

Edgar Allan Poe at 200: "The Absolute Literary Case"

By Thomas Devaney

January 19, 2009 will mark the 200th birthday of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). To celebrate, the Rare Book Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia is mounting a major Poe exhibition entitled "Quoth the Raven," featuring Poe materials assembled by Col. Richard Gimbel over a fifty-year period. The Gimbel Collection includes first editions, manuscripts, autograph letters, reprints, illustrated editions, foreign editions, photographs and artwork of Poe, as well as nearly all the periodicals in which Poe's contributions first appeared. Especially noteworthy are a first edition of *Tamerlane*, Poe's first poetry collection; the manuscripts of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "Annabel Lee," "For Annie"; and the only extant manuscript copy of "The Raven." The collection contains key biographical material and literary criticism of the period.

The body of Poe scholarship is extensive. Daniel Hoffman's *Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe* remains a classic study. Richard Wilbur and W.H. Auden also wrote perceptively about Poe. There are numerous valuable scholarly works, Jonathan Hartmann's new book on the marketing of Poe and Jonathan Elmer's study of "The Man of the Crowd" are both notable among them. The best all-in-one contemporary biography is Kenneth Silverman's *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* (Harper Perennial, 1991).

Above all Poe speaks directly to the popular imagination. His work is a mainstay of high school studies. A staple of horror movies, it's also beloved of rock musicians (think Lou Reed, Patti Smith, the Beatles—Poe on the cover, top center right, of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band), and devoured by children. The Simpsons episode "Tree House of Horrors," (from season two) is a masterful rendition of "The Raven." It is also one of the most successful adaptations of Poe's work to television. He has entered the DNA of our popular culture.

But why do we find Poe so fascinating?

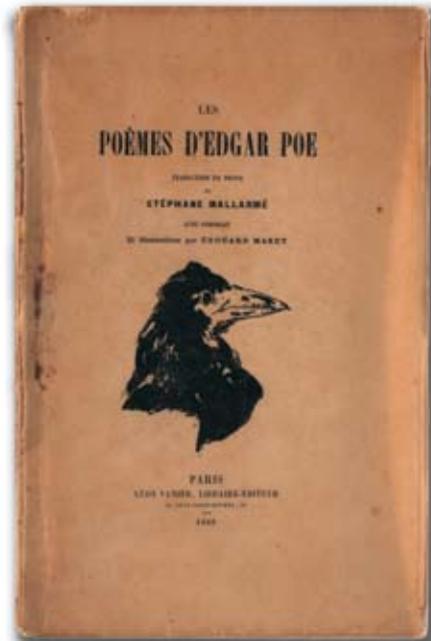
In life, he was paranoid, unlucky, nomadic, and chronically poor. He had difficulties maintaining close relationships, and his obsessive ambition—to be a serious literary author and editor—largely went unrewarded in his lifetime. Even Rufus Griswold, the man who claimed to be the executor of Poe's literary estate, had few kind words to say at Poe's death. Indeed, his scathing obituary helped blacken Poe's name in literary history for decades to come.

Poe's fortunes only began to shift when patient literary legwork by scholars such as John Henry Ingram (whose Poe collection is now at the University of Virginia) started to bear fruit. Favorable biographies began to emerge. A generation after Poe's death, the French poets Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry popularized his work with their translations. They celebrated Poe as a rebel who broke bonds with pure reason, and romanticized his disorderly life. A man considered pathetic while still alive became a dark and compelling character in the French popular mind. His miserable experiences turned into a story as suspenseful as any he had written.

Important authors such as T.S. Eliot, who originally considered Poe second-rate, rediscovered him via the French. New readers now began to see Poe as the self-made literary man he really was.

In the interest of self-promotion, Poe had embraced the new technology of the daguerreotype process, the precursor of modern photography. Poe's daguerreotype of 1848, taken by Edwin Manchester at the Providence studio of Masury and Hartshorn, is a distinguished example of a type particularly identifiable to us now: the author photograph. It fuses the man and his role (the literary author), even if the assured countenance of the man in the photo was a world apart from the person who in real life was living in near poverty. The photo has become, of course, a classic among literary portraits, setting a standard of self-dramatization for writers that we still recognize today.

