Dead World, Living Hearts

Elements of Romantic Mythology[1]

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for Yves Bonnefoy

Senancour

The *Rêveries sur la nature primitive de l'homme* are one of the important books of the dawn of the nineteenth century. In this text, Senancour limns an image of the world in accordance with the scientific thought of his time. It is a disenchanted image, dominated by mechanical necessity, and in it the distinction between good and evil no longer holds. God is absent; the world is not his creation. And Senancour expresses no regret:

> Everything in nature is indifferent, for everything is necessary: all is beautiful, for all is determined. The individual is nothing, as a being apart: his cause and his end lie beyond him. Only the whole exists absolutely, invincibly, with no other cause, with no other end beyond itself, with no laws but those of its nature, with no other product than its permanence.... The beautiful, the true, the just, evil, and disorder exist only for the weakness of mortals.... The same earth contains happy orchards and ruinous volcanoes. The villain triumphs, the hero dies; the orchard withers, the volcano is snuffed out; one and the same destruction devours both the animate and the inanimate, shrouded in the same oblivion; and in a world reborn, there remains not a trace of what was abhorred or deified in a bygone world.[2]

Nature produces and destroys indiscriminately: "The same fecundity will produce the insect and the star of eons; the same necessity will decompose for all time the ephemeral worm and the equally fleeting sun."[3] All is governed by a simple law, that of action and reaction, according to which higher forms of life are themselves only the result of "impulses received and returned":

> Every body is composite, every lasting aggregate is necessarily organized; every organized being receives the action of other composite beings, and reacts upon them: each is thus sensitive and active. When it feels, it knows; when it acts, it wants. If its organization is more complicated, it preserves the imprint of past sensations; then it has the capacity to effect several reactions, it deliberates, it chooses what it wants. This series of impulses received and returned makes up the *self* of each organized being.... The *self* of every organized being is therefore none other than that series of impulses that must necessarily end in the decomposition of organs, as it necessarily began when they were formed.[4]

As Senancour defines it at this time in his life, the world is only matter in the process of becoming, governed according to the principles established by Laplacian mechanics, sensualist philosophy, and a science of man that recognizes only organs and secretions. According to this unconditional determinism, human thought and will are the product of physical movements, and they dissipate in the same way. But whereas outside ourselves one order of things is replaced by another, never does a new world replace those we have lost in our hearts. All else is an illusion, a dream from which we are incapable of weaning ourselves. (True, much later Senancour was to speak mysteriously of flowers as expressing "a thought that is veiled and guarded as a secret by the material world."[5]) Senancour was also one of the first to register – as did Mallarmé, and nearly as radically as the latter – an internal death: "The barren winter remained inside me.... weariness with life was all I felt at the time when all life was beginning anew."[6] In our day, a reader is tempted to link this confession to Obermann's literary vocation: "Writing is all I have been given."[7] The writing of a book is experienced as a posthumous vocation. Senancour will write in order to seize a few moments of improbable happiness, to lament their loss, to replace them with dream, and not, as Mallarmé was to wish, in order to "confer authenticity upon our existence." It is not easy for Senancour to resign himself, but the best he can offer is an unreconcilable injunction: "Let us perish resisting, and if we are destined for the void, let us not have merited it."[8] In Senancour, the project of the Book was not animated by the "excess of hope," the passion that Yves Bonnefoy recognizes in Mallarme.

Goethe, Wordsworth, Keats

To Senancour, the image of a world traversed by necessity and by the alternation of destruction and new beginnings seemed irrevocable. But other minds of his time did not resign themselves to this. They sought to recover enchantments, angels, the mind of God – or more simply: meaning.

We must first call to witness Goethe – not only a poet, but also an adept in the language of science, with the noteworthy exception of mathematics. But in the realm of science, he opted for an organicist and vitalist orientation, a polemical choice which made him sensitive to what hung in the balance of scientific discourse. He knew that the adoption of a conceptual tool can determine in advance the answer that will be given to any question posed. Thus, in a late natural history text, Goethe bemoaned the fact that the vocabulary of mechanistic thought, developed in France by eighteenth-century science, had imposed itself to the point of trammeling the means of expression used by scholars who held a less simplistic idea of nature and life. "The nation, having adopted the sensualist philosophy, had grown accustomed to using material, mechanistic, atomistic expressions; and because linguistic usage is inherited and imposes itself even in everyday conversation, as soon as the latter rises to the spiritual domain, the language is resistant to eminent individuals who seek to express their views."[9]

In criticizing the vocabulary of mechanistic science, Goethe does not forget the problems of art, nor those of the language used to discuss them. He is the first to know that the terms that apply to life forms also apply to works of art. In his lexical musings, he will move rather quickly from the sphere of the representation of nature to that of aesthetics. Chiding French naturalists for their use of the word *composition* (in discussing "unity of composition"), Goethe reminds us that he dislikes it equally in the realm of art: he finds it "degrading" (*herabwürdigend*): we ought not to say that a painter "composes," nor should we label a musician a "composer": "If both of these were truly to merit the name of artist, they would not assemble their works from parts, but would develop a certain internal image, a higher resonance (*Anklang*), in accord with nature and art."[10] In fact, to compose, in the etymological sense, is to place side

by side, or juxtapose, and rather than this notion Goethe preferred that of organic growth. This opposition between composition and growth is of the same order as that established by Coleridge (who was indeed inspired by Goethe) between *fancy* and *imagination*. The first term gathers together elements that remain external to one another: it is a power of aggregation and simple recombination, whereas *imagination* creates new and living beings, by virtue of a organic power of unification and totalization. Coleridge even hazards a neologism, speaking of an *esemplastic* power – "from the Greek words, eis en plattein, that is, to give form to realize the One, to shape into one."[11] But the opposition of the two approaches (analysis and synthesis, the rational approach and intuitive vision, fancy and imagination) is itself a juxtaposition, which demands to be overcome in a superior synthesis that will reconcile the two in favor of a superior organicity. In Coleridge's famous chapter on "esemplastic power," in his *Biographia literaria*, we read: "grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or *find* itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you."[12] The counteracting forces and their interpenetration result in "the living principle and in the process of our own self-consciousness."[13] Coleridge's image is nearly identical to the one developed by Goethe to describe the power of metamorphosis that drives nature: "It resembles a centrifugal force, and it would be lost in the infinite if it had no counteracting force: I am alluding to the power of specification, that stubborn ability to persist that is inherent in all beings that come into existence, a centripetal force that cannot be disturbed by anything outside it."[14]

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Wishing above all to affirm the bonds that unite natural phenomena, Goethe sees the world as a field of multiple "actions" and "reactions," but he does not use these terms in the mechanistic sense that they had for Laplace or Senancour: he ascribes to them the meaning that they had in the vocabulary of the qualitative physics of medieval Aristotelians, and particularly of Renaissance neo-Stoicists, for whom the world was an *animans*, a great living creature. Goethe

seeks his roots in the vitalist intuitions that preceded the geometrization of the universe: he feels that the concrete relations that weave together to form universal life are irreducible and cannot be expressed in mathematical formulas. Their meaning is revealed only to the "mind's eye," which is for all that no less a fleshly – and fiery – eye. Goethe thus has a horror of the calculations made by the disciples of mechanism, who wish to subject life to physical equations. He makes Newton his *bête noire* (without becoming familiar with his alchemical speculations, which would no doubt have struck a sympathetic chord). He counters Newton's optics with another theory of light, which is in fact an objectified theory of visual experience:

> Light and darkness are engaged in a perpetual struggle against each other. Their reciprocal action and reaction are unmistakable. With unimaginable elasticity and speed, light hurtles from sun to earth, repressing the darkness; the same is true of artificial light in a proportionate space. But no sooner does this immediate action cease than the darkness straightaway shows its power and reclaims its place in shadows, twilight, night.[15]

The repressed darkness returns... The above passage recalls the "return of the repressed" according to Freud, many of whose concepts first take shape in Goethe. This theory of light could be termed the optics of a visionary (no pun intended) who is fascinated by images of vying forces. Goethe vitalizes the relation between light and darkness. Here, as everywhere else, he seeks to express the energies and forms of nature with an aim that is rather to relive its becoming than to analyze and calculate its components or parameters. Scientific inquiry as practiced by Goethe proceeds step by step, by analogical contiguity. This methodology is elucidated in his important essay on "Experience as intermediary/mediator between the object and the subject":

> Everything in nature, and especially the most general forces and elements, remains in a perpetual relation of action and reaction: this is why one can say of each phenomenon that it is related to an infinity of other phenomena, just as we say of an isolated source of light that it emits its rays in all directions. Having conceived of such an experiment, having put it to the test, we would not be quite sure how to go about looking for what is immediately proximate to it, for its immediate consequences. This is what we must focus on, more than what relates to it alone. The diversification of each individual experience is thus the proper task of a naturalist.[16]

The opposition between action and reaction is a generalized principle, of which the antagonism between darkness and light is but one specific case. Action and reaction are at work in all the bipolar pairs of which all of nature is the arena. Thus, in his reflections on the colors, Goethe inserts this universalizing remark:

> Faithful observers of nature, however divergent their thought, must agree that everything that appears to us, everything that is offered to us as a phenomenon, must indicate either an original duality, which may revert to unity, or an original unity, that can be divided. Such also is the representation that may be made of it. To divide what is unified, to unify what is divided: this is the very life of nature, *the eternal systole and diastole, syncrisis and diacrisis, the inspiration and expiration of the world, in which we live, we move, we are.*[17]

Discernable in the above-cited text is an echo of the celebrated words of the apostle Paul on the mind of God: *in ipso enim vivimus, et movemur, et sumus* (Acts 17, 28).[18] Goethe makes this formula of Christian liturgy – so close, it is true, to certain ideas of ancient stoicism – into a pantheistic adage.

Not content to attribute to all of nature the great alternating or pulsating rhythms of human organism, he also assigns them to the activities of the mind, in particular to scientific research. Dividing and uniting: these two operations of analysis and synthesis, though radically opposed, must remain connected, alternating like the phases of breathing: "A century devoted exclusively to analysis at the expense of synthesis is not on the right path; it is only when the two are joined together, like expiration and inspiration, that the life of science is assured."[19] What is important in Goethe's eyes is that the law that governs the phenomena of the world is also the law that commands acts of knowledge. There must be action and reaction, interaction between our powers of discrimination and collation, if the world is to be faithfully brought to light in its active and reactive life.

Goethe is far from maintaining this stance alone. It is striking to note that the apostle Paul's words are given a similar twist – this time verging on blasphemy – in Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), in regard to the "pleasure principle" that poetry must satisfy by assuming the action and reaction of mankind and the objects that surround him:

> Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise.... It is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives and moves.... What then does the Poet? He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and reacting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure.... he considers him as looking upon this complex scene of ideas and sensations, and finding everywhere objects that immediately excite in him sympathies which, from the necessities of his nature, are accompanied by an overbalance of enjoyment.[20]

What he thus declared in a programmatic text, Wordsworth was to repeat in a fine poetic fragment, in which he calls for the advent of a poetic discipline that would embody the interpenetration of the world and the human subject: this would be the dawn of a new age – life restored, in which no faculty and no being would remain alone:

> Thus disciplined
> All things shall live in us and we shall live
> In all things that surround us....
> For thus the sense and the intellect
> Shall each to each supply a mutual aid....
> And forms and feelings acting thus, and thus
> Reacting, they shall each acquire
> A living spirit and a character
> Till then unfelt.[21]

In the polemic pitting Goethe against Newton, Keats took a stand in favor of the ancient world from which the new science has banished all the supernatural creatures: in *Lamia*, he rails against a "cold philosophy" which is, of course, the science of nature, "natural philosophy." The harm is done, the world is disenchanted:

> Do not all charms fly
> At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
> There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
> We know her woof, her texture; she is given
> In the dull catalogue of common things.
> Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –
> Unweave a rainbow...[22]

Blake hurls the same anathema at Newton, with whom he associates Locke and Voltaire. An identical accusation is leveled in the writ-

ings of Novalis, especially in *Die Christenheit oder Europa:* "We have come to a pass where man is placed at the apex of the scale of beings and the eternal and inexhaustible music of the universe becomes the monotonic click-clack of a giant mill, tossed on the torrents of chance, a mill by itself, without architect or miller, a veritable *perpetuum mobile,* a mill that mills itself."[23] Novalis detects a counter-church in the offing, a church of destruction: "The members of this new church are endlessly at work removing all poetry from nature, the earthly soil, the human soul, and the sciences."[24] But, Keats wonders, why not dream of a poetic reconquest of reality, and why should philosophy not aim to speak with the voice of poetry? The proof is in the *pulsation:* "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses."[25] Even if Keats does not transfer it to the entire universe, as does Goethe, the internally experienced heartbeat bears witness to philosophical truth. Otherwise, leaving a world that had become uninhabitable, consciousness would beat a retreat into the world it constitutes for itself: "The soul is a world of itself."[26] Life would thus be safeguarded deep within the inner recesses of a sheltered solitude, not perhaps without some guilty pride.

The idea of a return to true life has also assumed political guises. It should be noted that the idea of this return, which was for some time linked to revolutionary aspirations, later, in other contexts, came to be associated with hopes for restoration. Thus Novalis, invoking the image of the heartbeat, pleads the cause of a secret society and a providential man who would restore the Church's authority. Novalis hails "a new, superior religious life that begins to beat (*pulsieren*) in the nations of Europe," and he invites his contemporaries to become apostles, grouped around a "Brother" whom he sees as "the heartbeat (*der Herzschlag*) of the new age."[27] Novalis mixed the cause of poetry with a Messianic enthusiasm. It is difficult not to read this as a still vague foreshadowing of the far more troubling movements that have traversed the century now reaching its end.

Philosophical versions

It is hardly surprising that philosophers, too, have also invoked images of organic coherence, of growth, of concrete, pulsing life. Hegel uses these images in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* to express the very unity of philosophical thought: "Philosophy in its most developed form constitutes itself from the inside; it is a single idea that pervades a whole and all of its elements, just as in an individual there lives a single life with a single heartbeat pulsing through all its limbs."[28] The same pulsating image appears in Schelling's *Ages of the World* (*Weltalter*). This image is meant to render perceptible the very process by which the real is produced. Schelling begins by inscribing negation within God, who is the center of the circle of nature, from which freedom and redemption will arise:

> The antithesis eternally bets itself in order to be consumed again and again by the unity, and the antithesis is eternally consumed by the unity in order to revive itself ever anew....
>
> This movement may also be conceived as a systole and diastole. It is a completely involuntary movement which, once begun, automatically repeats itself. The beginning again, rising again, is a systole, is tension, which reaches its acme in the third potency; the returning to the first potency is diastole, relaxation, upon which, however, new contraction immediately follows. Consequently this is the first pulsation, the beginning of that alternating movement which goes through all visible nature, of the eternal contraction and eternal expansion, of the universal ebb and flood.[29]

Schelling adds: "If life were to stop here, then there would be nothing but an eternal exhaling and inhaling, a continual alternation of living and dying, which is no true being [*Dasein*], but only an eternal impulse [*Trieb*] and zeal to be, without real being."[30]

Such is the vital aspect of the interaction and the polarity that govern the material world. These are ideas that Schelling developed around 1800, and that he was to put forth in various later works. The universe is seen as "a Whole of systems that are formed starting from a pulsing point."[31] Recognizable here is the hypothesis of the central mass, put forward by Maclaurin and Kant-Laplace[32] and reformulated in the language of speculative physics. There is reason to suppose that Schelling, who knew

Boehme and the Gnostics, could also have been familiar with the theory of God's retreat (*zimzum*), formulated in the Cabbala by Luria.[33] Schelling follows suit when he declares that the soul of the world, which is infinite productivity, contains within itself inhibition (*Hemmung*). Action and reaction then come into play, to become manifest in all the productions of inorganic nature. According to him, however, it is appropriate to superimpose upon them a principle that, not being a material force, is not accessible to empirical research: this is the *mind*, or freedom. Thus Schelling introduces the idea of an *evolution* of nature, while also declaring that "the immediate effect of restrained productivity is an alternation of expansion and contraction."[34] The "Soul of the World" (*Weltseele*) is first of all Unity; it unfolds in the hierarchical diversity of the objects in the finite world and of the activities of consciousness. However, finite multiplicity is a place of fragmentation and exile, which man must leave in order to achieve decisive progress, which is not beyond his powers: this step forward must reunite him with the primordial One. The way back will lead to the union of the subject (*productivity*) and the object (*natura naturata*): a process that Schelling, at one point in his thinking, thought had been achieved by mythology, then one that he entrusted to Art, and to the creative faculties of Genius. In the "created natures" that we are, the imagination (some would say dream) is the faculty that leads back to the "homeland."

Edgar Allan Poe

No one associated the physical laws of action and reaction to the image of the beating heart as much as Edgar Allan Poe. In *Eurêka*, he expanded the systole and diastole to the dimensions of the universe. So much importance does he give to a first Will that one might have thought him influenced by Schelling.[35] But it is Alexander von Humboldt and Auguste Comte that he mentions in his book. Whatever Poe's intellectual affiliation, it must be admitted that *Eurêka* is the last great neo-Platonist myth of literature, the last version of a theology of apocatastasis, that is, of the restoration of all things to their original state.

Venturing into speculative physics, Poe's dreams take off from the Kant-Laplace cosmogonal hypothesis.[36] And he adds to it. He constructs the model of a finite universe, animated by a cyclical process. In one of its aspects, Poe's text presents itself as a fabric of tightly woven arguments. The author assumes the role of a Dupin on a cosmic scale: he is the detective who organizes the reconstruction of the stages of universal life. But this reconstitution, even while being the product of reason applied to understanding the stages of global development in scientific terms, aspires to another status, a far more decisive one: that of a revelation, or even of a true theophany communicated in a great poem.

Eurêka has been called a "fable" (Paul Valéry) or a "cosmological novel" (Georges Poulet). These designations take into account the artificial and fictional dimension of the work, which cannot be exempted from the suspicion of being a superior mystification. For if we take it at its word, it is not enough to observe that it declares its poetic intentions starting with its dedication; it is not sufficient to observe that this work of hypothetical reasoning claims to be a work of art. This heroically presumptuous text claims not only to nullify any opposition between faculties and activities, which had been maintained by all of Poe's romantic predecessors, but also to abolish the difference between the creature and the creative power, between the poet's both intuitive and speculative knowledge and the Will that produces and reproduces worlds. Let us reread the dedication:

> *To the few who love me and whom I love – to those who feel rather than to those who think – to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities – I offer this Book of Truths, not in its character of Truth-Teller, but for the Beauty that abounds in its Truth – constituting it true. To these I present the composition as an Art-Product alone, – let us say as a Romance; or, if I be not urging too lofty a claim, as a Poem.*
>
> What I here propound is true: – *therefore it cannot die: – of if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will "rise again to the Life Everlasting."*
>
> *Nevertheless, it is as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead.*[37]

The duality – action and reaction – that Poe establishes in the universality of things is accompanied by a duality in the operation of consciousness, dream, and scientific thought, poem and knowledge; he calls for their reconciliation. The promise of intellectual

activity restored in "the Life Everlasting" is only one aspect of the reintegration of all of created matter in the original immaterial unity, which is God in a state of extreme concentration. As a result the highly marked duality is only temporary. The argument of chapter four boils down to a syllogism. In order to know God and the universe, *"We should have to be God ourselves!"* Given that we can hope some day to understand God and the universe, our consciousness could therefore be a part of God: "I... venture to demand if this our present ignorance of the Deity is an ignorance to which the soul is *everlastingly* condemned." [38]

One of the ideas to which Poe gives the greatest emphasis is that of proof through *consistency*, which guarantees a coincidence of aesthetic value and scientific truth: "A perfect consistency can be nothing but an absolute truth."

> The Universe... in the supremeness of its symmetry, is but the most sublime of poems. Now symmetry and consistency are convertible terms: – thus Poetry and Truth are one. A thing is consistent in the ratio of its truth – true in the ratio its consistency. *A perfect consistency, I repeat, can be nothing but an absolute truth.*[39]

Thus Poe places his text under the guarantee of a double legitimation. He resorts to a chiasmic twist in order to arbitrarily declare the "reciprocal" convertibility of scientific thesis and poetic revelation. Each is absorbed into the other; each is expressed in the other. Far from condemning poetry to untranslatability, and science to nothing but the rigor of numbers, Poe imagines a complete reconciliation between the "poetic" approach to totality and the analytic dismemberment of observed phenomena. The two versions reunited into one are the manifestation of God, "in Life Everlasting." The divergence of languages, which has characterized modernity since the blossoming of mathematical physics, is thus declared curable. In the context of Poe's work, this nearly final stage of his thinking is moving. (But it is easy to guess how such a theosophy would be abused in our contemporary climate of imposture.)

The fable of *Eurêka* initially involves the will of God the creator, who brings all of matter out of its own absolute spiritual essence. At the beginning, matter exists in the state of "concentrated" simplicity and unity. And once again it is the will of God that provokes the explosion, diffusion, fragmentation, and radiating

dispersion of this matter, henceforth condemned to difference and multiplicity. Such is the primordial *action*, a sort of big bang *avant la lettre*, producing all at once space and time, and setting off a great cosmic cycle. Yet the quantity of matter is not unlimited, nor is space, nor is divine action, so the dissipation will not extend indefinitely. Poe declares that "the immediate and perpetual *tendency* of the disunited atoms" is "to return into their normal unity."[40] They seek to rejoin "the principle, *Unity*," which is "their lost parent."[41] The image of creative action and the diffusive shattering of the first atom is accompanied by an imperious assertion:

> An action of this character implies reaction. A diffusion from Unity under the conditions, involves a tendency to return into Unity – a tendency ineradicable until satisfied.[42]
>
> Now, Reaction, as far as we know anything of it, is Action conversed. The *general* principle of Gravity being, in the first place, understood as the reaction of an act – as the expression of a desire on the part of Matter, while existing in a state of diffusion, to return into the Unity whence it was diffused; and, in the second place, the mind being called upon to determine the *character* of the desire – the manner in which it would naturally be manifested; in other words, being called upon to conceive a probable law or *modus operandi* for the return, could not well help arriving at the conclusion that this law of return would be precisely the converse of the law of departure.[43]

In a deliberately anthropomorphic formula, Poe asserts that matter feels the *desire* to return: this desire, which *poetically* takes the form of nostalgia, is *physically* manifested through the force of Newtonian attraction, that is, through gravity. But at the same time, this return is somewhat constrained. For the world was created in order that – for an entire phase of its existence – *"the utmost possible Relation"*[44] might develop. To this end, and to delay the return, God interposes another force: repulsion, as we observe it in electrical phenomena. Poe proclaims his "intuitive conviction" that "the principle in question is strictly spiritual."[45] It is therefore God himself who comes between the discreet parts of matter! In order to believe this hypothesis, we need only postulate that, in the world that we observe, *"The Body and The Soul walk hand in hand."*[46] However, the law of the reaction is inevitable: a catastrophic weariness awaits the totality of the created world, for matter will ineluctably return to its center and its compact unity, then to the immaterial purity of God. The reaction is the force that

is responsible for a major cataclysm. The image of the end of the world – the symmetrical converse of "the originating Act"[47] – has the appearance of an immense disaster. It takes its place in the series of catastrophes in which Poe's narrative imagination indulges.[48] He predicts the collapse of our universe:

> a chaotic... precipitation, of the moons upon the planets, of the planets upon the suns, and of the suns upon the nuclei; and the general result of this precipitation must be the gathering of the myriad now-existing stars of the firmament into an almost infinitely less number of almost infinitely superior spheres. In being immeasurably fewer, the worlds of that day will be immeasurably greater than our own. Then, indeed, amid unfathomable abysses, will be glaring unimaginable suns. But all this will be merely a climactic magnificence foreboding the great End.... While undergoing consolidation, the clusters themselves, with a speed prodigiously accumulative, have been rushing towards their own general centre – and now, with a thousand-fold electric velocity, commensurate only with their material grandeur and with the spritiual passion of their appetite for oneness, the majestic remnants of the tribe of Stars flash at length into a common embrace.[49]

In order for the symmetry of the end and the beginning to be complete, matter is swallowed up in the void from which it arose: "Matter, created for an end, would unquestionably, on fulfilment of that end, be Matter no longer. Let us endeavour to understand that it would disappear, and that God would remain all in all."[50] This cosmic suicide, however, is the signal of a renaissance. Starting from this end, a new creation is desired by the absolute Volition. God begins his work again according to the "law of periodicity":

> Are we not, indeed, more than justified in entertaining a belief... that the processes we have here ventured to contemplate will be renewed for ever, and for ever, and for ever; a novel Universe swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine?
>
> And now – this Heart Divine – what *is* it? *It is our own.*[51]

The vital rhythm, the beating of a universal heart, is crossed with the Newtonian model of action and reaction. The world is a manifestation of a "pulsating God."[52] In the final pages of his book, Poe introduces the idea of the world as organism. He is not trying to establish precise correspondences between the human body and the universe, as Schelling and Burdach did when they spoke of the *Weltorganismus.* He simply wishes us to understand that if God drew the substance that forms us from his own nothingness, he is

present in us, and that we are divinely present in the wheel of lives and deaths of the world that will turn sempiternally.

Consistency, of which Poe dreamed while writing *Eurêka,* thus fuses a neo-Platonist myth of the return to the primitive One with a fable of eternal cyclical return, which culminates in an anthropocosmology.[53] The universe functions like an organism; the human organism, in its superior differentiation, obeys the same law as the universe. With God alternating between immaterial Unity and diffuse Matter, individual existence is never completely separated from the deity. Any individual life is simply the manifestation of God in the "vaporized," diastolic phase of His existence, as well as in the "concentred," systolic, immaterial phase, which precedes or follows it.

Is the eternal or sempiternal repetition of the heartbeat life itself? So Poe asserts in the last lines of his "poem." But we may wonder whether this perpetually recurring pulsation, this *perpetuum mobile,* does not rather attest to the anguishing impossibility of dying. Doesn't this God, who is reborn only to disappear once again in his creation, resemble a tormented Sisyphus?

It is difficult to dodge these questions when one notices that the motif of perpetual palpitation also appears in Poe's work in a macabre and grotesque form: in "The Telltale Heart," the heartbeat of the hideous old man who is gratuitously killed because of one of his eyes ("a pale blue eye, with a film over it"[54]). The narrator-murderer has hidden the dismembered body beneath the floor. Even though the police agents have failed to discover anything, the agonized crescendo of throbbing is heard by the culprit, who soon cannot stand it any more and prefers to be *arrested* himself:

> I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observation of the men – but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what *could* I do? I foamed – I raved – I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder – louder – *louder!*.... I felt that I must scream or die! – and now – again! – hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder!* –
>
> "Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart![55]

This beating is no longer the order that governs the succession of cosmogonies, but rather an intolerable hallucination born of a crime, the consequence of the dismemberment of a pathetic Osiris. Consistency, far from being harmony between Truth and Beauty, establishes a relation of symmetry between, and finally a fusion of, the madness of a culprit and the anguishing survival of his victim. The criminal's heart is finally the only heart that beats in the dismembered victim and in the murderer.

* * *

The image of a world animated by the beating of a single heart is perpetuated until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Baudelaire kept Poe's cyclical cosmology in mind; but if he appropriates certain features of it for himself, he translates them into psychological facts and takes them up himself like a personal obligation. Poe had attributed the alternation of concentration and diffusion to God, affirming that the "Divine Being.... passes his Eternity in perpetual variation of Concentrated Self and almost infinite Self-Diffusion."[56]

There is justification for believing that, in *Mon coeur mis à nu*, Baudelaire is not thinking only of Emerson (in a comparison to which allusion is often made), but also of Poe, when he writes: "Vaporization and concentration of the *Self*... This is all."[57]

In Mallarmé, so "ready to be content with the earth," so attentive to the sensible world (as Yves Bonnefoy has reminded us), cosmologie is far from being the primary concern: the moon is perhaps a dead star that could be exploded, but the sky is the locus of twinklings that language groups under the name of constellations. Mallarmé is attuned above all to the *Poetic principle*, which quells his desire to "hollow out lines of poetry."[58] The evidence of a living world is to his eyes irrefutable. I can detect, hypothetically and no doubt delusionally, only the faintest trace of *Eurêka*. And for this I turn to the page where Poe raises the question of "our Galaxy's" resemblance to a "capital Y." The structure of "our Galaxy" is usually, and according to Poe erroneously, transcribed in the form of a letter of our alphabet. This leads him to observe: "An inhabitant of the Earth when looking, as we commonly express ourselves, *at* the Galaxy, is then beholding it in

some of the directions of its length – is looking *along* the lines of the Y – but when, looking out into the general Heaven, he turns his eyes *from* the Galaxy, he is then surveying it in the direction of the letter's thickeness."[59] Then, fleetingly, one can dream about the "y" ("onyx," "ptyx," "Phoenix," "Styx") and about the "twinklings" of the "Sonnet as an allegory of itself." We can also cast our eyes in the direction of the "Constellation" and the "sum total in formation" of the last page of the *Coup de dés*. Bonnefoy observes: "The throw of the dice...expands the chamber of the "*yx*" sonnet to the dimensions of the Universe."

