*Studia Anglica Posnaniensia XXXIV, 1999*

# MAIDENS, CORPSES, AND WORDS: EDGAR ALLAN POE AND THE FAILURE OF THE SUBLIME

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> I have no belief in spirituality. I think the word a *mere* word. No one really has the conception of spirit. We cannot imagine what is not.
>
> Edgar Allan Poe in a letter to
> James Russell Lowell

Recent critical opinions on Poe's recognition and use of the concept of the sublime are dramatically divided. On the one hand, in her provocative study of Poe's fiction anchoring it in the epistemology of Locke and Jonathan Edwards, Joan Dayan disregards the problem almost completely and only on the margin – in two endnotes – argues that "Poe's texts deform and deflect the customary American versions of the sublime" (Dayan 1987: 244) which was supposedly "spoofed" by the author of "The Domain of Arnheim" in his landscape sketches. On the other hand, Alan C. Golding (Golding 1978: 1, 3) with equal stress claims in his analysis of semantic strategies in *Eureka* that "'[s]ublime' is consistently a term of non-sensible reference and of non-limitation in Poe's work" and that "'Poetry,' 'Beauty' and 'the sublime' are [for Poe – M. W.] virtual synonyms" present in a great number of both his essays and tales.

Similarly, the category of the sublime in its specific Burkean version has been traced down in Poe's sea narratives by Kent Ljungquist (Ljungquist 1975), and in "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Craig Howes (Howes 1985). Besides, John P. Hussey identified in *Eureka* the influence of the sublime according to Hugh Blair (Hussey 1975), and finally, Glen A. Omans exhaustively considered Poe's indebtedness to Kant, taking the side of those who in the endless dispute on Poe's knowledge of German maintain that he read or at least might

have read *The Critique of Judgment* in the original (Myerson 1980). In his recent book on the supernatural sublime in Anglo-American romanticism, Jack G. Voller persuasively argues that Poe's fiction is actually a critique of both Burkean and Kantian ideas of the sublime, with *das Erhabene* as a relevant negative background for Poe's tales of horror (Voller 1994: 229-230). Thus, the sublime appears to be inscribed in Poe's texts through its failure – the recurrent denial of the solace of transcendence which is not followed by the reconciliation of the subject with its natural and symbolic limitations.

While the causes and effects of the sublime laboriously enumerated by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* can be found without much difficulty in most of Poe's gothic tales (Kiely 1972: 12-17), the problematic of the Kantian sublime reveals itself in Poe's fiction less frequently and in a somewhat less evident manner. First, contrary to Burke's sublime, *das Erhabene* "does not reside in anything in nature, but only in our mind" (Kant 1951: 104), so that it cannot be reduced to and represented by terrifying natural phenomena. Second, the Kantian sublime involves "a feeling of inadequacy of ... imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole [that is, the ideas of reason – M.W.] wherein the imagination reaches its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself, by which, however, a kind of emotional satisfaction is produced." (Kant 1951: 91).

Even though Burke and Kant shared a fundamental conviction that the sublime is an affective mixture of delight and pain, the former did not develop any conception of subjectivity that would match the complexity of Kantian theory of the faculties of cognition. Therefore, while Burke's *Enquiry* could indeed serve as a handy catalogue of narrative props to be used in *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Monk*, *The Critique of Judgment* anticipated the romantic crisis of representation and contained strategies of the exploration of the limits of symbolic expression. In the words of a postmodern commentator, "[t]he sublime [in its Kantian version – M. W.] denies the imagination the power of forms and denies nature the power to immediately affect thinking with forms." (Lyotard 1994: 54). This is precisely the sense of the anguish experienced by some Poe's narrators who in their minds keep trying – always in vain – to bridge the gap between the ideal and the actual or, in Kantian terms once again, between the ideas of reason and the capacity for sensible comprehension.

For Poe the central "idea of reason" was Beauty, which erroneously suggests the beautiful of the Kantian aesthetics. However, he defined Beauty not as the source of universal "disinterested satisfaction" (Kant 1951: 45-46) but as something quite identical with the sublime: "When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect – they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul* – *not* of intellect, or of heart



... which is experienced in consequence of contemplating 'the beautiful.'" (Poe 1984a: 16).

