CHAPTER 39

POE AND THE AVANT-GARDE

JONATHAN ELMER

THE original conscription of Poe into the ranks of the avant-garde is found in Charles Baudelaire's essays in the 1850s. Strictly speaking, of course, the "avant-garde" did not exist yet, but what Baudelaire finds in Poe sets the terms of what was to characterize avant-gardism: the social alienation of the artist; an emphatic focus on technique and method; a fascination with inhuman dimensions of experience; and a radical commitment to aesthetic autonomy. To survey very briefly Baudelaire's treatment, we can recall, first, that Poe famously provides the very type of the alienated *poète maudit*: "Are there then consecrated souls, destined for sacrifice, condemned to march towards death and glory, through the ruin of their own lives?"¹ Baudelaire casts Poe in the role of John the Baptist, wandering in the wilderness of American mediocrity, the herald of a modernity that properly begins with Baudelaire himself. This narrative says something about Baudelaire's inflated sense of himself, but others agree. Theodor Adorno calls Poe "truly a beacon for Baudelaire and all modernity" and links the two writers often in his works on aesthetics: the "heralds of modernism Baudelaire and Poe were . . . the first technocrats of art."² Adorno's use of "technocrat" here points to Poe's influential emphasis on method and technique—second motif—which had much impressed Baudelaire: "Poe would take literary works to pieces like a defective mechanism (defective, that is, in relation to its avowed aims) noting carefully the faults in manufacture."³ Third: Poe's texts push "the human figure into the background," says Baudelaire. The "writings of Poe are extra- or super-human," to such an extent that Poe's is ultimately a cosmic project: "So-called inanimate nature participates in the nature of the living beings."⁴ And finally, Poe's repudiation of the "heresy of *The Didactic*" (ER: 75) was a game changer for Baudelaire and his symbolist and decadent followers, with whom it evolves into the idea of "*l'art pour l'art*," an insistence on radical aesthetic autonomy that for some is the first truly avant-garde posture and for others the apotheosis of a bourgeois aesthetics that the avant-garde comes to destroy.⁵

With each of these four topics, Baudelaire has put his finger on something essential in Poe's work, and in each case we can see ways in which Poe's practice evolves into later

recognizably avant-garde versions. And yet I would argue that we still do not see clearly Poe's significance for modern experimental arts. By saying "experimental arts" rather than "avant-garde," I hope to move beyond inherited concepts of the avant-garde as essentially a form of social negation, as a protest against the baleful regime of the commodity. Poe was hugely influential on mass and popular arts as well as self-consciously avant-garde ones. What is more, his influence moves across media to an unusual degree—he is picked up not just by other authors but also by visual artists, musicians from Claude Debussy to Lennie Tristano to Lou Reed, filmmakers early and late, and creators of comics and cartoons. To the extent that "avant-garde" is restricted to whatever opposes aesthetic commodification and the culture industry, it fails to map Poe's range of influence on artistic innovation. Poe's significance for later arts is transmedial, or intermedial: it is as if he left lying about a method and a set of tropes that could be picked up by artists in media he often did not live to see, who would put them to work according to the special affordances of those media.

John Tresch has developed furthest the argument about Poe's "intermedial" conception of art. Tresch argues that because Poe considered literature "less as an isolated mental process than as a material link between an author and a reader," his poetics resembles a contemporary understanding of the "dialogical interrelations entertained by literature and other media. Poe saw literary technique and the material assembly and diffusion of texts as technologies that were continuous with other devices of the industrial revolution."⁶ "The Philosophy of Composition," Tresch argues, evokes the industrial arts in its very title, alluding not just to mechanical processes of text production—the "composition" of typesetting—but the whole field of manufacture, as in Andrew Ure's *The Philosophy of Manufacture*. But this interpretation may be too restricted. Poe also wrote "The Philosophy of Furniture," after all, a text less about manufacture than about arrangement. And the meanings of "composition" extend well beyond the industrial. At the very climax of "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," to take a striking example, after the mesmerized patient has uttered the words "*I say to you that I am dead!*," the narrator says: "At first I made an endeavor to re-compose the patient; but, failing in this through total abeyance of the will, I retraced my steps and as earnestly struggled to awaken him" (M 3: 1242). "Composing" here means containing the patient within the state of mesmerically induced suspended animation: reports from that state to the effect that one is dead constitute dire threats to composition. To be awakened, on the other hand, leads to radical *decomposition*—"a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity" (M 3: 1243). To "re-compose" here means to reassert control over an artificially produced corporeal integrity, a kind of suspended order. Mesmerism and storytelling are alike forms of "composition" threatened at all times with the energies of dissolution.

