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JOAN DAYAN

From Romance to Modernity: Poe and the Work of Poetry

What is Poetry?—Poetry! that Proteus-like idea,
with as many appellations as the nine-titled
Cocyrus!

—Poe, “Letter to B——”

POE BEGAN HIS WRITING CAREER AS a poet, and throughout his life he questioned the idea of poetry, worried about defining it, and by his own admission, failed to write poems “of much value to the public, or very creditable to myself.”¹ And yet, what Poe and his subsequent critics recognize as failure demands further consideration. The problem of Poe’s poetry is nothing less than a demonstration of what happens when the lyric of feeling confronts the demands of a form more public and less pure than that celebrated in “The Poetic Principle.” The effect of Poe’s poetry, whether he willed it or no, is to adulterate “that *Beauty*,” which he claimed as “the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem” (H 14: 276).² Poe’s alternating longing for and discomfort with the language of romance, and his final attempt to confound his earlier theoretical categories (Truth, Romance, and Poetry) in his scientific, cosmological long poem *Eureka* makes plain the difficult passage from nineteenth-century English poetry to a uniquely modernist poetic.

Eureka, Poe’s “Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe,” is his discourse on method and interrogation of poetry. In a letter to George

1. “Preface,” *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845), cited in Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 18.

2. H = *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York, 1902). M = *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978). O = *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1948). All further references to Poe are cited parenthetically in the text with volume and page number.

W. Eveleth following his New York lecture "The Universe" in 1848, published a year later as *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, Poe asserts:

Everything has gone as I wished it, and my final success is certain, or I abandon all claim to the title of *Vates*. As to the lecture, I am very quiet about it—but, if you have ever dealt with such topics, you will recognize the novelty and *moment* of my view. What I have propounded will (in good time) revolutionize the world of Physical and Metaphysical Science. I say this calmly—but I say it. (O 2: 362)

As anomalous precursor of "the modern epic," *Eureka* will transform the world of Poetical Science, giving Whitman the right both to declare "there is no more need of romances" (Preface, 1855 *Leaves of Grass*) and to make his coarse, broad composite in honor of "the entire revolution made by science in the poetic method" (Preface, "As A Strong Bird on Pinions Free").

I

The perceptible universe of *Eureka* depends upon the force of the particular, for it is Poe's sometimes overbearing attempt to physicalize what he calls "abstract" or "generalizing" philosophy. Through a language alternately condensed and digressive, he simulated the cosmic consolidation and fragmentation, the "attraction and repulsion" that remain (for Poe as for Newton) "the *sole* properties through which we perceive the *Universe*" (H 16: 213–14).

It could be argued that Poe began by writing a poetry that would finally demand his cosmology. Certainly, his theoretical writings remind us that Poe often seeks to present verbal processes in terms of a material world of particles that rush together and pull apart, before the apocalyptic return to what Poe calls the "Original Unity." In that supreme moment of cosmic collapse, matter will be "matter no more." But *Eureka* is not about that unknowable end so much as it is about a phenomenal world of conflicting tensions, conversions, and combinations.

When Poe debunks the idea of original genius, replacing "novel conceptions" with "unusual combinations" (H 10: 62), he speaks as one of a long line of poet-chemists. His emphasis on "the most combinable things hitherto uncombined," on "the combinations of very simple natural objects," on the surprising glories that can result from the "chemistry of the intellect" (H 15: 38–39) resonates in the voices of later atomists of form—Whitman, Mallarmé, Valéry, Eliot and Williams. For Poe, however, straddling the great divide of indefinite fantasy and exact science, the claims of matter wreaked havoc on the products of his

conception. In 1855 Whitman would find it easier to be confident about the equation between the perfect poem and exact science. Indeed, his later *Democratic Vistas* would announce: "America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, all-surrounding, and Kosmical. . . . It must in no respect ignore science or the modern."³ Whitman made his poems out of materials and found there abundant recompense. But for Poe in the 1830s the givens of romance exacted strange atonement for his being too cold an atomist of language, too cunning an analyst of poetic making.

The early Poe is uneasy with the language of romance, yet aware that "all is re-soluble into the old" (H 15: 13). So, he turns upon his predecessors, particularly those he recognizes as bearers of "purest ideality." It might initially seem that Poe's pursuit of an inimitable Eldorado is staged in his poetry. Yet just as the call for a "Naiad voice" attuning the reader to soul-exalting echoes, is often mutilated in the course of Poe's prose composition, his poems also demand our divorcing what Poe says from what he does.⁴ When Poe the constructor turns to his muse, he celebrates the fragment not the whole, the labor of process more than the final effect.

In his "Preface" poem to *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* of 1829, Poe skews what begins as a passionate dedication of self to the soul of romance. Instead of answering Byron's choice in "To Romance" of truth over the "Parent of golden dreams," this poem already reveals the bizarre permutations in Poe's lyric which increasingly come to dominate his poems of the 1830s. Successful resolution of the poem depends upon Poe's sustained rendering of the key figure Romance. Yet as the first stanza proceeds that figure breaks down:

Romance, who loves to nod and sing
With drowsy head and folded wing,
Among the green leaves as they shake
Far down within some shadowy lake,
To me a painted paroquet
Hath been—a most familiar bird—
Taught me my alphabet to say—

3. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 979.

4. Poe's ideal of "indefinitiveness," his turn to the "ethereal," "ideal," "breath of faery," or "mystic" should be seen as words masking his real emphasis on a method that subverts any purported fiction of the ideal. For a study of Poe's critique of romance as revealed in *Eureka*, see Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).

To lisp my very earliest word
 While in the wild wood I did lie,
 A child—with a most knowing eye.

(M 1: 128)

Successor to Shelley's "blithe spirit," Romance is a bird, nestled in a properly reflected nature and imaged in its shadowy waters. But Poe turns away from what might have been sublime to the ordinary. The "most familiar bird" denies the indeterminacy of Shelley's "Sprite or Bird" or Poe's Raven, the later "bird or fiend." No more than a "painted paroquet," it teaches the child to say his alphabet and to "lisp" his primitive word.

If we look at Poe's source in Byron's own farewell to the "motley court" of Romance, this lisp, more than simply alluding to a childlike way of speaking, alerts us to a novel reenactment of the peculiarities of Byron's court, "Where Affectation holds her seat, / And sickly Sensibility" ("To Romance"). To be a child "—with a most knowing eye" is odd, if we follow the Keatsian or Coleridgean combat between gray-haired knowing and innocent romance. This knowing eye forces our jump from childhood to age as it echoes the ancient mariner's "glittering eye" and introduces us to the curiously failed second stanza. In the move from a painted parakeet to "eternal Condor years" with the child/man stilled, "gazing on the unquiet sky," the poet vulgarizes Romance, and turns our anticipation of beauty into a recognition of the ungainly. Poe faces the proverbial sin in his song, and hopes to fend off "forbidden things" or fancied crime with a heart that yet "trembled with the strings." The drowsy songster of the first stanza too quickly becomes winged and flings "its down" upon the bard's "spirit." Could Yeats, who once lamented a world weaned from dreaming ("Grey Truth is now her painted toy" in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd") be revising Poe's failed vision when he composed "Sailing to Byzantium"? The dull figure of Romance that "loves to nod and sing / With drowsy head" becomes a "drowsy Emperor," kept awake by a golden bird "set upon a golden bough to sing / . . . / Of what is past, or passing or to come."

