

**UNTIMELY FIGURES: EDGAR ALLAN POE, JOURNALISM, AND THE LITERARY
IMAGINATION**

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of Pittsburgh

2010

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

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This dissertation is a study of Edgar Allan Poe that illustrates the values for originality and creativity that he sought to institute for literature, and the connections that these values have to literary criticism. This dissertation seeks to accomplish this, first, by performing close readings of Poe's criticism and fiction – especially the Marginalia, which is a cornerstone of this study – in order to demonstrate the importance of discontinuity in Poe's understanding of creativity and historical emergence. I argue that Poe attempted to figure the work of the creative imagination in literature and criticism as a temporal and spatial discontinuity in order to confront the mechanical entrainment produced by the new forms and technologies of mass print. Secondly, the readings performed in this dissertation address and respond to the problems raised recently by Poe studies, which question Poe's relation to the US. This recent work on Poe claims that Poe scholarship has suffered in light of a-historical and foreign studies that have concealed Poe's relation to history. Critics, therefore, have lately proposed a closer contextualization of Poe's work to return him to his rightful place in history as an American author. In disclosing the ongoing intention of Poe's writing to seek discontinuity from temporal entrainment, however, this dissertation illustrates how the contextualization of Poe within "America" proposed by recent Poe studies colludes with the practices that Poe confronted. Further, this dissertation illustrates the discontinuous as an affirmation of historical emergence rather than a desire for an a-historical withdrawal, as numerous contextualizing studies of Poe have done. The readings of

Poe offered here serve to illustrate how recent Poe studies – far from offering the authentic version of Poe that they promise – actually function as an effect of the tendencies expressed in journalism that produce a static, linear-chronological conception of time. This dissertation concludes, therefore, that much recent work in Poe studies obscures Poe’s understanding of creation, as well as the value for literature and criticism that Poe tied to possibilities for historical emergence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0	INTRODUCTION: ON THE CURRENT OCCASION OF POE STUDIES.....	1
1.1	TRAJECTORIES IN POE.....	12
2.0	PLAGIARISM AND THE RAVEN'S "NEVERMORE"	24
2.1	LANGUAGE AND ORIGINALITY	24
2.2	TOOLS, LABOR AND THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY.....	31
2.3	THE CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAGIARISM IN POE'S THOUGHT	35
2.4	"THE RAVEN" AND THE CURSE OF THE ETERNAL PRESENT	49
3.0	POE'S MARGINALIA AND THE LEAP OF CREATION.....	56
3.1	CREATION AND THE LEAP OF "NOT KNOWING" IN THE WORLD OF NEWS.....	56
3.2	CRITICAL NOTES: FUTURES OF INFINITE ERROR	63
3.3	THE MARGINALIA AND ITS PENDING THOUGHT.....	73
4.0	PROBLEMS OF PLOT: THE "CORRENTE CALAMO" AND THE MAN OF LEISURE.....	83
4.1	POE'S FORMALISM	83
4.2	THE "CORRENTE CALAMO" AND THE MEANING OF "PLOT"	89
4.3	TIME, LEISURE, AND THE FIGURE OF THE CRITIC	99

5.0	DEATH AND EVIL AS AFFIRMATION IN POE’S ART	112
5.1	EVIL BEYOND CHOICE	112
5.2	THE LIFE AND DEATH OF “THE OVAL PORTRAIT”	114
5.3	“LIFE ITSELF”: THE KINSHIP OF ART, EVIL AND DEATH	121
5.4	DISPERSAL IN “THE OVAL PORTRAIT”	130
5.5	WHAT IS A WORK?	135
6.0	CONCLUSION.....	146
7.0	BIBLIOGRAPHY	160

1.0 INTRODUCTION: ON THE CURRENT OCCASION OF POE STUDIES

Poe scholarship has arrived at a moment in which it asks, more emphatically than before, of Poe's relation to America. Rarely do any recent American studies of Poe begin without mention of his popularity abroad, especially in France, only to lament, in passing, that Poe's work has served only foreign interests that have garnered attention on isolated pieces of Poe's oeuvre, at different times, for the purpose of constructing either universalizing or a-historical systems of thought.¹ Recent scholarship in Poe seems to agree wholeheartedly that Poe studies has suffered for lack of more comprehensive studies of Poe's work, and for lack of a solid foundation on which to build. What has been missing in Poe scholarship, these critics argue, is a fuller, broader engagement with Poe's life and work that would return him to his rightful place as an American writer so as to establish a national and periodic field where scholarship might grow and build, rather than leaving Poe's work to be recovered and reused whenever another fashionable literary movement might arise to take hold of it.

In many ways, this dissertation offers this broader, contextualizing effort to understand Poe's work in relation to his historical moment. It does so, however, without necessarily dismissing foreign receptions of Poe as offhandedly as many American studies of Poe have done, and, perhaps most importantly, without limiting the study of Poe to a search for a context, which,

¹ Most notably, this has occurred with psychoanalysis, specifically with Jacques Lacan's famous use of "The Purloined Letter," but also Marie Bonaparte's earlier study of Poe and his work.

in many recent “Americanizing” works on Poe, acquires success as accuracy only insofar as it “finds” a seamlessness between Poe’s work and his surroundings. The reason for this is that contextualization, first of all, would result only in thinking of art as a material making, rather than thinking art as the possibility for the emergence of non-material forms – the creation of ideas – of which I will say much more below. One of the bigger goals of this dissertation, therefore, is to think contextualization for the sake of specificity, but to do so beyond mere arrangement of Poe’s work with respect to an overarching model of historicism that situates Poe’s work into cultural and chronological order. In working out Poe’s context with respect to America, therefore, I proceed in distinct contrast to the methods and assumptions of the critics who believe that they have successfully historicized Poe’s work by situating him within lines of influence, trends in publishing, and within popular practices and understandings of the culture and the press of the early American 19th century. Too often, scholars organize their work on Poe by beginning with the problem of history as a question of how America “appears” in Poe’s work. There is no better example of this than the recent anthology of essays entitled The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, organized by Stephen Rachman and Shawn Rosenheim.² These descriptions of Poe, these methods of situating his work in proximity to “America,” always

² In the introduction to The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen Rachman and Shawn Rosenheim formulate the problem I have been describing here by quoting from Terence Whalen’s book, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses, in which Whalen remarks that “to explore the relation between literary production and what has been thought of as production in general [we] must first confront an accumulated mass of Poe lore celebrating the isolation of art from ‘external’ social pressures.” Rachman and Rosenheim continue: “Which naturally leads Whalen to the query: “If Poe isn’t in step with his time where is he?” The task of this kind of work, therefore, is to uncover Poe’s “American face” by assuming that the social exists as a predeterminant for literature, and that previous work has not been successful at explaining how such a relation – between the social and literature, and “literary production and production in general” – exists in Poe’s work. See Shawn Rosenheim and Steven Rachman, “Introduction: Beyond ‘The Problem of Poe,’” in The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, eds. Shawn Rosenheim and Steven Rachman (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1995).

assume that literature begins either in a pre-existing sphere of the social (rather than thinking of literature as a social embodiment or as an expression of sociality or action), or, much worse, in a sphere of reality, either of which are thought as primary and antecedent to the work of the imagination or literature. The contextualization I produce in this dissertation seeks to understand Poe's work in relation to its contingent circumstances not to "situate" him for the sake of accuracy, but, rather, to disclose the motivation in Poe's work, a desire in the writing, that seeks future readers. This dissertation, therefore, attempts to reflect on the notion of origin with respect to the literary work, where origin does not remain as a specific moment in the production of the work. This is an important point not just for the sake of Poe studies, but for the sake of criticism: in establishing a critical study of Poe, this dissertation seeks what is the interminable or inexhaustible work of the imagination and action, which has a relation to the creative dimension of Poe's fiction, as well as to the creative work of criticism.

This creative aspect and role of criticism, as criticism approaches and engages Poe's work, was a point of reflection throughout this dissertation. One of the guiding principles in this study of Poe was to inaugurate a criticism that might establish a life for Poe's work, and confront the assimilation of Poe's oeuvre into a procession of figures of cultural history. The creative aspect of criticism calls for a way of rethinking history and our relationship to the past, and discloses how the recovery of "America" for Poe scholarship into a field of arrangement limits and destroys the inherent properties of Poe's work. Further, this understanding of criticism makes its work primary, and seeks to rescue literary criticism from subjection to applications of secondary nature, as if literary criticism followed primary works in a way that made these "primary" texts closer to "reality" – and its constant constitution – than criticism itself. With this respect, my understanding of criticism, and the work of the language of criticism in relation to

the language of the text it studies, formed closely with respect to Walter Benjamin and a figure that he offered to explain the relation between material content and truth content:

If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.³

What is most important in Benjamin's insights for this dissertation is the relationship between the material content and the truth content elaborated as the opposition between studying the wood, its material, etc, and studying the enigma of life as the fire that burns, destroys, gives off heat, and dies. This insight shapes an understanding of criticism as a relationship with the life of the text, of a participation in how the life of the text changes over time, grows, and forms relations, rather than building for criticism only a system that seeks to arrange the past as empirically available and finished, or as a search for the properties of material sources for "production." It is in this sense that the truth content as opposed to the material content takes on importance: the material out of which one builds a fire might establish a source, and possibly a context, but does not completely contain the possibility of the fire, nor does it "illuminate" the "work" of the fire, itself; I will say more about this important notion between material and truth – what I call material and non-material making – below.

I argue throughout this dissertation that, without attention to this creative aspect of criticism and its relation to the life of a work of literature, we miss fundamental aspects of Poe's writing, as well as the motivation he found for his writing and what it could mean for us today. Further, when historicist arrangement leads to the offhanded repudiation of foreign

³ Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," in Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), 298.

“applications” of Poe’s work, critics fail to see in even the generation of “universal” principles, such as psychoanalysis, a fecundity in Poe’s literature. This fecundity is related to the creative I describe above: Poe’s work, in its appropriation by different “applications,” does not encounter a system, finally, that exhausts explication of his work as an object, even when critics attempt to obtain the object by placing it in the lineage of influence, of production “in general,” or of the history of genre and literary technique. The context for Poe’s work that this dissertation seeks, therefore, elaborates on the specificity of his moment as a particular manifestation, which does not mean that we have found the past, but that we have participated in making this past readable for us at this moment.

This dissertation, therefore, brings into question the very notion of America as a continuity in fields of understanding (influence and so forth), especially since Poe’s criticism asks that we refuse the notion of America as a defined set of problems, or as a clear thematic presence in literature. Poe announced a very conscious and deliberate resistance to “American” themes in his work in an entry in his Marginalia in October, 1845; there, Poe states,

Much has been said, of late, about the necessity of maintaining a proper nationality in American Letters; but what this nationality is, or what is to be gained by it, has never been distinctly understood. That an American should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea – and at best is a questionable point.⁴

This insistence on refusing American themes is what often leads critics to describe Poe’s desire for his fiction as a desire for an a-historical withdrawal, which critics refuse to take seriously, citing it as an error of a romantic mind, or a utopian wish for a historical beyond. These sorts of attitudes have motivated, for the most part, the call in recent Poe studies for the alignment of

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “Marginalia,” in The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume 7, eds. Edmund Clarence Stedman and George Edward Woodberry (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries P), 259.

Poe's work into chronological continuity with American history as a recuperation of his work. What is important here, and all too often ignored, however, is Poe's claim that the figure of "America" is undecided. For Poe, it is not clear what America had been, what it was for an American author, or what it might produce for literature. In fact, Poe wrote in a moment that had no notion of a continuous and unified America. Poe, in his conscious refusal of American themes, seems to understand literature differently than the critics that want it to recover notions of American nationhood as pre-determinants of literary creation. Because Poe understood "America" as undecided, he did not wish to reduce the production of literature to themes that might close over the possibilities of an emergent creativity. Poe did not have American archetypes available to him, nor did he think that archetypes should be prescriptive of literary production. Further, Poe did not clearly see literature itself as a capacity to produce such archetypes for the nation; this may be one reason for his refusal not only of American themes, but of didacticism in general. Literature itself was not a capacity for Poe – volitional or otherwise – but the articulation of creativity.

For these reasons, Poe sought a criticism that could think with the conditions of his moment, and that could exist together with literature as the possibility of separating from our terms, evaluating them, and reflecting on the conditions in which the terms we create will circulate as "reality." This is a notion of criticism, therefore, that does not recuperate "reality," but participates in its creation. This understanding of criticism does not seek to arrange the past, but seeks a discontinuity in order to think toward the future. This is the reason that the creative imagination was so important to Poe: he was interested in the creation of images that were not merely produced as the passive apperception of our senses. To this end, this dissertation tries to think of the possibilities of imaginative literature and criticism as Poe imagined them: as the

possibility to produce a future that is different from the past and present. With this regard, I am critical of any naturalized psychology, or of notions of hardwired faculties of mind, to discuss the creative process. It is only in this way that the notion of criticism might give meaning to “America” even as it remains undecided in letters, as Poe describes in the quote I offer above. The “Americanness” of such a criticism would not stand as a mere social determination, or a successful description of the faculties of mind, but must figure as a possibility for immanent and transformational change. What is “American” emerges with criticism if criticism can work freely; America cannot be a continuity of terms, nor a complete withdrawal either. Criticism is the possibility of freedom established not by overthrow of what exists (which would amount to withdrawal, or to the negative freedom associated with the revolutionary mythos), nor by definition through a continuity of terms, but in the promise of immanent possibilities for change.

All of this is quite important with regards to the context for Poe’s writing, which cannot exist merely as a lineage in which to place Poe’s work. Rather, the context provides a shaping influence in which the desire to write arises, and culminates in a form that emerges within limits given by the historical protocols and knowledges available to it. The context for the work of imaginative literature and criticism takes its form in its relation with and against the forces of history that have engendered and delimited their particular possibilities – that is, that have given it form – and with and against the limits and possibilities of their immediate surroundings which are also responding to historical pressures. With this regard, this dissertation argues that Poe’s work thinks, in the wake of romanticism and with the burgeoning capitalist print industry, the taxation of the imaginative capacity of language – and, therefore, prefigures many of the problems manifested by recent critics trying only to situate Poe – rather than merely representing these technologies in his fiction and criticism, or trying to reclaim the past. The “America” Poe

confronted, therefore, did not appear as a nation state in the traditional, cultural sense of the term. Poe wished to participate, uncover, and make visible the modernizing tendencies that produced a literature that was no longer a cultural formation – in terms of human action in communities – but took form in the face of technological innovation, and urban organizations.

This context for Poe's writing, and the pressures it exerted on literature, formed specifically around the demands of the mass press and journalism for which he worked for most of his life. The press, its insistence on speed, mass circulation, and a mass readership as its target, affected the possibilities of speech and writing. In particular, the speed of journalistic production, both in terms of production and dissemination of information and literature, was fundamentally significant in Poe's engagement with the press. For the writer, as well as for the reader, journalistic speed changes the "moment" of thinking, where "moment" is to be understood in both its temporal and physical connotations. On the one hand, the writer faces smaller and smaller increments of time, which changes the experience of time and brings him closer to the instrumental time of capitalist production and the machine. On the other hand, the reader faces a barrage of material, which begins to change the time of attention and the impact of readership. All of this begins to change the nature of artistic experience by "thinning" out the time of thinking, imagination and reflection. The technology (both in the sense of its production, and in the sense of the development of a new literacy) of the journal and magazine pre-disposed the emerging mass readership to a temporal and imaginative mechanization that would change the very nature of thinking and imagination.

What this dissertation produces in contextualizing Poe in this way is that, first, it defines Poe's intentions in relation to his surroundings not as a work to be finished, but as a confrontation with his surroundings that seeks change for the future. Importantly, addressing

these contingent circumstances as context for Poe's work illustrates the desire out of which Poe's literature and criticism arose – a desire which resists assimilation into systematicities of writing, or into factual structures of production. In denying Poe's work the status of a finished product, one finds in his work that writing is never exhausted upon its completion, but continues to find further articulation in relation to criticism. This comprised, in many ways, the critical significance of Poe's Marginalia. The entries Poe prepared for the Marginalia strike a strong discord with the clearly appointed temporality and dates of journals by refusing such dated organization; the marginal comments, therefore, do not respond to linear-chronological temporal arrangements, but attempt, rather, to speak the present without temporal/spatial relations to other moments. Poe's Marginalia is a writing that occurs in an undefined present, as if the present figured as something intermediary that participates in a continuing process, without clear outcomes or pre-determinants, in which the thought of the present is always pending, and only occurs if the critic happens to have a thought of which to unburden himself. The purpose of these notes, therefore, was to confront the idea of the present as instantly available, as in reportage or journalism. Furthermore, the form of the note itself is important, in that the marginal note is never thought of as a text that might be published on its own. Critics usually think of marginal notes as appendages to the texts they study, and treat them as an intermediary between the text an author reads, and the text that he will write. The entries that appear in the Marginalia, therefore, force what would normally be the "object" of literary analysis into intermediary state, and withdraws from the literary its status as a finished object. The marginal notes, therefore, refuse a totalizing image of the present that journalism seeks to describe and name by insisting on an unfinishedness and uselessness for the notes that persist even for future readers. Perhaps most importantly, the Marginalia occur at the margins of other texts, which

breaks the circuit between language and reality sought by many critics – and instituted aggressively by journalism and reportage – by orienting language not to a real referent, but to other language. The Marginalia, therefore, in the face of a reality that loomed over the language of the press, announces the task of criticism as an outlook for the creative in this confrontation of language with other language.

This, again, recalls Walter Benjamin's important insights, from which I quote above, about the difference between the material and truth content of a work of art. The material content is important for the original "building" of the work of art, but art's tendency is to look forward, to live, in such a way that it no longer makes sense to look for the work's significance in the past. For this reason, I make much use of the term "discontinuity" as a way to describe the creative exertion – in relation to Poe's use of the leap in Eureka, and the conversation in the colloquys – required to abandon systematic arrangements and create the future. The meaning of such creation is connected to a historical domain of thinking in the West that arises out of the split between the Greek terms *techne* and *poesis*, and it is perhaps in this way that we may best describe the difference between truth and material content, on the one hand, and material making and non-material making, on the other. The Greek notion of *techne*, often translated as "craft," organizes a very particular form of making: it assumes a predetermined idea – often in relation to the transcendent, Platonic *eidōs* – that the craftsman, through *techne*, materializes in his practice in the application of materials and tools that are at hand. *Techne* is very important in that it establishes, through its practice, the possibility for human action to bring into existence forms that nature, on its own, cannot. These forms, however, are already available to thinking as idea in the Platonic *eidōs*, as I say above. The emergence of *poesis* in distinction to *techne* introduces a split in the notion of creation, and manifests a creation that does not begin with an idea that is

already available, or with what one already has at hand, but might, itself, create a new idea that would, in turn, grant new habits of making, of doing and of being. This possibility of creation exists as the sign of man's self invention, where man is not destined to repeat the past, but can create a future that is discontinuous from the present – this resides as the strong possibility for freedom in its promise of immanent change within history and institutions, and should lead us to rethink the “undecided” of America in Poe's refusal of American themes that I quote above.

As it pertains to this dissertation, Poe worked to claim this possibility of creation for language as the task of criticism. In the material of language, there is a ceaselessness that embodies the action of social life in history: this is the unique condition of language – that, as a material, it bears the force of creation over time (history). Poe attended very carefully to the material forms of the dissemination of language, as well as its technologies in the press and its techniques in journalism. The importance he placed on the creative imagination, however, cannot finally be built by craftsmanship – material making – which is why the chemist, in Benjamin's analogy, is the weak figure in relation to the alchemist. In foregrounding the sense of creation as poesis, this dissertation seeks to highlight the significance Poe wished to give criticism and its relation to an America for which there was not yet any national literature. This is especially important in light of the fact that we find Poe studies in the US at a moment in which critics promise to retrieve him from his potential disappearance into post-structuralism, psychoanalysis or romantic isolation by placing him in an empty time of American “culturalism.” In light of Poe's confrontation with the technologies of mass print and journalism, we might begin to see that the current occasion of American Poe studies that calls for a contextualization of Poe to place him into an American pantheon of culture is inimical to the

value he placed on spatial and temporal discontinuity as the proper mode, at his moment, for thinking, creation, and the literary imagination.

1.1 TRAJECTORIES IN POE

The four chapters that comprise this dissertation follow a trajectory, over roughly 6 years of Poe's career, that takes us through Poe's critical engagements with the press. This trajectory, however, is not chronological. Instead, I begin by looking at Poe's criticism of Longfellow, especially the texts where Poe worked out his understanding of plagiarism, and the relationship of plagiarism to what is perhaps Poe's most famous work, "The Raven." This is followed by two chapters that study Poe's experience working for journals; these chapters look especially closely at Poe's Marginalia, and the relationship of this critical work with Poe's engagement with the press. The dissertation ends, in some sense, where it began: with a notion of creation in relation to plagiarism, and with Poe's "The Raven," although, in this final chapter, I discuss this poem as Poe elaborated it in "The Philosophy of Composition." The trajectory of this dissertation, therefore, moves from a historical discussion of plagiarism, to a discussion of the spatial dimensions of Poe's writing as he worked in the margins of texts, to the temporal dimensions of the Marginalia, and finally, back again to a historical discussion of Poe's fiction and criticism. This trajectory serves to fashion an understanding of spatio-temporality in distinction to the scientific, linear-chronological model of history that is dominant in order to form an understanding of the discontinuous as it relates to the creative imagination in Poe's literature and criticism.

The first chapter, “Plagiarism and the Raven’s ‘Nevermore,’” begins, therefore, with the problem of plagiarism because plagiarism brings together at least three prominent problems and lines of inquiry that are active in Poe’s criticism and fiction. The first of these problems concerns the most practical aspects of publishing, and the preoccupation of publishers with obtaining new material and selling it. The first task of this chapter, therefore, is to describe the tendencies toward marketing that Poe ran up against, and that he sought to change. Publishers influenced the salability of books, magazines and papers with marketing campaigns, which unreservedly lauded new American works. These marketing ploys published claims for the establishment of a national literature as they “puffed” writers, and built reputations. Poe intervened in these kinds of marketing ploys by attempting to halt unrestrained praise, and by pointing out the flaws in different works in order to establish a rigorous criticism rather than strategic marketing for sales and reputation, especially those built around the questionable claims for national literature. Poe felt that, first and foremost, if a national literature was to emerge, it would do so only under the illumination of a rigorous criticism, which was necessary before any talk of a national literature should begin. What is interesting and important about this claim is that Poe did not see a national literature as the natural result of a nation, but understood the literary as a development of a critical investiture.

Poe’s investment in criticism, and his caution to the nativists and narrow-minded nationalists that saw the possibility for literature in some kind of naturalized American genius, challenges the myth of the American Adam, which has been important in explaining American character.⁵ The myth of the American Adam functions by establishing America as a spatial

⁵ Edward Davidson, in his book Poe: A Critical Study, notes, correctly, that Poe does not participate in the elaboration of the figure of the American Adam that has done so much to

removal – a virgin land – from the historical pressures and limitations of Europe. The American Adam defines the American as a new man, innocent and close to nature, who has escaped European oppression and is free to begin again, to name a new government, and to achieve freedom. This insistence on beginning anew as a way to avoid reiterating the past – especially when America is figured as a virgin land, or a new Arcadia that achieves freedom in its spatial removal from the interventions of the state and the bias of history – suggests that the problem of plagiarism haunts the American mind. Poe arouses the anxieties inherent in this myth with his insistence on plagiarism, with his claims that plagiarism runs amok in American publishing, and with his suggestion that the most famous American writers might be guilty of it and, therefore, incapable of the newness promised by the myth of the American Adam. This chapter focuses in particular on Poe's accusations against Longfellow, and his suggestion that the habits and orientation of the press, in its insistence on building reputations, created figures like Longfellow to establish an American literature, and that prominent American writers are not capable of originality.

The main purpose of this chapter, however, resides in the opposition between originality and plagiarism. By definition, plagiarism is opposed to the original and originality, but this chapter seeks to establish this opposition beyond the practical considerations of the press where literary work is owned like an object, and in which literature exists only as a finished product of

inform an understanding of American society as the society of the new world; Davidson, however, fails to see that the reason for Poe's resistance of this American theme is that Poe was committed to creation within history – creation is possible only within the social-historical – rather than a withdrawal from history. I make this point in this dissertation by illustrating Poe's criticism of a naturalized readership in favor of disclosing the social-historical in creation. Poe would have never subscribed to the myth of the American Adam because the loss of the past and of history would mean, for Poe, the loss of possibilities for creation. See Edward H. Davidson, Poe: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957).

a private intellect. The stronger sense of originality that was so meaningful for Poe requires that we regard language as the imaginative possibility for speech and writing, rather than the intellect of the author that purportedly owns the work and the reputation for production. Originality resides in the possibility of language for bringing together work and thought. The “meaning” of the word “plagiarism,” as we read it in Poe, therefore, signals a transformational, creative change that embodies the imaginative work of the social-historical. By imaginative work, I mean to indicate forms of invention that do not arise from arrangement or from sensual apperception of reality; imagination is a creativity that produces images that do not simply belong to the real products and consequences of reality, and yet are capable of changing our relationship to reality, or producing new notions of reality altogether. In this sense, the meaning of plagiarism for Poe is the imaginative creation of a present in which language is suffocated, incapable of speaking anything new, because the past has become wholly present in the language we speak.

Plagiarism is usually a word associated with the business of book producing and selling, but for Poe it becomes a literary problem of mind, imagination, history and origin. The great danger of plagiarism for Poe is not that an author chooses to “steal” another’s work, but that the technological order of the press taxes the imaginative capacities of language rendering an eternal present in which we cannot speak. I end this first chapter with a reading of “The Raven,” in which I discuss the figure of the raven as an embodiment of the past, which irrupts in the present without order only to block the possibility of producing a future. Over the next two chapters, I address the spatial and temporal aspects of Poe’s work as a way to confront the linear chronological model that threatens to close the possibilities of language in this way. Once I have properly addressed these aspects of Poe’s writing, and his critical investment in them, I return to

the problems I introduce here with respect to “The Raven” in the final chapter of this dissertation.

The second chapter of this dissertation, “Poe’s Marginalia and the Leap of Creation,” continues to explore this notion of originality by addressing it in relation to language, and to the ways in which Poe’s critical language engages literature more closely. To this end, this chapter explores Poe’s Marginalia carefully; the Marginalia is a cornerstone of this dissertation, and through a careful reading of this work, we see that the meaning for originality, and the significance of this term in Poe’s criticism, relates to the possibility inherent in a work whenever the language of criticism makes contact with it. This sense of originality does not limit the origin and originality to the moment of the production of a work, but discloses what is endless in the work as the task of criticism. In this sense, criticism functions as the actualization of the life of the work, and of its continuing possibility. With this respect, this chapter focuses specifically on the spatial organization of the Marginalia, which occur as critical notes in the margins of “primary” texts.

I argue in this second chapter that the form of the Marginalia – the insistence of the text on continuously foregrounding the spatial orientation of the language of the notes to the material of the printed page – signals the production of the present, and of the future, as a discontinuous jump from the material trace of the past. There are two figures of discontinuity at work in the Marginalia: first, the note itself appears as a critical appendage to a “primary” text that is no longer present (Poe did not include the “primary” material in the finished Marginalia). Secondly, there is a discontinuity between the moment that Poe wrote the note, and the moment in which he read it; Poe admits that he has forgotten what he had written: it is as if the notes that he has taken and placed in the margins of other texts are memoranda to remember to forget. This is an

important condition: the task of the critic, in the face of the stabilization of language I discuss in the first chapter, requires that he forget the origin as a product, as a stable “thing,” and that he “find” the origin in the action of forgetting, which produces a relation to that which is ceaseless in the work. The goal of this dissertation of challenging the static notion of a criticism that arranges and finds “origin” only by pointing to the past relates closely to Poe’s critical project in the Marginalia: the relation between notes and primary texts is not a secondary relation, nor a chronological arrangement, but an investment in the language of the “primary” text. For these reasons, I make much use of the term “discontinuity” in this chapter, and compare the relation between the notes Poe takes for the Marginalia and the primary texts he studies with the figure of the conversation from his colloquys. The figure of the conversation embodies a relation that cannot be spatially arranged under a category of linear chronology, but produces, rather, time as the emergence of otherness, or alterity. Therein lies the importance of the spatial relation of the leap – if we can even say that there is really a “spatial” relation there – in opposition to the linear chronological model of arrangement, so dominant in the rational and clearly appointed, temporal organization of journals that mobilize their resources and technology to report the present instantaneously. Poe meant for the undated notes of the Marginalia to appear in dated journals as a way to accentuate the disjunction between the spatial time of the journals, and the irruption of the notes from an undefined space at the limits of such linear arrangement. Poe intended to make the spatial figure of time as linear the target of his criticism.

This chapter describes these problems in some detail through not just through the form, but also through Poe’s observations in the Marginalia, especially a long entry in which Poe meditates on the effect that the explosion of printing would have on education and literacy. Poe describes changes in literacy using figures of incremental and linear accumulation – such as

figures of banking – but he upsets these calculations in order to produce confusion, and elicit wonder. Poe’s subversion of the expected and familiar outcomes of the linear temporal models of banking seek a future that is discontinuous from the present. These discussions of Poe’s interest in the irrational set this study apart from psychoanalytic understandings of Poe’s work that relate the irrational back to a developmental story of the individual mind. Further, many studies of Poe often refuse to discuss the irrational in his work altogether; this dissertation, and this chapter in particular, take Poe’s interest in irrationality – especially as it appears in confrontation to the figure of banking here – as a serious challenge to instrumentality, and to the notion that any form of social-historical interest must always have a rational application within the functions of modern state formations. For Poe, the leap of creation has no rational basis, and any notion that the creative leap might occur through a rational system is a pipe dream. The rational, linear model of banking produces a future that is so tied to the rationality of the present that its “products” exist as a capture and subordination of the present into mechanical instrumentality. A rational system of change, or a rational arrangement of materials, excludes rationality from participation in change as the agency that surveys; Poe’s notion of plagiarism in relation to figures of discontinuity insist on a more radical notion of change – the creative – in which the entire system itself needs to participate in the change as immanent and transformational. With this respect, the moment of wonder has a kinship to creation: it illustrates the moment that a rational system cannot verify its relation to reality, and suggests that the possibility to articulate the present might occur only through a radical discontinuity with the past (ie, creation, and origin in the present).

