

Frank Kelleter

9 America as Interior Space: Artificial Landscapes and the Modernization of Literature in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Fiction

Abstract: This essay explores the relationship between Romanticism and colonial-capitalist modernity, focusing on two short stories by Edgar Allan Poe: "The Domain of Arnheim" (1847) and "Landor's Cottage: A Pendant to 'The Domain of Arnheim'" (1849). It argues that Romantic styles of thought are mobilized by their own self-descriptions, and that these self-descriptions commit Romantic writing to notions of transcendence deeply concerned with processes of technological modernization. Poe's stories reflect this situation with an implicit media theory that both attacks and outbids Romantic desires for transcendent immediacy.

Key Terms: landscape writing, colonialism, capitalism, modernity, media theory

1 Introduction: Romanticism, Modernization, Colonialism

As an intellectual and artistic movement, Romanticism was intimately connected with developments later subsumed under the term *modernization*: the rational organization of labor, co-existing with mass exploitation and slavery; urbanization and new modes of traffic, co-existing with growing threats to social and ecological health; the expansion of literacy and the professionalization of the book market, co-existing with powerful disciplinary institutions and an increasing functionalization of knowledge; the triumph and triumphalism of bourgeois civilization, co-existing, especially in the antebellum period in the US, with a sweeping annexation of lands and lifeworlds. Romanticism was witness to all these things, but when we try to define Romanticism in its own terms, according to its intrinsic appraisal and performance of itself, we learn comparatively little about the historical forces with which it is so closely interwoven. Capitalism, colonialism, and the rise of modern technologies of motion, perception, and production: These issues are certainly visible and accounted for in Romantic artworks and philosophies, enlivening Romantic attitudes and mediating Romantic ideas, but no Romantic rhetoric would ever accept being traced back to such sources. This is not a question of repression, as if Romanticism had engaged in an insidious cover-up operation. Rather, registering social facts while simultaneously "going beyond" them is how Romanticism defines (itself as) *art*. Romanticism does not evade history, does not dodge the world of bodies and their political arrangement, the structured realm of lived sensations, but declares a deeper, indeed profound insight into

these matters. The movement's crucial concern is precisely with the possibility of transporting mundane appearances to a level of extraordinary significance. Romanticism is about *transcendence* understood as an aesthetic principle.

Thus, if someone were to argue that Romanticism is what happens when colonialism tries to give itself a meaning that has nothing to do with colonialism, this proposition would appear downright nonsensical to a Romantic mind. Of course, I am using the words *Romanticism* and *colonialism* here as stand-ins for historical forces much larger and more diversified than even these capacious formulas can capture. Both Romanticism and colonialism have raised, with different motivations and different consequences, the question of what it means to be human in an industrializing world. To this end, Romanticism has produced countless stories of humans encountering an expanding object world: narratives about "the self" – that idealized protagonist of so many nineteenth-century tales – meeting a positively given but always underexplored cosmos of things. With remarkable historical success, this romance of subjectivity, this fabulous hope of becoming oneself through sublime experience, has established *aesthetics* as the principal domain of human self-recognition in modern and modernizing cultures. Operating at the same time, colonialism has initiated a global redistribution of natural resources and a dramatic reclassification of human populations that Achille Mbembe defines as a "repeuplement de la Terre" (2016, 1). In its most general sense, therefore, the term *colonialism*, as I use it here, refers to a massive shift in the interaction of societies worldwide, accompanied by the spread of breathtakingly new technologies for producing things, pleasures, places, stories, wounds, corpses, etc. The colony is one of the first and one of the most effective sites of dispersal for the ongoing multiplication and adaptation of European, especially Western-Atlantic, realities across the globe, including their Romantic notions of experience and encounter, being and becoming.

This essay explores the relationship between Romanticism and colonial-capitalist modernity, focusing on two short stories by Edgar Allan Poe. Taking up the hypothetical definition suggested above, I do indeed approach Romanticism as a "meaning" of colonialism beyond colonialism, but in doing so, I do not wish to claim that Romanticism passes itself off as something it is not, as if the richness of Romantic art could be reduced to an issue of mere ideology, or as if ideology was merely a matter of concealment. Rather, I mean to stress that Romantic styles of thought, composition, and feeling are mobilized by their own self-descriptions, and that these self-descriptions typically commit Romantic thinking, writing, and living to notions of transcendence deeply concerned with processes of modernization dating back to eighteenth-century liberalism (central among the intellectual traditions Romanticism seeks to leave behind) and most visibly manifested throughout the nineteenth century in the escalating effects of Napoleonic imperialism and industrial capitalism.

It makes little sense, therefore, to discuss Romanticism apart from the vital conditions of its existence and development. Romantic art recognizes and names itself in intimate confrontation with the unprecedented social experiments of its time. In other

words, the immense historical proceedings subsumed above under the term colonialism – which have led, among other things, to the founding, consolidation, and westward expansion of the United States of America – are not some explanatory “background” for aesthetic innovations happening concurrently with them. Nor do they exist as a gratuitous “context” to individual works of art. Rather, industrial-capitalist and colonialist practices are active and alive within even the smallest formal features and the most nuanced affective potentials of any Romantic text we read. They animate Romantic attachments and they inform Romantic ironies. They certainly do so as a negative foil or counter-ontology: The cold calculation of the market and the cynicism of its international growth are chief among the ills that the newly sought and newly found phenomenon of aesthetic experience seeks to transcend. But colonial capitalism also inspires Romanticism’s favorite method of transcending things, which is by simultaneously canceling and preserving them. From the complicated structure of Emersonian subjectivity, authenticating human selfhood by dissolving it in events of nonhuman sublimity, to the elaborate historical dialectics of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, Romantics have provided each negation with its affirmation and vice versa. They have complemented expansion with contraction, matter with spirit, civilization with culture, history with being – or foreign plantations and military protectorates with home-like lakes and ponds as deep as oceans. No thesis remains without its antithesis, and every time, the synthesis is the truth of Romanticism itself.

It takes a Romantic mind, therefore, to consider the mere mention of words such as *colonialism* or *capitalism* sadly off-topic in discussions of art, or smugly abstract, or simply boring. Romanticism allows capitalism to forget itself without denying itself, not least by turning art into a separate mode of being, something existing *alongside* economic, political, juridical, and other spheres of human practice but never appropriately traceable to them. A mode of *being*, not doing: This is perhaps the most lasting result and the most pleasing manifestation of Western modernity’s pervasive desire for self-transcendence, i.e., modernity’s hope to find itself *elsewhere* and its simultaneous urge to model any elsewhere, Crusoe-like, after its own image. Romantic holism provides an attractive way out of this dilemma, one that does not insult the philosophical mind, because unlike Robinson Crusoe, the proto-liberal, Romantic thinkers and artists typically refrain from subordinating one of two conflicting dispositions under the other. Instead, they raise contradictions to a higher level of resolution. More abstractly put, Romantic thought manages to translate conflicts into existentially significant (or aesthetically uplifting) truths, as when Hegel negates negation only in order to arrive at affirmation (see Adorno 1966, 158–163). But what if the elevating synthesis of opposites was a self-validating leap of faith regardless of the domain in which it is performed? What if Emerson’s spiritual paradoxes, or Thoreau’s earnest ironies, or Whitman’s proudly comprehensive contradictions were to be described as enabling, first and foremost, themselves and their future refinement? It would be hard to miss their similarity to the mystical self-descriptions of colonial capitalism, which encourage a sense of historical mission while suspending concrete his-

tories worldwide, inviting imperialisms both formal and informal while sincerely speaking a language of liberation.

2 Edgar Allan Poe in Context: Perversity and Emersonian Transcendentalism

Few contemporaries understood the conceits of Romantic transcendence better than Edgar Allan Poe. And this is no coincidence because Poe almost perfectly embodied the new social type produced by Western expansion, the provincial intellectual who, according to Pankaj Mishra (2017), is driven by *ressentiment*. This is how we find Poe, the Southerner, in the 1830s and 1840s: disgusted by the commercialism of his time yet constantly scheming for money and dreaming of fantastic wealth; disdainful of the democratic mob yet obsessed with public recognition; castigating the stupidity of officials and the falsity of their social pretensions yet indulging in pseudo-patrician caprices so eccentric that he often seems to personify an aristocracy of one. Like many aesthetes to follow him, Poe was an ultra-modern critic of modernity, deeply invested in performances of sharp thinking and singular vision that all but distracted from the social rage that innervated them. Fittingly, one of Poe's most frequently discussed stories, "The Purloined Letter" (1844), is about a man who sees what no one else can see (a perfect foil for philosophical exegetes; see Muller and Richardson 1988). Detective Dupin's almost supernatural superiority of mind, his contempt for the commonsensical blindness of the police, his cool ethos of calculation, oddly idiosyncratic at the same time, is ultimately a mirror image of the destructive, if bizarrely methodical, fury of so many other Poe characters.

Wounded entitlement is one of Poe's central motifs – and the most frequent motive behind the murderous actions of his narrators. Hypersensitive to slights imagined or real, and hypervindictive in their social interactions, these characters are "perverse" in the specific sense proposed by Poe for this term. In stories such as "The Black Cat" (1843) and "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), *perversity* names a theory of subjectivity in which the self's redemptive merger with a higher power does not indicate the ultimate apotheosis of selfhood but ensures the mutual destruction of subject and object. Instead of an uplifting reconciliation of thesis and antithesis, we get the reciprocal collapse of strangely incestuous attractions, as in the obscure finale of "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), which anticipates Nietzsche, modernity's prime theorist of resentment, declaring that every gaze into the abyss goes both ways. The "transparent eyeball" of sublime Romantic subjectivity – "I am nothing; I see all," writes Emerson (1836, 6) – in Poe's universe becomes "the Evil Eye" of arbitrary but endlessly "vexing" enmity, as the mad narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" phrases it before killing his elected doppelganger or evil I (1843, 555). This kind of literature reads like transcendentalism preached by the devil; or rather, by the bitter striver on the

fringes of the metropolis, modernity's eternal companion and antagonist. "The Man of the Crowd" (1840) portrays a version of this figure as suggesting "the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense – of supreme despair" (1840, 392).

The stories of Edgar Allan Poe thus occupy an exceptional place in the literature of the antebellum era. They are unassimilable to transcendentalist visions of national-natural grandeur but also irreducible to the epistemological skepticism and anthropological pessimism of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, two more securely canonized representatives of "dark" Romanticism who lack the deep sense of hostility underlying much of Poe's writing. Never one to fraternize with his readers, Poe preferred genres that positioned him as always having the last laugh, such as horror tales and hoaxes (some of the latter largely undetected until today, like "The Philosophy of Composition"). No one but Poe could have written an adventurous sea yarn – *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), his only novel – in which the enterprising hero spends the first long part of his voyage stowed away in the claustrophobic darkness of the ship's hold, only to enter, at the end of his increasingly far-ranging and implausible expedition, a surreal realm of infinite whiteness that distills and extols every racial anxiety ever conjured up by the colonial imagination. Talk about undermining genre expectations. Even Poe's most famed technical stratagem as a storyteller, the unreliable narrator, partakes in this subtly vengeful establishment of authorial power, requiring discerning readers to identify not with character but text.

