Edgar Allan Poe's narrative monologues border on madness and disrupt the normally associated conventions of voice. Monologue is solitary speech, whether physically isolated, morally deviant, or semantically opaque; Poe's strongest narrators are not only solitary human beings, for as a fictive consequence of the criminal acts they narrate, they often speak from solitary confinement. But while his narrators appear isolated and deviant, Poe's narratives themselves swerve away from norms. An initial problem is to distinguish between the narrative conventions Poe borrows, transforms, and creates, because the superficially popular genre of his fiction conceals the relationship to English literary tradition. By emphasizing the intensity of reader experience above all else, Poe himself neglects literary history, yet even the most emotionally charged reception of a text is made possible by literary context. Although Poe does respond to conventions of the Gothic novel, his revision of epistolary narrative and conversational poetry is more decisive.

Poe's most compelling fictions succeed as representations of diverse and often pathological characters. Yet if we suspect that consciousness, in literature, is "a fictive appearance generated by language,

rather than something language describes or reflects," then we must attend to the devices by which fiction creates the illusion of representing a consciousness. Such devices depend on intertextual relations in literary history. The "I" emerges at various stages and in all genres of English literature, including dramatic soliloquy, conversational poetry, and first-person narrative. Whereas the dramatic frame clarifies what it means for a character to say "I," the poetic and narrative "I" raises problems that derive from the disparity between the actual form of writing and the imaginary scene of speaking. Poe revises the conversational mode to present dreams, fantasies, passions, obsessions.

The meaning of first-person narrative in stories by Poe becomes clearer in the context of his eighteenth-century precursors. The earliest epistolary fiction of Samuel Richardson brings the narrator into a peculiar condition of identity with the narrated world. If the surest truth of experience is "I think," the most irrefutable literary assertion is "I write." Yet who is the "I" of such a statement? The fictional "I" creates itself and, simultaneously, its frame. Especially where the letters of only one character constitute a fictional world, there is no clear separation between the narrating persona and the world narrated. After Richardson, then, the scene of writing is an accepted component of the English novel. This scene influences the later development of self-conscious prose and particularly modern internal monologue that pretends to reproduce a scene of unwritten thoughts.

Prior narrative traditions are tame, however, when compared with those introduced by Poe's first-person tales. In a sense, Poe transfers the intensely present "I" of Romantic verse to an analogous "I" of narrative. But his first-person accounts do not merely transpose the conversation poem into a narrative form: Poe's narrated monologues unsettle the representational conventions on which they initially depend. At the same time that a first-person voice reveals exalted states

\[ J. \text{ Hillis Miller, } \textit{The Disappearance of God}, \textit{2d ed.} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), ix. \]

\[ Poe's "\textit{The Raven}" may be viewed as a post-Romantic conversation poem. Taking the colloquial first-person voice for granted, Poe characteristically infuses formal devices of assonance, rhythm, and rhyme. The tensions already present in Coleridge's works are therefore intensified when Poe opposes the mental imbalance of his speaker to the formal precision of his verses. \]
of consciousness, Poe subverts the realistic pretense by focusing attention on the act of writing. The scene of Poe's greatest originality is the point at which he disrupts the conversational tradition by tampering with the unexamined illusion of narrative voice.

"I write in the present tense"

Apart from the obvious, yet superficial, influence of Gothic novels, Poe is most significantly influenced by the first-person form of epistolary fiction. A first-person "voice" is clearly essential to the genre based on personal letters and diary entries.

Samuel Richardson innovates in a monological vein by producing the epistolary novel *Pamela* (1740). Twentieth-century literary norms make the novelty of Richardson's narrative devices difficult to appreciate: Richardson introduces a genre of self-reflective writing while planting the seeds of its undoing. Early in *Pamela*, for example, the heroine represents her past thoughts in a letter to her parents: "O Pamela, said I to myself, why art thou so foolish and fearful? Thou hast done no harm! What, if thou fearest an unjust judge, when thou are innocent, would'st thou do before a just one, if thou wert guilty? Have courage, Pamela, thou knowest the worst! . . . So I cheered myself; but yet my poor heart sunk, and my spirits were quite broken."4 Recalling her thoughts in the form of a pseudodialogue at a specific moment, Pamela apparently practices what Shaftesbury calls the "Home-Dialect of Soliloquy." As Shaftesbury's analysis predicts, the soliloquist becomes "two distinct Persons" when Pamela reasons with herself.5 At the height of perplexity she contemplates suicide and thinks: "Pause here a little, Pamela, on what thou art about, before thou takest the dreadful leap; and consider whether there be no way yet left, no hope, if not to escape from this wicked house, yet from the mischiefs threatened thee in it" (Pam. 180). On one level, this passage works as psychological realism that represents a process of thought. At the same time, the pause in Pamela's thoughts is a pause in her narrative of events, like the dramatic monologue Diderot describes as "a moment of repose for the action, and of turmoil for the

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4Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958), 28 (henceforth cited as *Pam.*).
5Char. I, 170 and 158.
character." While these passages represent past thoughts, the narrative form appears to correspond to the represented moment.