The third chapter, “Problems of Plot: The ‘Currente Calamo’ and the Man of Leisure,” continues to elaborate on this notion of discontinuity as creative, but does so, as I say above, by

studying the notions of temporality at work in the Marginalia, especially as these pertain to the experience of speed produced by the newspaper press. A reflection on time and speed is very important for the Marginalia, but since each marginal note has been left undated, the Marginalia resists any notion of time as a linear arrangement, and does not participate in the speedy production of this spatial-temporal unfolding. Poe mentions a figure – the “currente calamo” – in one of his entries about the speed of journalism in the Marginalia, which becomes important for this chapter: the figure of the “currente calamo,” which designates the writing of an unceasing, hurried pen, serves to imagine the relentlessness of the mechanical time of the journal that does not stop to reflect on itself. Poe, therefore, displays the pressures of the press as the material form of this temporality, and avoids abstracting the production of time as natural or given. This temporality, however, entrenches other activities and rhythms of life by constructing a real order around its restless insistence to report reality as instantaneously available. Poe’s task in the Marginalia is to reflect on this order of time, and to open the possibility of an experience, within this order, of a time not bound to dates or clock time – Poe wishes to think the creative in relation to a time that we might say is no time at all. Time, therefore, is either nothing at all, or it is synonymous with creation (a leap).

I suggest in this chapter that this reflection on time is perhaps what gives critics so much trouble thinking Poe’s “withdrawal” and refusal of American themes because they look only for a representation of Poe’s moment in his fiction. Time, which is not an object that one represents, cannot be made visible or intelligible through representation; instead, Poe seeks to produce an experience of time in relation to the mechanical time of the journal. In conjunction with the incongruity produced by the containment of undated notes by dated journals, Poe illustrates the order of mechanical time through the figure of the man of leisure, who becomes the critic who

writes and prepares the notes in the first person. Importantly, the man of leisure – a figure related to America’s Southern chivalric myth – signals a withdrawal from one’s surroundings, especially when this figure represents the South’s hostility to Northern, industrial modernity. Poe, however, does not use this figure in such a way, nor as a way to redeem Southern ways of life as they face the threat of becoming extinct, or of emulating a form that was already available in order to preserve it as a way of combating mechanical time. Poe reworks the figure of the man of leisure, rather, from an amateur man of letters into an erudite critic as a way to pronounce a discontinuity within available knowledge and traditions. In this sense, the leisure Poe experiences in the library as he writes the Marginalia exists as a limit within the operation of mechanical time. If there is a “withdrawal,” then, the withdrawal is not from history, but exists as an image that arises outside of the order of clock time – insofar, too, as the Marginalia appears in the journals that it intends to confront. Falling out of clock time, out of a pre-determined, spatial relation of an expected outcome in the non-time of leisure, institutes for Poe a way of thinking about time that is not linear, but that exists only insofar as it becomes synonymous with creation, as I say above. This notion of creation, and the spatial and temporal conditions Poe tried to describe in order to give it both intelligibility as well as a value, come together in the last chapter of this dissertation.

The fourth and final chapter of this dissertation, entitled “Death and Evil as Affirmation in Poe’s Art,” returns to a historical study of Poe’s work, and looks in particular at the composition of “The Oval Portrait” over the course of 3 years, as well as, finally, Poe’s comments about “The Raven” in “The Philosophy of Composition.” I return to a history of Poe’s compositions here, once again, after looking at the spatial and temporal features of his Marginalia in order to emphatically conclude by bringing together notions of creation, art and

criticism that the previous chapters had been working toward. In this chapter, by distinguishing between a notion of labor and a notion of work, I produce a distinction between a material making and a non-material making that brings together my introductory comments about the creative in criticism and art with the opposition between *techne* and *poesis* that informed the problem of creation. The difference between *techne* and *poesis* that I describe above gives further meaning and direction to the spatial and temporal arguments that precede this chapter. Specifically, the meaning of creation that relates to *poesis* produces an important contrast to the notions of predetermined outcomes along linear, temporal coordinates. The possibility inherent in the creation of new ideas, and to the potential of altering experience, resides in a non-material making that is proper to the continuing life of a work of art. This stands in stark opposition to the reduction of an artwork to its thingly character, which would result only from intervention in materials that were already at hand, and with the habits, perspectives and ideas that would render a product as a finished object. I call this latter notion of making, “labor,” in this chapter, and oppose it to the “work” of art as the non-material making that I have been discussing.

I trace the difference between labor and work in this chapter in opposition to critics that tried to understand Poe’s revisions of “The Oval Portrait” over time, granting the “original” story a sense of firstness and centrality. “The Oval Portrait,” however, is interesting in that its animating force cannot be situated in a single moment of “origin”; in fact, the story refuses any relation back to a reality as its source, and includes a number of de-centering shifts. The story begins with the introduction of a narrator, but then becomes the story of the narrator reading about another story: the story of a painting that has claimed the narrator’s attention. Even as the tale focuses on the story of the painter who uses his wife as the model for his portrait, it is impossible, I argue, to establish a central incident or source for this tale, whether one posits the

central incident or source as the story of the painting, the wife as model, or the portrait to which the title refers. Instead, the tale is about what cannot finally be captured: the movement of attention and of life itself. At each moment that we think we may be confronted with an object we might capture, the story responds with an accompanying image of absence, or death, and thereby ruins any attempts to make the story into a stable object for arrangement. The dynamics of this instability integrate with the forces of art, where art must emerge from creative action, which is to say, that it does not find its impetus, motivation, or actuality in a material, assailable object or reality. The material of the portrait, as well as the language of the story, is coincident with the force of art, but is not finally a pre-determinant for its expression. This is an important moment with respect to the temporal and spatial aspects that I wished to elicit as the endless origin and critical task of the Marginalia since what is endless in “The Oval Portrait,” what stands as the work of the work of art, emerges without clear ties to the past.

As important as this notion of creation is for Poe and his criticism, I end this chapter with a reflection on “The Philosophy of Composition,” which works to reduce “The Raven” – which I argued in chapter 1 was the creative expression of a radical notion of plagiarism – into a thingly product of labor. Poe’s famous essay works to make of “The Raven” a manageable object, rendered as the property of a private intellect that produced the poem through the discreet application of techniques with tactical and expected outcomes and effects. I end with this discussion of “The Raven,” which serves to double the figure of the poem that I produce in the first chapter: namely, the figure of a final creative articulation in which the creative imagination becomes suffocated in a plagiarism that infects all language because of the spatial-temporal occupation of the present by the past. With respect to my reading of “The Raven,” Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” is the aftershock of this final articulation: this essay performs a

parodic repetition of the Raven's empty language. In doing so, however, it also performs a very important service for Poe. In the wake of Poe's insight in "The Raven," and of the battle over plagiarism that he waged in the American journals that he worked for, such a parodic repetition of "The Raven" served to render "The Raven" as a stable object that Poe could lay claim to as a way of protecting himself from the hostilities and accusations that arose over his claims about plagiarism in the American press.

"The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Raven" are doubles of Poe's efforts at understanding the creative in art at his moment, and in trying to establish a life for his work both within the traditions that he wanted to oppose, and beyond them as well. On the one hand, Poe certainly fell upon the practical problems of selling his work, maintaining a reputation, and of making the decision to work for money and fame, and it is within these pressures that we might understand the motivation for "The Philosophy of Composition." The dark side of Poe's creativity, however, does not just stand as a refusal of these decisions as a way of agitating against bourgeois values for the sake of agitation itself. Such confrontation would amount to nothing more than a childish form of evil that identifies a good and establishes this good as primary in its rebellion. Poe's interest in evil, as well as his mention of the "evil hour" of creation in "The Oval Portrait," is an evil that doesn't even understand itself as evil because it expresses the infinite chance of liberty in its most extreme form: that of poetry.

2.0 PLAGIARISM AND THE RAVEN'S "NEVERMORE"

2.1 LANGUAGE AND ORIGINALITY

1845 represents an important year in Edgar Allan Poe's career as this was the year in which he published "The Raven," and also engaged in a highly public feud with friends of Longfellow over the latter's poetry. The publication of "The Raven" garnered a great deal of attention for Poe, and made him famous in New York literary circles. The second set of events garnered attention for different reasons, but became famous nonetheless; these events comprise Poe's infamous, month-long tirade against Longfellow and "Outis" in the Broadway Journal, the publications of which make up what critics now call the "Longfellow War." Both of these publications, although quite different in a number of ways, are, however, related in their engagement with journalism and the emergent capitalist publishing industry. The "Longfellow War," in particular, dealt with very pragmatic problems of publishing, specifically with willful literary theft and its impact on the making and breaking of literary reputations. The final installment of the "Longfellow War," where Poe reconsiders plagiarism and its practice, however, brings it into relation with "The Raven" under a broader theme of plagiarism. Plagiarism, the work of charging an author with it as well as defining what it is, formed, for Poe, a center that allowed him to describe the social forces that oriented around the world of print, and influenced the production of literature. The term "plagiarism," therefore, served to bring

together the problems of speed and journalism, as well as communication with the masses, wealth, fame, and the debate over a national literature, all of which measured the power of speech and writing at his moment. The problem of plagiarism, therefore, involves much more than the detection of literary theft, willful or otherwise. In a stronger sense, a discussion of plagiarism promotes the inauguration of an outlook for originality, for what “originality” might mean, and how it may be possible.

In fact, the problem of originality seems to be everywhere in Poe’s work, especially when he writes on plagiarism. Stephen Rachman aptly notes that, when writing on plagiarism, “the trajectories of [Poe’s] arguments inevitably redirect themselves toward investigations into the nature of creativity and defenses or apologies for literary plagiarism.”¹ Such investigations sometimes hinged around the categories of “genius” and “talent,” terms that, alongside the question of originality, form a recognizable pattern that critics have often lumped into the romantic tradition. Rachman, as well as critics like Florina Tufescu, however, have noted that Poe’s investigations of originality through the topic of plagiarism – which, Rachman goes so far to say, becomes central to Poe’s *modus scribendi* since he didn’t just detect plagiarisms, but frequently committed them as well – was a way of challenging the private ideal of romantic inspiration as well as originality in literature. Rachman, in particular, argues that Poe’s obsession with plagiarism, which results from his own plagiary, aligned traditional notions of authorial intention with more recent destabilizing concepts of intertextuality in order to rework “originality,” and influence; this reworking, however, doesn’t seem to add up to much more than a revision of another’s text. Rachman makes his argument with respect to Poe’s Marginalia, and

¹ Stephen Rachman, “‘Es lasst nicht schreiben’: Plagiarism and ‘The Man of the Crowd’” in The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, eds. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 51.

argues that the Marginalia can be nothing more than this intertextual revision since it begins at the margins of other texts, which finally equates Poe's "origin" with plagiarism²; Rachman claims that "Poe's preoccupation with plagiarism functions as a question of the origins of *his* language and a problem with his own 'originality.'"³

Although challenges to romantic inspiration as well as common conceptions of "originality" certainly stand in Poe's interest in plagiarism, and in his own practice of plagiary, these arguments about "origin" and the aim of plagiarism in Poe's work are, at best, incomplete understandings of these terms in Poe's work and what they bring together. At worst, such conclusions move incompletely from the world of the private author – which terms like "genius" indicate as the locus of creation – to the public, or social, since it identifies Poe's work only as a trivial and private (what could it mean for Poe to have *his* language?) operation that produces a fleeting newness, rather than a demonstration that might illustrate how creation can only emerge through the social-historical realm. The studies I mention above fail to see in language the constant creativity emerging from conglomerations of groups – societies – through history: societies themselves are neither natural nor elemental, but emerge in different ways, places and times in the act of coming together. In fact, the great problem in studies of plagiarism, as we see in Rachman's work on Poe, is that the term "creation" – the manifestation of an "origin" or "originality" – is usually either reduced to mythic origins, and therefore displaced from the social-historical where it finds its possibility, or it is altogether dismissed as an outright

² In the following two chapters of this dissertation, I will argue against this understanding of Poe's Marginalia and will try to give it a much different significance in Poe's oeuvre. My argument is that the form of the Marginalia allowed Poe to confront the problems of plagiarism and originality as I describe them in this chapter, especially since the notes he collected in these publications produced a disengagement from the dominant temporal forms of the journal and magazine.

³ Rachman, 50-1.

impossibility. An important example of this occurs in Alexander Lindey's landmark work on plagiarism, in which he does not oppose the terms "plagiarism" and "originality." Rather, Lindey dismisses the possibility of originality as creation, stating quite simply that, "There are few platitudes as trite as the one about there being nothing new under the sun. There are few as comprehensively true."⁴

Robert Macfarlane's more recent work on plagiarism defines what he calls two "theories" of originality, "creatio" and "inventio," to situate more comprehensively what "originality" in literature might be. The bulk of his work on plagiarism and originality serves to dismiss the former as mythic creation, which he reduces to the paradigm of "something out of nothing." The latter term, "inventio," favored by Macfarlane as the proper condition for literature, describes a process of repetition in which language produces new significations, finds new referents, but does not "create" in the strong sense. Such work is important in that it displaces originality from the work of the author's private interiority (and, hence, from the notion of romantic genius and originality as well) and finds it, instead, in language. However, the creation out of nothing that Macfarlane desires to deny is still there even as "inventio," for even if we say that this constant "corruption" of language is only a characteristic of its signifying or indicating function, to say there is no "creation" would mean that language must be limited in its significations to the objects and referents already existing in the world. The world, then, would be nothing more than a stable set of referents, or meanings, available throughout history, which language might freeze into particular configurations at different times. As we will see, Poe's reflections on plagiarism do not allow such a reductive understanding of language, in which language stands only as mere exchange in communication. What matters in Poe's conception of "plagiarism" is that it arises in

⁴ Alexander Lindey, Plagiarism and Originality (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 14.

affinity with the institutions of his moment not as a referent to these, but as a creative expression that forms with his moment.

While it is true that origin in Poe sometimes has the trivial sense of newness Macfarlane attaches to it, Poe also gives it the stronger notion of something unknown cohering, for the first time, into an expression, not in the sense of discovery, but in the sense of creation, or of acquiring being. Although Poe sometimes discusses combinatorial effects, in which the compositional process seems to consist of nothing more than choosing among materials and techniques available to him, infinite as they may be, he also suggests, with greater emphasis in his fiction, that composition does not choose, whether that choice be between referents, techniques or effects. Composition, rather, is origin in the sense that it creates what it needs at a particular moment to institute completely new forms. There are, of course, numerous difficulties with this process since there are no protocols of understanding in place to describe or analyze an origin at its moment of irruption. Poe attempted to reflect on this radical notion of origin in the colloquy “The Power of Words,” in which the work of speech does not just refer to what exists, but produces new worlds for existence through its ability to bring together the productivity of action in language. This story figures the emergence of origin – through the “power” of words – as enigmatic: “not in knowledge is happiness, but in the acquisition of knowledge! In forever knowing, we are for ever blessed; but to know all, were the curse of a fiend.”⁵ This statement depicts “know[ing] all” as the “curse of a fiend,” not, as some critics have argued, because Poe wished to promote the over-production of knowledge in the capitalist world of print,⁶ but

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Power of Words,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 6, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965). 139.

⁶ These are the questions that organize Whalen’s book, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

because to “know all” would end the possibility of not knowing. There can be no accurate description of the conditions for the emergence of origin, of how it creates its coherence, because this would bring into causal relation all historical moments, and close off the possibility for origin altogether. Origin, therefore, passes through a moment of not knowing, in which its result is not pre-determined by past forms, but finally coheres into a new form.

“The Power of Words” introduces some important qualifications for thinking “origin” in relation to the importance of plagiarism in Poe’s work and thought. First, the colloquy itself, as an exchange between two speakers, posits the locus of “not knowing” in the action of speaking, in which any clarity that a speaker might acquire might be reworked, turned back into obscurity, in a response. Language, therefore, is both the mediation that embodies this action, as well as the chasm through which the interaction reworks itself, and perpetuates its action. This, already, begins to rework the simple notion that language acquires significance only through the accidental reference to an object. Language, its continuing possibility, resides in action. The problem of originality, therefore, requires that we think language in relation to the social-historical realm, rather than treating language, on its own, as the isolated location of change at the level of word-signification. At Poe’s moment, the temporal entrainment produced by journals affected labor and the experience of time, and, consequently, the possibility for creation. This temporal entrainment shows that the possibilities of language must confront the social-historical realm and the institutions that give it form; or, more concretely, that language itself is the institution that forms society and history. To ignore the human action and labor that accompanies changes in the meaning of language is to ignore how violence, manipulation or mechanical entrainment might promote or reduce historical emergence. A change in language, therefore, is not reducible to a word or a set of words whose meanings may change: change,

rather, is immanent and transformational. We can see in Poe's investigation of plagiarism the possibility of origin in relation to institutions of writing and their relation to social life.

Poe's obsession with plagiarism and his search for "originality" arise, first, in the midst of the dominance of a voluntary memory that unfolds only along spatial connections and relations, and which preserves terms and usages that exclude the possibility of alterity, or change. With this regard, the speed of the press and its insistence on urgency configures this linearity, as a speedy journalism threatens to turn "time" into a chronological compilation of events, and obscures the understanding of time as the manifestation of something other coming into being – creation. Further, the strong emergence of plagiarism in Poe's criticism, almost as the dominant sign of the publishing industry, also signals the danger that language may no longer participate in the process of change, and that it may no longer express the productivity of human labor as historical emergence through creation – a meaning for plagiarism that becomes more clear at the end of the "Longfellow War." For these reasons, the term "plagiarism" does not function solely as a technical term in Poe's work, but illustrates a changing potential in language. It is true that Poe goes to a great deal of effort to accurately define the term, and to make sure it is adequately and effectively employed in practical matters. But the emergence of plagiarism in Poe's work also relates strongly to Poe's reflections on the life of literature, especially as literature is printed and reprinted in the sphere of the emergent capitalist publishing industry, where fame and fortunes stood to be gained and lost, where critics sought to produce a national literature, and where the temporal pressures of journalism weighed heavily on the literary imagination. Plagiarism continuously grows in Poe's thinking, but this vital form eventually does violence to itself. In this sense, plagiarism is a "final origin": it articulates a change that announces a suffocation of language, a notion that another "origin" cannot "occur." Even as the

emergence and changing significance of plagiarism takes on particular force over Poe's career, the significance of plagiarism ultimately signals a termination of that force, and of further signification. This "final" notion of plagiarism arises in Poe's thinking for the first time at the end of the "Longfellow War," and finds its culmination in "The Raven." This chapter, therefore, will trace the changing meaning of plagiarism, which is especially well documented in the "Longfellow War," and will examine how it comes to its dominant standing in "The Raven."

2.2 TOOLS, LABOR AND THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY

Perhaps the most important work on the subject of plagiarism, and as a point of departure, is Foucault's essay "What is an Author?" This essay discusses the particularization of a work to an author, and begins to ask how and why one would begin to think of possession of the literary by an author. Of particular importance is the ideological function that Foucault understands the author to serve. The essay asks, "How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world? The answer is: One can reduce it with the author."⁷ This passage is very valuable to begin a reflection on the history of plagiarism, and it illuminates Poe's efforts to think about plagiarism as a problem of the press, but, more importantly, as a problem of creation. To this end, it is essentially important to elaborate on what this "threat" to our world could mean, and what relationship such a threat could have with creation. This passage from Foucault's essay leads to these questions; Foucault notes that, in asking about the author, "One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the

⁷ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New York P, 1998), 221.

opposite of his historically real function. [...] The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.”⁸

Following Foucault, we might begin to say, therefore, that the particularization of creation in the figure of the author is an attempt to manage the fear we have of the proliferation of meaning. The promotion of this proliferation does not belong to an individual, but is, rather, the subject of our social-historical unfolding. The threat to the world, therefore, arises insofar as the world – its meaning and what we know of it – is a creation of man, and the proliferation of meaning threatens the stability of this creation as well as the status quo. This is the reason, once again, that “The Power of Words” is so important: it does not place creation in a speaker or writer, but, rather, in the language that brings together the productivity of action between speakers. What the particularization of creation in the mind of an author reveals, therefore, is an historical tendency toward the loss of community as well as the obfuscation of community as the locus of human action and creation.

This loss of community articulates a long and uncertain historical change. Importantly, numerous scholars note that plagiarism – although a Latin term – is a product of European modernity. In order to make sense of this, it is important to establish a number of details that articulate this change. First of all, we can note that the problem of copyright arises in Europe with the appearance of the printing press, which divides labor into clearly appointed activities, often exteriorized into, and guided by the function of machines or the application of tools. It is important to note that the printing press initiates the problem of copyright through its visibility as a tool that changes the possibilities of labor. Governments rewarded the invention of this tool, in all quarters of Europe, with privileges, patents and copyrights because what is protected is not a

⁸ Foucault, 221-2.

set of ideas or the language of a book, initially, but the mode of production itself. Bruce Bugbee notes the differences, but also the kinship, between patents and copyright: patents were given to inventions in order to stimulate and promote industry. Copyright, on the other hand, occurs later, when authors brought new works to the press for publication. In the 15th century, therefore, when the introduction of printing presses to numerous cities in Europe began, local governments offered patents to printers to encourage them to establish their operations. These printers, at least initially, could print books by authors long since dead and therefore did not need to worry about copyright; the point of the patent was that these printers would not encounter competition, and would be free to perfect the function of their operation for the growth of industry and the local community in which they worked.⁹

These patents for printing cause a shift, first of all, from the labor of the scribes copying in the scriptorium, to the laborer working with machines. In this movement, which places precedence on the visibility of labor, we begin to arrive at a clearly delineated and appointed labor time. When the tool, the machine, becomes the measure of labor, we see more clearly a shift into modernity of the kind that Georges Bataille described in his work on political economy. The primacy of the tool, compounded by Max Weber's insights in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, led Bataille through his reflections on the rise of communities in the wake of feudalism that had lost their sense of community.¹⁰ This is an important point with relation to Poe's interest in plagiarism insofar as it illustrates how the individual is contained in the tools that give it form, and how this formation of the individual displaces him from the intimate continuity of community under which historical emergence and creation become possible. The

⁹ See Bruce Bugbee, Genesis of American Patent and Copyright Law (Washington D.C.: Public Affairs P, 1967).

¹⁰ See Georges Bataille, The Accursed Share, Volume 1 (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

relationship of a single person to his surroundings through the tool or the machine – which subordinates one’s surroundings to the goals and activities established in the tool and the machine – submits an individual’s sense of self to projects and definitions which make every present moment available to a static conception of economic and moral order.

A further distinction arises in this insistence on the tool: one of the great distinctions between the modern classification of man with that of the ancients resides in the modern classification of man as homo faber, or the animal that uses tools. This is quite different from the Greek description of man as the animal with rationality, or the animal with language. Although this distinction is quite common in fields of Anthropology, I am thinking, in particular, of the significance that Castoriadis gives it: in the insistence on tools, and the labor attached to them, we get only a material sense of creation as craftsmanship. This insistence on tools produces the notion of a purely material making, and ignores the immaterial creation that, for instance, I mention above with respect to “The Power of Words.”

The history of copyright, therefore, as it implements the notion of the work of art as a product of labor by a single author through production and the use of tools, produces, also, a notion of language that cannot speak beyond its stabilization in a particular product. This stabilization is of particular importance in understanding the problems that arise for Poe as he tries to think of plagiarism. The danger of plagiarism exceeds the problem of one author stealing from another – which is already serious enough under the conditions for publishing in Poe’s moment. Plagiarism also becomes a bigger problem than having the present merely reiterate the past. Beyond this, the danger of plagiarism becomes that the past might reiterate the present when poets can no longer speak a language that is different from a predetermined host of meanings that it has been worked into.

2.3 THE CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAGIARISM IN POE'S THOUGHT

Although Poe discussed plagiarism and its widespread occurrence in the literature of American and English journals as early as 1836 when he was editor of the Southern Literary Messenger,¹¹ the most hard-fought exposition of the practice occurred in his reviews and criticism of Longfellow. The reason for this is that Longfellow had many friends that effusively rushed to his defense as soon as Poe's accusations against him began to circulate. Longfellow was an important target of Poe's accusations because he was so well known, and the antagonism Poe's criticism initiated brought Poe, as well as the publications he worked for, into the spotlight of American literary criticism.

The increased publicity Poe received, although important, was secondary to the obligation he felt for criticizing the best-known authors and works of his time. First and foremost among his responsibilities, Poe repeatedly claimed that it was the task of criticism to point out the flaws in a work rather than its merits. This method, in many ways, resulted from a strategic engagement with the critical practices that abounded at the time; the reason for this was that Poe wanted to engage with literature as an opportunity, a crossroads, that would inaugurate critical reflection on literature. Importantly, the method of beginning with "demerits" was a way to counteract most American journals, magazines, and book sellers' commitment to fabricating literary reputations, especially as a result of the claims from England and elsewhere that the US was incapable of producing its own literature. Poe believed that the dominant practice of pointing out the merits of a work promoted holding on to what critics branded as the "good" in a

¹¹ An especially important discussion occurs in the introduction to his "Pinakadia," published in the Southern Literary Messenger, August, 1836, where Poe not only notes the widespread occurrences of plagiarism, but cites common sources for the American authors that commit it.

text, as one might hold onto a technique or a tradition, and carry it forward in imitation or, worse, plagiarism. Pointing out “flaws” in a work, however, produced an ongoing engagement with literature and inventiveness that was otherwise absent from an industry consumed with the problem of a national literature. Poe noted that the watchword at the beginning of the 1840s was “a national literature!” and that “we found ourselves daily in the paradoxical dilemma of liking, or pretending to like, a stupid book the better because (sure enough) its stupidity was of our own growth, and discussed our own affairs.”¹² Poe’s charge was that the prominence of many authors, therefore, was a mere staging – an exercise of popularity supported by what Poe called the “puffing” system, in which critics and reviewers unreservedly praised national works to produce authority and reputation. Most of the criticism that circulated in the journals of his day engaged only in the task of “finding” a national literature, hoping that it would occur naturally as a native product of a nation, since the resources or conditions for producing it seemed displaced from the practices of “puffing.”

Poe’s campaign against one of the more popular poets in America at the time, therefore, served to illustrate how a popular poet, more often than not, won and maintained his reputation. Plagiarism, at least superficially, became an unpleasant abuse of power by poets that achieved renown: lesser-known authors, because they had trouble publishing, were easy targets for plagiarists when their work appeared in obscure journals or books. Moreover, under the pressures of producing a national literature, critics were wary of detracting from established and popular authors, not to mention the fact that the public tended to defend a popular author as a matter of course. In fact, once Poe took on the position of editor at the Broadway Journal and

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, “Exordium,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 11, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 2.

began his long discussion of Longfellow's plagiarisms, he described what he felt was the plight of these lesser-known poets when a reader, offhandedly, encountered similarities between two texts:

We meet a certain passage in a certain book. We meet a passage nearly similar, in another book. The first book is not at hand, and we cannot compare dates. We decide by what we fancy the probabilities of the case. The one author is a distinguished man – our sympathies are always in favor of distinction. “It is not likely,” we say in our hearts, “that so distinguished a personage as A. would be guilty of plagiarism from this B. of whom nobody in the world has ever heard.” We give judgment, therefore, at once against B. of whom nobody in the world has ever heard; and it is for the very reason that nobody in the world *has* ever heard of him, that, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, the judgment so precipitously given is erroneous. Now then the plagiarist has not merely committed a wrong in itself – a wrong whose incomparable meanness would deserve exposure on absolute grounds – but he, the guilty, the successful, the eminent, has fastened the degradation of his crime – the retribution which should have overtaken it in his own person – upon the guiltless, the toiling, the unfriended struggler up the mountainous path of Fame.¹³

I cite this long passage because it illustrates a number of points with regard to both Poe's accusations against Longfellow as well as the problems of plagiarism. It is important to note that this series was the last of Poe's examinations of Longfellow's work. Poe had published a number of reviews of different works by Longfellow over the years, usually praising his work for the most part, but also strongly faulting Longfellow's didacticism¹⁴ and his tendency to imitate, “sometimes verging on downright theft.”¹⁵ The passage above, however, comes from the first of his five entries from his month-long series on Longfellow and plagiarism in the Broadway

¹³ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Longfellow War” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol. 12, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 54-55. For the remainder of this chapter, I will refer to this text parenthetically as “Longfellow War.”

¹⁴ Poe's notion of the “heresy of the didactic” from “The Poetic Principle” is well known, but he developed this notion in specific reviews and critiques, and developed it strongly in his reviews of Longfellow's work. See, in particular, Poe's review of Longfellow's Ballads.

¹⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “Chapter on Autography” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 15, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 191.

Journal. Rather than a review, or a study of Longfellow, these entries took the form of direct responses to publications in defense of Longfellow, especially to a pseudonymous article signed “Outis” (Greek for “nobody”).¹⁶ Poe felt particularly obligated to respond to Outis because Outis suggested offhandedly in his defense of Longfellow that one might accuse Poe of plagiarism, as well, since there are similarities between Poe’s work and Coleridge’s; Outis concluded, however, that such accusations would be rash since similarity is often the result of coincidence rather than theft.

