



# Kant vs. Cant: Poe's material sublime

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Kant vs. Cant: Poe's Material Sublime

Kant: *or cant as intelligible character.*<sup>i</sup>

Although Poe often uses the word 'sublime' in his writings, he never produces a theory of the notion (as with so many that he mobilizes in his work). And when one explores, as I shall do below, moments in his work (primarily his critical writings and *Eureka*) where he *does* give piecemeal elements of something that might be worked together into a theory of the sublime, a very contradictory picture emerges. Some influences on how he thinks of the sublime might as well be explicit, such as that of Burke. For instance, Poe writes: 'obscurity is a source of the sublime'. Section II, part II of Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is entitled simply 'Obscurity'. Poe also mentions Burke by name, and I will come back to this.<sup>ii</sup> Furthermore, the notion that the sublime is a subspecies of beauty comes back repeatedly in Poe, (such as here for example: 'Beauty [...] – using the word as inclusive of the sublime'<sup>iii</sup>) and this is a well-known idea of Burke's.<sup>iv</sup> It is also clear that Poe knows the rhetorical tradition, for instance the connection it draws between the sublime and the simple, which goes back at least as far as Pseudo-Longinus: 'simple in their sublimity – sufficiently sublime in their simplicity'.<sup>v</sup> And he seems to be aware of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century tradition linking certain picturesque landscapes to the sublime: 'A mountain, to be sure, by the mere sentiment of physical magnitude which it conveys, *does* impress us with a sense of the sublime'.<sup>vi</sup> Furthermore, he knows of the traditional link between the sublime and grandeur and elevation: in his review of R. H. Horne's *Orion*, he speaks of 'loftiest sublimity'.<sup>vii</sup>

However, Poe's recourse to traditional tropes surrounding the sublime is never simple, and his use of the most classical notions or references is often hopelessly complicated. Take the reference to Burke, for example. While it seems clear that certain elements of Poe's notion of the sublime could come right out of this author's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Poe has also been known to say rather disparaging things about him, such as this

statement from the Review of *S. T. Coleridge's Table Talk*: 'We have particular pleasure in giving circulation to the opinion on Burke's essay on the Sublime and Beautiful, a work which once cost us hearty self-reproaches because we could learn nothing from it'.<sup>viii</sup> The rhetoric here is complex: Poe implies that one should learn from Burke, although he couldn't, which works simultaneously as praise and disavowal of the British author. And as is often the case with Poe, the sentence is clearly tongue-in-cheek, so in the end it is difficult to know how to make any sense of it at all. Furthermore, to the idea that the sublime is associated with the simple, Poe has been known to associate that of horror: 'a horror sublime in its simplicity'.<sup>ix</sup> Poe's use of the sublime in relation to landscapes is also particularly puzzling when looked at in detail. In 'Dream-Land', for instance, we read:

From a wild weird clime, that lieth, sublime  
Out of SPACE – out of TIME.<sup>x</sup>

Aside from the word 'weird', which one might not readily expect in relation to the sublime, what is particularly striking here is the idea that it should be out of space and out of time (not to mention what we should make of the fact that these two words are written in capital letters). Another landscape description would seem to expand on these particularities, and suggest that Poe had his own idiosyncratic aesthetic linked to the sublime: 'I have been roaming far and wide over this island of Mannahatta. Some portions of its interior have a certain air of rocky sterility which may impress some imaginations as simply dreary – to me it conveys the sublime'.<sup>xi</sup> None of these – weird, out of SPACE and TIME, sterile, dreary – are attributes that have been traditionally associated with sublime landscapes. Finally, perhaps one of the most puzzling statements Poe makes on the sublime and landscapes is his advice to the spectator contemplating the landscape surrounding Mount Etna on how best to take in the sublime prospect: 'Only by a rapid whirling on his heel could he hope to comprehend the panorama in the sublimity of its *oneness*'.<sup>xii</sup> This goes in every way against general attitudes on how to take in the sublime, which is generally speaking supposed to be apprehended in a stationary attitude and from a tranquil and removed location – not in motion from the very middle of the scene one is trying to contemplate... Finally, with regard to the link between the sublime and

grandeur, although Poe's statement may at first sight seem perfectly canonical, the reference to 'loftiest sublimity' from the Horne review actually complicates things tremendously. Traditionally, the sublime is that which is *elevated*, yes. But here, Poe is elevating what is already elevated by at least two additional degrees: the sublime is not merely 'lofty' (an elevated elevation), it is 'the *loftiest*' (the most elevated elevation).

Given Poe's odd and disconcerting use of the notion of sublimity, it is no surprise that readers who have tried to make sense of it in his works have turned to outside reading frameworks for help in understanding it, primarily Burke and Kant. What I will be interested in here is the tradition that uses Kant's theories of the sublime as a framework for understanding the notion in Poe.

B. Q. Morgan lists 12 translations of Kant into English before Poe's death in 1849,<sup>xiii</sup> and in his review of Hansen and Pollin's *The German Face of Edgar Allan Poe*,<sup>xiv</sup> Richard P. Benton states that one of these, Jacob S. Beck's *Principles of Critical Philosophy* (London/Edinburgh/Hamburg, 1797) contains a translation of the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>xv</sup> There are also several collections and digests into which principles from the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* may very well have found their way. Jack G. Voller asserts that Poe is not likely to have overlooked Kant's 'Analytic of the Sublime'<sup>xvi</sup> and the number of English translations of Kant alone would tend to lend credence to Benton's claim that:

Interest in German literature and culture in Britain and the United States was particularly aroused by the publication of the English and American editions of Madame de Staël's *L'Allemagne* [sic] (1813-14). [...] In the United States, scholars and translators soon appeared, especially in New England [...]. In the South, or below the Mason-Dixon line, there were also scholars and translators who supported the cause of Germanism.<sup>xvii</sup>

To my knowledge, there is no way to *prove* that Poe read Kant's third *Critique*. But nor is there any way to prove he did *not*.<sup>xviii</sup> The former did reference the latter, and was in the habit of referring to him jokingly as 'Cant'. Most of his explicit references to Kant (which are not so very many) appear in humoristic or satirical contexts. Nonetheless, there are enough traces of Kant in Poe's texts (including specific technical vocabulary) to render it indubitable that he knew something of the German

philosopher – although his version of Kant is likely to be a strange one indeed, a cobbled together tongue-in-cheek Kant. However, what interests me is not primarily an argument of direct or indirect influence. What I would like to show here is that there is an uncanny resemblance between a Poe text – namely ‘The Sphinx’ – and a Kant text – namely a specific passage in the development on the mathematical sublime.

Drawing out this resemblance is productive in two ways. First of all, most scholars who have used the Kantian sublime to read Poe’s sublime have done so on the basis of what Kant called the ‘dynamic sublime’, in which nature is seen as a powerful and threatening force, ultimately overcome in the sublime by the power of reason.<sup>xix</sup> There are certainly many Poe texts which suggest this vision of nature’s power: ‘A Descent into the Maelstrom’, ‘MS. Found in a Bottle’, the end of ‘Pym’ to name a few. But the result of the overemphasis on the dynamic sublime is an excessive focus on the emotional (and therefore psychological) aspects of the sublime at the expense of its epistemological role.<sup>xx</sup> Fairly recently, there have actually been at least two attempts to use Kant to talk about Poe that speak of the Kantian sublime as if it were *nothing but* the dynamic sublime, something that is profoundly puzzling to any reader of the Kantian ‘Analytic’. Paul Hurh for one, following Martha Nussbaum, writes: ‘For in Nussbaum’s positing of safety as the essential context in the appreciation of aesthetic fear, she adopts Kant’s condition of the sublime as requiring, for its educative experience, that the subject be safe: “since he knows he is safe, this is not actual fear” (*Critique of Judgment* [...])’.<sup>xxi</sup> Although Hurh purports to speak about ‘the sublime’ in general, he is in fact indexing a characteristic of the dynamic sublime.<sup>xxii</sup> The fact is, then, that the mathematical sublime in Poe’s engagement with this philosophical and aesthetic concept has been neglected, when it is not suppressed altogether. So the first benefit of the reading I propose is to reinject the mathematical sublime into our understanding of this notion in Poe. This in turn – and this is the second benefit I want to foreground – reveals to us a much more material version of Poe’s sublime.

Before clarifying what the term ‘material’ means in Poe, one must first note that it is extremely idiosyncratic. John Tresch argues that Poe’s vision of materialism was not at all in alignment with that of his contemporaries.<sup>xxiii</sup> After a commentary of several of Poe’s works that mobilize scientific discourse, Tresch suggests that he replaces the well-known and age-old chain of being ‘with an arabesque spatialization of expansive enclosures. In place of a straight line, his universe is one of boxes within boxes, with uncanny passages between levels of hierarchized realities, and at the unreachable center there is a foundational, annihilating absence’.<sup>xxiv</sup> In another article, Tresch points to contemporaries referring to Poe as a machine and underlines the author’s many machinic preferences (‘How to Write a Blackwood Article’ as a machine for writing tales, ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ as a machine for writing poetry, etc.).<sup>xxv</sup> While the dominant conception of the time conceives of matter as fundamentally organic, continuous and linear, Poe sees it as mechanistic, full of breaks and disjunctions. As we shall see, reincorporating the mathematical sublime into our understanding of this notion in Poe is one way of tracing how this occurs.

Furthermore, in its peculiarity, Poe’s matter is definitely not that which has come to be associated with the work of scholars grouped under the designation of ‘New Materialism’. Indeed, in such works – and despite the indubitable familiarity their authors have with Marxist theory – materiality often nonetheless does sometimes seem to take on what Marx would have called a metaphysical aspect, as can be seen in the following statement from Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s introduction to the volume entitled *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*: ‘For critical materialists, society is simultaneously materially real and socially constructed: our material lives are culturally mediated, but they are not only cultural’.<sup>xxvi</sup> Such a vision is no simplistic vision of the material, as merely that which we can grasp and touch, to be sure. The authors recognize that the material is also apprehended *through* an overlying stratum of social construction. It is regrettable, however, that they do not ask the basic critical question: is it really possible to reach and to know that material base ‘beneath’ the layer of social construction? It is possible that, on this point,

Poe and his notion of the sublime are more radical precisely because of their proximity to the Kantian mathematical sublime.

To begin to explore this question, we must look at a specific moment in Kant's section on this *other* sublime. We recall that what is at stake in the mathematical sublime is the play between apprehension and comprehension, two faculties that work together to determine the size proper to the sublime: not quite colossal, or monstrous (a limit case in the 'Analytic of the Sublime'), but rather 'large beyond all comparison' (*über alle Vergleichung groß*).<sup>xxvii</sup> In his section on the mathematical sublime, Kant mobilises an example which is convenient for explaining how the interplay between apprehension and comprehension functions. He cites the experience of Savary – a member of the Napoleonic Egypt Expedition – with the pyramids. Savary stated that one must be just the right distance away from a pyramid to get its full aesthetic effect. Kant explains this phenomenon in the following way: if one is too close to the pyramid, it takes time for the eye to travel from the bottom to the top. In the process, the first images thus formed are erased before one reaches the end, before one has fully surveyed the monument. The series of partial images of the pyramid can therefore not be comprehended as a whole picture. The faculty that is able to survey the monument from top to bottom is apprehension, and the faculty that gathers together all the images produced by apprehension and creates an overall idea of the monument is comprehension. Apprehension is able to take in an infinite number of images (as number proceeds into infinity), but comprehension, which assembles these images into a whole, can only go so far. At a certain point, it is no longer able to incorporate any more data. Another explanation of how apprehension and comprehension function together is given by Paul de Man: they form a 'simple phenomenology of reading'.<sup>xxviii</sup> One's capacity to pass one's eyes over letters and words extends to infinity, but in order to comprehend what one is reading, there must be moments when apprehension ceases and comprehension takes over long enough to synthesise what has been read.

In Poe there is a scene that recalls Kant's example of the pyramid in the mathematical sublime, a scene in which something Egyptian (at least in name) is surveyed and what is at stake is the distance from which it is viewed: the tale entitled 'The Sphinx' (1846). Since it is one of Poe's lesser-known tales, it might be useful to briefly recall the plot. Two men have retired to the country to escape an outbreak of cholera in New York. One day the narrator sees a monster walking down the nearby hillside. When he describes the experience to his friend, the latter is able to make him see that his 'monster' is actually an insect – called a sphinx – located very close to his eye.

In addition to the Egyptian connection, there are several aspects of the experience narrated in 'The Sphinx' that suggest relating it to the sublime. The first link is the perception of the insect as a monster. We recall that the monstrous is one of the issues that come up in the mathematical sublime: as stated above, it is what is 'large beyond all comparison', and in order to specify precisely what this size is, Kant compares it to two other orders of magnitude, namely the colossal and the monstrous (*KU*, 253). Yet there have been convincing arguments that the distinction Kant tries to draw between these three dimensions does not hold—i.e. the sublime and the monstrous are, in fact, indistinguishable.<sup>xxix</sup> Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of the sublime in Kant over the 'Analytic' as a whole is a play between calm and 'horror and awe': for example, one cannot experience the sublime inherent in an awesome and horrible storm over the ocean unless one views it from a calm, safe location (see *KU*, 261). As noted above, this is of course a characteristic of the dynamic sublime, but in 'The Sphinx', as we shall see, this more familiar form of the sublime is not divorced from its mathematical counterpart. This precise play between becalmed and violent emotions is present in the narrator's experience of the sphinx. When he first sees the 'monster', we read: 'Yet when I describe the monster, (which I distinctly saw, and *calmly surveyed* [...])'.<sup>xxx</sup> Then, when he is done with his *calm* survey: 'I regarded this terrific animal, and more especially the appearance on its breast [a 'representation of a *Death's Head*'], with a feeling of horror and awe' (*Tales*, 1248).



