

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Edgar Allan Poe's The Poetic Principle Part-1

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The Poetic Principle
Edgar Allan Poe

In speaking of the Poetic Principle, I have no design to be either thorough or profound. While discussing, very much at random, the essentiality of what we call Poetry, my principal purpose will be to cite for consideration some few of those minor English or American poems which best suit my own taste, or which upon my own fancy have left the most definite impression. By "minor poems" I mean, of course, poems of little length. And here in the beginning permit me to say a few words in regard to a somewhat peculiar principle, which, whether rightfully or wrongfully, has always had its influence in my own critical estimate of the poem. I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, "a long poem," is simply a flat contradiction in terms.

I need scarcely observe that 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 revision ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.

There are, no doubt, many who have found difficulty in reconciling the critical dictum that the "Paradise Lost" is to be devoutly admired throughout, with the absolute impossibility of maintaining for it, during perusal, the amount of enthusiasm which that critical dictum would demand. The great work, in fact, is to be regarded as poetical, only when, losing sight of that vital requisite in all works of Art, Unity, we view it merely as a series of minor poems. If, to preserve its Unity—its totality of effect or impression—we read it (as would be necessary) at a single sitting, the result is but a constant alternation of excitement and depression. After a passage of what we feel to be true poetry, there follows, inevitably, a passage of platitude which no critical prejudgment can force us to admire; but if, upon completing the work, we read it again, omitting the first book (that is to say, commencing with the second), we shall be surprised at now finding that admirable



So having said that, we come to look at this work, *The Poetic Principle*. This is an 1850 essay. It is also one of his last published works, and this is a culmination of a series of essays, series of talks, lectures that he used to give in 1848 and 1849. So this is also a version of those talks, which were very popular in those two years. So, this is very evidently a part of American Romanticism.

And we are looking at American Romanticism and particularly this essay, in the context of our discussion on literary criticism in England, because this was the first major literary movement that crossed America, which influenced America. Also because, you know, in terms of a nation, in terms of an emerging literature, they were still a young nation, they were still dabbling with things and trying to figure things entirely on their own.

And so, we also find that though Romanticism, the influence of Romanticism had come from Europe and England, we find that the Americans, the American literary writers, they had evolved. They had managed to evolve their own kind of Romanticism, a very distinct kind of Romanticism. So this is to showcase how a new tradition gets formed.

There is no overt sort of statement that Poe makes at the outset that I am going to depart from the other kinds of traditions. But we find that in the observations, in the opinions that he is giving, he is clearly departing from the dominant tendencies in Europe as well as in England. And there is a way in which they also try to move away from tradition in order to reiterate their own literariness.

And we find that this moving away from tradition, works in a very different way when it comes to the literature in America, because for the others, for Europe and for England, moving away from tradition also means moving away from perhaps the classical writers, the classical notions laid by, from Aristotle and then on. But for Poe, when he is trying to move away from tradition, it is also trying to move away from the clutches of the principles laid within Europe and England.

He does not explicitly state that but we find that that movement, those moves are very evident as well. So, we find a lot of personal opinion of Poe also dictating his poetic formulation, his ideas about different kinds of yardsticks to be used and so on. So, and there is a way in which we realise that. Not just in England, we do find that the personal opinions of the literary critics, they do begin to form the basis of principles as well because there is a lot of focus on individual opinion, on individuality and there is no need for them to rest on any tradition to

get their opinions endorsed. So we find the same sort of thing getting explicated in Poe's works as well.

So it is a direct sort of a text which does not try to profess its own opinions. He is very unapologetic in stating certain things. And there is some times when he feels that there is no need to give a rationale for some of the distinctive moves that he is making. He does not bother to give that either. So, we can find that it gets straight to the point from the beginning of the essay itself, right in the first sentence.

"In speaking of the Poetic Principle, I have no design to be either thorough or profound." So he is talking about the Poetic Principle, and in this entire essay we find that he rarely digresses from it. The entire discussion is on Poetic Principle and based on his beliefs, based on his own yardsticks and the ways in which he has formulated the idea of poetry and what should contribute to the Poetic Principle.

And he has clarified right at the outset that he is not trying to be profound. We do not find that sort of, you know, the romantic profundity in any of the things that he says, it is very straightforward. And we do find that there are many things, there are overlaps that we will begin to identify between English Romanticism and American Romanticism, but we do find the language more cutting, the language more direct and there is very few of those fancy romanticised notions about the self or about writing.

So, and he does not claim that this is a thorough kind of a study either. It is based on entirely his personal opinions and his personal principles that he believed in while composing his own poetry. "While discussing, very much at random, the essentiality of what we call poetry", there is no justification being given over here for why he is discussing poetry. It is a random thing.

"While discussing very much at random", maybe because he was also a poet, "the essentiality of what we call poetry, my principal purpose will be to cite for consideration, some few of those minor English or American poems which best suit my own taste, or which upon my own fancy have left the most definite impression". So that is very clear. That is the only rationale for choosing the kind of texts that he chooses to discuss in this work. Those are the ones that suited his taste, and "which upon my own fancy have left the most definite impression. By "minor poems", I mean, of course, poems of little length". So that is also a different sort of a definition that he gives to poetry. Minor poems is poems which are shorter poems. And we will find that there is an extensive discussion right at the outset in situating

the short poems as against the long epic poems. And the minor poems is also a term that he gives to short poems, poems of little length.

