Newsletter Expansion

We are pleased to report that the dues increase proposed to fund the expanded PSA Newsletter has been approved by the PSA membership: 65 yes, 54 no, 1 abstention. Accordingly, annual dues for PSA members will be $8.00 beginning in 1989, and the PSA Newsletter will maintain its length of eight pages an issue.

New Honorary Members of the PSA

The recent balloting of PSA members found overwhelming approval for the granting of honorary PSA membership to J. Lasley Dameron (Memphis State University)—114 yes, 3 no, 3 abstentions—and G. R. Thompson (Purdue University)—112 yes, 2 no, 6 abstentions. Congratulations are due both scholars.

PSA Nominating Committee

The nominating committee for election of new officers of the PSA has been formed; it is comprised of Dennis Eddings (Western Oregon State Coll.), Richard P. Benton (Trinity Coll., Emeritus), Mary De Jong (The Pennsylvania State Univ., Shenango Valley), Kenneth Alan Hovey (The Univ. of Texas at San Antonio), and James W. Gargano (Washington and Jefferson Coll., Emeritus). The election will be held by mail ballot in 1989.

“Usher” Under Glass

At the beginning of Philip Glass’ new opera “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which received its world premiere opening at Cambridge’s American Repertory Theatre on May 18, Poe’s narrator gives his old friend Roderick a music box topped by two dancing figures. This object, marking the first in a series of significant deviations from Poe’s text, is intended as a token of friendship reflecting the narrator’s desire to preserve a life of boyhood innocence. Like so many talismanic features in the world of opera, however, the music box produces unanticipated results. Roderick, terrified by this intrusion into his sealed world, recoils at the sounds the box emits, and the narrator’s absorption into the feverish world of the Ushers begins. This early scene, which effectively establishes the atmosphere for a rousing production, also signals a transformation, rather than a mere adaptation, of Poe’s classic tale.

Recent critics of “Usher” have tended to demean Poe’s more obvious histrionics, his attempts to find “palpable” causes for the suffering endured by the Usher line. The ART production, if anything, represents a rearguard action, since so many of these effects receive such literal treatment, albeit without diminishing psychological implication. Librettist Arthur Yorinks uncovers suggestions of sexual ambiguity, and the stage design represents complex doublings in the guise of whirling mirrors. Movements in the decaying house become literally wire-drawn, and Roderick actually unveils one of his weird paintings. Expressionistic interpreters have long been intrigued by Poe’s objectification of emotions, and Richard Foreman’s direction sustains that tradition.

The considerable publicity attending this production stems largely from Glass’ current notoriety as a composer. Labeled a proponent of “minimalism,” he prizes a musical economy that relies on short motifs, insistent repetition, and marked alterations in volume and pitch. In the ART production, acoustical instrumentation (synthesizer and electric guitar) accompanies traditional orchestral colorations (winds, string quartet, and percussion). The dominant music of the production, however, remains Madeline’s wordless aria that haunts the male protagonists and offers a melodic contrast to the percussive effects in the score.

Even more taxing than Roderick’s archetypal aesthete is the role played by Poe’s narrator, named William in Yorinks’ terse libretto. On stage almost every minute of the production, William cannot escape the madness and misery that afflicts the Ushers since, in this version, the story begins and ends in his mind. Yorinks’ scaled-down text, however, creates problems for the actor playing the role. Denied primary voice, he resorts to cringing or pacing, not always the most interesting stage business. When he does give voice, he must offer an occasional clunker: “Roderick, you should get some air outside.”

Such verbal flaws notwithstanding, Glass’ coolly controlled music proves a fascinating complement to the frenzy that engulfs the House of Usher. The production has its share of chills, and more than its share of surprises, notably the appearance of an ambiguously rendered physician who lends the drama a clinical demeanor. There is more grotesquerie than grandeur in Madeline’s return, more sensationalism than suggestiveness in Roderick’s fall, but Glass has produced a work that memorably sustains Poe’s connections to the sister arts of opera and musical theater.

Kent Ljungquist
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Masthead portrait of Poe by Berta R. Golahny

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John Gardner Reads Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"

On Thursday, October 22, 1981, novelist John Gardner came to Chatham College to deliver the first Raizman Lecture in the Arts and Humanities, "On Creativity." The next day he visited my American literature class, graciously handling the inevitable inquiries from fledgling writers by urging them to read everything and to write constantly. He then asked what writers we had been studying—Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, James Fenimore Cooper—and immediately fastened on Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Turning his attention to the first row of students, he asked how they interpreted Poe's story. One student volunteered that "Usher" dramatized the dangers of aestheticism and intellectualism in a robust America, another offered that it warned against individual isolation and the loss of a supportive community, while a third replied that it was a story written solely for its horrific effect upon the reader. Yes, Gardner agreed, "Usher" achieves a striking effect. And people have found in it many meanings.

To some, it is a story about the obsessive destructiveness of an incestuous relationship, to others a story about the horrors of insanity brought on by morbid scholasticism, while to still others a story about the madness caused by unhealthy self-absorption. He had apparently been thinking about Poe and had perhaps been reading critical interpretations of Poe. Actually, Gardner concluded, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a story about Art.

Art, he explained, is like Madeline Usher, that thing that we consign to the basement, to the depths of the grave. We fear it and we hide it—probably, we also love it. Yet Art will not rest peacefully below ground. Art forces itself up from the subterranean mausoleum in which we have attempted to entomb it, seemingly of its own volition; in reality, of course, we drag it up from the crypt, from the depths of the soul, kicking and screaming and bleeding like Madeline Usher. Though we may appear to imprison it in the cavernous wells of unconsciousness, Art is our doppelganger, our twin, our sister, and will not remain hidden or secret. Art comes to the surface accompanied by pain and terror and horror. It never comes quietly, or easily, or when we want it to. Art is always disturbing, always disruptive, a potent force that threatens us with madness because Art is so powerful and the artist so fragile. We would rather bury it than embrace it, but, like Madeline Usher, it cannot be buried, cannot be forgotten and dismissed, for it has an energy that drives it up to consciousness and to daylight, there at last to overwhelm the artist who, like Roderick Usher, finds himself ultimately consumed by the Art he himself has summoned to life.

That is, he said, a danger the artist lives with constantly; through that danger, the artist communicates the intensity of his vision to the reader. A good story places the reader as well as the writer in immediate danger.

Without attempting to duplicate Gardner's words, I have attempted to represent accurately his thoughts. Within a year, Mickelsson's Ghosts would be published, a novel which in one reading is about a philosophy professor who retreats to an old Susquehanna house inhabited and then visited by spirits of the dead. Writing Mickelsson's Ghosts might have informed his reading of Poe's "House of Usher," just as his reading of Poe's "House of Usher" might have influenced his writing of Mickelsson's Ghosts. Mickelsson sees ghosts, perhaps creates in his mind his otherworldly visitants, teetering on the verge of a second breakdown of sanity, but he writes no philosophical book, leaves behind no literary Art; Gardner does that, drags Mickelsson kicking and screaming and bleeding, trailing visions, into the appreciative consciousness of the reader.

Is Mickelsson like Roderick Usher? Perhaps Mickelsson is a Roderick Usher who ultimately forsakes solipsistic solitude and refuses to bury Madeline—Mickelsson's Jessie. Instead, he insists on a positive and passionate (though isolated) coupling which seems to initiate not the annihilating collapse of the "House of Usher," but a life-affirming opening of the self to primitive sources of meaning in a celebratory revel. Mickelsson embraces the living Jessie rather than the dying Madeline to make love an Art, a temporary barrier against death that protects the artist from the "mean egotism" of Usher's madness. If it is madness which has touched Mickelsson, it is the positive madness of the artist, filling the room as he and Jessie consummate their love amidst the approving ghosts of natural creation. Mickelsson's Ghosts concludes with a crowded vision of imminent birth, a loud, raucous vision of one man's struggle to wrestle from chaos a lasting Art.

In 1982, John Gardner met his untimely death, three months after Mickelsson's Ghosts was published.

William E. Lenz
Chatham College

Recent and Forthcoming Poe-Related Books


Arthur Gordon Pym and Contemporary Criticism

May 19-22, 1988

One hundred and fifty years after the publication of The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, scores of its readers gathered at Pym's supposed birthplace, Nantucket, to honor his "Incredible Adventures and Discoveries." As gusts of fog and drizzle swept in from the surrounding ocean, and the pink and white petals of fruit-trees snowed the cobblestones of the old whaling port, a goodly company of scholars under the able skippering of Richard Kopley took an intellectual cruise to Poe-land from the eddy of the Harbor House. After Nantucketers Edouard Stackpole, Susan F. Beegel, and Wesley N. Tiffney bade us bon voyage, David Ketterer piloted us out of the harbor with a review of Pym criticism since 1980. New additions were then made to this criticism in six sessions chaired by Kopley's mates, Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV, Richard P. Benton, Kent P. Ljungquist, and James W. Gargano.

Out of the galley Curtis Dahl surveyed Pym's fare from gourmet delicacies to decaying human flesh, while Alexander Hammond related Pym's less-than-savory meals to the literary consumption at the Folio Club banquet, and J. Gerald Kennedy turned Pym's most disgusting food into a paradigm for "Decomposing the Textual Body." Models for the undecomposed body of Pym were revealed in explained Gothic tales of
G. R. Thompson, in his keynote address, related Poe’s quincunciality to Schlegel’s definition of the arabesque and its “framed indeterminacy.”

The most remarkable sightings of our cruise were provided by the actor, Norman George, who impersonated Poe delivering his last lecture as convincingly as Pym impersonated the ghost of Rogers haunting the mutineers, and by the Guest of Honor, John Barth, who offered the reflections of “an amateur navigator” on the “sensational implausibility” of “great uncle Edgar’s floating funhouse” in what he characterized as Poe’s “simulacrum of a novel.” Fair weather greeted us as Captain Kopley steered us back into port after what was the smoothest and most refreshing scholarly sail I can ever remember taking. Loud Huzzahs to Kopley and his whole crew!

Kenneth Alan Hovey
University of Texas at San Antonio

Dayan develops her argument through those works marginal to the Poe canon: *Eureka*, "The Domain of Arnhem," "Lodoro's Cottage," "A Dream," "Loss of Breath," "Bon-Bon," and "Elenor." At the center of this strategically eccentric approach, she interprets the more commonly discussed tales about women, "Berenice," "Morella," and "Ligeia." Dayan deliberately avoids extended discussion of the Dupin stories, *Pym*, the major poems, and Poe's essays on poetics, in order to reconstruct an unfamiliar Poe, who has greater claim to centrality in the American canon by virtue of his profound crossing of philosophy and fiction. There are enormous difficulties in this approach, and they are not resolved by the end of Dayan's study.

In fact, the question of Poe's "Americaness" is irrelevant to Dayan's careful interpretation of his radical critique of romantic idealism. As a comparatist, Dayan brings wide and varied knowledge to her study of Poe; her careful discussion of John Locke's influence on Poe's thought and literary practice is one of the most original aspects of this book. The sole claim she makes for Poe's "Americaness," however, is his intriguing affinities with Jonathan Edwards' efforts to evoke materially and sensuously the ineffable. Even so, the transformation of Edwards' divine Sublime into the rhetorical sublime of Poe's cosmology is not sufficient to undo the claims of those Americanists from Matthiessen and Feidelson to Bercovitch who have traced American literary nationalities in such a line from the Puritans to the Transcendentalists.

Dayan's best argument against these theorists of America is comparatist, just as it turns upon her fine treatment of Poe's critique of the Transcendentalism of Frogpondium, as he liked to call it. In this account, Poe anticipates T. E. Hulme's trivialization of the "circumambient gas" and "mushy metaphysics" of romanticism in that modernist manifesto, "Romanticism and Classicism." For Dayan, Poe draws upon Augustine, Locke, Newton, and Edwards, among many other international predecessors, to attack the transcendentalists' privileging of idealism over materialism. The "romantic ironist" Poe becomes a predecessor of William James' "radical empiricism," as the poetic cosmology *Eureka* works as Dayan's key text in the determination of an eccentric Poe and a marginal "canon."

Let me say at once that Dayan has represented accurately Poe's intentions. Misread as a "gnostic" or "extreme idealist" who carried Emersonian transcendentalism to an absurd limit, Poe has been ignored for precisely what makes him so important to us today: his sustained effort to convert the apparent dualism of matter and spirit, object and mind, into a working--a productive--relationship. Dayan reads precisely this philosophical revolution in *Eureka*, which offers not simply a pseudo-scientific account of the relation of matter and Idea in Poe's dispersion-unification dyad, but also a poetic realization of this cosmic law. In short, *Eureka* is a theory of language because it is language itself that best exemplifies for Poe the curious convertibility of matter into spirit, of object into idea. Hegel does not figure very centrally in Dayan's study, except as a sort of straw-man for Poe's critiques of Idealism, but this is precisely Hegel's theory of philosophical language. As Jean Hyppolite has argued so carefully, Hegel's "Absolute Knowing" (the final section of the *Phenomenology*) is essentially philosophical language, in which the endless convertibility--the fundamental difference--of material and immaterial is made the functional basis for human and thus historical knowledge. My point is that Dayan's Poe is not as "profoundly" and "radically" original in the context of international romanticism as Dayan claims, even though the case she makes for the *material* side of Poe adds an important new dimension to our understanding of him.

It should not surprise us, then, that Dayan's reading of Poe as a proponent of the special "materiality" of language also makes him a precursor of deconstructive theories of language. Paul de Man is discussed early, and his recognizable method of following carefully the rhetorical "tracks" of a text is at the heart of Dayan's own method of interpretation. Derrida and Lyotard are used through Derrida's basic definition of the trace-structure of the sign--time-space/becoming-space/time--is an unavoidable assumption of Dayan's work. The absence of Jean-Francois Lyotard is a little more troubling because Lyotard's efforts to translate the Kantian Sublime into the linguistic situation of our post-modernity seems so appropriate to Dayan's reading of Poe's efforts to "present the unrepresentable," to quote here Lyotard's definition of the "postmodern."

Dayan's interest in the special materiality of rhetorical language leads quite directly from *Eureka* to the landscape sketches. "The Domain of Arnhem" and "Lodoro's Cottage" certainly become more interesting as efforts to dramatize verbally the "convertibility between phenomenal and mental" processes (99). Once again, Dayan makes a somewhat unsuccessful effort to argue for Poe's "Americaness," but the case is too slender when based on these verbal mimickeries of "an art of trompe l'oeil" (106). Neither mimetic nor expressive, these sketches are "simulations," and it is with this word that my anxieties about this book begin.

Dayan does use the term "simulation," albeit not centrally, but I am thinking of Jean Baudrillard's use of the word to represent the artificiality of our utterly textualized postmodern economy. Remaining faithful to Poe's intentions and "genius," Dayan never suggests that his radical empiricism may well be the proper prelude to our postmodern condition, in which we simulate in words everything that has been destroyed by such words: Nature, Idea, physical objects, sex, life. In an intricately argued chapter on "Morella," "Berenice," and "Ligeia," Dayan shows how Poe uses these stories of macabre love and memory to elaborate his philosophical thesis about the convertibility of matter and thought. Those horrid fetishes, Berenice's "teeth," are transformed into poetic tropes of "uneending transformation," which Dayan would have us understand as Poe's *letters*, rather than the grim tokens of the narrator's psychotic fixation on his lover's mouth.

Behind this argument is an undeveloped feminist theme which would redeem Poe from his custudary role as precursor to the Symbolistes' exploitation of women as "characters" in a male poetic. Early in this chapter, Dayan suggests that her readings will demonstrate the convertibility of gender that Poe's rhetorical language makes possible. By the end of the chapter, however, I am even more convinced that Poe's poetic practice is merely a subtler version of his male narrators' transformation of living women into fetish-objects. Although she quotes Freud, Dayan explicitly rejects a psychoanalytical approach, and thus the compelling interpretation of "Berenice," as a poetic rendering of male fantasies about the *vagina dentata* is never addressed. And so this is precisely what is haunting about Poe's macabre elegies; his male narrators enact compulsively the conversion of woman into "poetic memory"--the ultimate fetish--that Marie Bonaparte argued to be essential both in Poe's life and art.

As Dayan develops her argument about Poe's decentered rhetoric, she must somehow account for *time*. After all, what relates individuated matter and its immaterial, energetic "source" is precisely the special "history" that governs Poe's cosmology in *Eureka*. "History" is precisely what links the centripetal and centrifugal forces of the "throb" of the "Heart-Divine," and it is here that Dayan seems blindest to the postmodern implications of her argument. For her, time is finally the temporality of writing, of that time-becoming-space/time--becoming-time--is an unavoidable assumption of Dayan's work. The absence of Jean-Francois Lyotard is a little more troubling because Lyotard's efforts to translate the Kantian Sublime into the linguistic situation of our post-modernity seems so appropriate to Dayan's reading of Poe's efforts to "present the unrepresentable," to quote here Lyotard's definition of the "postmodern."

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reads the dash as: dispersion (periodic syntax), consolidation (agglutination), the Sublime (textual blank), and the trivial (digression, the run-on sentence). “Time” is finally the “rhythm” of the dash, nowhere better illustrated than in the role it plays in such characteristic deconstructive rhetorical effects as periphrasis and chiasmus.

The “time of writing,” however, remains an abstraction, which is given particularity by way of Dayan’s careful tracing of the intertextual complexity of the barest scratchings of Poe. She is quite right that Poe’s allusive complexity requires such subtle teasing out of rhetorical associations drawn from a wide range of literary, philosophical, scientific, and theological sources. As a comparatist, she is unusually qualified for this otherwise daunting work. Even so, it remains the “time” of an intertextuality that belongs solely to intellectual and literary history. No wonder Dayan ignores Freud, generally skips psychobiographical accounts of Poe, and forgets utterly his antebellum, Southern circumstances.

Dayan is quite right to argue that Poe has “solved” the romantic dilemma regarding the dualism of subject and object, mind and matter, but she has missed the ideological consequences of that “solution.” In our postmodern, post-industrial western societies, the “conversion” of text into thing into metaphor—has realized Poe’s own Sublime. The simulations of our postmodern economies have reified a “world” of sheer “becoming,” of endless convertibility, of Emersonian metamorphosis. As Fredric Jameson has argued in his introduction to Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition, such “becoming,” “process,” and “convertibility” constitute the triumph of a capitalist exchange-economy—“the very ‘permanent revolution’ of capitalist production itself.”

In her conclusion to the chapter on the three tales about women, Dayan writes: “...these three tales... demonstrate how Poe reuses, fragments, and recombines his own texts. In reusing the stuff of Gothic fiction, he becomes involved in his own repetition compulsion. And ‘all is re-soluble into the old,’ as the writer keeps quoting himself, while testing the originality of novel combinations—the only talent remaining to the artist who knows that no utterance can count as re-creation” (190).

The instructive irony of Dayan’s study is that it “saves” Poe from a narrow Idealism, only to transform Poe unwittingly into what popular films would make him: the “source” for the “horrors” of our postmodern “world” of sheer “becoming,” of endless convenibility, of Emersonian metamorphosis. The simulations of our postmodern economies have realized Poe’s own Sublime. The simulations of our postmodern economies have reified a “world” of sheer “becoming,” of endless convertibility, of Emersonian metamorphosis.

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Kathleen McAuley, Curator of The Bronx County Historical Society and Manager of The Edgar Allan Poe Cottage, recently helped to coordinate the production of a videotape titled "Edgar Allan Poe and Fordham," to be used as a teaching tool in the Bronx public schools; she also wrote a companion text for teachers. Ms. McAuley is helping to plan the Historical Society's "Poe Week," to be held in the Spring of 1989 to mark the 180th anniversary of Poe's birth.

Mrs. James C. Smith, Curatorial Consultant of the Poe Museum, has nearly completed cataloging the library collection of the Poe Foundation. The collection is located in the Virginia State Library; the finished catalogue will be available at the State Library and the Poe Museum, in Richmond, Virginia.

The manuscript of Poe's classic short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is one of the literary treasures on display in "Legacies of Genius: A Celebration of Philadelphia Library's," an exhibition which may be viewed through September 25 in the adjoining galleries of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Library Company of Philadelphia, at 1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia.

Erick V. Weiss will present "An Afternoon of Mystery and Imagination: Dramatic Readings of Poe's Works" at The Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site (corner of Seventh and Spring Garden, Philadelphia) on August 13 and 14. Admission is free.

On January 19, 1989, The Edgar Allan Poe Memorial Committee, a group of Poe scholars and Boston merchants, will dedicate a plaque commemorating Poe's birth at the site of his birth, the corner of Carver Street and Boylston Street. The plaque will be unveiled in the afternoon; the ceremony, to be followed by Norman George's performance of "Poe Alone" and Clifford Krainik's slide presentation "Portraits of Poe," will take place at 8 p.m. at the Old South Meeting House, 310 Washington Street, Boston. The plaque's inscription, written by Norman George, will read as follows:

1809 (portrait) 1849
EDGAR ALLAN POE
POET • STORYWRITER • CRITIC


Edgar Allan Poe Memorial Committee
January 19, 1989


Chai organizes his "history of the assimilation and transformation of the cultural legacy of European Romanticism" from 1780 to 1830 by "above all, Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville" (xi) around eight "governing concepts:" Allegory and Symbolism, Science, the Secularization of Religion, Historical Consciousness, Pantheism, Subjectivity and Objectivity, Poetics, and "The Question of Representation." But he diverges from his focus on the four "great American authors" to discuss other Americans (Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker) and Europeans (Shelley, Balzac, Stendhal, and Goethe) so that Poe is discussed under only four of the topics for a total of seventy-five pages.

Chai's examination of Poe's place in the shift from allegory to symbolism is reductive. For instance, he limits the source and significance of the curtain of whiteness at the end of "Pym" to an image from Laplace's Apology, excluding all the rich possibilities noted at the Nantucket conference. Moreover, Chai insists that Poe remains an allegorist throughout his career without ever attaining the level of true symbolism. One can accept Chai's insistence on the image in "Pym" as "an allegorical illustration of the soul's reabsorption into the Spirit in death" (18), and one reads with interest Chai's theory that in such later tales as "The Black Cat," Poe employs a "transformed" psychological allegory in which the mind is "both subject and object of its own allegory" (22). In its struggle toward an essentially Romantic desire—"unmediated self-knowledge"—the mind self-reflexively watches the conflict between reason and irrational impulse, simultaneously attempting both to "possess" and repress its own allegorical creation as it exposes and conceals the mind's deeper nature (21-22, 30, 31). But one resists Chai's relegation of "Ligeia" to an allegory of the pursuit of knowledge. According to Chai, though the allegory here "verges upon symbolism," Ligeia cannot be considered a symbol "in the Romantic sense" because she expresses the "formulation of a subjective phantasy rather than an 'objective' ideal" (26). Ligeia cannot serve as an "objective" symbol of ideal beauty because Poe lacks a "universal" aesthetic based on a "definite formal ideal of beauty" (27). Though Chai underlines Poe's use of detail to evoke Ligeia's beauty, and cites Coleridge's requirement that a symbol accomplish an apprehension of "the Eternal in and through the Temporal" (35), he denies that Ligeia offers the opportunity for "unmediated experience of the divine essence," but only an idea associated with the "traditional notion of mutability" (27-28).

In later discussions of Romantic symbolism in Hawthorne (46-51) and Melville (76-79), Chai seems less demanding in his requirements for symbolism. His definition of the symbol as an embodiment of the artist's "visionary intuition" of a "higher Reality," which the artist expresses through material forms that will elevate the mind to a "direct apprehension of the Beautiful, an ideal platonic essence high above all material forms" (55), seems to apply to Ligeia just as well as it does the butterfly in Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful." Also, he readily admits there are varieties of symbolism such that Emerson and Hawthorne can evolve through different phases of symbolic representation (61). In still other discussions, Chai is almost banal in his requirements for symbolic value. For example, he can call the piece of shagreen leather in Balzac's La Peau de chagrin a symbol of the gradual exhaustion of the life force (162) or the veil in the "Zenobia's Legend" chapter of The Blithedale Romance a symbol of the "subjective abyss" that divides the Veiled Lady and Theodore (351). Here Chai seems not even to require that a symbol suggest any kind of ideal, only an idea. One can only conclude that Chai insists on Poe as an allegorist in order to maintain his pattern of evolution from neoclassical allegorizing in Poe, through Romantic symbology in Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville's Moby-Dick, back to allegory in The Confidence Man. That the purpose of this chapter on Poe is primarily to develop Chai's theory is supported by the fact that he does not explore in any depth here the "Romantic Foundations" of Poe's method but its allegorical or symbolical.

