America's Gothic Fiction

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Chapter 3

“A Wilderness of Error”

Edgar Allan Poe’s Revision of Providential Tropes

When Larzer Ziff observed that Cotton Mather’s providence tales in book six of *Magnalia Christi Americana* was “the stuff of novelists,” he was speaking generally of the artful construction, the inventive language, and the enormous appeal of these strange tales. However, he could have been speaking also of the ways in which later American fiction writers have found the *Stoff* of literature—as well as tropes, characters, and even dialogue—in Mather’s tales. Edgar Allan Poe not only was a master of the short story, but was a master of adapting the plots of earlier fiction to his own use. Many critics have looked to the works of European authors as source material for Poe’s fictive invention, and it is clear that Poe read broadly and borrowed liberally from European Medieval and Renaissance literature as he approached his own writing projects.¹ Yet, it is also true that Poe looked to his own literary heritage, the legacy of early American authors, as source material for his fiction. In particular, his work exhibits the influence of the motifs and narrative form of the early American providence tale, such as those in the sixth book of Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*.

While it is abundantly clear that the adult Edgar Allan Poe did not adhere to a specific religious creed—Christian or otherwise—it is equally clear that he was more than conversant with scripture and the many issues of Christian theology and religious practice that commanded the attention of his contemporaries. Like his character William Wilson, Poe attended religious services while he was a student in England, and subsequently

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¹ This aspect of Poe’s career is well documented in Burton R. Pollin’s *Discoveries in Poe* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970).
he was required to attend religious exercises at West Point.\(^2\) William Mentzel Forrest’s comprehensive documentation of biblical allusions in Poe’s fiction and poetry attests to the author’s thorough education in scripture.\(^3\) Moreover, Jules Zanger has identified Poe’s boyhood exposure to the conservative evangelical movement in his family’s Richmond congregation.\(^4\) Bishop Richard Channing Moore, minister of the Protestant Episcopal Monumental Church where the Allan family had a pew, was an impassioned evangelical preacher in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, and impressed the young Poe to the extent that he would mention him a decade later in his review of Francis L. Hawk’s *Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of the United States—Virginia* in the *Southern Literary Messenger*.\(^5\) Poe’s attendance at Moore’s services notwithstanding, Zanger argues that the author “grew up in a culture in which the principles of religious revivalism developed and rationalized by Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century continued to operate in a widespread and pervasive fashion” (99).

Central to this study is Edgar Allan Poe’s familiarity with providential history. Poe’s 1836 review of Hawk’s *Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of the United States* demonstrates his knowledge of the goals and conventions of this historiographical mode by way of his persistent reference to George Bancroft’s 1834 *History of the United States*. Bancroft, one of the most celebrated early nineteenth-century historians, was dedicated to perpetuating the early Puritan understanding of the national history as part of God’s design for his chosen people.\(^6\) George Bancroft was not alone in embracing the theory of providential history in nineteenth-century America. Indeed, many historians and authors of diverse literary works subscribed to this belief. The same issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in which Poe’s review appeared carried an essay on “Manual Labor Schools,” advocating an educational policy based on God’s plan for

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2. That Poe’s dismissal from the military academy was based in part on his absence from church services in January 1831 suggests that this was a requirement of West Point cadets. See Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 66–67.


5. *Southern Literary Messenger* 2.4 (1836), 282–86.

6. See pages 90–91 for a fuller exposition of Bancroft’s historiographical objective and that of other antebellum historians.
the bodies and minds of young men and God’s special disposition toward the young men of this nation. 7 Similarly, the lead piece in the following issue was Benjamin Franklin’s “A Lecture on the Providence of God in the Government of the World” in which Franklin debates aspects of eighteenth-century thinking on divine will, yet concludes that God directs the daily life of his people through his providence. 8 Although it is difficult to believe that Edgar Allan Poe did not read Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana when it was reprinted to such acclaim in 1820, he would, nevertheless, have been steeped in the language and the literary forms of providential history and the providence tale. Such notions were not only in the air: they were pervasive in his culture, and he circulated them as editor of the Southern Literary Messenger.

Within his creative work, Poe appropriates the generic conventions of Puritan providence tales in the form of early American gallows confessions, remarkable sea deliverances, and accounts of “self-murder” in such stories such as “The Black Cat,” “MS. Found in a Bottle” and “William Wilson,” and in the novella The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. However, Edgar Allan Poe is no Puritan. His fiction mirrors the structure and language of these providence tales, yet rejects the premise of the genre. When Poe evokes Cotton Mather’s topoi, he creates readerly anticipation of its themes of epiphany, regeneration, and salvation—themes that he ultimately refuses to realize. Contrary to Mather’s accounts, Poe’s tales give voice to the man who will not confess and the sailor whom God will not save, and Poe does so to establish ironic distance between the early eighteenth-century spiritual fictions of American belief and the nineteenth-century dark romantic fictions of the self.

More specifically, Poe’s short fiction expresses his rejection of the theory of divine providence that enabled authors such as Cotton Mather to create history and story from events that occurred in colonial New England. In the absence of a belief in divine order and divine intervention, Poe is, correspondingly, unable to achieve the coherence of plot and the tight, definitive closure of the earlier providence tales. When Hayden White asks, “Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?” (Content, 25), the reader of Mather’s tales must affirm that this author is able to construct coherent narrative only because of the moral structure that imposes itself on the emplotted events. However, when Poe takes up the tropes, plots, and

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even the dialogue of the Puritan providence tale, yet refuses to subscribe to
the theological underpinning of this genre, his narratives exhibit the stress
of working in counterpurpose. His plots are often ruptured, his narrators
assume limited authority, and his closures are aborted or ambiguous. As
Poe dismantles Mather’s plots by simultaneously invoking and undermin-
ing their reliance on providential history, his characters are thus removed
from Mather’s neatly ordered, theocentric world, and are relegated to a
modern “wilderness of error,” as he puts it in “William Wilson.”

The implications of Poe’s appropriation of providence tales are both
numerous and important. By breaking with the fundamental notion of
divine providence as a national precept and an ordering principle for our
community’s narratives, the nineteenth-century author is asking his reader
to envision another mode of emplotment for the private narratives of the
self and for our public accounts. The new plot must either discover alter-
nate comic plots to express our personal and public optimism, or the plot
may indeed be tragic. That Mather’s providence tales bear the weight of
historical documents puts additional pressure on the writer who endeavors
to recraft their plots.

Additionally, Poe’s reconfiguration of providential literature offers a
key to the nature of the gothic mode in American literature, and suggests
that gothic literature’s insecure narrative authority, fractured plotting,
and ephemeral closure reveal its rejection of the ideology that it invokes.
Consequently, the instability of its generic conventions bespeaks the
author’s insecurity in the philosophical and religious beliefs supporting the
historical narrative that it seeks to disrupt. Teresa Goddu has argued that
American gothic literature does not seek to escape its historical moment,
as critics have previously assumed, but instead “challenges the critical nar-
ratives of American literary history.” Speaking to the relationship between
the gothic mode’s darker themes and its structural difficulties, she notes
that “in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of
America’s self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artifi-
cial foundations of national identity” (10).

One might also see Poe’s attempt to undercut the narratives that estab-
lish national identity—such as those framed by Mather, one of the earliest,
most prominent, and longstanding pillars of New England—as part of his
rivalry with contemporary New England writers. As Kenneth Silverman
observes, Poe

9. In Tales and Sketches, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Urbana and Chicago: University of
Illinois Press, 2000), 427. All quotations from Poe’s short fiction are from this edition.
had been rankled by what he and others considered the smugness of many New England writers and their claim to social, moral, and literary superiority over other regions of the country. He planned in the “Stylus,” he said, to “make war to the knife against the New-England assumption of ‘all the decency and all the talent.’” (Poe, 200)

Counterplotting the popular providence tales of Cotton Mather would allow Poe to attack the core of conservative New England’s social establishment, religious community, and literary circles with one blow.

Irrespective of authorial motivation, much of Poe’s fiction provides valuable evidence for Goddu’s thesis regarding the construction of gothic fiction. Cotton Mather’s providence tales, like those of Increase Mather, James Janeway, and others, rely on several key structural elements—the omniscient ministerial narrator, an assertion of the historicity of the account, and a firm sense of divine causation leading to a singular conclusion that affirms God’s judgment of the events. Every comic plot celebrates the miracles that God effects on behalf of his faithful, whereas every tragic plot warns the reader of God’s terrible punishment of man’s sin. At the same time, this genre of narrative also argues for the divine approbation of the mythic errand into the wilderness and the divine presence in founding the New English colonies in North America. However, Poe’s narratives that mirror providence tales defy each of these structural elements, as they also challenge the pieties inherent to the genre.

First, Poe’s fiction challenges Mather’s statements concerning authorship by replacing the omniscient, ministerial narrator with a self-proclaimed unreliable narrator. The minister who alone can decode God’s message for man in the events of the world is thus replaced by an otherwise common man who in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is “very, very dreadfully nervous” or “dizzy” in the case of “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” or who problematically protests being called mad in both “Eleonora” and “The Black Cat” (792, 578, 638, 849). The ethos of Poe’s narrators is not that of the wise bard or the community historian, rather that of the drunkard, the convicted murderer, the card shark, and the womanizer. To confront directly the issue of narrative reliability, in the opening sentence of “The Black Cat” and in the final sentence of “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” the narrator indeed tells his reader that he does not expect to be believed. The narrative voice of “The Black Cat” insists that he does not seek the reader’s confidence, while that of “A Descent into the Maelstrom” suggests that those who believe his account are foolishly gullible. Contrary to Mather’s
impulse to monitor the reader’s interpretation of his narratives by layer-
ing his accounts with authorial explication of each detail of each event, Poe insists that his reader rely on his own wits to decode the ambigu-
ous and often contradictory information that the text displays. Cotton Mather’s readers are obliged to subordinate their personal observations 
of their seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century world and its texts 
to the didactic, religious interpretation of the minister. Yet, Poe’s readers 
are virtually abandoned for lack of narrative authority to puzzle their way through their complex and often chaotic nineteenth-century world and its texts. Much like Poe’s characters, his readers are forced to wander a “wil-
derness of error.” The author demands that his audience read the text as he or she reads the world. If the text of the world is enigmatic, the author’s text that purports to interpret the world only adds an additional layer of insecurity.

Where Poe’s narrators advertise their accounts as unreliable and implausible, the plot itself often defies the normal standards of causation that contribute to verisimilitude. Critics can only postulate why Ligeia dies, and surely cannot say with any certainty why she returns. When William Wilson murders William Wilson, who kills whom and why? Poe’s narrators address this issue by asserting that a quest for causation within the tale—providential causation or otherwise—is a “weakness” (“The Black Cat,” 853). With limited adherence to statements of causation, Poe’s narrators naturally struggle to reach conclusion, and, in many cases, simply close their accounts with a final chronological element independent of any culminating observation or evaluation. In lieu of resolution, the Prefect in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” can explain only what did not happen, and the narrator of “The Gold Bug” throws up his hands to exclaim, “Who shall tell?” (568, 844) Hayden White has argued that “the demand for clo-
sure in the historical story is a demand . . . for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama” (Content, 21). He pushes this argument further by the claim that

if every fully realized story, however we define that familiar but concept-
ually elusive entity, is a kind of allegory, points to a moral, or endows events, whether real or imaginary, with a significance that they do not possess as a mere sequence, then it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats. Where there is ambiguity or
ambivalence regarding the status of the legal system, which is the form in which the subject encounters most immediately the social system in which he is enjoined to achieve a full humanity, the ground on which any closure of a story one might wish to tell about a past, whether it be a public or a private past, is lacking. (Content, 14)

Thus, to express his distrust of the Calvinist underpinnings of the providential narrative, Poe rejects not only the principle of causation, divine or otherwise, but also the formulaic, singular closure that is essential to the genre. By dismantling the structural conventions of the providence tale, Poe sets his fiction in ironic relationship with the grander ambitions of the early American works he evokes.

Significant, too, is Poe's attempt to blur the distinction between fiction and nonfiction prose. At times he makes direct claims to writing within the framework of historical or journalistic genres as in “The Mystery of Marie Roget” and The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. Frequently, he relies on detailed information of date, place, names, ships, cargo, and tonnage to secure the guise of historicity in his fiction. Invoking the conventions of historical tracts, Poe's seafaring tales mirror the popular Renaissance travel narratives of Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas as well as the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century wondertales of remarkable sea deliverances of James Janeway, Increase Mather, and Cotton Mather. In addition, Poe's tales of intemperance and crime are composed in the vein of the gallows confessions popularized by any number of early New English ministers, Cotton Mather among them. Hayden White would not be surprised by the generic affinity between Poe's fiction and the larger culture of nonfiction, White's analysis of historical writing centering on the use of literary device to construct historical narrative. Indeed, Poe anticipates White's theoretical stance. In his 1836 review of Francis L. Hawks's Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of the United States of America, Poe draws a distinction between “naked facts” and a crafted historical narrative of those facts. He further acknowledges that the facts documented in Ecclesiastical History are “arranged” and “shaped” by the historiographer, a position that Hayden White would later theorize (282).

There is considerable evidence within American literary history to support White's thesis regarding the symbiotic relationship between fiction and nonfiction genres. Daniel Cohen has studied the close relationship between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century accounts of serious crimes and resultant gallows sermons and nineteenth-century crime fiction.
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David S. Reynolds, too, has identified the roots of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature in the period’s sensational and sometimes sordid journalism and other nonfiction accounts of social ills. Execution sermons were the primary form of criminal literature until the 1730s, but were immediately followed by equally popular, but surely worldlier, crime fiction, which was modeled after the earlier religious genre. As Cohen observes, “one man’s providence is another’s sensation” (10). Subsequently, in the antebellum period, many authors—Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne among them—looked to popular journalism to nourish their literary imagination. This medium included not only the major newspapers, but also what Reynolds terms the “seamy social texts” of penny papers, trial reports, and crime pamphlets (171).

