

The Marketing of Edgar Allan Poe

Jonathan H. Hartmann

STUDIES IN AMERICAN POPULAR
HISTORY AND CULTURE

Edited by
Jerome Nadelhaft
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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First published 2008
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Hartmann, Jonathan, 1966–

The marketing of Edgar Allan Poe / by Jonathan H. Hartmann.

p. cm. — (Studies in American popular history and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-415-96354-1

1. Poe, Edgar Allan, 1809–1849—Authorship. 2. Literature publishing—United States—History—19th century. 3. Authors and readers—United States—History—19th century. 4. Authorship—Economic aspects—United States—History—19th century. 5. Politics and literature—United States—History—19th century. 6. Popular literature—United States—History and criticism. I. Title.

PS2633.H37 2008

818'.309—dc22

2007044026

ISBN 0-203-92810-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-96354-0 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-92810-5 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-96354-1 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-92810-3 (ebk)

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
<i>Chapter One</i>	
The Problem of Poe's Appeal: Intellectual and Market Background	1
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Poe's Composite Autobiography	14
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
The Recycling of Critical Authority: Lessons from Coleridge and Hazlitt	37
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
The Debunking Work of Poe's light gothic Tales	59
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
The Importance of Ambiguity: Unreliable Narration and the Marketing of Sensation	82
Afterword	101
Notes	103
Bibliography	119
Index	131

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank David Reynolds for his expertise on both early American periodicals and contemporary English usage. I am indebted to David Richter for his patient and rigorous responses to my drafts. Finally, this book would not have been possible without the tireless optimism of Marc Dolan.

Thanks to Scott Adkins and the Brooklyn Writers Space for finding me a desk and to the Humanities and Social Science division of the New York Public Library.

Chapter One

The Problem of Poe's Appeal

Intellectual and Market Background

I. INTRODUCTION

As a boy, Edgar Allan Poe read British periodical tales and criticism in the Richmond, Virginia household of his foster father, merchant John Allan. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817–32), one of the most widely read periodicals in the Jacksonian United States, was the name-brand monthly that would provide important models for Poe's prose journalism. One of Poe's earliest published tales, "Loss of Breath: A TALE NEITHER IN NOR OUT OF BLACKWOOD," (1832) suggests his work's straddling the Atlantic Ocean in the manner of the influential magazine. My book will explain the responses to literary authority, as represented by *Blackwood's*, that are articulated in Poe's tales and criticism of 1831–49. While the tales were designed to be readily reprinted in Britain and the United States, the criticism primarily targeted American audiences.¹ This initial chapter will describe the economic conditions for Poe's prose career.

Poe's enduring appeal begs the question of the purposes and the implied audiences for Poe's hoaxing and ironic prose. A Romantic and psychologically-motivated school of thought typified by G.K. Thompson's *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (1973) holds that Poe's tales and criticism abound in two kinds of what he terms Romantic Irony: Poe may have intended not only to comment on the absurdity of life but also to poke fun at various audiences.² More recent studies, especially Terence Whalen's *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (1999) and Meredith McGill's *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (2003) have examined the economic motivation of Poe's writing. Whalen's new historicist approach sees Poe as unsuccessful in his quest to reach a readership that would combine the purchasing power of the multitude with the discernment of intellectual elites (18). McGill's nuanced application of book history reports that Poe's journalistic sleight-of-hand successfully

garnered the attention of American editors and audiences within a transatlantic reprint culture.

This book pursues a tangent from Whalen and McGill by reading both the well-known and the less canonical essays and tales with an eye to literary publicity. I show how the works themselves—that is, Poe’s articles as published in periodical format—may have affected each other’s reception. Writing in a culture marked by widespread reprinting of periodical and book-length texts that nevertheless was strongly influenced by Romantic ideology, Poe readied his articles for the broadest possible audience.³ To get his work read and make a living, he simultaneously attacked Romantic notions of literary and rhetorical authority and engaged in literary name-dropping. Poe’s bold self-promotion in his first essay “Letter to B” (1831/6) and “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846) may have struck a chord with readers eager for active engagement with journalistic prose.

II. CONDITIONS OF THE TRANSATLANTIC LITERARY MARKETPLACE

A. Romanticism Under Review

Poe’s prose career (1831–49) took place during the intersection of three historical movements. First, Poe wrote in what Friedrich Schlegel and William Hazlitt had referred to as the Critical Age, when witty commentary was supplanting fixed ideas of literary originality. As Poe remarked in an 1841 letter to Washington Irving, “the brief, the terse, the condensed, and the easily circulated will take the place of the diffuse, the ponderous, and the inaccessible.”⁴ Second, literary Romanticism, translated to the United States by individual scholars and the ubiquitous British periodical press, provided readers with a reassuring set of ideals during this transition to modernity. Finally, however, the transatlantic literary marketplace governed literary production with the arrival of factory-style printing in the United States, an enormous market for English-language literature, during the 1830s.⁵

The Romantic notion of a unitary genius as originator of a literary text, which had flourished from 1750 in Europe, functioned less as an inspiration for Poe than as a selling point for his tales and criticism. Despite British Romanticism’s decline towards 1830, it served as a convenient foil for Poe’s literary, aesthetic, and professional aims. During the Romantic Age, literary and art criticism had become more prominent and more complex. Romanticism emphasized not only the unique perspective of the writer caught up in artistic creation but also that of the critic helping to complete the artwork with an inspired written response to it.⁶ This movement called into question any absolute aesthetic judgment while celebrating the artist’s

capacity to understand his medium. For example, Friedrich Schlegel held that "a critical sketch is a critical work of art."⁷ Poe took this remark as justification for sarcastic and ironic reviewing; in "Letter to B," he exhibited these tendencies by alternately mimicking and guffawing at Romantic-era notions of author and critic.

Writing for increasingly fast-moving readers who required easily digestible entertainment, Poe liked nothing better than to contrast a writer's lofty intentions with his less-than satisfying results.⁸ One way Poe savaged works under review was by adopting the admonishing "This will never do" tone of the British quarterly book reviews in his criticism.⁹ Unsatisfying verse and imperfect scholarship are held up for contempt. This is true from his first essay "Letter to B" with specific reference to both the Lake School of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the American transcendentalists Emerson and Fuller.

Another technique Poe made use of in reviewing both other writers and his own works was hyperbole. Poe's renditions of his own life are idealized in his reportage and satirical in the tales. For example, while Poe's two biographies provided for the newspapers describe him as younger, more athletic, and more of a world traveler than he was, his fictional accounts are more pointed: "The Literary Life" (1844) describes the Machiavellian business of periodical editing, while "A Reviewer Reviewed" presents fictitious examples of very real drawbacks to Poe's critical method.

By the time Poe published "Metzengerstein," his first tale, in January 1832, the essay, the novel, and the short story had risen in status, each at the approximate time of its popularization by the periodical press.¹⁰ At the height of British and American Romanticism, George Gordon Lord Byron, William Hazlitt, and Ralph Waldo Emerson would offer readers their work as the merging of themselves not only with the living world around them but also with others' works which they had openly appropriated. Such an idea is consistent with Poe's formula for literary generativity:

Novel conceptions are merely unusual combinations. The mind of man can imagine nothing which does not exist:—if it could, it would create not only ideally, but substantially—as do the thoughts of God (*ER* 8, 224).

Here Poe suggests that our way of viewing the world around us determines the slight alteration our inventions may make to prior and simultaneous productions. This perspective on artistic creation represents a revision of

earlier models grounded in authors' relations to their acknowledged literary precursors.

