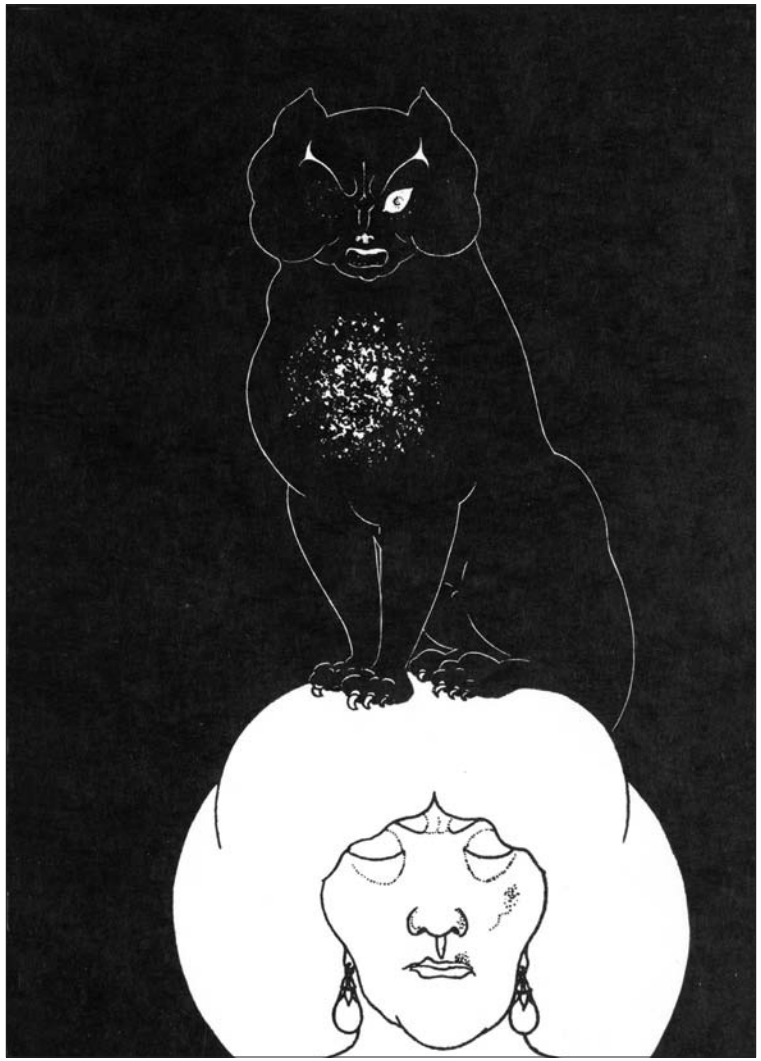
Creeping in the "Mere": Catagenesis in Poe's "Black Cat" and Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper"

Niles Tomlinson

ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance, Volume 56, Number 3, 2010 (Nos. 220 O.S.), pp. 232-268 (Article)

Published by Washington State University



Aubrey Beardsley, The Black Cat *from* Four Illustrations for the Tales of Edgar Allan Poe *(Chicago: Herbert S. Stone, 1901).* Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-108227.

Creeping in the "Mere" : Catagenesis in Poe's "Black Cat" and Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper"

NILES TOMLINSON

> And when on the Last Day sinful man appears in his hideous nakedness, we see that he has the monstrous shape of a delirious animal.
>
> —Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (2006)

The numerous thematic and tropic crosscurrents between Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and many of Edgar Allan Poe's tales are well recognized by scholars of nineteenth-century literature. Annette Kolodny identifies the specific parallels between the narrator's bedroom in Gilman's tale—"with its bed nailed to the floor, its windows barred, and metal rings fixed to the walls—and Poe's evocation of the dungeon chambers of Toledo" in "The Pit and the Pendulum." As essential markers of the gothic genre, both stories describe the horrific play between a hegemonic system of torturing logic and an individual's struggle with madness. Accordingly, Carol Margaret Davison argues that Gilman employs a narrative dynamic similar to Poe's: "both use . . . constitutionally nervous characters whose 'illnesses' are virtually impossible to diagnose, foreground the subversive nature of the imagination, and share the peculiar combination of haunting mood and rational design that has been deemed Poe's signature style." Gilman herself, in her autobiography, draws a connection between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Poe's work. In her

"I am sitting by the Window in this Atrocious Nursery."

THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER.

By Charlotte Perkins Stetson.

IT is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity — but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and *perhaps* — (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind —) *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

Frontispiece to "The Yellow Wall-Paper. A Story," by Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman), New England Magazine *11, no. 5 (1892): 647.*
Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection.

response to H. E. Scudder's rejection letter (*Atlantic Monthly,* 1890), which made clear how dismal her story had made him, Gilman concludes: "The story was meant to be dreadful, and succeeded. I suppose he would have sent back one of Poe's on the same ground."[1]

While "The Yellow Wallpaper" certainly echoes the claustrophobia of rationalism in "The Pit and the Pendulum," the hallucinatory effects of the arabesque in "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," and the theme of contagion in "Masque of the Red Death," it is "The Black Cat" (1843) that yields perhaps the most significant and active cross-textual noise. Even a cursory glance at these two narratives reveals the common threads: an unnamed narrator spiraling into madness, a haunted domestic space, women emerging from behind walls, and, most crucially from my vantage point, figurations of animality—"creeping" cats and women. This last correspondence is a highly productive substrate that has received little, if any, critical attention. In fact, Gilman's own characterization of her story as "dreadful" specifically echoes the governing emotion of "dread" that the narrator of "The Black Cat" uses to describe the overpowering sensation of being haunted by an animal. As he says of the second black cat (who arrives revenant after he kills the first): "although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing . . . chiefly—let me confess it at once—by absolute *dread* of the beast."[2] This "dread" is energized by his recognition that the animal he had thought destroyed—Pluto, the first black cat—has only returned in a more virulent, menacing form.

However, the primary source of this dread, I argue, stems less from an *oppositional* structure of animality that challenges the authority of the human than it does from a dawning sense that the animal Other is pervasive, unlocatable, slippery, and, most damaging, already domesticated/insinuated within the borders of an anthropocentric order that is ostensibly immune. In other words, the narrator's anxiety stems from contagious animality that permeates not only the walls of his home but also his sense of identity. While the narrator begins the narrative (his confession) the putative owner of a menagerie—"birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey" (*CW,* 850),

From "The Yellow Wall-Paper. A Story," by Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman), New England Magazine *11, no. 5 (1892): 656.* Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection.

and Pluto, the first black cat—as the story progresses animality creeps from its linguistic containment and begins to infect the signifiers of objective reality: the second cat appears on a "*hogs*head" of liquor; the narrator breaks open the wall with a "*crow*bar" (my emphasis). The story follows a trajectory from domestication *of* the animal to domestication *by* the animal, signified by the loss of categorizational boundaries that are readable and fixed. Accordingly, when the second cat "reache[s] the house," the narrator tells us, "it domesticate[s] itself at once" (*CW,* 854), thus revealing that the agency of domestication has been inverted. Domestication is here represented as a practice the animal initiates as a way to make itself present within the private human space—the human space of so-called civilized immunity—the walled structure meant to separate the human from the wild. Thus, it is fitting that Poe's narrator conceives of the returned black cat as a kind of breathing "pestilence," and that he is haunted by its surreptitious mobility: "The creature left me no moment alone. . . . I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face" (*CW,* 856).

