

EDGAR ALLAN POE, POET OF ECSTASY

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CHAPTER I

POE'S OWN PREDISPOSITIONS

From the time he was very young, Poe had an extremely sensitive nature, predisposing him to ecstasy, which is a nervous state. He was excitable and fickle.

He was very excitable and restless, at times wayward, melancholic and morose, but again--in his better moods frolicsome, full of fun and a most attractive and agreeable companion.¹

His over-developed sensitiveness led him to melancholy, for more than once he was hurt, and specially when he was still very young. Later on it developed into a kind of morbid and physical sadness, which was implanted in the mind of the poet through habit rather than by reason. Coming from an unknown source, it is a kind of mystical sadness, and he will use everything in nature as a pretext to justify his melancholy.

On the other hand, his sensitive nature, bound to be hurt, was hurt both in his own family life and with his first love; and as a kind of self-preservation, he withdrew within himself with his dreams and reveries, ignoring purposely the outside world, source of so much sorrow.

¹ Arthur H. Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1941), p. 108.

Also, partly because of his own desire to ignore the world, partly because of his Platonic belief in its unreality, he was predisposed to ecstasy, to accept it, to believe in it.

Poe himself acknowledges his sensitiveness when he says, "I am constitutionally sensitive--nervous in a very unusual degree."²

According to the testimony of his schoolmates, he led a self-absorbed life, frequently of high intensity. Later on, this practice of introversion led him to the revelation of romantic ecstasy. From ecstatic lyricism to mere ecstasy is but a short step. Poe's rambling through nature prepared him for the pantheistic doctrine. He became familiar with the universe through which the voice of God was speaking. Fleeing from the society of his fellowmen, he became, according to his own testimony, a solitary rambler:

Nothing yields me pleasure, but solitary communion with the mountains and the woods--the 'altars' of Byron. I have thus rambled and dreamed away whole months.³

This rambler was an idler, too, and ecstasy implants itself better in an idle mood. Idleness progressively empties the soul of its conscious content and makes thus a clear road

² John H. Ingram, Edgar Allan Poe: His Life, Letters and Opinions (London: J. Hogg, 1880), Vol. 2, pp. 132-134.

³ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 428.

for ecstatic visions and obsessions. He says, "I am and have been from my childhood an idler."⁴

These obsessions, or these visions revealed in ecstasy, exist mainly because of the importance which the poet attaches to them. As regards Poe, he always believed with a quasi-superstitious faith in his inner revelations.

Edgar Poe's dreams were assuredly often presageful and significant, and while he but dimly apprehended through the higher reason the truths which they foreshadowed, he riveted public attention upon them by the strange fascination of his style, the final analytic temper of his intellect and above all by the weird splendor of his imagination, compelling men to read and to accredit as possible truths his most marvellous conceptions.... With all the fine alchemy of his subtle intellect he sought to analyze the characters and conditions of his introverted life. 'I regard these visions,' he says, 'even as they arise, with an awe which in some measure moderates or tranquilizes the ecstasy--I so regard them through a conviction that this ecstasy, in itself, is of a character supernal to the human nature--is a glimpse of the spirit's outer world.'⁵

His belief in ecstasy is reinforced by the fact that in his own particular life, metaphysical problems arose which could not be solved by reason. The only possible solution was to turn to personal revelation.

Ecstasy is romantic escapism. Poe, overburdened with cares, hagridden with poverty, had naturally the desire to

⁴ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 46.

⁵ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 691.

flee the world, to forget the material circumstances. The only way to forget the non-ego was to withdraw within himself, to look within himself for his inner dream. When the outside world hurts one, the only shelter against it is within one's self. At the same time, ecstasy is a means of fleeing from one's self. One forgets himself when the visions from above swarm into his consciousness.

The question of whether Poe was or was not addicted to drinking has often been argued. At the time he attended the University of Virginia, according to the testimony of some of his schoolmates, he did not drink to excess but was absolutely unable to stand even a very little quantity of liquor without becoming drunk in no time. Thomas H. Lane, who knew him for several years, while acknowledging that "a drink or two" changed Poe from a mild man "in every way a gentleman" to a quarrelsome inebriate, insisted that Poe did not take drugs:

"To calm and quiet the excessive nervous excitability under which he labored, he would too often put himself under the influence of that Invisible Spirit of Wine."⁶

When accused of drinking, Poe protested that he was normally sober. "I pledge you, before God, the word of a

⁶ Ibid., p. 108.

gentleman that I am temperate even to rigor."⁷ He, more than once, insisted on the fact that he was abstemious. But this very defense proves that he habitually drank and at least enough to have become drunk more than once; nevertheless he fought this inclination very hard, but from it probably got a guilt complex which is obvious in some of his poems.

The second puzzling question about Poe is whether or not he used laudanum or opium. According to Dr. English's verdict Poe was never opium-addicted. But there is in his poems, an inner evidence characteristic of the dreams of opium. If we believe Coleridge and De Quincey, the alternation of darkness and light, the presence of gaudy colors, and obsessions are generally characteristics of drug-addicts. But these might be simply the result of a morbid imagination.

To decide whether or not Poe used opium or laudanum to forget the world in an ecstatic dream is not within my competence.

Added to all the other influences of his time, and it may be these are the most important, are the literary influences. Two main influences can be distinguished in his works: The philosophical influences of Plato and the

⁷ John W. Ostrom, editor, The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 156. (Hereafter referred to as Letters.)

Neo-platonists, on the one hand, and the influence of the Romanticists, especially Coleridge, on the other.

On February 14, 1826, Poe entered the University of Richmond. There, according to the testimony of W. Wertebake, he studied French, Spanish, and Italian. Poe also took Latin and Greek; and if he did not happen to read either Plato or Plotinus in the text, he probably learned about them.

Poe's debt to the Neo-platonist tradition is considerable. Plotinus, influenced by oriental thinking, thought that what reason cannot reach intuition can comprehend. There is, besides intellectual knowledge, another ineffable way of knowledge which puts us in direct communication with the perfect and unique God. Contrary to his predecessors, Plotinus tries to rid mystic knowledge of all its intellectual apparatus, which had always been used, before him, to prepare or fortify it.

Poe holds the same belief as the one we find in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
 Such shaping fantasies that apprehend
 More than cool reason ever comprehends.
 The lunatic, the lover and the poet
 Are of imagination all compact:
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
 That is, the madman: The lover, all as frantic,
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
 The poet's eyes, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to
 heaven;

And as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name.⁸

This intuitive faculty which Poe praises so much is partly a gift divine and partly a product of imagination.

The revelation of ecstasy is pantheism. Plotinus, commenting on and developing Plato, believed in a universal soul giving life to all the beings on earth, sea, and air. This soul had created the sky and the sun; and through it, this world is a God. The sun is a God, too, because it is animated by this soul and if there is something divine in us, it is for the same reason. These beliefs of Plotinus were taken up by Poe, who believed in the power of ecstasy; and he followed Plotinus, too, in the belief in pantheism.

Still according to Plotinus, another element of unity in the world is Beauty, for the very essence of the world is Beauty. Eternal nature is primitive Beauty and all which comes from it is Beautiful. This aesthetic view of the world is held by Poe, too.

The other influence which helped Poe to develop his ecstasy is romanticism. Byron, who was the most popular writer among students at that time, influenced Poe in his

⁸ Hardin Craig, editor, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1951), Act V, Scene 1, p. 201.

early writings. The Byronic pose, likewise, appealed to him in his early days.

Thomas Campbell, who was extremely popular at that time, influenced the rhythm of "To One in Paradise."

"No more--no more--no more
 (Such language holds the solemn sea
 To the sands upon the shore)
 Shall bloom the thunderblasted tree,
 Or the stricken eagle soar!"⁹

But the most important influence was that of Coleridge. Paying him a tribute, Poe declares that he owes his pre-eminence "rather to metaphysical than to poetical powers"¹⁰ and this pre-eminence, Poe tries to achieve through the same revelation. Poe, like Coleridge, held that a poem should be short, and they both believed in symbolism and the value of the subconscious as a power of revelation.

Poe followed Coleridge's doctrine regarding the value of Beauty and Strangeness, and his belief in pantheism. It has even been said that "The Raven" was another version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." This is probably going too far but there is a striking likeness in the poems.

⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 962.

¹⁰ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 246.

CHAPTER II

POE'S THEORY OF ECSTASY

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe proclaimed his official creed on the influence of ecstatic intuition in the composition of a poem.

Most writers--poets in special--prefer having it understood that they compose by a special frenzy--an ecstatic intuition--.¹

Poe wants to prove that this widely accepted belief is but an old legend, an ancient prejudice without any foundation, and that inspiration has little--if anything--to do with the composition of a poem. This attempt to prove the ineffectualness of ecstatic intuition is reinforced by a personal experience. His poem "The Raven", he says, is a composition devoid of poetic frenzy and inspiration.

It is my design to render manifest that no point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition....²

Thus, it would seem that poetry is but the result of intelligible, logical, mathematical calculation, planning, and reasoning. It is the product of craftsmanship: nothing is left to genius or inspiration. It is within almost anybody's power to make a good poem, the only requisite being the formula.

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 193.

² Ibid., p. 193.

But this too easy, too obvious, official demonstration, this negation of poetic intuition is but a hoax and is in keeping with Poe's propensity for mystification.

There are several objections to this explanation, as set forth in "The Philosophy of Composition". First of all, his demonstration was written after he had composed "The Raven"; and even by explaining the creation afterwards, he does not prove that such a logical thinking pre-existed its composition and engendered it. His mathematical dissertation would be possible for any poem after it has been written, but does not prove the pre-existence of any reasoning to the creative act. In this apparently logical reasoning, the result or conclusion is put first and from it the premises are drawn. But this is a highly artificial method and in a stroke of genius there is no calculation.

The main objection to this logical fabric, however, is given by Poe himself in a letter to his friend C. Mathews, in which he confesses that "The Raven" was an obsession, and that the idea of the poem did not leave him alone until he had written it. He had, as it were, the flapping of its wings in his ears and he found peace and rest only when this inspiration had taken shape in the form of the well-known poem. This statement refutes his system, elaborated in cold-blood after the composition. In fact, "The Raven", like

many of his other poems, was the result of an ecstatic obsession.

Though Poe tries to refute the popular belief that poetry is the product of divine inspiration, we find in the whole of his works, a widespread praise of ecstasy, "that pleasurable elevation or excitement of the soul"³ which is a divine gift. He praises it as a sure way to knowledge and he dedicates his so-called book of Truth, Eureka

To the only ones able to grasp Truth, that is to say, to those who feel rather than to those who think--to the dreamers and to those who put faith in dreams as the only reality.⁴

This proves that Poe really believes himself in the power of inspiration, and that his official creed was just a hoax.

Ecstasy is the mystical mark of genius bestowed by God on the chosen few. In ecstasy, God himself is the speaker and through the poets, he is conversing with mankind. Poe believes in the Greek theory that a poet was inspired by a kind of frenzy coming from the gods. In the same way the Roman poet, the Vates, was communicating with God too, in a trance, source of his inspiration.

³ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 99.

⁴ Clarence Stedman and George E. Woodberry, editors, The Works of Edgar Allan Poe (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1895), Vol. 9, p. 4. (Hereafter referred to as Works.)

This inspiration is the mark of genius because it is a source of revelation; it is given by God to enable the poet to discover the great mysteries of the world. It is in fact the only means of revelation worth believing in.

In the world, there are two apparently irreconcilable things: the ego and the non-ego. To fill the gap between them there is only one means, which is the contemplation in the absolute reached by ecstasy. Thus ecstatic intuition is the only way through which the differentiation between the subject and the object can be leveled.

This ineffable ecstasy has already been praised by Coleridge. It was Plotinus who taught its value to the occidental world. For originally ecstasy is a product of oriental thinking and civilization. It is a debt to the mysticism of India.

In ecstasy, there is a quick knowledge of the invisible world, and though Poe denies the presence of ecstatic intuition in his works, he acknowledges that it is to it that Coleridge owes his pre-eminence. It is to metaphysical rather than to poetical powers that the great poet owes his excellency.

In "Israfel", he refutes the Wordsworthian principle that poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility and expresses his belief that the poet should be in the grip of

strong emotion. This belief becomes the key-note of "Israfel" and "Romance":

And when an hour with calmer wings
 Its down upon my spirit flings--
 That little time with lyre and rhyme
 To while away--forbidden things!
 My heart would feel to be a crime
 Did it not tremble with the strings.⁵

Besides, man knows more through intuition than through mere reasoning. The discovery of Truth is not the result of cold deductions, inductions, reasonings, and so on, but is the product of a personal and intimate feeling. Truth is a mystical grace which one feels, perceives, senses rather than finds through dry and logical reason.

Abstraction may amuse and exercise, but take no hold of the mind. Here upon earth, at least, philosophy, I am persuaded, will always in vain call upon us to look upon qualities as things. The will may assent--the soul--the intellect--never. I repeat then that I only felt, and never intellectually believed.⁶

This is the reason why he does not believe that science reveals things as they really are. To him, science alters all. The only true reality is to be found in the poet's heart.

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 82-83.

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 89.

Intuition, sister of divine ecstasy, helps to sense the revelations from another world. To back up his belief, Poe quotes Pascal:

Pascal, a philosopher whom we both love, has said, how truly! que tout notre raisonnement se réduit à ceder au sentiment.⁷

He thus praises the triumph of intuitive knowledge over reason and says those who put their belief in their dreams are in the right way.

They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in waking, to find that they are upon the verge of the great secrets. In snatches, they learn of the wisdom which is of God, and more of the mere knowledge which is evil.⁸

Apart from the traditional teaching, each person knows the Ineffable through personal, mystical revelations. We must discover the secret meaning of things if we want to understand the great secrets. It is easy to discover by intuition which reveals in a quick glance the very essence of things. The intuitive knowledge does not stop at the unimportant aspects but goes directly to the core of the subject.

