



Embattled National Topics Parochial and Universal in Edgar Allan Poe's Depiction of the American South

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Abstract

Although Poe never worked out a systematic relationship between his political and philosophical thought, or relied entirely on the South for his conceptual framework, the Southern argument seems to have been indispensable to him, it created that transitional area which helped formulate its perceptions and language: the means by which he saw and constructed the world. Edgar Allan Poe is shown to draw on both individual and national, or rather sectional, Southern fears, much like fellow writers, who struggled with by and large similar issues.

Keywords: *Parochialism; Universalism; American South; Edgar Allan Poe*

Introduction

Poe hermeneuts have always contended that the difficulty of situating the author within an American tradition is due, in part, to the “obstinate fact” – in Gerald Kennedy’s words – that his writing cannot be assimilated into the wide-ranging exegetical paradigms “constructed to define [American] national literature during its so-called ‘renaissance’” (*The Violence of Melancholy* Kennedy 535). To date he has remained the quintessential outsider largely because of “the excesses and cruelties” (*Literature or Psychoanalysis* Tien 17) which have become the overused staples of Poe’s work, to the point of assimilation with the latter or interchangeability between the two. For Joseph Krutch – to name only one of the several critics who shares Morris Tien’s take – there could be no doubt that Poe’s writing was totally a product of his morbidity.

There is compelling evidence that Poe belongs to the tradition of aberrant literature – Romantic, Gothic, and subsequently Symbolist and Surrealist. A case can be made for Poe’s total reliance on sources outside the South: on the exotic, sensational stories of the Gothic tradition and on the tales of escape and

adventure so popular at the time. To say this, though, is not to exclude or deny the Southern dimension, as Richard Gray contends.

There is the simple fact that, while he was sublimely indifferent to the Southern landscape, and made very few references to its social and political institutions, he tapped many of the secret fears and guilts of his region. His fiction is soaked in the imagery and frequently shaped by the obsessions of the place where he spent most of the formative years of his infancy and childhood. The South appears in his tales, not as a convenient setting nor as the object of direct, critical analysis, but as a shaping influence – an ancestral voice so deeply submerged in the text that only its distant echo can be heard. (*The Problem of Regionalism*, 2011: 81)

One way in which Gray considers this ancestral voice makes itself heard is through the structure and feeling, the frame of values, that shape every tale, and that, just occasionally, Poe makes explicit. Not surprisingly, the values are profoundly “conservative” ones, in Gray’s qualification: a distrust of change, a sense of evil, a rejection of the ideas of perfectibility and progress, a preoccupation with the past, a belief in hierarchy and a hatred of abstractions. (Gray in *The United States South* Lerda and Westendorp, 2011: 81-2)

In stories like “Some Words with a Mummy”, “The Colloquy of Monos and Una”, and “Mellonta Tauta,” Poe brings these ideas into the foreground. The sense of human imperfection, for instance, that Southern apologists, and Poe, invoked in defence of the *status quo* (things should be left alone, the argument went, because nothing is perfect and meddling would only make matters worse), is also central to “Eureka”. Here, it morphs into the vaguely metaphysical belief that all created life is evil, because it involves fragmentation – the emanation of the imperfect Many from the perfect One.

There is no irony, no sense of what Jeffrey Folks might call “over-determination,” in Poe’s attempts to picture the arabesque in actual life or to discover the truly “picturesque” in its original sense, as in “Landor’s Cottage.” (*In a Time of Disorder*, 2003: 11) There is only the admission of the extreme difficulty of achieving this condition of abstract order in the face of the devastating power of death. But death is not equated with writing – it is merely alleviated by the sort of composition that Poe performed almost continuously.

The insecurity of such traditional bases of order as Poe had available to him is particularly significant in light of the increasing concern of Poe and his contemporaries with emerging sources of disorder, as Folks holds. Edgar Allan Poe draws on both individual and national, or rather sectional, Southern fears, like slavery and race. As Jeffrey Folks argues in his book on famous American Southern writers, Poe’s fellow writers struggled with by and large similar issues. Commending Mark Twain and William Faulkner on their tenability to Southern hot topics, he remarks:

The extraordinary narrative forms that Twain and Faulkner achieved mirror the madness, violence, and cynicism of a secular and materialistic national ethos in conflict with conventional sources of belief. Writing at a particularly acute moment of the epistemological crisis that followed the Enlightenment, Twain and Faulkner register the Gothic sense of a culture at the ‘end of time.’ As Southerners, they would have understood the central force of this crisis to be emanating from the northern industrial and cultural hegemony, and they would have understood that their nation, led by northern capitalism, was moving inexorably toward imperialism. (*In a Time of Disorder*, 2003: 2)

He goes on by citing Gail Mortimer who writes, employing Mircea Eliade’s conception of “the terror of history”:

Locked as he is into a conception of time that is linear, sequential, and historical, modern man has not often been able to escape the fear that human suffering is arbitrary. In his prose Faulkner continually

expresses the futility and poignancy of human attempts to overcome the inexorable passage of time, which changes things even as they come to have meaning and, thus, constantly renews humankind's experience of aloneness and loss. (ibidem 2)

Poe's *Pym* seemingly addresses an elsewhere avoided issue of race, but I would have no qualms about acquiescing to Mortimer's contention that the novel is, ultimately, about an experience of aloneness and loss. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* references race, indeed, yet not in the expected sense. The non-kosher structure, by narrative standards, of this novel provides ample evidence for the existence of an agenda which Poe upholds through signature storytelling. He makes use of returning image motives of black and white, but not in order to evoke slavery as such, but in order to replicate the discourse adjacent to it. To begin with, the author himself partook generously of both sides of the North-South separation. Raised in Virginia, but constrained by circumstances to work in cities in the North, whose life and literature he looked down upon, Poe became aware of an American clash of cultures. He did not shy away from registering the impact of that clash in writing.

In his study on the Southern streak evinced in Poe's work, a study entitled *South of the 'Border'*, David Faflik argues that "what mattered most to an artist like Poe was the *effect* such disputes had on a reader's private mind, a mind wrapped around words, not the causes or consequences of public antagonisms" and he deems *Pym*'s chronic irresolution as suggestive of this. Faflik goes on to distinguish another reason why, "as a perennial starving artist," Poe would resort to embattled national topics and would include them in his lore, namely his "keen professional sense of what made good copy" (Faflik, 2004: 272). Slave controversy sold. By insisting on the domestic regional ramifications of it, thus fanning the flames of that controversy, "had business logic behind it," Faflik thinks: "Cynical as it may sound, *Pym* finds Poe cashing in on a hot topic at a time when he was low on funds. Race, or rather the cultural baggage that comes with race, emerges less an ideological stomping ground for Poe than an excuse for personal protest, aesthetic exercise, and pure profit." (ibidem 273)

Pym seems to depend on incompleteness, and this is largely due to the super-imposed multitude of narrative strands that go unresolved. Actually, any individual encountered by the main party in an exploration depiction prompts a narrative detour. Captains, shipwrecked individuals, or cannibals all engender new recounts, resembling that which Tzvetan Todorov termed "narrative-men." Exploration recounts advance from narrator to narrator, accruing narratives with a consistency recalling the picaresque. In his monography on *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Lisa Gitelman maintains that one of the implications of this convention "is that non-whites and women are more properly characters than whites are in exploration accounts" (*Arthur Gordon Pym*, 2002: 358). The distinction between white and non-white "narrative-men" lies nowhere but in that the latter are never allowed to recount their own tales.

I consider this multi-stranded narrative as compliant with Poe's aesthetic ploys, a meaning-making strategy that recuperates, without obliterating or suppressing in foreclosed narrative patterns, an onerous contemporary issue.

Faflik focuses on the novel's incompleteness when he maintains that it "reads as a series of tense scenes, not one of which works itself out by story's end. A climactic cliff-hanger, followed by Pym's literally falling off the map, is emblematic of a tale that defies resolution" (278). Also arrested is Pym's self-development. The lack of a well-regulated mind, in other words, psychic disharmony is, by and large, one of the staples of Poe's characters, including Pym. As Lisa Gitelman notes, "Pym's psychic disharmony mirrors the disunity of the text he narrates, the disunity of Poe's sources, and even the wild eclecticism of the magazines that Poe contributed to and edited" (*Arthur Gordon Pym*, 2002: 356). "His high-seas adventures never really end, and so the adolescence of Poe's protagonist stalls in an abortive symbolic journey away from the North," Faflik joins in. (*South of the 'Border'*, 2004: 278)

Closing out *Pym*, “Poe wrote with just such border-crossings in view,” Faflik seems to believe. (ibidem 286) The *effect* of those crossings on readers was apparently an irresistible prompting to the author who more or less tried his hand at every literary fad that came along in his day. “True, the last chapters at the extreme southern island Tsalal recall the natural plenty of a lazy South,” Faflik believes.

Pym seems to discover in Tsalal a Mexican variation on one of Poe’s favourite tropes – Southern abundance. While his shipmates, seeming Yankees, create a base for trade, he takes up the frontier sport of bear hunting and pauses long enough only for an inventory of the area’s “fresh provision”.

Likewise, the “border” blow-up that finishes the book might also evoke popular (mis)conceptions of Mexico, allowing *Pym* to “play the part of the revolutionary” (*South of the ‘Border’*, 2004: 289). At the same time, though, we are given no context whatsoever. And that is because, by and large, Poe leads readers into a “Dreamland” – to borrow the title of one of Poe’s poems. His imagination usually conceives of a place “Out of Space – out of Time,” in his own words, reiterating in verse form the barren space that wraps up *Pym*. “Too many boundaries add up to no boundaries in the mind of this author,” comes Faflik’s harsh comment. Having depended on thresholds throughout his life and art, “Poe makes us *feel* with *Pym* a border stranger than any fiction,” in Faflik’s burdensome words. (ibidem)

Conjointly, “The Man That Was Used Up” provides a commentary on the 1830s wars against Native Americans, which were perforce attended with an increase in captivity narratives. Written at the time of the “late tremendous swamp fight way down South,” that is to say, the second Seminole War, while General Winfield Scott was escorting the Cherokees to Oklahoma across a “trail of tears” and one year after Chief Osceola had died in custody, the narrative serves as a response to the policy of Indian removal. It exposes the national hero and Indian fighter, General John Smith to be no more than an aggregation of fabricated fragments, a hollow man.

The parallel implication within this narrative is that the Indians, referred to by some of Smith’s acquaintances as “great wretches” or “terrible creatures” are, actually “Bugaboos” – meaning fictitious objects of dread. Smith stands in dire need of being daily reassembled, limb by limb, by his “old negro valet,” which only “adds a further complication to the illusion of cultural and racial dominance figured by the Indian fighter” (Poe 309;312;313;314; Kennedy 7). The implication here seems to be, by way of consequence, that the general was “used up,” dismembered, by his own racial hatred.

As if in payment for their redemption, the destiny of Poe’s heroes echoes that of the many captives who become “part of their culture’s representational technology, with their identities attached to the sermons, books, and gossip that a community uses to represent itself” (Haven Blake, 2002: 330). By presenting the Indian threat as non-existent, Poe’s story leads us to wonder whether “the cyborg’s ultimate mission is not so much to defeat an enemy society as to conquer its own” (idem). As Gerald Kennedy argues, “The Man That Was Used Up” seems to be Poe’s “first significant foray into the terrain of national myth and iconography”, though it came with a satire. (“*A Mania for Composition*”, 2005: 7)

In “The Man That Was Used Up” we see Poe concocting a vision of the consummately constructed warrior – in effect, a cyborg, whose technical parts give a semblance of humanity. With his prosthetic limbs streamlined for perfect gait and flow of movement, Poe’s General seems “to stand at the forefront of a markedly different tradition: the wide range of cyborgs in American fiction and film that exert astonishing military power over their victims and enemies.” (Kennedy, 2005: 7)

Various psychoanalytic terms and concepts describe such a domain as that where Poe concocts his fantasy of the perfectly constructed warrior: “primary process,” “potential space,” and “transitional phenomena.” Keats’s notion of “Negative Capability,” which sustains Poe’s creative dialectics of imaginative contradiction, is as relevant in this particular situation, as is Peter Rudnytsky’s enlargement

of this self-same notion to incorporate the mind of the audience, temporarily facing disconcerting experiences within the confines of narratives of trauma. (*Transitional Objects* Rudnytsky, 1993: 132)

In Winnicott's terms, where there are operational potential spaces, then the psychological successfulness of "transitional objects" becomes limitless. The transitional object is both outer presentation and inner creation, with no accompanying anxiety about its ontological status. Contextualizing, the fictional universe of Edgar Allan Poe becomes a field of transitional phenomena in which the character serves as commentary for the author's held beliefs and (political) allegiances. General Smith could be interpreted, as a matter of fact, as a veritable transitional object: at the same time real and not real, there and not there. What is *not* also *is*, what is without is also within, in a disquieting ontological equivocation. (Carstea, 2023)

Along these same argumentative lines, I perceive "Some Words with a Mummy" to be less about Dr. Ponnoner's revivification of an embalmed body than serving Poe as an artistic device of having a foreign traveller – as in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* – evaluate current issues in nineteenth century America from a different philosophical perspective. Through the mask of the mummified Count Allamistakeo, formerly a learned official in Pharaonic Egypt, Poe predicts the inevitable descent into tyranny of the American experiment in democracy. The count merrily responds to his American interlocutors' characteristic bragging about American Independence, democracy, and universal suffrage:

Thirteen Egyptian provinces determined all at once to be free, and so set a magnificent example to the rest of mankind. They assembled their wise men, and concocted the most ingenious constitution it is possible to conceive. The thing ended, however, in the consolidation of the thirteen states, with some fifteen or twenty others, in the most odious and insupportable despotism that ever was heard of upon the face of the Earth. (Poe, 1965: 536)

The name of this tyrant, Allamistakeo remembers, was "Mob" (ibidem 522). Somehow, the count strikes a responsive chord in the misanthropic narrator who, "convinced that everything is going wrong [in] the nineteenth century," is having himself embalmed for two centuries to discover "who will be President in 2045" (idem). The narrator's desire to know who would be the future President of the United States echoes the author's anxiety about and discontent with the capricious *hoi poloi*, "the destabilisation of power on the East Coast in the wake of westward expansion and admission to the Union of more than fifteen new states, and the social turmoil caused by hordes of European immigrants who had swept yet another Democrat into the White House" (*The Construction and Contestation* Hebel, 2009: 184).

Coda

Poe's fiction is most often a response to an apocalyptic sense of a world threatened by evil(s), and though this evil appears in a number of guises – epidemics, madness, natural disaster, revolution, murder – its role in the overall structure of Poe's imagination is to maintain a fragile equilibrium in the face of assaults from a chaotic and malevolent universe. Displaying either resistance or acquiescence to a sort of violence that has trauma as its end product, a narrative of terror is left behind as an admonition to a reader often specified as "you who know my soul".

Although Poe never worked out a systematic relationship between his political and philosophical thought, or relied entirely on the South for his conceptual framework, the Southern argument seems to have been indispensable to him, it created that transitional area which helped formulate its perceptions and language: the means by which he saw and constructed the world.

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