

# Studies in Gothic Fiction

Volume 1 Issue 1

Zittaw Press

## **Studies in Gothic Fiction**

© 2010 Zittaw Press

**Editor:** Franz J. Potter, *National University*

**Associate Editor:** Curt Herr, *Kutztown University*

### **Editorial Board**

Colin Marlaire, *National University*

Melissa Bradshaw, *DePaul University*

Katherine D. Miller, *San Jose State University*

Dale Townshend, *University of Stirling*

Jamieson Ridenhour, *University of Mary*

Roy Bearden-White, *Southern Illinois University*

Margarita Georgieva, *Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis*

# The Nightmare of the Unknowable, or, Poe's Inscrutability

Robert Tally

Poe begins and ends his enigmatic study of the man of the crowd with the phrase, *es lässt sich nicht lesen*, “it does not permit itself to be read” (179, 188).<sup>1</sup> The tale, or sketch, emphasizes this point as the narrator follows his curious but illegible subject through the streets of London all night and throughout the following day, but at the end of his wild perambulations he knows no more about the man than he did at first, and is unable to bring his reader any closer to understanding—to really *knowing*—this “man of the crowd.” This story, like others in Poe’s *oeuvre*, pretends to offer a kind of fictional anthropology, a pseudo-science that will grant us a vista into the unknown in order to solve a riddle posed by it, only to pull the rug out from under us. At the end of the tale, the mysterious figure remains a mystery; the hieroglyphic remains indecipherable. The narrator’s conclusion, that this man of the crowd is “the type and genius of true crime,” does not so much offer understanding of the old man’s character as it proffers the notion of inscrutability itself as terrifying prospect. As a dramatization of the futility of reading, “The Man of the Crowd” is itself a tale that doesn’t allow itself to be read. The same observation might apply to much of Poe’s work, in which inscrutability is the basis for the terror, the nightmare of the unknowable.

Indeed, if Poe is perhaps best known for his tales of terror, it is worth noting that the inscrutable—that which will not let itself be read—lies at the heart of them. To some extent, Poe’s engagement with the inscrutable follows from his powerful connections to transatlantic romanticism, which also sought to represent the unrepresentable by giving form to mystic, ecstatic, or ineffable experience. That which invokes real terror, for Poe, cannot be adequately understood. Famously, Poe defended his work from charges of “Germanism” by situating terror in an altogether different locus: “If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul.” As Poe continues in the Preface to his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, he “deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results” (“Preface,” 6). This terror is rightly associated with both the grotesque and the arabesque, that is, with the horrifically unfamiliar, as well as with the bizarre and complicated. Such terror clearly interacts with the strange or exotic, typically a fear of the unknown; much more fearsome still is the *unknowable*, the dim and gloomy sense that what is at first merely unfamiliar and perplexing is actually inscrutable, something that we do not, and *cannot* ever really, understand. As Poe notes, the soul is both the source of terror and the ground upon which it unfolds, and yet the soul is also the seat of knowledge, the Cartesian *res cogitans* that is supposed to impose the rational meaning upon the world and hence, in the Enlightenment project of demystification, to remove the terrors of the unknowable. However, in Poe, this terror reasserts itself emphatically, as a terrifying inscrutability itself.

Poe’s work frequently renders problematic the relation between storytelling and knowing; often Poe makes the seemingly knowledgeable narrator a kind of dupe, one who thinks he knows only to discover that he cannot know what is happening. In some cases, the reader as well as the narrator is duped. In “The Balloon Hoax,” Poe obviously delights in his ability to gull readers into believing a story that is utterly fantastic; elsewhere, for example, in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” Poe presents a quasi-scientific case study that some accepted as true. Poe’s “hoaxes” place the reader in

an awkward position, but not one very much different from that in which the reader is situated in other tales as well. Poe shapes his tales in such a way that the very narratives themselves thwart the aim of clear understanding, deconstructing their meanings on their very pages. No doubt, this is a reason why French poststructuralists have been so taken with his work.<sup>2</sup> A foundational project in many tales seems to be the critique of knowledge itself. Indeed, as I argue herein, the principal characteristic of Poe's tales is inscrutability, the inability to know. This, in the final analysis, is the true terror of Poe's work: not the fear of the unknown, but the fear of unknowability.