Poe’s response, therefore, is motivated by two important goals that we can begin to note from the passage I quote from above: first, Poe wished to make it very clear that he understood the consequences and the difficulties of accusing an eminent American poet of plagiarism, and that doing so was incidental to the process of exposing how the publishing industry built reputations, how it destroyed them, and the constraints this produced on setting the foundations and conditions for literature to flourish. The puffing system could bring an author to prominence, and that author, because of the distinction he attained, might then plagiarize with

¹⁶ For a detailed account of the events leading up to Outis’s defense of Longfellow, see Sidney Moss, Poe’s Literary Battles (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1963). Further, there has been much speculation over who “Outis” may have been, some critics arguing that Poe, himself, wrote “Outis’s” article to set up a straw man that he would then destroy in the series he published for the Broadway Journal, known as the “Longfellow War.” There is much to support this claim, especially the fact that Outis’s remarks appeared just before Poe became editor of the Broadway Journal, where he had a stake in the ownership of the publication and held enough authority to publish what he liked. The appearance of Outis’s publication just before this event – had Poe indeed written it – would suggest that Poe planned, in advance, the series that would appear from March to April, 1845, as a systematic exposition of his thoughts on Longfellow and plagiarism. Killis Campbell, however, has refuted such claims. See Killis Campbell, “Who Was Outis?” in University of Texas Studies in English, VIII (1928), 107-109. In this article, Campbell claims that “Outis” was, in fact, a friend of Longfellow’s, and suggests that Poe responded in length over 5 issues of the Broadway Journal not because of a pre-planned program, but because he genuinely felt insulted by Outis’s article. In any case, there is no definitive proof that settles the question of Outis’s identity.

impunity. The practices and criticism of the day, including the “puffing” system, not only restricted the development of literature, and of the authors that produced promising literature, but it also concentrated attention and productive energy on marketing rather than on criticism or poetry. This is the reason that Poe spent much of his life trying to found a journal that could survive independently of sponsors, so that it might study and observe “the purest rules of art,”¹⁷ rather than adhering to the derivative practices of marketing. As part owner of the Broadway Journal, Poe saw this as his first opportunity for such an endeavor, and inaugurated his editorship of the journal with this series against Longfellow. A careful demonstration of how one of the most popular American poets might be guilty of plagiarism would serve to denounce many of the “puffing” practices of criticism and journalism, and perhaps turn criticism toward a more rigorous engagement with literature.

Central to the impetus of the “Longfellow War,” Poe wished to detail the process by which he detected, and then accused a poet of plagiarism. Poe is more clear about this second point in the final installment of “The Longfellow War,” where he states, for clarification, that “Having brought the subject, in this view, to a close in the last Journal, I now feel at liberty to add a few words of postscript, by way of freeing myself of any suspicion of malevolence or discourtesy. The thesis of my argument, in general, has been the definition of the grounds on which a charge of plagiarism may be based, and of the species of ratiocination by which it is to be established: that is all” (“Longfellow War,” 105). This series of publications on Longfellow, therefore, served to overturn Outis’s unsystematic and hurried accusations against Poe, as well as to define plagiarism through a detailed demonstration, rather than through a generalized set of

¹⁷ This was Poe’s guiding mantra for the magazine he wished to found, which he outlined in his “Prospectus for the Penn Magazine.”

conditions. Both of these goals, however, aimed toward a further objective, which, for starters, meant to bring the outlook for originality into sharper focus; Poe's point, of course, is that, for the most part, the prominent American poets were incapable of originality, and that the criticism of the age was equally incapable of reflecting on, or directing the forces cohering around the publishing practices of the period. Under these conditions, it becomes more clear why Poe decided that a month-long series on plagiarism, as an inaugural project for his Broadway Journal, may have been necessary to disabuse the habits of critics and readers that reacted blindly, as a matter of course, against the critical principles he wished to institute.

The project of detecting plagiarism and accusing an author of the offense was mundane, even banal, and, in the end, quite difficult to prove, but necessary to begin such a movement. The passage from which I quote above illustrates the initial requirements, and the steps toward a demonstration of plagiarism. Initially, the hypothetical reader detects only "similarity," which is no more than what Outis discovered in comparing Poe's texts to Coleridge. The step, however, from detection of similarity to the charge of plagiarism requires an analysis that links the texts as identical, and then imposes on one of them the chronological category of firstness. To prove identity between two texts, Poe carefully enumerated similarities in theme, ideas, and figures and, more importantly, similarities in the elaboration of these, which moved the demonstration from the possibility of coincidence, which would involve only chance, to a stronger likelihood of deliberate theft. The final step for an accusation of plagiarism, however, involves what the hypothetical reader did not have available: publishing dates. Poe's demonstration, therefore,

required the chronological arrangement of publication,¹⁸ solidified by the temporal rhythms of journals and magazines.

What does Poe detect, therefore, when he detects a plagiarism? Ultimately, Poe must detect a date around which he might arrange publications. This date must serve as an indication of an origin, but this notion of “origin,” in order to provide a basis for the accusation of plagiarism, must acquire a very specific significance: the “origin” takes on the force of legal property to provide impetus for the accusation. The crime of plagiarism in terms of theft occurs when a reputable author can “steal” from a poet and push him further into poverty. Poetry, however, is not something that one might own in the sense of “having” an object. The most important demonstration of ownership usually hinges around the material fact of possession, after which one might begin to argue the more difficult notion of rights for possession, and whether the fact that one can show possession means that one might also claim rights to it. Rather than material possession, however, demonstrating “ownership” of poetry becomes a

¹⁸ Meredith McGill, in her book American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, argues that an accurate chronological arrangement of publications would have proved next to impossible during Poe’s time, regardless of the popularity and ubiquity of periodicals. Her work attempts to show the errors of anachronism into which twentieth century scholars fall when they try to organize a chronology of Poe’s work, or, indeed, other authors’ work, out of temporally and spatially de-centered antebellum publications – what she calls the culture of reprinting. What McGill means by temporal and spatial “de-centralization” is that texts circulated in different regions of the country (even internationally) and at different times without ever referring back to a moment of origin, or author as originator, especially since copyright laws were not fully enacted. Journals, therefore, did not publish authors, but borrowed literary forms: genre. Editors chose material from numerous sources that could be readable in the common terms of their audience, and reprinted these materials in different journals at different times, making accurate reference back to an “original” publication nearly impossible. Although this argument might be useful in illustrating isolated errors in the demonstration of a particular plagiarism, the point I am making, however, is that the periodization of literature and thinking that occurs through the journalistic press promoted the category of linear-chronological time as the highest order under which “origination” takes on organizational priority. The practice of “decentralized” printing in the wake of Romanticism, far from undoing “origin” or “authorship,” awakened a legal interest in the idea of the ownership of poetry, to which Poe’s obsession with plagiarism attests.

temporal problem. Ownership – the “propre” of the author – requires, therefore, a notion of authorship in which a private intellect, the author’s thought, “expresses” a poem, and must go hand in hand with the chronological memory strongly established by the dates of journals. The “origin” of the poem – when it takes on significance under the legal terms of ownership inflected by poverty, “Fame,” and financial remuneration – is an author’s private intellect, which is then firmly arranged in the public memory by periodicals. The origin of a poem as the property of a particular intellect seems to amount to no more than the romantic notion of private intellect that creates in isolation.

This definition of plagiarism, which defines the private intellect as the origin of literature, is quite important in the arena of the emergent publishing industry, not only with respect to the making and breaking of reputations, but also with respect to the pursuit of wealth. Although Poe may have been one of the first American critics to aggressively denounce the practice of plagiarism, such outrage is part and parcel of the value that the romantic tradition confers upon individual authorship. That such a formulation would arise here is not unexpected – in fact, the romantic notion of inspiration and imagination provided, on the one hand, the notion of the private intellect that produces work, and the influence of the press provided, on the other hand, the strong chronological configuration of time that continuously functions toward spatial connections and relations. These relations do not establish a higher necessity or consistency, but are merely a means of ordering phenomena under an overarching model of historicism.

A complication begins to arise, however, with the latter notion of time. Although the goal of uncovering plagiarism seems to reside in establishing “origin” in an author – what belongs to whom – the temporal arrangement and the label of dates required in the demonstration of plagiarism expand this problem beyond a private and isolated intellect. Dates are such

important indicators of “origin” that we might go so far as to say that Poe’s demonstrations show that the work belongs not just to an intellect, but also to a date. Beyond a crime of theft, then, plagiarism produces a further disruption: that an item of the past might stand as if it “belonged” to the present. Poe does not openly denounce this disruption, but it certainly troubles his work, and begins to suggest a more profound and troublesome problem for which the term “plagiarism” stands.

This problem arises suddenly in the final entry of the “Longfellow War.” Up to 1845, Poe defined plagiarism in terms that remained very close to the juridical problem of the ownership of property. In the final entry of the “Longfellow War,” however, Poe offers a new possibility for plagiarism, for the first time in his career, that radically upsets the work he had done up to that point. Through the first four installments of the “Longfellow War,” Poe berated Otis and the naïve judgment that plagiarisms such as Longfellow’s could be circumstantial; in the final entry of the series, however, Poe considers the possibility that Longfellow might be innocent of willful theft, and, in doing so, proposes the following explanation for an “involuntary” plagiarism:

It appears to me that what seems to be the gross *inconsistency* of plagiarism as perpetrated by a poet, is very easily thus resolved: - the poetic sentiment (even without reference to the poetic power) implies a peculiarly, perhaps abnormally keen appreciation of the beautiful, with a longing for its assimilation, or absorption, into poetic identity. What the poet intensely admires, becomes thus, in very fact, although only partially, a portion of his own intellect. It has a secondary origination within his own soul – an origination altogether apart, although springing from its primary origination from without. The poet is thus possessed by another’s thought, and cannot be said to take of it, possession. But, in either view, he thoroughly feels it as *his own* – and this feeling is counteracted only by the sensible presence of its true, palpable origin in the volume from which he has derived it – an origin which, in the long lapse of years it is almost impossible *not* to forget – for in the meantime the thought itself is forgotten. But the frailest association will regenerate it – it springs up with all the vigor of new birth – its absolute originality is not even a matter of suspicion – and when the poet has written it and printed it, and on its account is charged with plagiarism,

there will be no one in the world more entirely astounded than himself.
("Longfellow War," 105-6)

With respect to everything leading up to this entry, this constitutes a very surprising conclusion to the "Longfellow War." These concluding statements are unexpected because they reverse the goals Poe had set up to this point: if Longfellow was not guilty of "meanness," then the literary reputation he achieved was not a planned sham, or a product of the "puffing" system, but, perhaps, an impotence of a deeper and more pervasive nature. In any case, much of this diminishes the urgency and sternness with which Poe might level the charge of plagiarism against his target. Why would he choose to soften the blow of the accusation as he does at this moment, after having spent a month bringing his accusations and proof to a head? If his goal was to punish reputations wrongfully and maliciously built, why would he end his month-long exposition of Longfellow's plagiarisms, quite blunt and forceful up to this point, in such a way?

In this analysis, Poe reverses the temporal disturbance caused by plagiarism in which materials of the past wrongfully stand as if they "belonged" to the present. Under the sign of plagiarism, these materials still belong to the past, but now take possession of the present, rather than the other way around. Poe's revision of intention in plagiarism revises the notion of "origin" and "possession" altogether. Authors in the present no longer commit a transgression, but fall prey to these past materials inadvertently. In the legal view of plagiarism, the author's intellect was the origin of literature; in this final entry, Poe claims that language takes possession of an author's intellect: "What the poet intensely admires, becomes thus, in very fact, although only partially, a portion of his own intellect." This view of plagiarism undoes the idea of a subject whose ground is an ontology that gives it the possibility of making choices, which in turn become the agency for change (intellect as origin). In fact, an intellect cannot be an origin if language forms it: language becomes the origin of intellect, in which everything is decided anew

in the distinct, material context of the acquisition of language. The origin of poetry, therefore must be language and not rational volition. It appears that, rather than a continuous and rational subject, we are left to think of the complexities in which language is given, and, indeed, rethink what we have up to now called the “intellect” in terms of such a complexity.

Poe claims, however, that this formation is only “partial,” which may continue to suggest a volitional control in the intellect of the author as he searches for “origin.” In this sense, Poe’s argument might appear close to Harold Bloom’s conception of literary history, where the “origin” of history resides in a poem, and history progresses along a dialectical course in which art is superseded by other art, bypassing any social, political or public sphere, and where, finally, the author’s intellect (genius) serves as the arbiter between links in the dialectical chain. Although Bloom tries to characterize a historical development of art with this dialectal process – whereas Poe was trying to explain the conditions of plagiarism – the similarities between the two should be noted, particularly the notion that art begins in other art and finds its continuing possibility in genius, in order to point out the important discrepancies. Central to these discrepancies is the sudden disavowal of volitional control in Poe’s argument, which changes the very nature of Poe’s understanding of history and his moment. In Poe’s description from the passage I quote above, the absence of agency in the intellect insofar as it is inadvertently formed, opens the dialectical link between art and art that decides Bloom’s system. It further disrupts the private interior of the familiar romantic agency that Poe seems to have used up to this point. In his final comments, the experience of art “spring(s) from its primary origination from without.” This “primary origination” might be the equivalent of “the sensible presence of its true, palpable origin in the volume from which he has derived it,” but the memory of this “origin” is activated by a chance encounter with the world in which the poet’s memory awakens involuntarily and

with new force: “the frailest association will regenerate it – it springs up with all the vigor of a new birth – its absolute originality is not even a matter of suspicion.” This involuntary memory orients poetry and art to the world in which it is embedded, which is to say, that art is oriented to the present world in which the poet finds himself, and finds its life and meaning there, rather than “in” the “origin” or time in which the poem was written.

Such a description of the experience of art, or of poetry, in which art forms the intellect, and sets an involuntary memory into action, opens up numerous possibilities for thinking about the relationship between the past and the present, and the meaning of “origination.” In particular, this reading comes quite close to Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire – through a reading of Freud – that involves a notion of consciousness that is opposed to memory. Importantly for this discussion, memory is that which an object activates by chance, and which one may or may never discover. Conversely, that which consciousness experiences directly becomes sterilized in the experience, and comes under the control of consciousness for the service of the intellect (the intellect is only “partially” formed), which can then arrange the experience by recollection (the active memory of publishing dates). The essence of the matter, therefore, is that only that which does not enter into consciousness may put memory into motion. This is not to say that one establishes a causal connection between the past event and one’s current moment; the relationship is decided in a moment of arrest. One example of how this might happen is in Benjamin’s use of Proust’s “*mémoire involontaire*” in which a chance encounter with an object, in a single instant, allows time to be re-experienced. In this single moment, the tie to the object generates an active memory and a unique recovery of the past.

All of this goes to show that Poe might have found, in his descriptions in the final installment of the “Longfellow War,” a mobile memory for which language may have served as

an incarnation. Poe, indeed, gives language priority, but the problem is that it takes this priority under the sign of plagiarism: the past takes possession of the present. Instead of the creative movement Benjamin finds in Baudelaire and Proust, Poe sees a past that is altogether there, in the print of the original journal or book, of which the plagiarizing poet “cannot be said to take [...] possession,” so much as the plagiarist “is thus possessed by another’s thought.” This language springs up from the past into the present to produce parrots rather than authors or poets. So even as this “primary origination” – the volume that the plagiarist first read – springs up by chance in relation to the world, this “new birth” fails to produce an origin in the present. What this produces for him, finally, is a present in which one cannot speak, as journalism and reportage loom large over his imagination in a language “locked” into an origin that doesn’t belong to his present.

What is perhaps most important in this meaning of plagiarism is that it has arisen unexpectedly – almost with the force of an involuntary memory, when Poe was culminating his argument against Longfellow and Outis, causing Poe to retract the force of his accusations – as a sign of Poe’s moment. It is true that Poe faults a strong “poetic sentiment” for this “involuntary” plagiarism, and claims this problem a fault not of his own age, but of all great poets of all times. The argument, therefore, seems to continue to appeal to a particular and universal function of intellect, but the dynamics of the argument do not finally allow this. If language forms the intellect, then the “origin” of the intellect is not a universal “poetic sentiment,” but language itself. Only an intervention at the level of language, its circulation and usage, may arrest this process. Ultimately, then, there may be no origin in an intellect, only in the material context in which man encounters language. The poetic sentiment, therefore, is not so much a faculty, or an element in the life of an intellect, as it is an eddy in the life of language. Poe universalizes the

problem of plagiarism at this point because of the peculiarity of its temporal dimension, which amounts to the inability of his age to separate from the past.

Importantly, this notion of plagiarism does not simply stand as a representation or referent for his moment. The meaning of plagiarism does not exist as mere representation because it does not have an anecdotal exterior, as in the reportage of the newspaper press. The press, under its temporal pressures, understands the work of imaginative literature only as a lie. For journalism, the imagination works voluntarily, and only with respect to a real dimension that is decided before it works. It has a strange capacity, however: it can produce that which it knows is not real. This type of imagination works on a volitional and representational level: it can produce falsities with respect to a real, but only insofar as it knows the real before it begins its work. Journalism, with its insistence on the simultaneous incidence between word and referent, reduces the literary imagination to a relationship to a previous reality. The imaginative transformation devolves from a pre-existing sphere of reality that delimits what one creates imaginatively. This notion of plagiarism in Poe's work, however, appears as an involuntary memory, but what appears does not appear to consciousness, is not phenomenal – its referent is thought, an expression and representation of thinking.

With this respect, plagiarism as it occurs in Poe's thinking at this moment is creative expression – an origin that does not simply devolve from reality, and which does not result from a volitional choice of signification from available referents. Interestingly, this creative expression is, itself, an origin, but unlike the one Poe sought through the voluntary memory of dates in journals: it is, instead, a signification that emerges in the particular configuration that occurs in the wake of the romantic tradition and the rise of the capitalist print industry. The emergence of this signification for writing relates closely to the institutions at work in Poe's

moment, but stands apart from them in the sense that this signification expresses a creation. This creation, however, is ironically a “final” creation: it forms an origin that inserts itself as an interruption, or a disarticulation of further origins.

2.4 “THE RAVEN” AND THE CURSE OF THE ETERNAL PRESENT

The notion of plagiarism that Poe elaborates at the end of the “Longfellow War” might produce a different significance with respect to the morbid aspects of Poe’s writing than what critics have usually given these, often lumping these characteristics as relations to the Gothic tradition from which Poe borrowed. Regardless of whether Poe did, indeed, borrow these elements, what is important to note here is the relation these have to Poe’s thinking, and how these find their significance there. There is a feeling in Poe’s fiction of a past rushing up to the present, with forces that have been directed with the materials of tradition; these materials, however, “arrive” in the present as materials of the past, that inhabit the present, but cannot confer order or meaning to the present. Narrators of Poe’s tales, therefore, are often at a loss as to how to explain the present or give it meaning with respect to the traditions that had existed up until the recent past. For this reason, there is, everywhere in Poe’s fiction, figures of dead bodies, premature burials, images of suffocation, diseased minds in lost libraries, and sons of historically vast lineages who are no longer able to remember their family name.

The plagiarism Poe describes at the end of the “Longfellow War,” which configures the difficulties between relationships of the present with the past that we see in much of his fiction, however, is best figured in “The Raven,” whose publication anticipates the “Longfellow War” by only a matter of months. The description of plagiarism as a problem that “origin” is always

elsewhere (another time), and that the present is not an “origin” – it is unable to begin again – takes on powerful significance through the temporal aspect of the raven’s speech: “nevermore.” This is important leading up to the “Longfellow War,” but it is also of great importance in much of Poe’s fiction, as well as in relation to his Marginalia. The entries Poe prepared for the Marginalia, in particular, struck a strong discord with the clearly appointed temporality and dates of journals by refusing such dated organization; the marginal comments, therefore, did not respond to such temporal arrangements, but attempted, rather, to speak the present without temporal/spatial relations to other moments. The Marginalia attempts this by writing in the present as if the present figured as something intermediary that participates in a continuing process, without clear outcomes or pre-determinants, in which the thought of the present is pending, rather than speaking the present as reportage or journalism. The entries that appear in the Marginalia, therefore, force what would normally be the “object” of literary analysis into intermediary status – something from which the finishedness of an object is withdrawn. Plagiarism suggests that the possibility for “origin” is in language – not intellect – so the Marginalia are interesting in that these entries are situated in the margins of texts, but the margins represent a “closing space,” the space of suffocation, that Poe figures with particular force in 1845.

Poe further elaborates this “space” of suffocation in “The Raven”; the “where” of this space becomes more clearly the sphere of language, which the speaker of the poem cannot finally locate: this “space” is not assailable. “The Raven” begins with the speaker’s introduction, alone in his study, reading “forgotten lore,” in order to forget his sorrow: the death of his beloved, “Lenore.” The poem, however, distances itself quickly from the problem of solitude, of a lone intellect thinking and representing his thought in art. Further, the narrator’s failure to

separate from the object of his sorrow is only a symptom of a greater problem. The problem of the poem – the failure of the narrator to articulate or create a present that could produce separation from the past – arrives as an approach from the outside: a “rapping at my chamber door.”¹⁹ In fact, when the narrator rises to confront his visitor, he opens the door to discover “Darkness there and nothing more.” The darkness the speaker encounters – the “nothing” of the darkness at his door – as well as the arrival of the problem from elsewhere, signals the unassailability of the curse that the raven will bestow upon him, and his inability to intervene in the force that binds him to it.

Upon returning to his chamber, the narrator is approached again, this time by a knocking at his window, from which the figure of the raven appears, and whom the narrator identifies as belonging to “the saintly days of yore.” From its very first appearance, the raven takes on the significance of the past irrupting in the present. The narrator has a sense of that past, that there is something of the raven that does not belong to the present, but he is ultimately unable to articulate what that difference is. This impotence marks the present, and condemns the present with the inability to begin anew, or to obtain direction or coherence. This inability characterizes the state of the narrator, who cannot distinguish between what he does and what he can’t begin to do: although he notes a difference between past and present, he cannot confer validity to that separation by explaining it or making it intelligible. What is particularly important in this poem is that the present did not arrive as a linear-chronological event that the narrator can recount through the employment of cause and effect (as one might in journalism); the present “arrived” in the form of this very impotence, which remains its foremost quality. The employment of the

¹⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 7, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965). 94. For the remainder of this chapter, I will cite this poem parenthetically as “The Raven.”

present in a linear chronology would serve only to aggravate the problem; the impotence of the present occurs, in part, because such emplotment may be the speaker's only recourse to intelligibility. Poe decisively discards any notion of progress that would arrange the materials of the past in such a linear chronological way as to give them meaning; the result is that these materials, without arranging them into linear model of progress, exist as scattered materials, none of which, finally, grant the present any new material with which to begin anew.

The past, in the form of the raven's appearance, has a "saintly" character: it has order and intelligibility. The speaker, however, belongs to a present that is excluded from this intelligibility; therein lies the curse of the raven's speech: nevermore. Importantly, this word itself – which is key to the organization of the poem and the significance of the narrator's plight in an eternally sorrowful present – resounds without meaning. The raven repeats it like a parrot, without intent or significance, so its repetition serves only to collect, in a disordered present, language to which the speaker cannot confer meaning or order. The speaker realizes that the raven intends nothing and means nothing by repeating "Nevermore":

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
"Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store,
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore –
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of "Never-nevermore." ("The Raven," 97)

In this stanza we see that, beyond the narrator's reflection on the absence of meaning of "nevermore" in the raven's "speech," the speaker also speculates about the raven's master, and what may have prompted him to such extraordinary repetition and insistence on this particular word. The repetition is a "burden" inaugurated by a disaster that follows the raven's owner. This condition repeats a number of problems: in the first instance, the disaster, like the knocking on the chamber door, is an approach from elsewhere, rather than an impotence of the raven's

master – himself a writer – whether we might call that impotence lack of imagination or even “writer’s block.” The “master’s” songs bear the burden that follows him from elsewhere, “fast” and “faster,” touching everything and yet leaving everything untouched. This strange condition affects writing, what it has been up to now, but without granting the writer the ability to articulate how it changes from this moment forth. The writer continues writing, as he had done up until the moment of the disaster, but with the incapacity for language to begin anew. If anything, the raven’s repetition of “Nevermore” – which reverberates the arrest of time as a word that is hollow of meaning – signals a curse in the present in which a disaster has reduced the possibilities of language in much the same way that Poe describes the problem of plagiarism at the end of the “Longfellow War.”

In his reading, the speaker is looking for separation – “surcease of sorrow” – from past objects, through mourning, but also through forgetting (which is what the critic of the Marginalia is able to do in distinction to the speaker of “The Raven,” or even the speaker of “The Philosophy of Composition”). But the raven is an image from the past that materially inhabits his study, and blocks this possibility of separation. Poe, however, in “The Philosophy of Composition,” argues that the word “Nevermore” does, in fact, acquire a range of meaning and possibilities of signification: “I resolved to diversify, and so heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation *of the application* of the *refrain* – the *refrain* itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried.”²⁰ Poe goes on to claim that he chose the speaker’s questions insofar as they would elicit the “nevermore” response to increase

²⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 14, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 199.

the tone of sorrow. The speaker, therefore, proceeded from ordinary questions, to excited and desperate ones that might even suggest a desire on the part of the speaker for self-torture, as the raven's response becomes expected.

It's not clear, however, to what extent we may believe Poe's claims in "The Philosophy of Composition." Rather than "novel effects," we have a situation in which the speaker of "The Raven" not only expects a particular response to his questions, but, in expecting a particular response, belabors the misfortune of the possibilities inherent in asking. What becomes of great importance is the reason the speaker engages the raven's "nevermore" as a set of questions. When one asks a question, one elevates the terms of the question to the heights of their possibility: one cannot be sure what the terms might capture. The question raises its terms to the level of possibility of creation and imaginative elaboration. "The Raven," however, collapses all of the narrator's questions into a particular answer that signals the arrest of asking. The "nevermore" of the raven's answer, each time the speaker asks a new question, destroys the possibility of what it asks: the "nevermore" fixes the terms of the question, ends the asking, and ends the possibility of asking again.

The poem ends with the image of the raven casting its shadow over the speaker's floor, and with a final repetition of "nevermore," announcing that the raven will never lift its shadow. The final image, once again, dispenses with any notion of seeking recourse in the poet's – the speaker's, in this case – agency. The possibility of poetry, therefore, cannot reside in volitional control over composition – the agency I mention here – or romantic inspiration; the possibility of poetry resides in language. If this language, however, oriented to a mechanistic time as Poe elaborates it in his confrontation with journalism and in "The Raven," permeates us and articulates us, then the eventful being that strives to emerge from the world is itself deadened for

we can no longer name it in language. The disaster that looms over the speaker of “The Raven” is the threat of an eternal present and the terminus of history.

3.0 POE'S MARGINALIA AND THE LEAP OF CREATION

3.1 CREATION AND THE LEAP OF "NOT KNOWING" IN THE WORLD OF NEWS

Poe began experimenting with the form of the colloquies in 1839, when he published "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" in Burton's. He would publish "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" a year later, and would finish the third and fourth tales in this grouping, "Mesmeric Revelation" and "The Power of Words," in 1844 and 1845, respectively. The dates are of importance because Poe finished his third and fourth tale in this form roughly around the time he was publishing his first installments of the Marginalia, with which these colloquies, I would like to argue, hold a deep affinity. These stories hold a number of similarities for which they are often grouped together, including a strong thematic resemblance. Eric Carlson notes that these stories actually belong to different "categories" in Poe's thought, but share a kinship in that they represent the development of Poe's thought into the metaphysical and transcendent.¹ Further, these tales share a common interest in death, decay and destruction of apocalyptic scale; indeed, Poe appears in Douglas Robinson's American Apocalypses as an author of "definitive forms of the American apocalypse."²

¹ See Eric Carlson, "Frames of Reference for Poe's Symbolic Language" in Critical Essays on Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Hall, 1987) and "Poe's Vision of Man," in Papers on Poe, ed. Richard Veler (Springfield OH: Chantry Music P, 1978), 7-20.

² Douglas Robinson, American Apocalypses (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985).

Surprisingly, however, the form of the colloquy itself, which consists of a dramatic exchange with no narrative, and for which these tales are generally grouped together in the first place, garners much less attention than the themes of these tales. The themes are certainly important, and prepare Poe for writing Eureka, especially “Mesmeric Revelation,” which anticipates much of what Poe would discuss toward the end of his life in his prose poem. I bring up these stories with respect to Eureka to address the figure of historical emergence and creativity that Poe offers in his prose poem to think about his own moment and the possibilities for the future. In particular, I am thinking of the introduction to Eureka – which Poe would adapt for another tale, “Mellonta Tauta” – in which a letter from the future discussing the pursuit of truth, looks back retrospectively at the history of science and claims that “the progress of true Science [...] makes its most important advances – as all History will show – by seemingly intuitive leaps.”³ This introduces a number of complexities, most importantly that history does not progress in a simple, linear mode with a clear, locatable agency, nor can already existing knowledge contain the “intuitive leap” out of which history emerges. The leap is a figure of discontinuity; more, it is action – a physical exertion – that reaches beyond.

I wish to reflect on the colloquies, and especially their form, rather than on “Mellonta Tauta” or the introduction to Eureka, however, because these colloquies not only anticipate the figure of the leap in Eureka as a figure of historical emergence, but they also indicate a more radical possibility of discontinuity than this passage from Eureka. The form of these colloquies as a conversational exchange, which takes place without narrative frame, occurs between two speakers whose proximity to one another is sometimes very close – intimate even (“The

³ Edgar Allan Poe, Eureka, in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 16, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 189.

Colloquy of Monos and Una,” for instance, is a conversation between two lovers reunited in the afterlife) – and yet their separation is also infinite, unbridgeable, lost in the “expanse” between life and death (the stories take place in the afterlife, or, as in the case of “Mesmeric Revelation,” at the “point” of dying). Importantly, only speech fills this relation of intimate closeness and infinite distance between the characters. Within such a relation, their only recourse is to speak to one another in an unreal time of death, which the tale announces as the condition of renewed possibilities for speech and language. “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” for example, addresses the problem not only as a renewal, but also a rebirth: “for the infected world at large I could anticipate no regeneration save in death. That man, as a race, should not become extinct, I saw that he must be ‘born again.’”⁴ The conversation occurs in this time of death as a new opportunity for man, and Poe places what man can create in this exchange as a world that opens without measure. The relation between speakers spans the measurelessness that exists between life and death; the timeless and placelessness of death expresses the infinite distance between the speakers, which becomes the relation of speech. This measurelessness is the very measure of the unknown, not in the sense that what is not known belongs to a sphere of the not yet known, but in the sense that what is not known belongs to the measureless expanse of creation: therein lies the significance of the afterlife and the conversation in these tales.

This allows us to qualify the notion of the leap much more clearly (as well the “infection” of man that “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” mentions), which has nothing to do with the way that popular science describes its advance as in “leaps and bounds,” suggesting only a spatial, developmental relation. This notion of the leap in the introduction to Eureka, rather, develops

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 4, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 205.

through the notion of language between two speakers, as in the colloquies, in which there is no direct relation between speakers, which are sometimes close, but also infinitely separate, as I say above. To leap, therefore, is akin to speech here in that neither leaping nor speech are held back by a predetermined relation, or by a result, but play between firm ground (what Poe calls “knowledge” in these colloquies) and undefined space (the action of not knowing). The passage from “The Power of Words” that I discuss in Chapter 1 of this dissertation bears repeating here: Agathos, in speaking to another angel, Oinos, corrects Oinos about the relation between knowledge and happiness. Agathos declares that, “not in knowledge is happiness, but in the acquisition of knowledge! In forever knowing, we are forever blessed; but to know all, were the curse of a fiend.”⁵ To know all is a curse because, as I say in Chapter 1, it would end the possibility of passing through moments of not knowing; it would end, as it were, the possibility of the leap or of the exchange in the conversation as I describe it here.

This notion of the leap might also clarify the mention of “infection” in man in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” from which man needs to be saved. More specifically with regard to this infection, Monos mentions in the tale that “Art – the Arts – arose supreme, and, once enthroned, cast chains upon the intellect which had elevated them to power.”⁶ It seems, therefore, that man is in the strange position of having transformed the celebration of his own self-creation, art, into the means of his own enslavement. In this sense, the notion of art, of that which man creates, bears a relation to the importance and development of nihilism in Nietzsche. The nihilism to which I refer has to do with, first, the devaluation of God; in God’s absence, it

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Power of Words,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 5, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 139.

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 4, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 203.

becomes man's task to create the world and its meaning, which opens up boundless possibilities for man. The problem with nihilism, however, is that it "infects" other fields of meaning and activity: science, technology, art, and other human domains of activity – even in the face of the responsibility of creating the world – fail to open the world as possibility and move, instead, to dominate it. This is the case Heidegger makes in his reading of Nietzsche⁷, and in his analysis of the difference between the Greek terms "techne" and "poesis," as opposed to their modern counterpart, "technology."⁸ It is in this sense that we might understand Monos' lament in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," and in this sense, too, that we might begin to understand the project of Poe's Marginalia. Poe's attempts to publish, and to promote literature as an editor, ran up against, first, the "magazine prison house" that kept most writers in poverty, and the tendency of the magazine and newspaper press to safeguard an "eternal" image of man (naturalized man, moral man, etc, as well as the eternal present of plagiarism I describe in my first chapter, "Plagiarism and the Raven's 'Nevermore'"), which would chain him to the present and not allow the jump, the leap, that would be the sign of self-creation.

Despite all of this, Poe saw much potential in the magazine and journal, and was committed to using these media to institute an independent criticism, and support literature in the US. Many of his goals for the magazine corresponded to the early purposes of the newspapers, which often had as their goal the circulation of unofficial knowledge as a challenge to statist and religious power. An example of this occurs in 18th century France, when numerous printers were

⁷ See Martin Heidegger, What is Called Thinking? (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). In this lecture series, Heidegger discusses Nietzsche's statement about what is most thought provoking in our own time is that we are still not thinking, and that man embraces only the platitudes of his existence after the death of God.

⁸ I am referring to Heidegger's famous analysis of techne in which he compares the thought of techne as someone standing by a river and hearing the river, to someone with the thought of technology standing by the same river hearing only "standing reserve."

driven into exile at the time of the Encyclopédie. These exiled printers helped publish newspapers to spread the ideas of radical thinkers, and to damage the authority of the king.⁹ In the US we see some counterparts to this example as early as 1721 in the form of the New England Courant, edited by James Franklin – Benjamin Franklin’s older brother. One of the goals of this paper, and of Benjamin Franklin’s contributions to it, was to establish a free press, independent of the state, church, and even the universities. These goals changed quickly, however, as the journals became a dominant source of transmission, and the masses were defined more clearly as the subject and target of this transmission, rather than the king, for instance. These organs of mass circulation became a timely and well-placed means of eradicating any alterity, rather than a means of engagement with official symbols of power. In the nineteenth century in the US, these organs of mass circulation became primarily concerned with time, such that their existence was no longer motivated by the creation of knowledge or opposition, but by the instantaneous mobilization of its resources to secure and report the present. The tools of the penny press to present news as quickly as possible – the “scoops” – included stopping the presses, and interrupting their own stories with updates in a single edition of a newspaper, to give the sense that events were instantly available to readership. This created a style of engagement with the world in which reporters were on constant standby, waiting passively for what they would report. This also brings up the relevance and importance of Hiedegger’s reading of Nietzsche again: the experience that each present moment passes quickly creates a “ressentiment” against this linear structure of temporal passing. The constant standby on which media outlets were placed focused on capturing the present, and made any deviations from the

⁹ See Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, The Coming of The Book: The Impact of Printing 1480-1800, eds. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton (London: NLB, 1976).

ordered and expected frightful; the entire real order was mobilized to react to them under a pervading mass hysteria, fear, anxiety and alarm.

This style of reportage was inimical to the notion of a passage through not knowing that I discuss above. In order to report the world instantaneously, the world must present as if it were self-given, so that any deviation from this “self-givenness” is already the mark of its own self-exclusion. By excluding the moment of not knowing, knowledge takes on the illusion of permanence, of its not having been constituted, and of its being eternally continuous with the world it would understand. For this reason, Poe published the Marginalia as a way of encountering the possibility of thinking this form differently, or as a way of finding a discontinuity within its insistence on instantaneous reportage. Poe writes the Marginalia from the library of a critic who publishes, in journals and magazines, the notes he has organized from his library. It is important, therefore, to reflect on Poe’s project in relation to the journals that he worked for, that he criticized, to better illustrate the direction of Poe’s criticism, and the importance of the Marginalia for thinking the problem of language in relation to these journals. It is important to point out, first, that Poe conceived of this project in the absence of a national culture; the US did not respond to traditional projects of national culture in which literature and language formed national citizens. The unifying tendencies of culture, instituted by the study of language, were absent in the US. Culture as that which permeates every aspect of life, as techniques and forms of understanding that situate citizens in relation to each other and their surroundings, did not exist pervasively in the US to establish a universality. The US at this moment was fragmented into states, local communities, and nationalities lifted from their native soil and transplanted to America.

Poe noticed, however, that in the US, many of these distinct communities, regardless of this distinction, articulated a larger assemblage. Instead of a universality exhibited by culture, and founded on studies and institutions of language, Poe noticed a homogenization of individuals in the US that occurred as a result of the temporal rhythms of the journal, which solidified the present, and the relationship between its attendant reality and the language meant to represent it. The organization that produces homogeneity in the American population, therefore, is temporal, and not merely the surveillance of territory by force. Poe's project, therefore, requires illustration of the linear chronology and solidification of the present that the journal institutes, rather than merely taking it as given or natural. To do this, Poe attempted to disclose the non-identity between language and "reality" in order to reveal an animation, characteristic of language, that did not respond to the temporality of the journal, and its ontological petrification of the present. Poe composed the Marginalia to achieve this; this chapter, therefore, will focus on Poe's Marginalia, which produced a complex of signification in confrontation with the imaginary institutions of time figured by the journals in which it appeared.

3.2 CRITICAL NOTES: FUTURES OF INFINITE ERROR

Poe achieved the requirements I refer to in the section above through the form of the Marginalia, which consist of notes that are mainly characterized by their unfinishedness, and insist on their utter uselessness, thereby refusing a totalizing image of the present that journalism might describe and name. Perhaps most importantly, the Marginalia occur at the margins of other texts, which breaks the seamlessness between language and reality by orienting language not to a real referent, but to other language. This language of criticism, oriented to other language, bears a

relation to the figure of the leap, which I have elaborated above through the conversations in the colloquies. The notes that comprise the Marginalia always begin in other texts, as if the notes themselves are in conversation with the texts that exist in the critic's library. More importantly, however, Poe describes a different figure of conversation that lies at the center of the organization of those notes: the critic announces, in the introductory installment of the Marginalia, that in the notes that follow, "we talk only to ourselves."¹⁰ What is interesting in this announcement is that the notes do not seek the mass audience that journals usually addressed. These notes, therefore, are not merely reports written by the journalist in passive wait for the events that he will deliver to the press. Further, the author of these notes who is talking only to himself, reads his notes after having forgotten them. This dimension that splits the author of the Marginalia into the writer and the reader as the two figures of conversation echoes the importance of the conversation as the figure of historical emergence. With this regard, Poe represents the action of speech through shifting possibilities in writing and reading, and orients the leap beyond the stories of simple development and universal reportage that dominated the newspaper press.

The first installment of the Marginalia, published in the November 1844 edition of the Democratic Review, begins this project quite forcefully. In this installment, Poe includes an entry about readership in which he discusses how the increase in the number of publications and of reading material affects reading. Poe attends in particular to the capacity for reading, and wonders what the limits are for erudition after such a vast increase in publication and explosion of disciplines and learning. He begins by noting: "I have seen many computations respecting the

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, Marginalia, in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 11, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 2. For the remainder of this chapter, I will cite the Marginalia parenthetically by its title.

greatest amount of erudition attainable by an individual in his life-time; but these computations are falsely based, and fall infinitely beneath the truth. It is true that, *in general*, we retain, we remember to available purpose, scarcely one-hundredth part of what we read; yet there *are* minds which not only retain *all* receipts, but keep them at compound interest forever” (Marginalia, 13). The language of economics and banking here indicates that reading obtains value in functional increments, proportional to time and measurable by amount. Further, it indicates a memory like a repository that “retains” to “available purpose,” and the best of which will “retain *all* receipts.”

Poe continues with the figure of banking, and tells us that “even physically considered, knowledge breeds knowledge, as gold gold; for he who reads really much, finds his capacity to read increase in geometrical ratio.” The reader who trudges through the vast reading material will eventually learn to move quickly, until “The *helluo librorum* will but glance at the page which detains the ordinary reader some minutes,” and the *helluo*, “will have winnowed the matter of which the *tyro* mumbled both the seeds and chaff.” Such speed and the ability to glance over pages of text characterizes a reader who has become perfectly accommodated to the urgent writing of the press: for this reader, reading becomes immediate consumption. The two figures here – of banking and of eating – designate an activity of readership that must process language for the sake of growth, in both organic and economic terms, and leave behind what is not usable: the “chaff.”

Poe ends the entry with the image of a future that illustrates how current computations of attainable erudition must be wrong, “falsely based”:

A deep-rooted and strictly continuous habit of reading will, with certain classes of intellect, result in an instinctive and seemingly magnetic appreciation of a thing written; and now the student reads by pages just as other men read by words. Long years to come, with a careful analysis of the mental process, may even render this species of appreciation a common thing. It may be taught in the schools of our descendents of the tenth or twentieth generation. It may become

the method of the mob of the eleventh or twenty-first. And should these matters come to pass – as they will – there will be in them no more legitimate cause for wonder than there is, to-day, in the marvel that, syllable by syllable, men comprehend what, letter by letter, I now trace upon this page. (Marginalia 13-14)

The passage suggests that the attainability of great erudition will pass through the possibility of reading syllable by syllable, word by word, to reading pages at a time. All of this seems to hinge, at first glance, on the notion that there is something substantive in reading, something to which reading yields access and remains with the reader – something beyond language, and for which it is the function of language to transmit. In the most perfect of circumstances, then, language would be transparent to the substantive meaning it is meant to transmit so that readers would not need to go syllable to syllable, or even page to page, to “reach” meaning. The readership Poe seems to describe here must find ways to reduce the resistance language puts up against the attainability of erudition. Language, in these formulations, seems to act as a burden, as an imperfect medium to what is really desired. Language, after all, leaves behind a chaff as the *helluo* and the *tyro* attempt to approach the “matter,” the real object of reading. What, then, are we to think of the “chaff” that remains after reading?

To think through these problems, it is important to mention again that this entry occurred in the first installment of the Marginalia where Poe included an introduction to these notes, and a short explanation of their project and purpose. “In getting my books,” Poe tells us, “I have always been solicitous of an ample margin [...] for the facility it affords me of penciling suggested thoughts” (Marginalia 1). Poe notes quickly, however, that,

This making of notes [...] is by no means the making of mere *memoranda* – a custom which has its disadvantages, beyond doubt. “*Ce que je mets sur papier,*” says Bernardin de St. Pierre, “*je remets de ma memoire et par consequence je l’oublie;*” – and, in fact, if you wish to forget anything upon the spot, make a note that this thing is to be remembered. (Marginalia 1)

Such a description for his marginal notes, in which the writer writes not for the sake of remembering, but under the assumption that he will likely forget what he has written, might strike an odd chord with the description of a memory as a repository that, in the best of cases, may hold “all receipts.” Further, if the purpose of reading is to “winnow the matter,” what purpose could the notes Poe includes in the margins of his books possibly serve? Poe mentions that he decided to publish his notes only after having reread them, and, having forgotten them, found them amusing; he states, further, that “I found myself at length forming a wish that it had been some other hand than my own which had so bedeviled the books, and fancying that, in such a case, I might have derived no inconsiderable pleasure from turning them over” (Marginalia 3). The relation that Poe describes here, between a writer who forgets what he has written, and that writer, in a future moment, reading over his work as if someone else had written it, troubles the simple notion that reading grants “access” to erudition. The fact that he wrote notes not to remember what he had written, but for some indiscernable purpose (for “no” purpose, in fact), further obscures what the goal, the “matter,” of reading might be. Poe, as the reader of his own work, does not “hold” what he seems to suggest other readers can hold at compound interest. But, in any case, in forgetting his own writing, what has Poe failed to “hold”? The intent of the writing? The referent of his descriptions? Poe does not offer answers to these questions.

In fact, Poe’s imagery in the entry on reading leads to complications that the notion of banking cannot settle, especially when this image is placed beside the figure of consumption: an activity that leaves behind the “chaff” of language. Poe’s figures seem to organize reading along entirely predictable paths, but fail to reach the predictable outcome. The logic of regular and systematic growth implied by banking, as well as the notion of “computation,” stray away from an ordered, predictable course into the future and turn toward infinite error. These computations

are not only “falsely based,” but “fall infinitely beneath the truth.” Such a phrase indicates that we are either confronting an exaggeration for the sake of discrediting more conservative estimates of attainable erudition, or we are being asked to think a different relation to the truth of reading – one that has no “real” computation.

The notion of infinite error forces us to examine the latter possibility more carefully. Infinity of error steers us away from predictable computations to results that are infinitely far from the truth, and brings us from a clear course of temporality, where past, present and future align in a clear understandability through computations of interest, to uncharted, unforeseeable possibilities. The language of banking and economics introduces a logic of exchange, where an abstract notion of value – money – brings any and all objects into relation. This language of economics, this logic of exchange, doubles the value of exchange that journalistic writing gives language, where language can have meaning – value – only when it gives over the reality for which it is a sign. This sort of value for language, where language must say everything without being anything – like the abstraction of money – fails at approaching the truth. More, the figure of banking, and interest growth computed through the function of time as spatial coordinate, enters into a disorder that disables its ability to predict, or to chart future states from a present moment. Poe gives us a figure of computation that, on the one hand, leads to infinite failure: it cannot give us the “truth,” which takes on the meaning of a predictable outcome from present conditions. On the other hand, the sign of infinity points in another direction: to the temporal horizon of “forever,” where time has no definition or units, and therefore cannot be followed or charted. Poe’s entry here, in fact, asks for an order of temporality that is incompatible with the linearity of the journal, or with the simple notion of simultaneity that produces the value of exchange between reality and language.

In short, we cannot trust that we are thinking of actual computations that deal with “real” amounts in this entry, and we cannot assume a future bound to computations that would result in a traceable trajectory from initial conditions. Instead, it is the generation of error that is important, since the entry begins with terms of accuracy and calculation, yet leads to open possibilities that “computation” can neither track nor deliver through its formulations. The error of calculation dismisses the constraints of verifiability with an objective and stable reality, but also produces infinite possibility. Further, it does not situate the possibilities of reading with respect to a faculty of intellect, nor does it place a material determinism in reality or the “reading material” – the initial conditions for computations of interest. Instead, these figures produce the future through a radical discontinuity with the present that inherited knowledge, and the “presentness” of reality, cannot anticipate.

Embedded in the temporality of linear chronology – “Long years to come” and the assurance that the time will, without doubt, arrive – is a figure of relation that is not simply linear-chronological. Poe mentions this relation at the end of the entry on reading; this relation is the relation between the letters one writes and the syllables one reads: what I write “now,” letter by letter, will be read, syllable by syllable. At first glance, Poe meant this relation to embody the *tyro*, who could not attain great erudition because he simply took too long to read and fell behind the *helluo*. The relation between a writer who writes letters, and the reader that reads syllables, however, troubles the easy notion that the reader discovers in the reading a clear or stable meaning. This relation disconnects a linear continuity and the logic of simple exchange, especially since neither letters nor syllables are semantic units or signs. Words are the basic units that offer a concept or idea, and that hold semantic or symbolic value. But if the reader

reads syllable by syllable what the writer has written letter by letter, what is it that the reader reads? What is it that the writer has written?

Such minute attention to the language itself, to its material inscription and material characteristics, turns our attention to language before and beyond its reference to a “reality” it would tell, and enters into that reality itself. At such a moment there is no “exterior” to the language, nothing to “verify” it in terms of its exchange with something that it is not: a “real” object. This language, at the first moment of writing and reading, is empty of a referent, so that the writer and the reader must feel the material resistance of the language itself.¹¹ This language delivers a meaning, not in the sense of a communication of exchange, but in the sense of a communication of relation – material and contextual. In this resistance, in this experience of a language emptied of reference, we have an infinite possibility because exterior reference can no longer limit, measure or verify the word. At this moment, what is it that one reads?

The relation between what the writer has written and what the reader reads does not exist as a mere temporal relation because time is not a higher category here that explains or captures the relation. Further, time does not animate the reading, nor does it deliver, over time, the object to which the language of the text referred. The language itself decides the material relation, which through accidents and manipulations give language its complexity, allow it to enter into complexity, and form the then-there of the reader. Poe attends to the materiality of language so that we don’t exclude it from reality as the sign that refers – as that which is not included within

¹¹ We might also understand this “resistance” in relation to Poe’s emphasis on the sound and rhythm of poetry over its conceptual or symbolic content, which he works out in some of his better-known critical essays such as “The Philosophy of Composition.” The musical qualities of poetry, although they could be measured mathematically, produce indefinite effects that suggest heavenly or otherworldly delights. Such emphasis on sound and rhythm led Emerson to disparagingly call Poe “the jingle man.”

the sphere of referentiality – but as a material that both affects its surroundings, and whose surroundings, in turn, also affect it through language’s capability to enter into complexity. The material contexts and conditions in which a reader confronts language decide this complexity.

Poe pays particularly close attention to the materiality of language, but also to the material modes of transmission in which readers encounter language, in particular to the fact that students now read by pages as other men by words. What is important in this entry is that Poe ignores the verifiability of language through reality and instead focuses on readers. The purpose of this entry is not to find a referent for what the writer writes, but for language to find a reader – one who reads either syllable by syllable, or page by page. In any case, the reader is not a guarantee of language’s status as a placeholder for the referent. The act of reading, confrontation with language, does not ensure referentiality. The technique that students are now perfecting may become the method of the mob of the future, a matter that is sure to come to pass, and which indicates a change in the material context by which language is communicated to the reader. We move from reading the “syllable,” constitutive of words, which we have come to think as the element of meaning, to reading the page, which indicates a particular form for the word, printed by the machines of the printing press and transmitted by the temporal operators of the journals. The page frames the word, and announces a particular mode of transmission for it, a particular context for its material inscription and communication. The modes of its transmission establish how readers understand language, how they will come into relation with it, and this understanding and relation to its mode of production and transmission is taken for granted: “there will be in them no more legitimate cause for wonder” at how one reads. The readership that reads pages rather than syllables or words is a readership that belongs to the emergence of the journal, which reads pages at the rate that the newspapers produce them. It is a readership that

may not have the “time” to reflect on the world, and is therefore excluded from its constant constitution.

Poe refers to this danger almost in passing: he notes how we do not have legitimate cause for wonder today that a reader may comprehend, syllable by syllable, what he writes now, letter by letter. This loss of wonder over students reading by pages will come to pass as soon as reading by pages becomes common habit: the method of the mob. The insinuation, of course, is that Poe can still wonder, at his moment, that a reader can read page by page what he writes letter by letter. The notion of wonder is important: it signals awe, surprise, and perhaps even confusion. The moment of wonder is a moment that is not expected: the infinite error in our computation. A moment of wonder illustrates the moment that a rational system, through “computation,” cannot verify its relation to reality, and suggests that the possibility to articulate the present might occur only through a radical discontinuity with the past that we might describe as creation. In such a moment of radical discontinuity, the standards for judgment that had been available to describe and reflect on the world are suddenly inadequate and require a redistribution and reevaluation. The inability to wonder, therefore, signals a danger in which the instantaneous actualization assumed of reportage reduces the world to a self-evidence that eradicates any articulation of alterity. The moment for wonder, its possibility, closes more and more quickly: how can one wonder about time when even wondering about time is rushed, hurried, by the urgency of news?

With this respect, an important figure of reading appears here: the reader is a figure of a present that may have no past, even though he reads what Poe’s critic has written letter by letter for him. This reader may have no past if the moment of reading produces wonder, or an infinite error in computation, which Poe could not account for in his entry on reading. The action of

reading itself resists any attempt for representation, has no “accurate” or “inaccurate” standing, and figures only as possibility. In the notes Poe adds to a text – motivated by a reading that cannot be present to us (the activity itself cannot be present or represented) – the writing, letter by letter, does not deliver the presence of the moment of inscription: “something” to memorize. In the infinite error of computation, the reading does not offer economic or organic growth, but emergence of the unexpected – creation. The marginal note itself that arose from Poe’s own reading in his library stands for such creation: the activity of criticism is therefore tied to such emergence.

3.3 THE MARGINALIA AND ITS PENDING THOUGHT

Critics that study Poe’s Marginalia are quick to point out that most marginalia are compiled by scholars who study an author’s work, and are published posthumously by such scholars as appendages to the primary texts they study. Marginalia are generally not considered a separate publication; they are, rather, supplements that serve to follow an author’s thinking and work as he prepared a text for publication. This is the reason that critics that work on Poe’s Marginalia show some surprise at his obsession with them, and with the fact that Poe prepared them for publication in journals, and planned to assemble them into a book. Such an odd use of marginalia, that they should comprise an independent volume of work, prompts Stephen Rachman to claim that Poe’s decision to publish his marginalia “remains one of the more

singular enterprises in literary annals.”¹² Numerous explanations serve to manage such surprise, however, among them the notion that Poe published what he could, or whatever he might have at hand, for whatever wages he might acquire.

We know from the work of numerous critics, however, that these marginal notes probably did not exist in Poe’s library.¹³ A number of critics note, for example, that Poe’s library – which he describes in mock humility in the introduction to the Marginalia as “not a little recherche” – was actually quite small. We know, also, from Poe’s letters, that because of his pecuniary situation and frequent relocations, he read what he could from borrowed material. We also know that Poe sold many of the books he acquired as an editor for extra money, and never amassed anything approaching a large collection. Further, a number of critics have noted that the system for assembling and taking marginal notes that Poe describes for the Marginalia is not an accurate depiction of the way Poe actually took notes. These gestures suggest that the Marginalia are a performance, which means we should not read them as mere appendages to Poe’s criticism that he published opportunistically, but as a work of art. I suggest this in objection to the notion that Poe published the Marginalia for the immediate benefit of acquiring payment, but especially in opposition to critics like Robert D. Jacobs, who refer to the Marginalia only as an aid to explicate statements that appear in Poe’s criticism, assuming that the Marginalia are a forum in which Poe, finally, spoke genuinely and straightforwardly about what he really believed. To suggest that such communication is possible, and that Poe desired it, is part and parcel of programs of literacy that I describe above as related to figures of banking,

¹² Steven Rachman, “Es lasst sich nicht schreiben”: Plagiarism and ‘The Man of the Crowd’” in The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, eds Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 60.

¹³ Importantly, Thomas Ollive Mabbott, Poe’s bibliographer, notes this after careful examination of Poe’s work and publications.

which Poe overturns. To assume such communication as the goal of the Marginalia is to treat Poe's criticism and fiction as obscure or cryptographic texts that could be made to deliver their meaning with more precision and clarity than they do. To read the Marginalia this way is to ignore it as a work of the imagination that may institute new thought.

In the opening entry of the Marginalia, Poe explains the purpose of the entries that follow in ways that avoid reducing the entries to projects with anticipated outcomes. He tells us that, "the purely marginal jottings, done with no eye to the Memorandum Book, have a distinct complexion, and not only a distinct purpose, but none at all" (Marginalia, 1). There is no purpose at all, then, for writing the marginal notes, especially not to remember something of the texts the critic reads. The occasion for reading in his library, and writing, is not to remember so much as it is to forget: in writing in the margins of other texts, the critic frees these texts from voluntary recoverability in memory. The act of writing in the margins of other texts, of bringing language to other language, releases language from a verifiable or practical use and gives it, instead, the character of creation. Criticism in the Marginalia, therefore, serves to engender the possibility of separation from the self-evident standing of reality in language, to a passage into a moment of "not knowing" where a voluntary exercise of memory will not serve to accommodate what one reads.

If the original text is an occasion to forget, to not know, then the marginal notes themselves intensify this experience. Poe employs "marginal" comments as the form of this criticism because the defining characteristic of the Marginalia is the unfinished nature of the notes. A marginal note, usually, is the intermediary between the text the critic reads and the criticism he produces. In this case, however, it is the intermediary that Poe publishes, and not the "final" product (in fact, there can be no "final" product since Poe refuses a purpose for the

notes). This intermediate state signals a moment of separation, in which the future figures as a pending possibility, which may relate to what might not yet be known – where the future’s horizon is always otherness – and move away from the presumption that communication might always deliver what is to be known because its horizon is stability. A thought that arises in a moment, that belongs to a moment, might not have a clear connection to that which precedes it; its determination passes through a moment of “not knowing” in which its becoming is neither temporal nor reducible to a pre-existing, clear order of knowledge. The fact that marginalia are, by definition, intermediate and therefore unfinished, denies them the stability of things, or objects. Their unfinished nature, and character as non-objects, gives them the sense of an ongoing project, one that need not necessarily end, and one that is not bound to a predictable course. This characteristic of the marginal note gives criticism the figure of an immanent possibility.

Such possibility is the foundation of the Marginalia, but the event of their composition is neither haphazard nor careless. The critic describes the marginal notes as “hav[ing] a rank somewhat above the chance and desultory comments of literary chit-chat – for these latter are not unfrequently ‘talk for talk’s sake.’” The marginal notes, rather, are “deliberately pencilled” only at the moment in which “the mind of the reader wishes to unburden itself of a *thought* [that] however flippant, however silly, however trivial [is] still a thought indeed, not merely a thing that might have been a thought in time, and under more favorable circumstances” (Marginalia , 2). These thoughts are thoughts “indeed,” not that which would be “merely a thing,” which is not a thought “indeed,” but, rather, a “thought in time.” A thought in time can be “merely a thing,” or an object that one can exchange in a simple and discrete act. Literary chit-chat is such

a “thing”: it occurs hurriedly, in an off-handed way, much like the press of the penny papers reported its news.

A thought “indeed” is not “in time” because, first, such a thought does not respond to the urgencies of clear verifiability, and, secondly, the thought may have no relation to past thoughts, or future thoughts through clear chronology: it does not occur “in time.” A thought “indeed” stands alone at a certain moment, and may have connections to other moments only in a moment of arrest. The figure of the reader, who may read by syllables, words or pages, embodies such arrest since the relation between such a reader, in the future, and language, may lead to wonder – the unexpected. The emergence of wonder signals a moment of arrest because the newspaper, and the habits of reading it produces, do not anticipate such moments. In fact, the possibility of wonder occurs by disengaging from a hurried and readily transmittable reality to the discovery that language, in its participation in reality, did not deliver what a speedy press expected it to deliver. Poe’s criticism sought to produce a separation with inherited thought in order to reflect on the representational ideas that direct our interactions with the world, and, in doing so, inaugurate a critical investiture that begins with a moment of wonder, of not knowing.

Thoughts “in time,” however, always threaten the emergence of a thought “indeed” – in action. A thought “in time” seems to respond to a project – its character is one of applicability to service. We know this because the critic explicitly states that the hallmark of the marginal comment is its utter uselessness: “It may be as well to observe, however, that just as the goodness of your true pun is in the direct ratio of its intolerability, so is nonsense the essential sense of the Marginal note” (*Marginalia*, 3). I read “nonsense” here as uselessness since “nonsense” denies application to an appointed, clear course. To have a thought “in time” rather than “indeed,” therefore, means to subordinate the thought to a course established in time, to a

clarity obtained through a pre-condition of field or requisite of order – in this case to the established order of linear chronology. In such an order, the moment cannot stand alone, as in leisure, but must draw its meaning from a clear application to service. The act of thinking “in time,” therefore, means that present activity must take its direction from a clear goal located in the future: usefulness establishes the pragmatic clarity that subordinates present moments, and our activity “in” them, to that which one anticipates in future goals. Such moments operate by denying the present and its possibilities in favor of what is already known, and what can be anticipated. It is this continuity that gives the sense of time as linear relation, and which, if it is to be understood in its clearly appointed course, must ignore nonsensical deviations.

