

EDGAR POE AND HIS FRIENDS:  
A SAMPLER OF LETTERS  
WRITTEN TO  
SARAH HELEN WHITMAN

*By* J. ALBERT ROBBINS

**W**HATEVER may be said of Poe's posthumous fortunes, it can never be said that he was forgotten or that he has ever ceased to be the subject of lively controversy between his admirers and his detractors. One could trace the genealogy of both sides of this family of critics and biographers back in an unbroken line to Poe, who departed this life in 1849.

The patriarchs with whom all these later commentators must confess kinship are two who greatly affected the destiny of Poe's reputation—Sarah Helen Whitman, chief of the cultists, and Rufus Wilmot Griswold, dean of the detractors. Both had known Poe intimately—Griswold in a professional way as editor and anthologist; Mrs. Whitman in a most personal way, for she had gone to the terrible brink of marriage with Poe.

As literary executor and as the editor of the first posthumous collection of Poe's work, Griswold had an enormous potential for good or bad. Why he chose the latter is an issue too complex and too tangential for our purposes here. Let it be noted only that, first of all, Griswold lost no time getting into print. On October 9, 1849, the day of Poe's burial, Griswold's slanderous and



malicious "Ludwig" article appeared in Greeley's powerful *New York Tribune*. The third sentence alone should have sufficed to expose Griswold's bias, for, he wrote, "few will be grieved" by Poe's death. By the time Griswold helped to circulate damaging rumors about Poe and wrote the cleverly malicious "Memoir" for the *Works*, which he so promptly edited, the Griswold line was clear: Poe was an egomaniac, a dipsomaniac, an untrustworthy friend and treacherous colleague, a faithless husband and widower, a man who coveted fame and was jealous of others' successes. Worse still, the damaging insinuations of Griswold were repeated in subsequent memoirs and lives, and eventually sank into the popular image of Poe. Despite the careful work of many serious and able scholars, many of the old half-truths and lies show surprising vitality today.

Rufus Griswold was a mean-spirited referee of literary reputations—an anthologist and editor who merely marketed the creative work of others; but Sarah Whitman was a poetess—a doubly ideal being in a century which so completely revered *The Woman* and *The Poet*. There are several reasons why she devoted so much of her time and energy to Poe's memory. One limited but important reason involved an *affaire de scandal* which Griswold helped to circulate. The rumor had to do with the evening late in 1848 when Poe appeared at Mrs. Whitman's home to further his courtship and the essential center of the rumor was the claim, which Mrs. Whitman repeatedly refuted, that Poe was excessively drunk and so noisily troublesome that the police were called in. In trying to stem this virulent story she, of course, had the double motive of protecting both their reputations. A larger reason for her was that she treasured having known Poe and fondly recalled this brief brush with glory, and, indeed, most likely had truly loved



him. Add to these motives an enjoyment of letter writing and one has more than enough to qualify her to be madam president of the Poe society. For all her strange ways, she has placed Poe scholars in her debt through her own writings and her assistance to biographers. Nor were her self-appointed tasks by any means sheer joy. She did not shun the bitter controversies which fate thrust upon her. She sent letters to newspapers to refute both open slander and innuendo upon Poe. She kept up a staggering correspondence with dozens of persons interested in the poet. To anyone whom she considered serious and well-intentioned, she generously supplied information and copies of some of the letters in her possession. Unhappily, she honored requests for samples of Poe's autograph and cut off and gave away portions of Poe's letters. She sent money to needy Mother Maria Clemm. In 1860, she published her own testimony in the gentle, slender volume she called *Edgar Poe and His Critics*. As long as health allowed, she was the central clearinghouse for Poe admirers. She was the one to whom all of Poe's "friends" inevitably turned—the serious scholars, the sincere admirers, the eccentrics, the hero-worshippers, and the crackpots. It was she to whom they wrote, this widowed versifier who, be it noted, lived successively on Benefit and Benevolent streets in the city of Providence.

Our purpose here is to sample that portion of Mrs. Whitman's correspondence now at Indiana University. This impressive Poe collection of 312 manuscript pieces, assembled and given to Indiana University by J. K. Lilly, Jr., has been available to scholars both before and after it came into his hands. While Mrs. Whitman's papers were still in her Providence home, Caroline Ticknor used them in her biography called *Poe's Helen* (New York, 1916), and,



among others, Dr. John Grier Varner made extensive use of some of them in his definitive but unpublished biography written as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia, in 1940, and entitled "Sarah Helen Whitman, Seeress of Providence." (May I, at this point, also acknowledge the great value of Dr. Varner's study for details of Mrs. Whitman's life and personality.) I shall attempt not to duplicate easily available materials too extensively but concentrate upon some of the lesser of her correspondents generally considered too peripheral for notice. Although many of these admirers of Poe never made any substantial contribution, the details of their interest do form a minor chapter in Poe study—and do reveal some curious characteristics of the American Victorians.

Sarah Helen Power married a Boston lawyer and was widowed five years later. When Poe entered her life (she was six years older than he), she was living with her propertied mother and her feeble, feeble-minded sister, Anna, and another widow, Mrs. Bogart. She was a third-rate poet of the sweetly sentimental sort who would have suffered a deserved oblivion if Poe had not entered her life. She not only wrote poetry, she played the role of poetess to the hilt. She looked the part. Dr. Varner describes her as dainty and handsome, fair of complexion, with deep-set blue eyes of the dreamy sort that never seem to look at you. She cultivated the fragile, ethereal pose by every means. With a fan, she shielded her eyes from the shock of light. She flitted about, spiritlike, materializing and disappearing in what must have been a disconcerting way. On occasion she half concealed herself behind curtains and joined conversation by peeping out. In summer she wore white, in winter, black, and with low-cut dresses she enhanced a bosom of which she was quite proud. She was addicted to filmy



cloth—silken draperies, fleecy scarves, flowing veils, and shawls. She kept her ether bottle handy and used an ether-soaked handkerchief when she felt life getting out of hand. She worried much about her health. From before the advent of Poe until her death, she was a spiritualist and this dabbling in death she symbolized by wearing around her throat a tiny coffin carved from dark wood, pendent on a black velvet ribbon. She knew most of the New England Unitarian-Transcendental-Abolition group and she was, of course, a feminist. She fell quite under Poe's spell. It was a wild courtship during which both parties were often alternately or jointly hysterical. At one point, Poe clung to her dress so tightly, whilst he pleaded with her as an angel sent to save him from perdition, that the two were separated with a piece of the dress in Poe's hand. There was actually a marriage contract (December 22, 1848), broken, in part, by Mother Power's insistence that all of Helen's claims to inherited properties be legally abrogated. After Poe's wild, final appeal on December 23, he left Providence and they never saw each other again.

This was only the beginning of Poe in her life. She kept a portrait of him hung conspicuously. She was very proud that Poe had courted her and had written poems to her, though Poe wrote poems to women all his life. It delighted her to imagine herself as the real Lenore, and she confided to friends that her maiden name, Sarah Helen Poer (the old Norman spelling later changed to Power, she claimed), formed the anagram, Ah Seraph Lenore. She loved to talk of him. She answered and even encouraged all who wrote to her about Poe. Shortly after his death, she began to hear mysterious rappings which she knew must be Poe trying to get through to her. It is said that she visited the notorious Fox sisters in attempts to communicate with



Poe's spirit, and she felt on other occasions that she had talked with him through the mediumship of one Sarah Gould, a young Quaker girl who fell into trances easily, often, and anywhere.

It would be wrong, however, to let this giddy, girlish side of Mrs. Whitman obscure the other, more serious woman who presided with utter sincerity, complete generosity, and general competence over those of Poe's friends who came forward for help. Her correspondence was vast and varied and, though she might complain of the burden from time to time, she must have enjoyed it in large part. It was invariably a one-sided correspondence, for it was she, not the correspondents, who had help to give. Poe enthusiasts sprang up in the most unlikely places, with, often, only enthusiasm and good will to offer as credentials. The pattern of requests is amazingly consistent. On January 20, 1857, James Wood Davidson, of South Carolina, wrote, "My purpose in writing is to beg of you copies of such of your poems as relate in any way to the genius, the fate, or the memory of Edgar A. Poe . . . ." He enclosed a "scrap from a southern newspaper" which he had written on Poe, and continued, "I purpose ere long a longer, and comparatively more elaborate article on the genius and almost wholly misapprehended character of Poe . . . ." On April 3, 1860, Sarah Elizabeth Robins, of Ohio, gave her testimony to the genius of Poe and told how she determined "to do what I could to reverse the public judgment . . . in a veracious history of his life, and an impartial estimate of his genius." A New York correspondent, Thomas C. Latta, did not get around to the familiar formula until his twenty-second letter—of January 18, 1871:

I would further request of you the favor to *lend* me any other scraps of criticism or documents bearing on his history



which may in your opinion be serviceable in placing his character—strangely misunderstood & cruelly abused as it has been—in a better light. I would then proceed slowly to collate *all* the fragments of biography extant and . . . throw together the *disjecta membra* into one harmonious whole under some such title as “The true story of E. A. P.”

A more serious scholar, William F. Gill, of Boston, acknowledged help, and on March 14, 1874, wrote, “I am fairly at my work of writing the defense of Poe now. It occurred to me that you might aid me still further . . . .” Two years later, on April 21, Eugene Didier, of Baltimore, boldly wrote, “I am writing the life of Edgar A. Poe . . . . If you will furnish me with extracts from his letters, literary or otherwise . . . I shall most gratefully appreciate it.” Then, March 13, 1878, an Edgar M. Levan, of Reading, wrote, “For some years I have been gathering up every thing I can find relating to Poe. What I intend is to put conflicting statements . . . and divergent views . . . in juxtaposition, for the purpose of showing what a medley of contradictions they make up. It will make curious reading, I assure you.” He requested any help she could give. And so it went. Mrs. Whitman loaned or gave photographs, autographs, letters, and her own reminiscences. She gave advice and encouragement, and when the Poe enthusiasts increased in numbers and zeal, jealousies and collisions of interest inevitably developed. Mrs. Whitman found herself in the roles of referee and disciplinarian. The more serious and ambitious Poe scholars, particularly, came to literary blows. Ingram denounced Stoddard and Gill and Didier. Fairfield denounced Ingram’s work and Didier’s and Baudelaire’s. Gill denounced Ingram’s “Memoir” as unreliable and was counterattacked with charges of carelessness, indolence, intentional misstatements, plagiarism, and glaring ignorance.



Didier called Ingram a "presumptuous Englishman who claimed to be the discoverer of Poe" and Gill a writer with a poor literary style who overvalued himself. Immediate victim of it all was Mrs. Whitman, but chief victim was Poe, whose poor, tormented career and reputation had to suffer the internecine wars of his emotional friends.

One of Mrs. Whitman's more even-tempered and pleasant correspondents was James Wood Davidson (c. 1829-1905), the South Carolinian who had a varied and insignificant career as teacher of Greek, soldier, newspaperman, textbook writer, poet, anthologist, and propagandist for the beauty of Florida. The Lilly Collection contains fifty-six letters, postal cards, and fragments dated from January, 1857, to May, 1878. His first letter confided his intention to write a thoughtful article on the poet, and he did publish in *Russell's Magazine* (Charleston) an unsigned article in the November, 1857, issue, an article which, he told Mrs. Whitman, was abridged by more than half without his knowledge.

Mrs. Whitman generously sent Davidson several Poe letters and the copy of a daguerreotype portrait of Poe—undoubtedly one of the 1848 sittings made in Providence. On January 30, 1858, he wrote her from Winnsboro, South Carolina, what he saw in that portrait:

The unusual and conflicting ideas suggested by the picture fall into verbal form very slowly. No wonder the man was misunderstood. You happily designate the most obvious traits as "demoniac." He sought very often, I think to present just that characteristic; that whoever dared scrutinize might be confounded. —He wished to puzzle; and his face is a true exponent of that quality of mind—is a legitimate *effect*. He was conscious of his power—of his superior power—and this gave him the intellectual pride so strikingly indicated by the direction and elevation of the lines from the



nose. At the same time, there is a look of irritation and even distress, in the lower lip and in the eyes inobedient to the will just then, which is in sad inharmony with reliant pride. This kind of clash is to be found in every part of his face. There is a *chafed* look which injures all the nobler effects; and this look is *outside*, requiring a second look to see through it. But beyond it—and I can readily conceive it removed—there stands the princely, delicate, refined, and brilliant being whom we recognize elsewhere. I agree with you that the picture is full of character; that the eyes and brow suggest all the sombre and tragic elements of his nature; that there are suggested “in the inflection of the nostrils its latent sarcasm and intellectual pride, and in the cheek, the fine Greek contour of the chin, and the clear, delicate, but not cold, outline of the mouth his unrivalled sense of beauty, his profound, yet perverted, sensibility and his inherent dignity, refinement and self-respect. His waywardness, his frequent aberrations of will and the perversion of all the nobler elements of his character are most significantly indicated by the oblique downward inclination of the left eye—the serpent-like contortion of the left eyebrow.” In a daguerreotype, however, we must remember that the left eye is the *right* one. This face does not disappoint me; and yet it brings more palpably before me some traits unfortunate in their results which were fainter in my ideal portrait. Would that I had enjoyed with you the privilege of knowing the man himself. What was the expression of his profile?

Two months later (March 29, 1858), Davidson sent his thoughts on the sectional views of Poe and the reasons why Poe needed more understanding in the North than in the South. Davidson demonstrated far more of calm reason here than was usual among Poe admirers at so early a time:

Poe's character, it occurs to me, much less needs vindication in the south than in the north; for two reasons—he was a southron, and some of the charges are so monstrous that the common feeling refuses to entertain them at all.



I might have made three—the other that his victims were generally northern, but this I considered a part of the first; but at the same time I must disclaim intending its apparent consequent that he was unduly sectional. He moved among northrons, and they were most in his mind from personal observation. But a more impersonal construction is also admissible—the mathematical one, that there are many more objects of criticism there than here. All sectionalism in literature is feeble in its source, false artistically viewed, and pernicious in all its causal relations—suicidal *at least* to the extent of its whole claim. I am here considering the matter in its usual but *inverted* form. I should start with denying the existence—nay, the possibility—of any sectionalism in literature; just as anarchy is not to be considered in political philosophy as a form of government—as a fact or an existence in that philosophy at all.

Other of his letters related to the subject of slavery (he tried to reassure her on that debatable issue), affirmed his interest in chirography, and the pleasure of having met her on a trip in 1858. He sent her his phrenological reading and said he was eager to read her articles on spiritualism in the *New York Tribune*. On July 21, 1858, he told her that, on his way south, he stopped over in Baltimore and tried to see Poe's grave. The sexton could not be found to unlock the graveyard where Poe was buried in an unmarked grave. Then, taking up the subject of his reading of some of Poe's letters, he wrote on July 21, 1858:

How *can* I write you of his letters? I have read them many times; and more and more do I see beaming through them the heart—the concentration of heart—which *I* find in much of his *writings*. I mean, here it is direct, while there it is indirect. That spirit, or that *manner* of spirit, which merely astonishes the common reader (!) has always been suggestive to me of a complementary *affectional* power which if recognized would always command our esteem. I have



heard much, too, of his contemptuous disregard of attachments—reckless spurning of advances,—and haughty iciness of heart. From it all I guessed the nature of his heart; and, while there is something I have not yet solved, I feel that I had a key to his nature. These letters conduct me to a point of observation whence I view *before me* what I had only seen by the aid of mirrors before. You do not ask if he wrote sincerely—you *know* that he did. And yet I am sure these letters are capable of being as abundantly misunderstood as have been his published writings; but perhaps not by the same *class*. He has, after all, been less often misunderstood than misrepresented.

I cannot too much thank you for the privilege of reading these letters; but most grateful of all is the confidingness you manifest in entrusting them to my charge. It is not mere thanks with which my heart would acknowledge *that* favor.

Very little else in Davidson's letters is of general interest, except a statement on Mrs. Whitman's *Edgar Poe and His Critics*. He wrote on March 11, 1860, that "It has been very well received by those of my circle who have spoken of it. Some who knew *only* Griswold's Poe have been surprised by the new man here discovered." Here, if one were inclined to doubt it, is evidence that Griswold's description of Poe was commonly accepted as faithful, even in the South, where, one might assume, his reputation should have had its best chance for charity.

Another of Mrs. Whitman's correspondents was Thomas C. Latta, a New Yorker, who worked for several minor publishers and periodicals and developed an interest in Poe and a desire "to right his memory." A few of his thirty-five letters (July, 1870, to June, 1878) to Mrs. Whitman are of interest. On September 29, 1870, he wrote her on the problem of correcting slanders about Poe. The startling fact is that, as late as 1870, he felt "popular preju-



dice" about Poe too strong to attempt the problem. A not so startling fact was his reference to how such redress could not be linked directly with her name but would have to be done through an intermediary of unquestionable veracity. This care to shield a gentlewoman (Mrs. Whitman) from involvement in delicate matters is to be found throughout the correspondence, and it largely explains why, for decades, there was no honest fronting of the issues, particularly of Griswold's distorted testimony in the matter of Poe's drunkenness and amatory adventures:

If you had time & health permitted, I think it would be a noble & just act to make such a selection as you suggest, to be kept *in retentis* until the proper time arrived (popular prejudice I find runs too strongly yet against his memory) & then used with other material to construct, not a eulogy, but a charitable & dispassionate record of Mr. Poe's life with refutations of all the *major* calumnies. If you see fit to entrust evidence of Biographical falsehoods & misstatements—to me, I will accept it not merely as a touching proof of your regard but as a sacred trust, and at the fitting time either by myself, or through a worthier agent if I can find him, do my very best as I have said before to clear the weeds from off his grave.

His sad story powerfully affected me while in Scotland & since then I have often wished that I could satisfy myself thoroughly that the worst statements were untrue. I could not but see, when I read Willis's testimony to the uniformly calm, melancholy deportment, his reception into the *best* society of New York, —his wonderful taste & descriptive power in such articles as the Domain of Armheim &c., —the high bred grace & courtesy which he always carried into refined female circles, —the reach & exactness of his scholarship—the variety of his accomplishments, —his gentleness—his fearless courage, —his genius—his inconsistencies, —but the whole being marked by the unmistakeable impress of *gentleman*, —that the calumnies were self contradictory.



But then there was the damning sentence calmly written down for posterity by the author's own friend & literary executor "my dear Griswold," & no wonder that I felt staggered. Though abstemious myself, because I have simply no inclination for stimulants, I can sympathize with those whose necessities fancied or real, lead them astray, & always pity a drunkard, but never reproach or blame him. I did not therefore attach such importance to the stories of his occasional lapse in this way as many pious folks might do. But the calumny to which you refer & which I have formerly spoken of to you is so atrocious that if suffered to pass uncontradicted, the efforts of the most skillful special pleader to maintain the respectability of the unfortunate poet, founding [foundering?] on his other personal attributes, would be mere waste of words. The difficulty was to parry such a thrust—It is so like a stab in the dark. Before we see the gleam of the steel this mischief is done. I am so glad that you can let in a ray of light so satisfactory. It is a satisfaction to me even to have your assurance that he did contradict it, or explain it away, & I do not see why such contradiction might not have been given to the story ere now—only it could not directly emanate from you. A third party however, who had *seen* the testimony, & whose own veracity was unquestioned, might easily have vindicated Poe's character in this respect, without naming you or referring to you or committing you in the slightest degree—Am I not right in this or do you see objections. My dear friend forgive me that I have run on at this rate—troubling you in your present weak condition. Let it all go.

Like Davidson, Latta was interested in portraits of Poe. In his letter of October 21, 1870, he commented on the poorly engraved portrait of Poe published in the February, 1845 (not 1843), issue of *Graham's Magazine*:

*The Portrait*, of which I wrote you, is now before me—Mr. Swinton called about ten minutes ago & left it with me for a few days. It is a rather coarse colored miniature of which you have already seen the engraving in *Graham's*



Magazine 1843. The figure which has, by the scissors of some vandal, been cut short immediately below the waist, is that of a handsome man, the face not unlike in contour to that painted by Mr. Osgood now in the Historical Library—but thinner in the cheek, in my view not to its disadvantage—the eyes very large, not staring, but the artist has caught the quiet, calm introverted look which might have been totally missed in a painting of greater pretensions.

The brow is singularly developed, high, broad & fine, giving the idea of great intellectual power, but no hint of diseased imagination or unnatural combination of faculties. It certainly leaves the impression—"Look again at me—but you won't understand me any better."

I have often felt sorry that with the tantalizing reports we have of his and Coleridges wonderful gifts of conversational eloquence, no fragments have been transmitted to us of the supramortal talk, or may we say monologues. Talfourd Hazlitt & Lamb in the one case might have conferred a boon on posterity, but they are silent as dormice, & good James Gilman, who did his best, was quite incompetent to the task—Dr. Griswold with his lively sense of Poes miraculous genius should have done more than merely intimate the fact of its transcendant brilliancy. I *think* if I had been privileged to meet either, I could at least have carried away something & re-produced it in such a manner as to give some inkling of the peculiar power—and yet you must not take me for a Jimmy Boswell either.

It seems clear from Latto's letter of December 31, 1870, that Mrs. Whitman sent him a Poe letter (more likely, a copy of a portion of a letter) which showed the intensity of his passion and, it would seem, sent him a less personal letter which Poe had sent to her friend William J. Pabodie as a sample of Poe's autograph:

You are quite right I think in your views of the eloquent & impassioned letter. That he loved you deeply & sincerely I never doubted. In truth it could not well be otherwise, when



you became fully known to each other, —the congeniality was so wonderful—Still the letter was meant for you, and there is a tender sympathy as well as a grief in which a stranger may not intermeddle. I believe that he loved you as he says more than he ever loved woman before, and that he did not understand his own heart, —had never fully sounded its depths until he came to know you intimately—

I will send you back the letter on Tuesday or Wednesday, retaining the copy which I shall show to no one, until you send for it.

Many thanks for the letter sent to Mr. Pabodie. I shall prize it as an autograph and it is curious I never saw his handwriting until you sent me the red-ribbon ms.

I do not know who the "Southern lady" is, though several now living must be fully aware of all the facts, — or it may be the lies connected with the scandalous charge such as James Lawson, Dunn English, C. F. Briggs but I shall be rejoiced to see the statement contradicted. Even *his* denial of its truth would be something to advance, & in the absence of any direct evidence the other way would sway the minds of many, who receive as gospel the reiterated calumnies. The notice in Chambers Encyclopaedia or rather *Cyclopa* did incalculable mischief.

When Latta wrote on January 18, 1871, it was to thank her for a Poe letter which fired his resolve to refute Griswold. In outlining his ideas for a defense of Poe, Latta made an important point, one often lost sight of: if Poe was such a congenital alcoholic, then how account for the quantity of his writing or the excellence of much of it or of the remarkably "firm & beautiful calligraphy," as Latta put it? Indeed, Poe's career does not suggest such extremes of dissipation as the Griswold group described. The "brutal remark" mentioned in the next but last paragraph refers to the slanderous and uncharacteristic remark Poe was supposed to have made to Mrs. Mary Hewitt on the day he left New York to woo Mrs. Whitman: "That mar-



riage may never take place.” (See Professor Arthur H. Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe, A Critical Biography*, page 583.)

Many thanks to you for showing me the *original* letter, which is precious. I scarcely dared to hope that there was any document in existence containing his own statement on so important a point. The mere *sight* of it is enough for me & I now beg to return it. The mere statement that I have seen such an explanation coupled with the fact of Mr. [name marked out] denial of the money borrowing & Griswolds proved credulity or proneness to misstatements in other particulars may at some future day be of the greatest service to the cause of truth & contribute materially to the end we have in view. There is not the slightest need for mentioning to whom the letter was addressed, so far as I can see. Griswold's calumny is supported by no proof, & the word of any truthful man is just as good as his.

In E. P. & his Critics p 23 you refer to “a woman of fine genius” who became acquainted with him in 1845-6 & published some comments on his writings. Will you have the kindness to communicate to me this ladys name (if there be no impropriety in my making the request) & let me know at same time where I can procure her critique . . . .

As to the faults which lay on the surface, I would treat them precisely as you did. He *confessed* them with manly sincerity—he bewailed them—he implored peace & charity. What more can be said after that?

But as to the charge of [word inked out; in Mrs. Whitman's hand: *habitual intemperance*] it can be easily met & satisfactorily refuted. The brilliant list of his prose works, —each of them manifestly involving a labor equal to the production of a trashy 3 vol novel, —& the clear firm & beautiful calligraphy, so carefully punctuated, of *all* his correspondence to the very last, are sufficient answer.

I had noticed long ago (years ago) the report of the brutal remark said to have been made by him previous to his visit to Providence, but never credited it for a moment. It was palpably false.



Nay more it is my delibertate conviction that his assertion in the first letter to you was the simple truth, & that despite his marriage & his affectionate demeanour throughout to his wife, you were the first whom he ever truly *loved* with a passion worthy of the name. In my opinion you were his *elective affinity*, not to profane the term.

As his letter of February 28, 1871, shows, Latto clung to his idea of writing a defense of Poe. The article by George Gilfillan, an English writer, had appeared seventeen years earlier, in 1854. It was quite as savage as Latto indicated:

My original idea was as I said to try & blend the reliable portions of *all* the memoirs I have of the poet into one, rebutting calumnies dwelling lightly on the acknowledged errors—attempt an estimate of his genius borrowing largely from yourself on this topic, & imbue all I have to say of him with the spirit of appreciation & Christian kindness—To do all this would I fear transcend the limits of a magazine article, & *when* I may accomplish it is a doubtful case. The difficulty lies here—I have so very little that is really original to offer, after refutation of the grosser aspersions, though I think I can catch hold of Mr. Gilfillan & take him to task for some of his outrageous sensational paragraphs—“*putrid*” memory &c. Why he sputters out slaver with the unconscious jerkings of a galvanized donkey. This will about do & it is no worse than his similitude of Byron to “*A scalded fiend*”!

Another of Mrs. Whitman’s correspondents, George W. Eveleth, had never seen Poe, but he was unique among her group in being an old correspondent of Poe. He had opened a long and interesting correspondence with Poe simply by writing and begging the favor of a letter, although, he confessed, he was only “a rustic youngster of the backwoods of Maine.” With encouragement from Poe, there developed a spirited correspondence as this young medical student from Phillips, Maine, followed Poe’s career, commented on his latest writings, and even, once, con-



tributed subscription money to one of Poe's projected magazine schemes.

Eveleth's letters are lively and disputatious but, often, very eccentric. He began writing Mrs. Whitman in 1853 with an initial letter of great length in which he asked a long series of legalistically worded questions about Poe and spiritualism. He had read one of her letters on spiritualism in the *New York Tribune* and was eager to know if the "deceased friend" she there mentioned was Poe. This opened a long correspondence which, in the Lilly Collection, runs to thirty-eight letters between 1853 and 1876.

Apparently Mrs. Whitman could not believe that such a letter writer could exist, and she transmitted her answer to John Neal for delivery. In his next, Eveleth showed that he still believed the "deceased friend" was Poe and, said he, ". . . I am forced back upon my original ground—namely, upon the belief that you are at the other end of the wire, assisting Poe to lead the multitude (myself among the number) by the nose!" He assured her that he did exist and closed his letter, "Yours in haste and in *reality*."

What followed was a lively traffic in Poe and spiritualism, sentimental feeling and hallucinatory experiences, little games of mystification about pseudonyms—interminable questions about hundreds of details that stocked his strange mind. He coined an ethereal name for Mrs. Whitman—Neleh, which is Helen spelled backwards. He tried to make a transmundane deal with her: Would she agree that whichever was first to die would try to contact the other from the spirit world? He seldom saw anything in a real and realistic light. On the event of Lincoln's assassination, he imagined that forces of spiritualism were somehow involved. But let Mr. Eveleth speak for himself.



It is clear from his letter of October 25, 1864, that his interest in Poe was that of a spiritualist. He expressed gratitude for her gift of a copy of *Edgar Poe and His Critics* and asked the source of a sentence quoted on the 69th page:

"I cannot even now regard these experiences as a dream, yet it is difficult to say how otherwise they should be termed. *Let us suppose only that the soul of man, today, is on the brink of stupendous psychal discoveries.*" From which of Poe's "strange narratives" is the passage copied? I cannot seem to recall it as occurring in any one of his published *Works* in my possession. Are there still some of his writings kept back?

This quotation, she explained later, was from Poe's "Tale of the Ragged Mountains."

Eveleth's reference to pages 70 and 71 of her book concerns her summation of what Poe had written in a marginal note about visions and the mental condition which gave rise to "Ligeia." (This is doubtless the note which Poe wrote in the copy of the *Broadway Journal* sent to Mrs. Whitman. See Arthur H. Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe*, page 271 n.) Eveleth thought that he had seen something by Poe on almost the same subject in *Graham's Magazine*. (The passage he had in mind may be that on fancies as psychal rather than intellectual, in Poe's "Marginalia," *Graham's*, Volume XXVIII, page 117, March, 1846.)

In some of those marvelous and mysterious outgivings of our Author *I* too, as well as you, have thought that I could "see intimations of phenomena" then regarded as dreams, since recognized as matters of popular experience. That one of his "Marginalia" from which you quote on pages 70 & 71 has haunted me, again and again, as strangely full of meaning with reference to the coming amongst us of those wonderful sights and sounds, thought by multitudes (and not by



any means denied by me) to be from the *Land of the Disembodied*. I have made various endeavours to discover the time, and to trace out the exact circumstances under which, that note was written, with the view to find if *those* "psychal impressions" didn't forbode *these* "spirit-revealings"—Can you give any information as to time and surroundings? If I remember, I first saw that *Marginal Note* in one of the numbers of Graham's Magazine for 1844 or 45. Did you know anything of it previously?

And now, by the way, will you not allow our correspondence on the subjects of Poe, Spiritualism and *kindred*, broken off in consequence of an *error of impulse* on my part, to be renewed? I need my mind called, occasionally, from the dryness of "Provings of Theories in Science" (See American Monthly—Knickerbocker) into the imaginative walks so familiar to you. Then, may not the *cause* be benefited somewhat, in so doing? You said, in your last note to me, that you had thought of answering my *tracing of relationship between yourself, Poe and me* in the same vein—Will you not now?

His letter of December 26, 1864, commented on two of Poe's lesser prose pieces and indicated that he had been in correspondence with two Poe friends about Griswold's "Memoir" on the point of Poe's expulsion from the University of Virginia:

I have reperused the tale of the "Ragged Mountains" (with *accumulated* pleasure) and found the passage just as quoted by you. The reason of my forgetfulness was, that that tale had failed to fasten itself in my memory with the intensity of most of the other tales. I have gone over again "Morella," "Eleanora," "Ligeia" etc. with renewed interest, enlightened as they are by the *spiritual* rays thrown upon them from your volume. . . .

Your assurances from the University faculty, in contradiction to the statements in the Memoir, are in correspondence with those which I have received from individuals—



among them Kennedy and Latrobe of Baltimore—I believe I have given you the substance before, haven't I?

I too, as well as you, “paused to read again ‘Landor’s Cottage’ ”; and, while I read, I found myself wondering at the breadth of the field of the writer’s genius, so to speak—a genius soaring to the “triplicate and triple-tinted suns” (Power of Words), yet never once neglecting to put the minutest hue of Earth’s humblest flower in its exact position on his landscape.

