
Gero Guttzeit. *The Figures of Edgar Allan Poe: Authorship, Antebellum Literature, and Transatlantic Rhetoric.* Anglia Book Series 56. Berlin/Boston: DeGruyter, 2017, 256 pp., 99.95€.

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This study represents a remarkable achievement in research on Edgar Allan Poe, an author who is generally admired as an innovator but controversially discussed and monopolized by different schools of thought and criticism. With its focus on rhetoric as a pervasive creative force in Poe's work it opens a view on a hitherto neglected aspect of this author. Guttzeit claims that the problem of Poe "cannot be fully understood, let alone solved, without rhetoric" (223). Rather than subsuming Poe under the heads of dark Romanticism or Pre-Modernism, he locates "his writings in the historical situation of the transatlantic continuum of the British-American New Rhetoric" (12). In advance it can be said that his whole book provides convincing proof of this assertion. Well-grounded in classical rhetoric and yet open to new theoretical approaches and creative in the utilization of practically all the elements of the system of rhetoric, it makes us understand and appreciate Poe in an entirely new way. And what is most important, rhetoric is here looked at as an essential part of culture, which is in this case the culture of the antebellum period. This culture was, as Guttzeit claims, strongly influenced by the British, especially the Scottish, tradition of rhetoric, a tradition which was still cultivated in America, when in Europe the death bell of rhetoric had been sounded. It is difficult to do justice to Guttzeit's compact, multi-faceted and insightful book. I will first say what the book aims at and what theoretical and methodological foundations it provides for reaching

this aim and then characterize and evaluate the analytical parts of the investigation.

Guttzeit starts from recent insights (Richards 2004; McGann 2013), which perceive Poe not as a pre-modern and footloose writer but as a pivotal figure of the American print culture of his time. It is his aim “not only to remap antebellum print culture through Poe but also to examine Poe’s various figures of the author such as the transatlantic poet-critic, the genius rhetorician, the detective, and the elocutionist in the light of the contemporary culture of rhetoric” in America at a time which coincides with the decline of rhetoric and the rise of the romantic author in Europe (9). The guiding hypothesis of the book is “that Poe’s critical theories, his literary writings, and his authorial performances evince a rhetorical understanding of literature at a period when rhetorical discourse was in the process of becoming separated from poetical discourse” (12). The book’s basic argument hinges on the term *figures of the author* (and of authorship), which is contained in the title – *The Figures of Edgar Allan Poe* – and emerges almost on every page. Hence, the monograph can be understood as a study of authorship, not in the sense of ownership, a concept which arose in the early nineteenth century (Bosse 1981), but in the sense of the author’s intention to attain a certain effect, which permeates his texts. The various manifestations in which the author appears as a writer and creator (not as a biographical person) are called figures by Guttzeit. They are figures not in the classical sense of figures of speech, but they are rhetorical figurations in Poe’s effect-oriented poetics in that in all of the text-types and genres which Poe uses and partially invents the author appears as an agency striving for a specific effect. The concept of *figures of the author* encompasses “both the figurational activities of the author and the resulting products and performances”, or, in Stephan Greenblatt’s terminology, the author’s fashioning of discourse and the author’s self-fashioning. Referring to Jonathan Elmer’s study (1996), Guttzeit speaks of “the dialectic between the author as figurer and figured” (27). He divides the figures of the author according to their dominant aspect into theoretical, poetical and performative figures. The theoretical dimension “relates to the self-conception authors develop in response to the concepts and models of authorship that are present in their own historical situations” (13). The poetical dimension concerns “the interrelated – [basically rhetorical] – activities of invention, arrangement, and stylization”, which may be “self-reflexively foregrounded within the poetical text” (14). The performative dimension “refers to the rhetorical operations of memory and performance”, i.e. the staging of the authorial self in various settings and media (14).

In the book’s second part the author explicates his theory of rhetorical authorship, drawing on the system of classical rhetoric and giving the processes of composing a text (invention, arrangement, elocution, memory, delivery) new relevance in the context of Poe’s poetics, which defines the figures of the author as

“rhetorically structured processes and products of authors’ fashioning of both discourse and themselves as well as cultural topoi on which they base their own discourses” (53). Also he looks at contrasting attitudes towards rhetoric and poetry in the culture of antebellum America and European Romanticism with the opposition of the poet as someone who talks to someone else for some purpose (Campbell, Bryant) and someone who talks to himself and is at best overheard (John Stuart Mill). Poe’s early tale “How to Write a Blackwood Article” is used as satirically illustrating the force field of transatlantic relations, antebellum print culture and the dispersal of rhetoric, which made authorship possible and simultaneously precarious.

The parts of the book which are related to texts are invariably both analytical as well as theoretical. First, “both the persuasive and figurative aspects of Poe’s critical discourses” (“Letters of Recommendation” and “The Philosophy of Composition”) are investigated (91). In “Letter to Mr.-”, figures of the author are demonstrated that range from the Horatian producer of pleasure to the transatlantic figure of the poet-critic. Guttzeit exposes Poe’s endorsement of the rhetorical craft over against romantic aesthetics with its celebration of the notion of genius. The emphasis on the central role of rhetoric in Poe, which has so far eluded scholarly attention, can be regarded as a much-needed correction of criticism, which is performed in the book by emphasising Poe’s indebtedness to the Scottish school of rhetoric. Poe’s privileging of combinatory fancy over the creative imagination [1] and his explicit rejection of the concept of poetic genius [2] and his dismissal of the discipline of aesthetics [3] form the pillars of the book’s theoretical conception, which can claim absolute novelty in Poe scholarship. This is most impressively borne out in the chapter on “The Philosophy of Composition”, in which “Poe’s theory of effects” is explained as a “specifically rhetorical poetics” (126). In doing this, Guttzeit utilizes Genette’s term “autocommentary” and the notion of “writing backwards”, for which Poe finds an example in William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*. Poe is shown “to figure himself” in “The Philosophy of Composition” as “a rhetorical poet-critic, thus attempting to disprove the romantic aesthetics of genius” (147).

