

Literacy, Literality, Literature: The Rise of Cultural Aristocracy in “The Murder in the Rue Morgue”

(識字・字義・文学—「モルグ街の殺人」における文化貴族の形成)

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SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: ポウが1841年に発表した「モルグ街の殺人」は、パリを舞台に名探偵デュパンが活躍する作品として、推理小説史の幕を開けた。しかし今日、その舞台や主役設定、はたまた残酷なる貴婦人殺しを行なったオランウータンなどをそっくり字義的に読むことは、いささか難しい。

かつてバートン・ポーリンは、本作品中のパリがいかにアメリカ化されているかを指摘し、他方バーナード・ローゼンタールやジョアン・ダイアンらは、作家の南部貴族的精神や奴隷制擁護の姿勢がいかにテキストの無意識を統御してきたかを分析した。本稿は、そうした新歴史主義批評以降のポウ研究をふまえつつ、ポウにおける修辭的テキストと歴史的コンテキストとがいかに記号的相互交渉を行ない、ひいては、ポウにおける歴史が作品の背景に埋没するどころかいかに作品内部の盲点を積極的に構造化してきたかを解明する。

その前提としては、殺人オランウータンを南部黒人の一表象と見る視点が選り取られる。だが、南部的女性崇拜が黒人差別転じて黒人恐怖と密着していたのは当然としても、そうした恐怖の本質をさぐるとなれば、人種意識を超えて、さらに南部における所有権の歴史を一瞥しなければならない。

黒人に代表される「闇の力」への恐怖を形成したのは、奴隷叛乱を懸念する恐怖のみならず経済革命としての農地再分配（アグレリアニズム）が貴族的主体を脅かし所有権を侵害することに対する恐怖だった。そしてデュパンは、誰よりも南部に関するアレゴリーを読み解く技術に秀でた南部貴族として性格造型された。

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The discourse of literary history has invariably reorganized itself, reflecting the upheaval among ideologies of literary criticism. It is curious therefore to see that there is an American Renaissance writer who has persistently survived the rise and fall of critical approaches. Although he has often been ignored in the mainstream of literary history, the writer Edgar Allan Poe cannot help but refresh the reader's response, leading us to a reconsideration of the whole framework of literary history, especially at its critical points. But is it easy to call him important or universal simply because he survived a certain kind of history? Isn't he a kind of writer who should be appreciated in terms of his literary influence, not of literary quality, as F. O. Matthiessen explained in his book *American Renaissance*? Or, is it not that Poe survived literary history but that his writings have appealed to English educators in the pedagogic sense? For now, no explanation convinces us. All we can know is that traversing the critical history of Poe demands that we simulate the very history of modern literary criticism ranging from New Criticism through post-structuralism. This will be easily endorsed by a glance at *The Purloined Poe*, a recently edited collection of various essays on a masterpiece of Poe's detective fiction.¹

I would like to start by reexamining the literary status of Poe not simply as the father of detective fiction, but also as the discoverer of the significance of "reading." For him, reading seems to be the means by which to discover something true, but what he discovered actually is the act of reading as such. Of course, we are already familiar with linguistic or epistemological deconstruction of the figure of "reading" chiefly from the Derridean or de Manian viewpoint. But today it seems more plausible that rereading Poe carries us to the historiographical recognition of "reading as a literary genre" from the Foucauldian perspective. Whereas Deconstruction emphasizes the textuality of a work that will promote a variety of "reader responses," New Historicism presupposes that whether one book is literary or not depends on the receiver's literacy, which has been not the cause but the highly controlled effect of politics in gender, class, and race. Nevertheless, Poe has so deeply impressed his audience as the artist of art for art's own sake, that most Poe critics seem to have unwittingly refrained from grasping his reading subjectivity as politically constructed.

Here it is helpful to note that the polarities of consumption and production became sectionalized and gendered in the antebellum decades from 1820 to 1860, especially between the North and the South, as well as the way

productionism got closely intertwined with consumerism. Michael T. Gilmore states: "In earlier American literature, fiction called itself history or truth to emphasize its practicality and usefulness. The Novel was founded on Fact. Hawthorne inverts this convention by presenting history as fiction, as aesthetic storehouse or museum" ("Modes of Consumption in the Age of Production: Preliminary Remarks" 124-125, 147). This is a very illuminating redefinition of consumption as a positive mode of production, not the negative effect of production. The relationship between consumption and production turns out to be very deconstructive. Thus, we may locate in the American Renaissance the seed of consumerist art primarily as anti-productionist. This presupposition cannot but remind us of the fictional experiments of postmodern writers represented by John Barth, whose essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) was a literary manifesto for superconsumption of literature as a mode of reproduction. As Poe's or Melville's works are full of confidence-men, so postmodern works are virtually written by literary confidence-men, whose writing is in essence a special case of rereading and super-consuming (exhausting) their literary heritage. Historically speaking, it is the age of American Romanticism when literary confidence-men attempted to establish literary consumption as an aesthetic production. I would like to reconsider this paradoxical mode of literary consumption as part of the American literary tradition, however. The reason is very simple. Lacking their own substantial history from the beginning, Americans have been, from the colonial period on, obsessed with reading metaphors into whatever happens in the huge space of the New World.

Thus, the consumerist mode of reading is not peculiar to the American Renaissance writers, but it has persistently been a typically American mode of producing a most provocative literature, of which Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville are just representative.

I

What characterized Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville is their common interest in reading the possibility and impossibility of "letter," as is seen in "The Purloined Letter," *The Scarlet Letter*, and "Bartleby, the Scrivener." The three works respectively represent their concern with the symbolic generation of the

letter “A”, the allegorical movement of a letter as the signifier whose content we have no clue to knowing, and the semiotic fate of a “dead letter” cutting off any relationship between form and meaning. What is consumed, then, is the very act of reading the sign “letter.” It is safe to say that in antebellum America the “consumption of literacy” is reproduced, rediscovered, and reinvestigated as a mode of “literary production.” As Cathy Davidson suggests in her illuminating book *Revolution and the Word: the Rise of the Novel in America* (1986), the period between antebellum and postbellum America, when the fertility rate declined by 23 percent before 1850 and by 50 percent before 1900, coincides with the period when women’s sign literacy rate (according to Kenneth A. Lockridge’s data) more than doubled. Undoubtedly there is a surprising correlation between the levels of education and fertility. Then, she asserts: “More educated parents (the mother’s education level being especially pertinent) tend to have fewer children. The high correlation between increased female literacy and decreased fertility suggests that education brought with it a sense of control over one’s body, over one’s role in the reproductive process, and even some control over one’s husband” (117). Davidson’s perspective is extremely inspiring, just because, if her point testifies to a massive change in American social attitudes in the period, it could be supposed that the development of literacy at once repressed the conventional modes of (biological/material) reproduction and opened up the new age in which people’s consumption of literacy itself becomes a totally new mode of (literary) reproduction. Poe, in particular, developed such a new mode of consumerist reproduction just by rereading, reorganizing, or “disfiguring” the existing popular literary subgenres. I can illustrate this point with his earlier experiments like the aborted collection, “The Tales of the Folio Club” (1833), and his one and only novella *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837), both of which were produced as consumerist salad bowls of the literary modes quite popular in antebellum America. Those works help us suppose the irony of technological innovation, which promoted the democratization of literature and the aristocratization of literate people, simultaneously.

Therefore, I cannot help but select a literary subgenre inaugurated by Poe, which can be totally characterized by consumption of literacy as its central rhetoric. It is August Dupin who consumes literacy, and it is detective fiction, or the ratiocinative tale, which rhetoricizes the consumption of literacy. This

new mode of fiction made Poe very famous, and it is no wonder that there are quite a few critics who are eager to find in the detective fiction the consumerist origin of postmodern metafiction. For, as Poe created the genre of detective fiction by foregrounding the act of reading as the chief metaphor, so metafictionists produce their work just by rereading their precursors and metaphoricizing fiction itself. In his book *High Resolution* (1989), Henry Sussman highly appreciates the pedagogic imperative of postmodern metafictionists and post-structuralist critics, expecting “the greatest extension of literacy” to involve “the very careful reading of the relationships that configure all organized systems, not only the linguistic and imagistic codes but also systems of production, distribution, management, communication, education, law enforcement, and social services” (224). Insofar as literacy is produced as the effect of political control, it is very logical that a close reading of the “literature of exhaustion” as a high consumption system of literacy brings us the high resolution of the world we live in, if to a limited extent. But even if this formula is completely true of Barth, Pynchon, and Barthelme, who are all contemporary writers, and a rigorous reading of whose works will teach us something of the world around us, what will Poe’s detective fiction, written one and half a centuries ago, teach us? In view of the historical distance between us and the 19th Century audience, it is highly plausible that what seems very instructive to us now was not necessarily didactic in Poe’s age, while what sounds deeply enigmatic now was completely taken for granted in those days. We have to start with the recognition of the critical difference between antebellum literacy and postmodernist literacy.

Of course, we cannot overestimate the scholarly investigations of Poe’s detective fiction from a variety of perspectives: John Walsh’s meta-detective reading of “Mystery of Marie Rogêt”, Marc Shell’s New Historicist reading of “The Gold-Bug,” not to mention Barbara Johnson’s deconstructive reading of “The Purloined Letter” (see Walsh; Shell 5-23; Johnson 110-146). Their analyses are all so skillful that we feel sometimes as if we were reading brilliant explications of the texts woven out by contemporary writers. The consumerist mode of Poe’s detective writings is adequately repeated, replaced, and reproduced by the consumerist mode of postmodernist critical readings. But traversing essays on Poe’s detective stories, we note that there are very few articles on “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), the first and epochmaking work in the genre. Why do most Poe scholars feel reluctant to

produce any fruitful reading of it?

