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At the Cutting Edge: Touch Images in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum"[1]

JARKKO TOIKKANEN

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This article is the first entry in a debate on "At the Cutting Edge: Touch Images in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum'" http://www.connotations.de/debate/touch-images-in-poes-pit-and-the-pendulum). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de

Abstract

The sense of touch, a less studied aspect of "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), is peculiar to how Poe's story is experienced. Along the way, both for the narrator telling his story in retrospect and for the reader responding to his words, there are strange and awful things to be *felt*—some of which go unseen, others appear in full view. The analysis will focus on the imagined touch perceptions the words mediate, and how they are rhetorically presented as literary images. In this use, the term "literary image" refers to how sensory perceptions and abstract ideas take shape in the form of words, with *touch images* as the special object of study. Their functioning is compared to other kinds of sensory images they are joined with in Poe's story.

I hypothesize that some images call for explanation, creating *ekphrastic anticipation* when they lead the narrator or reader on to a course of interpretation, speculating on ideas and searching for meaning. Some images are only felt, with no particular meaning attached, functioning as *hypotypotic cues* whose primary effect is to propel the narrative onward, while making the awful milieu tangible. Whereas previous readings have often searched for the meaning of universal themes such as life and death, I focus on *how* reading PP enables the search. What is specifically compelling about Poe's story? How does the interaction between perceptions, words, and ideas constitute a distinctive medial dynamic? Sensory studies and affect theory, as well as rhetoric and Burkean aesthetics, will be used as the theoretical framework, to which my three-tier model of mediality designed for the practical criticism of literary and other media texts adds a layer.

Readings of Poe's 1842 short story "The Pit and the Pendulum" (PP from now on), originally published in *The Gift for 1843* and revised for *Broadway Journal* in 1845, have attempted to find explanations for what the story is really about and what it tells the reader about life and death. Much like with the reading of any literary text, the reader perceives the words, begins to imagine things based on the words, and then the imagined things start to make sense in the form of ideas. Such is the basic structure of the reading process—it starts with a present experience of the story, of the words perceived and the things imagined, and ends with interpreting the ideas produced along the way. There is nothing different about reading PP in that respect. However, Poe's story is special in its engagement with the reader's senses. Whereas previous readings, which I will discuss at the end of the article in counterpoint to my analysis, have often searched for the meaning of universal themes such as life and death, in either a positive or negative light, I focus on *how* reading PP enables the search. What is specifically compelling about how the story's words mediate imagined sensory perceptions—i.e. what one imagines seeing, hearing, and feeling while reading—that excite the abstract ideas by which readers explain the meaning of the story? The interaction between perceptions, words, and ideas in PP constitutes a distinctive medial dynamic for study.

I will argue that the sense of touch, a less studied aspect in previous scholarship, is peculiar to the *intermedial experience* of PP. Along the way, both for the narrator telling his story in retrospect and for the reader responding to his words, there are strange and awful things to be *felt*—some of which go unseen, others appear in full view. The analysis will focus on the imagined touch perceptions the words mediate, and how they are rhetorically presented as literary images. In this use, the term "literary image" refers to how sensory perceptions and abstract ideas take shape in the form of words, with *touch images* as the special object of study. Their functioning is compared to other kinds of sensory images they are joined with in Poe's story. I hypothesize that sometimes the images call for explanation, either by the narrator or the

reader; at other times they are only felt, with no particular meaning attached. Here are prominent examples to be analyzed:

sensory images that call for explanation:

- "seven tall candles" (PP 682): visual image
- "rich musical note" (PP 683): auditory image
- pendulum as "the painted figure of Time" (PP 689): visual image
- "spectral and fiendish portraitures" (PP 695): visual image
- "the coolness of the well" (PP 696): visual and touch image

sensory images with no particular meaning attached:

- "flatness and dampness" (PP 683): touch image
- "my head […] touched nothing" (PP 686-87): touch image
- pendulum as "long, long hours of horror" (PP 691): visual, auditory, olfactory, and touch image
- rats' "sharp fangs in my fingers" (PP 694): touch image
- "a suffocating odor" (PP 696): olfactory and touch image

The analytical experiment that follows does not claim to have empirical access to any reader's individual list of responses, sensory or otherwise, but the point of the exercise is to read closely the literary images in PP that mediate imagined sensory perceptions in the first place, focusing on the sense of touch. The main aim is to disclose the key part of touch images in the intermedial experience of Poe's story as it excites the ideas on which readers base their individual interpretations. Sensory studies and affect theory, as well as rhetoric and Burkean aesthetics, will be used as the theoretical framework, to which my three-tier model of mediality designed for the practical criticism of literary and other media texts adds a layer.

