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Rare Books and Special Collections Project
Literature of the American Renaissance
Professor Joshua Kotin
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The Purloined Poet

When Edgar Allan Poe was a student at the United States Military Academy, he owned a textbook entitled: *Conversations on Chemistry*, by Dr. J.L. Comstock. The Chemistry textbook was a strange sort of instruction to the study of Chemistry, even in 1822; the author of the textbook was a woman, the scandal of which necessitated a special forward from the American Editor of the textbook. “The English edition may be considered objectionable,” he wrote; “Hence it was natural to infer that familiar conversations was (...) a most useful auxiliary source of info, and more especially to the female sex, whose education is seldom calibrated to prepare their minds for abstract ideas, or scientific language.” The textbook is written as a series of informal conversations between a female science teacher and her three female students, which is an interesting—if unorthodox—model of pedagogy.

In 2017, the textbook is interesting for another reason entirely. On the front cover and flyleaf pages of *Conversations on Chemistry*, two poems are scrawled onto the pages, in Edgar Allan Poe’s handwriting. The first poem is 8 lines, and about 60 words. The second poem, written horizontally on the left flyleaf page, is about 12 lines and three stanzas. The poem reads:

Is there a tear that scalds the cheek?
Is there a sigh the bosom rends?
Is there a grief we cannot speak?
‘Tis in the last adieu of friends—

The hearts that long have blent their cares
Are by a thousand fibers tuned;
And cruel is the pang that tears
The links that fasten mind to mind.

But friends must part with those most dear
The severing pang their hearts must swell;
Misfortune will extract the tear
That trickles when we bid farewell.

This poem is enclosed in double quotation marks, and signed “E.A.P.” Though the writing was signed with Poe’s initials and written in his handwriting, the double quotations convinced some later owners of Poe’s textbook to surmise that this quoted poem was not, in fact, his own. This assertion was presented in a letter archived with Poe’s chemistry textbook, from a 1932 auction of the textbook in New York City. On August 30, 1932, Dr. Thomas Mabbott, an American Professor of literature and Edgar Allan Poe scholar, wrote a letter to Henry Morton Partridge, then the current owner of the text. Mabbott wrote: “the document is, in my opinion, certainly in the autograph of Edgar Allan Poe; but I do not believe it is composed by him.”

Mabbott’s deduction was correct. With the help of Google, the anonymous quoted poem at the beginning of Edgar Allan Poe’s textbook could be attributed to a poet named James Gates Percival, born in 1795 in Kensington, Connecticut. James Gates Percival was a physician, linguist, geologist, and a mildly successful poet, though by the end of his life he would be significantly less well known than the poet who transcribed his poem into the fly-leaf of his Chemistry notebook.

It is not immediately clear how Poe might have discovered Percival’s work. The connection might lie in the years that both Percival and Poe spent at West Point, the United States Military Academy. According to the Yale Library’s short biography of James Gates Percival, Percival taught Chemistry at West Point in 1824. Poe attended the
United States Military Academy in 1830 (Poe), where he would not have overlapped with Percival directly, but might have had some students or professors in common who could have shared Percival’s poetry with Poe. It is also not unconceivable that Poe might have come upon Percival’s poetry in periodicals of the time. Percival’s poetry was published in the New Haven Microscope, and the United States Literary Gazette, according to the Yale University Library’s guide to the James Gates Percival collection. Percival published a book of collected *Poems* in 1821, and several other poetry collections, including one published in 1843. However, the poem found in *Conversations on Chemistry*, titled: “Is There a Tear,” is not found in either *Poems* or his other two main series of poems, but is anthologized in *The Poetical Works of James Gates Percival: With a Biographical Sketch, Volume 2*, published in 1859 from Cambridge University Press.

While Edgar Allan Poe’s poems and short stories would go on to become greatly influential in the American literary canon, James Gates Percival’s poetry would never amass great fame. It might have been Percival’s sensitivity and reclusive nature that prevented him from engaging with the public; according to the “biographical sketch” at the beginning of Percival’s collected works, *The Poetical Works of James Gates Percival: with a Biographical Sketch*, explains Percival’s lukewarm critical reception to the “peculiar delicacy of his feelings” (Percival xi). According to this preface, Percival’s hermitlike tendencies “formed a chartered circle between himself in the world, so that in the place of his daily walks he remained to the end a stranger to all but a chosen few (Percival xi).

The absence of Percival’s place in the canon of American poetry, however, might have more to do with the aesthetics of his poetry than his social tendencies. In a review of James Gates Percival’s poetry for the *Atlantic Monthly*, James McHenry wrote:

“Inattention, or rather perhaps, a studied disregard, to the harmonious (...) structure of
our language, is one of the faults, which we have to allege against Dr. Percival” (McHenry). McHenry critiques Percival’s tendency towards fluff, writing that: “by enwrapping his ideas, especially in his longer poems, in such clouds of obscurity (...) there is frequently no penetrating to his meaning.” To McHenry, Percival’s flowery writing is an “intolerable mass of verbiage in which his thoughts are clothed,” and one that betrays a hackneyed idea of what poetry is and what poetry can be, relying on an overabundance of metaphor to disguise his lack of originality.

McHenry’s review was harsh, but not entirely off the mark. While Percival’s contemporaries were expanding romantic poetic forms into explorations of macabre, detective fiction, and horror, or were delving more deeply into the natural world and the landscape of dreams, Percival’s poetry was more sentimental than revelatory. His poetry is not lyrical enough to excuse his reliance on purple passages, but is not discordant enough to break the form in interesting ways. “Is There a Tear” is written in ABAB rhyme scheme, and a steady iambic tetrameter. The poem focuses on the parting of friends, a subject matter that matches much of Percival’s other poems in theme and tone. For instance, within the second volume of his collected works, there are 60 instances of the word “bosom,” 80 instances of the word “tear,” and 28 instances of the word “weep.”

While Percival’s poetry relies on poetic conventions, Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry pushes the genre forward in interesting ways. His is “a lyric incantatory style aimed at suggesting a visionary state of supernal loveliness above or beyond the ordinary world,” according to G. R. Thompson’s introduction to Edgar A. Poe: An American Life (1809-1849). “He developed a poetics that sought to reconcile the material and menial medium of language as sensuous sound that lifted the soul beyond the physical” (xiv). Percival’s poetry stays in the realm of the safe, Classical allusions, and natural imagery.
When Percival and Poe write on similar topics—grief, nostalgia—the disparity between the two poets becomes more apparent. Percival relies on repetitive renderings of the responses to emotions, showing the friends in the poem “Is There a Tear” weeping and sighing throughout the poem as a way to convey the gravity of their emotions. Poe has no patience for this. Even the poems of his that seem the most similar to Percival’s in form and meter, for instance, “A Dream,” are darker and more unearthly than Percival’s. Poe’s speakers don’t weep; instead, they tremble. Poe uses language of the uncanny to render grief and nostalgia with more complexity, more imagination, and more room for the spiritual.

For this reason, Poe’s relative fame seems warranted. Percival’s poem “Is There a Tear” might have been relevant to Poe during his college years—and at the end of them, when friendships must end or face inevitable change after graduation—but it does not feel particularly relevant now.
Works Cited


This paper represents my own work in accordance with University policy.
To love a tree that stands the check
Of these or signs in every place,
Is not the task of fools or wise,
But of the heart of men who live.

The heart that long can watch the sun
And in the sword that storms,
And in the light that turns
To love the heart that flutters mine in sport!

And in the heart that plays with thee,
The thoughts that stir, these springs and song,
Wherein the soul will watch the fire
Isn't there a love that is the possess?
CONVERSATIONS ON CHEMISTRY;
IN WHICH
THE ELEMENTS OF THAT SCIENCE ARE
FAMILIARLY EXPLAINED
AND ILLUSTRATED BY EXPERIMENTS,
AND SIXTEEN COPPER-PLATE ENGRAVINGS.

THE EIGHTEENTH AMERICAN EDITION FROM THE SIXTH LONDON EDITION, REVISED, CORRECTED AND ENLARGED.

TO WHICH ARE NOW ADDED,
EXPLANATIONS OF THE TEXT—QUESTIONS FOR EXERCISE—DIRECTIONS FOR EMPLOYING THE APPARATUS, AND A TO-
CALENDAR OF TERMS—TOGETHER WITH A LIST OF INTERESTING EXPERIMENTS.

BY DR. J. L. COMSTOCK.

