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## POE AS SOCIAL CRITIC

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AS early as 1855 the notion was abroad that Poe moved about over the earth thickly wrapped in a luminous cloud, which effectually shut him off from mundane concerns; that his mind dwelt exclusively in "the misty mid region of Weir." In that year Evert and George Duyckinck, who had known Poe in the flesh, wrote: "His rude contact with the world, which might have set up a novelist for life with materials of adventure, seems scarcely to have impinged upon his perceptions. His mind, walking in a vain show, was taught nothing by experience or suffering."<sup>1</sup> How a man who engaged in the active practice of journalism for upwards of fifteen years, who reviewed scores of books on topics ranging from the history of the American navy, life and manners in the West, education, the ecclesiastical history of the United States, and South Sea exploration, to eulogies of departed worthies like John Marshall; who, in 1844, walked with an observant eye up and down Manhattan, noting for future comment the wretched shanties of the recent Irish immigrants, the banal architecture of the dwellings,<sup>2</sup> and the bad taste of the Bowling Green fountain, which he likened to a "small country jail in a hard thunder shower"<sup>3</sup>—how such a man could prevent the various and gaudy life of the '30's and '40's from impinging upon his perceptions, is a little difficult to understand.

Professor Parrington asserts that Poe's "aloofness from his own Virginia world was complete. Aside from his art he had no philosophy and no programs and no causes."<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Hazard declares that Poe has "no connection with the regional frontier or with any region

<sup>1</sup> *Cyclopædia of American Literature*, 2 vols. (New York, Charles Scribner, 1866), II, 537.

<sup>2</sup> *Doings of Gotham . . . a Series of Letters to the Editors of the Columbia [Pennsylvania] Spy*. Now first collected by Jacob E. Spannuth with a Preface, Introduction, and Comments by Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Pottsville, Pa., Jacob E. Spannuth, 1929), pp. 25, 59. See also Poe's *Works*, ed. James A. Harrison, 17 vols. (New York, Crowell, 1902), XIV, 171: ". . . much of our cottage architecture . . . would have been Gothic if it had not felt it its duty to be Dutch."

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1927), II, 57.

except [that] to which [his] magic has given a local habitation and a name."<sup>5</sup> Accepting the general judgment of the literary historians, Professor A. M. Schlesinger finds that Poe is "a tragic and solitary genius, the Ishmael of letters, who shows no reflection of place or time in his work. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Professor Edwin Greenlaw, after an able and convincing statement of the view that literature has intimate relations with the social and cultural *milieu* from which it springs, feels obliged to say that a "sharp distinction [must] be drawn between . . . the product of the solitary artist working, so far as we can see, independently of time or place, such an artist as Poe for example, . . . and that other and far larger body of imaginative writing which is transcript of the life out of which it springs."<sup>7</sup> The old formula also serves Professor Russell Blankenship, who writes: "a grave weakness of Poe is his intellectual detachment from his time and environment."<sup>8</sup> Thus Poe baffles the sociological and historical critics, and becomes one of the chief supports of those doctors of

<sup>5</sup> *The Frontier in American Literature* (New York, 1927), p. 84. It is true that the frontier shows little direct influence in Poe's more imaginative work, although it is clear that he delved into books of travel and exploration in the West, among them accounts of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, on which he founded his "Journal of Julius Rodman" (see Miss P. P. Crawford, "Lewis and Clark's Expedition as a Source for Poe's 'Journal of Julius Rodman,'" University of Texas *Studies in English*, No. 12, pp. 158 ff. (1932). See also his review of Irving's *Astoria, Works*, IX, 207, and "Von Kempelen and His Discovery," which, as he explains, in a letter to Duyckinck (March 8, 1849), was written to hoax the public, to act "as a sudden, although of course a very temporary, check to the gold-fever," and to "create a stir to some purpose." (*Works*, XVII, 341.)

That Poe was well aware of the influence of the frontier on American life and character is evident in his notice of the work of Caroline M. Kirkland. "With a fidelity and vigor that prove her pictures to be taken from the very life, she has represented 'scenes' that could have occurred only *as* and *where* she has described them. She has placed before us the veritable settlers of the forest, with all their peculiarities, national and individual; their free and fearless spirit; their homely utilitarian views; their shrewd out-looking for self-interest; their thrifty care and inventions multiform; their coarseness of manner, united with real delicacy and substantial kindness when their sympathies are called into action. . . ." An accusation of pride, he notes, is "as destructive at the west as that of witchcraft in olden times, or the cry of mad dog in modern." (*Works*, XV, 84, 86.) See also his review of Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes, Works*, VIII, 257-265.

<sup>6</sup> *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York, Macmillan, 1922), p. 211.

<sup>7</sup> *The Province of Literary History* (Baltimore and London, 1931), pp. 99-100. Poe himself admitted some connection between environment and literature. He felt, however, that social, political, moral, or physical conditions could do no more than "momentarily repress" the development of art, whose principles "lie deep within the immortal nature of man, and have little necessary reference to the worldly circumstances which surround him." (*Works*, XI, 148.)

<sup>8</sup> *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind* (New York, Holt, 1931), p. 217.

æsthetic who hold that art and the mind of the artist are gifts direct from heaven. Three generations of commentators have imposed upon the world the fiction that Poe was rather more isolated from the ordinary concerns of human life than Simeon Stylites on his pillar.

Of late, however, the traditional view of Poe has begun to meet with exception. As long ago as 1923 Professor Killis Campbell indicated briefly the variety of Poe's interests in his contemporary world.<sup>9</sup> Hervey Allen in the preface to his *Israfel* laments that although "conservative academic circles still continue to yawn through Mr. Emerson's doubtful *Compensations*, there is no knowledge, or comment upon what Mr. Poe had to say of democracy, science, and unimaginative literature about the same time. The croak of the raven is conveniently supposed to be purely lyric."<sup>10</sup> Professor James Southall Wilson has well shown that Poe began his career as a prose writer with satire of contemporary tastes and manners, but that his satiric purpose almost entirely missed fire at the time, and has been overlooked ever since.<sup>11</sup> And Professor Howard Mumford Jones has sensed the fact that the treatment of Poe in the conventional literary history, in which "literature is a static concept, not a dynamic social agency," is inadequate; when the historians are "confronted by such a phenomenon as Poe, their shallow classifications break down."<sup>12</sup> It is a mistake, Dr. H. S. Canby believes, to think that Poe owed nothing to the American tradition.<sup>13</sup>

Emerson once said, "It is impossible to extricate yourself from the questions in which your age is involved." Nor was Poe able to extricate himself from these questions. The great staples of thought and discussion in his day were democracy, social reform, and prog-

<sup>9</sup> "Poe in Relation to His Times," *Studies in Philology*, XX, 293-301 (July, 1923). In his recent *The Mind of Poe* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1933) Professor Campbell has greatly extended the evidence.

<sup>10</sup> *Israfel* (New York, Doran, 1926), I, xi.

<sup>11</sup> "The Devil Was in It," *The American Mercury*, XXIV, 215-220 (Oct., 1931). I here make the suggestion that one of these early pieces, "Four Beasts in One," written in the midst of the Jacksonian era, is directed specifically against Jackson and his frontier democrats, and that the homo-cameleopard king is no less than King Mob, who so fluttered the Eastern dove-cote when Jackson took office.

<sup>12</sup> *America and French Culture* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1927), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Classic Americans* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1931), p. 275. See also F. M. Darnell, "The Americanism of Edgar Allan Poe," *English Journal*, XVI, 185-192 (March, 1927).

ress. As a preliminary to a survey of his opinions on these subjects, it will be pertinent, as well as of intrinsic interest, to review his personal experience with the politics of the period.

## II

It was his friend F. W. Thomas who first suggested to Poe the possibility of obtaining a government post by political appointment. In the spring of 1841, shortly after the death of the newly inaugurated Harrison and the accession of John Tyler, when the streets and inns of the capital were swarming with hungry office-seekers, Thomas wrote from Washington, where he himself had a small clerkship, to ask, "How would you like to be an office holder here at \$1500 per year payable monthly by Uncle Sam?" After enlarging on the easy duties and the leisure which would be available for literary effort, he concludes with the invitation to "Come on and apply for a clerkship."<sup>14</sup> Poe, struggling with poverty in Philadelphia, was fired by the prospect. He replied:

Would to God I could do as you have done! Do you seriously think that an application to Tyler would have a good result? . . . My political principles have always been, as nearly as may be, with the existing administration, and I battled with right good will for Harrison when opportunity offered. . . . Have I any chance?<sup>15</sup>

During the next two years, while the negotiations continued, Poe knew something of the pains of the courtier. He tried to play the game according to the rules. He enlisted the friendly aid of John Pendleton Kennedy, then a congressman;<sup>16</sup> he said polite things about a poem by Robert Tyler, a son of the President;<sup>17</sup> he tried to secure an article for his projected magazine from Judge Upshur, Secretary of the Navy and a close personal friend of the President;<sup>18</sup> he made a trip to Washington but became intoxicated and damaged his cause.<sup>19</sup> All was in vain. In a final revelation of the meanness, pettiness, and trickery of politics, he abandoned his hopes of political

<sup>14</sup> Poe, *Works*, XVII, 85.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 91-92.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 92, 93-94, 95, 102.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 134-137.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 105.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 132.