## A Voyage into the Unknowable

In Poe's early tale, "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," the unnamed narrator's thrill of "discovery" literally descends into the unknown and the *unknowable*. The very narrative style serves to highlight the inscrutability of the experience, as the first-person narration shifts its forms, tenses, and emotional intensity during the tale. While the conceit manifested in the title assures the reader that the tale is authentic, the narration belies it, as it begins in a calm, dry, reflective autobiographical style (including the past or perfect tense), then moves to a more fragmentary style of diary entries, then breathlessly scrawls its message as the mysterious ship plunges into the vortex.

These shifts may be registered by comparing a few lines from the text. The opening words of "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" lay out the faux autobiographical foundation, while also withholding the sort of information that most readers of autobiographies would desire. "Of my country and my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other" (99). In other words, an "I" is firmly established as the narrator, but very little about the narrator will be known. Indeed, the remainder of the first paragraph serves to establish the narrator's credibility; by underscoring how rational and how unimaginative he is, the narrator insists that he is the least likely *type* of person to create fictions or to be gulled by "the *ignes fatui* of superstition" (99). Yet, aside from being the sort of person who thinks a certain way, the narrator's biography is completely unknown. In some respects, this comports with the generic conventions of nineteenth-century personal narrative. As Jonathan Arac has discussed in *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative*, personal narratives of this time operated as extroverted accounts of unfamiliar or exotic experiences, rather than as introspective narratives of spiritual or personal development (as, for example, in eighteenth-century narratives of religious experience like Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative" or twentieth-century autobiographies that likely include some psychological analysis). However, Poe's perversion of the conventions of personal narrative is precisely his intent in "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," and the effect of the tale is to undermine the authority of such narratives, an authority that rests in personal narrative's purported ability to *know* or *understand* the exotic or foreign experiences they contain. Narrative, as Arac notes, derives from the Latin *gnarus* or "knowing" (76–77), but in Poe's narratives, the force comes from the subversion of narrative's truth-telling conventions.

The first half of "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" recounts events in the somewhat dispassionate past tense, explaining the odd things that have happened, but maintaining a relatively sober tone of one merely describing encounters. A curious break in the text—emphasized by a literal interruption in the textual layout of the page, with a single paragraph separated from the foregoing and subsequent text by asterisks—offers a change in the narration ... and in the narrator.

A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul – a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of by-gone times are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key. To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration is an evil. I shall never – I know that I shall never – be satisfied with

regard to the nature of my conceptions. Yet it is not wonderful that these conceptions are indefinite, since they have their origin in sources so utterly novel. A new sense – a new entity is added to my soul. (104)

Here, of course, is the Romantic transformation from rational man of science into sensitive (and notably *passive*) subject of mystical or inexplicable experience. Not only is the ineffable experience something that “will admit of no analysis,” but it apparently cannot even be articulated. The narrator who would know has become a narrator who *knows* he *cannot* know. So, too, is the reader now placed in the awkward position of not being able to read. Poe is introducing the text’s inscrutability at the very moment at which a kind of knowledge—at least, a new sensibility or a new conception—has been discovered by the narrator.

Following from this pivotal and bizarre little paragraph, the tense changes again. “It is long since I first trod the deck of this terrible ship, and the rays of my destiny are, I think, gathering into focus.” The “is” and the “are” indicate that the narration has shifted from a personal narrative of interesting past experiences to a running commentary of almost immediately occurring events. Indeed, it is in this paragraph that the narrator announces his plan to write down his experiences (including, presumably, the foregoing text) and predicts that he will not survive to see it published, vowing instead to enclose his manuscript in a bottle and, “at the last moment,” throw it into the sea (104, 105). The inevitable consequence of this shift in tense and the decision to foreground the *written-ness* of the tale, which previously we’d been allowed to follow without regard to its self-conscious textuality, is that the tale ceases to venture into the unknown-but-still-knowable, and becomes a kind of perceptual barrage of stimuli that in themselves seem inscrutable. That is, the narrator—no longer the scientist collecting data and analyzing it at his leisure—moves to the unreflective present tense, as if to say, “I cannot make sense of this, but here it is! Do with it what you will.” The experiences are, in the narrator’s own estimation, “so utterly novel” as to admit of no analysis.

The final lines of the tale accelerate this process and amplify the inscrutability of the text by leaping into the future tense, and thus peremptorily foreclosing on any hope of understanding experiences later. The narrator himself indicates this by notifying the reader that he will be unable to consider the matter further. “But little time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny – the circles rapidly grow small – we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool – and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering, oh God! and – going down” (109). This ending completes the title’s foundational conceit and allows the manuscript to be transmitted by bottle, but it also invokes a fake scientific “discovery”: that is, the discovery of the whirlpool at the South Pole. Poe’s bizarre footnote (and according to the note, it is Poe’s not the narrator’s), in which he seems to “correct” the false impression left by the manuscript and cites no less an authority than the cartographer Gerardus Mercator to vouch for “truth” that such a whirlpool must be located at “the (northern) Polar Gulf” (527 note 2) only confounds matters. The pseudo-scientific explanation further undermines the sense of clear legibility by suggesting an alternative, false knowledge, typical of Poe’s more direct hoaxes.

In “The Poetics of Descent,” I have suggested that Poe uses this narration to undermine the personal narrative form, which became so popular in the 1830s and 1840s (Tally). The popularity of personal narratives lay, in large part, in their ability to present scientific or quasi-scientific knowledge about the exotic regions their first-person narrators had explored. Examples include Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years before the Mast*, Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative, Herman Melville’s *Typee*, or even Poe’s own *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which for years was published as a nonfiction travel narrative, despite its utterly fantastic story. (Indeed, a sign of both the popularity of personal narratives and the injunction that they be “true” may be seen in the fact that the publisher of *Pym*,

Harper and Brothers, declined to published Melville's *Typee* in 1846 on the grounds that "it was impossible that it could be true and *therefore* was without real value" [Leyda 196, my emphasis]). Whereas the personal narrative form aimed at making the unfamiliar familiar, domesticating the exotic, or making the unknown known, Poe's perversion of the form—in "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and elsewhere—strikingly asserts the inscrutability and unknowability of these uncanny experiences or events. With Poe, these cannot be "brought home" in the sense of being made knowable, and the anxiety or terror is therefore enhanced. At the risk of being accused of "Germanism" myself, I might label Poe's treatment of the ineffable experiences as *unheimlich*, after Freud and Heidegger, who emphasize the very not-at-home-ness of the uncanny (or un-homely). "In anxiety one feels 'uncanny' [*unheimlich*]. [...] but here 'uncanniness' also means 'not being at home' [*das Nicht zu-hause-sein*]" (Heidegger 233). As I will discuss below, this aspect of Poe's inscrutable work will distinguish it from the tradition of gothic horror, as well as from the nineteenth-century personal narrative form.

### **Terror as the Anti-Epistemic**

In tales of terror, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "Ligeia," Poe deliberately puzzles his readers, leading them to imagine a stable meaning that then will not hold. In such tales, the lure of knowledge is tantalizingly dangled before the narrator's (and often the reader's) eyes, only to evanesce or, more often, to be violently dashed away. The prospect of knowledge—arcane or forbidden knowledge, perhaps, or the mere satisfaction of one's curiosity about some odd happenstance—forms desire from which arises the pleasure of the text, but the terror that excites in the tale derives from the failure of knowledge, the persistence of the inscrutable. In such tales, Poe's famous single effect is encapsulated in this terrifically unknowable phenomenon (395–96). If the pleasures of narrative may be found in the essentially epistemological project of knowing, the terrors of the text are fundamentally anti-epistemic.

In "Usher," for instance, we are presented with another unnamed and largely unknown narrator, who presents the wondrous events of the tale in such a way that we are invited to make sense of them only to have them render themselves inscrutable once more. The narrator's "childish experiment" at the beginning of the tale, in which he tries attempts to implement the romantic theory of the sublime for practical effect, by rearranging the elements of the scene in order to disarm their power to affect him, turns out only to increase the "gloom" felt by that scene (139–40). In attempting to fix things, to assign them stable meanings, and to understand them in their own being, the narrator—and Poe himself—shows how such methods are not only ineffective, but have the opposite of the intended effect: the act of reading the text seems to render the text all the more unreadable. The romantic view that the poet's use of the imagination can transform nature into the sublime—a Coleridgean theory adopted by Emerson in his belief that poets are "liberating gods" (see below)—is here mocked by Poe, whose narrator experiences "an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime" (138). Later, Poe includes a scene of reading in order to introduce and frame the tale's climax. In what amounts to an absurd blend of horror and humor, Poe's narrator reads the grotesque chivalric romance of "Ethelred" to calm Roderick Usher's nerves; the effect is just the opposite, of course, and the ghastly end to the tale leaves one no more enlightened than was the narrator's first impression of the house of Usher. The narrator can encounter the phenomenon of the fall of the house of Usher is witnessed, but neither he nor the reader has any greater knowledge. It is another text that does not let itself be read.

In "Ligeia," knowledge—or, rather, unknowability—is the very subject of the tale, embodied in the figure of the mysterious woman herself. The narrator, who (just as in "Manuscript" or "Usher")

is not merely one who tells what he knows but one, like the reader, who *seeks to know*, perpetually withholds knowledge even as he discloses it; more to the point, his apocalyptic disclosure of what has happened is inextricably tied to the notion that he does not understand what has happened. In the very first line, he bizarrely concedes that he cannot recall how he “became acquainted with” the woman who is the object such intense passion and love; he suggests that her most powerful characteristics entered his soul—again, reminiscent of the “Manuscript” narrator—“unnoticed and unknown” (110). Yet he admits that he has “*never known*” (emphasis in the original) Ligeia’s family name. Hence, both the narrator and the subject of the study are unknown. The characteristics of Ligeia that *are* known, the reader discovers, are her physical attributes, especially her eyes (to which lengthy descriptions are devoted) and her supernatural intelligence, especially with respect to her voluminous learning in the moral and physical sciences, mathematics, and the seemingly arcane “forbidden” knowledge. The narrator’s explanation of Ligeia’s erudition builds ecstatic, and notably erotic, climax in disclosing his feeling at being educated by her:

With how vast a triumph – with how vivid a delight – with how much of all that is ethereal in hope – did I feel, as she bent over me in studies but little sought – but less known – that delicious vista by slow degrees expanding before me, down whose long, gorgeous, and all untrodden path, I might at length pass onward to the goal of wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden. (114)

The phantasmagoria that follows from Ligeia’s death and the narrator’s second marriage makes visible the grotesque and arabesque features of the “divinely precious” wisdom, but the narrator’s delirium (and his confessed opium haze) makes any sense of really acquirable knowledge a dubious proposition. In the apocalyptic end, the avatar of knowledge is a hallucinatory vision, not a triumphant revelation.<sup>3</sup>

The horror of many such tales lies not in a particular fright, but in a general mood of uncertainty. Again and again, Poe presents the arcane, the exotic, the otherworldly, or unique, but he refuses to explicate in detail the foreign matter and to bring it into a safe and familiar intellectual archive. On the contrary, Poe’s work frequently undermines the scientific or pseudo-scientific practices of reading the meaning of events from their surfaces or of empiricism in general. Poe injects greater uncertainty into such proceedings. Even in the detailed science-fiction of a work like “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” which is written as a sort of medical case study, the horror of the inexplicable and unknowable undermines the scientific knowledge it purports to present. The last word there, as always, involves the arrogance thinking that this knowledge is attainable. Poe’s work actively defies interpretation, at times subtly and at others overtly undermining the reader’s assumptions that the story’s “meaning” will reveal itself. In some tales, like the detective stories, “Descent into the Maelstrom,” or “The Gold Bug,” Poe is willing to offer some explanation of the puzzles presented, but more often than not, Poe’s texts frustrate the desire for comprehension. Even in his more explanatory instances—for instance, in “The Man Who was Used Up”—Poe is as likely to confound as to confirm the reader’s surmises. The text does not allow itself to be read.

### **Poe’s Unfathomability**

The narrator in “Manuscript Found in a Bottle” marvels at the strange sailors who inhabit the spectral ship: “Incomprehensible men!” Poe not only makes incomprehensibility a hallmark of the tales of mystery, suspense, and terror, but may himself embody the concept. As a young man, even before writing “Manuscript,” he found the nightmare of the unknowable within his own breast. As a contemporary put it, “He said often that there was a mystery hanging over him he could never

fathom” (Mary Devereaux, qtd. in Ackroyd 58). Poe’s tales also present mysteries that cannot be fathomed, texts that do not let themselves be read.

Poe’s Dupin trilogy, the “tales of ratiocination,” would seem to offer a notable counter-example, but even in these mysteries, Poe does not really give the reader the satisfaction of interpreting clues and gaining knowledge. Rather than offering a puzzle—like a crossword or a Sudoku—where pleasure derives precisely from *figuring it out*, Poe insists on insoluble puzzling. Although detective fiction would seem to be the very model for pleasurable puzzle-solving, Poe’s Dupin stories continue to emphasize the inscrutability of his subject. Unlike later examples in the genre, Poe’s tales do not really invite the readers to “play” the detective, to solve the mystery themselves. Rather, Poe places the reader in the position of the perplexed observer who will marvel at the genius of the one who actually *can* figure things out. Auguste Dupin’s analytical prowess is itself a marvel, and Dupin’s powers lie in his own uncanny ability to *read*—whether he is reading clues (as in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”) or reading people (as in “The Purloined Letter”). We, the readers, cannot *read* in the same way. Dupin, whose character is introduced in “Rue Morgue” only after the fine distinction is made between the chess-player (who merely calculates) and the draughts- or whist-player (who must also be analyze his or her opponent), represents a reader that Poe’s work does not, in the end, permit any of us to be. However, the real mystery might be Dupin himself, whose mysterious background makes him another Roderick Usher, but one whose madness lies in ratiocination rather than phantasm. These detective stories, like the tales of terror, present knowledge as a problem—not something to be gleaned but something to be marveled at—and Dupin’s apparent ability to read the text makes our own inability to read, and the text’s inscrutability, all the more striking.

In his quarter-deck speech explaining why he must pursue Moby Dick, Ahab tells Starbuck and the crew: “He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That *inscrutable* thing is what I chiefly hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (Melville 164, my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> In Melville’s novel, it seems that it is really inscrutability itself (rather than the inscrutability of the underlying “malice”) that is most hated. In *Moby-Dick*, the inability to read and know is a concern throughout the novel, as Ishmael’s cetological system must remain “a draught of a draught,” and the Leviathan “must remain unpainted to the last,” and “the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable.” As Ishmael tauntingly concludes the chapter on the “face” of the whale, “Read it if you can.” Poe and Melville, so different in so many respects, both recognized the horror of inscrutability in the context of the nineteenth-century United States. In a society self-consciously fashioning itself as a model for future successes, such inscrutability appears as a real terror, a repressed but urgent, unconscious tainting of that “optative mood” and “progressive” vision of mid-nineteenth-century American thought.

This is what Harry Levin discussed years ago in his study, *The Powers of Blackness*, where he says “our [meaning Americans’] most perceptive minds have distinguished themselves from our popular spokesmen by concentrating on the dark half of the situation” (7). Tocqueville had recognized that American ideology was thoroughly imbued with dreams of scientific and social progress, progress based in part on the firm belief that knowledge will helpfully expand horizons and that the world and everything in it are indeed legible. (Is not the very label, “American Renaissance,”<sup>5</sup> an acknowledgement of this hope?) But Levin argued that that other part of America, the subterranean or dark vision of an utterly mysterious, illegible world, typified a powerful countercultural strain in American literature. Melville and Hawthorne picked up on it, but Poe made such terror his stock in trade.

Poe is more anomalous still. Much of what I have been discussing as Poe’s exploration of the unknowable and his inscrutability would seem to place him firmly within a romantic or gothic

tradition, a tradition in which he—by reputation—has long been at home, even if American Studies has not always accorded him so high a rank. It is certainly true that Poe is strongly influenced by romanticism, especially German romanticism, and that many of his tales deploys conventions of the gothic to great effect. But Poe's inscrutability cannot be merely ascribed to his romantic gothic affiliations, and I am tempted to add that this disposition in Poe actually distinguishes his work from what is traditionally understood as the gothic. In other words, Poe's terror, the nightmare of the unknowable, as I call it, is not compatible with the terror associated with gothic literature.

Although the gothic is a genre well known, indeed perhaps paradigmatically known, for its presentation of the mysterious, the fantastic, and the terrifying, the genre tends to domesticate its terrors by offering up a comforting narrative to contain the inscrutable by mapping it onto a more familiar terrain. Marshall Brown's *The Gothic Text* offers a surprising thesis on the gothic literature of the romantic era. Contrary to expectation, Brown's first thesis is "Romantic gothic fiction is not exciting," which would seem to fly in the face of the conventions of gothic literature. But, as Brown explains, "Fascination rather than excitement is the hypnotic core of the great gothic novels" (3, 4). Gothic novels are interested precisely in *knowing*, so the fascination is largely intellectual and not visceral. Indeed, Brown holds that lack of excitement, rather than the inability to maintain a "unity of effect," may have been the real reason Poe was so opposed to the length of the novel form. "But if there is a comprehensible reason why Poe dismissed long fiction as an impossibility, it is perhaps because the novels in his gothic mode do in fact constitutively lack the excitement he sought" (4). Noting the lengthy descriptive passages in Walpole or Radcliffe devoted to landscapes or architecture, Brown understands gothic novels as participating in a project similar to Kant's critiques. In other words, the gothic novel is epistemological, and the function of the novels is to bring the unfamiliar data into the structural framework of a knowable system. Scrutability is therefore at their core.

Poe's demand for excitement<sup>6</sup> might disqualify his work from Brown's definitions of the gothic, but another disqualifier seems to me to be Poe's commitment to inscrutability. Poe's work is opposed to the gothic, inasmuch as the gothic presents mystery in order to explain it away. "As their chaotic events unfold, the [gothic] novels return insistently to problems of orientation in time and place, to coherence of experience in a world of magic or mystery, to participation in a community under threat of isolation—in short, to the various continuities of meaning that stabilize a world at risk" (Brown xiv). Thus, the Kantian acknowledgement of the limits of reason nevertheless serves to establish the comfortable knowability of the world in establishing a frame for understanding. But Poe will not allow this comfort. Poe insists on insoluble puzzling, where the principal investigator does not actually gain knowledge so much as recognizes the ineffability of knowledge. Poe's terror, which is not of Germany but of the soul, comes down to a nameless fear of the that which cannot be read.

It is for this reason that I respectfully disagree with the otherwise engaging argument of Jeremy Cagle, who argues that Poe's dramatization of illegibility in "The Man of the Crowd" makes Poe an apt figure, not only of romanticism, but also of an American transcendentalism embodied by Emerson and Thoreau. Although Cagle acknowledges Poe's critique of Emerson's transcendentalism, Cagle concludes that Poe actually imagines the transcendentalist idea to win the day. "Poe's interest in exploring the irrational or unreadable—certainly a prominent theme in 'The Man of the Crowd'—is both a marked divergence from the *zeitgeist* of the mid-nineteenth century and also one of the hallmark tenets of romanticism which connects Poe to American Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau" (29). Cagle argues that Poe resisted the rationalistic "Common Sense" philosophy of his day and embraced a "new philosophy" that incorporated the irrational or the perverse by virtue of a "Higher Reason" based on intuition or imagination, not on rationality itself. Drawing on Emerson's view of the Poet as a "liberating god" who "unlocks our

chains, and admits us to a new scene” (Emerson 277–78), Cagle then argues that Poe endorses the image of the poet as the one who can *read well*. In other words, rather than presenting us with a text that does not let itself be read, Poe (in Cagle’s view) offers a critique of traditional—scientific or rational—reading techniques and promulgates a view of a poetic reading that somehow can read the unreadable texts.

This strikes me a surprising misreading in its own right, all the more striking since Cagle does acknowledge, albeit *en passant*, Poe’s active critique of Emerson’s position. Citing Lawrence Buell’s assessment of Emerson as a poet-priest of a fixed universal order—but, notably, not citing Emerson’s view that the “religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative men” (279), thus rendering poetry and religious thought identical—Cagle notes that Poe “presents a riposte to Transcendentalists” and utterly denies the Emersonian view that the poet has access to more liberated knowledge of the world. Poe’s is not merely a watered-down romanticism, in which scientific method must take a back seat to poetic impulse (as his critical writings make perfectly clear, Poe does not view these as binary oppositions), but rather a much more forceful argument about the actual legibility of phenomena. Emerson the former Unitarian minister *must* maintain that a transcendental Truth can not only be found but can be understood, whereas Poe is much more skeptical. When Poe notes, in “The Poetic Principle” (as elsewhere), that “In the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, *of the soul*, which we recognize as the Poetic Sentiment, and which is so easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the heart” (506–07), Poe is not saying that poetry provides an alternative to rational truth-seeking—that is, another, better way to read an otherwise illegible text—but that the poetic principle operates differently and within a different sphere altogether (to wit, the *soul*). Just as the narrator of the “Manuscript Found in a Bottle” discovered “a new entity is added to my soul,” describing it—but, and this is essential, *unable to interpret it*—as “a sensation that will admit of no analysis,” so too does Poe allow ineffable experience to permeate his tales without allowing them “to be read.” The terror, which is rightfully deep-seated in the soul itself, is one of inscrutability. The reader does not experience the terror of reading terrifying stories, but rather encounters the terror of not being able to make sense of these experiences.

Poe, as he suspected in his youth, is unfathomable in this respect. Although he clearly maintains affiliations with various modes and schools of thought, Poe certainly cannot be captured by labels like romantic, gothic, transcendentalist, irrationalist, and so on. Poe is like Michel Foucault’s mocking persona, who declares, “no, no I’m not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you” (Foucault 17). Poe remains a savage anomaly in nineteenth-century American literature, and a part of that status is his inscrutability. Incomprehensible man!

With Poe, inscrutability is the constant, lurking menace, thwarting the sense of sense-making and troubling one’s confidence in *knowing* at all. Like the purloined letter, the text and its desired meaning dangle right before our eyes, without our being able to comprehend it in any definitive way. Or, like Poe’s narrator in “The Man of the Crowd,” we can marvel at the enigma before us, but we cannot understand. That narrator begins his tale by noting that men “die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries that will not *suffer themselves* to be revealed” (179). But, by the end of his long night of fruitlessly investigating the mysterious “man of the crowd,” the narrator changes his tune. Given what greater terrors might be found if we truly could look into those inscrutable mysteries, “perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that *es lässt sich nicht lesen*.” Perhaps this reasonable and comforting will allow him to sleep, but as Goya so memorably depicted it, the sleep of reason breeds monsters. The nightmare of the unknowable remains, for us, a terror of the soul.

## Notes

1. Except for the “Preface” to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, all references herein to Poe’s work come from *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*.
2. See, e.g., Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies* 48 (1973), 39–72; and Jacques Derrida, “The Purveyor of Truth,” trans. Alan Sheridan, *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 173–212.
3. Etymologically, apocalypse relates to disclosure or uncovering (from the Greek), but in Poe’s tales the apocalyptic endings frequently leave things veiled. In “Ligeia,” the mystery of the story’s end only compounds the mysteries unfolding at the story’s beginning.
4. The other quotations in this paragraph are from Melville, pages 145, 264, 306, and 347, respectively.
5. As Levin explains, he—rather than his mentor, F.O. Matthiessen—is actually responsible for this label. “Matthiessen had wanted to call his book, after an apt phrase from Whitman, *Man in the Open Air*. The publisher had wanted something more descriptively categorical. My groping formulation must have caught Matthiessen’s liberal idealism, his warm feeling for the creative potentialities of American life. But it left out that ‘vision of evil’ which clouds the hopeful picture from time to time” (vii–viii).
6. In his famous review of Hawthorne’s “*Twice-told Tales*,” Poe writes: “A poem must intensely excite. Excitement is its province, its essentiality. Its value is in the ratio of its (elevating) excitement” (394).

## Works Cited

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Poe: A Life Cut Short*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.
- Arac, Jonathan. *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820–1860*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Brown, Marshall. *The Gothic Text*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Cagle, Jeremy. "Reading Well: Transcendental Hermeneutics in Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd,'" *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* IX.2 (Fall 2008): 17–35.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Purveyor of Truth," trans. Alan Sheridan. *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*. Eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. 173–212.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Poet," *Selected Essays*. Ed. Larzer Ziff. New York: Penguin, 1982.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon, 1972.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.
- Lacan, Jacques. "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. *Yale French Studies* 48 (1973): 39–72.
- Levin, Harry. *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*. Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1989.
- Leyda, Jay. *A Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819–1891*. New York: Harcourt, 1951.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick, or, the Whale*. Eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "Preface." *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1840.
- . *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*. Ed. David Galloway. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Tally, Robert T., Jr. "The Poetics of Descent: Irreversible Narrative in Poe's 'Manuscript Found in a Bottle.'" *Studies in Irreversibility: Texts and Contexts*. Ed. Benjamin Schreier. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007. 83–98.