In other words, Poe's literary persona aspired to be nobody's fool. Here was someone who made it clear that he was duped neither by the sanctioned ideologies of Western liberalism nor by the sanctimonious counter-tales of Romantic transcendence – neither by the belief systems of economic property nor by the cults of authentic self-sufficiency. Poe's ire was particularly aroused by New England philosophers of nature whose social contrarianism he recognized only too well as serving a pious project of national homecoming. Whatever you think of Poe's politics, he was definitely on to something with his misgivings. Consider that Ralph Waldo Emerson's aesthetic mission to de-colonize American literature was premised on the idea that the New World's natural sublimity would breed analogous forms in American experience and expression (see Emerson 1837). Certainly, this was a far cry from the instrumentalist views of nature at the heart of republican agrarianism and industrial capitalism. In fact, Emerson's transcendental optimism could easily switch into a bleaker mode when confronted with political impasses and personal tragedy. Thus, Emerson's essay "Experience" (1844), written shortly after the death of his son, exchanged the original Romantic vision of an uplifting synthesis with the forbidding vocabulary of a vertiginous abyss, where "souls never touch their objects" (1844, 328). In this manner, the promise of immediacy ("I am nothing; I see all") veered off into an anguished awareness of dependency: "We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately" (343). What remained unchanged, however, amid all this grief and adjustment, was

the idealistic structure of a philosophy that confused the fallibility of “our instruments” – the limits of the human senses – with the truth of that no(n)-thing (“this generalization”) to which “our more correct writing” gives “the name of Being” (341). Already shifting emphasis from Being to Becoming, Emerson was not the first Romantic who noticed that such substitution could save an impossible ontology. And true: Emerson’s metaphysics of sublime encounter was not tempered but rather intensified by its reversal into skepticism – a move anticipating the existentialist nihilism of Heidegger, who, “romantically like every violent anti-Romanticist” (Adorno 1967, 118), replaced the high heavens with deep profundity.

Already in “Self-Reliance” (1841), Emerson regarded the impossibility of immediate knowledge as a mark of authenticity that could override all distinctions between positivity and negativity, good and evil: “[My] friend suggested – ‘But these impulses may be from below, not from above.’ I replied, ‘They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil’” (1841, 132). In “Experience,” this defiant confidence gives way to intense epistemological uncertainties; some passages here approach the vocabulary of Edgar Allan Poe: “Life itself is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep” (1844, 337). Adopting an attitude of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), Emerson resigns himself to treating people, objects, and other promising singularities merely *as if* they were occasions for transcendence, because, who knows, “perhaps they are” (1844, 334). But this retreat from immediacy is promptly redirected into hope for something enigmatically elusive, inviting an existential heroism of search and endurance. Almost anticipating Ishmael’s objection against Ahab’s suicidal violence in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), Emerson concludes: “Suffice it for the joy of the universe that we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans” (1844, 341). Thus “[d]ivinity is behind our failures and follies also” (333). And so, in the end, at the bottom of the abyss, the fall into nothingness reveals itself as a spiritual ascent after all. This is Emerson’s post-Christian *felix culpa*. To delineate the metaphysical limitations of the mortal senses, to identify the natural constrictions of the human mind, to stress the physical work of mediation in the subject’s “struggle” to apprehend spiritual objects: These figures of thought do not lessen but rather heighten the transcendental aura of something out there, an essence forever withdrawn, “unspeakable” yet producing countless essays, philosophies, interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations.

On the face of it, this transcendentalism, especially in its skeptical and more Melvillean moods, seems to have little in common with the liberal utilitarianism that ruled national politics and its resolute westward expansion in antebellum America. In fact, the nation’s embrace of state-sponsored capitalism appears diametrically opposed to the sensibilities of its most cherished Romantic writers (76 Romanticism and Democracy). On closer inspection, however, it is not surprising that an originally colonial culture should sooner or later find itself in Romantic landscapes, be they bright or dark. Especially in its optimistic moments – and those are the canonized ones – Emerson’s transcendent American art revealed its settler-colonialist motivation pre-

cisely in the hope it offered to European nation builders and their descendants outside of Europe: the hope to literally *see* and *feel* a home where at-homeness was not self-evident. This was the hope to be not only born, but spiritually re-born into one's own – otherwise guilt-ridden – lifeworld. (The history of American Studies and the field's perpetual revisionism reflect this Emersonian motif; see Newfield 1996; Stievermann 2007; Voelz 2010.) Long before F. O. Matthiessen gave a new name to American Romanticism, on the brink of America's entry into World War II (and pointedly leaving out Poe from his canon of national self-recognition), Romantic writers in the US had already laid implicit claim to that title: *American Renaissance*.

Displacement, either as the native's physical trauma of violent coercion or as the settler's eerie feeling of residing where one suspects that one does not belong, is a key theme of the colonial imagination and hence of American storytelling. Transcendentalism provided an inspirational solution to this challenge. When Emerson romanticized nature as "the NOT ME" (1836, 4), this was a gesture as radically anti-liberal as anything written against utilitarianism a generation earlier in Germany. But in the US in 1836, at the time of the Trail of Tears and the Texas Revolution, Emerson's revaluation of American sceneries also supplemented the physical appropriation of the land with a mental submission to the land. Is it implausible to wonder if the latter promised to neutralize the former's foundation in brute force? At any rate, such rarefied redemption seems not unrelated to the growing tendency of nineteenth-century reform and popular cultures to sentimentalize native populations and other victims of national progress. In both cases, the creation of an idealized otherness allowed liberal ideologies to confront their own consequences and yet feel good about themselves. No wonder that ever since, the nation has recognized itself in ontological demands of "who we are."

All these issues are *aesthetic* in the sense that they involve questions of sensual perception and embodied judgment. Consider that American transcendentalism recommends a special disposition for humans to meet and experience the nonhuman world, and this recommendation applies to the great outdoors as much as to works of art. To perceive nature "truly," Emerson stresses (and similar arguments will later be made for art), Americans must strive to perceive it immediately, in a scene of *singular encounter*. The fact that this is impossible, as Emerson deplores elsewhere, only highlights the heroism, the extraordinary individual exertion, the startling genius, involved in the attempt: "[F]ew adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing" (1836, 6). To mend this, Emerson, while mindful of the restrictions of the human sensorium, asks his readers to put aside all interceding technologies and institutions of colonial capitalism, whether these are maps, binoculars, railways, museums, or books. As the painter Thomas Cole wrote in *Essay on American Scenery* (1836), a text Emerson knew well, the landscapes of the New World offer "undefiled works" to the eye, but only if the beholder lets go of "meager utilitarianism" (n. pag.). No artificial medium is supposed to intrude between the American self and its site of becoming: If nature is to show a passageway from soul to

over-soul, the observer must not observe it from the outside, nor with the help of modern machines of vision and motion, but he must immerse himself in it. Life in the woods. (And yes, it's usually recommended as a male practice.)

Poe thought this was an elaborate philosophical scam. He staged his critique of transcendental selfhood and its attendant cultural nationalism in a number of lesser-known tales, among them "The Domain of Arnheim" (1847; sometimes anthologized as "The Landscape Garden") and "Landor's Cottage: A Pendant to 'The Domain of Arnheim'" (1849). Both narratives revolve around a standard theme in Poe's fiction: the unreliability of subjective perception. Poe had always been fond of scenarios of radical idealism. Again and again in his tales, experience of the outside world is determined by the subject's (usually subconscious) interests. In "A Tale of the Ragged Mountain" (1844), "Morning on the Wissahiccon" (1844), and "The Sphinx" (1846), for example, characters think they encounter nature immediately, as if fulfilling Emerson's highest hopes, but then realize that whatever they are finding in their environments has been shaped in advance by the ideas they are bringing to it. In principle, there is nothing un-Romantic about this state of affairs; already Wordsworth had substituted the sublimity of nature with the sublimity of consciousness, most famously in the passage on the crossing of the Alps in *The Prelude* (begun 1798, published in 1850). Emerson, too, knew how to uphold a grand vision of human subjectivity while acknowledging the physical confines of subjective awareness. But Poe's idealism is of a different sort and so is his understanding of sublimity. This becomes evident when stories such as "The Domain of Arnheim" and "Landor's Cottage" push the irreducibility of subjective perception to its surprisingly materialist extreme. In these landscape tales, the ever-present possibility that individuals are deceived by their senses is amplified into the even more disconcerting possibility that individual acts of perception are being intentionally manipulated. For Poe, it is a small step from radical idealism to radical constructivism. In fact, the difference may only be a matter of perspective (↗5 Romanticism and European Philosophy).

3 "The Domain of Arnheim"

The earlier of the two landscape tales, "The Domain of Arnheim," centers on a nameless narrator who tells us about the life and works of his friend, the millionaire and landscape gardener Ellison. In the first part of the story, the narrator portrays his friend. We learn a lot about Ellison's character, his ambitions, and his views of life. The second part describes one of his artistic creations: the eponymous Domain of Arnheim, an enormous landscape garden, which the narrator visits at the end of the tale. Needless to say, this being a Poe story, the narrator quickly turns out to be unreliable. He clearly idolizes Ellison, presenting him as a truly extraordinary person, a transcendental subject in the emphatic sense of the term, someone who has seen beyond the outward appearance of material things to behold their spiritual reality. Moreover, Elli-

son – whose name rhymes with Emerson but also calls to mind the Scottish priest and aesthetic philosopher Archibald Alison – has managed to translate his natural epiphanies into a most sublime work of art (see Ljungquist 1984, 22). This man, we are told, is a Romantic genius in all the senses of the term: an original creator who lives his own life as if it was an artistic masterpiece. The narrator enthuses, “In the brief existence of Ellison I fancy that I have seen refuted the dogma, that in man’s very nature lies some hidden principle, the antagonist of bliss” (Poe 1847, 855).

There seems to be no deadly realm beyond the pleasure principle for this great personality. We know such characters from other Poe tales: haughty princes and proud landlords who set out to create a world in their own image. Rarely do they end well. Thus, the narrator’s casual reference to Ellison’s “brief existence” should put us on guard; apparently, this protagonist will not be spared the sinister fate of other Poe geniuses. And indeed, the first sentence of the story reads: “From his cradle to his grave a gale of prosperity bore my friend Ellison along” (855). In other words, the man is dead. Right at the beginning of his story the narrator registers, without quite grasping that he is doing so, the materialistic foundation of Ellison’s transcendental project – possession of a “princely fortune” (856) – but also, and more fatefully, the inevitable physical failure of his friend’s search for transcendence. Neither spiritual self-reliance nor monetary wealth (of almost fairy-tale-like proportions) could prevent the Romantic genius from ending up beyond the pleasure principle.

Why this is so – and what Ellison’s place of alleged transcendence looks like – is shown in the second part of the story, in which the narrator describes his visit to Ellison’s Domain. Contrary to what we would expect of a nineteenth-century landscape garden – American antebellum examples included New York’s Central Park designed by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted – Arnheim does not adhere to a picturesque aesthetics (see Hipple 1967; Ljungquist 1984; Klonk 1996; Copley and Garside 1997). While Ellison’s garden is an artificial space that pretends to have grown naturally (just like a picturesque garden would do), the effect of this is anything but “pleasing” or “scenic” (central attributes of the picturesque). On the contrary, Ellison’s Domain appears grotesque – frightening even. But the narrator does not notice. As so often in Poe, the voice of the storyteller remains trapped in mental schemes that are inappropriate to the events unfolding before his eyes. In particular, the narrator seems misled by Romantic ideas and vocabularies, including quite a few Emersonian figures of thought. Confronted with Ellison’s garden, he accordingly feels awe, as if he beheld not a human but a divine creation: not a walk-in painting, as Anglo-American landscape gardens typically presented themselves at the time, but a sublime natural force, an elemental site of being revealing itself in a sudden moment of unearthly insight.