Apparently, the transient state of the "elevation of soul" has been the evidence of the sublime since Pseudo-Longinus. In his account of the romantic sublime, Thomas Weiskel writes about "[s]urprise or astonishment" (Weiskel 1976: 23-24) as "the affective correlative" of the breakdown of the habitual relation of mind and object which is also what befalls Poe's mourning and dying protagonists. According to the canon set in "The Philosophy of Composition", the unattainable or lost object is a Woman – Ligeia, Morella, Berenice, and Eleonora – haunting Poe's fiction in a series of feminine names coming up as the titles of stories. In Poe's idiom, the Woman embodies the beautiful, but the "supernal Beauty" of title figures is always either gone or bound to vanish under the sway of Death. In some cases, the "ideal" original may be replaced by a substitute which, however, provokes the narrator's hatred (Rowena succeeding Ligeia) or at least disconcerting anxiety caused by the sense of guilt (Ermengarde succeeding Eleonora). The nameless daughter of Morella simply dies – the life of the prototype cannot be continued, for genuine Beauty is "singular" and unique. It defies description and repetition, invariably thwarting the desire to describe and repeat.

And yet, even though doomed to spectacular failure, Poe keeps trying to comprehend and represent Beauty – his "idea of reason" – by sensible forms. The paradigm of representation was established in an early poem "To Helen", invoking the first female incarnation of the Ideal:

> "Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
> How statue-like I see thee stand,
> The agate lamp within thy hand!
> Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
> Are Holy-Land!" (Poe 1984b: 62)

The "classic face" of the statue alluding "[t]o the glory that was Greece / And the grandeur that was Rome" leaves no doubt as regards the sculptural provenance of the image. Ostensibly, then, it meets the Kantian criterion of the "*ideal* of the beautiful ... which ... we can only expect in the *human* figure" (Kant 1951: 72), but Poe's "singular" women usually also possess extraordinary power of intellect – "learning" that makes them virtually superior to the unhappy male admirers. By far the best example of such intellectual excellence is Ligeia who combines perfection of the soul and body, although in fact it is only the "person", that is, her physical appearance that the narrator is able to recall in some detail.

The diction of the *post mortem* characterization is quite peculiar: Ligeia's grieving husband refers to her "cast of beauty" as if she had been a living tomb-

stone chiseled in hard material: her skin is metaphorized as "the purest ivory", the "delicate outlines of the nose" display "luxurious smoothness of surface", while the most prominent part of the noble head is "the contour of the lofty and pale forehead" (Poe 1984b: 263), phrenologically once more signifying exceptional intelligence. To the narrator, the most enchanting are his deceased wife's eyes – "those large, those shining, those divine orbs!" (Poe 1984b: 264). However, attempting at an adequate description of Ligeia's uncommon features, he cannot avoid the commonplace – all in all, his verbal portrait turns out to be a conventional *ekphrasis*, a sequence of similes that have already been petrified after centuries of literary use.

The other repertory from which the mourner takes the means of representation is his vast scholarly erudition. Hence, he refers to the "daughters of Delos", quotes Francis Bacon, and borrows "the Homeric epithet, 'hyacinthine'!" (Poe 1984b: 263) – everything to the same effect of majesty supposedly produced by classical decorum. Still, with one notable exception, again and again the unique is translated into the familiar, the individual into the replicable. The only instance when the image actually borders on the sublime are "the graceful medallions of the Hebrews" mentioned to approximate "the harmoniously curved nostrils" (Poe 1984b: 263) of Ligeia. In the "General Remark upon the Exposition of the Aesthetical Reflective Judgment" which closes the first part of the "Analytic of the Sublime", Kant reminds that "[p]erhaps there is no sublimer passage in the Jewish law than the command, 'Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything which is in heaven or in the earth or under the earth,' etc." (Kant 1951: 115). Therefore, Poe's ancient Hebrew medallions could not possibly have existed, which, paradoxically, is as close as the narrator could approach the ineffable. The absence of the Jewish graven images – or, rather, their feigned presence in language – furtively signifies the sublime, otherwise lost among the cultural emblems.

Thus, as an attempt to convey the "ideal of Beauty", "Ligeia" (as well as "Morella", "Berenice", and "Eleonora") is an exemplary chronicle of the narrator's setback. According to Michael Williams, "[t]he text demonstrates that his attempted recuperation, as soon as he begins to write, must always be cast in a culturally encoded language. And it shows that the symbol is mute – it does not offer access to the transcendent, but is merely endlessly, frustratingly suggestive, dependent on the subjective will to interpret for its significance." (Williams 1988: 97).

In three out of the four relevant cases, the access is figuratively blocked by a smooth surface – the maiden's "high" and "pale" forehead which is the one anatomical detail that links Morella, Ligeia, and Berenice together. Oddly enough, himself quite fascinated by foreheads, Poe did not approve of them in other writers' endeavors to capture the sublime. In his 1842 review of *The Poems of John G. C. Brainard* (contributed to *Graham's Magazine* after all the stories about ideal women had been written), he castigated the author for attributing the very same forehead to the national American epitome of the natural sublime – Niagara Falls:[1]



> The handful of water [which is pictured by Brainard as falling from the hand of Deity – M. W.] becomes inanimate; for it has a front – that is, a forehead, and upon this forehead the Deity proceeds to hang a bow, that is, a rainbow ... The whole of this first division of the poem, embraces, we hesitate not to say, one of the most jarring, inappropriate, mean, and in every way monstrous assemblages of false imagery, which can be found out of the tragedies of Nat Lee, or the farces of Thomas Carlyle (Poe 1984a: 409).

Somewhat to a surprise, identical imagery, however better motivated in terms of human anatomy, can also "be found out of" the tales of Edgar Poe who after 1842 never returned to the sublime as a woman. *Eureka*, which was Poe's ultimate effort to come to grips with the mystery of transcendence, assigned the category of the sublime to the whole Universe.

Nonetheless, at least in theory the series of female beauties could be extended *ad infinitum*: new names could be multiplied and bodies could keep falling apart into separate limbs or even smaller pieces. The best illustration of the metonymic potential of Poe's discourse is "Berenice": "thirty-two small, white, and ivory-looking substances" (Poe 1984b: 233) that Egaeus finds scattered around on the floor are the teeth of his beloved cousin. The sublime represented by thirty-two teeth is burlesque – infinity reduced to an exact number of items that, if need arises, may be succeeded by their false substitutes. Such is, in Poe's fiction, the representable extreme of Kant's "mathematically sublime": "the feeling is one *of on and on*, of being lost. The signifiers cannot be grasped or understood; they overwhelm the possibility of meaning in a massive underdetermination that melts all oppositions or distinctions into a perceptional stream; or there is a sensory overload." (Weiskel 1976: 26). It is precisely that "sensory overload" which turns out to be the reader's experience with "Berenice" and "Ligeia" – on the one hand, the accumulation of details seems almost out of control, on the other, they all inevitably fall short of the sublime anyway. Hence, in *Eureka* Poe would move to the other direction: "an excess of the signified ... where meaning is overwhelmed by an overdetermination which in its extreme threatens a state of absolute metaphor" (Weiskel 1976: 26) – a sort of Apocalypse. Unfortunately, that did not help much either, since transcendence was exiled from cosmos as well, filled only with matter of varying consistency.

[1] For the attempts to turn Niagara Falls into an American sublime icon, cf. Spencer (1957: 48-49).

Matter – in the form of "a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity" (Poe 1984b: 842) – constitutes still another absolute boundary in Poe's quest for the "ideas of reason". The mesmerized corpse of M. Valdemar, speaking from beyond the limit of medically verified death, causes the famous "scandal of utterance" created by "the return of the metaphor to its literal status" (Barthes 1988: 286). When agony is over, M. Valdemar answers the question if he is asleep, "'Yes; – no; – I *have been* sleeping – and now – now – *I am dead.*'" (Poe 1984b: 840). There is really quite little one may add to the pungent analysis of Poe's protagonist's speech once carried out in an unfinished essay by Roland Barthes: "'I am dead and not dead,' this is the paroxysm of transgression, the invention of an unheard-of category: the *true-false*, the *yes-no*; the *death-life* is conceived as an indivisible, incombinable, non-dialectic *whole*, for the antithesis implies no third term; it is not a two-sided entity but a single and new term." (Barthes 1988: 287).