Indeed, the fact that the narrator remains calm in the face of the horror that is the monster allows him to react to it in a way that recalls Kant's description of the observer of the Egyptian pyramids. The *calm survey* is described as a succession of discrete images as the narrator focuses on one detail after another:

The mouth of the animal was situated at the extremity of a proboscis [...]. Near the root of [the] trunk was an immense quantity of black shaggy hair [...]; and projecting from this hair downwardly and laterally, sprang two gleaming tusks [...]. Extending forward, parallel with the proboscis, and on each side of it, was a gigantic staff [...]. The trunk was fashioned like a wedge with the apex to the earth. From it there were outspread two pairs of wings – each wing nearly one hundred yards in length – one pair being placed above the other, and all thickly covered with metal scales; each scale apparently some ten or twelve feet in diameter. I observed that the upper and lower tiers of wings were connected by a strong chain. But the chief peculiarity of this horrible thing, was the representation of a *Death's Head*, which covered nearly the whole surface of its breast [...]. (*Tales*, 1248)

As with Kant's pyramid, a series of partial images is produced (apprehension), and as can be expected, this series poses a problem for the *comprehension* of the whole. Indeed, the narrator takes the thing he is seeing in one piece after the other for a 'terrific animal' (*Tales*, 1248), 'some living monster of hideous conformation' (*Tales*, 1247) making its way 'from the summit to the bottom' (*Tales*, 1247) of a hill he sees out the window.

As in the example of Kant's pyramid, the survey of the object poses no problem for apprehension, which is able to break the 'monster' down into discrete parts and describe them in detail one after the other. But a problem arises with comprehension, which does not properly synthesise the parts into a whole. In other words, as Françoise Sammarcelli has noted it is first and foremost a problem of framing.<sup>xxx</sup> The creature as he sees it exceeds all of the narrator's mental frameworks. As in Kant, comprehension's problem is connected to the distance from the object, and in both cases it arises because the distance is too small. At the end of the tale, once the narrator's companion has explained to him he is not seeing a monster on the hillside, but rather an insect on

the windowpane, he states (after taking the narrator's place at the window): 'I find it to be about the sixteenth of an inch in its extreme length, and also about the sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of my eye' (*Tales*, 1251).

Obviously, this explanation of the narrator's experience is faulty, as the eye cannot focus *at the same time* on something that is close to the eye (the insect) and something that is far from it (the hillside). As Bruno Monfort notes, he is *simultaneously* nearsighted *and* farsighted.<sup>xxxii</sup> But it is even faultier when we realise how small the insect and its distance from the eye are.<sup>xxxiii</sup> One sixteenth of an inch is approximately 1.6 mm, about the size of the metal tip of a ballpoint pen. In addition to this problem of scale, Monfort makes two additional observations of interest. Firstly, this size is not in conformity with contemporary entomological descriptions of the insect, which give it a length of six to eight centimetres.<sup>xxxiv</sup> And secondly, Poe places the death's head mark on the underbelly of the insect rather than on its back.<sup>xxxv</sup> One might simply suppose that Poe is describing a fantastical version of the insect that he is seeing from underneath as it had landed on the exterior of the window pane. But he also clearly describes the wings, which must be on the back. The narrator is therefore focusing impossibly near and far at the same time, on an impossibly small insect, which is impossibly twisted so as to make visible its back and its underbelly simultaneously.

And this impossibly conformed and impossible to see insect is almost *right in the eye itself*, almost *the eye seeing itself*. This is reminiscent of what Kant calls *Augenschein*, which appears in the 'General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflexive Judgements' immediately following upon the 'Analytic of the Sublime', and which Andrzej Warminski has translated variously as "merely what appears to the eye", "merely according to what the appearance to the eye shows", "according to what meets the eye".<sup>xxxvi</sup> De Man calls this moment a '*material* vision'<sup>xxxvii</sup> and this expression resonates well with the impossible vision of the sphinx in Poe's tale. Nonetheless, the use of the word 'material' at this particular moment in de Man's text is extremely enigmatic, as Warminski explores at length in his essay "'As the Poets Do It': On the Material Sublime'. It is enigmatic because

it cannot refer to matter in any metaphysical sense. De Man's matter is not something one can reach out and grasp. Just as Poe's impossibly small insect, which can apparently be seen from both sides at once, cannot be grasped by the mind and defies any form of knowledge, just so does de Man's matter.

We might draw a parallel here with Cavell's discussion of Poe's prose as having 'the sound of philosophy'.<sup>xxxviii</sup> After an analysis of the frequency with which Poe uses words beginning with 'imp' in 'The Imp of the Perverse', Cavell writes about the functioning of language in this tale:

But the fact or idea of imp words is not a function of just that sequence of three letters. 'Word imps' could name any of the recurrent combinations of letters of which the words of a language are composed. They are part of the way words have their familiar looks and sounds, and their familiarity depends on our mostly not noticing the particles (or cells) and their laws, which constitute words and their imps – on our not noticing their necessary recurrences [...]. When we do note these cells or molecules, these little moles of language (perhaps in thinking, perhaps in derangement), what we discover are word imps – the initial, or it may be medial or final, movements, the implanted origins or constituents of words, leading lives of their own, staring back at us, calling on one another, giving us away, alarming – because to note them is to see that they live in front of our eyes, within earshot, at every moment.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Connecting the Kant text and the Poe text has made something happen – something that is akin to the moment described above by Cavell, in which the totally familiar suddenly becomes totally *unfamiliar*, perhaps even threatening. But what takes place while reading Poe's tale with Kant's mathematical sublime is even more radical: Cavell's word imps are still accessible to the *eyes and ears*, i.e. the phenomenal senses. As we have seen, Poe's insect is impossible to perceive with these senses.

Here we run up against another difference between the kind of materiality I am driving at and that of the New Materialists, many of whom contend that their task consists in writing a phenomenology of matter.<sup>xl</sup> The material 'thing' that has occurred here in Poe's text is precisely *not* phenomenal, and it is only because it is not phenomenal that it can possibly be material. Paul de Man

argues this point at length in 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant', stating that it is precisely when phenomenality breaks down that materiality can take place.<sup>xli</sup> Indeed 'things' can only be apprehended relationally, as in Marx's theory of value and Saussure's theory of signification. Taking these two conceptions together allows us to realize that 'reality', 'the world' (even if these words are wholly inadequate for they evoke everything that is phenomenal) are structured like a language, a pseudo-language that is in turn – like any language – structured by overdetermined contradiction. As such, within these embedded structures, materiality is not something that *is*, it is something that *occurs*, an always fleeting and unexpected *event*.<sup>xlii</sup>

To return to Poe, the insect in the eye is a moment in which the eye becomes 'not unlike the eye of the savage or the poets who see only according to the pure optics of what the *Augenschein* shows or what only meets the eye', 'dis-junct from any mind whatsoever'.<sup>xliii</sup> Unless I am mistaken, Warminski's use of the term 'savage' is an echo of a passage de Man quotes from Kant's *Logik* in 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant'<sup>xliiv</sup>:

a wild man [*ein Wilder*] who, from a distance, sees a house of which he does not know the use. He certainly observes the same object as does another, who knows it to be definitely built and arranged to serve as a dwelling for human beings. Yet in formal terms this knowledge of the selfsame object differs in both cases. For the first it is mere intuition [*bloße Anschauung*], for the other both intuition and concept.<sup>xlv</sup>

In Poe, the landscape with its hill collapses onto the windowpane, as if the narrator were a 'wild man' who is so totally lacking in the usual hermeneutics that produce the usual readings that he is able to look at the scene with a radically formal gaze,<sup>xlvi</sup> as if what one sees through a window is actually painted onto the glass – or even further: onto the very eye, as if the narrator's vision were painted onto his eyeball itself.

These elements show that the texts of Kant's mathematical sublime and Poe's 'The Sphinx' are in dialogue with one another (I do say *the texts* and not 'Kant' and 'Poe'). The benefits of such a conversation must however still be specified. To grasp them, one must understand that, from the

very beginning of its post-Kantian history (for example in Schiller), the dynamic sublime has had a tendency to be misunderstood, especially when it is simply detached from the mathematical sublime as it seems to have been in Poe scholarship: it lends itself far too easily to anthropomorphisation. This is self-evident in any Caspar David Friedrich painting, in which a ‘little person’<sup>xlvii</sup> is represented on the edge of a great, sublime landscape. It is too easy, when one does this, to take Kant’s discourse on *faculties* to be a discourse on *people*, and start to imagine individuals sitting in safety while contemplating, for example, a storm from afar. The mathematical sublime, with its insistence on quantity and scale, and the faculties of apprehension and comprehension, is far more difficult to convert into anthropomorphic images. It helps us resist what Paul de Man would call a *Schillerian* Kant, in which Kant’s rigorous formalism – his attempt to present the relations between the faculties completely independently from their anthropological functioning – is converted into a discourse about people. How this happens is crystal clear in Voller’s *The Supernatural Sublime*. In this work, the author does discuss the mathematical sublime: he begins by quoting Kant, then goes on to quote Schiller’s ‘explanation’. Here are the two passages he quotes (with his own cuts):

Now the mind listens to the voice of reason which, for every given magnitude – even for those that can never be entirely apprehended, although (insensible representation) they are judged as entirely given – requires totality. Reason consequently desires comprehension in *one* intuition.... It does not even exempt the infinite ... from this requirement. [Kant, *Critique of Judgment*]

