NOTES ON EDGAR ALLAN POE, MATHEMATICAL POET

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All certainty is in dreams.
Edgar A. Poe, *A Dream Within a Dream*

Poets, as Freud well knew, grasp through ways all their own what psychoanalysts come to with difficulty, by winding roads and not necessarily. No artist seems to me more representative (perhaps Rimbaud and among moderns Kafka) in effectively rendering what revolves around what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls real, whether in the form of repetition or a certain *ecstatic* aspect. In Poe's writings there recurs an element of strangeness and bewilderment that one habitually tends to eschew in favour of the ease of some familiarity. Yet, there are subjects who are oriented to allow themselves to be perturbed, disoriented, simply because they cannot help themselves. In them the effect of anguish is overcome by the desire for openness about the unfamiliar. Poe is undoubtedly among them.

He, inventor of the detective Dupin, also seems to have great faith in reason and the ability to observe facts (signs), according to Dupin's method, and use them as a mathematical equation. Trust in *logos*, then, albeit in a very personal way.

The work of this aching and disturbing dandy is totally animated by excess and intolerant of any form of the everyday. The feverish search for the absolute is accompanied in him by an obsession with the theme of death, which runs through most of his work. Death that trespasses into life, courted, evoked, and fought over only to return again and again. The recurring themes in Poe's work iteratively and their declinations are linked to the unravelling of his human story, which, as we shall see, also has insistencies, conspicuous repetitions. What is certain is that Poe was never what is commonly referred to as quiet or happy; his existence dragged between dizzying peaks and equally dizzying precipices, feverishly pursued until he brushed against them, happiness and success, only to lose them soon after. He saw the almost habitual use of alcohol, opium, morphine as anaesthetics of pain but also as a means of transcending himself, of overcoming the limits that the human condition itself

imposed on him. This enchanter of the word who can draw the reader into his gothic, ghostly, claustrophobic atmospheres, but also into worlds placed in sidereal, rarefied spaces, was completely incapable of sustaining a condition even vaguely resembling any form of third way from excess. Poe′s work is completely superimposable on his life, which itself seems like one of his stories: honest, absolute, maddening; marked by the death of almost all the important women in his life beginning with his mother Elizabeth. It is impossible not to recognize Elizabeth in the protagonists of Poe′s stories, in the same features altered and consumed by illness, which most lends the woman an aura of rarefied and unattainable spirituality. But even more so in being alive and dead at the same time, and thus unable to truly be either. Women not alive and not dead, sick with strange and mysterious diseases that make them almost otherworldly creatures, and because of which they die only to come back to life, arousing the lover′s desire and horror. This theme recurs iteratively in Poe′s work, in his Morella, Berenice, Ligeia, Madeleine. However, it does not seem enough to me to conclude, as Marie Bonaparte (1976) does in her monumental and remarkable biography of the poet, that Poe is fixated on his mother and that all his women, real or invented (but which one will be the truest?) are re-editions of Elizabeth, whose death he keeps repeating, resurrecting her only to have her, sadistically, die again. One could also say that the dreaded and longed-for event, as the ultimate solution, is thus anticipated to spare the agony of waiting, but even this is not enough and perhaps even misplaced. It seems to me that, far beyond his fixation and ambivalence, and even beyond the mother, through the paradigm of death he insistently sets up a place of jouissance from which it is impossible for him to escape. We see live the representation of the (death) drive at work, blind and destined for indefinite repetition: it is a coming and going to the Thing almost in its actual nakedness. I have an idea that this is what makes some of Poe′s passages, marked by sublime beauty, almost unbearable. All this is well traced in Ligeia (Poe 1913a), one of his most famous tales, in which, however, something else also emerges.

Lady Ligeia, the woman loved by the protagonist, is described in appearance and spirit, with accents worthy of the purest romantic style. However, her ‘exquisite beauty’ does not prevent the lover from felt that there was much of ‘strangeness’ pervading it, ‘yet I have tried in vain to detect the irregularity and to trace home my own perception of “the strange”’ (Poe 1913a: 301).

Something eludes the description of her brunette beauty, something that has to do essentially with a certain strangeness of proportion, and which one cannot fully understand except through certain analogies.

> I mean to say that, subsequently to the period when Ligeia's beauty passed into my spirit, there dwelling as in a shrine, I derived, from many existences in the material world, a sentiment such as I felt always aroused within me by her large and luminous orbs. Yet not the more could I define that sentiment, or analyze, or even steadily view it. I recognized it, let me repeat, 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 felt it in the glances of unusually aged people. And there are one or two stars in heaven – (one especially, a star of the sixth magnitude, double and changeable, to be found near the large star in Lyra) in a telescopic scrutiny of which I have been made aware of the feeling. I have been filled with it by certain sounds from stringed instruments, and not unfrequently by passages from books.
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> Poe 1913a: 301

Ligeia's presence and connection with her evoke in the protagonist an ecstatic afflatus that is not a form of union with the whole but a falling away of boundaries marked by a certain *strangeness*. The indefinable beauty of Ligeia as well as being in the presence of certain nonhuman animals or objects and events of the non-animal world, as extreme otherness, are capable to open (or reopen) a channel with psychic realms that are original and never surpassed (as nothing is ever surpassed in the unconscious). There the function of the word, of the logos as we are used to conceiving it (as reason) is controversial: insufficient? Useless? Antithetical? Poe, both a lover of word and reason, and a poet oriented toward the exit from self that fosters the reemergence of some(T)hing of the extreme, nevertheless speaks, indeed, writes.

Strangeness is the element consubstantial to most of Poe's work. He is oriented to the real not only in the form of repetition, as I said, but also, and this is what seems to me most interesting, in his ability to grasp what is habitually hidden (repressed) and sometimes manages to emerge. In Poe the uncanny phenomenon is not circumscribed and clamorous, like Freud's encounter with himself in the mirror, or if you will, the Acropolis event, but it is a tonality inherent in almost all his writing and, I would say, in his life as well. It is a kind of vocation to be disoriented, to lose one's own definiteness in order to be penetrated by an intimate and hidden inside/outside. This position of extreme exposure, of fluidity if not falling of boundaries, always ready for the loss of self, hesitates in the ecstatic element that marks his work.

Even the bizarre maladies from which his characters suffer, involving mainly the 'senses', as in Roderick Usher (Poe 1913b), are not only referred to a pain of simply being in the world, but above

all to an extreme *receptive* faculty, to an unreserved exposure that the protagonists pay on their own person. Like the foreign heart of the transplanted Nancy (2010), which becomes a form of life inscribed in the body, in Poe strangeness is settled as that to which he cannot help but look and tend. This has on the reader the same effect of bewilderment sometimes bordering on the unbearable. Poe's writing is magnetic and repelling at once, as he himself was after all: on the one hand aristocratic, of refined manners and seductive eloquence, on the other so poor as to be unpresentable if not repulsive, often drunk or altered by substances; authoritative and haughty but also demanding as a postulant.

We return to Ligeia, who falls ill with a mysterious, unnamed disease and becomes similar to Poe's other heroines: waxy, ghostly, lit only by eyes that now 'shone with too much, too fiery radiance' (Poe 1913a: 303). Despite her strenuous struggle Ligeia dies. Death is fought only to be summoned again. And indeed, quickly, the beloved returns in the guise of the protagonist's new bride, the blond Lady Rowena, for whom death announces itself with a new illness like the one that afflicted Ligeia. Death is only apparent, for Rowena's body will not be slow to show signs of life in death, until she comes back to life only to die again.

In one of Poe's most powerful and sinister passages, we witness 'this hideous drama of revivification was repeated' (Poe 1913a: 308) until the not-living and not-dead finally reveals the features of the beloved Lady Ligeia. The automatism of repetition mimics the same cycle of vitamorte, i.e., annihilation in the vow to the Thing-mother to tear oneself away from her again and begin anew. Ligeia and the others are also, like Antigone, suspended between the two deaths (Lacan 1986), not dead and not alive, destined for the Supreme Good. Somewhat like vampires, in imagination and literature, forever living and forever dead: undead, nostalgically wistful for the loss of their mortal life. That is, for the loss of the possibility of breaking the blind circuit of the drive, thus for life itself.

