Poe Studies Association: 1983

The eleventh annual meeting of the Poe Studies Association was held in the Petit Trianon, New York Hilton, during the MLA Convention (December 29, 1983), with more than sixty in attendance. Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV (Univ. of Mississippi) presided, and Vice-President and Program Chairman Kent Ljungquist (Worcester Polytechnic Institute) introduced the speakers. Professor Fisher read a treasurer's report for 1983 (to December 31) from Thomas Brown (Univ. of Mississippi) who reported dues received $853.25, interest $106.14, total income $959.39, total expenses $101.75, and a net worth of $2065.67.

Newly elected officers are the following: Kent Ljungquist, President—2 years; David H. Hirsch (Brown Univ.), Vice-President and Program Chair—2 years; Dennis W. Eddings (Western Oregon College), Secretary/Treasurer—3 years; James Gargano (Washington and Jefferson College) and Glen A. Omana (Temple Univ.), Members-at-Large—2 years.

Other news reported: (1) David K. Jackson and Dwight Thomas have delivered the manuscript of the Poe Log to G. K. Hall; (2) Elizabeth Wylie's concordance to Poe draws toward completion; (3) The Jay B. Hubbell Center for American Literary Historiography, Duke Univ., now the archival repository for the PSA, welcomes all donations of relevant papers—and will recompense donors with postage, after materials are sent; (4) Richard Kopley (Pennsylvania State Univ.) invites suggestions and inquiries from those interested in a 1988 conference on Nantucket Island in observance of the 150th anniversary of the publication of The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym; and (5) Kent Ljungquist requests reprints for the 1983 survey of Poe criticism in American Literary Scholarship.

Papers read: “Subverting Interpretation: The Lesson of Poe's Geometry in 'The Pit and the Pendulum,'” Alexander Hammond (Washington State Univ.), “Poe and the Will,” April Selsey (College of St. Rose); and “Poe's Symbolic Language,” Eric W. Carlson (Emeritus, Univ. of Connecticut). A response to the three papers was provided by Joan C. Dayan (Yale Univ.).

Other Conferences

The Baltimore Poe Society and the Univ. of Baltimore sponsored a symposium, “Myths and Reality: The Mysterious Mr. Poe,” October 21-23, 1983. Made possible by the Maryland Humanities Council, the program included lectures by John Ward Ostrom (Emeritus, Wittenberg Univ.), “Edgar Allan Poe: Finances, Drugs, and Alcohol”; Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV (Univ. of Mississippi), “Poe at Work: Poe's Methods as a Literary Artist”; Cliff Krainik (Washington, D.C.), “The Sir Moses Ezekiel Statue of Edgar Allan Poe in Baltimore”; Richard P. Benton (Trinity College), “The Women in Poe's Life”; and William T. Bandy (Emeritus, Vanderbilt Univ.), “Poe's Last Days and Death.” Related panel discussions included the lecturers and the following participants: Stephen Matanle (Univ. of Baltimore), Lawrence W. Markert (Univ. of Baltimore), Richard Hart (Vice President, Poe Society), Adelio Macentelli (Essex Community College), and Alexander Rose (Secretary, Poe Society).


Recent Dissertations: January 1982-December 1983


Poe Studies Association Newsletter

Editors: Eric W. Carlson, Professor Emeritus
Department of English
University of Connecticut
Storrs, Conn. 06269
Kent P. Ljungquist
Department of Humanities
Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Worcester, Mass. 01609

Managing Editor: J. Lasley Dameron
Department of English
Memphis State University
Memphis, Tenn. 38152

The PSA Newsletter is distributed by the Department of English, Memphis State University. Copies are available upon request.

Poe-Related Research and Publications

John T. Irwin (Johns Hopkins Univ.), whose American Hieroglyphics is available in paperback (Johns Hopkins), is working on a book-length study of Poe and Borges. Kent Ljungquist will do the 1983 survey of Poe criticism for American Literary Scholarship (Duke Univ. Press).

Send reports to Humanities Department, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA 01609.

Bridges to Fantasy (Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1982), edited by George E. Slusser (Univ. of California, Riverside), Eric Rabkin (Univ. of Michigan), and Robert Scholes (Brown Univ.), contains useful discussions of Poe's affinities with fantasy writers.


