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ALEXANDER SCHLUTZ

## Purloined Voices: Edgar Allan Poe Reading Samuel Taylor Coleridge

THE PERVASIVE INFLUENCE OF SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE'S WORK ON THE writings of Edgar Allan Poe is well documented. As early as 1930, in his article "Poe's Debt to Coleridge," Floyd Stovall maintained that Coleridge was "the guiding genius of Poe's entire intellectual life."<sup>1</sup> Daniel Hoffman's contention from 1972 that "the philosophical breadth of Coleridge underlies Poe's acute narrowness as the pyramid on the Great Seal of the United States at its summit supports one assured and unblinking eye" is equally far-reaching.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as undeniable as the influential presence of Coleridge's thought in Poe's texts might be, the insinuation of seamless continuity that underpins these and similar assessments needs to be called into question. Poe is in fact far from completing the philosophical structure that Coleridge had attempted to build, and if he inhabits it, he does so not as a headstone in its supporting arch, but rather as a threat to its desired foundations.

Poe felt without a doubt that he had discovered the voice of a kindred spirit in Coleridge's early poetry, a voice that would continue to reverberate in Poe's prose, where elements of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* resurface with the persistence of those subconscious depths of guilt and speechless dread that fascinated both writers equally. It is also an open secret that Poe the reviewer and literary critic freely borrowed from Coleridge's poetological reflections to suit his needs, unabashedly presenting Coleridge's aesthetic principles, specifically those developed in the *Biographia Literaria*, as his own critical insights. Even Poe's famous "tales of ratiocination," which institute the modern genre of detective fiction, owe, as Christopher Kearns has rightfully pointed out, a debt to Coleridge that is

1. Floyd Stovall, "Poe's Debt to Coleridge," *University of Texas Studies in English* 10 (1930): 70-127 (71).

2. Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972) 87.

just as heavy as it is unacknowledged.<sup>3</sup> Despite their pervasiveness, such "effects" of literary influence would not have greatly troubled Coleridge, for whom Poe, who ultimately no more than adopts Coleridge's own strategies of textual appropriation, obviously presented no direct literary competition. What would have been of some concern for Coleridge, however—had Poe, like the "Frogpondian" Emerson, been able to make the pilgrimage to Highgate for a hypothetical table talk with the sage of British Romantic letters—is the fact that the philosophical and religious convictions that underpin Coleridge's thought ceased to have any purchase on Poe's thought and prose. If Emerson's Unitarianism no longer seemed a tenable religious position for the ex-Unitarian Coleridge, deeply immersed in Trinitarian belief in the last years of his life, the differences in religious, philosophical, and aesthetic sensibility between Coleridge and Poe ultimately run far deeper than such doctrinal conflicts.

Coleridge's desire for an all-encompassing philosophical system based on, and reconcilable with, Christian religious belief is firmly rooted in the philosophical discussion of the European Romantic period, in which the products and processes of the poetic imagination, a "faculty divine" for Coleridge, could be seen to mediate between the only seemingly irreconcilable realms of the empirical and the transcendent. Only a few decades later this very desire would appear as no less than unpoetic for Poe, who had already embarked on the vessel of an aesthetics that would mark the end of the nineteenth century, and for which the work of art is no longer proof of the connection between the human and the divine, but rather an autonomous aesthetic creation that derives its specific dignity from the moment of poetic eternity it upholds in the face of the inevitability of human death. Poe's appropriation of Coleridge's philosophical voice, which cannot entail the casting of an even wider analytical net, is, as I will attempt to demonstrate on the following pages, rather part of a narrative strategy that represents the systematic urge of the philosopher as the desire of the storyteller to weave together the various strands of his narrative in a satisfactory fashion. Where Coleridge speaks of philosophical method, Poe sees the workings of a plot, and it will be the task of this essay to delineate the intricate intertextual movement from one perspective to the other. This endeavor will then indeed span Poe's entire intellectual career, as it leads from his earliest poetological text, "Letter to B—," via one of his best-known tales, "The Purloined Letter," to *Eureka*, the rarely discussed final work of Poe's life. Each of these texts, while relying on Coleridgean ideas outlined in the *Biographia Literaria* and *The Friend*, thoroughly remakes its unac-

3. Christopher Kearns, "Rehearsing Dupin: Poe's Duplicious Confrontation with Coleridge," *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 3.1 (Spring 2002): 3–17.

knowledge sources, hiding a dependency that is ultimately a springboard to something new.

#### I. Letter to B—

To properly unravel the process of transformation and appropriation that constitutes Edgar Allan Poe's reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge it seems advisable to begin at the beginning and to turn our attention to Poe's earliest poetological text, "Letter to Mr.—," the preface to an 1831 collection of Poe's poems that would be published separately and with only slight alterations in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836 as "Letter to B—." Here one can find the following, typically ambivalent, passage with regard to Coleridge:

Of Coleridge I cannot speak but with reverence. His towering intellect! his gigantic power! He is one more evidence of the fact "que la plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce qu'elles avancent, mais non pas en ce qu'elles nient." He has imprisoned his own conceptions by the barrier he has erected against those of others. It is lamentable to think that such a mind should be buried in metaphysics, and, like the Nyctanthes, waste its perfume upon the night alone.<sup>4</sup>

These words present neither the unquestioning acceptance of a "guiding genius" or of a philosophical foundation for Poe's own work, nor do they simply express the common combination of admiration and regret with regard to Coleridge's philosophical endeavors that is usually founded on a mere refusal to actually come to terms with Coleridge the philosopher and metaphysician. There is more at stake in "Letter to B—" than is apparent at a merely superficial glance. In its original form, the text is designed as a defense of Poe's own poetry, which he fears will be judged by his American reviewers according to the positions of the "Lake school." In Poe's rendition, a conception of poetry as a philosophical and metaphysical practice of instruction is foremost among these positions, a tenet against which he upholds the view of poetry as solely a means for the production of beauty and pleasure: "Against the subtleties which would make poetry a study—not a passion—it becomes the metaphysician to reason—but the poet to protest" (*Essays* 8).

In his protest, Poe devotes lengthy passages to ridicule Wordsworth, but it is quite obvious that the true object and the only real threat against which he prepares his defense is Coleridge. Poe had in fact sufficient reason

4. Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984) 10f. Hereafter cited as *Essays* in the text.

for such a strategy of distraction, for when he claims at the end of his text, that "A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having for its *immediate* object, pleasure, not truth . . ." he is lifting his opinion directly from Chapter 14 of the *Biographia Literaria*<sup>5</sup> (*Essays* 11). Poe, who must have known how obvious the unacknowledged source for the central poetological claim of his own text would be for anybody familiar with Coleridge—who was after all no stranger on the American intellectual and literary scene of the 1830s—had compared Wordsworth's genius to that of a pickpocket only a few pages earlier. Given Poe's adeptness at the literary "picking of pockets" in the same text, such allusions seem less the product of a guilty conscience than the indulgences of a trickster who enjoys the game of hiding his purloined letters in plain sight, more or less taunting the reader to discover them. In this respect, the closing lines of "Letter to B—" are difficult to surpass in their thinly veiled irony. Summing up "this long rigmarole," which attempts to carve out a position of originality for his own poetry, Poe once more expresses his open disdain "for the metaphysical poets," for whom "as poets" he has "the most *sovereign* contempt" (*Essays* 11, second emphasis mine). The fact that these metaphysically inclined poets have a large following, Poe then attests, cannot be adduced as proof of the superior quality of their poetry, a claim he himself will "prove" with the following quoted lines: "No Indian prince has to his palace / More followers than a thief to the gallows." After openly appropriating Coleridge's very words in order to argue for his own superiority over Coleridge and the poets of the "Lake School," Poe can only have added these closing lines of the text in the "spirit of perversity" he would later immortalize in his short stories, and which inexorably forces the criminal to divulge his perfect crime to the police.

