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## Reading Fiction in Antebellum America

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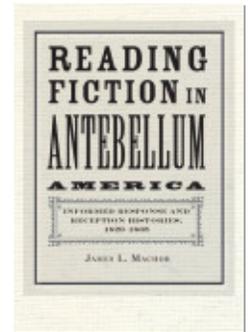
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## “These Days of Double Dealing”

*Informed Response, Reader Appropriation,  
and the Tales of Poe*

**A**MONG NINETEENTH-CENTURY American writers, perhaps no one had a more acute sense of audience than Edgar Allan Poe. Conceiving the form, unity, and originality of literature as a function of its effect upon readers, Poe defined fiction and poetry as discourses intrinsically involved with reception. This recognition of the need to engage readers within the developing literary marketplace of the 1830s and 1840s repeatedly surfaces in Poe’s critical commentary and accounts for his treatment of literature in “The Philosophy of Composition” as an instrument for securing the public’s attention during a single sitting. Long before that essay, however, Poe had made his concern with reception a component of his fiction in the design for his Folio Club Tales, a planned collection of stories written by members of a literary club and linked by the members’ responses to their colleagues’ tales. Yet if Poe’s attention to readers took various forms throughout his career, his greatest interest lay in the magazine audience for fiction.

Poe’s involvement with magazines, begun in his youthful reading of British periodicals, extended throughout his life. His stints as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* (1835–37), *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* (1839–1840), *Graham’s Magazine* (1841–1842), and the *Broadway Journal* (1845–46) immersed him in the world of magazines and magazine fiction and helped convince him, as he asserted on more than one occasion, that the “whole tendency of the age is Magazine-ward.” Believing of “the Magazine literature of America” that “there can be no question as to its extent or its influence,” Poe was certain that authorial achievement depended on skillful navigation through this growing medium.<sup>1</sup> Since magazines spoke to and for “the tastes of the day,” the successful writer would write for those tastes, and “not . . . merely for the taste of the taste-

less, the uneducated, but for that also, of the few.”<sup>2</sup> What was true for writers in general was especially the case for writers of the increasingly popular mode of prose fiction. The “writer of fiction who looks most sagaciously to his own *interest*,” claimed Poe, will “combine . . . his loftier efforts” with “such amount of less ethereal matter as will give general currency to his composition” (ER 312).

Despite his enthusiasm for magazines as the ascendant vehicle of fiction and audience engagement, Poe nonetheless recognized danger in writing the popular. Although he generally believed that a work’s popularity did not automatically signal artistic flaccidity, he also maintained that “a book may be exceedingly popular without *any* legitimate literary merit.” By the early 1840s, Poe even began expressing doubts that popularity was something a true artist would want. In a review of Charles Lever’s widely read novel *Charles O’Malley* in 1842, Poe claimed that seeking popularity in fiction represents a “stooping to conquer” and then sounded almost a proto-modernist warning that “the popularity of a book is *prima facie* evidence . . . of the book’s *demerit*” (ER 311–12).<sup>3</sup> Not that Poe would ever renounce public approbation, since he continued to relish the popular success of “The Gold Bug” and his Dupin stories. But like Robert Browning’s duke, Poe preferred never to stoop. Popular and critical success, he believed, needed to come on his own terms.

Poe’s double strain in thinking about fiction and the popular audience found a parallel in his interactions with reviewers and the informed pattern of response they disseminated to the middle-class magazine audience. In fact, Poe’s binary connection to informed reading holds double significance because of its relevance both to the shape of his career as a writer and to the reception of his fiction in antebellum America. Yet Poe’s dialogic relation to the public codes of reading in his own day was largely overlooked by most twentieth-century critics, who underscored his departure and independence from antebellum critical assumptions.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, Poe took on the reviewing establishment of New York and Boston, objecting in particular to the “cliques,” glad-handed corruption, truckling toadyism, and “disingenuousness” among reviewers whose praise or critique of a work too often depended on regional biases or under-the-table dealings between editors.<sup>5</sup> Despite his objections to what he called the “mere dogmas and doctrines, literary, aesthetical, or what not” that formed the “ruling cant of the day,” Poe nevertheless was deeply embed-

ded in their practices (*ER* 290). Only recently, in fact, have we come to understand, as one Poe critic has noted, that “in most instances, his critical opinions agree with those of his contemporaries” in *Graham’s*, *Godey’s*, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the *North American Review*, and other leading periodicals.<sup>6</sup> Behind those opinions and Poe’s commentaries as a whole lay a set of interpretive practices that linked Poe inextricably with the codes of antebellum informed reading.

If modern students of Poe often missed the connection, part of the reason is that Poe tended to exaggerate his differences from other reviewers, sometimes by creating readerly straw men. A case in point occurs in his second review of Charles Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* when Poe claims that reviewers as a group are wrong in their consensus that a work of fiction has to “disregard” or “contravene” established principles of art to be a popular success (*ER* 226). What Poe fails to mention is that his counterargument that a work could be both popularly and artistically successful paralleled the principle of most reviewers, who maintained that popular and critical success were not necessarily at odds and that the best fiction could achieve both.<sup>7</sup> Such an assumption, in fact, caused reviewers repeatedly to single out Dickens, Walter Scott, and the James Fenimore Cooper of the *Leather-Stocking Tales* as writers whose works deserved praise as models of that dual accomplishment.

Poe shared a number of other assumptions with informed reading, beginning with the belief that reviewers and magazinists exercised substantial influence as guides for the fiction-reading public. The “general opinion” about an author, Poe maintained, “is never self-formed” but is decided “by reference to the reception of the author’s immediately previous publication,” a process that makes the actual responses of the audience “a species of critical shadow” (*ER* 372). Even more explicit was his assertion in one of his “Literati” sketches that “the popular ‘opinion’ of the merits of contemporary authors . . . is adopted from the journals of the day” (*ER* 1118). Besides acceding to the prevailing belief that magazinists were shaping the audience for fiction, Poe exercised many of the specific practices of informed reading. In addition to reading for conventions of characterization that included identifying such fictional types as the “hen-pecked husband,” the “intermeddling old maid,” the “beautiful governess,” and the “high-spirited officer,” Poe subscribed to codes of verisimilitude and uniformity in characterization, as reflected

in his comment that in Robert Bird's *Hawks of Hawk-Hollow* too often a character "proves inconsistent with himself" or lacks a "fidelity to nature."<sup>8</sup> With other reviewers, Poe believed that characters could be read as indices to their authors, as evidenced by his remark that Seba Smith's eponymous Major Jack Downing "is not *all* a creation; at least one half of his character actually exists in the bosom of his originator."<sup>9</sup> Poe also attended to plot conventions and how they were deployed. He could praise a work for handling plot to produce "poetical justice" and take to task a novel such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Night and Morning* for its "absurd sacrifices of verisimilitude" in the "main events" (*ER* 214, 154). In treating genre, Poe embraced the code of uniformity, which caused him to upbraid novels such as Cooper's *Mercedes of Castile* for being "neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring."<sup>10</sup> Regarding narrative technique, while Poe felt that authorial commentary had a place in fiction and that "the *commenting* force can never be safely disregarded" by the "successful novelist," he also shared with other magazinists the belief that "it is possible to have too much of this comment" and that intrusive narration resulted when writers relied on a "superabundance" of "authorial comment" (*ER* 328, 104).

What is interesting is the way Poe's own practices directly contravene some of his objections to the way reviewers read fiction. Despite his oft-cited fulminations against what he called "the heresy of *The Didactic*" and his claim that any fiction must be "[v]iewed as a work of art, and without reference to any supposed moral or immoral tendencies," Poe's responses to novels are littered with remarks on the instructional and moral probity of fiction (*ER* 75, 103). As much as any reviewer, Poe could object to the unseemly, the immoral, and the vulgar in novels as an affront to informed readers, inveighing, for example, against *Charles O'Malley* for the "disgusting vulgarism of thought which pervades and contaminates this whole production" and from which the "lofty mind will shrink as from a pestilence" (*ER* 320). Conversely, he could praise J. P. Kennedy's *Horse-Shoe Robinson* for the way a "high tone of morality, healthy and masculine, breathes throughout the book" (*ER* 653).<sup>11</sup> While seldom expatiating on the tutelary merits of particular works, Poe did engage in the negative principle of didactic critique in informed reading by lambasting novels that imparted immoral lessons. Such was the gist, for instance, of his response to a novel entitled *Mephistopheles in*

*England*, which struck him as having “no just object or end” except “to cherish and foster the malice, the heart-burnings, and evil propensities of our nature. The work must, therefore, as a whole be condemned.”<sup>12</sup>

Even Poe’s idea of effect connected to the interpretive practices that dominated public responses to fiction. This linkage involved more than the obvious point that effect requires someone to be affected and thus necessitates thinking about fiction’s relation to its audience. Undergirding Poe’s concept of effect and his privileging of it as “indispensable” to the brief tale was the assumption in informed response that the successful author would be a virtual enchanter who controlled the audience with his or her spellbinding artistic performance. Like other reviewers, Poe believed that the successful work of fiction resulted from and testified to the ability of the author to wield the “wand of the enchanter,” whose “vigorous, and glorious *imagination* . . . induces the reader . . . to muse in uncontrollable delight over thoughts” (*ER* 216). As he explained most pointedly in one of his reviews of Hawthorne’s stories, when “in the brief tale . . . the author is enabled to carry out the fulness [*sic*] of his intention” and achieve the effect he desires, then “[d]uring the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (*ER* 572).<sup>13</sup>

Such connections and parallels should come as no surprise given the extent of Poe’s immersion in the world of antebellum periodicals. Because Poe was steeped in the public discussion of fiction, the interpretive practices through which it proceeded played a formative role in his conception of his relation to his audience and the impact he wanted his fiction to have on readers. He understood that to work, a story had to address its audience’s horizon of expectations. This engagement was not, for Poe, a matter of pandering to the popular, since the optimal goal was to produce a text and an effect that “should suit at once the popular and the critical taste” (*ER* 15). It also was never a matter of pure accommodation to that horizon since Poe understood, again in accordance with informed reading, that a work of fiction had to be different, had to depart from or even disrupt expectations to be seen as original and achieve its effect. In defining originality as “novelty of effect,” Poe believed that such “originality . . . demands in its attainment less of invention than negation,” an undercutting of audience expectations so as to destabilize or at least reorient the reading experience (*ER* 580, 20–21).

The interrelation of accommodation and disruption in Poe’s concep-

tion of authorial engagement of the audience emerges most clearly in his three reviews of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, where Poe also expressly addressed the nature of effect. Although he sometimes spoke of "effect" as any impact a work had on the reader, his comments on Hawthorne reveal a more specialized conceptualization. In explicitly linking the status of the "skillful literary artist" with the ability to achieve "a certain unique or single *effect*," so that "the soul of the reader is at the writer's control," Poe observed that in such Hawthorne tales as "Sights from a Steeple," "Little Annie's Ramble," and "The Haunted Mind," a thoughtful reader would "note their leading and predominant feature, and style it *repose*. There is no attempt at effect. All is quiet, thoughtful, subdued" (*ER* 570–72). Such a comment indicates that, for Poe, effect achieved by the "skillful artist" does not inhere in just any impression or impact. Hawthorne may produce repose, but he does not produce effect because effect cannot consist of calmness, satisfaction, or ease but emerges only when the reader is made to feel emotional and mental disruption. Because Poe believed that "[a]ny strong mental emotion stimulates all the mental faculties," he held that only the strong stimulation of mental faculties produces true effect (*ER* 1354). And herein lay the problem with feelings such as repose and comfort. Lacking strength, they could not produce effect, since they could not compel the reader's mind and soul to fall under the fiction writer's irresistible control. Effect resulted instead from the writer's ability to produce in the reader the opposite of repose, to disrupt the reader's ease by instilling disquietude and even disorientation so as to maintain authorial mastery over the reading experience.

Poe's ideas about effect and reading signal that his departure from the assumptions of informed reading did not consist of rejecting its interpretive codes but emerged instead from elevating some of those principles to paramount importance in defining his own relation to the fiction-reading audience. For Poe, more was at stake than a particular tale's success or failure to achieve its effect. What mattered was the exercise of power and control as the *sine qua non* of his artistic identity. Indeed, it would not be amiss to assert, as Stephen Railton has tellingly observed, that "control is . . . the central, informing preoccupation of Poe's uneasy career as an American writer"—a career in which he was driven by the idea that "no word can be permitted to escape the writer's control, and no reader."<sup>14</sup> What bothered Poe was not only the potential of the unruly

text to elude authorial authority once it passed from the writer's hands. Greater problems lay in the control reviewers had (or Poe believed they had) over the fiction-reading public and the attendant power of that public, especially within the reading formation of informed response, to determine a work's meaning, impact, and status.<sup>15</sup>

Poe, to be sure, recognized that readers had a necessary role in fiction and were not simply passive receivers of an impact. In the second Hawthorne review, Poe explained that a tale, when composed with "care and skill" to produce a "single *effect*," "leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction" (*ER* 572). To be truly appreciated, a work of fiction requires a reader who not only contemplates its form and meaning but does so in harmony with the author's purpose by bringing to the text a shared aesthetic sense or "kindred art." Poe, however, never felt comfortable with this dependence on the reader, despite his enthusiastic support for the popular world of magazine fiction and its mushrooming audience. If popularity could necessitate an unacceptable "stooping to conquer" by the author, the activities of the audience posed the danger of reader usurpation of control over the text and, thereby, an appropriation of power from the author. Since Poe equated success in fiction writing with mastery of the reader's soul, such usurpation could only signal authorial failure.