Theory and Method

Sensory studies and affect theory provide useful support for the inquiry. In a recent study on Poe and the senses, Caitlin Duffy claimed that, in his fiction, "Poe relentlessly calls attention to the senses—most prominently to sight and sound" (70).[2] Duffy offers a corpus-based

study with the help of data visualizations to demonstrate how Poe's striving for poetic effect—"a persistent sensorial overload and a variety of perspectives that overwhelm his characters" to bring about an "affect of terror" (70)—can be analyzed within the affective theoretical framework of Teresa Brennan. Duffy notes the similarities between Brennan's theory and Poe's fiction as engaging with how the "atmosphere" of a place can be affectively reinforced by the people and the environment they encounter through their senses: Poe's imaginary characters are said to "infect each other just as much as the gloomy estates and crime scenes seep into their bodies" (72). Here Duffy overlooks the fact that Brennan, in her new materialist tendencies, does not refer to the imagined perceptions of reading literature but stresses the roles of the physical body and space, especially the function of smell in transmitting affects. Something else is needed to account for the non-physical affectivity of imagined sensory perceptions—the haptic ones in PP in particular[3]—, and the affect theoretical views of Lisa Blackman serve the purpose in effect. She has underlined "the body's potential for psychic or psychological attunement" (*Immaterial Bodies*, xxv) and sought to "construct a material-semiotic-affective apparatus that reorients perception toward new ways of seeing, hearing, listening, and feeling" ("Researching Affect", 26-27). In PP, the narrator's body is seized both in the present and past, his sensory perception affected by horrors either recalled or anticipated that the reader is compelled to imagine. Blackman's concept of "*mediated perception*" ("Researching Affect" 38, emphasis in the original) can be applied in the study of Poe's literary images as her concept is not limited to the physical (contra Brennan) but also involves the non-physical affectivity of intermedial experience.

The next theoretical question pertains to rhetoric—how to account for feeling things when the object is only there in imagination, verbalized in the form of a literary image? As in Duffy's reading of Poe, sight and hearing have traditionally been privileged as senses providing objects for contemplation. In Kant's *Anthropology*, for instance, the sense of touch did not enjoy the same advantage because felt objects could not be imagined but instead had to be physically present and "solid"

(Toikkanen, "Feeling the Unseen" 74). However, following Blackman's line of thinking, imagined, or non-physical, touch perceptions can also produce objects of contemplation verbalized as literary images. Analyzing the production of touch images thus belongs in the study of rhetoric, with direct links to PP. In his catalogue of Poe's rhetorical devices, under "Imagery," Brett Zimmerman gives examples of each kind of sensory image in the story—auditory, gustatory, kinesthetic, olfactory, tactile, thermal, and visual. He chooses PP because it is "one of torture" (237), with a protagonist whose senses are alternately "being overwhelmed, resulting in physical torment" and "being deprived, resulting in mental torment" (237), a medial dynamic of the story Zimmerman relates to Burkean aesthetics. In my analysis, sensory images of motion (kinesthetic), physical contact (tactile), and temperature (thermal) will go under the umbrella term of touch images. This is because, in reading a literary text consisting of words, all such images engage the sense of touch by making the reader feel something, rather than see, hear, taste, or smell. Imagined touch perceptions are a defining factor in the intermedial experience of PP since, when there is nothing or very little to see, other senses gain acuity and, in the story's rhetorical design, the touch images the reader is made to imagine become tangible.

Since Burkean aesthetics are indeed relevant to analyzing PP, some of the views in *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), should be considered in relation to the three-tier model of mediality explained below. Burke lists the causes that give rise to sublime astonishment, a state in which all the "motions" of the soul are "suspended, with some degree of horror" (Part Two, Section I, 53).[4] Two of his causes are obscurity and privation—the partial or total reduction of sensory perception that may be either real or imaginary. The reduction is real if the event is based on something occurring in nature, whereas it is imagined if affectively caused by an experience of art. PP's protagonist is undergoing torture first-hand, in his reality, whereas readers experience the horror and astonishment in their imagination. In doing so, they are subjected to an imaginary sensory reduction in a Burkean manner that will be analyzed

in terms of its rhetorical design. As sight is taken away, there is experience mediated through the other senses. In PP, the sense of touch is urgently engaged with, through words, to affect the ideas and meanings produced by the story. The three-tier model of mediality addresses each aspect of the reading process as kinds of mediation interacting with one another: 1) senses as media, 2) ways of presenting, including words, as media, and 3) conceptual abstractions, such as ideas, as media ("Feeling the Unseen" 73).[5] The strength of this model is that each element of the interaction is understood to occur simultaneously, materially productive of one another—integrating the study of Poe's sensorium, verbal design, as well as aesthetics, while revealing what is specific about each medial tier and how it may be rhetorically actuated.[6]