In a remorseful letter to Thomas and Dow there is mention of "a cloak turned inside out" and "other peccadilloes of that nature," and of "making a fool" of himself at the public house of one Mr. Fuller. (*Ibid.*, XVII, 136.)

appointment. "You can have no idea of the low ruffians and boobies—men, too, without a shadow of political influence or caste—who have received office over my head. . . . I would write more, my dear Thomas, but my heart is too heavy."<sup>20</sup>

Thenceforward politicians and all their ways were anathema to Poe. In "Some words with a Mummy" (1845), a telling bit of satire on the notion of progress, he observes that one of the interlocutors of the revived mummy

could not make the Egyptian comprehend the term "politics," until he sketched upon the wall, with a bit of charcoal, a little carbuncle-nosed gentleman, out at elbows, standing upon a stump, with his left leg drawn back, his right arm thrown forward, with the fist shut, the eyes rolled up toward Heaven, and the mouth open at an angle of ninety degrees.<sup>21</sup>

Writing from New York to *The Columbia* (Pennsylvania) *Spy* in 1844 he remarked with indignant scorn on the political corruption of the city, as a result of which miles of its streets were often left in total darkness for a fortnight at a time. He noted also that easy tolerance toward public rascality which is a peculiarly American trait. "When the question is asked—'cannot these scoundrels be made to suffer for their high-handed peculations?'—the reply is invariably—'oh, no—to be sure not—the thing is expected, and will only be laughed at as an excellent practical joke.'<sup>22</sup>

It is doubtful whether Poe had any clear sense of direction in the welter of cross purposes which constituted party politics. He declared as above that his political principles had always been "as nearly as may be with the existing administration"; that is, Whig, and that he had "battled with a right good will for Harrison." But Tyler was at heart a Virginia Democrat who had flirted with the Whigs and been put on the ticket with Harrison as an act of expediency. After the latter's death, it was at first uncertain which way Tyler would go, but he presently began to oppose Whig measures. Poe wrote to Thomas respecting one Smith, through whom he expected a clerkship in the Philadelphia custom-house: "Mr. Smith has excited the thorough disgust of every Tyler man here.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 123-124.

<sup>21</sup> *Works*, VI, 125. See also "Fifty Suggestions," Nos. 12 and 16, *Works*, XIV, 173, 174.

<sup>22</sup> *Doings of Gotham*, pp. 31-32.

He is a Whig of the worst stamp and will appoint none but Whigs if he can possibly avoid it."<sup>22</sup> And of Judge Upshur he avowed that he thought him "as a reasoner, as a speaker, and as a writer, absolutely unsurpassed."<sup>24</sup> But Judge Upshur was an extreme states' rights, pro-slavery Democrat. It is obvious that in all this Poe's politics showed a disposition to be flexible, that he was seeking a job and a competence that would enable him to devote himself to his writing; but his stand on the larger general questions of social reform, democracy, and progress as it was understood by industrial Whiggery, is hardly open to doubt.

### III

As a thorough-going intellectual aristocrat Poe was an individualist, but his individualism was less the economic, laissez-faire type found in Whig political theory than the product of his deep-rooted sense of the uniqueness, worth, and dignity of the individual personality. "It is only the philosophical lynxeye that, through the indignity-mist of Man's life, can still discern the dignity of Man."<sup>25</sup> Whatever seemed to threaten the integrity of individual personality he would oppose. Hence, he despised Carlyle's hero-worship: ". . . is it possible," he asks, "that it ever excited a feeling beyond contempt? No hero-worshiper can possess anything within himself. That man is no man who stands in awe of his fellow-man."<sup>26</sup> Hence, also, enthusiasm for the greatest good of the greatest number, or for the exaltation of humanity in the abstract and spelled with a capital "H" failed to move him. Bentham and Mill with their utilitarianism were his peculiar aversions.<sup>27</sup> He liked neither the method of their reasoning nor their conclusions. He accuses Mill of employing the word "force" in four different senses on the same page. By the same process of introducing slight variations in the meaning of his terms, Poe asserts that he himself could prove a turnip to be a leg of mutton. Bentham's positions could be overthrown by the same arguments used to support them. A priori argument, outside the mathematical sciences, is futile; "it is utterly

<sup>22</sup> *Works*, XVII, 122.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 132.

<sup>24</sup> "Marginalia," *Works*, XVI, 161.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 100.

<sup>27</sup> See "Mellonta Tauta," *Works*, VI, 204; "Marginalia," *ibid.*, XVI, 1, 70; "Eureka," *ibid.*, XVI, 193.

and radically inapplicable" to the subject of government.<sup>28</sup> In so far as he entertained an ethical theory, Poe may be called a hedonist; but the hedonism of Bentham and Mill, embodied in the central utilitarian doctrine of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," was repugnant to him simply because it removed the emphasis from individual, and placed it on social, man.