Daniel Cohen also looks to the material text as evidence for the symbiotic relationship between these nonfiction and fiction genres in early American texts, and notes the historical development of the title pages of these books and broadsides. Cohen offers the example of a gallows sermon published by Increase Mather in 1675 that advertises itself in large font and boldface type as “A Sermon” with the title page including two scriptural quotations and two moralistic commonplaces. The title page also identifies the author as “Teacher of a Church of Christ.” By contrast, in the smallest font of the page, the reader learns the briefest details of the crime: two men had murdered their master. The language and composition of this title page advertise the text primarily as a religious document, and only secondarily as reportage of a current event. However, the language and composition of later examples of gallows sermons illustrate the marked shift in this genre. Cotton Mather’s Pillars of Salt, published only some twenty years later in 1699, advertises itself most prominently as “An History” of “Capital Crimes” as well as “Speeches” by the criminals, these three phrases in boldface with the largest font. A single quotation from scripture is included in small font. In a subordinate position, under the announcement of the history, the crimes, and the speeches, is appended the following note: “Whereto is added, For the better Improvement of this History, A Brief Discourse abut the Dreadful Justice of God, in Punishing of SIN, with SIN.” The implication of the language and the visual presentation of this statement is that the religious admonition is secondary to the sensational crime story. Finally, Cotton Mather’s 1713 gallows sermon

10. See Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance, especially 171–81.
entitled *The Sad Effects of Sin* highlights the single word “Murder” on the title page. Missing is the biblical quotation that was requisite for the title page of the genre ten years earlier, although foregrounded is the lurid account of crime.

Clearly, Cotton Mather was aware of his readers’ appetite for the story of crime that gave occasion to his sermonizing, and was eager to take full advantage of their worldly interests in order to inculcate his audience with his religious principles. Later authors, such as Poe, were also alert to the value of these texts at the level of fiction, and finally relish making a statement regarding the fictive element in nonfiction writing. Poe replaces the definitive, coherent assertions of our national visions and our national vices with ambiguous and often incoherent statements in order to problematize our American mythologies of self and society. As White has shown, historical narratives lend the comfort of completeness and coherence to otherwise frightening and disorderly events; Poe’s gothic revision of historical narrative unmarks the nonfiction, reveals it as fiction, and displays its terror and incoherence.

**Poe’s Remarkable Sea Deliverances**

The tale of sea deliverance is a staple of providential literature. James Janeway’s *Legacy* is devoted exclusively to such accounts, and Cotton Mather dedicates the opening chapter of book six of *Magnalia Christi Americana* to testimonies of miracles during shipwrecks. Edgar Allan Poe reprises the formulaic accounts of remarkable sea deliverances in a number of his works whose drama centers on distress at sea and whose plot and language parallel those of the earlier remarkables. The earlier narratives were, of course, both written and read as nonfiction, although the modern reader easily recognizes the dramatic and even melodramatic plotting and phrasing of such texts. However, Poe’s tales of disasters at sea develop a contrary strategy: the author offers many signals that his tales are based on reality, but undermines the verisimilitude throughout the narratives.\(^{12}\)

In the 1831 tale “MS. Found in a Bottle,” Poe’s narrator initially identifies himself as a methodical, diligent man, and claims that “no person could be less liable than myself to be led away from the severe precincts of

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\(^{12}\) Pollin speaks to this very issue: “In the *Baltimore Saturday Visiter* of October 12, 1843, Poe had published the first of his tales of sea horror, ‘MS. Found in a Bottle,’ conceived entirely in the spirit of the hoax. Similar was *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket,* which was issued as a book, in 1838, ‘edited’ by Poe” (168).
truth by the *ignes fatui* of superstition* (135). An exclusively rational man, he also derides "moralists" and actually delights in discovering the inevitable errors in their arguments. However, once in peril at sea, this unlikely believer acknowledges that his shipwreck places him "on the brink of eternity," and his deliverance is not only a "miracle" but a "miracle of miracles" (143). The shift in language signaling a shift in creed, Poe's narrator undergoes a form of conversion. Echoing Mather's accounts where the sea deliverance is occasion for regeneration or a sign of salvation, Poe's narrator confesses that with the extraordinary events at sea "a new sense—a new entity is added to my soul" (141). Indeed, the man examines his "very soul" and "ponder[s] upon [his] destiny"; he feels ashamed, trembles, and expresses both hope and despair as he approaches "the blackness of eternal night" (145, 146). The narrator's sentiments and the language used to express these sentiments are precisely those of a conversion narrative.

Yet, Poe's object in this tale is not to bear witness to God's mercy. He invokes the topoi of the Puritan providence tale for the purpose of subverting the spiritual motivation of this fiction form. Poe's narrator is not the man whom God will save from the ship's wreckage. In fact, he drowns, and does so even as he invokes the name of God. As such, Poe's story gives voice to the man whom God will not save. Thus, in this tale, Poe writes an alternate history of the American seafarer that stands in opposition to the history that Cotton Mather fashioned to exhibit the wonders of Christ in the new world.

There is no fully articulated dénouement to Poe's tale, only the final chronological element in the man's life: he died. Within the framework of Hayden White's analysis of historical narrative, the resistance to resolution other than chronological conclusion signals a resistance to disclose meaning in the narrative. However, that this tale is framed as a "MS. Found in a Bottle" begs the reader to speculate on the message that the narrator wished to communicate. Poe's message, however, is ambiguous. We are led to surmise that, contrary to the belief in providential history, God does not always protect his faithful or perhaps God never participates in the events of this world. The narrator may wish the reader to understand that the shipwreck conversions or deathbed conversions of Calvinist tracts are a sham, and part of the narrator's terror is his realization that he has not received God's grace. The possibilities are surely multiple, and in this respect, defy the convention of the singular, definitive, and moralizing closure of the genre of providential literature. The sole terrifying message of this flagon tossed to sea is that the critical questions that probe our understanding
of ourselves, our life in this world, and our life in the next can never be answered with any security. We will struggle with these questions in terror and agony, and the answers will be denied us until our struggle is ended, and it is too late. Ultimately, the chance of our attaining great wisdom is as probable as our receiving a message in a sea-borne bottle. In Poe's words, such knowledge is a “never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction” (145). Likewise, the probability of imparting great wisdom to our fellow man is as likely as posting it to him in a bottle at sea.

Studies of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, an enigmatic text that is often compared to “MS. Found in a Bottle,” frequently center on problems of narrative coherence of this novella. J. Gerald Kennedy speaks of the text as “patch-work narrative,” and Paul Rosenzweig laments that the work is “frustratingly protean in form.” However, Curtis Fukuchi finds that Pym’s faith in providential design informs the narrative, and argues convincingly that this religious conviction both motivates and unifies the text. A cursory reading of the text will indeed confirm the persistent reference to divine intercession on behalf of Pym and his fellow sailors. Yet, when *Pym* is approached not only as statement concerning divine providence, but also as a statement concerning the literature of divine providence, the text changes color. Despite Pym’s claim of confidence in his voyage, which is fueled in part by his confidence in the special mercy of God toward him, Poe’s invocation and subsequent defiance of the conventions of early American literature of divine providence cast doubt on Pym’s faith.


14. See Curtis Fukuchi, “Poe’s Providential *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*” in *Emerson Society Quarterly* 27.3 (1981): 148–56. Fukuchi argues that “the human plots and counterplots in the narrative are played out against this divine plot, and their repeated collapse suggests the inadequacy of materialistic quests and reinforces the increasingly disinterested motives that Pym displays in his providential survival and return” (148). Fukuchi also describes *Pym* as a “prophetic text” in that his study is predicated on his reading of a felicitous resolution to the work (155). Like Paul John Eaken in “Poe’s Sense of an Ending,” *American Literature* 45.1 (1973): 1–22, Fukuchi believes that Pym survives his voyage and gains access to divine knowledge; yet Poe withholds this wisdom from the reader.

