Sequential Poe-try: Recent Graphic Narrative Adaptations of Poe

It would be difficult to find an American author whose work has seen more multimedia adaptations than Edgar Allan Poe. From video games to cartoons, from CDs to action figures—Poe’s stories, poems, and general persona have found expression in a variety of popular forms. In film and television alone, according to The Internet Movie Database, there have been well over 150 adaptations of Poe’s work and/or life, including Sherlock Holmes in the Great Murder Mystery (1908), a string of 1960s B movies by Roger Corman, and a Poe-inspired episode in the recent Showtime television series Masters of Horror. In comic books, another visual medium and the focus of this essay, examples have ranged from the reverential to the parodic. Classics Illustrated, a series of comic books based on canonical works of world literature, has devoted no fewer than five issues to the poetry and tales of Poe. Their adaptations of such works as “The Pit and the Pendulum,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” are more or less true to the original storylines without much graphic flourish or narrative ambiguity. And before it became a magazine, Mad comics published a parody of “The Raven” that included the poem in full accompanied by absurdly exaggerated illustrations. In fact, according to comics scholar M. Thomas Inge, there have been well over two hundred instances of Poe’s work appearing in the medium, making him the American writer most often adapted to comic-book form.

Such an abundance of material is indeed staggering, giving pause to almost any popular-culture critic. As Inge scrupulously documented, comic-book translations of Poe’s work have appeared under a variety of series titles from the 1940s and into the 1990s. But recently there have been several notable examples of Poe-related comics that take the adaptation of his work in curious new directions. Earlier comic book versions were more-or-less straightforward and static representations of the material. Their fidelity to the original texts was of central concern; the writers followed the storylines closely and left little room for narrative variation. However, since the late 1990s, several comics have given a new twist to Poe’s stories and poetry by opting for nonliteral translations through differentiated contexts, ahistorical settings, unresolved endings, iconic or even cartoony illustrations, and ambiguous tones that leave open the possibilities for comic irony. These recent adaptations betray what could be called a more postmodern distancing technique that not only pays homage to the content of Poe’s narratives but, perhaps more significantly, translates the complex form of the narration. In other words, instead of being primarily concerned with “getting the story right,” several contemporary comic-book writers and illustrators have attempted to capture the romantically ironic spirit of Poe’s aesthetics.

The comics discussed here are limited to those that strike some kind of balance between word and image—interdependent combinations where text and picture create meaning in ways that neither could alone—or in some cases comics that give primacy to pictures. Of particular significance to my analysis is Linda Hutcheon’s recent work on adaptation theory, which addresses issues of creative reception and appropriation—or how individuals deliberatively translate, manipulate, and critically revisit a particular text. One way in which Hutcheon approaches adaptation is through a “reception continuum,” determining the extent to which authors, at one end of the spectrum, aim to be theoretically “true” in their translations of an original text (even though such fidelity is real-
istically impossible) or, on the other end, loosely contextualize the prior text through expansive addenda or diffuse “spin-offs.” In the latter category, we find three recent comic book series that adapt the work of Edgar Allan Poe with great liberty: Jason Asala’s Poe, Roman Dirge’s Lenore, and the DC Comics miniseries Batman: Nevermore. Two other “spin-offs” of Poe’s life and work take the form of graphic novels, In the Shadow of Edgar Allan Poe (2002) and Ravenous (2005). The first is a fumetti (a novel in sequential photographs) and considers the possibility that Poe’s bizarre art may have been inspired not by alcoholism or depression but by supernatural demons. The latter is a modern-day detective story (à la The X-Files) inspired by such stories as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Masque of the Red Death,” and “William Wilson.” Although all five of these narrative offshoots—the three comic book series as well as the two graphic novels—are intriguing extensions of Poe and his works, none directly engages or “faithfully” adapts Poe’s original texts. As such, they are of marginal interest to the project at hand and serve merely as illustrative contrasts to the more “accurate” adaptations. Furthermore, I will ignore those graphic narratives that drastically privilege the word over the picture, or what Scott McCloud has called “word specific” combinations. This kind of comic-art adaptation usually includes Poe’s poetry or tales in full and uses illustrations sparingly and only as a means to compliment the original texts. Since I am interested in the ways comic book writers and illustrators have translated not only Poe’s storylines but his manner of narrating them as well, I concentrate on those recent works that more closely resemble, rather than are merely inspired by, Poe’s actual poetry and fiction.

The focus of the present study will be on recent comics closer to the other end of Hutchinson’s continuum, those that retell or reenvision the actual tales and poetry, yet without the strict adherence to narrative fidelity attempted by earlier renditions. These are contained largely in three graphic novels: two collections released by Eureka Productions—Horror Classics, volume 10 of Graphic Classics (2004); and Edgar Allan Poe (3rd edition, 2006), volume 1 of Graphic Classics—and Marvel Comics’ Haunt of Horror: Edgar Allan Poe (2006). All three contain stories that use the medium of comics to enhance the storyline and accentuate many of the gothic elements found in Poe’s writings. For instance, in their adaptation of “The Premature Burial,” Tom Pomplun and Joe Ollmann use panel framing to heighten the sense of confinement that thematically underlies the story. During the tale’s climactic scene, where the narrator awakens and believes himself to be buried alive, Ollmann (the illustrator) shifts from the comic’s dominant pattern of four- and five-panel pages—where the panels are laid out in square or broad rectangular boxes—to a series of shallow and elongated panels that visually “entomb” the protagonist (see fig. 1). After a sequence of eight coffin-shaped panels, all of which show a panicky narrator pounding on the upper inside of the comic panel—as if he were desperate to break out of the frame border itself, thereby blurring the boundaries between the graphic fiction and its outer surroundings—Ollmann resumes his previous square-panel style for the story’s denouement. Such shifts in paneling style not only underscore the story’s morbid focus but also enhance the arc of Poe’s original plot.

Perhaps more importantly, and as the “Premature Burial” adaptation clearly demonstrates, the stories in these recent collections attempt to capture the aesthetics of Poe’s writings. They approximate, at least when compared to earlier comic-book adaptations, the kind of ironic stance G. R. Thompson explores in his foundational writings on Poe’s work. Thompson holds out for a more complicated reading of the author than had previously been allowed. Instead of seeing Poe as a flawed and inconsistent gothic writer, as many prior critics had done, he argues that the flat or straightforward character of Poe’s narrative is merely a facade, one whose surface masks a more sophisticated vision:

Almost everything that Poe wrote is qualified by, indeed controlled by, a prevailing duplicity or irony in which the artist presents us with slyly insinuated mockery of both ourselves as readers and himself as writer. Irony was the device that allowed him both to contemplate his obsession with death, murder, torture, insanity, guilt,
loss, and fear of total annihilation in a meaningless universe, and also to detach and protect himself from the obsession.13

Thompson places this duplicitous style, this elevation of contradictions, onto a higher plane of artistic consciousness, within the tradition of German romanticism as practiced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (and as specifically found in the aesthetic philosophy of Friedrich Schlegel).14 In what could be called his “romantic-irony thesis,” especially as it applies to Poe and other early American authors, Thompson defines this narrative posturing as a deliberate breaking of dramatic illusion, frequently through humorous or absurd commentary; a simultaneous interplay between humorous and serious narrative; an extended use of frame-tale sequences that call into question the relationship between text and audience; a blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction; and an undercutting of cultural and metaphysical presumptions, even while appearing to uphold those presumptions.15 Such a negotiation of opposite possibilities explains how the comic burlesque voice in Poe’s fiction can stand alongside the darker and more gothic images of death and despair without any definitive resolution in terms of narrative tone.

Many of the most recent graphic adaptations of Poe’s work are able to capture, or at least approximate, the author’s ironic tone through a kind of poetic license that does not strictly adhere to the letter of the original poems and stories. Earlier comic book translations of his work tended to be more realistic in style, not only in terms of visual verisimilitude—where the illustrations reflected the physical world as we know it—but also in terms of Poe’s narrative contexts. The stories contained in the early issues of Classics Illustrated are perfect examples of this. These versions of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “The Pit and the Pendulum” are all illustrated in a more or less mimetic style and reflect the geographic and temporal settings embodied in the originals.16 They are also “defer-
“potential” toward the grave subject matter of Poe’s narratives, reading his gothic tales unambiguously and ignoring any playful duplicity embedded there. In so doing, the *Classics Illustrated* adaptations provide a “safe” or uncomplicated reading of the author, functioning more as adolescent versions of *CliffsNotes* than as insightful engagements with Poe’s texts. Such is not the case with most of the more recent adaptations found in the Eureka and Marvel editions. The authors of these versions not only employ a variety of illustrative styles—abstract and impressionistic as well as “realistic”—but also revise the texts so as to reflect social milieus and physical settings different from Poe’s. In some cases, those revisiting the poems and tales create texts that transform, reinterpret, or even transpose the originals; at the same time, their adaptations can be read, in light of Hutcheon’s “reception continuum,” as relatively “faithful” renderings that adhere to the broader outlines of Poe’s narratives. We can look at these comics in the context of what Gérard Genette calls hypertextuality, or the functioning of texts in the “second degree.” For Genette, hypertextuality involves “any relationship uniting a text B [or hypertext] to an earlier text A [the hypotext], upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.”17 Seen in this way, a comic book adaptation becomes something like a palimpsest, a distinct text in its own right, but one that nonetheless shows traces—sometimes clearly discernable and at other times barely visible—of the original text it overwrites.

However, in this act of overwriting, in the intermedial transmission from one form of narrative to another, the authors of the recent adaptations considered here have retained the imprint of Poe’s equivocal narrative philosophy, not just the outline of his stories. One of the most liberal of these projects, yet one through which readers can clearly detect traces of Poe’s morbid tone, is Marvel’s graphic novel *Haunt of Horror*. Originally published as three separate comic book issues running from May to July 2006, this collection translates eight of Poe’s poems and two of his tales into comic art form. The adaptations range from the faithful to the far-flung, the most literal translation being Richard Margopoulos and Richard Corben’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Corben’s illustrations, presented through a series of unpaneled and heavily shadowed close-ups, take little liberty with the time or place setting. And their version of Poe’s classic tale more or less adheres to the storyline of the original, with one exception: when the narrator admits to killing the old man, his heart stops due to his nervous condition. Corben’s translation of “The Raven” also bears the basic outline of the original, even down to the nineteenth-century costuming. However, the raven who alights upon the chamber door reminds the narrator that it was he himself who killed his beloved Lenore, thus causing him to take his own life.18

Other texts in the collection bear significantly more embellishment, although they all engage in the macabre. In “Berenice,” also adapted by Margopoulos and Corben, a dentist becomes obsessed with his cousin’s smile (and her body) to the point that he drugs her so as to “work” unfettered, and in the process inadvertently kills her with an overdose. Corben and Rick Dahl’s “Spirits of the Dead” is a commentary on the legacies of racism in America, where former Union soldiers rise zombielike and take vengeance on a group of Klansmen lynching an African American. Still other unlikely variations in the Marvel collection are “The Conqueror Worm” and “The Happiest Day,” both reworked by Dahl and Corben. The former is turned into a science-fiction tale where alien worms, feeding on human flesh, are domesticated in order to sustain a post-apocalyptic earth. The latter becomes the story of a high-school nerd who returns to his ten-year class reunion and begins gunning down his former classmates, only to have his killing spree ended by his former (also nerdy) best friend who, unknown to his friend, is now a police officer. More creative, if not outright farcical, adaptations can be found in Dahl and Corben’s “Eulalie”—about an older man preparing for a “date” with his inflatable doll, delivered by a female parcel carrier named Eulalie—as well as in the appropriately misspelled “Izrafel,” Margopoulos and Corben’s story of a successful hip-hop singer being gunned down due to gangsta rivalry.19

