

THE SEARCH FOR LIFE AND TRUTH IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S TALES

 INDICE

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Poe only believes in man's solitary endeavour to know and to create. The way of knowledge and creation is strewn with innumerable dangers, the danger of walking into unexplored areas, beyond the safe boundaries of the received ideas, beyond the boundaries where communication is still possible, beyond the frontier that separates sanity from insanity. The effort of knowledge and creation widens the gap between man and his fellow beings when the relation between them merely consists in sharing the same false view of life. The search for truth starts at the irreversible moment when one questions «the recognized and *booked* principles» («the *Mystery of Marie Roget*,» p. 414) and does not accept conventional truth¹. The validity of truth is not to be measured by the number of people who believe in it. The most deceiving knowledge is the accepted knowledge, the apparently inviolable truth obtained by consensus, that «sottise conventionnelle» which Poe remembers from Chamfort's writings («toute idée publique, toute convention reçue, est une sottise, car elle a convenu au plus grand nombre»-«*The Purloined Letter*», p. 602). Only at the crucial moment when one doubts the validity of the conventional ideas and starts thinking for oneself, can one embark on the dangerous but no less gratifying quest for truth.

The essence of knowledge and truth lies in the continuous movement towards them, in the very act of searching for them. Truth is a vital reality, it bears within it the very motion of life. A stale, motionless truth would be for Poe ultimately synonymous with death, and it would therefore represent the very contrary of truth, the very contrary of thought, and an extinction of «the soul's self»:

[N]ot in knowledge is happiness, but in the acquisition of knowledge! In for ever knowing, we are for ever blessed; but to know all, were the curse of a fiend... [T]he *sole* purpose is to afford infinite springs, at which the soul may allay the

¹ Quoted from Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Poems And Stories*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn and Edward H. O'Neill, 3rd ed. (1946; rpt. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1958).

thirst to know, which is for ever unquenchable within it — since to quench it, would be to extinguish the soul's self («The Power of Words,» pp. 634-35).

The search for truth is one uninterrupted effort, one uninterrupted process during which one comes to know oneself and to know the world. When one wants to know, one must be open to reality and accept it as it is, accept the truth which is «stranger than fiction»², accept that the impossible is always possible. Everything that is «wild supposition» has the chance of truth³. For truth is not to adjust reality to the presumed knowledge of the «booked principles» but to be open to the marvellous, the «novel» and the «bizarre» of existence⁴.

Poe raises his voice against all attempts to mutilate reality in a Procrustean bed, whether it be by man's technical endeavour to «control» the «natural laws», to get «dominion» over nature, and over his fellow beings («The Colloquy of Monos and Una», p. 359, cf. p. 360), or by his refusal to comprehend the totality of reality.

That is why Poe is an uncompromising anti-reductionist, he demands that each phenomenon should be grasped on its own scale, and interpreted on the level of reality where it is situated. Man is a reality in itself, man is the infinite, to which the supposedly scientific axioms of mathematics cannot be applied:

The great error lies in supposing that even the truths of what is called *pure* algebra are abstract or general truths... Mathematical axioms are *not* axiom; of general truth. What is true of *relation* —of form and quantity— is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example («The Purloined Letter», p. 603).

Nothing is more contaminating than the pretence and illusion of scientism⁵. The ready-chewed principles offer to man an easy but false approach to reality. In fact, they prevent man from *seeing* it. With Poe truth can be seen, because no one can arrive at the truth unless one accepts reality as such, that is to say unless one is able to see it. That is the reason why Poe speaks of truth as being «superficial», «shallow», thus opposed to the false, «undue profundity»⁶. Truth is not invisible, it is not hidden «in a well», but in sight, «upon the mountain-tops» where it can be found («The Murders in the Rue Morgue», p. 326). Truth is thus self-evident, it manifests itself for the one who seeks it, and it is to be found through a sort of spiritual mountaineering which offers man a view of totality.

² «How to write a Blackwood Article», p. 237; motto to «The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade», p. 607.

³ «A supposition apparently so wild has every probability in its favour...» («Ms. Found in a Bottle», p. 136).

⁴ Cf. «How to write a Blackwood Article», p. 235.

⁵ See also «The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion», p. 294.

⁶ «I believed and still do believe, that truth, is frequently of its own essence, superficial, and that, in many cases, the depth lies more in the abysses where we seek her, than in the actual situations where she may be found» («Hans Phaall», p. 165).

«[T]here is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her, and not upon the mountain-tops where she is found... By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought...» («The Murders», p. 326).

For Poe truth is total truth, the truth of the whole, not the mistaken, unbalanced interpretation of «details» («The Mystery», p. 433). In the quest for truth one has to combine observation with imagination, the analytic powers with those of the «poetic intellect»⁷. Even in the investigation carried out by the withdrawn detective the imaginative is fully present⁸. As a matter of fact Poe's stories of ratiocination express all a quest for truth in the deepest sense of the word. Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, Poe's «hero of the mind», is placed outside time and the dangers of time, non-involved in the actual events. He does not play an active part in events, he only strives to discover their meaning. He fathoms the mysteries subjected to his notice, scrutinizes the inscrutable, and he does so by applying «the Calculus of Probabilities» («The Mystery», pp. 396, 433) or «the Theory of Probabilities» («The Murders», p. 333) to the entangled of life and death. Dupin does not always discover *the* criminal, what he finds out is the image of the probable criminal and the probable facts of the crime («The Mystery»). This *image* is an archetypal image, a symbol pregnant with meanings, conveying the trans-historical truth about Law and transgression.

In Poe's Tales the stress falls on the imaginative, on the gift to grasp by analogy, and to comprehend the mystic truth expressed by religion and myth⁹. Turning to the penetrating and creative imagination in order to grasp the totality of life and of man's universe, Poe finds the original meaning of imagination, as defined by Mircea Eliade: «'Avoir de l'imagination', c'est jouir d'une richesse intérieure, d'un flux ininterrompu et spontané d'images. Mais spontanéité ne veut pas dire invention arbitraire... Avoir de l'imagination, c'est voir le monde dans sa totalité, car c'est le pouvoir et la mission des Images de *montrer* tout ce qui demeure réfractaire au concept»¹⁰.

The violent fantastic of Edgar Allan Poe's Tales is, to a great extent, an attempt to shatter the received ideas of truth, putting everything to question, replacing the established principles by the principles of doubt. By imagining a fantastic universe, Poe comes to comprehend (in the true sense of the word) a reality by far larger than generally assumed, governed by laws which point to the thinking presence from beyond the world.

«Ms. Found in a Bottle», «A Descent into the Maelström», *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* are demonstrations by imagination of the possibility of a truth entirely different from the received one. The earth may have another form, the ocean may be rushing into the bowels of the earth, even the laws of nature may be otherwise than we conceive them. The expeditions narrated are also experiences out of time —for truth lies between time and the timeless, at the gates to

⁷ «The Colloquy of Monos and Una», p. 359.

⁸ «It will be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fanciful, and the *truly* imaginative never otherwise than analytic» («The Murders», p. 317).

⁹ «[T]he poetic intellect —that intellect which we now feel to have been the most exalted of all—since those truths which to us were of the most enduring importance could only be reached by that *analogy* which speaks in proof-tones to the imagination alone...» («The Colloquy», p. 359).

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Images et symboles: Essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, 1952), p. 23.

the infinite—, dangerous voyages implying a sacrifice on the part of the explorer. No watch can measure the time of this exceptional experience (all watches stop: before the descent into the Maelström; immediately after entering the holds of the ship, in the case of Gordon Pym) and the character is aware that only by sacrifice can truth be revealed to him: «I positively felt a *wish* to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make...» («A Descent», p. 349). Returning to the usual life after this experience out of time, the hero has become an old man in the space of a few hours. The quest for truth, for the ultimate reality implies the sacrifice of the earthly lukewarm existence.

The truth which Poe's incessant search fundamentally aims at is first of all the deeper truth about man's identity, as defined by the fact of being born, of living in time and of aspiring after eternity. A tormenting question permeates his writings: «Why born? Why born if it is not to live forever?»¹¹.

The mystery of life can only be solved when the mystery of death has been fathomed. Any fundamental question about life implicitly refers to death, any question about death is a question about life. Poe does not envisage the mystery of life versus the mystery of death but the mystery of life-and-death. The solution must be unique, covering both sides of the shield.

