

“NEITHER IN NOR OUT OF *BLACKWOOD'S*”:
THE MARKETING OF EDGAR ALLAN POE’S PROSE ADDRESS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment
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Abstract

“ ‘NEITHER IN NOR OUT OF *BLACKWOOD’S*”:
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This dissertation seeks to help explain Poe’s circulation of his journalism by performing close readings of both canonical works including “William Wilson” (1839) and “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846) and lesser-known articles such as “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.” (1844) and “Loss of Breath” (1832/5). Chapter One describes Poe’s involvement in the transatlantic literary marketplace prior to the enforcement of literary copyright. Chapters Two and Three treat his development of a literary brand in works including “Letter to B” (1831/6) and “A Reviewer Reviewed” by playing off his critical assertions against his practice as a critic. Chapters Four and Five treat Poe’s fiction. Chapter Four charts Poe’s development of a light gothic fictional mode that would appeal to both British and American readers. The final chapter explains Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” as a guide to his construction of unreliable yet compelling storytellers throughout his tales and criticism.

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Chapter One

The Problem of Poe's Appeal: Intellectual and Market Background

I. Introduction

As a boy, Edgar Allan Poe read British periodical tales and criticism in the Richmond, Virginia household of his foster father, merchant John Allan.

Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (1817-32), one of the most widely-read periodicals in the Jacksonian United States, was the name-brand quarterly that would provide important models for Poe's prose journalism. One of Poe's earliest published tales, "Loss of Breath: A TALE NEITHER IN NOR OUT OF 'Blackwood,'" (1832) suggests his work's straddling the Atlantic Ocean in the manner of the influential magazine. This dissertation will explain the responses to literary authority, represented by *Blackwood's*, that are articulated in Poe's tales and criticism of 1831-49. The title of this dissertation refers to Poe's promotion of transatlantically-themed American literature: while the tales were designed to be readily reprinted in Britain and the United States, the criticism primarily targeted American audiences. This initial chapter will describe the economic conditions for Poe's prose career.

Poe's enduring appeal begs the question of the purposes and the implied audiences for Poe's hoaxing and ironic prose. A Romantic and psychologically-motivated school of thought typified by G.K Thompson's Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales (1973) holds that Poe's tales and criticism abound in two kinds of Romantic Irony: Poe may have intended not only to

comment on the absurdity of life but also to poke fun at various audiences.¹

More recent studies, especially Terence Whalen's Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses (1999) and Meredith McGill's American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853 (2003) have examined the economic motivation of Poe's writing. Whalen sees Poe as unsuccessful in his quest to reach a readership that would combine the purchasing power of the multitude with the discernment of the elite (18). For her part, McGill finds Poe's journalistic slight-of-hand effective in garnering the attention of American editors and audiences within a transatlantic reprint culture.

This dissertation makes use of such relevant historical work in performing close readings of some well-known and also some of Poe's less canonical essays and tales in order to investigate how his works may have affected each other's reception. Writing in a culture marked by widespread reprinting of periodical and book-length texts that nevertheless was strongly influenced by Romantic ideology, Poe readied his articles for the broadest possible audience.² This involved attacking Romantic notions of literary and rhetorical authority while dropping literary names in order to circulate his works and make a living. For example, Poe's criticizing his own methods in "A Reviewer Reviewed" (1850) and "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) may have struck a chord with readers eager for active engagement with journalistic prose.

¹ See Thompson, Poe's Fiction 20-1.

² See McGill, American Literature 183 and Whalen 24.

II. Conditions of the Transatlantic Literary Marketplace

A. Romanticism Under Review

Poe's prose career (1831-49) took place during the intersection of three historical movements. First, Poe wrote in what Friedrich Schlegel and William Hazlitt had referred to as the Critical Age, when witty commentary was supplanting fixed ideas of literary originality. As Poe remarked in an 1841 letter to Washington Irving, "the brief, the terse, the condensed, and the easily circulated will take the place of the diffuse, the ponderous, and the inaccessible."³ Second, literary Romanticism, translated to the United States by individual scholars and the ubiquitous British periodical press, provided readers with a reassuring set of ideals during this transition to modernity. Finally, however, the transatlantic literary marketplace governed literary production with the arrival of factory-style printing in the United States, an enormous market for English-language literature, during the 1830s.⁴

The Romantic notion of a unitary genius as originator of a literary text, which had flourished from 1750 in Europe, functioned less as inspiration than as a selling point for Poe's tales and criticism. Despite British Romanticism's decline towards 1830, it served as a convenient foil for Poe's literary, aesthetic, and professional aims. During the Romantic Age, literary and art criticism had become more prominent and more complex. Romanticism emphasized not only the subjectivity of the writer taking part in artistic creation but also that of the

³ Poe's letter to Irving is dated June 21, 1841. See Ostrom 168.

⁴ See McGill 19. See also Starr, The Creation of the Media 87, Erickson, The Economy of Literary Form 181, and Zboray, A Fictive People 16.

critic helping to complete the artwork with an inspired written response to it.⁵ Romanticism called into question any absolute aesthetic judgment while celebrating the artist's capacity to understand his medium. Friedrich Schlegel held that "a critical sketch is a critical work of art."⁶ Poe certainly took Schlegel's declaration seriously; in his first critical essay, "Letter to B" (1831/6) and throughout his career as a prose journalist, Poe challenged Romantic-era notions of authorship and criticism.

In his literary reviews, Poe liked nothing better than to contrast a writer's lofty intentions with his less-than satisfying results. Poe and his journalistic peers wrote for increasingly fast-moving readers who required easily-digestible entertainment.⁷ One way Poe savaged works under review was by adopting the admonishing "This will never do" tone of the British quarterly book reviews in his criticism.⁸ Unsatisfying verse and fallible scholarship are held up for contempt. This is true from his first essay "Letter to B" with specific reference to both the Lake School of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the American transcendentalists Emerson and Fuller.

Both in rendering his own authorial self-portraits and in reviewing other writers, Poe makes extensive use of hyperbole. Poe's renditions of his own life are satirical, in the case of the tales, and idealized, in the case of his reportage. For example, while Poe's two biographies provided for the newspapers describe him as younger, more athletic, and more of a world traveler than he was, his

⁵ See De Paz, "Innovation and Modernity" 40.

⁶ See Friedrich Schlegel, *Atheneum* fragment 439, qtd. De Paz 34.

⁷ On British "railway" books, see Feather, *A History of British Publishing* 136.

⁸ For "This will never do," see Francis Jeffrey on Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, *Edinburgh Review* XXIV (Nov. 1814) 1.

fictional accounts are more pointed: “The Literary Life” (1844) describes the Machiavellian business of periodical editing, while “A Reviewer Reviewed” describes fictitious examples of very real drawbacks to Poe’s critical method.

Definitions of literary textuality changed considerably during the Romantic era as the Classical emphasis on adherence to traditional form and content opened up to the influences of modernity. By the time Poe published “Metzengerstein,” his first tale, in January 1832, the essay, the novel, and the short story had risen in status, each at the approximate time of its popularization by the periodical press.⁹ At the height of British and American Romanticism, Byron, William Hazlitt, and Ralph Waldo Emerson would offer readers their work as the merging of themselves not only with the living world around them but also with others’ works which they had openly appropriated. Such an idea is consistent with Poe’s formula for literary generativity:

Novel conceptions are merely unusual combinations. The mind of man can imagine nothing which does not exist: --if it could, it would create not only ideally, but substantially--as do the thoughts of God (ER 8, 224).

Here Poe suggests that our way of viewing the world around us determines the slight alteration our inventions may make to prior and simultaneous productions.

This perspective on artistic creation represents a revision of earlier models grounded in authors’ relations to their acknowledged literary precursors.

⁹ See Erickson, The Economy of Literary Form 30.

B. American Limitations and Possibilities

Within Poe's lifetime—from 1810 to 1820 in Britain and by the 1840s in the U.S.—three factors helped make authorship a reputable way to earn a living: industrial innovations made reading less expensive, purchasing power expanded within the population as a whole, and publishers targeted an ever-broader spectrum of readers. Poe and his American contemporaries were bound to the transatlantic literary marketplace by several factors. First, fiction had taken poetry's place as literary sales leader by the beginning of the 19th Century in Britain and by approximately 1820 in the United States.¹⁰ Second, periodicals originating in Scotland and England were the dominant mode of distribution and publicity for poetry, fiction and especially the essay. With the establishment of the novel as the prime literary commodity, literary reviewing became a promotional instrument for publishers, an instrument of political parties and at times a potential means of stress reduction for literary critics.¹¹ Hence, while American books themselves rarely achieved financial success in the U.S. and in Britain during Poe's lifetime, the professional and psychological mechanisms necessary for them to do so were gaining momentum.¹²

Nineteenth-Century American readers devoured British novels. Interestingly, however, American publishers enjoyed more regular profits during the 1820s, when distribution and publication were relatively primitive, than during the 1830s or 1840s. One early success was Washington Irving's seven-

¹⁰ See Erickson 7.

¹¹ See McGill, *American Literature* 317n. See also Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship* 29. For contestation of the author-function as a focus in considering periodical literature, see McGill 39.

¹² See Zboray, *A Fictive People* 36.

part Sketch Book: he was paid fully 40% of the profits from the sale of approximately 5,000 copies. It is estimated that Irving made more than ten thousand dollars from the sale of his books during a two-year period. Irving assumed considerable risk, however, by acting as his own publisher. During this period, book publishers' efforts were hampered by overlapping claims to regional distribution rights.¹³

An early surge in U.S. literary production coincided with its tremendous westward expansion for twelve years immediately following the opening of the Erie Canal (1825). Literary publishing continued unabated during the economic crisis of 1837-41. This depression followed America's first period of urban poverty by only eighteen years; 1819 had seen a similar panic that had brought many relief agencies into being. During the 1820s and 30s, the American institution of authorship changed from a pastime for the wealthy to a way writers could strive for, if not often achieve, a living. Irving and James Fenimore Cooper were the first U.S. authors to earn a living by writing fiction.¹⁴ During the 1830s, Hawthorne and Emerson followed Irving and Cooper along this path. As Poe was fond of remarking, these authors had means of support besides their publication. Before 1860, the bulk of American writers were unable to earn a living from the U.S. market alone.¹⁵

¹³ See The Profession of Authorship 34.

¹⁴ Two celebrated and prolific novelists who did not succeed in earning a regular living from their writings were Susanna Rowson, author of Charlotte Temple (1791) and Charles Brockden Brown, author of Wieland (1798).

¹⁵ See Profession 313. See also Mott 20 and Whalen, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses 46. Whalen offers a close look at Poe's efforts to respond to his apprehension of the literary marketplace as surging information economy.

In 1820, practical literature dominated publishers' catalogues. In the absence of a reliable transportation network, the publishing of American poetry, essays, and fiction would have been risky ventures. Individual authors and publishers, however, would sometimes set up specialized presses when they encountered sufficient regional demand for individual works or genres. For example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published popular textbooks in Portland, Maine.¹⁶ Prior to 1830, United States publisher-booksellers were spread out among regional centers such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Richmond. The expansion of canals and railroads during the 1830s and 40s helped start a trend towards national distribution based in New York, quite a feat in a nation segmented into tiny regional markets used to doing without new books during the coldest months of the year.¹⁷

Bookselling in the American South, which was less well served by railroads than the North or the West, catered to the wealthy. As the publishers Lea and Blanchard observed in 1848, it required an "organized band of Yankees" to sell books in that region.¹⁸ Parson Weems, who peddled books for Matthew Carey starting in 1794, worked year-round to survey readers and assemble carefully chosen book packets to be sold to local booksellers for a predetermined figure.¹⁹ The four-year economic slump that spanned the creatively productive middle

¹⁶ See *Profession* 35.

¹⁷ See Rowland, *Literature and the Marketplace* 32. Mott (375) reports that while New York had three times the population of Philadelphia and four times that of Boston in 1830, it had grown to five times their size by 1850. Meanwhile, the Seventh Census (1850) reported circulation of "periodicals, exclusive of newspapers" to be 50% higher in New York than either Boston or Philadelphia.

¹⁸ See *Profession* 39.

¹⁹ See Zboray, *A Fictive People* 50.

years of Poe's prose career was hard on publishers selling to the South and West where book buyers were least likely to have cash on hand.

Several factors combined to deprive American authors and publishers of the widest possible circulation. First, American manufacturing costs were high relative to those in Britain since American printers were only beginning, by the 1830s, to gear up for large-scale production. Second, because the U.S. was much larger than the British Isles and because its railroad network lagged several decades behind that of Great Britain, its major source for reading matter, it distributed books in a much more haphazard manner:

In 1820, the relation between the retailer and the printers, publishers, and jobbers was extremely complex. Almost all publishers were retailers; many printers were also publishers and sometimes also retailers; all jobbers were retailers; no jobber could deal profitably in the books of all publishers; and sometimes the bookseller who served as jobber in his territory for a firm in another state advertised the books of that firm for him.²⁰

Just as important as technology, then, was this system in which various middlemen looked to secure their own advantage over possible competitors: it was in the booksellers' and jobbers' short-term interests to strike up alliances with their peers, say fifty or two hundred miles away. The opportunity to share a load of books with a local business, however, would often be avoided for fear of keeping one's competitors solvent. In addition, promotion of a publisher's titles was during the 1820s nearly nonexistent; the reviewer's copy, which might be followed by his helpful review or "puff," served as its main engine.

²⁰ See Profession 39.

C. Transatlantic Reprint Culture

In Poe's day, London- and Edinburgh-based periodicals flooded the American market with European and British news, literature and reviews as well as reprinted American material. British reviews appearing in smaller editions for American distribution included the Quarterly Review, the New Monthly Magazine, the Edinburgh Review, the Foreign Quarterly, and Blackwood's Magazine. Like the New Monthly, which was reprinted in the U.S. upon its inception in 1809, the Quarterly Review was reprinted as soon as it began publishing in 1821.²¹ In 1824, it was estimated that the Edinburgh and the Quarterly Reviews sold four thousand copies each in the U.S. By way of comparison, their leading American competitor, the North American Review, had a circulation of approximately 8,000.²² A force that damaged genuine home-grown competition was the reprinting of individual articles from British journals in the pages of American periodicals. Journals calling themselves "eclectic magazines" organized their tables of contents not around the names of human contributors but around the British periodicals from which material had been borrowed.²³

²¹ See Peach 17.

²² See Charvat, Origins 29.

²³ See McGill, American Literature 24. Here McGill argues that the Nineteenth-Century periodical marketplace was not merely a function of economic conditions as implied by Charvat. Rather, when an author publishes, she is submitting her work to a democratic community of readers, editors, and publishers to do with it what they will. Any restriction of periodical reprinting, McGill argues, was judged likely to concentrate editorial power in the hands of a few established authors and publishers. Poe's submitting writing that presented itself as outstanding in originality or truth value is typical of authors and editors acting in their own interest. Stephen Railton's Authorship and Audience sees Poe's efforts to manipulate the behavior of his readers as related to his own hope of gaining increased direction of his own labor. For Railton, Poe's tales reflect this author/reader relationship in the interaction of Poe's anxious storytellers and his protagonists.

Meanwhile, American newspaper “extras” and “mammoth papers” such as *Brother Jonathan* and *The New World* (both 1839-48) would regularly reprint an entire novel within a single weekly edition.²⁴ During Charles Dickens’ 1842 visit to the U.S., he complained of the American pirating of his novels. Ralph Waldo Emerson explained the situation in a letter to Thomas Carlyle,

Every English book of any name or credit is instantly converted into newspaper or coarse pamphlet, & hawked by a hundred boys in the streets of all of our cities for 25, 18, or 12 cents. Dickens’ “Notes” for 12 cents, Blackwood’s Magazine for 18 cents, and so on. Three or four great New York and Philadelphia printing houses do this work, with hot competition.²⁵

While Dickens would likely have derived some benefit from the institution of international copyright, his international celebrity seems to have been linked to readers’ inexpensive access to his works, something realized by the absence of such legislation.²⁶ Technological and economic conditions, however, allowed British writers to thrive while Americans like Poe struggled.

D. Authorial Coping Strategies

Prior to the American Romantic era (1830-60), American authors published uninspired imitations of Alexander Pope and John Milton such as Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad* (1807). Following the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) and accompanying the rise of the British periodicals, however, Americans enthused over the adventure narratives of Byron and Scott. Byron was immediately imitated by writers including Poe, William Gilmore Simms, and Richard Dana. Emerson,

²⁴ See Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival On the Page* 61. See also Mott 360.

²⁵ See *Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle* (Slater, ed), qtd Peach 11.

²⁶ See McGill, *American Literature* 113. On U.S. postal legislation that allowed newspapers to exchange articles and reprint them, thereby providing perhaps half of their contents, see Starr 90.

Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville affirmed British works as examples which could contribute to the development of uniquely American perspectives.²⁷ Based on the examples of Washington Irving, John Neal,²⁸ and James Fenimore Cooper, it seemed American authors had to be published and to promote their work abroad in order to convince American readers of their merits. When Poe began to make a name for himself in Europe during the 1840s as the author of the Auguste Dupin stories, he was not offered publishing contracts or royalties. Rather, his material was reprinted without consultation over permissions or payment. Emerson's remarks suggest that an enterprising author might perform some of the same feats as the eclectic magazines. In "The American Scholar" (1837), Emerson echoes Poe's notes on the transformation of one's source material:

One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading, as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.

Here the well-read writer is positioned as weaver braiding together a hodgepodge of ideas and information into her own understanding and that of her readers.

While this mental model idealizes reading in the manner of the German Romantics, it also offers hints as to how the writer of Poe's day might earn his or her keep. In the absence of regular and generous payment for his short fiction, Poe worked for a series of journals and newspapers as an editor and reviewer.

Here he found a niche as a skeptical manipulator of sensational news items, and

²⁷ See Peach 20.

²⁸ The New Hampshire-based Neal published such adventure novels as Keep Cool (1817) and Logan, A Family History (1822).

intellectual and spiritual novelties. It appears to have been common practice not only for publishers and editors to recycle work printed elsewhere but also for magazine contributors to sell entire articles to more than one journal.²⁹

As for everyday American readers, what reason would they have had during the 1830s and 40s to buy an American-authored, let alone American-published book? As Poe observed beginning with his childhood in the home of foster father John Allan, many book purchasers simply wanted to fill their shelves with attractive editions that were decorated with stately European names (ER 6).

While a great many readers focused on the content of their reading, as suggested by their buying novels in mammoth newspaper editions, display-value--that is, the paper and the binding received for one's investment—was likely a factor for many book buyers. A certain number of readers would encounter American editions in subscription libraries.³⁰

Two negative influences on Americans' reading of books both written and published in the United States were the Depression of 1837-1841 and changes in technology and labor practices. During this period and beyond, conditions became especially attractive for British publishers to pirate American work. Likewise, the decrease in Americans' leisure capital made it attractive for American publishers to issue cheap reprints of foreign works rather than homegrown reading matter.³¹ The scarcity of hard currency and the standardization of printing procedures also resulted in fierce competition among

²⁹ See Thomas F. Marvin, "'These Days of Double Dealing': Edgar Allan Poe and the Business of Magazine Publishing" 81.

³⁰ See Zboray, A Fictive People 11. See also Bell, Culture, Genre, And Literary Vocation 73.

³¹ See Whalen, "The American Publishing Industry" 73.

publishers. Thus the average price of a book sold in the U.S. dropped from an average of two dollars during the 1820s to fifty cents during the Depression.³²

By the mid 1830s, the American printing industry had already begun paying employees in the form of wages, replacing earlier contracts supporting worker training through mandatory apprentice and journeyman stages. This institutional change set the stage for the employment of unskilled pressmen, “who needed only the strength to pull the press bar,” and managers paid according to the amount of work they could extract from their shops.³³ Technical inventions acted to keep wages and hence operating costs low. For example, the steam press could be operated by children who were paid far less than craftsmen or adult laborers. The new techniques of electrotyping and stereotyping took impressions of set type, allowing for flexibility in the number and geographical staging of print runs.³⁴

Workplace standardization and fierce competition from abroad helped determine American publication of cheap periodicals. In the case of Dickens’ American Notes for General Circulation (1842), the text was reprinted as a special supplement of the New York weekly The New World for sale at one-fortieth the price of the two-volume British edition.³⁵ Thus American publishers, though generally proceeding at a financial disadvantage, were as likely to appropriate British writings as British publishers were American material.³⁶ The state of

³² See James J. Barnes, Authors, Publishers, and Politicians (Columbus: OSU P, 1974) 1-29 passim, qtd Whalen, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses 24.

³³ See Zboray, “Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation” 187.

³⁴ See Zboray, “Antebellum Reading” 189.

³⁵ See McGill 22.

³⁶ See Tebbel, A History of Book Publishing in the United States 209.

affairs in 1840s America may be described as a carnivalesque culture of tacitly condoned reprinting.³⁷ Such a framing of periodical publishing articulates the opening of what has been called the mass-market “paperback revolution” that includes the dime novels of mid-century and the pocket books made expressly for the U.S. Army’s World War Two deployment. When speaking of 1840s paperbacks, Book historians are describing periodical installments that could be bound together according to the wishes of the purchaser.³⁸

Poe’s own book publishing efforts included two unsuccessful editions of poetry as well as the more popular 1845 The Raven and other Poems. He planned a volume, Tales of the Folio Club, which was rejected by Harper & Brothers among other publishers. Poe’s proposals for literary journals, *The Penn Magazine* (1840) and the *Stylus* (1848), were never funded. In 1838, Harper’s published Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym to mixed reviews. As Poe’s only published novel, Pym represents Poe’s version of what the Harpers had wanted to offer readers, a work “in which a single and connected story occupies the whole volume” (ER 1470). His two-volume Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (Lea and Blanchard, 1839) containing twenty-five stories was no more popular. Evert Duyckinck selected twelve stories for Tales (1845), a volume he edited for Wiley and Putnam’s *Library of American Books*. Tales garnered a lengthy if cautionary review from *Blackwood’s*, and Pym was reprinted in England at least twice during the 1840s.³⁹ Poe’s plan for a “Critical History of American Literature” was

³⁷ For carnivalesque periodical culture, see Lehuu 7. For the culture of reprinting, see McGill 17.

³⁸ See Tebbel 209.

³⁹ See Thomas and Jackson 708 (Tales) and 355 (Pym).

scaled back to a lecture, “The Poets and Poetry of America” and his sketches for “The Literati of New York City,” published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1846.

In this culture of reprinting, Poe’s most viable option for publishing his tales was the women’s magazine, represented in his case by the Philadelphia journals Graham’s Magazine and Godey’s Lady’s Book. Sarah J. Hale, editor of Godey’s from 1837 to 1877, demonstrated an interest in promoting literature as a profession by the generous compensation allotted to literary contributors such as William Cullen Bryant, Catharine Sedgwick, William Gilmore Simms, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁴⁰ During the surge in popularity of women’s magazines led by Godey’s, Graham’s, and Petersen’s, American periodicals increasingly emphasized the appearance of their pages—arguably to the detriment of their editorial and literary matter. Most journals paid a great deal of attention to their fashion plates and likenesses of current and classical celebrities, while they were content to run whatever print articles they could obtain for free.⁴¹

Thus the periodical reprint culture of the 1830s and 40s found Poe and his peers either involved in financial struggles or writing with the help of a second income. Poe’s close attention to the workings of periodical reprint culture, evident from his earliest essays and tales, insured that his work would often be circulated to distant readers who would never have heard of him, whether or not his name happened to be published with the articles. Poe’s intense interest in

⁴⁰ See Okker 93.

⁴¹ See Lehuu, Carnival on the Page 156.

transatlantic rhetorical and aesthetic developments seems intertwined not only with the impact his work would have on various audiences but also with the distribution of his prose articles.⁴²

III. The Chapters To Follow

The literary identity served up by Poe in his book reviews and tales is the subject of my second chapter, “Poe’s Composite Autobiography.” As a journalist writing in an age of industrial expansion, Poe used the term “Raising the Wind (Diddling)” (1844) as a metaphor for the circulation of periodical prose.⁴³ Poe’s diddler is a confidence man who lives by circulating counterfeit goods as real. Often, the diddler passes himself off as what he is not, as when he slips into a quiet furniture showroom to offer visitors a hasty bargain (Mabbott 872). As magazine contributor, Poe diddles in cobbling together material to be accepted for publication—paid or otherwise. In Poe’s era of extensive periodical reprinting, journalists and editors could pass themselves off as authors of reprinted material thanks in part to the difficulty of tracing ideas and words to any single source.

While writers and editors may be described as masters of “the short con,” book publishers resemble safe, steady banks, which Poe describes as overgrown diddling operations because of their unwillingness to take financial risks (Mabbott 870). For example, Harper & Brothers, aware of the public demand for novels,

⁴² See Thomas and Jackson 149-50 and 530-1 for Poe’s letter of April 30, 1835 to Thomas Willis White describing “Berenice” and his letter of May 4, 1845 to Frederick William Thomas portraying “The Gold Bug,” and “The Raven” as written “to run” with the taste of periodical readers for sentiment and sensation.

⁴³ See Whalen, “Poe’s ‘Diddling’ and the Depression” 198 for the observation that the writing of literature is the ultimate confidence scheme.

rejected Poe's proposed collection "Tales of the Folio Club" before publishing his The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1837-8). While Poe as journalistic diddler did not enjoy the level of face-to-face contact available to many confidence men, he was able to manipulate his print reputation through the quirks of the transatlantic periodical marketplace.

Poe's promotions of his two story collections, Tales (1845) and Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840) combined the diddler's audacity with publishing know-how. In advertising each work, Poe sought the endorsement of American authors who had achieved literary renown by making a British tour and so winning broad American acceptance following their success overseas. Poe's own anonymous review of Tales for the October, 1845 *Aristidean* feigns objectivity while intriguing readers with his range of genres and writing styles. During the months separating the release of his two collections, Poe kept his name in circulation with two influential and highly idealized autobiographical blurbs that were published as fact. The first of these introduced several of his poems included in Rufus Griswold's literary anthology The Poets and Poetry of America (1842). The second appeared in the March 4th, 1843 edition of the Philadelphia *Saturday Museum*, a mammoth newspaper.⁴⁴

One of Poe's most successful confidence schemes involved his literary criticism, which had several goals. First, Poe made himself into a national critical personality by expressing strong opinions. For example, Poe strove to distinguish himself among his American contemporaries by maintaining strict critical

⁴⁴ See Silverman 196.

standards and praising literary merit over mere popular appeal. He also produced inflammatory appraisals of American editions of successful novels, finding fault not only with the authors but also the illustrators and publishers. Poe's caustic review of Theodore Fay's bestselling novel Norman Leslie (1835) for the *Southern Literary Messenger* generated a great deal of attention along the eastern seaboard of the United States.⁴⁵ Quite frequently, Poe's articles expressed disgust with American authors' unsuccessful attempts to break free of British reading and writing traditions.

Chapter Three, "The Recycling of Critical Authority," examines Poe's extension of the work of two English critics, William Hazlitt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in forsaking the label of capital-A Author for a more conversational mode of writing. In launching his journalistic career with his essay "Letter to B" (1831/6), Poe borrowed the critical chauvinism of British quarterly magazines such as *The Quarterly Review* (1821) and *Blackwood's* (1817-32) for his attacks on the reputations of Coleridge and William Wordsworth. At the time of "Letter to B"'s publication in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe's aggressive reviewing style had won him a great many salutations and rebuttals from the editors of American periodicals.⁴⁶ While "Letter" presents little new evidence in its harangues against these poets and literary theorists, it raises Poe's critical profile by associating him not only with Wordsworth and Coleridge but also with canonical authors beyond the scope of his literary reviews. In addition, the spoofing tone of "Letter," which uses Coleridge's words against him, works to

⁴⁵ See Thomas and Jackson 187-219 passim.

⁴⁶ See Thomas and Jackson 214.

reduce readers' expectations for Poe's criticism. Finally, this chapter draws on William Hazlitt's critical essays for their conversational tone, a third quality essential to Poe's periodical criticism.

My fourth chapter, "The Debunking Work of Poe's light gothic Tales," examines Poe's minor fiction for its treatment of rhetoric, nationalism, and the role of the journalist. I describe Poe's puncturing the bluster of Jacksonian and antebellum writers, doctors, and politicians while extending appeals to readers on both sides of the Atlantic. In each of the light gothic tales, Poe describes a pretentious *alazon*, or bearer of false pride and authority. This figure is often accompanied by an *ieron* who corrects his claims.⁴⁷ In addition, most of Poe's light gothic protagonists reveal the foolishness of their own pretensions via their storytelling function. In order to facilitate the widespread reprinting of these tales, Poe designed them to span the Atlantic Ocean in their indeterminacy of diction and setting. For example, many of Poe's storytellers tell of their distress in the manner of *Blackwood's* narrators; only rarely do his protagonists reveal precise American origins. "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.," (1844), one of Poe's few tales that is set in the United States, is a quasi-autobiographical account of Poe's editorial work for William Burton and *Graham's Magazine* in 1839 and 1840.

Chapter Five, "The Importance of Ambiguity," explains Poe's knack not only for involving readers in tales told by unreliable narrators but also for captivating readers in multiple genres including poetry ("The Raven," 1845),

⁴⁷ See Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism 172.

fiction (“Ligeia,” 1838, and “William Wilson,” 1839), and literary criticism (“The Philosophy of Composition,” 1846). The narrative theory of Roland Barthes on the hermeneutic sentence and Umberto Eco’s work on the alternative worlds conjured up by the storyteller are essential to this project.⁴⁸ For example, “Ligeia,” Poe’s favorite among his tales, exploits the inherent unreliability of storytelling, a quality accentuated by first person autodiegetic narration. As one reviews Poe’s tale told by a figure who assumes the outlines of a murder suspect, one realizes that belief in any single element of “Ligeia” is up to the individual reader.

On the other hand, “William Wilson,” marked by convoluted narration and punning, presents an ambiguous plot: is its storyteller a tormented perpetual adolescent, a repentant sinner, or simply a man hounded by his double? Readers are inevitably confronted with Poe’s technical skill in assembling this conundrum. Among Poe’s fiction of the years 1838-9, important works seem to have been written with an eye towards promoting the others, quite likely as part of Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque. Both “William Wilson” and “Ligeia” make frequent and extensive use of the word “will,” whether to describe the human faculty, the stubbornness of a schoolboy, or the plans of a Creator. Readers encountering “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “William Wilson” in successive issues of *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* (September and October, 1839, respectively) may have been drawn to review their reading. For “William

⁴⁸ See Barthes, S/Z 4 and Eco, The Role of the Reader 40.

Wilson” plays repeatedly on the word “usher,” which had just been used to designate both the estate and the family name of Poe’s protagonists Roderick and Madeleine.

