

Poe in Cyberspace

Tipping Points: Tales of Obsession, Revenge, and the Internet

The movie *The Social Network* follows the actual career of Mark Zuckerberg, the programmer who, obsessed by personal revenge against a girl who rejected him, turned *Facebook* into a multi-billionaire enterprise. Poe was, of course, no stranger to tales of revenge and obsession: “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Purloined Letter,” and “Hop Frog” are among his works in which focused revenge motivates the protagonist, and the plot advances by means of detailed descriptions of rigidly logical strategies and equally mechanical tactics. Thus Poe made Dupin and Montessoro into what one might call the technological forerunners of computer programmers. Mark Zuckerberg’s attempt at revenge would not have been possible, however, without the prior existence of cyberspace itself. Therefore, the unspoken hero of both *Facebook* as a Web site and *The Social Network* as a movie is the recently globally interactive Internet called Web 2.0.

Strongly unexpected developments in electronic texts and in related online matters reshaped much of Poe research in 2010. We see sales of electronic books competing with printed editions, textbook rentals challenging bookstore sales, and electronic book readers facing each other in an era of intense rivalry. Meanwhile, smart phones are emerging as serious research tools, and the Internet traffic from social networks (not only Facebook but also texting, Wikipedia, MySpace, Twitter, and others) is threatening the traditional domination of the Internet by Google searches and email. According to one estimate, *YouTube* is now accessed 13 billion times a month, and *Facebook* is visited 30 billion times a month, often in order to download and view videos. For example, *YouTube* now lists more than five thousand Edgar Allan Poe videos. All at once, several tipping points have arrived, both good and bad.

The good news first. The strongest positive news of the season comes from the Web site of the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, already the leading repository for scholarly Poe materials on the Internet, which has added to its distinguished repertory several excellent Poe research tools hitherto available only in printed form. To its existing offerings of 1921 items out of copyright, John Ward Ostrom’s *Letters* (2nd ed. 1966), and Joseph R. Ridgely’s collection letters to Poe, it has recently posted Arthur Hobson Quinn’s biography (1941), Dwight R. Thomas’s dissertation *Poe in Philadelphia* (1978), and Dwight R. Thomas and David K. Jackson’s *Poe Log* (1987). Moreover, it is understood

that negotiations are under way for permissions to include T. O. Mabbott's authoritative three volume Harvard edition of the *Collected Works*. (See below for all web addresses in this article.)

E-texts: In 2010, digital materials began to attempt to play a much larger role in supplementing and even replacing printed materials. During one month in the summer of 2010, Amazon reported that all its electronic book sales had equaled hardcover sales for the first time. Searching "Edgar Allan Poe" in Amazon's books category yields 6,227 matches. In the Fall of 2010, Amazon was offering 475 Edgar Allan Poe titles in electronic form for its Kindle reader. (For those purchasing Kindle e-texts, Amazon now offers software to make them readable on a PC.) Although composed chiefly of common reprints and collections, what is remarkable is that many Kindle texts are priced below the printed versions, some reaching as low as one dollar, and quite a few can be delivered wirelessly. In addition, Amazon maintains a consolidated Edgar Allan Poe page for links to all its hardcover, paperback, Kindle, audio, large print, and school-library binding offerings. In competition, Barnes and Noble was offering 1,358 Poe titles in print and 304 Edgar Allan Poe e-books for its Nook. In support, Barnes and Noble maintains a Poe book club. Although most Nook offerings are public domain titles, they can be downloaded without cost after registration, can be played on most devices, and can be loaned. Yet, in a worrisome but unrelated sign of the times, the venerable bookstore firm of Barnes and Noble is reportedly seeking a buyer.

Hardware: After simmering for several years, the competition between electronic book readers is coming to a boil. The main players are the Kindle from Amazon and the Nook from Barnes and Noble, but the other aspirants include the iPad from Apple and the Sony Reader. At one extreme the book readers were battling at chain stores such as Walmart and Target, while at the other extreme they were competing for wireless presence on the Internet. In fact, the entire hardware spectrum, which now ranges from desktop computers at one end, laptops, notebooks, the iPad, and electronic book readers in the middle, to smart phones at the other end, has become embroiled in intense new growth and competition. (*Consumer Reports* recently reviewed 18 e-book readers ranging in size from six from 5 to 8 inches and in price from \$130 to \$500; in another comparison, it recommended, not unexpectedly, e-book readers for e-book texts, laptops for typing or editing, and the iPad for viewing documents and periodicals.)

