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“The Effervescence of a Moment”

Hawthorne, Poe, the Penny Press, and the Manifold Temporalities of Antebellum Short Fiction

Abstract

This article suggests that the rise of the new journalism of the penny press during the antebellum America constituted an inescapable reference point and challenge for Poe and Hawthorne, for its emergence radically transformed the context and the course of the early phases of their careers and needs to be examined as a fundamental component of their literary visions. To illustrate that, the article focuses on the ways in which the penny press reverberates in Hawthorne’s and Poe’s fictional temporalities. In fact, their works seem to respond to the new regimes of time that were being introduced by the rise of daily newspaper that was booming in the 1830s, forming the framework within which the two writers’ construction of their authorial figures took shape. Centering primarily on the writings of the early phase of their careers, the article retraces the repeated and central appearances that news and the newspaper make in the writings of Hawthorne and Poe, suggesting how their responses to the manifold temporalities in which they were imbricated were key to the development of their different literary conceptions and authorial figures.

Keywords: *Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, penny press, temporality, antebellum culture*

Various scholars have commented on the close relationship between journalism and literature in the antebellum US. From Claude Richard’s *Edgar Allan Poe: Journaliste et Critique* and David Reynolds’s landmark *Beneath the American Renaissance*, to Richard Kopley’s study on Poe, source criticism has underlined how authors of the time mined newspapers in search of materials which they then absorbed and reworked in literary ways (Reynolds 1998; Kopley 2008). Other critics, most notably Peter West and Mark Canada, have highlighted the antebellum as an epoch in which literature and journalism came into competition with each other, as they pursued conflicting notions of truth (West 2008; Canada 2011). In reconsidering the interactions between Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and

the emergence of modern journalism, this article seeks to shift the attention to another side of the question, that of the role journalism played in forging the two authors’ visions of the literary, thus contributing to shape their literary vocation, their notion of literariness, and, ultimately, the very status of literature itself in antebellum America. As is well known, Poe elaborated his literary vision also thanks to his readings of Hawthorne, which had a major role in shaping his own ideas of literature and authorship.

As Elisa Tamarkin notes, “understanding literature in the age of news—when newspapers were at once a dominant media technology and a powerful institution in the literary marketplace—means keeping track of how writers adapted their aesthetics to the priorities of a period that was now so preoccupied with being informed that it left audiences with little time to reflect on their own hierarchies of knowledge” (2012, 311). It is exactly in relation to a reassessment of the value and status of literary discourse and of the interrelated conceptions of authorship that journalism becomes significant in Hawthorne’s and Poe’s literary trajectories, especially in their early phases. The notion of authorship has been investigated and discussed almost exclusively in connection with the rise of market economy in the US, from the pioneering study of William Charvat to that of Michael Gilmore, to the most recent revisionary works of Michael Newbury, Leon Jackson, and others, with varying degrees of emphasis on the correlated notion of professionalism (Charvat 1992; Gilmore 1985; Newbury 1997). A different line of enquiry has explored authorship in the early nineteenth century US against the backdrop of the romantic culture, which constituted the breeding ground out of which modern notions of authorship stemmed (Rowland 1996, ch. 5; Thompson 1993; Benesch 2002). More recently, building on studies in reprinting culture, Ryan Cordell has drawn attention to the ways in which “the composition and circulation of texts among antebellum newspapers offers a model of authorship that is communal rather than individual, distributed rather than centralized” (Cordell 2015, 418).

Within this scenario, I would like to suggest that the rise of the new journalism constituted both an inescapable reference point and challenge for Poe and Hawthorne, for its emergence radically transformed the context as well as the course of the early phases of their literary authorship. As Tamarkin adds, “when literature was published in the form of news, it took its place within a larger print ecology that challenged both the temporality and material culture of reading books” (Tamarkin 2021, 316). Following her observation, I will focus on the ways in which the rise of the new journalism of the penny press reverberates in Hawthorne’s and Poe’s fictional temporalities, bringing together two major critical lines of enquiry: that opened by Meredith McGill’s landmark analysis of “the culture of reprinting” in the antebellum US, and that of the

recent emphasis on the temporal turn in nineteenth-century American literature and culture (McGill 2003; Pratt 2010). According to Edward Cutler, the success enjoyed by the establishment of “mass-circulation daily newspaper” in the 1830s and 1840s “evinces a historically unique mode of social knowing, one that newly articulates and identifies its subject with time” (Cutler 2003, 65-66). And temporality, in a plurality of forms, is a recurrent preoccupation in the fictions of Hawthorne and Poe, as well as a structural aspect of their literary visions.¹ In contrast to the received notion that antebellum culture promoted the establishment of a linear order of time, Lloyd Pratt contends that “this period and its literature articulate a conflicted experience of time working against the notion of destiny” (Pratt 2010, 5). According to J. Hillis Miller, “[c]ritical analyses of temporality in literature tend to fall into three categories” (2003, 89): grammatical, logical and rhetorical investigations. “Any literary narrative,” Miller suggests, “is a spatially arrayed allegory of temporality” (2003, 91). Even more so, when literary words are into close contact with those of journalism. Hawthorne’s and Poe’s fictions seem to suggest a varied and dynamic response to the new significance of temporality exemplified by the new information circuit. If “the newspaper became the predominant form of the new experience of temporality” (Cutler 2003, 69), the temporal experiences it generated do not necessarily involve a uniformity of perception, nor a fascination for present-ness or new-ness only. Rather, as Pratt contends, “the expansion of print and transportation technologies magnified [a] pluralization of time,” characteristic of modernity (Pratt 2010, 3-4). The manifold temporal trajectories which the two authors experimented in their fictional works is indeed illustrative of the “coexistence of competing orders of time” characterizing antebellum US culture (Pratt 2010, 39). This is especially true in their early narrative attempts, exposing the two authors’ engagement with journalism, and in their early critical statements and reviews, in which their responses to the growing and shifting perception of temporality are formulated. Moreover, as I hope this article will also make clear, the two writers’ construction of their authorial figures is not exempt from the regimes of temporality within which it takes shape.