Finally, “The Philosophy of Composition” offers a ludic appeal to readers’ interest in poetry, fiction, and criticism. Here Poe attracts readers by offering them a glimpse of the writer at work. Not only does Poe claim that he can explain precisely how he composed his fashionably mournful poem “The Raven,” but he fashions this process into a story that his contemporary readers are tempted to believe. Here Poe uses three techniques to advance his narrative. First, he summons up the literary authority of William Godwin and Charles Dickens, two of the most respected British novelists of the day, in explaining his writing methods. Second, Poe intrigues readers by insistently describing himself within the essay as the magician deceiving the readers of “Philosophy.” Third, Poe reprints verses and entire stanzas from “The Raven” so as to induce readers to disregard his unmasking of himself as devious storyteller. Readers who have previously encountered “The Raven” may be moved to enter the world of the poem once again. Hence, the playful strategies of “William Wilson,” “Ligeia,” and “The Philosophy of Composition” make powerful contributions to Poe’s goal of enabling broad-based transatlantic circulation of his prose.

Chapter Two Poe's Composite Autobiography

I. Introduction

As the success of his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” suggests, Poe’s readers may be especially eager to believe stories concerning his own writing life. Poe himself exploits this tendency, presenting his tales and criticism to substantial audiences with several dramatic flourishes. First, his “Exordium to Critical Notices” (*Graham’s Magazine*, January 1842) and other articles offer the self-portrait of a patriot combating the popular and critical taste for British authors and their American imitators. Second, his provocative tales, criticism and autobiographical writings have promoted his reception as a discerning reader, an analyst of both literary strategy and human nature. Third, Poe’s encouraging readers to view him as an aesthete engaged in life-long mourning has attracted audiences ready to identify with him in his struggles. Finally, Poe’s incessant foregrounding of the puns and hoaxes he offers his readers identifies him as a literary diddler or confidence man marketing himself as an American original.⁴⁹ In enabling these literary personae, Poe employs a self-reflexive language that has enhanced his literary reputation while ensuring the broad circulation of periodical prose.

⁴⁹ For the observation that the writing of literature is the ultimate confidence scheme, see Whalen, “Poe’s ‘Diddling’ and the Depression” 198. On Poe’s fascination with language, see Michael J.S. Williams, *A World of Words* 15.

II. The Transatlantic Diddler

A. The Question of Poe as Young American

Throughout the 1830s and 40s, Poe wrote as an ambitious American who refused, in his tales and criticism, to defer to preconceived notions of critical tone and literary hierarchy. Writing in a reprint-heavy transatlantic periodical culture, Poe's interrogation of the taste of readers, editors, and publishers helped win him substantial circulation, the exact extent of which is difficult to trace.⁵⁰ The frustrated tone of Poe's "Exordium" reflects the long odds he faced making a living by questioning the general American taste for British authors. Yet there is a second, more conservative tendency behind Poe's patriotic stance. Throughout his twenty years of writing prose, Poe aspired to a certain aristocratic prestige and romantic freedom from market considerations. His frequent revision of his prose and poetry was a way to facilitate their republication across the United States and beyond.⁵¹ It is difficult to separate Poe's literary conservatism and his pro-American tendencies because the two are subsumed by his fierce desire simply to be read. However, Poe's criticism and tales are composed so as to appeal to two important audiences: his American contemporaries and a more general transatlantic audience.

⁵⁰ For the inaccuracy of claims regarding circulation gains during Poe's editorship of the Southern Literary Messenger, see Whalen, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses 58-75 *passim*. For a recent effort to track down the reprinting of his articles in contemporary journals, see McGill 180.

⁵¹ Poe used his editorship of the Broadway Journal to reprint more than two dozen of his tales. See Thomas and Jackson 1401-2. See also McGill 320n.

Beginning with his April, 1835 reviews for the *Southern Literary Messenger* and his 1836 essay “Letter to B,” Poe showed little respect for literary reputation. From his perspective, his achievement of poetry, editorial tasks, and literary criticism had qualified him to evaluate nearly every type of writing. While Poe’s aggressive approach to literary reviewing generally alienated him from publishers, it was one of the factors that endeared him to the literary wing of John O’Sullivan’s Young American movement, which during the early 1840s sought an appropriate literary figurehead.⁵² The Young Americans admired Poe’s stern critical pose and his frequent calls for Americans to take up their pens and challenge the transatlantic hegemony of British literature.

One outlet for Poe’s expression of patriotic and egotistical urges was his commentary on the paper and binding of works written and published on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Poe sometimes provided such information at the end of his reviews. For example, Henry Cockton’s Stanley Thorn (1842), whose work Poe describes as beyond the pale of literary criticism, is “clearly printed on good paper.” Besides this, Lea and Blanchard, the publisher of its American edition, have provided

designs. . . by Cruikshank and Leech; and it is observable that those of the latter are more effective than those of the former and far more celebrated artist (ER180).

⁵² See Miller 135. See also Widmer109.

Here Poe displays his preference for the underdog, even in extra-literary matters of publishing. In reviewing the work of William Leete Stone (Ups and Downs in the Life of a Distressed Gentleman, 1836) and Laughton Osborn (Confessions of a Poet, 1835), Poe calls attention at once to the books' poor design. Poe is sufficiently disgusted by the gaping margins marring the two works to lead off their reviews with cutting remarks on this subject.⁵³ As editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Stone had protested against Poe's harsh literary reviews in his April 12th edition. Thus Poe's disdain for Ups and Downs may have reflected a degree of personal animosity he held for Stone.⁵⁴

Poe was not above praising British authors where he felt such enthusiasm was due. His steady championing of Charles Dickens represents one of his rare consistencies of critical position. By the 1830s, Dickens was already committed to the novel and surrounded by a great many imitators such as Charles James Lever, who scored popular successes that Poe declared to be undeserved (ER 311). Finally, Poe made use of the serial publication of Dickens' Barnaby Rudge (1841-2) to write substantial articles for the *Saturday Evening Post* of May 1, 1841 and *Graham's* of February, 1842 concerning its characterization and plot (ER1365).

On the other hand, Poe's "Editorial Miscellanies" for the *Broadway Journal* of October 11, 1845 expressed frustration over a negative review of one of his colleagues by the editor of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review*:

⁵³ See the Southern Literary Messenger, June 1836 and April 1835 respectively. See Silverman 69 for Poe's own commission of a sin resembling that of which he would accuse Stone and Osborn. In Poe's case, the West Point cadets who had sponsored his second volume of poetry (Elam Bliss, 1831) complained that it provided too little text relative to the substantial margins.

⁵⁴ See Thomas and Jackson 198. See also Bouson 171.

The chief of the rhapsodists who have ridden us to death like the Old Man of the Mountain, is the ignorant and egotistical [John] Wilson. . . . That he is “egotistical” his works show to all men, running as they read. That he is “ignorant” let his absurd and continuous schoolboy blunders about Homer bear witness. . . .

And yet this is the man whose simple *dictum* (to our shame be it spoken) has the power to make or to mar any American reputation! In the last number of *Blackwood*, he has a continuation of the dull “Specimens of the British Critics,” and makes occasion wantonly to insult one of the noblest of our poets, Mr. Lowell. . . . Mr Lowell is called “a magpie,” an “ape,” a “Yankee cockney,” and his name is intentionally mis-written *John* Russell Lowell. Now were these indecencies perpetrated by any American critic, that critic would be sent to Coventry by the whole press of the country, but since it is Wilson who insults, we, as in duty bound, not only submit to the insult, but echo it, as an excellent jest, throughout the length and breadth of the land. *Quamdiu Catalina?* We do indeed demand the nationality of self-respect. In Letters as in Government we require a Declaration of Independence. A better thing still would be a Declaration of War—and that war should be carried forthwith “into Africa” (ER 1077).

Poe’s abused American, James Russell Lowell, had introduced Poe to Northeastern readers by publishing “The Tell-tale Heart” in his short-lived magazine *The Pioneer* in January, 1843. Two years later, Lowell’s biographical assessment (*Graham’s*, February 1845) of Poe contributed to the Young Americans’ decision to endorse Poe’s work. Within a few weeks of Lowell’s essay, Poe had written a positive notice of Lowell’s 1845 Conversations on Some of the Old Poets.⁵⁵ Hence, by defending Lowell’s reputation, Poe was to some extent looking after his own interests.

Poe’s response, however, expresses anger not only at the British literary establishment but also at the Americans who help support it. If Poe had his way, American readers would follow his lead in choosing their reading. Ironically,

⁵⁵ See Thomas and Jackson 488. See also McGill 189.

some readers would find Poe's "Miscellanies" to be rubbing Lowell's face in Wilson's insults. As a Southern author who had over the past decade regularly received negative reviews, Poe might enjoy calling attention to this critical attack launched by Edinburgh upon Boston.⁵⁶

However, Poe is not content to dispute Wilson's treatment of Lowell and American literature. Poe's list of *Broadway Journal* contributors in the edition containing this "Miscellanies" installment includes his most frequent pseudonym, "Littleton Barry," and Edgar A. Poe. These two names close out the list; they are followed by the words "Our corps of anonymous correspondents is, moreover, especially strong." This same edition reports success for the Wiley and Putnam "Library of American Books," claiming that the company has sold over 1,500 copies of Poe's *Tales*. Here Poe promotes both his above-board and his covert enterprises; while the sales figure represents a limited success, Poe's articles likely enjoyed a larger reprinted than original circulation, due in part to his anonymous and pseudonymous publication.⁵⁷

B. The Transatlantic Periodical Player

Throughout his professional career, Poe aspired to achieve international acclaim. While his work never approached best-seller status during his lifetime, several of his tales were translated and reprinted in Russia and France.⁵⁸ Poe's criticism reveals a love-hate relationship with the British publishing industry. His critical essays expressed considerable hostility not only towards British literary

⁵⁶ See Kennedy, "A Brief Biography" 38.

⁵⁷ See Starr 121.

⁵⁸ See Silverman 320.

royalty but also towards the American reading public, which he described as slowing the entry of American authors and their works into international literary circles:

. . . That an American [writer] should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea—and at best is a questionable point. . . . We complain of our want of an International Copyright, on the ground that this want justifies our publishers in inundating us with British opinion in British books; and yet when these very publishers, at their own obvious risk, and even obvious loss, do publish an American book, we turn up our noses at it with supreme contempt until it (the American book) has been dubbed “readable” by some illiterate Cockney critic. . . . There is not a more disgusting spectacle under the sun than our subserviency to British criticism. . . . Now if we *must* have nationality, let it be a nationality that will throw off this yoke. . . (ER 1077).

As part of his October 11, 1845 “Editorial Miscellanies,” Poe acknowledges the financial incentives for the circulation of British literary product while nevertheless insisting that American readers pay attention to the few American works published in the United States and that, perhaps as partial incentive to this program, American writers take a global approach in terms of subject matter.

In advocating the distribution of his own collections of tales to American readers, Poe did what he thought should not have been necessary. That is, he sought the endorsement of American authors who had already found favor in Europe. Thus in Poe’s anonymous self-review of Evert Duyckinck’s Wiley and Putnam edition of his Tales (*Aristidean*, October, 1845), he presented Washington Irving, who inspired his writing of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” as a recommender of the tale. Five years earlier, Poe’s letter to Irving prior to Lea and Blanchard’s publication of Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque had asked him

to join Nathaniel Parker Willis, John Pendleton Kennedy, and James Kirke Paulding in a promotional effort that would feature their opinions in advertisements inserted in other books.⁵⁹ Poe managed to work Paulding's name into his *Aristidean* review. Paulding, who had collaborated with Washington Irving on *Salmagundi* (1807-8), had consulted with Poe prior to his writing The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and offered early and consistent praise for Poe's sketch "Lionizing" (1835).⁶⁰

In order to give his tales relevance for a wide range of readers and editors, Poe employed unusually vague temporal and physical settings. The tales favor intellectual over physical space. As Poe asserts in the self-review of Tales, above, one of the worlds most prominently reflected is that of literature written for British-oriented audiences. More specifically, Poe's tales navigate the territories claimed by the Romantic poets and the British periodicals that reviewed these authors' works. Most of Poe's tales make use of the British monthlies' settings and characterization, adding accents that draw attention to their domination of transatlantic publishing and reading environment. For example, "How to Write a Blackwood Article" (1838) combines the frontier jingoism of *Davy Crockett's Almanack* with the style of the British original.⁶¹ To heat up his concoction, Poe adds a disapproving portrait of the physical intimacy of aspiring author Suky

⁵⁹ See Washington Irving, Letters, Volume 3: 1839-1845. Ed. Ralph M. Aderman, Herbert L. Kleinfield, and Jenifer S. Banks. Boston: Twayne, 1982, 24-5, qtd. Thomas and Jackson 274. For an example of the importance of celebrity authorial endorsement to publishing sales, see Kathleen Verduin, "Dante in America" 19-21 passim.

⁶⁰ See Thomas and Jackson 195. See also Whalen, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses 10 and Silverman 132.

⁶¹ Poe refers to Crockett twice during 1835 in his reviewing for the Messenger. See Collected Writings 11, 77.

Snobbs and her African-American servant. According to this tale and “A Predicament,” the yarn for which “How/Blackwood” serves as a frame narrative, Snobbs indeed produces a worthy piece of periodical fodder.

“The Duc de L’Omelette” (1832) features the eponymous protagonist awakening in hell and challenging the Devil to a game of cards to win back his soul. Poe shows off his reading of French and art history in detailing the encounter. Nathaniel Parker Willis, the most successful American magazine writer of his time, was a model for Poe’s satirical portrait of the eponymous Duke. Having spent five years in Europe as a foreign correspondent, Willis was known as a dandy in matters of dress.⁶² As Poe tells it, the Duke’s sensitivity and exquisite taste is responsible for both his death and his success in winning back his soul. The tale opens “Keats fell by a criticism. . . . “De L’Omelette perished of an ortolan.” To be precise, the Duke has died of disgust at being served the rare bird without the proper dressing. Remembering the adage that the devil never refuses a game of cards, the Duke engages in this form of combat with His Satanic Majesty, slipping himself the winning face card.

The good-natured jesting expressed via the figure of the Duke, including his astonishment at the Devil’s asking him to take off his clothes in preparation for the extraction of his soul, serves to heighten the emotional pleasure of readers familiar with the real-life target of Poe’s satire. In addition, readers of the leading transatlantic journals would appreciate the tale’s setting in hell.⁶³ Poe’s frequent linking of setting to mental and linguistic matters contributes to this experience.

⁶² See Silverman 223.

⁶³ See, for example, William Hazlitt’s assessment of Unitarian idealist William Ellery Channing in the Edinburgh Review for October 1829, cited Turner 60.

For example, the ceiling-less appearance of the Devil's "apartment" renders the source of the enormous chain that hangs down from above "lost, like the city of Boston, *parmi les nues*." Poe is referring not to the climate of Massachusetts' capital but to the Transcendentalists' alleged obscurity of expression.

The tale Poe found most successful with literary insiders, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), is far less specific than "The Duc" in terms of setting. However, Poe may have encouraged readers to imagine a similarity between his own features and those of Roderick Usher:

A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; The silken hair. . . had been suffered to grow all unheeded. . . (401-2).

While to Twenty-First Century American readers the setting of "Usher" may be no more vivid than that of "The Duc," many of Poe's contemporaries would associate the preceding description with Lord Byron of Newstead Abbey.⁶⁴ A professional reviewer of Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque declared with regard to Poe's achievement in "Usher" that

[it] would be, indeed, no easy matter to find another artist with ability equal to this writer for discussing the good and evil—the passions, dilemmas and affectations—the self-sufficiency and the deplorable weakness, the light and darkness, the virtue and the vice by which mankind are by turns affected.⁶⁵

The range of feeling—sublimity, absurdity, desire, love, and hatred—suggested by both this anonymous reviewer and Poe's description, above, is perhaps the

⁶⁴ See Bachinger 6.

⁶⁵ See New York Mirror, December 28, 1839, qtd Thomas and Jackson 284.

prime attraction of Byron's ballads which enjoyed an extended vogue in the United States during the 1830s and 40s. Hence "Usher" encourages readers to recapture their feelings for Byron and his generation of Romantic poets including Shelley and Keats.

In a "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1844), Poe shows his fascination with geographic as well as emotional themes, linking the disparate locations of Benares (modern-day Varanasi, India) and some hills near Charlottesville, Virginia via the long reach of imperial Britain. Despite the story's apparent concern with physical location, Poe retains his focus on the intellect: Dr. Templeton, whose name suggests "town of the temple," uses his mesmeric subject Augustus Bedloe to reunite him with a comrade-in-arms who died fighting in Benares. Like the crew of the *Star Trek* who suffer the physical effects of traveling immense distances, Bedloe is worn out and finally killed by the stress of serving as a medium between Templeton and his long-dead friend. If one goes along with this reading, Bedloe may be granted the peaceful afterlife anticipated by the victorious Duc. For Varanasi is the city which has offered many Hindu believers, upon their cremation, absolution for their sins as well as those of their progenitors and descendants.⁶⁶

Like the British genres of Gothic fiction and the sensationalist periodical article, "Mountains" abounds in Orientalist elements. Poe's description of the city as a beehive of perplexing activity may be drawn from a Thomas Babington

⁶⁶ See Wilbert M. Gesler and Margaret Pierce 225.

Macaulay essay in the *Edinburgh Review* for October, 1841.⁶⁷ The eerie setting of “Mountains” is prepared by “the strange *interregnum* of the seasons which in America is termed the Indian Summer” (Mabbott 942). Here the word “Indian” anticipates Poe’s linkage of North America, especially the United States, with Poe’s Eastern site of British colonial warfare. The sentence quoted above seems intended to obscure the tale’s American origins by suggesting it is written by an outsider who has happened upon the term “Indian Summer.” The uncertain background of the storyteller for “Mountains” may be read as British, rendering it more attractive for reprinting in European periodicals.

C. The Proud Professional

Perhaps encouraged by the posturing of many authors in both Britain and the U.S., many readers probably envisioned the author’s life as a non-stop literary soiree, with high-grade poetry and prose somehow generated during such celebration.⁶⁸ Nothing could be further from the truth. While wealthy amateurs may have engaged in vanity publication of their own writing or even that of ghostwriters, the life of an American writing for a living was in Poe’s time quite different. The American journalist was generally overworked and underpaid.⁶⁹

There were several ways, however, to cut down on the time required for periodical composition. For example, Poe resorted both to inserting identical paragraphs in different review articles and, as editor of the *Broadway Journal*, reprinting his early creative work. The timeless human effort to live by one’s wits,

⁶⁷ See Mabbott 937.

⁶⁸ See Zboray, *A Fictive People* 121.

⁶⁹ See Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship* 313.

obtaining “something for nothing” on a regular basis, is presented in Poe’s tale “Raising the Wind (Diddling),” (1844) in an American setting. As described by both Americans and British visitors, the swindle or hoax was a recurring element of the United States’ westward momentum and its inhabitants’ shared desire for monetary gain. Since the hardened diddler or con man bears a great deal of resemblance to Poe as take-no-prisoners critic,⁷⁰ I will endeavor to sort out some of the similarities and differences between the two.

The utilitarian economist Jeremy Bentham, who is credited with the words “The needs of the many outweigh those of the few or the one,” is the immediate target of “Diddling.” Bentham is mentioned in large part because the article celebrates trickster Jeremy Diddler, a figure who appeared on stage in James Kenney’s English farce “Raising the Wind”⁷¹ before being translated into American periodicals.⁷² While Bentham ostensibly sought the maximization of social and personal rewards from the actions he studied, Poe’s tale bluntly emphasizes the entertainment and enrichment of Mr. Diddler alone.

Poe begins his diddler’s catalogue by defining man as “an animal that diddles.” The chief of the diddler’s virtues is impertinence:

Your diddler is impertinent. He swaggers. He sets his arms a-kimbo. He thrusts his hands in his trowsers’ pockets. He sneers in your face. He treads on your corns. He eats your dinner, he drinks your wine, he borrows your money, he pulls your nose, he kicks your poodle, and he kisses your wife (871).

⁷⁰ See Whalen, “Poe’s Diddling and the Depression” 195.

⁷¹ Kenney’s play first appeared on the London stage on November 5, 1803 before being presented for a lengthy period there and in the United States. See Mabbott 882n. Pollin reports a performance of the play during September and October of 1843. See Pollin, The Southern Literary Journal, Fall 1969.

⁷² See Whalen, “Poe’s Diddling and the Depression” 198.

These are the painful effects of the confidence schemes Poe's model diddlers put across. In his aggressive nose-yanking and corn-treading, the confidence man may be observed to literally take your place: As Poe says, it is the diddler who steps up to treat your loved ones with the affection to which they have grown accustomed.

The full-time diddler must fearlessly adopt a range of roles. In order to take advantage of a potential mark, he will feign a position of importance or at least usefulness. If he contrives to be received by a shopkeeper as a wealthy consumer, he may be extended credit under what would otherwise appear to be dubious circumstances. Should he step into an undermanned furniture showroom to offer a customer a discount on an object that is not lawfully his own, he need only make a good first impression as fawning salesman. The diddler's smile and apparent eagerness to please helps convince the mark to offer reciprocal treatment (873).

A quality shared by the diddler and the magazinist is the intention or at least necessity of hoodwinking multiple audiences. This is true for the man who borrows a furniture showroom to effect a hurried cash sale on a sofa he has not been authorized to sell. Both his customer and the proprietor will suffer if the second party returns in time to confront the first. Unlike the temporary salesman, the vendor of singular magazine articles has the opportunity to profit from the (mis)perception of a virtually unlimited number of targets. For example, Poe's two articles on "Autography" (*Southern Literary Messenger*, February and August 1836) ensnare a range of marks by reproducing a fictive correspondence

with some of the leading lights of American publishing. A key to “Autography” was his forging of a number of signatures of men such as William Ellery Channing and Matthew Carey, often from examples of their actual correspondence. Poe’s performing this action and proceeding to read the authors’ characters by their hands seem more clearly a hoax than his “Literati” sketches a decade later for *Godey’s Lady’s Magazine*. Yet the series not only generated reader interest, but also moved other journals to ask the *Messenger* to lend out the plates to reproduce the signatures for their own use. Audiences swindled by “Autography” include not only the various groups of readers fascinated by the autographs supposedly reproduced by the *Messenger* from authorial letters but also the journals that paid for the privilege of reproducing Poe’s facsimiles. Another potential victim of “Autography” would be the journals that lost circulation because they did not choose to reprint the article.⁷³

A comparison Poe makes between diddling and banking practices may help clarify the role of the diddler in the transatlantic literary marketplace. Like any successful business venture, diddling requires the minimization of risk and the maximization of profit (870). Thus while the majority of Poe’s diddlers settle for low payment and easy egress from the scenes of their transactions, the temporary furniture salesman is out to land a quick bundle of cash. The regularity of business habits adopted by the successful practitioners of “Diddling” resembles the logical writing and reviewing processes Poe details in both “The Philosophy of Composition” and his self-authored review of Tales.

⁷³ See McGill 183.

Poe's literary reviews speak to his metaphor of banking as an overgrown diddle. In the process, Poe displays many of the techniques of the successful diddler. For example, he takes his countrymen Theodore Fay and Morris Mattson to task for the promotions involving their derivative novels Norman Leslie: A Tale of the Present Times (1835) and Paul Ulric (1836), respectively. The former novel he finds detestable for its undergoing extensive puffing (overheated praise) from the Northeastern press. His searing December 1835 review of the anonymously published Norman Leslie for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Poe identifies the author as Theodore S. Fay, "nobody in the world but one of the Editors of the New York Mirror" (541). This calls attention to Harper and Brothers' latest advertising scheme, which has offered

the book—the book par excellence—the book bepuffed, beplastered, and be-Mirror-ed: the book "attributed to" Mr. Blank, and "said to be from the pen" of Mr. Asterisk: the book which has been "about to appear"—"in press"—"in progress"—"in preparation"—and "forthcoming:" the book "graphic" in anticipation—"talented" a priori—and God knows what in prospectu (ER 541).

It would not be going too far to say that a certain amount of envy contributes to Poe's jibes. The words in quotations are drawn from advertisements published during the five months preceding Poe's review. As the author of two books of poetry and a collection of tales that never found a publisher, Poe has reason to be jealous. During 1835-6, Poe was the sometime editor of a Southern journal with limited circulation. Further, he had had his collection of early fiction, "Tales of the Folio Club," considered and then rejected by William Carey of Philadelphia and Thomas W. White, editor of the *Messenger* from its inception in 1834. Poe

would also have been influenced by the extensive advertising for Norman Leslie inserted in the *New York Mirror*, of which Fay was an associate editor. At least four notices were published, complete with tantalizing excerpts beginning in July.⁷⁴

More importantly, Harper & Brothers, then emerging as a leading American publisher, stood behind the novels of both Fay and Mattson. For “poor devil” authors such as Poe, Harper and Brothers resembled a bank in its insistence on releasing only British and American printed matter that was likely to produce a significant and steady profit (Mabbott 1127, 1206). Unlike the independent author who profited by diddling, the Harpers displayed much less willingness to take financial risks. While the enterprising magazinist frequently courted starvation and his alienation from various social circles, the Harpers flourished by releasing editions of British authors including Robert Southey, Coleridge, and Dickens while publishing an extremely selective list of American product. In the 1840s, British name authors were a tremendously powerful sort of front-and-backlist, certain to sell in volume. In 1838, Harpers’ had released Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. This novel seems to have been better received by English readers than their American counterparts. Nevertheless, the Harpers’ solid reputation likely played a part in the generally positive critical response.⁷⁵

As Poe announces in “Exordium,” he would have American readers turn their great purchasing power to the benefit of writers claiming the U.S. as home. For like the diddler’s marks, readers are walking, talking sources of income for

⁷⁴ See Thomas and Jackson 175.

⁷⁵ A letter of February 20, 1839 from Harpers’ to Poe makes this point. In early Fall of 1838, Wiley and Putnam decided to release a British edition of Pym. See Thomas and Jackson 260, 258.

publishers and a few lucky authors. Even a relatively small change in reading habits by American purchasers of the leading U.S. periodicals such as the *North American Review*, *Godey's*, and *Graham's* could enhance the prospects for both novelists and magazinists by improving their standing in the eyes of American publishers. Hence, the “Diddling” committed by Poe as magazinist seems designed to further the distribution of his prose articles.

III. Promotion invoking originality

Along with the detection of potential in novice writers, originality may be the positive quality most frequently attributed to literature under review. It is difficult to find a work that one cannot credit with a single original (peculiar, intriguing) aspect. While Poe went to great lengths to give each prose article a strikingly novel appearance, it is his detective fiction that has earned a lasting reputation. In his three tales involving Auguste Dupin, Poe managed to convince readers of the merits of his brand of detective fiction, a genre that has garnered both a large number of imitators and a diverse set of audiences.⁷⁶

A. Novelty

Poe's anonymous review of his Tales for the *Aristidean* emphasizes the creation of pleasing wonder rather than perplexity in the minds of one's readers:

The evident and most prominent aim of Mr. POE is originality, either of idea, or the combination of ideas. He appears to think it a crime to write unless he has something novel to write about, or some novel way of writing about an old thing. He rejects every word not having a tendency to develop the effect. Most writers get their subjects first, and write to develop it. The first inquiry of Mr. POE is for a novel effect—then for a subject; that is, a new

⁷⁶ See Peebles 1-25 passim and Vines 1-4 passim.

arrangement of circumstance, or a new application of tone, by which the effect shall be developed. And he evidently holds whatever tends to the furtherance of the effect, to be legitimate material. Thus it is that he has produced works of the most notable character, and elevated the mere “tale,” in this country, over the larger “novel”—conventionally so termed (873).

Poe’s acknowledging responsibility for the review may be announced by the inserting of his name not only in capital letters, like the rest of the literati he mentions, but also within the last three letters of the word “develope.” A workmanlike example of Poe’s arrangement of novelty is “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains,” whose protagonist Augustus Bedloe appears at once a young man and someone two generations older; this character endures mesmerism followed by metempsychosis. The question of whether he has truly exchanged psychic energy with his doctor is made to hinge on a typographical error committed by the local newspaper. One would expect readers to be familiar to varying extents with the numerous premises of this tale. Few of them, however, could be expected to have encountered this exact arrangement.

Like Poe writing his auto-review of Tales, Poe’s diddler aspires to originality in each and every diddle. All this means is that every opportunity to diddle will require a slight modulation of expression, accent, or gesture. This actor behaves like an artist for whom each diddle is a new creation. For his part, the mark perceives novelty each time he is successfully diddled. Otherwise he would decline the diddler’s offers to make money while doing good. According to Poe’s reviews, then, novelty sells, but it is overrated in comparison with the results one may achieve via the ingenious application of journalistic bricolage.

B. Combination

In Poe's own review of Tales, he engages in dialogue with ancient wisdom to explain certain details of his perspective on writing:

“There is nothing new under the sun,” said SOLOMON. In the days of his many-wived majesty the proverb might apply—it is a dead saying now. The creative power of the mind is boundless. There is no end to the original combinations of works—nor need there be to the original combination of ideas (ER 869).

Solomon's perspective may hold in absolute terms. It would be impossible for us to utter new thoughts, were it not for our constantly shifting environments. Poe's periodical stations offered him regular—sometimes daily--opportunity to issue pronouncements on the latest developments in the literary world. Similarly, his tales such as “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (1838) and “Loss of Breath: A Tale Neither in Nor Out of Blackwood”(1832/5) recycle sensational material he has come across in his professional and recreational reading including the British monthly magazines and the American frontier almanacs.⁷⁷

One of Poe's tales considered most original by readers of his time and today is “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (*Graham's*, April 1841). Poe's opening sentence classifies the tale under the analytical while declaring that we don't understand how that faculty works. According to Poe's enthusiastic assessment, analytical thinkers possess the ability to prey on their neighbors by appropriating valuable information from their everyday actions. Poe offers as example the whist player who successfully reads the hands of his adversaries in their faces, their movements and their posture:

⁷⁷ See William Etter, “Tawdry Physical Affrightments” 3.

The necessary knowledge is that of *what* to observe. Our player confines himself not at all; nor, because the game is the object, does he reject deductions from things external to the game. He examines the countenance of his partner, comparing it carefully with that of each of his opponents. . . . He recognizes what is played through feint, by the air with which it is thrown upon the table. . . . The first two or three rounds having been played, he is in full possession of the contents of each hand, and thenceforward puts down his cards with as absolute a precision of purpose as if the rest of the party had turned outward the faces of their own (530).

Within a single group of regular players, Poe's logic holds. However, as a pair of whist players encounters new sets of competitors, analysis becomes more difficult than Poe is willing to let on.⁷⁸

While the gambling analysis put forth in "Murders" is not entirely sound, the subject would undoubtedly be useful in selling "Murders" to editors and readers in general. Most of the second group would have had personal or family experience with gambling. These readers would likely share some of Poe's familiarity with whist, chess, and draughts. Those who did not might nevertheless lend an ear to Poe's interpretation of their principles; readers eager for an edge at the tables might be willing to try impersonating Poe's systematic player.

A second source of intrigue for the readers of "Murders" would be Dupin's analysis of the twelve police interviews with neighbors of the two slain women. It happens that the aural witnesses are native speakers of Russian, Italian, German, Spanish, English, and French. If none of the twelve can understand the voice not belonging to the neighbors, each insisting that it spoke another language, then it may well be the voice of an animal, as Dupin comes to

⁷⁸The player who keeps still and expresses little emotion—trying to read the others while presenting a "stone face" to them—is not certain to be successful, as Poe's argument would suggest.

believe. On the other hand, readers may entertain the possibility that the mysterious intruder was an immigrant from China, Sweden, the Romansch-speaking region of Switzerland or Cajun Louisiana. However, they would be led by Dupin's discussion of physical evidence to discard this second possibility. Poe's description of the diverse group of residents, taken from the evening edition of the dramatically-named *Tribunal* or *Gazette des Tribunaux*,⁷⁹ would help sell "Murders" as an adventure-filled tour of the dark side of a European metropolis.

Third, readers would have been intrigued by the tale's discussion of forensics. Like the large audience for televised crime dramas, Poe's contemporaries enjoyed reading accounts of grisly acts of violence.⁸⁰ Poe's dramatic presentation of the incredible strength, size, and agility of Dupin's suspect, as described to his friend the storyteller, would have fascinated readers eager to hear of the latest news, whether real or humbug. The details which lead Dupin and his friend to suspect the murderer to be non-human would have nourished readerly urges to solve this bizarre case themselves before reading Dupin's own conclusion.

None of the appeals of "Murders" are new in and of themselves. Rather, they consist of striking combinations of disparate elements. That is, Poe puts popular interests including gambling, forensics, and human psychology, into individual frameworks which readers have not previously encountered.

Characteristic of Poe's technique is his juxtaposition of the abstraction of

⁷⁹ "Gazette des Tribunaux" is employed in J. Lorimer Graham's copy of Poe's *Tales*. "Le Tribunal" is the name that appears in three publications of "Murders": Poe's 1841 manuscript, *Graham's Magazine* for April, 1841 (18: 166-179), and Poe's brief paper-bound "Prose Romances" (1843). See Mabbott 526.

⁸⁰ See Reynolds 240-1. See also Etter 5.

analysis, described in the tale's preface, with a fictitious Parisian setting and racist imagery that would have appealed to many American periodical readers. The image of an Orangatang attacking women with a razor was used by the advocates of slavery in an attempt to frighten Americans away from its abolition during a time when news of slave revolts was widely disseminated.⁸¹ Hence, Poe combines theoretical, cultural, and emotional appeals to make "Murders" exciting reading, especially for Americans.

IV. Analysis as Technique and as Performance

Generations of academic readers have focused on Poe's vaunted analytical skill as a key to his critical arguments, his prose structure, and his autobiographical discourse.⁸² Together with Poe's claims to originality, analysis is in fact the term he applies most frequently to his writing. To be more specific, it is Poe's analysis of readers and his occasions for writing that allow him to produce novel effects. In the same articles in which he deploys analytical skills, however, Poe insists on drawing readers' attention to the textual seams and the authorial performance that hold together his literary bricolage.

Late in "Exordium," Poe offers an impressive list of credentials for the literary reviewer:

And of the critic himself what shall we say?--for as yet we have spoken only the *proem* to the true *epopea*. What *can* we better say of him than, with Bulwer, that "he must have courage to blame boldly, magnanimity to eschew envy, genius to appreciate, learning to compare, an eye for beauty, an ear for music, and a

⁸¹ Antebellum slave uprisings of the Jacksonian era included Nat Turner's rebellion (1831) as well as slave revolts on the ships *Amistad* (1839) and *Creole* (1841). See White, "The Ourang-Outang Situation" 95 and Aptheker 150. See also Kennedy ed. 196.

⁸² See Silverman 471n.

heart for feeling.” Let us add, a talent for analysis and a solemn indifference to abuse (ER 1032).

This is a formidable list. In developing his “talent for analysis and a solemn indifference to abuse,” the critic drops all pretension to the originality commonly applied to novelists and poets. Readers attentive to the letters that make up the first two words italicized, above, may note Poe’s pretension in flaunting his classical knowledge.

In addition, four of the critic’s qualities demanded by “Exordium,” Bulwer’s “genius” and “learning” and Poe’s knack for analysis and withstanding punishment, overlap with Poe’s requirements for the diddler: “minuteness, interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, *nonchalance*, originality, impertinence, and grin” (Mabbott 870). The diddler’s talents would be tremendous assets for a critic. Much of Poe’s prose shows evidence of these skills. For example, Poe’s weaving his own name into the “Exordium” paragraph within “*proem*” and “*epopea*” dares readers to contradict his critical judgment. “The *proem* to the true *epopea*” denotes the prelude to an epic.⁸³ Here “Exordium” posits the critic—Poe himself, according to Poe’s plays on his own name, over criticism in general—as the principal subject of “Exordium.”

As critic, Poe meets the criteria presented by “Exordium” in large part by redefining them. While his review-articles may not exhibit great genius or learning, they do reflect large portions of the qualities he himself has named, among them analysis, durability, ingenuity, audacity, and impertinence. For example, Poe shows a willingness to take risks by publishing “Letter to B” in

⁸³ See The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Miller ed.

both 1831 and 1836. This initial critical effort takes on Coleridge and Wordsworth's literary theory by using their own words against them. Since Coleridge had died prior to the publication of the 1836 text, Poe's attack would have struck some readers as in poor taste. Beginning in the fall months of 1835, Poe's sharp-edged reviews of American poetry and prose garnered a response from American periodicals that was apparently withheld from "Letter to B."⁸⁴

For a periodical writer of Poe's day, most of the qualities listed above were as crucial to writing successful fiction as they were to criticism. For example, Poe fashioned powerful sound effects to influence readers' emotional responses to his tales. Devices such as consonance, alliteration, and the periodic sentence may serve to regulate the speed at which his sentences are read.⁸⁵ The final words of "The Black Cat" (1843): display a powerful compression of detail:

...Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire,
sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and
whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had
walled the monster up within the tomb! (859)

In this paragraph, Poe offers several versions of the triangular (pyramidal) prose structure often recommended to newspaper journalists-in-training. Poe's initial sentence, marked by polysyndeton, unloads three descriptive phrases used to describe the "beast" before identifying two ancillary subjects, "whose craft" and "whose informing voice," which seem to have conspired against the storyteller. The simple sentence that concludes the tale summarizes physical actions which it attributes to this character. The last sentence also explains the final reversal the

⁸⁴ See Thomas and Jackson 214.

⁸⁵ See Reynolds 233 and Zimmerman, "Catalogue/Poe" 753.

cat—real or imagined—has achieved at the expense of its owner, an alcoholic who has bludgeoned his wife to death.

In promoting his own collections of tales, Poe was careful not to reproduce their text. Rather, he celebrated the sophisticated methods used to write them, as may be seen in the self-review of Tales. Like “The Philosophy of Composition,” the article claims great insight into Poe’s method, declaring the insect at the center of “The Gold Bug” merely a distraction from the real plot machinery. The same paragraph recommends “Ligeia” and “The Tell-tale Heart,” two of the Tales, as superior to “The Gold-Bug.” Poe makes special mention of his three tales involving M. Dupin, tales

all of the same class—a class peculiar to Mr. POE. They are inductive—tales of ratiocination—of profound and searching analysis. . . . The author, as in the case of “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the first written, begins by imagining a deed committed by such a creature, or in such a manner, as would most effectively mislead inquiry. Then he applies analysis to the investigation (872).

The three dashes increase the reading speed and raise the blood pressure of readers craving sensationalism such as they may expect from Poe’s detective tales. While Poe offers readers the insight that a writer of detective fiction would do well to begin with a sense of the revelation to be presented at the climax, he refrains from describing just what it means for this writer to “apply analysis.” This maneuver resembles his long discussion of the genesis of “The Raven,” which includes his attempt to produce melancholy beauty or “*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*” in his reader (25).

In his October, 1845 article on Tales, Poe is unusually honest regarding the achievement of his striking effects:

The style of Mr. POE is clear and forcible. There is often a minuteness of detail; but on examination it will always be found that this minuteness was necessary to the development [sic] of the plot, the effect, or the incidents. His style may be called, strictly, an earnest one. And this earnestness is one of its greatest charms. A writer must have the fullest belief in his statements, or must simulate that belief perfectly, to produce an absorbing interest in the mind of his reader. That power of simulation can only be possessed by a man of high genius. It is the result of a peculiar combination of the mental faculties. It produces earnestness, minute, not profuse detail, and fidelity of description. It is possessed by Mr. POE, in its full perfection (ER 873).

This review, posing as an independent echo of James Russell Lowell's February assessment of Poe *Graham's*, is fascinating for its structure. With the exception of the two sentences on simulation, the passage reads as unblemished praise. Someone reading hurriedly or inattentively could miss these sentences. More careful readers would find them surrounded in praise for the descriptive phrases, of little use in themselves, which give Poe's tales a realistic finish. In retrospect, Poe's anonymous puffing of his work is "earnest" mainly in its calling attention to his identity as a shrewd exploiter of human nature.

Since the solutions to the Dupin tales and "The Gold-Bug" were known to Poe in advance, they may not be more ingenious than his other works. Writing as anonymous critic of his fiction, however, Poe holds back from defusing the power of his stories. Instead, he alludes to the acts of analysis and invention that have

produced them. Like the posthumously published “A Reviewer Reviewed” (1850) Poe’s article on Tales manages to praise most of his well-known stories.

Poe’s review of Morris Mattson’s Paul Ulric (*Southern Literary Messenger*, October, 1836) suggests the novel shares key traits of “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.,” Poe’s ironic ode to magazing. The opening of Mattson’s novel, an unusually derivative one, according to Poe, bears a great deal of resemblance to the openings of many of Poe’s stories employing first-person narrators:

“My name,” commences Mr. Mattson, “is Paul Ulric. Thus much, gentle reader, you already know of one whose history is about to be recorded for the benefit of the world. I was always an enthusiast, but of this I deem it inexpedient to say much at present. I will merely remark that I possessed by nature a wild and adventurous spirit which has led me on blindly and hurriedly, from object to object, without any definite or specific aim. My life has been one of continual excitement, and in my wild career I have tasted of joy as well as of sorrow [Oh, remarkable Mr. Ulric!]. . . . At one moment I have been elevated to the very pinnacle of human happiness, at the next I have sunk to the lowest depths of despair” (838).

This opening, with its promise of non-stop emotional reward, of heartbreak and happiness, is calculated to appeal to broad tastes. Although the target of Poe’s first literary essay, William Wordsworth, had insisted that one might create one’s audience rather than pandering to the lowest common denominator, he had also described modern readers as caught up in urbanization and revolution and thus craving the application of “gross and violent stimulants” that were the Gothic novel’s stock in trade.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ See Poe, “Letter to B,” 1831/6. See Wordsworth 64. See also Giddings 96.

For Poe, Morris Mattson's targeting of his readers is "gross and violent." Poe's essays, typified by the article on Tales, insistently disavow the aesthetic value of Mattson's technique; however, readers familiar with Poe's prizewinning tale "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833) may find Mattson's novel derivative of Poe's own style. In fact, Mattson employs many of the British periodicals' formulas for fiction that served Poe well.⁸⁷ A prominent characteristic of Paul Ulric and the tales of both Poe and *Blackwood's* is their domination by the personalities of their first-person narrators. Typically, Poe's "MS." takes his protagonist in a different direction than does Mattson:

Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other. Hereditary wealth afforded me an education of no common order, and a contemplative turn of mind enabled me to methodise the stores which early study very diligently garnered up. Beyond all things, the works of the German moralists gave me great delight; not from any ill-advised admiration of their eloquent madness, but from the ease with which my habits of rigid thought enabled me to detect their falsities. I have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius; a deficiency of imagination has been imputed to me as a crime; and the Pyrrhonism of my opinions has at all times rendered me notorious. Indeed, a strong relish for physical philosophy has, I fear, tinctured my mind with a very common error of this age—I mean the habit of referring occurrences, even the least susceptible of such reference, to the principles of that science. Upon the whole, no person could be less liable than myself to be led away from the severer precincts of truth by the *ignes fatui* of superstition. I have thought proper to premise this much, lest the incredible tale I have to tell should be considered rather the raving of a crude imagination, than the positive experience of a mind to which the reveries of fancy have been a dead letter and a nullity (Mabbott 135).

The final sentence, which calls attention to the protagonist's one-sided opinion of himself, may produce laughter in a fair number of readers. This speaker opens by

⁸⁷ See Allen 69.

speaking of his inheritance so as to recall the quasiautobiographical works of Lord Byron and their reflection in novels such as Benjamin Disraeli's Vivian Gray.⁸⁸ Poe's readers may follow the path claimed by his own narrator, who brings up superstition as an appealing subject that he finds it necessary to disavow repeatedly.

As Poe frequently insists, a writer's first task is to please his intended and actual audiences; without this performance, he will miss his chance to terrify, to titillate, and to flatter them. Mattson certainly attempts his first task; however, Poe is unwilling to concede that he has achieved it. Poe's review of Paul Ulric is marked by his setting up the opening paragraph as an object of scorn. As he suggests, readers imagining themselves on a quest for "the benefit of the world," above, are easily deceived (838). While Poe declares himself resigned to the success of such novels, he often had difficulty restraining himself from figuratively burying his pen in the torsos of authors like Mattson. The rest of the review contains slapstick assaults on Mattson's plot which features Ulric's adventures with a host of *banditti* quartered near Philadelphia. For in spite of Poe's desire to please a wide range of audiences, he favors literary allusion and ironic treatment of death and violence over excessive sentiment and morality, two prevailing qualities of the Victorian novel, in works of fiction.

While the broad popularity of both Paul Ulric and Norman Leslie likely angered Poe, his review of the latter novel finds additional reason to warn readers away:

⁸⁸ See Schwarz, Disraeli's Fiction 21.

In the Preface Mr. Fay informs us that the most important features of his story are founded in fact—that he has availed himself of certain poetical licenses—that he has transformed character, and particularly the character of a young lady, (oh fi! Mr. Fay—oh, Mr. Fay, fi!) that he has sketched certain peculiarities with a mischievous hand—and that the art of novel writing is as dignified as the art of Canova, Mozart or Raphael. . . (ER 540).

Poe begins by calling attention to the time-tested promotional potential of fiction that at least claims to be drawn from real-life events. When intrigued by such a promotion, one is caught up in the cult of personality, thinking something along the lines of “Goodness, this remarkable adventure really befell the mysterious, talented, and no doubt famous author or one of his friends.” Next, Poe has fun with Fay’s employment of artistic license to delineate character. Poe’s words imply that Fay himself, as transformer of “the character of a young lady,” is a rogue.

Poe’s third reason for one to steer clear of the novel is its sensationalism, that is, its apparent preoccupation with sex and violence. The very strictures of Poe’s review, however, may manage to build prurient interest in Fay’s novel:

Why are you always talking about “stamping of feet,” “kindling and flashing of eyes,” “plunging and parrying,” “cutting and thrusting,” “passes through the body,” “gashes open in the cheek,” “sculls cleft down,” “hands cut off,” and blood gushing and bubbling and doing God knows what else—all of which pretty expressions may be found on page 88, vol. 1? (548)

Phrases such as “cutting and thrusting” juxtaposed so closely with “plunging and parrying,” are suggestive of both physical and sexual assault. All the while, Poe holds out the suggestion that his criticism will call attention to more of the same. It is Poe no less than Fay who is “sketch[ing] certain peculiarities with a mischievous hand.” Similarly, anyone who doubts that Poe’s own fiction would

refrain from alluding to graphic sensual pleasure would do well to peruse the 114-word title page to The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1837-8).

Much the way he pretends to explain how to write verse in “The Philosophy of Composition” and fiction in his anonymous self-review of Tales, he suggests in “Diddling” that he will actually detail how one would go about performing the swindles he describes. It is not surprising that each of these works omits the minute details that might offer talented amateurs a chance to emulate Poe’s models. In Poe’s day, the journalistic-writer-as-diddler produced a commodity, American magazine content, for which periodical editors, much like the Harpers, could always substitute name-brand British material which might be obtained free of charge. Thus the magazine writer as diddler resembles the con man taking tolls from naïve travelers. His is not the routine task performed by modern toll-booth attendants; rather than simply making change and offering directions, he must vary his demeanor according to the readers and editors he is targeting. As Poe says, this is the most tiring sort of diddle; it sounds like an eternal nomadic quest to charm one’s neighbors.

V. “Poor Poe”: Poe’s Exploitation of the Cult of Mourning

Madmen are of some nation, and their language, however incoherent in its words, has always the coherence of syllabification (Mabbott 558).

Poe’s portrayal of many of his protagonists as insane does not imply that he himself shared their various mental woes. Rather, Poe played on readers’ tendency to link author and storyteller-protagonist to build sympathetic interest in

his life and works. Poe promoted reports of himself as a sensitive and emotional poet ruined by literary cabals and bad luck.⁸⁹ This campaign sought to cover both sides of the Atlantic: first, in his tales' sustained embrace of Byronism and American vigor; and second, in his criticism's careful monitoring of British developments.

The distribution and acclaim achieved by Poe's work by the 1840s seems due largely to his determination to make his presence felt beyond the generic and national confines in which writers were seen to be positioned. Based on his literary biography and his prose articles, Poe would like to be thought of like the puzzles confronting not only the main characters of "The Purloined Letter" and "Murders in the Rue Morgue," but also the readers of these tales—that is, as an oddity that nevertheless demands one's consideration. Since it is human nature to respond both to Poe's prose and to the many stories of his life, his modeling of himself as an original prose writer has combined with his announcing his qualifications as critical champion of American literature and his development of an outsized literary persona to interest modern readers in his work.⁹⁰

The quotation above is part of the explanation provided by Poe's detective Auguste Dupin for the astounding disagreement among the twelve aural witnesses to the two Murders in the Rue Morgue. Had an insane person, as Dupin has it, a European or a Russian, attacked the two victims, the witnesses would agree to some extent on the language the suspect had spoken. Many of Poe's first-person storytellers bear some resemblance both to the superhumanly strong killer from

⁸⁹ See Silverman 400.

⁹⁰ See Renza, "Poe in His Time" 168.

Murders and to the garden-variety lunatic that is found in several of Dickens' novels.⁹¹ That is, these storytellers have been correctly viewed as insane.⁹² For example, the protagonist for "The Tell-tale Heart" (1843) is proud of the murder he has committed. Like the wife-murdering storyteller of "The Black Cat" (1843), he wants to convince readers not of his innocence but rather of his sanity. The "Tell-tale" protagonist insists that his sudden murder and burial of an elderly acquaintance whom he judged to have looked at him with the "evil eye" has been the product of cold-blooded reason (792).

Psychologically-minded biographers have noticed striking coincidences linking the tales and Poe's life. Like the characters from Charles Schulz' comic strip *Peanuts*, Poe's human protagonists such as Egaeus of "Berenice" and the Ushers and their guest in "The Fall of the House of Usher" appear alone or in small groups. When mentioned at all, their parents are deceased. Poe's frequently-recurring duos consist, first, of a real character who generally mouths autodiegetic narration. The shadow or sister to the first figure appears as an imaginary twin. Whether good or evil, healthy or diseased, the second half always appears as a counterpart to the first, like one squirrel chasing another during mating season. "Berenice" (1835) and "Morella" (1835) offer storyteller-protagonists with some similarities to Poe. For example, according to their first-person narration, they each have deep feelings for a female playmate who sickens and dies. Not only does this pattern reflect Poe's epitome of poetic beauty, "the

⁹¹ See Dickens' early novels Barnaby Rudge (1841), whose title character Poe calls "an idiot endowed with the fantastic qualities of the madman. . . possessed with a maniacal horror of blood" (ER 219) and The Pickwick Papers (1836) for the chapter "The Madman's MS."

⁹² See Eco, Six Walks 7.

death of a beautiful woman” (ER 19), but it also foreshadows Poe’s own 1836 marriage—preceded by his securing of a marriage license in September, 1834--to his thirteen-year old cousin Virginia Clemm.⁹³ In its opening paragraph, “Morella” insists that the storyteller had only a platonic love for the title character whom he married nevertheless.

VI. Conclusion

The dread of being buried alive, expressed in “The Fall of the House of Usher” as a bridge linking the tomb with the maternal womb, has been one of the chief selling points of Poe’s fiction from his earliest tales such as “Loss of Breath” (1832) through Twentieth-century interpretations of his work that employ a wide range of media.⁹⁴ While this is one of Poe’s more hackneyed themes, his attention to detail makes each instance seem new. Following *Blackwood’s* The Buried Alive (1821) and a spate of periodical treatments of medical experiments suggestive of the practice, Poe referenced this sensational form of living death in at least nine tales, “Loss of Breath” (1832/5), “Berenice” (1835), “Morella” (1835), “Ligeia” (1838), “Usher” (1839), “Thou Art the Man” (1844), “The Black Cat” (1845), “Some Words with a Mummy”(1845), and “The Cask of

⁹³ See Silverman, “Introduction,” New Essays on Poe’s Major Tales 3.

⁹⁴ See Rachman, “Subterranean Homesick Poe” 28.

Amontillado” (1846). The nightmare-chronicles of Poe’s storyteller-protagonists not only suggest live burial but also his imprisonment in the trade of periodical writing and editing.⁹⁵

On a personal level, live burial may stand for the repression of one’s feelings, an act which invariably results in their coming back “with a vengeance,” so to speak.⁹⁶ This phenomenon is displayed in Sam Shepard’s play The Buried Child (1978), which traces the destabilization of an entire family to the parents’ late-night burial of their unwanted infant child in their back yard. Poe’s adolescent letters to his foster father John Allan such as his March 19, 1827 request for funds (“ . . . I have heard you say . . . that you had no affection for me”) sought to appeal to Allan’s capacity for pity.⁹⁷ The accuracy of Poe’s self-portrayal in these letters is uncertain. Over the next twenty-odd years, Poe would formulate new versions of this letter addressed to his friends and acquaintances, often exhausting their capacity for response. Aside from his financial exigencies, however, Poe was not necessarily an unhappy man. As he puts it in his introduction to “Raising the Wind (Diddling),” ““Man was made to mourn,”” says the poet. But not so:--he was made to diddle” (869). This playful rejoinder to the tales’ preoccupation with tragic beauty is designed to give the impression that Poe was consoling not only his readers but himself.

⁹⁵ See Kennedy, Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing 32-59 *passim*.

⁹⁶ See Lawrence 66 and Bonaparte 78.

⁹⁷ Here Poe asks that Allan pay his college expenses so that he may pay debts incurred at the University of Virginia. See Thomas and Jackson 78.

Chapter Three

The Recycling of Critical Authority: Lessons from Coleridge and Hazlitt

Must we be free or die, who speak the tongue
Which SHAKSPEARE spake; the faith and morals hold,
Which MILTON held. In every thing we are sprung
Of earth's first Blood, have titles manifold!
WORDSWORTH⁹⁸

It is with literature as with law or empire--an established name
is an estate in possession, or a throne in tenure.
"Letter to Mr. ___" (Poe, ER 5-6)

I. Introduction: The Role of the Critic

Taken together, the two quotations above suggest that literature and readers are not afforded direct and uninhibited communication. Rather, authors' and readers' national, political, and commercial alliances have a great deal to do with what is published. By 1831, the year Poe published his initial critical essay, the name Wordsworth had risen from the list of poets considered avant-garde to the near side of respectability for even the most conservative British and American periodicals.⁹⁹ As Poe puts it above, Wordsworth's achievement of respectability renders him a literary "estate in possession" whose name has gone to work for his publisher and himself.¹⁰⁰ As demonstrated by the prose writings of Hazlitt,

⁹⁸ James Engell and William Jackson Bate, in their "Introduction" to Biographia Literaria (hereafter BL), place the Wordsworth quote in his "Sonnets dedicated to Liberty" pt 1 no. xvi, ll 11-14 (var).

⁹⁹ Thomas DeQuincey made the following observation in 1835: "Up to 1820 the name of Wordsworth was trampled underfoot; from 1820 to 1830 it was militant; from 1830 to 1835 it has been triumphant." See Charvat, Origins 24.

¹⁰⁰ The growth and professionalization of the publishing industry during the years 1750 to 1830 in Britain and the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States directed periodical writers and editors to target increasingly middle-class audiences. For British publishing, see Ian Watt, The Rise of The Novel 52. For American publishing, see Michael T. Gilmore, American Romanticism and

DeQuincey, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the modern print-media critic has displayed stylistic and creative powers analogous to those of the poet or writer of fiction. This function had been greatly discounted by the anonymous reviews speaking for major periodicals prior to 1815 in Britain and the early 1830s in the United States. The critic had been acknowledged to be a stylist and a rhetorician, but his obligation to entertain and especially to advise and protect his reader had generally been seen as outweighing any inclination he might have to compose literature of lasting value.

This chapter defines Poe's relationship to literary authority by reading his first essay "Letter to B" (1831/6) and his more mature reviews of Nathaniel Hawthorne against a backdrop of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and three of Hazlitt's essays for the *Edinburgh Review*. Poe's criticism builds on the examples set by Coleridge and Hazlitt to show the power of journalistic recycling. In order both to inform and to flatter one's readers, it is always necessary to repeat words

the Marketplace 6; John Paul Pritchard, *Criticism in America* 6-12 *passim* and William Charvat, *Origins* 164-205 *passim*.

While often claiming to serve the interests of the reader, the critic was nevertheless beholden to the wishes of the publisher, the dominant religion, and himself. Such dependency on the part of the critic made him liable to act as a conservative cultural force. American magazines were more religiously, if not politically conservative than the British journals they emulated: The first American journals were modeled on British magazines--the *North American Review* on the *British Quarterly* and the *American Quarterly* on the *Edinburgh Review*. While American periodicals voiced considerable discomfort with British foreign policy, they frequently reprinted articles from British journals while protesting the opinions of individual British editors. Americans read compressed editions of the *Quarterly Review*, the *Edinburgh Review*, and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as well as at least four others. See Mott, *A History of American Magazines* 131. Only towards the 1830s were groups of Americans openly reading for entertainment as well as moral uplift. See Harry H. Clark in Floyd Stovall, ed. *The Development of American Literary Criticism* 30.

Like John Neal before him, Poe noted repeatedly that an American author would not be read by his compatriots until his works had been granted a seal of approval by critics writing for British periodicals. Neal's biographical series, *American Writers* (1824-5), represented an early American challenge to the reading public surrounding *Blackwood's Magazine*. Posing for *Blackwood's* readers as an Englishman who had sampled American literature, Neal boldly promoted his own interests as well as those of his countrymen. With this important caveat, then, the critic of Poe's day served as a professional taster for readers bewildered by the rapidly increasing volume of books and periodicals. See Bate 10.

and ideas relevant to a work under review. However, by reprinting his 1831 “Letter” as filler for his employer, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe gains hundreds of readers for his thumbing his nose at British literary personalities both dead and alive. Surprisingly, the creative use of repetition may improve Poe’s chances of being taken as a modern original: not only does Poe’s spoofing treatment of literary axioms reduce audience expectations, but it increases the chances for new readers to imagine themselves as part of the literary conversation. In fact, Poe identifies himself as a creative reader by playing upon Wordsworth’s name to lend impetus to his critical career. For the sake of simplicity, this chapter will generally treat the contents of the 1831 and 1836 editions of “Letter” as identical.¹⁰¹

II. The Egg-Shell and the Egg: Coleridge’s Critical Authority and the Incursions of the Critical Age

. . . The value of any work of art or science depends chiefly on the quantity of originality contained in it, and which constitutes either the charm of works of fiction or the improvement to be derived from those of progressive information.

--William Hazlitt¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ The principal differences between the two versions of “Letter” are the amount of attribution Poe gives to Coleridge for his borrowings and the change of addressee from “Mr. ___” to “B.”

¹⁰² See Section IV of this chapter for close-up discussion of Hazlitt. See Section V for this quotation’s immediate journalistic context.

A. *Biographia Literaria*

In writing “Letter to B,” Poe has Coleridge (1772-1834)’s *Biographia Literaria* (1817) close at hand. Coleridge had originally intended that the *Biographia* both correct Wordsworth’s account of their co-production of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798ff) and contest the poetic theory contained in Wordsworth’s “Preface” (1800ff).¹⁰³ As a poet who experimented with self-publishing but deliberately kept himself on the fringes of periodical society, Coleridge had developed an excellent sense of the workings of the periodical press.¹⁰⁴ From the outset of the *Biographia*, Coleridge expresses dismay at the decline of learning that has accompanied what Hazlitt called the Age of Criticism (1700 forward; *CW* XVI, 218). It is becoming ever more difficult to identify original poetry, Coleridge declares, since the market is increasingly flooded with imitations and with literary reviews’ reproductions of these imitations (7:i:60). Faced with an egg-shell and an egg side by side, one cannot from a distance tell which is which (59).

B. Poe’s Motivation for Working from Coleridge

Poe has several incentives to set “Letter to B” as a response to Coleridge. Poe’s first reason for taking off from Coleridge’s literary theory is the opportunity it provides him to rehearse Coleridge’s own attacks on Wordsworth. Coleridge

¹⁰³ Engell and Bate offer Wordsworth’s 1815 edition of the *Preface* as the “effective cause” of the *Biographia*:

it hinges—at every crucial point and transition [chapters 4-5, 12-13, and from 12 to the second volume as a whole]—on the dialogue between Coleridge and Wordsworth and on Coleridge’s reply to Wordsworth concerning the subject of imagination and fancy (Introduction to *BL* cxxxv).

¹⁰⁴ Coleridge edited and wrote much of the weekly journal *The Friend* (1809-10; revised 1815-19). See M. H. Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze* 206.

himself would have had ample precedent such as Francis Jeffrey's angry review of Wordsworth's The Excursion for the *Edinburgh Review* of November 1814. Hence, while Poe's attacks on Wordsworth occurred more than fifteen years after their precursors in the British periodical press, they would in 1831 and perhaps in 1836 flatter many readers for their awareness of this dispute begun by Coleridge.

Coleridge spends approximately one-fifth of the Biographia displaying the defects of Wordsworth's rustic poetic realism. For his part, Poe takes only a few paragraphs to accuse Wordsworth of plagiarism, tediousness, an excessive concern for propriety, and--what Coleridge labeled Wordsworth's most disagreeable trait--mawkishness or excessive sentimentality (ER 8-10).¹⁰⁵ By the 1840's, when Poe had made a name for himself, he could afford to be more charitable to Wordsworth. But Poe's polemical strategy in "Letter" suggests his desire to develop a critical reputation as rapidly as possible.

Poe summons up Coleridge a second time for his reputation as a philosopher-poet, a profound but flawed thinker, in order simultaneously to borrow concepts and to attack their source. Poe makes explicit reference to Coleridge's Biographia Literaria in criticizing its excessive profundity. The epigram from Goethe that introduces the Biographia concludes "[the writer] wishes to spare the young those circuitous paths, on which he himself has lost his way." One of Poe's echoes of this statement is his assertion, in "Letter", that

"Trifles, like straws, upon the surface flow,
He who would search for pearls must dive below"
are lines which have done much mischief. As regard the greater truths, men oftener err by seeing them at the bottom than at the top;

¹⁰⁵ See the excerpt from Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" in Section II C3, below.

the depth lies in the huge abysses where wisdom is sought--not in the palpable places where she is found (ER 8).

These lines suggest an awareness, on Poe's part, of the trope employed by Thomas DeQuincey, Coleridge and John Donne before him of reading as prospecting for literary gems.¹⁰⁶ In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge had warned readers about the dangers of the philosophical life:

Well were it for me perhaps, had I never relapsed into the same mental disease; if I had continued to pluck the flower and reap the harvest from the cultivated surface, instead of delving in the unwholesome quicksilver mines of metaphysic depths (7:1:10).

Here Poe seems to enjoy poking fun at Coleridge for complaining about the rigors of his old-fashioned pursuit of knowledge.

Taking advantage of Coleridge's confession of mortality, Poe's proposal appeals to readers from the widest possible range of backgrounds. His lines on "the greater truths" suggest that in the overall picture, the scholarly discoveries writers make may be less important than the application of their abilities to the "palpable places" (Coleridge's surface) of wisdom in practice. These places may include taverns, stores, and publishing houses. Deep thinking is precisely what "Letter" insists not to have required.

Poe's third and final reason for writing with reference to Coleridge is Coleridge's concern with imitation and plagiarism. Coleridge expresses this interest in his anxiety over the blurring of literary perspective by unscrupulous authors and anonymous periodical criticism. For Coleridge, the caprices of the

¹⁰⁶ In describing the *Morning Post*, DeQuincey remarked to Coleridge

Worlds of fine thinking lie buried in that vast abyss, never to be disinterred or restored to human admiration. Like the sea it has swallowed treasures without end, that no diving bell will bring up again; but nowhere, throughout its shoreless magazines of wealth, does there lie such a bed of pearls, confounded with the rubbish and purgamenta of ages (295).

growing plague of periodicals have made the art-object (a whole egg) difficult to distinguish from its facile imitation (an egg shell presented as if it were whole). As discussed in Section C, below, “Letter to B” presents itself as Poe’s half-serious attempt to blend the brilliant names of prominent authors such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare into a brash critical statement capable of propelling a young writer like Poe to journalistic prominence. Since Coleridge’s “egg-shell and egg” concern with British periodical reprinting of British works fails to discuss transatlantic reprint culture, Coleridge’s own borrowing practices, which had been criticized prior to the publication of “Letter to B,” make him both a suitable model and an easy target for the borrowing American critic.¹⁰⁷

C. “Letter to B”: Jiu-Jitsu as a Critical Beginning

1. Original Reprints and the Philosopher-Critic

Poe’s first piece of prose criticism, “Letter to Mr. ___,” was published as the preface to Poe’s unpopular volume of West Point poetry published in early 1831. Five years later, “Letter to B” was reprinted in the *Southern Literary Messenger* of July, 1836. “Letter” provides the reader with a series of critical judgments. Its twelve-section structure has several likely purposes: First, it suggests the self-assurance of a prolific reviewer at the top of his critical game. While the extremely digressive format of the *Biographia* makes it “the greatest book of criticism in English, and one of the most annoying books in any

¹⁰⁷ Engell and Bate (cxv) note that Thomas DeQuincey raised the charge of plagiarism in his article for *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* of September, 1834.

language,”¹⁰⁸ “Letter” comes across as a slashing though much belated American rebuttal to Coleridge. Poe’s division of his essay into twelve unlabeled fragments serves to disavow the document’s coherence as a formal whole. Read as disconnected parts, “Letter” appears an example of the careless maxim-making disparaged by Coleridge in the early chapters of the *Biographia*.

The footnote appended to the title “Letter to B ____” would in a perfect universe manifest itself as the epigraph to Poe’s Complete Works. For it is here that Poe, like the tire-maker of today or the snakeoil salesman of the 1830s, asserts his freedom from any liability with regard to his product. According to the 1836 “Letter,” Poe is merely recycling his declarations of 1831 (5-11):

These detached passages. . . have vigor and much originality-but of course we shall not be called upon to endorse all the writer’s opinions (5).

Here Poe suggests, for those who read the footnote, that [his] critical views have undergone significant changes since the writing of “Letter to B__.”¹⁰⁹ By calling the twelve sections (separated by sets of three or more asterisks * * * laid across the center of the page) “detached passages,” “Letter” further disavows responsibility for internal consistency. Finally, in critics’ language, even the most insipid prose is frequently said to bear signs of “much originality.” The terms “originality” and “vigor” only achieve practical meaning for readers when placed in a specific temporal and critical context such as the Fall, 1836 editorial stance of *The Quarterly Review* or Poe’s *Southern Literary Messenger*.

¹⁰⁸ Arthur Symons, “Introduction” vii-xii *passim*.

¹⁰⁹ For an account of Poe’s childhood reading, see Kevin J. Hayes, *Poe and the Printed Word* 1-16 *passim*.

Thus Poe is quick to assert his independence from anyone else's standards. Here he voices the need inherent in the critical enterprise to borrow from previous texts in order to recalibrate others' opinions. In disavowing his responsibility for the essay to which his name is affixed, Poe begins "Letter" by lowering his readers' expectations. He asserts his critical control from the essay's very first line:

It has been said that a good critique on a poem may be written by one who is no poet himself. This, according to your idea and mine of poetry, I feel to be false--the less poetical the critic, the less just the critique, and the converse. On this account, and because there are but few B__'s in the world, I would be as much ashamed of the world's good opinion as proud of your own . . . (ER 5).

Notwithstanding Poe's footnote disclaimer, his remarks present significant focus along with certain contradictions. First, they welcome and cajole readers by asserting that their critical judgment is superior to that of the general public. The second sentence of "Letter" concludes by addressing one putative associate whose taste he knows intimately. The actual 1836 magazine readers of "Letter to B" would indeed be part of a select audience, enjoying not only access to the *Messenger* but also the time to read it. Tellingly, despite the text's gestures towards egalitarian conversation, the opening paragraph of "Letter" makes much of the height of its author's putative position as poet-critic: To begin with, Poe emphasizes that a poet will invariably make the best critic of poetry.¹¹⁰ Poe insists that this sweeping generalization--in opposition to the maxim contained in

¹¹⁰ Ben Jonson remarked that the accomplished poet is the best judge of poetry in Timber, Or Discoveries (1640-1). Jonson's point was hotly contested by eighteenth-century critics. See Jonson, Critical Essays 57.

his opening sentence “It has been said that a good critique on a poem may be written by one who is no poet himself”--is one he shares with his audience.

The opening sections of “Letter” not only flatter his periodical readers but also poke fun at this group for taking the bait described above and supposing themselves to be wiser than ordinary readers of prose. One may wonder, in examining Poe’s flattery of his readers, on what grounds Poe could justify his brushing aside the differences between his readers and himself. To begin with, casual and inexperienced readers of magazines and newspapers may be especially likely to express themselves out loud or in private rather than in public writing. By contrast, the critic, garbed in his editorial persona, may convince casual readers that he is a person who thinks in nonstop polished prose, the way Oscar Wilde is said to have talked: “with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all overnight with labour and yet all spontaneous.”¹¹¹

Most amusing is Poe’s explanation of the false intimacy readers claim with Shakespeare. For Poe, everyday readers, in their imagined excursions up “the Andes of the mind,” achieve a contact with Shakespeare that is based more on sensory than intellectual contact: as long as each putative, self-appointed expert stays within shouting distance of the person ahead of him, all may claim a limited communion with the summit. In sharp contrast to the fog-bound herd are Poe’s successful readers--

a few gifted individuals, who kneel around the summit, beholding,
face to face, the master spirit who stands upon the pinnacle (5).

¹¹¹ See William Butler Yeats, “The Trembling of the Veil” 124.

Who exactly are these chosen few atop the peak? If one believes Poe's flattery, he is promoting his audience to probational insider status as his partners in the production of literature. However, if one makes the reasonable assumption that the overwhelming majority of Poe's readers--that is, his newspaper and magazine readers--are not themselves poets, then they may instead be incarnations of the "fool" who for Poe is situated well out of range of the summit and informed only by what his neighbor says and does (5).

While the first three sentences of "Letter" strive to unite Poe's readers with the exalted poet and critic, they present several unfounded assumptions:

. . . It has been said that a good critique on a poem may be written by one who is no poet himself. This, according to your idea and mine of poetry, I feel to be false--the less poetical the critic, the less just the critique, and the converse (5).

For one thing, Poe does not directly address the question of whether he himself should be considered a poet, a critic, both, or neither one of the two. Is "Letter" to be understood as the theoretical treatise of an objectively-minded critic putting aside any bias involving his own verse compositions? Not all 1831 or 1836 readers would have had confidence that this was in fact the case. The few people who actually examined the 1831 "Letter" encountered it as the preface affixed to his small edition, Poems. While there was considerable negative response to the volume among the West Point cadets who sponsored its publication, some would likely have considered Poe a poet.¹¹² A regular reader of the 1836 *Southern Literary Messenger*, on the other hand, would have reason to value Poe's prose work--that is, his tales and criticism--perhaps considering him a critic rather than

¹¹² See Silverman 69.

a poet. Publishing industry readers, however, would recognize the unusually high level of recycling displayed by “Letter” while allowing that there were few prerequisites for the title Critic.

In addition, Poe’s second sentence makes several suggestions as to the status of his reader and himself. On the one hand, if “your idea” and “mine” are considered to be terms not only parallel but also similarly weighted, the author of “Letter” treats himself and his audience as equally tasteful readers. On the other hand, Poe’s juxtaposition, in the sentences that follow, of the “poetical” and the unpoetical critic suggests that the idea formed by his audience is merely a concept that has trickled down to it from the writing of poet-critics such as Poe.¹¹³ This second reading recalls Coleridge’s conception of readers guided to an appreciation of great literature by the writings of proper critics. Of course, Poe is also punning on his family name. Whether or not his works have earned him poet status, the hack-writer side of Poe can insist that he is certainly Poe-etical, and therefore a worthy critic.

Thus Poe must alternate between flattery and poking fun in order to reach a diverse readership. He claims to value his readers over the rest of the world, and this point has some merit. The self-important among Poe’s readers would be especially amused by his assertion that the popular opinion of Shakespeare is handed down from neighbor to neighbor in such a way that it does not reflect any genuine understanding of poetry on the part of the people. However, the reader as *bourgeois gentilhomme*, a stereotype approximating the reality of many of Poe’s

¹¹³ See Bartine 15.

most eager magazine readers, is not simply awarded the label Discerning Reader on a level with Poe's poet-critic. Rather, this reader is almost as plainly denounced by "Letter" as a sheep-like follower of the devotees of Shakespeare, "the greatest of poets" (5).

2. "Letter to B" As Manifesto and Spoof

In considering "Letter," one must not forget to examine the position of the mysterious addressee, the "B" of 1836 and the "Mr. ___ ___" of 1831. Traditionally, the addressee would be the literary patron, a force that was during the Jacksonian era being displaced by the transatlantic periodical reprint marketplace. Poe uses the epistolary form in such a way as to emphasize the ambivalent relationship linking author, publisher, and audience. He also constructs "Letter" so as to make fun of his publisher as much as any other reader. It has been suggested that the "B" of "Letter to B" refers to Elam Bliss, publisher of Poe's 1831 West Point poems. In 1831, Poe found no reason to refer even this directly to his patron; his scanting reference, if this is what the "B" is, five years later, seems to tease Poe's audience and perhaps to taunt Bliss if indeed it offers him any personal message. At first glance, Poe writes proudly for the recognition of his peers and for posterity. He must appear to scorn other literary authorities in order to produce the impression that he is engaged in the noble practice of literary warfare. Thus, even as "Letter" recycles poetic images of Romantic heroes and landscapes, it participates in the process of rooting literature out of its mountain and forest retreats.

Indeed, “Letter” begs for an indignant reaction from Coleridge’s circle or from his American admirers. Poe’s extended assumption of literary airs may be taken as both a critical manifesto and a spoofing indictment of such statements. The odd structure of “Letter” tends to support its standing as spoof. As a loose stringing-together of pointed remarks that are disavowed in his initial footnote, “Letter” labels itself as juvenilia. Of course, each reader must judge whether any of the version before him may be worth considering as more than a youthful jest. To see to what degree “Letter” represents a young man’s throwing of darts at an image of a literary star figure, let’s examine the degree and nature of Poe’s borrowings from the Biographia in his composition of “Letter.”

In referring to readers’ climbing the “Andes of the Mind,” Poe conjures up an American equivalent to Greece’s Mount Parnassus, shrine of Apollo and the Muses. As might be expected, however, Poe refrains from naming American authors. Here is Coleridge’s version:

Shakspeare, no mere child of nature, no automaton of genius, no passive vehicle of inspiration possessed by the spirit, not possessing it; first studied patiently, meditated deeply, understood minutely, till knowledge become habitual and intuitive wedded itself to his habitual feelings, and at length gave birth to that stupendous power, by which he stands alone, with no equal or second in his own class; to that power, which seated him on one of the two glory-smitten summits of the poetic mountain, with Milton as his compeer not rival (7:ii:15). . . .

Like Milton and like Coleridge himself as described in the early books of the Biographia, Shakespeare the Artist is imagined to have imposed his own intellectual and creative drive on his circumstances.¹¹⁴ Such a drive towards

¹¹⁴ Chapter One of BL describes Coleridge’s formal education and the development of his literary

literary authority, Coleridge says, has given Shakespeare the powerful voice coveted by poets such as Coleridge and Wordsworth:

. . . While the former [Shakespeare] darts himself forth, and passes into all the forms of human character and passion, the one Proteus of the fire and the flood; the other [Milton] attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own IDEAL. All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of MILTON; while SHAKSPEARE becomes all things, yet for ever remaining himself. O what great men has thou not produced, England! My country! truly indeed--

Must *we* be free or die, who speak the tongue,
Which SHAKSPEARE spake; the faith and morals hold,
Which MILTON held. In every thing we are sprung
Of earth's first blood, have titles manifold!

WORDSWORTH (15-16)¹¹⁵

As in some of Wordsworth's more lyrical pastoral poems, this excerpt characterizes English-speakers as Titans. In addition, the speaker is identified with the royal, Romantic and/or Egotistical "We." The four strident lines from Wordsworth which close the quotation may remind British and American readers of their closely interwoven literary and linguistic inheritance.

Coleridge's final [let us say] original exclamation in the quotation above-- "O what great men has thou not produced, England"--is taken by Poe as a red flag waved before the eyes of the up-and-coming American criticism. For Americans of the Jacksonian Era were afflicted by a Franco- and, to an even greater extent, Anglophilia which directed them away from local literature. While some American readers eagerly pursued the poetry and fiction of domestic authors, they generally trusted British opinion in their book-buying decisions. As a journalist who has had his fill of British literary hegemony, Poe undercuts the Biographia's

gifts and affinities.

¹¹⁵Engell and Bate, in their "Introduction" to BL (7:i), place the Wordsworth quotation in his Sonnets dedicated to Liberty pt 1 no xvi, ll 11-14 (var).

more pompous passages, begging the question of why American challengers to Shakespeare, Milton, and the Romantics should not be recognized by American audiences.

The specific qualities Coleridge praises most highly in Shakespeare are

DEPTH, and ENERGY of THOUGHT. No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher (16).

This is the starting point for Poe's using the Biographia to his own advantage.

Coleridge's demand for literary depth is contradicted by Poe's valorization of surface glitter. To begin with, in denying that Coleridge has achieved anything in his quest for "profundity",¹¹⁶ "Letter" finds Coleridge and Wordsworth not to be wise men (ER 8). If Coleridge's search was unsuccessful, Poe's "Letter" implies, why should my reader or my author, for that matter, risk echoing Coleridge's failure? As "Letter" puts it, readers who take the word of others as substitutes for their own experience will live more foolishly than a herd of cows. For these animals are wise enough not to follow a neighbor in her accidental tumble from a cliff.

Poe himself, however, may be seen as representative of the human cattle bleating after Shakespeare. For in asserting, in the tenth section of "Letter," that Poetry is a "Proteus-like idea. . . . Shade of the immortal Shakspeare!" (11) Poe is repeating a comparison that has been made many times before. To be precise, Proteus had served as a metaphor for the human imagination in dozens of

¹¹⁶ Two critics who have emphasized Poe's focus on surface values in his prose are Terence Whalen and Jonathan Elmer. In Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses 201-24 passim, Whalen describes Poe's interest in cryptography. Elmer describes Poe juxtaposing two approaches to readers: tiptoeing from the margins of intelligibility and assaulting them with flamboyant rhetoric. See Elmer's Reading At the Social Limit 4.

additional instances dating back to at least 1774 and twice in Biographia Literaria (see the second Shakespeare/Milton quotation, above).¹¹⁷ In the same section of “Letter,” Poe contrasts the magical, shape-shifting power of Shakespeare’s language with the heavy-handed verse of Samuel Johnson, one of the authors criticized by the Biographia. Poe’s facile discussion of poetry and criticism suggests that his reading had something in common with the worst practices of readers hurrying their way through their literary and news-reading encounters.¹¹⁸ Indeed, Poe uses the names Johnson and Milton roadside attractions for *Letter*’s critical tour rather than providing intellectual inquiry into their writings.

Ironically, given Poe’s dependence on Coleridge for his critical maxims, the first of Coleridge’s Lectures on Literature reads almost as though it had been written in response to Poe. Coleridge’s first “Permanent Cause” of “False Criticism” is that, as the prefatorial sections of “Letter” imply, any audience--not excepting the critic--experiences “the greater delight in being reminded of [its] knowledge than of [its] ignorance.” Second, while Poe’s reader may welcome the flattery inherent in the prefatorial intimacy of the opening paragraphs (“ . . . This, according to your idea and mine of poetry, I feel to be false. . . . there are but few B’s in the world. . . .” [ER 5]), so Poe himself may enjoy playing the role of an American Doctor Johnson, a self-educated Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Finally, the second of Coleridge’s Causes again strikes a chord with “Letter to B” by invoking the habit of adopting others’ opinions instead of “really referring to our own

¹¹⁷ On Proteus, see Engell 154.

¹¹⁸ Silverman (120) provides examples of Poe the reviewer committing editing mistakes similar to those which earned his reviewer’s wrath.

inward experiences. . . which can alone operate a true conviction.”¹¹⁹ If Poe’s “Letter” repeats Coleridge without adequately challenging his assumptions, then “Letter” would seem unlikely to possess inherent didactic value. On the other hand, readers familiar with literary criticism of the Romantic era would be likely to understand Poe’s spoofing technique.

3. Literary Surface Value

Much as Poe’s “Letter” offers a refreshing refusal to take itself seriously, Poe’s overt claim that literary value resides in surfaces is not entirely without merit (ER 8). One may arrive at this observation using “Letter to B” as a sample text. First, Poe’s claim is literally true in that superficial scanning of “Letter” may impress, entertain, or at least pass the time for most of those who see it. Newsgathering, a function that modern readers have increasingly pursued as a component of their multitasking activities, is a typical mission performed by superficial or “inspectional” reading. A second surface value consists of introducing the author (such as Poe himself, circa 1831) to the reader.

Third, inasmuch as a reader pondering a new hobby appreciates the comfort of a familiar guide, the self-satisfied book-buyer may value his literary purchases merely for their labels. It is comforting to possess leather-bound volumes attributed to famous authors, whether or not one is conversant with the work that is attributed to these names. For example, by 1839, Poe’s name would become familiar enough for him to receive fifty dollars for posing as the author of The

¹¹⁹ Coleridge, Lectures on Literature 189.

Conchologist's First Book.¹²⁰ Fourth, value resides for the connoisseur of publishing in the surface represented by the printed letters of Poe's text. As Poe says in "Letter," both snob and scholar may value a book whose pages are graced with "the mystic characters which spell London, Paris, or Genoa, [which] are precisely so many "letters of recommendation" (ER 6). One may indeed say that the entire literary value of "Letter" resides in its surfaces. For newspaper and magazine readers, "Letter" shows Poe's nationalist and anti-Transcendentalist critical attitude. A subscriber to the *Southern Literary Messenger* may feel his investment rewarded by the material Poe has provided for parlor conversation. For members of the publishing industry, Poe's first essay offers a self-conscious jibe at the state of "Letter"s.¹²¹

Indeed, instead of delivering closely-reasoned composition, "Letter," like much of Poe's criticism, eschews any such effort. For Poe's disclaimer to the 1836 "Letter to B" suggests a desire to hold forth like a magazine reader promoting his interests while making conversation. Poe's use of Coleridge seems particularly casual when one considers the placement of the material he imports from the Biographia into "Letter." Poe's discussion of Milton and Shakespeare may be motivated by the unusual prominence of these names in the initial pages

¹²⁰ This work was written by the Englishman Thomas Wyatt. See Silverman 139; Thomas and Jackson 259.

¹²¹ See Terence Whalen, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses 225 for a discussion of literary worth and literary form. To gain an idea of the energy Poe devoted to wrapping statements in unlikely packages, consider the amount of material he published dealing with secret codes. In Edgar Allan Poe's Contributions to "Alexander's Weekly Messenger," editor Clarence S. Brigham describes 36 puzzles Poe offered the readers of the Philadelphia magazine between December 18, 1839 and May 6, 1840. For his part, Silverman makes much of Poe's repeated working of the initials of "Edgar A. Poe or E. A. Poe, the names he used for his published works," into prominent positions in his writings. The letters that make up the name Allan, offered Poe by his foster parents, appear less frequently. See Silverman 126.

of the Biographia's two volumes. Coleridge trumpets these authors' virtues in the second chapter of the Biographia's second volume (7:ii:15; see above). In addition, he urges Shakespeare and Milton upon his reader in the very first footnote to Chapter One (7:i:6). Here, Coleridge finds Milton's masque *Comus* a juvenile production for its overreliance on two-word adjectives—what Coleridge terms “double epithets.” Without overt reference to Coleridge's own endorsement of Milton, Poe chooses to valorize *Comus* over Paradise Lost largely because of its relative brevity.¹²² Like any reader inspecting Coleridge's work, Poe would have come across these examples early in his examination of the Biographia.¹²³

Throughout the body (sections 4-11) of “Letter,” Poe sustains attacks on Wordsworth and Coleridge which are closely entwined with his borrowing from these same authors. Section Four appraises the Lake School as “the most singular heresy in modern history” (6). This slur resembles remarks made by British periodical treatments of Wordsworth and Coleridge during the thirty-plus years that preceded “Letter to Mr. ___.”¹²⁴ Wordsworth's liability, Poe says, is that he writes to teach. One cannot teach unless one pleases one's audience, Poe emphasizes, echoing Shelley, Coleridge, and Aristotle before him.

Wordsworth, as rendered by Poe, is an aged charlatan whose 1798 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* begs readers not to laugh at his silly pastoral narratives. In order to better ridicule Wordsworth, Poe critiques “The Idiot Boy” (1798). The

¹²² See Poe's essay “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846) for his advocacy of poetry grounded in atmosphere rather than plot.

¹²³ Of course, critics before Coleridge had expressed their discomfort in wending their way through Paradise Lost. For one example, see Johnson 150-5 passim.

¹²⁴ For the attacks of the British periodicals on the Lake and Cockney poets, see Richard Cronin, “Keats and the Politics of Cockney Style,” 785-806 passim. See also Allen 40.

poem concerns a mother, Mary Foy, who has helped her mentally retarded son onto the family pony in order to summon a doctor for a sick neighbor. Poe takes up the narrative upon the return of Johnny, "The Idiot Boy." In reprinting the poem for his readers' inspection, Poe makes several important alterations. See Wordsworth's stanzas (left side) and Poe's transcription (right):

And now she's at the pony's tail,
And now she's at the pony's head,
On that side now, and now on this,
And almost stifled with her Bliss,
A few sad tears does Betty shed.

She kisses o'er and o'er again
Him who she loves, her idiot boy,
She's happy here, she's happy there,
She is uneasy every where;

Her limbs are all alive with joy.

She pats the pony, where or when
She knows not, happy Betty Foy!
The little pony glad may be,

But he is milder far than she,
You can hardly perceive his joy.

"Oh! Johnny, never mind the Doctor;
You've done your best, and that is all."
She took the reins, when this was said,
And gently turned the pony's head
From the loud water-fall.
(ll. 392-411)

And now she's at the pony's head,
And now she's at the pony's tail,
On this side now, and now on this,
And almost stifled her with Bliss--
A few sad tears does Betty shed,

She pats the pony where or when
She knows not: happy Betty Foy!
O Johnny! Never mind the doctor!
(ER 9-10)

Wordsworth's poem describes an extended rural melodrama focusing, in the lines excerpted here, on the frightened parent of a mentally retarded youth. By contrast, Poe's manipulation of the text produces a mother who appears to be thoroughly consumed by her passionate sharing of loving embraces with the

family horse. Poe provides the passage outside of any narrative context and without reference to its source in Wordsworth's poem. By reversing the order of lines 392-3, he wrenches the stanza into a tighter structure: Poe's first and last lines rhyme, enclosing Betty Foy in a more narrow embrace of the horse. Finally, by reversing the words "with her" (l. 395), Poe calls into question the ownership of the "Bliss" (l. 395). This last move suggests a pawing of Betty--rendered the direct object of the verb "stifled"--by her pony (l. 395). While Wordsworth stresses Johnny's importance to his mother (see ll. 397-8; 407-8), Poe's rendition mentions Johnny only in its final line.

Poe's game in writing against Wordsworth and Coleridge may be described as a form of critical Ju-jitsu. Relative to Poe, the two British authors are well known and widely read, qualities which may allow Poe to work them into his publicity plans. Readers of *Lyrical Ballads* who are unable, at first glance, to recognize "The Idiot Boy" as recorded by Poe may be reminded of Wordsworth's poem and even its narrative structure by Poe's insertion of Wordsworth's dialogue (ll. 397-8) into the punchline of the new poem. Poe's most highly informed audience, the members of the publishing industry, would be likely to understand Poe's gesture as one expressing a fierce competitive drive. Those with some memory of Wordsworth's poem might recall or even be moved to look up the final stanza above. This would remind them of these lines' final gesture in which Betty

. . . gently turned the pony's head
From the loud water-fall.

For thousands of years, the force of water has served as one of the primary metaphors for sexual potency, sexual awakening, and sexual climax. However, Poe's deliberate reading of bestiality into Wordsworth's poem is not the only issue raised by Poe's rewriting of Wordsworth. For he makes little or no effort to express his own opinions, to properly cite his sources, or to convince sophisticated readers that he's anything but a thieving, self-serving journalistic critic. Poe's attitude seems motivated not by mere ignorance but rather by the spoofing tone which he has set for "Letter" beginning with his footnote disclaimer.¹²⁵

Of course, each of Poe's games has its serious side. In this regard, note Poe's direct acknowledgement of Coleridge in the 1831 "Letter to Mr. ___"

Of Coleridge I cannot speak but with reverence. His towering intellect! His gigantic power! *To use an author quoted by himself,* 'j'ai trouve souvent que la plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce qu'elles avancement, mais non pas en ce qu'elles nient,' ['I have often found that most schools of thought are correct in the bulk of their assertions, but not in their denials,'] and, *to employ his own language,* he has imprisoned his own conceptions by the barrier he has erected against those of others. It is lamentable to think that such a mind should be buried in metaphysics, and like the Nyctanthes, waste its perfume upon the night alone. In reading that man's poetry I tremble, like one who stands upon a volcano, conscious, from the very darkness bursting from the crater, of the fire and the light that are weltering below.

By 1836, when the *Southern Literary Messenger* printed "Letter" as "Letter to B," this document had lost its two references (my italics, above) to Coleridge himself as the primary source of the criticism Poe turns against Wordsworth and

¹²⁵ During Poe's childhood and adolescence, he enjoyed access to a range of books and magazines as ward of merchant John Allan. See note 22 above.

Coleridge.¹²⁶ The author of the 1836 text seems scornful of his critical target; not only does Poe reprint Coleridge's words without direct acknowledgement, but he refuses to give serious consideration to his critical theory. Just as importantly, Poe's assertion that Coleridge has walled himself in by barring the door to outside influence ("he has imprisoned his own conceptions by the barrier he has erected against those of others) calls readers' attention to rumors of plagiarism attached to Coleridge. For by calling Coleridge the man unswervable in his rock-steady opinion, Poe comments unfavorably on Coleridge's inconsistencies of lifestyle and prose performance.¹²⁷ Poe's words would be perceived as an accusation—albeit a most derivative one--by readers familiar with contemporary critical reception of the Biographia. Poe's word choice is designed so as to merit an angry reply from those backers of Coleridge not amused by "Letter."¹²⁸

One critical perspective holds that Poe's praise of Coleridge's philosophical insights in the reviews and opinions he wrote from 1836-1849 constitutes a certain paying-back for the extensive borrowing Poe does from Biographia Literaria.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, "Letter" seems remarkable mainly for the potential "buzz" (a collectively unremarkable and widespread critical emission, according to the Biographia) stirred up by its manipulation of literary names like

¹²⁶ For Poe's removal of the two citations, see Jonathan Bate, "Edgar Allan Poe: A Debt Repaid" 256.

¹²⁷ For glimpses of Coleridge's struggles with opium addiction, see Richard Holmes, Coleridge: Darker Reflections 117-81 passim.

¹²⁸ Coleridge was himself aware that he was likely to be accused of plagiarism upon the publication of the Biographia. His attitude seemed to be that a fair amount of imitation was necessary simply for English-speakers to reach an understanding of German romantic philosophers such as Fichte and Shelling An accusation of plagiarism, since attributed to John Wilson, was made in Blackwood's for October, 1823. The wording of Wilson's review suggests that the accusation had been previously aired in public. See Engell and Bate, "Introduction" to BL xxxvii-xxxviii. On the reception of Poe's early criticism, see Thomas and Jackson 214-20 passim.

¹²⁹ See Jonathan Bate 256.