The potential for readerly appropriation existed most dangerously in particular ways of reading, especially those that Poe believed were tendentious. Hence, he objected to didactic and moral readings of fiction even though he practiced both forms of interpretation. He also developed a marked uneasiness with the assumption that one can read from a text to the writer, particularly by identifying a narrator with an author. For Poe, such an interpretive strategy gave readers the power to erase the magic of a writer's mercurial genius by reducing the fictional text to a reflection of authorial personality and temperament.

In Poe's way of seeing things, however, any reading that invested ultimate authority in the audience's interpretations and judgment, which was precisely a central tenet of antebellum informed reading, posed a threat that made him anxious. Poe was hardly alone among his contemporary fiction writers in feeling an anxiety over his relationship with readers.<sup>16</sup> What distinguished him, however, was the way he approached that relation as a virtual battle for authority, waged as both frontal as-

sault and guerrilla warfare.<sup>17</sup> Properly pursued, a covert struggle would be especially valuable to Poe for undermining the audience's ability to fix his identity through his fiction. As a counter to the problematic agon with readers over authorial mastery of the text, Poe accordingly sought to make himself into the writer as shape shifter, whose artistic magic and sleight of hand would be so forceful yet subtle that it would disempower readers while leaving them in bewildered awe.

Yet a question arises in this context: Which readers were the target of Poe's disorienting strategies? This issue merits consideration because the most frequent critical anatomy of Poe's relation with readers has defined his approach as one characterized by a bifurcated notion of audience. Modern critics repeatedly have claimed that Poe wrote partly for the masses and partly for an astute minority of readers. According to one version of this argument, Poe segmented his stories by readership, creating his tales of horror for the mass audience and his literary hoaxes for the attentive minority. Terence Whalen, Benjamin Fisher, and others have countered that Poe did not align particular tales with different audience groups since such a strategy, in Whalen's words, "would have either limited his best works to the smallest circulation, or . . . condemned them to oblivion. Instead, he viewed his texts as split or divided objects." In this characterization, each tale contains elements pitched to thoughtful readers as well as something designed to work on the masses.<sup>18</sup>

Such arguments hold a certain degree of credibility, given Poe's repeated assertion that the fiction writer needs to engage both popular and discriminating readers; on one occasion he even claimed that the "judicious artist" would include in a work of fiction "qualities which are interesting to all, as a passport for those of a more intellectual character" (*ER* 312–13). Such a division, however, was never paradigmatic for Poe because as a defining principle it could not fit his notion of artistic mastery and the imperative to control all readers. Thus, it would be a distortion to view his tales of crime and horror or his fictional hoaxes as stories in which the majority of the audience was to become immersed in or duped by events and characters while other readers would step back from that experience in a more thoughtful and analytical way so as to understand and admire the art of the effect. Though Poe could happily talk of leading "the nose of a mob" by "its imagination," he also increasingly believed as his career progressed that imagination and analytical

intellect, as “the two divisions of mental power[,] are never to be found, in perfection, apart” (*ER* 1455, 549).<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the accomplished artist, who seeks perfection in both the text and its engagement with readers, would strive to tap both analysis and imagination in all audience members.

Even as Poe sought a response that merged imaginative credulity with analytical insight and appreciation, he also conceived the informed audience and the mass readership as a common ground for staging effect as a means of asserting authorial power. For if effect entailed disruption, then all readers had to be disrupted, disoriented, or to some degree duped, even the reader of “the kindred art.” After all, a reader who understood too much about a text’s artistry could not remain in the writer’s control, or, as Poe put it on two occasions in his *Marginalia* pieces, a work in which a reader can see the method cannot produce the effect it seeks precisely because “the wires are . . . not concealed” or “the trap is not properly baited or set” (*ER* 1404, 1365). The trick was to create a degree of understanding while still keeping the reader in the dark by producing an illusion of perception achieved or insight shared. In his third review of Hawthorne, while discussing originality in fiction, Poe suggested how this strategy could take in even the most kindred-spirited reader: “true originality—true in respect of its purposes—is that which, in bringing out the half-formed, the reluctant, or the unexpressed fancies of mankind, . . . combines with the pleasurable effect of apparent novelty, a real egotistic delight. The reader . . . feels and intensely enjoys the seeming novelty of the thought, enjoys it as really novel, as absolutely original with the writer—and himself. They two, he fancies, have, alone of all men, thought thus. They two have, together, created this thing. Henceforward there is a bond of sympathy between them, a sympathy which irradiates every subsequent page of the book” (*ER* 581). Interestingly, Poe defines this intimate bond with the reader by taking away as much as he gives. In the truly resourceful engagement, the reader is induced to feel a bond, to “fancy” achievement as a kindred art, that remains in part an illusion, staged by the writer who has kept his true accomplishment—the wires controlling the scene—hidden behind the curtain of his craft.

Every member of the audience, including the reader of a kindred art, was for Poe a potentially double addressee to be simultaneously engaged and kept at a distance, enlightened and mystified, even amused and ridi-

culed. Thus, if Poe's relation to the fiction-reading audience was ambivalent, it was not because, as Michael Williams has claimed, Poe conceived his readers as "potential victims or lurking villains."<sup>20</sup> His ambivalence toward his audience consisted of conceptualizing them as a necessary part of artistic effect even as he chafed under that necessity because it threatened loss of mastery. For Poe, that is, all readers were legitimate victims *because* they were potential villains. Informed readers, both as reviewers and as the middle-class magazine audience, were nemeses and desiderata of the powerful author, who would turn them into unwitting co-conspirators of their own capitulation.

The undercurrent of uneasiness that marks this conception meant that as much as he sought power over his readership, Poe did not conceive himself as a mere puppet master. His goal involved maintaining a balance between eliciting admiration while dominating the fiction-reading audience, but it was a balance always in danger of tipping toward self-cancellation, since a writer's true genius could never be fully appreciated, in Poe's logic, unless it was fully understood. Yet full understanding paradoxically would break the spell that marked authorial mastery. In the form Poe conceived it, the struggle with the audience for artistic control always threatened to do in the writer no matter how much he or she succeeded.



A battle with readers constituted one of several important elements in the reception of Poe's tales and the public conception of him as a fiction writer in the 1830s and 1840s. A combination of fascination, dismay, and pleasure marked the audience's encounter with his short stories; however, it was not the same pleasure that most twentieth-century readers have identified with Poe's fiction: the *frisson* of horror. Instead, from 1833 until the late 1830s, Poe was viewed—and achieved some popular success—as a writer of comic tales. Certainly, the public discussion treated stories such as "Hans Pfaall," "Ms. Found in a Bottle," and "Lionizing" that way, and there is little if any evidence to suggest that the middle-class audience who read these and other Poe stories in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the *Saturday Courier*, *Godey's*, and *Graham's* received them any differently. The issue of the *Messenger* containing "Lionizing" called it "an inimitable piece of wit and satire," while the *Baltimore Republican* dubbed "Hans Pfaall" a "capital burlesque upon

ballooning,” a response echoed by the *Baltimore Gazette*.<sup>21</sup> Six months later the *Messenger* was calling Poe a writer whose stories as a whole were marked by a “uniquely original vein of imagination, and of humorous, delicate satire” (Dec. 1835: 1). The *New York Corsair*, still later, referred to the “sparkling dash of fancy, sentiment, and wit intermingled” in Poe’s tales.<sup>22</sup> Interesting is the preponderance of these comic readings even though tales such as “Pfaall,” “The Duc de L’Omelette,” “Metzengerstein,” “King Pest,” “The Assignation,” “Berenice,”—in fact, virtually every one of the eighteen tales Poe published before 1839—can be read as narratives peppered with what critics today call conventions of gothic fiction but which, in the terminology of antebellum informed reading, marked out the sensational German tale or the story of “Germanic mysticism” and horror.<sup>23</sup>

Certainly Poe’s contemporary audience could have perceived in those tales features that they would have identified as marks of “Germanism”—a term loosely connected with mystical philosophy, antiquated (often Old World) settings, ruined habitations, necromancy, and an aura of desolation. The settings in dark European castles or palaces in “Metzengerstein,” “The Bargain Lost,” and “The Assignation” would have been salient, as would the encounters with the demonic in “Duc” and “Bargain,” the mysticism of “Metzengerstein,” and the plague-ridden atmosphere of “King Pest.” Informed readers could also have pointed to the live burial of “Loss of Breath,” the mutilation in “Berenice,” and the corrupt aristocratic characters of “Duc,” “Metzengerstein,” “The Assignation,” “King Pest,” and “Von Jung” as indications that these were stories of Germanic mysticism. Besides the conventions connecting these tales to that genre, the magazine audience could have used rules of notice to do the same thing. For attentive readers, the epigraphs from Schiller and Goethe heading the first published version of “The Assignation” and the subtitle of “Loss of Breath” as “A Tale a la Blackwood” (the British periodical well known to American readers for stories of Germanic horror) could have been telling signs of these tales’ modes. In light of the fit between reader horizon and the interpretive occasion provided by these tales, it is not surprising that a few readers did view some of these as stories of Germanic mysticism and, following the principles of informed reading, denounced them as sensationalistic. According to the *Augusta Chronicle*, “Berenice” and “Morella” were stories “belonging almost peculiarly

to . . . the German school” in their “gloomy exhibition of passion” (June 11, 1835, *PL* 156); likewise, the *Southern Literary Messenger* objected that in “Berenice” there is “too much horror in his subject” (Mar. 1835: 387). Even more strongly, the *Richmond Compiler* said that “The Duc de L’Omelette” “is calculated to produce effects permanently injurious to sound morals” and urged “Mr. Poe” to “disenthral himself from the spells of German enchantment and supernatural imagery.”<sup>24</sup>

Such responses, however, were the exception rather than the rule in the reception of Poe’s fiction before 1839. The question is, why? How was it that a writer known throughout the twentieth century as perhaps the quintessential gothic writer in American literature was read primarily as an author of fictional satires and burlesques for the first third of his career?

In some ways it is not difficult to see why reviewers and magazine readers took these tales as risible, particularly if we consider them in light of antebellum interpretive assumptions about informed reading. Readers could have found support for comedic interpretations by invoking a rule of notice: attending to character names as an index to a story’s meaning. Readers would hardly have found it difficult to locate a humorous drift in such characters as the Prince de Foie-Gras, Abel-Shittim, Mr. Windenough, Mrs. Lackobreath, the Duchess of Bless-my-Soul, Don Stiletto, and Her Serene Highness the Arch Duchess Ana-Pest.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, since informed readers were to be, at least in theory, well read, certainly some would have seen many of these tales as marked by allusions to or imitations of other fictional works generally held to be in the Germanic or sensational mode. The prophecy about the destruction of a castle and the portrait of an animal that comes alive in “Metzengerstein” would recall parallel developments in Horace Walpole’s Germanic “classic” *The Castle of Otranto*, while readers would recognize the entire drinking scene in “King Pest” as a virtual duplicate of the grotesque Palace of the Wines episode in Benjamin Disraeli’s popular novel *Vivian Grey*. Anyone familiar with Theodore Fay’s widely read *Norman Leslie* could not help but see echoes of it in “Von Jung,” and “Morella” would have looked remarkably like another version of Henry Bell’s “The Dead Daughter” or the classical story of the child-eating Lamia.<sup>26</sup> Such allusions and parallels, which are now virtually inoperative for most readers of these tales, would have been part of the reading formation—and thus the experience

of these stories—for many antebellum readers. The combinations of such connections with the jocular names may well have caused Poe's contemporaries to see these stories as part of a tradition they would have known: the popular subgenres of literary parody or Germanic satire.<sup>27</sup>

Such reading practices and expectations, however, would not necessarily have led all readers to a comic response, particularly those coming to any single tale without a working sense of the type of writer Poe was. Though informed readers supposedly would not have encountered Poe's tales in such an ignorant state, even the best-prepared reader would have read his first published tale, "Metzengerstein," in that condition. A question worth asking, therefore, is what would the experience of "Metzengerstein" have been for those first-time readers of Poe's first story.

Informed readers certainly would have been struck by the story's opening paragraph, beginning with its reference to "horror" and "fatality" and its announcement that the tale is set in Hungary during a period when "a settled although hidden belief in the doctrines of the Metempsychosis" flourished.<sup>28</sup> Such announcements would have looked like the standard trappings of Germanic mysticism. Yet readers also would likely have paused at the mention of metempsychosis, since it was not only a subject of mystical philosophy; it was also known to readers as a pseudo-phenomenon, a form of contemporary quackery employed by sharpers and spirit-rappers to deceive a credulous public. Then, too, the narrator's comment at the end of the opening paragraph must have added to the audience's sense that some rethinking about this tale and its subject might be necessary. For after commenting that, "[o]f the doctrines themselves—that is, of their falsity, or their probability—I say nothing," the narrator adds that "much of our incredulity . . . *'vient de ne pouvoir être seuls.'*" Readers had to wonder whether "incredulity" referred to a lack of belief in metempsychosis or a lack of conviction about its falsity, but if the former were the case, the phrase "comes from not wanting to be alone" (a reasonable English translation of the French) hardly would seem an apt cause for doubting metempsychosis.

With the second paragraph, more oddities might have struck antebellum readers. Not only does the narrator call metempsychosis a "superstition" that, even at the time of the story, was "fast verging to absurdity," but the quotation rendering the belief of the Hungarians as they "said" it is given in the French of "an acute and intelligent Parisian" (1: 19). Taken

together, such additions would seem either to give an absurdly contorted view of the belief or to deny it altogether.

Of course, to reach such conclusions, readers would have had to be able to translate the French in both paragraphs, and that ability would not necessarily have been widespread in the middle-class audience. Yet even those who could not make the translation could have reached two conclusions shared with those who could: first, that “Metzengerstein” looked like a typical Germanic tale in several ways, including the reliance on sprinklings of foreign phrasing that typified that genre; and second, that it also looked atypical because instead of using that foreign phrasing to create mystery, “Metzengerstein” seemed to be employing it to produce obscurity. That sense of obscurity would have been reinforced, furthermore, when the magazine audience reached the story’s fourth paragraph, in which the narrator, after invoking the prophecy that “the mortality of Metzengerstein shall triumph over the immortality of Berlifitzing,” discloses that “the words themselves had little or no meaning” (1: 19).

To reconstruct the experience of reading the tale in this way would seem to indicate that, for antebellum readers encountering it through codes of informed reading, “Metzengerstein” would have started to look like an absurdly comic version of the Germanic tale of horror or a parody of such Germanic novels as Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*. However, I do not necessarily want to claim that the initial readers of the tale in 1832 would have reached such a conclusion, particularly if we consider antebellum codes of reading as distinct from modern ones. From a modern perspective, that is, such involutions and abrupt contradictions designate comedy precisely because, as G. R. Thompson has argued, they disclose a narrator who does not understand the very story he tells and thereby becomes, as obtuse gothic yarn-spinner, an object of satire.<sup>29</sup> For antebellum readers, however, such a reading would have been virtually impossible since it depends on a code that was not among the interpretive strategies of the 1830s: the assumption of an unreliable narrator. Instead, the involuted comments and the narrative’s lack of help in making sense of them more likely would have led Poe’s magazine audience to conclude that the story was a technical, aesthetic blunder by Poe himself. From such a perspective, antebellum readers could have regarded “Metzengerstein” as a botched tale of Germanic horror, a bad imitation of a *Blackwood’s* tale or of *Castle of Otranto*.

The point here is not that this was the conclusion that the antebellum audience reached about “Metzengerstein” but that for informed readers in 1832 an interpretation of the story either as a turbid parody of the Germanic tale or as a flawed but seriously intended version of that mode would have been possible. Coming upon this initial Poe tale in the *Philadelphia Courier*, the audience of that periodical would thus have probably been perplexed by the story and by their difficulty in deciding exactly what it was. For such readers, it was a matter of having to choose between a bad Germanic horror tale or a poorly performed Germanic burlesque that was, in either case, connected to an inherently flawed and dangerous genre. For those readers, the story’s inability to identify its status would have been a further sign of its weakness.

By 1836, however, when Poe republished a slightly revised version of “Metzengerstein” in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the tale would have looked quite different. Readers could take it unequivocally as a witty parody “in imitation of the German” (the story’s subtitle), but the reason was not the changes Poe had made. Nor was it a matter of readers finally coming to their senses and interpreting the tale correctly. The controversy marking twentieth-century commentary on “Metzengerstein” belies any claim that a comic or a serious reading of the story is the “correct” one.<sup>30</sup> Rather, readers in 1836 could create a comic “Metzengerstein” instead of a tale that they may have originally found confusing because the conditions for reading Poe’s tale had changed. By 1836 Poe’s reputation as a comedic author of such tales as “Loss of Breath,” “Bon Bon,” “The Assignation,” “Lionizing,” and “King Pest” (all of which had preceded the reprinting of “Metzengerstein” in the *Messenger*) had been established in the reception events that had collected around Poe’s fiction. Public responses to his stories by that time were regularly identifying them as burlesques, satiric “hits,” or comedic “quizzes” aimed at the faults, foibles, and pretenses of the day. In that vein, the *New York Courier and Enquirer* styled “Loss of Breath” a “capital burlesque of the wild, extravagant, disjointed rigmarole” in *Blackwood’s*;<sup>31</sup> the *Augusta Chronicle* explained that “Lionizing” “has all the humor, animation, and satire of Sterne’s man from the promontory of Noses” (Aug. 7, 1835, *PL* 164); and the *Richmond Compiler* identified “Hans Pfaall” as “a burlesque upon the mania for ballooning” (Nov. 26, 1835, *PL* 181). Moreover, if a comment by James Kirk Paulding has any truth to it, the response to

Poe as a comic writer was not limited to reviewers. In an 1836 letter to Thomas White, proprietor of the *Messenger*, Paulding claimed that Poe's "quiz on [N. P.] Willis" in "Lionizing" and his "Burlesque of 'Blackwood'" in "Loss of Breath" "were not only capital, but what is more, were understood by all."<sup>32</sup>

Especially significant for establishing this version of Poe's fiction were the publication and reception of "Ms. Found in a Bottle" (1833, reprinted in the *Messenger* in 1835) and of "Hans Pfaall" (1835). Both tales originally were taken as nonfictional reports. A letter in the *Baltimore Patriot*, for instance, announced that "Hans Pfaall" is "no less than a true and authentic narrative of a voyage made by Mynheer Phaal [*sic*], from the city of Rotterdam to the Moon" (Aug. 7, 1835, *PL* 164). Part of the reason for such credulity was that these stories looked to their readers much like the true-to-life but breathtaking narratives of voyages and exploring expeditions that formed a staple of newspaper and magazine offerings, particularly at a time when experiments in ballooning were gaining public attention. Then, too, as several commentators pointed out at the time, the verisimilitude of these two tales in their detailed descriptions—especially of balloon construction, atmospheric measurements, and topography in "Pfaall"—struck readers as earmarks of the real thing. The *Messenger* commented, for instance, that "Hans Pfaall" renders its events "with a minuteness so much like truth, that they seem quite probable,"<sup>33</sup> while the *Charlottesville Jeffersonian* remarked that the actions of the story "are pictured . . . with all the detail of circumstances, which truth and the fearful reality might be supposed to present" (Jan. 1, 1835, *PL* 186).

The phrasing in some of the public commentary nonetheless indicates that not all readers were taken in completely by "Hans Pfaall" regarding its status as fiction or nonfiction—and some were not fooled at all. Only a day after the story's publication, the *Baltimore Athenaeum* called "Pfaall" a "well imagined" story that "displays much ingenuity" (July 11, 1835, *PL* 162), and a month later the *Richmond Whig* pointed out that "[t]here is a great deal of nonsense [and] trifling" in the tale (Aug. 7, 1835, *PL* 163). Those readers familiar with Poe's stories previous to "Pfaall" had, in fact, good reason to be skeptical, since they would have known that only a year and a half earlier, "Ms. Found in a Bottle" had created a modest stir as a successful hoax that had induced a good laugh among the reading public. Even at the time of its publication in 1833, moreover, some readers had

been able to see through the public misconception that “Ms. Found in a Bottle” was a work of nonfiction, apparently by seizing on several factors. Attentive readers noticed that it was being published in the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* as the declared winner of what had been announced over the previous months as a competition for the best imaginative tale submitted to that paper. Consequently, taking “Ms. Found in a Bottle” as a hoax did not depend on readers interpreting it though the concept of unreliable narration but involved reading for genre by determining its status as a work of fiction disguised as nonfiction. Such a move entailed, for some, linking Poe’s tale to a precedent. As the *Charleston Courier* reminded its audience upon the republication of the story in 1835, “Ms. Found in a Bottle,” in working on “the credulous,” had drawn on the writings of Captain John Symmes (October 17, 1835, *PL* 175). Informed readers in 1833 who made that interpretive connection and recalled that Symmes’s 1820 *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery* had itself been exposed as a hoax would have had a further warrant for taking Poe’s tale as a fictional fabrication playfully designed to mislead readers about its genre profile.

By 1836, the interpretive horizon of informed readers had been well prepared through a series of reception events, reviewer comments, and previous reading experiences to expect a certain type of fiction from Poe. In place was a contextual horizon of expectations for taking any new or republished tale by him—including “Metzengerstein”—as a satire, burlesque, or potential hoax.

It would be inaccurate, however, to assume that all of Poe’s contemporary readers were configuring his tales as comedic or that those who did so were doing it in a uniform manner. Besides the occasional reviewer remarks already noted about dangerous German horror, one of Poe’s readers, J. P. Kennedy, conveyed in a letter to Poe some dismay at the reception of Poe’s tales as humorous performances. In case Poe did not realize it, Kennedy explained, “Some of your *bizareries* have been mistaken for satire—and admired too in that character. They deserved it, but *you* did not, for you did not intend them so.”<sup>34</sup> Another reader privately complained of “Lionizing” that “it has neither wit nor humor; or, that if it has any, it lies too deep for the common understandings to fathom it.” No doubt there was an element of truth to the latter part of this remark, contrary to Paulding’s claim that Poe’s burlesques “were understood by all.”

Early in 1836, Harper Brothers turned down Poe's proposal to publish a collected edition of his tales on the grounds that the satire of the stories was too fine and required a familiarity and knowledge that many readers simply did not possess.<sup>35</sup> Whatever degree of accuracy the Harpers' conclusion may have reflected in describing the reading audience, there is no doubt that many readers nonetheless were being schooled to view Poe's stories as ludic and to read them, despite the occasional public objection, as moral tales that combined humor with tutelage. The *Baltimore Republican*, for instance, in commenting on "Lionizing" as "an admirable piece of burlesque," noted that Poe's tales possessed "an ability to afford amusement or instruction" (June 13, 1835, *PL* 157). More emphatic was the *Richmond Compiler*. Reading "King Pest" as a satiric temperance tale, in which "the evils and maladies attendant upon intemperance are all portrayed in the allegorical personages," the reviewer added that "few of Mr. P's tales are without aim or moral" (Nov. 26, 1835, *PL* 181).

The general drift in the public reception of his fiction in the mid-1830s must have pleased Poe quite a bit, in part because the comic response that dominated the discussion seems to have been what he was striving for in at least some of these tales. As he explained in reply to Kennedy's letter about the public "misreading" of several stories, "You are nearly, but not altogether right in relation to the satire of some of my Tales. Most of them were *intended* for half banter, half satire. . . . 'Lionizing' and 'Loss of Breath' were satires properly speaking." Seven months later, in a letter to Harrison Hill, Poe likewise identified the "series of Tales, by myself—in all seventeen," which he had been publishing (and republishing) in the *Southern Literary Messenger* during the previous eighteen months—as marked by a "bizarre and generally whimsical character."<sup>36</sup> Besides according with his professed goal, the comic readings of the tales had to please Poe as evidence of his authorial success at controlling reader response and thus validated his developing theory about effect. Indeed, the success of the hoaxes and the accompanying audience credulity would have strongly confirmed—and served as a satisfying index to—his ability to disorient and dominate his audience by leading them by the nose of their imagination.

Poe, in fact, was so delighted by the triumph of "Hans Pfaall" and "Ms. Found in a Bottle" that he was willing to claim more for them than he apparently had sought in the first place. Although taking credit in 1835

for the successful deception he had achieved with “Pfaall,” Poe admitted ten years later, in an unusual public disclosure, that fairly early in the composition of that tale “I gave up the idea of imparting very close verisimilitude to what I should write—that is to say, so close as really to deceive.” He even admitted that it was only in the three weeks following the story’s publication, when “the first of the ‘Moon-hoax’ editorials made its appearance in ‘The Sun,’” that “I understood the jest” (*ER* 1215–16).

Poe’s remark here suggests that he was encountering some troubling implications in the reception his tales were getting in the mid-1830s. It was as if readers had taken some of them in directions other than what he had wanted, and Poe was finding it necessary to redefine them as comically efficacious so as to reclaim them under his mantle of authorial control. Poe surely must have been bothered by some of the other responses, particularly those that read his tales as didactic or cautionary stories for imparting moral lessons or that objected to them as degenerate Germanic stories designed to harm the fiction-reading public. His frustration with the latter as early as 1835 is evidenced in his letter to Thomas White, who apparently had objected to “Berenice” as a story marred by sensationalism and bad taste. Wrote Poe in reply: “The history of all Magazines shows plainly that those which have attained celebrity were indebted for it to articles *similar in nature*—to Berenice. . . . You may say all this is in bad taste. I have my doubts about it. . . . But whether the articles of which I speak are, or are not in bad taste is little to the purpose. To be appreciated you must be *read*, and these things are invariably sought after with avidity.”<sup>37</sup> It is difficult not to sense Poe’s defensiveness in such remarks, as though he felt the need to take back control of his stories by claiming for them a calculated popularity based, as he explained to White, on “the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful colored into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque.” Although modern critics have wrestled with these passages, seeking to decipher exactly what Poe meant by “the grotesque” and “the ludicrous,” what is most striking in the context of Poe’s reception is the evasiveness of his comments. Is “Berenice” “ludicrous” or “horrible”? Grotesque or burlesque? Witty or fearful? Granting the story’s horror, Poe denies it by asserting the tale’s humor, even as he qualifies its comedic status by aligning it with fear. At work here is the same kind of shape shifting Poe practiced in his letter to Kennedy when discussing the supposed satire

of his tales. After his remark about intending them as “half banter, half satire,” Poe added in the same sentence, “although I might not have fully acknowledged this to be their aim even to myself.” In effect, Poe tells Kennedy that his tales were intended as humorous, though he might not have sought to make them funny, and that he designed the humor to be both inconsequential “banter” and serious “satire.” Under the oppressive potential of even ludic readings of his works, which threatened to fix him as comic writer, Poe shifts his profile before Kennedy’s eyes in an effort to avoid Kennedy’s ability—and the ability of the rest of the audience Kennedy had mentioned—to pin him down.

What is ironic is that Poe was able to get his wish about not being typecast as a comic writer. Despite how the interpretive horizon for the magazine audience had become contoured by the conception of his fictions as burlesques, satires, and hoaxes, a curious shift started to emerge in the reception of his stories from 1839 to 1840. Responses increasingly began to characterize his tales as only a few commentators had done previously by stressing the horror, crime, outré philosophy, and unnaturalness in their pages and by treating them as serious (and for some, dangerous) Germanic tales. The *Southern Literary Messenger* complained that “The Fall of the House of Usher” “leaves on the mind a painful and horrible impression” and accused Poe of being “too much attached to the gloomy German mysticism” (October 1839, *PL* 272). The *Saturday Evening Post*, while commenting on “Usher,” “William Wilson,” and the earlier “Morella,” noted more appreciatively that Poe “is deeply imbued with the spirit of German literature, and as one of that class of writers has few equals” (Nov. 2, 1839, *PL* 275). *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger* disclosed that “William Wilson” “reminds us of Godwin and Brockden Brown” (October 16, 1839, *PL* 274), while the *New York Evening Star* called “Usher” a “*chef d’oeuvre*” one would usually find “in the pages of Blackwood” (Sept. 7, 1839, *PL* 269). As part of this reorientation in the response to Poe, the *Boston Evening Gazette* offered this characterization of his fiction, with a special emphasis on “Morella,” “Ligeia,” and “Usher”: “The wilder and more impassioned tales of Mr. Poe, are of a dark, mystic, German character, the most ideal, shadowy and strange, like the phantasmagoric dream of an opium-eater.”<sup>38</sup>

By the close of 1839, following the publication of Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, reviewers were uniformly emphasizing the sober

and Germanic elements of his tales despite the fact that, of the twenty-five stories in the collection, two-thirds had been previously read and publicly discussed as burlesques, satires, and hoaxes. The *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* reported that readers would find these tales “generally wildly imaginative in plot; fanciful in description, often times to the full boundaries of the grotesque” (Dec. 14, 1839: *PL* 281). The *Saturday Evening Post*, after noting that the *Tales* is comprised largely of Poe’s republished pieces, emphasized that “[t]hey are strongly infused with the German spirit, [possessing] a metaphysical style to which the writer is ardently attached” (Dec. 7, 1839, *PL* 280). Although admitting that there is an element of “the quaint and the droll” in the volume, a reviewer in the *Philadelphia Pennsylvanian* underscored the way the tales are “marked with all the deep and painful interest of the German school” (Dec. 6, 1839, *PL* 279). Less flexible and more captious was a response in the *North American Review*, which announced, “These tales betoken ability on the part of the author to do better. Let him give up his imitation of German mysticism, throw away his extravagance, . . . and leave all touches of profanity to the bar room” (Dec. 10, 1839, *PL* 280).

Undoubtedly, Poe was aware of these responses and was likely pleased by the praise several accorded the tales as well as by the turn in his reception, insofar as it signaled a departure from the assumption that had fixed him as a writer of comic fiction. Yet it is also clear that he was chagrined by the shift even before it hardened into a new paradigm via the reception of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. In a November 1839 letter to Joseph Snodgrass, Poe expressed hope for a “complete triumph over those little critics who would endeavor to put me down by raising the hue & cry of *exaggeration* in style, of *Germanism* & such twaddle.”<sup>39</sup> By the time that *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* was being readied for publication, the conception of his fiction as Germanic had reached enough of a pitch that Poe found it necessary to try in his preface to the collection to counter that conception.

At stake was not just the way Germanism was being leveled against the tales as a moral indictment of the harm they posed to their audience. More perfidious, for Poe, was that such an epithet ascribed to his stories a derivative status by implying that they were mere imitations of a foreign model—and a questionable one at that. Hence, in his preface, Poe carefully asserted that any terror in these tales was legitimate and

original because it was not of foreign import: "If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul,—that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results."<sup>40</sup> Even more dangerous was the manner in which the "German" bent of the responses threatened to overwhelm Poe's authorial power by enabling the audience to pigeonhole his stories in a neat, pejorative category.

The bulk of Poe's preface can be seen as seeking to blunt this interpretive turn through an evasive "clarification" of what these tales are. After explaining that the "epithets 'Grotesque' and 'Arabesque' . . . indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales here published," Poe counters this characterization by asserting that "it cannot be fairly inferred," based on the stories in this collection, "that I have, for this species of writing, any inordinate, or indeed any peculiar taste or prepossession." Having severed his artistic identity from the fixed category that he has just identified as applicable to the tales, he then turns to the direct charge of Germanism by agreeing with it: "Let us admit, for the moment, that the 'phantasie pieces' now given *are* Germanic, or what not. . . . These many pieces are yet one book. My friends would be quite as wise in taxing an astronomer with too much astronomy, or an ethical author with treating too largely of morals." In other words, Poe implicitly asks, how can the stories be charged with doing what they do since that is what they do? They cannot do anything else any more than a moralist can avoid addressing morality. But having virtually defended Germanism as the tales' inviolable essence, Poe then tells his audience that "the truth is that, with a single exception," which he does not identify, "there is no one of these stories in which the scholar should recognize the distinctive features of that species of pseudo-horror which we are taught to call Germanic." Poe's strategy here works by sleight of hand: Now you see the Germanism, now you don't. Of a piece with such attempted disorientation of the reader to protect Poe's own authority as author is his brief second paragraph of this two-paragraph preface. There he notes that "[t]here are one or two of the articles [i.e., magazine stories] here, (conceived and executed in the purest spirit of extravaganza), to which I expect no serious attention, and of which I shall speak no farther." Drawing attention to at least a couple of the tales that had been received as comedic and simultaneously disclaiming their importance, Poe can as-

sert the diversity—and, hence, the intractability—of his creative powers while aloofly dismissing the assertion as a mere afterthought hardly meriting his attention.

It was an intriguing tactic, even a brilliant one—if it had worked. Of course, it did not, as illustrated by the responses to the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* cited above. Yet the sticking point in all this is not the ineffectiveness—or even the shape—of Poe’s response to his audience’s responses. The question is why this shift in the public perception and interpretation of Poe’s fiction occurred in the first place.

It is tempting to claim that the answer is the tales themselves. One version of this explanation might build on Meredith McGill’s point that the “publishing histories” of some of Poe’s stories in “altered states” created for his contemporaries “all kinds of confusions about authorial identity”<sup>41</sup>—including confusions or shifts in readers’ conceptions of Poe as a comic or Germanic writer. By this logic the altered material forms of Poe’s tales, resulting in part because of the revisions Poe made whenever he reprinted them, caused readers to take as Germanic what they formerly had read as comic.

Both the changes themselves and reviewer comments, however, indicate that material changes did not play a role in this rereading of Poe’s previous fictions. For one thing, between their original appearance in periodicals and the reprinting in *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, only three of the twenty-five stories in the collection had undergone any extensive revision. One of those, “The Signora Zenobia,” Poe divided into two separate stories for the *Tales*.<sup>42</sup> Nor did the physical form of the collection seem to have any effect. Lea and Blanchard, which published the volume, issued it in a standard format with no special features (e.g., black letter typeface or suggestive illustrations) that might have led readers to see the text as a compilation of Germanic pieces. Nor was it a matter of gathered impact. No reviewer identified—or even hinted at—a connection between reading the stories as a group and their genre profiles, so that stories that had looked ludic when read individually now as a group were interpreted as Germanic.

The other textualist explanation involves claiming that the shift in the response to Poe, which began treating him as the author of serious tales of German horror, resulted from a shift in the type of stories Poe began writing in 1839 and after—a change evident in the stories’ formal and

thematic properties. Such an explanation certainly meshes with what has served among twentieth-century Poe scholars as the standard narrative of his career. According to this paradigm, Poe began as a writer of hoaxes and satires, which he conceived as a group that he had hoped to publish as the Folio Club Tales, and then only in the late 1830s, with “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “William Wilson” (or, according to some versions of the story, “Berenice” and “Morella”) did Poe turn to the serious gothic fiction that would characterize the rest of his career.<sup>43</sup>

Such a formalistic explanation unfortunately runs into several problems, not the least of which is the way response and reception theories call into question its essentialist premise that there are formal and thematic elements in a text that exist prior to and independent of the way it is read. The history of how Poe’s fiction has been interpreted also problematizes any claim for the texts themselves as the cause. Recall that the responses to the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* tendentiously emphasized their Germanic sobriety despite the fact that eighteen of the twenty-five stories in the collection had previously been occasions for viewing Poe as a writer of comic fiction. Moreover, despite the standard modern story of the “shift” in Poe’s fiction writing, twentieth-century critics and scholars hardly have agreed about which Poe stories are comic and which are serious gothic narratives. A number of the early stories, including “Hans Pfaall” and such Folio Club Tales as “The Assignment,” “Metzengerstein,” and “Ms. Found in a Bottle” have been read by some as comic *and* by others as serious fictions.<sup>44</sup> The same has obtained in critical discussion of the supposedly clear-cut hoaxes and satires published after 1840, such as “Mesmeric Revelation,” “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” and “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether”—fictions whose “clear-cut” comedy itself problematizes the standard narrative of the shift in Poe’s writing style. Daniel Hoffman has even claimed that all of Poe’s hoaxes “have a serious interest.”<sup>45</sup>

Conversely, the tales often thought of as Poe’s most chilling and pensive gothic stories, including “Ligeia,” “Usher,” and “William Wilson,” have been turned on their heads and “exposed” as playful comedies or mordant satires.<sup>46</sup> More tellingly, some twentieth-century critics have argued that all of Poe’s tales, even his most serious narratives of the dark side, are to some degree comic, whether as prickly satires, as burlesques

of other forms, or as self-parodies.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly in the face of such shifting interpretive winds, several critics have agreed to a gentlemanly throwing up of hands and announced that “it is impossible to tell when Poe is playing games with us and when he is being serious” in his fiction.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, we cannot tell, if by “telling” we expect to determine on the formal level of the “tale itself” which ones belong to which category. Such indeterminacy, of course, accords quite nicely with Poe’s goal as the shape-shifting fiction writer; however, before we get too heady about ascribing a tidy fit between intention and effect and crown Poe with artistic laurels for a feat well done, it is worth pointing out that even Poe recognized, to a degree, that the explanation for the response to his tales did not lie in the fiction itself but in the way it was read. Significantly, Poe used that recognition as part of his strategy in his preface to the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* when countering the charge of Germanism. Just after “admit[ting], for the moment, that the ‘phantasy-pieces’ now given *are* Germanic,” Poe added that the reason is that “Germanism is ‘the vein’ for the time being. To morrow I may be anything but German, as yesterday I was everything else.” Although ostensibly a description of his past, present, and future proclivities as a fiction writer, the contexts for this comment—both the shift in the antebellum response to his tales and his own assertion a few lines later that his stories are *not* Germanic—provide an alternative explanation: that Poe is describing the supposed Germanism of his tales as a product of the altered way they were being read in 1839.

Poe’s explanation clearly begs the question as to why Germanism was the vein of the day, but it also opens an avenue for examining the reasons for the interpretive shift. It resulted not because more writers were producing Germanic mystical fiction to the point where anything that even faintly looked the part got the label. Evidence suggests, in fact, that just the opposite may have been the case by the late 1830s.<sup>49</sup> Rather, Poe’s stories became Germanic because “the German,” as an interpretive marker, had undergone change as a cultural and literary category for signifying and judging fictional forms. Understanding the transformation in the responses to Poe’s fiction thus requires attending to that shift as a product, in part, of altering cultural conditions and their impact on the interpretive practices of informed reading.