But the text shows otherwise. While the narrator believes that he encounters a quasi-divine work of art, a realm of existence that resides beyond physical – or colonizable – nature as its inexpressible origin and meaning, what he describes shows all the attributes of a techno-capitalist media simulation. In fact, his journey through El-

lison's garden resembles a carnival ride rather than an active perambulation. The narrator does not move; instead, he is being moved. A canoe, gliding without human intervention down a river on a fixed path, transports the visitor past prefabricated optical effects. After a while, it becomes difficult to even speak of a "landscape" anymore, because the narrator loses all sense of direction. His route seems controlled by an invisible hand, making it impossible to estimate where the canoe will go next. Then the following happens, which is also the end of the story, significantly switching to the present tense:

The canoe falls into the lesser channel and approaches the gate. The boat glides between them, and commences a rapid descent into a vast amphitheater entirely begirt with purple mountains whose bases are laved by a gleaming river throughout the full extent of their circuit. Meantime the whole Paradise of Arnheim bursts upon the view. There is a gush of entrancing melody; there is an oppressive sense of strange sweet odor; – there is a dreamlike intermingling to the eye of tall slender Eastern trees – bosky shrubberies – flocks of golden and crimson birds – lily-fringed lakes – meadows of violets, tulips, poppies, hyacinths and tuberose – long intertangled lines of silver streamlets – and, uprising confusedly from amid all, a mass of semi-Gothic, semi-Saracenic architecture, sustaining itself as if by miracle in mid air; glittering in the red sunlight with a hundred oriels, minarets, and pinnacles; and seeming the phantom handiwork, conjointly, of the Sylphs, of the Fairies, of the Genii, and of the Gnomes. (Poe 1847, 869–870)

This is the story's final paragraph; it describes a magnificent attack on the narrator's senses. No organ is spared: Arnheim "bursts upon the view," the ear hears "a gush of entrancing melody," the nose smells "an oppressive sweet odor," and in the end we see – what actually? Try to visualize what Poe's text describes and you will find it impossible. The things depicted here as material realities – colossal architecture suspended magically in the air, gigantic castles with hyper-real ornaments floating at no discernible distance before the eye – can only be pictured, if at all, as parts of a supernatural apparition.

Of course, exceeding the limits of the natural senses is the very definition of Romantic transcendence. The narrator's experience is real in this regard, because like all experience it is verified by what is most personal: his bodily sensations. What the narrator feels at the end of "The Domain of Arnheim" is indeed spiritual elevation – and what he sees is, in fact, the working of a power more potent than himself. But nothing physical is exceeded and no truth beyond the here and now of geographical space is established. Instead, we witness the effects of a complex and expensive mechanism of manipulation (450 million dollars, the narrator estimates, and then goes on to praise the mathematical majesty of so unimaginably large a sum). According to Poe, this applies to every event of natural (or aesthetic) transformation, whether it is directed at subjective or national self-recognition: Every such singularity of vision is an elaborate production, dependent on pre-existing knowledge, material assets, and a will to power. Immediacy thus takes place, but it takes place as a mediated spectacle, or to quote a key concept of Poe's aesthetics: as an *effect*. "Beauty," we read in "The Philosophy of Composition," is "not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect" (1846, 16). In

Poe's literature, the same turns out to be true for the reality of the sublime, for nature, art, and nation: all effects, not qualities.

The grand object outside as a trick played on, and by, the subject's constitutive interiority: This constellation explains all the false doppelgangers and incestuous destructions, all perversity and all forgery, in Poe's fiction. "The Domain of Arnheim," told in a voice infinitely more respectable than the mad rants of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," a voice of propriety that recalls some of Poe's literary reviews (despite their caustic inclinations), is no exception to this rule. On the contrary, it is the horror tales that invite us to read Poe's more bourgeois styles as shrewd performances, whilst the period's bourgeois rhetoric of decency calls up, after one has read Poe, a world of horror. Thus, even the narrator's impression that he is moving through an *external* landscape becomes questionable after a while. In fact, his splendid encounter with nature shows irritating traits of claustrophobic enclosure. Early on, he notices that the space around him is becoming increasingly constricted. Even the sky above seems somehow installed. Ellison's garden now begins to look like an especially perfidious version of the fatal interiors that we know from more overtly terrifying Poe stories: interiors arranged by masterful criminals with the explicit purpose of subduing their victims' senses. Consider the labyrinthine death chamber of "Ligeia" (1838), Prince Prospero's bewildering hideaway in "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), or Roderick Usher's "kingdom of inorganization" (1839, 327; "The Fall of the House of Usher"). All these intricately furnished rooms – theorized in Poe's "The Philosophy of Furniture" (1840), a little-known companion piece to "The Philosophy of Composition" – transform their residents into passive, amazed, and, in the end, literally *overwhelmed* onlookers.

Similarly, Ellison's garden seems to have been made, not for a solitary witness – Romanticism likes to address experience in the singular! – but for masses of spectators. The narrator innocently recalls how his friend explained why he did not build his Domain on a remote Pacific island. Ominously, Ellison declared at the time: "Let me seek a spot not far from a populous city – whose vicinity, also, will best enable me to execute my plans" (1847, 864). Clearly, this artist needs audiences, and large ones. What Stephen L. Mooney has called Poe's "Gothic Waste Land" (1962, 278) – in reference to the modernist feel of the horror tales – is perhaps better described here as Poe's Gothic Disneyland: a weatherless (non)amusement park, where all clocks are banned and all gambles are risky, a large scaled techno-illusion full of costly sensations and dizzying special effects.

4 "Landor's Cottage"

Published two years after "The Domain of Arnheim," the short story "Landor's Cottage" revisits the same themes, but this time explicitly references national mythologies of nature. The narrator presents himself as an original American trekker who

boldly goes where no man has gone before. Inevitably, this knapsacked pioneer seeks and finds strange sceneries that promise him an opportunity to come into his own far away from social constraints and colonial markets. But then he walks into a landscape that is even stranger than anything offered by the redemptive strangeness of the American frontier. His entry into extraordinary space turns out to be a media program: The narrator encounters a geographical simulation created specifically for the purpose of overpowering romantically minded visitors. Poe's American pathfinder is certainly breaking new ground here – he enters Emersonian “nature” – but he does so in the sense of performing actions and realizing emotions afforded by an efficient machinery of sensual trickery. The individualistic wanderer, as it were, lines up with other members of an invisibly large audience for a special national thrill. And suddenly he finds himself in front of a dwelling where no dwelling is supposed to be:

As it [Landor's Cottage] came fully into view – thus *gradually* as I describe it – piece by piece, here a tree, there a glimpse of water, and here again the summit of a chimney, I could scarcely help fancying that the whole was one of the ingenious illusions sometimes exhibited under the name of “vanishing pictures.” [...] Suddenly therefore – and as if by hand of magic – this whole valley and everything in it became brilliantly visible.

The first *coup d'œil*, as the sun slid into the position described, impressed me very much as I have been impressed when a boy, by the concluding scene of some well-arranged theatrical spectacle or melodrama. Not even the monstrosity of color was wanting [...] from a scene so enchantingly beautiful. (Poe 1849, 888)

Poe's staging of a staging goes beyond the clever self-reflexivity of Romantic irony (see Handwork 2000). Almost prophetically, passages such as this one anticipate the kind of *mediated immediacy* that has been accompanying the rise and global spread of techno-industrial culture since at least the second half of the nineteenth century. In fact, the curiously *active* surfacing of Landor's cottage and its surroundings already suggests the logic of the film apparatus: that is, the logic of serially connected frames that are no longer independently visible. As some critics have pointed out, Landor's attempt to draw authentic effects from geographical space is successful in the mode of a *laterna magica* (see Rainwater 1984; Kelleter 1997). As such, this spatial apparition transforms the pioneering explorer into an arbitrary – hence reproducible – contributor to expansive acts of social communication, all the while promising a dignified experience of subjective uniqueness. Resentment under these circumstances occurs, as Poe's madmen know, when the physical gratifications offered fall short of this promise, when the illusion cracks, and when a fantastic sense of reality is disrupted by feelings of betrayal and dereliction. Poe's skepticism about America as “nature's nation” (Miller 1967) could not be more obvious. The proverbially open land presents itself as a calculated artifact, the proudly post-colonial nation as a self-enclosed interior.

Many lines of media history radiate out from this place. What the narrators of “The Domain of Arnheim” and “Landor's Cottage” see when they gaze at natural landscapes – and how they see it – suggests techniques of perception that before long would turn *motion pictures* into the true home of American self-recognition. Fewer

than a hundred years after Edgar Allan Poe, James Stewart in Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1938) will find it impossible to tell a cinema palace apart from a national monument. As it happens, this occurs in the same year in which René Magritte paints a picture named after Poe's story: *Le domaine d'Arnheim*. The painting shows a majestic but impossibly molded mountain range; the grandeur of this not-quite-natural spectacle is framed by a domestic perspective and, implicitly, the idealism of a human eye. Outlandish as this vista appears, Magritte in 1938 could have chosen an even more American – and massively real – subject for his Poe illustration: Mount Rushmore, constructed on Lakota land between 1927 and 1941 as an unmistakably colonial memorial, transposing natural into national monumentality. Romantic critiques of this imperial monstrosity are quickly formulated; they stand back on its head what Poe had placed on its feet. Jean Baudrillard, for one, wrote an entire book about such artificial places and gave it a very European name: *Amérique*. Modernity, in order to spread, apparently likes to divide itself up into geo-cultural dominions of authenticity and inauthenticity. Romanticism is what happens when European cultures try to give themselves a meaning that has nothing to do with America.

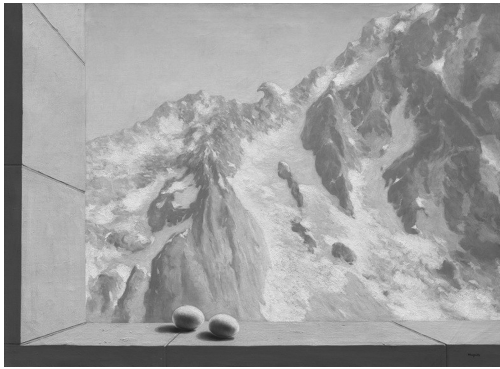


Figure 1: René Magritte, *Le domaine d'Arnheim*, 1938



Figure 2: Lee Friedlander, *Mount Rushmore*, 1969

5 Conclusion: An Art for Our Time

Certainly, Poe himself did not distinguish between cultural Romanticism and political Romanticism. His contempt for false spiritual pretensions did not extend to the pressing social concerns of his time and he certainly made no connection between aesthetics and political economy. His art demonstrates that one does not have to occupy a position of external scrutiny towards a historical constellation (summarized here as colonial techno-capitalism) to apprehend the terrors of its contradictions. The abstracted trinity of twenty-first-century critique – class, race, gender – was not a lens of observation for Poe, but a murky breeding ground for fears and neuroses. Still his insistence on the autonomy of art differed decisively from more traditionally Romantic versions of this credo. Based on the understanding that idealism can always morph into dark constructivism, a Gnosticism without God, Poe's oeuvre prepared aesthetic revolutions that put consciousness of modernity at the very center of their artistic practice. In fact, Ellison's and Landor's fictional simulacra are shaped by aesthetic principles remarkably similar to the ones guiding Poe's own texts. In both cases, the Romantic distinction between *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* is replaced by a poetics that differentiates between *composition* and *effect*. And in both cases, the ensuing works of art elevate themselves into the very position of sublimity they claim to have disavowed by their methods.

Poe's writings thus relate to their readers in much the same fashion as Ellison's garden relates to its audience. Moreover, the texts are aware of this – and they highlight this awareness as their distinguishing aesthetic feature. Henry James, quoting Gustave Flaubert in 1893, defined the salient trait of modernist authors as their odd ability “to be everywhere felt but nowhere seen” in their works (1893, 295). This quality is perfectly prefigured in Poe's complicated machines of literary deceit, with their unreliable narrators, their confusing topographical structures, their dizzying *mise en abyme* of perspectives. Daniel Hoffman, one of the most illuminating Poe readers, noticed the same fact when he remarked that the appearance of the unreliable narrator was accompanied almost inevitably by the inauguration of “the omniscient creator” (1978, 105).

Omniscience rooted in unreliability, subjective fallibility feeding into material acts of mass communication, paranoia emerging from deeply affecting ideals: These are not bad descriptions of a modern condition dependent on trailblazing campaigns into ever new worlds of property and meaning. In any case, there can be no doubt that Poe's Ellison in one sense really does transcend the limits of his earthly existence, even if he gains no access to the super-natural or the meta-physical. According to “The Domain of Arnheim,” it is through the ongoing material efficiency of his creation that the artist exerts postmortem power over those who come after him. By the same token, Poe's literature is oriented toward the future. It is a futurity much gloomier and more malicious than the one driving Walt Whitman's near-simultaneous visions of America's endlessly inclusive expansion in time and space. The following fake quota-

tion from Poe's cosmological tract *Eureka* (1848) – attributed there to Johannes Kepler but really a variation of the mysterious final message in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* – makes this clear. Poe's Kepler writes:

I care not whether my work be read now or by posterity. I can afford to wait a century for readers, when God himself has waited six thousand years for an observer. I triumph. I have stolen the golden secret of the Egyptians. I will indulge my sacred fury. (1848, 1270)

"Sacred fury" is not too weak an expression for Poe's self-image as an absently present, posthumously effective game master. "Poe programs his texts to explode like time bombs in the future," writes Louis Renza (1985, 81). But Poe, as we have seen, also assigns a peculiarly modern sense to terms such as *sacredness*, *omniscience*, and *God*, treating these key figures of occidental spirituality as the results of an ingenious arrangement of things, or put differently: as techno-compositional effects. The accompanying theory of autonomous art often operates under the simple name of fiction, but in the first half of the twentieth century it also differentiates itself into an entire series of poetic creeds, not restricted to narrative prose and generating multiple titles that outbid each other like market competitors, from *aestheticism*, *symbolism*, or *l'art pour l'art* to the treacherous finality of *modernism*.

Perhaps Yvor Winters, playing the part of humanist critic among the decadents, described this aspect of Poe's art best when he summarized Poe's poetry one year before Magritte's painting as "explicit obscurantism" (1937, 187). Winters' polemical assessment, which is as perceptive as it is anachronistic, captures an important feature of Poe's authorial aspirations. Obscurantism does indeed account for the perplexing endings of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, "The Domain of Arnheim," "The Man of the Crowd," and other stories. There is nothing revealed in the portentous final paragraphs of these works. In fact, it remains unclear what is even happening there at the level of action. For Winters, such privileging of impact over truth, or construction over expression, was scandalizing. Taking the mechanistic dogma of "The Philosophy of Composition" at face value, he considered Poe's poetic manifesto to be "a singularly shocking document,"

an effort to establish the rules for a species of incantation, of witchcraft; rules, whereby, through the manipulation of certain substances in certain arbitrary ways, it may be possible to invoke, more or less accidentally, something that appears more or less to be a divine emanation. (190)

As a description of Poe's aesthetics, this is remarkably accurate and yet it completely misses the point, because for Poe, all events of immediacy are mediated in such a fashion. Almost like an unreliable narrator himself, Winters unwittingly reveals Poe's fierce sense of modernity when he complains that Poe asks his ideal poet to "merely endeavor to *suggest that a higher meaning exists* – in other words, [the poet] should endeavor to suggest the presence of a meaning when he is aware of none" (187). As it happens, this outraged paraphrase identifies the core concern of an art that has become aware, not of any higher power outside or within itself, but of its own capability

to overpower multitudes of readers and affect entire worlds of perception, both present and future. The evocation of a meaning where meaning-making is already recognized as an affair of cultural reproduction – hence dependent on technology and organization – will become one of the central aesthetic problems in the age of world wars.

Poe's literature is particularly instructive in this regard, because it demonstrates that such aesthetic self-awareness, comparable to modernity's own famous "reflexivity," in no way guarantees a sophisticated historical perspective on the pathologies of modern life (see Beck 1993). Poe's hatred of American literati (the Transcendentalists but also the Fireside Poets) surely indicates distrust of established authorities. But the political structure of this hatred recalls, more than anything else, the anti-imperialistic chauvinism of earlier Romanticisms in Germany, the original nation of resentment. In both cases, one would expect radical skepticism to preclude further acts of spiritualization, but so far no philosophy of contingency, being a philosophy, has ever managed to repeal its yearning for infinity, or only at the risk of insanity. Much like Nietzsche after him, then, Poe declared dead what he subsequently impersonated, a mad creator of divine nothingness, a paradoxical God-author (see Kelleter 1997, 208–226; Detering 2010). It's as if he was idiosyncratically running Romanticism as a critique of Romanticism, but on closer inspection this turns out to be a rather persistent attitude in modernity – one that Poe's aestheticism shares with other avantgarde esotericisms, from nineteenth-century spectral psychologies such as Mesmerism, hypnotism, and succeeding systems of mental uncanniness all the way to our very own twenty-first-century ontologies of objects, media, and technology.

