

A DESCENT INTO EDGAR ALLAN POE AND HIS WORKS: THE BICENTENNIAL. Eds. Beatriz González Moreno and Margarita Rigal Aragón. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010. 152 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 9783034300896.

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If Whitman is considered the founding father of American poetry, in Pound's words "Whitman is to my fatherland ... what Dante is to Italy" (146), Poe remains one of the most misread American writers. The slanders of his first biographer created a black legend that critics and poets have been trying to dispel for more than a century since. Although widely read, his popularity turned against him and many critics concurred with T.S. Eliot that he was merely a litterateur for teenagers, whose intellect was that "of a highly gifted young person before puberty" (35). In his time, Poe was considered iconoclastic, yet he was just another High Romantic who assumed the role of an American Coleridge. Emerson called him "the jingle man," Russell considered his work to be "two-fifths sheer fudge" (141-42) and Henry James condescended that "enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection" (280). In the twentieth century, Matthiessen omitted Poe in his monumental *American Renaissance* (1941) while Yvor Winters censured his incoherence and obscurantism. Nevertheless, it should be said that the critics who fell under the influence of the New Critics produced one of the finest interpretations of his texts. In many ways, Poe is the twin brother with a dark face, the "dejected cousin" (Tate 38-50) of the ontologically optimistic "party of hope," the new American Adams – Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau –, who believed in progress, manifest destiny, and man's god-like greatness. Writing at a time when Emerson postulated that evil was non-substantive, Poe philosophized on the power of darkness and the dangers of the hubris of man's indomitable will. Together with Hawthorne and Melville, he warned against the dangers of self-reliance and of the self-made man (Lewis, Patea). Harold Bloom concluded as late as 1987 that "Emerson fathered pragmatism; Poe fathered nothing" (5).

However, as a poet and critic Poe is the founding father of Symbolism, Aestheticism and Decadentism. He is responsible for the birth of the short story as a literary form, which is arguably America's characteristic literary genre (May 69). As a short story writer he invented the short story and the detective, mystery and horror

story, the Gothic. Furthermore, as a master of fictional technique, he is the precursor of many Modernist, Surrealist and our Postmodernist attitudes. His statements on poetic art marked a turning point in the history of aesthetic theories. As a literary critic, he is arguably America's first critic who laid the theoretical foundations of the short story as a genre. Poe made a seminal contribution to short story theory. Even today short story theory preserves much of Poe's theoretical frame, and genre definition is posed in terms similar to his original formulations (Achter). Both his emphasis on the intrinsic qualities of the text and on the "unity of effect" as well as his concern with the reader's experience of the text make him a forerunner of reader-response criticism (May 69). As a theorist of aesthetic unity, Poe made unity into a fundamental principle of existence with metaphysical valences. Last but not least, Poe's greatness lies also in his explorations of the dark underside of human consciousness. He is one of the inventors *avant la lettre* of the unconscious.

Derided or condescended upon in his home country, Poe played nevertheless a key role in the development of European literature. Spokesman for the autonomy of art, and the aesthetics of "art for art's sake," Poe became the precursor of the Symbolist movement and a key figure for French Aestheticism and Decadence, which developed from Baudelaire's response to his works and his cult of the bizarre, the artificial and the perverse. In 1860, Dostoevsky examined the tension between realism and the fantastic in three of Poe's tales "The Black Cat, The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Devil in the Belfry" which had a bearing on his own works *Notes from the Underground* and *Crime and Punishment*. Yet the French turned Poe into a world figure. Poe became something of a religious cult figure. Baudelaire found in him an alter-ego, a brother, a mentor, and thought of him as intercessor in Heaven during his morning prayers. Between 1847 and the end of his life he translated five hours each day Poe's poems before writing his own poetry, while 5 of the 12 volumes of his complete works are translations of Poe. For him, Poe's doctrine brought together mathematics and mysticism (Vines 168). Writers in the wake of Baudelaire's symbolism elevated Poe to the stature of a literary deity. To Mallarmé, Poe was the master of technique who opened the way towards the supreme, universal work. Poe helped Valéry understand his own mind during the process of artistic creation, and Valéry appropriated in his own theoretical essays Poe's principles of "Philosophy of Composition" (Vines 12-6). Poe redirected critical attention to technique, to the conception of art as illusion, which the artist controls like a mathematical problem. This and the relation he posited between poetry and music, his attempt to refine the use of language so as to produce musical effects through poetry, impressed three generations of French poets over one hundred years, from 1847 to 1945, who based their poetics on Poe's poetic theories and practice. Poe became the "pivot on which for the past century French literature has turned" (Quinn 12). Eliot aptly perceived the poetic tradition that genuinely originated in Poe and was perpetuated by his French admirers as "the most

interesting poetic development of poetic consciousness” (42). As Peter Gibian rightly concludes in a recent study, to this day, via European influence, Poe’s aesthetics continue to haunt America experiencing “a return of something that has been repressed” (50).

On the occasion of the 2009 bicentennial, a series of conferences all over the world commemorated Poe’s birth on both sides of the Atlantic from Philadelphia all the way to Paris and, further, to St. Petersburg. Many prestigious universities championed a wealth of academic events dedicated to the study of his life and work. Spain alone hosted four International Conferences in its reputable Universities of Alcalá de Henares, Valencia, Cáceres and Castilla-La Mancha. These bicentennial meetings gave rise years later to a series of publications that expand on these initial proceedings. *A Descent into Edgar Allan Poe and His Works* edited by Beatriz González Moreno and Margarita Rigal Aragón is a significant contribution of well-regarded European scholars to the field of Poe scholarship. The editors’ avowed desire is to pay homage to Poe’s genius and to shed new light on Poe’s studies. The book falls into three parts. The first section, “Parallel Lives: Reading Poe,” analyzes Poe’s influence on the works of three major European writers, Charles Dickens, Charles Baudelaire and Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, who also represent three fundamental European traditions, the English, the French and the Spanish. In a thoroughly researched essay, “Poe versus Dickens: An Ambiguous Relationship,” Fernando Galván examines the mutual influences and the sometimes tense relationship between the British writer and the American. Galván adds new information from undocumented publications and letters while examining the popular reception of Dickens’ and Poe’s work in the press. His synoptic essay draws stimulating comparisons between the two writers, documents their encounters and disagreements, and covers with meticulous biographical detail the admiration, indifference and conflict that marked their relationship.

In an elucidating article, “Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire: the Artist as the Elite Victim,” Sonya Isaak delves into the profound admiration that the French poet felt for Poe, considering him his American alter-ego, whom he regarded in Dantean fashion as “*il miglior fabbro*.” Isaak offers a synthetic overview of the analogies underlying their lives and works. She argues that both grew up in affluent middle class families, were in need of a father, turned to protective mothers, shared a tragic worldview beset by Weltschmerz, censured technological progress as a substitute of spirituality, and adopted the aesthetic pose in defiance of an increasingly vulgar and materialistic world. Poe was disdainful of the mob’s lack of discernment, while Baudelaire became a dandy, in an act of rebellion against the established society and its status quo. Isaak persuasively argues that both are *poètes maudits* poets, exiles who suffer from alienation in a world dominated by the dictates of the “man of the crowd,” an impersonal man who announces the looming shadow of Musil’s world depicted as *The Man with no Qualities* (1930).

Ricardo Marín-Ruiz's "Two Romanticisms but the Same Feeling: The Presence of Poe in Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's *Leyendas*" is an extremely valuable contribution on the traces Poe left in Spanish literature. He centers on Bécquer, a poet whose reference was unfortunately omitted in Lois Vines's renowned volume *Poe Abroad* (1999). Poe influenced a series of Spanish Romantic poets who fell under his spell by way of Baudelaire's translations, among them Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, Rosalía de Castro, and Ros de Olano. In his essay he draws on previous studies by M. García Viñó, Izquierdo Pascual and Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, who expand on the avenues of investigation opened by John Englekirk (1930). Marín Ruiz brings to the fore biographical and literary parallelisms that link the Spanish Romantic poet to Poe's life and aesthetic. Focusing on stylistic and thematic concerns, Marín Ruiz analyzes the way in which Poe's Gothic characteristics, his Romantic notion of the ideal of beauty, and the sublime as well as his attraction for the supernatural and the irrational have had a bearing on Bécquer's *Leyendas*.

The second section of the book pays tribute to Poe's founding of different genres, such as the short story, the detective story, the Gothic tale, and science fiction. Two chapters of part two are centered around the figure of Poe's paradigmatic detective-poet, Auguste Dupin. In "The Thousand-and Second-Dupin of Edgar A. Poe," Margarita Rigal-Aragón perceptively refers to Poe's tales of rationalization in an attempt to produce a new reading of the role of his detective hero. Following her lead, Beatriz González-Moreno's "Approaching the Dupin-Holmes (or Poe-Doyle) Controversy" traces Poe's influence on Conan Doyle. Quoting Dorothy L. Sayers remarks to the effect that "Murders in Rue Morgue" (1841) "constitutes in itself a complete manual of detective story and practice," González-Moreno proceeds to analyze the way in which Doyle develops the "locked-room" mystery theme, and creates a new eccentric and cerebral detective in the figure of Sherlock Holmes. The essay also considers the accusations of plagiarism directed against Doyle. In the same vein, Ángel Mateos-Aparicio furthers the genre studies of Poe's detective stories by examining the American poet's influence on American mystery, horror, and science fiction. In "The Horrors Are Not to be Denied': The Influence of Edgar A. Poe on Ray Bradbury" he examines Bradbury's debt to his style, themes, and Gothic conventions while undertaking a close reading of many of his most representative works projected against Poe's short stories.

The third section, "Poe, Aesthetics and the Use of Language," takes an aesthetic and linguistic approach to Poe's work and masterfully links his conceptions to text linguistics and discourse analysis. In a very interesting, yet unfortunately brief study, Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan discusses two main concepts in Poe's works, the notion of melancholy and the picturesque, the latter characterized by its eclecticism, semiotic reading and fusion of nature and art

(97). Eighteenth-century theorists defined the picturesque as something pleasurable “capable of being illustrated by painting.” Based on variety and intricacy it contains “an uncertain concealment, [that] excites and nourishes curiosity” (98). Unlike the sublime, the picturesque focuses on rough and rugged surfaces, and establishes tensions and contrasts between the ideal and the real form, mirroring thus the twists and turns of the poet’s soul. Also interesting is the way in which Rodríguez Guerrero offers a brief evolution of the notion of melancholy, fashionable in the eighteenth century. No longer related to Puritan guilt and the theory of humors as exemplified by Robert Burton’s treatise, melancholy was considered in proto-neurological studies as a form of “insanity and chronic illness” that affected artists in particular. Rodríguez Guerrero relates Poe’s interest in disorders and maladies with the developments in psychology of David Hartley and the philosophy of John Locke, as well as Thomas Willis’s early work on neurophysiology, which opened the path to a new understanding of the mind as an autonomous entity which granted freedom to the imagination and liberated it from logical limitations. He concludes that the picturesque is associated with states of fantasy, and that melancholy is instrumental in inducing such states since it produces an altered state of perception of reality and creates an alternative worldview.

The book concludes with Eduardo de Gregorio-Godeo’s “Functions and Values of Description, Metaphorical Image and Comparison in ‘Ligeia’: A Discursive-Rhetorical Study,” an article that shifts the analysis of Poe’s paradigmatic short story to the field of discourse analysis and text linguistics. Since the short story as a genre is a vortex of a wide variety of discourse activity, his approach appears to be particularly appropriate. Gregorio-Godeo centers specifically on Poe’s discursive-rhetorical strategies in order to create aura of mystery and ambiguity, which is heightened by the fact that the narrative is focalized by the subjectivity of Ligeia’s lover who is both narrator and character.

The book’s epilogue, “John Allan versus Edgar Allan, or Poe’s Early Years” by José Antonio Gurpegui is an existentially filtered personal encounter with Poe which combines autobiographical confession, creative writing and scholarly knowledge. Gurpegui, a contributor to Lois Vines’ acclaimed *Poe Abroad*, a compendium of Poe’s worldwide impact on world literature, was in charge of the chapter “Poe in Spain.” From the vantage point of his tomb, his new musings represent an intimate reflection on the poet’s life and work, aiming in some way to produce a narrative postmodern simulacra of Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe.”

The book also includes a very useful chronology compiled by Ángel Galdón-Rodríguez which provides a timeline of Poe’s works and life projected against the significant events that marked European and North and South American history: wars of independence, revolutions, battles, important political, scientific and cultural moments etc.

Notwithstanding the one shortcoming of this book, the need for a more careful editing process that should have eliminated remaining typos and other kind of errors, *A Descent into Edgar Allan Poe and His Works* is a good read meant to broaden our appreciation of Poe, a great visionary artist and critic whose work has exerted a profound and lasting influence on writers everywhere.

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