“And here in the beginning permit me to say a few words in regard to a somewhat peculiar principle, which whether rightfully or wrongfully, has always had its influence in my own critical estimate of the poem”. Look at the way in which his own opinion, his own fancies and his own impressions are being highlighted one after the other. Very unapologetically, very directly.

If you contrast this with the kind of language used in the earlier critical traditions, there is always a way in which the personal opinion needs to be supported by some opinion from the tradition, that is where everything is founded upon. So we find Poe for two reasons one, Romanticism has moved away from the traditions, two, he is an American poet. There is very little in terms of a native American literary tradition that he can rest upon. So he is using that to his advantage, he is using, he is capitalising on that to present his opinion as *the* opinion and *the* basis of the critical foundations which are yet to emerge.

“I hold that”, so he comes straight to the point in the first paragraph itself. “I hold that a long poem does not exist.” It is a very radical statement to make. He is disowning, he is delegitimising, and he is seeing absolutely no literary value in long poems, epics. “I maintain that the phrase, a long poem is simply a flat contradiction in terms”.

This is a complete departure from whatever opinion has been held traditionally because traditionally, most poems as we know, they were very long. Epics were seen as the supreme kind of manifestation of human creativity. And even during the classical times, we know that epics and tragedies, both were considered in almost an equal footing. So that is the kind of standing that epic had. And almost all English writers who had left their mark as founding fathers they all had written long poems. Some of them were called as epics and some of them were long narrative exercises.

“I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only in as much as it excites, by elevating the soul”. So we can find the directness of this prose from the beginning. There is no, there are no prefatory surroundings, there are no ornamented phrases over here. So, he believes in this idea of poem being able to elevate the soul.

We find that you know, Longinus in direct as well as in indirect terms, we find his idea of the sublime getting invoked in many ways. So if you remember the essay that we had taken a

look at while discussing Longinus, Scott James had identified him as the first Romantic critic, and rightly so because he is the one who is closest to the Romantic imagination. Though Longinus does not get mentioned anywhere in this text or in most of the texts that we have taken a look at during the Romantic period, we find that his ideas remain the closest to the Romantic ideals.

“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”. He is making a direct equation between the poem’s ability to elevate the soul, to, if you could use Longinus phrase- what was it? – “To transport the reader out of oneself”. So that he says that cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length, only short poems, the phrase that he uses in the beginning is only ‘minor poems’ can perhaps hope to achieve that.

And, “After the lapse of half an hour, at the very most, it flags- fails- a revulsion ensues- then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such”. So he is giving a duration for the length of a poem. Maybe for half an hour you can sustain it and after that it fails. And it is a very serious word to use in this context, fails. The poem after that, it fails, and in fact, no longer such. The poem ceases to be.

So, any composition of a greater magnitude, of a greater length cannot sustain this kind of elevation. If it fails in elevating the soul, then it ceases to be poetry. So he is completely dismissing the grand ideas associated with epics, with long poems and saying that that is not good imagination at all, that is not good poetry at all. And by extension, he will go on to say that that is not even poetry. You need not even find any merit in these long poems. He is very direct in his statements, and he does not even give any leeway for exceptions to be situated either.

“There are, no doubt, many who have found difficulty in reconciling the critical dictum that the *Paradise Lost* is to be devoutly admired throughout, with the absolute impossibility of maintaining for it, during perusal, the amount of enthusiasm which that critical dictum would demand. The great work, in fact, is to be regarded as poetical, only when, losing sight of what vital requisites in all works of Art, Unity, view it merely as a series of minor poems”. So he is telling us a way of looking at how can we understand or appreciate *Paradise Lost* and it is like a series of minor poems.

“If to preserve its unity- its totality of effect or impression- we read it (as would be necessary) at a single sitting, the result is but a constant alternation of excitement and depression”. You will not be able to have the excitement or the status of elevation, the experience of elevation in a sustained length, if you are reading this in a single sitting, he is saying it will be a constant alteration of excitement and depression.

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In regard to the “Iliad,” we have, if not positive proof, at least very good reason for



“After a passage of what we feel to be true poetry, there follows, inevitably, a passage of platitude which no critical prejudgment can force us to admire; but if, upon completing the work”, look at this phrase, “critical prejudgement”. He is also telling us that we appreciate, we tend to find merit in most of, tend to find aesthetic experience in most ancient literary works because of a critical prejudgment perhaps. If you take that element out entirely, that critical prejudgement is not there then it is impossible to sustain that sort of an experience, that sort of a response to any long work.

So which no critical prejudgment can force us to admire. “But if, upon completing the work, we read it again, omitting the first book, that is to say commencing with the second, we should be surprised at now finding that admirable, which we before condemned, that damnable, which we had previously so much admired”. So that reversal can also happen, he says, if you are reading a long poem because the problem he identifies is with the length.

He gives the example of *Paradise Lost*, which is a voluminous work. If you read it in a single go, he says in a single sitting, the experience will be an alternation of excitement and depression. But if you read it again, he says, like omitting the first book and then beginning

with the second book, something which did not excite us before, what we condemned before maybe may now become admirable, what we had admired now may become condemnable.