In his influential *The School of Hawthorne*, Richard Brodhead considers the year 1850, “when Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*,” as a defining turning point in the institutionalization of Nathaniel Hawthorne as a canonical figure in the US literary scene (1986, 54). In his diachronic study, Brodhead suggested that the canonization of Hawthorne was accomplished through the agency of contemporaneous literary actors such as Evert Duyckinck and James T. Fields, Herman Melville, William D. Howells and Henry James. However, the early phase of his

¹ For recent discussions of the role of temporality in the two authors, see Weinstein 2015 and Fash 2020.

career, when his literary calling was awakening and he was trying to come up with the best way to cultivate it, is also worthy of notice. Whereas his canonization, after the 1850s, testifies to the growing aesthetic standing of a restricted circuit of literary production, the earlier phase of his literary development—i.e., the 1830s and 1840s—is characterized by a much more fluid and commingled circulation of writings of all sorts. Furthermore, in the period that Brodhead sees as a turning point in his career, Hawthorne reconsidered and refashioned his early writings, which he finally succeeded in publishing in book form. Interestingly, he also invested time writing three well-known prefaces (“The Old Manse. Preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse*” [1846]; “Preface to *Twice-Told Tales*” [1851]; and “Preface to *The Snow-Image*” [1851]), where he expounds on his earlier writings from the vantage point of a publishing author.

The early 1830s are also the decade during which Poe wrote a number of fiction pieces that finally convinced him to pursue a career in the literary field, while also beginning to write the critical reviews that would earn him the nickname *the tomahawk man*, as the press defined him. However, these years do not call for a renewed attention merely to the two authors’ early works, but also to the position-takings that typified their trajectories in the literary landscape of the time.² Often discussed from the viewpoint of the authors’ subsequent careers, Poe’s and Hawthorne’s early phases seem most enlightening when read in relation to each other and to their fluctuating social context.

1. Fiction writing in the culture of news

When in the late 1820s Hawthorne and Poe resolved to pursue a literary career, they began by aiming high: Poe tried to make his way in the field of poetry, the highest-status literary genre; Hawthorne aspired to impress the readership by publishing a novel.³ They both succeeded in getting their works published: Hawthorne in 1828, with the novel *Fanshawe*; Poe, first with *Tamerlane and Other Poems* in 1827, then with *Al Araaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* in 1829, and simply with *Poems* 1831. Their first works came out anonymously, in line with the habits of the day, but Poe’s second and third collections bore his name on the titlepage. A general lack of interest on both the public’s and the critics’ part, though, proved very disappointing for the

² Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology helps us understand the trajectories of single authors as part of a complex network of relationships among a number of agents in the literary field. Development is neither merely the result of individual vocation nor of structural and determined social conditions, but the result of a dynamic tension between various factors. See Bourdieu 1996.

³ On this, see Baym 1976, 27-29.

two aspiring authors.⁴ However, neither Poe nor Hawthorne became discouraged or dropped the idea of pursuing a literary career. Hawthorne’s resolution dates back at least to 1821, as attested by a well-known letter to his mother in which, in a half-serious, half-bantering tone, he laid bare his vocation:

What do you think of my becoming an Author, and relying for support upon my pen. Indeed I think the illegibility of my handwriting is very authorlike. How proud you would feel to see my works praised by the reviewers, as equal to the proudest productions of the scribbling sons of John Bull. But authors are always poor Devils, and therefore Satan may take them. (Hawthorne 1984, 139)

What is noteworthy are not so much Hawthorne’s doubts about the feasibility of becoming a self-sustaining professional writer, as the fact that in his fantasies he imagines his mother taking pride not in reading his works, but in the reviews of his works she would come across in the periodical press. He projects the resonance of his stories, mostly set in a distant past, as arising from a future reading of the reviews of his texts. Hawthorne visualizes his authorship in relation to the more accomplished English writers, but also, from the start, in close connection with the rising mass-information circuit. The image of the mother acts as the connecting link between the family circle and an anonymous number of readers to whom the reviews are addressed.

Poe also made a parental appeal in an 1829 letter to his foster father in which, in the form of a request for money, he expressed his aspiration to publish a book of poems:

Dear Pa,
I am now going to make a request different from any I have ever yet made.
[...]
I am aware of the difficulty of getting a poem published in this country [...] but the *difficulty* should be no object, with a proper aim in view.
If M^{SSRS} Carey, Lea & Carey, should decline publishing (as I have no reason to think they will not—they having invariably declined it with all our American poets) [...] you will give me a letter [...] saying that if in publishing the poem “Al Aaraaf” they shall incur any loss—you will make it good to them. (Poe 1948, vol. I, 20)

⁴ Hawthorne’s novel actually received very few reviews but, on the whole, mostly encouraging (Crowley 1970, 41-46). However, soon after its publication Hawthorne regretted having written it and tried to withdraw all the copies he could get hold of. Poe’s collection of poems went virtually unnoticed (Walker 1986, 18).

A few days earlier, he had written to Lea himself, stating that “if the poem is published, succeed or not, I am ‘irrecoverably a poet.’” In his characteristic tone, Poe is also voicing his determination to be a *litterateur*, and no less than a poet.

Then, following their unsuccessful early editorial ventures, Hawthorne and Poe decided to explore other literary genres, perhaps less sanctioned, but more palatable to the tastes of the readership of the day. They both directed their literary efforts towards the publication of a collection of short stories. The rising numbers of fiction publishing in the country during the 1820s might have encouraged the two young authors (Bell 2001, 70-74). Hawthorne reverted to a volume planned in his youth—“Seven Tales from My Native Land”—which he then transformed and rewrote into two book-length collections of tales, first “Provincial Tales” and then “The Story Teller” (see Thompson 1993, and especially West 2008). Poe, for his part, planned the collection “Tales of the Folio Club.” However, their strategy again proved fruitless, since none of these intended volumes elicited the interest of a publisher.