That "single and new term", plausible grammar combined with the self-effacing rhetoric, is a linguistic leap towards the sublime – the impossible made possible not by means of sensible representation, but through the properties of syntax and word usage that defy the loss of organic life. M. Valdemar's posthumous semantic paradox is as far as symbolic expression may reach – in fact, the sham victory over death will not last long, for the dead object of mesmeric experiments has only a few more words to add before he eventually dissolves forever in the chemical yield of the rotting process. The narrator's desire will not keep him alive as an ivory statue which is subject to degrading "mechanical reproduction" but still remains immune to decay. Poe staged his scientific hoax only one more time, in the earlier "Mesmeric Revelation", where he literally repeated his confession from the letter to Lowell with cautiously dramatized detachment. Vankirk, the immediate predecessor of M. Valdemar, is, however, much more articulate and goes to great lengths in order to inform the hypnotist about the material conditions of afterlife as well as the Divine Volition and the relativity of pleasure and pain which depend on each other across the frontier of death. Awakened, he immediately passes away and "in less than a minute afterward his corpse had all the stern rigidity of stone." (Poe 1984b: 726). To a degree, then, Vankirk shares the strange lot of Ligeia, like her a shadow petrified into an icon. By the way, stone and extremely "rarefied", "unparticled matter" belong to one and the same material continuum, whereas spirit indeed – both in "Mesmeric Revelation" and in *Eureka* – has the status of "*mere* word".

To conclude, Poe's pursuit of transcendence, which is an "idea of reason" in the Kantian order of faculties, fails confronting unsurpassable boundaries of the body and its physical decomposition, and language as the substance of literature that gives only mirages of stretching beyond itself. The "power of words", openly invoked in the title of a tale published in the same year as "The Facts in



the Case of M. Valdemar", may bring about great changes in the Universe, at times including the creation of new celestial bodies, yet those changes are always frustratingly material, even if they seem to be genuine miracles. The hereafter is also the domain of matter, as demonstrate "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" and "The Colloquy of Monos and Una". In the latter, Monos imparts to Una the vision of a future Paradise on Earth – "for the redeemed, regenerated, blissful, and now immortal, but still for the *material*, man." (Poe 1984b: 453). Immortality and infinity, conventionally associated with the spirit, in Poe's tales relate to its opposite, thus radically excluding the possibility of the sublime. No matter what, writing cannot enter the territory "Out of SPACE – out of TIME," for the "I" which in the poem "Dream-Land" comes from "a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime" (Poe 1984b: 79) beyond the Kantian categories of experience is unable to stop creating landscapes haunted by "ill angels" and "Eidolons" reigning on their black thrones. The sensible is the obligatory horizon of representation – the gap between imagination and reason can at best be modelled *within* the pale of words, which in Poe's fiction is the case of mesmeric moribunds, "MS. Found in a Bottle", and "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket".

The inner tension characteristic of the sublime is reproduced in Poe's texts as the opposition of perishability and survival – death as the irrevocable closure of existence and as a passage into another realm of being. However painful, the aesthetic suspense of Kant does not pose any immediate danger to the subject. For Poe, on the contrary, the subject is at stake – the continuity of consciousness and even physical integrity. Cognate tales illustrate alternative options: M. Valdemar vanishes from the world leaving behind no trace but the puddle of putridity, while Vankirk opens out immense cosmic vistas; against all odds, Pym returns from the South Pole to the familiar United States, while the narrator of "MS. Found in a Bottle" is bound to disappear in the ultimate chasm. Finally, the sublime moment safely brings the subject back to itself – "the mind recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object." (Weiskel 1976: 24). In Poe's narratives, the abysmal failure of the sublime deprives the protagonists of the sense of security. They can never make it to the safe side out of the language, always staying on that of words which will not guarantee them any post-textual life, "vague" as they are.

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