

Anna Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska
Katedra Filologii Angielskiej
UWM w Olsztynie

EDGAR ALLAN POE – A CASE OF DENATIONALIZATION

A great number of critical analyses has been published concerning Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and poems. After a period of neglect also his accomplishment as a literary critic has received due attention. What remains fluid and contested is Poe's contribution to the Young America movement and, to use a more general approach, the value and sincerity of his critical pronouncements concerning the so-called Americanness of literature.

In his analysis of the dominant cliques and trends in the 19th century literary life of the United States, Benjamin Spencer summarizes well enough the program of the Young America movement:

Its general design for the national literature in the 1840's resembled that of young Whitman: it was suspicious of Old World culture and judged the propagation of equalitarian principles to be the distinctive mission of American writers. During the very decade in which the academic critics at Cambridge were proposing that American literature should be "natural" rather than "national," the Young Americans placed the national literature in an impressive historical context of manifest destiny.¹

The flourishing of the Young America movement coincided with the rapid commercialization of the publishing market in the U.S. What John Stafford refers to as "the rise of the common reader" in the years between 1835 to 1850, greatly influenced Young America's espousal of a truly democratic, progressive literature.² For the most active members of the camp, such as Cornelius Mathews, W.A. Jones or the Duyckinck brothers, criticism in magazines became a means of promoting new subjects in American literature and educating the mass audience, even at the risk of fusing the literary and the political into an ideologically charged entity.

¹ Benjamin Spencer: *The Quest for Nationality. An American Literary Campaign*. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press 1957, p. 215–216.

² John Stafford: *The Literary Criticism of „Young America”*. Berkeley, University of California Press 1952, p. 11.

Spencer's simplified description of Young America's interests and principles provides an opportunity to draw comparisons with Poe's attitude as a literary critic. Firstly, Poe insisted on originality as an indispensable feature of a good work of literature, and he fiercely attacked numerous instances of imitation and/or plagiarism in the American literature of that period. Secondly, Poe's reviews were rarely limited to pointing out faults in selected works of literature. In fact, the writer emphasized his interest in the situation and prospects of American literature in general, and a sense of mission towards the American reader is clearly discernible as early as April 1836, in his review of Drake and Halleck, in which Poe "really began his program to educate the public taste³."

Characteristically, Poe's relations with the Young America movement, his vigorous defense of some American authors, and openly anti-British sentiments have most often been ignored or treated as a troublesome incongruity in an otherwise consistent image of Poe as a literary critic. Perhaps the problem lies in the long-lasting tradition of seeing Poe as an idealist infatuated with beauty and glorifying it as the main domain of art, a stranger to the reality, a person who lived "out of space, out of time⁴", or, conversely, as a rebellious outsider, a proud cosmopolitan who was rather disdainful of American life. Placing the two seemingly conflicting stances in juxtaposition to each other has served an important goal: that of denying that Poe could at any time be genuinely interested in supporting the highly politicized cause of American literary independence. Sidney P. Moss's approach might serve as an instructive example in this respect. In his well-known account of Poe's literary battles he claims:

Once Poe recognized the enemy of a self-supporting, self-respecting authorship – an enemy whose banner was nationalism, whose power derived from cliques, and whose weapons were the adulatory review for these in favor and silence or the abusive review for those out of favor – Poe assailed it whenever he could, whether by exposing cliquism as a racket or by assaulting those who were implicated in the cliques.⁵

However, in more recent years it has been the fashion to dissect the legendary Poe vs. the real Poe, to examine more thoroughly the influence of the marketplace on his literary career. As so often in the literary and cultural criticism of our times, the pendulum has swung back to the other extreme. To sum up the efforts of Poe scholars, the figure of heroic resistance has given way to a clever user of conventions and masquerade. Poe's nationalist or, to be exact, pro-American inclinations have been treated, if at all, with

³ Robert D. Jacobs: *The Courage of a Critic: Edgar Poe as Editor*. Baltimore, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore 1971 and 1998, p. 7.

⁴ Edd Winfield Parks: *Edgar Allan Poe as Literary Critic*. Athens, University of Georgia Press 1964, p. 1.

⁵ Sidney P. Moss: *Poe's Literary Battles. The Critic in the Context of His Literary Milieu*. Durham, Duke University Press 1963, p. 82.

suspicion and reserve, and commented upon solely in the context of his access to the Young Americans' camp. Characteristically, scholars have referred to Poe's entanglement with the cause of promoting the American in literature as yet another pose or temporary deviation from usual critical practices, rather than as a conscious act on the writer's part. To use George Levine's bitter comment on the contemporary approaches to texts, Poe's effusions in literary magazines have been treated as "a kind of enemy to be arrested",⁶ an ultimate proof of his opportunism, resulting from base motives, a façade masking largely unfavorable conditions of production accompanying the growth of American literary criticism in the 19th century.

Meredith McGill and Claude Richard's articles on Poe are representative examples of the more recent approach. In accordance with the contemporary trends in literary history, the two authors have tried to demonstrate the extent to which Poe's violent pro-American rhetoric contradicted his "real" critical principles and formed a case of spectacular self-promotion in the literary circles of the mid-19th century New York. Their treatments of Poe's nationalist "episode", however, have been based on rather disputable arguments that deserve to be considered in greater detail.

Richard's remarks, in particular, constitute a sweeping dismissal of Poe's Americanness in his literary criticisms. While referring to a review of Robert M. Bird's *Calavar* in the *Southern Literary Messenger* Richard claims: "But for a rather florid paragraph written ten years before at the outset of his career as a critic, Poe was anything but a champion of a national literature".⁷ To write such a statement about a man who devoted most of his editorial career to presenting "the best literature America was producing"⁸ and commenting upon his compatriots' efforts is to falsify Poe's biography. But this is just one of the many unfair generalizations Richard makes in his appraisal of Poe's affinities with the Young America movement. For example he claims that Poe "had steadily denounced the degrading influence of the idea of nationality on American criticism and American taste"⁹ and suggests that it was only beginning with October 1844 that Poe decided to express "the dearest opinions of the Democratic set" "with more energy than ever"¹⁰ and to puff anything written by Young America's representatives. Richard's vision of Poe as a cynical conformist is appealing because it strives to account for his numerous contradictory statements concerning the quality of

⁶ George Levine: *Reclaiming the Aesthetic*. In: *Aesthetics and Ideology*. Ed. George Levine. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press 1994, p. 3.

⁷ Claude Richard: *Poe and „Young America“*. In: *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia 1968, p. 27.

⁸ Arthur Hobson: *Edgar Allan Poe. A Critical Biography*, with a new foreword by Shawn Rosenheim. Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press 1941 and 1998, p. xix.

⁹ Richard, p. 27.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

American literature, but in fact it does little justice to the content and chronology of Poe's critical effusions.

Meredith McGill's *Poe, Literary Nationalism, and Authorial Identity* is yet another attempt at illuminating Poe's "embarrassing" entanglement in the Young Americans' camp, which is presented not as a symbiotic or parasitic relationship, but rather as a case of mutual appropriation:

However, to regard Poe's relation to the literary nationalist movement purely from the standpoint of Poe's own motives is to overstate his ability to dissociate himself from the terms by which he was embraced by the movement, and through which he gained access to a wide reading public.

Poe was certainly an unlikely recruit to this cause, which combined the bombastic promotion of a national literature with the vigorous advocacy of an international copyright agreement.¹¹

Much in the spirit of Richard's study, McGill claims Poe owed his literary success of 1845 solely to the association with the nationalists' circles, and points out that between March 1843 and late 1845 "Poe repeatedly compromised his critical principles to curry favor with the Duyckinck circle, sacrificing his independent critical voice to promote the literary and political goals of the Young Americans".¹²

Interestingly enough, McGill adds a slightly different dimension to Poe's alleged opportunism: "Poe did not abandon his critical ideals so much as he lost control over them as they were translated into the literary nationalist idiom."¹³ This partial justification for Poe's professional "betrayal" only confirms McGill's tacit assumption that he can't have embraced the nationalist cause, that he must have been forced into supporting it, that he fell victim to the circumstances.

To stress the artificiality of Poe's contribution to the Young America movement, McGill writes about the writer's "increasingly veiled differences with the nationalist program."¹⁴ However, the suggestion that Poe progressively and systematically distanced himself from the group of nationalist critics is only superficially correct. The chronological data concerning some of Poe's marginalia and often anonymously published reviews prove the writer was preoccupied with the topic of Americanness long before the year 1843 and after the year 1845. Moreover, instead of alluding to a consistent evolution in Poe's views on the actual or desired originality of American literature, one should rather mention the alternation of his critical moods between an apotheosis and a repudiation of the American element in poetry and prose. If anything remains constant in Poe's criticisms it is the love and hate

¹¹ Meredith McGill: *Poe, Literary Nationalism, and Authorial Identity*. In: *The American Face of Edgar A. Poe*. Eds. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman. Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press 1995, p. 274.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 275.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 273.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 274.

relationship with the so-called British standards and obsessively frequent comparisons of American literary products with their British counterparts.

It is at the very beginning of his career as a literary critic that Poe takes up the issue of American literature's real or imaginary greatness and its cultural autonomy. At the same time he commences what might, perhaps simplistically, be referred to as an anti-British crusade:

Who reads an American book? was tauntingly asked some years since, by the Edinburgh or Quarterly Review, – we do not recollect which, – nor is it important to know . . . if Sir Walter Scott himself were living, he would have the candor and honor to acknowledge that *Calavar* was vastly superior to some five or six of the last litter of his own great genius . . .

We forbear making quotations from the work, or entering into a more minute analysis of the story. Our chief object is to inform our readers that *Calavar* is an American production, which will not shrink from competition with the very best European works of the same character.¹⁵

From now on Poe critic will be making constant references to the situation on the literary market in the United States and assessing the quality and prospects of American literature. Occasionally, he will also provide rather sarcastic comments concerning the very possibility and/or absurdity of cherishing a national literature:

Time was when we imported our critical decisions from the mother country. For many years we enacted a perfect farce of subserviency to the dicta of Great Britain. At last a revulsion of feeling with self-disgust, necessarily ensued. Urged by these, we plunged into the opposite extreme. In throwing totally off that "authority", whose voice had so long been so sacred, we even surpassed, and by much, our original folly. But the watchword now was, "A national literature!" – as if any true literature could be "national" – as if the world at large were not the only proper stage for the literary histrio. We became suddenly, the merest and maddest partisans in letters. Our papers spoke of "tariffs" and "protection" . . . our review urged the propriety – our booksellers the necessity, of strictly "American" themes. A foreign subject, at this epoch, was a weight more than enough to drag down into the very depths of critical damnation the finest writer owning nativity in the States; while, on the reverse, we found ourselves daily in the paradoxical dilemma of liking, or pretending to like, a stupid book the better because (sure enough) its stupidity was of our own growth, and discussed our own affairs.¹⁶

The above passage contains a strong denunciation of the nationalist tendencies in literary criticism and contrasts them with a more cosmopolitan spirit in works of fiction. What seems to be particularly irritating for the author, though, is American critics' readiness to reject the hitherto sacred critical standards and to plunge into extremities even at the risk of compro-

¹⁵ Edgar A. Poe: Review of *Calavar*. In: Southern Literary Messenger 1(Feb. 1835), p. 315.

¹⁶ Edgar Allan Poe: *The Exordium*. In: Graham's Magazine (Jan. 1842), p. 1-2.

mising their professional integrity. Poe's text on J. G. C. Brainard – originally published in *Graham's Magazine*, in February 1842 – provides some middle ground between a thoughtless, clamorous nationalism and noncreative acts of imitativeness:

We have, at length, arrived at that epoch when our literature may and must stand on its own merits, or fall through its own defects. We have snapped asunder the leading-strings of our British Grandmamma, and, better still, we have survived the first hours of our novel freedom, the first licentious hours of a hobbledehoy braggadocio and swagger. *At last*, then, we are in a condition to be criticised – even more, to be neglected; and the journalist is no longer in danger of being impeached for *lese majesté* of the Democratic Spirit, who shall assert, with sufficient humility, that we have committed an error in mistaking "Kettell's Specimens" for the Pentateuch, or Joseph Rodman Drake for Apollo.¹⁷

To continue with the chronologically arranged list of Poe's "national" criticisms, he was the first to praise Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection of short stories, to place him in the international literary context and to express pride in his compatriots' achievement:

We have very few American tales of real merit — we may say, indeed, none, with the exception of *The Tales of a Traveller* of Washington Irving, and these *Twice-Told Tales* of Mr. Hawthorne . . . Articles at random are, now and then, met with in our periodicals which might be advantageously compared with the best effusions of the British Magazines; but, upon the whole, we are far behind our progenitors in this department of literature.

Of Mr. Hawthorne's Tales we would say, emphatically, that they belong to the highest region of Art – an Art subservient to genius of a very lofty order . . . As Americans, we feel proud of the book.¹⁸

The review of Rufus Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America* confirms the assumption that Poe's "nationalist" or pro-American attitude was not a matter of a single episode:

That we are not a poetical people has been asserted so often and so roundly, both at home and abroad, that the slander, through mere dint of repetition, has come to be received as truth. Yet nothing can be farther removed from it . . . Our necessities have been mistaken for our propensities. Having been forced to make rail-roads, it has been deemed impossible that we should make verse. Because it suited us to construct an engine in the first instance, it has been denied that we could compose an epic in the second. Because we were not all Homers in the beginning, it has been somewhat too rashly taken for granted that we shall be all Jeremy Bentham's to the end . . .

Those who have taken most careful note of our literature for the last ten or twelve years, will be most willing to admit that *we are* a poetical people; and in

¹⁷ Edgar Allan Poe: *J. G. C. Brainard*. In: *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 3, 1850, p. 139.

¹⁸ Edgar Allan Poe: *Nathaniel Hawthorne*. In: *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 3, 1850, p. 199.

no respect is the fact more plainly evinced than in the eagerness with which books professing to compile or select from the productions of our native bards, are received and appreciated by the public. Such books meet with success, at least with sale, at periods when the general market for literary wares is in a state of stagnation; and even the ill taste displayed in some of them has not sufficed to condemn.¹⁹

This review had originally been published in November 1842, long before Poe's alliance with the Young American camp began. Poe's identification with the "poetic people" and indignation at the labels ascribed to his compatriots oddly contrast with the critic's distanced view of the achievements of American literature. Such a mixture of passionate bitterness and irony permeates many other reviews written by Poe and proves his involvement in the promotion of original works of fiction. What strikes the contemporary reader is Poe's vituperative, almost aggressive language, full of hyperbolic phrases and military expressions. One is almost tempted to accuse the writer of unfairness towards the British critics he so readily accuses of ignorance and... unfairness. But certainly Poe could not be accused of indifference or lack of interest in his compatriots' literary efforts. At times the violent disapproval of British critics' methods of assessing American literature borders on hateful exaggeration, as is the case with Poe's review of William Gilmore Simms's tales:

All the tales in this collection have merit, and the first has merit of a very peculiar kind. *Grayling, or Murder will Out*, is the title. The story was well received in England, but on this fact no opinion can be safely based . . . *Murder Will Out* probably arrested the attention of the sub-sub-editor who was employed in so trivial a task as the patting on the head an American book — arrested his attention first from its title, (murder being a taking theme with a cockney) and secondly, from its details of southern forest scenery. Large quotations were made, as a matter of course, and very ample commendation bestowed — the whole criticism proving nothing, in our opinion, but that the critic had not read a single syllable of the story. The *critique*, however, had at least the good effect of calling American attention to the fact that an American might possibly do a decent thing, (provided the possibility were first admitted by the British sub-editors,) . . .

Now had *Murder Will Out* been a much worse story than was ever written by Professor Ingraham, still, under the circumstances, we patriotic and independent Americans would have declared it inimitable; but, by some species of odd accident, it happened to deserve all that the British sub-sub had condescended to say of it, on the strength of a guess as to what it was all about. It is really an admirable tale, nobly conceived and skilfully carried into execution — the best ghost story ever written *by an American* — for we presume that this is the ultimate extent of commendation to which we, as an humble American, dare go.²⁰

¹⁹ Edgar Allan Poe: Review of Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America*. In: Boston Miscellany II (Nov. 1842), p. 220–221.

²⁰ Edgar Allan Poe: Review of Simms's *Wigwam and the Cabin*. In: Godey's Lady's Book (Jan. 1846), p. 42.

Poe's *Marginalia* provide even more evidence of the critic's genuine interest in the originality of American literature and in the conditions of production that would stimulate and facilitate its development. It was in August 1845 that Poe remarked in a rather caustic way:

All true men must rejoice to perceive the decline of the miserable rant and cant against originality, which was so much in vogue a few years ago among a class of microscopica, critics, and which at one period threatened to degrade all American literature to the level of Flemish art.²¹

Two months later he published his most often quoted piece of *Marginalia* where he expressed his doubts about the nature of "national literature" and included a generous dose of scathing criticisms concerning Americans' eternal dependence on the British reviews:

We complain of our want of International Copyright on the ground that this want justifies our publishers in inundating us with British opinion in British books; and yet when these very publishers, at their own obvious risk, and even obvious loss, do publish an American book, we turn up our noses at it with supreme contempt (this is a general thing) until it (the American book) has been dubbed "readable" by some literate Cockney critic... There is not a more disgusting spectacle under the sun than our subserviency to British criticism. It is disgusting, first because it is truckling, servile, pusillanimous – secondly, because of its gross irrationality. We know the British to bear us little but ill will – we know that, in no case, do they utter unbiased opinions of American books . . . and yet, day after day, submit our necks to the degrading yoke of the crudest opinion that emanates from the fatherland. Now if we must have nationality, let it be a nationality that will throw off this yoke . . .

We do indeed demand the nationality of self-respect. In *Letters as in Government* we require a Declaration of Independence. A better thing still would be a Declaration of War – and that war should be carried forthwith "into Africa".²²

This war was to be fought with honesty, competence and, most often, impartiality. According to Arthur Hobson "Poe was working hard on his projected *Critical History of American Literature*, which never was completed".²³ Had this volume been written, those American authors who had to wait very long to get the international "seal of approval" might have achieved due recognition while they were alive. However, alongside his continuous support for American writers, Poe critic rather mercilessly exposed their mediocrity and the tendency to imitate British novels, short stories and poems. The piece of *Marginalia* numbered as CXLIX and published in July 1849 offers an overtly disillusioned and ironical diagnosis concerning the then state of American literature:

²¹ Edgar Allan Poe: *Marginalia*. In: Godey's Lady's Book (Aug. 1845).

²² Edgar Allan Poe: *Marginalia*. In: Broadway Journal (Oct. 4, 1845).

²³ Hobson, p. 430.

It is folly to assert, as some at present are fond of asserting, that the Literature of any nation or age was ever injured by plain speaking on the part of the Critics. As for American Letters, plain-speaking about *them is*, simply, the one thing needed. They are in a condition of absolute quagmire...²⁴

John C. French once called Poe "the most puzzling personality in American letters".²⁵ This image of Poe has been perpetuated by a number of slanderous or idealized accounts of his life. It seems that the contemporary trends towards "demystifying" Poe's literary criticism add up to the overall confusion by failing to recognize in him a scrupulous editor and full-time mentor who undertook a life-long task: that of promoting good American literature and preparing the reading public to appreciate its most original representatives. Even if Poe's violent pro-American rhetoric strikes one as calculated or incongruent with the critic's most famous literary manifestoes, it was doubtlessly of considerable assistance in boosting the national ego and, consequently, encouraging powerful artistic creations in the United States.

²⁴ Edgar Allan Poe: *Marginalia*. In: Southern Literary Messenger (Jul. 1849).

²⁵ John C. French: *In His Own Country*. Baltimore, The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore 1939, p. 9.