The abundance of death-stories does not represent an answer to the essential problem¹². On the contrary, the probability of death is paradoxically put to question since truth is not additional, and two questions do not make an answer¹³. It is not because he can easily imagine death that Poe returns to this time and again, but because he cannot imagine it, because he fails to conceive an appalling reality, the reality of nothingness. With a touch of irony one of his writers-on-the-spot confesses: «I have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius; a deficiency of imagination has been imputed to me as a crime...» («Ms. Found in a Bottle», p. 129). A «deficiency of imagination» prevents Poe from visualizing, from accepting and grasping what in the common view is the unquestionable truth of death. But this so-called «deficiency of imagination» points already to the very nature of the creative imagination: imagination bears within it the motion and diversity of life itself, the infinite of life, of imperishable Being. What is conceivable is existence in all its inextinguishable details. One detail breeds another, one movement brings about another, all is put in motion by a «primum mobile» of irrevocable creation. Here, Poe questions again the validity of all conventional knowledge, both in its general view of life and death and in its minute particular details. In the general view life is a limited space of time preceded and followed

¹¹ This is Béranger's question in *Le roi se meurt*: «Pourquoi suis-je né si ce n'était pas pour toujours?» (in Eugène Ionesco, *Théâtre*, vol. IV (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, 1963; rpt. 1966, 1981), p. 37).

¹² 44 Tales out of 69 (according to the edition mentioned), *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* included, deal with the problem of death, the probability and improbability of death, the relation between life and death.

¹³ Here we should remember Poe's anti-reductionist statement: «Mathematical axioms are *not* axiom; of general truth. What is true of *relation* —of form and quantity— is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. In this latter science it is very usually *untrue* that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole» («The Purloined Letter», p. 603).

by its opposite: nothingness, non-existence. Poe assumes that before life there was life still («In that chamber I was born. Thus awakening from the long night of what seemed, but was not, nonentity...» «Berenice», p. 146) and it is still life that awaits man after the mere accident of death.

In the general view death should be the total absence of any possible determinations. Trying to imagine it (for each of his stories can be regarded as an attempt to grasp what finally remains inconceivable to him), Poe ends up by creating another kind of life, pregnant with reality, where people talk among themselves («The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion», «The Colloquy of Monos and Una», «The Power of Words»), ponder over the forever fresh meanings and mysteries of existence, or atone for their sins committed in the previous life («The Duc De L'Omelette»). These quantitative and qualitative determinations, the eternal return to the essential question about the sense of creation turn death into life. Death as total void and silence is absent from Poe's writing, with only one exception: «Silence — A Fable», in which he shows that there is only one unbearable torment. Not the «disgust with mankind» (p. 220), not desolation and unredeemable solitude, but the terror of silence.

As an empirical argument, it is obvious that for Poe any death is only *apparent*. Any burial is the burial of a living person who had accidentally slipped into a state of trance or catalepsy («Berenice», «Loss of Breath», «The Premature Burial», «The Fall of the House of Usher», «Some Words with a Mummy»). Death is a reality for the others, not for the individual involved, death is a piece of knowledge obtained by *consensus*. It is always the others who state the death of a person, and they mistake the mere slowing down of the bodily functions for a total interruption of life.

In Eugène Ionesco's theatre it is also in the others' eyes that the signs of time, illness and death are apparent. Bérenger's death in *Le roi se meurt* is the others' verdict on him, an alienating word without connection with his own, inner reality¹⁴, and so is the process of growing old for one of the «Vieilles Anglaises» in *Le piéton de l'air*. Old age and death are external to the person who has to submit himself to them, to accustom himself to them. Conformity to death:

Il paraît que l'on ne se sentira pas vieillir. Il faut que les autres vous le disent. On est toujours là, au milieu, on regarde, on ne sait pas. Quand cela arrivera, il faudra qu'on me le dise¹⁵.

Another empirical argument in favour of the paradoxical absence of death in Poe's writing lies in his frequent use of cases of metempsychosis. Man comes back to the life on earth from the place where he had been temporarily exiled, as an animal («Metzengerstein»), as a new human being («Morella», «A Tale of the Ragged Mountains»), as the same as in the previous existence («Ligeia»).

¹⁴ «Sire, on doit vous annoncer que vous allez mourir» (*Le roi se meurt*, p. 20).

¹⁵ *Le piéton de l'air* in Eugène Ionesco, *Théâtre*, vol. III (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, 1963; rpt. 1980), p. 143.

Poe does not give a clear answer to the question obsessing him. His premise is doubt whether death exists or not. He is never at a loss to find arguments for and against the possibility of death. Mr Valdemar («The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar») reveals to him both the possibility and impossibility of death, for life can —by special means— continue indefinitely in a dead body. The hypnotized person, although dead, goes on talking and thinking: hence an argument for the eternity of life, even in the physical sense. Nevertheless, it is the concrete reality of death that makes Poe question immortality. The putrefaction of the body is the only argument in favour of the probability of death. This argument baffles Poe and urges him to start the demonstration all over again. The decay of the body is, in Poe's view, a «necessary condition» of death but not the «sufficient» one. It increases the chances of the probability, nothing more. The cases of «premature burial», of apparent death, of mummification, are all arguments for the immortality of the soul-and-body¹⁶.

As stated before, truth is not additional. The simple fact that Poe multiplies the cases of death, apparent death, metempsychosis, does not mean that he repeats himself and some piece of knowledge he takes for granted. Each case brings something new in comparison with the others, each case is a step further in Poe's quest for the ultimate truth.

He never sets an insurmountable barrier between life and death, he never delineates them as two different and totally separated kingdoms. The borderline is fuzzy, improbable: «The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague» («The Premature Burial», p. 532). Death is present in life and life is present in death, and people are caught in between, «alive, with all the qualification of the dead — dead, with all the propensities of the living...» («Loss of Breath», p. 107).

In spite of the terror of death — which Poe regards as merely anticipative, always referring to a future frightening event, not to a present one or to a present experience, death is not the entire and irrevocable annihilation of life. Something remains («In death — no! even in the grave all *is* not lost», «The Pit and the Pendulum», p. 435) what is preserved is much more than an indefinite «something», it is man's unique identity, given once and for all, man's essence which is immune to the apparent accidents of the life on earth. Animated by an unquenchable thirst for living Poe's Ligeia returns to life and love from the realm of the dead, bearing the same identity, as the same, unrepeatable human being as she had been.

The gift of life can never be lost but through man's weakness, through man's acceptance of death. If death were possible (which, at this moment of our discussion, is still no more than a hypothesis), it is only man that makes it so. Man has power of life and death over himself. «Man doth not yield him to the angels, *nor unto death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will» («Ligeia», pp. 222, 227)¹⁷. Ligeia's words and her resurrection represent two argu-

¹⁶ For «vampirism» and «necrophilism» in Poe's work, see Allen Tate, «Our Cousin, Mr. Poe», in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 38-50.

¹⁷ Quotation taken by Poe from the mystic Joseph Glanvil.

ments: a moral argument related to man's willpower and man's understanding of life and death, and an empirical argument expressed by her corporeal return to the life on earth.

The power of vitality, reinforced by man's own will to come into being and to live, is infinite and irrevocable, permeating all the things of the universe, irrespective of their nature, of their ontological position, no matter whether they are nearer to essence, to the centre of creation, or farther from it. One should imagine life as an infinite number of concentric waves emanating from God. Since all that exists, exists within God, and immortality is the quality of the divine force, then the rest of the universe, as part of God, shares the gift of eternity:

As we find cycle within cycle without end, yet all revolving around one far-distant centre which is God-head, may we not analogically suppose in the same manner, life within life, the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine? («The Island of the Fay», p. 355).

The different stories discussed up to this point have thrown light upon the doubt concerning the possibility or impossibility of death. They are relevant moments, fundamental steps in Poe's «theory of probabilities» («The Murders», p. 333) applied to this topic, which is the touchstone for any thinking human being confronted with the essential question about man's reality, man's condition as based on the meaning of existence and extinction. This row of «pro and con»-arguments shatter the false opposition between life and death. The final result is that death is envisaged not as the contrary of life but as another kind of existence. Plunged into what is wrongly called «death», Poe's heroes do not experience annihilation but are offered a new life, a new ontological status. Through death man enters «unorganized life», in other words, undifferentiated life: «When I say that it resembles death, I mean that it resembles the ultimate life... the ultimate, unorganized life» («Mesmeric Revelation», p. 548).

The new-comers to this unknown realm have to go through a period of initiation into the mysteries, «into the full joys and wonders of... novel existence» («The Conversation», p. 292), and «the majestic novelty of Life Eternal» («The Colloquy», p. 358) is revealed to them.

Thus for Poe death is not an unredeemable void but a passage to another form of existence, an existence of «majestic novelty». The revelation of this novel existence represents more than an increase in knowledge and understanding. It is an initiation into the ultimate meanings. Poe discovers what Mircea Eliade calls «la fonction spirituelle de la mort», the fact that through death man is given access to a spiritual reality and becomes part of this spiritual reality, he is turned into a purely spiritual being¹⁸. Man is at the same time initiated and reborn, as every initiation is both death and rebirth, the death of what was marked by the destroying power of time and by ignorance, and the birth to the new life of spiritual integrity:

¹⁸ «[L]a fonction spirituelle de la mort, à savoir que la mort transforme l'homme en esprit» (Mircea Eliade, *Occultisme, sorcellerie et modes culturelles*, trad. Jean Malaquais (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, 1978), p. 56).

Si on peut dire que l'initiation constitue une dimension spécifique de l'existence humaine, c'est surtout parce que seule l'initiation confère à la mort une fonction positive: celle de préparer la 'nouvelle naissance', purement spirituelle, l'accès à un mode d'être soustrait à l'action dévastatrice du Temps¹⁹.

Man is a being created for death, «Being-toward-death» as Heidegger would call it, but for death as supreme fulfillment, as everlasting, ultimate life. The passage from life to death is not the passage from existence to non existence, but the gradual metamorphosis of an imperfect, inauthentic being into a perfect and authentic one. Beyond the life on earth man gains his genuine condition, his reality and his immortality:

There are two bodies... corresponding with the two conditions of the worm and the butterfly. What we call «death», is but the painful metamorphosis. Our present incarnation is progressive, preparatory, temporary. Our future is perfected, ultimate, immortal. The ultimate life is the full design («Mesmeric Revelation», p. 548).

Having reached Poe's conclusion to the essential problem of life and death, it is necessary to return to his postulate and to retrace the philosophical course of his ideas. Poe starts from the premise that man is the thought of God and «it is the nature of thought to be irrevocable» («Mesmeric Revelation», p. 548), and it is on account of this very premise that Poe cannot, if he is to be consistent philosophically and to create a coherent universe, conceive death. It is not a «deficiency of imagination» that hinders him in picturing death, he is compelled to conceive the existent only, as a consequence of his rational development of ideas and as a consequence of his poetic development. It is not because he fears it, it is not because he suffers from lack of imagination; it is because he has penetrated the very nature of imagination, and because he has created a system of thinking from which the notion of death is banished at the outset. If man as a creature is the thought of God and thought is an irrevocable reality («Mesmeric Revelation», p. 548; «The Power of Words», p. 635), then man is placed within an area of total, perfect, forever undeniable existence. This postulate of total existence relates Poe to Parmenides' vision, in which existence exists and non-existence does not exist, as he expresses it in his philosophical poem: «there is Being, but nothing is not»²⁰.

To go further. From *man as a creature is God's thought and thought is irrevocable* («no thought can perish», repeats Poe in «The Power of Words», p. 635), it follows that man as thought cannot conceive the contrary of thought in other words, man cannot conceive death because thinking is thinking of existence, because thinking and existence are one. Since God creates by thinking, and the centre of creation is «God-head» («The Island of the Fay», p. 355), thought is ultimate-

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Naissances mystiques: Essai sur quelques types d'initiation* (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, 1959), p. 274.

Cf. rebirth in «The Colloquy», p. 358.

²⁰ Parmenides, *A Text with Translation, Commentary and Critical Essays* by Leonardo Tarán (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), Fragment VI, p. 54.

ly an act of creation. And here again Poe meets Parmenides, for whom thinking and existence is one and the same thing: «the same thing can be thought and can exist»²¹.

It is from the principle of rationality of the universe that Poe infers the non-existence of death. It is this rational principle that accounts for Poe's «incapacity» to conceive death. Thought is an act of creation, thought cannot deny itself, for there exists no opposite of «thought». Consistent with his premises, faithful to his vision of the universe, Poe shows by his stories that death is improbable, that death is *impossible*.

Paradoxically enough, what at first sight seems to be a series of horror-and-death stories is in fact Poe's unreserved praise of life.

