THE SUBTITLE of *Eureka* is "A Prose Poem." In his Preface Poe states that it is for dreamers; that it is an "Art-Product"—a "Romance"; and, finally and flatly, that it is a "Poem."

It is not a poem at all. It is not even a prose poem, as some of Poe's tales are. Edward Davidson ably demonstrates that it is "a central statement" of the symbolist theory that "art is man's one instrument for making some order out of the infinitude of empirical formlessness."¹ True: in *Eureka* Poe makes order of a kind, but it is not a poem's kind.

I am not concerned with the worth of *Eureka* as an essay (as Poe properly calls it in a second subtitle), but rather with how it became possible for him so to change his conception of the poem that he could put his lyrics and this work of "scientific detail"² (as he also described it) in the same genre-category. The reasons are complicated. I limit myself here to those that have to do with professional influences and pressures—those that transformed a natural lyricist into the author of a treatise on the universe.

I suggest that at least by the middle of the 1840's Poe became impatient of the limitations of the lyric, and even a little contemptuous of it, and came to realize that he could not afford to put his professional energies and talents into it. His alienation from formal verse increased as he committed himself to journalism as represented by the monthly magazine. The essential characteristic of the general monthly magazine was variety. In
offering a widely varied fare of amusement and information, editors were responding, in part, to the American public’s admiration of expertise—of specialized knowledge of disciplines, of how things work or are done. Through magazine writing and editing (perhaps especially through reviewing a wide variety of books), Poe discovered the versatility of his own mind, and came to think of the magazine, rather than the book, as the appropriate expression of American culture. At the same time, he came to feel the need of a literary form of broader scope than the lyric and the tale—one in which both imagination and erudition could be allowed free play. In part, his wish to create such a form was a reflection of the nineteenth-century poet’s desire to find a modern equivalent of the epic. *Eureka*—a mixture of philosophy, religion, mathematics, physics, and scientific theory in general, all serving as a vehicle of his private vision of the universe—was Poe’s attempt to make a modern epic. Its modernness, in part, consisted of his effort to journalize scholarship, to make knowledge and theory diverting. Pathetically, he believed his “poem” (which had a slow sale of 750 copies) would be immensely popular.

In his last years Poe had two obsessions, and they were related. One was with the idea of *Eureka*, the theme of which was, to him, so “solemn,” “august,” “comprehensive,” and “difficult” that it awed him into “humility.” The other was a determination to establish what he envisioned as the ideal monthly magazine (which he entitled, first, “The Penn Magazine,” later, “The Stylus”). The latter was the more important to him: he hoped to put his earnings from the book, and from lectures on it, into the magazine.

His magazine project, like his tales and poems, was dream work, inspired by revulsion against the realities of American journalism.
In spite of his reputation as editor of magazines (the legend of his success as editor needs careful re-examination), it is a question whether Poe was suited for the commercial magazine world at all. Harper and Brothers—shrewd, thoroughly business-minded, and certainly one of the foremost publishers of fiction—thought his magazine tales "too learned and mystical. They would be understood and relished only by a very few—not by the multitude. The numbers of readers in this country capable of appreciating and enjoying such writings is very small indeed."\(^4\) Poe’s reputation as editor is based largely on his management of Graham’s, but the owner, George R. Graham, one of the most astute magazine publishers of the 1840’s, wrote after Poe’s death: "The character of Poe’s mind was of such an order, as not to be very widely in demand. The class of educated mind which he could readily and profitably address, was small—the channels through which he could do so at all, were few.\(^5\)" In introducing Poe’s “For Annie” to Home Journal readers under the heading “Odd Poem,” N. P. Willis, the most successful of magazineists, made the interesting suggestion that “money could not be better laid out for the honor of this period of American literature—neither by the government, by a society, nor by an individual—than in giving Edgar Poe a competent annuity, on condition that he should never dilute his thoughts for the magazines, and never publish anything till it had been written a year.”\(^6\)

These judgments came from both the book world and the magazine world, which were by no means identical. Poe’s professional fate to a certain extent was determined by the position he took in the squeeze between the book and magazine economies in the 1840’s, when publishers’ rivalry in the reprinting of foreign works was at its height. 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. The prestige of the book was infinitely greater than that of the periodical, a fact that most
American writers were keenly aware of, and one that determined the form and the tone of much that they wrote.

Of course, there was no clear physical distinction between the two kinds of artifacts, and works published as pamphlets (Poe's *Tamerlane*, for example) belonged to neither. Periodicals took forms as different as the daily newspaper and the booklike annual, and between these were the weekly, the monthly, and the quarterly. The longer the interval between issues, the greater the prestige of the periodical. But by the 1830's the book and the magazine were borrowing each other's characteristics: some books were issued in paperbound parts, periodically, and some of the worst of these looked as bad as the weeklies.

Yet despite the blurring of distinctions, the book maintained its superior status in the minds of writers and readers, and was imitated by those magazine publishers who were ambitious of prestige. The best magazines boasted fresh, unbroken type, good paper, wide margins, and finely tooled illustrations. Burton, the owner of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, wrote Poe that competition was forcing him toward book standards: "expensive plates, thicker paper, and better printing than my antagonists."  

In a letter of 1844 to Charles Anthon, Poe made an extraordinary statement: "Thus I have written no books." Since by that date he had published three collections of verse, a two-volume collection of tales, a romance, and a textbook, the statement invites speculation. Some curious phrases in his book reviews are relevant: "absolutely bound volumes" and "absolute book." Sometimes he used them invidiously. "As the author of many *books* [Poe's italics], of several absolutely bound volumes in the ordinary 'novel' form of auld lang syne, Miss [Catharine Maria] Sedgwick has a certain adventitious hold upon the attention of the public, a species of tenure that has nothing to do with literature proper. " He would not allow the hard covers of her works "to bias critical judgment." In his "Literati" papers he rarely neglected to state whether a writer's magazine work had been collected or to comment on the format and
typography of such collections. When he favored a writer's work, its book publication was evidence of its quality; when he did not, the hard binding occasioned a sneer that such trash should be so honored. Thus a complimentary article on Willis refers to the "handsome edition of his poems with portrait." But of Longfellow he wrote that the "country is disgraced by the evident toadyism which would award to his social position and influence, to his fine paper and large type, to his morocco binding and gilt edges, to his flattering portrait of himself, and to the illustrations of his poems that amount of indiscriminate approbation which neither could nor would have been given to the poems themselves." The point is sharpened by the circumstance that in 1839, long before the publication of the elegant, illustrated edition of Longfellow referred to, Poe had begged the publishers of his Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque to print a few copies on fine paper. They refused because Poe could not afford to pay for the luxury.

If "absolutely bound" means simply hard binding, Poe's Tamerlane (1827, forty pages, 12 1/4 cents) was not a book. But Al Aaraaf (1829, seventy-two pages) was in boards, and Poems (1831, 124 pages) in cloth. (Purchasers complained of the bad printing of the latter.) Poe probably paid for the printing of all three, and could not afford attractive bookmaking. Certainly, "The Prose Romances of Edgar Allan Poe, Number One," issued by a Philadelphia publisher of cheap books in 1843 as part of a "Uniform Serial Edition" at 12 1/2 cents per miserably printed number, did not qualify as a book. Even at this price and in this format (halfway between book and magazine), there were few purchasers. There is no reference to this title in Poe's correspondence, but in his review of Sedgwick he said that the binding of her works gave her "a very decided advantage over her more modern rivals [who are condemned] to the external insignificance of the yellow-backed pamphleteering." Graham had this circumstance in mind when he said in the article on Poe previously quoted that the "tendency to cheapen every literary
work to the lowest point of beggarly flimsiness in price and profit” made “even the well-disposed” reader recoil from works so repulsively presented.

What of the Tales of 1840 and The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, which were hardbound? (Indeed, the two-volume Tales was in the same format as Sedgwick’s early novels.) We must now fall back on possible meanings of “absolute book.” If the phrase refers to some standard of form or unity, or to seriousness of content, he may have excluded Pym because, loose and episodic, it had none of the unity he strove for in his tales and expected in good novels. In a sense, he wrote Pym to order, and in a hurry. In June, 1836, the Harpers told him that “Readers have a strong preference for a single connected story,” occupying a “whole volume or a number of volumes.”

Within six months of that date Poe began to serialize his first and only “novel.” In the whole of his correspondence, the only word about it is that it is a “silly book.” Obviously he wished it to be forgotten.

His unwillingness to let the 1840 Tales qualify as a book is harder to explain. From the early thirties he had wished to present his tales in a framework, which, he may have thought, would have given them book status as far as organization was concerned. The tales were to be recited by members of a club, and each tale was to be followed by a critical discussion. In 1836 he proposed a volume of three hundred pages, one-quarter of which would consist of connective tissue between tales. His claim that the tales were “originally written to illustrate a large work ‘On the Imaginative Faculties,’ ” if it is true at all, probably represented the all but universal tendency at that time to disguise fiction as something else more respectable—to give it dignity by associating it with history or philosophy or psychology or something equally “useful.”

In his Preface to the Tales, Poe said, rather evasively, “I may have written with an eye to this republication in volume form, and may therefore have desired to preserve a certain unity of
design. This is, indeed, the fact.” The word “fact” must refer to “desired,” for the collection has no design whatever. The publishers apparently rejected the critical interludes, and Poe, to fill up the customary two volumes, simply gathered together all the stories he had written, including eight late ones which had nothing to do with the “club” pattern.

3

Sometime between 1839 and 1842, Poe’s conception of book unity changed. During the latter year he drew up a plan for a new two-volume edition of his tales to be entitled *Phantasy-Pieces*. All twenty-five of the 1840 *Tales* were to be included, together with ten uncollected ones. The significant feature of the new collection was to be the order of the pieces, a matter he pointed up in the margin of the Table of Contents: “To Printer—In printing the Tales preserve the order of the Table of Contents.” The “order” is simply that of variety. The first five tales, for example, are, successively, a detective story, a burlesque, an adventure tale, a satire, and a speculative dialogue on death.

The principle of variety is again emphasized in the 1844 letter to Anthon: “Unless the journalist collects his various articles he is liable to be grossly misconceived & misjudged [by those] who see only a paper here & there, by accident. He loses, too, whatever merit may be his due on the score of versatility—a point which can only be estimated by collection of his various articles in volume form and altogether.” And again, in 1846: the 1845 tales, selected by E. A. Duyckinck for the publisher, did not succeed in “representing my mind in its various phases. In writing these Tales one by one I have kept the book-unity always in mind—that is, each has been composed with reference to its effect as part of a whole. In this view, one of my chief aims has been the widest diversity of subject, thought,
& especially tone & manner of handling. Were all my tales now before me in a large volume [their merit] would be the wide diversity and variety.”

The implication here is that the unity of the whole derives from the totality of the mind of the writer in all its diversity, a conception which certainly owes something to Poe’s commitment to journalism. Yet Poe perceived that by its very nature magazine writing encouraged ephemerality and courted oblivion. Only the book offered the possibility of recognition and of a passport to posterity. On the other hand, he was convinced that the “energetic, busy spirit of the age [tends] wholly to the Magazine literature—to the curt, the terse, the well-timed, and the readily diffused, in preference to the old forms of the verbose and ponderous & the inaccessible.” If Anthon would persuade Harpers to publish his Phantasy-Pieces, the groundwork would be laid for public acceptance of his ideal monthly, which would attract the “best intellect and education of the land, the true and permanent readers.”

He would invest his magazine with the physical dignity of well-printed books—clear new type, hand-press work, good paper, wide margins, French stitching (so that “the book” would lie fully open), thick covers, and woodcuts in the style of the best illustrated European books. It would acquire “caste” through contributions by men of wealth and status—Nicholas Biddle, Judge Conrad, Judge Upshur—and President Tyler’s son! He would escape the domination of commercial publishers by seeking private capital, and of eastern critical cliques by getting subscribers in the South and West, where the influence of the cliques was slight. He would address the “aristocracy of talent” in America. His estimates of the circulation of such a serious journal ran as high as 100,000—at a time when the maximum circulation of Godey’s was 40,000.

