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Philip Edward Phillips (ed.), *Poe and Place*

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Philip Edward Phillips (ed.), *Poe and Place*

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REFERENCES

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"No Place Like Home," "No Place to Call Home"

- 1 It is highly fitting that the new Palgrave Macmillan series *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* should feature a collection on Edgar Allan Poe, not because Poe is tied to a specific locale in literary histories, but precisely because he has been seen as the "nowhere man" of American literature (Hutchisson 13), which is why his writings engage so saliently with imaginary spaces endowed with compelling reality effects (Poe's Paris), with spaces of the mind (the gothic American South), or with a cosmopolitan appurtenance to everywhere and nowhere. Series editor Robert T. Tally Jr. himself, in his 2014 study of Poe, argues that the latter is "one of those nomad thinkers whose transgressions and movements resist the national apparatus of capture, deterritorializing and reterritorializing thought as they move" (Tally 21). Building upon previous work by Scott Peeples, who also contributes to the current volume, Tally makes a case for Poe's cosmopolitanism, which puts Poe in the curious position of being "non-regional" yet also "local," with the local meaning not a "particular place" but "a kind of space: the urban" (Tally 112).
- 2 *Poe and Place*, comprising fifteen essays and one original poem, actually addresses the array of places (most notably, cities: Boston, Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Paris, St Petersburg; but also countries: England, Germany, Argentina; as well as the cosmos itself) that either belong to Poe (as sites of work and/or life struggle), that

Poe claimed (through explicit or covert references) or that claim(ed) Poe as a key part of their local or national culture. In doing so, as Philip Edward Phillips points out in the Preface, the volume places Poe (even more firmly) “within the context of antebellum America” while also exploring Poe’s transatlantic and global affinities (xiii). In this sense, it is relevant that Charles Cantalupo’s opening poem, “Poe in Richmond” establishes, argues Phillips, a juxtaposition of “then and now” and a “continuum of poet, place, and people” (xiii). Permeated by variations of a highly “Poesque” motif sounded at the beginning (“*Clickerty, clackerty, click clack, clack click, clackerty click rack*”), the poem effectively blends geographical and biographical inserts from Poe’s actual and imagined lives with Richmond scenes and with contemporary perspectives to engage Poe, as the volume itself does, in an afterlife of dialogue. The “chiastic” structure of the volume subsequently reflects Poe’s modes of engagement with place (as defined by Phillips, “active and independent in its being”) and with space (“the idea or extension of the idea of place”) (xiii) from *Part I, A Sense of Place*, comprising an essay by Peeples, highlighting Poe the cosmopolitan of circumstance, followed by *Part II, Geographical Places*, featuring articles on the cities Poe dwelt in, to *Part III, Imaginative Spaces* and *Part IV, Imagining Spaces*, which both engage Poe’s projections into/of spaces he never visited; the *Coda* consists of an article by Harry Lee Poe on Poe’s imagined cosmology.

- 3 In spite of these division into places — that Poe geographically inhabited — and spaces — that Poe imaginatively appropriated — the chapters permanently meander between the two, more or less overtly. The articles in the first two parts focus first and foremost on documenting Poe’s engagement with real cities, and subsequently use these cities as an angle to approach the writings which — to a greater or lesser extent — they can be connected with. While Peeples traces Poe’s “moving biography” to highlight an itinerary in which “there was no place like home, which is to say no place he could call home” (9), the next section engages more closely with individual Poe cities. Thus, Katherine Kim’s chapter on Boston highlights the city’s relevance for Poe’s life and writing, and conversely the relevance of Poe for the city, going against the grain of a tradition that sets Poe at war with a Boston of “Frogpondians” and Puritan puffery. In contrast to Boston, Richmond has always embraced Poe, and Christopher Semtner’s chapter documents the history of Poe’s residence in that city to suggest possible sources of influence. The article abounds in suggestions of what may have inspired Poe, to ultimately address the status of Poe as a Southern writer (evading Southern politics but adopting the attitude of a Southern critic pitted against the North) embraced by an array of subsequent Richmond artists. Gerald Kennedy’s chapter on England evinces a similar mix of documentary information and imaginary excursus into what Poe might have seen in London, on trips in England, or in Scotland, and argues for an “imprint of the Old World” (77) especially discernible in literary impressions, illustrated in a compelling reading of American and European selves in “William Wilson.” Jeffrey Savoye’s chapter on Baltimore broadens the discussion of the influence of place by noting that such an investigation should go beyond a mere list of facts to “deal with more difficult questions of subtle influences of time and place” to argue that the Baltimore years were “pivotal” in Poe’s literary career (Savoye 99), for example through literary connections (see Savoye’s comments on the Delphian Club) but also through its image of a “mob town” teaching Poe to mistrust democracy. In some contrast to the afore-mentioned approach is Amy Branam Armiento’s chapter on Philadelphia, which stresses that, even if most of what Poe wrote in that city is not set

there, the works nevertheless “reflect Philadelphia and its happenings,” and “imagery and descriptions” can be traced to “real objects, people, and events in the city space” (124) — for example, the proximity of “houses of detention” which “could not fail to inspire stories of gruesome murders” (134). Less focussed on direct referentiality, John Gruesser’s discussion of New York convincingly portrays Poe’s insider-outsider status in connection mainly to *Doings in Gotham* and *The Literati of New York City*, to propose a reading of “The Cask of Amontillado” as “fictional epilogue to the series” (158), with Poe performing an identification with both Montresor and Fortunato.

- 4 The articles in *Part III* start in the imaginary to sometimes return to the geographic and biographical. While William Engel’s chapter on Poe’s angelic imagination aims to recapture its key disturbing ambivalence (as an “amalgam of Miltonic, Islamic, and Gnostic elements”) to argue that these spaces afford “a glimpse into the fiery, starry crucible of [Poe’s] own poetic temperament” (184) and suggest an “aesthetic practice” “predicated on a metaphysics of absence” (189), Richard Kopley’s chapter on *Gordon Pym* sets out to decode the novel as a version of autobiography. After arguing that Poe “embedded his life” in his works, Kopley also uncovers a “Jerusalem” narrative in the same novel to finally posit that — in reiterating elements from Poe’s other works (for example teeth in “Berenice” and the description of the *Jane Guy* shore party “armed to the teeth” 203) — *Gordon Pym* ultimately reads as an Art Novel of “great mourning and of the effort to work through that mourning” (211). A highly interesting chapter navigating biography and imagination is Sonya Isaak’s reading of Poe’s Germany, which brings into focus Poe’s contradictory stance: painstakingly differentiating himself from the German Gothic through irony or what might be called aesthetic overkill, Poe also “sprinkled” Germanic references to suggest an appropriation of the country and its culture. Isaak effectively argues for an anxiety of influence, illustrated through a comparison of Gottfried August Bürger’s 1773 “Lenore” and Poe’s variations of the Lenore motif.
- 5 The idea of a contradictory relationship with an imaginary Germany in fact enables the transition to *Part IV*, which debuts with Alexandra Urakova’s engaging chapter on Poe’s St. Petersburg adventure, a literary myth to which Poe himself contributed, both directly and indirectly. Historically untrue, but in keeping with the *poète maudit* narrative as well as with the imaginary identity of St Petersburg, the myth was enthusiastically embraced, as Urakova shows, as late as the 1920s, surviving right through the Soviet era as a story of a “missed opportunity” (251). The discussion enables a transition to the global Poe, with an excursus into the continuity between Poe’s cityscapes — particularly in “The Man of the Crowd” — and the St. Petersburg of Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoevsky. The next chapter of this section routes Poe back to his geographical meanderings, as Emily James Hansen’s reading of Egyptomania in Poe’s work partially rests on the writer’s likely familiarity with the British Museum from his stay in London as a child and on an inferred familiarity with the nineteenth-century (pseudo)scientific fascination with Egyptian artefacts. The discussion is saliently placed at the intersection with Poe’s attitude to mob mentality as well as with contemporary discourses on race. Paris is the next imaged space and, in their excursus into the French world of E.A. Poe, Phillips and George point to a series of mutual appropriations and misappropriations, suggesting Poe’s (approximate) use of French as a marker of foreignness, and probing the depths of Poe’s geographical imagination, not so much in order to establish a “formulaic balance between Poe’s poetic imagination and his constructed French baggage” but rather to saliently suggest the “influences

[which] provided the alchemic materials necessary to create narratives set in a place of such significance to him and to his double, Baudelaire” (311-12). The section’s final piece, Emron Esplin’s chapter on Poe and Argentina, returns to the theme of Urakova’s chapter, to examine Poe’s afterlife in a country he never visited, this time not even in imagination, but by which he has nevertheless been appropriated, especially through the *modernistas*, expanding the discussion to the way that Horacio Quiroga, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar also “influenced Poe by using and/or altering his image, reputation, and literary corpus” (327). This perspective opens the way to exciting fresh perspectives of global Poe afterlives in places he never visited — neither geographically nor imaginatively — but that are nevertheless part of his heritage. The *Coda* spirals out to the cosmic dimension with Harry Lee Poe’s reading of *Eureka* as a prose poem that encodes insight into what are now scientifically acknowledged theories about entropy, the expanding universe, the role of gravitation, placing Poe in a complex scientific and philosophical tradition and offering a view in which homecoming — as a reconciliation between the physical and the energetic — is possible.

