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The Man in the Transatlantic Crowd: The Early Reception of Edgar Allan Poe in Victorian England

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NEITHER IN NOR OUT: TRANSATLANTIC MUTATION IN THE LITERARY

DEVELOPMENT OF EDGAR ALLAN POE AND OSCAR WILDE

by

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ABSTRACT

NEITHER IN NOR OUT: TRANSATLANTIC MUTATION IN THE LITERARY

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An important anomaly in transatlantic criticism is the contrast between

transatlantic theory and the applied criticism of literature through a transatlantic lens.

While most transatlantic scholars assert the value of individual strands of thought

throughout the globe and stress the importance of overcoming national hegemonic

barriers in literature, applied criticism generally favors an older model that privileges

British literary thought in the nineteenth century. I claim that both British and American

writers can influence each other, and that mutations in thought can travel both ways

across the Atlantic.

To argue this claim, I begin by analyzing the influence of *Blackwood's Magazine* on the literary aesthetic of Edgar Allan Poe. While Poe's early works read very similar to *Blackwood's* articles, he positioned himself against *Blackwood's* in the middle of his career and developed a different, although derivative, approach to psychological fiction. I next follow this psychological strain back across the Atlantic, where Oscar Wilde melded aspects of Poe's fiction to his own unique form of satire and social critique.

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Thank you also to my father, who got me hooked on Edgar Allan Poe; my mother,

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prodding that got this finished.

Finally, thank you to Edgar, Oscar, and the *Blackwood's* writers: if you hadn't written, I would not have had anything to write about.

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INTRODUCTION

> Accordingly, by the mutation of one of these genes or another, in one way
>
> or another, any component structure or function, and in many cases
>
> combinations of these components, may become diversely altered. Yet in
>
> all except very rare cases the change will be disadvantageous, involving an
>
> impairment of function. It is nevertheless to be inferred that all the
>
> superbly interadapted genes of any present-day organism arose just
>
> through this process of accidental natural mutation. – H.J. Muller (73)

In their efforts to explain the relatively new enterprise of transatlantic criticism, recent scholars have made use of metaphor to articulate the concepts crucial to the discipline. Wai Chee Dimock, for example, has proposed the concept of "deep time," a map which "thanks to its receding horizons, its backward extension into far-flung temporal and spatial coordinates, must depart significantly from a map predicated on the short life of the US" (759). Margaret McFadden suggests metaphors of matrices, networks, and webs as they "speak legitimately of a tradition of transatlantic female communication far older than either the cable or the steamer" (111). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use the idea of the rhizome to illustrate how "puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first" (226). All of these metaphors highlight the concepts of connectivity and mutuality that are critical to an understanding of the transatlantic project. Through such images, these critics suggest an important trope of transatlantic thought: no thought

occurs in a vacuum, and the reading of multiple texts from various traditions provides different insights than those that originate from reading texts in nationalist isolation.

One of the complications, however, in transatlantic criticism is the clash between ideas and practice. While the thinking behind transatlantic theory indicates the kind of egalitarian network of communication that McFadden proposes, actual application of transatlantic critique to literature tends to promulgate earlier theoretic approaches by suggesting the literary superiority of British authors over American writers, particularly in regard to questions of influence. I propose here another metaphor to flesh out and address some of the complications that have arisen when the theoretical concepts that guide transatlantic critique and the actual application of transatlantic criticism to literature clash. This metaphor is that of mutation.

When anything – a person, an animal, a virus – leaves its native environment, it immediately comes in contact with new factors. Both the new entity and the new environment are forced to adapt to the change in circumstances. This change is fundamental in nature and causes the new entity to be altered significantly from its original state in its native environment. For example, an American living in Australia for a period of time will begin to adopt new patterns of speech and methods of pronunciation, or an animal species transplanted to the Sahara Desert will become accustomed to a different diet if it is to survive. The new entity does not become absolutely like those in its new environment – very few Americans living in Sydney, for example, will be mistaken for native Australians – but the change is fundamental enough that, if and when the entity returns to its native environment, it will be different than it was when it left.

Applying this metaphor of mutation to transatlantic criticism immediately reveals that much of the criticism has dealt primarily with a one-way version of this critical thought: the effect of British literature on American literature. Even though our theoretical models are set up to suggest connectivity and mutuality, most of this criticism takes the form either of tracing English influences or of examining active attempts of American authors to reject British influence (in our metaphor, the change that causes the mutation). Either way, this kind of scholarship often relies on broad categorizations that classify authors as essentially American or British based on notions of national identity and aesthetic formulae. However, like travelers returning home, do strains of thought and ideas mutate when they travel? My proposal is twofold: first, that the model of mutating ideas adds a crucial interactive element to the "transatlantic map." Second, transatlantic theory, if it is to follow the theoretical ideals of connectivity and exchange, must therefore take mutations from multiple directions into consideration. Specifically, criticism must take into account that, just as British writers have impacted American literature, American writers have had a distinct and significant impact on the development of British literature. To further establish this, it is important to realize that the umbrella of transatlantic criticism essentially contains two different variants, criticism about transatlanticism and transatlantic criticism, and that the ideals espoused by the first are not always realized by the second.

In their introduction to *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor set out to answer the question "What is transatlantic literary studies?" Their answer embodies the same globally inclusive ideals suggested by the metaphors of Dimock, McFadden, and Deleuze and Guattari. Manning and Taylor are concerned with

the critical emphasis on "area studies," particularly where the term means "American studies" and leads to an undue fixation on the singularity of American thought and individuality. Manning and Taylor assert that "complex interchanges between the Americas, Europe and Africa, with all the forces of 'global' markets and movements of people, are a fundamental feature of modern life, one that makes clear the futility of continuing with nation-based studies developed in a world whose parameters looked very different" (3). Essentially, their argument is that literary studies should not privilege one form of influence over another, and that a preoccupation with a certain form of influence or national hegemony (specifically in this case, an "Area Studies" focus on American exceptionalism) is overly simplistic in an era of commercial and literary globalization. Manning and Taylor further specify that notions about how to "do" transatlantic criticism are difficult to come by, because the model of a global framework means opening up study to infinite influences and ideas. This, however, is an asset rather than a liability. "The key terms" of transatlantic theory: "rhizome, congener, contagion, surrogation, translation, metaphor, web, network, circulation, flow – have in common assumptions about relation, and a framework of comparison, implicit or explicit. Beyond that, they suggest possibilities rather than prescriptions" (11). "Doing" transatlantic criticism may not mean the same thing for every critic, but the underlying assumptions should be similar. Practical application based on this common ground should therefore lead to a focus on finding connections across cultures and demythologizing the hegemony of the nation. In the context of American literature, for example, Dimock's metaphor serves for Manning and Taylor as "a means of relating American literature to world history and of reconstructing its literary relations in a historicised but transnational context" (7). That

which before was viewed as fundamentally and uniquely American (e.g. Manifest Destiny, rags-to-riches tales, notions of independence and equality) is now re-contextualized to account for global factors.

While the goal of identifying new forms of transnational relation is certainly worthwhile, the application of this technique in transatlantic criticism has proven difficult to realize. While the range of "infinite possibilities" embodied in a transatlantic approach do indicate a variety of different readings, a disturbing number have focused on asserting rather than demythologizing hierarchical national value. This move may initially appear to fit the transatlantic portrait because, as Dimock and others have done, these critics seek to demythologize American literary uniqueness. However, in doing so, they privilege British literature and British national identity by studying its effect upon American writers without considering any type of reciprocal influence going back across the Atlantic. This linear approach therefore adds the very political privilege that transatlanticism claims to confront; here, however, Britain is the hegemonic power rather than the United States.

Asserting the literary authority of the United Kingdom is not a unique facet of transatlantic criticism, and it is natural to see the tenets of traditional modes and a reliance on conventional notions absorbed into transatlantic theory. One of the first evaluators of post-revolutionary British-American culture and relations, Alexis de Tocqueville, formulated such a unilateral relationship. He wrote that "among the small number of men who are engaged in literary works in the United States, the majority are English in origin and above all in style" (544). If American authors merely attempting to imitate their English counterparts was not proof enough of British superiority in letters,

Tocqueville also wrote that "the citizens of the United States themselves seem so convinced that books are not published for their benefit that before settling on the merits of one of their own writers they normally wait for England to approve his work" (544). Although British political governors had been expelled from the shores of the new United States, Tocqueville's observations indicate that, despite the revolution, the British were still the literary governors over the American. While this rule was far from universally accepted among American authors in Tocqueville's time (as Robert Weisbuch and others have shown), the part of Tocqueville's observation that has been almost universally accepted is the path of influence: ideas and literary sense flowed from England to America. In *Atlantic Double-Cross,* for example, Weisbuch describes Emerson, Hawthorne, and others as actively fighting against British literary imperialism, but does not consider any form of reciprocal influence going the other way.

Other contemporary critics assert this unidirectional relationship and add to it stratified, definite, fixed stereotypes of authors based on their nation of origin. Although they base their arguments on transatlantic ideals, the language of classification implicitly asserts a conscious or unconscious political agenda as it reinforces the ideals of area studies, in which one nation is defined as exceptional to another, by reinscribing the British as literary governors. For example, Tony Tanner, in his comparison of English and American Romanticism, claims that Wordsworth's "sense of harmonious reciprocities between mind and landscape…is absent from Whitman's more desperate and sometimes hysterical ecstasies" (84). Tanner's wording here is noteworthy: Wordsworth is "harmonious," invoking a sense of order, balance, and calm serenity, while Whitman's poetry is described in overtly negative feminized terms. While

Tanner's reading of these two authors is substantive, he applies these same characteristics broadly to British and American Romantics as a group. Therefore, with the question of individual readings aside, *all* British authors are "harmonious," while *all* American authors are "desperate" and "hysterical." Such broad categorization does not hold water if all authors in the time period are considered: Coleridge's opium-induced "Kubla Khan," for instance, fits the "desperate" and "hysterical" formulation more precisely than Thoreau's *Walden*. A reading that bases an author's aesthetic purely on his or her nationality neglects the very transatlantic networks and matrices that claim to invalidate an "area studies" approach. An author such as Coleridge, for example, should not be categorized with the broad British brush of "harmony" if his energetic and frantic writings do not fit that nationalist model. Certainly such an agenda was not Tanner's intention, but his classifications do reveal the unconscious prejudices that have carried down from Tocqueville's observation into contemporary criticism. Claudia Stokes also classifies British and American authors as "in clear opposition here in their respective attitudes towards pedigree" (28), which presents a similar problem. Stokes makes this argument to inform her thesis that authors from these nations shaped their arguments about international copyright based on their views of class structure. Her stratification fits her argument about British and American views about copyright, but once again seems overly simplistic: not all American authors looked down on aristocracy, and some (i.e. Poe and Longfellow) actively embraced it, while many British writers such as Dickens sharply critiqued their nation's class consciousness.

The irony of these and other treatments is that, while critics are self-reflexive about deconstructing American reliance upon exceptionalism, their same arguments

could also be used to undermine this myth of British literary superiority. A great deal of

transatlantic criticism focuses on the early to mid-nineteenth century, in which Britain,

not the United States, was the most powerful nation in the Atlantic. Critics often focus

on this literature of the nineteenth-century with a twenty or twenty-first century eye: that

is to say, they assert contemporary power structures to old literature. Speaking of

globalization as it applies to transatlantic theory and American literature, Paul Giles

claims that "there is an important sense in which this language of global empire conceals

'a fundamental dissymmetry in the relationship between the United States and every

other country in the world'" (46-7). Ironically, Giles' imposition of a twentieth and

twenty-first century world view on the time of "classic American literature" which

informs his piece masks the fact that the British Empire, not the United States, was the

nation that held "fundamental dissymmetry" with the world on which its sun never set.

Giles uses this imbalance to "challenge circular, self-fulfilling definitions of American

literature by opening up the field as a site of perennial struggle and rupture" (47). If that

is true, it follows that a similar analysis could disrupt notions of English literary

autonomy. Such an analysis even seems, according to Giles' logic, more relevant:

America's globalization is at least one hundred years more recent than American

Romanticism, while British political and literary imperialism were lockstep.

I am not asserting American superiority over British authors, nor am I arguing the

need for such a debate. I agree with Manning and Taylor that such a concept of national

privilege is ultimately narrow and ignores important connections. Just as transatlantic

readings have yielded important contexts for American writing, however, it seems fitting

that we push the critical envelope further by considering both sides of the mutation. My

goal with this thesis is to demonstrate that cultural forms travel both ways across the Atlantic, changing significantly both times. Transatlantic studies seek to assert that there are no one-way journeys in the world of literature: every crucial aesthetic move yields influence and individual innovation. Through my case study, I provide a concrete illustration of exactly that form of mutation.

I am indebted to some transatlantic critics who have made important strides by noticing transatlantic reciprocity in practical application. Although Nicolaus Mills' 1973 *American and English Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* ultimately makes the same type of stratified conclusion as the critics earlier mentioned, his methodology reveals the possibility of bilateral understanding. Mills begins by asserting that American fiction must be "analyzed in comparison with rather than in isolation from English fiction" (261). While this meshes with most of the theory about transatlanticism, what makes Mills particularly notable is that his is a study in comparison rather than in one-way British influence over American literature. He posits that writers should be looked at by their relationship within a common tradition, and that "they can be settled only when a comparison of American and English fiction analyzes the two traditions at the points at which they are *closest*, e.g., in the work of Scott and Cooper or Melville and Hardy" (261, italics added). Unlike earlier criticism, Mills does not privilege British influence on these American counterparts in his analysis of "close points." Instead, he attributes Nathaniel Hawthorne as an influence on George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and reads Herman Melville's *Pierre* and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* in tandem. True, Mills does depict Cooper as a literary descendant of Scott, but such a depiction is warranted by his analysis rather than Scott's Britishness (or, at least for the Scot, Old Worldishness) and

Cooper's Americanness. Mills' tight comparisons do often rely on a formalist approach, but he also invites social and cultural comparisons.

The framework by which Mills sets up this interesting and dynamic slew of comparisons is somewhat problematic, however. Despite his claim that American and British authors should be examined "at the points at which they are closest," Mills still goes on to make generalizations about each form of national literature, positing an American preoccupation with "certain ideational or visionary concerns" (262) in contrast to a British focus on social context. Mills defends this by stating that "any less tightly drawn comparison" (261) than the framework he has established cannot lead to such generalizations. I am unconvinced that *his* framework can also yield such a generalization; in fact, his thinking indicates the opposite direction. If we consider authors as tightly linked as he does, we can then consider that Twain's satires of living American cultural and political figures are more concerned with immediate social context than Scott's romantic histories. In turn, Scott's depiction of the Scottish struggle against British tyranny in *Rob Roy* is framed around a more ancient and epic sense of vision than Ahab's vindictive hunt for Moby Dick. A reading of authors at "close points," then, completely obliterates the nationalist generalizations that Mills seeks to establish. Mills' analysis suggests that individual authors transcended national stereotypes in their writing concerns and interests, but, because he is focused on exploring broad and general characteristics of American romanticism as opposed to those of British romanticism, he fails to emphasize the complexities of these authors within such broad categories.

Despite this limit, Mills' work is a crucial step in the right direction: recognizing that American and British authors can be studied together and can share several key

characteristics in their aesthetic platforms. If transatlantic criticism is to achieve its theoretical aims, the next step is to turn that analysis into a more productive discussion than "American writers are…" or "British writers are…" and focus instead on a cross-cultural map of commonalities and connectivity.

Mills is not the only critic to draw attention to the instability of British literary sovereignty, or the necessity of looking for cross-cultural connections. In his discussion of cosmopolitanism, David Simpson describes it as "neither local/national or international, but both at once…Ideological pressure would continue to assert the priority of one over the other (usually the local/national, especially in Britain), but in the industrializing countries there could be no going back" (56-7). He notes that the British tendency for inward reflection is inherently antagonistic to the goals of cosmopolitanism and transatlanticism brought on by industrialization. In their respective treatments of sympathy and philanthropy in the nineteenth-century, Frank Christianson and Amanda Claybaugh view British and American authors as part of a common conversation without privileging one nation over the other. Douglas Robinson provides examples of the metaphor of mutation as he considers that "if Baudelaire's and Mallarme's strong readings of Poe generated French Symbolism, Eliot's and Stevens's strong readings of the French Symbolists helped shape American modernism" (190).

The abundant scholarship on Edgar Allan Poe's posthumous influence in France that Robinson refers to makes Poe an excellent case study for a project such as mine. Literary figures such as Charles Baudelaire and Stephane Mallarme explicitly praised Poe and sought to establish him as an influential figure in the French literary pantheon. His nearly universal acceptance in France, and the lack of debate in modern scholarship about

that acceptance, is also an indictment against the argument that American literature influences British literary thought. This mode of thought thus stems more from imperialism than transatlanticism, for if ideas can flow to France from America as easily as they can come the other way, why is the same not true for England? Such prejudice is based on historical assertions of power rather than geographical barriers. These imperialist tendencies are still promulgated in critical scholarship, and indicate another wall that can be broken down by a multifaceted reading.

In this thesis, I assert that Poe's ideas did, in fact, impact British literature significantly. His ideas were not unique: in fact, the strain of thought that I analyze originated in Great Britain. In Chapter One, I demonstrate that Poe gained many of his Gothic ideas from *Blackwood's Magazine*, the premier literary journal of its time. *Blackwood's* was not only an outstanding literary publication; as a popular bestseller in the United States, it was the ambassador of British critical thought to America. Though Poe derived much of the material for his early writing from *Blackwood's* Gothic tales, he eventually rejected it, transforming those ideas into his own unique brand of psychological horror. This move coincides with a national literary concern with British influence, as Weisbuch has described.

For Poe, at least, the story does not end here: although Poe died without making much of a positive impact on international literature, his themes were posthumously appreciated and adopted into French literature. I explore this in Chapter Two, paying particular attention to how they were then accessed and adopted by an improbable author to carry them into Great Britain: Oscar Wilde. Wilde is particularly relevant to this project for two reasons. First, he was sufficiently audacious (which was not out of the

ordinary for Wilde) to admit his appreciation for the American Poe at a time when it was

extremely unpopular to do so. Poe's reputation in Britain was horribly marred by

Griswold's unflattering biography and his poor critical reception in England during his

lifetime. In fact, Wilde's willingness to admit his admiration is primarily due to Poe's

influence in France. Secondly, Wilde did not passively enjoy Poe: just as Poe changed

Blackwood's Gothic themes to fit his own literary project, Wilde experimented on Poe's

psychological horror to augment his own form of lyrical social satire. The strain of

thought from *Blackwood's* thus returned to England through Wilde, but in a form much

different from its earlier inception.

CHAPTER ONE

> Ask nothing of men, and, in the endless mutation, thou only firm column
>
> must presently appear the upholder of all that surrounds thee. – Ralph
>
> Waldo Emerson (242)

In the February 1845 *Graham's Magazine* section "Our Contributors, No. XVII: Edgar Allan Poe," James Russell Lowell wrote:

> Mr. Poe is at once the most discriminating, philosophical, and fearless critic upon
>
> imaginative works who has written in America…he seems sometimes to mistake
>
> his phial of prussic-acid for his inkstand. Had Mr. Poe had the control of a
>
> magazine of his own, in which to display his critical abilities, he would have been
>
> as autocratic, ere this, in America, as Professor Wilson had been in England; and
>
> his criticisms, we are sure, would have been far more profound and philosophical
>
> than those of the Scotsman. (Thompson 657).

The "Professor Wilson" referred to herein is John Wilson, famed Scottish literary critic and, along with John Lockhart, co-editor of *Blackwood's Magazine.* It would stand to reason that Poe, who craved literary fame, would have been flattered by the comparison to so notable a figure as Wilson, and even a bit pleased at being considered "far more profound and philosophical." However, this did not mean that Poe admired Wilson, at least at this stage in his career, nor that he desired the perception that his literary star was somehow hitched to that of the *Blackwood's* editor. In a September edition of the *Broadway Journal* in the same year, Poe had defended Lowell from a *Blackwood's* review by Wilson, calling the esteemed British editor "ignorant and egotistical" (Thomas 574). Although Poe was motivated by aesthetic feeling, calling Lowell "one of the

noblest of our poets," he entered into the fray on behalf of a fellow American against a British critic, thus acting in the "partisanship of American letters" he had lambasted a few years before.

Poe's defense brought forth a rebuttal from the *Evening Mirror's* Hiram Fuller, who claimed that Poe's attacks were "indeed, 'bearding the lion in his den'; and as Mr. Poe is preparing to publish an edition of his 'Tales' in England, (omitting the story of the Gold *Bug*, we can suppose,) he can expect but little mercy from the *back*-biting reviews of the Lockharts and Fonblanques, those bull-dogs of the English press" (Thomas 575). Fuller's prediction proved prescient in November 1847, as *Blackwood's* critique of Wiley and Putnam's "Library of American Books" said of Poe's *Tales,* "one is not sorry to have read these tales; one has no desire to read them twice;" "They are not framed according to the usual manner of stories;" "The punishment of this sort of diabolic spirit of perversity, he brings about by a train of circumstances as hideous, incongruous, and absurd, as the sentiment itself;" and "The style, too, has nothing peculiarly commendable; and when the embellishments of metaphor and illustration are attempted, they are awkward, strained, infelicitous" (Thomas 708-9). The rancor of this exchange between Poe and the editors of *Blackwood's Magazine* was neither new nor unexpected. *Blackwood's* was unlikely to grant favorable reviews to an American author such as Poe, particularly one who had engaged in such acerbic literary jousting.

This rancor does highlight Poe's turnaround from admiration of *Blackwood's* to castigation of British literary imperialism. In January 1842, Poe wrote in *Graham's Magazine* "Time was when we imported our critical decisions from the mother country. For many years we enacted a perfect farce of subserviency to the *dicta* of Great Britain"

(632). With his use of the first-person we, Poe is not excluding himself here from the castigation of American dependency on British influence, for he was partially a product of the literature of England. Although his views on the matter would change, this critique of "the *dicta* of Great Britain" would certainly not have extended to *Blackwood's* during the years of his early writing. *Blackwood's* was not lockstep with the traditional Anglophone print establishment when it became popular, and, if anything, its Scottish independence, German literary influence, and paradoxically critical and whimsical tone inspired Poe's early writing attempts. However, it eventually emblemized the block of British literary hegemony to Poe. While Poe's first short stories were highly derivative of *Blackwood's* style, his falling out with the style for both financial and aesthetic reasons led to his own aesthetic transformation from imitation to a new form of psychological horror. *Blackwood's* not only strongly influenced the American journals in which Poe attempted to make his early entrance, thus influencing the development of his early writing style, but was also responsible for influencing the development of Poe's editorial critiques in *The Southern Literary Messenger.* These early stories inspired by *Blackwood's* – namely, "Metzengerstein," "Loss of Breath," and "Berenice" – were rejected by the literary establishment and led to a repudiation of *Blackwood's* by Poe as he proclaimed "at last a revulsion of feeling, with self-disgust, necessarily ensued" (632). Poe desired the same notoriety and status that *Blackwood's* and its authors had achieved, but his failed emulation of their writing formula led him to alter that formula and craft his own unique style. This chapter will detail the process by which Poe changed his emphasis from an emulation of Gothic setting and plot device to focus on effect as rooted in individual terror.

