

BOOK REVIEW

**MARGARITA RIGAL
ARAGÓN ED.**

LOS LEGADOS DE POE

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Who would you associate the image of a raven with? If we were to conduct a street survey, most of the people would probably answer this question with one of two possible responses: Hitchcock or Edgar Allan Poe. If to the raven we add a dark and macabre mansion, a pretty dead lady and a black cat, Poe would most probably be the incontestable winner. Indeed, the presence of the American writer, both through his works and through his image as a peculiar or “tormented” character, is part of the modern day popular culture to the point that he could even be considered a “pop icon.” And yet, this popularity is almost exclusively linked to either a fictional account of his biography or to a limited part of his literary production. This biased view of Poe as the macabre and tormented author of equally macabre and tormented works is not only significantly far from the truth but also incredibly unfair to the mastery shown in the rest of his literary production. *Los Legados de Poe* intends to rectify these wrongs by providing a well-structured, rigorous piece of work that, without recurring to the endless list of biased clichés and stereotypes often applied to Poe, would make accessible the figure of this genius and his work to Spanish-Speaking students and researchers.

This volume joins the long list of re-editions, critical volumes and articles in specialized magazines that, coinciding with the bicentennial of his birth two years ago, have been published of late both in Spain and abroad. Besides Moreno and Rigal’s Volume published in 2010, we can find several re-editions of Poe’s works like the published in *Páginas de Espuma* (Iwasaki & Volpi 2010) or even a collection of graphic novel adaptations of Poe’s short stories (Whitehead 2008).

Originally intended for Spanish students and young researchers, the book is written entirely in Spanish and divided in two parts. The first one, consisting on nine articles written by different Spanish researchers and University professors specialised in the fields of comparative and/or American Literature, is followed by four appendixes that provide the necessary additional information for any student that wishes to pursue further research on the figure and works of Edgar Allan Poe. The second part, thus, perfectly complements the first, for it facilitates, in a neat and orderly manner, all the information necessary for anyone pursuing a deeper understanding of Poe's life and works that, for lack of space, could not be included in the main body of the text.

Following Margarita Rigal's introduction to the matter, purpose and organization of the book, the volume opens with three chapters dedicated to the most distinguished and acclaimed aspects of Poe's literary legacy: what we call the grotesque and the arabesque, the genre of detective fiction, and that of science fiction respectively. Thus, in the first chapter "Lo gótico y lo cómico (o lo arabesco y lo grotesco)" Rigal offers a highly interesting and thorough overview of the two main genres into which the majority of Poe's short story production has been traditionally divided: the grotesque and the arabesque or, more simply, the comic and the gothic. The author sets out to blur the initially straightforward distinctions between "arabesque" (or serious) and "grotesque" (or humorous) and punctuates the "mixed" characteristics of several stories in which both gothic and comic aspects coalesce. Moreover, Rigal draws attention to those works traditionally considered humorous that have been generally overlooked by critics and strives to restore to them some of the merit of which they have been deprived. It is to the editor's credit to open with this particular article a volume especially designed for a readership interested but perhaps not as yet fully dedicated to the study of Poe and therefore potentially unaware of this aspect. If, as Rigal claims, the purpose of this book is to make the work of Poe more accessible to Spanish non-specialised students, it is of vital importance that one of the most spread clichés about the figure of Poe and his work –namely, that he was merely a gothic writer– should be righted from the start.

The following two chapters –written by Margarita Rigal and Francisco Javier Castillo Martín respectively– deal with the other two genres in which Poe has been most influential: detective and science fiction. As regards the former, Rigal shows how the genre of detective fiction evolved not only from Poe's highly renowned Dupin cycle, but also from a variety of other tales in which traces of Dupin's distinguishing analytical mind and method of observation are applied to either criminal or detective characters. Francisco Javier Castillo Martín, however, does not exactly deal with Poe's legacy for future science fiction writers, but with the ways in which Poe's works reflected the scientific discoveries and technical advances that

were highly abundant in his time. The significance of the article lies in the fact that Castillo –through the analysis of “The Conversation of Eros and Charmion,” “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” and “The Power of Words”– argues that Poe did not share the awe towards technological and scientific advances that pervaded American society during the first half of the nineteenth century but actually regarded them with a great amount of scepticism. This might surprise the uninformed reader of Poe who, misled by the abundant appearance of technological devices and developments in some of Poe’s better known works, might overlook the true value that Poe conferred to them, hidden in these three less known tales.

The next five chapters in the volume are dedicated to the different approaches to the figure of Poe and his literary productions within the fields of popular culture, graphic arts, Spanish and French literature and translation studies. It is in this part that the book presents its most notably academic contributions for, without forgetting the restricted knowledge of the field that its intended readership may have, the authors in this section demonstrate not only their deep understanding of Poe and his production, but also their knowledge of the other related fields already mentioned. Chapter number four, written by Ricardo Marín Ruiz, gives a detailed account of the introduction of the figure of Poe in popular culture through poetry, fictional biographies of the author, fantastic literature, illustrations, comics, films and television, theatre, music and the internet, and points at the reasons for his persistent presence in them. Those reasons revolve, Marín argues, around the creation of a dark legend surrounding the author that awoke much more interest towards his figure and life than toward his literary production. And yet, this legend was more the mixture of his –by itself fascinating– biography with the darkest and more grotesque elements of some of his most famous tales than an accurate historical account. By unearthing many of the mythical and untruthful elements that evolve around Poe’s mythic figure, this article contributes wonderfully to the volume’s main aim of becoming a rigorous study that departs from the generally spread clichés about the Bostonian author.

The next article in this section, by Fernando González Moreno, offers a new and innovative approach to the study of Poe and his literary production from the perspective of visual narratology, which might specially appeal to those young scholars and researchers that the volume addresses. This seductive line of work is left open in the article, for it does not cover the more contemporaneous methods of graphically representing Poe such as comics and graphic designs that are nowadays much in vogue and that might interest a younger readership. However, it is regrettable that only six illustrations should be included in a total of nearly forty pages. Although the reasons for this lie most probably on space or even economic restrictions, the reader is left at times longing for more examples to provide a visual

backup to the otherwise vivid and artfully written descriptions of paintings, lithographies and engravings offered. On the other hand, this understandable lack is compensated by an inclusion of a list with all the illustrated editions of Poe's works which will be of special value to anyone interested in the graphic representation of Poe's works.

Chapter number six by Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan deals with Poe's reception in Spain, the channels through which he reached the country, and the various responses gathered. Moreover, it also hints at but leaves open the topic of his influence upon Spanish writers. Through a very thorough account of the various responses to the figure and works of Poe in Spain –obviously part of a much broader research project– the author shows how the conception and appreciation of Poe and his works has evolved during the last two centuries. The word “thorough” cannot be emphasized enough, for, although restricted to the usual amount of pages allotted to each chapter in the volume, the author manages to fit in an analysis of the reception of Poe in our country as shown in the most important prologues, articles and books written about Poe from his first appearance in Spain until the present time. By exposing the different representations of Poe offered by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, Rafael María de Labra, Miguel de Unamuno, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Pedro Salinas and Ramón Gomez de la Serna among many others, the author sets out to defend Poe from the (unjust) accusations that some of the aforementioned authors spilled on him, product of the prevailing mythicized image of the writer. Overall, Santiago Rodríguez succeeds in offering a detailed image of Poe as presented to the Spanish readership while explicitly suggesting a variety of as yet untrodden research paths within this field that would undoubtedly be very well received among this volume's target readers.

The next two chapters deal with the topic of translation, though in different ways. The first, by Juan Bravo Castillo, tackles what the author considers “uno de los acontecimientos literarios más apasionantes y dignos de estudio del siglo XIX” (176), that is, Baudelaire's passion and identification with Edgar Allan Poe. It should not be forgotten that it was through the publication of Baudelaire's translation of Poe's writings, that the popularity of the writer began to spread in Europe, a fact perhaps not broadly known by the common public, thus the appropriateness of the inclusion of this article in the volume. The second, chapter number eight, focuses on two Spanish translations of Poe's works: *Narraciones extraordinarias*, by J. Farrán y Mayoral and *Poesía Completa*, by María Cándor and Gustavo Falquera. Molina comments on the weak and strong points of both translations in turn and concludes by highlighting the difficulties that translating any literary work may pose, namely the differences in metric, phonology and even culture and ideology. Although she praises the former more than the latter, she understands the added difficulties that translating verse entails and does not wholly

discredit Córdor and Falquera's decision to provide a translation in prose despite its sacrificing naturality for the sake of loyalty.

The volume closes by challenging future researchers to analyze the as yet unexplored poetics of revenge in Poe's narrative. This last chapter, written by Félix Martín Gutiérrez, suggests several open research paths into Poe's body of works dealing with revenge, literary imposture, plagiarism, the disjunctive between creativity and production and the destruction of the literary double symbolising the author's wish for self-annihilation. In his accustomed poetic and subtle way of writing, Félix Martín plays around with a variety of philosophical topics and literary metaphors found in some of Poe's works and manages to provide a beautifully wrought overview of Poe's deeper anxieties concerning the state of art, the responsibility of the author/narrator, the power of words or his internal struggle between the wish for celebrity and his disdain towards populist literature. Through a profound analysis of several of Poe's works, the author points at the possibility of reading into some of Poe's characters/narrators an allegorical double of the writer as well as to several nuanced clues present throughout his various works that might indicate the presence of these inner conflicts in the mind of the writer. And yet, although Félix Martín artfully hints at these clues and plausible inferences, he does not read into them a resolution of the aforementioned conflicts, leaving that matter open for further discussion. Undoubtedly, anyone interested in further research around the figure of Poe and his production will welcome the suggestions offered in this chapter with great enthusiasm.

The second part of the volume, dedicated to appendixes, is eminently practical and highly useful and also merits detailed commentary. To be used as a complement to the previous part or as a quick reference guide, these appendixes will be of great use to any student or researcher interested in deepening his/her knowledge of Poe and his works. This way, the first appendix presents in a visually very accessible way, a chart that compiles in chronological order not only the major events in Poe's biography, but also the year of publication of his works, together with other historical and literary events of the time. Of great clarity, it is highly useful for anyone interested in further research because, by highlighting simultaneous facts through its formal presentation, it provides a better understanding of the historical, literary and personal events that might have influenced the writer's production. In a less visually attractive but equally clear way, the second appendix compiles the whole production of Poe divided in poems, tales, essays, letters and literary criticism, long narrative and drama. Within those sub-sections, each work is presented chronologically together with a brief commentary on the possible literary influences and intentionality of each, of indubitable help for future research within the field of comparative literature. The greatest assets of this appendix are, on the one hand, the inclusion of Poe's dramatic

production, generally unknown to the public –together with, one might say, his longer narratives– and the fact that it provides each work’s title in English along with the Spanish translation. This is of special relevance if we take into account that the volume, written in Spanish, consistently provides only the Spanish title of each of the works mentioned in the previous chapters, which, although understandable to some point, might become a little confusing to those readers who have previously approached Poe’s production only from English and might fail to recognize the Spanish translation of some titles. Although this appendix provides a convenient solution to this minor problem it would probably have been more helpful to the reader if the English title had been provided as well in the body of the work, either in footnotes or parenthetical information. In relation to this, it is also noteworthy that the appendix also provides, when available, the subsequent reprints of the works. As anyone familiarized with the publication industry during Poe’s times¹ will know, much of the literature of the time was published through newspapers or magazines, and reprints of the most popular pieces were frequent. Sometimes, those reprints entailed some minor or drastic changes to both the pieces and their titles and the same –or a very similar– piece might be referred to differently. This appendix solves this problem, making the researcher’s labour much easier. Following with the helpful spirit of the volume, the third appendix is equally accommodating, for it is a clearly presented bibliography that includes not only the references of the different editions of Poe’s works, but also of several of his biographies and numerous academic pieces both in English and Spanish. Besides, it includes a list of –trustworthy– internet sites with academic and literary content.

Overall, this is a well-structured, updated and thought-provoking volume that will undoubtedly encourage readers to acquire a more profound knowledge of the real character of Poe and of the entirety of his works. Banished are the preconceived ideas about Poe’s character and literary merits; the readers of this volume will find a collection of praiseworthy essays that work perfectly together to provide a well-researched and –most importantly–truer to fact overview of the true talent and genius of the Bostonian writer.

¹ See Whalen (2001) and Hayes (2000).

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