It is telltale that Edgar Allan Poe devoted more of his critical writing to his hatred of Longfellow than to any other purpose. This hatred has a complex structure. It marks a clash between North and South, wealth and poverty, privileged membership and marginality and disownment. It points, in effect, to broad gaps within antebellum American life. Poe has often been claimed as a French poet writing in the American language. Translated lavishly by Baudelaire, canonized by Mallarmé and Valéry, he has been adopted by the French poetic tradition much more than by the American. Since recognized as a strong impetus to Modernism, Poe remains a poet of his time. As William Carlos Williams was the first to claim, Poe’s work is “the first great burst through to expression of a re-awakened genius of place.”

Yet Poe’s historicism tends to be counter-worldly. His are reflected images of society and history in a severe mirror. Reflection, inversion, and imitation are themselves core problematics of Poe’s aesthetic, expressed in the obsession with plagiarism that led him to publish hundreds of pages denouncing Longfellow, and also in his aesthetic theory that essentially rejects art as imitation. Poe, like and against Longfellow, was concerned about American literature as a mere echo of British, without its own originality. He was also concerned with the status of art in an American culture increasingly commercial, industrial, and material. If one great Romantic project is to recast experience through imagination, to infuse reality with poetic meaning, then Poe’s poetry is a measure of its American
impossibility. In Poe, this led to a particular repudiation of naturalism. But Poe’s work also exposes the intimate relationships between aesthetics and metaphysics so fundamental to, and also destabilizing within, American Romanticism itself. Religion emerges as a crucial context for Poe, as it is for, and situates him within, American cultural trends.

Poe’s own biography suggests the American dream in reverse. At the age of two, Poe was twice abandoned: by his father through desertion and his mother through death from tuberculosis. He was then taken in but not legally adopted by Frances Allan and her ambivalent husband John. Poe’s years spent with the Allans trace a complex and distressing course of ambition and betrayal. Frances and John, small slave owners who were financially precarious until a late inheritance from a wealthy uncle lifted John to the plantation life he had long desired, raised Poe as a Southern gentleman without ever establishing him as their heir. Educated partly in England and partly in Richmond, he enrolled at the University of Virginia in 1826 at age seventeen. During this time, he was also coming into increasing conflict with his foster-father over drinking, gambling, and debts. Following a quarrel, Poe abandoned college to enlist in the army, which he abandoned in turn. John Allan’s death in 1830 left Poe disinherited and penniless but also released him from bourgeois expectations, enabling him to pursue the writing that had been, since his earliest precocity, his true calling. For the remainder of his life, he vainly attempted (like Melville) to support himself by his art, enduring grueling magazine work in both Northern and Southern cities—an effort to survive as a writer that equally spelled its defeat in distracting and secondary labor. Poetry, which he called in the preface to *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845) “the field of my choice,” remained a luxury he could ill afford. His personal life was marked by a series of strangely curtailed relationships to women: an un consummated marriage to his thirteen year-old cousin Virginia in 1836, and following her death from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five, a series of duplicating and intercrossing courtships, none of which were brought to conclusion. In 1849, Poe was found unconscious on a Baltimore street, dressed in someone else’s clothes apparently in order to cast, for payment, a bogus ballot at Ryan’s fourth-ward polls on Election Day. He died four days later of alcohol poisoning. A headstone at his grave was erected only twenty-six years later; the placement attended by Walt Whitman alone among America’s literary personalities but commemorated by Mallermé’s great sonnet on Poe. After his death, Poe’s work fell into the hands of the indefatigable Rufus Griswold, who further