

Reading Poe, Reading Capitalism

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***Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America.* By Terence Whalen. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999. 328 pages. \$60.00 (cloth).**

PERHAPS NOTHING BETTER DEFINES THE MAIN CURRENT OF AMERICAN POE criticism than the complaint that Poe has been left “quite outside the main current of American thought” (58), whether by Vernon Louis Parrington (who coined this phrase and critical posture in 1927), by F.O. Matthiessen who found Poe ancillary to the democratic ambitions of *The American Renaissance* (1941), or by the myth-and-symbol school of American studies.¹ American critics continue to be haunted by the suspicion that Poe is not, and never has been, entirely their own, frequently attributing their sense of dispossession to the superior or misguided enthusiasm of French authors and theorists. Poe had to be rescued from Charles Baudelaire’s romantic identifications and from Marie Bonaparte’s psychoanalytic speculations long before his tales became exemplary texts in poststructuralist debates over the relations of language and truth. American Poe scholarship has experienced successive waves of attempts to reclaim Poe for the study of American culture, beginning with Arthur Hobson Quinn’s magisterial *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (1941; repr. 1995), which “tried to tell the story of Poe the American, not the exotic as he has so often been

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American Quarterly, Vol. 53, No. 1 (March 2001) © 2001 American Studies Association

pictured, especially by European critics" (xix). Quinn's depiction of Poe as "a hard-working writer of fiction" (198) was followed by a series of studies that placed Poe at the center of the pressures and intrigues of the antebellum literary marketplace. Perry Miller's *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (1956), though considerably more devoted to the Whale than the Raven, nevertheless regarded Poe as an important voice in the debate over the development of a national literature. Sidney Moss's *Poe's Literary Battles: The Critic in the Context of His Literary Milieu* (1963) examined Poe's struggle to maintain an independent criticism in the midst of the bitterly competitive New York publishing coterie, while Michael Allen's *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition* (1969) traced many of Poe's distinctive authorial postures and generic experiments to his attempt to capitalize on the American popularity of the British quarterlies.² If Poe's tales proved difficult to integrate into thematic studies of American literature, Poe himself could be reclaimed through his undisputed importance to American publishing history.

The most recent wave of books seeking to repatriate Poe was heralded by Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman's essay collection, *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe* (1995), which broke new ground by insisting that Poe's French legacy was crucial, not antithetical, to the task of understanding Poe's place in American culture. This group of essays, which sought to reach across the divide between literary theory and literary history, was followed in quick succession by two studies that repositioned Poe's writing at the highly charged nexus of literary culture, technologies of mass-communication, and democratic society. In *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (1995), Jonathan Elmer argued that Poe's tales centrally address the problem of the disembodiment of power under democracy and offer crucial insights into the affective dynamics of an emergent mass-culture, while in *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet* (1997), Shawn Rosenheim located a "concrete historical source" (3) for poststructuralist interest in Poe in the cryptographic puzzles at the heart of his detective stories, tracing the cultural ramifications of Poe's popular narratives of encryption through such twentieth-century phenomena as psychoanalytic reading, Cold-War espionage, and fantasies about electronic communications.

If, as Michael J. S. Williams has suggested, poststructuralist Poe studies placed a premium on questions about "the relationship between

language and the self, the problematics of writing, the displacement or dispersal of origins, and the nature of (inter)textuality,”³ Poe criticism of the late 1990s sought to recast these questions in cultural terms.

Terence Whalen’s *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* bears a vexed relation to the history of these reappropriations, not least because he disregards this inheritance, choosing neither to place his book in the tradition of Quinn, Miller, Moss, and Allen, nor seriously to engage the work of contemporaries like Rosenheim and Elmer. Whalen’s at times strikingly original research on the conditions of Poe’s literary labor is considerably weakened by his tendency to ignore longstanding debates over Poe’s place in American culture, and by his reluctance to engage the most provocative new work on the challenges of reading Poe’s texts historically.

Whalen’s central argument is that Poe’s career and writing grant us a unique form of access to a crisis in value brought on by the mass market for literature in antebellum America. According to Whalen, Poe’s poverty, his mercantile upbringing, his literary ambition, and his unremitting subjection to the market made him “more sensitive than other intellectuals” (57) to changes in the publishing industry that Whalen argues were the bellwether of changes in the economy at large. Whalen is primarily concerned with the “homogenizing power of capital in the publishing environment” (46), which, he claims, threatens to reduce literature to the commodity status of information. Whalen interprets Poe’s fictions, his career maneuverings, and his critical and aesthetic theory as responses to “the rationalizing pressures of a capitalist economy” (51). He divides his book into three sections: “Capitalism and Literature” includes a general survey of antebellum conditions of literary production, an analysis of Poe’s claim to have boosted the circulation of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, and a chapter culling through Poe’s vast corpus of reviews for attitudes towards his readership. The middle section, “Race and Region,” measures Poe’s statements on race against the range of attitudes voiced in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, then turns to a reading of Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in the context of the racially-charged literature of exploration. The final section, “Mass Culture,” is organized by genre, providing close readings of Poe’s writing on cryptography, his detective fiction, and his philosophically oriented “angelic dialogues.”

The structure of the book accommodates an admirably broad range of interpretive methods, including cultural analysis, publishing history, discourse study, and text-centered literary criticism. Nevertheless, this eclecticism produces troubling discontinuities in Whalen's critical narrative, particularly when he shifts approaches while moving chronologically through Poe's career. For example, Whalen's analysis of Poe's editorial work for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, which includes a discussion of the discursive parameters of the magazine itself, is not followed by a comparable treatment of Poe's tenure as editor of *Graham's Magazine* or of his brief but important stint as editor and part-owner of *The Broadway Journal*. Rather, in interpreting the later fiction, Whalen relies on a characterization of Poe's relation to the literary marketplace based on his career in Richmond, as if the terms of this relation had been cemented by Poe's earliest professional experiences. The book's most traditionally framed literary criticism, the genre-based analysis of the later fiction placed at the end of the volume, is structurally, temporally, and methodologically distanced from the historical grounds of the analysis.⁴

Whalen's readings are loosely set within a Marxian framework; he is more inclined to borrow from than to take up Marxist debates over the relation of base to superstructure. He seeks to replace what he regards as the narrowness and imprecision of the notion of the literary marketplace with an analysis of the larger "forces and social relations that constitute a mode of production" (6). Though he promises to unveil "the true conditions of literary business in antebellum America" (58), Whalen is more interested in describing these conditions in general terms and in "searching Poe's texts for the tell-tale signs of capitalist determination" (57) than he is in using Poe's literary and editorial practice to illuminate the social relations of antebellum publishing. Indeed, book historians are likely to find Whalen's assertions about the American publishing industry sweeping and hasty. Whalen leans hard on the rejection of Poe's manuscript "Tales of the Folio Club" by the Harper Brothers in 1836, arguing that this setback introduced Poe to the single-minded pursuit of profit by mass-market publishers, the fatal intervention of capitalism between author and audience that Whalen personifies as the interference of the "Capital Reader." Whalen's depiction of capitalist publishers' absolute control over all aspects of literary production would have been significantly complicated by a closer look at the antebellum publishing industry itself. The

unpredictability of supply and demand, the hazy line between publishing and bookselling, unreliable networks of credit and systems of distribution, the uncertain and limited value of literary property, and high levels of mutual indebtedness between and among competing publishers (which caused a ripple effect in the industry whenever a publisher went out of business), all suggest that publishing in the 1830s and 1840s was characterized by something less than the full-blown capitalism of Whalen's assumptions.⁵

Whalen anticipates this critique and responds in ways that are methodologically incommensurate. He frequently suggests that Poe's consciousness covers the gap between actual publishing conditions and underlying capitalist forces. The uneven development of the literary marketplace is rendered moot by Poe's "precocious grasp of political economy" (9), his "perverse capacity. . . to imagine a world where emergent tendencies have become dominant" (16). At other times, Whalen suggests that an inexorable capitalist logic trumps all forms of relation in the antebellum "publishing environment":

I have tried to facilitate the conceptual leap from "historical context," where an endless multiplicity of details vie for explanatory power, to publishing environment, where one form of meaning dominates all others, and where one reader—the Capital Reader—mediates all relations between the commercial writer and the mass audience. (271)

Whalen wants both to evoke an aura of historical specificity and to read past or through it, too. The "Capital Reader" is both an actual person working for the Harper Brothers, "a living embodiment of capital" (76), and an omnipresent, unlocatable, all-determining force. Whalen uses the figure of the "Capital Reader" to simplify the emergence of a mass-market for literature, hypostatizing dynamic historical processes, arresting the volatile relation between production and reception,⁶ and foreclosing further analysis.

Despite such tendentious generalizations, Whalen demonstrates considerable ingenuity and resourcefulness in relation to his sources. He compiles a list of paid subscribers from the paper wrappers of *The Southern Literary Messenger* as a way of testing Poe's claim to have increased the circulation of the magazine with the excellence of his editorial contributions (he didn't). Similarly, Whalen patiently sifts through Beverly Tucker's essays and correspondence in order to disprove Poe's authorship of a racist review that is frequently used by

critics to anchor accounts of Poe's relation to slavery. At his best, Whalen is able to translate his archival findings into intriguing thick descriptions of particular "publishing environments." In the case of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, this includes detailing the range of opinion on slavery that appeared in the journal and outlining the editors' attempts to maintain a neutral stance so as to preserve the broadest possible Southern readership. And yet Whalen's rethinking of Poe's attitude towards slavery in this context is oddly exculpatory. Absolving Poe of having written the "Paulding-Drayton Review" does not settle the question of the relation between slavery and the "radical dehumanization" (183) that Joan Dayan has argued galvanizes Poe's racialized Gothicism.⁷ Whalen dismisses Dayan's work for her reliance on a misattributed review rather than using the context he has elaborated to address the questions she so powerfully raises. Given the studied neutrality of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, how are we to understand the violent swings between mastery and enslavement that are so prevalent in Poe's poetry and tales? Whalen avoids the question, calling attention instead to Poe's "circumspection" in his "conspicuous statements about slavery" (136) and reading the racialized violence at the end of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as an allegory, finally, not of race relations but of publishing conditions, further evidence of Poe's "deep politics" (111) of literary production.

In analyzing racial discourse in the *Messenger* and aligning *Pym* with the literature of exploration, Whalen struggles to maintain his structural emphasis on authorial consciousness as the primary mode of critical access to cultural and economic change. In these chapters, Whalen begins to explore the cultural contradiction between slavery and commercial nationalism, but his analysis of antebellum discourses of development is repeatedly curtailed by his need for insights about the national economy to have passed through Poe's mind. Whalen's judgments are guided by what Poe "must have felt" (175) and by opinions that "in all likelihood [Poe] would have agreed with" (176); the political positions he considers are drawn from texts that Poe "may have had in mind" (176) or that were, at the very least, "available to Poe" (181). What one hears in these moments is both an admirable caution about the limits of the historical record and a desperate need to keep Poe at the center of interpretation. While Whalen experiments with reframing his object of study in terms of genre, discourse, and the institutions of publishing, Poe's consciousness remains the principle of

validation for his theories about the relation between literature and capitalism.

Whalen's problematic dependence on a notion of authorial agency that his evidence puts into question is most apparent in his chapter on cryptography, in which he displays characteristic ingenuity in deciphering a magazine-contest cryptogram, conjecturally attributed to Poe, that had gone unsolved since it was printed in 1841. Taking Poe's experiments in secret writing as proof of his desire to subvert the aims of capitalist publishers, Whalen initially speculated that the message he had deciphered was "a secret note from Poe to his wife Virginia" (211). When another scholar identified the passage as a set-piece from Addison's *Cato*, Whalen responded by arguing that the encrypted quotation was a personal message of support designed to secure Poe a patronage post from President John Tyler. What is surprising here is Whalen's disregard of a broad range of interpretive possibilities in his drive to identify the text's obscured political content. In the abstract, there is no reason why the encryption of a well-known theatrical speech should threaten an analysis of either the conditions of literary labor or the commodity status of secret writing. Critics have long emphasized the rich citationality of Poe's literary practice. Stephen Rachman has recently argued that plagiarism was central to Poe's authorial strategy, transgression providing a more secure ground for claims to originality than authorship itself,⁸ while Shawn Rosenheim has identified the cipher as a mechanism for textual reproduction, detailing the remarkably generative power of the interpretive desire launched by cryptographic writing. Whalen might have turned to either of these critics for help in thinking through the relation of this citation to a literary marketplace burgeoning with anonymous, pseudonymous, and questionably attributed texts, one that had yet to bring literary production under the dominion of authorial proprietorship. Alternatively, he might have drawn on Jonathan Elmer's argument that successful mass-cultural forms exploit middle-class ambivalence towards the aesthetic. In its mixed message of vulnerability and stoic resistance to penetration, the encrypted speech from *Cato* provides an excellent example of mass-culture's oscillation between provoking and regulating readerly response. Whalen's evidence calls for a political criticism that takes seriously the pleasures of repetition, the ironies of cryptographic self-reference, and the complex play of prohibition and desire that animates mass-cultural literary forms. But for Whalen, the obscured content of

the cryptograph must be political in the narrowest sense: it must be addressed to the President himself and must refer in some way to “Poe’s real material predicament” (107), his desperate search for financial support to secure his artistic independence.

In insisting that Poe’s literary and critical practice was at every turn shaped by the exigencies of mass-market publishing, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* argues for the importance of Poe to scholarship on the effects of market revolution on American culture. Unlike Miller and Moss, who regarded New York as the cynosure of literary publishing and took note of Poe chiefly when he entered the world of Lewis Gaylord Clark, Evert Duyckinck, and Herman Melville, Whalen regards Poe’s entire career as symptomatic of the distorting effect of the need to please a mass public on the life and works of a “commercial writer” (8). His meticulous analysis of the national aspirations and sectional limitations of *The Southern Literary Messenger* shows how a general theory about the rise of market culture might be applied to specific print contexts, detailing both how market concerns affect editorial policy and how the public record of Southern opinion about slavery is abridged as a result. Like Poe’s nineteenth-century biographers, who saw an economic parallel in the boom-and-bust cycles of Poe’s intemperance, Whalen makes a strong case for considering Poe as an exemplary subject of market capitalism. And yet Whalen’s book also demonstrates the need for a political and cultural criticism that could embrace rather than distancing or repudiating the affective intensity, linguistic playfulness, and self-referential density of Poe’s writing. If reading Poe historically comes at the cost of understanding how his literary self-consciousness bears on the problem of culture in a democracy, we will find ourselves once more complaining that Poe has been left out of the main current of American thought.

NOTES

1. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman concisely summarize: “When the best case for classic American literature was made through its binding and illusory myths (myths neatly conveyed in the titles of its leading studies, Perry Miller’s *Errand into the Wilderness*, R.W.B. Lewis’s *American Adam*, Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, and Mathiessen’s *American Renaissance*), then Poe’s Gothic, ratiocinative, and hoaxing works did not fit readily into these mythic models.” Rosenheim and Rachman, *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), xi.

2. It should not go without saying that all of these reclamations rest on the strong bibliographic tradition within Poe studies, a complex collaboration between scholars and private collectors that stretches from John Ingram's tenacious acquisition of Poe materials in the late nineteenth century, to Thomas Ollive Mabbott's and Burton Pollin's meticulously annotated scholarly editions, to Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson's *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809–1849* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1987). In establishing the complex details of the publication and reception of Poe's widely scattered texts, Poe bibliographers have laid out numerous provocative pathways for critics to trace.

3. Michael J. S. Williams, *A World of Words: Language and Displacement in the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1988), xv.

4. Poe's poetry is another casualty of this organizational scheme. Whalen associates poetry with the romantic prehistory of Poe's discovery that the logic of capitalism required him to market his writing to a mass audience: "Poe's early poetry may have been insulated by a semi-autonomous tradition, but his tales were expressly summoned forth by the new economic order that emerged from the Panic of 1837" (9). And yet it is arguably a poem, "The Raven," which was and remains Poe's greatest mass-cultural success. It is difficult to imagine a connection between Edgar Allan Poe and the masses that is not mediated by the uncanny return of the self-canceling refrain "Nevermore."

5. For the unpredictability of supply and demand, see Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993); and William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870* (1968; New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1992), 168–89. For the provocative argument that the idea of the mass media, or "general supply," was first imagined by evangelicals in the 1830s outside the market for literary goods, see David Nord, "The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815–1835," *Journalism Monographs* 88 (May 1984): 1–30. Three highly debatable assumptions about the antebellum literary marketplace regrettably become guiding principles for Whalen's literary analysis: that this market is characterized by homogeneity rather than diversity; that overproduction is the product of capitalist efficiency rather than disorganization and uneven development, and that common knowledge, arguably the backbone of the print trades in the form of government printing, school texts, popular science, foreign novels and other uncopyrighted writing, is somehow valueless.

6. "[R]eader-response criticism . . . though in some sense enormously important, is in another sense beside the point because the Capital Reader initiates and controls the interaction between audience and author" (16).

7. See Joan Dayan, "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves," in Rosenheim and Rachman, *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, 179–209.

8. See Stephen Rachman, "'Es lässt sich nicht schreiben': Plagiarism and 'The Man of the Crowd,'" in Rosenheim and Rachman, *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, 49–87.