B. American Limitations and Possibilities

Within Poe's lifetime—from 1810 to 1820 in Britain and by the 1840s in the U.S.—three factors helped make authorship a coming profession: industrial innovations made reading less expensive, purchasing power expanded within the population as a whole, and publishers targeted an ever-broader spectrum of readers. Poe and his American contemporaries were bound to the transatlantic literary marketplace by several factors. First, fiction had taken poetry's place as literary sales leader by the beginning of the 19th Century in Britain and by approximately 1820 in the United States.¹¹ Second, periodicals originating in Scotland and England were the dominant mode of distribution and publicity for poetry, fiction and especially the essay. With the establishment of the novel as the prime literary commodity, literary reviewing became a promotional instrument for publishers and an instrument of political parties.¹² Hence, while American books themselves rarely achieved financial success in the U.S. and in Britain during Poe's lifetime, the professional mechanisms necessary for them to do so were gaining momentum.¹³

Nineteenth-Century American readers devoured British novels. Interestingly, however, American publishers enjoyed more regular profits during the 1820s, when distribution and publication were relatively primitive, than during the 1830s or 1840s. One early success was Washington Irving's seven-part *Sketch Book*: he was paid fully 40% of the profits from the sale of approximately 5,000 copies. It is estimated that Irving made more than ten thousand dollars from the sale of his books during a two-year period. Irving assumed considerable risk, however, by acting as his own publisher. During this period, book publishers' efforts were hampered by overlapping claims to regional distribution rights.¹⁴

An early surge in U.S. literary production coincided with its tremendous westward expansion for twelve years immediately following the opening of the Erie Canal (1825). Literary publishing continued unabated during the economic crisis of 1837–41. During the 1820s and 30s, the American institution of authorship changed from a pastime for the wealthy to a way writers could strive for, if not often achieve, a living. Irving and James Fenimore Cooper were the first U.S. authors to earn their keep by writing fiction.¹⁵ During the 1830s, Hawthorne and Emerson followed Irving and Cooper along this path. As Poe was fond of remarking, however, these authors had means of support besides their publication. Before 1860, the bulk of American writers were unable to earn a living from the U.S. market alone.¹⁶

In 1820, practical literature dominated publishers' catalogues. In the absence of a reliable transportation network, the publishing of American poetry, essays, and fiction would have been risky ventures. Individual authors and publishers, however, would sometimes set up specialized presses when they encountered sufficient regional demand for individual works or genres. For example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published popular textbooks in Portland, Maine.¹⁷ Until 1830, United States publisher-book-sellers were spread out among regional centers such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Richmond. The expansion of canals and railroads during the 1830s and 40s helped start a trend towards national distribution based in New York, quite a feat in a nation segmented into tiny regional markets used to doing without new books during the coldest months of the year.¹⁸

Bookselling in the American South, which was less well served by railroads than the North or the West, catered to the wealthy. As the publishers Lea and Blanchard observed in 1848, it required an "organized band of Yankees" to sell books in that region.¹⁹ Parson Weems, who peddled books for Matthew Carey starting in 1794, worked year-round to survey readers and assemble carefully chosen book packets to be sold to local booksellers for a predetermined figure.²⁰ The four-year economic slump that spanned the creatively productive middle years of Poe's prose career was hard on publishers selling to the South and West where book buyers were least likely to have cash on hand.²¹

Several factors combined to deprive American authors and publishers of the widest possible circulation. First, American manufacturing costs were high relative to those in Britain since American printers were only beginning, by the 1830s, to gear up for large-scale production. Second, because the U.S. was much larger than the British Isles and because its railroad network lagged several decades behind that of Great Britain, its major source for reading matter, it distributed books in a much more haphazard manner:

In 1820, the relation between the retailer and the printers, publishers, and jobbers was extremely complex. Almost all publishers were retailers; many printers were also publishers and sometimes also retailers; all jobbers were retailers; no jobber could deal profitably in the books of all publishers; and sometimes the bookseller who served as jobber in his territory for a firm in another state advertised the books of that firm for him.²²

Just as important as technological change, then, was the inefficiency of a system in which various production/distribution middlemen looked to secure

their own advantage over possible competitors: it was in the booksellers' and jobbers' short-term interests to strike up alliances with their peers, say fifty or two hundred miles away. The opportunity to share a load of books with a local business, however, would often be avoided for fear of keeping one's competitors solvent. In addition, promotion of a publisher's titles was during the 1820s nearly nonexistent; the reviewer's copy, which might be followed by his helpful review or "puff," served as its main engine.²³

