

Poe, the Working Writer

Peter Norberg

James M. Hutchisson. 2005. *Poe*. Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 290 pp. + xvii. Illus.

The daguerreotype of Edgar Allan Poe superimposed over a stormy night sky on the dust jacket of James M. Hutchisson's new biography is immediately recognizable to Poe scholars and general readers alike. Taken in 1848, less than a year before Poe's death, it is perhaps the most widely circulated image of the man whom Baudelaire praised for, among other things, his preoccupation with an "analysis of the eccentrics and pariahs of this world." Dubbed the "Ultima Thule" portrait by Sarah Helen Whitman, it has often led viewers to see Poe as a man not unlike the narrators of his more sensationalist gothic tales and, indeed, soon after his death, Poe's life became the stuff of fiction. Beginning with Rufus Griswold's sensationalist introduction to his posthumous edition of Poe's works, a steady stream of unsubstantiated anecdote and sheer speculation saturated the historical record of Poe's life. Arthur Hobson Quinn largely completed the task of sifting out the facts from the fiction in his *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (1941, reprinted 1998), but fictional versions of Poe continue to have a powerful hold on the popular imagination. Witness the recent publication of a number of novels based on incidents in Poe's life, including John May's *Poe and Fanny* (2005), an historical romance based on Poe's relationship with Frances Sargent Osgood; Louis Bayard's *The Pale Blue Eye* (2006), a detective story set during Poe's time as a cadet at West Point; and Matthew Pearl's *The Poe Shadow* (2006), a detective

story grounded in careful but inconclusive research into the events surrounding Poe's death.

Hutchisson's biography is a welcome supplement to these fictional treatments of Poe. His *Poe* provides a detailed and highly readable account of the events that provide the framework for such novels, while carefully discriminating among those events that are documented and those that are anecdotal. More impressively, Hutchisson gives a richly textured account of the publishing world that shaped Poe's career, weaving together the dramatic episodes of his personal and professional life in a manner that makes Poe's influential work as a journalist and critic as compelling as the psychological complexity that underlies much of his poetry and short fiction. Hutchisson acknowledges in his introduction that his book "is not intended for Poe specialists but rather for general readers." Its great strength lies in its ability to draw such readers into the publishing world of the early nineteenth century, a world that shaped Poe's conception of audience in powerful and ambivalent ways. By situating Poe's life so fully in this context, Hutchisson's biography may leave general readers curious about other dimensions of nineteenth-century literary culture. Moreover, Hutchisson's attention to Poe's workaday life as a writer helps us see the continuity in Poe's writing across genres, tracing common themes through Poe's critical reviews, his more journalistic pieces such as "The Philosophy of Furniture," and his major tales.

Because his purpose is to lead readers into Poe's world as a professional writer, Hutchisson moves quickly through Poe's childhood and adolescence. His first chapter provides a brief but detailed account of the significant events of Poe's formative years, including the tragic circumstances that left him an orphan by the age of three: the desertion of his family by his father, David Poe, and the subsequent death from pneumonia of his mother, Elizabeth; his adoption by John Allan, a wealthy Virginian merchant; his education at a London boarding school during his foster family's five-year sojourn in England; and his adolescent infatuation with Mrs. Jane Stanard and Eliza Royster. There is nothing new here, and so Hutchisson attends to these matters primarily to sketch a backdrop for the dramatic events of Poe's literary career. The strength of his treatment of Poe's early years lies in his studied avoidance of psychoanalytic speculation, ground covered thoroughly by Kenneth Silverman's biography *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* (1991). Hutchisson identifies two developmental patterns that informed Poe's literary career: his struggle as the orphan of a

destitute actress to assert his identity within a Southern aristocracy to which he never fully belonged (a struggle increasingly obvious in his conflicts with his guardian John Allan), and his tendency to seek solace in idealized relationships with women that were modeled after his relationship with a mother he never really knew. In subsequent chapters, he uses these patterns to explain some of the major conflicts in Poe's career, and to suggest why Poe's narratives are more often inquiries into the psychological motives behind aberrant or irrational behavior rather than moral lessons in civic virtue. Although he stops short of making such direct claims, Hutchisson's account of Poe's childhood and adolescence suggests that the Byronic posturing in his early poetry, his critical rejection of didacticism, and his championing of an aesthetics of pleasure reflect the rootlessness and sense of loss Poe experienced during his formative years.

The second chapter succeeds admirably in showing how Poe's emergence as a poet coincided with his struggles to conform to the expectations of Southern aristocratic culture and John Allan's standards of success. Hutchisson wonderfully interrelates the publication of Poe's first volumes of poetry with the series of events that contributed to his estrangement from Allan. Poe's first volume of verse, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), was printed in Boston soon after he had to leave the University of Virginia because of debts he had accumulated while struggling to accede to the lifestyle of his more wealthy classmates. His second collection, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Other Poems* (1829) was published while Poe was waiting to win admission to West Point. Poe was an accomplished cadet, but he lasted less than two years. Upon leaving, he took up a collection among his peers to publish his third volume of poetry *Poems by Edgar A. Poe [...] Second Edition* (1831), which he dedicated "To the U.S. Corps of Cadets." Hutchisson's Poe, in Byronic fashion, identified himself as a poet and an artist in opposition to the structure and values of Virginia society and the United States military.

In his account of Poe's early efforts in verse, Hutchisson presents Poe less as a young poet refining his sensitivity to the prosodic rhythms of language than a young man working through the grief of losing those closest to him via the standard themes of gothic romanticism. But Poe had a remarkably well-developed sense of poetic theory for such a young writer. While Hutchisson does discuss briefly the emphasis Poe placed on "craft" in his "Letter to B ____," Poe's early career as a poet remains somewhat of an untold story. Later in life, in his Preface to the 1845 edition of *Poems*, he would

write that poetry, “under happier circumstances, would have been the field of my choice.” But having lost the financial support of John Allan, the pressures of poverty soon forced him to begin writing fiction and criticism for the popular literary marketplace, often while working in an editorial capacity under men whose talents he considered inferior to his own.

In telling the story of these middle years, Hutchisson’s biography picks up speed. The mid-chapters divide Poe’s professional literary career into five distinct periods: his years in Baltimore (1831–34), when he wrote his early tales and satires; his time in Virginia (1835–37), when he worked as an editor at the *Southern Literary Messenger* and first began writing critical notices and reviews; his years in Philadelphia (1838–40), when he worked for *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* and wrote some of his most famous tales including “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “William Wilson”; the years when he worked for *Graham’s Magazine* (1841–43), the successor to *Burton’s*; and, following the success of “The Raven,” his last productive period as a poet and critic in New York City (1844–45). The remaining two chapters follow Poe’s slow decline following the death of his wife, Virginia, his relationships with a series of women including Helen Whitman, Frances Sargent Osgood, and Annie Richmond, and his efforts to revive his plans to publish a magazine of his own, *The Stylus*, during the months leading up to his death in Baltimore on 7 October 1849.

Hutchisson’s account of Poe’s middle years are a great contribution to recent publications on Poe’s life and career for the way they allow us to see Poe at work as a writer grappling with the real world concerns of publishing. After reading Hutchisson’s account of Poe’s work on *The Southern Literary Messenger*, for example, it is understandable how his poetic ambitions were deferred into editorial ambitions. Hutchisson never lets his readers forget that financial concerns were a primary motive in Poe’s life as a writer, editor, and critic. However, he also carefully locates in Poe’s early reviews of the poetry of Cornelius Matthews, Theodore Fay, and Lydia H. Sigourney the origins of the concept of “unity of effect” that Poe applied in his own sensationalist and ratiocinative tales and later returned to in “The Philosophy of Composition,” which he used to promote *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845). It is in such moments of synthesis that Hutchisson is at his best, demonstrating the continuity between works that earlier scholars would place in the separate categories of “serious literature” and “magazine hack work.” Importantly, Hutchisson makes Poe’s great talent as a critic a central

part of his life story and helps readers see the lasting effect Poe's criticism has had on a range of literary genres.

Scholars may still want to return to Quinn or Sidney Moss's detailed account of Poe's literary battles, but general readers may find themselves enticed in other directions. Hutchisson's account of caricatures of Poe in such works as Charles F. Briggs's *The Trippings of Tom Pepper* and Thomas Dunn English's *1844, or The Power of the "S.F."* may lead the curious-minded to a deeper exploration of Poe's presence in the imagination of his contemporaries. Others may find themselves drawn in different directions by the lines of influence Hutchisson sees between Poe's writings and the work of writers as various as André Gide, Willa Cather, and the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. However, Hutchisson often makes his arguments for influence in parenthetical asides that do not leave him space to support his claims and can distract from the main narrative thrust of his biography, the story of Poe's literary career. Hutchisson also pushes too hard his thesis that Poe's writings reflect his southern identity. His claim that "Poe's ultimate formulation of the 'poem written solely for the poem's sake' was rooted in his identification with the South and with its sense of history and time as cyclical" (87) seems forced, for surely Poe's quarrels with the Frogpondians is grounded in aesthetic differences more than regional and political ones. His arguments against didacticism and in favor of "beauty" are formal arguments related to his conception of "unity of effect," and although he was keenly aware of the differences between a Southern agrarian economy supported by the institution of slavery and the individualist and entrepreneurial culture emerging from the North's industrial economy, he was more concerned to engage and exploit that culture than resist it. Hutchisson himself demonstrates Poe's "Northern" ambitiousness in the careful account he gives of Poe's repeated efforts at self-promotion, from his work with Thomas White at the *Southern Literary Messenger* to his writing of "The Philosophy of Composition" in order to extol the poetic method he employed in penning "The Raven."

Throughout the biography, Hutchisson gives equal treatment to Poe's work as a poet, critic, and writer of gothic tales, burlesque satires, and other prose fiction, demonstrating Poe's responsiveness to a publishing world in flux. He came of age as a writer during the 1830s and 1840s, a time when a literate, middle-class reading audience large enough to sustain a commercial network of newspapers, booksellers, and publishing houses was just emerging along the eastern seaboard of the United States. At various times throughout

his career, he worked as an editor and critic for magazines based in Virginia, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Few writers were as keenly aware of the rapidly changing shape of American literary culture as was Poe, and fewer still responded to these changes in such a wide range of genres. Ultimately, though, Hutchisson leaves us with an image of Poe not all that different from the daguerreotype that looms on its cover: a man used up by his own compulsive behavior and by the genteel literary society of his day.