

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College, student essay, spring 2016.

Samuel W. Hartshorn, **Edgar Allan Poe** (1848). Modern photographic copy of original daguerreotype, H.31.25 in (79 cm) x 27.25 in (69.25 cm) with frame. Gift of Brown University.

This modern reproduction of Samuel W. Hartshorn's well known daguerreotype of the poet Edgar Allan Poe [1809-1849], owned by Brown University, speaks to the ethos of the Athenaeum—epitomizing both its mission to enlighten the mind through literary association and celebrating the democratic possibilities of a widely-accessible form like the daguerreotype. On a documentary level, the image captures a crucial moment when Poe's life intertwined with the Athenaeum's history—and indeed, one of most tumultuous weeks in the poet's life.

Regarded as the architect of modern short stories, and the forerunner of the “arts for art's sake” and French Symbolists movements, Poe lived and wrote productively, rising as one of the most eminent poets of his time. Adopting the literary profession by 1832, Poe launched his career with the “Tales of the Folio Club” while serving as the editor of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, later accepting a position as editor of the *New York Quarterly Review*.¹ In 1839, the same year he was appointed editor and chief of *The Gentlemen's Magazine*, Poe's growing collection of romantic creations were published in two volumes under the title of “Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque,” by Lee & Blanchard of Philadelphia.² His career culminated in “The Raven”, originally published under the pen name “Quarles” in *The American Review* in February, 1845.³

On November 5th, 1848, Poe boarded a train bound for Boston after acquiring two ounces of laudanum, half of which he consumed upon his arrival. Following his delirium and failed suicide attempt, Poe returned to Providence, miserable and desperate, to ask Whitman to marry him. Upon her refusal, he retired to his hotel on November 8th and began drinking heavily, interrupted only by a mysterious man identified as a “Mr. MacFarlane,” who persuaded the poet—for unknown motives—to visit the Masury and Hartshorn studio located at 25 Westminster Street the following morning.⁴ It was here where daguerreotypist Edwin H. Manchester, a camera operator who worked for Masury and Hartshorn, captured one of the most celebrated literary portraits of the nineteenth century, known today as the “Ultima Thule” daguerreotype, its Latin phrase first used by the ancient Greek historian Polybius to describe the farthestmost regions of the world.⁵ “Thule” refers to the name of a country described by ancient Greek explorer Pytheas (c. 310 BCE) as being a six days' sail north of Britain, and was widely regarded as the northernmost part of the world.⁶

The phrase was applied to the image by Whitman herself, who found the trialing circumstances surrounding the image's creation reminiscent of a passage in Poe's poem “Dream-Land”:

¹ Eugene L. Didier, *The Life and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Haskell House Publishers LTD), 64.

² Didier, *Life and Poems*, 70.

³ Didier, *Life and Poems*, 83.

⁴ John Carl Miller, ed., *Poe's Helen* (Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 348.

⁵ Miller, ed., *Poe's Helen*, 319-21.

⁶ Oxford Dictionary, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/thule#m_en_gb0862120, 24, March 2016.

I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule —
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime
Out of SPACE — out of TIME⁷

Indeed, the hazy image presents Poe quite out of place and time. His thick coat blends into the dark background, drawing the viewer's attention to the pale glow of this sullen expression. His brow appears to sag under the weight of depression, bulging bags beneath his eyes and a tight, grimacing mouth plainly exposing a fresh jab to the heart.

The provenance of the original daguerreotype is shadowy, and, in letters written in 1874 and 1875, Whitman remarks only that the plate had “mysteriously disappeared” and was “presumed to have been stolen.”⁸ She reports that as early as December 1848 it was displayed at the Masury and Hartshorn gallery, remaining on exhibition for several years. In 1850 the Masury and Hartshorn's former assistants, brothers Edwin H. and Henry N. Manchester, acquired the image where it was displayed at their own studio at 33 Westminster Street. It was during this ownership when it disappeared. Fortunately, ample copies were made at an earlier date and five contemporaneous versions of the daguerreotype are known to exist. Copies may be found at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the Poe Museum in Baltimore, and the Free Library of Philadelphia.⁹

After great consideration, Whitman finally submitted to the engagement on November 13, 1848, five days after her initial refusal. That afternoon Poe visited the Westminster studio one more, where he posed for the second of two daguerreotype portraits taken that week, possibly accompanied this time by his newly betrothed. Intended as a loving gift to Whitman, the Whitman or Hartshorn Daguerreotype captures a more solemn and relaxed Poe than the one taken only four days prior. The lightness and casual presentation of the poet poses a stark contrast to the Ultima Thule Daguerreotype, Poe's pale, wrinkled attire blending with a well-lit background. His slouched posture and unbuttoned vest evoke mixed disheveled exhaustion and triumph: a once fallen man rising from the battle scene, injured and regretful but inexplicably relieved.

Although their engagement ended the same year, Whitman kept the daguerreotype until 1874, enamored by Poe's “sweet and serene expression” in the image. There is speculation who it came under possession during this time, but the daguerreotype was gifted to Brown University's John Hay Library in 1905.¹⁰ Eventually, the picture was reproduced and enlarged as a gift from the university to the Athenaeum.

Although the daguerreotype was first introduced in Europe, it was in America where the art advanced into a truly prosperous business. In 1839 Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre [1787-1851] appointed Francois Gouraud to promote the daguerreotype in the United States, where he

⁷ Michael J. Deas, *The Portraits and Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1989), 36.

⁸ Miller, ed., *Poe's Helen*, 22.

⁹ Deas, *Portraits and Daguerreotypes*, 40.

¹⁰ “Edgar Allan Poe & Sarah Helen Whitman”, Brown University Library CURIO, <http://library.brown.edu/dps/curio/tag/daguerreotype/>, 24 March, 2016.

organized exhibitions and held lectures.¹¹ By the following decade, when the Hartshorn and Ultime Thule Daguerreotypes were shot, the new market for “celebrity” images was just beginning in the United States – eventually epitomized by the New York studio of Napoleon Sarony, whose late nineteenth-century images of figures like Lily Langtry and Oscar Wilde were best-sellers with an eager (and growing) fan culture. Of course, the tradition of portraiture continued, as Poe, established in his career and lusted over for his mystery and romance, posed for his own picture on several occasions. Yet, with sentimental origins tied to Whitman, the Hartshorn and Ultime Thule daguerreotypes seem to be an extension of the traditional notion of exchanging a miniature portrait with a loved one rather than of early artifacts of celebrity culture.

In the words of Whitman, “To translate that mysterious, shadowy, poetic life of his, with its elusive details and mythical traditions, into the fixed facts and clear outlines of the authentic narrative, must, I fear, prove a difficult task to the most conscientious annalist.”¹² The Athenaeum’s copy of the Hartshorn Daguerreotype provides an exhilarating glimpse into the drama of Poe’s personal life, which seems as vast and perplexing as the far reaches of the world.

¹¹ Merry A Foresta and John Wood, *Secrets of the Dark Chamber: The Art of the American Daguerreotype* (Smithsonian, 1995), 17.

¹² Didier, *Life and Poems*, 64.