HARTFORD:
OLIVER D. COOKE, 1822.
Dec. 29, 1901

36 Montrose St.
Halden, Mass.

Dear Mr. Nabbott-

After giving it quite a bit of thought, I believe that you are right in taking the Comstock item out of the world of fraud and con. At first I wanted to try one or two of the dealers in NYC but then I would run into the same problem of identity. I have been told more than once that if the book were proven beyond a doubt to be authentic then I would have no trouble in collecting $500 for it. You and I both believe in it but to prove it in such a manner as to meet the approval of shrewd and calculating dealers is another matter.

So, for the sum of $300, I give you ownership of Poe's chemistry book, a book that I have taken a lot of pride in owning and showing. I think that your idea of giving it to the Princeton Library is a fine one and one that I know they will appreciate. And I certainly thank you for naming me as joint giver. If they could send me a little notice to that effect, I will place it in my bookcase as a reminder.

I certainly can find use for your check at the earliest, and I've enjoyed our correspondence and thank you again.

Quite sincerely,

Freeman J. H. Leburn
*Two sets of verses, beginning "How wildly the sun of the
even" and "Is there a tear that soaks the cheek."

Aug. 30, 1932.

Dear Mr. Partridge,

Your most interesting letter has just reached me a few moments ago. May I congratulate you upon your very interesting and valuable discovery? The document is, in my opinion, certainly in the autograph of Edgar Allan Poe; but I do not believe it composed by him. You will notice that both poems are enclosed at beginning and end, in double quotation marks. While I do not recognize the verses, I feel sure they were selected by him.
for some album—when (unfortunately for us) he was not in the mood to do something original. I may add that his original album verses are usually shorter—a friend of mine recently dug another up which makes three in the last three or four weeks. I’m keeping the photograph if I happen on the verses will let you know. They are in the Morea manner, of course. Have you any indication of date? Poe was in Baltimore a great deal of course. Are there any other scraps in the writing? I see no more than the one you previously sent. I may be quoted if you wish it.

Sincerely yours,

Theo. H. Mehlert

115 East 82nd Street
New York City

October 23, 1938

Dear Mr. Oaffney:

Your letter of October twenty-first received, asking me for information regarding the Poe item now in your hands.

The book in question was the property of the late Henry Morton Partridge, my grandfather, born in 1830, in Norwich, Vermont. He attended Norwich University founded by his uncle, Captain Alonzo Partridge, former superintendent of the United States Military Academy, at West Point, who relinquished the superintendency to found Norwich University in 1819.

My grandfather left Norwich, Vermont, and established the Classical Academy in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1840. He met the poet, Edgar Allan Poe, when in Baltimore.
He was advised to give up teaching, however, and in 1842 went to Elmira, New York, where he married in 1844, Mary Frances Hart, daughter of Dr. Erastus Langdon Hart, an adventurer, and founder of the Public School System in that city.

When my grandfather died in 1893, his library was distributed among his children and my father, Charles Deardorff, came into possession of the item now in your hands.

Your suggestion of a slip case for the volume is perfectly in order and kindly let me know when the sale will take place.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Mary Deardorff

John J. Deardorff, M.D.
a/c Forbes-Darrell Galleries, Inc.
745 Fifth Avenue
New York City
EDGAR ALLAN POE’S COPY
WITH TWO MANUSCRIPT POEMS IN HIS HAND
ONE SIGNED WITH INITIALS

Plates. 12mo, original calf; back cover and backstrip lacking, front cover loose. In a half morocco case. Hartford, 1822

[Signature: E A P.—]

"Is there a tear that floods the cheek?
Is there a sigh the bosom rends?
Is there a grief we cannot speak?
"Tis at the last unath friend—

"The hours that long have been their own
Are by a thousand fibres joined;
And crush the pang that tears
The links that bind mine to mine.

"But friends must part with those most dear
The soaring pang their hearts must feel
Misfortune will extract the tear
That trickles when we bid farewell.

ON THE RECTO OF THE SAME LEAF IS ANOTHER MANUSCRIPT QUOTED STANZA IN POE’S HAND, UNSIGNED, COMPRISING 8 LINES, ABOUT 60 WORDS.

Accompanying the above is a autograph copy of an A.L.S. by Dr. Thomas Mahbott (tested Poe authority), 2 pp., 8vo, N. Y., August 26, 1832. The letter is in reference to the authenticity of the writing in the book:

"Your most interesting letter has just reached me a few moments ago. May I congratulate you upon a very interesting and valuable discovery? The document is, in my opinion, certainly in the autograph of Edgar Allan Poe; but I do not believe it is composed by him. You will notice that both poems are enclosed, at beginning and end, in double quotation marks. While I do not recognize the verses, I feel sure they were selected by him for some album—when unfortunately for us he was not in the mood to do something original... I may be quoted if you wish it.”