By a similar dynamic, Gilman's narrator continually couches the haunting yellow wallpaper in tropes of animality and contagion. This is evident in her description of the "yellow" smell of the wallpaper: "It creep [*sic*] all over the house. I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs."[3] The juxtaposition, in both this passage and the Poe passage above, of brute physicality ("hot breath" and "smell") and imperiled human subjectivity demonstrates the shakiness of the narrators' sense of immunity from the furtive spread of animality, even as it points up the telling contrast between the fixity of human space and the ever-mobile manifestations of animality. Indeed, the very characteristics Gilman's narrator uses to describe the mobility of the yellow smell are the same as those that become associated with the creeping women behind the pattern of the wallpaper—as well as with her own becoming as a creeping creature.[4]

Gilman's use of the verb "creep," then, is a felicitous descriptor for the dominant (and dreadful) movement that unfolds in both these stories: whether attributed to the black

cat or the wallpaper or the women emerging from behind the wallpaper, creeping serves to triangulate animality—specifically cats—contagion, and women. Creeping signals the corrosion of a hierarchal system whereby humans are not only elevated above what Poe calls a "brute beast" but man is privileged over woman. After all, what assures anthro- and phallogocentric architecture is precisely the opposite of creeping: a fixed and symmetrical rationality, a logic, that conflates man's dominion over animals (and women) with sanctification and purity. Man's immunity is guaranteed not only through the fixing of the Other in readable categories but also through a verticality of power and command whose logic dictates that the lower categories remain forever subjugated.

We find evidence of this immuno-logic in one of the most pervasive and enduring patriarchal orders, the Judeo-Christian, where Adamic-man is constituted both by the divine Other he sees in the mirror and by the dominated "creeping" Other that has no reflective value, since it remains prohibited by the borders of this mirror. Thus, at the moment of creation God declares: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."[5] The invocation of the divine mirror implicitly links purification to "dominion," sanctity to the authority of Law. Here, specifically *man* (this is before God creates Eve) is the origin, the unifying principle of the various species and their boundaries. Yet the change from singular to plural pronoun, "man" to "them," in the first two clauses also signals a slippage from the monadic mirror and invokes, through its inference of multiplication, the forthcoming woman (Eve) whose generative power parallels the proliferation of animals. The lower one gets, moreover, the more vigilant is the need for the authority of the signifier, as suggested by the needless repetition of the word "creep" at the end of the passage. Whereas authority over the other species signified is assured by the naming of their category and the natural boundaries in which they exist (fish=sea, birds=air, cattle=earth), the signifier "thing" combined with "creeping" connotes something that is multiple, non-tractable, fluid. A

"thing" (like the snake in the garden) that is prone to violate the Law of the Father—in Lacanian terms, the symbolic structure that insures the stability of signification. Man, this passage implies, may be given dominion but if anything will challenge his power, it will be some "thing" that is creeping, a "thing" that, since it cannot be named and thus fixed, instigates a slippage of categorization that threatens the whole immunological system.

We find a similar anxiety about slippage between humanity and animality in the (pseudo)scientific and cultural discourses that constellated the theory of degeneration in the last half of the nineteenth century, roughly the interval between the publications of "The Black Cat" and "The Yellow Wallpaper." This theory—which J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman identify as "the institutionalization of fear"[6]—haunted the minds of social and biological scientists alike. It was informed by the great natural-history revolutions in the nineteenth century—most prominently Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859—and the terrifying implications of a human/animal continuum, as opposed to binary, that this revolution proposed. As the new emphasis on process and metamorphosis troubled the fixed categories of species in "The Great Chain of Being,"[7] and as evolution neither implied nor required divine direction, the notion of progress became shadowed by the specter of regress. This most fundamental of slippages is acknowledged by E. Ray Lankester in his 1880 "Degeneration, A Chapter in Darwinism": "It is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress." For Lankester, as well as many other degeneration theorists, the diagnosis of pathology in the individual and collective body tended to perpetuate rational diagnosis itself as the only safeguard against this regression: "The full and earnest cultivation of Science—the Knowledge of Causes—is that to which we have to look for the protection of our race . . . from relapse and degeneration."[8]

Although there were many variations on degeneration, the primary argument was that moral "reversions," physiological abnormalities, and even social vices (alcoholism, prostitution, criminality) could pass from generation to generation.

Signs of animality not only were linked with the return of "primitive" traits but were viewed, given the growing evidence of "lowly origin," as inextirpable from human ontology.[9] Both the human mind and the human body were palimpsests written with primordial codes capable of reasserting mastery. For example, Dr. Henry Maudsley, in *The Pathology of Mind* (1880), sees in "idiots" a sign of retrogression toward "a lower type of brain": "in their habits and instincts they sometimes exhibit evidence of a reversion to the fundamental instincts of animal nature."[10] Cesare Lombroso, in his 1875 publication *L'uomo delinquente* (*Criminal Man*), argues that "the most horrendous and inhuman crimes have a biological, atavistic origin in those animalistic instincts that, although smoothed over by education, the family, and fear of punishment, resurface instantly under given circumstances." According to Lombroso—who classified criminals' facial characteristics, cranial sizes, and physical deformities—degenerative features are written on the delinquent's body, yet can only be read by a skilled diagnostician. Moreover, the signatures of atavism identified by Lombroso—"in descending order, asymmetry, femininity, sloping foreheads, and prognathism"—explicitly link women, "savages," and the loss of a readable order.[11]

In American discourse, we can read an implicit anxiety concerning the fragility of civilization and the civilized body. According to neurologist George Miller Beard, the more purely refined this body is, the more vulnerable to an incursion by nervous exhaustion—what he terms "neurasthenia." In his explication of this condition, Beard contrasts the relatively immune "dark races"—whose "coarsely built" bodies are already synonymous with degeneracy and thus not undermined by disorder—with the "highly and finely organized" races, in whose bodies "any local irritation is speedily transmitted and puts the whole system into disturbance."[12] But whereas Beard locates the dis-ease of civilization in the weakening effect of civilization itself, the American scientist Eugene Talbot, in *Degeneracy: Its Signs, Causes and Results* (1898), attributes social decay to the parasitic morass of the dependent and less civilized—including the disabled, the mentally ill, the racially intermixed, and the criminal. Some of these "degenerates" merely live off

the healthy individual "but [do] not tend to destroy him," while others (the "criminals") are "destructive of the well-being of man," "lack[ing] proper recognition of individual rights which constitutes the essential foundation of society."[13] The closing of the American frontier in the late nineteenth century meant also the loss of opportunity to impose the hierarchal imperative of Genesis, which in turn created an anxiety about possible role slippage: from domesticator to domesticated, from conqueror to parasite, from logic-driven human to instinctual animal.

Degeneration theorists, then, were especially keen on identifying the signs of retrogression not merely because diagnosis of pathology was an important step in treatment but because it reconstituted the very system of rational classification and verticality that these perceived eruptions of animality brought under assault. Identification of "pestilence" not only justified separation and quarantine, thus reaffirming the hierarchy of power relations, but also, as Priscilla Wald argues, "displayed the rationale of social organization and was, therefore, the force that bound people to the relationships that constituted the terms of their existence."[14] These theorists, then, helped produce the very categories of pathology they tended to look for. The problem, however, was that this contagion, generated in the animal/human continuum, had contingent borders and could lay dormant for generations—while its signs were at times visible, its essence was essentially spectral. Especially in the hyper-urbanization of the late nineteenth century, the more the degenerate faded into the confusing "jungle" of the masses—what Daniel Pick explains as the degenerate's "apparent invisibility in the flux of the great city"[15]—the more amplified was the anxiety about hidden monstrosity. There was something creeping in the human order of things, a lurking animality that could hide behind the most civilized façade. We can clearly see this theme in such important fin-de-siècle literary works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray,* Bram Stoker's *Dracula*—and, I would argue, Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper."

