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EDGAR ALLAN POE AND THE LIFE OF LITERATURE

Poète maudit, tragically devoted to a proto-modernist cult of literary salvation, or slavish hack, churning out what the magazine market required? Poe's satiric and whimsical attention to the profane underside of his métier suggests that his French and American identities are aspects of a single, more complex figure. Out of the unpromising materials of his dependence on the periodical press, Poe coaxed an extraordinarily self-conscious vision of literature as a social act.

A printer's epitaph opens Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*; *Moby-Dick* interposes dusty grammars and a sub-sub-librarian between its reader and its whale; Whitman took equal care over the writing and over the printing of his self-published *Leaves of Grass*. Attention to the less elevated, material side of their calling seems to be a peculiar tradition among American authors. The tools and skills of the literary craft furnish European literature as well with a vast collection of convenient metaphors, as Ernst Robert Curtius has shown, but these are of a different order; in general either their thrust is away from literature toward something else (e.g. the Book of Nature) or if they do refer from craft to art, then the device remains limited and conventional (e.g. as writing preserves speech, so poetry preserves beauty).[1] In American fiction the juxtaposition of art and craft seems to serve larger purposes. The raw materials of pen and paper, type and ink, the professional procedures of publication, distribution, and remuneration are not merely the vehicles but the subjects of meditation. When we ask about the meaning of "writing" in America, it helps to consider the broad, spiritual, usual sense of the word in the light of everything that American writers have been moved to record, in jest or earnest, about its narrow, physical sense. For the result is an unusual self-consciousness about the act of literature. And this self-consciousness is particularly evident in Edgar Allan Poe.

Since reductions provoke laughter, it is not surprising that we most often find literature reduced to its lowest terms in Poe's

humorous pieces on the periodical press and on literary celebrity, such as "X-ing a Paragrab," "How to Write a Blackwood's Article," "Lionizing," and "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq."[2] We ought to remember, however, that Poe tended to parody his own most serious subjects; the parallel between "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Scythe of Time" is one of many examples. These pieces might also be considered a sort of modern counterpart to the comedy of humors, the comedy of vocations—as represented for example in the *Sketches By Boz*, which Poe reviewed and admired. The trouble is that the only other vocation that attracts Poe's interest is the confidence game, whose affinities with his own professional practice are all too evident.[3] Dickens' sketches have all the variety of Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, but when Poe takes up "Diddling considered as One of the Exact Sciences," his one and only subject is the manufacture and maintenance of illusion. The object of Poe's vocational parody is always a *semblable* and a *frère*, and the amusement he provokes is always tinged with self-consciousness.

In "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.," Thingum's father delivers a speech on his son's choice of profession:

> the trade of editor is best; and if you can be a poet at the same time,—as most editors are, by the bye,—why, you will kill two birds with one stone. To encourage you in the beginning of things, I will allow you a garret; pen, ink, and paper; a rhyming dictionary; and a copy of the 'Gad-Fly.' I suppose you would scarcely demand any more.

Thingum had "had some idea," he tells us, of calling this account "Memoranda to serve for the Literary History of America," and we can already see one way in which his career is exemplary. This bare minimum of literary appliances suggests by its very bareness all those things — elegantly listed in James' book on Hawthorne — which the writer in America must start off without. For Poe there is drama in the question of where the writer will get his materials, and the role of beginner, with its scenes of Parting from the Parent and Confrontation with the Editor, develops this drama into a paradigm of the American career.

Finding pen, ink, paper, dictionary, and Gad-Fly insufficient materials with which to create great literature, Thingum takes another representative step. He makes "fair copies" of passages from Dante and Homer, signs them "Oppoldeldoc," and mails

them off to local reviews. The gesture is rich in satire (the various editors refuse the MSS. indignantly, but do not recognize them), but it is also worth reformulating in theoretical terms. Plagiarism and the pseudonym, hoaxes of identity which belong among Poe's favorite literary stratagems, respond to a void of *substance* with a miraculous transformation effected solely by change of *signature*. Poe knew the current of Romantic esthetic theory that could value such a phenomenon—for example, Friedrich Schlegel—but he adapted it to suit a peculiarly American exigency: lack of materials. One might consider an allegorical reading of "The Purloined Letter" in these terms: the two poets (D—and Dupin) are two thieves, both of them concealing their theft with a substituted facsimile capable of inducing temporary belief. For Poe the illusions produced by writing are usually risky and transitory.

One or two other bits of this "Literary Life" are also worthy of mention. The attention to typography, for instance: "the unkindest cut was putting the word POESY in small caps. In those five preeminent letters what a world of bitterness is there involved!" Poe often casts the type-setter in the role of imp of the perverse (e.g. "X-ing a Paragrab" and "A Tale of the Rugged Mountains"). In a piece on anastatic printing, published in the *Broadway Journal* the following year (1845), he suggests that by circumventing this demon, a feat to be accomplished only by reproducing *handwritten* manuscripts directly, one might change not only the cost of publication but the very nature of literature:

> The cultivation of accuracy in MS., thus enforced, will tend with an inevitable impetus to every species of improvement in *style*— more especially in the points of concision and distinctness—and this again, in a degree even more noticeable, to precision of thought, and luminous arrangement of matter. There is a very peculiar and easily intelligible reciprocal influence between the thing written and the manner of writing—but the latter has the predominant influence of the two. The more remote effect on philosophy at large... need only be suggested to be conceived.[4]

At what point does the tongue leave the cheek? When Poe suggests the primacy of manner (mode of printing) over matter, he lowers literature only in order to raise it higher. As a protomodernist, he locates its force in words themselves as opposed to their content, in their formal as opposed to their scientific or utili-

tarian qualities. Paradoxically, the reduction of the immaterial to the material ("Is not every word an impulse on the air?") argues "The Power of Words." And in *Eureka* the "more remote effect on philosophy at large" is fully conceived. The breath of speech becomes divine omnipotence; the ultimate reduction proves to contain the ultimate expansion.

The finale of Thingum Bob's narrative, in which he presents the secret of his "success" (actually the result of a wise investment) in literary labor, belongs to the same class of ambiguous reductions.

> By day I adhered to my desk, and at night, a pale student, I consumed the midnight oil. You should have seen me—you *should*. I leaned to the right. I leaned to the left. I sat forward. I sat backward. I sat upon end. I sat *tête baissée* (as they have it in Kickapoo), bowing my head to the alabaster page. And through all, I—wrote... *What* I wrote it is unnecessary to say. The *style*!—that was the thing. I caught it from Fatquack—whiz!—fizz!—and I am giving you a specimen of it now.

As we see in "The Philosophy of Composition," the position of the backside is no less important to Poe's esthetics than to his humor: "there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting." For Poe, both readers and writers must be conceived as squirming in their seats. Literature, that is, must be conceived as an act, taking place in time and obeying time's rules. An apparent reduction, then, gives literature a new dimension.

The relationship between experience and writing to which Poe most frequently refers is in fact specifically temporal. In "A Tale of the Rugged Mountains," for example:

> 'You will perceive by these manuscripts' (here the speaker produced a notebook in which several pages appeared to have been freshly written) 'that at the very period in which you fancied these things amid the hills, I was engaged in detailing them upon paper here at home.'

Thingum's present-tense self-description alerts us to a further specification of the temporality of writing. The act is an ongoing endeavor, an activity. This emphasis takes a variety of forms. Journal entries and letters, of which Poe makes considerable use,

are perhaps among the most obvious and traditional means of insisting on the rhythmic relationship of experience to expression. An equally interesting and more original example is periodical publication itself. Much of the text of "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq." consists of columns from "Monthly Notices to Correspondents" that reply to his missives, and when Thingum declares, "The extent of my renown will be best estimated by reference to the editorial opinions of the day," he is stating the general conditions of Poe's epistemology. Knowledge, like the periodical, is intermittent; note the use of the press in the solving of "The Mystery of Marie Roget."

Many of Poe's stories are constructed around what one might call—giving the term the sort of emphasis one gives to terms like "revenge" and "inheritance"—the "publication" plot. Each utterance, be it journal, letter, poem, or plagiarism, invites or demands a response on the part of the recipient, and the "happy ending" is not marriage or fortune but transmission of the message, provocation of response, establishment of contact. Thus Poe posits, and places at the center of much of his fiction, a void across which transmission must be effected—whether between aspiring writer and editor, as for Thingum, or between editor and editor, as in Poe's comic treatments of periodical controversy, or else, when MS. is consigned to bottle or letter to balloon, between the writer and the public. In this image of writing as a problematic effort to overcome an initial isolation, Poe makes his amateur or professional writers into figures for modern (or American) man, obliged to construct a micro-community of successful communication in order to save themselves from solipsism and inexistence. They have lost their listeners, so instead of speaking, they must write; they send their messages into the void, seeking the distant validation and guarantee of a reader's eyes. Each of them might say, with Emily Dickinson, "This is my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me."

We can observe an instructive contrast in the metaphoric use of the act of writing in Jean-Paul Sartre. For Sartre, the void presses right up against the solitary writer; the instant the ink leaves the pen, the letters he traces are utterly lost to him, becoming entities independent of any source. Hence that powerful scene in *La Nausée* when Roquentin abandons the history he has been working on because he is no longer able to believe that the papers before his eyes have been written by a specific human being, his subject:

> 'C'est lui, me dis-je, c'est pourtant lui qui a tracé ces signes un à un. Il s'est appuyé sur ce papier, il a posé son doigt sur les feuilles, pour les empêcher de tourner sous sa plume.'
>
> Trop tard; ces mots n'avaient plus de sens. Rien d'autre n'existait plus qu'une liasse de feuilles jaunes que je pressais dans les mains...[5]

When writing becomes completely independent of author, the self can no longer be reconstituted by the historical labor of the reader; it loses its ground of being. One of Poe's most striking images—very close phenomenologically to his portrayal of writing—plays upon precisely this sudden separation of subject from object.

> The shade of the trees fell heavily upon the water, and seemed to bury itself therein, impregnating the depths of the element with darkness. I fancied that each shadow, as the sun descended lower and lower, separated itself sullenly from the trunk that gave it birth, and thus became absorbed by the stream; while other shadows issued momently from the trees, taking the place of their predecessors thus entombed...[6]

Here writing is equivalent to premature burial: the shadows staining the water like ink no sooner enter the world ("that gave it birth") than they die out of it again ("entombed"). Between birth and death, life is a sort of agitated nothingness.

Despite such images, however, and despite Poe's fascination with the hoaxes of pseudonymity and plagiarism, he sustained a much-qualified but energetic belief in the possibility of authorship. Perhaps his most optimistic metaphor for literary communication was cryptography. Based on the assumption of a hiatus between inscription and reception, cast into time like a bottle into the sea, the cipher is nevertheless intended to emerge triumphant from its period of incomprehension and to find its decipherer, who will then have the treasure it conceals. The message may reach someone who will "know" its author by his "hieroglyphical signature," as Legrand recognizes Captain Kidd in "The Gold Bug," thus affirming his being as Roquentin can no longer affirm the being of the Marquis. Poe strives by the mediation of the written word to bring the lonely voyager home; he stretches the credible in order to throw bridges across the void of contingency where the self is suspended.

Still, the condition of the writer remains critical. Jean-Louis Baudry (an associate of the *Tel Quel* group, which has followed

Roquentin's lead in exploring the consequences of a writing cut loose from its writer) suggests that to conceive of writing in the traditional terms of "authorship"—that is, in terms of a continued transparent identity or contiguity of source and product—"ce serait croire... que l'on peut assister à sa mort comme à un spectacle. Sans doute, puisque dans la mort il s'agit de la mort des autres, avons-nous là l'ultime fantasme, le plus profond, celui de mourir en vivant, de vivre notre mort..."[7] In this passage the contradictions that Poe encompassed stand revealed; there is no better introduction to his best-known theme, survival into death. Whether death threatens Poe's narrator or strikes those around him, the result is a suspension of being, contingent upon the reestablishing of contact with others. This, and not the sensationalism that Poe loved to parody, explains the bizarre determination of his doomed narrators to transmit their last instants of experience—cool declarations like that of the old Norseman descending into the maelstrom: "my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see." Man alone is always man striving to break out of his isolation.

It is unnecessary to catalogue all the nocturnal rappings and subterranean noises that register this final-hour frenzy to communicate; one voice out of the grave makes the point for them all. Mr. Lackobreath of "Loss of Breath: A Tale Neither In nor Out of Blackwood," finding himself *à bout de souffle*, undergoes various interesting experiences, among them hanging. "I forbear to depict my sensations upon the gallows; although here, undoubtedly, I could speak to the point, and it is a topic upon which nothing has been well said." Premature burial follows, and in the tomb of course he recovers his powers of speech; for Poe the voice from the grave is truly *de rigueur*. Along with a companion our hero communicates, eventually, with the outside world:

> The united strength of our resuscitated voices was soon sufficiently apparent. Scissors the Whig editor, republished a treatise upon "the nature and origin of subterranean noises." A reply—rejoinder—confutation—and justification—followed in the columns of a Democratic Gazette. It was not until the opening of the vault, to decide the controversy, that the appearance of Mr. Windenough and myself proved both parties to have been decidedly in the wrong.

The peculiar rhythm of periodical publication mocks, and perpetuates, the desperate isolation of the writer, for whom writing

means no less than escape from living death. ''Qui n'a plus qu'un moment à vivre/N'a plus rien à dissimuler''—the epigraph to ''MS Found in a Bottle'' conveys the spirit if not the technique of Poe's writers. Its narrator too has been buried alive (in the ship's hold) by the catastrophe (shipwreck) that killed off the rest of his world, and he now combines *writing* and *invisibility*:

> Concealment is utter folly on my part, for the people *will not see*. It was but just now that I passed directly before the eyes of the mate; it was no long while ago that I ventured into the captain's own cabin, and took thence the materials with which I write, and have written. I shall from time to time continue this journal. It is true that I may not find an opportunity of transmitting it to the world, but I will not fail to make the endeavor. At the last moment I will enclose the MS in a bottle, and cast it within the sea.

''Shadow—A Parable'' begins with a paragraph which generalizes this point succinctly.

> Ye who read are still among the living; but I who write shall have long since gone my way into the region of shadows. For indeed strange things shall happen, and secret things be known, and many centuries shall pass away, ere these memorials be seen of men. And, when seen, there will be some to disbelieve, and some to doubt, and yet a few who will find much to ponder upon in the characters here graven with a stylus of iron.

For Poe, all papers are posthumous. Their survival, upon which so much depends, thus requires superior writing materials—an iron stylus, parchment instead of paper in ''The Gold Bug,'' blood instead of ink in *Pym*. Perhaps the key question is not even so much *what* one writes as *where* one writes it.

> While musing upon the singularity of my fate, I unwittingly daubed with a tar-brush the edges of a neatly-folded studding-sail which lay near me on a barrel. The studding-sail is now bent upon the ship, and the thoughtless touches of the brush are spread out into the word DISCOVERY.[8]

The extreme case of Poe's experimentation with writing materials is represented by the hieroglyphical chasms of Tsalal in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Least perishable of all papers

is the earth, and Poe attempts to borrow the authority of the Book of Nature with an adroit impersonation of Scripture: *"I have graven it upon the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock."* But one cannot conclude that Poe's narrators are heroic Promethean creators. Manuscripts survive at the cost of the mortal scribe's life. First Pym is almost crushed at the bottom of Nature's script, then he nearly plunges from the cliff where the letters are engraved. And the Editor's interpretation, we are reminded, is secondhand. The chasms are only to be read by the intrepid voyager, and civilization's knowledge of them must depend on the "pocket-book and pencil" which Pym "preserved with great care through a long series of subsequent adventures." The Editor's opening remark underlines the fragility of this transmission:

> The circumstances connected with the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym are already well known to the public through the medium of the daily press. It is feared that the few remaining chapters which were to have completed his narrative, and which were retained by him, while the above were in type, for the purpose of revision, have been irrevocably lost through the accident by which he perished himself...

What then of the immortality of Scripture? Among Poe's "Pinakidia" we find the following note: "The Book of Jasher, said to have been preserved from the deluge by Noah, but since lost, was extant in the time of Joshua, and in the time of David..."[9] Poe is morbidly aware that even the Bible needs its Ark.

This floating Bible motif appears as well in Bacon's utopian fiction, *The New Atlantis*, which has other similarities to *Pym*. Bacon, like Poe a master of codes, fragments, and Scriptural citation, stages a miracle for the people of Bensalem. A "great pillar of light" is suddenly observed in the middle of the ocean, topped by "a large cross of light, more bright and resplendent than the body of the pillar." The boats that approach it, however, find themselves mysteriously bound, except for that of one wise man of Salomon's House, who alone sails toward the pillar.

> But ere he came near it, the pillar and the cross of light brake up, and cast itself abroad, as it were, into a firmament of many stars; which also vanished soon after, and there was nothing left to be seen but a small ark or chest of cedar, dry, and not wet at all, though it swam.[10]

The ark contains the Bible, placed there by an apostle who had been warned by an angel "that I should commit this ark to the floods of the sea." The point is not in the matter but in the means. For Poe, too, writing is synonymous with salvation, but Poe's writers also know, like the apostle, that they cannot accompany their tale. Cast adrift on the world's watery distances, the writing that finds its reader has accomplished a minor miracle.

Bruce ROBBINS.

NOTES

[1] See "The Book as Symbol", in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, Bollingen, 1953).

[2] *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Stuart and Susan Levine (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1976).

[3] On this theme see John G. Blair, *The Confidence Man in Modern Fiction* (London, Vision, 1979).

[4] "Anastatic Printing", in Poe, *Essays and Miscellanies*, Vol. XIV of *Works*, ed. Harrison (New York, AMS, 1965), p. 157.

[5] *La Nausée* (Paris, Gallimard, 1938), p. 125.

[6] "The Island of the Fay", in Levine, pp. 20-21.

[7] "Ecriture, fiction, idéologie", in *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris, Seuil, 1968), p. 138.

[8] See "MS. Found in a Bottle".

[9] "Pinakidia", in *Essays and Miscellanies*, p. 52.

[10] *Selected Writings of Francis Bacon* (New York, Modern Library, 1955), pp. 554-555.