We are evidently here at the antipodes of any opening, of any possibility of breaking or departing from the circuit of repetition that indefinitely must continue. Yet, being so close, we might say *madly* close to the magnetic splendour of the Thing does not prevent the Author from being able to talk about it, or rather, perhaps *because of* it he can talk about it, indeed, write about it, with the disturbing and extraordinary effects we know. Precisely such closeness is the condition for which Poe is oriented to an ecstasy that is not wholeness, union with wholeness but bewilderment and strangeness that become a constant tonality.

'I could not love that where Death
Of Beauty to the breath would merge…'

These verses were not translated by Mallarmé, because they were suppressed by the author himself. In addition to the Romantic influences in keeping with his time they testify to how death is true beauty, the paradigmatic place where repetition and its enjoyments can be fulfilled. But beauty is, also, that elusive boundary where life and death meet, potentially generative of a different movement than the insistence of repetition; in other words, beyond the frontier of repetition that also must take its course, breathes the ecstatic afflatus that in Poe is dispossession of self and openness to an indefinite and unhanging void. The shadow that attracts him like a magnet is that of which nothing is known and which he, rather than rapaciously knowing, is eager to explore, experience and then attempt to put into words. Transit across this threshold can only be marked by anguish, the same anguish that contaminates the reader who wishes to be contaminated by it.

Writes Poe in one of the Marginalia:

> [….] I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words, with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it:- as I have before observed, the thought is logicalised by the effort at (written) expression.
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> 1846: 7-9

And shortly afterwards:

> 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 its epochs of most intense tranquillity – 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. I am aware of these 'fancies' only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable point of time – yet it is crowded with these 'shadows of shadows'; and for absolute thought there is demanded time's endurance.

> These 'fancies' have in them a pleasurable ecstasy, as far beyond the most pleasurable of the world of wakefulness, or of dreams [....] I regard the visions, even as they arise, with an awe which, in some measure moderates or tranquillises the *ecstasy* – I so regard them, through a conviction (which seems a portion of the ecstasy itself) that this ecstasy, in itself, is of a character supernal to the Human Nature – is a glimpse of the spirit's outer world; and I arrive at this conclusion – if this term is at all applicable to instantaneous intuition- by a perception that the delight experienced has, as its element, but the absoluteness of novelty. I say the absoluteness for in the fancies – let me now term them psychal 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.
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> 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 describe.
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> Poe 1846: 9, 8, 9

In this beautiful Marginalia the two sides that animate Poe are patent, nor can one do without the other. The confidence in the word is such that he does not 'despair of embodying in words at least enough of the fancies in question.' He pursues it even, or rather, *on that very edge* where it escapes, an enterprise not deterred even by its failure, indeed. Nor can he dispense with the encounter with the world of 'shadows of shadows' to the point of 'inducing or compelling it' to immerse himself in it (Poe 1846: 9).

After his expulsion from West Point Edgar is taken in by his aunt Maria Clemm, whom he will consider to the end his real mother and who lives with his daughter Virginia. Her young age (Virginia is a twelve-year-old girl) does not prevent E. (who is twenty-six) from becoming engaged to her and marrying her after only two years.

The devotion to Virginia, who is also ill with consumption, will be tender, childlike, devoid of any sexual implications, and in a sense absolute, despite the coexistence with other and numerous loves, all distant, unattainable, lived with frenzy. In the love for Virginia, the element of strangeness emerges as a double. The child bride is a kind of fraternal double of the poet to whom she even resembles: the black, wavy hair, the very wide forehead. In Poe's work the theme of the double is present explicitly only in the novella William Wilson although it recurs in the description of both male and female characters in whom it is easy to recognize the Author himself. In WW the protagonist is haunted by the presence of his own double, who invariably shows up at crucial

moments as if to demand an account, right up to the extreme, irremediable one. Notoriously, the Freudian reading has seen this double as a punitive instance of paternal mark (Freud *SE* XVII 1919), that is, the repressed that returns as a threat of emasculation. Death is equated with castration anguish. It seems to me, however, that death here also refers to a repetitive, dead-end drive circuit. The double as death, as a real drive that can only follow its deadly circuit shows itself with effects of extreme disruption.

After Virginia's death, the third and last great loss of his life, Poe writes to a friend:

> Six years ago, my wife, whom I loved as no one ever loved before, broke singing a blood vessel. We despaired for her life. I bade her an eternal farewell and went through all the agony of her death. She recovered a little and again I hoped. At the end of the year the vessel broke again. I relived exactly the same scene – and again, and again and again, at different intervals. Each time I felt the agony of her death with each attack of her illness I loved her more and more and clung to her life with a more desperate stubbornness.... I became insane, with long intervals of horrible lucidity. I had almost given up all hope of recovery when I found one in the death of my wife. This I can bear and endure as befits a man. It was the horrible endless oscillation between hope and despair that I could not have endured any longer without losing my reason entirely. So in the death of the one who was my life I receive a new existence but, my God!, with how much melancholy.
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> Poe 1909: 287

The scene described by Poe can be likened to one of his short stories: the 'horrible endless oscillation between hope and despair,' between life and death, returns in a circuit destined to repeat itself.

Poe deludes himself that Virginia's death will put an end to this diabolical repetition (is there a non-evil one?) and may mark the beginning of her recovery but it will not. The 'melancholy' of giving up the enjoyment of repetition is perhaps too much to bear. This writing so desperate and so lucid shows us another side of Poe, that of the 'reasoning' Poe. And indeed he is also the writer of the pure, elegant style, where every word is weighed and thought out in 'mathematical' ways, where sentence construction does not go through a plus or a minus, but seems to stand on a slight and perfect balance. In the essay Philosophy of Composition (Poe 1875), considered by some to be a mere divertissement, Poe explains his own method of composing a poetic text with the intention of 'showing that no part of it [he is alluding to the poem The Raven] was due to chance or intuition, that

the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.'

Poe gave birth to the character Dupin, the forerunner of detectives, the progenitor of Sherlock Holmes; being considered the father of the detective story risked making him a 'genre' writer, who he clearly is not. Dupin is the semiotician but also the 'visionary,' who likewise made reasoning and reasoning his own style, which is lucidly illustrated by himself in the famous short story The Murders in the Rue Morgue, without this making him lose anything in terms of that nonchalant dandy lightness in which we recognize the Author himself. The Dupin model has been repeatedly taken up, not only in literature but also in criticism and semiology, as an 'investigative paradigm,' (Eco and Sebeok 1988) both medical-psychological and detective. His ability to read the traces, the lowest clues (the scraps) that others do not see or do not consider noteworthy make him an emblematic precursor of psychoanalysis. But Dupin is also the frequenter of the night, the one who closes the shutters and lights the candles when the sun rises to write, to read, to converse with his alter ego, that is, Poe himself; and who then, when it has finally fallen, plunges into comfortable darkness to become a flâneur of the night. Wandering aimlessly through the shadows of the city he allows himself to be penetrated by the darkness, exposed to it. He too, like his inventor, indulges in what comes from the darkness in which he finds inspiration for his daytime operation. His keen intelligence and his ability to read 'clues' are nourished by sinking into the darkness, also a method, another form of intelligence that relies not on reason but on something else. Or rather, reason does not seem to be able to do without this something else, difficult if not impossible to define but having to do with a reversal of perspective that makes darkness a different possibility of seeing. With the same senses? With other senses? Nocturnal ecstasy is a search for darkness outside and inside, for a divestment of self that clears the field of what is habitual, known and repeated to make room for the unexpected, Fachinelli might have said to the surprise.

> It was not a new terror that thus affected me, but the dawn of a more exciting hope. This hope arose partly from memory, and partly from present observation. I called to mind the great variety of buoyant matter that strewed the coast of Lofoden, having been absorbed and then thrown forth by the Moskoe-strom. By far the greater number of the articles were shattered in the most extraordinary way – so chafed and roughened as to have the appearance of being stuck full of splinters – but then I distinctly recollected that there were some of them which were not disfigured at all. Now I could not account for this difference except by supposing that the roughened fragments were the only ones which had been completely absorbed – that the others had entered the whirl at so late a period of the tide, or, from some reason, had descended so

> slowly after entering, that they did not reach the bottom before the turn of the flood came, or of the ebb, as the case might be. I conceived it possible, in either instance, that they might thus be whirled up again to the level of the ocean, without undergoing the fate of those which had been drawn in more early or absorbed more rapidly. I made, also, three important observations. The first was, that as a general rule, the larger the bodies were, the more rapid their descent; – the second, that, between two masses of equal extent, the one spherical, and the other of any other shape, the superiority in speed of descent was with the sphere; – the third, that, between two masses of equal size, the one cylindrical, and the other of any other shape, the cylinder was absorbed the more slowly.
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> Since my escape, I have had several conversations on this subject with an old school-master of the district; and it was from him that I learned the use of the words 'cylinder' and 'sphere'. He explained to me – although I have forgotten the explanation – how what I observed was, in fact, the natural consequence of the forms of the floating fragments – and showed me how it happened that a cylinder, swimming in a vortex, offered more resistance to its suction, and was drawn in with greater difficulty than an equally bulky body, of any form whatever.*
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> *See Archimedes, 'De Incidentibus in Fluido.' --lib.2.
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> There was one startling circumstance which went a great way in enforcing these observations, and rendering me anxious to turn them to account, and this was that, at every revolution, we passed something like a barrel, or else the broken yard or the mast of a vessel, while many of these things, which had been on our level when I first opened my eyes upon the wonders of the whirlpool, were now high up above us, and seemed to have moved but little from their original station.
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> Poe 1913d: 164-65

In this fragment from A descent into the Maelstrom, reasoning overcomes the terror of the encounter with the Maelstrom, from which the protagonist gradually manages to re-emerge by clinging to the geometric shape that is the barrel. But is that thrilling hope due to the prospect of salvation or also to something else? Perhaps to the very being *so close* to the maelstrom? Reason (literally l'esprit de geometrie) does indeed prevail here over the deadly risk of the Maelstrom but only *after* encountering it.

After Virginia's death, Poe's poetic abilities are further intensified, as if he is seized by a creative and communicative frenzy that possesses him like a fever.

His use of drugs and alcohol became exasperated as did his wanderings. On October 3, 1849, he was picked up from the street in the throes of delirium tremens and admitted to Washington Hospital in Baltimore, where he remained three days in a semi-conscious condition until three o'clock on a Sunday morning.

> At that moment a very noticeable change began to take place. Weakened by his efforts, he calmed down and seemed to rest for some time, then gently turning his head, he said, – The Lord come to the aid of my poor soul, and expired.[1]
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> Letter from Dr. Moran to Madam Clemn (1849)

At the age of forty, in a manner worthy of one of his stories, America's greatest poet died. At his funeral there will be but a dozen people.

> Thank Heaven! The crisis-
> The danger is past,
> And the lingering illness
> Is over at last-
> And the fever called <<Living>>
> Is conquered at last.
>
> Poe 1913c: 663

The voyage has ended, Edgar has reached that intersection of vitamorte that he always pursued. 'Death will be a wonderful adventure,' Barrie said shortly before he died. Perhaps Poe would not have said it in the same terms, but he might have subscribed to it. A 'fever' oriented this genius who made bewilderment a way of being. Poe was a wanderer, able to stop for meaning to take shape in his masterpieces and then resume the voyage. He sought shadow and self-dispossession, moving on the thresholds of risk and dissolution; frequenting these glowing and generative territories went hand in hand with the search for formalisation. This, from my point of view, made his words so powerful, for those willing to listen. The no man's land where wandering, in its double meaning,[2] is at home,

[1] Letter from Dr Moran to Mrs Clemm, 15th November 1849.

[2] This is a French word and impossible to translate about '*errer*' which means to wander and to err.

if you will pardon the oxymoron, is precisely the place where words are lost but also renewed and others are found. Poe has relied on a further kind of 'reason,' one that, as Baudelaire writes (Baudelaire 2020), has the ambition to replace the 'direct, white light' with another that will 'envelop the [.....] horizon in a myriad of colours' (my translation). A reason, indeed, an elliptical thinking that draws on dreams and liminal territories where consciousness tends toward dissolution to open up to the unknown.

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