C. Transatlantic Reprint Culture

In Poe's day, London and Edinburgh-based periodicals flooded the American market with European and British news, literature and reviews as well as reprinted American material. British organs appearing in smaller editions for American distribution included the *Quarterly Review*, the *New Monthly Magazine*, the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Foreign Quarterly*, and *Blackwood's Magazine*. Like the *New Monthly*, which was reprinted in the U.S. upon its inception in 1809, the *Quarterly Review* was reprinted as soon as it began publishing in 1821.²⁴ In 1824, it was estimated that the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly Reviews* sold four thousand copies each in the U.S. By way of comparison, their leading American competitor, the *North American Review*, had a circulation of approximately 8,000.²⁵ A force that damaged genuine homegrown competition was the reprinting of individual articles from British journals in the pages of American periodicals. Journals calling themselves "eclectic magazines" organized their tables of contents not around the names of human contributors but around the British periodicals from which material had been borrowed.²⁶

Meanwhile, American newspaper "extras" and "mammoth papers" such as *Brother Jonathan* and *The New World* (both 1839–48) would regularly reprint an entire novel within a single weekly edition.²⁷ During Charles Dickens' 1842 visit to the U.S., he complained of the American pirating of his novels. Ralph Waldo Emerson explained the situation in a letter to Thomas Carlyle,

Every English book of any name or credit is instantly converted into newspaper or coarse pamphlet, & hawked by a hundred boys in the streets of all of our cities for 25, 18, or 12 cents. Dickens' "Notes" for 12 cents, Blackwood's Magazine for 18 cents, and so on. Three or four great New York and Philadelphia printing houses do this work, with hot competition.²⁸

While Dickens would likely have derived some benefit from the institution of international copyright, his international celebrity seems to have been

linked to readers' inexpensive access to his works, something realized by the absence of such legislation.²⁹ In general, then, technological and economic conditions gave British writers better opportunity to support themselves by writing than their American counterparts, who had a harder time getting into print.³⁰

D. Authorial Coping Strategies

Until the American Romantic era (1830–65), American authors published uninspired imitations of Alexander Pope and John Milton such as Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* (1807). Following the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15) and accompanying the rise of the British periodicals, however, Americans enthused over the adventure narratives of Byron and Sir Walter Scott. Byron's epic ballads were soon imitated by writers including Poe, William Gilmore Simms, and Richard Dana. Meanwhile, Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe, and Herman Melville affirmed British works as valuable models for U.S. residents' development of uniquely American perspectives.³¹ Significantly, based on the examples of Irving, John Neal,³² and Cooper, it seemed American authors had to be published and to promote their work abroad in order to convince American readers and publishers of their merits. When Poe bolstered his international reputation during the 1840s as the author of the Auguste Dupin stories,³³ he was not offered publishing contracts or royalties. Rather, these works were reprinted without consultation over permissions or payment. Emerson's remarks suggest that an enterprising author might perform some of the same feats as the eclectic magazines. In "The American Scholar" (1837), Emerson echoes Poe's notes on the transformation of one's source material:

One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading, as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.

Emerson describes the well-read writer as weaver braiding together a hodgepodge of ideas and information into her own understanding and that of her readers. While this mental model idealizes reading in the manner of the German Romantics, it also offers hints as to how writers might support themselves. In the absence of regular and generous payment for his short fiction, Poe worked for a series of journals and newspapers as an editor and reviewer. Here he found a niche as a skeptical manipulator of sensational

news items and intellectual and spiritual novelties. It appears to have been common practice not only for publishers and editors to recycle work printed elsewhere but also for magazine contributors to sell entire articles to more than one journal.³⁴

As for everyday American readers, what reason would they have had during the 1830s and 40s to buy an American-authored, let alone American-published book? As Poe observed beginning with his childhood in the home of foster father John Allan, many book purchasers simply wanted to fill their shelves with attractive editions that were decorated with stately European names (*ER* 6). Readers for whom display-value was less important absorbed novels in mammoth newspaper editions. A certain number of readers encountered American editions in subscription libraries.³⁵

