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.
Dec. 29, 1943

30 Kentmere St.
Balden, Mass.

Dear Mr. Babott—

After giving it quite a bit of thought, I believe that you are right in taking the Comstock item out of the world of price anderson. 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 $250 for it. You and I both believe in it but to prove it in such a manner as to meet the approval of shread and calutating dealers is another matter.

So, for the sum of $100 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,

[Signature]
Dear Mr. Partridge,

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 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.

Aug 30, 1932.
for some album — when (unfortunately for us) he was not in the mood to do something original. I may add that his original album versies are usually shorter — a friend of mine recently dug another up, which makes three in the last three or four years. I'm keeping the photost at hand, if you happen on the verses will let you know. They are in the Moore manner, of course. Have you any indication of date? Poe was in Baltimore, great deal of course. Are there any other scraps in the writing? I feel as some of the versies are personality in line. I may be quoted if you wish it.

Theo. Mc. Elhott

115 East 82nd Street
New York City

October 23, 1938

Dear Mr. Gaffney:

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

The book in question was the property of the late Harry Norton Perring, my grandfather, born in 1830, in Norwich, Vermont. He attended Norwich University founded by his uncle, Capt. Allen Perring, 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 1843 went to Elmira, New York, where he married in 1844, Mary Jemima Hart, daughter of Dr. Creatus Langdon Hart, an admiral, 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 H. Partidge, 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,

Mary H. Partidge

John J. Geoffrey, Soc.
c/o Parke-Bernet Galleries, Inc.
745 Fifth Avenue
New York City
EDGAR ALLAN POE'S COPY
WITH TWO MANUSCRIPT POEMS IN HIS HAND
ONE SIGNED WITH INITIALS.

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

_Edgar Allan Poe's own copy, with a signed (initials) autograph manuscript of a
quoted poem in the hand of Poe of the verses of a front fly-leaf, containing three
5-line stanzas._

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

"The Hearts that long have beat their ears
Are by a thousand fibres tossed;
And wail the pang that tears
The links that fasten mine to mine.

"But friends must part with those must soar
The searing pang their breasts must swell
Misfortune will extract the tear
That trickles when we bid farewell._
E. A. P._"

On the recto of the same leaf is another autograph manuscript quoted stanzas in
Poe's hand, unsigned, comprising 8 lines, about 60 words.

Accompanying the above is a photocopy of an A.L.S. by Dr. Thomas Mahbott (tested
Poe's authority), 2 pp., 8vo., N.Y., August 16, 1842. The letter is in reference to the authen-
ticity 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, cer-
tainly 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 1830, in Norwich, Vermont. He attended Norwich University founded by his uncle,
Captain Allen Partridge, former superintendent of the United States Military Academy, at
West Point, who relinquished the superintendentship 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 Elmira, New York, where he married in
1843, Mary Formelle Hart, daughter of Dr. Francis Lengden 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"
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, 1860, 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 or printer's name on the verse of the title page. This copy has the defective type in the headline on p. 154, and on p. 179, line 2, also the gauge on pp. 196 and 285.

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 "Mosses 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


New York, 1845-6

A 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. I.

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—Redfield and Heartman's Poe Books 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. One of the Poe receipts accompanying this set reads: "New York: July 20th 45. Receipt of Mr. John Bisco Eighteen dollars, 31/2 for two articles in 'Broadway Journal', Edgar A. Poe."

Three other receipts in Poe's autograph are of the highest biographical interest. Hervey Allen, in Survey, Vol. II, p. 685, 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 no 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. Whittet in his Memoir to the Complete Poems.) Here, however, are three receipts in Poe's autograph:

1. "New York: April 7th 45. Received of John Bisco ten dollars, on account of the Southern Literary Messenger. Edgar A. Poe 810."
2. "New York: April 10th 45. Received of John Bisco three dollars on a/c of..."