In his study of nineteenth-century attitudes toward death, Greg Laderman has disclosed how conceptions of death began to change in antebellum America, as the traditional Christian response of resignation was giving way to extreme feelings of loss and an expansion of rituals of mourning, particularly among the middle class. Americans were not facing any sustained increase in the incidence of death, but there were periods of significant fluctuation in mortality rates, particularly when what Laderman calls “changes in living and work patterns” resulted from market expansion in the capitalist economy.<sup>50</sup> Those expansions bought with them periods of economic upheaval, with one of the most significant being the Panic of 1837 and the depression that followed. By 1839 and 1840, the privations, increases in urban crimes, and fatalities that marked the depression—coupled with the attendant change in attitudes toward death—made it increasingly difficult for the middle-class audience to read stories of disease, crime, and human demise as in any way humorous.<sup>51</sup>

Contributing to this change in the conditions of reception was the growing uneasiness with certain developments abroad that signaled a threat to American society and to the Republic. Americans began to express fear over what were seen as potential perils accompanying an influx of certain types of immigrants. For this era witnessed a rampant suspicion about Roman Catholics, not just through Irish immigration but through German as well. If association with “the Germanic” came under increasing suspicion, it was not, moreover, only because anti-Catholicism was on the rise. Political radicals with protosocialist ideas began to arrive in the United States from Germany, and those ideas and their proponents were seen, particularly by the American middle class, as an Old World threat to the young republic.<sup>52</sup> In the wake of such cultural paranoia, “the Germanic” and anything associated with it, including fictional forms, took on increasingly ominous implications. The medieval settings and Old World trappings associated with the Germanic tale no doubt further served to connect Catholicism and German mysticism in a way that enhanced the perceived danger of the latter as a literary form.<sup>53</sup> By 1839–40, it consequently became almost impossible for readers to respond to Germanic elements in tales as minor components subservient to other ends—especially the comedic. Nor was it necessary for Poe’s

audience at this time to think of him as a writer who had gone from comedy to Germanic tales. If reviewers and the magazine audience could take the collected *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* as Germanic, it was because what formerly had been comic in his fiction now looked Germanic.

The dynamic of the audience's encounter with Poe's stories is important to consider here because these changing cultural contexts were not a hegemonic force working outside the experience of the fiction. That experience and the trajectory marking the reception of his stories—as well as other Poe writings—also were central to the reconstruction of Poe as a writer of serious fiction—for good or ill.

Part of that encounter involved the reception of Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, in late 1838. Although a few readers wondered about its factuality, most reviewers responded to *Pym* by situating it as a type of fiction reminiscent of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*—an adventure/travel narrative of striking verisimilitude and/or social commentary. *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* called *Pym* a novel written “after the manner of Defoe,” while the *New York Review* said it had “that air of reality which constitutes the charm of *Robinson Crusoe*.” The *Knickerbocker* spoke of *Pym*'s “Robinson Crusoe-ish sort of simplicity,” and the *New York Albion* exclaimed that “the author is a second Capt. Lemuel Gulliver.”<sup>54</sup> But having made some sense of *Pym* through a code of genre identification, readers were at a loss to decipher what Poe was doing in that mode. A reviewer in the *Albion* pointed out that *Pym* “does not deal in political or moral satire” in the vein of Swift and Defoe (Aug. 18, 1838, *PL* 254) and, in fact, had no higher purpose, according to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, other than to “require his insulted readers to believe his ipse dixit” (Sept. 1838, *PL* 254). Several reviewers began to suggest that *Pym* was a lark for its own sake and pointed to the improbabilities, the discrepancies, and the preternatural events as reminiscent of Sinbad the Sailor, Baron Munchausen, and Jack the Giant Killer.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps, some reviewers suggested, the novel was a hoax, in the mold of Richard Adams Locke's well-known “Moon-Hoax” of 1835—or Poe's own “Hans Pfaall.” If so, however, it was a bit much, marked by heavy-handedness and sanguinary excesses, according to the *Knickerbocker*, and what the *New York Review* termed “too many atrocities, too many strange horrors.” The *Monthly Review* objected that

“some of the most elaborate scenes” in the novel “are disgustingly horrible,” while the *Naval and Military Gazette* warned that *Pym* was fit fare “[f]or those who possess a genuine love of the horrible” (October 20, 1838, *PL* 257).<sup>56</sup> The problem was not simply a matter of too much horror going on for too long. The sticking point for informed readers was that, in light of Poe’s comic reputation, the horrifying elements had not been countered sufficiently by the comic—whether as satire or hoax—with the result that readers interpreted *Pym* as a failed “Hans Pfaall” or as an egregiously uncontrolled collection of atrocities—or as both. The question readers asked, in effect, was what Poe was doing with this novel. Was it truly an authorial gaff, a sign of decline, or was Poe up to something that was not quite clear?

Readers had to be suspicious because by 1838 it was difficult simply to dismiss Poe as a hack novelist, not only because of his proven successes as a fiction writer but also because of the reputation he had gained via his editorship of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. His nonfiction may indeed have played a role in the reconceptualization of Poe that would come in 1839 and 1840. Although Poe had begun as an outsider to the magazine literary scene, by the late 1830s he had become recognized as a voice to be reckoned with. In the logic of informed reading, such a writer could not have been using his stories simply to lampoon other genres or to create fictional bagatelles. Poe had to be a writer of serious literature that was above the faults he leveled at other writers. Then, too, the content of some of his editorial pieces may have served readers as a clue to Poe’s “true” nature as a fiction writer. For example, his review of Henry Chorley’s *Conti the Discarded* in the February 1836 *Messenger* heaped praise on the “very powerful influence” of the “*Kunstroman*,” which, he explained, instills “admiration and study of the beautiful, by a tissue of *bizarre* fiction, partly allegorical, and partly metaphysical.” From “Germany alone,” he added, could so “profound” a form have come.<sup>57</sup> Readers who saw in such comments enthusiastic support of the Germanic as a potent porridge of the bizarre, the allegorical, and the mystical could have found in Poe’s words an index for deciphering his own fiction as forms in which the mystical and bizarre serve as vehicles for metaphysical allegory in the Germanic mode.

When magazine readers turned to “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “William Wilson” in 1839, they did so with a different horizon

of expectations than what had been in place for Poe's reception only two years before—a horizon that caused them to ask different questions and reconceptualize the gaps in Poe's tales. In speaking of antebellum readers confronting gaps in Poe's tales, I do not mean that this was a novel experience for Poe's audience in 1839. Like all works of fiction (and all texts) Poe's stories always "had" gaps, but they were constituted, as gaps, in particular ways through the audience's specific reading formations. As we have seen, for antebellum readers the gaps "in" "Metzengerstein" were not intrinsic to the text but were a function of particular strategies of reading, which also determined the way readers could fill the gaps with comic significance by the mid-1830s. With the failure of *Pym* and Poe's altered public status, however, readers were constituting different gaps in "Ligeia," "Usher," and "William Wilson."

An index to that difference comes from a remark on "Usher" by John Heath in his letter to Poe shortly after that story's publication. Heath complimented the tale but expressed his lack of pleasure at finding himself "reading tales of horror and mystery." A parallel response characterized Washington Irving's comment on "William Wilson" in a letter to Poe two months later, in which Irving explained that the story induced a "singular and Mysterious" interest.<sup>58</sup> Significantly, both responses employ a term that had not previously been applied to Poe's short stories: *mystery*. It is as if these two readers were finding gaps in the respective tales that they were having trouble filling—a problem analogous to the one reviewers of *Pym* had encountered. Exponentially more puzzled by the "mystery" of Poe's new tales was Philip Cooke, who remarked in a letter to Poe, "Of 'William Wilson' I am not sure that I perceive the true clew. From the 'whispering voice' I would apprehend that you meant the second William Wilson as an embodying of the *conscience* of the first; but I am inclined to the notion that your intention was to convey the wilder idea that every mortal of us is attended with a shadow of himself—a duplicate of his own peculiar organization—differing from himself only in a certain angelic taint of the compound. . . ; I cannot make myself understood, as I am not used to the expression of a wild *half thought*. But although I do not clearly comprehend, I certainly admire the story."<sup>59</sup> This remark is telling in several ways. Faced with uncertainty, antebellum readers such as Cooke employed an interpretive strategy that enabled them to position the tale in a particular way—as a "wild" tale of the supernatural and

the mystical in the German mode. Just as importantly, Cooke's response indicates that one of the uncertainties is what a story such as "William Wilson" was about in terms of its philosophy or theme. If not satire, burlesque, or parody, what were "Wilson," "Usher," and "Ligeia" saying? For this reader, the solution to the mystery was to read "William Wilson" first through the didactic code as a moral allegory about conscience and then on a "deeper," perhaps emblematic, level as a vehicle for exploring a metaphysical theory. But also clear from his professed uncertainty about perceiving "clues" is that this reader felt less than comfortable with his allegorical or emblematic reading as a solution to the mystery of Poe's tale.

Interestingly enough, readers seem to have done the same kind of thing in responding to "Ligeia," following a rule of notice to identify its epigraph from Glanville as a clue to deciphering the story. At least that is what a reader for the *Southern Literary Messenger* did. Interpreting "Ligeia" in light of the Glanville epigraph as a "wonderful story, written to show the triumph of the human will even over *death*," the *Messenger* commentator treated the tale as an allegory or emblematic vehicle for presenting a philosophy about human volition (Jan. 1848: 36).

To get from the epigraph to this thematic response, any antebellum reader would naturally have had to go through a number of interpretive turns that, in all likelihood, would have begun with the title. Exercising the hermeneutic code of mystery/solution in conjunction with a rule of privileged position, informed readers would most likely have asked what the title refers to. That is, what or who is Ligeia? Although perhaps a bit unsettled by the narrator's initial inability to provide information about family name or origin of acquaintance, readers nonetheless could discover by the story's second paragraph that Ligeia was a woman—and the narrator's wife and friend. Certainly, Ligeia would have struck the audience as an unusual woman and consequently as a female character who could not be viewed as a comic or parodic stereotype. While readers might have taken her as belonging to the convention of the pale, slender beauty of many stories, that reaction probably was followed by a sense of Ligeia as a character who was also a mysterious stranger and a learned tutor. Her proficiency in classical languages—a rare accomplishment for women by antebellum standards—would only have enhanced the audience's sense that they were dealing with an unusual character of exceptional parts. Despite the husband-narrator's praise of Ligeia, however,

Poe's contemporaries must have wondered how to take her. For readers would have discovered by the story's sixth paragraph that Ligeia was also the purveyor of esoteric knowledge that led the narrator, as he admits, toward "the goal of a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden" (1: 316). It is difficult to think that antebellum readers would not have seen in this phrase allusions to such stories of transgressive knowledge as the Faust legend and, more poignantly for middle-class Christians, the temptation and sin of Eve. Combined with her abnormal erudition, Ligeia had to strike middle-class readers— male and female alike—as a woman who had gone dangerously beyond the bounds of true womanhood. The ideology of the antebellum cult of domesticity would have provided the logic for such a response, which would have had even greater support through a development in Jacksonian American to which Charles Sellers has pointed: the growing bourgeois fear of a connection between strong women and male indulgence in illicit behavior.<sup>60</sup> Such a connection, along with Ligeia's excesses, could only have been strengthened in the minds of Poe's contemporary readers by the disclosure of "Ligeia's more than womanly abandonment to a love" (1: 317).

Among readers for whom such dark implications would have accumulated midway through the story, a gap would have opened about the narrator himself: How is one to take his fascination with and continued adulation of this woman? That question could only have intensified by the end of the tale when antebellum readers confronted what must have struck them as a monstrous Ligeia responsible for Rowena's death and the supernatural violation of her body.

Yet even while experiencing such problems in the story, informed readers may already have been fashioning an answer by seizing on the narrator's comment that Ligeia's attractions had the "radiance of an opium dream" and his later admission that he had become "a bounden slave in the trammels of opium" (1: 311, 320). Pointedly enough, when "Ligeia" was republished in 1845, a comment accompanying it in the *New World* emphasized that element of the story, drawing attention to the "ruined and specter-haunted mind of the narrator" as "suggest[ing] a *possible explanation* of the marvels of the story, without in the least weakening its vigor as an exposition of the mystical *thesis* which the tale is designed to illustrate and enforce" (Feb. 15, 1845, *PL* 502–3). This was not, it should be stressed, a reading of the story as the fantastic in prescient

anticipation of Tzvetan Todorov's modern theory. The commentator in the *New World* did not identify a psychological or naturalistic explanation as an uncanny counterpoint existing in tension with the marvelous elements in the story. Instead, in interpreting the mind of the narrator as "ruined" by opium, this reader saw such an implication as in no way diminishing the story's mystical thesis about the supernatural power of the human will. Such a reading, moreover, would have gained additional credence for some readers from the fact that, at Ligeia's death, the narrator repeats in his own mind Glanville's words about the power of the human will.<sup>61</sup> For if the narrator, by such an action, makes this belief his own, antebellum readers could justifiably have concluded that the narrator's transgressive fascination with Ligeia is part of his guilt in that he too is responsible for the subsequent death of Rowena and the commandeering of her body by Ligeia's dark spirit.

If this is a reasonable reconstruction of the experience of "Ligeia" by antebellum informed readers, it would nonetheless seem to raise a problem. Would not such an experience entail, and even depend on, readers identifying the tale's narrator as unreliable—precisely the kind of thing that many modern critics have done?<sup>62</sup> In other words, would not this reconstruction depend on ascribing to readers an interpretive move that would have been impossible for them to make in 1839–40? I do not believe so. While an antebellum reader experiencing the tale as I have described would find something specious, it would not be the narrator but the tale itself. For the informed audience, the story was an "autobiographical" tale and thus, according to the interpretive convention for processing that technique, was told by a narrator who, as an imagined mind of the author, surely shared the author's mentality. Any problem with the narrator, therefore, could be interpreted as a flaw in Poe's handling of the story as a vehicle for conveying its "thesis" on the power—and perhaps the danger—of the human will.

