

Edgar A. Poe's Poetry in Spain in the 19th Century: An Issue for Connoisseurs

Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan

The first known reference to Edgar Allan Poe in Spain occurs in an 1856 letter Romantic writer, Cecilia Böhl de Faber (1796-1877), sent to realist writer, Juan Valera (1824-1905). In it she acknowledges reading a book of fantastic stories (*histories extraordinaires*, she writes), that seem quite bizarre to her, a comment that should not surprise a reader familiar with Böhl de Faber and her extremely conservative political and literary ideas. By the time she read the stories, she was already a member of Spanish early Romantic Movement based on German Idealism.¹ Two years later, Valera wrote Böhl de Faber a letter in which he refers to a common friend, Lucía Palladi, a Spanish aristocrat who lived in Naples, whom he calls the Dead Lady [La Muerta] whose appearance reminds Valera of Poe's female characters. Both letters are valuable documents that date Poe's reception in Spain in the 19th century between late Romanticism and early Realism. On July 9, 1856, a comment in the magazine, *La Iberia*, acknowledges Poe's great success in France.²

Between the 1850s and the 1880s, a number of British writers stood high among Spanish authors' favorites: William Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, John Milton (to a lesser extent), and Lord Byron, probably the most widely read British author of the 19th century.³ Although Poe's name does not appear frequently, he was an unavoidable model for writers of fantastic fiction and was frequently mentioned in newspapers and journals such as in José Ortega Munilla's "news of society" pages in *Los lunes del Imparcial* and in Rafael María de Labra's 1879 article, "La literatura norte-americana en Europa: J. Fennimore Cooper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Edgar A. Poe." Poe is also the main character of a woefully mediocre one-act play written in verse by Manuel Genaro Rentero, entitled *Edgar Poé*, staged on April 12, 1875, in Madrid and published in the same year.⁴

Spanish authors of the period showed an interest in Poe that ranged from mere curiosity to a more profound interest in the techniques of the fantastic story. Pedro Antonio de Alarcón (1833-1891) published "Edgar Poe. Carta a un amigo" [Letter to a Friend] in 1858. It is not until 1868 that we find another mention of Poe in Benito Pérez Galdós' essay, "Carlos Dickens," published in *La Nación* and again in his 1871 essay, "Las obras de Bécquer" [Bécquer's Works], published in *El Debate*. Leopoldo Alas Clarín's (1852-1901) and Juan Valera's

references to Poe are analyzed in this article. It is commonly accepted, as Pedro Salinas has pointed out, that Poe's poetry was not appreciated in the 19th century in Spain.⁵ This statement is true in general terms, but if we read the essays of some of these writers with a particular care, we perceive that some were more than well acquainted with Poe's poetry.

Charles Baudelaire's translations and reviews were instrumental in acquainting the Spanish readership with Poe. With minor exceptions, *Histoires extraordinaires* and *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires* were translated into Spanish and published several times by different translators. By 1859, a total of 34 stories were translated, all fantastic and Gothic except "Eleonora," "The Oblong Box" and "The Sphinx." The detective narratives such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" were also translated early on as well as others of science fiction such as "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaall," "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" and "The Gold Bug." Spanish readers had a thorough knowledge of Poe's narratives with the exception of the comic tales; of these, only "Three Sundays in a Week" was translated. Curiously enough, it was the first story translated in 1857 and the only one translated from the English original. *Pym* was also translated five times in the 19th century.⁶

Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's essay, "Edgar Poe. Carta a un amigo" (1858) [Edgar Poe. Letter to a Friend], was the first critical writing on Poe in Spain. Moreover, it was a landmark in the reception of Poe. In a somewhat personal appreciation, Alarcón follows Baudelaire's prologue to *Histoires extraordinaires* and provides a detailed but highly inaccurate biography of Poe. According to Alarcón, Poe traveled to Greece, went to the East, to St. Petersburg, and to Cape Horn. He even reached the Arctic. He was an expatriate who had the whole Earth as his homeland.

What is more interesting is the parallelism that Alarcón draws between Poe's and Byron's lives. Alarcón views Poe as the American Byron.⁷ The comparison with Byron must be understood in the context of Spanish cultural milieu. As Cardwell has written, Byron was the personification of the libertarian rebel, the religious heterodox and the writer with a satanic slant.⁸ He was by far the best known and most famous of the British Romantics in Spain. To draw a comparison between him and another writer conferred a sudden legitimacy to that author, although it meant also that he was placed among the disrespectful and, to a certain extent, dangerous poets because of his heterodox views on politics and religion. Alarcón,

however, does not pay homage to Poe's Byronian mask beyond its mention and the parallel biographies that he sketches. After the biographical account, Alarcón discusses Poe's works in general terms. He considered Poe a literary dissident since he created a new aesthetics that values beauty above all.⁹

Despite the parallelism with Byron, Alarcón does not analyze Poe in Romantic terms. It is striking that Alarcón characterizes Poe as a ratiocinative poet (and by poet, we must understand the figure of the Shelleyan poet). Poe searches the supernatural in realms that have been unexplored up to that moment. These realms are not those of the mystics, other poets, or pretenders. According to Alarcón, Poe is a poet who uses reason to produce awe in the readers; neither sensibility nor fancy has nothing to do with Poe. Alarcón sees Poe as a naturalist writer, a literary mathematician. He moves in the realm of intelligence and makes use of reason to prove what is impossible to explain, what is extraordinary or supernatural. Alarcón's critical judgments may surprise a 21st century reader because he understood that the underlying principle in Poe's narratives is rational; a ratiocinative principle binds his stories within a single poetics. However, Alarcón seems not to be aware of sentimentalism in Poe's works, as some critics have highlighted.¹⁰ In fact, Alarcón appears more interested in remarking Poe's detachment from Romanticism and his indebtedness to Realism.

This may be due to the fact that Baudelaire's translation of Poe's stories strips them of the overcharged style of the original. The subsequent translations into Spanish simply exaggerate this tendency leaving aside the bizarre and, to a certain extent, the "baroque" style Poe used. By the second half of the 19th century, Spanish readers favored a naturalistic style far from the excesses of Romanticism, as Ramos Gascón has analyzed.¹¹ It is most surprising that Spanish Realist and Naturalist writers never thought that Poe's stories were in the tradition of Romanticism. For them, the fantastic element did not come from the Romantic Gothic but from the new scientific mind of the century, as Alarcón argues in his essay. Poe's is, as Alarcón terms it, a scientific poetry, while, at the same time, grotesque and arabesque as Poe himself called it. Alarcón wanted to emphasize that the forms in it were extra-ordinary, although he acknowledges that the starting point is everyday life. Rather than concentrating on the Romantic contexts in Poe's writings, Alarcón is much more concerned with the renewal that the American writer accomplished. In fact, Alarcón is fundamentally interested in providing an adequate explanation for Poe's naturalization in Spanish literature. As a consequence, Alarcón does not mention, as I have already said, the Gothic element and seems to focus on the scientific works. For a reader

unaware of Spanish cultural milieu of the second half of the 19th century, this may be misleading because he or she may think that there was a blooming of science fiction and that the fantastic story was dismissed because of its Romantic roots. A glance at 19th century Spanish literature shows the exact opposite. Fantastic literature was written and widely read, while science fiction was at a very early stage of its development and was not such a favorite of readers.¹² Subsequent writers would focus on Poe's Gothic stories, and their comments correct the false impression that Alarcón's essay could have created.

Poe's poetry was not thoroughly known in Spain until the 20th century as a result of the interest Spanish poets paid to French poets, in particular Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé. In his lecture, Salinas sketched out the reception of Poe in Spain and in Latin America and concluded that Spanish authors would be acquainted with Poe's poetry in the 20th century.¹³ I agree with the statement although some qualification is required. Poe's poetry was known by a minority, including Juan Valera and Leopoldo Alas Clarín, two of the most outstanding novelists and critics of the last third of the 19th century. It comes as no surprise that Valera was Spanish ambassador in America and Clarín was familiar with English and French literature and criticism as well as being a witty and learned critic himself, much in the line of British critics.

Juan Valera refers to Poe several times in his works, mostly in prologues or criticism, as well as in the letter quoted at the beginning of this article. In the prologue to *Nuevos estudios críticos* [New Critical studies] (1888), Valera talks about art and progress and concludes that everything is synchronous. The beginnings of history are as contemporaneous as the new writers such as Poe, Heinrich Heine or Bécquer.¹⁴ A few years after, Valera planned to publish an anthology of American poets, as he says in a letter to Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo (1856-1912), written in Washington where Valera was ambassador. Menéndez Pelayo was the leading scholar of that age and an influential critic. He wrote a history of the aesthetic ideas in Spain, among many other works, which has been immensely influential up to the present. Valera wrote that he would like to publish an anthology of American authors titled *Ecos de América* [American echoes].¹⁵ He named William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Walt Whitman, Bayard Taylor and Poe. In the end he would publish only an anthology with poems by William Wetmore Story, Lowell and Whittier.¹⁶ In the prologue to the anthology, "Poesía angloamericana" [Angloamerican poetry], he talks about Poe as one of the great American authors

but does not translate any of his poems.¹⁷ A year before, in another letter to Menéndez Pelayo, Valera already lists the canon of American authors: Poe, Emerson, Bryant, Longfellow, Ticknor, Prescott, and adds Henry James.¹⁸ Valera was familiar with American literature and with Poe, much more if we take into account that in *Ecos argentinos* (1901) [Argentinian echoes], he comments that Rubén Darío's *Los Raros*, a collection of essays on bohemian authors among others, includes Poe, and Darío portrays him in a Baudelairean fashion.¹⁹

Leopoldo Alas Clarín cites Poe in his literary criticism. Clarín was familiar with British literature as his frequent references to the Pre-Raphaelites show. Mentions of American literature of the 19th century or even before, if it existed for Spanish writers, occur quite seldom. It is not easy to ascertain the extent that he knew Poe and his works. There is an allusion to Poe in an article on Gaspar Núñez de Arce, one of the most renowned poets of the 19th century published in 1888.²⁰ Clarín discusses Núñez de Arce's address to the Ateneo in Madrid, in particular the relation between the literary work and its contemporary society. Clarín refers to Victor Hugo's, Goncourt's or Flaubert's novels, but he also deals with Poe's works although he does not specify whether he is referring to his poems, novel or stories.

The other reference occurs, not surprisingly, in his 1889 article on Baudelaire's works. In the article, he discusses Baudelaire's poetry and poetics and copies a passage from "Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe," but Clarín does not acknowledge where it comes from.²¹ Clearly, Clarín was familiar with Baudelaire's works, both his poetry and his criticism. This should not come as a surprise. Clarín was interested in the new literary movements that came from Europe, basically France and Britain as well, and he was as well concerned with criticism, as his large stock of reviews and articles show. Baudelaire would serve as a model of modern poetry to be introduced in Spain. Despite his interest in Baudelaire, Clarín did not seem concerned with Poe as portrayed in Baudelaire's writings, probably because Clarín may have thought of Baudelaire as a Romantic rather than modern writer. Clarín seemed to favor a poetry written in a prosaic low key, as his comments on Campoamor and Núñez de Arce seem to suggest.

Clearly, Edgar Allan Poe was known in Spain in the 19th century. As revealed above, knowledge of Poe's work was entirely dependent on Baudelaire's reviews and translations, with the exception of Juan Valera's criticism. Cultural misinterpretations due to an insufficient knowledge of British and American Romantic poetry was present, as for instance, in Poe's being compared to Lord

Byron. American poetry, and in particular Poe's, was alien to Spanish literary trends in the second half of the 19th century when literary interests focused on Spanish traditions and French Romantic poetry. By the end of the 19th century, Spanish poetry hovered between late Romantic patterns and a renewal coming from France and Latin America. Despite the thorough knowledge Valera or Clarín had of American and British literatures, Poe's poetry did not seem to interest them because, contrary to his short fiction, both Spanish writers did not think Poe's poetry could be adapted to a Realist modality. In fact, they did not realize that the renewal of poetry that Baudelaire was demanding and exemplifying had Poe as one of its starting points. Poe was viewed only as an exotic writer of bizarre stories.

Notes

1. Carnero, Guillermo. *Los orígenes del Romanticismo reaccionario español: El matrimonio Böhl de Faber*. (Valencia: Universidad, 1978). Poe's short stories first edition in Spain also included a tale written by Cecilia Böhl de Faber (aka Fernán Caballero), titled "Dicha y suerte," a narrative that has nothing in common with Poe's stories.
2. "Sección de Variedades-Correspondencia de París." *La Iberia* (July 9, 1856).
3. Cardwell, Richard. "“El Lord Sublime”: Byron's Legacy in Spain." In *The Reception of Byron in Europe, Volume I: Southern Europe, France and Romania*, London. Ed. Richard Cardwell. (New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 144-63.
4. José Ortega Munilla. *Los lunes del Imparcial* (March 1, 1880 and April 12, 1880); Rafael María de Labra. "La literatura norte-americana en Europa: J. Fennimore Cooper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Edgar A. Poe." *Revista de España*. XLVII (April 1879): 457-89.
5. Pedro Salinas. "Poe en España e Hispanoamérica." *Ensayos de literatura hispánica moderna. Obras completas II. Ensayos completos*. (Madrid: Cátedra, 2007), 1326-31; Pedro Antonio de Alarcón. "Edgar Poe. Carta a un amigo" In *Obras completas*. (Madrid: Fax, 1933), 1775-77; Benito Pérez Galdós. "Carlos Dickens." In *Ensayos de crítica literaria*, Ed. Laureano Bonet. (Barcelona: Península, 1990), 217-23; "Las obras de Bécquer." *El Debate*. (13 November 1871), np.
6. For a detailed catalogue of translations, see J. J. Lanero and S. Vilorio. "Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)." In *Literatura en traducción: versiones españolas de Franklin, Irving, Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Prescott, Emerson y Whitman en el siglo XIX*. (León: Universidad de León, 1996), 93-129; David Roas. *Hoffmann en España: recepción e influencias*. (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2001), 148-56; and Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan. *Presencia de Edgar A. Poe en la literatura española del siglo XIX*. (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 1999), 81-86.
7. Alarcón, 1775.
8. Cardwell, 144-63.
9. Alarcón, 1776.
10. Jonathan Elmer, "Terminate or Liquidate? Poe, Sensationalism and the Sentimental Tradition." In *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 91-120.
11. Antonio Ramos-Gascón. "Introducción/." In *Pipá*. (Madrid: Cátedra, 1986), 80-81.

12. To date we need an in-depth study of Poe's possible influence in Spanish science fiction of 19th century.

13. Salinas, 1326-31.

14. "Prólogo." *Nuevos estudios críticos*. (Madrid: M. Tello, 1888), xi.

15. December 24, 1885.

16. Juan Valera. *Obras completas, Poesías, II*. (Madrid: Imprenta Alemana, 1917).

17. Valera, 237.

18. February 26, 1884.

19. Juan Valera. *Ecos argentinos*. (Madrid: Librería de Fernando Fé, 1901), 76.

20. Leopoldo Alas Clarín. "Un discurso de Núñez de Arce." In *Obras completas, vol IV, II*. (Oviedo: Ediciones Nobel, 2003), 1090.

21. Alas, 1149. The French text reads: "*le principe de la poésie est strictement et simplement l'aspiration humaine vers une beauté supérieure, et la manifestation de ce principe est dans un enthousiasme, une excitation de l'âme—enthousiasme tout à fait indépendant de la passion qui est l'ivresse du coeur, et de la vérité qui est la pâture de la raison. Car la passion est naturelle, trop naturelle pour ne pas introduire un ton blessant, discordant, dans le domaine de la beauté pure, trop familière et trop violente pour ne pas scandaliser les purs désirs, les gracieuses mélancolies et le nobles désespoirs qui habitent les régions surnaturelles de la poésie,*" Charles Baudelaire, "Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe." *Curiosités esthétiques. L'Art romantique et autres oeuvres critiques*. (Paris: Garnier, 1986), 636.