Introduction to Poe Criticism

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Overview: Poe and the Evolution of Criticism

Literary criticism is not a single, clearly definable enterprise. Invariably works of literature are involved, but how the critic deals with these texts and what assumptions, perspectives, and goals he or she brings vary from critic to critic and have changed course many times over the years. Understanding critics' ideas about Poe's tales requires some basic understanding of these "schools" of critical thought.

Some might challenge the use of the word "evolution" in relation to literary criticism, inasmuch as that word implies a progression to a more advanced state. To some, the succession of literary theories seems less like progress—in the sense of scientific progress in understanding the atom—than mere swings in intellectual fashion. At least from a present-day perspective, however, it does seem like progress to recognize that books and their meanings are not frozen; seeing the simultaneous existence of different ways to view works of literature brings us closer to the heart of the literary experience.

In regard to Poe in particular, our understanding has come a long way. Research on Poe tells us that there is a great deal more to Poe than first meets the eye. It certainly provides a picture of Poe's work very different from what most readers conceive. Research has revealed, indeed, a bewildering tangle of contradictions in his work, which leaves us with astonishingly little consensus about what Poe is all about. Most scholars would agree that his work is, by design, perplexing. As such it offers an inviting opportunity to young scholars of today and tomorrow to carry on the effort to come to terms with this towering but enigmatic author.

Poe in His Own Time

Poe was a fairly well-known writer in his day, but not one of the superstars. Although criticism today focuses largely on his tales, he was

better known as a poet and probably best-known as a magazine editor and critic. Toward the end of his short life, he traveled about giving lectures on the poets and poetry of America, literary politics, and the function of criticism. As a reviewer, he was renowned for his talent and taste for devastating pans, which earned him the sobriquet "Tomahawk Man."

Poe started his writing career as a poet and turned to story writing mainly for financial reasons (though his tales also earned very little, in those days before copyright laws). He never stopped writing poetry, however, and in 1845 published "The Raven," which was sensationally popular. Prior to that time, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow brought out a collection of American poems that did not include Poe's work, and again when Rufus Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America* came out with only three of Poe's poems, Poe complained bitterly about this treatment. It seems that Poe's reputation was high enough that he could reasonably claim unfairness but not so high that editors felt obliged to make more room for him in the first place.

The short story at this time was just in the process of being invented. Indeed, Poe is credited, probably more than any other single writer, with creating and defining the genre. His tales were widely recognized for their power and artistry. One criticism, however, was repeatedly leveled at him during his career, and it has dogged him ever since: his Gothic sensationalism.

As early as 1836, reviewers were lamenting what was then referred to as Poe's "Germanism." One critic of the day described Poe as "too fond of the wild—unnatural and horrible." Why, this critic complained, "will he not disenthrall himself from the spells of German enchantment and supernatural imagery?" (Thomas and Jackson 202). T. W. White, the editor of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, a prominent literary journal of the time, expressed the view of many. White generally admired Poe's work but repeatedly complained about his use of "too much German horror" and his blending of the "shadows of the tomb with the clouds of sunshine of life" (qtd. in Ingram 117).

In 1839 *The Southern Literary Messenger* rejected what is today considered one of Poe's masterpieces, "The Fall of the House of Usher." An editor, writing on behalf of White, told Poe:

> He doubts whether the readers of the *Messenger* have much relish for tales of the German School although [your tale is] written with great power and ability. . . . I doubt very much whether tales of the wild, improbable and terrible class can ever be permanently popular in this country. (Harrison, 48: vol 17)

Poe's Gothicism was passé, the editor believed; people preferred the more modern, realistic style of Charles Dickens.

Time has proven the editor quite mistaken in his estimation of Americans' tastes, for horror stories never disappeared, and in the movie industry they are perhaps the most consistently popular genre of all. But a note about the editor's comments may be in order for readers new to Poe. Some readers view Poe's Gothic tales reflexively as expressions of their author's tortured state of mind. This idea seems "natural." His tales are so macabre, so focused on death, decay, and tortured minds, that readers believe the obsessions reflect those of Poe. White, who knew Poe personally, thought no such thing. His point was not that Poe was personally obsessed with dark, subconscious terrors but that Poe was choosing to write in an unpopular genre. For White, the darkness and decay and terror were part of the Gothic genre, not Poe's personality.

