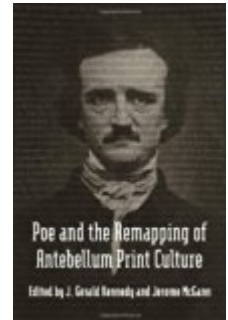


**J. Gerald Kennedy, Jerome McGann, eds..** *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012. vii + 272 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-5026-9.



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**Published on** H-Southern-Lit (September, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Anthony Dyer Hoefer (George Mason University)

Edgar Allan Poe can seem like an aberration in American letters. His vaguely European settings—his predilection for catacombs and dungeons, crumbling manor houses, and curious volumes of forgotten lore—appear far removed from the hustle and bustle of an increasingly commercial mid-nineteenth-century United States. Only rarely do his fantasias explicitly engage the American past or contemporary political and social issues. They instead sound the psychological depths or truck in lurid (and often sensationalist) violence. In short, Poe seems to have more in common with Monk Lewis than, say, James Fenimore Cooper or William Gilmore Simms. In an age of emerging literary nationalism, Poe seems to have been more interested in imagining nightmares than in imagining the nation. In his classic 1927 study of American intellectual history, Vernon L. Parrington touched on Poe's Virginia upbringing, but ultimately depicted him as a Romantic aesthete who found scant inspiration for art in his materialistic nation: "The problem of Poe, fascinating as it is, lies quite outside the main current

of American thought, and it may be left with the psychologist and the belletrist with whom it belongs." [1] F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, the seminal 1941 account of mid-nineteenth-century American literature, sidelined Poe in order to focus on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville—writers who directly engage the American scene.

But this view of Poe never held up to close scrutiny, and the past two decades of scholarship have thoroughly discredited it. The "American Face of Edgar Allan Poe" has been recovered, to borrow the title of an important 1995 essay collection (edited by Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman). The revisionist scholarship of David S. Reynolds, Toni Morrison, J. Gerald Kennedy, Terence Whalen, and others has made it clear that, for all its generically gothic or otherwise exotic trappings, for all its appeals to universal terrors of the soul, Poe's work also drew on the particular anxieties of his contemporary American readers (and not only in the rare story with a U.S. setting

like “The Gold-Bug” [1843]). “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842), for instance, can be read in light of devastating nineteenth-century epidemics. Such tales as “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) and “Mellonta Tauta” (1849) satirize Jacksonian mobocracy. “Hop-Frog” (1849) preys on fears of slave revolt, while *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) offers a probing exploration of race in general. As Betsy Erkkila rightly concludes, “Poe’s poems and tales are much more than expressions of personal psychology, sensational and horrific pulp written for a mass market, or mechanisms that go boo” (p. 69).

Recent scholarship goes further, situating Poe’s work in the chaotic, decentralized literary market(s) of the antebellum United States, in which printed literary works were viewed as public contributions to intellectual exchange and were thus unprotected by strict copyright law. Editors lifted stories from other publications and republished them in their own, sometimes altering them heavily before doing so, without paying the original authors. New publications sprang into existence and in many cases folded shortly thereafter. Authors struggled to make a living in this unregulated market, but it also allowed for wide and unpredictable dissemination of their work (and thus reputation). In her influential 2002 study *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853*, Meredith McGill balances accounts of the exploitation in this market by attending to its innovation and democratic ethos. Poe’s work offers one of her key case studies. She argues that his generic gothic settings offer a savvy way to transcend regionalist pigeonholing and to encourage widespread reprinting and, thus, widespread circulation of his writings.

This new collection of ten essays edited by J. Gerald Kennedy and Jerome McGann continues the broad retrieval of the “American” Poe, but it gives special attention to Poe within the culture of reprinting. In the volume’s introduction, Kennedy explains that in these essays, “Poe figures as the

avatar of [a] horizontal culture of reprinting, envisioning the broad contours of the American literary world, critiquing the nascent nation, and demonstrating the recirculation of ideas and texts” (p. 3). The volume offers a fascinating portrait of a paradoxical Poe—a self-styled arbiter of culture who wrote sensationalist fiction, a vituperative critic of liberal democracy who loathed the masses while desperately seeking their approval, a self-conscious southerner who advocated a cosmopolitan literature, and a smooth operator in a literary market that ultimately crushed him. Rather than merely stoking the (in Poe’s case massive) cult of the author, though, these essays suggest that Poe’s paradoxes, contradictions, and ironies have at least as much to do with his complex and troubled times as they do with his complex and troubled genius.

In his contribution to the volume, Kennedy examines Poe’s role in “inventing the literati” of the nascent U.S. literary culture. Kennedy highlights Poe’s unique position in the largely regional literary scene of the early nineteenth-century United States: “no other contemporary American literary figure worked so tirelessly or so ingeniously to overcome the anomalous disjunction of national culture and to construct an idea of American literature that transcended geographical distance and regional diversity. In the context of editorial stints in Richmond, Philadelphia, and New York, and through sojourns in Boston and Baltimore, Poe developed extended networks of literary connections and became familiar with several distinct cultures of letters” (p. 18). While Poe had little patience for literary nationalism, he sought to position himself as “the supreme literary authority on American literary eminence” (p. 22). In his “autography” series, Poe offered a “who’s who” of American literature. He satirized, gossiped about, and offered critical assessments of figures both major and minor. Yet Poe left his study of “The Living Writers of America” unfinished at the time of his death, and he never realized his ultimate goal to found a literary journal

of his own, *The Stylus*, which would allow him to even more directly shape the emerging national literary scene.

Leon Jackson explores Poe's complex relationship to "the culture of celebrity." As an "orphaned child of poor actors, fostered but never formally adopted by a wealthy Virginia family, raised in a socially elite culture, and then cast adrift, Poe's life represents an almost textbook example of incoherent social identity" (p. 39). A pauperized vagabond with an aristocratic upbringing and sensibilities, "Poe engaged with celebrity and wielded it as a tool through which to exorcise (but also exercise) his status anxieties" (p. 41). But Poe's engagement with celebrity was fraught with tension. Jackson examines how Poe was "both drawn to *and* repelled by" celebrity culture. "He was drawn to it to the extent that it seemed to hold out precisely the kind of applause he craved; he was repelled by it to the extent that it struck him as fraudulent and unjustifiable valorization of those lacking in talent; and his vacillations were driven by his hopes and fears" (p. 43).

Several other essays focus on Poe's place in the emerging national literature. Scott Peeples offers a survey of the antebellum literary scene in New York City and a close look at Poe's contributions to it. While we give much classroom time and scholarly attention to the rural preoccupations of New England writers, Peeples rightly holds that urbanization was a "predominant concern of antebellum American culture and literature" (p. 101). Eliza Richards's essay on "The Raven" (1845) examines how the "compulsive repetition" of Poe's most popular poem "persistently encouraged not only its own recitative repetition, but also its rewriting, in the form of parodies, imitations, and versions of all kinds" (pp. 200, 201). Maurice S. Lee crunches the numbers on Poe scholarship and discovers that his work has not been marginalized in the critical literature broadly, even if Poe has been marginalized in some accounts of American literary history. Lee's essay

proceeds to take a look at Poe's "urge to quantify the workings of the literary world" in writings like "The Literati of New York City" (1846) (p. 237). McGann, a digital humanities pioneer and eminent Romanticist who has recently turned his attention to American literature, argues that the antebellum culture of reprinting in general and Poe's particularly deep embedment in periodical culture as editor and author call for digital scholarship that can map these complex webs.

Poe's politics also receive extended attention in this volume. While contemporaries like Hawthorne and Melville offer searching critiques of liberalism, they were still committed democrats (indeed Democrats). Poe, however, was a more thoroughgoing antiliberal. In "Mellonta Tauta," for instance, one of his characters sardonically quips that no analogy for democracy can be found in nature "unless we except the case of the 'prairie dogs,' an exception which seems to demonstrate, if anything, that democracy is a very admirable form of government—for dogs." [2] Poe seems to elude Sacvan Bercovitch's profile of the typical American dissenter—his attacks on contemporary politics do not ultimately appeal to and reaffirm the liberal principles of America's founding.

Erkkila's rich essay offers a nuanced engagement with Poe's politics. She references Lionel Trilling's claim that (since American conservatism is liberal conservatism) the nation lacks any "substantive conservative tradition that might force liberals to examine the weaknesses and complacencies of their position" (p. 70). Erkkila brings Poe's politics into productive conversation with critical theory, especially that of Walter Benjamin, without eliding the differences between the southern conservative and the critical theorist. She finds grist in Poe's critiques of nationalism, expansionism, demagoguery, instrumental reason, popular culture, and simple narratives of progress, and even in his "fear of democracy, the mob, the city, and modernity." She contends that the "con-

servative, hierarchical, and agrarian” Poe and the “radical, egalitarian, Marxist, and revolutionary” critical theorist both “locate the [fundamental social] problem in the human desire to master all knowledge” (p. 90).

Jennifer Greeson makes a persuasive case that Poe’s *Eureka* (1848) is best read not as a straightforward metaphysical and cosmological treatise but as a satirical critique of Emersonian transcendentalism and U.S. expansionism. Indeed, Greeson contends that Poe linked the two, demonstrating how “‘spiritual’ discourses of objective, impartial Truth may underwrite quite ‘material’ programs of imperial dominion” (p. 123). The transcendentalists adamantly opposed Indian removal and the U.S.-Mexican war, of course. But in *Eureka* Poe suggested that the “self-centering spirit of universalization” of the Concord “frogpondians” (as he called them) could be readily coopted by the ideology of manifest destiny (p. 125).

Anna Brickhouse’s essay makes an interesting companion piece to Greeson’s, since she shows how Poe himself could be coopted to justify U.S. expansionism. The historian Robert Greenhow, an employee of the State Department, used (or perhaps even commissioned) Poe’s fictitious travel narrative *The Journal of Julius Rodman* (1840) as evidence that American explorers reached the Pacific Northwest before British explorers and that the United States thus had a better claim to the territory. Brickhouse uses this interesting case to explore a methodological question: “The example of Greenhow’s scholarship also suggests something about the pitfalls—perhaps especially for literary scholars—of insisting too perfunctorily on the mutually constitutive languages of literature and history, though these have long been the grounds of rich, interdisciplinary work” (p. 195).

Leland Person also uses Poe to raise theoretical (and pedagogical) issues. Rigid historicist studies can lock texts in their historical moment, disconnecting present and past and undermining the value of the inquiries themselves. Person offers

“reading backwards to the source” as one possible bridge over this gap. In the classroom, Person uses the disturbing persistence of “racist imagery associating Blacks and apes,” including the original King Kong film, a World War I recruiting poster, and a 2008 *Vogue* cover, as a “screen or filter” for his students to approach Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and the racism of its antebellum context (p. 158).

While these essays cover a wide range of topics, they make for a remarkably coherent volume, both in their exploration of Poe and his times, and in their willingness to use Poe’s work as a springboard for theoretical reflections and for interventions into U.S. literary, political, print, and intellectual history. This makes *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture* a crucial contribution to the “American turn” in Poe studies but also important reading for Americanists broadly.

#### Notes

[1]. Vernon L. Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1927), 58.

[2]. Edgar Allan Poe, “Mellonta Tauta,” in *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 880.

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**Citation:** Steven E. Knepper. Review of Kennedy, J. Gerald; McGann, Jerome, eds. *Poe and the Remapping of Antebellum Print Culture*. H-Southern-Lit, H-Net Reviews. September, 2014.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41096>



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