"Poe and Power" at MLA

A nominating committee, chaired by Dennis Eddings (Western Oregon State College), has presented the following slate of PSA officers for membership approval: J. Gerald Kennedy (Louisiana State Univ.), President; John T. Irwin (Johns Hopkins Univ.), Vice President; and Roberta Sharp (California State Polytechnic Univ.), Secretary-Treasurer. Nominees for Members At Large are Joel Myerson (Univ. of South Carolina), Lois Vines (Ohio Univ.), and Richard Kopley (Pennsylvania State Univ./Dubois). Daniel Hoffman (Univ. of Pennsylvania) has been nominated as an Honorary Member of the PSA. Additional nominations should be directed to Professor Eddings by 1 February 1995. Voting for officers will be by mail ballot. Other members of the nominating committee were Kent Ljungquist (Worcester Polytechnic Inst.), Liliane Weissberg (Univ. of Pennsylvania), and Michael Burduck (Tennessee Technological Univ.).

Papers delivered at the PSA session of the American Literature Association (San Diego, 2-5 June 1994) included Alexander Hammond (Washington State Univ.), "Disfiguring the Woman Writer: Poe's 'How to Write a Blackwood Article / A Predicament';" Roberta Sharp, "Von Kempelen Discovered;" and Benjamin F. Fisher (Univ. of Mississippi), "Poe in the 1890s." Kent Ljungquist was session chair. There will be a panel discussion on "Poe in the Classroom: Contexts, Challenges, Strategies" at the forthcoming ALA convention in Baltimore (May 1995). Further information will appear in the spring issue of the newsletter.

Michael L. Burduck (Tennessee Technological Univ.) delivered the 72nd Annual Commemorative Lecture of the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore on 2 October 1994. His topic was "Usher's 'Forgotten Church'? Edgar Allan Poe and Nineteenth-Century American Catholicism." Professor Burduck has provided the following summary: "Although few scholars have dealt with the influence of Roman Catholicism on Edgar Allan Poe, many clues present in his works suggest that he was familiar with—and perhaps sympathetic toward—the doctrines of the Church of Rome."

Richard Fusco's Baltimore lecture, entitled "Fin de Millenaire: Poe's Legacy for Detective Fiction," is now available, and Dennis Eddings' treatment of clocks and clock imagery is being prepared for publication.

The Edgar Allan Poe House in Baltimore (203 Amity St., Baltimore, MD 21202) is planning a "Poe Birthday Celebration" of theatrical events and music in January 1995.

The Richmond Poe Museum continues its series "An Afternoon in Poe's Richmond." As part of its October Poe Festival, papers were delivered on the topic "Poe and Women" by Burton R. Pollin (CUNY, Emeritus), Barbara Cantalupo (Pennsylvania State Univ./Allentown), and Buford Jones (Duke Univ.).

A session on Poe biographies was included in the ALA mini-conference on "Biography and Autobiography" in Cabo San Lucas, November 1994. Contributors included Ben-

Continued on page 2
The Poe Studies Newsletter provides a forum for the scholarly and informal exchange of information on Edgar Allan Poe, his life, works, and influence. Please send information on publications and completed research. Queries about research in progress are also welcome. We will consider scholarly or newsworthy notes that bear relevance to the PSA membership. Send materials to Kent Ljungquist, Department of Humanities, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA 01609-2280. We welcome suggestions designed to make the newsletter a more stimulating and useful publication.

PSA CURRENT OFFICERS

President: Liliane Weissberg
University of Pennsylvania

Vice President: J. Gerald Kennedy
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Secretary-Treasurer: Dennis Eddings
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The Poe Studies Newsletter is published twice a year. Subscriptions, which come with membership in the Poe Studies Association, are $8 per year. Send checks, payable to Poe Studies Association, to Dennis Eddings, English Department, Western Oregon State College, Monmouth, OR 97361. The PSA Newsletter is published independently of Poe Studies, published at Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164, subscription $8 per year (two issues).
Current Research and Publications


Katrina Bachinger’s Edgar Allan Poe’s Biographies of Byron: Byron’s Diffracted/Byron’s Deferred in The Tales of the Folio Club (New York: Mellen Press, 204 pp., $89.95) has been published as part of the Saltzburg Studies in Literature.