Nevertheless, the idea that Poe's tales are the reflection of his own psychological torments has a long history. The viewpoint was given its early shape by one very influential obituary, written by an acquaintance and bitter rival of Poe, Rufus Griswold. Writing under a pseudonym, Griswold published, two days after Poe's death, an obituary of him in the *New York Tribune*. He wrote that the news of Poe's death would cause "poignant regret among all who admire genius" but that few would grieve personally because of the kind of man Poe was. He

explicitly claimed that Poe himself was like the characters he created. Describing Poe as one of literature's "most brilliant and erratic stars," Griswold largely created the idea of Poe as an artistic genius tormented to madness. Griswold expanded his profile in an introduction he wrote to what was for a time the definitive edition of Poe's works. Griswold's viewpoint was disputed by others who knew Poe but was widely repeated and became popularly accepted.

Reception in Europe

The picture of Poe as the Romantic artist was enshrined by Charles Baudelaire, one of the greatest French poets of the nineteenth century. Baudelaire discovered Poe's writings in 1852, three years after Poe's death, and began translating his works and writing articles about him. In *Histoires extraordinaires* (1856) Baudelaire characterized Poe as the *poète maudit* ("accursed poet"), who suffered in the materialistic and commercial society of America yet was able to create the finest literature of his age. Baudelaire himself died broke and unrecognized, but he profoundly influenced the next generation of French poets, who enthusiastically seconded his appreciation of Poe. The French Symbolist movement, led by Stéphane Mallarmé, believed that the role of art was to give expression to the wild confusion of the poetic mind, reveling in symbolic language and literary artifice. Poe was their avatar.

Admiration for Poe was expressed by other prominent European literary figures as well. In an 1861 introduction to three of Poe's tales newly translated into Russian, Dostoevsky declared that the "vigor of [Poe's] imagination" distinguished him from every other author (61). In England, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti lauded Poe. These writers, from Baudelaire on, are often considered to be the first modernists, and their praise recast Poe (whom the editor of *The Southern Literary Messenger* had dismissed as retrograde) as a forefather of modernist writing.

The Europeans' respect for Poe made its way back to America, but the process took time. In 1893, when a well-known literary magazine polled its readers on the top ten books by American authors, Poe was scarcely even mentioned. In 1900, when the Hall of Fame for Great Americans was unveiled, designed to proclaim America's place in world civilization, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were included; Poe was not. As scholars and other literary figures, including the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, criticized the omission, Poe's reputation in his homeland began to ascend. (He was voted into the Hall of Fame in 1910.)

In 1923, the English novelist D. H. Lawrence included an essay on Poe in his very influential book *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Two years later, the American poet William Carlos Williams published an essay presenting Poe as a pioneer of serious American literature. (Williams suggested, as Shaw had done, that Poe's lack of stature in his native land was a measure more of the defects of the American reading public than Poe's true literary worth.) From that period onward, although Poe's literary merit has been denigrated by a continuing stream of critics, his eminent position in the literary canon has not been shaken.

Psychoanalyzing Poe

Much of what was written about Poe from the 1920's through the 1940's continued to focus on his presumed psychopathology. Lorine Pruette's "A Psychoanalytic Study of Edgar Allan Poe," John Robertson's *Edgar A. Poe: A Psychopathic Study*, and Joseph Wood Krutch's *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius* adopted the widely held view of Poe as an aberrant personality. Their attempts to uncover the nature and source of his aberration helped to perpetuate the perception. The most important of the psychoanalytic studies was that of Marie Bonaparte, published in French in 1933 and in English in 1949.

Bonaparte was a friend of Sigmund Freud and adopted his view-

point about the nature of the unconscious. Like many critics working from psychoanalytic paradigms, in effect she treats Poe as a patient, examining his life and his work for clues to his psyche. She analyzes his tales as a psychoanalyst would parse a patient's dreams: searching out the hidden symbolism that reveals Poe's inner conflicts. Taking up "The Black Cat," for example, she argues that the narrator, whom she identifies with Poe, displaces his hatred of his mother onto the all-black cat, which he mutilates and kills for biting him. He is able, for a time, to regard the second cat as a *good* mother, because this one has a large splotch of white on its breast. The splotch, by its color and location, represents a mother's milk; moreover, the second cat is found in a tavern (where one drinks), atop a barrel of liquor.

Bonaparte's work is controversial. On one hand, she is praised for her keen insight into the symbolic imagery in Poe's tales. On the other hand, she is faulted, first, for her complete adherence to Freud's theories (which today few analysts accept in their entirety) and, second, for her identification of Poe the man with his tales. The latter is an important issue, in terms of both Poe's work in particular and our ideas about how to think about literature.

Bonaparte takes Poe's tales as expressions of himself. Poe writes the tale; Bonaparte explains what it reveals about him. But while dreams may be the products of the dreamer's unconscious, is not a short story largely a conscious creation? Poe thought about how to draw his character, what setting to place him in, what would happen to him, and what he would say about these things. How ought we to think about the end product: in terms of what it tells us about Poe, or what Poe is trying to tell us about the world?

An example may clarify this idea. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in tales such as "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter," writes of men who exhibit fears of women and end up killing them. Yet few critics or general readers consider these tales as expressing Hawthorne's personal psychology. Rather, Hawthorne is seen as designing his tales in such a way that they expose these tendencies to our view. How is Poe

different? He, too, has invented male characters who show fears of women and ultimately kill them. Why do readers think that Poe is merely *expressing* his own feelings, while Hawthorne is *exposing* a human condition? One possible difference is that Hawthorne's third-person narrators point out their male characters' insecurities. Poe's first-person narrators do not. It is, however, widely agreed in the study of fiction that first-person narrators should not be identified with their authors, any more than a character in a play should be identified with his or her author.

Other critics also turned their attention, as Bonaparte did, to the way Poe's stories symbolically depict unconscious struggles, but with an important difference. Instead of seeing the tales as expressions of Poe's own insecurities and inner torments, the stories are read as expositions of the human unconscious in general. This was the view D. H. Lawrence took. Poe's tales of terror, for Lawrence, trace the disintegration of the human psyche. In Roderick Usher and in the narrator of "Ligeia," for example, Lawrence detected the image of vampires, who in their desire to know their female counterparts suck out their very life.

Some scholars, while agreeing that Poe's stories represented symbolic struggles, conceived these struggles in different ways. Some viewed them, as Baudelaire had, in terms of the artistic temperament, either in conflict with itself or in opposition to external forces. Poe's canonical tales of terror supported readings along these lines. Roderick Usher is an artist; Ligeia is a brilliant philosopher. Critics also pointed to Poe's longest work of fiction, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which invites reading as the record of a visionary quest through the realms of intellectual experience to some kind of denouement, whether tragic or ecstatic.

Whether the conflict was construed as superego versus id or imagination versus reason, these discussions share a common assumption: that the tales present their conflicts essentially in earnest. In the second half of the twentieth century, that perspective began to be displaced.

New Approaches

In attempting to explicate Poe's symbolism, the criticism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused largely on theme—the idea of fiction being that it is designed to express an idea. Over time, literary scholars grew disenchanted with this conception, feeling that it limited readers' experience of literature. To say that a certain story or poem "means" a certain thing was called "reductive." If one boils down a work of literature to its meaning, critics argued, all that is left is the meaning. One thereby misses what makes it art. The poet Archibald MacLeish summed up the new viewpoint in his oft-quoted lines, "A poem must not mean / But be."

In the 1920's there flourished in Russia a school of literary criticism known as formalism. Russian Formalists sought to analyze the text-in-itself, paying particular attention to its linguistic properties, as opposed to the historical or cultural conditions in which it was created. New Criticism, which peaked in England and the United States in the 1940's and 1950's, resembles formalism in its focus on the text itself. New Critics called on readers to view poems and works of fiction as self-contained works of art, focusing on the way they are constructed, their unifying principles. New Criticism gradually gave way to structuralism, which shares, however, an emphasis on *how* works of literature convey meanings.

Surprising Discoveries

When critics started analyzing how Poe's tales are constructed, a fundamental shift began. Like the house of Usher with its barely detectable fissure running from top to bottom, Poe's tales themselves seemed on close inspection to be divided against themselves. The tales of terror are prime examples. Horrifying they certainly are, but they are not *simply* horrifying. We experience them also as complicated, puzzling, and at times almost comic. At some points they read like metaphysical essays and at others like cheap novels. Poe scholars set to work to explain these contradictions.

One dividing line, discussed in an important article by James Gargano, "The Question of Poe's Narrators," cuts between the stories and their narrators. Almost always Poe's tales are narrated in the first person, by participants or at least on-the-scene observers. But what the stories tell us, Gargano argues, is quite different from what the narrators are saying. Poe's tales present the narrators' accounts, but in a way that allows the reader to see much more—including the failure of the narrators to see. The narrator of "William Wilson" is overwhelmed and blind to what is happening to him, but the reader understands that the man is in denial. The young man in "The Tell-Tale Heart" convinces himself that he is sane because he has rationally planned the old man's murder; we see that fear and guilt have driven him insane. Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado" believes he has cleverly avenged a wrong done to him; we see that he has inflicted a far greater injury on himself.

For Gargano, Poe's tales depict a moral universe. The narrators act, and speak, in blindness to this moral order but cannot escape it. G. R. Thompson, in his important book *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales*, agrees that the tales reveal the blindness of their narrators. He views Poe, as many do, in the context of the Romantic tradition, which argues that man's trust in reason is folly. Poe mocks rationalism, Thompson argues, by exposing his narrators' incomprehension of what is happening to them. Thompson notes the self-parody that can be seen in Poe's seemingly serious horror stories as further examples of the author's "ironic" stance.

A valuable body of literature has emerged, analyzing specific tales in terms of the disparities between the narrators' versions of events and the interpretations that readers may reach. Thus Gargano argues that the inability of the narrator of "The Black Cat" to understand the events he relates exposes his lack of moral vision ("Perverseness"). Benjamin Franklin Fisher believes that "The Assignation" reveals the limitations of its narrator in appreciating the Romantic ideal ("Flights"). Marc Leslie Rovner sees William Wilson as too obtuse to understand his moral circumstances.

Poe as Parodist

While the discovery of the contradictions in Poe's tales led Thompson and others to see irony, some saw parody and hoax. Clark Griffith argued that the Gothic horror tale "Ligeia" contained a disguised mockery of Transcendentalism. Richard P. Benton described the seemingly Romantic "The Assignation" as a hoax in which Poe parodies Thomas Moore's account of Lord Byron's affair with an Italian countess. Robert Regan saw "The Masque of the Red Death" as playing on Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Legends of the Province House." Stories that most readers have taken and continue to take seriously were now often identified as hoaxes or parodies. Griffith read "Ligeia" as covertly parodying the Gothic tradition; Fisher took a similar view of "The Fall of the House of Usher" ("Germanism"); James M. Cox saw burlesque in both of those stories and "William Wilson" as well.

To readers new to Poe, the idea that his seemingly dark and horrifying tales could be read as humorous is incredible. It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider the basis for such claims. In essence, the reasons are two.

The first is Poe's often abominable writing, a long-standing issue in the study of Poe. If he is such a great writer, the question is asked, why are his tales filled with passages that are overwrought, clichéd, or silly? For some, the answer is, Poe is *not* a great writer. Poe's contemporary, the poet James Russell Lowell, mocked Poe as "three-fifths genius and two-fifths sheer fudge." The aristocratic Henry James declared that "an enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection." American-born English poet T. S. Eliot sneered that Poe had "the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty." English writer Aldous Huxley said that Poe was "cursed with incorrigible bad taste." He considered Poe's writing "vulgar," like wearing a "diamond ring on every finger." The highborn Irish poet William Butler Yeats also thought "vulgar" the best word. When a friend sent Yeats a copy of Poe's poems that he had illustrated, Yeats wrote back to tell the illustrator he was wasting his talents. The gifted poet described Poe's work as

"vulgar and commonplace" and a few sentences later "insincere and vulgar." Such invective continues to the present day.

Poe's defenders often try to look beyond his flaws. The critic Allen Tate, who holds a generally favorable opinion of Poe, nevertheless confesses that "Poe's serious style at its typical worst makes the reading of more than one tale at a sitting an almost insuperable task." Tate notes how overripe Poe's tales can be: the "Gothic glooms, the Venetian interiors, the ancient wine-cellars (from which nobody ever enjoys a vintage but always drinks 'deep')—all this, done up in a glutinous prose." But, says Tate, Poe is worthy and readable if one is able to see through to "the power underlying the flummery."

Many scholars are unwilling to accept Poe's excesses as defects. Instead, they seek to explain them as part of a deliberate design. Michael Allen, in a book published in 1969, argues that Poe designed his stories to appeal simultaneously to two different audiences. Allen's analysis has been very influential and is worth understanding for the way it places Poe in the context of the literary marketplace of his time and the way it deals with the contradictions that readers encounter in Poe's tales.

