Neo-Poe: How to be Hip but Stay Legit

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But why Poe?
— Jonathan Elmer

Poe is a name brand. This cannot have escaped consideration in the advising processes whereby Jonathan Elmer and Terence Whalen brought their books into the world, first as dissertations, then as the primary exhibits in their tenure reviews. Somewhere along the line, advice was given of the kind Andrijka Kwasny received when she proposed abandoning her thesis on Faulkner to embark on a study of identity politics and the Ukrainian diaspora: “’You can’t afford to make your work difficult for the tenure committee to locate and legitimize’” (Kwasny 232-33). I am not concerned with righting the internal contradictions represented by such (good) advice, nor scandalized by institutional realities that force young critics to be so calculating. What I am interested in is how to understand more clearly what occurs, what is lost and gained, when we negotiate between these realities and the ideal born of our canon-busting recent past of a broader, de-centered cultural criticism. Elmer and Whalen do this with some success in books that combine institutional legitimacy with hip post-canonical appeal. That Poe is currently a popular figure in projects that seek to achieve such ends seems to me no accident.

Let me begin with Edgar Allen Poe and the Masses. Whalen’s principal innovation is to situate Poe not at the romantic margin of antebellum cultural life, as is typical, but at its center as a representative producer caught amid the conflicting social and material demands of the nascent American mass culture industry. Whalen depicts Poe’s plight as a struggle with the “horrid laws of political economy,” the bottomline conditions of literary production that put the same downward pressure on writers that was experienced elsewhere in the antebellum labor market. These conditions he figures as the “Capital Reader,” by which he invokes economic burden not simply as a conglomerate historical abstraction, but as the numerous editors, owners, and commercial investors with whom Poe was forced to negotiate. By pursuing its subject into the archive of publishing history, Poe and the Masses avoids the hyper-abstracted irreality that often plagues the masses as an analytical category. With each Capital transaction, Whalen builds an intimate account of Poe as a writer apart from the putatively pathological self-constructions (editorial entrepreneur, romantic outcast) he used to attract Capital interests. Poe emerges most vividly from the innumerable compromises and innovations whereby he resisted both
mass-market aesthetics and hunger. The Capital Reader thesis makes these compromises and innovations legible as such in a variety of contexts, from Poe’s literary hoaxes and experimental genres, to his editorial politics and manufactured identities.

Like Whalen, Elmer locates Poe at the center of antebellum culture; “social limit” refers not to his outcast persona, but to the logic of mass reading that produced and reconciled a divided liberal subject. According to Elmer, Poe exposed the basis for this subject in the relation between the abstracted ideal of democratic citizenship and the illicit body it produced. This genitive exposure Elmer also examines in wide range of Poe texts. Where he differs from Whalen is in his larger institutional perspective. Poe’s focus on in the self-alienating ironies of democratic citizenship has made him a “figure of mass culture,” Elmer argues. As such Poe has also been an object of enduring critical ambivalence. Elmer locates this ambivalence in remarks by T. S. Eliot and Harold Bloom, whose denigrations of Poe enact the same divided subject that Poe has been so adept at exposing. Elmer thus answers his own “why” question about Poe’s status as the quintessential “figure of mass culture,” especially in the criticism of elite modernists such as Eliot and Bloom. Poe haunts high culture as its repressed body-double, that which it longs to deny, but which it also needs to sustain its own existence.

Elmer provides this solution by removing himself from it, a move that proves his post-canonic critical legitimacy, but does so by replicating earlier practices of divisive self-denial. If Whalen avoids mass culture abstraction by focusing on Poe’s relations with various Capital agents, Elmer does no such end run. Reading at the Social Limit is massively abstract. The result is that one is likely to ask not why Poe, but where. Author, audience, and Elmer himself all vanish amid layers of psychoanalytic theory (Lacan, Zizek) historicized by way of equally abstract accounts of republican citizenship (Warner, Berlant). I don’t mean to take away from Elmer’s work, which duly rewards the effort of reading it. But there is something decidedly Poe-like in his evasion. At times, Reading at the Social Limit resembles the tortuous deliberations of one of Poe’s own wildly self-divided narrators, who in their will to realize one or another abstracted ideal (love, reason) encounter their own illicit humanity as a spectral return of the repressed. More to the point, in exposing the divisive interests of Eliot and Bloom (in using them the same way they used Poe), and in so proving his critical citizenship, he represses his own interest in division, the question why he needs Poe just as much as they do.

