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THE STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Among the few facets of Poe's life and works that have not been cohesively examined, one, strangely enough, is the way in which he put his stories and poems together. Possibly the reason is because they appear so seamless and spontaneous, little thought is given to the fact that they are constructs, products of the human mind rather than performances spun out of thin air. Poe encouraged the belief that he cold-bloodedly and scientifically welded his works into a unity by starting with an idea and then devised a system of words and concepts which best suited his needs of the moment and allowed him to create whatever given *effect* he might have in mind. Yet an analysis of his works as they stand in print gives the lie to any such inference: craftsman he was indeed, but from one work to the next he employed a stock vocabulary that provided him with the necessary inspiration to keep his story or poem moving and maintain its balance and momentum. This vocabulary acted like a magic incantation in providing him with the inspiration with which to follow through in his writing, the hypnagogic spell cast by this particularized language not only enabling him to mold his poems and tales into a deft and seemingly unified whole, but also permitting him to create endless variations on essentially limited themes.

If fact and fancy do not exactly jibe in Poe's creations, however, his artistry reflects the functionings of an avid and extremely acute mind whose sensibility was forever laboring to polish and refine whatever concept or idea was momentarily absorbing his thoughts. Although frequently advanced suggestions that Poe was a philosophically reasoned thinker, a symbolist or an allegorist are attitudes, as I endeavor to show, that will not hold up under the light of scrutiny for long, as a craftsman and master manipulator of words he must be acknowledged as a genius of the very first rank. In these pages I endeavor to show, too, the various technical devices he used in his writing, how these mechanical tools of his trade enabled him to write as he did, and what were the results as a

finished product. In addition, from what Poe had become as an artist by the time of his death, I also speculate how his career might have evolved had he lived on – a sorry and nugatory task, no doubt, although none the less a fascinating exercise in the might-have-been.

I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness for the origins of this study to members of one of my graduate seminars at the University of Akron, since they served as unwitting guinea pigs during the unfolding of many of the ideas expressed in these pages. My indebtedness to the torrent of genial insights expressed by Edward Davidson in his masterful investigation, *Poe: A Critical Study*, are of course evident at every turn. I am also indebted to the liberal contribution made to this work by my colleagues at Northern Michigan University, with a special debt of gratitude to Professor Royce Willman.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
I. Poe as Symbolist	9
II. The Musical Moment	25
III. The Later Poems	47
IV. The Poe Vocabulary	63
V. The Major Themes	85
VI. The Poe Hero	117
VII. Arthur Gordon Pym	143
VIII. "Annabel Lee" and "Hop-Frog"	155
IX. "Ulalume" and Some Conclusions	177
Bibliography	185
Index	187

I

POE AS SYMBOLIST

The one critical statement most contemporary critics would not object to about Poe is that he was a symbolist. It is virtually the only remark about Poe on which any two critics seem to see eye to eye, but since it is the observation that appears least inclined to occasion critical controversy, it at least provides a starting point for a discussion of his art.

If other aspects of Poe's creativity lead to explainable conclusions, these tend to be so flamboyantly extravagant or vitriolically hyperbolic that oftentimes one wonders if it is one and the same author critics are dealing with in their remarks about his life, his influence, and his artistry. Not only are Poe's aesthetics widely regarded as disputable, disreputable, or both, the tendency when analyzing his plot structures is to accuse him of celebrating the morbid and grotesque and extolling the satanic and perverse. Many initially enthusiastic commentators end by sadly concluding that Poe was actually insane, while others would have us believe that he was prevented from saying what he wanted to say either because of irrevocable misfortune or irremediable dissipation.

Known to fate and history as the *poète maudit*, that he was a symbolist may not of course be the only point about Poe on which critics are in happy agreement, but since so few other opinions about him match it in unanimity, let us examine the meaning of the term in a spirit of cautious suspicion before we proceed further. Possibly symbolist is applied to Poe so willingly because he is thereby so felicitously installed cheek to jowl with his contemporaries in American Romantic literature. Hawthorne provides as good a connection as any, better than Emerson, Thoreau, or Melville, since his and Poe's interests in the uncanny and occult are remarkably alike. In his "Custom House" introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne discusses the significance of the symbol as related to his fascinated discovery of a piece of cloth woven in the shape of the letter A. "My eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside. Certainly, there was some deep meaning in

it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind."

Richard Chase reminds us that "Hawthorne spoke of 'allegory' where we would speak of 'symbolism.'"¹ We shall see the observation is equally applicable that Hawthorne was not alone in speaking of symbolism where we might speak of allegory. Here the distinction is no problem, since we are concerned with the *manner* of Hawthorne's remarking on the scarlet letter's significance.

While thus perplexed, – and cogitating, among other hypotheses, whether the letter might not have been one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive, in order to take the eyes of Indians, – I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me, – the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word, – it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor.

Striking if not necessarily important is the similarity between Hawthorne's and Poe's attitudes toward their art and their emphasis on mood. If considered in conjunction with stories like "William Wilson" or "The Cask of Amontillado" this statement may of course appear ambivalent, since in them, as in so many other of Poe's tales, a common and solitary thread is sufficient impulse for a story of the length Poe felt all-encompassing enough to provide his favorite single, unified 'effect'. One story of Poe's, however, that immediately comes to mind is "The Tell-Tale Heart"; one can conjecture that given the proper circumstances Hawthorne too might have turned out a story remarkably similar in plot to Poe's creation, given an inspiratory background like that provided him by his purported discovery of the scarlet A.

Yet one also senses in the working of Poe's imagination a fundamental difference between his and Hawthorne's perspectives. Hawthorne's symbolism depends on sight, Poe's on sound. Edward Davidson, who examines Poe's artistic philosophy from the side of allegory, and uses that term rather than symbolism in his analysis, notes that Hawthorne, along with many of his contemporaries, regarded the moral allegory or moral 'tag line' as an integral and needful part of the tale,² whereas Poe considered this tendency a weakness, since it served to "delimit those imaginative exercises which, with the purity of his 'tone', made the Hawthorne tale itself an act of the imagination". As Davidson points

¹ *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N. Y., 1957), 80.

² *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), in his discussion, p. 181f.

out, in Poe's case the allegorical moment emerges, despite his several objections to allegory in his literary criticism, through his habit of depicting the plight of the individual who is "compulsively driven by some motive to be malignant, by some maggot in the brain which he cannot anticipate or understand but the penalty of which he is more than willing to suffer".³

What Davidson here describes is the Byronic hero, the Manfred type, rather than an allegorical anti-hero as we would ordinarily understand the term. And this distinction in meaning must be particularly emphasized, since all too frequently it stands between our interpretation of what Poe said and what he meant to say. Expressed in other terms, on occasion what Poe said and what we think he said do not coincide. These strictures for the moment to the side, there is in Poe's writings what we might call the allegorical-symbolic; but from Poe's vantage point they do not necessarily exist in the proportions that we, through our understanding of the term, might believe them to. Although there is nothing necessarily wrong in our interpreting Poe's writings in a different fashion from his approach to them, the point is that unless we are able to view his writings through his eyes, what we say in our criticism or analysis may be perfectly valid so far as contemporary attitudes are concerned, while bearing no relation to Poe's actual purposes.

