

## S. J. Iliopoulos and William Schultz

### POE, PYM, AND JAMES'S CRYSTAL BOWL: A NOTE ON THE POE/JAMES RELATIONSHIP

I can name positively certain poets whose work has influenced me, I can name others whose work, I am sure, has not; there may be still others of whose influence I am unaware, but whose influence I might be brought to acknowledge; but about Poe I shall never be sure.

T. S. Eliot, «From Poe to Valéry»

By what compass does a writer write? How does a writer take his bearings from writers before him, set his bearings in his own works, and pass on his navigational skills to succeeding writers? One of Henry James's characters — or «creatures,» to effect a biblical nuance — offers a clue to this great and important mystery contradicting the author of his being. In the following much-quoted passage James renounces Poe harshly:

It seems to us that to take [Poe] with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection.<sup>1</sup>

But Amerigo in *The Golden Bowl* defies his creator by alluding in the highest terms to Poe as an influence:

He [Amerigo] remembered to have read, as a boy, a wonderful tale by Allan Poe, his prospective wife's countryman...: the story of the shipwrecked Gordon Pym, who, drifting in a small boat further toward the North Pole — or was it the South? — than anyone had ever done, found at a given moment before him a thickness of white air that was like a dazzling curtain of light, concealing as darkness conceals, yet of the colour of milk or of snow. There were moments when he felt his own boat move upon such mystery. The state of mind of his new friends... had resemblances to a great white curtain.<sup>2</sup>

Who is right? James the all-too-human author when speaking seriously, rationally, not in fictional terms, or this character speaking through the acknowledged lie of fiction? Certainly the responsibility for whatever verdict must lie with James, who may have created Amerigo as a spokesman of his

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1. «Charles Baudelaire,» in Henry James, *Selected Literary Criticism*, edited by Morris Shapira (Middlesex: Peregrine, 1968), p. 55.

2. *The Golden Bowl* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 42.

literary unconscious, or who may not have been able to control his very own literary unconscious,<sup>3</sup> but in either case the author and Amerigo should be reconciled by us. The problem or crime is James's dissemblance about Poe's influence.

Previous critics commenting on the problem of determining influence have mixed judgements, falling into three categories: the majority follow, as James would have said, the wise policy of silence; others stop for a moment to consider a possible analogy between the works of Poe and James but almost instantly abandon the idea, as the remembrance of the latter's «unsympathetic» essay on Baudelaire returns like a toothache (Matthiesen); and a few find some significant Poesque echoes in James's fiction (Kelley, Fiedler, Levin).

Symptomatic of the criticism is Leslie Fiedler's view claiming Amerigo's reference to Poe to be merely «an offhand reference to the least-read work of Poe.»<sup>4</sup> Like all other critics, Fiedler does not attempt to adjudicate the difference of opinion between James and his character Amerigo.

This settlement, or at least some explanation, is a new question in Jamesian scholarship, one able to contribute to the more general question of the writer's compass used in writing. And the issue extends beyond the particular problem of Poe's influence on James, for James directly uses images from more than twenty novelists,<sup>5</sup> though the space of this short note does not permit such extended investigation.

Whatever James claims, whether «enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection» or not, James, through Amerigo, as it were, was influenced; this is a fact. While Amerigo speaks of «a dazzling curtain of light,» James synthesizes Poe's images in the last paragraphs of *Gordon Pym* and directly echoes Poe: «The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us.»<sup>6</sup> Amerigo does not remember whether the small boat was drifting towards the North Pole or the South — the difference should not appear to be terribly important to the Italian Prince; yet he remembers rather

3. That is, his «boyish appetites.» See James's *Autobiography*, edited by F. W. Dupee (London: Criterion, 1956), p. 36: «... had not my brother... beckoned on my lagging mind with a recital of The Gold-Bug and the Pit and the Pendulum? — both of which... I was soon enough to read for myself... [Poe] resounded in our mouths, while we communed to satiety, even for boyish appetites, over the thrill of his choicest pages.»

4. L. A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 290.

5. See R. L. Gale, *The Caught Image: Figurative Language in the Fiction of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1964), p. 102.

6. *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 4 vols, edited by J. H. Ingram (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1883), vol. 2, p. 185.

well «the colour of milk or of snow»: in *Pym* we read «milky hue» and «the perfect whiteness of the snow.»

In James's novel Maggie becomes more and more mysterious, like a «white mist» resurrecting the white «shrouded human figure» emerging from Poe's fictional cataract. Maggie is one of the White Females of American literature; yet, the possessive elements in her undermine her redemptive power, which (for all her love, love, love) becomes more and more questionable. Maggie's «pity» and «dread» match perfectly the ambiguities of the «shrouded human figure.»

The evidence for Poe's influence on James abounds, and it all echoes Amerigo's empathy with Pym's (and Poe's) «mystical» vision of «the white curtain.» James's allusions to *Pym* are neither «offhand» as Fiedler believes nor «the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection» as James claims in self-contradiction. The allusions are numerous: «shroud,» «hovering forces,» «cool darkness,» «white mist,» «golden mist,» «silver mist,» «rich sea-mist,» «some strange shore,» «submarine depths,» «drown,» «sink,» «mere blind terror,» «the fascination of the monstrous,» «treacherous depths,» «a narrow strait into the sea beyond,» «dark water,» «she was making for land,» «he had stood there before her as if restored from some far country, some long voyage, some combination of dangers or fatigues,» «immensity of light» — not to forget the various «chasms» and «labyrinths.»

James uses so many images echoing Pym's vision that the vision seems to control James, just as Amerigo seems to control James. The echoes reverberate in ever greater albeit weaker images:

It may be mentioned also that he [Adam] always figured other persons — such was the law of his nature — as a numerous array, and that, though conscious of but a single near tie, one affection... in his life, it had never, for many minutes together, been his portion not to feel himself surrounded and committed, never quite been his refreshment to make out where the many-coloured human appeal, represented by gradations of tint, diminishing concentric zones of intensity... really faded to the blessed impersonal whiteness for which his vision sometimes ached. It shaded off, the appeal — he would have admitted that; but he had as yet noted no point at which it positively stopped.<sup>7</sup>

The «caught image» comes from Poe's textbook of unnatural history: Pym is sailing from the black island to the whiteness of the Pole; from the abominable many-coloured «water» of the black island to the blessed whiteness of the milky waters. The «liquid» in the black island

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7. *The Golden Bowl*, pp. 111-12.

...was not colourless, nor was it of any uniform colour — presenting to the eyes as it flowed every possible shade of purple, like the hues of a changeable silk.... Upon collecting a basinful, and allowing it to settle thoroughly, we perceived that the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue.<sup>8</sup>

Pym is sailing from the black and the many-coloured, from «Mob, the Many»<sup>9</sup> to «the blessed impersonal whiteness,» the isolation for which Adam's vision «sometimes ached»; but, unlike Pym, Adam «had as yet noted no point at which it [the human appeal] positively stopped.» It is interesting to notice how Verver is actually interpreting Pym's «liquid» («the many-coloured human appeal») which, in his case, means «the awful people», as Maggie says, those who «make their horrible vulgar jokes» against him.<sup>10</sup>

According to Dorothea Krook in her mild *Ordeal of Consciousness*, James's novel «is a great fable... of the redemption of man by the transforming power of human love.»<sup>11</sup> Gabriel Pearson starts almost at the point where Krook stops: if after «a whole series of lies, duplicities, casuistries and silent suppressions» redemption may still occur, then «the lie... is sanctified by what it salvages and the disaster it postpones.»<sup>12</sup> The incidents of infamous wretchedness, of blind and foolish trust and of gratuitous cannibalism that inform the pages of *Pym* are perfectly matched by the «falsity,» the «treacherous depths» and the highly sophisticated cannibalism in *The Golden Bowl*.

In James's «domestic *Pym*» the golden bowl itself is a symbol of falsity: it is not golden but «perfect crystal» — which is not perfect either. This «golden bowl» has been related by critics to that of Blake's verses and to Ecclesiastes.<sup>13</sup> Yet it also can be related to the golden bowl in Poe's «Premature Burial» — isn't Maggie, somehow, «buried»? — or to the golden bowl in «Lenore»: «Ah, broken is the golden bowl! the spirit flown for ever!» Lenore, like Maggie, is both a wronged and an apotheosized Fair Lady: «Wretches! ye loved her for her wealth and hated her for her pride...»<sup>14</sup>

8. *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 2, p. 144.

9. See Geoffrey Rans, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), p. 90.

10. *The Golden Bowl*, p. 479.

11. *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1962), p. 240.

12. «The novel to end all novels: *The Golden Bowl*,» *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James*, edited by John Goode (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 302.

13. See Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, p. 321, and F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase* (London: Oxford U P, 1946), p. 83.

14. *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 3, p. 13.

Capturing the quintessence of Poe's influence on James in *The Golden Bowl*, Levin points out that the novel «ends... by bringing Poe's Antarctic shudder into a... drawing room.»<sup>15</sup> All these images — alluding to Amerigo's recollection of *Pym* and his vision of the «dazzling curtain of light, concealing as darkness conceals, yet of the colour of milk or snow» — form a «Jamesian dialectic between old-world experience and new-world innocence. Yet... the brightness signifies the challenge of novelty... and the bedazzlement of the ultimate.»<sup>16</sup>

This «bedazzlement of the ultimate» is a literary-mystical vision for Amerigo when he remembers Pym's «white curtain.» Pym's direction was uncertain, just as Amerigo's was; «he felt his own boat move upon such mystery.» So, too, James's own boat moves upon the mystery; James alludes to Poe to give direction to his own narrative, as the previously described imagery shows. This direction-giving retrospective allusion is, however, not discursive but almost literarily unconscious or preconscious, for it contradicts James's explicit discursive statements on the subject of Poe's influence. As Jaques Derrida writes in agreement with Paul de Man, literary figures come into being «by doing what they tell of and by telling what they do.»<sup>17</sup> Amerigo's recollection of reading Poe does what it tells of, because it allows James to recollect Poe; and it tells what it does, for it is about the literary influence of Poe (on Amerigo). Amerigo's «dazzling curtain of light, concealing as darkness conceals» is «performative,» to use a term from Paul de Man's criticism: it does what it tells of. James is dazzled. Perhaps literary figures must be «performative» if there is to be some compass for a writer to get his bearings from his predecessors.

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15. Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1976), p. 124.

16. Levin, p. 124.

17. *Memories for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia U P, 1986), pp. 25-26.

## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

S. J. Iliopoulos and William Schultz, *Poe, Pym, and James's Crystal Bowl: A Note on the Poe/James Relationship*

Στο δοκίμιό του για τον Baudelaire, ο Henry James εκφράστηκε περιφρονητικά για το έργο του E. A. Poe. Ωστόσο, ένας από τους ήρωές του στο μυθιστόρημα *The Golden Bowl*, ο Amerigo, διαψεύδει τον δημιουργό του και με υπαινικτικές αναφορές στο μυθιστόρημα του Poe *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* αναγνωρίζει και «ξεπληρώνει» το σημαντικό χρέος του James στον άτυχο «μάγο» της Αμερικανικής λογοτεχνίας. Δεν είναι όμως μόνο ο Amerigo που, ξεπηδώντας από το λογοτεχνικό ασυνείδητο ή προσυνείδητο του James, τον διαψεύδει. Ο ψυχισμός των άλλων ηρώων, οι «ιδεοληπτικά» επίμονες εικόνες, οι απειράριθμοι λεκτικοί υπαινιγμοί, καθώς και η γενική κατεύθυνση του τελευταίου μεγάλου μυθιστορήματος του James προς κάποιο θαλασσινό «μυστήριο», παραπέμπουν στην «πυξίδα» του *Gordon Pym* και στο άλλο έργο του Poe. Βασιζόμενοι στον αφοριστικό κριτικό λόγο του James, οι περισσότεροι σχολιαστές αγνόησαν αυτή τη σημαντική λογοτεχνική συγγένεια.