Readers who came to Poe decades after his death absorbed new ideas about what it meant to be an American author. Critics like Harold Bloom and Richard Wilbur may disagree as to the worth of Poe's writing (Shoshanna Felman notes he is "the most admired and the most decried of American poets"), but his achievement is undeniable. Poe has emerged as the author he always saw himself as being, exactly what Mallarmé called him: "the absolute literary case."



Edgar Allan Poe. *Les Poèmes d'Edgar Poe*, Traduction en Prose de Stéphane Mallarmé, avec Portrait et Illustrations par Édouard Manet. Paris: Léon Vanier, 1889.



Daguerreotype portrait of Edgar Allan Poe (ca. 1848). Photographed by Will Brown.

Many of Poe's strange stories hinge on a predicament, but his story of that name is singular in that it is a "burlesque" of the kind of article typically found in *Blackwood's Magazine*, an important British publication of the time. Yet it also reveals much about Poe's own practices.

The short story "A Predicament" is a companion piece to the original "How to Write a Blackwood Article." In this latter article the editor, Mr. Blackwood, expounds strategies for how to write a winning story. Ostensibly, "A Predicament" is the story written by the would-be author Signora Psyche Zenobia after her visit with the editor. Miss Zenobia dives headlong into applying Mr. Blackwood's tried and true devices. An early scene in the editor's office reveals some of his formulas. Blackwood propounds:

The first thing requisite is to get your self into such a scrape as no one ever got into before. The oven, for instance,—that was a good hit. But if you have no oven, or big bell, at hand, and if you cannot conveniently tumble out of a balloon, or be swallowed up in an earthquake, or get stuck fast in a chimney, you will have to be contented with simply imagining some similar misadventure.

Miss Zenobia hangs on Mr. Blackwood's every word. Cheered by his advice, Miss Zenobia offers the following: "I assured him I had an excellent pair of garters, and would go and hang myself forthwith." Mr. Blackwood's gregarious—though professionalized—response is a crescendo of more advice:

'Good!' he replied, 'do so;—although hanging is somewhat hackneyed. Perhaps you might do better. Take a dose of Brandreth's pills, and then give us your sensations. However, my instructions will apply equally well to any variety of misadventure, and on your way home you may easily get knocked in the head, or run over by an omnibus, or bitten by a mad dog, or drowned in a gutter.'

It's worth mentioning that both the "Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament" have been called "uneven," and even singled out by critic Clark Griffith as showing "the incredible unevenness in Poe's creative methods." What Griffith fails to see is that there is something masterfully apt in this unevenness. In each case Poe is echoing some ridiculous aspect of his characters: the self-important editor, the would-be writer who would do anything to be a writer, except perhaps the work it takes to be a writer. In this case the author goes for the quick hit, which turns out to be her own heroine's head.

The question is: Are the stories uneven on purpose? For me the unevenness is both intentional and necessary. "A Predicament" is a story written by a writer of questionable skills and misplaced ambitions. Still, there are no moments or scenes in the stories that do not stylistically function exactly as they should. Though unrelated to intentions of the story, the final detail of a death in the gutter uncannily prefigures Poe's own sad demise. As Mr. Blackwood reminds Miss Zenobia: "'Truth is strange,' you know 'stranger than fiction'—besides being more to the purpose."

Even when portraying hack writers Poe is so convincing that readers often believed he was presenting thinly veiled autobiography—and in some cases Poe does inject autobiographical details into his tales (the hilarious “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.” and “Narrative of A. Gordon Pym” to name but two). Poe is a mischief maker, constantly teasing the reader, blending author and narrator, daring him to think the teller of the tale mad, lucid, or some kind of in-between genius. In “Eleonora,” the narrator relates how the young and beautiful woman of the title has fallen in love with him and he with her.¹ But in the opening sequence the narrator sets up a calculated confusion, turning the distinction between the real and the imaginary into an open question:

We will say, then, that I am mad.
I grant, at least, that there are two
distinct conditions of
my mental existence—the condition of a lucid
reason, not to be disputed, and belonging to the memory of
events forming the first epoch of my life—and a condition of shadow
and doubt, appertaining to the present, and to the recollection of what
constitutes the second great era of my being. Therefore, what I shall tell
of the earlier period, believe; and to what I may relate of the later time, give only
such credit as may seem due; or doubt it altogether; or, if doubt it ye cannot, then play
unto its riddle the Oedipus.

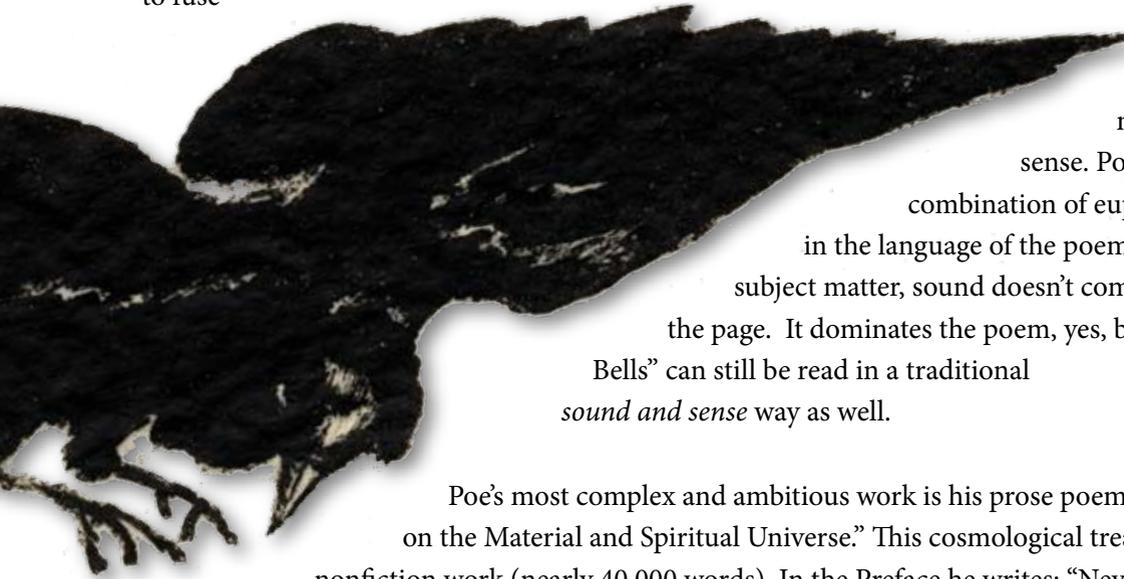
Poe was an exacting craftsman who artfully manipulated his readers. Yet, an ongoing misunderstanding that Poe was simply a “mad genius” continues.

Ultimately, with Poe the imagination illuminates the real. It is no doubt one reason why Guy Davenport devotes nearly half of his landmark essay, “The Geography of the Imagination” to Poe’s “The Philosophy of Furniture.” Poe is a towering figure among writers of the imagination. It’s not surprising that children continue to be intrigued by him. Poe is dark and fun. One of his great tricks is he tells you he’s going to do something and then he does it. Poe never lets children down by letting his characters off the hook (just think of “The Black Cat,” “The Cask of Amontillado” and many more). If you are in trouble in Poe, you are going to stay in trouble. Children respect this. And yet, Poe is not simply a children’s author. Henry James’s indictment of Poe on this score is famous. James wrote: “An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection.” Yet later in life, even the unimpeachable James reconsidered Poe. James went on to study and praise Poe’s “Narrative of A. Gordon Pym.” Even Poe’s great critics cannot dismiss him completely.

Randal Jarrell once wrote that “any poet has written enough bad poetry to scare away anybody.” In Poe’s case that’s true. Yet the spell-casting pleasures of his greatest poems are immense. Unlike many writers, Poe’s best-known poems also happen to *be* his best poems. They include “The Raven,” “The Bells,”

“Ulalume,” “The City in the Sea,” “Annabel Lee,” “To Helen” and his affecting early poem “Alone.” From its sound and its sense—and pure sensations—“The Raven” is a perfect poem.

Poe’s poem “The Bells,” is a rapturous illustration of sound poetry. The poem is exemplary of Poe’s method to fuse



form and function.

Its pure pleasure

is that sound

nearly overrides its

sense. Poe is seduced by the

combination of euphony and cacophony

in the language of the poem. Still, because of the

subject matter, sound doesn’t completely push sense off

the page. It dominates the poem, yes, but remarkably “The

Bells” can still be read in a traditional

sound and sense way as well.

Poe’s most complex and ambitious work is his prose poem “Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe.” This cosmological treatise is Poe’s longest nonfiction work (nearly 40,000 words). In the Preface he writes: “Nevertheless it is as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead.” It is currently read less as a poem and more as a piece of science fiction writing. Still, the possibilities of approaching this epistemological epic are as vast as its subject matter. Poe’s dedication note in “Eureka” is fitting. He writes: “to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities—I offer this Book of Truths, not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the beauty that abounds in its Truth; constituting it true.”

The overall range of Poe’s production is impressive, and only more so because of his short life. His essays “The Poetic Principle” (1848, 1850), “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), and his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Twice-Told Tales” (1842) are landmarks in literary criticism. Poe was an early and emphatic proponent of aesthetic thinking in the nineteenth century. In a well-known passage from “The Poetic Principle” he writes:

I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever with Duty or with Truth.

According to William Carlos Williams, Poe’s analytic essays “give the sense for the first time in America that literature is serious.” Some of Poe’s stories started off as essays. He mixed registers and genres. “The Premature Burial” begins as an essay citing a number of supposedly factual burials, but ends as a ghastly story recounting the narrator’s delusions. Poe’s influence on criticism continues to evolve.²

Poe's ambition to be the editor of a serious literary magazine was a singular force. In his letters he yearns for such a position. Concerning Poe's plans for his own magazine, he writes: "Touching 'The Stylus':—this is the one great purpose of my literary life. Undoubtedly (unless I die) I will accomplish it" [to Philip P. Cooke, New York, August 9, 1846]. Again he writes: "As regards the Stylus—that is the grand purpose of my life, from which I have never swerved for a moment" [to George W. Eveleth, New York, December 15, 1846]. Poe moved from city to city in one futile attempt after another to found his magazine. Today, more than half a dozen cities lay claim to his legacy. From Richmond to Boston, the East Coast is dotted with memorials to him.

But his life was not a happy one. It was not simply that he was poor. His entire life, after his youth, was a constant scramble to make ends meet. Yet the writing continues to display a confidence we do not meet in the life. Poe the "literary man" was perhaps Poe's greatest creation. It is not just that Poe was a capable writer, but he also helped to frame (by means of biography, photographs, and a serious body of work) the modern concept of what it means to be an author. Poe knew the ropes and did it all: poet, short-story writer, editor, critic—he was the total literary package.

Many of Poe's literary aspirations seem encapsulated in his impeccable penmanship: neat, well-proportioned, impressive on the page. In his many letters, Poe's handwriting is flawless, a further self-conscious way he had of being taken seriously. His exquisite manuscript of "The Raven" is typical. His signature *Edgar A. Poe* appears as if it were a trademark, itself becoming another example of the Poe brand.

If there's any doubt that Poe was anything but exacting when it came to handwriting, we need look no further than the fictionalized series of articles he called "Autography" (1841-42), in which he purported to analyze the signatures of writers and well-known figures to determine their true personalities. Tellingly, Poe's super legible writing acts as a cover for the more turbulent and disruptive forces occurring both in his life his work.



Arthur Rackham. "In their sad and solemn slumbers with the worm," from "The Premature Burial," in *Tales of Mystery & Imagination*. London: George G. Harrap & Co., [1935].

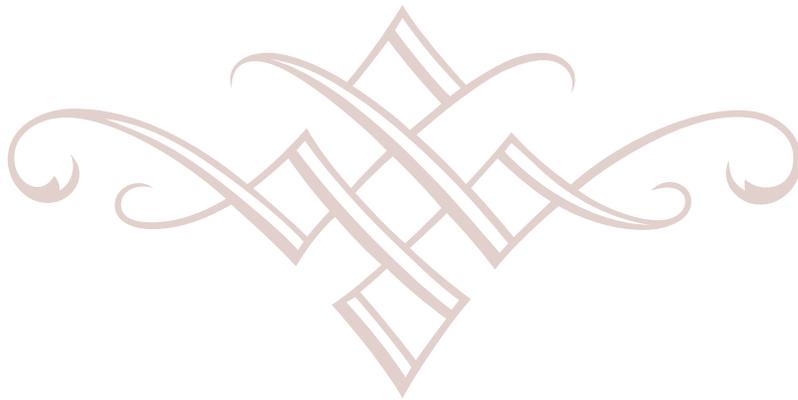


Edgar Allan Poe. "A Chapter on Autography." *Graham's Magazine*, November, 1841

At 200, Poe's saga continues. This past year the Philadelphia writer Edward Pettit caused a stir when he suggested in his article, "We're Taking Poe Back," that Poe's remains be dug up from their tomb in Baltimore and reburied in Philadelphia. After all, he argues, Poe wrote most of his best pieces while living in Philadelphia.

The drive to link Poe to Philadelphia is hardly new. One of Richard Gimbel's unrealized ambitions was to "make this city more Poe-Conscious. ... Before I die I hope to make Poe and Philadelphia synonymous." Pettit's points are sound, and Gimbel is convincing, except for one thing. Poe died in Baltimore. His was, appropriately enough, a dramatic and mysterious death, one of the great cold cases of all time. One could argue that, when it comes to Poe, drama trumps all other considerations. If so, considered strictly in terms of drama, Poe's grave may well belong in Baltimore.

The latest round of Poe debates is useful because, once again, it helps both to direct attention to and to dramatize Poe's life and work. Whether more people will visit the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia³ or his Baltimore memorial is really beside the point. What needs to be dug up isn't the corpse, but his living body of work. This Poe has been partly buried alive in the top five greatest hits of high school required reading lists ("The Cask of Amontillado," "The Tell-Tale Heart," etc.). As W.H. Auden noted: "the known works of no other author of comparable rank and productivity are so few and so invariably the same." Besides the Poe that everyone knows, there are other great pieces: "The Man of the Crowd," "The Imp of the Perverse," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and "Narrative of A. Gordon Pym." Poe's *oeuvre* includes Gothic mystery tales, detective stories, and his rip-roaring yarns of black humor, or what Andre Breton called *l'humour noir*. Poe wrote as no one had before and no one has since. He was a formally innovative writer of meticulous detail, but his inventions were not driven solely by the desire to be new. They were propelled by a need to be exact, to tell stories about the "secrets which do not permit themselves to be told"—and this is where Poe found his opportunity to write what had to be written.



NOTES

¹ Karen Weekes has identified what she calls “Poe’s feminine ideal” in her essay of the same name. Weekes writes: “Poe’s vision of the feminine ideal appears throughout his work. . . . Especially in his poetry, he idealized the vulnerability of woman, a portrayal that extends into his fiction in stories such as “Eleonora” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In these tales, and even more so in “Morella” and “Ligeia,” the heroine’s unexpected capacities for life beyond the grave indicate that females may have more strength and initiative than the delicate models of his verse. The most significant trait of his ideal, however is her role as emotional catalyst for her partner. The romanticized woman is much more significant in her impact on Poe’s narrators than in her own right.”

² On Poe’s Criticism: the phrase the “school of quietude,” which is attributed to Poe, has been used and amplified by Ron Silliman on his blog “Silliman’s Blog.” There is no direct citation where Poe uses the exact phrase, yet the general point is correct. The phrase first appears in Claude Richard’s article “Arrant Bubbles: Poe’s ‘The Angel of the Odd,’” *Poe Newsletter*, Vol. II, No. 3, October 1969, pp. 46-48. According to Richard: “Poe took an active part in the squabble between the ‘Young Americans,’ who were the proponents of a muscular and popular literature, and the Boston poets, who were attached to a more genteel, more traditional, more quiet conception of literature.”

² Continued* Benjamin Friedlander has collaged Poe’s literary reviews in his transformative collection “The Literati of San Francisco,” *Simulcast: Four Experiments in Criticism*, University of Alabama, 2004.

³ Colonel Richard Gimbel’s (1898-1970) Poe collection was originally archived at the Poe House on North Seventh Street in Philadelphia. It is now the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site run by the National Park Service. Poe rented the house from 1843-1844. He lived at the house with his wife (who was also his cousin) Virginia and her mother (Poe’s aunt) Maria Clemm. Poe wrote a number of his most famous pieces while living at the residence, including “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and “The Black Cat.” For more information about the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site visit: <http://www.nps.gov/edal/>



Thomas Devaney was curatorial consultant to the “Quoth the Raven” exhibition with head curator James DeWalt. Devaney is a poet and critic and the author of *A Series of Small Boxes* (Fish Drum, 2007) and *The American Pragmatist Fell in Love* (Banshee Press, 1999). He has worked with the Institute of Contemporary Art on a number of site specific, multi-sensory projects, including “The Empty House” at the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site for “The Big Nothing” exhibition (2004). The essay about the project is published in issue two of *The Sieneese Shredder* (2008). Devaney is a Senior Writing Fellow in the Critical Writing Program, Department of English, at the University of Pennsylvania.

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