We may of course rejoin that we can only deal interpretively with what Poe has left us; we can not conjure meanings and interpretations of his intentions out of thin air. If he did not adequately or intelligibly express his meaning, that is his fault, not ours. All of which is perfectly true; but before we return to Poe as symbolist let us first keep a few facts in mind. *The Oxford Universal Dictionary* tells us that although the word *symbolism* has existed in the language in written form since 1654, only since 1835 has it been used in the sense of "a symbolic meaning [which can be] attributed to natural objects or facts". Whether Poe was familiar with the word in that signification is as debatable as what he would have understood by symbolist, a word which has been employed in its effective meaning of one 'who uses symbols, or practices symbolism' only since 1812. Nor did symbolist come into parlance as 'one versed in the study of symbols or symbolism' until 1839, ten years before Poe's death; whereas another seventeen years would elapse before the term symbolism began to refer to its present implicit meaning of 'the principles or practice of the Symbolists' (1866).

³ Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study*, 181, 192-193.

None of this is to deny that symbol is not only of long standing in English but was a favorite expression among Poe's contemporaries. We have seen that Hawthorne endowed the word with additional Christian import by speaking of the letter A as "mystic symbol". Since 1590, symbol has denoted in English "something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else (not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental or conventional relation)." Certainly this definition ably characterizes Hawthorne's subjective intentions for his scarlet letter; whether we can say the same about Poe's purposes in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is another matter. In this tale, at the climactic moment the narrator declares that the sound he believes he hears of the heartbeats of the man he has murdered are growing ever louder. Then, in italics, the narrator continues that it was "*a low, dull, quick sound – much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*". Again we are reminded of Poe's dependence on sound, as contrasted to Hawthorne's on sight. We are also reminded of something else: Poe uses words for their indefinite, evocative connotations, a point to which we must return in due course.

For the present let us turn to Edmund Wilson's remarks from *Axel's Castle* about Poe as Symbolist (or as Wilson prefers, Poe as a "prophet of Symbolism"). After quoting Poe's remark that "indefiniteness is an element of the true music [of poetry] – I mean of the true musical expression . . . a suggestive indefiniteness of vague and therefore of spiritual effect", Wilson continues by observing that "to approximate the indefiniteness of music was to become one of the principal aims of Symbolism".⁴ We note parenthetically the emphasis placed on "was to become" in this quotation, since it, too, is something we shall have to return to somewhat later. I mention the Wilson reference at this juncture because of its relation to the vagueness and inexactness of the above-mentioned italics from "The Tell-Tale Heart" whereby the narrator *hears* a "low, dull, quick sound", however such a sound might be categorized, even if it is "enveloped in cotton" as the narrator suggests by way of clarification, since no matter in what terms it is explained, surely the adjectives low, dull, and quick are not ordinarily employed to describe phenomenal sensations. It is also noteworthy that nowhere in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is the word symbol mentioned, either by statement or implication. This observations brings us to a major point about Poe's attitude toward the symbolic: it is neither certain that he had any attitude positive or negative,

⁴ (New York, 1931), 12, 13.

nor is it demonstrable that he was in the least preoccupied with the term any more than that he felt the word represented anything of especial importance to his method or to his style. We might add that whatever our attitude toward Poe as symbolist, he did not think of himself as being one. On the contrary, he despised symbols as tricks which are utilized to confuse and deceive the reader without providing him with clarification and enlightenment.

Since Poe was seemingly intent on veiling his meanings behind a curtain of the obscure and ambiguous, at first glance the above remarks may seem implausible. But let us reserve judgment. Charles Feidelson, for example, introduces his lucid analysis of symbolism in American literature by remarking on this subject: "The unified phase of American literature which began with the tales of Hawthorne and Poe and ended with Melville and Whitman was not recognized as such by the men who made it. Certainly none would have described it as a symbolic movement; indeed, none would have called himself a symbolist. Yet today the family likeness can be discerned, and the pattern is that of symbolism."⁵ Nor does Poe employ symbol as a term in his writings to the extent that it is used by Hawthorne or Melville. In his poems it appears but twice and its second appearance, interestingly enough, in "Stanzas" of the 1827 and first edition of his poetical works,

