



AMERICAN LITERATURE READINGS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

# Retrospective Poe

The Master, His Readership,  
His Legacy

*Edited by* José R. Ibáñez  
Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan

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# American Literature Readings in the 21st Century

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## INTRODUCTION: RE-ASSESSING POE'S SEDUCTIVE ART

Over 200 years after his birth, Poe's reputation is firmly established in world literature. Despite changes to the American canon, he remains a central figure in American literature and a seminal voice in the development of the modern short story globally. There is a broad consensus that Poe's legacy relies to a great extent on the translations and essays of Charles Baudelaire. Indeed, so great was the importance of Baudelaire in the worldwide recognition of Poe that Paul Valéry remarked that the American author would have been almost forgotten if Baudelaire "had not taken up the task of introducing him into European literatures," a comment that Lois D. Vines considered both an exaggeration and an understatement (Vines 1999, 1). Had Baudelaire not regarded Poe as a model, the latter's fame might well have faded, and he might now be regarded simply as one among many American writers of his age. Baudelaire's discovery was consequential if one takes a cursory glance at the number of writers who have claimed to be under Poe's influence in one way or another.

If, for the French poet and those he influenced, Poe became a cult figure—we might recall here Mallarmé's claim that he moved to London to improve his English in an attempt to better understand Poe—in England things were radically different. T.S. Eliot's contentious essay "From Poe to Valéry," based on his Library of Congress lecture delivered in 1948 and published a year later in *The Hudson Review*, stands out as one of the most damning pieces of criticism on Poe. Eliot openly criticized Poe and declared that anyone examining his work would find nothing but "slipshod writing" (1949, 327). He even made the point that only a mind that

was still adolescent could be attracted to Poe's style, which he disparaged as "puerile thinking" (327). What puzzled Eliot above all was the passionate enthusiasm that Poe's work aroused in Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry, three French poets who each offered an individual understanding of poetry and who became advocates for Poe, all playing significant roles in establishing Poe's literary reputation.

Despite the harsh comments on Poe and his art, Eliot's article is perhaps an interesting case of how writers, critics, artists, and the general readership have read and understood Poe. The audience for Poe is indeed a strange one: whereas there have been numerous anthologies of Poe's fiction addressed to a young readership, adaptations of Poe's work for the screen have largely been aimed at an adult audience. There is also the fact that Poe has been held in awe by a large number of adult readers, among them some very notable writers: Baudelaire, Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, Stéphane Mallarmé, Robert Louis Stevenson, Paul Valéry, and Stephen King, to name just a few. All of them have claimed to have been influenced by Poe's work, and none can be characterized as adolescent, though some of them are or were writers catering to a young readership in their own work.

Some of the contributors to *Retrospective Poe* have taken Eliot's essay as a starting point, thus indicating the importance of Eliot as a critic even now, with the days of Modernism long gone. Taking that essay as a point of departure might lead contributors to downplay the importance of Poe or the extent of his influence on literature. Yet quite the contrary is true; the chapters herein attest to the vitality of such reception studies in terms of their subjects and approaches. This may be because, as Studniarz argues, "Eliot's response to Poe's literary legacy is puzzling and complicated" (99). Eliot may have felt that Poe posed a threat to the poetry he himself wrote, and thus preferred to criticize him harshly if only to avoid any literary relationship. To the names mentioned above we should add another great Modernist author, Jorge Luis Borges—the precursor of literary Postmodernism—who also acknowledged the influence of Poe on his work, to the point of claiming that the American writer was the originator of the modern short story (Esplin 2018). Borges was an avid reader who repeatedly pointed out his indebtedness to Poe, whom he had read in his childhood (16).

In any case, prior to Eliot's controversial essay, some comparativist studies had already appeared. In his exhaustive study of the influence of Poe in Hispanic literature, John E. Englekirk analyzed the influence of

Poe on Spanish-speaking writers on both sides of the Atlantic, singling out the work of some outstanding representatives of Spanish American letters, such as Rubén Darío. Englekirk offered an extensive catalogue of translations and of the critical appreciation of the American writer, plus a thorough analysis of Poe's influence on a number of Spanish and Spanish American authors. This was not the only study of the reception of Poe abroad. John C. French collected the lectures delivered at the Edgar Allan Poe Society in Baltimore in 1941 examining Poe's reception in Spain, Russia, France, and Germany.

In 1957, Patrick Quinn's seminal book on the reception of Poe in France, *The French Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, addressed Baudelaire's appropriation of Poe in the creation of his own literary persona. Quinn explores the extent of Poe's influence on writers of fiction and criticism, such as Marie Bonaparte, in an attempt to identify other appropriations of Poe.

In 1999, Louis Davis Vines edited *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, a work that aimed to be "the first attempt to bring together in one volume an account of Poe's effect on literatures around the world and to present analyses of his influence on major writers" (1). This collective volume not only explored Poe's impact on over twenty countries and geographical regions worldwide, as well as his influence on major writers—Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, Kafka, and Pessoa, to name just a few—but also became a landmark in Poe studies in that it set in motion the globalized, transnational projection of Poe as a literary figure in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Also in the early years of the twenty-first century, Burton R. Pollin collected essays on Poe's ascendancy in *Poe's Seductive Influence on Great Writers*. The volume contains twelve essays plus seven reviews about notable authors, mostly Anglo-Americans, who had been influenced by Poe. John T. Irwin explored the relationship between Poe and Borges in *The Mystery to a Solution* (1994), an act of interpretation and reading of their respective works. In 2018, Emron Esplin would continue the exploration of Poe's seductive influence on Borges, looking at the latter's understanding and interpretation of Poe, in *The Influence and Reinvention of Edgar Allan Poe in Spanish America*, with fresh readings of Poe's and Borges' stories that explain how Borges created Poe the story writer firstly for the Spanish readership, and then for the rest of the world.

As the methodological approaches changed, scholars came to favor reception theory, the study of intertextuality, and even more materialist studies, such as the history of Poe's publications in magazines and

anthologies, including translations. In 2014, an ambitious project, led by Emron Esplin and Margarida Vale de Gato, was initiated. *Translated Poe* picked up the baton of *Poe Abroad*, acknowledging Vines' collection as a source of inspiration. The editors commissioned a select group of Poe experts who examined translations of Poe's works from around the world, while also assessing how Poe's advocates interpreted his texts following national traditions in the reading of Poe in each language. Esplin and Vale de Gato are also editors of *Anthologizing Poe* (2020), a volume that examines the works of anthologizers, editors, and translators of Poe's texts worldwide. This study reveals why some tales and poems were anthologized—including some beautifully illustrated editions—which ultimately meant that they would enjoy broad critical attention, while others, considered less important texts, were relegated to the fringes of academic discourse. Indeed, anthologizers and editors have shaped our understanding and our appreciation of Poe's work since the final decades of the nineteenth century.

Esplin and Vale de Gato's two great contributions are accompanied by others that may not be so comprehensive but offer detailed analyses of the reception of Poe's work from a wide variety of approaches. Among the books that deserve mention here is Barbara Cantalupo's *Poe's Pervasive Influence* (2013), a volume that collects some noteworthy studies on the influence of the writer in Japan, namely in Edogawa Rampo's fiction, together with Portugal, Russia, and China. As Cantalupo acknowledges in the introduction, the book extends Lois D. Vines' *Poe Abroad*, just as Pollin's *Poe's Seductive Influence* did.

Poe's influence is not limited to literature. The visual arts and the cinema also show the marks of Poe's legacy. We are tempted to claim that it could hardly be otherwise, given the interest that Poe himself had in the visual arts, as attested by the numerous mentions of painters in his writing, and this is brilliantly researched by Barbara Cantalupo in *Poe and the Visual Arts* (2014a). Poe's legacy in this field is represented by the host of painters who illustrated the large number of editions of his work. This is an exciting field of research in Poe studies, one in which Pollin made a previous contribution with his *Images of Poe's Works: A Comprehensive Catalogue of Illustrations* (1995), and which has recently led to other interesting work, such as Margarita Rigal-Aragón and Fernando González-Moreno's *The Portrayal of the Grotesque in Stoddard's and Quantin's Illustrated Editions of Edgar Allan Poe (1884)* (2017), a book that presents new readings of how Poe has been interpreted by painters. They go beyond the

analysis of illustrations to reassess Poe's life and work, discussing some of his portraits. Intermedial studies offer new perspectives by exploring the ways in which a literary text is transposed into another discourse. In this sense, studies on ekphrasis, such as that by Rigal-Aragón and González-Moreno, may help us to understand Poe's legacy in fresh ways, as studies of filmic adaptations have also done.

Such film adaptations are linked to an interest in Poe as a popular icon. Without doubt, his morbid and bizarre stories have attracted a number of artists from the realm of popular culture. Roger Corman's movies are a good example. There are others, such as Jean Epstein, whose 1928 film *La Chute de la Maison Usher* was possibly influenced by the Surrealists' interpretations of Poe's stories. Much more intriguing are the connections to Alfred Hitchcock and Federico Fellini, Louis Malle, and Roger Vadim, as Scott Peeples explores in *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe* (2007). In any case, beyond the comparison of motifs, adaptations of plots, and other traditional studies, intermedial analyses will open up new avenues for understanding why we are still seduced by Poe in such a variety of ways.

One of the most recent achievements in the study of Poe's life and work is the monumental *Oxford Handbook of Edgar Allan Poe* (2019a). Its editors, J. Gerald Kennedy and Scott Peeples, have sought to compile a compendium of new developments in Poe criticism, including examinations of his legacy. For instance, Jeffrey Weinstock reflects on Poe's influence in postmodern culture and suggests that the postmodern elements in Poe's writing certainly anticipated, and influenced, what other authors began doing 100 years later (719). Poe's well-known influence on Latin American *Modernismo* is also dealt with in a contribution by Margarida Vale de Gato, who observes that Fernando Pessoa's translations of Poe's poems into Portuguese feature "a preference for verbal rhythm," which, according to Vale de Gato, might explain why Poe's poetic reputation in the United States "pales in comparison to Europe and Latin America" (619). Poe's visual legacy is assessed by Barbara Cantalupo, who also develops and extends the discussion of the influence of Poe in the visual arts. Finally, of special interest is the advocacy for Poe by three giants of Latin American letters, Horacio Quiroga, Jorge L. Borges, and Julio Cortázar, a trinity of authors who, according to Emron Esplin, can be equated to Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry (605). These three South American writers not only advocated for Poe's oeuvre, but also recreated, imitated, or translated Poe for a Spanish reading audience.

*Retrospective Poe* is divided into four parts. Part I, “Poe’s Echoes of the Classical World and his Current Legacy,” provides the reader with a general overview of Poe, while offering an invitation to look at classical and (post)modern readings of Poe’s work, particularly in Greece. Chapters 1 and 2 offer insights into the presence of the Hellenic world in Poe, and examine traces of Poe’s literature in nineteenth-century Greece, respectively. Greek interest in Poe might have been triggered by his comparison with Lord Byron. In the opening chapter, Harry L. Poe criticizes T.S. Eliot for having understood Poe’s horror fiction as representing the whole body of his work. Indeed, part of the extraordinary breadth of Poe’s writing is the focus on the universal themes of life and death, love, beauty, and justice, which for Harry L. Poe evoke two great cultural strands in the Western world: Hellenist and biblical. This chapter offers a comprehensive assessment of the classical strand of Poe by analyzing the presence of Hellenic elements in his poetry and fiction.

In Chap. 2, Dimitrios Tsokanos considers the impact of Charles Baudelaire’s renditions of Poe’s work on a European readership, particularly in terms of the presence of the American author in Greece and the reasons for his late arrival there compared to neighboring countries. Tsokanos pays special attention to the translations by Emmanuel Rhoides (1836–1904), a Greek writer, journalist, and translator who produced the first Poe renditions in Greek in 1877, offering a less embellished kind of translation, one which would later come to constitute the Greek face of Edgar Allan Poe.

Chapter 3 looks at the social fascination that death and mourning—usually the demise of children, infants, and young women—produced in nineteenth-century popular culture. In it, Eulalia Piñero Gil discusses Poe’s awareness of the impact of these social realities, which he also experienced in his own life. This chapter analyzes the influence of the deaths of young women on the deranged personality of many of Poe’s male characters, who, traumatized by the illness and death of their loved ones, end up committing transgressive acts in search of a fetishistic desire for consolation.

Part II, “Poe and Modernism,” offers readings of Poe with a Modernist perspective. While the break of Modernism with Romanticism is a truism in the critical response to both literary movements, the chapters in this section explore and qualify the extent of that break in particular cases that relate Eliot’s work, both poetry and criticism, to Poe’s oeuvre. Kevin J. Hayes discussed the influence Poe had on avant-garde painters in



“One-Man Modernist” (2002). Strangely enough, little research has been done on the influence that he may have had on Modernist writers despite the Modernist assertions of the distance that separated Romanticism and Modernism. In this section, contributors explore the connections, quite frequently silent and denied, that linked Eliot and Poe.

The first two chapters, Chaps. 4 and 5, present new readings of the troubling literary relationship that Eliot had with Poe (as indeed he had with other predecessors such as Samuel T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth). Viorica Patea contributes a judicious chapter that explores the influence of Poe on both Eliot and Ezra Pound. For this purpose she goes back to Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry to analyze the type of influence that Poe exerted over them and then moves on to examine Poe's influence on the American Modernists, following the traditional notion of Poe's voyage from America to Europe and then back to America in his development as a cultural icon. Patea analyzes the Romantic poetics underlying those of Eliot, linking them to the poetics of Poe to identify a ghostly influence that the latter exercised over Eliot. The chapter may be read as an exploration of Eliot's debt to Poe as well as to the British Romantics, despite all efforts by Eliot to deny such an influence in his essays on Poe and on the Romantics, and even in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

In Chap. 5, Stephanie Sommerfeld distinguishes between *poeta ludens*, Poe, and *poeta doctus*, Eliot. Based on this distinction, she explores their approaches to literature by examining some of the literary strategies used by both authors, for example the importance of skill, bathos, intertextuality, or even class, in order to evaluate how these function in each poet's work. The distinction Sommerfeld makes between *doctus* and *ludens* illuminates both Poe's and Eliot's approaches to poetry, the main difference being that of the degree of seriousness with which each writer observed life. Sommerfeld argues that Poe demythologized transcendence by resorting to satire in his tales, while Eliot favored transcendence as a way to overcome the existential crisis of society in the wake of the horrors of the twentieth century. She concludes that Eliot's “maturity,” seen through the lens of a poet writing in the twenty-first century, is less mature than Poe's “puerile” writing.

In Chap. 6, Sławomir Studniarz argues that Poe's literary legacy is “puzzling and complicated.” He advances the idea that Eliot's criticism of Poe was hindered by the influence that Poe exercised over the French poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He studies sonority

in “The Raven” and “Annabel Lee” following Roman Jakobson’s theory of the poetic text, in an attempt to show that Eliot’s criticism of Poe was not really criticism, but rather a pretext to write about himself and the Modernist poetics he defended. Studniarz goes a step further and gives examples of poets such as William Carlos Williams, Allen Tate, and Edith Sitwell, to name just a few, who loved Poe beyond their adolescence, thus rebuking Eliot’s dictum, and suggesting that Eliot’s essay is a misreading guided by critical prejudice.

In Chap. 7, Bonnie McMullen focuses on the seduction Poe exercised over Francis Scott Fitzgerald. McMullen considers Poe and Fitzgerald in terms of their familiarity with the theatrical life, their writing of short fiction, and their changing fortunes. She analyzes “William Wilson” and “A Short Trip Home” and seeks points of connection between the two stories, looking particularly at concrete similarities. She analyzes the architecture and the townscape, the university lives of the characters, and, most importantly, the characters themselves, as she makes a detailed argument that Fitzgerald uses doubles of Poe’s characters in his own story. In this way, McMullen concludes, Poe becomes the presiding ghost in Fitzgerald’s story.

Part III, entitled “Poe’s Readership in Spain,” offers a handful of examples of the ways in which Poe’s fiction has been marketed to young or adult Spanish-reading audiences. In Hispanic contexts, Poe’s texts were read and understood differently depending on the readers’ ages. Editions of Poe’s tales catered to the interests of these specific audiences, and illustrations were carefully selected by the editors.

Chapter 8 is an approach to Poe’s literary criticism and aesthetic reception in Spain in the 1930s and 1940s. Prior to those decades, authors and artists from the previous half century had made extensive use of Charles Baudelaire’s translations of and commentaries on Poe published in Spain. In their chapter, Alejandro Jaquero-Esparcia and José Manuel Correoso-Rodenas explain that during one of the most convoluted periods of twentieth-century Spain, a group of critics, among them Carlos Fernández Cuenca and Josep Farrán i Mayoral, managed to subvert the image of Poe created by Baudelaire. These authors began to offer more academic and historical readings of Poe, and their critical editions soon became milestones “within the Hispanic intellectual panorama” (139) and a reference point for national and international scholarship.

In Chap. 9, Fernando González-Moreno and Margarita Rigal-Aragón analyze how Poe’s texts were introduced to Spanish readers and how they

were made available to a select audience following a reading based on “maturity.” In this regard, the inexpensive, abridged editions for children of Poe’s lesser known stories, published in booklet format during the first decades of the twentieth century and during the Francoist dictatorship, contrast with hardcover editions from the 1950s to the 1990s, which were for adolescents and highbrow audiences, many of them characterized by evocative illustrations aimed at suggesting what reflections on the tales readers might have.

Chapter 10 focuses on the Spanish reception of “Berenice,” particularly on the different (audio)visual representations of this tale in Spanish popular culture. In their study, Ana González-Rivas Fernández and María Isabel Jiménez González first examine the work of two well-known Spanish illustrators and then explore the impact that “Berenice” had on the Spanish comic genre. Their chapter concludes with a close study of “El trapero” (“The Ragman”), a loose adaptation of “Berenice” by Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, a Spanish director, screenwriter, and Poe lover, who produced one of the all-time favorite TV series in the 1980s, *Historias para no dormir* [Stories to Keep You Awake], for Televisión Española, Spanish public television.

Part IV, “Poe’s Long and Far-Reaching Legacy,” is a reflection on the deep impact that Edgar Allan Poe had on the American readership and on overseas audiences. This section opens with Chap. 11 in which J. Gerald Kennedy argues that Poe foresaw the collective anxiety and the “culture of fear” of contemporary society that began to emerge as a result of the secularization of Western civilization, when scientific skepticism undermined religious belief. Kennedy sets out to explore some of Poe’s “troubling texts,” that is, a handful of poems and tales that show Poe’s theological qualms and illustrate how he anticipated our culture of fear, foreseeing as he did the proliferation of false narratives (today’s “fake news”) and the threat of atomic annihilation and weapons of mass destruction, and even anticipating the threat of environmental destruction.

In Chap. 12, Jeffrey A. Savoye seeks traces of sentiments of nostalgia in history up to the time of Poe. In his view, the American author lived in a cultural environment awash with nostalgia, a longing for the reinvention of a romanticized Southern past. Nostalgia is a concept that has gone largely unobserved by Poe scholars in their discussion of his enduring legacy in the popular imagination, and this chapter analyzes in detail the national sense of this sentiment and how Poe’s image benefited from it.

In Chap. 13, John Gruesser offers a comprehensive study of how “The Gold-Bug” was reproduced in books and journals during the time of the Jim Crow laws in the United States. Though Jupiter was an emancipated African American, the caricatural nature of his description pointed to the veiled racism present in antebellum American society. Gruesser investigates how Poe’s work has been seen as suitable for diverse educational purposes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries despite some of his texts having been seen as including elements of racism. He analyzes the shift from a readership who would accept racism before the Civil War to one that would look with suspicion on that same racism. To make texts more palatable to such readers, editors would use a range of strategies to conceal the explicit racism of “The Gold-Bug,” but would continue to reinforce the racial hierarchy of the period.

In Chap. 14, Marta Miquel-Baldellou analyzes the fascination that Stephen King has felt for Poe. She reads King’s indebtedness to Poe as a metaphorical Jungian shadow, linking this concept to Harold Bloom’s theory of anxiety. She emphasizes intertextual references and the psychoanalytic content of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Monkey,” one of King’s early stories. Some of those references do not come from Poe but from Marie Bonaparte’s analysis of Poe’s fiction, leading to a discussion of the similarities of the childhood experiences of both Poe and King. The doubling of fictive elements, as well as specularly and sexual drive, become dominant elements in the analysis. Miquel-Baldellou’s chapter is interesting in itself and also because it points to the way in which one particular author needed the ghostly presence of Poe to develop his career as a writer of terror fiction.

In Chap. 15, Eusebio Llàcer-Llorca analyzes Roger Corman’s famous adaptation of “The Masque of the Red Death.” Llàcer-Llorca focuses on strategies of amplification, such as the blending of the plot of “The Masque” with that of “Hop-Frog,” the addition of characters that do not appear in the literary text, and the intertextual links that Corman established with other works of literature. He also examines architectural elements and the use of colors, time, and characters. By discussing these narrative elements, Llàcer-Llorca assesses the ways in which Corman made use of a literary text to create a filmic discourse that went beyond a simple adaptation of a single story.

The final chapter in the volume is a thought-provoking analysis of the influence of Poe on Japanese writers. Takayuki Tatsumi explores twentieth-century readings and interpretations of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” a

tale which inspired writers such as Edogawa Rampo, who created narratives of city strollers, and Sakate Yoji, whose play *The Attic* permits readers to retrace the history of voyeurism, which began with Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" and continued with the Dupin trilogy, stories which Tatsumi interprets as narratives of city strollers which redefine "eccentric voyeurs as possible detectives" (299).

The chapters collected in *Retrospective Poe* attest to the multi-layered influence that Poe has exerted for close to two centuries, and the responses to his works by other writers, be they of praise and emulation or, much more rarely, of harsh criticism. Eliot's essay, despite its insensitivity, reveals his reticent attraction to Poe's work, thus creating a ghostly figure that will resurface in other authors. The influence is not limited to the literary sphere. Both in the visual arts and in the cinema, Poe has been a point of reference, in the process turning into something close to an icon of pop culture. This shift from the domain of high culture to that of popular culture might have been foreseen by Eliot, and indeed might serve to help explain his essay.

Although this book has a structured approach, the editors invite readers to focus their initial attention on those sections or chapters that best reflect their interests. As editors, we hope that the volume and its content will trigger further enriching debates on how Poe's texts have been read and understood by his global readership over the course of almost two centuries.

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