Understanding Edgar Allan Poe

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They Who Dream by Day

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In one case out of a hundred a point is excessively discussed because it is obscure; in the ninety-nine remaining it is obscure because excessively discussed. When a topic is thus circumstanced the readiest mode of investigating it is to forget that any previous investigation has been attempted.
(Poe, The Rationale of Verse)

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PROLOGUE

Back then, I spent hours in bookstores, after lunch or dinner, most often with Nuccia. (Bookstores still existed; now the one that used to be part of the university where I worked for forty years is no longer even called "bookstore" and sells computers and T-shirts.) We would look at, admire, and read a few pages of, books we would never buy—no matter what your cravings and lusts, you cannot buy all the books you want. One of those I did buy, after long mulling and counting the money in my pockets, was *The Unabridged Edgar Allan Poe*, and what put decisive weight on my decision was its being unabridged: I wanted, and still want, to confront an author's all; I am impatient with selections. I started spending time with it, and flashes of intuition lit up my mind; but it was too early to figure out the intricate patterns they drew. I was in my thirties; I had a life to live, a family to raise, a career—in what was presumed to be another field of inquiry—to attend to.

It was not much later, as I was turning forty, that my career in that other field took a fateful turn. After writing books with long bibliographies, I observed that they age fast, and, besides, they were not the sorts of books our role-models in the profession ever wrote. They just had their say, for whatever it was worth, and left it to critics to constrast and compare. I elected to really make them role-models: to model my work after theirs. It was that feature of their work that made it still readable today; and I wanted to be read, though not necessarily by my colleagues.

These are the two premises whose belated, but inevitable, conclusion is the present effort. Eventually, the book purchased in my young age had to come down from the shelf again; the sparks flew once more and, this time, I had the leisure to follow them. My way, as I announced when my career turned and as I have done in the past thirty years: by focusing entirely on my author and on the dialogue I could have with him. By illuminating my life and thoughts with the fires ignited by his genius.

Irvine, California, August 2023

I

RIDING THE STORM

Many of Edgar Allan Poe's characters go through extreme, exhilarating, horrific experiences, from which they sometimes do, and sometimes don't, emerge alive. Hans Phaall travels to the moon and back. The unnamed protagonist of *Ms. Found in a Bottle* survives a terrible sea storm only to be thrown onto another ship whose crew and captain seem to be specters unaware of his presence and whose destination is doom.

> [W]e are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles, round and round the borders of a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance. But little time will be left me to ponder upon my destiny! The circles rapidly grow small—we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool—and amid a roaring and bellowing, and shrieking of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering—oh God! and—going down! (F142-143)

Arthur Gordon Pym goes through a savage mutiny, desperate deprivation, the encounter with bloodthirsty, treacherous natives, and gets the closest any human has ever been to the South Pole. Toby Dammit bets the devil his head—and loses. The old-looking (but not really old) man who once descended into the Maelström was exposed then to a view that could only be termed sublime:

> Never shall I forget the sensations of awe, horror, and admiration with which I gazed upon me. The boat appeared to be hanging, as if by magic, midway down, upon the interior surface of a funnel prodigious in circumference, immeasurable in depth, and whose perfectly smooth sides might have been mistaken for ebony, but for the bewildering rapidity with which they spun around, and for the gleaming and ghastly radiance they shot forth, as the rays of the full moon […] streamed in a flood of golden glory along the black walls, and far away down into the inmost recesses of the abyss. (F695)

In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, a forsaken captive is subject to a variety of elaborate tortures by the evil judges and executioners of the Inquisition, and must decide to which of them to submit:

> "Death," I said, "any death but that of the pit!" Fool! might I have not known that *into the pit* it was the object of the burning iron to urge me? Could I resist its glow? or if even that, could I withstand its pressure? (F757)

Fortunato, in *The Cask of Amontillado*, is walled in, still breathing, in the cellar of his sadistic, vengeful enemy.

Then there is the engaging, the flirting even, with death. In theory—Morella's husband says: "the Principium Individuationis, the notion of that identity *which at death is or is not lost forever*, was to me, at all times, a consideration of intense interest" (F165). And in practice—Pym "was resuscitated from a state bordering very nearly upon death" (F335). Monos, in *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, found himself in what "was termed *Death* by those who stood around" (F708) and yet did not feel that way to him:

> My condition did not deprive me of sentience. […] I breathed no longer. The pulses were still. The heart had ceased to beat. Volition had not departed, but was powerless. The senses were unusually active, although eccentrically so—assuming often each other's functions at random. (ibid.)

