

Bleak December: Religious Fervor in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells"

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the meaning of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells" in terms of Poe's overlooked use of religious images. Past criticism of the poem is toured and examined, highlighting the shortcomings of critics who have failed to account for the poem's allusions to and sources from Christian contexts. A prospective reading is then provided which works with those overlooked aspects to make the following case: the bells of "The Bells" do not represent a vague onomatopoeic exercise, but instead figure the fervent celebration of a (likely Christian) religion by its adherents, as observed by the speaker across his life. The speaker's psychological journey is charted from his being proselytized in youth to his coping with doubts about promises of individual immortality in adulthood. This reading is then further supported by considering other poems by Poe (especially "A Pæan," "Lenore," and "The Raven"), wherein this paper demonstrates Poe's developing attitudes in the 1840s toward the prospect of the afterlife, as well as the implications of his own peculiar conception of a 'material soul.' Ultimately, "The Bells" is shown to be a haunting consideration of mortality as concealed by the same kind of dogmatic thinking which is likely responsible for the poem's specific images going overlooked for so long.

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I. Introduction

Despite considerable attention being paid to this curious posthumous entry into the published works of Poe, there remains as yet no adequate confrontation of the poem's complex imagery. A number of the poem's images indicate a focus on religion, making the words of Paul O. Williams from the late 1960s as relevant as ever: "Although the poem seems to discourage exegesis because it conveys its meaning as much by the resources of music as by those of language, more things can, nevertheless, be said about its literal meaning than have been" (Williams 24). What follows is a reading of "The Bells" which will justify a claim that the poem is a conspicuous treatment of spiritual themes, then present what a reading of the poem consistent with its orientation toward religiosity would look like, and finally support these assertions by appeal to evidence of Poe's ideological development. This is in no way a discarding of the existing interpretations of the piece. Indeed, there is contained within the following analysis implicit agreement, to varying degrees, with each of the extant interpretations of the work, from a simple onomatopoeic exercise tracing four variant bell-sounds (Graham 1) to a dithyramb on the triumph of "discord and death" (Williams 24) to the much-favored birth-to-death narrative map following Schiller (Cameron 37), as well as the sourcing work tracing the poem to Dickens (Pollin 221), Schiller and Romburg (Cameron 2, Dameron 368), a number of contemporary articles (Dedmond 520, Dudley 298, Pollin 469), and many subtler influences. As opposed to a defiance of the existing scholarship, this intends to be a statement regarding a large dimension of the poem on which said scholarship has remained oddly silent, and on which this paper will take the following stance: the bells within "The Bells" figure a religious outpouring, likely Christian in nature, into which the speaker sinks in accordance with an inability to reconcile doubts about religion's promises and cognizance of mortality.

II. The Rapture that Impels

The text of the poem is littered with allusions to religion. Temporarily ignoring occasional diction of "Heavens," "wedding," and "rapture," (lines 7, 15, 30) one notes four images which may not seem suspicious taken alone, but which sum to something so conspicuous that their being ignored in other studies of the poem is truly curious. These images are the "turtle-dove" in the second stanza—and the recurrence of its "moon" (lines 23-24, 50), the "deaf and frantic fire" in the third stanza (lines 44-45), the steeple-dwelling "ghouls" in the fourth stanza (lines 79-88), and the merry pæan-rolling "king" in the fourth stanza (lines 89-112). Now, there are more existing theories than those referenced above, three of which stand out as more thorough because they find themselves somewhere along the path toward addressing some of these lines; those theories are the reading of the work as a descent into madness (Fusco 121); the reading of the work as a tale depicting the death of a beautiful woman from the perspective of her lover; and the reading of the work as a jazz-like expression of inner turmoil exacerbated by droning rhythms (Du Bois 242). All, it can be remarked, may be fair guesses as to the content of any of Poe's work, not least of all his later poetry.

In Richard Fusco's madness reading, the images of the fourth stanza come into play as the expression of a speaker no longer of his right mind. Indeed, there is clearly something preventing the speaker from having total lucidity or total control of his expressions in the fourth stanza, which one could perhaps trace to a trauma in the third stanza. Fusco, like Williams, opens by identifying—as does this paper—the inadequate readings of the poem which had become critically prominent. Yet there is a certain implicit weakness to his interpretation as well, as it seems like a catch-all interpretation to which any difficulty may be subjugated. That is, one may, as in the pure bell-sound reading of the poem, discount any lines which offer interpretative issues; one may imagine a similarly 'convincing' reading of *Finnegans Wake* as an expression of madness, seeing as it is far less easy to try to parse every image the work offers. And, even ignoring this complaint, this interpretation fails to confront the images of the second stanza in a meaningful way, despite its insistence that the speaker is still sane during their presentation, except as a frame of mind to which the third stanza refers back.

The death-of-a-beautiful-woman interpretation, apparently more of a hint in the scholarly community than an officially expounded or individually championed notion—and as likely derived directly from Poe's comments in "The Philosophy of Composition"—subsumes within it the descent-into-madness interpretation as the result of the woman's death and does a better job of addressing the third stanza's fires (as the instrument of the woman's demise). Yet this interpretation fails to adequately cover the images of the second stanza aside from the explicit references to marriage; fails to cover the images of the fourth stanza; and even seems to ignore the beginning of the third stanza, wherein it is clarified that it is not the speaker (who at the outset asks the reader to listen to the bell-sound) who makes "a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire." Rather, it is the bells themselves which make this appeal, despite this interpretation's stance that the bells are not an instrument, i.e. not a form of expression for the speaker, but are, as in most interpretations, objects of the speaker's observation.

Finally, Arthur Du Bois' jazz reading of the poem is compelling. But, again, like the pure bell-sound reading of the poem and Fusco's madness reading, much of its power stems from being able to stop wondering at the meaning of difficult lines by deferring such concerns to questions of sound. In an odd maneuver, Du Bois' article, trying to preface his reading of "The Bells," attempts to reconcile every interest, inclination, and theme of Poe inside of a handful of pages, with each sweeping claim lacking any citation or sufficient internal justification. Despite these weaknesses, this is one of the most complete interpretations of the poem; while it may not do justice to the images of the first and second stanzas, it does provide a thorough tonal reading and its efforts are eminently respectable. Needless to say, however, not one of these three admirable efforts offers a full reading of "The Bells." Before such a reading may be attempted, it will be fruitful to clarify the aforementioned inclination of the poem toward religiosity.

With attention to manuscript evidence, it becomes clearer that Poe is treating a religious subject. Initially, one may be tempted to interpret such details as the references to "moon", "monody," and "pæan" (lines 24, 72, 91) as evidence that the poem is treating its subject in pagan terms, and so classify the four images enumerated above as extensions of Poe's affinity for classical allusions. Yet, in addition to those already-much-banded four images, one may provide a line present in the February 1849 manuscript version of the full poem's fourth stanza, though not in the published version of the poem: "They are neither brute nor human, / But are pestilential carcasses disparted

from their souls / Called Ghouls:—" This division of the steeple-dwellers from their souls brings into consideration directly (perhaps its excision implies '*too* directly') the conversation going on at this time over both what may possibly happen to a Christian soul after death and whether any such thing actually exists. Further, one may consider why this clarification of the steeple-dwelling ghouls as distinct from their souls was removed. Perhaps it was done so as to reintroduce ambiguity as to whether these "people" can be categorized as either "people" or "ghouls," even as their 'ghouldom' is being affirmed over their humanity. Perhaps, on the other hand, it was removed so as to fall into line with the notion that souls either do not exist independent of their bodies, or that the two things' connection cannot be severed. Either of these latter notions would be consistent with the last of the four models for Poe's consideration of death according to J. Gerald Kennedy's essay, "Phantasms of Death," writing at this point on "The Colloquy of Monos and Una:" "Poe appears to suggest that the total annihilation of body and soul must take place before the rebirth or transformation alluded to at the beginning of the work [to Poe's "vision of infinity"]" (129). At any rate, it is clear that Poe is concerned not only with a class of being conspicuously inhabiting a steeple, but a class of being not necessarily "disparted from their souls."

Attention to sourcing evidence reinforces this perspective and points more specifically toward Christianity as a source of the poem's religious fervor. Wesley Britton has pointed out the ignored legacy of John Milton in Poe's poem: "But to date, the similarities between the first stanza of 'The Bells' and stanza 13 of Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' have not been noted or explored" (Britton 1). Britton goes on to enumerate the many interconnections and parallels between the two poems, and to highlight borrowed diction in the named stanzas of each. Britton opens his article on this with a nod toward the cradle-to-grave pattern as the most compelling reading of the poem. Even conceding the poem's clear tracing of Schiller, Britton nevertheless here fails to adequately appreciate the value of his own discovery. Contextualizing the opening stanza of "The Bells" not only in terms of a winter birth, but in terms of the quintessential Christian birth allows the reader to more easily understand how this stanza differs in content from the wedding scenario of the second stanza, and provides a path into the speaker's initial happiness as a traditional celebration of the Christian miracle schema.

III. A Sort of Runic Rhyme

The poem can be read as a progression from birth to death, from sanity to insanity, *and* from romance to mourning, provided each is in accordance with the speaker's religious fervor as signified by the bells. All that follows is in keeping with Roger Asselineau's claim, in his brief biography of Poe, that in Poe "a poem becomes an end in itself. [. . .] [Poe] would undoubtedly have subscribed to Archibald MacLeish's prescription that 'A poem should not mean / But be'" (Asselineau 38). "The Bells" is not a description of the speaker's interaction with bells, but an embodiment of that interaction. This reading of the poem revolves around the theory, original here, that the bell-sound itself is symbolic of the audible expression of celebration of religion, in hymn or organized prayer, and that the speaker's relationship with religion may be traced by studying the uses of the bells in the poem and the poem's flux of images.

The first stanza subtly anticipates the difficulties the speaker is to have with the bells later in the work while depicting the speaker's early perception of religion (possibly the speaker's first experiences of religious fervor). The poem opens with the speaker's call to listen to the bells. This auditory proselytizing draws the listener into the audience of the bells. The allusion pointed out above by Britton places the winter birth of the stanza, already common in Schiller-dependent readings of the poem, in a Christian context. One need not pause unnecessarily on this opening, except to conjecture that this stanza signifies the happy celebratory tradition of Christmastime by which one may, in their youth, be drawn into religion. The one truly significant line in this stanza is that concerning "Runic rhyme," whereby the audible celebration of the Nativity by nature is said to be "Keeping time, time, time, / In a sort of Runic rhyme, / To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells / From the bells" (lines 9-12). So, the rhythms of nature are keeping time with the bell-sounds. Yet the language of that celebratory outpouring is "a sort of Runic rhyme." This unresolved note, that the bell-sound and nature's religious celebration are related only through an unsolved code, introduces a mysterious tension into the apparent pleasantness of the youthful hearing of the bells. All is not well, or even entirely understandable, in paradise.

The second stanza showcases the living of a pious adult life, as signified by the bells' reaction to the sacrament of marriage. Rather than simple exclamatory happiness, the bells here bring assurances of a happy life-to-

come. The "turtle-dove" in this stanza evokes idealized monogamy, and is associated with the Bible via both the Old Testament (in the Song of Songs) and the New Testament (at the Nativity). Like the first stanza's nature, we have an image of the aspiration of religious language toward immaterial significance, here figured not by the logically unattainable "Runic rhyme" of the bells, but by the physically unattainable position of "the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats / On the moon!" (lines 23-24). The promises of religion are becoming more obviously untenable. One feels the taunt of the turtle-dove, from its portentous religious position able to "gloat," for it already occupies the heavenly space of the "moon," a space toward which the bells will madly clamber in the desperation of the third stanza. Where the first stanza had nature, through an unintelligible intermediary, keeping time with the bells, the bells of this stanza instead urge the future: "How it dwells / On the Future! how it tells / Of the rapture that impels / To the swinging and the ringing / Of the bells" (lines 28-32). To this language of prognostication, Paul O. Williams would add the foretelling by the bells in both of the first two stanzas (Williams 24). Williams goes on to point out that this foretelling of "a world of merriment and a world of happiness" comes in contrast to the immediacy and reality of the destruction and death in the third and fourth stanzas with their emphatic mention of the present (Williams 24-25). The happiness of the future is not actual or known, but is foretold and promised. The recognition is vaguely present in the speaker's experience of the bell-sound that none of the glorious, beautiful promises brought by the bell-sound are coming into existence. Along this vein, note that the mystifying "jingling and the tinkling" of the first stanza have been replaced by the man-made, measured "rhyming and the chiming" at the end of the second stanza.