- 6 When read as part of a whole, the articles sometimes offer complementary — if not divergent — perspectives on the way that life experience is encoded in Poe’s writing or legacy. Thus, for example, while Kim suggests a Boston filiation for “The Fall of the House of Usher,” reiterating the claim that the story might reference the Usher House in Boston (1684-1830), as well as “Eliza Poe’s friends Noble and Harriet Usher” (29), Kennedy speculates that in Scotland, at Kilmarnock, “Poe may also have seen Dean Castle, where (like the fictional House of Usher) a zigzag crack ran down the façade of the keep” (76), to later propose that the “locale” of the story, though obscure, insinuates an “English setting,” with Poe “probably” recalling from “childhood memory” the Usher distillery in Edinburgh (86). By contrast, Savoye notes that “many readers may want to assign tangible roots to Poe’s works,” but “Poe himself ardently resists such efforts,” giving “The Fall of the House of Usher” as an example of a work that is set “in no particular geographical location” (98). However, Savoye later casts Baltimore — with its “strongly mercantile nature” — as a source of inspiration for the unsavoury depiction of businessmen in “Peter Pendulum, the Business Man” (103); Semtner joins an array of voices who put forth Poe’s foster father Allan as the object of ridicule of that same story, while Amiento counters this line of reading to argue that Poe is “lampooning the types of men employed at the Philadelphia Exchange” (126).
- 7 The importance awarded to places of publication also seems to emerge as a moot point. Savoye questions the significance of cities of publication beyond that of “necessary building blocks of bibliographies and biographies,” rhetorically asking whether one should assume that the publication of *Tamerlane and Other Poems* in Boston (invoked by Kim to argue for an imaginative reconciliation between Poe and Boston) “is inherently significant to the poems themselves” (97). For Kim, on the other hand, the link between Poe and Boston lies also in the coincidence of important or breakthrough works being published in close proximity to places significant in Poe’s life (“The Tell-Tale Heart” was published by James Russell Lowell [...] in the first issue of *The Pioneer*, a magazine housed at 1 Boston Place and located just one street away from where *Tamerlane* had been published in 1827” 29-30), as well as in his continued publishing ties with Boston even after moving from the city (35).
- 8 If divergences in establishing references and direct or likely sources of inspiration ultimately reinforce the view of Poe as both an “everywhere man” and a “nowhere

man” (xii), it is also worth noting that common themes cross the articles, establishing a continuity of interest that is one of the strongest points of the present volume. From the mark probably left by the British Museum on Poe’s imagination (Hansen, Kennedy) to the influence of British magazines and French journalism (Kennedy, Phillips and George Poe) and to the heritage of British (Kennedy) but also continental (Isaak) literature, the contributors suggest Poe’s complex, multivalent and multidirectional (Urakova, Espin) global routes as a writer who is at odds with the literary nationalism of his time (Hansen, Kennedy) while simultaneously seeking to craft his own American voice (Kennedy).

- 9 An intriguing point of confluence in the volume is the reference to Rufus Wilmot Griswold’s biography of Poe, with an almost unwavering consensus that Poe’s reputation suffered great damage at the hands of his literary executor — who, in his turn, as Gruesser reminds us, “suffered at the hands of Poe the critic” (151, 157). While it has certainly been established that Griswold’s highly distorted vision of Poe was re-echoed by subsequent reviewers and biographers (also sparking a defense of Poe, as Kim points out, 293), new dimensions of discussion could be opened by exploring the implications of John Hayes’ observation in his biography of Poe that it was actually Poe himself, fully cognisant of the view Griswold held of him, who chose Griswold as his literary executor. Noting that later images of Poe as a madman can be traced to Griswold’s obituary in *The New York Times*, which also had the effect of encouraging readings of Poe’s life through his narratives, Hayes suggests that this negative portrayal had in fact been anticipated by Poe, who knew that “controversy sells books (Hayes 7).
- 10 In the end, it appears that attempts to provide anchors only enhance Poe’s multifaceted homelessness, and the great merit of this volume is that it opens other Poe discussions and appropriations. Returning to the opening piece of the volume, it can be said that placelessness is inscribed into Poe’s very afterlife. As Peebles puts it, Poe’s notion of home went against the grain of “narrowly conscribed [...] antebellum American ideals” of “home as the locus of virtue and the determining influence in one’s life” and, in fact, “remained elusive, so that ‘Home, Sweet Home’ evoked not so much a loss as a lack, a state of belonging he knew about but had never known” (14). Rooting Poe and his literary imagination in geographical places or in imagined spaces is both informative as well as elusive, attesting, to borrow again from Peebles, to a Poe that is “not uprooted but *unrooted*” (16). Poe’s biographical and geographical roots/routes, one might add, seem to return to the placelessness of Poe’s imagination and impersonations.

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