Partial Cognizance and Delayed Inscription in Edgar Allan Poe’s Discourse of Trauma

Abstract: This article tackles fictional renderings of the mechanics of trauma. The analysis is dedicated to the question of what a trauma narrative is and how the subject of/in trauma is constituted. I begin with the assumption that what we are looking for in a literary work of art is not simply its meaning but the way in which that meaning is produced. All in all, I argue that in disaster zones, defined by the occurrence of the unspeakable, the signifying chain is interrupted, broken. What remains are disconnected things, events, images, and words: thoughts without a thinker, as Wilfred Bion would say. Repression is not possible, since it depends on the signifiers of an inscription, which is impossible in this case. Whereas the repressed unconscious can be defined, with Lacan, as the memory of what we forget, what we are dealing with in the case of catastrophes is a memory of what cannot be forgotten. Any effort to repair this hole in the continuity of the linguistic fabric reveals these creases, despite any attempt at mending. They are the bearers of truth: a-letheia.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; trauma; disaster zones; registration; otherness.

There is an unfaltering consensus among theorists of trauma and its psychic accoutrements, that the deleterious impact on the human mind is a consequence not so much of a bodily injury, (though the originary meaning of trauma itself, deriving from the Greek trauma originally referred to an injury inflicted on a body), but of a mental hiatus. Caruth bases her understanding of trauma on Freud’s suggestions in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, thus stating accordingly that “the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (Unclaimed Experience 2).

This Freudian-informed psychoanalytic theory of trauma is itemised in by

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and large similar, yet more systematic terms, by Bainbridge and Radstone, as presupposing two moments: the first refers to the moment of trauma itself, while the second involves “the memory, or rather the perception of the event” (Culture and the Unconscious 109). In other words, the “unpleasurable event...has not been given psychic meaning in any way, [because] the outside has gone inside without mediation” (Unclaimed Experience 59).

In their seminal work History beyond Trauma, Davoine and Gaudillière report this failure of the human mind to assimilate the event as it happens as a lack of inscription (a term which I will hark back to throughout my analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s work), while questioning the very conscious presence of the subject at the site of the “catastrophe”: “The catastrophe has already happened but could not be inscribed in the past as past, since in this respect the subject of speech was not there. Totally cut off, the truth was unable to be transmitted. The information remained a dead letter, outside the field of speech” (History Beyond Trauma 28). It is precisely this crisis of truth, the ontology and epistemology of truth as it emerges from the traumatic experience that is felt to pose the greatest challenge to trauma studies and is at the centre of trauma disquisition, and it is this crisis that will shape the corpus of my textual analyses later on in the chapter.

But since the complexity of any textual analysis can only be premised on and vouchsafed, at the same time, by a fully-fledged exploration of the instruments it employs, I will dwell for a while longer on the concept of trauma and the paradoxes that it is attended with. The most conspicuous paradox, lying at the very heart of the traumatic experience is, in Caruth’s words: “that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (Trauma and Experience 7). This belatedness is the very underpinning of the traumatic nature of the first moment of trauma, which “can only be ascribed to it after the fact. This is the principle of Nachträglichkeit or deferred action” (Bainbridge and Radstone 109).

Similarly, Henry Kristal, calling on the work of Cohen and Kinston posits the impact of an event in which “no trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche, instead, a void, a hole is found”, while Dori Laub has suggested that psychic trauma “precludes its registration”; it is “a record that has yet to be

32 qtd. in Trauma and Experience Caruth 7
made” (Laub, 1991 qtd. in Trauma and Experience Caruth 7). At this point in the theoretical outlining of the traumatic event, one question cannot be averted: what are the conditions of possibility of the arrested time that passes before the trauma can be inscribed/ registered? We find a satisfactory resolution of this temporal prevarication in Freud’s own account and understanding of the phenomenon:

The breach in the mind – the conscious awareness of the threat to life – is not caused by a pure quantity of stimulus, but by “fright,” the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognised as such by the mind one moment too late. The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known. (qtd. in Unclaimed Experience 61)

This blankness, latency, or “space of the unconsciousness” – the latter denomination is nothing short of a self-certifying myth in Caruth’s theoretical meditation on trauma – which is “paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality” is thus by no means to be equated with mere forgetting: “The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The power of the trauma is [that] only in and through its inherent forgetting is [it] first experienced at all” (Trauma and Experience 7).