The Premature Burial lists a whole somber catalogue of individuals who were victims of the inconsiderate sepulchral eagerness of their dear (?) ones, until the narrator, who has been using these regrettable incidents to justify his obsessive fear of meeting a similar end, finds himself appropriately duped by a farcical predicament. Mr. Valdemar, in the story telling the facts of his case, has his death suspended by mesmerism for several months; when the effects of the occult (and shady) practice are called off, the bystanders are treated to a most disgusting spectacle.

> As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, […] his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely *rotted* away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence. (F1072)

In addition to their utmost severity, these ordeals are often endured alone, or in limited company, which explains the recurring urge to set matters straight, as "a garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society,

and became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations" (F1064). This feature connects them with a number of other adventures, not always scary, occasionally even enjoyable, which are also solitary or near so. Julius Rodman, whose remarkable (if fictitious) "first passage across the Rocky Mountains of North America ever achieved by civilized man" (F573) is "reported" by Poe by publishing Rodman's "journal" (in a manner plausible enough to fool members of the United States Senate), "was urged solely by a desire to seek, in the bosom of the wilderness, that peace which his peculiar disposition would not suffer him to enjoy among men. He fled to the desert as to a friend" (F574). Augustus Bedloe, in *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains*, as he is about the relive an insurrection witnessed half a century earlier by a friend of his doctor (and mesmerizer), says, of the ravine he is entering: "it is by no means impossible that I was indeed the first adventurer—the very first and sole adventurer who had ever penetrated its weird recesses" (F899). Poe himself is a friend of wilderness and solitude:

> [T]here is one pleasure still within the reach of fallen mortality—and perhaps only one—which owes even more than does music to the accessory sentiment of seclusion. I mean the happiness experienced in the contemplation of natural scenery. In truth, the man who would behold aright the glory of God upon earth must in solitude behold that glory. […] My wanderings amid such scenes have been many, and far-searching, and often solitary; and the interest with which I have strayed through many a dim deep valley, or gazed into the reflected Heaven of many a bright lake, has been an interest greatly deepened by the thought that I have strayed and gazed *alone*. (F699-701)

What provides more substance to the connection between these two kinds of (near) solitary occurrences is that, gruesome or delightful as they may be, they put a single human, or a small group of them, in direct touch with environments or events no other has seen before: they expand human *knowledge*. And that is thrilling, besides being worthwhile. Here is the scribbler of the manuscript to be found in a bottle:

> To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible; yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions, predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction. (F142)

On the opposite side of the equation, speaking of people who have chosen to be where they are and take pleasure more than fright in what they do, here is how they forget the utilitarian purpose of their mission, and want to press on, for the sake of seeing what no eyes like theirs have ever seen:

> Men who had travelled thousands of miles through a howling wilderness, beset by terrible dangers, and enduring the most heart-rending privations for the ostensible purpose of collecting peltries, would seldom take the trouble to secure them when obtained, and would leave behind them without a sigh an entire *cache* of fine beaver skin rather than forego the pleasure of pushing up some romantic-looking river, or penetrating into some craggy and dangerous cavern, for minerals whose use they knew nothing about, and which they threw aside as lumber at the first decent opportunity. (F614)

> [A]s we proceeded on our journey, I found myself less and less interested in the main business of the expedition, and more and more willing to turn aside in pursuit of idle amusement—if indeed I am right in calling by so feeble a name as amusement that deep and most intense excitement with which I surveyed the wonders and majestic beauties of the wilderness. […] As yet, however, I felt as if in too close proximity to the settlements for the full enjoyment of my burning love of Nature, and of *the unknown*. I could not help being aware that *some* civilized footsteps, although few, had preceded me in my journey—that *some* eyes before mine own had been enraptured with the scenes around me. […] I was anxious to *go on*—to get, if possible, beyond the extreme bounds of civilization—to gaze, if I could, upon those gigantic mountains of which the existence had been made known to us only by the vague accounts of the Indians. (ibid.)

If you stay within the safe confines of ordinary, everyday life you may get the impression that one learns more by deeper inquiries into old texts, such as scholars, primarily, are equipped and inclined to pursue. But that would be a delusion:

> [T]here is little difficulty or danger in suggesting that the "thousand profound scholars" *may* have failed, first because they were scholars, secondly because they were profound, and thirdly because they were a thousand—the impotency of the scholarship and profundity having been thus multiplied a thousand fold. I am serious in these suggestions. (E18)

Truth is not sunken, but lying on the ground:

> [I]t is the nature of Truth in general, as of some ores in particular, to be richest when most superficial. (E18-19)

> As regards the greater truths, men oftener err by seeking them at the bottom than at the top; the depth lies in the huge abysses where wisdom is sought—not in the palpable palaces where she is found. The ancients were not always right in hiding the goddess in a well: witness the light Bacon has thrown upon philosophy; witness the principles of our divine faith—that moral mechanism by which the simplicity of a child may overbalance the wisdom of a man. (E466)

And it is often simple, in spite of the world being "so resolute […] to despise anything which carries with it an air of simplicity" (F887). Set yourself across the *surface* of the earth, then, or of the skies or of your emotions, which is often a simple thing to do, though it is not *easy*; try something no one has ever tried, and a novel truth will stare you in the face. You will know what of the world, and of our reactions to it, no one has ever known—and will be proud of it: of what you have learned and can help others learn.