We are pleased with the spectacle of the sensuous infinite, because we are able to attain by thought what the senses can no longer embrace and what the understanding cannot grasp.... [N]ature, notwithstanding all her infinity, cannot attain to the absolute grandeur which is in ourselves. We submit willingly to physical necessity both our well-being and our existence. This is because the very power reminds us that there are in us principles that escape its empire. [Schiller, “The Sublime” in *Essays Aesthetical and Philosophical*]<sup>xlviii</sup>

The Kant quote brings into play only the mind and the faculty of reason. The Schiller quote is chock full of personal pronouns ('we' three times in seven lines, 'ourselves' once, 'our' twice, 'us' twice): Schiller has transformed what was in Kant a discourse about disembodied aspects of the mind into something that is about 'us'.

Not neglecting the mathematical sublime helps resist this tendency and shows us a material Kant (or 'Cant'), who in turn shows us a material Poe. We end up with a tale that is intimately involved in a philosophical problematic. Interestingly, philosophy is mentioned twice in 'The Sphinx'. The first time is in the description of the narrator's friend: 'His richly philosophical intellect was not at any time affected by unrealities' (*Tales*, 1246). The second in the same character's reaction to his own apprehension of the insect:

When I had fully satisfied him on this stead ['the conformation of the visionary creature'], he sighed deeply, as if relieved of some intolerable burden, and went on to talk, with what I thought a cruel calmness, of various points of speculative philosophy, which had heretofore formed the subject of discussion between us (*Tales*, 1249).

The first reference to philosophy – in which this discipline is opposed to 'unrealities' – makes it clear that what is at stake here is the very fabric of reality itself. Subsequently, the fact that the friend responds to the insect by discussing speculative philosophy makes it clear that the experience of the insect is indeed meant to be a philosophical one.

In his introduction to 'The Sphinx', Thomas Mabbott writes: 'This slight story is based mainly on the old idea that things are not always what they seem, and a realisation that our senses may sometimes mislead us even when they function normally' (*Tales*, 1245). As reading Kant's mathematical sublime with Poe has brought forth, first of all, this is far from being a 'slight story'. Secondly, the senses of the narrator in 'The Sphinx' are very far from functioning 'normally'. Rather they conjure up an impossible vision (both near and far, impossibly close to the eye, and of an impossible insect), a vision which has nothing to do with the usual optics of seeing. A vision in which individual homophonic letters – a K or a C – start to speak volumes. In fact, vision functions so

strangely in this tale that one might legitimately wonder if it is human vision at all, if the narrator is perhaps not some sort of *inhuman* construct. We are far here from a commonplace often heard about Poe – granted probably most often for teaching purposes –: that his tales explore extreme states of the human psyche.<sup>xlix</sup> Here, Poe’s two characters are not ‘little people’ exploring human emotions – they are inhuman apparatuses that make it possible to explore a philosophical notion. And perhaps this is emblematic of what literature and philosophy should always do for each other. Introducing the one into the other should always help to suspend the usual economy of vision, of what we see in texts – or even the economy of relating to texts as a form of seeing – and bring out what is inhuman, not normally visible, in a word – material.

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<sup>i</sup> Kant: *oder cant als intelligibler Charakter*. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 43.

<sup>ii</sup> ‘Review of Critical and Miscellaneous Essays’, *Graham’s Magazine*, June 1841, 294, available at <https://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/gm41mt01.htm>.

<sup>iii</sup> ‘The Poetic Principle’, in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 78 (originally published in *Sartain’s Union Magazine* in October, 1850).

<sup>iv</sup> See Henri Justin, *Avec Poe jusqu’au bout de la prose* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 127 note 2.

<sup>v</sup> *Eureka*, ed. Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), parag. 2.

<sup>vi</sup> ‘The Poetic Principle’, 72. On this eighteenth-century phenomenon, see Baldine Saint Girons, *Le Paysage et la question du sublime* (Paris; Lyon: Réunion des musées nationaux; ARAC, 1997).

<sup>vii</sup> ‘R. H. Horne’, in *Essays and Reviews*, 294 (originally published in *Graham’s Magazine* in March, 1844).

<sup>viii</sup> ‘Review of S. T. Coleridge’s *Table Talk*’, *American and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, July 22, 1835, sec. vol. LXXII, whole issue 12185, 2, column 2, middle, available at <https://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/ba350722.htm>. In all rigor, it must be pointed out that Poe’s authorship of this text is not completely certain.

<sup>ix</sup> ‘Review of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, *The Drama of Exile and Other Poems*’, *Broadway Journal*, Vol. I, no. 2, January 11, 1845. In *Collected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe: Writings in The Broadway Journal*, ed. Burton R. Pollin, vol. 3 (New York: Gordian Press, 1986), 8.