The entailed paradoxical structure of the indirectness in psychic trauma belies the concept which best addresses the issue of the portentous dynamics of trauma, and which was mentioned earlier on: Nachträglichkeit. The problem of both knowing and of representing the event that it poses will best be tackled in the fourth chapter of the book, when the wielding of the insightful instruments put forth by object relational psychoanalysis generally, and by Melanie Klein specifically, will add unsuspected depth to this Freudian term.

The structure of traumatic experiences, which testifies to an “encounter with death” begs the question of what it means to transmit “a crisis that is marked, not by simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (Unclaimed Experience 2). A tentative answer to this question and to another one, co-extensive with it, namely the mode of this
transmission, the story of the unbearable nature of the event, will be hammered out, in extenso, in the second and third chapter of the book. As I will argue, in relation to some of Poe’s pieces, and echoing Caruth’s words, “the traumatised carry an impossible history within them, they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess”, which emphasises a laudable “peculiar strength”, according to Harold Bloom, “to say what could not be said, or to at least attempt to say it, thus refusing to be silent in the face of the unsayable” (qtd. in *Trauma and Experience* Caruth 9).

This impossible saying is addressed in particular by one theorist of the psychic trauma, the clinician Dori Laub, who dealt extensively with victims of the Holocaust and who becomes aware that it primarily derives from a built-in impossibility of knowing, altogether, a “collapse of witnessing”, in his own wording. Hence the conundrum: “How does one listen to what is impossible?” And the answer is reflective of a most surprising finding: in order for the psychic trauma to have a history, its belatedness notwithstanding, for it to be acknowledged and perceived as such, for it to “take place”, someone has to be able “to listen to the impossible, before the possibility of mastering it with knowledge” (qtd. in *Trauma and Experience* Caruth 11). And therein lies its danger, too, “the danger of the trauma’s ‘contagion,’ of the traumatisation of the ones who listen” (Terr, 1988 qtd. in *Trauma and Experience* 11). But it is also its possibility for transmission.

So far, the mechanics of trauma have revealed a certain incomprehensibility, a resistance to meaning, at the heart of the traumatic event, due by and large to the fact that the death encounter is central to such a psychological experience. Robert Jay Lifton terms it “numbing”, “the experience of a decreased or absent feeling either during or after trauma,” a “matter of feeling what should have been but was not experienced”, but he distinguishes it from repression, which ousts an idea, by means of forgetting, from consciousness.

Rather, numbing writes off the typical psychical pathways taken by undesired events on their way to the realm of the deleted and instead leaves the mind “severed from its own psychic forms, [because] there’s an impairment in the symbolisation process itself” (An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton 142). The impossibility of successfully assimilating the traumatic event, on account of the hampering by numbing is what makes the confrontation with death in trauma to break radically with any kind of knowledge or experience, for that matter: “In
trauma one moves forward into a situation that one has little capacity to imagine; and that’s why it shatters whatever one had that was prospective or experiential in the past, whatever prospective consolations one brought to that experience. And being shattered, one struggles to put together the pieces, so to speak, of the psyche, and to balance that need to reconstitute oneself with the capacity to take in the experience (An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton 147). And that is what trauma is all about.

Consequently, since willed access is denied and the literal registration of the event escapes full consciousness as it occurs, trauma does not simply serve as a record of the event, but it registers the force of an experience that is not and cannot be yet fully owned or cognised. Pierre Janet adumbrated, as early as 1889, the difference between “narrative memory”, which is defined as the automatic integration of new information into consciousness and what he calls “traumatic memory”, evinced by a subject who proves unable to make the necessary narrative “that we call memory” regarding the event (Janet, qtd. in Recapturing the Past Caruth 159).

This distinction shores up Lifton’s recent insights into the traumatic event. Expectable experiences are assimilated without much attention being paid to details, whereas frightening events may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes, that could have been used as referential landmarks, thus resisting integration: “Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not available for retrieval” (“Recapturing the Past” in Trauma and Experience Caruth 159).

The unavailability for retrieval, translatable by the impossibility of the subject to organise its experience on a linguistic level and thus to master or successfully order it to an extent, by sealing off the mechanisms of “knowing” the event, of cognizance by the subject, leaves the traumatised prey to a “speechless terror” (van der Kolk, 1987 qtd. in Repression and Dissociation Caruth 172). As Piaget pointed out: “It is precisely because there is no immediate accommodation that there is incomplete dissociation of the inner activity from the external world. As the external world is solely represented by images, it is assimilated without resistance (i.e., unattached to other memories) to the unconscious ego.” They therefore cannot be easily translated into symbolic language necessary for linguistic retrieval. (“Repression and Dissociation” in Trauma and Experience Caruth 172)
Such a linguistic breakdown occurring at the mental site of trauma whenever death or death equivalents (as will be listed and detailed upon in connection to Poe – like ultimate meaninglessness, to give just one example) are confronted, has doublefold consequences: it creates a second self within the self of the traumatised, as Robert Jay Lifton’s theory of the traumatised self proposes, and it relegates the task of registering and understanding what actually took place to the listener/reader, as Kevin Newmark alleges in a study of traumatic poetry.

Lifton departs, in his conceiving of the second self, from the core tenet of the trauma theory regarding the lack of registration, of inscription – “numbing”, in his own words – at the moment of the occurrence per se, when the self “capitulates completely to the uniquely disruptive impact of it” (Lee-Nichols 317). The concept of the second self seems thus to have been a previously uncharted path that awaited disclosure: “[...] to the extent that one is in anything there’s a self-involvement. But in extreme involvements, as in extreme trauma, one’s sense of self is radically altered. And there is a traumatised self that is created. Of course, it’s not a totally new self, it’s what one brought into the trauma as affected significantly and painfully, confusedly, but in a very primary way, by that trauma” (“An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton” 147). He bases his insight on the testimony of people who underwent extreme trauma, as is the case of Auschwitz survivors, who pointed to this form of doubling by saying that they were different persons in Auschwitz. It entails that a recovery from trauma can only occur after this doubling has ceased to exist and the traumatised self has been reintegrated. I will put the spotlight back on this reintegration by resorting to the explanatory means of relational psychoanalysis, throughout the fourth chapter of the book.

Kevin Newmark explores the effects of the same lack of registration at the moment of the trauma, and of the linguistic unavailability that attends it, but this time from the standpoint of the listener/reader, in an extensive study on traumatic poetry – within the same collection of studies on trauma edited by Cathy Caruth and published under the title Trauma and Experience – featuring poets like Baudelaire and Nerval. “Because the trauma is hidden,” Newmark contends, “it is accessible only by way of a necessary process of reading and interpretation” (“Traumatic Poetry” 253) On this occasion Newmark coins the term “textual trauma”, warning about the danger of a transgression by trauma of the confines of the text and spilling over its effects, “reproducing” them, in
Newmark’s words, on the reader “who erroneously believes it possible to remain forever sheltered from them. Traumatic poetry, to the extent that it necessarily confronts the reader with these issues, also suggests how the language we speak in order to understand the experience of trauma is also irretrievably marked by it.” (“Traumatic Poetry” 253)

Such a meta-contagion of the reader, who – I construe – becomes the locus of trauma registration, of trauma inscription, while it risks proliferating incomprehension in language, lays down, unwittingly, the regulations of the dynamics between the traumatic text and its reader. Without determining to what extent does the traumatic transference, at the time of the inscription in the reader, take place, it nods towards the leaving of traumatic residues, once the reader is attuned “to the language of traumatic events through which, with trembling lips, [traumatic events] begin to speak.” (253)

Missed Encounters with Death

The overarching opinion among a majority of Poe critics, one that has garnered wide and evenly-distributed consensus and according to which most of Edgar Allan Poe’s work is a trauma-generated narrative, has seldom come under threat of rebuttal. Assumptions predicated on the critical statement that the tales and poems authored by Poe find their potential for terror in biographically-informed content were largely shored up by unfortunate circumstances and details of his life. Hermeneuts who have stopped short of labelling Edgar Allan Poe a “traumatophile”33 and who evince no qualms about tracing the provenance of textual horrors in the author’s embattled life have, more often than not, found themselves steeped in slovenly, wayward and noticeably far-fetched theories, often deliberately in disregard of the author’s strategies of artistry or aestheticism.