Digital Convergence: Hardware buyers are justifiably confused as desktop computers are downsizing into all-in-ones, laptops are downsizing into netbooks, but cell phones, which are going in the other direction, are upsizing to become smart phones (some with cameras, camcorders, web browsers, texting capability, GPS devices, access to social networks, and even viewers for movies and TV programs). Apple has taken a leadership role with its innovative iPhone and iPad products. Digital convergence means in part that crossover devices are springing up to capture, store, edit, and display materials in the hitherto separate media of print (books, magazines, and newspapers), photographs, recorded music, the telephone, motion pictures, radio, television, and the Internet (Web pages, email, blogs, and tweets). In the related field of operating systems, the successful alliance of Apple and the AT&T network for the iPhone is facing growing competition from Google's operating system on Verizon and other networks.

Textbook Rentals: One burgeoning area which both Web distributors and bookstores are actively exploring is the textbook rental market, with mixed results thus far. The online distributor *campusbookrentals.com* lists 6,600 Poe titles that exist in print, but very few were available yet for rental, and even among those the pricing database was malfunctioning, in some cases quoting higher prices than full retail list. The Web site of *chegg.com* (a contraction of *chicken* and *egg*), another specialist in online book rental, listed thousands of Edgar Allan Poe titles in print, but very few of them were actually available for rental, and even so, many of those were at or close to full price. Although literature teachers may hope that students keep their textbooks as the foundation of a permanent personal library, many students now sell their books after each semester, and others buy and sell cheaper used text books. Of course, book rental allows students to avoid the uncertainty of book depreciation. Barnes and Noble entered the rental book market early in 2010, reportedly charging an initial rental price of 42% of full price. In survey courses the purchase price of anthologies has gone up steadily; for example, the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* now costs more than \$50 a semester, even at discount prices. In many colleges most of the students who enroll in literature courses are not English majors building personal libraries but rather general students meeting a graduation requirement.

Poe Blogs. According to a Google search, there are now almost a million mentions of Edgar Allan Poe on various blogs. (In addition, Edgar Allan Poe is mentioned on *Twitter* nearly a million times and on *Facebook* almost 3 million times.) Here are a handful or two of Poe blogs posted by recognizable organizations:

<http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/books/blog/edgar_allan_poe/>
<<http://poecalendar.blogspot.com/>> Poe calendar for 2009.
<<http://www.amazon.com/Edgar-Allan-Poe/e/B000APVRP2>> Amazon Poe page.
<<http://www.arts.gov/bigreadblog/?tag=edgar-allan-poe>> Big Read blog.
<<http://blog.moviefone.com/2010/08/28/john-cusack-tweets-about-new-edgar-allen-poe-role/>>
<<http://www.nypl.org/blog/2010/01/06/edgar-allan-poe-bronx>>
<<http://www.nea.gov/bigreadblog/?cat=27>>
<<http://www.utexas.edu/opa/blogs/culturalcompass/tag/edgar-allan-poe/>>
<<http://photobucket.com/images/edgar%20allan%20poe/>>
<<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2007/1/the-short-unhappy-life-of-edgar-allan-poe>>
<<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/Forget-Edgar-Allan-Poe-Nevermore.html>>

Other news: The new Google Instant feature will fill in the entire name “Edgar Allan Poe” when you type just *edg* and then immediately display the search results The Vault at Pfaff’s digital archive at Lehigh University has a Poe page <<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/pfaffs/people/individuals/77/>>

Taylor Davidson explores how Poe might have used *Twitter* <<http://www.taylor davidson.com/writing/2009/08/08/artists-tools-photographers-twitter/>> Some Poe entries at *tumblr* use unexpected rough language Many Web sites continue to have almost as many entries for the misspelling “Edgar *Allen* Poe” as for the correct spelling.

Sources: Web addresses of works mentioned:

- Amazon Poe Page: <http://www.amazon.com/Edgar-Allan-Poe/e/B000APVRP2/ref=sr_tc_2_0?qid=1287846922&sr=1-2-ent>.
- Consumer Reports: <www.consumerreports.org>.
- Barnes and Noble Poe book club: <<http://bookclubs.barnesandnoble.com/t5/B-N-Bookseller-Picks/Edgar-Allan-Poe/idi-p/400498>>.

Links at the Poe Society of Baltimore <eapoe.org>.

- Arthur Hobson Quinn’s biography (1941, including 1942 corrections): <<http://eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn00c.htm>>.
- John Ward Ostrom’s *Letters* (1948, 2nd ed. 1966), supplemented by letters to Poe, edited by Joseph V. Ridgely: <<http://eapoe.org/works/letters/index.htm>>.
- Dwight R. Thomas’s dissertation *Poe in Philadelphia, 1838-1844* (1978),

<<http://eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/pipdt00c.htm>> (see copyright notice).

• *Poe Studies*—including *Poe Newsletter* (1968-1985): <<http://eapoe.org/pstudies/index.htm>>.

Incidentally, *Poe Studies* since 1988 are available through Wiley: <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291754-6095>>.

• Dwight R. Thomas and David K. Jackson's *The Poe Log* (1987): <<http://eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/tplg00ca.htm>> (see copyright notice).

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“Poe in Cyberspace” columns are archived at <eapoe.info>.