On January 12, 1865, he again called Mrs. Whitman’s book spiritual and went on to comment upon a clipping from the *Evening Post* which she had sent. This clipping concerned “an anagram from the letters of my name,” as Mrs. Whitman explained in a pencilled notation on Eveleth’s letter. After the sentence mentioning “lost Lenore,” she has written: “Alluding to an apocriphal statement in the New York Evening Post.” The coincidence mentioned is one “evidenced in the anagram,” she notes. Here is sheer stuff and nonsense, of course—this arguing that a supernatural affinity between Edgar and Helen is “proven” because the ten letters in the words “lost Lenore” duplicate letters in Mrs. Whitman’s name:

So *I* think it strange, looking at the matter in one light, that, *among all the notices of your book, no allusion has been made to its spiritual phase*—Very likely, though, all the reviewers have belonged to that class which Poe styles “thinkers-that-they-think”—a class incapable of conceiving anything out of the range of their natural (mole’s) vision.

Have you any objection to giving me the name of that one of the Literati who sent you said No. of U. S. Magazine as well as the slip from the *Evening Post*? I would be glad to make the acquaintance of all such *kindred with you and Poe*. Also, can you inform me *what friend* it was to whom Poe wrote (as stated in the slip) “that he had, at last, found his ‘lost Lenore’ ”? The coincidence is, as you say, singular,



to employ no more expressive term—Who shall declare that an intuition, an analysis, out of sight of even Poe's mere *intellect*, did not operate to bring in those identical letters of your name making yourself in very fact the unknown burthen of the song?

His letter written on September 24, 1865, shows how the enthusiasts of spiritualism were attracted to Poe and to Mrs. Whitman's statements on that subject:

I believe I have named to you in a former letter, the fact that a Mrs. Butterfield, of Phillips, had interested herself in your volume on "Poe and his Critics"—She has, naturally, I judge from my short acquaintance with her, an inclination towards *the spiritual*. The death of her husband, lately, has, to my thinking, added to such tendency. I have sent to the *Foederal American* some verses of hers, called out by her bereavement, which I would like to have you see when they appear. Perhaps they will be given in the next (Oct.) number. They are entitled "Before and After the Visit of Death"—I have presented them as written by Mrs. L. C. *Tubertfield*. But my object in speaking to you of the lady is, with reference to another matter. Shortly before leaving Phillips for this place, I loaned her your volume, at her request, *a second time*. She informed me that she had an idea of publishing a notice of it. Now, in glancing over the book, a few days ago, I observed her pencil marks at passages speaking of Poe in connection with the phenomena of spiritualism; so that I infer her comments will be upon that particular branch of your subject. She has a promise set, that she will forward me the article when written. Then, in case I deem it proper for insertion in the *American*, and should find something to say myself in addition, would you have any objection to my making public reference to the following quotation from one of your letters:

"It is strange that in no notice of the book have I ever seen an allusion, the most distant, to this part of the volume, which to me is the most significant and important feature in it"—?



By the way, did you think enough of "The Stars and the Earth" to give a reading?—There, a funny question, isn't it? How would you know whether you thought enough of it, before reading? After the interrogatory, at its close, I wrote, but the Editors didn't publish—"We believe that Poe's was a genius which was let into the mystical labyrinths of the soul's realm to an extent reached by no other mortal."

With the epistolary friendship now on a firm footing, Eveleth, on November 8, 1865, made a startling proposition:

Now, I am going to make a peculiar request of you, which, I have confidence to believe, you will take in good part, though you may not think proper to answer it—In the event of your *leaving the planet* before I leave it, if there is such a thing as the voluntary return of the spirit, *I would be made sensible of the fact by your presence!* Will you not imply a promise to visit me? Yet again, in that event—that is, if you become satisfied before long, of your immediate departure, it would be a gratification to me to have left in my keeping your literary effects, especially the strange experiences, which I gather from you you have had, in the matter of intercourse with Poe (particularly) and other friends gone before you—the experiences, I mean, that have never yet been given to the public? I would keep to my own private eye every thing which you might indicate your wish to have kept; and would publish whatever you might express a willingness to have published, accompanied by such a "Memoir" (*not*, I trust, after the manner of Griswold!) as my ability should find to give.

Much of his letter of December 16, 1865, recalled the effect of a lengthy letter of February 29, 1848, from Poe, in which he outlined his views on the basic law of physical matter (gravitation) and of unity springing from nothingness. Poe's heady theorizing, added to the illness of which he wrote, caused Eveleth to experience a very Poesque dream:



In the winter of 1847-8, I was prostrated with Typhoid fever, and lay *hesitating between life and death* during just about the same length of period that you have lain—about two months. It was but a few days after the crisis of my disease, that a long letter came from Poe (it was the one an extract from which I have given in the opening of the Proving of the Nebular Hypothesis). The letter itself was long, then it was accompanied by several newspaper slips, offering comments upon the lecture—one comment, I remember, was a very complimentary one by E. A. Hopkins, son of Bishop Hopkins, of Vermont. The packet was brought to me at night, near nine o'clock. My first brave conclusion was, not to disturb my weak eyes and weary brain with the reading of it till morning; but the thought of it wouldn't allow me to sleep; so, as my decision finally was that the dwelling upon it, perhaps all night, would injure me more than the perusal, I called for a light and went clear through the whole, lying in bed—Wasn't I a wildered wanderer through the strange and illimitable labyrinths of the Universe, in the visions upon my pillow for the remainder of that night? The very next morning, I contrived, somehow, to take myself from bed into a chair and pen quite a lengthy answer to the budget. And it seemed to me that I gained strength under the operation.

It was a "Strange life in death that held *me* bound and fettered"—the fancy which haunted me the most vividly and constantly, in my lowest state, was, that I was dead and in the grave, while *my second self*, so to speak, hovered just over the burial-spot *contemplating* (in the full meaning of the term given by Poe in his "Coloquy of Monos and Una," if I recollect aright)—contemplating its mortal remains.

In a letter of April 8, 1866, the subject of Mrs. Butterfield and spiritualism came up again:

Now, with what shall I finish my sheet?—You will remember that, sometime since, I spoke to you of a Mrs. Butterfield who had interested herself considerably in your volume on Poe's Critics. I will quote some passages from a letter of hers of a few weeks ago:



“Those ‘slight pencilings’ you mentioned *are* mine. I agree with Mrs. Whitman in regarding those marked passages as the most ‘significant and important’ in the book. Upon those I wished to comment, and upon them I have certainly based some trains of thought. I wrote, and the manuscript is yet in my hand. When I see you, I will read you some portions of it. I wrote, till I stopped with a feeling similar to that I experienced over a sentence in Poe’s *Eureka*—I forget its language—will find it for you sometime. I wish to read his poems and *Eureka* again for *themselves*, and ‘*Ligeia*,’ ‘*Morella*’ etc. once more, in order to study more fully, through them, his mysterious spiritual condition.—In justice to myself and the subject, I *cannot* publish at present. I must wait till I have *grown* into a deeper, more individual knowledge of these spiritual realities of life, love, faith, hope and duty . . . .”

My reply was to the effect that I thought I did understand—that her difficulty seemed to be, that, although she *could not help* believing Poe’s singular, *magnetic* genius to have been a sort of precursor of the wonderful revelations of the last few years, yet she hesitated to acknowledge as much, even to herself, from a kind of dread of the want of *faith* shown by Poe and some of the believers of Spiritualism. I suggested to her that her position was somewhat like that of a jury, who would refuse to inquire as to the *fact* of murder, in consequence of their horror at the crime of him who might have committed it.—Was I right?

When Eveleth wrote on August 15, 1866, it was a grim day; he was in a mood to indulge himself in Gothic fancies and his thoughts turned to Poe:

This is a dull, drizzling day; and I, too, am listless—Would that I had something to stir my energies—something like the mystery of Poe’s tales to unravel; the weirdness of his poems to excite the imagination; a revelation from beyond “the river,” through you, to pore over; your pleasant self to look upon; or something of the like! Write. A blessing!



Mrs. Whitman had written Eveleth about the strange Miss Robins of Ohio, and he was only too willing to believe that Poe might well speak from the other world through such a person.