Swerving slightly from Tresch, let us say Poe does not so much *make machines* as *perform experiments*. When Baudelaire remarks that "Poe would take literary works to pieces like a defective mechanism (defective, that is, in relation to its avowed aims) noting carefully the faults in manufacture," the emphasis should be on "defective," not "manufacture," on testing rather than structure.⁷ If this mechanism (poem, story)

did not work the first time, let's try it again a different way. In his book *The Romantic Machine*, Tresch observes that André-Marie Ampère coined the term "technaesthetics" for the realm in which scientific, technological, and aesthetic programs converge.⁸ This seems like an excellent term for Poe's poetics, as long as we understand it as less about the factory than the laboratory, less about production than about tests and trials. If there is "playfulness" in Poe's work, it is not Eliot's "pre-adolescent" version; it is closer to what Walter Benjamin had in mind by "test performances" in his famous "Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility": as "aura" wanes, so a realm of "play" waxes, a realm characterized by an aesthetics that is "wholly provisional (it operates by means of experiments and endlessly varied test procedures)."⁹

Ambivalence about this experimentalist aesthetics has been a pronounced feature of Poe's critical history.¹⁰ When Adorno calls Poe a "technocrat of art," it is not an endorsement. Renato Poggioli is perhaps most direct: "'Laboratory' and 'proving ground'—these are phrases suggested by the scientific and industrial technology of our time, and it would perhaps be wrong to regard them as metaphors, pure and simple." He goes on: "what often triumphs in avant-garde art is not so much technique as 'technicism' . . . 'Technicism' means that the technical genius invades spiritual realms where technique has no *raison d'être*. As such it belongs not only to avant-garde art, but to all modern culture or pseudo-culture."¹¹ The repudiation of "technicism" safeguards the aesthetic as a "spiritual realm" and requires as well the distinction between culture and "pseudo-culture," by which Poggioli means mass culture, or what Adorno calls the "culture industry."

But consider an earlier response to Poe's famous "method." A very young Paul Valéry perceives the same "antithesis" that so disturbs Poggioli, but celebrates it: "We take pleasure in this sublime antithesis: the barbarous grandeur of the industrial world faced with the extremes of elegance and the morbid search for the rarest pleasures. And we love the art of this age, complicated and *artificial*."¹² For Valéry in 1889, Poe had articulated this "sublime antithesis" in which the artist is "a cool scientist, almost an algebraist, in the service of a subtle dreamer." The scientist and the dreamer are one, with different roles. The dreamer is receptive while the scientist is projective: "Given an impression, a dream, a thought, one must express it in such a way as to produce the maximum effect in the mind of a listener—an effect entirely calculated by the Artist." But the process, we note, is not so much production as reduction; something passes in via a "sieve," is condensed, and so "composed" to project forward to "overwhelming effect": "everything he has imagined, felt, dreamed, and planned will be passed through a sieve, weighed, filtered, subjected to form and condensed as much as possible so as to gain in power what it loses in length: a sonnet, for example, will be a true quintessence, a nutrient, a concentrated, distilled juice, reduced to fourteen lines, carefully composed with a view to a final and overwhelming effect."¹³

What Valéry allows us to see is how Poe's "technicism" might seem "avant-garde" before the version of the avant-garde with which we are familiar installed itself. It is a vision that observes the social "antithesis" but does not aim to resolve it, or even oppose it. And it is a vision that entails work on the body: feelings and dreams and thoughts are

"given"—and then filtered, weighed, distilled. This yields the "juice" with which the "scientist" will compose. It is ultimately as much a physiology as an algebra.

And here we grasp the key to Poe's significance for "experimental arts" beneath and behind the rigid categories installed by high modernism and its version of the "avant-garde." Robert Brain's study of the "physiological aesthetics" that dominated the latter half of the nineteenth century and that culminated in what he calls "early modernism" outlines a project that "configured the body and senses as having an inherent, not merely accidental, relation with technicity. Bodily functions, organs, and senses were operationalized as machines or technical objects in experimental systems; even the most basic functional living substance—the protoplasm—was treated as a storage medium in a manner directly parallel to graphical recording media."¹⁴ We know from the research of Brain, Jonathan Crary, Jonathan Sterne, and others just how focused on the human sensorium the nineteenth century was—on an analytics that could separate eye from ear, for example, on technologies of translation that could record or transfer sense data into machines, and eventually into media, and on the production of new syntheses: synaesthesia, kinesthesia, and so on.¹⁵ It is *this* experimental world that Poe anticipates with his analyses of sensation, with his linking of sensation and inscription, and with his allegorization of trial and error. Poe's fictions (and some poems) place the body within a cosmic field that is dynamic and vibratory, suspended in constant tension between attraction and repulsion—the field of energies he outlines in *Eureka*. This world was much more legible to artists and scientists in the latter half of the nineteenth century than it is to us: "In fin-de-siècle Europe this was the vibratory world, the exploration of thresholds and intensities, the dissolution of boundaries between selves and objects." But we find it hard to see this world because "historians of modernism followed the lead of mid-twentieth century critics like [Clement] Greenberg and Theodor Adorno in viewing the early modernist concern for the cultivation of the body as a symptom of false consciousness, a quasi-Taylorist discipline masquerading as social liberation."¹⁶

Like Brain, Jonathan Crary identifies a "critical historical turning point in the second half of the nineteenth century at which any significant qualitative difference between life and technics begins to evaporate. The disintegration of an indisputable distinction between interior and exterior becomes a condition for the emergence of spectacular modernizing culture and for a dramatic expansion of the possibilities of aesthetic experience." Crary argues that the analytic separation of the senses served a larger goal of understanding—and controlling—attention: "It became increasingly clear to researchers what a volatile concept [attention] was, and how incompatible with any model of a sustained aesthetic gaze. Attention always contained within itself the conditions of its own disintegration, it was haunted by the possibility of its own excess . . . Attention and distraction were not two essentially different states but existed on a single continuum."¹⁷ Poe's work was the most influential exploration of this continuum in the first half of the nineteenth century, I would argue, and this is why he is so important to later artists. Consider his comments on the poetics of effect, requiring a restriction of the reader's attention span and his short-term immobility—a "single sitting" (ER: 71). As Crary observes and Poe knew, this channeling of "attention" was not uniquely, or even

predominantly, visual, but rather involved any and all senses: “spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see,” writes Crary, “but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and *inhabit time* as disempowered.”¹⁸ Poe’s fictions, especially, seek to produce such isolation and disempowerment in his readers, the better to achieve the desired effect. But just as importantly, Poe’s tales *dramatize* such isolation in the narratives themselves. In this latter sense, *the tales are allegories of their own consumption*. Consider Poe’s early tale “Berenice” and its troubled central character, Egeus. Like us, Egeus is a reader. Just as we may find ourselves gripped by the macabre obscurities of the story, Egeus gets caught up in his reading, to the point of pathology, musing “for long unwearied hours with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin, or in the typography of a book” (M 2: 211). But just as crucial to Poe’s allegory as this fixed attention is that attention’s failure, emblemized by Egeus’s blackouts indexed in the text by asterisks. No matter how “captivating” perception could be, it always failed to fix itself in the end: Crary says that nineteenth-century investigations of perception “were heavily invested” in “the sense of perception as ‘catching’ or ‘taking captive,’ even as the impossibility of such fixedness or possession became clear.”¹⁹ To the extent that it is both a prescient analysis and a practice of this “spectacular” culture, Poe produces a poetics of discontinuity, portraying efforts to “compose” experiences—like Valdemar’s “suspended” body—that inevitably fail. A poetics of discontinuity is also a poetics of failure, one always open to a new effort, a new trial or experiment. His characters often try more than once—let’s see if we can do better with cat #2—but so does Poe himself: let’s try many versions of containment and control being undone by a sonic element—a cat’s cry, a beating heart, a repeated phrase, a tinkling bell.

When Crary refers to “suspensions of perception” (the title of his study), he suggests that the analytic isolation of sense experience (whether vision from hearing, or attention from distraction) made visible a dynamic continuum between integration and disintegration of the human sensorium. Such a play of fixation and collapse animates Poe’s work, which can allow us to see his influence on experimental arts a little differently. I have commented in passing that Baudelaire’s idea of the *poète maudit* has been enlisted in a narrative about the artist’s repudiation of bourgeois capitalism. Poe had plenty of issues with the literary marketplace of his day, but it’s not clear that he saw his ideas about the poem for the poem’s sake as the place he was making his stand on that. To the extent that themes of autonomy, withdrawal, and alienation, so pervasive in Poe’s works, are reduced to a heroic (because doomed) battle with Capital, we have an impoverished understanding of Poe’s impact on experimental arts. Egeus in “Berenice” and Roderick in “Fall of the House of Usher” repudiate the larger social world, to be sure. They withdraw to their ancestral abodes, there to cultivate their abstruse pleasures and practices—reading in a fugue state, for example, or improvising wildly on the guitar. You might say *they want peace and quiet above all. But theirs is not in any obvious way a rejection of bourgeois commodity capitalism* (unless one wants to suggest that their putatively aristocratic identity is already that rejection in sum). They are in flight, no doubt, in flight and in denial—but the forces arrayed against them are not market forces but cosmic

ones. Usher, for example, articulates a view about the "sentience of all vegetable things" that "trespassed . . . upon the kingdom of inorganization" (M 2: 408). A Marxist reading might see the retreat and withdrawal of Poe's characters as "alienation." But in so resolutely focusing on extreme states of embodiment and other anomalies of "sentience," Poe actually characterizes his contained spaces as specialized zones in which organization and "inorganization" vie for precedence, in which experiments in composition and decomposition are undertaken.

Consider now how such an understanding of the meaning of retreat and isolation plays out in an avant-garde decadent production such as J. K. Huysmans's *Against Nature* (*A Rebours*) (1884). Like a latter-day Roderick Usher, Huysmans's hero, Des Esseintes, is an aristocrat fallen on evil times. Unlike Usher, who seems to have no beef against the world that has passed him by, Des Esseintes spits venom at the bourgeois and the vulgar. But what really drives him is aesthetic experimentation—the provocation of sense experience through isolation and intensification. His holy grail is what might be called unnatural, or perhaps, inhuman experiences. Des Esseintes is a big fan of Poe. He has a room dedicated to producing maritime fantasy, tricked out with porthole window, "artificial seaweed," and an aquarium tinted "green or grey, opaline or silvery"—depending on what effect of weather and light he wished to conjure. When he tired of these flights of fancy, Des Esseintes "would rest his eyes by looking at the chronometers and compasses, the sextants and dividers, the binoculars and charts scattered about on a side-table which was dominated by a single book, bound in sea-calf leather: the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, specially printed for him on laid paper of pure linen, handpicked and bearing a seagull water-mark."²⁰ As far as Des Esseintes is concerned, "Nature . . . has had her day," and "sensitive observers" must find ways to augment, replace, or rub nature against the grain (this last the best translation for "*à rebours*"). Des Esseintes takes this project to great extremes, encrusting his tortoise with jewels so that it will make vivid effects as it trundles along, or exulting in the fact that his doctor's prescription of a "nourishing peptone enema" could in fact be viewed as the "crowning achievement of the life he had planned for himself; his taste for the artificial [having] now . . . attained its supreme fulfillment." Reversing the direction of alimentation amounts to a pleasing "slap in the face for old Mother Nature."²¹ But the projects fail. The tortoise dies, and the peptone enema does not produce the desired results. His doctor orders Des Esseintes to abandon his bizarre retreat in the provinces and return to Paris. The house of Usher implodes in spectacular fashion; the collapse of Des Esseintes's private world may be less dramatic, but it is just as definitive. As the novel comes to a close, a defeated Des Esseintes observes melancholically the arrival of the house-movers.

In the remainder of this chapter, I want to look at how Poe's "suspensions of perception" provoke responses and translations in other media. For reasons of space, I will restrict myself to a single—albeit very rich—tradition of intermedial uptake of Poe: the artist's book. As reproduction techniques developed over the course of the nineteenth century, artists, writers, and publishers all jockeyed for leverage in what was understood to be a scene of competition between word and image.²² This interplay between media and sense perception reached one high-water mark during the symbolist moment in France.²³

Stéphane Mallarmé's edition of "The Raven" with lithographs by Édouard Manet (1875) sold very few copies, but it made waves in the rarefied world of arts and letters in France. Huysmans begged Mallarmé for a copy of his next collaboration with Manet—*l'Après-midi d'un faune* (1876)—and his hero Des Esseintes spends several pages in *Against Nature* describing it lovingly. We have already noted Des Esseintes's partiality to Poe, an enthusiasm he also feels for Odilon Redon's lithographs. Huysmans's praise of Redon helped the artist's career significantly, especially in the literary circles where a passion for Poe was nearly a prerequisite: "The channel of communication now open to [Redon] was literary in nature," writes Dario Gamboni; "there is no doubt that, from his second album onwards ["To Edgar Poe"], his overt references to the work of various writers were aimed largely and consciously at attracting to himself some of the current interest in these authors in the circles with which he dealt."²⁴ Poe was a name to conjure with, no doubt, for Redon and for many later artists who gravitated toward his work. But that alone does not explain the specifics of what he produced or exhaust the question of motivation.

For Redon, to produce an album of images based on Poe's work brought him attention, but it also allowed him to make statements about his art in a media-competitive environment and to explore themes of perception that interested him. This competition started with the very form of the album: "a set of images conceived as a thematic unit, often intended to be viewed in sequential order, and housed in a specially made folder or box," the album inhabits the book form while hollowing it out from the inside.²⁵ As Gamboni comments, Redon's often intriguing captions, and the sequential "reading" of the images of the album—on a desk and not hung on the wall—"allowed him to combine the benefit of a literary association with a maximum of freedom and autonomy."²⁶ Importantly, these images were not "illustrations": "I have never used the defective word 'illustration,'" wrote Redon to a friend in 1898. "You will not find it in my catalogues. The right term has not yet been coined. I can only think of transmission, of interpretation."²⁷ Competition between word and image may be an ancient practice, but it is always historical, always engaged according to the ideological and media-specific state of play at the moment. In this regard, it is striking that Redon reaches for a concept of "transmission" in this letter, evoking an image of direct transfer across time and space that could be either spiritual or technical, or both. But what exactly is "transmitted" across this intermedial space?

Consider an image from Redon's album "To Edgar Poe" (Figure 39.1). A solitary open eye hanging in black space, this image might be called, à la Crary, "Suspensions of Perception," but in fact it was titled "After Reading Edgar Poe" by Redon. Such a title might suggest that the eye is the reader's, wakeful and vigilant after being disturbed by reading Poe. We might also minimize the significance of the title by noting that floating and disembodied eyes are not uncommon in Redon's work. As a matter of fact, however, the image has been traditionally understood as an "interpretation or transmission" of "The Tell-Tale Heart." But how? Faced with the puzzle of the link between Redon's images and their putative source texts, Gamboni gets tangled up: Redon's images "display precise links to specific texts and even . . . to specific, climactic moments of the narration. To that extent they can be regarded as 'illustrations' in a traditional sense.

FIGURE 39.1 Redon called this eyeball hanging in black space “After Reading Edgar Poe,” but it has come to be understood as inspired more specifically by “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Odilon Redon, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (*Le Coeur révélateur*) (1883). The Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Museum purchase.

But ambiguities abound.”²⁸ Indeed they do. Putting aside the idea that the eye may be the reader’s, Gamboni suggests that the image “evokes the moment in which the light introduced through a door by the narrator . . . falls upon the eye of an old man, who frightens him; but the narrator, in turn, terrifies the old man and eventually kills him.” If it is *this* moment that is depicted, it must be the narrator’s eye we see, as it inches itself ever so slowly into the room. But later, Gamboni suggests that the image “corresponds to the way in which Poe’s narrator introduces the reason for his murderous hatred.”²⁹ This suggests that the eye we see is in fact the old man’s eye, the “reason” for the narrator’s hatred. Three possible eyes, then: reader, narrator, victim. It is hard to see how one can accommodate this ambiguity and remain wedded to the idea that the image tracks to a moment, and that it serves as an illustration.

