



Poe and the Printed Word

Kevin J. Hayes

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Edgar Allan Poe continues to be a fascinating literary figure to students and scholars alike. Increasingly the focus of study pushes beyond the fright and amusement of his famous tales and seeks to locate the author within the culture of his time. In *Poe and the Printed Word*, Kevin J. Hayes explores the relationship between various facets of print culture and Poe's life and works by examining how the publishing opportunities of his time influenced his development as a writer. Hayes demonstrates how Poe employed different methods of publication as a showcase for his verse, criticism, and fiction. Beginning with Poe's early exposure to the printed word, and ending with the ambitious magazine and book projects of his final years, this reappraisal of Poe's career provides an engaging account that is part biography, part literary history, and part history of the book.

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POE AND THE PRINTED WORD

KEVIN J. HAYES



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In honor of
Lawrence C. Wroth

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvii
1 The student and the book	i
2 Poetry in manuscript and print	17
3 Baltimore book culture	30
4 Booksellers' banquet	45
5 The novel	58
6 Poe's library	74
7 Cheap books and expensive magazines	87
8 The road to <i>Literary America</i>	98
Conclusion	112
<i>Notes</i>	116
<i>Bibliography</i>	130
<i>Index</i>	138

Preface

Modern criticism often ignores the significance of the printed page. Such neglect is partially understandable. As literary texts grow in reputation, they are perpetuated in numerous popular and scholarly editions. Texts become increasingly removed from the form of their original publication, and these removals affect interpretation. The appearance of the printed page, however, shapes the reader's understanding of the text it contains. "The Balloon Hoax" provides a useful example. In most modern editions of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, its text is uniform with the rest of the pieces in the collection. Each story appears in the same-sized type with identically spaced margins and the same or similar headings. The uniform appearance of the work among other short stories removes any doubt about its fictional nature. So does its title. Originally, it was not called "The Balloon Hoax." It only gained that title in the oral culture *after* its fictional status became known. Containing the word "hoax," the title lets readers know the story is undoubtedly a product of Poe's imagination.

The story's first appearance in print was designed to make it closely resemble a factual account. Poe convinced Moses Y. Beach, editor of the New York *Sun*, to publish it as part of an *Extra Sun*. In terms of format, the story looked similar to any of the day's newspaper articles. It had a dateline as well as a multi-part headline characteristic of urgent news with bold-faced capitals, bold italics, and exclamation marks. The story was set in multiple columns, and the paper included other items, as any paper would. It also contained a woodcut illustration of the model balloon on which the full-scale one purportedly was based. The woodcut image made the technology Poe described more tangible and added further credence. When it first appeared, the hoax was a success, and many people accepted it as truth until they heard reports to the contrary. Unlike

his earlier balloon story, “Hans Phaall,” this new article contained nothing beyond the pale of contemporary scientific technology. Well aware that an ocean-crossing balloon was feasible, Poe had only to convince his readers. The story’s publication as a newspaper extra, however, even more than its realistic detail, made it convincing. Had the work appeared in another medium, say as a magazine article or a separately published pamphlet, few contemporary readers would have been duped. The newspaper extra was the medium for urgent news. Perhaps more than its text, the story’s printed appearance made the hoax successful.

Sensitive to the impact of print on interpretation, Poe developed as a writer, in part, by allowing changes in print culture to shape his work. In the present study, I examine the interrelationship between various facets of print culture and Poe’s writings – verse, criticism, and fiction. Organized thematically, this volume devotes different chapters to separate print genres or to separate aspects of Poe’s life and works. It is also organized in a rough chronological order, starting with Poe’s early exposure to the printed word and ending with the ambitious magazine and book projects of his final lustrum. In a way, the present study can be considered a focused biography, for it examines Poe’s life and work as they specifically relate to contemporary print culture. Part biography, part literary history, and part history of the book, this volume examines Poe’s art and thought from a new perspective.

While I assume my readers are generally familiar with Poe’s work, it is not essential to have read all of his writings to follow this book. I have tried to give enough background information to allow initiates to read with ease, yet not so much to weary seasoned Poe scholars. The volume has been designed for a wide readership: undergraduates taking their first survey course in American literature, graduate students, Poe scholars, historians of the book, or anyone who appreciates Poe’s writings and enjoys learning more about the man and his *oeuvre*. Though this book specifically concentrates on Poe’s relationship to contemporary print culture, it also serves as a general overview of his writing.

The first chapter, “The Student and the Book,” examines Poe’s earliest contacts with the printed word, looking at the books he read as a student in England and Virginia. Poe’s British education opened his eyes to the world of books, and he read a variety of schooltexts and rudimentary literature there. Returning to Richmond, Virginia,

he continued his schooling and gave serious attention to the ancient classics. At the same time he taught himself the major contemporary poets and essayists. Poe's Richmond education prepared him well for the University of Virginia where he took classes in ancient and modern languages and continued to read widely outside the classroom. Poe's early reading experiences convinced him of the value of the printed word, not only to disseminate ideas but also to bring alive the world of the imagination, a world where the only entrance requirement is literacy. An earlier version of the first part of this chapter appeared as "Poe's Earliest Reading" in *English Language Notes*, and I am grateful to the editors for granting permission to reprint the article here in a significantly revised and expanded form. The second half of this chapter was originally presented as "Poe's College Reading" at the American Renaissance Conference at Cancun, Mexico, in December 1997. The remainder of the present work appears before the public for the first time.

Poe began writing verse at an early age. According to one story, he had written enough poems as a Richmond schoolboy to consider publishing them in collected form. His teacher dissuaded him from making such private effusions public at the time, but before he was out of his teens Poe's first collection of poetry would appear in print. Once he began publishing his verse, however, Poe did not publish every poem he wrote, for he shrewdly recognized that while some kinds of verse should be made public, others should remain in manuscript. Chapter 2, "Poetry in Manuscript and Print," looks at how Poe's verse reflected the interrelationship between manuscript and print culture. In so doing, it draws upon the work of Donald H. Reiman and his distinction between private, confidential, and public documents. While Poe's poetry reveals his awareness of the differences between manuscript and print culture, in his prose he sometimes challenged the boundaries between the two in such works as "Autography" and "Marginalia."

Poe lived in Baltimore after he left the army and before he entered West Point, and he returned there after being dismissed from the military academy. As Lawrence C. Wroth explained many years ago, Poe's Baltimore was a lively and cultured place. Early on, the scant evidence indicates, Poe mixed with the cultured crowd, but after his return from West Point his scraggly and bepatched condition sometimes made him embarrassed to be seen in polite society. Nevertheless, as chapter 3, "Baltimore Book Culture," suggests, Poe took

every chance he could to continue reading old books and to keep up with the latest publications. He developed friendships with local booksellers and members of the Baltimore literati which gave him knowledge he could put to good use later. Though little is known about Poe's day-to-day life in Baltimore, the wide-ranging knowledge of books he revealed when he began writing for the *Southern Literary Messenger* shortly before and after he left Baltimore, suggests that his reading there had been extensive.

John Pendleton Kennedy, Poe's most important literary contact in Baltimore, helped him secure the editorial position with the *Messenger*. Poe's tenure with the magazine was the single most important experience shaping his attitude toward contemporary print culture. I do not devote a separate chapter to the *Southern Literary Messenger*, but, in a way, every following chapter reflects Poe's experience there. Chapter 4, "Booksellers' Banquet," begins with a brief summary of Poe's experience at the *Messenger*, but, for the most part, it treats one night in Poe's life, the night he attended a lavish dinner sponsored by New York's publishers and booksellers. Many of the city's and the country's most important authors and editors came. Poe had read much of their work and corresponded with several of them as part of his editorial duties at the *Messenger*, yet he had met few, if any, of the day's notable literati. Those Poe had treated harshly in his critical notices would scarcely have welcomed him to the table, but others respected his hard-nosed style and had said so in print. All in all, the occasion reflected the exuberant feelings of literary nationalism prevalent throughout the country. The contagious exuberance gave Poe hope for literary success.

Poe had the opportunity to meet the Harper brothers at the Booksellers' Dinner, and that same year they accepted his book-length *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* for publication. Chapter 5, "The Novel," expands on Bruce I. Weiner's work treating *Pym* as well as Weiner's study of Poe as a literary professional. The chapter title is a *double entendre*, for it refers to *Pym*, the one book-length narrative Poe completed, yet it also looks at Poe's attitude toward the novel as a literary genre. Much work has been done on the composition of *Pym* as well as Poe's use of sources. Here, I pay closer attention to Poe's inspiration for the book, the experiences he had and the books he read which motivated him to a task unprecedented in his personal experience, the writing of a novel. I also examine how contemporary readers received *Pym*, specifically looking at how

their attitudes toward the novel-as-genre shaped their understanding of Poe's book. The chapter closes with a discussion of the second and only other book-length work of fiction Poe attempted, the *Journal of Julius Rodman*, and looks at some reasons why Poe ultimately eschewed the novel for the short story.

Chapter 6, "Poe's Library," is, perhaps, a misnomer, for poverty prevented Poe from ever assembling a fine collection of books. Yet Poe did keep some books on hand he needed in his work, and when he was active in an editorial capacity, he received many review copies from the day's leading publishers. True, these did not stay in his possession for long before they went the way of the secondhand shops. Much of the chapter is devoted to Poe's thoughts about books as part of the material culture. "The Philosophy of Furniture" contains Poe's fullest statement on the subject, yet he supplied a handful of other comments concerning the effect the appearance of a shelf of books could have on a reader. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of how Poe used the image of the private library in his fiction.

One extremely influential development in book production occurred at a crucial point in Poe's development as a writer: the pamphlet novel. This new format marked the beginning of the cheap paperback of modern times. Countless foreign authors appeared in pamphlet novels and thus undermined the literary efforts of many American authors. As chapter 7, "Cheap Books and Expensive Magazines," shows, Poe's decision against novel writing and his efforts to own and edit an expensive, high-quality magazine were, in part, a reaction against the pamphlet novel.

Chapter 8, "The Road to *Literary America*," looks at Poe's attitudes toward writing literary history and traces his long-term desire to write a book-length work describing American literature. The project underwent many changes as Poe conceived and reconceived it. He partially realized it in his periodical series, "The Literati of New York City," but he never completed the book. The periodical series created much controversy. Though I do not treat the details of the controversy here – a century and a half later it all seems a little sordid – I do discuss the reasons why the series so upset its subjects. My conclusion provides some general thoughts on Poe's attitude toward the book in general and, in so doing, attempts to sort out the ambivalence Poe felt toward the book during his professional career.