

**POST-ENLIGHTENED POE: ANALYSING
THE PATHOLOGIES OF MODERNITY
IN “THE PURLOINED LETTER”
AND “THE COLLOQUY OF MONOS AND UNA”**

**POE POST-ILUSTRADO: UN ANÁLISIS
DE LAS PATOLOGÍAS DE LA MODERNIDAD
EN “THE PURLOINED LETTER” Y
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Abstract

This paper delves into the long-debated tensions that critics have found in Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)’s writings, which have placed him as a liminal figure between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. In particular, I will maintain that these tensions are representative of the contradictions inherent in the modern project, which I will argue are present in Poe’s writings and which situate Poe’s texts as both a symptom of and a reaction to the pathologies of modernity.¹ To this end, I will consider Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), arguing that the problems addressed in the volume were foreshadowed by Poe’s writings a century earlier. After a brief introduction, I will analyse the widely-discussed “The Purloined Letter” (1844) and the attitudes towards rationality that Poe presents in the story. I will then explore the lesser-known “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” (1841),² where Poe anticipates some of the problems that Horkheimer and Adorno voiced, most notably the confusion between progress and technification.

Keywords: Poe, Romanticism, Enlightenment, rationality, progress.

Resumen

El presente artículo ahonda en las tensiones que a lo largo de la crítica se han encontrado en los escritos de Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), y que lo sitúan como

una figura a caballo entre la Ilustración y el Romanticismo. En particular, se argumentará que dichas tensiones son representativas de las contradicciones inherentes al proyecto moderno, las cuales están presentes en los textos de Poe, situándolos como un síntoma y una reacción a las patologías de la modernidad. A este fin, consideraré *Dialéctica de la Ilustración* (1944), de Max Horkheimer y Theodor W. Adorno e indicaré cómo los problemas que trata este volumen fueron anticipados por Poe un siglo antes. Tras una breve introducción, analizaré la muy discutida “The Purloined Letter” (1844) y las actitudes sobre la racionalidad que Poe presenta en la historia, para después explorar la menos conocida “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” (1841), donde Poe anticipa algunas de las cuestiones sobre las que alertaron Horkheimer y Adorno, especialmente la confusión entre progreso y tecnificación.

Palabras clave: Poe, Romanticismo, Ilustración, racionalidad, progreso.

1. Liminal Poe

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It is my contention that Poe’s writing embodies the aporetic, ambiguous nature of modernity.³ Marshall Berman has reflected in his now canonical *All That is Solid Melts into Air* on the contradictory nature of the modern world, “a world where everything is pregnant with its contrary” (1988: 22). He further asserts that “[t]o be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction” (13). This emphasis on contradiction ties in with Horkheimer and Adorno’s diagnosis of the aporias of the Enlightenment which they formulated forty years prior to Berman’s volume. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they explicitly set out to discover why an emancipatory movement that attempts to give rise to, in Kant’s words, “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (Kant 2003: 54), brought about a new kind of barbarism, embodied in the self-destruction of the Enlightenment itself: “The aporia which faced us in our work thus proved to be the first matter we had to investigate: the self-destruction of enlightenment” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xvi). The concerns of Horkheimer and Adorno were related, among other things, to what are considered two essential pillars of the Enlightenment, namely, a deep faith in rationality, which relies on “strong conceptions of reason and of the autonomous rational subject developed from Descartes to Kant” (McCarthy 1998: viii), and an acritical assumption that the development of technification equals (moral) progress. However, the enlightened programme was unmasked as a movement not only of lights, but also of shadows. Horkheimer and Adorno perceived that the said ideological foundations of strong rationality, technical science and the myth of progress, far from achieving a more enlightened humanity, had actually contributed to the alienation of the individual.