Allen argues that if one wishes to understand Poe's work, one must consider the most successful literary magazine of Poe's time, *Blackwood's*. Any magazine editor, as Poe was, would have spent time searching for the key to its success. That key, Allen went on, was the ability of *Blackwood's* to attract two distinct audiences: the unsophisticated "many" and the elite "few." For the many, *Blackwood's* offered plentiful helpings of sensationalism, literary gossip, and fiction; to the highbrows it provided sophisticated burlesques, bits of curious and esoteric learning, serious criticism, and a pervasive tone of superiority. Poe understood the magazine's strategy and applied it to his own work. The result was a combination of lowbrow sensationalism, esoteric commentary, and sophisticated parody all within a single tale. Allen's analysis accounts neatly for the contradictions—or the unevenness, as some would call it—that critics were pointing out in Poe's tales. Al-

len's focus on the economic considerations Poe faced, his need to win readers, inspired others, including Jonathan Elmer, to explore the implications of Poe's role or roles in the literary marketplace.

Such analysis as Allen's leaves some readers unsatisfied. It accounts for the defects in Poe's tales, but the defects remain defects. We crave a "reading" of a tale in which the pieces fit together to serve an artistic purpose, not just a commercial one. Poe himself championed this idea, which he called "unity of effect." In order to be regarded as great, should a writer not be in control of the effects his or her works have on readers? If we say that Poe is an able writer, and if readers commonly experience parts of his tales as meretricious, vulgar, or silly, then we should be able to account for these reactions in terms of the overall design of the tale—especially when the passages are so conspicuous, so pervasive, so seemingly central to our experience. Viewing the tales as parodies or hoaxes answers this need.

Poe the Humorist

A second factor that disposes many Poe scholars to see humor where the general reader sees only gloom and horror is the overall context of Poe's work. Many readers know Poe from a handful of tales: "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," and perhaps two or three others. It comes as a surprise to such readers that of Poe's more than sixty tales, about half are openly comical.

"The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" tells of a man who visits a mental hospital known for its revolutionary methods. The man is invited to stay for dinner by his hosts, who grow wilder through the evening until it is finally revealed that these are in fact the inmates, who have overpowered their keepers and taken over the asylum. In "The Duc de L'Omelette," a French duke dies and goes to hell. He maneuvers the devil into a game of cards and escapes damnation by defeating him—palming a king while the devil takes a drink of wine.

"Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling" is told in dialect by Sir Pathrick O'Grandison Barronitt, who finds himself in competition with a Frenchman for the affections of the "purty widdy Misthress Tracle." Seated together on a sofa, the men pursue the woman through surreptitious handholding. The passion with which Sir Pathrick feels his attentions returned convinces him that he has won, until the woman steps away, and he realizes that it is the Frenchman's hand he holds. Infuriated, he crushes the Frenchman's hand, thereby answering the question posed in the title. The list of such tales goes on and on.

Perhaps more provocative than Poe's burlesques is his taste for hoax. What is now called "The Balloon Hoax," purports to tell the story of the first transatlantic balloon crossing. It was published in the *New York Sun* without any indication that it was fiction. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" presents itself as the factual, eyewitness account of a professional hypnotist, who tells of hypnotizing his dying friend to see whether the trance could arrest his death. The patient remained unchanged for seven months, the author says, until the decision was made to awaken him from the trance. When this was done the man instantly rotted away to a liquid mass. So preposterous is the ending that one cannot imagine that Poe would think anyone would believe it, yet many did.

By contrast, "Von Kempelen and His Discovery" is a deliberate hoax. In offering some details about its fictitious subject, the narrator writes as though the basic news of Von Kempelen and his recent amazing discovery—how to turn lead into gold—were already well known to the world. "The Premature Burial," "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Phall," "The Journal of Julius Rodman," and many other tales may also be regarded as hoaxes. Indeed, scholars themselves disagree, so difficult is it to know when Poe is kidding.

In this regard, two parodies are particularly significant. When "Silence—A Fable" was first published, it appeared under a title, "Siope—A Fable [in the manner of the Psychological Autobiographists]," that

clearly announced its parodic intent. But when readers took the tale seriously, Poe removed the subtitle (Regan 281). "Metzengerstein," too, was originally intended as a parody, but many readers took it as a genuine tale of the supernatural. Poe made one attempt to smarten his readers up: republishing in 1836, he added the subtitle "A Tale in Imitation of the German" (Thompson "Metzengerstein" 46 and n. 57). When readers persisted in taking the tale seriously, however, he removed the subtitle, and in subsequent republications even toned down or deleted some of the most ridiculous passages.