It is certainly possible to look at the earlier story "The Black Cat" as a prescient reflection of the fin-de-siècle anxiety about animality expressed in these later literary works and scientific

discourses. The narrator's descriptors for the cat reveal a loss of categorizational integrity as the animal slides further and further from human familiarity; that is, one can trace the destabilization of the signifier throughout the story as the cat named "Pluto" becomes "creature," "thing," and finally, "monster." By naming the cat Pluto, initially, the narrator signifies the animal's infernal origin (Pluto is the Roman god of the underworld) even as he invokes the Adamic privilege of naming (symbolically capturing) the various animals in Eden.[16] So the return of the black cat—a creature that goes unnamed—signals the erosion of the narrator's immunological power and his descent, as it were, into an increasingly contagious space. As the cat slips away from the human center, as its ontology becomes increasingly ambiguous and difficult to read, it also becomes more haunting, multiple, and pervasive. For there are not merely two cats. After the narrator kills Pluto, a "gigantic" image of the cat appears on the wall above the head of his bed, "as if graven in *bas relief* upon the white surface" (*CW,* 853); and, of course, after the police tear down the wall behind which the narrator has entombed his murdered wife, the second cat reappears balanced on her head "with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire" (*CW,* 859). In these further incarnations the cat poses a menace to the narrator's construction of purified borders: its image pollutes the "white surface" of his bedroom wall and is the destructive agent that leads to the collapse of basement walls that he has brazenly claimed to the police "are solidly put together" (*CW,* 858). The penultimate return also signals the germination of contagious admixture between oppositional forms: the cat/woman is animal/human, male/female, life/death—its "wailing shriek," as Poe tells it, announces a monstrous birth "half of horror and half of triumph" (*CW,* 859).

Similarly, in "The Yellow Wallpaper," we find clear echoes of a monstrous, multiplying animality that materializes through the walls. The wallpaper itself is replete with contagion: "all those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths," which, like the black cat, "shriek with derision!" (52). This image, according to Juliann E. Fleenor, intimates "something strange and terrible about birth and death conjoined,

about female procreation, and about female physiology";[17] it not only portrays the diabolical crossing of binary forms but also links procreation with monstrous creation, reproduction with contagion. Moreover, in the figures of creeping women we can see a similar dynamic of anthropocentric slippage and the multiplying of a contagious Other. After the narrator's initial recognition of the woman behind the wallpaper, she begins to see additional appearances outside the house—"I can see her out every one of my windows. . . . I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden. I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines" (50). Not only does hiding as a reaction to human intrusion align these women with animality (especially cat-animality), but creeping itself conflates the movement of animality with that of contagion. As the narrator herself begins to creep she becomes a figure of contagion, which is coded in the increasingly unstable boundary between herself and the other women, between the rational order and the return of animality, between, ultimately, the Adamic imperative to categorize and the "creeping things" that are erupting through the walls.

Indeed, "creeping" in Gilman's story becomes a loaded word as it brings into congress horror and *jouissance,* madness and the power of stalking, degeneration and liberation, loss-of-self and the intensity of self-knowledge. Not surprisingly, the narrator's embrace of creeping is at the root of an animated critical debate concerning the interpretation of the final moment in "Yellow Wallpaper"—when she creeps over the prostrate body of her fainted husband. Jeannette King and Pam Morris argue that the narrator "becomes a shameful caricature of female helplessness and submissiveness—a creeping woman"; Elaine Hedges suggests that her creeping shows that "she has been defeated," that "she is totally mad." On the other hand, Greg Johnson reads it as "a terrifying necessary stage in her progress toward self-identity." Loralee MacPike, who understands the narrator's creeping as part of her madness, notes that insanity "is the only creative act available to those doomed to be defined as subhuman by submission to society's standards."[18] Still other scholars offer a mixed interpretation:

Judith Fetterley argues that, while the woman who goes mad fulfills the trajectory of the male script, "still going mad gives the narrator temporary sanity"; and Paula Treichler posits that the narrator escapes patriarchal control, but "her individual escape is temporary and compromised."[19]

All of the above interpretations, while certainly furthering a provocative discussion, assume that the signifying act of creeping is either a digression from humanity or a promise of reformulated humanity, one in which a new subjective position is forged or at least briefly glimpsed. That is, implicit within all these interpretations is an anthropocentrism that codes creeping as either a retrogression or a temporary state, a kind of chrysalis, which promises a progressive metamorphosis. What is not recognized here is how fundamentally the contagion of animality collapses the logic of this assumed human center, how the return of animality suggests that the rational order of *man* (after all, patriarchal power most often licenses the human) is itself a kind of madness that entombs as it builds walls of demarcation, that sickens as it valorizes the logic of immunity, that foments degeneration as it advocates exceptionality.

By reading the intertextual reverberations between "The Black Cat" and "The Yellow Wallpaper," it is possible to understand Gilman's creeping narrator in a new light—one not easily tethered to human teleology. Poe's story, since it elucidates the horror of disintegrating human logic, opens a haunted space of alternative creation through contagious animality that Gilman's story then fully exploits. I suggest that Gilman's narrator is not *merely* degenerating or *merely* liberating herself from the laws of patriarchy but doing both. It is in her mixing of binary principles and categories—through the action of creeping—that she resists the imperative of the "mere," the boundaries of nothing-more-than. In other words, by invoking an emergent and fluid animality, Gilman describes *a regressive act of creation* that deconstructs the human as foundation for the hierarchal power relations of Genesis.

■■■

"MERE" LOGIC

Perhaps the most subtle, but also the most provocative, intertextual channel between "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "The Black Cat" is the repetition of the word "mere" in the opening lines.[20] In Poe's tale the narrator wishes "to place before the world" descriptions of "*mere* household events" (*CW,* 849); in Gilman, the narrator describes her husband and herself as "*mere* ordinary people" about to move into "secure ancestral halls" (39; emphasis added). In each case "mere" functions as a secondary qualifier for the primary qualifier ("household," "ordinary"), both of which connote normality, convention, domestication. In both phrases "mere" works as a kind of anxious ratification of surface meaning, a tautology that might be read as a compulsive need to quell the possibility of non-domesticated fluidity.

The echo of this word in these texts invites us to put it under etymological pressure. According to the *OED,* "mere" has the meaning of "being nothing more, no better than," but it also connotes "being pure and unmixed" and refers to "a boundary marker." We might read "mere," then, as reaffirming a rational practice, a containment strategy that conflates symmetry and purity with the borders of the self. In order to be pure and unmixed, one must know one's limitations, must be nothing-more-than, must not extend beyond a readable self. By implication, one's purity is insured by remaining visible and tractable in the mirror—the instrument of self-knowledge. But "mere" also denotes "a lake or large body of water," and this meaning troubles the other two. As a body of water both reflects the observer and hides the teeming dark currents beneath its surface, "mere" begins to take on a more haunting possibility. The rational reader mistakes the contained human form in the mirror for something natural. Thus Poe and Gilman's use of "mere" at the outset of their stories calls the reader to consider how insubstantial "mere" rationality truly is, since there is decidedly nothing "mere" about these tales. It quickly becomes apparent that the domestic space reflects

only the illusion of self-control through rational application. Poe's insistence on using the word "mere" suggests a desire for containment, for an immune response to the contagious possibilities that move stealthily beyond and/or beneath the borders of the rational mirror. The problem these respective narrators face as they spiral into madness is one of reading, of fixing in place the increasingly free-floating signifiers in their domestic environment. If we understand rationalism as a framing network in which categorization follows an organizing law of objectification, then we can begin to formulate madness as a kind of immuno-logical failure, where the narrator's subjectivity comes increasingly under siege by the more-than, by free-floating, viral signifiers.

Addressing this fear of madness, both "The Black Cat" and "The Yellow Wallpaper" begin with an invocation of a specific immuno-logical agent whose ratiocinative skills could maintain or restore the domestic space. Poe's manic narrator struggles to preserve his belief that all things are merely what they are, but the inverted syntax in his opening declaration "mad am I not" betrays a disorder that undermines his ability to demarcate a logical border (*CW,* 849). Haunted by an unreadable gothic dread, he pleads for a kind of messianic detective whose sleuthing power will once again properly fit and fix in place the fluid, multiplying narrative possibilities exploding in his once-harmonious home: "Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace . . . which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects" (*CW,* 850). He desires nothing less than a unifying principle that will reinstate a chain, a taxonomy, whereby everything will conform to a domesticated and tractable pattern. His phrase "ordinary succession" expresses the desire for a rational reading practice and specifically recalls "The Great Chain of Being" wherein man, by virtue of his ability to map the myriad species and determine the logical borders of difference, is guaranteed a privileged position—the mapmaker. We can see how animality that is increasingly spectral—when the narrator kills the first black cat, a second one appears—compromises the immuno-logic he had thought unassailable.

The unfixable animal causes a proliferation of clues for which no unifying interpretation is possible.

The physician-husband in "The Yellow Wallpaper" embodies, in one sense, the kind of master reader that the narrator of "The Black Cat" attempts to summon. As an immuno-logical agent, his role is to objectify and codify the world through diagnosis and force it into readability. In his directives for his wife to remain inactive and fixed in place, not to "stir without special direction" (40), can be read the logic of the "mere": domestic health is a product of rational thinking; immunity is guaranteed by an adherence to strict objectivity. As the narrator claims: "John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (39). This "putting down in figures" not only elicits a particularly phallogocentric kind of writing—one in which everything is penned so as to conform to the quantifiable and measurable—but also implies dominion: the rational mind remains above the descriptors of reality which are "put down" by the pen and forced into objectivity. This kind of writing, moreover, is commensurate with the act of diagnosis.

Playing on the double entendre of "sentence," Paula Treichler argues that a physician's "diagnosis is a 'sentence,'" a method of both linguistic and teleological confinement.[21] It establishes the boundaries wherein one's (particularly women's) subjectivity remains tightly controlled. This idea of diagnosis as a kind of writing into immurement, of "mere" making, is explained by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their germinal work *Madwoman in the Attic:* "As a creation 'penned' by man . . . woman has been 'penned up' or 'penned in'. As a sort of 'sentence' man has spoken, she has herself been 'sentenced': fated, jailed, for he has both 'indited' her and 'indicted' her."[22] John's diagnosis, then, is the polar opposite of the signifying pandemonium of the fluid wallpaper. For, "if diagnosis is the middle of an equation that freezes material flux in a certain sign, the wallpaper is a disruptive center that chaotically fragments any attempt to fix on it a single meaning."[23] A diagnosis is a function of an immune system in that it recognizes the Other as pathogen and translates it into readable code in order to "put it down."

The diagnosis continually reconstitutes the purified subject in its suggestion that the "mere" protects from any excess and from any mutability that may devolve into a monstrosity of more-than.

Yet fluid and monstrous morphology was, during the span of time between the publications of these two stories (1843 through 1892), precisely the revelation that science, particularly natural history, was bringing to light. The animal had, so to speak, been unleashed from the domesticating taxonomies of the neoclassical period. Evolutionary theory had increasingly problematized systems of species classification, so that by the time of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), fixity could only be considered an arbitrary move for "convenience's sake." The delineations of the "mere" had grown murky as evolution posited a continuum on which each species was always in the process of becoming more-than. Darwin argues, "No clear line of demarcation has as of yet been drawn between species and sub-species . . . or, again, between sub-species and well-marked varieties, or between lesser varieties and individual differences"; rather, "differences blend into each other . . . and a series impresses the mind with the idea of an actual passage."[24] The emphasis thus moved from exceptional origin (Genesis) to process, from fixed characteristics that could be shoe-horned into a table or matrix to fluid intermixing, from logically parsed sequence that demonstrated progress to anachronic returns of the primitive. With natural history's assault on controlled, readable formulas of cause and effect, reproduction itself generated an anxiety about the loss of categorizational control in the narrative of human development. If natural history posited an animality that had insinuated itself within the purification trajectory of the human (the logic of the "mere"), then the reproductive center for this contamination—the woman's body—was suddenly the locus of possible atavistic returns. Reproduction, madness, and "baser" tendencies (women, contagion, and animality) were all inextricably linked.

Indeed, the conflation of animal/human border destabilization and anxiety concerning women's bodies is key to perhaps the most colossal of this period's discourses on cultural dis-ease—Max Nordau's aptly titled *Degeneration* (1895). Nordau

describes the culture of "unbridled lewdness" at the fin de siècle as "the unchaining of the beast in man . . . the trampling under foot of all barriers which enclose brutal greed of lucre and lust of pleasure; to the contemner of the world it means the shameless ascendency of base impulses and motives." What seems to repulse Nordau is not only the resurgence of animality but the corruption of logical symmetry this resurgence brings. A telling example is the way he encapsulates fin-de-siècle women's preferences in clothing, criticizing its "laboured rococo, with bewildering oblique lines . . . folds with irrational beginning and aimless ending," behind which "the outlines of the human figure are lost, and which cause women's bodies to resemble now a beast of the Apocalypse, now an armchair."[25] We recognize here the specific markers of man's immuno-logic that is under assault from the contagion of asymmetry—the "irrational beginning and aimless ending" that elide the "human figure." But perhaps most importantly, Nordau's thoughts here reveal an anxiety that women's bodies are no longer controlled by the dominant patriarchal culture, that what lies underneath the chaotic pattern is potentially an animal, a "beast of the Apocalypse." Nordau is essentially realigning reproductive bodies with contagious bodies, multiplication with runaway signification.

Importantly, Nordau's screed against patterns of madness is prefigured in Gilman's wallpaper (published three years prior). The narrator describes its maddening lack of teleology: "I determine for the thousandth time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion. I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry" (44). Like Nordau, she is initially disturbed by the loss of a conventional woman's shape as she identifies a "formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (43). But whereas Nordau observes the markings of a contagious Other that threatens the boundaries of the privileged human form, Gilman describes the tenuousness of all forms in the absence of interior/exterior orientation. Even as the narrator is becoming, through chiasmus, the creeping woman behind the wallpaper, even as she is

emerging into the room from behind the "strangling pattern," the "creeping women" in the garden outside multiply, and "they creep so fast" (52). The borders between inside and outside become meaningless in the proliferating contagion. Even as this disintegrating boundary likely reveals Gilman's own horror at the incursion of a racial Other, it also points to the essential absurdity of the notion of "mere"; it demonstrates that, for better or worse, one is always already more-than what one thinks; one is contagious with the Other one wishes to exclude.[26]

Both Poe and Gilman significantly engage one of the central anxieties of degeneration theory by linking failed immunologic (architecture overrun by multiplying signification) to a female body that refuses to be immobilized. As the site of reproduction, a mobile female body portends an unsignified substrate of "creeping things," and thus helps to sanction the paranoid logic of degeneration discourse that tended to read sexual reproduction as essentially viral and pathogenic. In one of the most influential early degeneration discourses, Dr. B. A. Morel's 1857 *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales,* reproduction and contagion are inseparable. Morel defines "degeneracy" as "*a morbid deviation from an original type,*" which through the action of even its minutest "germs" is "transmissible" to future generations, so that "mental progress, already checked in [one's] own person, finds itself menaced also in [one's] descendents."[27] Here we see explicitly the markers of infection in the "mere," of transformations of the purified human form—the "original type"—which occur through successive reproductions and which result in not only successive contaminations but also a monstrous sense of *being more-than,* of promulgating through generations one's peculiar markers of monstrosity. Morel's anxiety reveals a horrific realization that the smallest deviancy may become the master of the purer, superior organism, that a sign of "pestilence" may, like Poe's black cat, be the infesting agent of eternal return that continues to signal the collapse of the immunological walls. While Morel makes no mention of the female body as the vehicle through which reproduction occurs, he certainly implies an anxiety about femininity, especially given the historical discourses whereby women's bodies (Eve being produced from Adam's rib)

are always already a deviation from, a subset of, man's body. And Morel's reference to menaced "mental progress" also invokes the privileged status of male reason, which becomes vulnerable to the potentially corrosive arc of reproduction. As Sander L. Gilman argues, with degeneration thinking "we again have the repetition of the Fall": "a necessary, eternal repetition of it is the regular descent into degeneracy of women."[28]

