

Poe and the Subjective Reality

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WHEN near the end of his life Edgar Allan Poe wrote in *Eureka* that "each soul is, in part, its own God—its own Creator,"¹ he well could have been referring to his own belief that the only practical reality for mankind is a subjective reality; that, in fact, the soul creates itself out of its own perception of what is real. Poe never contended that there was no absolute, or objective, reality. On the contrary, he believed that such a reality existed but that man generally did not find it. In *Eureka* he explains, "I make no call upon the reader to entertain the impossible conception of an *absolute* infinity. I refer simply to the 'utmost conceivable expanse' of space—a shadowy and fluctuating domain, now shrinking, now swelling, in accordance with the vacillating energies of the imagination."² To Poe there existed both physical and spiritual realities, but neither operated to man's best advantage. He points out further that "he who from the top of AETna casts his eyes leisurely around is affected chiefly by the *extent* and *diversity* of the scene. Only by a rapid whirling on his heel could he hope to comprehend the panorama in the sublimity of its *oneness*. But as, on the summit of AETna, *no* man has thought of whirling on his heel, so no man has ever taken into his brain the full uniqueness of the prospect; and so, again, whatever considerations lie involved in this uniqueness, has as yet no practical existence for mankind."³

Although man is potentially able, through intuition and imagination, to discover reality, that discovery is difficult, for man is partly dependent upon his physical senses and his intellect. Midway in his writing career Poe concluded

that the intellect, as well as imagination, was significant, and later concluded further that the intellect and the imagination worked together equally. The intellect supplies details which the imagination then synthesizes and blends into a whole. Poe says that Locke "sufficiently proved that all our ideas are originally derived from the senses. These first impressions form the basis of human knowledge."⁴ The senses, of course, often lead one away from objective reality, and thus the "reality" one apprehends is subjective and unique. Again in *Eureka*, in setting forth his main thesis, Poe says, "I propose to take such a survey of the Universe that the mind may be able really to receive and perceive an *individual impression* [*Italics mine*]."⁵

As he pointed out the impracticality of objective reality for mankind, Poe was not lamenting the fact that man does not perceive such reality. In fact, Poe says that if man discovers realities, they often are bound by time and space and thus are dull. But man is fortunate, for he has his imagination to soar above them.⁶ Moreover, Poe believes that individuality of impression is to be sought, for it is edifying. Indeed, he takes to task Alexander Von Humboldt (to whom he dedicated *Eureka*) for his multiplicity of points and amount of detail which "preclude all individuality of impression."⁷

All this leads to the supposition that subjective reality is all that matters to man anyway, because that perception of "reality" governs man's actions.⁸ That philosophical point is apparent in everything Poe wrote, but it is especially operative in the decade of fiction he wrote prior to his experimentation in the ratiocination stories. The "individual impression" of reality is particularly dramatic in Poe's fiction because nearly all his central characters are aberrant personalities upon whose distorted view hang both the effect of the tale and the interest. This characteristic, of course, is consistent with Poe's penchant for abnormal psychology and the macabre.

Poe's early story "M.S. Found in a Bottle" (1831) is an excellent case in point of Poe's concept of reality and its relationship to his technique. The story begins with the narrator's going to great pains to show that he is a reliable reporter, that he is a rational man not given to wild fancies or hallucinations. He even says that his "rigid thought" has brought him reproach and that the "Pyrrhonism" of his opinions has rendered him notorious. Poe's reference to Pyrrhonism is here interesting because in alluding to that philosophy which holds that all perceptual knowledge is untrustworthy, Poe is serving a dual purpose. He is reinforcing the narrator's contention that all his knowledge is derived from the intellect rather than fantasy, and he is establishing early a philosophical standard against which the "truth" of the ensuing story must be measured. Poe has reminded us that perceptual knowledge is untrustworthy—if one is looking for an objective reality. But perceptual knowledge is nevertheless valid to the perceiver, for it makes up his very consciousness. The narrator continues to tell us that his incredible tale is the positive experience of a mind to which the reveries of fancy have been a dead letter and a nullity. He clearly believes what his senses tell him.

But Poe nearly always provides some doubt for the reader about the reliability of such a "rational" narrator. This persona tells us that he "sailed in the year 18—, from the port of Batavia, . . . as a passenger—having no other inducement than a kind of nervous restlessness which haunted me as a fiend." A narrator who suffers a fiendish nervousness, and acts because of it, can't be regarded as totally invulnerable to fantasies, for hallucinations are the frequent product of such a state of mind. Moreover, throughout the unraveling of the tale, there is nothing to suggest that the others, either those on board the first ship or on the *Discovery*, have the same impressions or make the same observations as does the

narrator. An examination of the following excerpt illustrates the point:

One evening, leaning over the taffrail, I observed a very singular, isolated cloud, to the N.W. It was remarkable, as well for its color, as from its being the first we had seen since our departure from Batavia. I watched it attentively until sunset, when it spread all at once to the eastward and westward, girding in the horizon with a narrow strip of vapor, and looking like a long line of low beach. My notice was soon afterwards attracted by the dusky-red appearance of the moon, and the peculiar character of the sea. The latter was undergoing a rapid change, and the water seemed more than usually transparent.⁹

The reader is immediately aware of the verbs in these sentences: "I observed . . . , I watched . . . , My notice was . . . attracted . . . ," and "the water seemed . . . ," all of which suggest the personal impressions of the narrator. What is even more remarkable is that the captain says, according to the narrator, that he can perceive no danger. Indeed, no watch is set, and the crew unconcernedly stretch out on deck. When the narrator once again tells the captain his fears, the captain pays no attention and doesn't even design to reply.

This story anticipates, among others, "William Wilson" (1839), Poe's doppelgänger story in which the narrator believes he is pursued and threatened by his double, although other persons are apparently unaware of the double's existence. Like William Wilson, the narrator of "M.S. Found in a Bottle" insists he has a companion. He says that after the hurricane hits he is left with an old Swede, who has not been mentioned until this point. We have only the narrator's word for the old man's presence, and the narrator expresses both their thoughts when he says, "We apprehended little danger from the violence of the wind" and "We looked forward to its total cessation with dismay," statements that at least give rise to the presumption that the old man, although emphatically *real* to the narrator, represents in fact a facet of the narrator's own personality.

The subjectivity of the narrator's perception of reality is delineated again when he boards the phantom ship and observes that the crew, "incomprehensible men," pass him by unnoticed. Also, he admits that in the appearance of the captain of this ship, the *Discovery*, there would be nothing unusual to the casual observer, but he goes on to describe the man's singularity of expression, his fiery, unquiet eye, and the evidences of extraordinary age. The paradox seems to suggest that this particular view of the captain is peculiar to the narrator's own perception.

For a given time the narrator perceives nothing external to the boundaries of the ship. As he says, "All in the immediate vicinity of the ship is the blackness of eternal night." This isolated perception reflects the isolated man, a prototype of the Poe hero. Because he perceives only the ship and her crew, only they comprise his reality; and conversely, we might suppose that, given the clues from the author, the ship and her crew are real to the narrator and to no one else. The narrator's perception of reality here is truly indicative of the individuality of impression Poe has praised consistently because it leads to intensified life. It is only that in Poe's fiction the intensified life is often the intensity of horror and anguish.

In later stories, Poe makes additional illuminating statements about the nature of reality. In "Berenice" (1835), for example, Agaeus, the narrator, says that in the noon of his life "an inversion took place in the character of my commonest thought. The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn,—not the material of my every-day existence—but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself."¹⁰ It is evident here that Poe is explaining that reality is relative to the perceiver, the idea he has implicitly developed in "M.S. Found in a Bottle." Further, the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) acknowledges that a change of visual perspective often can alter a given

impression, and thus alter a momentary reality. After perceiving the House of Usher and being affected by its "insufferable gloom," he reflects that "a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression."¹¹ This statement serves to show that Poe believed that a person's perception of what was real depended entirely on, first, his sensory impressions and, second, the imagination's arrangement of those impressions.

Poe's belief in the subjective nature of reality affords an interesting study in itself, but when that belief is applied to the interpretation of "The Oval Portrait" (1842), artistically one of Poe's best stories prior to the tales of ratiocination, the study yields surprising new meaning. In addition to the story's dealing with the commonplace superstition of spirits' entering realistic portraits, it also offers another comment on Poe's notion of reality. As the story begins, the narrator, who is recovering from a "wound" (either physical or spiritual), finds refuge with his valet in an abandoned chateau. In the furnished apartment in which they establish themselves, there are a great number of paintings and a small volume "which purported to criticise and describe them." The narrator orders the valet, Pedro, to close the heavy shutters of the room, and to light "the tongues of the tall candelabrum" at the head of the bed in order that he might better contemplate the paintings and study the volume of criticism. Thus he is excluding from his field of perception all peripheral realities and focusing his attention on an isolated group of objects.

But when he moves the candelabrum in order to read more clearly, the rays of the numerous candles fall within a niche of the room he has not seen. He sees in vivid light then a fascinating portrait of a young girl. But the same niche, and thus the picture, become non-existent when he closes his eyes. Elemental as this may appear

on the surface, it does make one conscious of the necessity of perceiving. Poe even makes a point of the narrator's closing his eyes; he says, "Why I did this was not at first apparent even to my own perception. But while my lids remained thus shut, I ran over in mind my reason for so shutting them. It was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought—to make sure that my vision had not deceived me—to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze."¹² The fact that the portrait, which emerges from a blackened field into the narrator's range of perception, is a vignette reinforces the point, for a vignette is that kind of painting which blends its central figure into the background. The primary features of the painting are heightened because, like the phantom ship in "M.S. Found in a Bottle," they seem to emerge from a void.

As the narrator picks up the volume that explains the paintings, he replaces the candelabrum in its former position and shuts from view, and thus from reality, the portrait. One is again aware of the subjective nature of reality. The narrator then reads that the subject of the painting was the artist's wife and that she loved the painter, who in turn loved his Art. Indeed, the artist was so lost in reverie when he painted that he "*would* not see that the light which fell so ghastlily in that lone turret withered the health and spirits of his bride, who pined visible to all but him." Moreover, he "*would* not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from her who sate beside him." The artist, who presents again Poe's major theme of isolation, cannot separate himself from his Art; consequently, like other Poe protagonists, he has only isolated perception.

When the painting was in its initial stages, the wife was a thing of budding beauty because she was the object of her husband's undivided attention. As he painted, however, he seemed to transfer his wife's life from her physical being to the canvas, and he continued to do

this until he had created his "life-likeness." Having completed the portrait, the painter no longer needed to contemplate his wife. An object not contemplated by the painter was an object that did not exist for him. Like the recess that was only a dark niche until it was perceived in the candlelight, the wife who was no longer contemplated was dead.

The first half of this story, in which Poe elaborates upon reality's dependence on perception, helps to illuminate the second half, the tale within a tale. It is as if Poe, the sometime theologian, has agreed with the assumption behind St. Anselm's ontological argument that if God is thought about, He thereby exists—in the understanding.

All along Poe has pointed out that reality is peculiar to the person who apprehends it. If it should be congruent with truth, or objective reality, that is coincidental and irrelevant, for all that ultimately matters is what man believes for the moment to be real. It is that reality which determines man's actions and his fate.

NOTES

¹*The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS Press, 1965), XVI, 313; referred to hereafter as *Works*.

²*Works*, XVI, 204.

³*Works*, XVI, 186.

⁴"Genius," *The Southern Literary Messenger*, II, 300.

⁵*Works*, XVI, 186.

⁶Cf. "Sonnet to Science" (1829), in which Poe speaks of the dull realities which deny the poet the glories of the imaginative world, not bounded by time and space. See also Poe's comments in the essay "Genius" in *The Southern Literary Messenger* (II, 297): "The dull scenes of real life can never be suffered to chill the ardor of a romantic imagination. And as the poet finds truth too plain and unadorned to satisfy his enthusiastic fancy, he is compelled to seek subjects and scenery of a more faultless nature and brighter lives than this world affords."

⁷*Works*, XVI, 187.

⁸We all recall the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) who, with his sharpened senses, "hears" beating the heart

of the old man he has murdered and whose remains he has stuffed beneath the floor boards. It is clear in the story that only the guilt-ridden narrator (and not the police officers) hears the beating heart—but so realistically that he finally breaks down and shrieks, “I admit the deed!”

⁹*Works*, II, 2-3.

¹⁰*Works*, II, 17.

¹¹*Works*, III, 274.

¹²*Works*, IV, 246.