A brief survey of Poe's comments about *Blackwood's* reveals that, as he did on so many subjects, he contradicted himself numerous times. This is significant because, in a similar manner, modern scholarship is conflicted in the assessment of Poe's relationship with and feelings towards the publication. Susan and Stuart Levine argue that "Poe was very familiar with *Blackwood's*…he sometimes wrote as though he were part of the *Blackwood's* circle…he enjoyed the *Blackwood's* crowd" (19). Benjamin F. Fisher writes that the tales of terror found in *Blackwood's* "served as Poe's, and other Americans', model, time and time again" (72). Teresa Goddu and Kenneth Dauber, in contrast, argue that "Poe exaggerates *Blackwood's* assumptions in order to expose them" (96), and Scott Peeples suggests that Poe "lampooned its tales of sensation in print less than a year before 'Usher'" (182). All of these statements are valid if the main variable in Poe's contradictory comments is considered: the time period in which he wrote them. Early in his career Poe was highly influenced by *Blackwood's,* but it became necessary for him to advance his literary aesthetic beyond it as his career progressed and his writing became more sophisticated. John Freehafer argues that Poe wrote "The Cask of Amontillado" and other later tales of effect to outdo the *Blackwood's* tales that he admired. In addition to that, his later fiction was also written to best his *own* earlier, *Blackwood's*-inspired writing.

This is not to say that *Blackwood's* was the sole influence on Poe's early writing; indeed, his British influences alone included Byron, Coleridge, Keats, and others, and his comprehensive grasp of world literature included authors ranging from Homer and Ovid to the German gothic writers Tieck and Hoffman. However, Poe did initially seek to use *Blackwood's* to overcome what he viewed as the "American partisanship" that prevented

his entry into the literary forum and to establish himself as aesthetically superior to the authors he was competing against in writing contests. *Blackwood's* thus becomes an important lens through which to view Poe's early writings, especially when we consider that *Blackwood's* is almost as interesting an amalgamation – the supernatural with the supercilious, the combination of terror and hoax, political satire mixed with pure parody – as Poe himself.

Exactly how early in his life Poe became aware of *Blackwood's* is unknown. He was living in Britain when William Blackwood fired his first editors, who had produced a magazine full of flat pieces with "no fizz" and an incomprehensible structure (Flynn 137), and replaced them with John Wilson and John Gibson Lockhart. The subsequent publication, issue No. 7, was crafted in a formula based on five key elements: cryptic notices "To Contributors," serious but relatively short and accessible essays on scientific and political subjects, poetry and prose fiction, ferocious and personal criticisms, and assorted whimsical hoaxes and "bams" (144). This issue was published in 1817, when Poe would have been a mere eight years of age. While it may seem unlikely that a child of that age would have been interested in reading a literary publication of *Blackwood's* density, Poe was a precocious child, and if his claim that he wrote the majority of the poems in *Tamerlane and Other Poems* before he was fourteen was true, it is not inconceivable that he had begun his study of literature even earlier. More probably, he also read the American version of *Blackwood's* later in his life, which, according to Susan and Stuart Levine, was sufficiently popular in the United States to warrant an American version of each new edition.

That Poe's early fiction was somewhat formulaic in nature, or at least contained formulaic elements, should not come as a great surprise. He was, after all, making the transition from poetry to prose in order to make money, and he did enter stories like "Metzengerstein" in contests to win both literary acclaim and a cash prize. While many critics note that Poe's move to writing prose was financially motivated, "Mabbott was more blunt: 'But Poe wrote prose for bread and fame'" (Fisher 488). As Fisher also noted, there is a marked distinction between Poe's early *Blackwood's* derivative Gothic tales and his later experimentations in psychological horror. After writing *Blackwood's*-esque stories such as "Metzengerstein" and "Loss of Breath," "Poe went on to craft what are far more subtle renderings of Gothic art" (84). These tales, which include Poe's most famous prose writing, do manipulate Gothic characteristics, but are chiefly marked by their uncanny psychology. In other words, the effect does not require as much explicit imagery as it does implicit uneasiness. On the other hand, "Metzengerstein" as it was initially published is far more of an imitation of the Gothic tradition than a satire. In fact, a comparison of the initial text with the final published version demonstrates "that he refined away crudities, in an attempt to cull out extremes and to produce a more effective Gothic story, rather than to exaggerate the Gothic elements for humorous effect" (Fisher 487). This initial version also shows Poe's indebtedness to *Blackwood's*.

Fisher suggests that Poe transitioned away from *Blackwood's* as he honed his abilities as a writer and responded to critical charges of excessive "Germanism" by taking true horror from the soul rather than a Gothic setting (84). This is accurate and fits in nicely with my explanation of the *cause* of Poe looking to the soul rather than Gothic setting for inspiration: namely, that the transition in Poe's writing from near-imitation of

other Gothic pieces to a new and unique brand of Gothic/psychological fiction stems from his falling-out with the literary establishment dominated by *Blackwood's*.

Consider, for example, how the original text of "Metzengerstein" shows evidence of Poe borrowing from *Blackwood's*. Poe's manipulation of Gothic imagery is absurdly over-the-top: the animated frieze with flashing red eyes, the initials "W.V.B." branded in the horse's forehead, and the smoke cloud that "settled over the battlements in the distinct colossal figure of – a horse" (89). The litany of repeated over-the-top Gothic images indicate that Poe is having a great deal of fun with traditional German imagery here, as suggested by the representative writer from the Folio Club – possibly Mr. Horrible Dictu, who "had graduated at Gottingen" (596) – being well on his way to alcoholic mirth during the telling of this tale. Despite the element of parody in the work, however, Poe's fine crafting of "Metzengerstein" implies an alternate purpose: acceptance into the very same literary establishment which he appears to mock.

It is crucial to remember that "Metzengerstein" is one of Poe's first attempts at prose, and that he entered it into a literary contest to gain the financial remuneration that he could not purchase with his poetry. Therefore, this is not the context for Poe to focus on crafting a cleverly obscure parody of a popular literary journal, as his primary focus was the creation of a piece whose acceptance would yield hard cash. "Metzengerstein" is not subtle or psychological compared to Poe's more mature prose, and, as Fisher notes, the "tale reads almost as if it were an encyclopedia of 'German' supernatural horrors. Nevertheless, for an apprentice work, which might readily betray its models, it demonstrates its author's sophistication" (80). Thus, Poe's work can be read on two different levels. On the one hand, his internal satirist could not resist poking fun at a

genre that rapidly was plunging more and more into the ridiculous to produce dramatic effect. Some of this may have been self-conscious; after all, the line between practice and parody in Gothic fiction was often quite thin[1]. On the other hand, Poe also wanted the literary acclaim – and, possibly more importantly, the money – that would come by being recognized as a prominent contributor to that genre.

Two of those already prominent members were Wilson and Lockhart, the *Blackwood's* editors who shaped the magazine's distinctive style. Early in their career at *Blackwood's* they hid behind the shared pseudonym of "Christopher North," leading to much speculation about the true character of the editor or editors of the magazine. Their great personal differences only enhanced the paradox of their anonymity. According to Philip Flynn, while the older Wilson was "relentlessly robust in his athletic interests, spontaneous, gregarious, given to excess in emotion and expression," Lockhart was "fastidious, reserved," and, unusually for British literary figures of his time, possessed great "knowledge of German literature…a relatively rare accomplishment in Britain in 1817" (137). Mixing and combining their talents into the fictive editor of "Christopher North" became part of the fun of the *Blackwood's* myth. Such mixing would spill into the content of the periodical itself. The sensational pieces would be evenly spaced through the magazine, and "between those provocative pieces were placed more sober and defensible essays" (Flynn 139). While the effect was not quite schizophrenia, the paradoxical dualism of the publication due to the actual existence of two very unique editors effectively created a sense of stylistic ambiguity.

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[1] Parodies on Gothic fiction were often taken at face value. For example, Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* was deemed "guilty of immorality, blasphemy, and plagiarism" (Thomas vi) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, even though the piece was so absurdly over-the-top to be obviously satirical. It would be interesting to know whether or not the latter of the sins Coleridge mentioned grieved him more than the first two.

Critics of Poe often note his duality: intensely melancholy while superbly funny, mixing burlesque with arabesque, and alternately joking and being deadly serious. Reconciling humor and the supernatural/sublime was a consistent theme throughout Poe's life, as "humor was at least for him a short-lived euphoric response apt to exorcise the fiendish visions harassing his mind. This Janus figure seemed to view the world in two opposite directions, yet sometimes provided a dual perspective to reconcile extremes paradoxically" (Royot 57). Royot suggests that this dualism developed as a necessary antidote for Poe to stay psychologically sane. It also, in addition to being a means of exorcism, allowed him to equally *exercise* his craft in both witty burlesques and dark tales of horror.

Poe's first explicit reference to *Blackwood's* in his fiction occurred in "Loss of Breath: A Tale a la Blackwood." Thompson suggests that the piece is largely satirical, and that "one of his major targets, as the subtitle indicates, is the influential *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*" (89). Poe himself asserted the same point in a February 1836 letter to John Pendleton Kennedy: "'Lionizing' and 'Loss of Breath' were satires properly speaking – at least so meant – the one of the rage for Lions and the facility of becoming one – the other of the extravagancies of Blackwood" (Thomas 191). So, can we take Poe at face value, and agree with Thompson that "Loss of Breath" is simply a jab at "the extravagancies of Blackwood?"

Further analysis suggests otherwise, or at least complicates the picture. The *Blackwood's* allusion was not nearly as explicit in the initial publication of "Loss of Breath." In its original *Saturday Courier* 1832 printing, "Loss of Breath" was titled "Decided Loss," and no accompanying subtitle marked the satire as related in any way to

Blackwood's. This identifying "a Tale a la Blackwood" was added to the September 1835 printing in *The Southern Literary Messenger.* Interestingly enough, the subtitle itself also varied, as Thompson notes that a later version read "A Tale Neither in Nor out of 'Blackwood'" (89). The change from "a la Blackwood" to "Neither in Nor out of 'Blackwood'" is symptomatic of this revisionist bent and has great implications for the intent of Poe's story. A story "a la Blackwood" suggests a story written in similar mannerism and style. It may not be a direct imitation, but it is close enough in mode to suggest an instant identification with the source material. This is particularly relevant to note for a prose entry in a small-market publication such as *The Southern Literary Messenger*, as I will examine in a moment. A tale that is "Neither in Nor out," in contrast, is concerned with *location* rather than style. If "a la Blackwood" relates to the similarity of the tale's structure with those found in *Blackwood's*, then the later subtitle *indicates* that the tale is neither in – i.e. was never and has never been included in – or out, that is, has never been taken from *Blackwood's*. Wherever *Blackwood's* is, the tale is not, and vice versa, implying a complete separation and independence from the Scottish magazine. Independence must be a deliberately contrived motive, for otherwise why would Poe even need to mention *Blackwood's* in the first place?

Poe's revision of the subtitle reflects his growing dissatisfaction with *Blackwood's* because his tales of similar ilk had not reached the literary acclaim he felt they deserved. This distinction becomes crucially important to remember when we consider that Poe's letter to Kennedy, in which he claimed that "Loss of Breath" was a satire of *Blackwood's* "extravagances," was written in 1836, a full four years after "Loss of Breath" had been published as "Decided Loss" in the *Saturday Courier.* While it is

possible that Poe's letter preserved his original intent regarding the purpose of writing

"Loss of Breath," it is more probable that something vital to the development of Poe's

aesthetic changed during the course of those four years, and that his sensitivity to

audience reception (or the lack thereof) was crucial to this change.

The impact of audience reception can be measured better by including a study of

the poorly received "Berenice," first printed in *The Southern Literary Messenger* in

March 1835. N.B. Tucker wrote in June 1835 that "Berenice" belonged "almost

peculiarly to the genius of the German school of romance. We cannot but think, that such

over-wrought delineations of the passions are injurious to correct taste, however

attractive they may be to the erratic mood, and unnatural imaginings of a poetically vivid

mind" (Thomas 156). Although, like earlier works, "Berenice" is set in an identifiable

Gothic castle and bears many of the trappings of *Blackwood's*, modern critic Arthur

Brown argues that what makes "Berenice" so truly horrifying is "not death but the 'smile

of the dead'" (448). This, of course, has reference to the narrator's inane fixation on "*the*

teeth of the changed Berenice" (145), and his subsequent extraction of them from the

still-living corpse. Because the situation is so awful and yet so vividly and morbidly

believable, "this self-awareness – of author, of story, of reader – makes the literary

performance inseparable from lived experience and the story itself uncomfortably real"

(Brown 450). "Berenice" marks the beginning of a change for Poe. While he still

manipulated the *Blackwood's*-inspired Gothic imagery that marks his early works, he also

experimented with the narrator's psychological fixation with Berenice's teeth. The

combination of Gothic setting and individual psychosis in this case did not work

particularly well for Poe, but it did suggest the mutation that his writing would eventually

make.

Poe's employer at *The Southern Literary Messenger*, Thomas White, complained

to Poe about the overwhelming negative reactions he had received concerning the

excessive morbidity of "Berenice." In a letter dated 30 April 1835 Poe apologized, but

his defense of *why* he felt the piece was worth writing is noteworthy. Poe does not

defend "Berenice" on aesthetic grounds, but on purely economic principles:

> The history of all Magazines shows plainly that those which have attained
>
> celebrity were indebted for it to articles *similar in nature – to Berenice –*
>
> although, I grant you, far superior in style and execution…They are, if you
>
> will take notice, the articles which find their way into other periodicals,
>
> and into the papers, and in this manner, taking hold upon the public mind
>
> they augment the reputation of the source where they originated. Such
>
> articles are the "M.S. found in a Madhouse" and the "Monos and
>
> Diamonos" of the London New Monthly – the "Confessions of an Opium-
>
> Eater" and the "Man in the Bell" of Blackwood." (Thomas 150)

Poe evidently felt that "Berenice" had the potential to be an article similar to those

published by the *London New Monthly* and *Blackwood's*. This is remarkable considering

his 1836 claim that he was satirizing the "excesses" of *Blackwood's*. If any of Poe's

early stories contains excess, it is certainly "Berenice," and the purpose of that excess

does not appear to be simple satire. Poe wrote that such exaggeration was his mechanism

in writing "Berenice": "the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured

into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into

the strange and mystical" (Thomas 150). His purpose in writing such exaggeration he explains as "taking hold upon the public mind," which he hoped would mollify White with the thought that the piece would then, in turn, "augment the reputation of the source where they originated." If, as Wilson and Lockhart had done before with *Blackwood's*, Poe could stir the public up enough, they would surely respect him, and both he and *The Southern Literary Messenger* would prosper accordingly. Notoriety, in other words, leads to respect and increased subscription sales. He therefore invokes *Blackwood's* as a suitable model rather than a publication full of excesses to be disparaged, hoping that his financial fortunes and literary fame would follow a similar trajectory.

Ultimately, Poe's prose never garnered much critical or financial success from *Blackwood's* or the other leading Gothic periodicals. His work received mixed reviews in America, and, far from finding its way into the literary periodicals of England as he had hoped, he was completely ignored in Great Britain. The first British notice of him at all came from the pirated version of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in 1838 (Fisher 52), which was three years after Poe expressed his hope that a tale like "Berenice" would be picked up and thus "augment the reputation of the source" from whence it came. From this point, Poe's criticism of the genre and *Blackwood's* specifically becomes much more explicit than the subtle allusions of "Metzengerstein" or the reworked subtitle of "Loss of Breath." However, his own sense of the Gothic also begins to transform from this point as well, and this shift may have as much to do with critical reception as it does with his own growing sophistication…a sophistication that was revealed in later works of psychological terror such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Man of the Crowd."

Specifically, Poe isolated terror from a Gothic setting and located it firmly within the individual soul.

While many of Poe's Gothic settings are used to enhance his effect of terror, "The Tell-Tale Heart" is notable for its conspicuous lack of identifiable setting. No sumptuous friezes or jutting parapets are present to work on the mind of the narrator. The apartments of the narrator and the old man are actually never described in any detail, with only the objects necessary to progress the plot – such as the bed and the planks in the narrator's chamber – mentioned. This lack of detail to setting is a sharp contrast from works such as "Loss of Breath" and "Metzengerstein," which derive most of their effect from setting. Instead, Poe's terror is based on the narrator's madness, or that "what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses" (319). Poe's narrator, who is "very, very dreadfully nervous," informs the reader immediately that "above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell" (354). The narrator is unable to find quiet or peace despite his best efforts. Even in his sleep he has heard "the groan of mortal terror…well up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me" (355). These sounds that he has heard with his "acute" hearing are actually his own terrors, which torment him more than the shriek of any shrill nineteenth-century work whistle or rumbling steam engine. Poe knew these to be the symptoms of an extreme paranoia. In a society where psychological treatment generally consisted of isolation, enemas, or electric shock therapy, the proper remedy for such a disorder had yet to be properly applied, but Poe was familiar enough with the malady. This untreated obsession with his own fears causes the narrator to be "haunted day and night" by his landlord's "eye of a vulture – a pale

blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (354). He has no quarrel with the man himself; in fact, he made it clear that "I loved the old man. He had never wronged me" (354). Instead, his paranoia has found a new source on which to fixate. His mind, already contorted with the pressures brought about by his overdeveloped sense of hearing, has temporarily stepped away from its fear of itself and found something external to focus on, and his perspective is sufficiently distorted that he now believes that to "rid [him]self of the eye forever" somehow equates to his freedom from fear. This is obviously not the case, as he just finds himself obsessed with "the beating of his hideous heart" (357) even after his victim's death. The theme that rings through "The Tell-Tale Heart" is an intense and personal paranoia that does not diminish even when the object of the paranoia has been destroyed. The old man is not the true cause of the hideous beating, but is merely a cog in the grinding machinery of the relentless noise of Poe's narrator's insanity.

Poe's isolation of effect is also apparent in "The Man of the Crowd." Unlike "The Tell-Tale Heart," the setting is explicitly identified; however, unlike the castle of "Metzengerstein" or the sumptuous halls of "The Masque of the Red Death," this tale is set in the most ordinary and commonplace of locations: "the D---- Coffee-House in London" (232), located in "one of the principal thoroughfares of the city" (233). The narrator is surrounded by the press of the everyday exodus from work, which he observes from his seat "with a delicious novelty of emotion" (233). There is nothing to excite this "delicious novelty" from the crowd itself. The source of the novelty instead comes from the narrator's mental state: as he has recently convalesced from a long illness, he feels "a

calm but inquisitive interest in every thing" (232). He assigns originality to what is actually commonplace. This mental exercise in meaning-making makes him similar to the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart," only with a more beneficent perspective. That perspective changes when night falls over the city and the gas-lamps cast "over every thing a fitful and garish lustre" (235). The rest of the story reads as a gradual descent into hell, as the narrator sees a man with a frightful appearance and feels "a craving desire to keep the man in view – to know more of him" (236). The longer he follows the man, the more the city darkens and sinks into despair. Even when they return to the street where the coffee shop is located, the narrator remarks "it no longer wore, however, the same aspect" (237). Poe presents two possibilities with this mutable version of London. First, London in this tale may be an urban jungle which wears a veneer of respectability during the day. However, after the day workers and genteel citizens have gone home for the night, the true faces of the teeming tenements – represented by the man of the crowd – dominate the cityscape. That may be true, but Poe creates a sense of ambiguity with his narrator. Not only is the narrator still recovering from his illness, but he also becomes obsessed with the man of the crowd to the point of following him around London all night. He is desperate not to be seen, and does not abandon his pursuit until "the shades of the second evening came on" (238). What the narrator presents as inquisitive following may in fact be the psychotic stalking of a complete stranger, which throws both the nature of the man of the crowd and the changing nature of London into question. The scenes which the narrator describes – a coffee house, a crowded theatre, tenement housing, a bustling bazaar – do not inherently incite effect, but due both to the gas lamps and the narrator's state of mind, Poe transforms the ordinary into the terrible.

Even with this transformation away from *Blackwood's*, Poe still made use of

material from and settings that resembled *Blackwood's* and similar sources. Margaret

Alterton has attributed the source material of "The Pit and the Pendulum" to tales from

Blackwood's, as well as Charles Brockdon Brown's *Edgar Huntley* and Juan Antonio

Llorente's *History of the Spanish Inquisition* (349). The cryptography of *The Gold-Bug*,

along with Poe's interest in solving any puzzle or cryptogram sent to him, rings similar to

the "whimsical hoaxes and bams" (Flynn 144) of *Blackwood's*. "The Oval Portrait,"

particularly the opium-related poems from the original "Life in Death" that were cut for

the 1845 *Broadway Journal* printing, are similar to "Confessions of an Opium Eater,"

one of the stories Poe mentioned in his defense of "Berenice." "Confessions of an Opium

Eater" was also, coincidentally or not, published in *Blackwood's*. Even in these works,

however, Poe's prime focus is on individual terror and indicates the same shift in

emphasis from Gothic setting to individual psychosis. The prospect of being buried alive

is far more frightening than the wine cellar of "The Cask of Amontillado," and the terror

of "The Pit and the Pendulum" is enhanced by the absence of identifiable objects rather

than their presence.

Later in his career Poe would begin an open trading of barbs with *Blackwood's,*

including the explicit criticism of "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and the attached

"A Predicament," as well as the clash with Wilson mentioned earlier. There may have

been two reasons for this barrage of insults. First, the still young United States of

America was not considered an ideal place for the production of fine literature. In

Democracy in America, which was published during the war of words between Poe and

Wilson, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that "among the small number of men who are

engaged in literary works in the United States, the majority are English in origin and above all in style" (544). If American authors merely attempting to imitate their English counterparts was not insulting enough, Tocqueville also wrote that "the citizens of the United States themselves seem so convinced that books are not published for their benefit that before settling on the merits of one of their own writers they normally wait for England to approve his work" (544). In an era when the still-young United States had secured its political and military but not its literary independence, Poe's split from *Blackwood's* is emblematic of a literary Declaration of Independence. Although he would remain fond of some British writers, most notably Byron, his writing was to be more than just "English in origin and above all in style." This leads to the second reason: this new openness of attack indicates a crucial shift in Poe's literary aesthetic. He realized that patterning his fiction after that of *Blackwood's* would not bring him financial success or critical acclaim, and that a change in the manner that Fisher has described was needed. He also, as Freehafer has written, became interested in outdoing *Blackwood's*, which also led to him revising pieces such as "Metzengerstein" and "Loss of Breath" so that, where they were once near-imitations of *Blackwood's*, they now appear as parodies to a modern audience.

One of John Wilson's critiques of Poe's writing in 1847 was that "They are not framed according to the usual manner of stories." I suggest that this was deliberate on Poe's part because, for him, "the usual manner of stories" patterned after the *Blackwood's* model simply had not worked. The changes that he made indeed were anything but typical, and John Wilson was far from the only English critic to notice this. They also meant that Poe, unlike the pantheon of contributors to *Blackwood's*, was not

relegated to the dustbin of literary history. Instead of acting as filler to line his pockets while he concentrated his artistic energies on his poetry, Poe's psychological fiction became both literarily important and illustrated his increased understanding of literary aesthetics. His new fashioning would also lead to his acceptance in an entirely new country, where he would be made "a great man in France" by Baudelaire, Cambiare, and Mallarme. Their praise of Poe's sense of psychology and imp of the perverse would be passed on to Oscar Wilde, who, despite altering Poe's own aesthetic to suit his own literary technique, would refer to Poe as the "grand poète celtique" – the grand Irish poet.