The striking revision of "Fairyland" (1829) into "Fairy Land" (1831) demonstrates how Poe turns lyric fantasy into a blunt desublimation of desire. Here, the projection of an idealized woman fragments and dislocates a previous song. Whereas the first effort sounds like a breathless evocation of fairies in their tents of moonlight, the second with lines rearranged and forty new lines introduced at the beginning, centers on a dialogue between a speaker and his lady. Vulgar innuendo infiltrates romantic colloquy; and the reuse of lines from the earlier song reveals

the Poe “cleavage,” the parodic undoing of sentiment (“ cliché of the soul”) that William Carlos Williams would deem a new beginning for American poetry: Poe’s “concern, the apex of his immaculate attack, was to detach a ‘method’ from the smear of common usage.”⁵ In *Kora in Hell* Williams presents “Imagination” as this power to “detach,” to “separate,” to “break,” and thus to discover “in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things.”⁶ Like the Williams of *Spring and All*, Poe contends “with the sky through layers of demoded words and shapes.” A “man of great separation,” Poe is “the first American poet.” “Fairy Land” shows us how Poe dismantles, destroys and erects his words on the ruins of “the beautiful illusion.”⁷

The new lines of the first two stanzas of “Fairy Land” in their violence of address sound much like a Browning dramatic monologue. With the invitation, “Sit beside me, Isabel / *Here*, dearest, where the moon beam fell / Just now so fairy-like and well,” the speaker places his lady in his imaginary scene. When we read the fourth line, “*Now* thou art dress’d for paradise!” we cannot be sure whether Isabel is living or dead. As the lover rings changes on his lady, she becomes a part of all he sees, his only landscape.

I am star-stricken with thine eyes!
 My soul is lolling on thy sighs!
 Thy hair is lifted by the moon
 Like flowers by the low breath of June!
 Sit down, sit down—how came we here?
 Or is it all but a dream, my dear?

In this fantasy, held by the gaze of a merciless beauty, his soul lolls and her hair wafts like flowers. When he again invites the lady to sit down, she disappears as a possible presence. A demon lover tells a tale that reminds us of those Poe narrators who wonder at the moment of brute mutilation or horror, “Or is it all but a dream . . .”? What follows is a move from an overworked, affective nature to an aggressive locus of desire, marked by a chatty meditation on a rose that will be torn asunder.

You know that most enormous flower—
 That rose—that what d’ye call it—that hung

5. William Carlos Williams, “Edgar Allan Poe,” *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956) 21.

6. William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell*, in *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1971) 18.

7. William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, in *Imaginations* 111, 100, 89.

Up like a dog-star in this bower—
 To-day (the wind blew, and) it swung
 So impudently in my face,
 So like a thing alive you know,
 I tore it from its pride of place
 And shook it into pieces—so
 Be all ingratitude requited.
 The winds ran off with it delighted,
 And, thro' the opening left, as soon
 As she threw off her cloak, yon moon
 Has sent a ray down with a tune.

Any possible rite of *amor de lonh* (the lady of romance must remain unattainable to be nobly loved) is rewritten by the poet as wild violator of the beautiful.

Picture this surreal rose, which is not exactly a rose but an unmentionable, “that what d’ye call it.” Once it hung unthreatening like a far-away star, but a “dog-star” that gives off a maddening heat; and then it swings, “like a thing alive,” in the face of the male admirer. In Byron’s “To Romance,” the turn from dreams to truth (“But leave at once thy realms of air / To mingling bands of fairy elves”) causes the speaker to conclude that “woman’s false as fair.” In Poe’s burlesque of forbidden passion, the speaker retaliates for “ingratitude” (either the ideal lady’s unfaithfulness or her brazen refusal to remain on her pedestal). Her sex, torn out from “its pride of place,” is dismembered. A wind blows, delighting in the remnants it steals away and leaving a gaping hollow, “the opening left,” through which yet another figure for woman denuded—the moon uncloaked—sends “a ray down with a tune.” At this point, the poem falls apart, as its own earlier idealization is dashed before the upsurge of the carnal. We see a lover alone with his crime, desperately asking, “O, when will come the morrow?” He vainly addresses his muse, the open wound, silenced forever: “Isabel! do you not fear / the night and the wonders here?”

As in other early Poe poems, “Fairy Land” suggests that there is something in the idea of romance that drives the poet in Poe mad. Those poems which seem to be most likely vessels for his “breath of faery” turn into junctures of combination. We witness a combinatorial push gone wild, a desire for unity forced back upon a recognition of odds and ends. “The Valley Nis” (1831), ur-text for “The Valley of Unrest” (1845) clarifies the uneasy alliance between the poet’s attempt to write of “supernal” loveliness and the critical awareness that must defeat such visionary expectations. Both these poems will be surpassed by the rig-

orous "The City in the Sea" (1845), recognized by Yvor Winters as "Poe's best performance."⁸ All three poems absorb, translate, and compress the contents of Byron's 1806 poem "Darkness."

Poe's persistent concern with how his poems will finally appear, evidenced by his many revisions, suggests his problems with closure. His acutely heightened sense of form subjects his claims for completeness, or "unity of effect" to the fact of emendation. And "The Valley Nis" turns shrilly on its own inadequacies.

Far away—far away—
 Far away—as far at least
 Lies that valley as the day
 Down within the golden east—
 All things lovely—are not they
 Far away—far away?

It is called the Valley Nis.
 And a Syriac tale there is
 Thereabout which Time hath said
 Shall not be interpreted.
 Something about Satan's dart—
 Something about angel wings—
 Much about a broken heart—
 All about unhappy things:
 But "the valley Nis" at best
 Means "the valley of unrest."

(M I: 191-92)

Playing on the archaic *nis* (is not), Poe shows how he can reduce words into nothing, while playing upon the rhymed concord of "Nis" and "is," anticipating his claim in *Eureka*: "something can be where it is not." No matter how circumscribed, "Syriac tale" or no, this valley remains unlocalized (as indeterminate as the tale itself, which is "Thereabout"). And the "tale," we are warned, "shall not be interpreted." These stanzas show how not to say, while the weighty *nis* demonstrates how an apparently insignificant (and not to be interpreted) poem can mean. In Latin *nis*, the contraction for *nisi*, means "unless," compounding in one word the double diminution that contains Poe's favorite signs of reduction, *un-* and *-less*. Aware of Poe's theological and cryptological bent, we note that *Nis* spells *Sin* backwards. And knowing how long

8. Yvor Winters, "Edgar Allan Poe: A Crisis in the History of American Obscurantism," *In Defense of Reason* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1943) 251.

