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Edgar Allan Poe:
a debt Repaid

first published in

The Coleridge Connection
Essays for Thomas McFarland

edited by Richard Gravil & Molly Lefebure (Macmillan 1990)

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PUBLICATION DATA

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First published in 1990 by Macmillan in *The Coleridge Connection*, edited by Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure.

This chapter is extracted from *The Coleridge Connection*, 2nd edition, 2007. *Humanities-Ebooks LLP*, Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE.

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from

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Essays for Thomas McFarland

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Volume ISBN 978-1-84760-006-6

Edgar Allan Poe: A Debt Repaid

JONATHAN BATE

Poet and teller of supernatural tales, literary critic and theorist, philosophical speculator, author of marginalia, plagiarist, laudanum taker: Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) was something of an American Coleridge. He knew Coleridge’s works well and had no hesitation in making use of them. In the first half of this century Poe scholars busied themselves documenting the influence; they did not, however, stop to consider its dynamics, consequences, or theoretical implications. In 1930 Floyd Stovall undertook a comprehensive survey of ‘Poe’s Debt to Coleridge’, and concluded that he had validated the opinion of one of Poe’s first biographers that Coleridge was ‘the guiding genius of Poe’s entire intellectual life’.¹ But he did not make it his business to ask whether the notion of a ‘guiding genius’ might be problematic in view of Poe’s much-vaunted claim to originality – ‘My first object (as usual) was originality’, he said of his ballad *The Raven*.² Similarly, the scholars who revealed Poe’s unacknowledged borrowings from A. W. Schlegel,³ did not reflect upon the uncanny,

1 Floyd Stovall, ‘Poe’s Debt to Coleridge’, *University of Texas Studies in English*, x (1930) 70–127, repr. in Stovall, *Edgar Poe the Poet* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969) 126–74, quotation from p. 174, citing George E. Woodberry’s 1885 biography. Stovall’s article synthesises the earlier scholarship. A little supplementary material is added by Marvin Laser. ‘The Growth and Structure of Poe’s Concept of Beauty’, *ELH*, xv (1948) 69–84; Darrel Abel, ‘Coleridge’s “Life-in-Death” and Poe’s “Death-in-Life”’, *Notes and Queries*, cc (1955) 218–20; and Gerald E. Gerber, ‘The Coleridgean Context of Poe’s *Blackwood Satires*’, in ‘Poe Symposium’, ed. R. P. Benton, *Emerson Society Quarterly*, LX, Supplement (1970) 87–91.

2 Poe, in ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, quoted from Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, The Library of America (New York: Library Classics of the United States, and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p. 20. All quotations from Poe’s critical writings are from this edition. His creative writings are quoted from the companion volume, Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, The Library of America (New York: Library Classics of the United States, and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

3 See F. C. Prescott’s introduction to his *Selections from the Critical Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Henry Holt, 1909); ch. 3 of Margaret Alterton, *Origins of Poe’s Critical Theory* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Humanistic Studies, vol. n no. 3, 1925); and Albert J. Lubell, ‘Poe and A. W. Schlegel’, *JEGP*, LII (1953) 1–12.