If each of the adaptations in *Haunt of Horror* functions as a palimpsest text, an overwriting through which the original peers through, then what gives the individual selections a feeling of
cohesion is the collection’s narrative frame. This comes in the form of a ghoulish and skeletal host, Uncle Deadgar, who introduces the cycle of stories and appears at what was originally the beginning of each comic book installment (see fig. 2). Comic book aficionados will recognize this character as reminiscent of the figures used to introduce earlier tales of horror: for example, EC Comics’ Crypt Keeper, Vault Keeper, and Old Witch (in comics such as Tales from the Crypt and The Haunt of Fear) or DC Comics’ Cain and Able (hosts of such horror anthologies as House of Mystery and House of Secrets). Perhaps a more striking intertextual link can be found with the figure of Destiny, the hooded and elusive host of the 1970s comic book series Weird Mystery Tales and Secrets of Haunted House. Both wear a robe and cowl, and both carry authoritative texts—Destiny, his book of the past, present, and future, and Uncle Deadgar, presumably the text of Poe. This framing device is important in that it not only associates Haunt of Horror with an earlier tradition of graphic stories of terror but also utilizes the ironizing presence of Edgar Allan Poe. Beyond his allusive name, Uncle Deadgar wears a telling moustache that more directly links him to his historical counterpart. The collection’s terrifying, and at times graphically explicit, tales are counterbalanced by their jocular host, who “[digs] up a few tasty treats of putrid pleasure” that are sure to give readers “a bleeding-heart attack,” all in “the spirit of friendship.” Such a juxtaposition of seriousness and levity is rather apt when referencing Poe, an author whose serious efforts at gothic storytelling inversely mirror a playful awareness of the horrific narratives he is creating.

Other recent adaptations likewise rely upon the more playful or comedic side of Poe, and even more so than in the Marvel texts. One example can be found in Rod Lott and Kevin Atkinson’s version of “Some Words with a Mummy,” one of the several graphic retellings found in Eureka’s Horror Classics. In Poe’s original tale, filled with a variety of verbal puns and satiric commentary, the unlikely events surrounding the Egyptian mummy are contextualized by the fact that the narrator, returning drowsy one night from a symposium, consumes five bottles of brown stout (in addition to an indeterminate number of Welsh rabbits) and then quickly falls into “a profound slumber” (PT, 805). What happens next, the reanimation of the mummy and the conversation that ensues, could easily be interpreted as the result of a wild dream on a full stomach, thereby allowing for both a realistic and a fantastic reading of the text. Such ambiguity in the narrative betrays an ironic playfulness that is the hallmark of many of Poe’s tales. In Lott and Atkinson’s adaptation, that irony is retained (see fig. 3). The exaggerated tone of the original short story is preserved through the comic’s visual hyperbole, a series of almost cartoonish illustrations that undercut not only the gothic import of the tale but also any misplaced
reverence the reader may feel for the “seriousness” of its original author. (The narrator of the comics version bears the unmistakable likeness of Edgar Allan Poe.) Such a graphic translation is fitting for a satiric tale about a mummy named “Allamistakeo,” whose reanimation, as Poe reminds us, is undertaken “one tenth in earnest and nine tenths in jest” (PT, 808).21

The same kind of illustrative tone is even more apparent in two other recent graphic adaptations of Poe’s tales, both of which can be found in Eureka’s Graphic Classics: Antonella Caputo, Anton Emdin, and Glenn Smith’s “King Pest” and Milton Knight’s “Never Bet the Devil Your Head.” While the former may not speak to the political allegory that most certainly underlies Poe’s tale—that is, a pointed attack on the administration of Andrew Jackson—it nonetheless preserves the ironic levity found in the original. Emdin’s artwork, with its nonrepresentational embellishments, effectively captures the surrealistic feel of “King Pest,” a story whose fantastic unfolding is made all the more equivocal by the many references to drunkenness. In fact, Poe’s outrageous description of the six horrific revelers, each of whom possesses “a monopoly of some particular portion of physiognomy” (PT, 245), is given added absurdity through graphic exaggeration (see fig. 4).22 And when, at the end of the graphic adaptation (as in the original), Legs and Hugh Tarpaulin make their way back to the Free and Easy with Queen Pest and Arch Duchess Ana-Pest in tow, the reader cannot help but feel that Caputo, Emdin, and Smith have been “free and easy” in their treatment of Poe’s tale—a narrative stance analogous to Poe’s treatment of his readers’ expectations.

In “Never Bet the Devil Your Head,” the pictorial hyperbole is even more pronounced. Knight’s reenvisioning of Poe’s original is in perfect keeping with the author’s mischievous tone. Poe’s version was an attempt to satirize the ever-present literary didacticism of his day by presenting his own “sad history . . . about whose obvious moral there can be no question whatever” (PT, 459). The irony underlying this “moral tale” is made apparent through, among other peculiarities, a protagonist named Toby Dammit and a narrator who digs up the body of his dead friend and sells him for dog meat. Knight translates this incongruous tone most effectively through his visuals. The thick line style and overstated actions, complete with cartoony sound effects and graphic variations on letter styles, create an over-the-top feeling to a story that already verges on the fantastic (see fig. 5). Yet it is
important to note that, despite its retention of the original story’s playfulness, Knight’s adaptation is a limited satire. Poe’s “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” begins with the homodiegetic narrator (one whom the reader will likely equate with the actual author) foregrounding his reputation as a “moral” writer and then using the story proper as an ironic undermining of his stated ethics. Knight dispenses with this narrative frame and begins with the story of Dammit. This is similar to another adaptation in the Graphic Classics collection, Tom Pomplun and Lance Tooks’s “The Imp of the Perverse.” In their version, the framing treatise that establishes Poe’s psychology of perversity is all but neglected, and the reader is immediately introduced to a narrator imprisoned for some as-yet-untold crime. Although these abridged graphic translations reduce much of the ironizing context embedded in written texts, they nonetheless employ the humorous spirit found in Poe’s originals.23

As the examples of “Never Bet the Devil Your Head” and “The Imp of the Perverse” show, not all of Poe’s ironic import is captured in some of the recent comic-art adaptations. In some cases, the double-voicedness of the original texts is lost in a more straightforward attempt to render an unambiguous gothic plot. Pedro Lopez’s adaptation of “The Cask of Amontillado,” another comic...
in the Graphic Classics collection on Poe, stands as an illustration. While Lopez effectively captures the basic storyline, he eliminates the narrative frame and textual clues that qualify Montresor’s tale. For instance, he dispenses with the confessional asides that open the tale and that provide the reader with a context for the ultimate revelation. In the original, as Montresor is setting up his story of revenge, he seems to address an implied reader by commenting, “You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat” (PT, 848). Since the reader at this very early point in the story cannot possibly know the “nature of [Montresor’s] soul,” we can safely assume that these words are being addressed to someone who actually does, perhaps a close friend or some other kind of confessor. And given the fact that the narrated events take place approximately fifty years before the current confession—the story’s final sentence on Fortunato’s whereabouts remaining undiscovered “for the half of a century” suggests as much (PT, 854)—we can even read Montresor’s speech act as a deathbed confession. However, Lopez’s adaptation removes the contextualizing frame of the apparent confession—the reference to knowing the nature of his soul—and in doing so places Montresor’s narration outside of time. What is more, the absence of certain ironizing clues at the very end of the graphic narrative further “deromanticizes” Poe’s story. In the original tale, Montresor momentarily hesitates soon after his victim’s “For the love of God” plea and calls out his victim’s name twice—the narrator’s uncertain pause being suggested by the use of em-dashes—only to be answered by the jingling of bells on Fortunato’s cap. Lopez’s graphic adaptation of the story contains no hint of a hesitation, and the comic’s final line, “May he rest in peace!” betrays none of the ambiguity found in the original’s final Latin phrase, “In pace requiescat!” (whose “rest in peace” allusions could refer to either Fortunato or Montresor himself [PT, 854]). By leaving out such clues, Lopez eliminates any viable reading of the comic as a tale of remorse or penitence. Given all of this, one of the tale’s most ironically loaded images, the Montresor family arms with an image of a serpent biting the heels of a foot that crushes it, barely resonates in the graphic-narrative version, since Lopez’s Montresor is the unambiguous victor.

Nonetheless, romantic uncertainty is present in other adaptations found in the Poe Graphic Classics collection. For instance, Rick Geary’s com-
ics rendition of “The Tell-Tale Heart” includes a questionable narrator whose sanity is instantly called into question. Poe had contextualized the believability of his tale within the first paragraph, when the narrator refers to himself as “very, very dreadfully nervous” and mentions that this “disease” has sharpened his sense of hearing beyond the ordinary (PT, 555). Geary translates this gothic ambiguity through visual clues. Not only does his narrator speak of his nervousness and potential madness, but in the very first frame of the text we see him sitting in the midst of what appears to be a comfortable den and fronted by a warm hearth. Such surroundings are strikingly out of sync with any literal reading of the story’s conclusion. Given the narrator’s admission of murder from a position he feels is immune to revelation—a la “The Imp of the Perverse”—we would expect him to be recounting his crime from the confines of a prison. Yet there are four other instances in the graphic version where we see the “confessor” in the narrative present and confiding his tale to us from his den. Such a framing strategy stands in stark contrast to the two other confessional tales previously mentioned: Pomplun and Tooks’s “Imp of the Perverse,” which shows the narrator in prison chains on the very first page, and Lopez’s “Cask of Amontillado,” in which the narrator has no visual presence at all. Whereas these adaptations decline to call into question the trustworthiness of the teller, Geary’s adaptation puts uncertainty front and center. In fact, one could even argue that Geary’s translation of Poe’s famous tale enhances the ambiguity that underlies the original text.

Another graphic translation that betrays a sense of romantic irony is Matt Howarth’s “Fall of the House of Usher,” the piece that closes the Graphic Classics collection on Poe. Howarth’s is a hybrid adaptation that relies heavily on Poe’s original tale—indeed, there are pages where the words seem to over-power the images—yet at the same time its illustrations develop the text (as opposed to merely echoing it) and carry a meaning of their own. That Roderick Usher is presented as feeble and on edge is no surprise. There are many panels that show his nervous agitation when speaking with the narrator, and most times he is drawn with what could be described as a skeletal visage: sunken cheeks and dark recessed eyes, at times presented as completely black. But more significant is Howarth’s representation of the narrator and his state of mind. In Poe’s original, the narrator tells us that he is deeply affected by the House of Usher, both the mansion and its proprietor. The landscape surrounding the residence leaves him with a sensation akin to “the after-dream of the reveller upon opium,” the tarn produces a vague terror that “must have been a dream,” the house with its zigzag fissure appears as a “wild inconsistency,” and Roderick Usher’s condition increasingly changes him: “It infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions” (PT, 317, 319, 330). Immediately after admitting infection, the narrator attempts to fall asleep, and it is at this point that the gothic romance reaches its crescendo.

A similar “infection” can be found in Howarth’s translation, one that is revealed through a series of visual repetitions. The facade of the Usher mansion, with its zigzag fissure, appears no less than five times over the first three pages of the graphic narrative, a staccato-like sequence of images that feeds into itself, a phenomenon suggestive of Poe’s “paradoxical law” of terror: “the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition . . . served mainly to accelerate the increase itself” (PT, 319). Indeed, Howarth repeatedly draws the narrator as cognizant of the unfolding events, eyeing Usher askance and from a critical distance (see fig. 6). Howarth even calls our attention to the narrator’s attempts at sleep through a series of five panels that show him in bed—perhaps reminiscent of the earlier five images of the mansion—each of which presents the narrating subject from a different visual angle and proximity. The emphasis on the sleep images here is quite significant. As in Poe’s original, it is after this point that all of the story’s fantastic events and scenes—Usher’s hysteria, the unnatural glow of the tarn, the horrific sounds, the storm, the reappearance of Lady Madeline, Usher’s death, the blood-red moon, the destruction of the house—take place. In light of the tale’s repeated references to dreams and uncertain states of consciousness, Howarth’s visual repetitions and nonrealistic presentations suggest
an alternate interpretation of the climax. One can read the comic’s ending literally, or perhaps, as Poe hints at in the original tale, its unlikely events might be nothing more than a dream, as much a fabrication as the story of the “Mad Trist” that the narrator reads to Usher.

The ambiguous nature of Howarth’s adaptation takes on more resonance when placed alongside an earlier comic book version of the tale—underscoring the tendency to creative innovation in some recent adaptations. In a 1947 issue of *Classics Illustrated*, Harley M. Griffiths presents a more straightforward reading of Poe’s tale without any graphic nuances or narrative ambiguity. For instance, the visual perspectives of almost all panels are eye level and medium to long shots, in no way involving the reader subjectively. There is no indication that the house or its primary occupant affects the narrator in any dramatic way. And there is almost no reference to the narrator’s attempts at sleep on the night of the catastrophes. Perhaps most notable are the final pages of Griffith’s adaptation. In its last two panels, after the narrator looks back over the fallen rubble, he leads his horse away and says: “He loved his sister and had done no wrong, willfully, yet she killed him through fear. Goodbye forever, House of Usher.”28 Such a denouement not only uncomplicates the ending—there is no question here of Madeline coming back and frightening her brother to death—but also deromanticizes the tale by eliminating any flights of fancy or narrative ambiguity. Howarth’s text, in contrast, ends like Poe’s original—down to the tale’s concluding reference to the “dank

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The comparison between these two versions of “The Fall of the House of Usher” suggests, artists creating recent adaptations of Poe’s work have been more versatile in their projects. Not only do they capture the outlines of the author’s fiction and poetry—and in the case of the Haunt of Horror stories, these outlines are broad indeed—but they also employ the tone of the originals in ways that the earlier adaptations do not. The writers and illustrators of earlier versions tended to restrict themselves to just one reading of Poe, that of quintessential gothic artist, and thus approached his writing in what might be called an act of incomplete veneration. What they typically ignored is the part of Poe that does not take himself too seriously, the Poe that is best defined by way of ironic distance and narrative irresolvability. The artists in the more recent Marvel and Eureka collections hold out for this bifurcated voice and through their work try to retain the levity that counterpoises and even qualifies the gothic horrors within. By doing so, they help confirm G. R. Thompson’s “romantic-irony thesis” as applied to Poe’s writings, a reading that remains as relevant today as it was over twenty years ago. In other words, projects such as Haunt of Horror and Graphic Classics reimagine Poe’s work in ways that enliven the texts and resist exhibiting the tales as stale narrative artifacts. Or put another way, the intricate interplay between word and image developed in these contemporary graphic novels actually helps us, albeit retrospectively, appreciate the aesthetic complexity of Poe’s writing.

Notes

1 The 1908 silent film combines Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic sleuth with “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Roger Corman’s Poe-related films, most of which star Vincent Price, include House of Usher (1960), Pit and the Pendulum (1961), The Premature Burial (1962), Tales of Terror (1962), three segments based on and compressing the stories “Morella,” “The Black Cat,” “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” and “The Cask of Amontillado”), The Raven (1963), The Haunted Palace (1963), The Masque of the Red Death (1964), and The Tomb of Ligeia (1964). And on 19 January 2007 Showtime aired “The Black Cat,” a Masters of Horror episode in which Poe himself becomes the main character. For a more comprehensive listing of cinematic adaptations, see Don G. Smith, The Poe Cinema: A Critical Filmography of Theatrical Releases Based on the Works of Edgar Allan Poe (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999). For nonfilm adaptations, see Inscapes’ 1995 video game The Dark Eye, which makes use of “Berenice,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”; the first “Trehouse of Horror” Halloween special of The Simpsons (1990), which features a segment on “The Raven”; the two-CD collection Closed on Account of Babies: Poems and Tales of Edgar Allan Poe (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), with spoken-word and musical recitations performed by such artists as Dr. John, Iggy Pop, Christopher Walken, and Deborah Harry; and the many specialty toy stores that sell such items as the Edgar Allan Poe Bobblehead, the Edgar Allan Poe Action Figure (complete with removable plastic raven), and the L’il Edgar Allen [sic] Poe Mini Action Figure, which, according to online merchant Wicked Cool Stuff, comes with a “collectable, twelve page, mini color comic book chronicling Edgar’s crazy adventures!” (http://www.wickedcoolstuff.com/ledalpoemiac.html).

All of this is just a fraction of what could easily be called the Pop Culture Poe Factory that has proliferated over the past one hundred years.

2 The original Classics Illustrated series, running from 1941 to 1960, contained three issues adapting Poe’s tales: no. 21 (July 1944), which includes the story “Murders in the Rue Morgue”; no. 40 (August 1947), a compilation of “The Pit and the Pendulum,” “The Adventure of Hans Pfall,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher”; and no. 84 (June 1951), with “The Gold Bug,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Cask of Amontillado.” After acquiring rights to the Classics Illustrated name, First Comics and Berkeley Publishing devoted their first issue in the new series (February 1990) to adaptations of “The Raven” and a number of other Poe poems. The fourteenth issue (September 1990) included a more recent adaptation of “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

4 M. Thomas Inge, “Poe and the Comics Connection,” *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 2 (2001): 2–29. In his survey of Poe comic book adaptations, Inge provides an extensive chronological listing of titles that is the most thorough available. The various comics series that have adapted Poe’s fiction and poetry are too numerous to list, but they include such classic titles as EC Comics’ *Haunt of Fear, Crime SuspenStories,* and *Tales from the Crypt,* Youthful Magazine’s *Beware and Chilling Tales,* St. John Publishing’s *Amazing Ghost Stories and Nightmare,* Atlas Comics’ *Spellbound* (1952 series); and Warren Publishing’s *Creepy* and *Eerie.* See also Burton Pollin, *Images of Poe’s Works: A Comprehensive Descriptive Catalogue of Illustrations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989).


6 See Jason Asala (adapter and artist), *Poe* (Stanhope, NJ: Sirius Entertainment, 1998), originally self-published but then picked up by Sirius Entertainment, which collected the first several issues as a graphic novel; the series by Roman Dirge (adapter and artist), *Lenore* (San Jose: Slave Labor Graphics, 1999–2007); and Len Wein (writer) and Guy Davis (artist), *Batman: Nevermore* (New York: DC Comics, 2003). Asala’s comic book series, now discontinued, revolved around a fictionalized version of Poe who experienced adventures that eventually led to the stories that the historical Poe published. Dirge’s *Lenore,* a current comic book series originally inspired by Poe’s poem of the same name, centers on “a cute little dead girl” and is filled with dark humor and twisted endings, something that Inge has called “a sort of Peanuts meets *The Night of the Living Dead*” (“Poe and the Comics Connection,” 14). The five-issue miniseries *Batman: Nevermore* was part of DC Comics’ Elseworld line of comic books, which takes well-known superheroes and places them in unusual settings and times. In this limited series, apprentice reporter Edgar Poe helps Batman solve a series of murders reminiscent of the horrors we find in Poe’s actual fiction.

7 The term “graphic novel” is highly problematic in that it is commonly applied to any sustained graphic narrative, regardless of its “novelistic” qualities. As such, longer comics that fall within any of the narrative genres—story cycles, memoirs, histories, biographies, poetry, and even picture books—are indiscriminately given this label. Despite its untidy baggage, I will nonetheless use this term for convenience when referring to longer graphic narratives (that is, those running to more than eighty pages) and/or bound collections of previously published comic books, or graphic albums, packaged as more cohesive works.

8 See Jonathon Scott Fuqua (adapter), Steven Parke (artist), and Stephen John Phillips (photographer), *In the Shadow of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 2002); and Dawn Brown (adapter and artist), *Ravenous* (Toronto: Speakeasy Comics, 2005).


11 There is also a comics adaptation of Poe’s “Oval Portrait” included in *Gothic Classics,* vol. 14 of *Graphic Classics* (Mount Horeb, WI: Eureka Productions, 2007), but this text appeared just as the present essay was going to press. The first edition of Eureka’s *Graphic Classics: Edgar Allan Poe* (2001) was published in conjunction with *Rosebud Magazine.* It contained, appropriately enough, thirteen different adaptations by a variety of writers and illustrators, many of which were previously published. As noted before, more than half of the adaptations in the first edition rely mostly on text, with relatively few complementary illustrations, and only three of the original pieces were republished without change in the 2006 edition. For these reasons, I focus my analysis on the most recent version.


16 The earlier *Classics Illustrated* adaptations show a consistency of style, regardless of the artist, that borders on the mundane. The paneling style and layout rarely vary, and most subjects are visually presented at eye level and framed in what could be called (using the aesthetic language of film) medium shots. Regarding the fidelity to setting, only the very first *Classics Illustrated* story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (issue 21, 1944), is set in a time different from that of the original tale, one suggestive of the early twentieth century.


19 Corben and Margopoulos, *Haunt of Horror*, Other texts in the *Haunt of Horror* collection include loose adaptations of “The Sleeper,” now a story of the vampiric undead, and “The Lake – To —,” the story of a slain lover whose body is cast into a lake, and who returns to drown her murdering boyfriend as he lies in bed.

20 Corben and Margopoulos, introductory sketch to *Haunt of Horror* series; emphasis in original.


25 For this reading, see Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction*, 14.