Poe meditated on Milton, we could seek a source for this not-valley in Milton's couple, Sin and Death, where shape and substance both are subsumed in shadow and seeming. Indeed, Poe's valley Nis, once subjected to this trial of definition, means, he says, "the valley of unrest," recalling Milton's *Paradise Lost*, his "Region dolorous" where a damned throng "found / No rest."⁹

Poe's imaginary landscape proves to be more than an allegory of the life-as-dream motif critics often endorse. Though Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant" and *Adonais* offer a possible approach to the theme of Poe's dreamland, these poems are only part of a larger effort to sever and join various dictions and poetic voices.¹⁰ In "The Valley Nis," Milton's lost Eden, his "Universe of death," appears under cover of nineteenth-century romance. It is to this palimpsestic effect (the dark echoes rumbling under the glass of ideality) which I now turn. Besides borrowing and mixing two very distinct kinds of poetic discourse (what is for Poe a deep attachment to Milton veiled by a superficial toying with Shelley, Coleridge, and Tennyson), Poe overlays his landscape with a third ghostly ancestry—the eighteenth-century downturn into bathos, the posture adopted by Byron in writing his *Don Juan*: "Hail Muse! et cetera." The devilish layering of voices makes our reading of Poe's early poems an unsettling experience. We might see Poe as a writer so terribly haunted by the force of Milton that he first had to stage his own agon: he had to play the role of a Don Juan cursed to wander in Shelley's ethereal cliffs of Caucasus as punishment for failing to be Milton.

The fragmented picture of a Hell once so well described that it now can only be hinted at ("Something about Satan's dart— / Something about angel wings—") must begin as romance, with the fairy call to that place anywhere out of the world, "Far away—far away." A truer visionary Yeats will take up the call through Niamh, his "dreadful solitary fairy," who summons both poet and reader to pursuit of the absolute: "*Away, come away: / Empty your heart of its mortal dream*" ("The Hosting

9. Milton, *Paradise Lost* 2: 616–18. Poe's revisions of Milton's *Comus* as well as *Paradise Lost* merit further study. In *Comus* (244–52) a constellation of images reappear as echoes in "The Raven": "upon the wings / Of silence, through the empty-vaulted night / At every fall smoothing the Raven down / Of darkness till it smiled!"). The lost lady "Lenore" in this poem and in Poe's poem of the same name could have been suggested to Poe by Milton's three poems to a "Leonora": "To Leonora Singing in Rome"; "To the Same," which presents "Another Leonora [who] made a captive of the poet, Torquato, / who, for passionate love of her, went mad"; and the subsequent "To the Same," to "the Naiad of the Shore."

10. Poe praises Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant" as an "example of a poem of purest ideality" (H 8: 299).

of the Sidhe"). Poe remains an uneasy romantic. No sooner does he sound the obvious cliché, than he undercuts it in the next line's qualification, "Far away—as far at least."¹¹ And the first stanza is summed up in a flat question: "all things lovely—are not they / Far away—far away?" He sounds the supernal call only half-heartedly to query it.

The next stanza tells a broken tale, progressing through graduated imprecisions that confute Satan's dart, angel's wings and a broken heart (the yoking of Satan and Cupid marks the collision of Miltonic sublime with sentimental romance), and finally ends with a half-way shot at definition. Note the way the end-of-line dash (taken up and ironized so splendidly by Emily Dickinson) steps up intensity but leads nowhere: "Something about . . .—Something about . . .— / Much about . . . —," falling into the "All," deprived through these modifications of its potential sublimity.¹² After these approximations, we know that the definition is no definition at all, but at best a synonymic equivalence: "But the 'valley Nis' at best / Means 'the valley of unrest.'"

The final two stanzas delineate Poe's familiar blurring of what should be two distinct time periods, "Once" and "Now." The first scene is a "silent dell / where the people did not dwell." The inhabitants have "all gone unto the wars," leaving one of those unnatural "natural" landscapes so common in Poe's tales. Gesturing in the direction of a romantic antecedent (perhaps the sentient thing-ness of Bryant's "Thanatopsis"), the poet performs his curious rhapsody: portentous star-faces lean over vulnerable flowers; a blood-ray drips from the sun, then circulates through the tulips sprouting overhead. The sun falls, pallid from loss of blood on the silent flower of death.

And the sly mysterious stars,
 With a visage full of meaning,
 O'er the unguarded flowers were leaning:
 Or the sun ray dripp'd all red
 Thro' the tulips overhead,

11. In *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981) 58, John Hollander notes, "the phrase 'come away,'" was an "early seventeenth-century lyric cliché . . . to introduce an echo-song." When Poe, in his theoretical writings, talks about the suggestive undercurrent, calling for the "Naiad voice" that addresses the reader "from below," he again tempts our return to Milton. See Milton's evocation of "ravishment" in *Comus*: "Sure something *holy* lodges in that breast / And with these raptures moves the vocal air / To testify his hidden residence" (246–48).

12. See Emily Dickinson: "A something in a summer's Day / . . . A something in a summer's noon— / A depth—an Azure a perfume— / Transcending ecstasy" (# 122).

Then grew paler as it fell
On the quiet Asphodel.

(M I: 192)

These lines remind us that Poe's early artistry began as a compounding of unexpected elements. Although the scene seems to partake of a Shelleyan landscape (for example, in "The Spirit of Solitude," "yellow flowers" "gaze in their own drooping eyes," and "the ash and acacia floating hang / Tremulous and pale"), Poe's world is both more biblical and more sinister. His intensifications of a soulful nature suggest apocalypse, and we have only to read the second and final stanza to see what happens once all things are dead and gone. "Now the *unhappy* shall confess / Nothing there is motionless." In this world of infernal and cataclysmic rustlings, a space is reserved for the unregenerate, forced like "Helen" with a "human eye" to lie as do "th' uneasy violets." All matter is condemned to the unending oscillation endemic to man's present, fallen state: "the reedy grass doth wave"; "the eternal dews do drop"; the "vague and dreamy trees / Do roll." Then, in anticipation of that day when heaven and earth will roll up in universal consternation (predicting *Eureka's* final "ingathering"), the clouds will fly, "rustling everlastingly, / Through the terror-stricken sky, / Rolling like a waterfall / O'er th' horizon's fiery wall—."