I thank you for the information relating to Miss Robins, which I will endeavor to *hold sacred*, according to your request. The account is very exciting to me—Strange, mysterious, awe-inspiring are the doings of “the spirits,” whether within or without the flesh! Who shall say that Miss Robins did not write at the dictation of Poe himself? And will not *the authorised memoir* of the poet be an autobiography, given through some unknown medium?

In a letter written April 21, 1867, Eveleth quoted from a letter he had received from Elizabeth Oakes Smith, in which she affirmed the fine qualities of Poe and said, of Mrs. Whitman, that she “dreams—dreams”—a remark not wholly flattering and not wholly untrue. Eveleth’s parenthetical remark was to a signed essay by Mrs. Smith which had recently appeared in the February issue of *Beadle’s Monthly*. His last two paragraphs were about a scurrilous article on Poe which had been published in *The Round Table*, a political and literary weekly of New York then edited by Henry Sedley and Dorsey Gardner. As he admitted, the attack had moved him to lodge a complaint with the editor.

I have just closed a reply to a long, interesting letter from your acquaintance in the olden time, Mrs. E. Oakes Smith. She has an allusion to her “reminiscences” of Poe, bringing your name in connection. This, together with a thought that a line from me may start a return (with interest) from you, is for a reason why I write you now, *out of due*.

Mrs. Smith says: “I saw much of Poe, and wrote of him as he seemed to me” (this in her “Autobiographic Notes” for *Beadle’s Monthly*, which I have not seen, have you?). “He



was more sinned against than sinning, I am sure. He had not the *least appearance* of a man addicted to the wine cup, or inclined to any kind of sensuality—an erect, military bearing, always the gentleman—always grave, meditative, intellectual. If I saw him at his best, his worst could not have been bad, when no trace of it was visible. Mrs. Whitman dreams—dreams. She is truly a woman of genius, unique in thought and appearance. —”

That (about Poe) is different, somewhat, from this in The Round Table of Jan. 5th (heading, “Typical Characteristics”): “— Any one might have imagined Edgar Allan Poe, from his poetry, to have been the most ill-used of mortals and a man with the best of moral principles; whereas, although he received greater assistance from others than usually falls to the lot of struggling humanity, he was one of those outcasts of society—with great talents, it is true—who fail to take advantage of the opportunities thrust upon them and are forgetful of every moral obligation. The song of *The Raven* would cause one to picture a solitary student bent on the working of some lofty idea. The characteristics of the man show us, on the contrary, an abandoned rake, with an incessant craving for strong drink, who betrayed his benefactor.”

Those “characteristics” were gathered, no doubt, from that fount of all *black waters*, Griswold’s “Memoir”; and, most likely, the foundation for the idea of the “abandoned rake,” was the item therein which professes to tell of Poe’s treatment of yourself—from whose house he was turned while *bestly intoxicated*. I wrote to The Round Table Editor, asking him how he obtained the data upon which he based his *characterization*, informing him that very nearly all *such* foundations had been publicly proved to be non-existent, and inviting an insertion in his columns of my note, in order that his portion of the public might get an inkling of the truth. The invitation has not yet been accepted, and probably will not be, as I made no attempt to *wash with soft soap*.

As we see in his letter of January 12, 1868, Mrs. Whitman has called his attention to a short story in the January,



1868, issue of *Putnam's Magazine* (called "new" because the January issue resumed publication after a period of suspension). He had already seen a *Round Table* attack on the story, in many ways quite justified, for William Douglas O'Connor, the friend and admirer of Walt Whitman, had indeed gone far in suggesting the Christlike nature of Whitman (in the story he appeared as "Mr. Carpenter") and had put together a miserably saccharine story of a child who dreams of seeing Christ at the Christmas season. Eveleth's instincts to let the story stand without the Whitman parallel were sound, but even so the tale would be nauseously sentimental.

Eveleth's next wild speculation was a strange one indeed, whether originated by him or by Mrs. Whitman. Poe as the Wandering Jew or even as suggestive of the Wandering Jew was a wild thought that would have occurred only to such spiritualists as these two correspondents. Eveleth was up on his Wandering Jew lore, for Cartaphilus, or Carthaphilus, is another name for Joseph or Arimathaea, the Jew doomed to wandering for having insulted Christ as he bore the cross.

Yes, I have seen the initial number of the new "Putnam"—the conductors sent it to me. Being, at the time it came, somewhat busy, I had not read "The Carpenter" (among other articles) when your letter found me. It so happened that I had in my pocket the number (*called in* from a neighbor, to whom I had lent it) on the very evening that your letter was taken from the mail. I had seen in *The Round Table* a statement that Walt Whitman was presented under the character of the Carpenter, and that the Savior appeared in Walt; hence, you may be sure, my curiosity was carried up to a pretty high pitch, upon reading your assertion that "*The Carpenter* is intended as a portrait of Walt Whitman." Of course, I set right about *devouring* the story. And now I am



prepared to say that I *like* it (What led you to suppose that I would *hardly do so?*). It is brimfull of vivid, yet natural, picturing; the personages, though many for so short a narrative, are fittingly disposed of; the acting of the little half-angel lame girl touched *me to laughter sprinkled with tears*; and I do not discover any offensiveness (such as *The Round Table* declares) in the manner in which the Carpenter (Whitman) is made to do the works of Christ. If I were in pursuit of an objection to offer, I would seek it by raising the question why a real person is implied at all—why the Carpenter is not allowed to pass as a creature of the imagination *alone*. It seems to me that a *mere* story would have told better so than otherwise. Had Mr. O'Connor facts for his foundation? And is Walt *made up*, really, of the materials used in the building of the Carpenter? I would be glad to get a few items of Walt's history, if you have them; for I know very little of him. Does he belong to the family of your deceased husband? Is he a poet, in your estimation? I perceive that this question is answered in different ways by different critics. For myself, I have not met with enough of his matter to enable me to judge in the case.

So O'Connor is a "very dear friend" of yours; and the fact that he is (this partly) makes me interested in him. Did he inform you himself that he intended Whitman in his story? Is he a spiritualist? Had he in his mind, probably, some thought of "Poe's being the author of *Cartaphilus*," when he wrote *The Carpenter*? Did he ever speak, in your presence, of his theory that Bacon wrote the "Shakspeare" dramas?

Now, just a word about my intimating a belief that Poe was the author of *Cartaphilus*—Did I really advance such an opinion? (I do not remember exactly). In one of your letters I find these words: "Edgar Poe always was connected in my mind vaguely, with the Wandering Jew." Were *you* not, after all, the one who broached the idea? I ask for information, *not* to "mystify" you, or anything of the kind. I recollect that, when I first addressed you on the subject of Poe and of Spiritualism, I was almost induced to believe Poe still



alive, on account of the extraordinary circumstances connected with his reputed death—circumstances so out of the line of the natural; and I hinted my belief (or *fancy*) to you. But whether I named anything concerning Cartaphilus, I am not prepared now to say—if you have my first (or second?) letter, you can settle the matter.

The remainder of Eveleth's letters are a collection of reactions to current Poe "criticism"; of discussions of spiritualism ("I suggested the real, mystical life of Poe would come, if ever it should come, dictated from the 'undiscovered country' by Poe himself"); of his own hunches about Poe—all of them wrong (he was not convinced that Poe drank; he did not believe that 1809 was Poe's birth date). It is well that Eveleth did not rush into print with these speculations and guesses.

Eveleth was not the only grown man to entertain thoughts of occult communication. There are two letters in the Lilly collection from Dr. Joseph R. Buchanan, whose life, as sketched in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, was a pursuit of one mad theory after another. After earning his M.D. at the University of Louisville, he conceived and founded two "sciences": *psychometry*, excitability of cerebral tissues by psychic influences of another person; and *sarcognomy*, a method of curing diseases by making passes over the body while the patient sat with his feet in a tub of water. Buchanan also published a two-volume work on the Apostles, dictated, he said, by the Apostles themselves.

In one letter, dated only April 30, he promised to return the manuscript of one of Poe's poems when he could locate it. He promised also to include "a psychometric sketch." His P.S. was even more interesting:

P.S. If Poe has ever written through any *competent* medium, it would be interesting to compare that writing



psychometrically with his own—I am disposed to think it might give evidence of his spiritual identity—even if the intellectuality of the production were inferior to what we should expect.

Buchanan explained, in the letter of November 6, 1875, that he had not yet found the Poe poem. His memory, he confessed, was poor, but he was “almost *positive*” that he had it about 1860. He had searched his papers without success,

. . . but what is the loss of one written poem—to the loss of the myriad of poems that have never found lodgment on paper—Poe’s intellectual wealth went with his life—and literature in its totality is but a scintillation from the Divine fire of humanity—Little that *has been* written will live—but Poe is one of those that will be longest remembered.

One of the more sentimental devotees was the ill-fated Sarah Elizabeth Robins of Putnam, Ohio, who hoped to write a defense of Poe. Her intention, she admitted, she abandoned when she read Mrs. Whitman’s *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, but she continued to write Mrs. Whitman in a series of letters which moved increasingly from the factual to the highly emotional. Through Mrs. Whitman she developed a correspondence with James Wood Davidson of South Carolina. She also began a correspondence with Mrs. Clemm, Poe’s mother-in-law, and invited Mrs. Clemm to visit her. Mrs. Clemm accepted the invitation, for she was continually impecunious and continually moving from one friend’s charity to another’s. Miss Robins even proposed to take Mrs. Clemm to Europe in the fall of 1861 as her chaperon, but this came to naught. Miss Robins suddenly became demented and had to be cared for in an asylum.

In her letter to Mrs. Whitman of April 3, 1860, Miss Robins recounted how four months earlier she secured Red-



field's edition of Poe's works, how she there first saw Griswold's "Memoir." Her reaction is typical: she was moved to consider writing a defense of Poe. "My conviction of the gross and shallow injustice of the persecution which has pursued him," she wrote, "determined me to do what I could to reverse the public judgment which has obtained concerning him, in a veracious history of his life, and an impartial estimate of his genius." She then obtained Mrs. Whitman's *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, "found that much of my task had been perfectly accomplished," yet considered publishing what she had already written.

When she wrote on October 6, 1860, she spoke to the point of Poe's moral excellences:

Why is it that his great moral qualities have been so universally ignored? In perusal of his works I have been more struck by the pervading trait of moral earnestness in him than any other—a trait I believe more essential than any other to true greatness—yet most of his biographers seem utterly blind to it—Some have even denied him the possession of it—and I believe you are the only one of them who have dwelt upon and illustrated it. Most true is it that "Eureka" "Politian" most of his tales and many of his criticisms are "even dark with reverential awe." We have absurd stories of his "misconduct" from men utterly unable to appreciate him, and abundant rhetoric has been penned of his personal appearance, his analytic ability, his proud and melancholy temperament, his poetic mastery—why is it that none have written of his habitual veneration for the noble, his magnanimous defense of merit as illustrated in several of his criticisms, his scorn of all slightest coarseness of sentiment or expression, the recognition he everywhere exhibits of what is most exalted in ethics, and the high influence his personality *must* have had on all men capable of being affected by it? It seems unaccountable to me that men who knew him and profess to have studied his works, should have done him so universal injustice as well by *omission* as falsification.



Again, twenty days later, she continued on the same subject, quoting from the fervid and nobly argued critique of Mr. Davidson, who had partially recognized the greatness of Poe's moral endowment:

"his works are peculiarly free from sectarian obliquity [*sic*], sectional predudice [*sic*], and immoral taint. They are as free from vicious teaching as those of St. Paul." Often after perusing him for hours, and being reminded by this purity of those of whom it is said that "they shall see God," the malignity of his persecutors is almost intolerable in contemplation. It is so clear to any justice of view that "his scorn of baseness was immense."

On January 20 of the following year she wrote feelingly of what Mrs. Whitman's friendship had meant to her:

Should the life upon which I am engaged prove unworthy of myself and the great poet I am attempting to portray in some of the phases of his sorrowful career, I must yet ever bless the moment I was led to undertake this labor, Since it has brought me so exquisite a boon as your friendship. It is inexpressibly Sweet to be understood and sympathized with by you—it is to realize the loveliest ideal imagination has ever drawn in desiring the approbation of the noble.

In the two remaining letters, her emotions became more intense. A fragment of her letter of January 28, 1861, referred to her having a lock of Poe's hair, doubtless the gift of Mrs. Clemm:

beautiful hair . . . struggle of his thirty eight years, there gleams one silver thread! I intend to have it enclosed in a locket—the gift of my father, who died in my ninth year. I am now going to dare pray that you will send me a lock of yours to enclose with it.

And on April 5, 1861, she described how she had been deeply moved by a volume of Mrs. Whitman's poems which



the author had sent. One poem, laid in the volume, moved her to tears. Although there is no mention of Poe in "Resurgemus," the poem is obviously about him. In it, Mrs. Whitman looked forward to a more perfect reunion in another world.

Although my tears fell while reading the poem which you laid in the volume, I will not believe in its prophecy as connected with you—though to none I know could Azrael come more in the guise of a brother beloved, none could have so sweet a boon in death. My whole soul yields belief in the prophecy "Resurgemus." You who are so nobly worthy to partake an immortality shall have "One half the laurel that o'ershades his grave," the aureole of his love shall still glow about your brows when his name has become his country's pride. When his orb has emerged from clouds of calumny to shine with preeminent lustre in the constellation of the great minds of his age, your memory shall bloom beside his own; for it was you who first, rifting the envious mists, unveiled the splendor of the star.

Quite another class of correspondents were the serious biographers who appealed to Mrs. Whitman for assistance. She invariably responded generously, sending letters and copies of letters, information from her own knowledge and reading, advice on how best to handle matters delicate and critical. There were three Americans and one Englishman busily at work on biographies during the '70's, and Mrs. Whitman found life a misery, riding herd on four temperamental, jealous competitors for her favors. The four men and dates of their published works were Eugene L. Didier, of Baltimore (1877); William F. Gill, of Boston (1877); John H. Ingram, of London (1880); and Richard H. Stoddard, of New York (1884). The complex details of Mrs. Whitman's dealings with these men have been told by Dr. Varner, but a few facts and excerpts will indicate Mrs.



Whitman's relationship with them. But first, let us take note of her conception of the perfect biography, for this view of the matter was the ideal which she vainly hoped to encourage. The passage occurred in her letter of March 31, 1877, to Gill, the manuscript being in the Whitman Papers at the John Hay Library, Brown University:

I think that selection is as necessary in the writing of a Biography or Memoir, especially the biography of a poet—as it is in the modelling of his statue or the painting of his portrait. We want the ideal—the large general effect of the subject, not the petty, ignoble details and external blemishes.

When he wrote her on April 21, 1876 (one of fifteen letters and cards), Didier claimed, "I want my life to be complete, final and exhaustive," and went on to ask for "extracts from his letters, literary or other wise" and the truth about the broken engagement, of which Griswold had made so much. By June he was referring to "'our poet'—you see I have adopted your expression." His aims, he said, were to write "the accepted and genuine life," "to remove a cruel wrong from the *dead*." The manuscript was in the hands of the publisher by September, but there were delays and complications. The "apathy in business" caused his publisher to fear publication too early in the season and then the question of Gill's book arose. He wrote her on October 24, 1876:

The publication of the book has been delayed on account of some negotiation with that man *Gill*, who, it appears, has got together a lot of rubbish which he wants to publish. He applied to me to incorporate it with my life. I declined positively. Mr. Widdleton seems to fear him, and is now trying to buy his stuff—not for publication, but *merely to get it out of the way*.



Whether Didier knew it or not, that man Gill had been receiving aid from Mrs. Whitman long before he had written to Providence for assistance.

