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“Thou Hast Murdered Thyself”: An Analysis of Crime in Poe’s Tales

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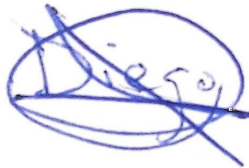
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Resumen

Este ensayo analiza el significado del crimen en los cuentos de Edgar Allan Poe. Para ello, el trabajo primero presenta una descripción del concepto de “sustancia” de Baruch Spinoza, que expresa una unidad que conecta todo con Dios. Posteriormente, explica la manera en que sus criminales son construidos a partir de esta noción, y examina tres cuentos (con sus respectivos protagonistas) en los que se observa su influencia: “El Corazón Delator”, “William Wilson” y “La Caída de la Casa Usher”. En ellos, los criminales, además de asesinar o encerrar a personas vivas, cometen el crimen máximo, que es rechazar la unidad fundamental del mundo, la unidad de lo humano y lo divino.

Palabras clave: Edgar Allan Poe, Baruch Spinoza, Criminal, Crimen, El Corazón Delator, William Wilson, La Caída de la Casa Usher, Unidad, Espiritual

Abstract

This essay analyzes the meaning of crime in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories. It advances a description of Baruch Spinoza’s concept of “substance”, which implies a unity that comprises and connects everything to God. Subsequently, it explains the way in which Poe’s criminals are shaped resembling Spinoza’s principle, and it considers three short stories (with their respective protagonists) in which his influence can be observed: “The Tell-Tale Heart”, “William Wilson” and “The Fall of the House of Usher”. In them, criminals, apart from murdering or locking up people alive, commit the ultimate crime, which is rejecting the fundamental unity of the world, the unity of the human and the divine.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, Baruch Spinoza, Criminal, Crime, The Tell-Tale Heart, William Wilson, The Fall of the House of Usher, Unity, Spiritual

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I. Introduction

Numerous authors, like have written horror stories, and many are still popular nowadays, such as “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820), by Washington Irving, “The Lady of the Shroud” (1909), by Bram Stoker, “The Signalman” (1866), by Charles Dickens, and “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928), by H. P. Lovecraft. But it is safe to say that one of the masters of this genre is the poet, critic, and writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849). In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), he asserted that poems should be short, or, in his own words, arranged “to be read at one sitting” (268). However, although in that statement he referred to the poems, in the short stories, as a derivative from the brevity of the poems, he develops the intensity. The exploration of the psyche and the depths of human thoughts and actions is proof of his great mastery in writing stories. His criminals do not occupy a secondary role nor do they follow a linear development, at the end of which they are aware of their guilt and realize the difference between good and evil. In fact, they have much more intricate personalities. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” for example, Poe employs the figure of Montresor, a seemingly polite and courteous character whose decision after enduring the “insults” of his friend Fortunato is to lock him alive in a newly constructed crypt in the vaults of his palace. Throughout the story, the reader notices that Montresor is not aware of the wrongness of his actions, but merely rejoices in his vengeance.

His criminals are elaborate characters. Many of Poe’s stories have a pattern as regards the characters’ behavior and motivation that can help them understand what Poe’s possible definition of crime is. In this essay, therefore, in analyzing three of his tales (“The Tell-Tale Heart”, “William Wilson” and “The Fall of the House of Usher”), I argue that the real crime for Poe is the fragmentation of the fundamental unity between the spiritual and the human, which presents similarities with Baruch Spinoza’s philosophy. As Monica

Papazu asserts, by not perceiving the fundamental unity of the world, the criminals do not recognize it in themselves either (“Man, a Thought of God” 111), and that is the trigger for all their subsequent actions and what leads them, in ways specific to each one, to their downfall.

II. Spinoza’s Influence on Poe

Before delving into the reasons for the rupture of this harmony and its consequences in Poe’s stories, it is imperative to explain the philosophical guidelines followed by the author in order to represent this inner disunity in his criminals, which are alike to the concept of “substance” of the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In his treatise *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order* (1677) (in Latin *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata*), Spinoza, among other matters, describes the notion of “substance” as “self-caused, conceived through [itself], [...] self-explanatory, necessarily [existent] and [...] absolutely infinite” (Lin 146). All that is real is *substance* for Spinoza, a unique *substance* from which everything that exists is formed. However, at the same time, what is real is also multiple because there are infinite attributes of substance. Therefore, the infinitude of that universe of which we are a part cannot be grasped by our finite understanding.

This is why substance is not represented by pure matter for Spinoza, but by God, since it contains a beginning and an end that come together because everything in existence is nothing more than an unfolding of that unique and eternal substance. God, according to him, is self-caused, conceived through himself, self-explanatory, necessarily existent, and absolutely infinite; he is the substance, and the substance is him. At the same time, he assures that “our way of understanding the nature of anything [...] must be through the universal laws and rules of Nature” (Spinoza 50). Here we find a new

synonym for substance: Nature, which lays the foundation for all that exists as well. God is also Nature and vice versa, and everything belonging to it is connected with him. Among his creation, the human being stands out.

Hence, the mind – body dichotomy so widely addressed throughout history by other authors such as Plato and Descartes, is condensed for Spinoza in two aspects: the spirit (or mind), the divine part, and the body, which, for him, is “a mode that in a certain and determinate way expresses God’s essence” (23), both of which constitute different forms of the same substance. Thereby, a oneness of the world is formed, a unity that comprises and connects everything to God. In the words of Monica Papazu, “this world made of one and the same substance (which is ultimately equivalent to God) can be defined as a *unitary world* [...] all that exists, exists within God and is made of the same indivisible substance: *the unity of the world is secured*” (Papazu, “Man, a Thought of God” 109). This consistent organization of the universe, according to her, dictates the rules of the unity of the world, a marriage between the divine and the human, for Edgar Allan Poe as well. In his short story “Mesmeric Revelation”, the readers can notice Mr. Van Kirk mentioning to the narrator that “the ultimate, or unparticled matter, not only permeates all things but impels all things—and thus is all things within itself. This matter is God” (Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems* 175). This fragment insinuates that, beyond being a haphazard coincidence, Poe’s conception of the universe is possibly influenced by Spinoza’s. His short stories, therefore, suggest a certain parallelism with the unity of the human and the divine derived from the concept of substance, an association of such relevance for the author that it leads him to attribute to all his criminals the supreme crime that causes them to be condemned: the disintegration of that unity.

III. Illustrative Cases of the Model of Unity

Poe's characters, like his stories, display a remarkable psychological depth and explore new regions of the human mind. His criminals, in particular, irrespective of the felonies independently committed by each, commit the ultimate crime and the one that links and places them all at the same level. Spinoza's idea of unity is not verified in the criminal, since he no longer perceives himself as the image of God, thereby denying his own spirituality, because he wants to create his own world to replace the existing one. This, paradoxically, becomes a realizable act, since, however much he rejects such spirituality, "the power of creation is not limited to God, but man [...] has the same attribute as the divine power. Man can create the universe" (Papazu, "Search for Life and Truth" 133). All of Poe's criminals are rationalists, but they eventually cease to be ordinary individuals to become executioners without ethical principles, as they do not realize the "unity of the self with the other" or of "the self with oneself", since "[they are] disunited inside [themselves] and disunited from the world" (Papazu, "Man, a Thought of God" 112). With the rupture of the unitary world, and, consequently, with God, there emerges a desire for transformation into perfect gods. They seek "psychic release and freedom in a crime" (Gargano 181), and then create an alternative universe through imagination to justify their crimes. One might even think that, occasionally, the justification of these crimes adheres to the teleological model of "validation by beneficial consequences", followed, for example, by Orwell in his novel *1984*, with the slogan "WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (Orwell 6). Nonetheless, these criminals fall victim to their own strategy, as if by a God-given punishment. They lose their divine identity and become beings "doomed to exterminate [themselves]" (Papazu, "Man, a Thought of God" 107).

I am going to illustrate this thesis by looking closely into several stories under the lens of the previously mentioned rupture of the fundamental unity of the world and in oneself.

i. “The Tell-Tale Heart”: The Narrator and the Eye

The narrator of this first story is the object of analysis, since he exhibits rather obviously the process described before. The separation between the human and the spiritual gives rise to a new universe created by imagination; this becomes evident through the attitude of the narrator, who reveals his crime in an act of hubris as if he eagerly longed to present his transformation into a self-proclaimed god. Furthermore, it is precisely his wounded pride that leads him to unveil the truth at the end, when he declares “they were making a mockery of my horror! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!” (Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems* 288). In his vocabulary, there is never a lack of adjectives to arrogantly describe, and even praise, his actions and behavior:

“You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight [...] how cunningly I thrust it in! [...] If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body [...] I smiled, — for what had I to fear?” (286, 287, 288).

On the eighth night, before murdering the old man the narrator lives with, he boasts and notes that he has reached an understanding of his powers, subtly indicating that he has evolved into a mighty being, who could be assumed to be a god: “Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity” (286). Regarding the justification of his crime, which could be related to the previously mentioned Orwellian idea of “War is Peace, Slavery is Freedom, Ignorance is Strength”, I contend that the

murderer, in a way, wishes to justify his crime and prove his sanity by remarking all the trouble caused to him by the old man's eye, or, in other words, the benefits that its disappearance would bring, in contrast to the love he feels for him: "Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold [...] it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye" (286). In this way, the narrator creates an imaginary universe in which this eye is the source of such wickedness that every action taken on his part to eliminate it is justified by its own laws. The ultimate crime, therefore, is committed: the murderer is "incapable of perceiving the fundamental unity of another human being" (Papazu, "Man, a Thought of God" 112), that of his own and that of the human and the divine, completely repudiating his wholeness and sentencing himself to extinction.

ii. "William Wilson": William's Union with God

The protagonist, William Wilson, meets his double, a man identical to him with the same appearance, name, and even date of birth, who is responsible for pursuing him. He ruins every misdeed he longs to execute, until he is killed by the "original". William Wilson's triggering mistake is his refusal to recognize the fundamental unity of the world since he does not acknowledge the unity of his soul and god, and this leads him to perceive himself and the other as two different William Wilsons. The loss of spirituality occurs because he "refused his own identity" (Papazu, "Man, a Thought of God" 112), as he proves when he states that "the fair page now lying before [him] need not be sullied with [his] real appellation. This has been [...] an object for the scorn—for the horror—for the detestation [...] [He] had always felt aversion to [his] uncourtly patronymic..." (Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems* 274, 277). The word "patronymic" is especially relevant for his break with the father, and hence, with the divine. According to Douglas Harper's Online Etymology Dictionary, the word is derived "from Greek *patrōnymos* 'named from the father,' from *patēr* (genitive *patros*) 'father' + *onyma* 'name'". In this case, the

narrator does not refer to his biological father, as he hardly influenced his upbringing or was involved in his life in any way: “at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions” (274). The name of the father who is the object of his rejection is no other than that of God, the Holy Father. By viewing himself “as two individuals, being unable to understand that he was one” (Papazu, “Man, a Thought of God” 112), his real fault does not involve killing another person, but fracturing “the condition of life” (112), the unity with the spiritual, the “*unitary* world” (109). His *doppelgänger*, thus, can be interpreted not as his good-natured self, but as the voice that reminds him of the moral law, that attempts to prevent him from committing that ultimate crime that would break the universal balance. In the end, however, he ignores it, and, as in other Poe short stories, William Wilson is doomed to destruction, as he announces: “thou hast murdered thyself” (Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems* 284).

iii. “The Fall of the House of Usher”: Roderick and the House

This third and last story, according to Monica Papazu, “observes the principle of *analogy* but partly violates the principle of unity” (“Man, a Thought of God” 110). We do not find only one unity, that between the human and the divine, but also another one between Usher and the family house. This association, or analogy, is in fact explicitly stressed by Poe in the text, as he points out that “[the] appellation of the “House of Usher” [...] seemed to include [...] both the family and the family mansion” (Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems* 195). Roderick Usher does not perceive himself as the image of God and breaks the unity with the spiritual; in this way, he creates his own universe to replace the existing one. Nonetheless, this new world, in this context, is not necessarily only created by Usher, since, as Papazu claims in her essay “Man, A Thought of God”, the house is an entity that behaves like him, although it is not a living agent. As Arthur

Robinson also explains, “Usher and his house can be bound together because animate and inanimate become only a matter of degree” (74). This means that, in the rupture of the unitary world, man is not the only participant, also the building; thus, far from being a simple coincidence, the imagery of the story can be associated with this process.

The sun, the light, figures that, for authors such as Dante, are “a symbol of God” (Alighieri 106) are almost missing in the story, not only inside the house (“dark and intricate passages [...] the vault [...] was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light [...] the intense darkness of the chamber...” [Poe, *Complete Tales and Poems* 195, 200, 201]), but also in Roderick, whose eyes “were tortured by even a faint light” (197), revealing the absence of God in him. Moreover, the same can also be noticed in his creations, which, as the narrator states, are “phantasmagoric conceptions” (198) that excel at conveying “an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet” (198). The fact that the narrator has never felt such horror implies that he continues to accept the fundamental unity of the world, because this causes him to not tolerate the mighty darkness of the drawings. Furthermore, Papazu also mentions that the fissure that Poe describes at the beginning of the story that runs through the house from top to bottom and “the sullen waters of the tarn” (195) could be considered a further allusion to the rupture of this unity, since it is what eventually destroys the house, and thus, at the same time, the Usher family. Hence, as in the previously explored stories, the extinction to which the criminal is destined occurs at the end of the story, when the house collapses with the brothers inside due to the widening of this crack. After having buried his sister alive, but, above all, after having committed the ultimate crime of breaking the unity of the human and the divine, Roderick Usher experiences the fate he deserves.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, in which I have examined the meaning of crime in Poe's short stories, I have stated that, in fact, the crucial transgression is not the one explicitly executed by the characters, like murdering or locking up a woman alive, but that of rejecting the fundamental unity of the world, the unity of the human and the divine. This is the supreme crime, and committing it brings about the downfall of the criminals in three stories ("The Tell-Tale Heart", "William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher") in which the criminals comply with the condition described above.

In addition, to accurately understand the philosophical underpinnings with which Poe's stories share characteristics, I have developed Spinoza's concept of "substance," on which the identification of God, nature, and the whole of existence is based, thus forming a harmonious togetherness.

Although the three short stories examined are closely related to this model, they are by no means the only ones to do so. Thus, there are other examples, such as "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado", that could be studied in the same way, since their protagonists also seem to break with the fundamental unity of the human and the divine.

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