Nordau makes a more explicit association between rational, male order and progress, which he opposes to the "pure atavisms" of degenerate sensibility. In his rebuff of Darwin's problematizing of species classification, he delineates the manifestations of the ab-"normal," which for him are tantamount to the ab-human:

> When under any kind of noxious influences an organism becomes debilitated, its successors will not resemble the healthy, normal type of the species, with capacities for development, but will form a new sub-species, which, like all others, possesses the capacity of transmitting to its offspring, in a continuously increasing degree, its peculiarities. . . . That which distinguishes degeneracy from the formation of new species (phylogeny) is, that the morbid variation does not continuously subsist and propagate itself, like one that is healthy, but, fortunately, is soon rendered sterile, and after a few generations often dies out before it reaches the lowest grade of organic degradation.[29]

In this passage, Nordau establishes two circuits of power through which patriarchal rationalism remains viable and in control: first, he suggests that there are clearly recognizable categories—species and subspecies—that can be ordered into a hierarchy and thus familiarized, rendered innocuous (that is, he attempts to assure his readers that degeneration cannot produce anything "new" and dangerous to established power). But even more sinister is his assurance that sterility and death guarantee immunity from contagion. Sterility becomes the

principle upon which his system of purification bases itself, for it at once freezes all movement, all reproductive activity, or at least contains it within the tightly scripted boundaries of the diagnostician's cultural lens. As Sander Gilman claims about the categorization of diseases: "The only buffer 'science' could provide against the anxiety that remained because of this inherent flaw, the fear of oneself eventually being labeled as degenerate, was to create categories that were absolutely self-contained. Thus disease-entities were invented which defined a clearly limited subset of human beings as the group solely at risk."[30] Of course this *sub*set is also calibrated as *sub*species, a "creeping" *sub*strate of women (and minority groups) prone to diseased bodies. And this very propensity toward contagiousness authorized a kind of mad-drive to fix in place, to sterilize, all forms of possible deviancy that would become one of the hallmark tropes of gothic tales—live entombment—upon which both "The Black Cat" and "The Yellow Wallpaper" draw heavily.

"The Black Cat" could even be read as a precise parable of the inherent lunacy involved with this immuno-logical drive. With no diagnostician arriving like a deus ex machina, the narrator is compelled throughout to attempt to determine the pertinent chain of events. He says: "I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts—and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect" (*CW,* 853). He remains simultaneously "above" the subject of study like a true diagnostician, trying to maintain confidence in the order of things, and obsessively concerned with it, lest it begin to overgrow the well-lit space of rational observation. As he becomes more and more haunted by "the creature" who leaves him "no moment alone," he "long[s] to destroy it with a blow" (*CW,* 855), an action that is a kind of radical simplification, a crystallization of the cause-and-affect imperative (the creature is dead because I killed him). Seen in this light, it is no surprise that the narrator ends up murdering his wife—"I buried the axe in her brain"—at the moment he attempts to kill the cat (*CW,* 856). While on one hand this action reveals the ease of cat/woman slippage, it also serves as a clarifying moment of logic, however brutal, that has been missing from the narrator's con-

taminated domestic space. Ironically, the narrator has a return of faith in the domestic harmony of rational order in the very aftermath of a monstrous, un-homey act. Chillingly, he describes the burying of his wife's body behind a wall and the restoration of the brickwork as if he were merely making home repairs: he details the step-by-step process by which he "procure[s] mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution" and, with the prepared plaster, which cannot "be distinguished from the old," "very carefully [goes] over the new brickwork." When finished, he feels "satisfied that all [is] right": "The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed" (*CW,* 857).

We see here the two primary principles of the immunological drive—the purification (cleaning) of the "mere" and the containment (fixing) of the contagious, multiplying Other. But the dictates of this kind of drive, Poe implies, amount to a far more disturbing madness than that which manifests itself as the infection of animality. That is, rationality *itself* is exposed as a kind of madness, for it promises a return to a purified architecture that is profoundly disturbing for the very reason that it has "not . . . the slightest appearance of having been disturbed." It is a logic that administers innocence through a not-really-me justification. For just as rationality allows for the cordoning off of the animal "pestilence" that has temporarily contaminated the purified human center, it also allows for the transference of monstrosity onto the "creeping" Others—women and animals. Thus, after killing his wife and rebuilding the walls, Poe's narrator once again feels assured that his "is a very well constructed house," and that within this structure his "heart [can] beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence" (*CW,* 858). Read in this light, then, the "wailing shriek" of the cat behind the wall and the narrator's ensuing return to a hysterical identity rescues him, if only temporarily, from a deeper pathology, a disease of diagnosis that sees monstrosity everywhere but in the mirror because it reads vertically through a purified lens. For diagnosis, more than anything else—and this is especially true in nineteenth-century degeneration discourses—ensures a view from an omnipotent height, a view that both reaffirms analytical authority and reinforces the top-down dynamic whereby the thing observed is a priori degenerate.

The problem with reason as the instrument of immunity is precisely that it necessitates this verticality of detached observation in order to make readable the "mere," the boundaries of nothing-more-than. Accordingly, reason as praxis constitutes a paradox: while it promises a leveling of power through knowledge—we are all *mere*ly ordinary, all intimately knowable and classifiable—it also instantiates a paradigm wherein reason's chosen (the gatekeepers of culture) assume the godlike power to determine deviancy. Since their power is manifest in their ability to observe, moreover, it is no surprise that mobility, unless tightly contained within their own frame of reference, is itself a signifier for disorder and contamination.

One absurd extension of this need for immobility was, of course, the disastrous "rest cure" developed by S. Weir Mitchell for the treatment of "hysteria" and applied almost exclusively to women. Gilman herself underwent this "cure," and her experience became the raison d'être for "The Yellow Wallpaper." The essential theory behind this treatment, was (in the same vein as Nordau's) that exhaustion results from stimulation, that healing can only be achieved by eliminating all means of self-expression and all forms of possibly contagious contact with others. As Mitchell himself explains: "The moral uses of enforced rest are readily estimated. From a restless life of irregular hours, and probably endless drugging, from hurtful sympathy and over-zealous care, the patient passes to an atmosphere of quiet, to order and control."[31] According to Laura Otis's interpretation of Weir's practice, a woman undergoing the "rest cure" was only allowed to express herself through the agency of the physician attending her: "To restore order in the patient's body and mind, it was essential that she be cut off from all that was familiar and above all from anyone who might confirm her own perceptions of her body and the world around her. She must talk only to the doctor or to paid nurses who upheld his views so as to hear only his version of her life, her body, and her illness."[32] As an exemplar of reason, the physician (and particularly Mitchell himself) advocated a logic whereby in order to fix (heal) his patient, he had to fix her in place. But he also had to conceal her in order that she not become a channel of contagion, or perhaps of unauthorized revelation.

His procedure—fixing in place and concealing—mirrors the actions of Poe's narrator's in "The Black Cat," as well as of the doctor-husband in "The Yellow Wallpaper," who insists that his wife stay in bed in the remote space of "the nursery at the top of the house" (40).

But the exclusiveness of this kind of doctor/patient relationship also served to reinforce the verticality of power, the exceptional vantage point of the diagnostician, which warranted his own immunity since he remained above, detached from the contagious field. Accordingly, the physician/diagnostician had a metonymic connection to the instrument (emergent in the nineteenth century) that allowed him the power not only to magnify his gaze but to dissolve the tenuous borderline between interior and exterior, as well as between self and other—the microscope. This instrument, a kind of cyborg extension of the diagnostician's eye, conflated looking down with looking inside, and in this way, physicians gained greater access to and, more crucially, control of both the inside and outside of bodies. The microscope also necessitated a tightly composed strata of possibly contagious material framed within the lens of its purview—its purpose being to fix, identify, and eventually provide a logical method for curing the pathogenic invasion.

Since microscopic diagnosis was, in the nineteenth century, almost exclusively an extension of the male gaze, and since women were culturally imagined as vectors of contagion and reproductive excess, the microscope became an instrument of patriarchal repression—a technological form of live entombment. The woman under the microscope, or under the "rest cure," became a gothic battlefield, a space in which monstrous contagion was rampant and immunity available only through the penetrating gaze of the diagnostician. The "mere" as a signifier for normality instigated a process whereby the subject was constantly shrinking within herself for fear that she would be read not as a "mere" person but as something-more-than, which the observing power instantly translated as something-Other-than. In this nightmare relay, the woman became either a figure of germinating monstrosities or a frozen and suffocated object, neither of which could form a coherent sense of self; for, as Eugenia DeLamotte notes, "the difficulty of being known is

the real subject of Gothic paranoia, and the heroine's impulse to cry out, 'behold who I am!' is the strongest and most stifled impulse Gothicists portray."[33]

However, while DeLamotte is certainly right to point toward the pervasive female nightmare of not being heard—"behold who I am!" not as an establishment of category but simply as an announcement of presence—her employment of the passive ("being known") could easily be misconstrued. For isn't the desire to be known also an opening for just the kind of constructive verticality that drives the diagnostician? My point is not to parse out a new, and probably misrepresented, implication for DeLamotte's argument, but rather to realign this crying out with the active voice, which, it seems, is the move Gilman makes. That is, I wish to switch the focus from "being known" to *knowing*, a change that emphasizes the present continuous verb rather than the constituted stable subject of a noun. As a verb, *knowing* aligns with "wailing" from "The Black Cat" and "creeping" from "The Yellow Wallpaper," for, just as knowing connotes a process whereby the known categories (knowledge objects) are made fluid in a dynamic unstable present, so too "wailing" and "creeping" in these stories illuminate a spatial and ontological crossing that makes a continuum of the animal/human binary. In other words, the "wailing shriek" from behind the wall in the Poe story *is* a declaration of "this is who I am!" But it is not *merely* the dead body of the woman or the voice of the cat that constitutes identity but rather the ongoing transformation, the embrace of contagion, in which woman is *becoming* cat. Just as it is not the woman shaking the bars behind the wallpaper, in Gilman's story, or the frantic observations of the narrator that are crucial, but rather the strong intersubjective current between the narrator and the women behind the wallpaper, a current distinctly portrayed through creeping—like a cat.

In brief, Poe's story helps us to read into Gilman's text, dialogically, an agentive presence of cat-animality, contagious and unlocatable through the mappings of logic, a feral agent that generates intersubjective crossings and an emerging space of relentless creation within the patriarchal order. I would argue that, much like Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine,* the cat/woman circuit in these two stories undoes "the work of death"

as it expresses the desire "of the one and the other, not fixed in sequences of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another."[34] Thus, by reading these two stories together through the channel of cat animality, we begin to see not so much a dialectical resistance to patriarchal immurement but a kind of *knowing* that *does not rest* and *cannot be concealed,* a knowing that permeates the "mere" with a braiding of more-than and Other-than.

CATAGENESIS

Whereas cat/woman intersubjectivity is explicit in Poe's story, it is, I would argue, implicit in Gilman's. Although Richard Feldstein reads the narrator's creeping as indicative of snake animality—what he calls "the sinuous crawl of an Eve/Satan composite commenting on the androcentric myth of the Fall"[35]—I would suggest that her "creeping" is much closer to the movement of cats than of snakes. After all, she is on all fours, not on her belly. While reading feline metamorphosis into "The Yellow Wallpaper" is admittedly a rather playful exercise, it does help us bring into sharper relief a general tone of animal sensibility that has not received enough critical development.

To begin with, the narrator's hearing becomes acute, and she seems easily startled. While contemplating the wallpaper she suddenly becomes aware of another's presence outside her room: "I can see a strange provoking formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design. There's sister on the stairs!" (43). She also, in catlike fashion, sleeps "a good deal in the daytime" (49) and "sit[s] on the porch under the roses" (44). Yet, her sleeping is not a compliant response to her husband's (and by extension, S. Weir Mitchell's) "rest cure," but rather a resistant form of dissimulation. Like a cat with closed eyes, she remains aware: "He started the habit—by making me lie down for an hour after each meal. It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep! And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell *them* I'm awake—O

no!" (48). Additionally, she demonstrates a catlike mobility: "I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe" (43). And, in a sequence that seems to imply a desire to commit suicide, we might read a cat's sensibility: "To jump out the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. Besides, I wouldn't do it of course! I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued" (52). For a cat who always lands on her feet, jumping out a window might very well *be* admirable exercise, but of course, the diagnostician would read the madness of suicidal desire into such an impulse and, in consequence, be confirmed in his belief that prescribing "rest" and stillness would prevent the deadly transgression of boundaries, both horizontal (from inside to outside) and vertical (from top floor to ground).

Indeed, degeneration theorists might misconstrue such a jump as the fatal consequences of the fall (and the Fall) from man's privileged position to the creeping women below. Certainly, Dr. Henry Maudsley in 1880 read the desire to "jump out the window" as proof of "the lowest forms of insanity and idiocy," proof "that the animal has not yet completely died out."[36] Thus, the narrator's very desire to jump again ties femininity to animality, since her movement is in opposition to the vertical detachment attained by man's use of reason. But this desire also invokes contagion, for if carried out, it would constitute a channel crossing in which autonomous categories are admixed, in which the jumper is simultaneously inside/outside, jumping/falling, domestic/wild. In brief, the female jumper engenders a feral register that emphasizes the crossing of autonomous categories.

By understanding the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," then, as a becoming-cat (and as a cross-textual gesture to the cat/woman hybrid in Poe's story), we open up a new vein of critical inquiry into this story—one that reads a generative subtext in the defining (and confining) parameters of logic. So even though I read the signature of animality differently, I would certainly agree with Feldstein's point that this story challenges the androcentric order, specifically by collapsing the centered and vertically aligned authority that has its roots in Genesis.

Poe's narrator, in an incredibly prophetic formulation of what would become the clarion call of the degeneration theorists of the next sixty years, speaks exactly to this disintegration triggered by the animal: "And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere Humanity. And *a brute beast*—whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed—*a brute beast* to work out for *me*—for me a man, fashioned in the image of the High God—so much of insufferable woe!" (*CW,* 855–56). The narrator laments not only the collapse of privilege in Genesis but also the loss of a human-controlled narrative, the very loss that haunted degeneration theorists and drove them to propose elaborate delineations of the animal Other in an attempt to reestablish logic and reason as the guarantors of human readability.