At the same time, the best audience for Poe's ingenuity as a pickpocket might in fact be Coleridge himself, since Poe, who had closely read the *Biographia*, does not merely purloin Coleridge but does so quite consciously in truly Coleridgean fashion. In a calculated rhetorical move, not only Poe's own position, but also his preceding critique of Coleridge is presented in words—French and English—that are taken verbatim from Chapter 12 of the *Biographia*, where Coleridge himself had written the following:

The spirit of sectarianism has been hitherto our fault and the cause of our failures. We have imprisoned our conceptions by the lines which

5. Coleridge's text reads as follows: "A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth. . . ." Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 2, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 7.2: 13. Hereafter cited as BL 2 in the text.

we have drawn, in order to exclude the conceptions of others. J'ai trouvé que la plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce qu'elles avancent, mais non pas tant en ce qu'elles nient.<sup>6</sup>

While Poe was unaware that the French just as much as the English in Coleridge's passage is derived from the writings of Leibniz, the French clearly indicated to him that he was quoting a quote. In what Jonathan Bate has described as a true act of homage to Coleridge, Poe hence repeats almost uncannily Coleridge's own pastiche-like practice of creating his text out of a network of quotes.<sup>7</sup> He thus ironically undermines Coleridge's authority by a repetition of the latter's very own textual practice: he usurps his voice and makes it his own. The first version of Poe's text, "Letter to Mr—," as Bate points out, in fact still acknowledges the quote and reads as follows: "To use an author quoted by himself [i.e., Coleridge], 'J'ai trouvé que la plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce qu'elles avancent, mais non pas en ce qu'elles nient.' . . ." Using the quote against Coleridge, Poe then continues: "and, to employ his own language, he has imprisoned his own conceptions by the barrier he has erected against those of others" (Bate 256). The fact that in "Letter to B—" Poe removes all indications that the French quote is derived from the *Biographia* only heightens the effect of a conscious usurpation of Coleridge's voice, which, however, is even less Coleridge's "own" than Poe expected. Whether such acts of appropriation can be seen as acts of homage, as Bate suggests, or whether they are, as Christopher Kearns puts it, "symptomatic of an attitude hovering uneasily between admiration and an almost Bloomian anxiety of influence," they are ultimately indicative of more than the either uneasy or almost flippant relationship of a young American writer to an elder statesman of English Romantic letters (Kearns 4).

For Poe also seizes this quote from one of the most central passages in the *Biographia Literaria*, where it appears at the end of what is in fact an extended direct translation from Leibniz via Jacobi, in which the latter outlines the concern that is also situated at the heart of Coleridge's own philo-

6. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 1, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 7.1: 247. Hereafter cited as BL 1 in the text.

7. Jonathan Bate, "Edgar Allan Poe: A Debt Repaid," *The Coleridge Connection—Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (London: McMillan, 1990) 254–73 (258). As already James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate point out in their annotations to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge's immediate source here is in fact not Leibniz, but rather F. H. Jacobi's German translation of passages from Leibniz in *Über die Lehre des Spinoza* (1789). While Coleridge's English is a translation of Jacobi's German, the French is indeed Leibniz' own, as also Jacobi had preserved this sentence in the original. Coleridge, as Bate remarks, is ultimately no less disingenuous than Poe, who "found in the *Biographia* exactly what Coleridge found in Jacobi: a depository of wise quotations" (258).

sophical project. Coleridge claims in Leibniz's doubly translated words that if all philosophical systems known so far were considered in their fundamental and only seemingly contradictory truths, they would be found "united in one perspective central point, which shows regularity and coincidence of all the parts in the very object, which from every other point of view must appear confused and distorted" (BL 1: 247). This promise, which immediately precedes the passage quoted by Poe, is none other than the ultimate philosophical goal Coleridge had set himself for his still to be written "magnum opus," where in the system of all systems every possible philosophical perspective could ultimately be reduced to the same underlying principles.

From which position, then, is it possible for Poe at this very moment to appropriate Coleridge's own, albeit borrowed words, turn them inside out and present precisely this all-inclusive philosophical position as Coleridge's own "imprisonment"? Obviously, Poe could not pretend to present a more inclusive philosophical position than that of Coleridge himself. It is not after all the metaphysician who reasons here, but rather the poet, who protests. Part of the answer is again, as Christopher Kearns has demonstrated, a premeditated alteration in Poe's text of Coleridge's Leibnizean quotation: Whereas Leibniz and thus Coleridge had claimed that most philosophical "sects" could be found to be correct in what they claimed "but *not so much* in what they deny"—"mais non pas tant en ce qu'elles nient"—Poe, whose excellent knowledge of French makes it quite probably more than a simple oversight, drops the "tant" to alter the sentence to "mais non pas en ce qu'elles nient"—"but *not* in what they deny." Poe thus attributes to Coleridge precisely the kind of exclusionary perspective against which Coleridge had originally used the quote, a strategy which in turn gives Poe, who actively "imprisons" Coleridge, as Kearns remarks, by way of a mistranscription, the necessary space to take up a contrary perspective (Kearns 12). Coleridge's desired philosophical position, under which all others could be subsumed without harm or distortion, must be actively made to deny the right of entry to at least one: Poe's own poetic protest against the paternal gesture of such all-inclusiveness itself.

Ultimately more important, however, than the textual sleight of hand that makes room for it, is the precise nature of the perspective that Poe feels he needs to free for himself in "Letter to B—." For Poe is of course aware that he misrepresents Coleridge's position when he insinuates that the latter's view of poetry would turn the aesthetic text into a mere vehicle for philosophical instruction. Borrowing Coleridge's very words to present his own aesthetic perspective makes that more than obvious, and Poe, an avid reader of Coleridge's poetry, would have had no doubts that his categorical assertions were far from the truth. What Poe ultimately does object

to in "Letter to B—" is not Coleridge's championing of philosophy over poetry, clearly no more than a rhetorical straw man to present Poe's argument more forcefully, but rather the ultimate *union* of poetry and philosophy that was so essential for Coleridge. For the latter had written after all—in a passage of the *Biographia Literaria* with which Poe was certainly familiar, and which functions there, in another twist of textual irony, to disqualify the poetic authority of Wordsworth—that "No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher" (BL 2: 25f.). This assertion presents a claim Poe is no longer willing to make, and while his position may in part reflect the unwillingness of the American writer to burden himself with the bulky British ballast of a Coleridgean erudition, it mainly derives from an aesthetic perspective that demands complete autonomy for art and poetry, aesthetic discourses which should no longer rely for their justification on fulfilling a mediatory function in the establishment of a philosophical system. And this, I would hold, is precisely the rift which needs to be located in the intertextual relation of these two writers, marked by an intricate simultaneity of sameness and difference, where the same words take on different meanings as they make their way from Coleridge's page to Poe's pen. While Coleridge strove to maintain the delicate balance of poetry and philosophy, Poe, who could no longer believe in a basis of their union, read Coleridge's words solely with the eyes of the writer. What embodied a philosophical desire for the latter becomes an aesthetic construct for the former, and the "Letter to B—" is emblematic of the loss of faith in the explanatory power of philosophical systems that informs Poe's reading of Coleridge.

Poe in fact brilliantly institutes this very reversal in the following paragraph in "Letter to B—," which makes a rather despairing claim about Coleridge's "philosophical breadth" in the *Biographia Literaria*:

He goes wrong by reason of his very profundity, and of his error we have a natural type in the contemplation of a star. He who regards it directly and intensely sees, it is true, the star, but it is the star without a ray—while he who surveys it less inquisitively is conscious of all for which the star is useful to us below—its brilliancy and its beauty. (Essays 8)

The analogy Poe uses here to illustrate Coleridge's "error" is of course by no means as "natural" as he would lead the reader to believe. Poe has undoubtedly lifted it from Plato's "Phaedo," where the fatal effects for the eye of a direct gaze into the sun had already been connected to the problems of philosophical investigation. But Poe, in by now familiar fashion not only hides the textual origin of a "natural type," he also (mis)uses it quite consciously to undermine the authority of his unacknowledged sources. This

kind of textual borrowing might in fact be Poe's very own version of "that moral mechanism by which the simplicity of a child may overbalance the wisdom of a man," which he had advocated in the previous paragraph. Not only must we assume that Poe here in not quite serious presumptuousness chides Coleridge for not having understood his Plato, Poe also employs the Phaedo's imagery in order to replace the Platonic philosopher-king with the exiled poet as the most adept at judging what is "useful to us" in the sublunar world.

In one short paragraph Poe reverses and ultimately severs the connection between the noumenal and the phenomenal world, as well as the union of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful so essential for both Plato and Coleridge. In the "Phaedo," Plato's Socrates had after all denounced the philosophical focus on *empirical* phenomena as a possible source of epistemological blindness, a danger against which he recommends the use of theories and thus of abstract vision in the endeavor to understand the causes of the empirical world. A reliance on *aisthesis*, on the eyes and the bodily senses, threatens to be blinding in the "Phaedo," while the truth about the empirical world can only be revealed through the "indirect" way of mental vision that is philosophical theory. This "second voyage" of deduction, as is well known, ultimately leads to the affirmation of the noumenal realm of forms as the truly real, an abstract truth of which the world of empirical objects is only a reflection. Poe, however, denounces precisely the metaphysical reflections of the philosopher as the gaze into the sun that would blind him, and thus urges a greater attention to the things "here below," while recommending only the occasional and less inquisitive glance in the direction of the stars above. Yet even though a nod to Francis Bacon in the preceding paragraph might suggest such a conclusion, Poe does not advocate here an exclusive preference for the empirical over the ideal. What the quoted paragraph praises are rather the *aesthetic effects* of the star, "its brilliancy and its beauty." These effects prove ultimately more essential than the star itself, which becomes negligible and even detrimental in the search for truth Poe delineates. To contemplate the essence of the star will reveal only empty words and concepts—"it is true, the star"—, which have no discernible meaning for the human observer. Such empty talk—the metaphysical cant of popularized Transcendentalism Poe so passionately disdained—is equivalent to mere darkness, "the star without a ray," and the investigation of a solar eclipse, which had served Plato as the vehicle for his philosophical metaphor, has more than lost its interest in Poe's aesthetic argument. Beauty and aesthetic brilliancy in turn, rather than having their causes in the ideal form of Beauty from which they partake and derive their *quidditas* according to the Socrates of the Phaedo, now become the only truth available, and the only one of any moral use to those living below.

