KEVIN J. HAYES

Introduction

On 1 January 1875, William M. Cash, an Alexandria, Louisiana news carrier, had a special New Year's Day gift for the customers on his paper route: he presented each with *The Bells*, a handsome, eight-page pamphlet reprinting the well-known poem by Edgar Allan Poe. Louisiana newspaper subscribers were not the only people to receive copies of *The Bells* as presents during the 1870s. In Philadelphia, a china and glassware retailer issued a complimentary edition of the poem for its customers during Christmas time, 1872, and the week after Christmas, grocery boys in the employ of Philadelphia grocer, Mitchell and Fletcher, gave copies of *The Bells* to their customers as New Year's Day presents.[1] Since bells had been a commonplace holiday motif for centuries, perhaps it should come as no surprise that copies of *The Bells* were being distributed to Philadelphia grocery shoppers or Louisiana newspaper subscribers. Anyone who believed what they read in the literary periodicals of the day, however, would hardly find Poe's writings suitable material to pass through the hands of impressionable young news carriers and grocery boys.

While Poe had achieved a status in France equal to that of a great national author and, through his French reputation, was gaining much acceptance in other parts of Europe, his reputation among the literati in English-speaking nations was ambiguous. Many of the articles in the English-language press in 1875 conveyed animosity toward Poe. One characterized him as a madman and attempted to muster evidence in an unconvincing effort to verify the diagnosis in clinical terms.[2] Robert Louis Stevenson wrote one of the more balanced essays of the time for the New Year's issue of the widely-respected British literary weekly, *The Academy*. Stevenson expressed his conviction that Poe had "the true story-teller's instinct," related his appreciation of "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Masque of the Red Death," yet deprecated several of Poe's other stories and critiqued his personal image. Before analyzing the tales, Stevenson observed, "I cannot find it in my heart to like either his portrait or his character; and though it is possible that we see him

more or less refracted through the strange medium of his works, yet I do fancy that we can detect, alike in these, in his portrait, and in the facts of his life . . . a certain jarring note, a taint of something that we do not care to dwell upon or find a name for."[3]

To be sure, not everyone who was writing about Poe in English during the 1870s expressed such skepticism toward his works and his person. In the mid-1870s, Poe gained his greatest British admirer, John H. Ingram, who began defending Poe in print with a rousing defense in *Temple Bar* in 1874 and began publishing his multi-volume collected edition of Poe's works the same year. The first two volumes of the Ingram edition appeared in late 1874, and Stevenson's essay forms a review of these. Volumes three and four would appear in early 1875.

In short, by the time people rang in the New Year, 1875, three predominant attitudes toward Poe had emerged: popular acclaim, measured skepticism, and ardent enthusiasm. The copies of *The Bells* William Cash distributed to Louisiana newspaper subscribers indicate Poe's acceptance among the general public. Robert Louis Stevenson represents the skeptics, and Ingram, like Charles Baudelaire before him, was an ardent enthusiast. These three varying attitudes toward Poe prevailed into the twentieth century. Writing in the 1920s, Paul Elmer More assumed the skeptical position as he articulated the other two, identifying Poe as "chiefly the poet of unripe boys and unsound men," the unsound men, from More's viewpoint, being the ardent enthusiasts.[4] Like many skeptical professors of literature after him, More associated Poe with adolescence and refused to acknowledge the wide-ranging literary and aesthetic implications of his imaginative and critical writings.

These three basic attitudes toward Poe have persisted to the present day. In the United States, virtually all students read some Poe during their news-carrier years, and Poe, perhaps more than any other author taught in middle schools and high schools today, functions as a catalyst for teaching students the magic of reading. Most leave school with fond memories of reading Poe. While some do not reread Poe after leaving high school, many do. Those who read him with growing fondness over the course of their lives belong among the ardent enthusiasts. Those who choose the study of literature as their profession may take one of two different directions. They may, like many of the contributors to this present volume, become enthusiasts and devote much of their professional lives to the study of Poe's life and art or, alternatively, they may turn skeptic and question Poe's significance to literary history. *The Cambridge Companion to Poe* has been designed for those who are returning to Poe with a general desire to know more about the man and his work. Its purpose is to provide a general overview of his writings and

to indicate some of their complexities. It might even help to turn potential skeptics into enthusiasts.

