



The Original British Invasion

by Jessica Anne Gard

In the mid-nineteenth century, the dialogue of the American literary world focused on discussion over the need for a legitimate and recognized American literature. Lack of international copyright protection, coupled with the rise of the American capitalist drive and compounded by a need to assert independence from the suffocating yoke of British culture, yielded a disenfranchised generation of American authors who waged a war of literary self-reflection against their culture, their public and the publishing industry.

One of these authors, Edgar Allan Poe, worked to achieve a revolution of American literature through his work as a writer and in the business of publishing. Poe sought ways to bypass the issues of book publishing while still reaching the American public and mercilessly promoted raised standards towards American literature. Poe's "Ms. Found in a Bottle," analyzed through the lens of historical interpretation, echoes the problems inherent in British hegemony in publishing and in American culture, and reverberates with political and personal resonance. This short story is rife with evidence of self-reflection regarding his forays into the business end of serial publications.

The foremost problem presented to American writers was the entrenchment of European literature in the American market. Lack of international copyright protection for works of literature enabled printers to pirate British works and sell them at a cheaper rate than American literature by avoiding the cost of royalties to the author (Thompson xxxvii). Although it would appear the unfairness was in balance on both sides of the pond, the scales of injustice were tipped slightly by the fact that British professional authors outnumbered their American brethren twenty to one (Furnas 322). According to publisher Samuel Goodrich, in 1820 in the United States British authors sold twice as many books as their American counterparts (Nye 76).

Examination of Poe's correspondence reflects the author's frustrated attempts to navigate the hostile climate of American publishing. In the end, circumstances led Poe on a course that formed a

unique aspect of American literature and culture. Poe became a pioneer of the "American short story" (Thompson xv).

Unfortunately, for Poe, the American serials publications fared no better against the onslaught of pirated British literature. The Anglo plague's effect on the magazine, or serial market, was manifold. First, American periodicals had the same privileges as the book printer regarding copyright laws. For example, *Godey's Lady's Book* was almost completely comprised of British material for the first seven years of its publication (Furnas 321-322). A second incarnation was formed by publishers who did not constrain themselves to the pirating of articles but often republished the entire British periodical. *The New Monthly*, the *Quarterly* and the *Political Register* found themselves reprinted for the American market (Peach 17). A third publishing trick was to reprint selections from several overseas periodicals into an eclectic magazine as in the title, *Select Reviews and the Spirit of the Foreign Magazines* (Peach 17). In less damaging and more admirable instances, British magazines served as a template for fledgling American publications such as *American Quarterly Review*, *North American Review*, and *American Monthly Magazine* (Peach 17).

A fine sketch of the frustrating roundabout of Nineteenth century publishing lies in the tale of Poe and his Folio Club manuscript. Poe began earnest attempts at a writing career in 1829. By May 1833, he was peddling a treatment for "The Folio Club" or "Eleven Tales of the Arabesque" to various publishers (Thompson xxiii-xxv). Publishers universally balked at what they perceived to be a risky venture. In 1834, Poe secured a tentative interest from Carey & Lea, but the publisher refused to grant Poe an advance on the publication. The reason for Carey & Lea's reluctance to provide an advance lay in the estimated risk that the publication of the book would not prove profitable. Poe, in dire straights, wrote to his patron John P. Kennedy and requested his intercession in the matter (to Kennedy Nov.19, 1834 www.eapoe.org). Kennedy replied by explaining Carey & Lea's opinion in the matter and describing a compromise to secure Poe needed money. Carey & Lea would send out the short stories in the work to interested magazines, which would supply Poe with money while he waited for the publication to prove lucrative (from Kennedy Dec.22, 1834 www.eapoe.org). This compromise later worked to Poe's detriment and sealed his fate as a short story writer.

Presumably, Carey & Lea's concern regarding the profitability of publication led to a significant delay. When the publication of "Eleven Tales of the Arabesque" by way of Carey & Lea was not forthcoming, Poe sent treatments to more publishers. In 1835, a letter to Kennedy makes it clear that Poe had convinced his employer, Mr. White of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, to print his "Tales" in the format which they were intended (to Kennedy Sept. 11, 1835 www.eapoe.org).

Apparently, the arrangement fell through and in early 1836, Poe appealed to the good nature of J.K. Paulding to help him publish the manuscript. Paulding replied that he knew of two publishers in New York, one published only religious texts and schoolbooks and he held some personal enmity toward the other. Paulding instead forwarded the manuscript to Harper & Brothers (from Paulding, Mar. 17, 1836 www.eapoe.org). Harper & Brothers declined to publish the manuscript, in large part due to the previous publication of much of its material in periodicals (from Harper & Brothers June 19, 1836. www.eapoe.org).

In September 1836, Poe wrote to publisher Harrison Hall peddling the same book (to Harrison Hall Sept. 2, 1836. www.eapoe.org). "Eleven Tales of the Arabesque" would not see publication in a book format until 1839. Lea & Blanchard, formerly Carey & Lea, published it (<http://www.eap.org/works/editions/tga.htm>).

Published in October of 1833, the beginning of Poe's battle over "The Folio Club," Poe's short story, "Ms. Found in a Bottle," shows some of Poe's frustration in navigating the literary world. In this tale Poe is seen as both as captain and passenger on a cursed ship navigating tumultuous seas. He is speaking in a foreign tongue and his voice is less audible than would be natural in that situation. This problem of voice and language in the captain and crew suggests communication problems, problems being seen or discovered, and problems being heard. These are the problems of the American writers in Poe's time.

In the extended metaphor, the ship is the source of the crew's problem and the only thing on which they can rely. This dependence and causation inextricably links the crew, captain, and ship together. The ship is uncontrollable. It is what tosses adrift on the ocean, containing the sailors and condemning them to an eternity at sea. The ship is what can never reach port and so the men within her to share her fate. On the condition of the ship, the narrator says:

She is built of a material to which I am a stranger. There is a peculiar character about the wood which strikes me as rendering it unfit for the purpose to which it has been applied. I mean its extreme *porousness*, considered independently of the worm eaten condition which is a consequence of navigation in these seas, and apart from the rottenness attendant upon age. It will appear perhaps an observation somewhat over-curious, but this wood would have every characteristic of Spanish oak, if Spanish oak were distended by natural means. [italics Poe's] (Poe 113)

In addition to this description of the ship and its peculiar porous wood, Poe mentions a Dutch sailor's saying regarding the inevitability of a ship's body growing in bulk on the sea, as with a living body (Poe 113). Add to this the assertion that the ship itself is caught in a powerful and inescapable current that carries it southward (Poe 115). Furthermore, the narrator claims "the ship and all in it are imbued with the spirit of Eld"; he feels like a "dealer in antiquities" and laments the influence of this spirit. It has affected him and "[his] very soul has become a ruin" (Poe 114).

In analyzing these passages, with the ship as a metaphor for America's literary world and the sea as its primary influencing force, Poe's statements betray a particularly astute commentary on the pervasiveness of British literature and culture. First, the ship being porous takes on more of the seawater (British influence) than is best. Second, is the unnaturalness of the material, "if Spanish oak were distended by unnatural means," the ship presents the appearance of a wood carrying a European means but, the appearance is achieved by an unnatural distending or bloating. The ship is waterlogged with this British influence. Third, the influence that has pervaded the ship has pervaded the men in it, including the narrator. Fourth, the nature of the influence is one of antiquity or, "the spirit of Eld," and like the obsolete mathematical instruments, it is useless, inspires hopelessness and is dead and deadening. Last, this current traps the ship, the pervasiveness of its element destroys the souls of the men and it carries the ship southward or hellbound.

A few years after the publication of "Ms. Found in a bottle," Poe embarked on a career working in the business end of the writing business (Thompson xxvii). He spent many years working on the editor's staff of various literary magazines. He was a vicious critic of American literature, intolerant of both the idea that the promotion of American literature necessitated a lower standard (Thompson xxix) and

the American literary world's aping of European conventions (Poe 632-633). After establishing his reputation, working under various editors, Poe attempted to launch several projects, such as new magazines, which sought only the contributions of American authors or buying out failing serials to revamp the format (Thompson xxxii & xxxix).

Just as tales of Poe's trials illustrate the popularity and development of the short story, a method to which American authors wishing to publish were often limited, the professional trials of Poe as an editor and critic of literary magazines illustrate even more clearly the problems inherent in promoting American literature in the mid-nineteenth century. Steep competition in the serials market led to many failures. Of the four to five thousand magazines launched between 1825 and 1850, only six hundred survived by mid-century (Sellers 371).

The first clue is the use of the abbreviation, Ms., which is shorthand for manuscript in the publishing business. Additionally, several key biographical details relate back to Poe and solidify this impression. First, the narrator establishes his position in society as one in which "hereditary wealth afforded [him] an education of no common order" but he had become estranged from his family (Poe 106). At this point in Poe's life, communications with his wealthy foster father, John Allan, had ceased (Thompson xxiii). Poe then establishes that the narrator has been adrift in the world as if the writing is currently adrift on the sea (Poe 107-108). The parallel to Poe's life is that John Allan had been a steady source of financial and social support for Poe and because of their estrangement in 1830, he was left without the contacts and income on which he had come to depend (Thompson xxiii). "Ms. Found in a Bottle" underscores the reality of Poe alone and tossing adrift on a hostile sea, when the narrator explains how after encountering a mysterious atmospheric anomaly on the sea and experiencing some cataclysm apparently related to it, the narrator discovers that all on the ship, except himself and a Swede, have disappeared (Poe 108-109).

The parallels to Poe's life established, the story moves into the crux of Poe's theme. By October 1833, Poe's passion for a career as an author, an anathema to his foster father, had gained the momentum of ambition. He had been active in establishing himself as an author since 1827, but it appears to have become more a consuming desire as the circumstances of his sacrificed his military career in 1831 might be construed as a choice to focus on writing (Thompson xxii-xxiii). This timeline places Poe in the business of seeking publication for six years prior to the publication of "Ms. Found in a

Bottle." His experience with rejection and other frustrations attendant upon the American author in this time are echoed in the experiences of the narrator. Poe's narrator finds himself flung on to a passing ship, where he is invisible to the crew stating, "Concealment is utter folly on my part, for the people *will not see*" [italics Poe's] (Poe 113). He undertakes to write his "Ms. Found in a Bottle" for the sole reason of tossing his story into the ocean, hoping it will gain an audience, but not for any hope of salvation (Poe 112). Clearly, the frustration of the undiscovered writer manifests in a tale, but in the event the reader doubts, Poe strikes one more blow:

An incident has occurred which has given me new room for meditation. Are such things the operation of ungoverned Chance? I had ventured upon deck and thrown myself down...while musing upon the singularity of my fate, I unwittingly daubed with a tarbrush the edges of a neatly-folded studding-sail...the thoughtless touches of the brush are spread out into the word DISCOVERY (Poe 112).

This theme of the publishing business in "Ms. Found in a Bottle" is not limited to the experiences of the writer. Although Poe would not begin his foray into the business end of serial publications until 1835 (Thompson xxvii), Poe provides an encoded explanation as to the plague in American publishing. As the stowaway/narrator is the writer in this extended metaphor, the crew is the audience and publishers, and the ship is the American publishing business and the culture.

Having established that the men of the ship "*will not see*" (Poe 112), Poe's narrator adds another detail about the crew:

They paid me no manner of attention, and, although I stood in the very midst of them all, seemed utterly unconscious of my presence. Like the one I had first seen in the hold, they all bore about them the marks of a hoary old age. Their knees trembled with infirmity; their shoulders were bent double with decrepitude; their shriveled skins rattled in the wind; their voices were low, tremulous and broken; their eyes glistened with the rheum of years; and their gray hairs streamed terribly in the tempest. Around them...lay scattered mathematical instruments of the most quaint and obsolete construction (Poe 113).

In viewing the "decrepitude" of his fellow countrymen, bent of back and weak of knee, the significance of voices that are "low, tremulous and broken" suggest these are fellow compatriots and

authors adrift in the same impassible ocean. The mention of obsolete mathematical instruments is also telling, their presence underscores failed attempts to solve the problem, an inability to guide the ship, and it supplies imagery that these are men of a long time past. Here is a frustrated narrator/author trapped on a ship frozen in time. This is an accusation that American subservience to the older British culture and literature prevents the growth of American literature. It seems almost certain when Poe's narrator finds Poe among their number:

I have seen the captain face to face, and in his own cabin--but, as I expected, he paid me no attention. Although in his appearances there is, to a casual observer, nothing which might bespeak him more or less than man... In stature he's nearly my own height; that is five feet eight inches. He is of well-knit and compact frame of body, neither robust nor remarkably otherwise. But it is the singularity of expression which reigns upon the face--it is the intense, the wonderful, the thrilling evidence of old age so utter, so extreme, which excites within my spirit a sense--a sentiment ineffable. His forehead, although little wrinkled, seems to bear upon it the stamp of a myriad of years--his gray hairs are records of the past, and his grayer eyes are Sybils of the future. The cabin floor was thickly strewn with strange iron clasped folios, and mouldering instruments of science, and obsolete long forgotten charts. His head was bowed down upon his hands, and he pored, with a fiery unquiet eye, over a paper which I took to be a commission, and which, at all events, bore the signature of a monarch. He muttered to himself, as did the first seaman whom I saw in the hold, some low peevish syllables of a foreign tongue, and although the speaker was close at my elbow, his voice seemed to reach my ears from the distance of a mile (Poe 114).

Physically, Poe seems to be describing himself. Poe's physical appearance is documented; his military records place his height at 5'8", many accounts describe his eye color as gray, which seems to fit with the famous daguerreotype, and most sources describe him as slight of build, an estimated 140 pounds (www.eapoe.org). This is Poe, the writer, at a

moment of revelation regarding the British influence. He is cursing the commission of a *monarch*, which has condemned him to sail an eternity, tossed about on the ocean on an uncontrolled ship. The captain pours over this *royal* commission, as if within it is the solution to the problem. The captain suffers also the same insubstantial voice as the crew.

To understand the depth of the devastating cycle, perpetuated by the lack of international copyright protection on American authors' careers, one must examine the rapid expansion of the United State's printing business that left national literature failing in its wake. A steady innovation in technology and distribution that characterized the mid-nineteenth century, caused an explosion of publication in America. By 1825, America had almost twice as many newspapers as Britain. Magazines and periodicals, which numbered twelve at the beginning of the century, grew to almost one hundred titles by 1825, between 1825 and mid-century four to five thousand more were launched. By 1830, America matched Britain's book production at approximately one thousand titles annually and "the estimated value of American book output more than doubled from \$2.5 million in 1820 to \$5.5 million in 1840." Unfortunately, the nation's writers gained nothing since the subject matter consisted mostly of religious works and schoolbooks with a fair sprinkling of pirated British works (Sellers 369-371). Such a profound loss of opportunity mitigated both the writers' economic and influential gains, and ensured the monetary poverty of American writers and the cultural poverty of the nation.

By 1825, the economic motivations of American printers firmly secured British domination of the American book and magazine market and created a hostile environment toward American authors (Krupat 966). The trend fed the market's creation of a cultural vortex that swept publishers, the public, and literary critics into a vacuum of obsequiousness toward British culture.

In 1820, British literary critic Sidney Smith jeered, "In the four corners of the globe, who reads and American book?" (Sellers 372). Such taunts provided a strong impetus for writers such as Edgar Allen Poe to promote a wholly American literature to rival their European counterparts and win the respect and recognition of the rest of the world as a nation independent of its mother country.

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FURTHER READING

I regret a lack of space required to fully demonstrate the influence of the British culture on America in the first half of the nineteenth century. It seems to be common knowledge as I find it referenced in every source. The following are books and articles I read but was unable to reference that specifically address the problem.

This is an informative introduction to a book of collected articles on the subject of cultural change and the market economy at this time. It also examines the main ideas of a number of works produced on the subjects related to the book's theme.

Martin, Scott C. Introduction. *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution in America, 1789-1860*. Edited by Scott C. Martin. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2005. 1-12.

Examines the role of the literary critic in the Nineteenth Century and the sway he held over the American public and the literary marketplace. Showing how Poe hated New England Brahmins' love of all things British could have significant influence on the American public and cultural development.

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