These tensions, I will argue, are embodied in Poe's texts. This was not uncommon for a writer of his time, for, as Berman asserts, "[o]ur nineteenth-century thinkers were simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life, wrestling inexhaustibly with its ambiguities and contradictions; their self-ironies and inner tensions were a primary source of their creative power" (1988: 24). As both a romantic and a prominent inheritor of the enlightened emphasis on rationality, Poe identified some of the flagrant contradictions of modernity, adopting the attitude of one of Paul Ricoeur's philosophers of suspicion.⁴ If the hermeneutics of suspicion involve reading texts in order to find hidden and potentially unattractive meanings, Poe, in his writings, read his own present and navigated the liminality between an enlightened and a romantic ethos. Dorothea Von Mücke, reflecting on this duality, has asserted that "many of Poe's texts [...] are characterised by a strange hybrid component" (2009: 19, my translation).⁵ It is true that Poe is mostly known for his Gothic scenarios, deranged characters and beautiful dead ladies. It is hard to come across a book by him without a sinister raven or a decrepit house on the cover. The epitome of American Dark Romanticism, Poe was much distanced from the nostalgic and joyful mood of the English romantics, whom he utterly despised (Prestwood 2010: 19-20). Indeed, Poe's romanticism has less to do with pastoral landscapes and indulging nature, and more with the appetites of the irrational and the repressed. However, Poe's interest in the irrational is at odds with his interest in the rational. Several critics have established "The Man of the Crowd"⁶ as the turning point in Poe's writing, marking the difference between the Gothic phase and the "ratiocinative cycle", in Gerald Kennedy's words (1975: 185). Poe prided himself on his analytical method, famously described in his piece "The Philosophy of Composition". But it is perhaps his story "The Purloined Letter" that best exemplifies the opposing attitudes towards rationality in a way that anticipates Horkheimer and Adorno's critique.

2. Diagnosing the "Pure Arrogance of Reason" in "The Purloined Letter"

The discussion on "The Purloined Letter" is, as John T. Irwin states, a "well-worn path" (1999: 29). This short story has received a wealth of commentary and praise, with Poe himself asserting that it "is perhaps the best of my tales of ratiocination" (in Muller and Richardson 1988: 3). The tale tells the story of how a letter is stolen by Minister D-, a criminal of high intelligence, at least as high as that of the detective Dupin. The Prefect of Police engages in a minute investigation of the case and makes use of every possible explanation to solve it, but to no avail. Conversely, Dupin unravels the mystery by combining an utterly rational method

with his imaginative instinct: “His *method* is a finer thing, a seemingly more supersensual mechanism, than the ordinary processes of rational reckoning. It partakes of the *irrational*, and is therefore the highest kind of ratiocination” (Hoffman 1972: 107, emphasis in original). Indeed, the interest of the story lies precisely in Dupin’s method of solving the crime and not in the crime itself, which acts as a pretext for the unfolding of the story. Or, in Hoffman’s words: “the center of the tale [...] is not *Who is guilty?* but *How will Dupin infer his guilt?*” (106-107, emphasis in original).

The story is largely built upon duplicity and antagonism, as shown by the oppositions between darkness and light, the William Wilson-esque identities of Dupin and Minister D–, or imagination and rationality. Critics such as Daniel Hoffman (1972) or Lianha Babener (1988) have taken the pairing of Minister D– and Dupin as the most relevant in the story.⁷ However, for the purposes of this study, I prefer to focus on the antagonism between Dupin and the Prefect of the Parisian Police. Their antagonism is, from the beginning of the story, symbolised by the contrast between light and darkness. The word “dark” appears no less than three times in the very first page of the story, setting out the dichotomy that will structure the whole text. Dupin and the narrator are in a room in Paris “just after dark” (Poe 1992: 684), quietly pondering some cases when the Prefect of the Parisian Police comes in to ask for help with an investigation. The narrator insists that they “had been sitting in the dark” (684) and that Dupin stood up in order to light a lamp but soon changed his mind, leaving the room in darkness in order to better study the case: “‘If it is any point requiring reflection’, observed Dupin, as he forebore to enkindle the wick, ‘we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark’” (684).

Understood in symbolic terms, one could argue that Dupin stands for darkness inasmuch as the Prefect stands for light, that is to say, enlightened reason. The Prefect’s reliance on a thorough analytical method to solve the case has turned into sterile bureaucratisation, as he is unable to accomplish his task. The Prefect is presented as a representative of a socially respectable institution which makes a conventional use of reason that struggles to be effective. The ineffectiveness of the Prefect is ironically reinforced by the pompousness of his speech: “The Prefect was fond of the cant of diplomacy” (Poe 1992: 686). After the Prefect’s exposition of his precise and minute exploratory methods, Dupin engages in an explanation of how mathematics are not to be used as the only reasoning system, as they are only functional in their own field of application and not in, say, moral probing. As Dupin notes: “Mathematical axioms are not axioms of general truth. What is true of relation —of form and quantity— is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. In this latter science it is very usually untrue that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole. In chemistry also the axiom fails” (695).