Donald Barlow Stauffer (SUNY Albany) has completed an essay on Poe and the classical tradition.

Richard Fusco’s Maupassant and the American Short Story: The Influence of Form at the Turn of the Century (Penn. State Univ. Press, 1994) includes references to Poe.

Gothick Origins and Innovations (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994, 242 pp.), edited by Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage, collects the papers from the first International Gothic Conference held at the University of E. Anglia, Norwich.

“Riddle of the Ravens” appears in the September 1994 issue of Wildlife Conservation. According to Burton R. Pollin, this article instances a raven that learned to say “nevermore.”


Arthur Gordon Pym and Related Tales, edited by J. Gerald Kennedy, has appeared in the Oxford World Classics series.

“The Salutary Discomfort” in the Case of M. Valdemar,” by Tracy Ware, has been published in Studies in Short Fiction 31 (1994): 471-480.


Special Offer to PSA Members:

William Woolfson’s Flora and Fauna in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe (1992) can be purchased for $5.95 (plus $1.00 postage) by writing to Edith Woolfson, 3980 Orloff Ave., Bronx, NY 10463.

Poe in Recent Fiction

In the “Afterword” to her collection Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque (NY: Dutton, 1994), Joyce Carol Oates exclaims, “Who has not been influenced by Poe?” (305). In her Poe-inspired tale “The White Cat,” an aging “gentleman of independent means” becomes obsessed with the valuable white Persian cat he has purchased for his lovely young wife. His repeated attempts to kill the cat fail; he is plagued by multiple apparitions of white cats, and terrifying dreams: “The white cat! The hideous smothering weight! Fur in his very mouth!” (93) In this photographic negative of “The Black Cat,” the wife survives as well as the cat. It is the husband who almost dies in a car accident, and who is left blind and paralyzed, able to see only “washes of white, gradations of white, astonishing subtleties of white like rivulets in a stream perpetually breaking and falling about his head” (95). The tale takes on New World resonance beyond these echoes of Pym, for the cat is named Miranda, his wife’s consort in the city Caliban.

In “Wonderlands” Oates praised the “overwrought, claustral world” of Poe’s fiction, where “sickness is superior to health; hallucination is superior to mere vision; the dead woman, being dead, exerts an irresistible appeal that is spiritual and not debased by the body” [(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities (NY: Dutton, 1988), 87]. Ruth Rendell reimagines this “claustral world” in Heartstones (NY: Harper & Row, 1987), where a melancholy scholar is confined with his two daughters to a gloomy fifteenth-century house haunted by the spectre of a black cat. In a surprise ending, the anorexic, seemingly deranged narrator regains her health, and turns out not to be the murderer of her father and his fiancee after all. While the narrator acknowledges that her style and perceptions have been heavily influenced by Poe, she concludes that he knew very little about the disembodied women populating his pages: “I supposed death from starvation would be a painless slipping away, having no notion then of blindness due to vitamin depletion, scurvy and anemia and fluid retention and collapse. Poe didn’t know much about dying either” (66).

E. L. Doctorow confided in the New York Times Book Review that he was named after Edgar Allan Poe, a favorite of his father (June 19, 1994). His newest novel, The Waterworks, “may be my finally coming around to do Poe honor,” he comments, “even though he was a drug-ad- dicted, alcohol-abusing narcissist” (31). While Whitman makes a brief appearance in the post-Civil War New York of The Waterworks (NY: Random House, 1994), Poe’s shadowy presence is both subtler and more far-reaching—most obviously in the tormented, melancholy freelancer Dr. Sartorius, whose experiments prolong the threshold between life and death, and who seeks ultimately to “find the language, the formulae, or perhaps the enumeration . . . to match God” (243).
Poe in Parody

*Editor’s Note:* Since the publication of “The Raven” in 1845, Poe has been the subject of parodists. Two recent instances connect the rhythm of Poe’s poem to contemporary concerns.

**Nevermore**

Once upon a midnight dreary, fingers cramped and vision bleary, System manuals piled high and wasted paper on the floor, Longing for the warmth of bedsheets, Still I sat there, doing spreadsheets: Having reached the bottom line, I took a floppy from the drawer. Typing with a steady hand, I then invoked the SAVE command But got instead a reprimand: it read “Abort, Retry, Ignore.”

Was this some occult illusion? Some maniacal intrusion? These were choices Solomon himself had never faced before. Carefully, I weighed my options. These three seemed to be the top ones. Clearly, I must now adopt one: Choose Abort, Retry, Ignore.

With my fingers pale and trembling, Slowly toward the keyboard bending, Longing for a happy ending, hoping all would be restored, Praying for some guarantee Finally I pressed a key — But on the screen what did I see? Again: “Abort, Retry, Ignore.”

I tried to catch the chips off-guard I pressed again, but twice as hard. Luck was just not in the cards. I saw what I had seen before. Now I typed in desperation Trying random combinations Still there came the incantation: Choose: Abort, Retry, Ignore.

There I sat, distraught, exhausted, by my own machine accosted Getting up I turned away and paced across the office floor. And then I saw an awful sight: A bold and blinding flash of light — A lightning bolt had cut the night and shook me to my very core. I saw the screen collapse and die “Oh no — my database,” I cried I thought I heard a voice reply, “You’ll see your data Nevermore.”

To this day I do not know The place to which lost data goes I bet it goes to heaven where the angels have it stored But as for productivity, well I fear that it goes straight to hell And that’s the tale I have to tell Your choice: Abort, Retry, Ignore.

Author Unknown

Poe Mouthing Crime

The assault gun’s lost its savor, but it’s still in heavy favor With the bigwigs of the rich and potent corps Who resist with will of granite any effort made to ban it As they always have successfully before. Nonetheless, this was the time Bill sought to bring his wounded crime bill With minimal concessions to the floor, Flouting all the warnings Doled out and the congressmen who hold out For future hopes of Gingriches galore. Though it took a brave and bold man to ignore The NRAvans quothing “Nevermore.”


Poe in the Marketplace

Waverly Auctions (Bethesda, Maryland) has announced an October 1994 sale of Poe reference and collectible books. Items include biography and criticism, magazine printings of poems and tales, collections, illustrated works, society publications, juvenile and comic book treatments of Poe’s works, and miscellaneous materials. Sale offerings also include photographs, prints, memorabilia, letters from Poe’s contemporaries, and the original “Ludwig” obituary from the *New York Daily Tribune*.

A one-sentence letter from Poe to R. Leighton, mentioned but not printed in Ostrom’s *Letters* (2: 611), was offered for sale in the summer of 1994. The letter, listed as unlocated item #610 in Ostrom’s “Revised Check List of the Correspondence of Edgar Allan Poe” (*Studies in the American Renaissance* 1981, 227), was part of the American Art Association sale in 1931 and then sold for $125. The January 10, 1846 letter responds to a request from Leighton as follows: “It gives me pleasure to comply with your very flattering request for an autograph.” The sale price in the Spring/Summer 1994 issue of *Profiles in History* is $15,000.

The manuscript of “Elizabeth,” one of the poems Poe dedicated to Elizabeth Rebecca Herring, was offered for sale by Remember When Auctions, Inc. (Portsmouth, NH) in the spring of 1994. The poem is an acrostic, with the first letter of each line spelling out her first and middle names. Estimated sale price was $30,000.

Acknowledgments

Reviews

This volume comprises seventeen critical essays which have been selected as the "best" by former editor-professors from the journal American Literature. The journal had its inception in March, 1929, and the essays range from 1930 to 1987. Needless to say, the claim of the essays being the "best" is bound to raise more than a few eyebrows. A study of the essays reveals that they fall roughly into five categories: (1) Social Awareness; (2) Psychology and Psychiatry; (3) Intuition and Ratiocination; (4) Style, Structure, and Theme; and (5) Aesthetic Theory and Practice.

In the category of Social Awareness are Ernest Marchand's "Poe as Social Critic" (1934); Sidney P. Moss's "Poe and His Nemesis — Lewis Gaylord Clark" (1956); and Stephen L. Mooney's "The Comic in Poe's Fiction" (1962). Contending that Poe's relationship to society has been falsely presented by leading social historians, Marchand proceeds to show that Poe, rather than being "out of space and out of time," was highly conscious of his environment and its workings. Politically conscious, he was contemptuous of Jacksonian democracy. A Whig, he supported the Whigs Harrison and Tyler without knowing that Tyler was a disguised Virginia Democrat. Conceiving of himself as a Virginian gentleman, Poe believed in an aristocracy of the intellect and thought democracy a plot to give inferior power over their betters. Poe also disliked industrialism and held the doctrine of progress to be "fatuous." Moss gives a detailed account of the enmity that existed between Poe and an editor of the New York Knickerbocker Magazine who, after Poe had attacked the New York coterie of writers surrounding the periodical, believed himself their defender. An important revelation made by Moss is the close connection between Clark and Rufus Wilmot Griswold, who became Poe's posthumous nemesis. Poe's battle with Clark resulted in Poe being much discredited as a human being, although the charges against him were unfounded. Poe's comic stories and his brand of humor have always been neglected. Mooney sets about correcting this deficiency. Using Bergson's theory of laughter, Mooney examines Poe's comic tales in which heroes or monarchs are deluded or irresponsible while their admirers are mere sycophants. Although Poe's humor is extravagant, outrageous, and fantastic, Mooney believes that his comic tales ought to be considered as "an integral part of his total work." All three essays are first rate.

In the category of Psychology and Psychiatry are Edward Hungerford's "Poe and Phrenology" (1930); David W. Butler's "Usher's Hypochondriasis: Mental Alienation and Romantic Idealism in Poe's Gothic Tales" (1976); and J. A. Leo Lemay's "The Psychology of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'" (1982). Hungerford closely examines the influence of current phrenology on Poe's characterizations. Phrenology proposed that the faculties of human beings are seated in the brain in various areas and can be detected externally from the shape and protuberances of the skull. Considered a pseudo-science today, it was the popular psychology of Poe's time. Hungerford shows that the "subtleties" of Poe's characterization cannot be recognized by a reader unacquainted with nineteenth-century phrenology. In his essay Butler diagnoses Usher's mental disease by reference to the authoritative medical treatises of Poe's time. He concludes that Usher suffered from "hypochondriasis," a severe melancholic disorder. But in an effort to disclose how much Poe "exploits the romantic implications" of this disease, Butler is unable to account for the material collapse of the house on the basis of scientific empiricism. He therefore concludes that "The Fall" amounts to a "dramatization of the impossibility" of developing "valid and complete" explanations of unusual private experiences. This essay appears to fall short of being among the "best." Lemay's essay on "Murrers" is too speculative to be creditable. Its clever interpretation is more in line with current fashion than with exacting logic. Homosexuality and lesbianism in his detective story! As the kid said to Shoeless Joe, "Say it ain't so, Joe!" At best, Lemay's reading turns the story inside out; at worst, it is a case of the runaway horse.

In the category of Ratiocination and Intuition are William F. Friedman's "Edgar Allan Poe, Cryptographer" (1933); W. K. Wimsatt's "Poe and the Chess Automaton" (1939); J. Gerald Kennedy's "The Limits of Reason: Poe's Deluded Detectives" (1975); and Michael Williams' 'The Language of the Cipher: Interpretation in 'The Gold-Bug'" (1982). Friedman was a professional cryptanalyst. In 1936 he was working for the U. S. War Department as the chief cryptanalyst of the Signal Corps. He studied Poe's experience and claims in cryptoanalysis and concluded that he was merely a "tyro" who never solved any ciphers that fell "outside the class of simple substitution." Poe's difficulty with the "Frailey cipher" was due solely to its monstrous diction. But Friedman might have considered that Poe's cryptoanalysis was largely journalistic "hype." Wimsatt shows that "Maelzel's Chess-Player" was not based entirely on his personal observations at exhibitions but was largely indebted to Sir David Brewster's pamphlet Letters on Natural Magic (1832). But Poe emerges from his essay "not as a detective drawing from observed facts" but "an imaginative writer capable of polishing 'the drab, mechanic guesses' of the prosaic." Above all, Wimsatt's essay is written with both sensitivity and wisdom; it is a fine piece. Kennedy's essay focuses on the "failed detective" in Poe's stories. Poe's "detective-god" Dupin is successful because he is both a poet and a mathematician. That is, he is able to bring both imaginative intuition and ratiocination, or exact, valid reasoning, to bear on the mysteries which confront him. In this manner he bests the "failed detective," the Prefect of police, who lacks imaginative intuition and hence cannot reason at all. Poe also presents the "failed detective" in several stories which are endowed with irony and satire, as "The Man of the Crowd" and "The Oblong Box." Here the so-called "detective" is simply a busybody motivated by curiosity, whose perceptions breed

Continued on page 6
Poe also recognizes various levels of linguistic competence on the part of speakers. Finally, he lays down the conditions necessary to establish a definitive text.

In the category of Style, Structure, and Theme are Benjamin F. Fisher's "Metzengerstein": Not a Hoax" (1971); Paul John Eakin's "Poe's Sense of an Ending" (1973); Jules Zanger's "Poe and the Theme of Forbidden Knowledge" (1978); and Cynthia S. Jordan's "Poe's Re-VisIon: The Recovery of the Second Story" (1987). Although Poe's "Metzengerstein" has traditionally been associated with the humorously intended Tales of the Folio Club, Fisher very ably argues, on the basis of style, tone, characterizations, and Gothic paradigms, that it is a serious effort to produce a genuine "German" tale of some artistry, and it is not to be taken as a burlesque or hoax. Despite the belief of some critics, including Henry James, that Pym is unfinished — as Poe himself pretended — Eakin cogently argues, based on his study of Poe's habitual strategies for the endings of his tales, that Pym is a completed fiction. In his essay Zanger identifies four Poe tales as a group connected by the theme of "forbidden knowledge." Having traced its textual origin to the Adamic motif in Genesis, he pursues the dubious course of seeking a personal motivation in some psychic conflict in the author, disregarding the necessary objectification of a work of art. He describes this conflict as a kind of cosmic Angst, an experience of us all. In her fashionable essay Jordan declares Poe as well as Hawthorne as feminist "re-visionists" (as defined by Adrienne Rich). For instance, Poe's Dupin is an "androgy nous mastermind" because he alone among men is conscious of the ways in which women are constantly victimized by males. He thus creates "a new fictional form — a second story" that is a text for female experience. Hence Poe's "women-centered tales raise the same issues as Hawthorne's: 'the imaginative limits' of male-authored fictio ns and 'the responsibility of change.'" In the Dupin tales Jordan sees Poe meeting this responsibility.

In the category of Aesthetic Theory and Practice are Anthony Caputi's "The Refrain in Poe's Poetry" (1953); Emerson Marks' "Poe as Literary Theorist..." (1961); and Ivor Winters' "Poe: A Crisis in the History of American Obscurantism" (1937). Caputi's precise examination of Poe's use of the refrain shows both the latter's "immense gift for poetic conception" and also clarifies the range Poe achieves when his use of the refrain proved successful ("Ualume" and "Dream-Land") as well as when it resulted in failure ("The Bells"). As a result of his study Marks reaffirms Edmund Wilson's opinion that Poe's criticism ought to be "a vital part of our intellectual equipment." For, as Marks states, he did lay down several important principles of criticism. Caputi's and Marks' essays are among the best in this collection. However, the same cannot be said of Winters' essay, whose obscurantism was of his own making. That sensitive critic James Gibbons Huneker strongly believed that Poe had been too much "the victim of Yankee college professors." A follower of the moral humanism of Babbitt and More, Winters' vile essay "trash es" the author whom the collection suggests is worthy of study and of some measure of admiration. Its inclusion appears a piece of bad judgment on the part of Budd and Cady.

Nevertheless, despite the Winters' essay and one or two others of dubious validity, the collection as a whole is well worth perusing. One would like to look forward to On Poe II.

Richard P. Benton, Emeritus
Trinity College, Hartford, CT


In his 1992 Virginia Quarterly Review critique of Kenneth Silverman's Edgar Allan Poe, acknowledging it to be easily the best biography, Jeffrey Meyers prepares the reading public for his own book: "There is still room, however, for a shorter, less psychoanalytical, and more dramatic narrative." The result is a shorter biography that endlessly rings the keynote of Poe's self-destructiveness (without Silverman's explanation or any of his own) and that stages, rather simplistically, situations of alarm or penury that are familiar to every student of Poe. For all of his self-vaunted insightful readings of the creative works of Poe, a few of the essays and very few of the reviews, there are astonishing gaffes about the texts and about Poe's life. The book-jacket blurb also gives much credit to him for his pioneer coverage of Poe's sway over literature here and abroad, although the contents and the listed sources for the chapter on "Influence" (326-27) acquit him of more than a very slight effort in that field. Moreover, through this "method" of "acknowledgment" he is free to appear original and knowing in some of the footnotes, without designating his specific uses. The largest contribution in this chapter and many others are lengthy passages of fustian, irrelevancies, or "also rans," such as Kafka's epistolary obsession with his fiancee's teeth or Lawrence's dialogue, in Mr. Noon, on a "parallel" filial attempt to extract funds from the father, i.e., John Allan (309), or a disquisition on life-preserving coffins (316-18). Several of these excursus also trace the path of Mr. Meyers' well-known career as a biographer and writer on biography.

He has succeeded, frequently, in attracting attention, praise, and prizes for his professional handling of "lives"; the early reviews of this book in the popular press are predominantly laudatory and ignore the cliché-ridden style and slipshod handling of facts. As for the "newly demonstrated strategy" of the subtitle — do educated people need to know about the linkage of Poe to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Huysmans, Dostoyevsky, Kipling, Conrad, et al.? Even in these, Meyers often errs or exaggerates; e.g., Conrad derived his gloom and pessimism chiefly from Poe; and Fitzgerald's life and attitudes parallel Poe's and therefore
his very early tale, "Diamond as Big as the Ritz," is derived from "Usher." Analogical inferences are scattered throughout the whole book, sometimes most confusingly or irrelevantly: anent Poe’s sonnet "To Science," he cites a stanza from Blake’s 1803 "Mock on," unread by Poe; the theme of "The Business Man" occasions a long quotation from Yeats’ "September 1913"; "Allen Tate, like Baudelaire, had the same domelike forehead as Poe" (278) — material fit for a gossip column. The reasoning is sometimes casuistical or unfounded: Poe derived his views on music plus poetry from Coleridge (53), but Pater (who, as Benson authoritatively proves, read Poe only in Baudelaire’s French translation) derived his two passages on poetry and music solely from Poe’s "Letter to B——" (290), which was not in the translation. Typically, Meyers leaps across the decades to pin down an "influential" relationship for the sake of his "legacy," often using such words as "suggest" and "prefigure." His final sentence shows his often strange style and generalizing habit: "Poe has overcome his notorious reputation (which today makes him interesting rather than repulsive)... He has always ... expressed universal themes...: dreams, love, loss; grief, mourning; alienation; terror, revenge, murder, etc." Which writer, a generation or more after Poe’s death, cannot be declared to be under his influence, given a proved reading or repeated mention of his texts? Even James Joyce is cited for his reference to Poe as "the high priest of most modern schools" (293) in his 1902 talk (essay) on the Irish poet James Mangan, but Meyers omits Joyce’s contextual sneer at Poe as inferior to Mangan [M. E. Kronegger, in two Joyce-Poe essays (only one being listed by Meyers) is circumstantial in stating this and also gives much on Poe’s influence on Rimbaud and Huysmans, the probable source for Meyers along with Patrick Quinn’s book]. One cannot deny Meyers his wide reading and presentation of much interesting material — simply his being the first or only one to notice the links.

The scholarship of the author on plain matters of Poe’s life and works is error-ridden, as it must be for a two-year stint on a complicated subject. Of dozens of instances I cite only a few: The baron Metzengerstein does not know the real source of the fiery horse (64); "The Maelstrom" was published in the June 1833 Saturday Visiter contest; publisher Putnam alluded to the hieroglyphics in Pym as "lifted from" Stephens’ travels in Arabia (not from the Gesenius Dictionary); Poe wrote the reviews of Mercedes of Castile and Works of Bolingbroke; The Gift was a journal; Poe printed his transoceanic crossing account under the title "The Balloon-Hoax"; A Valentine was his only poem expressly written for Mrs. Osgood (in fact, there were five); Eureka fell still-born from the press, generally ignored; "Johnny Tremaine" was the hero of Treasure Island; Huysmans, the probable source for Meyers along with Patrick Quinn’s book. One cannot deny Meyers his wide reading and presentation of much interesting material — simply his being the first or only one to notice the links.

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Poe, Donald Hall, and the Life of Writing

Over the past year, PBS stations have been broadcasting a one-hour program, hosted by Bill Moyers, featuring interviews with poets Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon. Hall recited a poem, written at age 12, that showed his infatuation with and inspiration from Poe. It was, he added, a poem full of morbidity. Despite no further references to Poe during the program, dark tonalities colored some subsequent comments, since Hall acknowledged his sense of an impending death sentence, the result of a diagnosis and operation for cancer. Throughout the program, spiced with excerpts from his verses, Hall stressed the need for attending to the music and the dynamics of poetic language.

In an autobiographical essay “Two Hundred Years,” written for the Gale Research Company (1988), Hall charted his adolescent transition from the playing fields of baseball to a life of writing:

By that time I had started writing. As I remember, twelve was the watershed. I was restless, morbid; doubtless the erotic life raised itself; therefore, I loved horror mov- ies: Lon Chaney, Jr., was the wolf-man transfigured period- ically by bulging eyeteeth into a murderous beast. Next door lived an older boy who told me that if I liked werewolves and monsters I ought to read Edgar Allan Poe. I read Poe and my life changed; I loved Poe, quickly acquiring him in the Modern Library, blessing of my youth. One night when my parents were out, I tried writing a poem, showing off for my babysitter; I think it went like this:

Have you ever thought
of the meaning of death to you?
It shrieks through the day,
it follows you through the night
until that day when
in monotonous loud
death calls your name:
Then, then comes the end of all!

Not content with Poe’s poems and stories, I wanted his life. I read Hervey Allen’s long biography of Poe, Israfel, and the romance of Poe’s alienation suited me; walking the suburban streets I imagined myself le poète maudit, teenage werewolf dressed in the hair of free verse. I wanted to grow up and be like Poe: I wanted to be mad, addicted, obsessed, haunted, and cursed; I wanted to have deep eyes that burned like coals—profoundly melancholic, profoundly attractive.... Allen made much of Poe’s precocity, saying (my recollection) that Poe read Keats and Shelley when he was fourteen. I was twelve; I had never heard of Keats and Shelley; I saved my allowance and bought the Modern Library Giant, which I still own. Two years head-start.


John Ward Ostrom

Wittenberg University Professor Emeritus of English, John Ward Ostrom, died December 15, 1993, in Springfield. He was 89.

An internationally recognized authority on Edgar Allan Poe, Ostrom wrote the Revised Checklist of the Correspondence of Edgar Allan Poe, a complete roster of Poe’s correspondence, and Letters of Edgar Allan Poe, a two-volume edition. The latter publication, described by the Poe Society as “the definitive collection of Poe’s letters,” won the Ohioana Library Association award in 1949 for the year’s best critical and scholarly work. In 1967 Ostrom delivered the lecture for the 45th annual commemoration program of the Edgar Allan Poe Society in Baltimore.

When Ostrom retired, he was recognized by the anthology, Papers on Poe: Essays in Honor of John Ward Ostrom, a collection written by 18 internationally known Poe scholars and edited by Dr. Richard P. Veler, presently Professor of English and University Editor at Wittenberg and a former student of Ostrom.

Editor’s Note: We are grateful to Wittenberg Today, the university's alumni newspaper, for allowing us to reprint excerpts of an article on Professor Ostrom.

A Pro Poe

The controversy engendered by American Literature’s issue on “The ‘New’ Melville” led to coverage in the 6 April 1994 Chronicle of Higher Education. A related article on “Old Authors, New Questions” contrasted so-called “Old Poe” (e.g., Poe as a writer of horror stories) and “New Poe” (e.g., Poe as a Southern writer engaged with debates on slavery and abolition).


An elementary school teacher in New Hope, North Carolina was ordered to stop using works by Poe in the classroom, according to articles in the 29 April and 13 May Durham Herald-Sun. “The Raven,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” and “The Masque of the Red Death” were deemed inappropriate for fourth and fifth graders.

An 11 June 1994 New York Times article on “Seeking a Bronx Muse” mentioned Burton B. Roberts, a former state supreme court judge, whose “Ode to the Bronx” was passed off as a lesser-known work of Poe.

The 27 June 1994 New Yorker featured excerpts from a series by Frank Gannon, entitled “Authors with the Most,” which contained a selection on Poe, describing him as “always insisting that literature didn’t have any function, it was just capital letters: ART.”

In a recent television episode of “The Simpsons,” Lisa’s schoolmate, whose voice was provided by Winona Ryder, constructed a diorama based on “The Tell-Tale Heart.”