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Poe's Aesthetics and American Modernism

Agnieszka Soltysik

This paper will explore some of the ways unexamined assumptions about gender can inform criticism and aesthetic judgement. My focus will be on Edgar Allan Poe and the way in which hostility or suspicion about the value of his work is often couched in the language of psychosexual normativity. For example, Eliot describes his writing as "puerile" and "slipshod," James describes Poe as lacking in seriousness and fit for people at a "primitive" stage of reflection, and Aldous Huxley describes Poe's poetry as the textual equivalent of "wearing rings on every finger." My point of departure then is the observation that these male modernists appear to be reacting to what they perceive as a failed performance of masculinity, defined implicitly as maturity, dignity, and above all, self-mastery. I will use the example of Poe as a point of entry into the question of modernist aesthetics in general and the gender politics that inform them in the context of American literature. A corollary concern will be the New Criticism and its reconfiguration of German and French modern aesthetic theory into the cultural context of early twentieth century America (the period in which negative critical reception of Poe peaked).

The larger issue framing this essay is that of the state of aesthetic theory today, but I will begin for reasons that will be clear by the end of this essay by looking at Poe's complicated relationship to American modernism. It is now generally acknowledged that "American modernism," like "modernism" itself, was a much more complex and contradictory phenomenon than the singular term implies. One speaks now of "American *modernisms*." This essay is meant to contribute to an understanding of some of the overlooked fractures within American modernism by examining how Poe was read by several of its key figures. To be schematic about it, this reception broke down into two different camps: there were those who scoffed at Poe and called him immature, juvenile and vulgar (such as Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Yvor Winters and the

English writer Aldous Huxley), and there were those who admired him and took him seriously (such as Willa Cather and William Carlos Williams). I will propose that one of the subtexts in the negative reception of Poe was related to the gender politics of American modernism. By this I refer to the premium it placed on masculinity and the masculinization of the profession of writer-artist.[1] I will also propose that the dramatically different responses Poe inspired point to unexamined differences within modernism regarding the nature of the aesthetic experience. To put it quite simply, Poe brings into focus what we can call the *asceticism* of some modernists and the more *sensualist* aesthetics of others. The final objective of this essay will be an invitation to rethink some of our assumptions, many of which we have derived from modernism, about the experience of what we call "the aesthetic."

I will begin with a truism that is found in most textbooks these days, namely, that Poe represents the earliest and one of the few American examples of aestheticism, the idea of "art for art's sake." Although the aesthetic movement called *l'art pour l'art* is associated with Théophile Gautier and his circle of bohemian friends in France in the 1830s, it can (and should) be traced back to Emmanuel Kant's Third Critique and the privileged place he gives to aesthetic judgement as a mediation between Pure and Practical reason (the subject of the first and second critiques, respectively) and as a bridge between the material world and the "Transcendental." The aesthetic experience – especially that of the sublime even more than that of the beautiful – intimated the existence of a higher spiritual realm. During the "play of the mental powers" that the aesthetic judgement mobilizes, the subject feels an intuition of a higher "finality" or purpose of human life (*The Critique of Judgment* 71). The true aesthetic experience, as many of us learned as students, is that of "disinterested contemplation." It should give us pause that this term never actually occurs as such in Kant's work (coming rather from later popularizers of Kant's work), even though the notion of disinterestedness (an

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[1] An important essay on Poe's subversive treatment of masculinity is David Leverenz's "Poe and Gentry Virginia." Paul Lauter's discussion of how Melville was canonized in the 1920s in *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park* also helps us to understand why Poe was a more difficult figure for American modernists to embrace. Lauter argues that Melville's South Sea adventures, whaling ships, and overwhelmingly male-focused prose made him represent a male artist that heroically resisted the feminizing corruptions of commercial authorship, while Poe seemed too close to feminized mass culture in his journalism and his more accessible fiction.

attitude untainted by personal interest or utilitarian considerations) clearly is important to Kant.

This insistence on disinterestedness, so important to modernist aesthetics, can be historicized by reading Kant in the context of his own historical and cultural moment. For example, eighteenth-century philosophers often wrestled with the problem of relativism in taste, and it is clear from their writings that European contact with colonial cultural "Others" was one of the triggers for this crisis of aesthetic judgement. In the case of Kant, the figure that haunts the Third Critique is the Iroquois who comes to Paris and likes nothing so much as the restaurants (Third Critique 43). The implication is that Europe's magnificent churches and peerless artistic production fail to impress the "savage" as much as a good meal because it gives him more direct pleasure. This passing reference to Native Americans is undeveloped, but its rhetorical force should not be underestimated. The point that Kant wants to make is that the uncultured person cannot rise above his personal bodily pleasures and appreciate something in a wholly abstract and impersonal way.

Another way to historicize Kant's preoccupation with disinterestedness is to read it in the context of the cultural values being promulgated by the burgeoning merchant middle class. In this reading, Kant can be said to have privileged the aesthetic as a form of resistance to the logic of interest and industry. Its very language, for example the "*play* of mental faculties," suggests its oppositional function to the consolidating middle class ethic of work, seriousness, and profit. The concept of play would become very important for certain German Romantics, notably Schiller, who was an important influence on Poe. Schiller developed the concept of play in art to a value in itself, and advocated especially (in defiance of classical aesthetics) the mixing of genres and tones in order to create more complex situations of aesthetic play. I mention this because it will become important for understanding Poe's mixing of tone, especially of the gothic and the comic, as in "The Raven."

For now, I want to continue my genealogy of the aesthetic by reminding readers how the Art for Art's Sake movement in France arose as a fierce reaction against capitalism. Gautier and his circle used the *l'art pour l'art* slogan not so much as a fleshed-out aesthetic theory, but, as one critic puts it, as "a rallying cry" for artists who "felt the need to express their hatred of bourgeois mercantilism and vulgar utilitarianism" (Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* 45). Gautier wrote in his preface to

Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835) that "il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui peut server à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid" (Calinescu 45). While this is rooted in Kant's Romanticism, it takes things much further than Kant. It is not an ideal of disinterestedness so much as an aggressive assertion of art's gratuitousness, its total resistance to the logic of profit and use-value. The famous slogan to emerge from Gautier's circle was "épater le bourgeois" or "shock the middle class." The aesthetic experience Gautier favoured was not contemplation, disinterested or otherwise, but an electric jolt to the sensibilities of the bourgeois subject. Many modern art and anti-art movements such as Dada, Surrealism and various kinds of *avant-garde* have returned to the concept of shock as an aesthetic. The discourse around the need to startle or appal the audience was always that of "awakening" the bourgeois subject out of his or her capitalist false consciousness, complacency or ideological dream-sleep.

One of the many paradoxes of modernity and modernism is that the very autonomy of the aesthetic sphere may have in fact been a necessary and logical component of the way capitalism functions as an ideological system. This has been the theory advanced by critics such as Terry Eagleton. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), Eagleton argues that modern art's apparent indifference to practical life served in fact to clear the way for commercial and capitalist ideology to take over all aspects of practical culture, including ironically much that is artistic (such as the stage, publishing, cinema, and so on). In this view, the concept of the autonomy of art was a necessary precondition for the total domination of society by the logic and practice of profit and consumption. In short, the relationship between art and capitalism, or culture and economics, in modernity can best be described as a complex and paradoxical dialectic of resistance and collaboration.

No writer raises these issues of aesthetics and commercialism and their ambivalent interpenetration more tellingly and effectively than Edgar Allan Poe. A Kantian in many respects, a contemporary of Gautier's, a consummately professional artist, unique among his American contemporaries for his concern with the aesthetic specificity of literature, Poe was also a commercial writer. He worked for a living, often paid by the line or number words, obliged to write innumerable reviews of just about every kind of book printed at the time, and always in the context of commercial literary journalism. Having the misfortune to live through one of the worst financial crises of the century (that of 1837), he saw his dream of founding an independent literary magazine crash with the

economy. This, more than anything else, including his much exaggerated drinking problem, was the real reason Poe lived and died in soul-crushing poverty. Given his position as professional and commercial writer, what does it mean to say that Poe advocated aestheticism or art for art's sake? Taken in the immediate context of American Romanticism and antebellum literary culture, it meant first and foremost that Poe felt that art should not be judged primarily in terms of its capacity to teach and uplift. In "Philosophy of Composition" (1846), this is expressed in the argument that Beauty is an "elevation of the soul – *not* of intellect, or of heart" (*Essays and Reviews* 16). In other words, the beautiful is not meant to instruct ("elevate the intellect") or make people feel better ("elevate the heart"), specifications that must be understood in the context of the prevailing antebellum taste for didactic and sentimental art. But what does it mean to "elevate the soul"? What is the "soul" as opposed to the "intellect"? By distinguishing it from the rational and the sentimental, Poe implies that there is yet another kind of feeling or emotion that is stimulated by art, something that is perhaps related to the spirit. Whatever it is, the aesthetic experience is clearly some kind of mental sensation.

Looking at Poe's critical work as a whole, one word appears more often than any other in conjunction to the aesthetic: "effect." For example, the full sentence in "Philosophy of Composition" reads: "When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect – they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of soul – *not* of intellect, or of heart – upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating 'the beautiful'" (*Essays and Reviews* 16). In other words, the "elevation of the soul" is an "effect," and an "intense and pure" one. Yet, there is something circular about this definition (of the "elevation of soul" as "effect," and of "effect" as an intense and pure elevation of soul).

In order to understand better what Poe meant by "effect," we must begin by noting that Poe understands the respective aesthetic objectives and effects of prose and of poetry as distinct. In prose, and more specifically, in the short story, the effect of a text is related to its climax or *dénouement*. When Poe says that every line of a story should contribute to its effect, he really means that every detail of the story should be helping to set up the dramatic impact of the ending. If one thinks of all the best-known and widely anthologized Poe stories, this is clearly a common denominator: "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Ligeia" and "Ber-

enice." All depend on the shock factor of a final cataclysmic revelation: Madeleine arriving at the door, Rowena's blond hair turning black as Ligeia possesses her body, or the teeth falling out of the narrator's box and onto the floor in "Berenice." This last example is unparalleled in demonstrating Poe's purpose: the narrator's absurd description of the teeth as "thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances" obliges the reader to "decode" and therefore recognize the teeth him or herself, giving the revelation all the more immediacy and force for having occurred in the reader's mind. This recognition is thus the occasion for the *frisson* or thrill that Poe developed as the *sine qua non* of the short story.

Let us examine this sensational effect for a moment. On the surface of things, it does not seem to have much to do with the disinterested contemplation described by Kant. And indeed, this is precisely what Yvor Winters will take Poe to task for in the 1930s.[2] Winters reproaches Poe with failing to "understand the moral basis of art" and with seeing art as "a kind of stimulant, ingeniously concocted, which may, if one is lucky, raise one to a moment of divine delusion" (Winters 123). But in the 1830s, when Poe is writing, the thrilling effect of his short fiction could seem to Poe as the very essence of the aesthetic effect postulated by Kant. Kant had not yet become identified with an absence of emotion, which is the specific reading of Kant's aesthetic that has become commonplace in the twentieth century and which we owe to the way modernism privileged lack of affect as a way of distinguishing its aesthetics from the sentimental fiction and art that dominated the nineteenth century. In the 1830s, Kant represented something else besides a lack of emotion: he represented seeing art as important in itself and as divorced from thought and usefulness and morality, but *not* as divorced from feeling. In fact, the aesthetic was for Kant and for the Romantics a kind of feeling, but a specific one: it was, more precisely, a specific kind of excitement. Thus, for Poe, good art *is* like a stimulant.

It might help to recall that the aesthetic was never opposed to bodily sensation in classical or Renaissance aesthetic theory. In fact, the Greek word *aisthesis* refers not to the domain of conceptual experience, but to sensual perception.[3] In short, aesthetics is etymologically rooted in bodily experience. Looked at it this way, the thrill or *frisson* created by a Poe story is not a vulgar departure from the aesthetic but one of its most realized instances.

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[2] Yvor Winters, "Edgar Allan Poe".

[3] Based on Terry Eagleton's discussion in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 13.

Poe elevated the sensational ending to a master formula for short fiction, and indeed, is generally credited with having thereby invented or at least consolidated the form of the modern short story. Two paradoxical things can be said about this formula. One is that it bears a more than superficial resemblance to the *l'art pour l'art* movement, notably in the desire to shock or startle the middle class reader ("épater le bourgeois"). Not only does Poe subordinate every other consideration in the creative process to the production of an aesthetic effect, he also creates his effect by undeniably shocking means: gruesome violence, torture, bodily disintegration or substitution, mutilation, and so on. Moreover, critics have noted the fiercely parodic nature of Poe's endings in relation to the most sacred orthodoxies of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, especially that of the beloved hero or heroine dying in bed surrounded by grieving friends. This iconic image from sentimental culture is the subject of Poe's relentless subversion, from Ligeia's occult desecration of Rowena's deathbed to the gruesome mesmeric experiments on Mr. Valdemar which result in his being transformed at the end into a gruesome puddle of putrefaction.[4]

What makes Poe's aesthetic of the sensational ending even more paradoxical is the fact that it is the result of consummately commercial considerations. I mentioned earlier that Poe wrote fiction mainly because it paid better than poetry; the short story was for Poe a means of making a livelihood by writing other than journalism and reviews. It was the only way of writing *creatively* and being paid for it, and the sensational ending was mainly an extension of that logic. In fact, the dramatic ending was the solution that Poe found to an authorial dilemma that has only recently come to be appreciated, namely, the heterogeneous composition of his audience. Terence Whalen's monograph on Poe's relation to the literary marketplace is particularly instructive on this point. In *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (1999), Whalen demonstrates through archival analysis of subscription receipts and similar documents that the subscribers of the magazine for which Poe wrote spanned different regions, classes, and educational levels. Part of the Poe legend for a long time was the myth that Poe despised the masses and was himself despised by them, exemplifying the American version of the *poète maudit*, the misunderstood and mistreated Romantic artist. Although Poe had his detractors as well as his admirers in the 1830s and 40s, he was no

[4] See, for example, Jonathan Elmer's "Terminate or Liquidate" in Rosenheim and Rachman, eds.

alienated poet holed up in his alcove writing to future generations. On the contrary, Poe was wholly immersed in the literary and cultural life of his time, writing on various subjects for various journals and for a demographically wide audience. Most of the journals he worked for attempted to create marketing identities that straddled the North and South and aimed at something like national circulation (which Whalen uses to buttress his argument about the circumspect nature of most of Poe's printed comments about slavery). Even more importantly, these magazines were obliged to appeal to a wider audience than the *literati* of the period, soliciting and sustaining subscriptions from a wide swath of middle class and literate (but not *cultivated*) readers.

It is instructive that Poe distinguishes in his criticism between the tastes of the masses (by which he means this broad base of middle class readers) and the tastes of what he calls the "literary people" (*Essays and Reviews* 871). For example, in an 1845 review of his own *Tales,* Poe notes that "the literary people" enjoyed "The Fall of the House of Usher," while "the mass" enjoyed the more suspenseful "The Gold-Bug" or "Murders in the Rue Morgue." The explanation he offers for the difference is that the more popular stories rely on "unbroken interest, [and] novelty," while the "Fall of the House of Usher" has a "grand and impressive "dénôument [sic]" (*Essays and Reviews* 870). In other words, the two stories more popular with "the masses" sustain interest in a more consistent way throughout the narrative while "Usher" appeals to more refined readers who can bear the long build-up in which nothing much happens until the very end. However, as Poe stresses here and in other critical essays, *both* audiences shared an appreciation for the sensational or climactic ending.

Thus, the solution for bridging the gap between this otherwise disparate public is to emphasize the lowest common denominator of successful effect: the dramatic climax. In this respect, it could be argued that Poe's aesthetics in the short story are not only commercial, but also consummately democratic. The taste of the "literary people" for a long build-up and sensational ending is coupled with the way Poe's stories are written to be widely accessible and understandable. In 1842, Poe wrote in a review of Longfellow that "every work of art should contain within itself all that is requisite for its own comprehension" (*Essays and Reviews* 691). Although Poe has been faulted for being difficult to understand, and Yvor Winters goes so far as to call him an "obscurantist," this is all the more ironic considering Poe is often dismissed by the same

critics for writing for adolescent boys, that is, for being too facile and obvious. It seems to me that Poe's reputation for juvenile fiction is indicative of something so obvious that has been overlooked: his ability to make linguistically sophisticated and powerful tales that are almost universally accessible. Though often intensely ironic because of their use of unreliable narrators, Poe's short stories are nevertheless generally understandable by the least sophisticated of readers.

I have discussed Poe's theory of aesthetic effect in the short story up to now. I want to turn to Poe's aesthetics of verse for a moment. Although he also often incorporated a kind of dramatic structure that led up to a climactic ending in his poems, and we see this clearly in "The Conqueror Worm" and "The Raven," a sensational ending is not the main effect that he strives for in his poetry. Instead, like the Symbolists that followed after him in France, Poe considered an effect of musical and suggestive indefiniteness as the highest objective of poetry. Poe saw poetry as a kind of music created by words, in which sound outweighs sense in importance. Thus, the aesthetic effect created by poetry had little to do with its literal or even figurative meaning, but everything to do with its rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, euphony and sound. For Poe, the beauty and pleasure of poetry is not an intellectual experience so much as a sensuous one. For example, in "The Rationale of Verse" (1848), Poe distinguishes Beauty from Truth and Passion, and insists that the latter two must always be subservient to the former, which is "the atmosphere and the essence of the poem" (*Essays and Reviews* 17).

We can turn for a moment to Poe's popular masterpiece, "The Raven" (1845), in order to appreciate how this works. Anyone who has read or heard this poem will remember its catchy rhythm, its irresistible repetition of trochees, and its refrain, the word "Nevermore." A recent critic has argued that the powerful trochaic rhythm of the poem actually undermines the comprehensibility of the poem. According to Richard Godden, we may hear, but cannot "listen to what the poem says" because the rhythm displaces attention from the meaning (Godden 997). In my view, Godden exaggerates the poem's hypnotic power, but the fact remains that "The Raven" owes much of its success to its sound effects. In this respect, it is comparable to Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1859), Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" (1871), and the larger European context of early modernism concerned with exploring the power and playfulness of the *sound* of poetry.

Placing "The Raven" in the company of Rossetti's pseudo-nursery rhyme and Carroll's nonsense poem brings into focus an aspect of Poe's poem that has been a perennial stumbling block for critics: its silliness or self-irony. Critics have frequently resorted to the word "ludicrous" when searching for a way to describe the poem's failure to maintain a properly serious sense of itself. Poe himself uses this word in "Philosophy of Composition" to describe the raven's entrance into the room, acknowledging that he is treading a fine line between the fantastic and the facetious. Modern readers sometimes imagine that Poe's contemporaries took the poem more seriously than twentieth-century readers, but it seems clear from reviews that the poem has always been read as an exquisite mixture of the melancholic, the gothic and the absurd.

This curious combination can be approached in a number of different ways. One that I mentioned earlier would be to read Poe in the context of German Romantic theory and the premium placed on play and genre-mixing by critics such as Schiller and the two Schlegel brothers. For example, Friedrich Schlegel identifies the combination of burlesque with tragedy as a particularly effective combination:

> There is a kind of bizarreness of enthusiasm that is compatible with the greatest refinement and freedom, and that not only intensifies tragedy but makes it beautiful, and, as it were, deifies it: like Goethe's *Bride of Corinth*, which is an epoch in the history of poetry. What moves one in that work lacerates and nevertheless is seductively fascinating. Some parts could almost be called burlesque, and it is precisely in these parts that the horrible seems overwhelmingly great. ("Fragments" 730)

Schlegel argues that the "burlesque" or "bizarre" moments in Goethe's poem not only do not detract from its tragic effect, but intensify it, make it more beautiful, and "deify" it (which, for a Romantic like Schlegel, probably means "more spiritual" or "transcendental"). Poe's work is replete with such moments, and nowhere more so than in "The Raven."

Jonathan Elmer's reading of "The Raven" proposes that the poem deconstructs its own aesthetic effects as it performs them. Elmer argues that the poem deliberately produces an effect of excessive artificiality in order to demystify the process of how poems generate meaning and create the illusion of authenticity, truth, and coherence as formal effects of language (Elmer 212). One of the strengths of Elmer's reading is that it tries to account for the suspicious and radically mixed reception of the

poem, especially the way it has been accused of being worthless kitsch. It is the "jingle" Whitman was undoubtedly thinking of when he called Poe a "jingle man." The word "jingle" itself is simply another synonym for kitsch, implying art that is commercial: easy to consume, catchy and superficial. This is how detractors of Poe have often read "The Raven," as the work of a childish mind, a case of arrested development – or, alternatively, as the work of a con-man, a cynical literary P. T. Barnum, whose texts are traps and hoaxes rather than serious art.

With the concept of kitsch, I have jumped from the 1830s to the turn of the twentieth century, because it is really with modernism that the whole question of high art and commercial art, or true art and kitsch, becomes one of the central axes of aesthetic thought. Here I arrive at the main concern of this essay, which is the curiously polarized reception that Poe had at the hands of the American modernists. Unlike Anglo-American modernists, the French did not feel any great ambivalence about Poe. On the contrary, thanks to Baudelaire's efforts in the 1840s and 50s, Poe has enjoyed a popularity and esteem in France that was unimaginable in the United States. Mallarmé translated and published "The Raven" in 1875 with Edouard Manet's illustrations. Paul Verlaine credited Poe's "Eureka" with being the text that changed his life when he was a young man. And Poe's cultural capital on the other side of the Atlantic only rose higher with the arrival of Modernism proper at the turn of the century. A phenomenon that can only be called Poe-mania swept France and continental Europe: Paul Gauguin, Alfred Kubin, Georg Grosz, Max Ernst and René Magritte are among the best known of the innumerable modernists who expressed an admiration, enthusiasm, or simply a huge debt to Poe and his work.

In contrast to this appreciation and adulation, English and American critics remained cautious or contemptuous about Poe's work, claiming to be mystified by Poe's great favour abroad. I will begin by quoting three of the most arresting examples:

> For American readers, furthermore, Baudelaire is compromised by his having made himself the apostle of our own Edgar Poe: "[I]t seems to us that *to take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness* one's self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly *primitive* stage of reflection. (My italics; Henry James 209)

> Poe is indeed *a stumbling block for the judicious critic.* If we examine his work in detail, we seem to find in it nothing but *slipshod* writing, *puerile* thinking unsupported by wide reading or profound scholarship, *haphazard* experiments

> in various types of writing, chiefly under pressure of financial need, without perfection in any detail. (My italics; T. S. Eliot 263)

> They [Poe's stories] are all studies in *hysteria*; they are written for *the sake of the hysteria*. . . . For the rest we are met on every page of his poetry with such *resounding puerilities* as the "pallid bust of Pallas," and the "viol, the violet, and the vine." (My italics; Yvor Winters 132)

All three critics reproach Poe for immaturity and a lack of seriousness: "primitive stage of reflection," "puerile thinking," "puerilities." More specifically, he is accused of lacking proper self-control: his writing is "haphazard," "slipshod" and "hysterical." One way to read these male modernists' reactions to Poe is in terms of some kind of gender panic. By accusing Poe of not being mature, masterful, serious and adult, they are accusing him of not being a *man*. Paul Lauter has suggested that "nothing was more important" to American intellectuals of the 1920s than "masculinizing American culture," and especially the figure of the writer (Lauter 217). According to Lauter, Melville was canonized at precisely this moment because he was perceived as difficult, uncompromising toward his audience, and "a densely allusive composer whose precious treasures would be yielded up, as with other modernist texts, only to learned initiates" (Lauter 217). In this critical context privileging textual resistance and opacity, Poe's highly accessible poetry and prose could only be seen as the sub-literary pyrotechnics of a callow interloper in the house of letters.

