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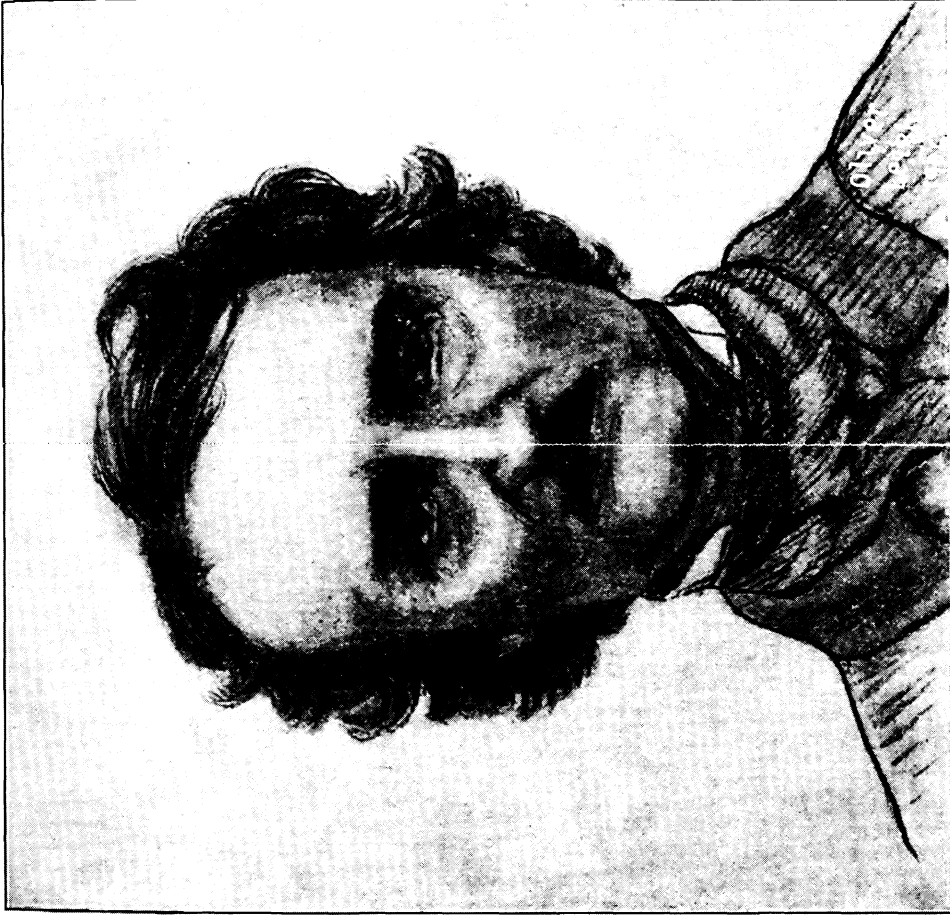
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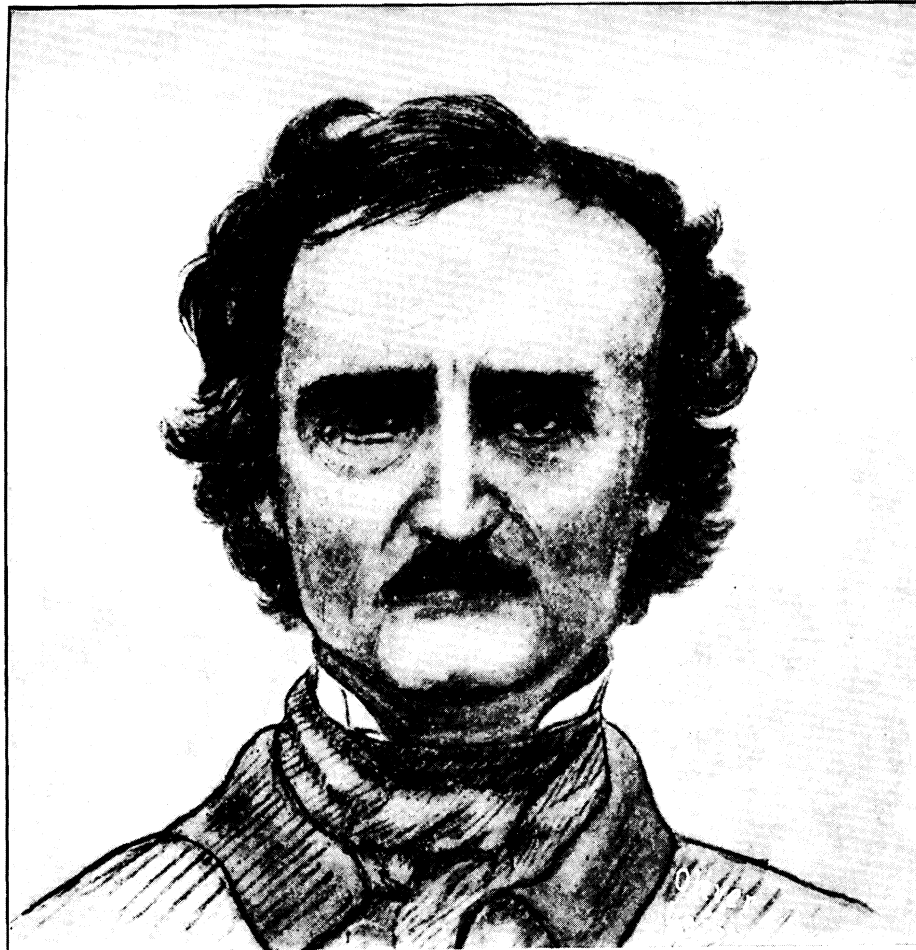


Figure 6. Oliver Leigh's "sober and sane" Poe.
From Oliver Leigh, *Edgar Allan Poe, the Man, the Master, the Martyr*
(Chicago, 1906). (See page 4)

Figure 7. Oliver Leigh's "swelled-head" Poe.
From Oliver Leigh, *Edgar Allan Poe, the Man, the Master, the Martyr*
(Chicago, 1906). (See page 4)

A Question of “Character”: Visual Images and the Nineteenth-Century Construction of Edgar Allan Poe¹

William A. Pannacker

I. “ULTIMA THULE”

On 9 November 1848, not long before his death, Edgar Allan Poe found himself seated uncomfortably in a heavy armchair, the back of his head braced by an iron ring, his hands clenching the arms of the chair so as to avoid the slightest movement. Overhead, a huge glass plate tilted below an open skylight, bathing him in an eerie blue light. It was the “operating room” of Samuel Masury and S. W. Hartshorn, daguerreotypists in Providence, Rhode Island; around their gallery hung silvery images of generals, politicians, and other notables. Aware of the mysterious aura of his craft, the daguerreotypist manipulated his instrument, while Poe, possibly hungover from recent drinking and tremulous from a nearly suicidal dose of laudanum taken four days earlier, struggled to remain absolutely still. The tension and pain of this moment showed clearly on his face; Poe’s fiancée, the poet Sarah Helen Whitman, would later call the image that resulted the “Ultima Thule” (figure 1).

In an 1874 letter to Poe biographer John Henry Ingram, Whitman claims she gave it that name because it suggested a passage in Poe’s “Dream-Land”:

I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule—
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
Out of Space—out of Time.²

Although “Dream-Land” describes a fearful journey from the netherworld, it is actually a hopeful narrative of emergence from mental trauma. The narrator, having safely “wandered home,” may use his ordeal as a source of romantic inspiration. Whitman’s use of “Dream-Land” as the referent for the “Ultima Thule”

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¹ This essay is a revised version of a lecture delivered on 19 July 1996, at the fourth annual conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing in Worcester, Massachusetts. For assistance on this project, I would like to thank Lawrence Buell, Kenneth Carpenter, Daniel Kim, Meredith McGill, and Shirley Wajda.

² John Carl Miller, ed., *Poe’s Helen Remembers* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 22; Thomas Ollive Mabbott, ed., *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969–1978), 1:344. Also quoted in Sarah Helen Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics* (1860; reprint, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1949), 81.

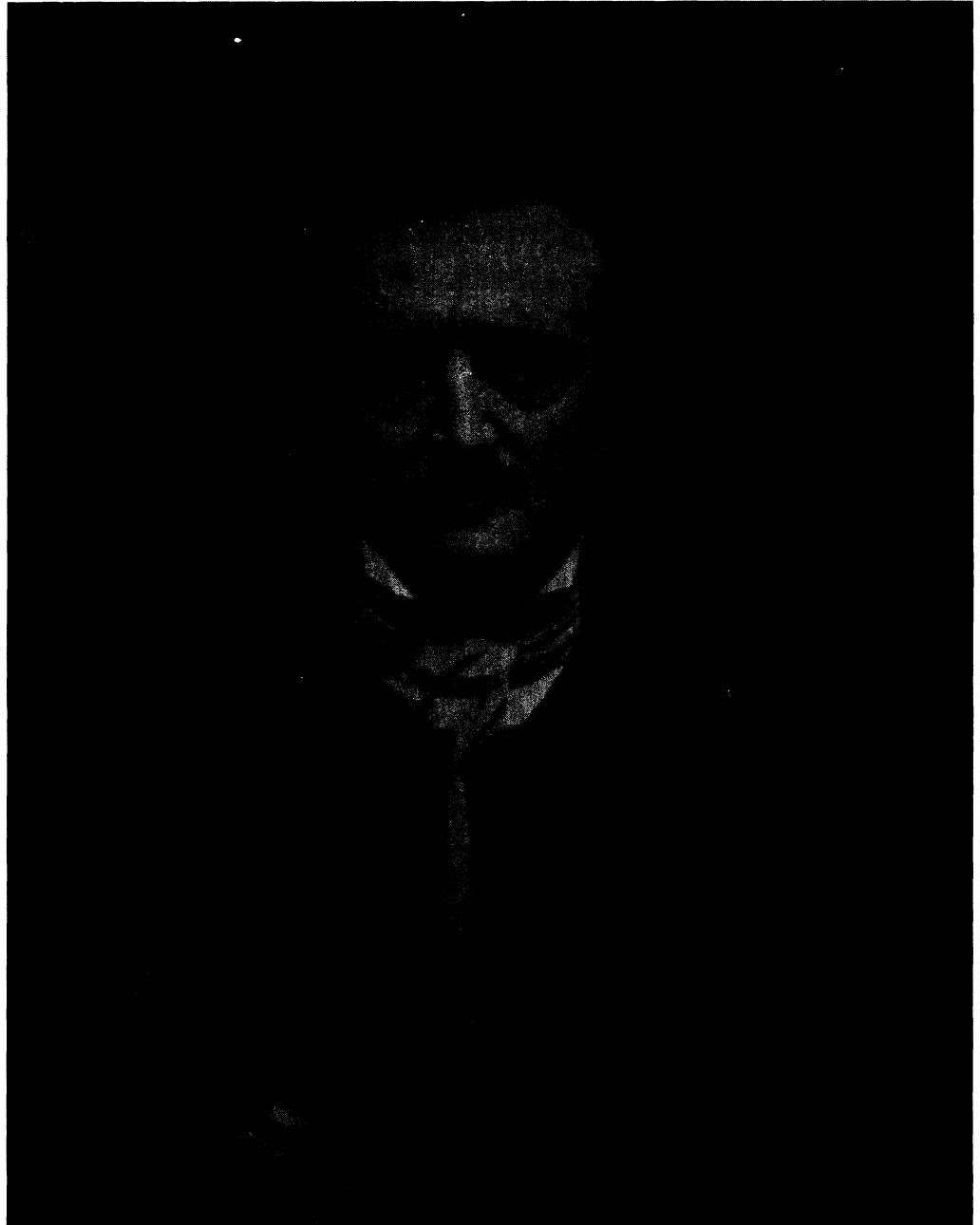


Figure 1. The “Ultima Thule” daguerreotype of Edgar Allan Poe (1848). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

daguerreotype, however, seems to highlight the tension between Whitman’s private experience of Poe’s psychological problems and her public romanticization of him as an idealistic dreamer after his death in 1849. The phrase “Ultima Thule” does not exactly occur in Poe’s poem “Dreamland” so much as in Poe’s short story, “The Pit and the Pendulum”:

I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me by monkish ingenuity in torture . . . *the pit*, whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself—*the pit*, typical of hell, and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments.³

Whitman’s presentation of Poe’s activities on the day the “Ultima Thule” daguerreotype was made seems to complete the parallel, for Poe arrived at

³ *Collected Works*, 2:690.

Whitman's house "in a state of wild & delirious excitement, calling upon me to save him from some terrible impending doom." Whitman continues, evoking the "loud, long, and final scream of despair" of "The Pit": "The tones of his voice were appalling & rang through the house. Never have I heard anything so awful, even to sublimity."⁴

As Hervey Allen observes, the "Ultima Thule" daguerreotype of Poe was taken "probably at the very hour when he looked the worst that he ever looked in his life," but of all the images of Poe, Allen continues, it "has become the best known to the world."⁵ The "Ultima Thule" was exhibited, copied, sold, and circulated almost immediately after it was made. For at least a decade the "Ultima Thule" hung in a prominent place in the gallery of Masury and Hartshorne and their successor firm, the Manchester Brothers, where some visitors bought expensive reproductions of it. Numerous copies of the "Ultima Thule" were already in circulation when the original disappeared from the Manchester Brothers' gallery around 1860. Another Providence firm, Coleman and Remington, was selling relatively cheap *carte-de-visite* prints of the "Ultima Thule" from a retouched photographic negative by this time.⁶ Matthew Brady also sold modified copies of the "Ultima Thule" from the early 1860s, although he claimed, significantly, to have taken the original. Copies were displayed in Brady's galleries in New York and Washington from the 1860s until the early 1880s, where still more *carte-de-visites*, and larger versions of the image were sold.⁷ In the nineteenth century alone, the "Ultima Thule" would become the basis not only for numerous photographic reproductions (Manchester, Coleman and Remington, Brady), but also for lithographs (Alexis Perrassin, figure 2), engravings (Timothy Cole, figure 3), woodcuts (Félix Vallotton, figure 4) and paintings (William E. Winner, and E. C. Lewis, and F. T. L. Boyle, figure 5).⁸ By the early 1880s versions of the "Ultima Thule" had been published frequently in books and periodicals, sometimes as the frontispiece for collections of Poe's works, along with several articles and a prominent biography.⁹ Although the "Ultima Thule" was not the only image of Poe in circulation, it seemed to replicate more closely than any other image the competing readings of Poe's "character": on one side, Griswold's prosaic view of Poe as a literary hatchet man and rhymester ruined by moral weakness, on the other, Whitman's poetic view of Poe as a romantic dreamer doomed by personal misfortune.¹⁰

Many nineteenth-century biographers of Poe, including Whitman, saw their task as analyzing Poe's "character" rather than the value of his literary works. They regularly used Poe's visual record in tandem with his writings. The apparently concealed ambivalence of Whitman's reading of the "Ultima Thule" daguerreotype

⁴ *Collected Works* 2:697; Miller, *Poe's Helen*, 348.

⁵ Hervey Allen, *Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2 vols. (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 2:782. Also see Michael Deas, *The Portraits and Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 6, 36; and Amanda Pogue Schulte and James Southall Wilson, *Facts About Poe: Portraits & Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe*, University of Virginia Records Extension Series (Charlottesville, 1926), 56-57.

⁶ Miller, *Poe's Helen*, 319-321; Deas, *Portraits* 40-41.

⁷ Deas, *Portraits*, 87-90.

⁸ Deas, *Portraits*, 40-41, 135, 138.

⁹ Among the versions of the "Ultima Thule" published

in the nineteenth century are the following: *Scribner's Monthly* 20 (May 1880); E. C. Stedman, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1881); *Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Hurst, 1882); *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 78 (March 1889); Edmund Clarence Stedman and George Woodberry, ed., *Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 6 (Chicago, 1894-95).

¹⁰ Rufus Griswold ["Ludwig"], "Death of Edgar Allan Poe," *New York Tribune* (9 October 1849), 2; reprinted in I. M. Walker, ed. *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 294-302; Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics* (1860).



Figure 2. Lithograph by Alexis Perassin (ca. 1860). Brown University Library.

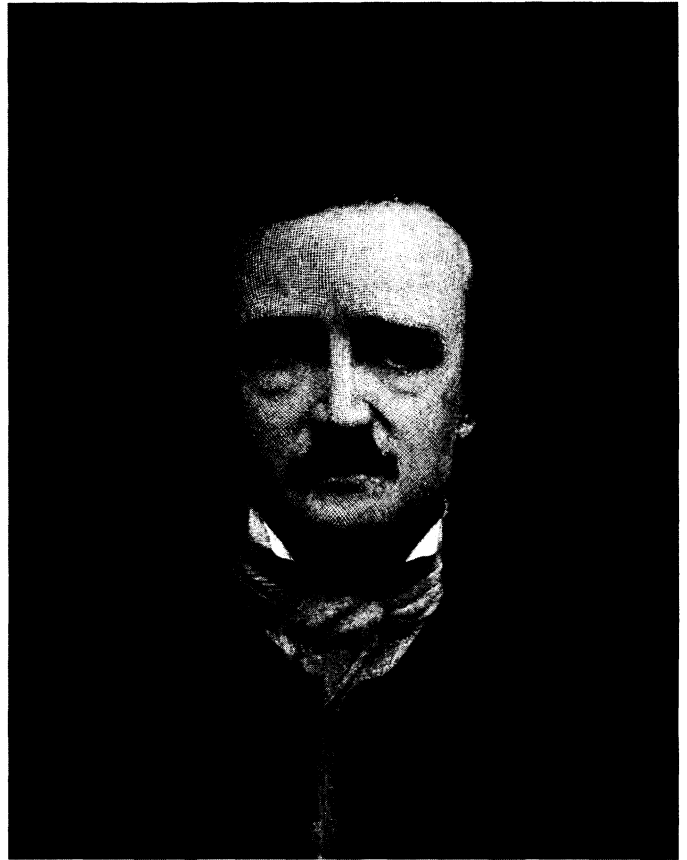


Figure 3. Wood engraving by Timothy Cole (1880). Frontispiece to Scribner's *Monthly*, vol. 20 (May 1880 to Oct. 1880).

Figure 6. Oliver Leigh's "sober and sane" Poe. From Oliver Leigh, *Edgar Allan Poe, the Man, the Master, the Martyr* (Chicago, 1906). (See frontispiece)

Figure 7. Oliver Leigh's "swelled-head" Poe. From Oliver Leigh, *Edgar Allan Poe, the Man, the Master, the Martyr* (Chicago, 1906). (See frontispiece)

In order to view the alternative portraits, carefully tear the first leaf of the frontispiece along the perforation in order to reveal the bisected mirror images.

is typical of Poe's biographers, who found, as one writes, a "strange diversity of character displayed in the portraits of Edgar A. Poe."¹¹ Another biographer, Edmund Clarence Stedman, relying on Poe's visual record as well as his writings, concluded, "Two natures in him strove / Like day with night, his sunshine and his gloom."¹² By the turn of the century Poe had become so Janus-faced that Oliver Leigh could create a transposable version of the "Ultima Thule" portrait unifying opposite sides of the image in order to test the "theory of Poe's contradictory temperament."¹³ Leigh presented two leaves, the first of which was bisected vertically through the center of Poe's face. Beneath the bisected leaf was a reversed image of the same portrait. When one lifted either half of the bisected first leaf, one was presented with an alternative image of Poe. In the "sober and sane" head (figure 6), Leigh saw, "The square headed *constructor* of stories and poems, the architect, builder and adorer with art." In the "swelled-head unity" (figure 7), Leigh saw the "top-heavy brain that bred and fed on eerie fancies, strange monstrosities, grotesques and arabesques, of the unbalanced mind that 'laughs but smiles no more.'" Leigh concluded that, like the doomed "House of Usher," the "brain of Poe the Critic and Poe the Poet was a lordly house divided against itself."¹⁴

It is often assumed that portraits of an author are subordinate or even incidental to the text of a biography or an edition of an author's works. As this paper

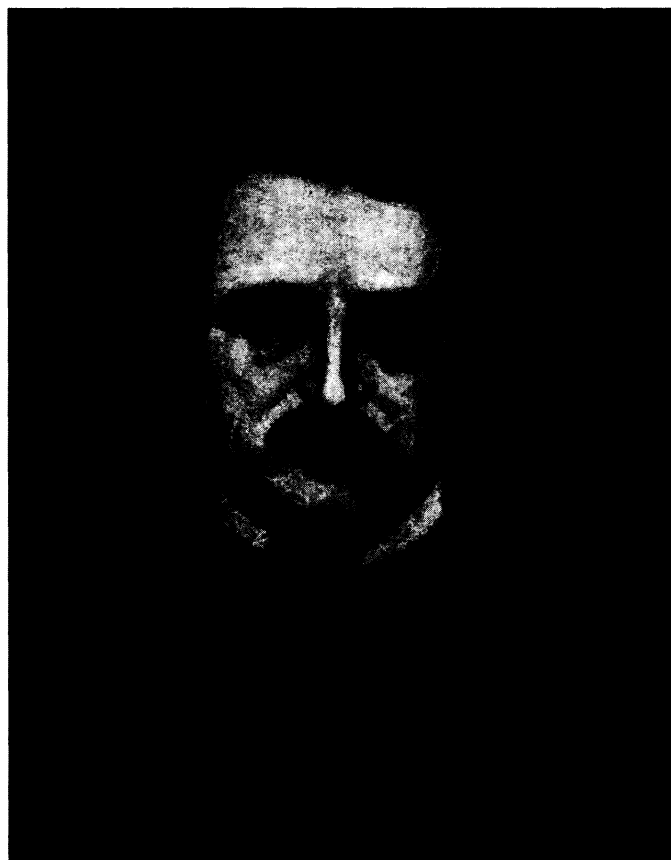
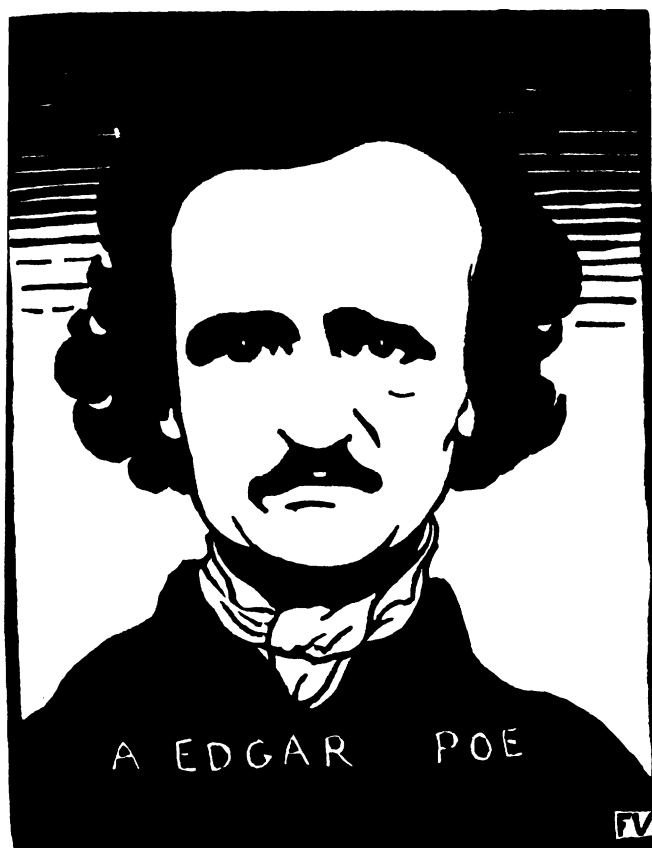
¹¹ Eugene L. Didier, *The Poe Cult and Other Poe Papers* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1909), 202.