This collection of essays by diverse hands published between 1954 and 1977 (except for the editor's excellent concluding essay printed here for the first time) both reminds and further convinces the reader of the significance of hoaxing to Poe's art. What is perhaps most impressive about these essays is that each defends the polysemous integrity of Poe's text as it delivers its own well-considered value judgments. And although I quibble with the inclusion of certain pieces on general irony which tend to blur the book's major focus on hoaxing (Eddings does try to justify their inclusion in his Introduction), the essays' collective and healthy respect for Poe's teasing modulation of tone serves to disarm the possibility of oversimplified or reductive readings. Indeed, Poe himself (as one essay recalls) in a note to "Hans Pfaff" comparing his own tale to another was well aware that hoaxing could betray both a satiric and a serious purpose: "Both have the character of hoaxes (although one is in a tone of banter, the other of downright earnest)" (91).

This is not to say, however, that the essays fail to take provocative divergent positions. Almost every piece deals with the significance of reader response to and participation in Poe's fictional world, and almost every piece posits the existence of two projected classes of readers, the common reader who is the butt of the joke and the uncommon reader who, to a degree, is in on the joke. As Robert Regan nicely puts it, Poe "is in effect making a division of his readers into passing and failing categories—into the elect and the reprobate—by a test which admits no halfway covenanters" (84). But, reflecting a debate voiced increasingly in recent criticism, these essays disagree over whether Poe's hoaxing finally implies a disintegrating or a harmonistic universe. The two most articulate voices in this profound disagreement are J. Gerald Kennedy's and Eddings' own. Kennedy maintains that "the reader's encounter with a treacherous text mirrors the narrator's encounter [in Pym] with a duplicitous world, and both experiences point toward a realization that man's search for truth and meaning culminates not in transcendent harmony but in cognitive confusion" (124). Eddings, on the other hand, contends more inclusively that theme and satiric hoaxing merge in an aesthetic unity representative of the unity of God's universe. It is up to us, as readers, to see this unity by playing Dupin to Poe. If we do, we see into the very unity of all creation. If we do not, we are victims of Poe's deception, demonstrating in that very fact his contention.
that erroneous methods of perception make man prey to duplicity” (165).

The implications of this critical debate seem to be that, whether we see mud or stars, our search for universal meaning is finally self-reflective. In "The Man of the Crowd" the reader follows the narrator who follows the old man who follows the crowd which follows the directing hand of Poe who follows the reader following himself, each chasing his own tale. Whether Poe's hoaxing sound and fury ultimately signify nothing or something, the collective insights of The Naiad Voice permit his art to be read better and thereby expand the ranks of his uncommon readers.

Mark M. Hennelly, Jr.
California State University, Sacramento


Donald Ringe's contribution to the study of the Gothic mode in American fiction is to examine its European sources, his aim being to demonstrate "that a distinctively American mode developed out of the British and German roots" and that the Gothic, "from being the purile form it has so frequently been considered, became, in the hands of the Americans, a suitable vehicle for the development of serious themes" (v). The claims are not new, but the effort to substantiate them provides some needed historical perspective on the American Gothic.

Ringe's historical approach tends to confirm the familiar observation that American Gothic fiction is more psychological than its European sources. He finds in the British and German traditions an interest in character psychology (in the delusions or misapprehensions of reality usually giving rise to Gothic terror) that is often subordinated to the experience of terror itself and the subsequent explanation of it as naturally rather than supernaturally induced. The Americans, on the other hand, make the problems of perception and the workings of reason and imagination primary. Although diverse in aim and treatment, American Gothic fiction is distinguished in Ringe's view by its use of Gothic incident, imagery, and effect as a means of conveying serious psychological themes.

Ringe's ability to illuminate these themes, however, is hampered by his distrust of modern psychological criticism. Thus the "distinctiveness" of American Gothic fiction often seems more a matter of emphasis than substance. Although he discusses some neglected writers—Neal, Paulding and Dana—there is not much new in his treatment of Charles Brockden Brown, Irving, Poe, and Hawthorne. Some readers will balk at the abrupt dismissal of Melville from the Gothic ranks, the absence of Twain, and the summary treatment of Howells, Bierce, and James as writers whose ghostly tales are of "only minor importance in the history of American Gothicism" (189). Ringe argues that American writers after the Civil War were committed to the aesthetics of realism, but even early in the century, as he shows, the Gothic mode in America was shaped by common-sense realists who distrusted the delusions of Gothic imagination and demanded "rational fictions." It is hard to see why Irving's "sportive Gothic," in which Ringe finds common sense affirmed, is a more significant development than James's experiments later in the century.

Poe is credited with developing more fully than Godwin, Maturin, or Brown "the relation between details of the Gothic setting, especially enclosures, and the disturbed minds of his characters" (151). Ringe finds in Poe's use of the Gothic mode a consistently developed theme of "psychic survival." Poe's characters are motivated by a fear of annihilation and a desire to preserve their sanity and identity. Their Gothic settings are symbolic of their efforts to hold off the inevitable, either by shutting out the reality of death or by perversely challenging its dominion. Despite his illumination of this theme, however, Ringe's synoptic discussion of Poe's tales is stale and sometimes unresolved. In reading "Ligeia," for example, he would have us take literally the revivification of Rowena's corpse by the spirit of Ligeia, arguing that it was not Poe's practice, like so many of his Gothic forebears, to explain away the supernatural in his best tales. The resulting ambiguity, Ringe recognizes, makes possible other interpretations, particularly the one that views Rowena's reanimation as a delusion of the narrator, but once again he dismisses psychological readings that remove us from the "historical context." Yet, proceeding to the significance of Gothic rooms in Poe's tales as symbols of the characters' psychological distress, Ringe fails to account for the fact that the room in which Ligeia apparently works her supernatural will is the narrator's creation.

Although his readings are seldom novel or exhaustive, Ringe does provide a generally reliable and worthwhile introduction to the Gothic mode in nineteenth-century American fiction.

Bruce L. Weiner
St. Lawrence University

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NEW MEMBERSHIP OR RENEWAL FOR 1984

I wish , do not wish to continue receiving PSA Newsletter (Spring, Fall).

(Check one)

Enclosed is my $5 check for dues and subscription for the calendar year 1984. (Check should be made out to "Poe Studies Association" and mailed to Dennis W. Eddings, Poe Studies Association, English Department, Western Oregon State College, Monmouth, Oregon 97361).

NAME ____________________________

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"Why Hawthorne was melancholy and what made Poe drink liquor and why did Henry James like England better than America?" The issues that Montgomery raises in this fascinating and infuriating book are hardly peripheral, since his ambitious project is to consider the philosophical-religious context of the twentieth-century writer. His "ranging" encompasses literature from Chaucer to Allen Ginsberg, philosophy from St. Thomas to Husserl, and cultural criticism from Hobbes to Eric Voegelin. One memorable paragraph (pp. 145-6) touches upon worker revolt in Poland, the eruption of Mount St. Helens, O'Connor's metaphor of spiritual hunger, Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, and Stalin's rebuke of religious authority. Such broad scope, in the eyes of some, may qualify Montgomery as the scholarly world's foremost name dropper; his wide coverage reflects, rather, the diffuseness of purpose that ultimately makes this volume a disappointment to the serious student of Poe. While injecting a note of welcome levity into a discussion burdened by weighty philosophical questions, Montgomery's title suggests his condescension toward Poe. Serving as Montgomery's convenient foil in a campaign to ascertain the validity of a Christian vision, Poe emerges as a false prophet, a harbinger of twentieth-century maladies offering a direct contrast to O'Connor, the protagonist of forgotten but essential truths.

As Montgomery systematically endorses O'Connor's artistry at Poe's expense, the nineteenth-century author serves as a case study of arrested vision while his twentieth-century counterpart wins the mantle of authentic prophet, one who bears witness through her visionary fictions. Somewhat mercifully, Montgomery allows Poe to disappear from the discussion for several chapters to make way for ruminations on Heideggerian philosophy. Giving Poe credit for raising the quality of magazine publishing in America, Montgomery could not damn with fainter praise: "I do not think any American writer of 'major' reputation has written so much bad literature" (p. 115).

Students of Poe have had to confront the animadversions of T. S. Eliot, Henry James, and Yvor Winters among others. With this learned and opinionated book, Montgomery joins the ranks of Poe's most articulate debunkers.

Kent Ljungquist
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

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Marion Montgomery takes the title of the second volume in his trilogy on "The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age" from a speech by Flannery O'Connor in which she counselled students of literature to avoid peripheral issues: