Vision and Putrescence: Edogawa Rampo Rereading Edgar Allan Poe

In 1914 the Japanese writer Hirai Taro adopted the pen name “Edogawa Rampo,” a phonetic play on Edgar Allan Poe, whose work he had recently discovered. Owing to the paucity of translations of Rampo’s work, the West has ever since presumed that he simply imitated Poe when writing his own detective and horror stories. There is no doubt he was “influenced,” but his work expands significantly on the ways Poe explores vision, the human body, space, and decay—ways that scholars have only recently begun to appreciate in Poe himself. To use Jerome J. McGann’s term, it appears that Rampo read Poe radially, that is, putting himself “in a position to respond actively to the text’s own (often secret) discursive acts.”

Rampo’s reputation in Asia, while based on his popular fiction, goes far beyond it. Many films depict his stories, and a large number of current international manga (comics) and several film anime and television serials are based on his writings. His life has also been a subject of public interest; two recent films depict it, if somewhat sensational: Rampo (1994), directed by Rintaro Mayuzumi and Kazuyoshi Okuyama; and Rampo: Okuyama Version (1995), directed by Okuyama. All of Rampo’s work is still in print in Japan, and he is widely translated throughout Asia, where popular literature reinforced by the energy of manga earns respect. In Asia he is clearly better known than his namesake. But what makes Hirai Taro particularly interesting in relation to Poe studies is that his sexual interrogations led him to reread Poe in a manner that broadly anticipates contemporary interest in the gaze, the body, and decay.

I

Hirai Taro was born in Nabari, in the Mie Prefecture, on 21 October 1894. He spent his childhood in Nagoya, which he left in 1912 at age seventeen to enter the prestigious, private Waseda University in Tokyo. He majored in economics, graduating four years later, and then for six years he worked as a clerk, accountant, salesman, and editor, sometimes also pulling a cart as an itinerant soba vendor. His years as a dock clerk at the Toba Dockyard (now the Shinko Electric Company) are a source of corporate pride, detailed at the company’s Web site. In 1914 he read “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” But not until 1923, while unemployed in Osaka, did he publish what is considered to be the first modern Japanese detective story, “Nisen doka” (The two-sen copper coin), which appeared beside the work of Poe, Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, and others in Shin seinen (New youth), the only mystery magazine in Japan. The editors asked for more, and Rampo followed with “Ichimai no kippu” (One ticket). Both works, writes Noriko Mizuta Lippit, “reflect obvious influences from ‘The Gold-Bug’ and ‘The Purloined Letter.’” In 1925, Rampo published a collection of stories and founded the Association of Lovers of Detectives, which after World War 2 became the Japan Mystery Writers Club, a group of enormous importance to the genre in Asia. Writing prodigiously, Rampo also began to translate Poe and completed six stories by 1931. Of Rampo’s own early work, Lippit has identified “Panorama to kitan” (A strange story of Panorama Island, 1927) as strongly Poe-influenced—directly “based on an idea taken from ‘The Domain of Arnheim’ and ‘Landor’s Cottage.’”

Rampo was so prolific that his collected works, filling thirteen volumes, were also brought out in 1931, when he was only thirty-seven years old. One of these, Waga yume toh shinjitsu (My dream and truth), contains his thoughts on Poe and Freud as well as “Dosei ai bungakushi” (The literary history of homosexuality) and “Renai funousha” (Mentally impotent for heterosexual love), neither of which is translated into English. These are of great value in understanding the way Rampo read Poe. By 1956, he had written twenty full-length books, fifty-three short stories and...
Rampo was not only Asia's most famous mystery writer but also an internationally known literary figure.

While Rampo's debt to Poe was noted early, it has customarily been taken as one of uncomplicated homage. A few Japanese scholars have been more perception about parallels and similarities in theme and plot, but disinclined to explore the way Rampo pursued Poe's probings of sexuality. Any investigation of this dimension of the two writers must begin with the fact that Rampo's sexuality was ambiguous. He had male lovers when he was young but entered into a heterosexual marriage later. He called his first experience at fourteen "a common make-believe homosexual love, which was really platonic and passionate." Love letters were popular in his school and many came to him, but he wrote back only one time, to a boy who was handsome, smart, and good at painting and swordsmanship—and who asked an older friend to make the match with Rampo. All of this follows a tradition that dates to the Samurai era; however, the older boy did not continue to play his part. During a school trip it was arranged so he slept side-by-side with Rampo in a large tatami room, but nothing happened, except that the boy drew a short sword he had brought and brandished it in front of Rampo. This was reported to the teachers, who scolded him, and Rampo was guarded by some classmates until he returned home. Afterward he felt he was looked upon as "strange" by his teachers and classmates—his first experience of the gaze, and in a sexual context. When the boy tried to continue the relationship, Rampo wrote that he felt great shame. Rampo's second experience with any women; but they did not even kiss. Mokoto Furukawa contrasts these two incidents, arguing that the first copied a traditional Japanese homosexual affair: a loving older man and a younger beloved boy. Rampo was cast in the chigo part, and while he was ready to accept this, the older boy could not act his role of nenja. By contrast, the second was a "new style" homosexual relationship of equals, informed by ancient Greek or Western culture. Rampo learned of the latter through a friend, Junichiro Iwata, who guided his exploration of Greek civilization. However, Hisahide Sugimori takes a different approach. It is natural, he argues, that Rampo, who favors abnormal mystery, goes too far into homosexual love. It is an ordinary thing that a man acts as a man, but when he acts as a woman against his original gender, he gives out a strangely perverted beauty. This can be a kind of disguise. When an actor who plays female roles in Kabuki wears powder, red underwear, and a wig to play a harlot or a girl in the village, he looks more strangely and vividly attractive than real harlots or girls. Since it smells like a sin against nature, the pleasure taken from it is deep. For those who enjoy this secret pleasure, ordinary women are just boring dolls.

Sugimori thus points out that Japan put additional cultural resources at Rampo's disposal, which he used in the belief that homosexuality is a purer, more idealistic form of love, all the while drawing on Japan's samurai tradition. Both Japanese scholars present dichotomies in Rampo's epistemology and suggest that his stories work to resolve them.

Rampo himself elaborated on his search for sexual identity in "Mentally Impotent for Heterosexual Love." There he wrote that in "acting against his original gender" he felt fated to love only one particular woman, but could not believe that he would find her, especially in his circle of acquaintance. Anyone who did attract him, therefore, he would only love partially: a heterosexual "love" would be "just something happening," not a divine love. Though he called this the root of his sexual nihilism, no doubt the prevailing Japanese social conception of the heterosexual act as "unsightly" reinforced his feeling. He had wanted to think highly of "love," he wrote, but could not once he learned that it came from "ugly organs." In the second, speculative part of his essay, Rampo postulated a kind of prelapsarian androgyny, not unlike Aristophanes' myth of the origin of the sexes, according to which "men" and "women" evolved as a result of a binary division. Given all of this, Rampo wrote, he had decided not to "search" for "love," comparing himself to a painter who does not paint or a poet who does not write. But he did get married eventually, in 1919, to an elementary school teacher, and they had a son. His life was quite unlike the sensational lives depicted in the 1994 and 1995 Rampo films.
II

To the extent that he theorized his own sexuality, Rampo was no doubt influenced by Freud, who became popular in Japan around 1925. *A Primer on Psychoanalysis* was published in Japan in 1926, but Rampo wrote that he waited until Freud’s *Complete Works* were translated in 1933 to purchase any books. One of the 1933 translators, Otsuki Kenji, formed a Freud reading group the same year, and Rampo joined for six months—his interest piqued, he said, by the number of people present who were interested in homosexuality. Only a few further fragments of Rampo’s reading impressions remain, and his understanding of Freud seems to have been intuitive, impressionistic, and certainly pre-Lacanian, while his stories show it to be incipiently performative, concerned with the body and the gaze in particular.

Recent scholarship on these topics in Poe, especially queer readings and those concerned with the gaze, cast an eerie illumination on Rampo’s interest. Leo Lemay, Robert Carringer, Jacqueline Doyle, Leland Person, and Gustavus Stadler, among others, furnish insights that probe Poe’s “(often secret) discursive acts.” Lemay, for example, unzips stories such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” to reveal a compressed homosexuality at work, with which, he argues, Poe intended to tweak Victorian readers. Whatever the origins of Poe’s convoluted references and invocations, Lemay is surely correct in recognizing that “[h]omosexuality has psychological and symbolic meanings in Poe’s fictive world that complement the story’s major themes.” Person notes that the classic rhetoric Poe inherited and exploited left him straitened in his use of woman as topos. Doyle points out how far Poe exceeds his rhetorical models in Petrarach, Dante, and Shakespeare in his tendency to dismember and entomb female characters. There is a fascination with their physical decay (in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Berenice”), and even after death, as she writes, women are “prone to eerie reanimation.” To this nexus one must add Carringer’s critique, with its focus on vision and space. He takes one hint from Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition”—“a close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of the isolated incident”—and another from Richard Wilbur’s reading of “William Wilson”: “Wilson never seems to set foot out-of-doors.” This “isolation of the poetic soul” indicates that the character “is in the process of dreaming his way out of the world,” Wilbur writes, for the “impulse to delimit space” to a room, a tomb, a recess, or a pit begins a process in which “the libertine alter ego is presented as a kind of archetype of criminality.” In the center of the space toward which the protagonists are driven is an image of the “eye” or “I,” homologous with the “evil I.”

“The Black Cat” can serve as a paradigm of these converging interests. The spatial dynamic begins constricted, becomes more so, and collapses on an image of the narrator himself that must be destroyed. Poe’s fear of the center has a decidedly sexual tone. Here is the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” explaining his motive for murder:

Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

The insupportable gaze that emanates from this eye accuses the narrator and represents something like his loss of humanity, thus effectively doubling him. Destroying this gaze and freeing himself from the double and from a disciplinary panopticon produces an illusory sense of freedom, as Poe’s narrator notes when he buries his victim: “I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected anything wrong” (*Works*, 3:792, 796).

“The illocutionary force of the . . . ending,” as Stadler has written of another tale, “disavows that the narrator himself has impulsively acted on a ‘craving’ similar to that attributed to his victim.” This moment comes earlier in “The Black Cat,” where the “close *circumscription of space*,” the gazing I/eye, and the body convene in an act of unwritable desire. In “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” Poe follows the narrator’s craving further, in a fashion that must have struck Rampo, for it is clearly called up in Rampo’s story “The Bug.” Poe’s narrator hypnotizes a dying man, “directing [his] gaze entirely into the right eye of the sufferer”—as in “The Black Cat,” the eye/I creates an inhuman other—and postponing the moment of death for seven months. The relation Poe finds between the gaze and the body is clearer here: vision *creates* bodily decay, in a flood of clinical detail that engulfs the reader at the conclusion: “The first indication of revival was afforded by a partial descent of
the iris. It was observed, as especially remarkable, that this lowering of the pupil was accompanied by the profuse out-flowing of a yellowish ichor (from beneath the lids) of a pungent and highly offensive odor.” Upon his release from hypnosis, the victim, according to the narrator's report, “absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity” (Works, 3:1237, 1242, 1243). Whether or not this is ejaculate, as Stadler maintains, he is surely correct to argue that here the gaze is ultimately unable to control or even contextualize what it “sees.” The tale fails not only in its announced goal of “explaining” the experiment but also in its efforts to reify Valdemar’s body. This is the place to recall Person’s remark that Poe’s male narrator “finds his own desiring self decomposing in the absence of a ‘loved object.’”

In Poe’s “Berenice,” the object of the gaze is dispersed differently. The fiancée of the narrator dies of a wasting disease, after which he disinters her body and extracts her teeth. At the end of the second section, the narrator’s gaze travels from his fiancée’s eyes to her mouth:

My burning glances at length fell upon the face.

The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once pretty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets, now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly, in their fantastic character, with the reigning melancholy of the countenance. The eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupilless, and I shrank involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips. They parted; and in a smile of peculiar meaning, the teeth of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves slowly to my view. Would to God that I had never beheld them, or that, having done so, I had died! (Works, 2:215)

Carringer calls what follows “a disguised bloody act of desexualization, the pulling of Berenice’s vaginae dentes.” Although it clearly is, there is more, for as Doyle remarks, Berenice has been “dismembered,” has had forbidden acts committed upon her body. From this Doyle construes a broader misogyny, arguing that Berenice is dispersed in order to diminish her threat, to bury “her text” in this story that is overshadowed by Arnheim’s melancholy and plague of Arnheim bursts upon the view,” writes Poe, “The Domain of Arnheim” or “The Landscape Garden,” Poe’s narrator follows a character named Ellison as he attempts to create a perfect landscape “composition,” an allusion that would not have been lost on Rampo. At length Ellison finds the ideal venue and creates a park that the narrator can only approach by “a light canoe of ivory.” He descends a stream of “exquisite cleanliness” that is free of “the usual river debris” and arrives in a glen of flowers. Here a golden door magically opens, revealing a gushing river and an amphitheater of flowers; “the whole Paradise of Arnheim bursts upon the view,” writes Poe, but its nature is unspeakable, the following passage little more than a list of flowers and architectural ornaments (Works, 3:1272, 1280–83). In the sequel, “Landor’s Cottage,” Poe’s narrator is ostensibly in upstate New York, where he describes himself vagabonding through a Washington Irving–like countryside. Following a trace of trail, he comes upon a similar amphitheater, at the center of which is another clear body of water and an indescribable house—“poetry,” Poe calls it: “[i]ts marvelous effect lay altogether in its artistic arrangement as a picture.” Inside the house the narrator encounters Annie, whose vivid gray eyes he interprets as "enthusiasmi" and "romance"—an effect that "wreath[es] itself occasionally into the lips.” Then the owner invites him into a
vestibule, next into a bedroom, and there he sees a series of rounded objects, and finally, "[t]he fireplace . . . filled with a vase of brilliant geranium." These spaces, colors, and land forms, as well as Poe's attempt to map female anatomy on landscape, to realize an idealized and purely material version of woman as other, find resonant echoes in Rampo. However, the narrator's self-estimate—"I have found the perfection of natural, in contradistinction from artificial grace"—misinterprets his own narrative, which manifests everywhere a fear of dirt, disorder, and decay: in short, "decomposition" is the ontological negative image of composition (Works, 3:1335, 1338–40).

III

Rampo seems to have understood Poe's gazed-upon, material, but ultimately unspeakable woman as the gateway to an arena where the doubled body is entirely fungible. Heterosexuality is never a rhetorical topos but simply a starting point for Rampo. Though his central characters are usually men, some are women, as in "Imomushi" (The caterpillar), and though his first-person narrators are nearly always men, female point-of-view characters of diegetic omniscience also appear. Rampo's work exhibits the same kind of spatial consciousness as Poe's, but that may be partly an accident of geography: many of his stories are set in small rooms, and Japan is a land of small rooms. Others are set in gardens ("Souseiji [The twins]"), amusement parks ("Oshie to tabi suru otoko" [The traveler with the pasted rag picture]), or other outdoor environments ("Dangai" [The cliff], "The Caterpillar"). The more open the space, the more it is constrained by an (often unseen) sense of verticality. For example, "The Traveler" features an unexpected high tower, "The Cliff" a precipice, and "The Caterpillar" a deep well. Death by falling into a well or from a high place, motifs from Japanese folklore, are common and often create the sense of horror that Poe achieves through spatial narrowing, such as entombment. In one story by Rampo ("Ningen Isu" [The human chair]), a man entombs himself for sexual pleasure, becoming all body as he lives inside a chair and feels the contours of its reclining female owner, who is a famous writer. There are open spaces in Rampo's stories, but they usually invoke the performative body.

Rampo's absorbed interest in sexuality, vision, and Poe's decomposition is best approached via "Kasei no unga" (The Martian canal), the story that rereads Poe's "Domain of Arnheim" and "Landor's Cottage." In Rampo's story a man wanders in a limitless forest, scared by the onset of darkness and the sense of infinite extension, his senses seemingly reduced to vision alone. The landscape is idealized but not as particularized as Poe's. The man comes to a vaguely lit spot, where he finds a marsh, at the center of which stands a rock. All nature seems to "yearn" for something to happen, and when the man looks down at himself, he finds he has become a beautiful woman: [W]hen I looked on a young girl's voluptuous body instead of a man's, I smiled as if there were nothing to wonder at, forgetting the fact that I was a man. Oh, this is my body! I was so happy that I felt my heart jump to my throat.

Oddly my body was the same as my girlfriend's. How beautiful it was!

His girlfriend is not present, not even imagined, but serves as a merely rhetorical point of departure for envisioning. There is then an exchange of sexual natures that occurs via a self-gaze, which is followed by a strange performance. The "man" swims to the rock and begins to dance for a personified nature:

Then an extreme muscular movement began. How wonderful it was, like a blue-green snake had torn itself in two and wriggled. It was the last moment of a measuring worm, a caterpillar, or an earthworm.

I was a beast that had struggled against endless pleasure or endless pain. But then, tired from dancing, I jumped into the black water and drank the heavy, mercury-like liquid, until my stomach could hold no more.

Even dancing wildly, I had lacked something. Strangely not only I myself but even the surrounding background sensed this. It did not relax. What more did it watch for?

An idea suddenly struck me: "it is the color red." This wonderful mural lacked only the color red. The eyes of the snake would glitter if it could have that color.

Imagine a bottomless gray or a brilliant snow white skin, and a speck of red color. Against it, the snake's eyes look attractive, more beautiful than anything else.

The projection of sexual desire by vision allows Rampo to conflate the landscape, the female body, and his narrator, who scratches his flesh so that his blood adds red to the scene. Unlike Poe's narrators who remember desire and dematerialize it, Rampo's narrator dematerializes himself, imagines the female body, and inhabits it. But he also finds it porous, permeable. He can imagine himself into it, but when he seeks to perform it, it returns to him the antithesis of identity:

When I writhed I was a long bug in the hour of death. Sometimes I pulled back my chest and legs, stretched my
waist extremely, then retracted my thigh muscles so they came up as high as possible. Other times I lay on my back on the rock, warped my body like a bow, and walked around as an inchworm crawls. I sat with my legs stretched apart, put my neck in the space between, and rolled over like a caterpillar. I imitated the cut earthworm and jumped about on the rock, flexed and relaxed my arms, shoulders, belly, waist, and every part of my body to form a curved figure. I played a starring role in this wonderful performance, as long as my life lasted.

Decay squirms here, from the torn-in-two green snake to the "cut earthworm," as the narrator’s performance imitates the maggoty danse macabre of nature. He is awakened from this dream—the reader learns on the last page that there is a frame story—by a woman (presumably his girlfriend) whose face, as she bends to kiss him, is likened to the red planet of Mars descending on him. From this image the story takes its name: "The Martian Canal." The last word inevitably evokes, in the sequence of images the tale unfolds, a passage backward to birth. Here it is useful to recall the gaze Poe employs in "Berenice." Unlike his narrator, who envisions a terrifying vagina dentata that either limits the gazer to or dissociates the gazer from the reciprocity of the gaze, Rampo’s subject projects desire into the physicality, the corporeality, of his/her object, the two merging in a performance of decomposition that leads to the identity of death/birth. As the decaying images remind us, all bodies are as ripe as that of M. Valdemar. But Rampo has discovered motility there—everything moves, dances, and this primary movement sanctions higher-level performances.

To this confluence of possibilities, Rampo returns often, exploring new directions. Two of the most interesting appear in "Hitodenashi no koi" (The love of a nonhuman) and "The Caterpillar." The first is told from the point of view of a woman whose misanthropic, retreating husband turns his attention to a beautiful doll. Happy with him at first, she feels after six months of marriage as if someone or something else occupies his love. A half year she has gazed at him, and now she perceives him to be double: "Another cold eye stared at the distance from the depth of his caressing gaze. Even his voice whispering his love sounded to me somehow hollow and mechanical" (ER, 433). It seems to her that her husband’s strangeness may be related to his custom of reading in the storehouse, an old habit he had stopped when they married but has recently begun again:

I married my husband in the middle of summer, and began to doubt him at the harvest moon of fall of the year. I, with wonder, remember even now that Kadono, turning his back, crouched down on a veranda, was sunk in thought for a long time under the pale white moon light. I was so touched to gaze after the back view of him at that time, and this was the beginning of my doubt of him. (ER, 486)

One night the wife follows her husband to the storehouse and overhears his conversation with another woman. He professes his helpless attraction, revealing that they have known each other since childhood and that he feels guilty about their affair. The wife, not brave enough to confront him, tries to see his mistress’s face as they leave the storehouse: “I opened my eyes wide with resentment to memorize the woman’s face,” she says (ER, 441). But darkness prevents any recognition. She spies on them repeatedly, but she can never see the woman come out of the storehouse. One day she realizes that she hears a large chest close every time her husband leaves the storeroom. The next day she checks, finding a beautiful doll, which emanates an unearthly attraction. She understands that her husband loves the doll, so she destroys it. That night her husband goes to the storehouse but does not come back. She goes to the scene:

There I saw two corpses, my husband and the doll lying on top of the other. The wooden floor looked like a pool of blood. The celebrated sword, which had been passed down in the family, had taken blood and now lay inert. A double suicide of the man and the clod of earth, which did not sound funny. It rather seemed to me that a strange, solemn thing tightened in my bosom. I could not shed tears or speak. I could not do anything but stand there.

When I gazed at them, I saw a drop of blood drip from the doll’s lips, only half of which remained after my blows, on to my husband’s arm as he held her neck. It looked as if she herself had vomited blood, and she had such an uncanny smile in her last moment. (ER, 454–55)

With Noh-like delicacy, Rampo has created a triangle of gazes. The wife gazes at her husband, who gazes at the doll, whose strange allure can only be apprehended when it is seen by and looks back at the wife. The doll’s red lips and vomited blood import from “The Martian Canal” a color emblematic for Rampo of the body’s materiality. The wife tries to destroy the triangle of gazes by crushing the doll, a fixed and speakable image of the female. This does not recover her husband for her, but it frees her from the unspeakable position of the ungazed-on, in which her husband has placed her by his infatuation with the doll. Only at the end of the story, when the wife is
moved to action, does her gaze, unrecognized by any other character save the doll, come to rest on the mouth that represents her desire—this is in fact what she desires to be, the purely material, loved object. Surely Rampo is meditating here on Poe’s “Berenice.” Though the woman has repudiated her double (“the clod of earth”), she remains in the speechless lock of its mutual gaze. Such a performance, though ostensibly of heterosexuality, partakes of the contrast Rampo sensed between his two experiences of homosexuality. Unfortunately, his Kabuki-like performance of the female here is usually overlooked, especially in popular interpretations, which prize the fetishistic aspect of the male gaze.

The most striking example of Rampo’s “radial” rereading of Poe is his later work “The Caterpillar.” Rampo’s vision problems and eye operation two years before publishing this story in 1937 may have focused its theme. The tale concerns the war invalid Lieutenant Sunaga and his wife Tokiko, and it is told from her point of view (though not in the first person). Lieutenant Sunaga has been horribly maimed in Manchuria, losing his legs and arms and every bodily sense except sight, appetite, and sexuality. His emotions he puts entirely into his gaze, which is so vivid as to recall the doll in “The Love of a Nonhuman.” He can express himself only through his gaze or by laboriously writing with a pencil clenched between his teeth: “Lieutenant Sunaga, or rather ‘the bundle,’ still seemed far from satisfied, but perhaps he became tired of the performance of writing with his mouth, for his head lay limp on the floor and moved no more. After a brief spell, he looked hard at her, putting every meaning into his large eyes” (JTMI, 73).

Lieutenant Sunaga is “essentially” male, but Rampo identifies him by his squirming motion with the bugs and undulant motions that characterize the gender-shifting performance of “The Martian Canal.” This is to say that Sunaga is characterized by motility. His flesh is decaying and his death is imminent, like those of Berenice and Valdemar in Poe’s stories, but his body is still essentialized as male, and it is the site of intense sexual desire, emotional longing, and a physical appetite for food. This is a provocative shift from the objectified Berenice (*vagina dentata*) or the essentialized Valdemar (whether he is simply putrescent or, as Stadler claims, ejaculate). Rampo now reverses the sexual polarity of Poe’s dichotomy, locating sexual power and control in Tokiko: “Suddenly bending over her husband, she smothered his twisted mouth with kisses. Soon, a look of deep contentment and pleasure crept into his eyes, followed by an ugly smile. She continued to kiss him—closing her eyes in order to forget his ugliness—and, gradually, she felt a strong urge to tease this poor cripple, who was so utterly helpless” (JTMI, 73).

Closing her eyes, the wife eliminates the reciprocity of the gaze. Lieutenant Sunaga is thereafter increasingly identified as a doll, and his condition is typified by undulant, insectlike rhythms. The reversal is not complete, however; what is speakable but absolutely unperformable in this story is sexuality.

There seemed to be but one consolation for her miserable “career” as nursemaid to a cripple: the very fact that this poor, strange thing which not only could neither speak nor hear, but could not even move freely by itself, was by no means made of wood or clay, but was alive and real, possessing every human emotion and instinct—this was a source of boundless fascination for her. Still further, those round eyes of his, which comprised his only expressive organ, speaking so sadly sometimes, and sometimes so angrily—these too had a strange charm. The pitiful thing was that he was incapable of wiping away the tears which those eyes could still shed. And of course, when he was angry, he had no power to threaten her other than that of working himself into an abnormal heat of frenzy. These fits of wrath usually came on whenever he was reminded that he would never again be able to succumb, of his own free will, to the one overwhelming temptation which was always lurking within him.

Meanwhile, Tokiko also managed to find a secondary source of pleasure in tormenting this helpless creature whenever she felt like it. Cruel? Yes! But it was fun—great fun! . . . (JTMI, 80)

The residual desire that Rampo allows Lieutenant Sunaga to feel and Tokiko to exploit dramatically extends his reading of Poe. When Tokiko tires of tormenting her husband, she “accidentally” blinds him:

She had cruelly deprived her husband of his only window to the outside world. What was left to him now? Nothing, absolutely nothing . . . just his mass of ghastly flesh, in total darkness.

However, she knew it was not her mistake. She felt her husband’s expressive eyes had been an obstacle to their being beasts together. The sense of judgment that came to them sometimes was hateful to her. Moreover, in those eyes she recognized something eerie, something inhuman. (JTMI, 82; emphasis added)

This passage clarifies an earlier section that describes a dream Tokiko experiences after arousing her husband to a sexual “frenzy”:
Now that she was wide awake she tried to erase all thoughts of the horrors of the nightmare that had assailed her mind, but the more she tried to forget, the more persistent became the images. First a mist seemed to rise before her eyes, and when this cleared, she could distinctly see a large lump of flesh, floating in mid-air, spinning and spinning like a top. Suddenly a stout, ugly woman's body seemed to appear from nowhere, and the two figures became interlocked in a mad embrace. The weirdly erotic scene reminded Tokiko of a picture postcard portraying a section of Dante's Inferno; and yet, as her mind drifted, the very disgust and ugliness of the embracing pair seemed to excite all her pent-up passions and to paralyze her nerves. With a shudder she asked herself if she were sexually perverted.

Holding her breasts, she suddenly uttered a piercing cry. Then she looked at her husband intently, like a child gazing at a broken doll. (JTMS, 75)

Tokiko "extinguishes" her husband not because of his threatening otherness or because he as object creates her as subject, as in Poe, but because the gaze—his, hers, any—forestalls the possibility of primordial union. To gaze or to be gazed on is to be formed, to be judged, a fate only evaded when vision ceases. This passage unites a number of visual motifs from Rampo's other stories. The reader who has followed his developing use of the gaze and the body is in a position to understand this section as a key to his perception of hidden discursive acts in Poe's work. From the initial dream state—mist, and flesh in motion ("The Martian Canal")—to the doll image ("The Love of the Nonhuman"), Rampo explores the mutations possible in Poe's gaze on flesh. In "The Caterpillar" Tokiko tortures her husband sexually and puts out his eyes, but she does not kill him. He commits suicide, crawling caterpillar-like through the garden behind the house until he finds and plunges into an abandoned well. Rampo sends Lieutenant Sunaga back up the birth canal as surely as Poe's narrator eliminated that possibility by removing Berenice's teeth.

Confating the sexual act and the moment of death, Rampo makes the march of the maggots imitate the moment of creation. This fundamental and unifying movement was suggested by Poe, but he could not "see" his own sexual ontology as Rampo can. Rampo's insight is to connect the gaze, the mortality of the body, and sexuality. The dance of motility, which is nothing less than basic, biological desire, is always seeking to rejoin its opposite in Rampo's work. Transgendered performances and even torture heighten a consciousness of the primordial dissolubility of all flesh. As recent scholarship has shown, these are present but buried in Poe. Rampo makes all three areas performative, thereby showing the porousness and the permeability of sexuality, the body, and decay.

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**Notes**

My thanks to Hiroe Monguchi, who was a graduate student at Kobe College when I taught there, for help with this essay.


9 Rampo, Waga yume, 43–46.

10 Mokoto Furukawa, “Edogawa Rampo no hisokanaru jyoujutsu: Doucesia kenkyuka to shitenou Rampo,” Kokuhungaku kaisaku to kansho 59, no. 12 (1994): 59–64. Furukawa refers to Rampo’s essay “Futari no shishou” (The two teachers), which is about the two people who aroused his interest in homosexual love; Junichiro Iwata, the scholar of Japanese traditional homosexual relationship who appears to have guided Rampo’s investigation of Greek relationship; and Hamao Shiro, a detective story writer who introduced Rampo to Western arguments about homosexual love. Furukawa and others believe that among the people who aroused his interest in homosexual love, junichiro Iwata, the scholar of Japanese traditional homosexual relationship who appears to have guided Rampo’s investigation of Greek relationship; and Hamao Shiro, a detective story writer who introduced Rampo to Western arguments about homosexual love. Furukawa and others believe that among the latter was the view of Edward Carpenter, who defended homosexual love as an extension of friendship between two men.

11 Rampo’s interest in Greek homosexuality is mentioned by Furukawa (“Edogawa Rampo,” 61).


15 Rampo, Waga yume, 172–73.


17 Lemay, “Psychology,” 172.