

Edgar Allan Poe is not well known primarily for his depictions of travel. His late novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* was not terribly popular when it was first published, and his shorter pieces, like “MS. Found in a Bottle,” “The Journal of Julius Rodman,” and “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall” remain relatively obscure even today when compared to his gothic tales of terror and his seminal exercises in detective fiction. A careful consideration of his critical reviews, essays, and poetry reveals, however, that Poe was obsessed with the idea of place, and particularly with examining locales that, in the nineteenth century, were deemed exotic, inaccessible, strange, or mysterious. He was not only engaged with the popular nineteenth-century genre of the prose travel narrative—writing reviews of such popular narratives as John Lloyd Stephens’s *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land* (1837) and Washington Irving’s *The Crayon Miscellany* (1835)—but he also adapted the genre’s sense of place to meet his own goal, expressed in his “The Poetic Principle,” of “elevating the soul” through poetry (*Poetry* 1431).

In order to understand Poe’s interest in travel and place, it is necessary to consider the role that travel played in antebellum American literary culture. American travel writing in its earliest years was largely a part of British travel writing; for example, the man who is often considered the first major American travel writer, John Ledyard, became famous for his narratives of his travels with the British captain James Cook (Ziff 20). American travel writing began to develop its own identity in the two decades preceding Poe’s birth. First, the 1790s American war with the Barbary Pirates meant that narratives of captivity in North Africa, both nonfictional and fictional, became particularly popular and resonant. Newspapers such as the *Philadelphia Minerva* regularly reported on American sailors taken captive by the Barbary Pirates, and before long numerous alleg-

edly factual captivity narratives were appearing in print in the new republic.

It was in this atmosphere that American writers of fiction began to engage with the possibilities of fictionalized travel narratives. Royall Tyler, for example, wrote a picaresque novel, *The Algerine Captive* (1797), that satirized the foibles of early American society, inquired into the religious controversies between Christianity and Islam, and attacked the practice of slavery in the United States by using the captivity of white Americans in North Africa as a foil. The two writers Poe reviewed and who are discussed in this essay, Washington Irving and John Lloyd Stephens, both participated in the tradition of American writing about the Near East that the Barbary captivity narratives initiated. Irving, early America's most famous man of letters, researched and wrote widely about Muslim cultures around the Mediterranean and even went so far as to attempt a lengthy biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. Stephens, meanwhile, combined wide reading about the Near East with a personal voyage to the Holy Land.

Stephens and Irving thus participated in nineteenth-century Orientalism—the tradition of Western European and North American writing about the Near East that Edward Said criticizes for its imperialist proclivities in his influential study *Orientalism*. Said argues that the voluminous European writing about the Near East from the nineteenth century tended to reflect the imperial interests of European powers and to represent the Near East as a cultural “Other” against which European civilization could define itself. By inserting themselves into the very substantial European tradition of writing about the Near East, Irving and Stephens created works that can now be seen as American counterparts to the tradition critiqued by Said. These works also raise the question of the degree to which Said's analysis of British and French texts from the nineteenth century applies to nineteenth-century American works, and the degree to which American writers such as Irving and Stephens can be distinguished from their British and French contemporaries.