Wordsworth and Shakespeare. To take the matter of naming a step further, why should not the words “Letter to B”—or better yet, “Letter to BE,” stand for young Poe’s drawing alongside Biographia Literaria to make use of its value as conversation piece? While Poe’s contemporaries were unlikely to regard “Letter” as the edifying literature sought by Coleridge, Poe nevertheless achieved his ends. While associating his name with British literary lions, “Letter” established a humorous tone that reduced expectations for Poe’s criticism of the 1830’s and beyond.

III. Hazlitt and Poe on Art and Politics

A. The Professional Essayist

William Hazlitt (1778-1830) was a contemporary of Coleridge who had assumed a very different position in the literary world by the years 1815 to 1817, when Coleridge completed his Biographia Literaria. Hack-writing, a profession which Poe and Hazlitt claimed to despise, inevitably comprised a good part of their journalistic duties. After working for a decade as a parliamentary reporter, Hazlitt had begun writing for Francis Jeffrey’s *Edinburgh Review*, the leading periodical of the day, in 1814. Three years later, he published both his Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays and The Round Table, his first essay collection.¹³⁰ During the fall months of 1817, two key Tory journals, the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood’s*, turned against Hazlitt and Keats along with their friend and

¹³⁰ For background on Hazlitt’s intellectual perspective, see Christopher Salvesson, “A Master of Regret” 31-2. Hazlitt trained to be a painter during the years 1802-4 before turning to writing as a profession. The art criticism that he produced alongside his other essays fueled his interest in the notion of “Originality” (1830). See Bromwich, Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic 120.

publisher Leigh Hunt.¹³¹ Hazlitt nevertheless considered himself an independent political voice despite the constraints imposed on him by employers such as Francis Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh Review*.¹³² Hazlitt's complaints regarding the political strictures of his field for writing bear comparison to Poe's reckoning with his own writing prospects in transatlantic reprint culture.

B. Hazlitt's Appeal for Poe

Hazlitt's essays on publishing would have several major attractions for Poe, who reviewed Wiley and Putnam's edition of Hazlitt's The Characters of Shakespeare for the August 16, 1845 *Broadway Journal* (ER 273). First, Hazlitt uneasily heralds the arrival of the periodical print media: The domination of the field of criticism by the publishers of the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* reviews, according to Hazlitt's simplified analysis, succeeded in forcing authors, critics, and editors who wanted to be paid for their work to toe the antirevolutionary line. In the United States during this period, critical opinion was even more standardized. This was due both to the desire on the part of American readers and publishers to successfully imitate their British predecessors and the rigid moral codes imposed by American spiritual leaders. It was only towards 1830 that American literary journals began to open up to works celebrating pleasure and

¹³¹ For the editorial attack that labeled Hunt, Hazlitt and Keats the Cockney School of Romantic writers, see the October 17th issue of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (II: 1817-18) 611.

¹³² Hazlitt also wrote for The London Magazine, Thomas Wooler's radical Black Dwarf, and the reform-minded Morning Chronicle. See Tom Paulin's assessment of Hazlitt, The Day-Star of Liberty 3 for Hazlitt's education under the influence of his father the Unitarian preacher.

spirituality as defined outside of the Christian church.¹³³

By comparison, Hazlitt's career coincided with the rise to prominence of British periodical criticism. From the start of his essay "On Living to One's-Self", published in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* of November 24th, 1816, Hazlitt admits that he is a committed member of the critics' club.¹³⁴ "On Living to One's-Self" also expresses jealousy over the privileges enjoyed by poets. Meditating upon the power of poetry to render palatable even the dark soliloquies of Byron's *Manfred*, Hazlitt declares

Sweet verse embalms the spirit of sour misanthropy: but woe betide the ignoble prose-writer who should thus dare to compare notes with the world, or tax it roundly with imposture (8, 97).¹³⁵

Since Hazlitt is a professional critic paid to dispense opinions, his editorial remarks are subject to harsh judgment from his various readers. Here is the second affinity linking Hazlitt's criticism and that of Poe: Since the critic, a writer of prose by the time of Byron and Hazlitt, speaks in a vernacular English to a public in which the lowest-common-denominator newspaper reader looms large, he can't dismiss this figure as easily as can Byron.

Third and most importantly, Hazlitt develops practical stylistic responses to the problems posed by modern reading and writing conditions. In his writings on publishing, Hazlitt informs readers that the institutionalization of the periodical media has almost but not entirely dissolved the existing ties, supported by literary patronage, that once linked readers and writers. Hazlitt attempts to address this

¹³³ See Charvat 17.

¹³⁴ Hazlitt had been less forthright in his earlier essay "On Common-Place Critics" (1816).

¹³⁵ It is likely that Hazlitt's eagerness to display his memory of literary quotations was related to a degree of jealousy for the formal university education received by many publishers and editors. See Thomas McFarland, *The Coarctive Imagination* 68.

issue by writing essays that read like impromptu conversation. In addition, by incorporating and alluding to literary sources from both Renaissance and contemporary England, Hazlitt's articles go a long way in welcoming new and increasingly impatient groups of readers.

While both Coleridge, in his enthusiasm for books as "venerable preceptors" (7:1:57-8) and Hazlitt share a considerable respect for literary and cultural tradition, Hazlitt copes more effectively with the disadvantages of writing for broader groups of readers. The "we" of Hazlitt's "On Reading New Books" overlaps heavily with Coleridge's less-than ideal audience of "Spunges, . . . Sand Glasses, . . . and . . . Straining Bags" (BL 5:65-6). When Coleridge's readers put away their books, neither they nor their putative interlocutors retain much trace of their literary encounter. Hazlitt is also skeptical about his readers' abilities:

I would rather endure the most blind and bigoted respect for great and illustrious names, than that pitiful, groveling humour which has no pride in intellectual excellence, and no pleasure but in decrying those who have given proofs of it, and reducing them to its own level. If, with the diffusion of knowledge, we do not gain an enlargement and elevation of views, where is the benefit? If, by tearing asunder names from things, we do not leave even the name or shadow of excellence, it is better to let them remain as they were; for it is better to have something to admire than nothing--names, if not things--the shadow, if not the substance--the tinsel, if not the gold. All can now read and write equally; and, it is therefore presumed, equally well. Any thing short of this sweeping conclusion is an invidious distinction; and those who claim it for themselves or others are exclusionists in letters (*CW* 9, 210). . . .

Here political conformity or correctness, as opposed to maintaining independent "exclusionist" status, means bowing down to cowardly and ass-eared public opinion when deciding whether to endorse or even to approach a particular book. An advantage to Hazlitt's critical approach is his appeal to literary tradition and

standards, which may help to reassure Hazlitt's older and more conservative readers.¹³⁶ Meanwhile, his linking of Shakespeare to Byron and contemporary prose according to the motto "If we cannot be profound, let us at least be popular" (*CW* 9:194-5) will likely attract readers from the middle classes.

Hazlitt's practice of silently and informally borrowing other writers' conceptions suggests that a critic may speak to multiple audiences by taking advantage of each group's familiarity with various of his intertextual references.¹³⁷ In his essay "On the Periodical Press," Hazlitt uses his knowledge of the English literary canon to balance his conversational guile, to offer literary-historical perspective, and to comment on the nature of literary business conducted with the British periodicals. As Hazlitt reminds his readers, during the first act of *Macbeth* (I.v.), Lady Macbeth convinces her husband to go through with their plans for assassinating Banquo:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
 May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
 Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye,
 Your hand, your tongue; look like th'innocent flower,
 But be the serpent under't. He that's coming
 Must be provided for, and you shall put
 This night's great business into my dispatch,
 Which shall to all our nights and days to come
 Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom (ll. 60-67)
 (216)

Here Hazlitt compares the periodical critic, the serpent in the grass prepared to unfurl itself from its pose as "th'innocent flower," to Satan in the Garden of

¹³⁶ Bromwich (105-6) asserts that Hazlitt's ranking of the Romantic poets—Wordsworth at the head, followed by Keats and then on a third level Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron—is a daring and prescient one. Hazlitt's hierarchy, Bromwich notes, is one shared by many twentieth-century readers. Poe himself, looking back on the Romantic era, would likely reverse the order of Hazlitt's list.

¹³⁷ An advocate of the pragmatic critical aesthetic adopted by Hazlitt and then by Poe is Michel de Montaigne (1533-92). See Montaigne, *The Complete Essays* 296-306. See also Bromwich 271.

Eden. Hazlitt's words on the innocent appearance which must be conjured up by the critic foreshadow the terrible scene of devastation which follows. Given Hazlitt's disclosures concerning politics and the literary life, the snake in "On the Periodical Press" is meant to stand for the magazine editor, the publisher, and also the working critic—whosoever stands to gain by ignoring or punishing good writing rather than seeking to promote it.

Hence, Hazlitt's use of quotation constitutes a fourth and final appeal for Poe. Hazlitt's literary borrowings, like Poe's own lifting from Coleridge in "Letter," would announce themselves as such to insider readers including the publishing industry. Hazlitt will quote or allude to the same works repeatedly over a period of years. For example, Byron's "words which are things" passage from Canto III, Stanza 114 of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage may be referenced by Hazlitt's phrase "tearing asunder names from things" from his essay "On Reading New Books," above. Hazlitt reviewed Childe Harold on May 2, 1818 for *The Yellow Dwarf* and discussed it in print for ten years thereafter. Hazlitt's adroit manipulation of others' influences combines with his treatment of the press, as discussed above, to offer Poe a model of critic as politician and prose stylist.

IV. Conclusion: The Originality Effect in Several Keys

As a poet turned critic turned writer of short fiction, Poe yearned to hear his works praised as creatively original. After all, even if such praise had little feeling behind it, it constituted public recognition. Indeed, following other Romantic-era critics anticipated by Edward Young in "Conjectures on Original

Composition” (1759), “Originality” (1830) is what Hazlitt’s posthumously-published essay declares to be the hallmark of successful artworks:

. . .The value of any work of art or science depends chiefly on the quantity of originality contained in it, and which constitutes either the charm of works of fiction or the improvement to be derived from those of progressive information. But it is not so in matters of opinion, where every individual thinks he can judge for himself, and does not wish to be set right. *There is, consequently, nothing that the world likes better than originality of invention, and nothing that they hate worse than originality of thought* (CW 302; italics mine).

Hazlitt suggests that critics’ published opinions are not treated with the respect granted to poetry and fiction. Hazlitt is inquiring as to the popular effect of a prose writer who admits to operating via a network of other works of various genres. By drawing a distinction between art and the everyday world of criticism, Hazlitt is lessening his apparent investment in his essays. If readers’ expectations for Hazlitt’s articles are lowered by such a distinction, this tactic may be said to have succeeded. By punctuating his articles with the memorable phrases and concepts of better-known writers, Hazlitt offers an excellent example for Poe’s critical essays.

A comparison of two writers of fiction may help illustrate the modern notion of originality developed by Poe and Hazlitt. Poe’s extended treatment of Nathaniel Hawthorne valorizes him as a craftsman, a writer of tortured prose who achieves what I will call a minor-key Originality Effect.¹³⁸ At the time Poe wrote, Hawthorne was a master of the short story, having yet to publish his first novel.

¹³⁸ According to Poe’s reading, Hawthorne is the old-fashioned, pre-Critical Age writer invoked by Hazlitt’s 1823 essay “The Periodical Press” (CW 16, 210-11). This figure pursues his craft while supported by patron, family or friends for the time it takes for him to get to the point of earning a literary living.

By contrast, the Dickensian *bildungsroman* or egotistical novel, as described in several of Poe's Hawthorne reviews, delivers sublimity appropriate for the mass market. As in any confidence game, the writer of the egotistical novel softens up readers by offering them absorbing characters and plot. Readers who allow themselves to be "taken in" by the world of the writer's fiction may readily believe the writer's conceit and their sympathy with it to be prodigious achievements.¹³⁹ Dickens' successful novels work their confidence games via positive, major-key identification.

In contrast to the egotistically original novel—a prose equivalent of Wordsworth's poetic narratives in which the reader consumes the spectacle of the author both devoured by and devouring nature--Poe allows Hawthorne, together with Joseph Addison and Washington Irving, the achievement of "a lower degree of what I have called the true original" (ER 581).¹⁴⁰ These three authors are for Poe quiet allegorists who make a reader wistful and pensive rather than bringing on the enthusiasm summoned up by "the true original." Poe notes that educated readers--as opposed to those who by books as mere ornaments--do enjoy Hawthorne. The former group enjoys gauging literary potential in imperfect works:

In this view, Hawthorne stands among literary people in America much in the same light as did Coleridge in England. The few, also, through a certain warping of the taste, which long pondering on

¹³⁹ For a discussion of Poe's puzzling over Hawthorne's quietly successful sketches, see Meredith L. McGill, "The Problem of Hawthorne's Popularity" 44-50 *passim*.

¹⁴⁰ The Egotistical Sublime is a term introduced by John Keats that describes the self-affirmative power of Wordsworth's poetry. It might also be applied to novels such as Dickens' to the degree that Dickens' readers share the wonder experienced by his protagonists. See The Letters of John Keats, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958), 1:386-7, cited by Susan S. Wolfson, The Questioning Presence 35.

books as books never fails to induce, are not in condition to view the errors of a scholar as errors altogether. At any time these gentlemen are prone to think the public not right rather than an educated author wrong. But the simple truth is, that the writer who aims at impressing the people, is always wrong when he fails in forcing that people to receive the impression (583).

This is a useful assessment of literary reception. The most valuable part of the preceding paragraph is Poe's image of the writer's "impressing the people" most literally by "forcing that people to receive the impression." According to Poe's trope, the successful author stamps his target audience, "that people," as his own by means of the unmistakable signature he applies to his written work. The literary effect by which readers recognize themselves in the egotistically original author is another name for this branding of narrative and readers.¹⁴¹

For example, Poe's reviews of the 1840s indicate that Charles Dickens' readers are so fond of his novels that they are liable to be taken in by Dickens' many imitators, who cobble together plot, characters, and dialogue seeking to win a share of Dickens' business.¹⁴² As Poe's description would suggest, Hawthorne is crafting his own brand of intellectual literature for readers' popular taste. During the second half of his journalistic career, Poe will admit that works which are widely acclaimed as original are likely not only to be ego-boosting narratives, but also to be syntheses of other works. Poe recalls his meditations on narrative genius and Nathaniel Hawthorne in discussing the likelihood that the style of any one of his contemporaries is indeed original:

¹⁴¹ Poe's Originality Effect allows him to distinguish the shortcomings of both "true [major key] originals" like Dickens and "minor genius[es]" like Hawthorne; while the two authors pursue very different goals, Poe can subsequently declare either writer to fail at the other man's specialty.

¹⁴² See Poe's reviews of shoddy imitations of Dickens: by Charles James Lever, *ER* 313, 325; by Henry Cockton, 177. Poe frequently accused American poets of aping the styles of the British Romantics, especially the Lake School.

Novel conceptions are merely unusual combinations. The mind of man can imagine nothing which does not exist: --if it could, it would create not only ideally, but substantially--as do the thoughts of God (ER 8, 224).

This pronouncement, from Poe's review of Thomas Hood's Prose and Verse for the August 9, 1845 edition of the *Broadway Journal*, echoes Hazlitt's message in "Originality" that there is nothing new under the sun. Novelty is a poem, a pretty flower or waterfall whose like we have never quite glimpsed before. If we took up poetry, plants, or water as the focus of our studies, we would likely find less and less novelty in the subject. As described in sections II B and III above, maintaining new eyes in reviewing increasingly derivative poetry was a challenge for Hazlitt and a major problem for Coleridge.

Poe's attention to the critical maneuvers of Hazlitt and Coleridge allows his work both to suggest an Originality Effect and also to offer some hope for critics as well. Indeed, in a critic's own writing, he can and does draw on his various readers' experiences of the major- and minor- key Originality Effect. For readers will inevitably process criticism as literature rather than take it strictly as guidance for their reading selections. As Hazlitt and Poe discovered very early, readers of criticism demand to be entertained just as much as readers of fiction. Thus, a playful manifesto like "Letter" has its place as a brief original to stand alongside Dickens and Hawthorne. Individual readers may identify with the American critical upstart speaking in "Letter." More skeptical readers may take it upon themselves to research to measure the levels of irony "Letter" offers.

Thus, the standard of originality so highly touted at the outset of the Romantic period seems increasingly fragile. Originality serves as a practical label that helps publicity writers, editors, and reviewers sort out the immense body of literature directed to them. As emphasized in the foregoing discussion of “Letter to B” and Poe’s literary reviews, both the repetition of one’s own wording and themes and the free appropriation of the ideas of others are crucial to one’s achievement of the Originality Effect. For Poe’s reviews as for Hazlitt’s essays, entertaining the reader is what matters—whether that means resorting to bombast or adopting a more relaxed conversational tone. The modern critic succeeds by means of carefully calculated journalistic choices: his writing must appeal to multiple audiences, bridging the spaces between sensation-seeking news readers, well-educated elitist readers, and the cliques and intrigues more closely connected with the press. Only then will his signature style have succeeded in producing its desired impression.

Chapter Four

The Debunking Work of Poe's light gothic Tales

I. Introduction

Engaging in dialogue with casual readers of periodicals is the goal of a group of Poe's tales here designated as the light gothic. Each of these tales appeals to readers on either side of the Atlantic by showing up a "heavy father" or "boastful soldier" figure from the Jacksonian or Antebellum United States.¹⁴³ One of the striking features of British Gothic novels is their indirect commentary on their own hackneyed plots, whether directly by holding a mirror up to vice, as in the case of Matthew Lewis' The Monk (1796) or indirectly by the prodigious use of Renaissance quotation, as in Ann Radcliffe's The Castle of Otranto (1764) and The Romance of the Forest (1791).¹⁴⁴ Compared to other Gothic fiction, however, the plots of Poe's light gothic tales are even less refined.¹⁴⁵ Throughout this chapter, the term "light gothic" is written in lowercase letters as a reminder that the tales are remarkable for their social commentary presented in frivolous form and not, like Poe's "Berenice" (1835) or "Ligeia" (1838), for their faithfulness to Gothic archetypes.

Poe's light gothic serves three purposes. First, after working through its slapstick plots, one may see that each of these tales functions as commentary on the notion of limitless present-tense growth promulgated by the young American

¹⁴³ See Frye 163.

¹⁴⁴ See Marie Roberts-Mulbey 271.

¹⁴⁵ For the self-reflexive qualities of the Gothic novel, see Wickman 77.

consumer culture of the 1830s and 1840s. Then as in the twentieth century, Americans publicly celebrated home-grown machines, institutions of government, and technical and literary achievements. Of course, the flip side to American boosterism was a self-consciousness regarding the attainments of the United States and its citizens when compared to Europe. In fact, the present tense for literate Americans was an amalgam of transatlantic productions tinged with Native American and African representations.¹⁴⁶ Second, the light gothic exposes Romantic notions of the writing life. Third, these tales' close involvement with popular culture and journalism itself, as epitomized by their referencing of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817-32), would probably encourage their reprinting in periodicals spanning the Atlantic Ocean. This chapter examines the self-reflexivity of Poe's light gothic tales; first, in relation to the cult of personality that had developed under the presidency (1829-37) of Andrew Jackson and second, in terms of the occupational hazards of prose journalism.

II. The Blackwood's Model: Cultural Fad and Literary Function

A striking feature of Poe's Gothic tales, one that follows the self-reflexive component of Gothic novels from The Castle of Otranto onward, is the occupation of their protagonists. Each is a public personality as well as an active reader, writer, artist, or public speaker. In contrast to Poe's darker Gothic tales featuring artists such as the polymaths Roderick Usher and M. Auguste Dupin, the light gothic tales often feature journalists as lead characters. For example, "Loss

¹⁴⁶ See Etter 7.

of *Breath: A TALE NEITHER IN NOR OUT OF BLACKWOOD*” (1835) differs from “Usher” in many ways. The action from takes place in the United States instead of Britain. Furthermore, rather than fearing the arrival of violence throughout the narrative as they may do in “Usher,” readers of “Breath” may chuckle at the slapstick antics of indestructible protagonist Lackobreath and his unnamed wife.

Near the opening of “Loss of Breath,” the storyteller, Mr. Lackobreath, performs epic American theater for his wife, ostensibly in order to convince her that he has not suffered the injury alluded to in Poe’s title. Throughout this tale, Lackobreath is mistaken for a corpse. At one point, he enacts the convulsions of a man upon the scaffold so as not to disappoint the crowd that has assembled to see him hanged.¹⁴⁷ Thus this autodiegetic narrator is presented as awkwardly stranded between the here-and-now rough-and-tumble of home, street, and professional life and, on the other hand, an afterlife suggested by a subterranean scene with his foil, the bloated Mr. Windenough.

Mr. Lackobreath’s uncertain mortality reflects narrative conventions associated with *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (1817-32). The first-person narration of many *Blackwood’s* tales leaves readers curious as to the circumstances of their telling which are by convention tied up in the mysterious fate of each storyteller. *Blackwood’s*, edited primarily by John Wilson, provided entertainment, instruction, and flattery to businessmen like Poe’s foster father John Allan. Competing with up-to-date and sensationalized news releases, the

¹⁴⁷ Here Poe is referencing the machinery of justice familiar to readers of Newgate fiction.

magazine published real scientific reports along with the misfortunes of characters such as “The Involuntary Experimentalist” (1837). While *Blackwood’s* often blurred the boundaries between reportage and fiction, fiction played an increasingly significant role in its repertoire.¹⁴⁸ An important departure from the Gothic formula established by Ann Radcliffe was *Blackwood’s* substitution of male professionals for the Gothic’s young women engaged in the process of discovering their own adult selves.

In “How to Write a Blackwood Article”/ “A Predicament” (1838), Poe spelled out a formula whereby a novice magazinist might design a piece of fiction to thrill periodical readers. Important features of the suitably sensational Blackwood’s-style article were a show of worldly education and one or more life-threatening incidents such as decapitations and the crushing of the storyteller-protagonist’s body. Nevertheless, the storyteller—like George Plimpton playing a professional sport—could not be damaged too badly to complete his tale (340). Indeed, like some of the bewildered scientists depicted in *Blackwood’s*, Poe’s light gothic protagonists endure physical tortures beyond believable human endurance. This is especially true in “Loss of Breath” and “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (1838).

In the second of these tales, Suky Snobbs, aka “Signora Psyche Zenobia,” describes her protracted dismemberment while conducting the field research that is supposed to fuel her fiction (336).¹⁴⁹ For having been instructed by a Mr.

¹⁴⁸ See Robert Morrison and Chris Baldick xi.

¹⁴⁹ Poe’s spectacular clock-tower setting is only one of perhaps a dozen *Blackwood’s* motifs he reframed throughout his tales. Poe employs *Blackwood’s* events and/or scenery in William McGinn’s “The Man in the Bell,” 1821 (“The Devil in the Belfry,” 1840), Henry Thompson’s “Le

Blackwood on how a would-be reporter should research a *Blackwood's*-style tale, Snobbs may have taken his advice on personally experiencing the rigors of one's dramatic spectacle all too literally. Poe calls attention to our lazy identification of the pen-name with the fictional protagonist by including a drawn out mock-grotesque mutilation of the latter, her head lopped off by the hands of the Edinburgh town clock:

Dogless! niggerless, headless, what now remains for the unhappy Signora Psyche Zenobia? Alas—*nothing!* I have done (357).¹⁵⁰

So concludes “Blackwood” and the life of Poe’s fictional character. Here Poe parodies the happy-ending Explained Supernatural narrative of the Gothic heroine. In this case, Poe’s storyteller is made to speak from her fall into the gutter as a female version of a hapless *Blackwood's* narrator. Snobbs’ decapitation at the “hands of time” may serve to remind readers of the chancy and often unacknowledged labor performed by contemporary British and American journalists.¹⁵¹

Revenant,” 1827 and Daniel Keyte Sandford’s “A Night in the Catacombs,” 1818 (“Loss of Breath,” 1835); “A Night in the Catacombs” (The Cask of Amontillado,” 1846); John Galt’s “The Buried Alive,” 1821 (“Loss of Breath,” “The Premature Burial,” 1845); William Mudford’s “The Iron Shroud,” 1830 (“The Pit and the Pendulum,” 1842); “John Wilson’s “Extracts from Gosschen’s Diary,” 1818 (“The Tell-tale Heart,” 1843, “Ligeia,” 1838); The Involuntary Experimentalist,” 1837 (“The Sphinx,” 1846); and finally “The Specter-Smitten” (1831), whose medical protagonist speaks much like Poe’s autodiegetic faltering narrators. See Morrison and Baldick vii-xxi *passim*. See also David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* 239.

¹⁵⁰Poe may have employed the term “niggerless” as part of an “average racist” popular discourse that would appeal to racial stereotypes that flourished during this period. See Terence Whalen, “Average Racism” 13. The word “article,” which closes Poe’s tale “How to Write a Blackwood Article” is apparently used in place of tale, story, and the like in order to emphasize that magazine tales, like articles of clothing, are confections that meet short-term consumer demands, produced by a publishing system rather than a single inventive mind.

¹⁵¹ See Mott, *A History of American Magazines* 197.

III. Making “light” of American Consumer Culture

Americans’ indulgence in the pleasures of British periodical fiction was not an isolated phenomenon restricted to *Blackwood’s* and its ilk. Rather, the artistic and literary tastes of U.S. residents were shaped in large part by the importation of British editions that were mass-produced and sold at cut-rate prices.¹⁵² Poe’s light gothic makes fun of the tastes of American consumers, from their enthusiasm for British fiction to their critics’ backing of American literary productions to their taste for representations of Native and African Americans by relatively privileged performers.¹⁵³ One of the most striking features of the American Republic was the inequality of rights that operated to grant great privileges to its free White men of property. While slave rebellions were suppressed and Native tribes massacred, the attention of the print-buying public was frequently stuck in the groove marketed by vendors of frivolous novelty.¹⁵⁴ Continental expansion promoted by President Andrew Jackson clouded the issue of the United States’ responsibility towards its neighbors and its resident non-citizens by promoting its campaigns with dreams of a limitless destiny for the Anglo-Saxon race.¹⁵⁵ Hence Poe’s light gothic tales found ample opportunity to spoof Americans’ cultural self-importance.

¹⁵² See Mott 130.

¹⁵³ See Etter 12.

¹⁵⁴ This situation is echoed by the world of the simulacrum, the late Twentieth-Century system of commodities made to be broken or forgotten within a set period, until their later redeployment as either “Classic” or corny kitsch. See Baudrillard, *Le Systeme des objets* 95.

¹⁵⁵ See Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment* 129.

A. The Performer

As Poe observed on more than one occasion, United States residents were during the 1830s and 40s attracted by public personalities just emerging on the American stage in fields such as religion, commerce, entertainment, and politics. During Poe's lifetime, American masculinity was increasingly associated with making money. The three types of Jacksonian men at the center of Poe's light gothic tales are the gentleman, the "self-made man" and the performer.¹⁵⁶ These figures attracted attention due to their social position, their social climbing, and their ubiquitous activity, respectively. By exaggerating qualities found in contemporary heroes or combining features of several of these figures, Poe makes fun of the public's enthusiasm for its "men of parts."

During the last year of Poe's life, in his "Marginalia" installment now referred to as "A Would-Be Crichton" (1849; Mabbott 1324), Poe described the debunking of an academic authority with a tone akin to that of the light gothic tales:

Here is a good idea for a Magazine paper:--let somebody "work it up:"—A flippant pretender to universal acquirement—a would be Crichton—engrosses, for an hour or two perhaps, the attention of a large company, most of whom are profoundly impressed by his knowledge. He is very witty, in especial, at the expense of a modest young gentleman, who ventures to make no reply, and who, finally, leaves the room as if overwhelmed with confusion;--the Crichton greeting his exit with a laugh. Presently he returns, followed by a footman carrying an armful of books. These are deposited on the table. The young gentleman, now, referring to some pencilled notes which he had been secretly taking during the Crichton's display of erudition, pins the latter to his statements,

¹⁵⁶ See David Leverenz, Manhood and the American Renaissance 75.

each by each, and refutes them all in turn, by reference to the very authorities cited by the egotist himself—whose ignorance at all points is thus made apparent (ER 1440).

Poe's "good idea" has a lot to say not only about the "Crichton" but also about the industrious student whose arguments may leave him speechless. Note that Poe provides not a single word of either argument, simply describing their effect on their audience. What is emphasized in Poe's anecdote are the Crichton's long-winded ignorance and the print authority which weighs down the student's attendant. One can imagine a series of new authorities being presented by the two opponents in the manner of nesting Russian dolls, each apparently disproving what his or her successor has explained.

The figures of Poe's egotist and his opponent date back to the *alazon* and *eiron*, stock character types of classical Greek and Roman comic drama. According to the traditional formula, the *eiron*, often a young man, shows up the *alazon*, a pretender to great talent, to the delight of the crowd. Poe's light gothic subjects, who often focalize the narration as well, are presented in the manner of false authorities or "heavy fathers."¹⁵⁷ One version of the *eiron* is presented in Plautus:

the original *miles gloriosus* (cock-of-the-walk soldier) [as] a son of Jove and Venus who has killed an elephant with his fist and seven thousand men in a day's fighting. . . . The exuberance of his boasting helps put the play over.¹⁵⁸

The doubtful abilities displayed by Poe's *alazon* "The Would-Be Crichton" resemble those of the protagonists of many of his light gothic tales such as "The

¹⁵⁷ See Frye 165.

¹⁵⁸ See Frye 165.

Literary Life” (1844; see below) which offers satirical deflation of Poe’s own critical persona. In tales such as “How to Write a Blackwood Article/A Predicament,” the *alazon* and the Jacksonian rhetorician are laid low.

The storyteller of “The Man That Was Used Up” is drawn to the gleaming figure of her subject, Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith by the smiling conversationalists that mingle his name with the latest news from literature, the theater, and Indian warfare. While Smith himself displays humility during his private audience with the storyteller, he offers his public listeners an *alazon*’s portion of bluster:

“There is nothing at all like it,” he would say; “we are a wonderful people, and live in a wonderful age. Parachutes and railroads—man-traps and spring-guns! Our steam-boats are upon every sea, and the Nassau balloon packet is about to run regular trips (fare either way only twenty pounds sterling) between London and Timbuctoo. And who shall calculate the immense influence upon social life—upon arts—upon commerce—upon literature—which will be the immediate result of the great principles of electro magnetics! Nor is this all, let me assure you! There is really no end to this march of invention. The most wonderful—the most ingenious—and let me add, Mr.—Mr.—Thompson, I believe, is your name—let me add, I say, the most truly *useful* mechanical contrivances, are daily springing up like mushrooms, if I may so express myself, or more figuratively, like—ah—grasshoppers—like grasshoppers, Mr. Thompson—about us and ah—ah—ah—around us!” (381-2).

General Smith’s soliloquy recalls Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss and Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein in its facile equation of scientific innovation and human progress. However, it turns out that the technology with which the General himself has been provided is rather limited; his looking at the world through gleaming glass eyes causes him to address the storyteller incorrectly as “Mr. Thompson.”