In Poe’s more euphoric moods his dream took the form of a crazy conspiracy. His magazine would “control” American litera-
ture. The editors would be a "coalition" of a dozen influential
men of letters; their names would be kept secret to protect them
from the commercial press; the "elite" of our writers would
"combine" secretly; new candidates for the staff would be subject
to exclusion by blackball; and the profits would easily provide an
income of $5,000 a year for each member, even if the circulation
were only 20,000.20 Toward the end of his life the dream became
megalomania. In 1848 he wrote Mrs. Whitman, the middle-aged
widow and poetess to whom he was briefly engaged: "It would
be a glorious triumph, Helen, for us—for you & me. I dare not
trust my schemes to a letter. Would it not be 'glorious'

to establish, in America, the sole unquestionable aristocracy
—that of intellect—to lead & to control it? All this I can
do if you bid me—and aid me."21

Yet Poe put some real thought as well as wishful thinking into
his project. One of the commonest phrases in his criticism is
"the many and the few," and his use of it is almost always con­
descending to the many. Nevertheless, though he defined the
mass as "the uneducated," "those who read little," and "the
obtuse in intellect," he further divided these groups into two
classes—"men who can think but who dislike thinking" and
"men who either have not been presented with the materials
for thought, or who have no brains with which to 'work up' the
material."22 Perhaps his dream of a large audience was sustained
by the hope that some of the mass could be trained to like to
think, and that some others would be hospitable to the materials
for thought. This possibility seems to be confirmed in his state­
ment that "the career of true taste is onward—and now moves
more vigorously onward than ever."23 His contempt for the mass
is further mitigated in his Hawthorne review of 1847, where he
refers to "the few who belong properly to books, and to whom
books perhaps do not quite so properly belong. The few
through a certain warping of the taste, which long ponder­
ing upon books as books never fails to induce, are prone
to think the public not right rather than an educated author wrong. But the simple truth is that the writer who aims at impressing the people is *always* wrong when he fails in forcing that people to receive the impression.”

The point of view expressed here is obviously that of an editor (or publisher) rather than an author. In the next sentence he turns author again and relieves Hawthorne (whose genius he generously admits and demonstrates) of the charge of failure because Hawthorne does not aim to impress “the people,” who are, indeed, incapable of comprehending him. The passage is but another example of the doubleness of Poe’s mind; yet, in the later years, Poe thought more and more like an editor and less and less like an author. Not only are his later works more calculated attempts to catch a wide audience than his earlier ones, but he repeatedly defends authors who, like Dickens and Bulwer, deliberately write for the many as well as for the few.

The defense becomes offensive when he says that Charles Fenno Hoffman’s ability “to use the tools of the rabble when necessary without soiling or roughening the hands with their employment” is an “unerring test of the natural aristocrat.” But he makes his point more objectively when he argues (in discussing Dickens) that “the writer of fiction, who looks most sagaciously to his own interest, [will] combine all votes by intermingling with his loftier efforts such amount of less ethereal matter as will give general currency to his composition.” Indeed, “the skill with which an author addresses the lower taste of the populace is often a source of pleasure to a taste higher and more refined.”

Thus, though Poe thought all his life of the mass audience as “rabble,” he tended increasingly to dwell on the “skill” which succeeds in “uniting all the suffrages,” and, inferentially, he came to believe that such skill is superior to that which is appreciated only by the few. This belief must have entered into his hopes for the *Stylus*, which he was most certainly thinking of when he said
of Duyckinck’s magazine, *Arcturus*, that it was a “little too good to enjoy extensive popularity,” though “a better journal might have been far more acceptable to the public.”

Most of Poe’s thinking about the potentialities of magazine literature had to do with prose, but his attitude toward poetry and the audience for it changed radically, too, as he became more deeply committed to an elevated journalism.

His early books of verse and his letters of the time contain a standard set of postures, many of which he borrowed from the elite tradition in England. Expecting to become, through inheritance, a man of independent means, he would address the cultivated few, ignore the rabble, and wait for fame. The postures are complicated and often conflicting. (1) One does not write for publication, and if one prints, it is for one’s peers. *Tamerlane* was “of course not intended for publication,” and the 1831 volume was “printed for private circulation.” (2) The gentleman is not “busy” or ambitious, and poetry is a product of “hours of idleness.” “I am and have been from my childhood an idler,” and thus it cannot be said that “I left a calling for this idle trade.” (The “idler” pose was a commonplace among writers of the early nineteenth century.) (3) Maturity has nothing to do with the poetic gift. He wrote *Al Aaraaf*, he claimed, when he was ten, most of the other early pieces before he was fifteen. (4) Learning has little to do with the imagination, and poetry is not subject to intellectual analysis. Yet the gentleman-poet is erudite, and he assumes that his peers will understand his arcane allusions and his quotations from foreign languages. (5) The poet is indifferent to popular opinion. “I would be as much ashamed of the world’s good opinion as proud of your own.” (6) The poet is a rare, exalted creator, with gifts denied to ordinary mortals, and a poem
cannot be judged except by poets. If Shakespeare is praised by the many, it is because the world has accepted the opinions of a "few gifted individuals, who kneel around the summit, beholding, face to face, the master spirit who stands upon the pinnacle." Artists, he wrote in 1836, are the "gifted ministers to those exalted emotions which link us with the mysteries of Heaven," and are infinitely superior to the "vermin" who "crawl around the altar of Mammon." 28

Some of these attitudes recur in the Preface to The Raven and Other Poems (1845). The poems are "trifles," collected and republished to restore the correct text. They are not in accord "with my own taste" or "very creditable to myself," or "of much value to the public." He denies that he has ever made "any serious effort" in poetry. Yet he insists that he holds it in too great reverence to write it "with an eye to the paltry compensations, or commendations of mankind." Three years earlier he had written a friend that the "higher order of poetry always will be, in this country, unsaleable," 29 but publicly he argued that the public had an appetite for verse, that we are a "poetical people," and that our practical, utilitarian talents and the love of poetry are not incompatible. 30

It is difficult to make sense of all this (especially if we put all the statements in chronological order), but it is likely that the success of "The Raven" with the general reader made him revise his concepts of the nature of verse and begin to consider the possibility of "suiting at once the popular and the critical taste" in verse as well as in prose. Though he could, in his lecture on "The Poetic Principle" in 1848, repeat his 1842 statement that poetry is a "wild effort to reach the Beauty above," there is little recognition of the "wild" in his published criticism of verse after 1845. Rather, he tends to play down the "romantic" order of poetry, to defend the "accuracies and elegancies of style" which were associated with Pope, to admit that he had underrated the value of Bryant's polish, and to argue the necessity of "reconciling
genius with artistic skill.” “Nine tenths” of prosody “appertain to the mathematics; and the whole is included within the limits of the commonest common-sense.” 31 “The Raven,” he claimed in “The Philosophy of Composition,” was composed “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.”

This celebration of the role of precision, logic, mathematics, and common sense in poetry, this denigration of “fine frenzy,” “ecstatic intuition,” and “accident,” was in part a journalist’s attempt at a rapprochement with the common reader to whom he had once denied any capacity for the understanding of poetry. Poe was investing the poet with qualities that the reader admired, and divesting him of those that set him apart from the non-literary person.

His major effort to narrow the gap between poet and reader was his analysis of “The Raven” in “The Philosophy of Composition” (which, we must remember, was published in Graham’s, the most popular of middle-class magazines). This essay caters to the American appetite for the “inside story” of how something is done, and makes the reader feel that he can do it too. In a sense, it deflates the romantic poet, who, Poe was sure, would shudder at this “peep behind the scenes,” at this exposure of the backstage gadgets which constitute the “properties of the literary histrio.”

The poetic “laws” which Poe stresses in this essay are those most readily comprehended by the common reader. The insistence on brevity, on a poem’s suitability for a reading at a “single sitting,” Poe supports with the practical argument that in this land without leisure or repose two sittings would allow “the affairs of the world [to] interfere.” His dicta that “melancholy is the most legitimate of all the poetical tones” and that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” especially if a “bereaved lover” is involved, must have been acceptable to the sentimental reader. His argument for the “intrinsic value” of the refrain is based on the “universality of its employment” (he had kept “steadily in view the design of
rendering [‘The Raven’] *universally appreciable*”). The “thirst for self-torture” was an idea readily grasped by the consumers of misery-novels. And, finally, he recognizes the popular desire for an explicit and useful meaning in his admission that the last stanza disposes the reader “to seek a moral.”

To what extent Poe persuaded himself that his essay could serve as a blueprint for the making of true poetry is questionable. We cannot trust entirely his statement to a friend that “‘The Raven’ has had a great ‘run’ —but I wrote it for the express purpose of running—just as I did the ‘Gold-Bug’ [but] the bird beat the bug all hollow.” Yet this private statement is echoed in the essay itself: “Irrelevant to the poem *per se* [is] the circumstance—or say the necessity—which in the first place gave rise to the intention of composing a poem [is there significance in the italic?] that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.”

If he believed that he had found a formula for writing poems both good and popular, why did he not use it more often in the last years of his life? He attempted to do so once more, in “Ulalume” (1847), a poem so mechanically constructed, so similar to “The Raven” in theme and tone, and so closely in accord with the general prescription offered in “The Philosophy of Composition” that one wonders why it has been such a riddle to commentators, and why it is considered “private” and obscure. Poe obviously planned a popular poem, and carefully “promoted” it as such. The original title was journalistic: “To — — — — Ulalume: A Ballad.” He first published it anonymously; got a friend to reprint it, again anonymously, but with a prefatory puff and the query, “Who is the author?”; planted it twice again, with his name; and read it into a public lecture. Five printings yielded much publicity but few dollars. Perhaps this was why he wrote no more “Ravens.”

After the 1831 *Poems* he wrote few lyrics—a total of twenty-eight in eighteen years—and the public was rather indifferent to most of those he produced. We tend to be impressed by the num-
ber of reprintings of the individual poems—"The Raven," 11; "The Haunted Palace," 10; "To One in Paradise," 8; "Sonnet—To Science," 8; "The Coliseum," 7. Of fifty-one poems, twenty-eight were reprinted more than three times. But these figures include reprintings in his own four collections (some poems were printed in all four). Moreover, three-fifths of the reprintings were in periodicals with which Poe had a close connection, editorial or other, and some were reprinted at his request in magazines edited or controlled by friends. Most of the reappearances, therefore, do not represent a genuine response to public demand, and he was rarely paid for them. Even first printings were not highly valued by editors: when he was paid, his rates were among the lowest offered to poets who were paid at all.

Yet the necessity to be a poet remained, and he never quite gave up hope that he would be generally accepted as one. *Eureka* was an attempt to realize that hope: he predicted the need of a first edition of 50,000 copies. It was his last and most dismally unsuccessful effort to "suit at once the popular and the critical taste."

3. The long list of subjects in which Poe was, or pretended to be, an expert includes modern foreign languages, Oriental linguistics, classical culture, Egyptology, physics, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, logic, phrenology, seamanship, landscaping, music, painting, cryptography, and duelling.
12. “Second Edition” on the title page of this work was either a common false claim, or it means that *Poems* was to be considered a second edition of *Al Aaraaf*. Poe said that *Tamerlane* had been withdrawn from circulation. He wrote Lowell, July 2, 1844 (*Letters*, I, 258): “I have [not preserved] copies of any of my volumes of poems—nor was either worthy of preservation,” as if he had produced not three but two volumes of verse.
13. Jacob Blanck to the writer, May 16, 1960: “Many [small collections of verse in the 1820's] were issued as pamphlets; many in printed boards; . . . it is generally agreed that board binding was meant only as protection of the sheets until the sheets were put into permanent custom binding. But plenty of these slim productions were issued in cloth . . . frequently highly decorated and surely meant to be permanent.”
19. Lowell's *The Pioneer*, 1843, was said to have been physically an imitation of “the page, the type, the width of the columns of Chapman's and Moxon's pamphlet editions of the British poets.” See Sculley Bradley's Preface to the facsimile of *The Pioneer* (New York, 1947), p. xi.
21. *Letters*, II, 410. “Aid” apparently refers to the Whitman family property, which Poe hoped to use to finance the *Stylus*. Within a month after the engagement he was obliged to sign papers which put the property out of his reach. See Quinn, *Poe*, pp. 582-83, and *Letters*, II, 420-21.
31. These statements are in the 1848 version of “The Rationale of Verse” (*Works*, VI, 47), not in the version of 1843 (*The Pioneer*).
33. The figures are based on a rough count of listings in Campbell, *Poems*. 