The intuitive and seemingly casual perception by which we often attain knowledge, when reason herself falters and abandons the effort, appears to resemble

⁷ Ibid., p. 446.

⁸ Ibid., p. 649.

the sudden glancing at a star, by which we see more clearly than by a direct gaze; or the half closing of the eyes in looking at a plot of grass the more fully to appreciate the intensity of the green.⁹

Ecstasy has the power to transcend things and to catch only the essentials of them.

Our body belongs to the world of appearances and our soul to the transcendental world of realities. If we can liberate the latter from the bondage of matter, it will partake of the life of the transcendental world, in which it will be part and parcel and thus be able to know its secrets. It is a better way of knowledge, for there is no security in the active human faculties--reason and judgment. Sharing in human nature, they are both limited and inclined to the same errors as the senses. They are based on human rules, which can be entirely false; and if a single proposition of the reasoning is false, the whole fabric is valueless. Neither of the processes by which the mind works is safe for Poe.

There is no absolute certainty in the Aristotelian or Baconian process--that, for this reason, neither philosophy is so profound as it fancies itself--and that neither has a right to sneer at that seemingly imaginative process called Intuition (by which the great Kepler attained his laws) since Intuition after all is but the Conviction arising from those inductions and deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, defy our capacity of expression.¹⁰

⁹ Works, Vol. 8, pp. 330-331.

¹⁰ John H. Ingram, Edgar Allan Poe: His Life, Letters, and Opinions (London: J. Hogg, 1880), Vol. 2, pp. 149-150.

Poe attacks both types of reasoning as being slow and crawling. As a means to determinate Truth, ecstasy is much superior to reasoning. Besides having the advantage of being quick, it bears with itself the conviction of its own truth. It has always been easier for the mind, especially for the mind of a poet, to be convinced by feelings rather than by logical reasoning. It is easier to believe in a dream than in a theorem. Abstractions will not convince but a blind faith will always find arguments to support and prove. One can always--or nearly always--prove a belief but one cannot always believe in a proved truth.

Especially in metaphysical knowledge, the importance of intuition is greater than in material knowledge. Poe, disciple of Pascal, thinks with him that in the realm of metaphysical knowledge, God is sensible au coeur et non à la raison. At that point intuition only can help us. Intuition is accompanied by a feeling which makes it easier to believe, specially when this intuition comes from nature:

Nothing can be added to the force of an argument which the mind finds in every beast, bird, or flower.¹¹

This intuitive faculty, which Poe praises so much, is partly a gift divine and partly a product of imagination.

¹¹ Works, Vol. 8, p. 328.

This faculty brings his soul often to a glimpse of things supernal and eternal to the very verge of the great secrets. There are moments, indeed, in which he perceives the faint perfumes, and hears the melodies of the happier world. Some of the most profound knowledge--perhaps all very profound knowledge--has originated from a highly stimulated imagination.¹²

In France, at the dawn of romanticism, the famous quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns arose between the upholders of the classical doctrine and their long-haired opponents. Not so famous and not so spectacular was the crucial question of the romantic age in England. The debate on Fancy and Imagination dates back to Coleridge when in his Biographia Literaria, he made a distinction between those two faculties. By this distinction, Coleridge reduces Fancy to a lower level, giving the supremacy to the only respectable faculty: Imagination. The essential difference was, as he expresses it, that Fancy constructs something out of something, while Imagination really creates. A creative act is "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation."¹³ While the former faculty is a mere workman, the second is a demiurge. This distinction was respected by many of the romantic writers and had long been a matter of controversy.

¹² Ibid., Vol. 8, p. 328.

¹³ J. W. Mackail, Lectures on Poetry (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), p. 270.

Poe denies this distinction. He puts both of the faculties on the same level and denies to either of them a really creative power in the full sense of the word.

The Fancy as nearly creates as the Imagination and neither creates in any respect.¹⁴

They are not different, as Coleridge thought, because neither of them creates completely, that is to say, creates from entirely uncreated material. They do not create something out of nothing but both of them use memory. They put the different material in an original order but the whole of it comes from created things since

The mind of man can imagine nothing which has not really existed.¹⁵

Something may seem new but if we analyze it, we will discover that its components are parts of the old stock of known things. The wildest and most vigorous effort of the mind cannot stand the test of analysis, and Poe's opinion proved true for Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", which seems to have been created completely from new things. In The Road to Kanadu all the different material from Coleridge's most imaginative poetry, are patiently discovered as belonging to already existing beings.

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 281.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 282.

So, Poe applies to poetry the law that something cannot spring from nothing. Creation in poetry, as in anything else, springs from the man's memory and is thus determined by it.

However, Poe makes a distinction between Fancy and Imagination, but it is a distinction of degree and not of nature. Imagination is just Fancy loftily employed.

What we feel and know to be fancy will be found still only fanciful, whatever be the theme which engages it. No subject exalts it into the ideal.¹⁶

The supremacy of Imagination does not reside in imagining extraordinary things, for something more extraordinary can always be imagined. Its supremacy is in the fact that it lifts its creations into the ideal. Its conceptions stand as a whole, enveloped in the moral sentiment of the ideal. Here is the distinction Poe makes:

The truth is, that the just distinction between the fancy and the imagination (and which is still but a distinction of degree) is involved in the consideration of the mystic.¹⁷

Imagination implies what Poe calls the mystic, which lifts the creation to an ideal, making it a whole and giving it its majesty. Poe used the term mystic in the same sense as Schlegel and the German philosophers. The term mystic is

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 282.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 285.

applied by them to that class of composition in which there lies beneath the transparent upper-current of meaning, an under or suggestive one. What we vaguely term the moral of any sentiment is its mystic or secondary expression. It has the vast force of an accompaniment in music. This vivifies the air; that spiritualizes the fanciful conception, and lifts it into the ideal.¹⁸

In plainer and more modern words, it is a theory of symbolism. The poetic creation in itself, the image, has no value. It is worthwhile only in its symbolical meaning, its philosophical and metaphysical sense which gives it life and spirituality. A good poem should have thus at least two meanings: an apparent and physical one and a hidden and symbolic one. As illustrations, he quotes "Christabel" and "The Ancient Mariner" as strongly mystical for they imply more than the images they describe. There is a deeper meaning in them.

We may conclude, according to Poe's thinking, that the Imagination has the power to make us see beyond life itself. It is not the power that creates things; it is the power that discovers the unseen, the unknown. It is a brief flash during which man catches a glimpse of eternal beauty, of eternal truth, during which he shares in eternity itself. Fancy is the power to describe what exists and what is

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 285.

already known. Imagination discovers what exists in a transcendent world. The former partakes of matter, the latter of eternity. The revelations of Imagination are eternal, those of Fancy ephemeral.

Ecstasy as a Source of Aesthetics in Poetry

In "The Poetic Principle," Poe disclaims any "design to be either thorough or profound," saying he wants only to discuss "very much at random, the essentiality of what we call Poetry."¹⁹ After having run through the theories, as old as the hills, which identify poetry with truth or good, Poe states his own point of view. But before taking up a definite attitude, he refutes briefly the two general ideas identifying poetry either with truth or with morals.

Poe does not deny the strength of value of truth but says it differs radically from poetry from the point of view of their "mode of inculcation." The mode of expressing truth--which should be one and absolute--should be limited in order to be forceful and strong. It does not only differ from the one of poetry, but it is entirely different from it. Poetry cannot have the dissemination of truth as an end, for such would imply that poetry would follow the rigid,

¹⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 167.

logical mode of inculcation of truth which is incompatible with the very essence of poetry.

This sentiment is the sense of the beautiful, of the sublime, and of the mystical. Thence springs immediately admiration of the fair flowers, the fairer forests, the brighter valleys and rivers and mountains of the earth--and love of the gleaming stars and other burning glories of Heaven--and mingled up inextricably with this love and this admiration of Heaven and of earth, the unconquerable desire to know. Poetry is the sentiment of Intellectual Happiness here and the hope of a higher Intellectual Happiness hereafter. Imagination is its soul.²⁰

Poetry should aim at pleasure, be brief, indefinite and musical. Besides, in a letter to G. Eveleth, Poe states that possibility is sufficient to poetry; a poet does not need to be true.

For the purposes of poetry, it is quite sufficient that a thing be possible. The language of poetry should be flexible, malleable, to follow the ever-moving shades of human thoughts, while the language of truth demands "severity rather than efflorescence of language."²¹ In pursuing truth as an end "we must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. And this unimpassioned mood is

²⁰ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), pp. 91-92.

²¹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 171-172.

as 'opposite as possible to the poetical mood," for with Poe "poetry was not a purpose but a passion."²² He thus disagrees with Wordsworth's poetic ideal of "emotion recollected in tranquillity" and firmly believes that the poet should be in the grip of strong emotion. He expresses this belief in his poem "Israfel". Poetry is a passion, an impulse, the product of imagination not of reasoning.

Poetry should be pursued as a passion not as a study since learning has little to do with imagination--intellect with the passion--or age with poetry.²³

But if poetry and truth are entirely different in their expression, poetry by aiming at beauty, aims at what is most true in the world. According to Shelley,

Poetry is something divine. It is at once the center and the circumference of knowledge. It is that which comprehends all sciences, and that to which all science must be referred.²⁴

As regards poetry and morality, Poe is more brief. This old problem has already been solved in his mind; as an artist, he is above morality. He is not immoral but amoral, for there is no common measure for art and morality. They belong to two different worlds, their essences are entirely different.

²² Ibid., pp. 171-172.

²³ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 60.

²⁴ Paul R. Lieder and Robert Withington, The Art of Literary Criticism (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1941), p. 465.

So, if poetry is neither truth nor good, what is its essentiality? The only end of poetry to him is the search of the beautiful, the discovery of beauty in revelation, the expression of it in its art. The first influence of beauty upon the poet's mind is that it helps develop the dreaming faculty and thus favors the birth of ecstasy.

The sight of beauty did not affect his aesthetic sense so much as it aroused his dreaming faculty. He looks out on the world as a vague and undefined delight.... His imagination so predominates over his perceptive powers, he is so much more poet than artist that he loses the beautiful in the suggestions, the reveries, the feelings, it awakens, and this emotion is the value he found in beauty throughout his life.²⁵

This exaltation is constantly the object of his regret and his longings.

"twas the chilly wind
came over me in the night and left behind
Its image on my spirit"²⁶

Poetry's "first element is the thirst for supernatural beauty." It is "the rhythmical creation of beauty." The reason for this search of ideal beauty is "an immortal instinct deep within the spirit of man which is thus "plainly a sense of the beautiful."²⁷ Beauty is not only a necessary

²⁵ George B. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 34.

²⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 8.

²⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 99.

aim of poetry, but certainly the final end to which it tends. Beauty is an instinct inherent to man as much as the instinct of survival, for the essentiality of the world is beauty. The everlasting nature of creation, its inner essence, its true essentiality is beauty, and to discover beauty would be to discover the very essence of the whole creation.

Al Aaraaf's obscurity is due to Poe's attempting--not only to tell a story--but also to express in an allegorical form some truth which he had arrived at. In the rapid growth of his intelligence, beauty, which has been merely a source of emotion, became an object of thought--an idea as well as an inspiration. It was the first of the great moulding ideas of life that he apprehended.²⁸

This Platonic idea of the world, the essence of which is beauty, leads Poe to the same idea as Plato as regards beauty: There are two aspects of beauty: the material and multiform and the ideal and unique. And he who shall simply sing what he sees or hears--expressions of the material beauty in this world, perceived through the senses of man--does not deserve the divine title of poet. A true poet, like the inspired Vates of the Romans, must transcend the material appearance of beauty and going beyond, reach the perfect image of beauty which exists only in the world of ideas, in the ideos. The desire we have of beauty is "no

²⁸ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 48.

mere appreciation of the beauty before us--but a wild effort to reach the beauty above us."²⁹

For real beauty is more than the appearances seen on earth. The supernatural loveliness, the one and indivisible beauty transcends all the apparent manifestations. Those manifestations only help to understand and to reach the ideal beauty. When we see beautiful things on earth, we must wonder how beautiful must be the beauty from which those beautiful things sprung. For all the differentiations of beauty on earth are but the embodiment of the eternal beauty, in the essence of which they share.

Still following Plato, Poe thinks that by synthesizing in our minds the different aspects of beauty, we would form the right idea of transcendental beauty. "In every glimpse of beauty presented, we catch through long and wild vistas, dim, bewildering visions of a far more ethereal beauty beyond."³⁰ For that appreciation of beauty around us is necessary, but it is only a means, a stage. The physical world is used as a spring board to the world of ideas.

If the "obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth"³¹

²⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 98.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 286.

³¹ Ibid., p. 696.

cannot be reconciled, from the point of view of the mode of expression, as Poe stated in his "Poetic Principle", they nonetheless have a common term: Beauty. For, beauty, by the virtue of her own existence and by its belonging to the transcendental world of ideas, implies truth. A thing of beauty is a thing of truth.

To the few who love me and whom I love--to those who feel rather than to those who think--to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities--I offer this Book of Truths, not in its character of True-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth, constituting it true.³²

Thus, Beauty is a message of truth.

Beauty, whether natural or imaginary, whether springing from the creative act of God or the creative thoughts of man, affects the mind as a glimpse of the infinite, and thus excites instantaneous pleasure and furthermore, stimulates men to endeavour to penetrate deeper into the mystery that encompasses them. Beauty is thus a revelation of infinite truth, seized only by the imagination.³³

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. Poe thinks that through the poet's insight, by catching a glimpse of beauty, he catches a glimpse of the deeper reality of the world.

