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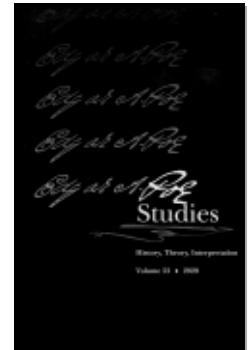
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Edgar Allan Poe

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Poe Studies, Volume 53, 2020, pp. 144-145 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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# Edgar Allan Poe

JORGE LUIS BORGES

Translated by SERGIO WAISMAN



**B**ehind Poe (like behind Swift, and Carlyle, and Almafuerte) there is a neurosis. Interpreting his work around this anomaly can be abusive or legitimate. It is abusive when the neurosis is alleged to invalidate or negate the work; it is legitimate when one searches in the neurosis for a means to understand its genesis. Arthur Schopenhauer has written that there is no circumstance in our lives that is not voluntary; in neurosis, like in other misfortunes, we can see the artifice of an individual working to reach an end. Poe's neurosis allowed him to renovate the fantastic story, to multiply the literary forms of horror. It could also be said that Poe sacrificed his life to his work, his mortal destiny to his posthumous one.

Our century is more unfortunate than the nineteenth; it is thanks to this sad privilege that the hells subsequently elaborated (by Henry James, by Kafka) are more complex and more intimate than Poe's. Death and madness were the symbols to which the latter recurred to communicate his horror of life; in his books he had to simulate that living is beautiful and that the destruction of life, from death or madness, is atrocious. Such symbols attenuate his feeling; for poor Poe the mere fact of existing was atrocious. Accused of imitating German literature, he could truthfully respond: *Terror is not of Germany, but of the soul.*

Much firmer and lasting than Poe's poetry, bequeathed to the imagination of men, is the figure of Poe as a poet. (The same thing happens with Lord Byron, perhaps with Goethe.) Some memorable verse—"Was it not Fate, that, on this July midnight"—honors and might justify his pages; the rest is mere triviality, sentimentality, bad taste, weak imitations of Thomas Moore.

Aldous Huxley amused himself by translating some sententious stanza of Milton's into Poe's singular dialect; the result is unfortunate, although one might object and say that a paragraph from "The Gold-Bug" or from "Berenice," translated into the inextricable prose of the *Tetrachordon*, would be even worse. Our image of Poe, of a craftsman who premeditates and executes his work with slow lucidity, at the margins of popular favor, comes less from Poe's pieces than from

the doctrine he articulates in the essay “The Philosophy of Composition.” It is that doctrine, not “Dream-Land” or “Israfil,” that lead to Mallarmé and Paul Valéry.

Poe thought of himself as a poet, and only a poet, but circumstances drove him to write stories, and those stories that he resigned himself to writing and which he confronted as occasional tasks are his immortality. In some (“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” “A Descent into the Maelström”) circumstantial invention shines; others (“Ligeia,” “The Masque of the Red Death,” “Eleonora”) do without it, blatantly, with unexplainable efficiency. From others (“The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Purloined Letter”) comes the mighty detective genre that today is published exhaustingly and which will never completely die out, since it has also been made illustrious by Wilkie Collins and Stevenson and Chesterton. Behind all of them, inspiring them, filling them with fantastic life, lie Edgar Allan Poe’s anguish and terror.

Mirror of arduous schools that practice the solitary art and do not wish to be the voice of the many, the father of Baudelaire, who begat Mallarmé, who begat Valéry, Poe inextricably belongs to the history of Western letters, which cannot be understood without him. Also, and this is more important and more intimate, because of an occasional verse and many incomparable pages, he belongs to the timeless and the eternal. From these I’d emphasize the last few from *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, a systematic nightmare whose secret topic is the color white.

Shakespeare wrote that the uses of adversity are sweet; without neurosis, alcohol, poverty, irreparable loneliness, Poe’s work would not exist. He created an imaginary world to elude the real world; the world he created will endure, the other is barely a dream.

Baudelaire inaugurated, and Shaw did not dismiss, the misleading practice of admiring Poe against the United States, of judging the poet to be a lost angel, to his detriment, in such a cold and greedy hell. The truth is that Poe would have suffered in any country. No one, in any case, admires Baudelaire against France or Coleridge against England.

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## Original Publication

“Edgar Allan Poe.” *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), October 2, 1949, sec. 2:1.

## Translated from the Following Reprinted Version

“Edgar Allan Poe.” In *Textos Recobrados (1931–1955)*, 263–65. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2001.