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In the first quarter of the 20th century, Alfred North Whitehead, a mathematician and philosopher, made a speech at University College London called "The Aims of Education." We are working with his title. Near the turn of the 21st century, one of my former teachers began asking two questions when giving speeches at universities and colleges. She looked faculty in the eye: "What is it to teach?" she said, "What is it to learn?" I will try to carry some of the urgency of her questions forward under Whitehead's title.

Her questions produced awkward silences. She is one of only two academics I have ever known who can make a simple interrogative sentence in English alter the whole emotional and intellectual climate of a room full of beautifully educated native speakers. She teaches English literature. The other one, who died several years ago, taught philosophy. One time, from the audience, after a speech about the place of harm in thinking about the nature of injustice, the philosophy teacher raised his hand. "Harm," he said, "I'm not sure what you mean by 'harm.' Would you have *harmed* me...say...if you had *bored* me to *tears*?"

Silence.

In addition to being humiliating, this was, actually, a good philosophy question. The speaker had argued that injustices are, above all, harmful. The philosophy teacher was demonstrating that the speaker had said nothing about what might count as harm even though thought about harm was supposed to illuminate the nature of injustice. The English teacher's questions sounded like philosophy questions—like questions about concepts or about the essences of things. And their effect was like the effect of asking a philosophy question—people brought up short by a query concerning the basic stuff of their lives, their work, or their views.

We could not get enough of that English teacher. At the first meeting of any seminar, she went around the room asking us to say why we were there. We began our first class with her by giving elaborate characterizations of what was at stake for us—politically, intellectually, and in our own research—such that the topic of this very seminar was crucial to us. Personally. By the time we had taken a few of her classes, we were more inclined to say things like, "I hope to learn to read."

The shift in statements of purpose showed that, whatever led us to seek her out in the first place, we returned for education.

What kind of education can bring people who hold bachelors' and masters' degrees in humanistic disciplines flocking to a course that demands at least 30 hours a week of library research in the hope that they will *learn to read*? You can tell that many of the University of Chicago's most ardent alumni began just such an education here as undergraduates because they are inclined to say equally mysterious things about this place. They say, "I learned to think at Chicago."

Now, anyone admitted to this august institution already can think, just as everyone who spent 30 hours a week working through literary, scholarly, or philosophical readings in English, French, and German already could pass literacy exams in those languages. (My teacher's voice in my head urges me to mention that it is no accident that *those* are the ordinary languages of contemporary academic research; I mention this in homage to her skill in training her students to pause; I won't take us any further into the ellipsis produced by her voice in my head.) My question today is: what do the sentences about reading and thinking mean? What kind of disruption, what sort of stutter, is celebrated when literate people aspire to learn to read? What are thinking people saying when they credit the University of Chicago with teaching them to do something that they already could do before ever laying eyes on our gargoyles?

Did the literature students, dazzled by their teacher's brilliance, overwhelmed by too much homework, *forget* that they knew how to read? Does Chicago produce some kind of collapse in the undergraduate mind such that students enter as thinking people and are brought to a point of absolute intellectual paralysis before being able to think again? Are we talking about education here or a version of Stockholm syndrome? And how can it ever be good to feel like you could neither think nor read? How could such a thing even *masquerade* as a benefit?

Well, good education isn't the only thing that can make the disruption of your sense of intellectual mastery feel like a boon. No one really minds getting knocked sideways by falling in love, for instance. It's not that you can't *say* what happened when you fell in love. It's not that you couldn't have produced a discursus on love in advance. It's not even that inner chatter is silenced in love. In love, the head is a noisy place. But what you thought you knew recedes. Who you thought you were no longer claims your undivided attention. An anxiety haunted, optimistically insulated, god big feeling of control crumbles in the face of something foreign. And you surprise yourself—if only in moments and if only for a little while—because something strange to you that is nevertheless in you couples with something unanticipated in the world.

What makes good liberal arts education different from romance, and also different from excellent technical training, is that taking advantage of a liberal arts education requires you to nurture an appetite for shifts in thought that disrupt you. And in so doing, you come to crave opportunities to imagine things otherwise, and to feel the ground give way as both your intellectual equipment and your topic change shape in the process. Thinking—the thing that we value almost above anything else around these parts—is like that.

A liberal arts education certainly won't make you healthy or wealthy. I don't believe that it will make you a better person either, although distinguished colleagues do not share my pessimism on this point. But liberal arts education is what we do as well as anyone at Chicago, and you are poised to take advantage of us in our strong suit.

Your situation is in some respects superior to mine when I started. My school didn't have the benefit of a common core answerable to the standards of various disciplines and beholden to none. My undergraduate teachers were not distinguished members of a major research university faculty on a campus where graduate students have always outnumbered undergraduates.

In other respects, my circumstances were happy. I say this even though I didn't know what a liberal arts education *was*. Where I came from, nobody knew. My mother told her friends that I was away taking a secretarial course. She *kept* telling them this all the way through my bachelor's degree and graduate work. They thought that I was slow, but very determined. Meanwhile, from the first, I understood that I needed to get a good education from the faculty of a small liberal arts college. And it became obvious fairly quickly that nothing about the place guaranteed this outcome. I already had the thing I'd most like to give you today—an understanding that my education was and is profoundly my own.

If you have your wits about you the world always presents you with opportunities to learn. You can acquire skills, for example. You can gather information. And there is always, always someone who understands whatever you are trying to do better than you do, who is further along than you are and ready to offer experience and advice. It doesn't matter what you are doing. You might be trying to read literary Arabic. You might be trying to work with statistics. You might need to figure out the arcane operations of the local bureaucracy. Teachers. Experts. The world is full of them. What you do with a perpetual opportunity to learn and no shortage of others who are willing to teach you what they know—what you make of it is up to you. Which means that the mind you make is yours.

The mind you make is yours even though the languages you work, read, think, love, sing, and dream in were used before you were born and will continue after you are dead. The mind you make is yours even though, at every turn and at every step, you will be working on, in, with, and from things that you did not make happen, things that you cannot entirely control, and things that you cannot single-handedly set to rights when they have gone awry. The fact that you have a mind—the glorious strangeness of your own mindedness—is one such thing. And the practical challenges of making good use of a liberal arts education just are the challenges of befriending thought, of being prepared to think even though thinking may carry you places that you do not want to go, will disrupt you, and is, above all, difficult and inconvenient.

Reading is an excellent concept-metaphor for thinking more generally. It is excellent because it highlights the fact that thinking is informed by language, and that, even within the bounds of the requirement that language-in-use make sense, there are many ways to read anything, a point

nicely illustrated by the shift of statements of purpose that came as my fellow graduate students and I kept returning to classes with the English teacher. Perhaps you are reading writings. Perhaps you are reading cultural, historical, or political phenomena. It could be data sets. It could be people—your intimates, for instance, or yourself. Whatever you read there is always the sense that you are working in translation from languages that you don't know and always the presumption that things will make a kind of sense that they don't seem to at first.

I did graduate work developing three very different sets of reading strategies. I worked in mathematical economics. Economics remains my private place of fascination. I concentrated in my home discipline, philosophy—more specifically, in ethics—and did dual and contending doctoral research in English literature.

We read for argument in the kind of philosophy that I do and teach. We often read the writings of dead men. The canonical corpus of the dead thinker is read as pitched at specifically philosophical problems—problems about concepts or modes of thinking or the natures of things. Consistency, coherence, and cogency set standards for interpretation such that when philosophy readers encounter a recalcitrant passage, they must work to determine whether the current account of the argument or the problem it addressed (or even of the set of assumptions that brought problem and argument to the fore) was *wrong*, whether there is an important division in the work, or whether the passage is a lamentable lapse on the part of the great man. But the grounding assumption is that everything in the corpus will make sense after the fashion of an argument. There will be conclusions. There will be considerations advanced in support of these. The philosophy reader's job is to make sense of the bundle.

For starters, the reader has to determine what kind of claim is put forward in the conclusion. Does it purport to describe things? Is it instead a story about how things might be or might have been? Maybe the conclusion isn't in the business of relaying facts or possibilities *at all*. Maybe it is saying what *should* be or what *should* have been. Or maybe it detaches itself from the detail of the actual, the possible, and the commendable to take on the very terms of thinking. Maybe it is, as one says, a conceptual claim.

In the course of trying to figure out the status of the conclusion, the reader takes cues from the considerations advanced on its behalf. If the conclusion is descriptive, then the text often offers evidence on behalf of the conclusion's construe of phenomena. No amount of information about how things are will determine *exactly* how things should be. Information about how things are is sometimes enough to tell you what should *not* happen, should the heavens fall, but that is another matter. So if the conclusion traffics in the positive *ought to be* or *ought to have been*, the reader looks for different kinds of support. And conceptual arguments have to shuttle between what is, what might be, and what ought to be in complicated ways, taking all of them into account in the course of trying to say something about the structure of the relevant region of thought.

Suppose you've got a read on all that. You have a take on the conclusion such that these considerations give it some kind of support. Now, what about the relation between the considerations and the conclusion? Is this a train of thought that could carry you to Cleveland as easily as it could deposit you in Timbuktu?

Training in reading for argument is training in asking and answering such questions. Exercises in intellectual confrontation are, to philosophers, what timed laps are to Michael Phelps. Remember the philosophy teacher's question? It was a magnificent show of the fruits of *professionally trained* tactlessness. You always face objections. No one who takes this personally can survive the training with decency intact. To be fair—sadly—not everyone in my field sides with decency as the proper context for ruthless insistence on cogency. But some do. Those of us aspiring to the high road choose to read the fact that our colleagues ask us embarrassing questions as a sign that they take our work seriously. We think that a good bout of argument is great fun—even when we love our conclusions and are delighted by the ingenious twists and turns in the roads we've built in order to reach them. No one of us is ever in place to ask herself every good question. What looks to you like the *obvious* objection to my big idea may never have occurred to me. We need each other. Even then, there's no guarantee that the whole lot of us won't produce a theory of injustice based on the idea that injustice is harmful without noticing that we haven't said what we mean by *harm*. That is why it's better to take the high road. Your best allies are people who make you keep working to make better arguments or reach better conclusions, people who are willing to use *their* time to push back in the face of *your* intellectual sallies and onslaughts.

That's how things are in my home discipline. Reading for argument is second nature. The presumption is that there is always a good answer to a hard question, and that the author of the argument stands ready to respond to the query—from beyond the grave, if necessary, as an archive of textual remains—if only we are clever enough to see the pattern in what we are working to read, if only we are focused and imaginative enough to extend the thinking on the author's behalf. I have no choice but to carry this training with me when I visit my favorite foreign country, English literature.

At Chicago, even someone with the flatfooted mindset of a disciplinary philosopher can find thinking partners in the English Department. They will let you bring a philosophy question that isn't yet well formulated into literary study. They will help if you want to learn to read literary material because you are still trying to understand how to pose the question, and you strongly suspect that your unfinished question is already at play in some literature.

The question that has been eating at me forever is related to the point I was trying to make about the practical challenges of mindedness. I mentioned that your mind is yours even though the life of the mind is always lived with, in and through things that you didn't cause—among these, the fact that you have a mind—things that exceed the limits of your control, and things that you cannot, all on your own, make right when they go wrong. You are accountable for what you make of mindedness, even though mindedness was not *your* idea in the first place and

is often, quite frankly, a downer. A lot of ethics is like that. Ethics is my area. I hope one day to know how to think about the ethical equivalent of that point about mindedness. My colleague in English, Jay Schleusener, has been helping me take this question to Edgar Poe's corpus.

Jay and I love thinking together. We hope always one day to perform extraordinary feats of reading—next year, in Jerusalem perhaps. Antebellum US literature is not Jay's specialty, so even Jay is a little off-kilter with Poe. And, as is always the case when you are enthralled by a dead guy's literary corpus, Jay and I pored over the scholarly secondary literature on Poe's tales, seeking the wisdom of experts, and came to believe that Poe deserved better reading than he was getting from the specialists. They just don't love him like we could.

What's so hard about reading Poe's tales? Kids read them. They inspired all those great Roger Corman B-movie productions in the 1960s. What's the problem?

