

❖ | BAUDELAIRE | ❖
AS A LITERARY CRITIC

SELECTED ESSAYS
INTRODUCED AND TRANSLATED BY
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AND
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woman, his Titanide, she is revealed in several portraits scattered through his sparse collection of poems, portraits, or rather ways of feeling beauty, which the temperament of the author joins and fuses in a vague but perceptible unity, and in which exists perhaps more delicately than elsewhere that insatiable love of the Beautiful, which is his great title of respect, that is the summation of his claims on the affection and admiration of poets.

Under the title: *Histoires Extraordinaires* we have gathered together various stories chosen from the whole of Poe's work. His work comprises a considerable number of short stories, an equal quantity of critical and miscellaneous articles, a philosophical poem (*Eureka*), poems, and a purely realistic novel (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*).

If, as I hope, I should have occasion to speak further of this poet, I shall give an analysis of his philosophical and literary ideas, and in general of works whose complete translation would have little chance of success with a public which much prefers amusement and emotion to the most important philosophical truth.

NEW NOTES ON EDGAR POE

PREFACE

Baudelaire's third essay on Poe served as a preface to his second volume of translations, published in 1857. The essay is one of Baudelaire's most important critical studies, since for the first time it sets forth the principles which form the heart of his aesthetic doctrine. In it he quotes and paraphrases passages from Poe's "The Poetic Principle," often presenting them as if they were his own.

As in his two preceding essays Baudelaire introduces digressions on various topics such as suicide, drunkenness, progress, decadent literature, and the natural perversity of man. Baudelaire was obviously impressed by Poe's notion of perversity which corresponds in many ways to his own belief in original sin. The American writer, who was devoid of any traditional religious convictions, never related his theory of perversity to the Fall, nor did he give it any other theological implications, but Baudelaire seems to have been so elated at his discovery of Poe's conception of the perverse that he ascribed his own beliefs to his literary idol.

Almost all of Baudelaire's favorite ideas are to be found in the essay. Once again he supports Poe in his attack on utilitarian poetry, although he is careful to add that morality is almost inevitably a by-product of poetry—an admission which has no counterpart in "The Poetic Principle." Like Poe, he believes that the short poem is best suited to the requirements of pure poetry. Like him, he also stresses the importance of melancholy, musicality, and strangeness, as well as the need to subject inspiration to discipline. It is in this essay also that Baudelaire modifies his own theory of the relationship of passion to poetry and momentarily accepts Poe's belief that passion is incompatible with pure poetry.

The transcendental implications of poetry that Baudelaire had suggested in "Since it is a Question of Realism" are strengthened by his acceptance of Poe's belief that poetry is human aspiration toward a superior beauty. But perhaps of greatest importance is the fact that Baudelaire seems to have finally arrived at his conception of the imagination which, like Poe, he considers almost a divine faculty. Although he will develop the subject further in the *Salon of 1859*, he has given it here all the importance that it will have in his later essays. His association of the imagination with correspondences and analogies finds no counterpart in "The Poetic Principle"; in fact, the theory of correspondences never seems to have been a part of Poe's literary doctrine. Yet on a number of occasions, such as in the "Pur-

joined Letter" and in "Marginalia" Poe also noted that "the material world abounds with very strict analogies to the immaterial."

Throughout the essay it becomes obvious that Baudelaire found in Poe's literary doctrine a confirmation of his own poetic practices as well as an affirmation of aesthetic ideas he had already accepted and, in some cases, expressed or suggested in his critical essays. It must be acknowledged that he depended too much on Poe for the articulation of those ideas, but in all fairness it must be admitted that the ideas were already inherent in his own work.

In addition to the three long essays, Baudelaire wrote seven short notices which, though very little known, contain a number of interesting observations. Of these the prefaces to "Mesmeric Revelation" and to "Berenice" reveal his antipathy to Realism and his admiration for the visionary artist preoccupied with the problems of "a spiritual man: probabilities, mental illnesses, scientific hypotheses, hopes and considerations about a future life, analysis of the eccentrics and pariahs of this world, directly symbolic buffooneries."⁶⁴ These preoccupations would be sufficient to explain Baudelaire's sympathy for a writer whom he considered his spiritual brother and whom he invoked as an intercessor, together with his father and his childhood servant Mariette, in the famous prayer found among the notations in his *Journaux Intimes*.⁶⁵

Yet in spite of his dissatisfaction with Realism and his concern with spiritual reality, Baudelaire recognized some of the possibilities of "representational" expression. A postscript to "Hans Pfaall" (1855) in which he refers to "the capricious hippogriff of *verisimilitude*" indicates that he was conscious of the two-edged character of realistic technique.⁶⁶ A few years later (ca. 1863), in a "Translator's Note" that remained unpublished until 1934, Baudelaire was still acclaiming Poe for "the magic of absolute *verisimilitude*" that he found in his tales.⁶⁷ His praise was evidently not the result of a passing whim, for in his analysis of Gautier's poetic stories (1859) he had likewise

noted the danger of losing contact with "reality or the magic of *verisimilitude*."⁶⁸

Among the short and somewhat slight prefaces that Baudelaire wrote in connection with his Poe translations should also be mentioned the introduction to his prose translation of *The Raven*. Once again Baudelaire finds himself in sympathy with Poe's idea that inspiration must be accompanied by will and hard work. Although he admits that Poe deliberately underestimated the importance of inspiration, he agrees that "it will always be useful to show them [the readers] what profit art can draw from deliberation and to make worldly people realize how much labor is required by that object of luxury called Poetry."⁶⁹



I

Decadent literature!—Empty words which we often hear fall, with the sonority of a deep yawn, from the mouths of those unenigmatic sphinxes who keep watch before the sacred doors of classical Aesthetics.⁷⁰ Each time that the irrefutable oracle resounds, one can be sure that it is about a work more amusing than the *Iliad*. It is evidently a question of a poem or of a novel, all of whose parts are skillfully designed for surprise, whose style is magnificently embellished, where all the resources of language and prosody are utilized by an impeccable hand. When I hear the anathema boom out—which, I might say in passing, usually falls on some favorite poet—I am always seized with the desire to reply: Do you take me for a barbarian like you and do you believe me capable of amusing myself as dimly as you do? Then grotesque comparisons stir in my brain; it seems to me that two women appear before me: one, a rustic matron, repugnant in her health and virtue, plain and expressionless, in short, *owing everything to simple nature*; the other, one of those beauties who dominate and oppress one's memory,

adding all the eloquence of dress to her profound and original charm, well poised, conscious and queen of herself—with a speaking voice like a well-tuned instrument, and eyes laden with thoughts but revealing only what they wish. I would not hesitate in my choice, and yet there are pedagogical sphinxes who would reproach me for my failure to respect classical honor.—But, putting aside parables, I think it is permissible to ask these wise men if they really understand all the vanity, all the futility of their wisdom. The phrase *decadent literature* implies that there is a scale of literatures, an infantile, a childish, an adolescent, etc. This term, in other words, supposes something fatal and providential, like an ineluctable decree; and it is altogether unfair to reproach us for fulfilling the mysterious law. All that I can understand in this academic phrase is that it is shameful to obey this law with pleasure and that we are guilty to rejoice in our destiny.—The sun, which a few hours ago overwhelmed everything with its direct white light, is soon going to flood the western horizon with variegated colors. In the play of light of the dying sun certain poetic spirits will find new delights; they will discover there dazzling colonnades, cascades of molten metal, paradises of fire, a sad splendor, the pleasure of regret, all the magic of dreams, all the memories of opium. And indeed the sunset will appear to them like the marvelous allegory of a soul filled with life which descends behind the horizon with a magnificent store of thoughts and dreams.⁷¹

But what the narrow-minded professors have not realized is that, in the movement of life, there may occur some complication, some combination quite unforeseen by their schoolboy wisdom. And then their inadequate language fails, as in the case—a phenomenon which perhaps will increase with variants—of a nation which begins with decadence and thus starts where others end.

Let new literatures develop among the immense colonies of the present century and there will result most certainly spiritual accidents of a nature disturbing to the academic mind. Young and old at the same time, America babbles and rambles with an

astonishing volubility. Who could count its poets? They are innumerable. Its *blue stockings*? They clutter the magazines. Its critics? You may be sure that they have pedants who are as good as ours at constantly recalling the artist to ancient beauty, at questioning a poet or a novelist on the morality of his purpose and the merit of his intentions. There can be found there as here, but even more than here, men of letters who do not know how to spell; a childish, useless activity; compilers in abundance, hack writers, plagiarists of plagiaries, and critics of critics. In this maelstrom of mediocrity, in this society enamored of material perfections—a new kind of scandal which makes intelligible the grandeur of inactive peoples—in this society eager for surprises, in love with life, but especially with a life full of excitements, a man has appeared who was great not only in his metaphysical subtlety, in the sinister or bewitching beauty of his conceptions, in the rigor of his analysis, but also great and not less great as a *caricature*.—I must explain myself with some care; for recently a rash critic, in order to disparage Edgar Poe and to invalidate the sincerity of my admiration, used the word *jongleur* which I myself had applied to the noble poet as a sort of praise.⁷²

From the midst of a greedy world, hungry for material things, Poe took flight in dreams. Stifled as he was by the American atmosphere, he wrote at the beginning of *Eureka*: "I offer this book to those who have put faith in dreams as in the only realities!" He was in himself an admirable protest, and he made his protest in his own particular way. The author who, in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," pours out his scorn and disgust for democracy, progress and *civilization*, this author is the same one who, in order to encourage credulity, to delight the stupidity of his contemporaries, has stressed human sovereignty most emphatically and has very ingeniously fabricated hoaxes flattering to the pride of *modern man*. Considered in this light, Poe seems like a helot who wishes to make his master blush. Finally, to state my thought even more clearly, Poe was always great not only in his noble conceptions but also as a prankster.

