EDGAR ALLAN POE AND AUTHORIAL IDENTITY[1]

***Abstract**: The authorial identity approach to Edgar Allan Poe's literary work aims at establishing the complex relationship between author and text, by theorizing the sense that the writer has of himself and the textual identity constructed in his writing, so as to trace out the process of doubling his character as well as the space-time relationship of the narrative.*

***Keywords**: selfhood, personal identity, narrative identity.*

The ever-expanding flourishment of autobiographical writing initiated in the middle of the 19th century in America is primarily 'certified' by literary critics as a result of a mixture of several influencing factors – the impact of spiritual self-examination, a strong belief in the reality and independence of the self, the continual assertion/expansion of the middle classes, along with a suitable literary marketplace, the rising rates of literacy, as well as the expansion of Romanticism, individualism and popular democracy; although the American autobiographical tendency was being 'stalled' because of the Civil War, it has never ceased to expand and improve until present times, also manifest as multiple autobiographies[2].

In Edgar Allan Poe's writings, fictional characterization becomes hardly distinguishable from personal character in a way that was assessed as early as 1856 when Charles Baudelaire referred "the characters of Poe, or rather *the* character of Poe" without offering a clear argument for his explanation (Walker, 1986: 411). Therefore, Poe's fiction can provide an appropriate space to be explored for insights into his inner life as a philosopher-writer-author. In this respect, the volume *The Complete Works of Edgar A. Poe*, plays the role of a supplement or substitute to his autobiography, if not a counter-autobiography, offering readers an updated representation about the writer's views and beliefs as an author.

Many critics – including Rufus Wilmot Griswold, Poe's literary executor who in his obituary states that "Nearly all that he wrote in the last two or three years, including much of his best poetry, was in some sense biographical" (Walker, *ibidem*: 301) – feel the same way and extend the idea that Edgar Allan Poe is one and the same person as his physically and imaginatively tormented protagonists of his grotesque tales and mournful poetry. It is not clear however whether Griswold referred to Poe's works as being (auto-/)biographical because he believed they reflected his development as a writer or whether he actually meant that Poe was just as mentally disturbed as some of them, being "none other(s) than Mr Poe hardly taking the trouble to hide himself". (Walker, *op. cit.*: 209)

The myth of Poe's fictional characters as hypostases of the writer's own self rises from the audience's response to some visual images of the writer, as well as to some textual ones. The *Ultima Thule* daguerreotype, as it was named by Poe's fiancé,

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*This work was partially supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/88/1.5/S/49516, Project ID 49516 (2009), co-financed by the European Social Fund – Investing in People, within the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

[2] *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, *The Education of Henry Adams*, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself*, etc.

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the poet Sarah Helen Whitman, exposes the tension and pain on Poe's face on that day nearly a year before his death and it has long been commented and interpreted.[1]

Until her own death seemed imminent in 1874, Sarah Helen Whitman tried to figure out a romanticized face of the author as an idealistic dreamer and her only public display of Poe's image is a poem called *The Portrait*.[2] However, her naming of the daguerreotype *Ultima Thule* has as source of inspiration Poe's own poem, *Dreamland* (1844): "I have reached these lands but newly/ From an ultimate dim Thule –/ From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,/ Out of Space – out of Time" (Poe, 1997: 28). Nevertheless the phrase "Ultima Thule" did not actually appear as such in *Dreamland* but in *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1842):

> I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me by monkish ingenuity in torture…*the pit*, whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself – *the pit*, typical of hell, and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule[3] of all their punishments. (Poe, 2001: 127)

Edgar Allan Poe's authorial identity as perceived by the large readership in his fiction and poetry has clearly ensued from the interaction between fiction, visual representations or imagery and his personal history. For instance, in *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), Roderick Usher can be perceived as an embodiment or hypostasis of the 'biographical'[4] Poe, whose morbid, artistic and sensitive nature gets reflected on the protagonist's visage and appearance:

> Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely molded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of more than web-like softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. (Poe, 2001: 31)

The assimilation between the biographical Poe and some of his characters has also been endorsed by Susan Archer Weiss, who analyses Poe's psychological features, without reference to any specific tale:

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[1] Hervey Allen relevantly points out that the *Ultima Thule* daguerreotype was most probably taken "at the very hour when he looked the worst that he ever looked in his life" and ironically it "has become the best known to the world". (Allen, 1927: 782)

[2] "Slowly I raised the purple folds concealing/ That face, magnetic as the morning's beam;/ While slumbering memory thrilled at its revealing,/ Like Memnon waking from his marble dream./ Again I saw the brow's translucent pallor,/ The dark hair floating o'er it like a plume;/ The sweet imperious mouth, whose haughty valor/ Defied all portents of impending doom./ Eyes planet calm, with something in their vision That seemed not of earth's/ mortal mixture born; Strange mythic faiths and fantasies Elysian,/ And far, sweet dreams of 'fairy lands forlorn.'/ Unfathomable eyes that held the sorrow/ Of vanished ages in their shadowy deeps;/ Lit by that prescience of a heavenly morrow/ Which in high hearts the immortal spirit keeps."

[3] "Ultima Thule, in literature, the furthest possible place in the world. Thule was the northernmost part of the habitable ancient world." – Encyclopædia Britannica.

[4] Edgar Allan Poe's entire life was marked by the presence of death that took away, too soon, persons that were dear to him (his mother who died of tuberculosis when Poe was very young, his aunt that raised him from an early age, his young wife Virginia).

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> 'Unstable as water,' is written upon Poe's every visage in characters which all might read; in the weak falling away of the outline of the jaw, the narrow, receding chin, and the sensitive, irresolute mouth. Above the soul-lighted eyes and the magnificent temple of intellect overshadowing them, we look in vain for the rising dome of *Firmness,* which, like the keystone of the arch, should strengthen and bind together the rest. Lacking this, the arch must be ever tottering to a fall. [...] In order to understand Poe, it is necessary that one should recognize the dominant trait of his character," which is, she writes, *"weakness of will…* To this weakness of will we may trace nearly every other defect in Poe's character. (Weiss, 1907: 219)

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Just as the fractured House of Usher collapses into oblivion so was Edgar Allan Poe's life mirroring the events in the tale up to the final downfall (of the great writer towards the end of his life). Nonetheless, the physiognomic and phrenological readings of Poe in juxtaposition with his characters along with the familiar biographical background of the writer are some basic elements that can help in piecing together Poe's image as a tragic hero doomed by a minor character flaw.

Edgar Allan Poe's entire literary creation presents then the complex relationship between a creator and his work, which results from the way in which the author's selfhood imbues/informs a narrative identity or authority through a process of doubling his character on the time-space (narrative) level. His self-perception is grounded in theories of mesmerism and of cosmology.

Like the renowned professor of physiology and anatomy, Herbert Mayo, who published in Philadelphia his *Popular Superstitions, and the Truths Contained therein, with an Account of Mesmerism* (1852), Edgar Allan Poe actively studied mesmerism in the 1830s and 1840s, and besides writing three explicitly mesmeric tales[1], he also reviewed and published other works on the subject, keeping correspondence with experts of the day at the same time. With his '(non-/)idealistic, asocial, and nonhuman universal principle thought' (Taylor, 2007: 198), Poe shared with Herbert Mayo the view on mesmerism as, 'vivid instantiation of a more fundamental process wherein persons are subjected to the control of material universal forces'. Unlike Mayo, however, Poe radically deviated from the utopian, utilitarian or benign notions of mesmerism at play in most contemporary discourses, picturing instead the unsettling implications for human ontology, consequent upon the idea that individuals are less sovereign entities than 'manipulatable effects' of external powers. Rather than optimistically assuming, as Mayo and others were doing, that identifying a universal force is equivalent to mastering it for the betterment of humanity, Poe concluded that an all-encompassing cosmic energy was inevitably troubling the human beings by suspending their autonomy and interiori**ty;** the disorientation of normal, corporeal functioning and the literal loss of self-possession attending mesmeric practice(-s) were illustrative for Poe of the fact that people were little more than 'occasions' for the demonstration of an impersonal power. For Poe, thus, mesmerism discloses the precariousness of selfhood and correspondingly of its identity – 'its putative

[1] *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains* (1844), *Mesmeric Revelation* and *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*.

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independence and integrity – to be disturbingly fragile, if not altogether illusory –'. (Taylor, 2007: 196-197)

Poe's notorious anti-democratic, anti-nationalistic and anti-capitalistic doctrine[1] suggests then that one cannot transcend life just for the sake of the self, one cannot find the perfect blend between the social and the universal without taking individuality out of the question. In Poe's cosmological theory, the first principle is that the universe is constantly disintegrating the human being, the individual, being guided by a unique, universal law[2].

Looking closely at the characters in Poe's tales, one can easily observe that they are actually mirroring their selves in relation to the universe; the microcosms of his tales, as well as the universe of his cosmological prose-poem – *Eureka* (1848) – are nothing more than stages where the *self* and the *world*, the *person* and the *thing* come face to face (with each other), the stages where there emerge the characters' splitting and doubling. (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *Ligeia*, etc.)

This new approach to Edgar Allan Poe's literary creation, that partially brackets away what has already been done about his work (deconstruction, psychoanalysis, sociology, etc.) concentrates on the *a-human universe* that Michael Taylor identifies in his study, "Edgar Allan Poe's (Meta)physics: A Pre-History of the Post-Human", as being «a different way of understanding the contravening relation of his thought (negative, non-productive, non-ethical) to the utopian positivity of both his age's human(ist) cultural imaginary and our age's resultant, reactionary discourse of the "posthuman"» (Taylor, *ibidem*: 199)

Epitomizing such a world view, and underlying Poe's entire literary creation, *Eureka* is on the one hand a mixture of empiricist inquiry and transcendent insight that manages to give a solution to the riddle of humanity, to the complex relationship between *self* and the *universe*, underlining their interdependent and basic elements. As a scientific treaty, on the other hand, it testifies to the development of the mesmeric theories to their natural, universal limits.

In brief, in *Eureka* Poe postulates (on) the idea that the universe took form through God's self-differentiation into a diffuse nervous system in which gravity relates all things in the universe not necessarily because of their common origin but also in the present, across time and space – "Every atom ... attracts every other atom, both of its own and of every other body" (Poe, 2009: 210) ; and this gravity or attraction will end up into an inevitable 're-collapse into restored unity', principle confirmed by present cosmological theories[3]. This interconnectivity is so strong that nothing can have independence, autonomy to such an extent that even the "displace[ment] ... [of a] microscopial speck of dust ... shakes the Moon in her path ... [and] alters forever the destiny of the multitudinous myriads of stars" (Poe, 2009: 210). Taylor goes on explaining that in the universe created by Edgar Allan Poe: 'identity can only be born in the moment that difference is buried, when gravity yields the grave. The supposedly "individual" self, actually coextensive with the universe, is thus both more (God) and less (an atom) than itself, but always already different from itself. What *Eureka* effects,

[1] *Ibidem.*

[2] Poe claimed that the universe has a definite origin, and that this beginning consisted of as a single, unique primordial particle who continually expands into the universe only to end up returning back to its origin and thus regaining its unity.

[3] The Big Bang Theory, Olbers' paradox, The Big Crunch Theory, Black Holes, etc.

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then, is a transition from digital/synchronic conceptions of self and other to an analogic/diachronic understanding that cancels such absolute divisions by illustrating the(/ir) inevitable flux between individuation and identity' (Taylor, 2007: 204) It bears repeating, however, that despite the potentially auspicious resonances of this assertion, Poe makes clear that "we" cannot have a positive relation to such a circumstance: "we" cannot put it to use, be elevated by it, pray to it, or even taken solace from it; "we" cannot even survive it. "We" can only be (dis)integrated by it. Thus, though the general tone of *Eureka* is one of ecstatic insight, there is yet a pervasive sense of the sinister fate awaiting "us." (Taylor, 2007: 204)

Poe then goes on and talks[1] about "Memories that haunt us during *our* Youth" and that "sometimes pursue us even into our Manhood; assume[ing] *gradually* less and less indefinite shapes; now and then speak[ing] to us with low voices" ((Poe, 2009: 325). He describes "an epoch in the Night of Time, when a still-existent Being existed – one of an absolutely infinite number of similar Beings that People the absolutely infinite domains of the absolutely infinite space", an epoch where "all is Life – Life – Life within Life – the less within the greater, and all within the *Spirit Divine*." (Poe, 2009: 325)

These "memories" represent the memories we have of our past unity, of our past existence prior to the separation from the divine spirit; yet they also play the part of omens for future events in our existence, since, as Poe already suggested, the primordial particle which was separated into infinite particles will finally end its cycle through the universe and return to its origin. In other words, we are never alone, because our "shadows" and "memories", even though they belong to the past, are pursuing and haunting our present existence as witnesses to our fate of the past/future loss of the self. This is an obsessively repeated pattern[2] that can even be observed in Poe's tales. Nevertheless, in Poe's tales these *phantoms* of the past turn into palpable realities "speak[ing] to us with low voices", telling about our future and hurling an encounter with that which is beyond "us."

Although written at the end of Edgar Allan Poe's life and literary career, *Eureka* stands as the summarizing statement of Poe's tales, which concretize and particularize the general cosmological narrative of the prose-poem, and can be seen as a theoretical and philosophical culmination of his (meta)physical principles. In these conditions, the subject is *itself* reduced to a *thing* that has the 'ability' of recognizing itself in the world, as seen in the universes discussed in *Mesmeric Revelation* (1849) and *Eureka,* but also in numerous (other) tales, such as *Ligeia* (1838) or *The Fall of the House of Usher*:

> Unlike the celebratory, self-affirming, and self-perpetuating syntheses of subject and object so commonly imagined in both nineteenthcentury (meta)physical discourse and in current optimistic post-humanisms, both of which fantasize not the death of the nineteenth-century literature human subject but only its edifying transformation into something more, Poe's nonproductive and unyielding vision of the post-human insists on the overcoming of the subject by the object that it uncannily resembles, the loss of the putative individual's life to the world such that

[1] in *Eureka*

[2] 'Time and again, Poe's characters are "haunted" by the knowledge of something "more vast" – and "infinitely awful"; they are overwhelmed by the sense that there is something more than that which they can immediately apprehend, something that is a matter of life and death'. (Taylor, *op. cit*.: 205)

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> the "I," too, becomes a thing; the post-human for Poe, in other words, is Gothic rather than utopic, something to be lived, if at all, by corpses rather than immortal persons. Thus, although he participates in his culture's particular "cosmontological" imaginary, Poe represents an inassimilable negativity within that culture's twinned developmental histories of the Human and the Individual, histories whose postmortems, despite the "post-human," have yet to be written. (Taylor, *op. cit*.: 220)

Edgar Allan Poe's unified theory of the interplay between the physical and metaphysical as manifest in his cosmological poem-essay *Eureka* and in much of his short fiction, including *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, offers a perspective on the universe and on the natural world in which the issues of *subject* and *object* are dealt with separately, using a fresh and innovatory approach that prioritizes the less 'autonomous' feature of the human being.

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