On the one hand, Poe's theory of art thus helps us understand that art's autonomy requires charisma, narratives, philosophies, institutions, teachers, curators, conferences, controversies, policies, machines, wage structures, immersive orchestrations, and so on, to establish and sustain itself as an experiential reality in the first place. On the other hand, this learned understanding is not the effect sought and afforded by Poe's art. Successful performances of aesthetic autonomy will endow any effort to link the work of art to its conditions of continuation and possibility with a feeling of insufficiency. In particular, political claims for or against the work will often appear inappropriate because, by the experiential standards realized by the work itself, they often are. Do not speak of colonialism when you strive to speak to a Romantic painting in its own language – as Romantic aesthetics typically asks you to! And yet Poe's art illuminates the historical forces it conducts. This is how colonialism and its techno-capitalist manifestations are present and active within these nineteenth-century tales of dread and deception. In the words of Steven Shaviro (writing on a different type of politically dubious creativity), "intensifying the horrors of contemporary capitalism does not lead them to explode," but it "does offer us" something (2015, 35). In this context, it is not necessary to perpetuate, as Shaviro does, art's self-describing belief in "the disinterest and the epiphenomenality of the aesthetic" (40) – nor do we have to buy into the political ideologies that develop, never alongside, but always within such

faith – to grasp, both viscerally and intellectually, the negativity of modern life as it is positively embodied and made aesthetically palpable here. Some madness of mind and world. Without telling us why, the art of Edgar Allan Poe suggests that, perhaps, we have no reason to stay sane.

6 Bibliography

6.1 Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialektik*. 1966. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Amérique*. Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1986.
- Beck, Ulrich. *Die Erfindung des Politischen: Zu einer Theorie reflexiver Modernisierung*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1993.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Cole, Thomas. "Essay on American Scenery." *American Monthly Magazine* 1, 1836. <http://www.csun.edu/~ta3584/Cole.htm> (accessed 30 Sep. 2018).
- Copley, Stephen, and Peter Garside, eds. *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape, and Aesthetics since 1770*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Detering, Heinrich. *Der Antichrist und der Gekreuzigte: Friedrich Nietzsches letzte Texte*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature. 1836. Selected Writings*. Ed. Donald McQuade. New York: The Modern Library, 1981. 5–42.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." 1837. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Donald McQuade. New York: The Modern Library, 1981. 43–63.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." 1841. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Donald McQuade. New York: The Modern Library, 1981. 129–153.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Experience." 1844. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Donald McQuade. New York: The Modern Library, 1981. 326–348.
- Handwerk, Gary. "Romantic Irony." *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Vol. 5: *Romanticism*. Ed. Marshall Brown. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 203–225.
- Hippie, Walter John. *The Beautiful, the Sublime and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967.
- Hoffman, Daniel. *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*. New York: Discus-Avon, 1978.
- James, Henry. "Gustave Flaubert." 1893. *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, Prefaces to the New York Edition*. Ed. Mark Wilson and Leon Edel. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 295–314.
- Klonk, Charlotte. *Science and Perception of Nature: British Landscape Art in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Ljungquist, Kent. *The Garden and the Fair: Poe's Landscape Aesthetics and Pictorial Techniques*. Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 1984.
- Matthiessen, F. O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Politiques de l'inimitié*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2016.
- Miller, Perry. *Nature's Nation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Mishra, Pankaj. *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. New York: Picador, 2017.

- Mooney, Stephen L. "Poe's Gothic Waste Land." 1962. *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism since 1829*. Ed. Eric W. Carlson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966. 278–297.
- Muller, John P., and William J. Richardson, eds. *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- Newfield, Christopher. *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." 1839. *Poetry and Tales*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 317–336.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Man of the Crowd." 1840. *Poetry and Tales*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 388–396.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Tell-Tale Heart." 1843. *Poetry and Tales*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 555–559.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition." 1846. *Essays and Reviews*. Ed. G. R. Thompson. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 13–25.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Domain of Arnheim." 1847. *Poetry and Tales*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 855–870.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Eureka: A Prose Poem*. 1848. *Poetry and Tales*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 1257–1359.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "Londor's Cottage: A Pendant to 'The Domain of Arnheim'." 1849. *Poetry and Tales*. Ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 886–898.
- Rainwater, Catherine. "Poe's Landscape Tales and the 'Picturesque' Tradition." *The Southern Literary Journal* 16.2 (1984): 30–43.
- Renza, Louis A. "Poe's Secret Autobiography." *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*. Ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985. 58–89.
- Shavito, Steven. *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Stievermann, Jan. *Der Sündenfall der Nachahmung: Zum Problem der Mittelbarkeit im Werk Ralph Waldo Emersons*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007.
- Voelz, Johannes. *Transcendental Resistance: The New Americanists and Emerson's Challenge*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010.
- Winters, Yvor. "Edgar Allan Poe: A Crisis in the History of American Obscurantism." 1937. *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism since 1829*. Ed. Eric W. Carlson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966. 176–202.

6.2 Pictures

- Friedlander, Lee. *Mount Rushmore, South Dakota*. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), 1969. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/86028> (accessed 16 March 2019).
- Magritte, René. 1938. *Le domaine d'Arnheim*. Christie's Images Ltd. 2016. In: Moore, Susan. 2017. "An Epic Magritte Is Set to Be the Highlight of Christie's 'Art of the Surreal' Sale." *Apollo: The International Art Magazine* (8 Feb.). <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/epic-magritte-at-christies-plus-more-art-market-highlights/> (accessed 16 March 2019).

6.3 Further Reading

- Dayan, Joan. *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Kelleter, Frank. *Die Moderne und der Tod: Das Todesmotiv in moderner Literatur, untersucht am Beispiel Edgar Allan Poes, T. S. Eliots und Samuel Becketts*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997.
- Kennedy, J. Gerald, ed. *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Kennedy, J. Gerald, and Liliane Weissberg, eds. *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