All these early attempts at publishing a book suggest that, at the onset of their literary careers in the dynamic, turbulent, antebellum social and cultural field, Poe and Hawthorne had very clear in their minds the close connection between publishing in volume form and achieving a reputation as authors.⁵ However, the impossibility of finding a publisher for their prospected volumes eventually meant that both Hawthorne and Poe were forced to once again revise their plans and seek other avenues for publication: namely, the periodical press of magazines, journals, newspapers, annuals, and gift books, the popularity and diffusion of which were flourishing in the early 1830s. It is precisely in those years that Hawthorne began to publish his tales separately and anonymously in publications such as the *Salem Gazette*, the *New-England Magazine*, and Samuel Griswold Goodrich’s *The Token*. During the same years, Poe was also beginning to publish his stories in various magazines, from the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier*, to which he submitted several tales for two literary contests in 1831 and 1833, to the *Baltimore Saturday Visiter* and the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Turning to these formats did

⁵ As William Charvat declared, “during most of the first ten years of his writing life (1827-37) Poe was essentially book-minded—that is, he thought in terms of the permanence of the book as opposed to the transience of the periodical” (1992, 86). More recently, Kevin J. Hayes has revived the argument, stating that Poe’s “earliest publications—three separately published collections of poetry—reveal the importance he attached to the book format. As a young adult, Poe saw periodical contributions as ephemeral and books as lasting” (2009, 1139). A similar case can be made for Hawthorne. Nina Baym observed that “after *Fanshawe*, Hawthorne abandoned all attempts to write what Bridge called ‘a work of magnitude’ for many years, even though such a work would have been far more likely to bring him the reputation he wanted than the short stories and sketches he wrote instead” (1976, 22). Horatio Bridge was a former college mate and close friend of Hawthorne’s.

not mean a reduction in the circulation of their writings—actually, quite the opposite. As Cordell reminds us, “while periodical writers were not often accorded the social prestige of authorship [...] their work nevertheless circulated more thoroughly than many of their literary counterparts” (2015, 418). It did mean, however, a mainly anonymous and fragmented form of circulation, which prevented the two writers from establishing their names as recognizable authorial figures. As Meredith McGill, Leon Jackson, Lara Cohen and others have indicated, the multiplicity of markets for symbolic goods in the polycentric US society of the time presented a noticeably uneven, fluid—if not chaotic—development, characterized by what historians generally refer to as the market, transportation, and information revolutions (see McGill 2003; Jackson 2008; Cohen 2012). The latter, in particular, is exemplified by the amazing rise, in those days, of the periodical press, the impact of which went well beyond the field of journalism and also directly invested the literary scene. Both Poe’s and Hawthorne’s careers are revelatory of the ways in which the information revolution of the new journalism, epitomized by the penny press, contributed to transforming the antebellum literary scene.

Opposite paths mark the onset of Poe’s and Hawthorne’s literary careers. Whereas Hawthorne’s early literary writings are in close contact with the journalism of the day, from which he later wanted to distance himself, Poe, on the other hand, began as a poet, and only later became more and more involved in the journalistic field. But while Poe’s professional engagement with newspapers and magazines is too well-known to require comment,⁶ it may be worth briefly recalling Hawthorne’s early journalistic experiences. At the age of sixteen, from August through September 1820, he produced a homemade, handwritten weekly newspaper ambitiously—or ironically—titled “The Spectator,” to be circulated among the family (see Chandler 1931, 288-330). Sixteen years later, in 1836—the year before he eventually succeeded in having *Twice-Told Tales* published—Hawthorne became the editor of a monthly periodical, *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*. In his farewell editorial notice upon relinquishing his position after only six months, Hawthorne complains that he never had “full controul (sic) over the contents of the Magazine” (Hawthorne 1836, 520), in a vein that recalls what would become a distinctive theme in Poe’s letters, critical writings, and prospectuses for the magazines he sought to found.

⁶ From *The Southern Literary Messenger* (where he was hired as contributor and then editor from August 1835 to January 1837) and *The New York Sun*, to Burton’s and Graham’s magazines, the *Evening Mirror*, and *The Broadway Journal* (the only periodical he ever managed to own for a brief span of time). Since Jacobs’ classic study (1969), a number of other works have highlighted Poe’s connections with the print industry.

Their turning to short fiction in the 1830s coincides with the eruption of the penny press. New York saw the rise of the first successful American penny newspaper, *The New York Sun*, in 1833, but even before, in 1830, Boston had given birth to the first effort to establish a penny paper on US soil, the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*. The appearance of what is considered the first mass medium triggered a series of changes that drastically altered the entire US social and cultural spheres. As a number of studies have pointed out, the penny press is generally credited with inventing news in its modern sense while simultaneously democratizing the practice of both reading and writing it.⁷ A major part in this process was certainly played by the market economy, which was becoming the dominant economic mode in the US. The ensuing complicity with the logic of commodification turned news into a product somehow connected with consumerism, very much like literature itself, which in antebellum America was gradually conferred a twofold status: on the one hand, it attained an aesthetic status; on the other hand, it operated as a commodity—a dual state that has accompanied literature ever since. As a consequence, both the new journalism of the penny press and literature became involved with the practices of puffing, forging and frauding, as Lara Cohen has shown (see 2012, esp. ch. 1). Thus, while the new medium of the penny press opened up unexpected venues for the distribution of literature, its emphasis on entertainment, on human interest stories, and on sensationalism also made it a powerful competitor for literature. Especially for fiction, which had a very unstable position when it appeared not in books but in an ever-proliferating, heterogeneous congeries of cheap, ephemeral print products that a burgeoning mass market was making available to growing numbers of readers (see Lehuu 2000).