In my reading that employs the three-tier model of mediality, some of the touch images the reader is made to imagine occur in the instant, others make one wait. Present imagined touch perceptions (the damp stone of the prison dungeon, heaps of rats pressing on the body) can be rhetorically distinguished from anticipated imagined touch perceptions mediated through the other senses (the pendulum soon to slice through the flesh). In this fashion, the touch images of Poe's story serve a double rhetorical function that is often distinct from the visual and auditory images. As the three-tier analysis will demonstrate, the touch images act, on the one hand, as *hypotypotic cues* enforced on the first tier of senses as media.[7] Their primary effect is to propel the narrative onward (stone, rats), while making the awful milieu tangible—affectively reinforced by smell and taste. On the other hand, sensory images create *ekphrastic anticipation* on the third tier of ideas as media when they lead the reader on to a course of interpretation (the seven candles on the judges' table, the descending pendulum as Time), speculating on ideas and searching for meaning as motivated by the visual and auditory images. At the same time, reading PP on the second tier of words as media is conducive to sublime astonishment as the story generates both anticipation and narrative thrust through a distinctive medial dynamic to produce intermedial experience.[8] On this premise, the list of prominent examples can be supplemented as follows:

Sensory images that call for explanation by creating ekphrastic anticipation:

- "seven tall candles" (PP 682): visual image of a present imagined perception
- "rich musical note" (PP 683): auditory image of a present imagined perception
- pendulum as "the painted figure of Time" (PP 689): visual image of a present imagined perception
- "spectral and fiendish portraitures" (PP 695): visual image of a present imagined perception
- "the coolness of the well" (PP 696): visual and touch image of a present imagined perception

Sensory images that function as hypotypotic cues with no particular meaning attached:

- "flatness and dampness" (PP 683): touch image of a present imagined perception
- "my head […] touched nothing" (PP 686-87): touch image of a present imagined perception
- pendulum as "long, long hours of horror" (PP 691): visual, auditory, olfactory, and touch image of a present (visual, auditory, olfactory) and anticipated (touch) imagined perception
- rats' "sharp fangs in my fingers" (PP 694): touch image of a present imagined perception
- "a suffocating odor" (PP 696): olfactory and touch image of a present imagined perception

The history of usage of the two classical rhetorical devices, hypotyposis and ekphrasis, falls in line with the analytical practice I have traced from Quintilian and Longinus to Kant in which both devices are defined as involving a transition from one sensory medium to another (*Intermedial Experience* 36-42)—traditionally visual images to words but also senses other than sight, including touch. Hypotyposis is different

from ekphrasis in the function of the literary image: "ekphrasis, by definition, enforces multiple layers of meaning while hypotyposis does not—it merely enforces the image" ("Auditory Images" 46; see also "Failing Description" 273). As explained above, the touch images to be analyzed as hypotypotic cues in PP are ones that occur in the instant, spurring on the story without need for interpretation. By contrast, when a touch image excites the reader into ideas, it creates ekphrastic anticipation to search for its meaning. This is the premise of the exercise in terms of the rhetorical devices in effect.

Finally, to complement the analysis, two other rhetorical devices Zimmerman lists under "Enargia" (generic term for sensory description, 194-98) are employed as relevant ways of presenting PP's touch images on three tiers: *chronographia* (description of time, 167-69) and *topothesia* (description of an imaginary place, 321-23). They are relevant because they affect the functioning of the touch images in the story. On the one hand, the focus of chronographia is on whether time in the story appears as narrative thrust for anticipated events, or if it appears as "Time," inviting further speculation about its meaning. On the other hand, the point of topothesia is to study how, in the protagonist's imprisonment, the total absence of light and, by degrees, the slowly growing amount of light affects the description of the space in which he is confined. How does it feel, for instance, to rest one's head on emptiness after taking a tumble in the dark (PP 686-87), and what is it like to feel the heat with demonic figures staring from the closing walls (PP 695)? The spatio-temporal qualities of the touch images, including the titular pit and pendulum, will affectively reinforce the intermedial experience of PP, propelled by the rhetorical design along the way of the story.

Analysis

In the beginning of the story, the topothetic description of the place of sentencing is saturated with auditory images complemented by visual images that revert to the encompassing acoustic space:

> The sentence—the dread sentence of death—was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears. After that, the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum. […] I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. […] I saw that the decrees of what to me was Fate, were still issuing from those lips. I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables of my name; and I shuddered because no sound succeeded. (PP 681)

The narrator's sighting of the seven candles on the table briefly enables him to defy horror and disbelief, understanding them as figures that wear "the aspect of charity" and appear as "white slender angels" who might save him (PP 682). The ekphrastic illusion does not last long:

> […] but then, all at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fibre in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery, while the angel forms became meaningless spectres, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them there would be no help. (PP 682)

The "thrill" that disrupts the narrator reflecting on the candles is a touch image that snaps him back into reality. The visual dream of heavenly salvation is replaced by a hypotypotic cue. It should be noted that, as a figure of speech, there is nothing metaphorical about the shift—the shock of the "galvanic battery" is presented as a simile drawn from technology that is as real as the table, candles, and the impending doom faced by the protagonist. The horror makes him faint, as soon as the interlude of another auditory image ("a rich musical note" [PP 682]) that lures him with the pleasantries of death ("what sweet rest there must be in the grave" [PP 682]) fades.

The chronographic transition from the Inquisition's court to the prison dungeon materializes as a report on the metaphysical. The hope of the afterlife is sustained ("no! even in the grave all is not lost" [PP 682]) as speculation on what lies at the heart of consciousness:

> In the return to life from the swoon there are two stages; first, that of the sense of mental or spiritual; secondly, that of the sense of physical, existence. (PP 682)

The claim is that, in how sensory perception is mediated, behind all recognition of the familiar—both everyday and otherworldly—there must be the work of the unconscious mind, or the soul. The implication is that what one secondarily sees and senses on earth might only be a replica of primary existence somewhere else. However, in making his claim, the narrator refers to "that condition of *seeming* unconsciousness" (PP 683, my emphasis) in which he can vaguely recall being carried down to his dungeon. He never fully took leave of his senses and so cannot grant temporal priority, in terms of "two stages," to any spiritual sense over that of physical existence.[9] The narrator's ekphrastic speculation on "the impressions of what I have termed the first stage" (PP 682) is abruptly halted by the hypotypotic cue of "flatness and dampness" (PP 683) once his final destination is reached. The story moves on:

> Very suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound—the tumultuous motion of the heart, and, in my ears, the sound of its beating. Then a pause in which all is blank. Then again sound, and motion, and touch—a tingling sensation pervading my frame. Then the mere consciousness of existence, without thought—a condition which lasted long. Then, very suddenly, *thought*, and shuddering terror, and earnest endeavor to comprehend my true state. Then a strong desire to lapse into insensibility. Then a rushing revival of soul and a successful effort to move. (PP 683-84)

Touch images beset the narrator's restoration of his bearings, reinforced by auditory images, as "motion and sound" bring about "a rushing revival of soul." There is the interoceptive perception of the heart that is synaesthetically perceived as sound too, after which the nervous system starts in "a tingling sensation" before there is any kind of conscious thought. A sense of physical existence is primary to the cerebral that encompasses urge and desire. As long as there is no ekphrastic relief to enable third-tier speculation on hypotypotically enforced touch perceptions on the first tier, the affective impact of the intermedial experience nears the paralytic.

How can the reader respond to the narrator's musings? Whereas PP's beginning calls on the reader to experience it *with* the narrator—the Inquisition's court is vividly imaginable and the direness of the protagonist's situation elicits sympathy—the metaphysical digressions may begin to count *against* him. As the reader has no access to the narrator's psychology apart from conjectures based on a reading of the second-tier story's words, ekphrastic descriptions of present sensory perceptions on the third tier (candles as angels, death as a musical note) have the potential to make the reader search for spiritual and metaphysical meanings and forget about the narrator's distress. Then again, since touch images as hypotypotic cues (the body's "thrill," "flatness and dampness") have the effect of presenting an imagined touch perception without this kind of interpretive demand, they are more readily shared without breaking immersion in ekphrastic anticipation of the narrator's next ordeal.

In the next scene, he enters the state of totally reduced visual perception:

> So far, I had not opened my eyes. I felt that I lay upon my back, unbound. I reached out my hand, and it fell heavily upon something damp and hard. There I suffered it to remain for many minutes, while I strove to imagine where and *what* I could be. I longed, yet dared not to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest here should be *nothing* to see. At length, with a wild desperation at heart, I quickly unclosed my eyes. My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. I struggled for breath. The intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me. The atmosphere was intolerably close. I still lay quietly, and made effort to exercise my reason. (PP 684)

For him, the surrounding blackness is real, while the reader is made to imagine it. Burke says that "[t]o make any thing very terrible, obscurity in general seems to be necessary" (Part Two, Section III, 54) and, in PP, the taking away of sight is indeed a source of horror, a cause for sublime astonishment as sensory privation. Elsewhere in the *Enquiry*, Burke ponders on darkness philosophically (criticizing Locke), cultur-

ally (in the form of crudely racialized examples), and neurophysiologically (on how the eye works), making a host of analogies between the experience of darkness and quotidian occurrences. His key conclusion is that "[c]ustom reconciles us to everything" (Part Four, Section XVIII, 135), a state Poe's narrator also seems to embody as he struggles to regain his powers of reasoning. He reflects on the flow of time and mulls over his whereabouts. The idea of having been entombed alive mortifies him for a moment, and he recalls stories of other people's fates at the hands of the Inquisition—that he can do so is proof of partial reconciliation with his sensory surroundings. He sets out to probe the space:

> My outstretched hands at length encountered some solid obstruction. It was a wall, seemingly of stone masonry—very smooth, slimy, and cold. (PP 685)

The hypotypotic cue of the vividly haptic stone wall ushers in a turn of events, as the narrator feels his way around the prison dungeon, and the reader imagines the sensory perception without needing to search for any further meaning embedded in the touch image. In the absence of sight, the process of measuring spatial dimensions is tortuously slow, made worse by fatigue and inanition, while the topothetic description of the lightless place results in imaginary echolocation. How large can it be? Touch is the dominant sense, proprioceptively reinforced by motion and balance to add to the embodied awareness of space.

The protagonist then trips over and falls on his face:

> In the confusion attending my fall, I did not immediately apprehend a somewhat startling circumstance, which yet, in a few seconds afterward, and while I still lay prostrate, arrested my attention. It was this: my chin rested upon the floor of the prison, but my lips, and the upper portion of my head, although seemingly at a less elevation than the chin, touched nothing. (PP 686-87)

He is literally staring into the titular pit, and although he does not see it, he feels it—as "nothing." The unexpected lack of physical matter serves as another hypotypotic cue that leads the narrator to reflect on

the "most hideous moral horrors" (PP 687) that seem to have been reserved as his fate. He drops a piece of masonry into the pit to sound its depth and, in a sudden flash of light out of nowhere, he sees the outline of the pit: "I saw clearly the doom which had been prepared for me" (PP 687). The sound of the plummeting rock coupled with the sighted realization of his predicament turn into ekphrastic visual and auditory images that represent his assent to the terror of existence:

> By long suffering my nerves had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice, and had become in every respect a fitting subject for the species of torture which awaited me. (PP 687)

The narrator flits in and out of consciousness, aided by drugs (as he says) mixed in the water he has been given, until he starts back into a state of partially restored visual perception:

> By a wild, sulphurous lustre, the origin of which I could not at first determine, I was enabled to see the extent and aspect of the prison. (PP 688)

In the half-light, he is able to see how incorrect his measurements and material approximations in the dark had been. On the walls, he can spot pictures of "hideous and repulsive devices to which the charnel superstition of the monks has given rise" (PP 689), such as skeletons and monsters that, nonetheless, do not appear to have much impact on the narrator as he quite coolly recounts his visual situation.[10] It is only in the next instant when he proceeds to describe his freshly altered haptic experience that the narrative again gains thrust—he is tightly strapped to a wooden frame, prostrate on his back.

Apart from being able to move his left arm slightly, the narrator's body is transfixed,[11] and it is now only through his vision that he can make sense of his surroundings. The touch image of the wooden frame, coupled by the cloth restraint that binds him down, quite literally compels the protagonist to search for other sensory means in escape from his misery. The "pungently seasoned" (PP 689) meat on the floor, for which there is no water to allay his thirst, sparks a gustatory plight that,

in his perception, makes the necessity to flee even more pressing. In imagining the narrator's panic, the reader is affected by the hypotypotic cues in ekphrastic anticipation of any kind of relief. In the ceiling of the dungeon, a "very singular figure" (PP 689) is spotted:

> It was the painted figure of Time as he is commonly represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum, such as we see on antique clocks. (PP 689)

The ekphrastic description of the visual image metaphorically emphasizes time (or "Time") as a metaphysical entity that, as such, does not result in profound speculation on who or what time is. Once the narrator thinks he sees the "pictured image" of the pendulum move, he is momentarily occupied by the perception "somewhat in fear, but more in wonder" (PP 689) until the fascination wears off. He is distracted by the sound of rats springing forth from the pit, complementing the topothetic scene as a further source of physical and mental discomfort, if not initially much else.

After a while of lying down, the narrator looks back up and notices "it had perceptibly *descended*" (PP 690). In the passage, where a second-tier picture turns into first-tier reality, horror is hypotypotically cued by jointly reinforced visual and auditory perception—by the "crescent of glittering steel" (PP 690) combined with the sound of the pendulum ("the whole *hissed* as it swung through the air" [PP 690]). It is PP's defining instance of its kind, interpretable as a chronographic rhetorical turn that upends and literalizes metaphorical speculation on Time as meaningless in the face of present sensory perception.[12] There are "long, long hours of horror" in which the narrator can but count "the rushing oscillations of the steel" (PP 691). To him, it seems days must have passed in the agitation—with the olfactory image of the personified pendulum's "acrid breath" (PP 691) adding to the multisensory experience—until he is finally exhausted by the thought of impending death.

In coming back to his senses, the protagonist is not as taken aback by the contraption as before, and he begins to hatch plans of escape, even

if the lack of nourishment has made him witless. He wonders if he had the nerve to wait until the blade had severed the first layer of his cloth restraint, allowing him to flee before the apparatus cuts into his flesh:

> I forced myself to ponder upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment—upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth produces on the nerves. I pondered upon all this frivolity until my teeth were on edge. (PP 692)

The touch image ("the peculiar thrilling sensation" based on "the friction of cloth") is perceived as sound, too, in a manner similar to the narrator's synaesthetic experience of his heartbeat earlier in the story. The haptic quality that has been implicit in the visual and auditory (and olfactory) image of the pendulum is brought to the fore. The horror of the pendulum is not ultimately rooted in how the device looks, sounds, or smells—it is embedded in the feeling of the descending blade. Whereas most of PP's touch images rely on present touch perceptions, in this extraordinary instance the explicitly non-haptic hypotypotic image of the pendulum provokes an anticipated touch perception mediated through sight, hearing, and smell on the first tier. The intermedial experience of the blade is imagined by both the narrator and reader, as they are suspended in sublime astonishment at grasping the prospect of an ekphrastic touch image that keeps the narrative at its cutting edge:

> Down—steadily down it crept. I took a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity. […]
>
> Down—certainly, relentlessly down! It vibrated within three inches of my bosom! […]
>
> Down—still unceasingly—still inevitably down! I gasped and struggled at each vibration. I shrunk convulsively at its every sweep. (PP 692)

Anticipation of relief from the horror only manages to sustain the horror, as third-tier speculation on the imagined touch perception cued by the loud and noisome steel blade is what excites it—"steadily," "certainly," "relentlessly," "unceasingly," and "inevitably." In his bid to escape, the narrator despairs at the thought whether his tormentors had

actually considered the chance and prepared for it accordingly. A new idea goes up in his brain as he wonders if he could make the rats gnaw through the restraint. He smears the cloth with the remaining bit of meat, and the rats are indeed attracted as another vividly haptic scene unfolds:

> In their voracity the vermin frequently fastened their sharp fangs in my fingers. […] They pressed—they swarmed upon me in ever accumulating heaps. They writhed upon my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure; disgust, for which the world had no name, swelled my bosom, and chilled, with a heavy clamminess, my heart. (PP 694)

At the end, the protagonist's attempt is successful, after a couple of swings on the skin. He flees the pendulum and the machine is instantly retracted—the Inquisition is watching, ready to launch their next device. There is a period of relief ("a dreamy and trembling abstraction" [PP 695]) from the horror of touch images, as the narrator distractedly meditates on the topothetic surrounding space. He sees the source of the half-light that suddenly intensifies and fully illuminates the pictures, or "the spectral and fiendish portraitures" (PP 695), on the dungeon walls:

> Demon eyes, of a wild and ghastly vivacity, glared upon me in a thousand directions, where none had been visible before, and gleamed with the lurid lustre of a fire that I could not force my imagination to regard as unreal. (PP 695)

The terrifying aspect of the visual images is reinforced by the first-tier olfactory perception of the "vapor of heated iron" that brings about a "suffocating odor" (PP 696), making it difficult for the narrator to breathe ("I panted! I gasped for breath!" [PP 696]). Rhetorically, the "demon eyes" on the walls recall the figure of Time in the ceiling as an ekphrastic visual image on the third tier that makes way for the hypotypotic cue of the hot stench, an image both haptic and olfactory. As the narrator frantically looks for another means of escape, there is no need to speculate on the meaning of the demons. The heat in the chamber

becomes intolerable and gives rise to a unique imagined touch perception:

> Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. (PP 696)

In the intermedial experience of PP, the anticipated relief of "the coolness of the well" remarkably disrupts the pattern of hypotypotic touch images, as it not only imagines the pleasant feeling of the well, but excites third-tier speculation on the idea of coolness. Whereas the steel blade was simply a steel blade, what else might "coolness" mediate except physical temperature—is it heavenly salvation and metaphysical bliss? Reading the touch image in this fashion turns it into a haptic ekphrasis that, in terms of the narrator's philosophy of "two stages" between the spiritual and physical, appears to surpass in significance the visual and auditory ekphrases (candles, musical notes, Time, demons) whose effect was fleeting—chronographically, the well feels like eternity.

However, as the inside of the well is lit by the "glare from the enkindled roof" (PP 696), the narrator sees something down there that is never shared with the reader ("Oh! any horror but this!" [PP 696]). On the spot, the dungeon begins to contract, its walls being drawn close, with the narrator manically calling for any other fate except that of the pit, quoting his own speech in declaration ("'Death,' I said, 'any death but that of the pit!'" [PP 696]). At the end of the story, there is a tension between the haptic ekphrasis of the well conflicted by the hypotypotic cue of an unknown visual perception the reader is forced to imagine—is it hell itself down there?[13] The topothetic scene comes to a sensory boil with the heat and the sights left unsaid and, eventually, the auditory images ("low rumbling or moaning sound" [PP 696] of the collapsing dungeon, as well as the narrator's "one loud, long, and final scream of despair" [PP 697]) that usher in the sonorous finale of improbable rescue as the protagonist falls into the pit.

There is little in PP to take as evidence of the temporal gap between the narrator's time of telling and the time of what is told. In describing the Inquisition in the opening scene, he refers to their lips as "whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words" (PP 681), which makes it clear the story is being written in retrospect. In this sense, all first-tier perceptions leading on to third-tier speculation on images are mediated through the second-tier medium of writing as a story in words with a medium-specific rhetorical design. The fact raises questions of the credibility or reliability of the narrator as the teller of his own story, and the role of the reader in interpreting the events accurately. Questions have indeed been asked of the historical inaccuracies surrounding the narrator's miraculous rescue by the French Army and the unbelievable timing of General Lasalle's grasp ("An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell" [PP 697]).[14] Is the redemption for real or a dying fantasy—must the narrator stay alive to tell his story? At the point of swooning, for one last time, the touch image of a tactile contact saves the narrator both spiritually and physically. The reader is left to speculate on the hypotypotic cue in an ekphrastic state of astonishment that recalls the Burkean sublime.

* * *

I promised to return to previous readings of PP in counterpoint to my analysis. Through the basic structure of the reading process of any literary text—starting with a present experience of the story, of the words perceived and the things imagined, and ending with interpreting the ideas produced along the way—readers have often searched for the meaning of universal themes such as life and death, in either a positive or negative light. According to Scott Peeples, such interpretations tend to dismiss "the reality status of the narrator's experience because they treat the story symbolically anyway, as a drama of spiritual or artistic redemption" (100-01). Once what happens in the present is substituted with the kinds of religious and metaphysical ideas it might excite, the

story is thought to take on another dimension, one that may be construed positively or negatively. Michael Clifton, Jeanne M. Malloy, and David Ketterer are, for Peeples, among the hopeful readers as they celebrate the narrator's rescue through good fortune or a kind of providence, and Allan Emery strikes a similar note when he understands Poe's story as being about learning to accept and attain "the possibility of transcendence after life" (39) through hardship.[15] Taking a critical stance, Peeples concurs with David H. Hirsch in how positive readings fall out of line with the author's "theory of internal coherence or single effect" by disrupting the story's logic. To keep the negative effect intact, Peeples prefers to read the narrator's redemption as "absurd" (101), as a random turn of events that only happens to make way for the next misfortune in a state of prolonged duress. In a similar way, Jason Haslam has echoed Joan Dayan in describing the finale as "a hyper-extended fiction, an ending that is unbelievable even within the artifice of a gothic tale" by which Poe addresses "the arbitrariness of detention, punishment, and their duration" (Haslam 280), a topical legal issue both then and now. For Haslam, PP is about the terrifying reality of suffering imposed from the outside, a contextual interpretation of the story's overall effect.

In both the positive and negative readings, readers have focused on the search of the meaning—the *what*—of the story. By contrast, I have detailed *how* reading PP enables the search.

From candles and portraitures to sharp steel and "long, long hours of horror" (PP 691), the analysis has shown the effect of the taking away of sight, and the kinds of imagined sensory perceptions mediated in the form of touch and other sensory images. Through close reading the functions of rhetorical devices informed by the three-tier model of mediality, the non-physical affectivity of intermedial experience has been brought to the fore. PP's medial dynamic makes the reader feel things that cue the story and excite ideas in the form of prominent touch images. The horror of Poe's story has to do with feeling what occurs in the instant, at the cutting edge, and what we are made to wait for, punish-

ing both the body and mind. Individual readers of Poe's story take different cues in search for their meanings as they imagine what the words compel them to imagine.

University of Oulu
Finland

NOTES

[1]Early work on this article was endorsed by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and the Academy of Finland (project number 285144, "The Literary in Life: Exploring the Boundaries between Literature and the Everyday"). I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers appointed to *Connotations* for their valuable and inspiring commentaries.

[2]Sensory studies in Poe have been a recent trend, often from the viewpoint of media technologies and arts involved in Poe's fiction. Well-received examples include Barbara Cantalupo and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney.

[3]In addition to advancing Poe studies, the article at hand could potentially contribute to haptic media studies, or the "haptic moment" of our contemporary media environment, from an interdisciplinary perspective. See David Parisi, Mark Paterson, and Jason Edward Archer.

[4]On the influence of Burke's ideas, Dennis Pahl finds in Poe "the irruptive power of the sublime lodged inside, or within the framework, of the beautiful" (33) which leads him to question the ideal stability of the aesthetic categories as such. Instead, in Poe, there are "inherent material qualities within poetic writing that produce violent and disruptive emotional effects" (37). The eye turns back to the words on the page from the ideas they might excite the reader into. See also Michael J. Williams. For more on Burke's influence on Poe in the context of "The Pit and the Pendulum," see Kent Ljungquist.

[5]It must be stressed that, in the three-tier model of mediality, the interaction between the different aspects of the reading process is not sequential but simultaneous. All three tiers require each other, and although one must first read the words of a literary text to imagine sensory perceptions, they must first use their eyes to read the words that mediate the imagined sense perceptions and abstract ideas. Of course, ears could also be used to listen to someone speaking the words, and, with media beyond literature, the ways of presenting on the second tier can involve any other sense. However, any work of art or media product must appear in some sensory form to be experienced at all.

[6]Rachel Polonsky, in her view on Poe's aesthetics, says that the author, who never used the term "aesthetic" in his writings, "was more likely to poke fun at than to resort to the unwieldy and vaporous philosophical ideas and terms" (61) doing their rounds in the early nineteenth century. Instead, Poe was concerned with "ef-

fect," for Polonsky "a keyword in Poe's theoretical work as a whole" (69), indicating a practical stance towards working with words and ideas. This stance goes well together with the three-tier model of mediality.

[7]Hypotypotic cues are enforced in the sense that, when encountering a sensory image in reading literature, one cannot help but imagine the sensory perception. For instance, in reading the word "pit," the pit is automatically enforced to be imagined in a sensory form. It must also be noted that the rhetorical device of hypotyposis is preferred in the analysis over alternatives such as *evidentia*, *demonstratio*, or *adumbratio* because hypotyposis stresses the sensory as image as such—not as evidence, demonstration, or adumbration of whatever the image might represent.

[8]As noted, the umbrella term of touch images is here used for perceptions of motion, physical contact, and temperature. It can be a future challenge for the three-tier model of mediality to broaden the first-tier range of sensory capacities to categorize proprioception (movement, balance) and interoception (sense of the internal body) as set apart from the sense of touch. However, in this case, the relations between the five classical senses—sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste—will evidence the rhetorical argument.

[9]Jennifer Ballengee has described the recurrence of the state in Poe's work as reflecting his "fascination with a level of experience that falls into neither consciousness nor unconsciousness." According to Ballengee, Poe's hope in trying to capture such "liminal experience" in writing was to create "something utterly unique" (31) in literature.

[10]Ljungquist looks for moments of calm observation in PP as proof of Poe using Burkean techniques "in dealing with a range of violent and unpleasant experiences." By exposing the narrator to unimaginable torture and then finding literary devices (such as retrospective narration) to defuse "the tension of narrator and reader alike," Poe was able to elevate "the terror of the human soul" (28) to new heights. See also David Halliburton. For a more detailed discussion of the distinction between terror and horror in Poe, see Paul Hurh.

[11]In studying aspects of kinesthesia in PP, Lawrence J. Oliver Jr. has discussed the lack of being able to control motion but, interestingly, with a focus on the inability of the protagonist to stop being pushed into the pit by the contracting walls of the dungeon at the end (74-75). Oliver does not mention his tribulation on the wooden frame.

[12]Ballengee has characterized this rhetorical turn as the instance when the narrator "becomes excruciatingly aware of the passing of each moment." The victim is said to feel "literally the passage of time as a series of horrifying shocks, a repeated and persistent moment in which he encounters his own impending death" (34-35).

[13]To intensify the liminal experience of Poe's tale, Ballengee compares the pit to the "abysmal pit of Revelation" in the Bible. In examining what "can (still) be told" (38) in modern storytelling, she employs the religious angle to what can be said in language about that which resists description.

[14]For Poe's historical sources, see David Lee Clark; and Margaret Alterton.

[15]Emery reads PP as a series of events by which the narrator learns how to prepare for the afterlife, even through the "miraculous and inexplicable surprise" (37) of the positive ending. In the process, Emery argues against the "seemingly contradictory arguments" (30) of J. Gerald Kennedy and Kenneth Silverman, the first of whom is stuck in the negative finality of death whereas the second opts too easily for religious consolation.

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