

## Poe's Poetry Reconsidered

Jerome McGann. *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe: Alien Angel*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014. 256 pp. \$24.95 cloth.

In this study, Jerome McGann offers the first major assessment of the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe in many years, one that considers the importance of poetry as such and examines the role of the engaged reader in producing meaning. McGann begins by revisiting the contradictory views of earlier critics, who have called Poe's poetry "unremittingly vulgar" and at the same time "theoretically advanced, even pretentious"—contradictions with which T. S. Eliot wrestled for much of his professional career. McGann argues that, while Eliot criticized Poe's verse, he wondered uneasily "whether Poe all along might have been a secret influence on his own poetry" [2]. If Poe had captivated the great French poet Charles Baudelaire, thought Eliot, then there must have been something American critics failed to notice. McGann's book explores this "something" and makes a strong case for reading Poe, the "Alien Angel," as a significant poet whose verse requires readers to participate in its meaning through performance.

McGann's examination of the music of Poe's poetry is one of the book's many strengths. Addressing observations by Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, McGann argues that Poe's verse focuses on "the reader and the reader's responses" [5]. Like Shelley, Swinburne, and Mallarmé, who "think about poetry along Poetic lines" [6], Poe demonstrates his aesthetic theory through sound, and it is through sound that he requires readers to reciprocate—to reveal their individual understandings of the verse by way of recitation. With regard to Poe's side of the performative exchange: "no American poet," in McGann's view, "ever realized more completely Gertrude Stein's program of 'Composition as Explanation'" [6]. Consequently, McGann suggests that Poe's obsession with literary "plagiarism" derives from his interest in "language as such," yet he terms Poe a "literary privateer" for calling readers' attention to these matters to reveal his own culpability [7]. McGann even posits that "an important and neglected ethics and social commentary pervade Poe's work," more "nakedly" in the poetics and poetry than in the prose [10]. Throughout the study, McGann makes a compelling case for the significance of Poe's verse in itself even as that verse engages with key social, ethical, and aesthetic values of antebellum America.

In chapter 1, “Poe *In Propria Persona*,” McGann carefully examines Poe’s *Marginalia* and reviews, which he regards as constituting the “theoretical center of Poe’s work” [18]. While Eliot never questioned Poe’s “cultural significance,” he struggled nevertheless with Poe’s poetic significance. For McGann, that significance comes from his awareness that “writers are always also readers and, reciprocally, that readers are always rewriting what they read” [22]. It is in the *Marginalia* that Poe explicitly weighs this “performative” aspect of writing. McGann observes: “The idea of poetry, its conceptual basis, is not adequately conceivable except as a poetic execution. In this sense the subject of Poe’s poetry is always finally the idea of poetry itself, and that idea is only to be realized performatively” [34]. Music thus holds “intellectual primacy” in Poe’s artistic vision and poetic execution; all other elements in the poem serve as “functions of the music” [36].

Chapter 2, “Poetics and Echopoetics,” further considers Poe’s musical poetics and its suggestive qualities. Poe’s use of literary allusion, according to McGann, exemplifies what Charles Bernstein terms “Echopoetics,” and, “like Bernstein,” McGann goes on to assert, “Poe is a shameless thief of poetic fire because he wants to make the experience of poetry the subject of his poetry” [86–87]. Poe’s poetry, like Lord Byron’s, is meant “to be listened to and performatively translated” by the reader [90]. McGann concludes with a reading of *Eureka* as the work that “explains” Poe’s poetics [95–113].

In chapter 3, “Poetry: or Masks for a Read Death,” McGann counters Ivor Winters’s view that Poe’s poetry lacks “content” by arguing, again, that Poe’s poems are “performative rather than expressive,” and that like those of Arthur Rimbaud, “their images do not refer, they resonate” [114–15]. For Winters, a poem’s style is a vehicle for its content, but for Poe, according to McGann, such a “transactional model of language is refused.” It is because Poe considers “cause and effect [to be] codependent functions” [118], McGann concludes, that his poems require “performance” from the reader for their import [120], as illustrated in many of his major poems. A poem such as “Eldorado,” then, “emerges as a test of the reader” that does not tell us “where to seek but how to seek” [129, 128]. McGann’s analysis of Poe’s poetry challenges us to consider our participation in the process of creating meaning.

In chapter 4, “The Politics of a Poetry without Politics,” McGann contends that Poe is concerned especially with “poetic representation itself” [150], and he terms Poe an “alien resident” because he is “skeptical, often contemptuous, of enlightened social views” [147]. Poe is unique, according to McGann: “He does not set himself apart from ‘the terror, the murk, and the dislocation’ of the age’s ‘pathological’ culture that Whitman . . . had begun to question in *Democratic Vistas*. . . . On the contrary, he is its willing ‘centre and victim’” [154, quoting Whitman]. What Poe regarded as the most poetical subject—the death

of a beautiful woman—“exposes the mortal limit to which poetry itself is subject” [157], and his poetic meditations on death seek to achieve the impossible: “to do the dead justice on their own terms” [166]. As illustration, McGann points to “The Bells” and “Annabel Lee,” poems that particularly call for recitation. Readers of Dante will appreciate the original interpretation of “Annabel Lee” as a poetical refiguration of Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*; at the core of the Beatrician myth, from McGann’s vantage point, is “the experience of pain, sin, and loss that cannot be mitigated,” and “equally at its core is the experience of that experience” [198]. McGann argues in his book’s coda that “Poe forces readers to experience American English as strange, as estranged,” and asserts that “the interpretive question in Poe therefore becomes not *what* it means but *how* it means, and so far as readers are concerned in that action, how they make equivalent meanings” [204]. Building on William Carlos Williams, who called Poe “‘the beginning’ of American poetry” and his writing “the New World” itself [205, quoting Williams], McGann concludes that Poe’s “priority springs from a deeper conviction: that the world—every world—is reborn in a poetic reimagination of the world” [205].

This book is at its best when offering fresh readings that emphasize the significance of sound, the role of language, and the engagement of the reader in Poe’s poetry. McGann’s critical readings of such traditionally problematic poems as “The Bells” challenge us to reconsider Poe’s demonstration of his aesthetic theories in the poetry and to rethink our assumptions concerning the purpose of poetry, including our role as performers who make meaning during recitation. While McGann provides a careful survey of the development of Poe’s aesthetic statements, his reading of *Eureka* strictly as a literary treatise too readily ignores Poe’s lifelong interest in astronomy, as well as his sophisticated engagement with the scientific writings of Laplace, Herschel, Nichol, and Humboldt. By discounting Poe’s emphasis on the role of the imagination in science, McGann sets aside the possibility that Poe was creating a hybrid work that offers suggestive observations, driven by brilliant intuition, on subjects both aesthetic and scientific. McGann’s general sense, however, that *Eureka* includes poetic and aesthetic ideas expressed earlier and presented later in a fuller, richer form is correct and compelling.

*The Poet Edgar Allan Poe* is a significant addition to Poe studies that advances our understanding of Poe’s unique contributions to poetry *as such* in America and around the world. McGann’s emphasis on the role of the reader and the significance of sound in poetry are essential to the appreciation of Poe’s artistry and the value of poetry. I therefore recommend this study to all Poe scholars and students of poetry.

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