In the same way, beauty is a message of the good. It leads man to morality. It is the protection of the soul

³² Works, Vol. 9, p. 4.

³³ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 92.

against sin. Poe ascribes to exaltation a symbolic, spiritual meaning and even a moral power as being something given

In beauty by our God, to those alone
Who otherwise would fall from life and Heaven
Drawn by their heart's passion³⁴

To grasp this supernatural loveliness, which is the source of poetry, of morals and belief in God, we have to struggle against space, time and matter. We steal glimpses into eternity, and the rapturous joy of this inspired struggle constitutes the poetic pleasure. This poetic pleasure must elevate man above himself to the ethereal spheres of eternity and unchangeability. These glimpses of ideal beauty which we get in poetry through ecstasy are the essentialities of poetry.

Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone.³⁵

This ideal beauty, which exists in the Ideos and which we try to reach, is only attainable through intuition and ecstasy. They put us in connection with the "under-current" of consciousness, which is the realm of revelation. There are two currents of consciousness in the soul of man: an

³⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 7.

³⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 98.

upper, clearer one which forms the clear idea, easy to understand. It is the realm of clear, logical ideas. Under it, is the current of the subconscious, fathomless, in communion with the ineffable. If we can reach this undercurrent, we shall be in connection with the worlds of reality and it will bring revelations to us.

Concluding his definition of poetry, Poe says poetry is the Rhythmical Creation of Beauty and in such inheres its only possible purpose.

Beyond the limits of Beauty its province does not extend. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. It has no dependence, unless incidentally, upon either Duty or Truth.³⁶

Ecstasy is the only means by which one may reach this transcendental beauty, in which the body is nearly asleep and the mind is floating, open to the revelations of the transcendental world. Ecstasy is the supreme freeing of the incarnate being; it is the return to, in this bodily jail, of the immortal life of the soul with its dazzling intuitions and its communion with the whole universe. To share in this whole one must rekindle in his soul the divine flame which must burn without ceasing.

Ecstasy is the only key to understanding the profound reality of the beautiful, the deeper sense of ideal beauty,

³⁶ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 334.

the under and suggestive current of meaning which lies under the transparent upper one. It is the secret meaning that we must reach, the secret of every thing to which ecstasy leads. Every one can know the ineffable, apart from the traditional revelation through mystical intuition. To contemplate beauty, one must forget himself and let his deeper self melt into the universal current in a trance which resembles nearly positive dissolution of the personality.

But beauty beheld in trance has a special character: Beauty and ugliness are close. Like Coleridge, Poe can only appreciate beauty when it is mingled with strangeness. Quoting Bacon, and approving his statement, he thinks that: "There is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in the proportion."³⁷ This love for strange beauty leads Poe to depict the neurotic. In some of his visions, the pictures he draws are strangely morbid; The beautiful is close to the repulsive.

Poe follows the European tradition of the Gothic novel, makes full use of the Eighteenth Century means of terror already used by a whole generation of writers. He likes to set his atmosphere in dark rooms, to use ghosts and supernatural spirits. He represents the terror of the ocean

³⁷ Francis Bacon, Essays and New Atlantis (New York: Walter J. Black, 1942), p. 180.

and the strange beauty of an imaginary star, "Al Aaraaf". He uses superstitions like "the raven" being a bird of ill omen and the city by the sea. The idea of physical or moral destruction, especially, draws his attention. All along there is a kind of terror in his works, terror felt by man in front of God and of the unknowable.

There is a two-fold respect in the beauty painted by Poe. On one hand, there is the beauty which flattens the senses refined by the culture of arts and civilization. It is a sensual and plastic beauty, as in the setting of the chambers for his stories. On the other hand, we have images which are absolutely free from civilization's influence, which have kept their whole value of dreams, of visions caught in one artificial Paradise.

So once more Poe has followed Coleridge's doctrine. "The pure imagination chooses, from either beauty or deformity, only the most combinable thing hitherto uncombined."³⁸

This belief, originating with Coleridge, was fully subscribed to by Poe. Beauty should have some disproportion to be more striking. Classical beauty seems tasteless compared to this new beauty which always presents a very strong aspect of thinking. An artist should have the sense of

³⁸ Works, Vol. 9, p. 225.

disproportion or deformity. The element of strangeness in a poem is the more valuable part of that poem.

Take away this element of strangeness--of unexpectedness--of novelty--of originality--call it what we will--and all that is ethereal in loveliness is lost at once. We lose--we miss the unknown--the vague--the uncomprehended because offered before we have time to examine and comprehend. We lose, in short, all that assimilates the beauty of earth with what we dream of the beauty of Heaven.³⁹

Poe there agrees with Shelley:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things.⁴⁰

Ecstasy as a Source of Metaphysical Knowledge

Heaven, according to Poe, has secrets; and God sends us messages to unveil those secrets. His message is sent through the means of beauty, direct revelation of God to mankind, and protection of the soul against sins. It is the only means we have to communicate with God for the essence of the world is beauty, likewise the essence of God. Mesace, in "Al Aaraaf", is the embodiment of beauty and it is God who sent her to mankind.

³⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 311

⁴⁰ Paul Robert Lieder and Robert Withington, The Art of Literary Criticism, p. 467.

Yet thine is my resplendency, so given
 To bear my secrets thro' the upper heaven!
 Divulge the secrets of thy embassy...⁴¹

From the idea of ideal beauty springs the idea of infinity, eternity, perfection and the idea of God living in Eternity. The one

Who livest--that we know
 In eternity--that we feel.⁴²

Thus, the knowledge of beauty leads to the knowledge of God, for beauty is the conveyer of man to his beautiful native shore: God.

Helen, thy beauty is to me
 Like those Nicean barks of yore,
 That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
 The weary, wayworn wanderer bore
 To his own native shore.⁴³

Through intuition and ecstasy only can one reach "Al Aaraaf," symbol of Beauty, where the message of God can be found.

By winged fantasy
 My embassy is given.⁴⁴

Beauty which is the essentiality of the world is the essence of God too.

⁴¹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 65.

⁴² Ibid., p. 64.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 86.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

Beauty, whether natural or imaginary, whether springing from the creative act of God or the creative thought of man affects the mind as a glimpse of the infinite and thus excites instantaneous pleasure and furthermore, stimulates men to endeavor to penetrate deeper into the mystery that encompasses them. Beauty is thus a revelation of infinite truth, seized only by the imagination. Poetry requires imagination rather than sympathetic power in both its maker and its readers.⁴⁵

"Poetry redeems from decay the visitation of the divinity in man,"⁴⁶ says Shelley. As for Pascal, the philosopher to whom Poe has already alluded, God is sensible au coeur et non à la raison. In a similar way Poe rejects the deductive, logical way of discovering God. We find God through ecstatic intuition, through the "pure contemplative spirit and majestic intuition of Plato" which in this case "is most desperately needed."⁴⁷ Reasoning is a human instrument, applicable to human range and discovery only. Everybody has the power to reason but ecstatic intuition is a godly gift. It is divine and infallible and can transcend human reason.

Heir of the romantic poets in general and Coleridge in particular, Poe looks at the world from a pantheistic

⁴⁵ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 92.

⁴⁶ Paul R. Lieder and Robert Withington, The Art of Literary Criticism (New York: D. Appleton Co., 1941), p. 467.

⁴⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 446.

point of view. "All is Life--Life within life--the less within the greater and all within the spirit divine."⁴⁸ But this spirit divine, source and principle of all, where is it? It is diffused throughout the whole world and throughout the whole creation. God is everywhere. His spirit is to be found in the whole creation from which he is not distinct. The universal mind is God,

The ultimate and unparticled matter, not only permeates all things, but impels all things; and thus is all things within itself...⁴⁹

With Poe it is the triumph of the natura naturans of Spinoza where God is immanent to the world he creates and not--as in the Christian doctrine--distinct from it. Thence the only principle of the world is unity.

Life is the only reality, life which is the materialization of God's will.

The unparticled matter permeating and impelling all things is God. Its activity is the thought of God--which creates.⁵⁰

Also all the living creatures are but the infinite individualization of this God. We are parts and parcels of Him. Everything shares in the primitive and metaphysical unity of the world, because there is one common soul, one souffle vital:

⁴⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Works (20th Century Edition), Vol. 9, p. 227.

⁴⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 91.

⁵⁰ Letters, p. 257.

In youth have I known one with whom the Earth
 In secret communing held--as he with it,
 In daylight, and in beauty from his birth: 51

The matter is multiform but the spirit is one. The whole universe has one life, common to all beings--rational or not--all things are but the expression of this one life, one embodiment of this vital principle. To understand one of those things, to pierce into its secret, is to share into the whole universe's secret. Through the different appearances, the same spirit sways the scepter. When in ecstacy the soul is dissolved into the whole, there is a relation of identity between spirits. All souls tend to be identical as a differentiation of the spirit of God. God is but will. Ours is a particle of his and we share in his divinity through his will. We are all an infinite particle of his will. Thus, when Lady Rowena dies, her spirit fades into The Whole and is replaced by the spirit of Ligeia.

In the same manner, the spirit of love is one, and all the different loves on earth are facets of it. Loving one or another being satisfies the spirit of love.

The same identity of souls appears in "William Wilson" and in "Al Aaraaf".

All nature speaks and even ideal things
 Flap shadowy sound from visionary wings 52

51 Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 6.

52 Ibid., p. 64.

Nature is neither a mere frame to human activity, nor the reflection of a state of mind. It has its own existence, independent of anything else. This existence is one and indivisible for the whole of the universe. It springs from the omnipotent power diffused in all nature, unknowable by the means of the senses, and is attainable only through ecstatic intuition.

The world is not different from its creator. God and the world are one and indivisible. To know one is to know the other. The world is God. The activity of matter is God himself, and God is present in nature.

The eternal voice of God is passing by....
And you can hear Him through Nature.⁵³

From the torrent or the fountain
From the red cliff of the mountain
From the sun that round me rolled
In its autumn tint of gold
From the lightning in the sky
As it passed me flying by
From the thunder and the storm
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view.⁵⁴

Before finding the image of God in oneself, one must first find Him in the world. The first revelation of God is in nature. According to Spinoza there are two different pantheistic points of view towards nature. In one, which he

⁵³ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

called natura naturata, nature is passive, created and set into motion from the outside, for God is distinct from nature and is separated from the world he created.

In the natura naturans, nature is active and creative. It partakes of the elan vital with all phenomena. Thus, God is immanent to the world. He is not distinct from his creation and thus the essence of the world is unity. Poe believes in the second part of the alternative and thinks that God is to be found in nature from which he is not distinct. To understand nature would be to have discovered God.

But if this God is inherent in nature, what is his essentiality? He is not a spirit in the normal sense of the word for to Poe

There is no such thing as spirituality. God is material. All things are material; yet the matter of God has all the qualities which we attribute to spirit: thus the difference is scarcely more than the words. There is matter without particles--of no atomic composition: This is God... Man and other beings (inhabitants of stars) are portions of this unparticled matter, individualized by being incorporated in the ordinary or particled matter.⁵⁵

From one pantheistic point of view, man is not superior to the world in which he is a part. In fact, he would rather be inferior since, being conscious, he would tend somewhat to separate from the whole current of consciousness.

⁵⁵ Letters, p. 260.

But, in Poe's thinking, man is not inferior to the world; he is far superior. We all share in the whole, that is to say, we all share in the spirit of the world which is the spirit divine. And by that we are ourselves part and parcel of God and the spirit divine:

This heart divine? What is it?
It is our own.⁵⁶

We thus are God ourselves. God, being inherent in his whole creation, is also inherent to man. In fact, man is just a differentiation of the spirit divine.

The ending of Eureka is purely imaginative. It deals poetically with the relations of a still existent Being and those creatures "which are really but infinite individualizations of Himself" they are conscious of a proper identity "conscious secondly and by faint indeterminate glimpses of an identity with the Divine Being of whom we speak--of an identity with God." The former will grow weaker, the latter stronger, till Man "will attain that awful triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehova."⁵⁷

This notion of pantheism is not reached from the outer world. It starts from Poe's inner nature. As Descartes thought "Cogito ego sum", so Poe thinks: God is everywhere; so God is in me, so God is me. The best way for man to know God is to dissolve into the whole of nature where God is present and thus to melt into the spirit divine. Ecstasy,

⁵⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Works (Twentieth Century Edition), Vol. 4, p. 223.

⁵⁷ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 555.

setting the soul free to be invaded by the universal spirit of the world, connects it with the heart divine.

This fusion between the ego and the non-ego is only obtainable in ecstasy. What reason cannot reach, intuition can grasp. This trance, very nearly resembling positive dissolution, is the only way to the knowledge of God.

To know God, we have to be of the same essence, we have to be part of the divine nature, ourselves. As Poe discovered hidden secrets of God and nature he identifies himself with God.

We know nothing of the nature or essence of God--in order to comprehend what he is, we should have to be God ourselves.⁵⁸

This is the explanation of the way of discovery: ecstasy by identification with God, and of the result: Man is God himself.

Ecstasy, by putting man in harmony with the whole universe, is a coming back to the primitive unity.

Communication of Ecstasy to the Readers

My spells are broken.
The pen falls powerless from my shivering hand.

I cannot write--I cannot speak or think
Alas, I cannot feel; for 'tis not feeling

⁵⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Works (Twentieth Century Edition), Vol. 4, p. 293.

This standing motionless upon the golden
Threshold of the wide-open gate of dreams.⁵⁹

This gazing, entranced by the world of realities, this ineffable ecstasy so difficult to attain and to prolong, is still more difficult to express and to communicate to the readers when the trance is over, when the "spells are broken." This difficulty springs from the fact that Poe's ecstasy partakes of the Ineffable, the inexpressible, which does not belong to the material world and which has to be communicated through the ordinary, material means of expression: language.

Worn out by everyday use, deprived of nobility and soiled with materialism--such is language with its stiff, static, and logical pattern, into which Poe will have to express his ecstatic, dynamic, imprecise thoughts.

"Oh! How powerless is the pen to express such feelings as now consume me!"⁶⁰ The essence of language so differs from the essence of the thoughts of the darker part of the consciousness that there is hardly any term common to both and it is difficult to reconcile them in expression, though this reconciliation is the poet's mission, for his

⁵⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 100.

⁶⁰ Letters, p. 399.

thoughts can only take a communicable shape when they are clad with words.

Language is perpetual Orphic song which rules with Daedal harmony a throng of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were.⁶¹

To express the abstract by the concrete is hardly possible, especially when the thoughts are not very precise; but nevertheless the abstract should be expressed in a clear manner. For there is a difference between the expression of obscurity and the obscurity of expression. And Poe's obscure thoughts, shadows of thoughts, should still be expressed in a clear way.

Reason and judgment, which have been suspended during the ecstatic trance, would interfere again in expressing the result of the revelation. The personal, private, intimate experience has to become universalized and shared. To be understood, revelation has to be diffused through language; yet such diffusion is contrary to the very essence of ecstasy which is personal revelation. Thence results a terrible struggle to express one's thoughts.

I would give the world to embody one half of the ideas afloat in my imagination.⁶²

⁶¹ P. B. Shelley, Prometheus Unbound (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1901), p. 203.

⁶² Letters, p. 32.

Poe realizes very vividly the gap between what he feels and what he can communicate to his fellow man. If the poet could transmit to men his ecstasies and his visions, humanity would be better; for it would understand the great secrets of the other world and communicate with nature. Because ordinary men do not feel divine intuition, it is the duty of the poets to reveal their discoveries; but unfortunately they are solitary singers and the language is not a proper instrument. If they, free of consciousness, could but let the voice of nature itself speak through them, men would recognize the very voice of the universe in their songs.

Because the expression of his revelations is difficult for Poe, instead of expressing them, he wants merely to suggest them by creating an atmosphere similar to the ecstatic one in which he bathed during his trance. A poem is not the Poetic Faculty but the means of exciting it in mankind. His means of creating an atmosphere are music and symbolism. But he first stated the creed, helped by Coleridge's dictum, that a long poem is a contradiction in terms and thence impossible. An inspired poem should be short to keep "the unity of totality of interest" which was rightly termed by Schlegel. Symbolism is to expression what ecstasy is to comprehension. In his essay "Fancy and Imagination" Poe lays down as a principle the importance of symbolism.

There lies beneath the transparent upper-current of meaning an under or suggestive one. This vivifies the air, that spiritualizes the fanciful conception and lifts it into the ideal.⁶³

Symbolism is the expression through an image of a mystical and transcendental idea. The image is not only beautiful in itself but also illuminates the idea. It has not only direct value but a symbolical one which transcends itself.

With the Classics, the image is a mere means of understanding when no other means is preferable. With Poe--and with the Romantics--an image is an inestimable ornament and an end in itself. It has, on the one hand, its own beauty; on the other, illumination of the subject.

In the symbol there is a mystical connection between the image and the thing symbolized. The image explains a sensual or intellectual reality; the symbol a mystic and transcendental one. There is no symbol if there is no transcendental meaning. To be symbolical the image must evoke an invisible and specially inexplicable element, unjustifiable by reason.

In classical metaphor, the second term of the comparison is not expressed but is clear and often unique; there is only one possible interpretation. In symbolism,

⁶³ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 285.

the image generally has several possible meanings which complete one another, and the image thus becomes richer for all those different meanings which form the symbol.

For Poe symbolism offered one of the best possible means of expression. To express ecstasy, which is mystic and primitive intuition, symbolism--obscure and primitive, too--was most suitable. A clear means of expression would not only have been unsuitable but impossible.

Symbolism is an old and primitive means of expression. Primitive peoples destroyed statues of their enemies thinking they thus destroyed their enemies. By destroying the image, you destroy the thing. From the middle ages until this century, witchcraft has been practiced on dolls. Symbolism is thus an extreme idealism, for matter has no existence and the sensual world is immaterial.

In the poem "To Helen" the image of a Nicean bark is the symbol of beauty leading man to God--his native shore. The boat, having been a simple allegory of forces which bear the soul from physical to metaphysical life, becomes a cosmic force by itself. Correspondences are but the reflections of the invisible world on the veil of the sensorial one. There is a link between the world of appearances as revealed by the senses and the world of realities as revealed by intuition. The supernatural world manifests itself through symbols. These symbols, discovered and interpreted by

ecstasy, are expressed by symbolism. They are beings or things--the manifestation of one supernatural power. "The Raven" is the symbol of the despair living in Poe's heart, the symbol of the inexorability of destiny. The teeth of "Berenice" may be in the same way the symbol of truth to be discovered, of the great secret to be stolen from the Gods, of beauty wrung from death, of eternity. The eyes of "Ligiea" are the image of the mystery of the world.

The main power in symbolism is the word. To name a thing is already to possess it, or to create it. One can have power over things through the magical incantation of words. Symbolism is a kind of primitive religion in which the image and the name of the thing have the same characteristics as the reality. Poe believes in the spell cast by names. To pronounce them is to evoke the person, to make him appear, to have him in one's own possession.

Berenice--I call upon her name Berenice!
 And from the grey ruins of memory a thousand
 tumultuous recollections are startled at the
 sound! Ah! Vividly is her image before me now!⁶⁴

The power of the name is the power of evocation; it is a throwback to the belief in the power the name has in the pagan rites over the person. The name carries an image with it.

⁶⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 643.

Thine image, and---a name--a name--!
Two separate---yet most intimate things⁶⁵

Thence the importance of the words and their analogy. The similarity between two verbal symbols proves to the illuminated the metaphysical similitude between the two things. Sounds as well as thoughts are related between each other as well as towards what they represent. The connection in the poet's mind between two words implies the metaphysical relation between the two objects represented.

So strong was Poe's belief in the power of words that he wrote in *Marginalia*:

Now so entire is my faith in the power of words that, at times, I have believed it possible to embody even the evanescence of fancies such as I have attempted to ascribe. I do not altogether despair of embodying in words at least enough of the fancies in question to convey to certain classes of intellect a shadow conception of their character.⁶⁶

In addition to the symbolism of his poems, Poe used music as a force of suggestion. Music is essential "when combined with a pleasurable idea of poetry."⁶⁷ It helps communicate the emotion, which is the basis of poetry. Music carries the emotional value of a poem, and as Poe

⁶⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 78.

⁶⁶ Works, Vol. 9, p. 197.

⁶⁷ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 61.

cannot express his ideas--the product of his visions--he tries to communicate through the emotions.

The reality lies in emotional contact. If two men exchange thoughts, they are fellow-beings, if they share an emotion, they are brother-men.⁶⁸

And music by creating an atmosphere helps communicate "the consummation of thoughts which is not in the knowledge but in the emotion."

It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the poetic sentiment, it struggles--the creation of the supernal beauty.⁶⁹

Poe quotes Plato, with whom he agrees, stating that a musical education is most essential because it helps the soul to understand the beautiful, which is the main end in human life.

A musical education is most essential, since it causes rhythm and harmony to penetrate most intimately into the soul, taking the strongest hold upon it, filling it, with beauty and making the man beautiful-minded.⁷⁰

Music is essential and Poe uses it in his poems in a most unusual way. In the second line of "The Haunted Palace", for instance, he breaks the rule that forbids a weak

⁶⁸ George E. Woodberry, Inspiration of Poetry (New York: Macmillan Co., 1910), p. 14.

⁶⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 98.

⁷⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 446.

syllable to be in a weak position, but he breaks it successfully by producing

A harmony baffling the lesser poets who have observed all the rules. Poe's use of the subtler harmonies of tone color, such as the contrast of open and close vowels, his variation in the amount of stresses and in the time intervals between the stress, produce such matchless lines as:

But evil things, in robes of sorrow⁷¹

In a similar way the music he creates in his poems is not a mere imitation of the real sound. It tends to create an atmosphere, to suggest a state of mind

For that wide circumference
In easy drapery falls
Drowsily over halls--
Over waterfalls--
O'er the strange words--o'er the sea--
Alas! over the sea!⁷²

The music of this passage does not suggest anything but the low, sad "a" sound repeated many a times, giving a melancholy, sad atmosphere to the scenery.

In "Ulalume" the music fits the thought. The repetition of verses represents the conflict in the poet's mind as he slowly approaches the grave, step by step. The rhythm glides along until suddenly it breaks into pieces in the last stanza.

⁷¹ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 272.

⁷² Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 133.

If music which is the necessary complement of the poetry cannot be supplied with instrument, words will have to supply it.

Music is the perfection of the soul, or idea, of Poetry. The vagueness of exaltation aroused by the sweet air (which should be strictly indefinite and never too strongly suggestive) is precisely what we should aim at in poetry. Affection, without bounds, is thus no blemish.⁷³

If we try to judge "Al Aaraaf" according to the standards of clear poetry, it is a failure, for passages are disconnected. The too abrupt transition surprises and disconcerts. The images are not clear and connected; the poem is an innovation, a new experiment

in the translation of feelings into the harmony of sound. The words have a definite meaning, they are not merely words, however; they become symbols of that fusing of thought and feeling which a musical symphony produces.⁷⁴

According to Poe himself, his best lines in the poem are

There nature speaks and even ideal things,
Flap shadowy sounds from visionary wings⁷⁵

Poe's devices to communicate his ecstasy are numerous and varied. He even used plastic devices as in "The Fall of the House of Usher" where a painting in a long tunnel, lighted

⁷³ Arthur H. Quimm, op. cit., p. 429.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 161.

⁷⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 64.

by unexplained rays, gives the atmosphere of a mind oppressed by fear and engaged by its own obsessions.

The use of contrast between the happy aspect of things, on one side, and their gloomy appearance, on the other, is another device to express the irreconcilable mystery of things found in ecstacy, for example the beginning of "The Haunted Palace":

In the greenest of our valleys,
By good angels tenanted
Once a fair and stately palace
Radiant palace--reared its head⁷⁶

and the ending when

A hideous throng rushed out forever
And laugh--but smile no more.⁷⁷

Poe's style has been widely discussed. He has been called both The Jingle Man and a master of the English language. Quinn pays this tribute:

It is not questioned that Poe was a consummate master of language--that he had sounded all the secrets of rhythm--that he understood and availed himself of all its resources; the balance and poise of syllables--the alternations of emphasis and cadence--of vowel sounds and consonants--and all the metrical sweetness of "phrase and metaphrase"⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 238.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 239.

⁷⁸ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 689.

CHAPTER III

POE'S PRACTICE OF ECSTASY

How does this feeling of ecstasy, which we have tried to analyze with respect to Poe's own theory, manifest itself in his works? First of all, it should be said that Poe's ecstasy is characterized by a certain number of general features, inherent to that intuitive feeling before it goes through the different stages from mere day-dreaming to the morbid and the abnormal.

Idea of Revelation

The first characteristic of Poe's ecstasy is the belief that there is revelation in the world

In the quivering of a leaf--in the hue of a blade of grass--in the shape of a trefoil--in the humming of a bee--in the gleaming of a dew-drop--in the breathing of the wind--in the faint odours that came from the forest--there came a whole universe of suggestion--a gay and motley train of rhapsodical and immethodical thought.¹

This statement is Poe's belief expressed through Bedloe's mouth: What we come across in the world is full of mystery, symbols. Everything round us is a mysterious token from God, a riddle given to us to be solved. To him,

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 681.

everything in the world is mysteriously meaningful, every detail is worth wondering at. In the commonest object in the universe, he found a world of revelation and a heavenly message. Thus, in the eyes of his beloved Ligeia he thinks he can discover the eternal secret of the universe if only he can decipher their mystery, "beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth."² And many a time he found himself on the very verge of the Great Secret and many a time that secret has escaped him; it always remained the unattainable.

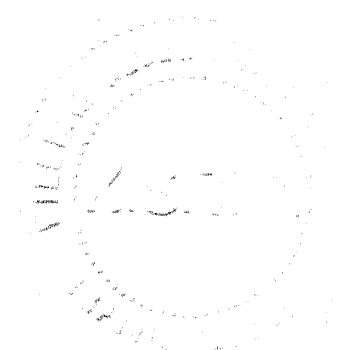
The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it--that something more profound than the wall of Democritus--which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What was it? I was possessed by the passion to discover.³

As soon as something has a mysterious or unfathomable appearance, it contains a revelation. To him, the two words mysterious and revelation soon become synonyms.

And the mystery Poe saw--or believed he saw--in the eyes of Ligeia is diffused through the whole creation. He found in nature the same puzzling expression as he found in her eyes.

² Ibid., p. 655.

³ Ibid., p. 656.



I found in the commonest objects of the universe a circle of analogies to that expression.... I recognized it, let me repeat it, sometimes in the survey of a rapidly growing vine--in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water. I have felt it in the ocean--in the falling of a meteor.... I have been filled with it by certain sounds from stringed instruments, and not infrequently by passages of books.⁴

This feeling that there are riddles to be solved in the world is easily explained by Poe's Platonic idea about the world. In the creation, there are two different sides of the world: the material or physical world of appearances that we see every day by means of the senses and the world of realities--above the former and out of reach of the senses and attainable only through intuition.

There are some qualities--some incorporate things,
That have a double life, which thus is made
A type of that twin entity which springs
From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.⁵

Sometimes the world of realities flashes on the world of appearances here and there, and it is left to man to understand the flashes. For those flashes of Truth on the veil of the material world do not appear in a clear way. Nothing is given to us in a simple manner; we have to solve the riddle, to decipher the universal mystery in the prophetic signs God sends us. Every one of those signs is

⁴ Ibid., p. 656.

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 33.

a symbol and a token
Of what in other world shall be--and given
In Beauty by our God,⁶

So, below this visible aspect of things, there is a hidden aspect, a symbolical meaning to be discovered and interpreted. If one only listens to nature around him, one will hear a "Naiad voice"⁷ which addresses him from below the appearances of things,

And the sly, mysterious stars
With a visage full of meaning,⁸

will be ready to unveil their secrets of eternity. The character of intuition is to substitute the inner world for the outer one, to replace the material by the spiritual and ideal vision. For that, matter is but a spring board towards the ideal. Material things are only a source for emotions.

But this divine message sent to us in human beings, in nature or in visions, is not going to be deciphered by anybody. It can be revealed through intuition only--a divine gift--which is given as a mysterious mark of genius to the chosen only, and especially to the poet. Poe still

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 6-7.

⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Essays (London: Everyman's Library, 1948), p. 286.

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 108.

retains the Grecian idea that poets are inspired by God, that God himself speaks through them, and only through them converses with us. For the poet, according to the Greeks,

was a divine man, more sacred than the priest, who was at best an intermediary between men and the gods, but in the poet the god was present and spoke. For, said Socrates to Ion, not by art does the poet sing but by power divine.⁹

Poe is sure that he is among the chosen to whom it has been given to interpret the divine message.

A Suspension of Disbelief

In this world, full of mystery, symbols and tokens can only be discovered by the mens divinator of the great poet. To him revelation is possible mainly because he does not doubt there is a revelation and does not question the result of his ecstatic revelation. He is convinced of his role of prophet, meant for discovering and transmitting God's message given to him through symbols.

The Truth hidden behind those symbols is revealed through ecstatic intuition and what is revealed through this means can be believed unquestionably, for Poe lays down as a principle that one cannot be misled by intuition.

There are few thinkers who will not be surprised to find, upon retrospect of the world of thoughts, how

⁹ George E. Woodberry, The Inspiration of Poetry (New York: Macmillan Co., 1910), p. 1.

very frequently the first or intuitive impressions have been the true ones.¹⁰

So, in ecstasy, Poe feels that the ecstatic revelations are the truth and the only things worth believing. He experiments the same as Coleridge did, a suspension of disbelief which constitutes in Poe's case the ecstatic faith. Intuitive dreams and visions appear to him as real, while the sensations revealed in ordinary life through the senses seem to have no reality. The land of dreams becomes the one worth believing in.

"The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became in turn--not the material of my every day existence--but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself."¹¹

There is no real existence in the matter which we perceive through our senses. It is but an illusion which, when thought of as reality, will prevent us reaching the realm of true reality. We shall perceive only an empty shell of matter, having ignored the real core of things which exists only in the upper world of ideas, revealed through intuition:

All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.¹²

¹⁰ Works, Vol. 8, p. 328.

¹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 643.

¹² Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 103.

But if the world around us has no reality of its own, it is useful as an intermediary because it is through this world that the symbols are given; and the symbolical message from nature is worth believing in. The stars are the best guide

To point us the path to the skies
To the Lethean peace of the skies¹³

Ah, we safely may trust to its gleaming
And be sure it will guide us aright
We safely may trust to a gleaming
That cannot but guide us aright
Since it flickers up to heaven through the night.¹⁴

So Poe is ready to interpret and to believe any message in nature because one believes more easily what one feels than what one tries to prove by reasoning. Nothing can be added to the force of an argument which the mind finds in every beast, bird, flower.¹⁵

The symbols hidden in nature are not the only messages from God; visions or dreams are sent by Him, too. And when a vision arises, hallucination or reality, Poe does not question it. His judgment is suspended, leaving the whole field of consciousness free for feelings, emotions, or sensations. He does not think or judge when he is engrossed in

¹³ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁵ Works, Vol. 8, p. 331.

visions; he sees it and that is enough to prove its existence. If one cannot rely upon outer nature for the true existence of things, one can always trust his own feelings which are reality.

I regard the visions, even as they arise with an awe which, in some measure, moderates and tranquillizes the ecstasy--I so regard them, through a conviction (which seems a portion of the ecstasy itself) that this ecstasy itself, is of a character supernatural to the human nature, is a glimpse of the spirit's outer world.¹⁶

At the heart of Poe's thinking in his ecstatic intuition, there is a great part of solipsism; that is to say, an idealism carried to an extreme where the ego believes only in its own sensations, real or imaginary. In so far as Poe thinks he sees something, this object has a real existence for him and its reality is unquestionable. He firmly believes in it even if it goes against all logical reasoning, for it comes from the spiritual world of realities.

What I saw upon this cliff, although surely an object of very extraordinary nature, the place and season considered, at first neither startled nor amazed me--so thoroughly and appropriately did it chime in with the half slumberous fancies that enwrapped me....¹⁷

It is an intrinsic characteristic of ecstasy to believe in its own visions more than in the logical negation of them.

¹⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, Works (American Book Co., 1935), pp. 410-411.

¹⁷ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 396.

I say that for a few moments, this apparition neither startled nor amazed me. During this interval my whole soul was bound up in intense sympathy alone.¹⁸

Thus, following once more Coleridge's doctrine, Poe believes that the main faculty in the human mind is neither reason nor judgment, but the capacity to fathom revelations and to share the world of reality through ecstasy. This faculty is the Imagination.

The faculty in question brings his soul often to a glimpse of things supernatural and eternal--to the very verge of the Great Secrets. There are moments indeed, in which he perceives the faint perfumes and hears the melodies of a happier world. Some of the most profound knowledge--perhaps all very profound knowledge--has originated from a highly stimulated imagination. Great intellects guess well.¹⁹

The Sixth Sense of Ecstasy

This world, full of messages, is ready to unveil its metaphysical secrets to the chosen ones; and Poe is ready to believe those revelations divulged in ecstasy. But what is Poe's ecstasy or rather--for there are many different expressions of ecstasy in Poe's works--what are the main features of what Poe himself calls "the sixth sense of ecstasy"?

The main character of Poe's ecstasy is the momentary death of the body, more or less complete, according to the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 396.

¹⁹ Works, Vol. 8, p. 328.

degree of importance of the trance. For all the different ecstasies generally start by the poet

loosing all sense of motion or physical existence by means of absolute bodily quiescence long and obstinately persevered in.²⁰

It is when the sense of kinesthesia disappears that ecstasy comes and revelations invade the soul. When the body is asleep or dead or insensitive, the soul, liberated from its physical clog, becomes alive again and really sees the true meaning of things. It is then that the insight of the poet penetrates the deeper meaning of the universe.

Those thoughts, born in ecstatic contemplation, come best before sleep, when the body has lost all feelings of existence.

I am aware of these fancies only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so.... 'These fancies' have in them a pleasurable ecstasy, as far beyond the most pleasurable of the world of wakefulness or of dreams, as the heaven of the Northman theology is beyond its hell.²¹

Day-dreaming is the best entrance to this state of mind. It may be attained, also, by the use of alcohol or opium.

In ecstasy, the mind sets itself free from the bodily clog, the soul becomes free from all inhibitions, social,

²⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 644.

²¹ Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Works, Vol. 9, p. 196.

moral, logical as well as conventional. Loosing consciousness of its own existence, it melts into the universal current of consciousness where it finds the revelation of great realities.

In the life of every man, there occurs at least one epoch when the spirit seems to abandon, for a brief period, the body, and elevating itself above mortal affairs just so far as to get a comprehensive and general view, makes thus an estimate of its humanity, as accurate as is possible, under any circumstances, to that particular spirit. The soul here separates itself from its own idiosyncrasy, or individuality, and considers its own being, not as appertaining solely to itself, but as a portion of the universal
End. ²²

Thus freed from the clog of the body and the hindrance of matter, the spirit can partake in the transcendental world of realities. By getting rid of the clear consciousness, the soul lets the spirit of the universe invade it. If the visible and the invisible worlds are both part of the Whole and if man belongs to that creation from which he is inseparable, he must, to understand this universe--or at least to have the intuition of it--rid himself of clear consciousness, which is an obstacle to communing with the world, because by the feelings of consciousness, we oppose the ego to the non-ego. When consciousness disappears, the creation--such as it really is--can fill man's soul. All the inhuman creatures of the world--angels, devils, spirits--besiege the soul and

try to penetrate it, but are pushed back by clear consciousness. Ecstasy, by liberating the soul, enables it to catch a glimpse of the real mysteries of the world.

Poe goes back to primitive religions and the mystic Eastern doctrines which do not try to find outside themselves the solution for the problems of the world. It is inside themselves that they search for the answer to the riddle. Prophets, savages, primitive men do not look outside their own soul to find the non-ego. They use neither reason--intensification of conscious thoughts--nor experience--intensification of sensual experiment. They go into their inner self through ecstasy; and in their mind, invaded by the spirit of the world, they find the answer they are looking for. It is the same state of mind from which the old myths were born, and to obliterate clear consciousness is the aim of all the pantheistic religions.

When one lets one's spirit be possessed by the universal spirit of the world,--

Whether poetic ecstasy is divinely inspired, whether it be the most perfect state of life, or whether it is only a survival from that period of exaltation which may have accompanied man's escape from brutish life....²³

the soul is omnipotent; it transcends matter and is ready to receive the heavenly message. In such a state of mind

²³ George E. Woodberry, Inspiration of Poetry (New York: Macmillan Co., 1910), p. 11.

all doth seem
 Less gross than bodily, and of such hues
 As veil the Almighty Spirit when yet he makes
 Spirits perceive his presence.²⁴

But during this period of "dreamy delirium replete with ecstasy", the outer world still enters the soul by the means of the senses. Nevertheless, during this period, the usual censorship exercised by the intelligence exists no longer. This state of mind

is not characterized by an unbalanced or diseased reason or by any temporary fury and aberration; it is characterized by a suspension of reason.²⁵

The logical judgment by which sensations are interpreted in the normal state of mind is absent. All is regulated by association of sensations, ideas, images or recollections with neither conventional association nor logical norm. There is no interference of reason, judgment or volition. "The will is laid to sleep and the mind works without self-directions."²⁶ In that ecstatic trance,

Volition had not departed, but was powerless. The senses were unusually active although eccentrically so--assuming often each other's functions at random.²⁷

²⁴ S. T. Coleridge, Works (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1864), p. 295.

²⁵ George E. Woodberry, Inspiration of Poetry (New York: Macmillan Co., 1910), p. 11.

²⁶ Loc. cit.

²⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), pp. 441-448.

So, even in that state of demi-slumber, the senses were unusually active and the fancies--for Poe refuses to call them sensations--created by the senses do not belong to the physical world.

In these fancies--let me now term them psychical impressions--there is really nothing even approximate in character to impressions ordinarily received. It is as if the five senses were supplanted by five myriad others alien to mortality.²⁸

For trance in ecstasy is brought on by the isolation of a very strong sensation which, growing more and more powerful, occupies in the end the whole field of consciousness. Perception is replaced by pure sensation--all the more accurate for its loneliness. Every sense, therefore, sight and hearing especially, are keyed above the normal. It is a kind of monomania of sensation.

All--all expired save thee--save less than thou:
Save only the divine light in thine eyes

Only thine eyes remained.²⁹

More than that, the very strong sensation remains after the cause is gone. It becomes an obsession of the senses. Those eyes, Poe saw in ecstasy one night,

²⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Works (20th Century Edition), Vol. 9, p. 197.

²⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 98.

only thine eyes remained;
They would not go--They never yet have gone.³⁰

Thus, to Poe, sensation is superior to feeling or thoughts because it leads man right into ecstasy, and through it puts him in communication with the reality of the whole universe. This process, far from being abnormal, is the normal, primitive way in which the mind works.

The casual swarm of impressions which makes up men's thoughts without a principle of control, denotes nothing abnormal but is rather an unusually perfect illustration of the normal action of emotion in a pure form.³¹

Besides this important aspect of sensations, another feature of Poe's ecstasy is the interference of sensations and their interaction. The senses were "assuming often each other's function at random." As Baudelaire--Poe's soulmate --hears the night walking *Entends, ma chere, entends la douce nuit qui marche...* so Poe could hear in ecstasy the song of the moonlight. The "opiate vapour, dewy, dim," from the moon "steals drowsily, musically."³² In the same way, he can feel the burning of the stars.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

³¹ George E. Woodberry, Inspiration of Poetry (New York: Macmillan Co., 1910), p. 13.

³² Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 21

Like Proust later on, Poe points out the importance of the odours in the evocation of memory and the beginning of ecstasy:

I believe that odours have an altogether peculiar force in affecting us through association; a force differing essentially from that of objects addressing the touch, the taste, the sight or the hearing.³³

In the "empurpled vapours"³⁴ of the opiate ecstasy, when sensations are becoming so powerful and strange, what were the ideas which occurred to Poe's mind?

As a whole, images and sensations were predominant, leaving little room for the ideas. As Coleridge could not express what he saw in his opium dream, so Poe cannot express his thoughts, which are only

Unthought-like thoughts that are the souls of thought³⁵

It is in those ghosts of dear thoughts, hardly conceived at all, felt by intuition more than comprehended logically, that Poe feels a revelation. Mysterious as they are, they are nevertheless much more important than the thoughts of the stream of clear consciousness, controlled by reason and interpreted by judgment. The ecstatic thoughts

³³ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Works (20th Century Edition), Vol. 9, p. 232.

³⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 100.