Unlike the degeneration theorists, however, the narrator of "The Black Cat" and the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" have no recourse to detached observation, no personal immunity through a putative "Knowledge of Causes." Both these narrators are confronted with a contagion that is distinctly *circular.* The dread they feel for the returning cat and, at least initially, for the returning creeping women, respectively, stems from the fact that these figures of animality are simply always *returning,* leaving both narrators "no moment alone." Instead of moving in a one-way direction, as Nordau would have it, and becoming increasingly sterile (less-than), animality in these stories returns and continually contaminates the immune space, accumulating a more-than ontology. Animality, as seen in both Poe's pestilential black cat and Gilman's creeping women, belies man's emplotment as it links a retrogressive evolution to perpetual rebirth. In short, both these stories illuminate an alternative to the dynamic of creation described in Genesis; they portray a *catagenesis* that, in its prefixal meaning of "down," "against," "back," and its stem meaning of "beginning,"[37] brings to our view a resistant form of emplotment through animality: a way of digressing from the dominant narrative—the fixed order of man—in order to be reborn.

In other words, the "mere" of man can only be maintained by a creation narrative that privileges man as the creature who arrives at a fixed point of self-knowledge—as Giorgio Agamben reminds us: "man is the animal that must recognize itself as

human to be human."[38] Ultimately, man, in order to recognize himself as man and maintain his immunity as man, must be able to read the emplotment of nature as man-centered and teleological. But both Poe and Gilman haunt their stories with a cat ontology that makes gender and species signification fluid and also collapses the temporal mechanism at the root of this imperative. For the perpetual return of animality not only disrupts the logical reasoning of man but also presages a new kind of reading, one that suggests a knowing that comes before and after the laws of rationalism, a becoming that is catagenetic, or, as Deleuze and Guattari would put it, "involutionary": "Involution is creative. To regress is to move in the direction of something less differentiated."[39] While the male narrator in Poe's story is horrified by this loss of differentiation and the narrator in Gilman's story eventually seems to embrace it, they both are opened to a wildly different arc; they become aware of a plot that precedes and supercedes them and that forces into crisis the very premise of human readability in the first place.

In his lecture "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," Derrida himself describes a momentous and, in his case, naked encounter with a cat, in which he too is awakened to the crisis of readability. For Derrida, of course, there is something always escaping from the naming and categorizing of this being called "cat," always something elided by the process of human understanding. As he says of this animal: "It doesn't do as the exemplar of a species called cat, even less so of an animal genus or realm. . . . Nothing can ever take away from me this certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized." Derrida invokes the naming of the animals by Adam in the Garden of Eden in order to interrogate the construction of human determination and ordering; that is, he raises the notion that beings existed before they were named as animals, that in truth, they were before us, and thus were open to a multiplicity of possible being before they were segregated by species and reduced to mappable signification. He addresses the slipperiness of what it means to *be after the animal*. "*Being-after-it* in the sense of hunting, training, or taming, or *being-after-it* in the sense of succeeding or inheriting? In all cases, if I am (following) *after* it, the animal therefore comes before me, earlier

than me." As beings before, the animals are already multiple in meaning and positionality: both before, as in-front of us, and before, as in preceding, as in behind. The animal, then, Derrida claims, "surrounds me": "And from the vantage of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also—something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself—it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me."[40] Here, Derrida points to an essential problem with human immuno-logic; it is constructed through a human gaze that determines meaning and location, whereas, in truth, human logic is always already being surrounded by, infected by, the gaze of the animal Other. As David Wood argues, "if the cat is given a role in determining who *I* am, this experience also serves as a cautionary brake on my own self-understanding."[41]

What Derrida returns us to is the notion that the cat is not only unfixable (always preceding and superceding man) but also heir to a kind of trans-categorizational and trans-temporal authority that no amount of immunological work can dissipate. The return of the cat gaze (of cat-knowing, of cat ontology) radically disrupts the central mechanism whereby man knows himself as man and not animal. That is, the contagion of animality instantly demolishes rational architecture because rationality can only work in a space cleared of the animal—as the exclusive marker of humanity, rationality necessitates the quarantining of animality. Conversely, the presence of the animal in the rational order only energizes the immuno-logical drive to isolate and categorize impurities—to fix the animal, again, in the sign of the prohibited Other. And it is precisely this fixed order, this dialectical process of reason that the creeping return of cat ontology resists in these two stories: the cat as a liminal figure of multiplying admixture, of perversity, of temporal collapse, promises a retroactive rebirth, a de-evolutionary renaissance—a Cat-agenesis.

By this reading, animal agency in both stories inaugurates a becoming that forces us to retrofit not only the maps of rationalism but also the hierarchal imperative of Genesis: the "creeping things" take center stage and flood the room with an unreasonable knowing. As Mary Jacobus notes of "The Yellow

Wallpaper," "The woman on all fours is . . . an embodiment of the animality of a woman unredeemed by (masculine) reason"[42]—a point of analysis that could just as easily be applied to the black cat/woman hybrid in "The Black Cat." The critical point concerning Catagenesis is that it resists the frozen logic of reason by constituting an alternative emplotment for creation: as Genesis lays the ground rules for man's dominion, Catagenesis makes unruly the logic at their foundations. Crucially, Catagenesis is a return to the body, a rebirth into contagion from the glacial admonitions of immuno-logic; it suggests a deliberate movement, a *knowing* that comes from *moving,* from *crossing* between categories—the women are creeping and multiplying, the wall is crumbling, the cat is wailing. Not a retrogression toward sterility, as the degeneration theorists would have it, but an awakening to the fecund, if horrific, play of animality. The return of the cat inverts Nordau's and Weir's central diagnosis that fluidity, admixture, and unauthorized mobility are the cause of cultural and individual *exhaustion.* The cat, the dark secret, a figure of border crossing, regenerates a space left barren by the laws of no-more-than, and in the process exposes the rational order as a system that is mad and exhausted.

CONCLUSION

Animality in the nineteenth century was the locus of an energized discursive struggle; by turns, animals were deployed as avatars of horror, of social demonization, and of liberation/rebirth. Increasingly signifiers of fluidity and secret holders of the elusive essence of life, animals both threatened and promised new forms of emplotment that menaced "mere humanity." While Poe might not be an author readily associated with feminism, through his fascination with, and exploration of, fluid animality, he helped to open a modality of crucial resistance to the stultifying effects of patriarchal law.[43] It seems clear that Poe sensed the generative, if horrific, power of an animality that was emerging from its live entombment within the more tightly scripted "mere" of the neoclassical age. In fact,

in his first published story, "Metzengerstein," an imitation of the German gothic tale, he seems especially attuned to this power in his description of the rebirth of a horse (who at first stands "motionless and statue-like") from its frozen image on a tapestry: "[The Baron's] gaze returned mechanically to the wall. . . . The neck of the animal, before arched, as if in compassion, over the prostrate body of its lord, was now extended, at full length, in the direction of the Baron. The eyes, before invisible, now wore an energetic and human expression, while they gleamed with a fiery and unusual red" (*CW,* 22–23). In this story the baron's family rival is being reborn as a horse and thus admixing the markers of species—the horse's eyes have a "human expression." With the "sepulchral and disgusting teeth" we again see the contamination of whiteness, the pollution of purity and privilege (*CW,* 23). But most importantly, the red eyes of the horse, which anticipate the red eyes of the black cat, connote, in the tradition of alchemy, the emergence of a new and exalted form of life. According to Randall A. Clark, in his study on alchemy's influence on Poe, the color red signals the final stage of material transformation, "the creation of the homunculus (new man) . . . the freeing of divine Wisdom . . . imprisoned in the darkness of matter and delivering it to a new life."[44] By conflating the apotheosis of new life with the contaminated form of an animal, Poe, in effect, inverts the Adamic teleological center of man; he describes a Catagenesis in which animality is the center for the knowing gaze of the exceptional, in which the more-than, the multiple, is not separable from regeneration. The merely human in this description is located in the "mechanical" gaze of the baron and the "prostrate" body of the horse's lord; human forms that are, perhaps, trapped in their own logic, entombed in the "mere," dead to the energy of retrogressive rebirth.