<sup>x</sup> *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 79.

<sup>xi</sup> ‘Doings of Gotham [Letter I]’, *Columbia Spy*, May 18, 1844, sec. vol. XV, no. 4, 3, top of column 2, available at <https://www.eapoe.org/works/misc/gothamb1.htm>.

<sup>xii</sup> *Eureka*, parag. 7.

<sup>xiii</sup> *A Critical Bibliography of German Literature in English Translation, 1481-1927, with Supplement Embracing the Years 1928-1935*, (Stanford University, CA; London: Stanford University Press; H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1938), 257–61.

<sup>xiv</sup> *The German Face of Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of Literary References in His Works* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995).

<sup>xv</sup> ‘Poe’s German and Germanism’, *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism: History, Theory, Interpretation* 28, no. 1–2 (1995): 23.

<sup>xvi</sup> ‘The Power of Terror: Burke and Kant in the House of Usher’, *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism* 21, no. 2 (1988): 27.

<sup>xvii</sup> Benton, ‘Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism’, 22–23.

<sup>xviii</sup> There is no consensus among scholars regarding the extent of Poe’s contact with the German philosopher’s work. Some assume he read Kant and was directly influenced by him, for example Glen A. Omans, “‘Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense’: Poe’s Debt to Immanuel Kant”, ed. Joel Myerson, *Studies in the American*

*Renaissance*, 1980, 123–68. G. R. Thompson (*Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973– and 'Romantic Arabesque, Contemporary Theory, and Postmodernism: The Example of Poe's Narrative', *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 35, no. 3–4 [1989]: 163–271] also argues Poe had a high level of familiarity with German philosophy. Others maintain that he could not have had any *direct* contact at all, for example Hansen and Pollin, *The German Face of Edgar Allan Poe*.

<sup>xix</sup> See, for example Kent Ljungquist, 'Poe and the Sublime: His Two Short Sea Tales in the Context of an Aesthetic Tradition', *Criticism* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1975): 131–51, and 'Descent of the Titans: The Sublime Riddle of "Arthur Gordon Pym"', *The Southern Literary Journal* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 75–92; Voller, 'The Power of Terror'; Frederick L. Burwick, 'Edgar Allan Poe: The Sublime, the Picturesque, the Grotesque, and the Arabesque', *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 43, no. 3 (1998): 423–36, and 'Edgar Allan Poe: The Sublime and the Grotesque', *Essays in Romanticism* 8, no. 1 (2000): 67–123; Daniel Tobias Seger, 'Stürze in den Malstrom: "Edgar Allan Poes "A Descent into the Maelström" im Horizont von Kants "Analytik des Erhabenen"', *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 42 (2001): 225–43.

<sup>xx</sup> There are two scholars who recognise the epistemological role of the sublime in Poe. See Burwick, 'Edgar Allan Poe', 2000, 430 and Seger, 'Stürze in den Malstrom', 240–41. Although Seger does not discuss the mathematical sublime *per se*, he uses mathematical images to describe how the sublime functions in 'A Descent into the Maelström'.

<sup>xxi</sup> *American Terror: The Feeling of Thinking in Edwards, Poe, and Melville* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 212.

<sup>xxii</sup> For a similar phenomenon see J. Alexandra McGhee, 'Morbid Conditions: Poe and the Sublimity of Disease', *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 14, no. 1 (2013): 57.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See "'Matter No More": Edgar Allan Poe and the Paradoxes of Materialism', *Critical Inquiry* 42, Summer (2016): 865–98.

<sup>xxiv</sup> 886.

<sup>xxv</sup> "'The Potent Magic of Verisimilitude": Edgar Allan Poe within the Mechanical Age', *The British Journal for the History of Science* 30, no. 3 (September 1997): 275.

<sup>xxvi</sup> 'Introducing the New Materialisms', in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 27. Bill Brown, 'The Matter of Materialism: Literary Mediations', in *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, ed. Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce (New York: Routledge, 2010), 60, 66; Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, 'The Transversality of New Materialism', in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, ed. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities, 2012), 103, 103 note 7 and 106. For a critique of this tendency in the 'New Materialisms', see Alberto Toscano, 'Materialism without Matter: Abstraction, Absence and Social Form', *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (2014): 1221–40. I am grateful to Jennifer Bajorek for bringing Toscano's work to my attention.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment: Including the First Introduction*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co., 1987) and *Kants Werke. Band V, Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1908), 248. The Pluhar translation provides the pagination of the German edition. Therefore, further references will be given in the text as *KU*, followed by this pagination.

<sup>xxviii</sup> 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant', in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 77.