Art thus replaces philosophy as the *deuteros plous* and the practice best-suited to afford some much-needed light to human affairs.

From such a perspective it must necessarily seem "lamentable" that Coleridge's mind should be "buried in metaphysics," and that he, like the Nyctanthes, the "sad tree" of India, which flowers brilliantly at night but drops its blossoms at dawn, should "waste[s] his perfume upon the night alone." And who better predisposed than Poe, master of literary ventriloquism and expert in channeling narrative voices from the grave and the cells of the condemned, to free Coleridge from such ostensibly self-imposed imprisonment, bringing the perfume of his brightest nightly flowers to the dark light of day? To observe more closely how Poe picks the locks of Coleridge's metaphysical chains, we now need to skip fourteen years ahead, to 1845, the date of publication of that tale of Poe which is most overtly concerned with the problem of imprisoned perspectives and the possibility of a privileged point of observation from which they could all be united.

#### Purloined Letters and Essays on Method

"The Purloined Letter" is not only one of Poe's best-known and probably the most-discussed of his stories, but also a tale that attests to the lasting influence of Coleridge's ideas on Poe's thought and prose. Indeed, the very Coleridgean predicament that Poe takes up in the "Letter to B—" also constitutes the central problem and determines the narrative structure of "The Purloined Letter," which juxtaposes two modes of reasoning, an "imprisoned," mechanical and a "liberated," imaginative one in the characters' struggle for the enigmatic piece of writing. In his effort to retrieve the mysterious letter that the cunning Minister D. is using to blackmail a "certain royal personage," the Parisian Prefect G is quite unsuccessful, even though his search of the Minister's hotel is certainly rigorous beyond reproach. "The remote source of his defeat," as the protagonist of Poe's story, Auguste Dupin, puts it, lies in the fact that the Prefect is quite thoroughly imprisoned in his own perspective, excluding that of others. Unable to imagine an approach other than his own, it is impossible for him to reflect back on the principles of his search and hence to assume a position that would allow him to see beyond their limits. What lies outside the Prefect's comprehension is precisely the fact that our principles of observation constrain what we are able to observe, since no matter how much one might refine a certain model, it will only yield results which confirm to its presuppositions.

The Prefect, to borrow from a distinction that Poe's narrator develops in another tale of ratiocination, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," is merely "ingenious" and far from being "analytic." While ingenuity as defined by

Poe's narrator is a mere mechanical skill of correctly combining the facts, obeying the law of cause and effect, analysis is a truly creative power, not determined in its outcome by a strict adherence to such external rules. The close relation of this distinction to Coleridge's differentiation in the *Biographia Literaria* between "fancy" and "imagination" need not even be deduced, it is openly suggested in Poe's text. In a telling aside, the narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" remarks that "Between ingenuity and the analytic ability there exists a difference far greater, indeed, than that between the fancy and the imagination, but of a character very strictly analogous. It will be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fanciful, and the *truly* imaginative never otherwise than analytic."<sup>8</sup> Dupin himself is a true example of the analyst: not confined to a single perspective, his observations are not limited to a specific set of presuppositions. Rather, through an act of imaginary identification, he is able to put himself in the mind of the Minister, which allows him to recreate the latter's thoughts and hence to "intuit" his strategy.

The crux of the problem is the question of how one is to arrive at the principles that will make this analytical "leap of the imagination" possible in the first place. What is the position from which all other perspectives become accessible and how does one reach it?<sup>9</sup>—The narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" has no trouble admitting that there is in fact no way to reach such a position by means of analysis itself, as the method that allows us to perceive the rules and laws according to which we decide to frame our observations, cannot itself rely on a set of analyzable principles. Hence the results of the analyst's performance, "brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition" (*Poetry* 397). This reference to the "essence of method" again openly alludes to Coleridge, whose "Essays on the Principles of Method," a central

8. Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984) 399f. Hereafter cited as *Poetry* in the text.

9. Or, to put it in the words of Jacques Lacan in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" how does one put oneself in the imaginary position of "absolute master"? How does one fulfill the desire that Jacques Derrida in "The Purveyor of Truth," his subsequent critique of Lacan's reading, would describe as inherently deluded? While it is not my goal in this essay to engage the Lacan-Derrida debate about Poe's story directly or in detail, I do think that a shift in frame, as Derrida would put it, emphasizing the text's close relation to the work of Coleridge, who thus becomes another duped possessor as well as addressee of the purloined letter, presents a useful addition to the discussion between psychoanalytic and deconstructionist criticism. For Lacan's and Derrida's essays in English translation and a good source of information about the debate and its subsequent continuation, see John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, eds., *The Purloined Poe—Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988). For an extensive analysis of "The Purloined Letter" as a response to the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, see Daniel Burgoyne, "The Colloquy of Edgar Allan Poe and Samuel Taylor Coleridge," diss., University of Washington, 1998.

part of the 1818 edition of Coleridge's *The Friend*, Poe would have read in James Marsh's American edition from 1831.<sup>10</sup> It is here that Poe found the philosophical model for the two modes of reasoning described in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and narrativized in "The Purloined Letter." We thus need to turn to *The Friend* to develop a clearer understanding of what is at stake when the "essence of method" is transferred from Coleridge's text to Poe's tales.

The "science of Method," as Coleridge describes it in *The Friend*, will enable its practitioners to satisfactorily construct a system, be it scientific, aesthetic, philosophical, or otherwise. Method thus constitutes a science that does not treat specific classes of objects, but rather the *relations* between the objects of knowledge as its primary material. Method, in other words, has thought and reflection itself as its objects:

METHOD, therefore, becomes natural to the mind which has been accustomed to contemplate not *things* only, or for their sake alone, but likewise and chiefly the *relations* of things, either their relations to each other, or to the observer, or to the state and apprehension of the hearers.<sup>11</sup>

The relations that can form the material for Method are of two kinds, Coleridge explains. The second and lesser type of relation stems from the observation of empirical facts and will thus always suggest a systematical arrangement governed by the mechanical laws of cause and effect. Coleridge labels this mode of classification "theory" and defines it as a relation "in which the existing forms and qualities of objects, discovered by observation or experiment, suggest a given arrangement of many under one point of view: and this not merely or principally in order to facilitate the remembrance, recollection, or communication of the same; but for the purposes of understanding, and in most instances of controlling, them" (*The Friend* 464).

Such is the systematic approach of the Prefect in Poe's story, whose at-

10. Marsh also published an edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* in 1829. These two editions and in particular Marsh's foreword to the *Aids to Reflection* were instrumental for Coleridge's impact on American intellectual life. See also Anthony Harding, "Coleridge and Transcendentalism," *The Coleridge Connection—Essays for Thomas McFarland* 233–54.

11. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend* 1, ed. Barbara Rooke, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 4.1: 451. Hereafter cited as *The Friend* in the text. Coleridge's formulation cannot but ring odd to the contemporary ear, which is acquainted with "scientific method" but seems to balk at the suggestion of a "science of Method." Coleridge's attempt to philosophically describe the process of arriving at scientific hypothesis itself, it seems, must of necessity produce a terminology that encapsulates contradictions. Poe, as we will see, will find a different solution to the problem in *Eureka*.

tempts at theoretical control of the given facts are described by Dupin as "a sort of Procrustean bed, to which he forcibly adapts his designs" (*Poetry* 689). This approach is doomed to failure because the Prefect, unlike Dupin, has not the motivations of the Minister D. in view, but rather a set of external circumstances, which he believes to be thoroughly in his control. It does not occur to him to examine the hypothesis underlying his theoretical approach, which, as the product of an abstraction from empirical data, necessarily remains arbitrary as Coleridge explains:

For what shall determine the mind to abstract and generalize one common point rather than another? and within what limits, from what number of individual objects, shall the generalization be made? The theory must still require a prior theory for its own legitimate construction. (*The Friend* 476)

If this were all, however, the science of Method would be caught in an infinite regress. Every meta-theory would be as groundless as the theory it was designed to explain, and its generalizations would hence be in need of yet another theory for their justification. Dupin, to put it in the terms of Poe's story, would be yet another Prefect, simply on a superior level, different in degree, but not in kind.<sup>12</sup>

For Coleridge, the central problem of "theory," no matter how abstract its principles, is its reliance on observation and empirical data. Built on such an insecure basis ("observation, though aided by experiment, is necessarily limited and imperfect," [*The Friend* 477]), a merely theoretical system could never provide any insight that goes beyond these empirical limitations. For this reason, only mathematics could qualify as a perfect science, since it operates unconcerned with empirical reality and deals exclusively with intellectual entities that are the synthetic products of prior definitions.<sup>13</sup> Following the model of mathematics, true philosophical insight can thus only be

12. The status of Dupin, and by extension that of the psychoanalyst, once he has gained possession of the letter from the Minister D., is of course also at the heart of the debate between Lacan and Derrida. Coleridge, as we will see in the following, has no reservations about a source of truth that makes an absolute difference in kind possible for the place occupied by Poe's detective. For Coleridge, there decidedly is a place outside the Lacanian chain of signification and the Derridean process of dissemination, allowing for a law that is free of the "blindness" of the "law of castration."

13. "With the mathematician the definition makes the object, and pre-establishes the terms which, and which alone, can occur in the after reasoning," writes Coleridge, echoing Kant's assessment of the mathematician's synthetic *a priori* judgments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While Kant is never directly referred to in the "Essays on Method," nor in *The Friend* as a whole, the influence of Kantian philosophy on Coleridge's systematic approach developed here is undeniable. The distinction, so essential for Coleridge, between theory and law and understanding and reason is clearly derived from his study of Kant (*The Friend* 476).

achieved if the relations that are the material of Method originate not in empirical observation, but in the mind of the observer. This superior kind of relation, which Coleridge terms "Law," occupies the foremost place in the science of Method.

... in whatever science the relations of the parts to each other and to the whole is predetermined by a truth originating in the *mind*, and not abstracted or generalized from observation of the parts, there we affirm the presence of a *law*. (*The Friend* 459)

Unlike the definitions of mathematics, however, the principles of Law are not only intellectual principles but also account for the relations between and for the very existence of the objects of empirical reality. They can do so because they are the divine causes of empirical phenomena that can never be derived from the latter through the deductive processes of theory. The science of Method, which has ultimately little to do with Poe's purloined principles of analysis, is firmly grounded in religious faith.

... we contemplate it [Law] as exclusively an attribute of the Supreme Being, inseparable from the idea of God: adding, however, that from the contemplation of law in this, its only perfect form, must be derived all true insight into all other grounds and principles necessary to Method, as the science common to all sciences. . . . (*The Friend* 459f)

The "essence of method," which has "the whole air of intuition," is hence for Coleridge an act of faith, while the mere ingenuity of theory is due to the lack of a religious principle:

Alienated from this (intuition shall we call it? or steadfast faith?) ingenious men may produce schemes, conducive to the peculiar purposes of particular sciences, but no scientific system. (*The Friend* 460)

Coleridge's science of Method, much like Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Theory of Scientific Knowledge*, is a science of science, a propaedeutical discipline which is to supply in Coleridge's words "A Principle of Unity with Progression" that would provide the foundation, unity, and first principle of a truly comprehensive philosophical system, capable of continuous development<sup>14</sup> (*The Friend* 476). Based on the principle of Law, this scientific

14. Ultimately, Coleridge's science of Method, in its effort to provide the "supersensual essence, which being at once the *ideal* of reason and the cause of the material world, is the pre-establisher of the harmony in and between both" is closer to the transcendental idealism of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, as we shall see in the discussion of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (*The Friend* 463). Nevertheless, the systematic impulse to truly transform philosophy into an exact science has its roots in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. Neither of the two German idealists' systems, however, proved sufficient for Coleridge's aspiration to firmly ground a comprehensive philosophical system in his religious beliefs.



philosophical method thus extolls religion as the ultimate goal and unifying element of any systematic endeavor:

Religion therefore is the ultimate aim of philosophy, in consequence of which philosophy itself becomes the supplement of the sciences, both as the convergence of all to the common end, namely, wisdom; and as supplying the copula, which modified in each in the comprehension of its parts to one whole, is in its principles common to all, as integral parts of one system. And this is METHOD, itself a distinct science, the immediate offspring of philosophy, and the link or *mordant* by which philosophy becomes scientific and the sciences philosophical. (*The Friend* 463)

This religious principle uniting philosophy and the sciences needs to be recognized, according to Coleridge, if one aims to construct a satisfactory philosophical system. Coleridge's philosopher is ultimately a philosopher *only* because he has access to the source of divine reason which provides him with the vantage point from which to truly perceive the *necessary* relations of things, which form the primary material of the science of Method. It is this capacity which distinguishes theory from Method and a mere mechanical arrangement of facts from an organic system. It *demand*s of the philosopher an act of faith.

#### Faith, Imagination, and the Subject

Neither Dupin nor the Minister D. are given to overt professions of faith, nor are these the rule in Poe's oeuvre as a whole. Poe's death-bound tales after all provide ample proof for the conviction that it is impossible for the human mind to come to know itself, let alone its divine origin.<sup>15</sup> If there is any higher power involved in the telling of "The Purloined Letter," it is that of a good plot. Poe's story is entirely the product of literary machinations: It begins in the dark of a library and it ends with a quotation. One

15. This sobering fear had in fact already been Coleridge's as well. Had Poe been able to read Coleridge's notebooks, he would have discovered that Coleridge's thought could be even closer to his own than the admirer of the *Ancient Mariner* already suspected. For in the private pages of his notebooks, particularly in his entries concerning the workings of imagination in nightmares, Coleridge sketches out a view of the self to which even the darkest of Poe's stories have ultimately little to add. Cut off from its most desired connection to the divine reason, Coleridge's nightmare self is rather the helpless prey of irrational and demonic mental forces, originating from the frailties of the body, in face of which the rational self finds itself a powerless observer of its own destruction. The notebooks thus illustrate what Coleridge had already admitted in Chapter 9 of the *Biographia*, the fact that the philosophical convictions he develops here are not the admonitions of a righteous believer, but rather the "necessary beliefs" of a mind often lost in the "sandy deserts of utter unbelief" (BL 1: 152). Poe for his part, would ultimately simply probe the depths of this abyss much more openly than Coleridge, who still thought to build a philosophical bridge across it.

can wonder after all, if the mysteriously incriminating letter has ever existed to begin with. And the reason why Dupin is so perfectly able to intuit the actions of the Minister D., is, like the letter purloined by both of them, almost too obvious to see: Twin brothers in physical appearance and mental capacity, they mirror each other as the figments of the imagination of one and the same creator, who claims no divine inspiration for his aesthetic constructs.

In this narrative transformation of Coleridge's Method, it is once again not the metaphysician who reasons but rather the poet who protests. For poetry, not philosophy, let alone religion, is what makes Dupin and the Minister D. superior thinkers in Poe's story. While both of them are, quite in Coleridge's sense, mathematicians and not empirical scientists, they neither combine philosophy nor faith with their mathematical reasoning, but rather their experience as poets. Only because of their imaginative poetic faculties are both able to outwit the merely ingenious and fanciful Prefect, who is trapped in his conviction that an insurmountable difference separates the realm of poetic imagination from effective methods of rational calculation. As Dupin argues, the Prefect's blindness to the shortcomings of his approach ultimately "lies in the supposition that the Minister is a fool, because he has acquired renown as a poet" (*Poetry* 691). When the narrator of "The Purloined Letter" contends that to his knowledge the Minister was no poet, but a mathematician who had received acclaim for his writings on differential calculus, Dupin reinforces the necessity to see these two professions as united:

You are mistaken; I know him well; he is both. As poet *and* mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect. (*Poetry* 691)

Poetic imagination thus replaces religious faith as the key element of systematic thought in Poe's narrative. In performing this shift, Poe severs the union of poetry and philosophy that was essential for Coleridge. And in an irony he may have privately enjoyed, Poe himself could thus be seen as "that *monstrum horrendum*" as Dupin ultimately comes to describe the Minister—"an unprincipled man of genius," Poe's version of what Coleridge would have called "a man of method without faith."<sup>16</sup>

16. Derrida is thus almost uncannily doubly correct when he points to Lacan's deliberate misquotation of Poe's and Dupin's quote from Cr  billon's *At  e* at the end of "The Purloined Letter," for what is at stake in Poe's text is certainly poetic *dessein* rather than tragic *destin*. And Lacan, in thus continuing the practice of appropriating quotes, joining the chain that had already linked Coleridge and Poe, seems unconsciously to fall prey to the same "Wiederholungszwang" that the seminar had set out to discuss (see Muller and Richardson 206).