In "Mellonta Tauta," a satire on democracy, progress, and other objects of his dislike, he avails himself of a device to be used by many others after him, from Bellamy to Wells. He projects us into the distant future to provide an opportunity for criticism of the present. It is the year 2848. The protagonist of the piece is hurtling through space at one hundred miles an hour in a vast balloon with two hundred other passengers. To relieve the tedium of the journey she writes a letter:

I rejoice, my dear friend, that we live in an age so enlightened that no such thing as an individual is supposed to exist. . . . Is it not truly remarkable that, before the magnificent light shed upon philosophy by Humanity, the world was accustomed to regard War and Pestilence as calamities? . . . Is it not really difficult to comprehend upon what principle of interest our forefathers acted? Were they so blind as not to perceive that the destruction of a myriad of individuals is only so much positive advantage to the mass!<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

Poe had little faith in social reform, with its emphasis on the improvement of *society*. His age was preëminently one of reform. Hardly a human custom or institution that was not under fire from some enthusiast; capital punishment,<sup>30</sup> diet, dress, marriage, the position of women, education, property—all came under the critical or zealous scrutiny of the reformer. The country was dotted with social experiments, New Harmony, Brook Farm,<sup>31</sup> and a score of others. The teachings of St. Simon, Fourier, and Robert Owen were widely spread. Poe was hostile, even questioning the sincerity of the reforming spirit, as it appeared in such popular novelists as

<sup>28</sup> "Marginalia," *ibid.*, XVI, 38.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 199, 200. Cf. *ibid.*, XVI, 170.

<sup>30</sup> As Poe says, a vexed topic; see his notice of the Reverend George B. Cheever's *Defence of Capital Punishment*, *Works*, XV, 33.

<sup>31</sup> "Crazyites" Poe called the people of Brook Farm. (*Works*, XIII, 27.)



Sue: "The cant . . . about the amelioration of society, etc., is but a very usual trick among authors, whereby they hope to add such a tone of dignity or utilitarianism to their pages as shall gild the pill of their licentiousness."<sup>32</sup> The reformers were distinguished, he felt, chiefly by their simplicity and their devotion to mere freakishness.

The world is infested, just now [he writes in *Graham's*, in 1845] by a new sect of philosophers. . . . They are the *Believers in everything Odd*. Their High Priest in the East, is Charles Fourier<sup>33</sup>—in the West, Horace Greeley. . . . The only common bond among the sect, is Credulity:—Let us call it Insanity at once, and be done with it.<sup>34</sup>

The ground of his opposition is first, that "The modern reformist Philosophy . . . annihilates the individual by way of aiding the mass,"<sup>35</sup> and, second, that it has no real support in human nature. "He that is born to be a man," says Wieland in his "Peregrinus Proteus," "should nor can be anything nobler, greater, or better than a man." The fact is, that in efforts to soar above our nature, we invariably fall below it. Your reformist demigods are merely devils turned inside out.<sup>36</sup>

Feminism, as an element in the reform movement of the age, also received Poe's attention. His ideas on women were the thor-

<sup>32</sup> *Works*, XVI, 105. Note the familiar trick of damning the social radical by calling him "licentious." It is frequently inferred from Poe's anti-didacticism that he was free of the moral taboos of his age. But in all matters touching women, sex, marriage, "morals," no more conventional-minded man than Poe ever lived. As a reviewer he seldom fails to chide and to commend writers for the moral tendencies of their work. "A high tone of morality, healthy and masculine, breathes throughout" Kennedy's *Horse-Shoe Robinson* (*Works*, VIII, 11); the hero of Ingraham's *Lafitte, the Pirate of the Gulf* is an atrocious scoundrel, yet "he is never mentioned but with evident respect . . . his portraiture as depicted, leaves upon the mind of the reader no proper degree of abhorrence" (*ibid.*, IX, 115); Mrs. Child's *Philothea* "might be introduced advantageously into our female academies. Its purity of thought and lofty morality are unexceptionable" (*ibid.*, IX, 154); George Sand (or, as Poe prefers to call her, Madame Dudevant) is a woman "who intersperses many an admirable sentiment amid a chaos of the most shameless and altogether objectionable fiction" (*ibid.*, XIV, 150); Byron's love for Mary Chaworth is pure and tender, "strangely in contrast with the gross earthliness pervading and disfiguring his ordinary love poems" (*loc. cit.*); Michel Masson, author of *Le Cœur d'une Jeune Fille*, is "A fetid battener upon the garbage of thought. . . . A beast. . . . A pig. . . . A carrion-crow . . ." (*ibid.*, XVI, 36).

