

The Poetics of Haunting and the Haunting of Poetics:

Author and Reader as Uncanny Doubles in the Work of Edgar Allan Poe

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Abstract

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Entitled *The Poetics of Haunting and the Haunting of Poetics: Author and Reader as Uncanny Doubles in the Work of Edgar Allan Poe*, this project examines the crucial tension between author and reader that animates Poe's poetic theories and gives rise to the doppelgänger as the central figure in all of his work. This study begins by exploring how Poe has emerged in recent years as one of the most original and enduring of antebellum American authors despite his long dismissal by literary scholars as juvenile, vulgar, and merely popular. As the young nation's foremost critic and (along with his contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne) its primary innovator in the modern short story form, Poe insists that by combining a focus on compositional "unity of effect" with skillful and meticulous literary craftsmanship, a text can be made to embody authorial intention so fully that it completely determines the reader's experience and thus enforces authorial control over the work's meaning. Yet, as his many uncanny tales and morbid

explorations of liminal states serve to attest, Poe recognized the vexed nature of textual ontology.

Poe's poetic theory breaks down by what modern theorists would call "the death of the author."

That is, while wanting to control the reader's experience, Poe comes to fear the reader's ultimate freedom and thus the failure of his own theory. The reader becomes his uncanny double.

Performing a thorough analysis of the poetic theories Poe develops in his reviews and essays not only illuminates Poe's choice of haunting psychological themes but also opens up new ways of reading his tales and poems while beginning to explain why his work so profoundly continues to haunt us.

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Introduction: Poe's "Haunting" of American Literature

Entitled *The Poetics of Haunting and the Haunting of Poetics: Author and Reader as Uncanny Doubles in the Work of Edgar Allan Poe*, this project examines the crucial tension between author and reader that informs Poe's poetic theories and gives rise to the doppelgänger as the central figure in all of his work. The chiasmus of the title captures the reversing and doubling that remains constantly at play in Poe's tales and poems, but it also suggests that Poe's deep obsession with struggles for contested authority and control over the meaning of texts informs not only his own creative work but drives the reader's experience of Poe's work. This psychologically disturbing and often deeply felt personal reaction to Poe's writing has engendered a violent critical response to him and his work so that he has long remained a strangely polarizing and polarized figure in American literature. The strange disparity between Edgar Allan Poe's incredible popularity and the lingering effects of his banishment from the American literary canon presents a strange conundrum, one this project explores in depth because, even at a first glance, there seem to be two Poes, as if he had already become his own uncanny double.

The first is Poe as the most beloved of classic American authors, the sad-eyed figure in that famous daguerreotype, instantly identifiable through his creepy, grotesque prose and in his haunting poetry with its reverberating lyricism. This Poe appears in countless collections of his work, published in illustrated volumes for children, broadcast to the world in endless electronic editions. This Poe is an inevitable American icon and a cosmopolitan author whose legacy lives on around the world. This Poe inspires boundless adoration.

The other Poe, however, has long been banished from the American canon of “high literature.” He wrote horror and detective stories and puerile poetry. The mere popularity of this Poe marks him as beneath critical notice. His work is considered vulgar, juvenile, amoral and in bad taste. He was an alcoholic and a drug addict, who married his thirteen-year-old cousin, and who died drunk, penniless, and friendless in a Baltimore gutter at the age of 40. He was anti-democratic, as provincial as he was pretentious, a misogynistic and racist antebellum Southerner. This is the Poe that his contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson calls “the jingle man,” the Poe reviled by his own literary executor, Rufus Griswold, who edited the first three-volume collection of his works, the Poe whom Henry James dismisses as lacking seriousness, the one whom F.O. Matthiessen pointedly excludes from his *American Renaissance* and Harold Bloom still rails against in *The Western Canon*. This Poe provokes endless anxiety and hostility.

Yet, even as one notes this strangely double image of Poe, one cannot help but recall how often doubles appear in his tales and poems, not only in the form of actual doppelgangers as in “William Wilson” but also in the form of compulsive repetitions and returns from the dead, things that are lost but never go away, things that cry out even though they are walled in. Can this be merely a coincidence that we have cultural double vision when it comes to Poe and that there are so many doubles in his tales and poems? If this is not a coincidence, and the present project argues that it is not, then the question becomes instead why Poe’s writing proliferates doublings. The first chapter of this dissertation undertakes a literary history of Poe’s critical reception, with particular attention to his long exclusion from the literary canon. Because Poe’s reception is essentially the story of the return of the uncanny repressed, the second chapter shifts to a psychoanalytic approach in order to examine how Poe’s effect of doubling causes him to

emerge as a haunting figure to Griswold as his editor, to Henry James as a fellow author, and to the critics Matthiessen and Bloom as guardians of “high literature.”

To understand the doppelgänger as the central figure for Poe – not just thematically and diegetically, and not even merely in terms of how Poe has tended to be culturally perceived, but also in terms of how readers personally experience his work – one must first examine Poe’s own poetics because the double nature of texts themselves lies at the heart of his theories. For Poe, the well-crafted text can perfectly embody authorial intention so that a reader’s interpretation exactly mirrors the author’s intended meaning. As Poe explains in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, “In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (572). Indeed, this short but densely packed quotation gestures toward most of the main principles of Poe’s poetic theories. Poe continually stresses the primacy of a work’s “unity of effect,” an authorially intended singleness of focus that should not be constrained by didactic ideals or moralism, and which he believes is best achieved in shorter works because the reader’s attention can remain perfectly fixed on the text for the duration of only one sitting. The forcefulness of the final phrase, “the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control,” suggests the severity of Poe’s convictions regarding authorial control. The third chapter of this dissertation undertakes a thorough articulation of the poetic theories Poe develops in several key essays, including his “Letter to B –,” his “Exordium to Critics,” and his review of *Twice-Told Tales*. After an extensive psychoanalytic interpretation of “The Raven” in the fourth chapter, the fifth chapter returns to an even closer scrutiny of “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe’s fullest elaboration of his poetics and the essay in which he perversely attempts to reclaim authorial control over his wildly popular poem.

Of course Poe realizes full well that texts appear to readers in a variety of uncontrollable contexts, and that even under perfect conditions all readers tend to experience texts in vastly different ways and discover widely divergent meanings. Indeed, making his living as a “magazinish” – an editor, a reviewer (who not incidentally functions as a professional reader and writes about what he reads), and a writer (of essays, tales and other miscellaneous pieces) – Poe recognizes that, via texts, the author and the reader are constantly seeing reflections of themselves in the other and endlessly changing places. Yet, even as he knows this as an essential characteristic of textual ontology, Poe as an author feels tremendous anxiety over the inevitable loss of authorial control over a work’s meaning. For Poe, this anxiety erupts as horror.

Consider how many of Poe’s works concern terror at the loss of control (for example, “The Pit and the Pendulum” or “A Descent into the Maelström”), including the loss of self-control (“The Black Cat” or “The Imp of the Perverse”), and especially the additional loss of narrative control (as in “The Tell-Tale Heart”). Still other tales and poems concern the desperate desire to assert narrative control over feelings of insurmountable loss (“Annabel Lee” or “Ulalume”). One of Poe’s most notorious (and allegedly misogynistic) artistic pronouncements is that “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (*E&R*, 19); however, the less frequently cited conclusion to this observation is that “equally is it beyond question that the lips best suited for such topic are those of her bereaved lover” (*E&R*, 19). So we see again how Poe’s attention remains fixed on not only the condition of loss but also on ways to exert narrative control over that loss. Closely related to these concerns about loss of (narrative) control are uncanny doublings as in “William Wilson” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Even Poe’s seminal detective stories (“The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Purloined Letter”) deal repeatedly with issues of doubling even as they remain

intensely concerned with texts and methods of reading. As these many uncanny tales and morbid explorations of liminal states serve to attest, Poe recognized the vexed nature of textual ontology. Poe's poetic theory breaks down by what modern theorists would call "the death of the author." That is, while wanting to control the reader's experience, Poe comes to fear the reader's ultimate freedom and thus the failure of his own poetics. The reader becomes his uncanny double.

As one contemplates how Poe's tales and poems problematize his poetics, two works in particular stand out as especially potent explorations of this crucial tension between authorial intention and readerly interpretation, and both of these have been selected for close analysis in this dissertation. Among his tales, "Ligeia," which Poe called "my best tale," presents perhaps the most complicated tangle of tropes, themes, and theoretical challenges. Of his poems, "The Raven" represents the work that finally brought Poe fame during his own lifetime and it still remains his best-known work, but it also presents especially valuable opportunities for examining how Poe's poetic theories intersect with his underlying anxieties. Therefore, the close analysis of these two works makes up extended portions of the present study. Indeed, the concluding chapter serves as a demonstration of the types of readings opened up by this multi-faceted project as it reads "Ligeia" specifically through the understanding of Poe's poetics of doubling.

Methodology

This dissertation works to combine three distinct literary critical approaches: literary history, textual theory, and psychoanalytic theory. Taking a literary historical view allows Poe's work to be understood in terms of the cultural context from which it emerged as well as in relation to the social structures that have influenced its reception. Such an approach also informs the traditional

close reading strategies that are used throughout this project; however, literary history alone cannot account for Poe's theorizing about contested textual authority nor explain his works' proliferation of uncanny doublings.

Textual theory provides an essential framework for examining the complex interplay between authors, texts, and readers. Indeed, the useful concepts and precise terminology of textual theory both empower the explication of Poe's poetics that comprises several key chapters in this dissertation and also radiate their effects throughout the entire project. For example, as a rule this project follows the important distinction that Jerome McGann makes regarding the text as a physical embodiment of a work. Textual theory also cautions against accepting the notion that "any old text" of a work is sufficient for literary analysis, and the particular versions of Poe's work selected for study in this dissertation have been chosen with this understanding in mind. G.R. Thompson's collection of Poe's *Essays and Reviews* for the Library of America edition follows the admirable practice of selecting the "first appearance of each title ... unless the piece was subsequently rewritten and expanded" and offers useful notes on variants (*E&R*, 1482). For Poe's tales and poems, Thomas Ollive Mabbott's extensively annotated editions have been preferred over the eclectic editions presented in the Library of American collection edited by Patrick F. Quinn. Although Quinn is an excellent Poe scholar, his editorial principles are not consistent with the project undertaken in this dissertation.

Finally, psychoanalytic theory presents not only helpful tools for recognizing and interpreting latent or repressed meanings within texts but also offers powerful principles for exploring the effect of uncanny doubling, the strange power of the partial object (Lacan's *objet petit a*), and the return of the repressed. Because he has so extensively and cogently applied psychoanalysis to cultural artifacts, Slavoj Žižek's explication of Freudian and Lacanian ideas is frequently cited in

this dissertation. Of course, Poe has been no stranger to psychoanalytic readings of his work, and Lacan's famous seminar on "The Purloined Letter" serves as a case in point. While some critics have suggested that Poe is the darling of psychoanalysts and poststructuralists because his texts merely reflect their own ideas back at them, one of the legitimate criticisms of Lacan and Žižek has been that they tend to approach texts in an ahistorical way. Accepting the notion that psychoanalytic criticism needs to be informed by textual history and literary historical criticism, this project attempts to redress that potential shortcoming by putting three different modalities into conversation with each other. Because scholars tend to remain entrenched in particular theoretical "camps," arguably literary studies has not experienced enough blending of diverse theories.

Although the initial chapters alternate between these approaches, as the project progresses and the explored concepts begin to build upon each other these three methodologies gradually become woven together to construct a single, stronger and more complex analytic device. This combined historio-textual-psychoanalytic approach offers a new way of looking at how Poe's poetics of doubling informs not only his tales and poems but also his critical reception, and opens up more richly nuanced readings of Poe's individual works than would be possible using any one of these approaches in isolation.

Archive

To compensate for the complexity of the theoretical methodology it undertakes, this project engages in the close literary analysis of relatively few primary texts. To elaborate Poe's poetic theories, only the essential essays have been scrutinized. "Letter to B—," "Exordium to Critical Notices," and the two versions of Poe's review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* are analyzed in

the third chapter with only occasional reference to Poe's other reviews and essays. The fifth chapter mounts a detailed explication of "The Philosophy of Composition." While reference is made to many of Poe's tales and poems, this dissertation's exhaustive critiques are limited to "The Raven" in the fourth chapter and "Ligeia" in the concluding chapter. While conscious that the narrow focus on only two of Poe's creative works may seem limiting, these texts in fact represent Poe's poetics, a poetics that haunts American literary history.

Admittedly, using the term "haunt" here in relation to such a literary figure as Poe may on the surface seem more than a little precious, perhaps too richly apropos or even a bit *outré* (to use one of the author's own preferred terms), but I would suggest that the word "haunt" must be specifically invoked here not merely to echo superficially the supernatural trappings of Poe's gothic literary creations but also to suggest in a lively phrasing those unpredictable and mysterious ways in which Poe's work refuses to be dismissed or forgotten and the various powerful ways his writing continues to exert its influence and disturbs the psyche. Clearly, I am not alone in recognizing this almost supernatural quality to Poe's work. As Maggie Tonkin writes in an article for *Women's Studies* "The 'Poe-etics' of Decomposition: Angela Carter's 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe' and the Reading-Effect" (2004), "Few authors are as undead as Edgar Allan Poe. Despite having been interred over one hundred and fifty years ago, Poe continues to generate effects. Like all the 'dear ones' buried in his fictions, prematurely or otherwise, he perversely refuses to lie down" (1). For Tonkin and others, Poe demonstrates an uncanny ability to bring individual readers under the spell of its phantasmagorical literary experience, tapping into the deepest and most primal of human psychological imaginings while simultaneously challenging, and indeed often subverting, the modern mind's desire for the vaunted intellectual comforts of reason and rationality, both of which have historically been especially

prized within American culture – for ours is a nation imagined and built upon the firm foundation of Enlightenment principles, the first nation literally written into existence.

Both Poe's persona and his writing can also be seen as exhibiting what Jacques Derrida has termed "spectrality," that almost uncanny tendency of some authors and their works to resist belonging only to their own particular historical context. In the introduction to *Specters of Marx* (1993), his prolonged exploration of the competing philosophies of history, Derrida refers to the *spectral* as "a moment that no longer belongs to time ... that is not docile to time, at least to what we call time" (xx). While on the one hand, Derrida can be seen as echoing typical literary critical claims for enduring authors and their towering achievements — as Johnson famously said of Shakespeare, a great poet does not belong to a single age but to all time. However, Derrida strenuously moves beyond such typical hyperbole about the "timelessness" of literary masterpieces. Rather, in presenting his sharp challenge to traditional notions of an orderly and natural progression of historical narrative, Derrida can here be viewed as following Walter Benjamin's more densely theoretical challenging of commonplace notions of orderly historical progress by arguing that ideas and events must not be accepted as merely unfolding "through a homogenous, empty time" (261). Derrida's ideas have particular relevance to my analysis of what I describe here as Poe's poetics of haunting and haunting of poetics, for as Derrida elaborates the connections between the temporal disjunctions of "spectrality" and inheritance, he engages in a broader critique of positivistic historicism in much the same way that Poe can be seen as critiquing the naive American positivism of the Transcendentalists and Literary Nationalists of his own historical moment as well as the subsequent iterations of American positivism inherent in both Pragmatism and Modernism. As such, Poe can be recognized as anticipating and prefiguring the self-critical, "undone" sensibilities of both literary Post-

Modernism and literary critical Post-Structuralism. Indeed, it was Poe who provided such a richly emptied-out primary work as “The Purloined Letter,” around which Jacques Lacan based his provocative psychoanalytic seminar and thereby launched an intense barrage of post-structuralist articles centered around the explication of divergent literary theories as applied to and manifested in Poe’s endlessly enigmatic tale. Furthermore, as a post-Post-Structuralist coda to this frenzied response to “The Purloined Letter,” Shawn Rosenheim has recently argued that the entire Lacanian project of *The Purloined Poe*, published as a critical collection in 1987, illustrates how Poe’s texts offer trick mirrors in which literary critics cannot help but admire their own reflections. Whether or not one agrees with Rosenheim’s assessment, clearly Poe’s effect resonates with ideas of Derridean spectrality.

By focusing on Poe’s poetics of haunting and the haunting effect of his poetics, this dissertation attempts to account for the curious power of Poe’s work to exert such an enduring imaginative influence over a vast and diverse collection of American and international readers, writers, and critics. Indeed, it would not be too extreme to argue Poe’s effect upon those who encounter his work extends beyond what can be understood as a normal readerly experience or recognized as typical literary influence, for Poe’s work frequently plays upon our darkest unspoken fears, probing things we want individually and collectively to repress. Nearly a century before the groundbreaking work of Sigmund Freud, Poe plumbed the darkest depths of the human psyche. His international reputation bears this out; however, his position in American literary studies has long continued to struggle. Importantly, he also mapped the shadowy terrain that forms the dark underside of the American imagination. Not surprisingly, the repression of Poe as an important literary figure mirrors the repression of the troubling impulses and darker sensibilities he has come to represent for us. For all these reasons, Poe *haunts* us.

Chapter 1: Poe's Critical Reception

Beginning this dissertation's overall project of recuperating Poe's literary work requires first clearing away the distractions and liabilities of his too-public persona and his largely negative reputation. To this end, the first chapter analyzes the history of Poe's critical reception, exploring the causes and effects of his vexed relationship with American academic readers. In particular, this chapter scrutinizes the approach to Poe taken by two major 20th-century arbiters of the national canon, F. O. Matthiessen and Harold Bloom, recognizing not only the overt ways in which these two public intellectuals have cast out Poe as undesirable but also tracing the ways in which Poe has resisted their rejection. For as Derrida observes, "Hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (37). Thus, in their very dismissal of him, guardians of "high literature" inevitably confirm Poe's spectrality; Poe can clearly be seen haunting these canon-building works, lingering unbidden about the fringes of their shared vision of a pure, positivistic American literature.

Griswold's Maligning Obituary and the Rise of the Poe Controversy

In *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe* (2004), his compelling analysis of the disparate versions of Poe circulated since 1849, Scott Peeples suggests that as early as the scandalous obituary published by Rufus Griswold just two days after the death of Poe as a flesh and blood man, Poe the notorious literary figure had already risen from the grave and transformed into a grotesque caricature of the living man. In the first public notice of the author's untimely death, Griswold starts with cold fact and quickly continues into a harsh assessment that tries to present

itself as similarly factual,

Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore on Sunday, October 7th. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it. The poet was known, personally or by reputation, in all this country; he had readers in England and in several states of Continental Europe; but he had few or no friends; and the regrets for his death will be suggested principally by the consideration that in him literary art has lost one of its most brilliant but erratic stars. (qtd. by Willis, vii).

By showing that Griswold cribbed his obituary description of Poe almost verbatim from the sketch of the villainous character Francis Vivian in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *The Caxtons*, Peebles demonstrates that from the self-same moment at which most American readers learned of the author's sudden death, much of the personal and biographical information that the public would then believe about Poe's character had already been warped into something that was "literally a fiction" (6), borrowed from the pages of a popular novel. As Bulwer-Lytton had written of the character Vivian, Griswold claims that Poe was "[i]rascible, envious ["arrogant" in *The Caxtons*] — bad enough, but not the worst, for these salient angles were all varnished over with a cold repellent cynicism, his passions vented themselves into sneers" (qtd. by Peebles 5). Throughout this essay and its future iterations and expansions, Griswold continually seeks to portray Poe as a poisonous and egotistical character. Griswold's attacks reached their nadir in his account of Poe's life written for the *International Monthly Magazine* in October, 1850. In an online essay concerning the topic, the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore summarizes this subsequent slanderous collection of Griswold fabrications thus:

No lie was too great for Griswold, no slander too outrageous. Poe's choice not to return to the University of Virginia became expulsion for wild and reckless behavior. Poe's honorable discharge from the army became desertion. The 1827 publication of *Tamerlane and Other Poems* was dismissed as a lie. He even accused Poe of engaging in some dark secret with the second Mrs. Allan and invented a scheme by which Poe supposedly

blackmailed an unidentified “literary woman of South Carolina.” (Poe Society, online) Yet even as he engaged in such vituperative attacks on Poe’s character — even going so far as to forge letters, supposedly written by Poe, that were calculated to alienate the death author’s friends — Griswold continued to claim publicly that he held deep sympathy for Poe’s literary genius, an imposture that made Griswold’s lies about Poe seem even more plausible. While Peeples acknowledges that “all famous people play fictional public roles,” he argues that Poe represents a particularly vivid instance of this phenomenon:

[W]ith Poe this storytelling and mythologizing has been unusually intense, because not only the facts of Poe’s life but the very essence of his personality have been subject to debate from the beginning (debate that has not been limited to biographers and scholars), and because Poe’s writing is always intriguingly autobiographical and yet never truly autobiographical, inviting intertextual readings of the Poe canon and the Poe legend. (6)

In response to Griswold’s maligning portrayal of the author in his obituary — an attack which Griswold later expanded into a full essay for inclusion in a four-volume set of Poe’s collected works after he had gotten himself appointed (under questionable circumstances) as Poe’s literary executor by the author’s mother-in-law — many of Poe’s professional and personal contacts rose to his defense. Close on the heels of Griswold’s public attack on Poe’s character, one of the more popular American writers at the time and a long-time friend of Poe, Nathaniel Parker Willis published an impassioned and sympathetic portrait of the author in the *Home Journal*. Willis writes that during Poe’s employment under him as a critic and sub-editor, far from any stereotypically expected difficulties of dealing with a creative genius, Poe was “invariably punctual and industrious,” always obliging when asked to tone down his editorial criticisms when Willis suggested he had gone too far, and “through all this considerable period ... a quiet, patient, industrious, and most gentlemanly person, commanding the utmost respect and good feeling by his unvarying deportment and ability” (ix). To be fair, Willis acknowledges he had

heard rumors circulated about Poe's problem with alcohol though he had never witnessed the author in this state. He elaborates upon the hearsay, recounting how it was described to him that "with a *single glass* of wine, [Poe's] whole nature was reversed, the demon became uppermost, and, though none of the usual signs of intoxication were visible, his *will* was palpably insane" (x, Willis's emphasis). However, Willis reiterates that even in the off-hours from work or when meeting Poe by chance in the streets he personally had never observed Poe in this rumored darker state of "arrogance and bad-heartedness" but "knew him only ... [by] his modesty and unaffected humility ... [which] were a constant charm to his character" (x).

Willis was not alone in rallying to Poe's defense. As Peeples observes in his study of Poe's posthumous reputation, "a series of testimonials to Poe's character — most of them favorable — appeared over the next several months, as the Ludwig article was widely reprinted and the first volumes of Poe's collected works were issued" (Peeples, 2). Even Poe's fiancée, the poet Sarah Helen Whitman joined the fray, coming to his defense in a volume entitled *Was Poe Immoral?: Edgar Allan Poe and His Critics*. Whitman denied Griswold's invented anecdotes about an unstable and drunken Poe alienating himself from her affections and publicly embarrassing her.

Nearly a hundred years later, Arthur Hobson Quinn, a critic who still stands as one of the greatest of Poe scholars, exhaustively catalogued the devious misrepresentations, pure falsifications and outright forgeries upon which the unscrupulous Griswold based his original hyperbolic portrayal of Poe, but for decades after Poe's death the controversy surrounding his moral character continued to be argued in public and the taint of Griswold's false characterization has yet to be fully eradicated. Remarkably, the section on Poe volume two of the eight-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature* first discredits and then proceeds to

quote at length from Griswold's essay. Under the aegis of general editor Sacvan Bercovitch, the editors acknowledge the previous slanders and then immediately perpetuate this false image of

Poe:

Griswold published versions of Poe's life that made Poe anathema to respectable literary culture, until modern scholarship restored the facts. Although many who had known Poe protested, Griswold's version still captures much of the feeling that his memory has provoked: He walked the streets in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses, or with eyes upturned in passionate prayers (never for himself, for he felt, or professed to feel, that he was already damned), but for their happiness who at that moment were objects of his idolatry; or with his glance introverted to a heart gnawed with anguish, and with a face shrouded in gloom, he would brave the wildest storms; and all night, with drenched garments and arms wildly beating the wind and rain, he would speak as if to spirits. (654-5)

The knowing repetition of such a false portrayal in an exhaustive work of literary history cannot help but perpetuate the damage it admits to be wrong. (While I'm aware of the irony of my own reproduction of the Griswold mischaracterization here, I do still feel compelled to present the quote in full to demonstrate the extent to which the Cambridge editors have quoted them.) Yet this image of Poe seems to satisfy a perverse American longing for viewing the artist as a tortured solitary genius, and Poe's tales themselves invite thus identifying him with his maniacal narrators. As such, the Cambridge editors suggest, "Poe served as an early exemplar of what has become a commonplace" (655). Many of Poe's illustrious literary contemporaries suffered obscurity and rejection of their work which future generations would revere. The Cambridge editors find a succinct summation of this prevalent problem in a quote from influential 19th-century literary figure Evert Duyckinck, "Our most neglected and best [sic] abused authors, are generally our best authors" (qtd. in Bercovitch 655). But even in their justification for reiterating the stereotypical image of Poe, these editors prevent the emergence of a clearer and

more instructive version of Poe.

While Quinn and other scholars have acknowledged the lasting and incalculable damage caused by Griswold's prolonged character assassination, for his part Peeples points out the degree to which Poe understood that for those seeking public attention there is ultimately no such thing as bad publicity. In fact, as Peeples points out, "Poe had antagonized powerful editors and authors throughout his career, and had satirized the practice in his story 'The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.,' in which a 'magazinish' rises to the top of his profession by picking fights with his rivals" (4). In all probability Poe, always alert to any perceived slight, would scarcely have welcomed being so viciously slandered and likely would have revenged himself by heaping untold vitriol upon his accusers; however, Peeples seems correct here in his assessment that Poe would have appreciated the notoriety afforded him by the discussion of his character, not to mention approving of the accompanying book sales. Ultimately, Peeples provides a valuable corrective when he asserts that "Griswold did more good than harm to Poe's long-term popularity by stimulating a character debate that kept people writing about Poe for decades, keeping prospective readers curious and thereby keeping Poe very much in print" (5). Indeed, Poe's collected works as edited by Griswold had gone through nineteen reprintings by the early 1860's, selling at least as many copies per year as Poe's most successful volume had done in its single print-run during his life. Griswold's editorial work fueled the fire of the Poe controversy for many years and, as Peeples puts it, "probably helped maintain interest in his work" (24); however, Griswold's paratextual shaping of these first editions of Poe's collected works must not be underestimated when considering the author's early posthumous reception.¹ Griswold added

¹ In *Radiant Textuality* (2001), Jerome McGann argues that each edition, version, or translation constitutes a textual "deformation" even though "criticism (scholarship as well as interpretation) tends to imagine itself as an informative rather than a deformative activity" (114).

the unbidden obstacle of an unsavory authorial persona to Poe's pre-existing liabilities as a literary figure, namely that for some readers and critics Poe's writing will always seem convoluted and his subject matters distasteful.

Fortunately, by the time of centenary celebrations of Poe in 1909, Griswold's malicious essay had gone out of print and his editions of Poe's work had been successively replaced by the more dispassionate editorial labors of not only John Henry Ingram in the 1870's but also James Harrison's 1902 "Virginia edition." Still, by becoming a fictional character along the lines of his own most maniacal narrative inventions, Poe had finally arrived as a full-blown, larger-than-life American celebrity, albeit posthumously. This is the version the Cambridge editors perpetuate. This image of Poe also stands as the one that would further Charles Baudelaire's championing of the American writer as a *poète maudit*, a Byronic figure of poetic rebellion, the type of passionate artist who must inevitably be destroyed by those same forces that instill him with genius.

Throughout his historical reception Poe has been variously extolled and derided as a critic, poet, and writer of tales. French Symbolist Charles Baudelaire translated all Poe's works into French and helped to secure his enduring European reputation as literary giant. The late 19th-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé claimed to have learned the English language for the express purpose of reading Poe in the original. However, Poe's detractors have never shied from employing sharp witticisms to dismiss him. Ralph Waldo Emerson apparently dismissed him as "the jingle man" (Matthiessen, 136-37). The increasingly neglected American poet James Russell Lowell may now be best remembered for a derisive couplet he penned about Poe. In his 1848 "Fable for Critics," Lowell jokes,

There comes Poe, with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,
Three fifths of him genius and two fifths sheer fudge,

Who talks like a book of iambs and pentameters,
In a way to make people of common sense damn metres,
Who has written some things quite the best of their kind,
But the heart somehow seems all squeezed out by the mind. (67-8).

Henry James offered the barbed opinion that “an enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection,” though his own torturous prose stylings would seem to owe much to Poe’s serpentine sentences and labyrinthine logic. Further, one can scarcely imagine James writing his gothic masterpiece *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) without the undeniable influence of Poe’s earlier twists on the same psychological apparatus. Just as Poe does with his series of unreliable narrators, James relies upon his reader’s perspicacity to illuminate the madness underlying the apparently supernatural occurrences. Indeed, James’s narrative voice in many of his popular tales featuring haunted writers and uncanny doubles owes much more to Poe than is commonly recognized. For his part, Aldous Huxley famously dismissed Poe as providing a particularly miserable example of the tendency some literary authors have to express mere vulgarity in their writing (Cox, 112). As reported by James M. Cox, even Allen Tate, a critic generally appreciative of Poe’s literary merits, has said,

I confess that Poe’s serious style at its typical worst makes the reading of more than one story at a sitting an almost insuperable task. The Gothic glooms, the Venetian interiors, the ancient wine cellars (from which nobody ever enjoys a vintage but always drinks ‘deep’)—all this, done up in a glutinous prose, so fatigues one’s attention that with the best will in the world one gives up, unless one gets a clue to the power underlying the flummery. (Cox, 113)

The key to understanding Tate’s backhandedness here is hidden in the qualifier tacked onto the end of the final sentence. Once one does get a clue that remarkable power underlies Poe’s “flummery,” one’s attention re-engages and the vistas of his imaginative scope become endlessly fascinating; however, for some, Poe still appears as a effete or aesthetic intellectual whose heart

has been overtaken by his mind and whose lasting achievement remains the endless troping and parodying of a wide variety of generic forms, during the course of a literary career that serves to create that unique quality one associates with Poe. Indeed, as Lowell's verse caricature recalls, that persona has become synonymous with the public image of Poe and his literary *oeuvre* and which, nevertheless, still carry with them the hallmark of his pervasive effect of "haunting." Even at his worst and most problematic, Poe remains undeniable as a particular artistic archetype. Of course one must acknowledge here that more traditional literary critics might prefer to label this effect of *haunting* as merely what has long been termed "influence," dismissing the introduction of such quasi-supernatural terminology as fashionable jargoneering; however, I would stress here that using a more conventional term such as "influence" ultimately fails to account for the extreme degree to which many of those same traditional literary critics can be observed as scrupulously (one might say anxiously, or almost fearfully) avoiding discussion of such a troubling and unhallowed figure as Poe.

When considering those critics who have neglected or disparaged the centrality of Poe to antebellum American literary development, the lauded dean of New Criticism F.O. Matthiessen stands out in particular with his watershed study *American Renaissance* (1941), an exhaustive tome on the era which can be observed taking some deliberate pains to avoid any prolonged or serious discussion of Poe and his influence. When he does mention the author, Matthiessen refers to him merely as "Poe" without explanation or introduction, conjuring this fragmentary name out of the collective unconscious in a way one can infer assumes Poe's necessary presence in any serious discussion of American literature. "Re-naissance or *revenance*?" Derrida asks concerning the inherent tension between what he calls "imminence and the desire for resurrection," a question which resonates powerfully with Matthiessen's title (44). What better

or more apt term than “haunting” can at once account for Matthiessen’s dismissal of Poe and simultaneously evoke Poe’s uncanny ability to linger evermore about the fringes of American literary studies. Somewhat ironically, Matthiessen’s exclusion of Poe supports the claim here that Poe cannot be adequately understood from the perspective of his mere historical moment, but it also demonstrates how essential this marginalized figure remains to the establishment and maintenance of a literary canon.

To fully understand Matthiessen’s project, one must first examine the introduction to his work in the forward, which he labels “Method and Scope.” Here, to underscore the metaphorical potency of his book’s title, *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen claims, “It may not seem precisely accurate to refer to our mid-nineteenth century as a *re-birth*; but that was how the writers themselves judged it” (vii, his emphasis). The critic elaborates that while this renaissance was not a return to a pre-existing state or set of values, it represented the nation’s maturation and affirmation of “its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture” (vii). Most evocative and significant here, I would argue, is his use of the precise word “heritage” in relation to the writers he proposes to study (though he has not yet named them) because the word already carries with it the notion of an inheritance or something passed down to an heir from earlier generations. While a “heritage” can be seen as a birthright, it still necessarily relies upon what has come before, the groundbreaking work of one’s predecessors. Although one might still quibble with the appropriateness of his exact terminology, the title of Matthiessen’s study and his name for the era, the American Renaissance, has continued to resonate with readers and critics so that one can now scarcely refer to any literature of the antebellum era without adopting Matthiessen’s phrase, though the Matthiessen himself is quite pointed in limiting his view of the era to what he claims as its quintessential five-year span between the years of 1850 and 1855.

Within these narrow constraints, Matthiessen claims as the insurmountable masterpieces of American literature the following: Emerson's collection of lectures *Representative Men* (1850), Hawthorne's novels *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). One striking peculiarity about this list of authors and their crowning works that cannot escape at least passing notice from our more inclusive early 21st-century perspective is that all of the authors represented here are upper- or middle-class white men from New England. Additionally, while one might initially be tempted to view the critic's self-imposed temporal limitations of this particular half-decade as somewhat arbitrary, Matthiessen is quick to disabuse his reader's of such a notion. As he elaborates his statement of purpose, Matthiessen argues that he centers his interest entirely on the first half of the 1850's because one "might search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality" (vii). For him then, the early 1850's define the high water mark of nascent American literature. This despite the fact that the narrow temporal scope introduces to the project very serious limitations that one might argue begin to undermine the entire enterprise. For example, the temporal constraint eliminates from consideration Emerson's earlier collections of essays in favor of *Representative Men*, a collection of lectures concerning archetypal "great men" from Plato ("the Philosopher") to Shakespeare ("the Poet") to Napoleon ("the Man of the World"). That none of these "great men" happen to be Americans perhaps allows Emerson greater latitude in his explorations of man's relationship to society, but the same fact (that none of them are Americans) might still be seen as something of a liability for Matthiessen's project since he sees these works as inaugurating and confirming specifically American participation in "the whole expanse of art and culture."

Also worthy of particular note here is that Matthiessen chooses not to include short stories among his representative fiction, despite its importance emergence as a distinct form during the earlier half of the nineteenth century. While Hawthorne had first become known primarily for his short fiction during the earlier decade and Melville was no stranger to the short tale, Matthiessen clearly values the novel over the short story, here choosing two novels from each of these to stand not only for their personal literary achievements but for the best and most representative American writing of their era. Still, even allowing his temporal parameters and obvious bias in favor of the novel to stand for the moment (though not for long), one cannot miss the exclusion here of Harriet Beecher Stowe's socially transformative novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Published in 1852, Stowe's book was not merely the best-selling American novel of the entire century, falling just behind the Bible itself in book sales, but it has widely been argued that the novel bore directly upon the nation's march towards the Civil War. Even before the corrective work of New Historicism during the latter half of the 20th-century, Matthiessen's choice to almost entirely ignore Stowe's novel remains somewhat bizarre. While he acknowledges in his introduction that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published the same socially-momentous year as Melville's *Pierre*, beyond that he refuses to engage the novel in any substantive way, mentioning only once more in his entire book and then merely in passing reference to Emerson's uneasiness over his paucity of public attention. Matthiessen writes that Emerson worried about "his restricted audience when he compared the response of his few hundreds or thousands to the mass that greeted *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He perceived also how that it was that book's distinction to have been 'read equally in the parlor and the kitchen and the nursery'" (67). With even his putative authorial subject recognizing that novel's social significance, Matthiessen's cultural blindness as a mid-20th-century critic clearly demonstrates the narrow and elitist aesthetics of his

era; however, the one need not belabor these obvious limitations to the New Critical perspective. The point here is not to excoriate Matthiessen for valorizing literary works by what he saw as the “great men” of the American Renaissance. No serious contemporary study of the era would exclude Stowe or other diverse voices. However, Matthiessen’s critical judgment continues to have important consequences for American studies at least in part because several of his other inherent prejudices have remained but little examined. Most significant among these remains his blindness to the developing tradition of American short fiction, particularly as theorized and epitomized by Poe. By ignoring this important tradition, Matthiessen and other critics in his wake have left subsequent students and scholars ill-equipped to address this literary form. Similarly, our understanding of American literary traditions has been unnecessarily homogenized by Matthiessen’s admitted enthusiasm for one particular commonality among his five chosen authors, a tendency he refers to as their “devotion to the possibilities of democracy” (ix). While Emersonian idealism remains an indisputably important strain in American thought of the nineteenth century, so too are cynicism about the limits and failures of democracy and a deepening recognition of the darker sides of human nature. To ignore the obverse of republican positivism during the American Renaissance degrades our ability to understand the subsequent development of other important strains in American literature such as Modernist fiction (particularly as exemplified in the short story), Southern Gothic fiction, hard-boiled crime and noir fiction, as well as the work of the Beats and other counter-culture artists. None of these American forms, I would argue, can be studied adequately without accounting for the decisive influence of Poe. Further, that throughout the recent history of American studies Poe has remained inadequately understood and incorporated into the narrative of American literary development helps account for his “haunting” resonance with later writers. Poe already writes

about transgressive themes, but his lack of respectability within the American canon may in fact have inadvertently magnified his reputation as a mysterious and rebellious “other” which has only further enhanced his reputation outside academia and compounded the problem of his public persona remaining at odds with a more realistic view of his lasting impact and literary legacy.

In terms of the New Critical stance on Poe, while one can scarcely argue that Poe would do much to diversify Matthiessen’s list of five great (white male) authors, the simple fact is that Poe is perforce excluded from consideration by the excessively narrow proscription of Matthiessen’s dates for American Renaissance moment. Poe, after all, died in the Fall of 1849. Additionally, Matthiessen clearly has no interest in short fiction as a form, so the majority of Poe’s writing would still be outside his interest. While Poe was also known as a poet still does little to improve his standing within the scope of *American Renaissance* since Poe wrote almost exclusively lyric poems rather than expanding into longer and more oratory poems, which is clearly the form for which Matthiessen most highly prizes Whitman. However, Matthiessen’s apparent disregard for Poe’s work as a critic and literary theorist remains in some ways most damaging to Matthiessen’s project, for after setting forth the parameters of the works he intends to examine, he claims his “main subject has become the conceptions held by five of our major writers concerning the function and nature of literature, and the degree to which their practice bore out their theories” (vii). Somewhat ironically, this stated “main subject” is fairly close to the aims of this dissertation (although obviously in direct relation to Poe); however, Poe would seem in many regards to be a more suitable author for Matthiessen to examine in such a project as he sets forth. Indeed, Poe as a critic and theorist writes extensively about the “function and nature of literature.” Poe used many of his book reviews, including two reviews of Hawthorne’s

Twice-Told Tales, to articulate his aesthetic theories, and Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" directly addresses the topic as it sets about a self-reflective dissecting of Poe's creation of his most famous poem, "The Raven." By contrast, an analysis of Hawthorne's and Melville's conceptions about the "function and nature of literature" requires a literary critic to infer the authors' ideas on the subject based on writing that presents itself first and foremost as fiction. Matthiessen acknowledges as much when he writes, "Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman all commented very explicitly on language as well as expression, and the creative intentions of Hawthorne and Melville can be readily discerned through the scrutiny of their chief works" (vii). While Matthiessen portrays himself as confident about this undertaking, a more dispassionate view exposes that his rationale remains flawed from its very beginnings. He plans to discern these authors' "creative intentions" from the very works he then subsequently proposes to measure against these intuited "creative intentions." The snake of this project thus eats its own tail. Again, the point here is not to disparage the historically-important scholarship of Matthiessen; however, recognizing the dilemma with which he confounds himself may begin to explain why the specter of Poe haunts the pages of his *American Renaissance*.

Ultimately, as we shall observe, Matthiessen cannot completely ignore the ways in which Poe makes his presence felt both in his own era and in that of the New Critic. While he would initially seem to prefer not discussing Poe, Matthiessen (perhaps a bit like one of Poe's own unreliable narrators) reliably brings up the topic he can be seen attempt to avoid. Indeed, I would ultimately suggest that Matthiessen's de facto exclusion of Poe from his seminal academic study of the era stands more as a testament to Poe's unclassifiability. In many respects then we see how Poe as a writer, poet and sophisticated theoretician about the "function and nature of literature" cannot be understood as merely American or merely of his biographical era. Poe's

central aesthetic principle of the “unity of effect” remains so apt it almost seems self-evident — except that no one before him had articulated it in such a way and applied the idea to poetry and short fiction. Additionally, Poe’s literary lineage is more global than merely national, which has also tended to confound Americanist scholars. Therefore, Poe’s pointed exclusion from Matthiessen’s Mount Rushmore of great American authors comes as no surprise; however, the compelling ways in which Poe cannot be ignored in Matthiessen’s critical retrospective suggest the very ways in which Poe needs to be recuperated and reincorporated into American studies. Tellingly, Poe has twenty-seven references in *American Renaissance*, several in sometimes very lengthy footnotes. This total places Poe foremost among the other antebellum American writers to whom Matthiessen alludes, with more direct references than the critic affords Charles Brocken Brown (1), James Fennimore Cooper (14), Washington Irving (9), or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (20); however, all of these American forebears are outstripped by the Matthiessen’s more frequent references to canonical English writers, chiefly Shakespeare and Coleridge, as well as the more modern American writers Henry James and T.S. Eliot, both favorites of 20th century literary scholars.

Early in the first chapter of his book, Matthiessen contrasts Emerson’s overwhelmingly positive temperament to the darker outlooks manifested by two of Emerson’s very familiar contemporaries: “The possible tragic consequences of isolation, the haunted reverberations of the soul locked into its prison, though not envisaged by his optimism, were the burdens of Hawthorne and Poe” (8). Used as a counter-example to what Matthiessen views as Emerson’s healthy version of social individualism in “Self-Reliance,” Poe’s apparently egotistical atheism finds its way into a footnote later on this same page where Matthiessen moralizes that Poe “reached the desperate conclusion in *Eureka* that no one can believe ‘that anything exists *greater*

than his own soul” (8, Poe’s emphasis). Two pages later, Matthiessen directly acknowledges Poe’s significance as a poet within major movements of world literature as he frames Emerson’s importance by writing that “his extension of the meaning of the inner life relates him to the dominant strain in modern art that leads from Hawthorne through the younger James to Proust, from Poe through the symbolists to Eliot” (10). Poe finds his way into another footnote some pages later as Matthiessen attempts to account for Emerson’s failings as a transcendentalist poet. Quoting at length from Poe’s parodic piece “The Signora Psyche Zenobia,” also sometimes known as “How to Write a *Blackwood* Article,” Matthiessen notes,

The excesses of vagueness and obscurity into which this transcendental doctrine can run are only too apparent. They are mocked thus by Poe: ‘Above all, study innuendo. Hint everything — assert nothing. If you feel inclined to say “bread and butter,” do not by any means say it outright. You may say any and every thing *approaching* to “bread and butter.” You may hint at buckwheat cake, or you may even go so far as to insinuate oatmeal porridge, but if bread and butter be your real meaning, be cautious, my *dear* Miss Psyche, not on any account to say “bread and butter”’ (57).

Interestingly, while Matthiessen himself stops well short of calling Emerson’s poetry laughable, he clearly appreciates the humor of Poe’s unflattering portrayal. However, it should be noted that Poe lampoons the entire transcendentalist school of expression, not limiting the target of his scorn to Emerson’s poetry as Matthiessen seeks to do here. Matthiessen clarifies later that because he valued simpler modes of expression Emerson remained skeptical of technical prowess in writing. As Matthiessen puts it, Emerson “was uneasy with any display of mere virtuosity” which begins to explain why he (as mentioned above) would refer to Poe as “the jingle man” (136-37). In noting this judgment, Matthiessen attempts to link Whitman to Emerson’s glib dismissal of Poe by noting Whitman’s oft-reiterated “scorn for ‘piano tunes’” (137); however, Matthiessen does not mention that Whitman personally acknowledged his

appreciation for Poe, if perhaps in action more than in words, by being the only major American literary figure to attend Poe's funeral.

As he traces the development of the "organic principle" from Coleridge to Emerson in the next section of *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen's casts another sidelong glance towards Poe that represents simultaneously his most strained avoidance of Poe and his most important inclusion. To address the American development of aesthetic theories in the years immediately preceding his chosen half-decade, Matthiessen does not consider Poe, whose extensive books reviews and essays on the writing craft during the 1830's and 40's undeniably represent the fullest and most articulate explorations of nascent, and native, literary theory. Instead, Matthiessen turns entirely away from considering the aesthetic theories of other writers in order to consider the ideas of an admittedly mediocre American sculptor of the era, Horatio Greenough, because Emerson had (in Matthiessen's words) "rejoiced in him as one of the best proofs of our native capability" (143). This despite Matthiessen's acknowledgment that only a few years earlier Emerson had derided the same sculptor as evidence of (in Emerson's words) "no genius in the Fine Arts in this country," a harsh judgment that Matthiessen pushes aside with his belief that Emerson had "probably forgotten" his earlier dismissal of Greenough (143). Of the sculptor's aesthetics, Matthiessen claims that Greenough "had reaches his main tenets as early as 1843" (144). Though Matthiessen does not mention the development of Poe's aesthetic theories here, Poe's first arrival at his main tenets for literary expression are generally dated at the publication of his 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. The particulars of Matthiessen's explication of Greenough's aesthetic theories of the organic principle are not of much interest here, but that Matthiessen goes on at length in his book about the sculptor's ideas while refusing to address Poe's simultaneous development of such ideas for literature is almost

maddening. The omission becomes particularly egregious when Matthiessen invokes Poe to explain the exigencies that gave rise to Greenough's development of his aesthetic ideas by comparing it to the situation encountered by two American writers. He writes of Greenough, "Like Poe and Henry James, he was forced by the very absence of a living native tradition for his art to re-examine the essentials of both its technique and its purpose, and so to arrive at fundamental discoveries in advance of current European practice" (144). Clearly, writing at the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th, Henry James provides merely an interesting historical side note, but Matthiessen can seem rather perverse here to be alluding to Poe's achievements in developing a poetics of literary practice, which coincided almost exactly with Greenough's aesthetics of sculpture, while never actually addressing Poe's theories. In point of fact, however, Matthiessen's strategy reveals his implicit desire to foreground an Emersonian model of American aesthetics, which roughly corresponds to a Wordsworthian model, while suppressing Poe's model, which correlates to a more Coleridgean aesthetic. This choice by Matthiessen to reach so far in his embrace of Greenough offers a striking example of his overall efforts to seal off Poe from *American Renaissance*'s ostensible goal of charting the development of American literary thought. Arguably, Matthiessen performs these contortions to the detriment of his overall project. For while Matthiessen's two fiction writers, Hawthorne and Melville, may or may not have been familiar with the aesthetic theories of Greenough — which they would then have needed to extrapolate into literary applications — both writers were certainly very familiar with the writings of Poe, whose literary critical work affected both of them very directly. Poe's review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* 1842 represents one of his earliest and fullest articulations of his "unity of effect" in short fiction. Further, Poe's combative stance in his 1846 satire "Literati of New York City," particularly with its career-damaging condescending

portrayal of influential literary patron Evert Duyckinck, is echoed by Melville's own pasquinade of the man in two early chapters of *Pierre*, one of the very novels Matthiessen reveres in *American Renaissance*. Indeed, in his 1975 *ESQ* article "'Bartleby the Scrivener,' Poe, and the Duyckinck Circle" Daniel A. Wells argues that Melville took Poe's side against the "philosophical and aesthetic orthodoxy" of Duyckinck, a narrowness of judgment that had led Duyckinck to give *Moby-Dick* a lukewarm response and to reject *Pierre* outright (35-6). In his reading of "Bartleby," Wells sees Poe as the inspiration for Melville's character of Nippers, a man who is characterized by "testiness and frustrated ambition," who demonstrates a very mechanical turn of mind and who voices continual frustration with the inadequate height of his writing table, a classically Melvillean farcical metaphor for Poe's thwarted literary aspirations (37-8).

In his *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen makes several interesting remarks about Poe in his discussion of Nathaniel Hawthorne. After claiming "the only earlier American writer whose work bore any inner resemblance to Hawthorne's was [Charles] Brockden Brown" because both were able to transform "the mechanical horrors of the Gothic novel into something really felt" and both "explored the mysterious borderland between fantasy and reality" (201), Matthiessen insightfully observes an important trend in the development in our national literary tradition: "This ability to take the stock trappings of romanticism and to endow them with the genuine horror of tortured nerves has been a peculiarly American combination, from Philip Freneau's remarkable poem 'The House of Night' through Poe to Ambrose Bierce and William Faulkner" (202-3). Unfortunately, although he gestures briefly towards an important literary tradition, Matthiessen fails to explore the thought further. When he returns to Poe some pages later, he does so to elevate his estimation of Hawthorne's seriousness in an unfavorable

comparison to Poe. Matthiessen writes that Hawthorne's "hard critical sense equipped him to see through not only the distortions and delusions of Puritanism, but likewise through the sleight-of-hand of contemporary 'sciences' like phrenology and mesmerism, and thus to occupy a more serious domain than Poe" (205). While discussing Hawthorne's 1834 sketch "The Haunted Mind," Matthiessen somewhat counteracts his dismissal of Poe's susceptibility to pseudo-sciences by acknowledging aspects of "Freudian analysis ... foreshadowed by a remarkably accurate description in Poe's *Marginalia*" (232-3). In our own time, Poe has been praised by American theoretical physicist Michio Kaku, the co-founder of string field theory, for being the first one to offer a plausible explanation for Olbers' paradox which "bedeviled many generations of philosophers and astronomers" (27). Olbers' paradox asks why, if the universe contains an infinite number of stars, the night sky is mostly dark instead of displaying a vast sea of stars. In "Eureka: A Prose Poem" (1848), Poe both explains the paradox itself and provides his own creative answer, one which modern scientists have finally come to accept:

Were the succession of stars endless, then the background of the sky would present us an uniform luminosity, like that displayed by the Galaxy—since there could be absolutely no point, in all that background, at which would not exist a star. The only mode, therefore, in which, under such a state of affairs, we could comprehend the *voids* which our telescopes find in innumerable directions, would be by supposing that the distance of the invisible background so immense that no ray from it has yet been able to reach us at all. (*P&T* 1328, Poe's emphasis)

As Kaku states simply, "This is the key to the correct answer" (28). Like anyone with an interest in science will do, Poe on occasion subscribed to theories that were later discredited; however, such normal failings can hardly be construed as demonstrating that any writer occupies an inherently less serious domain than those writers who take but little interest in the physical sciences. Matthiessen's claim here is spurious and one might suppose he knows it, given the

value he finds in Poe's other judgments.

Oddly, while eager to elevate Hawthorne above Poe for the latter's apparent gullibility, Matthiessen makes the move of buttressing his own high estimation of Hawthorne by drawing upon Poe's own favorable judgment of Hawthorne's literary skills. He writes, "Poe cited 'The Hollow of the Three Hills' as an instance of Hawthorne's exceptional skill in creating a *totality* of impression" (206, his emphasis). Ironically, Matthiessen here makes reference not only to the very review of Hawthorne in which Poe first articulates his theories about literary composition but also paraphrases Poe's guiding poetic principle of the "unity of effect" without ever once acknowledging the landmark significance of Poe's aesthetic insights. This uncannily recurring theme of Matthiessen's obvious deep familiarity with Poe while failing to appreciate and to examine his significance to emerging American literary traditions demonstrates the effect of Poe's "haunting" the pages of *American Renaissance*.

Finally, Matthiessen's self-contradictory approach to Poe in *American Renaissance* can be most usefully viewed as signaling an unconscious acknowledgement of his resistance to Poe's influence, and in turn the resistance of Poe's influence to the mere limitations of his socio-historical context. Born several years after Hawthorne, Poe actually appears between Hawthorne and Melville in most strictly chronological anthologies of American writing from the era. In contrast, Matthiessen can be seen going to pains to exclude Poe from his formulation of the greatest half-decade of American literary achievement by starting this five-year epoch the year after Poe's untimely death and pretending that the writers he discusses would not have viewed Poe as a contemporary. As such, Matthiessen shows tacitly, but forcefully, the power of Poe's literary presence to demonstrate the quality that Derrida refers to as "spectrality."

Matthiessen's vexed relationship with Poe would continue a few years after the

publication of *American Renaissance* when he was called upon to write the chapter on Poe for Spiller and Thorp's *Literary History of the United States* (1948). In his chapter, Matthiessen concerns himself primarily with Poe's literary career, but he implicitly defends and explains his relegation of Poe in the earlier book by suggesting that Poe's influence on American writers is only an indirect result of his more significant impact on French symbolists. And while Matthiessen acknowledges Poe as "one of the few great innovators in American literature," he continues to imply that Poe's work fails to represent the pinnacle of American literary achievement demonstrated by the five great writers he chooses to canonize in *American Renaissance*. And unfortunately, this evaluation of Poe has been extended by other critics under Matthiessen's considerable influence. As Scott Peeples observes of Spiller and Thorp's *Literary History* that "would become a standard reference for decades," the editors place the Matthiessen chapter on Poe "just before" the chapter of the book that examines all five of Matthiessen's preferred authors and the title of the subsequent chapter, "Literary Fulfillment," clearly, as Peeples so aptly puts it, "suggests that Poe was merely a precursor to the real (American) thing" (71). Even in this focused follow-up to *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen refuses to see Poe as participating fully and influentially in the development of important trends in American literature. For Matthiessen, Poe's innovations only have impact on our nation's literature indirectly through their influence on foreign writers, and this skewed view of Poe carries forward into the assessment of critics in latter half of the 20th century as well.

Among the New Critics, perhaps even more problematic than Matthiessen's relationship to Poe is Perry Miller's approach to the author in *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (1956). Based solely on the title, one might expect a study of Poe and his career to constitute a major portion of this volume, but such is not the case.

As clarified by Miller's prologue which remarkably mentions Poe not a single time, his primary project in this book remains an exploration of Melville's literary fortunes in the New York literary scene presided over by Evert Augustus Duyckinck and Lewis Gaylord Clark. In fact, Poe does not make his first appearance until the penultimate page of Miller's first chapter, "Lewis Gaylord Clark's Table," and then only in an aside about how Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* may have shared a source with Melville's *Moby-Dick* in the story of "Mocha Dick, Or the White Whale of the Pacific: A Leaf from a Manuscript Journal" by ex-naval officer Jeremiah N. Reynolds, a tale Clark printed in his May 1839 issue of the *Knickerbocker*. Poe does not surface in Miller's book again until well into the second section, where he's evoked to offer praise for Young America's first monthly magazine, *Arcturus*. Miller notes that "Poe was not merely flattering Duyckinck when he called it the best edited magazine the country had yet seen" (88). Poe receives no further consideration until the third chapter of this second section, where Miller offers a brief account of Poe's role in literary feuds with Clark and another member of the New York literati Charles Frederick Briggs. Indeed, aside from his continuing foremost interest in Melville, Miller demonstrates himself throughout the book to be entirely more interested in examining the careers of literary taste-makers Duyckinck, Clark and Briggs than that of a mere author and literary critic such as Poe, who receives no sustained treatment until the third section of the book. Even then, Poe is introduced as a point of interest for Miller primarily because of his temporary alliance with Duyckinck, an alliance that became strained when Poe in a January, 1845, review of *The Waif* accused the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow of plagiarism and started what would become referred to as "the Longfellow War." As Miller reports, Poe's attack on Longfellow was countered in the pages of Clark's *Knickerbocker* with a patriotic appeal called "Necessity for a National Literature," which warned against "foreign

licentiousness and and immorality” in America’s “struggles against evil” (qtd. by Miller, 132). As Miller notes, “The unspoken point was clear: one of the evils America must overcome is Edgar Poe” (132). Given such fierce animosity towards him by certain literati during his lifetime, Poe’s perilous position in relation to Griswold’s posthumous character assassination becomes easier to understand. Still, Miller’s book never moves beyond fairly superficial commentary about Poe’s literary life in this milieu. With his focus firmly on Melville’s transformative experiences in this “war of words and wits” dominated by Duyckinck, Clark and Briggs, Miller portrays Poe as little more than a bit-player in the feuds and does little to use Poe’s role in the battles to illuminate anything about his development as a writer or even as a national literary figure. That casual mention of a possible source for Poe’s *Pym* remains noteworthy because stands as one of Miller’s few items of legitimate, if passing, interest to Poe studies. Another such item presents itself when Miller tells of the poor reception Poe received for his lecture at the Society Library on February 3, 1848. According to Miller, Duyckinck dismissed the lecture as “full of a ludicrous display of scientific phrase—a mountainous piece of absurdity” that served merely to drive its audience from the room (228). Indeed, Miller claims, this event finally signaled to Duyckinck and others that Poe’s “usefulness to the cause of home literature was at an end” (228). Interestingly, Poe later revised this lecture, titled “The Cosmogony of the Universe,” and published it as *Eureka*, that same prose poem in which Michio Kaku claims Poe provided the first solution to Olbers’ paradox. Apparently such profound scientific insights did not impress audiences more used to transcendentalist bromides. While both the source-note and the commentary about Poe’s departure from the company of literary nationalists prove useful to a fuller appreciation of Poe’s encounters with the characters he would lampoon the next year in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* with his “Literati of New York City” (1846),

Miller never even mentions the piece. Indeed, although he uses this tumultuous political background to sophisticated effect in his thoughtful historicization of numerous Melville novels and stories, Miller's treatment of Poe and his work remains superficial. Though he demonstrates himself as a skilled historical observer, Miller ultimately provides the benefits of such analytical insights to only one of Poe's literary works, "The Raven." Still, Miller confines even this valuable textual background on Poe's 1845 poem and the subsequent publication of Poe's American Library collections to a single short passage:

The story of the *Journal* is familiar because Briggs took Lowell's suggestion, from the first issue on January 4, 1845: he started paying Poe a dollar a page, and in March announced him as co-editor with himself and Henry Watson. It looked like a clever move; Poe was also writing for the *Mirror* (after Colton had set "The Raven" in type, he let the *Evening Mirror* have the sheet, so that the poem actually appeared there on January 29, a few days before the *American Review* was out; it was also printed in the *Journal* on February 8), and with the success of his bird and a moderate success (which promised better things) from a lecture on American Poetry at the New-York Historical Society on February 28, Poe's value seemed real. Duyckinck persuaded Wiley and Putnam to commence their American Library with a collection of his tales and another of his poems. "I like Poe exceedingly well," Briggs wrote Lowell, declaring he would not believe the "shockingly bad stories" Rufus Griswold told him. (126-7)

While this background information may prove useful to other scholars of Poe's work, Miller allows this disappointingly brief passage to stand as the sum of his treatment of "The Raven," leaving the impression that he has little interest in Poe's writing beyond the 1845 Poe poem which he appropriates for use in his own title. Those with a greater interest in Poe's work or his development as a writer might have expected more. In a final consideration of *The Raven and the Whale*, Miller's comment may be more telling than he intends when he suggests during his discussion of the so-called Longfellow War that "Poe scholars have spent time that could have

been better employed getting straight the chronology of the pieces that appeared” in the various publications that waged the war. If Miller’s injunction to Poe scholars has merit, it also contains the unstated but implicit understanding that Miller does not number himself among them. Not only then is Miller’s title misleading, but given the long-standing controversies surrounding Poe, one might plausibly suspect Miller of cynically employing the notoriety of Poe’s persona in order to generate wider public interest in a scholarly work that might not otherwise gain non-academic attention.

In his nearly 600-page opus *The Western Canon* (1994), Harold Bloom mentions Poe only thrice, a pittance when compared to the dozens of times Bloom discusses Dickinson, Eliot and Emerson. Bloom devotes nearly thirty pages of his book entirely to Walt Whitman and peppers the volume with countless additional references to the poet and many more allusions to his individual poems. For Poe, acknowledgement from Bloom comes once to begrudgingly include him almost as an afterthought in the pantheon of American writers in his long chapter about Whitman as the “center of the American canon.” Bloom mentions Poe once again later to disparage his writing in comparison to that of Charles Dickens in a chapter that discusses the canonical novel, though one might hasten to remind Bloom that Poe was a short story writer and not a novelist. Like Matthiessen did fifty years before him, Bloom continues to value the novel as a form of fiction writing far above the short story. Poe is given one final nod to acknowledge his influence (along with Franz Kafka) on the work of Jorge Luis Borges who shares a chapter with fellow Latin Americans Pablo Neruda and Fernando Pessoa, both appreciated particularly by Bloom for their Hispanic-Portuguese versions of Whitmanesque genius. Aside from holding esteemed positions as Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University and Berg Professor of English at New York University, Bloom also routinely passes for America’s

foremost public academic at the turn of the 21st century. To whatever extent the pronouncements of blustery English professor-types can be said to indicate the prevailing winds of contemporary American culture, Bloom's tropical gusts would seem to matter. He's routinely blurbed on the dust jackets of "important" new novels and popular books of cultural criticism. He appears on television talk shows and publishes opinion pieces in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines. In short, when Bloom talks, the intelligensia of the nation listens. Growing effusive on the topic of the American literary canon, Bloom writes:

If you think of the major American writers, you are likely to remember Melville, Hawthorne, Twain, James, Cather, Dreiser, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald among the novelists. Nathaniel West, Ralph Ellison, Thomas Pynchon, Flannery O'Connor, and Philip Roth would be among those I would add. The poets who matter most begin with Whitman and Dickinson and include Frost, Stevens, Moore, Eliot, Crane, and perhaps Pound and William Carlos Williams. Of more recent figures, I would list Robert Penn Warren, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, John Ashbery, A. R. Ammons, May Swenson. The dramatists are less illustrious: Eugene O'Neill now makes for unsatisfactory reading, and perhaps only Tennessee Williams will gain by the passage of time. Our major essayists remain Emerson and Thoreau; no one has matched them since. Poe is too universally accepted around the world to be excluded, though his writing is almost invariably atrocious. (288)

This quote is presented at some length because seeing the full paragraph is important to appreciate the way it comes round at the end to smack Poe in the derriere like some ill-behaved schoolboy arriving just as the tardy-bell rings, but for the way it obscures his standing and his categorization even as it grimacingly stretches to include him. Acknowledging Poe's international reputation, Bloom makes no attempt to account for foreign tastes but merely allows that his being "universally accepted" makes it impossible for Poe to be reasonably "excluded," though his inclusion will clearly not be tolerated without the headmaster's public pronouncement

regarding the poor quality of his work: “his writing is almost invariably atrocious.” Yet, even once he’s gained his back-door admittance to the canon over Bloom’s strenuous objections, Poe’s position remains disturbingly unclear. By including him after the noted essayists Emerson and Thoreau does Bloom mean to include Poe as a prolific literary critic and essayist merely in this last category of writers? Such a placement seems unlikely since Poe’s non-fiction is of such a different style and character than these other two. Is Poe then instead meant to be assigned to the company of his fellow poets headed by Whitman and Dickinson? Again, this seems unlikely since Bloom, a thoroughgoing child of 20th-century tastes, pointedly excludes formalists who worked in rhyme and meter from his list of “poets who matter most.” In this sweeping dismissal, Bloom passes over all the so-called “schoolhouse poets” of the American Renaissance, including the era’s foremost man of literature and letters, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow whose poems my grandfather grew up memorizing for recitals at his rural Wisconsin grammar school in the early decades of the 20th century. Of formalists, Bloom spares only the notable exception of Robert Frost who one recalls brought a decidedly Modernist sensibility to his deliberately retro versification. So, no, Poe cannot belong here. Are we then to place poor Poe between Melville and Hawthorne in the opening list of “major American writers”? This would seem the most apt of our options until we come to the concluding phrase of the first sentence, “among the novelists.” Certainly the list includes a few noted short story writers (such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald and O’Connor), but one might still argue that all of those represented are better known, and perhaps more widely taught, for their novel-length works. Certainly this idea seems consistent with Bloom’s concluding qualifier. For Bloom it would seem, the novel stands as self-evidently the most important prose fiction form. Indeed, Bloom never mentions short stories here and one might note that Washington Irving, a significant American writer of the short tale,

remains conspicuously absent from his list.

The sixth edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, published in 2003 and overseen by series editor Nina Baym, includes eleven of Poe's poems and nine of his stories, as well as one essay and excerpts from another, giving the author fully one-hundred pages of Volume B's 2600 devoted to writing from 1820-1865. While this would appear to be something of a corrective, a number of his significant and best-known tales are excluded, such as "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Gold-Bug," and "The Black Cat" among others. Of course editors of scholarly anthologies are forced to make difficult decisions and sometimes works they might wish to include simply cannot find room; however, in the same volume Ralph Waldo Emerson receives nearly 150 pages as does Walt Whitman, Herman Melville is given 200 pages, and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau are each allotted nearly 250. By giving him a mere one hundred pages, the editors put Poe on par with Frederick Douglass who also receives one hundred pages but whose pages allow for the inclusion of nearly his entire literary output. Certainly, Douglass deserves inclusion not only for the historical significance but also the impressive literary achievement of his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. No scholar of American literature would suggest otherwise; however, both Douglass and Poe who were similarly active in the public discourse of their times fall far short of the nearly 150 pages devoted to reclusive New England poet Emily Dickinson. Although Dickinson's artistic genius is undeniable and her poetry diverse and evocative, one can scarcely argue that her significance to understanding 19th-century American literature warrants the space devoted to her work, especially when a 19th-century American poet like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, so important and popular in his own time and into the early 20th century, can be spared a paltry ten pages in the anthology. Of

course, the allotment of pages in the canon-defining Norton anthologies is not a competition per se, but in the end, it is in fact a competition. One's representation here arguably mirrors one's standing in contemporary academic circles. No one studies American formalist poetry from 19th-century anymore, so Longfellow and Bryant and Whittier can be safely limited to a handful of pages while Whitman and Dickinson, two poets whose sensibilities and aesthetics are clearly more in line with contemporary thought, reasonably seem to demand well over a tenth of the anthology between them. Poe's poetry is well represented here. The editors have included not only "The Raven," "Annabel Lee," "Ulalume" and enough other representative works that the student can become reasonably familiar with Poe's poetry based on the selection. However, the overall approach to 19th-century American poetry remains strikingly skewed and frankly ahistorical. Not surprisingly, the anthology's editors offer a brief introduction to Poe that sounds all the familiar themes: "The life of Edgar Allan Poe is the most melodramatic of any of the major American writers of his generation." To their credit, the editors do expose Griswold's "character assassination" (and refer to it as such), saying that "Griswold's forgeries went unexposed for many years, poisoning every biographer's image of Poe, and legend still feeds on half-truth in much writing on him" (1507). Overall, the editors provide a fairly balanced portrait of Poe, and while they refer repeatedly to his intemperance with alcohol they do a thorough job of discussing his editorial work along with his literary feuds. Further, even biographical facts come laced with subtle adjectival innuendo: "Poe lived in sordid poverty among his once-prosperous relatives, including his aunt Maria Poe Clemm and her daughter Virginia, whom Poe secretly married in 1835, when she was thirteen" (1508). By contrast, the introductions to Hawthorne, Melville, and other of Poe's contemporaries are limited to more innocuous biographical information and certainly do not touch on anything scandalous. While it may be

true that other writers of the era lived less controversial lives than Poe, editors still make deliberate choices about how to portray each writer. For example, the editors here do not feel compelled to report on Hawthorne's notorious complaint about being crowded out of the literary marketplace by "scribbling women." While the faults and foibles of other writers remain unremarked, Poe's negative persona cannot help but come to the fore. Poe, it seems, can never be seen as merely a writer like any other.

The problem has been one of long standing in Poe studies. Even before modern media generated our current cult of celebrity and saw the ascension of dark despondent Poe into its pantheon, the author's reputation has tended to get in the way of scholarly approaches to his work. F. O. Matthiessen pointedly attempted to exclude Poe from serious attention in his canon-building New Critical masterwork *American Renaissance* (1941), though for a variety of reasons that merit closer scrutiny he could not banish the author entirely. Half a century later, Harold Bloom's 600-page opus *The Western Canon* (1994), mentions Poe only thrice — once to begrudgingly admit that "Poe is too universally accepted around the world to be excluded" among the names of important American writers although "his writing is almost invariably atrocious," once to disparage Poe's writing in comparison to that of Charles Dickens in a chapter on the canonical novel, and once to acknowledge his influence (along with Franz Kafka) on the work of Jorge Luis Borges. The sixth edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature: 1820-1865* (2003) includes eleven of Poe's poems and nine of his short stories, as well as his "Philosophy of Composition" and excerpts from another essay. While this could be seen as something of a corrective to Poe's position in American studies, the fact remains that some of Poe's most important and influential tales remain conspicuously absent from the anthology. Still, Bloom's harsh pronouncements notwithstanding, one must acknowledge that Poe's

standing in academic circles may in fact be improving from its dismal, almost non-existent state of fifty years ago.

Published in 1954, two years before Miller's *Raven and the Whale*, Patrick F. Quinn's *The French Face of Edgar Poe* represents one of the first serious attempts to bring Poe into American literary studies by tracing the history of his influence on writers and scholars in France and suggesting that scholars in Poe's native country had for too long neglected one of the nation's most important authors. Quinn's call remained largely unanswered. However, forty years later, the problem of Poe's poor critical reception in American academics remained, despite several important critical studies of Poe during the intervening years, including John T. Irwin's masterful critical study *Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytical Detective Story* (1994) and *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (1988), a collection of essays organized around Jacques Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" and a groundbreaking book that (especially given the profound influence of French literary theorists on Anglo-American literary studies in the latter half of the 20th-century) put American scholars into the somewhat uncanny position of having to re-inherit Poe back from the French.

In 1995, taking his lead from Quinn's earlier work, Stephen Rachman edited *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, one of the first collections of scholarly American articles dedicated entirely to the analysis of Poe's work. In 1996, Eric W. Carlson edited his useful *A Companion to Poe Studies*. In his introduction to this diverse collection of scholarly articles, Carlson argues that Poe research in the latter half of the 20th century "rivals, if it does not exceed, the 'renaissance' that has occurred in Emerson, Melville, and Henry James studies" (1). Essays by Ian Walker ("The Poe Legend") and Alexander Hammond ("Modern Poe Biography and Its Resources") offer useful correctives to past misconceptions that have plagued Poe's critical

reception. In 2002, Kevin J. Hayes edited *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, a collection of essays that while less ambitious and exhaustive than Carlson's, presents important articles that demonstrate new critical directions in Poe scholarship.

The Hammond piece in particular provides evaluative commentary on two Poe biographies — Jeffrey Meyer's *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* and Kenneth Silverman's *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*, the latter of which Hammond sees as demonstrating that Silverman is “dedicated to writing biography as interpretive narrative” (57). Hammond acknowledges that Silverman's biography, published in 1991, has received mixed responses but he maintains that “one index of Silverman's strength as a biographer is his resistance to what must have been a strong temptation to synthesize ... established, if divergent, lines in modern Poe criticism” (59). As such, Hammond argues, “Silverman's biography offers a particularly fruitful resource for certain recurrent topics of critical debate about Poe, especially those dealing with gender issues in his writings” (60). In balance, because Silverman presents “a Poe with warts in place,” Hammond believes his biography “will inevitably shape critical discourse on Poe for years to come” (60). Indeed, much of this dissertation's understanding of Poe's personal history and by extension his character derives from Silverman's version of the author's life. If correct in his assessment about the biography's influence, Hammond's optimistic view suggests that Poe studies during the 21st century will follow a very different route than they have in the previous century and a half.

Two fairly recent stand-alone studies, Ronald C. Harvey's *The Critical History of Edgar Allan Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1998) and Douglas Anderson's *Pictures of Ascent in the Fictions of Edgar Allan Poe* (2009), as well as *Critical Insights: The Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe* (2011), a substantial collection of scholarly articles edited by Steven Frye, all

serve to suggest an emerging trend in Poe studies: an approach to the author's work that falls in line with more traditional and dispassionate approaches to literary studies, nonetheless, I would argue that a thorough analysis of Poe's own poetics remains to be done. Yet Poe's personality can often still stand in the way, which reveals a serious need for need for more scholarship much more narrowly devoted to the close scrutiny of Poe's actual literary work. Subsequent chapters of this dissertation attempt to advance this newest movement in Poe studies by elaborating on his richly-imagined poetics while entering into the project of performing close analyses of Poe's writing, vital scholarly work that has remained remarkably absent from much of his critical history. These later chapters remain focused on elucidating Poe's literary theories and the poetics of his writing craft before undertaking close readings of Poe's creative output. These readings consider Poe's poems and tales according to his own poetic standards while combining textual theory and psychoanalytic theory into a new critical tool uniquely adapted to exploring the central tensions in Poe's work, tensions under which the author and the reader emerge as uncanny doubles.

Chapter 2:

Haunted by Poe: the Editor, the Author & the Critic —

Case Studies of Rufus Griswold,

Henry James, F.O. Matthiessen & Harold Bloom

During the nearly two centuries since Poe's untimely death in 1849, the specter of his literary influence has grown continually more powerful. Poe plainly shares many of our post-modern fascinations; for example his work repeatedly problematizes the notion of objective truth and its narratability, examines the interrelations of language, motivation and social constructions of power, and explores the liminal spaces between apparently opposing states, such as between life and death. Not surprisingly then, Poe's importance to American literature has become increasingly potent despite the efforts of those who have sought to damage Poe's reputation. Critics have attacked his supposed literary crimes and his alleged personal faults, to deny the powerful influence of his literary legacy on other writers, to prevent his unsavory Gothicism and aesthetic of art-for-art's sake from contaminating the American canon of "high literature," and even to exclude him from scholarly narratives of national literary inheritance. However, throughout all these attempts to dismiss Poe as sub-literary, obscene, childish, mad, bad, and unknowable, the fact remains that Poe's work and legacy have resisted these exorcisms.

An unruly figure like Poe presents unique problems for the various categories of his heirs, but applying psychoanalytic principles to scrutinizing the work of those who have struggled hardest to dispossessing themselves of Poe's distasteful presence reveals a remarkable consistency in their motivations and their methods. In their various efforts to rid themselves of the specter of Poe, Rufus Griswold, Henry James, F. O. Matthiessen, and Harold Bloom all

perform this attempted exorcism by essentially reducing Poe to a partial object; however, by attempting ensure that Poe stays dead, the editor, the author, and the literary critic each in his own way cannot help participating in the logic that drives the return of the uncanny repressed.

The Uncanny Double: The Haunting of Rufus Griswold

The initially pseudonymous writer of Poe's obituary, Rufus Griswold begins his project with the character assassination of a dead man, Further, as Poe's literary executor and the first editor of his collected works, Griswold attempts to master Poe's authorial presence by editorially altering his work to emphasize certain aspects while eliminating others; however, Griswold's cutting up Poe's work, making silent emendations, and destroying manuscripts and other textual evidence all serve to manifest Poe as a partial object, making him essentially undead. Further, with his forgery of Poe letters and his adoption of other questionable editorial practices, Griswold emerges as Poe's uncanny double who even in his most obvious and egregious transgressions still suggests how the editor always risks becoming an author's doppelgänger.

Poe's literary executor and posthumous editor, Rufus Griswold did more than any other person besides Poe himself both to damage Poe's reputation and ironically to secure his lasting fame. By reimagining Poe as the villain from a Gothic novel and by subsequently turning himself into a sort of evil twin to this newly invented Poe persona (reminiscent of the narrator's rival in "William Wilson"), Griswold goes beyond the typical editorial function of doubling authorial intention. Instead, as Poe's doppelgänger, Griswold substitutes his own will for Poe's through personal impostures, perversions of Poe's personal relationships, the alteration and forgery of Poe's letters and manuscripts, and sundry other literary crimes. Not the least of Griswold's malicious acts toward the recently deceased author was his poisonous (and pseudonymous)

obituary through which most of the nation first learned of Poe's death. Ironically, by blackening his name, Griswold ensured Poe's enduring notoriety. Though Poe's reputation suffered in literary and academic circles for over a century, instead of destroying Poe's reputation and banishing him from American literature, Griswold ultimately made Poe into one of the most romanticized and widely read American authors of the 19th-century precisely by exciting public interest in the lurid caricature of Poe he painted. Griswold schemes initiate what preeminent Poe scholar and biographer Arthur Hobson Quinn terms "the recoil of fate." The doom Griswold intends for Poe is visited up Griswold himself as he suffers personal tragedy, loss of reputation, and finally ignominious obscurity in death.

Most of the nation first learns of Poe's death in a strangely mean-spirited obituary published in the evening edition of the October 9, 1849, *New York Tribune*, and swiftly reprinted in other periodicals throughout the country. Signed "Ludwig," this death notice marks the beginnings of Griswold's protracted campaign to destroy Poe's good name. Griswold begins starkly,

Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it. The poet was known, personally or by reputation, in all this country; he had readers in England, and in several of the states of Continental Europe; but he had few or no friends; and the regrets for his death will be suggested principally by the consideration that in him literary art has lost one of its most brilliant but erratic stars. (qtd in Quinn, 646)

The first two sentences are strikingly flat statements of fact, uncolored by the expressions of sympathy or sorrow typically found in an obituary, and as such they immediately establish their author as oddly unemotional but also as honest, perhaps to a fault. By starting Poe's death notices with such cold hard facts, Griswold sets a tone of blunt reportage intended to make his readers more receptive to the subsequent character analysis he will present. As such, these

opening lines already establish one of Griswold's primary strategies for killing off whatever remains of the dead man's actual character; regarding Poe, Griswold consistently presents himself as a disinterested bearer of unsavory truths and the reluctant performer of unpleasant tasks.

By the end of his obituary, Griswold leaves off writing about Poe directly and likens him to a romantic villain before lapsing into very long quotation from Bulwer's novel *The Caxtons*. Before introducing the quoted passage that describes the novel's Francis Vivian, Griswold performs a clever reversal on Poe's character. He writes,

He had made up his mind upon the numberless complexities of the social world, and the whole system with him was an imposture. This conviction gave a direction to his shrewd and naturally unamiable character. Still, though he regarded society as composed altogether of villains, the sharpness of his intellect was not of that kind which enabled him to cope with villainy, while it continually caused him by overshots to fail of the success of honesty. (qtd in Quinn, 647)

Perhaps himself possessing unique insights into the way a malicious mind functions, Griswold undermines Poe's character in a particularly insidious manner. He first suggests that Poe possesses a Lockean worldview that inevitably gives rise to an unrelentingly Machiavellian attitude. By characterizing Poe this way, Griswold subtly prompts readers to conflate Poe's fictional villains with the author himself, a tendency that hardly requires encouragement for many readers. Griswold then suggests that Poe's uncommon insights into his psychopathological characters indicate he saw "society as composed altogether of villains." Next, allowing for Poe's impressive and well-known intelligence, Griswold undermines the advantages of such a mind by suggesting that Poe's very insightfulness, "the sharpness of his intellect" in fact prevented him from being able to "cope with villainy," presumably the villainy of others though by easy inference here Griswold can be seen to suggest also that villainy Poe possessed within his own

“shrewd and unamiable character.” Finally, Griswold implies that among the drawbacks of his uncommon intelligence were not only Poe’s over-complicated and over-reaching literary “overshots” and his fundamental lack of simpler, less intellectual “honesty,” but also implies that these character flaws account for Poe’s ultimate failure to achieve greater literary success.

To complete his transformation of Poe into a Gothic villain, Griswold concludes his obituary with a very long quotation from *The Caxtons* describing the distasteful character of Francis Vivian. He also concludes his “Memoir” of Poe with the same passage, but introduces it in a manner that obscures its status as a mere quotation. Griswold’s “Memoir” is given even greater significance and longevity by its inclusion in his 3 volume set of Poe’s collected works, the first supposedly authoritative edition of Poe’s tales and poetry. Griswold’s one sentence introduction of the quote and the quote itself are reproduced at full length below (and with the same lack of quotational punctuation) to demonstrate not only how vaguely Griswold signals the quote as such but also to demonstrate the almost absurd length of the passage he lifts from Bulwer. Griswold finishes his “Memoir” of Poe as follows:

He was in many respects like Francis Vivian, in Bulwer’s novel of “The Caxtons.” Passion, in him, comprehended many of the worst emotions which militate against human happiness. You could not contradict him, but you raised quick choler; you could not speak of wealth, but his cheek paled with gnawing envy. The astonishing natural advances of this poor boy—his beauty, his readiness, the daring spirit that breathed around him like a fiery atmosphere—had raised his constitutional self-confidence into an arrogance that turned his very claims to admiration into prejudices against him. Irascible, envious—bad enough, but not the worst, for these salient angles were all varnished over with a cold repellent cynicism, his passions vented themselves in sneers. There seemed to him no moral susceptibility; and, what was more remarkable in a proud nature, little or nothing of the true point of honor. He had, to morbid excess, that desire to rise which is vulgarly called ambition, but no wish for the esteem or love of his species; only the hard

wish to succeed—not shine, not serve—succeed, that he might have the right to despise a world which galled his self-conceit. (Reprinted from Griswold’s *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 3 vols.)

Interestingly, Griswold anticipates the thorough doubling of Poe he will accomplish as his executor and editor by plagiarizing Bulwer (itself a sort of clandestine authorial doubling) in order to set up Poe as a double of Francis Vivian. Though in his first printing of the death notice, Griswold had set the long Bulwer passage off in quotation marks and italics, he excludes these typographical cues in the extended version he publishes in the “Memoir.” This shift not only gives more weight to the caricature of Poe it presents but also encourages readers to mistake Bulwer’s fictional words for Griswold’s own original and presumably non-fictional portrayal of Poe. As Quinn explains, “The veracity of a portrait so derived, it is hardly necessary to challenge. Yet it was extensively quoted as Griswold’s own opinion, and it did much greater harm than if it had been recognized as a mere quotation” (647). Yet, as Silverman explains, the “rumors, falsehoods, and deliberate inventions” perpetrated by Griswold were not limited to his conflation of Poe with Bulwer’s villain in the “Memoir.” According to Silverman, Griswold “alleged or implied that Poe had been expelled from the University of Virginia, had deserted the army, had tried to seduce John Allan’s second wife, and had been hauled from Sarah Helen Whitman’s house by the police” (440). Still, not content with such typical scandal-mongering, Griswold would also go on to use his position as Poe’s literary executor to work further harm upon Poe’s reputation.

Not all of Poe’s posthumous press was so negative. As Quinn reports in his exacting biography of Poe, many of Poe’s friends and acquaintances came to his public defense in the pages of periodicals. Susan Archer Talley writes in the *Richmond Republican* of October 15, 1849, that notices of Poe’s death though “purporting to give an account of the poet’s character,

have, either from ignorance or prejudice against him, represented it in so unjust and distorted a view as to be almost unrecognizable to those who best knew him” (qtd in Quinn, 651). An influential literary figure who had many dealings with Poe, N.P. Willis offers perhaps the sharpest contrast to Griswold’s dark portrait of Poe in the October 13, 1849, issue of *Home Journal*, asserting that in spite of any charges that Poe was “arrogant and bad hearted, ... in this reversed character it was never our chance to see him.... But there is another, more touching and far more forcible evidence that there *was goodness* in Edgar Poe” (qtd in Quinn, 652, Willis’s emphasis). Writing in the October 20, 1849, issue of Philadelphia’s *Model American Courier*, Henry B. Hirst not only defends Poe’s character but provides his own insights as to the likely motivations of Griswold’s unkind claims about him:

Edgar A. Poe is no more. We knew him well, perhaps better than any other man living, and loved him, despite his infirmities. He was a man of great and original genius, but the sublime *afflatus* which lifted him above his fellows, made him a shining mark for the covert as well as open attacks of literary rivals, and, alas! that it should be so, eventually proved his ruin. (qtd in Quinn, 653)

Hirst’s insight that the malice of these “literary rivals ... proved his ruin” interestingly applies not only to Poe’s career while alive (which Hirst apparently means) but also signals the lasting damage that Griswold’s redoubled “covert as well as open attacks” would do to his posthumous legacy. However, in place of these more reasoned portrayals of Poe in the popular press, Griswold’s “Memoir” published alongside Poe’s tales and poems remains the most prevalent image of Poe passed down to subsequent generations. Somewhat ironically, Griswold seems to have underestimated the degree to which the reading public adores a dashing dangerous figure. Much as the later British Romantic poets found Milton had inadvertently made Satan the hero of *Paradise Lost*, Griswold’s dark caricature of Poe in fact turns him into the American icon he is today. Sadly for scholars, Griswold’s invidious editorial impostures ultimately prove the most

damaging as they destroy, alter, and falsify documentary evidence related to the author and his work.

Soon after his publication of Poe's obituary, Griswold continued his pattern of the aggressive exertion of control over Poe's persona and his body of work by forcefully inserting himself as the executor of Poe's literary estate. Despite an only tenuous relationship between the men that was strained at best, Griswold presented himself to Poe's mother-in-law Muddy as the person who could best see Poe's collected works into print. As Poe biographer Kenneth Silverman reports,

Less than a week after Poe's death, she gave Rufus Griswold power of attorney, allowing him to contract for a uniform edition of Poe's prose and poetry. He said he undertook the work only to aid her; once the publishing costs were recovered, she would receive most of the profits... But her hopes of profiting from Griswold's edition of Poe's works came to not much. (Silverman, 439)

While scholars have long argued over the validity of Griswold's claims as Poe's literary executor, the simple fact remains that after he secured the position, Griswold set about destroying Poe's character and corrupting his body of work from the inside out, never overtly but always concealing his duplicity within a clever doubling of Poe himself.

For his part, Poe's friend and colleague Graham stirred himself to perhaps the most spirited and protracted of defenses against Griswold's character assassination.

Editors are always faced with challenges when confronted with the massive documentary evidence they must shape into a coherent collection of an author's work. However, an editor's job is generally understood as an obligation to represent authorial intention as faithfully and completely as can reasonably be accomplished.² Indeed, from a certain perspective it is the

² G. Thomas Tanselle's *Rationale of Textual Criticism* (1989) remains one of the essential explorations of how authorial intention informs editorial practice. He writes, "Whatever concept

editor's role to disappear into the edition by faithfully (re)producing what he understands as authorial intention and reproducing texts to embody that intention. However, Griswold's doubling of Poe immediately takes on a much more sinister character. Silverman writes of Griswold's actions, "In quoting several of Poe's letters to himself, he concocted and inserted passages in Poe's style, contrived to make Poe seem treacherous to Graham, Godey, Eveleth, and other friends" (440). As Quinn explains this web of deceit, "Griswold evidently thought, by making Poe speak in a unfriendly manner of Graham and Godey, that he could discourage any further effort on Graham's part to defend Poe, and prevent Godey from coming to Poe's defense" (670). Griswold uses his role as editor to double as author and to ventriloquize Poe surreptitiously.

In preparing his edition of Poe's collected work, Griswold does not limit his ghost writing to Poe himself but also seizes upon opportunities to alter texts about Poe from other writers, even from such a public figure as James Russell Lowell. While preparing his first volume of the Poe collection, Griswold writes to Lowell requesting a revised version of Lowell's earlier sketch of Poe published in Graham's Magazine. In his letter, Griswold plays on the familiar refrain that serving as Poe's editor had been thrust upon him unwillingly and he means to perform the work dispassionately:

Poe was not my friend—I was not his—and he had no right to devolve upon me this duty of editing his works. He did do so, however, and under the circumstances I could not well refuse compliance with the wishes of his friends here. From his constant habit of *repeating himself*, and from his habits of *appropriation*, particularly in the *Marginalia*, it is a difficult task; but I shall execute it as well as I can. (qtd in Quinn, 658-9, emphasis in original)

of authorship one subscribes to, the act of reading or listening to receive a message from the past entails the effort to discover, through the text (or texts) one is presented with, the work that lies behind" (18).

Given what is now known about Griswold's impostures, his letter to Lowell offers some striking insights into the strange psychological character of his uncanny doubling of Poe. Griswold's duplicity here uncannily echoes the familiar play on words in the title of Poe's most famous doppelgänger tale, "William Wilson." Further demonstrating his ability to subtly reveal his own character while ostensibly describing Poe, Griswold emphasizes two of Poe's actual character traits, both "repeating himself" and "appropriation;" however, Griswold interestingly couches these "habits" as tendencies of Poe's which make editing him difficult. While there is no doubt much difficulty involved, Griswold is himself engaged in the act of "appropriating" Poe so that he can "repeat himself" in the voice of his dead double.

Next, in a particularly telling example of Griswold's double-dealings in putting together the Poe collection, Griswold himself clearly pens changes to the version of Lowell's essay included in the volume. Citing a February 19, 1850, letter from Griswold to Thompson, Quinn notes the version of the essay he prints in the volume one of the Poe collection introduces significant changes to Lowell's essay and, not surprisingly, "the revised sketch was much less favorable in its estimate of Poe's work" (Quinn, 660). Though Lowell never publicly protests, neither does he reprint the revised essay in his own collected works. Tellingly, Griswold continues his tendency to redouble his falsehoods about Poe in order to give them more credence. Commenting on the revised Lowell essay in his own "Memoir," published in volume 3 of the collection, Griswold writes, "The character of Mr. Poe's genius has been so recently and so admirably discussed by Mr. Lowell, with whose opinions on the subject I for the most part agree" (Reprinted from Griswold's *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 3). Such duplicity is stunning in its audacity. Presumably the only parts with which Griswold would disagree are those he could not revise while still making the document at least passingly resemble Lowell's

original.

In his biography Quinn exhaustively documents Griswold's forgeries, printing the false versions side by side with reproductions of extant Poe manuscripts, an exercise that need not be rehearsed here even though Quinn's biography is unfortunately long out of print. Suffice it to note that as his attempts to portray Poe as an unredeemable villain became more adept, Griswold himself became as loathsome as the figure he attempted to present to the world. Griswold's duplicity toward Poe and his memory derived as much of its power from Griswold's willingness to parrot Poe's own words as it did from his unscrupulousness about putting his words into the mouth of Poe. As Quinn writes, "Griswold did not hesitate to make use of the powers of expression of the man he was defiling. His analysis of Poe's tales of ratiocination at first glance seems acute until we recognize that he is repeating verbatim Poe's own description of his tales in his letter to P. P. Cooke" (672). Griswold uses his role as Poe's literary executor and its unique access to Poe's private correspondence not only to alter the documentary evidence but also to pilfer from it in order to make his comments echo Poe's own. Griswold's doubling of Poe functions in both directions, so that the two start to become indistinguishable.

Griswold's forgeries of Poe that remain most salient here are those where Griswold makes Poe seem to reflect upon Griswold himself, and praise him. Particularly telling in this regard is a February 24, 1845, letter from Poe to Griswold which Griswold alters significantly and includes in his "Memoir" of Poe. Preserved in an autograph manuscript at the Boston Public Library, this letter dates from the time when Griswold was preparing his anthology, *Prose Writers of America*. Poe was obviously eager to be included, but as Quinn observes of the altered letter, "Griswold's changes not only represent Poe in a fawning attitude to a man he wishes to please, but they portray him as conceited and Griswold as a fine critic" (448). The first sentence

Griswold adds to Poe's letter immediately follows the salutation and says, "A thousand thanks for your kindness in the matter of those books, which I could not afford to buy, and had so much need of" (qtd in Quinn, 446). Of course there is no way of verifying the incident to which Griswold, as Poe, refers here; however, it seems likely that at their last meeting Griswold may have purchased some books for Poe, which Poe perhaps thanked him for at the time but did not reiterate in his subsequent letter. Whether he at the time felt slighted by this or not, Griswold finds that as he prepares Poe's collected works for publication he wants to be sure everyone knows (or thinks) that he generously bought books for Poe when the author could not afford them. The next sentence of the letter appears in both Poe's original autograph letter and in Griswold's altered version: "Soon after seeing you, I sent you, through Zeiber, all my poems worth re-publishing, & I presume they reached you" (qtd in Quinn, 446). To this rather business-like submission of manuscripts for consideration, Griswold adds effusive praise for himself, making Poe write,

I was sincerely delighted with what you said of them, and if you will write your criticism in the form of a preface, I shall be greatly obliged to you. I say this not because you praised me: everybody praises me now: but because you so perfectly understand me, or what I have aimed at, in all my poems; I did not think you had so much delicacy of appreciation joined with your strong sense; I can say truly that no man's approbation gives me so much pleasure. (qtd in Quinn, 446)

These forged lines, composed by Griswold nearly five years after the original letter, reveal much about how Griswold wishes to be seen by the readers of his "Memoir" and the three-volume set of Poe's collected works. As ventriloquized by Griswold, Poe here not only portrays Griswold as a "fine critic" (as Quinn notes) but suggests that he would gratefully use Griswold's insights about his work as a "preface" to his published work. With this comment, Griswold retroactively puts the very words into Poe's mouth that validate his questionable claims as Poe's literary

executor. The shift from Poe's actual submission of his work for anthologization is subtle but telling; in Griswold's falsified version, Poe apparently believes his works would be improved by Griswold's mediation and that his readers would benefit from hearing Griswold's critique in advance of experiencing his works themselves. Further, in Griswold's staged fantasy, Poe fulfills the editor's wildest desire: a dead author returns from the grave to express gratitude and pleasure at having an editor who "so perfectly understand[s] me." Indeed, no other line penned by Griswold as Poe quite so dramatically demonstrates the haunting effect that Poe has on Griswold. By clandestinely doubling Poe, Griswold effectively re-embodies Poe, but in a darkly mirrored version of Poe where he conforms to Griswold's distorted image of him.

As a brief footnote here, one might note that Griswold's lines of ersatz Poe string together several phrases with colons, a punctuational strategy not common for the real Poe who is more given to using dashes or semi-colons. Of course it is very difficult to spot a few forged sentences slipped into an authoritative letter, but the incidentals here begin to reveal Griswold's mischief, a fact that lends support for the textual use of Giovanni Morelli's methods for determining authenticity in art objects. In *The Pleasures of Contamination* (2010), David Greetham comments usefully on the connection between Freud's psychoanalytic tools and Morelli's focus on "the involuntary, the inadvertent, and the unintended over the conscious and the striking" (79). Ultimately, Greetham concludes the problem with any system of verifying textual authenticity through internal evidence alone is that "virtually all its features of attributable style (especially 'likes' and 'dislikes,' which involve volition) are replicable by others" (80). Indeed, in the case of Poe, only Quinn's painstaking work with the documentary evidence of physical, autographic manuscripts finally provides incontrovertible proof of Griswold's forgeries. Sadly, as Quinn notes, even once forgery has been discovered, teasing it

out from the authentic remains tedious work that quickly bores the non-specialist, and in a case like Poe's the damage can never be fully undone.

As shown by Griswold's villainous portrait of Poe in the Ludwig obituary and in his later "Memoir," Griswold conflates Poe with the disturbed narrators of his tales and poems. In fact, Griswold admits as much and more in the "Memoir" when he writes, "The remarkable poem of 'The Raven' was probably much more nearly than has ever been supposed even by those who were very intimate with him, a reflection and an echo of his own history" (Reprinted from Griswold's *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 3 vols). As discussed more fully in my chapter analyzing "The Raven," the narrator of that poem stands for Poe as the epitome of a failed, or anti-ideal reader. Any elements of Poe one perceives in this persona are fragmentary and fictionalized; however, Griswold's mistaking this figure for Poe himself possesses a certain distorted brilliance of its own. In the speaker of "The Raven," as in the narrator of "William Wilson" and "Ligeia," and in the rest of Poe's tales and poems, one can recognize the image of Poe that Griswold represents to the world. If these figures are not Poe the man (and the biographical record suggests they are not), but rather an authorial persona, a sort of fictional double of himself that Poe embodies in his work, it is this second figure that Griswold effectively doubles.

Even before he becomes Poe's rival, editor, and uncanny double, Griswold already behaves in a ways more reminiscent of a Poe narrator than anything the author himself does in life. As Sandra Tomc reports in "Poe and His Circle," Griswold grieves so fiercely at the death of his first wife Caroline in 1842 that he refuses to leave the cemetery after her funeral, publishes a long blank verse poem to her memory, seems sometimes to forget that she is dead, recounts dreams of their reunions, and reopens her crypt over a month after her death to cut a lock of her

hair, kisses her forehead and lips, weeps for hours, and is only forcibly removed from her side when discovered there by a friend two days later. With this macabre personal history that seems strikingly more like a Poe tale than Poe's own life ever does, one can hardly wonder that Poe and his work should resonate so strongly with Griswold. Upon publication of his three volume collection of Poe's works, even reviewers who had been critical of Poe during his lifetime address most of their disapproval toward Griswold and make a point of observing his obvious, silent emendations to Poe's work. According to Quinn, in a review for the September 21, 1850, edition of *Literary World*, influential literary figure Duyckinck questioned Griswold's selection of an "early unfortunate review of Cornelius Mathews, which Poe had repudiated, instead of later and more friendly ones" (677). Quinn also notes that Duyckinck wondered "why the third volume was carefully purged of any unhandsome references to Dr. Griswold" (677). An anonymous reviewer in the September 21, 1850, issue of Philadelphia's *Saturday Evening Post* does little to refute Griswold's characterization of Poe but takes particular exception to his decision to speak so ill of the recently departed author:

Nothing so condemnatory of Mr. Poe, so absolutely blasting to his character, has ever appeared in print, as this work of his 'literary *executor*.' It is absolutely horrible (considering the circumstances under which Mr. Griswold writes) with what cool deliberateness he charges upon Mr. Poe the basest and most dishonorable actions. Writing as the "literary executor" of the deceased poet, we should have thought it would have suggested itself to any generous mind, that his part was that of a friendly counsel, rather than of a prosecuting attorney, or even of the judge sworn to do exact justice, to the extent of pronouncing the sentence of death. (Qtd in Quinn, 677)

As Poe had already discovered in his tales featuring doppelgängers, the encounter with the uncanny double remains inextricably linked to death.

In his Poe biography, Silverman suggests that Griswold had much cause for his antipathy

toward Poe. Among the reasons for Griswold's spite toward Poe, Silverman cites Griswold's "resentment over his [Poe's] public derision of *Poets and Poetry of America*, their rivalry as canonizers of American taste, their subtler rivalry for such women writers as Fanny Osgood" (440). Describing Griswold's decline and death in the years after his assassination of Poe, Silverman writes, "As Muddy hoped, neither Griswold's character nor Fate allowed him to go unpunished" (441). As Silverman reports, during the coming years Griswold suffered an epileptic fit and fell off a Brooklyn ferry before being rescued. He was later injured in a gas explosion that "severely burned his face and took of seven fingernails" (441). "In 1857, his lingering tuberculosis became active," Silverman writes. "Wrapped about the throat, he looked unrecognizable, fell out with most of his friends, and died of the disease the same year, at the age of forty-two" (441). Griswold's wife had previously moved to Maine, and the small New York room where he lived alone was found "decorated with portraits of himself, Fanny Osgood, and Poe" (441). Griswold's death seems to reiterate Poe's own, or at least the death Griswold attempts to give Poe with his Ludwig obituary, a death mourned by "few or no friends" with the only "regrets" being for the loss of his "brilliant but erratic" contributions to the nation's literary arts.

The odd coda of a curious observation about how letters between the men intertwined with their fates may briefly serve as an enigmatic summary of the present exploration of Griswold's haunting by and doubling of Poe. In his *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* (1991) biographer Kenneth Silverman dates the first meeting between Poe and Rufus Wilmot Griswold at approximately May 1841, while Poe was still working as the editor of *Graham's Magazine* and when Griswold had begun collecting poetry for his groundbreaking

anthology of American verse. Silverman writes that according to “Griswold’s later account, Poe called at his hotel, and not finding him home left two letters of introduction” (211). Although Silverman does not comment on this as a peculiarity, Poe’s having left *two* letters already begins to hint at a doubleness or duality in the relationship between the two men. Silverman also reports that in late September 1849, on the day before he set out on the journey where he would meet his death, Poe met with the editor John R. Thomson who gave him a letter to deliver to Rufus Griswold. Poe apparently never went far enough on his trip to meet with Griswold, and there of course remains no indication of what became of that letter from Thompson, but the strangely suspended state of that missive becomes highly evocative when recalling the lesson of Lacan’s seminar on “The Purloined Letter.” Lacan asserts that “a letter always arrives at its destination” (Muller and Richardson, 53)

The Disembodied Voice: The Haunting of Henry James

Though steeped in good taste and Gilded Age gentility, the shorter works of Henry James, with their enigmatic figures, their uncanny doublings, their uneasily inhabited rooms, and their pervading tone of disquiet and eerie indeterminacy, all cannot help but evince the insistent echo of a repressed presence, a ghostly voice that one comes ultimately to recognize as the undeniable whisper of an early and enduring influence on James as an author. This disembodied voice that haunts James’s tales is none other than that of Edgar Allan Poe, and James’s tales exhibit what Bloom (following Freud) has called “the anxiety of influence.” Admittedly, to James scholars Poe might initially seem a curious source for that haunting. James openly admires Poe’s contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne, praises him often, and even writes an admiring book-length study of his fiction, but James spares Poe relatively few comments. Working in tandem,

both Hawthorne and Poe exert powerful influence over the development of American short fiction, yet there remains the strange distinction between how James relates to his two dominant precursors. In this case, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory helps to explain why James acknowledges Hawthorne while he still spurns Poe. Lacan says there are always two fathers. One father is the benevolent figure who helps the child learn about language and the law, who gives him his good name in the world and empowers his personal identity. This first father is not a threat to the child because he maintains an appropriate distance and moves aside to make way as the child matures. As Žižek articulates this concept: “[T]he father *qua* Name of the Father, reduced to a figure of symbolic authority, is ‘dead’ (also) in the sense that *he does not know anything about enjoyment*, about life substance: the symbolic order (the big Other) and enjoyment are radically incompatible” (143). For James, Hawthorne represents such a father. However, as the other father, the “obscene” figure who must be repressed, Poe remains all too close and acts as a threat to James’s independent identity. While the first father helps to maintain order by expressing his potential power with his absence, the second is all too present, all too alive for the child. Žižek describes this second figure as “the specter which hinders ‘normal’ sexual relationship [is] ... the ‘anal father’ who definitely *does* enjoy” (143). Even without speculating as to James’s private sexuality as many recent critics have done, I would argue that his writing itself bears out precisely this understanding of Poe. But of course the main problem with the obscene father is that he also becomes a grotesque image of the worst possible self. As Žižek explains: “He is the subject’s double who accompanies him like a shadow and gives body to a certain surplus, to what is ‘in the subject more than subject himself’; this surplus represents what the subject must renounce, sacrifice even, the part in himself that the subject must murder in order to start to live as a ‘normal’ member of the community” (143). To be a serious literary

figure, James cannot publicly accept his inheritance of Poe's legacy.

Most often, James's attitude toward Poe is thought to be summed up in a few derisive remarks James made in an essay on Charles Baudelaire; however, despite his apparent dismissal of Poe's importance as a literary precursor, James's own work in fact demonstrates the deep and abiding influence of Poe on James. Unlike James's warm acceptance of Hawthorne, his pointed attempts to distance himself from Poe, not just in the Baudelaire essay but later in his continuing refusal to give voice to his obvious debts to Poe's legacy, suggest a more powerful possession more than mere casual literary influence would explain. Indeed, so pervasive is Poe's ghostly presence, particularly in James's tales of "the grotesque and quasi-supernatural" and even more markedly in his later Prefaces to these same tales, that one begins to hear Poe's disembodied authorial voice almost everywhere. At first the whisper of Poe emerges in spite of James's disavowal, but eventually Poe's presence seems to arise more forcefully precisely because of its attempted repression.

In his April 27, 1876, commentary in the *Nation* on Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, James asserts, "For American readers ... Baudelaire is compromised by his having made himself the apostle of our own Edgar Poe" (81, qtd. in Carlson). Throughout the review, James takes pains to distance himself and his own literary endeavors from the taint of what he calls somewhat derisively Poe's "very original genius" and claims "that to take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self" (81-2). Of course, James prided himself on his seriousness. Even though he elsewhere admits his childhood enthusiasm for Poe, the more mature James, thirty-three at the time he writes this essay on Baudelaire, makes a show of having left aside such youthful ardor in favor of a more mature literary persona, steeped in seriousness.

Yet Poe's contamination of Baudelaire is not for James merely the result of the French

writer's having read and been influenced by Poe. The real problem lies in Baudelaire's having taken Poe seriously enough to spend years "very carefully and exactly" translating Poe's tales and his "very valueless verses" into French (81). Interestingly, this last phrase regarding Poe's poetry is one that James later reconsidered, emending it to "very slight verses" in later reprintings of the essay (citation, qtd. in Pollin). Yet that curiously endearing phrase "our own Edgar Poe" lingers provocatively, for in it James embraces Poe's familiarity as both a fellow American and a fellow writer while erasing the name of Poe's severe step-father, John Allan, so completely that not even a suggestive initial A. remains. But of course James most frequently cited remark from this essay is his cool dismissal of Poe as lacking seriousness and tainting his enthusiasts with a similar lack of seriousness. Recalling the language of corruption and contagion that has frequently used to separate low, popular fiction (such as the Gothic) from "high literature," James's disavowal of Poe begins to provide deeper insights into his personal motivations for keeping a critical distance from his predecessor.

In their 2011 collection of essays on *Henry James and the Supernatural*, editors Anna Despotopoulou and Kimberly C. Reed employ the Derridean concept of "spectrality" to enlarge upon Lustig's ideas of "the ghostly" in James. They argue that for James spectrality becomes the ideal means for exploring those liminal states of existence that so fascinated him. They suggest that as his career progresses James becomes increasingly drawn to this mode of spectrality because "it enabled him to experiment with the much celebrated subjectivity of vision and the style of indeterminacy" and to escape "closed forms and meanings" (5-6). Despotopoulou and Reed further observe that "James's fiction and nonfiction is constituted not only by the invocation of unexplained presences and the construction of the uncanny, scary moments, but also most grippingly by the pervasiveness of ghostly 'elsewheres' that are conjured by writing

that relies on absence, omission, and silence” (6). As such, the very essence of James’s vaunted writing style becomes intimately connected with the “visual opaqueness of the ghostly” (6). Indeed, this seems an astute descriptive for James’s characteristic mode. One might further note that for both James and Poe as highly self-aware and meticulous writers, literary form and function are always inextricably bound together. In his review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe asserts, “In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design” (572). Discussing the success of “The Turn of the Screw” in his Preface to “The Aspern Papers,” James asserts, “The thing was to aim at absolute singleness, clearness and roundness” (172). For both Poe and James, it remains essential that even the most minute aspect of a well-wrought tale must contribute to the author’s ability to achieve a single intentional effect. Not coincidentally, for both of them this effect often involves constructing a haunted and haunting text. What haunts James preface here is the specter of Poe, with whom he still competes. Yet, James omits Poe from his discussion of the tale’s origins, composition, and intention, even as his own work stands above Poe’s at least in terms of its central effect of producing anxiety in readers through indeterminacy of meaning. To return to Bloom’s notion of “the anxiety of influence” where the writer must reject his precursor to find his own voice.

Though seldom cited in scholarship about either writer, James offers another insight into his attitudes toward Poe in his Preface to “The Altar of the Dead.” Here James compares himself directly to Poe. Moreover, James does so as he explores the artistic challenges that confront a scrupulous author of supernatural and horror fiction. Implicitly acknowledging that he and Poe have a common interest in the artistic execution of fantastic horror, James argues that in fiction the supernatural is always best presented as an eruption of the unexpected in the lives of more or

less ordinary people. He explains:

We want it clear, goodness knows, but we also want it thick, and we get the thickness in the human consciousness that entertains and records, that amplifies and interprets it. That indeed, when the question is (to repeat) of the “supernatural,” constitutes the only thickness we do get; here prodigies, when they come straight, come with an effect imperiled; they keep all their character, on the other hand, by looming through some other history—the indispensable history of somebody’s *normal* relation to something. It’s in such connexions as these that they most interest, for what we are then mainly concerned with is their imputed and borrowed dignity. Intrinsic values they have none—as we feel for instance in such a matter as the would-be portentous climax of Edgar Poe’s “Arthur Gordon Pym,” where the indispensable history is absent, where the phenomena evoked, the moving accidents, coming straight, as I say, are immediate and flat, and the attempt is all at the horrific in itself. The result is that, to my sense, the climax fails—fails because it stops short, and stops short for want of connexions. There *are* no connexions; not only, I mean, in the sense of further statement, but of our own further relation to the elements, which hang in the void: whereby we see the effect lost, the imaginative effort wasted.

(256-7, James’s emphasis)

Most striking in this passage is the tone of James’s engagement with Poe. He seems respectful of the author even as he explains *Pym*’s failings, and furthermore, he evaluates the novel according to Poe’s own valued poetic principles. James’s ultimate disappointment with the work stems from its “climax fails” and “we see the effect lost.” Indeed, “effect” is precisely the word that Poe employs to discuss the central intention of a work. James seems to meet Poe on his own terms here. Of course, that James should choose one of Poe’s longest and weakest works as his example is rather unfair. One of Poe’s only attempts at writing a novel, *Pym* does come off as largely fragmented and unpolished, as has frequently been noted by critics and which is clearly demonstrated by the novel’s relative obscurity among Poe’s collected works. *Pym*’s occasional flashes of brilliance are marred by its lack of overall coherence and its failure to achieve Poe’s

“unity of effect,” for which he found the short tale such an ideal medium. Poe himself frequently remarks that longer works suffer from the lack of narrow focus and the impossibility of a reader experiencing them in their entirety during a single setting. But James means to compare himself favorably to Poe, and specifically he seeks to match his own work against Poe’s widely held mastery of the horror tale. Choosing Poe’s unsatisfying attempt at a novel as the point of comparison against several of his own works, including his supernatural masterpiece “The Turn of the Screw,” James cannot help but show himself to good effect as the more skilled writer.

I dare say, to conclude, that whenever, in a quest, as I have noted, of the amusing, I have invoked the horrific, I have invoked it, in such air as that of “The Turn of the Screw,” that of “The Jolly Corner,” that of “The Friends of the Friends,” that of “Sir Edmond Orme,” that of “The Real Right Thing,” in earnest aversion to waste and from the sense that in art economy is always beauty. (257)

The tales that James offers here as representative of “the horrific” would all warrant closer attention in a more extensive comparison of the two authors; however, the most salient point for the present argument is that James clearly demonstrates here the importance to him of making favorable comparison of his work against that of Poe, an acknowledged master of “the horrific.” Each of the stories that James selects here may have closer analogues in Poe’s body of work, but justice of the contest is less important than the fact of James engaging in it and showing himself as triumphant.

James’s tale “The Real Right Thing,” which he mentions above and “The Great Good Place,” which he does not, contain uncanny doublings where the author finds himself superseded by an ambitious young protege. As Sheila Teahan has observed of these James tales,

The story’s title itself exemplifies a mode of doubling: “The Great Good Place” is a seemingly tautologous title whose compensatory repetition fills in the holes in discourse that figuration both covers over and reveals. Moreover, the story is itself doubled by

James's story "The Real Right Thing," with which it shares an alliterative doubling title. (175)

Though Teahan concerns herself only with the work of James, her observations about these titles might easily be extended to encompass Poe's own "William Wilson" with its similarly alliterative and repetitious title that simultaneously conceals and exposes the inadequacy of signification. Indeed, as Poe reveals in his story's first paragraph, William Wilson is not even the real name that the narrator uncomfortably shares with his double.

In his ambitious study, *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* (1998), Richard Davenport-Hines suggests that perhaps Henry James's debts to Poe extend beyond the already mentioned stories. Concerning "William Wilson," one of Poe's most powerful explorations of the uncanny doppelgänger, Davenport-Hines writes, "The duplicate Wilsons foreshadow the duplicate Clare Vawdrey in Henry James's story 'The Private Life,' [1892] in which an author who needs a reclusive life if he is to succeed in his creativity acquires a doppelgänger who goes out in society and dazzles his audiences" (287). Davenport-Hines does not elaborate on what he views as the parallels between these two tales, but the similarities, as well as some of the differences, in Poe's and James's versions of the uncanny double are quite telling. Poe's tale is told from the point of view of one of the doppelgängers, and part of the story's uncanniness comes from the reader's lingering uncertainty as to which one; however, James's narrator is neither of the doubles but an outside observer mystified by inconsistencies in Vawdrey's behavior. In fact, the narrator's discovery of the author's doppelgänger in "The Private Life" serves as the tale's uncanny turn, a surprise that James arguably handles with more subtle artistry than Poe manages in any of his comparable tales. But again an evaluative literary appreciation of one author over the other would seem to matter less than the simple fact of the overlapping of the two author's interests in uncanny doublings, particularly as they relate to

author figures.

Not surprisingly, both Poe and James repeatedly use their fiction tales as vehicles for exploring their critical theories and testing the limits of authorial control, a practice that does much to explain the strong pattern of shared interests and common obsessions that surface in their work. Written texts often figure significantly in the tales of both Poe and James. Their characters are often authors and readers, figures who discuss books frequently and have occasion to talk about their relation to literature. As such, these tales often incorporate “readings” of embedded texts and their plots often hinge upon issues of interpretation, particularly the failure of interpretation in the more disturbing tales. Indeed, I would suggest that for both of them, the eruption of the uncanny is almost always triggered in some way with a dramatized loss of authorial control.

Animated by this shared obsession with the loss of authorial control, Poe and James both struggle against an author’s ultimate reliance on readerly interpretation of textual meaning. While in some ways they occupy opposite ends of the literary register, their plights are similar. Always expanding his influence and popularity, Poe is perceived as pushing the boundaries of taste and decorum even as he is constantly forced toward the fringe of an ever-expanding American canon. Always provincial but with aspirations toward the cosmopolitan, Poe has become the most globalized of American authors, as widely read as he is misunderstood and more beloved than he was ever despised. Meanwhile, constantly struggling against the rising tide of historical obscurity, James serves as the epitome of refinement and literary seriousness but cannot escape being slowly and inevitably drawn into the empty abyss at the center of that expanding American canon. Always cosmopolitan but finally neither fully European nor yet American, James has become a quaint and stuffy Victorian who is more respected than read and

whose admirable restraint is now read as sexual repression.

In a tale some years later about an expatriate author's return to New York after years abroad, James again revisits the figure of the uncanny double in another of his quasi-supernatural tales, "The Jolly Corner" (1908). This story finds a self-sufficient and successful, though essentially loveless, man stalking after a spectral presence through his private New York properties after an absence of thirty years spent in Europe. Though the man first believes this figure to be his doppelgänger, when he finally sees this double he encounters the face of a stranger, "evil, odious, blatant, vulgar" (page #). The aging James could be offering a particularly jaundiced view of himself in this passage, but he might just as easily be describing the unhealthy Poe of that famous daguerreotype. Unlike Baudelaire who posed for an uncannily similar photograph, James is no "apostle" of Poe who is eager to demonstrate himself as Poe's *semblable*, but the commonalities resonate. Indeed, the closer one begins to examine the tales of James, the more echoes of Poe one begins to hear. Not only do the two authors share many thematic interests, but despite their strong, superficial differences in tone and style, at core they have remarkably similar aesthetics.

In fact, while developing their separate but remarkably similar poetic theories, both Poe and James reveal a shared central concern, one might even say obsession, with the craft of writing. Both authors remain overwhelmingly committed to asserting and maintaining absolute authorial control over textual meaning. Perhaps the strongest evidence of this concern rests in the fact that both Poe and James engaged in strenuous and retroactive attempts to restore their authorial control over already published works. Poe tries to reclaim "The Raven" a year after its publication with his "Philosophy of Composition" that details (probably somewhat fictively) his creative process for writing the poem while also offering a strongly authoritative reading of the

poem. James engages in very similar activity though in a more extended manner by writing a series of Prefaces to the New York Editions of his collected tales. Interestingly, despite the similarity between the two projects, Poe has typically been viewed as mercenary for exploiting the success of “The Raven” with his follow-up essay while James has been routinely praised for endowing posterity with the enduring legacy of his insights into literary art. However, before taking either of these authorial enterprises at face value, one must recall that the collected works of both Poe and James abound with unsettling tales that have authors and readers as their central characters, books and texts as their primary objects, and plots that rely for their uncanny effects upon problems of interpretation, meaning and authority. In response to this collection of disturbing and ambiguous works, each author claims to present candid expository insights.

Yet, remarkably, Poe and James both take pains to assert the absolute recoverability of authorial inspiration and to emphasize the importance of authorial intention to literary criticism. The first lines of James’s “Preface to ‘The Aspern Papers’” posit not only the author’s ability to recall the details of his inspiration but strongly imply authorial intention’s centrality to understanding the meaning of a work. James writes, “I not only recover with ease, but I delight to recall, the first impulse given to the idea of ‘The Aspern Papers.’ It is at the same time true that my present mention of it may perhaps too effectually dispose of any complacent claim to my having ‘found’ the situation” (159). For James, the author’s inspiration not only marks the origins of a literary work but signals the author’s enduring possession of it. Poe sounds a similar note in early portions of “The Philosophy of Composition” when he claims that he never experiences “at any time, the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions” (*E&R*, 14). Given such easily recalled inspiration, neither author makes any qualms about also positing clear authorial intention that guides the careful creation of the work.

Poe states that he always prefers “commencing with the consideration of an effect” (*E&R*, 13).

James waxes more metaphorical, but the authorial impulse is identical: “I got wind of my positive fact, I followed the scent” (159). However, for both James and Poe the composition of a work corresponds to the fulfillment of an original authorial intention.

Still, critics have long questioned Poe’s earnestness in “The Philosophy of Composition,” but most scholars have accepted James’s accounts as forthright. However, in his brief but bold essay, “Jeffrey Aspern and Edgar Allan Poe: A Speculation,” Gerald J. Kennedy argues that Poe’s life and literary persona may have provided the model for what he terms the *homme manque* of Jeffrey Aspern in Henry James’s 1888 novella *The Aspern Papers*. For Kennedy, Aspern’s portrayal as an American lyric poet of the 1820’s cannot help but suggest Poe, although critics have typically taken James at his word when he claims that he had to invent such an author because he found no analogous historical figures.

Kennedy notes that James pointedly never mentions Poe in this particular preface, one that not insignificantly also addresses “The Turn of the Screw,” but I would suggest that Kennedy does not go nearly far enough in his search for traces of Poe. I find that a closer analysis of James’s precise phrasing and diction in this Preface exposes the disembodied voice of Poe echoing throughout the prose. Either James is deliberately planting clues in the text or he is so conscious of trying to suppress the obvious presence of Poe lurking behind Aspern that he cannot help himself. After James relates that he had engaged in the writerly practice of “covering one’s tracks ... in postulating a comparative American Byron” (James 166), his further denials of Poe begin to unravel themselves. While still pointedly avoiding any mention of Poe, James begins to defend himself against the imaginary “charge ... that I foist upon our early American annals a distinguished presence for which they yield me absolutely no warrant” (168).

Yet, the accuser remains so notably absent from James's protestations that James almost begins to sound like one of Poe's narrators who compulsively confesses because he believes everyone can see his crimes as plainly as he sees them himself. The following paragraph needs to be quoted at length because James's writing here reverberates so densely with words and phrases that recall Poe's tales and poems:

“Where, within them, gracious heaven, were we to look for so much as an approach to the social elements of habitat and climate of birds of that note and plumage?”—I find this link with reality then just in the tone of the picture wrought round him [Aspern]. What was the tone but exactly, but exquisitely, calculated, the harmless hocus-pocus under cover of which we might suppose him to have existed: This tone is the tone, artistically speaking of “amusement,” the current floating that precious influence home quite as one of those high tides watched by the smugglers of old might, in case of their boat's being boarded, be trusted to wash far up the strand the cask of foreign liquor expertly committed to it. If through our lean prime Western period no dim and charming ghost of an adventurous lyric genius might by a stretch of fancy flit, if the time was really too hard to “take,” in the light form proposed, the elegant reflection, then so much the worse for the time—it was all one could say! The retort to that of course was that such a plea represented no “link” with reality—which was what was under discussion—but only a link, and flimsy enough too, with the deepest depths of the artificial: the restrictive truth exactly contended for, which may embody my critic's last word rather than of course my own. My own, so far as I shall pretend in that especial connexion to report it, was that one's warrant, in such a case, hangs essentially on the question of whether or no the false element imputed would have borne that test of further development which so exposes the wrong and so consecrates the right. My last word was, heaven forgive me, that, occasion favouring, I could have perfectly “worked out” Jeffrey Aspern. (168-9)

James's heavy emphasis on the word “tone” throughout this paragraph recalls Poe's own frequent use of that term to describe how an author crafts his prose to gather about his work an air of haunting suggestiveness. Further, the rhetorical shape of this passage, the very manner in

which James structures this argument, strongly suggests that vaguely pedantic attitude Poe so frequently adopts in his arguments, ventriloquizing his reader to pose a hypothetical question and then waxing poetical and philosophical in his answer. The allusions to the Poe's titles and themes are almost too numerous to count. As the most noted example Poe's lyric genius, "The Raven" appropriately offers the most obvious answer to the initial question James poses with its curiously avian metaphor. Why should James be asking what sort of bird he might find in the history of American letters? Perhaps in hopes of reminding his canny readers of Poe by subtly alluding to his poetic masterpiece. The circular phrasing of "the picture wrought round him" brings to mind Poe's tale "The Oval Portrait," a story exploring art's parasitic relationship to life. James's extended maritime metaphor bears not only traces not only of Poe's *Pym*, "MS Found in a Bottle" and "The Cask of Amontillado," but also reveals more deeply submerged suggestions of "A Descent into the Maelstrom" and "The Gold Bug." James then returns yet again to "The Raven," whose titular bird "flits" and flutters into the speaker's chamber, to speak unbidden its repeated burden of "Nevermore." Yet all these innuendos regarding Poe's work could be dismissed as the stuff of imagination were it not for central simple fact that James refuses to acknowledge (even if only to dismiss it) the most obvious connection his reader is likely to make. A brief quotation from "The Aspern Papers" itself serves as particularly evocative here: "Jeffrey Aspern had never been in it that I knew of: but some note of his voice seemed to abide there by a roundabout implication, a faint reverberation" (James, *Signet*, 154). By suggesting the figure of an "American Byron" whose "charming ghost of an adventurous lyric genius might by a stretch of fancy flit," James must know that many of his readers "by roundabout implication" will not hesitate to think of Poe.

Yet James leaves Poe's name unspoken throughout his entire essay, and herein lies one of

the apparent oversights that seems most remarkable in this Preface to “The Aspern Papers,” an essay which significantly also includes his discussion of “The Turn of the Screw.” The latter tale so plainly carries on Poe’s tradition that almost immediately after its serial publication James’s contemporaries were already recognizing Poe as its obvious source of inspiration. Writing under the pen name of “Droch,” Robert Bridges observes in his November 10, 1898, *Life* review that James “has shown what he can do with a tale of the Poe sort – and he does it extremely well” (qtd in Beidler, 174). Bridges also recognizes how the tale’s horror is sustained through its air of absolute indeterminacy. He notes that “when you sift the terror to its essential facts, there does not seem to be anything to make a fuss about.... But there is the place for the literary artist to show what he can do – and Henry James does it in a way to raise goose-flesh!” (qtd in Beidler, 174). Indeed, despite whatever opinions he may voice in the letter to William Dean Howells where he dismisses “The Turn of the Screw” as not only a “potboiler” but as the most “abject” work “a proud man brought low ever perpetrated” (qtd in Despotopoulou and Reed, 2), James’s own attempt at distancing himself from this particular work cannot hold. James must still secretly thrill to the apt comparison with Poe followed by the implicitly higher praise of calling James a “literary artist,” a title that few critics ever allow to Poe.

Moreover, James’s masterpiece ultimately represents that crowning work in which he must finally know himself to have surpassed Poe. Describing that supreme moment when the younger author finally fully emerges from the shadow of his predecessor, Bloom explains, “I mean something more drastic and (presumably) absurd, which is the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one’s own work, that particular passages in his work seem to be not presages of one’s own advent, but rather to be indebted to one’s own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one’s greater splendor” (141). With “The Turn of the Screw,” James composes “a

tale of the Poe sort,” but his own work ultimately stands on its own merits and arguably surpasses Poe even on his own terms. While Poe and James have quite similar aesthetics when it comes to their desire for authorial control over textual meaning, in his tale James is able to extend the “unity of effect” beyond length that Poe believes possible. Even more importantly, with “The Turn of the Screw” James finally discovers a solution to that that so never-endingly vexes Poe’s work, the irresolvable tension between author and reader that forces them into acting as uncanny doubles of each other. To conquer Poe’s absolute limit of “one sitting,” James relies upon his characteristic circumlocution and improves. In the Preface, he writes,

To improvise with extreme freedom and yet at the same time without the possibility of ravage, without the hint of a flood; to keep the stream, in a word, on something like ideal terms with itself: that was here my definite business. The thing was to aim at absolute singleness, clearness and roundness, and yet to depend on imagination working freely, working (call it) with extravagance; by which law it would n’t be thinkable except as free and would n’t be amusing except as controlled. The merit of the tale, as it stands, is accordingly, I judge, that it has struggled successfully with its dangers. (172)

James finds himself able to expand the length of the work beyond Poe’s limitations precisely because his single effect is one of calculated ambiguity, of innuendo and suggestiveness that mounts gradually to horror. Similarly, James finally escapes the inherent tension that both he and Poe have found between author and reader by relying upon the reader’s own imagination to flesh out the horrific details that James’s prose hints at but carefully avoids explaining. As he explains in his Preface, James had as a reader of similar tales experienced disappointment when implied horrors had been inevitably reduced by the author to specific actions:

One had seen, in fiction, some grand form of wrong-doing, or better still wrong-being, imputed, seen it promised and announced as by the hot breath of the Pit—and then, all lamentably, shrink to the compass of some particular brutality, some particular

immorality, some particular infamy portrayed: with the result, alas, of the demonstrations falling sadly short. (176)

Although for the most part readers do not experience such shortcomings in Poe's fiction, James manages to pinpoint one of the great weaknesses of many imaginative works that aim for the speculative, sensationalist, and suspenseful. Particularly in macabre fiction, horrors seen are less powerful than those merely suggested.

To resolve this formal problem in "The Turn of the Screw," to make his ghosts seem impossibly evil without ever having to reduce their monstrosity to particulars, James makes an authorial leap of faith into trusting his readers to supply specificity where he deliberately avoids it. James explains his strategy: "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself—and that already is a charming job—and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with the particulars" (176). Struggling with the same central problem of textual ontology that vexes Poe's poetics and animates his proliferation of doppelgangers, James reverses the polarity of this tension and invites his own readers to double as authors. In this way, James discovers that using authorial ambiguity to empower the reader's imagination proves stunningly successful with "The Turn of the Screw." Yet of course, James can never fully free himself from the figure of Poe as his own uncanny double. He dismisses his own most successful work as a "potboiler" and then represses Poe as obscene father from his discussions of the tale's origins and inspiration.

As Gert Buelens and Celia Aijmer suggest in "The Sense of the Past: History and Historical Criticism" (2007), the ghostly is powerfully evoked by acts of both writing and reading because if authorial intention breathes life into characters who haunt the embodied text

only to become revenant during the reading process then those same characters are forever “doomed to a spectral existence” due to the indeterminacy of language and the uncertainty of textual meaning. One might add that this is precisely why the author and the reader become uncanny doubles of each other, and why both endlessly haunt the textual experience. Thus, one cannot simply dismiss James’s connections to supernatural and macabre fiction as a passing fancy or limited to a few tales that he wrote quickly for money. On the contrary, the haunting spirit of *The Turn of Screw* has become increasingly recognized as pervading the rest of James’s writing. In *Henry James and the Ghostly* (1994), T.J. Lustig explores just how thoroughly “the ghostly” becomes a major theme in in James’s entire literary oeuvre, from “ghostly notes” in *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* to the “phantasmagoric experiences” in *What Masie Knew* and “In the Cage” and even to *The Sacred Fount*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* which do not contain “objectified ghosts” but which feature protagonists who are “haunted men and women who frequently themselves become haunting presences” (4). So, for James hauntings themselves become an almost uncannily familiar theme that gradually emerges as one of the predominant themes in his fiction. Indeed, as Lustig argues, “During the later stages of his career, the ghostly was no longer used exclusively to guarantee the outer edge of his fiction. Instead the ghosts tended to be encountered at its core, where they were closely linked ... to the figure of the author” (4). Further, I would argue that this increasingly explicit connection between what Lustig calls “the ghostly” and the figure of author, serves to reiterate the similarities between Poe and James. For both of them, the ghostly remains closely linked to the figure of the author, a fact that also underscores the degree to which James himself is haunted by his repressed authorial inheritance from Poe.

The Obscene Supplement of American Literature: The Haunting of F. O. Matthiessen & Harold Bloom

As the discussions of Griswold and James have shown, Poe has long been attacked from various quarters for his supposed literary crimes and his alleged personal faults, with his detractors even trying to deny or to minimize the obvious influence of his literary legacy on other writers; however, in the 20th century (and now into the 21st) literary scholars have gone the further step of attempting to exclude Poe from scholarly narratives of national literary inheritance. Respected and influential American critics F. O. Matthiessen and Harold Bloom, towering figures of 20th century American literary criticism, bookend academia's formidable construction of an American literary canon during the recently completed century, Matthiessen with his seminal tome *American Renaissance* and Bloom with his equally majestic *Western Canon*. Notably, both of these scholars engage in concerted and repeated efforts to resist Poe's inclusion in the American canon. A close scrutiny of Matthiessen's and Bloom's strategies for purging "high literature" of Poe reveals the logic of psychological repression, and the power of Poe's work and legacy to resist these exorcisms emerges as the return of the uncanny repressed.

In their work about Poe, both Matthiessen and Bloom consistently portray Poe and his work as dead, distasteful, and unworthy of serious attention. However, their treatment of Poe and his work as "bad" (Bloom's word) reveals strong indications of psychological repression, and a closer analysis of their critical writing about Poe demonstrates the ways in which their repeated dismissals follow the logic of the partial object. Applying principles of psychoanalysis to Matthiessen and Bloom's strategic exclusion of Poe from the American canon reveals how Poe, as a partial object (what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*), emerges as the obscene supplement of the

American Author, the uncanny remainder whose very repression ensures the orderly function of social structures, in this case the American literary canon as established guardians of “high literature” construct it. As Žižek points out in *Interrogating the Real*, “[R]eality is never given in its totality; there is always a void gaping in its midst, filled out by monstrous apparitions” (152). These “monstrous apparitions” can make themselves felt by the emergence of what Lacan refers to as “symptoms,” where a symptom is nothing other than the specter of a repressed truth. As Žižek explains the symptom, it serves as both as a pathological and a philosophical sign that functions ambivalently between the realms of the Real and the Symbolic, and in its healthy dimension it can bridge the unavoidable gap between these two. The symptom can be glimpsed by what Žižek terms “looking awry,” though a symptom must be understood as paradoxically both visible and invisible, a blot on the field of vision. What the glimpses of the symptom reveal is the lurking presence of that something else which remains unknown or concealed. That is to say, the symptom gestures toward the repressed. For Matthiessen and Bloom, Poe’s status as the uncanny repressed emerges as “symptoms” from their canon building work.

The very framing mechanisms for Matthiessen’s the canon-building project with *American Renaissance* is calculated to exclude Poe. He asserts that the half-decade of 1850-55 represents “one extraordinarily concentrated moment of expression” and claims that one could “search all the rest of American literature without being able to collect a group of books equal to these in imaginative vitality” (vii). Matthiessen’s choice of the word “vitality” at the end of the sentence almost seems like a mocking sneer; Poe died October 9, 1849, missing the start of this great period of “imaginative vitality” by less than three months. By deciding to begin his study with the year 1850, Matthiessen ensures that Poe is dead, and can thus be categorically excluded from consideration as long as one ignores the inconvenient fact that Griswold’s three-volume

Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe were published during precisely these years that Matthiessen proposes to examine in his nearly 700-page tome structuring the American Renaissance. Matthiessen's title, which has since passed into common cultural usage in referring to the antebellum years, may also conjure up an important Derridean question. "Re-naissance or *revenge*?" Derrida asks concerning the inherent tension between what he calls "imminence and the desire for resurrection"(44). Indeed, what more apt term than "haunting" can account for Matthiessen's repression of Poe while simultaneously evoking Poe's uncanny ability to linger evermore about the fringes of American literary studies? By ensuring that Poe is dead, Matthiessen ironically opens the door to the author's ghost.

Matthiessen represses Poe's poetics by pointedly refusing to discuss them even though he in other ways indicates his awareness of their existence. Matthiessen appreciates that "Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman all commented very explicitly on language as well as expression" (vii). Although the two fiction writers he chooses to study did not write such commentary, Matthiessen tautologically suggests that "the creative intentions of Hawthorne and Melville can be readily discerned through scrutiny of their chief works" (vii). Of course, because he has placed Poe under repression, Matthiessen cannot comment that Poe, an exact contemporary of Hawthorne and Melville, had in fact developed an extensive poetics that both authors would have read. In fact, many of Poe's insights into the art of fiction were voiced in a review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. Yet, Matthiessen continues by suggesting, "It seemed to me that the literary accomplishment of those years could be judged most adequately if approached both in the light of its authors' purposes and in that of our own developing conceptions of literature" (vii). Matthiessen has already admitted that Hawthorne's and Melville's "purposes" must be inferred from their works themselves, but now he proposes to further intuit from them the nation's

“developing conceptions of literature.” While in the chapters discussing these authors’ works, Matthiessen does account for the national literary scene, referring to Evert Duyckinck’s influence for example, but he never discusses Poe’s role as a major national tastemaker and perhaps the preeminent reviewer of the previous decade.

Matthiessen does in fact make reference to Poe’s famous review of Hawthorne’s stories, but mostly to note what he calls Poe’s “praising *Twice-Told Tales* as the only work of this kind by an American” (205). Matthiessen further describes Poe’s admiration for Hawthorne’s tale “The Hollow of the Three Hills” because it represents “an instance of Hawthorne’s exceptional skill in creating a *totality* of impression” (206, Matthiessen’s emphasis). However, Matthiessen completely ignores the fact that Poe discusses Hawthorne’s stories as part of a developing trend in American short fiction and does so while elaborating upon his own thoroughly elaborated poetic theories. Instead, Matthiessen remains firmly focused on Hawthorne here and uses Poe merely to parrot his own estimation of Hawthorne’s artistic achievement. When Matthiessen later mentions the influence of Poe’s “Poetic Principle” on Baudelaire, he still fails to discuss the actual poetics that Poe develops. Instead, Matthiessen uses this as another opportunity to dismiss Poe’s work as inferior by claiming, “Poe always rarified his matter, since his imagination never moved in the physical world but in the psychological. In the choice and development of his symbols, Baudelaire was more sensual, more plastic, more human” (243). As with his earlier handling of Poe, Matthiessen takes pains to limit and contain Poe. Already ensuring that Poe is dead at the outset of his literary examination, Matthiessen now reiterates the effects of that death by denying even Poe’s imagination contact with the “physical world.” However, the dead thing which moves only in the psychological realm is none other the specter of the uncanny repressed.

Apparently what Matthiessen intends to show here is how Poe remains essentially incapable as an artist of participating in the emerging “realism” that Matthiessen esteems in the novels of Hawthorne and Melville, but what emerges from Matthiessen’s construction is more sinister and psychologically revealing. For Matthiessen, Poe is not even adequately human. Poe, in other words, has risen to the level of a “thing,” yet another form of the uncanny repressed. Matthiessen’s partial representation of Poe throughout his book is almost violent in its fragmentation of his ideas. Moreover, Matthiessen’s revelation of familiarity with Poe’s reviews and essays suggests that his exclusion of Poe’s poetics (as well as his fiction and poetry) from revivification in *American Renaissance* cannot be dismissed as mere oversight. Rather, this represents a systematic repression of Poe and his influence on the development of American literature.

