Poe and Gothic Creativity

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Resisting an optimistic view of life so common to a time and place from which Poe wanted to escape, He rendered darkness visible, an effort many current Gothic creators also embrace, as Gilda Williams argues "'Gothic' in contemporary art a is necessarily a partial term which serves mostly to identify a peculiar, dark sensitivity shared by the artist and the observer chosen to respond to the work in this manner."[1] The dark and uncanny side of the human psyche, as well as the concepts of perversion, criminality, monstrosity, transgression, violence and destruction deeply explored in Poe's tales exert a deep influence on many contemporary artists and writers. Among them, Lou Reed, in his tribute to "The Raven," has claimed that "obsessions, paranoia, willful acts of self-destruction surround us constantly," and that Poe is a "writer more particularly attuned to our new century's heartbeat than he ever was to his own."[2] Poe's fears of death and psychological disintegration are not very different from our own; his artistic, dark sensitivity is in tune with the aesthetic perceptions of contemporary artists connected to the New Gothic Art, because, as Francesca Gavin states, much of this art "is a manifestation of contemporary fears—of death itself, of the war in Iraq, of serial killers, paedophiles, guns and gang culture, apocalyptic fears about environmental disaster and global warming."[3] Poe's literary creations have undoubtedly enabled us to perceive the mystery and terror of our restless souls, showing that the manifestation of horror in creativity should be understood as a response to a world desensitized to violence and human perversity, and art is not immune to such destructive effects.

Poe's work reveals the paradoxical nature of art, as deeply conscious of the germ of destruction in every creative act, seeming in turn to imitate the way the universe was created, as he concluded in *Eureka*. "*In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation*."[4] This nihilistic perception at the origin of Poe's aesthetic vision turned destruction into the origin of creation. Susan Manning used the expression "creative nihilism" to define a creative process that produces writing that satirizes itself and thereby destroys the literality on which it is ground, mimicking that rhythms of creation/destruction described in *Eureka.* Poe's final work is, according to Manning, a satire of scientific language, much like Swift's texts, created "to expose the unrealism of the learned," because "Swift's mad philosophers are caught in worlds of their own construction,

forever alienated from the truths they seek by their obsessive theorizing; and, unfortunately, this seems to be much more Poe's own case than that of the objects of his ridicule."[5] This means that every form of knowledge and every form of creation has a dark side that must be confronted if artists want to preserve the authenticity of their works. Poe was one of these creators who had to take the negative side of creativity. Considering existence as a dark paradox, Poe could only create an art that reflects the creative cosmic forces that seem to obey to a cataclysmic formula, where terror and evil can be felt as sublime.

If the central idea in *Eureka* is that the end of all life is death, art cannot escape this destructive tendency, and, consequently, it will destroy or kill what it creates. This is the cost of creativity. Every creation is thus contaminated with the virus of its annihilation, which led Poe to create a perverse art that was, in part, responsible for his self-destruction. This leads us to the following question: what if Edgar Poe, that American writer so out of his time and place and for this reason not given to ephemerides, was tormented not only by the vice of alcohol but also by the vice of his art? What we really would like to know is if that never-to-be-imparted secret—searched for in the "blackness of darkness" of the abysses, in the maelstroms of the oceans, in the premature burials, in the experiences of anticipated death, in the suffering extremes caused by torture instruments, acts of revenge, tragic loves or perverse impulses—couldn't be, perhaps, very close to the implicit revelation in many of his short stories that art can kill.

In many of Poe's tales, the murderer is an artist, a *virtuose* in the killing art, very similar to the one portrayed by Thomas de Quincey in "Murder as One of the Fine Arts" (1827). The worst atrocities are committed as if they were a work of art. They obey to the same aesthetic principles on which a poem, a painting, or a sculpture is based. In this perspective, not only the perverse artist in the "Oval Portrait, but also Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher" are nothing more than Poe's doubles, characters blessed and cursed by their genius. Trying to control and avoid this fatality, Poe invented his own aesthetic theory presented in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), where he defended the famous cohesion principle called "unity of effect," which he considered inherent to every artistic composition. Accordingly, each word and image should be part of a strategy of meaning in a meticulously studied structure created to obtain an aesthetic effect. Likewise, a criminal can anticipate his victims' emotions of agony and terror, which will be so much more intense the stronger the rigor and the perfection of the act. Art and artists seem to be both subject to the *imp of perverse*, which allowed Jonathan Auerbach to conclude that "Poe's

understanding of the creative process, in fact, bears a marked resemblance to the process of plotting enacted by his criminals and detectives."[6]

All this explains the very deep complicity between Poe and his villains who, like himself, are mostly self-destructive beings and victims of their negative impulses. Through them, the author of "The Imp of the Perverse" confronts his readers with the reality of human perversity. Poe's tales can be read as transgressive stories that expose the creative process as a destructive practice common to science and art. Being both the artist and the criminal and dominated by the same demoniac impulse that destroys personality, Poe's creative process had inevitably to have much in common with many perverse plots created by his criminal characters. Poe's art never succeeded in escaping this creative nihilism, and he was perfectly conscious of this irony, not only in his sarcastic tales, but also in the constant satire he directed to himself and his writing. That's why his art is so close to contemporary Gothic art, where the imagery of death and evil is often used as a metaphor for art itself and where artworks that reference horror or the Gothic are not always totally negative. Francesca Gavin concluded: "Often expressions of horror are self-referential .... [because they] poke fun at the genre's fairground imagery," for the simple reason that "humour is central to so much of this artwork."[7] This is the reason why irony is so present and powerful in Poe's fiction, because, as Jerry Saltz concludes, "almost all art that could be called Gothic has an ironic edge: it's aware of its position, even the absurdity of its position.[8] This persistent use of irony also contributes to the association of the tragic and comic, which is another aspect of Poe's art that reveals its duplicity and its tendency for paradox, present in every work connected to the Gothic Creativity that results from the contradictions between beauty and horror. It's certainly true that Poe was deeply aware of the costs of creativity and of its revengeful effects, being himself a victim of his own perverse aesthetic ideals that led him, among other things, to defend the death of a beautiful woman as the most poetic motif. Also perceiving this negative tendency of the creative process, Elisabeth Bronfen concluds that "art needs dead bodies, art creates dead bodies. In the images of the beautiful but dead female faces, the sister'' chopped-off heads, as well as in the decorated skull, the perfection of aesthetic idealization meets its opposite, monstrosity."[9] This female monstrosity, revealed in several photos by Cindy Sherman, is also portrayed by Poe in Madeleine, Ligeia, Berenice and many other women.

Particularly aware of the contradictory forces at work in every creative process, Edward Hirsch found two vital spirits of creative imagination that he used as

metaphors for artistic imagination "the demon and the angel are two external figures for a power that dwells deep within us. They are the imagination's liberating agents, who unleash their primal force into works of art."[10] According to Hirsch, art possesses a mysterious and inexplicable power that unleashes something ancient and dark into the world. Artists usually wrestle with these forces when something is at risk or when the self is in danger by the proximity of death. They live in the eternal artistic conflict with their demon or *daimon*, the Greek concept of a true undying self. Jung was also conscious of this powerful influence, observing that "a creative person has little power over his own life. He is not free. He is captive and driven by his daimon."[11] Baudelaire seemed to know everything about this creative dark tendency when his poem, "La Destruction," shows his own understanding of Poe's *imp of the perverse*.

By exposing the dark side of creativity haunted by his own literary creations, Poe establishes a dialogue with some previous Gothic writers, who, like Mary Shelley, were willing to go deep into this subject. Like *Frankenstein,* many of Poe's tales translate a certain Romantic crisis of artistic identity and become self-reflexive narratives about the uncertainties inherent to every creative activity. As a site of reflection on the darkest side of creativity, Poe's fiction has become center of attraction for many ethical and aesthetical concerns connected to what has been called "Gothic Creativity, " through which the transgressive effects of artistic and intellectual activities are expressed. These are tenets still enforced by Gothic art today, which, according to Christopher Gunernberg "speaks of the subjects that transgress society's vague definitions of normality, discreetly peeling away the pretences of outmoded conventions and transversing the amorphous border between good and evil, sanity and madness, disinterested pleasure and visual offensiveness."[12]

This is the reason why we can find, in the works of several contemporary artists, so many connections to some of the most famous *Poesque* themes. In 1947, Clement Greenberg described Jackson Pollock's paintings of the mid 1940s as 'Gothic' and in the spirit of Edgar Allan Poe.[16] The number of possible associations can be as infinite as endless is the capacity of Poe's fiction to inspire new creators in their themes such as death, enclosure, transgression, decay, instability, ruins, the supernatural, the grotesque, the divided self, the abject, excess and terror, using images of monsters, violated or mutant bodies, ghosts, dolls, masks, skulls, etc. Some contemporary women artists, whose work can be described as Gothic, often maintain the tendency of reducing bodies to pieces, as in the case of Cindy Sherman and Louise Bourgeois. In Sherman's works

we can find some elements taken from medical catalogues that evoke disease, mutation, disintegration, environmental disasters and a kind of physical decay that Poe would appreciate. Louise Bourgeois' *Cells* were built to recreate her parents' room translating the artist's memory of an unhappy childhood centred on her authoritative father, which led the artist to confess that "Each Cell deals with fear."[17] Paul McCarthy's preference for family secrets, a very common Gothic theme, led him to be interested in monstrous parents and to create the disturbing sculpture, *Cultural Gothic* (1992), where a terrible family curse becomes as destructive to the self as the one inherited by Roderick Usher, which supports Anne Williams' idea that "Gothic plots are family plots."[18] In Gregor Schneidey's labyrinthine architectural installations, we can find a Gothic love for haunted houses and uncharted dungeons. In Rachel White's and Tacita Dean's works, it's easy to perceive a very special interest in ruins and architecture, which Jonathan Jones considered an important reference inherited from the famous author of "The Fall of House of Usher." In "A House is not a Home," Jones stated that "Poe has haunted modern art from the beginning .... But perhaps the strangest haunting of twentieth-century art by this drunken southern Gentleman is the connection between Poe's writings and those kinds of art, which, since the 1960s, have adopted site, architecture and interior as their media. His obsession with interiors and their destruction—the Gothic core of his writing—is a constant, unspoken presence in this art."[19]

As we know, Poe perceived the constant presence of death, being both fascinated and terrified by "the conqueror worm." Consequently, the theme of death is widely explored by many artists with *Poesque* reminiscences, as it is the case of the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles' explorations of the morgues of Mexico City and the Colombian Doris Salcedo's tomb-like sculptures. Andres Serrano is also well-known for his large-scale, painterly color photographs of corpses, the *Morgue* series (1992-). Jonathan Meese creates a vampiresque, Poe-like figure inventing tales under the effect of inebriation. Damien Hirst, the most quintessential Gothic artist, is death-obsessed, and created his version of Strawberry Hill, the neo-Gothic Toddington Hall, where he houses his macabre collection. Some other artists who explore Gothic themes in certain aspects associated to Poe's aesthetics are Cady Noland, Karen Kilimnik, Mike Kelley, Richard Prince, and the abject artists of the early 1990s, where the concept of terrible beauty is deeply expanded. Forerunners to the present moment, all these creators produce disturbing works of art which seem to follow what Jasmine Becket-Griffith, in *Gothic Art Now*, considered the true spirit of contemporary Gothic art that "aims to inspire and to intrigue: transporting

you to alternate realities, to elegant pasts, and to nihilistic futures. Not to be always sees as simply eye candy, a common undercurrent in most Gothic art relies on deeper meanings, symbolism, social commentary, alternative ideas, mortal reckonings, and cultural explorations."[20] Well-aware, as was Edgar Poe, of all the contradictions between beauty and horror, many of these artists use the imagery of death and evil as a metaphor for art itself creating expressions of horror that reflect on the many aspects of the creative process, even on its most violent, destructive and perverse ones, so that consciousness might be regained. Consequently, Roberta Smith was right when, referring to some British contemporary artists, she concluded that "their work has been called nihilistic, but they embrace as much as they deny. They operate from a romantic, nearly nostalgic faith in the avant-garde assertion that art should entertain and disturb, and question its own rituals while probing life's."[21]

Gothic creativity should certainly pay homage to Edgar Poe because he developed a kind of art that makes visible the psychopathology of contemporary culture, maintaining a vision unblinkingly focused on the oddities and perversities of the outside and inner world. As Andrew Delbanco well observed, "evil remains an inescapable experience for all of us, while we no longer have a symbolic language for describing it .... It leaves us in our obligatory silence, with a punishing question: How is the imagination to compass things for which it can find no law, no aesthetic purpose or aesthetic resolution?"[22] This same terrifying question may certainly have been the cause of many aesthetic torments for Edgar Poe, who found, in the paradoxes of his art of terror, a way to solve the difficulty to represent the unrepresentable, combining an "exquisite sense of Beauty" with an "exquisite sense of Deformity of disproportion."[23] Mingling terror and pleasure in a strange harmony and creating rational compositions that contained a poetics of disorder, Poe knew the danger of losing the cohesion and unity he so much desired to maintain. This paradoxical condition turned Poe into a victim of his perverse art, keeping him in a permanent state of suspense between life and death and on the brink of madness, caused by an inescapable addiction to his creative work towards which he always developed a certain kind of ambivalence. The creative and destructive forces he willingly evoked became part and parcel of his own process of psychic disintegration.

Robert Smithson perceived this creative fissure so present in Poe's work and in his life: "When the fissures between mind and matter multiply into an infinity of gaps, the studio begins to crumble and fall like *The House of Usher*, so that mind and matter get endlessly confounded."[24] This decadence of the artist

studio follows the decadence of the artist's mind, showing that no creator should ignore, as the Portuguese Nuno Cera noticed, that "the horror is a reflection of our time. It is dispersed every day throughout the media, turning cities into the ground for terror."[25] Gothic creativity produces an awareness about this generalized presence of terror, forcing us to look at imagery we want to avoid but which is not as disturbing as our contemporary reality, which Edgar Poe predicted in the 19th century, when he confessed: "I have no faith in human perfectibility. I think that human exertion will have no appreciable effect upon humanity. Man is now only more active—not more happy—not more wise, than he was 6000 years ago."[26] This skepticism can be found in the following group of art works, in spite of their different forms of expression: Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Great Deeds Against the Death* (1994); James Aldridge, *Blackened Hands* (2007); French, *Skulls* (2007); Matt Greene, *Mater Tenerbrarum* (2004); Ricky Swallow, *Skeleton in Conversation* (2006) and *Death with Candle* (2003); Elina Merenmies, *Potato* (2001), *Birthday Party* (2005) and *Trees Dancing* (2006); Stephen Dunne, *Ghost* (2006) and *Preaching to the Choir* (2006); Wes Lang, *An Appeal to Heaven* (2007); Tim Noble and Sue Webster, *Kiss of Death* (2003); Des Hughes, *Hand of Glory* (2007) and Nuno Cera, *Dark Forces*, (2004). Together with Roderick Usher, all these artists seem to say: "I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results."[27] Without this creative anxiety inherited from Edgar Poe, contemporary Gothic creativity could never have accomplished its full artistic expression.

Notes

1. Gilda Williams. *The Gothic—Documents of Contemporary Art.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 13.

2. Lou Reed. *The Raven* (New York: Warner Bros. Records Inc., 2003).

3. Francesca Gavin. *Hell Bound—The New Gothic Art.* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2008), 7.

4. Edgar Allan Poe. *Eureka*, in *Poetry and Tales.* Ed.________________ . (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1261.

5. Susan Manning. "'The Plots of God are Perfect': Poe's *Eureka* and American Creative Nihilism." *Journal of American Studies* 23, 2, (August 1989): 239.

6. Jonathan Auerbach. "Poe's Other Double." *Criticism* 24, (1982): 352.

7. Gavin, 7.

8. Jerry Saltz. "Modern Gothic." In *Documents of Contemporary Art*. Ed. Gilda Williams. (CITY: PUBLISHER, DATE), 48.

9. Elizabeth Bronfen. "The Other Self of the Imagination: Cindy Sherman's Hysterical Performance." In *Cindy Sherman, Photographic Works 1975-1995.* Ed.____________. (Munich: Schirmer Art Books, 1995), 17.

10. Edward Hirsch. *The Demon and the Angel*. (Orlando: Harvest, 2003), xv.

11. C.G. Jung. *Memories Dreams and Reflections*. (New York: Vintage, 1989), 357.

12. Christoph Grunenberg. *Gothic—Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art.* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1997), 168.

13. Edmund Burke. *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* Ed. James T. Boulton. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 39.

14. Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1996), 30.

15. Edgar Allan Poe. In *Poetry and Tales.* "The Premature Burial." (CITY, PUBLISHER, YR) 679.

16. Clement Greenberg. *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*: *Arrogant Purpose 1945-49.* Ed. John O'Brian. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 166.

17. Louise Bourgeois. *Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father. Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*. Ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist. (London: Violette Editions, 1998), 205.

18. Anne Williams. *Art of Darkness—A Poetics of Gothic.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 22.

19. Jonathan Jones. "A House is not a Home." *Frieze* 55 (Nov.-Dec. 2000).

20. Jasmine Becket-Griffith. *Gothic Art Now*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 11.

21. Roberta Smith. "A Show of Moderns Seeking to Shock." *New York Times* (Nov. 23, 1995), C14.

22. Andrew Delbanco. *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil.* (New York: Noonday Press, 1996), 11.

23. Edgar Allan Poe. "Marginalia." In *Essays and Reviews.* Ed. ___________. (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1300.

24. Robert Smithson. "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects. In *The Gothic Documents of Contemporary Art*. Ed. Gilda Williams. (CITY, PUBLISHER, YEAR). 20.

25. Nuno Cera. *Hell Bound—The New Gothic Art.* ed. Francesca Gavin. (CITY, PUBLISHER, YEAR). 22.

26. Edgar Allan Poe. "Letter to James R. Lowell." (New York, 2 July, 1844). in *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe Vol*. I. Ed. John Ward Ostrom. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 256.

27. Edgar Allan Poe. In *Poetry and Tales,* "The Fall of the House of Usher." (CITY, PUBLISHER, YEAR). 322.