³⁵ Loc. cit.

come from the unconscious part of the soul, where no control is exercised, which is an inherent part to the whole world of ideas, and for this reason, much more valuable because they spring from the under-current of the soul in communication with the unknown world of realities.

There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are not thoughts and to which, as yet, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use the word 'fancies' at random and merely because I must use some word, but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas! how rarely!) only at these epochs of most intense tranquility--when the bodily and mental health are in perfection--and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams.³⁶

These thoughts bubble up to the surface of consciousness where they fade away almost instantly, before the soul takes clear consciousness of them. Fascinated by their strangeness and their brevity, Poe waits anxiously for their return as Coleridge did after his dream of Kubla Khan.

Then all the charm
Is broken--all the phantom--world so fair
Vanishes and a thousand circlets spread
And such mishape the other--Stay awhile
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes
The stream will soon renew its smoothness
The visions will return! And lo! he stays
And soon the fragment dim of lovely form

³⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Works (20th Century Edition), Vol. 9, p. 196.

Comes trembling back, unite and now once more
The pool becomes a mirror.³⁷

To Poe those thoughts have a final revelation. They come from beyond, and they hold the solution to all the mysteries of the world. As they do not come again--or if they do, they are still as obscure and as inconstant as before--he feels that all is mystery in this world, the final secret may be within our reach, but it will always escape. We can only catch glimpses of the reality but Poe is still hoping that the next trance will bring another glimpse--perhaps a clearer one--of the world of reality.

In ecstasy, images are not isolated but are associated according to laws which are neither those of experience, nor even of day-dreaming. But their association shares in that certainty inherent to ecstasy and the poet thinks that their association is not casual but has a metaphysical meaning. It leads to the mystical doctrine of correspondences.

Romantic Ecstasy

The first stage of Poe's ecstasy is the ecstatic lyricism he finds in nature. In nature, he finds the Beauty he adores, the essence of the world which makes a poet.

³⁷ S. T. Coleridge, Poetical Works (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co.), Vol. 1, p. 173.

Besides the emotion engendered by the contemplation of nature, nature helps him to transmit his supernatural message; for beauty in nature is a common mean to all men.

I am a poet--if deep worship of all beauty can make me one.....I appeal to you as a man that loves the same beauty which I adore--the beauty of the natural blue sky, and the sunshiny earth--there can be no tie more strong than that of brother to brother.³⁸

In a romantic way Poe, wandering alone in nature, finds himself in a fruitful solitude. By its soothing influence, nature calms his irritability. A peaceful, dreamy state of mind occurs and the feeling of physical existence progressively melts away.

The heat gradually overcame me and resigning myself to the influence of the scene and of the weather and of the gently moving current, I sank into a half slumber, during which my imagination revelled in visions of the Wissahoccon of ancient days.³⁹

So, gradually, while the body loses consciousness of its own existence, the mind starts wandering in the spheres of the imagination and permits itself to be invaded by the universal current of consciousness.

Nature lulls the poet into slumber before revealing secrets to him. Like a wizard, it casts a spell upon the mind of the dreamer by its sweet and soothing influence

³⁸ Letters, p. 32.

³⁹ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 396.

When the soaring moon sings
 An influence dewy, drowsy, dim,
 Is dripping from that golden rest.⁴⁰

There fell a silvery-silken veil of light
 With quietude and sultriness and slumber⁴¹

This nature Poe sees with an absence of pure sensation. Once used as a spring board, it either disappears from the field of his vision or it is transformed by his imagination.

I paused, I looked
 And in an instant all things disappeared.⁴²

However, nature is influenced by Poe's emotions and in return, influences them. There is action and inter-action between them all the time.

In this nature where God is immanent, the main principle is unity. To understand a single symbol in that nature would be to understand all of them for the essence of the world is unity and all the beings--rational or not--participate in the same united universal life, in the same creative spirit. All nature speaks and the duty of the poet is to listen to it and to try to understand it. It is his prophetic duty to interpret the symbols swarming around him and to transmit them.

⁴⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 109.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 98.

⁴² Loc. cit.

Here and there, in groves about the grass, like wildernesses of dreams, sprang up fantastic trees.⁴³

So even alone in nature, one cannot be solitary, for the whole nature speaks through symbols. It is full of the presence of the dead and the voice of God is speaking in solitude. Nature is not an inanimate object deprived of life, which has no part in the vital spirit of the universe. Like human beings, it shares in the life of the Whole, the same elan vital which animates all the creatures is present in nature too.

It is a study of natural beauty touched with the supernatural that results from the stimulation which loneliness brings to the poet: "In truth, the man who would behold aright the glory of God upon the earth must in solitude behold that glory."... To me at least, the presence--not of human life only, but of life in any other form than that of the green things which grow upon the soil and are voiceless--is a stain upon the landscape--is at war with the genius of the scene." Since the greatest of his poems and stories deal with the conflict of human emotions, rather than the background of inanimate nature, this sentence might be misunderstood were it not followed by "I love, indeed, to regard the dark valleys and the forests that sigh in uneasy slumbers --and the proud watchful mountains that look down upon all--I love to regard these as themselves but the colossal members of one vast animate and sentient whole--a whole whose form (that of the sphere) is the most perfect and most inclusive of all; whose path is among associate planets; whose meek handmaiden is the moon; whose mediate sovereign is the sun; whose life is eternity; whose thought is that of God; whose

⁴³ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 650.

enjoyment is knowledge; whose destinies are lost in immensity.⁴⁴

Nature is full of symbols. All we see there, without having a value of direct representation, has nevertheless a meaning which transcends them, a symbolic value. A symbol is an aspect of the world which is revealed in an inexpressible manner, in a form inexplicable rationally.

Because the invisible and the sensorial worlds are both parts of the Whole, there is a link between the world of appearances revealed by the senses and the world of Truth revealed by ecstatic intuition. The supernatural world manifests itself to us, either through living beings like the Raven, or by signs like good and bad weather, or else by dreams. Nature especially speaks through symbols as the Valley of the Many-coloured Grass.

The golden and silver fish haunted the river, out of the bosom of which issued little by little, a murmur that swelled, at length, into a lulling melody more divine than that of Aeolus--⁴⁵

The whole universe partakes in the life common to all beings. As in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", to kill the albatross was to offend all beings, so in "Eleonora", nature shares in the emotion and life of the young couple.

⁴⁴ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 313.

⁴⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 651.

The passion which had for centuries distinguished our race, came thronging with the fancies for which they have been equally noted, and together breathed a delirious bliss over the Valley of the Many-Coloured Grass. A change fell upon things.⁴⁶

In the same way, after Eleonora's death, things change again in the Valley and for the death of one being the whole of nature seems to be in mourning. Going further than the romantic theory by which nature changes according to the mood of the poet, through whose eyes it is seen, Poe assumes that nature really undergoes changes. For nature is alive and sympathizes with man's sorrow or rejoices with him. It even has a life in itself with feelings and can be jealous of man. The reason why

... the wind came out of the cloud by night
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee⁴⁷

is that nature was jealous of the perfect love existing between the poet and his beloved. So nature has not only life but feelings just like a human being.

The happy flowers and the repining trees
were seen no more: the very roses' odours
Died in the arms of the adoring airs⁴⁸

Besides the presence of symbols in nature, there is another messenger from the upper life which helps us to

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 650.

⁴⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 91.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 98.

understand the great secrets. The dead are present in nature. In ecstasy, the soul joins in the infinite of the world where the spirits of the dead are and it meets them.

Be silent in that solitude
Which is not loneliness--for then
The spirits of the dead, who stood
In life before thee, are again
In death around thee.⁴⁹

In a similar way to Shelley in "Adonais", Poe believes that after our death, we shall be united to nature and our soul, coming back to the whole creation, will join the spirit of the universe and mingle with it and thus not only participate in the life of the universe but give life to it.

we are never alone in the world, for
The spirits of the dead are around us⁵⁰

The spirit of God is around us too. In Poe's pantheism, God is inherent in nature and his voice is audible through it.

Poe's treatment of nature in his works is generally a very subjective one. He sees nature through his own emotions and not in an objective manner.

Sometimes, it is true the real scene remains prominent in his mind, but even then, although it does not fade away into mere emotion, it is not unchanged; it ceases to be natural, and is removed into the preternatural. In "Visit of the dead", the treatment of the landscape is wholly his own; crude as its expression is, it affords the first glimpse of that new tract of

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

⁵⁰ Loc. cit.

Acheron, as it were, which he revealed "out of space,
out of time"

And the stars shall look not down
From their thrones, in the dark heaven.
With light like Hope to mortals given,
But their red orbs, without beam,
To thy withering heart shall seem
As a burning and a fever
Which would cling to thee forever.
But 'twill leave thee, as each star
In the morning light afar
Will fly thee--

Such imaginings--the visions of the throned stars with averted faces, the identifying of the outer fascination of an ill-omened nature with the mortal fever within, the dissolving of the spell as the red orbs flee far in the streaming eastern light--might well portend in poetry a genius as original as was Blake in art.⁵¹

He uses nature as a symbolical background. In "Elsonora", the two themes, nature and story, are closely interwoven in a contrapuntal manner so that they are intimately mingled and both nature and characters share in the same feelings.

Ecstasy, this attempt to seize the impalpable, to fix the evanescent, the supernatural, reached by the soul by fleeing from the material world, by forgetting the physical existence, brings the soul out of time. It creates a sort of fifth dimension in which the spirit moves, free from the law of the physical world. Time not only suspends its course, but it does not exist any longer; the very notion of

⁵¹ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), pp. 35-36.

time passes away. There is no sensation of duration. The poet seems to have stepped into a different world where time is out of joint.

Those minutes of ecstasy are difficult to reach. They have no continuity; they only mark spots of time in the poet's life. So Poe would like to eternalize them and try to perpetuate the ecstatic feeling. The first means is to cancel, to suppress the presence of the world.

The hated world slept
Except thee and me.⁵²

Besides, beauty must be eternal to be perfect and exists out of time. Perfection must not be touched even by time.

Bringing him out of time, ecstasy also brings him out of space. The setting of his ecstatic poems is hardly real. It is either highly artificial, produced by dreams, or a real setting so much distorted by the imagination that it has a strong touch of unreality.

The absence of noise or motion helps give the impression of ecstatic suspense. "The Raven" is the type of static poem, trying to retain by the absence of noise and of motion, the fleeting sensation of ecstasy and inspiration. The room is a room with neither motion nor noise. All the senses are concentrated on the bird sitting on the

⁵² Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 98.

bust. Life seems to have stopped; material life is so intimately mingled with imagination that it is difficult to realize the real part of the setting. By sharing in eternity through a minute of ecstasy, the sensation stills everything.

Dangerous as subjective interpretations are, it is hard to believe that this poem 'Dreamland' does not reflect Poe's remarkable power of projection 'Out of space--Out of Time'. He produces the effect of vastness and desolation by the usual methods of denying limitations

Bottomless vales and boundless floods

Mountains toppling evermore
Into seas without a shore

Lakes that endlessly outspread
Their lone waters, lone and dead.⁵³

In two different ways, silence and stillness are the two aspects of the static impression we get out of Poe's poems. But Poe makes a distinction between two different sorts of silence: the silence of the material world, propitious to ecstasy, and the silence of the mind which is fruitless. Like Coleridge, Poe thinks that silence is not nothingness. Through the silence of the world, nature speaks and in it the voice of God is audible. This material silence encompassing the body has nothing frightful in itself:

⁵³ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 415.

He is the corporate silence; dread him not
 No power hath he of evil in himself.⁵⁴

It is the silence of the soul which is dreadful. It is the negation of God who refuses to answer. In the heart, it is the absence of the blissful ecstasy which is a message from God.

Running parallel with the suspension of time is the suspension of motion. The soul freezes the world to be able to transcend it.

The final stage of prolonged ecstasy would be death.

Ecstatic Love

"Alone" is Poe's self-acknowledgment of his personal attitude towards love.

I could not bring
 My passions from a common spring.⁵⁵

For the object of his passion--or rather of his passions--is not a woman but the woman whom he has seen through the ecstatic veil of idealization, making thus all the different women he has loved a single one, the only one worth being loved, the ideal woman who like Verlaine's

⁵⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 33.

⁵⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 1026.

N'est chaque fois ni tout, à fait la même,
ni tout à fait une autre⁵⁶

The perception he has of his beloved one is made of dreams and imagination rather than sensations. In the description of Poe's heroines, we find the absence of pure sensations. Whatever her name is, her portrait is hazy, giving the impression of a floating ghost

whose lineaments upon my mind
are shadows on the unstable wind.⁵⁷

None of his women give the impression of carnal creatures. They are all cold, pure abstraction, imaginary realizations of an idealized concept. He sees all of them as he sees

Berenice:

I had seen her--not as the living and breathing Berenice--but as the Berenice of a dream--not as a being of the earth, earthly, but as the abstraction of such a being.⁵⁸

We do not find either plastic or pictorial description--or very few and vague ones--of Poe's heroines. Their characteristics are intellectual and abstract rather than physical and tangible. The less body they have, the more

⁵⁶ Verlaine, Mon Rêve familial, lines 3-4.

⁵⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 1007.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 645.

soul they possess. His women are painted through his intellect, not through his senses. They belong to the realm of ideas not to the realm of humanity.

The Lady Ligeia has still no human quality; her aspirations, her thoughts, and her capacity are those of a spirit; the very beam and glitter and silence of her ineffable eyes belong to the visionary world.⁵⁹

Poe himself realizes and acknowledges the idealization of his women because of his own nature:

Feeling with me had never been of the heart and my passions were always in the mind.⁶⁰

So, all his women are the intellectualization of an ideal, of an angel belonging to another world, an Ysolt, a Beatrice, a Marguerite, with no human warmth, a cold, perfect marble with no human passion. He thinks of her in terms of a spiritual passion which transcends human limits.

The maiden of Poe's dreams, the Eidolon he served, the airy woman divinity in which he believed--for he had the true myth-making faculty, the power to make his senses over what his imagination perceived⁶¹

is but a symbol: the symbol of love and beauty. Helen has become symbolic of beauty and love of the Greeks. It has become the symbol of Poe's love too: ideal love for an

⁵⁹ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 118.

⁶⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 645.

⁶¹ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 118.

ideal woman. She belongs to the realm of ideality and eternity. She is rich with a whole past civilization; she is an outgrowth of all the women the world had worshipped. She is the being of a vision.

I saw that you were my Helen--my Helen-- the Helen of a thousand dreams--she whose visionary lips had so often lingered upon my own in the divine trance of passion.⁶²

This woman, who has the appearance of a vision, is the product of that one idolatrous and purely ideal love, love which has the character of an ethereal dream. Love put him in a state which very nearly resembled ecstasy. This love had the power

to oppress me with this ineffable emotion--to surround and bathe me in this electric light, illuminating and enkindling my whole nature--filling my soul with glory, with wonder and with awe.⁶³

This creature of dreams, this pure beautiful angel, wife of the soul of the poet, was predestined to him for eternity. Poe believed that the meeting of that woman was the realization of a pre-established order. As Plato thought that man could choose his destiny before coming to this world, so Poe thinks that souls are paired in the mind of God. It is a kind of predestination of love.

⁶² Letters, p. 387.

⁶³ Loc. cit.

I have never been able to shake from my soul the belief that my destiny for good and evil, either here or hereafter, is in some measure interwoven with your own.⁶⁴

And one cannot escape the destiny to meet her:

whom the great Giver of all Good had pre-ordained to be mine--mine only--if not now, alas! then at least hereafter and forever in Heaven....⁶⁵

This ideal love has a strange morbid aspect. Poe is in love with a phantom, half alive, half dead, alive in his memory, already dead or dying to the material world. As a matter of fact, all his women are dying, insane, or at least seriously ill, either physically or morally or both. Poe confesses the reason for his taste himself.

I could not love except where Death
Was mingling his with Beauty's breath.⁶⁶

In "Ulalume", Poe painted the struggle in the mind of a man between his love for an ideal, embodied in the lost Ulalume, and his human passion for a living woman. This conflict between a lost ideal and a living woman is frequent in Poe's tales. They symbolize the two different parts of the same woman: the ideal and the physical aspect.

His creed towards beauty explains his attitude: real beauty has an element of strangeness in it which makes it

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 386.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 387.

⁶⁶ George E. Woodberry, Edgar Allan Poe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1885), p. 59.

all the more beautiful and the morbid strangeness of a dying woman is most beautiful. On the other hand, the consecration of love can be attained only in eternity, through death. Love is only perfect when it has been disincarnated --losing thus all its foils--sublimated by death--which puts it on a divine level.

As others cannot resist the attraction of beauty, so Poe cannot resist the morbid fascination of illness and death. The most beautiful picture he can draw of his beloved is that of a corpse or a ghost. It is lying in her coffin that a woman reaches the utmost of her beauty.

My love, she sleeps! oh, may her sleep
As it is lasting, so be deep.⁶⁷

For through death his beloved one shakes off this earthly hindrance of the body and finds bliss in the perfect communion of souls.

Poe's ecstatic love fluctuates between two opposite poles corresponding to two opposite tendencies in human nature, two antithetical propensities in man resulting from human duality, governed by the two sides of man which Pascal called *l'Ange et la Bete*. In the same way, one side of Poe's nature

⁶⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1918), p. 22.

is drawn by Astarte, the Phoenician form for the Babylonian Ishtar, the goddess of fertility. She is associated in Babylonian astrology with the planet Venus, later with the moon goddess, Selene. In "Eulalie", Astarte clearly means Venus and the star in "Ulalume" represents passion of the flesh. She is contrasted with Diane who usually is represented by the moon and chastity.⁶⁸

According to Quinn, this quality is inherent in Poe.

The duality of Poe's nature will be apparent to anyone who has closely studied his life. It is reflected most concretely in his countenance. Take a full face daguerrotype of Poe, lay a card upon it, so that the first one side and then the other will be concealed. On one side, you will see a high forehead, an eye large and full, a firm mouth, and a well shaped chin. On the other will appear a low brow, a less lustrous eye, a mouth painfully drawn, and a chin less certain.⁶⁹

This duality in human nature and within himself leads Poe to consider love from a twofold point of view.

His first attitude towards love is to consider it a kind of escapism, as an ideal evasion towards the platonic world of ideas led by the woman-angel. In his effort to escape the materialism of life and disgust of himself, Poe chose a woman as a guide to the transcendental world. By her erudition and her knowledge of metaphysical science she is able to lead him as Beatrice led Dante through Paradise to the glory of God.

⁶⁸ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 533.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 693.

I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a childish confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied.⁷⁰

This ideal picture of a woman sprung from Poe's ecstatic dreams is the sister of Dante's idealized Beatrice, seen in a mystical vision and only possible through the Heavens because of her purity and her Beauty. His passion for such a woman is completely idealized.

The sentiment--the holy passion which glows within my spirit for her, is of Heaven, heavenly, and has no taint of the Earth.⁷¹

This Platonic, spiritual love is based on spiritual and mental affinities. It is a religious, sacred feeling, highly idealized.

My brain reeled beneath the intoxicating speed of your presence, and it was with no merely human senses that I either saw or heard you. It was my soul only that distinguished you there. I grew faint with the luxury of your voice and blind with the voluptuous lustre of your eyes.⁷²

On the other hand, Poe considers love in a disparaging light. It is the minor sister of ecstasy and because of its appearance of ecstasy--its false appearance--it is a deceiving hoax, binding man to gross nature and standing as an

⁷⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 657.

⁷¹ Letters, p. 386.

⁷² Ibid., p. 387.

obstacle between him and God. In that case, man is misled by the grosser aspect of the woman: it is the woman-beast who acts as a guide for him.

Human love brings voluptuousness with it and is a hindrance to ecstasy. It emphasizes the difference between the ego and the non-ego, for it exists--not in things and in the universe--but in man himself. More than that, voluptuousness belongs to the perishable; while by its own essence, ecstasy partakes of eternal beauty. One should purify one's senses to reach eternity. Poe thinks with Keats that sensuous pleasure prevents us from communicating with nature. It closes within himself, not within the fertile and fruitful part of his nature, but within the barren, thoughtless, unproductive part of himself.

In addition, human love is all the more dangerous because it has all the appearances of ecstasy. It deceives the man who thinks he can find in it the solution to the Great Secrets. Human love does not lift the soul up to the ideal but brings man down to the material world of the senses, to the world of appearances making him believe at the same time that he has found the truth. Love giving satiety, prevents him from seeking for something higher than himself when he could rise above his earthly happiness up to the world above and find the great revelation and God. It is because the two lovers were satisfied with their

earthly rapture that God condemned them to be drowned with the rest of the humanity.

Mystic Ecstasy

The conception of the tragedy of mankind, conquered by the worm who symbolizes the serpent, the spirit of evil, is powerful.⁷³

Besides the symbolical meaning of things, the problem which fascinated Poe was finding the solution to the eternal riddle of the soul and life after death--the perennial question of all the philosophers of human nature.

The nature of man is eternal. It is now as in the time of the Ancients. There is no hope in human perfectability. We are neither more happy nor more perfect than our progenitors nor less than our descendants. This eternity of human nature makes all human problems universal, so says Poe:

I disagree with you in what you say of man's advance towards perfection. Man is only more active, not wiser, nor more happy than he was 6000 years ago. To say that we are better than our progenitors is to make the foregone age only the rudiment of the present and the future; whereas each individual man is the rudiment of a future material (not spiritual) being. It were to suppose God unjust to suppose those who have died before us possessed of less advantages than ourselves.⁷⁴

⁷³ Arthur H. Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1941), p. 391.

⁷⁴ Letters, p. 260.

Poe believes in the individuality of man, in the dignity of human nature. Man has a value of his own. He partakes of the unparticled matter, that is to say, of the spirit divine; but he is individualized by the particled matter which clothes him and gives him particular characteristics.

The problem of man leads Poe to consider the problem of God who has created him. In "Eureka", he explains his ideas about the world. There was originally a creative Being, concentrated in himself, who was unity. By extending himself God individualized himself into beings. So all the numerous things are but individualizations of himself. But unity comes before diversity and the story of the universe is the story of an attempt to recover this primal unity, the silence, the stillness, the oneness from which all things derive. To seek the unity is to seek Paradise, which is also death--the only means of coming back to that unity.

His intimate belief in the immortality of the soul is partly a result of his theory of pantheism and of his idea of God and partly inherent to his ecstasy, his belief in his own sensations and in his own existence. The fact that one thinks is enough to prove that one lives: Cogito ergo sum. The soul which is created in the image of God and who shares in His divinity cannot die because of its divine

essence. It is not only an attribute of the soul to be immortal, it is its very essence.

Even death, in which we lose the sense of our existence, does not prove that the soul has lost its own existence and has disappeared into nothingness. Poe shows that the soul does not die more in death than it does in a swoon, when we lose consciousness of our own existence and are in a state resembling death.

To swoon and awake in utter unconsciousness of any lapse of time during the syncope would demonstrate the soul to have been then in such condition that, had death occurred, annihilation would have followed. On the other hand, when the revival is attended with remembrance of visions (as is now and then the case in fact) then the soul is to be considered in such conditions as would insure its existence after the bodily death--the bliss or wretchedness of the existence to be indicated by the characters of the visions.⁷⁵

Therefore, if the spirit goes on existing in a swoon, it is the same in death and the notion of identity is not lost forever in death. Through the conversation of Cinos and Agathos, Poe painted the future life

as a place where the soul's unquenchable desire to know is recognized as its greatest happiness and therefore the soul's search for knowledge is never ceasing. He also expressed the idea of the conservation of force in poetic terms. As no thought can perish, so no act is without infinite result. Since every vibration once set in motion is eternal, the power of a word once spoken is also everlasting.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Works, Vol. 8, p. 299.

⁷⁶ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 469.

Another argument in favor of the immortality of the soul, according to Poe, is that God is the same as himself and we share in God's will. We are, therefore, equal and through our will we can rule over death itself. The will is omnipotent and is able to rule over matter. It can retain its own identity or life in the body or reincarnate itself into another body, which it can even transform by its influence, as in "Ligeia".

This power of the will can even produce immortality: "Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will."⁷⁷ This is the reason Poe believes in the power of the will. The last test for the will is that through it man can defy death.

O God! O Divine Father--shall these things be undeviatingly so?--shall this conqueror be not once conquered? Are we not parts and parcels of thee? Who --who knowest the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.⁷⁸

The unparticled matter, the spirit, can be saved. It is immortal because of its will power to live and of its divine differentiation.

⁷⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 659.

⁷⁸ Loc. cit.

In mesmeric revelation, he rejects the idea of the absorption of the individual in God. That would be an action of God returning upon itself--a purposeless and futile action. Man is a creature. Creatures are thoughts of God. It is in the nature of thoughts to be irrevocable.⁷⁹

He insists on the dignity of man and the freedom of the soul. The particled matter, the body, can go back to the primal unity through death which leads it to nothingness, but the will cannot die and may even bring matter to immortality. In "Ligeia" the power of the spirit transforms the body of the fair-haired and blue eyes Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine into the dark headed Lady Ligeia. Another clear example of the power of the will over matter occurs in "Mesmeric Revelation", a prelude to "Eureka", where Poe shows the will peering into eternity by ridding itself of the limitations of the physical body by putting it into a state resembling physical death.

"Poe assumes the validity of mesmerism and tries through placing of a man, ill with phthisis, under such a trance, to ascertain the truth of immortality." Van Kirk, in the mesmeric trance, answers questions and reveals that what men call death is but a painful metamorphosis,

Our present incarnation is progressive, preparatory, temporary. Our future is perfected, ultimate, immortal. Poe bases the distinction between inorganic

⁷⁹ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., pp. 391-392.

life and organic beings upon a Creator. Opposed to Emerson's conception of spirit being the only creator, God, with all the powers attributed to spirit, is but the perfection of matter. If God had so willed it, law could have been inviolate with its result, perfection.⁸⁰

In the "Case of Mr. Valdemar" the will is strong enough to maintain for nearly seven months the appearance of life in a dead body. As soon as the will stops exercising its power, the

whole frame at once--within the space of a single minute, or less, shrunk,--crumbled--absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome--of detestable putrescence.⁸¹

According to Poe, death is but a painful metamorphosis. The spirit does not die; it just changes. It is the progressive feeling of fading sensations. Death is a complete cessation of all the cenesthetic sensations of life.

Motion in the animal frame had fully ceased. No muscle quivered; no nerve thrilled; no artery throbbed. But there seemed to have sprung up in the brain, that of which no words could convey to the merely human intelligence even an indistinct conception.⁸²

The body progressively disappears into nothingness and the mind alone exists.

At death, the worm is the butterfly--still material, but of a matter unrecognizable by our organs--

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 419.

⁸¹ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 103.

⁸² Ibid., p. 449.

recognized occasionally, perhaps by the sleep-walker, directly--without organs--through the mesmeric medium. Thus a sleep-walker may see ghosts.⁸³

Morbid Ecstasy

Day-dreaming leads to ecstasy, but extreme ecstasy leads to an abnormal state where fear, obsession, impulsions and insanity are frequent. Often on the verge of insanity, Poe sometimes fell completely into the realm of insanity, where the main element is fear increasing to horror.

As he acknowledges himself, as early as 1840 in his preface, his pseudo-Germanic horror, which is found in nearly all his tales, was not the romantic product of a German influence but the outgrowth of his morbidity, emphasized both by his heredity and his addiction to drinking. His fear is a physical one. It is not the fear of danger which haunts his hyper-sensitive soul, but the fear of fear, all the more frightening because of its indefinite meaning; for there must be something supernatural, something worth knowing which haunts Poe's mind in a negative sense for he does not know the reason of his fear or what to be afraid of. This fear of being afraid is all the more terrible because of its vagueness. It is always impending over the

⁸³ Letters, p. 257.

mind of the poet or of his characters who dread it. It is the fear of expectation and an expectation of fear.

To an anomalous species of terror I found him bounden slave. 'I shall perish,' said he, 'I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of my soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect--in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR.'⁸⁴

As Poe said that there is hardly any difference between genius and madness, so there is scarcely any gap between ecstasy and fear. There is always a kind of awe in an ecstatic state which is the expectation of the revelation. But despite his fear, and perhaps because of it, Poe goes on with his poetic mission.

As out of mighty and terrific discord noblest harmonies are sometimes evolved, so through the purgatorial ministries of awe and terror, and through the haunted Nemesis of doubt, Poe's restless and unappeased soul was urged on to the fulfillment of its appointed work--groping out blindly towards the light and making the approach of great spiritual truths by the very depth of the shadow it projected against them.⁸⁵

Fear is always ready to invade the soul as soon as it loses its sense of existence and the use of opium amplifies sorrow

⁸⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 235.

⁸⁵ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 690.

as well as joy and changes fear into terror as well as happiness into bliss.

But this ecstatic horror, dreaded so much, is at the same time fascinating. Poe enjoys describing scenes of horror like the putrefaction of Valdemar's body. The most important horror is that of death or madness:

Death, the spectre which sate at all the feasts!....
Alas! as it grew, so grew in our hearts the dread of
that evil hour.⁸⁶

Horror is all the more fascinating because it heightens beauty into the sublime. Beauty which we can contemplate only with awe shares in the divine character and through this is elevated to the sublime. Even this terror produces a kind of thrill to his mind, an unwholesome pleasure.

Yet that terror was not fright--
But a tremulous delight,
And a feeling undefined,
Springing from a darkened mind.⁸⁷

This dreaded death is a close sister to ecstasy. In fact, there is a very close relationship between swoon, death, and ecstasy for the three of them liberate the soul from matter and set it free in the world of realities where, for a more or less long period, it wanders and comes across revelations which it might or might not be able to remember when it comes

⁸⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Poems and Tales (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 444.

⁸⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 134.

back to consciousness. As he describes it in the colloquy of Monos and Una, death starts in ecstasy and is a prolongation of it. Death is just a change of state, "a painful metamorphosis."

After some few days of pain, and many of dreamy delirium replete with ecstasy, the manifestations of which you mistook for pain, while I longed but was impotent to undeceive you--after some days there came upon me, as you have said, a breathless and motionless torpor; and this was termed Death by those who stood around me.⁸⁸

We find a complete range of terrors in Poe's writings, from the common fear of blood to the terror of fear and madness.

One of the most propitious circumstances for the development of horror is silence. The deep tendencies of the unconscious part of the soul come into consciousness, after a short while when the dreamer enjoys an ecstatic dream. Then, the atmosphere becomes heavy all round, the slightest noise becomes threatening. The vague oppression of the universal horror exasperates itself in the individual conscience, in the curse of silence.

A very frequent type of abnormality into which ecstasy degenerates is the obsession. In "Berenice" Poe shows how ordinary day-dreaming prepares the way for the obsession which is caused by the teeth of Berenice. Very

⁸⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 441.

often the hallucination, born in a moment of ecstasy, becomes an obsession. The effect remains after the cause has disappeared.

Believing that nature is full of symbols, and that to understand one is to understand all of them, Poe is always fascinated by an object in nature and the more obscure its meaning, the more valuable is the revelation one can get out of it, for it belongs to the obscure world of realities which are only revealed by obscure symbols. The obsession becomes a monomania; it fills the whole field of consciousness, abolishing everything else, leaving not even room for the will or the judgment. He becomes hypnotized by the inside vision which blurs the other perceptions and he follows it unconsciously. It is as if his eyes were looking inside, ignoring the outer world. The judgment is suspended, so is reason. The obsession, like a bright image, dazzles into a momentary torpor all the other faculties of the soul. The only one left is the impulsion, which is an irresistible desire, not controlled by the judgment and unchecked by reason.

Of Berenice I more seriously believe que toutes ses dents etaient des idees. Des idees!--Ah! here was the idiotic thought that destroyed me! Des idees!--ah! therefore it was that I coveted them so madly! I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason. And the evening closed in upon me thus--and then the darkness came, and tarried, and went--and the day again dawned--and

the mists of a second night were now gathering around--and still I sat motionless in that solitary room--and still I sat buried in meditation--and still the phantasma of the teeth maintained its terrible ascendancy, as, with the most vivid and hideous distinctness, it floated about amid the changing lights and shadows of the chamber.⁸⁹

Day-dreaming, so favorable to the birth of ecstasy, is very favorable to the outgrowth of obsession, because it is the vagueness, the uncertainty, the incoherence that favor it.

Certain ideas exercised over him the power of fascination. They return again and again in his stories and poems and seem like the utterance of a mind possessed with thoughts, emotions and images of which the will and the understanding take little cognizance.⁹⁰

We have a whole range of obsessions in Poe's tales. Generally they are visual obsessions, but the "Tell-Tale Heart" is a very good example of an auditive obsession.

From impulsion to obsession there is hardly any distance. In "Morella", we have an example of the impulsion, uncontrollable by the spirit and seeming at the same time sent from heaven or hell accordingly as it is a good or a bad one.

And at the baptismal fount I hesitated for a name.... What prompted me, then, to disturb the memory of the buried dead? What demon urged me to breathe that sound, which in its very recollection, was wont to make ebb the purple blood in torrents from the temple

⁸⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 647.

⁹⁰ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 690.

to the heart? What fiend spoke from the recess of my soul, when, amid those dim aisles, and in the silence of the night, I whispered within the ears of the holy man the syllables--Morella?⁹¹

Obsession is a morbid form of ecstasy, it is a degenerate ecstasy.

The loss of spiritual identity is the final stage to which ecstasy can lead. Often in both his poetry and in his prose Poe painted a struggle between two feelings or two opposite tendencies. They are the symbol of a tragic conflict in the human soul who has lost, sometimes without knowing it, its spiritual identity. Poe's characters live in the shadow of that terror. The terror of madness hovers over nearly all his tales. He is often dealing with one theme: destruction of the body or of the mind. He sings dethroned reason or entombed consciousness. This conflict is represented in "Ulalume" by the struggle between human passion for a woman and the spiritual love for the lost "Ulalume". In that poem

Psyche represents the spiritual aspect of the soul. She sees the danger the poet does not wish to see. He tries to lull her terrors, to conquer 'her scruples and gloom' and he almost succeeds but she points to the tomb of Ulalume, who preserves through her love for the poet that integrity and he is saved.⁹²

⁹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 670.

⁹² Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 532.

Another aspect of that loss of identity is found in "The Fall of the House of Usher". Roderick and Madeline, twins, can be considered as the two parts of the same mind.

The relation between Roderick and Madeline is an identity of a strange and baffling kind. Her disease threatens that identity but her death restores it in another world.⁹³

Poe seems drawn with a fatal fascination to those problems of identity leading to tragedy. In "Ligeia", there is a struggle to preserve and reconquer the physical and mental identity, the former one being influenced by the latter. The "Haunted Palace" painted in an allegorical form is a symbol of the decay of a human soul. It was first published separately in April, 1839. Then it was incorporated in "The Fall of the House of Usher", the prose equivalent of the poem.

The last step in the loss of spiritual identity is painted in "William Wilson". It is the portrait of a split personality, illustrating the conflict between the moral and the sensual life, between spirit and matter. William Wilson ignores his loss of identity until the end when it is too late. He does not know from what he is suffering. By killing the spiritual part of himself, the better one, he is

⁹³ Arthur H. Quirm, op. cit., p. 285.

"dead to the world, to Heaven and to Hope,"⁹⁴ for without spiritual integrity, "this image which is thine own" has no real existence.

The moral life has triumphed over the sensual life of Wilson, who has defied the principle of identity which takes its own revenge.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, The Complete Tales and Poems (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 641.

⁹⁵ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 287.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

POE'S EGOISM

Ecstasy which is at the basis of Poe's thinking produces three results: a melancholic despair, the negation of the world outside and exaltation of the ego. The result of Poe's ecstasy is his egoism.

I have struggled in vain against the influence of this melancholy. I am wretched and know not why. Convince me that it is worth one's while--that it is necessary to live.¹

Ecstasy brings revelations only rarely. The soul struggles to reach this state first, then to prolong it, and then to understand the revelations it brings. But the result is disappointing. Ecstasy does not last; the final revelations are not reached and the spirit more or less believes that all is mystery and no final answer is attainable.

On the soul tired by its own efforts to reach ecstasy, a heavy discouragement falls. The body is tired too, for ecstasy is accompanied by a nervous state. Thus, in the soul of the poet, tired both mentally and physically, melancholic despair springs, grows and finally takes possession of the field of consciousness. Nothing worthwhile can be achieved

¹ Letters, p. 73.

in this life and the sky remains deaf to the attempts of the poet to peer into its secrecy.

Then the poet feels that he has failed his mission. He feels that the grace of God has deserted him, his genius no longer has existence; and the best part of himself being dead, he is not interested in living anymore. Despair then invades him, for there is no hope in this life.

Ecstasy is always accompanied by a belief that it is the only truth. Ecstasy believes in itself; it brings its own certainty within itself. If the poet believes in his own dreams and revelations, if to him the only real existence is in the spiritual world of realities, the world outside loses its consistency.

"All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream."²

In the same way that Descartes refutes the outer world to find the existence of the soul and of God within his own self, so does Poe. But then Poe is so much engrossed in his introverted vision that he can never acknowledge the existence of the material world. He believes only in the existence of his own soul, in the reality of his own ego.

Once more he follows Plato's idea that what we think to be reality is but the shadow of real things which we

² Edgar Allan Poe, Poems and Miscellanies (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 103.

cannot see. Thus the world has no real consistency. It is a mere illusion of the senses and Poe denies its real existence. Even if he does not state it, he believes in the myth of the cave. The reality behind us can be seen only by intuitive ecstasy which, by suppressing the existence of this world, enables men to see into the realm of truth.

If the world outside has no reality, the only real one is within the human soul. The certainty that his soul is the reality leads Poe to an extravagant pride and a belief in his own ego to an extreme degree. Poe reached the conclusion that he is God himself.

The passionate spirit which hath known,
 And deeply felt the silent tone
 Of its own self-supremacy,--
 (I speak thus openly to thee,
 'Twere folly now to veil a thought
 With which this aching breast is fraught)
 The soul which feels its innate right--
 The mystic empire and high power
 Given by the energetic might
 Of Genius, at its natal hour;
 Which knows (believe me at this time,
 When falsehood were a tenfold crime,
 There is a power in the high spirit
 To know the fate it will inherit)
 The soul which knows such power, will still
 Find Pride the ruler of its will.³

The soul who has once believed in his own existence and power is doomed forever to an extreme solipsism. It is the characteristic of ecstasy to end in an exaltation of the

³ Ibid., p. 122.

ego. The spirit believing in its own revelation trusts his own revelation completely and ends by believing in his own omnipotence. His extreme introversion soon limits its horizon to his own self. This exaltation of the ego reaches its climax with Poe's ideas on God.

Poe's solipsism--idealism to the extreme--makes him believe in his ideas as the only reality--and reduces the world to two last terms, God and himself; and finally to one, he being God.

The first reason for his belief which is basic because he felt it more than he can express it, is the revolt of his soul at the idea that there is a spirit superior to him.

The utter impossibility of any one's soul feeling itself inferior to another; the intense, overwhelming dissatisfaction and rebellion at the thought;--these, with the omniprevalent aspirations at perfection, are but the spiritual, coincident with the material, struggles towards the original unity--are, to my mind at least, a species of proof far surpassing what man terms demonstration, that no one soul is inferior to another--that nothing is, or can be, superior to any one soul--that each soul is, in part, its own God--its own Creator;--in a word, that God--the material and spiritual God--now exists solely in the diffused matter and spirit of the universe; and that the re-gathering of this diffused matter and spirit will be but the re-constitution of the purely Spiritual and Individual God.⁴

So if we are parcels of the universal unity, we are parcels of God.

⁴ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 554.

His second argument is that you can only know the nature of something if there is in you something akin to that nature. Otherwise, it would never be possible to imagine. So if Poe can know what is the intimate nature of God, he believes it is simply because he is God himself.

All--absolutely all the argumentation which I have seen on the nature of the soul, or of the Deity, seems to me nothing but worship of this unnamable idol. 'Pour savoir ce qu'est Dieu,' says Bielfeld, although nobody 'listens to the solemn truth,' il faut être Dieu même--and to reason about the reason is of all things the most unreasonable.⁵

Going to the extreme, he finally decided that each soul is partly its own creator. "What I do assert is, that 'each soul is, in part, its own God--its own creator'."⁶

But in that case, he even rejects the idea of the absorption of the individual soul in God. The individual is God's creation. "Creatures are thoughts of God. It is in the nature of thought to be irrevocable."⁷

This egoism ends in a thorough belief of human liberty. He is his own master.

⁵ Works, Vol. 8, p. 306.

⁶ John H. Ingram, Edgar Allan Poe: His Life, Letters and Opinion (London: J. Hogg, 1880), pp. 149-152.

⁷ Arthur H. Quinn, op. cit., pp. 391-392.

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