The Marginalia therefore, seek a moment of separation, of discontinuity from dominant, linear-chronological models of time that can invest the critical work with the possibility of emergence and creativity rather than continuity with already existing forms. The man of leisure spends his time among a vast collection of books, without thinking about wages (what his writing might be worth compared to other writing and other objects) and without urgency to publish or speak. He may think about the literary cliques that influenced the publication of American literature at that moment, about an emergent national literature, about an international copyright law, or any number of topics of his day, but these topics themselves are not the objects that form or guide criticism: they are not the goal for his thinking. The critic of the Marginalia, at leisure in his library, peruses the topics and debates of his age, but as if he were untouched by them. Of course, the critic is, in fact, “touched” by these topics: they constitute the historical protocols and knowledges that give form to his thinking, but without subordinating his thinking to these knowledges. While the critic is at leisure, his thinking exists as a unique moment in the possibility of criticism. Criticism becomes the possibility of separating from the terms and

descriptions of the world in order to judge whether these terms are adequate to it. Such a separation entails a moment of “not knowing,” a moment in which one can reflect on knowledge rather than merely using it or preserving it. The Marginalia, therefore, is not in-line with expectation or “literacy.” In fact, the marginal comments of the Marginalia appear in stark contrast to the dated materials of the journal: there are no temporal connections or markers between the entries in the Marginalia – nothing, in fact, to introduce them. They appear only as a new thought, emerging without connection to temporal rhythms or dates.

Most importantly, however, they appear as criticism in the margins of other books. The margins are small, and don’t leave much room: they are at the limits of the seemingly unlimited world of print, which also doesn’t leave much “room” to speak. The critic notes, though, that “The circumscription of space [...] in these pencillings has in it something more of advantage than of inconvenience” because it forces the court, the well-placed, and yet unhurried confrontation with the “chit-chat” of the age. Still, such a style is too close to the style of journalism that insists on the condensed and easily transmittable statement of fact. The critic notes that

In the *marginalia*, too, we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly – boldly – originally – with *abandonnement* – without conceit – much after the fashion of Jeremy Taylor, and Sir Thomas Browne, and Sir William Temple, and the anatomical Burton, and that most logical analogist, Butler, and some other people of the old day, who were too full of their matter to have any room for their manner, which, being thus left out of question, was a capital manner indeed, – a model of manners, with a richly marginalic air. (2)

The Marginalia, therefore, present an advantage, but also a limit. Like “some other people of the old day,” the page fills up with such matter that it does not allow “manner.” The spaces left by the frame of the page, which is the frame of delivery for the press, fills the page almost too full of substance; it is a space too occupied with substance to have place for a style, a mode, or a

technique since the urgency of reportage assumes its single method stands for everything (and is therefore no method at all). The critic, like some of the figures he mentions in this passage, struggles for his existence against the institution that allowed him to exist in the first place. He must publish in the press, but he must confront the press as he publishes; the press is at once the mode that threatens to silence him, but also the temporal measure for which he seeks figuration.

This difficult situation places the critic at the limits of what might be said. As the press fills up the pages it publishes almost to the limit of their space, the critic must now write in “no” space at all. It is almost as if the diminished room on the page coincides with the diminished power of language, where speedy journalism understands language to have already said everything. The notion of the creative takes on life only if it can say something that is not already present in the reality that fills up the pages of the press and suffocates language. Creativity, therefore, is not a latent energy hidden in language, but exists as a pending possibility for a future reader that can either occur, or not. The figure of the reader in the Marginalia is a figure of such pending possibility – it is a figure of relation where the unfinished notes will either find a future by articulating a separation from the past, or where the inherited thought of the past will decide even future confrontations. Future time, with respect to creation, is an activity in which readers must participate, rather than existing as a passive experience – such as linear-chronology – in which we are subsumed. The pending future of the Marginalia, therefore, exists in action, in discontinuity, and is pending because it figures only as possibility that may not occur at all.

Further, it is language itself, in its material context, that allows for this possibility. The notes, written without a purpose, without the project of accuracy motivated by reality, and without seeking the “object” of language for which the *helluo* reads, maintain a difference, a

discontinuity, with the original text from which they arise. This difference, this discontinuity, and the unfinishedness of the notes, forces open the closed circuit between reality and its representation in language so that the future, and time itself, can come under question. It is important to note, therefore, that the future reader of the Marginalia cannot be a private individual to whom this discontinuity is revealed because this discontinuity cannot be possessed by knowledge; the Marginalia, rather, figures the reader as the culmination of the action of reading who will either articulate a future or will fail to do so based only on the difference, on the immanent articulation of discontinuity, that is the character of language itself.

Poe tried to produce in the Marginalia a writing that could confront the journalistic press as a writing that had no time or place, that arose in the study or the library, so that language itself, and not what it meant to represent as reality, would become reality itself for the reader. The material conditions in which readers encounter language either increase the possibilities for creation, or reduce them. Such a reflection on language, in its careful relationship to the labor of criticism and art, might increase these possibilities against the dangers of a stagnant journalism. The figure of a reader, therefore, is a figure of a future that does not exist merely as spatial chronology; history, rather than a story of the sum total of events in society, exists here as the possibility for change. The study of history, or of literary history, cannot be the study of localized objects that answer to the special conditions of science. History, instead, “sees” objects emerge only over periods of human activity that create them out of their social, political, and material contexts. This leads us to the notion that the social is what is creative, and not isolated individuals. Because the thought of literature, and of Poe’s criticism, is pending on the activity of readers, because the critic writes now what will be read later in a new way – perhaps in

wonder – we participate in the continual emergence of the creative in human activities in which time figures as the actualization of this emergence in future readers.

4.0 PROBLEMS OF PLOT: THE “CORRENTE CALAMO” AND THE MAN OF LEISURE

4.1 POE’S FORMALISM

Poe’s work as an editor began, although unofficially and sporadically, in the Fall of 1835 for Thomas Willis White’s Southern Literary Messenger. After a few months of submitting some reviews and short fiction for the Messenger, White officially announced in the December 1835 issue that Poe would assist the proprietor of the paper in organizing and publishing the material that would belong to the intellectual department. Although White did not specifically name Poe as the editor – perhaps because he never completely trusted Poe’s judgment or his determination to avoid drinking – Poe did indeed become, for all intents and purposes, editor and primary contributor to the intellectual department of the Messenger. His appointment produced immediate results, and the intellectual department began to publish more reviews and criticism than it ever had before Poe’s arrival. It did not take Poe long after claiming his position in the “intellectual department” of the Messenger to produce the kind of criticism for which numerous journals across the US would label him a “tomahawk critic,” and for which he would become notorious. The December issue of the Messenger, Poe’s first as a full time editor, contained a review of the novel Norman Leslie, which was so aggressive and harsh in its attack of the novel, that it garnered national attention for White’s relatively small Southern periodical.

What is interesting about this attack is that its brutality and aggression have two particular targets: Poe attacked the novel itself directly and at length, but the aggressive tone of the article was also meant to issue an oblique attack on the publishing industry, especially the New York clique, that had engaging in a long and successful campaign of promoting such a poor novel. The latter goal was achieved indirectly, through provocation, which caused a sensation and drew attention to Poe, to the Messenger, and to the values Poe wished to establish for American criticism and the publishing industry. Despite the indirect means by which Poe issued such an attack, however, much more attention has been paid to the reaction, to the stir it caused and to the reasons Poe wished to cause such a stir, than to Poe's discussion and analysis of the novel. The reason for this, largely, is that the novel has nothing serious in it, and the reaction Poe sought in publishing the rash review seems a more important and serious goal than the discussion of the novel. Further, the formalist terms that Poe uses to discuss the novel seem to address universal values that transcend time and place. The long tradition of Poe scholarship that places him within romantic trends, and characterizes his "exotic" fiction as a withdrawal from his moment, is deeply associated with these formalist terms and the universal, trans-historical standing critics assume they seek. In fact, Shawn Rosenheim and Steven Rachman argue, in the recent anthology entitled The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, that these kind of formalist terms in Poe's criticism, as well as the characterization of his fiction as a "romantic withdrawal" from his surroundings, have encouraged critics either to ignore Poe when thinking about literature in a cultural context, or to place him within traditions that are avowedly "timeless," such as psychoanalysis.¹

¹ See the introduction to The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe, eds. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).

Attending to the reactions caused by Poe's essay places his work in an easy relation to the publishing industry, and traces a trajectory for Poe's reviews and criticism through the social and intellectual influence of his day. On the one hand, this early review has allowed critics to track the influence of British periodicals on Poe.² Even more importantly, however, when critics have tried to think of Poe's relationship to the publishing industry of the early 19th century rather than his supposed attempts to withdraw from it, two general theses arise: on the one hand, critics place Poe very close to the influence of the capitalist press and "mass culture." Terence Whalen notes that the harshness Poe exhibited in his reviews shows more than just the influence of British periodicals on Poe; Whalen notes that Poe's desire to be noticed, as well as his willingness to shock with harshness in his criticism and gruesome themes in his fiction, illustrates a particularly keen flair for the workings of the emergent capitalist print industry, for which Poe showed a "willingness to adopt a calculating, aggressive stance toward literature and toward the mass audience whose "taste" would henceforth be measured by gross acts of purchase."³

Whalen argues that Poe composed his literature for consumption by a mass audience, and makes of Poe's writing nothing more than a wholesale capitulation to market trends, for which the ultimate consequence is the uncontrolled explosion of information. Whalen's thesis bears close association with work on the history of the book, as well as the criticism that discusses Poe

² See Michael L. Allen, Poe and the British Magazine Tradition (New York: Oxford UP, 1969). These comparisons, however, are echoed elsewhere as well. The harshness of the review recalls Christopher North and other famous British reviewers and critics of the time.

³ Terence Whalen, "Poe and the American Publishing Industry," in A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe, ed. Gerald J. Kennedy (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 69.

as coincident with the development of “mass culture”⁴ as it marks the emergence of the capitalist print industry as the central formation for understanding Poe’s work. This work, however, ignores not only the value Poe wished to give literature over and above its salability on the market, but, more importantly, it ignores the protracted reflections on creation and originality that consumed Poe throughout his life. It is quite clear from Poe’s criticism and letters that he saw literature as much more than a means of livelihood (although the payment a writer receives for his work cannot be ignored), or as a servile tool of industry. Poe, in fact, was very critical of the literature and the publishing business that dominated his moment, and was interested in possibilities for literature beyond the journalistic, and beyond the pressures that an urgency for reportage and mass circulation would put on imaginative literature. Under these pressures, and in proximity to the urgency of mass print and reportage, literature loses its ability to formulate the world when it can only borrow from what is quickly reproduced and reiterated. Under such conditions, as I argue in the previous chapter of this dissertation, literature cannot pass through a moment of not knowing that may stand apart from the world.

Robert Jacobs’ work on Poe’s criticism exemplifies the second of the two theses I mention above; rather than dismissing Poe’s formalist criticism as part and parcel of a

⁴ See, for instance, Jonathan Elmer, Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995). In this book, Elmer works closely on the figure of the masses, and its relation to “the people,” to illustrate how the latter emerges as a figure, and how it fails to represent a “real” body. This failure is important for Elmer because it produces an ambivalence on the part of individuals who are at once “I,” and also “we, the people.” Where the figure of the sovereign represented a transcendent position beyond the people, the figure of the people as sovereign integrates sovereignty with the masses. In this dissertation, and this chapter in particular, however, I describe the US as a mechanical homogeneity in which such an integration is ultimately untenable; further, Poe’s literature never refers to such an integration or imagination of a people. Poe’s stories, especially “The Man of the Crowd,” always refer to the masses as a “crowd,” or a “mob.” The crowd is not a people – no matter what it undergoes – because the crowd does not tend toward community, especially under the temporal entrainment I will describe below.

disengagement or abstraction, Jacobs understands Poe's description of "universal" principals in his criticism as an attempt to formulate the workings of a "naturalized" psychology. Rather than a capitulation to the trends offered by the rapid increase in the circulation of magazines, Jacobs claims that Poe's aim for journalism and art under the conditions of a mass circulation was to produce a literature that would appeal to the new mass readership insofar as it obeyed the "natural" laws of psychology, and could therefore affect the mass readership as a whole. This is an important point to make with respect to Poe's criticism, especially in light of Poe's well-documented interest in phrenology, which he discussed in earlier work as a materialist psychology that could scientifically demonstrate the presence and activity of certain faculties of intellect. Poe's interest in the faculties of mind he discusses elsewhere might well have arisen, as Robert Jacobs argues, from the influence of the Scottish common sense school. Descriptions of these "faculties" by the Scottish school – especially Lord Kames – were influential in the American Enlightenment, and it seems likely that Poe would have become familiar with this school of thought during his time at the University of Virginia. These faculties included descriptions of cognitive functions that purported to establish common elements of consciousness, elements that attested to a hard-wired sensorial apparatus for the immediate apperception of reality. Poe sometimes followed the common sense school to establish the rational illustration of these common principals of sensory apperception – "faculties" of mind.

Identifying such terminology in Poe's criticism, however, is part and parcel of a larger tendency in Poe studies that note an increasing disposition in his criticism over the years toward rationality⁵ – very often absent, or explicitly challenged in his fiction – for the sake of explaining

⁵ Robert Jacobs and Edd Winfield Parks note this tendency in Poe, and map his career as a critic as a clear development toward the refinement of this rational explanation of the creative process.

certain characteristics of the creative process. This has been useful for much recent scholarship in Poe that wishes to situate him as an American writer by demonstrating a lineage of influence that would tie him to his time and place. In order to “show” such a movement toward rationality, however, critics often explicitly announce that they must exclude Poe’s fiction from the study, and they often end up excluding half of his criticism as well. I want to suggest that, rather than a clear tendency toward rationality, Poe’s vacillation between rational explanations of sensory and intellectual functions – his study of the “faculties” of mind – and the wildly imaginative, represented the struggle Poe, himself, faced trying to reflect on creation in the radical sense, rather than creation merely as production, or as the trivially novel. The former discloses the limits of the rational because rationality cannot anticipate it; further, creation might lead to outcomes that a rational-logical understanding of linear-chronological models of history cannot predict. When Poe began with “faculties” of mind, therefore, and attempted to discuss the original and the creative in these terms, he discovered the possibility of a continually emergent otherness that these terms, finally, could not explain. In this sense, then, creation is the institution of new forms that previous knowledge cannot understand or anticipate, that may have no clear connection to past forms, and that emerge as discontinuous.

The problem with these two theses, then, is that they either imagine Poe as a mere effect of market pressures and social pre-determinants, or they continue a search for formalist trends in Poe’s writing that must ultimately disregard imaginative creation. A closer scrutiny of how Poe’s interest in seemingly formalist terms, especially plot, in conjunction with his work in journals shows, however, another possibility for these terms and their relation to the problems of writing in the mass circulation of print. Under the urgency of reporting news quickly, the ephemeral details of the empirical world could be repeated again and again until the publication

and circulation of print became seemingly autonomous. The journalists, the recorder keepers of the everyday, could not give order to this collection – in fact, this is where the individual mind, depicted as “talent” or “genius” loses any kind of relevance. Rather than a withdrawal or a complete capitulation, Poe’s interest in plot, and his interest in the figure of the solitary artist or in the man of leisure (which I will discuss below), are attempts to figure the urgency of the press and the incursion of its materials into inner life, and how this incursion increasingly dismissed the work of “genius” as irrelevant. This chapter will discuss Poe’s interest in plot as it arises in his confrontation with journalism, and how this notion of plot relates to his interest in solitary characters, especially with the man of leisure in the Marginalia.

4.2 THE “CORRENTE CALAMO” AND THE MEANING OF “PLOT”

The Norman Leslie affair represents a point of departure in the development of Poe’s critical career not because of the fame it acquired, but because this review begins to show how his questioning of art and literature was tied to the dominant forms of journalism and reportage, and the world these created. The full title of this novel reveals some of the possibilities of what it might have said about the literature of the magazine and newspaper presses in the US in the 1830s; in November, 1835, Harper and Brothers published the novel under the title Norman Leslie: A Tale of the Present Times. That this novel hoped to tell about the “present times” signals an important task for literature: that in a fallen world, men must create not only the world, but also its meaning. The novel, on its own, did not end up saying much; the novel, rather, existed as a reference to the newspaper press and to reportage, since its construction was heavily achieved in and through the newspaper press, but also because it reflected the practices

of the press. The newspapers – especially the Mirror in New York, for which the author, Theodore Sedgwick Fay, worked – produced the novel insofar as they announced what the novel was, and how the public was to read it ahead of its publication. If anything, then, the novel reflected this newspaper press and its politics, but, most importantly, the “present time” instituted by these journals.

When read this way, Poe’s insistence on plot as an essential characteristic for literature should neither surprise, nor bear claims of a relation to an a-historical formalism. What Poe began to work toward at this early point in his career was for a higher necessity for literature, one that would ultimately represent man in his ascendancy as self-creator. The important reason for this at Poe’s moment is that the press – even as it understood itself to function for promoting a national literature and for the circulation of literacy for large, although distinct, populations in the US – begins to work autonomously and entrenches the population instead of freeing it for new possibilities of creation. We see Poe reflect on this problem as he discusses how the urgencies of a speedy press begin to condition what is published and how it forms a readership. In two separate entries of the Marginalia, Poe reflects on the feeling of speed that characterizes his age. In both entries, he elaborates on this experience of speed through a discussion of journals, magazines, and journalism in general. The first of these entries occurs in the fourth installment of his ongoing project of composing his Marginalia, which he published in the September 1845 issue of Godey’s Lady’s Book. Here, Poe claims that the increase of magazine literature does not indicate a decline in American taste or letters, but indicates, rather, a new era in which “men are forced upon the curt, the condensed, the well-digested in place of the voluminous – in a word, upon journalism in lieu of dissertation.” Poe continues:

I will not be sure that men at present think more profoundly than half a century ago, but beyond question they think with more rapidity, with more

skill, with more tact, with more of method and less of excrescence in the thought. Besides all this, they have a vast increase in the thinking material; they have more facts, more to think about. For this reason, they are disposed to put the greatest amount of thought in the smallest compass and disperse it with the utmost attainable rapidity. Hence the journalism of the age; hence, in especial, magazines.⁶

Poe defended American taste against the widespread publications of magazines and journals to define his critical project more widely, which began with an attempt to characterize and illustrate the pressures that the press exerted on writing. It was important for Poe, therefore, to discount American taste, or private opinion, as the motor that drove the literary establishment, and produced the conditions of the age: for Poe, it is not taste, or a decline in taste, that produces literature. For this reason, Poe is careful to note in this passage that men themselves do not think more profoundly than they previously did, so that we are not to confuse the characteristics of his era as resulting from changes in a faculty of mind or consciousness. Instead, Poe makes it clear that the techniques of skill, method, etc, arise out of the “thinking material” itself, and the material conditions of its production and transmission. It was this “thinking material” – magazines, journals and journalism – and their temporal imperatives that produced the necessity for the methods of reading Poe mentions here.

A little over a year after the publication of the entry I quote from above, Poe would produce another entry where he continues to reflect on these problems, and, especially, on the requirements of the press. In this entry, published in the seventh installment of the Marginalia, he continues to develop his analysis of speed in journalism by describing more carefully the dispersion of the “greatest amount of thought in the utmost attainable rapidity.” Poe goes on to

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, Marginalia in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 11, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 82. I will cite this work parenthetically as Marginalia for the remainder of the chapter.

discuss the failure of the Quarterlies, which “have *never* been popular,” mostly because “Their issues [...] are at too long intervals; their subjects get cold before being served up. In a word, their ponderosity is quite out of keeping with the rush of the age.” This “rush” that Poe notes here corresponds to the experience that everything lived passes quickly; importantly, Poe qualifies this sense of speed, this experience of “rushing,” with a discussion of journals. Poe claims that “the greater portion of the newspaper press” has as “their sole legitimate object [...] the discussion of ephemeral matters in an ephemeral manner. Whatever talent may be brought to bear upon our daily journals, (and in many cases this talent is very great,) still the imperative necessity of catching, *currente calamo*, each topic as it flits before the eye of the public, must of course materially narrow the limits of their power” (Marginalia 117). The “*currente calamo*” of the passage is quite important: journalists, regardless of talent, were to catch, at the moment of their occurrence, topics and events without reflection. The result is a reportage that insists on being in the present, of making the present instantly available. The consequence is that “talent” does not matter; there is a general air of indifference to the work of “talent” such that it cannot confer a new necessity or order to the journals that are swept up in “the rush of the age.”

This indifference to talent is one of the major problems that guides Poe’s criticism, and which begins to take precedence in the early review of Norman Leslie. This notion of talent loses its force when its relations to “genius” so often lead scholars to align Poe with the Romantic tradition, and to characterize this reflection on indifference only as a lament for the misunderstood genius. The more important problem of indifference signals the rise of the press as autonomous, and bears the sign of its ascendancy over human action, even when it purports to report and discuss that action. What we begin to see inaugurated in the review of Norman Leslie, therefore, is a criticism that concentrates upon the concern for art’s own essence as man’s

self-creation (making man present to himself), which renders art present and essential, not as a useless activity or passion, but as an essential activity that builds and takes part in the overall work of humanity. This problem takes on force in Poe's confrontation with journalism, in which the sphere of activity circumscribed by journalism and the magazine press delivers "history" as a set of facts by the chroniclers of the everyday. In the reportage of journalism, history responds only to a chronological arrangement of the sum total of events in society. The journalist disappears in this reportage as if totally irrelevant to it: he cannot give what he reports a higher necessity, or an order or meaning. This is where, for Poe, the mind, depicted as "talent" or "genius," becomes indifferent.

This is also the reason that Poe condemned the plot of Norman Leslie, published as A Tale of the Present Times. Poe wrote for pages summarizing the plot and ridiculing it as he went along. Before getting into the plot, however, Poe notes that "In the preface, Mr. Fay informs us that the most important features of his story are founded on fact – and that he has availed himself of certain poetical licenses"⁷ to hide the personalities of his characters. Poe goes on to ridicule Fay for claiming that these "poetical licenses" that he has taken constitute transformations that amount to great art, and for comparing himself to Raphael, Mozart and Canova. The preposterous comparisons in the "preface," however, don't end there, and Poe continues: "[Fay] goes on to say something about a humble student, with a feeble hand, throwing groupings upon a canvass, and standing behind a curtain: and then, after perpetrating all of these impertinences, thinks it best 'frankly to bespeak the indulgence of the solemn and sapient critics.' Body of

⁷ Edgar Allan Poe. "Norman Leslie," in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 8, James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 52.

Bacchus! We, at least, are neither solemn nor sapient, and, therefore, do not feel ourselves to show him a shadow of mercy.”⁸

Although Norman Leslie had nothing serious in it, Poe took it seriously insofar as it proclaimed itself to be art and yet produced a “plot [that] is a monstrous piece of absurdity and incongruity.”⁹ Poe was serious in his treatment of this unserious novel insofar as it was symptomatic of a writing penetrated by a world of journalistic events collected by Fay without object, and presenting a view of life – of “the present times” – without, finally, any kind of higher necessity. For Poe, art could not stand justified if it existed only as chaos, especially when that chaos was meant to reflect the chaos of a “real” world created by the unlimited circulation of the press. The violation of literature by journalism, in which Fay lets the events that journalism records haphazardly invade and articulate his “plot” without order, makes the novel the a record of events – an intrusion of mechanically ordered, clock time into the novel – rather than making the novel an event or a creation of its own. This is a literature that does not participate in creating reality, but becomes passively articulated by the time of the journal. Poe’s insistence on the definition of plot, on its importance, derives from the need to make of literature something more than the passive activity of journalism.

Poe was dedicated to the project of defining plot as a necessary condition for literary creation for most of his career; however, around 1844, Poe’s experiences in journalism guided this project more directly toward the culmination that it would reach, finally, in Eureka. When Poe moved to New York and began work for Nathaniel Parker Willis’ Evening Mirror and Weekly Mirror, Poe experienced first hand the kind of work that belonged to what he describes

⁸ Poe, 52.

⁹ Poe, 60.

as “the greater portion of the newspaper press.” Unlike his previous work, his job at the Mirror was mostly mundane, ranging from the writing of short, anonymous announcements, to any trifle that the owners might need at a moment’s notice. During his time there, he witnessed the circulation of the Mirror grow to 10,000 subscribers. Increasingly, Poe noticed how the growth of magazines and journals often coincided with the style of the mechanical writing and reporting that he performed for the Mirror, and its tax on the “talent” that he wished to reflect on.

These trends in mechanical writing and reporting began to solidify saliently in the 1830s; where men of letters still edited the majority of periodicals up to this point, journalism and reportage increasingly dominated the style and content of magazines and newspapers. This was especially true of the New York Herald, run by James Gordon Bennet, which technically and stylistically became a precursor of more contemporary journalism. Bennet sent correspondents to Washington, and even managed to have reporters admitted to the House and Senate. To receive news quickly from his correspondents, he used the telegraph regularly, along with a variety of other techniques and technologies. Emphasis on speed and accuracy produced the kind of pressures on writing and style that burdened Poe at the Mirror: announcements and reports appeared quickly, and editors expected writers to condense statements for rapid transmission. This insistence on rapid transmission sought to close the gap between the occurrence of an event and the appearance of its report.

The latin phrase, “currente calamo,” that Poe mentions in his discussion of the “rush of the age” signals this perceived co-incidence between language and the reality it reports, especially as the temporal gap between an event and its representation in language collapses. The modifier, “currente,” indicates haste in a speedy, constant movement, as in a trot, gallop or flow. The “calamo” indicates a reed, or a cane, but also a reed pen, so that the phrase might be

taken to mean a hasty, flowing pen that proceeds in a steady, but swift and unhesitating rhythm. The flowing pen denotes a writing that cannot stop, and that must continue in order to confirm contemporaneity. The writing must be swift, urgent, so that it might achieve simultaneity with itself even as it writes, which is to say that it must occur simultaneously with reality, in which the writing not only refers to this reality, but becomes totally superimposable with it in its simultaneity. This writing is not a medium, or mediator, but an immediacy that engenders a total transparency of language with reality at the moment of its enunciation. Still, even as we understand language approaching its perfect use only as it closes the gap between event and representation, even as we might imagine this gap completely closed, the value of language becomes secondary to reality. In reportage, language only follows an animation that springs up from reality, and does not, itself, participate in it.

Further, this figure of the flowing or galloping pen indicates a writing that occurs in an offhanded way, as if it has nothing more to say than what it means to represent. If such writing must be simultaneous with the reality it is in, always referring to a reality that surrounds it, then it expels its own occurrence from that reality: as the galloping pen achieves simultaneity with the present, it excludes its own activity from what it represents. The galloping pen follows only the trail of a reality that empties language of reflection, granting it the value of a simple exchange between word and referent. This value for language in journalism might shed light on the indifference to “talent” I mentioned earlier, as well as a greater indifference to imaginative literature in general. Because reportage insists on being in the present, the present must be instantly available. This means one of two things: either the present is so instantly present that we are not in it for very long, or the present becomes eternalized because of its constant and instantaneous repetition. In either case, change either happens so fast that we cannot account for

it, or it ceases to happen altogether. Regardless, the galloping pen must continue ad infinitum, without reflecting on itself since there is no “time” for such reflection, and since language must preserve its representational status from one edition of a paper to the next. The indifference to imaginative literature, and to what Poe calls “talent,” is that these exist in a doubtful relation to the reality that the galloping pen wishes to “catch,” or, worse, writing that disguises itself as “imaginative” (read: Norman Leslie). In these formulations, imaginative literature becomes simply a lie, a triviality, because it does not respond to processes of verification required of a real referent. Further, writing becomes transparent to this object, and the work of “talent” is irrelevant when writing is to respond only to the exterior motivation of accurate representation. Finally, all of this suggests that the temporal mechanics of the journal constricts language insofar as it erodes the figural in language, and seemingly reduces it only to the possibility of saying something that is already present as a stable reality.

Fay’s novel fails to be art, and fails to imagine the world, because it offers only a sequence of “facts” – much like journalism might – in which nothing is justified, and in which man participates only passively. Poe’s formulation of a definition for “plot” begins to show that he deemed some kind of inner necessity as essential to the work of art; we can begin to see this in the following passage: “The word *plot*, as commonly accepted, conveys but an indefinite meaning. Most persons think of it as simple *complexity* [...] But the greatest involution of incident will not result in plot; which, properly defined, is *that in which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole.*”¹⁰ Poe published this passage in a review of Bulwer’s Night and Morning in 1841 in Graham’s. Where Poe only ridiculed Fay in his early review for the

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe. “Night and Morning,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 10, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 116-7.

Messenger, we begin to see here a definition of plot, and a real motivation that shows us that the confrontation with the New York clique that published and marketed Fay's novel was not an arbitrary bid for attention. In this more mature discussion of plot, we begin to see that Poe wanted to separate the popular notion of plot as linear arrangement, or "simple" complexity, from his understanding of it as order or necessity. The splitting that occurs in these two notions of plot render, also, two notions of history: one in which history appears as a disparate collection of facts (as in the press), and another in which history occurs as doing and making in the human realm of action.

This latter point becomes even clearer with respect to the opposition Poe makes, finally, in Eureka, between the plots of man and the plot of God. The doing and making of man, that I refer to above, takes precedence when the plots of man are divorced from the plot of God, which is the only perfect plot, but unattainable. In Poe's final discussion of plot, he describes the plot of God as beginning in the first thought – the thought of God is the thought that creates the universe. In Poe's story, once God has created, He does not remain a sentient being amidst creation, from which He might derive pleasure, and remain in relation to what He has created. God is neither an entity nor an agency in a particular place or time. Instead, God remains the figure of creation in Poe's story: the unattainable perfection for which man must aim in his own creations, a perfection he ultimately cannot attain if creation is to continue. If man's creation could attain the perfection of God, then creation would cease since the passage through not knowing that is so important for further creation would no longer be possible. God, therefore, represents the beginning and end point of history, and man – the plots of man – stand in Poe's story as the continuing possibility of history that open up the passage into moments of not knowing.

We might say, therefore, that it is to man's great advantage that he is not God. In Poe's story about plot – God's and man's – Poe tried to illustrate a creative doing and making in relation to God's creation. In this sense, human making has as its goal the bringing into being what nature, on its own, could not. In the unlimited circulation of the press, in which man created a temporality that was imposed universally, and therefore taken as natural, this figure is important to begin to reflect on the "currente calamo" as a figure of man's making. Importantly, therefore, the plots of man strip both God and nature as the primary and static values of history, and gives man the creative power of change, of creation, within the autonomous repetition of the press that reports a history that seems increasingly distant and removed.

4.3 TIME, LEISURE, AND THE FIGURE OF THE CRITIC

Poe's interest in terms that have come to bear a relation to formalism and a-historical criticism have often suggested that his engagement with the press tended toward withdrawal, especially from the influence of the masses, or, as Poe called them, the "mob." The first person narration in much of his short stories, in which the narrator tells of mental derangement, or of isolation in aristocratic homes, libraries and gardens, further emphasizes this characterization of Poe as an escape from his surroundings for the sake of a literature that would be free from the pressures of the press and, further, the mass audience that decided the salability of what was published. When Poe begins his Marginalia in the first person, therefore, critics have been quick to see this collection of notes as the products of a vain ego in a ploy for authority, refinement and distinction. This is the case Richard Gray makes by arguing that the introductory entry of the Marginalia is a performance in which Poe sought to imitate a Southern gentleman reading at

leisure in his study. Following Bourdieu, Richard Gray argues that such imitation aims to acquire “cultural capital” for the sake of upward mobility and social authority. Like Gray, Robert D. Jacobs and Louis D. Rubin argue that we can only make sense of Poe in light of his place within Southern society, and that the figure of the Southern gentleman of leisure is often at the center of his work.

It is important to note that the figure of the Southern man of leisure existed in the South as an oppositional figure to the industrialization of the North,¹¹ so these critics’ identification of Poe with the Southern man of leisure strongly suggests that Poe was an isolationist. The figure of the man of leisure took on value as a sign and symbol of the South, whose traditions Southerners often believed this figure, insofar as he existed in Southern society, could preserve so long as he could remain “untouched” by modernization. To this end, the Southern man of letters remained “amateur” in his literary career to resist the immorality of Northern letters, and to remain free from influences that threatened his community from the outside, as if his privacy, itself, was substantive of the South. This notion of the private individual, who hides away, is a conservative attempt to reject and resist changes for the sake of preserving the continuity of community. This private individual believes that by protecting the authenticity of his interiority – who he is privately – he can preserve a way of life in the face of the industrial, social, and political changes that were occurring everywhere around him.

¹¹ Thomas Willis White, as I will discuss below, used the myths surrounding this figure as an appeal to his region and its difference from the North. Later critics, especially Allen Tate, thought of the Southern plantation gentry as aristocratic in the old, European sense, which articulated the deep, social and political differences in the organization of the South with respect to the North. These differences, put in terms of aristocracy, allowed Tate to describe the means by which modernization destroyed Southern society.

It is no wonder, in light of this characterization of Poe, that Jacobs, as I mention in the previous chapter of this dissertation, took Poe literally in the Marginalia, assuming that Poe “was being sincere,”¹² writing as himself and to himself. It seems as though Jacobs assumes that Poe, at this stage in his career, abandons the editorial “we” that he uses in his criticism, for the first person singular, which Poe usually reserved for his fiction and poetry, in favor of a kind of private writing. In abandoning “we” for the “I” in this non-fictional space, Poe would have been effectively putting aside his criticism for a kind of documentary of his life, or for a kind of personal writing like a diary. In either case, these naïve assumptions raise striking questions: Who is this “I”? Does this “I” arise in Poe’s decision – wanting to confront the press and to provide a figure to reflect on its temporal rhythm – to retreat into a journalistic diary where he recorded the events of the day? What events did he wish to record? Finally, what does it say that critics, with Jacobs as the example, wish to make of the Marginalia a documentation of a life, the records of a life?

The reflections on plot that precede this section might lead us to some possible answers to these questions. First, Poe did not have any wish to retreat from the world as is suggested by the figure of isolation that he used in introducing his Marginalia. To the extent that he used the figure of the man of leisure, it is important to think of the internal relationship between this figure and Poe’s thought. Poe’s desire to reflect on and illuminate the urgency imposed by the temporality of the journal, and its linear structure, hinges around the figure of the man of leisure. The journal, in imagining a reality that it can deliver instantaneously, gives language the image of transcending that reality and of not participating in it. For this reason, the time of leisure is of central importance for Poe because this “time” discloses the discrepancy between reality and

¹² Robert D. Jacobs, Poe, Journalist & Critic (Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1969), 354.

language; further, “leisure,” which can be “slow” and empty of events, occurs in a “time” that journalism cannot report. The figure of the man of leisure, therefore, serves a particularly important task for Poe: it reveals the extent to which the temporality of the journal and its reportage are not excluded from the reality they tell, but pervade it, organize it, and articulate its possibilities.

The use of the “I” in the Marginalia, therefore, violates what journalism and even criticism wished to maintain as the separation between public and private life, especially in the South, as I mention above. The impersonal circulation and reach of the newspaper and magazine accentuates this separation, in which the “public” is never a face-to-face interaction, but becomes only a “common” time of a linear, shared temporality. The news, about which journalists were incapable of speaking in the first person, arises in the Marginalia in relation to a writing circulating everywhere (the numerous installments of the Marginalia Poe prepared from 1844 to 1848, in fact, were published in different journals and magazines), and that is tied to calendar time and referents; but we have another writing, one that wishes almost to exit this easy reference and recognizability, and says something, indicates something, to which it cannot merely point. This is the internal necessity of plot, which Poe achieves in the Marginalia through the temporality of leisure which makes writing sovereign, and an event in and of itself, as I will explain below.

Poe’s experience with the Southern man of leisure came mainly from his involvement with Southern literature during his work in the South, especially in Richmond working for Thomas Willis White at the Southern Literary Messenger. While working for White, Poe learned about the particular pressures on publishing, on soliciting publications, and on the pressure that regional magazines faced as their readership increased in number. Poe witnessed

how these journals and their rise in readership affected the production of imaginative literature; more, he reflected on the failure of criticism and literature at this moment to provide communities with ideal images by which they might think about themselves and their relation to the nation. Even when papers purported to represent a particular locale – or, better, embody their interests, customs and culture – these papers exhibited changes that came in from the outside of the locale, or that the centers of literary production could neither contain nor manage. Distinct communities began to lose the notion of local control, and even as this occurred, they lost the ability to retell the story of such a loss of control. Papers, when they could retell such stories, could only report them, explain them in social or economic terms, but could not create them, or manage them. This often led to the failure of numerous periodicals, especially in the South, where editors wished to use the journal and magazine as a means to produce distinctive regional literatures, or simply to promote the distinct literature they assumed was present, but left unpublished for lack of a local press. In the South, a number of magazines emerged with the goal of serving as a medium to publish such literature, although many perished because either the literature they hoped to publish did not exist, because the mechanics of the journal put pressures on its production, or both.

Thomas Willis White's Southern Literary Messenger is an interesting case of a Southern journal that managed to survive beyond its initial intention of becoming an organ of Southern literature. White, like other publishers, initially wished to use his publication to promote Southern letters, and appealed to the Southern chivalric myth to obtain contributions. In soliciting his readers for material, White acknowledged that men of letters in the South remained amateur, often for genteel and moral reasons, and that that they were too proud to convince the “professional” press in the North to print their work. He offered his Southern Literary

Messenger, based in Richmond, as a medium for these amateur poets to publish. The appeal to publish in a periodical, however, resulted incompatible with the literary conditions White assumed existed in the South, and that he hoped to promote. This incompatibility is precisely what William Gilmore Simms noticed after numerous attempts at starting a literary magazine; in 1842 he wrote, “[An editor’s] contributors – men, generally, in our country, devoted to other professions, – can only write for him at moments of leisure [...] He is necessarily compelled to wait upon them for their articles, which, good, bad or indifferent, he is compelled to publish. The constant drain upon himself, enfeebles his imagination and exhausts his intellect.”¹³ One’s “amateur” status, in many ways, comes by way of leisure, when the man of letters can think on his “own” time, a time that is not bound to publishing dates, the popular press, or the constant flux of news. A periodical, however, can hardly survive if it must wait for publications from amateur writers. On the other hand, soliciting work on a timely basis would change not only a contributor’s “amateur” status, but the “leisure” of the Southern man of letters: to publish in journals is to succumb to the journal’s temporality, its steady urgency for projects and news. An editor “waits” on men of leisure because editors are necessarily bound to the temporality of journals.

A journal’s potential for large distribution, and the availability of fresh material at frequent intervals, especially in the case of Southern journals, would become detrimental to the literature Southern editors hoped to promote. In binding the Southern man of letters to the temporality of the journal, the literature of the region could only become more similar to the conditions of the “professional” press. The conditions for literature produced by the size and

¹³ Quoted in Richard J. Calhoun, “Literary Magazines in the Old South” in The History of Southern Literature, eds. Louis Rubin et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985), 157.

speed of distribution were incommensurate with the literature the Southern Literary Messenger wished to promote and represent: this shows that journals produced an experience of temporality that affected the possibilities and organization of entire populations, and pronounced the demise of certain literary expressions coincidentally with their representation in journals. Journalism exists in a “time” that is incompatible with the “time” of leisure: the former seeks clarity through the instantaneous exchange between its forms and reality, while the latter does not have a clear connection to the time or world of news. When published in a journal, however, literature must answer to the external constraints of verifiability, and to the clarity and regularities of clocktime. The journal, therefore, was not a passive conveyor of stable information pertaining to a stable reality that was already present, but an operator that instituted temporal rhythms, which lead to a homogenization that exceeded local or regional control. In this sense, the “*currente calamo*” seemingly becomes automatic, and exceeds any attempts at manageability despite the fact that it is a figure that arises out of institutions of human labor.

Such homogenization occurs through the journal’s insistence on dates that binds it to an external time, the “common” time of the “*currente calamo*” (and imposes on it a linear chronology). A journal might publish book reviews, criticism, literature and journalism together in one edition,¹⁴ all of which it groups under the emblem of its title and the date. This group of work finds its cohesion under the emblem of the date through the spatial figure of time: the work becomes located in the sum total of events named coincidentally with the date. The common time of the date works in a sphere of reality in which the journal names what is present, only to signal

¹⁴ In fact, the Southern Literary Messenger did not perish as quickly as did other Southern journals for want of quality, literary contributions; its survival depended largely on abandoning its intent to concentrate mostly on belles lettres. To this end, the Southern Literary Messenger became more like its Northern counterparts in content as well: it published political, travel, and historical essays, as well as literary criticism, fiction and poetry.

the passing away of what is present in its next edition. The journal, then, produces an experience of temporality that registers an indubitable ontological state for each present moment in which objects and provinces of human activity exist seamlessly alongside each other until they pass into the nothingness of linear temporal pastness. Even as these activities or objects pass away, their simultaneous presence “in” a language that reports them gives them an equivalent ontological status, the image of recoverability as stable objects, and even their present recoverability through the logical-linear extension of cause and effect. Papers and journals, therefore, were incapable of reporting the changes that attended the change of reporting: language in the periodicals became incapable of figuring its own collapse for it was the figural itself that became increasingly impossible to reflect on.

In this sense, we might say that the journal produces a temporal entrainment, which institutes a behavioral regime in the nation at large. Although the nation was fragmented socially and culturally at this moment, we might say that the experience of temporality instituted by the organs of mass communication established a material and mechanical homogeneity. Because journals institute a temporal rhythm in which they name a reality that is present at a certain moment, the journal produces a temporal measure, and an experience of time, by which one might count or account for the passage of time. Such units, and their lived experience, are neither eternal nor universal, but are produced through interventions at critical points,¹⁵ which

¹⁵ I am thinking, in particular of Manuel DeLanda’s central term, “entrainment,” in War in the Age of Intelligent Machines, to describe these interventions and critical points. The intervention I refer to here involves the temporal rhythm of publication. What is of primary importance here is to note that material rhythms produce temporality, and that these material conditions extend to the possibilities of language. To be more clear: the emergence of a particular experience of time I discuss here does not so much institute new units of time, but gives these units more dominant force in the experience of time to the degree that they pervade and condition durations that were not necessarily commensurate with them. The temporal rhythm of the journal makes clock and

breaks with a previous organization and experience. Temporality, however, presents a particular difficulty: at the moment that such an organization of time emerges, it represents the past as coterminous with its present organization, and therefore must deny the break that caused it. The journal, therefore, produces an experience of time – an experience of how that which is present “in” time passes – but cannot necessarily define or describe how the journal itself produces and participates in the changes it has created. Further, because of the success of such organizations – their effectiveness for instituting regimes of behavior – we must conclude that there is no faculty of mind – no natural, hard-wired operation – that resists these material interventions, or remains untouched by them in some kind of naturalized readership or private interiority. Language does not deliver a reality to the senses, but this “delivery” itself has a history.

This is the temporality that Poe wished to confront, and to make intelligible for the sake of criticism, by illustrating that which is incompatible with it: the time of leisure. As a figure that forms in relation and response to the material conditions of its moment, the Southern gentleman gathers together the protocols by which Poe could think historically about change in and over time. More, it allows him to think “time” itself: the figure of the Southern man of letters brings into contrast the time of leisure with the linear-chronological figure of time. Poe, therefore, did not intend to use the Southern man of letters to configure a regional antagonism, although the figure is important as a connection to an organization of life that no longer exists; rather, he intended to use it as a figure that allowed him to think the problem of creation. The

calendar time dominant for even activities of thinking. More, the journal conditions how one experiences clocktime, especially with respect to the production of the creative arts, which it periodizes in each of its issues. At this moment, therefore, the image of a nation state or culture did not centralize the production of literature; instead, individual readers enter into organization when the temporal singularity occurs. The result is a versatile information flow from de-centered “sites” – publication centers – that reduce the possibility of creation as the emergence of other possibilities.

Southern man of letters is both a figure of the local that emerges out of local materials and activity, which the regional press seeks to promote, but also a figure of the past, that is no longer contemporaneous with the modes by which journals reach, and therefore form, the masses. This is an important condition: the journal wishes to give meaning and value to the local, what exists as regional, but destroys the contemporary validity and vitality of that form as it seeks to represent it as that which is present, and that which language might deliver as a stable object. The Southern man of letters, therefore, is a sign and symbol of the South, of its social and political organization, but also a mode that is incompatible with the new forms that seek to represent it as such. The representation of the man of leisure in the Marginalia, therefore, is not the representation of a “real” object that is present and verifiable: the figure of the man of leisure, when represented in the journals, destroys “leisure.” The figure of the man of leisure in Poe’s work, therefore, is not a representation in the sense of handing over a stable reality for verification, and does not have a clear connection to an object that exists in reality; rather it is a figure of intelligibility for a temporality that has no standing in the press of the “currente calamo.” It is important to stress that, for Poe, this figure does not serve a reactionary function that announces the recovery of a lost South, or of something from the past with which Poe wishes to identify or save. The Southern gentleman, rather, is a figure of incommensurability with the temporal forms of the journal, and provides a protocol by which Poe intended to make the temporal experience of the journal intelligible, and possible to reflect on.

The amateur writer’s “leisure,” therefore, is much more than just his free time from his livelihood, and it is much more than a desire to remain private. It designates a condition in which the writer is free from social and political projects and may, without hurry or urgency, reflect on nothing in particular. Social and political projects, or the pressures of reporting

quickly, are not the standards by which leisure can become knowable for a readership. Reflection on nothing in particular, during a temporality that has no clear connection to projects that might quantify it or produce an anticipated objective, perhaps, is what causes such difficulty for critics that cannot locate Poe “in his time”; time and leisure are not objects that a writer or a critic represent, and which, although they form in relation to social, technological and political conditions, emerge as figures that may have no real referent. To this end, the work produced during leisure has no connection to a literacy that wishes to report reality, or to deliver a message as one would deliver an object.

The figure of the man of leisure is central to Poe because without illustrating the discrepancy between language and reality, and without destroying the notion of “time” understood simply a succession of objects, criticism cannot reflect on the forms of the journal. To be able to write about the journal critically, it is necessary to write what previous knowledge will not appropriate, and what will not merely appear as coterminous with the forms of journalistic time. This is the task for the figure of the man of leisure in Poe’s Marginalia: in the midst of a language that responds everywhere to projects of clarity, and to computations in which the future arrives as predicted in simple stories of development, the man of leisure turns away from these predictable courses of charted time to a different exigency, one in which a reflection on nothing does not find representation in reportage or journalism and finds, rather, in the midst of this mechanical homogeneity, the advent of infinite improbability. The moment of leisure does not enter into reportage or journalism because these cannot represent it as continuous with everything that is already an object of knowledge. The time of leisure, therefore, is either “nothing,” or it is synonymous with creativity in which creativity, what emerges from creativity, is not coterminous with what preceded it: it is a time of passing into “not knowing.” In this

“time” of leisure, therefore, we have the notion of a temporality that corresponds to the emergence of discontinuity and otherness, rather than a temporality that serves only to relate past moments to the present and future through logical-linear arrangements that must exclude anything that these fields cannot arrange into order.

The man of letters that Poe uses as the critic of the Marginalia does not report the news, but neither does he withdraw from the world. The man of leisure illustrates the incursion of the mechanical time of the journal into his inner life, which means that he cannot simply withdraw from it. The time of leisure, however, affords a deliverance from the temporal continuum of the press, and the commonality of its calendar time. The temporality of leisure is embedded in the world, much like the temporality of the “currente calamo,” so, rather than a withdrawal, it affords another experience of stories, news, which can only happen when the “time” of the journal can be freed from its commonality. This is no withdrawal because the critic of the Marginalia does not offer only useless bits of private speculation, but an experience of the world as an arrest, in leisure. For Poe, “plot” was not a temporal problem (not necessarily the development of a story in linear-logical unfolding), but a problem of relation that attempted to achieve unity through deliverance from the common temporal continuum; leisure, rather than the time of a withdrawal, becomes a time incommensurate with “common” time.

For this reason, Breton saw Poe as a precursor of Surrealism. Some of the experiments of Surrealism confused the difference between narration and information; Poe experienced the “real” of the press, and related it in the Marginalia to the imagination of a critic that forgets what he writes as he writes it. This is the kind of writing that might be linked, too, to the automatic writing in which the Surrealists were so interested. The “currente calamo,” although it works mechanically, is not an automatic writing because it does not make language solitary and

sovereign, but always relates language back to referents and to calendar time. The man of leisure is much closer to this automatic writing in that he responds to the world in a way that what happens, what he writes about, happens pervasively and articulates him. This event, however, is not simply a private matter: what happens to the man of leisure, as his time of leisure faces the time of the press, cannot be described simply as an event that is happening to someone. The event, rather, in a leisure time that the critic does not remember, is an event he articulates only as an involuntary memory, in which the past is re-experienced anew.

5.0 DEATH AND EVIL AS AFFIRMATION IN POE'S ART

5.1 EVIL BEYOND CHOICE

I have been arguing in this dissertation that Poe's work for magazines, newspapers and journals placed him decidedly within the clear urgency of the goals of prosaic labor, which he understood as an operator that reduced art to the status of an instrument. This is one reason that Poe so often criticized didacticism as a goal of literature, or censured any attempts to elaborate moral understandings or principles as the task of criticism. In a clear attempt to refuse these instrumental understandings of literature, Poe wrote a number of stories that explored perversity as a fundamental element of human nature. Tales such as "The Black Cat," or "The Imp of the Perverse," foregrounded a strange impulse that would overtake narrators and push them to refuse rationality and even their own welfare. It is important to understand that Poe did not appropriate this impulse – despite the fact that I call it a "fundamental element of human nature" – as a faculty of mind in relation to other faculties; this impulse, rather, exists in man as an element of chance that Poe's stories can neither explain, account for, nor anticipate. Further, what Poe calls perversity exists as an impulse for destruction that would show that the real order of prosaic labor – its values, its major attitudes and its direction of activity – is unnecessary.

It is also necessary to clarify what I call "a clear attempt to refuse" the dominant attitude of prosaic labor in these stories. Although Poe chose not to follow the direction of labor in the

sense that he refused to subordinate his literature to predeterminants or real objects, this refusal also exceeded the ethical motivation of a choice. In making a choice, Poe would have only have been avoiding the established order, rather than creating something which could have taken its place. Although we cannot ignore the fact that Poe did, indeed, make a choice to refuse the clearly appointed labor that, for instance, his step-father wished for him to take part in, the possibilities inherent in his stories are not merely reactionary. For this reason, Poe's exploration of death and evil in his stories are attempts to reflect on the in the trenchability of operations of knowledge. One way of thinking this problem is to understand, for example, the possible to be anything that gives life: with this respect, any thinking that is thought about life becomes subordinate to it in the sense that it is the condition under which its thinking is possible. With this respect, the impossible is death; upon facing death violently one faces what was impossible to think under the conditions of life.

The task of this chapter, therefore, is to think about the work of art in relation to evil and death without qualifying this sense of evil as the dialectic with good that pushes history toward its terminus. Under the conditions of journalism that I have been describing, the possibilities of evil and death in Poe's fiction are ways by which he attempts to think the work as its own measure, rather than the measure of goals that have been set for it beforehand. In a world in which all activity is subordinate to the measure of efficiency, the place of literature and art seems to become attached to this process as well. This notion of evil shows us Poe's understanding of the work of art puts at stake: the freeing of life from its entrenchment in operations which would make it appear as an unfulfilled promise, always existing as what it is not now, but what it must become by submitting its present moment to projects of intelligibility and instrumentality. This

chapter, therefore, will concentrate on Poe's "The Oval Portrait," which attempts to think the possibilities of life in relation to evil and death.

5.2 THE LIFE AND DEATH OF "THE OVAL PORTRAIT"

Poe's "The Oval Portrait" appeared for the first time in the April 26th, 1845 edition of The Broadway Journal, and was a revision of what many scholars consider a less successful version, originally titled "Life in Death," which was published approximately 3 years earlier in Graham's. The critical interest in the "less-successful" "Life in Death" bears importance within Poe scholarship because critics take the history of the story, from its publication in 1842 to its revision as "The Oval Portrait," as an example of Poe's execution of "unity of effect." This compositional principle appears throughout Poe's criticism, and often holds as a central concept of artistic form that guided the production of Poe's fiction, and influenced how he understood literature. In tracing how Poe accomplished a "unity of effect" in his final version of this particular story, critics note that he eliminated some mistakes and lack of polish that weakened the original. But, most importantly, critics have noted that Poe accomplishes unity in the revision by eliminating passages about the narrator's state of mind (of his use of opium, in particular), and thereby brings the "central incident" of the tale more directly into focus, a move that equates unity to a focused centrality.

I am referring to Seymour Gross and Richard Dower's work on the revisions to "Life in Death" when citing a "central incident" in these tales. Gross and Dowell both concur in identifying the "central incident" of "The Oval Portrait" as the story of the portrait itself, that tells the relation between its subject and its artist. The story of the portrait is an account of how

the subject of the painting, who happened to be the painter's wife, died as she sat for the painter. Both tales introduce this story of the portrait with a first person narrative spoken by an injured man, who makes his way to an empty chateau to rest and heal. In this empty chateau, he discovers numerous artworks, but becomes mesmerized by the image in the oval portrait. After contemplating it for a long while – Poe reduces the four hours he spends looking at the painting in “Life in Death” to just one hour in “The Oval Portrait” – the narrator discovers a small book with the story of the painting. The text of this story – what Gross and Dowell call the “central incident” – concludes Poe's tale. In citing this story as the “central incident,” both of the articles I mention here address the importance of the introductory narrative only as a way of focusing attention on the story of the portrait. Gross, for instance, goes so far as to say that, in “Life in Death,” “the narrator's mind is irrelevant, for once the story of the painter and his wife begins to emerge, the narrator is forgotten.”¹ Dowell, in much the same vein, claims that “The basic weakness of ‘Life in Death’ is that ultimately [...] the opium [...] has [nothing] to do with the central incident of the story.”² Both critics agree that the story of the wounded narrator has nothing to do with the story of the oval portrait, and fail in thinking the relation between the two. This failure allows these critics to follow one section of the story with greater insistence, which produces the “centrality” they seek, while at the same time diminishes the experience of the work of art that animates the tale.

The insistence on a centrality by which to read both stories – and particularly “The Oval Portrait” – constricts the life of this story and obscures its historical significance, but this

¹ Seymour L. Gross, “Poe's Revision of ‘The Oval Portrait,’” Modern Language Notes, vol. 74, No. 1 (January, 1959): 17. For the remainder of this chapter, I will refer to this article parenthetically as “Gross.”

² Richard W. Dowell, “The Ironic History of Poe's ‘Life in Death’: A Literary Skeleton in the Closet,” American Literature, vol. 42 (January, 1971): 482.

obfuscation brings to bear another line of inquiry that is active in the story, especially in the wounded narrator's experience of the work of art. Inherent in this critical interest in "Life in Death" and "The Oval Portrait," there is a desire to turn "Life in Death" into an object, fixed as an antecedent to "The Oval Portrait," in order to place the life of Poe's writing into an historical framework organized around the principle of "unity of effect." These critics share in the desire of the story's narration by a wounded traveler to clearly understand art in a way to make it manageable, and to subordinate art into a lower activity on the level of platonic imitation, or of craftsmanship. The critical interest in these stories, therefore, repeat the legal problems of plagiarism in which the labor of an isolated intellect produces a story, and subsequently possesses what it produces. I argued in the first chapter of this dissertation that literature or art cannot grant an experience of community as long as they "belong" to the private mind, and that this particularization of the work as the sole province and possession of the private individual produced a present that could never begin anew. The history of "The Oval Portrait," in confluence with the critical reception that desires to locate unity as centrality, illustrates a related problem in which the work of art fails to begin anew in relation to the private author that possesses it, but also in the reduction of its existence to an object accommodated into a historical framework that gives the meaning of this object in advance as the product of labor time. Ultimately, however, these two stories refuse accommodation into such an historical framework because they resist the notion of possession or property in the act of creation. "The Oval Portrait," in fact, does not refer back to an antecedent, nor does it submit to easy manageability in some kind of "central incident," but, rather, opens the question about the limits of the work as a particularization by the author. This, perhaps, is not as clear in "Life in Death," but if we are to think of "The Oval Portrait" as a revision of this first tale, what becomes clear after a careful

reading of these two stories is that the revision that takes place cannot be reduced to a number of compositional decisions applied to a central incident. The “effect” of “Life in Death,” held by critics as the antecedent for which Poe sought a “unity of expression,” does not carry over to “The Oval Portrait”; what “The Oval Portrait” refers to, and where it finds its beginning, therefore, become two questions that defer the possibility of an answer. These problems are particularly significant in Poe’s career during the period between 1842 and 1845 since these dates represent an important period for Poe’s work on plagiarism, as well as his experiences working as editor for a journal that sought a labor from its workers for which “talent” was unnecessary.³ The importance of talent exists only to the extent that it is not subordinated to the prosaic world of labor, which means that the framework that settles “The Oval Portrait” in a “central incident” would seek to direct it to an incidental relation, or to goals for its composition that remain beyond it.

Rather than fixing a central incident for either tale, therefore, I wish to proceed by asking about the relation between the narrative frame and the story of the portrait. To begin, then, it is important to examine several components of “Life in Death” that Poe elaborated, but then left out of the revision. The first, which is perhaps the most important and significant alteration, is the omission of the long explanation of the narrator’s use of opium. “Life in Death” begins with the narrator explaining that he has been wounded after an encounter with banditti, and that these wounds have resulted in the interruption of travels that were underway before the story began. The narrator, therefore, is obligated to stop at a deserted chateau with his valet to rest and

³ I am referring to Poe’s observation in the Marginalia that the work of “talent” was irrelevant to the production of journalism and other writing for the press. This occurs as the work of printing falls from the work of the cultivated, humanist printer and editor, to the mechanistic production of reportage. I discuss this history in more detail below in section 5.4 of this chapter.

recover. A long section follows in which the narrator remembers that he has opium, announces his intention of taking the drug, and explains that the reason for taking it is to induce calm, and perhaps sleep, in order to aid in his recovery from the wounds he has suffered. Further, the narrator details his short history with and limited knowledge of the drug, and, finally, the experimental mode of ingestion he intends to use, all of which leads the reader to believe that the narrator perhaps ends up ingesting an enormous dosage.

The long discussion of opium describes the capacity of the drug for producing “mental derangement” that could reach “alarming” levels. This mental derangement is one feature of the drug experience Poe included in the original story; another feature, even more extraordinary, is the magical influence of the drug: as the narrator gazes at the artwork around him in the chateau in which he is resting, he states that “I felt that in [the drug’s] magical influence lay much of the gorgeous influence and variety of the frames – much of the ethereal hue that gleamed from the canvas – and much of the wild interest of the book which I perused.”⁴ In eliminating the drug experience altogether from the revision, Poe eliminates not only the effects of mental and sensory derangement, but also this more difficult notion of magical influence. Gross explains that such a revision accomplishes the task of bringing greater emphasis to the oval portrait and its story, rather than on the narrator’s deranged experience of it; Gross notes that in light of the focus on opium, “the reader naturally expects the significance of the subsequent action to lie in its impingement upon the tortured mind of a desperately wounded man in the throes of a ‘voluptuous narcotic,’” (Gross, 17) which is, in fact, not the case. For Gross, the withdrawal of the drug theme from the story makes of the narrator only a point of view: “The narrator, then, is

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe. “Life in Death,” Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore – Works – Tales, <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/ovlprta.htm>>

a point of view as in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’ rather than a directly involved participant as in, for example, ‘Ligea,’” and orients the story only to the aim of bringing attention to the story of the oval portrait (Gross, 17).

