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The Motif of Damnation in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”

Introduction

The aim of the present essay is first and foremost to examine and explore the motif of damnation in the well-known poem called “The Raven” by the early 19th-century American poet Edgar Allan Poe, within the frameworks of an in-depth analysis. The starting point is that the poem can be interpreted as a poem of damnation; that is, damnation is one of the dominant motifs within the poem. I intend to define damnation as a state or situation from which there is seemingly no escape, as a hopeless and possibly final state of mind and soul that may even manifest itself at physical, not only at a psychical level. In the present context, this state of damnation mainly derives from loss. Furthermore, this state defined as damnation can also have different degrees and may be experienced at several different levels. As a first step, I would like to briefly explore the circumstances of the composition and make an attempt to establish connections between the possible biographical circumstances of the author and the writing process of the poem, presenting possible biographical motivations that the author might have had in composing one of the most prominent pieces of his poetic work.

After the short examination of the circumstances of the composition and the possible biographical motivations, I intend to examine the poem and its narrative structure stanza by stanza, and find motifs and references among the lines that may support that damnation is one of the key motifs of the work. In addition, I would like to provide several levels of possible interpretations and reveal what different kinds of damnation may be present in the poem; in other words, to analyse how many ways the narrator telling the narrative poem might be considered to be damned. After revealing several modes and grades of damnation supposedly implied in the poem, I intend to make an attempt to provide an interpretation that may bring closer the different aspects of damnation in the poem to each other, based on the text itself and on a few biographical data and / or accepted critical approaches.

Finally, after the in-depth analysis and the exploration of the motifs that imply damnation in the poem, I will make an attempt to reach some conclusion, making some concluding remarks on the analysis of the poem.

Possible Biographical Motivations and Circumstances of the Composition

Before attempting an in-depth analysis of the poem based on the text itself, it might be worth having a few glances at the possible biographical motivations of the author and the circumstances of the composition. The starting point is that the poet's biographical events, at least partly, may have influenced the creation of the poem, and the poetic narrator can be considered partly identical with the author himself. Although it may be considered evident to a certain degree, yet these aspects might have some relevance from the point of view of interpretation.

Poe supposedly wrote "The Raven" in 1844. It was first published on January 29, 1845, in *The New York Evening Mirror*. It became his probably most prominent poetic work already in his life, and it was reprinted and published many times after the date of the first publication. Partly due to "The Raven", Poe became a highly popular author within the contemporary American literary circles. "The Raven" appeared in numerous anthologies, for example, in the anthology entitled *Poets and Poetry in America*, 1847, edited by Rufus Wilmot Griswold.

As it can be read in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, the poem is now analyzed in middle schools, high schools and universities, almost creating a literary myth around itself. (Kopley 193). It was named "the poem about remembering" by Poe's contemporary William Gilmore Simms, but it is interesting to examine what role "remembering" could play in the composition of the poem, not strictly separating Poe himself from the poetic narrator of his work.

First of all, in his essay entitled "The Philosophy of Composition," in which he, in fact, analyses his own poem "The Raven" and discusses the circumstances of the writing and justifies his selection of the topic, Poe openly denies that the poem was mainly inspired by biographical facts and his own memories.

However, considering only the number of the people whom Edgar Allan Poe lost in his life (although I do not get immersed in the biographical events of the author in

detail, due the limited extension of the essay, the people whom he lost and the personal tragedies of his life are well-known for biographers and literary historians) before writing his poem called “The Raven”, it may seem evident that these losses could lead the poet to a very depressed and seemingly hopeless state of soul, which could play a serious role in writing a poem about loss and the hopelessness felt for it. The dark atmosphere of the poem is mainly created by the poetic narrator’s loss of his beloved called Lenore, as it is well-known, and this loss of the beloved woman may lead to a mental and psychical state similar to or identical with damnation, damnation that can be defined as a situation that is seemingly final and from which there is no escape.

In “The Philosophy of Composition”, published in the April issue of *Graham’s Magazine*, 1846, as mentioned above, Poe makes an attempt to present the analysis of his own poem “The Raven” and also to describe the circumstances of the composition. The author claims that he considered each aspect of the poem and that he had a completely conscious conception about what to write.

Although in the present essay I do not intend to analyse “The Philosophy of Composition” in detail, I attempt to use it in order to spotlight the supposed circumstances of the composition of the poem and the poetic intention depicted in it. As it can be read in the tenth paragraph of the essay, Poe himself strongly argues that the poem was the result of conscious poetic work and he had an exact concept about what and how to write:

“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 every thing like totality is at once destroyed. But since, ceteris paribus, no poet can afford to dispense with any thing 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.” (Poe)

That is, as a matter of fact, Poe himself concentrates on his poetic purposes and his intended literary achievement in a seemingly impersonal voice. In the essay, his style is rather analytic than emotional, he seems to consider himself a craftsman.

Nevertheless, several literary historians and critics doubt that Poe himself thought it completely serious what he wrote down in “The Philosophy of Composition”, and it is widely considered to be a pedantic writing towards the public audience rather than an honest confession about the composition of the poem. For instance, T. S. Eliot himself also dealt with the possible circumstances of the composition and argued that “The Raven” rather seems to be the result of personal motivations than the result of a conscious poetic concept. As he states it:

“It is difficult for us to read that essay without reflecting that if Poe plotted out his poem with such calculation, he might have taken a little more pains over it: the result hardly does credit to the method.” (Eliot, cited in Hoffman 76)

In addition, also one of the famous biographers of Poe Joseph Wood Krutch describes the essay as, “a rather highly ingenious exercise in the art of rationalization than literary criticism.” (98) That is, it cannot be neglected that several literary scholars tend to treat the essay as a kind of posterior attempt to rationalize the writing of a poem that was supposedly induced, at least partly, by the author’s real emotions and remembrances. Furthermore, as written in the literary-historical work entitled *A History of American Literature – from Puritanism to Postmodernism*, it does not seem to be very probable that Poe really wrote “The Raven” so thoughtfully and methodically as he claims in his own essay – the authors rather tend to suppose that the narrator of the essay is one of Poe’s “maniac” narrators that can be observed in several of his short stories; for instance, in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Black Cat”, “The Mask of the Red Death”, etc. (Ruland and Brandbury 651)

The present essay also tends to accept the assumption that biographical motivations played a serious role in the composition of one of Poe’s most significant poems, and he did not write it completely so consciously and analytically, since it strongly seems to be an honest confession about a state of soul in which he possibly

really was in the period when he wrote the poem. Biographical events in themselves may seem unimportant from the point of view of analyzing the text itself; however, this aspect will be highlighted again in a further chapter of the present essay, since the supposable poetic self-confessional character of the poem might pave the way for examining “The Raven” as a meta-poetic work that is also meant to express the necessary damnation of poets.

After the attempt to briefly outline the possible biographical motivations of the author, henceforth I intend to explore several levels of damnation in the poem, within the framework of an in-depth analysis.

Damnation as a General Aspect within “The Raven”

As mentioned above several times, the main aim of the present essay is to interpret the poem called “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe as a poem about damnation. I intend to define the concept of damnation as a state of suffering from which there is no escape, or a situation for which there is no solution at all, either in the physical or in the mental and psychical sense of the word. Several leitmotifs of the poem, such as midnight, winter, solitude, mourn, loss, etc. refer to the fact that the fictitious world created within the literary work and the poetic narrator enclosed in this world are surrounded by, and actually exist in the state of damnation. In the present section I intend to explore some of the motifs that might be interpreted as references to the state of damnation of the poetic speaker, mainly based on the text of the poem itself, illustrating with textual examples, then in the following section I make an attempt to find several different possible levels of damnation within the poem.

It may sound like a commonplace that the poem itself begins with a very dark and ominous overture, as it can be read immediately in the first stanza, and this ominous atmosphere is created by words and phrases such as “midnight dreary”, “weary”, “forgotten lore”, “rapping”, “muttered”. That is, the first stanza is full of words that contribute to the dark atmosphere, and this dark atmosphere is immediately created in the beginning of the poem:

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -
Only this, and nothing more.'* (1-6)

As it is interpreted in the same way by several critics and literary historians who have ever dealt with Poe's "The Raven" (e. g., Artúr Elek, Charles Kopley or Jay B. Hubbel), the narrator of the poem is supposedly a young scholar who has recently lost his beloved, and in order to forget a little about his grief, he tries to be immersed in (possibly scientific) books. It is midnight and December. The whole starting situation seems to be depressed, hopeless and gloomy. As written in the first stanza, the speaker nearly falls asleep. It may even be interpreted that he is near to death; in other words, this half-sleeping state is a transitory condition between life and death, although physically he is still alive.

Until the Raven itself appears, the situation within the narrator's room is nearly static and unchanged. He only hears knocking on the chamber door and remembers his lost beloved several times, but the atmosphere is not broken. As a matter of fact, in the first six stanzas, the first third of the poem there is not much more than a static poetic meditation and a prelude to the real events of the narration. Closely examining the first six stanzas and their atmosphere, it may be discovered that the speaker tries to escape from his mourning for Lenore and hopes for a guest who will save him from his hopeless solitude behind the knocking on the chamber door, but he is disappointed every time when he attempts to check who is outside, and everything, every single noise makes him remember only his lost Lenore.

As the poetic narrative goes forward, the Raven suddenly appears in the room of the narrator, from outside, and the only one word, the later recurring refrain of the poem is pronounced by it for the first time. All of this is depicted in the seventh stanza that can be interpreted as a turning point within the narration:

*Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door -
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door -
Perched, and sat, and nothing more. (43-48)*

The static and hopeless nature of the situation is seemingly broken up by the appearance of the bird that lands on Pallas's bust. Then, at least for a while, the Raven remains silent, and the poetic narrator seems to feel better, due to the presence of the unexpected and bizarre night visitor.

The key phrase of the poem, the recurring refrain closing down every single stanza from here is pronounced at the end of the eighth stanza:

*Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
'Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,' I said, 'art sure no craven.
Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the nightly shore -
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.' (50-56)*

The Raven answers to the question about what his name is; that is, he may name himself and does not only repeat the phrase mechanically as the poetic speaker assumes it in the beginning. Even in the beginning, it may have a much deeper relevance within the poem than the persona himself or readers would think it for the first sight.

Whatever the poetic voice asks of the Raven, the answer is always the same: *nevermore*. Certainly, when he starts supposing that the Raven is, in fact, a herald from the afterlife – all the same whether from heaven or hell – and he inquires about his lost beloved Lenore, the answer is the same:

*Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
'Wretch,' I cried, 'thy God hath lent thee - by these angels he has sent thee
Respite - respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this lost Lenore!'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'* (79-84)

As it can be read in stanza 14, it suddenly runs through the speaker's mind that the bird sitting on the bust of Pallas may not be an ordinary bird, but some supernatural creature that was sent to him to bring news from over there. In the moment when the speaker realises that it is not an ordinary, earthly creature present in his room, at first it is hope that flashes up for a little while within the whole dark and seemingly impenetrably hopeless atmosphere of the poem and within the state of soul of the speaker.

However, when the Raven's answer is *nevermore* to the speaker's question whether or not he will see Lenore one more time, even if not in this earthly, mortal human life, but in his afterlife, his hopefulness and momentary good mood suddenly turns into fury and deeper despair than before. Nevertheless, once again he repeats the question in stanza 16, trying to control his fury:

*Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil!' - prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us - by that God we both adore -
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels named Lenore -
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden, whom the angels named Lenore?'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'* (90-96)

Despite the fact that the Raven answers *nevermore* to any question, the narrator's hopefulness flashes up one more time, and he supposes that perhaps in another life, in a dimension beyond his present human and consequently helpless existence he will perhaps meet his lost beloved. He may know exactly what the next answer of the bird

will be, yet he asks the question once again, deceiving himself in a certain way. Stanza 17 might be interpreted as another important turning point within the poetic narration, as a point of no return, where all of the hope flashing up before gets lost in the darkness, and nothing remains within the room and within the soul of the speaker but bitterness, hopelessness, and despair; that is, he finds himself in a form of damnation.

The last stanza in which the poetic narrator states that "...[his] soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor shall be lifted - nevermore!" may be interpreted as the vortex of damnation where the dimension of time that has been present and observable in the former stanzas seems to cease, and some endless, eternal damnation surrounds the speaker, both his physical body and his soul. The room becomes a place where the shadow of the Raven rules; furthermore, it is strengthened by the fact that the speaker condemns himself to damnation, since it is him who pronounces the last *nevermore* within the poem.

Having made an attempt to briefly explore the presence of some general aspect of damnation within the stanzas of the narrative poem, henceforth I will turn to the different possible levels of damnation that are behind the general impression made by the atmosphere and imagery of Poe's poetic work.

A Possible Approach – The Raven Itself as the Carrier of Damnation

The Raven, the key motif, and effectively the protagonist of the poem may be interpreted as an entity that carries damnation, and brings this damnation into the internal world of the speaker and upon the poetic speaker himself from outside. In this case, it should certainly be presupposed that the poetic narrator is not originally damned, and the internal literary world of the poem is not in the state of damnation from the very beginning.

The present section of the essay attempts to provide one possible interpretation about one certain level of damnation within the poem – damnation that is brought upon the poetic narrator by the Raven itself. In other words, in the present analysis it is supposed that the narrator is not in the state of damnation at the beginning of the narration, but he gradually reaches the state of damnation after the Raven appears in

his room and lands on the bust of Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom in Greek mythology. One possible interpretation of the poem, from the point of view of damnation is that it is not enough that Lenore, the beloved woman has died and the poetic narrator simply mourns her, it is not the only reason in itself for which he is slowly surrounded by the dark and impenetrable atmosphere of damnation.

Literary critic Granger B. Howell also argues that the atmosphere of the poem in itself foreshadows a state that is similar to damnation, or it can even be treated as identical with damnation, damnation in the Christian sense of the word. As Howell writes in his essay entitled “Devil Lore in ‘The Raven’ ”:

It's not simply that she is dead. It is that he has damned himself. It is no mistake that the month is "bleak December" rather than an equally dreary November. The forces of darkness are never more powerful than during the high holy days of the Christian year, and December, with its share of the twelve days of Christmas, ranks foremost. The mention of "each separate dying ember [which] wrought its ghost upon the floor," is reminiscent of Coleridge's "Christabel" in which other embers reflect the presence of evil in much the same way.

Howell suggests that December and midnight, the time of the narration itself creates an atmosphere that is favourable for the “powers of darkness” in the Christian sense; that is, the environment depicted in the poem surrounding the narrator is a completely suitable place for damnation.

Attempting to find the appropriate passage about Edgar Allan Poe within the book entitled *Az amerikai irodalom története (History of American Literature*, one of the most known comprehensive works about American Literature published in Hungarian), it is observable that the authors make nearly the same suggestion as Howell’s: the presence of the Raven gradually brings ultimate despair and darkness into the room and into the mind of the poetic narrator, and the refrain *nevermore* repeated time and again slowly but securely strengthens the sense of damnation, the sense of a state from which seemingly there is no way of escape. It is also argued that the final /r/ phoneme of the refrain (pronounced in the rhotic American accent after

the long /o/, while usually unpronounced in Standard Southern British English) also carries some darkness and ominous character within itself, the symbolism of sounds, mainly that of the dark vowels apart from final /r/-s that predominates the poem also contributes to the dark, gothic and apparently hopeless atmosphere that surrounds the whole narration (Országh and Virágos 65-66).

One key argument for the statement that the narrator is not, at least not completely in the state of damnation until the Raven appears in his room may be the fact that in the first six stanzas, as mentioned above, in the first and apparently static phase of the poetic narration, the narrator is sad and mourns for his lost beloved, but no supernatural force is explicitly present within the room. He can be treated as only an average man, with average pains and sadness. In the present essay it may be accepted that although the atmosphere is ominous and sad from the beginning of the poem, in the first six stanzas only premonitory signs (e. g., the ominous knocking on the door, the howling wind outside, the whole mood generated by “the bleak December”, etc.) of damnation are present. As analysed above, the seventh stanza of the poem in which the Raven suddenly flies into the room from outside, is the turning point of the poetic narration where the static state and motionlessness is broken up.

The sudden appearance of the Raven undoubtedly generates tension both in the mind of the poetic speaker and in the course of the narration. The speaker’s monotonous mournfulness suddenly turns into curiosity and pale hopefulness. He is curious about the origin of the bird, and when he suddenly realises that the Raven is not an ordinary animal, but it may be in possession some supernatural forces, he wants to believe that there is maybe hope for him to meet his lost beloved one more time, if not in this world, then in some kind of afterlife. But when the Raven’s answer is *nevermore* to any question asked of him, the hope that flashed up in the poetic speaker’s heart and mind suddenly starts fading away. As it is written in the last stanza of the poem cited above, he realises that the bird has not brought news to him about his lost beloved, even if it is sent and governed by supernatural forces. On the contrary, the Raven was sent as an executor, in order to destroy even the last splinters of hope in the narrator’s heart and mind, always and timelessly making him remember that there is no way out of the state of damnation. The narrator must realise that he

will never see his lost beloved Lenore again either in his mortal human existence or in his afterlife. It is also suggested that he will not even reach any kind of afterlife, rather he will stay in his room for ever, in eternal grief and despair, in a transitory state between life and death; in fact, in the state of damnation that falls on him in the form of the Raven's dark wings.

At this level, damnation can be interpreted as a process, or at least the result of a process rather than a static and unchanged state. The persona goes through a process and gradually reaches damnation, due to the appearance and presence of the Raven, and the hopelessness and darkness generated by it. The soul of the speaker may not be lost from the very beginning of the poem, but it gets lost in the dark gyres of loss, hopelessness and unavoidable remembrances. The Raven is supposedly a supernatural entity who comes from outside – from outside, where there is only darkness, night and winter – and breaks in the poetic speaker's room; that is, the Raven penetrates into his internal world, into his ultimate lair where he might have escaped from his own loss, remembrance and dark thoughts resulting from them. But there is no escape – the Raven as the carrier of damnation, coming from outside, finds the narrator even here, in this enclosed environment, and makes him realise that he cannot hide from the pain of loss and cannot deceive himself into hoping that once he will find his lost beloved again, if not here, then in some dreamland, Eden, anywhere else beyond his present human existence. The Raven, as the speaker himself suggests in the last stanza, will stay with him for ever to make him remember his losses and his hopeless situation. His room, where he escaped from the outside world, from damnation, becomes itself the place and prison of damnation.

Examining one of the possible aspects of damnation within the poem, the Raven as the carrier of damnation, in the following section of the essay I will make an attempt to explore another possible level of damnation present within the poem.

Damnation as an Original and Unchanged State in the Poem

As outlined in the previous chapter, although the aspect of damnation can be interpreted as a process, not situation or a state originally given, it may also be examined as an original and unchanged state. Having explored arguments for

accepting the suggestion that the poetic narrator of “The Raven” might not be in the state of damnation from the very beginning of the poem, in the present section of the essay I would like to examine another possible level of damnation in the poem from a different perspective, proceeding from the assumption that the speaker is perhaps in the state of damnation from the beginning. Now I make an attempt to examine the poem supposing that the Raven is not the carrier of damnation, but it is only something that makes the poetic narrator realise the truth.

As discussed above, the atmosphere of the “The Raven” is clearly ominous and dark even in the first stanzas when the Raven is not yet present. This atmosphere of melancholy and darkness is created immediately in the very beginning of the poem, and it is sustained all along. The narrator is sitting in his room, mourning for his lost beloved Lenore and meditates about whether or not he will see her once again in some form, when the mysterious knocking from outside suddenly disturbs his meditative state of mind, and he wants to explore who is knocking on his door at any price. In the second stanza it is also mentioned by the narrator that he “eagerly (...) wished the morrow”; in other words, he is waiting for the end of the ominous and dark night that strongly contributes to his sad and hopeless state of soul, apart from the pain of loss that he feels.

When the Raven appears, as discussed above, the poetic speaker wants to believe that the bird may give him some hope and can lead him out of his originally hopeless and dark situation. He may even see some saviour in the bird that has arrived to somehow redeem him from damnation. But when the Raven repeats only *nevermore*, it becomes clear for the speaker that he *is* in a situation from which he can escape no more, and he does not reach damnation gradually, since there is nothing to reach, only damnation exists as an unchanged state from which it is impossible to break out.

John F. Adams also suggests that the Raven is in fact a kind of “private symbol”, as he calls it; that is, not a physical entity, but rather the projection of the grief of the poetic persona, an abstract entity that stands for the feelings and the state of soul of the narrator. (In his essay the author also compares the traditional folkloric and mythological properties and associations as for ravens and the properties and associations that are observable in and generated by E. A. Poe’s poem and its title

character. The author draws the conclusion that Poe uses the motif of the raven in a very individual way and creates a so-called “private symbol” of it, rather than using it as an allusion to various folkloric and mythological sources in which otherwise controversial connotations are attributed to ravens.) As Adams writes it in his essay entitled “Classical Raven Lore and Poe’s Raven”:

In the course of the poem, the Raven develops and modifies this and its other associations, becoming more and more a private symbol, more and more a dream or hallucinatory figure generated by the persona's emotional bankruptcy, increasingly symbolizing private spiritual dryness rather than personal lamentation for a specific loss.

Adams’s argumentation seems to be supportable if I consider the basic atmosphere of the poem and the original state of soul of the poetic narrator that are, in fact, not drastically changed by the appearance of the Raven and the continuous repetition of the phrase *nevermore*. Certainly, the Raven can be interpreted as something that is not completely part of reality, a supposedly supernatural creature that appears in the environment of the poetic narrator in a physical form, but also a kind of mental entity that appears within the mind of the speaker. It is hard to decide whether its presence in the room is physical or symbolic, but the present approach seems to support that it is rather a visionary figure existing within the narrator’s mind than a concrete physical entity.

If the Raven is treated as a “private symbol”, it is not necessary to interpret it as a mystic herald or a carrier of damnation, not even as an independent and physically existing character of the narrative poem. It can also be only the projection of the speaker’s dark thoughts and unbearable sense of loss. When he talks to the Raven and hears the same answer every time – *nevermore*, the dialogue may not be between him and another living character, but he may only talk to himself, gradually comprehending the fact that his beloved really died and nothing or no-one can resurrect her. Furthermore, considering the fact that the poetic speaker is supposedly a young scholar, a man knowledgeable about (possibly also natural) sciences; that is,

supposedly a rational and intellectual person, the Raven may also be interpreted as nothing more than the awakening of his own rational sense of reality that suggests him that no-one may resurrect from death, however he loved Lenore, he inevitably has to resign himself to the fact that she is dead. However, he cannot work up the fact that the beloved woman exists “nevermore” in any form, and even love cannot overwhelm human mortality. In vain does the speaker’s mind know that Lenore is dead, his soul is incapable of accepting the cold, rational and, as a matter of fact, paradoxically natural truth. This realisation, this complete and ultimate loss of the last splinters of hope might lead the speaker to a mental state from which there is no way out; that is, into a state of mind and soul that can be treated as equal to damnation. It is not suggested at all that the speaker physically dies, but it is rather suggested that he has to resign himself to the fact that his beloved is dead, and no-one on earth can escape from death. Perhaps he will live for much more time, beyond the scope of the poetic narration and the frameworks of the poem, but since he has lost all of his hope by facing the death of someone whom he loved, the rest of his life will probably be unhappy and desperate. He will have to live in a kind of earthly damnation until his death, without any supernatural force that leads him to damnation, because surprisingly it is him who condemns himself to damnation by his own sadness and ultimate loss of hope.

After revealing two possible levels of damnation in the poem, in the next section of the essay I attempt to explore another, and maybe interesting possible level of damnation.

Meta-poetry in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” – the Necessary Damnation of Poets

In the present section of the essay, I make an attempt to provide one more and perhaps a little unusual interpretation of the poem, from the point of view of damnation. Several literary historians and critics who have ever written about E. A. Poe in some form agree that he was undoubtedly one of the most prominent and original figures in the history of American Literature, or at least during the 19th century. It is often argued that his poetic magnitude and poetic sense of the world that manifests itself in

nearly all of his writings cannot be neglected within the analysis of his obviously most known poem of high aesthetic value.

As Hungarian literary critic Artúr Elek wrote in 1910, it is never to be neglected that Poe was *a poet* in every single piece of his works; therefore, his obsessive engagement to aestheticism and beauty cannot be ignored, no matter which piece of his literary lifework is being analysed. (67) (Although Elek's critical approach may seem old-fashioned today, comparing them to contemporary trends of literary criticism, it may be worth examining the same text from even highly different perspectives of different eras of literary history in order to explore as much possibilities of interpretation as possible.)

If the assumption is accepted that Poe was a *poet* in each of his works, and his being a poet is inseparable from the atmosphere and possible interpretations of any of his poems (or even his prose works), then it is possible to examine and interpret "The Raven" and see the presence of damnation within it with a completely different eye.

As mentioned above several times, the poetic narrator is often interpreted as a young scholar; in any case, an intellectual who mourns her lost love Lenore. But would it not be possible to interpret the figure of the narrator as a poet, a man of letters who attempts to be immersed in literature in order to forget about his memories and pain for a while? If it is supposed that the poetic narrator is, at least partly, identical with Poe himself, and as discussed above, biographical motivations may also have inspired the composition of the poem, (although Poe himself argues in "The Philosophy of Composition" that he had nearly no autobiographical inspiration and his only aim with the poem was to write a beautiful piece of poetry of deep content), it becomes more and more acceptable that "The Raven" can also be interpreted as a meta-poetic work, a certain kind of poetic self-confession, a confession about a poet's sufferings resulting in the composition of an aesthetically valuable poem.

The opening situation of the poem is unchanged, even if it is accepted that the poetic narrator is rather a poet than a natural scientist. But it may also be audaciously supposed that he is writing a poem about the loss of his beloved Lenore when he suddenly hears something from outside that disturbs his melancholic and meditative state of mind. Going further, it also appears to be imaginable that the poetic narrator is

writing his poem called “The Raven”, a poem in which the bird is a symbol of his personal pain and the loss of his beloved. Then suddenly the poem comes to life and becomes reality, at least for the poet himself, within his own room, and finally the Raven, the embodiment of his grief and unforgettable memories comes to life and appears in front of him – it can even be claimed it is the text itself that comes to life via its own poetic power. If I consider this possibility of interpretation, then the statement that a (poetic) text comes to life and becomes independent of its creator at one level, but at another level it may become one with its creator, is not so far from the widely accepted postmodernist trends of literary criticism according to which the text lives its own life, introduced and accepted by the Deconstructionists and others. The persona / poet may face his own poetic visions, and through the presence of the Raven, which, in fact, may exist only in the poet’s fantasies and in the physical reality at the same time, he becomes one with his poetry. It might be a possible approach that a perfect poem can be born only at the price of the deepest emotional shock that a human being can go through: the loss of someone, the loss of a beloved beautiful woman. A poet has to experience emotional and physical extremities of the highest degree in order to become capable of creating a perfect piece of literature, perfect in every sense, in order to be able to write a valuable poem similar to “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe. In other words, it is necessary for the poet to experience and survive an extreme situation, a nearly unbearable state of soul and mind, a state close to damnation in order to gain the capability of achieving aesthetic perfection. In this sense, damnation can also be treated as a psychological state, bringing the concepts of madness and damnation very close to each other. Considering the fact that the key motif of several of Poe’s short stories is madness, it may not sound so weird if madness and damnation are treated as similar to each other, or even accept the hypothesis that madness can be treated as a certain type of damnation.

In “The Raven”, the poetic narrator lost his beloved, and this loss is very hard to get through. This loss is what leads to a mental and emotional state that is close or identical with damnation. The narrator has to face solitude, hopelessness and probably everlasting grief. His room is a place for sufferings, and facing the creature of his own poetic imagination, the Raven that is meant to express all of his sorrow, pain and dark

emotions, he undoubtedly experiences damnation within his own poetic mind. He hears the cruel refrain *nevermore* pronounced again and again, pushing him deeper and deeper into his own grief and pain, but from inside, not from outside. The room, as an enclosed environment, may also mean much more than only the poet's room in the simple physical sense. This room can also stand for his mind and soul within which the interaction between him and the Raven – that is identical with his own sorrow and remembrances which he is seemingly unable to get rid of – occurs. As a result of this interaction, the poetic narrator reaches a state of soul that is very similar to damnation and from which seemingly, as stressed above several times, there is no way out. However, experiencing a state similar to damnation, in parallel with unbearable emotional pain and the darkest sorrow that a man can live through, he also gains the capability to write perfect poems, to see human existence from a higher perspective and produce pieces of literature that are everlasting and have some superior message to the all-time reader; pieces of literature that can cause aesthetical pleasure and make people think about their own existence at the same time.

In the last stanza, the poetic narrator condemns himself to damnation explicitly, and although the rest of his life after the loss of his beloved may be sad and nearly completely hopeless, having gone through a serious trauma and experienced damnation, now he possesses the capability of creating everlasting pieces of poetry, and for a poet it is maybe much more important than living a normal and happy life in the everyday sense. At least partly considering his biographical data and possible motivations discussed in the beginning of the present essay, even if this it seems to contradict postmodernist critical approaches according to which the biography of the author does not matter in the interpretation of a text, the author himself may have been completely aware of the fact that it is nearly necessary for a poet to experience extremities of life and states close to damnation in order to be capable of writing something that is more valuable and beautiful than any average piece of literature in the world, since the honest suffering of an artist may add something more to the value of the given work of art. In this sense, the meta-poetic character of “The Raven” and the concept of necessary poetic damnation can be connected with the 19th century French literary tradition called the *poète maudit* (accursed poet), also considering the

fact that Poe was nearly the contemporary of Charles Baudelaire, one of the French poets traditionally named *Les Poètes Maudites* and had a serious influence on several French symbolist poets. French Literary historian Pascal Brisette even states that Poe himself was one of the authors called by this name, despite the fact that he was American, just like John Keats, whose life and poetry also show features referring to damnation and cursedness (Brisette 36).

This way, the meta-poetic interpretation of “The Raven” and the introduction of the concept of *necessary poetic damnation* within the poem, for the sake of creating everlasting poetry, may seem to be a supportable approach that brings closer older traditional and postmodernist readings to each other, among the several other possible approaches and interpretations of this well-known poem written by one of the prominent canonised American poets of the 19th century.

Concluding Remarks

Literary historian Charles Feidelson Jr. claims that E. A. Poe was a poet who apparently seriously believed in the “physical power of words” (37). Making an attempt to examine probably one of his most prominent poetic works entitled “The Raven”, this statement may be seen justified. The complexity, the multi-layered character of the poem obviously proves to both literary critics and readers that the author might have been one of the prominent and most original poets within the history of American Literature.

In the present essay, I examined and explored the aspects of damnation within the poem. Examining only a few possible levels of interpretation from the point of view of damnation, it became clear that several possible ways of interpretation may prove to be acceptable, several ways that can even be seen as controversial approaches, yet somehow they complete each other, and together they constitute a whole. Damnation can be a process initiated by or a state carried by the Raven. Simultaneously, it can be seen as a state that is unchanged from the beginning, and the bird only makes the narrator realise that he has been in the state of damnation for long. Furthermore, beyond the loss of the beloved women, being a poet identical with being in the state of a kind of damnation also arises as a possible manner of interpreting “The Raven”

by Edgar Allan Poe. Different types of damnations are revolving within the same kaleidoscope, different levels of interpretation appear to be valid for the same poem, and these different approaches may present a complete picture about the poem as a whole. Damnation, state or process, poetic or just simply mental and emotional, is the very state within which the narrator of Poe's "The Raven" suffers, and the Raven itself is the physical embodiment, the incarnation of this damnation within the poem. By reading "The Raven", Edgar Allan Poe invites the reader to a journey, a journey to a world where damnation rules – but even if this poetic world of Poe is ruled by damnation, it is not to be forgotten that it is *poetic*. And this poetic quality is what gives a wonderful character to the gloomy and melancholic atmosphere created in "The Raven" by Poe, and via this poetic quality, the author becomes capable of making the reader experience different aspects and levels of damnation; but at the same time, he also saves the reader from this damnation, via "the physical power of words", as quoted above from literary historian Charles Feidelson Jr.

Certainly, the present essay, due to its extension, is not able to explore and discuss all possible dimensions of damnation within the poem. However, examining a possible leitmotif of it and offering a few possible approaches and levels of interpretation from a certain perspective, it may have highlighted a few main aspects of the complex and multi-layered character of "The Raven", which makes it a nearly legendary poem even at an international level and has been arresting the attention of several literary scholars and readers time and again in the past 160 years.

EDGAR ALLAN POE: *The Raven*

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -
Only this, and nothing more.'*

*Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; - vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow - sorrow for the lost Lenore -
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore -
Nameless here for evermore.*

*And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me - filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
'Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door -
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door; -
This it is, and nothing more,'*

*Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
'Sir,' said I, 'or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you' - here I opened wide the door; -
Darkness there, and nothing more.*

*Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, 'Lenore!'
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, 'Lenore!'
Merely this and nothing more.*

*Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.*

*'Surely,' said I, 'surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore -
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore; -
'Tis the wind and nothing more!'*

*Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door -
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door -
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.*

*Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
'Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,' I said, 'art sure no craven.
Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the nightly shore -
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'*

*Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning - little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door -
Bird or beast above the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as 'Nevermore.'*

*But the raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only,
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing further then he uttered - not a feather then he fluttered -
Till I scarcely more than muttered 'Other friends have flown before -
On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.'*

Then the bird said, `Nevermore.'

*Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
`Doubtless,' said I, `what it utters is its only stock and store,
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore -
Till the dirges of his hope that melancholy burden bore
Of "Never-nevermore."'*

*But the raven still beguiling all my sad soul into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird and bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore -
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking `Nevermore.'*

*This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,
But whose velvet violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o'er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore!*

*Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
`Wretch,' I cried, `thy God hath lent thee - by these angels he has sent thee
Respite - respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this lost Lenore!'
Quoth the raven, `Nevermore.'*

`Prophet!' said I, `thing of evil! - prophet still, if bird or devil! -

*Whether tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted -
On this home by horror haunted - tell me truly, I implore -
Is there - is there balm in Gilead? - tell me - tell me, I implore!
Quoth the raven, `Nevermore.'*

*`Prophet!' said I, `thing of evil! - prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us - by that God we both adore -
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.'*

*`Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!' I shrieked upstarting -
`Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken! - quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!
Quoth the raven, `Nevermore.'*

*And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted – nevermore!*

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Creation, Imagination and Metapoetry in “Kubla Khan”

—

An Essay on the Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Paradigmatic Poem

Introduction

Kubla Khan is one of the best-known works by the famous romantic English poet Samuel Taylor. Many interpretations of the poem are possible, different critics have represented completely different opinions about the message of the work in the past more than 200 years. The aim of the present essay is to approach the poem from one of the numerous points of view, within the frameworks of an in-depth analysis

One of the possible interpretations is *meta-poetry*; that is, poetry written about poetry itself. But before we attempt to explore in detail what motifs seem to support that that the poem is a kind of meta-poetic self-confession, it is worth having a glance at the circumstances under which the work was written, and what comments the author himself later added to it. Henceforth we attempt to summarize what biographical motivations played what roles in the creation of the poem, before we start the in-depth analysis and the exploration of the motifs referring to the meta-poetic character of the work.

Possible Biographical Motivations

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his poem called *Kubla Khan* in the autumn of 1797, allegedly in a farmhouse near Exmoor, but since it was published only in 1816, it seems to be probable that the author revised it several times before the publication. Coleridge himself claimed that the poem was inspired by and opium-induced dream, as it is implicitly referred to in the secondary title of the poem: *A Vision in a Dream*. Furthermore, it is also supposed that the imagery of the poem is partly inspired by Marco Polo’s reports about his journey to

China and the description of the area called “Shangdu” (which is identical with the poem’s spot called Xanadu), where Mongolian ruler Kubla Khan really used to have a palace in the 13th century. The description by Marco Polo was included in Samuel Purchas's book entitled *Pilgrimage* (Vol. XI, 231).

As Samuel Coleridge himself writes in his note to the poem:

“In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas's Pilgrimage...”

Since the poet himself commented on the composition of the work, it is really probable that he wrote, or at least started to write it under the influence of drugs, or the vision described in the poem was originally really caused by intoxication.

True, Coleridge commented on his own poem after it had been published, he himself gave no explicit interpretation about the message of the work. That is why the poem is debated by many critics, whether it is just a kind of visionary poetry without any kind of previously planned message, just in order to cause aesthetic pleasure to the reader, or although the author himself left no kind of explicit interpretation, there was an underlying conception behind the creation of the mysterious lines, and there is really a kind of very well-developed message under the surface.

From here, as mentioned above, after having a glance at the circumstances under which the work was supposedly composed, we will make an attempt to interpret the poem as a kind of meta-poetry, a poetic interpretation of poetry, art, and the assignment of the poet himself.

A Possible Interpretation of “Kubla Khan”

The poem is divided into three paragraphs by the author. It starts with the description of a wonderful palace built by Mongolian and Chinese ruler Kubla Khan in Xanadu, a

really existing geographical area situated in China. However strange it sounds, a loose historical background is observable behind the dream-like vision set into poetry, since the Khan was a real historical personality, and the palace described in the overture of the poem really existed in some form. Outside the visionary palace a holy river, the Alph is flowing into the dark, “sunless sea”, as Coleridge writes. Then the poem continues with the description of the “fertile grounds” near the palace, and it also turns out that the building is surrounded by ancient forests and hills. To sum it up, the first paragraph describes a historical, but at the same time seemingly supernatural and mythical, majestic world, dominated by Kubla Khan and his “pleasure dome”. This world seems to be a static picture where everything is unchanged, like a timeless, painting-life place, where the dimension of time does not exist, or at least it cannot be observed, a kind of empire of eternity. It must be mentioned that in the first paragraph the poetic speaker describes the sight as a spectator from outside, he is not an active character, is not present in the world where the dream-like settings exist.

However, in the second paragraph of the poem a drastic, dramatic change of view can be observed:

*“But oh ! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover !
A savage place ! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover !...”*

That is, a little further from the fairy-tale like, majestic and idyllic palace of the Khan the speaker describes a hell-like, mysterious and ominous environment, “a savage place”, which is beyond the boundaries of the area that is dominated by Kubla and his “pleasure dome”. Pagan-like, supernatural forces appear in the poem, breaking out from the depth, disturbing the idyll of the world outlined in the first paragraph. A source of a fountain is described that feeds a river that floods through trees and rocks, and this river finally inundates Kubla’s gardens. As the last lines of the second paragraph describe:

*“And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!”*

That is, as the water inundates Kubla Khan’s wonderful domain, the ruler hears voices, “ancestral voices”, supposedly the voice of the spirits of his ancestors, who remind him that the flood is just a kind of prognostication, and he will soon have to face war against something or someone. Summarising it, the second paragraph is a kind of contrast to the first, in which the destruction, the annihilation of the idyllic and seemingly perfect land described by the first paragraph is outlined. However perfect and visionary the domain of Kubla Khan was, it was destroyed by a flood, probably motivated by mysterious, supernatural forces that might have been envious of the Khan’s power, as he was a mortal human, despite what he had possessed and what he had achieved, he could not reach as much power as certain supernatural forces, maybe gods who punished him for having wanted too much.

In the third, last paragraph of the poem the speaker continues to describe what happened after the palace was destructed by the flood, he claims that:

*“The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves ;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice !”*

That is, the shadow of the dome was reflected by the water, and in vain it got destroyed, some kind of wonderful sight emerged from the water, and in some form the palace (and possibly the ruler himself) re-created itself (and himself) in another dimension of existence.

Finally, suddenly the poetic speaker shifts into first person singular, starts to narrate in a much more personal voice, appears as not a simple narrator, but as a kind

of character of the poem. As Coleridge writes: “In a vision once I saw...”, that is, the speaker acknowledges in a way that all that he described in the first two paragraphs was a kind of poetic vision, as was the “Abyssinian maid” playing a dulcimer mentioned in the further lines of the poem. The speaker claims that if he had the capability to recall the music played by the mysterious maid, than he would be able to reconstruct Kubla Khan’s visionary palace from mere music, and he would be able to become as enormous and powerful as Kubla Khan himself. The very last lines of the poem:

*“And all should cry, Beware ! Beware !
His flashing eyes, his floating hair !
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.”*

That is, it is described how powerful and fearful the poetic speaker himself would become if he were able to reconstruct the palace and gain the power of Kubla Khan. A possible interpretation is that he could even become one with Kubla Khan in some kind of supernatural, timeless dimension, he himself could become the mythical ruler.

Concluding Remarks – Meta-poetry in the Poem

The poetic speaker himself could become much more than he is in mortal, human reality, and if we attempt to interpret the poem as a kind of meta-poetry, a work about the creative power of poets, we might even risk the statement that Samuel Taylor Coleridge (and all other great poets in his world view) are all Kubla Khans, who have the power to create and dominate within the world of imagination. Since the poem itself is a mixture of dream and vision, as the author himself claimed, everything is possible in the world described in it. Although Kubla Khan is the powerful ruler of a seemingly perfect and dream-like world, he has to face the destruction of his domain, but somehow all of it resurrects in a new form. Poets, who are all creators and rulers of

their own imaginary worlds, may have to face the destruction of what is important to them. But on the other hand, if they are real artist, they have the power the re-create their own worlds, their own works of art, even if they are destructed time by time. But no matter how many times one's imaginary world is destructed, the eternal power of art is somehow outside the dimension of time, and poets must be able to possess this kind of power. The destruction of Kubla Khan's palace and the flood can also be interpreted as the destructive power of time that shows no mercy towards anything mortal. But since the Khan / the poet (?) is a man of exceptional artistic abilities, he has the power and the courage to fight against time and resurrect from total destruction and finally reach a kind of eternity via his creative power and works of art.

Since the search for eternity and the cult of geniuses were amongst the key characteristics of the period of the Romantics, Coleridge's poem may be read as a kind of *romantic guideline* for poets, a meta-poetic work that reminds artists that eternity can be reached if they are really talented enough and brave enough to fight against the destructive power of time and human mortality, not merely as a vision-dream-like poem that perhaps causes aesthetical pleasure to the all-time reader, but its real message is hard or even impossible to decode.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: *Kubla Khan*

Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled round;

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,

*Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.*

*But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!*

A damsel with a dulcimer

*In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

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The Illusion of Immediacy – Medial Aspects of Paul Celan’s Poetry

Introduction

In the present research paper I intend to examine one of the very important aspect of Paul Celan’s poetry – namely *mediality*, the problems of mediality and immediacy, highlighting how the problem of *mediatedness* by media and the impossibility of immediacy, and the fight against the medial nature of the world appear in several works by the poet.

Nowadays, we may speak about a number of types of media, that is why I think that it is worth examining poems that permit interpretations from the direction of mediality. First and foremost, perhaps it is worth investigating what Paul Celan could think about one of the most primordial media that were also considered an imperfect means of communication even in the age of the poet – a few words about language.

Language as Medium by Paul Celan

Paul Celan’s view about language is very controversial, and it has a dual nature. On the one hand, the poet wished to demolish the limits of human language considered as an imperfect medium for communication; on the other hand, Celan’s poetry permits an interpretation according to which he wanted to create a new poetic language that is beyond the human language used in everyday communication, even if not ceasing, but perhaps somehow reducing the mediatedness and mediality of the world. To illustrate this view of human language, one of the author’s well-known, programme-like poems entitled *Sprachgitter – Speech-Grille* may serve as a good example, in which Celan makes an effort to cease the limits of human language:

JOHN FELSTINER’S ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

“Speech-Grille

Eyes round between the bars.

Flittering lid,
paddles upward,
breaks a glance free.
Iris, the swimmer, dreamless and drab:
Heaven, heartgray, must be near.”

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

“Sprachgitter

Augenrund zwischen den Stäben.

Flimmertier Lid
rudert nach oben,
gibt einen Blick frei.

Iris, Schwimmerin, traumlos und trüb:
der Himmel, herzgrau, muß nah sein.”

Metaphors – at least according to Celan’s concept – increase the distance between two subjects; that is, they increase the mediatedness by language, and it may be the metaphorical nature of language because of which there can be no clear communication mediating messages over the everyday language. If we have a glance at the lines cited above, we may see that the poetic images lack the reference to something, which would be the gist of the traditional definition of metaphor. As it is mentioned by Celan himself, it was the above poem in which he tried to conceive that he was bored with the permanent hide-and-seek game with metaphors. (Felstiner 1995:

106-107) Although the American monographer of the poet John Felstiner writes that at the time of writing *Speech-Grille*, in 1957 Celan did not yet completely cease the use of metaphors in his poems, but he did his best to divide them into an internal and an external reality. This way, symbolically, the mediatedness by language is not ceased, but it may be decreased, and words are perhaps able to speak to the reader in a more immediate way.

Celan's fight against metaphors may be read as an experiment of the clearance of the language and the decrease of the mediatedness by language to some degree (Mihálycsa 1999). In the poems written later than *Speech-Grille* the words do not function as metaphors, do not refer to anything, only *stand* alone, constituting poetic realities (Bartók 2009: 29). The wish to clear language from metaphors also appears in one of Celan's late, fairly known poem entitled *Ein Dröhnen – A rumbling*:

JOHN FELSTINER'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

A RUMBLING: it is
Truth itself
walked among
men,
amidst the
metaphor squall.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

EIN DRÖHNEN: es ist
die Wahrheit selbst
unter die Menschen
getreten,
mitten ins
Metapherngestöber.

That is, human language is not more for Celan than a *metaphor squall*, a chaotic medium lacking any sort of system. Some transcendent *Truth* walks down, among men amidst this chaotic squall of metaphors, and it may make us remember Nietzsche's theory about metaphors (Kiss 2003 : 112). According to Nietzsche – and it is no novelty for Linguistics – even linguistic commonplaces are metaphorical. Thinking after Celan, the language of our everyday life is an inadequate medium to mediate unambiguous information, because it is too medial and mediated. May there be *Truth* only if we conceive it in a language that is free of metaphors? The question evidently has no adequate answer, but based on Celan's above poem it may seem that a language cleared from metaphors could be able to express truths, and the cessation of *metaphoricalness* may decrease the multiple mediatedness and mediality of human pronunciations and experiences.

In some of Celan's poems, the poet perhaps tries to demolish, or at least by-pass the excessive mediatedness of human language by the method that certain poems are not written in one of the concrete national languages, but the poet borrowed words from different foreign languages – that is, it is hard to establish in which language the given poem speaks, unless we do not count the words of different languages on a statistical basis. The poem entitled *In Eins – In One*, or at least the beginning verses of the poem can be a good example to this tendency:

JOHN FELSTINER'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

'In One

Thirteenth February. In the heart's mouth an
awakaned shibboleth. With you,
People
de Paris. *No pasarán.*''

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

„IN EINS

Dreizehnter Feber. Im Herzmund
erwachtes Schibboleth. Mit dir,
Peuple
de Paris. *No pasarán.*”

The above extract was originally written in German (the English translation of the German elements also tends to cease the borders between languages), but foreign expressions can be found in it nearly in the same proportion. The word *shibboleth* (originally meaning river, but in the Bible it was a secret tribal password used at border-crossing) is from Hebrew, the expression *Peuple de Paris* (people of Paris) is from French, while the expression *No pasarán* (they will not break through) is borrowed from Spanish. As for the poem, Derrida says that in the text a border-crossing takes place between different languages (Derrida 1994: 23-24). Although there is no doubt that the text of the above extract *is* a pronunciation in human languages, it is not easy to define in *which* language the poem speaks. The cessation of the medium of a concrete human language can also be interpreted as a poetic experiment to cease, or at least decrease mediality and mediatedness.