It will prove illuminating to return once more to the *Biographia Literaria* in order to examine the unity of poetry, philosophy, and faith in the Coleridgean text from which Poe purloins the other distinction that is central to his tales of ratiocination, that between fancy and imagination. For this purpose we can in fact return to the very page where the quotation from the "Letter to B—" that I discussed at the beginning of this essay had left off: Coleridge, immediately after he introduced the goal of completing an all-inclusive philosophical system, now addresses the question of where the first principle of such a system might be found. For the same reason that theory was discarded as a means to provide it in the "Essays on the Principles of Method," Coleridge here excludes the possibility that this principle could be located in memory, the mechanical part of the human intelligence. Such an approach would immediately lead to the familiar problem of infinite regress, as this part of the human mind after all constitutes part of what the system as a whole should be able to explain:

A system, which aims to deduce the memory with all the other functions of intelligence, must of course place its first position from beyond the memory, and anterior to it, otherwise the principle of solution would be itself a part of the problem to be solved. Such a position therefore must, in the first instance be demanded, and the first question will be, by what right is it demanded? (BL 1: 247)

This question complicates the central assumption of the "Essays on the Principles of Method," where Coleridge asserted the existence of the divine relations of Law as a necessity that only had to be reinforced by the shortcomings of theory. In his attempt to demonstrate the right to demand such a first principle located outside the confines of mere mechanical ingenuity, Coleridge now moves to the writings of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling and continues his text with an embellished translation from the latter's "Über Postulate in der Philosophie" [On Postulates in Philosophy]. In this text, which is an appendix to Schelling's "Abhandlungen zur Erläuterung des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre," written in 1796 and 1797, Schelling uses the postulation of first principles in geometry as an analogy which "supplies philosophy with the example of a primary intuition, from which every science that lays claim to evidence must take its commencement," and Coleridge thus returns to the example of mathematics he had also given in *The Friend* (BL 1: 250).<sup>17</sup> Geometry's first principle, expands

17. The quotation is Coleridge's direct translation from Schelling in Chapter 12 of the *Biographia Literaria*. Here is Schelling's German original from his *On Postulates in Philosophy*: "Die Mathematik gibt also der Philosophie das Beispiel einer ursprünglichen Anschauung, von der jede Wissenschaft ausgehen muß, welche auf Evidenz Anspruch machen will,"

Coleridge translating Schelling, an undetermined line, or rather an undetermined point in motion, is in fact a mere postulate. It needs to be inferred from the two observable types of movement: straight lines and circles. Ultimately, the possibility of an externally undetermined line, "undetermined through any point without, and determined through itself," which cannot be demonstrated, must be intuited as the middle ground of the two movements. "The mathematician," like Poe's analyst, hence "does not begin with a demonstrable proposition, but with an intuition, a practical idea" (BL 1: 250).

Coleridge, via Schelling, uses the mathematical discipline of geometry as an analogy for philosophical activity. Just as much as the mathematician needs to intuit the first principle of geometry, the philosopher needs to discover the first principle and postulate of philosophy by means of a "most original construction."<sup>18</sup> In Schelling's early text, which still operates within the terminological framework of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, this "most original construction," which provides the first principle of philosophy, is the self-reflexive construction of the "I" in consciousness. This original activity, in which the "I" creates itself simultaneously as subject and object, is the philosophical equivalent of the mathematical postulate. Since this postulate, as a purely internal act, can never be empirically demonstrated, it will only be evident to those who possess the "philosophical organ" that will allow them to recreate the same moment of construction within themselves. This activity has to be demanded to make the philosophical position communicable and comprehensible.

... it [philosophy] is evident for anyone who possesses the organ for it (who does not lack the inner capacity for construction), just like mathematics, which is also not made comprehensible by means of figures, stencilled in copper, or through mere contemplation, but by means of an inner organ (the imagination).<sup>19</sup> (Schelling 447)

F. W. J. von Schelling, "Über Postulate in der Philosophie," *Sämtliche Werke*, 14 vols., ed. K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856-1964) 1: 444-52 (444).

18. Coleridge's translation: "Nevertheless philosophy, if it is to arrive at evidence, must proceed from the most original construction . . ." (BL 1: 250). Schelling's original: "Nun muß aber die Philosophie, wenn sie evident werden soll, von der ursprünglichsten Construction ausgehen . . ." (445).

19. "... sie ist evident für jeden, der das Organ dazu hat (dem das innere Constructionsvermögen nicht abgeht), gerade so wie die Mathematik, die auch nicht durch die Figuren, in Kupfer gestochen, oder durch das Ansehen allein, sondern durch ein inneres Organ (die Einbildungskraft) verständlich wird." The English translation here is mine; this part of Schelling's text is not incorporated by Coleridge in Chapter 12 of the *Biographia Literaria*.

The central postulate of transcendental philosophy, which Schelling here renders as the command "become conscious of yourself in your original activity!"<sup>20</sup> is thus a product of imagination. As the "philosophical organ," this faculty constitutes the irreplaceable element that alone can differentiate a merely mechanical set of presuppositions from the living whole of an organic system. Without access to this self-reflexive inner organ, every thinker remains a mere Prefect in Coleridge's translation of Schelling's text:

So is there many a one among us, yes, and some who think themselves philosophers, too, to whom the philosophical organ is entirely wanting. To such a man, philosophy is a mere play of words and notions, like a theory of music to the deaf, or like the geometry of light to the blind. The connection of the parts and their logical dependencies may be seen and remembered; but the whole is groundless and hollow, unsustained by living contact, unaccompanied with any realizing intuition which exists by and in the fact that affirms its existence, which is known, because it is, and is, because it is known.<sup>21</sup> (BL 1: 251)

This absolute ground of reality in which the activity of thinking or knowing and being are one and the same, however, has different connotations for Schelling and Coleridge. Ultimately, Coleridge proves to be purloining Schelling's concepts just as much as Poe would later purloin his own. For Coleridge, the absolute identity of knowing and being, epistemology and ontology, which the passage in the *Biographia Literaria* professes as the outcome of "living contact" and "realizing intuition," is a property of the living God and can as such, like the principles of Law, only be attributed to a supreme being. What had been for Schelling the recognition of the original activity that constitutes the "I," which creates itself in absolute causality in the act of thinking itself, is rendered by Coleridge as a gift from heaven: "The postulate of philosophy and at the same time the test of

20. . . . werde deiner selbst in deiner ursprünglichen Thätigkeit bewußt! (Schelling 448).

21. The last three lines of this quotation are no longer a translation from "Über Postulate in der Philosophie," but are derived from another of Schelling's early texts which Coleridge uses throughout the remainder of Chapter 12 of the *Biographia*: "Vom Ich als Princip der Philosophie oder über das Unbedingte im menschlichen Wissen" [About the I as the Principle of Philosophy or about the Absolute in Human Knowledge]. Here Schelling had written: "For the ultimate ground of all reality is a something that is only thinkable through itself, i.e., through its being, which is only thought insofar as it is, in short, in which the principle of being and thinking fall in one" ["Der letzte Grund aller Realität nämlich ist ein Etwas, das nur durch sich selbst, d.h. durch sein Seyn denkbar ist, das nur insofern gedacht wird, als es ist, kurz, bei dem das Princip des Seyns und des Denkens zusammenfällt"]. F. W. J. von Schelling, "Vom Ich als Princip der Philosophie oder über das Unbedingte im menschlichen Wissen," *Sämtliche Werke*, 1: 149-245 (163); my translation.

philosophic capacity, is no other than the heaven-descended KNOW THYSELF" (BL 1: 252).

In the *Biographia Literaria*, just as much as in *The Friend*, the act of self-knowledge that underlies transcendental philosophy has thus for Coleridge its true foundation in divine reason. This conviction is reinforced throughout the remainder of Chapter 12 where Coleridge continues to unfold the necessary prerogatives of a complete philosophical system by creating his own text out of a series of translated quotes from Schelling. Coleridge now mainly draws and translates from Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*, which presents a decisively less Fichtean position than the earlier texts Coleridge also used. In Schelling's system, transcendental philosophy, which has the "I" or self-consciousness as its object, now forms only one part of a comprehensive philosophy and needs to be complemented by natural philosophy, the science which treats of the objective activity of nature. It is the task of Schelling's system to show that these two poles of human knowledge are ultimately identical and simply two different expressions of one and the same absolute activity, an absolute which is now no longer located within the "I," but constitutes a higher sphere that comprises both the subject and nature. While Coleridge reproduces Schelling's argument in broad stretches of his own text, he continues to significantly alter these Schellingian passages. Schelling had described the highest goal of natural philosophy as showing the identity of nature and self-consciousness. Coleridge, however, presents this identity as an affirmation of the creative presence of the Judeo-Christian God.

The theory of natural philosophy would then be completed, when all nature was demonstrated to be identical in essence with that, which in its highest known power exists in man as intelligence and self-consciousness; when the heavens and the earth shall declare not only the power of their maker, but the glory and the presence of their God, even as he appeared to the great prophet during the vision of the mount in the skirts of his divinity. (BL 1: 256)

Coleridge's religious transformation of Schelling's Absolute is most clearly visible when Coleridge describes his own expectations of the "equatorial point" of both natural and transcendental philosophy that "would be the principle of a total and undivided philosophy" (BL 1: 282). In a description that recalls Coleridge's assertion from *The Friend*, religion and philosophy would be seen as interchangeable in this point of absolute identity:

In other words, philosophy would pass into religion, and religion become philosophy. We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to

end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the SELF, in order to lose and find all self in GOD. (BL 1: 283)

Coleridge's text here foreshadows his definition of imagination, which will be presented in Chapter 13 of the *Biographia* as a substitute for an extensive deduction of the "equatorial point" of philosophy, which Coleridge, using the ploy of a cautionary letter from a friend, had postponed for a later work on "constructive philosophy" (BL 1: 302). Imagination, as central for Coleridge as it is for Schelling, provides the possibility of an actual connection of the self and God and thus the unity of philosophy and religion in the medium of artistic activity. It is after all precisely the unity of the finite and the infinite that defines primary imagination in Coleridge's well-known formulation that describes it as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (BL 1: 304). What the self grasps in the act of imagination envisioned by Coleridge is its connection to the divine. This divine relation differentiates the "living contact" of imagination from the "mere play of words and notions" that is the product of the recollective faculty of fancy, which remains bound by the mechanical law of association. With this vital connection of imagination and the divine first principle of Coleridge's desired philosophical system in mind, we can now return to Edgar Allan Poe, who purloins Coleridge's conceptions for his own aesthetic purposes.

#### Eureka

Coleridge never completed his oft-promised *opus magnum*, in which the desired all-inclusive Christian philosophical system through which all others could be shown to be "united in one perspective central point" would have been exhaustively developed.<sup>22</sup> Poe on the other hand *did* publish what he considered the crowning effort of his life's work, the tour-de-force prose-poem *Eureka*, his *Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe*. "I have no desire to live since I have done 'Eureka.' I could accomplish nothing more," Poe wrote with rhetorical flourish to his mother-in-law, Maria Clemm, three months before his death, suggesting that what his efforts as a writer ultimately tended towards was his very own peculiar version of an all-inclusive philosophico-literary utterance.<sup>23</sup> For *Eureka* presents itself precisely as what in "Letter to B—" Poe had deemed Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* to be: "a treatise *de omni scibili et quibusdam*

22. Even though Coleridge's "Great Work" was never completed, parts and fragments of it do nevertheless exist. Presented and collected by Thomas McFarland with the assistance of Nick Halmi they make up *Opus Maximum*, vol. 15 of Coleridge's collected works.

23. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2 vols., ed. John Orstrom (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1948) 2: 452.

*aliis*" (*Essays* 8). There, as will be recalled, Poe had accused Coleridge of having made a grave mistake in pursuing precisely such an endeavor, of going wrong "by reason of his very profundity," wasting his precious poetic powers on the lonely metaphysical night.

It is thus unlikely that Poe was entirely serious when he first presented *Eureka*, Coleridge-style, as a public lecture at the New York Society Library on February 3, 1848. Yet, it is equally unlikely that Poe would have designed the most extensive work of his writing career, which attempts to synthesize contemporary astronomical theories from Simon de Laplace to Alexander von Humboldt in an effort to present a coherent theory able to explain no less than "the essence, origin, creation, present condition and destiny of the universe," *entirely* as a hoax. If that were the case, Susan Manning has rightfully remarked, the joke is ultimately on Poe, since the effort he must have invested in its execution far outweighs its possible effect on any audience, including that of Poe scholars, who only rarely pay the text extended critical attention.<sup>24</sup> It is thus, as Joan Dayan has argued, precisely the fundamental and self-conscious ambiguity of Poe's text, the undecidability of *Eureka's* ultimate rhetorical stance that needs to be seen as Poe's literary achievement and as one that is undoubtedly aligned with the underlying thrust of Poe's oeuvre as a whole.<sup>25</sup> The undecidable status of Poe's literary cosmology as a text can ultimately be seen to match the undecidability of the epistemological problem it depicts in all its outrageous digressions. If Coleridge had attempted to restore philosophical certainty to the epistemological process by grounding human consciousness in the divine, Poe would be unwilling to disregard the possibility, worthy of Descartes' *genius malignus*, that the universe might be no more than an elaborate joke at the expense of humanity's desire for knowledge. If the latter were true, the artist might be better equipped than the philosopher to retaliate by writing a text of ambiguous purpose, indicating simultaneously that the writer had fallen into the trap of believing to actually have unraveled the secrets of the universe, and that he had embarked on a satirical project, ridiculing precisely such a belief and the naïve trust in both the human conceptual apparatus and human language it betrays, or else that he might have done both, thus equally exposing the inescapable shortcomings of human cognition and reveling in the possibility of literary language to create a self-conscious universe all its own. In *Eureka's* all-inclusive rhetorical posture—"and it may be as well here to mention that by the term 'universe,' wherever employed without qualification in this essay, I mean to

24. Susan Manning, "The plots of God are perfect': Poe's *Eureka* and American Creative Nihilism," *Journal of American Studies* 23.2 (August 1989): 235-51 (236).

25. See Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind—An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

designate the utmost conceivable expanse of space, with all things, spiritual and material, that can be imagined to exist within the compass of that expanse"—that Poe both goes farthest in usurping Coleridge's philosophical voice, and in which simultaneously the crucial difference in approach between those two writers comes into clearest focus (*Poetry* 1262).

The underlying cosmological plot developed in *Eureka* can be roughly summarized as follows: The divine volition creates a first particle, characterized by oneness and simplicity. By a primal divine act, this particle is then forced to diffuse itself completely by means of radiation. The ensuing atoms, once completely diffused, interact while governed by the two forces of attraction and repulsion which account for all the successive states of the universe. By attraction, the atoms strive to regain their primal unity in a common center, while repulsion ensures that the divine goal of utmost relation between the atoms is reached, precluding them from uniting until that point in time when the force of attraction will eventually be stronger than the force of repulsion, allowing the universe to coalesce again into one common center. Upon completion of this cosmological cycle, the process promptly begins anew. Poe himself condenses his "general proposition" in the style of the idealist philosophical theses he would have found in Chapter 12 of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* as follows: "In the original unity of the first thing lies the secondary cause of all things, with the germ of their inevitable annihilation" (*Poetry* 1261). And Poe's two contrary and complementary forces of contraction and expansion, attraction and repulsion, which make this process possible, equally lead us back to the *Biographia*, now to the beginning of Chapter 13, where Coleridge, again presenting what is essentially a direct quote from Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* had written:

DesCartes, speaking as a naturalist, and in imitation of Archimedes, said give me matter and motion and I will construct you the universe. We must of course understand him to have meant; I will render the construction of the universe intelligible. In the same sense the transcendental philosopher says; grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or find itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you.<sup>26</sup> (*BL* 1: 297)

26. Only the second sentence and the mentioning of Archimedes are originally Coleridge's. For Schelling's original German see Engell's and Bate's footnote to the passage in *BL* 1.

While Poe claims to have achieved no less than precisely that in *Eureka*, a text which thus seems to fulfill the idealist project both in spirit and to the letter, Poe's two material and spiritual forces ultimately construct a poetic universe that is fundamentally different from that of an idealist system. The difference between the two approaches becomes almost instantly apparent in the opening pages of *Eureka*, when Poe locates his version of Coleridge's "equatorial" and thus Archimedean point from which the universe could be perceived in its oneness on the top of mount Ætna:

He who from the top of Ætna casts his eyes leisurely around, is affected chiefly by the extent and diversity of the scene. Only by a rapid whirling of the heel could he hope to comprehend the panorama in the sublimity of its oneness. (*Poetry* 1261)

Mount Ætna, however, of course has no top, and there is thus no position from which to make such an observation, except that of a free fall into the mouth of a volcano. Like the legendary Empedokles, to whom this passage alludes, Poe's fictional observer has to embrace death in order to experience the universe in its oneness.<sup>27</sup> The ideal unity and the perfect relations of Law, which for Coleridge could be intuited through the divine faculties of reason and imagination, constitute for Poe the object of an aesthetic desire, which can be sought in the process of writing, but—like the bottom of the Maelström in Poe's short story "A Descent into the Maelström"—could only be attained in the moment of self-annihilation. The Archimedean point of autonomous subjectivity from which the philosopher might attempt to move the world is thus a mere surface effect in Poe's text. It is constantly revealed—for anyone who cares to look and read—as an aesthetic illusion of the written word, an impossible "mental gyration" in the void (*Poetry* 1262). Clearly, nobody could even contemplate such a performance on the empirically existing or rather non-existing "summit of Ætna," and the "prospect" the ensuing view would afford can thus only be envisioned by means of an aesthetic simulacrum of death in the literary text. Poe can thus claim a Cartesian originality for the considerations developed in *Eureka*:

But as, on the summit of Ætna, no man has thought of whirling on his heel, so no man has ever taken into his brain the full uniqueness of the

27. For a discussion of Empedocles' pre-socratic philosophy as a possible source for the cosmogony developed in *Eureka*, see Peter C. Page, "Poe, Empedocles, and Intuition in *Eureka*," *Poe Studies* 11.2 (December 1978): 21–26; and, with a different position with regard to the ultimate seriousness of Poe's project, David Ketterer, "Empedocles in *Eureka*: Addenda," *Poe Studies* 18.2 (December 1985): 24–25.

prospect; and so, again, whatever considerations lie involved in this uniqueness have as yet no practical existence for mankind. (*Poetry* 1261)

If Poe was indeed the first to contemplate such a precarious philosophical position, he voiced it for the first time not in *Eureka* but rather in "Letter to B—," where he wrote the following with regard to Coleridge: "In reading his poetry, I tremble, like one who stands upon a volcano, conscious, from the very darkness bursting from the crater, of the fire and the light that are weltering below" (*Essays* 11). Once again it is Coleridge, who gives Poe the cue for a vision of the self decidedly unlike the former himself would advocate in his philosophical texts. But even if Poe must have recognized the threats to the rational conception of the self at the basis of Coleridge's philosophical voice, threats that ultimately engulf it in the poetic utterance of texts like "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," the metaphor Poe utilizes to depict the relation of these two differing conceptions of subjectivity could not be further from Coleridge's own desires. Coleridge wrote his philosophical texts after all as a means of protection against precisely such an onslaught of the irrational. Poe, on the other hand, once again reverses the relation Coleridge had sought to establish, when he locates the true source of light and fire *below* the rational surface of the *cogito*, in those subconscious volcanic depths that deny the self any firm ground or stable first principle to stand on.

Consequently, the method Poe uses to structure this free-fall into the volcano is once again the same he had already propounded and executed in his stories of ratiocination. In *Eureka*, this method surfaces as a message in a bottle found floating on the *Mare Tenebrarum*. Poe's narrator presents the bottle's content, a curious letter written in the year 2848, as a methodological prelude, meant to prepare the reader for the actual project on which he is about to embark.<sup>28</sup> The fictitious letter writer, whose voice the narrator now impersonates, is looking back on intellectual history and shows himself surprised that in earlier years only two roads to truth had been accepted by mankind: those of deduction and induction, of a priori and a posteriori philosophy. After thoroughly ridiculing both paths of reasoning, he finally relates what in his day is conceived as the most direct road to absolute truth:

... none of them [earlier philosophers] fell, even by accident, into what we now so distinctly perceive to be the broadest, the straightest

28. Another version of the same letter appears in Poe's *Mellonta Tauta*, where it is read by Pundita, aboard the balloon "skylark" on April 1, 2848, and thus doubly framed as a lark and an April Fools prank.

and most available of all mere roads—the great thoroughfare—the majestic highway of the *Consistent*[.] Is it not wonderful that they should have failed to deduce from the works of God the vitally momentous consideration that *a perfect consistency can be nothing but an absolute truth?* . . . By its means, investigation has been taken out of the hands of the ground-moles, and given as a duty, rather than a task, to the true—to the *only* true thinkers—to the generally-educated men of ardent imagination. (*Poetry* 1269)

The difference to Coleridge's approach is striking. While Coleridge, both in *The Friend* and the *Biographia Literaria*, had argued for a common principle in which both induction and deduction, as well as materialist and idealist philosophies could be seen as united, Poe no longer bases his road to truth on correspondence to an essence, but on formal consistency. In other words, the theory developed in *Eureka*, as the product of an "ardent imagination," is judged for its aesthetic value. As an aesthetic construct it no longer reflects a fundamental principle of unity, but creates its own coherent system. The discovery of the rationally consistent structure of the universe thus requires a leap of imagination that is, however closely related to Coleridge's principles of Method, no longer grounded in divine Law.

The scientific spokesperson chosen in *Eureka* to represent this imaginative method of reasoning and who is extolled by Poe's letter writer as one of the first to have grasped this route to truth, is the German seventeenth-century astronomer and mystic Johannes Kepler. Without the "vital laws" discovered by Kepler, claims Poe's letter writer, Newton, confined to the dead ends of inductive and deductive reasoning, would have been unable to postulate anything of true import. Kepler's planetary laws, which made the discovery of the Newtonian laws of gravitation possible, were arrived at neither inductively nor deductively, but rather by means of imaginative guess-work:

Yes!—these vital laws Kepler *guessed*—that is to say, he *imagined* them. Had he been asked to point out either the *deductive* or *inductive* route by which he attained them, his reply might have been—I know nothing about *routes*—but I *do* know the machinery of the Universe. Here it is. I grasped it with *my soul*—I reached it through mere dint of intuition.<sup>29</sup> (*Poetry* 1270)

29. Just as much as Poe arguably develops a consistence theory of truth *avant la lettre* in *Eureka*, the leap of imagination that is part and parcel of Poe's processes of ratiocination is akin to and may even have influenced Charles Saunders Peirce's principle of "abduction." Poe would certainly have agreed with Peirce's following definition of the term: "Abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which in-

In this capacity, as Joan Dayan has suggested, Kepler may very well ultimately be a stand-in for Poe himself, who might thus glorify himself in *Eureka* when the fictitious letter-writer proclaims about the words of Kepler that "I glow with a sacred fire when I even think of them, and I feel that I shall never grow weary of their repetition" (*Poetry* 1270). Those words, which the former has the "real pleasure of transcribing," and which bring his equally transcribed letter to a close, are the following:

I care not whether my work be read now or by posterity. I can afford to wait a century for readers when God himself has waited six thousand years for an observer. I triumph. I have stolen the golden secret of the Egyptians. I will indulge my sacred fury. (*Poetry* 1270)

Both Thomas Ollive Mabbott and Joan Dayan have pointed out that Poe here indeed quite faithfully transcribes Kepler's own words written in a letter of 1618 upon the discovery of the third of his planetary laws.<sup>30</sup> Poe's sources for Kepler's own triumphal *Eureka!* may have been either Sir David Brewster's *The Martyr's of Science, or, the Lives of Galileo, Tycho Brahe, and Kepler* (London, 1841), or John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune's *Life of Kepler* (1830). The reverence for Kepler as such, however, who was not uncommon as a hero of pre-enlightenment science for the Romantics, also once more leads us back to Coleridge's *The Friend*, where Poe would have found Kepler praised as a true man of method. In his "Essays on the Principles of Method," Coleridge had written the following about Kepler:

But Kepler seemed born to prove that true genius can overpower all obstacles. If he gives an account of his modes of proceeding, and of the views under which they first occurred to his mind, how unostentatiously and *in transitu*, as it were, does he introduce himself to our notice: and yet never fails to present the living germ out of which the genuine method, as the inner form of the tree of science, springs up!<sup>31</sup> (*The Friend* 485)

introduces a new idea; for induction does nothing but determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis." See Nancy Horrovitz, "The Body of the Detective Novel: Charles S. Peirce and Edgar Allan Poe," *The Sign of the Three. Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983) 179-97 (181).

30. *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P at Harvard UP, 1978) 3: 1319. See also Dayan 34f.

