ROMANTIC RENDERINGS OF SELFHOOD IN CLASSIC AMERICAN LITERATURE
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Conclusion to the Section of the Earliest American Masters of Story-Telling: Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper
I. Selfhood in/or Poetry: Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson
Respect pentru oameni și cărți.

The fantastic strain in his Gothic masterpieces rather enables the reader to use some realistic ideas in a successful understanding of both fantastic stories.

A) From Horror to Realization

I am keenly aware of the privileged status of our national cultural context. Our country, Romania, has been a favorite abode of numerous French fanatics. He has been and remained home in Paris for a much_selected sojourn. As a country, we have been described as a country of charming princes.

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Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)
Tzvetan Todorov, the French philosopher of Bulgarian origin, with an outstanding academic career on both shores of the Atlantic (Harvard and Yale Universities included), remains a providential choice here, since he championed Poe in his much acclaimed structural study of 1970: *Introduction a la litterature fantastique*. This book translated into American English by Richard Howard\(^1\) as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* in 1973 is now a classic reference study for all those who approach Edgar Allan Poe.

It is important for us, as Romanian readers, to remark now that the book’s translation into Romanian was achieved during the same year, 1973. Therefore, Todorov’s approach of Poe to demonstrate the polarity between the *uncanny* and the *marvelous* within the structure of all *fantastic* literature was available in our country from the very beginning of its international (and due to translation, in the first place, American) career. As it is now well known, Todorov postulates that fantastic literature stems from an essential ambiguity, i.e. a *hesitation* between the *uncanny* – which does allow for some rational approach of mysterious dark phenomena decisive for the incidents in the story – and the *marvelous* – which allows no such interpretation\(^2\). Todorov builds up his celebrated demonstration proceeding from Poe’s classics: the novella *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) and the psychological thriller short story “William Wilson” (1844). It is remarkable that Todorov’s interpretation tips the scale towards the *uncanny* in both cases. Thus he regards Poe as a precursor of modern psychoanalytical fiction – and *not* as just an(other) American author eager to conform to the old European

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fairytale tradition\(^1\) — since the fantastic strain in his Gothic masterpieces rather enables the reader to use some realistic clues in a successful understanding of both fantastic stories.

I am keen on this particular aspect in order to make my students aware of the privileged status of the 19\(^{th}\) century American writer in our national cultural context. Due to some enthusiastic translators\(^2\) Edgar Allan Poe has been a favorite author to generations of Romanian readers, who have been as numerous as his all time French fanatic admirers. Poe is quite at home in Romania — as he is in France and England. His influence on Romanian Symbolism — via French Symbolism which hailed Poe as a supreme artist and thinker — is obvious enough if we only think of a poet like George Bacovia (1881-1957).

Hence, Todorov's signal of a Poe-cult revival during the late 20\(^{th}\) century (re)confirms the romantic American writer's top rank in the (East-) European literary canon. This extremely complex American writer's successful career as a favorite of literary translations all over the world is just one of the reasons why there can be no innocent approach of Poe today.

The other one is intertextuality: Poe's influence on generations of writers and film makers alike has been tremendous. There can be no more first time with any one of his masterpieces. We cannot "simply" study them anymore, as (false) beginners. There is no reading of Poe's "Annabel Lee" without Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita\(^3\). A reading of Poe's "William Wilson" and/or even

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1 Actually this level had already been overcome by Washington Irving (1783-1859) – Poe's masterful precursor in the American Gothic. Irving's two best known Gothic stories "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" have long been assimilated by an all time American popular culture patrimony. Ever since their days, elements of Gothic had mingled with American historical allusions (e.g. the legendary American War of Independence), thus enhancing (and emphasizing) the literariness of such stories. The main achievement of this ambiguous blending of Gothic atmosphere with realistic elements is providing access to irony in both the complex narrative structure and the subtle meaning of such fiction, originating rather in the legend than in the fairy-tale tradition. Both protagonists: Rip Van Winkle and Ichabod Crane, respectively, are definitely anti-heroes, unlike fairy-tale versions of "charming princes."

2 Outstanding poets like lon Vinea, Dan Botta were among the first to translate E. A. Poe's fantastic stories and tales of ratiocination, and poems, too, into Romanian. Academic studies in E. A. Poe represent nowadays a constantly enriching domain of research in our country, due to some of our most distinguished Romanian scholars, themselves founders of Americanism as a cultural tradition in Romania: Ana Cartianu, Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga, Dan Grigorescu, Geta Dumitriu, Ştefan Stoinescu, Matei Călinescu, Monica Pîllat-Săulescu. Tzvetan Todorov's study on fantastic literature was translated into Romanian by Virgil Tănase.