One of the reasons is that the text of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is unreadable in several respects. For example, the way Dupin comes to determine the identity of the murderer's "voice" is extremely enigmatic, especially in our context:

Murder, then, has been committed by some third party; and the voices of this third party were those heard in contention. ...The witnesses, as you remark, agreed about the gruff voice; they were here unanimous. But in regard to the shrill voice, the peculiarity is—not that they disagreed—but that, while an Italian, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Hollander, and a Frenchman attempted to describe it, each one spoke of it as that *of a foreigner*. Each is sure that it was not the voice of one of his own countrymen. Each likens it—not to the voice of an individual of any nation with whose language he is conversant—but the converse. ...You will say that it might have been the voice of an Asiatic—of an African. Neither Asiatics nor Africans abound in Paris" ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "M" 2: 549-550).²

The plot is not very difficult. One day in Paris, in a house in the Rue Morgue, there occurred a pair of brutal murders. The body of Madame L'Espanaye was found in the back yard crushed and virtually decapitated by a razor discarded nearby. The corpse of her strangled daughter Camille L'Espanaye was found violently stuffed, head down, up the chimney in their fourth-floor room. The police are baffled by several circumstances. Here enters C. August Dupin. He speculates on the murders being too brutal and grotesque and superhuman. What is more, he was impressed that every witness, whose respective nationality is different from each other, determined the murderer's voice to be that of a foreigner, while leaving the gender of the murderer open to question, and that there was some non-human hair found in Madame L'Espanaye's clutched fingers and non-human finger marks on the daughter's neck. This is the way Dupin the detective identified the murderer as an orang-outang recently imported from Borneo to Paris, and the voice of the foreigner as that of the beast.

Such a sequence of ratiocination might sound very convincing in those days. To us living in the late 20th Century, however, this logic is too precarious. If Dupin reached his conclusion mainly inferring from the fact that the voice of the murderer sounded like a foreigner's to everyone who heard it, his

reasoning, or, to be more exact, Poe's description of Dupin's reasoning, will make us feel very uncomfortable. For Dupin seems to imply here that someone living outside of known languages and known genders should be instantly judged "inhuman." This judgement is too illogical and imperialistic today, since now we are surrounded by many human beings speaking unknown languages and unveiling unfamiliar genders. It may be to such an absurd aspect that we can attribute the unpopularity of the tale in the circle of Poe critics; what they could do was just investigate the linguistic possibility of "ape" the murderer as the anagram of the initials "E.A.P." (Renza 63), or the narratological potential of "Dupin" as one who does "dupin(g)" (Pollin 254).

And yet, still we cannot discard the thesis that whatever seems to us very illogical in a work of 19th Century American fiction may have made perfect sense to the antebellum audience at large. Instead of criticizing Poe's absurd logic, we should further imagine the discourse of another spatio-temporal structure, in which their sense of logic, literacy, and humanity is essentially different from ours. For example, however "unexpected" the discovery of the orang-outang as the murderer may seem now, the historical context of antebellum America will lead us to expect the murderer. Let us take a look at Bernard Rosenthal's comment on the tale:

Although Poe was certainly the most blatant racist among the American Romantics, the recognition of his views does not necessarily require a reassessment of the man and his art. To be sure, all the implications of "Murders [*sic.*] in the Rue Morgue" cannot be understood without an application of Poe's racial views, but on the other hand, there are no jarring incongruities between his political thought and his art. (Rosenthal et al. eds., *Race and the American Romantics* 3).

In the antebellum South, slavery dominated the real world Poe lived in: Poe did not even question but promoted slavery in those days. This is the point. Rosenthal gives no further analysis, but his opinion carries us to a new reading of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which reading the figure of the orang-outang is consistent with reading that of the southern black in general. Very lately, in her fascinating essay "Romance and Race," Joan Dayan expands Rosenthal's perspective, redefining the development of the genre of romance in the United States as "linked in unsettling ways to the business of race"(90). My purpose, however, is not only to reinterpret Poe's romantic fiction as an allegory of reading the antebellum South, but also to reevaluate the

first detective story in the world as a representation of the rise of cultural aristocracy.

II

For the status of the African-American prevalent in 19th Century America, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s explanation will be very helpful:

Several enlightened aristocrats in the first half of the 18th Century abstracted individual black children from the daily routine of slavery and educated them with their own children in experiments to ascertain if the "perfectibility of man" applied equally to blacks and to whites. What was at stake in these experiments was nothing less than the determination of the place of the African on the Great Chain of Being, a place that hovered rather precariously well beneath the European (and every other) "race of man," yet just above—or parallel to—that place reserved for the "ourang-outang." As Edward Long put the matter in *The History of Jamaica* (1774) there was a natural relation between the ape and the African, ...For Long, the ape and the African were missing links, sharing "the most intimate connexion and consanguinity," including even "amorous intercourse." (*Figures in Black* 10-11)