> While […] I cannot but lament the most unfortunate and bloody events which immediately arose from my advice, I must still be allowed to feel some degree of gratification at having been instrumental, however remotely, in opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention. (F430)

> The last nine hours have been unquestionably the most exciting of my life. I can conceive nothing more sublimating than the strange peril and novelty of an adventure such as this. May God grant that we succeed! I ask not success for mere safety to my insignificant person, but for the sake of human knowledge and—for the vastness of the triumph. […] In a night such as is this to me, a man *lives*—lives a whole century of ordinary life—nor would I forego this rapturous delight for that of a whole century of ordinary existence. (F892-893)

The scholars Poe shuns would have problems with the object of this pride. They would protest that you cannot expand knowledge by making up characters and circumstances in a tale; and they would point out that people who endure extraordinary trials have their perception and ratiocination strained by them—get, literally, out of their minds—and cannot be trusted to give a faithful, veridical account of what they may have sensed. We will take up the first worry later; right now, let us focus on the second one, and begin by registering the fact that Poe seems to share the substance of it, if not any anxiety associated thereby. His characters, he grants with no apparent concern, are in strained conditions, most frequently described as dreamlike.

Baron Metzengerstein becomes strangely fascinated by the tapestry "in a vast and desolate upper apartment of his family palace" (F80); his demise is soon to come from an incarnation of that very tapestry; for the moment, it is "with difficulty that he could reconcile his dreamy and incoherent feelings, with the certainty of being awake" (F81). Berenicë's cousin, who will be haunted by her presence, describes a total inversion between dreams and wake:

> 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. (F156)

Hans Phaall records: "Fancy revelled in the wild and dreamy regions of the moon" (F199). Arthur Gordon Pym even theorizes that emotional stress can cause a lapse into irrationality, and a breaking of the barrier between nightmares and reality:

> [O]ur intellects were so entirely disordered by the long course of privation and terror to which we had been subjected, that we could not justly be considered, at that period, in the light of rational beings. (F410)

> Peters and myself […] began to remember what had passed rather as a frightful dream from which we had been happily awakened, than as events which had taken place in sober and naked reality. I have since found that this species of partial oblivion is usually brought about by sudden transition, whether from joy to sorrow or from sorrow to joy—the degree of forgetfulness being proportioned to the degree of difference in the exchange. (F414)

Ligeia's widower "saw, or may have dreamed that […] [he] saw, fall within the goblet […] three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby coloured fluid" (F489)—*in reality*, those drops are going to kill his second wife Rowena and make her corpse available for appropriation by Ligeia. The inadvertent spectator of the fall of the house of Usher, while inspecting the building upon his arrival there, shakes off "from […] [his] spirit what *must* have been a dream" (F534).

On a more cheerful note, dreams are what Julius Rodman thinks of when contemplating the splendor of Nature:

> The prairies exceeded in beauty any thing told in the tales of the Arabian Nights. On the edges of the creeks there was a wild mass of flowers which looked more like Art than Nature, so profusely and fantastically were their

> vivid colors blended together. […] The whole scenery rather resembled what I had dreamed of when a boy, than an actual reality. (F593-594)

And, as for Poe the wanderer, let us join him as he visits the Wissahiccon, "a brook, (for more it can scarcely be called,) which empties itself into the Shuylkill, about six miles westward of Philadelphia" (F848):

> The heat gradually overcame me, and, resigning myself to the influence of the scenes and of the weather, and of the gently moving current, I sank into a half slumber, during which my imagination revelled in visions of the Wissahiccon of ancient days. (F849)

But—to reiterate the worry we are presently addressing—what would a scholar, firmly steeped "in sober and naked reality," say of the cognitive claims warranted by such surrender, and by the half slumber that follows? Isn't the essence of scientific method to be found in the public replication of experiments? So, what knowledge could be provided by experiences one has alone, and in a precarious mental state bordering on what is positively private: sleep?