In a nutshell: Poe's short fiction takes no interest in character. "In the tale proper," he wrote, "there is no space for development of character."¹ That's why he made tales. Of course, if there is no space for character-development, then there is no space for character *at all*. Character *develops*. That's what character does. Poe knew that as well as anyone. When you read fiction for character, you try to understand imaginary events as these catch hold of, take shape from, and express the imaginary inner lives of imaginary people. Imaginary inner life is not Poe's topic. Now, I want to use Poe to help me pay attention to how individuals are permeated by things beyond their control—like grammar, logic, and the idiomatic and rhetorical dimensions of living languages. I need ways of understanding exactly how individuals are, nevertheless, accountable for what they do. I have to work from outside in, rather than from inside out. The vicissitudes of inner life are not to the point. So the no-character thing is a plus for me.

Since there are no characters in Poe's tales, plot has nothing to do with individual characters acting in narrative time to disclose and change their inner natures. Instead, Poe defines *plot* as "that, in which nothing can be disarranged, or from which nothing can be removed, without ruin to the mass—as that, in which we are never able to determine whether any one point depends upon or sustains any other."² Judging from contemporary scholarship, it is possible to read a lot of Poe's tales without noticing that nothing happens in them. The fact that there are no plots, in the usual sense of the term, is something that you can miss. Granted, it *feels* like something is happening in the tales, but armed with Poe's bizarre definition of "plot," gradually you notice that much of the writing is not about conveying events at all. It's as though you are working with the prose fiction equivalent of a tableau vivant. It is as though events have the status of clouds gathering overhead, and the feeling of something happening is the feeling of the atmosphere growing more dense, coming gradually to press in from all sides. Poe has told his readers that the illusion of storyline is produced through an array of interdependent points or *positions*. His term "plot" is closer to "plot" as in *plotting data points* than it is to "plot" as in the *plot of the novel*.

How are you supposed to read an array of interdependent points disguised as a story? Well, you have to work against the grain of commonsense psychology. Commonsense psychology is a framework for reading fiction. But it is *so much more* than that, and Poe routinely strains against readers' almost unavoidable tendency to tell commonsense psychology stories in order to get a read on almost anything. According to commonsense psychology, who you are comes from your personal history, your individual talents and preferences, your plans and projects, achievements and injuries, what you know, what you think, and your cultural circumstances. All of these color and stain your inner world. Your actions flow from your inner world, which *you* experience and others *don't*, into the outer world, where you have witnesses, and company.

Any movement outward can be praised or criticized in different ways. The goodness or badness, grace or clumsiness, wisdom or folly, of your actions may be laid at the doorstep of your inner world. The significance of what you do may instead be based on the effects you bring about. Or the value of your action may involve some combination of outcome and source. Different thinkers have different theories about action-assessment.

The presumption that mindedness informs the doings of adult human beings has *got to be* true. Trying to opt out of this way of understanding interpersonal life will amount to opting out of having your wits about you. So this is a kind of baseline point for reading each other and it sets a standard for reading oneself. Poe is pushing back against commonsense psychology as the framework for reading short fiction. That doesn't mean that he was clueless about people. It doesn't mean that he failed to notice that the literate public in his day read fiction as gossip about imaginary people. You have to understand something pretty well in order to push against it accurately. As he mentioned, his decision to write tales was part of the push.

What does he give us in place of imaginary people with complex imaginary minds? Figures. Points. Positions. Once Poe has an array in place, things are dark. Poe's households crumble around masculine figures notable for groundless, but still goal-directed surges of volition, affection and thought. Strange and beautiful women, when in evidence, only come into their own postmortem. It comes as no big surprise that there are almost no children in the tales.³ And when we turn from individual and household to civil society, things are no better. Poe's cities—most notably, a London and several Parises that bear striking resemblances to antebellum New York—are scenes of crimes. And so the twin pillars of most morality tales—character and society—will not support the weight of ethical narrative in Poe. Nevertheless, Poe wrote morality tales, without characters and without normal-writer plot.

We can't rely on commonsense psychology to help us figure out how to read these morality tales. Happily, Poe gives us some help in finding an alternative strategy. He teaches us through admonitions about how not to read. Explaining why the Prefect of Police has failed to recover a purloined letter in spite of making a thorough search of the rooms in which the letter must be concealed, Poe's detective, C. Auguste Dupin remarks:

A certain set of highly ingenious resources are, with the Prefect, a sort of Procrustean bed, to which he forcibly adapts his designs. But he perpetually errs by being too deep or too shallow, for the matter in hand; and many a schoolboy is a better reasoner than he. I knew one about eight years of age, whose success at guessing in the game of 'even and odd' attracted universal admiration. This game is simple, and is played with marbles. One player holds in his hand a number of these toys, and demands of another whether that number is even or odd. If the guess is right, the guesser wins one; if wrong, he loses one. The boy to whom I allude won all the marbles of the school. Of course he had some principle of guessing; and this lay in mere observation and admeasurement of the astuteness of his opponents.⁴

When Dupin asks how the boy manages "the thorough identification [with his opponent's intellect] in which his success consisted,"⁵ the boy replies:

When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression.⁶

Imitation, rather than psyching out the other guy, is the secret of the boy's victories. Dupin's own skill at detection is, likewise, a matter of artful repetition—something that plays itself out on the *surface* of things.⁷ Such skill is *not* a matter of trying to plumb the depths of an opponent's psyche by imagining secret conflicts or passions in the heart or mind of the villain. It is a matter of knowing what to repeat.

Gripped by this passage, determined to read well, my partner in thought and I set out on the trail of repetition in Poe's tales. We had to scrap a lot of the traditional ways of organizing Poe's writings into groups along the way. One of the three tales that features the Dupin figure, for instance, doesn't seem to belong with the other two. Commonsense psychology would lead you to think that all three belong together because the same figure appears in all three and all three involve solving crimes. Same name. Same kind of make-believe human doings. Same. Maybe not, we have started to think. But that surprise was nothing compared to the surprise of finding that two tales that seem to have *nothing* to do with each other cry out to be read together.

These two are as different as you please in terms of ordinary accounts of genre. One is a satiric sketch. The other appears to be a horror story. They are even further apart in terms of the specially-invented-by-critics-to-deal-with-Poe genres, such as "female revenant stories" and "apostasies of populism." Above each tale hangs a quotation. And here are the first lines of the tales proper:

1. I cannot just now remember when or where I first made the acquaintance of that truly fine-looking fellow, Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith. Some one did introduce me to the gentleman, I am sure—at some public meeting, I know very well—held about something of great importance, no doubt—at some place or other, I feel convinced, —whose name I have unaccountably forgotten.⁸

2. I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the Lady Ligeia. Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering. Or, perhaps, I cannot now bring these points to mind, because, in truth, the character of my beloved, her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown... And now, while I write, a recollection flashes upon me that I have never known the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed, and who became the partner of my studies, and finally the wife of my bosom.⁹

Two instances of a nameless masculine narrator position; two confessions of having forgotten the circumstances under which the narrator position became locked in with an oddly named other position; two versions of erasing another masculine figure who sealed the named figure to the nameless narrator position—Jay and I stopped dead in our tracks. The first lines are from a tale called "The Man That Was Used Up." The second open a tale called "Ligeia."

We knew from our research that Poe invented the name "Ligeia" because he needed a word that rhymed with "idea" in an early poem. We knew from playing hunches and from the work of very fine scholars that the tale that bears this made-up name traffics in matters involving Africans in America, racialism, and sensationalist stories about mixed race women. Those aspects of the cultural context bleed into "Ligeia" implicitly. "The Man That Was Used Up," on the other hand, is explicit in its traffic with the federal government's early 19th century military campaigns against Native Americans. The tale parodies the self-representation of the dominant body politic as the product of voluntary association, suggests that populist political sentiment in its day is empty ("empty" in the sense lacking referents or objects), and sketches some of the ways in which privilege tends to make its favorite children stupid. In short, questions about individual ethical and intellectual agency in circumstances that overreach the limits of individual person power are at play in both.

There are many, many instances of repetition in the structure of these two tales. I will give you just one of them—the relation between the position of the nameless narrator and the position to which it is sealed—its weirdly named point of contrast. Jay and I call the point of contrast "the position of singularity." Both tales revolve around the issue of singularity. In each case it is an issue which emerges through the proximity of a singular figure, a position that is virtually

defined by the fact that it cannot be read in any of the usual ways— socially, say, or morally or emotionally or cognitively.

The occupant of that position in Poe must be, by definition, two things: (a) an imaginary individual that might carry all the baggage of personal history and commonsense psychology; and (b) genuinely and non-accidentally singular. Roughly speaking, any occupant of the position of singularity must be thought to have its principle of individuation inside itself, as a kind of inner source determining it to be the very one that it is. It must be *exactly* what it is by its own doing.

A lot of the stress in these tales is to be found right here. To the extent that human individuals must be thought to be singular, they must be thought to bear the source of their individuality within them. To the extent that human individuals must be thought to be instances of types or classes, they cannot after all be singular. Any understanding we have of them will be couched in terms of traits or qualities that are potentially shared among other individuals. So the position of singularity just *is* the position of the unreadable with a human face.

Now, commonsense psychology rests in the assumption that we are all separate, distinct, uniquely valuable individuals. No one wants to deny this. But, given this starting point for thinking about people, Poe says, in effect, "Then let's start from *truly* unique individuals."

Commonsense seems to insist that each person is singular. Paradoxically, it also supposes that we can account for each person in terms of character traits, personal qualities, motives that make sense, well-understood social positions, and so on. There have been ingenious attempts to force singular figures in Poe to fit the mold of commonsense psychology, speaking of Procrustean beds. They don't work.

What lies between the two positions—narrator, singular figure—is the plot. Of course there *is no plot* in the character-revealed-through-action-in-narrated-time sense. With a kind of hopeless, locked-in passivity, the position of the narrator lingers in proximity to the position of singularity, sustained there by repeated mini-enactments of its initial captivation. We have the first two points of an array as "that in which nothing can be disarranged, or from which nothing can be removed, without ruin to the mass—as that, in which we are never able to determine whether any one point depends upon or sustains any other."

The occupants of the narrator position in these tales are feeble, ignorant and forgetful. Both are attached to attractive figures notable for passion, philosophical inclination, and will. The perspective from the position locked into relation with Ligeia is more alarming, less mediated. Things get *extreme* in "Ligeia."

Here's how. Perhaps in order to follow out the thought that the genuinely singular individual will be what it is all on its own under its own steam, the figure of Ligeia somehow embodies something analogous to divinity—the narrator position calls this thing the "will pervading all things by nature of its intentness." Ligeia is so much its own thing that what holds it together—

its will, *the* will, somehow—is analogous to whatever orders the cosmos. We learn this through a series of analogies meant to convey what the narrator cannot describe about his response to the expression in Ligeia's eyes:

I derived, from many existences in the material world, a sentiment such as I felt always aroused within me by her large and luminous orbs... I recognized it, let me repeat, sometimes in the survey of the rapidly growing vine—in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water. I have felt it in the ocean; in the falling of a meteor. I have felt it in the glances of unusually aged people. And there are one or two stars in heaven...in telescopic scrutiny of which I have been made aware of the feeling.¹⁰

The narrator's insistence that Ligeia's will is "gigantic" is anchored in this passage. Ligeia's *ordering principle* (the Ligeia Idea, if you will) is somehow the *same* as the ordering principle in the whole of the natural world.

Both of these tales set about methodically pressing against the image of the human being facing the challenge of the ethical *individually*, endowed with reason, desire, and will. The problem is this: given a practical orientation that treats the individual person as the fundamental unit for ethics, how ought one to respond to circumstances of manmade injustice that are neither any one person's fault nor the sort of thing that any one person can remedy? "Volition" becomes the name of the thing in each of us that is charged with answering this question.

It is an *American* question on the Northeastern seaboard in the first half of the 19th century. By contrast, across the Atlantic, working at about the same time as Poe, John Stuart Mill argues that there are hardly any individuals at all, that Englishmen do not know how even to estimate the value of individuality, and that, nevertheless, his countrymen ought to pursue major social reform for the sake of making England a place where self-made persons might emerge from the human herd and thrive.¹¹ Stateside, for Poe, the individual is instead the flat baseline from which we proceed, the given, plain parameter for ethics.

I have said that our two tales register the peripheral pressures of unjust circumstances. This is clearest in "The Man That Was Used Up." The General lost himself bit-by-bit in the Indian wars. In the course of arguing that the United States should be called "Appalachia," rather than "America," Poe wrote:

[I]n employing ['Appalachia'] we do honor the Aborigines, whom, hitherto, we have at all points unmercifully despoiled, assassinated, and dishonored.¹²

The General participated in implementing national policy with respect to two tribes. In pursuit of an account of this splendid figure, the narrator uses the principle of voluntary association as the basis for his investigative strategy (he seeks out members of the General's church, his friends and his supporters). Voluntary association is, of course, the basis for standard accounts of collective action and for social contract visions of a democratic polity.

The trouble in the General's tale is that if the principal, standard outlet for courage is direct, voluntary participation in campaigns that unmercifully despoil, assassinate and dishonor other societies then you can hardly be unambiguously praised for courage. Suppose, instead, that you decided to exercise courage in drumming up support for an opposition party. After all, it is not as though Jacksonian policies with respect to native inhabitants were unopposed. For Poe, the possibility of standing side-by-side with your fellow citizens in frank opposition is too likely to lead you to ask how it is that you came to be a *US citizen* standing *here*. The whole venture was made possible by earlier versions of the kind of thing that you now mean to oppose. And Poe is enough saddled with the flatly individual baseline for ethics that he has no resources to imagine meaningful action directed at opposing the historical conditions that make your own life possible.

Enter Ligeia. The figure of Ligeia, at least, is directly informed by the first principles of cosmic order. That ought to make it possible to produce cosmic justice. [Concerned about the limits of an individual person's power to remedy historically entrenched, systematically reproduced injustice? Maybe something with a will as big as all outdoors can help. Maybe you need a Ligeia.] Unfortunately, qua *utter* singularity, qua perfectly powerful *individual*, qua being so unique that it can only be described via elaborate analogies to diverse typical figures and species of creature, the Ligeia-thing has no interest in justice or injustice. It has a deathbed scene. It makes the narrator figure read a poem it wrote. After its death, it re-instantiates itself, briefly, apparently just to demonstrate that it can *decide* whether or not to yield to death utterly (a challenge set for it in the made-up quotation that hangs above the tale).

It is not that there could not be such a thing as ethically sustainable social life in Poe. But the modes of social life that Poe tracks ruthlessly in his tales fail to make ethically sustainable lives possible, individually or collectively. More precisely, they fail in the terms set by the tales. The terms are two:

- A. That the addressee of the practical challenges of ethical conduct is always an individual adult human being in full possession of his or her faculties, and,
- B. That any response called for in meeting an ethical challenge must lie within the power of the addressee of that challenge.

Although Poe never lays out these conditions explicitly, their combined force eats at his tales constantly.

In my home discipline, we will say that if some proposed conditions on what will count as ethically good conduct suggest that it could take a *Ligeia* to do the right thing, then the proposal *must* be wrong. A Ligeia-thing has no reason to care about ethical conduct at all. And anyway ethical conduct is a human problem with a human face—it is something that is at once possible and problematic *for us*. This seems right, but it's not easy to say what's gone wrong.

Certainly we are no strangers to the scale of the ethical challenges haunting Poe's tales. The challenges registered in his tales were national. The ones that the US citizen has encountered recently are international: for example, financial markets run amok; transnational firms carrying inestimable assets and incalculable risk bundled in loan-based securities, leveraged, and leveraged again; the threat of domino effects should an enormous firm fail. High government officials urge that intervention is necessary in order to prevent the wrongful ruin of firms, families, and individuals who otherwise have nothing to do with the problem and are anyway completely powerless to protect themselves in the face of it. It is a big problem. In outlining the nature of the problem, individual people are named, suggesting that *these* are the ones responsible for the situation. But none of them acting alone, even *in* an official capacity, *consistently, for years*, could have produced a situation in which global capital markets are somehow at risk. And no sooner is an individual named than other voices rise, urging that the source of the trouble is not an individual, not even a group of individuals, but something widespread and bad that is somehow everywhere where power is all at once, and nowhere in particular—call it "greed;" call it "failing to hold others accountable;" call it "philosophy" or "business as usual." If the ethical challenges connected to economic risk on this scale are supposed to be addressed by an individual, then that individual will have to acquire the economic equivalent of superpowers to meet those challenges. The language of personal responsibility and accountability is in the air. But no one person is at fault, and it doesn't seem like any one person could set things right again.