Searching for the *truth* of life, Poe ends up by finding *Life*. Poe's quest for truth was in fact a quest for life, for the eternal life. Reading Poe's Tales, one realizes that only Truth can give access to the eternal life.

It could hardly have been otherwise in the universe of Poe's writing where *thought* and *life* are one and the same thing: the thought-of-life — the life-of-thought is spreading throughout the universe, like «cycle within cycle without end» («The Island of the Fay», p. 355).

Thought is also man's identity, an identity which God gives to man, for, as Poe writes, «the source of all motion is thought — and the source of all thought is... God» («The Power of Words», p. 636). That is why man is, on the one hand, called to live eternally, and on the other, called to participate in the comic creation. The power of creation is not limited to God, but man, as the thought of God, has the same attribute as the divine power. Man can create the universe, like Agathos speaking the star into being: «The wild star... I spoke it... into birth» («The Power of Words», p. 637).

The creation of the universe by words is one of the most important mythical features in Poe's world, relating his work to the Gospel according to John (1, 1), and to the book of wisdom called The Śatapatha-Brāhmana:

At the end of a year he tried to speak. He said 'blūh': this (word) became this earth; —'bhuvah': this became this air; —'svah': this became yonder sky²².

Similar to the image of the concentric waves of life emanating from God, the power of creation through words extends to the most casual aspects of human petty existence. «Never Bet the Devil Your Head. A Tale with a Moral» is an overtly ironical exaggeration (comparable with the «bizarreries» in «A Predicament») which, nevertheless, expresses his point of view as strongly as his seriously intended tales. Toby Dammit's execution is the outcome of his usual formula: «I'll bet the devil my head» (p. 367). The hero's words, being source of creation, as any words are, do not fail to give physical reality to the devil and to the fatal bet. The «moral»

²¹ Fragment III, p. 41.

²² The Śatapatha-Brāhmana, in Vol. 44 of *The Sacred Books of the East*, trans. Julius Eggeling, ed. F. Max Müller (Oxford, 1900; rpt. Delhi: Mortilal Banarsidass, 1963), XI Kānda, I adhyāya, 6 Brāhmana, 3, p. 12.

of the tale is that the character is punished for his use of words, for his ignorance, for his failure in understanding the nature of man and the nature of creation.

That is why Poe writes in defence of the «power of words» as embodied in the works of thought and imagination, in the literary works, which express man's identity as a creative being.

Cultural values are on the wane though misinterpretation and oblivion. Non-values pass as values, a poor printer's occasional line are considered better than the verses of Homer and Dante, which are regarded as «devoid... of the soul of *Poesy*²³». Criticism, instead of fighting its lonely fight with time: with the time that passes bringing oblivion, and the present time of a civilization which is not progress but regress to a state of non-value²⁴, is marked by conformity to the evils of the time, to the presumed knowledge, fake erudition, complacent illiteracy which have taken the place of an authentic quest for truth and of all authentic spiritual calling. Criticism is a mortal disease of literature, for criticism is also a cultural usurpation. Placing himself out of time -as the Egyptian historians used to do, and returning to life in another epoch, the author can no longer recognize his own text because of all the «annotations, or emendations» that «enveloped, distorted, and overwhelmed the text» («Some Words with a Mummy», p. 630).

Through this distorting, misinterpreting and usurpating criticism, modern man manifests his very refusal of literature, his lack of respect for the written —existent— text, which is in fact lack of respect for reality, for the reality of the created work as such, and for the reality of man as a creative being.

In short, it has been shown that no man can sit down to write without a very profound design. Thus to authors in general much trouble is spared. A novelist, for example, need have no care of his moral. It is there —that is to say, it is somewhere— and the moral and the critics can take care of themselves. When the proper time arrives, all that the gentleman intended, and all that he did not intend, will be brought to light, in the «Dial», or the «Down-Easter», together with all that he ought to have intended, and the rest that he clearly meant to intend: —so that it will all come very straight in the end («Never Bet the Devil Your Head. A Tale with a Moral», p. 365).

The refusal of the written text (of the real text) by the critics who replace it by their own irrelevant interpretations is part of a deep-going crisis which threatens the existence of all cultural values. With his eyes fixed on the present, Poe imagines the future, the people of the new millennium who will obliterate the notion of culture and the notion of man. In the epoch of the frequent and easy travel by balloon («Mellonta Tauta») George Washington, who created history, will be regarded as a barbarian from the long-forgotten cannibalistic prehistory, and

²³ «[T]here is not a printer's devil in our office who is not in the daily of composing better *lines* [better than those of Homer and Dante]» («Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.,» p. 581).

²⁴ Cf. «[O]ne or two of the wise among our forefathers —wise in fact, although not in the world's esteem— had ventured to doubt the propriety of the term 'improvement', as applied to the progress of our civilization... At long intervals some master-minds appeared, looking upon each advance in practical science as a retro-gradation in the true utility» («The Colloquy», p. 359).

the thinkers of mankind will be reduced to: «a Turkish philosopher (or Hindoo possibly) called Aries Tottle», whose «greatest disciples were one Neuclyd, and one Cant» («Mellonta Tauta», p. 686).

The deep cultural crisis which Poe senses in a variety of modern phenomena means a refusal of all spiritual values, a refusal of the past and of eternity, a refusal of the meaning of the present where everything is gathered in a whole, a refusal of the truth and of the quest for truth, which is ultimately a refusal of the very dynamism of life.

To grasp the truth is for Poe to understand the nature of man and the nature of Creation, to accept the created world with its laws (nature), man as an individual and the dignity of man's spiritual endeavour.

In Poe's eyes modern man is about to forget this profoundly human meaning of his endeavour, and become alienated, alien to himself and to reality, as he attempts to rule over nature and over his fellow beings. In trying to usurp God's place, man moves farther and farther from God and from his own identity, and loses the way to the eternity of Life which awaited him: «Man... fell into childish exultation at his acquired and still-increasing dominion over her [Nature's] elements. Even while he stalked a God in his own fancy, an infantine imbecility came over him» («The Colloquy of Monos and Una», p. 359). Raising «huge smoking cities... innumerable, before whose «hot breath» ([g]reen leaves shrank», man's dominion over nature could only result in his deforming and destroying the face of nature («The Colloquy», p. 360). Through his very technical endeavour undermined by *hubris*, man loses in fact his supremacy, as he has to live side by side with creatures of «brass and wood, and leather», creatures with «brains of lead», whose «reasoning powers» and «dexterity» are greater than man's own abilities. («The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade», pp. 618-19). The advent of the new era does not only represent the loss of man's supremacy but also the loss of man's deepest identity, his *moral* identity, as well as the loss of his freedom, understood as the freedom to choose between good and evil: «This thing was of prodigious strength, so that it erected or overthrew the mightiest empires at a breath; but its powers were exercised equally for evil and for good» («The Thousand-and-Second Tale», p. 619). Like Dostoevsky, Poe perceives that the only freedom which is truly human and meaningful is moral freedom, the freedom of one's conscience, the freedom to choose between good and evil, and that modern man is thus threatened in his very spiritual identity²⁵.

Poe sees darkness falling on man, «civil war» raging over continents, crime becoming beneficial for «the mass», and humanity turning into a sick, monstrous species, «odious... rapacious, filthy», instead of realizing and fulfilling its identity as the «thought of God», as an imperishable thought, called to exist eternally²⁶.

More than a century later, the truth of Poe's writings has been demonstrated both by science and by history, which does not imply that the validity of his truth

²⁵ See esp. «The Grand Inquisitor's Legend» in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

²⁶ «Mellonta Tauta», pp. 685, 690; «Mesmeric Revelation», p. 548.

has been recognized, since demonstration and recognition are two different things, not linked together by a cause-and-effect relation.

At the best one reads Poe shrugging one's shoulders and tossing one's head at his preposterous prophecies. At the worst, not being read at all, he exists in the vague notion of «a Turkish philosopher (or Hindoo possibly)»²⁷ by the name of Edgar Allan *Pooh!*

At best, Poe leaves you a doubt: «Who shall say that anything is impossible hereafter?»²⁸.

At worst, man «infected with system, and with abstraction»²⁹ will do his best to demonstrate how utterly wrong, how utterly ludicrous, how utterly impossible, how utterly idiotic Poe was. For look, just look all around you, from one end of the planet to another, do not refrain from admiration: this is, ours, is, the Brave New World!



²⁷ «Mellonta Tauta», p. 686.

²⁸ «The Balloon-Hoax», p. 531.

²⁹ «The Colloquy», p. 360.