Poe would receive these carping questions with disdain. Science, he would allege, moves forward through intuition and imagination; by repressing both, and insisting on the rigor and certainty which they presume will be obtained by following a correct procedure, "so-called men of science" have opposed "great obstacles" to its progress (F1120). They should rather be emulating Kepler: "Yes! these vital [planetary] laws Kepler *guessed*—that is to say, he *imagined* them" (E130). In a letter of February 29, 1849, to George E. Isbell, author of a work entitled *The Vestiges of Creation* he has not yet seen, Poe delivers an even harsher reprimand:

> One thing is certain; that the objections of *merely* scientific men […] are generally invalid except in respect to scientific *details*. Of all the persons in the world, they are at the same time the most bigoted and the least capable of using, generalizing, or deciding upon the facts which they bring to light in the course of their experiments. And these are the men who chiefly write the criticisms *against* all efforts at generalization—denouncing these efforts as "speculative" and "theoretical." (E1094)

A more articulate confrontation between Poe's "science" and what commonly receives that appellation will have to wait until we have more meat to chew on. Let us now, rather, turn to the inverse image of such acrid pronouncements. In *Eleonora—A Fable*, Poe pens what might be used as an epigraph for his entire work—and was used as such by Mary

Newton Stanard in her "romantic rendering" (E1154) of his life-story (appropriately entitled *The Dreamer*):

> They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape the dreamers by night. In their grey visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in awaking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret. In snatches, they learn something of the wisdom which is of good, and more of that mere knowledge which is of evil. They penetrate, however rudderless or compassless, into the vast ocean of the "light ineffable." (F721)

They have been "upon the verge" of the great secret, not quite masters of it; they obtain but "glimpses" of eternity—we will comprehend later the great force of these words. In the meantime, speaking of Alfred Tennyson, Poe brings together the indefinite, indistinct aspect of dreams and the power of poetry, which he glosses here by comparing it with music:

> [T]he *indefinite* is an element in the true ποιησις. […] I *know* that indefinitiveness is an element of the true music—I mean of the true musical expression. Give it any undue decision—imbue it with any very determinate tone—and you deprive it, at once, of its ethereal, its ideal, its intrinsic and essential character. You dispel its luxury of dream. You dissolve the atmosphere of the mystic upon which it floats. You exhaust it of its breath of fäery. It now becomes a tangible and easily appreciable idea—a thing of the earth, earthy. It has not, indeed, lost its power to please, but all which I consider the distinctiveness of that power [*the distinctiveness of the indistinct*]. (E409)

And, in case you miss the link between poetry and the truth which is supposed to be the goal of knowledge, he obliges:

> [T]he poetic intellect […] we now feel to have been the most exalted of all—since those truths which to us were of the most enduring importance could only be reached by that *analogy* which speaks in proof-tones to the imagination alone, and to the unaided reason bears no weight. (F705)

We have yet an ocean to cross before landing where any of this can acquire solid (though controversial) meaning; in preparation for it, let us sit on the shore a minute longer and assess where we are. Poe believes, nay, he is *convinced*, that "all true knowledge […] makes its advances almost invariably by intuitive bounds" (F1121), that Aristotle and his ilk "confined investigation to *crawling*" (ibid.) and consequently "[n]o man dared utter a truth for which he felt indebted to his *Soul* alone" (ibid.). But all this drivel must go, and we must find in lonely, exalted experiences

(which are, we will discover, far more common than it seems), and in the misty, otherworldy conditions they induce, the most effective stimulant to epistemic growth. He is convinced, I said, and would want to convince *you*—though not by using the tools recommended by Aristotle and his ilk:

> [A]ccording to the schools, I *prove* nothing. So be it:—I design but to suggest—and to *convince* through the suggestion. I am proudly aware that there exist many of the most profound and cautiously discriminative human intellects which cannot *help* being abundantly content with my—suggestions. To these intellects—as to my own—there is no mathematical demonstration which *could* bring the least additional *true proof* of [what I said]. (E147)

Time will tell—the time of the current narrative, I mean—if there is something more to this haughty avowal than impertinence and obduracy, on the part of one who sang to himself, at the age of twenty,

> From childhood's hour I have not been
> As others were—I have not seen
> As others saw—I could not bring
> My passions from a common spring—
> From the same source I have not taken
> My sorrow—I could not awaken
> My heart to joy at the same tone—
> And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone. (F39)

II

SHARING THE GOODS

So Julius Rodman went into the wilderness to be with his friend the desert. Soon enough, however, his misanthropy relented. He was traveling with his associate Pierre Junôt and thirteen other men they had recruited, all of whom were valued: his attitude toward them ranged from honest appreciation to sincere admiration. Five Canadians were not good hunters or fighters; but "were good boatmen, and excellent companions, as far as singing French songs went, and drinking, at which they were pre-eminent […]. They were always in a good humor, and always ready to work" (F582). Five others were brothers from Kentucky, and he was truly impressed with them: they were "all strong well-built men" (F583), especially the eldest, John, who "had the reputation of being the strongest man" (ibid.) in his state, and "[l]ike most men of great physical strength, […] was exceedingly good-tempered, and on this account was greatly beloved by us all" (ibid). "All of them were experienced hunters and capital shots" (ibid.). Alexander Wormley had been a preacher, and had become fixated on finding gold mines; but, aside from this quirk, "was remarkably sensible and even acute" (ibid.). Toby was a black man belonging to Pierre, who was probably too old for the expedition but "able-bodied […] and still capable of enduring great fatigue" (F584). The last man, Andrew Thornton, was a Virginian who "had been rambling about the western country" (ibid.) for three years and often amused the rest by telling tales of his adventures, delivered "with a strait-forward earnestness which left us no room to doubt their truth" (ibid.)—a stance from which the fictitious Rodman, and the real Poe, evidently had something to learn.

The group assembles in Petite Côte, "a small place on the north bank of the Missouri" (F581) of some one hundred inhabitants, and they must make merry there, for the morning they leave on their journey "nothing could exceed the hilarity of […] [their] whole party" (F588). From then on, they face numerous challenges, including dangerous humans and beasts, and prove themselves willing and able to help each other and come up ahead. But there is more than just solidarity and good companionship

here: early in his account, Julius makes an intriguing confession, speaking of Andrew.

> I never, at any period of my life, felt so keenly as I then did, the want of some friend to whom I could converse freely, and without danger of being misunderstood. […] [I] appeared to seek relief in a contemplation of the wild scenes of Nature; and these scenes and the reflections which they encouraged, could not, I found, be thoroughly enjoyed, without the society of some one person of reciprocal sentiments. Thornton was precisely the kind of individual to whom I could unburthen my full heart, and unburthen it of all its extravagant emotion, without fear of incurring a shadow of ridicule, and even in the certainty of finding a listener as impassioned as myself. I never, before or since, met with any one who so fully entered into my own notions respecting natural scenery; and this circumstance alone was sufficient to bind him to me in a firm friendship. We were as intimate, during our whole expedition, as brothers could possibly be, and I took no steps without consulting him. Pierre and myself were also friends, but there was not the tie of reciprocal thought between us—that strongest of all mortal bonds. (F588-589)

It is a rich passage, and some of its themes must await proper unpacking—specifically, the relevance of intimacy to mutual understanding and the porous border between an extravagant display of emotion and a comical one. Here I limit myself to the most austere issue. Having decided, provisionally, to go along with Poe's contention that private experiences of a peculiar, even unique kind contribute to an increase of knowledge, we must aver that this increase will remain circumscribed to the people living the experiences unless they find a way, before it is too late, of sharing what they have come to know. So, whatever else is implied in Rodman's complex posture toward Thornton (and a lot is), we must approve of the drive to communicate his reflections and feelings to a friend—to make them *common* with him. If he did not, and if Thornton did not do the same with others, the secret of how he thinks and feels would be buried with him—while no one else is the wiser.

And, again, there are multiple threads to this enterprise of communication, that will have to be considered in turn. The first, and most obvious, is: what is private, inescapably bound with an individual's mind, or soul, must be made public, *published*. Perhaps what that mind went through might never be replicated in another, as would be required by "so-called men of science" to have it pass muster for approval; but at least some other mind should have access to the *content* of the experience.

It is a delicate, and highly personal, topic with Poe, who published frantically through the twenty years of his adult life, made his meager

living (constantly with the wolf at the door) from such publishing, complained rancorously about the publishers who controlled his destiny, denounced the absence of copyright laws that damaged him (and many others), and unsuccessfully tried for years, until his bitter, tragic end, to emancipate himself from these fetters by publishing his own journal. What follows is a representative sample of his rants and fancies:

> [W]e have Magazine publishers (who sometimes take upon themselves the duplicate title of "editor *and* proprietor,")—publishers, we say, who, under certain conditions of good conduct, occasional puffs, and decent subserviency at all times, make it a point of conscience to encourage the poor devil author with a dollar or two, more or less as he behaves himself properly and abstains from the indecent habit of turning up his nose. (E429)

> [T]here are still found individuals who ask, innocently enough, in what manner the want of the International [Copyright] Law affects the pecuniary interest of the native American. The man who asks the question should first write a book or a magazine article, and then offer it to a publisher for sale. The publisher […] will say—"My dear sir, you are a man of genius […]. But, if I pay one dollar for your book, I am impliedly acknowledging that you are not *only* a man of greater genius than—shall we say Dickens?—but that you […] are more popular than he. For, observe! I can get Dickens's works *without* the dollar. (E229)

> Holding steadily in view my ultimate purpose,—to found a Magazine of my own, or in which at least I might have a proprietary right,—it has been my constant endeavour in the meantime not so much to establish a reputation great in itself as one of that particular character which should best further my special objects, and draw attention to my exertions as Editor of a Magazine. (E1005)

With this much dishonesty and graft going on, one cannot envisage that making something public will automatically establish its credibility. Fake news were a regular occurrence at the time, mostly in order to create a sensation. They were referred to as hoaxes; Poe was aware of them, at times tried to expose them, and at other times concocted some of his own. In one case *The Sun*, a New York penny paper, had (in 1835) vertiginously augmented its sales by putting out bogus telescopic "discoveries" about the moon. Poe, who had published *Hans Phaall* three weeks before, did his best to prove those observations phony, but (like countless other debunkers of fake news) failed to get any traction with the audience:

> Immediately on the completion of the "Moon story," […] I wrote an examination of its claims to credit, showing distinctly its fictitious character, but was astonished at finding that I could obtain few listeners, so really eager were all to be deceived. (E603)

Such gullibility may have inspired him, years later, to grace *The Sun* with his own "astounding news": of a flight across the Atlantic in a balloon, taking 75 hours. Published on April 13, 1844, and causing hysteric levels of enthusiasm, the story was retracted after two days and has been known ever since as *The Balloon-Hoax*. Still later, in that 1849 which saw his death as well as the peak of the Gold Rush, he engineered a new hoax by talking about a man named Von Kempelen who had found a way of converting lead into gold, with the intent to put a damper on the California frenzy "and thus, acting as a sudden, although of course a very temporary, *check* to the gold-fever, […] create a stir to some purpose" (E1130). In the story itself, he is more explicit about the economic mechanism he is attempting to trigger:

> If many were prevented from adventuring to California, by the mere apprehension that gold would so materially diminish in value, on account of its plentifulness in the mines there, as to render the speculation of going so far in search of it a doubtful one—what impression will be wrought *now*, upon the minds of those about to emigrate, and especially upon the minds of those actually in the mineral region, by the announcement of this astounding discovery of Von Kempelen? (F1161-1162)

This was to be his second-to-last tale. The last one (*X-ing a Paragrab*) is about publishing, and about a foolish typographical mishap, and has a parting shot for its epitome of a publisher:

> As it is well known that the "wise men" came "from the East," and as Mr. Touch-and-go Bullet-head came from East, it follows that Mr. Bullet-head was a wise man; and if collateral proof of the matter be needed, here we have it—Mr. B. was an editor. (F1167)

Poe's awareness of the basic unreliability of what is made public, and his inclination to play with it, are never as evident as in the way he frames *Arthur Gordon Pym*. The narrative (Poe's longest) is said in a preface to have originated with Pym, who provided facts to Poe and allowed him to write them in his own words and publish them "*under the garb of fiction*" (F327). But the public (the preface continues) would not go for it, and would assume them to be true; so Pym eventually took up the task of writing, while admitting that "no fact is misrepresented in the first few

pages which were written by Mr. Poe" (F328). A final unsigned note reports "the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym" (F467) and the consequent interruption of the story. Poe is also reported being uninterested in completing it:

> The gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface [*viz.* Poe], and who, from the statement there made, might be supposed able to fill the vacuum, has declined the task—this for satisfactory reasons connected with the general inaccuracy of the details afforded him, and his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration. (F467)

Then the note's anonymous writer (who is none other than Poe) goes on to comment on some elements of the story, "as the facts in question have, beyond doubt, escaped the attention of Mr. Poe" (ibid.).

Such windings may be alluring for their own sake; at our present stage, they argue that, in attributing epistemic weight to private, dreamy, memorable incidents, Poe is perfectly conscious of the booby traps that pester the area—those who disseminate (what they maintain are) private incidents may do so with the aim of cheating rather than informing. There are, I said, more threads than one to be disentangled in getting clear about the issue of communication, and eventually they will let us attack the problem we have thus unearthed. Now let us rest content with having shone light on the complexity of the situation and return to the austere point I am trying to make. If it is not to be lost forever, what one gets to know in private must be shared. How does Poe pursue this objective with the extreme, solitary experiences he talks about?

Only unusually does he avail himself of a ploy that was then current, even dominant: only unusually, that is, does he speak as an omniscient narrator. *The Mask of the Red Death* (suggestively subtitled *A Fantasy*) is one of these few exceptions, and so is *Metzengerstein* (his first tale); the rule is to have a character speak, often the very one who is going through the most intense, mind-numbing events. Poe is then plainly, directly attending to the question I have raised; so let me ask it once more. How do these characters succeed in sharing what brought them to the limits of human faculties, and sometimes beyond?

The simple answer is: in multiple ways. Let us review some. The most trivial calls upon an external intervention analogous to the *deus ex machina* that brought several ancient tragedies to a dramatically disappointing end. (Euripides was particularly fond of it. In his *Orestes*, when the eponymous character is about to be punished for killing his mother, Apollo turns up to set everything in order: Orestes will be acquitted and mortals are invited to go in peace.) Here the same device

plagues *The Pit and the Pendulum*. The protagonist has been detailing his torments, and is about to be overcome by them, in which case his first-person account will be irretrievably lost, when the most unlikely salvation arrives from an unexpected quarter:

> There was a loud blast as of many trumpets! There was a discordant hum of human voices! There was a harsh grating as of a thousand thunders! The fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. It was that of General Lasalle. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies. The French army had entered Toledo. (F757)

Slightly less outrageous, but still fanciful, are the tales situated in the afterlife. I already quoted from *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, where Monos describes his own death. In *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion* we go many steps further, as Eiros depicts the extinction of all life on Earth. (And, again, we are disappointed, for what good is that to be for an expansion of *human* knowledge?)

Ms. Found in a Bottle might be perceived as equally perplexing. Yes, we have been told by the narrator:

> I shall from time to time continue this journal. It is true that I may not find an opportunity of transmitting it to the world, but I will not fail to make the endeavor. At the last moment I will enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it within the sea. (F139)

But, putting ourselves in his shoes, can we truly believe that, overwhelmed by a horrible vision and about to go down with the ship, he would find it in himself to finish his writing, fill and cork the bottle, and throw it into the ocean?

Maybe so. There are people like that. The American photographer Robert Emerson Landsburg, on the morning of May 18, 1980, was a few miles from the summit of Mount St. Helens. When the volcano erupted, he took pictures of the rapidly approaching ash cloud (these clouds travel at up to 700 km/h and can reach temperatures of 1000º C). Before the cloud got to him, he rewound the film back into its case, put the camera in his backpack and laid himself on top of it. His body was found seventeen days later; the film was safe and was developed, providing valuable documentation to geologists. Talk about a hero and a martyr for knowledge!

In other cases, someone who was involved in aberrant happenings, and was led by them to commit awful crimes, gets to unload his burden shortly before being executed. In *The Black Cat*, a man harassed by a feline that reminds him of his cruelty ends up killing his wife but having the murder

uncovered by that very cat. In *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, two more murderers cannot resist their own obsession to come clean—to make *public* their private horrors.

There are those who just survive and are able to tell, most notably in *A Descent into the Maelström*, which provides an exquisite instance of lucid reasoning under unsustainable stress:

> I made […] three important observations. The first was, that, as a general rule, the larger the bodies were, the more rapid their descent—the second, that, between two masses of equal extent, the one spherical, and the other *of any other shape*, the superiority in speed was with the sphere—the third, that, between two masses of equal size, the one cylindrical, and the other of any other shape, the cylinder was absorbed the more slowly. (F697)

And there are cases where Poe hoodwinks the reader, for example having Pym die before he can finish his write-up, so we will not know how he managed to come back from the South Pole where his story was interrupted in the most arcane circumstances.

The final device to be reviewed has already surfaced when I mentioned the inadvertent spectator of the fall of the house of Usher: it amounts to introducing a witness, a sort of stand-in for the reader, who survives even if the protagonist does not, and can observe and report the protagonist's actions and, to the extent that they are voiced, feelings. This witness can be inadvertent, as is Usher's friend, and can even be the butt of a joke: the young man who recounts *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether* takes until the very end before realizing that the insane have been running the asylum, and meanwhile is subjected to the heavy irony (entirely lost on him) of the leader of the insane.

> The head rebel [who is in fact the person speaking; he speaks of the rebellion as having occurred in the past, while it is still going on] […] admitted no visitors at all—with the exception, one day, of a very stupid-looking young gentleman of whom he had no reason to be afraid. He let him in to see the place—just by way of variety—to have a little fun with him. As soon as he had gammoned him sufficiently, he let him out, and sent him about his business. (F946)

In the more felicitous cases, the witness is in with the object of his observation and report, even complicit with him. The mystifying exploits of Baron Ritzner Von Jung are followed intelligently and sympathetically by his chronicler. But the kind of association that was to have the most brilliant future is the one between Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin and the guy who, having money to spare and feeling "that the society of such a man

would be […] a treasure beyond price" (F658-659), arranged that they should live together, which they did after he "was permitted to be at the expense of renting, and furnishing in a style which suited the rather fantastic gloom of […] [their] common temper, a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstitions into which […] [they] did not inquire, and tottering to its fall in a retired and desolate portion of the Faubourg St. Germain" (F659).

The cohabitations of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, of Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings, of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, and of so many other pairs in the history of detective fiction, have their roots here. But, having thus catalogued the main ways whereby in Poe the strangest experiences get propagated, these very pairs allow us to phrase the next puzzle, and get to the next station of our itinerary. For Watson does not understand what Holmes does, Hastings is constantly led off track when he tries to think on his own, and even Dupin's friend can manifest nothing other than surprise at his inferences; none of them, certainly, would be a match for the intellects whose performances they witness. Can we then say that what those intellects fathom, or what Usher lives through, has actually been *communicated*? It has been broadcast, for sure; but is that enough for true transmission?

III

STRATEGIES OF MAKE-BELIEVE

The old-looking man who went into the Maelström has, more than once, told his story, which had an auspicious ending as he was picked up from the sea by a boat. His final comment applies impartially to that time and to the present one—to the listeners then and to the one he has now brought to "the summit of the loftiest crag" (F685) so that he can see the whirlpool:

> Those who drew me on board were my old mates and daily companions—but they knew me no more than they would have known a traveller from the spirit-land. My hair had been raven-black the day before, and now it is white as you see. They say too that the whole expression of my countenance had changed. I told them my story—they did not believe it. I now tell it to *you*—and you will put no more faith in it than did the merry fishermen of Lofoden. (F698)

In the last chapter I brought out two additional hurdles a piece of private knowledge must clear, after being made public, if it is to be properly shared and added to a common store. It needs to be understood, in the sense in which Watson often does *not* understand what Holmes is talking about, and, preliminary to that, it needs to be believed, so that others won't shrug their shoulders of it, will take it seriously, and will *try* to understand it. It needs to be the case that they will not take it as a hoax. The old-looking man is doubtful that what he went through will be given credence by his closest associates, let alone by an unknown foreigner; here I will begin to look into the microphysics of how such credence is best maximized, postponing examination of the last hurdle until we have made substantial progress with this one. (Such easy logical and temporal prioritizing of believing over understanding will be revised later; so it might be useful to note in passing that Poe says, of the "overwise," that "hoax, with these sorts of people, is, I believe, a general term for all matters above their comprehension," F213.)

We are familiar with a protest the scholars despised by Poe would vent: one cannot expect a fictitious tale to have cognitive import. And we are not yet equipped to do this matter full justice; but we can at least

release a humble remark, and build on it. If you went alone into the wilderness, or a vortex, or were buried alive (and dug up), you may have some awesome truth to divulge; but the only tool at your disposal for teaching the lesson you are eager to spread is to tell a story. You will be believed if that story is good: if it is plausible, and sustains interest. So you could do worse than listen to the advice of an exceptional storyteller, who made up a fictitious Julius Rodman narrative good enough to be believed by US senators, and who is also keen on reflecting critically on his art—to the point of being told by one of his correspondents (the author and editor James Ewell Heath, on September 12, 1839): "In the department of criticism especially, I know few who can claim to be your superiors in this country" (E895).

Poe's recommendations on this subject apply to both poetry and prose, so I will mostly treat them together, introducing distinctions when they become relevant. And his first piece of advice is to calm down. Having gone to hell and back, you may be overwhelmed by emotion; but that is not a place to be if you want to be heard. You want your utterance to be original, so as to attract attention, and must realize that originality does not come easy: it is the outcome of hard work.

> The fact is, originality (unless in minds of very unusual force) is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition. In general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought. (E12)

> [T]he true invention is elaborate. There is no greater mistake than the supposition that a true originality is a mere matter of impulse or inspiration. To originate, is carefully, patiently, and understandingly to combine. (E436)

In *The Philosophy of Composition* (which he judges his "best specimen of analysis," E1073) Poe stretches this point too far. Having selected *The Raven* as his most generally known poem, he officially adheres to the "design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (E6). But this pretense is disingenuous: he knows only too well that no one could have written the same poem by just following instructions—rules cannot tell you what to do but only, at best, what *not* to do.

> Rule applies but to the merits of denial—to the excellencies which refrain. Beyond these, the critical art can but suggest. We may be instructed to build a "Cato" [a tragedy by Joseph Addison, first performed on April 13,