While there are no parallel alchemical referents in "The Yellow Wallpaper," there are clear echoes of emerging animal fluidity and Catagenesis. In the final scene John's desperate question—"For God's sake, what are you doing!"—immediately before he faints exposes the patriarchal anxiety about female movement even as it invokes God, the Law of the Father, the creator of the hierarchy delineated in Genesis. Her response,

however, is not to stop, not to be still, but to keep "on creeping just the same," and, crucially, to look *back* at him over her shoulder (53), a signal that the degenerating woman on all fours is moving beyond the stasis of his order. When he faints "right across [her] path" (53), he becomes like the prostrate figure in the "Metzengerstein" tapestry, the collapsed and exhausted authority of the "mere" overwhelmed by contagion. Crossing into cat animality, ceaselessly creeping, the narrator emerges as a present continuous verb out of the live entombment of the noun. "To creep over him" is to return to a knowing beyond—before and after—the emplotment of "mere humanity."

Georgetown University and George Washington University

NOTES

1. See Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," in *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on the Yellow Wallpaper,* ed. Catherine Golden (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1992), 154; Carol Margaret Davison, "Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *Women's Studies* 33 (2004): 64; and *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography,* (1935; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1972), 119.
2. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe,* vols. 2–3, *Tales and Sketches, 1843–1849,* ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1978), 855; hereafter cited parenthetically as *CW.*
3. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," in *"The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Selected Stories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* ed. Denise D. Knight (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1994), 49; all further references are to this edition of the story and are cited parenthetically by page number.
4. Notably, T. S. Eliot evokes this same conflation of yellow with feline animality in "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock": "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes / The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes." See *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 4.

5. Gen. 1:26 (Revised Standard Version).
6. J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman, introduction to *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress,* ed. J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), xiv.
7. The "Great Chain of Being," as purported by Aristotle (and later translated into more mathematically abstract variations by such humanists/rationalists as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza), is a universal hierarchy, an intricately aligned series of gradations from the most imperfect of life forms at the bottom to the most perfect at the top—that is, from minerals to vegetables to animals to humans to God. It is complete and essentially fixed, with no congress between the levels.
8. E. Ray Lankester, "Degeneration, A Chapter in Darwinism," in *The Interpretation of Animal Form: Essays by Jeffries Wyman, Carl Gegenbaur, E. Ray Lankester, Henri Lacaze Duthiers, Wilhelm His and H. Newell Martin, 1868–1888,* trans. William Coleman (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1967), 118, 120. It should be noted, however, that much of degeneration theory, which argued that the deviations in one generation could be inherited by the next, relied on Jean Baptiste Lamarck's earlier system of transmutation (1809) rather than on Darwin's theory of natural selection. Whereas Darwin claimed that an organism's traits are naturally selected in an essentially random process, Lamarck proposed that an organism's characteristics are the direct inherited products of its ancestors' habits. See Jean Baptiste Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy: An Exposition with Regard to the Natural History of Animals* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984).
9. The phrase "lowly origin" comes from Charles Darwin's famous last sentence in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871): "We must, however, acknowledge . . . that man with all his noble qualities . . . with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system—with all these exalted powers—Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin." See *The Descent of Man* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998), 643.
10. Henry Maudsley, *The Pathology of Mind: Being the Third Edition of the Second Part of "The Physiology of Mind," Recast, Enlarged, and Rewritten* (New York: Appleton, 1880), 178.
11. Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man* (1875), trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 91, 205.
12. George Miller Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Putnam's, 1881), 50.

13. Eugene Talbot, *Degeneracy: Its Signs, Causes and Results* (London: Walter Scott, 1898), quoted in Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 23.
14. Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2008), 15.
15. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration,* 54.
16. Genesis implies that the animals created by God are not fully ratified as distinct entities until Adam decides how they will be categorized: "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name." See Gen. 2:19 (RSV).
17. Juliann E. Fleenor, "The Gothic Prism: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Gothic Stories and Her Autobiography," in *The Female Gothic,* ed. Juliann E. Fleenor (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983), 234.
18. See Jeannette King and Pam Morris, "On Not Reading between the Lines: Models of Reading in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 22 (Winter 1989): 31; Elaine R. Hedges, afterword to "The Yellow Wallpaper," in *Captive Imagination,* 131; Greg Johnson, "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* (Fall 1989): 523; and Loralee MacPike, "Environment as Psychopathological Symbolism in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Captive Imagination,* 140.
19. See Judith Fetterley, "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Captive Imagination,* 259; and Paula A. Treichler, "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Captive Imagination,* 199.
20. For this insight I am indebted to Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 253.
21. Treichler, "Escaping the Sentence," 201.
22. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 13.
23. Treichler, "Escaping the Sentence," 207.
24. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection,* ed. Joseph Carroll (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003), 126.
25. Max Nordau, *Degeneration,* 2nd ed. (1895; New York: Appleton, 1905), 5, 8.

26. This horrific Other, for Gilman, is undoubtedly interfused with racial anxiety, for in her later writings she moves increasingly toward positions of ethnocentrism and racism. While there are no explicit racist descriptions in "The Yellow Wallpaper," in the color and smell of the wallpaper, as Susan Lanser persuasively argues, one can read a "political unconscious," a register of apprehension regarding the large immigration of Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans—the "Yellow Peril"—into the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century. See Lanser, "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies* 15 (1989): 428–29.
27. B. A. Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espéce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives* (1857), quoted in Nordau, *Degeneration,* 16.
28. Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 215.
29. Nordau, *Degeneration,* 16.
30. Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology,* 215.
31. S. Weir Mitchell, "From *Fat and Blood: And How to Make Them,*" in *Captive Imagination,* 49.
32. Laura Otis, *Membranes: Metaphors of Invasion in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Science, and Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999), 60–61.
33. Eugenia DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 173.
34. Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 2047.
35. Richard Feldstein, "Reader, Text, and Ambiguous Referentiality in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Captive Imagination,* 312.
36. Maudsley, *Pathology of Mind,* 116.
37. *The Webster's New Universal Dictionary* defines catagenesis as "the retrogressive evolution of a species."
38. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal,* trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004), 26.
39. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 238–39.
40. Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought,* ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London: Continuum, 2004), 116–17.

41. David Wood, "Thinking with Cats," in *Animal Philosophy,* 132.
42. Mary Jacobus, "An Unnecessary Maze of Sign-Reading," in *Captive Imagination,* 288.
43. It should be noted that the question of Poe's feminism has, in the last two decades, developed into a vigorous scholarly debate and reassessment—according to J. Gerald Kennedy, Poe has now joined "the vanguard of male feminists." See "Poe, 'Ligeia,' and the Problem of Dying Women," in *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales,* ed. Kenneth Silverman (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 114. Paula Kot observes that some scholars now attribute voice to Poe's infamous silent women: "By pointing out that Poe's dead women refuse to stay dead, for example, critics challenge the notion that Poe's tales merely silence feminine experience." See "Feminist 'Re-Visioning' of the Tales of Women," in *A Companion to Poe Studies,* ed. Eric W. Carlson (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 388. Joan Dayan revisits Poe's most recognizable brand of apparent misogyny—the elevation of women into idealized forms—and argues that this trope forwards a cultural critique: Poe "takes the rhetoric of praise and exaggerates it until words themselves become as stifling, as horrific and circumscribing, as any of his closed rooms, tombs, or coffins." See "Poe's Women: A Feminist Poe?," *Poe Studies* 26 (1993): 2.
44. Randall A. Clack, "'Strange Alchemy of Brain': Poe and Alchemy," in *A Companion to Poe Studies,* ed. Eric W. Carlson (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 142.