The third stanza is the religious crisis of the speaker, as the bells react to the fearful flip-side of the coin of the Christian afterlife and so fight themselves. Again, the speaker asks that we listen to the bells, which now "shriek, shriek, / Out of tune, / In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire, / In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire" (lines 42-45). Unlike Schiller's fire, which possesses both positive and negative aspects, the fire in Poe's poem is unfeeling and does not yield to the appeals of the bells. The assurance of hellfire instills terror into not only the speaker, but into the bells whose interactions with the fire the speaker details. The bells—or possibly the bells' envisioned fire (the syntax is ambiguous)—now make one last attempt to claim the beautiful promises of the second stanza: "With a desperate desire, / And a resolute endeavor / Now—now to sit or never, / By

the side of the pale-faced moon" (lines 47-50). This desperation belies the confidence of the gloating turtle-dove in the prior stanza, a notion underscored by the fading of the moon's brilliance. Immediately following this, the speaker finally provides in this stanza his own comment on the bells, saying (almost sympathetically), "Oh, the bells, bells, bells! What a tale their terror tells / Of Despair!" (lines 51-53). In these lines, the speaker as good as says outright that the bells' "desperate desire" and "resolute endeavor" is a failure. For the remaining half of the stanza, the waxing and waning of "horror," "danger," and "anger" (lines 55-65) present the efforts of the bell-sound to maintain its optimism in the face of the fear which it itself expounds. Ultimately, there is nothing to be said but a redundant reliance on the same doctrinal formulation "Of the bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells, bells—" (lines 67-68).

The fourth stanza, at last, portrays the state of religious adherents, their leadership, and of the speaker whose experience has paralleled them. The bells of this stanza are no longer warning bells of immediate danger, but final, definite funeral bells. While the object of mourning in this stanza is certainly up for debate, the context of the bells' "despair" in the third stanza points to the foretold happiness as a contender as valid as a lover of the speaker. As shown by "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe is assuredly no stranger to allegorical implementation of death. The two key images in this stanza are the "Ghouls" and "their king" (lines 88, 89). The ghouls are specified to be "the people—ah, the people, / They that dwell up in the steeple, / All alone, / And who tolling, tolling, tolling, / In that muffled monotone, / Feel a glory in so rolling / On the human heart a stone—" (lines 79-85). These vindictive steeple-dwellers seem reminiscent of the gloating turtle-dove, and one would be hard-pressed not to read a parody of prayer or hymning into "that muffled monotone." Crucially, the language of these steeple-dwellers, as they are to be found "tolling, tolling, tolling," is precisely the bell-sound; here, at last, is the crux of this reading's theory that the bell-sound figures religious outpouring. This image explicitly conflates the language of the steeple-dwellers with the sound of the bells. Conflated also are the bells themselves and the religious adherents, as each image associated with the latter as easily maps to the former—and one should be cautious to point to these lines as unambiguously regarding the bells alone, as does Fusco. As to their identity as "Ghouls," Kennedy points out that, in Poe, "the preternatural [. . .] commonly dramatizes the interpenetration of life and death, the mingling of metaphysical opposites" (Kennedy 111). They are figures evocative of living mortality, even as they are evocative of a

congregation. Their king, meanwhile, must then be religious authority, "And he rolls, rolls, rolls, / Rolls / A pæan from the bells; / And his merry bosom swells / With the pæan of the bells, / And he dances, and he yells:" (lines 90-95). For all that Fusco said about the speaker's madness, surely there is no figure in the poem more mad than this jolly overlord of the ghouls. The revelation of this figure's introduction is the revelation of the originator of the bell-sound, whose own expression is "Keeping time, time, time, / In a sort of Runic rhyme," (lines 96-97) and for whom the promises of the bells never lose their potency. The "Runic rhyme" of the first stanza returns, now clarified as having acted as intermediary between a celebrant nature and the bells only by willful invention; the speaker recognizes the same "sort of Runic rhyme" and so utilizes the exact same phrase. Notable, also, is the word "pæan," potentially implemented so as to defamiliarize religious outpouring by associating it not with Christianity but with paganism. This notion is supported by the use of the word in Poe's earlier poem, "Lenore," wherein a celebration of one who has ostensibly gone to heaven is called "a pæan of old days" (line 21). In the end, from the realization of the "Runic rhyme" onward, the sound of the bells and the celebration of the mad king become an inextricable mess. The happiness of the king becomes "a happy Runic rhyme" (line 107) while the sound of the bells attempts to overpower all doubt simply by fervency, here symbolized by quantity of "bells." At last, the mortal reckoning of the funeral bells ends the poem with the uncharacterized loudness of the third stanza's "clamor and the clangor" being replaced by the unambiguously negative "moaning and the groaning."