¹² Edmund Clarence Stedman, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1881), 14.

¹³ Oliver Leigh ["Geoffrey Quarles"], *Edgar Allan Poe: The*

Man: The Master: The Martyr (Chicago: Frank M. Morris, 1906), 11.

¹⁴ *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man*, 11-12; Leigh seems to have been unique in his view of Poe's face as an allegory of the impending national crisis.



will show, however, the reciprocal relationship between image and text guided the construction of “Edgar Allan Poe.” By the end of the nineteenth century, photographs became the standard of objective evidence in fields like criminology and literary biography, both of which were concerned with the accurate identification of “character.” Nevertheless, the widespread analysis of Poe’s visual record did not stabilize his character; quite the contrary. Images like the “Ultima Thule” were used to construct alternative readings of Poe’s life and works. Moreover, such interpretations were complicated not only by the relationship between image and text, but also by the competing and overlapping discourses of poetry and prose, fiction and autobiography, and the complex intersection of meanings in the word “character” itself.

II. MEMENTO MORI

Like much of his fiction, there is something morbid about the daguerreotypes of Edgar Allen Poe. The photographic portrait is a “ghost we hold imprisoned,” writes Oliver Wendell Holmes, “a latent soul, which will presently appear before its judge.”¹⁵ Walt Whitman describes photography as “a new world—a peopled world, though mute as the grave.”¹⁶ “All photographs are *memento mori*,” explains Susan Sontag, “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability.”¹⁷ Possession of a old photographic

Figure 4. Woodcut by Félix Vallotton (1894). From *The Critic*, vol. 42 (April 1903), p. 333.

Figure 5. The painting attributed to Ferdinand T. L. Boyle, reproduced with permission of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, from Burton Rascoe, *Titans of Literature* (New York and London, 1932).

¹⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Doings of the Sunbeam,” *Atlantic Monthly* 12 (1863): 5.

¹⁶ Walt Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black (New York: Putnam, 1920),

2:116.

¹⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 15.

portrait gives one a feeling of a temporal collapse, of direct contact with the physical reality of an individual who no longer exists. This is particularly the case when the photograph is an original, when it registers the light directly reflected from the face of the subject. As such, it has the quality of a relic, and the use of original daguerreotypes seems to support interpretive claims not based upon personal contact, as in the case of the late nineteenth-century biographers of Poe. As Walter Benjamin observes, photographic portraiture offered “a last refuge for the cult value of the picture.”¹⁸ Like sacred relics, photographic traces of Poe’s material reality seem to confer authority on their possessors and to reinforce the faith of what Eugene Didier has rightly called, “The Poe Cult.”¹⁹

According to Poe, “the Daguerreotype plate is *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands.”²⁰ As such, photography came to reinforce the genre of biography, which depends upon claims of objectivity and authenticity—there must be a “real” subject, and the biographer must have the most direct contact possible. Late-nineteenth-century biographers like John Henry Ingram, William F. Gill, Edmund Clarence Stedman, and George Woodberry went to great pains to collect authenticated Poe portraiture after the death of nearly all of Poe’s intimate contemporaries. By the 1870s and 80s, during the rise of literary realism and scientific empiricism, a race was on to acquire “original” Poe daguerreotypes, which would provide direct access to the “real” Poe. An “original” image made by the unbiased eye of a scientific instrument would supposedly reveal more factual information about the subject than any idealized engraving. Ingram feverishly hunted down every daguerreotype of Poe available, but he was often unable to acquire originals; “copies,” he complained, “are everywhere.”²¹ Stedman too had been collecting steadily since the 1870s, and by 1895 his edition of the *Works of Edgar Allan Poe* in ten volumes triumphantly announced that it included photographic copies of the originals of all but two of Poe’s portraits.²² Didier summarizes these competitive efforts in 1909: “Nine lives of Poe have been published, each of which contains a portrait, more or less different, but all claiming to be the ‘best’ likeness.”²³ In his *Life of Edgar Allan Poe* (1878), for example, Gill claims his frontispiece, “taken from life,” “represents the poet in his later years, and by several of his most intimate friends is pronounced the best portrait extant.”²⁴ Like Brady’s claim to owning the original “Ultima Thule,” Gill’s claim is significant. The possession an original daguerreotype (as opposed to an infinitely reproducible photographic negative) is an appropriation of the subject in a moment in time; it gives the owner an interpretive authority exceeded only by those who actually “knew” the subject when he or she was alive.

Poe’s long-surviving fiancée and defender, Sarah Helen Whitman (1803–1878), claimed an interpretive privilege on the authentication of Poe’s visual records

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 226.

¹⁹ Didier, *Poe Cult*, 75–86.

²⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Daguerreotype,” *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, CT: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 38; also see Frederick Garber, “Assisting the Light,” *Prism(s): Essays in Romanticism*, 1 (1993): 1–29.

²¹ Miller, *Poe’s Helen*, 455.

²² Edmund Clarence Stedman, “On the Portraits in this Edition,” *Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman and George Woodberry (1894–95; rpt., Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 10:269

²³ Didier, *Poe Cult*, 199–200.

²⁴ William F. Gill, *The Life of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1878), vi.

based on her own “intimate” contact with Poe, an experience that no other biographer could claim after the late 1870s. Only those who actually “knew” Poe, she asserts, could comment objectively on the authenticity and meaning of his images. She criticizes the engraving of Poe in Redfield’s *Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, for example, as “clerkly and clerical” and “very unlike the original.”²⁵ She declares the painting of Poe by Samuel Osgood “valueless as a portrait to those who remember the unmatched glory of his face.”²⁶ And she pronounces the engraving in John Gill’s anthology, *Laurel Leaves*, “hideous. There is no other word that can describe it,” she continues, “The expression is weak, nerveless, inane—altogether *unlike* him & *unworthy* of him.” With the possible exception of the “Whitman” daguerreotype, which seems to have been an engagement present from Poe to Whitman, nearly every other image of Poe, even the one used by Gill, is an inaccurate reflection: “What malign spirit inspired him [Gill] in making this *memento mori*, it is difficult to conceive.”²⁷ Conscious of the subjectivity of visual analysis, Whitman writes of one portrait, “it is no true lens through which to peer into the wondrous, far-down depths of the mind-and-soul of him.”²⁸ Photographic evidence, Whitman maintains, is inadequate to describe the complexities of Poe’s “character, any adequate transmission of its variable and subtle moods [is] impossible.”²⁹

Whitman is suspicious of daguerreotypes of Poe, no doubt, because some of them tend to confirm the image of Poe as the maddened, disinherited Edgar of *King Lear* fixed by Griswold in his obituary of Poe in the *New York Daily Tribune*:

He walked the streets, in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses, or with eyes upturned in passionate prayers . . . or with his glance introverted to a heart gnawed with anguish, and with a face shrouded in gloom, he would brave the wildest storms.³⁰

“Likenesses such as the ‘Ultima Thule,’” observes Michael Deas, “provided a kind of visual credence to Rufus Griswold’s defamatory description of Poe, and have been instrumental in shaping a popular image of the poet.”³¹ Henry S. Cornwell’s reading of the “Ultima Thule” in 1880, for example, seems to echo Griswold’s darkly romantic image:

The aspect is one of mental misery, bordering on wildness, disdain of human sympathy, and scornful intellectual superiority. There is also in it, I think, dread of imminent calamity, coupled with despair and defiance, as of a hunted soul at bay.³²

In this representative comparison, the relationship between Poe’s writing, his visual record, and his personal history becomes problematically intertwined. The language of Griswold’s description of Poe is, in fact, rather Poe-esque. John Neal angrily attacked Griswold’s description of Poe as pure plagiarism: “The thoughts I have underscored are Poe’s—and so is the very language—every word of it.”³³ While Poe’s fiction shades Griswold’s influential portrait, Cornwell’s visual reading of Poe’s portrait emerges from the combined influence of Poe’s fiction, Griswold’s interpolation, and the known circumstances of Poe’s biography.

²⁵ (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1858); qtd. in Didier, *Poe Cult*, 195.

²⁶ Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, 35.

²⁷ (Boston: William F. Gill, 1876); Miller, *Poe’s Helen*, 378.

²⁸ John Carl Miller, *Building Poe Biography* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 223.

²⁹ Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, 35.

³⁰ Walker, *Critical Heritage*, 299.

³¹ Deas, *Portraits*, 6.

³² Qtd. in Stedman, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 13.

³³ Walker, *Critical Heritage*, 390.

Would Cornwell have identified Poe's look in 1848 as "dread of imminent calamity" without knowing that Poe died miserably in 1849?

Whitman's larger project, asserting the interpretive authority of her personal contact with Poe, involved refuting "the spirit of Dr. Griswold's unjust memoir" by discrediting interpretations based upon second-hand information and visual evidence.³⁴ In *Edgar Poe and His Critics* (1860) Whitman not only refutes many of Griswold's positions but undermines the visual grounds on which his construction of Poe is partially based. An opening epigraph suggests that Whitman's project is, in part, to re-focus on Poe's distorted visage; she quotes Tennyson, "We cannot see thy features right; / They mix with hollow masks of night."³⁵ Whitman goes on to critique the engraving of Poe in Griswold's *Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe* (1850-56) as "utterly void of character and expression; it has no sub-surface." Only by "writers personally unacquainted with Mr. Poe," she writes, has this engraving been "favorably noticed."³⁶ In other words, Whitman's intimate association with Poe makes her a better judge of how well any daguerreotype reflects his "character."

Given her professed interpretive authority over Poe's daguerreotypes, it is striking that Whitman's biography does not include any of them. Although she comes to regard the more relaxed "Whitman" daguerreotype of Poe in her private collection as "the best likeness he ever had" (Figure 8), she never publishes it as a refutation of the dark intensity of the "Ultima Thule."³⁷ Until her own death seemed imminent in 1874, her only public display of Poe's image is through a poem called "The Portrait":

Slowly I raised the purple folds concealing
That face, magnetic as the morning's beam;
While slumbering memory thrilled at its revealing,
Like Memnon waking from his marble dream.

Again I saw the brow's translucent pallor,
The dark hair floating o'er it like a plume;
The sweet imperious mouth, whose haughty valor
Defied all portents of impending doom.

Eyes planet calm, with something in their vision
That seemed not of earth's mortal mixture born;
Strange mythic faiths and fantasies Elysian,
And far, sweet dreams of "fairy lands forlorn."

Unfathomable eyes that held the sorrow
Of vanished ages in their shadowy deeps;
Lit by that prescience of a heavenly morrow
Which in high hearts the immortal spirit keeps.³⁸

Whitman's interpretations of Poe's visual image are multi-leveled, as in the previously discussed naming of the "Ultima Thule." The language, style, and form of Whitman's "Portrait of Poe," is, perhaps appropriately, derivative of Poe's verse. As such, it conflates Poe's image with his poetry, alluding to "Ulalume,"

³⁴ Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, "Preface," n.p.

³⁵ Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, n.p.

³⁶ Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, 35.

³⁷ Qtd. in Deas, *Portraits*, 42.

³⁸ Qtd. in Didier, *Poe Cult*, 227-228; Originally published in Sarah Helen Whitman, *Hours of Life and Other Poems* (Providence, RI: Geo. H. Whitney, 1853).

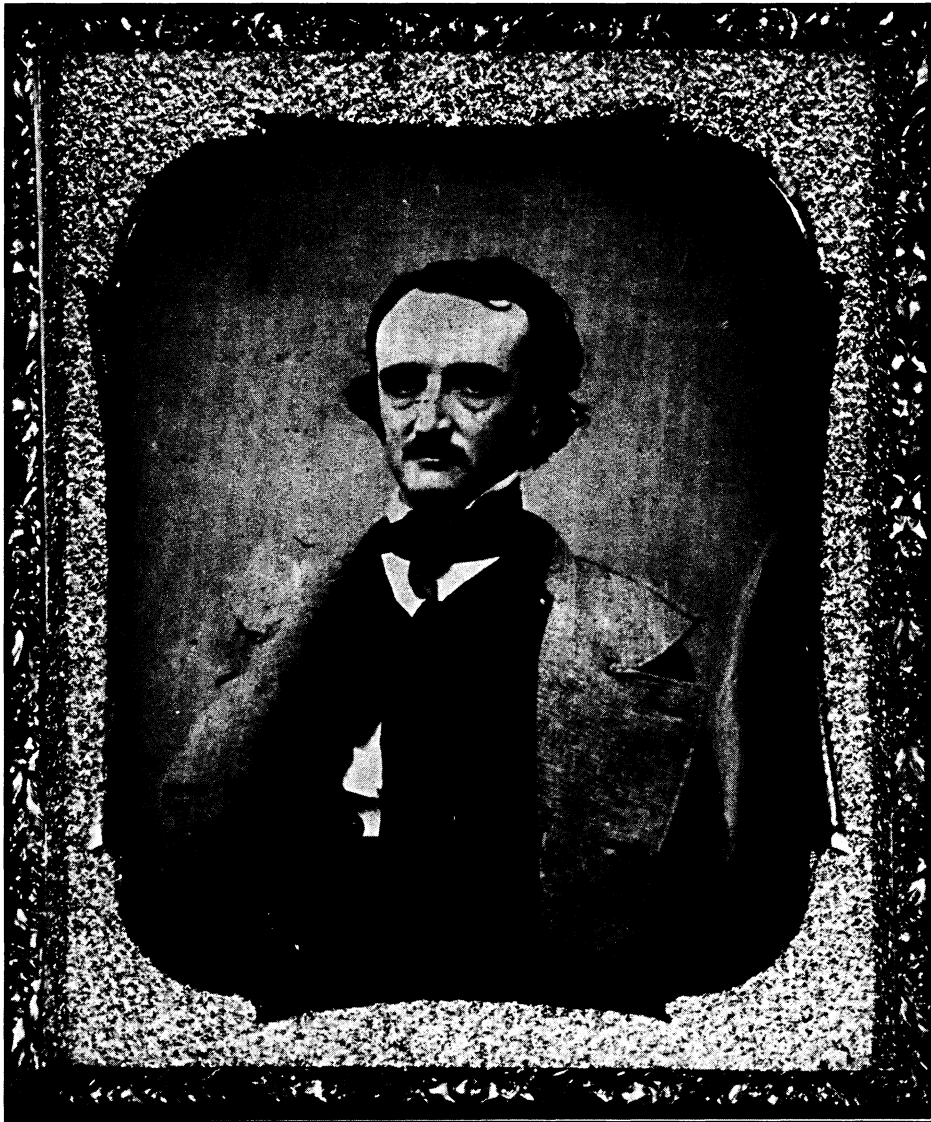


Figure 8. The “Whitman” daguerreotype (1848). Brown University Library.

“Lenore,” “The Haunted Palace,” and “The Bells,” just as Griswold conflates Poe’s life with his prose. But, in doing so, Whitman engages with Griswold on his own terms, for she directly refutes his depiction of Poe’s madness, bitterness, introversion, and despair. Poe is not mad but, like the romantic poet John Keats, dreaming of “fairy lands forlorn”; his mouth is not cursing but “sweet” and “imperious”; he is not looking inward but to “vanished ages”; he is not “shrouded in gloom” but defying “impending doom.” Such an approach to the construction of Poe’s image seems consistent with Whitman’s mistrust of the visual and her criticism of Griswold. Moreover, Griswold places Poe’s dark fiction in a reciprocal relationship with Poe’s visual image. Whatever her private understanding of Poe may have been, Whitman’s public interpretation of Poe’s image is interwoven with the culturally privileged genre of poetry rather than Poe’s somewhat disreputable prose, with romantic idealism rather than gothic terror, with “Dream-Land” rather than “The Pit and the Pendulum.”³⁹

³⁹ Whitman was not alone in preferring poetry to photography as a representation of Poe’s character. N.P. Willis, upon examining the frontispiece of the *Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1858), comments, “The picture is from a daguerreotype, and gives no idea of the beauty of

Edgar Poe . . . After reading ‘The Raven,’ ‘Ulalume,’ ‘Lenore,’ and ‘Annabel Lee,’ the luxuriast in poetry will better conceive what his face might have been” (qtd. in Whitman, 38).

Whitman's avoidance of unfiltered visual evidence would not seem as valid to the generation of Poe interpreters writing after 1878, when nearly all of Poe's contemporaries were gone. Biographers like Stedman (1833-1908) and Woodberry (1855-1930) emerged at the moment when the general public was first trained to comprehend historical figures and events through photographs.⁴⁰ They came to know the faces of the eminent through photographic galleries, picture books, and stereoscopic cards and *carte de visites* of places and people that were traded like contemporary baseball cards. For the first time, the illustrious, people at an inaccessible distance, and the long dead, were visually accessible to almost anyone. Historical figures were subject to interpretation not in the flattering romantic portraiture that disguised character, but in the open, revealing, realistic photograph. Photography seemed to democratize biography by making it possible for those without the privilege of personal access to their subjects to view them as equals and contemporaries.

Even the former authority of personal acquaintance with the subject began to be displaced by the authority of photographic evidence. Artists like Thomas Eakins used photographic studies of motion to detect realities invisible to the human eye, and biographers began to think along similar lines. "We have learned many curious facts from photographic portraits which we were slow to learn from faces," writes Oliver Wendell Holmes; photographs reveal "the mental and emotional shapes by which his [the subject's] inner nature made itself known to us."⁴¹ Such an approach to biography and the construction of authors led to a process in which a canon of portraits was created along with a canon of texts.

Poe existed for biographers like Stedman and Ingram not simply as a body of scripture. He was a face, and preferably not the face of the old-fashioned, idealized engraving or portrait. Rather, he was recorded by the modern, scientifically accurate perception of the photograph. The text and the photograph of the writer became increasingly interconnected in the literary biographer's craft, each shaping the meaning of the other. Ultimately, the claims of those, like Sarah Helen Whitman, who "knew" Poe in life would be displaced by those with access to "authentic" images and texts, those validated by technological and scholarly inspection.⁴² Stedman declared that readers must "drive out of mind the popular conceptions of his [Poe's] nature, and look only at the portraits of him in the flesh."⁴³ Stedman and Woodberry's *Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1894-95) in ten volumes seems a triumph of empiricism and of the collecting impulse applied to the construction of Poe as an author. It includes not only the "authorized text" revised "in Poe's own hand" with an extensive scholarly apparatus, but "Contemporary Notices," a complete bibliography, and all but two of the known "portraits that were undoubtedly taken from life."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ According to Robert Taft, The daguerreotype was introduced in the United States around 1840. There were 938 photographers in the United States by 1850, 3,154 by 1860, 7,558 by 1870, 9,990 by 1880, and 20,040 by 1890. *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839-1889* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1938), 61.

⁴¹ Holmes, "Doings," 9-10.

⁴² Striking frontispiece portraits appear to be valuable mar-

keting tools as well. Whitman writes that one examiner of the frontispiece to the Ingram edition "pronounced it 'good, very good.'" Afterwards, she writes, "He said he must have the book" (Miller, *Poe's Helen*, 226).

⁴³ Qtd. in Didier, *Poe Cult*, 193.

⁴⁴ *Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 10 vols., Ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman and George Woodberry (1894-95; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 10: v, 243, 269.

It is significant that Stedman insists upon a close study of Poe “in the flesh,” for visual images provided for a mediated inspection of Poe using so-called scientific methods like phrenology and physiognomy. Using both literary criticism and emerging techniques for reading the body, biographers would attempt to recover Poe’s “character” from the *memento mori*—the possessions, the texts, the handwriting, the visual images, and perhaps even the physical remains of Poe, which were disinterred and examined in 1876: “Some hair yet attached the skull, and the teeth, which appeared to be white and perfect, were shaken out of the jaws.”⁴⁵ By this time Poe’s physical remains were inextricable from his identity as the author of macabre fiction, and the description of this event seems a darkly comical allusion to Poe’s short story, “Berenice.” Afterwards, Poe’s remains were moved to a more prominent place with an appropriate monument with “a finely executed medallion bust of the poet, taken from a photograph copy of an original daguerreotype.”⁴⁶ The body of Poe itself had been appropriated and reconstructed by his interpreters using visual evidence thrice-removed from the subject. “Strange, is it not,” said the church sexton who unearthed the writer’s remains, “that Poe will not stay put!”⁴⁷

III. “CHARACTER”

It has been observed that it was not specifically Poe’s work that Griswold had maligned in 1849 but his *character*. Griswold claims that Poe possessed “no moral susceptibility” and “little or nothing of the true point of honor.”⁴⁸ Numerous other critics took their cue from Griswold in their post-mortem attacks.⁴⁹ The introduction to an early edition of Poe writings states that “a truthful delineation of his career would give a darker hue to his character than it has received from any of his biographers.”⁵⁰ Poe’s friends and admirers likewise rallied in defense of his “character.” In 1850 George Graham of *Graham’s Magazine* claims that Griswold’s “exceedingly ill-timed and unappreciative estimate of the character of our lost friend is UNFAIR AND UNTRUE . . . so dark a picture has no resemblance to the living man”⁵¹ Gill’s 1878 biography of Poe likewise professes to give “an impartial estimate of the true character of my subject.”⁵² And J. J. Moran, the physician who attended the death of Poe in Baltimore, publishes *A Defense of Edgar Allan Poe, Life, Character, and the Dying Declarations of the Poet* in 1885.⁵³ In short, delineating Poe’s “character” becomes an obsession for his nineteenth-century biographers; it is seldom clear, however, what these biographers mean by “character,” a term that signified an unstable intersection of meanings in the nineteenth century.

In the oldest literal sense, a character is a letter of type or a symbol used in printing or engraving.⁵⁴ It can also be the mark imprinted by this character, and, by extension, character may relate to the unique quality of a person’s handwriting.

⁴⁵ See *Notes and Queries*, 5th ser., 5(May 13, 1876): 386–387.

⁴⁶ Didier, *Poe Cult*, 190.

⁴⁷ Mary E. Phillips, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man* (Chicago: John C. Winston, 1926), 2:1513.

⁴⁸ Walker, *Critical Heritage*, 300.

⁴⁹ See Dudley R. Hutchinson, “Poe’s Reputation in England and America, 1850–1909,” *American Literature* 14 (1942): 211–223.

⁵⁰ *The Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1858), xix.

⁵¹ Qtd. in Gill, *Life of Edgar Allan Poe*, 249.

⁵² Gill, *Life of Edgar Allan Poe*, vii.

⁵³ Washington: William F. Boogher, 1885.

⁵⁴ All of the following definitions are based on those in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 3:30–32.

In a figurative sense, character may be applied to the peculiar physical or moral qualities of an individual just as they describe the physical qualities of handwriting. A face, then, may be imprinted or “characterized” with meaning as a blank sheet is imprinted by type; a face, therefore, may be “read” like a text for abstract meanings such as moral “character.”

In 1856 Charles Baudelaire, for example describes Poe as one of those “who bear the words *bad luck* written in mysterious characters in the sinuous creases of their foreheads.”⁵⁵ A person’s “character” may also reflect the quality of his or her “type”; poor character—possibly the result of poor breeding—leaves its imprint on the face. John M. Dillon’s *Edgar Allan Poe: His Genius and Character*, for example, begins, “The willful, restless spirit, the great weakness of character have also left their imprint [on Poe].”⁵⁶ In this sense, “Character” may be an “expression” rather than an “impression.” Stedman writes, for example, that Poe’s “external aspects were the signs of a character within.” For Stedman, the external manifestations of internal character create an interpretive framework for the construction of Poe. Stedman begins with a description of Poe’s character and observes that “The recorded facts of his [Poe’s] life serve to enhance this feeling.”⁵⁷ Like Stedman, many of Poe’s nineteenth-century biographers have relied even more explicitly upon the “character” of Poe’s appearance to defame or defend the “character” within.

The complexities of the nineteenth-century understanding of “character” are particularly apparent in the efforts of photographers to explain the incredible promise of their newly-developed skills. In 1864 Marcus A. Root writes that the photographer’s task is to “penetrate, by whatever means at his command, the fleshly mask, which envelops the spiritual part of his model, and ascertain his real type and character”⁵⁸ H. J. Rodgers echoes this opinion a decade later; a photographer, he writes, should recognize “character, from the lowest type and form of life to the highest grade of human excellence”; moreover, the photographer should “be able to read the faces of men and women as easily as he would an open book.”⁵⁹ Both photographers maintain a species of dualism; external character signifies a hidden internal reality or “truth” to which their technology and skills give them access. The metaphors seem to multiply: the photographer is a philosopher seeking verities among shadows, a surgeon penetrating the flesh to expose internal pathologies, a critic explicating the meanings of an obscure text. Amid this kind of techno-philosophical confidence, the perceptive skills of the photographer seem to promise new opportunities for the student of human nature.

Rodgers, for example, creates a lengthy visual catalogue of human types based upon their appearance. The faces of great intellects, he claims, are always similar; “the forehead is high and broad, and the lower portion of the face thin.”⁶⁰ Such a description could easily be applied to the “Ultima Thule,” which was probably made to be displayed in a gallery as a portrait of a conventionally hydrocephalic *auteur*. Despite the apparently lofty brows of the “Ultima Thule,” Poe is described by those who knew him as possessing a receding forehead, “sloping

⁵⁵ Baudelaire, Charles. *Baudelaire on Poe*, ed. and trans. Lois and Francis E. Hyslop, Jr. (State College, Pa.: Bald Eagle Press, 1952), 89.

⁵⁶ (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1911), 3.

⁵⁷ Stedman, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 14.

⁵⁸ Marcus Aurelius Root, *The Camera and the Pencil, or The*

Heliographic Art, (1864; reprint, Pawlet, Vt.: Helios, 1971), 439.

⁵⁹ H. J. Rodgers, *Twenty-three Years Under a Sky-Light, or Life and Experiences of a Photographer* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1873), 98.

⁶⁰ Rodgers, *Twenty-three Years*, 113.

back sharply from, the brow.”⁶¹ Rodgers explains this mystery: “A person with a small, narrow forehead could be posed to look highly intellectual by bringing the head slightly forward.”⁶² Paradoxically, photographers like Rodgers who place such confidence in their ability to read internal character are also conscious that they edit their visual texts using backdrops, props, poses, lighting, composition, exposure, and darkroom techniques to achieve certain effects.

The complex negotiation of physical reality and preconceived effects suggested by Root and Rodgers seems to emerge from and run parallel to the eighteenth-century “science” of physiognomy, which interpreted abstract qualities on the basis of external features. Just as photographers used posing strategies and lighting to shape the visual personae of their sitters, James Burgh and Johann Caspar Lavater encouraged public speakers to make their facial expression and body language correspond to their words.⁶³ By the 1880s, however, physiognomy (along with other new “sciences” like anthropomorphic measurement) was also being used by the state as a means of identifying criminal types, by school systems for determining the educability of students, and by biographers in analyzing of Poe.⁶⁴ Stedman applies such techniques to the identification of Poe’s character in his 1881 biography:

But look at some daguerreotype taken shortly before his death . . . we find those hardened lines of the chin and neck that are often visible in men who have gambled heavily, which Poe did not in his mature years, or who have lived loosely and slept ill . . . the man was at war with his meaner self.⁶⁵

Poe, it seems, was a recognizable “type”; the “dissipations” of his youth, his rumored gambling habits, and the destitution of his middle age, both of which were biographical circumstances known to Stedman, are clearly legible in retrospect.

Probably the most notorious nineteenth-century method of reading the body is phrenology, which determines character from the shape of one’s head. According to Rodgers, a good photographer should also be a competent phrenologist, and Poe’s visual record was frequently the subject of analysis by phrenologists in the nineteenth century.⁶⁶ Phrenological analysis of Poe was enthusiastically undertaken by literary critics as well. In March 1850, for example, John Moncure Daniel supports Griswold’s defamation of Poe’s character by subjecting Poe to a phrenological examination: “The head, as a whole, was a decidedly bad one,” Daniel writes, “the coronal region was very deficient. It contained little moral sense and less reverence.” Here, as in the case of physiognomy, preconceived notions of Poe’s personal character are read into his visual record. What is more complicated, however, is the way Daniel then uses Poe’s character as a “key to many of his literary characteristics.” Daniel writes, “In Poe’s writings there is despair, hopelessness; and the echoes of a melancholy extremely touching to those who read

⁶¹ Deas, *Portraits*, 5.

⁶² Rodgers, *Twenty-three Years*, 99.

⁶³ See James Burgh, *The Art of Speaking* (Danbury, 1775); and Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (Boston, 1794).

⁶⁴ See Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, ed., *A History of Private Life*. Vol. 4, *From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, ed. Michelle Perrot, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 468–475.

⁶⁵ *Edgar Allan Poe*, 12–13.

⁶⁶ See Rodgers, 98–102; “Edgar Allan Poe,” *Phrenological Journal*, 12 (March 1850): 87–89; O.S. Fowler, *New*

Illustrated Self-Instructor (New York, 1859), 34–37; “Edgar Allan Poe. Mental Temperament,” *Phrenological Journal*, 97 (September 1893): 126; H. S. Drayton, “Phrenotypes and Side-Views: The Vindication of ‘Poe,’” *Phrenological Journal*, 104 (October 1897): 157–158; See Madeleine B. Stern, comp., *A Phrenological Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Americans*, (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1982), 66–69. For more detailed treatments see Edward Hungerford, “Poe and Phrenology,” *American Literature* 2 (1930): 208–231; and Madeleine B. Stern, “Poe: ‘The Mental Temperament’ for Phrenologists,” *American Literature* 40 (May 1968): 155–163.

with a remembrance of his broken life.”⁶⁷ Poe’s fictional “characters,” then, are a reflection of his “character,” which can be deduced from the “character” of his appearance. An 1858 introduction to a collection of Poe’s poetry puts it simply, “What he writes he is.”⁶⁸

In this last sense, “character” has a relationship to the fictional and dramatic, such as a character in a novel or a play, or the character assumed by an actor in a performance. Baudelaire unifies without explanation the characters of Poe’s fiction with Poe’s personal character: “The characters of Poe, or rather the character of Poe.”⁶⁹ Fictional characterization becomes identical with personal character; the fiction, therefore, can be mined for insights into the inner character of the author, and the *Works* may supplement or substitute the autobiography. An 1850 review by John Neal, for example, claims that *The Works of Edgar A. Poe* “give one a very just idea of his character as a writer.”⁷⁰ Griswold’s obituary extends this claim, asserting of Poe that “Nearly all that he wrote in the last two or three years—including much of his best poetry—was in some sense biographical.”⁷¹

But in what “sense” does Griswold mean Poe’s works were biographical? Is Poe’s writing biographical in the sense that it reflects his development as a writer? Or does Griswold mean that Poe was actually mentally disturbed like Roderick Usher? E. D. Forgues, for example, concludes the latter; he writes in 1846 that in many of Poe’s tales, the “protagonist is none other than Mr Poe hardly taking the trouble to hide himself.”⁷² As seen above, this myth of Poe as one of his own fictional characters emerges from and responds to the visual images as well as textual images. Didier, for example writes, “We turn away with a shudder from this ‘sorrow-laden’ face wondering what had wrought the terrible change in him.” He continues, “Was the change caused by retributions of conscience, which he had described with such awful fidelity in *William Wilson*, the *Tell-Tale Heart*, and *The Man of the Crowd*?”⁷³ In the imagination of some critics, then, Poe had become, both physically and imaginatively, the tormented protagonists of his grotesque tales.

The clearest example of this kind of interaction between fiction, visual imagery, and personal history, is the biographical response to Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” As Deas observes, “The physical similarities between Poe and a character such as Usher have led at times to an unfortunate blurring of the distinction between life and art.”⁷⁴ The character of Roderick Usher—supersensitive, arcane, artistic, morbid, hypochondriacal, mourning the death of a beautiful woman—seems the embodiment of the biographical Poe; the visual description of Usher is even more compelling:

Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely molded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of more than web-like softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Walker, *Critical Heritage*, 362.

⁶⁸ *Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1858), xx.

⁶⁹ Walker, *Critical Heritage*, 411.

⁷⁰ Walker, *Critical Heritage*, 387.

⁷¹ Walker, *Critical Heritage*, 301.

⁷² Walker, *Critical Heritage*, 209.

⁷³ Didier, *Poe Cult*, 200.

⁷⁴ Deas, *Portraits*, 6.

⁷⁵ *Collected Works*, 2:401–402.

Although she does not mention the short story, in *The Home Life of Poe* Susan Archer Weiss's analysis of Poe's features seems to repeat the description of Usher:

"Unstable as water," is written upon Poe's every visage in characters which all might read; in the weak falling away of the outline of the jaw, the narrow, receding chin, and the sensitive, irresolute mouth. Above the soul-lighted eyes and the magnificent temple of intellect overshadowing them, we look in vain for the rising dome of *Firmness*, which, like the keystone of the arch, should strengthen and bind together the rest. Lacking this, the arch must be ever tottering to a fall.

Weiss here reads the narrative logic of "Usher" in the face of Poe, showing that Poe's character is readable simultaneously in Poe's face and fiction. Weiss continues: "In order to understand Poe, it is necessary that one should recognize the dominant trait of his character," which is, she writes, "*weakness of will* . . . To this weakness of will we may trace nearly every other defect in Poe's character."⁷⁶ Just as the fractured House of Usher collapses into oblivion, so Poe's defective moral character led to the downfall of an otherwise great artist. Weiss's reading, of course, is derived not only from her analysis of Poe's physical features, which are suggested by "Usher," but from her reading of "Ligeia," which begins with the quotation, "Man doth not yield himself up to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will."⁷⁷ Based upon such physiognomic and phrenological readings of Poe's visual character, which were themselves influenced by the character and characters of Poe's writings, Poe becomes a tragic hero doomed by a minor character flaw. Stedman, concluding his own examination of Poe's character, writes, "His will, in the primary sense, was weak from the beginning."⁷⁸

IV. CONCLUSION

In "Some Words With a Mummy," Poe seems to predict the circumstances of his own reception; a dead author's works, he writes, are converted into "a kind of literary arena for the conflicting guesses, riddles, and personal squabbles of whole herds of exasperated commentators." The author's original meaning is "enveloped, distorted, and overwhelmed," he writes.⁷⁹ But if a would-be biographer cannot get at the meaning of the "real" Poe, what inferences can be drawn from this account of Poe's construction in the nineteenth-century?

This case, in which several cultural processes converge, illuminates some of the complexities of author-reader relations in the nineteenth century. The increasing importance of the author function placed greater emphasis on the physical reality of the producer of an identifiable body of texts. This had the effect of accelerating the production of authoritative editions, biographies, and visual representations, all of which interacted with each other as elements in the construction of an "author." As photographic and printing technology improved during the shift from romanticism to realism, representations of authors in idealized engravings and portraits were gradually replaced by supposedly more realistic photographic representations. The resulting multiplication of images increased the relative impact of visual evidence on the interpretation of authors. As shown in this essay, the critical methods of biography, which formerly relied more exclusively on

⁷⁶ Susan Archer Weiss, *The Home Life of Poe* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1907), 219.

⁷⁸ Stedman, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 102.

⁷⁷ *Collected Works*, 2:310; Stedman also uses this quotation as an epigraph to *Edgar Allan Poe* (1881).

⁷⁹ *Collected Works*, 3:1189.

textual evidence, began to direct more attention to records of physical evidence, to the body of the author itself. In many cases besides that of Poe, one may expect to find similar interactions between readers' interpretations of the textual and visual—even when the reader claims to be focusing on only one or the other.

This shift from engravings to photographs during the consolidation of the author function had significant implications in the management of the public and private spheres of author-reader relations as well. The use of photography resulted in increasing public exposure of authors and diminishing control over their private identities, particularly when infinitely reproducible (and surreptitiously taken) photographs could be used as the basis for many new forms of scientific character reading: physiognomy, phrenology, and later, psychology. The inability to control the production, distribution, and interpretation of photographs, complicated the already formidable difficulties of controlling one's publications. Predictably, such conditions created some generational conflict between 1840 and 1900. There was considerable resistance to the intrusion of the public realm of photography into the formerly private, frequently domestic sphere of genteel literary production among those born earlier in the nineteenth century. In 1865 a reviewer for *The Nation* writes that it was fortunate for one female author "that she lived in pre-daguerreotype ages," because, "she could scarcely have escaped the momentary glance of the camera that now perpetuates indiscriminately for us both the evanescent shapes of beauty and grace as well as their opposites."⁸⁰ Photography increased the difficulty of managing the distribution of personal information and disrupted the social distance between authors and readers.

The advent of photography forced some authors (or the custodians of author's reputations) into retrenchment like that of Sarah Helen Whitman, who regretted the publication of the "Ultima Thule" and preferred to publish the supposedly more representative "Whitman" daguerreotype only in a poetic form. Another strategy was to deny the ability of photographs to capture human character; photographs were merely superficial, but art could perceive inner truth. Whitman, for example, clearly preferred idealized engravings to photographs. She writes to Ingram, "The portrait is much more like E.A.P. than the photograph from which it was taken."⁸¹ Subsequent writers, however, embraced photography, ostensibly accepting the complete exposure of the private self while complicating the very category of selfhood. The protean Walt Whitman, for example, through circulating numerous photographs of himself in tandem with his evolving poetry, presented new visual personae to complement new literary priorities.⁸² In the final edition of Walt Whitman's poems, he concludes, "I look upon 'Leaves of Grass,' now finish'd to the end of its opportunities and powers, as my definitive *carte visite* to the coming generations of New World."⁸³ As we move through the nineteenth century, then, we may characterize authors as engaging in an ongoing struggle with readers both textually *and* visually to negotiate the complexities of self-revelation and concealment.

⁸⁰ "Literary Notes," *The Nation*, 1.15 (12 October 1865), 468.

⁸¹ Miller, *Poe's Helen*, 226.

⁸² See Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Folsom, "Appearing in Print: Illustrations of the Self in *Leaves of Grass*," *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1995), 135-165; and Folsom, "Whitman's Calamus Photographs," *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 193-219.

⁸³ *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 562.