

THE POET AS A "LIBERATING GOD" IN
19TH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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- UFPR -

Most critics agree nowadays that American literary independence was achieved during the 19th century, through the writings of such great authors as Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau, for their oeuvre, as a whole, presented "a new way of perceiving reality"¹ in subject matter and in form. But looking back from our 20th century perspective into the past seems relatively easy. It demands "only" a broad grasp of the social, political, and cultural forces that have influenced the writers of a certain time, i.e., a synthetic capacity to perceive the main trends that delineate themselves during a particular period, besides knowing the works of such writers. Much harder, it seems to me, is the task of the literary historian or critic who tries to prognosticate from the data he has available and from his perspective, how a certain literature will develop, and to set certain expectations for the writers to come.

This is the topic I am concerned with: to present the expectations that Alexis de Tocqueville and Ralph Waldo Emerson had for the emerging poet of the New World, as seen from their 19th century historical and literary perspective. Their predictions will then be applied to the oeuvre of Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman, not only because they are the first truly "American" poets but also because they represent, in their aristocratic and democratic tendencies, the extreme answers to those anticipations. Substantiating Tocqueville

and Emerson's arguments with specific examples of Poe and Whitman's poetry, we hope to establish points of similarity and contrast between different aspects of form and content, in order to see how far both poets succeeded, fell short of, or surpassed Tocqueville and Emerson's predictions. In our conclusion, reference will also be made to the points of view of William Carlos Williams, a famous poet and critic himself, and Larzer Ziff, a contemporary literary historian, looking back on Poe and Whitman's achievement.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the young French aristocrat who visited the United States in 1831 with his friend Beaumont, on an official mission to study the prison system in America, had as his real purpose in coming here "to discover the inner meaning and the actual functioning of democracy in action, in a country which had never known aristocracy"². The ensuing oeuvre, Democracy in America, published in 1835 in France and in 1838 in America, continues to be a classic. The first book of Volume II, "Influence of Democracy on the Action of Intellect in the United States" contains several chapters dealing with literature and the arts, but I shall concentrate on presenting Tocqueville's ideas in relation to the literary characteristics, the English language, and the sources of poetry in democratic nations, shown always in contrast to the same issues in aristocratic nations.

Concerning the first topic, Tocqueville already realized, at the time he was visiting the United States — when Bryant, Irving and Cooper were writing — that it was still England that supplied American readers with most of their books; and, even more, that Americans not only drew constantly upon English literature but actually engaged in the composition of literary works that were "English in substance and still more so in form"³. As a consequence, American writers are seldom

popular, for by following a strict and traditional literary code, there would be no place for the "too startling or too acute"⁴; besides, this kind of literature could become gradually remote from the natural language spoken by the people. But he allows for one exception in this picture: the journalists, for "they speak the language of their country and make themselves be heard"⁵.

Contrarily, he goes on saying, it is from a democratic society prepared by tradition and culture to take part in the pleasures of the mind, from a "motley multitude whose intellectual wants are to be supplied"⁶, that new authors arise. This new literature would not any more be subjected either to strict or to permanent rules; for, as the pleasures of belles-lettres are considered only as a recreation among the struggling everyday life of Americans, they would require a literature that is strong and startling — the opposite of what English models did provide. As a consequence, literature in democratic ages can never present "an aspect of order, regularity, science and art", its form will be "slighted" and its style will be "vehement and bold", for the object of the authors will be "to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste"⁷. Nevertheless, Tocqueville acknowledges that writers might appear who still follow a different path, but these would be rare exceptions. And he ends this chapter by predicting that in the progress that nations make from aristocracy to democracy, "there is almost always a moment when the literary genius of democratic nations coinciding with that of aristocratic nations, both seek to establish their sway jointly over the human mind"⁸.

Turning now briefly to what Tocqueville has to say about the changes that have occurred in language in democratic

America, he starts by affirming that, in contrast to American authors who copy the English, the mass of the population is subjected to the influence of their social conditions and institutions as these become apparent in the language. Thus, it is here that we can detect changes, for a greater number of words is brought into use, as well as the nature of ideas these words represent. But Tocqueville considers it deplorable that democratic nations thus innovate their own language, by fitting an unwonted meaning to an expression already in use, because "without clear phraseology there is no good language"⁹, which reminds us of his strict intellectual standards and methods of research, which could not allow for a word to have an indeterminate meaning. But he sees a more positive aspect in the fact that in democratic societies all words of a language are mingled, for as there is no difference in classes, men meet on terms of constant intercourse, and this revolution is felt as much in style as in language.

Let us now present Tocqueville's expectations and inquiry into what might be the natural sources of poetry among democratic nations, which will constitute the main topic for our discussion of Poe and Whitman. But as his arguments coincide rather surprisingly with the topics Emerson proposes in his essay "The Poet"¹⁰, I shall present them together, in their interpenetrations; in fact Emerson's essay, published six years after Tocqueville's oeuvre, can be seen as a companion piece to Tocqueville's.

In his characteristic objective manner, Tocqueville defines poetry as "the search after, and the delineation of, the Ideal"¹¹, while Emerson's definition is interspersed throughout his argument: poetry is Beauty, the ideal, truth, a universal symbolic language, "the path of the creator to his work"¹². Both definitions seem to touch each other, as

both search after the Ideal, and this relates again to what Emerson says later in the essay, that "poems are a corrupt version of some text in nature with which they ought to be made totally"¹³; nevertheless, we can participate in the "invention" of nature when the "symmetry" and "truth" that regulate nature also penetrate our spirit.

Tocqueville's description of the poet as he "who, by suppressing a part of what exists, by adding some imaginary touches to the picture, and by combining certain real circumstances that do not in fact happen together, completes and extends the work of nature"¹⁴, shows clearly well the figure of the poet as an artificer who, more than a mathematician — who only suppresses, adds, and combines — completes and extends the work of nature. This seems also to be Emerson's concept, although he gives us several related versions of the poet, in accordance with his tendency to reiterate with many illustrations: the poet is the man of Beauty, the interpreter, the sayor, the Namer or Language-Maker, he who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole, he who uses forms according to the life and not according to the form. Besides, the poet is also the transcendency of man's own nature, capable of a "new energy", and thus poets are "liberating gods", they are free, and they make free, by reading the meanings of color and forms and making them "exponents" of their "new thought"¹⁵.

Emerson also seems to agree with Tocqueville's assertion that the object of poetry is "not to represent what is true, but to adorn it and to present to the mind some loftier image"¹⁶, when he states that all facts of human life are "symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change and reappear a new and higher fact"¹⁷; for both definitions are corollaries to their descriptions of the poet.

Even more interestingly, the means of poetry receive converging definitions from both writers, for when Tocqueville states that "verse, regarded as the ideal beauty of language, may be eminently poetical; but verse does not of itself constitute poetry"¹⁸, we can immediately refer back to Emerson's famous lines "for it is not metre, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem"¹⁹. Emerson even goes so far as to say that, as thought makes everything fit for use, obscene words become illustrious when spoken in a new connection, and bare lists of words can be suggestive to an imaginative and excited mind. Both Tocqueville and Emerson thus tend to disregard technical considerations, anticipating new trends which will lead into 20th century experimentations, in which content creates form.

But it is when we come to discussing Tocqueville's sources among democratic nations that we discover once more how close he and Emerson are in venturing judgments on the issue, considering their different backgrounds and consequently their different Weltanschauungen. Tocqueville's inquiries whether one can find among the actions, sentiments and opinions of democratic nations, any which lead to a conception of poetry, leads him to a preliminary conclusion that, as imagination is used mainly to devise what is useful and represent what is real, poets are drawn to the visible world, avoiding the past, supernatural beings and man in isolation as subjects for poetry. But, if the principle of equality has dried out the old springs, new ones are disclosed: as a first step to replacing the gods and heroes, democratic nations turn to inanimate nature; nevertheless, this is a transitory period for men soon discover that they are interested only in a "survey of themselves". As Tocqueville emphasises, "here, and here alone, the true sources of poetry among such nations

are to be found²⁰, and poets who neglect this, will lose all power over the minds of their readers.

Yet Tocqueville qualifies this disregard for nature per se, when he admits further on that the Americans have poetic ideas, but no poets, because their eyes are not aware of the wonders of nature, their eyes are fixed upon their own march across the wilderness, "draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature"²¹. Tocqueville thus does allow for nature, but in intimate relationship with man, as a background for poetry. It is Emerson who will develop this idea much further, for nature is for him, in the whole and in every part, a symbol of the supernatural, offering all her creatures to the poet as a picture-language²². Moreover, in contrast to Tocqueville, who asserts democratic men do not perceive wild nature about them till it fall "beneath the hatchet"²³, Emerson goes so far as to say that "every man is so far a poet as to be susceptible of these enchantments of nature; for all men have the thoughts whereof the universe is the celebration"²⁴.

As democratic nations care little for the past, they open up the future for the poet, and this "vision of what will be" is considered by Tocqueville to be "the widest range open to the genius of poets" as they can see their performances from a distance²⁵. Emerson also speaks of a poet to come who will sing the present, which is nothing else but the future being lived day after day. The time seems to him to be ripe for a poet to appear who would raise his eyes from work, and sing his own present; as Emerson declares: "We do not with sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness address ourselves to life, nor do we chaunt our own times and social circumstance. (...) We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable

materials (...) Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres"²⁶.

This national note on which Emerson ends receives an even wider connotation in the other source of poetry which he and Tocqueville share, and which is nothing else than an extension of the two first sources: "all that belongs to the existence of the human race taken as a whole, to its vicissitudes and its future"²⁷. It is no longer the individual, but the whole assemblage that presents to the spectator one vast democracy, that should be sung by Tocqueville's poet, in the same way that for Emerson, even "the poorest experience is rich enough for all the purposes of expressing thought"²⁸ and the Universe is "the externalization of the soul"²⁹, if only the poet can articulate it. This same idea is carried even further by both authors, when Tocqueville states that, as men have a far broader idea of Providence and of its interference in human affairs, they conceive that the destinies of the human race are regulated by God ruling the world by means of a universal and eternal design — thus another source of poetry. Emerson adds a transcendental touch to this last idea, when he says that man has a great power inside himself when he allows "the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him", for then he is "caught up into the life of the Universe" and his speech, his thought, and his words are universally understood³⁰.

The last prediction Tocqueville makes is actually a restatement of his first one, when he cites as still another source for poetry the "delineation of passions and ideas" instead of that of "persons and achievements", for as every day language, dress, and actions are distasteful to the conception of the ideal, the poet is always searching below the surface, to read "the inner soul"³¹. As it is inside

himself that man can discover everything capable of exciting feelings of "pity, admiration, terror, contempt", man needs nothing more than man, alone in the presence of Nature and of God, as "the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry"³².

Emerson, in his final advice to the future poet, translates Tocqueville's reading the "inner soul" when he tells him to persist, "until at last rage draw out of thee that dreampower which every night shows thee is thine own"³³, thus acknowledging the divine "madness" that suffuses the poet, this great intensity which he discovers when he reads his inner soul and which draws out of him his dream-power, which Poe and Whitman were so imbued with.

There seems to be thus a progression, inside Tocqueville and Emerson's prognostications as to the sources of poetry, which starts with nature, either as the scenery suffering transformation as man progresses through the "wilderness", or as the scenery with which man communes as an emblem of God; moving on to man surrounded by his own time and circumstance, as well as pointing to his inner self to find his passions and ideas; to then reach that larger realm of the future and the destinies of the human race, which reveal the thoughts of a Supreme Mind governing the universe.

With these concepts in mind, let us now examine how some of Tocqueville and Emerson's foretellings can throw light on the oeuvre of Poe and Whitman by juxtaposing the different themes these two extreme examples of a rising American poetry present, and try to see if they can be considered "liberating gods" through their achievements.

Whitman, Emerson's "disciple" as he himself acknowledged, is the incarnation of what Emerson and Tocqueville anticipated as the poet of democracy. As a start, he shares Emerson's transcendental relationship with nature, full of life and

meaning, as a symbol of God's presence and power, and in his poems visible nature is celebrated in conjunction with man, as several passages in "Song of Myself" exemplify:

Press close bare-bosom'd night — press close
magnetic nourishing night!
Might of south winds — might of the large few stars!
Still nodding night — mad naked summer night.
Smile o voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset — earth of the mountains
misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just
tinged with blue!
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of
the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and
clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbow'd earth — rich apple-blossom'd
earth!
Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love — therefore I to
you give love!
O unspeakable passionate love. (section 21)³⁴

In this passage, nature, having given love to man, is addressed by him in his indebtedness, as he returns his love to the earth by describing her in terms of sensory and sensual impressions, which suggest the image of female beauty. Voluptuous and cool-breathed, she is referred to in terms and

images of color, movement, fragrance and touch, and the synaesthetic potential of the whole is emphasized by the parallelistic structure of the lines, which are themselves enveloped by the poet's invocation to the earth to "smile".

This transcendental communion with nature is taken a step further in another passage, which almost literally transposes Tocqueville's prediction that Americans would prefer to chant their own march through the wilderness, subduing instead of admiring nature:

(...) in log huts, camping with lumbermen
Along the ruts of the turnpike, along the dry
 gulch and rivulet bed,
Weeding my onion-patch or hoeing rows of carrots
 and parsnips,
crossing savannas, trailing in forests,
Prospecting, gold-digging, girdling the trees of
 a new purchase,
Scorch'd ankle-deep by the hod sand, hauling my
 boat down the shallow river, (...)
Scaling mountains, pulling myself cautiously up,
 holding on by low scragged limbs,
Walking the path worn in the grass and boat through
 the leaves of the brush, (...)
Approaching Manhattan up by the long-stretching
 island, (...)
Walking the old hills of Judaea with the beautiful
 gentle God by my side,
Speeding through space, speeding through heaven
 and the stars, (...)
I tread day and night such roads. (section 33)³⁵.

As can be seen, the physicality with which the passage describes man's progress from the wilderness to the city, is matched by the physicality of moving from America back to the hills of Judaea and forward to achieve an almost mystical communion with the cosmos.

A kind of simultaneity seems also to be achieved here, for past, present, and future are welded together through the device of the parallelistic use of the gerund, while the use of the simple present in the last line, reinforces the habitual action of treading the same roads day and night.

But if for Whitman marching through the wilderness is a real and contemporary event, which takes place in a real America fighting for survival in an incipient democracy, for Poe this same march becomes a metaphor for his search after the ideal, for his own struggling self and for his own lack of roots. In Poe, natural landscape and geographical America do not exist, and in its place his poems "develop a geographical conceit" and "read like the map of a maze or the arranged irrationality of a surrealist scene"³⁶. Here we have, as in "The City in the Sea", a landscape located "far down within the dim West", in which "a strange city" is surrounded by "melancholy waters"³⁷. And even when the scene is more congenial, as the beginning line of "The Haunted Palace" would suggest, - "in the greenest of our valleys" - we are immediately made to know that this is no verdant American valley, but is placed in "Monarch Thought's dominion" only to become infested by evil things, and its "blush and bloom" become a "dim-remembered story"³⁸.

Nature is thus always removed from reality, in time and space, even when a longer description could suggest a more realistic place. But Poe makes it a point to assert that this place is again out of place and time, as in "Dream-Land",

where the poet is wandering "by a route obscure and lonely",
and where he only sees

Bottomless vales and boundless floods,
And chasms, and cares, and Titan woods,
With forms that no man can discover
for the tears that drip all over;
Mountains toppling evermore
Into seas without a shore;
Seas that restless aspire,
Surging, unto skies of fire;
Lakes that endlessly outspread
Their lone waters, lone and dead, —
Their still waters, still and chilly
With the snows of the lolling lily³⁹.

What a contrast to Whitman's "walking the path worn in the
grass", in which all the details recall a living and amiable
nature! And even if Whitman's reaching out through space,
in this desire to experiment cosmic consciousness, makes
him speed through the heaven and stars, these are part of the
visible world, whereas Poe's landscape of the imagination
can only be reached in dreams, as "Ulalume" and "Eldorado"
attest. In the first,

The skies they were ashen and sober;
The leaves they were crisped and sere — (...)
It was night, in the lonesome October
Of my most immemorial year:

But these skies and leaves and October night do not interact
with the poet in a positive relationship, as in Whitman, they

are only a projection of the poet's own soul, as stanza IX of the same poem confirms:

Then my heart it grew ashen and sober
As the leaves that were crisped and sere - (...)
And I cried: 'It was surely October
On this very night of last year
That I journeyed - I journeyed down here! - 40

They only serve as an indefinite and somber background reflecting Poe's own desperate thoughts on death.

"Eldorado" too, presents a landscape of an unattainable ideal, set "over the Mountains/ Of the Moon, /Down the Valley of the Shadow"⁴¹, in which the details of the moon and the shadow, instead of adding concreteness to the scene, as in Whitman, further remove it from reality or locate it firmly in myth.

The contrast between Poe and Whitman can be further observed if we move into the next topic proposed by Tocqueville and Emerson; namely, the first in relation to the future, the second in relation to the present as sources for poetry - both times related again to man, as he stretches his imagination and ideas towards progress. Whitman again seems to be foregrounded in this new frame, for his whole oeuvre is hailed as a celebration not only of himself, but of democracy and the American nation, as a direct answer to Emerson's call for a poet chanting "our own times and social circumstance." As this excerpt from "By Blue Ontario's Shore" so well corroborates,

Others take the finish, but the Republic is ever
constructive and ever keeps vista,

Others adorn the past, but you O days of the present,
I adorn you,
O days of the future I believe in you - I isolate
myself for your sake,
O America because you build for mankind I build
for you.
O well-beloved stone-cutters, I lead them who plan
with decision and science,
Lead the present with friendly hand toward the
future⁴². (section 8)

The same kind of loving relationship established between the poet and Earth, in "Song of Myself", seems to take place here, in which the interchange of friendship and trust between the poet and the land is set in a democratic context of present times, but pointing towards the future.

Actually Whitman's whole poetry is interspersed with scenes from everyday life, mirroring not only the present, but making the past and the future become alive and near, as another excerpt, this time from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" so well confirms:

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross
from shore to shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north
and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the
south and east,
Others will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they
cross, the sun half an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred

years hence, others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-
tide, the falling-back to the sea of the
ebb-tide⁴³. (section 2)

If most of Whitman's poetry thus attests to his singing the present while at the same time displaying the other characteristics Tocqueville and Emerson predict American poetry would present, not so with Poe. His natural landscape is located in his own imagination, and thus removed from us, as seen, but there is also another removal from us, in time, for the past is the means through which he presents to us the delineation of the ideal. Again, not a historical past, as there was no geographical landscape, but an imaginative past, in which even countries such as ancient Greece and Rome acquire a larger and more obscure and remote connotation than they would in our everyday language.

From "Annabel Lee"'s "It was many and many a year ago,/
In a kingdom by the sea"⁴⁴, through "The Raven"'s "Once
upon a midnight dreary"⁴⁵, in which the narrator not only
retells a past experience but further removes it from us by
his being himself immersed in "many a quaint and curious volume
of forgotten lore", we are inside an untouchable past, farther
removed than the "once upon a time" of fairy-tales, and much
more hopeless. Even the evocative power of the famous lines
in "To Helen",

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.

does not bring the home the wanderer was brought to any nearer to us, for "glory" and "grandeur", as mentioned, transmit an abstract quality to the cities, making them even more unreal in time.

Deprived of his present, as most critics agree, "without family, home, income, position"⁴⁷, this wanderer found refuge in an imaginary past, whose ties to any real past are filtered again through classic lore. It is the contemplation of the past, associated by Tocqueville with aristocratic nations, that is present in Poe's poems, but the past as background for his dreams of another world, the past as artifact and artifice to hold the suggestions and sensations conveyed by his poems, not the historical or even mythic past suggested by Tocqueville. There is though a poem, "Al Aaraf", in which Poe escapes into an imaginary future, but again, it is used as a means of escape, and not in any way related to our human experience.

Another contrasting issue concerning Whitman and Poe's poetry is Tocqueville and Emerson's prediction that in the long run, it is no more the individual but actually the destinies of the human race which will be sung by the democratic poet, if he allows "the Universe" to circulate through him, in Emerson's perceptive insight.

Whitman's major concern is his own individuality and personality, as his "Song of Myself" so abundantly corroborates. But for Whitman, by the fact that his self is also universal, as part of the Divine, it seems to merge with the "other", with the "you", as the so often quoted beginning of "Song of Myself" brings forward:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs
to you⁴⁸.

Or, further on, when the poet sings through himself the
plights of the human race, which he again has made his own:

Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through
me the current and index.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of
democracy,

By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have
their counterpart of on the same terms.

Through me many long dumb voices,

Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners
and slaves,

Voices of the diseases'd and despairing and of thieves
and dwarfs,

Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,

And of the threads that connect the stars, and of
wombs and of the father-stuff (...) ⁴⁹ (section 24).

Whitman wants to be the lyre, through which inspiration, like a
flowing river, will pass, and his "word primeval", his
"barbaric yawp" is nothing more than the resounding of all
these voices which again are presented with the power of
an uninterrupted flow, one wave of voices following another,
until the whole human race seems to be contained in them.

This characteristic all-embracing stance also works the
other way round, Whitman fuses the individual with the
community, in the same way that he filters the universe
into the "you":

Underneath all, individuals,
I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores
 individuals,
The American compact is altogether with individuals,
The only government is that which makes minute of
 individuals,
The whole theory of the universe is directed
 unerringly to one single individual — namely
 to You⁵⁰.

But what does Poe filter through his individuality?
Can we perceive in him any sense of "en masse" brotherhood,
of identification with each single individual and with the
whole of the American people? His poems only reveal his
concern for the individual, for man isolated in time and
space from his contemporaries; he stands "separate and aloof
from all others"⁵¹, a characteristic of the poet in
aristocratic ages, and his poetry is filled not with the toils
and pleasures of his fellow Americans, but with the
supernatural beings, discovered by the mind, related to
aristocratic peoples.

Be it the spirit Israfel, or the supernal beauty of
Annabel Lee, Lenore, or Ulalume, there is no sociability
of meeting between the poet and his fellow beings, but only
with the projections of his own mind. There we meet ethereal
beings and beautiful deceased women, as remote from us as the
spirits that inhabit his dreamland, as his only communion is
with death, the death of his ideals metaphorized into these
beings. As the end of "Annabel Lee" testifies,

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,

In her sepulchre there by the sea —
In her tomb by the side of the sea.⁵²

Or as the poet asks the raven,

"Tell this soul with sorrow laden, if, within the
distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels
name Lenore —
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels
name Lenore."
Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."⁵³

It is this complete disregard for the concrete sources of poetry that America had to offer him, and which Whitman made so great a use of, which sets Poe apart from Tocqueville and Emerson's generalizations concerning the democratic poet singing not only Man but man inserted in the destinies of the human race, in a context of historicity. But we believe that, when Tocqueville affirms that the democratic poet would prefer to depict passions and ideas instead of persons and achievements, which forces him to always search below the external surface, and if we remember that Tocqueville also allowed space inside a democratic community for writers who would choose a different track, we see again that he did not deny, in broad terms, the presence of a Poe in his panorama of future American bards. And it is exactly this last source which Tocqueville envisages for poetry in democratic nations that becomes the spring for all of Poe's poetry: the "pity, admiration, terror, contempt" that man discovers inside his soul, "the hidden depths in the immaterial nature of man"⁵⁴. Looking only at himself, Poe

has probed deep into his soul, but, as he lacked "a center grounded in the actuality of real life"⁵⁵, his creative work could not sustain itself artistically, for there was no compromise with the anti-poetic world which furnished Whitman with so many of his main themes.

Poe's poem "Alone", considered by Allen Tate to be a key to his single symbolic matrix — the vortex, the grave, the pit⁵⁶ — can actually be seen for our purposes to project his "otherness", his isolation and realization of this difference, such as when he says:

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were — I have not seen
As others saw — I could not bring
My passions from a common spring —
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow — I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone —
And all I lov'd — I lov'd alone.⁵⁷

Pearce calls Poe's poems "disembodied creativity"⁵⁸, which I think is a good means to contrasting them with Whitman's creativity, so clearly embodied in his place and time.

Paradoxically, this last source for poetry into which Poe seems finally to fit, in relation to democratic nations, is exactly the one I would have some reservations in including Whitman, for he seems more intent on describing the everyday actions of men in democracies — repugnant in Tocqueville's view to conceptions of the ideal — than on probing deeply below the surface to read the inner soul. Although he considers himself to be the poet of the body and soul, and although he has expressed poetically his thoughts on birth, death, rebirth,

leading to a cosmic consciousness, he does not seem to have reached the depths that Poe has, in exploring and depicting a human soul, according to critics.

We can also see how the two chapters dealing with literary characteristics and with the use of the English language in democratic nations provide us with a good survey to evaluate Poe and Whitman's achievement, for each poet, in his own way, has produced a new literature which is "startling and acute"; one disregarding "order, regularity, science and art" and whose "slighted" form is actually the projection of his "untutored and rude vigor of thought", of so "great variety and singular fecundity"⁵⁹ and whose "barbaric yawp" has really sounded and still sounds "over the roofs of the world"⁶⁰; the other, an artificer whose "slightest work" is "carefully wrought in its least details;" and whose "art and labor will be conspicuous in everything"⁶¹, in accordance with his aristocratic posture and wit his superior abilities; and who, even if he was called, in contrast to Whitman's yawp, "the Jingle Man", his mastery of form is only surpassed by the suggestiveness of his imagery and his skill in creating moods.

In the same way, the use both poets have made of the English language shows again how true Tocqueville's prophecies have become, as well as Emerson's, for Whitman has used copiously from the vocabulary of different social classes, as befits a poet of democratic times, and his picturesque descriptions of the world around him as of the life of his times, allowed him to use even, for his time, "obscene" words. Poe's use of indeterminate words, on the other hand, to enhance the mood he was trying to create, offers another perspective to the users of the English language; at the same time, "he spent more time in analyzing the construction of

our language than any living grammarian, critic, or essayist⁶²; he wanted language "to impose order on the tumult of experience and draw from it the beauty of design"⁶³ in contrast again to Whitman's apparently "crude" enumerations and planless listing of details.

This brings us back to Tocqueville and Emerson's definition of verse, for both not the primary requirement for poetry, and in this way paving the way for Whitman's achievement but somehow ignoring Poe's craftsmanship; and, to round up our topic, Tocqueville and Emerson's visualization of the poet and his objectives: Whitman, in his exuberant and apparently indiscriminate use of the physical world around him, seems not to fit so well as Poe does, into Tocqueville's assertion that something has to be changed, in order to complete and extend the work of nature, and in this aspect Poe would be the perfect poet. On the other hand, Emerson's concept of the poet is actually so all-embracing that we believe any poet would fit into it, either as the man of Beauty, or as the interpreter, or the Language-Maker, so there would be no difficulty in trying to frame either Poe or Whitman inside this concept. This is why Poe and Whitman also concretize, each in his own peculiar manner, Emerson's image of the poet as a "liberating god"; for both have freed American poetry from the conventional forms and subject-matter prevalent in their day and have, through their effort to lay hold on some completer notion of man's being⁶⁴, allowed their contemporaries to discover a new world, real and imaginary, inside the New World which surrounded them.

Thus, having followed closely and literally Tocqueville and Emerson's predictions in the first part of this paper, as they were going to be the basic text for our discussion of Poe and Whitman's achievement, to then discussing the

several aspects in form and content which characterize and contrast their poetry, we hope to have shown some of the ways in which both poets would be framed, or not, inside Tocqueville and Emerson's expectations as to the image of the poet in democratic times.

Looking back on Poe and Whitman's achievement from our 20th century perspective, Tocqueville and Emerson's views receive again corroboration, from Larzer Ziff and W. C. Williams. Ziff confirms Poe's aristocratic image, by asserting that he is a negative response to the democracy in which he was mislocated, for his fictive world did not correspond to the real world around him,⁶⁵ while W. C. Williams feels that Poe's greatness in "having turned his back and faced inland, to originality" is the very reason for Americans not being able to recognize him. He makes a very original point, though, in considering Poe a real American in his literary criticism and in his tales, for in this aspect Poe is "the astounding, inconceivable growth of his locality"⁶⁶. And Ziff summarizes Whitman's achievement in words which again recall Tocqueville and Emerson's democratic predictions, by saying that Whitman, viewing man "from the midst of the jostle in the street, did not call forth that man to a different way of life but revealed to him the strength that lay hidden in what he was"⁶⁷.

If Poe the aristocrat was caught up in his time while Whitman the democrat grew in his very environment, one singing his isolation, the other his integration in place and time, there are two points in which these two liberating gods do come together: in their power and in their originality. And this corroborates Tocqueville's most ambitious prediction, for that moment to come when both the democratic and the aristocratic literary genius coincide, to establish their

ascendancy over the human mind; for this moment, we believe, was achieved in 19th century American literature, when Poe and Whitman were writing their poetry.

NOTES

¹ ZIFF, L. Literary Democracy. New York, Penquin , 1981. p. VII

² TOCQUEVILLE, A. de. Democracy in America, v. II. New York, Vintage Books, 1945, p. 394.

³ Ibid., p. 59.

⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸ Ibid., p. 63.

⁹ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁰ EMERSON, R. W. "The Poet" in The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New York, The Modern Library, 1940.

¹¹ TOCQUEVILLE, p. 75.

¹² EMERSON, p. 338.

¹³ Ibid., p. 331.

¹⁴ TOCQUEVILLE, p. 75.

¹⁵ EMERSON, p. 336.

- 16 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 75.
- 17 EMERSON, p. 329.
- 18 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 75.
- 19 EMERSON, p. 323.
- 20 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 77.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 22 EMERSON, p. 325.
- 23 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 78.
- 24 EMERSON, p. 326.
- 25 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 78.
- 26 EMERSON, p. 338.
- 27 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 79.
- 28 EMERSON, p. 327.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 325.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 332.
- 31 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 80.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 33 EMERSON, p. 339.
- 34 WHITMAN, W. Complete Poetry and Selected Prose. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959, p. 39.

- 35 *ibid.*, 48-50.
- 36 GELPI, A. The Tenth Muse. Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1975, p. 146.
- 37 POE, E. A. The Complete Poetry and Selected Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe. New York, New American Library, 1968, p. 71-2.
- 38 *ibid.*, p. 106.
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 110-11.
- 40 *ibid.*, p. 122-4.
- 41 *ibid.*, p. 134.
- 42 WHITMAN, p. 245.
- 43 *ibid.*, p. 116.
- 44 POE, p. 139.
- 45 *ibid.*, p. 113.
- 46 *ibid.*, p. 69.
- 47 GELPI, A. p. 115.
- 48 WHITMAN, W. p. 25.
- 49 *ibid.*, p. 41-2.
- 50 *ibid.*, p. 249.
- 51 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 79.

52 POE, p. 140.

53 Ibid., p. 118.

54 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 80.

55 PEARCE, R. H. The Continuity of American Poetry. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1961, p. 143.

56 TATE, A. Introduction to The Complete Poetry and Selected Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe. New York, New American Library, 1968, p. X.

57 POE, p. 141.

58 PEARCE, R. H., p. 152.

59 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 63.

60 WHITMAN, p. 68.

61 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 60.

62 GELPI, A. p. 131.

63 Ibid., p. 133.

64 TOCQUEVILLE, p. 80.

65 ZIFF, p. 75.

66 WILLIAMS, W. C. In the American Grain. New York, New Directions, 1956, p. 233.

67 ZIFF, L. p. 257.

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