When first reading this book, the reviewer was curious to see how the author would integrate Poe’s detective stories into his rhetorical poetics. In fact, he succeeds as everywhere in his investigation, though his argument is problematical in this case in one respect. It is completely convincing for him to relate the figure of the detective, who brings into play his powers of ratiocination in solving a case, to “the poetical figure of the author, invested with inventive powers that are a combination of constructive and analytical powers” (151), so that the detective is a kind of stand-in for the author and his ingenuity. Also it makes sense to draw on C. S. Peirce’s concept of abductive reasoning, in order to describe “the ingenuity of

unravelling a web woven for unravelling” (170). But the “rhetorical-poetic invention” exercised by the figure of the poet in the detective stories is a far cry away from rhetorical invention, i.e. *invention* as the first stage in the production of a rhetorical text. Probably the author intended to fit Poe’s detective stories into his overarching rhetorical system – and it must be conceded that he is a highly gifted system-builder –, but here his procedure does not work without forcing the issue to some extent, though everything else that he says on the rationale of Poe’s detective stories is enlightening. He makes it quite clear that at the beginning of detective fiction there is a specific figure of the author, i.e. a self-conception of the author as an inventor of a detection case, who creates a detective as a kindred spirit to effectively solve the case by applying his ratiocinative capacity.

Whoever is concerned with Poe’s poetry invariably gains the impression that his poems must, on account of their powerful rhetorical use of sound, be read aloud or recited, and that, to be more precise, they have a pronounced performative quality. The chapter dealing with Poe’s verse focuses on the ways in which poetical performance was understood as elocutionary in Poe’s times and how Poe figures the poet as elocutionist performer, thus establishing a performative figure of the author between “jingle-man” and “damned rhetorician” (177). Rather than focussing on the modernist afterlife of Poe, the author argues that at a time of romantic opposition to rhetorical poetry Poe was responding to elocutionary theories, discourses and practices of antebellum American culture. This change of perspective and especially the inclusion of elocution and performance prove to be necessary and highly fruitful, as the discussions of “Ulalume” and the investigation of Poe’s theoretical work *The Rationale of Verse* show. An interesting detail pointed out in Poe’s attempt to carve out an elocutionist stage for the American poet is the apparently slight fact that he opposes the suppression of secondary stresses in British Received Pronunciation and advocates dwelling longer on words, which is adequate to reading poetry aloud. Incidentally, this phonetic-cultural context makes clear that the last sound in the refrain word of “The Raven” – “nevermore” – should be the American retroflex /r/, although the British long open /o/ would also work effectively, as recordings of the poem show.

The last analytical chapter once again impressively highlights the rhetorical orientation of the book in that – analogously to the concluding part of the process of composing a speech (delivery) – it focuses on examples of delivery in various media and genres employed by Poe in order to elucidate intersections between the cultures of print and rhetoric. It includes discussion of Poe’s failing public performances as an orator and the anxiety of the loss of inspiration, for example his notorious appearance at the Boston Lyceum in 1845, where he failed to recite an original poem, which undermined “his credibility in north-eastern literary circles” (204). That the figure of the actor in drama, viewed as connected to

authorial anxieties, offered no way out of these performative quandaries is demonstrated by an analysis of the satiric tale “Loss of Breath”. Ultimately Poe’s final tale “X-ing the Paragrab” is turned to in order to uncover Poe’s strategies of forestalling potential failure of technologically inflected performative figurations of the author. The book’s final chapters re-construct Poe’s singular role within antebellum literary culture and thus lead back and powerfully corroborate the theses established in the book’s first part.

All in all, Guttzeit’s study is not only innovative in its rhetorical approach, which uncovers a hitherto not adequately recognized essential dimension in the whole work of Poe, but it simultaneously locates Poe in a characteristically North American antebellum cultural climate which is intensely shaped by transatlantic rhetoric. In conclusion a word on the relation of Guttzeit’s study to what is generally accepted as Poe’s achievement may be appropriate. Poe is justly famed for his exploration of the abysses of the souls of criminals, victims and psychopaths and the intense representation of emotions like fear, sadness, despair, terror and revenge and his at times bizarre interest in psychological and parapsychological and occultist phenomena. As the book shows, all these concerns receive their specific poetic intensity by the effect-oriented, rhetorical poetics of the writer, which pervades all his literary productions in the form of various figures of the poet. Thus it is no wonder that one of the most intense studies of a criminal’s soul, “The Tell-Tale Heart”, is, while opening our view on a deeply disturbed soul, a powerfully rhetorical text. Poe is also famous for the autonomous sound-structures in his poetry, which are said to anticipate modernist sound experiments. But here again it is the rhetorical, elocutionist manipulation of sound structures, which creates the most powerful effect. It might be interesting to investigate whether the sound quality of poets like Rimbaud, Rossetti or Wilde are not more indebted to Poe’s poetry and poetics than is usually believed.

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