CHAPTER TWO

Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their

minds cannot change anything. – George Bernard Shaw (113)

Oscar Wilde was a personal friend of Stéphane Mallarmé, and among their

common literary interests was a fascination with Edgar Allan Poe. After the second

edition of Mallarmé's "Le Corbeau," a prose translation of "The Raven," was published,

Wilde praised the translation in a letter, referring to Poe as the "grand poète celtique," or

the grand Celtic poet (471).   This Irish appropriation of the American author with an

ambiguous background was not Wilde's first expression of admiration for Poe.   One of

Wilde's laments about his 1882 trip to America was that he would not have the

opportunity to meet Edgar Allan Poe. Richard Ellman notes that "Wilde actually valued

Poe, 'this marvellous lord of rhythmic expression,' above the others [American poets],

but Poe was dead" (167), so he settled for meeting Walt Whitman instead. Although

Poe's current fixture in popular culture is due to "its ability to exploit his personal

suffering and the sad, and sometimes strange, realities of his life as well as the even more

fantastic myths that have grown up around him" (Neimeyer 209), this was not the case

during Wilde's time. In the United States and England, Poe's reputation had been nearly

destroyed by Griswold's biography, which was written not to praise Poe, but "to expose,

or rather malign, Poe as an irresponsible and drunken madman, deserving perhaps pity,

but not admiration or enthusiasm" (Neimeyer 209). While Wilde was certainly no

stranger to controversy, his favorable reading of an unpopular author merits critical

attention. Why did Wilde express favorable sentiment towards Poe? Did Wilde's own

writing change at all as a result of having read Poe? I contend that, while his motives

were different than those of Poe adapting *Blackwood's,* Wilde performed a similar textual

adaptation by mutating Poe's sense of the psychological into his social critique. Like

Poe, he used death imagery and a sense of the macabre both as social commentary and as

a more serious meditation on the nature of mortality.

Wilde's expression is particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that Poe had

relatively little impact on the international literary scene at the time of his death. Both

British and American critics were relatively dismissive of his work, and it does not

stretch the imagination greatly to picture Poe's works fading into the same obscurity that

they remained largely mired in during his lifetime. While later literary figures on both

sides of the Atlantic would eventually come to admire and appreciate Poe, this relatively

early expressed admiration of Poe by Wilde, along with Wilde's experimentation on

Poe's themes, is particularly worth consideration in light of the transatlantic question: can

a British author admire and adapt the themes of an American predecessor? I argue not

only that Wilde adopted some of Poe's themes and ideas, but that this adaptation

represents the development of the transatlantic mutation that I have been discussing.

Both Poe's link to *Blackwood's* (if not the later pivot against the Scottish publication) and

the general critical trend of nineteenth-century American writers following British

literary trends have been well established, but this argument of influence going the other

way across the Atlantic is the linchpin on which my model of mutation stands.

<center>Ireland</center>

Taking Wilde at face value is always a dangerous risk. The artist who wrote the

aphorism "all art is quite useless" (48) as a *compliment* of art rather than a derogative was

notorious for his inventive use of double meaning. Therefore, I have to pause with the

consideration of a phrase such as the "grand poète celtique," particularly as it is my intention to assert that Wilde, in this case, literally meant what he wrote. I should also add that it is possible that Wilde intended this comment as completely satiric; however, the evidence suggests that he did actually mean to praise Poe and, by extension, himself.

The first two words in "grand poète celtique" translate without ambiguity into English: grand = great, grand, or promising, and poète = poet. However, the word "celtique" should give us pause. Unlike Irlandais, the French word for Irish, celtique has a distinct Celtic connotation. Rather than relating to the modern Irish state, it hearkens back to the ancient, pre-British Gaelic tradition. A "poète celtique," then, is not just an Irish poet, but a bard, with all the connotations of power and prophecy that the ancient Celtic bards – and the contemporary nineteenth century influential French poets – commanded. This high praise would have resonated with Mallarmé, who, like many of his countrymen, was fervently enamored of Poe.

There may be another reason that Wilde reserved his admiration for Poe as "the grand Celtic bard" for a personal letter in French: he was conscious of his Irish identity, and while not ashamed of it, he knew that it was a potential liability to his reputation in England. Henry Craik once asked "Was there ever an Irish man of genius who did not get himself turned into an Englishman as fast as he could?" (Kiberd 33) That was the pattern in Wilde's career as he conscientiously crafted himself into the urbane literati far different from the roaring, swearing, and drinking Irishman common on the British stage. He was part of a tradition ranging from Sheridan to Shaw of Irish playwrights who immigrated to England to make their fortune. His main characters are members of the English elite to which he was immensely proud to belong, and his setting was more likely

to be Devonshire or Bishopsgate than Downpatrick or Bangor. At the same time,

however, Wilde did not sever his ties with his native land. He was, after all, the offspring

of an "inflammatory" writer and ardent Irish nationalist (Ellman 8), whom he joined in

becoming a member of the Irish Literary Society (126). His university days at Oxford

increased his "conviction that an Irishman only discovers himself when he goes abroad"

(Kiberd 37), and he used his position in English society to subtly critique the treatment of

his homeland.

  Wilde may or may not have actually been committed to the cause of Irish

nationalism.[2] His whole life was an exercise in duality as he balanced the often

conflicting roles of family man/bourgeois homosexual and Irishman/Englishman. Kiberd

asserts that "Wilde refused to write realist accounts of that degraded Ireland which he

only partly knew, and he took instead Utopia[3] for theme, knowing that this would provide

not only an image of revolutionary possibility for Ireland but also a rebuke to

contemporary Britain" (50). He was more interested in the possibilities within both

Ireland and Britain than he was with being content with them the way they actually were.

For Wilde, the duality of his Irishness/Englishness served to further complicate questions

about his identity. Due to his personal activities which were outside the accepted realm

of both nations, he could not really be fully accepted into either society. Why, then,

when Wilde himself refused to be classified, did he appropriate Poe as an Irish writer?

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[2] In *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (1994), David Coakley argues that Wilde followed in the footsteps of his mother and was an ardent Irish nationalist. In contrast, R.S. Pathak suggests in *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1976) that, by 1874 "Wilde had largely lost touch with Ireland, which might have been the source of his inspiration."

[3] In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde wrote that "England will never be civilized till she has added Utopia to her dominion. There is more than one of her colonies that she might with advantage surrender for so fair a land."

While there is potential to read "grand poète celtique" as an attempt to twist Poe into some sort of Irish nationalist agenda, it would probably be too wide a stretch. However, when we consider the "originality" that made Poe so popular among his French readers, the reason for Wilde's appropriation may be more evident. The French literary circle in which Wilde associated was much more open to literary experimentation than that of London. For example, Ellman notes that Wilde's play *Salome,* which was written during his time in Paris, was praised by the French literary establishment, including figures such as Mallarmé, Pierre Loti, and Maurice Maeterlinck. The English reaction and subsequent censorship, in contrast, made him so physically ill that he required convalescence in Bad Homburg (374-7). Poe's ideas about duality and the imp of the perverse, accessed while Wilde was living in Paris, gave rise to Wilde's experimentation on the same themes within his own English/Irish context. Hence, Wilde's "grand poète celtique" refers not only to Poe, but also may be a nod to Wilde's own perceived sense of self-accomplishment. Both he and Poe, he may claim, are not only poets, but bards as well.

<p style="text-align:center">French Connection</p>

In 1883 Wilde resided at the Hotel Voltaire in Paris. While he discussed the occasional British writer with his young acolyte Robert Harborough Sherard, "much of their conversation turned on a quartet more appropriate to the current Parisian scene: Gerard de Nerval, Poe, Chatterton, and Baudelaire" (Ellman 218). He also spent a great deal of time conversing with Maurice Rollinet, whose "subjects included suicide, disease, hypochondria, cadavers, embalming, live burial, specters, madness, diabolism, and putrefaction, with Poe presiding as dark angel" (Ellman 228). This was also the

beginning of his association with Mallarmé, who had learned English for the sole purpose of reading Poe (Quinn, *French Face* 3). Wilde's interest in the American author and his imp of the perverse was multifaceted, but it took on a new focus during his time in France. This is not unique to Wilde; T.S. Eliot also "found that he had to look at Poe's work through the eyes of his French admirers" (Polonsky 44).

To comprehend the Parisian literary scene in which Wilde was immersed, as well as to explore why it may have led Wilde to experiment with Poe's themes, it is essential to understand the degree to which French literature had been permeated by the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's impact has been, almost without question, unanimously agreed upon by French scholars[4] whose studies yield insight into how this French admiration influenced Wilde.

In contrast to the lukewarm reception of Poe in Britain and the United States throughout the nineteenth century, for his "French admirers the problem was to find a language of praise sufficiently sublime" (Quinn, *French Face* 12). His popularity in France was stimulated by the ardent fervor of Charles Baudelaire, who stated in 1856 "Edgar Poe, who isn't much in America, *must* become a great man in France – at least that is what I want" (Quinn, *French Face* 9). Baudelaire translated five volumes of Poe's works in his Crepet edition. Cambiaire notes that shortly after the 1856 translations were finished, "the fame of Baudelaire's translation and of the French appreciation of Poe had spread over France and even crossed the Pyrenees" (Cambiaire 38). Although the reasons for Poe's popularity in France are multitudinous and have been carefully examined by numerous critics, we will consider Quinn's account for its relevant to

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[4] In addition to the works of Quinn and Cambiaire quoted below, Jean Alexander's anthology *Affidavits of Genius: Edgar Allan Poe and the French Critics, 1847-1924* is an excellent source for information on Poe's influence in France.

Wilde. First, his frequent and mostly grammatically correct use of French in his writing

"offered the best credentials the French could wish to see – a good knowledge of their

language" (Quinn, *French Face* 30). He also appealed to the French regard for logic. In

comparing Poe and Balzac, Baudelaire wrote that "Of the two men it is Poe, a writer

whom so many people are pleased to consider as some kind of mad visionary, who is the

more rational. It is in his work that one finds the greater regard for order, clarity, and

coherence. In a word, it is he who is the more French" (Quinn, *French Face,* 34). In

considering Baudelaire's statement, it is important to note that both the "mad visionary"

and the logical Poe were important to his French audience. In contrast to Keats, Shelley,

and Coleridge, who were considered too elaborate, Poe "preached the gospel of

originality, and…this captured the attention of French poets because to be great in France

it is necessary to be original" (38). Whatever the reasons, Poe's influence on French

literature was so complete that, in the early 1900s, George Brandes listed Poe as the most

important foreign writer to shape French literature, "adding as secondary influences

Tolstoi, Dostoyevsky, Heine and Shelley" (Cambiare 13).

What makes this particular literary mutation of Parisian "Poe-mania" so

significant in our discussion of transatlantic mutation is the positive French response to

an American author despite an intellectual history between the two nations that is, at best,

problematic. Although France and America were early allies in the latter's quest for

independence, by the time of Jay's Treaty and the French Revolution great suspicion

marked foreign relations between the two nations. This led to the Alien and Sedition Act

under John Adams, which expressly targeted French foreign agents and American

supporters of the French Revolution (Ellis 199). Despite alliances during the World

Wars, Franco-American political and cultural relations have continued to be marked by tension and distrust.