Newspapers, in fact, not only frequently appear in the tales as well as in the critical writings of the two authors; they are also profoundly intertwined with the theme of authorial literary vocation. In this context, Poe’s and Hawthorne’s different responses to the rise of the penny press can be seen as symptomatic of the ways in which they experienced the urgency of new orders of temporality and the latter’s impact on their writings. They responded to it *in* and *through* their fictions as well as critical writings. Newspapers figure in Poe’s short fictions from the beginning to the end of his career, from the 1835 “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall,” to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” to the late 1849 “Von Kempelen and His Discovery”—not to mention “The Balloon Hoax,” published directly as a piece of news in 1844, and “The Raven,” first published in the New York penny newspaper *Evening Mirror*. Even more, several of Poe’s stories question their status as fictions/news:

⁷ The bibliography on the penny press is too extensive to be reported here; see in particular Schudson 1978; Schiller 1981; Leonard 1995.

“whether in its fictionality the narrative is to be understood as the story of something that is supposed to have actually happened or as an hallucination, a dream, a hoax; or whether it is not to be understood as fiction at all, but as a factual account” (Irwin 1980, 118). In Hawthorne’s tales, references to newspapers are mostly concentrated in the early tales, from “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” (1834) to “Wakefield” and “Old News” (1835). Newspapers, however, surface again, years later, in Hawthorne’s Prefaces—most interestingly in “The Old Manse,” but also in the Preface to *Twice-told Tales*.

Peter West has emphasized “the journalistic origins of romance” in Hawthorne (West 2008, 42). In his view, Hawthorne’s treatment of romance is to be seen as his reaction to the impending encroachment of the market logic on literature, of which the mass penny press is emblematic. The writer’s engagement with this new journalism during the initial stages of his career bespeaks, for West, his endeavor to create an alternative narrative discourse, one able to express a non-commercially biased angle. In his analysis, West is following a well-established critical viewpoint, which has long regarded artistic and commercial writing as the two poles between which literature fluctuates. While recent studies have much complicated the relationship between literature and the market, West’s highlighting of Hawthorne’s debt to journalism helps one to place the author’s trajectory in a different perspective, for he shows how Hawthorne was keen not just on old newspapers as remnants of a past age but was instead very much interested also in the new information circuit that was gaining momentum in his days.

It is precisely Hawthorne’s interest in the contemporary world of journalism that explains the peculiar emphasis these stories place on temporality. A good case in point is the first of the tales mentioned above, “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe,” the plot of which revolves around an order of time introduced by the rise of the information circuit of the new dailies. A supposedly astounding piece of news is at the center of the tale: the murder of the “old Mr. Higginbotham.” The temporal order of the story is triggered by word-of-mouth reports and fake-news newspaper articles about a supposedly terrible murder. Time thus becomes a kind of co-protagonist of the story in its own right. As soon as the protagonist, Dominus Pike, gets to know the piece of news from a “traveller” met by chance, he is

rather astonished at the rapidity with which the news had spread. Kimballton was nearly sixty miles distant in a straight line; the murder had been perpetrated only at eight o’clock the preceding night, yet Dominicus had heard of it at seven in the morning, when in all probability, poor Mr. Higginbotham’s own family had but just discovered his corpse, hanging on the St. Michael’s pear-tree. The stranger on foot must have worn seven-league boots, to travel at such rate.

‘Ill news flies fast, they say,’ thought Dominicus Pike; ‘but this beats rail-roads. The fellow ought to be hired to go express with the President’s Message.’
The difficulty was solved, by supposing that the narrator had made a mistake of one day, in the date of the occurrence. (Hawthorne 1982, 189)

What we have in this passage is a graphic representation of a major change in the perception of time that was taking place around those years. As Michal O’Malley has amply shown, antebellum America saw the passage from natural, cyclical time to industrial, clock time (1990). And the new journalism of the penny press had a major function in introducing a radically novel conception, not just of time itself, but of the implications brought about by an overall new order of temporality. At first, it might appear surprising that a peddler like Dominicus is provided with a clock; and yet, as O’Malley writes, in the 1820s the “‘pillar and scroll’ clock [introduced at the time by Eli Terry] quickly became associated with the archetypical fast-talking Yankee peddler,” thus making “mechanical timekeeping within the easy reach of mechanics, farmers, artisans and laborers for the first time” (1990, 31; 32). It is this availability of clocks that enables Dominicus to determine the exact time, precisely when, in history, it also contributed to setting the preconditions for the popular success of the penny press, which inaugurated the structural connection between news and timeliness. In fact, the narrator is startled not only by the event itself, but also by the rapidity with which the news of it spread. He is able to measure the pace of the news transmission thanks to the clock, which seems to identify the precise hour of Mr. Higginbotham’s death, and the hour the news of it reached him. The speed with which the news travels seems unrealistic to Dominicus because he is in a society in which most movements are still taking place on foot.

The protagonist, having learned the news of the murder as a fact reported orally by a traveler, “did not hesitate to introduce the story at every tavern and country-store along the road [...]. He found himself invariably the first bearer of the intelligence, and was so pestered with questions, that he could not avoid filling up the outline, till it became quite a respectable narrative” (Hawthorne 1982, 190). The episode, thus, thanks to the retellings of Dominicus turns from a news report into a full-fledged, twice-told story. Yet, something else comes to complicate the tale, when the factuality of the report and the occurrence of the murder itself are questioned. In the end, the reader gets to know that the murder of Higginbotham had actually been planned by three people, but “two of them, successively, lost courage and fled, each delaying the crime one night, by their disappearance,” while “the third was in the act of perpetration, when [Dominicus] blindly obeying the call of fate, like the heroes of old romance,

appeared” on the scene, to verify the facts, and just in time to save the man from being hanged (1982, 199).

Thus, through a paradoxical conclusion, Hawthorne calls the reader’s attention not so much to the sensational theme of the tale, as to the effects of the changes in temporality that the text stages. Effects that were noticeable in society as well as in the field of literature. By questioning the linear, clock time that was a pillar of the new journalism, the story also seems to expose the radical narrative structure, the fictionality of news itself. In a paradoxical twist between two temporal regimes, the story uncovers the information circuit as essentially based upon fake news which springs precisely from the different order of time inaugurated by the clock, and which soon became the bedrock of the sensationalistic journalism of the penny press, whereas fiction, by then a supposedly imaginary report, turns out to be truer than news to the point that fiction becomes nothing less than a life-saving agent. Poignantly, fiction, with its romance ending and focus on the long-term, turns out to be more significant, truthful, and in the end reliable than the news.

Analogously, in Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” the narrator begins by stating that the story takes its cue from a brief journalistic report which caught his curiosity and set his imagination in motion. Here again, the tale highlights a permeability between fact and fiction: “In some old magazine or newspaper, I recollect a story, told as truth, of a man [...]” (Hawthorne 1982, 290). The piece of news, however, is presented again as in “Mr. Higginbotham’s Catastrophe” as wanting in resonance and density of significance. It takes a fictional author to go over the long twenty years of “self-banishment” (Hawthorne 1982, 290) from his wife and home that the protagonist of the tale inflicted upon himself for no evident reason. The tale, thus, is another example of the struggle between the concise, potentially fertile, but embryonic spot in time represented by a piece of news, and the narrative unfolding of fiction with its convoluted, non-linear, temporal evolvment.

As the title reveals, Hawthorne’s “Old News” also has to do with journalism. This time, however, the newspapers discussed are not contemporary ones, but those of colonial America. In a recent article, Joel Berson retraces the four 1739 newspapers that in all likelihood constituted the sources Hawthorne used to write the first of the three sketches that compose this text, the first version of which was possibly written in 1829 (see Berson 2018). Through the conflation of this oxymoronic title, Hawthorne muses over the temporality of news, their shifting meaningfulness over time, and the relations between journalism, the historical past, and the contemporary age. Complicating the evolutionist paradigm typical of the nineteenth century, he is baffled especially by the enigmatic, contradictory quality of these old items of news: “Ephemeral as they

were intended and supposed to be [...] [they] have long outlived the printer and his whole subscription list, and have proved more durable, as to their physical existence, than most of the timber, bricks, and stone, of the town where they were issued” (Hawthorne 1982, 251). This apparent longevity of news seems to contradict its transient nature. In a sense, Hawthorne’s representation of old news presents a twofold temporality: on the one hand, its immediate and volatile function for the day in which news was printed; on the other hand, its function as epitome of the age, maintaining a capacity for signification spanning historical time. Furthermore, it is also noteworthy that Hawthorne considers those prints he is looking at as forming “a volume” (Hawthorne 1982, 251), as if they no longer represent single items, but a unified book, gaining coherence and significance with the passing of time.

By taking old news as the topic of his text, Hawthorne mimics a journalist, but with the perspective of a historian. He does not cast his glance on contemporary events, rather, he turns his gaze backwards, toward a past of about ninety years before in the first sketch, seventy in the second and fifty in the third. And he does not focus on major events, but on minor episodes of the social microhistory of Boston, on habits and customs of a past age. In a way, Hawthorne turns the news on its head, by transforming it from a medium into the content of his text, and by turning its obsolescence into something that crosses epochs. However, the durability Hawthorne finds in old news is not a product of news itself, but of the gaze cast upon these old newspapers by the narrator through his literary approach. It is literature, in other words, that makes the old newspapers significant and revealing; it is literature that has the power to transmute the ephemerality of newspapers into a discourse over the past, having a message not just for the present but also for the future.

Poe’s approach to the new language of dailies seems to be wholly different. In part, because of his much deeper commitment to the journalistic world, which implied a very different literary practice, but, above all, for his distinct literary vision. Starting from the beginnings of his career, Poe engages the language of journalism head on. The 1835 “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall” has mostly been interpreted as a parody of ballooning, a vogue which raged in the US at the time, but it has also been read as a parody of *The New Sun*, the first successful US penny newspaper, launched in 1833 in New York City (see Dinius 2004; Martinez 2011). In both “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” penny newspapers are also central: in the first, Dupin and the unknown narrator become aware of the murders through a sensational newspaper article aptly titled “extraordinary murders,” and get to know many details about the facts through newspaper reports of the crime. Dupin, moreover, finally manages to ascertain the truth through an ad he published in a newspaper. Even more central

is the role of news in the second tale, which directly takes news as its major theme. The story is interwoven with excerpts from contemporary newspapers about a tragic event occurred in New York, which Poe relocates in Paris: the mysterious death of a beautiful girl, Mary Rogers, known as the “cigar girl.” The fact aroused a lot of public attention thanks to print coverage: the penny papers jumped on the news, which caused a sensation and remained in the public’s eye for several weeks.

What is peculiar in this text is that, unlike “The Murders,” Dupin’s investigation is carried out not through a visit to the crime scene or through in-person examinations, but exclusively with the aid of newspaper articles. Writing a story on the death of this beautiful girl therefore meant to give life to a narrative deeply imbricated with the new print industry and the new mediatic reality the penny press was creating. The tale deals not with the dead body of an alleged victim, but with a paper reality created by the news around the death of the girl. Far from being merely the sources, the papers form the backbone of Poe’s text. While “The Murders” presented a fictional reality described in the text as ‘real,’ “Marie Rogêt” explicitly examines a mediatic reality made of print, since, as Dupin states, he is trying to solve the mystery of the death of Marie Rogêt /Mary Rogers “with no other means of investigation than the newspapers afforded” (Poe 2000, 723). The newspapers, then, here represent the only interface between Dupin and the mystery he is trying to solve. In this sense, Dupin also poses as an interpreter figure who is able to master the various new discourses and disciplines of the modern episteme. In the end, though, reality seems to strike back. The tale was published in three installments in the *Snowden’s Ladies’ Companion*, a magazine mainly aiming at a middle-class audience. Between the publication of the second and third installment, however, a statement issued by the owner of an inn near the spot of the supposed murder seemed to imply that the girl died of a botched abortion. Poe was therefore compelled to delay the publication of the third and last installment for one month, in order to revise his story and make it suit the unexpected revelation.

Each in its own way, the three Poe tales discussed so far emphasize the importance of the modern: “Hans Pfaall” with its imaginary voyage to the moon, accomplished thanks to technical developments, which inaugurates science-fiction; “Murders,” in which new forensic techniques of investigation go together with the new journalism, and “Marie Rogêt,” in which the accelerating times of journalism and those of historical development seem to clash, producing unexpected and disconcerting results. In all three, the new temporality of news is a co-protagonist of the story bearing directly on Poe’s conception of literature and textuality. For the three texts seem to be grounded on what Cutler calls “the omnipresence of ‘the present’ itself” (2003, 66). In fact, Cutler also argues, the “newspaper rhetorically projected for the reader a

sense of the temporal present as a shifting but nonetheless substantive ground of social experience” (2003, 77). Emblematic, in this sense, is the “Balloon Hoax,” a story published directly as a newspaper article, as an ‘extra’ of the *New York Sun*, relating the extraordinary news of a transatlantic balloon crossing in just three days. The *article* stirred a sensation among readers before it became known it was a hoax (see Fash 2020). Poe’s text plays with the temporalities of plausibility and implausibility of such an accomplishment, intertwined with the new temporality of timeliness that was becoming a defining element of news. The supposed travelogue makes sense as sensational news only for an urban audience reading it in the newspaper. Even more, timeliness is here not just a feature Poe borrows from journalism, but the pivotal structural frame of the tale itself. Thus, imitating a newspaper article, this story only apparently seems to blur fiction and journalism, while in fact it epitomizes Poe’s attempt to incorporate the very logic of news into the production of fiction.

On a closer look, these tales also evince Hawthorne’s and Poe’s anxieties towards contemporary journalism as well as the temporalities it helped to set in motion. In “Mr Higginbotham’s,” for instance, the times of reality and the times of journalism seem to chase each other, while in “Marie Rogêt” the virtual reality of the papers appears truer than the professed reality portrayed in “Murders”—even though it is precisely the mix of different temporalities that ultimately makes “Marie Rogêt” inconclusive. “Mr. Higginbotham’s” and “Wakefield” seem to suggest that fiction serves precisely to cover a complexity and volatility of meaning that news itself appears incapable of bringing to light and handling. Thus, in “Wakefield,” a scant piece of news sparks the writer’s imagination, inducing him to produce a representation of multifaceted human behavior, just as the alleged news reported in “Mr. Higginbotham’s” initiate an intricate story. In both tales, news is portrayed as insufficient to account for the many-sided human reality that fiction proposes to investigate in depth. From a slightly different perspective, “Old News,” as the title suggests, deals not with current but past, outdated news. Compared with Poe’s “The Balloon Hoax,” “Hans Pfaall,” or “Marie Rogêt,” “Old News” is unique in the way it deals with the past: “Happy are the editors of newspapers! Their productions excel all others in immediate popularity, and are certain to acquire another sort of value with the lapse of time. [...] With hasty pens, they write for immortality” (Hawthorne 1982, 251). Curiously, here Hawthorne underlies a dual value of news: one connected with the current age; another with the aging of news. Contrary to what is generally assumed, Hawthorne does not seem to consider news an evanescent object, and past news obsolescent. Quite the opposite, he seems to think that news may even possess an everlasting quality. While Poe’s tales make the most of a temporality

imbricated in contemporaneity and modernity, Hawthorne’s stories demand a twofold temporality that constantly interlaces the present with the past.

2. Journalism, temporality and the rationale of fiction writing

As suggested above, the related issues of journalism and temporality are far from constituting merely themes in the tales of Hawthorne and Poe. Indeed, they bear directly upon their visions of fiction writing and literature. In the rest of this article, I will discuss their significance in their critical writings: namely, in Hawthorne’s Prefaces to his tales and in Poe’s reviews of Hawthorne’s texts. As Poe observed in 1846, “the consequences” of the penny press “in [its] influence on the whole newspaper business of the country, and through this business on the interests of the country at large, are probably beyond all calculation” (Poe 1984, 1214). The tales discussed also exhibit the two authors’ awareness of the effects the new press had on the literary scene, and how a newly invented journalistic language that was aimed at a general audience, easy to read, entertaining, and capturing the readers’ attention was presenting new challenges to literature, with which it was partly in competition. Media hoaxes, sensational stories, newly invented genres such as detective fiction and horror tales could hardly have achieved the success they indeed had without the new social and cultural context created by the establishment of the first mass medium.

In the chaotic, largely anonymous, and increasingly market-oriented US social scene of antebellum America, the advent of the penny press induced Poe and Hawthorne to profoundly re-discuss and reconceptualize the rationale as well as the significance of literary writing. Criticism has mainly underlined the extent to which the culture of reprinting influenced and even defined Poe’s and Hawthorne’s literary trajectories. Yet the culture of reprinting, in turn, could deploy its effects thanks to the changes triggered by the eruption of the penny press, as Poe observed in the quote above. If, on the one hand, it is an unassailable truth that issues of property and circulation at stake in the culture of reprinting affected the notions of authorship and textuality, on the other hand, it is hardly deniable that the model of news production introduced by the penny press reverberated well beyond the circuit of journalism, impinging upon the literary sphere.