There are plenty of simple answers—answers that involve the practical embarrassments of literary criticism, not as a vocation or social mission, but as a practice carried out within the limits of professional necessity. These are worth stating, if for no other reason than their bald utility defies the residual impulse to declare Poe a genius or otherwise resurrect his self-naturalizing canonical status. Poe, again, is a known commodity, and as such provides administrative advantages for a hiring committee (say) that requires a context
in which to make informed decisions. Poe also provides rhetorical benefits we often forget, at least until we try to write about an author whose collected works are not found in every university library. Familiarity means that even Poe’s more obscure works can be cited without summary. Nor do we have to introduce him or justify interest in his work. Poe comes with a pre-installed history that includes biographical information and numerous standing critical debates. Whalen is often most engaging when he uses his Capital approach to address questions that have long preoccupied Poe scholars. Elmer grounds his project similarly on similar questions having to do with Poe’s contested place in critical and cultural history.

The qualities that recommend Poe are not limited to institutional practicalities. He also serves the needs of disciplinary identity. Poe close reads. Irony, ambiguity, linguistic density, psychological depth: all provide ample opportunity to show proficiency in a practice that more than any other defines (and legitimizes) us as professionals. The ability to support close reading also provides cover as we increasingly venture into the professional domains of others. Elmer and Whalen are both more sociological than literary in their aims. Yet neither makes his primary analytical claims in a rhetorical context associated with social or sociological history. They operate between the lines of one or another cryptic Poe text. Poe’s ability to sustain not just close, but diverse and creative reading supplies a cross-disciplinary alibi in allowing us to substitute interpretive for other-disciplinary competencies—researching social history, or writing it in a form recognizable as such.

But “qualities” cut both ways, and those that have not recommended Poe are in large part what make him most appealing today. Poe was never canonical in the way Melville was, or any of a dozen mid-19th-century U.S. writers who have been more-or-less consistently sanctioned by cultural authorities. As Elmer points out, the only thing consistent about Poe’s critical treatment has been its ambivalence, from the scorn of contemporaries like Emerson, to the more stately denouncements of Eliot and Bloom, to recent suspicions about his racism and misogyny. This is not to say Poe has ever been in danger of being dismissed—far from it. Even his detractors find him too useful for that. (A colleague of mine uses Poe in composition class to show how not to write and in introductory literature class to teach close reading.) This ambiguity gives every Poe project a transgressive edge akin to that enjoyed by his mass-market readers. More important, Poe’s dubious cultural status carries with it a subversive mystique. Any extended treatment of Poe benefits from both the structural advantages of dealing with a known author and current sentiments that join liberal emancipatory sympathies with a taste for the delinquent.

Current tastes favor Poe in other ways as well. His inability to land a patronage job or find other employment (like Hawthorne and Melville) when writing failed meant that Poe had to fend for himself amid the difficulties of mass literary production. This places him at just the point where he is now
being discovered as indeed central by a new wave of critics interested in re-materializing the study of literature, not by reframing it as an equally rarefied Cultural Studies, but by situating it within newly configured fields of political economy. *Poe and the Masses* and *Reading at the Social Limit* represent two of these: the history of the book, with its explicit interest in material practice, and the explosion of work in the past decade that targets bodies—including bodies subjected to liberal media—as a primary locus of cultural mediation. Poe fits both like a glove. Hawthorne provided a similar fit when the widespread interest was middle-class domestic relations; Melville, when it was an older style of bipolar class critique; Stowe, women’s sentimental culture. Poe’s appeal stems from his combining a well-documented, highly self-conscious mass-market career with a clear interest in emotional manipulation.

Answers to the question, “But why Poe?”, range from the banal to the slightly less than banal. This should not be a surprise. But we would as soon avoid such recognition as it reduces, if not Poe’s canonical status, then his ability to ground what Lauren Berlant calls sexy knowledge, knowledge that has supplanted the mysteries of canonicity as that which confirms literary criticism as a professional practice (trading in special knowledge) as opposed to merely a craft. Sexy knowledge is also necessary to be critically hip—a term next to which those like craft and technique sit quite uncomfortably. (Remember Jake Barnes’s comment that success in writing requires that one write but not be seen writing.) Besides its unpleasant connotations vis-à-vis class, the juxtaposition of knowledge and practice produces discomfort by positioning us too close to the world we criticize—too invested in structures (social, economic, political) we most like to condemn. Sexy knowledge masks discomfort. Its pleasures elevate us above internal contradiction and provide the basis for hip critical affectation that swaggers safely past both the banality of professional practice and the opportunity that banality presents to relocate ourselves (and our hipness) at the center, not of mass cultural production, but of the mass production of cultural studies.

This is what Elmer seems to promise. But he backs off in an act of swaggering that forgets the professional necessities that bind him to, as well as distance him from, predecessors like Eliot and Bloom. Whalen provides a Capital gloss on such forgetting. He repeatedly explains Poe’s compromises and inconsistencies by turning to practical embarrassments whereby artistic integrity succumbed to market demand. There is no reason to expect Whalen to use his account of Poe as a model to reflect on his own practice. But a comparison between Poe and Whalen (or young critics generally) is not hard to imagine. Not that the various turns and preoccupations of *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* appear overly determined by a concern with marketability per se. But the book does devote whole chapters to satisfying desires outside its stated topic, “the political economy of literature in antebellum America.” Whalen *close reads*. He close reads several of Poe’s best-know works, and some of his least. He does it well too, suggesting that what has made Poe’s most obscure
work inaccessible has not been its aesthetic failure, but our inability to read it correctly. As I said, Whalen is also highly engaging when addressing questions that have traditionally absorbed Poe scholars: his fabled success as the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, for example, or his contested authorship of an egregiously racist article on slavery. If Whalen provides a fine account of the conditions of mass literary production in the antebellum U.S., he has also written one more book on a 19th-century literary celebrity whose canonics mysteries are still very intact and very marketable.

Elmer is one step from examining the psychic structures (his project) that lie behind our continuing interests in Poe. Hip theory helps him forget these interests, and forget with them the practical necessities so important in marketing critical knowledge — whether Bloom’s or Elmer’s; whether to a hiring committee, tenure board, or publisher. Yet if Bloom and Eliot wind up the butts of Elmer’s critique as members of a cultural elite that produced the very “illegitimate” body it wanted to expel, at least they live as bodies, which Elmer resurrects by exposing the practical embarrassments of their careers. As chief casualty of his own will to critical legitimacy, he haunts his project, as I suggested, like one of Poe’s narrators, or like Poe himself, whose hungry visage lurks behind every curious turn and preoccupation of his work.

The degree to which such an account seems melodramatic is inversely proportional to one’s proximity to a potentially career-ending marketing hurdle: job, tenure, publication, etc. Fear is a constant and palpable reality in the lives of young critics pursuing academic careers. No other profession I can think of demands such a large initial investment of time, money, and ego, while paying such meager (if any) returns. Added to fears that stem from professional insecurity are others we have produced ourselves in assuming a more public role for critics. Insofar as this role has involved reform-minded social criticism, it promises (or so we dream) a more legitimate—and secure—function for criticism at a time when the old universals are not selling as well as they did. But disciplinary constraints of the kind generated rhetorically by identity politics, for example, operate largely on the basis of fear. Whatever success we can claim in effecting such constraints outside the academy, inside they create behavioral anxieties just as limiting in that they join so quickly and seamlessly with those stemming from a tight job market or shifting hiring practices that seek to fill vogue topic categories, while continuing to cover traditional ones. Woe betides anyone who fails to negotiate such passages effectively. For those who do—witness neo-Poe.

Beyond its promise of a more open field of literary study, canon reform carried with it a possibility of greater institutional self-awareness. While often crude and under-theorized, early assaults on the great tradition, such as Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs*, were effective in exposing the contingent banalities on which canonical privilege was based. What made such exposure easier was that it operated across complementary lines of social conflict: in the case of Tompkins, gender and generational. Those who were embarrassed
were patriarchs like Bloom and Eliot—still good targets, as Elmer shows. But he also shows the difficulty of extending self-critique to the present. We are far less aggressive in exposing each other to embarrassment, and far more in covering our collective butts as purveyors of knowledge not only special, but sacred insofar as we charge it with our own heated rhetoric—itself a register of personal and professional vulnerabilities. Imagine applying the kind of critical terms commonly used on Poe to our own sacred enthusiasms: narcissism to feminism, masochism to the job market, political economy to the performative conceits of the profession—conceits whereby we, like Elmer and Whalen, abstract and capitalize ourselves as young career minded academics.

If hipness masks the practical embarrassments of criticism as a job, it also masks the fear that what we know is wrong or worthless. This fear spans our careers. But it increases when career-threatening obstacles are near. Hip affectation is based on the erotics of such fear, and exposing it too openly may indeed reduce the value of our special knowledge. It may also reduce one of the few illicit joys we own: swaggering in the face of impending disaster. Yet given the significance of those moments when we are most fearful—when we choose dissertation topics, for example—not admitting our fear inhibits our ability to measure its effects on the way we practice criticism. Symptomatic of our vulnerability is the fact that critical history has evolved largely as a form of intellectual history colored by formal (biography, institutional history) and thematic (race, gender) preoccupations. Avoided are genealogies that deal with our more intimate investments in criticism as a profession, vocation, and so forth. It is hard to be hip about these things. And if hostility toward critics like Christopher Lasch and Ann Douglas is any indication, providing a more self-effacing mirror in which to look will not win friends. But my interest in reading the books dealt with here was at times rapt, based as it was not just on what they did say, but on the spectral return of what they did not. This indicates a market, however ambivalent. It also suggests that Poe, a figure who likewise bears our ambivalence, will continue to help us locate space between vogues and traditions, ideals and institutions, being hip and being legit.

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Work Cited