The largest section of Part II, on the Foundations of Science, Here Chai does demonstrate some of the Romantic foundations of Poe's scientific ideas: Laplace's Essai philosophique sur les probabilites as a source for the tales of ratiocination, and the importance of Laplace's nebular hypothesis for Poe's cosmogony in Eureka; the "inner affinity" between Poe and Leibniz revealed in the speculations of "Mesmeric Revelation" and Eureka. Chai's main thesis is that Poe attempts to fuse scientific thought with aesthetics through
the "mathematization of nonformal elements or concepts" (106), the valorization of theory over fact, and the interpretation of Poe's imagination as an intuitive yet analytical faculty. Thus, the traditional opposition between matter and spirit can be annulled, and poetry and science viewed as different means to the same end—the Romantic goal of achieving a "comprehensive and unifying theoretical explanation of material phenomena" (105). Though Chai's discussion enriches our appreciation of Eureka, his conclusions about Poe's quasi-scientific writings are not groundbreaking. What matters most here is his impressive grasp of post-Renaissance scientific thought.

In Part V, on Pantheism, Chai gives six pages to a discussion of Poe's concept of "divine energy" in Eureka, again deepening our respect for this work. He then discusses Poe's "Poetics" in eight and one-half pages in Part VII. Chai's basic conclusions seem sound: Poe's poetics are an amalgam of neoclassic and Romantic aesthetic principles. But Chai can hardly do justice to Poe's poetic theory in so short a space. He discusses only Victor Cousin as Poe's "Romantic foundation." There is no consideration of A. W. Schlegel, Schiller, or any number of other possibilities suggested by recent scholarship on Poe. Also, Chai over-emphasizes the similarities between Cousin and Poe in order to support his proposal of Cousin as the major (only?) source of Poe's aesthetics. This last section on Poe reveals that Chai has cited only twenty-four secondary sources during the course of his four sections on Poe. Of the twenty-four, four were published before 1860, eight during the 60's-70's, and only two during the 1980's. Though Chai does cite such major sources as Mabbott's Collected Works, Pollin's Collected Writings, and Thompson's Romantic Irony, he does not seem to have considered much of the recent Poe scholarship published prior to the appearance of his book. Finally, it is difficult to see how Chai can insist that Poe is not a symbolist in Part I in view of his definition in Part VII of the ends of Poe's aesthetics as "ultimately Romantic: the symbolic significance of beauty qua aesthetic ideal" (389n). Indeed, Chai seems to contradict his earlier position in summarizing the evolution of Poe's aesthetic in his penultimate paragraph: "A concept of allegory at first indistinguishable from that of symbolism is gradually filtered out and finally rejected as a diversion from that beauty which elevates the mind to the level at which it apprehends the divine essence" (374).

Thus, one is forced to conclude that the major value of Chai's book lies elsewhere than in his discussions of Poe. The treatments of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville are longer, more detailed in their attention to specific texts, yet still informed with the same knowledge of 18th-19th century literary history of the American Renaissance, there to provoke continued discussions of Poe's, and others', aesthetic intentions.

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Letter to The Editor

Dear Sir:

It was a pleasure to read the recently discovered Poe letter, dated "Richmond--August 5," in the last PSA Newsletter, but the assigned year of "1849" should be corrected to "1848." In August 1849, Poe would not have been so anxious to see reviews of Eureka: the book had been published more than a year earlier, in July 1848. Moreover, the two articles Poe gave to "Mr. Thompson"--John R. Thompson, editor of the Southern Literary Messenger--can be attributed to the year 1848. The "article about Mrs. Lewis," one of several shameless puffs Poe committed to please his benefactor Sarah Anna Lewis, appeared in the Messenger for September 1848. The article he wanted Mrs. Clemm to forward was almost certainly "The Rationale of Verse," a lengthy disquisition which had been declined by both the American Review and Graham's Magazine. Thompson did not like it either, but he published it in the October and November numbers of the Messenger. The three people Poe mentioned in an abbreviated fashion--John, Mrs. M, and Louisa--were old friends: John Mackenzie, his mother Mrs. Jane Scott Mackenzie, and his wife Louisa Lanier Mackenzie.

Cordially,

Dwight Thomas

The editor appreciates this correction.

Continued Discount on The Poe Log

G. K. Hall is still offering a 30% discount on the price of The Poe Log for members of the Poe Studies Association--the $75.00 book is available for $52.50. Checks in this amount, made out to the Poe Studies Association, should be sent to Dennis Eddings, Poe Studies Association, English Department, Western Oregon State College, Monmouth, Oregon 97361.

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The Quest for Calvin

Some years ago, while in Buffalo, I visited the grave of a shadowy figure in Poe's life—Calvin F. S. Thomas, who, in 1827, printed Tamerlane and Other Poems.

The most famous resident of Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery is Millard Fillmore, another shadowy figure. The pleasant young woman behind the information desk had, understandably, never heard of Thomas. She was a Poe fan, however, and delighted that there was a connection between him and her workplace. She gave me directions to the Thomas grave.

At the grave I noted that the names of various relations of Thomas were engraved on the simple stone, but that, although he was the lot's original owner, his name did not appear. Typical, I thought, of the elusive Calvin.

I live in Boston and often pass the corner of Washington and State streets where the eighteen-year-old Poe entered the shop of the nineteen-year-old Thomas. The small volume that resulted from their meeting has been called "The Black Tulip of American Book Collecting." Thomas had intrigued me, and with the idea of someday writing an article, I had looked up references to him in the Poe literature. In the standard biographies, he is usually given brief mention, often described as "obscure." But a few scholars showed him more than passing interest.

While preparing his 1882 biography, George E. Woodberry conducted an extensive search for Thomas and located a daughter (Mrs. Martha Thomas Booth) in Springfield, Missouri, who provided biographical details in a letter. Her father, she wrote, "was born in the city of New York, Aug. 5, 1808. His father, who was an Englishman and I think the only member of his family in this country, died when father was a very young child. Grandma removed with her two children, father and an older sister, to Norfolk, Va., to reside with relatives, returning after a few years to Boston, her native place, to educate her children." Mrs. Booth said that her father had never mentioned Poe and that there were no records of the Boston shop. Woodberry concluded that, because Poe had used a pseudonym for Tamerlane, Thomas never knew his identity.

In 1909, J. H. Whitty added a tantalizing note concerning Poe and Thomas: "The relatives of Poe and Thomas were said to have been associated in some way years before this, and something about this old connection was not pleasant to Thomas. This was very likely his reason for keeping his knowledge of Poe a secret up to his death in 1876." Whitty may have based this vague statement on an unpublished memoir of Poe by F. W. Thomas (the manuscript was lost and has never been located by scholars). Woodberry observed in his 1909 biography that no corroborative evidence for the view Whitty presents exists ("...nothing is elsewhere said"). In his 1917 edition of Poe's poems, Whitty mentioned that he had heard hints of "a runaway escapade" of David Poe with a woman named Thomas. Either or both of Poe's parents could have had contact with Mrs. Thomas and her children in Norfolk, but the matter remains purely speculative.

Oscar Wegelin wrote articles on Thomas (in 1926 and 1940) that traced his printing career and identified pamphlets printed from his press after he left Boston in 1828. In his 1941 facsimile edition of Tamerlane, Thomas Ollive Mabbott included some biographical notes on the printer.

Mabbott discovered that Thomas had had many publishing ventures in Buffalo, where he had finally settled. In 1846, Thomas took over the Western Literary Messenger; its November 1849 issue contained an obituary of Poe, along with a reprint of "Annabel Lee." Thomas ran into legal difficulties with the federal government, and, closing down his Buffalo operations, moved to Springfield, Missouri, in 1869. He died on a return visit to Buffalo in 1876 and was buried in Forest Lawn.

Standing at his grave, I wondered just what, if anything, Thomas did know about Poe. Thomas wrote articles for a Buffalo newspaper (one of them appeared a few weeks before his death); if he had been aware of Poe as the author of Tamerlane, it is curious that he never revealed his part in the book's publication.

In 1988, the "obscure Boston printer" was mentioned in wire service stories about the twelfth copy of Tamerlane that had been found in a New Hampshire barn and was auctioned at Sotheby's on June 7. I finally did write an article on Thomas that, in connection with the auction, appeared on the Op-Ed page of the Boston Globe. The handsome Sotheby's catalog contained an excellent history of Tamerlane that devoted a few paragraphs to Thomas, but concluded that "very little is known of him."

Perhaps Poe scholarship should take that statement as a challenge.

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