Prior to completing their individual chapters, contributors to the present volume were issued a challenge: to write chapters that would contain fundamental information for students returning to Poe for the first time since their youth as well as new information and ideas that would appeal to seasoned Poe scholars. The contributors rose to the challenge and accomplished their tasks admirably. Regardless of individual focus, each of the following chapters presents a combination of general overview and original insight. Taken together, this collection of essays offers a fresh view of Poe's life and work for the new century.

The image of Poe that emerges from the following chapters is, however, considerably different from the image of Poe people held in William Cash's time. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, Poe was known, first and foremost, as a poet. The list of books in the 1897 Sears catalog, for example, extended for dozens of pages and contained multiple editions of Poe's verse, but no editions of his short tales.[5] With the celebration of the centenary of Poe's birth in 1909, his short stories began to achieve renewed attention. Reflecting on the numerous centenary tributes that had appeared in the London press during the week of the centenary, Arnold Bennett, writing the following week, observed, "Last week we all admitted that Poe had understood the 'art of the short story.' (His name had not occurred to us before.)"[6] The trend that began with the centenary continued over the course of the century. Marie Bonaparte, in her groundbreaking study, *Edgar Poe, Étude Psychanalytique* (1933; translated as *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* [1949]), subsumed Poe's verse into the biographical portion of the study yet devoted separate chapters to nearly all of the major stories. Poe's verse continued to attract considerable attention through the mid century, however, for his rich symbolism and scrupulous attention to poetic form was especially appealing to the prevailing critical approach of the time, the New Criticism. As Structuralist critical approaches gave way to Post-Structuralism, however, readers began recognizing anew the importance of reading Poe in relation to his cultural milieu. Consequently, emphasis shifted to those works that could be analyzed in relation to their times. Furthermore, the still-burgeoning emphasis on criticism in literary studies has placed additional importance on Poe's large body of critical writings.

The *Cambridge Companion to Poe* reflects current attitudes toward Poe's work. Only one chapter specifically treats his poetry whereas a majority of the chapters take his fiction as their subject, and three concern his critical writings. While the individual chapters in this collection need not be read in

any particular order, they have been arranged in such a way as to build upon one another. The first three chapters take Poe's life and critical writings as their subject. Chapter One, Kent Ljungquist's "The Poet as Critic," offers a good overview of Poe's criticism, yet in so doing simultaneously provides a basic outline of his life and literary career. In Chapter Two, "Poe and His Circle," Sandra Tomc, also taking Poe's life and critical writings as her subject, argues that Poe, like contemporaries N. P. Willis and Rufus Wilmot Griswold, deliberately cultivated sensationalism as a way of gaining notoriety and establishing his literary career. Rachel Polonsky, while treating Poe's connections with European aesthetic philosophy in Chapter Three, "Poe's Aesthetic Theory," devotes much attention to the fine humorous tale, "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob," and, in so doing, offers a challenging new interpretation of the story.

The middle portion of this volume, comprising Chapters Four through Nine, situates Poe's imaginative writings within several different modes of discourse to show how Poe both followed yet departed from a variety of literary approaches and genres. In Chapter Four, "Poe's Humor," Daniel Royot offers an appreciation of Poe's sense of humor and situates it within the long-standing traditions of American literary and folk humor. In Chapter Five, "Poe and the Gothic Tradition," Benjamin Franklin Fisher begins by placing Poe among Anglo-American Gothic novelists and then provides close readings of several of Poe's Gothic tales to show how he manipulated and challenged the conventions of Gothic fiction and horror. In Chapter Six, "Poe, Sensationalism, and Slavery," Teresa Goddu also considers Poe's use of horror yet complicates it by showing his indebtedness to the rhetoric of anti-slavery discourse. Those authors who argued against slavery recognized the value of horror as a rhetorical strategy. Poe, in turn, recognized the literary value of their descriptions of slavery. Goddu's chapter, though not intentionally, nicely ties together two strands of Poe's work advanced in earlier chapters, namely his interest in horror and his understanding of the value of sensationalism to literary discourse.

The next three chapters situate Poe's writings within other discursive practices. In Chapter Seven, "Extra! Extra! Poe Invents Science Fiction!" John Tresch evaluates the claim that Poe deserves recognition as the inventor of modern science fiction. While identifying precursors to science fiction in such earlier literary genres as utopian fiction, Tresch delineates Poe's significant contributions to the genre and shows how subsequent practitioners reflect Poe's influence. Similarly, Peter Thoms evaluates Poe's contributions to the detective story in Chapter Eight, "Poe's Dupin and the Power of Detection." While readers nowadays take the conventions of detective fiction for granted, they were unknown before Poe's three detective tales featuring his

master-sleuth, C. Auguste Dupin. In Chapter Nine, "Poe's Feminine Ideal," Karen Weekes examines Poe's depiction of women in his verse and fiction and challenges the notion that any of Poe's fictional women represent his feminine ideal and instead sees Poe's female creations largely as intellectual manifestations of his ideas.

Chapters Ten through Twelve provide more in-depth discussions of four individual Poe works. In Chapter Ten, "A Confused Beginning: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, of Nantucket*," Geoffrey Sanborn examines the only book-length novel Poe brought to completion, a work that has continued to intrigue and puzzle Poe enthusiasts since its initial publication. Sanborn sees the novel as a search for identity analogous to what many young men in the United States were experiencing during the 1830s. In "Poe's 'Constructiveness' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" Scott Peeples takes what might be called a Neo-Structuralist approach as he parallels the House of Usher with its story to emphasize Poe's literary craftsmanship. Chapter Twelve, "Two Verse Masterworks: 'The Raven,' and 'Ulalume,'" examines what many consider Poe's two finest poems. In the first half of the chapter, Richard Kopley describes the composition of "The Raven," analyzes its themes, and situates it within the culture of Poe's day and the popular culture of our own. In the second half of the chapter, I attempt to reconcile the topical references in "Ulalume" with its formal and thematic elements.

The final two chapters trace Poe's cultural influence from the end of his life to the present day. In earlier chapters, Tresch and Kopley touch upon modern popular culture reflecting Poe's influence, but Mark Neimeyer offers a detailed treatment of the subject in Chapter Thirteen, "Poe and Popular Culture." Examining a variety of popular media from cinema to comic books, Neimeyer shows how Poe's life, works, and image have become enmeshed within the mass culture of the United States and, indeed, the world. Elite culture, on the other hand, provides the subject for the fourteenth and final chapter, "One-Man Modernist," which analyzes what Poe meant to avant-garde art movements from the mid nineteenth through the twentieth centuries.

Most of the contributors to this volume were assigned general approaches to take yet not given any specific Poe works to address. The result has allowed *The Cambridge Companion to Poe* not only to reveal the depth and breadth of Poe's accomplishment but also to emphasize different aspects of Poe's work not normally emphasized in the scholarship. Take Poe's humor, for example. Poe has never fully received his due as a humorist, yet this volume, as it has evolved, places new emphasis on Poe's humor. Besides Royot's general treatment of the subject, several other contributions consider Poe's humorous tales and reveal their wide-ranging implications. Polonsky shows

how two of Poe's humorous tales reflect his aesthetic theory. Fisher and Goddu show how Poe combined horror with humor. Tresch shows how Poe's sense of humor helped lead him to science fiction. Regardless of their different critical approaches, subjects, or ultimate conclusions, the following chapters offer professional and provocative interpretations that all of Poe's readers – whether popular reader, enthusiast, or skeptic – will appreciate.

NOTES

1. *National Union Catalog: Pre-1956 Imprints*, 754 vols. (London: Mansell, 1968–1981), nos. P0436278–P0436280.
2. "A Mad Man of Letters," *Scribner's Monthly* 10 (October 1875): 690–699.
3. Robert Louis Stevenson, "Literature," review of *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John H. Ingram, *Academy* 7 (2 January 1875): 1.
4. Paul Elmer More, *The Demon of the Absolute* (Princeton University Press, 1928), p. 86.
5. Sears, Roebuck and Company, *1897 Sears Roebuck Catalogue* (1897; reprinted, New York: Chelsea House, 1968).
6. [Arnold Bennett,] "Books and Persons," *New Age*, new ser. 4 (January 28 1909): 284.

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KENT P. LJUNGQUIST

The poet as critic

Edgar Allan Poe, poet, short story writer, and critic, was a controversial figure in the publishing world of antebellum America. His ability to spark controversy stemmed not only from an image concocted by his contemporary detractors but from the sharp tone and pointed content of the critical articles he wrote during his lifetime. He worked as an editor and contributor to magazines in several American publishing venues, including Richmond, New York, and Philadelphia. His continuing ambition was to found and edit his own magazine, an outlet that would have granted him financial security and artistic control in what he deemed an antagonistic literary marketplace. Poe's challenge to moralistic strictures against literature, his confrontations with the New England literary establishment, and his caustic and satirical critical style won him many enemies. Some readers too easily identified Poe with a voice like that of his deranged or vindictive narrators, a tendency made plausible by the misrepresentations of the Reverend Rufus Griswold, his literary executor. Griswold, who launched his literary career with editorial work for periodicals like the *Boston Notion*, reacted defensively when Poe attacked figures in New England's literary establishment. In fact, the "general caustic severity" of his criticism was one factor in Griswold's damning obituary that launched the Poe Legend, a combination of half truths and outright fabrications about Poe's personal habits and conduct. Griswold's portrait, in which Poe's role as a critic was relegated to that of a "dissector of sentences," almost irrevocably damaged his reputation.[1]

Griswold omitted from his obituary the fact that Poe was born in Boston, a city which would later be the object of some of his most stinging attacks. His literary career began in the late 1820s and early 1830s, and at that time the American writers against whom he began to measure his talent included William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892), John Neal (1793–1865), and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882). Each of these authors had achieved some degree of prominence by the early 1830s, but none of them confined themselves to a single literary

genre or isolated outlets of publication. If Bryant's poetry served as a model to aspiring men of letters of the 1830s, he also toiled as chief editor for the *New York Review and Athenaeum*, as an assistant editor of the *New York Evening Post*, and as a contributor to and reviewer of literary gift books and annuals. If Whittier achieved a degree of notoriety for a rustic American verse akin to what Robert Burns had produced for Scotland, his literary apprenticeship had included editorial stints for the *Boston Philanthropist*, the *American Manufacturer*, and the *New England Weekly Review*. Neal edited the *Yankee,* and in that periodical he adopted an aggressive critical style, particularly when addressing his twin hobby-horses of plagiarism and originality, soon to be obsessions of Poe. In the pages of the *Yankee*, Neal noted how much poetry of the period imitated that of Bryant. Conscious of such charges was Longfellow, whose apprentice verses appeared alongside Bryant's in the *United States Literary Gazette*. In the early 1830s, moreover, Longfellow, like Poe, turned from poetry to criticism in his "Defence of Poetry" (1832) and a companion piece, "Old English Romances" (1833).

Each of these writers demonstrated that poetic or artistic creation and the critical function could complement one another. Poe, in fact, would later claim that inferior poets would inevitably lapse into false critiques, or to put the matter more positively, that "a poet, who is indeed a poet, could not . . . fail of making a just critique" (*E&R*, 6). Perhaps more important, each of them was a New Englander, and their explicit objective was to sink literary roots into that region's soil. When Poe convinced the Bostonian Calvin Thomas to publish his first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), it appeared as a volume avowedly "by a Bostonian," a nod to a region that would be an obsessive part of Poe's critical consciousness throughout his career. When he published his second volume of poems, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* (1829), he was still under the spell of Lord Byron as a poetic model, an influence he would never completely shed.[2] The aspersions cast upon Byron by Bryant and Longfellow may have weaned New England writers from the allegedly noxious influence of the British author's verse. The last of Poe's early poetic collections, his *Poems: Second Edition* (1831), published in New York, contained the distinctive verses "To Helen" and "Israfel" as well as an initial critical statement, the "Letter to Mr. —," an attack on derivative followers of the British Lake School reminiscent of Byron's in "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" and *Don Juan*. In 1831, such an attack reminded American readers not just of Byron's criticisms but of strictures levelled against an "American Lake School," whose titular head was Bryant, also called the "American Wordsworth."[3] Whatever the case, the "Letter to Mr. —," which was republished in revised form as "Letter to B—" in the *Southern Literary Messenger* (July 1836), constitutes Poe's

first substantial statement on his poetics. It contains an initial statement on the aims of poetry as opposed to the objectives of science and other literary forms:

> A poem . . . is opposed to a work of science by having for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth; to romance by having, for its object an indefinite instead of a definite pleasure, being a poem only so far as this object is attained; romance presenting perceptible images with definite, poetry with indefinite sensations, to which end music is essential, since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception. Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music without the idea is simply music; the idea without the music is prose from its very definitiveness. (*E&R*, 11)

As many scholars have noted, Poe derived his definition of poetry in part from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, praised in the essay for his "towering intellect" and "gigantic power." Such reverence is accorded to Coleridge at the expense of Wordsworth, who represents the view that the "end of poetry is, or should be, instruction." This alignment of poetry with moral instruction Poe labels a "heresy" of the Lake School, treated sometimes dismissively, sometimes playfully in the essay. The tone of flippancy and sarcasm applied to philosophic and aesthetic issues would be one of the hallmarks of Poe's criticism in later years. In bowing to the wisdom of men like Coleridge and Robert Southey, the wise critic need not be sober or reverential but must learn to laugh at "poetical theories so prosaically exemplified."

Whatever tone adopted by the critic, Poe felt that the poet should be predisposed toward indefinite images and sensations enhanced by music or sweet sound. Music could thus be a vehicle for the exploration of unearthly beauty, not to be confused with mere prettiness. As he wrote in "Letter to B—," poetry might render the "airy and fairy-like," but latent in its impact was "all that is hideous and unwieldy" (*E&R*, 7–11).

Poe once again acknowledged his debts to Coleridge in a review of Robert Montgomery Bird's novel, *Sheppard Lee* (*Southern Literary Messenger*, September 1836), one of his first significant critical statements on prose fiction. The main character in Bird's novel experiences metempsychosis (inhabiting the bodies of persons who had died), a plot device that Poe would use in "Ligeia" and "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains." In the review Poe seizes upon Bird's handling of the occult. Objecting to incredible or improbable elements in the narrative, Poe claims that unraveling a plot by awkwardly appealing to the supernatural constitutes an affront to artistic standards. This censure of Bird's idiosyncratic characters and extraordinary plot devices may seem like an early call for realism in fiction, but the review calls for more than minute attention to credible detail.

After scoring Bird's capricious exploitation of the "explained supernatural" – a technique he may have associated with the works of Washington Irving and Anne Radcliffe – Poe eschews "directness of expression" in narratives of improbable events. He states a preference for leaving "much to the imagination – in writing as if the author were firmly impressed with the truth, yet astonished at the immensity, of the wonder he relates, and for which, professedly, he neither claims credence – in minuteness of detail." Minute particulars, Poe suggests, have little bearing on the thrust of narrative fiction. A subtle author can exploit "the infinity of arts that give verisimilitude to a narration," and at the same time, he can leave a residue of wonder at events "not to be accounted for." Rather "than explaining away his incredibilities," the artist can give them vividness and character (*E&R*, 402–403). The review of *Sheppard Lee* anticipates other critical statements on the artful combination (what Poe would call "novel combinations") of verisimilitude and improbability in prose fiction. Twentieth-century critics have applied the principles enunciated in the review of *Sheppard Lee* to Poe's own works of supernatural or speculative fiction, including the longer narrative, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838).

If Bird failed to integrate fully the various threads of his narrative, poets, too, could be found wanting in their failure to achieve novel combinations. In an early review of Joseph Rodman Drake's *The Culprit Fay and Other Poems* and Fitz-Greene Halleck's *Alnwick Castle* (*Southern Literary Messenger*, April 1836), these two prominent New York poets appeared to lack the true poetical faculty in rendering natural scenery. Poe would acknowledge in a January 1837 review that Bryant occupied a secure and respected position among the American authors in general; by implication Bryant, a native New Englander, now clearly occupied a superior position among New York poets, easily surpassing the likes of Drake and Halleck. That status owed much to Bryant's "repeated reference to the beauty and majesty of nature." However ardent and loving his renderings of natural scenes and vistas, Bryant's poetic vision was limited to nature in its "moral" and "physical" manifestations. His verses may lack the "spiritual" or soul-stirring characteristics reserved for poets of the first rank. If Poe generally limited his remarks on Bryant to the poet's efficient handling of word choice, prosody, and versification – Bryant had delivered formal lectures on these subjects in the 1820s – he adopted a broader perspective in the "Drake-Halleck Review." He went beyond derision of the two poets to a fuller expression of his thoughts on ideal forms of beauty and the poetic sentiment. In particular, Poe takes great relish in ridiculing the sentimental endowment of natural objects with human significance. For example, he disparages the