31. It should at this point no longer come as a surprise that Coleridge's contention that Kepler proves "that true genius can overpower all obstacles," is, as Nick Halmi points out, a direct plagiarism from Goethe, taken from the latter's chapter on Kepler in his *Farbenlehre*. I am grateful to Nick Halmi for sharing with me the manuscript of a talk, "What Kepler taught the Romantics about Nature," presented at the 1994 NASSR conference at Duke

That "living germ" and "inner form of the tree of science" however, was for Kepler, as it would be again for Coleridge, based on a *correspondence* between the divine and the human mind, a correspondence which allowed for the "inner" discovery of the "outer" laws of the universe in a moment of anamnesis. In Poe's text, on the other hand, the Keplerian moment of intuition, despite the insight it produces, is not the revelation of correspondence to an essence. Like the top of mount Aetna and the absent letter that allows the story of Dupin and the Minister D. to circulate in perpetuity, the imaginative grasping in Poe's text reveals no origin. Here, rather than discovering the principle of unity behind its distinctions, which would secure its correspondence to the world it observes, the mind has to be satisfied with the consistency of its constructs. Thus, Kepler's astronomical laws and Coleridge's philosophical principles of Method are significantly altered in Poe's transcription. In a striking reversal that turns the Coleridgean relation of artistic creation and the divine on its head, the "golden secret" of Poe's own text, his particular and as such original *Eureka* emerges as the narrative principle of plot:

In the construction of *plot*, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the incidents that we shall not be able to determine, of any one of them, whether it depends from any one other or upholds it. In this sense, of course, *perfection* of plot is really, or practically, unattainable—but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God. (*Poetry* 1342)

Method has thus turned into plot, and the principle of Law, which according to Coleridge "in its absolute perfection is conceivable only of the Supreme Being," is now the creative principle of a divine narrator. Where Coleridge's divine Law "not only appoints to each thing its *position*, but in that position and in consequence of that position, gives it its qualities; yea, it gives its very existence as *that particular thing*," Poe's God does so in a universe that has turned into fiction (*BL* 1: 459).

But Poe not only defines the universe as a piece of fiction, he also fulfills this definition in the written performance of his own text. *Eureka* is based on a set of fundamental paradoxes and ambiguities, constantly undercutting the principle of cause and effect, which leave the task of unraveling the text's self-referential plot to the reader. Consider for example Poe's rendition of the prospective apocalyptic ending of the universe, which finds

University. His analysis of the relation between Kepler's positions with regard to the mind's connection to nature and those of the Romantics has been most helpful in writing this section of the present essay.



close parallels in the rushes to destruction of "A Descent into the Maelström" and "MS. Found in a Bottle," as well as in Arthur Gordon Pym's enigmatic journey to the south pole:

... and now, with a million-fold electric velocity, commensurate only with their material grandeur and with their spiritual passion for oneness, the majestic remnants of the tribe of Stars flash, at length, into a common embrace. The inevitable catastrophe is at hand. (Poe, *Poetry* 1353)

This final catastrophe will reinstate the universe's lost unity by a complete annihilation of all matter, leaving God once again to remain all in all. Such an ending, however, did not appeal to Poe's notion of a denouement:

But are we here to pause? Not so. On the Universal agglomeration and dissolution, we can readily conceive that a new and perhaps totally different series of conditions may ensue—another creation and radiation, returning into itself—another action and reaction of the Divine Will. Guiding our imaginations by that omniprevalent law of laws, the law of periodicity, are we not, indeed, more than justified in entertaining a belief—let us say, rather, in indulging a hope—that the processes we have here ventured to contemplate will be renewed forever, and forever; a novel Universe swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine? (*Poetry* 1356)

While this periodic throbbing of the Heart Divine, reminiscent of the cosmogonies of classical antiquity in its cyclical pattern of creation and destruction, may very well be modeled on Empedocles' rhythm of the cosmic breath, as David Ketterer has suggested, Poe's "Heart Divine" also clearly has the qualities of the "Tell-Tale Heart" in Poe's famous story, for it now forces the perpetrator to divulge the literary machinations of his cosmological crime:

And now—this Heart Divine—what is it? *It is our own.* / Let not the merely seeming irreverence of this idea frighten our souls from that cool exercise of consciousness—from that deep tranquility of self-inspection—through which alone we can hope to attain the presence of this, the most sublime of truths, and look it leisurely in the face. (*Poetry* 1356)

More reminiscent of a Nietzschean proclamation of the death of God than of a mode of religious contemplation, this self-avowedly irreverent moment of introspection turns the Coleridgean notion of self-knowledge completely upside down. It is not the intuition of a universal reason, gov-

erning our conscious mind by the same principles which account for the existence of the universe and which provide the key for self-knowledge as well as for a comprehension of the Absolute. Poe's sublime moment, leisurely presented as a "cool exercise of consciousness" is not akin to that of the British Romantics and certainly not to the version of sublimity advocated by Coleridge. In Poe's narration, *Eureka's* plot does not "proceed from the SELF in order to lose and find all self in GOD," and it is decidedly not the experience of "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (*BL* 1: 304). Quite on the contrary, in Poe's account, the "eternal I AM" is ultimately a product of the mind's own workings. It only subsists as a remnant in each individual's desire for unity:

each soul is, in part, its own God—its own Creator:—in a word, that God—the material *and* spiritual God—*now* exists solely in the diffused Matter and Spirit of the Universe; and that the regathering of this diffused Matter and Spirit will be but the re-constitution of the *purely Spiritual* and Individual God. (*Poetry* 1357)

Not only would the pantheistic position espoused here have been anathema to Coleridge, what should serve as the unifying concept of Poe's treatise also presents itself as an unresolved ambiguity in which cause and effect cannot be told apart. It remains undecidable whether the former existence of a unity causes the desire for its re-constitution in the individuals' minds, or if it is simply an effect of this same desire which has predicated Poe's poetical account of the mind's divine origins. Poe himself has introduced this suspicion into his text in the form of a quotation from Alexander von Humboldt, to whom *Eureka* is dedicated. Refuting in his *Kosmos* of 1845 Johann Heinrich von Mädler's hypothesis of a gigantic celestial body in the gravitational center of the universe von Humboldt had claimed that: "It is but Man's longing for a fundamental First Cause, that impels both his intellect and his fancy to the adoption of such an hypothesis"<sup>32</sup> (*Poetry* 1357).

Poe's *Eureka* thus does not offer itself as a revelation about the true nature of the universe, but rather attempts to reproduce the universe's structure *as a plot*—that is, as an autonomous creation of the mind which owes its consistency to its creator's concerted effort of reason and imagination. Its unity is solely produced by the impossible gyration around a lost center which is performed in the work of art. The process of ratiocination thus

32. Poe presents von Humboldt's original German in a footnote as follows: "Das Streben nach den letzten und höchsten Grundursachen macht freilich die reflectierende Thätigkeit des Menschen, wie seine Phantasie, zu einer solchen Annahme geneigt."



produces a consistent whole, yet one which no longer reflects the first principle of a comprehensive philosophy but rather the self-reflexive unity of an autonomous aesthetic system.

It is tempting to construe the relationship of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Edgar Allan Poe within the framework of *The Purloined Letter*, as one sees Poe purloining and ventriloquizing Coleridge, who was already a philosophical ventriloquist himself, repeating his words but altering his voice. It is obvious, however, that Poe, if he plays Dupin to Coleridge's Minister D., does not find the letter that Coleridge had hidden, but rather one that could not have been written by the author from whom its words would seem to be stolen. Thus, even Poe's definition of plot itself, the central aesthetic device of his tales that thwarts the Coleridgean desire for first principles, is ironically a direct quote from Coleridge. Here is Poe's definition of plot in a book review of 1841: "... plot ... properly defined, is *that in which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole*. It may be described as a building so dependently constructed, that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric" (*Essays* 149)—The purloined Coleridge, who in turn had echoed Aristotle, had made the very same assertions about the poetry of Shakespeare and Milton in Chapter 1 of the *Biographia Literaria*. It is thus with a gesture of appropriation, continuation, repetition and disillusion that the voice of the Modern makes itself heard from within the Romantic, overthrowing the entire fabric in order to constitute a new whole.

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## British Romantics and Native Americans: the Araucanians of Chile

SINCE EDWARD SAID'S GROUNDBREAKING *ORIENTALISM* (1978), MUCH OF the critical impetus within Romantic Studies has been in the area of colonialism and its effects. Developments have been in two directions: in one a number of scholars have questioned the binary relationship implicit in the work of Said and a number of his early followers, showing that not only was knowledge of the East not simply the largely textual and backward-looking production that Said described, but also that it involved many more varied kinds of encounter than first envisaged.<sup>1</sup> The East was a matter of multiple relationships—medical, scientific and consumerist as well as intellectual, taking place in the English shires as well as the Deccan plateau.<sup>2</sup> Some, at least, of these relationships disturbed Britons' notion of who they were rather than confirmed them in a sense of superiority. Some questioned rather than aided the priorities of empire-builders. Some involved Britons and Orientals living beyond their previous identities in cultures to which they had emigrated. The effects of these relationships were registered in literary discourse: sometimes, indeed, that discourse sketched out such relationships for British readers.

In a second direction, historians have investigated the effects on culture and literature of Britain's involvements in other parts of the world. The Romantic era was not only the period in which Britain acquired an Indian empire, but also that in which it extended its reach to Australia, New Zealand and the South Seas, to Northern Canada, and to Africa. The accounts of explorers and colonial officials, writing from what Mary Louise Pratt and

1. See, for instance, Nigel Leask's *Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992).

2. On the commercial effects of Oriental empire in Britain, see James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste 1660–1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997). On its material and cultural effects see Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999).