Laid in is a letter from the owner reading as follows:

"The book in question was the property of the late Henry Mason Partridge, my grandfather, born in 1829, in Norwich, Vermont. He attended Norwich University founded by his uncle, Captain Alden Partridge, former superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, who relinquished the superintendency to found Norwich University in 1819.

My grandfather left Norwich, Vermont, and established the Classical Academy in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1846. He met the poet, Edgar Allan Poe, when in Baltimore. He was advised to give up teaching, however, and in 1842 went to Elmslie, New York, where he married in 1843, Mary Parmelee Hart, daughter of Dr. Kristus Langdon Hart, an educator, and founder of the Public School System in that city.

When my grandfather died in 1893, his library was distributed among his children and my father, Charles R. Partridge, came into possession of the item now in your hands..."

Sincerely yours,

Henry M. Partridge

(Fisher)
POE'S TALES WITH IMMACULATE COVERS

320. POE, EDGAR A. Tales. Portrait inserted. 12mo, original green cloth, gilt lettering on backstrip, stamped in blind on sides; several leaves unopened; some leaves show natural paper blemishes.

New York, 1845

FIRST EDITION. WITH THE COVERS IN IMMACULATE STATE. Mr. David Randall in his article in the Publishers' Weekly of November 30, 1840, states: "We hold, therefore, that the cloth binding on the 'Tales' is distinctly later than the wrappers." This is also Randall's variant C of the work, with neither stereotype's nor printer's name on the verso of the title-page. This copy has the defective type in the headline on p. 104, and on p. 179, line 2, also the gauge on pp. 196 and 265.

According to Mr. Randall the four pages of advertisements at the back are in the second state, with the first title reading "German Romance." A few contemporary newspaper clippings concerning Poe are laid in the volume.

Hawthorne's "Marsters from an Old Manse" published by the same firm (Wiley and Putnam) in 1840 was bound in a similar binding as the above.

A UNIQUE SET OF "THE BROADWAY JOURNAL" WITH FOUR RECEIPTS AND AN A.L.S. BY EDGAR ALLAN POE AND OTHER AUTOGRAPH MATERIAL


In a full brown morocco folding case. New York, 1845-6

AN UNIQUE SET OF THIS VERY RARE FIRST EDITION OWNED BY POE AND TO WHICH HE CONTRIBUTED MUCH OF HIS BEST WORK. With a title-page in Vol. 1.

It was edited first by John Bisco, Charles F. Briggs (Harry Francis) and H. C. Watson. In June, Briggs resigned and Poe was made editor, and on October 25th Bisco retired, and Poe became Editor and Publisher—thus fulfilling a lifelong ambition.

In addition to a large amount of reviews, essays, etc., Poe reprinted many of his tales and poems in the Journal, revising them thoroughly, re-editing and re-timing them so that The Broadway Journal must be considered the definitive text for his work.

Complete sets of the Broadway Journal are very rare—Reed and Heartman's Poe Census in the American Book Collector, May, 1932, locates only three complete, and six, incomplete sets.

For the Journal's early numbers, Poe was a paid contributor, Woodberry stating that his compensation was two dollars per column, and one of the Poe receipts accompanying this set reads: "New York: Dec. 10th, 1845, Need of Mr. John Bisco Eighteen dollars. In full; for two articles in 'Broadway journal', Edgar A. Poe.

Three other receipts in Poe's autograph are of the highest bibliographical interest. Horvev Allen, in Israel, Vol. II, p. 652, says: "Bisco probably through Poe, had made arrangements with Minor (editor of the Southern Literary Messenger) to take subscriptions in the South for the Broadway Journal. Bisco had paid Poe his share, apparently without authority, and as returns were made to the Messenger. The matter was never accommodated, and Poe ceased to contribute to his old paper."

"I know of no documentary proof hitherto brought out of this affair." (Allen quotes from J. H. Whitey in his Memoir to the Complete Poems.) Here, however, are three receipts in Poe's autograph:


2. "New York: April 10th, 1845. Received of John Bisco three dollars on account of..."