So, “It follows from all this that the ultimate, aggregate or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun is a nullity, and this is precisely the fact”. So he is not really going into the details of why one may find the first part admirable in the second reading or the second part more damnable in the second reading, he does not go into those details. He is saying very bluntly that the effect of even the best epic, even if you take *Paradise Lost*, it is just a nullity, and this is precisely the fact.

He is refusing to engage with the fact that an epic a long poem can give a sustained aesthetic experience, a sustained experience of elevation. He continues to maintain this point by giving examples, supreme examples, from different critical traditions. The first one being *Paradise Lost*, then he moves on to *Iliad*, from the classical times.

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CREATING THE NOBIL... THE SOURCE OF THE POETRY IS IN THE LIND OF THIS CREATING... THE 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 revision ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.

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In regard to the “Iliad,” we have, if not positive proof, at least very good reason for believing it intended as a series of lyrics; but, granting the epic intention, I can say only that the work is based in an imperfect sense of art. The modern epic is, of the supposititious ancient model, but an inconsiderate and blindfold imitation. But the day of these artistic anomalies is over. If, at any time, any very long poems were popular in reality—which I doubt—it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again.

That the extent of a poetical work is, *ceteris paribus*, the measure of its merit, seems undoubtedly, when we thus state it, a proposition sufficiently absurd—yet we are indebted for it to the Quarterly Reviews. Surely there can be nothing in mere size, abstractly considered—there can be nothing in mere bulk, so far as a volume is concerned which has so continuously elicited admiration from these saturnine pamphlets! A mountain, to be sure, by the mere sentiment of physical magnitude which it conveys, does impress us with a sense of the sublime—but no man is impressed after *this* fashion.



“In regard to the *Iliad*, we have, if not positive proof, at least very good reason for believing it intended as a series of lyrics”. So in both these texts in *Paradise Lost* as well as for *Iliad*, those are two voluminous works, he says maybe those were not initially intended as works to be read in a single sitting, maybe those need to be broken down and read.

So with *Iliad* also he has this argument, that maybe it was intended as a series of lyrics, “But granting the epic intention, I can say only that the work is based in an imperfect sense of art”. So look at this audacious way in which he is dismissing *Paradise Lost* as well as *Iliad* purely on account of the length of the work.

“The modern epic is of the suppositious ancient model, but an inconsiderate and blindfold imitation”. So he is saying in the contemporary, there is no room for an epic kind of work that is “an inconsiderate and blindfold imitation”. So this is a radical view which only the American literary critical tradition maintains. I do not think anyone within the English literary critical tradition had the audacity to completely dismiss epic or the long narrative poems in general.

So here he does that saying, in the modern times this is an inconsiderate and blindfold imitation. “But the day of those artistic anomalies”, so he is also in by extension, referring to these long compositions, these long narrative exercises as artistic anomalies. “If, at any time, any very long poems were popular in reality, which I doubt, it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again”.

There is no way in which we can measure whether those long poems, whether *Paradise Lost* or *Iliad*, whether they were really popular during those times. It is not like a performance, you cannot evaluate it in that sense. There is no way to judge how people felt about those poems, which were composed at that point of time. And it continued to remain popular, continued to remain canonical, on account of what he says, what is that phrase that he uses? It is a critical prejudgment, on account of that critical prejudgement.

And he says, if at any time, even if they were popular in reality, now they are not going to be popular at all because no one has the time and consideration for this kind of an aesthetic experience which requires a lot of time. It is also keeping very much in tune with the American way of responding to most things which were European or English. So they take a radically different view, sometimes you know, it also comes across as being this eccentric like it does in Poe’s works, but they ensure that there is a different track altogether that they are following.

That the extent of a poetical work is *ceteris paribus*, I hope you know what that is. What is *ceteris paribus*? Yes, other conditions remaining the same. It is a Latin phrase. “The measure of its merit, seems undoubtedly, when we thus state it, a proposition sufficiently absurd, yet we are indebted for it to the Quarterly Reviews.

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critical dictum would demand. The great work, in fact, is to be regarded as poetical, only when, losing sight of that vital requisite in all works of Art, Unity, we view it merely as a series of minor poems. If, to preserve its Unity—its totality of effect or impression—we read it (as would be necessary) at a single sitting, the result is but a constant alternation of excitement and depression. After a passage of what we feel to be true poetry, there follows, inevitably, a passage of platitude which no critical prejudgment can force us to admire, but if, upon completing the work, we read it again, omitting the first book (that is to say, commencing with the second), we shall be surprised at now finding that admirable which we before condemned—that damnable which we had previously so much admired. It follows from all this that the ultimate, aggregate, or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun is a nullity,—and this is precisely the fact.

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Surely there can be nothing in mere size, abstractly considered, there can be nothing in mere bulk, so far as a volume is concerned which has so continuously elicited admiration from these saturnine pamphlets". He is referring to the works that come out in these quarterly reviews, those pamphlets. "A mountain, to be sure, by the mere sentiment of physical magnitude, which it conveys, does impress us with a sense of the sublime, but no man is impressed after this fashion by the material grandeur of even *The Columbiad*." *Columbiad* is one of those long narrative poems composed in America in the early 19th century.

He is again, you know, there is no reason to, I mean, this comparison between the physical magnitude and the feeling of sublimity that one gets. Perhaps it is an invocation of, a very indirect invocation of Longinus again, one does not know for sure. But he is saying, maybe the mountain, the sight of something out there in the nature, something very grandeur, something really, of this magnitude, it may impress us with the sense of the sublime, but in this fashion an epic cannot impress at all.

So it is also this work, *Columbiad* was not very well received in America, so he is also using that as an instance to prove that there is no way in which epic can receive a sustained aesthetic response in the contemporary. Even the Quarterlies have not instructed us to be impressed by it. Those were the pamphlets, the critical pamphlets which were in circulation, even they did not say anything nice about it.

"As yet, they have not insisted on our estimating Lamartine by the cubic foot or Pollock by the pound", referring to other works, "but what else are we to infer from their continual prating about 'sustained effort'?"

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to say, commencing with the second), we shall be surprised at now finding that admirable which we before condemned—that damnable which we had previously so much admired. It follows from all this that the ultimate, aggregate, or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun is a nullity—and this is precisely the fact.

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On the other hand, it is clear that a poem may be improperly brief. Undue brevity



If, by ‘sustained effort’, any little gentleman has accomplished an epic, let us frankly commend him for the effort.” He is trying to separate the effort that goes into the making of a work and the end result that it produced, asking us not to get confused with one over the other. Of course, if there is an effort which has gone into the making, let us frankly commend him for the effort.

If this indeed be a thing commendable. Look at the cynicism also, that is something that we find consistently in Poe’s literary works. He is very cynical. He is very cynical about whether the epics were popular in the first place. And he says, you know, even if those were popular, I do not have the time to engage with it now- the point is, now they are not popular, they cannot have a sustained effort.

Now he is saying even if one were to commend someone on the sustained effort that produced an epic, and he is saying, you know, there comes a cynical comment within brackets, if this indeed be a thing commendable. But let us forbear praising the epic on the effort’s account. So forget about that effort, what about the result? What is the result that comes out?

“It is to be hoped that common sense, in the time to come, will prefer deciding upon a work of art, rather by the impression it makes, by the effect it produces, than by the time it took to impress the effect, or by the amount of sustained effort, which had been found necessary in effecting that impression”.

Very utilitarian, very direct, we also find that very much in keeping with the many attitudes that were to dominate the American culture in the decades to come. Decide the work by the end result, do not take into the account the effort that went into it, if at all the effort had to be commended, okay, commend it. Leave it at that. Do not get that confused with the notion of literary merit. That does not amount to the aesthetic experience at all, that does not add to elevating the soul at all. If someone has put in some effort for something that does not necessarily translate to the effect that that work had on the readers.

The fact is, that perseverance is one thing, genius is quite another. That is a very important, radical thing to state as well. Saying that, of course, I do admire the perseverance that you had put in, if you had to, you know, if you had to spend 30 years to write something, of course, I appreciate that, I acknowledge that, but do not for a moment think that that can be equated to genius.

In the work that he discussed just before this, if you recall, in Shelley's apology for poetry, there is a mention of a number of writers who had to put in almost their entire lifetime for producing certain works. About how, you know, for about three decades they had to continue at it in order to compose that. So he finds it important to make a mention of that, and he wants us to judge the work and get experience based on that as well.

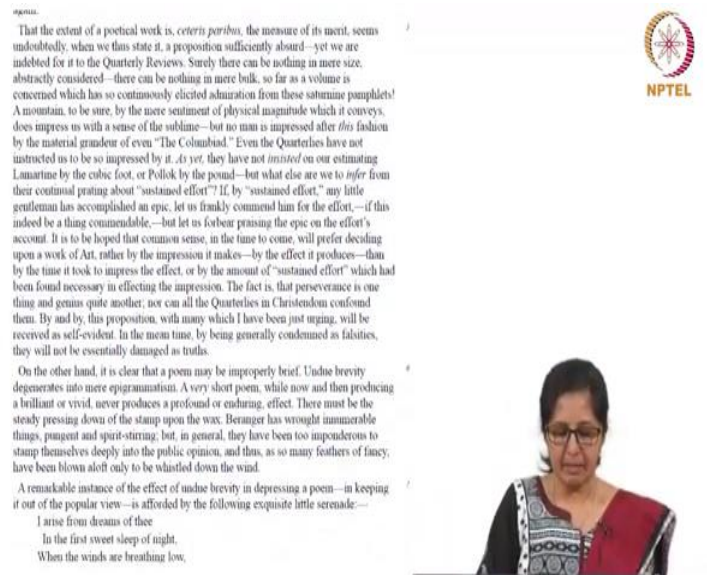
Poe is moving away from it entirely and he is not even ready to acknowledge that as a commendable effort. If someone wants to acknowledge that as an effort, as something commendable, of course you are free to do that. But he is also making it very clear that genius is something else altogether. "Nor can all the quarterlies in Christendom confound them". He is again, you know, he is also using the pamphlets, the critical evaluations that came in those quarterlies as a base for some of his assumptions.

"By and by, this proposition, with many, which I have been just urging, will be received as self-evident". He is also saying this is you know, you do not need any sort of a critical judgement for this, just plain common sense. In between remember, he also says, he hopes that at some point the evaluation of a literary work will be based on common sense, based on the effect that it has on the reader. Very simple, very plain, to not go into any of the nitty-gritty. Just see if there is a sustained kind of experience of elevation that the work is able to afford you. If it does, yes, it is good. If it does not, it does not.

