

1988

### Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson. The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849.

Richard Fusco  
*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new)



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Fusco, Richard (1988) "Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson. The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849.," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 6 , Article 34.

Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new/vol6/iss1/34](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol6/iss1/34)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

## REVIEWS

291

Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson. *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1987. 919 pp. \$75.00

In his excellent essay in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, G. R. Thompson reminds us of the modern tendency to pigeonhole Poe's personality and his work into various dualities: i.e., the Romantic poet versus the ratiocinative theorist, the superficial Gothic writer versus the keen observer of abnormal behavior. Essentially, in analyzing his place amid the American canon we have ironically mimicked Poe's tendency to present all phenomena as a series of conflicting and ultimately untenable dichotomies. Granted, a few talented critics have occasionally shunned the easier intellectual path and traveled along interpretatively daedal roads of pluralistic perspectives, but we the wayward majority have contented ourselves with the simplicity of bifurcation. I am confident that those students of Poe who peruse *The Poe Log* will discover that such analytical approaches are overly reductive. This masterful presentation of the diurnal world of Poe offers us a perspective free from a biographer's mandate to interpret. Consequently, rather than the reordering of evidence to fit a theory, Thomas and Jackson painstakingly chronicle only the verifiable, permitting us to witness the complex interplay of circumstance and event surrounding each literary effort and biographical incident.

For instance, of late I have casually tried to correlate the relationship between events in Poe's life and the vicissitudes of his cosmological philosophy. In particular, I had entertained a simplistic explanation for the odd serenity that underlies the nihilism in *Eureka*. I suspected that Poe's lengthy reconciliation to his wife's death contributed to his blissful belief in a universe destined for nothingness. Certainly Poe had previously explored in his writing pessimistic theories, but he never imbued them with such sublime depths as he did in *Eureka*.

I do not dismiss the impact of Virginia Poe's death upon the treatise, but I have revised my perception after going through *The Poe Log*. Events in early 1847 offered encouragement to Poe's artistic conceit. On one hand, he found a receptive audience abroad (particularly in France), and that newly earned reputation was duly reported in American periodicals. On the other, his libel suit against the *New York Mirror* for printing a scathing attack on him (by Thomas Dunn English) ended in his favor, which he probably saw as vindication of his literary prowess in the "Literati" sketches. Also, during those months Poe believed that his proposed literary journal *The Stylus* would finally be launched, promising him the unrestricted forum he sought throughout his career. Together these events motivated him to

accept the import of his past writings and to laud their philosophical consequence. Via the guidance of *The Poe Log*, moreover, I could extend my once limited perspective. The editors detail how Poe complied to a request to recite *Eureka* in late October 1848. On 5 November, responding emotionally to frustrating circumstances in his complex relationship with two women, Poe unsuccessfully attempted suicide by swallowing laudanum. Could his recent reacquaintance with his own sublime resignation in *Eureka* have calmed his thanatophobia sufficiently to permit contemplation of such an act?

I suspect that most first perusals of *The Poe Log* will tempt readers toward similar speculations. Its artful format, terse explicitness and editorial restraint do inspire critical imagination. Granted, there are probably omissions that will prompt Poe scholars to reach into the closets of memory, but I do not foresee the sort of supplements that were needed for *The Melville Log*.

My only quarrel with *The Poe Log* is that on occasion it fails fully to realize its ultimate purpose. Like myself, other students of Poe will initially devour the volume page by page. The intermittent narrative format used by Thomas and Jackson does facilitate reading the text as if it were a standard biography. After that first encounter, though, the scholar will treat it as an indispensable reference to confirm or explore new avenues and related side paths about a literary hunch. Then, some editorial decisions (I suspect financially motivated) will detract from the quality of the volume. For example, rather than deal with their policies explicitly in a preface, the editors at times bury them in notes within the text itself: i.e., the silent corrections of misspellings in excerpts of printed matter and in the use of the name *Allan*. Also, I would prefer an exhaustive reference system. Thomas and Jackson do provide valid reasons for their slightly limited index. It will suffice for most purposes, yet one may feel frustrated when searching for some biographical curio. The text would probably note the incident or name, but the index may not provide ready reference to it. Such flaws are insignificant, however, given the resplendent care devoted to each fact. I expect that ten years from now *The Poe Log* will have had an impact on scholarship commensurate with the influence Mabbott's *Collected Works* has had during this decade.

Richard Fusco

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania