

Poe: An Assay

In “The Gold Bug,” the overt finding of the treasure
is tossed out mid-tale like a bone to a waiting dog.
His stories were not intended for the canine heart that howls inside us,
though he fed it the tidbits it needed to stay near.

What could simply be seen, named, described was not his interest.
Half-close your eyes, he advised, to double the world.
The process of a discovery accomplished was his interest,
its after-savoring his appetite and his pleasure.

While he wrote, the peppered moths
of industrial London were growing darker with an internalized protective soot.

While he wrote, the last illegal slave ships were still coming in.

In his 150-year-old prose there is only word you might recognize as archaic.

Omission his characteristic gesture;
stepping into the thought that thought cannot enter
his characteristic desire.

While he wrote, the ongoing, quiet famine of laborers paid below costs of housing
and food.

While he wrote, the ongoing, unquiet emptying of the Plains.

These things happened under the culture’s floorboards and behind its walls.
These things happened beneath the lids of half-closed eyes.

It is not precisely true that they are absent, though it is true they do not appear.

Whether they were for him
embraced or subsumed in his offered terrors cannot be known.

While he wrote, Turgenev, Goethe,
and this lithe-legged haiku of Issa from the other side of the world:

Spider,
do not worry.
I keep house casually.

In Poe the worry is like the long-cooled lead in Baltimore house-glass, settled and clear.

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Where then is the commensurate tenderness of his endeavor?

It can be glimpsed in his idea of the self, found also in Freud and the Greeks, as a story seeded with hidden chambers, and in his portrayals of the death-mask costs of a public face.

It wells inside the pure rapture of his wish to stop time, disguised in the pathos-cry “Nevermore.” This he claimed—in what can only be read as a leg-pulling essay—to have chosen with cold deliberation for its haunting vowel-sounds and rhythm alone, then found a plot-line to lintel.

Released from his hands like a tenderly captured bird the acts of betrayal that mark love’s beginnings and ends, the betrayal of the stories being to kill, of the poems, to die. Such acts he recognized as belonging to life, to longing—only silence truly enemy, only silence belonging to death.

A last tenderness: that he called it a sign of God’s mercy that “the ultimate woe—is particular, not diffuse. That the extremes are endured by man the unit, and never by man the mass.”

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Having read him once,
the non-canine part of the heart, which will not be bone- or meat-assuaged,
stays stained.

For many years I feared to read him again,

and still cannot bring myself to pass the early paragraphs of the pendulum tale, which terrified me in childhood beyond all others, for reasons I even now cannot explain.

He shared with Browning the need of an alert and ironic reader.
He shared with Coleridge a furious clear-seeing, and an equally overwhelming need to annul it.

I ponder him now while looking out past a rain
that begins as light muslin then heavily damasks off copper eaves,
in a place he is said to have walked in.

The rain's sound is the kind that leads to long sleep but then waking in fear.

Its thoughts are as outside audible meaning as the words of the man
in one story who rises to speak to his own dissectors and is not understood,
then collapses beside the abruptly vacated table.

His sentence—the story soon tells it—
is what each of Poe's speakers, calm, inquisitive, a little bemused,
seem to be saying,
though mostly as here without being heard,
from whatever side of horror they look at this world—

“I am alive.”

An irrefutably accurate self-portrait until it is not.

A condition no measure of pity, no maelstrom of genius attention, unhooks from fear
or can manumit from its sorrow.

Jane Hirshfield

Statement

In recent years, I've found myself writing various poems in two distinct forms—"pebbles" and "assays." (Both forms are my own names for kinds of poetry I first recognized in reading others' work.) Recognizing that an arriving poem falls into one type or the other seems to clarify both the writing process and revisions—the archetype of the form provides a tonal template or substructure, the way a sunken ship provides a place for a coral reef to form. These two forms sit at opposite ends of a single spectrum—they both make poems that like to think, but differently. A pebble does its thinking under its hat. It is seemingly simple, but also a bit recalcitrant: it isn't quite completely present until it has been finished inside the reader's reaction. As the name implies, a pebble poem is small, but shortness isn't its only determinant; haikus, for instance, are not pebbles. A pebble is cool, detached, and often a bit self-contradictory. It doesn't show its hand or bare its teeth. It is more sketch than oil painting, more tune plucked out one note at a time than emotive and symphonic arch.

An essay, like a pebble, is couched more overtly in thought than emotion, and also like a pebble, awakens a complex of thought and feeling beyond its own seeming means. (Though that can be said of any good poem, of course.) As the name implies, an essay is somewhat essay-like and somewhat experimental; since essays involve a process, one is almost always longer rather than shorter. Like many poems traditionally subtitled "a meditation," an essay takes the temperature and measure of its subject, rather than embodying or presenting any conclusion. Some essays are prose-poems, and all share the prose-poem's flavor of the oblique and the inventive. Whatever their lineation, they have a feeling of being hybrids of poem and prose, and some of the ones I've written mix the two in their use of the page.

Pebble Example:

The Story

"Do you ever—,"
my weeping friend asked.
I lied and said yes and invented a story,
a fate I would now have also to live through,
because like a bride

I had promised myself to its hands.