The correspondence from Gill runs to forty-four letters and one postal card, written between July, 1873, and November, 1877, and ranges from sweet amity and concord to bickering and near-rupture. When he wrote on September 25, 1873, he avowed his intention of equalling Poe's own forthrightness: as to Griswold's "mendacity," he said, "If I can claim no other kindred trait with the genius of whom I am to write and speak, I can sympathize in the manner and spirit with which he denounces any imputation upon himself, and the hand which points the finger of contempt at Griswold's perfidy will not be gloved." By September 11, 1874, he had developed jealousy of her aid to Ingram:

I will of course return any of the Poe material you desire; but as regards Mr. Ingham [*sic*] I must say that I feel deeply that he has been permitted to use material first which I had thought was to be exclusive. He is mistaken in thinking that English and American literary circles are at all independent . . . .

But Gill was not entirely an armchair biographer. As he wrote, September 30, 1874, he had sought out George R. Graham, who had selected Poe as first editor of his Philadelphia magazine, and "walked six miles over hilly roads" to find him. In December of 1876 he sent her a copy of an article on Poe which he had published in the *World* and preened himself for his service to the cause:

I thank God that I have lived to be instrumental in rolling away from the sepulchre of infamy in which Poes fair fame has been entombed, the ponderous stone that has for so many years shut out the light by which his memory should



have been illumined. I care not for myself, I am but an humble tool in the hands of a divine Providence—a wheel in the mills of God, but I am so truly deeply grateful that the veil has as it seems been lifted to an extent at least, that I could almost weep tears of joy in my unbounded gratification. Let me thank you again for your valuable aid and encouragement.

On November 9, 1875, he told her that he had been invited to participate in the Poe memorial ceremonies, in which he imagined himself “ringing the peals of triumph in the ears of the dead and living villifiers, who have sought to sully the fair fame of the revered Poe.”

Gill's sniping at Ingram (and Ingram's counterfire) exhausted Mrs. Whitman's patience, and on October 26, 1876, Gill mentioned it and said, “You seem to be pretty harsh just now.” In other matters, Gill found it needful to soothe Mrs. Whitman. Someone had referred to her as “venerable,” and in October, 1877, Gill assured her “that you never impressed me as *old*.” In the same year, there were hurt feelings on both sides about his having an engraved portrait of her done without fully consulting her, but he mailed her the plate and regained her good will. There is but one letter in the Lilly Library from Mrs. Whitman to Gill (October 26, 1876), but it indicates how she tried to control matters. She wrote him: “Now, if you have prepared any paper for publication on Poe in which you are intending to speak of me [here the words “in any way” are stricken out] I must urge it upon you as you value my countenance & friendship to submit the MS to me before publication.” This phase of the jealousies is the subject of an undated, unsigned rough draft of a letter to Sarah S. Rice. In it Mrs. Whitman explained:

It is true that I had allowed him [Gill] to copy a passage from one of Poe's letters—a protest against the charge of



want of regard to moral obligations. It is true that I permitted Mr. Ingram to use the same passage. I did not imagine that in so doing I was giving to either an *exclusive* title to the use of what was freely and unconditionally surrendered.

There are but two letters from Richard H. Stoddard in the Lilly Library—and three from Mrs. Whitman to him. The first of his letters, September 19, 1872, opened with an attempt to smooth ruffled feathers: In his paper on Poe, he said, "I certainly had no intention to discredit any statement that you made in 'Poe and his Critics,' and if I have done so I am sorry for it, and ask your forgiveness. The truth is the more I looked into Poe's life the more I doubted the truth of any statement about him in print." After discussing several biographical problems, he said, "I don't put any faith in anything that Mrs. Clemm said, or wrote. I am sorry to say this, as she was a woman, and is dead." Mrs. Whitman, herself, subscribed to this opinion of Mrs. Clemm also.

Stoddard's letter of October 28, 1872, commented on some of Poe's love letters which she had sent and contained an admission of frustration in his task of understanding Poe, which is quite unique among the correspondents. The reference, in the second sentence, to Poe's not loving his wife must refer to Poe's first love letter to Mrs. Whitman (October 1, 1848), in which he recalled telling her "that I loved now for the *first* time."

The Poe letters you sent me are very curious, very curious, indeed. I did not like one thing in, (I think it was,) the first one, —an allusion to his dead wife, whom he intimated that he didn't love, and merely married because she loved him. It wasn't necessary to say it and, I hope, it wasn't true. The more I read and hear about Poe, the less I make him out. I haven't the key to so strange a nature. I dare say it is because I really am a common-place person. I never could



understand unus[u]al developments of Genius; therefore I am unfitted to judge of them. I can only admire and wonder. I suppose the angels are wiser. They *must* be: They can't be so stupid as we are when we dissect each other.

In an undated and unsigned rough draft of an answer, Mrs. Whitman tried to explain Poe's seeming infidelity to his wife. The errors and deletions show her own feelings and possible uncertainties in the matter:

I am sorry that you condemn him for what he said to me of his marriage. He did not say that he did not *love* her but that he married exclusively for her happiness. Assuredly he loved & very dearly her but doubtlessly he [error for *she*?] was as a sister & a child rather doubtless felt that she could not enrich his life with [the preceding eighteen words are lined out] felt there could [*have been* changed to] be little reciprocity of thought or life between them. Again, it was not in his *first* letter that he said this but it was in defending himself against some implied charge a passage contained in my letter which had deeply pained & wounded him & for which he [indecipherable word] & he had no sooner said it than condemned himself for the admission.

There are eighteen letters from the bereft and lonely Maria Clemm to Mrs. Whitman, ranging from May, 1852, to October, 1869. They have been largely summarized in Caroline Ticknor's book, *Poe's Helen*. The theme in most of them is how she misses "my poor Eddie" and "my precious Virginia"; how the slanders of mean-spirited men upon Poe grieve and distress her; how life has few rewards, now that she is alone, dependent upon the charity of friends, and suffering from bilious dyspepsia and other ills. She begs the gift of small sums from time to time and sends her thanks and gratitude when they arrive, though the word money is never mentioned. She answers questions about Poe



and claims her own memory to be more reliable than his was ("My poor Eddie never could remember dates").

Her letter of November 7, 1852, written from Milford, Connecticut, is quite representative. Clearly her life now lacks meaning and purpose. Her double loss has proven irremediable.

Dear friend

I cannot express to you how much I was disappointed, when I had to pass so near Providence and not to see you. I have had it in contemplation to go south, where I have warm friends, and *know* I would have a happy home. But I have been obliged to relinquish this truly delightful prospect for want of means. Oh if I could see you for a short time, I know for *his* sake you would advise me what to do. How often do I wish I could go to my beloved children! And oh how I regret my dear Fordham home. I have many kind friends, but I cannot open my heart to them, as I could to my beloved lost ones. I sometimes feel *so* desolate, and think if I had but *one* left. I know it is very selfish to trouble you with my feelings, but I think you will sympathise with me. Do write me a long letter, I am always so happy to hear from you. Please direct to me care of Wm Strong, Milford *Conn.* I do hope I will be able to make you a short visit some time this winter. Do you ever hear from Mrs. Locke? As soon as I went to Lowell (three years ago) I was told she had said so many unkind and *untruthful* things of my dear Eddie, that I was induced to write her a cruel letter. I have often regretted it since, but I could not *live* and hear such falsehoods about *him*, without resenting them.

Believe me to be your sincere friend.

Maria Clemm

The most poignant of all the letters is the little note of despair which Maria Clemm sent to one of Poe's best friends, Mrs. Nancy Locke Richmond—Poe's "Annie"—on that sad day in October, 1849:



Annie my Eddy is dead he died in Baltimore yesterday—  
Annie my Annie pray for me your desolate friend. My senses  
*will leave me*—I will write the moment I hear the particulars,  
I have written to Baltimore—write and advise me what to  
do—Your distracted friend

M C

Poe's death in 1849 gave his admirers a sense of mission.  
Not all, of course, were as colorful or as eccentric as a few  
whom we have examined; but, whatever the faults of some,  
Poe's friends did not lack for sincerity, devotion, and zeal.

J. ALBERT ROBBINS is *Associate Professor of English at Indiana University.*