<sup>33</sup> Poe refers often to Fourier and his doctrines, always scornfully. In "Mellonta Tauta" he puns on the name, converting it into Furrer. (*Works*, VI, 199.) See also *ibid.*, XIII 155; XIV, 172; XVI, 100.

<sup>34</sup> "Fifty Suggestions," *Works*, XIV, 179-180.

<sup>35</sup> *Works*, XVI, 170.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 161.

oughly naïve and unrealistic ones traditional in the South. In the course of a rebuke to Bulwer for some public remarks about Lady Blessington, he takes occasion to outline the aims of female education in America:

*We* do not put the names of our fine women in the newspapers. The business of female education with us, is not to qualify a woman to be the head of a literary *coterie*, nor to figure in the journal of a travelling coxcomb. We prepare her, as a wife, to make the home of a good, and wise, and great man, the happiest place to him on earth. We prepare her, as a mother, to form her son to walk in his father's steps. . . . When we have done this, we have accomplished, if not *all*, at least *the best* that education can do. Her praise is found in the happiness of her husband, and in the virtues and honors of her son. Her name is too sacred to be profaned by public breath.<sup>37</sup>

Men, he thought, could never penetrate "that gentle and beautiful mystery, the heart of woman."<sup>38</sup> Hence, the delineation of feminine character in fiction was best performed by women. His ideal heroine was "a being full of lofty and generous impulses, beautiful, intellectual and *spirituelle*."<sup>39</sup> He found the "dictatorial manner" of Frances Kemble the chief fault of her *Journal*, for a "female, and a young one too, cannot speak with the self-confidence which marks this book, without jarring somewhat upon American notions of the retiring delicacy of the female character."<sup>40</sup>

In his reviews of their works, Poe was generally very gracious to lady litterateurs, yet he held bluestockings in contempt. In the farcical "The Man That Was Used Up," the narrator attends the rout of "that bewitching little angel, the graceful Mrs. Pirouette," in search of information about the Brevet Brigadier General A. B. C. Smith, empty fraud and prophet of progress. After a nonsensical dispute with Miss Bas-Bleu he makes his retreat "in a very bitter spirit of animosity against the whole race of the Bas-Bleus."<sup>41</sup> Later Poe observed that "Our 'blues' are increasing in number at a great

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 14. See also X, 102-103, for some rant against "a pack of literary debauchees," "heartless slanderers," and "wretches" who are "libelling our mothers and sisters unopposed."

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 95.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 96.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 30.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 268.

rate; and should be decimated, at the very least. Have we no critic with nerve enough to hang a dozen or two of them, *in terrorem*?"<sup>42</sup>

It is in his notice of Margaret Fuller in "The Literati" that we get some indication of his views on feminism. Her *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, he thought, was "a book which few women in the country could have written, and no woman in the country would have published, with the exception of Miss Fuller. In the way of independence, of unmitigated radicalism, it is one of the 'Curiosities of American Literature'." He conceded that it was "thoughtful, suggestive, brilliant," but added, "the conclusions reached are only in part my own. Not that they are too bold, by any means—too novel, too startling, or too dangerous in their consequences, but that in their attainment too many premises have been distorted and too many analogical inferences left altogether out of sight. I mean to say that the intention of the Deity as regards sexual differences . . . has not been sufficiently considered."<sup>43</sup> Later, in a letter to Thomas, he referred to this brilliant representative of the race of the Bas-Bleus as "that detestable old maid."<sup>44</sup>

Just as he received his views on women as the gift of his time and place, so Poe received his views on slavery and swallowed them whole, unseasoned by criticism. He brings to the defense of the South's peculiar institution the same rationalizations that issued from a thousand Southern pulpits every Sunday, and from a thousand Southern presses every day of the week for more than twenty years. In an elaborate review of two works, *Slavery in the United States*, by J. K. Paulding, and *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists*, by an unnamed author—a review in which he says little of the books under consideration—he sets out his argument, founding it on a whole theory of history and society. Social revolutions occur at either of two alternately recurring extremes of the human mind—fanaticism and irreligion. At either extreme men will be animated by the same motive—the desire of happiness. But however the moralist may insist that happiness has its sources within the individual, men will bend all their energies to acquire the external means for attaining it. "Foremost among these, and the equivalent which is to purchase all the

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 173-174. See also XIV, 170; XV, 245.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, XV, 74-75.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII, 333.

rest, is property. . . ."<sup>45</sup> In normal times each enjoys his own property without casting an envious eye on that of his neighbor. But under the excitement engendered by fanaticism or irreligion "the many who want, band themselves together against the few that possess; and the lawless appetite of the multitude for the property of others calls itself the spirit of liberty."<sup>46</sup> The Great Rebellion in England is an example of the fanatical extreme, and the French Revolution of the irreligious. The latter upheaval offers an object lesson to the South, for

it should be remembered now, that in that war against property . . . that war on behalf of the alleged right of man to be discharged from all control of law, the first triumph achieved was in the emancipation of slaves. The recent events in the West Indies, and the parallel movement here, give an awful importance to these thoughts in our minds.<sup>47</sup>

After a burst of indignation against "the calumnies which have been put forth against us, and the wrongs meditated by those who come to us . . . seeking our destruction under the mask of Christian Charity and Brotherly Love," Poe's next care is to maintain that the negro is of an inferior race. It is false to argue, he says, that because negroes are, "like ourselves the sons of Adam, [they] must therefore, have like passions and wants and feelings." He now dilates on the idyllic relation which subsists between master and slave, "incomprehensible to him who drives a bargain with the cook who prepares his food, the servant who waits at his table, and the nurse who dozes over his sick bed." At this point he opens up with the full orchestra, and concludes in a burst of lyric pathos:

We have seen the dying infant in the lap of its [black] nurse, and have stood with the same nurse by the bed side of her own dying child. Did mighty nature assert her empire, and wring from the mother's heart more and bitterer tears than she had shed over her foster babe? None that the eye of man could distinguish. And he who sees the heart—did he see dissimulation giving energy to the choking sobs that *seemed* to be rendered more vehement by her attempts to repress them? *Philanthropy* may think so if it pleases.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 267.

<sup>46</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 269.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 270, 271, 273-274.

On several other occasions Poe recurred to the subject of slavery.<sup>49</sup> In a fit of irritation he wrote to Thomas in the last year of his life, "I sent a review of the 'Fable' to the 'S. L. Messenger' a day or two ago, and I only hope Thompson will print it. Lowell is a ranting abolitionist and *deserves* a good using up."<sup>50</sup>

## V

Science and mechanical invention exercised a fascination over Poe's mind, fired his imagination, and supplied him with much material for his fictions and the more serious speculations of *Eureka*. But in its practical results on society he found it evil. It destroyed the beauty of nature, vulgarized all the relations of life, delivered men over to a sordid scramble for gain, and abetted democracy in its steady encroachment on the integrity of the individual. His distrust found expression as early as 1829 in the "Sonnet to Science." The root of his hostility to English utilitarianism rested in his perception that it was the philosophical instrument of a rising industrial middle class. "Utilitarianism," he wrote, "sees in mountains and waterfalls only quarries and manufacturing sites."<sup>51</sup> The same is the theme of the sketch, "Morning on the Wissahiccon." In "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," which, like "Mellonta Tauta," takes place in the distant future, Monos reviews the last age of the earth:

At long intervals some master-minds appeared, looking upon each advance in practical science as a retro-gradation in the true utility . . . these men—the poets—living and perishing amid the scorn of the "utilitarians" . . . pondered piningly, yet not unwisely, upon the ancient days when our wants were not more simple than our enjoyments were keen . . . holy, august, and blissful days, when blue rivers ran undammed, between hills unheewn, into far forest solitudes, primæval, odorous, and unexplored.

<sup>49</sup> For passing mention, see *Works*, IX, 70, 136; XII, 218; XV, 245. Whittier's themes "are never to our liking." In a letter to Snodgrass, June 17, 1841, Poe mentions a lengthy criticism of "Mr. Carey's book on slavery," which Burton refused (*ibid.*, XVII, 74). Was this ever printed?

<sup>50</sup> *Works*, XVII, 333. For the "using up," see *Works*, XIII, 165 ff. It is a mistake to dismiss Poe's opinions on slavery as dictated entirely by his resentment toward the New England hegemony in letters; "a little rant upon the Abolitionists (in the attempt to score on Lowell)," says Dr. Canby (*op. cit.*, p. 290). Poe ranted against the abolitionists before Lowell was out of college; the review of Paulding, above noticed, is of 1836. His feelings on the subject were, I am convinced, genuine; nor did they alter.

<sup>51</sup> *Works*, X, 25.

. . . Meantime huge smoking cities arose, innumerable. Green leaves shrank before the hot breath of furnaces. The fair face of nature was deformed as with the ravages of some loathsome disease.<sup>52</sup>

Like Emerson in his more skeptical moments, Poe felt that America was absorbed in getting and spending. Wealth was the chief measure of worth; here, "more than in any other region upon the face of the globe, to be poor is to be despised."<sup>53</sup> Some years later he wrote in the "Marginalia": "The Romans worshipped their standards; and the Roman standard happened to be an eagle. Our standard is only one-tenth of an Eagle—a dollar—but we make all even by adoring it with ten-fold devotion."<sup>54</sup>

But the doctrine of progress, which stands in relation to science as effect to cause, seemed entirely fatuous to Poe.<sup>55</sup> Monos says to Una, "You will remember that one or two of the wise among our forefathers—wise in fact, although not in the world's esteem—had ventured to doubt the propriety of the term 'improvement,' as applied to the progress of our civilization."<sup>56</sup> Ellison, the genius of "The Domain of Arnheim," had little faith in "the possibility of any improvement, properly so called, being effected by man himself in the general condition of man."<sup>57</sup> In a letter to Lowell (summarized

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 202-203.

<sup>53</sup> Letter to Anthon, June, 1844 (*Works*, XVII, 179).

<sup>54</sup> *Works*, XVI, 161. See also "Fifty Suggestions," Nos. 15 and 21, *Works*, XIV, 173, 175; "Mellonta Tauta," *Works*, VI, 212-213; churches are "a kind of pagoda instituted for the worship of two idols that went by the names of Wealth and Fashion"; *Works*, IX, 158, education is invaded by "a misconceived utilitarianism," to the peril of the classical languages.

<sup>55</sup> Poe was not untouched by the expansive nationalism of his day. The tone and implication of his reviews of two volumes on the subject of a proposed exploring expedition, under government auspices, to the South Sea whaling fisheries, are of considerable interest. He speaks of the "paramount importance both in a political and commercial point of view" of the men of the whaling fleet. "The Pacific may be termed the training ground, the gymnasium of our national navy"; "mighty results" are to be expected "when this vast field for national enterprise is better known and appreciated." (*Works*, IX, 85, 87.) The second review will be found in the same volume, pp. 306-314. See also in this connection the long notice of Irving's *Astoria* (*Works*, IX, 207-243).

<sup>56</sup> *Works*, IV, 201-202.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 180. See the early satire "Lionizing" for a jibe at the perfectibilians (*Works*, II, 38); the review of Bryant's "The Ages," a poem on progress where Poe condemns "the radical error of deducing a hope of *progression* from *cycles* of physical nature," *ibid.*, XIII, 133; the review of Horne's "Orion," an allegory on progress, which makes out its case but "feebly," *ibid.*, XI, 258, 261; "Some Words with a Mummy," *ibid.*, VI, 136. Poe's objections to Chivers's ideas on "man's advance towards perfection" are mentioned in letters from Chivers. (*Ibid.*, XVII, 184, 189.)

by Harrison) "Poe said that the vanity of human life was a genuine not a fancied thing to him; that he lived in dreams of the future while he did not believe in the perfectibility of the race. He thought that striving and struggling would have no effect, and that men are not more wise or happy than they were six thousand years ago."<sup>58</sup>

The appalling wilderness of stars, the unfathomable depths of space, the vast reaches of time, the rise and fall of civilizations each confident, in its pride, that it would endure forever, gave a somber tinge to Poe's thought. The greatest names of men fall into contempt or oblivion; future savants will putter about the site of long-dead New York and make ridiculous guesses about the life that once flourished there.<sup>59</sup> Nor does contemplation of the loftiest pinnacled edifices of the intellect offer relief from the tragedy of man. "It is laughable to observe how easily any system of Philosophy can be proved false:—but then is it not mournful to perceive the impossibility of even fancying any particular system to be true?"<sup>60</sup>

## VI

Being the intellectual aristocrat that he was, Poe despised the rabble with its "excitable, undisciplined, and childlike . . . mind,"<sup>61</sup> and heaped scorn upon it early and late. Democracy was merely an attempt to give "the obtuse in intellect"<sup>62</sup> power over their betters. One passage from among many will serve to show his thought:<sup>63</sup>

Pundit . . . [says] that the ancient Amiriccans *governed themselves!*—did ever anybody hear of such an absurdity? . . . He says that they started with the queerest idea conceivable, viz: that all men are born free and equal—this in the very teeth of the laws of gradation so visibly impressed upon all things both in the moral and physical universe. Every man "voted," as they called it—that is to say, meddled with public affairs—until, at length, it was discovered that what is everybody's business is

<sup>58</sup> July 2, 1844, *Works*, XVII, 182-183.

<sup>59</sup> "Mellonta Tauta," *Works*, VI, 211 ff.

<sup>60</sup> "Marginalia," *ibid.*, XVI, 164.

<sup>61</sup> *Works*, XIII, 143.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, XI, 10.