Clearly, the relation between this stilled image—this “suspension” of perception—and the narrative to which it is attached is a complex one. In fact, by titling his image “After Reading Edgar Poe,” Redon draws attention to the errancy of eyes in Poe’s work as a whole. Poe’s monomaniacal narrators characteristically attack the face, gouging out eyes or teeth (“The Black Cat,” “Berenice”), blocking from view or walling up (“The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Cask of Amontillado”). The face is *the seen* that must become unseen; it is the projected zone of the sovereignty of the eye, of vision. “The Tell-Tale Heart” dramatizes this projection most succinctly in the scene Gamboni suggests Redon may be illustrating, in which the narrator’s murderous vigilance brings his eye to the crack in the doorway, and his lamp casts just enough light into the old man’s bedroom to illuminate . . . another eye. (The oft-remarked homophonic pun between eye and I is of course relevant here; no I without an Other I.) By showing us, perhaps, the *narrator’s* eye, Redon is capturing, in fact, the reversibility of eyes in the tale. The image becomes less a snapshot of a moment than an interpretation of the logic animating the tale as a whole.

But in these tales, the violent standoff between eyes and I’s is supplemented—and ultimately undermined—by a contest between eye and ear. Here we have an example of how Poe’s own analytics of the senses gave dramatic shape to the wider cultural and scientific developments tracked by Cray, Brain, Sterne, and others. The old man’s eye—the eye of a vulture, with a film over it—is doubled by the narrator’s, as we have seen, but it is also doubled by a sound—the beating of a heart that, like the vulture eye, is covered or wrapped, in this case by cotton wadding. There are two doublings, but they are not equivalent. The antagonism of eyes is an affair of the human. But harbored within this human face-off is another dimension, the domain of sound, which other tales suggest is finally beyond the human. In “The Black Cat,” the inhuman cry that consigns the narrator to the hangman emerges from the “red extended mouth” of the cat, a visceral image merely doubling, as it were, the blinding vision of the solitary—solar—eye of fire. In “The Cask of Amontillado” it is the tiny tinkle of Fortunato’s bell as the last brick goes in. This sonic torment, this shard of sound that undoes the labor that has gone into the narrator’s plot, is understood to emanate from beneath the floorboards in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” where he has buried the remains of the old man. Let us look again at Redon’s image. The planks between which the eye peers do not look like they belong to a doorway or even a wall. They look like floorboards.³⁰ Redon captures with uncanny precision the radical instability of the system joining eye and ear. Frames and thresholds are imposed—rooms closed, walls erected, floorboards opened and replaced. But these frames and thresholds are essentially, not accidentally, porous. Redon uses Poe’s tale as an occasion for a meditation on media—Poe’s, and his own. The eye calls forth the full dynamic of eyes (and ears) in Poe, but it also is an eye facing Redon’s own viewer. The artwork looks back. To meditate on media in this intermedial way is always to think about limits and affordances, to dramatize the powers and incapacities of artistic labor in any one medium. Poe’s tale does this; so does Redon’s image. “The Tell-Tale Heart” plays with the instability of inside and outside, as does Redon’s image: not only do we not know whether the eye between the boards is “inside or outside,” it looks indeed as if

it has already migrated from the material enclosure, as if the eye hanging in black space were another knot in the wood that had displaced itself.³¹ Enclosure and its “outside” are made of the same stuff.

Redon’s “noirs” are notoriously ambiguous and evocative, and unpacking his intermedial engagement with Poe is accordingly many layered. A look at an equally familiar visual response to Poe’s tale can help separate the larger intermedial stakes from Redon’s idiosyncratic approach. Harry Clarke’s illustrations for *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (1919, 1923) are among the most beloved and applauded visual interpretations of Poe in the tradition. Not unlike Redon, Clarke had been drawn to Poe’s work for the artistic opportunities it afforded. Nicola Gordon Bowe tells us that “Harry’s diary reveals that already, on his twenty-fifth birthday, 17 March 1914, he was reading Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* with a view to illustrating them.”³² To engage with Poe was to engage with the book form and to have to navigate the issue of “illustration.” Clarke made a series of images keyed to Poe’s tales and hawked them to publishers. Clarke is less ostentatiously unconventional than Redon, but his modernist bona fides are legitimate enough. Bowe offers her summary judgment: “Clarke represents the subversive side of Symbolism in his predilection for dreamed images invested with iconic substance, deliberately ambiguous nuances, enigmatic, fatalistic, sensuous and ominous figures, drawn from eclectic and obscure sources and closely related to contemporary or recent literature, poetic, and musical ideas.”³³

Clarke provided two illustrations of “The Tell-Tale Heart” in the 1923 edition, one in color and one not. It is the latter that concerns us here. At first blush, Clarke seems to offer a “snapshot” illustration of the type we could not find in Redon’s image. The image’s caption provides confirmation, if we needed any, that the scene depicted the tale’s climax, when the beating heart torments the narrator. But by linking his image so tightly to this moment, Clarke has given himself a problem Redon avoided by restricting himself to the eye as the key that unlocks the theme of sensory competition. As we have seen, sound often undoes the plots, enclosures, and compositions of Poe’s narrators; sound seems to represent an extra-human dimension in these tales. Clarke attacks the issue rather more directly. Like Redon, he understands how Poe’s narrator’s attempt to limit the number of eyes actually incites a transfer and multiplication of them. Thus, the narrator looks out at us, but so too does the old man peer with his dead eye from beneath the mounded covers. Clarke conflates the murder scene with the space of burial (see Figure 39.2).

But Clarke also depicts an exfoliation of sound emerging from the site of burial, crawling up the side of his image to reach out, frond-like, toward the narrator. I say exfoliation, since the image evokes the kind of organic ornament so common in art nouveau and arts and crafts traditions. The repeated motif is the iconic heart shape—as in, “I [Heart] Poe”—but a heavier object resembling the human organ itself hangs like a grotesque pendant from the curling shape. Far from avoiding the problem, it seems, Clarke seems to want to *thematize* the visual possibilities of representing sound. At the same time, a large lashed eyeball surmounts the sprouting foliage, an eye that has no counterpart in Poe’s tale, a fact all the more striking given how explicitly Clarke is tracking Poe’s

BUT, FOR MANY MINUTES, THE HEART BEAT ON
WITH A MUFFLED SOUND

FIGURE 39.2 Harry Clarke's illustration of the climax of "The Tell-Tale Heart." Note the exfoliation of both eyes and hearts. Harry Clarke, illustrations in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (1919) by E. A. Poe. Courtesy: The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

text. This eyeball recalls quite directly another image of Redon's, "There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower," from his series "Les Origines" (1883). This apparently surveying eye has an ambiguous function in Clarke's staging of the conflict of eye and ear in Poe's tale. On the one hand, it might seem to announce a superiority or primal originality of vision; but its emergence from what might seem the ornamental border of Clarke's image also suggests an incursion from without, the kind of inhuman dimension I have argued Poe is deeply interested in, a dimension impinging from without as much as emerging from within (see Figure 39.3).

What I would emphasize about Clarke's image is that even as it fills the classic function of illustration more clearly than Redon ever attempted to do, one can see how the dynamics of Poe's tale, the contest of senses, the efforts of framing and control and their failure, incite a genuine, and parallel, investigation in Clarke, using the tools and traditions specific to his medium and style. Like Poe's tales, these "avant-garde" images become inquiries into mediality, via the human sensorium.

A few years after Clarke's illustrations appeared, an astonishing four-volume quarto edition of *Histoires Extraordinaires*, in Baudelaire's translation, was published in Paris. The publisher was KRA, one of the names under which Simon Kra and his family published. The house was established in 1919 and became a major outlet for surrealism in its first twenty years, publishing *Manifeste du Surréalisme* in 1924, for example. Two of the four volumes in the Poe edition contain the tales translated by Baudelaire, with accompanying etchings by Neapolitan artist Carlo Farneti—each tale averaging about three images. The other two volumes are entirely Farneti's illustrations, some of which were used and some not—an investment indicating just how highly regarded Farneti's work was by the publishers. These images are not nearly as well known as Clarke's or Redon's. They are very striking, and Burton Pollin recorded his admiration of them in *Images of Poe's Works*. I cannot undertake any summary assessment of this mammoth project, but merely want to remark that Farneti, like Redon and Clarke, uses Poe to negotiate intermedial terrain in a self-consciously avant-garde milieu.

In this production, however, the contest between text and "illustration" has been taken to an entirely new level, with Farneti's work almost overmastering Poe's: two of the four volumes have no text, and the two volumes *with* text are literally interrupted or intruded upon by Farneti's images. Figure 39.4 shows a page from the climax of "Valdemar."

In the KRA edition of *Histoires*, print is regularly disrupted by the various fluvial forms of Farneti's visual vocabulary; this image from "Valdemar" is notable for its intensity only. Lavinia Brancaccio notes how roughly Farneti plays with the page, how he pushes the "decorative," "framing" aspect of illustration onto and into the text itself (and much more aggressively than Clarke had): Farneti's images, she writes, "do not decorate the book, but live in the body of the text."³⁴ The text to which this image is "contiguous" (to use Brancaccio's term) is the same scene from "Valdemar" that we looked at earlier, the moment when Valdemar makes his impossible announcement: "*j'ai dormi—et maintenant—maintenant, je suis mort!*" I have argued in passing that sound indexes the inhuman in Poe—the cat's cry is an obvious example, as is Fortunato's bell, or the chattering of the orangutan in "Rue Morgue"—but precisely by its absolute proximity

FIGURE 39.3 Redon's vegetable eyeball: "There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower," the second plate from *Les Origines* (1883). Odilon Redon, "There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower," plate 2 out of 8 from *Les Origines* (1883). The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL. Photo courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY.

to the human, and to human speech, the sonic event recorded here is perhaps an even better example of such inhuman sound. Dead people do not talk (or flipping it around, with Derrida, perhaps only dead people talk); and Valdemar was already well on his way to an extra-human condition when his jaw dropped, and he somehow continued to speak using only his black vibrating tongue, or perhaps we should say enunciate with a "syllabisation . . . terriblement, effroyablement distincte." Within the heart of the human,

extra-
terres-
tre. En
premier
lieu, la voix
semblait par-
venir à nos
oreilles, —
aux

miennes du moins, — comme d'une très
lointaine distance ou de quelque abîme
souterrain. En second lieu, elle m'im-
pressionna (je crains, en vérité,
qu'il ne me soit impossible de
me faire comprendre), de la
même manière que les
matières glutineuses ou
gélatineuses affectent
le sens du toucher.