Poe's revision of "The Valley Nis," "The Valley of Unrest," deletes the bathetic opening with the *nis/is* play and removes many of the landscape oddities, including supine Helen. Most of the superfluous and precious adjectives are eliminated. The "sly" stars become "mild-eyed," and they watch over flowers, while a "red sun-light lazily lay" over the valley. With the cutting away of excess verbiage and such unhappy concatenations of sounds as "dews do drop," Poe has suppressed the ambiguously sexual implications. As we move from what is now one sharply delimited time to the next ("Once" to "Now"), we move from a relatively insipid scene to a land of death, unalleviated by any comic effects or incongruities. In this more direct, plain style, which accentuates symmetrical repetitions, Poe foreshadows the linguistic synonymy and attenuation of his later poems. Building on the equivalences between negative terms, he now uses only those adjectives that further neutralize the elements of his poem. A strategy of simplification is under way. Since the once-upon-a-time stanza has become unobtrusive, our attention is drawn to the "Now," with its graduated diminutions, where words reduce but do not ridicule. Note how Poe proceeds through degrees of attenuation: "silent dell" / "people did not dwell" / "mild-eyed stars" / "sun-light lazily lay" / "sad valley's restlessness" / "Nothing

there is motionless" / "Nothing save the airs" / "by no wind" / "by no wind" / "unquiet Heaven" / "Uneasily" / "weep above a nameless grave" / "Eternal dews come down" / "They weep:—from off their delicate stems" / "Perennial tears descend in gems." Byron's "Darkness" could well be the ground for Poe's rendering of dissolution. But whereas in Byron's poem, "nothing stirred within their [the rivers, lakes, and ocean] depths," in Poe's there remains an unidentified, agitated pulsing. As in "Silence—A Fable," his nothing exudes plenitude. This drawn-out defeat reveals the power of languishing things, a phantom evocation that Mallarmé carries to an extreme in his "Ouverture ancienne d'Hérodiade."¹³

Significantly, much of Poe's early poetry dramatizes the cosmic convertibility observed throughout *Eureka*, making the words themselves reenact the Divine "hold" on matter as it alternately concentrates and irradiates its forces. We should note two basic strategies in these poems:

1) A cloying, fitful space exaggerates the "fluctuating principle" that marks the present human condition on earth. Through repeated words and phrases Poe signals this agitated and restless realm: dews drip, lilies loll, moons wax and wane, things reel, and roll, as varied manifestations of the "conqueror worm" and his "wizard rout" flit in and out.

2) A still point heralds the inevitable relapse into unity, the "ingathering" when God will be *all in all*. Operating against, or in tension with a more sinister scansion, this tendency prepares us for the motive for merelessness in *Eureka* (and in Poe's later lyrics). Poe wills attenuation through different forms of negation, using such prefixes as *un-*, *in-*, and *dis-*, the suffix *-less*, and such sublime markers as *only*, *merely*, *all*, *without*.

These poems thus set the stage for Poe's later, cosmic drama of utterance, and he wants us to attend to the linguistic nature of his struggle. Like the Byron of *Childe Harold* IV, Poe writes "To One in Paradise" (1833) as a lament, which once sounded will turn loss into language. To cite Byron's challenge: "Reaping the whirlwind from the oft-sown winds; / The stubborn heart, its alchemy begun, / Seems ever near the prize,—wealthiest when most undone." Besides its close rep-

13. See especially that striking passage where Mallarmé dematerializes something as flushed with life as a rose in a scene of ever-intensifying vacancy: from "aroma" to "roses" to an "empty bed" hidden by "a snuffed candle," and finally leading to nothing but "an aroma of cold bones" (*Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry [Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1945] 42).

lication of the turn from florid love to bitter cure, from hope to dust, Poe's poem recasts both natural elements and those of feeling into punctuation, with a rare bow to the power of words. Using the Byronic dash and exclamation (along with other condensations of image-clusters in *Childe Harold IV*), Poe adds his own mark to another's vocalization—the parenthesis:

For, alas! alas! with me
 The light of Life is o'er!
 No more—no more—no more—
 (Such language holds the solemn sea
 To the sands upon the shore)
 Shall bloom the thunder-blasted tree,
 Or the stricken eagle soar!

(M I: 214-15)

The parenthesis, a figure for enclosure, contains Poe's amplification, and his added comment is significant, for he refers to the force of repetition, either his own or Byron's (or Shelley's whose "Lament" refrains, "No more—Oh, never more!"). But the parenthesis also signals a specific relation between words and things (an analogy between natural and verbal processes), figuring in conjunction with the dash the competition between compression and extension so much a part of *Eureka's* cosmology. Whereas the dash marks the space between and delimits the steps towards vision, the parenthesis embeds, compounds, and obstructs.¹⁴ Above all, in this poem Poe recognizes that a way of speaking can work changes, can realize things. In "To Zante" (1837) the mere repetition of "*No more!*" (italicized, as if Poe knew its power as cliché) gives the words reused the god-like, transformative power to seize, suspend and convert:

No more! alas, that magical sad sound
 Transforming all! thy charms shall please *no more*—
 Thy memory *no more!* Accursed ground
 Henceforth I hold, thy flower-enamelled shore
 O hyacinthine isle!

(M I: 311)

It is no wonder that the most precise of memorialists is also Poe's consummate poet: the mourner of "The Raven" will confess "I stood

14. For a fuller discussion of how Poe uses the dash to restructure prose in accord with Newton's dynamic of attraction and repulsion in the universe, see Joan Dayan, "The Analytic of the Dash" in *Fables of Mind* (55-79).

repeating," as the bird repeats "Nevermore," and we know that the bird listening and solitary listener are one. Whitman's "outsetting bard" in "Out of the Cradle" first gains a voice by translating his reminiscence of the song of the "Demon or bird!" and of the sea's fluent "Death, death, death, death" in a way that recalls Poe's doubling of hearer and heard, bent in mutual absorption:

. . . the word up from the waves,
 The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
 That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
 (Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in
 sweet garments, bending aside,)
 The sea whispered me.

II

At the end of *Eureka* Poe asks his reader to accept the "merely spiritual shadows," a realm where no objects intervene: "The *phaenomena* on which our conclusions must at this point depend, are merely spiritual shadows, but not the less thoroughly substantial" (H 16: 311). What is the nature of Poe's spirituality, or to speak more precisely, his non-materiality? Nowhere in *Eureka* does Poe resort to impressionism, to vagueness, for his cosmology combats what he sees as "obscurity" practiced by the "mystics for mysticism's sake." Instead, Poe attaches himself to the very objects he claims to annihilate. The non-materiality of Poe, like that of Mallarmé, and later Whitman, succeeds through an excessive attention to things, to the corporeality of words. The longing to kill the object "by allusive words, never direct" demands an attention to the sensible world, and by extension, an exaggerated attachment to form and structure.¹⁵

Before considering *Eureka's* incentive to a new American poetry, especially the experimental long poem, I now turn to Poe's later poems (1847 to his death in 1849). These poems, as well as *Eureka*, had a tremendous effect on Mallarmé and Valéry's ideal of pure poetry, a labored elimination of the burden of meaning. As Valéry put it: "Ainsi

15. As Yves Bonnefoy stresses in "The Poetics of Mallarmé": "Mallarmé is fundamentally attached to objects, as nature—nature as the eighteenth century understood it" (*Yale French Studies*, no. 54 (1977): 17). In 1926, T. S. Eliot contributed to "Hommage à Stéphane Mallarmé," in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, vol. 27. In this seldom cited, but crucial essay Eliot recognized that both Poe and Mallarmé, while being examples of "la passion de la spéculation métaphysique," never lost themselves in a world of dream and hallucination. They remained committed to the real world: "ils ne sautent pas brusquement dans un monde de rêve; c'est le monde réel qui est par eux agrandi et continué" (525).

analyse des conditions de la volupté poétique, définition par *exhaustion* de la *poésie absolue*,—Poe montrait une voie, il enseignait une doctrine très séduisante et très rigoureuse, dans laquelle une sorte de mathématique et une sorte de mystique s'unissaient" [Thus, analysis of the conditions of poetic pleasure, definition of *absolute poetry* by *elimination*—Poe was disclosing a way, teaching a very strict and alluring doctrine in which a kind of mathematics and a kind of mysticism became one].¹⁶

Freed from the irregularities and excesses of his earlier counterfeit dreamlands, Poe's later poems show how *Eureka's* procedures were to a large extent determined by the change in his poetic practice. *Eureka* plays upon the conversion of the manifold into one, a point that is not reached but elaborately defined:

With a perfectly legitimate reciprocity, we are permitted to look at Matter, as created *solely for the sake of this influence*—solely to serve the objects of this spiritual Ether. Through the aid—by the means—through the agency of Matter, and by dint of its heterogeneity—is this Ether manifested—is *Spirit individualized*. (H 16: 309)

This anticipation of final unity is itself a discourse on method, using the dash to show the gradual (and material) elimination of content. Poe's cosmology, in its demonstration of a turn toward (but not a collapse into) oneness would be a guide to Mallarmé who longed to turn "brut" into "essential" language.¹⁷

In paring down his poetry to essentials, Poe leaves us with something as precisely delimited as a Mallarmé sonnet. It is no wonder that Mallarmé, during that sterile winter of 1866 as he struggled to write "L'Ouverture ancienne d'Hérodiade," saw Poe as his "grand maître," the ideal against which he would measure his perfected dream of beauty: "Il me faudra trois ou quatre hivers encore, pour achever cette oeuvre, mais j'aurai enfin fait ce que je rêve, écrire un Poème digne de Poe . . ." [It will still take me three or four winters to complete this work, but finally, I will have accomplished what I dream: to write a Poem worthy of Poe].¹⁸

"Ulalume," "The Bells," "To Helen," "For Annie," and "Annabel Lee" were written at the time Poe composed "The Universe" and *Eureka*.

16. Paul Valéry, "Situation de Baudelaire," *Variété II* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1930) 142. This and all succeeding translations from French to English in the text are mine.

17. See Mallarmé, "Variations sur un sujet," *Oeuvres complètes*. In *Eureka* Poe opposes "vulgar" to his own "more philosophical phraseology" (H 16: 215).

18. Mallarmé, *Correspondance, 1862–1871*, ed. Henri Mondor (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1959) 207.

Their hard-won destruction of verbiage return us to the query that begins *Eureka*. "What terms shall I find sufficiently simple in their sublimity—sufficiently sublime in their simplicity—for the mere enunciation of my theme?" (H 16: 185). If words are mere, if they fail to define, Poe endorses inanity not by mockery but by promoting the plight of the re-useable: the repetition that undoes the power of the word. For Mallarmé as for Poe every time a word is spoken, it tends toward no-thing: "Je profère la parole pour la replonger dans l'inanité" [I utter the word in order to plunge it into the void].¹⁹ In "Ulalume" which Mallarmé claimed as his favorite, Poe dramatizes the temptation to fall into wordlessness. Nowhere else does his redundancy sustain itself with such rigor, and we begin to understand the terrible force of his graduated correction of the world of flesh and blood.

The tautologies of "Ulalume" keep language pending. The repetitions have a formal more than semantic significance, and through an alternating reduction and amplification of words as formulae, Poe recomposes his landscape of absence. The first stanza sets the scene that the rest of the poem will take up and vary.

The skies they were ashen and sober;
 The leaves they were crisped and sere—
 The leaves they were withering and sere:
 It was night, in the lonesome October
 Of my most immemorial year:
 It was hard by the dim lake of Auber,
 In the misty mid region of Weir:—
 It was down by the dank tarn of Auber
 In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

(M I: 415–16)

Poe sustains the cumulative qualifications: leaves change from "crisped and sere—" to "withering and sere," and we are told it "was night, in the lonesome October"; the locale is "by the dim lake of Auber" or "by the dank tarn of Auber" or "In the misty mid region of Weir" or "In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir."

19. Mallarmé, "Igitur," *Oeuvres complètes* 451. Poe's own exercise in repetition demonstrates further this deliberate impoverishment of words. In "The Philosophy of Composition" he explains that "the *refrain* . . . depends for its impression upon the force of monotone—both in sound and thought," and then he adds, stressing the debilitation he intends: "Had I been able, in the subsequent composition, to construct more vigorous stanzas, I should, without scruple, have purposely enfeebled them, so as not to interfere with the climacteric effect" (H 14: 199, 203).

Poe's emendations do not qualify, but compound sameness, and the enumerated details fail to specify. This dialogue with the indeterminate recalls Poe's life-long struggle with "that class of terms to which 'Infinity' belongs—the class representing thoughts of thought" (H 16: 203). Although the words first seem the remnants of romance, they matter less than the relations they form. It matters little that the speaker walks with his "soul" on days when, as he confesses, "my heart was volcanic," but when the "skies" that "were ashen and sober" are equated with "talk" that "had been serious and sober," Poe forges a reciprocity between his landscape and his language. He then returns to "leaves . . . crisped and sere— / . . . withering and sere," but with a difference. Once the sky is equated with talk, abstract ideas turn into concrete things: "but our thoughts they were palsied and sere— / Our memories were treacherous and sere." Substituting "palsied" for "crisped" and "treacherous" for "withering," Poe prepares for a journey into mind: "the thought of nature" so pronounced in his "Power of Words" and his landscape sketches, "The Domain of Arnheim" and "Landor's Cottage." We also recognize Poe's monomaniacal narrator who seeks to remember and to know the indescribable:

Well I know, now this dim lake of Auber—
 This misty mid region of Weir:—
 Well I know, now, this dank tarn of Auber—
 This ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

(M I: 418)

From not knowing (For we knew not / And we marked not / We noted not / We remembered not) the speaker now claims to know, but what he knows we never find out. Poe forces us to remain on the boundary of the *not*, a vacancy (and for the narrator, a resistance to sense) that he achieves through too much concentration, a too exacting anatomization of the haunting "unthought-like thought." The final revelation of the name "Ulalume" written on the tomb door leads only to more repetition and the barring of the quester from the secret "that lies in these wolds— / From the thing that lies hidden in these wolds."

Mallarmé's turn to Poe was prompted by this craft of spectralization, the cult of suggestion that repels the thing: "j'invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d'une poétique très nouvelle, qui je pourrais définir en ces deux mots: *Peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit*" [I invent a language that must inevitably spring from a very novel poetic that I would define in these two words: *To paint, not the thing, but the effect that it produces*].²⁰ In what is perhaps Poe's last work, "The Light-

20. Mallarmé, *Correspondance, 1862–1871* 137.

House," we progress from the obvious "upper-current" to the unsaid (or unspeakable)—to the "very profound under-current" (H 13: 148). This journal of "a man all alone" in a lighthouse (a variation of Usher's light-imbued tunnel painting), with the task "to manage the light"—a "duty," he claims as "a mere nothing" (M 3: 1390)—ends with a revelation where no objects (no words) intervene.

Like the chalky, white surface of the lighthouse floor, this diary of negations ("—but oh, no!—this is all nonsense / to 'see what I can see' To see what I can see indeed!—not very much / Nothing to be seen / A few sea-weeds came in sight; but besides them absolutely *nothing* all day—not even the slightest speck of cloud") terminates with a final string of ellipses. Although editors have claimed these marks denote an intent to fill in, thwarted by Poe's death, I suspect these points signal the deliberate reduction of words to the interstices, leading to a very determinate void. Like Mallarmé's "faux manoir" that crumbles in its attempt to impose limits on infinity, but has earned the right to declare, "l'infini est enfin *fixé*," Poe's text breaks down.²¹

No mere sea, though, could accomplish anything with this solid iron-riveted wall—which, at 50 feet from high-water mark, is four feet thick, if one inch The basis on which the structure rests seems to me to be chalk

Jan. 4.

Reducing the ellipses (from eight to six to one) to "a point," where, as Poe wrote in "Mesmeric Revelation," "the interspaces must vanish, and the mass absolutely coalesce" (M 3: 1024), the final entry, a date in some "vague infinity," demarcates the claims of the absolute.

Out of this full blank, Mallarmé (who once lamented his paper "implacably white") will found a cosmos. His universe of stars on the page, *Un Coup de Dés*, asserts essential language to be cosmic law, and recalls *Eureka* in its projected "l'explication orphique de la Terre, qui est le seul devoir du poète et le jeu littéraire par excellence" [the orphic explanation of the Earth, which is the poet's only duty and the literary game *par excellence*].²² In "DU FOND D'UN NAUFRAGE," Mallarmé resurrects Poe's alternations between presence and absence in the moves of black against white in the pages of *Un Coup de Dés*, ever in pursuit of "l'unique

21. Mallarmé, "Igitur," *Oeuvres complètes* 442.

22. Mallarmé, *Correspondance, 1871-1885*, eds. Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1965) 301.

Nombre qui ne peut pas être un autre” [the unique Number which cannot be another].²³

Mallarmé’s disarticulation of language, his dream—“simplifier le monde”—and his crisis of “élimination,” the reduction that would lead him to “la sensation des Ténèbres absolues” engenders Poe’s second coming as Mallarmé divined: “Tel qu’en Lui-même enfin l’éternité le change” [Such that eternity changes him into Himself], Mallarmé’s “Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe.”²⁴ As any reading of a Mallarmé alexandrine reveals, he calls for sublimity (the pure space of the blank page) not through vagueness but through extreme precision (the “unanime blanc confit” of “Une Dentelle s’abolit,” for example). And yet, as we look through Mallarmé back to Poe, it is striking that Mallarmé, in translating the poetry of his “master,” converts into prose the rigorously shaped and concentrated Poe poem. This could say something about the linguistic givens of Poe’s writing: words make their impact in sound and association, and the true indefiniteness might be housed in an apparently alien, ultra-determined form.

But it says even more about Mallarmé’s relationship to what he termed Baudelaire’s “interdit” against translating Poe. Mallarmé cites this warning in his notes to his own translations: “‘Une traduction de poésies aussi voulues, aussi concentrées, peut être un rêve caressant, mais ne peut être qu’un rêve’” [A translation of poetry so deliberate, so concentrated, may be a cherished dream, but it can only be a dream].²⁵ Taking Baudelaire at his word, then, Mallarmé extends and loosens the formidable verbal cameo Baudelaire noted with another implicit turn, back to Baudelaire’s preface to *Spleen de Paris* and his endorsement of a poetic prose, “musicale sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s’adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l’âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience” [musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple and brusque enough to adapt itself to the lyrical movements of the soul, to the undulations of dream, to the jolts of consciousness].²⁶

Poe projected this musicalization of mind in *Eureka*, “a fluctuating domain, now shrinking, now swelling, in accordance with the vacillating energies of the imagination” (H 16: 204). By opening up the line to the suggestive undercurrent dear to Poe, Mallarmé has generated a text that crosses poetry and prose, translating one into the other to endorse

23. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* 463.

24. *Oeuvres complètes* 189.

25. *Oeuvres complètes* 228–29.

26. Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975) 275–76.

the convertibility celebrated in *Eureka*: he allows the cosmology to double back on the poetry, swelling what was compressed. When Mallarmé renders “Ulalume” into a rhythmic prose broken up by the Poe dash, he follows what Poe thought poetry to be, as he put it in his one clear definition: “I would define the poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*” (H 14: 275). Mallarmé breathes the spirit of *Eureka* back into the established Poe poem, forcing his French reader to perform the conversions to and fro between matter and “matter no more.”

Eureka’s science of forms and relations, of gravity’s pulls and collapsings, prophesies Mallarmé’s sudden insight into “la corrélation intime de la Poésie avec l’Univers.” And when we read his demand for an orphic explanation of the earth, we should recall that this tracker of the absolute learned of limits, measure, and the scansion of thought from Poe’s “philosopher proper,” the cosmographer/poet whose “frenzy takes a very determinate turn” (H 16: 293).

III

When we turn to *Eureka* in its American context we face what is perhaps Poe’s greatest failure, but for the future of a certain kind of modern poetry, his most significant work. His emphasis on method, the crossing of prose and poetry and his turn to science, reveal him as the unacknowledged legislator of what Whitman celebrated as “the gangs of kosmos and prophets en mass.”²⁷ Poe’s combination of science and lyric, his mimicry of cosmic consolidation and fragmentation through a language alternately condensed and digressive, set the stage for subsequent efforts to turn the traditional epic into the fundamentally anti-generic long poem.

Whitman’s poetic experiments begin at a critical juncture: in between frenzy and control, measure and the oceanic, matter and spirit. Although the contrasts with Mallarmé are obvious (the impersonal vs. personal poet, elite vs. democratic voice, *poésie pure* vs. an unpolished, prolific extravagance), I am concerned with the attempts of both poets to translate *things into thoughts*. In *Eureka* Poe sets up a method of what I have called “convertibility,” where matter and spirit operate together to articulate the unsayable.²⁸

27. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1976)
22. Further quotations are from this edition.

28. In Poe’s tale of the universe, “convertibility” of terms and phrases, fact and fancy, matter and spirit, enacts God’s plot of perfect reciprocity in a human text. In *Fables of Mind* I argue that convertibility as a stylistic device is the key to Poe’s thought and to his experiments in fiction.