Though he was born in Boston, Poe was very proud of the South where he grew up, aware of himself as a typical Virginia Dandy. In his letter to Frederick W. Thomas (June 26, 1841), Poe wrote: "I am a Virginian, at least I call myself one, for I have resided all my life, until within the last few years, in Richmond" ("O" 1:170).³ Therefore, it is natural to suppose that Poe must have imbued the ideology of the antebellum Southern aristocracy, in which the political system of slavery was taken for granted. According to Stephen Peithman's annotation on "The Gold-Bug": "Poe's attitude towards blacks is typical of southern thought at the time: Negroes were inferior, little more than childlike, and with all the affection (and intellect) of a family dog" (Peithman 264). What is more, Poe the journalist provided us with a good deal of evidence of his proslavery ideology. While he was the editor-in-chief of the *Southern Literary Messenger* (1834-1864) between 1835 and 1836, he reviewed James Paulding's book ("Paulding-Drayton Review," *SLM* [April 1836]) and asserted: "Nothing is wanting but manly discussion to convince

our own people at least, that in continuing to command the services of their slaves, they violate no law divine or human, and that in the faithful discharge of their reciprocal obligations lies their true duty" ("H" 8: 275). When he became the editor of the *Broadway Journal*, he put an ad for *SLM* in the magazine, describing it as follows: "*SLM* ...has a large subscription list among the elite of the Southern aristocracy..."; "Its subscribers are almost without exception the elite, both as regards wealth and intellectual culture, of the Southern aristocracy, and its corps of contributors are generally men who control the public opinion of the Southerners on all topics" (*SLM* [March 22, 1845]: 191 and 183). Poe dared to promote Southern aristocratic pro-slavery discourse, despite the fact that the abolitionist movement was becoming more vital in those days with William Lloyd Garrison's weekly the *Liberator* as its central organ. The *Liberator* quickly responded to the *Broadway Journal's* advertisement of the *Southern Literary Messenger*: "The style and matter of the Messenger, are chiefly of the kind expressively denominated 'sophomoric' ... Its principles are of the vilest sort, its aim being to uphold the peculiar institution, to decry the colored race, to libel the abolitionists..." (Dwight Thomas et al. 521). Finally, the April 6, 1940 issue of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* disclosed the fact that on December 10, 1829, Poe himself sold Maria Clemm's slave "Edwin" to Henry Ridgway living in Baltimore (John Miller 52-53).

In fact, Poe was just a University of Virginia dropout, having no blood tie with any aristocratic family. What Poe described was no more than the imaginary South. But, as Richard Gray explained, it is already the Old South that invented itself, in the way that perhaps "all patriarchal cultures do, by trying to interpret and regulate life according to some idealized version of the past" (Gray 185). What we supposed to be the "South" turns out to be the discourse of the South, and what matters is what kind of rhetoric an author chooses to consume the South.

This way of interpretation invites us to read Southern aristocratic conditions into "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." For example, Harry Levin, in discussing Poe's "Southern Consciousness," reread the conflict between blacks and whites in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* as that between them in Poe's contemporary South. Jay Hubbell admitted that Poe's imagination is essentially Southern, illustrating the point with his attitude towards women and blacks, his distrust of the idea of progress, his belief in

hierarchy and the indelible nature of evil. Bernard Rosenthal reinterpreted the latter half of *Pym*, in which the hero is entrapped by the black barbarians on the Island Tsalal, as a sign of Southern mythology (Hubbell 151-171; Levin 120-122; Rosenthal et al. 2-3; also see Rosenthal, "Poe, Slavery, and the *Southern Literary Messenger*" 29-38). So, it is not difficult for us to decode, in the first place, Dupin as a type of Southern aristocrat, Madame and Camille L'Espanaye as idealizing the integrity of the Southern whites, and the orang-outang as a representation of what W. J. Cash called "the rape complex," the paranoid belief that any black man who did not demonstrate complete subservience was after white women (Cash 115-120).

Historically speaking, while the American Revolution had such an impact upon the North that northern society came to hold the vision of "Republican Motherhood," the new idealization of women, southern male ideologues, until the 1840s, did not dare to revise the sexist notion of female intellectual inferiority but simply promoted the "Cult of Beauty" much further, by the standard of which a fair complexion of rose (or red) and white was judged, even by representative men like Thomas Jefferson, more beautiful than "that eternal monotony of black skin" (Berkin 424; Wilson, "Cult of Beauty" 334-335). We may safely make the beauty of the Southern Lady the logical companion to the idealized Southern patriarchy (Berkin 425). The more the Southern intellectuals admired the beauty of woman, the more they must have feared any violence against female sexuality, which could not fail to violate the ideal integrity of the patriarchal, aristocratic, and hyperconservative South. From this perspective, I would agree with Richard Gray that the absent presence of the South in Poe "supplies a—necessarily indirect and, perhaps, quite unconscious—expression of that greatest of all Southern fears: the fear that the slaves would one day rise and destroy a people who...had exploited, victimized, and oppressed them" (193).

Insofar as the image of the South overlaps that of the woman in Poe's fiction, isn't it possible to interpret the slaughter of the female figures as the defacement of the South as such? As Richard Hofstadter said in his analysis of 18th Century American slavery, Southern whites lived in anxious conflict between their desire for ample slave labor and their fear, for, despite stringent controls and punishment, there were enough revolts, and actual plots to keep white fears alive (Hofstadter 123-125). And, according to the ethics of honor, as Wyatt-Brown pointed out, there was no greater offense to white authority

than the black spoilation of white womanhood, especially when the deed was done against a member of a proud household (388). We can safely suppose that it is this kind of patriarchal mentality that Poe shared with other Southern contemporaries. For example, Poe, on the one hand, uncovered his orthodox Southern chivalry in his essay "The Poetic Principle" (1850), when he recognized the "ambrosia" in a woman's "winning endearments—in her burning enthusiasms—in her meek and devotional endurances—in the faith, in the purity, in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty—of her love" ("H" 14: 290-291). But, on the other hand, we are faced with works like "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," which can be said to reflect the realistic danger of the same chivalry, and allegorize the fear that someday an "ape" will "rape" the integrity of the whole southern aristocrat society. What shapes the essence of Poe's fiction, then, is the ambivalent relationship between the cult of white beauty and the fear of black slaves.

To support this reading, let us pay attention to three aspects of Poe's representation.

First, as Pollin pointed out, the building we see in the tale reflects American rather than French architectonics; it is the "lightning rod," running about five feet and a half from the casement, by means of which the murderer ourang-outang jumps into the window, but "[t] here is good reason to believe that in France lightning rods were employed only on public buildings later in the 19th Century, and that particular district ...appears...to be totally lacking in the device. ...Poe, who valued originality, wished to exploit this native product; transplanted prematurely into Paris" (246). Here Poe promotes American consumerism by advertising the lightning rod in the French context.

Secondly, we could see the figure of the murderer as reflecting less the metaphorical analogy than the literal kinship supposed in the antebellum South between the ourang-outang and blacks. This reminds us of a mode of lynching "Tarring and Feathering" commonly afflicted on the abolitionists and black slaves in the South. And it is the political legitimization of Southern lynching, "Lynch law" which was originated by Colonel William Lynch in Pittsylvania, Virginia in 1780 with the aim of ridding the South of outlaws, that was supposed to be "the white woman's guarantee against rape by niggers" (Ingalls 408; Hair 295). Hair further suggests that ridding society of "black brutes" who raped white females was indeed the strongest justification of lynching, and that whites who objected to lynching ran the risk of being accused of

sympathy for black rapists (295). Therefore, if reconceived from such a perspective, Poe's refiguration of lynching will make a difference. Certainly, Poe not only seemed to approve of the very system of lynching in his editorial in the May 1836 issue of *Southern Literary Messenger* ("Lynch's Law" 386), but also came to reappropriate the lynching mode of "Tarring and Feathering" in tales like "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" (1845), in which Monsieur Maillard, a superintendent of an insane asylum gone mad himself overpowered the guards, tarring and feathering them, or "Hop-Frog" (1849), in which, to get his revenge on the king and his ministers, the court jester Hop-Frog persuades them to play the roles of escaped ourang-outangs, by saturating them with tar and coating them with tarred flax. And yet, distinct from the representations of it in works like Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman Major Molineux" or Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Poe admirably refigured the very mode of "Tarring and Feathering" not as a conventional way to repress the abolitionists and black slaves, but as a complex strategy for outwitting and avenging the repressors and the ruling class. In terms of cases in which male black slaves were claimed to have raped white women, even if the former slept with the latter by mutual consent (Wyatt-Brown 316-317; Fisher IV 136-147), it is easier to detect the motivation of revenge on the part of slaves. For what afflicted them in fact was not only the act of lynching, but also the very discourse of rape, which "should be totally separated from the issue of violated white womanhood and then recast as part of the social, political, and economic oppression of blacks" (Carby 314).

Moreover, in Poe's rhetoric in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the figure of the murderer ourang-outang can be grasped as the blacks disfigured by tarring and feathering, while the figure of the black slaves is conceived of as stripped of their natural fur. Even if this viewpoint sounds to us in the 20th Century ultraracist and unfounded, we cannot read Poe without being aware of the Southern aristocrat discourse in which slavery is legitimized, the "literal" kinship between ape and blacks established. I said "literal," for even what seems to us "literal" must be the effect of a certain dominant ideology of a certain spatio-temporal construction. However unfounded the kinship between ape and blacks is, it is the Anglo-American and good old Southern ethnocentric unconscious that forcibly made something ill-founded seem well-founded, and something simply analogical seem totally literal. The figurative

status of “tar” and “feather,” then, might as well be named a double metonymy, applicable to both the black slaves and the ourang-outang. The fear provoked in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” actually represents the fear on the part of the repressor that the lynched slaves will take revenge on the aristocrats, leading the whole society of the antebellum South to destruction. This is the way Poe reread and consumed a Southern convention for writing fiction.

With the first and the second point in mind, we are forced to suppose that Dupin could disentangle the mystery, just because he was basically familiar with the discursive structure of the South. This is the third point. Remember that postmodern critics are inclined to relocate the origin of metafiction in Poe's detective fiction (see Tani), and one can easily reconsider Dupin to be a metacharacter, who is keenly conscious of what he should or should not do in the type of fiction where he is placed. Indeed, Dupin the detective disentangled the mystery of the murders. But, to be more exact, it is Dupin the metacharacter, who disentangled the network of American discourses constructing the very text, that encouraged Dupin the detective to identify the true murderer in France. Dupin does not seem to produce anything, but his consumption of the discourses did produce strong readings; which helped produce a new literary mode.

According to the history of American publication, the period between 1822 and 1842 saw an aggregate of 1, 115 different works, whereas in the year 1853 there were some 733 works published in the same country. In his provocative article “Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Invention,” Ronald Zboray ironically explains that as the average increase in the population of the United States scarcely reached 80 percent in the very period between 1842 and 1853, it appears that, owing to the rapid progress of printing technology, “literature and the bulk of the book trade advanced ten times faster than population” (Zboray 180-181). Probably aware of such an historical condition, Robert Giddings attributes the production of the detective fiction itself to “the impact of print on literacy, which meant that certain habits of reading become interiorized” (Giddings 97). Of course, the overestimation of technology is incompatible with the mind of the South. But it is certain that antebellum America saw the progress of printing technology as well as the rise of the Dupin-type aristocrat, who can sell his own literacy as a commodity. Poe's Dupin trilogy endorses the way the detective's literacy is highly appreciated.

For example, the narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" says: "I felt that the society of such a man would be to me a treasure beyond price; ...It was at length arranged that we should live together during my stay in the city; and as my worldly circumstances were somewhat less embarrassed than his own, I was permitted to be at the expense of renting, and furnishing in a style which suited the rather fantastic gloom of our common temper, a time-eaten and grotesque mansion..." ("M" 2: 532). In "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," the sum of the reward for resolving the mystery is specified: "...the Prefect took it upon himself to offer the sum of twenty thousand francs for the conviction of the assassin, ...The entire reward thus stood at no less than thirty thousand francs, which will be regarded as an extraordinary sum when we consider the humble condition of the girl" ("M" 3: 727). The same thing is true of "The Purloined Letter," in which the Prefect tells Dupin and the narrator as follows: "Why, a very great deal—a very liberal reward—I don't like to say how much, precisely; but one thing I will say, that I wouldn't mind giving my individual check for fifty thousand francs to any one who could obtain [for] me that letter. The fact is, it is becoming of more and more importance every day; and the reward has been lately doubled..." ("M" 3: 982). With no economic capital, Dupin was able to market his own act of reading, exchanging it with money. In the characterization of Dupin, we can recognize the historic passage from the age of slave capital to the age of cultural capital. In this sense, he could be called not so much a traditional Southern aristocrat as the model of a cultural aristocrat newly produced by the techno-consumerist climate in America.

To conclude my argument, let me explain next the disruption of the ideal of aristocracy, and the way it becomes related to the representation of "fear" in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

III

The threat of the abolitionist movement was tremendous, especially to people like Poe. At this point, taking a glance at the sources of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" will be helpful. Although the ourang-outang was first exhibited in the States around 1831, it is a case of a robber baboon, reported in a short article published in the *Annual Register for 1834*, that must have inspired Poe. Furthermore, according to T. O. Mabbott, there were a couple of

tall-tale like stories of mischievous pet monkeys: one story is about a pet monkey, who, imitating his master shaving himself, cut his own throat. Another story is about a barber's pet monkey who, in the absence of his master from the shop, essayed to shave a customer with disastrous results. The victim later reproaches the barber, saying, "I'll never let your father [or grandfather] to shave me again" ("M" 2: 523). Whether fictional or factual, these stories set forth the figure of the educated ape, whose intelligence may compare with or even surpass that of human beings. And, we may further presume that the threat of a humanized ape must have been compatible with the threat of educated black slaves in the antebellum South. Blacks, if illiterate, are not the object of anthropology but of primatology, while if literate, they are believed to produce the power of blackness, which enables them to rape not merely Southern ladies but also the whole Southern society. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. compared such an enlightened black, who is capable of outwitting whites by deconstructing imperialist languages, to the figure of the "Signifyin' Monkey" originating in African mythology (see *Figures in Black* and *The Signifying Monkey*). Let us recall the sentence that made Fredrick Douglass's slave narrative most impressive: "Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet/had given me the *inch*, and no/precaution could prevent me from/taking the *ell*" (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* 82; also see Salvino 140-156). One is also reminded of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), a novel some critics would call a parody of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which the anti-hero Bigger Thomas is compared to an ape. Linda Prior redefined "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" as a tale misreading a murderer ape as a human murderer, and *Native Son* as a novel misreading a black boy as a man-like ape (Prior 52-53).⁴ Suffice it to say that in the novel the Afro-American writer Richard Wright may have wanted to outwit the Anglo-American writer Poe, consuming the racist formula Poe established.

By the way, we should not forget here that, in the antebellum South, there was a discourse contemporary intellectuals grasped as more troublesome than abolitionism. It was the discourse of "agrarianism" that threatened Southern aristocrats, requiring them to revise their vision of life. Of course, today "agrarianism" does not always contain negative implications; it just seems closely related with Thomas Jefferson's utopianism as well as with the New Critical doctrine of "organic form." As Louis Douglas explicates in his introduction to *Agrarianism in American History* (1969), in 1800, in the

