CHAPTER XXXVII

POE'S VERSE

THERE is very little of Poe's verse; yet he has been called, by the greatest English critics, the only real American poet. There is very little of it; yet scarcely a single poet of the Victorian age has altogether escaped its influence. We can find traces of Poe in almost every one of the greater poets of our time, as well as in the host of minor poets.

One of the reasons for this influence was certainly that wonderful sense of the values of words, of their particular colours and sounds, of their physiognomy, so to speak, which Poe shared with the greatest masters of language that ever lived. His instinct in this direction led him especially toward the strange, the unfamiliar, the startling; and he was able to produce effects of a totally unexpected kind. Even when he shows the inspiration of some older poet, he invariably improves upon what he takes. Perhaps you remember Byron's famous lines about passion:

> The cold in clime are cold in blood,
> Their love can scarce deserve the name;
> But mine was like the lava flood
> That boils in Ætna's breast of flame.*

This comparison of a lover's blood to lava is so strong that one might well doubt whether the extravagance of speech in describing passion could be pushed any further. Perhaps Poe was the only poet of the age who could have pushed it further, and who did. Undoubtedly he was inspired by Byron's lines; see how he transforms and enlarges the whole fancy—

> These were days when my heart was volcanic
> As the scoriac rivers that roll,
> As the lavas that restlessly roll

* *The Giaour*, ll. 1099—1102.

Their sulphurous currents down Yaanek
In the ultimate climes of the pole,
That groan as they roll down Mount Yaanek
In the realms of the boreal pole.*

This strikes us at once as a much more extravagant utterance than Byron's, but it does not shock; on the contrary it fascinates us by its strangeness and its grotesque force. Moreover, it explains itself at once by reason of this fantastic strangeness. We know that the utterance is not that of a perfectly sane man; this is madness. The poem is intentionally mad; it is a description of nightmare horror —horror and fear of the unseen; and the speaker, being wild, uses only wild similes and exaggerations. Yet there is a grandeur in these images, as there often is in great madness — the madness of genius. Now Poe alone had the skill to do these things, to make the extravagant and the extravagantly terrible a source of art and pleasure.

But it was not only the novelty of his fancy and the queer power of his language that made him so influential. He introduced new ideas of melody into verse, especially by what has been called the "repetend." This word, formerly used only in mathematics, has now the signification in literature of the artistic repetition of lines or phrases, partly with a view to the intensification of some new fancy. Yet the repetend is not exactly repetition; it is repetition with modification. The line is repeated almost in its first form, but not quite so, and the slight change deepens the effect. You have good examples of repetend in the verse above quoted; lines two and three form one example of repetend; and lines five and seven form another repetend; while lines four and six constitute yet another form of repetend. I did not quote you a whole stanza. The entire stanza contains another repetend, which would make four repetends in ten lines. At some future time I must speak to you about another form of this art, very ancient, for it is a general characteristic of the great Finnish epic, the

* *Ulalume.*

Kalevala. But the principle of repetition in the *Kalevala* is very primitive and simple, childishly simple, compared with the repetend as devised by Poe. His methods in this way were so original that they might almost be called discoveries or inventions. The poem from which I quoted is not even the most remarkable example of this kind of work. Please observe this fact: all the really famous verses of Poe, all the compositions which made him celebrated as a poet, are constructed with a profusion of repetitive phrases.

There are not very many great poems, at that, though I have used the adjective all. I should name "The Raven," "The Bells," "Ulalume," "Annabel Lee," "Eldorado," "Israfel," "The Haunted Palace," and "Dream-Land," as more especially striking in this repetitive art. "The Bells" is the most astonishing feat of all, for it consists almost entirely of repetends. But even where Poe is least fantastical and most classic, he scarcely ever gives up entirely the use of repetition. There is one exception, the exquisite invocation. "To Helen"—

> Helen, thy beauty is to me
> Like those Nicæan barks of yore,
> That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
> The weary, wayworn wanderer bore
> To his own native shore.
>
> On desperate seas long wont to roam,
> Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
> Thy Naiad airs, have brought me home
> To the glory that was Greece
> And the grandeur that was Rome.
>
> Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
> How statue-like I see thee stand,
> The agate lamp within thy hand!
> Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
> Are Holy Land!

Written when the poet was only fourteen years old, this remains one of the treasures of English poetry, but it is

much less widely known than "The Raven," "The Bells," "Ulalume," or "Annabel Lee," — and this because it has fewer of Poe's peculiar characteristics than the others. The charm of the repetend, then quite new, was what immediately caught public attention even in the time of the early Victorian poetry. It was not the extremely delicate fancy about Helen as a living Psyche that could at once catch popular attention; it was such strange music, rather, as the following repetends expressed—

> This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
> On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,
> But whose velvet violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o'er
> *She* shall press, ah, nevermore!

—or,

> "Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store,
> Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
> Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore:
> Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
> Of 'never—nevermore.'"

"The Bells" carries this repetition to the very highest point of art; and here all the repetends are devised especially with a view to phonetic effect. Indeed, I imagine it would not be wrong to call this piece the most sonorous, if not actually the most musical, in the whole of nineteenth century literature. Remember, when I say this I do not mean to declare the poem in all respects superior to any other Victorian poem of equal length, but only in respect to the art of sound, though it is otherwise also very great. We must read it aloud to understand how wonderful it is. The attempt is to represent by the use of words—resonant words—the effect of four different kinds of bells. The first kind is the little sweet sounding bells attached to the harness of horses drawing a sledge over the snow in the holidays of an American winter. This is a merry sound, and all the words chosen express merriment and sparkling

brightness. The next verse deals with the sound of wedding bells — that is to say, the sound of church bells as chimed on the occasion of a wedding. Here all the words are chosen to express rapturous joy, pleasure, softness, sweetness. Next we have the sound of firebells — that is to say, the sharp-sounding bells rung in American cities to announce to the fireman that a fire has broken out. Here all the words are words that clang — words of harsh and violent sound mixed with terms indicating fear and confusion. Last we have the description of the death-bells, the sound of the great bells of a church announcing a death. These are rung very slowly on such occasions; and this slow ring is called tolling or knelling. Here the words are all solemn and terrible at the beginning; but at last they become grotesque. The poet has been seized by the idea of death as triumphing in that sound, and death becomes to him then like a goblin or a ghoul, and he indulges in some strangely fantastic imagery. I think the first three parts are better than the fourth in respect to poetical conception; but in respect to sound it would be very hard to say which is the most wonderful.

Hear the sledges with the bells,
Silver bells!
What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
In the icy air of night!
While the stars, that oversprinkle
All the heavens, seem to twinkle
With a crystalline delight;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

Observe that all these words, or nearly all of them, express what is small and bright as to appearance, little and

sweet as to sound. The value of the word "tintinnabulation" was never so well shown before in modern poetry. I need scarcely tell you that it can only be used to indicate the rapid sound of a very small bell; for example, the sound made by the little Japanese insect *kantan* might very correctly be spoken of as a tintinnabulation.

Now we turn to the sound of wedding bells. Observe how soft and rounded with vowels the words suddenly become.

Hear the mellow wedding bells,
Golden bells!
What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!
Through the balmy air of night
How they ring out their delight!
From the molten-golden notes,
And all in tune,
What a liquid ditty floats
To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats
On the moon!

Oh, from out the sounding cells,
What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!
How it swells!
How it dwells
On the Future, how it tells
Of the rapture that impels
To the swinging and the ringing
Of the bells, bells, bells,
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!

Liquid "l's" and "o's" and "u's," but especially l's and o's, prevail throughout this stanza; and the occasional excellent use of sonorous Latin words, such as "voluminously," or of Greek words, such as "euphony," is made to harmonize in the strangest way with the use of simple English words of one syllable, such as "gush" and "wells."

Effects of this kind were never even attempted before Poe's day, and they have never since been improved upon. In the succeeding stanza we have a choice of harsh, wild, or terrible words.

Hear the loud alarum bells,
Brazen bells!
What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!
In the startled ear of night
How they scream out their affright!
Too much horrified to speak,
They can only shriek, shriek,
Out of tune,
In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,
In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire,
Leaping higher, higher, higher
With a desperate desire,
And a resolute endeavor
Now—now to sit or never,
By the side of the pale-faced moon.
Oh, the bells, bells, bells!
What a tale their terror tells
Of Despair!
How they clang, and clash, and roar!
What a horror they outpour
On the bosom of the palpitating air!
Yet the ear it fully knows,
By the twanging
And the clanging,
How the danger ebbs and flows!
Yet the ear distinctly tells,
In the jangling
And the wrangling,
How the danger sinks and swells,—
By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells,
Of the bells
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells,—
In the clamor and the clangor of the bells!

These are all horrid sounds or harsh sounds. Of horrid sounds notice such words as "clamorous," "clangour," "clamour," "twanging," "clanging"; and of harsh sounds, the words 'jangling," "wrangling," "frantic," "shriek." Almost every device of sound, whether of alliteration, rhythm, or repetition, is attempted here. To understand the truth of the work, however, you must try to think of the old-fashioned firebells, formerly used in both Europe and America, before the days of electric bells. To-day in America the firebells are rung by electricity; they are not very large, and they do not make a great volume of sound, because it is not necessary to alarm the people any more; the trained bodies of firemen can take care of the city. But in the old days everybody was expected to help in putting out a fire; and the bells were very large, and were rung unceasingly, as hard as the ringers could ring them. The image of the leaping fire, trying to rise to the moon, is very fine; and the adjectives "deaf" and "frantic" are excellently used. I think that Swinburne was influenced by this poem when he wrote the famous line about cruelty deaf as a fire, and blind as night. Why fire should be spoken of as deaf may seem to you strange unless you are accustomed to western poetical imagery, but I think that most of you can feel what it means. The idea is the same as that of the old phrase "deaf to pity," — that is, as little to be moved by prayers for pity, as if one could not hear them. Elements are of course without senses; and it would be almost platitude to mention the fact, were it not for the value that personification may give it. When you speak of fire being deaf, you at once personify fire, you make it a destroying living force that cannot hear; therefore the effect is very terrible.

I shall not read to you the fourth stanza of "The Bells" because in the fourth stanza the effects sought for by the poet are effects of ghostliness and terror rather than of sound; and I am now considering Poe's value especially as a maker of sound. But please to remember one thing

about it, namely, that in this fourth stanza "long tones" are especially chosen. The sudden lengthening of the sound indeed gives to the voice a particular tolling and knelling quality that is very remarkable. However, the verses already quoted will be sufficient to explain to you the strange fascination that this poem has had upon the imagination of all Europe and America for many years.

I have said enough about these devices of Poe — his alliteration, his repetends, his original use of Latin words of many syllables as onomatopœia. There are some other peculiarities to be considered — for example, his revival of old Saxon words in a new sense. For two such revivals he is especially responsible, and even Tennyson was affected by his use of these. When you read in the "Idylls of the King" such phrases as "the weirdly-sculptured gates," perhaps you have never suspected that this use of the adverb weirdly was derived from the study of the American poet. There were two words used by the Saxons of a very powerful kind; one referring to destiny or fate, the other to supernatural terror. "Weird" is a later form of the Anglo-Saxon word meaning fate. The northern mythology, like the Greek, had its Fates, who devised the life histories of men. Later the word came also to be used in relation to the future of the man himself; the ancient writers spoke of "his weird," "her weird." Still later the term came to mean simply supernatural influence of a mysterious kind. Poe found it so used, and made it into a living adjective, after it had become almost forgotten, by using it very cleverly in his poems and stories. As he used it, it means ghostly, or ghostly looking, or suggesting the supernatural and the occult. Hundreds of writers imitated Poe in this respect; and now it is so much the rule, that the word must be used very sparingly. It is the mark of a very young writer to use it often.

The other word which I referred to is "ghastly," which differs from ghostly as to spelling by one letter, but as to meaning very greatly. "Ghastly" does not mean ghostly

only; it means horrible, to the degree of creating supernatural fear, or horrible to the degree of suggesting death. In the latter sense Sir Walter Scott, who had studied the old northern languages to good effect, often uses it, as in the lines describing William of Delaraine after his sickness,

> For he was speechless, *ghastly*, wan;

or in the ballad of "Frederick and Alice," describing the light of the dead who

> rest their ghastly gleam
> Right against an iron door.

But it was not Sir Walter Scott, it was Poe, that first made the word newly arrived and gave it extraordinary vogue. These two words have been so much abused since his time that only a very good writer can afford now to use them. Tennyson has occasionally used "ghastly" like a great master, but always in the manner in which Poe used it. The value of the word, as well as of "weird," really lies in its vagueness. It can be effectively used to suggest a great many different kinds of the terrible or the horrible. In a poem which I am going now to quote to you, you will find it used with great power.

One more value of Poe to be illustrated is the originality of his fancy in the domain of the shadowy and the fearful. There is something fearful in most of his work, but the force of this element is best shown in his awful poem, "The Haunted Palace." The palace is the mind of man, or perhaps of a beautiful woman — long radiant with happiness, then helplessly wrecked. In other words, it is a description of a mind becoming insane. You will not see the real horror until you have read the whole:

> In the greenest of our valleys
> By good angels tenanted,
> Once a fair and stately palace—
> Radiant palace—reared its head.

In the monarch Thought's dominion,
It stood there;
Never seraph spread a pinion
Over fabric half so fair.

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow
(This—all this—was in the olden
Time long ago),
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
A wingèd odor went away.

Wanderers in that happy valley
Through two luminous windows saw
Spirits moving musically,
To a lute's well-tunèd law,
Round about a throne where, sitting,
Porphyrogene,
In state his glory well befitting,
The ruler of the realm was seen.

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace door,
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing,
And sparkling evermore,
A troop of Echoes, whose sweet duty
Was but to sing,
In voices of surpassing beauty,
The wit and wisdom of their king.

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch's high estate;
(Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
Shall dawn upon him desolate!)
And round about his home the glory
That blushed and bloomed,
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.

And travellers now within that valley
Through the red-litten windows see

Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a ghastly rapid river,
Through the pale door
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh—but smile no more.

You will be able to guess some of the similes without explanation. The windows are "the windows of the soul" as English poets sometimes call them — that is to say, the eyes. The palace door "with pearl and ruby glowing," is the mouth; you know that poets compare beautiful teeth to pearls, and the red of young lips to roses or rubies. The spirits moving to perfect music are the senses and the feelings in a state of health. The king, born to the purple and sitting upon the throne above the circling of the spirit, is Reason. As the palace, representing the intellect, is said to be situated in a happy valley, we may suppose that the poet means to say that the life described is passed at first in the midst of happy surroundings; but you will do well to remember also that human life in the abstract is sometimes spoken of as a valley. So is the world.

The first part of the poem is thus plain. The second part describes the change. Again we see the two windows, but now they are spoken of as being "red-litten," referring to the bloodshot appearance of the eyes of an insane person. Within, no beautiful spirits are seen, but "vast forms that move fantastically." These are the fearful fancies of insanity. The music is no longer perfect; it has become a discordant melody — by which is implied that the machinery of reason has become discordant, broken. The king has disappeared — that is to say, reason has departed. The gate — that is, the mouth, is no longer a gate of pearl and ruby; it is pale, like the lips of an insane person. The beautiful echoes described in the first part of the poem as coming through the gate, and signifying the voice, are no longer heard; there come out a "hideous throng," that laugh continually, but never smile. The "hideous throng"

means the incoherent talk of the insane; and I scarcely need remind you that in some forms of terrible insanity the sufferer continually laughs, laughs horribly, but never smiles. The smile, the natural smile, is a sign of gentle happiness. Now if you read the poem over again, bearing these similes in mind, you will see what a terrible thing it is, and how original the fancy of likening the brain of a mad person to a house haunted by ghosts and goblins. There is immense power in these verses, and it is not wonderful that they should have created a terrible sensation.

Now the elements of fear and pity, as the Greeks anciently established, are essential to great tragedy, and are among the oldest forces of successful literature. Whoever knows how to play upon these two feelings with power, can always be sure of influencing a public. In our own day temporary success has been obtained by relying upon these elements only to make little plays or stories. I suppose that you have heard the name of Maeterlinck. Maurice Maeterlinck is a Belgian writer who has been writing little dramatic romances, which he calls "plays," but which are scarcely long enough or elaborate enough to deserve the title. Some day I shall speak to you more fully about his methods. They are very simple. He does nothing more than excite our fear and pity by placing children orwomen in terrible situations, often of a ghostly kind. In one play, "Aglavaine and Selysette," he has indeed depended chiefly upon the emotions of love and jealousy, and this is the best; but generally he takes only fear and pity for his motives. These are also the motives in Poe's "Haunted Palace." But Poe's "Haunted Palace" chiefly appeals to terror, ghostly fear; the pity is far off, clouded by the method of the description. With one feeling only, Poe could do more than Maeterlinck can accomplish with several passions. That is the sign of his power. Properly speaking, the more complex an emotion is made, the more powerful it ought to be. Maeterlinck made combinations; Poe did not. Like the great musician Paganini, he could play any tune upon one

string, and these weird tunes which he played in such poems as that we have been reading, affected English verse for many years.

In one respect the horrible element of Poe, the terror, was a revival. It was the old horror of death created during the Middle Ages and quickened to new life by a great artist, who had freed himself from all definite religious beliefs. The horror of death in the Middle Ages arose from the emphasis through centuries upon the physical side of death, and upon the powers of darkness about the grave. Poe was impressed by the mediæval sentiment regarding death, and he observed that it could be isolated from its old religious relations; he kept the shadows, the mystery, and the horror, without preserving the suggestions of faith. Now the old faith afforded some consolation; without the consolation, such fancies about the grave would have been much more terrible. Poe made them so, and startled his generation by the frightful poem entitled "The Conqueror Worm." Here the drama of life is described in a way that never occurred to any other mind. God and the angels and the whole ghostly universe are represented as watching the play of human existence upon a shadowy stage—somewhat as in Shakespeare's "Hamlet," the king and his court watch the play which the prince ordered the actors to perform. But in this case nobody knows what the play is about, except God himself; the audience must guess the meaning when the play is over. In the last act of the last scene a worm, a grave worm, appears upon the stage.

> But see amid the mimic rout
> A crawling shape intrude:
> A blood-red thing that writhes from out
> The scenic solitude!
> It writhes—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
> The mimes become its food.

Then the angels know that the play is the tragedy called "Man," and that the hero of the play is the grave

worm. The horror of the whole fancy is greatly enhanced by the vagueness of the description; nothing is distinct; all is darkly suggestive except the worm itself. Of course the appeal of the poem is pathetic in the supreme degree; it embodies the doubt and the fear and the mystery of the eternal question, "Why do you exist?"

Poe first introduced effectively into English poetry the oriental fancy of "ghouls." Moore had indeed referred occasionally to ghouls, in his "Lalla Rookh"; and Beckford had introduced them in his prose romance of "Vathek." But these two rivals were writing of eastern lands in those works, whereas Poe brought the ghoul into the modern western world of dreams and fears. The ghoul is, in the old Arabian belief, a goblin haunting cemeteries and waste places, digging up the dead and devouring them — sometimes even devouring the living. There is no more unpleasant fancy in Arabian story. That anybody should have been capable of utilizing such a fancy in modern poetry would scarcely have been believed before Poe attempted it. He used it very successfully, in a vague way; but not in a way that any one else dared to imitate. He has put a ghoul even into the song of "The Bells." I mention this only by way of introducing the statement that Poe was a most consummate artist in the creation of medley. His mind was mostly Gothic in feeling — Gothic on all its dark side; but he could weave into his Gothic phantasmagoria shapes of Arabic, Egyptian, Italian, Venetian, and even Greek fancy, with the most surprising result. You will find this best exemplified, perhaps, in his prose stories; but it appears also in his poetry. For example, in "Ulalume" you have the dainty luminous figure of the Greek Psyche wandering through the haunted forest inhabited by ghouls and demons; in "The City in the Sea" you have suggestions of Greek and Renaissance architecture worked into a framework of myth belonging to old Hebrew tradition. There are many stories of cities under the sea; but the last part of the poem, hinting of the Cursed Cities of the Bible,

shows how skilfully Poe could blend different epochs together. Now all this and much more which might be mentioned, exemplifies the methods of the romantics in all countries, in France, in Germany, and in England. The romantics made new effects by blending many old elements into novel combinations. Poe, however, did this in so individual a way as to give his poetry a character that no other English verse possessed. Small as the bulk of his work is—the very smallest perhaps of any really great poet — it will repay study of the most careful sort, and no one who makes the study can quite escape the influence of the writer.

In concluding these notes upon the poems of Edgar Allan Poe, it is worth while to comment upon the circumstances that made him such a poet. Remember that he was the son of a law student, who fell in love with a young actress, and gave up his profession and his prospects in order to marry her and become an actor. This romantic union was thus an affair of youthful passion and youthful idealism; both of these persons were affectionately imaginative, and ready to sacrifice everything for an idea. They both died young, leaving their little boy to be taken care of by strangers. The little boy was pretty, delicate, sensitive, imaginative, with the soul of an artist, inheriting the talents of both parents and probably the weaknesses of both. Under happy conditions he would perhaps have produced very different work. But he grew up under the supervision of strangers, in a country where the practical side of life only was esteemed, and the work of imagination treated with little respect. The young man's dreams, ambitions, and tastes, could not be taken seriously. He found himself, after making several blunders in life, doomed to remain without intellectual sympathy. He found no friendships in the dreariness of American city life. He was thrown back upon himself, forced to find consolation and companionship in dreams. This is one of the many cases in which we may suppose that literature has gained from

the unhappiness of the author. Most poets are said to write poetry because they are unhappy; this is not altogether true, though there is some truth in it. But in Poe's case it was true. If he had been placed in fortunate surroundings, with leisure and with money, it is quite possible that he would nevertheless have produced remarkable work of some kind. But certainly, as a happy man, he would not have produced the wonderful prose stories and poems that have given him a unique place in nineteenth century literature, and that have affected and improved the best work of the generations after him both in prose and in verse.