Biography, Intentionality, and Interpretation: Poe and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

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I wanted to contribute to this forum because my recent scholarship has taken a decidedly biographical turn, culminating in my book *The Man of the Crowd: Edgar Allan Poe and the City*. Writing this book has made me appreciate the textuality of biography, and even more, the intertextuality of biographical and literary works. Not coincidentally, over the past few years I’ve been raising more questions about biography and interpretation with my students, especially when teaching my department’s introduction-to-the-major course. In that course, students immediately appreciate the “intentional fallacy” as a general principle, but the plot thickens as we consider specific examples, especially interpretations that depend on biography but not necessarily on authorial intention. In their own research, they quickly discover how difficult it is to resist searching for clues to textual puzzles in biography. Which leads them—as it has led me—to the question of whether, or when, that search should be resisted. Many of our students are creative writers themselves, so they recognize both the inevitability of lived experience expressing itself through poetry and fiction and the trap of having your friends and relatives assume that you’re always writing about yourself.

In some ways, Poe might seem to be a special case when it comes to biographical interpretation. The outlines of his life story are well known; moreover, they’ve been enhanced by about 170 years of mythologizing—which, by the way, has always been good for the business of Poe scholarship. Poe’s fame and readers’ curiosity about his life
also help in the classroom, where students generally show up primed to learn more about the writer who seems to personify all things gothic. Of course, these advantages also present challenges: Poe scholars love to trade complaints about popular misconceptions (drugs, insanity, necrophilia) that students and other casual Poe fans confront them with. To get a sense of the pervasive conflation of Poe with his characters, check out any illustration of “The Raven,” dating back to Édouard Manet, and you’ll see a haunted lover who looks a lot like the poet himself. It may be impossible to resist the melding of Poe with his creations. A couple of years ago, when I wrote a script for a five-minute TED-Ed lesson “Why Should You Read Edgar Allan Poe?” I needed a hook, and there it was: “A high forehead topped by disheveled black hair, a sickly pallor, and a look of deep intelligence and deeper exhaustion in his dark, sunken eyes. Edgar Allan Poe’s image is not just instantly recognizable—it’s perfectly suited to his reputation.”¹ It’s impossible to read Poe without some awareness of that reputation—both his physical image and his reputation are part of the “Poe canon.”

But while Poe comes with his own unique biographical baggage, the situation Poe scholars find themselves in when it comes to the use of biography is not so exceptional. Just within the American canon, similar layers of myth surround Dickinson, Thoreau, Twain, Hemingway, Kerouac, Plath, and others. Moreover, writers don’t have to have their face on a Barnes and Noble bag for their lived experience, once known, to play an outsized role in the understanding of their work. Over half a century after Barthes confirmed “the death of the author,” authorship—not just as an organizing principle for a body of work, but also as a lens for interpreting that work—has not stayed buried.

One of the standard components of our intro-to-the-major course is a selection of critical essays reflecting various approaches to a single text, usually a short novel or play: I chose a handful of Poe stories and a range of critical essays on those stories, presented in roughly chronological order. This past spring, we started with Darrel Abel’s “A Key to the House of Usher” (1949), a meticulous analysis of the story’s symbolism written implicitly in response to Brooks and Warren’s dismissive comments on “Usher” in Understanding Fiction.² Abel avoids referring to Poe biography; his focus is strictly on Poe’s artistic decisions. From there, we proceeded to Marie Bonaparte’s chapter on “The Black Cat” (1933; trans. 1949): Bonaparte, whose book on Poe is often cited as the epitome of Freudian literary criticism, is interested in the tale only to the extent that it reveals clues to Poe’s unconscious.³ My students
respected Abel’s exegesis but sensed that something was missing from his clinical approach—specifically, Poe. Bonaparte’s method, clinical in its own way, predictably raised their suspicions; in fact, their suspicions were off the charts. As an unabashed Bonaparte fan, I pointed to the insights she provides into “The Black Cat” as she psychoanalyzes Poe, but the connection between Pluto’s bite and Poe’s fear of vagina dentata failed to resonate. Students just seemed relieved to hear that no one writes like either Abel or Bonaparte anymore.

But if Abel’s Poe porridge was too cold and Bonaparte’s too hot, what approach did my students find just right? I realize that question oversimplifies even my oversimplified survey of Poe criticism, but I find it useful; and the answer is, students responded more favorably to essays that positioned Poe in mid-nineteenth-century culture but did not remain focused on his lived experience or unconscious motives. In other words, for my students at least, biography might be the key that unlocks a larger interpretation but not the main focus of the interpretation. As an example of new historicist criticism, we read Elise Lemire’s essay on 1840s Philadelphia race riots and amalgamation discourse in relation to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Lemire points to the prevalence of African American barbers in Poe’s Philadelphia, as well as white anxiety about a rising Black middle class (represented by barbers) and violent reactions to the prospect of sexual race mixing. Because the popular pseudo-scientific connection between Africans and apes was well established by the 1840s, the figure of a razor-wielding orangutan killing two white women had potent racist overtones. My students recognized that biography matters in readings like this one, but mainly in placing Poe at the scene of a larger cultural “crime” of racist logic: Poe’s life in Philadelphia in the early 1840s and his attitudes on race lead to Lemire’s larger claims, but no one would call her essay “biographical.” Still, it was clear that for some students, the revelation that Poe was himself racist was the biggest takeaway. In response, I said something to the effect of, Yes, he was, but that’s not really the point of Lemire’s essay. And we proceeded to talk more in terms of the ape-as-Black-male-predator trope without reference to Poe. Looking back, I wish I had encouraged more discussion about acknowledging, contextualizing, and generally processing Poe’s racism—but more on that in a moment.

Lemire’s article was also helpful to me in writing my recent book, which is a biographical study intended primarily for a nonacademic audience. “Biographical study” sounds old fashioned, but I use that term
to distinguish the book from “biography,” because while it moves chronologically through Poe’s life, it’s largely limited to a couple of closely related aspects of that life—the cities Poe lived in and his intra- and intercity movements. The biggest challenge in writing the book was the tension between, on one hand, not wanting to read too much of that urban, itinerant biography into Poe’s work, as if to claim to have discovered the key to the house of Poe; and on the other, not wanting to write a dull, dry book that no one would want to read. Connections between life and writing are the fuel of literary biography, and that’s even more the case, I suspect, with a biographical study such as mine. So while feeling that tension, I also felt liberated to think in terms of interplay among literary texts, biography, and larger cultural phenomena of Poe’s time—they mattered more or less equally to me.

Because I was focusing on Poe’s urban experience and trying not to shy away from related issues surrounding race and slavery, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” was a key text. I relied mainly on Lemire’s essay, but this forum topic has encouraged me to reconsider a cluster of articles on Poe, racism, and “Rue Morgue,” and I’ve found them helpful in thinking about how we typically approach issues of biography and intentionality. Prior to Nancy Harrowitz’s 1997 essay “Criminality and Poe’s Orangutan: The Question of Race in Detection,” there was little if any published commentary on the story’s racist implications, but there had been considerable controversy surrounding Poe’s racism and presumed approval of slavery. That controversy became particularly heated in the early 1990s, as scholars debated whether Poe had written a certain proslavery book review while editing the Southern Literary Messenger. Poe didn’t write the review, but it was still impossible to argue that he opposed slavery or that he was not personally racist; at best, one could claim that he was not unusually racist for a white man raised in Richmond, Virginia, in the early nineteenth century. As critics increasingly reconsidered the racist caricatures in “The Gold-Bug” and “A Predicament,” the insurrections in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and “Hop-Frog,” and, eventually, the racial subtexts of “Ligeia,” “The Black Cat,” and “Rue Morgue,” it was difficult if not impossible to bracket off Poe’s personal beliefs about race and slavery, to the extent that they could be known.

Without delving into Poe biography at all, Harrowitz concluded that “Poe’s specific choice of an orangutan is a surrogate, an imitation of those all-too-human ‘foreign groups’ who, because they live among us, are potentially more threatening than the unrestrained orangutan.” That’s about as close to a personal indictment of Poe as she comes. In
an essay that appears alongside Lemire’s in the landmark 2001 collection *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, Lindon Barrett addresses the question of whether Poe’s opinions regarding race are discernible and whether they matter. They are discernible, he argues, because

the very contours of the culture in which Poe finds himself and the terms of subjection open to him are defined by highly consequential notions of race and racial blackness, influences virtually impossible to escape, and from which escape would be marked, no doubt, by unequivocal announcements of repudiation on Poe’s part—of which there are none. In the same way that, without explicit evidence to prove otherwise, one must assume that Poe is a native speaker of English given the culture he lived in, Poe necessarily refracts notions of racial hierarchy in which racial whiteness is privileged extraordinarily over racial blackness.\(^8\)

So Poe was probably about as racist as the next white guy, but what matters are the culture’s “notions of racial hierarchy,” which are inevitably reflected in Poe’s work.

And with some exceptions, that seemed to be the prevailing view by the early 2000s. New historicist critics scrutinized the long-overlooked racial dimensions of Poe’s work, finding some endorsements of racist ideology (as in “Rue Morgue”) and some deconstructions of racist ideology (as in some readings of *Pym*). And yet, while Poe traditionalists may have seen this trend as an attempt to “out” Poe as racist, these new readings were rarely so personal as that—if anything, critics tried to avoid fixating on what Poe believed or how we should feel about him as a human being.

Lemire, for instance, seems relatively uninterested in the biographical Poe. She assumes—quite reasonably—that the racist associations linking the razor-wielding ape to Black men as violent sexual predators were intended by him:

*Poe also insists* that the reader draw comparisons between blacks and simians, even as *he does not explicitly evoke* the imagined similarity in his list from Cuvier of the characteristics of orangutans. And by making a barbering razor the chief murder weapon, *Poe draws on* perceived similarities precisely to invoke the frightening and dangerous possibility of black upward mobility that black barbering signaled for so many whites.\(^9\)
What Lemire doesn’t do—and here she is consistent with Barrett and Harrowitz—is personalize Poe’s decisions—his motives might be described as cultural. She can discern the racism that informs his intention, but she writes about it as symptomatic of the racist ideology that surrounded “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” not as symptomatic of Poe’s beliefs.

Two other essays on “Rue Morgue,” both published a few years after *Romancing the Shadow*, suggest a slightly different approach—significantly, both concern teaching the story. In an essay for the MLA’s *Approaches to Teaching Poe’s Prose and Poetry*, Leonard Cassuto describes guiding students toward a recognition that the orangutan “stands as a fraught symbol of sexually charged racial anxiety”; his method combines textual analysis, reference to scholarship, a little history, and, yes, biographical information about Poe, specifically his “professional movement across the Mason-Dixon Line to the North,” which “glosses the main action of my classroom mystery about ‘Rue Morgue.’” Cassuto reports that once students put the clues together and solve the “mystery,” some of them have trouble accepting Poe’s racism. He usefully complicates the simple “Poe was racist” payoff by guiding them through an antislavery reading of “The Black Cat” (implicit condemnation of “perverse white-on-Black violence”). But whether the analysis reflects well or badly on Poe, in the classroom (at least in Cassuto’s), the emphasis seems to lie more on the role of his personal disposition and motivations.

In his essay “The Ourang-Outang Situation,” Ed White analyzes precisely that classroom issue. As in Cassuto’s classroom, in White’s, the lesson leads inevitably to race—in his reading, the orangutan’s violence suggests slave insurrection. But White, like Cassuto, insists that authorial agency play a role in the discussion. White’s model, borrowed from Sartre’s description of “situation,” also accounts for context and reader response, but he seems particularly concerned that we not leave authorial intention out of the negotiation:

The [pre-new-historicist] “death of the author” announced a repudiation of the belief in the brilliant creative genius who constructed whole worlds from her imagination. By contrast, the reconstructed author has become more of a site or place-holder through which discourses circulate, and it matters little if we speak of “Poe,” “Dupin,” or “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” for these sites largely overlap. Again, we need a mediating position from
which to think about authors engaged in the praxis of their literary work. We needn't elevate the author to some special status to grant her the same (qualified) agency that we observe outside literature.¹²

Clearly, these essays on “Rue Morgue” suggest a difference in the way we talk about Poe, apes, race, and murder in the classroom as opposed to the way we write about them in scholarly books and journals. But while White focuses on teaching the story, the implication of his call for a more “situational” approach applies to nonpedagogical scholarship as well. Otherwise, it would seem as if we were just indulging students’ appetite for biography even though we know that it’s unhealthy (or at least unprofessional).

I agree with White that authorial agency, and biography in general, have a role to play not only in the classroom but also (if I’m reading him correctly) in published discourse among literary scholars. It’s important that we regard author biography neither as the final arbiter of interpretation—the evidence that settles the bet—nor as a simple way to confirm the author’s complicity with hegemonic discourse (and nothing more). Rather, we might try to keep in mind that biography is a text—or really, a messy collection of texts—that are part of the intertextual network that enables our understanding of (in this case) “Poe,” detective fiction, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” and, not least, racism. What we read about Poe’s lived experience tells us something about how to read “Rue Morgue,” which tells us something about how to read “race” in nineteenth- or indeed twenty-first-century American culture. Or our understanding of racism, informed not only by “Rue Morgue” but by countless other texts that deploy similar tropes, tells us something about how to read “Poe.” I believe this more fluid approach to biography, intentionality, and interpretation would make for more meaningful discussions both inside and outside the classroom.

Notes