It is especially in the interrelated critical writings of the two authors that we can best retrace their different reactions to the pressure placed upon literary writing by the new press. An instance of Hawthorne’s response can be observed in the 1846 Preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse*. The author describes his entering the parsonage as a form of consecration, in a way as a sort of wishful literary canonization. Midway in the Preface, the author takes the reader into

the library, where he surveys various religious books—the only ones collected there—commenting that, despite their “venerable” (Hawthorne 1982, 1136) aspect, these volumes are both economically valueless and utterly uninteresting. The more recent they are the less appealing they appear to him. In contrast, a “few old newspapers, and still older almanacs” left there make a completely different impression on Hawthorne. To him, these old newspapers “reproduced [...] the epochs when they had issued from the press, with a distinctness that was altogether unaccountable” (1982, 1137). Surprised by his perceptions when going over these timeworn papers, Hawthorne asks himself what made their creators “able to produce nothing half so real, as these newspaper scribblers and almanac-makers had thrown off, in the effervescence of a moment.” His answer is that “it is the Age itself that writes newspapers and almanacs.” While “most other works—being written by men who, in the very act, set themselves apart from their age—are likely to possess little significance when new and none at all, when old,” newspapers, in contrast, possess “a kind of intelligible truth for all times” (1982, 1137). “Genius, indeed,” Hawthorne adds, “melts many ages into one, and thus effects something permanent, yet still with a similarity of office to that of the more ephemeral writer. A work of genius is but the newspaper of a century, or perchance of a hundred centuries” (Hawthorne 1982, 1138).

Hawthorne openly challenges the received wisdom that opposes the enduring value which books of religion are expected to aspire to, and the transient interest of newspapers, that are routinely replaced, on a daily or weekly basis. Here, “the effervescence of a moment,” encapsulated by the news, assumes a permanence turning newspapers into an almost sacred message, “a kind of intelligible truth for all times,” which is usually associated with religion. In stressing again the impact of the new press upon the social and cultural antebellum scene, the very idea of “the newspaper of a century” as “work of genius” is revolutionary under several respects. To begin with, it implies that the genius does not necessarily consist of an individual but, as in the case of newspapers, of a cooperative enterprise of various journalists producing noteworthy writings. More complex is the politics of temporalities outlined by Hawthorne’s passage. In addition to the paradoxical consideration that newspapers may well be far more long-lasting than books ostensibly concerned with eternity, Hawthorne identifies a structural link between newspapers and the time in which they were written, to the point that, as he says, it seems it “is the Age itself that writes newspapers and almanacs.” Their significance, then, is not connected only with the moment when they were written, but with a much broader historical dimension. Again, paradoxically, the more time passes, the more meaningful they may become. For that to happen, something else is required. In order to “melt [...] many ages into one,” a newspaper requires the

backward view of a reader, an interpreter able to extricate from its pages the “effervescence of a moment.” Thus, Hawthorne posits a double temporality, one related to the time when newspapers are produced, and another one resulting from historical perspective and interpretation that unfolds over time. In Hawthorne’s stories, these temporalities do not clash, but reinforce each other. Their twofold temporality is echoed in the words of the editorial with which James Gordon Bennett opened the first issue of the *New York Herald*, published on May 6, 1835: “This is the age of the Daily Press, inspired with the accumulated wisdom of past ages, enriched with the spoils of history, and looking forward to a millennium of a thousand years, the happiest and most splendid ever yet known in the measured span of eternity!” (quoted in Copeland 2003, 169).

Indeed, the opening of the Preface to *Twice-told Tales*, where Hawthorne discusses the limited “newspaper-circulation” of most of his tales, seems to draw an implicit resemblance between the value of old newspapers he commented upon in “The Old Manse” and that of his own tales he was ultimately presenting to the reader in book form (Hawthorne 1982, 1150). He recalls how, for a considerable time, “he had no incitement to literary effort in a reasonable prospect of reputation or profit; nothing but the pleasure itself of composition” (1982, 1150). The overall rhetoric of the second preface is patently convergent with his considerations about old newspapers developed in the Preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse*: “The great bulk of the reading Public probably ignored the book altogether. A few persons read it, and liked it better than it deserved” (1982, 1151). Shortly afterwards, he adds: “The circulation of the two volumes was chiefly confined to New England; nor was it until long after this period, if it even yet be the case, that the Author could regard himself as addressing the American Public, or, indeed any Public at all” (1982, 1151). This prolonged disregard from the public allegedly turned him “for a good many years, into the obscurest man of letters in America,” as he notably defined himself (1982, 1150).⁸

This resemblance between the value of newspapers and fiction becomes more surprising when the searching for old newspapers and his own writings are made to converge: “Much more, indeed, he wrote; and some very small part of it might yet be rummaged out (but it would not be worth the trouble) among the dingy pages of fifteen-or-twenty-year-old periodicals, or within the shabby morocco-covers of faded Souvenirs” (Hawthorne 1982, 1150). Like old news, his tales

⁸ Meredith McGill has amply demonstrated not only how exaggerated Hawthorne’s self-deprecatory definition was, but also and especially, the manifold “uses” of this exaggeration, in terms of the critical reception of the earlier phase of his career, which was thus turned into a “prolonged and unheralded apprenticeship for his ‘Major Phase,’ the concentrated three-year period in which he achieved national fame as the writer of novel-length romances” (2003, 224).

also seem to “require [...] to be read in the clear, brown, twilight atmosphere in which [they were] written” (1982, 1152). Thus, Hawthorne creates a strange comparison between his interest in old newspapers and his activity as a writer of fiction. He seems to produce an uncanny sense of the present, by juxtaposing it to a constructed, collective memory emerging from his stories set two centuries earlier. The temporalities in which he chooses to enwrap both the newspapers of the past and his tales are also peculiar. While the former are approached through a backward glance, his stories seem to presuppose a double readership: a contemporary and a deferred one, which at some point in the future may hopefully discover as much amusement and interest in his writings as he finds in old newspapers. In this way, Hawthorne achieves a threefold goal: firstly, he removes the timeliness of news and its bearing merely on the present moment; secondly, he invests in the historical import of news—his reconstructing the past figuratively and imaginatively works as a “tarnished mirror” of the present (Hawthorne 1983, 148); thirdly, through a kind of structural deferral of his recognition, he lays the ground for his consecration.

As can be detected in his well-known reviews of Hawthorne’s tales, Poe’s approach to contemporary journalism and temporality appears totally different. When read in succession, his reviews reveal something interesting about their composition. According to Poe, they were all written under the constraints of the periodical press industry, which allegedly determined the reviews themselves: the first being limited to “undigested and cursory remarks, without proof and without explanation” (Poe 1984, 569); the second, with the author “pressed for room,” and therefore forced to “discuss [Hawthorne’s] volumes more briefly and more at random than their high merits deserve” (1984, 569); and the third with Poe who had to “hasten to conclude this paper with a summary of [Hawthorne’s] merits and demerits” (1984, 587). In the first and shortest of the three texts, Poe confines himself to paying tribute to Hawthorne, while in the second and third, he discusses the work of his fellow writer more in detail, commenting, as McGill observes, on the specific feature of “repose” that Poe ascribes to Hawthorne’s tales, as well as on his originality and on the short tale in general (McGill 2003, 227-233). In the second and third, it is evident that Poe uses the reviews also as an excuse to advance his own literary ideas.

Besides his critical considerations of his fellow writer, these reviews constitute, as it has often been noted, his manifesto on prose writing. However, from his first (1842) to his third (1847) review, we also see a marked shift in Poe’s attitude towards Hawthorne. From regarding him “as one of the few men of indisputable genius” (Poe 1984, 569) and “a man of the truest genius” (1984, 577), he moves on to considering him “*not* original in any sense” (1984, 579, italics in the

original). How do we account for such a change? As McGill suggests, the concept of repose “is a tricky stylistic marker in that it can signal both a high degree of originality and its lack, a notable authorial achievement or a kind of generic unremarkable writing” (2003, 228). However, it seems to me, repose needs to be read in relation to Poe’s elaboration of his vision of short fiction in those very reviews of Hawthorne’s tales; a vision which he details right after having stressed repose in Hawthorne. Read in this connection, the notion of repose appears indicative of more than “a break with ordinary life that renders it enchanting, a defamiliarized but potentially edifying perspective on the everyday” (McGill 2003, 233).

As Poe notably states, the “tale proper [...] affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose” (1984, 571). He then adds: “[i]n the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fulness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (1984, 572). Thus, Poe introduces temporality as a structural element of prose writing, but in a new form: the temporality of reading. “We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal” (1984, 572). It is not a question of glancing backward or forward here, nor of the time represented, but of the structural temporal dimension of the reading of the tale itself, since “all excitement is, from a physical necessity, transient” (1984, 585). This is why the notion of “preconceived effect” (1984, 586) is so central in his literary vision, and for Poe effect is also the criterion for measuring the originality of prose fiction: “it is the novelty of *effect* alone which is worth consideration” (1984, 580). And it is precisely on the point of originality that, in his third review, Poe levels a critique at Hawthorne. He acknowledges that Hawthorne has “the purest style, the finest taste, the most available scholarship, the most delicate humor, the most touching pathos, the most radiant imagination, the most consummate ingenuity” (1984, 587), yet he defines him “*not* original in any sense” (1984, 579). What for Poe makes Hawthorne not original is his inability to tickle “the reader’s sense of the new” (1984, 579).

The search for “the reader’s sense of the new” is precisely what informs the manifold temporalities with which Poe experiments in his short fiction and what differentiates his works from those of Hawthorne. Indeed, if the “sense of the new” has clear romantic overtones, it just as clearly also seems to refer to the kind of news that was becoming popular in those days: the sensational news with which the penny press was revolutionizing both the journalistic field and the social life of the antebellum US. In this sense, the reactions of the two authors to the emergence of the penny press and to the varieties of temporal experiences it elicited appear profoundly different.

In underscoring that Hawthorne’s tales have “repose” as their “predominant feature” (1984, 570) Poe emphasized precisely how Hawthorne’s fiction marks a difference from the language of modern news and journalistic logic. In his third review, while allowing that Hawthorne’s fictional tales show a formal perfection—“they belong to the highest region of Art” (1984, 574)—Poe observes that in Hawthorne’s tales “[t]here is no attempt at effect. All is quiet, thoughtful, subdued” (1984, 570), which induces him to reverse his judgement of Hawthorne’s originality, stating that “he is *not* original in any sense” (1984, 579, italics in the original). Also, Poe’s well-known emphasis on the issue of length seems to be clearly related, on the one hand, to a new, much wider, and mostly anonymous readership that could devote, often for very practical reasons, only a limited amount of time to reading, and, on the other, to the journalistic constraints of space.

These examples indicate how the aesthetic logic of “repose” that Poe identifies as underpinning Hawthorne’s tales is very much at odds with that of the attention-catching effect advocated by Poe, who, in fact, aims to absorb the power of the language of news within literary discourse and so incorporate the logic of journalism in his fictional writing. Poe wants to engage journalism head-on. The emphasis on effect, on sensational themes, on catching and maintaining the readers’ attention, on the technology of style and composition, on the production of pleasure, and on the importance of length were exactly the tools through which the penny press was revolutionizing the antebellum social landscape.

The two writers’ different approaches and the multiple temporalities in which they were both embedded and helped to generate continue to reverberate on their authorial figures. Hawthorne’s investigations into tradition and history have had the effect of establishing him as a canonical figure, a figure aspiring to the status of “newspaper of a hundred centuries,” who launched a claim to be recognized as an author with a capital A. Much more troubled has been the trajectory of Poe who, paradoxically, has attained a canonical status only when the canon itself has been debunked as a construction disguising a number of vested interests behind the covers of aesthetic values. Interestingly, Poe’s reviews and Hawthorne’s Prefaces have a point in common: they are connected with their authors’ desire to publish their stories in volume format. It was only upon the appearance of their tales as a book collection that they could become an object of the two authors’ criticism: a criticism leading Poe to take Hawthorne’s text as a benchmark for the development of his own critical and literary vision, and Hawthorne to devise a new language for a critical appreciation based on “helping the reader’s way into the interior edifice of a book” (Hawthorne 1982, 1155). In this sense, they are illustrative of the ways in

which their fictions and their desire for recognition moved across, and were mediated by, the manifold and shifting temporalities of the antebellum US cultural scene.

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