Gross’s work on the story emphasizes a revision which amounts to the movement from a story of an isolated mind in “Life in Death,” whose wild imagination creates without order since it is under the influence of a narcotic, to an ordered intellect that serves as nothing more than a point of view with the potential to be neutralized into a more objective account. This produces a particular problem: that the availability of a “real” object (the painting itself) puts pressure on the perceiving intellect to either demonstrate correctness in its apperception, or to make obvious some kind of error, which, in either case, become “effects” of the narration with regard to the portrait. In any case, such a diminishment of the narrative frame into a “point of view” makes it much easier to formulate the story as an object with a “center” – the portrait that captures the narrator’s attention. Such an analysis, however, brings up a number of questions, among them, what such a revision would make of the portrait – perhaps only a faithful copy of reality? Is the task of the artist, therefore, the formulation of correct representations that can (should) be verified against the reality that is already present? This would also make of the artist, then, only a “point of view.” Is the narration, then, the apperception of the life told in the story, and “captured” in the painting, that Gross understands as the central incident? If the story of the painter and his wife is central, then the value of the narration lies only in its status as a verifiable confirmation of the artist’s achievement in the portrait: the accurate representation of the life that he held before him. Gross’s reading, therefore, represents art only as the accomplishment of imitation, placing precedence on reality and subordinating labor to its reproduction.

The search for centrality, therefore, takes us quite far: if “The Oval Portrait” has a beginning in some kind of “central incident,” it is not “Life in Death,” but in “a” life that is antecedent even to the story. Gross’s work on the story reduces it, finally, to nothing more than a platonic abolition of art, in which the artist seeks to elevate art to creation and life, but must fail because art can only be a shadow of a real substance. Further, the painter and the narrator accomplish the same function: verification of that substance through a normalized perception. “The Oval Portrait,” however, dismantles such a normalized perception, and as hard as Gross works to point to something substantive as the beginning or origin of the story, this “origin” becomes scattered in the tale, for this “life” exists in the story that tells it, the portrait that represents it, and the narrative that tells of its perception. The tale itself is a dispersal that does not contain centrality, which begins to give significance to the fact that there cannot be just one record of the “life” in the portrait, or even of the portrait itself. The story of the portrait is just one figure of this “life,” and if it were to stand as central why wouldn’t Poe have dispensed with the figure of the wounded narrator altogether? If the story of the portrait was to be central, why, for instance, would the narrator’s wounded condition matter for the revision?

I want to suggest that the original story, “Life in Death,” is not as disorganized or incoherent as some critics have suggested although there are certainly some “weaknesses”; many reach this conclusion because they have wrongly identified the “central incident” of the story: it is not a moral, it is not about the cost of art, and it is not about the painter. It is, rather, about “Life itself,” as the painter proclaims at the end of the tale.⁵ Both “Life and Death” as well as “The Oval Portrait” are about life and its relation to death, where death is not the end of “a” life,

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Oval Portrait,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 4, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965). 249. For the remainder of this chapter, I will refer to this tale parenthetically as “The Oval Portrait.”

but a condition that makes it possible to think what was previously impossible under the conditions of life. For this reason, death in these stories has an inherent connection to art. Death eludes the simple notion of a particularization of creation in an author, and instead opens up creation to the participation in a greater movement: experience of art results in a dispersal of meaning rather than accommodation into a framework.

5.3 “LIFE ITSELF”: THE KINSHIP OF ART, EVIL AND DEATH

To liberate the story about the oval portrait, the art object in the tale, from a fixed centrality in “Life in Death” and its revision, we might look more closely at the story itself before bringing it back into relation with the narrative of the wounded narrator that is so often ignored in the tale’s significance. Rather than beginning, therefore, as Gross or Dowell do, with the antecedent to “The Oval Portrait,” I would like to consider the story from the very end. When we begin from the end, we find that “The Oval Portrait” denies a clear accommodation within the history in which Gross or Dowell would like to place it. “The Oval Portrait” refuses a clear reference to an antecedent, and asking about “The Oval Portrait” as a revision can only disclose the difficulty of delineating the limits of a work of art. This difficulty is also the positive and generative potential of the story, the question that calls for criticism, and finally fulfills the role of the narrator as both speaker in the tale, and spectator of the portrait as a work of art rather than simply a copy or a representation.

The tale ends with a statement about “life itself,” which becomes an elusive notion that the story ties directly to the limits of the work of art. The tale does this throughout, but brings art and “life itself” most forcefully into relation in the story of the portrait that the wounded narrator

finds in a book next to his bed. When the narrator finds that he cannot sleep despite his wounds and fatigue, he spends hours reading through the book, which contains the histories of the artworks that adorn the walls of the chateau he has broken into. Once he discovers the oval portrait, he becomes fascinated with it and looks for the story of this particular painting in the book. There he finds a tale about a beautiful, young woman – the woman in the portrait – and of her husband, who painted the portrait. The woman hated art because of her husband’s passion for it, yet the painter was set on making a model of his wife to portray her beauty in a portrait. The story tells us that she sat for weeks while her husband worked on the portrait until, finally, it was complete. “This is indeed *Life* itself,” the painter exclaimed upon its completion, only to turn to his wife at that very moment to find her dead. The tale ends there, with the painter caught between the finished portrait and his dead wife, and without coming back to the wounded narrator.

This ending for the tale seems to leave the narrator completely to the side and brings the painter into focus, which is perhaps one reason that critics have insisted that the painter’s action, contained in the story of the portrait, constitutes the central incident of the tale. Indeed, the painter’s position as artist configures a strong relation between the artwork and the model that sat for him, almost independently of the narrator. Further, his position at the very end of the tale between the dead wife and the portrait seems to make of the painter a conduit through which the life of the woman who sits for him transfers to the portrait through his work. Daniel Hoffman has written on this action in “The Oval Portrait” as a type of absorption, which the painter ignores, as we can see in the following passage from the tale: “and he *would* not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him” (“The Oval Portrait,” 248). Hoffman gives an important significance to this suggestion of absorption,

which he further characterizes as sort of vampirism, and which he finally attributes to the cost of art in Poe's fiction: "The death of a beautiful woman, Poe's prescribed theme for poetry, makes necessary that the beautiful woman die [...] And [...] leads the artist to become the murderer of his muse." More emphatically, even, Hoffman states that "Poe makes the artist a cannibal or vampire whose subject *must die* so that there may be art."⁶ Hoffman's reading offers a possibility for art beyond a secondary status as imitation, or representation, and makes of it a primary object through the ghoulish figure of the vampire, which art accomplishes at the expense of a victim's life (in other words, art is primary now that it "has" a life, and is not an imitation of a life). This figure of the painter as a vampire could also acquire significance in relation to Baudelaire's use of the vampire. In his poem "Les Métamorphoses du vampire," Baudelaire portrays the figure of the vampire as a prostitute, who confuses seller and the object to be sold, as well as turning desire and pleasure into labor. In this poem, the vampire prostitute sucks the marrow from the bones of the poet, creating a fusion between work and the object made: the poet's work, like the prostitute's, becomes a ghastly living dead as it is commodified. This meaning could have given greater significance to the work of art as mere object; Poe's use of death, however, does not finally have this vampiric significance for the painter is never a vampire, but an artist that invites death through a sacrifice of the "object" that he paints. In the disappearance of the wife in death, she escapes the objecthood to which she might have succumbed.

The story of the portrait prefigures the ghoulishness of this possible vampiric significance when it portends the wife's death by describing the moment of the marriage as an "evil hour." This "evil" element is apparent in much of Poe's fiction, but Hoffman gives it a simpler meaning

⁶ Daniel Hoffman, Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 311.

than it has in “The Oval Portrait.” For Hoffman, or even Gross, the “evil” act is simply murder: it is, in the most innocent interpretation, the painter’s gross negligence for his wife’s health in his monomaniacal pursuit of capturing her beauty for the portrait. In its more ghoulish interpretation, the painter causes the woman’s death through the transference of her life from the world to the work of art. In either case, the meaning of “evil” here is nothing more than the breaking of a law, or its rejection, willful or accidental. It is quite important to return the sense of evil in Poe’s story to its proper significance, which can be quickly confused or hijacked, especially by American intellectuals that use the term when describing the global resistance to capital. It is important to mention Harry Levin within this group, even though his work focuses on literature, which he seeks to place above money, war or technology. For Poe, however, literature did not necessarily serve as a fuller notion of experience since even the production of literature was not beyond the influence of the mechanistic and technological entrenchment of America. The evil in Poe’s story “belongs” to America in a much different way: it acts “within” the whole not as a resistance or reaction, but as an exertion that might dissociate literature from its entrainment in the mechanistic that I mention here. Evil, for Poe, is important because literature might not promise the “higher” experience that Levin takes for granted, and becomes one possibility of achieving it. Levin’s notion of evil, on the other hand, is “within” the experience of the “American Dream” as simply another aspect of its logic, even if it presents itself as a challenge or contradiction. Poe’s evil is clearly much different, for the “benign” American Dream that Levin sees as positive, Poe understood as mechanical entrainment. The “American Dream” as Levin understands it is the constitution of a universal society whose goal is the “fulfillment of nature through material progress.”⁷ For Poe, however, this “universality”

⁷ Harry Levin, The Power of Blackness (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 6.

toward a common goal of “progress” signaled the articulation of a community in a temporal entrainment, achieved through the mechanistic activity of journalism and printing. Levin, however, established this “universality” as a benign conglomeration representing world cultures in a new land, which American authors represented in the archetypal symbols of Christianity. Evil appears in this account only in a reductive, minor form that exists as a reaction to the primary – this may be the sense, generally speaking, that American intellectuals use the term when describing global resistance to modernity. This type of evil (if we can typify evil) is nothing more than an attendant of the good: it is operative. This “evil” exists as an accommodation into a movement of mechanistic and measured gain insofar as “evil” identifies itself against the good, where the good is primary and “evil” has a motivation subordinated completely to goals that it does not set for itself. Evil, in this formulation, is simply the negative in the inevitable goal of the “good” at the end of history.

If we are to understand the more radical nature of “evil” in Poe’s fiction, we must think of it as more than a simple murder. We must ask more carefully of the connection between evil and poetry, and between art and death in “The Oval Portrait.” Importantly, the connection between art and death does not allow us to read the completion of the portrait as an absorption or transfer of a life. The story of the portrait at times describes the work of the artist as a portrayal, a depiction, of which witnesses of the work “spoke of its resemblance [to the young bride] in low words, as of a mighty marvel.” This resemblance confirms the relation of the painter’s work to the world, but cannot stand, finally, as mere imitation since the story stresses that even as he painted his bride, “he *would* not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him.” In fact, as he becomes progressively engrossed in his work, the painter increasingly turns away from the

model that set the work in motion: “But at length, as the labor drew nearer to its conclusion, there were admitted none into the turret; for the painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work, and turned his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife.” If we continue to believe, then, that the painter has accomplished a faithful depiction, then we must begin to think of this as a faithful depiction of a model that he refused to see – that he turned away from. The tale further emphasizes the painter’s blindness as the young woman’s health continues to fail: “And he *would* not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him” (“The Oval Portrait,” 248). The emphasis on the modal “would” does not indicate alarm for a mindless negligence caused by the obsessive focus on art, but indicates quite the opposite. To make of the painter’s passion for art the cause of a mindless negligence would be to give the painter and his work a minor position, to make of art a mistake; instead, this passion for art engenders a stern and sovereign decision to *not see*, to turn away from the imitative, from the reproduction of what is already present, and to create. The modal indicates this sovereign decision of the painter, which demonstrates that the origin of the work is the expression of the painter.

The final moments between the woman’s life and death coincide with the last few brushstrokes that complete the portrait. It is almost as if the painter’s hand holds, in the final moments of his work, his wife’s life in the balance: “And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought” (“The Oval Portrait,” 248-9). The painter had worked for weeks, but the ultimate moment, the precise moment when the painting comes within reach of

completion, of entering through the work a relation between what the artist has produced and the model that sits, is the very moment that finally breaks with continuity or a clear, traceable exchange: “but in the next [moment], while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, ‘This is indeed *Life* itself!’ turned suddenly to regard his beloved: - *She was dead!*” (“The Oval Portrait,” 249). The story maintains the strong relation between the model and the painting – which is the reason critics insist on a transference of life from one location to another – until the very end of the artist’s activity in order to invest art with a notion of life that cannot be subordinated to an object. The strong connection between the woman and the portrait maintains until this last moment, until the portrait faces the dead woman, and turns back unto itself as the sign of a curious subtraction. The painting is “Life itself” not because life is an object that the painting absorbs, nor is life an object that might be delivered from one location to another; the painting takes on life because of the significance death gives it: rather than referring to a reality, it refers to nothing. The painting is not “a life” – it is not the woman’s life; it is, rather, “Life itself,” which it achieves in its orientation to “a death.” The beautiful woman does not live on (again, the painting is not “a life”); rather, the painting, art, achieves life only in relation to death, which is to say, only in relation to the impossibility of the creation pointing back to a reality from which it came. The painting is neither a copy, nor is it the beautiful woman herself, “a” life, but it is “Life itself.”

In this sense, the painter’s final brushstrokes take on two important meanings: the first, we might say, is that the brushstrokes do, in fact, kill the woman, bring her to her death, but this “evil moment” is not tantamount to murder. With regard to the meaning for art that death gives to the portrait, the death of the woman at the hands of the artist takes on the significance of

sacrifice.⁸ As she sits for weeks as the model for her husband's painting, she serves a purpose such that her present value – who she is at the moment of sitting – is subordinated to the future accomplishment of the finished portrait. Death, however, releases the young woman from the particulars imposed by the time of labor, and into a more general movement of a different sort of work: that of life itself, which is creative and not merely imitative or secondary. The work of art stands apart from labor and labor time in this sense: art experienced as sacrifice through the young woman's death abolishes her utility, destroys her character as an object to be copied, and instills in the work of art an unreal, eternal duration that has no operative value. The death in the work of art instills in it a plenitude beyond the empirical and everyday. This may have been the meaning Poe sought in the original title, "Life in Death," and it may have been the reason Poe ended this first tale with the painter's confusion, who asked "But is this indeed Death?" after the announcement of his wife's death. Poe eliminated this last line in "The Oval Portrait," but its inclusion in "Life in Death" was not an imprecision, which Gross maintains in his reading of the first tale. Death, rather, reveals life in the artwork as a release from subordination to things, and as an emptying, or a subtraction, of the stable possession of reality that the journalism of Poe's day understood language to establish.⁹

⁸ I am thinking in particular of the significance sacrifice has for Georges Bataille, who understands the act of sacrifice as that which removes any status of the object from what is sacrificed in order to return the sacrificial to a divine immanence. See Georges Bataille, Theory of Religion, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

⁹ I want to suggest this reduction of language in relation to the disciplinary function of the author that Foucault traces in his essay "What Is an Author?" This disciplinary function does not need to be brought to bear on articulations that have no author. The labor of journalism continues ad infinitum independently of any question of authorship, of "talent," as Poe says, because reportage has already interiorized the temporality of the "currente calamo" that I discuss in the third chapter of this dissertation.

The further consequence of relating the brushstrokes to the notion of the “evil hour” and to sacrifice turns the inherent negativity of these notions into an affirmation. This is an important reason to insist that death is not merely murder, since murder would only trample on the established order as a challenge that reaffirms it, and could never have the potential of substituting it; murder could only be a discreet act in reaction to what we must finally be forced to accept. The evil of the “evil hour” in which the young woman submitted to her fate, rather, has the significance of an “outside” of possibility: death is the condition under which it is possible to think what would have been impossible under the conditions of life. Death, therefore, is the condition for the continuing creativity of life. With this regard, the painter, in refusing to see, does not subordinate the brushstroke to the achievement of a means – the use of technique to accomplish imitation. As the painter hovers over the painting, deciding where to apply the final brushstrokes, he does not calculate how to finish based on what is available in regards to an arsenal of techniques. The gesture of the brushstroke defines this “outside of possibility” by affirming what did not exist before. It is affirmation in that it creates possibility within the limits of the gesture, which were not available before it was carried out. The action is creation, and does not belong to the woman, but is akin, perhaps, to her death, which obliterates the intelligibility of localized, empirical experience of an object, and implicates art toward a larger movement of life.

This meaning was especially important for Poe, who struggled against the positivism of reportage and journalism, which functioned always within an intelligibility that set the parameters for correctness and error (good and evil), and, therefore, also the moral and didactic inclinations of American literature and criticism in his time. A radical notion of evil was of great importance, but this notion could not be turned back to into a weak challenge. This “evil” had to

reside as a possibility that could offer a compelling judgment for life and art over and against the operative goals so clearly and deeply entrenched in the moral good.

5.4 DISPERSAL IN “THE OVAL PORTRAIT”

“The Oval Portrait” ends with the story of the portrait, in which the artist withdraws into the turret, where his wife dies as he finishes his work. The artist’s withdrawal, however, does not block off art into a narrow field of interiority, introspection or isolation; the notion of sacrifice must have a sense of participation, which is what the narrator provides. The encompassing act of sacrifice implicates a community, and the narrator fulfills this position, although his lonely presence in a deserted chateau brings up, once again, the crisis Poe confronts in much of his fiction: that the cultural materials of the past are incapable of giving life or order to the present, especially since they exist in lonely, forgotten chateaus. The narrator’s encroachment of the chateau, however, activates the narrator’s participation in the “life” of the oval portrait. To a great extent, however, the theme of the attenuation of these cultural materials for social order takes on significance in “The Oval Portrait” insofar as the narrator tries very hard to reduce his experience of the portrait to an empirically manageable object. The narrator’s participation in the tale serves to explore the impulse for life in the work of art, as well as the strategies for its containment.

The difficulty of Poe’s short story, as I have said above, is that it questions the limits of the work of art – where it begins and where it might end – especially as the notion of art relates to “life itself.” This difficulty is intensified by the fact that neither the portrait nor the story of its composition occupy a centrality in the tale; in fact, the wounded narrator, who experiences the

painting and then discovers its history, serves to further disrupt any notion of such centrality, and begs an important question: why are there two records, the portrait and the story, of the woman's life? These two "records" illustrate the creative dispersal of "life itself," which the experience of the wounded narrator further serves to illustrate for the tale. The narrator, therefore, becomes a figure of a reader who is "incomplete" – wounded – and "dispersed" between the material figures that conduct his attention, his sleepiness, and his agitation into "waking life." This is the reason that, importantly, the revisions to "Life in Death" make of "The Oval Portrait" the story of a mind awakening into life, rather than the story of a mind receding into hallucinations. "The Oval Portrait," itself, is the narration of the shifts between the portrait and the story of the portrait, which is the movement of someone being "startl[ed] [...] at once into waking life" ("The Oval Portrait," 246). This occurs upon the narrator's discovery of the portrait, which he confuses for a real visage – "my fancy, shaken from its half slumber, had mistaken the head for that of a living person" ("The Oval Portrait," 247). The point of including the narrator is not just to give the story a viewpoint, but to make the experience of the portrait the impulse and measure of "life," as well as to destroy the simplistic notion of truth and falsity with respect to the presence of an available reality, and of art's secondary relation to that reality, despite the narrator's idealism.

"The Oval Portrait" is a narrative of an action caught between two material inscriptions; the material inscriptions, however, do not hold the action. It occurs, rather, in spontaneous relation to art, and in a moment of unknowability. The narrator discovers the oval portrait unexpectedly: after spending many hours examining the artwork in his room and reading the small book that described it, the narrator finally decides to reposition the candelabra by which he is reading, and in so doing directs light onto a small portrait on a section of the wall left un-

illuminated by the previous position of the light. He is immediately taken by what he sees: the portrait of the beautiful young woman. His reaction is to look quickly at the painting and then close his eyes, an action which seems to surprise the weary man: “Why I did this was not at first apparent even to my own perception” (“The Oval Portrait,” 246).

The action seems insignificant as it occurs, but the narrator does not ignore it, and he becomes occupied with reflecting on how and why he reacted as he did. Before gazing on the portrait again, the narrator finally decides that the “impulsive movement” served to “gain time for thought – to make sure that my vision had not deceived me – to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze” (“The Oval Portrait,” 246). The narrator understands the closing of the eyes now as a voluntary turn inward, and as a conscious movement that afforded a moment of reflection. Importantly, though, it is a reflection that afforded “a more sober and more certain gaze,” and, this, seemingly, resulted from the voluntary closing of the eyes despite the fact that the narrator claims only a few lines later that the painting itself was the object of the sobering effect: “That I now saw aright I could not and would not doubt; for the first flashing of the candles upon that canvas had seemed to dissipate the dreamy stupor which was stealing over my senses, and to startle me at once into waking life” (“The Oval Portrait,” 246).

This turn inward is significant because the story of the painter and the portrait that follows doubles the shutting off of the visual register, but in the case of the painter, this is not a turn “inward.” For the painter, who “*would* not see,” the refusal to look is a sovereign act linked at once to the meaning of sacrifice for art, as well as the originary expression of creation. The shutting of the eyes at this early moment in the tale, on the other hand, occurs as chance in a moment of unknowability, despite the fact that the narrator strives to accommodate the act into a

voluntary and intelligible framework. The narrative, despite the fact that it is given in first person, does not follow the chance occurrence from the point of view of a consciousness that can devolve the story in frameworks of intelligibility. Instead, the narrating consciousness, once it begins to gain retrospective control of the chance event of the closing of the eyes, finds itself confused. The importance of the story itself, therefore, is not consciousness, but the situatedness of an eventful character within the material inscriptions that “awakened life,” and then, perhaps, guided it. Still, the retroactive accommodation of the chance action into the narrative is an attempt to place a human faculty ahead of the event to flatten the narrative into a linear chronology. The moment of the closing of the eyes surpassed the human mastery – in the form of the assailability of an object – that the retroactive glance seeks to impose, thereby affording the event a stability that it perhaps does not have. Further, the stability of the event captured snugly in the linearity imposed by the narrative dissimulates the spontaneous, non-substantive animation that the story calls “waking life.” The faculty that the narrator imposes in the story, therefore, can never be an agent, only a retroactive accommodation. In any case, the action of the weary traveler ultimately eludes the pathetic attempts to cover over the negativity of his own consciousness.

Ultimately, the narrator domesticates his awakening into life as a trick or technique of the artist. The narrator attributes his feelings of wakefulness to the “lifelikeness” of the portrait, the accurate imitation of reality – a characteristic of the painting that the ensuing story of the painter undoes – which he calls the “secret” of the painting, and the source of his agitation. Understanding the “secret,” however, does not dampen the experience of agitation, which continues to suggest a deeper mystery in the experience of art. Before the narrator can turn to the book he has been reading to discover the story of the portrait, he “replace[s] the candelabrum

[to] its former position” to “shut from view [...] the cause of my deep agitation” (“The Oval Portrait,” 247). The refusal to look at the painting in this later case is still quite different from the painter’s refusal to look at his wife: with respect to the narrator, the refusal to look is an attempt to deny the work of art, to return it to the ambit of objecthood. The narrator fails to grant significance to the painting, and reduces it only to the application of a technique, or to the history of its production. The gesture of the artist, however, as we saw earlier, did not rely on the application of paradigms or techniques, but founded the limits of the work within the gesture of the brush on the canvas; those limits, however, lie beyond the canvas, and took form in the weeks heading up to those final brushstrokes, during the time in the turret, in the initial look at his wife, and, certainly, in the agitation the artist felt and that, consequently, the narrator would feel in the experience of the portrait. The artwork “works” in the gestures of the artist, but well beyond them, too. The brushstroke that we can locate in the artist’s hand, therefore, does not belong exclusively to that act, but doesn’t belong to what precedes it either. It exists as a relation between the moment of the painter and the moment of the narrator, which inscribes the present moment of the narrator with a particular possibility and exigency: to speak in relation to the experience of the painting. Poe’s fiction, however, always seems to configure the conditions for the failure of this inscription in the present, and to the suppression of the possibilities of art. In this case, art acquires an intimate relation to life, but the failure of actualizing these possibilities lie with the narrator, who seems incapable of fulfilling its movement for growth.

Importantly, the story does not end with the narration of the movements of awakened life, and with the clumsy attempts by the narrator to control these, but with the figure of the beautiful woman’s death. The force of this abrupt ending estranges the portrait’s closeness to things, and gives it the final force of affirmation, in that the portrait can only stand for itself, and does not

enter into an exchange. The fact that the narrator can hover between the story of the portrait and the portrait, in some respect the same way the painter might hover between his wife and the painting, reveals, finally, only an alterity that sometimes gathers these together, and sometimes disperses these into new forms. In any case, and despite the narrator's attempts, the work awakens an understanding of art that has no goal, no object, which Poe increasingly understood as the destiny of art in a social-historical moment dominated by involuntary plagiarism and the mechanics of the journalistic press.

5.5 WHAT IS A WORK?

The question about the limits of the work that I have insisted “The Oval Portrait” raises resounds also with the problems of plagiarism that Poe dedicated so much time to exposing, and which I write about in the first chapter of this dissertation. Plagiarism, of course, relies on the particularization of a work as the sole province of an author, which he then possesses within a system of property rights. The emergence of the author in this sense is an important phenomenon, and one that I tried to reflect on earlier in this dissertation in relation to Foucault's essay “What Is an Author?” I would like to reflect on this essay again as a way to discuss not just the author, but how the work appears and disappears in relation to how I discuss art in “The Oval Portrait.” Foucault's essay has garnered much attention, and has focused work on “author-centered” studies, where scholars have questioned the validity of the category of the author as sole creator of a work. The events sponsored by the Society for Critical Exchange, and that took place at Case Western Reserve University and The Washington College of Law at The American University, are an important example of this, since these events formed an attitude that became

prevalent through a number of works on the subject, beginning with the papers collected from those meetings by Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi in The Construction of Authorship.¹⁰

This collection of essays centers on questions of writing practices, and purports to examine texts in which the act of origination does not “belong” to an individual. In such cases, this collection of essays shows how copyright laws are inadequate to the conditions of the writing practices that produce certain texts and meanings. In particular, Woodmansee and Jaszi cite the “polyvocal collaborative situations like the nineteenth-century women’s groups described by Ann Ruggles Gere, in which texts were generated and revised in an atmosphere of sociable intertextuality” (Woodmansee and Jaszi, 11), or the collaborative practices of Samuel Johnson as examples that exceed the strict limits of copyright as an “author-centered” work. Some of these examples are quite promising in that they locate the possibility of creation in the public act of coming together and speaking, where speech itself is action, but Woodmansee and Jaszi do not ultimately capitalize on these rich possibilities. Instead, they seem to locate each participant in collaboration as an individual and, insofar as these individuals work together, they produce difficulties in definitively attributing to any one of them the privileged position of author as creator.

Despite this failure to examine the public as a center of action in relation to the creation of texts, Woodmansee and Jaszi’s work is important and quite useful on the subject of the emergence of the author, a subject that Woodmansee claims has “received relatively little attention despite Michel Foucault’s observation” on the importance of examining how this formation of the author arose in our culture. What seems missing here, however, would relate

¹⁰ Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi, eds, The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature (Durham: Duke UP, 1994). For the remainder of this chapter, I will refer to this text as “Woodmansee and Jaszi.”

more essentially to the question of the emergence of the author as Foucault poses it in his essay. I am thinking especially of one of the reasons Foucault gives at the end of the essay on why a focus on the author is important, and, implicitly, what it might lead to: “There are reasons dealing with the “ideological” status of the author. The question then becomes: how can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world? The answer is: One can reduce it with the author.”¹¹ Critics like Woodmansee and Jaszi take Foucault’s essay as an opportunity to trace this “ideology” in the visible form that arises as the author, but, in so doing, ignore what I addressed in the first chapter of this dissertation as the animating questions behind this task, namely, what danger does the author reduce? What is the danger with which fiction threatens our world? Foucault advances the formation of the author as a measure of limiting the proliferation of meaning, which arises in relation to this danger that remains unthought. The question of the author, therefore, should take us to another question embedded in the text of “What Is an Author?”: what is a work?

With this respect, Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” is apropos, and introduces what is at stake in this discussion. Heidegger notes at the very beginning of this essay that the work of art, once it is finished, becomes an object, or a thing. Any questioning of the work of art, therefore, must question this thingliness in which it resides. The essay, at that point, takes on the question of the thing very seriously, and spends many pages trying to address what the thing is in the work, but, ultimately, can never attain a closeness with what seems most available in the work. Things themselves, or objects, therefore, are not what the work of art finally gives us; what we gain from this kind of making, rather, is our way of relating to these

¹¹ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1994), 221. I will refer to this essay parenthetically as “Foucault” for the remainder of this chapter.

things – the form that is our reality, that gives the content of our reality. The work of art is not the thing in itself, but the work of form, of the creation of a form that would contain the reality that one might experience. There is such a thing in the work of art as an object, or a thing, but the making of this thing affects the immaterial as well, and, in this sense, changes what it is that we receive of the object, what the object is, what aspects of the object can be known and can become close to us. This represents not an objective relationship to reality, which would amount to positivism, but to the potential of an altering experience.

For all of these reasons, the question of the work seems essential, especially since, if the author is a reduction of the danger with which fiction threatens our world, then the danger belongs to the work he produces as the possibility of alterations in experience. In asking about the work, we can continue to elaborate a distinction that began to arise in “The Oval Portrait.” The notion of the work as art – the artwork – arose with the affinity of the artwork, its origination, to life and death. In this sense, the work of art must be differentiated from a different kind of work, which we can call labor. This latter kind of work is also productive, but its limits are generally much clearer and consist of a subordination of a present moment into alignment with future goals. The idea of work as labor might correspond to the subordination of a worker, of his present state, to a relation with a goal, or an object, through the mediations of a tool. In this respect, the painter of “The Oval Portrait” produces only a painting, something that labor renders as an imitation of an object, and produces another object to be looked at. Since artworks also tend to have the character of an object, of a thing, then they can hold this relation to labor, or to the activity one does in order to produce an object. The wounded narrator, to a great extent, tried to reduce the oval portrait to this standing, but in order to do so he had to abolish the experience of waking life, which could not belong to an object or to the idea of labor.