However, there were two sides of the Anglo-American modernist reception of Poe. For example, English playwright George Bernard Shaw argued that Poe's is the first name in the American Pantheon and credited Poe with creating a "world-record for the English language" in his short stories (Shaw 220-221). Willa Cather wrote in 1895 that Poe was "our only master of pure prose" and, with the exception of Lowell, "our only great poet" (Cather 204). Finally, in 1925, William Carlos Williams wrote in his collection of essays, *In the American Grain*:

> Poe's work strikes by its scrupulous originality, *not* "originality" in the bastard sense, but in its legitimate sense of solidity which goes back to the ground, a conviction that he *can* judge for himself.

> Poe gives the sense for the first time in America, that literature is *serious*, not a matter of courtesy or truth.

> Poe was unsophisticated, when contrasted with the puerile sophistications of a Lowell. It is a beginning he has in mind, a juvenescent *local* literature. (216-217)

Here we have, almost point by point, a refutation of the charges against Poe by Williams' modernist contemporaries. Where Eliot and James see immaturity, Williams sees solid and independent judgement. Where they see frivolousness, Williams sees the first seriousness in American literature. Where they see puerility, Williams sees a foundational gesture, a clearing of the ground in order to make way for a new literature.

One could just attribute Williams' admiration and Eliot's and James' rejection of Poe to personal taste and leave it at that. However, I want to explore a possible avenue of speculation by going back to the question of aesthetics. In this framework, something that emerges as a common denominator among James, Eliot and Winters is a conviction that literature has a profoundly moral and intellectual function and that the proper aesthetic response therefore is one of intellectual contemplation. Winters describes poetry as a "refined and enriched technique of moral comprehension" and repeatedly describes its ideal effect as creating some sort of "moral sublimity" (Winters, "Edgar Allan Poe" 122-123). The trouble with Poe, Winters argues, is "traceable to Poe's failure to understand the moral basis of art, to his view of art as a kind of stimulant, ingeniously concocted, which may, if one is lucky, raise one to a moment of divine delusion" (125). Winters objects to the idea of art as a stimulant, and takes Poe to task in particular for seeing style and subject matter in a poem as inseparable or even appearing to favour style over subject matter, insisting instead that the proper aesthetic attitude is one of intelligent attention to what a poem actually says. I grant that Winters should not be taken as a spokesman for all modernists, or even for Eliot and James, who would probably feel uncomfortable with Winters' moralism in these quotations. However, if we look at Eliot's and James' work, we do find a preference for the ironic and detached reception of art, an attention to the minutiae of moral psychology, and a distinct unease with the body and its pleasures. There is no better illustration of this than "The Waste Land" and its discomfort with sexuality and women, its homophobia, and its conception of salvation as a vast library.

It is a commonplace of modernist studies that poets like Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams wrote in reaction to "The Waste Land." It is generally understood that what they objected to in that brilliant and

influential poem was its pessimism about modernity. Hart Crane, for example, supposedly wrote *The Bridge* (1932) to counter Eliot's dark view of the modern urban landscape with a celebration of the beauty and vital, synthetic and symbolic power of the Brooklyn Bridge. Similarly, Williams wrote *Paterson* (1946-1958) in order to refute the idea of the modern city as a waste land with a lovingly detailed verse epic of the daily life of a mid-sized industrial town.

What is less obvious about Crane's and Williams' difference from Eliot is that there is also a different aesthetic theory behind their work. If Eliot means his poem to be a refuge of civilized intelligence against modern barbarism, both Crane and Williams see poetry and the aesthetic experience as more sensuous, sensual, concrete, fleshy and asking something different from the reader besides ironic and disinterested contemplation. Crane, for example, asks his readers to use something else besides their reason. His opacity and densely packed metaphors oblige readers to confront the materiality of the poem itself, and to intuit rather than decipher the meaning of its opaque language.

Williams' sensuousness is very different from Crane's, and does not lie in the thickness or difficulty of his poetic language. On the contrary, Williams is an easy and pleasurable read, and his love of the senses expresses itself in a certain epicurean sensibility that permeates his work. A good example is "This Is Just to Say":

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

The poem playfully takes the form of a note left on a refrigerator or kitchen table. In describing the deliciousness, sweetness and coldness of the plums, the poem assumes a shared understanding of the sensuous

pleasures of food. The speaker confesses having given in to the irresistible desire to eat the plums and asks the reader (addressee) for forgiveness by trying to express how good they were. The last stanza attempts to conjure up the sensation of the deliciousness of cold, sweet plums in the reader. Such pure, naked, guiltless sensuality is hard to imagine in Eliot's or James' work.

Willa Cather's previously quoted article on Poe is similarly sympathetic to an aesthetics of sensation and emotion. Cather asks:

> Where lived another man who could blend the beautiful and the horrible, the gorgeous and the grotesque in such an intricate and inexplicable fashion? Who could delight you with his noun and disgust you with his verb, thrill you with his adjective and chill you with his adverb, make you run the whole gamut of human emotions in a single sentence? ("Edgar Allan Poe" 204)

Cather's point here is that Poe was a "mighty master of the organ of language" and could create a whole range of emotional effects with precision. What is striking in this passage is the underlying assumption that such diverse emotional effects as delight, disgust, thrills and chills (all very physical), are the legitimate province of literary aesthetics. In this Cather differs pointedly from other modernists who wished to disentangle serious literature from the bodily pleasures offered by popular entertainment (of which there is no better illustration than the scorn Huxley heaps on the multi-sensory "feelies" in *Brave New World*).

To recapitulate, I am suggesting that there were modernists who valued primarily an aesthetics of irony and detachment, and there were modernists who valued an aesthetics of sensation. This brings me to my final point, which is that the field of aesthetics, that is, the study of the experience unique to our responsiveness to art objects, is woefully undertheorized. When we look at how little has been added to the subject since Kant's Third Critique, we begin to understand how extraordinary his attempt was to isolate and scrutinize the attitude, state of mind or pleasurable attention that is specific to human responsiveness to works of art.

Nevertheless, extraordinary as his achievement was, I would suggest that we have taken certain aspects of Kant's aesthetic theory, such as disinterestedness and inutility, too seriously for too long. As I proposed earlier, these concepts should be read historically as part of a backlash against the capitalist values of self-interest and use-value which seemed

to be taking over all aspects of cultural life. The desire to free art from the logic of instrumentalism and subjectivity is a laudable one, and literary critics have been correct in valuing it, but perhaps we have overestimated disinterestedness and autonomy while overlooking other things that art can make us feel and do. Maybe by remaining suspicious and dismissive of the emotional and social effects of the aesthetic we have undermined our ability to think critically about any effects besides the most abstract. It is true that recent years have seen what is called sometimes the return of the aesthetic, a reaction to the insistently ideological and sociological concerns of cultural studies and its many sister disciplines. But has the new aesthetic turn really brought a better understanding of aesthetic experience? Much of it seems to be a defensive retreat into the old fortifications, reinvesting critical energy into the notions of quality, value and other ways of distinguishing "good" art from "bad" or commercial art. This focus on "quality" simply plays into the hands of disciplines such as anthropology, whose scholars would deny the existence of the aesthetic experience as a distinct experience, subsuming it instead to other forms of tribal identity assertion such as sport, class and religion.

Yet, assuming that there is something specific that occurs when we read or look at a work of art, it seems that we are curiously inarticulate about it. Channelling my final question through Williams' enigmatic modernist master-poem, I wonder why, if "so much depends/upon/a red wheel/barrow/glazed with rain/water/beside the white/chickens," then why do we have so few words for it besides Kant's two favourite ("beautiful" and "sublime")? This brief look at Poe's emotional aesthetics and its violently ambivalent reception by Anglo-American modernism is offered as an invitation to rethink the asceticism of our notions of the aesthetic.

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