<sup>63</sup> We should not be deceived by the fact that Poe once replied to the objections of a foreign critic of democracy (see *Works*, VIII, 112-114), or by the fact that he once or twice used as an argument for international copyright the dissemination among us in foreign books of monarchical or aristocratical sentiment dangerous to democracy (*ibid.*, XVI, 79). The motives here are obvious and, it seems to me, do not weigh much against the whole tendency of his mind as it appears throughout his work.

nobody's, and that the "Republic" (so the absurd thing was called) was without a government at all. . . . A little reflection . . . sufficed to render evident . . . that a republican government *could* never be anything but a rascally one. While the philosophers, however, were busied in blushing at their stupidity in not having forseen these inevitable evils, and intent upon the invention of new theories, the matter was put to an abrupt issue by a fellow of the name of *Mob*, who took everything into his own hands and set up a despotism, in comparison with which those of the fabulous Zeros and Hellofagabaluses were respectable and delectable. This *Mob* is said to have been the most odious of all men that ever encumbered the earth. He was a giant in stature—insolent, rapacious, filthy; had the gall of a bullock with the heart of an hyena and the brains of a peacock. . . . As for Republicanism, no analogy could be found for it upon the face of the earth—unless we except the case of the "prairie dogs," an exception which seems to demonstrate, if anything, that democracy is a very admirable form of government—for dogs.<sup>64</sup>

Near the beginning of his career as a reviewer, Poe had given voice to the eighteenth-century idea of Dr. Johnson that governments, after all, have little power to cause or cure the ills of men: "we must look for the source of our greatest defects in a variety of causes totally distinct from any such action—in a love of gain, for example."<sup>65</sup> Thus the source of society's ills is to be sought in the individual heart. But here there is little hope, for "To be *thoroughly* conversant with Man's heart, is to take our final lesson in the iron-clasped volume of Despair."<sup>66</sup>

In his views on society and government Poe took on inevitably the color of his environment. It must be remembered that he always regarded himself as a Virginia gentleman,<sup>67</sup> that he was reared

<sup>64</sup> "Mellonta Tauta," *Works*, VI, 207-209. See also "Some Words with a Mummy," *ibid.*, VI, 136; "Hans Pfaill," *ibid.*, II, 48: "we soon began to feel the effects of liberty, and long speeches, and radicalism, and all that sort of thing. People . . . had as much as they could do to read about the revolutions, and keep up with the march of intellect and the spirit of the age"; *ibid.*, IX, 18-20, where Poe ridicules the French Republicans and sneers at hoi polloi who as "the result of newly acquired rights" now have the privilege "of presenting themselves dirty instead of clean before the eyes of the magnates"; *ibid.*, XII, 212, where he refers contemptuously to "a vast number of people without coats," as constituting the audience at the Chatham Theatre in New York; "Fifty Suggestions," No. 25, *Works*, XIV, 178-179, for his cynical view of democratic unrest in Europe; the same No. 21, p. 181, "'La Jeune France,' . . . a body without a head."

<sup>65</sup> *Works*, IX, 54.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 162.

<sup>67</sup> See Joseph Wood Krutch, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, Knopf, 1926), Chap. II.



in the expectation of becoming heir to one of the wealthiest men in Richmond,<sup>68</sup> that as a youth at the University of Virginia he mingled on a footing of ostensible equality with the drinking and dicing young bloods whose families constituted the aristocracy of the South. He was conscious, moreover, of superior powers of imagination and intellect. Hence, it was easy and natural for him to assume an attitude of superiority toward the rabble. But Poe protests too much, for he was at the same time profoundly and uneasily conscious of his own origins and of his precarious position as a foster son. When his break with John Allan put the world of Virginia society out of his reach, he was constrained to assert with three-fold vehemence the feelings of an aristocrat.

His scorn for Democracy and his fear of it are the same as that excited in the breasts of the propertied classes—North or South—by the Jacksonian incursion. His theory of government as instituted for the protection of property with his easy identification of the interests of property with those of religion and morality is the theory naturally adopted by any economy which feels itself on the defensive, as the South felt itself in the '30's and '40's.<sup>69</sup> His suspicion of industrialism, in whatever degree it was shaped or intensified by his feelings as an artist, may well have its source in the antipathy of the slave economy toward its Northern rival. The various reform movements of the age, with their open or concealed threat to established institutions, must be suspect to the social order with which he had identified himself intellectually and emotionally from his earliest years.<sup>70</sup> It is thus difficult to avoid seeing in Poe's hostile criticism of democracy, industrialism, and reform, the influence of that Virginia world of which he is said never to have been aware.

<sup>68</sup> Hervey Allen, *Israfel*, I, 116; Poe, *Works*, XVII, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Observe the similarities between Poe's social philosophy and that of the Federalists of two generations earlier, when Jeffersonian Democracy seemed to threaten the prerogatives of those whom John Adams denominated the "industrious, virtuous, and deserving."

<sup>70</sup> A good account of the domestic and social environment of Poe's childhood and boyhood is given in Hervey Allen's *Israfel*, I, 27-62; 90-146.