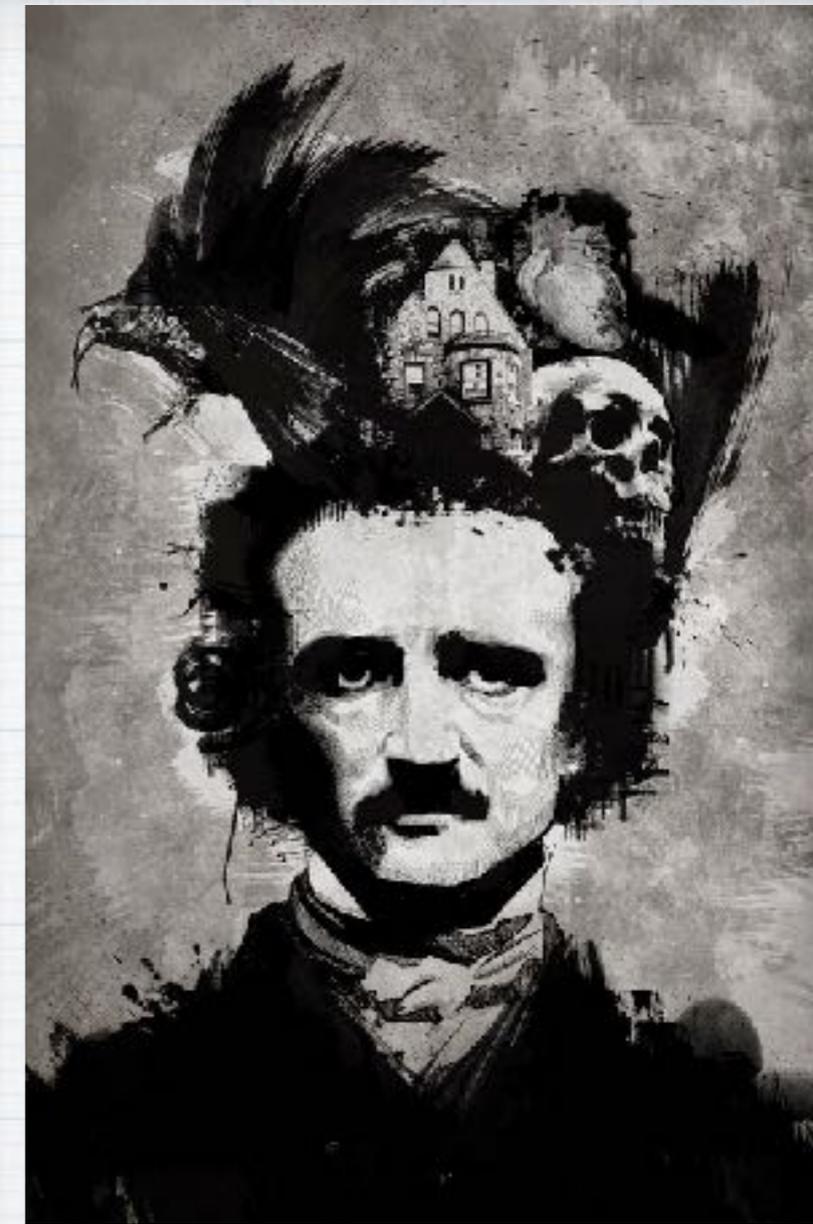




The philosophy of Composition



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CHARLES DICKENS, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of "Barnaby Rudge," says- "By the way, are you aware that Godwin wrote his 'Caleb Williams' backwards? He first involved his hero in a web of difficulties, forming the second volume, and then, for the first, cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done."

I cannot think this the precise mode of procedure on the part of Godwin- and indeed what he himself acknowledges, is not altogether in accordance with Mr. Dickens' idea- but the author of "Caleb Williams" was too good an artist not to perceive the advantage derivable from at least a somewhat similar process. Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its **denouement*** before anything be attempted with the pen. **It is only with the denouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.**

* Here means the catastrophe which occurs towards the close of a poem or a story.

There is a radical error, I think, in the **usual mode of constructing a story**. Either history affords a thesis- or **one is suggested by an incident of the day-** or, at best, the **author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative-** designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or **authorial comment**, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent.

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. Keeping originality always in view- for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest- I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" **Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone- whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone- afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.**

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would- that is to say, who could- detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say- but, perhaps, the authorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause. Most writers- poets in especial- prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy- an ecstatic intuition- and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought- at the true purposes seized only at the last moment- at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view- at the fully-matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable- at the cautious selections and rejections- at the painful erasures and interpolations- in a word, at the wheels and pinions- the tackle for scene-shifting- the step-ladders, and demon-traps- the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, constitute the properties of the literary histrio.

I am aware, on the other hand, that the case is by no means common, in which an author is at all in condition to retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained. In general, suggestions, having arisen pell-mell (confused) are pursued and forgotten in a similar manner.

For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor, at any time, the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions, and, since the interest of an analysis or reconstruction, such as I have considered a desideratum, is quite independent of any real or fancied interest in the thing analysed, it will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the modus operandi by which some one of my own works was put together. I select 'The Raven' as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition- that the work proceeded step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.

Let us dismiss, as irrelevant to the poem, per se, (in itself) **the circumstance- or say the necessity- which, in the first place, gave rise to the intention of composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.**

We commence, then, with this intention.

The initial consideration was that of **extent**. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from **unity of impression**- for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. But since, *ceteris paribus*, (with other conditions remaining the same) no poet can afford to dispense with anything that may advance his design, it but remains to be seen whether there is, in extent, any advantage to counterbalance the loss of unity which attends it. Here I say no, at once. What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones- that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a **poem is such only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating the soul**; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief. For this reason, at least, one-half of the "Paradise Lost" is essentially prose- a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, inevitably, with corresponding depressions- the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, **totality, or unity of effect**.

The Unity of effect, essential in a poem

It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art- the limit of a single sitting- and that, although in certain classes of prose composition, such as "Robinson Crusoe" (demanding no unity), this limit may be advantageously overpassed, it can never properly be overpassed in a poem. Within this limit, the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit- in other words, to the excitement or elevation-again, in other words, to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect- this, with one proviso- that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all.

Holding in view these considerations, as well as that degree of excitement which I deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical taste, I reached at once what I conceived the proper length for my intended poem- a length of about one hundred lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight.

My next thought concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed: and here I may as well observe that throughout the construction, I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable. I should be carried too far out of my immediate topic were I to demonstrate a point upon which I have repeatedly insisted, and which, with the poetical, stands not in the slightest need of demonstration- the point, I mean, that Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem.

A few words, however, in elucidation of my real meaning, which some of my friends have evinced a disposition to misrepresent. That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful. When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect- they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of soul- not of intellect, or of heart- upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating the "beautiful."

Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes- that objects should be attained through means best adapted for their attainment- no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation alluded to is most readily attained in the poem.

Now the object Truth, or the satisfaction of the intellect, and the object Passion, or the excitement of the heart, are, although attainable to a certain extent in poetry, far more readily attainable in prose. Truth, in fact, demands a precision, and Passion, a homeliness (the truly passionate will comprehend me), which are absolutely antagonistic to that Beauty which, I maintain, is the excitement or pleasurable elevation of the soul. It by no means follows, from anything here said, that passion, or even truth, may not be introduced, and even profitably introduced, into a poem for they may serve in elucidation, or aid the general effect, as do discords in music, by contrast- but the true artist will always contrive, first, to tone them into proper subservience to the predominant aim, and, secondly, to enveil them, as far as possible, in that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the essence of the poem.

* Thank you