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Poe's Secret Autobiography

It is not good for man to cherish a solitary ambition. Unless there be those around him, by whose example he may regulate himself, his thoughts, desires, and hopes will become extravagant, and he the semblance, perhaps the reality, of a madman.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Prophetic Pictures"



No one needs to remind the American critic of recent Francophile continuations of the assumptions about Poe's canonical status—to be sure, with a "difference"—by past French writers and critics from Baudelaire to Poulet. Not unlike the cracked, ultimately imploding house of Usher, Poe's texts undoubtedly exhibit, sometimes to the point of exhibitionism, a supplementary or, to use one of his own frequently used words, a "supererogatory" verbosity that at once deconstructs the Poe-narrator's logocentric prison-house and the reader's attempt to account for it. Poe, the unconscious producer of postsemiotic texts, has taken precedence over Poe, the exploiter and parodist of late romantic tableaux and memorabilia, and even Poe, the innovator of popular literary genres like the "how did the who-dun-it do it?" It seems time for the still unregenerate, antitheoretical American critic to face a Poe-esque truth as gleaned from one of his most recently deconstructed and re-deconstructed tales: that Francophile criticism has again purloined the Poe *oeuvre* from the archives of American literary history right before the eyes of the latter's self-consciously nationalistic guardians.

Of course, even from this ideological perspective, a perspective that Francophile criticism has come to associate with American criticism's "self" concerns, the Poe canon has registered well-known ambivalent responses. Suspicious of Poe's character, his popularity, and the "literary" pretensions of his works, American criticism has begrudgingly admitted his corpus and, as I shall argue, even his corpse into American literature's Hall of Fame, that is, its institutional courses and anthologies. As prose writer, Poe was

Henry James's "exquisite specimen of provincialism," a writer appealing to "a decidedly primitive stage of reflection," yet who on occasion, if only in his criticism, could "find a phrase of happy insight in a patch of the most fatuous pedantry."¹ In the context of the post-World War II institutionalization of American criticism from F. O. Matthiessen to Harold Bloom, the brief quantity and "narrow" aesthetic as well as moral range of Poe's works has consigned them to the limbo of footnotes in the *American Renaissance* and, at least until recently, to Bloom's conspicuous silence about their anxiety-seminal influence on later American writers.² These de facto diminishment of Poe's importance in American literary history tend to confirm Claude Richard's judgment that "to American critics, Poe has been relegated to relative obscurity" or hardly exists "because he didn't fit into the 'picture.'"³

To be sure, there have been more ideologically insistent and critically sophisticated efforts to bring Poe back into the mainstream of American literature. Leslie Fiedler, for example, suggests that Poe's confounding of the distinction between high- and low-brow literature entails an American populist demystification of elitist institutionalism, and in this way accords with the American political "experiment."⁴ On a more hermeneutic level, Jonathan Auerbach claims that Poe's works reveal, and can even be read as allegorical internalizations of, Poe's struggle and desire to come to terms with producing literature for a commodity-oriented readership.⁵ In this sense, Poe's works at least valuably dramatize their "American" literary-ideological relations of production.

There also remains another way to view these works "in the American grain." Refining William Carlos Williams's judgment that Poe's works, in style as well as theme, reflect a mainstream "American Adam" concern, specifically what Williams defines as the American's "necessity for a fresh beginning," Joseph Riddel argues that these works effectively deconstruct the "American" quest for literary-ideological originality and/or original self-identity.⁶ To Riddel, Poe's works are crypts on and cryptographic repetitions of other texts; they thus prefigure and predict postmodernist notions of intertextuality, the fictionality of all origins, and the death of

the authorial self as well as the autonomous work. Particularly in *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, as John Irwin painstakingly shows in his critical revision of Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, Poe represents the desire to arrive at the origins of self through a phonetic language trying to double the immediate effect of hieroglyphic writing.⁷ But his quest, one that typifies the concerns of other "American Renaissance" writers as well, is doomed to failure since there can be no quest for self without language, and no language whose very materiality as writing does not interfere with the self's desire to become narcissistically doubled—absolutely self-present—through the mirror of this medium.⁸ Poe's fiction thus constitutes an aporia to would-be "American Adam" autobiographies, the imaginable representations of the American self as indeed a "fresh beginning." But for this very reason, one can argue for his priority not only in exercising through writing the Republic's ideological or "American dream" wish for self-autonomy, but also in exorcising by exposing the nightmarish consequences of this wish.

Still, revisionary "American Renaissance" or canonical recuperations of Poe's works, written through as well as against an insistent American mythos (noticeably, here, with the help of a purloined scene of Francophile criticism), may underestimate the way his works effectively prejudge these same recuperations as misreadings that foster a secret and perverse "American Adam" autobiographical project. Looking at Poe's tales from this perspective, I do not mean to claim that they are "autobiographical" in the sense of symbolically outlining his extratextual, perverse spiritual autobiography through, say, the experiences of his many haunted narrators or the various incognito subterfuges afforded by the discourse of fiction. Rather, I mean something akin to Paul de Man's notion of autobiography as a figure of reading as opposed to genre of writing,⁹ but here revised as a figure of Poe's reading of his own texts as he imagines them being misread by others in order to regard them as his dialectically confirmed exclusive private property. Poe produces texts, that is, to gain a perspective on their writing like that of his narrator in the lyric tale, "The Island of the Fay,"

who can look with "interest" on a scene in nature only if he "gazed alone."¹⁰

One does not have to be a Poulet-like intuitionist to apprehend Poe's tales as motivated fictions in relation to their imagined reception. For one thing, they impishly advertise their literary seams, their thematic, stylistic, generic, and other conventional derivations. Far from attempting to conceal these derivations and "plagiarisms," precedents that Thomas Mabbott and others have eagerly detected (as Poe himself did with many works written by his contemporaries), Poe's tales overexpose them and thus repeatedly verge on becoming literary hoaxes; repeatedly concern themselves with conspicuously obsessive topoi such as premature burials, doubles, and dying, beautiful women; and repeatedly flirt with motifs like enigmatic ciphers or written "characters," allusions to other texts, even the repetition of certain words and phrases. Equally relevant here is Poe's habit of reducing word-sense to sound, to the sheer materiality of the signifier mocking the reader's attempt to make sense out of it: the animal sounds mistaken for a foreign language in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"; most famously, perhaps, the "nevermore" mimicking of human speech by the bird in "The Raven"; or the guttural sounds and gnashing of teeth (the latter, a metonym of the very condition for articulate speech) by the dwarf-protagonist in "Hop-Frog." Along these same lines, one everywhere encounters countless verbal jokes, particularly in the form of submerged puns and commonplace maxims which compound the already hoaxy aura of Poe's tales. Hans Phaall dropping a letter to townspeople below from a balloon in the sky translates as a text appearing "out of the blue" and "full of hot air"; the narrator in "Berenice" extracting teeth [*sic*] from his dead female cousin puts himself "in the jaws of death"; or the "duping" Dupin detecting an ape as killer of the two women thus dabbles in "monkey business," or at least, like the character Hop-Frog in the later story, "makes a monkey out of" the social establishment, here the Parisian police.