proportionate dimensions of American rural life, 90% was agricultural, 10% non-agricultural. "The occupation of farming remained firmly linked with concepts of public and private morality, with achievement, and with equality" (Louis Douglas ix). The reason why the concept of agrarianism offended a lot of intellectuals was that it demanded people to admit the need of land redistribution. In his *Agrarian Justice* (1797) Thomas Paine was implying that if the United States were to have an agrarian society, land would have to be equitably redistributed, and that there cannot be a nation of farmers unless ordinary people own farms (Cf. Rosenthal, *City of Nature* 170-171). Insofar as most contemporary conservatives believed in private ownership of property as the basis of American society, as the "ordinance of God," agrarianism was radically attacked as a dirty word, which cannot but undermine the dogma of Christianity. To borrow C. C. Hazewell's opinion, agrarianism was a worse sin than atheism because all agrarians are by definition atheists and opposers of private property. In his essay "Agrarianism," Hazewell criticizes this new mode of ideology, likening it to communism. "Under the term Agrarians is included, in common usage, all that class of men who exhibit a desire to remove social ills by a resort to means which are considered irregular and dangerous by the great majority of mankind. Of late years we have heard much of Socialists, Communists, Fourierites, and so forth; but the word agrarians comprehends all these, and is often made to include men who have no more idea of engaging in social reforms than they have of pilgrimizing to the Fountains of the Nile" (394). Agrarianism, then, is a sort of communist discourse which will abolish private ownership of property, and produce in the Southern conservatives the fear that *someday one may get deprived of his or her own property unreasonably, and everything may come to nothing*. For them, agrarianism became the greatest threat to aristocratic consumerism.

Now let me highlight a representative Southern economist, Thomas Roderick Dew (1802-42), president of the College of William and Mary, who made every effort to resolve the dilemma between Southern aristocratic consumerism and Northern democratic industrialism. His ideological impact on his contemporary intellectuals cannot be ignored, because his admirers included Poe the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, for which Dew was one of the regular contributors. Poe was so eager to receive Dew's articles that he even delayed publication of the March 1836 issue of the *SLM*, awaiting his address "On the Influence of the Federative Republican System of

Government upon Literature and the Development of Character” (to be delivered before the Virginia Historical Society). This address, covering more than 20 pages in the format of the journal, undoubtedly attracted Poe to a great extent, since here Professor Dew at once supported slavery and attacked agrarianism.

It is not difficult to sum up Dew’s points. First, Dew finds it vital to promote industrial technology in the South as well, following the example of the North: “The canal and the rail road, the steam boat and steam car, the water power and steam power, constitute in fact the great and characteristic powers of the 19th Century—they are the mighty civilizers of the age in which we live” (266). Secondly, he sees a happy relationship between the different classes in the South, and admits no need for abolitionism: “I have no hesitation in affirming that the relation between capitalist and laborer in the south is kinder, and more productive of genuine attachment, than exists between the same classes anywhere else on the face of the globe. The slave is happy and contented with his lot, unless indeed the very demons of pandemonium shall be suffered to come among us and destroy his happiness by their calumnious falsehoods and hypocritical promises” (278). Thirdly, Dew tries to vindicate slavery by identifying abolitionism with agrarianism: “Domestic slavery, such as ours, is the only institution which I know of, that can secure that spirit of equality among freemen, so necessary to the true and genuine feeling of republicanism, without propelling the body politic at the same time into the dangerous vices of agrarianism, and legislative intermeddling between the laborer and the capitalist” (277). Professor Dew’s opportunism is evident. Though desiring to introduce Northern technological achievements into the South, Dew does not give up pro-slavery discourse characteristic of Southern aristocracy: he does not agree either with Northern democracy or with agrarian communism.

Dew’s opportunistic ideology appealed to the Southern aristocrats, however. To be more correct, Dew’s vision can be said to have ignited the will to revisionism his fellow intellectuals had felt necessary in an age of cultural upheaval. It is very natural, then, that, driven by the fear that *someday one may get deprived of his or her own property unreasonably, and everything may come to nothing*, a romantic writer like Poe came to exaggerate the figuration of slavery, as is clearly seen in his representation of blacks in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and *The Journal of Julius Rodman* (1840). In addition, it

was on May 10, 1837 that New York banks suspended specie payment, and subsequently the Panic confused Poe's life to a certain extent (Bittner 129).⁵ For during the period 1830-36 enormous state debts had piled up from the construction of canals and railroads and in the chartering of new banks among the settled states. The depression continued until 1843 and was most severely felt in the West and the South. There was a general suspension of public works, a demand for more stringent banking laws, widespread unemployment, and state defalcations and repudiations (McGrane 206). This period notably coincides with the tragic days of Poe's life. In January 1837, Poe, what with the managerial crisis of his boss Thomas Willis White and the aggravation of their personal relationship, had to terminate his editorship of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, moving with his family to New York (February 1837) and then settling in Philadelphia (early 1838). From 1839 through 1840, after a one-year engagement with *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* (May 1839-May 1840), Poe was dismissed by Burton, failed to find adequate financial backing for his planned new literary journal *Penn Magazine* (autumn 1840), and was finally bedridden by illness (December 1840). I have already suggested that Dew's attack on agrarianism may have led Southern intellectual aristocrats to fear that *someday one may get deprived of his or her own property unreasonably*, but, in view of his biographical context, I am certain that Poe became hysterical in his opposition to the communistic leveling signified by agrarianism, all the more because the rise of agrarianist discourse along with the panic of 1837 was likely to force him to have so little, much less, or even nothing, to lose. Therefore, it is no wonder that the romantic writer felt like promoting "the sole unquestionable aristocracy of intellect," which he is later to formulate in a letter to Sarah Helen Whitman (November 26, 1848, "O" 2:410), by means of representing and surviving the fear of the politico-economic upheaval in the speculatively renovative form of fiction, that is to say, the detective story in the early 1840s.

In his analysis of "The Gold-Bug" (1843), the third detective story of Poe, Marc Shell noticed that "in 1840 Samuel Young called 'humbug' the paper dollars that the banks were issuing for specie," and that during the depression of 1837-40 the suspension of specie payments by the banks led to the issuing by corporations, cities, and individuals of small change notes, which were often called 'shinplasters'" (10, 227). Paper money was regarded not as simply inferior to specie but also a fake of money itself. Let us suppose, then,

that Young called the paper money “humbug” pejoratively, exactly because he felt a certain kind of fear that he was about to be surrounded by a number of simulacra, unreal signs, which would even deprive him of his own identity. If, then, the Panic of 1837 was shocking enough to radically reorganize the psychological structure of contemporary Americans, isn’t it natural that Poe had already felt that fear prior to “The Gold-Bug,” while writing the first detective fiction, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” to be published in April 1841? This perspective induces us to reinterpret the murders of Madame and Mademoiselle L’Espanaye as the threat approaching Poe’s beloved aunt and wife, that is to say, his own ideal of southern integrity. From this point of view, the form of the detective story can safely be redefined as neutralizing the Southern fear of agrarian abolitionism by the Southern ideology of intellectual aristocracy.

What matters now is Dupin’s ironical formulation of the method of the Prefect: “*de nier ce qui est, et d’expliquer ce qui n’est pas*” (To deny what is, and explain what is not,” “M” 2: 568). If “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” can be reasonably read as an allegory of the antebellum South, Dupin’s formulation mentioned above can also be meaningful as a representation of what was taking place in the region he loved. In this context, “To deny what is, and explain what is not” can be paraphrased as follows: “To deny private property, and explain what should not be—agrarianism, abolitionism, and democracy.” In this sense, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” can also be reconstructed as an allegory of politico-economic resistance to productionism as well as to anti-consumerism.

American literary history teaches us that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” brought Poe international fame. Just like Dupin the armchair detective, Poe the professional writer developed for himself a productive method of consuming cultural capital. Indeed, literacy itself may be considered as nothing substantial. But, as Marc Shell skillfully analyzed, “The Gold-Bug,” the third detective fiction of Poe, in which Legrand’s black servant Jupiter is characterized as “manumitted,” shows the way the detective generates “something from nothing that is at once economic and linguistic” (21-22). What interests us here is that, as literacy helped Legrand decode the cryptogram and brought him tremendous wealth, so Poe’s ability of rereading the cultural network of popular literary modes made it easier for him to write the text, and won him first prize, that is, 100 dollars. However, the more we

read into "The Gold-Bug" such a consumerist allegory "*something comes from nothing*," the more we feel like recalling the antebellum crisis allegorized in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which Poe and the characters unfold the fear that "*everything comes to nothing*," and without which we could not have had any history of detective fiction as well as of postmodernist literature in general.

NOTES

The Japanese version of this paper was delivered in January 1991, at the monthly meeting of the Tokyo branch of the American Literary Society of Japan. The current version springs from my talk in August 1991, given at the annual symposium of the Sapporo Seminar, when Professor Michael T. Gilmore, one of the invited speakers, offered me invaluable advice, without which my argument would not have been completed.

- 1 F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* avoids dealing with Poe because Poe's value "is now seen in his influence rather than in the body of his own work" in light of "the development from Poe to Baudelaire, through the French symbolists, to modern American and English poetry": (xii). Also see John P. Muller et al.
- 2 Unless otherwise specified, the parenthetical abbreviations refer to the following texts: "H"—James A. Harrison, ed., *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*; "M"—Thomas Olive Mabbott, ed., *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*; "O"—John Ostrom, ed., *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*.
- 3 Also note that Poe was a member of John Allan's aristocratic family, although by adoption.
- 4 As Wright was nearing the midway point of the first draft of *Native Son*, two young black men, Robert Nixon and Earl Hix, were charged with the murder of a white woman, and that the openly racist *Chicago Sunday Tribune* reported that the killings by Nixon were "accomplished with a ferocity suggestive of Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue'—the work of a giant ape" (Leavelle 6). Cf. Kenneth Kinnamon 209-234.
- 5 In explaining the financial situation of Poe in March 1830, Kenneth Silverman states: "his (Poe's) earlier struggle to get and keep money can only have been revived and worsened by the economic depression that began a few months later, centering in New York. Wild speculation in land and real estate during the 1830s, in part based on the country's real potential for economic growth, brought a piling up of credit, the creation and evaporation of huge fortunes on paper, and ultimately a financial panic. ... Poe's writing cannot have improved his financial situation much, for he is known to have published little more during fifteen months in New York than two tales, 'Von Jung, the Mystic' and 'Siope: A Fable'"(130-131).

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