So he is also trying to base this upon common sense, trying to make criticism less complicated. Whether this is a sustainable model or not, that is a different question altogether

that we shall come back to maybe after having gone through this entire essay, but at this point, it is important to notice that he is not resting his notions upon any of the critical yardsticks or critical notions which are available to him at that point of time. On the contrary, he is consciously, very deliberately moving away from those.

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That the extent of a poetical work is, *ceteris paribus*, the measure of its merit, seems undoubtedly, when we thus state it, a proposition sufficiently absurd—yet we are indebted for it to the Quarterly Reviews. Surely there can be nothing in mere size, abstractly considered—there can be nothing in mere bulk, so far as a volume is concerned which has so continuously elicited admiration from these saturnine pamphlets! A mountain, to be sure, by the mere sentiment of physical magnitude which it conveys, does impress us with a sense of the sublime—but no man is impressed after *this* fashion by the material grandeur of even “The Columbiad.” Even the Quarterlies have not instructed us to be so impressed by it. *As yet*, they have not *imisted* on our estimating Lamartine by the cubic foot, or Pollok by the pound—but what else are we to *infer* from their continual prating about “sustained effort”? If, by “sustained effort,” any little gentleman has accomplished an epic, let us frankly commend him for the effort,—if this indeed be a thing commendable,—but let us forbear praising the epic on the effort’s account. It is to be hoped that common sense, in the time to come, will prefer deciding upon a work of Art, rather by the impression it makes—by the effect it produces—than by the time it took to impress the effect, or by the amount of “sustained effort” which had been found necessary in effecting the impression. The fact is, that perseverance is one thing and genius quite another, nor can all the Quarterlies in Christendom confound them. By and by, this proposition, with many which I have been just urging, will be received as self-evident. In the mean time, by being generally condemned as falsities, they will not be essentially damaged as truths.

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 of the stamp upon the wax. Beranger has wrought innumerable things, pungent and spirit-stirring; but, in general, they have been too inopercous to stamp themselves deeply into the public opinion, and thus, as so many feathers of fancy, have been blown aloft only to be whistled down the wind.

A remarkable instance of the effect of undue brevity in depressing a poem—in keeping it out of the popular view—is afforded by the following exquisite little serenade—

I arise from dreams of thee
In the first sweet sleep of night,
When the winds are breathing low,

“In the meantime, by being generally condemned as falsities, they will not be essentially damaged as truths”. So it is very critical of the critical opinions. The informed critical opinions which have been handed down over generations, which are based on traditional approaches. He says, just rest on your common sense. Just trust your instincts in evaluating a work.

“On the other hand, it is clear that a poem may be very improperly brief.” So he wants a midway. He says, a long poem of course, cannot have a sustained effort, but it should not be improperly brief either. “Undue brevity denigrates 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 of the stamp upon the wax”.

So he is using this analogy to talk about you know, about how it should be like. There must be the steady pressing down of the stamp upon the wax, the appropriate amount of pressure for the stamp to be left on the wax. Not like too much to damage it entirely, but it should be sufficient enough to leave the mark. And if does not, if it is not weighed down properly there is no mark left at all.

So he is critical about the very brief poems as well, improperly brief as he says. And by now, we also have got a hang of his attitude that it is very personal. And he does not try to, it is very cynical, it is very personal, he does not try to get the opinion of, get the critical support or the critical endorsement of anything that they are used to going by during that time.

“Beranger has wrought innumerable things, pungent and spirit-stirring, but in general, they have been too imponderous to stamp themselves deeply into the public opinion, and thus as so many feathers of fancy, have been blown aloft only to be whistled down the wind”. He is again giving examples from the contemporary where it was not long enough or it was not powerful enough to stamp themselves deeply into the public opinion.

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does impress us with a sense of the sublime—but no man is impressed after *this* fashion by the material grandeur of even “The Columbiad.” Even the Quarterlies have not instructed us to be so impressed by it. *As yet*, they have not *instructed* on our estimating Lamartine by the cubic foot, or Pollok by the pound—but what else are we to *infer* from their continual prating about “sustained effort”? If, by “sustained effort,” any little gentleman has accomplished an epic, let us frankly commend him for the effort—if this indeed be a thing commendable,—but let us forbear praising the epic on the effort’s account. It is to be hoped that common sense, in the time to come, will prefer deciding upon a work of Art, rather by the impression it makes—by the effect it produces—than by the time it took to impress the effect, or by the amount of “sustained effort” which had been found necessary in effecting the impression. The fact is, that perseverance is one thing and genius quite another, nor can all the Quarterlies in Christendom confound them. By and by, this proposition, with many which I have been just urging, will be received as self-evident. In the mean time, by being generally condemned as fables, they will not be essentially damaged as truths.

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 of the stamp upon the wax. Beranger has wrought innumerable things, pungent and spirit-stirring; but, in general, they have been too imponderous to stamp themselves deeply into the public opinion, and thus, as so many feathers of fancy, have been blown aloft only to be whistled down the wind.

A remarkable instance of the effect of undue brevity in depressing a poem—in keeping it out of the popular view—is afforded by the following exquisite little serenade:—

I arise from dreams of thee
In the first sweet sleep of night,
When the winds are breathing low,
And the stars are shining bright;
I arise from dreams of thee,
And a spirit in my feet
Hath led me—who knows how?—
To thy chamber-window, sweet!



And now he is giving an example from Shelley. This is from one of Shelley's poems, “An Indian Serenade” I think it is called. “A remarkable instance of the effect of undue brevity in depressing a poem”. How does it depress a poem, in keeping it out to the popular view, is afforded by the following exquisite little serenade.

So I want you to see the connection that he is making over here. A short poem he says, it does not have that kind of length or that kind of pressure to reach the public. It fails to leave a mark upon the public opinion. So he also, like most of the other things that he has said, he is not really told us how that happens. How does a short poem, an improperly short poem fail to make a mark? But of course, he is giving us a couple of examples of good poems which did not get much visibility.

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I arise from dreams of thee
 In the first sweet sleep of night,
 When the winds are breathing low,
 And the stars are shining bright:
 I arise from dreams of thee,
 And a spirit in my feet
 Hath led me—who knows how?—
 To thy chamber-window, sweet!

"The wandering airs they faint
 On the dark, the silent stream;
 And the champak odors fall
 Like sweet thoughts in a dream:
 The nightgale's complaint,
 It dies upon her heart,
 As I must on thine,
 Oh, beloved as thou art!

Oh, lift me from the grass!
 I die! I faint! I fail!
 Let thy love in kisses rain
 On my lips and eyelids pale.
 My cheek is cold and white, alas!
 My heart beats loud and fast;
 Oh! press it to thine own again,
 Where it will break at last!

Very few, perhaps, are familiar with these lines—yet no less a poet than Shelley is their author. Their warm, yet delicate and ethereal imagination will be appreciated by all, but by none so thoroughly as by him who has himself arisen from sweet dreams of one beloved to bathe in the aromatic air of a southern midsummer night.

One of the finest poems by Willis—the very best, in my opinion, which he has ever



This is one of Shelley's poems, which did not get the kind of attention that many thought it should. "Very few, perhaps are familiar with these lines, yet no less a poet than Shelley is their author". So Shelley was a very popular author not just in England, but in America as well as in Europe. So by giving this as an example, an exquisite poem by Shelley as an example, and how this was hidden from the public view, he is able to substantiate his point at least to a certain extent by saying that if it is improperly brief it may not leave a stamp on the public opinion, and that is how a poem becomes depressing.

He says, please take a look at that again, "The effect of undue brevity in depressing a poem in keeping it out of the popular view". So popularity also becomes a way in which the merit of the poem is recognised and this is in tune. If you look at the principles that he is laying out over here they are quite similar to one another. The earlier one was common sense, about how a reader, he is not even qualifying the reader, he is not talking about a reader who is informed in certain kinds of scholarship.

He is not talking about a reader who is familiar with certain kinds of traditions. He is only saying, if there is a sustained aesthetic experience, if there is an aesthetic experience which has a sustained kind of elevation, then it is good. But do not confuse it with the other kinds of details and no one has the time or energy to stay with a long epic and he thinks that, you know, no one ever had perhaps and here he is saying it is all about popularity. If it is very brief and he is giving two examples over here.

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Hath led me—who knows how?—
To thy chamber-window, sweet!

"The wandering airs they faint
On the dark, the silent stream;
And the champak odors fall
Like sweet thoughts in a dream;
The nightingale's complaint,
It dies upon her heart,
As I must on thine,
Oh, beloved as thou art!

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On my lips and eyelids pale.
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One of the finest poems by Willis—the very best, in my opinion, which he has ever written—has, no doubt, through this same defect of undue brevity, been kept back from its proper position, not less in the critical than in the popular view.

The shadows lay along Broadway,
'Twas near the twilight-tide—
And slowly there a lady fair
Was walking in her pride.



“There warm, yet delicate and ethereal imagination will be appreciated by all, but by none so thoroughly as by him who has himself arisen from sweet dreams of one beloved to bathe in the aromatic air of a southern mid-summer night”. It is like, you know, it is barely there, he is saying, you know. The poem is too brief that there is hardly an experience which could be engaged with over here.


“One of the finest poems by Willis”, that is Nathaniel Parker Willis, one of the contemporary poets in America, “the very best in my opinion, which he has ever written”. That is, he has again, you know, here he is also making a fine distinction between his opinion of the poem and the popularity of the poem. And we find that somehow the popularity of the poem, the public opinion of the poem seems to have an elevated status over the personal opinion that he has.

So there is also an inherent irony over here. On the one hand, he is pursuing a line of argument along his personal opinions, and on the other hand he is also basing the merit, the notions of merit, though he does not really use the term often, he is basing the notion of a good aesthetic experience based on public opinion and popularity as well. So coming back to this...

“One of the finest poems by Willis, the very best, in my opinion, which he has ever written, has no doubt through this same defect of undue brevity”. So this long voluminous works, such as epic length or the short poems, and now this is seen as an undue brevity been kept back from its proper position, not less in the critical than in the popular view.

So he is not clearly told us how this equation really works. If it is too long, you cannot engage with it for more than half an hour because that experience cannot be sustained at all. If it is too short, it does not reach the public view and not reaching the public view is also seen as a defect over here.

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She kept with care her beauties rare
From lovers warm and true,—
For her heart was cold to all but gold,
And the rich came not to woo,—
But honored well are charms to sell
If priests the selling do.

Now walking there was one more fair—
A slight girl, lily-pale,
And she had unseen company
To make the spirit quail.
'Twixt Want and Scorn she walked forlorn,
And nothing could avail.

