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PART ONE

*Geographical Contexts*

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## CHAPTER I

*Great Britain**Christopher Gair*

While “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846) is Edgar Allan Poe’s best-known intervention in debates about literary form, little attention has been paid to the significance of its opening words: “Charles Dickens, in a note now lying before me...”<sup>1</sup> The reference to Dickens offers a revealing insight into the ambitions and anxieties that marked Poe’s efforts to construct the figure of the American professional author during the 1830s and 1840s. For a start, the nonchalant revelation that he was on writing terms with the preeminent English-language literary figure of the age seems designed to place Poe as Dickens’s American double or, if not quite that, then at least as someone circling closely in his orbit. By extension, the reference also suggests a wider, positive interest on the part of the British author in what was occurring on the other side of the literary Atlantic at a moment when Dickens’s often scathing accounts of American culture in *American Notes* (1842) still elicited a mixture of anger and insecurity in the United States. While Poe’s dismissal of the importance of a national literature is often taken for granted, his ability to posit himself as a synecdochal part of a national whole serves to massage the self-confidence of his audience at a moment when the call for literary nationalism made most famously by Ralph Waldo Emerson had yet to be realized in the flowering of the “American Renaissance” in the early 1850s.

The impression created, Dickens – or at least his name – disappears from the essay after the opening sentence of the second paragraph. And yet, in what follows, the Englishman remains as a ghostly presence, and Poe appears to offer a philosophy that implicitly questions the craftsmanship underpinning Dickens’s primary form, the “baggy monster” of a novel Henry James would critique later that century. In his second paragraph, Poe insists, “Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen.” Broadly speaking, it could be argued that Dickens adhered to this principle throughout his career: most of his novels, including *Martin*

*Chuzzlewit* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1849), and *Bleak House* (1852–3), end with the restoration of a comfortable middle-class order for their protagonists. The economic and moral imperatives that underpin Dickens's version of social stability and that have been disrupted through a combination of individual evil (by others), cultural transgression, and misguided, usually selfish, actions on the parts of each book's principal characters are re-created once each protagonist has learned the values necessary to earn their position in society. But while Poe's claim could be applied macrocosmically to Dickens's work, it collapses in the face of the latter's sensitivity to the demands of his readership and his habitual shaping of plot development in response to readers' impressions of the latest episode of novels first published in serial form in monthly magazines. Indeed, Poe had already identified both Dickens's genius as a writer and the formal macrocosmic problems of his chosen form and his writing habits in his review of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). Though Poe notes how, "*the intention once known, the traces of the design can be found upon every page*," he tempers his praise with criticism of how, in a long novel, many "points are deprived of all effect" because they make no sense without knowledge of a dénouement that will not be revealed for hundreds of pages. In addition, he ties this diffusiveness to magazine serialization of the novel in what he sees as the unnecessary insertion of accounts of the Gordon Riots (which are "altogether an afterthought," having "the appearance of being forcibly introduced"). Poe finds the "absurd fashion of periodical novel-writing" responsible for "numerous traces of indecision – traces which a dexterous supervision of the complete work might have enabled him [Dickens] to erase."<sup>2</sup>

In this context, it seems that "The Philosophy of Composition" refutes the formal supremacy of Dickens's chosen genre and even his preeminence as a novelist. Although Dickens's early works, *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), contain a section of short tales and an episodic narrative that can be read in independent segments, the major works that follow demand attention to multilayered interweaving plots that unfurl over many chapters. While Poe's comments on the "extent" of a work of art might not normally be regarded as an attack on a single author, the fact that they come so soon after he cited Dickens inevitably reflects back on Dickens in highlighting what his works don't do. Indeed, this implicit attack becomes even more evident if we read "The Philosophy of Composition" as not only an explication but also as an example of Poe's practice: his insistence on the need for a piece to be "read at one sitting" to ensure the "important effect derivable from

unity of impression” implies that the reference to Dickens must relate to everything that follows. Even when Poe qualifies this assertion, he elects not to do so through his contemporary.<sup>3</sup> Instead, he cites Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as an example of an occasion when “this limit may be advantageously overpassed,” referring to an early (and prenatal, in the case of the United States) example of literary transnationalism rather than to a transatlantic rival.

The literature, criticism, and culture of Great Britain play particularly important roles in the shaping of Poe’s literary aesthetics, and Dickens occupies a central position in Poe’s thoughts about the status of the writer in the early decades of the modern industrial age. While Poe is highly skeptical about the kinds of literary nationalism propounded by Emerson in “The American Scholar” (1837), this should not be taken to imply that he had no interest in the politics of American literature or anxieties about the inherent and inescapable binary relationship between British and American culture and the ongoing influence of British literature and criticism.

On one level, the facts are straightforward: in June 1815, Poe accompanied his foster parents, John and Frances Allan, to Great Britain; after disembarking in Liverpool, the family spent the summer in Scotland, with Poe attending Kirkgate School, Irvine, and lodging with John Allan’s sister, Mary. The family moved to London in October and – after a brief return to school in Irvine – Poe attended a boarding school in Chelsea, run by the misses Dubourg, before, in autumn 1817, moving to the Reverend John Bransby’s Manor House School in what was then the village of Stoke Newington. Poe and the Allans returned to the United States in the summer of 1820.

The relationship between this relatively brief childhood experience and Poe’s later literary output is more complex and varied. Great Britain is represented in several of Poe’s works, but – while its presence is essential to some narratives – it is not always central to their structure. For example, the peripheral mention of the Hebrides in “Silence: A Fable” (1839) and “The Valley of Unrest” (1845) is insignificant, while the allusion to colonial India and Warren Hastings in “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” (1844) and the fact that the elk in “Morning on the Wissahiccon” (1844) is owned by an English family are not developed into extended critiques of transatlantic relations or other meditations on British politics or culture.

“The Philosophy of Furniture” (1840) goes further, deploying its discussion of interior decoration to contrast not only British and American

furnishings, but also American obsession with money and lack of artistic good taste more generally. For Poe, the United States, being deprived of an aristocracy able to diffuse the “proper feeling,” functions along purely economic lines in its confusion of “magnificence” and “beauty”: thus, “inartistical arrangement, a prevalence of straight lines, glare, glitter,” the “exaggerated employment of mirrors,” and a “monstrous and odious uniformity” combine to corrupt taste and ideas.<sup>4</sup> Though adding an affection for the aristocracy to the Anglo-American lens for his attack on American manners, Poe’s views here offer an artistic antecedent to Henry David Thoreau’s slightly later observations on American life in “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849): Thoreau’s doctrine, “the more money, the less virtue,” is matched by Poe’s “a man of large purse has usually a very little soul... As we grow rich, our ideas grow rusty.”<sup>5</sup> The key difference, of course, is that while Thoreau – like his mentor, Emerson – conceals his indebtedness to British Romanticism behind an emphasis on cultural nationalism and the need to develop democratic self-reliance, Poe celebrates British aristocratic taste as a way of highlighting American flaws.

Poe draws upon his experience of living in Great Britain in the setting for several of his tales, although the extent to which they are explicitly about the importance of national identity varies. “Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling” (1837) takes place in Southampton Row, Russell Square, where Poe had lived with the Allans, but otherwise does little to claim an important British genealogy. More significantly, “William Wilson” (1839) offers a modified representation of the Manor House School and of Bransby as the setting for its early scenes before shifting to Eton and Oxford. Other tales featuring Great Britain include “King Pest” (1835), “Ligeia” (1838), and the complex transatlantic satire, “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (1842), which seem as much concerned with mocking Transcendentalism and American culture as they are with mocking Edinburgh, where they are staged.

These tales do, however, exemplify Poe’s double-sided relationship to Britain and question the assumptions about British superiority that underpin, for example, “The Philosophy of Furniture.” Although he does not cite it, “How to Write a Blackwood Article” provides evidence to support what Paul Giles has described as Poe’s ability to position himself “on an eerie dividing line between British convention and American independence.” For Giles, this transatlantic negotiation is illustrated most clearly in “William Wilson” through Wilson’s inability to escape the shadow self haunting him. Thus, “Wilson frames this act of doubling through a pun on constitution, which indicates not only his physical constitution, but also

the political constitution of each country which is mirrored disconcertingly across the North Atlantic divide.” In Giles’s persuasive analysis, “The tranquillity of the rural past [English village life] . . . is haunted by a threat of violence and oppression [exemplified by Dr. Bransby], as if these placid scenes of English life could never quite conceal the old country’s pervasive colonial impulse toward domination and mastery.”<sup>6</sup>

While Giles’s reading of “William Wilson” may help explain the mixture of reverence and suspicion in Poe’s attitude to Dickens, it also offers a useful insight into some of his other nonfiction writing. Elsewhere Poe mentions Great Britain in relation to literary criticism in ways that again indicate why he should feel (at best) ambivalent about the relationship between old and new worlds. While Poe is happy to champion individual poets such as Tennyson, he is unstinting in his condemnation of what he regards as nationalistic and vitriolic attacks by British critics on American writers. Thus, in the *Broadway Journal* (October 4, 1845), he launches a stinging critique of the condescension generally aimed at American authors from across the Atlantic and of the obsequious acceptance of this by Americans:

There is not a more disgusting spectacle under the sun than our subserviency to British criticism. It is disgusting, first because it is truckling, servile, pusillanimous – secondly, because of its gross irrationality. We know the British to bear us little but ill will – we know that, in no case, do they utter unbiased opinions of American books – we know that in the few instances in which our writers have been treated with common decency in England, these writers have openly paid homage to English institutions, or have had lurking at the bottom of their hearts a secret principle war with Democracy: – we know all this, and yet, day after day, submit our necks to the degrading yoke of the crudest opinion that emanates from the fatherland. Now if we must have nationality, let it be a nationality that will throw off this yoke.<sup>7</sup>

The nuances of what Poe says here have tended to be lost in a critical overemphasis on his opening paragraph. In that, Poe refutes the calls for a nationalistic form of “American Letters,” asserting, “That an American should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea. . . . After all, the world at large is the only legitimate stage for the autorial *histrion*.”<sup>8</sup> For scholars such as Kenneth Silverman, this introduction contains the nub of Poe’s argument, articulating his opposition to Emersonian calls for new men to write about new lands.<sup>9</sup> Characteristically, however, Poe frames this refutation in transatlantic terms that construct a call for an American literary voice, implying that American literature must move beyond such narrow parameters and that

American critics and readers must learn to trust their own judgment and abandon their reliance on the opinions of British critics. Thus, although his plea for writers to look beyond the local for material is at odds with Emerson's demand in the opening lines of "Nature" (1836) for "our own works" in a "poetry of insight and not of tradition,"<sup>10</sup> the framing of Poe's appeal is strikingly similar. Poe and Emerson both recognize a postcolonial mentality shaping an American literature that remains deferential to the former colonial power, and both call for a new kind of American identity (framed in masculine terms specifically by Emerson and implicitly by Poe) that will have the courage to slay the cultural and political fatherland.

For Poe, this identity is also determined by economic and class relations within the United States and in the relationship to Britain. In "International Copyright," he says the lack of international copyright law leads not only to the flooding of the American market with cheap foreign imported books, but also the "injury to our national literature [caused] by repressing the efforts of our men of genius, for genius as a general rule is poor in worldly goods and cannot write for nothing." Again, Poe's argument resembles Emerson's: each implies that the need for American writers of original material is an essential component of the democratic state and recognizes the extent to which the marginal position of the professional writer militates against their emergence. Moreover, Poe articulates what remains unsaid in Emerson's argument: the only American writers who can afford to write are the "gentlemen of elegant leisure," whose innate conservatism "leads them into imitation of... British models" because "Colonies have always naturally aped the mother land."<sup>11</sup>

Poe did, of course, admire some American writers, and his 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* indicates the reasons for such respect and the need to temper it. This review also reveals Poe's relationship to British fiction. "Nathaniel Hawthorne" anticipates "The Philosophy of Composition" in its key concerns. It develops, at greater length, Poe's belief that the tale "affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent which can be afforded by the wide domain of mere prose" and insists upon a "unity of effect" that "cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting." As with "The Philosophy of Composition," the tale is contrasted with the "objectionable" novel, with the ideal tale designed with a single "effect" in mind and with every word contributing to "one pre-established design." Poe states "emphatically" that Hawthorne's tales "belong to the highest region of Art" and, in lengthy analyses of several tales, praises Hawthorne's



“invention, creation, imagination, [and] originality.” Nevertheless, Poe does find one element of Hawthorne’s work unsatisfactory: while the style is “purity itself,” the subjects of the tales are “insufficiently varied” with an overarching tone of “melancholy and mysticism.”<sup>12</sup>

Poe’s review of a quintessentially New England author seems, albeit sometimes elliptically, to relate to his attitudes to the strengths and weaknesses of British and American literature – and the relation between them – more widely. Hawthorne himself, in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), would later articulate the reasons for calling his longer works “romances” rather than “novels” in a manner that indicates Poe’s perceptive recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of Hawthorne’s fiction. In drawing the distinction, Hawthorne argues that the dominant European form of storytelling – the realist novel – is unsuitable to American needs. While Dickensian realism depended on the complex and multilayered class relations, urban geography, and political and legal intrigue stemming from hundreds of years of history, the relatively new and egalitarian nation, which lacked such self-evident complexities, demanded a different form. Hawthorne explains that the writer of a romance should “claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material” not available to the novelist. To discover the truths of the “new” nation, Hawthorne felt it necessary to look beneath the surface and to apply the powers of the imagination to the bare bones of historical detail. Unlike in the old world, where exteriors presented the realities of individual and social identity, Hawthorne argued that in the United States the potential of the nation – the self-reliance that he called the “truth of the human heart” – could only be presented “under circumstances . . . of the writer’s own choosing or creation” through the use of symbolism and allegory.<sup>13</sup>

Hawthorne’s literary self-defense depends on the same transatlantic binary deployed by Poe. The “straight lines” and “monstrous and odious uniformity” identified by Poe in “The Philosophy of Furniture” are what, for Hawthorne, preclude the possibility that realist representation of contemporary American life can provide meaningful insights into the human condition. Hawthorne not only refuses to “ape the mother land” – as Poe had put it – but also gives sound reasons for developing a genre apposite to a new political and cultural landscape. Yet Poe’s criticism of the “insufficiently varied” subject matter of Hawthorne’s tales suggests that (at least for Poe, writing about Hawthorne’s early work) Hawthorne had been unable to find a suitably diverse alternative. While it is impossible to know what Poe would have made of Hawthorne’s turn to novel-length productions and whether he would have seen them as inferior to tales read

at a single sitting, there is no doubt that Hawthorne's preface mirrors Poe's call for American literature to break free from its subservience to inappropriate old world generic and critical models.

The disappointing nature of Dickens's attempts to write about American life appears to preempt Hawthorne's distinctions. In *Imagining America*, Peter Conrad argues that the "equality which is the [United States'] social and economic glory is, for Dickens, its imaginative affliction: in making men equal it makes them all alike." In the American sections of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the result is that Martin and his companion, Mark Tapley, encounter a series of national types, "without exception," as Conrad continues, "listless, hollow-cheeked, tedious, and portentously verbose."<sup>14</sup> Each character is introduced as "one of the most remarkable men in our country" and each is interchangeable with the last. In contrast, the infinite possibilities afforded by the maze-like nature of Dickens's London are essential components of his authorial power in a number of ways. The manner in which the knowing narrator can act as guide to readers presumed ignorant of the geographical intricacies of the city sees him piloting them through its darkest areas and eliciting a sympathetic, reformist response to the moral labyrinth allegorized through urban poverty and decay. The way that Dickens's language mimics the landscape reinforces his power: the convoluted sentences, packed with semicolons and subordinate clauses, compel careful attention from readers and enable Dickens to bridge the gap between the two very different worlds of London's poor and its more affluent classes.<sup>15</sup>

"The Man of the Crowd" is, in its London setting and formal effects, the most Dickensian of Poe's works. Indeed, there is a lengthy critical history accusing Poe of plagiarizing Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836) in his construction of the tale. Stephen Rachman has looked closely at the similarities and differences between "The Man of the Crowd" and, in particular, "The Drunkard's Death," noting that while Poe is "clearly indebted to Dickens," he rewrites scenes to generate very different effects. For Rachman, Poe's tale shadows Dickens, as the narrator shadows the man of the crowd, and Dickens haunts Poe's text in the way the old man occupies the psyche of Poe's narrator, with Poe "borrow[ing] details from Dickens to pretend to the same kind of intimate knowledge of the city." Importantly, however, Rachman notes that Poe "transmogrifies the socially intelligible world of Dickens into a diabolical parade of types, of urban hieroglyphics ostensibly significant to the narrator only in their potential decipherability. . . . Dickens draws his characters with sympathy. Poe erases the intimate moral relationship between people and the places they inhabit by subsuming these establishments under the guise of the crowd."<sup>16</sup>