But if Mallarmé's sonnet presents itself as allegorical, it is as an allegory *of itself*. The Work to which the poet aspires must *respond* to the universe (where, according to the poet, there is no God), rather than *participate* in the act of God, as Poe imagined in *Eurêka*. Even if the poet wishes to be absent from the poem, with Mallarmé the poetic act – though it never forgets the universe – becomes recentered on the human. If the toss of the dice of poetic thought partakes of the same nature as the cosmic toss of the dice, this recentering upon the human is thus all the more justified. The internal infinity of the poem need not be jealous of physical infinity.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage

Notes

1. This text was published in a limited edition in the volume entitled *Trois Conférences* (Vevey, 1997), with an engraving by Eduardo Chillida.
2. Etienne Pivert Senancour, *Rêveries sur la nature primitive de l'homme* (Paris, 1902), Première Rêverie, pp. 28-33.
3. Senancour, *Rêveries*.
4. Senancour, *Rêveries*, p. 38.
5. Etienne Pivert Senancour, *Obermann*, preface by George Sand (Paris, 1863), "Dernière partie d'une lettre sans date connue," p. 423.
6. Ibid., p. 340 (letter 75). In his fine book *Senancour*, Marcel Raymond compared this remark to a line by Mallarmé: "*Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l'ennui...*"
7. Ibid., p. 415 (letter 90).

8. Ibid., p. 412. Albert Camus remembered this remark in *L'Homme révolté.*
9. Goethe, "Principes de Philosophie Zoologique,"in *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden* (Stuttgart, 1863), vol. 6, p. 612.
10. Ibid., p. 612.
11. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* 2 vols. (Oxford, 1907), p.107 (chapter 10).
12. Ibid., p. 196 (chapter 13).
13. Ibid., p. 198 (chapter 13).
14. Goethe.
15. Goethe, *Beiträge zur Optik,* par. 24. The reader is referred to *Goethe and the Sciences,* ed. F. Amrine, F. J. Zucker, H. Wheeler (Dordrecht, 1987).
16. Goethe, "Der Versuch, als Vermittler von Objekt und Subjekt" (1793), in *Sämtliche Werke,* vol. 6, p. 575.
17. Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre, Didaktischer Teil, Verhältnis zur allgemeinen Physik,* par. 739, in *Sämtliche Werke,* vol. 6, p. 204.
18. Paul's words actually echo a line in Aratus's *Phenomena* (II, 6). Both the apostle and the pagan writer were known to Newton. See Mary Teeter Dobbs, *The Janus Faces of Genius: The Role of Alchemy in Newton's Thought* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 193-207. Coleridge, in a letter of 17 December 1796 to John Thelwall, invoked the words of Paul and Aratus inorder to define Christianity: "The religion which Christ taught is simply, first, that there exists an omnipresent Father of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, *in whom we all of us move and have our being;* and, secondly, that when we appear to men to die, we do not utterly perish." Kathleen Raine, ed., *The Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1950).
19. Goethe, *Analyse und Synthese,* in *Sämtliche Werke,* vol. 6, p. 601.
20. William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), in *The Poems,* ed. John O. Hayden, 2 vols. (London, 1977), vol. 1, pp. 879-880.
21. Wordsworth, fragment of a first version of "Ruined Cottage." The reader is also referred to M. H. Abrams' remarks on these lines, which he cites in *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1973), pp. 279-280.
22. John Keats, "Lamia," part II, pp. 229-237.
23. Novalis.
24. Novalis.
25. John Keats, letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May 1818, in *Letters,* ed. M. B. Forman (3d ed., London, 1947).
26. John Keats, letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 25 August 1819, p. 374.
27. Novalis.
28. G. W. F. Hegel, "Lectures on the History of Philosophy," introduction A, 2, c, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Frankfurt, 1971), vol. 19, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie,* p. 47.
29. F. W. J. von Schelling, *The Ages of the World,* trans. Frederick de Wolfe Bolman, Jr. (New York, 1942), pp. 117-118.
30. Schelling, *The Ages of the World,* p. 119.
31. F. W. J. von Schelling, "Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie," in *Schriften von 1799-1801,* p. 125.
32. Maclaurin, *Exposition des découvertes philosophiques de M. le chevalier Newton,* trans. Lavirotte (Paris, 1749), pp. 416-417; I. Kant, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte*

und Theorie des Himmels (1755); P. S. Laplace, *Exposition du systeme du monde* (Paris, 1796).

33. Gershom Sholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik* (Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 149-150.
34. F. W. J. von Schelling, "Einleitung zu dem Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie," in *Schriften von 1799-1801*, p. 306. See also *Idées pour une philosophie de la nature*, in *Essais*, trans. S. Jankelevitch (1946), pp. 81-92.
35. In a note, Poe refers to Schelling as a "formidable" thinker.
36. Poe's point of departure had been imagined by others before him. Thus Joseph Joubert, curiously, in one of his thoughts in the year 1800, wrote: "Just one grain of matter was needed to create the world." *Pensées*, ed. Georges Poulet (Paris, 1966), p. 78.

    The similarities between Poe and Kant-Laplace are set forth in David van Leer's study and bibliography, in *Romanticism and the Sciences*, ed. Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine (Cambridge). See also E. H. Davison, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969), pp. 223-251; and Dayan, *Fables of Mind: Inquiries into Poe's Fiction* (New York and Oxford, 1987); and Hélène Tuzet, *Le cosmos et l'imagination* (Paris, 1965).
37. Edgar Allan Poe, *Eurêka*, in *The Centenary Poe: Tales, Poems, Criticism, Marginalia and Eureka*, ed. Montagu Slater (London, 1949), p. 349.
38. Poe, *Eurêka*, p. 351.
39. Poe, *Eurêka*, p. 400. Poe may have read this word *consistency* in an author whom he cites: Auguste Comte. Comte speaks of "mathematical consistency" that can be given to the Laplacian theory on the formation of the solar system ("Vingt-septième leçon," *Cours de Philosophie positive*, Paris, [n.d.], vol. 2, p. 291). He is referring simply to calculations that can consolidate the cosmogonal hypothesis. Comte does not introduce any poetic considerations, and the cycle of condensation and expansion that Poe assigns to the whole of the universe is in Comte confined to the solar sytem alone. The perpetual cycle Comte imagines nevertheless resembles that of *Eurêka:* "We know... that simply by the constant resistance of the general atmosphere, our world must, in the long run, inevitably be reunited with the solar mass from which it emanated, until, in the immensity of future times, a new expansion of this mass comes to organize, in the same way, a new world, destined to an analogous career" (p. 297). Auguste Blanqui will push the belief in the repetitiveness of cosmogonical cycles to the realm of the absurd in his odd essay *L'immortalité par les astres.*
40. Ibid., p. 353.
41. Ibid., p. 359.
42. Ibid., p. 352.
43. Ibid., p. 366. In the *Déduction générale du processus dynamique ou des catégories de la physique* (1800), Schelling assigns to science "the unique task of constructing matter." In the fifth paragraph of this small piece, Schelling expresses the desire to start "from the point from which an opposition of forces, in the ideal subject of nature, appears necessary to this construction.... We will say only that we will call one of these forces, the one that goes towards the outside, the *expansive* force; but the other, the one that must be conceived of as going towards the inside of nature, we will call the *delaying* or *attractive* force. The first, considered in and of itself, is a *pure act of producing (ein reines Produzieren)*, in which nothing can be distinguished absolutely; the other is

that which brings *division (Entzweiung)* in this general identity, and thus the first condition of effective production," *Schellings Werke*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1907), vol. 1, p. 743. These general principles, in this case, apply to magnetism, electricity, and the "chemical process."

44. Poe, *Eurêka*, p. 353.
45. Ibid., p. 373: "the two Principles Proper, Attraction and Repulsion – the Material and the Spiritual – accompany each other, in the strictest fellowship for ever."
46. Ibid., p. 373.
47. Ibid., p. 403.
48. See Eveline Pinto, *Edgar Poe et l'art d'inventer* (Paris, 1983), pp. 271-338.
49. Ibid., p. 403.
50. Ibid., p. 404.
51. Ibid., p. 405.
52. James Lawler, *Edgar Poe et les poètes français, suivi d'une conférence inédite de Paul Valéry* (Paris, 1989), p. 105.
53. Paul Valéry, "Au sujet d'*Eurêka*," in *Oeuvres*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1962): "The universe is constructed according to a plan whose profound symmetry is in some sense present in the innermost structure of our minds. The poetic instinct must lead us blindly to the truth" (vol. 1, p. 957).

    The cosmogonal myth of *Eurêka* was taken up again at the beginning of the twentieth century, but without its anthropomorphic double. In 1931, Abbé Lemaître (of the Louvain observatory) pursued his astrophysical thinking in the following way, which gained Eddington's support: "At the beginning, the entire mass of the Universe existed in the form of a single atom; the ray of the Universe, although not strictly nonexistent, was relatively quite small. The entire Universe results from the disintegration of this primordial atom. It can be shown that the ray of space must grow. Certain fragments that retained their products of disintegration formed the star clusters or the stars of all masses." J. Jeans, G. Lemaître, W. de Sitter, A. Eddington, E. A. Milne, R. A. Millikan. *Discussion sur l'évolution de l'Univers*, trans. and preface by P. Couderc (Paris, 1933), pp. 15-22.
54. Poe, "The Telltale Heart," in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1938), p. 303.
55. Ibid., p. 306.
56. Poe, *Eurêka*, p. 407.
57. Charles Baudelaire, "Mon coeur mis à nu," in *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1975), vol. 1, p. 676.
58. Stéphane Mallarmé.
59. Poe, *Eurêka*, p. 389.