

***The Pit and the Pendulum and Other Tales*, ed. by David Van Leer**  
(Oxford University Press, 2018)

The short stories of Edgar Allan Poe occupy a fluid space in literary studies, crossing boundaries of the Gothic, mystery, and supernatural. That flexibility allows for a variety of possibilities when it comes to collecting Poe's tales for an anthology, and there is no shortage of Poe anthologies. Beginning with the four-volume *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe* that Rufus Wilmot Griswold edited between 1850 and 1856, more than one hundred anthologies of Poe's work have made it to print in the English language alone. Most of these are smaller volumes that focus on the boundaries noted above, selected and arranged as studies in a particular genre or narrative form.

This Oxford collection, edited by David Van Leer, breaks from that pre-established pattern, in an effort to capture the author's status as cultural commentator. In doing so, Van Leer turned to Poe himself for their arrangement; the ordering is chronological. As an opening note points out, '[t]he most popular [appear] alongside less well-known travel narratives, metaphysical essays, and political satires' (n. p.), encouraging a consideration of Poe's tales in dialogue with each other. This removes the entrapment of setting, characterisation, and genre conventions that can so easily dominate a reading of the tales when, as is often the case, they are clustered in such a way as to guide an insular reading. When a Poe collection is focused on a specific genre or a collection favours the familiar clusters of detection, death of a beautiful woman, or morality, it can be stifling. This collection circumvents that by its curation and with a clearly mapped path of Poe's critical reception from the popular to the academic.

In tracing Poe's critical reception, Van Leer's opening essay (a reissue from 1998) will serve students and new readers well. Like the trajectory of the tales themselves, this Introduction expands outward. It launches from a discussion of the extent to which Poe's life and death impacted his literary legacy, before moving on to document how psychological and linguistic theorists like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida 'brought about a rebirth of scholarly interest in Poe' (p. xi) by focusing instead on the works themselves. In the process, Van Leer asserts, the tales in particular became 'safe for grown-ups to think about Poe without feeling guilty' (p. xi), since Poe was legitimised in the academy by celebrated aesthetic theorists. However, Van Leer argues, this defensive posture ultimately stifled a clear-eyed reading, particularly one incorporating the cultural context of the times in which they were written and Poe's contemplation of those times. The Introduction therefore posits

that readers have been ‘cut off’ from an objective reading of the tales because of the weight of critical analyses that has encouraged a reading of them ‘as otherworldly’ (p. xxi). As an antidote to such readings, by stripping out the insularity of theoretical frames and genre clustering, Van Leer claims that we can ‘read the world back into Poe’ (p. xxi) and get closer to their cultural commentary.

Some of that ‘guilt’ to which Van Leer alludes rests in the clustering of Poe’s works that began with those Griswold anthologies. In carrying the tales beyond *Volume I: Tales*, Griswold inherently flagged those stories contained in *Volume II: Poems and Miscellaneous*, or the ‘Miscellanies’ in *Volume IV: Arthur Gordon Pym, &c*, as somehow of lesser merit. With the exception of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (in *Volume II*), which found its way out of the more obscure tales, the Poe tales given the most attention over time have tended to be those contained in *Volume I*. Van Leer’s Oxford collection does not reject the most canonical of these, such as ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841), ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1845), ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (1839), and ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ (1843) (all of which were part *Volume I*). His including the less anthologised – ‘A Tale of the Ragged Mountains’ (1844), ‘Hop-Frog’ (1849), and ‘The Man That Was Used Up’ (1839) – creates an interlocking relay of tales that ‘underscore the importance of place or environment throughout the fiction’ (p. xviii). The baton passed from one story to the next is the idea of an ‘externalization of mental states’ (p. xviii). When the stories are connected as a whole, as they are here, this idea comes to the fore, helping support Van Leer’s assertion that Poe’s tales were intellectually driven, a consideration obfuscated by the drama and arrangement of those first anthologies edited by Griswold, and perpetuated by subsequent collections that adhere to the genre boundaries that this collection requires readers to ignore.

Asking that a writer as familiar as Poe be read differently is no small task, but this volume succeeds in doing just that. It is fitting that ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’ (1842) sits at the centre of the twenty-four tales collected here. Like its narrator, who is ceaselessly reorienting himself, the ordering of these tales – beginning with ‘MS Found in a Bottle’ (first published in 1833) and ending with ‘Van Kempelen and his Discovery’ (1849) – helps readers look at even the most familiar tales with a new perspective, through which Van Leer’s assertion that Poe ‘subordinate[d] people to place’ (p. xvii) becomes clearly evident. One is left, at the end of reading these tales in the order they are presented, with a sense of Poe in motion, moving ever forward and engaging with the domestic and international events of his day.

*The Pit and the Pendulum and Other Tales* from Oxford University Press is a beautifully bound edition, wrapped in purple cloth. Its curation is equally elegant, and this collection will make even the most familiar tales read as new again.

*Elizabeth Mannion*