A version of this kind of reading formulation appears, in fact, to have been the motor behind a comment by Poe's sedulous correspondent, Philip Cooke. Shortly after reading "Ligeia," Cooke had written Poe to let him know that

I of course "took" your "idea" throughout. The whole piece is but a sermon from the text of "Joseph Glanvil" [*sic*] which you cap it

with—and your intent is to tell a tale of the “mighty will” contending with & finally vanquishing Death. The struggle is vigorously described . . . until the Lady Ligeia takes possession of the deserted *quarters* . . . of the Lady Rowena. There I was shocked by the violation of the ghostly properties—so to speak—and wondered how the Lady Ligeia—a wandering essence—could, in quickening *the body of the Lady Rowena* . . . become suddenly the visible, bodily, Ligeia. If Rowena’s bodily form had been retained as a shell or case for the disembodied Lady Ligeia, and you had only become aware *gradually* that . . . a soul of more glowing fires occupied the quickened body and gave an old familiar expression to its motion—if you had brooded and meditated upon the change . . . and then . . . broken into the exclamation which ends the story—the *effect* would not have been lessened, and the “ghostly properties” would, I think, have been better observed.<sup>63</sup>

Explaining how he comprehended the story’s idea, Cooke nonetheless objects to the way it is presented. What bothers him in particular is the way the theme is actualized through what the narrator says and observes about the transformation of the resurrected Rowena into Ligeia. In his reading, this problem in the handling of the narrative, while not disrupting the theme, interferes with the story’s “ghostly properties” and thus with his ability, as a reader, to decipher his position vis-à-vis the characters. To be sure, Cooke seems more concerned with the shape of Ligeia’s metempsychosis and the probability of the plot (as deciphered by the code of causality) than with the narrator’s authority, but as a good informed reader Cooke would not have seen these issues as separate, since narratorial authority always was, in informed reading, a matter of authorial authority and competence in telling and plotting a tale. Significantly, Cooke’s response embodies precisely that connection in the way he refers to the narrator of “Ligeia” as “you,” as if Poe himself (or at least an autobiographical projection of Poe) “became aware” of Rowena’s transformation and blurted out the story’s last words.

To some degree, Poe must have been amused by such remarks, but he also must have found responses such as Cooke’s disturbing, even as he had to take some satisfaction both from them and from reviewer comments about “Usher” and “William Wilson.” The disquietude and disori-

entation of those comments accorded with the kind of disruptive effect that Poe equated with excellent fiction.<sup>64</sup> Yet even if the match were that neat, Poe had to have been concerned because, to work in the fullest sense, it would require an understanding of the artistry behind the disruptions of these tales and thus the establishment of an aesthetic distance in which the reader perceives the controlling wires and lays bare the traps. To succeed, in other words, Poe's tales depended on the audience's triumphant understanding. Compounding the problem was that Poe could not even know for certain whether such cognizant appropriation of the text's power was going on. Instead, in light of comments such as Cooke's tempered chiding, Poe confronted responses against which he had to defend himself. By late 1839, faced with the need to recapture his own sense of authority as a fiction writer, Poe began pursuing a two-pronged strategy.

One tactic involved directly addressing readers, both publicly and privately, via counter readings of his tales that were coupled with a playful evasiveness through which Poe could become the author as chameleon. Hence, the deft dodgings and arch acrobatics of his preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Likewise, in his response to Cooke, Poe chose elusiveness as part of his strategy. Despite telling Cooke that "[t]ouching 'Ligeia' you are right—all right—throughout" and that a "gradual perception" that Ligeia lives again would produce "a far loftier and more thrilling idea than the one I have embodied," Poe never changed the conclusion of the text, despite making other (and in some cases substantive) revisions each of the three times he republished it.<sup>65</sup> This is not to imply that Poe revised "Ligeia" as he did simply to confound Cooke. The lack of change to the ending suggests that Poe probably did not see it as flawed and that his "admission" to Cooke may have been a hoax of the moment. In other words, from Poe's perspective, if the tale had not served as an irresistible force of authorial power in working on Cooke and readers of his ilk, the problem was not with the tale itself but with a dense, officious, and uncooperative readership.

By 1839 Poe seemed, in fact, to be growing increasingly perturbed with the fiction-reading audience. After expressing his satisfaction that "Ligeia" was at least "intelligible" to Cooke, Poe announced, "[a]s for the mob—let them talk. I should be grieved if I thought they comprehended me here." A similar disdain marked the advice Poe offered to his friend

Frederick Thomas a year later in response to Thomas's inquiry about how to succeed as an author. "If you would send the public opinion to the devil," advised Poe, "forgetting that a public existed, and writing from the natural promptings of your own spirit[,] you would do wonders."<sup>66</sup>

As the other prong of his strategy, Poe sought in the early 1840s to construct his tales in a way that would counter the problematic element in the reception of the stories in the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* by keeping the audience off balance and eliciting awe while simultaneously achieving understanding from readers who would nonetheless not quite comprehend what happened to them. It is as if Poe could not relinquish his desire, despite his growing uneasiness with the popular magazine readership, to somehow affect an audience who would be both overpowered and appreciative.

In composing his tales, accordingly, Poe combined several tactics. To avoid being fixed by his audience, Poe sought generic diversity by returning to the successes of his past through stories that could elicit a comic response. Poe had begun to employ this strategy even before the reception of his collected tales as he became aware of the shift to the Germanic emphasis in responses to his fiction. Publishing "The Psyche Zenobia" ("How to Write a Blackwood Article") in 1838, he followed it in 1839 with "The Devil in the Belfry"—a melange of fabricated authorities and identifiably humorous names that Poe simply called an "extravaganza"—and "The Man That Was Used Up," a tale that Daniel Hoffman has asserted would have been recognizable to Poe's contemporaries as a political satire probably aimed at Winfield Scott.<sup>67</sup> To these Poe added two new hoaxes, the serialized "Journal of Julius Rodman" (1840) and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841), as well as "Never Bet the Devil Your Head" (1841), "Diddling" (1843), "The Spectacles" (1844), and "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq." (1844).<sup>68</sup> In several of these, Poe went after targets that the contemporary magazine audience could readily have identified as "hits," from con games and human vanity to the puffery of literary journals. Other stories, however, could be read several ways—or at least Poe wanted the comic swath to cut broadly. When one reader wrote to him about "Never Bet the Devil Your Head" as a satire on New England transcendentalism, Poe demurred by retorting with a counter reading: "You are mistaken about 'The Dial.' I have no quarrel in the world with that illustrious journal. . . . My slaps at it were only in 'a general way.' The

tale in question is a mere Extravaganza levelled at no one in particular, but hitting right & left at things in general," from homeopathy and child-rearing practices to antigambling tracts.<sup>69</sup>

To enhance his reputation for diversity, Poe also turned to a fictional mode he called "something in a new key": his tales of ratiocination and detection beginning with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and "The Mystery of Maria Rogét" (1842).<sup>70</sup> Achieving significant popularity, these tales enabled Poe to tap the magazine audience's interest in such topical events as the widely reported, mysterious death of the "beautiful cigar girl," Mary Rogers, in New York City and more generally in the crime reporting that was a staple of mass-circulation newspapers. Such stories also provided him with what he hoped would be a vehicle for mystifying and dazzling the audience without being tarred with the brush of "Germanic horror," and his plan apparently worked, at least for some readers. The *Pennsylvania Inquirer* marveled at "Rue Morgue" for the way "[a]t every step it whets the curiosity of the reader, until the interest is heightened to the point from which the mind shrinks with something like incredul[i]ty; when with an inventive power and skill, of which we know no parallel, he reconciles every difficulty" (July 1843, *PL* 430). The *Literary Gazette* said of the same tale simply that its "marvelous chain of analytical reasoning" causes readers to feel that "the horror of the incident is overborne by the acuteness of the arguments" (Jan. 31, 1846, *PL* 621).

One interesting dimension of Poe's experimentation with this "new" mode is that, at a time when his dissatisfaction with the fiction-reading public and its demands was growing, readers found these tales accommodating by discovering in them something informative, useful, and reassuring. According to the *Saturday Museum*, "Murders in the Rue Morgue" provided "the man of legal lore an opportunity of acquiring an insight into his profession, more thorough than his long days and studious nights could ever glean from all the records of criminal practices" (July 22, 1843, *PL* 429). Making a broader claim for the value of the Dupin tales as a group, the *American Review* informed readers that these stories, while designed "to surprise the mind into activity," also "relieve the curiosity of the reader from the tangled mesh of mystery, in which it is caught and confined" in a manner that "makes him aware of the practical value of such mental acuteness in the ascertainment of truth."<sup>71</sup>

It would, nonetheless, be a mistake to push any claim of accommodation too far in drawing out Poe's relation to fiction readers in the 1840s. Poe wanted the upper hand, and playing the part of the accommodating writer was one more role he could take on as a means to display his abilities as a writer of multifarious modes and masterly diversity. Poe's concern with diversity as a principle of his reception is perhaps most evident in his reaction to the Wiley and Putnam 1845 publication of their collection of twelve of his stories, which Evert Duyckinck had selected from the roughly sixty-five tales Poe had published. Despite the pleasure Poe took at the success of the Dupin stories and other ratiocinative tales such as "The Gold Bug," he complained afterward that Duyckinck "made up the book mostly of analytic stories. But this is not representing my mind in its various phases—it is not giving me fair play. In writing these Tales one by one . . . one of my chief aims has been the widest diversity of subject, thought, & especially *tone* & manner of handling." Cloaking his consternation by wrapping self-aggrandizement in a mantle of objectivity, Poe went on to claim, "Were all my tales now before me in a large volume and as the composition of another—the merit which would principally arrest my attention would be the wide *diversity and variety*."<sup>72</sup>

Yet the impression such diversity would ostensibly create of him as a writer was hardly enough, since such an impression meant only that readers had not been able to channelize him. It fell short as an index to the kind of control over the audience and the fiction-reading experience that Poe regarded as a hallmark of great authorship. For such an effect, more was needed, and to achieve it Poe turned to the more aggressive and potentially dangerous part of his strategy: to subtly entrap his audience in stories that would, like "Ligeia" and "William Wilson," affect readers by destabilizing the reading experience and eliciting awe, while preventing them from mastering the tale.

I am referring here to the strategy Poe pursued through the stories many twentieth-century readers view as his quintessential tales of mystery and horror: "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," both published in 1843. Antebellum readers were certainly prepared to receive both tales as anything but comedic, despite the fact that "Descent into the Maelstrom" and "Julius Rodman" had gone the rounds as successful hoaxes only two years before. Not only had Poe's reputation as a serious Germanic writer been implanted in the magazine readership by 1839

and 1840; the intervening publication and reception of “Maria Rogét,” “The Oval Portrait,” “The Masque of the Red Death,” and “The Pit and the Pendulum” further entrenched that interpretive assumption. Just as formatively, middle-class readers came to “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” at a time of growing public interest in urban crime—and in the psychological and moral condition of criminals and the criminally insane.

For centuries insanity had been viewed as a possible cause for crime and for murder in particular, with the condition of the insane criminal conceptualized as a form of total and permanent mania, measured by the criterion of the “wild beast.” But by the mid-1830s, doctors, jurists, and legal thinkers began to argue that criminal insanity need not be total nor constitutional. Instead, such insanity could manifest itself intermittently so that, if eventuating prior to and as the impetus for an act of homicide, such insanity precluded moral culpability on the part of the killer. The logic here was that the criminal, as a victim of an “irresistible impulse,” was unable to prevent his or her own temporarily heinous behavior. Termed “moral insanity,” the concept became the basis of debates about criminality and guilt as part of a new form of insanity defense. By the early 1840s, according to Norman Dain, the issue of moral insanity, the status and treatment of the criminally insane, and the insanity defense “became an important and controversial subject in America.”<sup>73</sup> Through published trial accounts and articles in newspapers and magazines, these ideas and the developing controversy were disseminated to the same middle-class audience that was reading “Tell-Tale Heart” and “Black Cat.” The controversy even seems to have reached something of a peak in 1843, the year both tales appeared, in the murder trial of a man named Singleton Mercer, whose trial and insanity defense were treated extensively in several New York papers.<sup>74</sup>

There seems little doubt that the antebellum audience would have interpreted both stories as criminal narratives. When the narrator in “Tell-Tale Heart” says in the second paragraph that “I made up my mind to take the life of the old man,” readers would have had more than a clue (2: 792). In “Black Cat” the warrant for such an interpretation comes even earlier, if more subtly, when in the opening paragraph the narrator blurts out “to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul” (2: 849). The combination of impending death and confession of wrongdo-

ing would have enabled readers to infer, if not impending capital punishment, at least a transgression so bad as to signal criminality. In both stories, informed readers would have quickly seized on elements of the pre-texts to identify them as part of the mushrooming genre of crime fiction.<sup>75</sup>

As a reviewer in *Graham's* pointed out, however, "Tell-Tale Heart" was more. Attuned to the autobiographical form of fiction in "Heart" and "Black Cat," the reviewer concluded that "Mr. Poe probes a terror to its depths, and spreads it out to the reader" by "leading the mind through the whole framework of crime and perversity, and enabling the intellect to comprehend their laws and relations." As an "anatomist" of the well-springs of wickedness, explained the reviewer, Poe provided the audience of his two stories with an insight into the criminal mind.<sup>76</sup> Thus, when each tale's narrator mentions madness, readers could readily have made a link between dementia and criminality.

In moving through "Tell-Tale Heart," antebellum readers would have become involved in the issue of the narrator's madness by his early accusation that "You fancy me mad" (2: 792). At issue, given the contemporary controversy over the insanity defense, was a question of the relation between insanity and crime in this narrator and the story he tells, but more was at stake for antebellum readers than a question about whether the narrator is insane or not. In light of assumptions about the moral obligation of fiction, informed readers had to ask how they should be relating to this narrator and his tale and what Poe's purpose was in providing this "anatomy" of the criminal mind.

Here, too, context was a factor in that, as David Reynolds has pointed out, by the early 1840s crime pamphlets and crime fictions increasingly were representing the criminal sympathetically.<sup>77</sup> Even if the middle-class audience were not necessarily reading such fiction, they knew of it as part of the sensational tales that reviewers and editorialists regularly castigated. A question for this audience was whether "Tell-Tale Heart" represented such a sympathetic treatment by casting the narrator's crime in the category of "moral insanity" and the narrator as a victim of an abnormal mental failing that had tormented him into a heinous act beyond his control. Then, too, what was Poe suggesting by such sympathetic treatment (if sympathetic it was)? Was the tale making a case for the new insanity defense?

These were more than questions prompted by interpretive curiosity. They raised unsettling moral issues, and one of the reasons they did so was the story's narrative voice. Informed readers would have come to "Tell-Tale Heart" expecting a tale's narrative voice to serve as a guide to a character's actions and speech, especially if questions arose as to whether they should be construed as acceptable or deserving of sympathy. Even Poe, as we have seen, subscribed to the interpretive convention of reading for such a controlling voice and modeled that practice as a reviewer. But in this story readers would have been hard pressed to find such a guiding perspective. If that were not enough, the encounter with the tale's conclusion would have produced further disorientation. Though the narrator's admission of his crime to the police would probably strike antebellum readers as a resolution that restores order, his shriek and his comment that the dead man's heart continued to beat beneath the floor hardly would have seemed an ending that drains the tension from the narrator's frenzy and the reader's close—and possibly sympathetic—involvement with it. In other words, attentive readers would have noticed that the conclusion only highlights their own investment in emotional excitement and that the experience of the tale has encouraged them to indulge in a self-implicating violation of the morality of informed reading.

The combination of audience expectations and the way the pre-text of "Tell-Tale Heart" could serve as an occasion for grappling with interpretive and readerly identity had the capacity to create an uneasiness that fit Poe's goal: a disorientation in the reading experience that would thwart readers' ability to draw back with charges of Germanic mysticism or through other judgmental moves. Moreover, any sympathy readers found themselves feeling for the narrator may have stymied a retreat to analytical safety, since by such sympathy readers, in effect, admitted to being co-conspirators who shared the criminal guilt of a story that they had tried to master.

It would be naive, however, to assume that all of Poe's audience gave him what he sought or that the story itself, as one modern critic has claimed, defies rational analysis.<sup>78</sup> However troubling the experience of the tale may have been, a commentator in the *New York Tribune* confidently and even contumaciously declared "The Tell-Tale Heart" to be a story about an insane murderer—and a disgusting one at that. As the

*Tribune* put it, Poe's tale was "overstrained and repulsive" in its "analysis of the feelings and promptings of an insane homicide" (Jan. 13, 1845, *PL* 395). The problem was not only the gruesome details of the iniquity, which looked like something out of the sensational criminal reports of the penny press, but the way the experience of the tale, by encouraging a psychological intimacy with the criminal that could induce sympathy, jeopardized the audience's moral equilibrium. In its own way, "The Tell-Tale Heart" looked from such a perspective to be another version of the suspect sensational tale, which posited the wrong role for its audience. Even for antebellum readers who were not sure that the narrator was insane or was to be viewed sympathetically, the question of what Poe was doing by linking criminality and insanity in the same tale would provide a pathway for seizing analytical control of the story. For whether Poe was supporting or calling into question that link, the status of the story as a proponent of one of these positions meant that it was a form of advocacy fiction and thus belonged to an inherently suspect and inferior genre.

It is necessary, however, to raise a complication in this anatomy of antebellum experiences of "Tell-Tale Heart." Any reading that assumes the narrator is or might be insane would be an interpretation that casts doubt on the reasonableness and accuracy of the narrator's reports and judgments. Consequently, what returns here is the issue that arose in reconstructing an informed reading of "Ligeia": Does not the assumption of insanity depend on the conception of an unreliable narrator, which was not part of the interpretive lexicon of informed reading in the 1840s?

The question is unavoidable because it arises as well for "The Black Cat," a story Poe's contemporaries recognized, as the *Aristidean* noted, as "a reproduction of the 'Tell-Tale Heart,'" though with "an amplification of one of its phases" (October 1845: 317). That recognition is not surprising, for we have already noted the way the experience of the opening of "Black Cat" likely would have paralleled that of "Tell-Tale Heart" within antebellum informed reading. Readers of "Black Cat," however, would have grappled with other elements in deciphering the story's philosophy and purpose, both in itself and in relation to the audience. One would have occurred, I believe, at some point after realizing that the narrator is a murderer who, as he explains in the opening, will die on the morrow. Antebellum readers could have concluded that the narrator is "unburthen[ing] my soul" by telling his tale from a prison cell, which

means he has likely unburdened himself with a confession before he begins his tale. That conclusion, in turn, could have led to the question of why the narrator is confessing for a second time. In raising this question, however, I do not believe antebellum readers would have decided, as one modern critic has, that such a situation means that the narrator's story lacks value as an unburdening confession and seems merely "arbitrary and compulsive" in its motivation.<sup>79</sup> For antebellum readers, the re-confession that the tale stages could have been interpreted as a form of penitence born either of the need to humble oneself in sin or from an inborn desire to do the right thing by offering a cautionary tale. If the first depended on Christian principles, readers could configure the second explanation from what had become a growing conviction in the nineteenth century that human beings, by their nature, were drawn to the good and the right.

Even more significant would be a third possible interpretation, which readers could have located in the narrator's admission that he had been subject to "the Fiend Intemperance" and that his "more than fiendish malevolence" was "gin-nurtured" (2: 851). Many antebellum readers would have been familiar with the fact that in nonfictional accounts of murder at the time, intemperance often was cited as a motivating factor.<sup>80</sup> For those readers, the narrator's disclosure of his drinking problem would have provided a rationale for his homicidal behavior and his story as confession. The confession he is now making for the first time is the secret tale of his life: the etiology of his self-destruction under the horrors of demon drink. To answer the question of why the narrator tells his tale, readers could have interpreted his story as a temperance tale in the mold of T. S. Arthur's popular *Ten Nights in a Bar-room*, which had appeared only a year earlier.

More importantly, such an interpretation would have enabled antebellum readers to see the narrator as a victim of insanity without having to interpret him as unreliable. The logic would have run as follows. Owing to his intemperance, the narrator suffered from moral insanity during the time he committed the two killings and afterward while walling up his wife's body and the second cat. At the time of the telling of the tale, however, the narrator is not insane—a conclusion conforming to the theory of moral insanity—and consequently is quite trustworthy, not only in his version of the events but in his claim that currently "mad am I not"

(2: 849). Such a conclusion about the narrator would have fallen neatly in line with the linkage of alcohol, insanity, and illness among middle-class reformers who used that sutured triad to define the alcoholic as psychologically wayward yet reclaimable through the social technologies of disciplinary health care.<sup>81</sup> Consonant with middle-class values, such a view could readily provide magazine readers with an ideological base for deciphering “Black Cat” as a reassuring temperance tale.

This response to the tale nonetheless could hardly have come without its own difficulties. Because this era witnessed a growing tendency to view the alcoholic with sympathy, readers could well have found themselves in the same problematic situation that accompanied any feelings of sympathy for the narrator as a victim of insanity in “Tell-Tale Heart.”<sup>82</sup> Both responses brought readers into a dangerous emotional bond with the deviant. More disturbing to readers of “Black Cat” would have been the narrator’s comment, shortly after his disclosure about his alcoholism, that the “final and irrevocable” impetus to his actions was the “longing of [his] soul to *vex itself*—to offer violation to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only” (2: 852). The problem informed readers would have endured with such a disclosure lay not only in its serving as an explanation for the narrator’s actions but also in the murderer’s claim that this “spirit of PERVERSENESS . . . is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart . . . which give direction to the character of Man” (852)—a claim at odds with prevailing antebellum ideas about human nature as inherently inclined toward the good. In addition, readers would have had to wonder about the black cat itself, since the interpretive rule of privileged position would probably have led to the question of what exactly *is* the nature and significance of the titular feline. The problem of answering that question was no doubt compounded by the narrator’s intimation that something supernatural is at work in the second cat, which leads to the discovery of the murdered corpse.

This last turn is especially problematic because it would seem to raise again the issue of unreliability, in that readers who assumed this narrator to be sane at the time of the telling would have to account for his continued adherence to a supernatural explanation for the tale’s pivotal events. Of course, one move to make would have been to treat this as a tale of the supernatural and thereby dismiss it as far-fetched, which is precisely what a reviewer in the *Literary Annual Register* did. According to that

reader, “the ‘Black Cat’ is a striking but improbable story of a murderer haunted by a cat with the mark of a gallows on her breast, and finally by her agency brought to justice.”<sup>83</sup> But for readers who had invested in the interpretation of the story as a temperance tale and/or a narrative about criminality and moral insanity, such a conclusion would have been less than satisfying. Instead, such readers would apparently have been confronted at the close with the question of whether the narrator was confused, haunted, or perhaps still mentally unbalanced.

Rather than reaching an interpretation involving narrative unreliability, however, some antebellum readers addressed the question of what was going on in “Black Cat” by allegorizing its problematic elements as figurative or emblematic vehicles. According to a reviewer in *Littell’s Living Age*, while the second cat of the tale would appear to “have been a proper inmate for the ‘Castle of Otronto’ . . . it may be argued that the Black Cat is a figurative personification for the dark-brooding thoughts of a murderer, murder being the climax of the story” (Nov. 1845: 343). What is most noticeable in the public discussion of the story at the time is the way readers interpreted the “Black Cat” as a tale in which everything is a vehicle, not just of the narrator’s murderous mind but more specifically for his explanation of events as products of his spirit of perverseness. Or as some readers of the time viewed it, the tale was a vehicle for Poe’s theory of perverseness as the etiology of the story’s events. As the *American Whig Review* explained, “‘The Black Cat’ is a story, exceedingly well told, illustrative of a theory, which the author has advanced . . . respecting perverseness, or the impulse to perform actions simply for the reason that they ought not to be performed.” Despite noting, moreover, that “[t]he theory is ingeniously represented in the case of an imaginary character,” this reviewer attributed the character’s comments to Poe himself: “For this devilish spirit, Mr. Poe claims the honor of being ‘one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of man’” (Sept. 1845: 309). Here was an informed response situated squarely within the interpretive code for autobiographical fiction: though the autobiographical narrator is a created fictional character, he still speaks the author’s mind in the way that any narrator must do. Interestingly enough, *Blackwood’s* magazine in Britain reached the same conclusion about “Black Cat.” Although noting that Poe “appears at first to aim at

rivalling the fantastic horrors of Hoffmann,” readers “soon observe that the wild and horrible invention in which he deals, is strictly in the service of an abstract idea which it is there to illustrate. His analytical observation has led him, he thinks, to detect in men’s minds an absolute spirit of ‘perversity,’ prompting them to the very opposite of what reason and mankind pronounce to be right.”<sup>84</sup>

For such readers, if something was amiss in the explanation of the tale’s events, the problem was not the narrator’s; it was Poe’s. Hence, the *American Review* added that the “Black Cat” “is not much to our taste” because “[t]he perverseness, to which the author refers, seems to us to be rightly classed, not among the original impulses of human nature, but among the phenomena of insanity. . . . It is a moral disease, not a primitive impulse.” The logic behind this decision to clear up the tale by reading it as a story of “moral insanity” over which Poe had lost control is understandable, and the reason is hinted at in the *Blackwood’s* comment about what “reason and mankind pronounce to be right.” If the story, as an illustration of Poe’s theory of perversity, dismayed readers, the reason was that such a theory was an heretical affront to rationality, to the view of human nature as inherently good, and to antebellum Christian values. As a result, readers could interpret the tale as itself perverse and distorted, presenting its theory, as *Blackwood’s* complained, in “a turn of circumstances as hideous, incongruous, and absurd as the sentiment itself.” In this response, the disruptions and incongruities of the “Black Cat” were akin to those of Germanic sensationalism, this time bodied forth in an absurdly plotted and abhorrently confused allegory.

