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Reviews

G. R. THOMPSON, *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973; \$12.50.

DAVID HALLIBURTON, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973; \$15.00.

G. R. Thompson's study is at once more controversial and more conventional than Halliburton's *Phenomenological View*: it is debatable in its working hypotheses and conclusions, but orthodox in the general shape of its argument. *Poe's Fiction* advances a thesis, supports it with external evidence (chiefly from philosophy and literary history), and applies or demonstrates it in analyses of the tales, *Arthur Gordon Pym*, and *Eureka*. Thompson's annotations display a broad command of the literature on Poe. His discussions of German Romanticism, the evolution of Gothic fiction, and the developing significations of key critical terms ("Gothic," "grotesque," "arabesque") are deeply researched and lucidly presented. These sections enlarge our understanding of Poe's intellectual affinities and propose wholesome correctives to the equation in Poe scholarship of "grotesque" with "comic" and "arabesque" with "serious." Thompson's comments on unequivocally humorous tales and, up to a point, on the narrative strategies of many Gothic pieces are astute and instructive. A handsome book, written with vigor and conviction, *Poe's Fiction* nonetheless employs a critical logic and proceeds from a view of Poe that other readers may reject.

In its broadest outlines, Thompson's thesis holds that a skeptical, ironic, "ambivalent" vision of life and art informs Poe's writings. This prevailing attitude, rather than faulty conception or execution of the tales, accounts for the incongruities between and within them. The "paradoxical intertwining" of "the comic and the serious," "the ideal and the demonic," "the Gothic and the satiric," "hope and despair" is to be apprehended as a balance of "opposite forces" in "dynamic tension," resulting from Poe's conscious artistry and authorized by the aesthetics of post-Kantian German Romanticism. Although Poe was "obsessed" with the dark possibilities of the human mind, and although the fiction of terror afforded a ready vehicle for his preoccupations, "Poe was able to protect himself from . . . despair" by adopting a skeptical stance toward his

subjects and his fictive medium. Read with a keen eye to ironic signals, his works reveal elements of parody, hoax, satire, and “slyly insinuated mockery of both ourselves as readers and himself as writer”: the qualifying, even controlling, perspectives in “almost everything that Poe wrote.” Thompson declares both early and late in his study that Poe, as a Romantic Ironist, never ignored “the terrors of an ultimately incomprehensible, disconnected, absurd, or at best probably decaying and possibly malevolent universe” in which “the only attainable harmony . . . was a double vision, a double awareness, a double emotion, culminating in an ambivalent joy of stoical self-possession and intellectual control.” Accordingly, Poe’s Gothic works function in several dimensions, addressing different audiences or different sensibilities in a single reader.

Read naïvely, at face value, they record such supernatural phenomena as metempsychosis, the Doppelgänger, succubi. On the psychological level of meaning they dramatize the illusions suffered by an “emotionally self-indulgent, distraught, or mad” protagonist or narrator. For the intelligent reader, supernatural events are realistically explained by the experiencing character’s subjectivity, clues to which Poe plants in each Gothic tale. On yet a third level, the fictions are hoaxes or burlesques of Gothic fads, to be perceived as such by a select, discriminating audience. The ideal reader’s qualifications include familiarity with the sources Poe exploits and sensitivity to excesses, lapses of taste, failures of point of view, and other incongruities deliberately introduced by the author. Not the least of the satisfactions enjoyed by connoisseurs of Poe’s “deceptive tripleness” is their sense of advantage over the less perceptive: “If the unwary reader is deceived by the apparent verisimilitude of an apparently supernatural tale . . . so much the better. If the unwary reader is deceived by a satiric and mocking Gothic tale, he is properly served.” But the jest, according to Thompson, goes still further. Poe, like the German authors he most closely resembles (Tieck, Hoffmann, Jean Paul Richter), believes that the subjective human mind, including the artist’s own, can attain no certainties in an opaque universe. His “ambivalent joy” in imaginative or intellectual control is therefore attended by an “ambivalent pessimism.” Thompson’s essential Poe proves to be a melancholy hoaxter, a nineteenth-century black humorist, a specialist in the absurd: *caveat lector*. But the terms of Thompson’s thesis manage to cancel one another out. Can the ironic element in Poe’s fiction be at the same

time a defense against despair and the result of “a controlled, and therefore skeptical, philosophical despair”? If Poe believes in the illusoriness of all thought and sense perception, against what norm could he or his intended audience measure the folly or wisdom, the blindness or insight, the madness or sanity of a Roderick Usher, a C. Auguste Dupin, an unwary reader, a wary reader, or, for that matter, an Edgar Poe? Issuing from an absurdist world view, would not Poe’s implied psychological explanations of Gothic plots be quite as untenable as supernatural explanations? and would not the notions of “the occult,” “insanity,” and “hallucination” be drained of meaning in that philosophical context? Does not “nothingness,” the bleak central theme of “Usher” and *Eureka* in Thompson’s reading, become meaningless? “Void” signifies nothing, not “nothing.” Into Poe’s “ambivalence,” as into a wilderness of mirrors, both Poe and his critic disappear.

These difficulties are not merely theoretical; they inform Thompson’s explications of individual texts, obscuring the ontology of fictional “events,” fictional characters, and critical judgments. If we read “Usher” or “Ligeia” or “William Wilson” in light of the utter unreliability of the narrator, the grounds for interpretation disappear. If the return of the Lady Ligeia is but a fantasy in the narrator’s deranged, narcotized Romantic consciousness, then Ligeia before her death, Rowena, the sinister bridal chamber, and the very opium in whose “shackles” the narrator says he was “habitually fettered” lose their standing as data for critical contemplation. Every response to the tale, from simple credulity to symbolic and psychological decoding, is undermined. Thompson’s suggestion that the narrator of “Morella” might have murdered both his wife and his daughter—an acute perception of that gentleman’s symbolic deeds, though not of his physical acts—is vitiated by the possibility that the narrator’s whole experience is his own mad fabrication: the ladies themselves may only exist in his imaginings. Examining the “dramatic irony” of “William Wilson,” Thompson observes, “if the second Wilson is the product of the imagination of the first Wilson, the first Wilson’s behavior must seem to his companions, if not comic, very peculiar indeed.” But in the degree to which we see the second Wilson as a purely mental construct of the first, the “companions” are likewise deprived of objective status; nothing meaningful can be said or supposed about them.

Thompson’s procedure repeatedly obscures the distinction be-

tween art and actuality. In an excess of literalism, he implies that the events of a tale have an empirical reality that the narrator misrepresents: Wilson's companions must think him odd; the protagonist of "Ligeia" is a "guilt-ridden madman who has probably murdered at least one wife and has hallucinated a weird rationalization of his crimes"; "The Man of the Crowd" may be read as "the deluded romanticizing of the tipsy narrator, who perversely attributes a Romantic significance to an old drunk who wanders from bistro to bistro" (the fact, disregarded by Thompson, that neither man is shown to take a drink during the twenty-four-hour span of the action would presumably be of a piece with the narrator's other misrepresentations of actual life). Alternatively, Thompson implies that the events of Poe's tales lack even a provisional, hypothetical existence: we can be sure of nothing in "Usher" or "Ligeia" because their narrators are revealed as "completely untrustworthy" or "completely deranged." To conclude, as Thompson does, that our being sure of nothing is the very point, the *revelation*, of the tale is but to compound the confusion. I heartily concur with Thompson's suggestion that the effect of Poe's Gothicism depends on the reader's simultaneous assent to the "supernatural" and "psychological" possibilities of the tales. Poe's great technical accomplishment in these fictions is precisely the coexistence or suspension of those elements of meaning: the protagonist's mental state reciprocates with the phenomena he experiences. By putting excessive interpretive pressure on the psychological elements, however, Thompson denies the simultaneity of response, leaving at best a progression from "deceptive" supernatural effects to "realistic" clinical explanations and, lastly, to "ultimate" readings from a detached, godlike, ironical perspective. Each response in turn obliterates its predecessor.