... 'Tis a symbol and a token

duplicates almost exactly

Is a symbol and a token -

of "Visit of the Dead" [a title later changed by Poe to "Spirits of the Dead"] of that same edition. "Stanzas" does not appear in any subsequent edition published during Poe's lifetime. He may have found the poem too derivative. Other expressions in the stanza in which he employs symbol became part and parcel of his prose and poetic vocabularies, however: "expanding eye", "lov'd object", "strange sound", "harp-string broken", "T' awake us" - expressions which remind us of Poe's indebtedness to eighteenth-century diction. Why should he subsequently ignore only symbol? In the stanzas from "Spirits of the Dead", besides symbol he uses "breeze", "shadowy", and "mystery of mysteries", all later favorites of Poe's. Again, symbol is the sole expression that vanishes from his vocabulary.

⁵ *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago and London, 1953), 1.

Even more remarkable is Poe's failure to mention 'symbol' in his famous article on Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. Hawthorne uses the word in several of the stories that Poe reviews. The veil worn by Mr. Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil" Hawthorne calls a 'symbol' three times, the third occasion in the penultimate paragraph; he also refers to it as a "mysterious emblem" twice and an "appropriate emblem" once. Yet Poe nowhere mentions the latter expression in his remarks on this tale; nor does he use the term 'symbol' in his critique, either. In conjunction with observations on "The White Old Maid" he employs the word 'mysticism' to categorize tendencies in Hawthorne's manner which he deprecates, but otherwise he admits that "beyond these trivial exceptions we have really none to make. The style is purity itself. Force abounds. High imagination gleams from every page. Mr. Hawthorne is a man of the truest genius."

All this stems from Poe's *Graham's Magazine* review of May, 1842. By 1847, having revised his earlier impression of Hawthorne's work, in a new review Poe substituted for the above remarks a new conclusion that was remarkably at variance with his earlier attitude. Here he accuses Hawthorne of being "infinitely too fond of allegory", which, Poe continues, is "at war with the whole tone of" Hawthorne's nature, "which disports itself never so well as when escaping from the mysticism of his Goodman Browns and White Old Maids into the hearty, genial, but still Indian-summer sunshine of his Wakefields and Little Annie's Rambles".⁶

Had Hawthorne changed his views in line with Poe's recommendations one can conjecture how well we might remember him today. Fortunately, Hawthorne's way was not the seeming way Poe recommends. We must also keep in mind that from his point of view Poe's recommendations are not as reprehensible nor as banal as they might seem at first glance. What Poe derided in this new conclusion to his remarks was by indirection the Brook Farm experiment which began in 1841 (and about which Poe was scarcely informed at the time of his earlier critique of 1842). By enjoining Hawthorne to "mend his pen, get a bottle of visible ink, come out from the Old Manse, cut Mr. Alcott, hang (if possible) the editor of the *Dial*, and throw out of the window to the pigs all his odd numbers of the *North American Review*", Poe in sarcastic vein was attacking Transcendentalism (and rival publications) as much as any purported weaknesses in Hawthorne's style and technique.

⁶ Godey's *Lady's Book* XXXV (November 1847); quoted in Robert L. Hough (ed.), *Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965), 148.

Yet it is curious that in his review of 1842 Poe is obtusely oblivious to Hawthorne's overt "message" in "The Minister's Black Veil". Hawthorne's point in this story is that we each hide our inmost natures from our fellows; each of us conceals his sins and wickednesses behind a veil of dissimulation and deceit. The visible black veil also represents the extensive symbolic characteristics of guilt and shame shared through their misdeeds by all mankind. This point Hawthorne emphasizes by having Mr. Hooper declare on his deathbed: " 'I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!' " But when we turn to Poe's observation about this statement, we begin to wonder about his critical perceptiveness: "The *moral* put into the mouth of the dying minister will be supposed to convey the *true* import of the narrative; and that a crime of dark dye, (having reference to the 'young lady') has been committed, is a point which only minds congenial with that of the author will perceive." Earlier in the story, Mr. Hooper has conducted the funeral of this "young lady". First, he bends over the coffin to gaze at her.