Read against the backdrop of such early texts, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* emerges as a complex variant of the providential deliverance at sea. The novella chronicles the sea voyage of Pym and Augustus, two young men given to intemperance and willfulness. Within the context of Mather’s sea adventures, one might anticipate the conversion of one or both men as they mature intellectually and spiritually during their voyage, especially when confronted with extreme circumstances that almost appear to be designed by God to test their souls. However, neither young man finds salvation through earthly trials; Augustus does not survive the voyage and Pym survives for a time, but reveals neither the culminating experiences aboard the *Jane Guy* nor the meaning of the voyage.  

Although Poe invokes the language of divine providence throughout the text, the author simultaneously undermines the conventions of the providence tale. Consequently, it appears that the unity of the narrative issues from its negative posture. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* delivers a seemingly endless series of blows at the conventions that are characteristic of providence literature with the object of challenging the theory of providential intercession and the narrative forms that are predicated on a belief in divine providence.

The most obvious feature of Mather’s tales, whether they are captivity narratives, conversion accounts, or sea deliverances, is the appeal to the deity in all confidence that God both hears his people and acts on their behalf. Much like Mather’s visible saints, Pym regularly invokes the name of God. He recommends himself to God, recognizes the mercy of God, and attributes his good fortune to the special intercession of Providence. However pious his prayers, Pym also speaks otherwise. And on the many occasions when Pym looks to the heavens, Poe chooses a variety of ways to compromise his heavenly gaze, which J. Gerald Kennedy describes as the character’s “confusion.” “Pym’s earliest invocation of providence in chapter one hints at his confusion: his rescue from the *Ariel* occurs, he remarks, *either* through ‘good fortune’ or through the ‘special interference’ of a providential power” (82, 3). Not the confident assertion of a man of faith, Pym’s assessment vacillates between a worldly and spiritual understanding of the events of his life.

16. My reading of the text, unlike that of either Fukuchi or Eaken, is consonant with the more traditional interpretations of *Pym* as a failed quest. I concur with Joel Porte who concludes that *Pym* “is an American Pilgrim’s Progress which leads not to eternal salvation but to eternal terror.” See *The Romance in America: Studies in Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and James* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 84.

In later chapters, Pym’s invocation of the deity is less confused than it is strategic. When in desperate straits aboard the *Grampus*, Pym characteristically seeks his Maker: “Throwing ourselves on our knees to God, we implored his aid in the many dangers which beset us” (122). However, lest the reader believe that he subscribes fully to a belief in the providential design for his life, Pym immediately adds, “[we] arose with renewed hope and vigour to think what could yet be done by mortal means towards accomplishing our deliverance” (122, emphasis mine). His profession of faith in the agency of God is trumped by his recommendation of human efforts. In another instance, the presumption of divine intercession is quickly contradicted by earthly reality. Sighting an approaching brig, Pym instinctively praises God for the rescue: “We poured out our whole souls in shouts and thanksgiving to God for the complete, unexpected, and glorious deliverance that was so palpably at hand” (124). However, the sailors soon recognize that the crew of their blessed rescue ship has been stricken with disease and the deck is littered with decaying bodies. Much short of divine, the ship is described as emitting a “hellish” odor of putrefying flesh (124). Yet another providential intercession proves otherwise when Pym and Peters search for provisions on the *Grampus*, and discover a bottle of port wine. Pym immediately “giv[es] thanks to God for this timely and cheering assistance” (127), but just as quickly, the sailors drink a good bit of the wine, are quickly inebriated, and act the fool until they are reduced to despair. Thus, in an ironic turn, the gift from the heavens becomes the most grievous of the seven deadly sins, despair.

Again, Poe both invokes and undermines a belief in divine providence when Pym attributes the discovery of a tortoise aboard the *Grampus* to divine loving-kindness. Poe uses this opportunity to revisit Cotton Mather’s fusion of disparate disciplines—history, natural science, and theology. Pym’s claim that the tortoise is a gift from God is problematic because it immediately follows Pym’s thorough explanation of the provenance of the tortoise. Captain Barnard had taken the animal on board earlier in the Galapagos Islands because that species of tortoise provides excellent food and a store of water in a membrane at the base of its neck. Pym details the appearance, weight, and distinguishing characteristics of this animal, even explaining the Spanish derivation of its name. We learn where it was stored on the ship, and how Augustus and Peters lifted it from below the deck. Pym spares us no detail. We are also apprised that the nutritious meat of the Galapagos tortoise has “no doubt, been the means of preserving the lives of thousands of seamen” (138). On the heels of this elaborate explanation and celebration of the turtle, Pym’s abrupt “thanks to
God for so seasonable a relief” seems disingenuous in that he has already revealed that the provenance of the turtle was not divine providence (138).

Characteristic of Mather’s providential accounts, the god-fearing individual may be visited by an apparition of a distant, much-loved relative, the spirit of a dead man, or even God himself for the purpose of encouraging the faithful or provoking the conscience of the depraved. In the hands of Poe, this motif becomes the object of parody. When Peters and Pym suspect a man of poisoning his fellow sailors one by one, they contrive one such apparition, and do so with “the idea of working upon the superstitious terrors and guilty conscience of the mate” (107). Recognizing that such events are a sham, but that nonetheless they have currency among the common man, Pym disguises himself as Hartman Rogers, the most recent victim, and makes his appearance among the mutineers and murderers. True to form, these hardened men are susceptible to the remarkable occurrences found in religious folklore. In a dramatic flourish that is the equal of those crafted by Cotton Mather, the murderer rises from his seat when he sees the “ghost” of Rogers and falls dead, his body rolling off the ship into the sea. However, unlike Mather’s accounts, this remarkable does not give rise to sober statements about the hand of God that metes out punishment among the depraved because Pym never believes that God will act on his behalf. He must then save himself, and merely appropriates the strategies of a religious past for this purpose.

At the close of this scene, there is yet another dramatic moment when Augustus is within seconds of death at the hands of the three remaining mutineers, and the combined efforts of Pym and Peters are ineffective to save him. There is no one to aid them. Cotton Mather would use this precise moment to introduce the intercession of God in such a situation, but Poe forgoes the deus ex machina in favor of a dog ex machina. Pym’s dog, Tiger, enters the scene, pins one man, and pierces his throat with his sharp teeth, allowing Pym and Peters to “beat out the brains” of one sailor and strangle another. In a complete reversal of the tropes of providential literature, a sham apparition and a dog ex machina facilitate the bloody slaughter of men of low character by men of questionable character. There are no heroes in this novella; they are no visible saints; and whereas Pym speaks of a God, there is no God.

18. See, for example, Cotton Mather’s “A Man Strangely Preserved on the Keel of a Boat at Sea” (2:345) and “the story of Mr. Joseph Beacon” (2:468–69).
The plot of chapter twelve directly responds to a classic element of early American tales of sea deliverance—the temptation of cannibalism. In Cotton Mather’s “The Wonderful Story of Major Gibbons,” for example, when men at sea prove desperate for sustenance, they look to the heavens, then look to themselves and decide to draw lots to determine whom they will eat. They debate the decision, identify their victim, and pause for prayer before selecting an executioner to kill the fated man. At this very moment, God answers their prayers by sending a large fish into their boat. They are gratified, but once again fall into the same condition of extreme hunger, and once again enact their lottery. God responds a second time with a large bird to nourish them, and a third time with a friendly ship to rescue them, God proving to be their “friend in adversity” (2:346).19

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym mirrors this plot element of providential literature when the sailors aboard the Grampus find themselves in a similar state of want. They, too, debate the issue of cannibalism, and then draw lots to select a victim. No divine intercession occurring in Poe’s narrative, the murder is consummated, and the body is consumed. At the end of the four-day’s provisions, Pym’s crew, like that of Major Gibbons, is again reduced to want. However, in an ironic turn, Pym finally discovers how to avoid repeating their cannibalism. He remembers that he has an axe that will allow the crew to gain access to the lower deck storeroom that holds ample provisions. Oblivious to the tragic timing of his recollection, Pym simply informs the reader that the axe “was hailed with the most ecstatic joy and triumph, and the ease with which it had been obtained was regarded as an omen of our ultimate preservation” (136). Within the context of the events, one hardly believes that his axe was obtained with “ease” as it came as an aftermath to cannibalism. In addition, within the larger context of the formulae of remarkable sea deliverances, the religious tenor of the language of “omens” of “ultimate preservation” appears to be misapplied in reference to murderous dimwits who resort unnecessarily to cannibalism because they simply forget that they are literally sitting on a storehouse of food and drink.

To complete the tale of divine providence, three days later a large fish leaps into the Grampus.20 Unlike Major Gibbons’s divine gift, Poe’s fish

19. The motif of the fish as manna is also found in Mather’s tale of William Laiton (2:349–50) and his “Mantissa” concerning Mr. William Trowbridge (2:354).

20. Naoki Onishi argues convincingly that Herman Melville also draws on Mather’s “The Wonderful Story of Major Gibbons” in Moby-Dick. He finds that the image of Tashtego and the bird at the moment of the Pequod’s sinking mirrors the appearance of the providential bird in Mather’s tale, and he asserts the “revealing contrast” between “the credulity expressed in
strikes Peters violently with his great tail, and jumps back into the water. When we read this passage through the filter of its analogue in Cotton Mather, the trope of the fish as the sailors’ manna is rendered ironic. If Pym had any faith in God’s supplying him with sustenance from the sea, which he surely does not, this fish would have quickly discouraged him in his faith. For Mather’s characters, survival is a sign of salvation. However, Poe’s survivors are painted as fools and cannibals.

The above scenes occur in the *Grampus* chapters of *Pym*, after which the tenor of the narrative changes dramatically. The *Jane Guy* sequence is less a challenge to the conventions of providential literature than an attempt to discern meaning by an alternate faith in empirical inquiry. Pym changes his strategy of survival in these chapters, and relies on rational, and sometimes scientific, analysis—whether consulting the ship’s navigational log, investigating historical accounts of similar sea voyages, or dispassionately examining the natural phenomena he encounters. However, this is not to assert that Pym finds his salvation or even his rescue at sea by virtue of scientific knowledge. In J. Gerald Kennedy’s evaluation,

geographic and scientific information appear to validate the truthfulness of the narrative as it demonstrates the intelligibility of physical reality. Yet the young narrator repeatedly makes faulty inferences by misreading visual signs. . . . Experience disconfirms Pym’s assumptions so persistently that the very possibility of arriving at “truth” becomes doubtful and problematic. (12)

All efforts to decode the world of the Tsalal or to understand the physical challenges to the *Jane Guy* are futile. Thus, Poe undermines man’s faith in the ability of rational inquiry to unlock the truths of the physical world, just as he earlier demythologizes man’s faith in divine providence to reveal truth. Where in the early chapters Poe dismantles the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century man’s faith in the ability of God to know and to act on His knowledge, in the later chapters Poe critiques the nineteenth-century man’s faith in his own ability to know and to act on his knowledge. Neither comprises an authoritative basis for narrative.

Consistent with Poe’s “MS. Found in a Bottle,” *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* reveals no spiritual or worldly truth. To the contrary, it testifies to the inability to lay claim to wisdom, and further expresses distrust of

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man’s ability to communicate truth, even if he were to acquire such. While Paul Rosenzweig admits that *Pym* encourages “movement toward meaning,” he concludes that the text refuses meaning. “Nothing is certain in the world of the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, not even the certainty that nothing is” (137, 149). If the details of the plot of both the *Grampus* and the *Jane Guy* chapters did not convince the reader of the impossibility of securing truth through divine or human efforts, then Poe appends a “note” to this effect. The note, like Mather’s many “Mantissa,” simply reprises the author’s argument, but in a different way. Following this narrative on the challenge to create meaning, the note informs the reader that Pym’s manuscript is inaccurate, incomplete, and incoherent. It is not to be believed, if it were ever understood.

J. Gerald Kennedy observes that “Pym’s situation often mirrors our own predicament as well—that of imperfect readers of signs, determined to find coherence or meaning or intelligibility in the texts we confront” (39). The reader of *Pym* should look to the image of Pym as reader for an analogue of “our own predicament.” Locked in the hold of the *Grampus*, Pym attempts to read a fragment of a note written in blood. Although he sheds what little light he has on the paper, and although he reads with “caution,” he is unable to decode the message. In this particular situation, Pym is literally and metaphorically delirious and in the dark. Syllables are “vague” and words are “disjointed” (80). As such, he is prompted to a wildly imaginative and inaccurate reading of his text. However, his greater mistake is assuming that he is able to read his world once he emerges from the hold. Pym’s challenge and our challenge as readers is that we are always delirious and in the dark, and that we always hold a fragmented text, however urgently written in blood.

Ultimately, *Pym* is a self-reflexive evaluation of man’s urge to create meaning of his life in terms larger than his singular experience might suggest. In Kennedy’s words,

*Pym* unfolds a powerful fable of the human need to interpret life-shaping events in relation to a transcendent meaning or purpose. The narrator’s craving for certitude and his persistent efforts to construe his experience as fortune or misfortune reveal a seemingly naive faith in providence. (*Abyss of Interpretation*, 12–13)

Thus, in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe seeks a form of emplotting that is distinct from the classic binary of comic and tragic modes. Such is the limited narrative vision of a Cotton Mather who forces each event in man’s life into a plot that discloses God’s approval or disapproval of that man. Moreover, God’s judgment becomes the singular, definitive conclusion of the narrative. For the providence tale in *Magnalia*, there is no alternate plot or conclusion. When *Pym* denies its reader coherent emplotting of events and proffers implausible narrative threads and plural, inconclusive conclusions, it strikes out at man’s belief in his ability to emplot his life, while it acknowledges man’s tremendous desire to do so. In his analysis of *Pym*’s refusal to conclude, Paul John Eaken speaks to the psychology of endings: “We want to believe that we could know all, but the urgency of our wanting is directly proportionate to our conviction of the impossibility of our knowing” (21). Poe’s *Pym* points to the instability of man’s knowledge, and, by extension, the instability of all narrative.

*Pym*’s prefatory statement to his narrative rehearses Poe’s rationale for publishing the account “under the garb of fiction.” According to the putative author, that the history appeared as fiction is a “ruse” (56). In reality, the ruse is the assertion that history is other than fiction.

**The Gallows Confession**

Several scholars have identified newspaper articles appearing in the 1830s and 1840s that relate events that are uncanny in their similarity to the plot of Poe’s “The Black Cat.” Their studies argue convincingly that such journalistic pieces provide source material for Poe’s composition of this tale.²² Stephen Rachman looks to literary source material and cites a chapter in Charles Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop* as Poe’s inspiration for “The Black Cat.”²³ Yet, read against the backdrop of book six of *Magnalia*, “The Black Cat” emerges as a composite of many of Mather’s providence tales, prin-


cipally the temperance tale and the gallows confession.\textsuperscript{24} Much like Poe's reprise of Mather's tales of maritime disasters and deliverances, “The Black Cat” offers an ironic revision of a variety of accounts from Magnalia.

The opening words of “The Black Cat” identify the tale as a “most wild, yet most homely narrative” (849). As such, the fusion of two opposing currents in this account mirrors the focus of Mather's book six, which showcases extraordinary events in the lives of ordinary people. However, while Mather insists that his reader have complete faith in his explanation of the commingling of the demonic and the domestic, Poe's narrator “neither expect[s] nor solicit[s] belief” (849). He is a murderer who is sentenced to die the following day. For the modern reader, the narrator's persona as a criminal might automatically compromise his authority, but within the context of Mather's tales, this would not necessarily be true. Magnalia contains numerous accounts of gallows confessions in which a criminal, after much prayer and consultation with the minister, confesses his sinful life, exhibits great remorse, at times admonishes others to avoid his example, and ultimately prepares to meet his maker. The ethical appeal of the otherwise criminal narrator springs from various elements: his intimate association with a minister whose remarks often preface those of the criminal, his conversion, and the exceptional moment of his discourse, minutes from death and eternity. Likewise, Poe's narrator claims that one of his motivations for recounting his crime is to “unburthen [his] soul” (849). By mirroring the language of the earlier narrative form, Poe fashions his account within the tradition of the gallows confession.

Similarly, “The Black Cat” invokes the form and language of Magnalia's testimonials concerning the fate of the drunken man. Rarely offering an extended narrative, Mather's brief anecdotes simply recount the spiritual and social disgrace of the intemperate and assert his damnation. In the most general of terms, these individuals are described as “debased,” “diseased,” and “open unto the worst of all temptations of the devil.” However, two specific motifs emerge consistently in Mather's accounts. First, he describes the drinking man as satanic: “We have seen them turn beasts—yea, turn devils!” (2:394). Secondly, he recounts that the fiery beverage causes men (and women) to stumble and fall into the fire of their domestic

\textsuperscript{24} See Mather's tale of James Morgan (2:409–12) for an example of an eighteenth-century tale of intemperance, which is also a gallows confession and a conversion narrative, these being intersecting genres in their early appearance.

Many scholars have studied Poe's use of the nineteenth-century temperance tale, which has its origins in Puritan sermonic literature. Regarding “The Black Cat,” David S. Reynolds concludes that the story “exploits” the popular genre of the temperance tale, while “avoiding didactic statement” implicit in the genre (Beneath the American Renaissance, 68–70).
hearth, as such anticipating their fall into the eternal fires of hell (2:394–5).

These are the same motifs that David Reynolds identifies in the popular temperance tale of the nineteenth century, a fiction form with its roots in *Magnalia* and other temperance tracts by Cotton Mather (65–73).25

“The Black Cat” also duplicates the language of moral outrage and self-recrimination often found in the earlier Puritan texts. Poe’s narrator begins his account by speaking of himself as “mere Man,” and as such invokes the doctrine of innate depravity, which is implicit in the providence tale (850).26 Recognizing that he is “fashioned in the image of the High God,” the narrator repeatedly refers to his soul just as the spiritually introspective Puritan gauges the state of his soul in hopes of a sign of regeneration (856).

Poe’s narrator in “The Black Cat,” like the intemperate sinners of *Magnalia*, describes himself as satanic. When he is intoxicated, he reports that “the fury of a demon” possesses him, and he seems to lose his soul (851).

However, these motifs, like those of the gallows confession, serve Poe only as a foil for the larger purpose of his fiction. When Poe appropriates the conventions of the Calvinist narratives, he simultaneously strips them of their moralistic import. In “The Black Cat,” the narrator admits being under the influence of the “Fiend Intemperance,” his soul expressing a “fiendish malevolence,” but he nonetheless concludes that his cat is the “Arch-Fiend” (851, 858). In doing so, he externalizes his guilt and transfers his satanic identity to the cat, a posture that would have been inconceivable in the earlier tales of intemperance. Although the reader is not obliged to accept this concluding statement from the mad drunkard, the dénouement of his account cannot invoke the themes of contrition and regeneration that the tale might have otherwise offered.

Thus, the gallows confession that Poe sets in motion ultimately contains no confession. Neither does it offer conversion. In Poe, we see little evidence of remorse or fine moralizing. Throughout his drunkenness, and his

25. T. J. Matheson’s insightful essay, “Poe’s ‘The Black Cat’ as a Critique of Temperance Literature,” *Mosaic* 19.3 (1986): 69–80, places this tale against the backdrop of nineteenth-century temperance fiction, in terms of both language and motifs. His argument is the analogue of the one presented here in that Matheson concludes that in this story “Poe is both rebutting and criticizing certain aspects of temperance literature” (80), just as I assert that in appropriating the language and motifs of providential literature, Poe is rebutting the religious principles underlying this literature.

26. The typesetting of “The Black Cat” evokes the format of the eighteenth-century religious tract. Emphasis is denoted by italics (such as “this infathomable longing of the soul to vex itself” and “incumbent eternally upon my heart”), key terms that begin with an uppercase letter (such as “Law,” “Man,” “Humanity,” and “Horror”), and the two words that stand completely in uppercase letters, “PERVERSENESS” and “GALLOWS,” as if to mark their critical importance for this text.
subsequent violence, Poe’s narrator finds no sign of conversion. His heart and his fancy are moved, but “the soul remained untouched” (851). At the close of the tale, the narrator—unlike the gallows confessor—assumes no responsibility for his deeds. In lieu of spiritual regeneration, the narrator is spiritually dead. He persists in identifying the cat as “the monster” and the “Arch-Fiend,” his language revealing his unwavering belief that he was a victim of the cat “whose craft had seduced [him] into murder” (859). Moreover, despite the narrator’s invocations to the deity—“But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend!”—there is no God in “The Black Cat” (858). There is merely a fictive framework of providential intervention, rendered ironic because of the absence of a deity that is at the center of the narrative genre that Poe both invokes and inverts in this tale.

Additional conventions from various accounts of criminal action in *Magnalia* reappear in Poe’s “The Black Cat.” Like Poe, Cotton Mather was interested in the ways in which crime is detected within a community. Mather observed of early New England that “many people have sinned horribly, upon a presumption that they sinned secretly: but the judgments of God have been wondrously and prodigiously and stupendously display’d in the discovering of secret sinners among us” (2:400). He further exclaims, “But, Oh, how strangely have the sins of men found them out!” and recounts any number of tales in which murder, adultery, bestiality, fraud, and excessive profiteering have come to light in unusual and often symbolic fashion. This is the very premise of Poe’s “The Black Cat.”

In this respect, Poe’s story bears remarkable similarity to Mather’s tale of Mary Martin, a gallows narrative in which a young woman confesses to hiding the body of her murdered child in a chest, thus concealing her crime “from the eyes of all but the jealous GOD” (2:404, 5). Like Mary Martin, the narrator in “The Black Cat” takes extraordinary steps to hide his victim’s corpse, and, in doing so, claims that “no eye could detect anything suspicious” (857). In each case, despite repeated denials, the murderous act is revealed only when there is a cry from behind Poe’s wall and inside Martin’s chest. In her confession, Mary Martin reveals that she attempted twice to kill her child much as Poe’s murderer twice violates his cat. In the closure to his account, Mather makes much of the symbolic retribution meted against the murderess. He insinuates that Martin must step from the gallows platform twice to complete her execution because she

27. It is interesting to note that Poe initially describes the cat’s cry in human terms, “at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child” (859).
twice attempted to murder her child before she was successful. In Mather's eyes, God's judgment speaks through this remarkable occurrence, this evaluation serving as the text's proper closure. In Poe's tale, however, there is no moralistic evaluation. Indeed, there is no reach toward consequence, when causation itself is understood as folly. Moreover, there is no logical conclusion. The reader is merely informed of a detail that he already surmised: the cat was secreted in the wall, and serves to alert the authorities of the mad narrator's crime.

Were Poe's story to reflect a belief in divine providence, the animal's cry would have become a symbol of God's omniscience and unrelenting vigilance in delivering punishment for man's sin. However, for true consonance with providential literature, the animal would not have been a cat, for, in Mather's accounts, the cat is often a harbinger of evil, not of divine righteousness. It is also true, however, that in Mather's narratives cats are frequently associated with women. Daniel Hoffman has observed that Poe invokes the "old superstition" of identifying odd or difficult women as cats, Hoffman's logical expression of this motif being "wife = witch. Ergo, black cat = wife."  

In the American folk tradition, the fusion and confusion of women and cats was a feature of tales about Salem in the late seventeenth century. As secretary to the witch trials, Cotton Mather was the actual "author" of such accounts. In book six of Magnalia, he offers further examples of the satanic transformation of women into cats for the purpose of afflicting men, and thus further promulgates this eerie equation. In fairness, Cotton Mather also rejects the conclusion that all complaints of feline mischief should be attributed to female misrule. In Magnalia, he argues that this common misconception "proceeded from some mistaken principles: as that Satan cannot assume the shape of an innocent person" (2:478). He even insists that many such complaints result from post hoc ergo propter hoc argumentation, and must be subject to additional proof to establish witchcraft. Nonetheless, his recounting the fantastic tales that dramatize a woman's transformation into a monstrous cat serves to plant in the minds of men and women the very principles that he questions.

29. See, for example, Cotton Mather's recording of Robert Downer's testimony that the night after Susanna Martin threatened him with evil purpose, a cat jumped through his bedroom window, attacked him on the throat, and almost killed him in Wonders of the Invisible World. Being an Account of the Tryals of Several Witches Lately Executed in New England. To Which is Added, A Further Account of the Tryals of the New England Witches, by Increase Mather (Boston, 1693), 142–43.
In “The Black Cat,” the wife and her cats are confused in the mind of the narrator. Indeed, in the opening paragraphs of the story, he refers to his wife’s superstitious belief that “all black cats [are] witches in disguise” (850). Although he immediately makes multiple attempts to distance himself from the belief, the narrator, like Mather, has already promulgated this notion if only by attributing it to another speaker. Poe secures this superstition with the closing image of the tale, that of the cat sitting on the head of the wife’s corpse, the cat squalling its accusations at the narrator. In this way, Poe successfully invokes and undermines the earlier trope of providential literature. The innocent women is compromised by dint of identification with the black cat, especially because of her supposed belief that “all black cats [are] witches in disguise,” although this statement is uttered only by her husband, not by herself. Ultimately, when the crime is disclosed, the informant is also the black cat, now associated with the satanic voice. What would have been in Mather a glorious moment in which God’s hand is able to effect the triumph of the godly woman and the destruction of the evil man is otherwise in Poe. The righteous woman is a grotesque corpse, the murderer disavows his crime, and the informant literally and metaphorically stands with the grotesque. The dénouement of Poe’s tale defies the earlier belief in absolute good and absolute evil, and is eager to confuse both these concepts and the symbolic representations of these concepts.

Poe further elides the identities of the wife and the cat in sacrificing the life of the woman for the animal. In the death of the young wife, he also reverses the providential belief that God preserves the righteous individual. *Magnalia Christi Americana* offers several narratives in which God-fearing men and women suffer exceptional physical trauma, and are restored by the hand of their God. “The Black Cat” mirrors and subverts this motif of Puritan providential literature as well. In particular, Poe’s final disposition of the narrator’s wife parallels Mather’s account of Abigail Eliot who was struck on the head with an iron, and lost brain matter in the accident. Nonetheless, Abigail’s “intellectuals” were not diminished by her misfortune, and she “liv’d to be a mother of several children” (2:356). In Mather’s felicitous plot, God rewards the good wife with health, fertility, intelligence, and longevity. Yet, in Poe’s story, God does not spare the narrator’s wife when he plants his axe in her skull. Unlike the faithful in *Magnalia*, this patient and long suffering spouse does not live to testify to God’s power and mercy in restoring her to health. As such, Poe’s story is the shell of Mather’s providence tale, but without the hand of God.

Poe’s lack of larger commentary on the wife’s murder is also telling, especially in contradistinction to the closure of providential literature.
Whereas Mather concludes that Abigail Eliot’s return to health is a sign of God’s loving-kindness, Poe avoids any culminating statement whatsoever. He reverts to the limited narrative structure of the chronicle, and simply announces that “she fell dead upon the spot, without a groan” (856). As he suggested earlier, he eschews full narrative and is merely “detailing a chain of facts” (853). As a result, for Poe, this event calls for no larger statement because his account does not serve any overarching philosophical or religious concerns, as does Mather’s. There is no absolute good or evil, and physical occurrences are unremarkable and ultimately symbolic of nothing.

Indeed, the goals of Poe’s narration run counter to those of Cotton Mather. Where Mather extrapolates greater moral and social truths from his accounts, Poe calls in his opening paragraph for a more logical and sober mind to “reduce” his tale to an “ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” (850). That is, he seeks the truth of the story in “very natural” exposition of the facts, rather than in supernatural explication. Of course, questions of interpretation—especially those of causation—are at the center of “The Black Cat,” and they defy exposition by either narrator or reader. In their stead, Poe adheres to his stated goal of “plac[ing] before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events” (849), but ultimately renders his events meaningless by pushing his claim of veracity and objectivity to its logical extreme. This authorial posture strikes a blow at that of Cotton Mather who insists that the ministry assume responsibility for exposing the “evident operations of the Almighty God” in the events of life. Yet when Poe eschews his interpretive role, he invites the reader to establish causation, thus placing this critical responsibility in the hands of the random reader. Or, as he later suggests, an attempt at determining motive and reason is pointless. Following his first mutilation of the cat and the subsequent fire, Poe speaks again to the issue of causation: “I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts” (853), the narrator states. Understanding an author’s search for causation—providential or otherwise—to be a “weakness,” Poe places his goals for “The Black Cat” at odds with the grander ambitions of early providential literature. Because Poe’s story mirrors the structure of the providence tale, yet rejects the premise of the genre, “The Black Cat” asserts that nineteenth-century America can no longer assent to the belief in providential intervention in the lives of men and women. Neither can they identify an ordering principle for their lives that will stand in place of divine providence for antebellum America.
Where Mather sees design, Poe casts the events of one's life as a “series” or a “chain,” as bald chronicle rather than interpretive history.

Poe’s “William Wilson,” too, takes on the framework of Mather’s gallows narratives. Yet, once again, the criminal confessor will not accept responsibility for his crimes, claiming instead to be a “victim” and a “slave of circumstances beyond human control” (427). Neither will he disclose the full record of his evil deeds. Nor will he even reveal his true name. However, the narrator wills himself a name. Although he suggests that his life has been ordained by other than his free will, he exercises that will to choose a name that symbolizes his human agency, William Wilson. Wilson opens the tale with the language of moralistic self-remonstration that is characteristic of Mather’s sinners and criminals. In Mather, a confession of the abject condition of one’s soul—whether on the gallows or in the privacy of one’s prayer closet—is prefatory to conversion and ultimately, one hopes, to salvation. Yet, in Poe’s ironic revision of the Puritan topoi, the narrator’s self-recrimination anticipates only an exposition of the crime that leaves Wilson “dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope!” (448). Further playing with Mather’s language, Poe takes up the early author’s term for suicide, which is “self-murder” because when William Wilson murders his double, he murders himself. And, where Mather looks to man’s innate depravity that “dogg[s]” a man to self-murder (2:467), William Wilson looks to the rival outside himself when he threatens his double/his self, “you shall not dog me unto death!” (447).

The goal of “William Wilson” is not merely a rejection of Calvinist literary convention, but a challenge to the religious underpinnings of that literature. Wilson characterizes his early religious education as “Draconian,” every hour marked by the “deep hollow note of the church-bell” and every transgression measured by the minister’s ferule (429, 428). The passage from the religious school of Reverend Bransby to Eton, then to Oxford, and finally to foreign sites signals a passage from a theocentric early American identity to an increasingly liberal, humanist self-fashioning. In each venue, however, the voice if not the person of the earlier “companion” and “rival,” William Wilson, cautions the narrator and exposes his vice. Finally, when Wilson murders Wilson, he hopes to rid himself of the moralistic principles that he attempted to leave behind in the physical site of Bransby’s church and school.

Because the story is a retrospective of William Wilson’s life, Poe exposes the consequence of Wilson’s philosophical maneuvering in his initial depiction of the character. In the opening paragraph, Wilson is fashioned
as Cain. He is the “outcast of all outcasts most abandoned” whose ill repute is known throughout the world (426). Although he does not fully renounce his lifelong turpitude, he acknowledges that his understanding of his life lacks a guiding principle other than his personal whim or self-gratification. Indeed, he asks his fellow man to “seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of fatality amid a wilderness of error” (427). As such, he is asking for man to restore a set of foundational principles that might replace those that he rejected throughout his life. No longer convinced of the validity of his amoral wilderness, he at last seeks an element of fate—a God or gods—to order his life. Having rejected his religious past and devoid of its replacement, he is dead to the world and holds no hope of attaining heaven.

The irony of the tale is that Wilson rejected the pieties of providential literature, but has yet to discover their replacement in the nineteenth century. Constructed without substitute foundational principles, Poe’s nineteenth-century narrative lacks its own means of evaluation and interpretation. It does not recognize and value parallelism (the birth date and physical similarity of William Wilson and William Wilson) or repetition (ill doing and the discovery of ill doing); it identifies these elements of plot as “remarkable coincidence” and “remarkable fact,” which unlike Mather’s remarkables remain unmoored, without the potential to be analyzed or evaluated (432, 434). Whereas this material would have prompted Mather’s definitive, moralistic statement celebrating the hand of God, these details render Poe’s narrator mute. He is surprised, but incapable of interpretation.

In a self-reflexive moment in the text, Poe’s narrator almost apologizes for the quality of his anecdotes. He characterizes his tale as “a few rambling details” that are “utterly trivial” and even “ridiculous” (428). Yet, he simultaneously seeks to make more of them.

These [details], moreover, utterly trivial, and even ridiculous in themselves, assume, to my fancy, adventitious importance, as connected with a period and a locality when and where I recognize the first ambiguous monitions of the destiny which afterward so fully overshadowed me. Let me then remember. (428)

Poe’s self-murderer yearns for narrative coherence for the events of his life, a coherence that would establish causation, and thus a plot expressive of the unity of his life. Although he guards against definitive statement of purpose, the narrator wants to make meaning of his life and see his life
whole. This urge for integrity compels him to search the past, and permits the narrative—however diffuse and inconclusive—to unfold.

At the same time, however, the author ultimately does not permit William Wilson this wisdom, and suggests that such understanding is impossible. In other tales, Poe openly discloses his belief that the search for continuity and coherence in the events of one’s life is an unfortunate human “weakness” (853). This is, of course, the primary “weakness” of historians who believe in providential design, and for whom both continuity and coherence are established by God. Thus, when Poe takes on the form of early American historical literature of divine providence and rejects its theological platform, he establishes ironic distance between the early spiritual fictions of the American self and the nineteenth-century dark romantic expressions of the self.

That Poe cloaks his fiction in the guise of a historical account makes his challenge to early American historical narratives even more pointed. Poe crafted his “MS. Found in a Bottle” to be read as a journalistic account of a sea deliverance. Because “MS. Found in a Bottle” was first published in the Baltimore Sunday Visiter of October 12, 1833, alongside reportage of current events, which the story largely resembles, and because the title of the story resembles a journalistic headline, it blurs the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, works of the imagination and historical accounts. Likewise, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket was issued as a book, in 1838, purportedly “edited” by Poe. The style and the content of its title page resemble those of contemporary travel narratives. In addition, “The Black Cat” and “William Wilson” invoke the structure, language, and tone of the genre of the gallows sermon, yet another historical tract from early America. More than a tease or a hoax, Poe is calling into question his readers’ notions of the stability of history. Additionally, Poe’s fiction works toward eroding the authority of historical narrative. By his fictive guise as editor who openly discloses his sources, Poe mirrors the authorial position of Cotton Mather who chronicles the uncanny occurrences of New England, while taking care to note the source of each account.

Finally, in the process of undermining the providence tale by refashioning this material as gothic fiction, Edgar Allan Poe simply furthers the developing process of writing historical accounts that Cotton Mather put into motion in the late seventeenth century. Where Increase Mather published and marketed his gallows sermons as religious tracts, Cotton Mather amplified his sermons with sensational information about the crime and, perhaps even more dramatic, a statement from the criminal, these aspects designed to attract readership. Taking his cue from Cotton
Mather, Poe’s narratives continue this trajectory. They retain the formula of the providence tale, but dispense entirely with the moralistic dénouement. Moreover, they dispense with the voice of the minister as historian. Because Mather asserted the primacy of the minister as historian, he alone assumed authority to narrate and interpret the uncanny events of New England. Where he had no immediate knowledge of a “remarkable occurrence,” he meticulously documented his source, which was most often a minister or multiple ministers. However, Poe eliminates the third-person narrator with claims of serving as dispassionate and disinterested interpreter, and seats authority in the man at the center of an extraordinary event. In this way, Poe gives his narrative over to the man who is passionately involved in the uncanny and even implicated in crime, and gives voice exclusively to the criminal or the man whom no God will save.