3 Vladimir Nabokov (1899 – 1977) American writer of aristocratic Russian origin. Nabokov is an emblematic postmodern writer. He wrote his books in Russian and in
"The Fall of the House of Usher" without Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (particularly "City of Glass")\(^1\) is just as unlikely today, when we are already in the second decade of the 21st century. There is hardly any watching of some early 21st century mystery movie featuring Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot\(^2\), via Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*\(^3\) — without E. A. Poe's C. Auguste Dupin at the back of our minds. There is no (rhetoric of) suspicion and suspense in today's psychological horror fiction, no thriller delight in today's ever darker strains of 3 D Gothic — without the 1839 novella "The Fall of the House of Usher". There is no "shadow of a doubt" about how much Alfred Hitchcock owes to Poe's Gothic mysteries and grotesque tales, and to obsessive poems like "The Raven" looming beyond the silver screen of any psychological thriller with a dash of film noir such as "The Birds" (made in American English. His masterpiece is *Lolita* (1955), a postmodern quintessence of parody, pastiche, intertextuality, metafiction. The book delights attentive readers of world literature, who can cope with the narrator's ironical (and outrageous) self-portrait. He is a middle-aged professor of literature by the name of Humbert Humbert, in love with Lolita, a thirteen year old nymphet, who reminds him of his long lost juvenile passion for *Annabel Leigh* — his first sweetheart having died at thirteen, killed by a merciless disease, just like Poe's *Annabel Lee*.

\(^1\) Paul Auster (b. 1947) is an outstanding contemporary American writer of novels, essays, poems. His exquisite narrative style appeals constantly to the reader's classic American literary background, inviting funny games of intertextuality and metafiction. *The New York Trilogy* (1987) is a consecrated book of fiction consisting of three parts: "City of Glass", "Ghosts," and "The Locked Room." All these sections are haunted by allusions to masters of the American canon, such as E. A. Poe (as a highly ironical, intertextual penname, William Wilson doubles up the persona of writer Quinn in "City of Glass" — an intricate metaphorical image of late 20th century New York); or Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) whose Fanshawe turns up in "The Locked Room" — of all places...). The entire book generously rewards all the attentive readers of classic American literature.

\(^2\) Dame Agatha Christie (1890-1976), British writer of detective stories, (murder) mysteries, whether as novels or short stories anthologies. She dominates the Golden Age of Detective Fiction as the best-selling author of the entire 20th century. Her infallible protagonist in most of these is Hercule Poirot, a Belgian amateur detective, whose "little gray cells" always grant him his intellectual success, no matter how intricate his case might be. He has been popularized by the numerous film series inspired by the books. Among his most successful interpreters there have been great cinema actors such as Peter Ustinov, David Suchet.

\(^3\) Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), a remarkable British writer of Scottish descent, and also a distinguished Edinburgh medical doctor: therefore, the writer himself is a romantic double personality. He is the creator of Sherlock Holmes, the amateur detective whose sharp mind would always come out victorious from any case, no matter how obscure. His ingenious use of unexpected clues and his unaltered confidence in logic will always baffle Dr. Watson, his best friend, collaborator and narrator of these adventures within the maze of evil minds. Numerous film series have popularized Sherlock Holmes as a hero who now belongs to cinema-lovers as much as he delights his reading fans all over the world.
Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

1963 after a story by Daphne du Maurier, herself indebted to the American master).

Moreover: fiction writing as well as literary criticism would hardly be acknowledged as respectable professions today without Poe's decisive contribution.

It is strange to think when he had the time to achieve that much in a life-span of barely forty years: the exact contemporary of romantic Polish musician Frederic Chopin (1810-1849), also enthusiastically adopted once by romantic France; and likewise, the contemporary of the romantic Russian writer N. V. Gogol (1809-1852), whose influence upon Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) was no greater than that of Edgar Allan Poe.

Like Columbus, the other favorite protagonist of Todorov's studies, Poe had no patience with ideological clichés: to him democracy was "the tyranny of the mob". Survival is to him a solitary business, and success were only granted within one's mind — if anywhere at all. This skepticism (unless we call it downright pessimism) may stem from the American author's double mentality: that of a worshipper of reason with an Enlightenment cast of mind — his personal myth of "ratiocination" as insistently demonstrated by Dupin, his astute Parisian detective, the prototype of an entire Western detective gallery — and at the same time that of a Gothic master of thrillers and horror stories.

