

Review of:

Henri Justin, *Avec Poe jusqu'au bout de la prose*,  
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Surprising as it may be to some, it has to be said that France's contribution to the Poe 2009 bicentennial was visibly less than that of neighbouring Spain. France managed one conference (in Nice) to Spain's four, and offered relatively little to match the flurry of press publicity, media events and new editions of the master's works offered over the year by its Iberian neighbour. Nonetheless, 2009 did see the appearance of the major study by Henri Justin, *Professeur honoraire des universités* and long one of France's best-regarded Poe scholars, which will be the subject of this review.

The looming presence of Poe's shadow in the French literature of the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries is known to all, via the route that leads from Baudelaire to Mallarmé, Valéry, Jules Verne and beyond. French psychoanalysis has appropriated the American master through Marie Bonaparte and Jacques Lacan, and his writing has been dissected by French critics, philosophers and creative writers of the eminence of Roland Barthes, Michel Butor, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Georges Poulet, Raymond Queneau and more. Henri Justin himself has for several decades now been responsible for a steady stream of books, lectures and conference papers, and articles both scholarly and popular on Poe: we may particularly note his earlier book *Poe dans le champ du vertige* (1991) and some very useful material in English, published in organs like *Poe Studies* and the *Edgar Allan Poe Review*, on Poe's fortunes in France.

In such a context, it is a shade disconcerting to discover, in Justin's introduction to the new book, the affirmation that in today's France Poe has become "un écrivain réputé facile" ("a writer reputed to be 'easy,'") that "pour beaucoup, ce n'est pas un grand écrivain" ("for many, he isn't a great writer") (7). If this is the case, it is surely a relatively new phenomenon, given Poe's massive footprint in French literature and criticism of the fairly recent past. Justin's book thus presents itself as an attempt to reclaim Poe in France for in-depth critical and conceptual study - a task which, on the 2009 evidence, would not be necessary in present conditions in Spain, or, indeed, Mexico or Brazil. This aim presupposed, *Avec Poe jusqu'au bout de la prose* does not take the form of a conventional or blow-by-blow introduction. Nor does it propose a systematic narrative of "Poe in France," though aspects of that story are examined (and Justin has done that elsewhere). Assuming a prior knowledge of Poe's life and work in the reader, it appears, rather, as a personal meditation arising from years of reading, teaching and writing on the great Bostonian, teasing out themes and motifs, placing them in fruitful, if at times conflictive dialogue, and thus generating new perspectives for future study and debate.

Before consideration of the content, the typographic aspect of the book deserves comment, since it offers unusual features which may also be of interest to Translation Studies. Justin

quotes Poe throughout in French (not giving the original English unless specific lexical comment is imperative), in what might be called a series of *hybrid* translations: based on those of Baudelaire and Mallarmé (or, in their default, the late twentieth-century versions of Jean-Marie Maguin and Claude Richard) but corrected or refined by the author where he deems necessary (this is also true of the French titles to Poe's texts, many of those used here not being Baudelaire's). Justin's view is that, despite its near-sacrosanct canonic status, the Baudelaire translation, which indeed is not error-free, needs either revision or replacement if Poe is to be fully understood in our times (390-92). Meanwhile, in this book Justin's textual changes are indicated, within a given quotation, in a different font from that of the base translations. This unusual and effective typographic device is new to the present reviewer, who believes it could be usefully applied to other translational contexts. The Poe who heralded technological advances in the world of print would no doubt have approved, and Justin is to be congratulated on his originality here.

Justin's Poe is an explorer and questioner of limits, endlessly desiring to go beyond surfaces and penetrate the depths of things—interrogating and shifting the limits of language, the mind, and, finally, in *Eureka*, human knowledge of the universe. The key image is the inside of the maelstrom, the key figure the detective, the key question the “what was it?” of “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Ligeia”. Poe is seen as a writer who not only creates new genres (as famously in the detective story) but fuses existing ones to generate remarkable hybrids (“criticism-fiction” in “The Philosophy of Composition,” “research-fiction” in *Eureka*).

There are sections on Poe's life, on *Pym*, the poems and the criticism, and on Poe and psychoanalysis, but the heart of Justin's argument lies in his detailed, textually hypersensitive readings of the major tales—assembled above all into the familiar clusters that Poe criticism since Bonaparte has made us expect: the “marriage group,” the tales of ratiocination, the murder tales. At the same time, coherence across the groups is evoked in, for instance, an admirable passage where Justin examines Poe's “sense of an ending” and shows how apparently diverse tales are linked by the finality of apocalyptic conclusions of the type “and—going down,” “*She was dead!*” or “Thus ended all” (64); or in another where the recurrent metaphor of the interior is analysed in its role as symbol of the characters' mental state (“Chaque ‘chambre’ est un psycho-univers”) (“Each ‘room’ is a psycho-universe”) (105-09).

The psychological/psychoanalytic approach (Poe as explorer of the maelstrom of the mind), yields some rich insights. The Poe-Bonaparte-Lacan narrative is revisited, with Justin revelling in the irony of Bonaparte's patient-on-the-couch becoming Lacan's master analyst (254-55). There is an intricate analysis of Poe's motif of perversity (291-99), tracing it from “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse” to its significant occurrences elsewhere in the work. Here, though, strangely and despite the example of a French predecessor like Hélène Cixous, Justin does not directly mention the uncanny kinship between Poe's perverse and the Freudian category of Thanatos, this despite his evoking both Freud's “The ‘Uncanny’” and the notion of the death-drive elsewhere in the study (256-59). At one point, Justin declares: “Poe … pourrait bien avoir annoncé Freud” (“Poe … could indeed have heralded Freud”) (255), but—at a time when Freudian science stands in need of defence in France against its postmodern detractors—the case for that position could perhaps have been made more bitingly and succinctly.

If there is a unifying thread in Poe's work as elucidated by Justin, it is that of *detection*, the Ariadne's skein that guides his readers through the psyche's labyrinth and allows them to emerge free of its monsters. The theme is pursued through the analysis of the tales of

ratiocination, of course, but also in less expected areas: Dupin and Legrand are not the only detective figures thrown up by reading Poe. For Justin, in tales of mental aberration such as “Ligeia” or “Berenice,” it is the *reader* who is invited to play detective and elucidate the psychological phenomena behind the characters’ occult delusions: “ces contes ... exigent une lecture détectrice, une enquête textuelle” (“these tales ... demand a detective reading, a textual inquiry”) (96); in “The Oval Portrait,” it is the pre-eminent strangeness of the word “*life-likeness*” (Poe’s coinage, as Justin stresses), drawing attention to its own bizarrie, that stimulates the narrator’s and reader’s detective activity in interpreting the painting; while in *Eureka*, it is Poe himself who morphs into a kind of cosmic detective, bent on coaxing out the secrets of the universe. The Dupin tales themselves are subjected to a close reading that stresses the detective’s disturbing kinship with his adversaries, ape and minister, recalling that only a knife-edge divides pursuer from pursued. Justin’s account of the detective quest across Poe’s work is persuasive and haunting, though one may regret the near-absence from the book of certain tales—“The Man of the Crowd” (failed detection) and “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (mistaken detection)—whose analysis could have enriched the argument.

Throughout the study, the author’s enthusiasm for his subject is visible and avowed. Justin sees Poe’s texts’ capacity for generating meanings as endless: “La lecture est sans fin ... après des années de fréquentation je retrouve des effets textuels insoupçonnés” (“The reading never ends ... after years of living [with Poe], I continue to find unsuspected textual effects”) (97); and, near the end, confesses: “Je garde pour les textes de Poe une admiration folle, un étonnement sans cesse renouvelé” (“I retain a boundless admiration for Poe’s texts—my astonishment at them is ceaselessly renewed”) (393). Criss-crossing the *oeuvre*, Justin plays detective to Poe’s texts (or, as Poe would have put it, Oedipus to their Sphinx-like riddles) in readings that are highly personal but fully substantiated from the texts—in a volume that amply fulfills its *raison d’être* by sending its reader back to the fountainhead, to the inexhaustible writings that flow from Poe’s nocturnal stylus, steeped in the *power of words*.