

Edgar Allan Poe

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Translated by Renata Singer (2005)

It's hard to find another writer in modern literature who can achieve such ghostly, mythical, and covertly uncanny effects as Edgar Allan Poe.

And not only in his work. His life seems to be hidden under a veil as well, and has much in it of the stuff of myth. It's not only our generation that is in the dark about him - even the people of his day lacked precise information about him. And part of his life remained closed to them.

Let's take a single instance as an example. The great English poet Lord Byron took very much to heart the wrongs done to the Greek people. A people, a whole nation, was being tormented, suppressed, depressed, and enslaved. And Byron made up his mind that he had to help free them. So the poet became a great fighter, for a foreign oppressed nation. The hero of the pen became the hero of the sword in order to save the tortured, the exploited and enslaved.

This just and noble deed, together with the power of Lord Byron's idealism, fired the enthusiasm of the youth of Europe and America. Many young people abandoned their homes, left their parents, and ran off to follow the famous English poet's example. This general enthusiasm also affected Edgar Allan Poe. In 1827 he left America, only returning in 1829. Here's where the strangeness begins.

Where was Poe, during those two years? Did he fight too? Was he in Greece at all? His biographers have various things to say about him. But as to those two years they are all silent. Not one of them has anything clear or accurate to tell us.

And here is another example. I'd like the reader to pay close attention now, as I believe this is highly significant.

In the reading world and in literary circles there's an accepted view that Edgar Allan Poe was "morally eccentric", that he wrecked his health with too much smoking, that he was a terrible drunk, and so on.

Is this the truth? In his tales Poe delves deeply and incisively into the labyrinth of the human soul. He is famous for seeing all the dark and hidden corners, all the criminal inclinations, that exist in people. Nevertheless in his own dealings with people he was naïve, foolish, and easily-led. He trusted everyone, even his bitterest enemies. Throughout his whole life, and after his death as well, Edgar Allan Poe paid dearly for his foolishly naïve trustfulness.

Whom did Poe choose, to have authority over his literary inheritance? Imagine! He deeded away his whole trust to a writer called Griswold, who for both literary and personal reasons was a dogged, brutal and ruthless enemy of Poe's.

It was this confidant, this so empowered "good friend", who first told the world about the "immorality", "depravity" and "amorality" of Edgar Allan Poe.

Griswold's view found many supporters among members of so-called Society - those who are titillated by, and love to shriek about, anything that smacks of spice and slander.

It made little difference that the entire press of America came out in a storm against this smutty pamphleteer. It also made no impact that Poe's magnificent biographer, Ingram, in his preface to Poe's work, refuted and crushed all these accusations against Poe, going through Griswold word by word to show how false, tendentious, and clumsy he was. With the satisfaction that old cynics get from dirty talk, our decadent society clung to the bits of gossip it had once heard - about the noble-spirited, sharp-minded tragically lonely Edgar Allan Poe.

Yes, according to Ingram, Poe was clean and decent and his reputation stands fine, pure and high, exalted in his tragedy, without a speck of dirt or disrepute.

And yet not everything is totally cleared up. The story of Poe's need for alcohol, for instance, is still far from settled. Writing about himself, Poe says: 1

"Truth to tell that from time to time I drink myself into madness, though it gives me no pleasure at all." And later he writes: "At such times it's not pleasure that I'm pursuing when I place my life, my glory, my judgement all in jeopardy. It has always been a desperate attempt on my part to run away from recollections of cunning, injustice and baseness. To escape from the terrible loneliness and the feeling of dread, that warned my soul of vague, imminent calamity." So Poe wrote to a friend of his before his death.

So the poison of alcohol was there, even to the extent of "into madness", until "life, glory, judgement" were put at risk... So how can we understand and judge this odd person? Which of his critics tells nothing but lies and which the whole truth? Or perhaps all of them are right, and wrong.

¹ Unless indicated, all Poe excerpts are back-translated from Shtern's Yiddish; there are no footnotes in the original (Ed.)

It's difficult, very difficult, to understand all sides of this complicated artist whose life, writing and death are all so remarkable.

Even the way that he first came to public attention was surprisingly original. The nature of his literary debut was something that occurs only once in a century - or even less.

In 1833 a Baltimore newspaper held a public competition offering two prizes: one for the best short story and one for the best poem. As usual with open competitions, mountains of writing came in to the editors. Two manuscripts stood out though - for their outstandingly clear and beautiful handwriting. And it was to the author of these two manuscripts that the committee awarded both prizes, for a poem and for a short story. The author was none other than Edgar Allan Poe, a name that the competition committee was coming across for the first time. Well! Two awards at one time for two works far apart in artistic genre. And this happened with a beginner! In the history of literary competitions there's never been another case like it.

No less interesting is what happened next. The committee members didn't know who he was. But the splendid uniqueness, wonderful skill and wild fantasy of the work so stunned and amazed them that they yearned to get to know the author. And one of them, a Mr. Kennedy, sent Poe an invitation to which he received the following reply: "I can't come to dinner for humiliating reasons – because of my appearance. You can perhaps imagine with what embarrassment I must confess this, but my circumstances compel me to do so."

Mr. Kennedy didn't hesitate. In no time at all he tracked down the poet, who was living in terrible poverty and literally starving.

Alone and orphaned, with so much sorrow and in such a unique way, did Edgar Allan Poe take his first steps in literature. And all these traits, his originality, his temerity, his dread of people and of life – blossomed forth into maturity, in attractive ways, in his work.

But about that we must write separately.

"Shock and Horror"

Edgar Allan Poe lived alone and he lived in poverty, without any true, sincere friend. He never had great joy, and never knew much consolation. And if one doesn't have warmth and light, everything becomes grey, black, cold, dark ... the streets, the cities, the world become gloomy valleys where one is joyless and all alone, where instead of work, struggle and good fortune there are horror, ghostliness and dread.

Shock and horror stand out, in all of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry. Where does this dread come from? Why are his characters so fearful? I would put it like this: the characters of this remarkable English poet have problems due to a kind of fear from which they will never be free. A fear you can't save people from, because you don't know where to find it. And in truth, it isn't found anywhere except ... in the heart of these people. It's organic to them, a part of their being. It, the fear, is a product of their anguish; refined by their suffering-sharpened, morbidly overheated brains.

And because the dread is not fortuitous and not external, but internal - and therefore powerful, cutting and constant - it hunts-after and persecutes and never rests, and there's no place to run from it and no chance of getting rid of it.

Some people are afraid not of the thieves who will take away their fortune, nor of forest bandits who will take their lives, nor of imprisonment for the sins they committed, nor of hunger, nor of the treachery of lovers – from all these things we can in some way protect ourselves. But they are afraid of their own loneliness. They run about in markets and squares, not enjoying day or night, and they are anxious. Their accursed existence, their life hangs over them like a heavy cloud. They don't know what to do with themselves.

In other cases a person is not afraid of himself but of someone else. Then the fear is of a different sort: in fact, here it's even more eccentric. Imagine, Edgar Allan Poe sees people who go around shivering because it could be that someone might take them for a dead person and bury them alive. And if you read carefully, you'll notice the poet doesn't consider this to be crazy. He tells you that in a very large percentage of cases of death we are dealing not with a real but with an apparent death. That is, it's just a type of fainting or a lethargic sleep – and unknowingly we bury these people alive.

And sometime the fear is so fierce, so unnatural, so out of the ordinary, so darkly-diseased – that it's simply horrifying, and a frosty cold grips your body. For it's a truly intolerable state of affairs, if such individuals really exist in the world. In Poe there are heroes in constant anxiety, neither eating nor sleeping; they never stop shaking, are always terrified. And all because they frighten themselves, brooding about – what if something happens that will make them have to be afraid.

Here's how one of them speaks: "I will go under, I must sink from the terrifying tremendous madness. Yes, it cannot be otherwise, I will go under. I am afraid of the coming events not for themselves, but for the consequences. I shiver to think of the most commonplace events, which can affect a weak constitution. It's not the danger that unsettles me, but the contemplation of its inevitable effect, fear. I feel that in such a morbid

condition a moment will come when I'll go mad and succumb, in this fight with a spectre that you can't take hold of: this fear."

As we can see, fear has a significant place in Poe's work. He loves the subject. He caresses it, playing it like a good fiddle, bringing out all kinds of melodies. And he plays like a virtuoso. Poe is a master at imparting the finest subtlest tones of the human tragedy that we call losing one's way. With remarkable patience and great mastery he unravels for us the most complex clusters of psychic abnormality, to display clearly every form that has been spun and woven, to make up the various tangles of the soul. And I agree with Professor Mossault² when he says: "The unfortunate poet Edgar Allan Poe can be regarded as a researcher of the consequences of fear. No-one has described them more precisely or analysed them so finely. No-one has so shockingly shown us those painful feelings which turn a person to stone, ripping into his heart and soul with an indescribable dread, causing agonies of death-fear."

It would be a mistake to think that fear is the only theme in Poe's work. Quite often the dread in Edgar Allan Poe's stories is only a cause, that brings out all kinds of dark forces. And this opens up a broad field for uncovering and investigating the gruesome complexity of the basis of criminality.

Violent death, murder and annihilation are oft guests in Poe's work. Nearly always their origins are so subtle, so barely noticeable, so delicate, so difficult to grasp, that Poe can in truth be rated one of the deepest and most penetrating psychologists in literature. The factors that lead to murder are seldom violent hatred, greed for money and the like. You can kill a man without having the slightest hatred for him, with no real resentment at all but just like that - because there's something about him you don't like. His eyes or his teeth can cause terrible crimes. Let's hear something curious that a hero of Edgar Allan Poe's short story says about himself. Having committed the murder, the murderer is explaining why he did it:

"There was absolutely no basis for my taking a dislike to the old man. He had never done me any wrong. I didn't need his money either. But I think that his eye vexed me. Yes, it was the eye. That fiendish eye of pale blue, with a film over it. Whenever he looked at me I could feel a cold shudder run through my body. And so little by little, I made up my mind that I had to rid myself of these eyes once and for all."³

This person, who has been attacked by madness, nevertheless goes about carrying out his gruesome deed with calm, cold calculation. For seven

² Spelling uncertain; Y. is "moso"

³ "The Tell-Tale Heart". Poe's words were: I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

nights in a row he steals into the old man's bedroom, holding a lantern in his hand, and shines the light straight onto the "fiendish" eye.

"But the eye was always closed and so there was no way I could do the deed, because it wasn't the old man who vexed me but his eye⁴."

On the eighth night he takes the lantern and goes into the old man's bedroom. The old man isn't sleeping and cries out: "who's there?" but the murderer stays quite still. Suddenly he hears a soft groan, not a groan of hunger or of pain, but the kind of groan you hear from a dying person. The old man lies motionless, paralysed by fear, as if chained to his bed... and so a whole hour passes. Eventually the murderer opens the lantern, letting out a fine pale spider's web of light that falls straight onto the wide-open fiendish eye. At that moment an extraordinary sound reaches him, faint and muffled and as fast as the ticking of a clock that is wrapped in cotton wool. It's the old man's heartbeat. Getting faster and faster, louder and louder. The murderer, overcome by an overwhelming fear of the night, of the ghostly silence, goes wild. Opening wide the little doors of his lantern, with a shriek he throws himself onto the old man and chokes him to death, then hides the corpse under the floor.

At four in the morning there is a knock at the door, and three police officers enter. The neighbours had heard the shouting and called the police to investigate. The murderer experiences a strange wild joy at the thought that all traces of his crime have been erased. He greets the police with exaggerated, almost provocative, courtesy, shows them around the whole house, invites them to be seated, and so on. But all the time he is exuding a nervous, sickly exhilaration that verges on complete madness. Suddenly he hears again that crazy soft sound, muffled, as fast as the ticking of a clock wrapped in cotton wool. Anxiously he paces the room, deliberately making a racket; but the sound becomes more and more distinct, all the time growing louder. The policemen smile too, as if they hear it, suspect and know. And the impudent echo keeps calling, louder and louder... "Abominations!" I yelled out. "Don't hide from me. I'll admit to everything. Break open the floorboards! Here! Right here! It's his heart that's beating so terribly."⁵

In another of Poe's tales, the cause of the crime is a person's teeth⁶. A character says "Teeth! These teeth! They were here, and there, and everywhere, I saw them everywhere; long, narrow, and unnaturally white!"⁷ The teeth drive him mad. Everything around him disappears,

⁴ Poe wrote "Evil Eye"

⁵ Poe's own words were (the last words of the story): "Villains!" I shrieked, dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! Here, here! - It is the beating of his hideous heart!"

⁶ "Berenice"

⁷ (Ed.) Poe's words were: The teeth! — the teeth! — they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white..."

only the teeth remain, circling around him, as infinite as the sea. They become the essence, the foundation of his life. “I looked at them in every light. I set them out in various orders. I investigated what was wonderful about them. I focussed on each of their characteristics at length. I thought about how they were constructed. I imagined that even without the lips they could assume some kind of expression.”⁸

Edgar Allan Poe, this writer who lived in solitude – inhibited, lonely, unfortunate – took his revenge on the society that had humiliated him. With a strange grim stubbornness he again and again uncovered the vileness, the deeply concealed baseness of our “fine and noble” society. For let us be clear: Poe’s characters do not come from the lowest strata, they are not boors, nor ordinary stomach-cutters or purse-snatchers. Not at all – they are actually fine people, very proper, sophisticated and intelligent. And it was precisely in these “proper” people that Poe discovered these black-as-night impulses. And what he found he did not touch up, did not veil over, but threw it, as it were, into the face of society. And our sophisticated society got its desserts – all its immorality, its sickness and its gangrene – full on.

Timorous, isolated Edgar Allan Poe made his reckoning with the world around him. The terrified Poe threw a pall of fear over the people around him! For no matter how much armour they put on, they could never be safe from danger. However safe they might be, they could still never feel secure. Danger can come from where we least expect it. Your own “eyes” can betray you, your own “teeth” can give you away...

⁸ (Ed.: Poe’s words: “I held them in every light. I turned them in every attitude. I surveyed their characteristics. I dwelt upon their peculiarities. I pondered upon their conformation. I mused upon the alteration in their nature — and I shuddered as I assigned to them in imagination a sensitive and sentient power, and even when unassisted by the lips, a capability of moral expression.”)