Richardson’s Pamela also shows a self-conscious awareness of the process of writing. She accounts for her possession of writing materials (Pam. 100, 154) and at several points notes her time of composition to the hour. Pamela’s activity of writing is, in addition, occasionally interrupted by the world she describes. Amid contemplations, Pamela writes, “But I must break off; here’s somebody coming” (Pam. 75). Even more vividly, she writes of her feeling of dread and its influence on writing: “Though I dread to see him, yet do I wonder I have not... I can hardly write; yet, as I can do nothing else, I know not how to forbear!—Yet I cannot hold my pen—How crooked and trembling the lines!—I must leave off, till I can get quieter fingers!” (Pam. 191). After Pamela describes her inability to write, the narrative breaks. As the fictional Pamela exists only by virtue of her writing, she literally “can do nothing else.” Her peculiar self-awareness only slightly disturbs the representational illusion with the recognition that “Pamela” exists only as a fictive writer. We experience Pamela primarily as a writer, but she remains a realistic character within the fiction.

Richardson’s novel explicitly narrates Mr. B’s approach to Pamela, and it tells a parallel tale of the reader’s approach to her texts. Mr. B must fight to obtain Pamela’s writings, a struggle which identifies him with the reader, who now holds the texts that are also objects within the fictional world. Like a sympathetic reader, Mr. B understands and loves Pamela all the more for the words she pens (Pam. 242–44); in fact, he only begins to acknowledge the depth of her character through her writing, just as the reader discovers her.

“I write, therefore I am” is the principle of first-person narration. Even for Mr. B, Pamela is most truly herself in her writings. Yet as Mr. B. kidnaps and isolates her, she is pushed toward a mode of writing that is not intended to be read. Pamela cherishes the notion that she can be identical with what she writes and defends herself against charges of insincerity: “I know I write my heart; and that is not deceitful” (Pam. 240). The purity of her manuscripts at first depends on their remaining untouched by Mr. B; when he demands to see all she writes, he undermines the very possibility of writing (Pam.

Pamela imagines that she will no longer be able to write "with any face"—or heart?—if she must write without monological isolation, in the expectation of Mr. B's readership. In a sense, then, the novel ought to end as soon as she and Mr. B are united; Pamela writes, of necessity, for only as long as they are separated and she contemplates matters that she must hide from him. The scene of writing is linked to the developments that overcome Pamela's solitude by bringing her closer to the reader and to Mr. B.

Henry Fielding proves to be a genuine critic when he subsequently lambastes the new epistolary fiction in his *Shamela* (1741), revealing the essence of Richardson's narrative monologues by means of comic distortions. *Shamela* does not merely parody Pamela's more obvious quirks, such as the ambiguous character of the heroine. Fielding's caricature pokes fun at the improbable narrative device by which Pamela continues to write during the most heated moments of action, and in so doing, Fielding reveals the nature of Richardson's epistolary form.

One of Shamela's most humorous diary entries, purportedly written "Thursday Night, Twelve o'Clock," may serve as an introduction to Poe's revision of narrative conventions. In a style that obliquely prepares the way for Molly Bloom's internal monologue, Shamela describes events as they occur:

Mrs. Jervis and I are just in bed, and the door unlocked; if my master should come—Odsbobs! I hear him just coming in at the door. You see I write in the present tense, as Parson Williams says. Well, he is in bed between us, we both shamming a sleep; he steals his hand into my bosom, which I, as if in my sleep, press close to me with mine, and then pretend to awake.—I no sooner see him, but I scream out to Mrs. Jervis, she feigns likewise but just to come to herself; we both begin, she to becall, and I to bescratch very liberally. After having made a pretty free use of my fingers, without any great regard to the parts I attacked, I counterfeit a swoon.

Shamela is a counterfeiter both in bed and in her narrative pretense that suggests simultaneity with narrated action. She can as easily feign an impossible narrative stance as she can "counterfeit a swoon." Thus the parody of Pamela's character combines with a comic exaggeration

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7Henry Fielding, "Joseph Andrews" and "Shamela," ed. Martin C. Battestin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 313. The parallel scene in *Pam.*, Letter 25, does not actually employ the present tense. For comic effect Fielding combines this outrageous scene with the most radical of Richardson's stylistic innovations.
of her manner of writing: Fielding exposes the possibly bizarre consequences of Richardson's innovation. First-person, present-tense writing results in a variety of difficulties, such as the paradoxical illusion that Shamela can simultaneously write her diary and engage in a battle with Mr. B. Nothing in *Pamela* reaches such self-contradictory extremes, of course, yet Fielding aptly captures the potential turns of perversity made possible by Richardson's representations of thought and of moments of writing. One hundred years later, E. A. Poe develops a kindred genre in which diabolical monologists appear menacingly present.

"Why will you say that I am mad?"

In one sense, then, Poe's first-person narrators stand firmly in the tradition of epistolary fiction as initiated by Richardson and parodied by Fielding. But when Poe situates his work in relation to tradition, he refers almost exclusively to poetic models. In "The Poetic Principle," Poe establishes both an aesthetic theory and a canon of "English and American poems which best suit my taste." While Poe argues strongly that he has discerned the poetic principle, he describes something that he himself invents, in connection with his own poetic preferences. Poe favors short poems of high intensity, on the basis of a "peculiar principle" of psychology:

> a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ration of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such. [CPS II, 1021]

On the surface, Poe's principle of literary taste is a "psychal necessity," the human inability to sustain a state of excitement for longer than half an hour. Imposing a half-hour limit that is not literally

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necessary, Poe imagines a faintly sexual scene, derived from figurative demands of a literary scene in which the excitement "flags—fails—a revulsion ensues," and the poem loses its status as poem. An emotional coupling between poem and reader takes place. But does the poetic principle really derive from "psychal necessity," or does poetry control psychology? Only superficially do Poe's poetics depend on exclusively psychological principles. If Poe admires verses that produce an exalted state in the mind of the reader, he seeks poetic personae that create illusions of similarly exalted conditions.

The poetic principle of elevating excitement produces a present scene analogous to that of Coleridge's conversational poetry. A moment in the speaker's experience corresponds to the reader's exalted experience. One mode of Poe's writing is, then, a radicalization of the poetic genre Coleridge begins with "The Eolian Harp." In his "Letter to B——," he admires Coleridge's "towering intellect" and "gigantic power" yet adds that "in reading that man's poetry, I tremble like one who stands upon a volcano, conscious from the very darkness bursting from the crater, of the fire and the light that are weltering below" (CPS II, 860). Whereas Coleridge "imprisoned his own conceptions," Poe—for the sake of an exalted half hour—strives to free the bound forces, as in "Tamerlane," the dream poems, "The Raven," "The Sleeper," and "Annabel Lee." Poe's tales present even more powerful first-person presences. Often enough, Poe's narrators are themselves imprisoned, yet in some way liberated by the scene of narration. The liberation of bound forces and representation of an exalted consciousness are initial premises for Poe's fiction. Poe gives free expression to thanatos, an impulse toward death or destruction; beyond their scenes of murder, Poe's narrators perform their own self-destruction in dramas linked to "the imp of the perverse."

The deviant narrators of "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Imp of the Perverse" in some ways extend into short fiction the epistolary and conversational modes developed by Richardson, Coleridge, and their followers. Yet Poe's narrators often confront the representational illusion at the same time that they dispute the superficial claim that they are insane. In Poe's texts, the scene of madness combines with a controlled scene of writing; at exactly this point, Poe destabilizes the genre he assumes: rhetorical forms both constitute and question a conversational pretense.

On one level, Poe's mad monologues may be read as expressions
of psychological realism. "The Tell-Tale Heart," for example, presents itself as the spontaneous narrative of a murderer: "True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am! but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story" (CPS I, 445). As the scene of discourse, we may imagine ourselves in conversation with a confined lunatic. His denial of madness only intensifies the effect of his bizarre claim to have "heard all things in the heaven and in the earth." The opening words imply that we have provoked the speaker by asserting what he denies: far from being insane, he says, "the disease had sharpened my senses," and if we choose to listen, we will share his exalted mood for a few minutes. As soon as we begin to read, then, we find ourselves written into a drama in which we have accused the speaker of being nervous or mad. The narrative opens with a paradox, however, which unsettles the representational illusion. The speaker combines mad assertions with narrative lucidity and presents a disconcerting contradiction between his representing and represented personae. The discrepancy between sane narrator and madman perhaps shows the error of assuming that linguistic normalcy implies psychological normalcy. The narrator is mad, or at least abnormal, according to his own account, because he kills an old man for no reason. He is doubly mad when he imagines he hears the pounding of the dead man's heart and gives away the crime he had concealed. Yet the narrator tells a coherent tale, as if to demonstrate out of spite that he is sane, refuting the ordinary belief that he must be mad. This contradiction overturns mimetic conventions: a literal reading of the mad narrator shows itself to be naive, because only Poe's textual pretense creates the illusion of disparity between madman and sane narrator.

"The Black Cat" follows similar patterns, without the exclamatory wildness of the tell-tale narration. The contradiction is even sharper in "the most wild yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen," for the scene of writing is explicit. Condemned to death, the narrator explains: "To-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events.
In their consequences, these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them" (CPS I, 476). Again Poe invents a situation of radical conflict, in which lurid and lucid details compete. Renouncing all value judgments, the narrator resolves to tell his tale in the most indifferent tones. He explains his peculiar behavior only by reference to a philosophical principle. The speaker has been prone to mysterious states, as when "the fury of a demon instantly possessed me"; the narrator attributes his ultimate downfall to perversity:

Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? [CPS I, 478]

Similar to an evil genius, the "spirit of perverseness" appears as a reversal of the daimonion that turns Socrates away from evil. The spirit of perverseness inverts, turns upside down, subverts: "It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute" (ibid.). Rather than speak of some psychological drive that leads men to evil, the narrator points to an abstract, counterrational impulse to violate whatever is—nature or law. The impulse to perverseness, governed by the rhetorical figure of chiasmus, is a kind of hidden nature in man. The mad narrator undoes himself both through his perverse actions and in his submerged story of textual subversion, a tribute to "the power of words" (CPS II, 637). The spirit of perverseness is an antidaimonion that turns the speaker against himself; the overt instigator, a black cat, bears the name of Pluto, god of the underworld.

"The Imp of the Perverse" reveals more explicitly the perverse power of words. Half treatise and half tale, the text opens in the tone of philosophical inquiry: "In the consideration of the faculties and impulses—of the prima mobilia of the human soul, the phrenologists
have failed to make room for a propensity which, although obviously existing as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment, has been equally overlooked by all the moralists who have preceded them. In the pure arrogance of the reason, we have all overlooked it.” The neglected primum mobile resists the efforts of reason, of perception, of human purpose. Speaking in the tones of rationality, Poe’s narrator points to the limits of reason, beyond which our senses must be guided by belief. Experiencing vertigo on the edge of an abyss, we encounter “a shape, far more terrible than any genius or any demon of a tale.” A thought takes form: “Because our reason violently deters us from the brink, therefore do we the most impetuously approach it” (CPS II, 639–40). Rather than call us away from evil, the perverted “genius” presses us toward the abyss. The perverse further opposes reason and systems of good and evil because it can at least appear to “operate in furtherance of good.”

The narrator condenses the paradoxical perverseness into a definition: “It is, in fact, a mobile without motive, a motive not motivirt [sic]” (CPS II, 638). Displacing comfortable theological beliefs according to which God is the primum mobile, this alternative, an introjected “mobile without motive,” upsets all order. The perverse suggests that there can be motion without any rational ground, and even the apparent motive can be without motivation.

By a perverse logic, the entire analytical discourse is transformed when the speaker describes his present situation. Not only does the apparently unmotivated take on motive; perversely, we become visitors to a prison rather than readers of a philosophical discourse:

I have said thus much, that in some measure I may answer your question, that I may explain to you why I am here, that I may assign to you something that shall have at last the faint aspect of a cause for my wearing these fetters, and for my tenantry this cell of the condemned. Had I not been thus prolix, you might either have misunderstood me altogether; or, with the rabble, have fancied me mad. As it is, you will easily perceive that I am one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse. [CPS II, 640]

The speaker denies his madness by calling himself a victim of the principle he has outlined. Yet his language hovers between calculation and illogic. The narrator explains “why I am here... wearing these fetters” by reference to a cause that is only a perverse absence of
cause. From the standpoint of realistic representation, the perverse narrator betrays his deviance through linguistic peculiarities. He begins his tale: “It is impossible that any deed could have been wrought with a more thorough deliberation. For weeks, for months, I pondered upon the means of the murder” (ibid.). Like the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” who comments that “it is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain” (CPS I, 445), he assumes an understanding of what he has not yet explained. Both fictional speakers break accepted conventions by employing the definite article, where “the idea” and “the murder” have not been previously explicated. If we read these narrators as mimetic characters, their linguistic deviations may be signs of defective mental processes. From another perspective, however, ill-formed syntax is a contradiction embedded in the narrative by Poe, to enhance the contradictions in the narrator’s account.

The narrator undoes himself in a scene of internalized self-address, after the words “I am safe” have become his standard refrain: “One day, whilst sauntering along the streets, I arrested myself in the act of murmuring, half aloud, these customary syllables. In a fit of petulance, I remodelled them thus; ‘I am safe—I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession!’ ” (CPS II, 641). Language overthrows him, for as soon as he asserts one thing, the perverse drives him to subvert this rational thesis:

No sooner had I spoken these words, than I felt an icy chill creep to my heart. I had had some experience in these fits of perversity, (whose nature I have been at some trouble to explain), and I remembered well, that in no instance, I had successfully resisted their attacks. And now my own casual self-suggestion that I might possibly be fool enough to confess the murder of which I had been guilty, confronted me, as if the very ghost of him whom I had murdered—and beckoned me on to death. [CPS II, 641]

A rhetorical moment takes the place of all ghosts, when “the imp of the perverse” drives the speaker to confess. “The rabble” would understand his behavior as a symptom of madness, but his perversity turns out to be a reflex inherent in words.

“Ms. Found in a Bottle”

Poe’s radical revision of the conversational pretense derives, then, not from the poetic principle of psychological exaltation, but from a
rhetorical application of the spirit of perverseness. The mad monologues achieve powerful effects of psychological realism and can be read as the conversations of deranged speakers. Beyond the operation of perverseness in self-destructive behavior, however, Poe's narrators show that language may undermine its own theses. As soon as a murderer tells himself, "I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession" (CPS II, 641), he already assures that he will pronounce his doom. In the tradition of the epistolary and confessional novel, several of Poe's short fictions more radically disrupt the conversational mode by recognizing themselves as writing, and the realistic pretense fades.

"Ms. Found in a Bottle" initially confronts the reader with an uncertainty: Is this the manuscript found, or will it describe a recovery of some other document in a bottle? The manuscript we read is not, in any obvious sense, found in a bottle. Apparently, the story may be about a "Ms. Found in a Bottle," or it may actually be this manuscript. The story generates the odd illusion that it exists within itself. A perplexing ambiguity makes impossible any clear distinction between the text that represents and the text that is represented. Midway through the narrative, we are informed: "It was no long while ago that I ventured into the captain's own private cabin, and took thence the materials with which I write, and have written. I shall from time to time continue this journal. It is true that I may not find an opportunity of transmitting it to the world, but I will not fail to make the endeavor. At the last moment I will enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it within the sea" (CPS I, 133). The bottle is a familiar figure of textuality, of the metonymic relation between form and content, literary container and the thing contained. But the expected configuration is inverted: whereas the container is a bottle within the textual world, what is contained is the text itself. This illusion is also destroyed, however, because the bottle only exists by virtue of the text "inside" that describes its existence. Perversely, the text of "Ms. Found in a Bottle" usurps the world it describes by showing that it is identical with that world. The mimetic convention slips away when the text discloses itself merely as a text; the bottle and the wine merge, the container and the contained become inseparable.

Yet the representational level remains: "At the last moment I will enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it within the sea." The text masquerades as an object in the world it represents; Poe, by titling the story, pretends to verify this pretense. Poe also "adds" an epi-
graph that accords a special status to the words of the desperate writer: "Qui n'a plus qu'un moment à vivre / N'a plus rien à dissimuler" ("One who has only a moment to live / Has nothing more to conceal")." According to this proverb, then, no dissimulation can occur if the writer is on the verge of death. In the final lines of the story, "amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and tempest," the narrator writes that "the ship is quivering—oh God! and—going down!" At this moment, presumably, the text is enclosed in the bottle, just as the ship is swallowed up by the sea. But the representational illusion is also engulfed as the moment of writing becomes the moment of death: we can never remove the text from its alleged bottle, for text and bottle are identical. According to the rhetorical figure, the inside of the bottle should represent its contained meanings, but the fullest meaning of Poe's story is that this text is identical with its inside, the entire text is its meaning, so that in some sense the bottle can never be uncorked. 9

The writer or speaker in "The Cask of Amontillado" never reveals his present place, yet he embeds figurative clues within the tale he narrates. In connection with the story of ruthless murder, a first level of allegory makes the unfortunate Fortunato a stand-in for the reader. As readers, our mistake is to think we can confidently, safely uncork a text and savor its wine. Within the representational illusion, Fortunato shows the same faiblesse: "He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine" (CPS II, 667). The narrator rightly claims that "I did not differ from him materially"—because, of course, both are textual fictions—"and bought largely whenever I could." Yet they do differ: Fortunato prides himself on an ability at wine tasting; the narrator represents himself primarily as a buyer of wines. Fortunato is like a presumptuous literary critic, while Montressor is a writer who stores his textual bottles in endless vaults. While staging Fortunato's death, the narrator figures himself as a writer within the story. Fortunato makes the mistake of wishing to outdo Luchresi, who is reputed to have a fine "critical turn" (ibid.). As he walks unknowingly toward his tomb, Fortunato laughs and "threw the bottle upward with a gesticulation I did not understand."

9 Intertextual relations between Poe's "Ms. Found in a Bottle" and Defoe's Robinson Crusoe constitute another extramimetic level of meaning, analysis of which is beyond the scope of the present discussion.
This is a potentially troubling moment for the narrator, whose reader has taken the text, or the act of signifying, into his own hands:

I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement—a grotesque one.

"You do not comprehend?" he said.
"Not I," I replied.
"Then you are not of the brotherhood."
"How?"
"You are not of the masons." [CPS II, 669]

The speaker is troubled by his victim's continued independence. How can the author of a text or scheme respond to such a rebellion? At this provocation, which is like that of an elusive reader, the narrator turns the situation around:

"You are not of the masons."
"Yes, yes," I said; "yes, yes."
"You? Impossible! A mason?"
"A mason," I replied.
"A sign," he said.
"It is this," I answered, producing a trowel from beneath the folds of my roquelaire.
"You jest," he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. [Ibid.]

At first, "mason" refers to the secret order of Masons, an order that separates itself by means of arcane signs. Yet the narrator quells his reader's rebellion by demonstrating that his signs escape him; we now understand the opening line of the story: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge" (CPS II, 666). Poe's persona takes revenge on his critics, showing their inability to understand what they say by literalizing their figures of speech and demonstrating that their error entombs them. Fortunato believes that the Masonic order controls its secret language, but he learns that its language can control him. The pun on "mason" turns a trowel into an ominously literal sign of the Mason's demise, and Fortunato can only lean heavily on the narrator's arm as he walks toward his death.

"The Cask of Amontillado" suppresses the rebellious reader by writing him into the text and by entombing him in a subterranean vault. The trowel, a figure for the stylus, walls up unfortunate Fort-
tunato, who tries to dismiss Montressor's action as a joke. But the act of writing is utterly serious: as "I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up" (CPS II, 671), and the story ends. The Mason, unable to control his trope, finds himself victimized by the perverse action of masonry. The narrator becomes confused with what is narrated, the container with the contained, as if urging us to disbelieve the mimetic conventions that pretend to present the voice of a speaking subject. The reader, too, should be unable to savor his wine, confronted by a double who has become like wine decomposing within a bottle, the corpse within a textual tomb.

Poe takes up the first-person form only to transgress its usual limitations. The "I" no longer rests with a stable representational function, for behind the mask are only contours of the mask. Where the fictionally speaking voice becomes inextricably bound up with the events it speaks, the more solid ground of mimetic fiction crumbles. There remains an enhanced sensitivity to the dynamics of textual illusion.

First-person narratives, from Richardson to Poe, enact the unification of narrator and narrated, narration and event, creator and created. When the mimetic framework is questioned by internal contradictions, self-narrative unsettles the barrier between signifying and referential functions of language. To represent a self, narration reflects itself.

The literary life of self perhaps corresponds to an equally fictional worldly self that depends on performance for its existence. The monos of monologue can no longer stand as a subject or monad and is rather a textual swerve. For monologue is not the logos of subjectivity but only the linguistic embodiment of isolation and deviance that reveals perverse origins of the fictive subject.