No reader should decide that Poe's horror tales are *not* parodies until he or she reads "How to Write a Blackwood Article." In this unquestioned parody, a silly woman calling herself Psyche Zenobia, seeking to elevate the literature being turned out by the society of which she is a member, turns for advice to the editor of Britain's prominent literary magazine. He provides a list of rules for constructing tales "full of taste, terror, sentiment, metaphysics, and erudition." Clearly Poe is having fun at *Blackwood's* expense. The second part (sometimes printed separately under the title "A Predicament") presents Zenobia's attempt to translate *Blackwood's* advice into fiction. It tells of a woman visiting a cathedral, who gets her head stuck between the hands of the clock in the tower. The tale is ridiculous, yet it reads with the same breathless horror as Poe's "serious" tales of terror. Moreover, the parody was published within a month of "Ligeia" and only one year before "The Fall of the House of Usher." It seems incredible that a writer could ridicule a style so mercilessly one month and then employ it in complete seriousness the next.

Against the background of Poe's total output, it is easy to see why many Poe critics are more inclined than general readers to see parody and hoaxing in tales like "Usher." Indeed Poe's hoaxing has become a central focus of Poe scholars, who have addressed it from a variety of perspectives. It is not simply that hoaxing helps explain otherwise confusing features (and presumed faults) in Poe's work. More and more, Poe's hoaxing seems an essential part of what he is about. Many of the

essays in Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman's collection, *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, examine aspects of what the editors call "Poe's charlatanism" (xii).

Deconstruction

As awareness of the depth of Poe's hoaxing grew, along came another development in the evolution of literary criticism. Poststructuralism and its close cousin deconstructionism can be seen as continuing the attack on the idea that literature is all about conveying ideas. The formalists had said, in effect, "Don't just think what a work of art 'means' or 'says'; look at how it is constructed and how it creates the effects it creates." Deconstructionists said, "Look at how stories and poems *avoid* saying what they mean." Where you think you see unity and coherence in a work, look closer, and you will find over and over elements in the text that qualify, undercut, or contradict the "coherent" meaning you have constructed. These qualifications are not accidents or mistakes: they are part of the essence of the literary enterprise.

Deconstructionists searching for texts to analyze found in Poe's work a veritable bonanza. In addition to all the parody and hoaxing along the lines already discussed, Poe offered a trove of works that took hoaxing and blocked meaning as their very subject. One article sought to explain the nature of "Diddling," contemporary slang for what today we would call a scam or a con. The plot of "Mystification," a word that to Poe meant the deliberate attempt to baffle someone, turned upon a piece of writing of a type called amphigory, which appears to be meaningful but proves to be nonsense. Deconstructionists also pored over "The Gold Bug," with its secret writing, and "The Purloined Letter," about a piece of writing that is concealed, disguised, turned inside out. "The Purloined Letter" was the subject of a famous article by Jacques Lacan, a rejoinder by Jacques Derrida, and a staggering volume of subsequent commentary by others.

Another key text for deconstructionists was *The Narrative of Arthur*

Gordon Pym, a novel of baffling indeterminacy, filled—even more than is usual for Poe—with narrative lapses and contradictions, along with forged notes, hieroglyphic writing, and other explicit references to the problematic nature of the written word. Scholars taking up the tale include John Carlos Rowe, John Irwin, Dennis Pahl, and G. R. Thompson.

Finally there is "The Man of the Crowd," about a man who, looking out the window of a coffeehouse, picks a man out of the crowd and determines to know, as it were, the secret of his character. He follows and observes the man all night until dawn the next day, finally concluding that he will never learn what he wants to know. He ends the story (as he began it) with what he says is a comment made about a certain book: "it does not permit itself to be read." The line, made-to-order as a motto for those interested in the way that texts block the construction of coherent meaning, has been quoted and discussed, at a conservative estimate, in hundreds of scholarly papers over the past three decades.

Deconstructionist writings are often complex, diffuse, and difficult to follow. They consider the works they examine mainly in terms of what these works reveal about literature itself, rather than in terms of traditional literary themes that seem closer to ordinary life. Much deconstructionist writing is also heavily self-referential, leaving many readers wistful for literary analysis that speaks about something outside itself and "real." At the same time, deconstruction does seem singularly in tune with Poe's work, which consistently challenges our most basic assumption that literature involves an attempt by the writer to "communicate." If such is the case, why does Poe again and again give us writing that appears expressly designed to mystify us?

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