

*The undiscovered country from whose bourn
some travelers do return. The final frontier
in Poe and Dickinson*

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers, to begin with, a discussion of Poe's short story, "MS. Found in a Bottle", as a quintessential American representation of the Romantic notion that death is the source of all imagination and, consequently, of all forms of artistic expression. It also posits that the model set forth in this story looks forward to later developments, such as the discipline of depth psychology and the absurd novels of Kafka and Beckett. From that point, it discusses how the various issues Poe broaches, i.e., the application of the idea of the frontier to the boundary between reason and irrationality, language and silence and, finally, life and death, can be seen reflected in the Modernist poetry of Stevens and Eliot. And finally, it offers a reading of several of Emily Dickinson's poems on death (N^{os} 160, 280, 449, 712 and 822) as later variations on this same very complex American, and Romantic, theme.

Key words: frontier, death, Poe, Dickinson, American Literature.

RESUMEN

*EL PAÍS DESCONOCIDO DE CUYOS CONFINES SÍ REGRESAN ALGUNOS
VIAJEROS. LA ÚLTIMA FRONTERA EN POE Y DICKINSON*

El ensayo empieza comentando el relato de Poe, "MS. Found in a Bottle" como una expresión americana del concepto romántico de que la muerte es la fuente de toda imaginación y, como consecuencia, de toda obra de arte. También sugiere que este relato anticipa fenómenos culturales posteriores como la psicología freudiana y las novelas absurdas de Kafka y Beckett. Continúa considerando hasta qué punto las

diversas cuestiones que Poe trataba, a saber, la idea de la frontera aplicada a las líneas divisorias entre la razón y la sinrazón, entre el lenguaje y el silencio y, finalmente, entre la vida y la muerte, se ven reflejadas en la poesía modernista de Stevens y Eliot. Termina ofreciendo una lectura de algunos poemas de Emily Dickinson, sobre la muerte (n.ºs 160, 280, 449, 712 y 822), como otra elaboración de este mismo tema, típico tanto del Romanticismo como de la poesía norteamericana.

Palabras clave: frontera, muerte, Poe, Dickinson, literatura americana.

All of us have heard the question at least once or twice before; and some of us may have even asked it ourselves: “Just how *American* was Edgar Allan Poe?” After all, while Poe was writing, Washington Irving had already literally translated European legends and tales into specifically American terms, set in specific, recognizable locations. Cooper was in the process of initiating our undying myth of the American West. And Hawthorne was deeply immersed in his fictional investigations of the Puritan origins of the American self. But where was Poe? Rapt, we surmise, in a Gothic dream world of apparently inexplicable nightmare experiences, much less clearly rooted in the American soil than even those nightmare experiences of his Gothic predecessor, Charles Brockden Brown. A decaying city on the Rhine, an abbey in an isolated part of England, an ingenious and diabolical torture chamber in Toledo at the end of the Inquisition, a palazzo and its catacombs during carnival, an ancient family manor on the edge of a gloomy tarn ... hardly the stuff that American dreams are made of.

Or is it?

Let’s think more carefully about that question. Where *was* Edgar Allan Poe?

We might begin to look for an answer by pointing out the obvious: he was absorbed in the endless convolutions of his own mind. But I would suggest that it’s precisely these qualities, his introspective absorption and his consequent obsession with the nature of mental states and processes, that make Poe a quintessentially American writer.

And why is that?

To answer this second question, maybe we can try changing verbs. If, instead of the verb “absorbed”, we choose the verb “navigate”, my point should be easier to grasp. Poe was *navigating* through the spaces—both known and unknown—of the mind (that primordial and purely natural miracle of architecture, the human mind, whose inside is infinitely larger than its outside). He was navigating through its civilized, populated areas and its unmapped territories, its light and its shadows, reporting on many of its presumed certainties and making bold sorties into many more of its uncertain mysteries.

One of the aims of this essay is to contemplate the role of boundaries in American poetry. And the idea of boundaries, for a student of American literature and culture, inevitably suggests the idea of the frontier. What I am trying to say is that Poe, in spite of his apparent lack of interest in specifically American experience, probably understood the concept of the frontier, and its deepest implications, better than any of his contemporaries—at least up until his death, in 1849.

Because the frontier, of course, is much more than a physical borderline. It is both a geographical and a psychological boundary, both a material and a spiritual one. We all carry this second, essentially Romantic frontier inside of ourselves. It may begin as an external line between society and nature, or civilization and wilderness, but it very soon takes on much deeper interior connotations: the known vs. the unknown, the rational vs. the irrational, a conflict which leads to a serious consideration of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, or language and silence—all of which brings us to what my title refers to as the final frontier, which is also one of the central issues of Romanticism, the line between life and death.

And here, on this very complicated psychological frontier, is where Poe really was¹.

What Poe understood so well, as did Emerson from a considerably more benign perspective, is that Romanticism takes us to the very limits of sense... and then—it leaves us there.

But what does that mean?

The word itself, “sense”, harbors a wonderfully telling ambiguity: it can refer to sensation, or intuition, or significance. If Romanticism takes us to the limits of sense, then it takes us to that amorphous, paradoxical zone where sensory experience is converted into meaning. Practically all of Poe’s most significant fictional constructs—with the possible exception of the tales of ratiocination—take place within the mind, and are attempts to investigate the treacherous topology of that elusive interface (to use a Pynchonian term) between non-sense and sense, between what is there and what we think about what is there.

We could talk about any number of examples from his work, but I particularly want to make a few remarks about “MS. Found in a Bottle”, one of his earliest stories (first printed in 1833) and one which constitutes a prototype for this Romantic pattern in Poe’s art.

Of course, it should be clear from everything said above why the voyage into the unknown—and especially the sea voyage—is so important for Poe. You only have to think about those old maps of the world, the ones drawn up before the world had been completely charted, to see what I have in mind. Those beautiful old maps can give us an instructive illustration of the Romantic enterprise, in that they attempt to include the unknown in a

description of the known. In Poe's sea voyages, the protagonists are always impelled into those undelineated realms of speculation where the map maker's fancy was free to populate the void with imaginary monsters.

And this is what happens, for the first time, in "MS. Found in a Bottle". A nameless narrator, because of a nervous restlessness that haunts him like a fiend, decides to take ship from the port of Batavia (now Djakarta), in Indonesia. Like so many of Poe's narrators, this one, too, has a rather extreme opinion about the functioning of his own mind. How often we find Poe's stories beginning with this sort of declaration of the narrator's supposedly healthy rationality. In the first paragraph, he describes the "Pyrrhonism of [his] opinions", thus identifying himself as a textbook skeptic. He is proud of his "habits of rigid thought"; the "aridity" of his genius and a "deficiency of imagination", all of which, he claims, enables him to "detect the falsities" of the works of the German moralists (that is, the transcendental philosophers whose thinking formed the theoretical basis of Romanticism). In other words, he wants to believe that he has his feet planted firmly on the solid ground of empiricism and common sense: "Upon the whole", he says, "no person could be less liable than myself to be led away from the severe precincts of truth by the *ignes fatui* of superstition". (Mabbott: 135) But of course, that is exactly what's going to occur in the "incredible" adventure he is preparing to report. This unsuspecting journey into the unknown will, to paraphrase Franz Kafka, who inhabited much the same mental territory as Poe, take the very ground out from under his, and our, feet².

Soon after the journey begins, the ship passes some imperceptible borderline. First, there is the extraordinarily powerful wind (he calls it a Simoom) which sweeps everyone but an old Swedish sailor and himself into the sea. Now this opening volley, as it were, from nature already challenges the narrator's incredulity. How can such forces exist: "... beyond the wildest imagination, was the whirlpool of mountainous and foaming sea within which we were engulfed"; and how did he manage to survive? Significantly, he uses that word, "imagination"—an indication that this physical transformation may just be an emblem for a psychological transformation, as well.

After this, the ship is blown along uncontrollably at a dizzying rate for five days, probably, he surmises, down the coast of Australia. On the fifth day, although there are no clouds, the sun simply stops emitting light ("as if" he speculates, "all its rays were polarized") and sinks into the turgid sea. As far as his own experience is concerned, it never rises again.

The unnatural storm continues to rage, and the ship is surrounded by "horror, and thick gloom, and a black, sweltering desert of ebony". It's clear, from this point on, that the narrator has forgotten his earlier skepticism. The Swede is overcome by superstitious terror, and the narrator tells us that his "own soul was wrapped up in silent wonder".

Notice the terms that he unwittingly employs. Apparently, the capacity for wonder is equivalent to the possession of a soul. With this admission that he has opened himself, not only to emotional experience, but to the essentially religious emotion of *awe*, we know that the Romantic borderline has been crossed—or at least, it has begun to be crossed.

Suddenly a huge phantom ship (“perhaps four thousand tons”) appears high above them at the top of a gigantic wall of water, and rushes down on the narrator’s craft like a screaming banshee. But, rather than meeting the certain death he expected, he is improbably thrown by the shock of the collision into the rigging of the monster ship, to fall unharmed onto her deck. And with this event the transition is complete. Everything he experiences on this second vessel is simply inexplicable.

Now significantly, at this point the text itself begins to break down into fragments, relatively disconnected paragraphs, separated by strings of asterisks. In the second of these fragments we learn that the story we are reading is being written on materials that the narrator has stolen from the captain’s cabin, and that he will enclose in a bottle “at the last moment [...] and cast into the sea”. In other words, we learn that the story is a narrative of a journey into death.

But the first of these fragments is possibly even more interesting. When the narrator of “MS. Found in a Bottle” crosses that indefinable borderline between the predictable world of dull realities and the unpredictable realm of the imagination, he does much more than merely follow the trajectory of what had become, by 1833, a not unusual Romantic excursion. That one small step for him into a new state of mind was also a giant leap for us into a new sensibility, a sensibility that has characterized the Western imagination from then until the present:

A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul—a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of by-gone time are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key. To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration is an evil. I shall never—I know that I shall never—be satisfied with regard to the nature of my conceptions. Yet it is not wonderful that these conceptions are indefinite, since they have their origin in sources so utterly novel. A new sense—a new entity is added to my soul. (Mabbott: 141)

The ideas were hardly new in 1833; but of course, what we are interested in is the effectiveness with which they are expressed. The ripples from this crystallization of the emergent Romantic sensibility, the historical reverberations it sets off, are practically incalculable.

“A feeling for which I have no name”, “a sensation which will admit of no analysis”, “a new entity is added to my soul”: it seems safe to say that Poe discovered and explored the unconscious mind long before the development of the discipline of psychology, long before quite different thinkers like Freud and Jung dedicated their lives to making a space for this repository of irrationality within our scientific canons of self-description.

Notice, also, how this is basically the same journey that another of Poe’s unnamed narrators would make six years later, in “The Fall of the House of Usher”. And the echoes of that particular journey—from the mental terrain of reason (or sanity) to the terrain of irrationality (or insanity) have re-verberated well into the 20th century.

Just think about Kafka’s land-surveyor, K., who undergoes essentially the same process in his own attempts to “measure” the terrain of *The Castle* (written during 1918), that is, to comprehend the incomprehensible events that occur within its domain.

Or think of Samuel Beckett’s *Watt* (written during the second World War), where the absurd logical positivist who gives the book its title makes a similar incursion into the inexplicable during his strange season of duty in the house and grounds of the mysterious Mr. Knott. Both of these characters could quite easily have spoken those words we’ve just read above: “To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration” [that there are experiences that will not admit of analysis] “is an evil. I shall never [...] be satisfied with regard to the nature of my conceptions”.

Or think of the Beckett Trilogy: the relationship between Moran and Molloy, Malone’s long, self-conscious narration of his own death, and the climax of *The Unnamable*, that monumental experiment in saying what cannot be said.

All of these, however—the depth psychology of Freud and Jung, the absurd novels of Kafka and Beckett—all of these are examples of the underlying continuity between European and American Romanticism. And as such, they would be fascinating lines of discussion to develop further. But we are concerned here with American culture, and, more specifically, American poetry. And in order to get there—at least by the route I’ve chosen—it will be necessary to make another brief visit to that singular mental non-location in Poe’s story, from which the manuscript emerges.

By the end of “MS. Found in a Bottle”, the narrator has actually begun to get used to living with horror. But we have to remember that horror, from his point of view, consists of being unable to explain his own experience—or, maybe even more to the point, being unable to explain the emotions his experience arouses. In another one of the key passages of the story, he says, at the end of the penultimate fragment:

To conceive the horror of my sensations is, I presume, utterly impossible; yet a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions, predominates even over my despair, and will reconcile me to the most hideous aspect of death. It is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction. (Mabbott: 145)

And of course the story itself, the verbal construct which is the story, takes us as far as we can go (in life, in language) toward that mysterious and exciting knowledge. The story ends at the moment when the ship *goes down* into the gigantic whirlpool that swallows the narrator up into silence and destruction: "... we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool—and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering—oh God! and—going down!"

Maybe it should be no surprise that the whole extravagant machinery of this story looks forward so uncannily to the phenomenon of black holes in space. Because we students of literature, whose job it is to live among works of the imagination, should recognize that the imagination, in some ultimately inexplicable way, *precedes* knowledge. In this particular case, the limits of the imagination, as Poe imagined them, look forward to what we are nowadays more or less generally agreeing to be one of the limits of the knowable universe. But notice something else. If we have a striking image here of how everything is inevitably sucked into the black hole of death, we also have a counter-image of resistance to death. Because the manuscript in the bottle is a message that goes the other way, a message that is emitted, as it were, from the black hole, from the silence that contains the ultimate, unspeakable mystery.