It is remarkable, then, despite the cool political relations between America and France, that literary relations between the nations have been vibrant. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* has become such a staple in American political theory that Isaac Kramnick observed "If the number of times an individual is cited by politicians, journalists, and scholars is a measure of their influence, Alexis de Tocqueville – not Jefferson, Madison, or Lincoln – is America's public philosopher" (ix). Paris was home to two generations of expatriate American authors such as Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and Allen Ginsburg. Reciprocally, this trend has continued in modern philosophy and literary theory, with noted luminaries such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man teaching and publishing in the United States. In the same vein, although to a much greater extent, it is not as surprising as it may seem on first glance that the American author Poe could be so easily accepted not only by a select group of French intellectuals, but by the French reading public as a whole.

This picture presents a sharp contrast to the strong antipathy of Poe's reception in Great Britain, which enjoyed much better political relations with the United States. It also presents an intriguing possibility: the acerbic British criticism of Poe during his life, as well as the dismissal of his works after his death by British literary figures such as T.S. Eliot and Henry James[5], may have as much to do with imperialist antipathy as the aesthetic differences mentioned in the first chapter. While France did not feel any sense of proprietary relationship to the United States, Britain was the grand global power in the

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[5] See Volume 3 of *Edgar Allan Poe* edited by Graham Clarke in *The Critical Assessments of Writers in English Series.*

nineteenth century. Not only that, but it was a global power that had been successfully challenged in recent memory only once, and the memory of the American Revolution and the War of 1812 was still jarring to a British sense of superiority. American writers and intellectuals had a difficult time being accepted at all in Great Britain as anything more than English imitators or rough, backwoodsman philosophers. Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, for example, were popular largely because of the rustic picture of rural America that their works presented, particularly as Irving's *Sketchbook* lauded the historical superiority of European architecture and culture. In contrast, someone as acerbic and controversial as Poe was unlikely to break through the wall of British critical disdain. However, through the mutation of his psychological horror into Wilde's social commentary, the reaction to his ideas varied from the disparaging of Eliot and James to the cheers of a sold-out house watching Lady Bracknell disparage Bunbury's illness in *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

The Strand Mutates

I focus now on the literary similarities between the writing of Poe and Wilde, and aim is to point out possible places where Wilde took his own unique slant on themes that he read and appreciated in Poe. Most of my evidence here comes from my own and other scholars' critical readings of the two authors in comparison. This is a necessity because, despite Wilde's expressed admiration of Poe, he did not explicitly credit the American with a direct influence on any of his works.

In his lecture "Impressions of America," Wilde said that America was "the noisiest country that ever existed…It is surprising that the sound practical sense of the Americans does not reduce this intolerable noise. All Art depends upon exquisite and

delicate sensibility, and such continual turmoil must ultimately be destructive of the musical faculty" (22-3). Poe, who is writing both in the "noise"-filled America described by Wilde and under his own mental duress, focuses on that strain as a source of mental undoing. Comparing Poe's "The Bells" with Wilde's "Lord Arthur Saville's Crime" yields an interesting similarity: Wilde borrowed Poe's idea of noise pressure yielding unity and added to it a critique of social class pressure by transforming the figurative jangling of Poe's bells into the suffocating demands of the English class system.

In "The Bells," Poe's use of alliteration in the third line of each stanza forecasts the shift from merriment to tragedy to a final numbing as individual emotions are assimilated into a collective whole. The third line of the first and second stanzas foretells worlds of "merriment their melody" (3) and "happiness their harmony" (17). Phonetically, the "h" and "m" sounds are soft and pleasing to the ear, fitting the mood of the words. Two words of alliteration per phrase also suggest a duality of complementary forces rather than opposing. This mood created by alliteration changes in the third stanza, however, with "*What* tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!" (38). Instead of two alliterative terms there are now four: "tale," "terror," "turbulency," and "tells," plus "their" which looks alliterative even though the sound is different. The harsh fricative "t" (also present as an end sound in "*What*") is driving, propelling the sentence with the fear and velocity of the ringing "Brazen bells" (37) that the stanza describes. Interestingly enough, there is no alliteration in the third line of the fourth stanza. This plays even more into the idea of emotion, or, more particularly, its absence as disparate worlds are drawn into unity. The lack of happiness, melody, or terror is found in the "world of solemn thought their monody compels" (72).

As significant as the alliteration is, the rhyming words with "bells" immediately following the alliterative phrases further suggest Poe's purposes. Both the sleigh and the wedding bells "foretell" merriment and happiness, respectively. This suggests a future felicity even though the events in which the bells are ringing – winter and wedding – are very much in the present. The result of these two events is therefore not to be experienced fully in the moment. Rather, the effects of merriment and happiness are not yet ready to be felt, and are therefore foretold rather than told. The alarum bells, in contrast, "tell" the immediate "tale of terror." This is not an event to be joyfully anticipated; rather, this fear is very much of the moment. Finally, all are drawn into one "solemn thought" as the iron tolling "compels." The word "solemn" here, when put in the funereal context, suggests a contemplation of the state of the universe and the individual place in that. This is a meditation that is "compelled" by the reality presented by death: that there is one final end, and, whether melodious wedding bells or terrifying alarum bells have been a person's lot in life, all will ultimately face that end.

From the second stanza, Poe brings in the idea of tune. The wedding bells ring melodiously "all in tune" (21). This echoes the earlier concept of "harmony" (17). Bells ringing in tune suggest two or more separate notes (probably two in this case, since they are wedding bells) whose separate voices sound in a complementary manner. The personification here is clear: the bells foretell lives which will also work together in unity, blending two separate entities into one great and unified whole. This concept changes drastically in the third stanza as the bells "shriek, shriek/out of tune" (42-3) with "twanging" (58), "clanging" (59), "jangling" (62), and "wrangling" (63). Instead of a harmonious singing, the alarum bells now "shriek," and the "-ing" adjectives add to the

pandemonium. "Wrangling" specifically indicates combat as opposing forces grapple

with each other. The tune has been lost in discord, and any attempt at unity can only pray

with "a clamorous appealing" (44). By the fourth stanza, the disparate voices have

coalesced into one "muffled monotone" (83). This combines with the disappearance of

alliteration and the element of compulsion. The bells are no longer ringing melodiously

or clanging sporadically. Instead, they are muffled, but this does not indicate that their

music is dead. Rather, the bells ring in a unified "monody."

In "Eureka," Poe wrote that "when, I say, Matter, finally, expelling the Ether,

shall have returned into absolute Unity – it will then (to speak paradoxically for the

moment) be Matter without Attraction and without Repulsion – in other words, Matter

unto Matter – in other words again, *Matter no More*" (582). In essence, Poe viewed life

as a means by which humans could shed both temporal triviality and terror as they

attempted to reach this state of Unity, or "Matter no More." "The Bells" indicates that

death is the final unifier, and that the emotions causing the variety of concordant and

discordant noises in life will eventually coalesce into one great and eternal "muffled

monotone."

In "Lord Arthur Saville's Crime," Wilde takes this concept of cracking under

noise pressure and adds to it a theme common to his other works: the importance of

maintaining social position. This text, as Owen Dudley Edwards has noted, was indebted

to Poe as "a delicious satire on the sense of destiny and doom" (33). Lord Arthur, an

otherwise ordinary English gentleman whose palm reading signifies that he will soon

commit murder, is shaken by this stunning revelation. He asks "were we no better than

chessmen, moved by an unseen power, vessels the potter fashions at his fancy, for honour

or for shame?" (7) It is critical to note that, at this point, nothing has actually happened to Arthur. His life is still exactly the same as it was when the cheiromantist examined his hand save the introduction of the *possibility* of him committing a crime. It is even more revelatory that it is the social upheaval that will result from this crime that shakes him, not the notion of actually killing another human in cold blood. The social ramifications are what he cannot bear, for the thought that "some day, his own name might be placarded on the walls of London…made him sick with horror" (10). Like Poe's narrator, Lord Arthur Saville also finds himself the victim of noise as he stands "listening to the tremulous silence of the trees. 'Murder! murder!' he kept repeating, as though iteration could dim the horror of the word. The sound of his own voice made him shudder" (9). Two noises haunt Arthur in this sentence. The first, the "tremulous silence" of trees in Hyde Park, is an inaudible sound that bears terror nonetheless. It is the magnification of something unspoken but nevertheless very real, much like the social pressure faced by a gentleman of breeding. Decorum in the Victorian era was an immensely elaborate art with very strict guidelines. Visible transgression from social mores, such as the murder Arthur now feels he will inevitably commit, will certainly be met with a "tremulous silence" as he is shunned by society. Hence, not only the "tremulous silence of the trees" caused him to quake, but even "his own voice made him shudder."

Arthur accordingly concludes that he shall perform the required killing as quickly and unobtrusively as possible so that he may resume his normal activities. Wilde notes his remarkable facility in this by stating that "he had that rarest of all things, common sense" (12). This is an adroitly crafted contradiction as the truly sensible action would be

to forget about the cheiromantist's reading, not alter his lifestyle and commit a crime he would otherwise never contemplate. Arthur's folly is assuming that his hand reading guides his life, not the other way around. He has let his true fears – the possibility of social failure, losing his fiancée, and other worries common to a gentleman of class – cloud his reason until his "common sense" has become a driving goad to murder in an attempt to satisfy fate. Wilde's subtitle to the story, "The Study of Duty," furthers this definition: Arthur's logical "duty" is to murder quietly to preserve his good name, even though an objective "study of duty" would recognize that Arthur is under no obligation to murder at all. The jangling noise of his fears leads to Arthur throwing the cheriomantist into the Thames, where "there was a coarse oath, a heavy splash, and all was still" (25). Like Poe's bells, which are eventually conjoined into a "muffled monotone," Arthur's overwrought anxieties finally end in the whispering stillness of the flowing Thames. The mutation here in Wilde's work is primarily one of scope. Poe's "The Bells" explores the jangling cacophony of many different phases of life (i.e. youth, marriage, and catastrophe) as they eventually lead towards the final muffled monotone. No attempt is made in "The Bells" to individualize this universal tendency. Wilde, however, focuses Poe's process on a single life and the singular duty of class expectations and examines the capacity of the screaming noise of the British class system to muffle the most basic of moral obligations.

Both Poe and Wilde wrote works entitled "The Sphinx," and an analysis of their respective works yields a similar result. While Poe's work is again an experiment in individual psychology, Wilde's *The Sphinx* carries broader social implications. The similarity between Poe's short story and Wilde's epic poem is not coincidental; as J.D.

Thomas notes, "Sherard names Poe as a principal source of inspiration to Wilde at the time of composition of *The Sphinx* and 'The Harlot's House'" (488). In addition to "The Sphinx," Poe's "The Raven" also left tell-tale traces in Wilde's *The Sphinx*, as both pieces detail despair over death.

The primary narrative focus of both Sphinx narratives and "The Raven" is the magnification of an animal into something gruesome and terrifying. Poe's narrator in "The Sphinx" is extremely myopic: an insect "about the sixteenth of an inch in its extreme length (541)" appears "far larger than any ship of the line in existence" (540). The reason for this magnification is one of simple perspective, as the narrator's friend notes while sitting in his place that the insect is "also about the sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of my eye" (541). The havoc wreaked by this insect is due to the narrator's "abnormal gloom" (539), as a more rational person would have noticed this phenomenon simply by recoiling from the monstrosity. The anxieties of the narrator's nervous mind shut out the details that would initiate such a realization. However, for all of this narrator's abstract imaginations, the Sphinx is merely a vague phantasm of death. It is not assigned any concrete attributes or made to represent any specific event prophesying of an immediate fate. In fact, Poe is careful not to give us much in the way of specific detail about the narrator's anxiety other than it occurs "during the dread reign of the Cholera in New York" (539). This omission seems purposeful, as if Poe is intentionally being vague about the purpose of this Sphinx. While this text could have been turned into a commentary on the social ills that follow a plague or a history of the impact of an outbreak in New York, Poe is only giving the reference to the cholera outbreak to provide a possible reason for his narrator's myopia. Here Poe does not care

about broader application, but is interested in the fever-wracked overwrought brain of his narrator.

Such individual interest is not the domain of Wilde's *The Sphinx*. Here the narrator takes a "curious cat" that "lies couching on the Chinese mat" and transforms her into an Egyptian "exquisite grotesque! half woman and half animal" (451). The word curious is potentially loaded with different meanings. It is the cat herself that is curious about the narrator and enters his room. However, this is not an explicit visitation in the form of Poe's raven or Coleridge's ancient mariner. Upon seeing this feline, the narrator personally attributes the various characteristics of the "half woman and half animal" Sphinx to the cat. These mixed images, along with the accompanying descriptions of anthromorphic gods and Old Testament scenes, are part of a religious sequence that culminates in Christ's crucifixion. Beckson notes that the images are not the only religious signifier in the poem: Wilde's use of meter also suggests the purpose behind these attributions, as the meter of this poem is identical to that of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (Beckson 170). While Tennyson dealt with the question of immortality through coming to terms solely with Christianity, the mixed imagery in "The Sphinx" indicates an amalgamation of religious ideology. The Egyptian ritualistic imagery may have been influenced by the *Book of the Dead,* which was placed in the keeping of the British Museum in 1888. *The Book of the Dead* dealt with rituals performed by priests "in the belief that their recital would secure for the dead an unhindered passage to God in the next world, would enable him to overcome the opposition of all ghostly foes, would endow his body in the tomb with power to resist corruption, and would ensure him a new life in a glorified body in heaven" (Budge xi). These goals, therefore, are no different

than those of traditional Christianity. Wilde's juxtaposition of Old and New Testament iconography with Egyptian and Mediterranean lore reveals the inherent commonality of mankind's quest towards immortality through religious practice. This is also the motive that Barton Levi St. Armand ascribes to Poe "in resurrecting the Egyptian mode as part of the dramatic stage setting of his tale, Poe also revived the pattern of initiation ritual which underlaid the symbols of the Egyptian Mysteries, the Mysteries of Isis and Osiris, as they were understood by his own age" (877-8).

However, the possibility of overcoming death is still under question. In this regard, the form and purpose of "The Raven" seem to have particularly impacted Wilde's poem. Compare, for instance, Poe's "pallid bust of Pallas" (104) with Wilde's "Crucifix, whose pallid burden, sick with pain, watches the world with wearied eyes" (547). The word "pallid" in both cases contrasts with a representation of Deity: the Goddess of Wisdom in Poe, the Son of God in Wilde. One is charged with the bringing of wisdom and light to the world and the protection of women; the other *is* the light of the world and the salvation of all men and women. Yet both are subject to the phantasms rendered powerful by the fantastic imaginations of the narrators. Poe's raven subverts Pallas, sitting atop her in solemn mockery as the specter of darkness that the Goddess cannot dispel. Wilde's narrator, meanwhile, bemoans the Sphinx's rendering of Christ's sufferings impotent as Christ "weeps for every soul that dies, and weeps for every soul in vain" (547). While the purpose of the two subversions is identical – death is made dominant over life – the key variable in the two examples is that of scale. Poe's raven signifies the death of Lenore, and his awful triumph atop the bust of Pallas signals the narrator's loss of hope and sanity, as well as the inability of the Goddess to save the lost

Lenore. Though his "soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/Shall be lifted – nevermore!" (108-9), only his soul and the lost Lenore are of concern. The raven is not a harbinger of *universal* despair, but is intended to produce an *individual* effect of hopelessness and grief. Wilde's Christ, however, weeps not just for one lost maiden, but for *every* "soul that dies, and weeps for every soul in vain." This mutated weeping is a frustration both of the central mission of Christianity and of the rites of the Egyptian priests, as the aim of the salvation and rebirth of souls is all "in vain." The shadow of the Sphinx falls not just over the weeping narrator, but over the souls of all mankind, who are universally and inextricably lost. Through the subjugation of another, more recognizable pallid deity, what was the loss of one man in Poe has transformed into the loss of all mankind in Wilde.

Wilde's manipulation of Egyptian imagery and religious symbolism in *The Sphinx* was not Wilde's only foray into the land of the Nile, as he incorporated both classical Egyptian symbolism and the contemporary British conquest and administration of the Suez Canal into his works. Poe, as well, featured Egyptian materials and settings in his works. Their purpose, however, was not the "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3) that Edward Said ascribes to many of their contemporaries. Instead of minimizing or unjustly appropriating ancient Egyptian civilization, both Poe and Wilde stepped away from the trend of European Orientalism to use Egypt as a metaphor for their respective forms of Utopia, which also provided a forum to critique the foibles of an overly confident western civilization.

Poe's narrator inculcates fondness for an Egyptian past in "Some Words with a Mummy," in which the resurrected Egyptian Count Allamistakeo asserts the superiority

of his long-vanished nation to the "modernity" of antebellum America. After Egyptian technology has been proved superior, the narrator "thought it advisable to vary the attack to Metaphysics" (512). The conversation has shifted from debating about tangible objects – railroads, architecture, and glass manufacturing – to discussing the nature of reality itself. Even if modern machinery is not as advanced as that of the ancient Egyptians, surely modern progress in philosophy will trump the primitive count. The narrator, however, is disappointed, as Allamistakeo "merely said that Great Movements were awfully common things in his day, and as for Progress it was at one time quite a nuisance, but it never progressed" (512). The idea of "Progress" never progressing is a direct assault on the capitalist imperialism of nineteenth-century western nations. Like Shelley's Ozymandias, the cultural flowering of Allamistakeo's Egypt has long since been forgotten in the dust. The implication is that the supposed superiority of modern thinking and "Progress," which is less even than the "primitive" accomplishments of an ancient day, will follow the same pattern.

Similarly, Wilde's interest was heavily influenced by Britain's imperialist history in Egypt. An anonymous contemporary of Wilde's reviewed *The Sphinx* and compared Wilde's animal imagery to "the monsters of the Egyptian room at the British museum" and notes that "we are introduced, as in Poe's poem, to a student sitting solitary in his room at night, and contemplating with fascinated eye a small Egyptian sphinx that gazes at him day and night from the corner of his room" (Beckson 165). The invocation of the British Museum, indicative of Britain's fascination with its imperial colonies, is highly evocative. T.G.H. James notes that while "ancient Egypt rated low in the scale of significant areas of collecting during its [the British Museum's] first half-century" (150),

interest picked up dramatically "after 1798 when French forces landed on Egyptian soil" (151). Britain was fascinated with Egypt, yes, but much of that fascination comes packed with imperialist connotations. Egypt is now both a jewel in the crown of England and another prize gained from the French.

This appropriation of culture is troubling to Wilde. Britain's imperialist ties to Egypt are also wryly noted in *An Ideal Husband*, in which Sir Robert Chiltern claims that "the Suez Canal was a very great and splendid undertaking. It gave us our direct route to India. It had imperial value" (405). This is greatly ironic, especially taking Wilde's Irish heritage into account. Chiltern describes the efficacy of the Suez – and, by extension, Egypt – based on its "imperial value." Wilde, who also hails from a nation reluctantly under the control of the British Empire, is ambivalent[6] about defining a country solely on her value to her imperial mistress. In contrast to Mrs. Cheveley's Argentine canal, the Suez is also the source of Chiltern's wealth through insider trading, making the "imperial value" also equivalent to the rising star of Parliament's *personal* value. This clearly biased perspective contradicts Georg Simmel's observation on the inherent value of an object: "an object does not gain a new quality if I call it valuable; it is valued because of the qualities it has" (306). Hence, Mrs. Cheveley's tongue-in-cheek admonition "It was a swindle, Sir Robert. Let us call things by their proper names. It makes everything simpler" (407).

Both Poe and Wilde critique western imperialism in Egypt, and Poe's critique is especially enlightening in regards to Declan Kiberd's declaration that Wilde abjured

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[6] On St. Patrick's Day in 1882, Wilde told a crowd in St. Paul, Minnesota that "with the coming of the English art in Ireland came to an end, and it has had no existence for over seven hundred years. I am glad it has not, for art could not live and flourish under a tyrant." Also, in response to the murder of Lord Frederick Cavendish on May 6, he told a reporter "We forget how much England is to blame. She is reaping the fruit of seven centuries of injustice." (Ellman 196).

writing realist accounts of Ireland in favor of a Utopian theme of possibility. Both "Some

Words with a Mummy" and Wilde's *The Sphinx* focus on the strength and symbolism of

classical Egypt, by the nineteenth century a dead civilization appropriated by its new

imperial masters. What appears as nostalgia for ancient Egypt may be the representation

of their longings for a different kind of Utopia. Nostalgia is a problematic concept; as

Theodor Adorno explained, it is important to distinguish "preartistic experience" from

"aesthetic experience," or sensation, as it "requires projection" (346). This projection of

preartistic experience suggests an attempt at discovering aesthesis, but it is a forced

attempt. When we try to uncover sensation, or aesthetic experience, we must be careful

that our attempts to find it do not find us forcing ourselves, and thus projecting an

experience that is anything but aesthetic. What may feel like coming into touch with

elusive sensation is actually a self-delusion. Therefore, Adorno would probably confine

the term "nostalgia" relative to the acknowledgement of a state predating the culture

industry, but would be uncomfortable with attempts to recapture that state. Hence, Wilde

uses Egypt as a metaphor for the possibility of a Utopian Ireland, but does not seek to

actually capture or depict that Utopia. Similarly, Poe imagines – both through Egypt and

through other means – a much different form of Utopia: death.

     While Poe's fascination with death is not a surprise to even the most casual

reader, Wilde, who was influenced not only by a direct reading of Poe but also by

Rollinat's pantheon of Poe-esque perversities (Ellman 228), also experimented with death

as a theme in his work. Although Wilde is generally thought of as the "flashy and

fastidious Paddy with 'a suspicion of brogue' and 'an unfamiliar turn to his phrasing'"

(Kiberd 36) that his classmates at Oxford recalled, he also dealt with the same imp of the

perverse that was so crucial to Edgar Allan Poe. Like Poe, he could be playful and use

death as comedic device or social critique. He also seemed personally affected by the

imp of the perverse, particularly after his incarceration in Reading Gaol.

The theme of death runs throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. One vein in

which it seems particularly influenced by Poe is in the ill-fated character of Sibyl Vane,

Dorian's romantic interest. To Poe there was nothing more tragically beautiful and

aesthetically compelling than "the death of a beautiful woman," a theme which Wilde

recaptures in *Dorian Gray*. Her death is two-fold: first, when her passion for acting is

replaced by her love for Dorian, he is appalled and cries "you have killed my love. You

used to stir my imagination. Now you don't even stir my curiosity. You simply produce

no effect" (112). Dorian was more in love with Sibyl's portrayals of Rosalind and Juliet

than he ever was in the actress who portrayed them. It is not the reality of a living,

breathing companion that he seeks. The illusion that Sibyl had created was much like

Poe's obsession with an ephemeral beauty only to be found in death.[7] When Sybil

realizes that she can no longer meet Dorian's expectations of that illusion, she commits

suicide. Initially this causes Dorian great grief. He laments "So I have murdered Sibyl

Vane, murdered her as surely as if I had cut her little throat with a knife. Yet the roses

are not less lovely for all that" (121). This is where Dorian is different from Poe's

narrators. He will not spend long years "in her sepulchre there by the sea" (714) in

mourning, but will cheerfully be off to dinner and the opera with Lord Henry Wotton

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[7] The similarity between Sibyl Vane and Poe's mother, Elizabeth Poe, as actresses known for their
portrayals of Shakespearean heroines is noteworthy. Hervey Allen records that, during her three-year career
in Boston, Elizabeth Poe played Blanche, Ophelia, Cordelia, Juliet, and occasionally Ariel (10). *Israfel,* 10.

within hours of his discovery of her death[8]. This is not a commentary on the

meaninglessness of life; after all, Dorian's sins and his other murders do catch up with

him in the end. Rather, it creates an impression of the meaninglessness of individual

value, a point that Wilde would more fully develop in his later work. Wilde's prefatory

comment to *Dorian Gray* – "no artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything"

(48) – suggests that his treatment of death (as well as Poe's, whom he also considered an

artist) has a point beyond pure shock value.

Wilde suggested social expediency as an option for death in *The Importance of*

Being Earnest. This is a play which, while full of social commentary, is generally

considered light and facetious and not a place where the imp of the perverse is let out to

play. In his review of the play in *The New York Times,* Hamilton Fyfe remarked that "the

thing is as slight in structure and as devoid of purpose as a paper balloon, but it is

extraordinarily funny" (Beckson 189). Lady Bracknell, however, broaches the subject of

death when discussing her nephew Algernon's fictional invalid friend Bunbury. She says

"Well, I must say, Algernon, that I think it is high time that Mr. Bunbury made up his

mind whether he was going to live or to die. This shilly-shallying with the question is

absurd" (489).   Bunbury's very existence is a social excuse, and Lady Bracknell views

his potential death as a means to recovering Algernon's time for her own social purposes.

This is also how Lord Arthur Saville regards the deaths of his relations and the

cheriomantist: regrettable, but socially expedient. Of course, Bunbury's entire existence,

including his frequent health lapses, is a facade to allow Algernon to escape social

pressure. Although completely false, death – or the image of death – is a perfect excuse.

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[8] Dorian Gray's apparent apathy after Sybil Vane's death mirrors the narrator of Poe's "The Black Cat,"
who, after murdering and entombing his wife, finally "soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, *slept* even with the
burden of murder upon my soul!" (354)

Bunbury's entire existence may end in a moment to satisfy the whims of either Algernon or Lady Bracknell, and the audience is too busy laughing to care.

Even though Poe often dealt with death as a moving and emotionally draining event, he also had the ability to transform a potentially dark situation into something resembling light comedy. The social commentary in his short story "Never Bet the Devil Your Head" is similar to that of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Like Lady Bracknell would have Algernon do for Bunbury, the narrator writes to inform the world of the death of his friend, Toby Dammit, "although it is not [his] design to vituperate" (291) him. Once again, this topic of the death of a friend is something that should be treated with great gravity. However, Poe adds absurdity to the narrative through the manner of Dammit's death: a continued refrain of "I'll bet the Devil my head" until the prince of darkness finally comes in to collect on the wager. While the appearance of the devil as "a little lame old gentleman of venerable aspect" (294) and the resulting challenge are funny enough, it is the narrator's reaction to Toby's loss that is the most amusing. When Dammit loses the wager, the narrator rushes to his side and finds that "he had been deprived of his head, which after a close search I could not find anywhere; - so I determined to take him home, and send for the homoeopathists" (296). It is difficult to decide which is more absurd: his search for the missing head or his belief that a doctor will somehow be able to remedy the slight defect of a severed cranium. This, like Allamistakeo's comments in "Some Words with a Mummy," could be read as social commentary on contemporary society, as "Poe's hoaxes and explorations of the ludicrous were intended to slough off European trappings and undermine the cultural hegemony of smug New England pundits" (Royot 57). Poe was not always trying to terrify his

audience, and the image he gives of the treatment of the headless Dammit is quite

humorous: "He did not long survive his terrible loss. The homoeopathists did not give

him little enough physic, and what little they did give him he hesitated to take" (296).

The narrator's friendship towards Dammit is complicated by the final sentence, and this

is where Algernon and Arthur Saville come back into the picture. The narrator, who

"bedewed [Dammit's] grave with my tears…for the general expenses of the funeral, sent

in my very moderate bill to the transcendentalists. The scoundrels refused to pay it, so I

had Mr. Dammit dug up at once, and sold him for dog's meat" (296). Like the deaths of

the cheiromantist and the fictional Bunbury, Dammit's death is now measured in

expediency. The narrator mourns him when the bill has been taken care of, but when the

transcendentalists refuse to pay up (which may be a point in Royot's favor about Poe's

mockery of smug New England pundits), Dammit becomes a red figure in the narrator's

cost-benefit analysis.

　　　　Such humor is what Wilde is most known and praised for as a writer. Just as he

was blessed with the gift of gab, so "most of his characters are inveterate talkers, and he

frequently interrupts the movement of the plot to show off their wit" (Pathak 84). Some

of that humor may, as Hamilton Fyfe claimed, be as "slight in structure and as devoid of

purpose as a paper balloon." There is, however, a darker and edgier side to the

Irishman's humor that reads much like the black irony of the Virginian Poe. While Poe

was certainly preoccupied with death and wrote about morbid themes, his writing is not

always designed to be purely dark and tragic. His application of the macabre is more

sophisticated by his manipulation of just enough humor and comedy to create a true

tragedy through duality, or, in the words of Daniel Royot, "humor was at least for him a

short-lived euphoric response apt to exorcise the fiendish visions harassing his mind. This Janus figure seemed to view the world in two opposite directions, yet sometimes provided a dual perspective to reconcile extremes paradoxically" (57). Likewise, Wilde could use death to make an audience howl with laughter, but he also used it to explore his own mortality.

During his two-year incarceration for sodomy, Wilde penned "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." Prison did not agree with Wilde, and the resulting poem is a much different work of art than his earlier works. When he hears that another prisoner is headed to the gallows, he writes "the very prison walls/Suddenly seemed to reel,/And the sky above my head became/Like a casque of scorching steel" (25-28). Here his torment has directly channeled one of Poe's most enduringly horrific images: the descending scythe of "The Pit and the Pendulum." Poe's narrator regards his place of torture as "*the pit* whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself – *the pit*, typical of hell, and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their [the Inquisitors'] punishments" (312). The thought of capital punishment has transformed the open sky, which appears as an illusion of freedom but is as confining as the reeling prison walls, into Wilde's own descending instrument of torture. The dead prisoner's crime was the murder of "the thing he loved" (35), a thought which Wilde follows with "each man kills the thing he loves" (37). This is similar to the situation presented earlier in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but Wilde's claim in "Reading Gaol" differs in two significant ways. First, Dorian Gray does not suffer for killing Sybil Vane. In "Reading Gaol," however, no ballet or sporting outing follows the murder of the prisoner's loved one. The guilty are punished in Reading Gaol, and Wilde is genuinely mourning the loss of an individual,

whereas before individual life had little meaning. Despite the emphasis on individual suffering, this is not an isolated case of murder and punishment. The murderer is not the exception, but "*each* man kills the thing he loves." Wilde bemoans this human tendency to destroy not only in the isolation of Reading Gaol, but reaches it out to encompass all of humanity. Poe's dark pit is not only the place of suffering for a single victim of the Inquisition, but has become the torture chamber for the souls of all of humanity. The individual imp of the perverse that Poe unveiled in his fiction has mutated in Wilde to become mankind's universal bane.

CONCLUSION

> It seemed natural and human. In my eyes it bore a livelier image of the
>
> spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided
>
> countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine. – Robert Louis
>
> Stevenson (64)

During his time in Paris, Oscar Wilde saw something in the French reception of the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. He glimpsed the potential for transformation and originality in a work that, when combined with his own innate wit, yielded truly astounding results. Wilde's fictional world may look much different in landscape and personality than that of Poe, but both artists suggest Utopia and the possibility of a better, albeit improbable and fantastical, world. Wilde's consideration of death also mirrored Poe's as both an instrument in his satirical toolbox and as a genuine method of contemplating his own mortality.

It would naturally be presumptuous for me to assert that Poe was Wilde's *only* influence, just as it would be equally presumptuous to assume a European author as an exclusive influence on Poe. This is, however, my point: no matter how circumstantial some of these connections may appear, Wilde was at least impressed enough with Poe to refer to him as a "grand poéte celtique," and Wilde's own writing changed as a result of having read Poe. The strain that began in Britain by the *Blackwood's* editors returned again in the work of Oscar Wilde, another "grand poéte celtique." Also, Wilde was not the only British artist who Poe influenced. Wilkie Collins, Frederick Marryat, Arthur Conan Doyle, and their successors in the British mystery tradition are indebted to Poe's

Dupin stories, and Alfred Hitchcock was heavily influenced by Poe's stories of the macabre.[9]

As I noted earlier, it is a daunting task to track all of the possible variables in a strand of literary thought. In this current example I have tracked just a few steps along the way: *Blackwood's* development of a half-serious/half-joking Gothicism, Poe's transformation of that Gothicism into more individual psychological terror, and Wilde's adaptation of the French version of Poe's work into his own social critique. While this tracing is significant in itself, it also suggests a much larger and more complex map of mutation that could be created. For example, further study could trace backwards from *Blackwood's* by examining Wilson and Lockhart's appropriation of German Gothicism. We could then explore possible sources of pre-German Gothic derivation, and so on back until the first man and woman heard something growl in the darkness beyond their campfire and experienced a perverse thrill of terror and excitement. Going the other way, Wilde's social experiment would not be the end, and it may be possible to trace his influence into the graphic novels of Alan Moore, George A. Romero's zombie movies, or the comedy of Monty Python. The three-step map of mutation that I have described does not reveal the beginning nor the end of this particular strand, but it does illuminate the possibilities made manifest by considering multiple directions of literary travel rather than a unidirectional flow of ideas from the Old World to the New.

It is also worth noting that, while the authors that I have used are by no means outside the traditional "canon" of literature, they do not fit comfortably within the typical assignations of canonical periodization. While Poe is typically classified as an American Romanticist, his works are much different than his contemporaries. Weisbuch groups

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[9] See Dennis Perry's *Hitchcock and Poe: The Legacy of Delight and Terror.*

him with Melville and Hawthorne (as opposed to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman), but acknowledges that such an amalgamation is, at best, rough (xviii). Wilde straddles the British Victorian and Modernist traditions, with neither side able to claim him completely or reject him utterly. In addition, neither Wilde nor the *Blackwood's* writers and editors are English, and their Irish and Scottish heritages add a postcolonial element to this work. The implication of this is that following transatlantic mutations does not have to depend solely upon traditional canonical assignments of literary periods. This means that, in the spirit of Wai Chee Dimock's "deep time," there are literally thousands of possible strands that could be traced. Imagine, for example, a strand located tightly within the same general time period beginning with Carlyle, stretching across the Atlantic to Hawthorne, and then coming back to influence the work of Yeats. Contrast that with a strain beginning in America with Whitman, transcending years and miles to impact Woolf, and then coming full circle again in the work of Pynchon.

In my introduction, I noted that Nicolaus Mills' analysis was instrumental in setting up the framework for a comparison of authors from different traditions at their "close points." I also remarked that I found his generalizations about separate American and British preoccupations – specifically, that Americans were focused on individual visionary concerns and British writers on social context and critique – problematic. As I have analyzed *Blackwood's*, Poe, and Wilde during the course of my research and writing, I have become convinced that this sort of generalization underestimates the real complexities of these writers' works. Poe's works resonate with psychology and individual pathos, but focusing solely on those elements neglects his wide range of social commentary. Wilde certainly was a master of social critique, but his more poignant

works were also deeply laced with the agony of the individual. Considering these two

authors in tandem – and, by extension, opening our literary criticism to read writers

together we may never have considered comparing – opens, in the words of Dimock, an

"extension into far-flung temporal and spatial coordinates."

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