Smith's words echo the nationalistic rhetoric of advertising, news and politics familiar to U.S. residents from the late Eighteenth to the Twenty-first centuries. The traps and guns Smith speaks of were used to wound and capture those outside the ranks of the privileged, residents deemed unworthy of U.S. citizenship. African and Native Americans, the frequent targets of slave traders and the U.S. Army, would figure prominently in many readers' mental image of such outsiders.¹⁵⁹ When Smith speaks of the London-Timbuktu balloon service, one realizes that his division of his world into "we" and "not us" extends beyond the Americas. Based on Smith's Anglocentric speech, his "march of invention" would likely emphasize nations successfully marketing themselves as fair-skinned and civilized.¹⁶⁰

Domestic and professional themes are intermingled not only in "The Man That Was Used Up" and "Blackwood," but also in "Loss of Breath." To begin with, Mr. Lackobreath bemoans his marriage to what he characterizes as a shrewish wife. More importantly, "Breath" suggests an interrelation among sexual potency, literary and rhetorical performance, and social well-being. In "Breath," the storyteller becomes aware of a flagging ability to convince others not only that he is a fond husband and a man who can speak his mind, but also that he is literally a living, breathing person. The bluster of Lackobreath's narration displays itself in his many allusions, most of which seem irrelevant to his subject. These include four sets of classical and Biblical references arranged

¹⁵⁹ See Shaindy Rudoff, "Written in Stone" 66.

¹⁶⁰ See Annette Kolodny, "Fictions of American Prehistory: Indians, Archeology, and National Origin Myths" 695. See also David Haven Blake, "The Man That Was Used Up" 344. For a distinction between "colonial and commercial imperialism," see Whalen, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses 183.

in parallel fashion, each illustrating Poe's opening point and all arranged within a single sentence (61-2). It's as if Lackobreath as narrator is compensating for the speech that has recently been denied him (as protagonist) by the catastrophe hinted at in the tale's title.¹⁶¹

As definitively as General Smith in "The Man That Was Used Up," Lackobreath's autodiegetic narration presents him as *alazon*. In performing for both diegetic audiences and Poe's readers, Lackobreath's repeated simulation of the outward signs of death stands in for the extravagant literary hoaxes and newspaper exaggerations of real-life ordeals that were familiar to Poe and his contemporaries. It is possible that Lackobreath's propensity to excess verbiage, illustrated by his insulting his wife to open the tale proper, is responsible for his losing his voice:

"Thou wretch!—thou vixen!—thou shrew!" said I to my wife on the morning after our wedding, "thou witch!—thou hag!—thou whipper-snapper!—thou sink of iniquity! thou fiery-faced quintessence of all that is abominable!—thou—thou--" here standing upon tiptoe, seizing her by the throat, and placing my mouth close to her ear, I was preparing to launch forth a new and more decided epithet of opprobrium, which should not fail, if ejaculated, to convince her of her insignificance, when, to my extreme horror and astonishment, I discovered that *I had lost my breath* (62).

The entire paragraph above is written as a single sentence. The wordiness of the narration echoes the protagonist's swelling up with his own importance only to be cut off when he oversteps certain boundaries. Poe's allusion to the devil in the

¹⁶¹ On sexual potency and the storyteller's "breath," see Leverentz, *A Historical Guide* 101.

closing words of the tale may imply that certain spiritual forces are involved in stealing his breath—either heaven, which cannot bear to listen to him, or hell, which desires his eloquence straightaway.

B. The Self-Made Man

As suggested by the actions of Suky Snobbs and Mr. Lackobreath, Poe's light gothic protagonists manifest an ambiguity of gender identity.¹⁶² Lackobreath is granted the part of a masculine hero, exaggerated so that his actions appear ludicrous. The same is true for the storyteller of "The Man That Was Used Up," who, after describing her enchantment with the military commander who is the subject of "Man," suggests that (s)he is not the "Mr. Thompson" that General Smith takes her for (382).¹⁶³ Snobbs' granting herself the pen name "the Psyche Zenobia" may have appeared to Poe's contemporaries as no more ridiculous than her taking up the role of a sensationalistic writer of periodical tales. The genre of the American travelogue, which intertwines discourses of home and frontier, seems spoofed by the movement of Lackobreath—whole body and individual parts—through a battlefield of severed members.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² For work on exploration of gender identity in Poe, see Leland S. Person, "Poe and Nineteenth-Century Gender Constructions" 156-60 *passim*.

¹⁶³ Critical opinion is divided as to whether the unnamed storyteller for "The Man That Was Used Up" is male or female. See Barbara Cantalupo, "Poe's Female Narrators" 50.

¹⁶⁴ See Reynolds 227.

What really unites Poe's light gothic victim-protagonists, however, is their deployment of artifice. Lackobreath's bedroom reveals "a set of false teeth, two pairs of hips, an eye, and a bundle of billets-doux from Mr. Windenough to my wife" (64). While the storyteller assures readers that his wife's dalliance has not disturbed him greatly, the bedroom's profusion of body parts brings to mind the numerous replacement organs employed by Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith of "The Man That Was Used Up." Smith is a hero of Native American campaigns who stands tall only in legend and when literally pieced together—like the many little bits that make up his name—by his African-American attendant.

The Brevet Brigadier General's middle initials and last name are a puzzle: A. B. C. Smith—the first three letters of the alphabet followed by the most typical American name. His military rank is open to question, given the term "Brevet," denoting a temporary honor, at its head. The idea of Smith himself as a precious physical commodity is conveyed by the storyteller's second and third paragraphs. She proceeds downward from head to toe, declaring the General the most perfect man she has ever seen:

Upon this topic—the topic of Smith's personal appearance—I have a kind of melancholy satisfaction in being minute. His head of hair would have done honor to a Brutus;--nothing could be more richly flowing, or possess a brighter gloss. It was of a jetty black;--which was also the color, or more properly the no color, of his unimaginable whiskers. You perceive I cannot speak of these latter without enthusiasm; it is not too much to say that they were the handsomest pair of whiskers under the sun. At all events, they encircled, and at times partially overshadowed, a mouth utterly unequalled. Here were the most entirely even, and the most brilliantly white of all conceivable teeth (Mabbott 379).

Of course, if he were a smaller man, the storyteller adds, one might judge his carriage a bit stiff. One discovers upon a second reading that the narrator's relish for the General's appearance is colored by her realization that it is largely a man-made fiction. Were the General whole and undamaged by his war experience which paradoxically has earned him his celebrity, the storyteller might dream of marrying him.

As it happens, the slave or servant Pompey is responsible for attaching the various artificial components of the nondescript "bundle of something" named General Smith so that he can perform everyday tasks. Poe's detailing of Pompey's function is crucial; the labors of the African-American non-citizen literally support the functioning of the General's class of people.¹⁶⁵ In retrospect, one reads the invalid Smith's initial description as a devilishly-handsome Brutus as a negative comment on his character. Literally and figuratively, the fine-looking parts of Smith do not add up to a trustworthy whole.

Just as reliant on technology as General Smith is the protagonist of "X-ing a Paragrab" (1849), Mr. Touch-and-go Bullet-head. This seemingly independent operator is an Eastern editor who starts up a newspaper, "The Tea-Pot," out West. Bullet-head's response to the taunting of a rival newspaper editor is to compose a lead article which is rendered nearly indecipherable by the pilfering of the small "o" from his paper's type-case. This circumstance moves his compositors to replace each "o" with an "x," a procedure which renders the article nearly unreadable:

¹⁶⁵ See Blake 346. The storyteller's reference to Pompey as Smith's "Negro valet" may be a euphemism for "house slave."

. . . Dxes yzur mxther *knxw* yxu're xut? Xh, nx, nx! sx gx hxme at xnce, nxw, Jxhn, tx yxur xdixs xld wxxds xf Cxncxrd! Gx hxme tx yxur wxxds, xld xwl, --gx! Yxw wxnt? Xh, pxh, pxh, Jxhn, dxn't dx sx! Yxu've gxt tx gx, yxu knxw! sx gx at xnce, and dxn't gx slxw; fxr nxbxdy xwns yxu here, yxw knxw. Xh, Jxhn, Jxhn, if yxw *dxn't* gx yxu're nx *hxmx*—nx! Yxu're xnly a fxwl, an xwl; a cxw, a sxw, a dxll, a pxll; a pxxr xld gxxd-fxr-nxthing-tx-nxbdy lxx, dxg, hxg, xr frxg, cxme xut xf a Cxncxrd bxg (1374).¹⁶⁶

The editor is derided as the unwitting target of his own article, which has boomeranged to strike him from behind. The denigration of New England is accomplished by juxtaposing the name “Tea Pot,” suggestive of the legendary Boston protest of British taxation, with the locations described in the unpleasant print above—for example, the “xdixus xld wxxds xf Cxncxrd.” Although forests may have been the site of many massacres involving the U.S. government and Native American tribes, they were rarely treated in American literature as unpleasant in and of themselves.¹⁶⁷ The voice calling the woods “odious and old” resembles the taunting that goes on at elementary-school recess.

As usual, Poe aims his satirical darts at well-known literary faces. The Concord woods are recognized by regular periodical readers as the site of Transcendentalist inspiration celebrated in the verse of Emerson and the pages of The Dial. One's initial frustration and eventual enjoyment of the sight gag are promoted by the italics applied to the x-filled “know,” “don't,” and “homo” as well as the vexed compound “good-for-nothing-to-nobody.” The magnificent final sentence of the quotation above applies to its targets many of the unpleasant names attached to periodical editors-in-chief by Poe's “The Literary Life.” In

¹⁶⁶ Note the Tea-Pot's typographical error, the accidental “z” in the second word of the quotation.

¹⁶⁷ See Kerwin Lee Klein, Frontiers of American Historical Imagination 129.

declaring “nobody owns you,” the “Tea-Pot” is burning its editor: while not a slave, his actions resemble the foolish behavior of African-American slaves as described in much contemporary literature. It’s remarkable—goes the thinking of the passage speaking against its editor—that not only are you not a slave, you are an editor out of Concord, which is allegedly the most sophisticated address in the country. Since a periodical editor is considered only as good as the journal he publishes, the grandstanding of Bullet-head manages to cross him and the Tea-Pot all the way out of town.

As literally spelled out in the quotation from “X-ing a Paragrab,” above, Poe’s light gothic tales get a lot of mileage out of the adage that parts make the man—literally in the case of “The Man that was Used Up,” figuratively in that Bullet-head is but a character type largely constructed by the print sector discourse. If, like the General’s supporters you aren’t much of a judge, then an *alazon*’s bluster may combine with surface appearances to carry your allegiance. As shown in “Loss of Breath,” American readers of Poe’s light gothic tales were seen as eager to hear of physical mutilation, especially when linked to American frontier mythology. Contemporary with “Breath,” the 1834 *New-England Magazine* called “Indian murder or speech. . . the heaviest drug on the market.”¹⁶⁸ In addition, the collection of body parts as trophies was associated with various European and American military groups. Lackobreath’s

¹⁶⁸ Lucy Maddox, *Removals*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991 38-9, qtd Etter 17.

performance of John Augustus Stone's Metamora (1829) to convince his wife of his enduring vitality suggests the contortions of celebrity actor Edwin Forrest who was cheered for his enthusiastic portrayal of the eponymous chief.¹⁶⁹

The Gentlemen's Racket

Recalling Lackobreath's bombast and "A Would-Be Crichton"'s presentation of academic debate as pantomime, "Some Words with a Mummy" (*Colton's American Review*, April 1845) offers readers some fun with the questionable truth-claims announced by antebellum headlines. "Mummy" follows up on the public thirst for the drama of scientific and historical research, specifically the vogue of Egyptology.¹⁷⁰ The promulgators of scientific learning are represented by Poe's bleary-eyed and besotted storyteller-physician. Instead of acting according to the Hippocratic Oath, the doctors' slapstick maneuvers suggest the intention of doing nothing serious, or taking nothing seriously—nothing, that is, but their broad assumptions.

Like recent viewers of the television series *ER* and *Law and Order*, American periodical readers have long been interested in knowing how technical procedures are accomplished. If one cannot explain an operation, it is nevertheless useful to offer one's readers some technical vocabulary for the sake of verisimilitude. While Poe—with his focus on the human life–death cycle, had previously exploited readers' interest in medical matters, "Mummy" both panders

¹⁶⁹ See Etter 16.

¹⁷⁰ Public interest in ancient Egypt had been stimulated by Jean-Francois Champollion's deciphering of hieroglyphics from the Rosetta Stone (1822) and the scholarly work delivered by men who traveled to Egypt with Napoleon's expedition (1799-1801). See OED I: Egyptology. See also The Pit and the Pendulum and Other Stories 86.

to this taste and, by his characterization of the Egyptologists, calls attention to this technique.¹⁷¹ The doctor, a mere shadow in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” becomes a central character in “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” and is represented by nearly every diegetic character in “Mummy.” In the first two of these tales, the doctor appears mysterious and threatening. While Poe hints that the Ushers’ doctor wants to dissect Madeleine at his earliest opportunity, in “Mummy,” Dr. Templeton brings on an early death for Augustus Bedloe by involving him in an unfortunate experience of the previous century. By contrast, the doctors who reanimate the City Museum’s “Mummy” are presented as middle-aged schoolboys convinced of their individual and collective superiority to the investigators of any other time or place. In order to assemble the combination of the silly and the scientific that produced “Mummy,” Poe brushed up on the basics of Egyptology.¹⁷² Poe’s reading of this material allowed him to name contemporary authorities such as George Robbins Gliddon and the travel-writing celebrity James Silk Buckingham (1786-1855), thereby grounding the playful action of “Mummy” in a thin layer of verisimilitude.¹⁷³

As a way of both spoofing and exploiting the Orientalist and medical vogues, Poe employs what “Blackwood” terms the “tone laconic, or curt. . . . Somehow thus: Can’t be too brief. Can’t be too snappish. Always a full stop.

¹⁷¹ On reform literature in antebellum America, see Reynolds 82.

¹⁷² Major sources for Poe’s description of this pastime include George Robbins Gliddon’s collection of lectures entitled *Ancient Egypt* and the *Encyclopaedia Americana*’s entries on Embalming and Mummies. For Poe’s sources on Egyptology, see Mabbott 1176-7 and Frederickson 74-6 *passim*. See also John L. Stephens’ *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land. By an American* (New York: Harper, 1837), which Poe treated in the New York *Review* for October 1837.

¹⁷³ Buckingham founded the literary journal *The Athenaeum* in 1828. Poe seems to have turned against him during the 1840s for his expression of anti-slavery views. See *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, “Athenaeum” and “Buckingham.”

And never a paragraph” (Mabbott 341). This style stands out as the storyteller-protagonist is summoned to partake in an impromptu series of experiments on a museum’s mummy:

. . . We were about to separate for the present, when some one suggested an experiment or two with the Voltaic pile.¹⁷⁴ The application of electricity to a Mummy three or four thousand years old at the least, was an idea, if not very sage, still sufficiently original, and we all caught it at once. About one tenth in earnest and nine tenths in jest, we arranged a battery in the Doctor’s study, and conveyed thither the Egyptian (II: 1181).

The storyteller’s knowing irony may suggest to the nonprofessional reader a familiarity with an intricate array of American scientific procedure. The sentences that follow demonstrate Poe’s familiarity with Greek, with Latin, and with reference works—ostensibly medical ones. Most importantly for maintaining the proper tone, the first paragraph quoted above measures two sentences in length and the second, three. Longer paragraphs within *Mummy* alternate between dialogue from the scene of the event, description of scientific procedure and the musings of the storyteller. In addition, Poe’s second sentence, “The application of electricity to a mummy. . . and we all caught it at once”, conveys a sense of Mesmeric electrotherapy as a folk tradition and scientific prank. Hence, “*Mummy*”’s simple style and “snappish” verbal gags render its medical procedure far less sinister than that of “*Mountains*” or “*Usher*.”

Once the narrator, fortified with five bottles of brown stout, has observed motion in the eyes of the mummy following the very first dose of electricity, he and his companions set to work:

¹⁷⁴ The terms “Voltaic pile” and “galvanic battery” were used interchangeably during this period, when popular literature had not yet distinguished between the hypothesis of Luigi Galvani (1791) and its refinement by Alessandro Volta (1799).

After the first shock of astonishment, however, we resolved, as a matter of course, upon farther experiment forthwith. Our operations were now directed against the great toe of the right foot. We made an incision over the outside of the exterior *os sesamoideum pollicis pedis*, and thus got at the root of the abductor muscle. Readjusting the battery, we applied the fluid to the bisected nerves—then, with a movement of exceeding life-likeness, the Mummy first drew up its right knee so as to bring it nearly in contact with the abdomen, and then, straightening the limb with inconceivable force, bestowed a kick upon Doctor Ponnonner which had the effect of discharging that gentleman, like an arrow from a catapult, through a window into the street below (Mabbott 1181-2).

The fatuous narrator who glibly relates this scientific experiment is surrounded by friends still more worthy of scorn, if their powers of observation are any indication. He is the only man who has noticed the mummy's initial blinking of an eye. Following the practice of Mr. Blackwood Blackwood, the style of the preceding paragraph may be described as a Tone Medical. This style persists as the mummy's body prepares for the kick. The final phrases of the paragraph, however, mock the medical profession in describing the end of the experiment, namely Doctor Ponnonner's tumble.

That Ponnonner suffers no ill effects from this event is evidence of "Mummy"'s genre: As in "A Predicament," Poe's companion-piece to "How to Write a Blackwood Article," the protagonists cannot be seriously injured. Perhaps the most significant precursor to the mummy's kick, the leg motion of dissected frogs when contacted by electricity, was reported by Luigi Galvani in 1789. Galvani postulated that life runs on electricity, that electricity represents the "soul of the universe." Galvani's hypotheses inspired Mary Shelley to have

Victor Frankenstein awakes his Creature with an electric shock.¹⁷⁵ However, Poe's description of the kick as "a movement of exceeding life-likeness" emphasizes that the men playing with electricity have no idea why the mummy has arisen:

We rushed *en masse* to bring in the mangled remains of the victim, but had the happiness to meet him upon the staircase, coming up in an unaccountable hurry, brimful of the most ardent philosophy, and more than ever impressed with the necessity of prosecuting our experiments with rigor and with zeal (1182).

Poe's gratuitous use of italicized French to describe the doctors' motions emphasizes that the men's eagerness is worthy of a mob—undignified, of course, for professionals but familiar to connoisseurs of the fraternity or bachelor's party. Since—according to Poe's interest in emphasizing wordplay rather than sensational gore—no bloodshed is provided, the doctors are forced to content themselves with verbal warfare.

A discussion ensues in which the mummy, whom Poe labels Count Allamistakeo, and the doctors compare the achievements of ancient Egypt and the antebellum United States. Allamistakeo describes his high-caste Egyptian form of entombment much as a writer at the very end of the twentieth century might the process of being frozen in a cryogenic chamber. Mummification seems to be a matter of fashion or, for those who can afford it, of professional curiosity, the motive advanced by Count Allamistakeo. Most interesting are Allamistakeo's words on authorship. According to him, the fashion among scholars of his time was to be embalmed alive.

¹⁷⁵ See Tatar 59.

Typically, Poe exploits the wide appeal of popular science, writing into “Mummy” a correspondence between Allamistakeo’s assertions and popular race theory:

“. . . I remember, once and once only, hearing something remotely hinted, by a man of many speculations, concerning the origin of the human race; and by this individual the very word Adam (or Red Earth) which you make use of, was employed. He employed it, however, in a generical sense, with reference to the spontaneous generation from rank soil (just as a thousand of the lower genera of creatures are germinated)—the spontaneous germination, I say, of five vast hordes of men, simultaneously upspringing in five distinct and nearly equal divisions of the globe” (1190).

This description approximates that promulgated by American apologists for slavery such as Josiah Nott.¹⁷⁶ Poe makes certain to qualify Allamistakeo’s account, presenting it secondhand at a distance of thousands of years from Jacksonian America. Poe offers readers the hot topic of race theory while making sure that “Mummy” does not take a stand: Allamistakeo’s account can be taken as either a degree of support for or a laugh at the theorists of polygenesis.

Democracy and progress, two of America’s trumpeted virtues, are to the mummy not desirable things. While the former seems to have led to mob rule, the latter is championed by organs such as the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*, an extract of which leaves the entire group scratching their heads in puzzlement. The upshot of “Mummy” is that quack remedies such as Pononner’s lozenges and Brandreth’s Pills are the things that hadn’t been invented in the days familiar to

¹⁷⁶ See Frederickson 82. For the political manipulation of American race theory, see also John M. Belohlavek, “Race, Progress, and Destiny: Caleb Cushing and the Quest for American Empire” 25.

Count Allamistakeo. In other words, the Egyptian society represented by Allamistakeo appears one of exquisite refinement in every art but that of advertising, better known as swindling.

Another example of the overreaching tendencies of American salesmanship is Alexander-the-Great-o-nopolis, the site for editor Bullet-Head's news operation "The Tea-Pot" and a monument to the presumption of American expansionism. Poe's story was written during the height of the American Neoclassical Period, when Americans were applying classical names to their towns and streets and classical architecture to their buildings. By naming their town for a Greek antecedent, Poe's Americans literally base their dreams of empire on monuments of ancient Greece and Rome. The lengthy name chosen over Alexandria might impress settlers at a lowest-common-denominator level of education. In addition, the specificity of the words "the great" ensures that everyone who encounters the name remarks that the place has at least a claim to high standing. Poe's rejoinder to such overreaching is his abbreviation for the city's name, Nopolis. This term connotes a region that is lacking in polity, a place of rule lacking an organized form of government. As Mr. Touch-and-go Bullet-head's name suggests, his fortunes are at the mercy of typographical whim, his own editorial hubris, and the opinion of his readers.

IV. How to Read Sensational Fiction

Inevitably, some of Poe's contemporary readers in the U.S. and Britain were Thomases demanding proof of the extraordinary phenomena detailed by his light

gothic works. Poe's "The Angel of the Odd: AN EXTRAVAGANZA" (1844) examines such an attitude, presenting an unbelieving narrator who turns from a pile of tedious writings including Joel Barlow's American epic "Columbiad" (1807) to a newspaper obituary:

The avenues to death are numerous and strange. A London paper mentions the decease of a person from a singular cause. He was playing at "puff the dart," which is played with a long needle inserted in some worsted, and blown at a target through a thin tube. He placed the needle at the wrong end of the tube, and drawing his breath strongly to puff the dart forward with force, drew the needle into his throat. It entered the lungs, and in a few days killed him (Mabbott 1101).

Apparently, the storyteller has read enough of the sensational press to recognize a likely fiction, declaring "I intend to believe nothing henceforward that has anything of the 'singular' about it. The storyteller has eaten a large dinner and imbibed a great deal of alcohol. Still, his focus on the word 'singular' is well taken.¹⁷⁷

Not surprisingly, the remainder of "Angel" consists of a sequence of unbelievable events. A German-accented "angel" composed of alcoholic vessels suddenly appears to question the storyteller's disbelief in the newspaper article. The steady consumption of alcohol within the narrative suggests that it can be read as a light-hearted version of Poe's Temperance tale "The Black Cat." The angel says his function is to provide "the *odd accidents*" which surprise men like the storyteller. When the angel literally lets the storyteller drop from the sky, he falls down his chimney into his living room which is filled with newspaper and

¹⁷⁷ In a discussion of Poe's "burlesque" or light gothic tales, Edward H. Davidson notes Charles Baudelaire observing "that Americans 'like so much to be fooled'" (139).

alcohol. One implication of the storyteller's alcoholic experience is that if you aren't in the mood to enjoy a tale of sensation, give it a little while, or pass the tale to your neighbor. Most readers are sociable enough to enjoy such tales at least some of the time.

Those perusing the tales of Poe and his contemporaries should do as the storyteller of "Angel" had resolved to and read for entertainment before expecting any edification. Perhaps because the Angel appears such an absurd creature, "The Angel of the Odd" is more downright silly than the rest of the light gothic tales. When juxtaposed with these, however, "Angel" carries a serious message: It seems far better to doubt the authority of one's reading matter than to carelessly obey national directives, represented by the "man-traps and spring guns" of General Smith, in which nightmares are presented as saving graces.

V. "The Circumstances of Prose Production, circa 1840

A. Writing both In- and Outside of the light gothic Tales

The taking-apart of protagonists' bodies in "The Man that was Used Up," "Loss of Breath," and "How to Write a Blackwood's Article" both allows and problematizes a romantic—i.e., anti-realistic--view of writing. Whatever happens to each of Poe's fictional characters, many readers conventionally assume that both the storyteller and the author must live on—or how would the tale get told? Poe's essay, "Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison-House" (1845) is explicit in its description of publishers' methods of obtaining copy while putting off paying their authors. By the time one reads a periodical article, "Secrets" declares, its

author may well be dead or dying of starvation due to such delays.¹⁷⁸ While Poe's light gothic tales do not speak as plainly as "Secrets" on writer-publisher relations, they do offer considerable insight into the exigencies of life behind the scenes of periodical contribution.

There are at least two similarities linking Poe's light gothic protagonists and the heroines of certain Gothic novels. In several British Gothics such as Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (1803/18), the heroine is described performing the acts of reading and writing. Her journal, which generally gives a simplified view of the novel as a whole, is a site in which she recounts her anxiety for her property and her person which are menaced by the Gothic villain. To a greater degree than this Gothic-novel heroine, Poe's storytellers are represented as reporter-protagonists, their first person autodiegetic narration bracketing one or more varieties of infradiegetic performance. Thus, while Suky Snobbs, in "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and Mr. Lackobreath in "Loss of Breath," describe their looming death and survival, respectively, the storyteller calling himself "William Wilson" is presented as writing a defiant confession. Writing thus offers Poe's protagonists an opportunity to unveil to readers and perhaps to themselves their own hidden emotional turmoil. The other similarity between the Gothic heroine and Poe's light gothic protagonists is their physical invulnerability. While regularly threatened violence never reaches the body of the Gothic heroine, attacks and dismemberment do not faze Poe's male storytellers. Even Snobbs' death, like the trip to Edina, is staged for the sake of her story.

¹⁷⁸ Like other writers of his generation, Poe may have found it profitable to circulate news of his financial woes. Nathaniel Parker Willis and Rufus Griswold are said to have benefited by spreading tales of their own misfortune. See Baker, Sentiment and Celebrity 58.

“Loss of Breath”’s ambiguous characterization of its storyteller/protagonist Lackobreath as rhetorician struck dumb suggests at once the marvelous power that narrative holds over readers and the uneven balance of powerful rhetoric and pitiful financial muscle available to most would-be authors. Lackobreath’s verbal effusion in protesting a case of speaker’s block makes him a representative of these circumstances. For magazinists of the 1830s and 40s spoke to their audiences using a voice without a name—specifically, an unreliable or invisible byline—as the creation of a network of forces including publishers, booksellers, readers, and reviewers. In Poe’s day, multiple authors might write using the same byline. In addition, a range of anonymous articles have been attributed by various readers to editorial staffers such as Poe.

Fiction-writers’ power to influence publishers was during Poe’s heyday closely linked to their ability to string words together at a penny a line, in the manner of Charles Dickens. Newly-trained sensationalist reporter Suky Snobbs, in the guise of “The Psyche Zenobia,” spends the bulk of “A Predicament,” her version of a *Blackwood’s* article, engaged in pseudo-scholarly observations within a verbose description of her visit to a place she calls Edina. Only at the midpoint of her article does Snobbs reveal Edina to be based on a familiar model: “Everyone has been to Edinburgh—the classic Edina” (352). If Snobbs writes, like Poe, for an American audience, then this statement must not be taken literally. For the vast majority of American readers of periodical fiction in 1838 would never have visited Scotland. They would, however, have journeyed to a Britain of their imagination with the aid of periodical literature.

B. Money Talks

The final word “article” in the title of Poe’s tale “How to Write a Blackwood Article” is important for its reference to working relations between editors of periodicals and writers seeking publication. The specific meaning of the word is a piece of prose writing that would meet *Blackwood’s* stylistic and thematic standards. It is striking that Poe uses the ambiguous term “article” instead of a word such as “story” that would describe the genre of the work. An article is commonly a possession, something manufactured and most likely sold to a private owner. Thus, besides sending up the “singular” identifying marks of the sensational *Blackwood’s* narratives, Poe’s tale makes note of the intensive commodification of all parties involved in the process of assembling such works.

The concept of delivering oral or print rhetoric as one’s means of sustaining life is employed to comic effect in “Loss of Breath” and “How to Write a Blackwood Article.” Everyday readers of these tales are not likely to think hard about words providing the bread and butter for those who compose and arrange them. Thinking of the perils of Suky Snobbs and Mr. Lackobreath, however, it is possible to imagine the periodical writer stationed beside a conveyor belt, cranking out material to fill pages according to a rigid schedule. If one imagines a single belt used for fiction, editorial, and criticism assignments, one may get a sense of the plight of the writer given only hours or minutes to assemble a periodical article.¹⁷⁹ Lackobreath’s scheming for one-half the tremendous

¹⁷⁹ In Poe’s time, the quality or intensity of periodical writing was being superceded by an emphasis on sheer quantity. The success of inexpensive print formats including the American mammoth

quantity of hot air that fuels his wife's seducer Mr. Windenough speaks to the periodical writer's dilemma of being asked to write faster and faster—both in terms of article length and frequency of contribution, rather than better and better.

Certain writing techniques, such as the stiff upper lip boasted by Lackobreath, lend themselves to the practice of periodical journalism. Styles recommended to Snobbs by Mr. Blackwood include

The tone elevated, diffusive, and interjectional. Some of our best novelists patronize this tone. The words must be all in a whirl, like a humming-top, and make a noise very similar, which answers remarkably well instead of meaning. This is the best of all possible styles where the writer is in too great a hurry to think (341).

The avowed hurry of the periodical writer echoes Snobbs' anxious storytelling which is arranged so as to suggest the distress of Snobbs as prototypical *Blackwood's* protagonist. Snobbs' death at the hands of the clock face echoes Mr. Blackwood's advice on the handling of Transcendentalist writings: "A little reading of the Dial will carry you a great way" (342). This anti-Emersonian play on words is supported by Mr. Blackwood's offering Snobbs his watch with the intimidating supposition that his bulldogs, "Tom!—Peter!—Dick, you villain!" can indeed devour her in five minutes (347). Snobbs protests, however, that she cannot spare the time. This attitude on the part of Snobbs may be attributed to pressing periodical deadlines. Its immediate cause, however, appears to be Snobbs' natural and healthy fear of rampaging dogs; she needs no reading to tell

papers and British-made editions prompted magazine staffers to seek to prioritize wide and rapid publication. Independent contributors of fiction and poetry were confronted with similar temporal constraints. See Lehuu, By the late 1830's, when Poe developed most of his prose technique, improved technology had reduced by one-half the standard rate of pay offered to Poe and his peers. See Whalen, "The American Publishing Industry" 74.

her that her interview with Mr. Blackwood is at an end. The supposition that a vendor of sensation stories must write on what she has personally experienced is one promoted by the British periodical style, so much so that Poe can toy with the idea of Snobbs actually dying in order to publish her article, putting on *Blackwood's* airs in speaking under the pseudonym of “the Psyche Zenobia.”

While Poe’s light gothic storytellers such as Suky Snobbs come off as narcissistic conversationalists, Poe’s ambiguously-gendered narration for “Man” pokes fun at other stylistic affectations of Jacksonian periodical fiction. The very first paragraph of this tale offers a hesitant storyteller, as uncertain in her facts as the male voice introducing “Ligeia”:

I cannot just now remember when or where I first made the acquaintance of that truly fine-looking fellow Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith. Some one *did* introduce me to the gentleman, I am sure—at some public meeting, I know very well—held about something of great importance, no doubt—at some place or other, I feel convinced,—whose name I have unaccountably forgotten. The truth is—that the introduction was attended, on my part, with a degree of anxious embarrassment which operated to prevent any definite impressions of either time or place. I am constitutionally nervous—this, with me, is a family failing, and I can’t help it. In especial, the slightest appearance of mystery—of any point I cannot exactly comprehend—puts me at once into a pitiable state of agitation (378).

The woman describing Smith must be constantly ill at ease, if she is as scatter-brained as the bulk of this paragraph suggests. The first sentence makes a lengthy qualification of the apparent subject of the tale. The description of Smith, however, must wait for the narrator’s confession “I cannot just now remember when or where. . . .” Within another sentence or two, one realizes that the storyteller has forgotten Smith in her positioning of her own insecurities at the

center of her talk. To such a storyteller as that of “The Man That Was Used Up,” everything is sensational. Like Poe’s cynical storyteller for “The Angel of the Odd,” however, Poe’s readers are likely to question the validity of her statements.

C. Identity, Personality, and Genre

As the light gothic tales show in deflating their *alazons*, Poe’s America is a world of poseurs and masters of humbuggery. These characters include his self-avowed professional storytellers, prattling buffoons such as Thingum Bob, Suky Snobbs, and General John A.B.C. Smith. The informed reader may take the “A Tale neither in nor out of Blackwood” subtitle of “Loss of Breath” as another signpost for suspense, suggesting that Poe will ultimately manage to poke fun at *Blackwood’s*, the British name-brand which provides his style guide. Like Suky Snobbs, Lackobreath strains the notion of storyteller-cum-performer, making use of the storyteller’s license to fib. Here’s a recent description of the liar’s stance:

Lying is a bad thing. It makes you sorry you were ever born. And not to have been born is a curse. You are condemned to live outside time. And when you live outside time, there is no day and night. You don’t even get a chance to die (Paul Auster, City of Glass).

As this late-twentieth-century observer suggests, a writer must lie, changing names or stretching circumstances in one way or another simply in order to make herself heard. The process of telling and listening to stories inevitably manipulates time: one’s surrender to the process distorts one’s sense of a regular chronology. One writes stories in order to ensnare readers like a spider structuring its web so as to prevent its visitors from escaping. Occasionally,

published writers become celebrities known well beyond their professional circle. Though they may often wish they had followed another vocation, writers may never absolutely die: as long as they've written engaging material, they will be read long beyond their physical deaths.

As storytellers, Poe's protagonists Suky Snobbs, William Wilson, and Thingum Bob (see below) disavow their proper names in an effort to alter their fortunes. Despite the tragedy it presents, "William Wilson" may be classed as a light gothic narrative because of its intense and incessant wordplay.¹⁸⁰ "William, son of Will," the literal Anglo-Saxon reading of Poe's title, suggests the storyteller's assumed identity ("Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. . . .") as a descendant of Shakespeare. That is, Poe's invocation of the great English poet and his punning on that familiar word "Will" creates this character's precursors. The surname connoting "son of Will" also suggests this tale's debt to *Blackwood's* editor John Wilson, whose series *Noctes Ambrosianae* served as an inspiration for Poe's unpublished collection of light fiction, "Tales of the Folio Club" (1832-3).¹⁸¹ The second self that haunts the storyteller of "William Wilson" may be read as an allegory for the unregulated reproduction of American literature by the British and American presses without the acknowledgement of their authors or the payment of any sort of fee. When a writer of the Jacksonian era saw his fiction in an unfamiliar context such as a French, British, or unexpected American edition, he might be proud of his articles' wide circulation—but he might wish, like Charles Dickens, for a little

¹⁸⁰ The linguistic games coursing through "William Wilson" require that it be taken either as light gothic or the lightest of Poe's Dark Gothic tales.

¹⁸¹ See Allen 29.

more control over their reprinting.¹⁸² In the case of “William Wilson,” Poe’s storyteller has lost any sense of his own uniqueness and begs for readers’ sympathy.

Along with the personal identity of authors and editors, the genre of American periodical articles during the 1830s and 1840s was often unclear. That is, rather arbitrary interspersal of criticism and fiction throughout a single periodical edition was a common phenomenon in both newspapers and magazines. Much of the time, the only external indication of a work’s genre would be its title, often indexed in the case of a magazine. Poe’s article “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq., Late Editor. . . . BY HIMSELF” (1844), which describes how to succeed in publishing, is one work that defies stable generic boundaries.

To be a master of collage, to be as unoriginal as possible, is a technique that Poe shares with aspiring poet Thingum Bob, son of a barber named Thomas. For by interspersing a hodgepodge of highbrow literary references such as the idealist philosophy of Immanuel Kant and everyday consumer products such as “The Literary Life”’s hair tonic, Oil of Bob, Poe will attract a broad and heterogeneous target audience. Here is how the aspiring poet Bob Junior concocts such a mixture:

From the rubbish of an old book-stall, in a very remote corner of the town, I got together several antique and altogether unknown or forgotten volumes. . . . [These included something] which purported to be a translation of one Dante’s Inferno, . . . another . . . which contained a good many old plays by some person whose

¹⁸² See McGill, *American Literature* 197. For the impact of cheap reprinting of Dickens’ novels on his own promotional practice, see Erickson 159.

name I forget, . . . [and] from a third, which was the composition of some blind man or other, either a Greek or a Choctaw, . . . I took about fifty verses beginning with ‘Achilles’ wrath,’ and ‘grease,’ and something else. From a fourth, which I recollect was also the work of a blind man, I selected a page or two all about ‘hail’ and ‘holy light’; and although a blind man has no business to write about light, still the verses were sufficiently good in their way. . . . Having made fair copies of these poems I . . . dispatched one to each of the four principal Magazines, with a request for speedy insertion and prompt pay (768).

From the description given, these documents include translations of not only Dante, but also Homer’s Iliad and Milton’s Paradise Lost. Bob, however, lends an American outlook to his rendering of the English-language literary canon. His account presents the purported cradle of Western culture as the substance (grease) used by a barber to treat both his customers’ hair and his tools. Bob’s choice of the word “hail” indicates a similar misunderstanding of the context of the work he is appropriating. For Milton’s “hail” [III, i] is an imperative beginning his address to God to grant him insight into his project. Bob, however, takes “hail” as a noun, a decision which would mark him illiterate to many American readers. Here In this passage, Bob manages to deflate the American passion for classical culture and his own literary pretensions. By confusing the languages of classical epic literature and a native tribe suffering removal by the United States army, he provides good fun for a wide range of readers.

A careful reading of “The Literary Life” will take notice of its title. The last two words “BY HIMSELF” underline the folly of believing such a desperado as Bob. Who is this fellow called “himself,” anyway? According to the model laid out by Thingum Bob’s promotion of his very first writings, “himself” can be anyone but Bob. Conversely, Bob, who excels at manipulating pseudonyms, may

be anyone but himself. For the story's unmasking of its publisher-protagonist as a confidence man drains the familiar name "Bob" and the pronoun "himself" of definite meaning. In 1844, when the tale was published, "BY HIMSELF" was the marker of an autobiography which told a story that would assertively challenge readers to suggest it was untrue. Specifically, this label was applied to the burgeoning genre of the slave narrative in order to request sympathy from a sharply divided American audience.¹⁸³ Unlike many of these histories, however, the success story told in "The Literary Life" is a complete fraud. Who, then, are readers of "The Literary Life?" to believe? They may long for interaction with people and works not declaring themselves completely self-made, realized all "by himself." Hence, "The Literary Life" has the potential to question the granting of the designation "nonfiction" for autobiography.

Bob's first writing is accomplished by two feats worthy of Poe's diddler or confidence man, Bob's driving his father out of town and his purchase of several moldy books. Bob obtains these works, Poe tells us, "for a song." In other words, Bob trades the [folk] barbershop jingle composed by the editor of the "Gad-Fly" for a heap of what to him is most strange and unfamiliar literature which he will try to claim as his own. It is fitting that the short syllable "bob" is a British term for a shilling as well as the end of the catch-all term "thingamabob." As befits a self-important narrator, "I love Bob" is the message suggested by the enunciation of "Oil of Bob," Bob Senior's own hair tonic that inspires the editor of the "Gad-Fly" and engages wee Bob in his publishing career.

¹⁸³ The frequent publishing of such chronicles by the American Anti-Slavery Society prompted a great deal of scorn among pro-slavery and Nativist elements in the United States. See Susan Wylie-Jones, "The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings in the South" 291.

The only childhood scene with which Bob is provided takes place in

Thomas Bob's barbershop:

Of one's *very* remote ancestors it is superfluous to say much. My father, Thomas Bob, Esq., stood for many years at the summit of his profession, which was that of a merchant-barber, in the city of Smug. His warehouse was the resort of all the principal people of the place, and especially of the editorial corps—a body which inspires all about it with profound veneration and awe. . . . My first moment of positive inspiration must be dated from that ever-memorable epoch, when the brilliant conductor of the “Gad-Fly,” in the intervals of the important process just mentioned, recited aloud, before a conclave of our apprentices, an inimitable poem in honor of the “Only Genuine Oil-of-Bob,” (so called from its talented inventor, my father,) and for which effusion the editor of the “Fly” was remunerated with a regal liberality, by the firm of Thomas Bob and company, merchant barbers (766-7).

Bob's family is apparently of low social standing, although his father does entertain members of the press. The barbershop jingle described by the lengthy sentence which closes the paragraph is something that could be tossed off with a momentary insight and paid for in small change. Thus Thingum Bob himself, a newspaper baron by the time of his telling the tale, is presented as a demonstration of how literary talent and financial reward may often be inversely rather than directly correlated. Bob's business deals show newspaper owners insensitive to anonymous submissions, but open to flattery and opportunities to march (to creep, to fly as in the cases of *The Toad* and *The Daddy-Long Legs*) alongside an enterprising author.

The closing paragraphs of “*The Literary Life*” present “Thingum Bob” as another word for genius. This constitutes a clever pun, since “thingamabob” is both the word one uses when one can't come up with the precise name for an item and a name for Poe's journalistic protagonist as commodity. Since Bob describes

himself as a self-made periodical magnate, his name may stand for the power of the press to manipulate public opinion and thereby the careers of periodical contributors. For example, anonymous publishing, used for many of Poe's reviews and some of his tales even in their initial publication, was one expression of thingumbob. That is, periodical publishers were able to choose whether and how to affix authors' names to their articles. Anonymous and pseudonymous reviews published in influential journals had the potential to make or break a career.¹⁸⁴

VI. Conclusion

As mentioned above, Poe's storyteller for "How to Write a Blackwood Article/A Predicament," who declares herself to be Signora Psyche Zenobia, slips up by stating outright "My name is not Suky Snobbs" (Mabbott 349). Taking D.H. Lawrence's advice to trust the tale, not the teller, one may observe that Poe is here calling attention to certain conventions of transatlantic periodical storytelling. Poe's doing so encourages readers to identify with what they think to be Poe's own feelings. His seeming unveiling of technique, something he perfected in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), succeeds by offering readers the opportunity to imagine that they themselves understand "How to Write a Blackwood Article." Anyone who has tried knows there is more to it than either work lets on. Poe's mock unveiling of his technique in both works reflects the tenuous relations linking writers to their readers, publishers, booksellers, and

¹⁸⁴ See Mott, A History of American Magazines 196.

editors. What Poe's light gothic tales accomplish is to portray writers of periodical fiction as one element in the web of false American idols that have consistently garnered popular attention. Periodical contributors, as represented by Poe's light gothic protagonists, operate as deceptive voices which may not be formally attached to a proper name—whether or not the contributors' work eventually receives lasting praise.

Chapter Five

The Importance of Ambiguity: Unreliable Narration and the Marketing of Sensation

I. Introduction

Wherever we encounter Poe, his tales hold our interest because we want both to complete their formulaic plots and to partake in the emotion served up by their troubled narrators. An important vehicle for understanding the narrative strategy of the tales is the unreliable narration of “Ligeia” (1838), “William Wilson” (1839), and “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846). “Philosophy,” Poe’s most comprehensive work of criticism, claims to explain both the writing and the workings of Poe’s most popular poem “The Raven” (1845). However, the mourning of a lost love by the poem’s narrator-protagonist merges with the poem’s quotation in “Philosophy” so as to dominate the essay with its emotional power.¹⁸⁵ “William Wilson” will be treated for its insistence on the indeterminacy of narrative, while “Ligeia” will speak to unreliable narration.¹⁸⁶

None of Poe’s tales aims for a conventional sort of realism; rather, they deliver inspired representations of mental anguish, something relished by contemporary American audiences.¹⁸⁷ In other words, these narratives are

¹⁸⁵ Poe himself exulted over his achievement of “The Raven,” declaring shortly before its publication that it was “the greatest poem that ever was written.” See Thomas and Jackson’s description (495) of Poe’s statement to his friend William Ross Wallace in late January of 1845.

¹⁸⁶ Narrative indeterminacy refers to an indefinite multiplicity of narrative situations, Narrative ambiguity occurs in works which emphasize only two such possibilities. See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *The Concept of Ambiguity* 30.

¹⁸⁷ See Reynolds 172.

constructed so as to appear too crazy not to be believed. For example, Poe's autodiegetic tales typically present their narrators as men suffering hardships that rival anything that frontier almanacs and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* have to offer. There are three ways in which these stories claim to take the reader where no one has gone before. First, Poe readers' thirst for narratives of dramatic and peculiar events. Second, he implies that there is some measure of truth to his narratives. For example, "Philosophy"'s presentation as a facetious tall tale nevertheless suggests that Poe himself has actually experienced something like the narrated events. If one accepts Poe's claims in "The Philosophy of Composition," then one may easily believe the tales' first-person narrators. Third, Poe's interweaving of themes and wording throughout the works under discussion helped him promote his first prose collection, Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840) and its successor, Tales (1845). Such successful marketing of "Philosophy" to a wide range of audiences implies that Poe's unreliable narration works not only for fiction but also for poetry and the critical essay.

II. Poe's "Philosophy" of Tale-Telling, As Seen in "Ligeia" and "William Wilson"

A. "Ligeia": An Enduring Attachment

"Ligeia," published in the Baltimore *American Museum* for September, 1838, was consistently regarded by Poe as one of his finest tales. As early as 1835, Poe had centered his tale "Berenice," a model for "Ligeia," on "the death of a beautiful woman," the perfect topic for poetry according to "The Philosophy of Composition" (ER 19).¹⁸⁸ Since death is a universal narrative subject and repetition a strategy essential to manufacturing emotion in both poetry and prose, Poe has his autodiegetic narrator, who introduces himself as the husband of the title character, appeal to his audience in a morbid and obsessive fashion.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, in its evocation of terror, "Ligeia" may rival the "*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*" (25) which "Philosophy" declares to be the emotional essence of "The Raven" (See Section III, below).

Poe seeks to enhance the resonance of the autodiegetic narration of "Ligeia" by inserting a quotation attributed to Joseph Glanvill¹⁹⁰ as the tale's epigraph:

And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will (310).

¹⁸⁸ "Berenice" proved gruesome enough that four paragraphs were excised for its publication in the *Broadway Journal* for April 5, 1845. See Mabbott 207.

¹⁸⁹ For obsessional narration in Poe, see Williams, *A World of Words* 99.

¹⁹⁰ Scholars have not been able to find the remark in Glanvill's writings. See Mabbott, 331n.

Here the words “lie,” “die,” and “know” are linked by Poe’s use of the antiquated present-tense suffix “-eth.”¹⁹¹ These three verbs are crucial to one’s motivation for reading; one reads stories with fond hopes of achieving insight or knowledge—ultimately, knowledge of the rules governing life and death. The word “will” figures in each of the four sentences above, twice as subject and twice as objective genitive. The repetition, later in “Ligeia,” of the words on the will and their recitation both before and after the narrator’s rendition of Poe’s poem “The Conqueror Worm” would ensure that readers did not ignore them.¹⁹²

This chapter-section lays out three readings of “Ligeia” in a sequence that suggests a potential reader’s progressive involvement with the tale. Such an artificial classification may bear little resemblance to a particular reader’s experience. However, the trio represents a range of reader perspectives: collaboration (whether conscious or not) with what one takes to be a narrator-victim, alienation from an unreliable narrator, and/or ambivalence resulting from one’s realization of the tale’s ambiguousness as to any absolute assignation of responsibility. The fourfold mention of the will within the quotation above suggests the obsessional thinking that is played out in the activities of Ligeia (see “first reading,” below), the thoughts and largely unmentioned actions of the

¹⁹¹ Some portion of the lugubrious effect of “The Raven” can no doubt be traced to its own use of the same suffix in the first word of its refrain: “Quoth the raven ‘Nevermore.’ ”

¹⁹² Poe intended his insertion of “The Conqueror Worm,” performed by the time of the tale’s appearance in the New York New World of February 15, 1845, to answer questions from readers such as his friend Philip Pendleton Cooke regarding a definite ending for Ligeia and the tale.

narrator (“second reading”), and also the recursive thinking engaged in by readers who first enjoy and then try to make sense of the narrative.¹⁹³

In addition, the exploration of the will in “Ligeia,” like Adam’s and Eve’s eating the forbidden fruit and Prometheus’ appropriation of fire, calls readers’ attention to one of the most common human weaknesses, our fascination with power. This message on the omnipresence and the frailty—the Achilles heel, as mentioned in the narration of “William Wilson” (PT, 433)—of human designs reverberates throughout the first half of the tale as the narrator describes the effect of Ligeia’s presence on him. Like Jonathan Edwards, the leading American eighteenth-century theologian, Poe’s storyteller observes that when one sees an opportunity to steal the gods’ fire or to eat the forbidden fruit, one goes ahead and takes it.¹⁹⁴ Subsequently, the final sentence of the epigraph is recited, first by Ligeia and then by the storyteller while she lies on her deathbed. Within the first reading, the will, or overweening ambition, can be read as a human flaw linked to the genuine potency of Ligeia.¹⁹⁵

A cataloguing of the voices summoned up by “Ligeia” in the quotation above might include God, Glanvill, Ligeia, and the unnamed autodiegetic narrator—not to mention Poe himself. Confusion is engendered for readers respecting the authority suggested by Poe’s invocation of God and Glanvill. A central question driving one’s reading of “Ligeia” is “To what party or force can I attribute the burden of responsibility and intention for the events of this

¹⁹³ See Thomas and Jackson 271 for the remarks of Poe’s friend Philip Pendleton Cooke.

¹⁹⁴ See Kuklick 39.

¹⁹⁵ Both German Romantic thinkers such as Kleist and Hoffman and the English Romantic poets such as Shelley and Coleridge treated the theme of human volition or will. See David Punter, The Literature of Terror 106.

narration?” Readers would likely offer as answer either God, Poe, Ligeia, or the narrator; a narratologist might identify the narrator acting at Poe’s behest.

However, the narration’s foregrounding of God, Glanvill and Ligeia at the expense of Poe and the narrator sets up a conflict between one’s religious belief (or superstition) and one’s analysis of the narration, the strength of one’s preexisting faith versus one’s determination to read through the deception inherent in the telling. Here’s how the tale begins:

I cannot, for my soul, remember precisely how, when, or even precisely where I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia. Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering. Or, perhaps, I cannot now bring these points to mind, because, in truth, the character of my beloved, her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown. Yet I believe that I met her first and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine. Of her family—I have surely heard her speak. That it is of a remotely ancient date cannot be doubted. Ligeia! Ligeia! Buried in studies of a nature more than all else adapted to deaden impressions of the outward world, it is by that sweet word alone—by Ligeia—that I bring before my eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more. And now, while I write, a recollection flashes upon me that I have never known the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed, and who became the partner of my studies, and finally the wife of my bosom. . . (310-11).

In a first or naïve reading of “Ligeia,” the narrator’s story makes sense. That is, readers force themselves to complete the sense-making circuit even in the blatant absence of a reliable narrator. For already, the narration has suggested that Ligeia, of whom its picture is strikingly incomplete, will be its central protagonist. The narrator’s declaration of mental impotence (“my memory is feeble through much suffering”) suggests his incapacitation by his grief over the loss of his wife.

Within this first reading, Ligeia is presented as a creature radically alien to him and the embodiment of a superhuman will. The narrator compares his experience of looking into his wife's eyes to the feeling of having a bit of knowledge on the tip of his tongue without being able to summon it up. The experience is one that he has felt in other circumstances:

I recognized it, let me repeat, sometimes in the survey of a rapidly-growing vine—in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water. I have felt it in the ocean; in the falling of a meteor. I have felt it in the glances of unusually aged people. And there are one or two stars in heaven. . . in a telescopic scrutiny of which I have been made aware of that feeling (314).

Ligeia's gaze resembles the look of a wide variety of living things. The foregoing list suggests the qualities wisdom (the aged), mystery, beauty (the chrysalis), power (the stars; the meteor), and also the concurrent passage of evanescent (the chrysalis; the moth) and wonderful life (the ocean; the butterfly in its metamorphosis). Note that despite including three explicit references to feeling, the narrator does not tell of such intimate relations as maintaining a conversation or inhaling the odors surrounding the vine. Rather, he privileges visual identification of the objects in his list. Such a choice distances the narrator from these objects. The mention of the telescope emphasizes the narrator's attention to surface elements rather than their more problematic depths.

In the second paragraph of the tale, the narrator zooms in on his perception of Ligeia:

There is one dear topic, however, on which my memory fails me not. It is the *person* of Ligeia. In stature she was tall, somewhat slender, and, in her latter days, even emaciated. I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease of her demeanor, or

the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall. She came and departed as a shadow. I was never made aware of her entrance into my closed study save by the dear music of her low sweet voice, as she placed her marble hand upon my shoulder. In beauty of face no maiden ever equaled her. It was the radiance of an opium dream—an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos. . . .“There is no exquisite beauty . . . without some strangeness in the proportion.” . . . I looked at the delicate outlines of the nose—and nowhere but in the graceful medallions of the Hebrews had I beheld a similar perfection. There were the same luxurious smoothness of surface, the same scarcely perceptible tendency to the aquiline, the same harmoniously curved nostrils speaking the free spirit (311-12).

Here Ligeia seems an impossibly magnificent and subtle presence such as liquid marble, appealing not only to the eye but also to the ear and the touch. The storyteller describes only his aesthetic impressions of Ligeia rather than a deeper knowledge of her character. He does not disclose any conversation between Ligeia and himself. Various components of Ligeia’s appearance—her hand, her face, her nose—are treated separately. Ligeia appears, as the narrator says, a spectacular wraith rather than a living spouse. By “*person*,” the narrator refers to his wife’s sensible attributes rather than her character. According to the narration, Ligeia represents the epitome of woman as ghostly sensory image: the narrator appreciates her ephemeral presence, less insistent in its demands than that of a bird or a cat.¹⁹⁶

The first reading outlined above may seduce readers eager to engage themselves from a distance in the observation of mourning ritual.¹⁹⁷ For “Ligeia” offers not one but a series of deaths, all of which appear, in the first reading, to

¹⁹⁶ On Poe’s objectification of women, see Joan Dayan, “Amorous Bondage” 180.

¹⁹⁷ See Karen Haltunen, Confidence Men and Painted Ladies 126.

take the narrator entirely by surprise. Ligeia's death, declared at the outset, is rendered ambiguous by the threefold invocation of "Glanvill" within the tale proper and by her stuttering passage from one side of the border of death to the other during the course of the tale's final evening. It is hinted that Ligeia is an alchemist seeking to prolong her life indefinitely:¹⁹⁸

I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia: it was immense—such as I have never known in woman. In the classical tongues was she deeply proficient, and as far as my own acquaintance extended in regard to the modern dialects of Europe, I have never known her at fault. Indeed upon any theme of the most admired, because simply the most abstruse of the boasted erudition of the academy, have I ever found Ligeia at fault? How singularly—how thrillingly, this one point in the nature of my wife has forced itself, in this late period only, upon my attention! . . . I saw not then what I now clearly perceive, that the acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding; yet I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage (316-17).

Thus the narrator presents Ligeia as both the most striking of female figures and the repository of an obscure science that might allow her to live forever. The narrator's presentation of such clashing perspectives on the potential agency of Ligeia suggests that the narration represents the horror of the narrator's desires exposed as perverse and returning to haunt him. For a cost of Ligeia's beauty in the storyteller's eyes is apparently her living on the edge of starvation, depending on how one takes her description as "somewhat slender, and in her latter days,

¹⁹⁸ See Mabbott 331n.

even emaciated” (311, above). Hence, one completes an initial reading of “Ligeia” with an uneasy feeling about the relationship between the storyteller and his protagonist.

One’s interrogation of the role of the narrator in the death of his wife instigates a certain readerly fascination which motivates a second reading of the tale. If Ligeia were training the narrator to commit some sort of action on an object outside of his two marriages, perhaps one could believe his assertion that her agency exceeded his. However, because the central and problematic events of the narrative concern the death and putative return of Ligeia and/or her successor Rowena, the narrator seems to know a great deal more than he will admit. That is, if he were honest with the readers, it would be he, not she, performing the rituals at the heart of the tale.¹⁹⁹ This is suggested by his decoration of Rowena’s bridal chamber as more of a monument to Ligeia. Five Egyptian sarcophagi mark the corners of the room. The layout of curtains and vents is such as to create the impression that one is surrounded by dark phantoms (322). Here is how the narrator treats his new wife and the former one:

That my wife [Rowena] dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper—that she shunned me and loved me but little—I could not help perceiving; but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man. My memory flew back (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed. I reveled in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty,

¹⁹⁹ The unreliable narration of “Ligeia” bears a great deal of resemblance to that which is filtered through the impossibly obtuse American named Dowell in Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915).

According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, unreliable narration is indicated primarily by “the narrator’s limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme.” Based on these three measures, Poe’s narrator-protagonists seem especially unreliable even among the class of autodiegetic narrators. See *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* 100.

her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love. Now, then, did my spirit fully and freely burn with more than all the fires of her own. In the excitement of my opium dreams (for I was habitually fettered in the shackles of the drug) I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night, or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned—ah, *could* it be forever?—upon the earth (323).

The feelings expressed in this paragraph seem part of the emotional whirlpool which Ligeia represents for the narrator. He reports that his own behavior upsets his next wife Rowena as soon as they are married, if not before. Each of the statements in this paragraph describes powerful emotion, emotion which can be attributed to multiple sources. For example, is all the narrator's anger directed at Rowena, or has he ever hated Ligeia as well? Has the narrator loved other women before, and is Ligeia in fact the narrator's first wife? Is there any truth to the narrator's implication that Ligeia's drive to live forever has infected him with unbearable feelings? Finally, were the studies performed by the narrator and Ligeia designed for any purpose other than risking lives (Rowena's and perhaps Ligeia's) in an effort to cheat death?

While the narration doesn't answer these questions, its marvelously provocative description of Ligeia as "the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed" offers several suggestions. The juxtaposition of the last word of this adjectival series, "entombed," with the first three emphasizes that for the narrator, the memory of Ligeia's dead body is central to his obsession with her physical appearance and her intellect. The final sentence establishes the narrator's participation in the project he has described, Ligeia's imagined immortality. As

his own description of his wives suggests, the storyteller seems to enjoy gazing only at those women who are dead or dying. Since he reports never being able to get Ligeia out of his mind, such an interest would provide some motivation for his negative feelings towards Rowena. For the narrator is simultaneously thrilled and terrified by the idea of Ligeia on the verge of death.

Examining the final sentence of the quotation above, one is struck by the equivocation of the conditional phrase “ah, *could* it be forever?” That is, the first and second readings alternate in rapid succession. The storyteller says he cried out to Ligeia in hopes of bringing her back to life. The “forever” in his question, however, may refer either to the duration of Ligeia’s death or to the new life which he may have imagined himself granting her via some aspect of the ceremonies to which he has alluded. If one grants that “forever” may indicate the narrator’s desire always to possess Ligeia’s image, then the narrator appears as a sadistic murderer rather than a loving husband. While the narration has emphasized the wish of Ligeia to live forever, it is the narrator’s desire to behold her that drives the tale—certainly its telling and very likely its events. Thus the tale’s conclusion completes a *pointe* story such as that found in “William Wilson,” below; that is, the plot proceeds in a certain direction until later details offer additional interpretive possibilities.²⁰⁰ In the first reading, Ligeia is Poe’s centerpiece. However, the storyteller soon takes on a larger role as one considers his morbid fascination with the deaths of Rowena and Ligeia.

²⁰⁰ See Rimmon-Kenan, The Concept of Ambiguity 82.

However, the second reading, identifying the narrator as at least complicitous and very likely responsible for the murder of his wives is not entirely satisfying. For it is impossible to say exactly which of the events of the narration are untrue and which may actually have happened. For one thing, the narrator's story is rendered suspect by his describing his experience of Ligeia as "the radiance of an opium dream" and his description of his suffering from opium addiction following her death. As told by a remarkably unreliable narrator, "Ligeia" denies the first reading while offering the second as an alternative explanation.

Hence, "Ligeia" stimulates reader interest and achieves dramatic unity via its narrator's obsession with the riddles of death and sexual difference.²⁰¹ According to the first reading above, Ligeia is the genuine fantastic heart of the tale, while Rowena and the narrator are merely props.²⁰² The second reading, recognizing the narrator as unreliable, features Ligeia as his sacrificial victim. A third reading of narrative indeterminacy allows for the possibility that Ligeia is neither protagonist nor victim. Perhaps she is only the narrator's projection. For the "death of a beautiful woman" formula which animates a number of Poe's tales describes a sexual fantasy in which the storyteller obsessively rehearses the approach of his beloved; he yearns for the instant in which he can possess, know, or merge with her completely.²⁰³

²⁰¹ For an analysis of evolving theories of sexual difference, see Rosi Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects 416.

²⁰² See Todorov, The Fantastic 44.

²⁰³ See Joel Porte, The Romance in America 69.

B. “William Wilson”: Ushering Readers into the Tales

While the three important readings of “Ligeia” are likely to unfold for the reader over a relatively lengthy period of time, “William Wilson” (*Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, October 1839) works immediately to emphasize the ambiguity and indeterminacy inherent in narration.²⁰⁴ Theorists of reading agree on the general principle that readers enjoy negotiating the various puzzles and seeming certainties that stories present to them. Indeed, up to a certain point—the point at which a particular reader will give up on reading a particular work once and for all—narrative complexity and indeterminacy of narration appear to be a good thing. For each time one reads, as long as one does not become so embittered as to never again attempt to complete that text, one finds the experience in some way new. One’s second, tenth, and eighty-seventh readings are enriched not only by the experience one has gained while removed from the work in question but also by the ever-increasing range of texts one has constructed in concert with the work.²⁰⁵ For example, the language of “Wilson” tugs at its readers with simultaneous aesthetic, moral, and psychological appeals. This reading will emphasize Poe’s insistent scattering of puns throughout this tale—puns that follow up on “Ligeia” in promoting Poe’s growing collection of tales.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ The metaphor of the Gothic Mind, which links architectural detail to description of characters’ physical and mental states, served both Gothic novelists and Romantic poets. See Thompson 69 for a description of the styles of architecture and the mental afflictions which are portrayed in many Gothic narratives. See also Punter 106.

²⁰⁵ See, for example, Roland Barthes, *S/Z* 210; Umberto Eco, “Lector in Fabula,” 256; Susan Winnett, “Coming Unstrung” 515.

²⁰⁶ Critics such as G. R. Thompson find “William Wilson” one of Poe’s most compact if limited tales. See Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction* 169. For the notion of the fantastic, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The*

“William Wilson” presents a favorite Poe type, that of the deeply flawed Byronic hero. Readers who have heard anything of Poe are likely to note a striking resemblance between the general circumstances of Poe’s childhood and that described by “Wilson”’s autodiegetic narrator.²⁰⁷ A brief summary will suggest the dramatic potential of “Wilson.” The narrator begins by speaking from a mysterious limbo: “Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson” (426). Casting himself as a repentant sinner, he proceeds to describe his bizarre education under the rule of an English headmaster who doubles as parish priest. The narrator’s upbringing in the labyrinthine schoolhouse introduces another boy, one who shares the same name and every day takes on a closer and closer resemblance to him. Once the narrator has left the school, this figure reappears whenever the narrator intends to commit a sinful act. Finally, he resorts to drawing his shadow into a duel to the death. An apparent victory in this combat lasts only a moment, however. The final words of the tale, spoken by the shadow,

In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself (448),

return the reader to the unspecified opening setting. A moralistic reading of “William Wilson” holds that the narrator has sinned egregiously and has taken up the name from which the story gets its title. If the autodiegetic narration is taken as written artifact, perhaps Wilson is dead. As direct address coming from Wilson, however, the tale implies that Wilson is alive yet cut off from ever

Fantastic 24-40 passim.

²⁰⁷“William Wilson” is Poe’s tale which most resembles a short autobiographical confession. The strange sensations experienced by Wilson while growing increasingly apart from his conscience bear a certain resemblance to descriptions of the young Poe by some of his playmates. Men describing the young Poe based on their boyhood acquaintance with him have characterized him as aggressive, intelligent, and not terribly sympathetic. See Silverman 24.

reaching heaven.²⁰⁸ Readers who retain some memory of the epigraph of “Ligeia,” published one year prior to “William Wilson,” would be especially motivated to ask questions such as “Does the narrator, in his framing of the tale, follow God’s will?” Such a moralistic reading, however, would deny the reader the pleasure of Poe’s equivocation.

One’s initial response to the early paragraphs of “William Wilson” is likely to voice one’s confusion. To speak in the language of “The Philosophy of Composition,” one wonders what is the main and what the “under current” of meaning (ER 24). Take, for example, the double meaning of Poe’s second sentence, “the fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation.” Is the narrator mourning the figure of his conscience, slain in their final confrontation, or is he instead concerned with the written history (“the fair page” not as clerk but as writing surface) represented by his family name? Both readings are appropriate. Readers who studied Poe’s epigraph

What say of it? What say CONSCIENCE grim,
That specter in my path?
Chamberlain’s PHARONNIDA (42)²⁰⁹

would tend to read the shadow as the narrator’s conscience rather than a malicious doppelganger. For the small capitals spelling out “CONSCIENCE” suggest that this moral attribute may play a leading role in an allegory informing the tale. In addition, lovers of Gothic tales might anticipate the figure’s alternate identity as “grim. . . specter.” During the middle section of “William Wilson,” Poe uses

²⁰⁸ For a discussion of narrative frames, devices that virtually deny the existence of a central image within “William Wilson,” see Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* 154. On the representation of speech in fiction, see Rimmon-Kenon, *Narrative Fiction* 109.

²⁰⁹ Mabbott reports that Poe’s epigraph resembles a passage not from William Chamberlayne’s *Pharonnida*, but from his play “Love’s Victory” (448n; 1658).

suggestion to rather realistic effect. The double (the conscience) steals upon the narrator by degrees until both the reader and the protagonist are unsure which so-called Wilson has spawned the other.

Anyone seeking to find a conclusive ending to “William Wilson” is faced with a *pointe* story in the tale’s Gothic narrative. One may choose to favor the moralistic version of things in which the narrator witnesses the death of his conscience due to his excessive pride. Alternately, one may select the fantastic (supernatural) option in which a doppelganger molests the narrator.²¹⁰ This second view is well served by the Gothic imagery within the tale. Thirdly, one may choose a psychological reading. That is, the events of the tale may take place not in fact but rather in the mind of not only the author and his readers but also the storyteller-protagonist of “William Wilson.”

Indeed, from the narrator’s introduction and disavowal of his own name in the very first sentence, “Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson,” one is dealing with unreliable narration. In judging that the narrator is unstable and need not be believed, this reading may succeed in removing all the terror from the tale. The proponent of such an approach might very well propose his own history of the narrator’s childhood, beginning, no doubt, with his family experience. Nevertheless, great tales are often told by lying and/or dubious narrators. Hence a contemplative pleasure is offered readers such as Poe’s

²¹⁰ See Todorov 37.

correspondent Philip Pendleton Cooke who can enjoy the marvelous Gothic and moral qualities of the tale while reassuring themselves the tale is of course not based in fact.²¹¹

Whatever credence readers place in Poe's autodiegetic narrators, they are prodded to consider securing access to more of Poe's tales by the wordplay carried out by "William Wilson." For the tale gives special emphasis to key words including "usher" and "will." The first of these terms describes the school instructors. It may also reference "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), the tale Poe published in *Burton's* one month before "William Wilson." The second word, "will," characterizes numerous Poe narrators. It is emphasized as much in "Ligeia" as in "William Wilson." One likely motive for the foregrounding of "will" and "usher" within "William Wilson" and "Ligeia" would have been the promotion of the forthcoming Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840). By establishing these words as virtual brand names in the minds of his readers, Poe could increase the possibility that they would consider purchasing his story collections.

"William Wilson" produces its own funhouse-mirror effects by making obsessive reference to the title character, to his will—the term fetishized in "Ligeia"—and to words implying duplication, copying, or uniqueness. Poe's tale appears a battle of wills, offering readers a puzzle as to which one prevails.²¹²

The doubling inherent in the Anglo-Saxon patronym "William, son of Will"—that is, "William, Will's son"—appears as a basis for the many pairings presented by

²¹¹ See Thomas and Jackson 283.

²¹² For a report on reader response to "William Wilson," see Daniel Hoffman xiii.

the tale.²¹³ The repeat visits of the narrator's double (his conscience), combined with the chronological fusion of Poe's introduction and climax, lend this tale a recursive narrative structure which bears some resemblance to the scheme of repetition with variation valorized in "The Raven."²¹⁴ The verbal and narrative pattern developed in "William Wilson" allows Poe to describe the advance of the double on multiple levels—body, mind, spirit—which are tied together in the figure of the storyteller confronted with his better half.

While "William Wilson" may intrigue the reader with its insistence on the double nature of its protagonist, it raises further questions in sketching his grim schoolhouse. "The Fall of the House of Usher" is invoked by this description:

The house, I have said, was old and irregular. The grounds were extensive, and a high and solid brick wall, topped with a bed of mortar and broken glass, encompassed the whole. This prison-like rampart formed the limit of our domain; beyond it we saw but thrice a week—once every Saturday afternoon, when, attended by two ushers, we were permitted to take brief walks in a body through some of the neighboring fields—and twice during Sunday, when we were paraded in the same formal manner to the morning and evening service in the one church of the village (428).

Fittingly, it is ambiguous whether the two ushers mentioned here are the same figures who are elsewhere in "Wilson" designated the "Classical" and "English and Mathematical" ushers (430). The stern headmaster who leads the students on their two trips to church serves a second function as its pastor, a situation which

²¹³ See Jonathan Elmer's observation, in his *Reading at the Social Limit*, that the protagonist's introduction of himself may be read as a report of a self divided: "Let me call myself, for the present, Will-I-Am Will's Son [emphasis mine]" (85).

²¹⁴ See Elmer 73 for two related assertions: First, the introductory sentences of "William Wilson" become the tale's main subject, but only after one has made it through the tale and back to the beginning. Second, the paragraphs which follow the first two are mere winding passages leading back to what one had considered the tale's "beginning."

provokes the narrator to exclaim “Oh, gigantic paradox, too monstrous for solution!” (429) The storyteller wonders how a compassionate minister can moonlight as his school principal. On the level of narrative structure, this declaration draws attention to the incompleteness of the possible worlds one has likely constructed for the tale as a whole.²¹⁵

Emerging from a reading of “William Wilson,” one may or may not be eager to read more writing of this kind. For as measured against Poe’s other tales, “Wilson” achieves an all-time high for punning narrative ambiguity. Readers who like to digest their stories without the insistent interruptions provided by the multiple voices which constitute “Wilson” would prefer Poe’s detective narratives featuring Dupin in the role taken up fifty years later by Sherlock Holmes. Such stories present one with at least the illusion of a solution to the mysteries posed at their outset.²¹⁶ Nevertheless, “Wilson” prepares both its happy and its disappointed readers for reading more of his Gothic tales, especially “The Fall of the House of Usher,” to which “Wilson” alludes, and “Ligeia,” which surpasses “Wilson” in its references to the “great will” of God and the “feeble will” which is traditionally bequeathed to human beings (Mabbott, 310).

The confluence of these three tales provides the impression that a strategic marketing campaign is underway. Much as Poe built a reputation by selecting and arranging names and quotations of authors better known than he, so he publicized his fictions via repetition with variation of their themes, titles, and

²¹⁵ For the notion of possible worlds, see Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* 14. For the notion of jamming (delay) within the hermeneutic sentence, see Barthes, *S/Z* 210. See Hoffman 214 for a discussion of William Wilson’s thought processes.

²¹⁶ The narration of the Dupin tales is focalized by a friend of Dupin’s, a Watson-type, rather than by a single autodiegetic protagonist.

characters. The limited evidence available on Poe's readership suggests that these methods have helped his work reach a considerable range of publics.²¹⁷ While this strategy was not financially lucrative during Poe's lifetime, it has delivered over the long term.

C. "An Air of the fantastic": "Philosophy" as Humbug

Poe's most comprehensive work of critical theory, "The Philosophy of Composition" (April 1846; composed and revised 1844-49) works to sell Poe's tales not by repeating words from their titles but by echoing the themes and detailing the putative writing process of both the tales and his poem "The Raven" (January 29, 1845, *The Evening Mirror*). During 1845, Poe was unsuccessful in his attempts to place "The Raven" in *Graham's*, his first choice as a magazine outlet.²¹⁸ By April of the following year, however, the poem's popular success motivated *Graham's* to publish Poe's treatment of it in "Philosophy."²¹⁹ This essay was well positioned to promote the sales of The Raven and Other Poems, which had been published by Wiley and Putnam in November 1845.²²⁰ Given that the same publisher released Poe's Tales that very year, Poe likely intended to stimulate conversation regarding that work as well.

²¹⁷ Most research on actual recorded readers of the 1830s and 40s has focused on publishers and other authors' correspondents. More recent work has sought out readers' diaries and letters as well as library records. See Zboray, A Fictive People xvii as well as his chapter "Gender and Boundlessness in Reading Patterns," 156-79 *passim*.

²¹⁹ Silverman reports that the poem was published by the New York Evening Mirror on the final page of its January 29, 1845 edition.

²¹⁹ For "The Raven"'s primacy of place with the general public among all of Poe's works, see I.M. Walker, Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage 36. See Reynolds 226-7 for Poe's boasts of his success at pleasing popular audiences.

²²⁰ Wiley and Putnam released this volume as a sequel to Tales, selected by editor Evert Duyckinck as part of the publisher's Library of American Books.

1. Bringing in the Authorities

Poe's first role in "The Philosophy of Composition" is that of poet-critic. Here he offers a sophisticated sales pitch to reach a broad spectrum of readers. Two promotions are combined in a single rhetorical gambit. That is, Poe applies the powerful verse of "The Raven" to showing the merits of his self-serving critical theory while simultaneously applying that theory to valorizing "The Raven." Such a maneuver was typical of Poe, who rarely missed an opportunity to "diddle" at the expense of naïve audiences.²²¹ Poe's grandstanding casts a wide net for eager readers while encouraging some to play "trip up the critic."²²² This section will concentrate on the narrative rhetoric Poe uses to frame not only "The Raven" and the critical theory but also his considerable body of tales.

Poe begins "The Philosophy of Composition" with several bold moves to demonstrate his literary authority. The first paragraph is dedicated to engraving Poe's place in his readers' literary pantheon beside those of two British literary lions:

CHARLES DICKENS, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of "Barnaby Rudge," says "By the way, are you aware that Godwin wrote his 'Caleb Williams' backwards? He first involved his hero in a web of difficulties, forming the second volume, and then, for the first, cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done (ER 13).

²²¹ See "A Con Artist's Criminal Charm," The New York Times (Late Edition, June 6, 2002) E3.

²²² By suggesting a form of amusement called "trip up the critic," I mean to invoke "find the humbug," the pastime that allowed visitors to P.T. Barnum's notorious displays to enjoy even the experience of being deceived. For example, when viewers of *The Grand Buffalo Hunt* (1843) in Hoboken, New Jersey were confronted with less of a Wild West experience than they might have hoped for, they took it upon themselves to celebrate the experience rather than to complain about it while in view of the visitors who would succeed them. See Neil Harris, Humbug 63.

In case anyone has missed the essay's commanding title, Poe's initial paragraph leaves little doubt that the solemn practice of writing will be the overt focus of "Philosophy." The substantial intertextual references appear designed to serve as evidence for the critical pronouncements that will follow. Key here is the note Poe has received, a physical token from Charles Dickens. More than this, it is a note from which Poe chooses to quote. Better still, the quotation features Dickens, probably the most popular English-language periodical novelist of the time, offering critical advice to Poe. Finally, the citation of Dickens refers readers to Poe's own review of an early installment of Dickens' novel Barnaby Rudge (1841/2). Poe's use of the present tense ("DICKENS . . . says") suggests that Dickens has recently remarked on the Poe article which predates "Philosophy" by four years.²²³

In his favored role of poet-critic, Poe energetically steers his Dickens (represented by the quotation) to a more complete observation based on the work of William Godwin. Poe improves on Dickens' notion that one does well to write with a narrative climax or denouement (to use Poe's term) in view, not only filling out a substantial paragraph, but providing the basis for the *tour de force* he achieves in "Philosophy." The choice of Dickens as starting-point for the essay emphasizes this author's preeminence as storyteller and critic.²²⁴ By insisting on his human bond with Dickens and directly quoting from the author's letter to him,

²²³ Poe and Dickens met on approximately March 7, 1842 during Dickens' first tour of the United States. Dickens had written the letter on the 6th. See Thomas and Jackson, 364. See also Arthur Hobson Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe, A Critical Biography 366.

²²⁴ "CHARLES DICKENS" appears in small capitals as the first two words of "Philosophy." See Poe's quotation, above.

Poe cements the trust granted to him by faithful readers. However, Poe will proceed to improve upon Dickens' observation so as to give the impression that as poet and critic, he may stand on the shoulders of Dickens.

2. Poe's Putative Writing Method

Flourishing the authorship of the popular success "The Raven" and reminding many readers of his ruthless brand of criticism, Poe asserts that when he puts pen to paper, it is with his entire plot already in mind.²²⁵ "Philosophy," he declares, is a logical work:

It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem (14-15).²²⁶

It is dishonest to state that problems as a whole are necessarily resolved--let alone worked out, like the endgame in a chess match--from start to finish without a single detour. By maintaining that "mathematical" rigor is possible, Poe sets himself standards that are perhaps as impressive as they are unattainable.²²⁷ More importantly, however, he ensures that readers who have completed his introduction will be motivated to follow along in order to see whether he is up to his task. Along the way, they will make the acquaintance of or renew their ties with "The Raven." No doubt certain enthusiasts among newspaper, magazine, and publishing industry readers would manage to bring a copy of the poem to

²²⁵ By 1846, many magazine readers would have encountered Poe's criticism either in print or via word of mouth.

²²⁶ The term Poe would use today to close the preceding statement is "mathematical proof."

²²⁷ Silverman suggests that the hyper-rational tone adopted by "Philosophy" is part and parcel of Poe's trying to convince contemporary readers that his sanity remained intact (296).

place side by side with “*Philosophy*” in order to help them check Poe’s commentary against “The Raven” itself.

Having elaborated upon his assertion that the talented author begins writing with a clear sense of the effect he wishes to create in his readers (ER 13),²²⁸ Poe is not content to rest as a master of poetry and prose composition and criticism. Rather, his desire to establish the validity of his judgment and taste is mirrored by an alternate self-presentation. This second identity is that of charlatan and trickster. For example, in accounting for his writing of “The Raven,” Poe claims he will lay bare

The wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock’s feathers, the red paint, and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion* (14).

The eight phrases of this quotation describe a threadbare operation in which rags are brought to life by the magic of vaudeville or, in Poe’s time, the circus. Poe’s description brings to mind the exposure of the small, elderly man playing the part of The Wizard of Oz, the figure presiding over the imaginary world traversed by L. Frank Baum’s Kansas-bred heroine Dorothy. Like Baum, Poe recognizes that staging a performance in which one appears to expose certain tricks of the literary (dramatic) trade is an excellent way of extending a welcome to hesitant readers. Note well that the paragraph quoted above describes the writing process of *other* writers, those who lack whatever it is that allows Poe to write in the manner he intends to describe.

²²⁸ This position echoes that presented in Poe’s May, 1842 review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales (ER 580, 586).

Perhaps the prospect of increasing the sales of The Raven and Other Poems added to Poe's temptation to sketch himself in "Philosophy" as a trickster as well as a capable critic. Poe's initial claim to write not only with insight but with honesty can be evaluated based on his work in "Philosophy." Throughout "Philosophy," Poe uses the language of performance to describe the process of concocting his literary stew. Thus he offers readers a more appealing prospect than simply taking each of his statements as incontestable fact: Instead, they may play "Find the humbug," here presented as "Trip up the critic," a contest suitable for readers of widely varying abilities.

Hence, it is doubtful that "The Philosophy of Composition" succeeds in capturing the entirely logical writing self which it proposes. One reason to question Poe's sincerity is his interweaving stanzas from "The Raven" with his critical remarks. Readers are more or less hypnotized by the verses, increasing their susceptibility to Poe's argument. Professional writers, though they might admire Poe's aggressive posturing, would laugh at Poe's idea of writing a poem as mechanically as a novice chef would bake a cake with only Lydia Maria Child's cookbook as his guide.²²⁹ Possibly, the length of "Philosophy"—something that might occupy forty minutes of one's time--aids in inducing such a trance. While one may not notice these strategies during one or more early readings of "Philosophy," eventually Poe will make one suspicious. Is he really describing his mental processes as poet, not merely in their exact step-by-step order, but still more precisely *thought by thought*?

²²⁹ See The American Frugal Housewife (1829), republished dozens of times and currently available from Dover Press.

While Poe had ample reason to have birds on the brain,²³⁰ his own account of coming up with the notion of the raven is preposterous. Poe implies that if he hadn't needed a respondent to conclude each stanza with the syllables which form the word "Nevermore," he would never have thought of the raven as the supporting actor for the student's soliloquy. Once Poe's reader has swallowed the concept of the dour contrapuntally speaking raven, he may readily believe the second half of "Philosophy." What the second half accomplishes is to get right down to the sentiments Poe wishes to evoke and the devices by which he would make good on his promises.

Poe's third role in "Philosophy," then, is that of crafty seducer. He shapes the mood of "The Raven" based on his awareness of mourning as the most lucrative subject for contemporary fiction and verse.²³¹ However, Poe describes his choice in aesthetic terms. The most striking tone he can deliver, he decides, is a melancholy beauty, to be represented by "the death of a beautiful woman. . . . [T]he lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover" (ER 19). The power of such a note would be enhanced by Poe's establishing the "under-current, however indefinite of meaning" that moves a reader to remember a poem (24).

²³⁰ Perhaps in order to reward readers earnestly trying to puzzle out Poe's writing technique, "Philosophy" allows that Poe borrows techniques and individual lines from other authors. Not surprisingly, Poe's conception of the poem benefited from a number of environmental influences. Poe tacitly acknowledged the influence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Courtship of Lady Geraldine" on "The Raven" by dedicating the volume *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845) to her. Poe drew not only from the work of both well-known authors such as Dickens and Browning but from humbler sources as well. A French parrot was one likely precursor to Poe's "Raven." Mabbott reports that Poe had a friend who owned a tame raven, affording Poe the opportunity to study his animal subject at close range. For real-life birds and literary fowl which may have inspired Poe, see Mabbott 354. On the resemblance of "The Raven" to "Lady Geraldine," see Mabbott 356.

²³¹ A taste for mourning was from the outset of the nineteenth century one of the predominant currents of American poetry and fiction. Due in part to the technological development of the print industry, the cult of mourning increased in popularity after 1830. See Halttunen 126.

This Poe has accomplished by composing an unforgettable combination of sound and rhythm, making sure to offer repetition of a novel refrain, with slight variation throughout the poem.

By quoting his “Raven” stanzas at brief intervals throughout the second half of “Philosophy,” Poe reinforces the poem’s potential hold over a sizeable bit of the popular imagination. The final stanza falls, inevitably, at the foot of the final newspaper or magazine column, allowing the obsessive behavior of Poe’s protagonist and the melancholy sounds and alliterative effects so prized by Poe to work their magic. Here’s how Poe says he chose the basic refrain for the eighteen stanzas of “The Raven”:

Such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis. . . and these considerations inevitably led me to the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant [*italics mine*] (18).²³²

According to Poe, such thinking led him to the word “Nevermore.” It seems likely that by “long o” Poe has in mind not only the o of “more” but also the o one finds in “home.” The first syllable of the word “sonorous,” while presenting a different o sound, certainly may be drawn out as long as the others. Note that Poe’s explanation of his sentimental climax works sound effects similar to those he recommends for tragically beautiful poetry.

Besides echoing “The Raven,” Poe takes more drastic measures to ensure that the poem resurfaces with something like its full eighteen-stanza effect. By including four complete stanzas in his “Raven” quotations during the second half of “Philosophy,” Poe facilitates readers’ reinscription into the experience of the

²³² The long “o” and the “rrr” are two of the most common sounds in spoken English.

poem as a whole. For after discussing his refrain, Poe quotes from the last three stanzas, beginning with stanza 16:

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!--prophet still, if bird or devil!--
 Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here
 ashore,
 Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted--
 On this home by Horror haunted--tell me truly, I implore--
 Is there--*is* there balm in Gilead?--tell me--tell me, I implore!"
 Quoth the Raven "Nevermore" (ll. 85-90, ER 20).

The language of this stanza, like that of the poem as a whole, is intentionally over-the-top in the manner of Lord Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1812-18) and Don Juan (1819-24). The first five of the six lines above read as if poured out breathlessly by the wild-eyed student. One might imagine an eccentric friend uttering the first two of these, if faced with the student's situation. The rhythmic and sound effects continued by lines three and four, however, push one into going along with the narration against one's concern for the poem's narrative sense. Were Poe to critique such lines as written by another, he would not refrain from demanding to know the subjects of the descriptive words "desolate," "all undaunted," "enchanted" and "haunted." For example, see Poe's arbitrary revision of a single stanza from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Drama of Exile" (1844, ER 132-4). While the black bird of Poe's poem would likely answer to the adjective "undaunted," it is likely that the shore, rather than the raven, is "desolate." However, such confusion represents Poe's "under current,

however indefinite of meaning” (24).²³³ In this case, a certain amount of verbal excess (sound and rhythm over linguistic precision) serves as an index of the student’s terror.

According to “Philosophy,” Poe aims for “an air of the fantastic” in contrasting the raven’s behavior with the varying moods of the student (22). Poe says he aimed for dead seriousness following the bird’s unlikely entrance in order to set up a striking climax. Poe’s reading of his poem emphasizes the student’s dreaming of a dead lover, one who may indeed never have existed. The dream overlaps the raven’s entrance with its exchange with the student, suggesting that the dialogue itself takes place within the student’s mind. In the last line of “Philosophy” preceding its quotation of the poem’s final stanza, “*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*” is declared to be the raven’s symbolic meaning. It is likely that the “*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*” is not a momentary pang Poe wishes to create in his readers but rather a touchstone to which they can return again and again by rereading or reciting his poem (25).

If “The Raven” represents a heady popular *tour de force*, the narration of Poe’s “Raven”-“Philosophy” compound is no less fantastic. Poe’s apparent unveiling of the way his poem engages readers mirrors “Philosophy”’s account of how the conception of the raven shapes the student’s monomaniacal trance. For one’s reading “Philosophy” in order to understand how writers work their magic will not prevent one from being charmed by the wiles of “Philosophy” and its kind. One’s attainment—assuming a linear and sequential reading--of the

²³³ The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (1971/1985) reports that “desolate” has indeed been used to refer to living beings as well as to settings.

conclusion of “Philosophy” leaves Poe’s effect, “*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*,” in view to full advantage. For a reader caught up in the heady enjoyment of “The Raven,” it is a pleasure to have Poe give a precise name to what appears as a mere suggestion, however emphatic, in the printed words of the poem. However, by following these last four italicized words with the final stanza of “The Raven,” Poe hinders many readers from understanding not only their response to his essay but also the workings of “The Raven.”

What Poe has done in “Philosophy,” then, is to deliver an advertisement for “The Raven,” available to his contemporaries in numerous periodicals as well as Wiley and Putnam’s The Raven and Other Poems. Certain of Poe’s readers have been attracted by his endorsement of his own forthrightness in explaining his writing process. A larger group will likely have been impressed by the essay’s introduction asserting his critical authority and moved by its conclusion in which his gaudy criticism yields to the power of his verse. Thus, while failing to complete a coherent critical argument, “Philosophy” succeeds in showing off the attractions of “The Raven.”

Poe works like a television executive who allows viewers a peek at the way professionals (lawyers, doctors, police officers) perform their business—never relinquishing control of the viewers’ heartstrings. By slipping stanzas of “The Raven” into “Philosophy,” Poe succeeds in inducing readers to undergo the emotional experience of “The Raven” yet again. More important, however, is the work of “Philosophy” in recruiting new readers for Poe’s best-known poem.

Having realized great success with the intricately-designed emotional and poetic appeals of “The Raven,” Poe retrieves these attractions to work their magic once again.

III. Conclusion

“The Philosophy of Composition,” “William Wilson,” and “Ligeia” are each centered on the obsessions of their autodiegetic narrator. In place of the troubling and well-managed refrain which “Philosophy” deems essential to “The Raven,” “William Wilson” harps on words suggestive of the mental, physical, and spiritual concerns of its protagonist. “Ligeia,” the first of these works to be published, foregrounds the will as obsessive narrative subject. While “Philosophy” may not convert many readers to Poe’s literary theory, its strategy of explication, self-mockery, and seduction successfully manipulates the prejudices of Poe’s contemporaries familiar with “The Raven.” Hence, Poe’s casting of his authorial voice as the unreliable narrator of “Philosophy” serves notice that all narration merits careful questioning.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Poe's deployment of unreliable prose narration in his tales and criticism is closely related to his journalistic goals. As demonstrated in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe enjoyed beginning rounds of "Now I Make You Believe in my Story, Now I Disavow It" with both his tales' narration and the assertions of his critical essays. A sense of Poe's ludic journalistic spirit may be gleaned from his indifferent and ironical support for his critical arguments, his confidential correspondence and his sustained punning efforts throughout his journalistic career.²³⁴ Since Poe would rarely be well compensated for the delivery of individual prose articles, it was to his advantage to write articles such as "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" that could readily move around the American newspaper exchanges and in some cases, make the Atlantic crossing for British and Continental reprinting.²³⁵

In order to promote the transatlantic circulation of his prose articles, Poe manipulated readers' confidence by various means. In both his criticism and his tales, he fashioned narrative epitomizing the unreliable yet compelling narration that has fueled American storytelling from Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography (1818/67) to Herman Melville's Moby Dick (1851) to Jonathan Safran Foer's Everything is Illuminated (2002). Poe's criticism, as typified by his "Editorial Miscellanies" in the *Broadway Journal* of October 11, 1845, made much of his

²³⁴ On Poe's punning, see Hoffman 159. On games,

²³⁵ On American newspaper exchanges, see Starr 90.

putative alliance with American journalists in the face of the brutal competition maintained by transatlantic periodical reprint culture. In addition, Poe succeeded in gaining readers by setting some of his tales and criticism against Romantic vistas and personalities very different from the urban atmosphere of tales like “Loss of Breath” and “The Black Cat.”

Poe’s readers want to believe rather than simply to question the veracity of Poe’s storytellers. As Poe makes clear in “The Philosophy of Composition,” we are for the sake of entertainment willing to overlook signs of

The wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock’s feathers, the red paint, and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion* (ER 14).

The long-term critical reception of “Philosophy” relative to Poe’s early story “How to Write a Blackwood Tale/A Predicament” (1835) is indicative of improvement in Poe’s position in both the American and the transatlantic reprint marketplace. During the 1830s, Poe had to fire his ironic barbs off of the tough skins of canonical British authors so that a few of his neighbors would get the opportunity to read him. By 1846, Poe was able to refer with pride to the detective tales featuring Auguste Dupin, to shaggy dog stories (“The Gold Bug,” 1839), and to “The Raven” as examples of the manipulation of journalistic confidence.²³⁶ Thus Poe succeeded in writing both criticism that would garner attention from American editors and tales worthy of transatlantic circulation.

²³⁶ See Thomas and Jackson 530-1.

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