No mercy now can clear her brow
For this world's peace to pray;
For, as love's wild prayer dissolved in air,
Her woman's heart gave way!—
But the sin forgiven by Christ in Heaven
By man is cursed always!

In this composition we find it difficult to recognize the Willis who has written so many mere "verses of society." The lines are not only richly ideal, but full of energy, while they breathe an earnestness—an evident sincerity of sentiment—for which we look in vain throughout all the other works of this author.

While the epic mania—while the idea that, to merit in poetry, prolixity is indispensable—has, for some years past, been gradually dying out of the public mind by mere dint of its own absurdity—we find it succeeded by a heresy too palpably false to be long tolerated, but one which, in the brief period it has already endured, may be said to have accomplished more in the corruption of our Poetical Literature than all its other enemies combined. I allude to the heresy of *The Didactic*. It has been assumed, tacitly and unavowedly, *diabolically and infernally*, that the ultimate object of all Discourse is Truth. Veritas.



He gives this poem from Nathaniel Parker Willis. “In this composition, we find it difficult to recognise the Willis who has written so many mere verses of society. The lines are not only richly ideal, but full of energy, while they breathe an earnestness, an evident sincerity of sentiment, for which we look in vain throughout all the other works of this author”.

So it is a very mixed sort of opinion over here as well, where this is a kind of poem which has not received good popularity, but at the same time, Poe himself thinks that this is the best. So we could read this in two ways; one is that perhaps he is trying to continue to defend the idea that shorter poems are the best. Even the best of writers who have received popularity otherwise, visibility otherwise, if you look at their own works, Shelley and Willis in this case, their best poems are their shorter works, but it needs to be avoided. The shorter versions should be avoided because they do not reach the public eye for some reason on the other.

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Now walking there was one more fair—
A slight girl, lily-pale;
And she had unseem company
To make the spirit quail:
"Twixt Want and Scorn she walked forlorn,
And nothing could avail.

No mercy now can clear her brow
For this world's peace to pray;
For, as love's wild prayer dissolved in air,
Her woman's heart gave way!—
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And he is continuing his engagement of the epic. With “the epic mania”, because that was also a time when a lot of writers in Europe and England and in America, they were trying to imitate the classical epic form. So a lot of imitations in terms of style and in terms of form in different parts of Europe, in fact. Those were all quite well-received as well. And he thinks that it is a very, it is a needless, kind of a blind kind of imitation which does not really serve any purpose. And he talks about this as the epic mania.

“With the idea that, to merit in poetry, prolixity is indispensable”. Prolixity is like loosely translated, as you know, verbosity or wordiness. Lot of words without really meaning anything. No depth but just, you know verbose.

“While the epic mania has for some years past been gradually dying out of the public mind by mere dint of its own absurdity, we find it succeeded by a heresy too palpably false to be long tolerated”. He was also believing that you know, maybe this is, that epic mania is soon dying out after that surge of popularity that it had in terms of the imitation. The 15th, 16th and 17th centuries actually saw a lot of epics being produced in imitation to the classic model.

Now he comes to another point that he has trying to pursue about a kind of heresy, which he refers to as the heresy of the didactic, and that is, again, a radically different notion from the earlier traditions, but we also find significant overlaps with the English Romanticism. “I allude to the heresy of The Didactic.” Much has been written about this phrase that Poe used, the heresy of the didactic.

“It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all poetry is truth. Every poem, as it is said, should inculcate a moral and by this moral is the poetic merit of the work to be judged.” We saw that in most of the works that we had engaged with so far about the power of literature to morally edify, there should be a truth that one could engage with, literature itself was seen as something truthful.

But in English Romanticism, we find that the idea of the truth either it gets replaced with beauty or it is intertwined with the idea of beauty. Here he is completely putting aside the idea of truth and focusing only on beauty. “We Americans”, this is where, you know, it gets to become very native in its articulation. He is very clearly saying that this is also significantly one of his last prose works, as I mentioned. And he is also trying to situate the literature in America in a very distinctive sense.

“We Americans, especially, have patronised this happy idea, and we Bostonians, very especially have developed it in full”. And this is clearly, for obvious reasons, a very different rhetoric that we have not come across in literary criticism at all, because America it is still in its infant stage. And no one else has begun talking about American literature. They begin by making their own tradition, their own scholarship by attributing things to themselves.

We Americans, and particularly the Bostonians have very especially have developed it in full about their belief that poetry is not entirely based on truth or morality. “We 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”.

Look at also the change in the pronouns over here. Till this point of time, it was very clear that it was his own opinion, his personal opinion about poetry, about different works, about his individual opinions. Now it suddenly becomes a collective thing about ‘We Americans’ and what we believe in. And this transition is also very important because we find that when you look at the larger scheme of things it is actually the personal opinion, which becomes a collective and it is a cyclical thing. It is a collective opinion, which becomes personal too.

That is how we find, very interestingly, that notions of Canon and notions of such traditions are also formed. It is personal and collective at the same time, and they together they have gone to inform you know, ways in which the political grammar of literature also gets written and defined. So we will read that sentence again.

“We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting the true poetic dignity and force. But the simple fact is, that, would we 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”.

So, he is advocating this idea of writing a poem for poem’s sake. And we also will, you know, very shortly discuss some of the ideas pertaining to art for art's sake, where you are saying, forget about all the other things that art will eventually help you to reach, just look at art for art's sake, just look at a poem for a poem’s sake. And he is also telling us eventually that is the only thing that really matters if you look deep within your soul and try to judge a work of art. It is not about anything else, it is only about that work itself. Not leading towards any idea of beauty, any idea of truth, he is dismissing that entire notion as the heresy of the didactic.

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tolerated, but one which, in the brief period it has already endured, may be said to have accomplished more in the corruption of our Poetical Literature than all its other enemies combined. I allude to the heresy of *The Didactic*. 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. We 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.

With as deep a reverence for the True as ever inspired the bosom of man, I would, nevertheless, limit in some measure its mode of inculcation. I would limit to enforce them. I would not enfeeble them by dissipation. The demands of Truth are severe; she has no sympathy with the myrtles. All *that* which is so indispensable in Song is precisely all *that* with which she has nothing whatever to do. It is but making her a flaunting paradox to wreath her in gems and flowers. In enforcing a truth we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood, which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical. He must be blind, indeed, who does not perceive the radical and chasmal differences between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation. He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth.

Dividing the world of mind into its three most immediately obvious distinctions, we have the Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense. I place Taste in the middle, because it is just this position which in mind it occupies. It holds intimate relations with either extreme, but from the Moral Sense is separated by so faint a difference that Aristotle has not hesitated to place some of its operations among the virtues themselves. Nevertheless, we find the *offices* of the trio marked with a sufficient distinction. Just as the intellect concerns itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the Beautiful, while the Moral Sense is



“With as deep a reverence for the true as ever inspired the bosom of man, I would, nevertheless, limit in some measure its mode of inculcation. I would limit to enforce them. I would not enfeeble them by dissipation. The demands of truth are severe; she has no sympathy with the myrtles. All *that* which is so indispensable in song is precisely all *that* she has nothing whatever to do. It is but making her a flaunting paradox to wreath her in gems and flowers. In enforcing truth we need severity rather than efflorescence of language.”

So he is not saying truth is not needed at all. What he is being suspicious of is about the idea of truth being planted in poetry because the demands of truth are severe. If you want to say truth then maybe this is not the medium for it. So it is again, and in some ways it is an extension of the classical notion it is also a radical departure.

Because there is a way in which historically, it has been shown the most critics that we have engaged with prose are trying to show that poetry is the supreme form of art, which tells us universal truths. And here Poe is acknowledging the effect that a poem can have on the human mind but not necessarily because of this element of truth, not necessarily because of this element of universal engagement with everything that is true, everything that is beautiful.

And he is not, mind you, he is not being sceptical about the notion of truth over here. He is saying that truth is not something, which can be perhaps wrapped in this form. Because the demands of truth are severe. In enforcing truth, we need severity rather than the efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, and terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. These are the things that truth requires.

“In a word, we must be in that mood, which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical”. The poetical and the truthful, they do not really coexist. I want you to tie this up with the idea that Sydney had, in a remote way we can find the connection to what Sydney said- the poet is not a liar because in the first place there is no claim to any fact or truth that a poet makes.

He does not really clarify on what philosophical basis he is referring to truth. But it is very clear that he is seeing truth as an antithesis of the poetic, something you know, that is also one of his inherent beliefs in his poetical principle that truth cannot be accommodated. Poetry cannot afford the kind of truth that he is talking about.

“He must be blind, indeed, who does not perceive the radical and chasmal differences between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation. He must be theory-mad beyond redemption, who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of poetry and truth”.

It is like, you know trying to mix oil and water. So he is saying that these two are elements which can never come together. That is, there is a continuation, there is an overlap as well as a discontinuity from the English Romantic tradition. Overlap as in they also believe that they also do not really believe in the power of poetry to teach. The didactic thing is something that

even the English Romantics are sceptical about, but they also think that truth and beauty can go together.

Here, he is, not only he is not believing in the power of this, he considers that you know, didacticism, anything that attempts to teach through poetry, through art is a heresy. It cannot exist at all. And then he is also being very sceptical about truth and beauty, truth and poetry, beauty as poetry. Truth and beauty coming together because the demands of both these things are, they are worlds apart.

It is trying to, it is like an attempt to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of poetry and truth. And he says, there must be people who do that. And how does he qualify those people? "They must be theory-mad beyond redemption". Someone who is, he is very aware that he is going against the grains of some of the fundamental theoretical principles of Romanticism as well, where beauty and truth go together. And this is the way in which he is able to have an individual opinion as well as a very American opinion about the way in which literature should be perceived and the way in which say, poetical principles should be laid out.

We will wrap up with this in the following sections. This is also a fairly long essay, but halfway through the essay you will realise that much of this length is on account of the long quotations that he uses as well. So in this, from now on he engages with this philosophy of a mind a bit and trying to divide it in different ways.

Right, so we will see that his critical opinion largely remains pretty much the same. The poetical principles that he lays out, more than discussing them, his point is in trying to, he is not open to a sort of negotiation of different sorts of perceptions. His focus in this entire work is to cement the opinion that he holds right at the outset.

It is not a discussion sort of thing. He is not trying to evaluate his own opinion in any way. He is trying to perhaps pursue the same line of argument that he begins with in terms of the various things, which would go ideally into the poetic principle. So please try to take a look at the rest of the essay before we meet again. All right. Thanks for your attention.