As he stooped, the veil hung straight down from his forehead, so that, if her eyelids had not been closed forever, the dead maiden might have seen his face. Could Mr. Hooper be fearful of her glance, that he so hastily caught back the black veil? A person who watched the interview between the dead and living, scrupled not to affirm, that, at the instant when the clergyman's features were disclosed, the corpse had slightly shuddered, rustling the shroud and muslin cap, though the countenance retained the composure of death. A superstitious old woman was the only witness of this prodigy.

Surely, one can say, Poe should have been able to see through Hawthorne's mechanics to realize that Hawthorne was employing one of his favorite symbolic tricks – veiled behind the screen of the "might have been", the "perhaps", the "possibly", the use of the subjunctive tense – all the tricks of Hawthorne's "it might have been, except that it wasn't" technical repertoire. But again, this scene as Hawthorne lovingly creates it depends for its impact on visualization rather than the aural sense; hence, its impact might be lost to one of Poe's sensibilities. In Poe's case in the light of his remarks above, the loss seems to have been total. For to whatever extent the parson's concluding statement may explain his assuming the black veil for purported wrongs he has done the young lady, the moral and symbolic problems the story presents remain unresolved through Poe's explanation. Poe has offered a 'detective' solution to the tale without presumably being aware of the ethical issues which Hawthorne so obviously is attempting to express through the symbol of the veil and the meaning which it represents. And it is my contention

here, as it will be in other instances to follow, that it is the very mechanism of the symbol which throws Poe off the scent: thinking and reacting in other terms as he does, whenever the symbolic is presented to him as a medium for action, invariably he is unable to see and recognize it for what it is.

What Poe's own method and approach to writing are we shall investigate at a later time. Since he is so explicit on the subject in his review of Hawthorne, however, the word *effect* immediately comes to mind. "A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect." Yet because this seemingly calculated, cold-bloodedly purposeful effort to achieve 'effects' has antagonized and infuriated many contemporaneous and later critics of Poe's writings, the tendency is to ignore any contradictions to the above-expressed principles, even though these, too, can be found in Poe's works. I shall examine his self-stated manner of writing "The Raven" in due course; one of his contradictory statements may nevertheless be noted here:

We Americans have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true Poetic dignity and force: – but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls, we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified – more supremely noble – than this very poem – this poem *per se* – this poem which is a poem and nothing more – this poem written solely for the poem's sake.

Although it can be pointed out that Poe emphasizes here that to write a poem for the poem's sake is his own personal "design" (in the sense of intention), the element in his remarks I wish to indicate at this juncture is his insistence that a poem should be, or at least can be, written solely out of the desire to write a particular kind of composition. It need not be written with some ulterior motive in mind, as to prove a point, paint a moral, or present some message of significance, a position of Poe's which is too frequently neglected or overlooked in criticisms of his method and aesthetics in favor of attitudes like the following: "Poe's savage attacks on his fellow poets were based, in most respects, on this assumption that poems are murky and confusing simply because poetasters have not properly exercised the techniques of their craft. Poems can even be original, quite unlike poems ever made before, by virtue of a

poet's revitalizing the old or even inventing a new symbolism, a new use of language, out of which absolutely new poetic meaning can be obtained."⁷ For relevant to Poe's criticism though these observations may at first appear, we might keep in mind statements made by another critic about Poe's criticisms: "Poe may be said to have reached a point in his critical thinking wherein he saw that *effect* as the object of a writer's art is produced by an appreciation of the orderly nature and working of law, and he felt that the secret of impressive writing lies in the use of natural processes . . . into one consistent way of thinking."⁸ We might also keep in mind remarks of another critic of Poe as a literary reviewer to which I intend to return in due course: "Despite the commonly-held idea that he lived 'out of space, out of time,' Poe's reputation in his own day was mainly established by his reviews of contemporary books; he referred to himself as 'essentially a magazinist.'"⁹

To pass on from these strictures for the moment, Poe makes additional revealing comments in "The Poetic Principle" which bring us back once again to his critique of Hawthorne and our earlier discussion of Poe as symbolist. Although he in effect says in this article that "Beauty is its own excuse for being", Poe also declares that the poet "who shall simply sing, with however glowing enthusiasm, or with however vivid a truth of description, of the sights, and sounds, and odours, and colours, and sentiments, which greet *him* in common with all mankind – he, I say, has yet failed to prove his divine title." Expressed in other terms, although art may be justified for art's sake, and the poet may be forgiven for writing for the sake of writing, he must do more than simply write to merit the title of poet: description alone, no matter how vivid, how colorful, how expressive, does not suffice. The poet must be able "to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone". In explanation, Poe enumerates in his *Marginalia* that "the richness or force of the matters combined; the facility of discovering combinable novelties worth combining; and, especially, the absolute 'chemical combination' of the completed mass – are the particulars to be regarded in our estimate of Imagination."

⁷ Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study*, 70. Note also Davidson's later remark that "Poe as a symbolist was among the first to formulate a theory – and *Eureka*, itself an extended symbol, is the central statement – that art is man's one instrument for making some order out of the infinitude of empirical formlessness" (p. 252), as an example of the persistence of critics to regard Poe as a symbolist *malgré lui*.

⁸ Margaret Alterton, *Origins of Poe's Critical Theory* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1918), 184. The italics are mine.

⁹ Edd Winfield Parks, *Edgar Allan Poe as Literary Critic* (Athens, Georgia, 1964), 1.

If it is toward this imaginative 'chemical' essence that, according to Poe, the artist must aspire if he hopes to write what Poe considers true poetry, we know, too, since he emphasizes this point in his writings so repeatedly, that Poe's definition of poetry is "*The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth" ("The Poetic Principle"). In terms of this definition, Poe's objection to Hawthorne's use of symbolism obviously is that Hawthorne attempts in a prose medium to convey more than lies within the province of the tale, which in the constantly reiterated dictum advanced by Poe in his criticism should be an unrelenting effort to create special or unique effects. In this sense, his objections to the 'mysticism' in Hawthorne's "Minister's Black Veil" and "White Old Maid" depend on the word as signifying unintelligibility or murkiness of meaning rather than its more customary definition as the establishing of a spiritual relation with something not apparent or obvious to the senses nor the intellect. Thus, instead of praising them as do most modern critics for their quality of the *spirituel*, Poe condemns Hawthorne's stories for being muddy and unclear.

No wonder that Poe missed the moral of "The Minister's Black Veil" so completely: in his efforts to discover *effects* in the story, he hit upon one of Hawthorne's devices (the incident quoted earlier concerning the funeral of the "young lady") for enveloping the narrative with the quality which to Hawthorne was a prime requisite in any romance, namely mood. To Poe, however, mood assumes somewhat the role of a bugbear, in that it confuses rather than illuminates. If ordinarily he does not refer to it as such, it is apparent that it is what we would call mood he has in mind when he remarks in "The Philosophy of Composition", for example, "It is the *excess* of the suggested meaning – it is the rendering this the upper instead of the under current of the theme – which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so-called poetry of the so-called transcendentalists." By the same token, "some amount of suggestiveness – some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning" must be present in artistic creation, since to Poe it "is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that *richness* . . . which we are too fond of confounding with the ideal". The problem arises then: where is the line to be drawn between "some amount of suggestiveness" and "the *excess* of the suggested meaning"?

Here of course is where we reach the crux of the matter in our discussion of Poe's method; and it is toward this issue that the bulk of our study

will have to be directed. Before going into the matter in introductory terms, however, I should like first to return to Symbolism (capitalized) as it relates to Poe's works as well as to the problem of Poe as symbolist. Edmund Wilson as mentioned earlier has referred to Poe as a "prophet of Symbolism"; Wilson, however, has also offered a definition of Symbolism which is possibly less complimentary by implication to Symbolism's "prophet" by calling the movement "an attempt by carefully studied means – a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors – to communicate unique personal feelings".¹⁰ Thereby he removes the intentions of the Symbolist, and by extension Poe, from the level of the abstract and universal into the realm of the private and subjective, the world of the poet's personal psyche and innermost thoughts. Thereby we are also confronted by the further issue of autobiography and the extent to which what Poe wrote and what he experienced coincide. Must we agree, as is so commonly assumed, that a great deal of what Poe said, if it is not actually true to life, was his attempt to have his day-dreams clothed in the habiliments of fiction if not of fact?

We may grant that the means of the Symbolist are studied in that they are calculated – at times almost cold-bloodedly so. Like Poe, the Symbolist strives self-consciously for *effect*. In order for him to achieve exactly that specific effect he desires to impart to his reader, he is forced to communicate through complex associations of ideas which, if limited in their scope, will none the less be dense in their suggestiveness. Moreover, their effectiveness will depend on the sensory reaction of the reader to this particular kind of vocabulary. The Symbolist, in other words, must create a pervasive aura or atmosphere which can be comprehended by the senses rather than the mind, that can, for example, evoke an image sensed, an essence sniffed, or a morsel tasted. As a corollary to the Symbolist's intentions, there arises an additional problem about which no one was more keenly aware than Poe. This is the difficulty of insuring that any two people will appreciate the same perception in exactly the same way. Because of their varying backgrounds, because of heredity, because of a thousand and one factors, the sensibilities of the Symbolist and his audience need not necessarily coincide. An especial problem, this, for the Symbolist, who so ardently desires to communicate sensationally; yet as we shall see, this is a problem Poe had to come to grips with early in his career. If he inserts in his writings configurations which can be meaningful and significant to others, these experiences and

¹⁰ *Axel's Castle*, 21–22.

emotions, no matter how personal, will be relevant and usable to the romantic as they contribute to the unravelling of life's mysteries. Thus, 'unique personal feelings' may be worth communicating because what has been often felt but never so well expressed before may be codified, explained or clarified through the artist's perceptions, his superior perceptions enabling him better than would be the case with the 'non-artist' to transform feeling and emotion into comprehensible and definable terms.

Applied in this sense, the expression "unique personal feelings" Wilson employs in his definition of Symbolism adequately delineates Poe's almost instinctive predilection to employ symbolic modes of expression in his writings. This is not to say that he employed symbols consciously, since we have seen that although we may regard Poe as a symbolist, in terms of his understanding of the word he did not. Instead, he applied to what we would call symbols another frame of reference which I shall attempt to define and clarify somewhat later. So far as Wilson's formulation about "complicated association of ideas" is concerned, admirers of Poe's poetry may at first experience an acute sense of discomfort. There are after all the many disconcerting quirks to his psychological make-up which have provided rich scope for attack to the 'Poephobe' from the time of Lowell to the present. We are reminded that oftentimes Poe is regarded as merely a 'jingle-man' – "Three fifths of him genius and two fifths sheer fudge", in James Russell Lowell's words – judgments for which Poe has provided a virtually endless supply of second-rate doggerel in verse and in prose as 'proof'.

Still, we have observed in quotations culled from his writings that to Poe symbol evidently meant something that has to do not with sight but with sound. Once again we are brought back to music. In "The Poetic Principle" he remarks: "It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the Poetic Sentiment, it struggles – the creation of supernal Beauty. *It may be*, indeed that here this sublime end is, now and then, attained in *fact*. We are often made to feel, with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which *cannot* have been unfamiliar to the angels." Nor is this note of romantic rapture peculiar to Poe, since he here echoes remarks from Keats's *Lamia*, wherein is sung

A song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres,
While, like held breath, the stars drew in their
panting fires (l. 299–300).