

Review of:

Ana Elena González Treviño (ed.). *El genio de lo perverso: Ensayos del coloquio en conmemoración del bicentenario del natalicio de Edgar Allan Poe*. Mexico City: Samsara, 2011. 136 pp. 750 pesos.

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Edgar Allan Poe was no Ambrose Bierce, to disappear in Mexico – a country he never visited and knew little of. Nonetheless, among the major writers from north of the border, he has traditionally benefited from an enthusiastic reception in Mexico. The constant presence in Poe's work of images of death and the supernatural strikes an immediate chord in the Mexican sensibility: the author of "The Masque of the Red Death" is not bereft of points in common with a land that numbers among its national festivals the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). Direct references to Mexico are scarcely to be sought in Poe's work, while indirect reference does not appear to extend beyond the traces in his late writings ("Eldorado" and "Von Kempelen and His Discovery") of the 1849 California Gold Rush that followed the Mexican-American war of 1846-1848 and the annexation by the US of huge swathes of territory till then Mexican.

The parallels between Poe's individual sensibility and the Mexican collective world-view are striking. Carlos Fuentes, Mexico's greatest modern novelist, has tales in the fantastic mode visibly exhibiting Poe's influence: his celebrated novella "Aura" (1962) bears the traces of "The Fall of the House of Usher", while a later story, "Brillante" (2009) is effectively a rewrite of "Morella". There is also a running tradition of translation of Poe's tales and poems in Mexico, from Ignacio Mariscal's pioneering rendition of "The Raven" of 1869 up to the present day. The bicentenary of Poe's birth in 2009, celebrated worldwide, elicited a significant response in Mexican literary circles, among creative writers, critics and translators. A republication of Julio Cortázar's classic Argentinian translation of the complete stories, with new editorial material, appeared that year in Spain, co-edited by the Peruvian writer Fernando Iwasaki and the upcoming Mexican novelist Jorge Volpi, and fronted by a brace of prologues, signed respectively by Carlos Fuentes and Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa. 2009 also saw the publication in Mexico of a volume of new parallel-text translations of a selection of Poe's poems, *El cuervo y otros poemas*, produced by a literary translation consortium operating under the wing of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) in Mexico City and edited by Ana Elena González Treviño, of that faculty.

Also in 2009, a bicentennial conference was held by the Colegio de Letras Modernas in Mexico City under the title *El genio de lo perverso* ("The genius of the perverse"). The proceedings – edited, like the book of translations, by Ana Elena González Treviño – were published in 2011, in the volume that forms the subject of this review. The full title translates as: "The genius of the perverse: Essays from the colloquium commemorating the bicentennial of the birth of Edgar Allan Poe". The volume (entirely in Spanish) consists of a brief editorial preface, fourteen critical essays (including one by the editor) and, at the end, a poem by

Mario Murgia in the form of a pastiche of “The Raven”. All the contributors hail from Mexico: ten (including Ana González) are from the UNAM, three from other Mexican universities, and two from outside the academic world of the humanities. The last-named are, respectively, Enrique Hernández Lemus from the National Institute of Genomics and Paulo Roberto Coria Monter from the Mexico City police. The collection thus - and in contrast to others of the bicentennial conference proceedings that have appeared - stands or falls, without transnational support, entirely on the quality of the endogenous analyses it presents testifying to the local reception of the work of Edgar Allan Poe.

Of the contributions, a number take the form of general overviews of Poe’s work as a whole. These include “Poe (1809-1849)” by Hernán Lara Zavala; “Voces de la ultratumba: apología de Edgar Allan Poe” (“Voices from beyond the grave: an apology for Edgar Allan Poe”) by Juan Carlos Calvillo; “Poe y los otros” (“Poe and the others”) by Marina Fe; and the punningly titled “Poest Mortem” by Carlos Manuel Cruz Meza. These texts, while bound by the inevitable constraints of their self-imposed generality, offer a useful series of brief introductions to Poe: in particular, Calvillo notes Poe’s struggles with the outer limits of signification in both his poems and tales, while Cruz Meza privileges the constancy of his encounters with death across the stories. For her part, the editor offers a chapter surveying Poe as poet, “El color del sonido: la experimentación acústica en la poesía de Poe” (“The colour of sound: acoustic experimentation in Poe’s poetry”), arguing that in the hands of the author of works like “Ulalume”, poetry approximates to abstraction and approaches the condition of pure sound.

In the realm of more specific analysis, Alejandro Pacheco García examines the theme of cryptography in his piece entitled “Un último enigma para Dupin: esteganografía y criptografía en la obra de Edgar Allan Poe” (“A last enigma for Dupin: hidden messages and cryptography in the work of Edgar Allan Poe”), relating the Poe of “The Gold-Bug” to a real-life mystery of 1822 involving coded messages, the unexplained disappearance from a Lynchburg, Virginia hotel of a treasure-hunter named Thomas Beale. Two chapters home in on individual tales, namely Anna Reid’s “Manifestaciones de locura en ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (“Manifestations of madness in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’”) and Adriana Bellamy Ortiz’s “Poe y la ambigüedad de la imagen: ‘The Oval Portrait’” (“Poe and the ambiguity of the image: ‘The Oval Portrait’”). It is difficult for criticism to be original on either story, but both articles offer closely argued and no doubt pedagogically useful analyses of Poe’s tale-writing in practice. A more unusual note is sounded by the writer and academic Alberto Chimal, who, in “*Poliziano*: Edgar Allan Poe se asoma al escenario” (“*Politian*: Edgar Allan Poe takes the stage”), analyses Poe’s little-known, unfinished verse-drama *Politian* (a text which Chimal himself has recently translated into Spanish), recalling its source in an actual criminal case of Poe’s time - the “Kentucky Tragedy” of 1825 - and offering an unexpected comparison in that connection to “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt”.

The comparative dimension makes its entry in three contributions, one of them Mexican-themed. Gabriela Villanueva Noriega proposes an unusual comparison, namely between Poe (“The Man of the Crowd”) and Conrad, in “Cuerpos, detectives y criminales: *The Secret Agent* de Joseph Conrad y Edgar Allan Poe” (“Bodies, detectives and criminals: Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* and Edgar Allan Poe”); José Guillermo Córdova Mendoza offers a disquisition on “El corazón del universo y el terror del allende el espacio: el cosmos según Edgar Allan Poe y [H.P.] Lovecraft” (“The heart of the universe and the terror beyond space: the cosmos according to Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft”); and Olga Lilia Calderón Ramírez, in “‘Enterrado vivo’ de Edgar Allan Poe, su influencia e importancia en la

cuentística decadente mexicana del siglo XIX” (“Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Premature Burial’ – its influence and importance for the Mexican decadent short-story tendency of the nineteenth century”), locates the traces of Poe’s tale in the works of a group of late nineteenth-century Mexican writers (Alberto Leduc, Carlos Díaz Dufoo, Rubén M. Campos and Bernardo Couto Castillo). All three articles tend to strengthen, were it necessary, the incontrovertible circumstance of Poe’s massive and multiform influence on innumerable writers after him.

The two contributors from outside the literary world take up, respectively, the themes of Poe and natural science (Enrique Hernández Lemus, “La estafa (literaria) considerada como una de las ciencias” - “(Literary) diddling considered as one of the exact sciences”) and Poe and criminology (Paulo Roberto Coria Monter, “Edgar Allan Poe y las ciencias forenses” – “Edgar Allan Poe and forensic science”). Both outside experts treat Poe the writer with maximum respect, Hernández Lemus reading *Eureka* as a prolepsis of both the concept of the “Big Bang” and the general theory of relativity, and Coria Monter hailing the American author as anticipating subsequent developments in criminological research, notably the later nineteenth-century findings of the criminologists Alphonse Bertillon and Hans Gross. Poe is thus linked to concrete scientific discoveries outside his primary realm of literature.

Finally, Mario Murgia’s pastiche of “The Raven”, “Cría cuervos ...” (literally, “Raising ravens”, replicating the title of a 1976 film by the Spanish director Carlos Saura), appears as a paean to both Edgar Allan Poe and the collection’s editor, and brings the volume to a conclusion appropriately recalling the spell that Poe continues to exercise on practising writers everywhere.

All in all, this volume may be considered to satisfy: if some of the chapters on general or well-trodden themes inevitably lack originality, the competence of their authors signals them as potentially useful in a national pedagogic context, while a good number of contributions do indeed suggest unexpected connections and strike out new paths for Poe scholarship. The book is attractively produced, with an evocative black-and-red cover; typos and misspellings are, while not totally absent, mercifully few; and all in all, Edgar Allan Poe’s “pilgrim shadow” should have every cause to approve this testimony to his warm reception, two hundred years after his birth, in a land bordering his own. As Ana González truly states in her introduction (p. 11), “La presencia e influencia de Edgar Allan Poe en México tiene alcances insospechados” (“Edgar Allan Poe’s presence and influence in Mexico reach into unexpected places”).

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