Dupin's indictment of mathematical reasoning holds a striking parallel with Horkheimer and Adorno's warnings in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They advise against attempts to measure everything in terms of mathematical reasoning and the enlightened cliché of equating thought with mathematics. Poe had realised long before the German authors did that mathematical theorems cannot give an account of "the insoluble and irrational" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 18) nor be applied to anything beyond the scope of mathematics themselves. The same can be contended about the Prefect's method which, as Dupin acknowledges, is apparently perfect but not apt for analysing Minister D-'s *modus operandi*. In other words, the problem lies not within the method itself but rather its use in realities that transcend it: "Yes", said Dupin. "The measures adopted were not only the best of their kind, but carried out to absolute perfection. Had the letter been deposited within the range of their search, these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it" (Poe 1992: 692). If in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* we read that the Enlightenment is totalitarian, it is because it relies on the certainty of the infallibility of reason, which Poe mocked in tales such as this one.

The Prefect not only miscalculates about the methods he should use to solve the case; he also misreads the identity of the criminal. Following Horkheimer and Adorno, this misreading may be defined as totalitarian. An important tenet of the Enlightenment is its tendency to reduce identities to realities that can be easily assimilated, hence perpetuating the enlightened project by appropriating the world, as we read in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "The self which learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world soon equated truth in general with classifying thought, without whose fixed distinctions it cannot exist" (2002: 10). The Prefect constitutes a parody of this way of reasoning, along with the investigative methods used by the police in general, which seem to be accurate and infallible but in the end turn out to be sterile. The totalitarian aspect of the Enlightenment thus lies in the Prefect's assumption that reality will conform to his expectations and to his reasoning:

What is all this boring, and probing, and sounding, and scrutinizing with the microscope, and dividing the surface of the building into registered square inches — what is it all but an exaggeration of the application of the one principle or set of principles of search, which are based upon the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity, to which the Prefect, in the long routine of his duty, has been accustomed? (Poe 1992: 694)

It is not by chance that the figure who represents this authoritarian condition of the Enlightenment is a police officer worried about his honourability and motivated not by a sense of duty but by the reward he will obtain if he solves the crime. It is no accident that one of the first interventions of the Prefect in the conversation

refers to his concern about losing his position (Poe 1992: 685). This points to a blatant inversion of ends and means, an idea which Horkheimer criticised in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but which was given wider attention in his book *Eclipse of Reason* (2004: 3-39). Ends and means are upturned: what should be the end of the police investigation (solving the case) becomes the means to gaining honour and money, that is, to the Prefect's self-preservation as an honourable server of society. The Prefect is making use of an instrumental reason, i.e. a subjective reason—subjective because it is based on personal interest—with “operational value” which considers only “heteronomous contents” (Horkheimer 2004: 14-15). Dupin himself is not exempt from this reality: he also participates in the inversion of ends and means and relies on subjective reason, as he very straightforwardly confesses that, far from wanting to solve the case for the sake of it, he is seeking revenge against Minister D–.

The use of instrumental reason has further consequences. By considering the mystery as a means to the end of personal profit, the Prefect objectifies Minister D– as a “criminal”, completely regardless of his individual dimension. The Prefect, who believes only in his own methods to solve crimes and who cannot help his bemusement when he discovers that he is not able to solve the enigma of the purloined letter, reifies Minister D– as a criminal and applies his deductive rules upon him. By restricting Minister D–'s identity to merely that of a criminal, the Prefect and his colleagues are putting into practice the principle of abstraction, called “the instrument of Enlightenment” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and which “makes everything in nature repeatable” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 10). This explains why the Prefect had certain (unfulfilled) expectations about the criminal's *modus operandi*: he had expected him to be a mere iteration of every other criminal. The Prefect's arrogance is enhanced by the fact that he believes the Minister to be a fool because he has gained notoriety as a poet. As Dupin observes, this is the reason for his failure as a detective: “the Prefect and his cohort fail so frequently, first, by default of this identification, and, secondly, by ill-admeasurement, or rather through non-admeasurement, of the intellect with which they are engaged” (Poe 1992: 693). The fact that the Prefect is so convinced about his being right leads him to misinterpret not only the facts but most importantly the capacities of the criminal in question: “the remote source of his defeat lies in the supposition that the Minister is a fool, because he has acquired renown as a poet. All fools are poets; this the Prefect feels; and he is merely guilty of a non *distributio medii* in thence inferring that all poets are fools” (694).

It could be argued that the Prefect suffers from the “pure arrogance of reason” which Poe alludes to in his short story “The Imp of the Perverse” and which is responsible for overlooking key aspects in the study of human identity (1980b:

58). In this text, Poe establishes an interesting parallel that could be applied to the main characters of “The Purloined Letter”. He distinguishes between the “intellectual or logical man” and the “understanding or observant man” (58). If the Prefect falls into the category of logical man, one could argue that Dupin is more of an observant man. However, Dupin is a much more complex character than that, and despite his instrumental sympathy with the criminal and his intuitive method, his mind is nothing but analytical. As Paul Hurhe has stated, Poe’s most acclaimed detective combines a romantic attitude based on his imagination with a calm enlightened confidence in the power of reasoning: “Poe is not merely working against the “vulgar dictum” that imagination and reason are discrete and unrelated antagonistic faculties; rather, he asserts their interrelation through their opposition” (2012: 473). On a similar note, Gerald Kennedy writes:

C. Auguste Dupin balances imaginative involvement with analytical detachment. Like his adversary in “The Purloined Letter”, Dupin is both poet and mathematician. [...] According to Poe’s epistemology, the two modes of cognition are inextricably related; “the truly imaginative [are] never otherwise than analytic”, he writes in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (IV, 150). (1975: 194)

The problem outlined in “The Purloined Letter” has further consequences for the criticism of the Enlightenment. Ultimately, it is suggested that reason as we have traditionally conceived it cannot give an account of the whole experience of reality. The criticism we extract from Poe’s fiction and from Horkheimer and Adorno’s philosophy is that humans are merely supposed to recognise the limitations of their own capacities (and every consequence which that entails) and to accept that faculties other than reason are at stake when it comes to the potential understanding of a problem, of an individual or of the world. In a typically romantic exaltation, Poe claims that “instinct, so far from being an inferior reason, is perhaps the most exacted intellect of all” (1980a: 65). Leaving romantic outbursts aside, it is interesting to see how this feeling is embodied in Dupin himself, who exemplifies “the shadowy nature” of “the boundary between instinct and reason” (66). The very act of categorising them as completely separate entities obeys a characteristic enlightened urge to classify all entities in the world. And of course, reason and instinct do have distinct features but, as mentioned previously, it is the cooperation of both that actually solves the crime and ultimately permits comprehension: “The leading distinction between instinct and reason seems to be, that, while the one is infinitely the more exact, the more certain, and the more far-seeing in its sphere of action— the sphere of action in the other is of the far wider extent” (66). It is precisely Dupin’s instinct that leads him to measure his intellect against that of the criminal, whom he regards as an equal, and eventually solve the crime. As Babener maintains, Dupin’s method “stresses detection through psychological identification with an adversary” (1988: 323). When the identity of the other is not objectified,

there is room for understanding, regardless of Dupin's vengeful intentions in this case. Minister D- is not conceptualised by Dupin as "a criminal" but as an "opponent", as a peer: "It is merely', I said, 'an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent'" (Poe 1992: 693). Dupin's intellectual comradeship with the criminal, even if permeated by a desire for vengeance, allows him to accurately grasp his identity in a way that the Prefect fails to do.

Poe leads us to the realisation that human beings are most unlikely to be innately good or cooperative with what the social order expects from them. The principle of a homogenised society, as Horkheimer and Adorno realised, needs social coercion to be effective, because human beings are in fact *not* the same. While Dupin treats Minister D- as an individual, even if he does so moved by his desire for revenge, the Prefect relies on the enlightened principle of a homogeneous society where all individuals are the same and will behave following the same patterns. Humans under this modern condition are thus "forced into real conformity" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 9) and individuality is denied in favour of a manipulated society, whose unity "consists in the negation of each individual and in the scorn poured on the type of society which could make people into individuals" (9). The Enlightenment aims at the universal, but always at the cost of the particular. Poe was aware of this fact, and so was Dupin when he said, referring to the Prefect's failure to gauge the criminal's cunning: "They are right in this much— that their own ingenuity is a faithful representative of that of the mass; but when the cunning of the individual felon is diverse in character from their own, the felon foils them, of course" (Poe 1992: 693).

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3. The Collapse of Civilisation in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una"

If the analysis of "The Purloined Letter" shows how it prophesied several of the indictments put forward by Horkheimer and Adorno, it is "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" which in my view best exemplifies Poe's diagnosis of the pathologies of modernity. Poe had already treated the issue of progress in his satirical piece "The Man that was Used Up", published in 1839, where he mockingly commented upon "the rapid march of mechanical invention" (1992: 385)— a theme that he would later reprise in his "Colloquy" in a more serious manner. Nicolás Casullo defines what he considers to be the shiny characteristics of Modernity: "equality, knowledge, conquest, mutation of the landscapes, an exteriority that can be potentially industrialised. Docility and progress" (2004: 26, my translation).⁸ It is striking that virtually all of these features are present —and denounced— in Poe's tale. There is a sense that these supposedly praiseworthy

elements are in fact destroying civilisation, probably in the name of civilisation itself. The communion between what are deemed positive aspects of the so-called progress of civilisation and a feeling of impending doom are identified by Berman as core aspects of the modern experience: “To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world— and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (1988: 15). This aporetic duplicity ties in with the marked resemblances between Poe’s tale and certain ideas posited in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The aim of its authors was “nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of ‘barbarism’” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xiv). Indeed, Poe’s tale seems to accurately exemplify the process of the self-destruction of the Enlightenment that Horkheimer and Adorno discussed.

What Poe describes in “The Colloquy” appears to be a post-apocalyptic world that has succumbed to human excess. It seems as though the epigraph of the tale, which reads: “These things are in the near future” (Poe 1992: 512), had uncannily prophesied the collapse of civilisation witnessed by Horkheimer and Adorno during the 20th century. A feeling of impending disintegration was not infrequent among authors at the time, and Poe’s was not the only voice to denounce what he perceived as the barbarian state of contemporary society. Baudelaire, probably the most important heir to Poe’s literary legacy, writes that

[i]t is impossible to find a magazine from whatever day [...] without encountering, in every single line, the signs of the most horrifying human perversion, right beside the most surprising boasting about integrity, kindness, charity, and the most insolent assertions about progress and civilisation. All newspapers, from the first line to the last, are but a tissue of horrors. (2016: 118-119, my translation)⁹

Such disaster has already been consummated in “The Colloquy”. The story begins with the aftermath of Monos’s death and his reencounter with his beloved Una in a post-apocalyptic afterlife. Monos, who has just left the world of humans, asks Una at what point shall he begin telling his story, and she replies, befuddled by his question, that “in Death we have both learned the propensity of man to define the indefinable” (Poe 1992: 513). This constitutes the first hint—or the second, if the epigraph is considered— about the meaning of the tale. The power of this utterance lies in its relating death with the enlightened impulse to categorise and define reality. Not by chance is the tree of knowledge termed as “death-producing” (513). This corresponds to a traditional enlightened attitude to the world in which individuals perceive themselves as outside, or above, the natural world which they need to categorise and systematise in order ultimately to master it. The incommensurability of the world is reduced to calculability, and the first realm to

be dominated for human profit is that of nature. Indeed, the relationship between humankind and nature is crucial to understanding the enlightened approach to reality, which incidentally has pervaded the western world up until the twenty-first century when the technification of nature for man's profit is the order of the day. This idea was central to Horkheimer and Adorno's indictment; they argued that "what human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts" (2002: 2). They cited Francis Bacon as one of the first thinkers who realised that scientific progress would result, necessarily, in man's dominion over nature (1). In other words, they denounced the fact that science allows mankind to rule the world. This idea is present in Poe's tale, as formulated by Monos:

Man, because he could not but acknowledge the majesty of Nature, fell into childish exultation at his acquired and still-increasing dominion over her elements. Even while he stalked a god in his own fancy, an infantine imbecility came over him. As might be supposed from the origin of his disorder, he grew infected with system, and with abstraction. He enwrapped himself in generalities. (1992: 514)

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It is a well-known fact that the romantic writers changed the perception of the relationship between man and nature, and saw themselves as a part of nature itself rather than as a separate entity from it. The Lake poets in England epitomised this relationship in what has become a paradigmatic poetic style, and the communion with nature stands at the core of English romantic poetics. Casullo provides an insightful explanation of the change that the romantics underwent in the conception of their relation to nature: "Romanticism [...] was born perceiving the modernisation of the world as an ontological break between nature and man" (2004: 30, my translation).¹⁰ Monos also laments the dominion of man over nature and believes that there should have been some "principles which should have taught our race to submit to the guidance of the natural laws, rather than attempt their control" (Poe 1992: 513). In the tale, there is a pastoral nostalgic memory of a nature that has not been destroyed by human action — "holy, august and blissful days, when blue rivers ran undammed, between hills unhewn, into far forest solitudes, primæval, odorous, and unexplored" (514)— in disquieting contrast to "huge smoking cities" (514). A sickness motif appears and Monos laments that a diseased humankind is to blame for the destruction of nature: "[T]he fair face of Nature was deformed as with the ravages of some loathsome disease" (514). This sickness motif is also present in a previously mentioned passage, where the urge to categorise reality is conceptualised in terms of illness: "system and abstraction" are infectious agents that bring about destruction. And this is one of the aspects that make the two German authors claim that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 4). As explained in the analysis of "The Purloined Letter", the Enlightenment not only equates

reason with mathematical thought; it also establishes systematic categories that enable humans to appropriate reality and thus dominate it:

In thought, human beings distance themselves from nature in order to arrange it in such a way that it can be mastered. Like the material tool which, as a thing, is held fast as that thing in different situations and thereby separates the world, as something chaotic, multiple, and disparate, from that which is known, single, and identical, so the concept is the idea-tool which fits into things at the very point from which one can take hold of them. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 31)

The dominion over nature is intimately related to the concept of progress. Certainly, the mastery of man over nature is more often than not accomplished in the name of such progress, as though moral improvement were equated with a process of mere technification. Poe is aware of this fact, and the criticism that he makes of the idea of progress is predominant in this tale. Before engaging in a detailed description of the moment of his death, Monos tells Una about the state of civilisation in which he lived:

MONOS. One word first, my Una, in regard to man's general condition at this epoch. You will remember that one or two of the wise among our forefathers—wise in fact, although not in the world's esteem—had ventured to doubt the propriety of the term “improvement”, as applied to the progress of our civilisation. (Poe 1992: 513)

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What is at stake in this passage is the confusion between moral progress and progress as understood by an increasingly technified society. The faith in progress that the Enlightenment presupposes developed suddenly into faith in the technical possibilities of an industrial society. Baudelaire, attuned to Poe's feelings about society, writes an uncanny foreshadowing of the barbaric state of society that Horkheimer and Adorno witnessed: “the universal ruin, or the universal progress; for the name matters little” (2002: 87). This is almost a paraphrase of Monos's words: “the Earth's records had taught me to look for widest ruin as the price of highest civilisation” (Poe 1992: 515). It must not be forgotten that Poe was writing in the first half of the nineteenth century, a time when the questionable consequences of the industrial revolution were beginning to be self-evident, while simultaneously intellectuals were celebrating the supposed progress that society was undergoing. It is not by chance that the publication of this story coincides in time with the beginning of the Victorian era, in which the general public opinion, including men such as Herbert Spencer, had it that their own society was at the peak of civilisation—an idea which was in painful contrast with the actual situation of most of the English population. We must consider that Poe lived in a society that he found utterly despicable. Baudelaire, drawing on the intellectual intimacy he felt with Poe, articulates this hostility as follows, emphasizing the pragmatism and utilitarianism of a nation concerned with material success:

Edgar Poe and his country were not on the same level. The United States is a gigantic infant [...] Proud of its material development, abnormal and nearly monstrous, this newcomer in history has a naïve faith in the almightiness of industry [...] Time and money are national treasures! Material pursuit, exaggerated to proportions of a national mania, leaves little room in the mind for unworldly pursuits. (1980: 81-82)

The fact that the industrialised society of the United States is called by Baudelaire “a gigantic infant” is of extreme relevance. There are abundant references to this childish condition of humanity throughout the tale, and it is probably not by chance that the core of Kant’s answer to what the Enlightenment is was precisely the liberation from “a self-incurred immaturity” (2003: 54). The characterisation of humankind in Poe’s tale seems to be a deliberate negation of Kant’s proposal. As Monos says, a humanity engaged in “childish exultation” (Poe 1992: 514) before its own powers and dulled by an “infantine imbecility” (514) is doomed to fail. The “infant condition of [man’s] soul” (513) as the reason for a juvenile adoration of the dogma of progress is also criticised by Nietzsche, who claimed that “the self-deception of the masses [...] in all democracies— is highly advantageous: making people small and governable is hailed as ‘progress!’” (in Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 36). In less elegant words but conveying essentially the same idea, Baudelaire reflects on Poe’s feelings about progress, claiming that he “considered Progress, that great modern invention, to be an ecstasy for dupes” (1980: 82).

The uncritical acceptance of progress and the confusion of progress with technification bring about a regression in the truly humane, truly enlightened state of humankind. As Monos notices, some individuals have tried to voice this confusion: “At long intervals some master-minds appeared, looking upon each advance in practical science as a retro-gradation in the true utility” (Poe 1992: 513), and Horkheimer and Adorno acknowledged that “progress is reverting to regression” (2002: xviii). Society has become so corrupted that it can no longer continue to be: “for the infected world at large I could anticipate no regeneration save in death. That man, as a race, should not become extinct, I saw that he must be *‘born again’*” (Poe 1992: 515, emphasis in original). The disquieting silence that reigns at the end of the tale can be considered an antecedent of the silence of Auschwitz, which Horkheimer and Adorno understood as the epitome of the self-destructive impulse of the Enlightenment, of the rationality of progress: “Dust had returned to dust. The worm had food no more. The sense of being had at length utterly departed, and there reigned in its stead —instead of all things— dominant and perpetual— the autocrats Place and Time” (520). The bleak, apocalyptic ending of “The Colloquy” only emphasises the criticism of the myth of progress, wrongly assimilated as a dogma. The identification between progress and

technification results, fatally, in the perpetual infantile state of mankind which eventually negates the enlightened enterprise itself.

4. Conclusion

The elective affinities between the themes in Poe's work and modern and postmodern philosophical debates of the twentieth century, as well as the fact that his writings have continued to trigger commentaries throughout two centuries after his birth, can only be a sign of his contemporary relevance. The themes we find in his texts still resonate with meaning to the modern ear and encapsulate what has been described above as the inherently contradictory and ambiguous experience of the modern world. Poe emerges as an acute critic of modernity whose texts remain an inexhaustible testimony of the endeavour to debunk some of the tenets of the complex, uncertain and even contradictory modern tradition, in a way that establishes him as "a beacon for [...] all Modernity" (Adorno 2002: 20).

Notes

¹. I have been loosely inspired by the title of Reinhart Koselleck's *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of the Modern Society* (1988). There have been other critics who have treated Poe as a pathologist of modernity. See for instance Dorothea Von Mücke's text "Entre la patología y la moralidad: 'El demonio de la perversidad'" (2009).

². I have selected these two texts as paradigmatic examples or case studies of issues and problematics that we may find in all of Poe's work. That is, this article does not intend to be exhaustive; on the contrary, the investigations presented here might (and should) be pursued further as other texts by Poe lend themselves to analogous interpretations.

³. See Poe. *La mala conciencia de la modernidad* (2009) edited by Félix Duque for a survey of Poe's multi-faceted relationships with modernity.

⁴. Ricoeur famously coined this expression in his book *Freud and Philosophy*

to refer to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud who, he argued, were the "masters" of the "school of suspicion"; a type of interpretation based on a "single method of demystification" (1970: 32).

⁵. "Muchos de los textos de Poe [...] se caracterizan por un extraño componente híbrido."

⁶. Besides being a turning point in the themes tackled in Poe's tales, "The Man of the Crowd" is also a key text for the study of the modern experience, especially the cosmopolitan one, as David Cunningham acknowledges: "it represents a decisive moment not only in the development of Poe's literary canon but in that of modern fiction itself" (2009: 45, my translation ["representa un momento decisivo no solo en el desarrollo del canon literario de Poe sino en el de la ficción moderna per se"]).

⁷. For a study of the importance of pairs and doubles in the story, see Lianha Babener's essay "The Shadow's Shadow: The

Motif of the Double in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter'" (1988).

⁸. "igualdad, saber, conquista, mutación de los paisajes, exterioridad industrializable. Docilidad y progreso."

⁹. "Il est impossible de parcourir une gazette quelconque, de n'importe quel jour [...] sans y trouver, à chaque ligne, les signes de la perversité humaine la plus

épouvantable, en même temps que les vanteries les plus surprenantes de probité, de bonté, de charité, et les affirmations les plus effrontées, relatives au progrès et à la civilisation. Tout journal, de la première ligne à la dernière, n'est qu'un tissu d'horreurs".

¹⁰. "El Romanticismo [...] nace percibiendo la modernización de mundo como escisión ontológica entre naturaleza y hombre".

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