In Wolfgang Kayser’s epoch-making study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* Edgar Allan Poe is singled out for separate treatment in a number of places, in particular in a long section entitled “Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque”, taking its cue from the title of Poe’s first collection of stories, published in 1840. Kayser’s approach to Poe, however, is blurred by a somewhat haphazard use of the term “grotesque”, making the category comprise a tale like “The Black Cat” (1843) and making him include even detective stories like “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and “The Purloined Letter” (1845) in his discussion of this mode. Kayser’s perspective on Poe’s grotesques clearly reflects his scholarly preoccupation with Romantic, in particular German, versions of the grotesque, with their explicit emphasis on the macabre, sinister and nocturnal aspects of the mode.

But Poe’s approach to the grotesque points in many different directions, and what is characteristic of the poetics of the grotesque in his *oeuvre* is precisely the diversity of narrative devices and techniques he adopts in order to develop the mode in his own – sometimes highly eccentric or idiosyncratic – manner. In the present Chapter and in Chapter 6 I shall take up two of his stories in order to illustrate his stylistic and narrative pluralism: “King Pest” (1835, probably written in 1834) and “The Masque of the Red Death”

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Walking Shadows

(1842). What is offered to us here are two prototypical versions of the grotesque, ranging from the carnivalistic excesses of “King Pest” to the apocalyptic horrors of “The Masque of the Red Death”. These two subcategories of the grotesque in a decisive manner determine the narrative strategy in these tales. But however much these two narratives may differ from each other, the convoluted, non-Euclidian spaces of both texts have, on another conceptual level, been through the same grotesque blender or wringer. What has come out at the other end is a strange mélange, a bizarre mixtum compositum, reflecting in diverse daemonic ways the idiosyncratic lack of sense and sensibility of its would-be angelic, super-human or spirit-ridden originator.

In his doctoral dissertation Das Groteske und seine Gestaltung in den Erzählungen Edgar Allan Poes (1974), Bernd Günter establishes Poe’s links to the grotesque tradition as follows:

There is hardly any other – and certainly no other American – writer apart from Edgar Allan Poe with whose work both the reading public and literary scholarship in such a spontaneous and unanimous manner have associated the notion of the “grotesque”. In popular opinion Poe does not only appear as the precursor of the short story, as the “father” of the detective story, as well as the first representative of the psychological tale of terror, but he is likewise and to the same extent regarded as the master of the grotesque.3

In the famous Preface to his Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840), Poe himself dismisses the question of genre or mode in a rather offhand manner: “The epithets ‘Grotesque’ and ‘Arabesque’ will be found to indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales here published ....” However that may be, Poe is eager to stress the inherently native, that is non-European characteristics of his tales, bearing in mind that he had been accused of “‘Germanism’ and