In one of the most satisfactory readings of the story that I have come across, Harold Beaver lucidly explains that what Poe does here is to trace the creation of language *backwards*—from rational knowledge, the expression of demonstrable facts, to irrational experience, which corresponds with the imagination, and then finally, all the way back into pure silence. "Like Keats", Beaver says,

Poe put an absolute trust in "the truth of the imagination". But the retrieval of such truth, he realized, was far more complex than the ridiculous contrivance of a bottle. It might entail the breakdown of all rational methodology and so put at risk even commonplace norms of communication. Moving beyond all fixed codes, in search for the origins of language itself, it involved the discovery of something that might not, in the last analysis, be capable of being shared. (Beaver: 15)

What an elegant turn of phrase: the retrieval of the truth of the imagination. Isn't that a felicitous way to talk about the creation of poetry? And this nice image leads me to another observation.

Beaver, understandably for an article published in 1987, goes on to make the almost obligatory reference to Derrida. He says at one point that Poe “deconstructs the hierarchical status of ‘truth’ (as immanent and rational) and ‘fancy’ (as artificial and contrived) by showing that the qualities predicated of ‘fancy’, as a dependent term, are in fact a condition of ‘truth’ or ‘science’, as a spontaneous or immediate term, until the narrator’s whole linguistic system is decentred and the autonomy of what is considered by him ideologically serious is exposed as sham”. (Beaver: 18) Well, that certainly is one way of putting it. But I would prefer a different, less obligatory frame of reference, and would suggest that the whole process Beaver otherwise elucidates so well in Poe’s tale is really only a slightly different way of talking about the same surrender of the intellect to the unconscious and impersonal forces flowing through the universe that Emerson describes so beautifully as the process of inspiration in “The Poet”. (And certainly, as all of us have dolefully learnt, Emerson’s prose too, in its own way, is constantly, and I would say bravely, flirting with incoherence.)

But then, to get back to real sources, let’s recall a few sentences from that well-known letter of Keats, written in 1817, that Beaver makes reference to:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart’s affections, and the truth of the imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not [...] the imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream,—he awoke and found it truth [...] I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning [...] O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts! (Bernbaum: 840)

Sensations rather than thoughts: it is the vocation of the Romantic poet to mediate between the two. That strange, irrational non-location that corresponds with the creative imagination, that interface between hard, rational knowledge and the pure silence of sensations, that is the space that all Romantic poetry, in one way or another, uncomfortably inhabits.

The specific example that comes most immediately to my mind in this respect is Whitman’s “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”. Here too, on a much smaller scale, we follow a similar trajectory: from the rational language of the astronomer, which communicates an impersonal, objective and enervated version of the stars, to a personal, immediate and much more moving vision of the nighttime sky.

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide and measure them,
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in
 [the lecture room,

How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
 Till rising and gliding out I wonder'd off by myself
 In the mystical moist night air, and from time to time,
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

In its own modest way, this poem also dwells on that borderline between coherent language and incoherent silence. The problem for the Romantic poetics is the same one that Poe was addressing in “MS. Found in a Bottle”—how do you put into words what that “perfect silence” contains? Or do you put it into words? The same quandary accounts for those marvelous lines in section 5 of *Song of Myself*, which I never tire of quoting. Speaking directly to his soul, that irrational and emotional element of our being which also participates in the perfect silence of the world at large, the poet says:

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
 Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,
 Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvéd voice.

Of course, in this particular case, Whitman employs 1346 lines to give that pre-verbal lull an irrational and emotional—i.e., poetic—expression.

You have probably heard that old apothegm of Zen Buddhist thinking: “The finger that points to the moon, is not the moon”. Or maybe you’re familiar with the wittier variant version, “When the finger points to the moon, the idiot looks at the finger”. This is a cogent expression of what I’m talking about. How better to say, as Poe’s narrator very painfully discovers, that our conceptions about the world are not the world itself? How better to say, without saying it, that there is a gap, a rift, a *difference* between our descriptions and what they describe? A difference between the reified idea in the mind and the immediate experience in the senses?

But notice. That apothegm is also a lovely model for the poetic use of language, because it’s telling us, in language, what language cannot do. It contains the finger, it contains the moon, *and* it contains the gap between them. When we speak poetically, we exercise a language that acknowledges, and even celebrates, its own ultimate inadequacy. Poetic language always leaves the most important part unsaid. And this is why all poetic language points—in two directions—toward the silence.

It points toward the pre-vocal, and pre-logical silence that consciousness emerges from. One of our great 20th-century Romantic poets, Wallace Stevens, understood this very well. We could practically read “The Idea of Order at Key West”, for example, as part II of “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”. First comes the immersion in silence—or in the non-verbal noise of sensory experience—and out of that arises the expression, the music, the poetry.