This view of Poe as a writer of the human mind trapped between grotesque nightmares of the irrational (as in his best Gothic short stories and poems) and the idealized triumph of reason, personified by the brilliant detective, has also rendered the romantic American author as a founding father of the Southern Myth. Since the Southern Myth writes the story of mental confinement between the two forces governing poetic imagination: the irrational and the rational, Poe — despite his atypical settings, and although he was not even a Southerner by birth – remains a characteristically Southern author:

And if Cooper1 was the founding father of the Western Myth in literature, even though he never actually saw the prairie, then, even more queerly, Edgar Allan

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1 James Fenimore Cooper (1789 – 1851), celebrated author of The Leatherstocking Tales, telling in five books the prairie adventures of Natty Bumppo, a.k.a. Hawkeye, a.k.a. Leatherstocking – the literary prototype of the Frontier man. The best achievement of the entire cycle is The Last of the Mohicans (1826), in which the tragic friendship between the lonely white hero (Natty Bumppo) and the chief (Chingachgook) of the Mohawk (one of the sacrificed native American tribes) ends up as a meditation upon the chances of the emerging "new nation" confronted with racial (in)tolerance and the ultimate indifference of (human) nature.
Selfhood in-or Poetry

Poe was the founding father of Southern Myth, although he was actually born in Boston and hardly ever used Southern settings in his fiction or his poetry.

(Gray, 2004, 118; my emphasis)

This is the way in which the British scholar Richard Gray portrays E. A. Poe today. Like Todorov’s Columbus revisited in the late 20th century, Gray’s Poe of our early 21st century is of two minds. Detachment in time adds up to the palimpsestic picture; moreover, the projection of the thinker’s self adds up to this picture. And it is the thinker’s (different) national identity which enhances the value of this double detachment (in both time and place): Richard Gray, like Malcolm Bradbury once, is a British scholar; whereas Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian by birth, has been adopted by both his French and American second homelands.

Todorov has proved himself right in his double focus. If it is correct for him to say that somehow we are all modern offspring of Columbus (in a globalized world) – then so is his intuition about Poe, our contemporary (in our return to the fantastic with still some hope in cool intellectual lucidity): Poe’s is a trademark to be detected nowadays in the best of (not only best-selling) world literature and cinema.

Edgar Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, to a couple of young actors, Elizabeth Arnold and David Poe Jr. Before him, there was Henry, his elder brother; after him there was Rosalie, his younger sister. The family dissolved as the father abandoned them, then the mother died of tuberculosis of the lungs, in her mid-twenties. His father is reported to have died too, within a couple of years, in his late-twenties. The three siblings were separately entrusted to foster families, and practically lost touch with each other. Edgar was entrusted to John and Frances Allan, from Richmond, Virginia, who gave him their family name, but never legally adopted him.

The Allans were quite wealthy, which meant for Edgar a good opportunity for studying, especially abroad. He was a precocious creative reader – thus anticipating the writer he would soon become. Thus they spent together five years in Britain, from 1815 to 1820. Young Edgar went to grammar school in Irvine, Scotland; then he attended a boarding school in Chelsea. From 1817

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1 See Richard Gray, Southern Aberrations. Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 2000; and also Richard Gray, A History of American Literature, Blackwell Publishing, 2004. The British scholar is an expert in the vast domain of American literature, with an emphasis on the intricate culture(s) of the Old South. This is what makes his approach of E. A. Poe as a central creative personality of the Southern Myth all the more meaningful.
on he went to Reverend John Bransby’s manor House School at Stoke Newington, not far from London. This last setting must have been also the most impressive, as the Reverend appears with his unaltered real name in “William Wilson”, one of Poe’s most accomplished psychological thriller short stories and his very first to be successfully translated into French already within his lifetime.

His foster father, a Virginian plantation master and slave-owner was also involved in tobacco trading. For a while, luck seemed to be on his side.

For only one year, Edgar Allan attended the University of Virginia as a student of ancient and modern languages and literatures. Judging by Poe’s propensity for precious quoting in foreign languages (both modern and classic) in most of his fiction, we can see now that he was quite fond of his studies. Yet he also became fond of gambling, so that his debts required ever more money – with which his foster father could (or would) no more provide him. Hence their relationship deteriorated. And the young undergraduate had to give up his academic studies.

Thus Poe had to find a job, which was that of a private in the United States Army. In 1827 he published Tamerlane and Other Poems – his first volume of poetry, signed “by a Bostonian”, which went practically unnoticed.

He received his foster father’s support for an appointment to West Point, the United States Military Academy. Before undertaking it, Poe went to Baltimore visiting Maria Clemm, his paternal aunt, and Virginia Clemm, her daughter and first rank cousin. He also met there Henry, his elder brother, and invalid their paternal grandmother. This is the time when a second volume of poetry got issued: Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems (1829).

The West Point interval proved a disappointment. Poe seems to have done all he could to get dismissed from there – which he managed. Thus in the early spring of 1831 he arrived in New York, where his third volume of verse came out, entitled just Poems. He soon returned to Baltimore, just in time to see his brother once more before the latter’s death as a consequence of heavy drinking and poor health.

The only way to earn his living by that he could think of was a professional writer’s career. This is how Poe started writing short stories and contributing articles to the literary magazines of his day. With his quarrelsome difficult temperament and his morbid inclination for heavy drinking, Poe never managed to keep up a job for too long. Yet he was a hard-working editor, a most demanding literary critic – actually the first serious American literary critic, generously praising Nathaniel Hawthorne (in an article called “A Review of Hawthorne’s Twice Told Tales”) and mercilessly accusing Henry Wadsworth Longfellow of plagiarism in the latter’s poetry.
When he was twenty-six, E. A. Poe married Virginia Clemm, his thirteen years old first cousin. This episode (plus its autobiographical projection upon such stories like “Berenice”, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, or such poems like “Annabel Lee”) has inspired a great mid-20th century book: Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita – plus a lot of speculation.

The latter amounts to highlighting a deep sense of solitude and insecurity within the poet’s soul. He certainly could have used a true family atmosphere and moral support in his life. The former amounts to the framing of a typological category for such improbable romances in all American literature to come: the nymphet, i.e. the perfect ephemeral feminine hypostasis, the thirteen year old seducer – herself seduced by the elusiveness of her evanescent age. Whether caused by actual death or by “natural” maturing process, the nymphet miracle is soon afterwards bound to vanish.

Virginia Clemm would soon fall prey to tuberculosis of the lungs, the fatal disease of the age, with so many romantic victims – whether in real life or in literature. She died by the beginning of 1847, after a twelve years’ marriage to the poet.

The year 1839 brings about the first publishing of Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque in two volumes. The previous year had marked The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym first published. In 1843, the detective story “Murders of the Rue Morgue” was first published. Two years thereafter the poetry volume The Raven and Other Poems would bring Poe a well-deserved acknowledgement.

Poe was no stranger to literary success, even if this did not occur from the start of his short but dense literary career. He did conquer the critical acclaim of James Russell Lowell, who saw in Poe a man of “some genius.” Some of his short stories were translated into French right after they had been first published in the United States (e.g. “William Wilson”). He was glorified by his contemporary French readers – whether professionals or amateurs.

The French Symbolists exalted E.A. Poe as a spiritual master of their movement; it was Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) who discovered and championed Poe ever since the latter’s lifetime (around 1847), and then translated Poe into French for the first time ever, referring to him as to a “soul-mate” who had made “profound discoveries about the human heart”. It was Stephane Mallarmé (1842-1898) who wrote the sonnet “Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe”, in veneration of the archetypal poet. Tribute was paid to Poe also by Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), even in his proclaiming the musical character of poetry.

His final achievement was “Eureka: A Prose Poem,” an essay published in 1848, one year before his death. The essay foretold the Big Bang theory by
This is his favorite work, which he preferred to regard as that of a visionary poet rather than that of a scholar.

Yet Poe died misunderstood and truly doomed, under the most sordid and obscure circumstances. Found unconscious somewhere in Baltimore, on October 3, 1849, he was taken to hospital, where he died on October 7, early in the morning. No coherent account from him could explain such sudden moral and physical disintegration. Lately there has been some speculation that – there being a presidential election campaign in full swing at the time – he might have been intoxicated with alcohol, and then forced to vote for a candidate he disliked; or even forced to vote several times, against his wish.

In itself, Poe's life (and in death) story is rich in puzzling melodrama, mystery, and detective fiction aspects – as if in some hallucinatory mirror of his own fiction and poems. Moreover, the poet's own personal inconclusive ending ironically echoes his lifelong disdain for the games of democracy – or "the tyranny of the mob", as he used to call it.

And, much as he may have disagreed with his utopian contemporaries, the self-called Transcendentalists (whom Poe would rather call "Frog-Pondians," alluding to Walden Pond) – he oddly shared their attitude towards the main issues of their times of crisis. By defiantly refusing to pay his poll-tax, Henry David Thoreau denied and denounced the same system of a democracy only worthy of his "Civil Disobedience."

And that happened exactly at the time when Poe was dying: during the same election year 1849.

a) Poe's After-Life Poem: *Annabel Lee*

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of ANNABEL LEE;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child;
In this kingdom by the sea;
But we loved with a love that was more than love –
I and my ANNABEL LEE –
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling