

Poe and the Myth of Origin

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Abstract

*Published in 1848 – one year before Poe’s death – Eureka is one of the last direct legacies of the English and French Enlightenments. This work is placed under the patronage of Newton, Laplace and Humboldt to whom Poe dedicates his essay “with [his] very profound respect”. The program of the American writer is ambitious. “I design to speak of the Physical, Meta-physical and Mathematical – of the Material and Spiritual Universe: – of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny.” Of the eighteenth century, Poe has kept the spirit and pleasure of intellectual conquest, the taste for exploration of all the fields of knowledge and imaginative writings. But he knows that he belongs to another world, a world where Science – he says – has driven Diane away from the forests and the poet from the public space. Eureka is above all a “romance”, a prose poem. It is also a discourse in scientific language. Poe translates the myth of Origin into astronomical formulas. “[The] myths decay and symbols become secularized – Mircea Eliade writes –, but [...] they never disappear, even in the most positivist of civilizations, that of the nineteenth century. Symbols and myths come from such depths: they are part and parcel of the human being” (Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, tr. Philip Mairet). In composing Eureka, Poe extends the exercise of rewriting beyond the limits of science. He speaks of the eternal return of Poetry, and highlights the origin of myths of Origin. “In the Beginning Was the Fable” (Paul Valéry, “Au Sujet d’Eurêka”).*

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Quant à [l']origine [de l'Univers], – AU COMMENCEMENT ÉTAIT LA FABLE. Elle y sera toujours.

Paul Valéry, "Au sujet d'Eurêka".

As for [the] origin [of the Universe], – IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE FABLE. There it will always be.¹

Paul Valéry, "About Eureka".

"Many people mocked the words of Poe: "I have no desire to live since I have done "Eureka." I could accomplish nothing more" (letter to Maria Clemm, July 7, 1849, *Letters*, t. II, p. 452). Where some see only pretentiousness, this could also be an expression of nothing more than the feeling of a writer and a philosopher assured of having finally grasped and formulated the basic principles of a creed hitherto imperfectly designed",² Claude Richard observes. Published in 1848, "Eureka is the product of long psychological and scientific preparation. From *Al Aaraaf*, then in successive steps, the basic principles of Poe's philosophy decant slowly – in *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion*, *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, *Mesmeric Revelation*, *The Power of Words* – throughout studies and new initiations, carefully checked".³ Eureka is an ambitious work. It is a cosmogony, and "cosmogony is a literary genre of a remarkable persistence and surprising diversity, one of the most antic genres that are",⁴ Paul Valéry writes. "It seems that the world is barely older than the art of making the world"⁵:

[...] le genre cosmogonique touche aux religions, avec lesquelles il se confond par endroits, et à la science, dont il se distingue nécessairement par l'absence de vérifications. Il comprend des livres sacrés, des poèmes admirables, des récits excessivement bizarres, chargés de beautés et de ridicules, des recherches physico-mathématiques [...].⁶

The cosmogonic genre touches on religions with which it merges in places, and on science, from which it is necessarily different by the absence of checks. It includes sacred books, admirable poems, excessively weird stories, loaded with beauty and the ridiculous, physico-mathematical research [...].⁷

¹ Author's translation.

² Author's translation. Cf. Claude Richard's note, Edgar Allan Poe, *Contes Essais Poèmes*, edition directed by Claude Richard, Paris, Robert Laffont, "Bouquins", 1995, p. 1484-1485: "Bien des gens se sont moqués de la phrase de Poe : "Je n'ai pas désir de vivre, puisque j'ai fait Eureka. Je ne pourrais accomplir rien de plus" (lettre à Maria Clemm, au 7 juillet 1849, *Letters*, t. II, p. 452). Là où certains ne voient que prétention, ne s'exprime pourtant rien d'autre que le sentiment d'un écrivain et d'un philosophe assuré d'avoir enfin saisi et formulé les principes fondamentaux d'un credo jusqu'alors imparfaitement conçu". From now, we will use the abbreviation CEP, followed by the page number.

³ Author's translation. Cf. Claude Richard's note, CEP, p. 1485: "Eureka est le fruit d'une longue préparation psychologique et scientifique. Dès *Al Aaraaf*, puis par étapes successives, les principes fondamentaux de la philosophie de Poe se décantent lentement – dans *Conversation d'Eiros avec Charmion*, *Colloque entre Monos et Una*, *Révélation magnétique*, *Puissance de la parole* – au fil d'études et d'initiations nouvelles, soigneusement vérifiées."

⁴ Author's translation. Cf. Paul Valéry, "Au sujet d'Eurêka", in *Edgar Allan Poe*, Paris, L'Herne / Fayard, "L'Herne", N° 26, edition directed by Claude Richard, 1998, p. 367: "La cosmogonie est un genre littéraire d'une remarquable persistance et d'une étonnante variété, l'un des genres les plus antiques qui soient."

⁵ Author's translation. Cf. Paul Valéry, "Au sujet d'Eurêka", *op. cit.*, p. 367: "On dirait que le monde est à peine plus âgé que l'art de faire le monde."

⁶ Paul Valéry, "Au sujet d'Eurêka", *op. cit.*, p. 367.

⁷ Author's translation.

In other words, the cosmogonic genre transgresses the limits of the genre. It defines all the stories of genesis of the universe – including works of science. Science is also a narration.

Eureka is a complex, composite work. As the author affirms in the dedication to the reader, this is a poem. It is also a rationalist discourse, with many philosophical and scientific sources⁸ – a narrative in the form of an essay on the genesis of the Universe, an imaginative creation which has some traces of the survival of cosmogonist myths. At the same time it draws on the legacies of the English and French Enlightenment in elaborating a new cosmology from Laplace's nebula theory and the Newtonian law of gravitation. But the foundations of Poe's cosmology are aesthetic, Eveline Pinto notes. "Poe invents the themes of his world according to his experience as a writer".⁹ *Eureka*, then, is a work of fiction. Eveline Pinto concludes:

Pas plus que les auteurs des premières tentatives de cosmologie intégrale, Poe n'innove. Dans sa *particule primordiale*, ne s'anticipe ni "l'atome primitif" de Lemaître, ni "l'Ylem" de Gamow ; lorsque Poe inaugure sa singulière histoire de l'Univers par la supposition de l'Unité, il ne faudrait pas, par une sorte de projection rétroactive, le tenir pour le précurseur de modernes théories. Ces thèmes ne sont peut-être dans la science que la trace des survivances, des archaïsmes et des images qui continuent à investir la pensée rationaliste.¹⁰

No more than the authors of the first attempts at complete cosmology, Poe does not innovate. In its primary particle, he does not anticipate Lemaître's "primeval atom" nor the "Ylem" of Gamow; when Poe inaugurates his unique history of the Universe by the assumption of Unity, he should not be regarded as the precursor of modern theories by a sort of retrospective projection. In science these themes are only perhaps the trace of survivals, of archaisms and images which continue to invest the rationalist thought.¹¹

⁸ Cf. Claude Richard's note, *CEP*, p. 148: "Poe fut d'abord porté par la tradition néo-platonicienne et la Naturphilosophie de Schlegel. Puis il s'est familiarisé avec – outre la théorie des nébuleuses de Laplace, Newton et Kepler – le célèbre *Cosmos* de Alexander von Humboldt à qui *Eureka* est dédié, les *Vestiges de la création* de Chambers, le *Cours de philosophie positive* d'Auguste Comte, l'un des traités de Bridgewater, *Astronomy and General Physics Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*. Il n'est pas impossible non plus qu'il ait eu connaissance de l'*Histoire naturelle universelle et théorie du ciel...* (1775) de Kant, du moins à travers l'exposé qu'en fait Humboldt dans *Cosmos* et du très célèbre *Philosophiae naturalis theoria redacta ad unicum legem virum in natura existentium* (1758) de Boscovich qui devient "la plus populaire des spéculations concernant l'ultime constitution de la matière" et qui se trouvait enseignée dans maintes écoles américaines. Il a puisé sa théorie des correspondances (de la lumière, de l'électricité, de la chaleur, du magnétisme) dans les travaux d'Oersted et de Faraday, de J. Priestley, de Pictet, de Seebeck, de Peletier, probablement connus à travers des rapports divers, tandis qu'à propos de la nature répulsive de ces forces, il s'inspire des travaux de Cavendish et de B. Franklin." Author's translation: "Poe was first led by the neo-Platonic tradition and Schlegel's Naturphilosophie. Then he got to know – in addition to Laplace's nebula theory, Newton and Kepler – the famous *Cosmos* by Alexander von Humboldt to whom *Eureka* is dedicated, Chamber's *Vestiges of Creation*, *The Course in Positive Philosophy* by Auguste Comte, one of Bridgewater's treatises, *Astronomy and General Physics Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*. It is not impossible that he was aware of *The Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens...* (1775) by Kant, at least through the account of which Humboldt gave in *Cosmos*, and of the very famous *Philosophiae naturalis theoria redacta ad unicum legem virum in natura existentium* (1758) by Boscovich which becomes "the most popular speculation about the ultimate constitution of matter" and which was taught in many American schools. He derived his theory of correspondences (of light, electricity, heat, magnetism) from the works of Oersted and Faraday, J. Priestley, Pictet, Seebeck, Peletier, probably known through various reports, while the works of Cavendish and B. Franklin inspired him about the repulsive nature of these forces".

⁹ Author's translation. Cf. Eveline Pinto, *Edgar Poe et l'art d'inventer*, Paris, Klincksieck, "Collection d'esthétique (Paris)", 1983, p. 326 : "Poe invente les thèmes de son univers en fonction de son expérience d'écrivain."

¹⁰ Eveline Pinto, *Edgar Poe et l'art d'inventer*, op. cit., p. 298-299.

¹¹ Author's translation.

Implicitly, Eveline Pinto reduces the paradigmatic opposition between science and myth. By highlighting the convergence of myths and scientific theories with the same conception of the origin of the universe, she opens up the possibility of a competing, poetic hypothesis: the hypothesis of the American writer, according to which the phantom of the original Unity haunts the minds of men across cultures and centuries – because men have long known – they have always known the secrets of the universe – because we are literally dust of stars, we are all depositories of the memory of the world. “We walk about, amid the destinies of our world-existence, encompassed by dim but ever present *Memories* of a Destiny more vast – very far distant in the by-gone time, and infinitely awful.”¹² Memories that are bound up with the Platonic reminiscence, and echo the confidence of Egaeus: “it is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before – that the soul has no previous existence. [...] There is, however, a remembrance of aërial forms – of spiritual and meaning eyes – of sounds, musical yet sad; a remembrance which will not be excluded; a memory like a shadow – vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady”.¹³ Let us follow the hypothesis of Poe: the survival of cosmogonic myths over centuries, the perforated memory of our past lives are reducible to the phenomenon of a confused reminiscence: the subject remembers without remembering, he is in the image of an anonymous multitude – of conglomerate identities, distinct and similar at the same time – of humanity, – and humanity represents the incarnation of God, “a God, [...] [who] became all things at once, through dint of his volition, while all things were thus constituted a portion of God.”¹⁴

Why do ancient and archaic myths survive? “[M]yths decay and symbols become secularized – Mircea Eliade writes –, but [...] they never disappear, even in the most positivist of civilizations, that of the nineteenth century. Symbols and myths come from such depths: they are part and parcel of the human being”.¹⁵ What is a myth? According to Claude Lévi-Strauss:

Myth is the part of language where the formula *traduttore, traditore* reaches its lowest truth-value. From that point of view it should be put in the whole gamut of linguistic expressions at the end opposite to that of poetry, in spite of all the claims which have been made to prove the contrary. Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions; whereas the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation. Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader throughout the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells.¹⁶

So the myth is all at once infinitely translatable and untranslatable. Infinitely translatable because it resists the many transformations produced in translation, it is transposable from one language to another language, without losing the value of myth. Implicitly, Claude Lévi-

¹² *Eureka, The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, volume 2, New York, Redfield, 1857, p. 212.

¹³ “Berenice”, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, London, Penguin Books, “Penguin Literary”, 1982, p. 642.

¹⁴ *Eureka, op. cit.*, p. 170.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, translated by Philip Mairet, Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 25. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Images et symboles Essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux*, [Paris], Gallimard, “Tel”, 2004, p. 36: “[L]es mythes se dégradent et les symboles se sécularisent, mais ils ne disparaissent jamais, fût-ce dans la plus positiviste des civilisations, celle du XIXe siècle. Les symboles et les mythes viennent de trop loin : ils font partie de l'être humain.”

¹⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth”, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 68, N° 270, Myth: A Symposium (Oct. - Dec. 1955), p. 430.

Strauss de-literarises tales of myth, of which we can therefore affirm the *untranslatable* character. We do not translate a myth. We tell a myth. It is a mode of discourse adapted to all discourses: poetic, literary, scientific, political, etc. The myth is a story – a “sacred history,” Mircea Eliade says:

[...] il relate un événement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des “commencements”. Autrement dit, le mythe raconte comment, grâce aux exploits des Êtres Surnaturels, une réalité est venue à l’existence, que ce soit la réalité totale, le Cosmos, ou seulement un fragment : une île, une espèce végétale, un comportement humain, une institution. C’est donc toujours le récit d’une “création”: on rapporte comment quelque chose a été produit, a commencé à *être*.¹⁷

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the “beginnings.” In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a “creation”; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*.¹⁸

Science assumes the function of myth when it teaches men “the secret of the origin of things”¹⁹: the expansion of the Universe “from an extremely dense and hot state”,²⁰ the evolution of forms of life since the apparition of life on Earth. It tells us how something has created something – not how something has been created *from nothing*. Only the myth does this, as Paul Valéry suggests.

Quant à l’idée de commencement, – j’entends d’un commencement absolu, – elle est nécessairement un mythe. Tout commencement est coïncidence ; il nous faudrait concevoir ici je ne sais quel contact entre le tout et le rien. En essayant d’y penser on trouve que tout commencement est conséquence, – tout commencement *achève* quelque chose.²¹

As for the idea of a beginning – I mean an absolute beginning – it is necessarily a myth. Every beginning is coincidence, we should develop here I do not know what contact between everything and nothing. In trying to think about it, we find that every beginning is a consequence – every beginning *ends* something.²²

Any attempt to tell the tale of the genesis of the universe, of life, leads to the production of a myth. Even science is therefore the source of modern fables, like old mythologies. We could cite as an example the Schrödinger’s cat experiment. Science questions and then explains: how? Myth asks: why? They do not answer the same questions; but science and myth are both discourses of *truth*. Science produces transitional truths through the development of theories of which none is definitive. A “myth is a “true story”,²³ as Mircea Eliade underlines. Similarly, *Eureka* is a “Book of Truths”: “*What I here propound is true*: – therefore it cannot die: –

¹⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*, [Paris], Gallimard, “Folio essais”, 2005, p. 16-17.

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, translated from French by Willard R. Trask, Long Grove, Illinois, Waveland Press, Inc., 1998, p. 5-6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

²⁰ Author’s translation. Cf. Wladimir Vostrikov, *Conceptions cosmologiques*, Paris, Mon Petit éditeur, 2012, p. 81 : “à partir d’un état extrêmement dense et chaud”.

²¹ Paul Valéry, “Au sujet d’Eurêka”, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

²² Author’s translation.

²³ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11: “histoire vraie”.

or if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will “rise again to the Life Everlasting”.²⁴

Poe’s program is ambitious: “I design to speak of the *Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical – of the Material and Spiritual Universe: – of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny*”.²⁵ He then follows with the general proposition: “*In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation*”.²⁶ The starting point of Poe’s cosmological investigation is a hypothesis: God is Spirit. He “created [us], or made [us] out of Nothing, by dint of his Volition”.²⁷ The cosmic vision of the American writer is thus theological.

What else does Poe say?

I now assert – that an intuition altogether irresistible, although inexpressible, forces me to the conclusion that what God originally created – that that matter which, by dint of his Volition, he first made from his Spirit, or from Nihilicity, *could* have been nothing but Matter in its utmost conceivable state of – what? – of Simplicity[.]²⁸

“*Oneness*, then, is all that I predicate of the originally created Matter”²⁹. “The willing into being the primordial particle, has completed the act, or more properly the conception of Creation.”³⁰ This is indeed a *conception* and not – Poe says explicitly – “an ‘act’ in the ordinary meaning of the term.”³¹ The “Irradiation from Unity” however is an act; this is “the primary *act*” of God.³² “The thought of God is to be understood as originating the Diffusion – as proceeding with it – as regulating it – and, finally, as being withdrawn from it upon its completion.”³³ The principles of attraction and repulsion are “the two *immediate* results of the discontinuance of the Divine Volition”³⁴; and the law of gravitation, “force impelling matter to seek matter”,³⁵ translates “the tendency of the diffused atoms to return into their original unity”.³⁶

The cosmology of Poe is also poetic: “the Universe [...] is but the most sublime of poems.”³⁷ The creation of the Cosmos is a divine act of *aesthetic*, a work of art, in accordance with ancient and archaic myths of origin of the world. According to Mircea Eliade:

La cosmogonie est le modèle exemplaire de toute espèce de “faire” : non seulement parce que le Cosmos est l’archétype idéal à la fois de toute situation créatrice et de toute création – mais aussi parce que le Cosmos est une œuvre divine ; [...] le Cosmos [...] est l’œuvre exemplaire des Dieux, c’est leur chef-d’œuvre.³⁸

²⁴ *Eureka, The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, volume 2, New York, Redfield, 1857, p. 117.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133-134.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 156-157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 204-205.

³⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe, op. cit.*, p. 48-49.

The cosmogony is the exemplary model for every kind of “doing”; not only because the Cosmos is at once the ideal archetype of every creative situation and of every creation but also because the Cosmos is a divine work; [...] the Cosmos is the exemplary work of the Gods, it is their masterpiece.³⁹

Poe does not elaborate further.

In divine constructions the object is either design or object as we choose to regard it – and we may take at any time a cause for an effect, or the converse – so that we can never absolutely decide which is which.⁴⁰

The pleasure which we derive from any display of human ingenuity is in the ratio of *the approach* to this species of reciprocity. In the construction of *plot*, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the incidents that we shall not be able to determine, of any one of them, whether it depends from any one other or upholds it. In this sense, of course, *perfection of plot* is really, or practically, unattainable – but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God.⁴¹

Poe’s originality lies in the composition of poetry from an exercise of rewriting cosmogonic myths into a discourse which is both literary and scientific. Generic confusion of this work is great. “Nevertheless – Poe tells us – it is as a Poem only that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead.”⁴² This is a strange invitation to the reader. Why simultaneously offer a “Book of Truths” and the freedom to refuse to hear the truth? The cosmogony of Poe is a personal myth of which the transmission implies that it is immediately degraded to a poem, reduced to the state of a fable. Why? Here is a hypothesis of an answer: because Truth is something *to discover*, it is not an object that can be gifted.

Poe offers us a “Book of Truths”, he says. So the object of transmission is not the Truth, it is the Book. The Book in and of itself is a work of *language*, a *language act*. In other words, the gift is a speech, a poetic discourse of which the Beauty – still according to Poe – confirms the truthful character. So Beauty and Truth are complementary. About Laplace’s nebula theory, Poe writes: “we shall find it *beautifully true*. It is by far too beautiful, indeed, *not* to possess Truth as its essentiality”.⁴³ Thus, beauty is a criterion of truth. It is also “the sole legitimate province of the poem”.⁴⁴ New conclusion: Poetry and Truth are not strangers to each other; they are both linked in a same connection with Beauty. In a few words, the dedication to the reader changes into possibility the impossibility “to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth” of which Poe makes the statement in “The Poetic Principle”⁴⁵:

The demands of Truth are severe. She has no sympathy with the myrtles. All *that* which is so indispensable in Song, is precisely all *that* which *she* has nothing whatever to do. It is but making her a flaunting paradox, to wreath her in germs and flowers. In enforcing a truth, we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is

³⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, *op. cit.*, p. 32-33.

⁴⁰ *Eureka*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴⁴ “Philosophy of Composition”, *Poems & Essays*, London & Melbourne, Everyman’s Library, “Everyman Classics”, 1987, p. 167.

⁴⁵ “The Poetic Principle”, *Poems & Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

the exact converse of the poetical. He must be blind indeed who does not perceive the radical and chasmal differences between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation.⁴⁶

Now let us ask why, and in what way, *Eureka* is a poem.

Indeed, this work does not meet all the criteria of Poetry expressed in several of the author's texts, for example, "The Poetic Principle" and "Philosophy of Composition". Therein, Poe determines that the length of a poem should be adapted to the period of a reading session equal to or less than thirty minutes: "a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief."⁴⁷ So, logically, "a long poem does not exist", "the phrase, 'a long poem' is simply a flat contradiction in terms."⁴⁸ "After the lapse of half an hour", the excitement "flags – fails – a revulsion ensues – and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such."⁴⁹ Why then attribute to *Eureka*, which is about one hundred pages long, the status of a poem? Two responses are possible: the first consists in claiming that Poe's essay does not belong to the category of prose poems by reducing the dedication to the reader to an ironic discourse of which the general intention is satiric and is directed at men, who "feel", rather than "think", who "put faith in dreams as in the only realities", and also to those for whom Truth is to be found among the objects of a poem; the second response accepts the reading order and therefore formulates the following hypothesis: *the work is indeed what Poe says it is: a prose poem*, it is an exception to the aesthetic rules outlined in Poe's prior publications, and acts as an additional poetic manifest, it complements the previous theoretical and critical productions of the author on the rules of composition and the nature of the poem. In fact, the work answers the question: *what is Poetry?* when Poe writes: "the Universe [...], in the supremeness of its symmetry, is but the most sublime of poems. Now symmetry and consistency are convertible terms: – thus Poetry and Truth are one."⁵⁰ In "The Poetic Principle", Poe "define[s] [...] the Poetry of words as *The Rhythical Creation of Beauty*."⁵¹ So there is a poetry which is not a Poetry of words, a poetry, also sensitive, moving, which characterizes Poe's essay, if it is truly a poem, and which we can suppose to be a Poetry of *thought*. The Poetry of thought is a language act to which we can apply Henri Meschonnic's definition of poem:

[...] J'appelle poème la transformation d'une forme de vie par une forme de langage et la transformation d'une forme de langage par une forme de vie, toutes deux inséparablement, ou je dirais encore une invention de vie dans et par une invention de langage, ou encore un maximum d'intensité du langage. Vie au sens d'une vie humaine.⁵²

I call poem the transformation of a form of life by a form of language and the transformation of a form of language by a form of life, both inseparably, or even the invention of life with and through the invention of language, or the maximum intensity of language. Life in the sense of human life.⁵³

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ "Philosophy of Composition", *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁴⁸ "The Poetic Principle", *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Eureka*, *op. cit.*, p. 204-205.

⁵¹ "The Poetic Principle", *Op. Cit.*, p. 99.

⁵² Henri Meschonnic, *Éthique et politique du traduire*, Lagrasse, Éditions Verdier, 2007, p. 26-27.

⁵³ Henri Meschonnic, *Ethics and Politics of Translating*, translated and edited by Pier-Pascale Boulanger, John Benjamins Publishing, 2011, p. 50.

[...] cette définition du poème déborde de la définition traditionnelle, qui est essentiellement une définition formelle : les poèmes à forme fixe. Elle englobe tout ce qu'on peut appeler arts du langage. En ce sens un roman n'est un roman que s'il a du poème en lui. À chaque phrase. Et ce n'est qu'un exemple parce que tout ce qu'on appelle les genres littéraires y est inclus. Et tout autant ce qui est de l'art de la pensée, qui fait un poème de la pensée.⁵⁴

[...] this definition of the poems exceeds the traditional definition, which is essentially a formal definition: fixed-form poems. It encompasses everything that can be called arts of language. In this sense a novel can only be a novel if it has poem in it. In each sentence. And this is just one example, because everything we call literary genres is included. As is the art of thought, which makes a poem of thought.⁵⁵

The poetry of thought – of which Poe's cosmogonic work is an example – is a poetry of ideas. Poe links the ideas to ideas, weaves a text of which the value of myth lies in the program of the author: Poe describes a beginning – the formation of the universe – from nothing. He evolves beyond the limits of science, drawing from the source of poetry, writing under the government of the imagination, intuition – which is the result of convictions obtained after the long and unconscious walk of thought.

In telling us the genesis of the Universe and the return of atoms towards the original Unity, Poe invents a modern myth of life of the Cosmos – he also becomes a prophet of the end of the world:

When, on fulfilment of its purposes, then, Matter shall have returned into its original condition of One – a condition which presupposes the expulsion of the separative Ether, whose province and whose capacity are limited to keeping the atoms apart until that great day when, this Ether being no longer needed, the overwhelming pressure of the finally collective Attraction shall at length just sufficiently predominate and expel it: – when, I say, Matter, finally, expelling the Ether, shall have returned into absolute Unity, – it will then (to speak paradoxically for the moment) be Matter without Attraction and without Repulsion – in other words, Matter without Matter – in other words, again, Matter no more. In sinking into Unity, it will sink at once into that Nothingness which, to all Finite Perception, Unity must be – into that Material Nihilism from which alone we can conceive it to have been evoked – to have been created, by the Volition of God.

I repeat then – Let us endeavor to comprehend that the final globe of globes will instantaneously disappear, and that God will remain all in all.

But are we here to pause? Not so. On the Universal agglomeration and dissolution, we can readily conceive that a new and perhaps totally different series of conditions may ensue – another creation and irradiation, returning into itself – another action and reaction of the Divine Will. Guiding our imaginations by that omnipotent law of laws, the law of periodicity, are we not, indeed, more than justified in entertaining a belief – let us say, rather, in indulging a hope – that the processes we have here ventured to contemplate will be renewed forever, and forever, and forever; a novel Universe swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the Heart Divine?⁵⁶

In creating a new myth of the eternal return of life, Poe speaks of the eternal return of Poetry. Poetry is everywhere – Poe teaches us in “The Poetic Principle”:

We shall reach, however, more immediately a distinct conception of what the true Poetry is, by mere reference to a few of the simple elements which induce in the Poet himself the true poeti-

⁵⁴ Henri Meschonnic, *Éthique et politique du traduire*, op. cit., p. 28.

⁵⁵ Henri Meschonnic, *Ethics and Politics of Translating*, op. cit., p.

⁵⁶ *Eureka*, op. cit., p. 211.

cal effect He recognizes the ambrosia which nourishes his soul, in the bright orbs that shine in Heaven – in the volutes of the flower – in the clustering of low shrubberies – in the waving of the grain-fields – in the slanting of tall, Eastern trees – in the blue distance of mountains – in the grouping of clouds – in the twinkling of half-hidden brooks – in the gleaming of silver rivers – in the repose of sequestered lakes – in the star-mirroring depths of lonely wells. He perceives it in the songs of birds – in the harp of Æolus – in the sighing of the night-wind – in the repining voice of the forest – in the surf that complains to the shore – in the fresh breath of the woods – in the scent of the violet – in the voluptuous perfume of the hyacinth – in the suggestive odor that comes to him, at eventide, from far-distant, undiscovered islands, over dim oceans, illimitable and unexplored. He owns it in all noble thoughts – in all unworldly motives – in all holy impulses – in all chivalrous, generous, and self-sacrificing deeds. He feels it in the beauty of woman – in the grace of her step – in the luster of her eye – in the melody of her voice – in her soft laughter – in her sigh – in the harmony of the rustling of her robes. He deeply feels it in her winning endearments – in her burning enthusiasms – in her gentle charities – in her meek and devotional endurances – but above all – ah, far above all – he kneels to it – he worships it in the faith, in the purity, in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty – of her love.⁵⁷

Poetry is everywhere: always where something or someone tears us away from our melancholy. Poe's work makes us think of the movement of life: the anxiety, the unrest of thought, long, essential. It talks about death, it depicts the deceased and ghosts, but it is always on the side of life, that passes, fragile. That is why Poe's cosmological essay is great – why it is a work of poetry. It invites us to live in the enjoyment of life.

⁵⁷ "The Poetic Principle", *op. cit.*, p. 111-112.

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