Another, perhaps clearer, reason for Poe’s exclusion begins to emerge when Matthiessen identifies what he views as one of the major strands of thought that connects his selected authors. Matthiessen observes, “The one common denominator of my five writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy” (ix). Matthiessen’s use of the possessive pronoun (“my five writers”) reveals the imposed consistency of national thought that Matthiessen reifies with his canon-building project. He openly privileges writers who belong to the more positivist version of American identity. Yet, the very logic of constructing such a unified edifice to American literature betrays its necessary exclusion of divergent voices because “reality is never given in its totality” but always structured around a gaping void. Briefly comparing Emerson’s poem “Uriel” to Poe’s “Israfel” in order to evaluate their “symbolic expression ... of the poet’s role” (74), Matthiessen limits his discussion of Poe’s work to a single sentence. He finds that “[w]hat is insistent through Poe’s disjointed stanzas is

his intense suffering” (74). Matthiessen’s use of the word “disjointed” here further serves to fragment Poe’s portrayal, limiting him to incoherent and partial expression of any authorial intention. By contrast, Matthiessen valorizes Emerson because he “affirms the increasing greatness of man” (74-5). Emerson belongs to the positivist tradition of Matthiessen’s unified American literary cannon; Poe is a “disjointed” and fragmentary outsider.

Matthiessen admits his work is not so much an exploration of the nation’s literary history as the erection of a particular version of that literary history. Given such an overt agenda, his project can already be seen as intellectually questionable from the start. Interestingly, Matthiessen reveals more than he perhaps intends when he contrast his own project to that of Parrington in his earlier study *Main Current of American Thought* (1927). Matthiessen first quotes Parrington’s stated mission: “With aesthetic judgments I have not been greatly concerned. I have not wished to evaluate reputations or weigh literary merits, but rather to understand what our fathers thought” (qtd in Matthiessen, ix). In response, Matthiessen writes, “My concern has been the opposite” (ix). That is to say that Matthiessen means to concern himself with making aesthetic judgments, with evaluating reputations, and with weighing literary merits, but he does not intend to understand the era’s trends of thought. Matthiessen plans to construct a particular version of national literary history, and he has already decided which works to canonize. Matthiessen reveals as much regarding his agenda when he writes, “But I agree with Thoreau: ‘Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all’” (xi). Thoreau of course assumes that one can evaluate which are the “best books” before having read them. Thus both Thoreau and Matthiessen display the sort of accepted judgment that Poe himself already decries in his earliest critical statement, 1831’s “Letter to Mr.—” This further explains his exclusion of Poe, whose reputation and literary merit, thanks to Griswold’s pernicious influence,

certainly formed one of the primary topics of literary discussion during the five years Matthiessen proposes to examine.

Matthiessen's efforts at building a positivist American canon proved successful for much of the 20th century, but by the final two decades of the century American culture had shifted to become more inclusive. Post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, and many other *post*-s decentered the monolithic version of American identity in which Matthiessen had participated. Poe has begun to openly haunt the halls of academia by the time Harold Bloom takes on his role as the foremost defender of "high literature," but in order to maintain the structural integrity of the American canon, Bloom continues Matthiessen's patterns in the treatment of Poe. In an attitude remarkably similar to that of Matthiessen before him, Bloom holds Poe in fierce disdain, speaking of him in more starkly judgmental terms than his precursor ever employed. According to Bloom, Poe writes "bad verses," "badly written tales," "nightmares of diction as well as of vision," composes rhymes that are "dreadful," makes observations that are "neither true nor interesting," produces writing that is "almost invariably atrocious," and so on. However, while Bloom admits that Poe's place in the canon of world literature is as inevitable as it is dubious, he remains careful to regard Poe (as far as practicable) only from a distance and when pressed to closer examination tending to limit his presentation of Poe's work to very small pieces.

In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), the short study upon which Bloom's reputation was first founded and upon which it still largely rests despite the large weight of work stacked upon it like a reverse pyramid, Bloom discusses Poe's influence on the Symbolists in terms of perversity, an appropriate enough connection for Poe. Bloom writes,

"Perverse" literally means "to be turned the wrong way"; but to be turned the right way in regard to the precursor means not to swerve at all, so any bias or inclination perforce

must be perverse in *relation to the precursor*, unless context itself (such as one's own surrounding literary orthodoxy) allows one to be an *avatar of the perverse*, as the French line Baudelaire-Mallarme-Valery was of Poe, or Frost of Emerson. (*Anxiety*, 85, Bloom's emphasis)

Convolved as Bloom's phrasing is here, he seems to be suggesting that rigidly following a literary antecedent is not perverse unless the object of admiration represents an "avatar of the perverse," which Bloom seems to think Poe does (and presumably Emerson does as well).

Bloom clarifies that "the strong poet's imagination *cannot see itself as perverse*" but believes that "its own inclination must be healthy" (*Anxiety*, 85, Bloom's emphasis). Bloom seems here to be suggesting that Poe possesses a "strong poet's imagination," but elsewhere in his writings complains, "Poe is as inescapable in his bad verses as he is in his badly written tales, which are nightmares of diction as well as of vision. Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry all adored Poe's poetry, but then their ears were not well attuned to English as a language" (*Poe* "Introduction," 9). However, ensuring that his moral judgment regarding Poe's perversity not be lost, Bloom states, "If the imagination's gift comes necessarily from the perversity of the spirit, then the living labyrinth of literature is built upon the ruin of every impulse most generous in us" (*Anxiety*, 85). Clearly the influence Bloom himself remains most anxious about is the corrupting effect the literature of such figures as Poe can have on society. He writes that "we are wrong to have founded a humanism directly upon literature itself" because "[t]he strong imagination comes to its painful birth through savagery and misrepresentation" (*Anxiety*, 85-6). Such a sentiment seems strange, even perverse, coming from a literary scholar so invested in erecting another marvelously Matthiessenian edifice to literature as he does with his *Western Canon*. However, as Žižek writes in *Looking Awry*, "The same object can function successively as a disgusting reject and as a sublime, charismatic apparition: the difference, strictly structural, does

not pertain to the ‘effective properties’ of the object, but only to its place in the symbolic order” (143). So, the glimpse Bloom allows of his horror at literature’s “painful birth through savagery and misrepresentation” can be sublimated (even in its archaic sense of “making sublime”) through the repression of an obscene, supplemental figure that can be made to stand for all that awfulness.

Bloom foregoes dispassionate literary analysis and moves directly to challenging Poe’s canonicity in his “Introduction” to a 1987 collection of critical essays on *The Tales of Poe*. Indeed, the forcefulness of Bloom’s strangely disjointed attack is alarming when one considers that he publishes it in a collection of essays for which Bloom himself serves as editor. He begins his assault with insinuations Poe’s otherness by reminding his readers of French poets’ unaccountable fondness for Poe, suggesting that Baudelaire even said his “morning prayers to God and to Edgar Poe” (1). However, as Bloom asserts, this “French Poe is less bizarre than French Freud, but more puzzling, because its literary authority ought to be overwhelming, and yet vanishes utterly when confronted by what Poe actually wrote” (1). Bloom’s specific word choices are important here. He does not merely dismiss Poe’s poetry, or his tales, or his poetics. Rather, employing the full language of psychological repression, Bloom claims that Poe’s “literary authority,” his very existence as an author “vanishes” like an illusion when “confronted” with an examination of his texts, “what Poe actually wrote.” To demonstrate his thesis, Bloom quotes a six-line fragment from Poe’s lyric poem, “For Annie.” If the lines are not especially defensible as brilliant writing, their appropriateness as evidence in a book specifically about Poe prose tales seems questionable. However, Bloom evaluates the lines as follows: “Though of a badness not to be believed, this is by no means unrepresentative of Poe’s verse” (1). Bloom’s immediate adoption of a hostile stance toward the subject of this literary study

recalls that anonymous reviewer of Griswold's edition of Poe's collected works who suggests that such a role "would have suggested itself to any generous mind, that his part was that of a friendly counsel, rather than of a prosecuting attorney" (qtd in Quinn, 677). But Bloom presses his attack, next quoting several lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost* that may have influenced Poe's poem "Ulalume." But before he compares Poe's own lines to those of Milton, Bloom interposes nine lines of Aldous Huxley's "wickedly funny" parody of Poe to set up the joke he means his readers to make of Poe's verses. Bloom follows his jest by proving a chronological list of the 19th-century American poets he believes are "preferable to Poe," an evaluation under which Bloom says "Poe scrambles for twelfth place with Sidney Lanier" because "Huxley's accusation of vulgarity and bad taste is just" (3). If Griswold had personal grudges against Poe, and Henry James needed to clear a creative space for himself, Bloom's openly hostile attitude toward Poe seems less explicable until one recalls that Bloom perceives himself as a last guardian of "high literature" against the intrusion of the vulgar and the bad. His attack dog approach follows the logic of repression because the purity of the American canon must be defended against contamination.

In the second section of this "Introduction," Bloom finally turns his attention to Poe's tales, the actual topic of the collection, but he retains the moralistic and judgmental tone he has already established. He writes, "Whether either *Eureka* or the famous stories can survive authentic criticism is not clear, but nothing could remove the stories from the canon anyway. They are a permanent element in Western literary culture, even though they are best read when we are very young" (3). Again, Bloom's specific word choices reveal even more about his underlying anxiety about Poe than his overt hostility does. He ends the sentence with a revelatory prevarication; seeming to admit Poe's canonicity he instead implicitly questions the tales' status

as canonical. After all, one cannot remove from the canon something that has never been in it to begin with, and being a “permanent element” in any given culture hardly confers honor. In a petty discourtesy, Bloom calls Poe’s tales “stories” instead of the author’s preferred term, a passive aggressive move one wonders if he would dare use against the academia-beloved Henry James who also preferred the term tales for his short works. Further, Bloom speaks about the status of Poe’s works in terms of life and death, wondering whether Poe’s tales “can survive authentic criticism.” Clearly in Bloom’s opinion Poe cannot “survive” but warrant death, but his term “authentic criticism” is even more evocative. The word “authentic” remains ambiguous here, referring equally to genuine criticism and to criticism of Poe’s own authenticity. If this latter reading is against the grain of normal usage, Bloom has already established it by precedent in this essay by proposing to make Poe’s “literary authority” vanish under closer scrutiny. Ironically, of course, Bloom’s wondering how Poe might withstand “authentic criticism” risks reminding the canny reader that Bloom’s own writing about Poe fails to belong in this category.

Rallying to the defense of the canon, Bloom quickly moves from speculatively killing off Poe’s works to killing off the author himself. He writes, “Poe’s survival raises perpetually the issue as to whether literary merit and canonical status go together” (3). This seemingly innocent query conceals a drastic maneuver on the part of Bloom as a guardian of high culture, for lurking subtly behind his speculation is a warning that if figures like Poe must be understood as having “canonical status” based merely on their being a “permanent element in Western literary culture” then inclusion in such a “canon” will no longer represent “literary merit” as it used to in the good old days. Bloom laments that Poe is “so inevitable and so dubious” before suggesting that anyone who disagrees with his educated evaluation of Poe should be punished by being subjected to Poe’s work: “Uncritical admirers of Poe should be asked to read his stories aloud

(but only to themselves!)” (3). Is this not the display of cultural authority revealing the void at its core by attempting to assert power through a tautology, pronouncing for example that “the law is the law”? Yet the repression of Poe is precisely the abyss that maintains the symbolic order of an American canon constructed on the foundation of “high literature,” a lurking truth that Bloom unconsciously voices in his estimation that the “association between the acting style of Vincent Price and the styles of Poe is alas not gratuitous, and indeed is an instance of deep crying out unto deep” (3). Admittedly no “cultural critic,” Bloom can apparently recognize “bad taste” in acting as well as he can in writing. What he cannot so readily understand is why neither will simply “vanish” back into the abyss despite repeated efforts the guardians of high culture to banish them.

Amazingly, Bloom next attempts, once again and yet as if for the first time, to dispel Poe’s canonical authority by denying his status as an author. Considering the strange power of “William Wilson” to “survive its bad writing” and “Poe’s awful diction,” Bloom claims, “The tale somehow is stronger than its telling, which is to say that Poe’s actual text does not matter” (4). The critic’s attempts to destroy the authority of Poe’s authorship have instead made him even more powerful: “Poe’s diction scarcely distracts us from our retelling, to ourselves, his bizarre myths. There is a dreadful universalism pervading Poe’s weird tales” (5). All unwittingly, Bloom here proclaims Poe’s ultimate triumph because as a reader he has become Poe’s uncanny double, losing his own identity in precisely the textual condition explored throughout Poe’s entire body of work. The emergence of the doppelganger as the crucial figure for Poe becomes increasingly evident in the thorough exploration of Poe’s poetic theories performed in the next chapter of this study.

Bloom’s next attempt to banish Poe and diminish his authority reiterates his repression of

Poe. Bloom explains his animosity toward Poe by citing Poe's rejection of one of the American literary canon's most treasured authors: "Poe, a true Southerner, abominated Emerson" (5). The verb Bloom uses is forceful and calculated to reflect its negativity back onto Poe as the subject of the sentence, but Bloom's psychological repression is buried in the appositive phrase that characterizes Poe as "a true Southerner." The American South represents that region of the country most often connected with Poe because of his residences in Virginia and Maryland. Poe died and was buried in Baltimore. However, as surely as the antebellum American Gothic gives way to Southern Gothic, the South becomes not only the region most associated with our history's darkest horrors, but also the uncanny home of our most repressed aspects of national consciousness. Thus, despite his having been born in Boston, Massachusetts, and lived for years in both New York and Philadelphia, Poe is almost always described as a "true Southerner" by literary critics who mean to damage his reputation.

Bloom follows his attempts to nationally marginalize Poe as belonging to the South and not properly esteeming Emerson with an assertion about the relative merits of the two authors that positively confirms his status as Bloom's uncanny double under a psychoanalytic reading of Bloom's text. Bloom claims, "Emerson father pragmatism; Poe fathered precisely nothing, which is the way he would have wanted it" (5).

Whether he realizes it or not, Bloom's description of Emerson and Poe as rival versions of fatherhood for the American literary tradition is no mere accident. As Lacan explains, there are always two father figures. One is the traditional, "pragmatic" father who serves as the guarantor of the rule of law and the maintenance of the existing symbolic order, and who exercises his power as fundamentally *absent*; however, the other father is always excessively *present*. He is licentious and obscene, rising as the uncanny double of the traditional father

because he possesses knowledge about enjoyment. As Žižek describes this figure he is the Anal Father, “the specter which hinders ‘normal’ sexual relationship [is] ... the ‘anal father’ who definitely *does* enjoy” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 143). One recalls Bloom’s disgust with Poe as “vulgar” and in “bad taste,” whose excessive presence in his “atrocious” writing can serve as a type of punishment, and he is “best read when we are very young.” However, this obscene version of the father does not remain merely the doppelganger of the traditional father, for he eventually emerges as the subject’s own uncanny double.

Ultimately, this obscene father represents the version of himself that the child must struggle repress. Žižek explains, “He is the subject’s double who accompanies him like a shadow and gives body to a certain surplus, to what is ‘in the subject more than subject himself’; this surplus represents what the subject must renounce, sacrifice even, the part in himself that the subject must murder in order to start to live as a ‘normal’ member of the community” (143). For Bloom, as for Matthiessen before him, Poe must be renounced, even sacrificed, to ensure that the literary scholar can exist as member of an academia dedicated to ensuring the survival of only the best authors of “high literature.” As Bloom himself admits in his essay, “Poe was and is our hysteria, our uncanny unanimity in our repressions” (5). However, just because Bloom intellectually recognizes this aspect of Poe does not prevent him from trying to deny Poe’s power or repress his cultural authority.

Bloom’s fight against Poe reveals itself as a self-defeating compulsion not only in its repetition but also in its apparent self-contradictions that reveal deeper truths. Thus, a mere two pages after he recommends that Poe’s tales “are best read when we are very young,” Bloom can still remark that “Poe authentically frightens children, and the fright can be a kind of trauma” (5). Stories that frighten children tend to summon up primal, repressed fears, and are generally used

by adults to educate and discipline children, teaching them how to behave in ways that maintain the proper social order. By admitting that his own childhood reading of Poe “induced nasty and repetitious nightmares that linger even now” (5), Bloom essentially confirms that “bad” Poe and his “atrocious” works function as the monstrous other that confirms the normal status of the literary canon. No wonder that he next cites D.H. Lawrence’s assertion that “everyone in Poe is a vampire—Poe himself in particular” (6). As a serious and mature scholar, Bloom understands the supreme importance of the law and order maintained by “high literature,” and thus he remains on guard against Poe’s tendency to contaminate minds with his endless effect of uncanny doubling. Bloom observes how “[t]ranslation even into his own language always benefits Poe” (8). For the serious critic, Poe’s uncanny ability to duplicate his own awfulness in the minds of his readers must be resisted, for repetition, or even summary, merely serves to spread more of his contagion into a world where his ubiquity is already a huge cultural problem. Bloom writes, “I haven’t the space, or the desire, to summarize [Poe’s work], and no summary is likely to do anything besides deadening both my readers and myself” (8-9). For Bloom, the only escape from the horror that is Poe is to shun him and to flee his presence or face certain death. Bloom’s essay struggles against Poe for several more pages, repeating its same strategies of repression, such as quoting a fragment of Poe’s awful verse against the sublime lines of Tennyson. In the end, Bloom concedes that “Eliot was probably right” in describing Poe as “a mass of unique shape and impressive size to which the eye constantly returns” (15). The “unique shape” that Eliot describes here corresponds precisely to Lacan’s objet petit a, the obscene supplement. The return of the uncanny repressed remains inevitable because we cannot look away.

Bloom doubles his own argument in his “Introduction” to *Edgar Allan Poe*, a 1999 collection of historical and contemporary commentary on the author, again edited by Bloom

himself. The critic reproduces his earlier attempts to exclude Poe through the logic of repression so exactly that reading these two essays, written over a decade apart, becomes itself something of an uncanny experience. Bloom duplicates almost all of the same rhetorical strategies he had employed in the previous essay with only minor nuances. Introducing the very same fragment of verse he had used to demonstrate Poe's failings in the first essay, Bloom again suggests reading Poe as a form of punishment: "Anyone who thinks that Poe was a great poet should be asked to recite 'For Annie' out loud" (9). Afterward, Bloom repeats himself remarking that the French Symbolists' enthusiasm for Poe can be forgiven because they simply had "no ear for English," only this time Bloom makes the clever observation seem like his own instead of attributing it to Aldous Huxley. Perhaps he believes he has repeated it so many times that he believes it is actually original with him. Because he repeats so much of what he has said before, the eminent literary scholar's approach to Poe increasingly begins to resemble hatchet work, for the type of compulsive repetition he exhibits here is one of the hallmarks that signals the return of the uncanny repressed.

Throughout this rote exercise in repression, Bloom begins to reveal signs that the endless struggle against Poe's specter has begun to exhaust him. Interestingly, as he accedes to Poe's "inevitability" as a popular writer, Bloom accounts for the public's enthusiasm in a very interesting way:

As a literary critic with little use for what is now termed "cultural criticism," I tend to believe that Poe's bad eminence relies upon the popular taste for repetition, easy tunes, and exacerbated intensity, indeed for hysteria as such. Since Poe had the singular genius to incarnate and express a peculiarly American hysteria, we shall never be done with him. (Poe "Introduction," 10)

Bloom's refusal to participate in "cultural criticism" is not new. He already makes very similar claims in his 1973 masterpiece *The Anxiety of Influence*, and his magnum opus, *The Western*

Canon revels in its reification of “high literature” with all the tradition and judgmental glory that its title suggests. For Bloom “cultural criticism” involves not only having to read “bad” writing and take it seriously, but it also means that being “merely popular” is no longer adequate reason for the banishment of authors and their works from literary studies. In fact, Bloom puts precisely such logic on display in the above excoriation of Poe for appealing to “popular taste.” This argument harkens back to Matthiessen’s arguments, as does Bloom’s anachronistically sexist evocation of “hysteria.” After struggling for decades to banish Poe from the American canon, the exhausted guardian of “high literature” seems to forget that he writes on the cusp of the 21st century. But most telling of all, Bloom includes an enthusiasm for “repetition” first among those hallmarks of poor critical judgment of these masses who adore Poe. Indeed, Poe does often use repetition to great effect, especially in his poetry but also in his tales. Yet Bloom’s particular distaste for repetition seems a bit uncanny as he repeats himself in an essay that already repeats one of his earlier essays. Indeed, Bloom’s repeated repetition becomes a hideous thing unto itself, for he already knows that it can banish Poe never more. Indeed, to paraphrase Žižek who is in turn parodying Marx: a specter is haunting the American Literary Canon ... the specter of Edgar Allan Poe.

Chapter 3: Poe's Poetics

Throughout two decades of essays and reviews (1830s-40s), Poe develops a thorough poetic theory of literature, paying particular attention to his two favored forms, brief lyrical poems and the short story. The three key elements of this aesthetic theory, which Poe typically refers to as his “poetics,” continue to develop throughout his career as a poet, tale-writer, literary critic and editor, finding increasingly complete expression in his reviews and essays, culminating in Poe’s popular and oft-delivered lecture “The Poetic Principle,” a piece that saw formal publication in the year after his death. The three key concepts within Poe’s theory of literary aesthetics are as follows: 1) an over-riding focus on “unity of effect,” which comprises an understanding of literary art as a type of meticulous craftsmanship where each part of any given work must contribute toward achieving the single central goal of authorial intention for the piece; 2) an autotelic conception of Art for Art’s Sake, where any work of art must be appreciated and evaluated entirely on its own terms; and 3) an insistence on the absolute control of authorial intention over textual meaning. Each of these three central aspects of Poe’s literary aesthetics naturally entails numerous inter-related sub-principles and each carries with it a variety of theoretical implications.

Poe expands at length upon many of these aesthetic concepts and principles throughout his twenty-year career as a “magazinish,” an itinerant editor and columnist who contributed work to a wide variety of literary publications in the burgeoning American press of the 1830’s and 40’s. Throughout his prolific miscellany of essays and reviews — from his “Letter to B—” in the *Southern Literary Messenger* (July 1836) to his reviews of Hawthorne’s *Twice Told-Tales* in *Graham’s Magazine* (April and May 1842) and from his essay on “The Philosophy of

Composition” (*Graham’s Magazine*, April 1846) to his frequently delivered lecture on “The Poetic Principle,” finally published posthumously in *Sartain’s Union Magazine* (October 1850) — Poe returned repeatedly to expounding these same central aesthetic ideals, frequently paraphrasing at length from his own earlier writings.

Although admittedly Poe’s ideas can become increasingly complicated and at times seem needlessly convoluted in their various iterations, the overall consistency of Poe’s thought ultimately concentrates into a coherent aesthetics. As such, his literary theories remain important not only for the ways they inform and illuminate Poe’s own fiction and poetry but also for their early and essential contribution to the development of the modern short story as a vital prose form, one that has emerged as an important American literary tradition and a genre now recognized as one of our nation’s most consequential contributions to world literature.

Some of the common confusion that can arise about Poe’s aesthetics derives from the manner in which his three primary principles and their supporting framework become increasingly intertwined as he expands upon them. For example, Poe’s insistence upon a work’s “unity of effect” leads quite logically to his expressed preference for shorter works. Poe argues that brief lyric poems and short prose tales lend themselves to the maintenance of a single artistic focus and a unified readerly experience in ways that more sprawling works such as epic poems and novels remain incapable of achieving. Similarly, recognizing Poe’s insistence upon authorial control over textual meaning remains essential when accounting for his problematic posture in “The Philosophy of Composition,” where he claims to recount in detail the logical steps he followed in writing “The Raven.” This essay in particular warrants close scrutiny, not only because it remains one of his most frequently reprinted essays but also because it has so frequently been misunderstood by critics. In fact, this essay and its relation to “The Raven” are

at the crux of understanding both Poe's aesthetic theories and his literary achievement, for they embody the central tension in Poe's work — his horror at the loss of authorial control.

When viewed through the historic lens of his long-term critical reception, Poe's aesthetic principles themselves begin to suggest why he may have languished so long outside the favor of American academics. Poe's insistent elevation of the brief prose "tale" or short story over the novel has long placed him at odds with many American literary scholars because it also entails a dismissal of what Poe sees as the erroneous valorization of works demonstrating "sustained effort." Since the rise of the New Critics in the early 20th century, national literary studies of prose fiction have tended to focus their attention almost exclusively on novels, seeing these as representing the highest form of expression of national literary achievement. However, by somewhat arbitrarily valorizing the novel above the short story, these scholars have often been forced to ignore the inconvenient historical realities of print culture in 19th-century America, elevating works that suited their own aesthetic tastes over the merely popular or influential and thereby constructing an increasingly false narrative of the American literary tradition. Against such long-standing misperceptions, a clear understanding Poe's aesthetics finally serves to describe the underlying reasons for Poe's powerful resonance within our current postmodern socio-historical moment — at the outset of a radically globalized and purportedly post-ideological Digital Age. Within this context, the time has arrived for us finally to recognize and to account for that lingering specter which has for so long haunted American consciousness. As his remarkably cogent aesthetics demonstrate, Poe is now more relevant than ever.

Poe's Earliest Critical Statement on Poetry

Entitled "Letter to Mr.—," Poe's earliest published critical statement regarding his

“poetics” took place in a brief missive addressing the forms and functions of poetry, appearing alongside his own youthful poetic works in an early collection entitled *Poems of Edgar A. Poe*.³ The selection of works includes “To Helen,” his untitled sonnet known as “To Science,” as well as “Al Aaraaf” and “Tamerlane,” all of which have subsequently been acknowledged as being relatively mature considering that Poe himself had just turned twenty-two at the time of the volume’s publication. While “Letter to Mr.—” can hardly be said to advance the coherent aesthetic theories sketched out above, it nevertheless remains important for its suggestion of the early directions of Poe’s thinking on several key topics related to the nature and function of poetry as well as revealing important sources of influence on his ideas, most notably Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Poe begins the essay with a bold assertion that the best poets are inevitably the best critics of poetry written by others, while those incapable of writing competent poetry themselves are not liable to make sound judgments when estimating the poetic achievements of others. Poe expresses his flat opposition to the suggestion that “a good critique on a poem may be written by one who is no poet himself,” stating that “the less poetical the critic, the less just the critique, and the converse” (5). For Poe, a “critique” entails an evaluative judgment that depends upon a poet’s keen awareness of the inner workings of his craft. Poe expands his argument by sketching out a careful distinction between the terms “judgment” and “opinion,” arguing that the word “judgment” properly belongs only to the realm of the critic as one of expert discernment while the term “opinion” applies to the broader public estimation of a writer and his works. To

³ According to Poe biographer Kenneth Silverman, this volume was privately published by Elam Bliss in New York 1831 with money Poe had apparently collected from fellow cadets while attending West Point, this third and final of his early poetry collections may have attained a slightly wider distribution than his first two volumes but it still garnered little in the way of actual recognition for him as a serious poet.

illustrate his point, Poe presents the example of William Shakespeare, whom the “opinion” of the world holds in universally high esteem even though the majority of people personally lack the “judgment” to support such an opinion. Poe explains that “they did not originate the opinion, but it is theirs” (5) to the extent that they willingly defer to the estimation of those better equipped to make sound critical judgments. For Poe then, the critic serves an essential social role as a taste maker, and as such we thus see that Poe already begins to reveal his oft-noted elitist tendencies. While he does not elaborate on those deficiencies which would prevent the general public from forming their own judgments, his inherent appeal here to a natural hierarchy of critical authority, an authority possessed and asserted by the poetic elect may also be part of what informs his next assertion that there exists a “great barrier in the path of an American writer” in comparison to the easier route to esteem for British authors because “an established name is an estate in tenure, or a throne in possession” (5). Indeed, his point here is a perfectly valid one that much concerned the American literati of his era. While the American readership of the 1830’s and 40’s remained enamored with popular British writers who were published widely in the United States and avidly read by an enthusiastic public. By contrast American writers often had a much harder time convincing American editors to risk printing their work since it often would not sell as well. In the early years of American literary production, readers often proved remarkably reluctant to take a chance with a lesser-known “local” author. Although Poe may not yet intend this comment as an actual disparagement of American literary efforts, the metaphorical link he forges here between authorship and property ownership or royal title remains powerfully suggestive of his underlying anti-egalitarian tendencies. As such, Poe clearly already begins to recognize the challenges facing those who would attempt to establish a national literary movement. As he correctly observes, the American writer “is read, if at all, in preference to the combined and

established wit of the world” (5). Further, the critical judgment of American reviewers had already proven itself to be questionable at best for its lack of education and refinement, and corrupted at worst by a corrupt system where publishers and authors would often pay magazine editors and reviewers directly to ensure positive notices. As a result, the American readership had quickly learned not to trust such “puffery” of American writers by American critics. To Poe the solution to such a problem was obvious — an independent and informed class of literary critics who were not beholden to publishers.

Though he would later become much more embroiled in discussions surrounding the nationalist literary movement, Poe does not linger long here on the issue of a nationalistic American literature. Instead Poe quickly returns his attention to the matter of critical judgment, reasserting that the “justice of a critique upon poetry” must be “in proportion to the poetical talent” of the critic (6). Poe’s renewed implication that some innate “poetical talent” informs the best critical judgment relies upon the notion that this “talent” and the “judgment” that comes with it are bestowed upon some while being denied to others. This absolute faith in a hierarchy of “poetical talent” remains not only consistent with Poe’s enduring elitism but also serves to align him closely with conventional British Romantic ideals of poetic genius; however, this implicit belief in the gift of genius will emerge as somewhat more problematic when considering Poe’s later discussions of literary achievement as deriving from the force of intellect applied to a deliberately developed craft, a position that has frequently put him at odds with other poets and critics. Both then and now, there seems to be a prevailing preference for viewing poetry in the terms that William Wordsworth set forth in his hugely influential Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), namely the conception that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” This muse-inspired version of the solitary genius stands in stark contrast to Poe’s

posited vision of the author as a meticulous and calculating wordsmith. However, because he does not in this early critical piece clearly distinguish his own view from this classic Romantic notion of poetic composition, Poe can be seen to falter somewhat in his initial attempt to define poetry and poetic judgment. These distinctions are more clearly articulated in his later essays and reviews.

Poe in this early essay clearly remains very much under the long and imposing shadow cast by those twin pillars of British Romanticism, the aging but still contemporary poetic figures of Wordsworth and Coleridge, even as he struggles to define himself against their powerful influence and clear out critical space for his own ideas. Here, the young American Poe can be seen to enact the same failing he had earlier decried in those who would slavishly follow the judgments of their betters. As Kenneth Silverman notes in his 1991 biography, Poe cribs his very definition of poetry almost verbatim, and without clear acknowledgment, from the *Biographia Literaria* of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: “A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having, for its *immediate* object, pleasure, not truth” (11, Poe’s emphasis). While the essay demonstrates Poe aligning himself with Coleridge, of whom he writes that he “cannot speak but with reverence” and who he terms a “towering intellect” with “gigantic power” (10), as Silverman also notes, Poe exacerbates rather than mitigates his plagiarism of the key definition by inserting the phrase “in my opinion” as a weak gesture toward assumed ownership of the idea and its expression. The move is not unlike that “opinion” of Shakespeare’s greatness for which Poe excoriates the ignorant masses. To make matters worse, the young Poe also indulges in a number of bantering jabs at Coleridge elsewhere in the piece. For example, he suggests, “The wise must bow to the wisdom of such men as Coleridge and Southey, but being wise, have laughed at poetical theories so prosaically exemplified” (7). Later, Poe refers to what he views

as “Coleridge’s liability to err ... by reason of his very profundity” (8). To illustrate his point, Poe offers the metaphor of contemplating a star in the night sky: “He who regards it directly and intensely sees, it is true, the star, but it is the star without a ray—while he who surveys it less inquisitively is conscious of all for which the star is useful to us below—its brilliancy and its beauty” (8). This metaphor is particularly interesting because it anticipates Poe’s later assertions about the distinctions between depth and shallowness of insight and analysis. Poe consistently claims to prefer drawing important conclusions from the seemingly superficial to depending too heavily on the self-consciously profound. Poe finds Coleridge too intense and too “prosaic” in his theorization about poetry. While on the one hand, in “Letter to B—” Poe merely demonstrates a young poet’s predictable anxieties about the putative threats that analysis poses to artistic production and enjoyment, on the other hand he shows himself here clearly struggling to move out from under what must have seemed the overwhelming shadow of Coleridge’s “towering intellect.” That later in the same essay Poe finds himself borrowing the repudiated Coleridge’s definition of poetry almost word-for-word clearly indicates his failure to accomplish such desired liberation. Moreover, the young Poe can be seen to mirror the same struggle evident in the works of his contemporaries laboring toward the development of an essentially and uniquely American literature. That is, both exhibit their simultaneous debt to and disavowal of their origins in English literature.

Although Poe had not yet arrived at his own independent definition of poetry in “Letter to B—,” he still finds that the adoption of a Coleridgean approach to poetry has placed him in direct opposition to what he terms the “heresy of ... the Lake School” as exemplified by Wordsworth, the idea that “the end of poetry is, or should be, instruction” (6-7). In place of this “heresy,” Poe asserts that the goal of poetry should instead be pleasure, claiming by a bit of circuitous logic

that “he who pleases, is of more importance to his fellow men than he who instructs, since utility is happiness, and pleasure is the end already obtained which instruction is merely a means of obtaining” (7). Thus, even in this earliest rejection of poetic didacticism in favor of purely aesthetic goals for poetry, Poe already begins to outline the more thoroughly elaborated aesthetic theories that emerge in his later essays. Sadly, his aesthetics places him at further odds with many of his fellow American writers as it evolves into even more explicit iterations of what has been viewed as his controversial credo of Art for Art’s Sake. In pursuing these aesthetic principles, Poe also clearly demonstrates his lifelong tendency of writing overly clever prose and adopting a pedantic attitude in his pronouncements, a trait that many of his detractors, both in Poe’s own day and in the years since, have found remarkably difficult to tolerate. Henry James, for example, remarks of Poe’s criticism that only occasionally could he “find a phrase of happy insight in a patch of the most fatuous pedantry” (Carlson, 66). Still, this markedly anti-didactic tendency expressed in Poe’s earliest critical statement continues to resonate throughout all of his future critical essays, remaining a constant force as his poetics continue to develop. While his anti-didacticism could not help but alienate Poe from his contemporaries in the era of Emerson and Longfellow, this same guiding aesthetic principle has subsequently ensured Poe’s lasting relevance as a critic and writer. Underscoring the fact of this early statement’s significance to Poe’s poetics, the author revisits this essay several years later, revising it only slightly for publication in the pages of the *Southern Literary Messenger* (July 1836) once he became editor of that publication and found himself possessed of a broader readership for his critical ideas.

Poe’s “Exordium to Critical Notices”

In the January 1842 issue of *Graham’s Magazine*, for which periodical he was currently

acting as editor, Poe makes a strong appeal for fostering an independent and serious American literary criticism, not beholden to national allegiances. He argues that Americans have spent too long under the sway of English critics, thus “enact[ing] a perfect farce of subserviency to the *dicta* of Great Britain” (1027). But then he finds that Americans reviewers have begun to err too far in the opposite direction, becoming instead “the merest and maddest *partizans* in letters” (1027). Poe dismisses such nationalism as misguided and demonstrating a fundamental misunderstanding the very nature of artistic achievement, lamenting that “the watchword now was, ‘a national literature!’” (1027). He scoffs at such provincialism, “[A]s if any true literature *could be* ‘national’ — as if the world at large were not the only proper stage for the literary *historio*” (1027, Poe’s emphasis). As such, Poe dismisses out of hand the popular cries for tariffs or other protections that might serve to promote the nationalist literature movement, and he takes particular exception to the common editorial turn of inflating the estimation of authors based simply on their American nationality, citing the nativist elevation of James Fenimore Cooper and James Kirke Paulding as specific examples of this pernicious practice. Poe writes,

Unmindful of the spirit of axioms that “a prophet has no honor in his own land” and that “a hero is never a hero to his *valet-de-chambre*” — axioms founded in reason and in truth — our reviews urged the propriety — our booksellers the necessity, of strictly “American” themes. A foreign subject, at this epoch, was a weight more than enough to drag down into the very depths of critical damnation the finest writer owning nativity in the States; while, on the reverse, we found ourselves daily in the paradoxical dilemma of liking, or pretending to like, a stupid book the better because (sure enough) its stupidity was of our own growth, and discussed our own affairs. (1027-28)

While Poe’s marked enthusiasm for these particular axioms may derive in part from their function as a potential salve to his wounded pride at not having yet achieved literary esteem in the United States, his observation remains valid that many critics with nationalist sympathies

seemed routinely to dismiss high-quality works with foreign subjects while praising less accomplished works merely for their presentation of American subjects and themes. Indeed, it had long been a common practice for editors and reviewers to accept (and even solicit) bribes from publishers and booksellers for favorable reviews in their periodicals, a practice that Poe found not only extremely unethical but harmful to the actual improvement of American literary craft.

In her article “Poe, Literary Nationalism, and Authorial Identity” (1995), Meredith McGill examines an important moment in Poe’s literary career – his brief association with an influential group of literary nationalists known as the Young Americans. Yet the minimal significance of the author’s involvement with this group and their movement can scarcely be overstated, for although their relationship did not last long before turning rancorous, the patronage of the Young Americans, particularly Evert Duyckinck, remains largely responsible for what little fame Poe managed to achieve during his own lifetime. Under the aegis of the Young Americans’ nationalistic publishing venture, the Library of American Books, Poe was able to see into print two volumes of his work, *Tales* and *The Raven and Other Poems*. Not only did the publication of these books allow him to collect and revise stories and poems that had previously largely been relegated to the pages of periodicals, but it for the first time gave Poe a greater degree of personal control over his work and his authorial identity “in an era when magazine authors were frequently unpaid, and, when paid, traditionally ceded control over publication to editors in exchange for their pay” (McGill 273). For McGill, the circumstances of Poe’s publication by the Library of American Books and Poe’s ultimate complicity in the image these Young Americans advanced of Poe must be recognized as undermining the typical vision of the author advanced by contemporary critics, what McGill calls “an image of Poe standing

apart from the institutions and practices through which authors gained access to the reading public” (271). McGill takes exception to the idea that “Poe’s prominent attacks on this system [of literary coteries dominating the marketplace] and his persistent advocacy of an analytic and impartial criticism have enabled literary historians to portray him as a figure of heroic resistance despite the sometimes damning details of his literary and critical practice” (271). For McGill, Poe’s critical independence is compromised by the literary nationalists’ adoption of his ideas about critical independence even though he never adopts their ideas about advancing American literature merely because it is American. While she is clearly correct in suggesting that “publication of Lowell’s essay was a pivotal event in Poe’s struggle to gain recognition for and to profit by his writing” (272) and while she provides a cogent reiteration of Claude Richard’s argument that “the consolidation of Poe’s authorial identity came at a significant cost to his critical independence” (273), McGill’s central premise here becomes muddled as she asserts, “The crisis for Poe was not that he was forced to embrace literary nationalist ideals in order to advance his career. Rather, his autonomy was jeopardized when the literary nationalists embraced *his* principles, invoking him as an idealized figure of independent judgment within their discourse. Poe did not abandon his critical ideals so much as he lost control over them as they were translated into the literary nationalist idiom” (275, McGill’s emphasis). That McGill’s overall argument about Poe’s supposed loss of autonomy remains ultimately unconvincing in no way detracts from the significance of the historical and biographical tableau she presents.

Still, regardless of whatever forces may be said to account for the gradual shift toward more legitimate literary criticism and away from nationalistic “puffery” of works by American authors, Poe does admit within his “Exordium” that the scandalous situation had improved somewhat as editors began to reject the previously common practice of being paid by publishers

and booksellers for favorable reviews. Instead, magazine editors began more forcefully to assert their separation from the financial interests of the book trade. Poe writes,

If our editors are not as yet *all* independent of the will of a publisher, a majority of them scruple, at least, *to confess* a subservience, and enter into no positive combinations against the minority who despise and discard it. And this is a *very* great improvement of exceedingly late date. (1028, Poe's emphasis)

That editors, publishers, and even many in the nationalist literary movement began to recognize the wisdom of Poe's ideals momentarily endeared him to a segment of the New England literati, but such good relations did not last. Poe's imperatives here for meaningful criticism, particularly of American writing, hew closely to his main aesthetic principles. By arguing for the necessity of educated and insightful critiques of literary works, Poe advances a critical judgment that evaluates the success of works on their own terms and in a manner that must remain independent of narrowly agenda-driven financial or political interests. This approach follows his central principle regarding the need for "unity of effect" and also strongly resists what Poe saw as the "heresy of the didactic" by espousing instead an ideal of Art for Art's Sake.

Indeed, Poe's steadfast insistence upon this latter principle — the absolute value of autotelic art — describes the underlying difference in artistic philosophies that can be seen to mark his apparent (though illusory) distance from and subsequent (perceived) exclusion from the American literary tradition, both during his own life and throughout two centuries of critical reception. Poe's resistance to moral and positivistic goals for his writing marks his alienation from those American authors and critics who have considered his work as immoral, insufficiently positivistic, or in bad taste. Conversely, Poe's autotelic credo can also be seen as precisely that same aspect of Poe's literary aesthetics that ensures his paramount significance to a more cosmopolitan community of writers and critics, particularly in France and Russia, countries

where his work was translated even during his own life and where he readily found enthusiastic readers and acolytes. Along with his prolific and influential contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe had already set about developing the modern short story as part of an American literary tradition.

Poe's First Notice Regarding Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*

Poe's initial notice regarding Hawthorne's collection in *Graham's Magazine* (April 1842) is short enough almost to escape critical notice, but at a closer look it reveals a few peculiar and important details about Poe's developing aesthetics. On the surface of it, this brief notice seems slight, a minor gesture of editorial politeness; however, between his apologetic excuse and his stated goal to make future amends for this cursory review, Poe offers several telling hints of the longer essay he has in mind for exploring the nature and effect of this emerging form of abbreviated fiction, a brief and very controlled form that was rapidly becoming a dominant genre in American writing with the explosion of magazine publishing in the young nation. Examining this form itself, which Poe calls the "tale" and which would come to be known more commonly as the short story, would seem to be Poe's primary interest in reviewing Hawthorne's collection. In his first place-holder review, Poe alerts readers that in the next issue, he plans on "treating this subject in detail; taking Mr. Hawthorne's volumes as text" (568). Poe goes on to suggest that in the subsequent essay he plans to explain the advantages he believes short prose tales hold over both poems and novels for demonstrating "the highest talent" in literary achievement. Importantly, Poe makes it quite clear that reviewing Hawthorne's collection will serve him primarily as a pretext for the elaboration of his own literary theories and for an exploration of what he sees as an emerging American genre, one that Hawthorne's stories can be seen to

exemplify as well as one that Poe has continued to develop in his own fiction since the publication of “Metzengerstein” and “The Assignation” a full decade earlier.

More a notice of Poe’s intent to perform a review than a review proper, this piece is only six paragraphs long, seemingly a mere place-holder slipped into the magazine by a harried editor who has run out of time to write a promised review but who still wants to at least acknowledge the book and reiterate his commitment to draft a longer review for the next issue. Poe adopts a somewhat remote editorial voice to explain that “[a]n accident has deprived us, this month, of our customary space for review” but he pledges, “In May we shall endeavor to carry out our intention” (568). Yet Poe does not miss the opportunity to explain precisely why he finds Hawthorne’s work so compelling and so deserving of a more thorough treatment in the magazine’s subsequent number. Even these few paragraphs afford Poe the chance to voice his unrestrained enthusiasm for what he clearly recognizes as an emerging and distinctive form of short prose fiction — a genre that Poe refers to as the “tale” but one which later becomes recognizable as the modern short story. Even in such limited space, Poe waxes rhapsodic about how he has “always regarded the *Tale* (using this word in its popular acceptance) as affording the best prose opportunity for display of the highest talent. It has peculiar advantages which the novel does not admit” (568, Poe’s capitalization and emphasis). While Poe does not employ the exact terminology of his aesthetic theories in this passage, implicit here are the teleological status of artistic works and the notion of textual meaning following authorial intention. Poe also offers the subtle suggestion that shorter works might lend themselves better to deliberate organization around a single effect.

Poe’s excitement at recognizing a kindred spirit in Hawthorne is palpable even in this short notice. Tellingly, Poe’s enthusiasm derives in no small part from the fact that he perceives

that both he and Hawthorne are breaking similar new ground in literary fiction. He also clearly finds it inspiring that both of them are young American writers. He writes that with only the “rare exception” of Washington Irving “we have had no American tales of high merit ... no skilful composition—nothing which could bear examination as works of art” until this publication of Hawthorne’s collection (568). Despite (or perhaps because of) Poe’s antipathy toward promoting fellow American writers based on their nationality, he warms quickly to praising what he sees as Hawthorne’s genuine merits.

However, before Poe launches into his evaluation of Hawthorne’s accomplishments, he digresses into criticism of Hawthorne’s title for the collection, taking issue with the imprecision of calling these stories “twice-told.” Poe’s decision to spend even a small portion of this first, very cursory review quibbling with the collection’s title can seem rather odd, but a closer look reveals its deeper significance to Poe’s reading of Hawthorne. As Poe explains the fault in Hawthorne’s mild cleverness, “If in the first collected edition they were twice-told, of course now they are thrice-told” (568). Beyond merely belaboring the thin witticism of Hawthorne’s title, Poe’s observation here already begins to reveal two important points about Poe as a writer and literary theorist. Firstly, as a meticulous wordsmith and almost compulsive reviser of his own work, Poe strove toward precision in language. Though as a struggling professional writer and editor, Poe would seem to have often written quickly for money; however, he remained committed to finding the precise word or phrase to express his ideas and to elicit precisely the desired nuance of understanding in his reader. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Poe’s writing, and one often noted as a fault by his detractors, is his tendency toward digressive sentences, but this stylistic habit of apparent circuitousness demonstrates his willingness to circle his readers back over any particular term he wishes to emphasize or problematize. Poe, anticipating the

poststructuralist problematics of language, remained acutely aware of the inevitable slippage between intention and meaning. Secondly, Poe's observation of Hawthorne's ill-fitting title demonstrates the extreme level of craft-orientation in Poe's thinking about the relationship between author and reader, an evolved view that had perhaps already begun to distinguish him from Hawthorne and other writers of this era, not to mention other critics and editors. In Poe's conception here, it remains paramount that the author always understand himself as creating an essentially reader-centered text. For Poe, the author must remain endlessly aware of how his text will appear from a reader's point of view. As such, the text stands as something of a two-way mirror between the author and the reader, each of whom recognizes a double of himself in the opposite figure. While Hawthorne, and to an even greater extent Herman Melville, also frequently explored issues of language and meaning in their work, Poe demonstrates in both his fiction and his non-fiction (though for him these two frequently blur into each other), and even in his poetry, that his thinking centers largely around such issues. As a result of this focus, reading and writing emerge as significant, and often vexed, activities in much of Poe's work, certainly more so than in that of any other author of the American Renaissance. In considering Hawthorne's collection of stories, Poe submits that rather than "tales" per se, he finds that most of the included compositions are "essays properly so called." While this observation suggests Poe's heightened awareness of genre issues, it can remain a somewhat puzzling judgment given the degree to which Poe's own writing tends to push the limits of such narrow genre distinctions. "Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Black Cat," and many of his other tales begin with long expository disquisitions before finally launching into writing that can more easily be recognized as fiction. Clearly, during this early era in the development of the short story, the form continued to evolve and test its boundaries even for such remarkable early exponents as Poe and

Hawthorne.

Once he finishes his remonstrances against the collection's title, Poe demonstrates himself as very favorably disposed towards Hawthorne's collection of stories, expressing his extreme pleasure to at last find an American writer besides Washington Irving capable of composing tales that "bear examinations as works of art" (568). Still, being Poe, he cannot resist a final swipe at the collection's title allowing that "under whatever titular blunders we receive this book, it is most cordially welcome" (568). While in this first cursory pass at reviewing the book he does not address any of the individual tales or essays beyond providing a rather lengthy list of those he considers the best, notably including the proto-detective tale "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe" among these, suggesting a potential influence in Poe's ongoing development of his tales of ratiocination. Before appearing in the collection Poe reviews, Hawthorne's tale — supposedly based on a true case — had originally been published several years earlier in *The Token* (1837). Of his Dupin tales, Poe had only published "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" the year before reviewing Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842. Although in his subsequent review of Hawthorne's collection Poe's only remark on "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe" is that it is "vividly original and managed most dexterously" (575), the story undoubtedly caught Poe's attention, and it may have been one that he had seen before its inclusion in this particular collection.

Poe concludes his preliminary remarks about *Twice-Told Tales* with somewhat uncharacteristically effusive praise for Hawthorne himself:

The style of Mr. Hawthorne is purity itself. His tone is singularly effective—wild, plaintive, thoughtful, and in full accordance with his themes. We have only to object that there is insufficient diversity in these themes themselves, or rather in their character. His originality both of incident and of reflection is very remarkable; and this trait alone would

ensure him at least our warmest regard and commendation. We speak here chiefly of the tales; the essays are not so markedly novel. Upon the whole we look upon him as one of the few men of indisputable genius to whom our country has yet given birth. (569)

In this brief appraisal of Hawthorne's talents, Poe begins to outline those values he more completely espouses in his subsequent essay reviewing the collection at greater length. Not only does Poe here place emphasis on the significance of what he terms "originality" as well as novelty and diversity of theme, but he also hints at the importance of a writer's stylistic "purity" and the utility of his adopting a "singularly effective" tone that works "in full accordance with his themes." Although his terminology is still developing, significantly we find Poe here emphasizing the importance of the single effect and the author's need to organize his writing around the expression of a work's central theme. Even in such a short notice, Poe's aesthetics emerge as remarkably consistent.

Of course, the novelty of Poe's insights can be difficult to grasp. Indeed, expecting such authorial single-mindedness in terms of artistic design and execution has become so intrinsic to our aesthetic appreciation of literature that the idea almost goes without saying.⁴ Indeed, readers and scholars can now find it somewhat challenging to appreciate fully Poe's own remarkable originality in identifying and championing such artistic principles while articulating his theories regarding the supreme value of orienting a literary work's construction toward the authorial intention of a "single effect." However, acknowledging Poe's insight remains important even if, and perhaps especially if it seems that Poe merely states the obvious. Without such an

⁴ As Alexander Jessup writes in the introduction to his 1923 collection of *Representative American Short Stories*, Poe's "formula on the short story ... is one of those perfectly obvious facts that has always been so plainly in sight for any one to point out (like the letter in the card-rack in Poe's own story, *The Purloined Letter*) that it seems to have escaped real attention, having been seen without any one giving it a thought" (Jessup xxvii). If this early 20th-century scholar perhaps slightly overstates the degree to which practice preceded theory, his point about Poe's insight remains a useful one.

acknowledgement that Poe remains among the first literary figures to articulate the principle in a sustained and coherent way, his pivotal position in the early development of the American short story remains unappreciated. Further, any literary study that fails to account for the landmark significance of Poe's aesthetic theories cannot help but remain deeply flawed in its historical conceptions of American literary development.

Poe's Full Review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*

In his second and more extended discussion of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in the May 1842 issue of *Graham's Magazine*, Poe mounts a more fully realized explication of his literary principles. As he had already suggested in his brief earlier notice, Poe primarily uses the opportunity of a review to expound upon his own theories while using Hawthorne's tales merely by way of illustrating the principles he discusses. Poe expresses no qualms about dismissing Hawthorne's essays from his discussion because "[t]he tale proper ... affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose" (571). The qualifier about "mere prose" at the conclusion of this claim takes on greater significance when one turns to an examination of Poe's later essay on "The Philosophy of Composition," which ostensibly describes his own poetic processes for writing "The Raven," for although he allows the value of fiction tales, Poe still maintains that "the highest genius could be most advantageously employed for the best display of its own powers ... in the composition of a rhymed poem, not to exceed in length what might be perused in an hour. Within this limit alone can the highest order of true poetry exist" (571). Interestingly, Poe still elevates poetry above prose despite his own personal shift away from writing poetry in favor of short prose forms. By the time he was writing this review in 1842, Poe had not published any poetry for nearly a

decade, since before turning his attention to writing stories for magazine contests in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Still, it warrants notice that even as he immerses himself in his career as an editor, book reviewer, and a writer of short prose tales, Poe maintains at least a philosophical preference for lyric poetry as the highest form of literary achievement. While he obviously finds himself shifting his own literary output to satisfy the demands of the literary marketplace, likely in an effort to earn a living, Poe's aesthetics tellingly do not bend to such economic exigencies. He maintains his poetic ideals. With the publication of "The Raven" three years later, he would finally reach this "highest order of true poetry" in his own work.

Even in this brief introduction to his review, Poe touches on the central premises of his aesthetics. In particular, three initial assertions here deserve to be teased out in some detail. First, in both the case of prose compositions and rhymed poetry, Poe implicitly yet forcefully asserts that the primary aim of literary art is to exercise one's talent or to employ one's genius and to be recognized as doing so in a display of one's powers. Somewhat at variance with Wordsworth's predominating image of writing that spills forth in a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," Poe instead sees writing as "the exercise of the loftiest talent" and "how the highest genius could be most advantageously employed for the best display of its own powers." While both writers seem to rely on the notion of some innate "talent" or "genius" as the source of creative powers, in Wordsworth's figuration writing seems to flow from its source unbidden. By contrast, for Poe writing is a conscious decision that requires effort. It is the "exercise" with which "genius" should be "employed."

Poe's conception of writing as the result of artistic labor leads logically to the second implicit assertion he makes here — writing must be understood as directed toward a reader. From the beginning Poe incorporates his awareness of the reader as the one who will experience

and judge the written work. If the genius of the author is the source from which writing springs, then the reader must be understood as the writing's destination. Though he does not name the reader as such, clearly Poe means it is the reader who cannot be expected to maintain focus on a poem longer than "what might be perused in an hour." This recognition of the reader's essential role in the reception of an artistic work, a role that must be considered from the very inception of the work, suggests that for Poe writing stands as an essentially public act; the author writes in an effort to show something to the reader, and most specifically this thing the author wishes to show the reader is first and foremost his talent or genius.

Interestingly, by declaring the exercise of his talent as the primary goal of an author, prior even to any intention of specific textual meaning, Poe would seem to affirm precisely that distinction between the authorial intention to *do* and the authorial intention to *mean* that textual theorist Peter Shillingsburg posits in his landmark treatise *Scholarly Editing in the Computer Age* (1996). Almost echoing Poe's own insistence on unity, Shillingsburg writes, "An intention to record on paper, or in some other medium, a specific sequence of words and punctuation according to an acceptable or feasible grammar or relevant linguistic convention is specific and singular" (33). For Shillingsburg, the intention to *do* remains verifiable and "recoverable" in a way that any intention to *mean* is not. After this first type of verifiable intention, the editor and reader find themselves confronted with an endlessly perplexing polyphony of potential meanings because, as Shillingsburg says, "[I]n composition, intentions are multiple, and 'intentions to mean' are irrecoverable" (35). Although Poe does not go so far when writing overtly about aesthetics, he clearly begins to discover this important distinction because his poetry and his tales repeatedly explore the themes of loss of authorial control and the uncertainty and even the irrecoverability of textual meaning. Making a similar distinction about shades of textual

meaning in his *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), an very influential work in textual criticism, E. D. Hirsh equates “meaning” with an idealized and unchanging original authorial intention and denotes as “significance” those readerly interpretations that change from reader to reader and according to context. As such, Hirsh views “meaning” as both unchanging and text-bound, an assertion which leads to the obvious problem that new versions of texts would produce new and perhaps non-authorial “meanings.” Shillingsburg’s distinction then remains more useful as we scrutinize Poe’s formulations of authorial intention. As Poe further elaborates these ideas later in the same passage from his review of Hawthorne’s tales, he begins gradually to introduce the possibility that an author will have some other ideas about what he wishes to communicate with his reader (an intention to *mean*), but clearly the display of the author’s genius (the intention to *do*) comes first when considering the purpose of a tale or poem as an instance of public speech.⁵

The third assumption made by Poe in this passage is contained in his claim that only within the limits of a one-hour perusal “can the highest order of true poetry exist.” One the one hand Poe can simply be read as arguing that the best poetry is shorter rather than longer, in the manner of sonnets, odes, and ballads instead of epics; however, in this construction, Poe can also be understood as delivering responsibility to the reader not only for an evaluative judgment of the artistic work but for the actual ontological status of the work itself. Always a meticulous prose stylist, Poe here seems to be implicitly suggesting that the highest order of true poetry does not even exist outside the boundaries of a reader’s one-hour perusal. The work itself comes into being to attain such artistic heights only when it is read. Interestingly, Poe may here be giving

⁵ The unpopularity of 19th-century American poetry with 20th-century readers is well known; however, one might note that with the advent of Modernism not only was there a move away from rhyme and meter (except to emphasize awkwardness, discordance, or affection), but there was also a corresponding shift away from the earlier understanding of poetry as essentially private and personal speech to viewing rather as primarily public speech. Once again, we find that Poe effectively anticipates modernism and postmodernism.

more textual authority to the reader than he intends, for in his tales, essays and poems, Poe as an author generally evinces a deep jealousy of authorial control over textual meaning, voicing his deep suspicions of any attempts at readerly or editorial usurpation of authorial power, even while his tales and poems enact again and again the horrors of alienation from authority.

Finally, Poe here makes his most concise — and his most often cited — argument for the organization of a literary composition around a single unifying intention with a narrowly desired result on the reader. He writes that “in almost all classes of composition, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance.” (571). While the author emphatically remains the subject here, the clear object upon whom this “effect or impression” must be made is the reader. Poe further emphasizes the significance of orienting the work toward an idealized reader’s response by reiterating the need for a short allotment of time for experiencing the work in its entirety. He states, “It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting” (571). While Poe remains silent about the presumably open-ended time requirements for the composition of a piece, he places close constraints on the expectations an author should have about a reader’s attention span. Poe demonstrates great elegance in this construction as he posits an author who organizes his work towards facilitating the single effect or impression on an ideal reader, and this ideal reader in turn orients his reading around an idealized understanding of authorial intention. Indeed, although recent textual theorists have tended to problematize such text-based communicative transactions, the general relationship between author and reader that Poe outlines here remains essentially true to the basic ways in which we still understand texts to convey meaning.

Leaving off his discussion of poetry, Poe turns his attention to what he terms the next highest class of composition “as Mr. Hawthorne has ... exemplified it” (572), namely the short

story, a form to which Poe then applies these same aesthetic and theoretical principles. By definition of a tale, Poe clarifies that he means a “short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal” (572). As before, Poe narrowly defines the effective length of a work according to the typical limits of a reader’s focused attention:

The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality*. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses in perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. (572, Poe’s emphasis)

While recognizing that readers will return repeatedly to longer works such as novels, Poe ultimately views the unavoidable interruptions in a reading of longer works as undermining their ability to have a sum effect in their entirety. By thus compromising the “true unity” of the reading experience such breaks cannot help but make them less powerfully effective and therefore inferior to shorter stories and poems.

Such a view toward artistic unity does much to explain Poe’s lifelong preference for shorter fiction and the relative weakness of his attempts at longer pieces. For example, his only real attempt at a full novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837-38) has generally been acknowledged by critics as containing some passages of Poe’s strongest prose which demonstrate characteristic moments of his dark brilliance but when taken as a whole the work fails utterly to cohere as a novel. While we might tend to attribute this failure to Poe’s greater facility for the short story, the author himself would argue instead that the novel itself as a form of expression remains incapable of that “unity of effect” which for which he strove and which readers have become accustomed to finding in his tales and poems.

Poe elaborates his theories here by emphasizing the way in which a shorter work not only

allows the author greater control but helps to safe-guard against the reader's being interrupted from reading. He explains, "In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences—resulting from weariness or interruption" (572). Clearly, the complete elimination of outside influences on a reader's experience of a work remains an impossibility. Even if immediate disruptions to the reading process could be avoided, Poe remains in error with his conviction of such an "ideal reader."

Any reader brings to his or her reading of a given text myriad and unpredictable "external or extrinsic influences," influences that do much to orient any individual reading of the text, impact the experience of the work, and weave themselves seamlessly into any derived meanings. Indeed, Shillingsburg has correctly observed that even the most guarded of authors must ultimately rely upon the context a reader brings to the text since words themselves have no meaning without referents. Expanding on Shillingsburg's thoughts, one might also recognize that in opposition to the strict temporal parameters Poe attempts to construct around the reading experience, an author has no actual way of dictating the time — nor the space — in which a text is experienced.

Although he does not directly acknowledge the far reaching nuances of this central problem in his review of Hawthorne's tales, in his poems and tales Poe provides numerous illustrative examples that work through these and other theoretical concerns. Most notably, Poe does this in "The Raven" where the entire poem centers on the speaker's dramatized instances of reading, re-reading, and mis-reading. As an added, perhaps unconscious irony, the central actions of the poem are said to occur as the speaker distractedly pores over "many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore" and then is interrupted from his own reading by tapping at his

chamber door. While in the expository passage cited above Poe emphasizes that while the reader remains actively engaged with a text “the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control;” however, as dramatized in “The Raven,” the speaker’s mind, what Poe calls the “soul of the reader,” is clearly not “at the writer’s control” when it comes to the authors of the volumes he idly peruses in his chamber. This apparent disjunction between Poe’s poetic theories and his own dramatized versions of reading will be further explored in the examination of his individual works. For now, it would be difficult to overstate the significance of Poe’s powerful assertion of the need for absolute authorial mastery over the reader’s experience. As a writer, Poe posits the author as absolutely dictating not only textual meaning but using his words to wield extraordinary authority over the very being, the “soul” of the captive reader. Such an assertion merits further exploration in terms of the author-reader struggles made explicit in the work of post-structuralists such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault as well as in the hermeneutics of authorship explored by textual theorists G. Thomas Tanselle, James McLaverty, and Alexander Nehamas. Indeed, beyond his explicit expression of these aesthetic theories in his reviews and essays, Poe can be seen to survey throughout his tales many of the very same textual theoretical nuances one finds in the contemporary thought of these theorists and scholars.

In addition to anticipating the theoretical work of more than a few post-structuralists his Hawthorne review, Poe also lays out the central premise of all subsequent detective and mystery fiction by presenting the details of his model for the planning and composition of well-wrought tales. Although Poe himself had presumably already employed precisely this method when writing his seminal “Murders in the Rue Morgue” the previous year, this essay presents the idea in a much more straightforward manner. Further, as Dennis Porter explains in his “Backward Construction and the Art of Suspense,” this strategy of conceiving a story in reverse would later

become a particularly useful method not only for mystery writers such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers during Golden Era of detective fiction in the early years of the twentieth century but also for apparent innovators in the tradition of hard-boiled detective novels such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Poe articulates this conception at some length,

A skilful [sic] literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (572, Poe's emphasis)

For Poe as an aesthetic theorist, writing cannot be viewed as a flowing process of boundless imagination and self-discovery but more as a systematic, one is tempted to say mechanical, development of the particular pieces most calculated to achieve a known end result. Deliberately chosen results and exhaustively planned ideas need to precede composition. In this view, the writer functions as type of engineer following a well-sketched blueprint to create the required object to accomplish a pre-conceived function. Of all Poe's short prose pieces, it is his genre-defining detective stories, pieces which he himself termed tales of "ratiocination," that most clearly embody and illustrate his ideas about the utility of "backward construction." Drawing on the narratological theories of Russian formalists, Porter explains how this narrative method drives the mystery stories: "The detective encounters effects without apparent causes, events in a jumbled chronological order, significant clues hidden among the insignificant. And his role is to reestablish order and causality" (329). Indeed, this is precisely the narrative movement found in Poe's genre-founding stories and in nearly all the work of subsequent crime and mystery

writers whose “work of prose narrative [is] founded on the effort to close a logico-temporal gap” (Porter, 329). Poe’s explanation and examples of “backward construction” prove especially salient for later writers of mystery fiction, most notably Arthur Conan Doyle, whose own Sherlock Holmes tales owe even more than merely their mode of composition to Poe’s foundational work.

Both in espousing such backward construction and in his exploration of the idealized aims of a literary composition, Poe consistently supports the notion of Art for Art’s Sake. As he considers the aptness of the prose tale for communicating those twin artistic aims espoused by the Romantic poets, the expression of some transcendent and idealized manifestation of Beauty or Truth, he suggests that prose writers attempting to convey ideas of Beauty work at a disadvantage to poets since the musicality of poetry better lends itself to this goal. Still, Poe allows that “Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale.” Poe makes an important break from convention here when he insists that the expressions of Truth in prose tales can take on some unexpected and non-traditional forms. He explains,

Beauty can be better treated in the poem. Not so with terror, or passion, or horror, or a multitude of such other points. And here it will be seen how full of prejudice are the usual animadversions against those *tales of effect* many fine examples of which were found in the earlier numbers of Blackwood. The impressions produced were wrought in a legitimate sphere of action, and constituted a legitimate although sometimes an exaggerated interest. They were relished by every man of genius: although there were found many men of genius who condemned them without just ground. The true critic will but demand that the design intended be accomplished, to the fullest extent, by the means most advantageously applicable. (573, Poe’s punctuation and emphasis)

As other critics have frequently noted of this passage, Poe’s position here begins to suggest his later reiterated and more emphatic endorsement of autotelic art by allowing authorial intention to “be ... what it may” and concern representations of terror, passion, and horror, subjects which

had traditionally remained the province of low or popular fiction such as that published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* which often featured ghost stories and lurid tales of terror. A few years earlier, Poe himself had poked fun at the often outlandish generic conventions of this enormously popular Scottish publication in his own piece "How to Write a Blackwood's Article," published in the *Broadway Journal* (November 1838). Narrated in an amusingly empty-headed prattle by Signora Psyche Zenobia who assures the reader that she has been "assured that the finest writing, upon every subject, is to be discovered in the pages of that justly celebrated Magazine" (279), the essay/tale presents Mr. Blackwood himself describing the rules for composition of the magazine's sensationalist tales: "In the first place, your writer of intensities must have very black ink, and a very big pen, with a very blunt nib. And ... mark me!—*that pen—must—never be mended!*" (280, Poe's emphasis). The humor here derives not only from suggesting that the implements of writing are paramount to the content of prose produced but also in the metaphorical commentary these physical requirements offer on that content — namely, that it is uniformly and unremittingly dark, broadly drawn, lacking in any fineness or subtlety, and that the writing is neither revised nor edited. As he continues to lampoon the magazine by ventriloquizing its publisher, Poe singles out a few noteworthy *Blackwood's* pieces for derision, including Thomas de Quincey's "Confessions of an Opium-eater" which he describes as containing "plenty of fire and fury, and a good spicing of the decidedly unintelligible" (281). Interestingly, the main thrust of Poe's attack seems to be against the magazine's sensationalism itself. He has his parody of the publisher spout, "Sensations are the great things after all. Should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations—they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet" (281). Interestingly, despite his earlier disparagement of such sensationalist fiction, Poe continues to work in very much this same vein,

writing essentially these same types of tales while developing his own innovations in form and style and finding revelatory new psychological insights in stories that might otherwise be dismissed as merely trashy popular fiction.

But in his review of Hawthorne's collection, Poe seems less concerned with distancing himself from the taint of such popular sensationalist fiction. Indeed, it may be for this very reason that he seizes upon the opportunity to fire an open broadside at the nationalist literary movement with the following judgment:

We had supposed, with good reason for so supposing, that [Hawthorne] had been thrust into his present position by one of the impudent *cliques* which beset our literature, and whose pretensions it is our full purpose to expose at the earliest opportunity; but we have been most agreeably mistaken. We know of few compositions which the critic can more honestly commend than [sic] these "Twice-Told Tales." As Americans, we feel proud of the book.

(574, Poe's punctuation).

Again, Poe takes extreme pains to set himself at odds with the cause of literary nationalism, dismissing such groups as "impudent *cliques*." Of course such circles are particularly irksome when one feels excluded by them, but the underlying streak of Poe's frustration here remains valid. He remarks that he had initially been put off by Hawthorne's favorable notices precisely because of the esteem in which he was held by the nationalists. More than anything he might directly say against the movement, this initial hesitancy toward Hawthorne on Poe's part dramatically underscores the problem of such "puffery" which can undermine its own interests by inadvertently obscuring the real merits of writers like Hawthorne by too enthusiastically championing less accomplished writers based solely on political interests. Whatever personal resentments Poe may harbor, his criticism of the nationalists' practices remains valid.

In contrast to his initial negative prejudice toward Hawthorne, Poe waxes effusive in his

praise of the author's positive qualities. Poe writes,

Mr. Hawthorne's distinctive trait is invention, creation, imagination, originality—a trait which, in the literature of fiction, is positively worth all the rest. But the nature of originality, so far as regards its manifestation in letters, is but imperfectly understood. The inventive or original mind as frequently displays itself in novelty of *tone* as in novelty of matter. Mr. Hawthorne is original at *all* points. (574, Poe's emphasis)

Not only is the justice of Poe's literary judgment further enhanced by his willingness to praise Hawthorne in spite of his association with the literary nationalists, but here again the consistency of Poe's aesthetic principles manifests itself. While Poe apparently views the terms he strings together here as synonymous — “invention, creation, imagination, originality” — he also considers them as representing the single most important trait that can be possessed by a writer of prose fiction. Such estimation on Poe's part comes as no surprise since these collective attributes all correspond closely with his attitude of autotelic appreciation for literature, the way in which a work of art must be judged entirely on its own terms. In a view where art exists solely for its own sake, then “originality” along with such similar traits must logically stand forth as the most powerful attribute an artist can possess.

Not surprisingly, as Poe devotes most of the remainder of his review of Hawthorne's collection to brief comments upon individual tales, he tends to call out for particular notice those stories which evince “originality” and which demonstrate strong authorial control around a unified effect. For example, Poe praises “The Wedding Knell” as “full of the boldest imagination—an imagination fully controlled by taste” (574). While Poe admires “The Minister's Black Veil” as a “masterly composition,” he worries that the “*obvious* meaning of this article will be found to smother its insinuated one” because the “*moral* put into the mouth of the dying minister will be supposed to convey the *true* import of the narrative” instead of leading readers to the suggestion of “a crime of dark dye ... which only minds congenial with that of the

author will perceive” (574-5, Poe’s emphasis). Here again, Poe demonstrates his focus on the author’s meticulous control of the text that must always lead the reader toward a clear apprehension of the work’s single effect.

Perhaps it is unavoidable that a critic so concerned with “originality” should demonstrate such a keen eye for alleged plagiarisms; however, Poe rounds out his consideration of Hawthorne’s individual tales with the unfortunate insinuation that Hawthorne in “Howe’s Masquerade” borrows too directly from Poe’s own “William Wilson.” More than a little ironically, both tales in question address the theme of uncanny doubling, but that similarity is not the source of Poe’s primary concern. Rather, he objects to the coincidence that they both employ what Poe terms “the figure in the cloak [as] the phantom or reduplication” of the story’s protagonist (576). Poe reproduces a brief passage from each of the tales before enumerating what he sees as their excessive similarities:

Here it will be observed that, not only are the two general conceptions identical, but there are various *points* of similarity. In each case the figure seen is the wraith or duplication of the beholder. In each case the scene is a masquerade. In each case the figure is cloaked. In each, there is a quarrel—that is to say, angry words pass between the parties. In each the beholder is enraged. In each the cloak and sword fall upon the floor. The “villain, unmuffle yourself” of Mr. H is precisely paralleled by a passage at page 56 of “William Wilson.”

(576-7, Poe’s emphasis)

While the points of comparison are striking, and would doubtless appear even more significant to the author of one of the tales, what seems more likely than plagiarism is the very similar manner in which the figure of an uncanny double lends itself to portrayal in a gothic tale of this era. Cloaks were not only common outwear in the era but they also serve the narrative function of dramatically and thoroughly concealing the figure wearing them. Masquerades were festive

events where individual identities were purposely masked as part of the event's social play. Intense conflict and harsh words would seem to be one of the hallmark psychological reactions to being confronted with one's double. Indeed, all of the apparent similarities between the tales are more easily explainable than they are remarkable. For his part Poe admits as much even as he introduces the topic, writing that in comparing these two stories he "observe[s] something which resembles a plagiarism—but which *may be* a very flattering coincidence of thought" (575, Poe's emphasis). Of course, Poe deliberately leaves unstated precisely to whom he believes the coincidence to be flattering, which begins to suggest that he may have a more than passing concern with pointing out how these stories resemble each other.

Arriving at the concluding paragraph of his review, Poe drops these imputations of plagiarism abruptly, returning instead to his effusive praise of Hawthorne's artistry. In a doubling that is as uncanny as that in "William Wilson" and "Howe's Masquerade," Poe sounds as if he could be describing himself as he enumerates what he sees as the other writer's strengths and weaknesses:

In the way of objection we have scarcely a word to say of these tales. There is, perhaps, a somewhat too general or prevalent tone—a tone of melancholy and mysticism. The subjects are insufficiently varied. There is not so much of versatility evince as we might well be warranted in expecting from the high powers of Mr. Hawthorne. But beyond these trivial exceptions we have really none to make. The style is purity itself. Force abounds. High imagination gleams from every page. Mr. Hawthorne is a man of the truest genius.

(577, Poe's emphasis)

Flattery indeed, but this is a flattery that flatters both writers in equal parts. In Hawthorne, it seems, Poe recognizes himself. Poe's admiration of Hawthorne's work emerges directly from his perceiving that both of them are engaged in advancing the same goals for short prose fiction.

These goals in turn mirror Poe's own guiding aesthetic principles — close authorial control of works that demonstrate a unity of effect and that ultimately reflect an ideal art for art's sake.

While Irving and a number of the other darlings of early American literature, including Hawthorne (who remains Poe's putative subject in this review) had few qualms about writing sensationalist fiction while they sought to establish themselves, these writers tended to pointedly distance themselves from the taint of the "penny dreadfuls" once they had become more established. Ultimately, these authors were viewed by those with a nationalist interest as participating in the creation of "American Romance." By contrast, however, Poe more boldly aligns himself closely with these unsavory themes made popular in European fiction, especially the Gothic novels of Mrs. Radcliffe, Horace Walpole and Matthew Gregory Lewis as well as the sensationalist tales of German Romantics Johann Ludwig Tieck and E.T.A. Hoffman. Indeed, in his review of Hawthorne's "Twice-Told Tales" Poe can be seen vigorously defending gothic and unsavory subjects as belonging to that species of Truth worthy of legitimate literary art, even though Poe earlier felt compelled to defend himself against charges of Germanism in the preface to his collection of short stories entitled *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque* (1840), writing, "If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul, — that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results" (citation). In his own life and long after, Poe was to have a vexed and often combative relationship with American reviewers and scholars. Not only was he a notoriously harsh reviewer of his fellow American writers, but as we have seen in subsequent years Poe has not seemed to fit comfortably into narratives of national literary identity.

Poe's stance regarding "tales of effect" has most often been interpreted as aligning him with the 19th-century French credo of *l'art pour l'art*. Indeed, this position does seem to be most

consistent with Poe's overall aesthetic theories that favor a formalist approach over any overtly didactic use value for writing. Though such a position has often been viewed as amoral (frequently in the sense of immoral), in his later essay "The Poetic Principle," published posthumously in October 1850 issue of *Sartain's Union Magazine*, Poe attacks didacticism as an artistic "heresy" and valorizes the "poem written solely for the poem's sake" above all other works of man (75-6). Obviously, the politics of Poe's poetics in this regard have made him especially vulnerable, as a white, male antebellum Southerner, to narrowly moralistic and troublingly anachronistic critiques by John Carlos Rowe in his "Poe, Antebellum Slavery, and Modern Criticism" and elsewhere. Rowe remains a well-respected scholar and his criticism raises interesting issues. However, by focusing as it does on evaluative and ethical judgments aimed at calling into question Poe's canonicity for personal failings, Rowe's underlying hostility to Poe betrays an anxiety similar to Bloom's, one that participates in the same logic of repression. To construct an idealized, positivistic version of the American canon devoid of politically unsavory ideas and uncomfortable historical facts, Rowe must work to exclude Poe for many of the same reasons that Matthiessen and Bloom do. As we have seen, the uncanny repressed always returns.

Poe's "Philosophy of Composition"

Perhaps Poe's most frequently anthologized essay, "The Philosophy of Composition" stands forth as one of Poe's clearest elaborations of his full poetics. Certainly, it reiterates all the major principles discussed in the preceding examination, from the fixed focus on "unity of effect" and the underlying belief in autotelic art to the assertion of authorial intention as the force that controls a reader's experience of the text. However, the essay also introduces a number of

complex new problems that must be considered in any discussion of its relation to Poe's body of work.

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe expounds upon his literary theories while claiming to provide a step-by-step account of his exact processes for writing "The Raven." As a result, for many readers the compositional approach Poe describes has seemed implausibly calculated and overly mechanistic. The essay strains credibility in part because it explicitly rejects the Romantic notion of poetry springing forth in full glory from the well-springs of inspiration, but it also leaves readers wondering whether the whole piece might be merely one of Poe's hoaxes. Unfortunately, the essay can be seen to undermine Poe's clear exposition of his poetic theories because these ideas may be dismissed as yet another satirical aspect.

Another challenging issue raised by the essay derives from Poe's inclusion of a detailed, authoritative reading of "The Raven." As his description of compositional strategies moves into more interpretative territory, Poe once again conjures the specter of uncanny doubling. He becomes author turned ideal reader of his own poem. Of course the conventional goal of any reader's interpretation is generally understood as recovering authorial intention, but the author acting as the reader of his own work erases the very difference between these roles that makes interpretation possible. Authoritative readings are dangerous precisely because it remains so difficult to understand the author as just one more reader among many.

These issues and other related concerns warrant close analysis and careful consideration, work the fifth chapter will undertake more thoroughly; however, before considering "The Philosophy of Composition" in detail, one must first mount a reading of "The Raven" less influenced by Poe's own expository re-enforcement of authorial intention. Having in the present chapter established a firm literary historical foundation based on Poe's articulated poetic

principles, this project turns in the next chapter to developing an interpretation of Poe's most famous poem through a lens of psychoanalysis unclouded by the fog of ahistoricism.

Chapter 4:

Applied Poetics: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Poe's "The Raven"

Poe's iconic poem "The Raven" (1845) has recently been read in a variety of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic ways; however, reading the poem through the lens of Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian understanding of how language functions and why it fails to function in certain ways, I argue here that the poem provides rather a profoundly insightful exploration of the complex, and vexed, relationship between and among authors, readers, and the contested meanings of a text. Indeed, the problem of the reader's relationship to textual meaning constitutes a theme to which Poe returns time and again in his poetry and his fiction, perhaps not surprisingly since he addresses the topic so frequently in his reviews and philosophical essays. In some ways, Poe's writing is always about writing and reading practices. Decidedly one of the most self-consciously literary authors of his era, Poe in many regards seems to have anticipated (and perhaps inspired) post-modernist writing and grappled with some of the most challenging aspects of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic thought. Poe, for example, clearly recognized the ineluctable divide between the signifier and the signified, or in Lacanian terminology the specter-producing gap between the Symbolic of everyday reality and the failed symbolization of the Real, or what Žižek sometimes calls the "pre-ideological kernel." Though Poe, of course, never used such specialized, academic terminology as have come to favor in the early 21st century, Poe's central conceit of "The Raven" demonstrably relies on precisely this frisson of disquiet as the speaker shifts his questions in relation to the bird's unchanging reply in order to indulge what Poe in his essay on the poem calls a "species of despair which delights in self-torture" (19). As such, the first-person narrative presented in "The Raven" serves as a narrative exploration of the

textual limits of authorial intention and the dangers (approaching the madness of hysteria) that lie in unfettered readerly interpretations that infer textual meaning in uncontrolled and unauthorized ways. Hinging as it does on the inherent limits of language, this dramatized madness becomes something of a casebook study to demonstrate several key psychoanalytic insights offered by Freud, Lacan and Žižek.

Indeed, as I will argue in this chapter, Poe employs the figure of the raven, with its implacably empty signifier “Nevermore,” as a physical manifestation of the unavoidable intrusion of the actual mortal exigencies of life and death into the symbolic order, the interruption that Lacan views as the inevitable disturbance of the Real. However, while the raven’s repeated refrain reveals the limitations of language by demonstrating the inevitable gap between intended meaning and inferred meaning, this intruder into the speaker’s chamber also ensures the endless reiteration of the speaker’s perverse pleasure in the thwarting of his desire for reunion with his lost love. Žižek cogently elaborates precisely this psychoanalytic concept in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*:

As Lacan points out again and again, the very notion of life is alien to the symbolic order. And the name of this life substance that proves a traumatic shock for the symbolic universe is of course *enjoyment*. The ultimate variation on the theme of a letter that always arrives at its destination reads therefore: “you can never get rid of the stain of enjoyment”—the very gesture of renouncing such enjoyment inevitably produces a surplus enjoyment that Lacan writes down as the “object small a.” (26, Žižek’s emphasis)

Following the lead of Lacan and Žižek, one can readily observe how Poe’s stated “single effect” for the poem, “making [the Raven] emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*” (25, Poe’s emphasis), hinges on Poe’s complex portrayal of not only the sadness of the poem’s speaker but also his “human thirst for self-torture” (24). This linguistic and psychoanalytic dynamic resonates throughout the entire tableau of the poem, but it reaches

its climactic apotheosis in what Poe described as “the first metaphorical expression in the poem” (25), the exchange that ends his penultimate stanza of “The Raven”:

“Take thy beak from out *my heart*, and take thy form from off my door!”

Quoth the Raven “Nevermore!”

The Publication History and Textual Status of “The Raven”

First published anonymously in the January 29, 1845, issue of the New York *Evening Mirror*, “The Raven” appeared the next month in the both the *American Review* and the weekly *New-York Mirror* under Poe’s byline and was then quickly reprinted in a wide variety of publications over the next several months. Its sudden and prodigious cultural impact made it the 1840’s equivalent of a 20th-century hit single suddenly being played on all the radio stations. As such, “The Raven” enjoyed immediate popularity beyond anything Poe had previously written and brought within his grasp the poetic recognition he had long sought in vain. After its rapid republication in such a wide variety of periodicals throughout the country, this lyric poem served as the signal work in *The Raven and Other Poems*, Poe’s collection of poetry published later that same year under the aegis of Evert Duyckinck and the Young Americans’ publishing venture, the Library of American Books.

Poe continued to tinker with the poem throughout its fevered circulation during that year, both correcting unwanted changes introduced by editors and typesetters as well as making a number of his own improvements such as choosing to capitalize the word “Raven” throughout the poem. With the publication of his 1845 collection, Poe himself hoped to eliminate non-authorial variants. Indeed, in his introduction to this volume he writes, “These trifles are collected and republished chiefly with a view to their redemption from the many improvements

to which they have been subjected while going ‘the rounds of the press.’ I am naturally anxious that if what I have written is to circulate at all, it should circulate as I wrote it” (Riverside 452). His nods toward self-deprecation aside, Poe clearly wishes to reign in the textual instability resulting from his poems’ broad circulation and to (re)assert authorial control over the collected poems in this volume.

However, like many other authors, Poe continued to tinker with his work even after this apparently fully authorized publication. Having collated all the legitimate variant texts, including the single extant complete manuscript (authenticated in the face of several forgeries), Mabbott prefers to follow the text from the September 25, 1849, issue of the Richmond *Semi-Weekly Examiner* since this represents the final authorized version published during Poe’s own life and a printing over which Poe seems to have had personal oversight. While editorial justifications can obviously be offered in support of a wide variety of textual choices, I agree with Mabbott’s choice here to follow a single text and for that reason have decided to cite primarily from his edition in my study of Poe’s work.

The Speaker of “The Raven” as a Failed Reader

Beginning as it does with the words “once upon a midnight dreary,” Poe’s most famous poem immediately invokes the familiar opening of countless fairy tales that start with “once upon a time,” not to mention that infamously melodramatic first sentence of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s 1830 novel *Paul Clifford* — “it was a dark and stormy night”. Curiously, Poe uncharacteristically also reverses the more natural order of adjective and noun in the phrase “midnight dreary,” opting instead to give the words a more stiltedly poetic turn. This slightly

stilted phrasing is unusual for him since he usually eschews such overtly affected devices. But by thus subtly heightening the self-conscious poeticism while evoking the familiar opening to children's stories, this initial phrase clearly signals to the reader that he is entering an imaginative work, one perhaps set in the realm of faerie or at least one that should not be taken as entirely literal, perhaps presenting instead something of an allegory or parable. Given Poe's frequently repeated scorn for what he termed the "heresy of didacticism," one can hardly expect him to offer a straightforward narrative with an easily recognizable moral; however, the opening line clearly suggest that one should be receptive to a deeper message and this approach is not entirely inconsistent with Poe's stated design elsewhere. While he strenuously objects to writing for overtly moralistic ends, he clearly favors organizing creative works so that they achieve "unity of effect" which can include the demonstration of a particular philosophical principle or the exploration of a particularly vexing conundrum. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," for example, begins with a long explication of deductive methods, or what Poe terms "ratiocination," and at the conclusion of this more expository section as he launches into the story per se, Poe announces to his reader that he intends the narrative that follows as an illustration of the principles just discussed. Therefore, viewing the poem's speaker as a model (though far from ideal) reader remains in fact perfectly consistent with Poe's frequently reiterated poetic goals.

The speaker of "The Raven" is a casual reader and sometime peruser of old books, if not the student most often referred to by literary critics.⁶ This persona first makes his presence known in the second half of the poem's first line: "while I pondered, weak and weary" (364). Notably, Poe here carefully postpones revelation of the opening sentence's core independent

⁶ Scholars are following Poe's lead by calling the persona a "student" since the author himself uses this term in "The Philosophy of Composition." However, as we shall see, blithely accepting authorial interpretations remains a vexed proposition.

clause upon which these introductory dependent clauses syntactically rely; the conjoined subject and predicate of the poem's first complete sentence do not emerge until the third line with the forceful phrase "suddenly there came a tapping" (364). Not only does this grammatical delay allow Poe to set the scene before the surprising arrival of the poem's title figure, but it also allows the ominous bird's initial intrusion into the speaker's awareness to be marked by an enigmatic auditory signal, his "tapping." The speaker hears and attempts to interpret this apparently insistent token of the raven's arrival long before he sees the bird. In fact, while thinking that this tapping comes from a human visitor, the speaker answers the door, responding to what he believes to be a request for entry by opening the wrong passage into the room. Thus from the very opening lines, the poem's speaker clearly demonstrates his interpretive failings.

As noted above, in the first line of the poem the narrator introduces himself in a subordinate phrase; however, one should also note that this first introduction of the speaker also places his first-person pronoun "I" on a syllable that must remain unaccented to keep the steady rhythm of the verses' troches. Because in metrical poetry the word "I" can serve as either an accented or unaccented syllable as needed, Poe's deliberate placement here further downplays this first-person speaker's significance as an individual, allowing him instead to stand as an everyman with whom the reader will be encouraged to identify. By combining these largely subconscious but still powerful effects of grammatical subordination and lack of rhythmic emphasis, Poe strategically enhances this speaker's role as a model *reader* and one from whom the poem's external reader is expected to infer some illustrative principle. Not coincidentally, Poe's speaker also describes himself as "weak" and "weary," underscoring not only his lack of drive but also hinting at his serious failings as a reader.

Significantly, the verb accompanying the speaker's initial self-identifying pronoun

dramatizes his thoughtfulness while limiting his attentiveness and acumen as a reader of texts. He does not “read” or “study” a single text but rather states that he “pondered ... [o]ver many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore” (364). To ponder over a volume remains suggestive of analytical reading and yet it is not precisely that same activity and in fact it may imply less careful analysis, a suggestion reinforced by the speaker’s later claims that he had been “napping” rather than reading. Further, when considering Poe’s use of the adjectives “quaint” and “curious” to describe these perused volumes of “forgotten lore,” one needs to recall that in the early nineteenth century the word “quaint” had not fully taken on its later connotations of the pleasingly old-fashioned but most often meant merely “marked by skillful design,” as in Herman Melville’s use of the term two years later in a passage from chapter XXI of *Omoo* (1847) where the mate is described as having an “arm embossed with pugilistic bruises, and quaint with many a device in India ink.” Further, given Poe’s propensity for linguistic archaisms, he likely intends “curious” in its older sense of “precisely accurate” or “carefully made” than in its later meaning of “exciting attention as strange or novel.” Combining these two terms suggests texts contained in these volumes that would have been meticulously crafted by their authors, consistent with Poe’s own poetics. This view is also supported by the term “lore” which in its archaic sense would have indicated not only knowledge gained through experience but also would have suggested specific lessons. The adjective “forgotten” used in conjunction with “lore” initially would seem to imply that the knowledge is ancient and long-neglected; however, combining the particular understanding of “lore” as relating to lessons with a more literal and immediate interpretation of the word “forgotten” begins to indicate that perhaps the poem’s speaker, as a less-than-ideal reader has failed to heed the lesson of these carefully crafted texts. That is to say, this “weak and weary” reader who “ponder[s] ... [o]ver” these volumes rather than scrupulously

and attentively interpreting them serves as an illustrative example of the antithesis of Poe's ideal reader whose very soul would be at the command of the author during a text's hour of perusal. As such, the parable of this protagonist's poor reading habits continues with his drifting into sleep and then being interrupted by the mundane intrusion of "some one gently rapping ... at [his] chamber door" (364).

As an interesting footnote to Poe's portrayal of the nodding reader whose consciousness drifts elsewhere, this particular trope appears frequently throughout English literature. For example, Poe would certainly have been aware of this as Coleridge's supposed inspiration for "Kubla Khan." However, more significantly the motif is employed often in medieval poetry to set up allegorical dream visions. Geoffrey Chaucer's "House of Fame" represents a prime example of this trope with its humorous opening. Similarly, Chaucer's "Parliament of Fowls" also foregrounds the poet's exploration of the act of reading. While Poe was no medievalist, we do know that he was widely read and a scrupulous student of poetic forms.⁷ While admittedly somewhat tenuous, Poe's connection to this poetic tradition gains significance because scholars of medieval poetry have long suggested that one of the principle advantages Chaucer and his contemporaries found in this device lay in its opportunity for self-consciously exploring the possibilities and limits of poetry as a medium, which emerges as remarkably similar to what Poe accomplishes by using the trope in "The Raven."

Yet the important foundation laid by this opening stanza is not limited to its earlier analogues in explorations of poetic practice, for it carries deeper implications regarding the limits

⁷ During his career as a magazinist, Poe reviewed a number of poetry collections that included selections from Chaucer, such as S.C. Hall's *Book of Gems: The Poets and Artists of Great Britain* which Poe reviewed for the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836. Tellingly, Poe also makes particular mention of Richard Horne's "Chaucer Modernized" in his 1848 essay "The Rationale of Verse." Clearly, Poe would have possessed at least a passing familiarity with Chaucer and arguably would have known the work of other medieval poets.

of language itself. The poem also begins to play out intimations of a Lacanian understanding of language as this first stanza ends with the speaker acknowledging that he gives voice to his thoughts even in the solitude of his private chamber. After hearing the mysterious rapping at his door, he reports his vocalized words in direct address, “‘Tis some visitor,’ I muttered, ‘tapping at my chamber door — / Only this and nothing more’” (365). Because the first-person narrator of this poem is already communicating directly, as it were, with us as the extra-textual readers of the poem, this quotation might at first appear redundant. The speaker’s apparent visitor has not yet come into the room to hear these words, and in any case they don’t seem to be addressed to the visitor since they refer to this unknown person in the third person rather than the second. So, this “muttered” sentence printed in quotation marks is clearly intended to demonstrate that the speaker here is deliberately speaking aloud, as if to himself. But why? Talking to oneself in this way represents a symbolic communication with the Lacanian big Other, which Žižek has explained as “an uncanny subject who is not simply another human being, but the Third, the subject who stands above the interaction of real human individuals — and the terrifying enigma is, of course, what does this impenetrable subject want from us...?” (41). While the opening stanza of the poem seemingly begins innocently enough, Poe’s preliminary gambit has already been made.

The second stanza of “The Raven” reiterates the speaker’s questionable status as a reliable reader. In its reprisal of the setting for this eponymous bird’s arrival, this stanza delays overt mention of reading as it shows that the speaker had been gazing meditatively into the fire instead of his books. While he has yet to describe his reading materials with any specificity, he observes the way “each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor” (365). Meanwhile he wishes for the night to pass as he recounts that he “vainly ... sought to borrow /

From my books surcease of sorrow” (365). Not only is the poem’s speaker clearly an inattentive and unfocused reader, but he uses his books merely as an escapist pastime, an already somewhat dubious activity but one that at least remains essentially consistent with the notion of effective authorial control of textual meaning. However, the unsuccessful result of even this merely escapist reading is made plain by the speaker’s subsequent inability to describe the texts from which he had been hoping to find “surcease of sorrow” as he reverts rather to an extended explanation of the emotional distress he had aimed to supplant through his immersion in the activity of reading.

The Limits of Language & the Function of Desire

In some ways even more psychologically profound than the speaker’s obviously vexed relationship to the activity of reading is the claimed source of his sorrow. In reading (badly) he claims to seek an escape from his “sorrow for the lost Lenore — / For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore — / Nameless *here* for evermore” (365, Poe’s emphasis). Several remarkable aspects of this brief explanation for his emotional state deserve special attention here. Firstly, although the implication remains clear that the speaker loved this woman very deeply, he in fact never expresses his love or his passion in those terms. Whatever other emotions he feels or felt toward her are left entirely to readerly inference from his avowed “sorrow.” Secondly, her death is addressed only euphemistically by applying to her the adjective “lost” and suggesting that the “angels” are acquainted with her, as one might expect angels would be with a deceased person who has gone to heaven. Of course, none of these details are explicitly stated in the poem, but the plain implications regarding the speaker’s emotions cannot be avoided — namely that he loved this woman deeply and that she is now dead. Still, the

speaker's striking indirectness here communicates almost more effectively. Yes, he describes her as a "rare and radiant maiden," but the character of Lenore remains as indistinct and elusive to the reader as does the precise nature of the speaker's attachment to her. Further, no sooner has the speaker named his lost love than he effectively un-names her by suggesting that while the angels may call her by name, she has now become "[n]ameless *here* for evermore." This reversal of her naming not only enhances the ineffability of those qualities in her which must provoke his desire for her, but this act also gestures toward removing her as an object from the symbolic order. Of course, we now know that her name is Lenore, but the speaker reclaims or disavows that naming, essentially placing her name under erasure, for that which cannot be named effectively has no place in the symbolic order. Beyond merely expressing standard romantic platitudes about the indescribable wonderfulness of his love object, these few lines represent an implicit textual embodiment of not only Poe's understanding of the functions and limits of language itself, but his willingness as a literary craftsman to explore that liminal space and to exploit its potent psychological power to affect the reader's experience.

In addition to their evocative sounding of the limits of language, when read as a provocative statement of Poe's personal insights about the contradictory nature of human desire, these lines carry enormous weight in terms of a psychoanalytic understanding of the speaker's connections to his "lost Lenore." Clearly, Poe suggests that desire itself participates in a similarly vexing limitation to that which we experience with language; an ineluctable gap seems always to emerge between the one who desires and the object of that desire. Indeed, this gap remains so constant that one begins to recognize that rather than saying one desires something *despite* its being unobtainable, we might instead posit that one desires something *because* of its elusiveness. Further, because desire hinges on the idealization of an object, an idealization that

would be destroyed by realization of the desire, one finds that the precise cause for one's desire endlessly defies description. Lacan refers to this psychoanalytic principle of the ineffable cause of desire as *l'objet petit a* (or simply *l'objet a*). Žižek cogently explains the concept in his primer *How to Read Lacan* as “that mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable ‘something’ that makes an ordinary subject sublime” (66). Enlarging upon the principle, Žižek describes *l'objet a* as “an entity that has no substantial consistency, which in itself is ‘nothing but confusion’, and which acquires a definite shape only when looked at from a standpoint slanted by the subject's desires and fears — as such, as a mere ‘shadow of what it is not’. *Objet a* is the strange object that is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself in the field of objects, in the guise of a blotch that takes shape only when part of this field is anamorphically distorted by the subject's desire” (69). This formulation of *objet a* is directly associated with the Lacanian “lamella” or libido, a connection which begins to account for Poe's frequently vilified assertion that because “Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem” it follows that “the death ... of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” and that “the lips best suited for such a topic are those of the bereaved lover” (19). I would argue here that Poe's oft-quoted claim is only allegedly notorious (just like Lacan's own statement that “woman doesn't exist”) because it has been misread as a flatly misogynistic statement about gender roles while in fact Poe (like Lacan) remains less interested in dead women (or non-existent women) per se and instead fixes his focus on them as perfect objects of impossible desire.

For this reason, Poe emphasizes the importance of presenting the death of the woman from the subjective point of view of her bereaved lover, the perspective that effectively transmutes the almost tediously everyday reality of one person's mortality into a poetical construction capable of larger significance as it approaches what Poe terms Beauty, or “that

intense and pure elevation of *soul*—*not* of intellect, or of heart ... which is experienced in consequence of contemplating ‘the beautiful’” (16, Poe’s emphasis). Poe, then, recognizes the psychological truth that the death of the beloved other marks that other as a perfectly unattainable and therefore an ideal (and idealized) object of desire, a condition which sets the stage for an unfettered poetic exploration of pure desire. As Žižek explains this psychoanalytic insight in his *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (1992), “In the network of intersubjective relations, every one of us is identified with, pinned down to, a certain fantasy place in the other’s symbolic structure” (6). As opposed to the commonplace notion that fantasy figures are merely distorted visions of the real people upon whom they may seem to be based, Žižek argues that psychoanalysis holds that we “relate to these ‘people of flesh and blood’ only insofar as we are able to identify them with a certain place in our symbolic fantasy space, or, to put it in a more pathetic way, only insofar as they fill out a place preestablished in our dream” (6-7). Obviously, people violate our fantasy versions of them all the time, creating at least small ripples in the surface of our symbolic order, but Poe is too canny not to see and exploit the more serious problems latent in a dead object of desire. It’s fine and good to idealize her and to pine over her loss, but what if she comes back? While her death makes a convenient pretense for poetic mourning, clearly the real tragedy would be her return. Such a return, dramatized so frequently in Poe’s horror tales, represents a catastrophic rupture in our symbolic order. Yet, for Poe, hyper-conscious as he is of the inevitable slippage between a speech act’s intention and its received meaning, this devastating rupture in the symbolic order is always already immanent. This horrifying gap lies entombed in the structure of language itself and disturbing its grave cannot help but give rise to some dark embodiment of the void.

The third stanza of “The Raven” introduces even more serious consequences entailed in

the speaker's poor reading practices. While before he had shown himself as merely insufficiently attentive to the books before him, this stanza begins to demonstrate the speaker's tendency toward errant interpretations as it shows his seeking agency and intention in the movements of the chamber's drapery. As he elaborates on the furnishings of the chamber — furnishings which not surprisingly evoke Poe's characteristic arabesque setting — the speaker recounts that "the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain / Thrilled me — filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before" (365). In the poem's increasingly relentless conflation of reading and writing, the speaker here reads his own emotional state into the "sad, uncertain rustling" sounds of the draperies. These sounds are clearly devoid of an organizing authorial intention, yet the speaker compulsively interprets their authorless and therefore "uncertain" noises as commenting on his own emotional state, echoing and enhancing the pathetic fallacy inherent in the "midnight dreary" of the poem's very first line. Yet the speaker's awareness of his own interpretive tenuousness in ascribing meaning to such clearly authorless "rustling," a meaning he claims "[t]hrilled me," also prompts his recognition that the "fantastic terrors" he finds there come to him as effects that must "never [have been] felt before." Beneath the superficial hyperbole of this overly dramatic phrase resides a core truth in the sense that the interpretation of authorless and intentionless sounds cannot help but be unique to the reader of such quasi-texts. That is to say, a properly structured reading can never be truly unique because it follows the convention of searching out and locating authorially intended meanings; by contract, a reader truly experiencing effects that have never been felt before cannot by definition be reading correctly since at core reading entails the act of interpreting authorial intention.

While in the first half of this third stanza the speaker's misreadings remain subtly woven into his descriptions of his chamber, his tendency toward misinterpretation comes to the fore in

the latter half of this stanza and persists into the fourth as he begins to make a more dramatic response to his initially idle and drowsy awareness of the tapping he had noted at the close of the first stanza. Where before the speaker had merely stated, “’Tis some visiter ... tapping at my chamber door,” he now begins to interpret this sound more actively as he repeats twice more, “’Tis some visiter entreating entrance at my chamber door” (365). This shift, subtle as it may be in some ways, involves a significant move from the speaker’s mere awareness of the other’s presence in the first stanza to his subsequent inference that this other is “entreating entrance” or asking him for permission to enter this personal space dedicated to his private introspection. Yet having made this advance in his interpretation of the tapping, the speaker still does not consider what potentially far-reaching effects such an entrance will have on him. Instead he comments on this perceived request by deliberately downplaying its larger significance, concluding the third stanza with an apparent desire for self-reassurance, “This it is and nothing more” (365). As dramatized throughout the poem, at each step in his developing interpretation of the scene, situation and events this speaker seeks to limit his interpretive play to what he sees as clear denotations and “nothing more”; however, his persistent and escalating failures as a reader prevent him from effectively circumscribing meanings in this way. He cannot curtail the endlessly evolving connotative contexts in which he performs his own narrow definitions any more than a scrupulous author of a text can control the proliferation of potential meanings inherent in a vigorously intentional text. Language simply doesn’t work that way. We don’t own words; we share them.

Springing into action with the opening of the fourth stanza when his “soul grew stronger,” the speaker addresses his visitor directly: “‘Sir,’ said I, ‘or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore; / But the fact is I was napping ... / And so faintly you came tapping ... /

That I scarce was sure I heard you” (365). In his initial address to this visitor, whose gender he states here in significantly ambiguous terms, the somewhat disoriented speaker attempts to smooth this interruption of his reveries by constructing normative social interactions — the caller knocks to request entrance and the host rushes to answer while offering pro forma apologies for his slowness to respond.

Curiously, the relationship between host and visitor here could also be viewed as in some ways analogous to the relationship between author and reader with the chamber standing in as the text. In such a metaphorical understanding, the reader as visitor to the text always represents a guest intruding upon the private chamber of the author as host. Interestingly, the speaker and the raven double each other within the context of this poem just as author and reader must double each other within a text, an effect of doubling that we shall see Poe in fact redoubles in his detective stories.

Additionally, it is worth noting that in this third stanza the speaker not only finally confesses that earlier he had been asleep rather than reading but also implicitly admits his interpretive shortcomings by saying that he was not certain he had “heard” the visitor even though the insistent tapping sound has been a constant since the very first stanza of the poem. Indeed, at the close of this fourth stanza the speaker’s actions reveal that he has still not rightly “heard” the visitor’s tapping in the sense of correctly interpreting it, for he finds when he “opened wide the door; — / Darkness there and nothing more” (365). Quite literally, his interpretive move which seeks to discover the author of the rapping at his chamber door reveals instead the emptiness of a black void. Not surprisingly, finding this “darkness” does not illuminate the speaker about his mistaken interpretations. Instead, the speaker persists with his failed interpretive strategies.

“The Stillness Gave No Token”: The Uncanny Fetish

Already established in the earlier stanzas as an errant reader practiced at inferring meanings from scant or non-existent evidence, the speaker spends the fifth stanza gazing into the void he has discovered by opening his chamber door. Poe writes, “Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, / Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before” (365). Strangely here, the speaker’s act of “peering” outward at the open door, looking “[d]eep into that darkness” he sees there, reverses the direction of his gaze as he struggles to make sense of this void. That is to say, looking outward into “darkness” where nothing can be seen provokes him to engage in mental activities that are rather more inward looking: “wondering, fearing, [d]oubting, [and] dreaming.” Further, this last action of “dreaming” forces the reader’s mind to stumble over itself in a triple repetition of this same word, “dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.” Even as these unelaborated dreams ennoble him by being beyond what “mortal ever dared,” they unman him as he loses his facility with language. As if incapable of finding adequate synonyms for the word “dream,” the speaker numbly repeats it again and again, a repetition made particularly resonant with the droning alliteration of the phrasing, the echoing d’s and m’s throughout the line.

In the third lines of this particularly evocative stanza, the visual emptiness of the first line’s external darkness is echoed by a void of sound and an absence of movement as the speaker says, “But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token” (365). Within this context, the word “unbroken” used to describe “silence” presents a compelling variation on a litotes, that figure of speech where an affirmative state is expressed by the negative of its contrary. While perhaps not an entirely original turn of phrase, Poe’s use of this particular verbal construction

seems especially apt because it carries with it the implication that the “silence” exists as a full and complete thing in and of itself, even while silence clearly represents an absence of sound. Silence is the presence of auditory absence. That is to say silence is a thing that exists by being itself a form of nothingness. The subsequent adjective “unbroken” reminds the reader that the potential interruption or breaking of this silence would occur through the intrusion of some other, audible presence than that represented by the silence’s own presence-in-absence.

The second half of this line at first seems to merely reiterate the profundity of the silence and yet does so by again negating the potential of an external presence. The speaker says that “the stillness gave no token.” Already a somewhat odd formulation, this particular phrasing connects to Freud’s exploration of “tokens” in his 1927 essay on “Fetishism.” In this essay, Freud suggests that a fetish is essentially a form of penis substitute imagined by a boy who perceives in his mother’s lack of a penis a latent threat of his own potential castration. Because of this apparent lack, the male psyche initially perceives the female genitalia with fear and even horror. Although Freud believed that normal psychological development can subsequently transform the female genitals into an object of desire, sometimes the earlier trauma can only be overcome by the male psyche finding a fetishized substitute that stands in as what Freud calls a “permanent memorial” to the boy’s earlier experience of horror (154). Freud’s phrase here eerily echoes Poe’s own statement in “The Philosophy of Composition” regarding the poem’s “intention of making [the Raven] emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*” (25, Poe’s emphasis). Freud’s frequently reiterated emphasis on the idea of memorialization remains consistent not only in his exploration of the normal transformation away from the sense of loss or lack but also in his explanations of fetishization where he describes the fetish itself as becoming a “*token* of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it” (154,

emphasis added). In Lacan's revision of Freudian psychoanalysis, these concepts shift away from representations of physical bodies and connect more explicitly to the symbolic order constructed by language. As such the idea of the phallus becomes disentangled from sexualized representations of the penis and stands more clearly as any representation of authority within the symbolic order. In this view, the mother herself, in Freud's example, must be understood as a phallic figure to the boy because she exerts her power over the boy in spite of (and even because of) her lack of a penis. The mother expresses and wields her power over the child through her mastery of language and this becomes what child is aware of lacking. Thus Lacanian "castration" relates more properly to anything that separates a subject from symbolic authority. Ultimately then a phallic symbol itself can be seen as castrating because it creates a gap between its bearer and what that bearer is in and of himself.

For Lacan, fetishism functions more directly as a means of accessing power where language becomes literalized through the denial of its symbolic aspects. In terms of sexual expression then, this literalization creates a substitution, which Lacan refers to as a "displacement," where language shifts from working as a function of meaning to something that can "give reality to an image" (269). As Lacan and Vladimir Granoff explain in their joint article "Fetishism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real" (1956), the psychological condition resulting from this displacement prevents a person from entering into normal social relationships — specifically those that are sexual — where he must be confronted with the actual presence of the other, with the result that the afflicted person remains "frozen in the permanent memorial" of fetishization (272-3). But even more important in an analysis of "The Raven" remains the point that Lacan and Granoff see the fetish itself not necessarily as a fixating object or image but rather as a sort of tableau vivant which embodies and exposes the pathology of the

fetish as enforcing a permanent condition of liminality between the “symbolic, the imaginary and the real” (275). The obvious connections here to “The Raven” as an intended expression of “mournful and never-ending remembrance” are striking, particularly when one considers Poe’s poem itself as a sort of still life or tableau vivant, which its minimal dramatic arc seems to reinforce. The entire poem seems to take place in a hazy liminal space between sleeping and waking, between light and darkness, and between being and nothingness.

At eighteen stanzas, this is a relatively long lyrical poem and yet it is a poem where events occur without bringing any noticeable change with them. The startling arrival of the raven merely serves to reconfirm the miserable speaker’s desperate desire for his lost love who will never draw any nearer nor be removed any further from him — Lenore remains the perfect object of desire, and the speaker’s enigmatically one-word pet fetishizes his relationship with his lost love. That is to say, the dramatic protagonist of the speaker here not only fails to be changed by events but he proves himself utterly incapable of change precisely because he is “frozen in the permanent memorial” of his lost Lenore. Indeed, as the stanzas progress, the figure of Raven (though still unseen at this point) emerges as the very apotheosis of the Freudian fetish, that “token” which the stillness will eventually give. As such, the titular figure incarnates and personifies the speaker’s increasingly pathological relationship to language, that power which he cannot master and which in any case remains forever incapable of returning to him the lover whose lack he cannot escape. Herein lies a deeper significance to the poem’s title, which (as some critic mentions) also suggests the idea of raving, or ravin’ as it would perhaps have been pronounced using that frequently employed abbreviation of the final syllable, thus evoking not only the bird but also that species of madness often characterized by explosive verbosity and meaningless utterances. Under a Lacanian reading the doubly denotative meaning of the word

raven/raving becomes displaced by the image of the poem's talking bird upon which it puns, a bird whose enigmatic single-word vocabulary provides the constant foil against which the speaker's raving interrogatives can perversely batter themselves.

In fact, at the very next line the silence is broken by the single word that can possibly carry a meaning for the grieving speaker, the name of his lost love. We learn that the stillness gives way to a "token" of language when the speaker reports that "the only word there spoken was the whispered word, 'Lenore?'" (365). Tellingly, the speaker mystifies the appearance of this "only word" by reporting the speaking of it in passive voice, grammatically depriving the source of this lonely speech act any agency in committing this act. Clearly, the ready implication is that the poem's speaker has uttered this word, but Poe cleverly employs the the passive voice here to give the forlorn utterance an uncanny quality on at least two separate levels.

On the first level of uncanniness, the reader is asked to choose between two possible interpretations, neither of which can offer the reader any psychological comfort. In the first case, the reader is pushed toward imagining an ordinary human voice coming from an unseen ghostly other. Worse, this invisible entity seems to read the mind of the speaker when it utters the name of that lost love which lingers so endlessly present in the speaker's thoughts. Alternately, the reader must reason that the speaker himself has spoken the name of Lenore aloud himself without being consciously aware of the act. Significantly, neither of these possible readings allows the reader to escape a deep feeling of uncanniness, for either the speaker is being confronted with a supernatural presence or else this haunting word issued unbidden from the mouth of the speaker himself. Additionally, the logical conclusion of this latter choice becomes that the poem's "weak and weary" speaker uses passive voice deliberately to indicated that he speaks without being consciously aware of his own actions. Even if the reader entertains the

idea that the speaker is aware of his own speech act but chooses to distance himself from it through the use of passive voice, this interpretation still suggests that the speaker must now be understood as an unreliable narrator, either unwilling to take responsibility for his own actions even if he is not profoundly alienated from himself psychologically. Again, neither possibility eliminates the uncanniness of the mysteriously spoken name.

On the second level of uncanniness that lingers around this haunting utterance, the reader must note that the name of the speaker's lost love issues forth in the form of a question, "Lenore?" While on the one hand, this might nudge the reader toward ascribing the word to the speaker (either unconsciously or with disavowed agency), on the other hand, even if the speaker himself has whispered this name as a call to the unseen visitor at this door, he solicits a reply from his dead lover who he has informed the reader just two stanzas earlier remains "[n]ameless *here* for evermore" (365). The speaker violates the safety and security of his own chamber here not only by opening the door to darkness but by "dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before" and by daring to name the "nameless," arguably itself something of an uncanny act. Further, a question asks for an answer; the use of an interrogative call here demands a response, but while the source of the earlier insistent tapping remains an unsolved mystery, any reply to this question can only come from the still and silent darkness outside the speaker's chamber door. Particularly coming as plaintive naming of "nameless," the only possible reply is the continued haunting of the speaker, either with the torture of his own memory fraught as it is with "fantastic terrors" or by the horrifying possibility of some external and otherworldly presence making itself known to him from the depths of that empty darkness into which he peers and poses his terrible question. Again, as with the earlier uncertainty surrounding the source of the spoken name, neither possible answer to this eerily posed question will allow the reader to

escape a feeling of uncanniness.⁸

In the final two lines of this sixth stanza, the speaker admits that he spoke the name himself and reports that “an echo murmured back the word, ‘Lenore!’ / Merely this and nothing more” (366). Although an “echo” here deflates the horrible expectation of a supernatural reply, Poe carefully constructs his grammar and punctuation here so that his speaker gives the echo itself agency to murmur a reply and in the reported direct address of this response the question mark after the name in the previous line becomes an exclamation point. Not only does the echo assume power to offer him a response to his question but its reply is amplified into a positive assertion. The concluding line seeks to explain away the echo’s reply as a familiar and insignificant effect of the known physical world and so re-subsume this rupture of presence-in-absence into mere absence, but the reader’s tension here cannot be eased because this final line of “[m]erely this and nothing more” so closely echoes the final line of the previous stanza, just before the speaker gazed into the void of outer darkness and whispered his single question into the abyss. Beyond the speaker’s inability to read due to his preoccupation with grief, a state so clearly demonstrated in the earlier stanzas, now the much deeper extent of the speaker’s psychological damage starts to become evident. Further, this mental instability manifests itself in his misunderstanding and misuse of spoken language. He shows himself as not only unable to attend effectively to the authorial intentions latent in his books, but he also ascribes emotional states to the weather and intention to the inanimate objects of his chamber, he peers into the darkness while searching for presence in absence, and he obscures the agency of his own speech and gives agency to the “echo” that can then seem to murmur his own utterance back to him in

⁸ According to the collations of this poem performed by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, most early versions of the poem had an exclamation point rather than a question mark here. Poe first introduces the question mark in his complete MS version of the poem “Inscribed to Dr. S.A. Whittaker of Phoenixville [Pennsylvania]” and dated September 1848.

reply. This single-word (indeed single-utterance) query and response foreshadows the perverse play of changing questions and unchanging answer which the speaker will shortly engage in with the raven.

For now, however, the speaker echoes the action of his own furtive whisper and turns back into his private space only to be once again disturbed by the persistent sound of tapping which seems to him “somewhat louder than before” (366). Typically such increased volume would indicate a greater urgency or redoubled effort to communicate, but because the visitor remains unmanifest except through the continuing sound of tapping, the speaker begins to doubt whether this noise has meaning at all. Still, as he reassesses the source of the noises and this time perceives the tapping as coming from his chamber’s window, he determines to investigate, saying in reported direct address as if speaking aloud to himself, “[S]urely that is something at my window lattice; / Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore — / Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore” (366). This “something” that the speaker has convinced himself must be present comes in direct opposition to the previously repeated refrains where he had imagined a visitor, seen darkness, or heard the echo of his own voice “and nothing more,” yet this assertion that “something” must be present to make the tapping noises tellingly abandons even the vague determinacy of his earlier suppositions. If “something” is not “nothing,” it still remains unnamed (or at least inadequately named) and as such unknowable without more information. Yet even as the confounded speaker investigates the sound at the window, going to “see ... what thereat is,” he presupposes that he will again find a dark and silent void when he answers the knock: “’Tis the wind and nothing more!” While the wind would be marginally more determinate than the vague “something” of three lines earlier, the wind for all its potential animating force is not a “something” that one can “see.” Though an

evocative symbol, not to mention a stock provocation/explanation for needless fears in gothic writing, the wind remains a thing that can only be felt as a touch on one's skin or else identified by its effects on other things, such as by witnessing the billowing of a flag or hearing the knocking of window shutters. Besides his mistaken plan to ascertain the presence of wind with the wrong sense organs, the speaker's most telling statement at the end of this stanza comes in his now almost compulsive repetition that the tapping indicates some new blindly asserted something "and nothing more." Regardless of whatever he currently believes that "something" to be, the speaker's adamant determination to control and to contain its signification has by this point become obsessive. He has demonstrated himself as not only incapable of appropriately determining meanings according to normal readerly practice, but he has also shown himself as inordinately committed to eliminating any lingering ambiguities in those same meanings that he continues to prove himself incapable of correctly deciphering.

"Let my heart be still": The Uncanny Excess of Life

Before leaving this first, six-stanza section of the poem, some attention must be given to the speaker's use of two variations on the idea of stilling the beating of his heart. He employs trope first in the middle of the third stanza, saying that "to still the beating of [his] heart" he stood repeating the self-reassurance that the tapping he was hearing must have a natural source with a reasonable explanation. He grasps for this comforting notion in response to being filled with "fantastic terrors never felt before," which would presumably cause one's heart to race with anxiety. This emerging trope of the insistence on feelings or dreams that have never been felt or dreamed before should catch our attention for it presents a curious problem in a poem so overladen with alliteration, assonance, end-rhymes, internal linear rhymes and partial rhymes, as

well as insistently reiterated ideas and phrases. Even the words “tapping” and “rapping,” themselves compulsively repeated, signify a brisk repetition of knocking sounds. Further, it is precisely this repeated and insistent tapping that seems to trigger the speaker’s fears, signaled to the reader in muted form as the racing of his heart which the speaker hopes to “still.” If the first mention of this fear reaction might have been overlooked entirely or dismissed as merely an effect of the speaker’s having been startled awake by the sounds, his second mention of this fear response dismisses such a benign explanation. While yet muted, in the sixth stanza as the speaker indicates his renewed determination to explore the mystery of that “something” he hears tapping. Here he says, “Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore” (l. 35). The simplest form of the conscious question that arises for the speaker here is simply, “Who’s there?” But for the canny reader, the less obvious but more important question should instead be, “Who does the speaker think could be there that would provoke such anxiety?” The answer, of course, is the vocalized question he passively reported at the conclusion of the fifth stanza, saying, “the only word there spoken was the whispered word, ‘Lenore?’” (l. 28).

In turn then, the reader must inquire why the possible arrival of “the lost Lenore” should fill the speaker with “fantastic terrors.” The answer of course is precisely because she is irrecoverably “lost,” and however fervently we miss them, the dead must not come back. While the grieving lover pines in endless sorrow over his dearly departed lover, the only result that presents itself as impossibly worse than her actual death is her subsequent return from the dead. Tellingly, in both cases where the speaker makes reference to his anxiety, the speaker responds by wishing that his heart would become “still.” The temptation can be strong to gloss over this phrasing as a mere hyperbolic expression of his natural desire for calm nerves in response to his mounting anxieties about hearing strange noises in the middle of the night. The phrase remains

common enough in casual speech to this day, but taken more literally the only way a heart can be “still” is if it has ceased beating, indicating death. Of course the idea of a mourning lover melodramatically wishing for his own demise so that he can rejoin his lost beloved has been a commonplace romantic theme since time immemorial, from Shakespeare to Keats, yet the reiteration of this trope carries additional significance in “The Raven.” If the speaker had only used the phrase once, perhaps this standard romantic explanation could be allowed to stand, but his second use of trope occurs after the speaker has inquiringly called the name of his lost love into the void. Further, this void he finds outside his chamber door has been described as a void of not only “darkness” and “silence” but also a void of “stillness [that] gave no token.”

Yet the speaker’s repeatedly wanting to “still” his heart comes not merely as some Romantic or romanticized notion of being “half in love with easeful Death,” as Keats laments in his own bird-inspired midnight meditation, “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819). Rather, Poe’s speaker here reveals his participation in the “death drive,” which is not adequately represented by its typically oversimplified mainstream understanding but rather suggests its common sense opposite — the desire to overcome death. As Žižek cogently explains this concept:

The blind, indestructible insistence of the libido is what Freud called the ‘death drive’, and here we should bear in mind that ‘death drive’ is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, an ‘undead’ urge that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, generation and corruption. Freud equates the death drive with the so-called ‘compulsion-to-repeat’, an uncanny urge to repeat painful past experiences that seems to outgrow the natural limitations of the organism affected by it and to persist even beyond the organism’s death. (*How to Read Lacan*, 62-63)

Here yet again in Žižek’s description we encounter a remarkably accurate description of what the poem has demonstrated as the speaker’s uncanny excess of libido unconstrained by death. If the

speaker wishes for death, he does so only as an inversion of what Žižek explains as “the *masculine* fantasy of a finally accomplished sexual relationship by which the couple is forever united in mortal ecstasy” when “the *woman* follows her man into death in an act of ecstatic self-abandonment” (*Looking Awry*, 115, his emphasis). Instead, however, the speaker’s anxiety here betrays his over-riding instinct to live on while giving voice to his perfect (because unfulfilled and unfulfillable) desire for his lost love. The speaker’s impulse here follows the same logic as the old joke that the only thing worse than *not* getting what you want is *getting* what you want. Ultimately, the speaker need not have feared. He doesn’t get what he wants, but rather gets something better — a fetish to remind him that because he will never get what he wants, his opposing desires and despairs will remain forever perfect. The speaker throws open his shutters and invites in the raven.

“Perched Upon a Bust of Pallas”: The Raven as Blotch

Poe’s titular figure of “The Raven” finally makes his first visible appearance in the seventh stanza when the speaker throws open his shutters. The raven enters not by flying but rather by walking through the opened window “with many a flirt and flutter.” Notably, the speaker is quick to suppress this feminized and even coquettish initial appearance of the bird, replacing it with a more masculine and deliberately chaste description in the next line where he describes its strangely pedestrian entrance as “[i]n there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore” (l. 37). The speaker’s initial response to seeing finally the source of that persistent tapping is to place the raven within a long and storied history of portentous midnight visitors. No sooner has the raven entered the chamber than it finds itself a prominent perch up on the speaker’s marble bust of Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, civilization, and law and

order. As he does so often in his works, Poe here tempts his reader to become lost in symbolic significances rather than observing the profundity of the superficial image of a black bird standing like a stain on the white marble bust of human wisdom. Here, predictably — almost inevitably — the reader of the poem finds himself following the lead of the (unreliable) speaker in looking for ways to explain away this bird by ignoring this bird as a highly evocative, living presence and instead moving immediately to place it into its seemingly obvious and almost over-determined symbolic role in a richly allusive context.

Indeed, the potential socio-historical significance of the raven as an omen of some sort has been well-explored in detail by nearly two-hundred years of critical commentary and need not be exhaustively recited here, particularly since I am arguing that under a psychoanalytic reading any crypto-historical allusions the bird may initially seem to carry are ultimately undone by its signaling the final breakdown of the symbolic order. In *The Secret Life of Puppets* (2001), her potent exploration of how post-Enlightenment art, science and literature gradually supplanted religion in American life, Victoria Nelson writes,

The religion of the empirical carries with it the strong impulse to rationalize the irrational, to dethrone and ‘manage’ it—a tendency detectable even in Poe, who was, on the surface, an indefatigable ratiocinator not merely in his detective stories but in, for example, his prominent positioning of the bust of Pallas Athena in ‘The Raven.’ In his imaginative works, however—and this is a quintessential American contradiction—Poe always sabotaged his own rational constructs.... [T]he goddess of reason and wisdom is no match for a greasy-feathered black bird and the ancient tradition he brings with him through the window.” (79-80)

Nelson goes on to note that in Norse mythology two ravens named Thought and Memory sit on the shoulder of Odin, who is known as the god-of-the-ravens. These birds bring Odin news of all they see or hear. In Christian allegory, the raven can stand (confusingly) for either

the Devil or for Christ. However, as Nelson explains, “In the secular allegory of the dreaming mind, we might say such birds represent sudden dark irrational thoughts or moods, that insidious melancholia the alchemists dubbed *caput corvi* or ‘Raven’s head’ which—seemingly from out of nowhere—alights in, and takes over, human consciousness” (182). Yet “the ravens come from a distinct Somewhere,” argues Nelson, “namely, that inner realm, once marked out for the gods, which was remapped in the Western world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the narrower territory of psychosis” (182). Thus, even in an attempt to consider the raven’s superficially allusive participation in the mythopoetic traditions of European literature, we find that by the logic of the poem’s socio-historical context we have returned once again to Poe’s proto-psychoanalytic explorations of the human psyche.

Significantly, the apparently (but only apparently) symbolic grandeur of the bird’s entrance is enhanced in the subsequent lines as it makes “[n]ot the least obeisance” while exhibiting the “mien of lord or lady” (l. 38-9). Interestingly, this indeterminacy of the visitor’s gender — a reiteration from the fourth stanza’s “Sir ... or Madam” — continues until after the raven first speaks at the conclusion of the eighth stanza, apparently in response to the speaker’s inquiry about the bird’s name. In her deeply Lacanian reading of the poem, “Quoting the Signifier ‘Nevermore’: *Fort! Da!*, Pallas, and Desire in Language” (1998) Daneen Wardrop makes much of this gender indeterminacy which shifts into a more clearly male gender once the raven enters the symbolic order of language.

Wardrop offers a more meaningful reading. While still playfully post-structuralist, Wardrop’s analysis presents serious and useful insights with its deeply Lacanian reading of the poem. She argues that “The Raven” dramatizes its speaker’s entrance into the symbolic realm of language through its progression of three distinct six-stanza phases. According to Wardrop’s

reading, the first section corresponds to the protagonist's "quest for the pure signifier: the sign that stands only for itself" (164). This initial stage of the desire for an ideal language is emblemized by the poem's assertion that the speaker's lost love is named Lenore by the angels but remains "[n]ameless *here* for evermore" (365). Noting that the second section introduces the poem's refrain of "nevermore" as an "inchoate articulation of syllables that stands on the verge of meaning, predicting entry into the symbolic mode" (167), Wardrop observes that these stanzas dramatize the protagonist's marveling at the mere existence of discourse as the word of refrain "attempts to offer us pure discourse, a representation of absence" (167). For Wardrop, the emergence of the poem's frequently repeated "nevermore" corresponds closely to "the role of repetition compulsion in Freud's ideas of psychological development and Lacan's ideas of language acquisition" (168). Indeed, as Wardrop astutely remarks, the word "nevermore" itself semantically echoes the peek-a-boo game of *Fort! Da!* (or *Gone! Here!*) that Freud describes his grandson as repeatedly playing at the pivotal childhood moment of language acquisition which corresponds learning to tolerate the profound dichotomy of presence and absence. In Wardrop's construction, the final section of the poem then enacts "the narrator's relinquishment of the prelingual drive for union with the mother in order to embrace the post-oedipal desire that marks the birth of language" (175). As Wardrop explains, "any doubt that the female figure in 'The Raven' is the mother (and not Lenore, simply an understudy), we find dispelled in the thirteenth stanza ... where Poe italicizes the word '*She*'" (176). The subsequent proliferation of the refrain "nevermore" under a multiplicity of widely divergent meanings demonstrates for Wardrop a clearly Lacanian understanding of "signifiers as standing not for signified but for other signifiers" (177). Following the commentary of other critics such as Jonathan Elmer and the eminent Poe scholar J. Gerald Kennedy, Wardrop explores the word nevermore's various

internal ironies so that under Wardrop's reading, the poem's pivotal, compounding word "Nevermore" itself forms an oxymoron, simultaneously indicating both absence and desire — an antithetical combination of terms" (177). Yet, compelling as Wardrop's insights are in some ways, I would still argue that they fall into one of Poe's typical traps for unwary readers, searching too deeply into the meanings of things while overlooking the superficial significance. Whatever connotative or denotative ironies "nevermore" may hold as a word become less important than the simple fact that the raven as a non-rational being means and can mean none of them. To return then to Wardrop's claim that the word becomes emblematic of "signifiers ... standing not for signified but for other signifiers," we must bear in mind that any and all multiplicity of contingent significations finally signifies nothing. No intention to mean roots the speaker's inferred meanings, so that in the end the bird's "inchoate articulation of syllables" can never move beyond the "verge of meaning."

As Wardrop gleans from her reading of Lacan, "one is not human, has no individuality, no identity — certainly no gender identity — until the advent of language. The signifier grants the subject his or her status as subject" (171). Pursuing this logic, Wardrop next asserts that the bird's male gender "is significant because the raven operates as the father in a number of important ways," most importantly because "the Name of the Father is Nevermore" (172).

While Wardrop's psychoanalytic reading offers some extremely valuable insights to the poem, I strenuously disagree with her equation of the raven figure with the father here. While the use of language certainly marks one's entrance into the symbolic order, we must hasten to observe that merely pronouncing a distinguishable word does not make the bird in fact human. Indeed, Poe himself indicates in "The Philosophy of Composition" that he had chosen the bird precisely to address "the difficulty [that] lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of

reason on the part of the creature repeating the word” (18). Poe employs a raven as the bearer of this word precisely because it is “a *non*-reasoning creature capable of speech” (19, Poe’s emphasis). As such, the bird can hardly be read as the father figure who serves as the bearer of the symbolic order of language. Not only has the speaker spoken before the raven’s arrival, but the bird speaks as a “non-reasoning” creature. Further, I would argue that the full significance of the poem’s imminent dramatic tableau depicting the complete breakdown of language and the speaker’s unravelling sanity hinges precisely on the bird’s lack of humanity which signals and enforces its enduring lack of subjective status despite its illusory entrance into the symbolic order. That said, I do agree with Wardrop that “Nevermore” as the poem’s refrain (or burden as Poe calls it following traditional poetic parlance) can serve as the Lacanian “Name-of-the-Father, which keeps us within the realm of desire and language rather than biology” (172). However, Wardrop goes too far when she asserts that “[t]he raven owns the pure signifier our narrator needs in order to be able to express his want-to-be—a want-to-be that pervades the poem, through profound images of lack, with the recognition of absence and the loss of oneness with the mother” (173). Clearly the raven does not “own” the signifier; in the parroting mouth of the raven, this word becomes merely a mock signifier, always already emptied of any truly authorial intention. Indeed, this utter lack of intentionality is precisely what inscribes the signifier with its radical indeterminacy, haunting its emptiness with the phantom of potential meaning.

“Beguiling my sad fancy into smiling”: The Perverse Pleasure of Pain

Initially, the speaker seems to stumble over the meaning of the word, thinking of it merely as the name of the bird. While in some ways seeming still to speak aloud to himself, the speaker addresses his visitor directly, saying, “Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s

Plutonian shore —” (l. 47). At first, to both the extra-textual reader and intra-textual speaker, the bird appears to respond to this musing request, for the speaker next reports, “Quoth the Raven ‘Nevermore’” (l. 48). As Nelson points out in her *Secret Life of Puppets*, the speaker first admits he believes the raven’s mantra has “little meaning—little relevancy,” by which she says “we recall the enigmatic cry ‘Tekeli’li!’ from the black birds in *Pym*” (182). In Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, the titular narrator accidentally travels to some impossibly cryptic version of the Antarctic and finds himself tortured by his inability to ascribe adequate meaning to that strange word, but by contrast the speaker of “The Raven” shows himself as only too eager to twist his visitor’s one-word vocabulary to suit his own perverse aims. However inattentive a reader he may have shown himself to be, long before the raven arrives at his door the speaker has more than adequately demonstrated his entrance into the symbolic order, however vexed his relationship with that purported “order” may be. His problem then remains not his personal failure to enter this order as Wardrop would have it, but rather as we have already seen, his hyper-awareness of the inherent limitations of the symbolic order itself. Now, by playing on his own awareness of the raven’s lack of subjectivity throughout the remainder of the poem, the speaker systematically manipulates the signifying nature of the raven’s endlessly repeated mock “signifier.”

Initially upon the bird’s arrival, however, the speaker seems actually to have (mis)understood “Nevermore” as the name of the raven, believing that “his soul in that one word he did outpour” (l. 56). Thus the word’s apparently simple and singular fixity of meaning ironically seems to arise directly from the speaker’s continuing misapprehension of intended meanings; however, as we have already observed, this poem dramatizes the ways in which language tends to break down. As the stanza progresses, it begins to dawn on the speaker that

this single repeated word can take on new meanings depending on what precedes it. At first he shows himself to be startled when the bird repeats its mantra in response to his muttered observation that likely the raven will abandon him the next day just as so many “[o]ther friends have flown before” (l. 58). Taken as a response here, “Nevermore” would seem to assert that unlike those others the raven will never depart, but of course this meaning is perversely assigned not by the bird who gives voice to the word but rather by the projected “intention” of the speaker acting as the reader (or listener) of the bird’s utterance. Such an interpretation of course does violence to the normal functions of language.

Upon still further reflection the speaker recognizes the potential play available to him as a questioner who can be guaranteed to receive this one word answer to any and all of his inquiries. The speaker cannot conceal the spontaneous display of pleasure he experiences in such a realization, reporting how “the Raven still beguiling my sad fancy into smiling, / Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door” (l. 67-8). The speaker’s smile here at first appears to signal his arrival at a long-sought escape from his melancholy. His moving a chair before the bird suggests that perhaps it will provide for him the respite from sorrows he had failed to find in his reading, but his use of the term “beguiling” here indicates the level of (self-)deception entangled in this newfound diversion. Indeed, as the narrative of the poem progresses, we find that the speaker engages in repeatedly emptying out and refilling the meaning of the raven’s endlessly repeated refrain of “nevermore.” First he had taken it for the raven’s name, then for the bird’s commitment not to abandon the speaker. As this game of questions and answer continues, the speaker variously interprets this single refrain as an indication that he will find no respite from his thoughts of Lenore, as a claim that there is no “balm in Gilead” to comfort the heartbroken, and then as an assertion that the speaker will never

be reunited with his lost love. Throughout these variations on posing different questions against a single expected answer, we cannot help but recognize that this speaker has hit upon a strategy for effectively making a mockery of the entire symbolic order; however, tellingly, only this final projected interpretation provokes the speaker to voice his denial of the bird's veracity.

Moreover, the speaker's interpretive challenges become compounded by the revelation that these signs he seeks to understand have been issuing not from another human consciousness but rather result from the actions of an animal, or as Poe phrases it in his essay about the poem, "a *non*-reasoning creature capable of speech" (18, Poe's emphasis). Indeed, as one of the central conceits upon which the poem hinges, this revelation of the highly contestable status of any "intentionality" behind this repeated word must ultimately be understood as bringing about the speaker's undoing as a reader. Any interpretations of this word cannot help but become untethered inferences, a fact that in turn allows the speaker to enter into his rather perverse exercise of posing a series of "questions" to the raven, questions for which he already knows what the predictably monotonous "answer" will be, but also questions which serve to frame that answer in such a way that its inferred meanings seem to shift and change. As with so many of the narrators in his tales and speakers in other poems, Poe constructs his protagonist here to reveal for his canny reader a certain species of madness, one that remains forever locked inside its own warped and insular consciousness.

The speaker's perversely self-torturing line of questioning culminates in the antepenultimate stanza with which Poe claims to have "first put pen to paper" before composing any other section of the poem:

"Prophet," said I, "thing of evil! — prophet still, if bird or devil! —

By that Heaven that bends above us — by that God we both adore —

Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within that distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore —
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”

Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.” (lines 91-6)

In the escalation of the speaker’s exchanges with the Raven this stanza denying even a spiritual reunion after death stands out as being the cruelest and most final to the grieving lover. Indeed, in his “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe confirms his intention for this stanza to serve as the narrative climax of the poem. According to his account, he composed it before writing any other part of the poem at least in part so that he could set for himself the high dramatic mark to which he could build the preceding stanzas. Poe even goes so far as to suggest that in his subsequent composition of the rest of the poem he would have “purposely enfeebled” any “more vigorous stanzas” that might have threatened “to interfere with the climactic effect” of this particular moment (20). The speaker’s shift here (presaged in the preceding stanza) to repeatedly calling the raven both a “prophet” and a “thing of evil” seems essential to this climax because while a prophet is generally thought of as one who has more direct access the authority of “that God we both adore,” this midnight visitor must instead be seen as announcing and even embodying the utter failure of the symbolic order. As in Wardrop’s reading of the raven representing the father, the speaker manifests a strong temptation to view this visitor as a messenger of some remote authority. Indeed, by claiming that the raven is a “prophet still” whether he is “bird or devil,” the speaker provokes in the reader a correspondingly powerful impulse to search for spiritual or intellectual profundities in both the raven’s presence and his persistent pronouncement of “Nevermore,” a word that seems fraught with significance; however, any apparent portentousness of this parroted speech act must ultimately be seen as

mounting in the narrative of the poem precisely because we repeatedly witness the emptying out of any and all meanings the speaker attempts to infer from this constant refrain. Indeed, while Poe's universe tends to be essentially godless in both this poem and elsewhere in his writings, the speaker's frequent references to Biblical mythology — the "balm in Gilead," that "distant Aidenn," and those remote "angels [who] name Lenore" — should serve as a powerful reiteration of the theme he presents in the tableau of the raven as a blotch on the bust of Pallas. Surely, as good Christians, none of Poe's contemporary readers would have imagined Pallas Athena as a real, existing God even though they would certainly have understood the classical allusion Poe makes with the appearance of this bust in the speaker's chamber, and such readers also might reasonably have recognized Poe's not-so-subtle commentary of having the unwanted visitor perch his inky body upon the white marble bust. As Victoria Nelson puts it, "[T]he goddess of reason and wisdom is no match for a greasy-feathered black bird and the ancient tradition he brings with him through the window" (80), only this "tradition he brings" is nothing short of the irrational at its purest, the eruption of the Real that denies and destroys and attempts to order it or ascribe it meaning. If, as Nelson claims, Poe "always sabotaged his own rational constructs" by disrupting rationality with inevitable and irresistible intrusions of primordial existence qua the Lacanian Real, we must recognize that in doing so Poe also represents a "quintessential American contradiction" (79). Even more controversially, and thus presented in slightly obscured fashion throughout the narrative of the poem, Poe challenges the reality of the Judeo-Christian God who his readers would not so easily dismiss as mythological and to whom many of them in their own lives would have turned for comfort at the loss of loved ones. Herein lies the darkly subversive potency of Poe's poem. By enacting the complete and utter failure of the symbolic order in the face of life (and death) itself, "The Raven" reveals the emptiness of the

heavens, the essential and undeniable absence of God.

Curiously, the chosen verb here, “clasp,” carries with it more baggage than the apparently self-evident meaning of “to enclose or to hold within the arms,” for this word also suggests the notion of “to fasten or to close” as one might do with a purse or bag, a secondary meaning that strongly implies a desire on the part of the speaker to seal this idealized love object off from any additional burdening. Indeed, even the speaker’s rarified articulation of Lenore’s increasingly remote identity — after all, she is first introduced as “nameless *here* forever more” — serves to enhance verbally and symbolically his distance from her, enforcing her permanent absence and forestalling the realization of his purported wish to “clasp” her even before the raven delivers its predictable pronouncement on when such an embrace will occur: nevermore. As Poe has consistently demonstrated throughout the poem, language itself can only ever signal absence. Any presumed or promised presence remains merely inferred and illusory.

Once the raven’s repeated burden is figured by the speaker to signal the impossibility of his eventual reunion with the object of his desire, he reacts violently, speaking aloud — presumably to his avian visitor but also as before to “that God [he and the raven] both adore” and the “angels” as representative of the Big Other to which the symbolic order itself is oriented — “Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend” (l. 97). Of course, “that word” to which the speaker suddenly takes such apparent umbrage is precisely the same word that the raven has been speaking all along, “Nevermore.” However, what the speaker seems to be signaling here is the notion that word understood as representative of language itself has always been and will continue to their “sign of parting,” which is to say the sign of difference. Further enhancing the irony of the speaker’s reaction is the underlying narrative effect by which this very word which he calls upon to serve as their “sign of parting” has effectively already taken on a metaphorical

significance as instrument of their coming together, as the sign of their inseparability. Yet, indeed, such is the very nature of language. In order to have any meaning at all, words must be shared and their definitions agreed upon; however, in our post-Saussurean world we well know that any attempt at perfect communication is doomed by the very function of language. Any use of language always carries with it both an inevitable gap between the signifier and the signified but also an unavoidable surplus of meaning that cannot be limited or controlled by the grasping intentions of the author. As such, the word itself qua language must always be understood not only as the very thing that binds us endlessly to one another, but also simultaneously as the thing which severs us one from another as a “sign of parting” doomed to ensure our mutual alienation.

Significantly, in a close psychological analogue to the linguistic duality inherent in his claiming “Nevermore” as a “sign of parting,” the speaker reveals (perhaps unwittingly) that it is this same refrain which guarantees the utter impossibility of his ever achieving his desire. In finally terming the raven’s mindlessly repeated word a “lie thy soul hath spoken,” he ironically also confirms that his impossible fantasy of being reunited with his lady love will in fact always remain perfectly unspoiled as an unchanging desire to “clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore” (l. 94). Thus understood, “nevermore” represents a “lie” the speaker believes because the “sign of parting” between him and his love object is also the promise of his permanent — because unfulfilled and unfulfillable — perfect desire.

The Raven as *objet a*

As such, we must recognize that the figure of the raven here has come to represent Lacan’s *objet a*, that seemingly external intruder upon which the subject stumbles in his pursuit of what Freud termed the “pleasure principle.” While this deterrent often manifests itself in a

guise that seems external to the subject, an interruption arriving from a remotely external and objective reality, the rise of this *objet a* to interrupt the smooth flow of the “pleasure principle” must in fact be understood as essentially inherent to the functioning of the psyche itself, which inevitably finds or manifests the object that thwarts its own full satisfaction. As Žižek explains this apparent paradox,

the *objet a* prevents the circle of pleasure from closing, it introduces an irreducible displeasure, but the psychic apparatus finds a sort of perverse pleasure *in this displeasure itself*, in the the neverending, repeated circulation around this unattainable, always missed object. The Lacanian name for this “pleasure in pain” is of course enjoyment (*jouissance*), and the circular movement which finds satisfaction in failing again and again to attain the object, the movement whose true aim coincides therefore with its very path toward the goal is the Freudian *drive*” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 56, Žižek’s emphasis)

We discover a remarkable consistency with these psychoanalytic principles of a perverse “pleasure in pain” when looking to Poe’s own reported intentions for the speaker’s relationship to the raven’s repeated refrain. Regarding his own designs for the effect of the verbal intercourse between speaker and raven in his “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe writes,

I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover—the first query to which the Raven should reply “Nevermore”—that I could make this first query a commonplace one—the second less so—the third still less, and so on—until at length the lover, startled from his original *nonchalance* by the melancholy character of the word itself—by its frequent repetition—and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it—is at length excited by superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character—queries whose solution he has passionately at heart—propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture—propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demonic character of the bird (which reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a phrenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the *expected* “Nevermore” the most delicious because the most intolerable

of sorrow. (19, Poe's emphasis)

His belabored reasoning in this single labyrinthine sentence notwithstanding, Poe clearly shows himself taking great pains in an effort to emphasize the pathological character of the cumulative psychological effects demonstrated in the speaker's one-sided wordplay with the raven.

Throughout the poem Poe can be observed deliberately haunting precisely this ambiguous liminal space Žižek describes as existing in the tension between an intrusion of seemingly external circumstances and an interruption arising from the psyche itself. Starting with Poe's establishment of this poem as a dream poem continuing through a black bird's perching like a blot upon the symbolically significant white bust of Pallas Athena (goddess of the psyche) and culminating in the speaker's verbal exchanges with this "non-reasoning creature capable of speech." Each of these carefully orchestrated details ultimately aids Poe in positing the liminal epistemological status of the poem's narrative as neither quite corresponding to some objective reality nor entirely confined to the mere midnight imaginings of its speaker, just as the raven arises to fetishize the speaker's relationship to his lost beloved, ensuring the enduring of his perfect, unfulfilled desire and empowering his continuing perverse pleasure in the pain of his loss. As Poe plainly states in the authoritative reading he offers in "The Philosophy of Composition," the Raven remains "emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*" (25, Poe's emphasis).

Chapter 5:

The Figure of the Double in Poe's "Philosophy of Composition"

Published in the April 1846 issue of *Graham's Magazine*, just a little more than a year after the first publication of "The Raven," Poe's densely expository essay "The Philosophy of Composition" represents the summation and culmination of his poetic theories as it purports to recount in minute detail the impulses and processes that Poe claims informed the crafting of his most famous work. Yet not only does the essay reiterate all the main principles of his poetics and demonstrate the remarkable consistency of his thought, but it also powerfully demonstrates how his poetics itself serves to proliferate the uncanny doubling of authors and reader in all of his writing. As such, "The Philosophy of Composition" stands as the crucial work for recognizing why Poe's tales and poetry remain continually animated by and perhaps even obsessed with the author's struggle to maintain absolute control over textual meaning. Written in direct response to the wild popularity of "The Raven," "The Philosophy of Composition" reveals Poe's deep anxiety about aberrant readings and represents his perverse attempt to reclaim absolute authorial control over his poem after its broad publication. Poe makes this attempt by not only reasserting the author's privileged position in relation to a work's origins but also by subsequently positing the author as the "ideal reader" of his own work. Thus, even in such an apparently straightforward expository piece, the doppelgänger emerges as a figure embodying the central tension inherent in Poe's poetics and duplicated endlessly throughout his body of work.

As a consequence of the impossible tension between Poe's drive to maintain authorial control and his desire to publish his work broadly to an enthusiastic popular readership, Poe's texts proliferate uncanny doublings between author and reader. The doppelgänger figure that

emerges is both author and reader, each recognizing himself in the other and reacting with horror at the obscene supplement of self. As Žižek succinctly explains: “In my double, I don’t simply encounter myself (my mirror image), but first of all what is ‘in me more than myself’” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!*, 144). In “The Philosophy of Composition” more than any of his other works, Poe demonstrates his acute awareness of the problem with textual doubling of author and reader by attempting simultaneously to occupy both roles. He first portrays himself as the consummate author in control of every textual nuance and variable, and then as the ideal reader whose interpretation perfectly mirrors authorial intention. Yet, such an ideal is clearly impossible. As Lacan has argued, each double always perceives the radical unknowable in the other, seeing himself as other through the eyes of his opposite and finally recoiling from the doppelgänger as a figure of unspeakable horror. Indeed, this precise reaction against the uncanny does much to explain why critics have found themselves at such a loss to account for “The Philosophy of Composition.” Poe seems to be completely in earnest and yet the essay almost refuses to be read as anything other than an elaborate hoax or a parody. Encountering Poe’s mechanistic descriptions of how he came to write a poem as profoundly affecting as “The Raven,” the credulous reader turns away in nervous laughter. Both Freud’s notion of the uncanny and Lacan’s understanding of how language works (and fails to work) provide useful insights for analyzing “The Philosophy of Composition” and for positioning it within Poe’s body of work as the uncanniest doubling of all.

Poe’s Rise to Popularity on the Wings of “The Raven”

As the single most famous work he had published in his lifetime, “The Raven” provided the wings upon which Poe’s personal fame rose rapidly to dizzying heights. Clearly such

notoriety brings with it a vindication of sorts for the struggling literary artist, but for Poe it also entails several less welcome consequences. Two of these present serious challenges to Poe's desire for strict authorial control over the work. Firstly, the popularity of a work spurs wide and rapid reprinting, making it difficult to maintain direct authorial oversight of the far-flung publishing process. Secondly, even if textual variant can be contained, broad readership also ensures wildly disparate readings and interpretations of the work. Still another troublesome side effect of the public's enthusiasm for "The Raven" emerges as readers begin to conflate the author and his most famous work. While the two previous issues introduce an uncomfortable separation between the author and the work over which he still wishes to exert control, this latter identification of Poe with "The Raven" has the opposite effect of manifesting the poet and his poem as doubles of each other.

Published in the January 29, 1845, issue of the New York *Mirror*, "The Raven" attracted immediate attention from the reading public. The startlingly original poem itself may have been enough to excite readers, but N. P. Willis, the *Mirror*'s co-editor, took pains to present it with a great deal of fanfare: "We are permitted to copy (in advance of publication) from the 2d No. of the American Review, the following remarkable poem by EDGAR POE" (qtd in Mabbott 361, Willis's caps). Astutely anticipating the profound effect the poem would have on readers, Willis calls it a poem that "will stick to the memory of everybody who reads it" (qtd in Mabbott 361). One of the most famous literary figures of the era, Willis could offer publicly meaningful evaluations and he made strong claims for "The Raven" in his introduction, asserting that it was "the most effective single example of 'fugitive poetry' ever published in this country; and unsurpassed in English poetry for subtle conception, masterly ingenuity of versification, and consistent, sustaining of imaginative lift" (qtd in Mabbott 361). Evidently, readers agreed with

the assessment offered by Willis. As Poe biographer Kenneth Silverman reports,

The reception of “The Raven” might be compared to that of some uproariously successful hit song today. “Everybody reads the Poem and praises it,” said the *New World*, two weeks after its appearance, “justly we think, for it seems to us full of originality and power.” Readers thrilled to the poem’s inevitable-seeming novelty, as of something unimaginable but entirely within reach. They became, one New Yorker said, “electrified by the weird cry of Nevermore.” The *Pennsylvania Inquirer* reprinted “The Raven” under the heading “A BEAUTIFUL POEM”; the *New World* called it “wild and shivery,” written in “a Stanza unknown before to gods, men, and booksellers”; the *Morning Express* said it “may well defy competition in its way from the whole circle of contemporary verse writers.” Within a month after its appearance “The Raven” was reprinted at least ten times. Its sound effects made it ideal for reading aloud, and in *A Plain System of Elocution* (2d ed., New York, 1845) it soon found a place it still occupies, among the “Poetical Recitations” of a school text. (237-8)

Given his previous struggles to gain recognition for his work, Poe must have been thrilled to see one of his works garner such accolades. As Silverman writes, “The countless admirers also pleased Poe as confirming the soundness of his artistic aims” (239). Poe himself admits as much in “The Philosophy of Composition” when he writes that the first impetus for writing “The Raven” arose from his “intention of composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste,” though Poe dismisses his hopes for such success as essentially “irrelevant to the poem *per se*” (*E&R* 15). However, Poe was obviously pleased by the reception of his work. According to Silverman, he performed many dramatic readings of the poem, he delighted to hear people talking about it in public, and he even considered going to England to present Queen Victoria with a bound copy of the poem.

However, Poe would no doubt have been less enthusiastic about the loss of authorial control that the popularity of “The Raven” consequently engendered. As Silverman reports, “Excitement over the catchy poem broke out in a rash of parodies. Periodicals in Boston, New

York, and Philadelphia comically turned the famous bird into other creatures” (238). Still other imitators employed the poem’s verse form to write about other topics as “The Raven” was repurposed to support such diverse goals as advancing the temperance movement and providing advertisements for Dr. F. Felix Gouraud’s medicated soap. Poe’s precise feelings about these parodies remain unknown, and it remains possible that he merely laughed them off; however, when it came to reprints of “The Raven,” Poe displayed his characteristic desire for complete control. As Silverman notes in his biography, Poe “made effective small revisions in successive reprints of the poem throughout his life” and that he was particularly “finicky about the typographical setup of the long lines” (239). Clearly, Poe continued to exert whatever authorial control he could over the poem for the remainder of his life. Indeed, for his scholarly edition of Poe’s *Complete Poems*, Thomas Ollive Mabbott collates 23 important authoritative variants of the text, not even including its very first printing in the New York *Mirror*. The antepenultimate variant in Mabbott’s collation appears in the September 25, 1849, issue of the Richmond *Semi-Weekly Examiner* immediately following a local lecture by Poe. Published just two week’s before Poe’s untimely death, the *Examiner*’s reprint of the poem includes an editorial preface claiming “we furnish readers, to-day, with the only correct copy ever published — which we are enabled to do by the courtesy of Mr. Poe himself” (qtd in Mabbott, 363). Thus Poe’s forceful claims for authorial control over the origins and reception of the poem in “The Philosophy of Composition” remain completely consistent with his attitude toward the poem during the coming years. He continued to revise, recite, and reprint the poem in new forms until the time of his death.

Perhaps the strangest effect caused by the popularity of “The Raven” is the way it causes the Poe’s contemporaries to begin conflating the work with its author. In his biography

Silverman notes how connected Poe and his most famous work became in the popular imagination:

Poe's own fame rose with that of "The Raven," and many readers identified poet and poem. *The Town* published an illustration of a humanized raven, presenting it tongue-in-cheek as the "portrait of a distinguished poet, critic and writer of tales." According to a later account, Dr. John Francis of New York invited Poe to his home and introduced him to his wife and guests by saying, "Eliza, my dear—'The Raven'!" (238)

While Silverman finds nothing more significant in these events than the "gratification of Poe's lifelong desire for approbation and victory" (238), I would suggest that within the larger context of Poe's poetics, which already tend to proliferate doubled figures of authors and readers, this added doubling between author and work in the public imagination takes on a rather uncanny character even as it fulfills Poe's ideal of perfect identity between authorial intention and textual meaning. While on the one hand the enormous popularity of "The Raven" and its furious reprinting in the national press of course fulfills Poe's desire to be read and appreciated, on the other hand Poe's celebrity represents a loss of control not only over the poem but over his own identity in the public eye. The poem's frantic republication inevitably brings with it the introduction of unauthorized textual variants and untold numbers of distinct and perhaps entirely erroneous readings. Similarly, parodies of the poem arise not only as misreadings of a sort but also insert themselves as uncanny doubles of the poem that remain horribly recognizable even as they replace Poe's authorial intention with inferior counterfeits. In such social context, no wonder Emerson could blithely dismiss Poe as "the jingle man." The poem's vast popularity even brings about a strange conflation of the work and its poet but also a strange social condition "The Raven" starts to stand in for Poe himself. In a condition we have become all too familiar with in our own age, this sort of popular culture doubling of a celebrity's identity forces him to lose all control over his public image. Such a public persona loses all but the most tenuous of

connections to the original person, becoming a doppelgänger that represents something simultaneously more and less than the person from whom it arises. In response to the inevitable anxiety produced by this condition made manifest with the success of “The Raven” and his own burgeoning celebrity, Poe writes “The Philosophy of Composition” to reclaim authorial control over not only his intentions for the poem but also over his own public role as an author and critic.

“The Philosophy of Composition” has typically been read cynically, as yet another of Poe’s hoaxes intended to dupe his unwary readers into believing poetry could be written in a mechanistic manner and to capitalize callously on the wild success of “The Raven.” Already in 1850, just four short years after the initial publication of the essay, antebellum critic George Washington Peck compares Poe’s essay to his other “harmless hoaxes,” arguing that Poe “carried his analysis to such an absurd minuteness, that it is a little surprising that there should be any[one] verdant enough not to perceive that he was ‘chaffing’” (qtd. by Person, 241). Other literary critics have tended to agree with Peck’s assessment: however, skeptics voice legitimate concerns about the dubious reliability of Poe’s self-reported steps in composing “The Raven,” and even Mabbott has called the essay “a partly fictional account” (353), what all these readers have tended to overlook is the large extent to which the poetic theories Poe espouses in “The Philosophy of Composition” reiterate those same concepts he articulates throughout the body of his earlier reviews and essays. Obviously Poe writes the essay in response to the popularity of “The Raven,” but he does so less to capitalize on his success than to reclaim authority over the work from the mass of unruly readers. Even as he thrills to his new found celebrity, Poe finds himself suffering from one of the primary natural by-products of such broad popularity and ready republication — namely the steady erosion of his authorial control over the meaning poem. Read within this biographical and historical context, “The Philosophy of Composition” represents

Poe's boldest and most forceful, though ultimately futile, attempt to re-exert authorial control over "The Raven."

The *Barnaby Rudge* Gambit

Poe begins "The Philosophy of Composition" with a strange gambit by quoting from a private letter to him from Charles Dickens. With this move, Poe not only illustrates how readily authors and readers can change roles back and forth, but he also immediately establishes the multiple layers of intertextuality he will explore in his essay. Poe begins his essay,

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." (13)

With this seemingly candid view of two successful authors discussing the craft of writing, Poe makes several carefully calculated moves to introduce the essay's complex exploration of the interconnections between authors, texts, and readers. With this opening Poe indicates that Dickens wrote this particular note to him in response to Poe's review of *Barnaby Rudge*, an important touchstone and potential source for Poe's own raven figure, though he pointedly avoids saying as much in the essay.

Yet even without admitting Dickens's work as the source for his own literary bird, Poe's allusion to *Barnaby Rudge* works not only as an identifier for Dickens, an author who arguably needs no such introduction, but the reference also validates Poe's own critical enterprise. The simple fact of these two authors corresponding proves to Poe's literature-conscious audience that his criticism is seen as so valid and useful that no less a literary giant than Dickens would read and respond favorably to it. Such validation of Poe's critical acumen remained essential before

an American audience who had often considered Poe too harsh in his judgments. Many would remember that Poe had earned the nickname “Tomahawk” for his severe responses to the works of more than a few darlings of the literary nationalist cause. Though Poe’s contemporaries might not have recalled the precise details of his analysis of *Barnaby Rudge*, Poe had in fact successfully predicted who the murderer would be while the novel was still appearing serially in 1841 (*E&R* 1494). By foregrounding his relationship with Dickens, Poe thus softens or at least justifies his hard critical reputation by showing that Dickens did not feel attacked but rather understood and appreciated by Poe as a fellow author and kindred spirit.

By foregrounding his personal acquaintance with Charles Dickens, Poe displays his access to undeniable literary authority, not only in the person of Dickens who had already become one of the most popular of authors in England and America but also in terms of the intimate knowledge of writing craft that their epistolary exchange demonstrates. For the canny reader, the very fact of Poe’s jocular bantering with Dickens already serves to place him into the role of one who shares literary insights with other respected authors. Further, this epistolary interchange with Dickens implicitly serves to endorse the writing practices and poetic theories Poe had long been espousing in the public press, and which he will go on to reiterate in the remainder of his essay.

Yet most significantly, in quoting Dickens with this opening passage of “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe points at the most logical source for his prophetic speaking bird in “The Raven.” In his *Barnaby Rudge* review, first published in the May 1, 1841, *Saturday Evening Post* and then expanded for *Graham’s Magazine* in the February 1842 issue where he specifically mentions *Caleb Williams*, Poe’s comments that he thought the novel’s talking raven might have been used by Dickens to more dramatic effect. He writes,

The raven, too, intensely amusing as it is, might have been made, more than we now see it, a portion of the conception of the fantastic Barnaby. Its croakings might have been *prophetically* heard in the course of the drama. Its character might have performed, in regard to that of the idiot, much the same part as does, in music, the accompaniment in respect to the air. Each might have been distinct. Each might have differed remarkably from the other. Yet between them there might have been wrought an analogical resemblance, and, although each might have existed apart, they might have formed together a whole which would have been imperfect in the absence of either. (243, Poe's emphasis)

Given this extensive exploration in this review of the raven's missed potential for prophetic and resonant statements in Dickens's novel, Poe must undoubtedly beginning to imagine how he might use a similar talking bird in his own writing. Indeed, Poe elaborates on this possibility so extensively in the revised *Graham's Magazine* review that his not mentioning the novel's raven in "The Philosophy of Composition" is rather odd, especially since this essay purports to be an explication of how he wrote "The Raven." However, as amply demonstrated not only in the essay at hand but also in his previous essays and reviews, Poe highly values the notion of artistic "originality." He, for example, expounds upon originality at great length in his revised discussion of Hawthorne. Significantly, at the opposite extreme from this vaunted "originality" resides plagiarism, for which Poe reserves a special sort of contempt bordering on horror. During this same period in which he was writing "The Raven" and "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe remains embroiled in his notorious accusations of plagiarism against Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. This personal context may help account for Poe's carefully avoiding any appearance of having borrowed ideas from other writers. Poe, however, remains committed to his project of recounting the particular circumstances and thoughts that gave rise to "The Raven." He powerfully asserts that he has never had "the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions" (14), and he undertakes their explication here. Still, if Poe

believes himself acutely conscious of his own authorial practices, then his failure to elaborate on the obvious connection between his own poetic raven and the talking bird in Dickens's novel can scarcely be understood as anything other than a deliberate omission on his part. While it remains vaguely possible that Poe would expect his canny readers to recall this review of *Barnaby Rudge* and make the rather obvious connection for themselves, this explanation for Poe's silence on the matter in "The Philosophy of Composition" seems unlikely at best, especially given Poe's tendency to repeat himself from one piece to the next, often quoting entire sentences almost verbatim from earlier works. Instead, Poe here seems to be following the psychological strategy he outlines in "The Purloined Letter" of hiding things in plain sight where they are most likely to be overlooked.

Several pages later in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe goes even further toward concealing the Dickensian source for his raven, suggesting that it was not even the first type of talking bird he considered when planning the poem. He writes,

The next *desideratum* was a pretext for the continuous use of the one word 'nevermore' ... immediately arose the idea of a *non*-reasoning creature capable of speech; and, very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended *tone*. (E&R 18, Poe's emphasis)

Of course the possibility remains that Poe is completely honest when suggesting that he first considered a parrot instead of a raven. One of his first published poems does feature a talking parrot. In his poem "Romance," first published as the "Preface" to *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* (1829), Poe writes that "Romance, who loves to nod and sing / With drowsy head and folded wing,... / To me a painted paroquet / Hath been — a most familiar bird — / Taught me my alphabet to say" (Mabbott 128). In his discussion of possible sources for the poem, Mabbott also acknowledges that a "parrot as a precursor of the Raven is given support in

the otherwise almost valueless *Edgar Allan Poe* (1901), by Colonel John A. Joyce ... [who] claimed that Poe 'plagiarized' his 'Raven' from an Italian poem called 'The Parrot' by Leo Penzoni in the Milan Art Journal of 1809" (353). However, this potential source seems beneath serious consideration since Mabbot also admits that "Penzoni and the periodical are unknown to bibliographers, and the English 'translation' presented is obviously a concoction by Joyce" (353). Even if Joyce's claims have absolutely no merit, the methods through which he levels his charge remain curiously evocative of precisely the same tension that haunts Poe's own poetics. Joyce accuses Poe of plagiarism, which essentially amounts to a clandestine doubling of Penzoni. A plagiarist duplicates the work of another so that he can falsely assume the role of the author. That is, if the charge is true, Poe qua reader has doubled himself as Penzoni qua writer by duplicating "The Parrot" as "The Raven," but if the charge is untrue, Joyce has passed himself off as a counterfeit Penzoni by duplicating "The Raven" as "The Parrot." These doubled texts in turn produce doubled authors even as readers double themselves as authors. Spurious as Joyce's allegations no doubt must be, they are interesting to consider here because this issue Joyce indirectly raises of how authors and readers become doubled through their interaction with texts in fact resides at the heart of Poe's poetics. This may also serve to explain some of Poe's apparent obsession with accusations of plagiarism. False claims of authorship interfere with what Poe views as the natural and perfect identification between authorial intention, textual meaning, and readerly experience.

Quotations, however, have the opposite effect of demonstrating the appropriate ways in which authors and readers become doubled through textual interaction. For this reason, Poe begins his essay by demonstrating precisely such a relationship of textual role reversals taking place between himself and Charles Dickens. And yet, there remains the troubling fact that Poe

seems to deliberately conceal how his own raven secretly doubles that of Dickens in *Barnaby Rudge*. While Poe may be relying on his analytical reader to play detective, recognizing the significance of *Barnaby Rudge* as Dickens's novel containing the talking bird, it seems more likely that Poe's implicit positing of an endlessly interactive relationship between author and reader where the two are constantly changing roles and doubling each other in fact serves as the mechanism by which the shadowy figure of this double raven must be repressed. After all, recognizing one's own doppelgänger remains a experience of intolerable horror to be avoided at penalty of death.

While finding uncanny doubling at work in such an apparently expository piece as "The Philosophy of Composition" may at first seem peculiar, authors and readers seem to be constantly performing precisely this curious doubling of each other in all of his short tales and poems; however, considering Poe's habit of blurring generic boundaries with so much of his writing as well as his steady preoccupation with doppelgängers, one should not be surprised to find uncanny doubles emerging in his essays and reviews as well. Indeed, the effect of textual doubling between authors and readers becomes dizzying in the first paragraph of "The Philosophy of Composition." Dickens writes *Barnaby Rudge*; Poe reads it and writes a review of it; Dickens reads Poe's review and writes a note in response; Poe reads Dickens's note, rewrites it into the context of his own essay. Yet, this is just the beginning, for not only have both authors have acted as readers of *Caleb Williams* and then become writers about it, but this same image repeats itself endlessly outward into our own readerly and writerly practices. Further, Poe has read the raven in *Barnaby Rudge* and then written about his own raven. Finally, and more to the point in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe has written "The Raven," Poe has read "The Raven," and now Poe is writing a reading of "The Raven" that purports to read the writing of

“The Raven.” The layers of textual doubling are seemingly endless. Texts proliferate like reflections in a set of barbershop mirrors facing each other. “The Philosophy of Composition” presents itself as an essay designed to account for and reassert Poe’s originality in composing “The Raven” even as it perversely attempts to re-enforce his authorial control over its meaning by offering a uniquely authoritative reading of the poem. Yet, as we have seen in previous chapters, Poe well knows that texts and language can never function in only intended ways.

Poe Doubling Down on his Poetic Theories

Hinting at *Barnaby Rudge* as the original source of his raven without explicitly revealing it is such a striking move by Poe at least in part because it suggests that despite his assertions to the contrary Poe has determined not to elaborate candidly all the details of his creative process in “The Philosophy of Composition.” Yet by the second and third page of his essay, Poe claims precisely such candor as his planned approach in the essay. Explaining “The Philosophy of Composition” as a uniquely revelatory project, Poe writes, “I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would—that is to say, who could—detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion” (*E&R* 14). Naturally, Poe views himself as precisely the author to perform such close scrutiny of the writing process because as early as his “Letter to Mr.—“ he sets himself in opposition to the Romantic mystification of writing habits he sees in Wordsworth and Coleridge. Poe attributes the relative uncommonness of such honest revelations of writing practices to “authorial vanity” (*E&R* 14), which prefers to shroud creation in mystery. Poe writes, “Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition” (*E&R* 14), he clearly has in mind Coleridge’s supposedly dream-

induced “Kubla Khan” and Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads* with its assertion that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” This pervasive Romantic vision of the solitary genius overpowered by flashes of inspiration contrasts sharply with Poe’s image of the poet as a literary craftsman, and Poe dismisses the former as a self-serving imposture. In contrast, Poe presents a much more chaotic view of the creative process when he asserts,

Most writers ... would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at 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, constituted the properties of the literary *historio*. (*E&R* 14, Poe’s emphasis)

Poe’s theatrical metaphors are apt here (perhaps doubly so), for he proposes in “The Philosophy of Composition” to allow readers behind the curtains of artistic production, to unveil for them at last the untidy truths and secret labors by which poetry comes to be written. With his essay, Poe claims he will “show the *modus operandi* by which some one of my own works was put together” (14), and he selects “The Raven” as the poem he will expose to public scrutiny. Not surprisingly, even as Poe proposes to expose his writing practices with his methodical self-revelation, he begins by establishing his own absolute authorial control over the work.

However, having established his literary credentials by association with Dickens, and by extension Godwin, Poe immediately turns “The Philosophy of Composition” to reiterating the same poetic theories espoused in his earlier reviews and essays. Poe stresses a work’s origins and ultimate meaning in authorial intention as well as the primacy of “unity of effect,” achieved through the author’s careful orchestration of textual construction. As he had first written in his

review of Hawthorne, Poe believes a well-crafted work of appropriate length can assure that “[d]uring the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (*E&R* 572). For Poe, the masterful text can in turn control the totality of the reader’s experience, temporally, physically and spiritually. The difference in “The Philosophy of Composition” is that Poe is no longer extrapolating from his reading of other writers’ texts but claims to describe his own poetic practices which he can then demonstrate as naturally producing a fully authoritative reading of the text.

To foreground the necessity of authorial self-awareness and concomitant textual mastery, Poe presents his familiar central principle of a unified work organized around the achievement of a single effect very early in “The Philosophy of Composition.” Poe states in an disarmingly straightforward manner, “I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect” (13). Elaborating upon this goal, Poe phrases the ideal in a slightly different manner than he has done before, but its essence remains unchanged:

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention. (13).

This notion of a fully imagined *dénouement* which the author keeps in view during the process of composition closely corresponds to Poe’s foremost guiding concept of literary poetics, namely his continual insistence upon a work’s “unity of effect.” As he similarly clarifies elsewhere, Poe views the achievement of this single effect as relying absolutely upon an ideal of writing as meticulous craftsmanship where each part of any given work must be designed and oriented toward its contribution towards a pre-established authorial intention. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, this key concept for Poe has become one that readers of the modern

short story have so thoroughly internalized that Poe's assertion of the principle hardly seems as innovative as it would have been at the time. By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, readers had learned to take completely for granted a work's organization around the a single unifying intention. Fraught with doubts and setbacks as it may be, the compositional process described by Poe still firmly reiterates his primary aesthetic ideal that the author alone bears full responsibility for the work and maintains complete control over the creation of the text. By keeping the "denouement constantly in view," the author ensures that every aspect of the tale or poem leads to "the development of the intention." Interestingly, the reader has been elided from the essay's initial statement of how authorial intention determines textual meaning because for Poe the reader must always remain an essentially passive figure, completely subject to authorial control by means of the well-constructed text.

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe also reiterates his belief in the principles of art for art's sake. Having clarified that he understands a literary work as arising first and foremost from authorial intention, Poe resists any didactic purposes for by claiming, "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem" (16). Poe here closely echoes his earlier statements in the Hawthorne review and elsewhere that "Beauty can be better treated in the poem" (*E&R* 573). Tales are more adapted for expressions of Truth and other purposes, but in any case the goals of an author cannot be proscribed and a work must be assessed only in terms of how well it accomplishes its effect, not criticized in moralist terms for the effect it undertakes. Once again, Poe follows his conviction that the true artist pursuing only the "originality" of his invention cannot be confined by convention or social utility. Poe also clarifies in "The Philosophy of Composition" that by "Beauty" he means "precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect" (*E&R* 16). Thus, even more explicitly than elsewhere Poe demonstrates how his validation of

autotelic art follows as a logical extension of the work's organization around "unity of effect," which in turn remains always subject to absolute authorial control.

One measure of how desperately "The Philosophy of Composition" strives to reassert Poe's original intentions for "The Raven" can be witnessed in the essay's repeated use of the word "force." As Dennis Pahl so keenly observes in his article "De-Composing Poe's 'Philosophy'" (1996), Poe uses the word "force" and variations upon it with alarming frequency in the essay. Concerning the unity of setting in the poem, Poe mentions how the closed chamber gives "the *force* of a frame to a picture" (21, emphasis added). Regarding the repetition of "Nevermore," Poe claims "the refrain ... depends for its impression upon the *force* of monotone" (17, emphasis added). Poe suggests that in order for the refrain "to have *force*, [it] must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis" (18, emphasis added). Poe writes that the "opportunity" to provide variations in meaning to the repeated refrain was "*forced* upon me in the progress of the construction" (19, emphasis added). He considers that "originality" is not a matter of "impulse or intuition" except perhaps "in minds of very unusual *force*" (20, emphasis added). Indeed, because the word "force" occurs in some form on nearly every page of the essay, Pahl argues that the exaggerated repetition signals Poe's unravelling attempt to allow the masculine expository essay to exert mastery over the more "feminine principle of poetry" (Pahl, 1). In so doing, the essay acts as "an extension of the poem, or its double" (Pahl, 1). Regardless of whether one accepts his highly gendered reading of the essay and the poem, Pahl makes an important observation about how the essay and the poem function as doubles even if the essay ultimately cannot use sheer force to limit the meanings of the poem. For his part, Poe seems to recognize this necessary surplus of possible meanings when he writes near the end of "The Philosophy of Composition" that it is the "under current, however indefinite of meaning ...

which imparts to a work of art so much of that *richness* (to borrow from colloquy a forcible term)” (24, Poe’s emphasis). Ironically, if Poe could ultimate enforce only authorial meanings onto his text, he would deprive it of that same “richness” which he clearly values.

Yet, even as Poe recognizes the problems inherent in an excess of authorial control, his essay still strives to enforce that control by weaving his own (readerly) interpretations into the recounting of (authorial) compositional practice. Once Poe has established his more abstract intentions for the poem — that it not be too long to read at one sitting, that it remain “not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste” (16), that it concern Kantian “Beauty [which] is the sole legitimate province of the poem” (16), that its tone be melancholy which is “the most legitimate of all the poetical tones” (17), and that it use a repeated refrain as the “pivot upon which the whole structure might turn” (17) — he shifts into explaining his more specific choices. For example, he discusses how he came to choose “Nevermore” as the poem’s burden, or repeated refrain, based upon its combination of sounds; however, a subtle shift occurs as Poe’s analysis of his process become more minute. Poe moves into the role of interpretive guide when he describes the selected refrain as the ideal word “in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem” (18). By shifting from mere reportage about his material selections as the craftsman who constructed the poem, Poe adopts a mode where he begins to explain his artistic choices in terms of the meanings they are meant to impart to the ideal reader, a role Poe finds himself perfectly adept at playing.

Other critics have also noticed the perversity of Poe’s attempting to function as both the author and his ideal reader by writing an authoritative reading of his own poem. In “Poe’s Composition of Philosophy: Reading and Writing ‘The Raven,’” Leland S. Person suggests that “the poem and the essay are ‘doubles’” that “interpret or ‘read’ each other, at least in the sense

that interpretation, or reading, as become a reiteration, or echo — a rewriting” (248). Though Person does not engage in a psychoanalytic reading, his use of the term “doubles” here is striking, as is his claim that Poe performs an auto-deconstruction in “The Philosophy of Composition” because his authoritative interpretation of the poem “depends upon a perfect, logical relationship between authorial intention and what he calls ‘effect’” because such an “intention to produce an effect is always matched immediately, he would have us believe, by the perfect word” (242). While Person contends that Poe cannot be in earnest when he posits this relationship, I would argue that this remains precisely the relationship Poe attempts to maintain between authorial intention and “unity of effect.” However, as Poe remains painfully aware, as evidenced by his simple need to write “The Philosophy of Composition” re-enforce his authorial intention for “The Raven,” even the “perfect word” can be corrupted by context and relies upon a corresponding perfect interpretation by an ideal reader.

Thus, in “The Philosophy of Composition” and his other essays, Poe’s conception of an author’s absolute control over textual meaning cannot help but find itself always already undermined by its concomitant reliance upon the reader’s experience of the work. Under Poe’s poetics, the reader remains the ultimate destination where any intended meanings must ultimately be verified. Poe’s conception of the author as craftsman carries with it a constant awareness of a work’s intended audience. Poe writes that when he first contemplated undertaking poem that would later become “The Raven” he was aware of “the intention of composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste” (15). While this sort of intention plainly falls into the category that Peter Shillingsburg has described as the “intention to do” rather than the “intention to mean,” in Poe’s understanding both sorts of intentions remain within the scope of authorial control. Poe’s further clarification that once he

had determined to write such a poem, his “initial consideration” to write a poem not “too long to be read at one sitting” (15) begins to indicate his design to control the “intention to mean” as well by extending the author’s concern into the reader’s experience of the work. Reiterating a point made so frequently in his earlier essays, Poe refuses to “dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed” (15). Interestingly, while remaining adamant about the author’s need to ensure the “unity of impression,” Poe cannot help implicitly locating the measure of a work’s “totality” within the experience of the reader. Thus, even as he attempts to reiterate the aesthetic theories articulated in his earlier essays and reviews, Poe finds himself returning again to the same central paradox: the tension between authorial intention and readerly interpretation for control of textual meaning.

In some ways, “The Philosophy of Composition” represents Poe’s last major attempt to overcome the central tension in his poetic theories by (re)establishing once and for all a condition of absolute authorial control over textual meaning. With this essay, Poe seeks to enforce authorial control over his most popular and widely read poem, “The Raven.” While he does not describe the author’s and reader’s dispute over control of textual meaning in precisely the terms of the paradox it embodies, the problem still stands forth in stark contrast to the authorial command over textual creation that he describes in such rigorous terms. He writes of his compositional process that “the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (15). The tone Poe adopts here cannot help but suggest an almost mechanistic approach toward his poetic processes, but it also belies the loss of control an author necessarily undergoes when the successful completion of his “unity of effect” ultimately relies upon the reader’s experience of the text, which of course it

must do.

“The Limit of a Single Sitting”

In “The Philosophy of Composition” as in his earlier essays, perhaps the clearest manifestation of Poe’s desire for control over textual meaning emerges when he uses “the limit of a single sitting” to portray the ideal length of a work for optimal authorial control (*E&R* 15). Though he tellingly makes no explicit mention of the reader here, Poe’s familiar term for measuring the length of a work also implies the required posture and attitude of his ideal reader. Thus, Poe necessarily imagines authorial control as extending not only over the temporal experience of the reader but also over the reader’s body. In this essay as elsewhere, Poe consistently focuses on the physical posture of the reader, physically sitting down and remaining seated during an uninterrupted perusal of the text, is precisely what Poe views as ensuring the “intensity of the intended effect” (*E&R* 15). Thus Poe reiterates his earlier insistence in the Hawthorne review of works being “read at one sitting” to ensure “the immense force derivable from *totality*” (*E&R* 572) . That is, in order to prevent the erosion of authorial control and to ensure the poem’s reception in its full “totality,” Poe wants to keep his ideal reader in a passive, even subservient posture. The idea of “sitting” here then refers not only to the limited amount of time the author expects to control the reader’s experience but also to the physical, and psychological, attitude of the reader.

Not surprisingly, Poe offers a vision of the reader starkly at odds with that of his contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson, who published “The Poet” in his *Essays: Second Series* in October 1844, just a few months before “The Raven” appeared in print. In “The Poet,” Emerson offers his famous theory of poetry where “expression is organic, or, the new type which things

themselves take when liberated” (458). Emerson’s view of poetic creation follows that of the Romantics, not meticulous and methodical but spontaneous and overflowing: “The poet knows that he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly” (459). Not surprisingly, Emerson sets himself at odds with Poe in terms of the author’s relationship to the reader as well. Emerson sees the role of the author as freeing rather than controlling. He writes, “The poets are thus liberating gods.... They are free, and they make free. An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author” (462). By contrast, Poe considers the reader’s arrival at this “precise sense of the author” as the ultimate purpose of the reading experience. In place of a liberated reader, Poe reiterates the image of a seated reader throughout “The Philosophy of Composition.” He expounds, “If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression” (15). The importance of this seated position is borne out as Poe elaborates on this image by stating that “if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed” (15). Not only does an inadequately attentive and dedicated reader pose a significant threat to the author’s intentional “totality” of the work, but a reader who becomes too active or engaged will corrupt the textual experience of authorial intention. To maintain the “immensely important effect” the reader must remain isolated from “the affairs of the world,” not allowing them to “interfere” with the work because otherwise its “totality is at once destroyed.” For Poe, the stakes could scarcely be higher. However, if the reader remains appropriately passive within the bounds of “one sitting” then the text can function as it has been constructed to do, ensuring that readerly experience of the work exactly duplicates authorial intention. No wonder that Poe is so concerned with “the limit of a single sitting” (15), for as he explains, “Within this limit, the

extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit” (15). In Poe’s equation then, the ideal reader exists in a form without individuality or variability, performing a role roughly equivalent to that of a mathematical constant; the reader merely ensures the smooth functioning of the authorial approved system of textual meaning.

Though Poe never explicitly states his intended “single effect” for “The Philosophy of Composition,” clearly foremost among Poe’s goals for the essay is the enforcement of authorial control over any divergent meanings of “The Raven.” This design becomes apparent as Poe’s essay inexorably shifts away from describing the composition of the poem to providing his own authoritative reading of it. Simple explication shades into narrative that then gives way to critical analysis. This gradual process of erasure can be witnessed at work in the following passage Poe sets about explaining how he designed a plausible reason for the raven’s repetition of the refrain:

And here it was that I saw at once the opportunity afforded for the effect on which I had been depending—that is to say, the effect of the *variation of application*. I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover—the first query to which the Raven should reply “Nevermore”—that I could make this first query a commonplace one—the second less so—the third still less, and so on—until at length the lover, startled from his original *nonchalance* by the melancholy character of the word itself—by its frequent repetition—and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it—is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character—queries whose solution he has passionately at heart—propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture—propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a phrenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the *expected* “Nevermore” the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrow. (19, Poe’s emphasis)

Within the byzantine perambulations of this exceedingly long sentence, Poe effects an important

shift in the character of his exposition. Initially, he merely reports his composition process as one of discovery but through the slow and steady permutations of attitude, he arrives at a very different perspective. This sentence shows the figure of the enthusiastic author transmogrifying himself, phrase by phrase, into the apotheosis of the insightful reader. If texts can only mean what the author intends, then what role finally belongs to the reader? But what becomes of the extra-textual reader remains one of the inevitable queries suggested by Poe's forceful attempt to reform his reader into a double of the author. As Karin Littau insightfully summarizes the problem in her *Theories of Reading* (2006), "Putting this question slightly differently, we might ask: what are the consequences of there being, as suggested above, no reader other than, it would seem, a textual one, that is, a reader who is already written?" (122). The solution Poe implicitly offers with "The Philosophy of Composition" suggests that the proliferation of uncanny doubles emerges as one of the primary functions of texts. In such a formulation, authors are texts are readers. Thus, even as Poe works his way through these interpretive questions about "The Raven," posing "queries whose solution he has passionately at heart," his essay itself comes to embody the perfect doubling of author and reader in the text. When considering the way in which Poe represents the author and reader acting as doubles of each other in this text, something more than the mere adoption of opposite roles emerges. As Poe amply shows in "William Wilson" and his other tales of uncanny doubling, such figures can never exist peacefully together. Indeed, the understanding of Poe's poetic theories which I have endeavored to develop here should quite naturally lend itself to many more insightful readings of Poe's other works, many of which more overtly expose the figure of the doppelgänger.

Updating and expanding Freud's explication of the uncanny double, Lacan provides insights that help to explain why, for Poe, the double begins to emerge as an uncanny figure who

haunts all texts. Describing why uncanniness adheres to the trope of the double, Žižek explains,

Here, one has to go beyond the standard “Lacanian” reduction of the motif of a double to imaginary mirror relationship: at its most fundamental, the double embodies the phantom-like Thing in me; that is to say, the dissymmetry between me and my double is ultimately that between the (ordinary) object and the (sublime) Thing. In my double, I don’t simply encounter myself (my mirror image), but first of all what is “in me more than myself”: the double is “myself,” yet—to put it in Spinozian terms—conceived under another modality, under the modality of the other, sublime, ethereal body, a pure substance of enjoyment exempted from the circuit of generation and corruption. (144)

What Žižek suggests here that one’s double must be viewed as unbearable precisely because it embodies and inhabits all the enjoyable aspects of the self without having to bear the accompanying internal difficulties of anxiety, self-doubt, self-loathing, etc. For Poe, such a view corresponds to how authors must scale their work to conform with readers’ expectations and how readers can often find themselves delighted and yet horrified by encounters with works of original genius. In his review of Hawthorne, Poe writes if authors’ works do not appear familiar enough, the reader “is excited, but embarrassed, disturbed, in some degree even pained at this own want of perception, at his own folly in not having himself hit upon the idea” (*E&R* 581). In Freud’s conception, such an experience corresponds to that which is not truly uncanny because it remains merely strange and unfamiliar; however, Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich* relates very closely to the opposite circumstance Poe describes when a reader identifies with the author and experiences authorial intention as a textual embodiment of his own thoughts. Poe explains,

In the second case, [the reader’s] pleasure is doubled. He is filled with an intrinsic and extrinsic delight. He feels and intensely enjoys the seeming novelty of thought, enjoys it as really novel, as absolutely original with the writer—and himself. They two he fancies, have, alone of all men, thought thus. They two have, together, created this thing. (*E&R*, 581)

Written decades before Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" and over a hundred years before Lacan's explication of the *doppelgänger*, Poe's language in this passage seems itself almost uncannily psychoanalytic. Poe even describes the reader's pleasure in the text as being "doubled." Yet, the "thing" that author and reader have created together cannot help but possess another dimension beyond its "pure substance of enjoyment" (to echo Žižek's Lacanian phrase). For as Žižek asserts, this "pure substance of enjoyment" represents that which the double possesses and the self cannot. This "thing" is ultimately nothing other than Lacan's *objet petit a*, which represents the "*unheimliches* surplus forever missing in the mirror image" (144). In the end, this image of the double always immediately turns the strangeness back onto the self. Encountering one's double necessarily entails the horror of viewing the self as radically other. As Žižek describes this unbearably asymmetrical relationship: "the price to be paid for my image to retain its harmonious consistency is that the entire horror of its amorphous leftover falls into me" (145). Ultimately the self then becomes the monstrous one, the evil twin of this pairing. According to Žižek,

The lesson of the dialectic of the double is therefore the discordance between eye and gaze: there certainly is in the mirror image "more than meets the eye," yet this surplus that eludes the eye, the point in the image which eludes my eye's grasp, is none other than *the gaze itself*: as Lacan put it, "you can never see me at the point from which I gaze at you." (145, Žižek's emphasis)

For this reason, there can never be a simple or peaceful equivalency between doubles; the very existence of one's double always carries with it the inevitable recognition of the monstrous object in oneself, the horrific point at which the self becomes nothing more than the gaze. As demonstrated in so many stories of the uncanny double (including Poe's own tales on the theme), this relationship between doubles always ends badly, usually with one double violently killing the other and in the process killing himself. Indeed, this complex problem of the double is

precisely what remains at stake in “The Philosophy of Composition” when Poe doubles himself as author while also doubling the reader of his poem.

The author, however, can never view himself from precisely the point at which the reader views the him; neither can the reader view himself from the position of the author. Both of these conditions are true, not in spite of the power of textual doubling, but precisely for the reason that the author and the reader remain doubles of each other. Thus, as he must do, Poe ultimately fails to reclaim in any sort of triumphant and unequivocal way his own authorial intentions for “The Raven” in this follow-up essay where he performs an analytical reading of his own poem’s reputed origins does not, however, mean that Poe cannot be in earnest with his essay’s attempt to do so. Rather, Poe demonstrates the uncanny doubling of author and reader that inevitably happens with the writing and reading of texts. While I maintain that Poe does in fact believe in this direct correlation between authorial intention and “unity of effect,” at least as an ideal. For Poe, authorial intention remains a sort of North Star for all readerly navigation through the seas of a text; however, just as with that celestial body, the enduring value of that distant light resides not in its attainability but precisely in its fixed and unattainable position. If such a position were actually attainable, if the reader could actually fully inhabit the place of authorial intention, its very position as a guiding ideal would be nullified.

Theories of Authorial Intention

Poe’s attempt in “The Philosophy of Composition” to resume control over the public meaning of a published work is not unique in literary history. Henry James attempts much the same activity in his New York Prefaces to his collected tales. James also very pointedly asserted an authoritative reading of “The Turn of the Screw” as a supernatural, Victorian ghost story, but

of course his claims to the contrary can ultimately do nothing to prevent other readings. Edmund Wilson's influential reading of the governess as a psychological case study of sexual repression proves a powerful example. Indeed, critics often find authors to be such notoriously unreliable readers of their own work — as intentional creators they tend to balk at allowing their own deliberately chosen words the interpretive play inherent in the very function of language. As Wimsatt and Beardsley recognize in "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), an author's explicit commentary on his own works is potentially harmful and diverting to the literary critic. Textual meaning cannot be limited by authorial intention.

While it's true that this remote ideal is dramatically represented as unattainable in "The Raven" (as well as in many other of Poe's poems and tales), from this consistent portrayal in Poe's work, it does not necessarily follow that Poe's assertion of the ideal's utility cannot be sincere. Indeed, in a similar paradox, many textual theorists of our own era continue to allow the necessity of reading for authorial intention even though arrival at any definitive understanding of true authorial intention is always already forestalled by the nature of what Jerome McGann has famously described as the "textual condition." In the introduction to his seminal book *The Textual Condition* (1991), McGann observes the extreme degree to which the contemporary scholarly view of text has severed it from its writerly origins: "Today, texts are largely imagined as scenes of reading rather than scenes of writing. This 'readerly' view of text has been most completely elaborated through the modern hermeneutical tradition in which text is not something we *make* but something we *interpret*" (4, McGann's emphasis). McGann proposes another way of considering texts, one that incorporates an essential understanding that texts only exist as "materially and socially defined" and that "readings, as Derrida has shown, are structured philosophically—and historically actuated—as writings" (8). In this McGannian view, the

physical embodiment of a text is not seen as the failure of some romantic ideal, but rather as the very condition under which texts exist at all, and as such all “[t]exts vary from themselves (as it were) immediately, as soon as they engage with the readers they anticipate” (9-10). For McGann then, texts can never merely be adequately understood as flawed vehicles for authorial intention any more than they can be usefully seen as the imperfect embodiments of a solitary writer’s flash of genius. Both notions mistakenly insert a damaged hermeneutics into their ontology of the text.

In the end, that critical analysis of “The Philosophy of Composition” has so frequently resorted to claiming the essay as an imposture precisely because critics have been unable or unwilling to credit Poe’s implicit understanding and deep recognition of the profound paradox of the textual condition. Poe’s impossibly elaborate essay strains our credulity precisely because it claims a privileged but illicit relationship between text and author as reader, and thereby exposes and discredits a number of our most cherished illusions about the complex relationships between and among author, text, and reader. That is to say, in much the same way that his detective tales evade the central questions of morality and mortality by answering these ethical and metaphysical problems with the transposition of exhaustive revelations about the minute circumstances leading up to the central crime of murder, Poe’s essay responds to the curious reader’s musings upon the endless mystery of “authorial intention” by recounting the particulars of compositional craftsmanship in tedious detail. In doing so, Poe does not — indeed cannot — clarify or add to the reader’s understanding of the poem. Instead, whether wittingly or not (and perhaps as part of a literary experiment), Poe demonstrates the irreconcilable disjunction between authorial intention and textual meaning. Ultimately, each reader must encounter the text on his own and find his own meanings, and the reader accomplishes this by imagining his

own “authorial intention” as a construct unique to his own experience.

Indeed, I would argue that by dismissing Poe’s essay as a hoax or “put-on,” or by seeing it as a subversion of his own aesthetic principles is to miss the fact that not only is “The Philosophy of Composition” an effective reiteration of Poe’s aesthetic principles but also a powerful manifestation of the central tension at work throughout all of his writing — his essays, his poems, and his fiction. This failure to recognize the “The Philosophy of Composition” as occupying the central maelstrom of Poe’s aesthetic imagination demonstrates the profound historical limitations of our critical understanding of Poe’s theories and evinces the almost preternatural degree to which Poe’s works continually revolve around the very same central issues of authorship, readership and textual meaning that we continue to grapple with in the early twenty-first century. Further, as I have mentioned elsewhere, Poe’s participation in what has been (perhaps inelegantly and sometimes anachronistically) termed “postmodern” thought helps to account for the impressive recent (re)surgence in Poe studies during the last two decades and at the outset of the digital age. A fresh understanding of Poe’s poetics opens up new way of reading all of Poe’s work. Under such a view, the figure of the doppelgänger can serve a powerful tool for observing how Poe’s poetic theories inform his invention of the author/reader in his Dupin tales, his use of secret writing in “The Gold Bug” and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, his exploration of tortured liminality of “The Facts of the Case M. Valdemar,” and of course the horror inherent in his tales of uncanny doubles like “William Wilson” and “Ligeia.”

Chapter 6:

A Reading of “Ligeia” and Concluding Remarks

In its examination of Poe’s poetic theories and how they inform his poetry and tales, this project has applied three different literary critical approaches (literary history, textual theory, and psychoanalytic theory) in a manner designed to address the shortcomings of all three modalities, putting them into conversation with each other to construct a uniquely complex analytic device. The goal of this combined approach has been to open up more richly nuanced readings of Poe’s individual works than would be possible using any one of these approaches in isolation. The following reading of “Ligeia” is presented here as an example of precisely the sort of textual analysis that becomes available through a historio-textual-psychoanalytic understanding of Poe’s poetic theories as proposed in this dissertation.

“What marvel that I shudder while I write?”:

The Uncanny Doubling of Author and Reader in Poe’s “Ligeia”

The uncanny double abounds in Poe’s work. Understanding why the doppelgänger represents the crucial figure in Poe’s writing requires close examination of the poetic theories Poe develops in his literary criticism, for it is there that Poe posits the well-crafted text as the perfect embodiment of an author’s intention and the ideal instrument for ensuring “the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (*E&R* 572). Still, Poe also knows well that texts need readers to interpret them. While this irreconcilable tension arguably underlies every text in Poe’s body of work, it manifests itself variously in his burlesques and satires, in his hoaxes and exposes, in his seminal tales of ratiocination and cryptic writing, in his poetry, and perhaps more

dramatically in his tales of terror. Not surprisingly, given its source in the impossibly vexed relationship between author and reader, this tension frequently inhabits Poe's texts with an author/reader doppelgänger. Indeed, viewed through the lens of his literary poetics, Poe's work repeatedly reveals the return of this uncanny double as a shadowy textual figure that allows both the author and the reader to recognize himself in the other. One of Poe's earliest published stories and one that he revised extensively for republication throughout his career, "Ligeia" provides an especially potent example of how the latent tensions in Poe's poetic principles manifest in the form of a doppelgänger, that Freudian uncanny double whose *unheimliches* trait is manifesting the Lacanian *objet petit a*, that mysterious something "in me more than myself." As such, is it any wonder that Poe would call this "my *best* tale" (*T&S* 1364)?

Even at its most superficial narrative level, "Ligeia" tells a quintessentially Gothic tale of love unconquered by death. The nameless narrator relates how he pines endlessly over his dead first wife, the lovely Ligeia. He waxes rhapsodic over the "strangeness" of her "exquisite beauty" (*P&T* 263), gushes about her "raven-black ... tresses" (*P&T* 263), and dilates at no small length upon the remarkable expressiveness of her eyes (*P&T* 264-5). As if her unsurpassable beauty were not enough, her learning is also immense. She studies alchemy and other arcane topics; the narrator says, "Her presence, her readings alone, rendered vividly luminous the many mysteries of the transcendentalism in which we were immersed" (*P&T* 266). Some time after Ligeia dies, apparently "through the weakness of [her] feeble will" (*P&T* 269), the still grieving narrator marries a bland blue-eyed blonde named Rowena whom he "loathed ... with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (*P&T* 272), seemingly for the simple fact that she was not Ligeia. The narrator becomes a "bounden slave in the trammels of opium" (*P&T* 270), and the unhappy couple retreat to a pentagonal chamber in the turret of a remote

abbey. The vaulted ceiling of the room is “elaborately fretted with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidical device” (*P&T* 270). The carpet is “spotted all over, at irregular intervals, with arabesque figures ... wrought upon the cloth in the most jetty black” (*P&T* 271). In due course, Rowena too succumbs to illness, repeating the familiar pattern and redoubling the narrator’s widowhood. In a bizarre hallucinatory sequence the narrator becomes “distinctly aware of a gentle foot-fall upon the carpet” and relates that “as Rowena was in the act of raising wine to her lips, I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of brilliant and ruby colored fluid” (*P&T* 273). Later, as the narrator sits in wake over Rowena’s enshrouded corpse, the spirit of Ligeia gradually takes possession of the dead body, reforming it in her own image so that it becomes taller and reveals “disheveled hair ... blacker than the wings of the midnight” (*P&T* 277). The tale’s mounting terror reaches its climax as the revenant figure opens her eyes to gaze into those of the narrator. He shrieks and calls out the name Ligeia. The end.

Of course, one need not be an aficionado of Poe’s work to recognize that “Ligeia” reproduces the same structure that Poe revisits in many of his stories and poems, including his most famous work, “The Raven,” with its haunted persona grieving over his lost love forever more. Indeed, in his “Philosophy of Composition” (1846) which purports to recount his step-by-step processes for writing “The Raven,” Poe claims, “When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (*E&R* 19). One of Poe’s most critically cited and notorious pronouncements for its alleged revelation of his misogyny, this statement in fact does little more than summarize a

longstanding staple in Gothic romance, the basic theme of love supernaturally conquering death. As such, it represents a theme to which Poe returns often. Poe's most immediate and direct source for "Ligeia" has long been identified as occurring in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820). In that romance, the protagonist's first wife Rebecca is accused of witchcraft and his second is a blond named Rowena. Poe's transcendentalist Ligeia character studies alchemy, a branch of arcane knowledge not unlike witchcraft. The pentagonal room in the tower with its fiery censer and the mysterious drops of ruby liquid (perhaps an *elixir vitae*) all hint at witchcraft, as does of course Ligeia's supernatural return from the dead. Noted Poe scholar and editor Thomas Ollive Mabbott suggests another possible source for this tale in the anecdote of "A Madman's Manuscript" in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, a book that Poe reviewed enthusiastically in the *Southern Literary Messenger* (Nov. 1836). In his review, Poe quoted at length from this particular anecdote from the eleventh chapter of the novel. Mabbott proposes yet another possible influence on "Ligeia" in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*, a picaresque tale of metempsychosis that Poe also favorably reviewed in the pages of the *Southern Literary Messenger* (Sept. 1836). Not only does Bird's novel recount the movement of a single narrator's spirit among several bodies, but in his review Poe expounds upon those elements of the fantastic that he finds most acceptable in tales of wonder, citing these as invisible persons, the elixirs of life, and the Wandering Jew. As Mabbott points out, Poe "used the first two, and perhaps the third, in 'Ligeia'" (T&S 307). That Poe's writing should be so influenced by his reading comes as no surprise. The same could be said of any author. However, observing these close connections between Poe's reading, his reviews where he begins to discuss writing as craft, and his tales where he puts theory into practice all serve to indicate just how intimately related all these activities are for him.

Often recognized as one of his most succinct explanations of his own literary poetics, Poe's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in *Graham's Magazine* (April-May 1842) sets forth several key principles to which Poe consistently adheres both in his estimation of others' work and in the crafting of his own. As a fundamental principle for both authors and critics, Poe insists upon an unwavering conception of art for art's sake. In his view, any work of art must be appreciated and evaluated entirely on its own terms. Poe claims that a "true critic will but demand that the design intended be accomplished, the fullest extent, by the means most advantageously applicable" (*E&R* 573). Not surprisingly, this principle of autotelic art places Poe at odds with many of his contemporaries who view art's function more in terms of social or moral utility, but Poe elsewhere dismisses such notions as the "heresy of *The Didactic*" (*E&R* 75). Sadly, moralistic modern day critics continue to dismiss Poe's entire poetics as an emphasis on style over substance and a shallowly defiant credo of art for art's sake, but such is not the sum total of Poe's literary poetics. Further, fellow American aesthete Henry James expresses the same insistence on art for art's sake in his own essays and the literary prefaces to his frequently uncanny tales.

More significant for Poe, however, is the stress he places throughout many of his book reviews and other critical essays upon the importance of a well-crafted work's unwavering focus on achieving a single preconceived "effect." In his review of *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe explains how "in almost all classes of composition, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance" (*E&R* 571). Later in the same article, Poe reiterates this principle of "totality" or "single effect" (*E&R* 572, Poe's emphasis), and of Hawthorne in particular he writes,

A skilful [sic] literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a

certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (*E&R* 572, Poe's emphasis)

With this first principle, Poe describes literary art as a type of meticulous craftsmanship where each part of any given work must contribute toward achieving the single central goal of authorial intention for the piece. Poe's second principle also becomes clear in the above quote as he insists upon absolute authorial control over the text, and by extension the reader's subsequent experience of it. This same poetic principle also explains Poe's preference for shorter works, which afford better opportunities for the author to control the reader's experience. Writing that Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* offers exemplary works of short fiction, Poe explains,

We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal. The ordinary novel is objectionable, for its length. ... As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality*. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fulness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. (*E&R* 572, Poe's emphasis)

Of particular significance in this passage is how steadily Poe's insistence on strict authorial control over the text extends into his complete mastery of the reading experience. Initially, he merely seeks to limit the intrusion of "worldly interests" that might distract a reader from the work, but ultimately what Poe desires is no less than authorial control over "the soul of the reader." Expressed thus, Poe's literary poetics begin to take on a darker dimension in terms of

the inevitable negotiation of textual meaning between an author's intention and reader's interpretation. Inhabiting tales and poems richly stocked with code writing and purloined letters, with newspaper articles and rare volumes of arcane lore, with recited poems and falsified quotations, Poe's characters are constantly being described as readers and writers. They people a densely literary world. However, given the forcefulness of his poetics regarding this relationship between author and reader, Poe's work deserves particular scrutiny when contested textuality comes into play, as it frequently does. Similarly, recognizing the strength of Poe's convictions regarding absolute authorial control remains essential when accounting for his problematic posture in essays such as "The Philosophy of Composition," which exhibits an almost desperate compulsiveness as it retroactively attempts to reassert authorial control over readings of "The Raven." In fact, this essay and its relation to "The Raven" are at the crux of understanding both Poe's poetics and his literary achievement, for they embody the central tension in Poe's work: his horror at the loss of authorial control. However, because the struggles between author and reader for control of textual meaning are central to Poe's understanding of his craft, this same telltale horror cannot help but lie at the heart of nearly every piece in his body of work. As one of his most characteristic and substantially revised tales, "Ligeia" stands forth as a particularly useful text for observing how Poe's poetic theories not only inform the composition of his works but also begin to haunt them with uncanny doubles of authors and readers.

In "Ligeia," Poe's emphasis on intertextuality and practices of reading and writing makes itself apparent even before the start of the narrative proper. As he so often does, Poe introduces his tale with an epigraph from a noted authority in one discipline or another. In this case, he selects an apt quotation from English clergyman and moralist James Glanvill:

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 to death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will. (*P&T* 262)

Poe apparently intends this epigraph not only to gesture toward his own erudition and breadth of reading but also to prepare the way for the supernatural conclusion of the forthcoming tale by suggesting the potential power of will to overcome even death. The problem with this quotation is that its authenticity is either mistaken or blatantly fraudulent. During the nearly two hundred intervening years since the story's first publication, scholars have been unable to locate or verify the source of this quote. Giving voice to the most commonly held critical judgment, the latest edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* notes that Poe most likely fabricated the quotation "as was his habit" (citation). However, Poe clearly expects such issues of factuality to remain absent from the reader's experience during the "hour of perusal." Thus, even before the reader encounters the tale's first-person narrator in the next line, Poe has already begun to ventriloquize external authority in his attempts to exert absolute authorial control over every aspect of his text. For the purposes of "Ligeia," this quote derives from Glanvill and it expresses the reality that the will might in fact conquer death. Notably, this "Glanvill" quote is offered not only as an epigraph before the tale but is subsequently repeated three more times during the course of the tale, once by the narrator and then twice more by Ligeia upon her deathbed. The exaggerated use of this "quotation" not only contributes to the uncanny effect of the tale by subtly preparing the reader for the shocking denouement, but its repetition by different characters serves to unmoor it from its origins and suggest how reading shades into (re)writing. Through recontextualization and repetition, these same words gradually acquire additional significance independent of any authorial intention, which can never be verified or maintained in any case.

A similar problematic of textual origins and authorial intention obtains in the story's inclusion of five stanzas of morbid lyrical verse. The poem is woven into the narrative of the

tale and its composition is attributed to Ligeia herself, although the narrator indicates that it is he who recites the lines. He reports, “At high noon on the night in which she departed, beckoning me, peremptorily, to her side, she bade me repeat certain verses composed by herself not many days before” (*P&T* 268). Interestingly, although the middle phrases of this sentence at first seem to be adverbial modifiers describing how Ligeia “bade [him] repeat certain verses,” the grammar of this sentence is actually ambiguous enough to allow the dependent clauses, “beckoning me, peremptorily, to her side,” to instead indicate an effect of her departing. Even if not literally true, this second possible interpretation resonates with the overall theme of the tale. With the inherent tension between its more literal mimetic meaning and its figurative diegetic meaning, this sentence may indicate that Poe deliberately leaves more than a few aspects of this narrative open to various interpretations. Under his edict of absolute authorial control, this ambiguity further suggests that Poe may be playing with different levels of meaning in order to heighten the reader’s experience of this textual ambiguity. Such an authorial strategy is further implied by the fact that, within the diegetic context of the tale, this poem’s message undermines the ersatz Glanvill quotation which asserts a potential triumph of human will over death itself.

That motley drama!—oh, be sure
 It shall not be forgot!
With its Phantom chased forevermore,
 By a crowd that seize it not,
Though a circle that ever returneth in
 The self-same spot,
And much of Madness and more of Sin,
 And Horror the soul of the plot....

And the angels, all pallid and wan,
 Uprising, unveiling, affirm

That the play is the tragedy, "Man,"
And its hero the Conqueror Worm.
(*P&T* 268-9)

By suggesting that all of humanity is merely food for worms, Ligeia's poem, composed mere days before her death, would seem to run counter to the hopeful promise of the epigraph. However, in response to hearing her own verse read back to her, Ligeia repeats the final sentence of that "Glanvill quotation" as she interrogates God in a critique of the poem's grim assertions. She says,

"O God! O Divine Father!—shall these things be undeviatingly so?—shall this Conqueror be not once conquered? Are we not part and parcel in Thee? Who—who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield him to the angels, *nor unto death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." (*P&T* 269)

On the one hand, Ligeia's deathbed appeal to God merely stands as yet another Gothic convention. However, on the other hand, this plaintive appeal to the Author of All Things, that God whom Poe tells us (in the voice of Glanvill) "is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness" (*P&T* 262), remains remarkable in a character whom we have been told possesses "immense" learning and "erudition" (*P&T* 266), whose "presence, her readings alone, rendered vividly luminous the many mysteries of ... transcendentalism" (*P&T* 266), and for whom the narrator tells us "[w]ords are impotent to convey any just idea of the fierceness of resistance with which she wrestled with the Shadow" (*P&T* 267). If God's will pervades all things, then it is clearly Ligeia's "presence" and "will" that pervades this entire tale. One begins to sense already that Ligeia is not only the character whose name stands as the very title of the present tale, nor is she merely asserted as the intra-textual author of this embedded poem, but if her "will" is sufficiently strong she can in fact supplant the nameless narrator to become the authorial presence that determines her own tale. But this is rushing to the conclusion.

Before expiring on her deathbed after hearing no divine reply to her pleas, Ligeia repeats yet again that last line from the faux Glanvill epigraph. Not only are these “quoted” words her last, but by way of introducing Ligeia’s final instance of direct address, the narrator reminds his reader yet again that these are “again, the concluding words of the passage in Glanvill” (*P&T* 269). The intense strangeness of Poe’s textual layering in this section of the story can scarcely be understated. Indeed, the diegetic levels of interchangeability between authors and readers here begin to warrant a more thorough explication before one proceeds to the still more convoluted textual history of this poem’s late insertion into the tale. At Ligeia’s request, the narrator recites her own recently composed verses back to her, so that an author becomes the audience to a reading of her own work. In response to this reading, Ligeia offers a prayer to God in which she quotes Glanvill, so that a reader reiterates and recontextualizes words that someone else has written while addressing the figure of ultimate authority.

All of the above instances of reading, reciting, authoring and such remain of course subsumed under the larger diegetic reality of a narrative titled “Ligeia” which is putatively being written by the nameless narrator, who for his part makes frequent reference to his compositional activities. From the very first sentence of the story, the narrator demonstrates self-consciousness about the telling of this tale, specifically alluding to his inadequacy to the task: “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia” (*P&T* 262). Similarly, he relates that he has no recollection of Ligeia’s patronymic. He has never known the name of her father. Besides these failings of his own memory, the narrator frequently employs throughout the tale the common trope of words being insufficient to convey his meaning or describe his experiences. He invokes this inherent limitation in the power of language itself most especially while writing about Ligeia. For example, he claims, “I would in

vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease of her demeanor” (*P&T* 262). In his lengthy descriptions of Ligeia’s eyes, the narrator finds himself at no loss for words but still laments the limits of language:

The “strangeness,” however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the *expression*. Ah, word of no meaning! behind whose vast latitude of mere sound we intrench our ignorance of so much of the spiritual. The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it—that something more profound than the well of Democritus—which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What *was* it? (*P&T* 264)

There is more than a little punning in the power of Ligeia’s “eyes” to overmaster the “I” of this first-person narrator, and in fact this threat is literalized in the terrifying climax of the tale. Yet such rhapsodic empty descriptions of one’s love object still lie well within the conventions of Gothic and sensationalist fiction, and Poe’s narrator uses these to good effect; however, coming as a description of Ligeia’s eyes in specific this passage provides still further interpretive possibilities that reflect directly upon the narrator’s putative status as “author” of this tale.

Indeed, the eyes of Ligeia dominate not only the narrator’s description of his lost love but eventually overwhelm the entire narration of the story as her spirit returns from death to reanimate the enshrouded body of Rowena. As apparently through sheer *will*, the revenant Ligeia possesses the corpse of her husband’s new bride, the narrator recounts that he becomes transfixed in a manner not unlike Poe’s ideal reader. He writes, “I resolutely and perseveringly kept my attention riveted upon the body” (*P&T* 274). The body in question is that of the deceased Rowena, but the reader is given to understand within the narrator’s complex of hopes and fears that he expects Ligeia’s spirit may return to (re)animate this empty vessel. The

narrator claims the physical torpor this prospect creates in him exceeds the capacity of verbal expression: “Through a species of unutterable horror and awe, for which the language of mortality has no sufficiently energetic expression, I felt my heart cease to beat, my limbs grow rigid where I sat” (*P&T* 275). Interestingly, not only does this passage rely upon sensationalist rhetorical strategies that remain somewhat commonplace in Gothic fiction, but also the description further heightens similarities between the tale’s narrator and Poe’s ideal reader who becomes passively absorbed into the text and thus senseless to any and all intrusions from the outside world.

As the tale’s dramatic tension continues to mount, the narrator tells how he becomes increasingly absorbed by thoughts of Ligeia. But Poe’s tale here has begun to work on two separate diegetic levels. On one, it remains an increasingly suspenseful tale of supernatural horror. On the other, it has become an allegory of the reading of such a tale. The result of this narrative duality is such that even while rhetorically questioning his own effectiveness and motivations for relating the story of his experiences, the narrator also models for Poe’s reader the effects of having one’s “soul ... at the writer’s control.” Under this doubled effect, one begins to perceive the split between Ligeia as character and “Ligeia” as tale.

And again I sunk into visions of Ligeia—and again, (what marvel that I shudder while I write?) *again* there reached my ears a low sob from the region of the ebony bed. But why shall I minutely detail the unspeakable horrors of that night? Why shall I give pause to relate how, time after time, until near the period of the gray dawn, this hideous drama of revivification was repeated; how each terrific relapse was only into sterner and more apparently irredeemable death; how each agony wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe; and how each struggle was succeeded by I know not what of wild change in the personal appearance of the corpse? Let me hurry to a conclusion.

(*P&T* 276, Poe’s emphasis)

The emphasis and re-emphasis on repetition combined with the overwrought rhetoric of the tale as written are both so here striking that some critics have felt inclined to dismiss “Ligeia” as a mere parody of a Gothic horror tale. The parenthetical question from which this essay takes its title (“what marvel that I shudder while I write?”), here serves as an obvious cue for the desired physical reaction of the reader. If he shudders while he writes, should we not shudder as we read? Yet again, Poe demonstrates the logic of his poetics is such that writers and readers constantly mirror each other’s activities. Tellingly, this rhetorical question occurs between the second and third instances of the word “again” in the same sentence, and Poe places the third iteration of “again” into italics for even more emphasis. Perhaps such apparently overwritten passages have contributed to some critics’ condemnation of Poe as a vulgar prose stylist, but whatever such devices may lack in subtlety they compensate for with effectiveness. This is the stuff of nightmares, and although Freud’s psychoanalytic terminology was not developed until the century after Poe penned his tales, the paragraph above cannot fail to announce the pending return of some uncanny, repressed thing. Indeed, the primordial dread of such a return is precisely what fuels the psychological terror of not only “Ligeia” but many of Poe’s works, including “The Raven.”

Later the same devices that serve to heighten dramatic tension for Poe’s reader are those which indicate the rapt passivity of the narrator as he relates, “I trembled not – I stirred not – for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed – had chilled me into stone. I stirred not – but gazed upon the apparition.” (*P&T* 276-7). Interestingly, even the narrator’s already relatively passive reactions here become negated in this construction; he “trembled not” and “stirred not.” Further, the narrator’s phrasing at the close of this sentence, when he “gazed upon the

apparition,” redoubles its emphasis on the visual quality of his seeing while still stressing his inert qualities so that he becomes a mere observer. While the narrator for now retains his first-person status even as he becomes reduced to an observer, his passive regard of this ghostly “apparition” already begins to flirt with the powerful effect of the “gaze.” Here too one must not overlook the telling point that in this tale’s rapidly approaching denouement it is precisely the narrator’s recognition of Ligeia’s eyes as they gaze into his own which ushers in the conclusion of the tale. Her eyes meeting his own spells the realization of his ultimate horror. In the last lines of the tale, the narrator’s terror reaches a fevered pitch as he becomes absolutely certain of Ligeia’s presence in the animated body of Rowena:

What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought? One bound, and I had reached her feet! Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head the ghastly cerements which had confined it, and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and disheveled hair; *it was blacker than the wings of the midnight!* And now slowly opened *the eyes* of the figure which stood before me. “Here then, at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the Lady Ligeia!”

(*P&T 277*, Poe’s emphasis)

In these violently dramatic final lines, the revenant Ligeia, whom the repeated Glanvill “quotation” suggests has managed to return through a triumph of will, opens her eyes to look into those of the narrator. Looking into her eyes spells the demise of this enfeebled and nameless narrator. The undead presence of Ligeia, as a return of the uncanny repressed, has finally fulfilled the “single effect” of “Ligeia.” After she looks at him, he shrieks aloud and retreats into merely reporting, in direct address, his recognition of her. This shift from straight narration to the quotation of his own words is essential because it completes his death as the narrator qua author of “Ligeia.” That is to say, the story ends with Ligeia’s gaze destroying the narrator who

afterward becomes nothing more than voice. Here then is Poe's "the most poetical topic in the world" spoken by "the lips best suited for such topic" (*E&R* 19).

Thus, one can appreciate how "Ligeia" becomes the perfect embodiment of Poe's desired "single effect" because, on a strictly diegetic level, the tale remains entirely about itself. That is to say, as a Gothic tale of terror Poe's single effect in this tale is precisely the effect of reader's mounting enthrallment with a tale of increasing suspense that concludes with the startling and overwhelming presence of the ghostly figure. Under such a superficial reading, the narrative arc of "Ligeia" resembles a campfire story where the listeners huddle closer and closer as the tension mounts, knowing that at the very end the storyteller will shock them with a shout and a gesture indicating the immediate presence of the story's bogeyman, at which point their terror will climax and be relieved in laughter now that the suspense of the story has finished and the narrative spell is over. Viewed in such a way, the tale remains a remarkably successful entertainment. For this reason, a mid-century Poe scholar like Clark Griffith can argue that "Ligeia" must also be recognized as "partly burlesque" (65). Griffith writes, "Like 'Siope,' its predecessor, it combines Gothic overplot with satiric underside. Full of terror and sentiment but also of metaphysics and erudition, it duplicates the ideal horror story delineated in "The Psyche Zenobia," its sequel. It is, in a word, an allegory of terror, almost perfectly coordinated with the subtlest of allegorized jests" (65). Of particular interest here is Griffith's close relation of "Ligeia" to Poe's next published work, "The Psyche Zenobia" (also known by the title "How to Write a Blackwood Article"). Griffith astutely terms this next piece the "sequel" to "Ligeia" to emphasize the way in which Poe's writing about writing is reflected in actual writing of his tales, but perhaps it would be more useful to reverse the order. Even if Poe writes "The Psyche Zenobia" after "Ligeia," he had already begun to formulate his comprehensive poetics in such

earlier expository pieces as his “Letter to B—,” published in the July 1836 issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger* as well as the reviews of Dickens and Bird discussed above. Still, Griffith’s apparently inadvertent use of the word “duplicated” above is especially apt when one begins to consider the deeper significance of Poe’s trope of uncanny doubling in “Ligeia” and how it relates to his conception of the relationship between the author and the reader.

To be clear, although “Ligeia” has sometimes been considered peripherally as one of Poe’s doppelgänger tales, the figure of Ligeia is not the double of the despised second wife Rowena. Ligeia emerges rather as the uncanny double of the narrator, for it is he who is haunted by her too-present absence, transfixed by the “strangeness” of her eyes, unmanned by her “very low voice” and “the wild words which she habitually uttered,” and finally usurped by her return which degenerates his narration into a shriek of self-quotation and then the super-textual silence enforced by the end of the tale. As the final reduction of Ligeia and the narrator to a gaze and voice should make evident, “Ligeia” demonstrates how the text itself comes to embody the uncanny doubling between author and reader. Still, one might logically wonder why such apparent mirroring of author and reader in the text must become uncanny for Poe. After all, in the perfectly normal understanding of this relationship is one where the author creates a text as the fulfillment of his intention and the diligent reader experiences the text as imparting the meanings intended by that author.

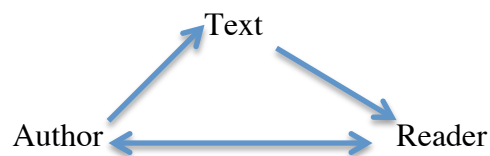


Figure 1

As Barthes and others following him have observed, even such a basic understanding of the textual relationship becomes complicated by the simple fact of the author's absence from the text and the need for the reader to imagine or project his presence in order to make sense of the text. Of course, even for the most scrupulous readers, this author figure constructed by the reader, whose intention one seems to find in the text, cannot be more than a projection of the reader. However "real" such an authorial presence may feel to the reader, it remains an effect of the author's spectrality. To paraphrase Poe, the skillful author has constructed a text that may be haunted by him. Yet, for the author, the text he constructs is always already haunted by the figure of his ideal reader, who ultimately represents a projection of himself because it is based entirely on his own understanding of himself as a reader. For the author, this ideal reader is an absence defined by its imminent presence. Because this prospective presence of the reader can only come at the cost of the author's own absence, the author must invest every word, every sentence, and every nuance with his own undeniable presence. To put this in Bartsian terms, the birth of the reader coincides with the death of the author.

As complicated as these projected identities between author and reader may seem, the layers of ideality become still more complex when one transposes the above diagram onto a text such as "Ligeia."



Figure 2

Because Poe stands behind (but is not exactly equivalent to) the “I” of this nameless narrator, the reader must project a double image in the position of the author. One is constructed as the narrator of “Ligeia” and one as author of “Ligeia.” This bifurcation of the position of writing then becomes replicated in the doubling of the narrator’s diegetic “writing” as intentional narration and Poe’s (actual) writing as authorial intention. The canny reader must differentiate as least these two levels, although he may mistakenly conflate these two into a single textual instantiation of “Ligeia,” but then Poe’s “Ligeia” is no more equivalent to the narrator’s “Ligeia” than Poe is to the narrator. Of course the reader himself cannot escape this logic of doubling in the figure of the “ideal reader.” In this construction, the author is active and uses his intention to craft a text that will effectively control the reader’s experience.

Still, readers read for authorial intention, however elusive, and as such the narrator stands as something of an authorial double even as from a wider perspective he remains distinct from Poe while serving as an instrument of Poe’s intention. The text embodies an author’s intention, but it also becomes a haunted space for the reader who perceives in this inanimate thing the lingering presence of its absent author, whom he must finally recognize as his own uncanny double. It is at this level that one begins to perceive how “Ligeia” itself manifests its primary horror as yet another instantiation of Poe’s author/reader doppelgänger. Ligeia’s “will” possesses the dead body of Rowena just as an author’s intention (re)animates a text for the reader. To express this doubling, one must now posit two diagrams that mirror each other.

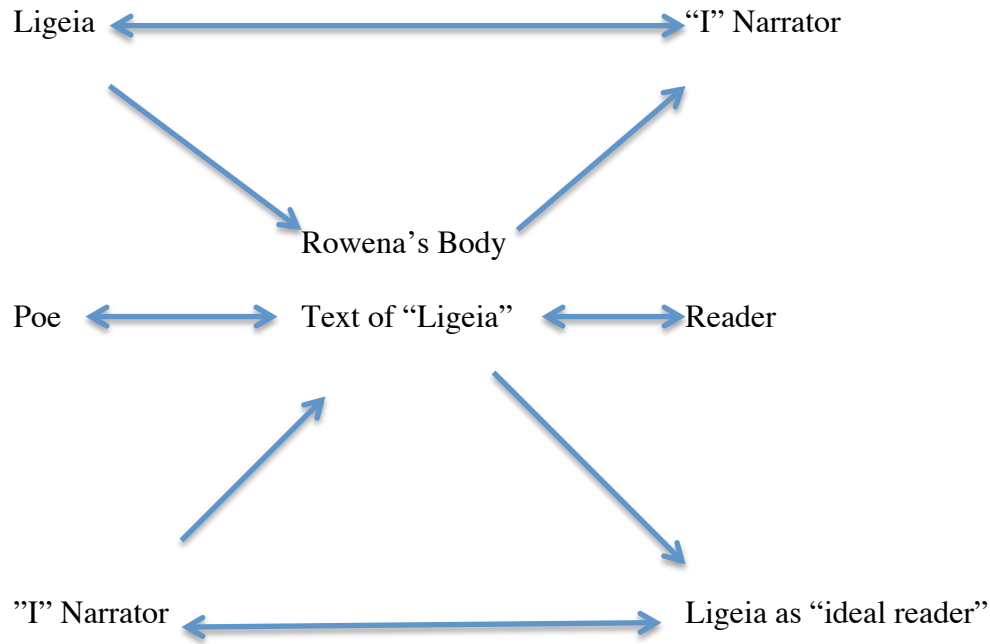


Figure 3

Long before established in the story as an ideal reader, Ligeia becomes the transcendent author as well. Accommodating Ligeia's role as the author whose "will" or intention possesses Rowena's body qua text, the "I" narrator shifts roles to become the reader of Ligeia's textual embodiment, even as she becomes his ultimate reader.

The terminology of Lacanian psychoanalysis offers further help in making sense of this author/reader doubling. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (1992), Slavoj Žižek offers an explanation of the doppelgänger that begins to illuminate why Ligeia's gaze necessarily coincides with the death of the narrator.

Here, one has to go beyond the standard "Lacanian" reduction of the motif of a double to imaginary mirror relationship: at its most fundamental, the double embodies the phantom-like Thing in me; that is to say, the dissymmetry between me and my double is ultimately that between the (ordinary) object and the (sublime) Thing. In my double, I don't simply encounter myself (my mirror image), but first of all what is "in me more than myself": the double is "myself," yet—to put it in Spinozian terms—conceived under

another modality, under the modality of the other, sublime, ethereal body, a pure substance of enjoyment exempted from the circuit of generation and corruption. (144)

In Ligeia's unbearable presence, the narrator encounters not only the mirror image of an author whose will supplants his own but his uncanny double, which always possesses something more than he does himself. Within the diegetic structure of Poe's supernatural tale of terror, the revenant Ligeia becomes for the narrator quite literally this "other, sublime, ethereal body, a pure substance of enjoyment exempted from the circuit of generation and corruption." Such is always the relationship between author and reader as doubles of each other in the mirror of text: each always possesses for the other that indefinable something extra that the one viewing his double perceives as a lack in himself. In Lacanian schematics, this relationship between doubles is written as *a-a'*, where the apostrophe designates that something extra, or what Lacan often calls the *objet petit a*. As Žižek further elaborates,

In other words, *objet petit a* is the *unheimliches* surplus forever missing in the mirror image, i.e., "unspecularizable," yet precisely as such present in it in the shape of that unfathomable X on account of which the mirror image obtains its *unheimliches* character—the double is "the same as me," yet totally strange; his sameness all the more accentuates his uncanniness. This is why the image of a double so easily turns into its opposite, so that, instead of experiencing the radical otherness of his similar, the subject recognizes *himself* in the image of radical otherness. (144, Žižek's emphasis)

This duality of recognition exactly summarizes the horror confronted by the narrator of Ligeia in his final encounter with his lost love. Her willful presence signals not only her own radical otherness but his own as well. No longer does he find himself on the verge of "inexpressible madness" at the "thought" of her return; her return makes that madness an expressed reality for him.

Finally, the most telling aspect of this fatal, final encounter between Ligeia and her nameless narrator is how each of them becomes reduced to a partial object. To understand why

the uncanny encounter results in Ligeia's presence fulfilled in a pair of possessed eyes and the narratorial presence vanishing into a disembodied shriek of recognition placed inside quotation marks, one must only recall that both the gaze and the voice are the two items that Lacan super-added to Freud's list of "partial objects" (breasts, phallus, and feces). As Žižek explains in "'I Hear You with My Eyes'; or, The Invisible Master" (1996), the gaze and the voice "are *objects*, that is to say, they are not on the side of the looking/hearing subject but on the side of what the subject sees or hears" (Žižek, 90). In this sense then, both gaze and voice once again correspond to the Lacanian *objet petit a*, that which must be primordially repressed from our healthy experience of normal reality. When this *objet petit a* intrudes upon the normal sense of reality, this interruption is experienced as an utter loss of reality itself. As Žižek simply explains such moments, "[W]hen the gaze qua object is no longer the elusive blind spot in the field of the visible but is included in this field, one meets one's own death." (94) Under repression then, the gaze of the double corresponds to a blotch or blind spot in the field of visible things, which is why meeting the eyes of the double inevitably spells doom. Similarly, as Žižek puts it, "the object voice par excellence, of course, is silence" (92). And indeed silence is where the tale ends. Following the narrator's shriek, there are no more words. As Poe's "*best* tale" and the perfect allegorical embodiment of his literary poetics, the encounter between author and reader as uncanny doubles results in the revelation that each of them remains an undead partial object: the gaze of the reader meeting the voice of the author.

Concluding Remarks

As the preceding analysis of Poe's "Ligeia" demonstrates, this project has effectively combined three distinct literary critical approaches (literary history, textual theory, and

psychoanalytic theory) in order to generate an important new way of reading Poe. This unique approach not only offers a powerful method for analyzing Poe's tales and poems, but should help to further recuperate Poe studies from the lingering effects of long academic repression by explaining how Poe's own poetics of doubling has contributed to his oddly divided critical reception. Poe's reputation now seems secure, growing more inevitable and less dubious all the time, but one still cannot help but recognize how Poe's current iconic status and global literary influence simultaneously represent the culmination of his wildest dreams and the realization of his darkest fears. The author wants his work to survive and be read widely, but such enormous fame also signals the ultimate loss of authorial control. At last count, there were over 250 electronic editions of Poe's work available online, but some of these are so far from authoritative that they fail to spell his name correctly in the title. The birth of the reader does indeed come at the expense of the death of the author.

Given its constraints of space and time, this project has limited its analysis to relatively few of Poe's primary works; however, I do plan to expand this critical enterprise into historio-textual-psychoanalytic readings of Poe's other tales and poems. Obviously, this approach will prove effective for analyses of uncanny tales like "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Black Cat," but another rich avenue for exploration presents itself in his detective stories, with their intense interest in reading practices and their frequent proliferation of uncanny doubles. Indeed, the detective figure himself embodies the diegetic doubling of both the reader and the author inside the text. In light of the argument advanced here, Poe's invention of the detective story makes perfect sense. Regarding the *doppelgänger* as the crucial figure for understanding Poe's body of work accounts for both his poetics of haunting and the haunting quality of his poetics.

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