Seymour Gross, interestingly, in order to maintain a centrality for “The Oval Portrait,” had to make a similar distinction, and removed any experience of work from the artwork to recognize only the time of labor. Gross accomplished this by turning the painter’s passion for art into a moral failure, and into an inability to attend to his wife, the real object of the oval portrait. In doing this, Gross reduces both life and the artwork – essentially linked in the story – to mere objects. The painter’s passion, however, cannot be an object since it cannot be experienced from the outside by a subject, but belongs to the work of life as it emerges as action in the story.

What Gross manages to do – and what the wounded narrator attempts but does not quite manage – is the reduction of the danger Foucault mentions in the quote above. In terms of the story, this danger is akin to “evil,” which also has a relation to life and art. Both Gross and the wounded narrator make of the painter an isolated artist – the author – of the portrait. This reading, of course, is not difficult, since the painter already exhibits the characteristics of such a figure of isolation, especially in his retreat to the lonely turret. The real force of this reduction, however, occurs in coincidence with how the work of art shrinks from its passionate and dangerously evil potential, to a trivialized product of labor time. The disciplinary function of the author, therefore, must arise in conjunction with the reduction of the work into an operative labor time. Foucault notes that “Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors (other than mythical, sacralized and sacralizing figures) to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive” (Foucault, 211-2). Before the author became the originator of the work, and the transgression of a work became his, however, both booksellers and printers were the object of inquisitions, torture and executions throughout Europe. For the most part, these humanist printers were scholars who knew ancient languages well, and could act as editors ensuring that the works of the ancients were accurately

printed. They were also confidantes to writers and other scholars, often acting as the protectors of learned men, as well as editors and critics of their work. The object of punishment shifts from the printer to the author only as printing becomes operative, and the text can be reduced to the status of an object.

After the 30 years war, printing in Europe – with the exception of Holland, where the figure of the printer as humanist scholar still held – came under guild control, and began to garner print privileges and copyrights from the state. In England, the printer formed part of the Stationer’s Company, and became the enforcer of monarchical censorship. One of the important details of this shift resides in the move from the educated, humanist scholar, to the relatively uneducated guild printer. Because of the war and because of economic turmoil in much of the continent, the attitude of printing became one of survival, and the work of printing turned from the scholar to the laborer. During the years of the great humanist scholars – from such figures as Gryphe, Aldus or Robert Estienne – the book gathered together the work that would give it a status beyond a mere object: it held together erudition and experience that, in turn, would continue to do work as it circulated. With the guild laborer, however, the book loses its status as a work in this sense, and becomes, rather, the object produced under privileges and under the protection of the guild. The printing press and the laborers who operated it produced books as one would produce any other good for circulation, or for use, granting the book a “thingliness” arising from labor time.

The author, now an inhabitant of salons rather than a visitor of printing houses, comes under the attention of legal authority only as printers lose their status as scholars; even when printers printed “transgressive” texts, these were the “result” of the author. The book, therefore, approaches the status of a mere object despite the fact that it could have a “transgressive”

potential, but this neat division of labor, in which the work of creating a book belongs to the province of clearly appointed labor time, makes this transgressive potential a private matter of the author. Poe noticed these effects especially as they became manifest in another, related shift. I argued in the first chapter of this dissertation that, in the US, the spread of magazines and journals produced a temporal entrainment in the population. As the printer emerges as a relatively uneducated laborer, for whom books are only objects with exchange value, and for which all language exists on an even playing field, from poetry to textbooks, the field of printing begins to produce, in conjunction to its products, the practice of reportage and journalism whose main objectives are representations of stable realities. Poe sees this in the journalist, who emerges as an “uneducated” writer, and for whom “talent” is irrelevant. The journalist, like the printer, works in a clearly appointed temporality that is incommensurable with the sacrifice of the painter of “The Oval Portrait.” This clear temporality and division of labor demarcates a particular position for the “creative author,” as well, as he withdraws – as the painter does to the turret in “The Oval Portrait” – into his own narrowly defined field, from where the work of art can no longer express community even through the experience of sacrifice.

For Poe, this configures a very particular problem: the experience of the artwork still holds the measure of life, as we can see in “The Oval Portrait,” but Poe often has trouble expressing this experience. The work of art, which is expressive of community, often finds its disaster in the withdrawal of the artist into isolation in much of Poe’s fiction. Still, this did not diminish the fullness of the experience of poetry and art for Poe, an experience that often figured as a potential, as it did, for instance, in “The Domain of Arnheim.” In this story, the artist cited

both “the contempt of ambition,” as well as “an object of unceasing pursuit,”¹² as two conditions for bliss. This description is important since it gives art a state of permanent un-satisfaction, something that cannot hope to be achieved by ambition, and something that remains beyond reach, although one must endlessly participate in the failure of never reaching the goal. These conditions form a kind of work that is very different from what I have been calling labor up to this point, and illustrates that Poe had formed a very keen understanding of the distinction between what I have called work and labor. The “work” has both a character of the unknown, as well as the character of moving beyond its moment, as is the case in “The Oval Portrait” where the work engenders life in the wounded narrator. It is unknown in the sense what it creates cannot be anticipated, and the “how” of this emergence, even when localized in the artist’s gesture or practice, is not ultimately known. The work of labor, on the other hand, is eminently knowable in the sense that its goals are clear, and it grounds the laborer in distinct relation to his surroundings, but not necessarily in the beyond achieved by art.

The distinction between the artwork and labor finds an important significance in Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition,” where Poe makes the surprising claim that he can remember and explain every decision that he made in any and all of his compositions. To demonstrate this claim, Poe describes the composition of “The Raven,” which I argued in the opening chapter of this dissertation, held a close relation to Poe’s work on plagiarism. The problem of plagiarism, of a work belonging to a particular mind, disarticulated the expression of community in literature. With respect to “The Raven,” the speaker of the poem inhabited a present that could not begin anew, that threatened to remain eternally present – a threat embodied by the raven who

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, “The Domain of Arnheim,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 5, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 177.

repeated phrases of the past without giving them meaning or order at the moment of enunciation. “The Philosophy of Composition,” in some respects, is a rewriting of “The Raven,” an activity that repeats the original problem of the raven in the poem, but without granting “The Raven” the status of art. “The Philosophy of Composition,” rather, reduces the poem to its “thingly” character to demonstrate how Poe performed operations on it, and, finally, to grant Poe possession of it as author. Although he cites that beauty is the “province of the poem,”¹³ he makes this province a goal, in that he can establish “beauty” independently of the poem, and in advance of its composition. The labor of the poet, then, becomes a process of craftsmanship, or handiwork, with the material of the poem. Poe therefore reduces the language of the poem to its sonorous qualities, to the abstract sensations of sound caused by speech – in short, Poe reduces language to acoustic disturbances that can produce moods, but not significations or meaning.

Donald Pease has written about “The Raven” and rightfully notes this problem, and describes the essay as “an intention to bring the reader backstage and expose the merely performative, the literal as opposed to the literary, quality of the literary work.”¹⁴ Pease notes that the speaker of the essay does not finally provide “a ‘critical’ perspective, but only another staged version of the same activity resulting in ‘The Raven.’” This means that the critical essay never functions critically: it never “deliver[s] the poem over to significance” (Pease, 183). Pease is quite right in all of his statements, but what is missing is a very important qualification: Poe never promises to give “The Raven” the kind of significance that Pease expects of criticism. Poe promises only to reveal “the wheels and pinions – the tackle for scene-shifting – the step-ladders

¹³ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 14, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 198.

¹⁴ Donald E. Pease, Visionary Compacts (Madison, Wisconsin: The U of Wisconsin P, 1987), 181. For the remainder of this chapter I will refer to this text parenthetically as “Pease.”

and demon traps – the cock’s feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary histrio.”¹⁵ Poe employs figures of stagecraft in an act of lifting the illusion that was his poem and to make visible, or perhaps to perform, the “labor time” of the author that works with craftsman’s tools. Poe performs a complicated act of appropriation in which he reduces the work to a series of choices, rather than expressing an art formed by experience. In revealing the workings of the stage props, Poe presumably reveals authorship behind the illusion, but what he has performed, as Pease points out, is merely the repetition of the mechanics of the raven. The act of appropriation that is “The Philosophy of Composition” requires that the author appear in relation to the object that he produces, such that the object can only refer back to him, and does not offer a chance to begin anew, or to acquire a relational context or experience.

Poe may have had a number of reasons for writing “The Philosophy of Composition,” including the suggestions by Outis that he may have plagiarized “The Raven,” suggestions, no doubt, over which Poe was still fuming when he wrote his essay. Be that as it may, what Poe has performed here is a violent reduction and domestication of the “danger with which fiction threatens our world,” in that by rendering “The Raven” as a concept of labor, he completely abolishes any appearance of the world in the poem, or, more importantly, any possibility for the poem to make a world appear. The writing becomes only a set of techniques, which can be lifted from the world in which they took their form and that sustained them. To this extent – and even though I have described labor as a sort of entrenchment – labor, too, can have a relation to the institution of the world, although its “life” is quite different from the creative possibilities of art,

¹⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 14, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 195.

as I have described above. The techniques of versification, of repetition, etc, that Poe describes in “The Philosophy of Composition,” are lifted from any material conditions that produced, elaborated, or sustained them. When this is the case, they become “mere” techniques: because these sets of techniques become disembodied, articulated only by an abstract intellect that picks and chooses, criticism can become very cerebral, and relate only to logical application. This is mostly because the objects produced by such techniques, as in “The Raven,” are now just that, objects, rather than the experience and participation in life and work. The reduction of “The Philosophy of Composition,” with its relations to plagiarism, reduce the work to such an extent that it does not just achieve the reduction of the danger with which fiction threatens our world, but also makes the “world” disappear into a logically ordered, idealist empiricism.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This dissertation has asked about Poe studies in the US, and has engaged with Poe's experiments with both irrationality and evil as these relate to the creative imagination and to his understanding of the functions of criticism. One important question that we might begin to ask by way of a conclusion involves the ethics and values that are needed for criticism if historical emergence occurs not along a trans-historical rationality, but under a radical, creative imaginary. Indeed, this is a question that is not just specific to Poe studies, or even literature and English departments, but one that should trouble the university at large.¹ Poe's criticism has engaged the question quite forcefully, and his engagement with historical emergence as a problem of the creative imagination – and in relation to the discontinuous – configures the problem with respect to the special conditions of language in relation to the social-historical domain, and illustrates how this problem might continue to matter for literary studies and criticism. In asking this question I would like to also repeat some of the arguments that I make in this dissertation in new ways in order to continue to highlight their significance.

¹ I ask this question in relation to Bill Reading's analysis of the university in his book The University in Ruins. Here, Reading shows how the university, often as a result of the tendency that is being called "globalization," has been de-referentialized from a culture that it once understood itself to produce. The crisis, then, if we want to allow ourselves to use that term, is the radical disjunction of the university from its own field, what we might call the organization and production of national cultures. The crisis of disjunction or de-referentialization empties the university of the critical strength it once had, leaving it almost in a position in which it cannot even tell its own story of de-referentialization except, perhaps, by entering the language of economics.

I would like to conclude by configuring the question of creativity in criticism, and the notion of originality, to the problem of literary studies and how Poe's criticism – as I have discussed it in this dissertation – might be important today, especially if the relation between creation and criticism is to matter for the study of literature. To develop the problem specifically with regards to Poe and his insights on the creative imagination during the pressures of journalistic production, it is important to note, first, the role of language, traditionally, in the university and the nation state, as I have begun to do above. The problem faced by literature at Poe's moment, and the reasons that it should be of importance to us today, involves the taxation of the imaginative in language, and its changing significance in the embodiment of the social. These changes signal the eradication of the national project for which studies of language at the university were central: national languages, to a great extent, and national identity and the modern European nation state as a result, could be formed and maintained under institutions of literature. Institutions, especially literature, that formed around questions of language were vital in deciding expressions of national community, but also of the historical and critical apparatuses that would ensure their continuity. The institution of literature in the university, therefore, is tied closely to the development of modern paradigms of identity and history.

One of the problems Poe faced, and which becomes important for our moment, is that literature seems to be superseded by the proliferation of other materials that inscribe thinking differently and, perhaps, to other ends. Literature, then, is faced with an occasion in which it might not matter with respect to the question of the formation of mind. There are two particular transformations in this regard that relate to Poe studies and that derail Poe's critical investment in

language as the articulation of the creativity he could still see, at his moment,² in groups coming together to form communities. The first of these relates to the way in which literature becomes a commodity under the organs of mass print. Poe, of course, reflected carefully on what happened to literature as the groups of people that bought and read journals began to determine the success of books and authors. This is one reason, as I discuss at length in the first chapter of this dissertation, that critics and printers devoted so much energy to marketing rather than to the rigorous criticism that Poe wished to institute. This is also the reason that fields such as the history of the book have focused recently on Poe's work as an editor and critic to discuss how his writing confronted the politics of the literary marketplace.³ The history of the book, however, often does not attend to the greater transformation that was at work at Poe's moment, and critics in this field often think of Poe in terms of the popular press only as an effect of popular culture, and place primary significance on the formation of the masses as the focus for the value of literary production. I would like to suggest that this interest in the masses, however, is one characteristic of the transformation Poe tried to engage with his criticism, and one of the

² I emphasize that Poe could still "see" the social in his moment to suggest, at least in a preliminary way, that the social may not be visible for us any longer under the current regimes of power in late capitalism, except, perhaps, as a sociological, positivist empiricism, as I will describe below. This problem arises as the creative imaginary, especially as Poe understood it, became suffocated.

³ There are many works on Poe in this vein, but most apropos as an example of what I mean here is Meredith McGill's American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853. In this book, McGill misunderstands Poe's desire to establish a criticism ahead of literature because she fails to see criticism as the actualization of the life of a work. Because of this, she argues that Poe sought to create a criticism ahead of literature in order to appropriate for himself the terms by which the nation would understand literature, what literature would represent "America," and why. Of course, Poe was not interested in instituting dominant terms that would give criticism only an explanatory task. He was, rather, interested in giving literature a historical role in the formation of mind, something that is completely ignored by the figure of the masses produced by mass journalism: that of a naturalized readership in wait for information.

consequences of the petrification of the present that the journal's techniques and technologies began to produce.

As journals began to target the masses as the judges-as-consumers of the literary, the masses begin to take on the character of a naturalized readership, already formed and in wait for information. The critical engagement with literature, therefore, becomes secondary to studies of the sociology of the masses, and to a scientific and empirical study of popular culture. Poe's insistence on the primacy of criticism and of his portrayal of the masses as a "mob," therefore, seems quite at odds with critics that saw in the "masses" the center of the political process in a democracy, and which represented for many editors of Poe's time, therefore, the "America" to which Poe must necessarily relate. This is the case with numerous democratic groups and journals, including John O'Sullivan and his Democratic Review. The latter, for instance, resisted a copyright law – of which Poe was in favor – noting that republication was cheap and benefited American publishing. As far as O'Sullivan was concerned, the growth of American literature was ensured in the long term: the American "masses" would impose their taste for American literature – a taste presumed to exist for native literature all along – so long as they kept reading, and cheap publication ensured that they could.⁴

This movement, however, has more recent effects in the study of literature, which, perhaps, finds its historical index in the rise of Cultural Studies in the past 20 years. This is, perhaps, the best example of what I mention above as the scientific and empirical study of

⁴ It is interesting to note that Poe sided, only incidentally, with conservative groups in his support of copyright law. The Whigs supported an international copyright law because it promised to keep foreign literature out of American journals, ensuring a wholesome, moral literature for American readers. They believed that foreign literature was laden with licentiousness, and therefore threatened the proper, moral formation of American minds that only American literature could afford.

popular culture, which discloses a number of symptoms that emerge from the transformations Poe tried to illustrate at his moment. I am not interested in putting forth yet another attempt to define “Cultural Studies,” but to illustrate Poe’s anticipation of the persistence of certain non-productive tendencies in criticism, and their danger for the creative imaginary that Poe valued. What is important, therefore, is to question what might have called for a moment in which academics felt the need to name something called “culture” as a political and oppositional move because they began to have trouble finding it in the work of the academy itself. Cultural Studies, however, is a reactionary; since English Departments and universities in general – like the journals and purveyors of information for the masses in Poe’s time – no longer see themselves as representing a universality, they must lay claim to cultures that have proliferated outside of their domain. In part, perhaps, this explains the insistence on a differentiation between “high” and “low” culture, with “low” culture, of course, becoming increasingly important as the incidence of its consumption grows, and “high” culture seemingly becoming stiff, or pretentiously esoteric, since it is increasingly seen as irrelevant to questions of social order in these formulations.

We might say, then, that the problem of Cultural Studies in relation to the problem of the masses – or the mob, in Poe’s terminology – of Poe’s time, is a problem in which English departments, and literary critics, saw themselves in a relation of possession to the literary, which they subsequently lost. I make this claim because, first of all, English departments no longer see themselves as “having” culture, and, it might be said, Cultural Studies was a way of looking for it elsewhere. Interestingly, the problem of Poe’s place in America, and of the interest in American Poe studies of recovering Poe within periodic and national fields, might also be understood as a process of re-appropriation of Poe’s work. Importantly, this process of appropriation (re-appropriation?) of Poe by American Poe studies in the last 10 to 15 years bears

a striking resemblance to the process of appropriation that Poe, himself, effected with regards to “The Raven” in “The Philosophy of Composition.” Through the study of sociology, and of popular influence, these studies of Poe try to engage the scientific methodologies that would render a mechanism to appropriate Poe, to establish a relationship of belonging to what was empirically present at Poe’s time. With this respect, if one is in a relationship of possession to literature, the social, or culture, then one is assuming that it is being “made” elsewhere, or, better, that it has already been made, and, since we have been left out of its production, then we must now fight over the objects that are left to claim.

This language of property and ownership is meant to illustrate the consequences at work in recent Poe studies, and especially in relation to the decay of the European project for the university that I mentioned earlier. The tradition of the university that saw itself as making national citizens did not understand itself merely as “having” literature or culture, but as developing it, elaborating it, and setting forth the conditions under which they can flourish. The university, then, had to ensure the elaboration of culture, but also its preservation, which also means the transmission of its culture through the formation of mind in language through institutions of literature, art and philosophy. These were the critical institutions that the university thought *with* to produce culture and its attendant orders. The moment in which the question of culture becomes a search *outside* there is no longer a thinking *with*. In this configuration, culture becomes something hardened, a certain “madness” pervades it, and it puts the Cultural Studies critic, as well as the critic that seeks Poe “in his time,” in a position of capture through systems and methods of engagement. What is just as problematic is the fact that many of the categories of thinking – such as the individual as locus of agency – persist in these formulations. In other words, in studies of Poe that locate him as an American within popular

cultural trends, as well as in the engagement called “Cultural Studies,” there is a need for thinking agency, especially in order to accrue social consequences in a very difficult moment (which may or may not be possible), and such agency is often located at the level of terms such as “subject” and even “individual,” or, alternately, in the engagement of consumption of “low” cultural objects, whose vast proliferation is understood as a new ground by which to rethink community.

The problem with locating objects and thinking them in their consumption is that made objects are already subordinate to the operation that gives them. This, too, is the consequence of thinking the literary as a made object, which critics understand as something “made” in clear connection to popular influence, for instance, that, in turn, the masses consume in journals. To study consumption of objects, therefore, is to participate in the entrenchment of operations of knowledge. Any engagement with an object by way of its use subordinates both the object and the subject to its use: the use gives an operation of duration, or, in other words, time as anticipation. In such a moment, the object, as well as the subject, are in the strange position of becoming in which what they are now is subordinated to the anticipation of future states; in the engagement of time as anticipation they are bound to a process of becoming that has clear delineations. The future escapes from the present in frameworks of operations in which becoming is always a problem of being what we are not now. In becoming – understood within the parameters of a projection of anticipation – we are bound to an operation that gives a way of being that is incompatible with what we are. What this means is that the notion of agency, applied at the level of the individual in action or consumption, subsumes the individual into the classifications of the operative possibilities of the object and nothing more. This is a problem connected to the loss of wonder that I discuss in the section of the second chapter entitled

“Creation and the Leap of “Not Knowing” in the World of News,” and it is tied as well to the labor one does with a tool, in which the tool places the “subject” in a relationship of clear anticipation in relation to the materials upon which he works. For these reasons, as soon as we think of the individual as agent in consumption, and not as a function within a larger movement, then we have expelled thinking from existence and we have bound the individual into classifications, categories and operations.

Terence Whalen’s celebrated book on Poe, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses, is perhaps the best example of what I mean here. Whalen’s study is important because it represents the symptomatic confusion of the larger critical problem I have been trying to outline. In thinking the universality of the university, Whalen is wrong to locate in a “total knowledge” the ground for universality; he is wrong, further, in claiming that the goal of universality is for “social integration.” Traditionally, universality had limits: its domain was a “culture,” and it was language itself that provided universal mediation within its domain. The threat to cultural universality arises when language can be put to specific uses that produce codifications unique only to a limited province of human activity. Literature, as an object and exercise of language, cannot pertain only to specified and pragmatic uses or communications. This means that there can be no knowledge of a “production in general” (Whalen’s larger goal) with respect to literature; literature is not a product in the simple sense of a future goal (as in an “end product”) achieved only through the application of pre-existing techniques and knowledge. Literature, through the universality of language, might pertain to activities that already existing knowledge might not anticipate, or to activities that are not already codified. Such unpredictability signals an otherness insofar as these activities might not belong to available categories of knowledge.

Whalen's confusion is illuminating with respect to the problems I have been outlining here, especially with respect to his reading of "The Power of Words," which was a key text in my discussion of the leap and of discontinuity in Poe's fiction and criticism, especially in the Marginalia. Whalen makes much of Agathos's statement that "[...] not in knowledge is happiness, but in the acquisition of knowledge! In forever knowing, we are forever blessed; but to know all, were the curse of a fiend."⁵ Whalen interprets this phrase as a description of the activity of an information gatherer, a figure that browses the surplus of information produced and reproduced by the capitalist print industry. In some sense, Whalen takes Agathos to stand as Poe himself, who Whalen claims was an aggressive producer that scorned the burgeoning mass readership and ignored public good. He continues his work by searching for the source for Poe's tale; his summary of past scholarship is telling: "It could, for example, comprise a legitimate scientific hypothesis that Poe believes is literally true; or it could be a scientific hypothesis that an intrigued but skeptical Poe dramatizes; or it could be a kind of fable of Romantic power that Poe sincerely endorses; or it could be a fable of poetic power that a post-romantic Poe dramatizes with an indeterminate degree of irony and subversion."⁶ In short, it could be anything but literature.

Poe's criticism remains important as it attempted to confront the entrenchment of these operations, as well as rational projects; importantly, Poe tried to think about the possibilities of criticism not in reference to a culture, which was already a disappearing domain, but in relation to the mechanical entrenchment of industrial modernity. We need to ask now, however, how Poe's work can provide its ongoing intention in the name of originality when it finds itself within

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Power of Words," in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 6, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 139.

⁶ Terence Whalen, Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 252.

these projects. Poe's work on criticism always tried to work with respect to a larger movement than what terms such as individuals or nation states designate by addressing the movement of the life of a text. But what could it mean to enter into a larger movement that could possibly matter? Is the category of the individual something that should matter to us in thinking of a larger movement? What does a "larger movement" beyond the individual even mean? And, finally, do these questions matter to literature at this moment? In order to enter into this movement it will be very helpful to think along with Poe, who has already pushed us in this direction. To think with Poe must mean only to think with his writing, his literature; so to enter into this movement, to ask how it might matter, is, in a way, to also ask what literature itself thinks, and to ask about the historical being of language. In this sense, this conclusion does not put Poe into a lineage, but thinks his work with respect to a genealogy that illustrates what mind can produce historically.

The future of Poe studies, for the sake of literature and criticism, requires that we try to think this larger movement with which Poe's work intends to participate, and whose horizon exceeds the arrangements and discreet shapes of lineage, as it tries to find the creatively emergent. This would, furthermore, end the reductive practice of seeking Poe, of trying to find Poe in his characters, or even trying to find Poe in the event of the first person in his criticism. This latter point was of especial importance in relation to the Marginalia; I noted in the third chapter of this dissertation that critics have been very quick to think of Poe's marginal notes as biographical material, when these should be thought, perhaps, as Maurice Blanchot thought of each occurrence of the "I" in literature, and especially in his friend Bataille's work. In his essay on Bataille, Blanchot does not seek any biographical context to discuss Bataille's work, and asks, instead, about what the "I" could mean as Bataille wrote it. The answer to this question,

however, could not be answered by placing the “I” in context, for the “I” does not exist as a naturalized psychology, or a biographical account, but arises as a limit experience (which we might say was the way in which Poe used the “leisure” of the man of leisure in his work with periodicals). Blanchot states, “The limit-experience is the experience of what is outside; the experience of what is still to be attained when all is attained and of what is still to be known when all is known: the inaccessible, the unknown itself.”⁷ This is the reason, apropos of not only this conclusion, but this entire dissertation, of why Blanchot could never discuss Bataille in his writing. In the rare instance when he actually wrote about him, Blanchot stated, “Permit me, in thinking of Georges Bataille, to think in proximity to an absence rather than claiming to set forth what everyone should be able to find in his books.”⁸ This important passage expresses the affirmation of the discontinuous, as an absence or as the figure of death in Poe’s “The Oval Portrait,” that fulfills, also, the possibility of criticism as the gift of life in literature.

This possibility is strongly connected to the materiality of language, especially as Poe tried to engage it as the embodiment of action. This also points the way for how we might think about Poe and the work he tried to engender in his fiction. For instance, the Dupin stories, and most notably “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” are a case in point: the detective’s use of the press has lead scholars to seek source materials for the stories in the press of Poe’s time.⁹ The stories themselves, however, examine the language of the press, and play with its temporalities, in ways that do not secure referents, but examine the reading as a chance event. The newspapers do not reach Dupin and the narrator of the tales to establish the temporal habits of the press; the present

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 205.

⁸ Blanchot, 202.

⁹ The most recent example of this is Richard Kopley’s book on the Dupin mysteries. See Richard Kopley, Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries (New York: St. Martin’s P, 2008).

existed for them insofar as they dreamed it: “[...] continuing to occupy our chambers in the Faubourg Saint Germain, we gave the Future to the winds, and slumbered tranquilly in the Present, weaving the dull world around us into dreams.”¹⁰ The detective and his friend are not hailed by the linear temporality of the journals and the language of reference to the present, and therefore lie at the limit of the projects and applications of the press. When they study the newspapers, therefore, they break the connection of the press with the referential, and reflect, instead, on possibilities of what language can say as a way of finding a present that might be otherwise, and a future that has not been determined physically. Thinking of Poe’s stories in this way might lead us to articulate a different history for his detective fiction, one that is less close to the history of the police, for instance, and in favor of one that ties the detective to problems of thinking that arise under the suppression of the imaginative in language in the fallen reality of the press.

In order to pursue this line of thinking, it is obvious that we must reflect on what thinking itself is, and what is at stake in thinking. With this respect, it might serve us well to note that the word “think” is etymologically tied to the word “thank” in English.¹¹ Thanking is a response that is given gratefully to what one receives in the manner of a gift. If we follow the clue left us by this important etymological link along with what we have already been saying, what should become clear is that it is not the individual that thinks, or wills thinking, in isolation and from the wellspring of his being. Rather, thinking is the exhibit of the moment in which his being is actualized. Thinking occurs in a dual instant of actualization, in which intelligence and material coalesce: the intelligence expends force, and the material “responds” (thanks) by bearing

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Mystery of Marie Rôget” in The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Vol 5, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS P, 1965), 3.

¹¹ Heidegger notes this in his lecture series What is Called Thinking?

(tolerating) the imprint in a specific expression. The specific expression, then – in this case the specific expression Poe’s Dupin stories – is an exhibit of this movement as it unfolds and “proceeds.” In other words, thinking occurs only insofar as it is a material articulation of a more general movement. The mind, then, is a modality that arises as a function of an infinite movement that takes on its specificity only in the instant of its actualization; it responds in the instant of its actualization by becoming the determination that it is and exhibits this formation in the response of thinking. In this sense, to think always involves beginnings, with respect to their finiteness, that will accrue consequences with respect to what is beyond them since in their emergence they generate other thinking that is not thought.

What is important in this thinking is that thinking is not merely operative, but immanent in the very movement by which it is made and by which it accrues consequences. It is to this extent that language, as material, can bear the force of intelligence, but only in the social gathering of action. Now, it is very important to point out that this thinking is not presented as a way of reviving literature if it is dying – for the question is always to ask how we are caught in its movement – but to adequately understand what is at stake in the moment that these possibilities, or modes of thinking, face their death. In the moment of the death of a certain modality or way of thinking, it should be possible to think what was previously impossible. Or, is the impossibility of our moment much darker, and more impossible than this analysis lets on? If we are to assume that we can know intelligence insofar as it is exhibited in specific material articulations of its movement, then are we also to assume that the reduction of these articulations and of our engagement with them signals the constriction of intelligence itself? – for if we do not know intelligence, then it might be because it is not being expressed. This means that the advent of infinite improbabilities is reduced by being bound to systems that preempt change by ordering

what exists into a mechanical instrumentality. Might the mechanics of an American reappropriation of Poe, therefore, signal the ultimate expropriation that Poe expressed in “The Raven,” in which a shadow from the past inhabits the present and expels it from speaking the future?

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