My excursus on trauma and trauma-related studies is meant to steer my argument away from the neat compartmentalisation of Poe’s work under the heading of trauma-informed or trauma-generated narrative, which abuses, in my opinion, by inadvertently factoring in, the biographical content and thus fallaciously deems fiction a mere epiphenomenon. While listing, tangentially, and briefly looking into some studies evincing the aforementioned pitfalls, I will

33 Walter Benjamin uses the term in relation to Baudelaire, in his study entitled The Storyteller
try to establish, for reasons which will be detailed all throughout the book, that Edgar Allan Poe’s work is not a purpose-built fictional discharge of personal predicament, the sort that would “destine him to re-enact his early traumas” – as Panter and Virshup allege, in a statement that encloses the widely-held misconception delineated above\textsuperscript{34} – but can be construed in terms of an astute trauma-structured narrative, a discourse not about, but of trauma, avowedly pandering to Gothic conventions and pragmatically unoblivious of the pecuniary gain that such a fiction would incur.

In his “Preface” to \textit{The Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque} (1939), Poe himself argues that its contents are “the results of matured purpose and very careful elaboration.” In an attempt to posit a similar intent shared by tales that may appear to differ in terms of composition history, Poe underscores “a certain unity of design” characterising the volume, asserting that “these many pieces are yet one book” (129). In defining the book’s theme, he says: “If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul” (idem). He stipulates that he deduces “this terror only from its legitimate sources” and claims to urge it “only to its legitimate results” (idem). Duncan Elmer, in a study bearing the very name that Poe used to characterise his collection, \textit{A Certain Unity of Design}, discusses: “Figuring terror not as the manifestation of external horrors, Poe defines it as the revelation of the evil contained within. In effect, he implies that his tales are not the foreign “species of pseudo-horror,” which some critics have labelled them” (Faherty 4).

James Werner shares the opinion that Poe designed fictional “interiors” to have unsettling “effects” upon the readers who temporarily “inhabit” hell. Channelling another one of Poe’s statements of artistic purpose, \textit{The Philosophy of Composition}, Werner remarks in his book, \textit{American Flaneur}: “Always keeping the primacy of “effect” in mind, Poe constructs mental and physical interior states replete with a haunting “suggestiveness,” an “under current, however indefinite of meaning,” hinting at what might lie beyond or within the surface “reality” (\textit{Philosophy of Composition} 24). As in many of Poe’s tales, the reader can adopt his/her own stance of “analytic detachment,” dismissing such outrageous ideas and events as the hallucinations of a deranged mind. But the “verisimilitude” or realistic detail Poe employs in depicting these events complicates such an easy rejection.

\textsuperscript{34} Creativity and Madness 113.
I argue, consequently, that the fictional events in the overwhelming majority of Poe’s work lend themselves to a construal in terms of trauma. Poe both thematises and instantiates modernity, for example, as trauma, specifically in his late poem, “The Bells,” as argued in Jonathan Elmer’s essay *The Jingleman: Trauma and the Aesthetic,* which I will make reference to in what follows.

“The poem’s inventiveness would seem to consist in the containment of the contingent and harshly impinging. Some irritating bells, madly ringing, or perhaps only ringing irregularly, will be submitted to a poetic form which will, as it were, ring programmatic changes – both semantic and rhythmic – on this contingent piece of the real "the bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells."” (Elmer 136) The bells Poe hears are intrusive in an initially obstructing way - let us characterise them, in concurrence with Elmer’s argument, as an instance of modernity as shock:

Hear the tolling of the bells –  
Iron bells!  
*What* a world of solemn thought their monody compels!  
In the silence of the night  
How we shiver with affright  
At the melancholy meaning of the tone!  
For every sound that floats  
From the rust within their throats  
Is a groan.  
And the people – ah, the people  
They that dwell up in the steeple  
All alone,  
And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,  
In that muffled monotone,  
Feel a glory in so rolling  
On the human heart a stone –  
They are neither man nor woman –  
They are neither brute nor human,  
They are Ghouls: –  
And their king it is who tolls: –  
And he rolls, rolls, rolls, rolls  
A Paean from the bells!
And his merry bosom swells
With the Paean of the bells!
And he dances and he yells;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the Paean of the bells –
Of the bells: –
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the throbbing of the bells –
Of the bells, bells, bells –
To the sobbing of the bells: –
Keeping time, time, time,
As he knells, knells, knells,
To the rolling of the bells –
Bells, bells, bells –
To the moaning and the groaning of the bells. (437-8)

It is difficult to ascertain, as Jonathan Elmer remarks, whether repetition is used as a method or as a theme in the poem. The accretive, additive nature of the poem is also to be remarked: the repetitions get more insistent and numerous as the poem progresses, and recycle more rapidly in both smaller and larger units. It is certainly the case here, as it is also in “The Raven,” that the semantic drift of the poem and its rhythmic energies seem at odds: for as we move toward the darkening close of the funereal “iron bells,” the poem’s repetitions become more and more agitated, even ecstatic.

We have here, I would argue, echoing Elmer’s analysis, an instance of the trauma of modernity, “in which an initially obstructing or impinging shock – the bells ringing – comes to feed the very work it seems to obstruct.” (Elmer 138) If trauma is a useful term of analysis it is not only by virtue of the formal paradoxes it brings to light – the return to and defense against the missed encounter.

In what follows I will tackle another instantiation of the fictional rendering of the mechanics of trauma. The analysis is dedicated to the question of what a trauma narrative is and how the subject of/ in trauma is constituted. I begin with the assumption that what we are looking for in a literary work of art is not simply its meaning but the way in which that meaning is produced. In his story
“The Pit and the Pendulum”, Poe uses the fictional account of the narrator’s imprisonment and torture by the Spanish Inquisition “to explore the limits of human experience in consciousness and unconsciousness,” as Jennifer Ballangee contends (The Wound that Speaks 12).

Poe’s narrator survives his trial, while examining the traces that are left – that is, examining the possibility of storytelling, or, in other words, what of experience can be communicated. Poe’s narrator swoons, and loses almost all of consciousness; of what remained of it, he avers, “I will not attempt to define, or even describe it” (Poe 232). Yet, driven by memory he does describe it – in the gruesome terms of a torture inflicted by the Inquisition. Thus, Poe’s victim puts in visual terms for his witnessing audience the shocking experience of the traumatic encounter with death itself.

The scenes of torture that follow this passage point toward the knowledge of the “gulf beyond” sought in the story, a theme with which Poe’s work demonstrated a steady fascination. The recurring theme of death in Poe’s work rarely involves the straightforward end of existence, but rather centres around the process of dying, a state of being proximous to death, or, often, returning to life from death or even experiencing some aspect of death while still alive. Most commonly, this latter experience expresses itself in various manners of being buried alive.

Poe is perceived as developing a method of recovering impressions perceived while sleeping (or, in other words, while not conscious) that involves him struggling for awareness on the threshold of sleep. For, as he notes, even though he is able to transfer the visions into memory, he can still only briefly consider them in the logic of analysis. Poe’s note of this limitation implies that he feels the impressions remain in memory, but inaccessible to conscious, analytical consideration. Thus, it follows, he is positing a level of experience with this experiment that falls into neither consciousness or unconsciousness. Poe distinguishes these impressions as “psychal” rather than intellectual, noting that they arise in the soul at the threshold of sleep or consciousness.

If we were able to convey these “psychal impressions” – to recover the experience designated by only a trace of memory – he feels that they would be supremely novel material, both in themselves and in what they would consequently suggest. With this, he continues, others would acknowledge that “I have done an original thing”. The originality of his art would derive from the uniqueness of the forgotten thing. Accomplishing such a task would enable Poe
to achieve one of his primary aesthetic goals: by recording these experiences in writing, he might create something utterly unique.

Poe allows the surprising shock of death itself to determine his aesthetic: this is the “completely new thing” he hopes to offer to his audience. The convergence of death and uniqueness lies at the heart of Poe’s sense of beauty. In his essay “The Poetic Principle”, Poe designates beauty as the object of poetry, rather than truth. Dividing the mind into three parts – pure intellect, taste, and moral sense – he locates the realm of taste as that which alone determined Beauty. Thus, freeing his idea from any moral restrictions, Poe can associate beauty with an immortality devoid of spiritual ideals. The desire for beauty becomes a physical longing, an “immortal thirst” toward which we strive, “inspired by an ecstatic prescience of glories beyond the grave...”

Thus, poetry excites our souls, enabling us to glimpse this “supernal Loveliness” of an immortality that extends beyond physical death. Yet, since Poe refrains from associating his idea of beauty with a moral sense of immortality, the approach to beauty must be closely linked to death, which thus assumes the position of a gateway to what lies “beyond”. Correspondingly, Poe indicates intense melancholy as being most thrilling to the soul; it follows, then, that “...this certain tint of sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of true Beauty” (Poe 889). “Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the political tones”. Having established melancholy as the ultimate poetic mood, Poe goes on to designate death as the most melancholy topic; thus, he concludes, death may provide the most beautiful and appropriate subject for poetry.

Shifting Poe’s theories of the beautiful in poetry to his prose, then, “The Pit and the Pendulum” appears as a story, a work of art, in which the proximity of death produces a creative act that is both horrifying and liberating. In it, the human thirst for beauty merges with what Poe calls elsewhere (in an analysis of his poem “The Raven”) the “human thirst for self-torture”, a perverse and melancholy desire to bring death near.

The self-same traumatising proximity of death, with its delayed inscription and numbing effects can be recognised in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”, which dabbles in the portentous topic of mesmerism. Poe’s interest in mesmerism is well known and corroborated by the several articles and presentations that he composed on the subject. As a state that seems also on the threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness, mesmerism appears as another facet of Poe’s fascination with the luminal experience of death in life.
From deep within a mesmeric trance, M. Valdemar is able to speak – without the aid of his blackened and swollen tongue, one presumes – the impossible: his own experience of death. If all is “not lost” even in death, then a recoverable experience of death would “prove” in some way the possibility of existence after death. In this sense, the recoverability of that experience includes both its presence in memory and its accessibility to the intellect – for the proof depends upon its being repeatable to others – in writing, as Poe hopes to do – as the locus of its inscription – or in speech, as M. Valdemar succeeds for a moment in doing. Like in “The Pit and the Pendulum”, then, with each successive fall, and with each new torture, the body of the narrator revisits the unconscious, which occupies for Poe in this function the position of death (whose proximity is manifested by the threat of torture), as Ballangee argues (The Wound that Speaks 184-5).

Elsewhere, Walter Benjamin ascribes this same sort of dehumanisation to the crowd described in “The Man of the Crowd”: “The people in his story behave as if they could no longer express themselves through anything but a reflex action. These goings on seem even more dehumanised because Poe talks only about people. If the crowd is jammed up, it is not because it is being impeded by vehicular traffic – there is no mention of it anywhere – but because it is being blocked by other crowds” (Selected Writings 30).

In this passage, the crowd takes the place of machines, embodying the overwhelming stimuli from which they must shut themselves off, in a movement that is at once dehumanising and saving. As Benjamin suggests in a footnote to the “Motifs” essay, “[t]he daily sight of a lively crowd may once have constituted a spectacle to which one’s eyes had to adapt first” (Selected Writings 21). The overstimulus of the technological crowd seems thus to produce a deadening effect upon those subjected to it. The overwhelming experience is shut out, and what is left to experience is something like a residue: “In shutting out this experience the eye perceives an experience of a complementary nature in the form of its spontaneous after-image, as it were”. (21) This numbing serves the purpose of defense from shocks or trauma.

The new awareness of the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum” appears now in the light of art: even as he realises the gravity of his predicament, his nerves thrill at the sight of these glowing paintings. Moreover, this sudden imposition of art corresponds with an awareness of the witnesses, his audience. Suddenly, the story has become self-referential – a story “in which art plays a
role in the experience of death and in which this exchange is performed before a witnessing audience” (Ballengee 195). At this point, the pictures appear for the first time in their full definition: the artwork that glows with increasing intensity on the wall, the narrator realises with horror, depicts his own imminent death by torture: “A richer tint of crimson diffused itself over the pictured horrors of blood. I panted! I gasped for breath...” (Poe 253). Thus, in a further exaggeration of its own self-referentiality, the story that professes the goal of exploring the “gulf beyond” through the recollection of a series of tortures culminates in an artistically rendered depiction of its own agenda: an illustration of death in the midst of torture.

Convinced of the certain death that the pit offers, the narrator moves irresistibly toward it, as an escape from the torments that bear down upon him. Yet, poised over the pit, straining to see into its depths, he struggles unsuccessfully to recognise its meaning. After a moment, the significance of the pit ultimately overwhelms him: it “burns” itself upon his reason. The violence of this communication conveys the meaning of the pit, relieving the narrator (and Poe) from struggling to define the impossible words to describe it. The repeated failure of language here – indicated by his cry “for a voice to speak” – recalls the tongueless and impossible utterance of M. Valdemar, speaking his own death, and the linguistic unavailability at the time of trauma identified by theorists. At such moments, where the radical novelty calls for the giving of a name to inscribe what is happening, there is always a great risk that the tool of names will break. “Then the continuity of transmission is interrupted on this point, and into this weak link in the signifying chain, in the ‘string of words’, there irrupts something that cannot be spoken in words” (Davoine and Gaudillière 149), the Real, the uncanny, constantly seeking the doorway of language.

Hannah Arendt contrasts this signifying welcome of the new arrival with the anonymous mechanism, still current nowadays, in which people are reduced to numbers: “The sheer naming of things, the creation of words, is the human way of appropriating and, as it were, disalienating the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a new-comer and a stranger” (Men in Dark Times 61).

In disaster zones, such as that in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”, defined by the occurrence of the unspeakable, the signifying chain is interrupted, broken. What remains are disconnected things, events, images, and words: thoughts without a thinker, as Wilfred Bion would say (Second Thoughts 92). Repression is not possible, since it depends on the signifiers of an inscription,
which is impossible in this case. Whereas the repressed unconscious can be defined, with Lacan, as the memory of what we forget, what we are dealing with here is a memory of what cannot be forgotten. Any effort to repair this hole in the continuity of the linguistic fabric reveals these creases, despite any attempt at mending. They are the bearers of truth: *a-letheia*.

On the edge of the impossible where M. Valdemar has disappeared, he tries desperately to invent an otherness in the place where he experiences its inextinguishable absence.

In the case of the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum”, the exclamation of “horror” itself occupies the position of death, marking the trace of the encounter. Having provided a sign for the unspeakable death lurking in the pit, the narrator takes a step back, refraining from hurling himself toward that doom, and instead raising his hands to cover the vision that has already failed him, unable to synthesise the sublime threat of an abysmal death into an idea that might be linguistically represented.

Thus, Poe presents the beauty of death veiled, through a narrator who fails, momentarily, to narrate, as he stands poised between death and life, in deference to a conclusion about trauma drawn by Petar Ramadanovic in his book entitled *Forgetting Futures*, namely that “trauma does not concern a past event but rather a becoming form, not something that has finished but a certain kind of futurity. The subject of/ in trauma is not a fragmented subject but a subject which is not whole because it is yet to come” (Ramadanovic 5).

Such an oblique view of beauty reflects Poe’s sense of how that which, after Lacan, we call the “Real”, and after Caruth, “trauma” might best be aesthetically represented: “What I called on to define...” (Marginalia 206).

**Works Cited:**


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