

## Remembrance and Healing in Poe's Narratives of Childhood Grief

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Edgar Allan Poe's essential "good health," a psychic health that preserved him as an artist but that contributed to his physical destruction, consisted in safeguarding that essential quality of philosophical well-being as defined by Plato, the preservation of the soul's unity (cf. the beginning of Plato's *Republic*, as glossed by Hannah Arendt: "being one, it is better to be at odds with the whole world than to be at odds with and contradicted by himself" [245]). Perhaps no major American writer has so taken to heart the Socratic law of non-contradiction as did Poe, who could well be said to have been "at odds with the whole world," but the necessity for this conflict has not been adequately understood by Poe's critics. In Poe's "dialogue" with himself, to paraphrase Arendt once again, Poe clung desperately to the fact of his own unwavering honesty in the face of the world's attacks and scorn. To give up would have been the easier course, earning Poe a stable income and critical acceptance—by his contemporaries if not by future generations—but it would have plunged him into mental chaos of the kind that Poe dreaded and that he imagined in "William Wilson" or "The Fall of the House of Usher," stories of Poe-like figures who cross the line into dishonest accommodation and are avenged by their own psychic need for unity.

Numerous philosophical oppositions underlie Poe's conception of psychic integrity: his conception of the opposition of individual and the mob, of "fact" versus rhetoric or opinion, of truth versus politics, of objective standards in art versus hack accommodation to the marketplace on the one hand or the mere impressionism of the dilettante on the other. Poe understood the mob's willingness to sacrifice truth and its representatives for expediency, as did Plato in his parable of the return of the philosopher to the cave after glimpsing the truth, where he encounters those who have

never left the cave and are thus ignorant, biased, and who use force and threats to gain their way. It was obvious to Plato, as it was to Poe, that a love of justice was natural to human beings: to be a human being in any full sense involved an innate recognition and striving for justice, the absence of which implied an abysmal condition of inhumanity, the equivalent of madness and chaos. Striving for justice was an ethical activity that Poe as a southerner and as an aristocrat (in his own estimation if not in that of the literati), would have connected with the word "honor." In this view, justice could never be an elective virtue, "added on" in times when it was expedient and discarded when costly; it was the essential motive behind what to most modern critics has seemed a literary career too often mired in contentious disputes over what has seemed aesthetically irrelevant, meddlesome, perhaps even repressive concerns for truth, honor, purity of taste, dignity, and reputation.

In reality these matters were crucial to Poe's psychic health because they formed the basis of a coherent and positive identity to one who, because of the circumstances of his childhood and adolescence, had particularly strong reasons to doubt his selfhood. These reasons included his having been orphaned at age two, taken in but never adopted—and later entirely rejected—by a cold, insensitive merchant and his loving but sickly and remote wife, his lifetime of poverty and his marriage to a tubercular young woman and responsibility for her utterly dependent mother. These obstacles, however, could have been overcome if Poe had been willing to accept the cynical commercialism of taste that dominated American writing in his day, or if he had curried the favor of the influential literary establishment and ignored the mediocrity of so many of its members. Admittedly, Poe was not unwilling to seek favor when it seemed necessary—masquerading as a Democrat while pursuing a political appointment from

President Tyler (he was unsuccessful), or praising the poetry of Francis Sargent Osgood, his patroness and admirer—but he held fearlessly to his principles when it mattered.

Like a Japanese samurai warrior, cultivating an ideal of order and beauty at the very moment that he was preparing to face death, Poe cultivated nobility and dignity even as his life was engulfed in horror. During his brief life death and illness were Poe's ceaseless preoccupation, what with the death of his mother at age 24, of the beloved Mrs. Stanard at age 31, of Frances Allan at age 44 when Poe was 20, and of his wife Virginia Clemm when she was 25 and he 38. There was also the troubling early death of his brother, William Henry Leonard Poe, who died of alcoholism at age 24. Poe also faced a ceaseless display of professional corruption in the form of puffery, favoritism, and plagiarism, forms of behavior that may be said to have "sickened" American writing during his most productive years, from about 1830-1845. Yet in response to illness and death, Poe maintained his belief in an ordered and purposeful universe and his view of his own part within it.

Nearly all modern critics have separated Poe's conception of ethics and aesthetics, a division that reflects modern philosophical compartmentalization but that would have seemed peculiar to Poe and many of his contemporaries. What is absent in studies such as Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* is a recognition of the necessity of objective values such as honor within the belief structure of 19<sup>th</sup> century southern culture and of the relationship of such identity-forming values to attitudes toward remembrance, remarriage, and emotional healing. Such values provided frameworks of order not merely for individuals but for society as a whole, thus limiting the destructive force of opportunism, indifference, and abuse that

characterize social life in the absence of such larger belief systems. What is remarkable about Poe's regard for honor is the steadfastness with which he maintained his values in the face of an increasingly commercial and cynical society. Like Melville in *The Confidence Man* and *Pierre*, Poe was documenting the transition to a modernity driven by harsh realities of market economics and unbridled individualism. In the absence of political principles of just the sort that Wyatt-Brown questions, this age was dominated by the extremes of anarchy or authoritarianism.

Accordingly Poe's psychic health required an enormous commitment to honor, truth, and loyalty in the face of a corrupt world. Given his life of unremitting personal loss and the degraded professional society he worked in, is it then any wonder that, as an artist, Poe viewed the "death of a beautiful woman" as the most ideal subject for literature? Clearly, Poe's fascination with this theme must be understood in the context of suffering and uncertainty within which he wrote. Thus, in "The Sleeper" (1831), an early poem thought to commemorate the death of the beloved Jane Stanard in 1824, Poe imagines himself (or perhaps was actually writing) standing before a woman's grave on a mild summer night. In a world of "ghosts" where funerals are frequent and death is "triumphant," Poe imagines for the lady a sleep "enduring" and "deep," her soul in the core of Heaven. The poem has a melancholy beauty characteristic of many of Poe's works and of those of his contemporaries, reflecting what J. Gerald Kennedy refers to as the "cult of mourning," but laments of this sort are more than an artistic effect: they are best seen as a necessary resistance to the anarchic, consuming force of disorder and death. In Poe's age the destructive potential of contagion was more acutely felt than ever before—in part because of the dawning public awareness of the secret world of microbes, in part because of the actual increase in contagious disease in a

period of growing urbanization. (Poe was born thirteen years before Louis Pasteur, whose lifelong study of infection built on earlier studies by 18<sup>th</sup> century scientists such as Edward Jenner, whose work was made possible by the invention of the compound microscope; important discoveries such as vaccination and pasteurization were the culmination of scientific investigations that were reflected in contemporary interest in “secret” sources of illness.) In August 1849, for example, Poe himself was lucky enough to survive infection with cholera (though he died two months later, apparently of unrelated causes) during the epidemic that in one month killed over 8,000 persons in New York state alone. In this context, Poe’s idealization of life after death is not an escape from reality; it is an intelligible response to a horribly real condition of imperilment. Poe’s many “paeans” to death, such as “Lenore” (“the queenliest dead that ever died so young”), are exhortations of hope in the face of seemingly omnipresent death. Here Poe imagines Jane Standard’s soul, mirthful as it “float[s] up from the damnéd earth” to Heaven.

The finest of Poe’s dirges, “Ulalume” (1847), is a more complex rendering of the psychic necessity of remembrance, as it dramatizes the danger to Poe’s selfhood of abandoning his grief for the “lost Ulalume.” On the first anniversary of the lady’s death, Poe’s narrator is lured by the promise of new love (“Astarte’s bediamonded crescent...with love in her luminous eyes”). In response to this call of eros, a dangerous attraction to the passionate life that in Poe’s case was always prelude to illness and death, the narrator overcomes the “mistrust” and even “terror” that his soul feels, until they (narrator and soul) are “stopped by the door of a tomb”—Ulalume’s vault—and the narrator realizes that it is the anniversary of Ulalume’s death. Thus, he has been “tempted” to the “ghoul-haunted woodland” and “dark tarn” by a “demon,” presumably in

the shape of Astarte, the goddess of erotic love. The poem forcefully presents the terror and threat to identity that Poe feels in abandoning remembrance and, conversely, the security and health that is attached to fidelity to the memory of the deceased. In this poem, Poe presents a remarkable conception of the dangers of means-oriented philosophy. Astarte's "warmth" represents the pure sensation and hedonism that paradoxically involves a "pallor" (the moonlight of Astarte) rather than health. The never-ending task of mourning is conveyed by the presence of tears on the narrator's "cheeks, where the worm never dies." In contrast with erotic passion, remembrance ensures "life" in the form of mental coherence.

The idealized quality of love that is still available to Poe in this context is defined in "For Annie" (1849), written to Nancy ("Annie") Richmond after Poe's suicide attempt in November 1848 following the breakdown of his courtship of Sarah Helen Whitman. The narrator imagines that he is already dead or near death ("that horrible/Horrible throbbing!" refers to Poe's irregular heartbeat). The "worst torture," however, is passion with its quenchless thirst. In symbolic death Poe now "lies happily/Bathing in many/ A dream of the truth? And the beauty of Annie." For a widower in Poe's position, Annie, a soul mate who also happened to be a 28-year old married woman and mother of a 3-year old girl, is a kind of heaven, protecting the poet-sleeper at her breast. "Composedly" and "contentedly," he lies with a "brighter" heart, thinking of Annie's "spiritual" gray eyes.

Poe wrote many tales of causing, escaping, arresting, defeating, or transforming death. Among the best-known are "Ligeia" 1838, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 1839, "William Wilson" 1839, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" 1841, "A Descent into the Maelström" 1841, "The Masque of the Red Death" 1842, "The Pit and the Pendulum" 1843, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 1843, "The Black Cat" 1843, and "The Facts in the Case of

M. Valdemar" 1845.

From these many tales, many of which involve the disintegration of the self, I will examine the role of remembrance in psychic health in "Eleonora" (1842) and "Ligeia" (1838), stories which share a vampire-like theme of preservation of life by an act of will of the lover or beloved. From the beginning in "Eleonora" we learn the intriguing fact that all forms of "genius," including the narrator's, "spring from disease of thought." The narrator writes of his cousin Eleonora with whom he "had always dwelled together, beneath a tropical sun" (much like Poe with Virginia and Mrs. Clemm) in a secure and happy valley within a dense tropical forest. There the beauty of nature seemed emblematic of divine love. The narrator and Eleonora live together innocent of erotic love for fifteen years until, at age 20 and 15, respectively, they experience "the god Eros."

Their "delirious bliss" changes the appearance of nature, heightening colors, bringing tropical birds and ruby asphodels (in place of the pale daisy) along with golden and silver fish and a divine melody from the River of Silence that encircles their valley. From the sky a vast cloud descends, enclosing them "within a magic prison-house of grandeur and of glory." Innocent Eleonora now sees that "she had been made perfect in loveliness only to die" and worries that her mate will love another after her death. He vows never to marry another on penalty so horrible that it cannot be recorded. Comforted by his vow, she promised to return after death either in person, as a spirit, or at least through signs. In the period after her death, the narrator lives "heavily" as nature's beauty dies away from the valley but Eleonora keeps her promise, visiting him by signs and once even pressing her "spiritual lips" upon his. But, longing for love, he finally leaves the valley and enters the world. In a "strange city," he meets, falls in love with, and weds a beautiful maiden, "the ethereal Ermengarde." By some unexplained means, the

narrator is able to evade the curse that his vow should bring. Indeed, after his remarriage, he is visited one final time by Eleonora, who tells him that he is “absolved, for reasons which shall be made know to thee in Heaven, of thy vows unto Eleonora.” It is perhaps the only story in which the necessity to grieve gives way to “the Spirit of Love.”

For Ermengarde the narrator feels a “spirit-lifting ecstasy of adoration,” far greater than his love for Eleonora, a dangerous recovery of passion which comes only after the spirit visitations of Eleonora cease. It is important that the reader learns almost nothing of a specific nature about either Eleonora or Ermengarde, but there are certain crucial elements about their relationship to the narrator: notice their similar names, always significant in Poe, and similar *métiers*: Eleonora—medieval queens of England and France; Ermengarde—in Poe’s story, a woman at the court of a king. Ermengarde, while surpassing Eleonora in beauty, is yet so similar that the narrator’s transference of love is not a betrayal. Because the two women are so similar, it is possible, in this tale at least, to imagine remembrance and eros abiding together. Still, Poe recognizes even here the necessity of Eleonora’s approbation to evade the self-imposed curse and thus to evade the penalty (i.e., psychic anarchy, untruth).

“Ligeia,” published four years earlier, deals with precisely the same thematic dilemma as “Eleonora,” but it arrives at what may be seen as a more decisive conclusion. Like Ermengarde, who appears at court a stranger from some “far, far distant and unknown land,” Ligeia comes from an unspecified family and background. A ghostly, vampire-like quality (emaciated form, shadowy movement, “marble hand”) characterize her. Like Ermengarde, the appearance of Ligeia’s face is “spirit-lifting” and spiritual, especially her large, black, expressive eyes—eyes that emit mystical, other-worldly beauty. It is an expressiveness that the narrator is never able to fathom, and the

sentiment that he experiences he cannot define, “analyze, or even steadily view.” It is a sentiment connected with Ligeia’s intense passion for life and her “fierce energy.”

As if to focus the reader’s attention on the problem of the insecurity of existence, the narrator is unable even to portray the intensity of Ligeia’s “desire for life.” Ligeia twice repeats the epigraph of the story (attributed by Poe to Joseph Glanvill): “Man doth not yield him to the angels, *nor until death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (117). Like the narrator of “Eleonora,” the narrator flees the site of his beloved’s death and moves to a decayed abbey in a remote region of England; and like the narrator of “Eleonora,” he remarries. Lady Rowena Trevanion is “the successor of the *unforgotten* Ligeia” (italics added).

The weakness of the narrator after Ligeia’s death also repeats the plot of “Eleonora”: “feelings of utter abandonment,” “incipient madness,” “a bounden slave” to opium. After leading his bride to a bizarrely oppressive bridal chamber, complete with ebony bridal couch, grotesque tapestries, and sarcophagi in the five corners, he is consumed by memories of the departed Ligeia. After a month of marriage, Rowena falls ill. At the end of September a shadow drops “three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid” into Rowena’s glass, causing her rapid decline and, three days later, her apparent death. As the narrator sits with the shrouded body on the fourth night afterward, he is filled with memory of the night he sat with body of Ligeia, “the one and only supremely beloved.” Hearing a sob from the deathbed, he detects a “twinge of color” in the face of the corpse. Convinced that Rowena still lives, he tries to restore her life, but she slips back into death. The cycle (“hideous drama of revivification”) is repeated “time after time” throughout the night. Between each episode, he gives himself up “to passionate waking visions of Ligeia.” Finally the corpse walks to the middle of the

room, loosens the casements about her head, and opens her eyes. It is, of course, the figure of Ligeia.

The crucial difference in “Eleonora” and “Ligeia” is that in the latter story the narrator’s remarriage is not and, given the heroine’s striving for immortality, can never be sanctioned by the deceased. Thus, in “Ligeia” the narrator faces a greater difficulty in reconciling eros and remembrance and is only able to accomplish this by the revivification of the deceased. The fact that Poe considered “Ligeia” his “best tale” is also significant: perhaps he rated it so highly because it was the most accurate in recording the true nature of his necessity—and all human beings’ necessity—to preserve a coherent sense of identity in the face of illness and death. In this sense, “Ligeia” is far more than the tale of vampirism, of the cult of mourning, misogynic or, alternately, of ideal love that critics have found it to be: it is Poe’s most successful artistic interweaving of the problem of remembrance with his concern for honor, loyalty, coherence, unity—those features of the integrated self that formed the only defense against madness and death. It is, in sum, an expression not just of Ligeia’s, but of Poe’s, enormous will for life and striving for renewal and meaning.