

Pictures of Ascent in the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe. By Douglass Anderson. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 201 pages). ISBN 978-0-230-61943-2

A blurb by Stephen Railton on the back cover of Douglas Anderson's *Pictures of Ascent in the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* describes it as the result of "first-rate critical intelligence communing with one of the most fascinating minds in the American canon." The word "communing" turns out to be appropriate. Douglass has written a dense and erudite meditation on the ways in which Poe transformed and elevated the historical, cultural and personal material and events of this life into the brilliant fiction that seems to soar above the dull literary landscape of the Age of Jackson. His favored word for this backdrop is "anthropocentric parochialism," a somewhat ambiguous term that gestures towards the way Poe, Douglass argues, was less fascinated by humanity than by the heady new realms of spiritualized scientific inquiry emerging during this period.

There are in fact several themes interwoven in this book. One is that Poe was a genius who transcended the material constraints of this life and times by refashioning them figuratively into his work. A key example of this would be Poe's experience of cholera outbreaks, one in 1832 and another in 1849, two dates that neatly book-end Poe's active writing career. One of the strengths of Anderson's book is his convincing demonstration of how the earlier epidemic insinuates itself as a literal and figurative element into a whole cluster of Poe's stories. Of particular interest to Gothic Studies scholars, this theme provides the title of the first chapter, "Problems of Disposal," which ranges over a large number of works, including "The Assigination," "Ligeia," "Berenice," "Morella," "Bon-Bon," and "King Pest," linking them through the trope of contagion and the putrefaction of diseased bodies.

The next chapter, "Pneumatics of Mind," moves to a slightly different theme, this time concerned with what Douglass calls Poe's fascination with "disembodied states of consciousness." Taking a totally different angle on the question of mental transformation and transcendence of matter, this chapter focuses on stories of cognition (the Dupin tales), liminal mental states ("Loss of Breath"), and tropes of the mind as a drifting, rudderless wreck ("The Descent into the Malström"). The next chapter, "The Gravity of Things," centers on images of descent, weight, and vortexes in stories such as "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "MS. Found in a Bottle," and probes Poe's interest in contemporary science, a focus that Douglass continues to elaborate throughout the rest of the book. The two last chapters, "The Kingdom of Inorganization," and "The Infected World at Large," are organized loosely around two images: a dialectic of "Attraction and Repulsion" and an apocalyptic spread of infection.

As this account suggests, each chapter features a rather different kind of organizing principle, and the overarching trope of "ascent," briefly discussed in the first and last chapters, is sometimes asked to carry more weight than it can. Douglass has written the book itself as a cluster of interconnected tropes and images, eschewing conventional demonstration and argumentation for the most part. The result is a book that reads at times more like a prose poem than a scholarly monograph, with the usual attendant pleasures and frustrations this approach produces. Douglass rarely refers to the work of other scholars in the body of his text and his endnotes are not numbered references but short descriptions of his main sources. The result, while engaging and

generally rigorous enough, recalls the Poe criticism of earlier decades, when critics often viewed Poe's fiction as philosophical allegories of the mind, and when thematic concerns towered over issues of language. Much of this early work is eloquent and fascinating, but now seems disconnected from the complexities of Poe's literary culture and sometimes even from Poe himself. Douglass mostly ignores the issues of tone and irony that Poe's work inevitably raises; every tale is treated with the same seriousness of intent. The questions of race and gender that have occupied Poe scholars and transformed the academy are nowhere in sight. Douglass also ignores Poe's vast critical work, his poetry and his unfinished play, "Politian." Instead, a familiar deck of stories, "William Wilson," "The House of Usher," "Mesmeric Revelations" is reshuffled into new configurations that often tell familiar tales: Poe's lofty philosophical interests, his artistic genius, his maddeningly dull ("anthropocentrically parochial") contemporaries.

Nevertheless, to his credit, Douglass covers much ground as well. In fact, his book ranges over an impressive number of short stories, roughly in chronological order, including interesting minor works such as "Silence—A Fable," and "Four Beasts in One—The Homo-Cameleopard." He is a meticulous Poe scholar and is often familiar with various versions of the same story; his ability to incorporate an analysis of a story's development during the course of several revisions into his analysis adds interesting dimensions to his discussions. Much of the book is devoted to insightful close descriptions of the stories Douglass has identified as "clusters": groups of stories with similar concerns. Some of these links do not surprise ("King Pest" as a "desperate appeal to laughter in the face of decay"); others are more *recherchés*: "The Masque of the Red Death" as based on Goethe's *Theory of Colors*, translated into English in 1840.

Finally, Douglass is very good on kinetic tropes. As his central image is one of upward movement, he finds movement in space everywhere he looks: descents into vortices, frantic zigzags, and agile leaps and graceful flights. For an author who has been often associated with claustrophobic interiors and pre-mature burials, another Poe emerges from Douglass's book: a poet of vast perspectives and breathtaking energy in his quest for escape from the mundane and material.

AGNIESZKA SOLTYSIK MONNET
University of Lausanne