Two negative influences on Americans' reading of books both written and published in the United States were the Depression of 1837–1841 and changes in technology and labor practices. During this period and beyond, conditions became especially attractive for British publishers to pirate American work. Likewise, the decrease in Americans' leisure capital motivated American publishers to issue cheap reprints of foreign works rather than homegrown reading matter.³⁶ The scarcity of hard currency and the standardization of printing procedures also resulted in fierce competition among publishers. Thus, the average price of a book sold in the U.S. dropped from an average of two dollars during the 1820s to fifty cents during the Depression.³⁷

By the mid-1830s, the American printing industry had already begun paying employees in the form of wages, replacing earlier contracts supporting worker training through mandatory apprentice and journeyman stages. This institutional change set the stage for the employment of unskilled press operators, "who needed only the strength to pull the press bar," and managers paid according to the amount of work they could extract from their shops.³⁸ Technical inventions acted to keep wages and hence operating costs low. For example, the steam press could be operated by children who were paid far less than craftsmen or adult laborers. The new techniques of electrotyping and stereotyping took impressions of set type, allowing for flexibility in the number and geographical staging of print runs.³⁹

Workplace standardization and fierce competition from abroad helped determine American publication of cheap periodicals. In the case of Dickens' *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842), the text was reprinted as a special supplement of the New York weekly *The New World* for sale at one-fortieth the price of the two-volume British edition.⁴⁰ Thus American publishers, though generally proceeding at a financial disadvantage, were as likely to appropriate British writings as British publishers were American

material.⁴¹ The state of affairs in 1840s America has been described as a carnivalesque culture of tacitly condoned reprinting.⁴² Such a framing of periodical publishing articulates the opening of what has been called the mass-market “paperback revolution” that includes the dime novels of mid-century and the pocket books made expressly for the U.S. Army’s World War Two deployment. When speaking of 1840s paperbacks, book historians are describing periodical installments that could be bound together according to the wishes of the purchaser.⁴³

Poe’s own book publishing efforts included two unsuccessful editions of poetry as well as the more popular 1845 *The Raven and other Poems*. He planned a volume, “Tales of the Folio Club,” which was rejected by Harper & Brothers among other publishers. Poe’s proposals for literary journals, *The Penn Magazine* (1840) and the *Stylus* (1848), were never funded. In 1838, Harper’s published Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* to mixed reviews. As Poe’s only published novel, *Pym* represents Poe’s version of what the Harpers had wanted to offer readers, a work “in which a single and connected story occupies the whole volume” (ER 1470). His two-volume *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (Lea and Blanchard, 1840) containing twenty-five stories was no more popular. Evert Duyckinck selected twelve stories for *Tales* (1845), a volume he edited for Wiley and Putnam’s *Library of American Books*. *Tales* garnered a lengthy if cautionary review from *Blackwood’s*, and *Pym* was reprinted in England at least twice during the 1840s.⁴⁴ Poe’s plan for a “Critical History of American Literature” was scaled back to a lecture, “The Poets and Poetry of America” and his sketches for “The Literati of New York City,” published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1846.

In this culture of reprinting, Poe’s most viable option for publishing his tales was the women’s magazine, represented in his case by the Philadelphia journals *Graham’s Magazine* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. Sarah J. Hale, editor of *Godey’s* from 1837 to 1877, demonstrated an interest in promoting literature as a profession by the generous compensation allotted to literary contributors such as William Cullen Bryant, Catharine Sedgwick, William Gilmore Simms, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁴⁵ During the surge in popularity of women’s magazines led by *Godey’s*, *Graham’s*, and *Peterson’s*, American periodicals increasingly emphasized the appearance of their pages—arguably to the detriment of their editorial and literary matter. Such journals paid a great deal of attention to their fashion plates and likenesses of current and classical celebrities, while they were sometimes content to run whatever print articles they could obtain free of charge.⁴⁶

Thus, the periodical reprint culture of the 1830s and 40s found Poe and his peers either involved in financial struggles or writing with the help

of a second income. Poe's close attention to the workings of periodical reprint culture, evident from his earliest essays and tales, insured that his work would often be circulated to distant readers who would never have heard of him, whether or not his name happened to be published with the articles. Poe's intense interest in transatlantic rhetorical and aesthetic developments was well suited to coordinating the assembly and marketing of his prose.⁴⁷

III. THE CHAPTERS TO FOLLOW

The literary identity served up by Poe in his book reviews and tales is the subject of my second chapter, "Poe's Composite Autobiography." As a journalist writing in an age of industrial expansion, Poe used the title of his 1844 article, "Raising the Wind (Diddling)," as a metaphor for the circulation of periodical matter.⁴⁸ Poe's diddler is a confidence man who lives by circulating counterfeit goods as real. Often, the diddler passes himself off as what he is not, as when he slips into a quiet furniture showroom to offer visitors a hasty bargain (Mabbott 872). As magazine contributor, Poe diddles in cobbling together material to be accepted for publication—paid or otherwise. In Poe's era of extensive periodical reprinting, journalists and editors could pass themselves off as authors of reprinted material thanks in part to the difficulty of tracing ideas and words to any single source.

While writers and editors may be described as masters of "the short con," book publishers resemble safe, steady banks, which Poe describes as overgrown diddling operations because of their unwillingness to take financial risks (Mabbott 870). For example, Harper & Brothers, aware of the public demand for novels, rejected Poe's proposed collection "Tales of the Folio Club" before publishing his *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837–8). While Poe as journalistic diddler did not enjoy the level of face-to-face contact available to many confidence men, he was able to manipulate his print reputation through the quirks of the transatlantic periodical marketplace.

Poe's promotions of his two story collections, *Tales* (1845) and *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) combined the diddler's audacity with promotional insight. In advertising each work, Poe sought the endorsement of American authors who had achieved literary renown by making a British tour and winning broad American acceptance following their overseas success. Poe's own anonymous review of *Tales* for the October, 1845 *Aristidean* feigns objectivity while cataloguing his intriguing range of genres and writing styles. During the months separating the release of his two collections, Poe kept his name in circulation with two influential and highly

idealized autobiographical blurbs that were published as fact. The first of these introduced several of his poems included in Rufus Griswold's literary anthology *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842). The second appeared in the March 4, 1843 edition of the Philadelphia *Saturday Museum*, a mammoth newspaper.⁴⁹

One of Poe's most successful confidence schemes involved his literary criticism, which had several goals. First, Poe made himself into a national critical personality by expressing strong opinions. For example, Poe strove to distinguish himself among his American contemporaries by maintaining strict critical standards and praising literary merit over mere popular appeal. He also produced inflammatory appraisals of American editions of successful novels, finding fault not only with the authors but also the illustrators and publishers. Poe's caustic review of Theodore Fay's bestselling novel *Norman Leslie* (1835) for the *Southern Literary Messenger* generated a great deal of attention along the eastern seaboard of the United States.⁵⁰ Quite frequently, Poe's articles expressed disgust with American authors' unsuccessful attempts to break free of British reading and writing traditions.

Chapter Three, "The Recycling of Critical Authority," examines Poe's extension of the work of two English critics, William Hazlitt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in forsaking the label of capital-A Author for a more conversational mode of writing. In launching his journalistic career with his essay "Letter to B" (1831/6), Poe borrowed the critical chauvinism of established British magazines such as *The Quarterly Review* (1821) and *Blackwood's* (1817–32) for his attacks on the reputations of Coleridge and William Wordsworth. At the time of *Letter to B's* publication in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe's aggressive reviewing style had won him a great many salutations and rebuttals from the editors of American periodicals.⁵¹ While "Letter" presents little new evidence in its harangues against these poets and literary theorists, it raises Poe's critical profile by associating him not only with Wordsworth and Coleridge but also with canonical authors beyond the scope of his literary reviews. In addition, the spoofing tone of "Letter," which uses Coleridge's words against him, works to reduce readers' expectations for Poe's criticism. Finally, this chapter draws on William Hazlitt's critical essays for their polished modern style, a third quality essential to Poe's periodical criticism.

My fourth chapter, "The Debunking Work of Poe's light gothic Tales," examines Poe's minor fiction for its treatment of rhetoric, nationalism, and the role of the journalist. I describe Poe's puncturing the bluster of Jacksonian and antebellum writers, doctors, and politicians while extending appeal to readers on both sides of the Atlantic. In each of the light gothic tales, Poe