Additional soft spots in *Poe's Fiction* can be mentioned briefly. The proposition that irony and skepticism dominate Poe's art deserves to be tested against Poe's verse, especially the early lyrics; but Thompson examines only "The Raven," the most talelike of the poems, and "The Haunted Palace," which he treats not as an independent production but as an organic part of "The Fall of the House of Usher." Inaccurate or strained paraphrase, an occasional distraction in Thompson's readings of the short stories, reaches unacceptable levels in his discussion of *Pym*, as a few extracts will illustrate to readers familiar with the novel: "the harmless sail on

the calm sea ironically turns into a nightmare: the boys drink too much, lose control of their boat, and are almost capsized in a sudden storm. Then a ship bears down on them, seemingly determined to cut them in two, but at the last instant turns to miss them. It sails away from them for a time" (ch. 1); Pym impersonates "a drunken sailor" and stows away in an "iron box" (ch. 2); "the good dog, as though sensing the hungry Pym's treacherous thoughts, attacks" (ch. 3). Surprisingly, "The Cask of Amontillado" and "Hop-Frog," probably the most ironic of all Poe's Gothic tales, are handled perfunctorily, as though their manifest verbal and dramatic ironies were less pertinent to an understanding of Poe's "Romantic Irony" than the supersubtle and often questionable ironies of other stories. Genetic evidence in support of ironist readings is not controlled by uniform standards: Poe's revisions of tales in the direction of greater ambiguity are usually held to demonstrate his refinement of the hoax, his selection of ever smaller audiences to share in his "secret" ironies; but a revision of "Mesmeric Revelation" is said to advance Poe's ironic purposes by diminishing ambiguity.

Also open to question is the presumption of satirical or burlesque intent where Poe probably (or even demonstrably) borrowed material for a tale from another writer without acknowledgment. Following Richard Benton, Thompson interprets "The Assignment" as a lampoon, chiefly because of the parallel between Byron and Tom Moore on the one hand and the unnamed protagonist and narrator of the story on the other. Similarly, I question Thompson's inference—as Halliburton questions Clark Griffith's—that when Poe employs in apparently serious tales (e.g., "Ligeia") materials he had already used or would soon use in his own unambiguously humorous tales (e.g., "The Man That Was Used Up"), he betrays an ironical intent in the former. Might such echoings not as well constitute evidence of a serious ("obsessive"?) intent in the humorous tales? Might they not signify both? Or, finally, might they indicate nothing in particular, the humorous tale having its own intention, distinct from that of the serious tale, and the echoing of phrases and situations being referable merely to the fact that Poe wrote both works?

En route to his conclusions about many of the stories, Thompson offers insights about style, point of view, and structure that can be appreciated independently of their critical context, and brought to bear upon other conceptions of the tales than those which govern

Poe's Fiction. The recurrence in "Metzengerstein" of terms incorporating the syllable *equ* and so punning upon the central horse symbol; the placement of the narrator's bed chamber directly above the dungeon in which Madeline Usher is interred; the lurking homicidal motif in "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains"; and the relationship in "The Oval Portrait" between the arabesque picture frame and the framing narrative—these are but four of Thompson's many luminous perceptions. While, in the words of the jacket copy, "not every reader will agree with Thompson's full thesis," *Poe's Fiction* is a provocative book, requiring on the reader's part the sort of close and wary attention that Thompson brings to his subject.



Midway through *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View*, David Halliburton fronts the problem of ironist readings. Granted that "comic" and "ironic" may denote less complex qualities for Halliburton than for Thompson, his remarks are nevertheless salutary:

There is often . . . a risk in taking Poe too seriously, a risk that critics such as Griffith [and of course Thompson] have sought to avoid by following up all possible ironic leads. But there are risks in the other direction as well. The hunt for concealed ironic messages has a way of leading the critic indefatigably on—much like the hunt for concealed sex. Raise the suspicion that the author is pulling your leg, and it becomes difficult to take him seriously at any time. No reader wants to seem a fool by missing the joke; moreover, conventional wisdom holds that the true meaning of the text is often, if not the reverse of what it appears, at the very least hidden or disguised. . . . The temptation today is to . . . infer comic intention where it does not in fact exist.

Such polemical moments are infrequent in Halliburton's study. He knows what labors have been performed in the Poe vineyard but is less immediately concerned than Thompson with the other toilers, their tools, or their harvests. He cites his predecessors conscientiously—then goes his own way about the reading of Poe texts. If literary criticism is a kind of missionary activity, Halliburton would win converts by the force of personal example rather than by arguments, formal proofs, or the testimony of witnesses. The example proves extraordinarily interesting: Halliburton's achievement as an interpreter seems to me the best thing that has happened

in Poe scholarship since the work of Davidson, Patrick Quinn, and Wilbur in the late 1950's. His 150 pages on Poe's verse comprise, to my mind, the finest published treatment of the poems. His discussions of the major fiction and *Eureka* are immensely stimulating. Distinguishing Halliburton's approach is a degree of sensitivity and what I might call an imaginative generosity which has rarely been bestowed on Poe's works.

Halliburton maintains that he is "more concerned with the reading of texts than with the illustration of method," but the procedures and assumptions of phenomenological criticism, to which he devotes an early chapter, seem particularly suitable to Poe. Like the New Critic and unlike biographical, historical, archetypal, and source-and-influence critics, the phenomenological reader seeks "to meet the text, and to stick with it." But while the method of New Criticism intrudes a substantial distance between the audience and the work, the phenomenologist would unabashedly reduce distance, trying "to put aside, for a time at least, considerations of value, personal taste, or ideology" and to assume, in Boris Tomashevsky's words, an "innocent" responsiveness to "the signs the author gives." Halliburton's willingness to yield to the written word ("to get hold of the text the interpreter must first, in a sense, let go") accords with the dominant strain in Poe's public statements about the artistic transaction—with his dynamic, affective, audience-oriented aesthetic. Hence Halliburton's desire to experience the text as a "process" in which the reader is intimately involved, not as an artifact held at arm's length. Frequently he uses the first person singular while articulating his response to a tale or poem, in a speculative but far from impressionistic type of paraphrase: "I am attempting to put myself in a situation that the text presents. . . . When I interpret I identify with this character [the persona or "discrete consciousness within the work"], not in order to burden him with my consciousness, but to assume the weight of his." Adopting the persona's perspective as the ground of interpretation, and taking that perspective with good faith in the absence of strong comic signals, Halliburton is Thompson's polar opposite as a reader of Poe.

The ideal of the "innocent" response is necessarily, and fortunately, only provisional. Halliburton's interest in Poe derives partly from the challenge posed by generalizations about Poe's obscurity and deficiency of meaning. Like Thompson, he brings to his task a

store of philosophical knowledge, in this case the writings of C. S. Peirce, the existentialists, and the phenomenologists. Again like Thompson, he compares Poe texts to works by English, continental, and other American authors; he studies earlier and later versions of individual pieces; and he refers to Poe's critical writings when "they can shed some light" on imaginative texts. He groups tales and poems according to dominant situations or subjects, such as women, landscapes, victimization, detection. Often with great virtuosity, he compares Poe's works to one another, both within and between genres. And he attempts to demonstrate that "Poe's imaginative writings constitute an overarching unity or whole," a system whose

recurring features . . . include power struggles between beings over who shall survive and on what terms; confrontations between an isolated individual and another human being, or between an individual and the material world, or, in cases where he externalizes something that reacts against him, between an individual and himself; a fascination with states or conditions of being; a concern with the way phenomena in the universe fit within one another, as container and contained; polarities and reversals, whereby one phenomenon calls into appearance its dialectical "counterpart" . . . ; the continuity of consciousness and identity; the reciprocity of body and soul; the need for plenitude and affirmation; the indestructibility of being; and the supremacy of God.

The identification of a Poe "system" strikes one as a happy consequence, an earned result, of Halliburton's inquiry, rather than a predetermined goal. Similarly, his mode of analysis consists more in a *disposition* toward the texts than in a system of fixed critical terms and procedures. What interests him centrally is the psychology of characterization and its complement, the rhetoric by which a persona expresses and shares his sense of reality. The critic's skill in tracking a character's apprehension of time, space, power, and identity has no parallel, I believe, in the literature on Poe. Equally unprecedented is his attention to the revelatory grammar, syntax, and sequence of the persona's statements; if space permitted I would quote his remarks on the beginning of "Berenice" as an instance of the rewards of such attention.

In verbalizing the subtle movements and relationships in Poe's verse and fiction, Halliburton tends to avoid the vocabulary of New Criticism. The language he elects is a language of paradoxes, of

coinages and hyphenated constructions (he cites Kenneth Burke, Sartre, and Heidegger among his forerunners in this practice), of approximations, analogies, and conditionals. We read, for example, that in “Annabel Lee” “there is *something like* a balance between the situation of the first-person and the ascendancy of the other. . . . one experiences . . . *a kind of* mutuality of being, *as if* vital power, for once, *were capable of being* balanced . . .” (italics mine); “the family in Poe is curiously everything and nothing”; “the final naming [of “Usher”] becomes a parodic Word within the Word, a presence of the absolute turned inward on itself, a force transforming its presence into its own absence”; “the vortex . . . is the most equivocal of motions. It is a descent that resists descent, a movement that twists away from itself only to be twisted back to itself *by itself*.” This order of expression can sink into a turgid obscurity: “The water of the tarn—the medium between the *now* of present consciousness and the *then* of the gulf beyond—is opacity, prevention, an expanse of matter that, merging the properties of the wall and the mirror, keeps the world in its place by throwing its own image back upon it. The mirror-water-wall circumscribes and by circumscribing perfects, making the scene a kind of infinity to itself, which threatens to absorb the being of any human actor who comes within its sphere.” But more often Halliburton’s idiom, for all its oddity, names a Poe situation or effect with striking precision. Of the narrator’s thinking in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” for instance, he writes, “The process is a kind of one-sided reciprocity in which the victimizer feeds upon the terror he arouses, turning the object of his torture into the object with which he tortures himself.”

Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View has its weaknesses of both substance and strategy. A misreading mars the analysis of “The Pit and the Pendulum”: Halliburton reports that after identifying the pendulum as the “source of imminent death,” the narrator-victim reinterprets it, “more accurately” and consistent with the victimizers’ scheme, as “the means of immediate release,” for “the blade severs his bonds.” (On the contrary, the protagonist’s hope for this eventuality is frustrated; the inquisitors have wound the strap around his body “in all directions—*save in the path of the destroying crescent*,” and he frees himself by tempting the rats to gnaw through his bonds.) The text of “The Masque of the Red Death” does not justify Halliburton’s assertion that Prince Prospero

is killed by falling on the point of his own "upturned" dagger: this false, or at least forced, paraphrase obscures the symbolic point and the major irony of the tale, namely that the Red Death claims Prospero and his thousand friends in their impregnable sanctuary. Whether one sees the personified Red Death as a party-crasher from outside the walls or as an unacknowledged product of the impresario-prince's own perverse, perfervid creativity, the Red Death is the agency of Prospero's demise. Poe underlines this meaning as he describes the confrontation with the mummer in the eastern chamber: Prospero is "convulsed" with a shudder, then "his brow reddened[s] with rage." Altogether too little attention is given the detective tales and the comical-satirical stories. Halliburton's "Methodological Introduction," with its heavy freight of quotations, is the most pedestrian part of the book; his phenomenological assumptions come to life only when he engages the texts. It is by no means obvious to me that the method will yield interesting results if applied to a writer of highly contrived distances—a Henry Fielding or a Henry James. What is certain is that Halliburton possesses a large talent for criticism, and that he has given us a superb interpretation of Poe's tell-tale art.

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VASANT A. SHAHANE, *Rudyard Kipling: Activist and Artist*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973; \$6.95.

Vasant A. Shahane, senior professor of English at Osmania University in Hyderabad, India, has given us, in *Rudyard Kipling: Activist and Artist*, another of those all-too-brief, elementary "life and works" of Rudyard Kipling of which the critic himself, in his introduction, recognizes the redundancy. Even had the book been well done there would not have been much excuse for doing it, since so many "introductions to Kipling" are already available. And the job has really not been done well.

So simple a matter as researching previous Kipling criticism, for example, has led Professor Shahane into a number of errors. At one point, in trying to establish an accurate chronology of Kipling studies, he states baldly that "in the twenty-five years following the death of Rudyard Kipling . . . not a single sustained piece of criti-