That each stanza ends in a repetitive string of "bells" is no mistake, nor is it an error that the number of lines and quantity of concatenated "bells" increases in each successive stanza. The further the speaker sinks into considerations of religious fervor while recognizing the interaction between that fervor and mortality, the more wholly the speech of the speaker becomes replaced by "a gush of euphony" (line 26). One is asked, at the outset of each stanza, to listen to the bell-sound, and in doing so, to undergo the ideological, physiological, psychological journey of the speaker with respect to the those same bell-sounds. So, yes, Poe does follow the eight-stanza cradle-to-grave pattern from the middle of Schiller's "Das Lied von der Glocke," but he does so in a way which exemplifies his own unique, macabre conception of spirituality.

IV. A World of Solemn Thought

There is, of course, evidence in Poe's other later works—and in their contrast with earlier works—that Poe was moving into a place of more ideological certainty with regard to spirituality. In the introduction to Poe's Cambridge Companion, the resource's editor alleges that critical interest in Poe's verse waned in favor of interest in his prose due to the verse's failure to sufficiently interact with Poe's social milieu (Hayes 4). One may note, however, that "The Raven" and "A Dream Within a Dream" (and "The Bells") have no less interaction with nineteenth century mourning culture and prevailing discourses on death than do "MS. Found in a Bottle" or "The Facts in the case of M. Valdemar." Indeed, Poe contends throughout his literature with consciousness and death, and especially with the issues of how or if one may experience the divine and what follows death. To say, however, that Poe was not spiritual or that he denied the existence of the soul would be to miss the tenor of most of his writing. Rather, Poe moved during his life from a fascination with the emptiness of promised paradises to the heroism of existential despair to a conjecture at the soul's divine potential (Carlson 7-20). In his last group of writings, Poe had absolute conviction about his at-times-contradictory vision of the universe. As Asselineau puts it, "For his part [Poe] was ready to accept the existence of a mystery at the center of the universe, but his intelligence, as *Eureka* shows, strove to pierce it and eventually reached, instead of Emerson's vague pantheism, what Allen Tate has called a form of panlogism. Poe's rationalism [. . .] resisted the fascination of the abyss and refused to be engulfed by a hazy spiritualism" (Asselineau 33). As elucidated explicitly in *Eureka*, "Mesmeric Revelation," and "The Poetic Principle," the later Poe (despite his distaste for the Transcendentalist movement) outwardly subscribes to the transcendental idea that all matter is part of the divine consciousness of a God entity, and to the semi-transcendental idea that death allows the soul to be re-subsumed by that omni-perspective.

Yet, for Poe, when one wonders whether there is a continued *individual* experience after death, one asks a question to which one already knows the undesired answer, as does the lore-student in "The Raven." Poe sees such a hope as a juvenile affair, associated with his own early literary scheme of the lost paradise, and leading to the paralyzing resignation of the lore-student in the closing stanza. The argument of this paper is not that Poe denies the notion of an afterlife, but that Poe does deny the Christian afterlife with its pleasant persistence of embodied consciousness, and that he may thereby

betray an abiding anxiety about mortality. Poe, near the end of his life, puts forth a more-or-less consistent cosmogony, yet one suspiciously similar in practical human experience to an existential worldview with a weakness for art. Indeed, despite his avowed version of spirituality, Poe seems constantly to link whatever may be termed 'soul' with body. As Kennedy perceptively writes:

What seems significant about the cycle of spiritualized dialogues is Poe's inclination to see body and soul as inextricably bonded. Despite the conception of an unearthly, astral form, an odd materialism informs Poe's notion of the spirit world; [. . .] It is as if, for all of his mystical inclinations, Poe cannot escape an empirical vision of a bounded world. [. . .] Poe's visionary texts [. . .] project a false transcendence, a phantasmic existence after death, conceptually embedded in a cosmos of matter and energy, a system that culminates in irreversible dissolution: entropy. (Kennedy 130)

For Kennedy, "Poe's visionary texts" include any wherein the model of death is what he terms "separation" or "transformation" (roughly, popular or transcendental models), as separate from any wherein the model of death is what he terms "annihilation" or "compulsion" (roughly, destructive or obsessive models). The latter two, it is clear, were the primary focuses and central thematic concerns of nearly all of Poe's literature. What is remarkable, which Kennedy exhaustively illustrates among Poe's prose works, are the ways in which the former two are informed by the diction and thematic underpinnings of the latter two. What Carlson identifies as Poe's "existentialism," Kennedy shows spreading into the visionary texts which Carlson finds indicative of Poe's "transcendentalism." Even as Poe formulates a spirituality of his own, it is a spirituality as full of reason as the body of works he associates with "ratiocination," i.e. the studied reason of his detective stories and interest in cryptography. So, even as the later Poe maintains an absolute certainty of his own transcendent paradigms, he showcases a certainty about the finality of death and loss of one's self and one's acquaintances.

The development of the poem "Lenore" provides a glimpse at this move toward inward ideological certainty in Poe's works. Bradford Booth and Claude Jones' *Concordance of the Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe* points to the word 'pæan,' as mentioned earlier, as being present in both "The Bells" and "Lenore." There is, however, another, earlier use, unlisted in this concordance. The reason for its absence is that the earlier use is actually an

early form of "Lenore," titled "A Pæan." In keeping with being differently titled, "APæan" and "Lenore" are drastically different poems. The earlier version, published in 1831, is a work in a variation on hymnal common measure wherein the speaker proclaims that no one needs to mourn his young lost love, for she is happily in heaven (Hecker 67-70). The later version, surfacing around 1842, is a work in one of Poe's characteristically complex invented meters wherein the speaker addresses a character named Guy De Vere, imploring him to mourn his lost love; De Vere responds that he does not need to do so, for she is happily in heaven. Now, this figure of De Vere is one with a number of possible sources, but which clearly exemplifies wealth, pride, and inflexibility (Pollin 4). In the eleven years between the release of these two versions, Poe eventually decided that the earlier version required emending. The obvious differences between the two are the changes to the structure and form of the poem; the subtler difference, but more important difference for this study, is the movement of the speaker from identity as the heaven-proponent to allegiance with the mourning-proponents against the wealthy, proud, unmoving, heaven-advocating character, Guy. This 'Guy,' onto whom Poe forces the perspective of the earlier optimism, has none of the subtlety which the Poe of the 1840s is wont to imbue in his morose speakers. The revision is a clear abandonment of the earlier ideal, a denial of the religious hopefulness espoused by both the earlier speaker and the earlier meter. It is not to be discounted, after all, that Pollin points out that the name De Vere is associated with wealth, an association whose lack beleaguered the aristocratically minded, yet ever-impoorished Poe throughout his life; the figure then holds more than one of Poe's bitter feelings.

Also telling, the fate of the ideology of Lenore's young lover is not left to chance. A lost Lenore is the reason for the lore-student's melancholy in 1845's "The Raven." While there is no positive identification of the speaker of "The Raven" as Guy De Vere, the re-use in poetry of the name 'Lenore' for the lost love is too conspicuous not to explore. If the speaker of "The Raven" is Guy De Vere, one sees a thoroughly interesting development. Lenore's lover, distanced in both outlook and identification from the De Vere of "Lenore," is now convinced, much to his own dismay, that there is not "balm in Gilead," that Lenore does not occupy a space wherein the two can be posthumously reunited—even if the speaker is in denial about the inward source of this revelation. This kernel of meaning is obvious without extending the figure back into the earlier poem. But, if one does presume the re-use of 'Lenore' to be more than coincidental, the fact that the lore-student (and De Vere-figure)

is once again the speaker presents an acceptance of the character back into Poe's usual formula of writing in the first-person singular. To support this, one may map back onto Poe's "lyric outbursts" the claim by Asselineau that "for all their rational construction and narrative contents, [Poe's] tales are lyric outbursts in disguise, in which the 'I' of the speaker corresponds less to fictitious characters than to Poe himself if he had let himself go" (Asselineau 34). The re-acceptance of the Lenore-loving speaker's point-of-view coincides with the speaker's acceptance of a materialist conception of death. It is as though Poe would neither leave the figure of De Vere to his spiritual optimism nor associate the speaker of "The Raven" with the optimistic character of De Vere. The move from "A Pæan" to "Lenore" to "The Raven" is one instance of a progression in Poe's literature from heaven-based religious idealism to a rebellion against that idealism to, finally, a resigned pessimism about religious idealism. Though it cannot be said that Poe explicitly holds any of these positions during his life, the progression is nonetheless instructive, and it is that final state-of-mind that informs the analysis of Kennedy and Asselineau, and is implied by the analysis of Carlson.

There already exist refutations of the above theories on Poe. One bold 2010 dissertation by Adam Bradford, for instance, uses Reader-response Criticism to argue that the ultimate effect of Poe's literature was a subtle affirmation of prevailing nineteenth attitudes toward death and mourning (the latter much more tenable than the former). The problem with drawing such conclusions about Poe is that, while consistent with the culture surrounding Poe and a thread to be found among Poe's works, they are at odds with both complex studies of Poe and Poe's works—such as those by Mabbott, Asselineau, Carlson, and Kennedy (which confront the many contradictions among Poe's philosophies)—and basic knowledge of their thematic content, in ways that are neither intuitive nor illuminating. Based upon some remarks from Poe's metapoetic essays stretched into his script and several poems, the dissertation alleges that only those readers who immediately rejected any kernel of meaning or iconoclastic sentiment in Poe's writings truly understood him. Clearly there is a problem here. Any author against whose ideas there is or was significant backlash, in this mode, could be seen to have been writing precisely to please the lowest common denominator. In other words, it is impossible to write anything which challenges one's own culture, as a reader-only reading of such work will *always* reveal that the effect of that work is to maintain the status quo, thus discarding any notion of the value of art to present new ideas. That said, all secondary criticism is, to some extent, obviously a reader's response, and this particularly unfortunate example

misses the point even of the schools of New Historicism and Reader-response Criticism to which it attempts to adhere; the issue only arises when one's interpretation of a work is based near-solely upon the contemporary public's readings, with no serious attention paid to the work, the author, scholarly readings, or the public's readings in subsequent cultural moments. Such an interpretation can be said to be a worthwhile study of those painstakingly gathered pieces of writing which are the responses, though not of the work on which they comment.

V. Conclusion

Whether "The Bells" is the rich product of Poe's mature mind, written around the same time as the poignant "Annabel Lee," or is the sonorous contrivance of a poet in desperate straits—Poe was indeed destitute at the time of its publication (Lanier 17, Schultz 172)—will no doubt continue to be a subject of debate. That the poem treats religiosity, however, is clear. And that the poem *may* be read as the rich product of a mature Poe is also clear. It seems of dubious value, then, to hold fast to a less content-encompassing interpretation of the poem which is less consistent with Poe's ideological situation near the end of his life. It is, however, understandable that a reading of "The Bells" in this mode has not supplanted the aesthetic and archetypal readings of the poem. Returning again to the superior insight of J. Gerald Kennedy, he concludes his essay on "Phantasms of Death in Poe's Fiction" with the following: "While Poe could entertain visions of transcendence, he was finally too much the victim of our own crisis of death to exorcise its dread. [. . .] Little wonder that for many, Poe cannot be taken seriously: to do so is to confront the fearful yet vitalizing truth that our century has done its best to deny" (Kennedy 133). While it cannot be denied that Poe occasionally sinks too deep into the mire of repetition and obscurity in his poems ("Ulalume" seems an obvious case-in-point), he nowhere writes nonsense, and in his most effective poems practices an exceptionally seductive combination of complex ideas with musical intricacy. The ending of "The Bells," at last, seems every bit as haunting as the shadow at the close of "The Raven," for it, like that shadow, reveals nothing more than the speaker coming to terms with a knowledge of mortality which had been hidden by beautiful, rhetorical, heavenly idealism.

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