Poe is more rigorous than anyone I know in insisting upon the individual as the point of address for the challenge of the ethical. And he is as acutely aware as anyone that *no* story about individual feats of will or self-directed moral development could address the ethical problem adequately, largely because *no* individual could effect change on the scale required to make things right. And this is so even though *any* thoughtful individual might notice that things are very, very wrong, and feel the call of the ethical as a plea to address the wrongness of circumstances. The ethical questions at play in Poe are acute. Letting Poe teach us to read what he's left behind exposes ongoing deep tensions in thinking.

One way of translating the ardent alumni words of praise—"I learned to think at Chicago"—is as a way of saying that, in the extended sense of reading that I have been discussing today, our alumni learned the need to continue re-learning to read at Chicago. If you get that from this place, you will have gotten a lot.

Of course, as I said at the outset, what you make of things like chances to keep re-learning to read is up to you. You will always be working in, with, through, and from things that are not up to you, among these, your own mindedness. But never forget what *is* up to you. You can think. You can learn.

It's not that you can't be deprived of the capacity for thinking and learning through illness or injury or stress. You can. But when you can neither learn nor think you no longer live in the

same sort of world as those who have their wits about them. The practical challenges of mindedness change.

The practical challenges you face belong to undertaking undergraduate work here. Some of your designated instructors will care very much about you and what you get from classes with them. Others would rather be doing their own research than prepping for class with you. Some of the things that you'll read or see or do will be splendid in their own right. Others won't. Your own work will be uneven. Your classmates will not be uniformly congenial. With any luck, you will encounter at least one miserably self-satisfied faculty person whose help you need in order to figure out how to think about something that is eating at you. If fortune smiles upon you, there will be some repulsive classmate whose insights you have to take seriously. I wish you at least one teacher whose expectations of you are so high as to be frankly insane so that you can have a chance to feel yourself struggling to build a mind flexible enough and focused enough to do the impossible. And I hope also that you will have a teacher who expects so little of you that anything that you can get from the class will be got by your own doing. In short, in spite of all of the advantages that you already can count on just in virtue of having the luxury of four years at Chicago ahead of you, I hope that you will have a chance to wrest some education from difficult people under difficult circumstances. There is no surer way to understand that your education is your own.

1. Marginalia (June, 1849), in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews* (The Library of America: New York, 1984), p. 1465.

2. Poe, "Edgar Allan Poe" (1848), in *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales*, (The Library of America: New York, 1984), p. 868.

3. The clear exception is a nameless daughter gradually overtaken by whatever is left of her dead mother, Morella.

4. "The Purloined Letter," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales*, p. 689.

5. *Ibid.*

6. "The Purloined Letter," pp. 689-690.

7. The most influential and challenging reading of Dupin as the figure that knows what to repeat is Jacques Lacan's reading of "The Purloined Letter." See Lacan's "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," Jeffrey Mehlman, translator, reprinted in John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, editors, *The Purloined Poe*, (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, 1988), pp.28-54.

8. "The Man That Was Used Up," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales*, p. 307.

10. "Ligeia," p. 265.

11. See *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, John M. Robson, ed. (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1977), pp. 260-276.

12. "Marginalia - Part IX," *Graham's Magazine*, December 1846, reprinted in Raymond Foye, ed., *The Unknown Poe: An anthology of fugitive writings by Edgar Allan Poe with appreciations by Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, J. K. Huysmans, and Abdré Breton*, (City Lights Books: San Francisco, CA, 1980), p. 47.