It is not difficult to imagine the dismay Poe must have felt in reading such responses, since in one form or another they echoed the old taunt of imitative Germanism now coupled with a charge of flaccid thinking. By treating the narrator’s ideas in “The Black Cat” as if they were Poe’s, such readings implicitly labeled Poe as the one with the deviant mind. Nor could Poe have been much happier as he looked elsewhere at his public reception and found the interpretations of his Dupin tales as tutelary narratives for lawyers and right-thinking gentlemen. More, of course, was at issue than these responses to specific tales, which represented for Poe the worst aspect of the didactic propensity in informed reading—at least when applied to his own fictions. Especially troubling was the cumulative result of such readings in implying a loss of mastery through an

inability to control his texts' effects on his readership. Poe was reaching the point where even responses that lauded elements of his stories were becoming galling, as if such responses signaled readers' presumptions about their ability to comprehend his artistry. Thus, even as he relished the praise he received for the ingenuity of his ratiocinative tales, he dismissed such reactions as a sign of the audience's misunderstanding. As for those tales, Poe explained in another letter to Cooke, "people think them more ingenious than they are—on account of their method and *air* of method. In the 'Murders in the Rue Morgue,' for instance, where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the supposititious Dupin with that of the writer of the story."<sup>85</sup> By such dismissal of the reader's awe, Poe could claim that the true brilliance of those stories' method lay in their artistic sleight of hand. Seeking to define himself as once again a step ahead of his readership led Poe to identify his Dupin stories as virtual aesthetic hoaxes.

Indeed, the power Poe associated with the fictional hoax as a tool of control over his audience grew in the mid-to-late 1840s, when he wrote such deliberately designed impostures as "The Balloon Hoax" (1845) and "Von Kempelen and His Discovery" (1849). Regarding the latter, Poe explained in a letter to Duyckinck accompanying the manuscript that "I mean it as a kind of 'exercise,' or experiment in the plausible or verisimilar style. Of course, there is *not* one word of truth in it from beginning to end." Convinced that "such a style, applied to the gold-excitement [in California], could not fail of effect," Poe added, "[m]y sincere opinion is that nine persons out of ten will (even among the best-informed) *believe* the quiz."<sup>86</sup> His conviction that the fictional hoax provided an answer in his battle with the informed audience is suggested further by his response to the public reception of such tales as "Mesmeric Revelation" (1844) and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845). On several occasions Poe quietly admitted that in "my 'Valdemar Case' . . . I had not the slightest idea that any person should credit it" and that he "never dreamed" of "Mesmeric Revelation" as being anything but a story without "veracity" concerning the events recounted. Instead, he explained, "Mesmeric Revelation" was written to "introduce . . . to the world" his "philosophy . . . in a manner that should insure [*sic*] for it attention. I thought that by representing my speculations in a garb of vraisemblance . . . I would secure

for them a hearing. In the case of *Valdemar*, I was actuated by similar motives.<sup>87</sup> A curious thing happened, however; both stories were received as factual accounts of incidents in which mesmerism had been used either to prolong human life or to verify “scientifically” existence beyond the grave. Newspapers and magazines reprinted “Mesmeric Revelation” and “*Valdemar*” with introductory remarks calling each story a “statement of facts” or suggesting that it may well be authentic, while several of Poe’s friends, including George Eveleth and Sarah Helen Whitman, wrote letters to inquire whether the stories were true.<sup>88</sup> Only after such responses did Poe begin declaring that “‘Hoax’ *is* precisely the word suited to M. *Valdemar*’s case” and start chortling in print over the joke he had played on the credulous press and much of its public.<sup>89</sup> Yet Poe was playing a dangerous, self-incriminating game here that ironically removed from him as much power as it garnered. For among those “hoaxed” by his retrospective claim for “*Valdemar*” and “Mesmeric Revelation” as impostures, as one modern critic has suggested, was Poe himself, in that “he was forced by public clamor to acknowledge, ultimately, that which he never intended.”<sup>90</sup>

That public clamor was not one-sided, however, since a substantial segment of the magazine audience had its doubts about the authenticity of the two tales. A good deal of the public discussion, in fact, was devoted to clarifying that each story, as the *New York Tribune* put it, “is of course a romance” and to interpreting “*Valdemar*” and “Mesmeric Revelation” in the same way reviewers had treated “*The Black Cat*”: as fictional conveyances for Poe’s own philosophy.<sup>91</sup> The *Aristidean* called “Mesmeric Revelation” “nothing more than a vehicle of the author’s views concerning the DEITY, immateriality, spirit, &c.” (October 1845, *PL* 587), while the *Literary Gazette* took it as a tale in which Poe “daringly attempts a solution to that deepest of riddles, the nature of the Deity” (Jan. 31, 1846, *PL* 621). Such responses, of course, were precisely the ones at which Poe claimed to have aimed, yet the credit he took for both tales as successful hoaxes had strategic relevance even for the interpretations that matched his intentions. Such a claim provided Poe with one more opportunity to assert authority over those who had ostensibly read the tales “correctly,” in that the status of these stories as successful hoaxes implied that they were more elusive and powerful than even readers of a kindred art had realized.

No more than his other tales, however, did Poe's claimed hoaxes free him from the problem of depending upon the audience's expectations, beliefs, and interpretive strategies for the success of his fiction. To work as hoaxes, after all, stories such as "Valdemar," "Mesmeric Revelation," and "Von Kempelen" depended on the capacities of the audience, first to be taken in by and then to see through the hoax as a jest. A hoax unrecognized cannot achieve its goal of being understood and admired as a successful imposture. In like manner, readers who cannot see that they were taken in cannot know the extent of their delusive attempts at textual mastery; their incrimination remains invisible. What does the mischief is that such understanding by the audience *makes* the story work and thus constitutes a masterful response by the reader. The problem was that such mastery invested readers with final power in what Poe continued to view as the struggle between audience and writer over control of a text and its effects.

Not that Poe's readers always felt in control, particularly when it came to believing that his stories represented the kind of fiction they wanted. Much of the public response to Poe in the late 1840s expressed just the opposite sentiment. Despite Poe's efforts at diversity, despite the way several of his tales were received as clever comedies or intriguing mysteries, and despite his goal of countering the charges of Germanism, the overall response to his tales from 1843 until his death in 1849 consisted of viewing them as stories of Germanic sensationalism or mystical humbuggery—and often chiding them for being so. *Graham's* called him "an anatomist of the horrible and the ghastly," whose "pertinacity" at "prob[ing] a terror to its depths . . . is a peculiarity of his tales" (Sept. 1845: 143). The *New Haven Courier* found that his stories continued to be "full of more than German mysticism, grotesque, strange, improbable," while the *Southern Patriot* emphasized that Poe "is fond of mystifying in his stories."<sup>92</sup> More direct in their dismay were reviews of the 1845 *Tales* in *Littell's Living Age* and the *Knickerbocker*. While the latter termed the collection part of "the force-feeble and the shallow-profound school," the former announced, "We object, for the most part, to the tales . . . because they uncurtain horrors and cruelties" that "form no part of the glories of literature" (Nov. 1845: 343).<sup>93</sup> Several reviewers even suggested a link between the diseased sensationalism of the fiction and Poe himself. According to the *Harbinger*, "Mr. Poe's tales are . . . clumsily contrived, un-

natural, and every way in bad taste. There is still a kind of power in them; it is the power of disease; there is no health about them, they are alike in the vagaries of an opium eater." A similar innuendo marked a notice in the *Richmond Compiler*. Although admitting that Poe's stories "manifest unusual talent, and indeed genius," the reviewer added that it is "of a morbid, unpoised character; they resemble the strange outpourings of an opium eater, while under the influence of that stimulating drug."<sup>94</sup>

Such comments reflected the fact that by the mid-to-late 1840s, other factors had come into play in the reception of Poe's fiction. The battles he had waged over the years, particularly with the literati and magazinists in Boston and New York, had made him such enemies that the public response strongly swayed to the critical and even damning in the periodicals of those cities. The acrimony reached the point where several of Poe's enemies, including Louis Gaylord Clark at the *Knickerbocker*, were spreading rumors and libelous stories in 1846 about Poe's personal habits and moral health—accusations accompanied by innuendoes that Poe was succumbing to mental instability. Those stories were picked up and reprinted in newspapers in New York, Baltimore, and St. Louis.<sup>95</sup>

Exacerbating the situation was the cumulative effect of years of responses to Poe's tales within antebellum assumptions of autobiographical narration that identified Poe with the moral and psychological conditions depicted in his stories. The interpreted connection between Poe and his narrators (or characters) received an additional boost through the public commentary that accompanied the publication and immense popularity of "The Raven." Often while ladling praise, reviewers spoke of the poem as a "conversation carried on between Mr. POE and 'The Raven'" (*Knickerbocker* Apr. 1845, PL 523) or claimed that in the poem, as the *Aristidean* announced, the reader hears "the poet tell his own story" (Nov. 1845: 400). Struck by the poem's haunted narrator, the *Southern Quarterly Review* observed, in an eerie echo of responses to the 1845 *Tales*, that "[i]t seems as if the author wrote under the influence of opium, or attempted to describe the fantastic terrors which afflict a sufferer from *delirium tremens*" (July 1848, PL 739). Apparently the tone and point of view of "The Raven" and his "Germanic" tales could be so taken as a reflection of Poe's own state that even his friend George Eveleth told Poe in a letter that he "was afraid, from the wild imaginations manifested in your writings, that you were an opium-eater."<sup>96</sup>

Such equations, it should be remembered, were an important component of the broader assumption of informed response that one could read from (or through) the fictional text to the author himself, and by 1848 that assumption had become a recurrent element in Poe's reception. By the time of his death in late 1849, the idea that Poe's tales, though interesting and often brilliant, displayed a deviancy that reflected a problem in the man himself was well on its way to becoming established in the public sphere. There is little doubt, moreover, that Rufus Wilmot Griswold's infamous biography of Poe in his libelous "Ludwig" article did much to extend and disseminate this equation of Poe and his tales.<sup>97</sup> But in depicting Poe as having a moral and mental character only slightly above such creations as Roderick Usher, William Wilson, or the criminal narrators of "The Black Cat" and "Tell-Tale Heart," Griswold was following, not inventing, the interpretive assumption that the points of view and characters of Poe's tales were an extension of the man.

Nor was Griswold the last of Poe's readers before the Civil War to interpret Poe and his fiction in this way. Just after Poe's death, an article in the *Model American Courier* explained how Poe "passed his hours in studies which were only pursued in chambers litten [*sic*] with sepulchral lamps, of various colored chemical fires, which he afterward described in the spirit-haunted apartment of the Lady Rowena" in "Ligeia."<sup>98</sup> Extrapolating to a higher level of generalization, a trio of reviews in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in March 1850 told its readership that "nearly all of Poe's tales are biographical," being marked by a "despair, [a] hopelessness[,] and the echoes of a melancholy extremely touching to those who read with remembrance of his broken life" (174, 180). Less than a year later, the *Democratic Review* employed almost the same phrasing to claim of Poe, "Nearly all that he wrote in the last two or three years . . . was in some way biographical" (Jan. 1851: 162). So close were man and tale, so aligned were writer and created character in this formulation that an 1853 article in the *National Magazine* presented Poe as a warning against intemperance by claiming that his tales, "unhealthy" in their adherence to "the dyspeptic school," are colored by "the shadow of mania a potu" that shaded the writer's own life.<sup>99</sup>

The final irony in the antebellum reception of Poe's fiction is that even some of those who came to his defense and to the defense of his tales against the charges of Griswold, Clark, and others contributed to the

reading of Poe as a version of his criminal and haunted narrators and to the assumption that his tales' characters were dark reflections of the man himself. In the *American Whig Review* in 1850, George Peck defended Poe against his attackers by praising his genius and arguing that for thoughtful readers, "Poe's stories must be healthy diet." In the course of his defense, however, Peck concluded that "in several passages in his tales Poe has unintentionally personated himself" (Mar. 1850: 305). More poignant was the brief book-length work on Poe published by his friend and admirer Sarah Helen Whitman in 1860. Part recollection, part impassioned defense of Poe and his writings against the calumnies of Griswold and company, Whitman's version of Poe duplicated the interpretive logic of the very readers she hoped to counter. In seeking to explain the complexity of the man and his work, she pointed out that in "Ligeia" "we look into the haunted chambers of the poet's own mind and see, as through a veil, the strange experiences of his inner life." In her reading, tales such as "Morella," "Elenora," and "Ligeia" are narratives in which "the author's mind seems struggling desperately and vainly with the awful mystery of Death." Indeed, claimed Whitman, all of Poe's "graver narratives" are "attributable, not so much to a delicate artistic purpose, as to that power of vivid and intense conception that made his dreams realities, and his life a dream."<sup>100</sup> As the troubled and misunderstood romantic genius, Whitman's Poe is the spontaneous maker whose mind and temperament are reflected in the character of his prose and the nightmares of his characters.

The image of Poe as the tortured soul whose own psyche resides in the narrators, characters, and atmospherics of his tales hardly ended with these defenses or even with the nineteenth century. Interpretations of his stories as indices to the man, rendered by narrators who in some way serve as Poe's psychological doubles, continued throughout the twentieth century, even among some Poe scholars.<sup>101</sup> Yet to stress this point is not to imply that such responses have "misread" Poe's tales and thereby provided an inaccurate version of his fiction—and of Poe himself. From the perspective of historical hermeneutics, the significance of such responses and of their continued currency, both in and outside the academy, lies in their being the legacy of reception events that first took shape as interpretations of Poe's fictions constructed by the codes of antebellum informed reading.