<sup>xxix</sup> Derrida argues that the colossal and the sublime are indistinguishable (see 'Le Colossal', in *La Vérité en peinture* [Paris: Flammarion, 1978], 136–68, in particular pages 144, 157 and 163), and Jacob Rogozinski goes on to extend this identification to the monstrous (see 'À la limite de l'Ungeheure. Sublime et monstrueux dans la Critique du Jugement', in *Kanten. Esquisses kantienues* [Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1996], 147–67).

<sup>xxx</sup> *Tales & Sketches. Volume 2: 1843-1849*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 1247 (emphasis mine). Further references will be given in the text as 'Tales' followed by the page number.

<sup>xxxi</sup> 'Cadres, limites, récits: notes sur le décentrement dans les contes d'Edgar Allan Poe' in *Espaces du texte*, ed. Claudine Verley (Poitiers: UFR de langues et littératures, 1994), 63–74.

<sup>xxxii</sup> 'Le Sphinx dénaturé: une écologie du discours?' *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 129 (2011): 22.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> See *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe: An Annotated Edition*, ed. Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 322 note 4.



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<sup>xxxiv</sup> See 'Le Sphinx dénaturé', 21. Also interesting is Elmar Schenkel's suggestion that the narrator's experience may be the result of a medical condition known as accommodation failure (see 'Disease and Vision: Perspectives on Poe's "The Sphinx"', *Studies in American Fiction* 13, no. 1 (1985): 98 note 11).

<sup>xxxv</sup> 'Le Sphinx dénaturé', 28.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> "'As the Poets Do It": On the Material Sublime', in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Tom Cohen et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant', 82.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> 'Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)', in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 19.

<sup>xxxix</sup> 23.

<sup>xl</sup> See for example Brown, 'The Matter of Materialism: Literary Mediations', 60, 65, 75; Coole and Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', 3, 10, 28.

<sup>xli</sup> See in particular his discussion of the passage from the mathematical sublime to the dynamic sublime in Kant's 'Analytic', 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant', 78–79 and the last three pages of the essay, 87–90.

<sup>xlii</sup> See Andrzej Warminski, 'Ending Up/Taking Back (with Two Postscripts on Paul de Man's Historical Materialism)', in *Material Inscriptions: Rhetorical Reading in Practice and Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 159–89.

<sup>xliii</sup> Warminski, 'As the Poets Do It', 16.

<sup>xliv</sup> 81.

<sup>xliv</sup> *Kants Werke. Band IX, Logik, physische Geographie, Pädagogik*, ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1923), 33. The translation of the Kant passage given above is manifestly de Man's own; right after the Kant quotation, he switches his translation of *ein Wilder* as 'a wild man' to 'savage'. The racial connotations are interesting here, as several readers of 'The Sphinx' have connected the tale to this question: Hsuan L. Hsu draws a connection between the description of the insect and colonialism ('Urban Apartments, Global Cities: The Enlargement of Private Space in Poe and James', in *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, by Hsuan L. Hsu, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 65). Scott Trafton underlines that the figure of the sphinx was central to anxious debates about whether or not the ancient Egyptians were 'Negroes', a debate which played a key role in the antislavery movement (*Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century Egyptomania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 63). Finally, Bruno Montfort sees in the sphinx a sign of the narrator's phobia of the South and 'the secret figure of slavery tracing itself out in filigree behind the improbable presence of a butterfly out of Africa on the American continent' (my translation, 'Le Sphinx dénaturé', 26.). As fascinating as this theme is, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Form also plays a key role in the version of materialism proposed by Toscano. See 'Materialism without Matter', 1225–31.

<sup>xlvi</sup> This expression may seem incongruous. I use it because it emerged during a very formative moment in J. Hillis Miller's 'Speech Acts in Literature' graduate seminar at the University of California, Irvine in the winter of 1997. A fellow student gave a presentation on *The Wings of the Dove* in which she argued that Milly Theale knew of Kate Croy and Merton Densher's plot from the very beginning. It was followed by a heated debate on whether it makes sense to speak of fictional characters as 'knowing' things.

<sup>xlvi</sup> *The Supernatural Sublime: The Metaphysics of Terror in Anglo-American Romanticism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), 100.

<sup>xlvi</sup> See for example Benjamin F. Fisher, *The Cambridge Introduction to Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Far more complex is a reading such as Henri Justin's in *Avec Poe jusqu'au bout de la prose*: 'Poe's art is always "psychedelic" in the etymological sense of the term: it manifests psyche. Staging a conscience, his art situates psyche in relation to this psychic scene, which is for each of us its inevitable locus' (my translation, 105). There are many more mediations here than in a version of Poe as a psychological writer such as Fisher's: manifesting, staging, in relation to, scene. And where there are mediations, there is room for materiality to occur.