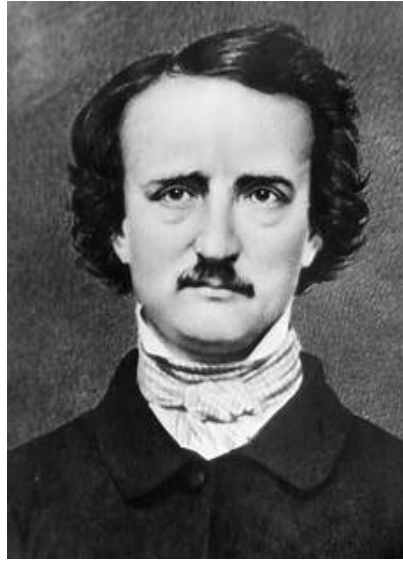


Poetry as "Supernal Beauty"



Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

from "Letter to B--" (1831)

Poetry, above all things, is a beautiful painting... A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having, for its *immediate* object, pleasure, not truth; to romance, by having for its object an *indefinite* instead of a *definite* pleasure, being a poem only so far as this object is attained: romance presenting perceptible images with definite, poetry with indefinite sensations, to which end music is an *essential*, since the comprehension of sweet sound is out most indefinite conception. Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry, without the idea is simply music; the idea without the music is prose from its very definitiveness....

As to Wordsworth, I have no faith in him.... Of Coleridge, I cannot speak but with reverence. His towering intellect, his gigantic power!...

from "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846)

What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones--that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief. For this reason, at least one half of the *Paradise Lost* is essentially prose--a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, *inevitably*, with corresponding depressions--the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, totality or unity, of effect.

It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art--the limit of a single sitting--and that, although in certain classes of prose composition, such as *Robinson Crusoe* (demanding no unity) this limit may be advantageously overpassed, it can never properly be overpassed in a poem. Within this limit, the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit--in other words, to the excitement or elevation--again in other words, to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect--this, with one proviso--that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all....

And here I may as well say a few words of the versification [in "The Raven"]. My first object (as usual) was originality. The extent to which this has been neglected, in versification, is one of the most unaccountable things in the world. Admitting that there is little possibility of variety in mere *rhythm*, it is still clear that the possible varieties of meter and stanza are absolutely infinite--and yet, *for centuries, no man, in verse, has ever done, or ever seemed to think of doing, an original thing*. The fact is, that originality (unless in minds of very unusual force) is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition. In general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought, and although a positive merit of the highest class, demands in its attainment less of invention than negation....

from "The Poetic Principle" (1848, 1850)

I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, "a long poem," is simply a flat contradiction in terms.... A poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags--fails--a revulsion ensues--and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.... On the other hand, it is clear that a poem may be improperly brief. Undue brevity degenerates into mere epigrammatism. A very short poem, while now and then producing a brilliant or vivid, never produces a profound or enduring effect. There must be the steady pressing down the stamp upon the wax....

And here let me speak briefly on the topic of rhythm. Contenting myself with the certainty that Music, in its various modes of metre, rhythm, and rhyme, is of so vast a moment in Poetry as never to be wisely rejected--is so vitally important an adjunct that he is simply silly who declines its assistance, I will not now pause to maintain its absolute essentiality. 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.... In the union of Poetry with Music in its popular sense, we shall find the widest field for the Poetic development....

It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea; and we Bostonians, very especially, have developed it in full.... I would define, in brief, the Poetry of Words as The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth....

That pleasure which is at once the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense, is derived, I maintain, from the contemplation of the Beautiful. In the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, of the soul, which we recognize as the Poetic Sentiment, and which is so easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the heart. I make Beauty, therefore--using the word as inclusive of the sublime--I make Beauty the province of the poem, simply because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring as directly as possible from their causes--no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation in question is at least most readily attainable in the poem. It by no means follows, however, that the incitements of Passion, or the precepts of Duty, or even the lessons of Truth, may not be introduced into a poem, and with advantage; for they may subserve, incidentally, in various ways, the general purposes of the work--but the true artist will always contrived to tone them down in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem....

Thus, although in a very cursory and imperfect manner, I have endeavoured to convey to you my conception of the Poetic Principle. It has been my purpose to suggest that, which this Principle itself is strictly and simply the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty, the manifestation of the Principle is always found in an elevating excitement of the Soul--quite independent of that passion which is the intoxication of the Heart--or of that Truth which is the satisfaction of the Reason. For in regard to Passion, alas! its tendency is to degrade, rather than to elevate the Soul. Love, on the contrary--Love--the true, the divine Eros...is unquestionably the purest and truest of all poetical themes. And in regard to Truth--if, to be sure, through the attainment of a truth, we are led to perceive a harmony where none was apparent before, we

experience, at once, the true poetical effect--but this effect is referable to the harmony alone, and not in the least degree to the truth which merely served to render the harmony manifest.

We shall reach, however, more immediately a distinct conception of what the true Poetry is, by mere reference to a few of the simple elements which induce in the Poet himself the true poetical effect. He recognizes the ambrosia which nourishes his soul, in the bright orbs that shine in Heaven--in the volutes of the flower--in the clustering of low shrubberies--in the waving of the grain-fields--in the slanting of tall, Eastern trees--in the blue distance of mountains--in the grouping of clouds--in the twinkling of half-hidden brooks--in the gleaming of silver rivers--in the repose of sequestered lakes--in the star-mirroring depths of lonely wells. He perceives it in the songs of birds...in the sighing of the night-wind--in the repining voice of the forest--in the surf that complains to the shore--in the fresh breath of the woods--in the scent of the violet--in the voluptuous perfume of the hyacinth--in the suggestive odor that comes to him, at eventide, from the far-distant, undiscovered islands, over dim oceans, illimitable and unexplored. He owns it in all noble thoughts--in all unworldly motives--in all holy impulses--in all chivalrous, generous, and self-sacrificing deeds. He feels it in the beauty of woman--in the grace of her steps--in the lustre of her eye--in the melody of her voice--in her soft laughter--in her sigh--in the harmony of the rustling of her robes. He deeply feels it in her winning endearments--in her burning enthusiasms--in her gentle charities--in her meek and devotional endurances--but above all--ah, far above all--he kneels to it--he worships it in the faith, in the purity, in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty--of her love.

Edgar Allan Poe