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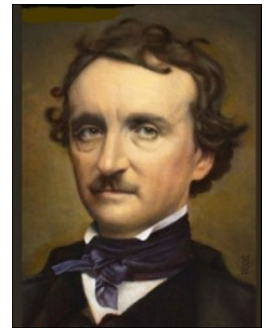
PHILOSOPHY OF CONTRADICTION: ABSTRACT UNITY OF EFFECT IN POE'S DUPIN MYSTERIES

By Leslie D. Walton, Assistant Professor, Liberal Studies

"A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale."

~ Edgar Allan Poe

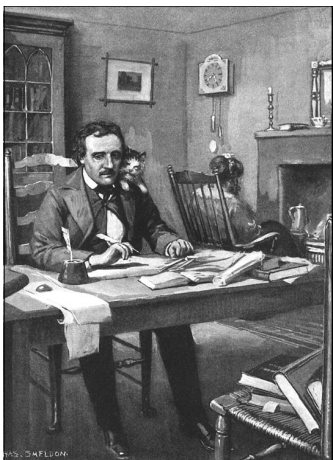
Edgar Allan Poe is as mysterious and diversely talented as is his body of literary work. Romanticism and the Gothic are fundamental aspects of Poe's tales and poetry, and his commitment to "unity of effect," which is outlined in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition," is instrumental in his successful engagement of his audience. Poe's short stories primarily rely on phobias and fears to impose a "sensory effect" on his readers, whereas his detective stories are more focused on the study of intellect and the effective use of deductive reasoning. Richard Kopley points out in his book *Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries*, "Undoubtedly, Poe sought an effect in his Dupin stories—one of amazement" (66), instead of focusing on fear, Poe concentrates on elements of human nature—curiosity, competition, and our inherent need for resolution—to provide his desired effect. Poe's detective stories or "Tales of Ratiocination," as he calls them, are unique in that a set of generic conventions are defined that, in turn, created a new genre of literature; however, the substantive quality of these stories is questionable when compared to his other short tales. Poe's peculiar brand of narrative prose and poetry, in particular his tales of horror and "The Raven," continues to intrigue and engage us, but his detective stories are more of an enigma.



Poe is one of the most analyzed American authors in literature, with copious volumes of books, critical essays, articles, and movies that seek to decode or rationalize the cryptic portfolio he left us. Many scholars attribute the creation of the American detective story and a new genre to Poe; however, I assert that Poe's detective stories, which do define detective conventions, are merely an extension of his tales of horror and are inferior because he deviates from his own literary philosophies. Why did Poe abandon his core philosophies and methods in writing the Dupin tales and other detective mysteries? To find a response, one must question Poe's reason for writing these tales of detection. My examination posits that Poe's motives may have been an attempt to change the prevailing opinions of him by the literati of the time, or were these stories another of his elaborate hoaxes—a game—that, by chance, ended in the creation of a new genre.

Poe penned over seventy short stories¹ and as N. Bryllion Fagin explains in *The Histrionic Mr. Poe*, but of these less than a third are known to the general reader, and only less than a dozen are of such wide fame as to warrant the inclusion of their author among the great story-tellers of the world. Yet there can be no question that it is by virtue of his contribution as a short story writer, no less than poet and critic, that Poe ranks as one of the great figures in literature. Certainly in the history of the American short story he occupies the honored position of pioneer, almost of founder; and just as certainly, unlike most literary pioneers, he is still being read. (161)

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The undying fascination with Poe is rooted in the mystery of his life and sudden death, and because his tales, poetry, and critical essays continue to mystify both scholars and readers alike. Numerous Poe scholars assert that his fictional characters are indeed Poe himself—in particular, Roderick Usher, the tormented protagonist in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and C. Auguste Dupin, the analytical detective in Poe’s three “Tales of Ratiocination.” A close examination of the Dupin tales supports this supposition and also provides the landscape for questioning the value of these stories within the context of Poe’s portfolio of horror tales. The connective themes, plots, and settings reinforce the position that his ratiocinative tales are an inferior version of Poe’s gothic terror tales simply because he violates his life-long philosophy of the “unity of effect.” For comparison, an analysis of two of his most anthologized tales of horror, “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Cask of Amontillado,” will support my assertion that the Dupin tales fail to measure up to these classic examples of Poe’s true genius.

I

Poe’s philosophical views pertaining to writing are well documented in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” and in his letters and articles of literary criticism. Although this essay has been discounted by many scholars as another hoax manufactured by Poe to elevate himself above his colleagues, French symbolist poets² found confirmation in his essay of their theoretical methods (Pahl). Poe adamantly argues in his essay, “The Philosophy of Composition,” that

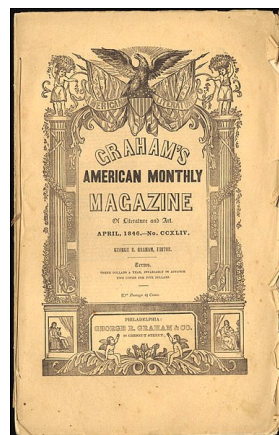
Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention. (Poe 1373)

In this context, Poe’s definition of plot is parallel to that of the design of a “unity of effect.” Although Poe’s expressed purpose for writing this essay was to explain how he composed his poem “The Raven,” it is widely accepted that his narrative philosophies outlined in the essay are also applicable to prose fiction—in particular, short stories, tales, or sketches, as they were labeled at that time. Other authorial considerations outlined in the essay that are crucial to achieving an effect on the reader are brevity and impression or unifying tone. These elements are vital and an author must consider and achieve his pre-conceived specifications in order to create the desired unity of effect.

Poe reaffirms the importance of plot in many of his articles of literary criticism. In one in particular, a review of Bulwer’s *Night and Morning*,³ Poe comments, “But the greatest involution of incident will not result in plot; which, 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” (Thompson 624). Poe concedes that plot is often neglected in good stories; however, “... it is a thing to be desired. At best it is but a secondary and rigidly artistical merit, for which no merit of a higher class—no merit found in nature—should be sacrificed” (625). Ironically, as Poe concludes his critical review of Bulwer’s novel, he chastises the author for floundering in his attempt to achieve a unifying plot; he writes,

No sooner do we begin to take some slight degree of interest in some cursorily-sketched event, than we are hurried off to some other, for which a new feeling is to be built up, only to be tumbled down, forthwith, as before. ... Time not being given us in which to become absorbed, we are only permitted to admire, while we are not the less chilled, tantalized, wearied, and displeased. (625)

I posit that this review could easily be describing Poe’s “Tales of Ratiocination” because they fail to embody a unifying plot and the sheer convoluted nature of the narratives disengage and confound the reader.

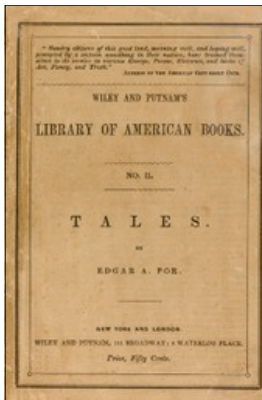


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In “The Philosophy of Composition,” brevity is an important consideration for achieving a preconceived effect, and Poe states, “If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed” (1375). After defining the length, Poe explicates the importance of choosing an “impression, or effect, to be conveyed: and here I may as well observe that, throughout the construction, I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work *universally* appreciable” (1376). Poe’s discussion is primarily regarding poetry and his assertion that “Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem” (1376). Poetry, to Poe, is “that intense and pure elevation of *soul—not* intellect” (1376), and it is this premise that ignites his philosophical embattlement with the “Lake School” poets⁴. In letter to B____⁵, Poe writes, “Aristotle, with singular assurance, has declared poetry the most philosophical of all writings⁶—but it required a Wordsworth to pronounce it the most metaphysical. He seems to think that the end of poetry is, or should be, instruction—“ (Thompson 590). Poe’s response to Wordsworth is that “the aim of poetry, even instructive poetry, ought to be pleasure” (Kearns). Poe would later label this as “heresy of the didactic,” and he would impose the same comments in critical reviews of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s prose. Once again Poe comingles his poetic paradigm with his standard for narratives. There is no room for reality in Poe’s tales, and Fagin summarizes this fact in stating that “Poe’s abhorrence of the didactic, his dwelling in a story world of his own imagining, and his preoccupation with technique deprive him of any appeal for the naturalistically-minded, the sociologically-minded, or the salvation-minded” (161).

II

The Poe legacy includes his creation of the detective genre, which is not completely accurate given that Voltaire and Radcliffe, among others, penned mysteries including detection prior to Poe’s installments. Granted, Poe did define or inspire what we now know as the conventions of detective fiction; however, a close reading of these stories brings into question the qualitative value of his stories within the genre. The conventions employed in Poe’s “Tales of Ratiocination” include: (1) an eccentrically brilliant amateur sleuth; (2) the sidekick, first-person narrator, who reports to the reader; (3) the adversarial law enforcement official who resents the detective’s interference; (4) the systematic announcement of simple, obvious clues discovered merely through observation; (5) the locked room murder/mystery; (6) the consistent ineptitude of the police; (7) the unjustly accused suspect; (8) analysis by psychological deduction that solves the mystery using imaginative logic and intuition; and (9) the solution involving the least likely person/suspect. Poe’s Dupin may be the prototype for future sleuths, like Sherlock Holmes, but the narrative quality of these tales obscures their ability to actively engage the reader.



In a letter to Philip P. Cooke⁷, Poe outlines his method of writing “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”:

You are right about the hair-splitting of my French friend:--that is all done for effect. These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious—but people think them more ingenious than they are—on account of their method and air of method. In the “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” for instance, where is the ingenuity of unraveling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unraveling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the supposititious Dupin with that of the writer of the story. (Quinn 514)

Even as expressed by Poe, the Dupin stories primarily consist of an explanation of how he solves the crime. Also evident is Poe’s intentional insertion of himself in creating his “French friend” Dupin, and Warren Kelly asserts a similar sentiment in his essay⁸:

I propose the additional possibility that Poe places his own critical voice within Dupin’s. More specifically, I contend first that Poe constructs his



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readers, or appropriates his readers' process of reading, within his Dupin stories, through his creation of a first-person narrator who reports the speech of the stories' focal character, Dupin, whom Poe invests with his own critical voice, and second that Poe's attempt to produce his audience's reception in its reading those stories parallels his work as a critic.

The narrative stance employed by Poe in these stories violates his own method of effect by creating an instructional tone, which permeates throughout the trilogy. Fundamentally, Poe's Dupin mysteries fail because they offer no tangible solutions and the narrative structure effectively withholds evidentiary matter, which, in turn, disallows the reader to solve the mystery. Instead, the reader is subjected to a convoluted explanation, as if "Poe is teaching his reader how to read the new genre in a manner analogous to Dupin's teaching the narrator how to read phenomena" (Grimstad). Poe's didactic narrative structure in his ratiocinative tales contradicts his well-documented stance on the destructive nature of didactics in fictional literature.

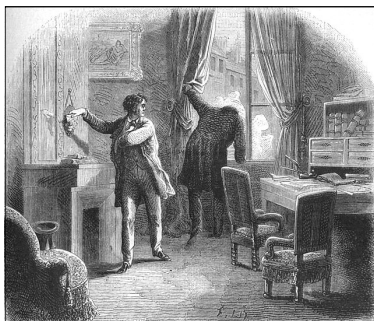
He abandons the successful "unity of effect" recipe of his short stories and creates a series of ratiocinative tales, but why? A prevailing opinion seems to be that Poe was attempting to escape madness by creating a vision of reason. Detective fiction seeks to rectify wrongs and restructure a chaotic society; however, the Dupin trilogy fails to live up to those expectations. David Van Leer's essay⁹ postulates that "These are not tales of chivalric retribution. In the first two, all misdeeds go unpunished, whereas in the third Dupin's response to the villainous but hardly illegal theft of a letter is merely to repeat the original crime in a morally ambiguous way." Poe maintains his use of the Gothic in these tales through setting and tone; however, instead of a protagonist that succumbs to fear, paranoia and eventual madness, Dupin "discerns the causes behind effects, proving nature's laws are accessible to the man of reason" (Kennedy). Unfortunately, the "tales" read more like essays, and in fact, the technical, disjointedness of the prose mirrors Poe's essays on poetic theory and his articles on literary criticism.



Poe's "unity of effect" demands brevity, a sound plot, an impression or tone that corresponds with the plot, and a clear dénouement. The Dupin tales lack the effect of unity because

The very structures of the tales reinforce Poe's concession that plot is of secondary importance in his depiction of the mysterious. The fractured chronology of all three narratives shifts attention from the evidence to the manner of its discovery and interpretation, and general philosophical discussions both frame the narratives and interrupt (at times overwhelm) Dupin's explication of the crimes. Even in "The Mystery of Marie Roget," the least philosophical of the three tales, the rehearsal of evidence is more circular than linear. (Van Leer)

The series' first and final installments contain even more pronounced narrative irregularities, "where general discussions of the principles of analysis occupy more of the text than do the actual crimes" (Van Leer), or the explication of the solution. There are generally five stages of development in a detective story: commentary, crime, evidence, analysis, and solution. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe's stages of progression include: (1) a philosophical explanation of the nature of analysis, (2) an argument that the game of whist and checkers requires more mental superiority than chess, (3) a vague character sketch of Dupin and his peculiar ability to read his companion's mind, (4) a brief announcement of the murders, (5) an excruciatingly long reading of newspaper commentaries regarding the murders, (6) Dupin's monologue on truth, and then suddenly (7) Dupin's declaration that he has solved the crime. The story ends with the orangutan's owner recalling the events of the murder.



In the widely praised finale to the series, "The Purloined Letter," Poe's pathway to narrative destruction is all too familiar. This time, we already know the culprit of the crime; therefore, the story is foreshadowed by an extensive philosophical analysis of the crime. Interspersed within the redundant crime analysis are lengthy discussions of the

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game “even and odd,” axioms in mathematics and map labeling. The excessive philosophizing overshadows the recovery of the letter, by Dupin—the disinterested sleuth—whose sole purpose for solving the mystery is for the reward. The narrator, Dupin’s unnamed companion, was as much in the dark as the reader, and the actual appearance and contents of the letter are never exposed. Given the narrative and structural flaws of these tales of detection and their lack of cohesiveness—absence of any unity of effect—I do not find them “ingenious,” as Poe asserts, but clearly inferior to his tales of horror, which embody Poe’s “unity of effect.”

III

Poe’s true genius is represented in his tales of horror; two, in particular, “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Cask of Amontillado” represent his attainment of a “unity of effect.” Both of these stories are among Poe’s shortest tales, and yet the brevity of them does not limit their impact on the reader. Poe’s concise diction and astonishingly clear syntax in both narratives allow the reader to focus on the plot and experience the nightmare alongside the characters.

The “Tell-Tale Heart” is a classic psychological thriller that unfolds in the form of a monologue where the protagonist continually professes his sanity but not his innocence. The opening paragraph immediately engages the reader:

True—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! And observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story. (Poe 555)

Throughout the narrator’s rhetorical revelations, the reader is held captive inside the narrator’s psyche. Poe gradually exposes the protagonist’s mental condition through time and sensory perceptions and using an argumentative rhetorical style to set the tone of the story. The old man had never wronged the narrator, but his vulture eye was the root of his torment. Our protagonist calls it an “Evil Eye,” which we could view as an effective metaphor. Through shared sensory experiences, Poe begins to merge the two characters delicately, and one night when the old man hears a sound and groans in fear, the narrator explains how “it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom” (556). After seven nights of stealthy observation, the “Evil I” drives our narrator to murder the old man. Still declaring his sanity, “If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body” (558). Finally, the police come to his door and, driven by the perceived beating of the old man’s heart, the narrator confesses, “Villians!’ I shrieked, ‘dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!” (559).



In his biography of Poe, Quinn asserts that “The complete unity of [The Tell-Tale Heart] disarms the critical faculties until the imagination of the madman seems for the moment reality. It is an almost perfect illustration of Poe’s own theory of the short story, for every word contributes to the central effect” (394). Poe may have been more brilliant than Quinn could have ever imagined because, according to an essay by John E. Reilly¹⁰, “death-watches are insects that produce rapping sounds, sounds that superstition has held to presage the death of someone in the house where they are heard.” Poe must have been aware of this little known fact because he includes in the story, “Yes, he has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. *All in vain*; because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim” (557). Furthermore, there are two varieties of the insect and “the sound of the lesser death-watch, . . . is faint (and thereby appropriate to the narrator’s acuteness of hearing), regular, and sustained over a period of hours. Most appropriately, however, it resembles the ticking of a watch, and has been described in precisely these terms” (Reilly). This directly corresponds to Poe’s description of the sound the

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narrator hears: “now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton” (557). “The Tell-Tale Heart” is a perfect specimen of Poe’s “unity of effect” because every aspect of his theory is met. The plot is sound and the impression or tone is in sync with every aspect of the narrative.

“The Cask of Amontillado” is another seamless example of Poe’s perfection when it comes to his theory of “unity of effect” in a short story. Once again, the plot is relatively simple and straightforward, and every detail contributes to the whole. Poe uses elements of the Gothic, and he employs irony, symbolism, and humor to stitch together a concise story of revenge. Scholars often write of how Poe ends his stories; whereas, like with the previous tale, I assert that it is Poe’s ability to engage his reader with the opening line that makes his tales of horror so effective. The beginning of “Cask” is a classic example: “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I have borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge” (848). The ironic undertones of the story are numerous, beginning with the fact that the events unfold during carnival, a Mardi Gras like setting, where people wear masks and nothing is as it appears. Montresor seeks out Fortunato and, by appealing to his ego, baits him into going into the catacombs to examine a case of Amontillado. Fortunato is appropriately dressed like a fool and on his head was “a conical cap and bells” (848).



On more than one occasion Montresor suggests that they turn back because of Fortunato’s cough. Continuing to feed his ego, Montresor says,

‘we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi—‘Enough he said; ‘the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough.’ ‘True—true,’ I replied. (850)

The irony here is palpable and it contributes to the wholeness of the story. As they proceed through the catacombs, the men discuss Montresor’s coat of arms: “A huge human foot d’or, in a field of azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel” and the motto reads “*Nemo me impune lacessit*”¹¹(851). The motto connects back to the opening lines of the story, once again reinforcement or “unity of effect.” As they near their destination, the men discuss belonging to the brotherhood of masons; Fortunato says “‘You are not of the masons.’” and Montresor replies “‘yes, yes,’ I said, ‘yes, yes.’” Montresor then produces a trowel from beneath his jacket, and Fortunato is amused by his jest and demands that they continue toward the Amontillado. Eventually, they arrive and Fortunato, drunk and clueless, is chained within an enclosure. Montresor proceeds to build up the masonry wall with his handy trowel. The story ends with “*In pace requiescat!*”¹² “The Cask of Amontillado” is brevity at its finest. There is not one word which does not contribute to its unity. Poe’s use of humor effectively sets the tone and enhances the impression of effect for the reader.



IV

Poe was a gifted author, poet and essayist. During his brief life, he wrote over seventy short stories, numerous poems, endless essays, letters, and articles. He has been called the inventor of the American detective genre and the father of literary criticism. His commitment to excellence in prose and poetry is well documented and his philosophy of “unity of effect” is well known. There have been volumes of essays and articles written about Poe and every aspect of his writings; however, Poe is still as mysterious and undocumented as are his fictional characters.

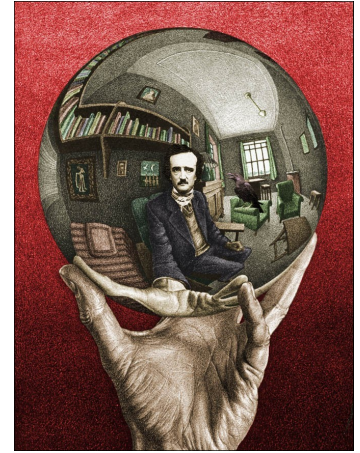
In writing the Dupin tales, Poe fails to achieve the unity of effect that exists within his tales of horror. In a compare and contrast of the two successful Dupin stories with the two tales of horror discussed in the preceding, the most obvious difference is their unity of effect—or lack thereof in the case of Dupin. The tales of horror engage and pull the

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reader into the story, and their senses are awakened to a peculiar brand of horror—they are entertained. The Dupin tales are mere essays that don't engage the reader; in fact, they don't allow the reader to participate—not even Dupin's nameless sidekick can contribute to the solving of the mystery. It is as though Poe wanted to create a puzzle, solve it, and then tell us how it was done—without giving us any tangible information to engage and understand.

Looking back at the beginning of this journey, I asked why did Poe write these tales of ratiocination. I don't believe we will ever fully understand Poe's motives for writing these tales. In fact, maybe that was his intent. Poe loved games and hoaxes, and maybe we are all on the other end of the ultimate Poe hoax.



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Notes

- ¹ Poe published sixty-eight stories and sketches. Referenced from *The Histrionic Mr. Poe*. N. Bryllion Fagin, p. 160.
- ² Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Valery were great admirer's of Poe. "Decomposing Poe's "Philosophy," by Dennis Pahl.
- ³ Poe's text is reprinted from *Graham's Magazine*, April 1841. G.R. Thompson, ed., *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*.
- ⁴ Reference to the British Romantic poets, especially William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, also including Robert Southey.
- ⁵ *Letter to B___* was first published as the preface to *Poems* (1831) under the title "Letter to Mr. ___ ___." G.R. Thompson, ed., *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*.
- ⁶ From Aristotle's *Poetics*, IX.3. The phrase is taken out of context. Aristotle writes that poetry is more philosophical than history, for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. G.R. Thompson, ed., *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*.
- ⁷ Letter dated August 9, 1946.
- ⁸ Kelly, Warren Hill. *Detecting the Critic: The Presence of Poe's Critical Voice in His Stories of Dupin*.
- ⁹ *Detecting Truth: The World of the Dupin Tales*.
- ¹⁰ *The Lesser Death-Watch and "The Tell-Tale Heart."*
- ¹¹ "no one offends me with impunity"
- ¹² "rest in peace"

MEET YOUR TEACHER

FORTY YEARS IN EDUCATION

PART III: MY INDIANA SUMMER

This academic year coincides with three anniversaries: forty years of teaching—the first half in former Czechoslovakia, the second half in the United States, and the last decade at Humphreys College. Those 40/20/10 anniversaries inspired the following Q & A exchange between Dean Jess Bonds and Humphreys' Librarian Stanislav Perkner.

The previous parts of the interview are available in the Summer and Fall 2012 Newsletter Supplements:

Part I, *Coming of Age in Cold-War Europe*, Summer 2012:

http://www.humphreys.edu/pdf/newsletter/newsletter_2012_summer_supplement.pdf

Part II, *At Charles University in Prague (1972-1990)*, Fall 2012:

http://www.humphreys.edu/pdf/newsletter/newsletter_2012_fall_supplement.pdf

Q: When did you visit the United States for the first time?

A: It turned to be a life-changing trip that took place between March and August 1986 in Bloomington, a Midwestern university town. Indiana University invited me as a visiting researcher. The study-stay was sponsored by the United States Information Agency, a now-defunct Cold-War era institution devoted to “public diplomacy”; it operated between 1953 and 1999 as the world’s largest public relations organization. My field research was focused on the news operations of American radio stations, corresponding to my lectures on *The World of Radio/Radio of the World* at Charles University in Prague.



Q: How did you manage to leave Cold-War Czechoslovakia for such a relatively long stay in the country that was considered by your government “an enemy territory”?

A: It took more than a year between the initial offer voiced by Indiana University’s Eastern-European specialist Owen V. Johnson in summer 1984 and my arrival in Bloomington. The visit was a result of broader international developments that ultimately ended four decades of the Cold War.

Q: So, you were at the vanguard of the thaw, like the first breath of warm air in the winter. Please explain further.

A: As you already know, I met Professor Johnson during the 1984 Prague Congress of the International Association for the Mass Communication Research (*the Newsletter Supplement*, Fall 2012). He indicated that Indiana University had a study-stay opening for a young Eastern-European scholar. Despite the fact I was approaching forty, I still passed as a “young” one.

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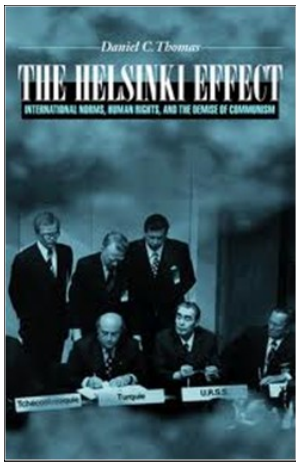
Q: As you told me, you turned Owen's Prague offer "into a bitter joke." However, it became reality.

A: Try to see the offer in a Cold-War context. After the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army, the country was in a firm grip of Big Brother represented by neo-Stalinist Leonid Brezhnev. After the occupation, Czechoslovak relations with the West were almost frozen for two decades. Yet, one important historic event intervened on my behalf: the 1975 Helsinki (Finland) Declaration on Security and Cooperation in Europe, signed by 35 states, including two superpowers—the Soviet Union and the United States. Gradually, the Helsinki commitment to cooperate forced the Soviet bloc to rethink its isolationism. Another signal of the profound geopolitical changes was the beginning of Gorbachev's economic reforms in the middle of the 1980s.



Two political rivals, Erich Honecker (East Germany, left) and Helmut Schmidt (West Germany), at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe held in Helsinki in 1975

Q: Let's return to your personal story. How did the 1975 Helsinki conference influence the 1985 decision of Charles University to let you go to Indiana?



A: After ten years following the Helsinki agreement, the Czechoslovak government did not have too much to show. Charles University's "international exchanges in the field of education" were negligible. Coincidentally, I had a chance to see a broader picture in 1984. I served on a Foreign Ministry committee preparing the Helsinki-Accords Report for the 1985 London conference monitoring the first ten years of the Helsinki process. It was a pathetic task.

Q: Can you be more specific?

A: One of the flagrant examples was the case of Jaroslav Seifert (1901-1986), the 1984 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. This living classic was not only a world-renowned poet but also a journalist who defended civil and human rights. He publicly resisted the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968. He signed *Charter 77*, a dissident petition reminding the pro-Soviet government of its Helsinki commitments. The publication of Seifert's books was subjected to restrictions. The original edition of his

memoir was released in Canada (1981). The following Czech editions could be printed only in an abridged format with some chapters removed and many names purged by censors.... In light of those and similar facts, it was difficult, if not impossible, to defend the Czechoslovak commitment to the Helsinki process. I can only guess that once the Charles University Rector Zdeněk Češka received a let-him-go signal "from above," he supported my plan. Sporadically, I would receive copies of the invitation correspondence between the universities and detected a weakening resistance on the Czechoslovak side. One day, the International Relations Director of Charles University asked me whether I was interested in visiting Indiana. It was without saying that I'd travel alone, without any family members, to minimize the risk of my defection. Additionally, I was not permitted to initiate or maintain any personal contacts with the American side in this matter, including Indiana University and the U.S. Embassy in Prague. All visa preparations were handled by the Ministry of Education in Prague. Soon, I started to have some doubts about the sanity of my decision.

Q: What was the problem?

A: First, the ministry informed me that my stipend would be \$600 per month, paid by the USIA. According to the ministerial rules, my regular university salary would be stopped; in light of the 1986 absurdly uneven rate, the Czechoslovak

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currency was so weak that the \$600 *nominally* surpassed my Czechoslovak income. Obviously, nobody took into account the *real* buying power of the \$600 in the United States. Clearly, this ridiculous rule was to discourage international exchanges between the two countries. Some of my older colleagues would even advise me to cancel the plan. They recalled the 1950s persecution of the people who were labeled as “pro-Western.” Additionally, I had to convince my Prague Dean Vladimír Hudec that my teaching load could be adjusted. Ultimately, he agreed with a six-month leave of absence, despite the fact that the invitation was good for a full academic year. Luckily, Charles University agreed to cover my intercontinental airfare. The last challenge emerged a few days before my planned departure: Some paper-pusher at the Ministry of Education forgot to submit my travel plans to a “federal inter-ministerial commission” that was authorized to place the final rubber stamp on my file. I had no idea that such a powerful commission existed! Fortunately, the commission convened on Wednesday, two days before my Friday departure. The late afternoon call from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs assured me that all was cleared. The last surprise came on Friday morning when a Prague airport official noticed that my invitation came from Bloomington, Indiana, while my air ticket was good for Bloomington, Illinois. To fix this university worker’s error cost me some cash on the spot; however—finally—I was sitting on the plane heading to New York.

Q: How would you describe your first American impressions?

A: I fulfilled my dream. However, the first weeks were unexpectedly spoiled by severe culture shock. I had read about it; however, I had never expected to suffer from it. Surprisingly, my English that was good for India appeared not to be sufficient for Indiana. For a while, my brain was linguistically paralyzed. All locals in Bloomington spoke too fast; their speech was heavily accented with lots of slang expressions. I was shocked that twenty years of my otherwise enjoyable English-language studies was useless. Another source of my frustration was my financial standing. Before I received my first USIA check, I felt—after years—as a penniless student.



Upon my arrival, Bloomington was covered by snow ...

Q: How did you manage to adjust to those new conditions?

A: As I see it today, my Bloomington angel guardian materialized as Ms. Bareikis, Director of the International Relations Department. She arranged that I spend my initial weekend in a university hotel. On Monday, I learned that my rented apartment would cost me about \$250 every month. That left me with \$350 available for everything else. Ms. Bareikis was aware that my first USIA check would arrive in two weeks—if I were lucky—and offered a cash loan that I reluctantly accepted; frankly, I had no other choice. Later on, the university provided me with some field-research money. That stipend was based on reimbursement. In other words, I had to save my travel funds first to spend them on buses and motels, and then ask for the reimbursement. For the first three months, I was stuck in Bloomington. Gradually, though, I started to gain my lost confidence. My feelings of alienation were weakening, thanks to my new colleagues and students – among them Owen Johnson and his Czech wife Marta, who worked for the Main Library, graduate students Philip and Jean Gaunt, and Jim Collorafi. My English recovered in several weeks.

Q: I am sure that your Bloomington environment differed from the Prague one in many ways.

A: In Bloomington, I occupied a small office in the Ernie Pyle Hall, the site of the School of Journalism and its outstanding library. It took me a while to learn how to use the computer. In the local post office, I saw a Xerox machine for public use. In 1986 Czechoslovakia, access to copy machines was restricted: What if someone used it to print underground literature or anti-government leaflets? I will never forget how embarrassing it was when I tried to converse with an answering machine message voice – I had never experienced it before. The first time I watched commercial televi-

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sion, I was taken aback by the intensity and pace of commercials. Why were there four gas stations on some intersections? How was I supposed to respond to the *Howdy* greeting? Where to find an ordinary shaker of the table salt on the Kroger grocery store's shelves full of Hawaiian, Kosher, Maldon, pickling or rock salts? Was it OK to sit on the grass in the park? Was it appropriate to address Dean Brown as "Trevor" right away? What are the American rules of first naming? In the Czech language, using a first name is a very sensitive issue. Why did some people in downtown carry their beer in a brown bag? Was it safe to drink from water fountains? What was a "buck," six-pack," "donut," "dude" or "stuff"?

Q: What surprised you most as a visiting college educator?

A: My first impressions included Bloomington students' punctuality. Frequently, I was consulting graduate students who specialized in Russian and East European research, and they were never late. I was impressed by the overall efficiency of university services. For the first time, I saw a multiple-choice examination format; in Prague, most testing was done orally, as in the Middle Ages. Finally, I experienced a typical university campus life where both the students and faculty shared a community. As though preparing myself for my Bloomington stay, I always enjoyed reading "campus novels" – from Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* to David Lodge's *Small World*. Lodge was actually my reading on the flight from Prague to Indianapolis.

Q: What helped you to assimilate to the new way of life?

A: In retrospect, my initial mixed feelings stemmed from the previous years of systematic brainwashing in Cold-War Czechoslovakia. The entire system of education and propaganda was strongly anti-American and anti-Western. As I already told you, I met my "first American," a tourist, on a bus trip between New Delhi and Taj Mahal. After WWII, the Czechoslovak families of political defectors were persecuted. For example, an uncle of my elementary school classmate, Jana, immigrated to the United States. As retribution, the local authorities blocked Jana's access to college education and forced her to take a job in a collective farm. To illustrate my paranoia, here is a story from my first weeks in Bloomington: One day, I found a message from Professor Robert F. Byrnes (1917-1997) who invited me to a lunch. To educate myself, I consulted the library copy of *Who's Who in American Education* and found out that I would be meeting the founder of Indiana University's Russian and East European Institute, who served in the 1950s as a Director of Mid-European Studies Center funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. "Here we go! The CIA goes after me right away!" Should I ignore the invitation? Needless to say, the lunch turned out to be a very pleasant experience.

Q: How did you work on your English-language proficiency?

A: To be fully immersed in the English-speaking environment was very helpful. Every evening, I was rehearsing the rules of grammar. I read the local newspapers and highlighted unknown words. I struggled with David Letterman's colloquial English on television (I still remember his large curly hairdo). By coincidence, my neighbor was Jim Collorafi, a violoncellist and a doctoral student of music. As an admirer of the Czech composer Leoš Janáček (1854-1928), Jim even took some language courses offered by the Czech Program at Indiana University. I would help him with a Czech conversation and he would challenge my English. This coincidence established our life-long friendship.



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Q: Indiana University is well known for its outstanding library holdings. I assume you found access to the media-related literature that was not available in Prague.

A: Overall, I spent hundreds of hours in the Main Library or in its Journalism Branch. I was taking detailed notes for my Prague university lectures. I was aware that Xerox copies might trigger unwelcome attention of the Czechoslovak authorities upon my landing in Prague; Western literature was considered the most dangerous contraband. I hoped that my handwritten Czech notes would pass the border scrutiny. Several American colleagues, most notably historians Edwin Emory and Burton Paulu, offered to mail book packages to my Prague address. From my Bloomington sanctuary, I contacted the leading BBC historian Asa Briggs at Oxford University, who mailed—anonously—some of his works to Prague. Unfortunately, I never received them; most likely, they were confiscated by the Czechoslovak authorities. The Indiana University Libraries were also well-known for their émigré literature holdings, including Czech and Slovak authors in exile. For a couple of weeks, I had not read anything else but the works of Josef Škvorecký, who defected to Canada, Milan Kundera (France), Arnošt Lustig and Ivan Sviták (the U.S.), and Pavel Kohout (Austria). Ludvík Vaculík, Václav Havel, Ivan Klíma, and Milan Uhde decided to stay in occupied Czechoslovakia but were silenced after 1968. Indeed, Indiana University's Slavic Library collected them all.

Q: By the end of August 1986, your Indiana Summer was over...

A: I was leaving the United States with a slight hope that such an opportunity would emerge again. The following five years were full of life-changing events. The Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution of 1989 ended the communist era. The Cold War was over. The dissident Václav Havel was elected the president... The Bloomington summer prepared me for my 1991 decision to enjoy the freedom and settle in the United States for good.

Will be continued in Spring 2013

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