Whereas these overexposed verbal eruptions point to the intertextual locus and/or linguistic dislocation of Poe's tales, they also

signify authorial manipulation as such—the immanently signified presence of an “I” in wilfull control of his text’s production. The literary hoax, after all, connotes the writer’s intention, or at least the awareness of the fiction of his fiction’s reception. If Poe elsewhere adheres to an affectivist philosophy of composition, to that ideal of a text totally enthraling a reader in its tightly construed, unified representational spell for the time it takes to read it, he also sabotages this ideal by permeating his texts with elements that can interrupt this spell and call attention to his own performance. Of course, one might wish to argue that, short of gratuitous exhibitionism, Poe’s disruptive activity expresses his “supererogatory” animus toward his consumerist democratic audience. At the very least, it violates the literary contract whereby the reader agrees to suspend his or her disbelief on the assumption that a tale manifests the writer’s genuine effort to project a sharable imagined and imaginative world. Or one could regard such disruptions as indicative of the Poe text’s unconscious awareness of “writing” as a constant slippage of signifiers. Certainly the forged as opposed to metafictional aspect of the literary hoax as well as the *over-baring* of the device in Poe’s tales points to the iterability of fiction in general, that is, to fiction as lacking an original ground from which one could apprehend it as a totally self-present mode of representation.

Yet the verbal static emanating from a Poe tale seems too controlled, too contrived, too intentionally recognizable, for us to regard it as simply a sign either of his ideological grievance toward his audience or of his unconscious semiotic praxis. On the contrary, such static seems self- rather than other-directed. It appears directed, namely, toward revealing to its imagined reader the word-mediated traces of its author, the man in the text-as-machine, for no apparent reason other than to confront his reader with an autobiographical terminus. Indeed, the “self” suddenly uncovered by our awareness of hoaxy elements in Poe’s tales occasionally even leads us to the culdesac of his subliminally inscribed signature. For example, the letters of “Siope” (Greek for “calm” or “silence”), a brief fable that Poe later retitled “Silence” and had earlier associated with autobiographical writing per se in his caption for this tale,

"in the manner of the Psychological Autobiographists" (Bulwer and De Quincey, according to Mabbott, 2:199), anagrammatically spell the words "is Poe." In the same way, the "ape" that kills the women in "Rue Morgue" anagrammatically spells, of course, the initials of Poe's name: E. A. P.

These discernible, seemingly arbitrary or redundant self-references may signify more than displays of parodistic free play or further extensions of the self-limiting literary hoax. One could instead maintain that they reverse the way tropes usually associated with fiction intrude on and problematize autobiography's "true" renditions of its writer's life-experiences. By permeating his tales with autobiographical intimations in a quite literal rather than symbolically representational sense, Poe exemplifies how autobiography can function as a postscriptural aporia to fiction. Moreover, since the verbal elements conveying these intimations willy-nilly distract the reader's attention from the tale's aesthetic or narrative spell—the very spell Poe identifies as the fictive experience par excellence—we could also argue that elements like his self-consciously planted signature effectively preclude his tale's being read *as* a self-contained fiction, let alone as a text in the process of *unconsciously* inscribing, as Geoffrey Hartman has expressed it, a Saussurean specular name.¹¹ Thus, the reader made aware of Poe's inscribed rhetorical gambit of writing a tale in terms of a "I know that you know I know that *I* am in the process of writing this fiction of a fiction" now confronts a text less endowed with the concentrated ambiguity of two possible readings than a text whose verbally abused "first" or aesthetic reading possibly indicates a secretly withheld autobiographical subtext. On such occasions, Poe's tales do not so much place the reader in the position of not being able to *decidé* between a conventionally aesthetic and a perversely hoaxy reading as suggest that the text he or she has just been reading *has not yet been read*—a situation induced by his or her sudden encounter with a performative linguistic operation which "is Poe."

In short, one can construe Poe's tales as autobiographical cryptograms. He all but confesses this possibility in an oft-cited passage

from one of his *Literati* essays where he maintains that "the book of an author" doubles as "the author's self The soul is a cipher, in the sense of a cryptograph; and the shorter a cryptograph is [i.e., like his own brief tales], the more difficulty there is in its comprehension."¹² His 1841 article on "Secret Writing" clearly shows his desire to produce as well as ability to decipher such writing. There never was, he says, "a time when there did not exist a necessity, or at least a desire, of transmitting information from one individual to another . . . as to elude comprehension [by others]."¹³ Poe proceeds to contend that all cryptographs are decipherable; in other words that there exists no such thing as a private language. But he also demonstrates his interest in the latter possibility by reprinting a lengthy response to his contention by a correspondent named W. B. Tyler who insists that one could indeed produce a cryptographic text that would "be perfectly 'hidden'" and seem "an impenetrable mystery" to others.¹⁴ When commenting about Shelley in his 1849 "Marginalia," Poe himself will suggest the possibility of producing texts whose public or readable appearance belies their withheld significance for their writer: "[Shelley's] rhapsodies are but the rough notes—the stenographic memoranda of poems—memoranda which, because they were all-sufficient for his own intelligence, he cared not to be at the trouble of writing out in full for mankind."¹⁵ Indeed, one can also see Poe's impulse toward "secret writing" in his very alteration of the title "Siope" to "Silence" where his previous, relatively concealed signature effectively *becomes* erased unto "silence" or a more radically concealed signature. To someone like Poe who was convinced that a writer's very autograph and handwritten manuscript could express his "moral biography,"¹⁶ even the print-mediated relatively concealed signature in "Siope" would constitute a form of autobiographical-alias-autographic concealment.

For Poe, then, writing a tale includes the possible imagination of its misreading. At the very least, like the hoaxing of fiction whose function is defined by his idea of secret writing, or like the many other anagrams we can discover in his texts—for instance, "nevar" in the word "raven" of his famous poem—secret writing

for Poe serves to delay the reading of the text's very signifiers. Once deciphered, as deciphered the anagrams may always become, the decoded message seems no less "an impenetrable mystery." The future absence of the illocutionary and/or aesthetic context in which this message was produced saddles its necessarily fragmentary semiotic appearance with zero semantic value. For example, the "nevar" in "The Raven" amounts to no more than a mere tautology or italicized repetition of the poem's "nevermore" refrain; like Poe's other anagrammatic "monkey business," it functions as a kind of secret writing that effectively promulgates the illusion of having produced a still unread literary text. Even when apprehended as secret writing, Poe's texts simply disclose a contentless autobiographical pregnancy, a prematurely buried autobiographical subtext whose self-referential significance becomes discernible only through a purely speculative, self-alienating act of reading.

From this perspective, we can better focus on and interpret the effects of Poe's verbal doubling. Here I do not simply mean "doubling" in the sense of represented characters like the two William Wilsons, or of anagrammatic splittings like "nevar" and "raven," but rather that doubling found in his very construction of texts, for example in "The Gold Bug" which was actually first published in a two-part weekly sequence in the *Dollar Newspaper* (Mabbott, 3:806). About money, doubtless also about (especially given its site of publication) its own status as a commodity in Poe's contemporary literary marketplace, the clearly demarcated narrative focuses of "The Gold Bug" serve to increase its conventional literary value, which of course accounts for its continuing popularity in the Poe canon.¹⁷ But we can also claim that the reader pays the price for this narrative doubling or formal defamiliarization of a narrative convention. That is, focusing on William Legrand's mode of deciphering Captain Kidd's cryptographic treasure-map, the second part of the story comes to take narrative precedence over the first where Legrand, the narrator, and Jupiter actually discover the treasure. By making the second or methodological section the narrative center of the story, Poe effectively displaces or

interrupts the section that, according to textual precedents on which the story was based (Mabbott, 3:800-803), would otherwise have attracted greater melodramatic interest to a convention-bound reader.

This effect seems to resemble that produced earlier in his career by his analytic demystification not only of the illusory doubling of human activity in Maelzel's mechanical Chess-player, but of the very public wishing to believe in it. In a more perverse sense, it also resembles the effect that his own "The Philosophy of Composition" will have on readers of his earlier, highly popular poem, "The Raven." In other words, the second part of "The Gold Bug" both anticipates by mimicking a "second" or "critical" reading of the first part and, more important, effectively leads its readers to adopt a reflective relation to the narrative as a whole. William Legrand, "the great Will" or redundant figure of the writer desiring, as Poe explicitly states in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, to make "the soul of the reader [be] at the writer's control,"¹⁸ first dupes the narrator, himself a figure for the tale's reader, by distracting him with a physical gold bug, an inscribed metonym of the desired aesthetic mystification Poe's tales would perpetrate on their readers. More important, in confessing this chicanery in the process of narrating his solution to the Kidd-cryptograph, Legrand also distracts the narrator/reader *again*. As author in control of the text he has withheld and first interprets, Legrand, that is, all but forces the narrator/reader into a reflective relation to this text and, by a virtually inevitable proleptic doubling, confesses the writer's attempt to do the same with the reader of "The Gold Bug." At *this* confessional point, then, the "reader" confronts a text whose sheer aesthetic effect has become retroactively and irrecoverably lost or sabotaged by its production of the reader's self-conscious relation to it. In short, this lost aesthetic relation to the narrative now itself becomes the tale's *still* buried treasure—like the wine Fortunato will never get to "taste" in "The Cask of Amontillado."

This circuitous concealment of his text helps define Poe's motivated assumptions about the effect an interest in constructing

and deciphering a cryptograph (and the short tale here encoding it) will have on readers of his stories and poems. "To see distinctly the machinery . . . of any work of Art," he notes in his "Marginalia" (205), "is . . . of itself, a pleasure, but one which we are able to enjoy only just in proportion as we do *not* enjoy the legitimate effect designed by the artist." In this sense, we can posit that Poe's tales produce two distinct tiers of reading. First, the aesthetic or "legitimate effect" of a Poe tale distracts its reader from recognizing the act of authorial self-inscription; in the process, it inversely frames this act as a kind of secret writing that conceals, like Maelzel's mechanical hoax, the man controlling the tale's operations, operations Poe rhetorically formulates as those of a literary machine in "The Philosophy of Composition." But second, insofar as a reader becomes aware of the writer's "intentional" concealment via hoaxes, signatorial anagrams, motifs, and narrational catechreses like staged methodologies potentially referring to the very tales that encode them, he or she is led to adopt a reflective or *anesthetic* relation to the text-at-hand, a reflexivity that now inversely produces the possibility of Poe's own secret relation to *his initial aesthetic composition of it*, and "nevermore" allows the reader access to this relation.

In one sense, then, similar to Dupin's notion of truth in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe constructs his stories as all surface without depth, even as they lead the reader eventually to suspect this depth. But whether read in terms of their surface design or suspicions of their depth, these tales invite rather than resist closed readings. If the ostensible goal of a Poe tale is to control its reader in its aesthetic spell for the duration it takes to read it, this goal becomes a pretext not for a "legitimate" or proper reading after all, but for an *im-proper misreading* which results in the writer's *sole* ability to reappropriate the tale's imagined if Imaginary scene of writing, its prematurely buried beautiful premise, or what Poe describes in his "Marginalia" as that special "class of fancies of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language" (98-99). Such delicate, prelinguistic fancies constitute Poe's sense of his

secret creative origins, his private relation to "Poesy"—the other anagrammatic significance of "Siope," for example¹⁹—which readers will miss for being trapped by the tale's *post factum* textual residues or provocative patterns of meaning.

We can observe how Poe explicitly stages such scenarios of misreading in an 1842 tale retitled and revised in 1845 as "The Oval Portrait." The narrator of this story, in Arthur Hobson Quinn's paraphrase, is

a desperately wounded man who seeks refuge in an unoccupied chateau, and seeks the portrait of a young and beautiful girl, which startles him by its likeness to life. Finding an old volume that describes the paintings, he learns . . . [that she] had given her life to please her husband, an artist, who, as he painted into his picture her marvelous beauty, drained from her her health and spirits. Finally, when he gazed on his completed work and cried out, "This is indeed Life itself," he beheld his bride dead.²⁰

In the earlier version of this brief tale, the narrator informs us that he had just taken opium before he saw the portrait; in the revised version, that he was merely drifting off to sleep. In either case, this information has led formalist critical readers to focus on the narrator's ironic function in the tale as much as on the material he narrates, an option also afforded by many of Poe's other tales.²¹ But by inviting a formally determinate reading, the story here effectively distracts the reader from focusing on what Poe later maintains personifies "the most poetical topic in the world," namely, the tale's actual topic of a beautiful woman's death ("The Philosophy of Composition," 425).²² Moreover, the tale concerns the theme of art's vampirization of the very effect, "lifelikeness" (Mabbott, 2:664), which the tale no less than the portrait purports to convey. One could also say that the text within the text does the same thing, for the narrator's reading of the volume perforce makes him avert his gaze from the otherwise self-present portrait of the beautiful woman. His reading, that is, disseminates the immediate object of his initial aesthetic response. Indeed, bereft of both the portrait *and* the text from which the narrator (only) quotes, the narrative of "The Oval Portrait" before *us* thus refers

to a virtually absent text, itself in the process of absenting its pictorial referent which has already absented its living model.

What *we* read, then, is the narrator's misreading or missed appropriation of the picture, a figure for the aesthetic object per se. Not only does his reading virtually kill this object like the artist's painting his wife's picture has killed her, our reading, too, is put in the position of repeating this artistic homicide. After all, our reading of "The Oval Portrait" inevitably tends to double the narrator's own curiosity to know more about a "vignette"-like aesthetic object which so affects him at first that he closes his eyes, not knowing "why I did this" (Mabbott, 2:664, 663); his ensuing explanation for this closure, "to make sure that my vision had not deceived me—to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze," again provokes our own desire "for a more sober and more certain" understanding of the narrator as well as tale. Just as the narrator then comes to read the portrait's verbal commentary, so his statements lead us into a "second" reading of the story. The story itself thus effectively buries by distracting our focus from its putative generative source—that "most poetical topic" as such of a dying, beautiful woman.

Such repetitive de-compositions of, first, the woman by the artist, next the portrait by the volume, then this volume by the tale's very narrative, and finally this narrative by the interpretive narrative able to recognize how such verbal circularity figuratively doubles an "oval portrait," obviously suggest an endlessly provisional sequence or *en abîme* of misreading. But I would argue that as with the sequential relation between "The Raven" and "The Philosophy of Composition," the tale's allegorical staging of misreadings functions to keep the reader ignorant of its ever-more "poetical" locus of production. More precisely, in *reflectively* re-enacting the killing of a beautiful woman, these projected misreadings keep the beautiful woman, the secret inspirational source or muse of the story itself, *in the process* of dying. If only from the position of the writer imagining these misreadings, they effectively prolong the tale's secret aesthetic life.

If Poe here and in his other tales allegorizes his reading of others' misreading his therefore privately retained relation to his "most poetical topic," he indeed writes, to use Lacan's etymology for "purloined letter," prolonged narratives, texts that postpone the moment of an aesthetic reading akin to his (Imaginary) own, or texts that by authorial will will "never" be read as they were written, in this way serving to produce his secret autobiographical relation to them. In short, as allegories of their process of misreading, his tales never quite exist. Rather, they are ghost stories—not so much stories about ghosts as stories of the possibility of stories about Poe's autobiographical relation to the "beautiful" topos that spawns them. But since Poe can effect a "bad faith" imagination of others misreading his texts, he can also imagine the contingency of such misreadings, their dependence, for example, on the sheer material survivability of a text so as to become misread. Or more pointedly, he must be able to imagine the possibility of a reading that could double his own, one that like our present discussion would witness, appreciate, but also cancel his otherwise dead-end narcissistic project even before textual disintegration might occur.

And so in this sense, Poe's tales also allegorically confess such obstacles to his wish to produce secret autobiographical fiction. As we can see from looking at an 1844 tale called "The Oblong Box," Poe's fiction endopsychically recognizes the limitation of its patently "bad faith" projection of misreadings. The narrator of this story finds himself on a ship with a young artist named Wyatt and his reputedly beautiful wife whom the narrator, nevertheless, judges to be plain-looking. He also notices that Wyatt, an artist, has brought an oblong box to his stateroom about which he remains silent. Merely curious at first about what the box contains, the narrator soon becomes convinced that it "could possibly contain nothing in the world but a copy of Leonardo's 'Last Supper' . . . done by Rubini the younger" (Mabbott, 3:925). Eventually provoked to anger by Wyatt's silence, for he assumes "feelings of warm friendship" with Wyatt (3:922), the narrator becomes even more certain in his conviction that the box indeed contains

"artistical secrets" (3:925) like Rubini's valuable counterfeit—a situation not unlike the critical reader's suspicion of a determinate, Captain Kidd-like treasure of meaning concealed amid the intertextual counterfeits advertised in almost any Poe tale. The narrator suspects that Wyatt intends to "smuggle a fine picture to New York, under my very nose; expecting me to know nothing of the matter" (3:925). Then, during a storm when the ship begins to sink, Wyatt refuses to remain on a lifeboat unless he can take the box with him. The box, he exclaims, weighs "'but a trifle'" or "'mere nothing'" (3:931). Wyatt returns to the ship, retrieves the box, jumps overboard, and quickly sinks with it after the captain rejects his request as "'mad'" (3:932). The narrator wonders why the box sank so quickly; the captain replies he had packed it with salt, and as soon as the salt melts "'they will soon rise again'" (3:933). He also exposes the narrator's misreading of the box's contents, for it turns out that it did not contain an art treasure in the narrator's sense, but the artist's dead wife who, according to the captain, "was, indeed . . . a most lovely, and most accomplished woman" (3:933).

This story, of course, resolves itself into one of those "proverbial" maxims mentioned earlier, here the artist "sinking or swimming" with his artistic ideal. But more important, like the pun in the title of another tale, "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe's narrative of "The Oblong Box" covers or "masks" the *read* death, that is, precisely the reading that would have accorded with the artist's privileged and intimate knowledge of what his text-alias-box contained: Poe's own dead, beautiful muse. The narrative projects its own *egregious* misreading through the figure of the narrator, a misreading imaged in the story as clearly disconnected from the artist's relation to his "most poetical topic." Because of an unprovoked aggressive tendency on the narrator's part (Wyatt, after all, simply remains silent about the box's contents), his misreading in effect leaves behind not only the artist's still secret relation to Beauty, but also a *dead* "relation" (in both senses of this word): the intimate, dead, but still remembered—hence ghostly—source of the artist's activity. The desired imagination of misreading, then,

here itself seems "supererogatory." Instead of preserving or prolonging, it suggests the divorce from any possible corroboration of the writer's relation to his "most poetical topic." He alone witnesses the entropic disintegration of this topos. Like the small feminine Fay whom the narrator surrealistically imagines as circling a small island in the tale "The Island of the Fay," the "poetical" writer's beautiful woman can become more and more shadowy, more ghostly, soon to disappear altogether: ". . . when the sun had utterly departed," she (here little more *than* a figment of the narrator's imagination) "now the mere ghost of her former self, went disconsolately with her boat [i.e., the small tale containing Poe's "most poetical topic"] into the region of the ebony flood . . . and I beheld *her magical figure* no more" (Mabbott, 2:605; my emphasis).

Simply put, Poe can imagine the material cancellation of his project. It is in the context of this possibility—the fissure, say, in his scene of writing allowing him to imagine the ultimate disintegration or fall of his own house of fiction—that Poe's secretly determined autobiographical relation to his writing accrues epigraphic urgency. The "mesmeric" control a writer exerts on his (mis)reader through his text clearly depends on the limited duration of composing and imagining the misreading of a material text. But if for Poe narrative time is intrinsically finite, the issue of textual entropy can also take the form of his imagining *un*-controlled misreadings in the future. The mummy revived by a "material" galvanic battery in the comic-satiric tale, "Some Words with a Mummy," pointedly maintains that only a writer can read his text the way it was intentionally composed, for after his death a writer's "great work" gets decomposed or invariably becomes "converted into a species of haphazard notebook . . . for the conflicting guesses, riddles, and personal squabbles of whole herds of exasperated commentators" (Mabbott, 3:1189).

Moreover, given Poe's acute sense of his literary-ideological environment, the honorific status accorded to Romantic Transcendentalist tenets and their associated writers, not to mention his sense of text-proliferation in his time as a "scourge,"²³ the further possibility arises that the very misreadings he desires to inscribe in

his fiction may never occur because his work may be regarded as not worth reading at all. In this sense, one can attribute another motivation to his construction of ghostly texts, texts not quite *there* either for the reader who will misread them or the writer who, after all, constructs them precisely through this imagination of their misreading and its mediated reflection of a more and more shadowy, residual muse. This mode of construction here serves as a strategy to justify Poe's claim to literary originality in the context of an unfavorable literary milieu. His desire to perceive his own work as original appears, of course, in the way he often accuses other notable contemporaries like Emerson of imitation ("Marginalia," 143), or Longfellow and Hawthorne of plagiarism. Poe also employs more subtle (one could even term them proto-deconstructive) methods to reduce the major or successful status not only of other literary texts but also of literary-ideological criteria responsible for the value of such texts, including those he himself produces. As Sidney Moss suggests, for example, in "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe effectively deconstructs honorific notions of Romantic Imagination and genius by showing how his own successful poem, "The Raven," was the result of a highly calculated or nonspontaneous mode of mechanical-deductive construction.²⁴ For Poe, literary originality "demands in its attainment less of invention than negation" ("The Philosophy of Composition," 427)—the negation, no doubt, of other textual precedents and the literary norms they give rise to. Or as he claims in "Peter Snook," such originality is not "a mere matter of impulse or inspiration" but rather the ability "carefully, patiently, and understandingly to combine."²⁵

But of course, in exposing both the appearance and honorific notions of literary originality here as patently *unoriginal*, Poe indirectly claims an original position in recognizing this very situation. In effect, Poe's critical reversals or explicit "negation" of contemporary "literary" standards serve to disclose for him an untrammelled intertextual space of writing that promises him the possibility of a "fresh beginning" as regards his own writing. The vigor of his ambition to determine this original space of writing in

relation to fraternal competitors is clearly revealed in his secretly inscribed fantasies of homicide concerning writers represented by accepted literary conventions including styles as well as themes of writing. Perhaps nowhere in Poe's canon does such a fantasy get so tellingly inscribed as in a tale he considered to be one of his best, "Ligeia." There he depicts the female protagonist with characteristics that justify Daniel Hoffman's view of her as a muse-figure for Poe²⁶: her very name a reference to a spirit personifying music (Mabbott, 2:331); "the dear music of her low sweet voice"; especially her "airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos" (2:311). Indeed, the tale clearly devolves on the prolonged dying and revenant-revivification of *two* beautiful women. Yet Poe's narrational intimations of the character Ligeia as a "spirit-lifting" muse-figure on whom we can say the writer-alias-narrator remains dependent throughout the tale (and even as he writes it after the events it depicts apparently took place) appear to include a quite specific literary-ideological allusion. Thus, her "intensity of thought" and "gigantic volition" (2:315), a willfulness dramatized by her and later the narrator's reiteration of a putative passage from Joseph Glanvill claiming that the individual's will can overcome death, project her as a relatively cryptogrammatic allusion to Transcendentalist ideology—not to a Continental as opposed to English romanticism, as some critics have argued, but to its American and European ideological versions.²⁷ For example, as a muse-figure whose "paternal name" the narrator confesses he has "never known" (2:311), Ligeia represents a *sui generis* figure of Romantic Imagination to the writer/narrator, a fatherless vision which thus abjures any romantic ideological precedent.

From this allegorical perspective (which, as we have seen, must constitute a misreading of or reflective relation to the text), "Ligeia" also representationally traces the murderous process by which Poe can effect and not merely declare his sense of being original. Despite her will to survive, Ligeia eventually dies, and the aggrieved narrator marries the Lady Rowena who only serves to remind him of his former wife's "wisdom, of her lofty . . . ethereal

nature" (2:323). Loveless and trapped in the narrator's bizarrely decorated English abbey, faced with a husband addicted to opium and who isolates her in rooms such as where a wind-machine artificially makes the pictures on a tapestry seem "hideous and uneasy" shapes (2:322), Rowena herself dies, but not before a series of periodic resuscitations. In the representational "mad disorder" of the final scene in which the grave-clothed corpse revives before the narrator and its identity becomes uncertain (2:329-30), Ligeia apparently—is it the narrator's delusion?—repossesses the body of Rowena, thus seeming to validate the passage from Glanvill.

(Mis)reading this tale as a literary-ideological allegory, one could argue that "Ligeia" concerns the death and resurrection of Coleridgean Imagination at the expense of Coleridgean Fancy, the faculty of verbal association suggested even in the way the narrator designates Rowena as "the fair-haired and blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine" (2:321). But as Rowena's allusion to a character from Scott's *Ivanhoe* suggests, "Ligeia" also revises these faculties into an oppositional relation between modes of prose fictional and poetic praxis, specifically privileging the latter over the former. On the one hand, the abbey-setting of "Ligeia" clearly depicts the claustrophobic space, the "hideous" characters and events, and the artificially induced effects that identify any Poe tale. On the other, Ligeia's vampirization of Rowena extends this reference to his own fictional praxis beyond the context of the tale's self-evident parody or ironic distention of its literary milieu, the Gothic and/or romantic fictional conventions it employs such as the binary of the light and dark lady. Given the way the narrative endows her with attributes indicative of a conventional wifely docility and yet confers on her an honorific full name (the *Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine*), Rowena here stands as a trope of both a familiar and privileged literary praxis associated with contemporary fictional discourse. Thus, the narrator's rejection of her in favor of Ligeia constitutes a way for the tale itself to define its own literary-ideological scene of (fictional) writing as no less willfully original, enduringly poetic, and secretly

operative than the vision of its "beautiful" and seemingly "entombed" protagonist (2:323). Just as Ligeia vampirizes Rowena, Poe's tale "Ligeia" effectively murders or vampirizes a conventional and privileged mode of literary praxis for the sake of dialectically resuscitating the more original Poe-esque "poetical topic," the generative trope of a dead, beautiful woman that ostensibly accounts for this very tale which thus continually and strategically entombs "her."

But here again, this narcissistic fantasy of original writing inevitably becomes haunted both by the necessarily social aspect of writing and its temporally limited materiality. Poe later admitted that Ligeia should have died one final time after her ghostly resurrection (2:307), a resurrection, by the way, that *we* reenact with "Ligeia" insofar as our allegorization of the tale itself constitutes a ghostly or reflective figure of reading. Poe's admission suggests that no mode of original expression *including his own* can survive or become recognized as such in the future except as a transitory and illusory event. For the briefest moment, we can (mis)read a Poe tale as in the process of autobiographically secret-ing his "most poetical topic" in a radically original manner. But then the text of the tale comes to dominate both him and us: it appears minus its authorial intention; it escapes the writer's will; not to mention conceals its environmental milieu in which he sought to define his radical originality and which we can only, as here, reconstruct reflectively. To Poe, every story he writes will "fall" like the house of Usher. As with Roderick, the artist, with his twin sister Madeline in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe's attempt to maintain the illusion of originality through his writing the tale eventuates *in* a tale, that is, in the project-shattering union between the artist and his beautiful muse-alien-sister, and in the disintegration of even this unity into random, more and more anonymous signifiers.

But if even Poe's narcissistic abuse of fictional discourse fails to support his illusion of originality, no writer, least of all Poe's competitors for literary greatness who, unlike him, seem unaware of the limitations textuality imposes on acts of Imagination, can ever possess anything akin to permanent canonical status. "My whole

nature," as Matthiessen in the *American Renaissance* quotes Poe as saying, "revolts at the idea that there is any being in the universe superior to myself."²⁸ This perverse—even mass suicidal—democratic position could easily define the literary-ideological context in which Poe writes the 1848 *Eureka*. We can justifiably consider this cosmological prose poem as Poe's apocalyptic "negation" (hence effort at originality according to the view espoused in "The Philosophy of Composition") of Emerson's major essay, *Nature*, as regards both the latter's theoretical scope and its articulation of the desire to arrive at "an original relation to the universe." As Poe declares in his preface to this work, *Eureka* "cannot die:—or, if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, [it] will 'rise again to Life Everlasting.'"²⁹ Poe's placement of quotation marks around "rise again to Life Everlasting" marks his materialistic qualification both of its orthodox Christian meaning and the presumption of immortality that he imputes to the idealized notions of Emersonian Transcendentalists or, as he referred to them more than once, the "Frogpondians." To judge from Emerson's famous dismissal of him as "the jingle man," Poe rightly felt himself looked down upon by Emerson's elitist literary circle. And he returned the favor in kind. In his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, for example, he admits to having momentarily qualified his estimation of Hawthorne's literary originality because of his association with this circle.³⁰

Thus, it is hardly mere speculation to claim that in *Eureka* Poe expresses his animus toward Emerson's assumptively original vision of nature. Throughout his essays but especially in *Nature*, Emerson tracks the privileged moment when the individual transcends "all mean egotism" and experiences a "transparent" oneness with nature. In *Eureka*, contrarily, Poe effectively demystifies this moment and instead argues that all individuals (and individual events) exist in a material state of regression or collapse back into an Original Unity (579) which he defines oxymoronically as "Matter no more" (587).³¹ Aside from his vision's deferral of potential Transcendentalist experience to a material-bound future, we here encounter the relevant pun of "no matter" and its virtual

reduction of such experience to the very materiality and commonality of language itself. Moreover, it "doesn't matter" whether like Emerson one lays claim to his privileged experience. Since all individuals will gain "an identity with God" (590), the social or, what to Poe amounts to the same thing, the literary recognition of one's originality becomes a moot issue, ultimately dependent on one's accidental position in the material universe. Eclipsed for the moment, then, his text "will 'rise again'" since it refers to the buried but inevitable material truth grounding Transcendentalist idealism. Like "Ligeia," for example, *Eureka* propagates the notion of an entropic material spiritualism precisely in contradistinction to the "natural supernaturalism" or intimations of immortality that permeate the writings of Poe's English and especially American Romantic peers.

Thus, along with the aforementioned "secret writing" strategies, each in their way helping to produce a buried, autobiographically determined sense of beauty, this materialistic negation of the would-be permanent canonical originality of other writers serves to double Poe's narcissistic project to possess a private and original relation to his act of writing. At the same time, it also helps convince him of the possibility that his written works will indeed "rise again" in the future, will gain him, that is, recognition as an original American writer precisely for having "executed" such a project. Poe, in other words, not only attempts to ghost-write his tales but also his place in American literary history. But here again, he cannot ever be certain that such recognition will occur. On the one hand, because of the postponed nature of his project, Poe lives and writes, as he informs James Russell Lowell in 1844, in terms of a "longing for solitude" and "continually in a reverie of the future."³² On the other, faced with determining his literary originality "between the lines" of other contemporary textual practices and constructing his texts through the imaginary misreadings of others, he necessarily experiences moments of self-doubt. In his "Marginalia" of 1848, for example, around the time he publishes *Eureka*, Poe warns that we should not "maltreat" geniuses, for just when they are about to achieve "some long-cherished end," they

sometimes "sink themselves into the deepest possible abyss of seeming despair, for no other purpose than that of increasing the space of success through which they have made up their minds immediately to soar" (145; my emphases). But who can apprehend this "space of success" except the writer in question? Poe clearly incurs difficulties in trying to determine his own original space of writing vis-à-vis the imagined misreadings of others. Because his readers "nevar" have the full Poe text before them, he must arbitrarily, that is, perversely, declare its originality. More than guilt, this literarily motivated declaration governs the significance of the narrators' impulsive confessions in "William Wilson," "The Imp of the Perverse," and "The Tell-Tale Heart." What they confess, after all, is their originality in committing crimes that otherwise—like Poe's literary crimes—might have gone unnoticed.

Still, if Poe's ambitious project constantly swings back like a pendulum toward the pit of literary oblivion, his postponed fiction, his secret abuse of prevailing literary conventions and ideologies to determine a privately original space of reading and writing his own fiction, equally allows him to adopt a nonambitious rhetorical stance toward this fiction. He can regard himself as the producer of what others will designate as minor literature but which, like *Eureka*, will nevertheless manifest his genius sometime in the future. Thus, Poe's working in minor or magazine genres (reviews, criticism, articles on nonliterary topics, as well as short commercial tales) is charged with the secret agenda of deferring his recognition as a major American literary talent. Magazine writing, he states in "Peter Snook," is "a very important branch of literature" in which Americans are presently behind English writers; even the critical essay is a potential art-form, an unexplored hence original space of writing or, as he expresses it, "a branch of literature . . . which is daily growing in importance, and which, in the end (not far distant), will be the *most* influential of all the departments of Letters."³³

Poe also internalizes this gambit of "minor literature" or encoded assertion of literary authority within certain tales, for example, "The Domain of Arnheim," a tale that devolves on the

ostensibly minor literary topos of landscape gardening. The narrator of this tale still stands in awe of a man named Ellison who, now dead, once possessed both a self-evident artistic genius and economic resources to have realized it in any artistic medium he wished. Yet despite his options to have worked in the more honorific arts, he chose to become "neither musician nor poet" but instead to traffic in "materialism" (Mabbott, 3:1271), that is, to construct a landscape garden. Significantly, one of Ellison's "elementary principles" as an artist "was the contempt of ambition" (3:1268-69). But his artistic success in this minor genre leads the narrator to wonder whether "it is not indeed possible that, while a high order of genius is necessarily ambitious, the highest is above that which is termed ambition[.] And may it not thus happen that many far greater than Milton have contentedly remained 'mute and inglorious?'" (3:1271).

As practiced by Ellison, landscape gardening indeed turns out to express a beauty "true throughout all the domains of art" (3:1273), a phrase referring to the (1847 revised) title of the tale itself, "The Domain of Arnheim." In other words, the garden expresses and yet conceals the labor of the paragon artist who takes nature and so "imbue[s] his designs at once with extent and novelty of beauty, as to convey the sentiment of spiritual interference" or "the *art* of the creator . . . apparent to reflection only" (3:1276). Ellison considers nature as a whole, and in particular American nature, "the original beauty of the country," (3:1275), as a pretext or textual field—and here he stands as a figure revising Emerson's vision of nature³⁴—on which as artist he can inscribe *his own* originality or "spiritual interference." The narrator of the tale thus testifies to the success of this ghostly self-inscription, that is, to Ellison's posthumous "supererogatory" association with an otherwise anonymously authored "natural" artifact. Giving us a verbal tour of the finished garden, the narrator imagines how others will perceive it for the first time. Ellison's construction of the garden clearly requests this imaginary and detailed speculation, for it entails Ellison's and doubtless Poe's own imaginary effort to control the reception of their respective "landscape"

works. The experience of the imagined spectator/reader through the seriatim maze of the garden/narrative seems to lead him or her to an original if controlled experience of the Romantic Sublime, to some gated Paradise of "Tall slender Eastern trees" and, "up-springing confusedly amid all, a mass of semi-Gothic, semi-Saracenic architecture, sustaining itself by miracle in mid-air . . . seeming the phantom handiwork . . . of the Fairies" (3:1283).

This experience manifests Poe's desire for an original reading of his own "semi-Gothic, semi-Saracenic" tales, tales he himself had designated in an early collection with the terms "grotesque and arabesque." Indeed, the tale itself, not simply the sequential narrative effect on its implied reader, performs this original reading in the way it allusively inscribes and transcends, for example, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." But like the imagined "as if" spectator of Arnheim represented in the tale, even the most "original" reader of this tale who becomes aware of *its* paradigmatic artistic originality ("true throughout *all* the domains of art") will be unable, in the end, to experience how it originally expresses "the art of the creator." One cannot apprehend Poe-alias-Ellison in "The Domain of Arnheim" except by "reflection only," in other words, as its lost-because-absent cause. It seems fitting, then, that even the ideal reader will likely miss—and only reflectively grasp when and if discovering—anagrams in the tale's self-identifying proper names, "Ellison" and "Arnheim": "Eli's son" and "near Him." These anagrams testify to the tale's secret and premature burial of Poe's radical, godlike ambition to be original, to his desire to produce a textual "domain near Him," the ultimate Origin. They also testify to the way he programs his texts to explode like time-bombs in the future, as expressed in the title when we substitute the French homonym "demain" for the English "domain": "Tomorrow near Him"! If we regard this tale as paradigmatic of at least Poe's tales, we could thus argue that Poe writes them as evanescent expressions of his own quasi-spiritual autobiographical "interference," his "Kilroy was here" authorial traces, himself as the lost, absent cause of texts that, like those of his artistic peers, he foresees will indeed become "lost causes."

The "post-mortem effects," as Lawrence implicitly termed them, of Poe's cyrogenic project to survive by artificial textual means—through the galvanically, salty, or mesmerically induced misreadings coterminously defining the production of his texts—point to his willed plot to return to future readers as a ghostly autobiographical figure still haunting these texts. Even with this awareness, however, such (mis)readers encounter a text that only momentarily "is Poe"; like that huge, white human figure appearing at the end of *Pym*, this autobiographical "Poe" then proceeds to disintegrate or disappear into the anonymous blank pages of the material text. Or like some manuscript found in a bottle, the title of one of his first published tales where a narrator finds himself on a ghost-ship named "Discovery" and ends on the verge of "some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-imparted secret" (Mabbott, 2:142, 145), a Poe tale sooner or later transports its reader to a ghostly subtext that both expresses its own ambition to discover and define originally the American experience, and yet leads this reader to confront its never-to-be-imparted autobiographical secret—the tale's withheld aesthetic premise that permits only Poe to read this tale autobiographically.

Such depictions of Poe's project clearly argue against the various critical attempts to recuperate the major canonical status of his works or his proper place in the "American Renaissance." Thus, to write his stories as self-distracting artifacts, as texts produced through a proleptic reading of others misreading them so as to confirm the writer's privatized autobiographical relation to their production, is to run afoul of ideological, French deconstructionist, and American traditionalist criteria—a situation Poe himself could not have plotted better since it effectively prolongs the question of his canonical status or (the same thing) the "secret" autobiographical agenda of his writing. Far from struggling against, Poe's tales unabashedly exemplify and embrace, the bourgeois narcissism encouraged by his literary-ideological environment, in particular its reification of textual-semiotic exchange. Of course, one may still regard such narcissism as the "supplementary"

possibility of all text-production and view Poe's mode of writing as prefiguring what have become certain truisms for Gallic deconstruction: producing texts that anticipate, befuddle, expose, and leave their reading "undecidable"; or using temporarily buried puns, anagrams, commonplace maxims, and represented scenes of writing and reading that reveal a text's marginality, its dependence on the materiality of "writing," and/or its deconstruction of its own autonomous status. But as I have argued, Poe's tales effectively abuse these proto-deconstructive gestures. They seek to control, predict, and thus predicate their own secret identity in terms of misreadings that, as Paul de Man has rigorously maintained, are "undecidable" linguistic tropes rather than manipulable pretexts for confirming the *self*-referentiality of these tales to their producer.³⁵

On the other hand, Poe's *self*-interested literary practices, his motivated production of texts as private property and abuse of the conventional transaction among, variously, reader, writer, and text, foster his ambivalent status in American literary history. Most of our canonically minded writers and critics have neither recognized nor wanted to regard Poe as an American literary father. I am not thinking of those benign Po-e-philiac writers and critics who naively assume his canonical status. Rather I refer to those who use the Eliotian "preadolescent" judgment of Poe to deny his influence on their work, but who nonetheless repeat the Poe who "ghost-wrote" his own texts. Poe, that is, wrote fiction as a pretext to a fiction and autobiography he never came to write. Itself a fiction of both fiction and autobiography, Poe's self-aggrandizing abuse of the literary medium scandalizes the notion of "serious" literary production, particularly in a country then concerned with its cultural secondariness and today still desirous of demonstrating the morality of its cultural vision.

It is *this* Poe whom Henry James found "primitive" even as he doubled Poe's ghost-writing praxis. Preferring to designate Hawthorne as his literary father, James at best would only acknowledge Poe as a writer of ghost stories that did not sustain his promise to convey an indeterminate effect of terror.³⁶ But as Shoshana Felman has shown, James himself could write a ghost story like

The Turn of the Screw as an allegorical pre-reading of its own projected Freudian and other misreadings.³⁷ In this sense, we can say that James denied Poe by unconsciously misreading Poe's more subliminally inscribed or *text-oriented* mode of ghost-writing. In Bloomian terms, James's repression of Poe as precursor of his own praxis points to Poe's having ghost-written *James's* ghost stories. One has only to compare the representationally obfuscated scenes of Ligeia's final revivification and, in "The Jolly Corner," Spencer Brydon's encounter with that "spectral but human" figure, one of whose hands "had lost two fingers," to register James's later ghost story as an unconscious staging of *his* anxious encounter with Poe's literary-ideological precedent³⁸: with Poe, the maimed writer of inauthentic fiction, of texts postponing their identity as self-present fiction and instead confessing Poe's perverse desire to uncover a prefictional space of writing in which all American writers might be condemned to dwell. Like Peter Quint in *The Turn of the Screw*, Poe here returns as James's repressed possibility of writing, a disguised American literary ghost peering into James's very house of fiction.

I use this Bloomian framework advisedly. Bloom's project of discerning major precursors for American writers indeed leaves Poe "out of the [canonical] picture." Yet Bloom's own anxiety over originality, his entropic history of post-Enlightenment literature, and even his style of criticism strangely repeat features of Poe more than of Emerson, Bloom's self-adopted father. And surely it is Poe who, as I have tried to argue, underwrites what Bloom identifies as the double-bind "burden of [the] American tradition," a burden expressed in Bloom's *agon* call for "an antithetical criticism in the American grain, *affirming the self over language*, while granting a priority to figurative language over meaning"—the result being a Poe-esque "mixed discourse . . . at once esoteric and democratic."³⁹ Matthiessen ironically may have been right, then, when he excused Poe from "the American Renaissance" because Poe's "value, even more than Emerson's, is now seen to consist in his *influence* rather than in the body of his own work."⁴⁰ It indeed was this "body" that Matthiessen literally buried

in a footnote, but that Poe himself had prematurely buried before him in the archives of American literary history. And it is this "influence," albeit subterranean, which suggests that Poe's "body" of works, continually purloined by French criticism, was in fact produced in such a way as to return to its original American ideological setting—if only to haunt it and engender readings possessing the uncanny effect of a séance.

NOTES

1. *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism since 1829*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 66. T. S. Eliot's sense of Poe as appealing to a preadolescent mentality (212) shows the continuation of the Jamesian view of Poe by canonical American writers into the twentieth century.

2. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), xii, n. 3, uses the term *narrow* to describe Poe's "intense theories of poetry and the short story," and regards even these theories as more relevant to an understanding of nineteenth-century French poetry than of "the American Renaissance." A later and more favorable critic of Poe's work, Edward Davidson, *Poe, a Critical Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1957), explicitly refers to the "narrowness" of Poe's "mind and art" (256), and suggests that his "greatness" lies in "his few explorations into the dark underside of human consciousness" (260; my emphasis). Comparing him with Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Hawthorne—Matthiessen's "Renaissance" figures—Davidson finds Poe deficient in addressing "the questions of man in the new mass world of democratic society, of the new 'American Adam' whether in the wilderness or in the driving urgency of success, of the lonely self" (256). For a brief survey of Poe's literary reputation that began with Rufus Griswold's notorious obituary of Poe, see Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 3–13. In pointing to Harold Bloom's relative silence on Poe's works, I am referring to the period between his publication of *The Anxiety of Influence* and the date of my paper, September 1983.

3. "An Interview with Claude Richard," *Iowa Review* 12 (Fall 1981):12.

4. Leslie Fiedler, *What Was Literature?: Class Culture and Mass Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), pp. 89–90, 132–33, *passim*.

5. Jonathan Auerbach, "Poe's Other: The Reader in the Fiction," *Criticism* (Fall 1982):343; see also 348, 353, and 360.

6. *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 129. Williams's point in this selection from *In the American Grain*, namely, that Poe, even through his style, fought "for the right to BE first—to hold up his ORIGINALITY" (133) and thus strove to found an American literature, touches on an issue I will raise later in this essay. Joseph Riddel's comments occur in "The 'Crypt' of Edgar Poe," *boundary 2* (Spring 1979):119, 124–25, 141, *passim*. Also cf. John Carlos Rowe, *Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 91–110.

7. John Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), esp. pp. 55, 61–62, 91–94, 98, 100, 120–28, 133–36, 224–25, and 231–35.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

9. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94 (1979):921.

10. *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas O. Mabbott, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1978), 2:602. All references to Poe's tales will be cited by volume and page number from this edition. For other references to Poe's works, I have tried where possible to use readily available editions.

11. Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Psychoanalysis: The French Connection," *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 94, *passim*.

12. The quotation appears in Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*, p. 42. Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 4, quotes another oft-cited and here relevant passage from Poe's *Literati* sketch of Margaret Fuller: "The supposition that the book of an author is a thing apart from the author's self is . . . ill-founded."

13. Poe, "A Few Words on Secret Writing," *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison, 16 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1965; rpt. from the 1902 New York edition), 14:114.

14. *Ibid.*, 14:142–43. The correspondent's name was W. B. Tyler, his residence—unlike that of other correspondents whom the Harrison edition here records—unspecified. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "What Poe Knew About Cryptography," *PMLA* 57 (1943):759, considers Tyler's letter "tedious," and wonders if "Poe believed him to be a relation to the President," in whose administration Poe, with the help of certain friends, was trying to procure a sinecure. Given the fact that Poe refers to W. B. Tyler as someone he at least knew of, "a gentleman whose abilities we very highly respect" (140), and given that this name does not appear in the City Directories of the major eastern seaboard cities (including Washington, Richmond, Baltimore, Phila-

delphia, New York, and Boston), "Tyler" may have been the Supreme Court justice of Virginia, a William B. Tyler who graduated from William and Mary College around 1812. Yet I am not sure that he was not Poe himself, since in this letter "Tyler" gives an example of a cipher whose solution/translation echoes one of Poe's most frequently used refrains in his tales and poetry—a refrain "Tyler" here italicizes: "the sentence might either be 'I love you now as ever,' or 'I love you now *no more*'" (142). Poe, after all had made up letters for his 1836 articles on "Autography" (Mabbott, 2:259). If Poe indeed adopts the alias of Tyler here, then we can also claim that he secretly but openly professes a theory of secret autobiographical writing in this letter: "With secret writing I have been practically conversant for several years. . . . I have . . . a record of thoughts, feelings and occurrences,—a history of my mental existence, to which I may turn, and in imagination, retrace former pleasures, and again live through by-gone scenes,—secure in the conviction that the magic scroll has a tale for my eye alone" (140-41).

15. Edgar Allan Poe, *Marginalia*, introduction by John Carl Miller (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), p. 181.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 19; hereafter cited in text by page number. Poe makes the same point throughout his pieces on "Autography."

17. For the monetary-metaphoric significance of "The Gold Bug," see Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophic Economics from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 5-23. See also Michael Williams, "'The language of the cipher': Interpretation in 'The Gold Bug,'" *American Literature* 53 (January 1982):646-60. In contrast to what I argue here, Williams claims that this tale "offers us as consolation [to its placing us readers in a situation of semantic indeterminacy] a limiting paradigm of the reading process. A text can be recovered by clarifying definition, establishing a determining context, and recognizing authorial intention" (660).

18. *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose, Poetry, and Eureka*, ed. W. H. Auden (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1950), p. 450.

19. My colleague, James M. Cox, helpfully called my attention to this additional anagram.

20. Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1941), p. 331.

21. In their annotated edition of Poe's tales, *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1976), p. 62, Stuart and Susan Levine call attention to Poe's ironic projection of the narrator in "The Oval Portrait." They also see the formalist ironic method operative in many of Poe's other tales. G. R. Thompson, *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), pp. 9ff. and throughout this work, argues for a more pervasive romantic ironic vision in

Poe's tales, only *one* of whose manifestations was the "device" of the ironic narrator.

22. Quotations from "The Philosophy of Composition" are taken from *Selected Prose, Poetry, and Eureka*, ed. Auden.

23. Baudelaire quoted from Poe's "Marginalia" in his remarks to *Nouvelles histoires sur Edgar Poe* (1857), cited in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Carlson, p. 46.

24. Sidney P. Moss, *Poe's Literary Battles: The Critic in the Context of His Literary Milieu* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963), ix; see also p. 108, n. 63.

25. "Peter Snook," *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1975), p. 564.

26. Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Avon Books, 1978), p. 245, *passim*.

27. See Clark Griffith, "Poe's 'Ligeia' and the English Romantics," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 24 (October 1954):8-25. Thompson, *Poe's Fiction*, pp. 82-83, agrees with Griffith's thesis about Ligeia as a figure of German "transcendentalism" and Rowena of "dull" English "worldliness."

28. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, p. 8 n. 7.

29. *Selected Prose, Poetry, and Eureka*, ed. Auden, p. 484. On the relation between Poe's writing and the quest for immortality, see Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*, pp. 149-50. Also cf. the introductory comments to Emerson's *Nature* by Stephen E. Whicher, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 13, where he benignly notes in passing the similarity in topic and theoretical ambition between Emerson's major essay and Poe's *Eureka*.

30. Poe had assumed 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" ("Review," *Selected Prose, Poetry, and Eureka*, ed. Auden, 451). Only after Poe quickly notes that "we have been agreeably mistaken" about Hawthorne's association with this "clique" does he proceed to "commend" the latter's work as an original contribution to American literature: "As Americans, we feel proud of the book" (452).

31. The page numbers in *Eureka* refer to *Selected Prose, Poetry, and Eureka*, ed. Auden.

32. *The Viking Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Philip Van Doren Stern (New York: Viking Press, 1945), p. 21. Poe also states in this letter that "I am not ambitious—unless negatively."

33. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 564.

34. Ellison's personal use of nature here effectively negates Emerson's ideal "transparent" relation to the "Not Me." In the spirit of Poe, one can even

perversely argue that his choice of Ellison's very name bears on this issue: Ellison's "l" alphabetically just so happens to come before—hence is more literally “original” than?—Emerson's “m.”

35. See, for example, Paul de Man, “Literature and Language: A Commentary,” *New Literary History* 4 (Autumn 1972), where he argues that a writer may be more privileged with his text not in terms of his (autobiographical) knowledge of his own intentions, but only “in the knowledge of his impossibility” to “know what he is saying”—an “ignorance” to which he then also “reduces the reader” (191).

36. Henry James alludes to this failure of Poe's “promise” in his New York preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, collected in *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton, Critical edition, 1966), p. 122.

37. Shoshana Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” *Yale French Studies: Literature and Psychoanalysis*, nos. 55/56 (1977), esp. pp. 94–112, 115, 124, 190–93, and 203–7.

38. *Henry James: Selected Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1964), pp. 575–76.

39. Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 336.

40. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, xii n. 3; my emphasis.