I hope it won't be out of place here to recall, however briefly, the process of the creation of poetry as the Romantics conceived it. All of those unconscious physical phenomena that compose the world enter into human awareness through the senses. Those physical sensations produce feelings (not ideas), an emotional response to the experience of nature. And if that response is strong enough, if it moves us (as emotions should do) sufficiently, then the pressure has to be relieved, the feeling has to be pushed out, or *expressed*. For most of us, it's enough just to say, "Ahhh", or, going one step further, to say, "Ahhh ... isn't that beautiful!" But for the poet, whose emotional response is deeper and more complicated, the language must also express those deep and complex feelings.

Our emotions are the traces the world imprints on human sensibility. We translate those traces into words, and in that way we make them conscious. For many Romantics, this whole process was a link, a nexus with the world—and not necessarily a break, a fracture, or a source of alienation.

This is important. The gap between experience and idea may also be a continuum. And that, of course, is what we human beings are in the world. That gap—or continuum—is us.

Stevens' poem is self-reflective. It describes a song which is the poem itself, a cry that is not ours, although we understand. The words of the song emerge into consciousness directly from the sea—through the silent perception of the sea. Being poetry, those words eloquently trace themselves back into the silence. They illuminate their own transcendental provenance:

Words of the fragrant portals, dimly starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

But poetry also points forward, to the future, to the post-vocal silence into which all conscious voices will inevitably disappear:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

And I hope you can't help hearing, behind the stillness of Eliot's Chinese jar, the faint echo of an earlier silent form, that "still unravished bride of quietness" which is the source of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

If I had said at the beginning of this essay that many of Emily Dickinson's poems and Poe's stories are doing essentially the same thing, I suspect that any readers I might have would've been at least a bit surprised and maybe even skeptical. By now though, I hope those virtual readers are willing to accept that proposition, because it is the spinal chord of my argument. Dickinson, too, completely understood the Romanticism that gave life to her poetry, and realized that her own language also emerged from that borderline that Poe re-visited so often in his fiction. To take an initial example, let's consider poem N° 160:

Just lost, when I was saved!
 Just felt the world go by!
 Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,
 When breath blew back,
 And on the other side
 I heard recede the disappointed tide!

Therefore, as One returned, I feel
 Odd secrets of the line to tell!
 Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores—
 Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
 Before the Seal!

Next time, to stay!
 Next time, the things to see
 By Ear unheard,
 Unschatinized by Eye—”

Next time, to tarry,
 While the Ages steal—
 Slow tramp the Centuries,
 And the Cycles wheel!

I would classify this as one of Dickinson's early intermediate poems; and by that I mean a poem of transition between her traditional Christian belief and her later Romantic stance. It describes her reaction to a close brush with death. She has been to “the awful doors/Before the Seal” and has returned. The first line exhibits a typical Dickinsonian ambiguity. Was she just on the point of being lost—of dying—when she was saved? This would probably be the more obvious reading. But we might also consider another possibility. Was she on the point of being saved—i.e., dying and going to heaven—when she was lost, by staying alive? The resolution of the poem actually seems to justify this latter interpretation.

In any case, though, this is a significant ambiguity, for it suggests that she was being pulled in two directions at the same time. And in this sense, the second stanza is the most striking:

Therefore, as One returned, I feel
 Odd secrets of the line to tell!
 Some Sailor, skirting foreign shores—
 Some pale Reporter, from the awful doors
 Before the Seal!

I have never been able to read it without thinking of Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle", or his later re-working of the same theme, "A Descent into the Maelström". Is she possibly discovering, at this very point, the Romantic pattern of artistic creation that Poe had already investigated so powerfully?

There is still, in this particular poem, a dominant presence of the Puritan tradition that marked her upbringing. In the very next line, we hear an undeniable note of yearning in that exclamation: "Next time, to stay!" And the last stanza gives us a typical image in Dickinson's poetry (one that she uses in later poems to a much greater effect), the contrast between Eternity, which signifies a continuing life that is entered through death, and Time, which signifies an inevitable death that is entered through life. Remember that for the Puritans, Resurrection, that privileged access to the Hollywood Hills of Eternity, was an escape from the depredations of time, from the decay and dissolution that afflicted a fallen nature. This is why she so often uses that verb "steal" to describe the gradual processes of time in nature. Having entered God's eternal realm, the Elect are no longer vulnerable to time's surreptitious larcenies.

However—and this is the big however this poem seems to be straddling—if you want to be a poet, if you want to communicate the mysteries "By Ear unheard/Unscrutinized by Eye—", then, it's necessary both to go there *and* to come back.

Emily Dickinson's deep fascination with death was not a result of some personal morbidity, or neurosis or a need to escape from life. It may have begun as a desire for salvation, but that desire was soon transformed into the Romantic drive to contemplate those "Odd secrets of the line", to explore all of the implications of the final frontier. This Romantic fascination with death, and the approach to death, produced some of her strongest poems. I am thinking about N^os 280 ("I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"), 449 ("I died for Beauty"), 465 ("I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—") and 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death").

One of the most interesting and persistent questions concerning all of these well-known poems is where they are supposed to be spoken from. In every one we are either told directly or given to understand that the poem itself, the language of the poem, begins *after* death. If so, the first word already expresses an apparent contradiction, since death is—we assume—the limit beyond which language, as the vehicle of communicable experience, cannot go. You

might logically suppose that she is trying in this way to suggest some idea of the after-life, until you realize that each poem takes us as far as language, or consciousness, can go before passing over into the silence. So what's going on? First, the speaker dies. But somehow, she keeps on speaking. And then the speaker dies (again?) when her words cease and she crosses the line between knowledge and mystery.

Judith Farr, a highly regarded scholar of Dickinson's work, has proposed an elegant solution to this problem. She believes that Dickinson literally intended these poems to be read as messages from the soul in that intermediate state that medieval theologians referred to as the "Transitus". This term describes the widely-held belief—and some of us still hold it today—that when the body dies, the individual soul physically removes itself before being subsumed into whatever it is that may be thought to subsume souls. In Victorian times it was referred to as the "crossover", and Farr claims that many well-known contemporary paintings, that Dickinson would've been familiar with, were actually intended to represent the soul in this penultimate stage on the journey toward eternity. (Farr: 6)

This is, as I said, an elegant, a brilliant suggestion; and like all good criticism, every time I read it I find it compellingly convincing. It even puts me in mind of a photograph I've seen somewhere (unfortunately for any pretensions to academic credibility I may have harbored, I don't remember where)—a photograph that purported to represent a vague "spiritual" cloud, the soul, (but which resembled, more than anything else, a puff of cigar smoke) abandoning the mouth of an aged, reclining and fully dressed gentleman who was purported, at that very moment, to have died.

And that, in turn, puts me in mind of those two curious—maybe even repulsive—stories by Poe about experiments in mesmerism of the dying. In "Mesmeric Revelation" (1844) and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), a subject is mesmerized just before the moment of death (and in the second case kept artificially alive in the mesmeric state for a period of 7 months, for the sake of the experiment). Now this is a marvelous imaginative construct to transgress that last impassible borderline. If the dying can't come back to tell us what they discover on the other side, then mesmerism provided Poe a privileged access to the individual consciousness in its supposedly inviolable personal transformation. In "Mesmeric Revelation" we actually do get a conversation between the dead and the living; an individual consciousness is extended into death and formulates the experience of the absolute—or of God—in intelligible, or almost intelligible, words.

As I hope you can appreciate, this is only one more way of sending back a message in a bottle.

And I can't help suspecting that Dickinson's fascination with death was, like Poe's, at least as much epistemological as it was religious. In fact, in both

cases, because they were good Romantics, epistemology and religion resolve into more or less the same thing. Isn't this what poem N° 822 is telling us?

This Consciousness that is aware
Of Neighbors and the Sun
Will be the one aware of Death
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval
Experience between
And most profound experiment
Appointed unto Men—

How adequate unto itself
Its properties shall be
Itself unto itself and none
Shall make discovery.

Adventure most unto itself
The Soul condemned to be—
Attended by a single Hound
Its own identity.

With no recourse to a fictional gimmick like a message in a bottle or mesmerism, Dickinson also makes it perfectly clear here that death is the moment of incommunicable revelation—the paradoxical moment of truth. This poem, dated from 1864, was written after those others that I have mentioned, the ones that Farr calls “poems of the transitus”. It is very possible that the transitus, or the Victorian crossover, was in her mind, but I think N° 822 makes it clear that those poems are, above all, an investigation of the “interval”, whatever it is, that constitutes in itself the borderline between what we know as life and the “most Profound experiment/Appointed unto Men—”.

Would it be fair to suggest that that interval is really the locus of the Romantic imagination? Or even of all imagination?

In “MS. Found in a Bottle” we have a “regression” from certainty—which can also be thought of as the “dull realities” that Poe alludes to in “Sonnet—To Science”—to uncertainty, to the unknown. Or, from self-satisfied skepticism, to the excitement of awe at the marvelous, to the confrontation with mystery. What I am proposing here—just in case it hasn't become clear by now—is that more or less the same thing happens in Dickinson's great poems of discovery through death. If they seem to occur between the moment of death and the unconsciousness of death, couldn't that be because the poem itself, from beginning to end, *is* that borderline?

And if you would object that the passage should logically be instantaneous, then I would hasten to remind you that at this point the mind

is leaving precisely that area of human existence ruled by logic. This appears to be what we learn in N° 712:

Because I could not stop for Death—
 He kindly stopped for me—
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
 And Immortality.
 We slowly drove—He knew no haste
 And I had put away
 My labor and my leisure too,
 For His Civility—
 We passed the School, where Children strove
 At Recess—in the Ring—
 We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
 We passed the Setting Sun—
 Or rather—He passed Us—
 The Dews drew quivering and chill—
 For only Gossamer, my Gown—
 My Tippet—only Tulle—
 We paused before a House that seemed
 A Swelling of the Ground—
 The Roof was scarcely visible—
 The Cornice—in the Ground—
 Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses' Heads
 Were toward Eternity—

Notice that the whole poem, the complete experience, is encompassed between those two capitalized words, those two tremendous abstract nouns, at the end of the first and last lines: Death and Eternity. The speaker is traveling from her house to her grave. And exactly half-way through the poem, she begins to comprehend what is happening. Look at the end of stanza 3 and the beginning of stanza 4. They are the only two stanzas that are linked by a syntactic enjambment: “We passed the Setting Sun/Or rather, He passed Us—”. Just there, in the space between the two stanzas, she realizes that she is now outside of nature, or time. She is not passing through the world any longer. She is static, while the world is passing her by.

If “MS. Found in a Bottle” looks forward to the phenomenon of black holes, N° 712 looks forward to the Theory of Relativity. Remember that movie they showed us in the ninth grade? The closer you get to the speed of light, another apparent limit-case of the physical universe, the slower time goes. Reach the speed of light, we suppose, and time stops. Only here, the limit-case is death. The last stanza makes this relativity clear:

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
 Feels shorter than the Day
 I first surmised the Horses' Heads
 Were toward Eternity—

It is true, in many more ways than one, that death is the mother of beauty. By the time we get to the end of “MS. Found in a Bottle”, we realize—or we should realize—that all language emerges from the silence, all that we know comes forth out of mystery and that imagination is the matrix that gives birth to all of our facts. Recall the epigraph that Poe added to the sixth printing of “MS. Found in a Bottle”, in 1845: “He who has but a moment to live, has no longer anything to dissemble”. That addition only clarifies Poe’s message. Poetry, fiction, art—all of those ultimate forms of knowledge tell us the truth, and are engendered by the unavoidable—and silent—“truth” of death.

And so, since it is almost time now for this voice to retreat into silence, I would like to conclude with another of Dickinson’s great poems of the interval. N° 449, like N° 712, describes a tranquil, unresisting passage into the silent mystery:

I died for Beauty—but was scarce
 Adjusted in the Tomb
 When One who died for Truth, was lain
 In an adjoining Room—
 He questioned softly “Why I failed?”
 “For Beauty”, I replied—
 “And I—for Truth—Themselves are One—
 We Brethren, are”, He said—
 And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—
 We talked between the Rooms—
 Until the Moss had reached our lips—
 And covered up—our names—

This poem, too, begins with death and ends, where all poems have to end, on the brink of silence. But I don’t think it’s really a poem of the transitus. Dickinson seems to see death here more like checking into a cheap hotel—the grave is a very narrow room, indeed—with thin walls. As soon as she gets comfortable in her unfamiliar bed, she hears her neighbor, trying to settle into his. So they talk a while between the rooms, one of those lazy, somnolent conversations that all of us have had, until sleep—in this case the Big Sleep—finally overtakes them both.

If Dickinson meant this poem to be anything, it must have been what it literally (in a figurative way) is—a message from the grave. And in that sense

I suppose we should think of it as an attempt to communicate the ultimate knowledge. But her Romantic predecessors had already discovered that the ultimate knowledge lies beyond rational comprehension, and is as a consequence inexpressible. How do you speak the unspeakable? This is the Romantic quandary that we are still trying to come to terms with. It's the quandary she expresses so well at the end of N° 280 ("I felt a Funeral, in my Brain"):

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
 And I dropped down, and down—
 And hit a World, at every plunge,
 And Finished knowing—then—

As I suggested before, religion and epistemology come together for the Romantic mind at the moment of death. Both Poe and Dickinson fall downward into the ultimate revelation. When that plank in reason breaks, she too discovers that she no longer has a secure footing in rational knowledge. It is a brilliant pun on the etymology of the word itself: epistemology.³ She has nothing left to "stand upon", or of course, she has lost her understanding. We finish knowing when that "never-to-be-imparted secret whose attainment is destruction" is finally revealed.

And this is why N° 449 is just as much about art—that is, the drive to express the inexpressible, the need to speak in the face of death—as it is about dying. Here we have a speaker who *died* for beauty. But instead of "died", we may just as well read the verb "lived"; she dedicated her life to beauty. And her neighbor died, or lived for truth. If there is any ultimate, and communicable knowledge to be gained from death, it must be the knowledge contained in their conversation. But what do they say?

He questioned softly "Why I failed?"
 "For Beauty", I replied—
 "And I—for Truth—Themselves are One—
 We Brethren, are", He said—

Nothing more than a paraphrase of an earlier statement of Romantic recognition:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty", —that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know:

a message, remember, that Keats "translates" out of the "silent form" of the urn. All poetry points toward the silence. After all, as he says in the second stanza: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter [...]".

As a matter of fact, I prefer to imagine that, in addition to making a later comment on the Romantic concept of the imagination as a “buffer-zone” between knowledge and mystery, art as an interface between life and death, Emily Dickinson was also thinking in much more specific terms. I prefer to imagine that her neighbor in the grave has a specific identity, that she was placing herself in that imaginary interface of art—both in and out of time—with John Keats, a poet with whom she is claiming an implicit kinship of failure.

Words move, music moves
 Only in time; but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.

The moss may reach her lip and cover up her name, but it does not stop her voice, the voice of all poetry, that emerges, whether the poet is living or dead, from the silence of the grave.

What I suppose I'm trying to say—not very satisfactorily, I admit—is what I suppose Poe, more satisfactorily, was trying to say. All poetry consists of manuscripts found in a bottle. Fragmentary reports of glimpses into the mystery that wash up onto the shore and find their way into our hands by chance—or by some sort of meaningful design so enormous and complex that it may as well be chance.

The American artist is especially inclined—for reasons we are all familiar with—to push out to the frontier, wherever or whatever it may be, and to gaze across through eyes that are gifted with the capacity for awe. This is why so much of our art offers a good opportunity to study the various pathways that Romantic thinking has followed.

We have been trying to explain it to ourselves for over two centuries now. You'd begin to think that we're not very good at listening. Or maybe we're not very good at explaining. (In fact, the problem itself requires a complicated reformulation of our notions about explanation and understanding.) The interval between reified idea and immediate experience, the interface between concept and world, is us. And we can make that interval whatever we want it to be.

Our Romantic forebears are telling us, again and again, in messages that come from the grave, that we need to fill it with imagination, that we need to cultivate the abiding mysteries, to keep our world alive and whole. To think and speak poetically is to make that interval a continuum, to safeguard a

creative unity between mind and world and, very importantly, a continuity between life and death.

If we ignore the vitalizing power of the imagination, that essential chord that roots our human being in the larger ground of Everything-that-is, then the interval becomes a gap. An emptiness. A void. We negate a significant portion of our potential to be human—to sympathize, to suffer and to celebrate, to wonder at irresolvable complexities, and to choose—and things begin to fall apart.

NOTES

¹ Edwin Fussell (1965) demonstrates Poe's interest in the exploration of the American west, as reflected in his book reviews, and also provides an interesting discussion of the psychological dimensions that the idea of the frontier assumed in Poe's fiction. The present essay, while taking a different direction, elaborates on several of the concepts that Fussell introduces. In this respect, it may be worth our while to quote a few sentences from the conclusion of his chapter on Poe.

In his restless patrol along the lines between the senses, between waking and sleep, between sanity and insanity, between order and disorder, between normality and abnormality, between sentience and insentience, between the organic and the inorganic, between life and death, between good and evil, between Heaven and earth, [Poe] was the typical American of his age. [...] The most grotesque horrors in Poe's writing—mesmerisms, catalepsies, premature burials, forays into madness—are attempts to explore the neutral territory between categories of being, the debatable ground of the soul's possession. The terror, as well as the poetic sentiment, is identical with the figurative structure of the Western frontier. (173-4)

² At the end of "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer" the wall-investigator realizes that his narrative has been a futile attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible. He renounces his researches—and his speech—saying, "Hier einen tadel ausführlich begründen, heisst nicht an unserem Gewissen, sondern, was viel arger ist, an unseren Beinen rütteln." (A detailed demonstration of any shortcoming here would undermine not only our conscience, but, what is even worse, the very ground on which we stand.) (Kafka: 82)

³ [Greek *epistēmē* knowledge, understanding, from *epistanai*, "to stand upon," understand: *epi*- upon + *histanai*, to stand, place + LOGY].

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