II

For he was never a dupe! I do not think that the Virginian who calmly wrote in the midst of a rising tide of democracy: "People have nothing to do with laws except to obey them," has ever been a victim of modern wisdom; and: "The nose of a mob is its imagination. By this, at any time, it can be quietly led"—and a hundred other passages in which mockery falls thick and fast like a hail of bullets but still remains proud and indifferent.⁷³—The Swedenborgians congratulate him on his "Mesmeric Revelation," like those naïve Illuminati who formerly hailed in the author of the *Diable amoureux* a discoverer of their mysteries; they thank him for the great truths which he has just proclaimed—for they have discovered (O verifiers of the unverifiable!) that all that which he has set forth is absolutely true;—although, at first, these good people confess, they had suspected that it might well have been merely fictitious.⁷⁴ Poe answers that, so far as he is concerned, he has never doubted it.—Must I cite in addition this short passage which catches my eye while scanning for the hundredth time his amusing "Marginalia," which are the secret chambers, as it were, of his mind: "The enormous multiplication of books in all branches of knowledge is one of the greatest scourges of this age, for it is one of the most serious obstacles to the acquisition of all positive knowledge." Aristocrat by nature even more than by birth, the Virginian, the Southerner, the Byron gone astray in a bad world, has always kept his philosophic impassibility and, whether he defines the nose of the mob, whether he mocks the fabricators of religions, whether he scoffs at libraries, he remains what the true poet was and always will be—a truth clothed in a strange manner, an apparent paradox, who does not wish to be elbowed by the crowd and who runs to the far east when the fireworks go off in the west.

But more important than anything else: we shall see that this author, product of a century infatuated with itself, child of a nation more infatuated with itself than any other, has clearly seen, has imperturbably affirmed the natural wickedness

of man. There is in man, he says, a mysterious force which modern philosophy does not wish to take into consideration; nevertheless, without this nameless force, without this primordial bent, a host of human actions will remain unexplained, inexplicable. These actions are attractive only *because* they are bad or dangerous; they possess the fascination of the abyss. This primitive, irresistible force is natural Perversity, which makes man constantly and simultaneously a murderer and a suicide, an assassin and a hangman;—for he adds, with a remarkably satanic subtlety, the impossibility of finding an adequate rational motive for certain wicked and perilous actions could lead us to consider them as the result of the suggestions of the Devil, if experience and history did not teach us that God often draws from them the establishment of order and the punishment of scoundrels;—*after having used the same scoundrels as accomplices!* such is the thought which, I confess, slips into my mind, an implication as inevitable as it is perfidious. But for the present I wish to consider only the great forgotten truth—the primordial perversity of man—and it is not without a certain satisfaction that I see some vestiges of ancient wisdom return to us from a country from which we did not expect them. It is pleasant to know that some fragments of an old truth are exploded in the faces of all these obsequious flatterers of humanity, of all these humbugs and quacks who repeat in every possible tone of voice: "I am born good, and you too, and all of us are born good!" forgetting, no! pretending to forget, like misguided equalitarians, that we are all born marked for evil!

Of what lies could he be a dupe, he who sometimes—sad necessity of his environment—dealt with them so well? What scorn for pseudophilosophy on his good days, on the days when he was, so to speak, inspired! This poet, several of whose compositions seem deliberately made to confirm the alleged omnipotence of man, has sometimes wished to purge himself. The day that he wrote: "All certainty is in dreams," he thrust back his own Americanism into the region of inferior things; at

other times, becoming again the true poet, doubtless obeying the ineluctable truth which haunts us like a demon, he uttered the ardent sighs of *the fallen angel who remembers heaven*; he lamented the golden age and the lost Eden; he wept over all the magnificence of nature *shrivelling up before the hot breath of fiery furnaces*; finally, he produced those admirable pages: "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" which would have charmed and troubled the impeccable de Maistre.

It is he who said about socialism at a time when the latter did not yet have a name, or when, at least, this name was not completely popularized: "The world is infested, just now, by a new sect of philosophers, who have not yet suspected themselves of forming a sect, and who, consequently, have adopted no name. They are the *Believers in everything Old*. Their High Priest in the East, is Charles Fourier—in the West, Horace Greeley; and they are well aware that they are high priests. The only common bond among the members is Credulity:—let us call it Insanity at once, and be done with it. Ask any one of them *why* he believes this or that, and, if he be conscientious (ignorant people usually are), he will make you very much such a reply as Talleyrand made when asked why he believed in the Bible. 'I believe in it first,' said he, 'because I am Bishop of Autun; and, secondly, because I don't know the least thing about it.' What these philosophers call 'argument' is a way they have 'de nier ce qui est et d'expliquer ce qui n'est pas.'" ⁷⁵

Progress, that great heresy of decay, likewise could not escape Poe. The reader will see in different passages what terms he used to characterize it. One could truly say, considering the fervor that he expends, that he had to vent his spleen on it, as on a public nuisance or as on a pest in the street. How he would have laughed, with the poet's scornful laugh, which alienates simpletons, had he happened, as I did, upon this wonderful statement which reminds one of the ridiculous and deliberate absurdities of clowns. I discovered it treacherously blazoned in an eminently serious magazine:—*The unceasing progress of science has very recently made possible the rediscovery of the*

lost and long sought secret of . . . (Greek fire, the tempering of copper, something or other which has vanished), *of which the most successful applications date back to a barbarous and very old period!!!* That is a sentence which can be called a real find, a brilliant discovery, even in a century of *unceasing progress*; but I believe that the mummy Allamistakeo would not have failed to ask with a gentle and discreet tone of superiority, if it were also thanks to *unceasing progress*—to the fatal, irresistible law of progress—that this famous secret had been lost.⁷⁶—Moreover, to become serious about a subject which is as sad as it is laughable, is it not a really stupefying thing to see a nation, several nations, and presently all humanity, say to its wise men, its magicians: I shall love you and I shall make you great if you convince me that we are progressing unconsciously, inevitably—while sleeping; rid us of responsibility, veil for us the humiliation of comparisons, turn history into sophistries and you will be able to call yourselves the wisest of the wise? Is it not a cause for astonishment that this simple idea does not flash into everyone's mind: that progress (in so far as there is progress) perfects sorrow to the same extent that it refines pleasure and that, if the epidermis of peoples is becoming delicate, they are evidently pursuing only an *Italiam fugientem*, a conquest lost every minute, a progress always negating itself? ⁷⁷

But these illusions which, it must be added, are selfish, originate in a foundation of perversity and falsehood—meteors rising from swamps—which fill with disdain souls in love with the eternal fire, like Edgar Poe, and exasperate foggy minds like Jean-Jacques [Rousseau]; in whom a wounded and rebellious sensibility takes the place of philosophy. That he was justified in his attack on the *depraved animal* is undeniable; but the *depraved animal* has the right to reproach him for invoking simple nature. Nature produces only monsters, and the whole question is to understand the word *savages*. No philosopher will dare to propose as models those wretched, rotten hordes, victims of the elements, prey of the animals, as incapable of manufacturing arms as of conceiving the idea of a spiritual and

supreme power. But, if one wishes to compare modern man, civilized man, with the savage, or rather a so-called civilized nation with a so-called savage nation, that is to say one deprived of all the ingenious inventions which make heroism unnecessary, who does not see that all honor goes to the savage? By his nature, by very necessity itself, he is encyclopedic, while civilized man finds himself confined to the infinitely small regions of specialization. Civilized man invents the philosophy of progress to console himself for his abdication and for his downfall; whereas the savage man, redoubtable and respected husband, warrior forced to personal bravery, poet in the melancholy hours when the setting sun inspires songs of the past and of his forefathers, skirts more closely the edge of the ideal. Of what lack shall we dare accuse him? He has the priest, he has the magician and the doctor. What am I saying? He has the dandy, supreme incarnation of the idea of the beautiful given expression in material life, he who dictates form and governs manners. His clothing, his adornments, his weapons, his pipe give proof of an inventive faculty which for a long time has deserted us. Shall we compare our sluggish eyes and our deafened ears to those eyes which pierce the mist, to those ears *which would hear the grass growing?* And the savage woman with a simple and child-like soul, an obedient and winning animal, giving herself entirely and knowing that she is only half of a destiny, shall we declare her inferior to the American woman whom M. Bellegarigue (editor of the *Grocer's Bulletin!*) thought he was praising by saying that she was the ideal of the kept woman? This same woman, whose overpractical manners inspired Edgar Poe, he who was so gallant, so respectful of beauty, to write the following sad lines: "The frightfully long money-pouches—'like the Cucumber called the Gigantic'—which have come in vogue among our belles—are *not* of Parisian origin, as many suppose, but are strictly indigenous here. The fact is, such a fashion would be quite out of place in Paris, where it is money *only* that women keep in a purse. The purse of an American lady, however, must be large enough to carry both her money and

the soul of its owner." ⁷⁸ As for religion, I shall not speak of Vitzilipoutzli as lightly as Alfred de Musset has done; I confess without shame that I much prefer the cult of Teutatès to that of Mammon; and the priest who offers to the cruel extorter of human sacrifices victims who die *honorably*, victims who *wish* to die, seems to me a quite sweet and human being compared to the financier who immolates whole populations solely in his own interest. ⁷⁹ Now and then, these matters are still understood, and I once found in an article by M. Barbey d'Aureville an exclamation of philosophic sadness which sums up everything that I should like to say about the subject: "Civilized peoples, who keep casting stones at savages, soon you will not deserve to be even idolaters!" ⁸⁰

Such an environment—although I have already said so, I cannot resist the desire to repeat it—is hardly made for poets. What a French mind, even the most democratic, understands by a State, would find no place in an American mind. For every intellect of the old world, a political State has a center of movement which is its brain and its sun, old and glorious memories, long poetic and military annals, an aristocracy to which poverty, daughter of revolutions, can add only a paradoxical luster; but That! that mob of buyers and sellers, that nameless creature, that headless monster, that outcast on the other side of the ocean, you call that a State!—I agree, if a vast tavern where the customer crowds in and conducts his business on dirty tables, amid the din of coarse speech, can be compared to a *salon*, to what we formerly called a salon, a republic of the mind presided over by beauty!

It will always be difficult to exercise, both nobly and fruitfully, the profession of a man of letters, without being exposed to defamation, to the slander of the impotent, to the envy of the rich—that envy which is their punishment!—to the vengeance of bourgeois mediocrity. But what is difficult in a limited monarchy or in an ordinary republic becomes almost impossible in a sort of Capernaum where each policeman of public opinion keeps order in the interest of his vices—or of his virtues, for it

is all one and the same thing;—where a poet, a novelist of a country in which slavery exists, is a detestable writer in the eyes of an abolitionist critic; where one does not know which is more scandalous—the disorder of cynicism or the imperturbability of Biblical hypocrisy. To burn chained Negroes guilty of having felt their black cheeks sting with the blush of honor, to play with guns in the pit of a theater, to establish polygamy in the paradises of the West, which the savages (this term seems unjust) had not yet soiled with these shameful Utopias, to post on walls, doubtless to sanctify the principle of unlimited liberty, *the cure for nine months' illnesses*, such are some of the salient characteristics, some of the moral examples of the noble country of Franklin, the inventor of a counting-house morality, the hero of a century devoted to materialism. It is good to consider constantly these extraordinary examples of gross behavior in a time when americanomania has become almost a fashionable passion, to the extent that an archbishop has been able to promise us quite seriously that Providence would soon call us to enjoy this transatlantic ideal.

III

Such a social environment necessarily engenders corresponding literary errors. Poe reacted against these errors as often as he could, and with all his might. We must not be surprised then that American writers, though recognizing his singular power as a poet and as a storyteller, have always tended to question his ability as a critic. In a country where the idea of utility, the most hostile in the world to the idea of beauty, dominates and takes precedence over everything, the perfect critic will be the most *respectable*, that is to say the one whose tendencies and desires will best approximate the tendencies and desires of his public—the one who, confusing the intellectual faculties of the writer and the categories of writing, will assign to all a single goal—the one who will seek in a book of poetry the means of perfecting conscience. Naturally he will become all the less concerned with

the real, the positive beauties of poetry; he will be all the less shocked by imperfections and even by faults in execution. Edgar Poe, on the contrary, dividing the world of the mind into pure *Intellect*, *Taste*, and *Moral Sense*, applied criticism in accordance with the category to which the object of his analysis belonged.⁸¹ He was above all sensitive to perfection of plan and to correctness of execution; taking apart literary works like defective pieces of machinery (considering the goal that they wished to attain), noting carefully the flaws of workmanship; and when he passed to the details of the work, to its plastic expression, in a word, to style, examining meticulously and without omissions the faults of prosody, the grammatical errors and all the mass of dross which, among writers who are not artists, besmirch the best intentions and deform the most noble conceptions.

For him, Imagination is the queen of faculties; but by this word he understands something greater than that which is understood by the average reader. Imagination is not fantasy; nor is it sensibility, although it may be difficult to conceive of an imaginative man who would be lacking in sensibility. Imagination is an almost divine faculty which perceives immediately and without philosophical methods the inner and secret relations of things, the correspondences and the analogies. The honors and functions which he grants to this faculty give it such value (at least when the thought of the author has been well understood) that a scholar without imagination appears only as a pseudoscholar, or at least as an incomplete scholar.

Among the literary domains where imagination can obtain the most curious results, can harvest treasures, not the richest, the most precious (those belong to poetry), but the most numerous and the most varied, there is one of which Poe is especially fond; it is the *Short Story*. It has the immense advantage over the novel of vast proportions that its brevity adds to the intensity of effect. This type of reading, which can be accomplished in one sitting, leaves in the mind a more powerful impression than a broken reading, often interrupted by the worries of business

and the cares of social life. The unity of impression, the *totality* of effect is an immense advantage which can give to this type of composition a very special superiority, to such an extent that an extremely short story (which is doubtless a fault) is even better than an extremely long story. The artist, if he is skillful, will not adapt his thoughts to the incidents but, having conceived deliberately and at leisure an effect to be produced, will invent the incidents, will combine the events most suitable to bring about the desired effect. If the first sentence is not written with the idea of preparing this final impression, the work has failed from the start. There must not creep into the entire composition a single word which is not intentional, which does not tend, directly or indirectly, to complete the premeditated design.

There is one point in which the short story is superior even to the poem. Rhythm is necessary to the development of the idea of beauty, which is the greatest and the most noble aim of poetry. Now, the artifices of rhythm are an insurmountable obstacle to the detailed development of thought and expression which has *truth* as its object. For truth can often be the goal of the short story, and reasoning the best tool for the construction of a perfect short story. That is why this type of composition, which is not as high on the scale as pure poetry, can provide more varied results, more easily appreciated by the average reader. Moreover, the author of a short story has at his disposal a multitude of tones, of nuances of language, the rational tone, the sarcastic, the humorous, which are repudiated by poetry and which are, as it were, dissonances, outrages to the idea of pure beauty. And that is also why the author who seeks in the short story the single goal of beauty works only at a great disadvantage, deprived as he is of the most useful instrument, rhythm. I know that in all literatures efforts have been made, often successful, to create purely poetic short stories; Edgar Poe himself has written some very beautiful ones. But they are struggles and efforts which serve only to prove the strength of the true means adapted to the corresponding goals, and I am inclined to believe that in the case of some authors, the greatest that can be chosen, these heroic attempts spring from despair.

IV

"*Genus irritabile vatum!* That poets (using the word comprehensively, as including artists in general) are a *genus irritabile*, is well understood; but the *why*, seems not to be commonly seen. An artist is an artist only by dint of his exquisite sense of Beauty—a sense affording him rapturous enjoyment but at the same time implying, or involving, an equally exquisite sense of Deformity or disproportion. Thus a wrong—an injustice—done a poet who is really a poet, excites him to a degree which, to ordinary apprehension, appears disproportionate with the wrong. Poets *see* injustice—*never* where it does not exist—but very often where the unpoetical see no injustice whatever. Thus the poetical irritability has no reference to 'temper' in the vulgar sense but merely to a more than usual clear-sightedness in respect to Wrong:—this clear-sightedness being nothing more than a corollary from the vivid perception of Right—of justice—of proportion—in a word, of the beautiful. But one thing is clear—that the man who is *not* 'irritable' (to the ordinary apprehension) is *no poet*." ⁸²

Thus the poet himself speaks, preparing an excellent and irrefutable apologia for all those of his race. Poe carried this sensibility into his literary affairs, and the extreme importance which he attached to things poetic often led him to use a tone in which, according to the judgment of the weak, a feeling of superiority became too evident. I have already mentioned, I believe, that several prejudices which he had to combat, false ideas, commonplace opinions which circulated around him, have for a long time infected the French press. It will not be useless then to give a brief account of some of his most important opinions relative to poetic composition. The parallelism of error will make their application quite easy.

But above all, I must point out that in addition to the share which Poe granted to a natural, innate poetic gift, he gave an importance to knowledge, work, and analysis that will seem excessive to arrogant and unlettered persons. Not only has he expended considerable efforts to subject to his will the fleeting

spirit of happy moments, in order to recall at will those exquisite sensations, those spiritual longings, those states of poetic health, so rare and so precious that they could truly be considered as graces exterior to man and as visitations; but also he has subjected inspiration to method, to the most severe analysis. The choice of means! he returns to that constantly, he insists with a learned eloquence upon the adjustment of means to effect, on the use of rhyme, on the perfecting of the refrain, on the adaptation of rhythm to feeling. He maintained that he who cannot seize the intangible is not a poet; that he alone is a poet who is master of his memory, the sovereign of words, the record book of his own feelings always open for examination. Everything for the conclusion! he often repeats. Even a sonnet needs a plan, and the construction, the armature, so to speak, is the most important guarantee of the mysterious life of works of the mind.

I turn naturally to the article entitled "The Poetic Principle," and I find from the very beginning a vigorous protest against what could be called, in the field of poetry, the heresy of length or of dimension—the absurd importance attributed to bulky poems. "I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, 'a long poem,' is simply a flat contradiction in terms."⁸⁸ In fact, a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites and uplifts the soul, and the real merit of a poem is due to this excitation, to this *uplifting* of the soul. But, from psychological necessity, all these excitations are fugitive and transitory. This strange mood into which the soul of the reader has been drawn by force, as it were, will certainly not last as long as the reading of a poem which exceeds human capacity for enthusiasm.

It is obvious then that the epic poem stands condemned. For a work of that length can be considered poetic only insofar as one sacrifices the vital condition of every work of art, Unity;—I do not mean unity in the conception but unity in the impression, the *totality* of effect, as I said when I had occasion to compare the novel with the short story. The epic poem then

appears to us, aesthetically speaking, as a paradox. Bygone ages may have produced a series of lyric poems, later compiled into epic poems; but every *epic intention* obviously is the result of an imperfect sense of art. The time for these artistic anomalies has passed, and it is even very doubtful that a long poem has ever been truly popular in the full meaning of the word.

It must be added that a too short poem, one which does not furnish a *pabulum* that will sustain the excitation created, one which is not equal to the natural appetite of the reader, is also very defective. However brilliant and intense the effect may be, it is not lasting; memory does not retain it; it is like a seal which, placed too lightly and too hastily, has not had time to imprint its image on the wax.

But there is another heresy which, thanks to the hypocrisy, to the dullness, and to the baseness of human minds, is even more formidable and has a greater chance of survival—an error which has a hardier life—I wish to speak of the heresy of *teaching a lesson* which includes as inevitable corollaries the heresy of *passion*, of *truth*, and of *morality*. A great many people imagine that the aim of poetry is a lesson of some sort, that it must now fortify the conscience, now perfect morals, now in short *prove* something or other which is useful. Edgar Poe claims that Americans especially have supported this heterodox idea; alas! there is no need to go as far as Boston to encounter the heresy in question. Even here it attacks and breaches true poetry every day. Poetry, if only one is willing to seek within himself, to question his heart, to recall his memories of enthusiasm, has no other goal than itself; it cannot have any other, and no poem will be so great, so noble, so truly worthy of the name of poetry as that which will have been written solely for the pleasure of writing a poem.

I do not mean that poetry does not ennoble manners—let there be no mistake about it—that its final result is not to raise man above the level of vulgar interests; that would obviously be an absurdity. I say that, if the poet has pursued a moral aim, he has diminished his poetic force; and it is not rash to wager

that his work will be bad. Poetry cannot, under penalty of death or failure, be assimilated to science or morality; it does not have Truth as its object, it has only Itself. The means for demonstrating truth are other and are elsewhere. Truth has nothing to do with songs. All that constitutes the grace, the charm, the irresistible attraction of a song, would take from Truth its authority and its power. Cold, calm, impassive, the demonstrative mood rejects the diamonds and the flowers of the Muse; it is then absolutely the inverse of the poetic mood.

Pure Intellect aims at Truth, Taste reveals Beauty, and Moral Sense teaches us what is Right. It is true that taste is intimately connected with the other two, and is separated from Moral Sense only by so slight a difference that Aristotle has not hesitated to include among the virtues some of its delicate operations. Thus, what especially exasperates the man of taste in the spectacle of vice is its deformity, its disproportion. Vice injures the just and the true, revolts the intellect and the conscience; but, as an outrage to harmony, as dissonance, it will wound more particularly certain poetic minds; and I do not think it scandalous to consider every offense against morality, against moral beauty, as a kind of offense against universal rhythm and prosody.

It is that admirable, that immortal instinct for the beautiful which makes us consider the earth and its spectacles as a revelation, as something in correspondence with Heaven. The insatiable thirst for everything that lies beyond, and that life reveals, is the most living proof of our immortality.

It is at the same time by poetry and *through* poetry, by and *through* music that the soul glimpses the splendors beyond the tomb; and when an exquisite poem brings us to the verge of tears, those tears are not the proof of excessive pleasure; they are rather evidence of an aroused melancholy, of a condition of nerves, of a nature which has been exiled amid the imperfect and which would like to take possession immediately, on this very earth, of a revealed paradise.

Thus, the principle of poetry is precisely and simply human

aspiration toward a superior beauty, and the manifestation of this principle is in an enthusiasm, an excitation of the soul—an enthusiasm altogether independent of passion which is the intoxication of the heart, and of truth which is the food of reason. For passion is *natural*, too natural not to introduce an offensive, discordant tone into the domain of pure beauty, too familiar and too violent not to scandalize the pure Desires, the gracious Melancholies and the noble Despairs which inhabit the supernatural regions of poetry.

This extraordinary elevation, this exquisite delicacy, this accent of immortality which Edgar Poe demands of the Muse, far from making him less attentive to the technique of execution, have impelled him constantly to sharpen his genius as a technician. Many people, especially those who have read the strange poem called *The Raven*, would be shocked if I analyzed the article in which our poet, apparently innocently, but with a slight impertinence which I cannot condemn, has explained in detail the method of construction which he used, the adaptation of the rhythm, the choice of a refrain—the shortest possible and the most suitable to a variety of applications, and at the same time the most representative of melancholy and despair, embellished with the most sonorous rhyme of all (nevermore)—the choice of a bird capable of imitating the human voice, but a bird—the raven—branded with a baneful and fatal character in popular imagination—the choice of the most poetic of all tones, the melancholy tone—of the most poetic sentiment, love for one dead, etc.—“And I shall not place the hero of my poem in poor surroundings,” he says, “because poverty is commonplace and contrary to the idea of Beauty. His melancholy will be sheltered by a magnificently and poetically furnished room.”⁸⁴ The reader will detect in several of Poe’s short stories curious symptoms of this inordinate taste for beautiful forms, especially for beautiful forms that are strange, for ornate surroundings and oriental sumptuousness.

I said that this article seemed marred by a slight impertinence. Confirmed advocates of inspiration would be sure to find

in it blasphemy and profanation; but I believe that it is for them especially that the article has been written. Just as certain writers feign carelessness, aiming at a masterpiece with their eyes closed, full of confidence in disorder, expecting that words thrown at the ceiling will fall back on the floor in the form of a poem, so Edgar Poe—one of the most inspired men I know—has made a pretense of hiding spontaneity, of simulating coolness and deliberation. "It will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part"—he says with an amusing pride which I do not consider in bad taste—"to show that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." Only lovers of chance, I say, only fatalists of inspiration and fanatics of *free verse* can find this *attention to detail* odd. There are no insignificant details in matters of art.

As for free verse, I shall add that Poe attached an extreme importance to rhyme, and that in the analysis which he has made of the mathematical and musical pleasure which the mind derives from rhyme, he has introduced as much care, as much subtlety as in all the other subjects pertaining to the art of poetry. Just as he has shown that the refrain is capable of infinitely varied applications, so also he has sought to renew, to redouble the pleasure derived from rhyme by adding to it an unexpected element, the strange, which is the indispensable condiment, as it were, of all beauty. He often makes a happy use of repetitions of the same line or of several lines, insistent reiterations of phrases which simulate the obsessions of melancholy or of a fixed idea—of a pure and simple refrain introduced in several different ways—of a variant refrain which feigns carelessness and inadvertence—of rhymes redoubled and tripled and also of a kind of rhyme which introduces into modern poetry, but with more precision and purpose, the surprises of Leonine verse.⁸⁵

It is obvious that the value of all these means can be proved only through application; and a translation of poetry so studied,

so concentrated, can be a fond dream, but only a dream. Poe wrote little poetry; he has sometimes expressed regret at not being able to devote himself, not more often, but exclusively, to this type of work which he considered the most noble. But his poetry always creates a powerful effect. It is not the ardent outpouring of Byron, it is not the soft, harmonious, distinguished melancholy of Tennyson for whom, it may be said in passing, he had an almost fraternal admiration. It is something profound and shimmering like a dream, mysterious and perfect like crystal. I do not need to add, I presume, that American critics have often disparaged his poetry; very recently I found in a dictionary of American biography an article in which it was adjudged esoteric, in which it was feared that this muse in learned garb might create a school in the proud country of utilitarian morality, and in which regret was expressed that Poe had not applied his talents to the expression of moral truths in place of spending them in quest of a bizarre ideal, of lavishing in his verses a mysterious, but sensual voluptuousness.

We are all familiar with that kind of sharp riposte. The reproaches that bad critics heap upon good poets are the same in all countries. In reading this article it seemed to me that I was reading the translation of one of those numerous indictments brought by Parisian critics against those of our poets who are most fond of perfection. Our favorites are easy to guess and every lover of pure poetry will understand me when I say that in the eyes of our antipoetic race Victor Hugo would be less admired if he were perfect, and he has succeeded in having all his lyric genius forgiven only by introducing forcibly and brutally into his poetry what Edgar Poe considered the major modern heresy—the teaching of a lesson.

It is not that Victor Hugo is a bad poet, but that he is a poet who has not understood the art of poetry. He has not understood the art of poetry because he has not understood the art of poetry. He has not understood the art of poetry because he has not understood the art of poetry. He has not understood the art of poetry because he has not understood the art of poetry.

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