Eureka sets out with Poe leaving no doubt as to the nature of his new language: "there is . . . *no such thing* as demonstration—but the ruling idea which, throughout this volume, I shall be continually endeavoring to suggest" (H 16: 185). We might think then of Mallarmé's "Suggérer, voilà le rêve," but know that it will be Whitman who, in his belief in the possibility of a "grand American expression," enacts most powerfully a program for "indirection." And nowhere do we get such a sense of the transits between the rough Walt of the object-filled catalogs and the fathomless "real me" as in the remarkable "Preface" to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and the untitled "song" that follows it (later to be titled "Song of Myself"). When the two compositions are read together, we see how Whitman tries to confute and combine the expectations of prose and poetry: the ellipses of his "Preface" carry over into the poem, acting much in the way as Poe's dash to structure (and unstructure) the writing, to control our reading, and finally, to give a breath, a rhythm to what he calls the "perfect poem" (14).

What, then, is the nature of Whitman's "language experiment"? Like Mallarmé, who founded his poetic on a use of words that would repel the thing (while ever fettered to it), Whitman will invent a language in order to prove what he had promised: "the words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything." In his "Preface" he admits: "My words are words of a questioning, and to indicate reality." But Whitman never allows the claim for obliqueness (the poem works by "curious removes, indirections") to annihilate the definite, his amatory sensible world. As "the channel of thoughts and things," Whitman's poet takes his stand in between apparent oppositions: "The indirect is always as great and real as the direct. The spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body" (19). As with Poe's call for a language of "Common Sense," what he calls "*ordinary* language" (H 11: 253) or a "*natural*" depiction of *things*, Whitman's bid for "the dialect of common sense" is only part of his project, a means toward, or rather a necessary complement to the unsaid: "It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible" (23).

A few examples from the 1855 "song" demonstrate Whitman's language of conveyance, how his poet fulfills his obligation to the American people: "to indicate the path between reality and their souls" (10):

Lacks one lacks both . . . and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn. (27)

The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place. (41)

I am the poet of the body,
And I am the poet of the soul. (44)

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
 And I have said that the body is not more than the soul. (82)

Equating opposing "facts," Whitman keeps words pending, and in the process, words as bearers of determinate meaning are neutralized. And it is this "effect" of *indifference* that brings about Whitman's immaterialism, a turn toward the inexpressible by expressing *everything*. So, he declares in "Starting from Paumanok": "I will make the poem of materials, for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems" (18).

Finally, Whitman's poet whose "thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things" (9), his demand for love "between the poet and the man of demonstrable science" (14), recalls Poe's "Double Dupin": the "creative and resolute," the mathematician and poet. When Whitman turns against a language of "romance," he, like both Poe and Mallarmé, chooses to promote "the concrete realities and theories of the universe furnish'd by science."²⁹ He tells his "poets of the cosmos" to return to "first principles," to "be under the general law," to follow Newton in his quest for the "truth" in "simplicity." "Nothing is better than simplicity" (12). We know, however, that Whitman's "simplicity," like his "definiteness" calls equally for the opposite. That is how his language works, and his stress upon construction, upon "exact science and its practical movements," though perhaps a ruse, is his necessary trope of poetic making: it will give us Whitman's "tally," the accounting that makes the terms of physical science his initiative for a new form, an urgent but carefully gauged poetic attitude.

IV

Though there are few open recognitions of Poe's radical technical innovations and their influence on twentieth-century American poetry, we can attend to surprising hints and resonances. Poe's work remains present in the writings of those poets, who while not acknowledging his influence, yet write poems that tempt us to remember Eliot's qualification: "And yet one cannot be sure that one's own writing has *not* been influenced by Poe." In Poe we read of "chemical combination," the "chemistry of the intellect," to be revised in Eliot's analogy of the poet's mind and the "shred of platinum," Williams' energizing "imagination" that "uses the phraseology of science," and Charles Olson's belief that the poet should "cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature."³⁰ And in words that foreshadow Eliot's

29. Whitman, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," *Leaves of Grass*, eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1973) 567.

30. Williams, *Spring and All* 149; Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966) 25.

call for “depersonalization” in which “art may be said to approach the condition of science,”³¹ Poe notes that “a poem . . . will be poetic in the exact ratio of its dispassion. A passionate poem is a contradiction in terms” (H 11: 277). For Poe, if “the mind of the poet [had] been really ‘crowded with strange thoughts,’ and not merely *engaged in an endeavor to think*, he would have entered at once upon the thoughts themselves, without allusion to the state of his brain. His subject would have left no room for self” (H 11: 20).

Eliot, ignoring Poe’s injunction to read *Eureka* as poem, remarks on Poe’s “remarkable passage about the impossibility of writing a long poem” and concludes “what we have to bear in mind is that he himself was incapable of writing a long poem.”³² However, what Poe claimed as impossible in “The Poetic Principle” and “The Philosophy of Composition” did not prevent him from leaving for posterity a text that works through impossibility to demonstrate how to extend the limits of poetry. And, of course, when reading Poe’s theoretical critique of the long poem, we must be aware that *Eureka* is a deliberate attempt to do what he said could not—or should not—be done.

Poe’s argument for a poetic prose (the precision of the prose line combined with an “ideal” of poetry) looks forward to Pound’s appreciation of the “Prose Tradition in Verse.” In 1840, reviewing Moore’s “Alciphron,” Poe wrote: “the poem is distinguished throughout by a very happy facility which has never been mentioned in connection with its author, but which has much to do with the reputation he has obtained. We allude to the facility with which he recounts a poetical story in a *prosaic way*” (H 10: 68). And for Pound, Ford Madox Ford is “significant and revolutionary because of his insistence upon clarity and precision, upon the prose tradition; in brief, upon efficient writing—even in verse.”³³

Auden would recognize *Eureka* as a poem and praise “this cosmology, ‘the story of how things came to exist as they do,’” as achieving “in English in the nineteenth century what Hesiod and Lucretius had done in Greek and Latin centuries before.” Yet, he recognizes it as an anomaly: as a long poem it “violates every article in his critical creed.”³⁴ Recall

31. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950) 7.

32. Eliot, “From Poe to Valéry (*Hudson Review*, Autumn 1949), reprinted in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric Carlson (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1970) 211.

33. Ezra Pound, “The Prose Tradition in Verse,” *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 377.

34. W. H. Auden, “Introduction” (*Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry*, 1950), reprinted in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe* 255.

Poe's preface to *Eureka* and its surprising conclusion: "Nevertheless, it is as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead." A flat contradiction to his oft-pronounced, "A 'long poem' is simply a flat contradiction in terms," Poe yet defines this paradoxical genre in words that describe exactly what happens in *Eureka*, words that will be taken up both by Whitman and Eliot when reflecting on their use of the long public form. Poe explains, "What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects." This idea of a string or sequence of poetic moments recurs throughout his essays. Although on one level (the most obvious), Poe endorses a lyric elevation of soul ("The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement"; "all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief"), Poe also condemns "a poem too brief," which "may produce a sharp or vivid, but never a profound or enduring impression" (H 13: 152). Significantly, his complaint against Milton's *Paradise Lost* sets the stage for his own cosmology. We can regard Milton's epic, he explains, as "poetical, only when, losing sight of that vital requisite in all works of Art, Unity, we view it merely as a series of minor poems." Even if we try to preserve its unity by reading it in a single sitting, Poe claims, "the result is but a constant alternation of excitement and depression," or, in other words, a move from poetry (excitement/elevation) to prose (depression/dullness) (H 14: 267). For "at least one half of 'Paradise Lost' is essentially prose—a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, *inevitably*, with corresponding depressions" (H 14: 196).

In *Eureka* Poe redefines what he originally meant by unity of effect. If Yeats writes his *Vision* to find metaphors for poetry, Poe writes *Eureka* to pursue those combinations, "from either *Beauty or Deformity*," that can make a poem out of "the most combinable things hitherto uncombined—the compound as a general rule" (H 12: 38). In the overlay of two apparently contradictory modes, the ordinary details of prose set off by heightened poetic moments, lies the potential for a novel synthesis. If Poe damns Milton for his poem *Paradise Lost*, he praises him for his prose, but in a way that collapses any distinction between the two modes. Reviewing *The Prose Works of John Milton*, Poe says that Milton pushes "his more directly controversial works" toward "a species of lyrical rhapsody—divinely energetic." The poet of *Paradise Lost* in his *Areopagitica* forged a something "constituting for itself a department of composition which is neither prose nor poetry, but something with all the best qualities of each, and upon the whole superior to either" (H 12: 245).

Just as Eliot's references to Poe reveal a curious blind spot to *Eureka* as precursor to the modern epic, Whitman also neglects Poe's analytic side, his language of science, and the demands such a language makes

on poetic production. In *Specimen Days* Whitman recalls the poet as a sick genius incarnating the nineteenth-century “tendency of poetic culture to morbidity, abnormal beauty.” While taking Poe’s concrete phenomenalism to its extreme as a “Kosmos, Walt Whitman, of Mannahatta the son,” it is curious that Whitman never refers to *Eureka*.³⁵

At the end of his life, Whitman turned again to Poe. In 1889, three years before his death, Whitman made a powerful confession that comments on *Leaves of Grass* and recalls *Eureka* by way of Poe’s criticism of the long poem. Like Eliot, Whitman concentrates on the lyric poet of a single effect. *Eureka* goes unmentioned, but Poe’s polemic against the long poem continues to haunt Whitman. And in “A Backward Glance O’er Traveled Roads,” we read:

Toward the last I had among much else look’d over Edgar Poe’s poems—of which I was not an admirer, tho’ I always saw that beyond their limited range of melody (like perpetual chimes of music bells, ringing from lower *b* flat up to *g*) they were melodious expressions, and perhaps never excelled ones, of certain pronounc’d phases of human morbidity. (The Poetic arena is very spacious—has room for all—has so many mansions!) But I was repaid in Poe’s prose by the idea that (at any rate for our occasions, our day) there can be no such thing as a long poem. The same thought had been haunting my mind before, but Poe’s argument, though short, work’d the sum out and proved it to me.³⁶

Whitman here recalls Poe’s pronouncement in “The Poetic Principle”: “But the day of these artistic anomalies is over. If, at any time, any very long poem *were* popular in reality, which I doubt, it is clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again” (H 14: 267).³⁷ Using Poe’s definition and negations of the genre to question his *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman renews the problem of the long poem for his time. And in absorbing the Poe he attempted to deny, Whitman will end up violating

35. Gay Wilson Allen notes that Whitman would have heard several astronomers who lectured in New York in the 1840s. Ormsby MacKnight Mitchell lectured in the Broadway Tabernacle in December 1848, and *A Course of Six Lectures in Astronomy* was published the following year. Even if Whitman had not attended Poe’s lecture, “The Universe,” in 1848, he must have heard of it, since although it was poorly attended, it was well publicized.

36. Whitman, *Leaves*, eds. Bradley and Blodgett 569.

37. Eliot, as if responding to Poe’s relegation of the long poem to the past, writes that he does not “believe that the ‘long poem’ is a thing of the past; but at least there must be more in it for the length than our grandparents seemed to demand.” He also argues for “an interaction between prose and verse” as “a condition of vitality in literature.” See *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933) 152.

his own long poem, converting it into the compressed and polished lyrics of "Goodbye, My Fancy." These poems end, delimit, and undo his earlier composite text, his "seething mass of materials."

Poe's crossbreed, his quest into the parameters of science and poetry, provokes those subsequent sequences founded on the fact of combination. The consistency of "interleaving," whether in a mix of ill-digested remnants (Poe's early poems) or the bold blurring of a poetic idea through prose (*Eureka* and certain tales), opens up the poetic line to generate a new, expansive space of proximate levels, jagged, oblique, and rough. The amorphous, galvanic medium that Poe makes of his prose urges us to rethink the long poem in mechanical terms. What Poe calls "the Cloud-Land of Metaphysics" emerges the locale for poetic language, for Olson's "things on a field," for Williams' "field of action," and finally, for what Valéry called "le spectacle idéal de la création du langage."³⁸

Poe shows how "truth" can be seized by a language that mimes the two tendencies of matter, "attraction and repulsion," convergence and dispersal. And it is no exaggeration to claim that Poe's strategies of reduction and expansion give us a method for discussing the modern poetic sequence: Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, as well as Pound's *Cantos*, Williams' *Paterson*, and Olson's *Maximus*.³⁹ The dual insistence on laconic compression and visionary sweep produces that taut unevenness of a journey through Paterson or Dogtown.⁴⁰ Perhaps Poe's preface to *Eureka* initiated the dialogue between those poems that refuse closure, that court their own incompleteness, the open road leading from Whitman to his sons, those "Recorders ages hence." These later poetic scenes return us to *Eureka* in its extraordinary blend of romanticism, science, philosophizing, exhortation, and reverie.

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38. Valéry, "Le Coup de Dés," *Variété* II 171.

39. The modern sequence poem, a long poem without a sustaining narrative framework, is treated at length in M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1983). See also the fine essay by Joseph N. Riddel, "A Somewhat Polemical Introduction: The Elliptical Poem," *Genre* 11 (Winter 1978): 459-77.

40. I refer both to Williams' *Paterson* and Olson's landscape for the wanderings of "I, Maximus" in his *Maximus Poems*. Dogtown is the lonely highland of Cape Ann, Gloucester, now uninhabited. "This being the last place created," goes an old saying, "all the rocks not needed in the rest of the earth were dumped here." Olson like Poe envisioned a poetry that would follow a cosmological imperative: "I happen, as a poet to be interested in what is the old word, I think, for creation as a structure—which is the word cosmology," *Poetry and Truth: The Beloit Lectures and Poems* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1971) 13.