

THE POE BICENTENNIAL YEAR 2009 IN SPAIN

Christopher Rollason – rollason54@gmail.com

First published in the EUROPEAN ENGLISH MESSENGER (European Society for the Study of English - ESSE), Vol 19.2, Autumn 2010, pp. 50-55 - www.essenglish.org/messenger.html

Copyright ESSE and the author

**

ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe's presence as a major influence in Latin American literature is well-known, thanks to the likes of Borges and Cortázar, but less attention has been paid to the remarkable popularity which he today also enjoys in Spain, both in university circles and among readers at large. Poe's birth bicentennial year of 2009 was marked by multiple academic and cultural events worldwide, and, outside the United States, quite probably nowhere more than in Spain, which had, by the end of the year, hosted a whole series of commemorative readings, theatrical performances, exhibitions, etc, as well as no less than four international academic conferences, held by the Universities of Castilla-La Mancha (Albacete, February), Alcalá de Henares (May), Extremadura (Cáceres, November) and Valencia (December). There were also several important reissues of Poe's works, among them a new edition of the Cortázar translation of the stories with each tale prefaced by a different Spanish-speaking writer, and Siniestras amadas, an impressive illustrated volume produced by the artist Jack Mircala. This paper will offer an overview of this rich and varied Spanish contribution to the bicentennial, considering its different manifestations and with particular stress on the four conferences. It will, finally, offer some provisional conclusions and suggestions in the endeavour to account for the 'Poe phenomenon' in Spain today.

.....

The objective of this article will be to offer a retrospective of the Poe bicentennial celebrations over 2009 in a particular country, namely Spain, and to propose some suggestions which might help account for Edgar Allan Poe's current high profile in that country and be useful in the context of Poe studies there. A few clarifications and contextualisations may firstly be in order. Firstly, regarding my own qualifications to be the author of this paper, while I do not actually live in Spain I visit that country frequently, have substantial contacts with its academic milieu, and have attended numerous conferences there, also publishing in Spanish journals (I am a member of AEDEAN, the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies). Of the four Poe conferences held in Spain over 2009 (in Albacete, Alcalá de Henares, Cáceres and Valencia), I was able to attend three, presenting a total of four texts, three in English and one in Spanish, variously as papers, plenary lecture and round table contribution. Secondly, despite Poe's well-charted influence on Latin American writers and the mentions that will be made in this article of, notably, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar, I shall be focusing on the Poe bicentennial as it was lived in Spain, not in the Spanish-speaking world as a whole. There were Poe conferences in 2009 in Mexico City and Viña del Mar (Chile), and various Mexican locations also hosted Poe events, but it would be beyond the scope of a brief paper like this to chart Edgar Allan Poe's recent fortunes in Latin America, and that task I therefore leave to others: the richness and density of the bicentennial reception in Spain alone is, already and in itself, a remarkable phenomenon. Thirdly, I should add that the Fall 2009 edition (Volume X, Number 2) of the Pennsylvania-based *Edgar Allan Poe Review* was in part guest-edited by the Spanish Poe scholars and organisers of the

Albacete conference, Margarita Rigal Aragón and Beatriz González Moreno: this volume contains a wide range of useful material on the Poe-Spain connection (including an article by Rigal Aragón herself entitled “Spanish ‘Misreadings’ of Poe’s Life and Works at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century” and a valuable historical study by Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, “Edgar A. Poe’s Poetry in Spain in the 19th Century: An Issue for Connoisseurs”)¹. I shall refer to this volume where pertinent, but will endeavour not to duplicate its content in the present article.

In the publishing world, a good dozen commemorative volumes appeared in Spain over late 2008 and 2009, most of them illustrated and some aimed at the children’s market. Many were listed in an article published in *El País* in late 2009 (Fernández, 2009): it may be asked, indeed, whether the Poe year saw such an editorial flurry in any other country. Of particular interest was the reissue of the complete tales, in the already celebrated translation by Cortázar, in a special edition conceived by Fernando Iwasaki (Peru) and Jorge Volpi (Mexico) which included a brief commentary on every tale, each of them the work of a Spanish or Latin American short-story writer born after 1960. This volume, published by Páginas de Espuma (Madrid), also featured introductory texts by Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa (the latter new), as well as Cortázar’s own brief life of Poe. The editors declared in their preface: ‘Todos somos descendientes literarios de Poe’ (‘We are all literary descendants of Poe’) (Volpi and Iwasaki, 2008, 13)². A second reissue of the stories in the Cortázar translation, this time with illustrations by Harry Clarke, was published by Libros del Zorro Rojo, under the title *Cuentos de imaginación y misterio* (“Tales of Imagination and Mystery”); the same publisher also brought out an illustrated reissue of *Arthur Gordon Pym* (the artist here being Luis Scafati), again translated by Cortázar. Outstanding, meanwhile, also was the volume *Siniestras amadas: 22 delirios necro-románticos de Edgar Allan Poe*, (“Sinister and beloved: 22 necro-romantic moments of delirium by Edgar Allan Poe”), the work of the distinguished illustrator Jack Mircala (published in Madrid by Ediciones Sinsentido). This beautifully produced book offered a selection of Poe’s tales and poems on the theme of women (“Ligeia”, “Eleonora”, “Ulalume”, “Annabel Lee” and the rest), freshly translated and illustrated by the artist.

In the area of academic publishing, the two journals of AEDEAN, *Atlantis* and *Nexus*, both highlighted Poe in 2009. *Atlantis* included articles on Poe in both of its 2009 issues - both in fact by myself, on Poe and Borges (June) and Poe and Bob Dylan (December) and corresponding respectively to my contributions to the Albacete and Alcalá conferences. *Nexus* devoted the first of its two issues for the year to the bicentennial, with contributions by the well-known American expert Scott Peeples as well as by three already mentioned Spanish scholars, Rigal Aragón/González Moreno (in a joint article) and Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan.

On 17 January, the Madrid bookshop Tres Rosas Amarillas organized the event “Una noche con Poe” (“A Night with Poe”), a “terrific nocturnal reading” of tales by Poe with a fancy-dress party. This evening featured the presence of a number of the participants in the Volpi/Iwasaki volume. Two weeks later, on 31 January, the Federico García Lorca theatre in Getafe, near Madrid, was host to a single performance of the play *Sombras y Preguntas*

¹ The Spanish-related material in this number consisted of an introduction by the guest editors (including a summary of the Albacete conference), eight articles and one review. Of the articles, six were on topics related to Poe and Spain. The review was my own co-written text on the Jack Mircala volume *Siniestras Amadas* (cf. below).

² For a more detailed discussion of this volume, see Rigal Aragón (2009), 42-43.

(“Shadows and Questions”), based on the life and work of Poe. The director was Natividad Gómez: the performance was based on an adaptation of a play by Alfonso Sastre, *¿Dónde estás, Ulalume, dónde estás?* (“Where are you, Ulalume, where are you?”), with additional material by the director. The result was an ambitious, indeed experimental work, allying bold interpretations of the last phase of the writer’s life to atmospheric readings of his late poems (“The Raven” resounding in English in the background, “Ulalume” recited in Spanish at the end), all to a musical background of “gothic” rock. Edgar himself was powerfully rendered by Carlos Gutiérrez, with all other parts taken by the actresses Ana Codeseda and Cristina Martínez and the actor Laure Ruiz. The play was performed for a second time on 18 April, at the Centro Cívico, also in Getafe.

On 18 March, the Universidad Complutense de Madrid hosted a one-day commemorative event, including a number of scholarly contributions, as well as a reading of “The Raven” and a showing of the film of “The Pit and the Pendulum”. Next, the night of 23 April, “Day of the Book”, saw a Poe reading in the prestigious setting of Madrid’s Ateneo (Athenaeum), with readers and writers exchanging conversations and literary experiences. This event, held to a full house, centred on a concert accompanied by graphic illustration – the first of its kind in Spain – offering a fusion of music, drama and images that captivated the public. José Ramón García provided a piano accompaniment to tales by Poe recited by the actor Felé Martínez and illustrated by Jack Mircala. A large screen displayed Mircala’s images from *Siniestras Amadas*; the readings included “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherezade”, “Eleonora” and “The Black Cat”. Later in the year, round-table discussion of Poe featured in the programme of the Semana Gótica (Gothic Week) held in Madrid from 24 October to 1 November – the first edition of what is hoped will be a regular multimedia event celebrating the Gothic genre.

Elsewhere in Spain, in April the municipal council of Jerez de la Frontera (Cádiz province, Andalusia) named a (new) street in the city after Edgar Allan Poe. The connection is, of course, “The Cask of Amontillado” (“*can you tell Amontillado from Sherry?*”); the proposal was made by José Luis Jiménez García, president of the Asociación Jerezana, member of the Real Academia San Dionisio de Ciencias, Artes y Letras, and assiduous promoter of the Jerez/sherry family of wines in Spain and worldwide.

The roll-call of Spanish academic conferences devoted to Poe over 2009 runs to four, hosted by, respectively, the University of Castilla-La Mancha (Albacete campus; 3-6 February), the University of Alcalá de Henares (21-23 May; organised by that university’s ‘Instituto Franklin’ for American studies), the University of Extremadura (Cáceres campus; 19-21 November), and the University of Valencia (2-4 December). Between them and including plenary lectures, papers, round-table contributions, seminars and workshops, the academic interventions numbered approximately 125, with some Poe scholars participating in two, three or even all four conferences. The working languages were, in all cases, English and Spanish. All four were fully international, with the participation from scholars based outside Spain averaging 25% and including distinguished American Poe experts and others based in France, Italy, Switzerland, Greece, Poland, Canada and elsewhere. The American scholars present included Scott Peeples and Barbara Cantalupo (Albacete), Djelal Kadir and Juana Celia Djelal (Alcalá), Richard Kopley (Cáceres) and Daniel Ogden (Alcalá and Valencia). Sadly, there was no Latin American representation at any of the conferences. Hispanic interest, however, was not neglected, with some 15% of the interventions having to do with aspects of Poe and the Spanish-speaking world. All the conferences also offered non-academic entertainment – readings, theatre, film, etc, and the last three were enlivened by two thrice-repeated

accompaniments: an amontillado wine-tasting backed up by an illustrated lecture on the wines of Jerez (the brainchild of the already mentioned José Luis Jiménez García); and an exhibition of Poe poems in calligraphic form and multiple languages conceived by the Paris-based artist William Wolkowski.

The range of Poe topics covered by the 125 interventions was vast, with virtually all possible aspects represented. In the paragraphs which follow, I shall mention some of the contributions that I personally consider to be of particular interest, without prejudice, obviously, to the rest and recalling that, while it is impossible to mention everything in so short a space, the details of the four conferences are available on their respective websites (see note below).

All facets of Poe's work were represented – the tales in their various genres (Gothic, detection, satire, utopia, etc), the poems, *Arthur Gordon Pym*, *Eureka*. Arguably under-represented were his critical and theoretical writings, and the same could be said of the history and characteristics of Poe criticism (Poe's poetics nonetheless formed the theme of the Valencia round-table contribution by the eminent classicist Jaime Siles). The biographical aspect was not neglected, featuring prominently in the plenaries by José Antonio Gurpegui (Albacete) and Félix Martín Gutiérrez (Alcalá), while Poe's pertinence to the contemporary world was eloquently evoked by Boris Vejdovsky in his Alcalá plenary. A welcome feature was the marked presence of intertextual and interdisciplinary aspects: interdisciplinarity was explicitly part of the Valencia rubric and was strongly emphasised in all the conferences.

Interdisciplinary relations between Poe's work and other fields featured strongly in contributions highlighting such diverse areas as: Poe and utopia (Daniel Ogden, plenary, Valencia), Poe and visual art (Barbara Cantalupo, plenary, Albacete), the artistic avant-garde in "Usher" (Borja Menéndez, paper, Alcalá; my own paper, Valencia), Poe and French classical music (Michel Duchesneau, plenary, Valencia), Poe and American popular music (my own plenary on Poe and Bob Dylan, Alcalá), Poe and the Greco-Roman world (Juana Celia Djelal, paper, Alcalá; Ana González-Rivas Fernández, papers, Albacete, Cáceres and Valencia), Poe's reception and translation in modern Greece (Eleftheria Tsirakoglou, Valencia), Poe and natural science (Fernando Ballesteros, round-table contribution, Valencia), and Poe and psychoanalysis (Ramiro Martín Hernández, paper, Cáceres; my own round-table contribution [in Spanish], Valencia). Some of the more strictly literary contributions also connected Poe's work to surprising subjects in the wider world, such as silence (Mary Carmen Branchadell, papers, Cáceres and Valencia) or ageing (Marta Miquel Baldellou, paper, Valencia).

The facet of intertextuality and influence stimulated contributions comparing Poe with a whole range of writers and literary movements, among them E.T.A. Hoffmann, Baudelaire, Ambrose Bierce, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, Paul Auster, Belgian fantastic literature and French farce. Especially noteworthy here were Fernando Galván's exemplary plenary on Poe and Dickens (Albacete) and Antonio Ballesteros' two revelatory papers on Poe and the Japanese writer Edogawa Rampo (Alcalá and Cáceres).

Intertextuality was also to the fore in the contributions on the interaction between Poe's work and Hispanic literature and culture. Two round tables (Albacete and Cáceres) were devoted to the subject. Papers on Poe and Spanish writers focused on Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (Ricardo Marín Ruiz, Albacete), Antonio Machado (Cristina Flores Moreno, Alcalá) and Emilia Pardo Bazán (María Carmen Marredo Torvisco, Cáceres), while the history of Poe's reception in Spain came under the microscope in papers on the role of Ramón Gómez de la Serna in

introducing Poe to a Spanish public (Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, Cáceres) and on Poe's image in the literary magazines of the Franco period (Eusebio Llácer Llorca and Nicolás Estévez, Alcalá). His presence in Latin American letters was analysed in papers relating him to Pablo Neruda (María Isabel López Martínez, Cáceres), Cortázar (José Antonio Sánchez Riaño, Cáceres) and Borges (my own paper, Albacete; Victoria Pineda González, Cáceres). Also analysed were aspects of the translation of Poe into Spanish (Isabel Tello Fons; Javier Ortíz García - papers, Valencia), and his influence on the cinema of Luis Buñuel (Pilar Pedraza, plenary, Valencia). We may add, too, Scott Peeples' fascinating plenary on "Poe and Pain" from Albacete, since it focused on "The Pit and the Pendulum", Poe's only story with a Spanish setting. All in all, it is clear that the right degree of effort was made to localise the conferences and relate Poe's work to the Hispanic culture of which the host nation is the historic epicentre.

The significance of the academic conferences, cultural events and publications that graced Spain's Poe bicentennial year is beyond doubt. These commemorations have had the gratifying effect of creating an embryonic Edgar Allan Poe community in Spain – indeed, given the strong international participation, a community at the same time not confined to Spain alone. At this point, it may be interesting to ask, why Spain today? The current 'Poe phenomenon' in that country is no atemporal given. If we take the fantastic aspect of Poe's work, we may note that the distinguished Spanish novelist José María Merino has argued that Spain has until recently been stony ground for the production or appreciation of fantastic literature. For Merino, the vogue of the fantastic which began tentatively in the later Franco years and has blossomed with democracy marks a rupture with the traditional Spanish preference, validated by the Catholic church and the associated social and political structures, for realism as the dominant genre, with the non-religious fantastic being subject to marginalisation. The trajectory of fantastic literature in Spain has, then, been very different from its history in Latin America, where it early on secured far greater acceptance (Merino 2009). Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, in his *Edgar Allan Poe Review* essay referred to above, suggests that the nineteenth-century tradition was that 'Spanish readers favoured a naturalistic style far from the excesses of Romanticism' (Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, 2009, 51). These historical analyses are borne out by the Llácer/Estévez paper from Alcalá mentioned above, which highlighted the decidedly lukewarm praise accorded Poe's work by the Franco-era literati. One factor which may help explain the recent Poe boom in Spain is the quality (and name value) of the Cortázar translation, which dates from 1956 but whose full impact came only after Franco's death in 1975: Cortázar is often referred to as the Hispanic Baudelaire, and his translations of Poe, a century later, have arguably had a similar galvanising effect, in both Latin America and Spain, to that of Baudelaire's in nineteenth-century France. These are complex literary phenomena which will clearly require further study. Meanwhile, the challenge is now on to find ways of building permanently on the gains of the bicentennial year, and to take Poe studies in Spain to fresh ground, in constant contact and interaction with the very best international scholarship.

NOTE

The websites of the four conferences are –

Albacete: <www.uclm.es/ab/humanidades/0809/poe.asp>;

Alcalá: <www.institutofranklin.net/en/conferences/past-conferences/poe-alive-century-anxiety-conference-2009>;

Cáceres: <<http://gexcall.unex.es/poe>>;

Valencia: <www.uv.es/copoe/organizacion.html>.

WORKS CITED

- Fernández, V. "Terrorífico Poe". *El País (Babelia)*, 19 December 2009, 11.
- Merino, José María. "Reflexiones sobre la literatura fantástica en España". In *Ensayos sobre ciencia ficción y literatura fantástica* (e-book), Actas del I Congreso Internacional de Literatura Fantástica y Ciencia Ficción, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, 6-9 May 2008, BEM On Line, 2009, 55-64. <www.congresoliteraturafanastica.com/pdf/EnsayosCFyLF/pdf>.
- Mircala, Jack. *Siniestras amadas: 22 Delirios necro-románticos de Edgar Allan Poe*. Madrid: Ediciones Sinsentido, 2009.
- Nexus. 2009.1: *In honour of Edgar Allan Poe*. On-line at: www.aedean.org
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Narración de Arthur Gordon Pym*. Trans. Julio Cortázar. Illus. Luis Scafati. Madrid: Libros del Zorro Rojo, 2009.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Cuentos completos: Edición comentada*. Trans. Julio Cortázar. Ed. Fernando Iwasaki and Jorge Volpi. Intr. Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes. Madrid: Páginas de Espuma, 2008.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Cuentos de imaginación y misterio*. Trans. Julio Cortázar. Illus. Harry Clarke. Madrid: Libros del Zorro Rojo, 2009.
- Rigal Aragón, Margarita. "Spanish 'Misreadings' of Poe's Life and Works at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century". *Edgar Allan Poe Review*, Vol. X, No. 2, Fall 2009, 36-48.
- Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan, Santiago. "Edgar A. Poe's Poetry in Spain in the 19th Century: An Issue for Connoisseurs". *Edgar Allan Poe Review*, Vol. X, No. 2, Fall 2009, 49-56.
- Rollason, Christopher. "The 'Character of Phantasm': Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and Jorge Luis Borges' 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'". *Atlantis*, Vol. 31, No. 1, June 2009, 9-22. Paper given at Edgar Allan Poe conference, University of Castilla-La Mancha (Albacete campus), 2009. On-line at: <www.atlantisjournal.org/ARCHIVE/31.1/2009Rollason.pdf>.
- Rollason, Christopher. "'Tell-Tale Signs' - Edgar Allan Poe and Bob Dylan: towards a model of intertextuality". *Atlantis*, Vol. 31, No. 2, December 2009, 41-56. Paper given at Edgar Allan Poe conference, University of Alcalá de Henares, 2009. On-line at: <www.atlantisjournal.org/ARCHIVE/31.2/2009Rollason.pdf>.
- Rollason, Christopher and González-Rivas Fernández, Ana. Review of Jack Mircala, *Siniestras amadas*. *Edgar Allan Poe Review*, Vol. X, No. 2, Fall 2009, 131-135.