J'ai parlé à la
fois de son et de
voix. Je veux
dire que le
son était
d'une

syllabisation distincte,
et même terriblement,
effroyablement distincte.

M. Valdemar *parlait*, évi-
demment pour répondre à la
question que je lui avais adres-
sée quelques minutes aupara-
vant. Je lui avais demandé, on
s'en souvient, s'il dormait tou-
jours. Il disait maintenant :

— Oui, — non, — *j'ai dormi*,
— et maintenant, — maintenant *je*
suis mort.

Aucune des personnes présentes
n'essaya de nier ni même de réprimer
l'indescriptible, la frissonnante horreur
que ces quelques mots ainsi pro-
noncés étaient si bien faits

pour créer. M. L...,
l'étudiant, s'éva-
nouit. Les gar-
des-malades
s'enfuirent im-
médiatement
de la cham-
bre, et il fut
impossible de
les y ramener.

Quant à mes
propres im-
pressions, je ne

FIGURE 39.4 The climax of "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," from *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*/Edgar Allan Poe; traduction de Charles Baudelaire; eaux-fortes à la manière noire de Carlo Farneti (KRA, 1928). Carlo Farneti, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," in *Nouvelles histoires extradordinaires*, by Edgar Allan Poe (1928). Courtesy: The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

a communications system is harbored that exceeds all efforts to contain it through “composition” by frame or page.

It is this media dynamic that Farneti’s image engages. We see an effluvium issuing from Valdemar’s mouth at the top of the page, running down the middle of the page to pool at the bottom. In narrative terms, it is an anticipation of Valdemar’s corporeal dissolution at the close of Poe’s text. In the terms of the intermedial dynamic we have been exploring as Poe’s bequest to the experimental arts, the message is more complex. By tying such dissolution to Valdemar’s mouth (in the image), and to his inhuman utterance (in the text), Farneti provides a visually striking realization of what lies beyond his—or any—medium. This is (impossible) sound (impossibly) visualized. Like both Redon and Clarke, but more insistently than either of them, Farneti takes up Poe’s works not as a set of narratives to illustrate but as a set of sensory dramas to engage, and in engaging to push his own art toward its experimental limits.

I have argued that Poe’s significance for later experimental artists, whether we consider those artists “avant-garde” or not, lies not in his relationship to capitalism and the commodity, but rather in his anticipation of the puzzles and challenges of what Rimbaud called the “dérèglement de tous les sens.” Media theorist and historian Tom Gunning states the case well:

The systematic derangement of the senses and their systematic reproduction . . . went hand in hand. It is shortsighted to draw dichotomies between emerging modernism and this modern ambition of technological reproduction, which calls neither for condemnation as a naïve “class fantasy” nor simple valorization as an anticipation of artistic modernism or an example of scientific “progress.” . . . To do this means venturing into the ambivalence of both its technical and commercial production and the range of imaginary scenarios that surrounded it, both inspired by and inspiring its own development. The nature of this doubling of the human senses should not be assumed, but uncovered and interrogated.³⁵

To properly cash out my hypothesis about Poe’s significance, one would have to see how his influence wielded itself in media-specific ways in film, music, radio, comics, and cartoons. I have merely put a toe into the rich tradition of “artist’s books.” But I have tried to keep in view how these “transmissions” of Poe (to recall Redon) express an experimentalism that engages both technical and commercial production as well as the “imaginary scenarios” so richly available for later use in Poe’s own texts.

NOTES

1. Charles Baudelaire, “Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Works,” in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 162–163.
2. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, new ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (1970; London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 29.

3. Baudelaire, "Further Notes on Edgar Poe," in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, 198.
4. Baudelaire, "Further Notes on Edgar Poe," 171, 186.
5. Renato Poggioli observes that "it was symbolism which carried one of the external signs most characteristically avant-garde to the highest degree of development," while Peter Bürger's Marxist periodization sees the development here as bourgeois. See Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (1962; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 21; and Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
6. John Tresch, "The Uses of a Mistranslated Manifesto: Baudelaire's 'La Genèse d'un Poème,'" *L'Esprit Créateur* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 23–35, quote from 23–24. See also by John Tresch: "The Potent Magic of Verisimilitude: Edgar Allan Poe within the Mechanical Age," *British Journal for the History of Science* 30, no. 3 (1997): 275–290; "Extra! Extra! Poe Invents Science Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 113–132; "Technology," in *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 372–382; "The Prophet and the Pendulum: Sensational Science and Audiovisual Phantasmagoria around 1848," *Grey Room* 43 (Spring 2011): 16–41; Mara Mills and Tresch, "Audio/Visual," *Grey Room* 43 (Spring 2011): 6–15.
7. Baudelaire, *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, 198. T. S. Eliot's famous dismissal of Poe extends and misapplies Baudelaire's observation: "The forms which his lively curiosity takes are those in which a pre-adolescent mentality delights: wonders of nature and of mechanics and of the supernatural, cryptograms and cyphers, puzzles and labyrinths, mechanical chess-players and wild flights of speculation." Eliot, "From Poe to Valéry," *Hudson Review* 2, no. 3 (1949): 335.
8. John Tresch, *The Romantic Machine: Utopian Science and Technology after Napoleoan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
9. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility." Benjamin has most to say about play in the second, longest, and never-published version of this famous essay, which is what is quoted here. See *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and others, vol. 3, 1935–1938 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 107.
10. And it is ambivalence present from the very beginning: Tresch observes that between the 1852 and 1856 versions of Baudelaire's essay on Poe, the Frenchman excises the term "laboratoire": "The air in Poe's literature remains 'raréfié,' but the allusion to laboratoire has disappeared." Tresch, "The Uses of a Mistranslated Manifesto," 28.
11. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 136, 138.
12. Paul Valéry, "On Literary Technique," in *Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 7, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (New York: Bollingen Foundation), 323.
13. Valéry, "On Literary Technique," 315, 315, 315–317.
14. Robert Brain, *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), xxiii.
15. In addition to Brain, and the works of Tresch cited earlier, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT

- Press, 1990); Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Robin Veder, *The Living Line: Modern Art and the Economy of Energy* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2015).
16. Brain, *The Pulse of Modernism*, xxiii, xxi.
 17. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 12–13, 47.
 18. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 3.
 19. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 3.
 20. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A Rebours)*, trans. Robert Baldick (1956; Penguin: London, 1981), 20.
 21. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 22, 193, 194.
 22. See Keri Yousif, *Balzac, Grandville, and the Rise of Book Illustration* (London: Ashgate, 2012). For one wider treatment of this age-old competition, see Garrett Stewart, *The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
 23. See Anna Sigrídur Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, The Artist's Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Penny Florence, *Mallarmé, Manet and Redon: Visual and Aural Signs and the Generation of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Barbara Larson, *The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005); Jodi Hauptman, *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005). "Starr Figura, Redon and the Lithographed Portfolio," in Hauptman, *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odile Redon*, 76–98.
 24. Dario Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*, trans. Mary Whittall, rev. ed. (1989; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 76, 122.
 25. Figura, "Redon and the Lithographed Portfolio," 82.
 26. Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen*, 106.
 27. Quoted in Figura, "Redon and the Lithographed Portfolio," 83.
 28. Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen*, 111. See a similar equivocation in Jodi Hauptman's *Beyond the Visible*: At first, Hauptman says that the image she uses as a frontispiece is "a visualization of a moment in Poe's story 'Berenice' (1835), in which the narrator becomes obsessed with and feels tormented by his fiancée's teeth." But only two sentences later, she says: "Rather than referring to a particular moment in the story, Redon instead evokes the mood of the horrifying tale and places the viewer in the position of the obsessed narrator." Moment or no moment? Hauptman, *Beyond the Visible*, 29.
 29. Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen*, 111, 116.
 30. See Gamboni: "the wooden surfaces in 'The Tell-Tale Heart' look more like the planks of a floor than like a door or a wall; the drawing may therefore also allude to the end of the text, in which the narrator hears the heart of his victim beating under the floor and feels compelled to give himself up to the police." Gamboni, *The Brush and the Pen*, 114.
 31. Gamboni also notices this detail and summarizes its import well: "Moreover, the knot in the wood, conspicuously placed in the upper center of the drawing, clearly suggests another eye, 'with a film over it,' and thereby launches a process of proliferation that can allude both to the narrator's obsession and to his punishment." *The Brush and the Pen*, 116. For a different, contemporary, treatment of the dissolution of thresholds, one specifically attentive to auditory images, see Jarkko Toikkanen, "Auditory Images in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 39–53.

32. Nicola Gordon Bowe, *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989), 34.
33. Bowe, *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, 2–3.
34. Lavinia Brancaccio, “Carlo Farneti,” in *In Margine: Artisti napoletani fra tradizione e opposizione, 1909–1923*, ed. Picone Petrusa (Milan: Fabbri, 1986), 179–185. Here is the full Italian: “Più che a fronte del testo, le tavole farnetiane sono a margine o, per meglio dire, contigue al testo che scorre col suo intreccio. Non decorano il libro, ma vivono nel corpo del testo” (180).
35. Tom Gunning, “Doing for the Eye What the Phonograph Does for the Ear,” in *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 16.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baudelaire, Charles. “Further Notes on Edgar Poe.” In *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists, 188–208*. Translated by P. E. Charvet. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972.
- Brain, Robert. *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.
- Gamboni, Dario. *The Brush and the Pen: Odilon Redon and Literature*. Translated by Mary Whittall. Revised edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Tresch, John. “Technology.” In *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, edited by Kevin J. Hayes, 372–382. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Tresch, John. “The Uses of a Mistranslated Manifesto: Baudelaire’s ‘La Genèse d’un Poème.’” *L’Esprit Créateur* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 23–35.

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

EDGAR
ALLAN POE

Edited by

J. GERALD KENNEDY

and

SCOTT PEEPLES

Editorial Assistant

CALEB DOAN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kennedy, J. Gerald, editor. | Peeples, Scott, editor.

Title: The Oxford handbook of Edgar Allan Poe / edited by J. Gerald Kennedy and Scott Peeples.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018019391 | ISBN 9780190641870 (hardcover: acid-free paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Poe, Edgar Allan, 1809–1849—Criticism and interpretation—Handbooks, manuals, etc.

Classification: LCC PS2638 .O94 2018 | DDC 818/.309—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018019391>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America