

Barbul, Minodora, ed. *Edgar Allan Poe: The Bicentennial (1809-2009)*. Editura Universitatii de Nord; Baia Mare, 2011. 136 pages.

This collection of eight essays came out of the "First International Anniversary conference" dedicated to the bicentennial of Edgar Allan Poe, which was held in Baia Mare, Romania, October 23–25, 2009. The breadth of approaches to Poe's work displayed in these essays underscores what a dynamic force the poet, critic, author and theoretician was and still is in an impressive multiplicity of areas.

As a critic Poe could be acerbic about the work of others, but was often the first to hit the mark accurately, as has later been frequently confirmed. As a poet the writer could produce poems which once heard can never be easily forgotten or confused with that of any other poet; Poe could set something chiming in the ear which became simply a permanent reference point with regard to poetic notions. As a creative writer Poe opened gates into the psyche that expand our vision of dark corners of the mind, as well as pointing out paths into realms that widen our conceptions of sanity. And with a few stories of "ratiocination" Poe created a framework to which authors of detective stories have ever since been beholden.

Each of the essays in this collection increases our ability to understand how Poe managed to achieve so much in a brief and troubled existence lasting only forty years. For instance, Minodora Barbul, in dealing with the short story "Berenice," offers the following quote from Noemi Bomher: "The language of dreaming sends either to the real world or to the latent text and its deciphering was called Magnetism in 1780, Metaphysics in 1805, Romanticism in 1830, humor in 1850, Psychoanalysis in 1920 or Surrealism in 1939." Barbul then draws our attention to the fact that "[it] is amazing how Poe managed to cover the entire range of influences in 1835 when he wrote 'Berenice,'" as she develops the idea of just how far Poe "was a man ahead of his time." Barbul also connects the development of morphine in 1805 with Berenice's catatonic state as well as with dreams in order to explain that "Berenice" has links "with the modern type of fantastic literature" and that it is "undoubtedly a modern essence shaped with the old tools its author had at hand in the 19th century."

Madelaine Pepenel also refers to dreams and Poe's interest in the psyche in her treatment of "The Black Cat," pointing out that "[t]he lasting effect after having read one of Poe's horror stories is seldom the great plot or characterization but the feeling of really having been in contact with actual

insanity." Fear and horror are cited as two major techniques used by Poe, techniques intensified by the fact that "the horrors of his stories are chiefly taking place in the mind of the narrators." And as "our only channel to what really goes on in these tales is through the wretched narrators, it contributes to the feeling of isolation and makes it hard for the reader to know what to believe."

In approaching the tensions produced in Poe's works by the friction between poles of sanity and insanity, Mihaela Prioteasa underlines the fact that "Poe's heroes are ... trapped in a sisific pendulation between hope and despair; they are permanently tortured by the undulating nature of their split personality, and are pushed to the extremes of the human condition." In her examination of "The Pit and the Pendulum" Prioteasa maintains that "the story of the protagonist is actually Poe's personal life story and his permanent race to find an exit from the labyrinth of grief and mourning." Such a view does not wander far from the emphasis on flights from reality as seen in the treatment of dreams by Pepenel and Barbul.

A fascinatingly different subject is to be found in Ramona Demarcsek's treatment of Poe's creation of an unsettling feeling of reality in some of his stories by, in particular, the use of supposed diary entries. In examining "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" and other stories where diary entries figure, such as *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and "The Balloon Hoax," Demarcsek argues persuasively that the elements Poe employs, such as the "use of first person narrative, addressing the reader/audience directly, (quasi)-scientific details, employment of the epistolary style, appealing to the realities of the time and to his own biography, and most importantly, employing the diary entry ... work together towards the final general effect that these narratives have: plausibility and verisimilitude."

David R. Saliba comes at Poe from the writer's own ideas concerning the production of a desired "effect." Poe's writings on the subject are well known and can appear somewhat overbearing if one does not fully agree with the writer's theoretical caveats. Saliba does agree, however, and maintains that "Soul, Beauty, and Effect are the basic elements and essence of Poe's poetics. He defines these concepts, illustrates their functions and consistently applies them to his craft. ... the validity of his clearly defined and simple poetics is indisputable."

Moving from poetics to aesthetics, Fiona Tomkinson argues "that, somewhat uncannily, Hegel's account of Romantic art in the *Aesthetics* provides us with a theoretical description of a kind of art which perhaps achieves its

most complete *praxis* within certain of Poe's works." And while this essay asks us to stretch our imaginations perhaps further than Poe might have been comfortable with, one of Tomkinson's more interesting points comes at the conclusion of her article where she explains that "Hegel also sees Romantic art as dissolving into comedy under the pressure of the prose of the world." One example she chooses to illustrate this point is Poe's "The Man Who Was Used Up," where the military hero seems to combine classical beauty and romantic heroism, but his ideal physique and voice turn out to be the result of a collection of manufactured parts purchased from various commercial enterprises and attached to the body mutilated in battle with the savage tribes: "Pathos and tragedy disappear in his connoisseurship of the technological expertise which enables him to reassemble himself in the mornings."

Comedy takes a back seat when Roy Rosenstein links the Paris morgue, with its openness to gawkers and Mark Twain's use of it in *The Innocents Abroad*, to Poe's short story "Murders in the Rue Morgue." As Rosenstein reveals, no such "rue" is to be found in Paris, but he suggests that it is quite possible that Twain was tipping his hat to Poe: "Twain says in effect that we need not look so far, to the animal world as did Poe, for the beast within: every day ordinary men down and out in Paris carve up their fellows in the underworld, and then the upper crust of society no less cruelly comes to gawk at their brothers' handiwork. For Twain the quick and the dead at the Paris morgue resemble, indeed surpass, not only the Pawnees and the Comanches but even Poe's enraged orangoutang in their animalistic and murderous frenzy."

Jan Nordby Gretlund's contribution to this collection takes as its focus Poe as a Southern writer, despite the fact that "Poe wrote almost nothing about the South, about his roots, or about southern life and history." Gretlund mentions Poe's failure to create a thriving Southern periodical which could counteract contemporary literary currents from the Northeast or "the notion of 'progress' so popular in his country in the 19th century." According to Gretlund, "Poe's intellectual enemy in the 1830's was clearly Emerson and his optimism." For "Unlike Emerson, Poe tried to explore the unknown inner-self without compromising his exploration with religious or utilitarian principles." Gretlund enriches his essay not only with a survey of Poe's educational background, but with perceptive analyses of Poe's attitudes toward moralism or preachments. As Gretlund see it, "Poe was an early existentialist, creating and combating his anxiety through the creative

act. The desired end product is not to instruct others, but the poet's stimulation of his own mind."

In sum, and as the above would suggest, this small collection presents in its variety and range of ideas a much fuller well to draw from than the number of pages would suggest.

Carl Wieck

Tampere University, Finland