Three

Poe and the French Symbolists: Disjoining the Cultural Episteme

With Midnight to the North of Her—
And Midnight to the South of Her—
And Maelstrom—in the Sky—

—Emily Dickinson, “Before me—dips Eternity”

De Quincey’s stature in the history of postromantic letters is ambiguous and his place often camouflaged. Though his *Confessions* quickly became a literary sensation, his esoteric subject matter was not broadly emulated within the Christian mainstream of the Western tradition. The confessional literature of the Victorian era, with the emergence of figures like Newman and Mill, turned toward spiritual autobiography that generally reflected a reaffirmation of traditional values. Despite this trend, De Quincey became something of a writer’s writer, significantly instructing the odd poet or fiction writer who recognized him as an original thinker and master prose stylist. In America, E. A. Poe praised De Quincey’s then anonymous *Confessions* as “fine—very fine!—glorious imagination—deep philosophy—acute speculation—plenty of fire and fury, and a good spicing of the decidedly unintelligible” (Hayter 149). And in France Baudelaire acknowledged De Quincey’s “infallibility” as *the* literary authority on opium, paying deference to the opium-eater by translating De Quincey’s work rather than writing his own on the pleasures and pains of opium. Though De Quincey’s impact on later romantic and symbolist writers is clear, I do not intend to demonstrate the obvious chronological influence of De Quincey on Poe, of Poe on Baudelaire, and of Baudelaire on Rimbaud. Rather, I shall explore how the ideas and methods of each writer grew out of De Quincey’s seminal work. For the literary theories and practices of Baudelaire, Poe, and Rimbaud are based upon a common rejection of cultural
perception, expressed by the outcast’s estrangement from his homeland.

**Baudelaire and the Theory of Correspondances**

The common ground of De Quincey and Baudelaire is apparent in their mutual exploration of the effect of artificial stimulants on the literary imagination. Yet the moral conclusions that Baudelaire reaches regarding the use of wine, hashish, and opium differ from those of his predecessor. Though De Quincey is frank and graphic in his depiction of the pains of opium, and though one of his admirable qualities is the gift of unflinching introspection, the *Confessions* finally is an elaborate, subtle rationale for the author’s addiction. He sidesteps moral issues and instead rationalizes his laudanum habit, citing his sensitivity, his precocity, or his grief and suffering as causes of his addiction. Baudelaire’s perspective is more complex and even contradictory. A bohemian debauchee with a strong Catholic strain in his meditative letters and writing, Baudelaire does not hesitate to address moral issues or to admonish his readers. Baudelaire also differs from De Quincey in his response to different kinds of intoxicants. Unlike De Quincey, who assails the intoxicating properties of wine, Baudelaire celebrates the “*profondes joies du vin*” (304) and cautions against hashish intoxication, which he views as an essentially solipsistic activity. While both wine and hashish “exaltent [la] personnalité” (312), hashish is “antisocial” whereas “*la vin est profondément humain*” (308), or promotes a sense of fellow feeling among drinking companions. In his 1851 essay “*Du vin et du hachish,*” Baudelaire’s most urgent warning is that hashish attacks the will, our most precious “organ”:

> Enfin le vin est pour le peuple qui travaille et qui mérite d’en boire. Le hachish appartient à la classe des joies solitaires; il est fait pour les misérables oisifs. Le vin est utile, il produit des résultats fructifiants. Le hachish est inutile et dangereux. (312)
[Finally, wine is for the common people who work and who deserve to drink it. Hashish belongs to the class of solitary joys; it is made for lazy idlers. Wine is useful: it produces fruitful results. Hashish is useless and dangerous.]

By the end of the decade Baudelaire had grown more extreme in his attitude toward drugs that alter human consciousness. In "Le Poème du Haschisch" (1860) Baudelaire’s tone is more somber and admonishing (Mickel). Warning of hashish’s capacity to diminish the will and creativity, Baudelaire writes without hesitation of "le caractère immoral du haschisch" and likens its habitual use to "un suicide lent" (583). For Baudelaire, drug taking becomes not only immoral and self-destructive, it becomes sinful.

Despite Baudelaire’s expressed reservations about De Quincey and opium- or hashish-eating, he demonstrates great sympathy for the English prose writer. De Quincey’s claim that the opium-eater is one divorced from his fellow man by a self-imposed liberation and exile is reiterated in Baudelaire’s description of the opium-eater’s relation to society at large:

Ils s’écartent de la population commune, comme s’ils abdiquaient humblement tout droit à la camaraderie avec la grande famille humaine. Cette nation contemplative perdue au sein de la nation active. (585)

[They deviate from the common population as if they were humbly abdicating all right to camaraderie with the great family of man this contemplative nation lost in the bosom of the active nation.]

This qualified sympathy, born out of Baudelaire’s own consumption of opium and hashish, is corroborated by his sensitive inclusion of the most poignant sections of the Confessions in his translation of that work. In Un Mangeur D’Opium, Baudelaire does not chide De Quincey’s excesses but instead emphasizes themes that preoccupied De Quincey: the pariah (1896, 3:122ff.), the London prostitute Ann and the tyranny of London faces (1896, 3:108), the nature of the opium vision (1896,
Poe and the French Symbolists

3:130ff.), and, most importantly, the sense of grief, suffering, and guilt that pervades the English author’s work.

But since *Un Mangeur D’Opium* is really a condensation and selective translation of the *Confessions*, a method of writing called *rifacimento* used by De Quincey himself, Baudelaire’s work demonstrates experiential similarities and temperamental sympathies with De Quincey. Indeed, Baudelaire extended De Quincey’s preoccupations. Though De Quincey was fascinated with the idea of using dreams in imaginative literature, he never really articulated a formal literary doctrine based on extraordinary sense perception as Baudelaire did. If Baudelaire was less pioneering than his English predecessor, his experimentation with states of heightened sense experience, specifically hyperesthesia and the genuine synesthesia encountered during hashish taking, led to an articulated and applicable aesthetic: the poetic theory of *correspondances*.

The hashish-inspired hyperesthesia recounted by Baudelaire in "*Le Poème du Haschisch*" is not essentially different from that described by De Quincey. What Baudelaire and his associates in the *Club des hachischins* experienced is described as *"une acuité supérieure dans tous les sens"* (575). The main difference between the opium- and hashish-inspired sense experience is that while both increase the vividness of sense impressions, hashish is more likely to involve more of the senses and to engage them simultaneously (Hayter 152). The hashish user is more likely to experience genuine synesthesia, in which one sense stimulates or is confounded with another. Baudelaire describes the effects of hashish as a gradual intensification of sense impressions until all the senses are engaged in sympathetic stimulation:

L’odorat, la vue, l’ouie, le toucher participent également à ce progrès. Les yeux visent l’infini. L’oreille perçoit des sons presque insaisissables au milieu du plus vaste tumulte. C’est alors que commencent les hallucinations. Les objets extérieurs prennent lentement, successivement, des apparaences singulières; ils se déforment et se transforment. Puis arrivent les équivoques, les méprises
et les transpositions d’idées. Les sons se revêtent de couleurs, et les couleurs contiennent une musique. (575)

[The senses of smell, sight, hearing, and touch participate equally in this development. The eyes aim towards infinity. The ears hear almost imperceptible sounds in the midst of the greatest tumult. It is then that hallucinations begin. One by one, external objects slowly take on extraordinary appearances. They deform and transform themselves. Next, ambiguities, misjudgments, and transposition of ideas occur. Sounds are endowed with color and colors contain a melody.]

According to Baudelaire’s theory of correspondances, in part derived from the mysticism of Swedenborg (579) and in part an outgrowth of his Wagnerian criticism (Lehmann 207), any individual tone, sound, color, smell, or feeling has an analogue or equivalent in any other sensory category:

Correspondances

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
—Et d’autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l’expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l’ambre, le musc, le benjoin, et l’encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens. (46)

[Nature is a temple where living pillars sometimes give out confused speech; there, man traverses forests of symbols, which observe him with familiar glances]
Like the long echoes that in the distance are medleyed in a dark and profound unity vast as the night and day, perfumes, colors, and sounds answer each other.

There are perfumes cool as children’s flesh, sweet as oboes, green as meadows, and others corrupt, rich and triumphant,

Having the expanse of infinite things, like amber, musk, benjamin, and incense, which sing the transports of the spirit and the senses.]

Although the confluence of sensation is specific and real for Baudelaire the hashish-eater, the theory of correspondances is an imaginative construct that reflects a conscious literary epistemology in which the aim of the poet is to examine the interrelation of sense impressions that function as interpretable symbols. When the correspondences are identified, or in a sense created, as a metaphor might be created, the poet has conceived a profound unity among all things. Heightened sense perception brings the poet in contact with objects (symbols) that are not only individually expressive but that contribute to a choir of sights, sounds, colors, and odors which together express transcendent correspondences. This phenomenon is a direct descendant of the protosymbolist involutes of both Coleridge and De Quincey, whose symbolic complexes of image and emotion express truths that transcend ordinary perception.

Correspondances thus involve a mystical disjoining of the cultural episteme when the normal association between a sense perception and thought is subverted by the poet. In Baudelaire’s work, this subversion frequently happens during a voyage of estrangement in which the poet-voyager imaginatively departs from the landscape of his culture. The voyage, in effect, becomes the counterpart of the opium dream. In his prose poem “L’Invitation au Voyage,” Baudelaire explicitly correlates the journey away from one’s native country with the opium dream, “un vrai pays de Cocagne”:

Des rêves! toujours des rêves! et plus l’âme est ambitieuse et délicate, plus les rêves s’éloignent du possible.
Chaque homme porte en lui sa dose d'opium naturel, incessamment sécrétée et renouvelée. (159)

[Dreams, forever dreams! The more the soul is ambitious and delicate, the more do dreams get away from the possible. Each man has in himself his dose of natural opium, incessantly secreted and renewed.]

For Baudelaire the voyage becomes a conventionalized metaphor for estrangement from cultural experience and perception. In two centerpieces of his poetic canon, “L’Invitation au Voyage” and “Le Voyage,” Baudelaire explores opposing states of mind that elicit the pleasures and pains of departing from one’s native land. In the former work, the journey is toward a state of ideal love—toward “[le] pays qui te ressemble!”—an imaginative country which resembles the love itself, where “tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, / Luxe, calme, et volupté” (72). Later, in the voyage the poet’s speaker, still searching for new lands, laments: “Amer savoir, celui qu’on tire du voyage!” (124). The voyage results in a bitter knowledge, for the journey is toward death:

O Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l’ancre!
Ce pays nous ennuie, ô Mort! Apparçillons!
Si le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l’encre,
Nos coeurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons!

Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte!
Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau! (124)

[O Death, old captain, it is time! Pull up the anchor! This country tires us, O Death! Let us get under way! If the sky and the sea are black as ink, our hearts, as you know, are full of light!

Pour us your poison to comfort us! So much this fire is burning our minds, we want to plunge to the bottom of the abyss—hell or heaven, what does it matter—into the depths of the Unknown in order to find something new!]
In both poems the journey itself corresponds to an imaginative state and, as such, becomes a kind of perception. The disjoining of the cultural episteme thus occurs on the imagistic as well as the metaphorical level. Image, figure (symbol), and theme are one.

Poe and the Disjoining of Cultural Value

Baudelaire's interest in heightened states of sense perception and the synesthetic correspondences of sense experiences is derived as much from Poe as from De Quincey (Tate 241n). Like De Quincey, Poe found the imagery of intoxication an expressive means for describing the visionary faculty and the literary imagination. The convention of intoxication in Poe's tales is analogous to heightened sensibility that is variously expressed in hyperesthesia, synesthesia, and the sensation of vertigo or entropy. This fascination with extraordinary sense perception is compounded with what D. H. Lawrence has identified as Poe's intense concern with "the disintegration-processes of his own psyche" (65). In Poe's tales the reader participates in a systematic stripping away of conventional perception that leads to a state of physical, psychical, or allegorical collapse.

Poe's work generally displays a preoccupation with heightened sense perception or the mortal disintegration of the body. In his tales of the sea, these two preoccupations frequently merge and form allegories of epistemological disintegration. As the journeyer casts off from his cultural moorings, he is confronted with a totally new visual and kinesthetic reality and is forced to question all he was once sure of. Works such as "A Descent into the Maelström," "MS. Found in a Bottle," and The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, whether they describe circular or linear voyages, are thus descendents of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Each of Poe's tales describes a mariner's voyage away from the familiar and his discovery of another level of consciousness or realm of being.

"A Descent into the Maelström" offers an archetypal jour-
ney of death and rebirth largely consistent with the Christian episteme. Though the tale teller enters a kind of heretical space, he returns to the embrace of his culture. The tale is told to an unnamed auditor-narrator who listens to the story on a craggy mountain peak which offers a vertiginous outlook over the Norwegian “Moskoe-ström”:

the vast bed of the waters, seamed and scarred into a thousand conflicting channels, burst suddenly into phrensiéd convulsion—heaving boiling, hissing—gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices, and all whirling and plunging on to the eastward with a rapidity which water never elsewhere assumes except in precipitous descents. (Poe 1978, 2:580)

From several miles away, the old fisherman and the narrator watch as the maelstrom forms a “terrific funnel speeding dizzily round and round with a swaying and sweltering motion” (2:580). Poe has chosen his setting carefully, for the distant perspective emphasizes the importance of sense perception in the tale, and the disorienting entry into heretical space is consistent with the landscapes of Coleridge and De Quincey. The old fisherman describes, in hyperesthetic terms, the vertiginous sensation of being caught in and dragged down by the maelstrom; he is “enveloped in foam,” feels the “amazing velocity” of the boat, and skims “like an air bubble up on the surface of the surge” which appears as a “huge writhing wall” (2:588). During the gradual whirling descent, the old man experiences periods of “stupor” (586), “confusion of mind occasioned by the wind and spray together” (589), light-headedness, and even delirium (591). The effect is a sustained synesthesia. But clearly these overlapping sensations have none of the mystical properties of Baudelaire’s correspondances; rather, this state of sensate confusion marks the moment of death, or the verge of sleep (Wilbur 257), or some other kind of consciousness beyond normal waking experience. Whatever the symbolic significance of the journey, the returning fisherman completes a Christian circuit and expresses no deep estrangement from his culture.
Poe's earlier tale, "MS. Found in a Bottle," describes the same phenomenon of the maelstrom but offers a narrative structure that subverts the death-rebirth archetype. Coleridge's Ancient Mariner here comes more clearly to mind due to the "estrangement" of the narrator from his native land and his journey "farther to the southward than any previous navigators" (2:139). Moreover, the tale offers no circular return, no apparent rebirth; the narrator lives on only through his anonymous manuscript which closes with a series of disjointed impressions. The first of these discrete meditations defines the importance of the writer's extraordinary sense perceptions but at the same time asserts that they are ineffable:

A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul—a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of by-gone time are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key. To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration is an evil. I shall never—I know that I shall never—be satisfied with regard to the nature of my conceptions. Yet it is not wonderful that these conceptions are indefinite, since they have their origin in sources so utterly novel. A new sense—a new entity is added to my soul. (2:141)

The narrator finds that his previous experience at sea fails to prepare him for his voyage aboard the DISCOVERY. The cultural codes of language and sensation and the analysis of lessons of the past are inadequate to his present experience. At first sight of the ship, the writer feels "an indefinite sense of awe" (2:140). He finds the hoary, spectral crew members who ignore him are "incomprehensible men!" (2:141), and the construction of the ship itself is "of a material to which [he is] a stranger" (2:142). He regards the captain with "a feeling of irrepressible reverence and awe mingled with the sensation of wonder" (2:144). In short, his journey aboard the DISCOVERY severs him from his comfortable sense of reality and takes him into a heretical space. Once he boards the DISCOVERY, he is inevita-
bly drawn into a vortex of the incomprehensible. His sensations
defy description; his place in time and space is obscure.

The experimental narrative of the tale reflects this incompre-
hensibility. Once inside heretical space, the writer-narrator ap-
parently ceases to exist among the company of specters; he is
himself imperceptible. His narration mirrors this epistemological
shift, breaking down into a series of discrete, disjointed diary
entries which reflect, on a linguistic level, the disruption of
sequential experience and certain knowledge. Time, in effect,
ceases to exist. Sensations, too, cease: “All in the immediate
vicinity of the ship is the blackness of eternal night, and a chaos of
foamless water looking like the walls of the universe” (2:145). And the universe disintegrates:

Oh, horror upon horror!—the ice opens suddenly to the
right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in
immense concentric circles, round and round the bor-
ders of a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose
walls is lost in the darkness and the distance. But little
time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny! The
circles rapidly grow small—we are plunging madly
within the grasp of the whirlpool—and amid a roaring,
and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest,
the ship is quivering—oh God! and—going down! (2:146)

Poe’s allegory can be read on several levels, but clearly in one
sense the journey is a descent into another realm of con-
sciousness, into a heretical universe from which there is no
return. The final plunge is not compensated by a miraculous
ascent, as in “A Descent into the Maelström.” Only the manu-
script itself returns to civilization.

Estrangement from the cultural episteme is also the domi-
nant theme of The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nan-
tucket. As in the earlier tales, Poe’s novel is structured by a
series of deaths and rebirths—Pym’s enclosure in the box, his
disguise as the corpse of Rogers, his archetypal becalming and
reanimation, his live burial and emergence from the cave-in—
all of which take place on a voyage that parallels the Ancient Mariner’s. Pym journeys toward the South Pole, is visited by an albatross and a death ship, and encounters a land where everything is unknown. Like the experience of Poe’s earlier characters in “A Descent into the Maelström” and “MS. Found in a Bottle,” Pym’s allegorical death and rebirth is accompanied by psychic disturbance and heightened states of perception. The most notable instance is Pym’s “disorder of mind” when he becomes sick and is enclosed in the box. His dreams and visions in the darkness are, like the “perturbed sleep occasioned by opium” (73), filled with hyperesthetic images that make his senses supersensitive when he awakes. The sensate extremes of the later sea chapters—the storm, the “dead calm” afterwards, and the gradual disintegration of the Grampus—are structural analogues of Pym’s individual death and rebirth. The Christian archetype of death and rebirth, however, is subverted by dramatic sequences that contribute to the motif of estrangement from culture.

The first events of the novel begin to develop this theme. The mutiny that occurs aboard the Grampus is a figurative dissolution of civilization, underscored by the unusually brutal murder of Captain Bernard and over twenty crewmen loyal to the order that the Captain represents. Poe describes the “horrible butchery” (84) in explicit detail not only to emphasize the degree to which cultural values are betrayed but to foreshadow subsequent events in the novel. While Pym and his friend Augustus (the captain’s son) are horrified by the mutiny, they later reenact the butchery in their cannibalism. Here, too, the event profoundly distances the men from cultural values; Pym finds himself rendered helpless by an “abject and pitiable terror” of consuming human flesh. Filled with a “diabolical hatred,” he falls into a swoon only to wake to the murder of Parker (144–46) whose remains the surviving crew members consume over a four-day period. Pym’s loss of consciousness before partaking of human flesh is a psychical threshold that, like the ancient Mariner’s swoon, marks the boundary between the culturally
sanctioned and the forbidden. Once this Rubicon is crossed, Pym and his surviving companions are literally and allegorically estranged from culture. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" provides an interesting contrast with Poe's novel. The marriage feast from which the Mariner is excluded is a symbol of cultural continuity; whereas in Poe's narrative the mutiny and cannibalism in which Pym and his companions are unwilling participants are symbols of cultural dissolution. During the mutiny, social order is disrupted as the authority relationships are broken down. During the act of cannibalism, individuals are dismembered and their flesh consumed: Augustus's arm putrefies and, after his death, his "entire leg came off in [Peters's] grasp" (155).

The final sequence of events in the novel, Pym's sojourn among the south Atlantic islanders, is, like other major sections, introduced by detailed, elaborate digression. Rivalling De Quincey in this art, Poe uses the digressions on navigation, the history of exploration, and ornithology as a means of severing the reader from his or her own sense of fictive reality. It is through the art of digression that the reader is led from the "facts" of the narration into the world of the unknown. When Pym and his new companions from the Jane Guy disembark to explore the south Atlantic islands, the reader is thus prepared for an unknown realm: "At every step we took inland the conviction forced itself upon us that we were in a country differing essentially from any hitherto visited by civilized men. We saw nothing with which we had been formerly conversant" (193). In keeping with the travel literature of his time, Poe is simply making his tale as attractively exotic as he could, and yet the physical setting and geography are soon transformed. When Pym in buried alive by a cave-in orchestrated by the seemingly harmless islanders, the merely exotic journey assumes a cosmic significance:

I was suddenly aware of a concussion resembling nothing I had ever before experienced, and which impressed me with a vague conception, if indeed I then thought of
anything, that the whole foundations of the solid globe were suddenly rent asunder, and that the day of universal dissolution was at hand. (207)

While one senses a certain ironic detachment in Poe’s description, the exaggeration is in keeping with the images in “A Descent” and “MS.” which end in the dissolution of the universe. And, in a sense, that is what happens to Pym and Dirk Peters; the known world collapses around them, they are separated from members of their culture, and they are all left for dead by the island inhabitants. Although Pym escapes entombment and eventually the islands themselves, his life and the novel end tumultuously, with Pym’s homeward-bound vessel plunging “into the embraces of the cataract” during a storm at sea.

The ending of Pym is also in keeping with that of “The Fall of the House of Usher” which, more than any of Poe’s tales, is an allegory of the disjoining of the cultural episteme. This interpretation, while not definitive, is consistent with other persuasive readings that focus on the notion of psychic collapse. Clearly, Poe’s central concern in the tale is with epistemological questions. The narrator’s description of the physiognomy of the house with its “vacant eye-like windows” (Poe 1978, 2:397) and the sensation it evokes—“an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium” (2:397)—indicate Poe’s preoccupation with human perception as a theme in the story. Of course Poe is not interested in common, everyday perception but the heightened sensibilities of the Usher race, who practice the highest forms of art and social benevolence:

His very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognisable beauties, of musical science. (2:398–99)
Roderick Usher, a member of the highest social order, is an accomplished musician, abstract painter, poet, theosopher, and man of letters. A refined practitioner of the most subtle arts of his culture, Usher falls victim to his training and aristocratic pedigree which have afflicted him with a nervous disorder.

The refined Usher sensibility ironically burdens him with a "morbid acuteness of the senses" (2:403) so that all tastes, odors, sights, and sounds are oppressive. His clinical hyperesthesia and wide reading in mysticism give rise to an animistic world view in which all vegetable things are sentient:

In his disordered fancy [about the sentience of vegetable things], the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization. This belief, however, was connected (as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers. The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around. (2:408)

Usher performs a transfusion of sense experience, tapping his own superabundance of sensation to endow the inanimate (inorganized) world with life, or sensation. His faculties invest the House of Usher with a spiritual intellect felt by the narrator as he approaches the estate. In a sense, Roderick Usher and the House of Usher are one. And since Usher represents the highest achievements of our civilization, when he collapses and the house itself disintegrates, so does our civilization. Poe's tale suggests that Usher's psychic disintegration is an allegory for the disintegration of cultural knowledge and value.

Rimbaud's Dérèglement de Tous les Sens

Whereas Roderick Usher and the narrator of his story are unwilling participants in the disintegration of the psyche and the
Poe and the French Symbolists

cultural episteme, Arthur Rimbaud, the literary descendent of both Poe and Baudelaire, considers this process crucial to the liberation of the literary imagination. Rimbaud’s poetic theories and his poetry have much in common with De Quincey, Poe, and Baudelaire, for all were interested in the effect of artificial stimulants on the functioning of the imagination. Baudelaire’s theory of *correspondances* had an unequivocal impact on Rimbaud, whose often quoted letters on the *voyant* praise Baudelaire as “le premier voyant, roi de poètes, un vrai Dieu” (Lettres 68). This youthful apotheosis led to some interesting but derivative experiments such as “Voyelles,” which is based on Baudelaire’s doctrine of *correspondances*. For Rimbaud, *correspondances* were a celebration of sense experience and a means of transcending ordinary perception to experience the mystical, universal connection among all things. But just as Baudelaire came to distance himself from De Quincey, Rimbaud finally rejected Baudelaire. The means by which Rimbaud pursued his own vision were in direct conflict with Baudelaire’s admonitions in “Du vin et du hachisch” and *Le Poème du Haschisch.*

In his 13 May 1871 letter to Isambard, Rimbaud expresses a literary epistemology based on his personal experiments with altered states of awareness. During this period, Rimbaud would deliberately fatigue himself and then take large quantities of coffee, tobacco, and wine in various combinations (Rickword 48): “Maintenant, je m’encrapule le plus possible. Pourquoi? Je veux être poète, et je travaille à me rendre voyant: vous ne comprenez pas du tout, et je ne saurais presque vous expliquer. Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens” (Rimbaud 1931, 55). [Right now I’m debauching myself as much as possible. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working at making myself a visionary: you will not understand all of it, and I’m not sure if I can explain it to you. It is a question of arriving at the unknown by a derangement of all the senses.] Two days after writing this letter, Rimbaud sent his famous letter to Demeny in which he speaks of the same issues with more specificity and authority:
Le Poète se fait voyant par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens. Toutes les formes d’amour, de souffrance, de folie; il cherche lui-même, il épuise en lui tous les poisons pour n’en garder que les quintessences. Ineffable torture où il a besoin de toute la foi, de toute la force surhumaine, où il devient entre tous le grand malade, le grand criminel, le grand maudit,—et le suprême Savant!—Car, il arrive à l’inconnu! (62)

[The poet makes himself a visionary by a long, immense and reasoned derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, suffering, and madness; he looks into himself, he exhausts in himself all poisons in order to keep only their quintessences. Ineffable torture where he needs all the faith, all the superhuman strength in the world, where he becomes, among all, the great invalid, the great criminal, the great outcast—and the supreme Scientist—Because, he arrives at the unknown!]

What a few days before had been a rather hesitant claim to becoming a visionary poet is here transformed into an articulate, daring abnegation of sobriety and traditional social value. In order to become a voyant, Rimbaud declares the poet must undergo a radical, systematic derangement of the senses, a violent process that Hart Crane called “rapturous and explosive destructivism” (231) and that, more recently, has been described as “deconstructing the self” into a “scattered or disseminated self” (Bersani x–xi).

In order to dis-integrate the socially approved self, the poet must undermine social convention, a process that divests the self of cultural competence. The deconstruction of the socially structured self occurs through a systematic negating of the culturally accepted associations among sense experience, knowledge, and value. Such a dissolution of the social self through a “dérèglement de tous les sens” is apparent in the opening lines of “Le Bateau ivre”:

Comme je descendais des Fleuves impassibles,  
Je ne me sentis plus guidé par les haleurs:
Des Peaux-Rouges criards les avaient pris pour cibles, 
Les ayant cloués nus aux poteaux de couleurs.

J'étais insoucieux de tous les équipages, 
Porteur de blés flamands ou de coton anglais. 
Quand avec mes haleurs ont fini ces tapages, 
Les Fleuves m'ont laissé descendre où je voulais. 
(Rimbaud 1966, 114)

[As I drifted down impassible rivers, I no longer felt myself guided by haulers: loud red-skins had made targets of them, having nailed them naked to colored stakes.

I cared nothing for any boats, carrying Flemish wheat or English cotton. When the uproar was done with my haulers, the River left me drift where I wanted.]

As the "haleurs" relinquish control of the boat and the voyant feels his lack of guidance, he responds to the world with absolute freedom, shedding the restraints imposed by family, fellow humans, and the daily commerce of the world. Drifting carelessly and aimlessly down the river, the voyant imagines a coalescence of the sea, the poem, and the vision. The visionary poet immerses himself in the natural sensate world, and the boundary between self and the purifying elemental world is dissolved:

Et dès lors, je me suis baigné dans le Poème 
De la Mer, infusé d'astres, et lactescent, 
Dévorant les azurs verts; où flottaison blême 
Et ravie, un noyé pensif parfois descend;

Où, teignant tout à coup les bleuités, délires 
Et rythmes lents sous les rutilements du jour, 
Plus fortes que l'alcool, plus vastes que nos lyres, 
Fermentent les rousseurs amères de l'amour! (116)

[And from then on, I bathed in the Poem of the Sea, infused with stars and swirling milk, devouring the green azures; where, pale and entranced flotsam, a passive drowned man sometimes drifts by;
Where, suddenly tinting the blueness, deliriums and slow rhythms under the glowing of day, stronger than spirits, vaster than our lyres, ferments the bitter redness of love!)

The “Poème de la Mer” is a synesthetic tumult of images, described by Rimbaud’s friend Delahaye as a “precipitous flow of violent sensations” (Rickword 33). The catalogue of images and sense impressions reflect the actual process of disjoining the cultural episteme; that is, the dissolution of conventional perception and its replacement with a new self and a new world created by the voyant. The poet feels himself “jeté par l’ouragan dans l’éther sans oiseau,” [thrown by the hurricane into the birdless sphere], now a “bateau perdu” drifting dead-drunk and free through a universe he himself creates. Rimbaud carries the romantic-symbolist epistemology to an extreme, projecting a heretical cosmogeny in which the myth-making poet is the center of a universe that wheels vertiginously around him. And yet, as Henry Miller argues, Rimbaud is no “madman whirling about the pivot of self” (87). He is “concerned with the problem of the soul, with the expansion of consciousness and the creation of new moral values. [He is] at the hub of [a] wheel which sheds light on the void” (112). Like his romantic predecessors, Coleridge and De Quincey, Rimbaud engages in a heretical epistemology that is simultaneously destructive and constructive, fragmenting the old and projecting the new.

“Le Bateau ivre” ends with a final renunciation. Delighting in the “ecstatic agony” of his voyage (Peschel 56), the voyant rejects any possibility of return to his native land:

Je ne puis plus, baigné de vos langueurs, ô lames,
Enlever leur sillage aux porteurs de coton,
Ni traverser l’orgueil des drapeaux et des flammes,
Ni nager sous les yeux horribles des pontons. (Rimbaud 1966, 120)

[I can no longer, bathed in your languors, o waves, sail in the wakes of the cotton boats, nor encounter the pride of flags and pennants, nor row under the horrible eyes of prisoner-ships.]
After his prolonged and willed derangement of the senses, the voyant has shed his social and moral responsibilities as well as his national and familial identity. Rimbaud’s antipathy toward contemporary Christian European civilization led him to divest himself of its mode of perception. This desire starts, he writes in “Matinée d’ivresse,” “par quelques dégoûts et cela finit,—ne pouvant nous saisir sur-le-champ de cette éternité,—cela finit par une débandade de parfums” (232). [(It starts) with a few disgusts and it ends—we cannot immediately seize this eternity—it ends in a confusion of perfumes.] The poet’s determined renunciation of the cultural episteme begins with a disgust for oneself and all cultural modes of perception and, after a willed derangement of the senses, ends in a riot of perfumes.

Outlining the literary kinship of Rimbaud, De Quincey, Poe, and Baudelaire does more than establish a line of literary descent or influence; it defines a tradition that had a significant impact upon modern literature. In its most obvious manifestations, the tradition of these symbolist writers depends on a heretical departure from cultural sobriety. The resulting disorientation of the senses and spirit ends in a visionary estrangement from cultural perception. Although the sensory derangement described by the nineteenth-century writers in this tradition was drug-induced, the disorienting journey became a literary convention in that most heretical of periods, the modern age.