It may also seem that Celan’s poetry treats the natural human language as a disaster (Lacoue-Labarthe 1996: 193-213). The poetic word wishes to demolish the limits constituted by the language of the everyday life, and necessarily, it wants to transgress these limits. The non-conventional words of Celan’s poems and their new, surprising meanings also serve as the basis of this intention, since Celan ignores the earlier forms of poetic behaviour, and experiments to re-define the concept of *poeticness*.

There can also be a radical notion according to which poetry is not else but the cessation of language itself, and poetry *takes place* at the spot where language is already absent (Lacoue-Labarthe 1996: 199-200). This language certainly does not mean natural language, since if the poetic word is an autonomous entity, then poetry is not else but the liberations from limits. When the word *takes place*, that is, it is

pronounced, the continuous speech is suspended, and the word as an autonomous entity rises above the system of the language, in a similar sense to Hölderlin's notion of *caesure* and *clear word* (Reines Wort). Celan's compound words created only in poetic constellations exist outside natural language; therefore, they may be treated as *clear words*. Poetry is constituted by the word that testifies human *being* and *presence*. This type of word is called by Celan *counter-word* (Gegenwort) in his speech called *Meridian*, after Georg Büchner's drama *Danton's Death* (Paul Celan 1996). Poetry's intention is to pronounce existence, mainly human being within it. The gist of the pronunciation of existence is that although poetry cannot reverse the tragedy of the imperfection of human language and man's scepticism about language, but at least it writes down and archives the tragedy of language (Lacoue-Labarthe 1996).

Despite the fact that language can be experienced as a tragedy, it may seem that written, mainly literary texts and poetry is trying to fight against the extreme mediality and language's tendency to distance subjects from each other. Language may lose its accentuated role and become one medium among many, and maybe it is language's main tragedy (Lőrincz 2003 : 164). That is why I think that it is worth examining how written texts are represented in Celan's poetry as media.

Writing as Medium in Paul Celan's poetry

Writing and written texts, literary texts within them are recurring motifs in Paul Celan's poetry, and writing seems to appear a somewhat clearer medium than any other one.

Thinking with Gadamer, knowing Celan's cycle called *Atemkristall – Breath-crystall* the poem can be the medium of the encounter of "I" and "You" (Gadamer 1993). Although a poem is a medium consisting of language, the written text is evidently beyond the spoken language, since it is more imperishable – and at the same time, more material. This materiality, however, implies that a written text can place itself outside of its own historical existence, and a literary work may become a classical work (Gadamer 1984) that is historical, past and present at the same time – a material, that is, mediated entity, but at the same time existing outside the dimension of time, becoming immediate and in some sense transcendent.

Derrida highlights the primacy of the medium of writing and, despite the Saussurean paradigm, its original nature that may have existed even before the appearance of language (Derrida 1991: 21-113). For Celan as a poet, writing is evidently a primary medium, several poems by author refer to it, and although he apparently does not believe in the exquisite capability of mediation of language, following Derrida's thoughts it is imaginable that poetry / poetic texts can function as media beyond the spoken language, as according to Derrida writing can express any message much more clearly than a spoken text.

Poetry is the possible medium of the expression of superior messages. The truth value of these messages may remain undistorted, and beyond all of this we may think about non-linguistic, electronic and optical media, to which Celan's well-known poem entitled *Fadensonnen – Threadsuns* may refer (I will deal with it in detail later on).

One of Celan's late poems entitled *Das Wort Zur-Tiefe-Gehn – The word of in-depth-going* can also be interesting for us, since it contains strong references to the motif of writing:

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

THE WORD OF IN-DEPTH-GOING

that we have read.

The years, the words, since then.

We are still the same.

You know, the space is endless,
you know, you do not need to fly,
you know, what wrote itself in your eyes,
deepens the depths to us.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

DAS WORT VOM ZUR-TIEFE-GEHN

das wir gelesen haben.

Die Jahre, die Worte seither.

Wir sind es noch immer.

Weißt du, der Raum ist unendlich,
weißt du, du brauchst nicht zu fliegen,
weißt du, was sich in dein Aug schrieb,
vertieft uns die Tiefe.

In the closing lines of the poem something is *written*, writes itself to the poetic addressee, and this undefined entity *deepens the depths* (vertieft ... die Tiefe); that is, it is able to open up deeper spheres of sense. Eye is the medium of sight – based on the last verse of the poem above, we may conclude that writing, written text is a phenomenon that *written in the eyes of someone* is able to mediate messages that may not be mediated by spoken language. The writing of the text into the eye is an important motif, because one decodes any text through one's eye. Writing, written texts are primarily optical media which we are able to decode based on our sight.

We may even risk the statement that human life is organised by linearity and continuity because of the continuity of phonetic writing systems (McLuhan 1962: 47). Starting from this thesis of McLuhan we may presume an opposition between verbal and written culture, just like between visual and acoustic media.

Certainly, it is worth mentioning that one of the monographers of McLuhan completely doubts that writing would be a primarily visual medium, since it can operate as a reflected sight if the reader, for example, reads foreign texts, and these times he or she comprehends the meaning of the text without decoding the form (Miller 1971: 10). The phonetic alphabet does not only separate the sight and the sound, but also separates each meaning from the phonemes signed by the letters, which results in meaningless letters referring to meaningless phonemes (McLuhan 1962).

Considering the same problem, we may cite George Steiner, according to whom the system of the phonetic alphabet and the printing that uses moveable letters based on it are not metaphysical inventions that are able to express transcendent messages – the reasons for their inventions is to be sought in the linear structures of the syntax of Indo-European languages (Steiner 1998: 253-257). However, this way writing would be degraded to a completely material level, while literature and literary texts may be able to express transcendent messages, even if the medium containing the message is physically tangible. As McLuhan states it, it is possible that writing makes texts uniform, but this uniformity concerns only the physical appearance, the medium of the work of art, but the artwork itself is able to remain unique.

Among others Walter J. Ong deals with the history and spread of printing and with the dominance of sight that in the history of humanity gradually replaced the dominance of hearing (Ong 1998: 245-269). Due to printing one has a different relation to texts already written by someone, since although handwritten texts counted as irreproducible, unique objects, in some cases artworks created by their author, printed texts are distanced from their author, are uniform in some sense, and can be reproduced in an unlimited number. Speaking about lyric poetry this revolution can lead to the conclusion that certain literary texts are able to mediate their complete message only in a printed form – for example, let us just think of the typographic image poems by E. E. Cummings. Apart from handwritten texts, printed texts can be treated as finished works, since they cannot be written any further. As for Paul Celan's poetry, it may have importance in the case of the late, hermetic poems by the author – these short poems consisting only of a few lines or words in many cases, are evidently finished texts, as for their printed form. In Celan's work even punctuation marks play an important role and may modify the opportunities of interpretation. Some poems, as Derrida emphasises, are even *dated*, and the appearance of the date in some editions below the printed poem may also accentuate their finished character (Derrida 1994: 3-74).

Gadamer emphasises that written, literary texts can have some specific truth value. According to the traditional definitions, a text is poetic if it lacks the factor justifying the truth value of the utterance (Gadamer 1994: 188-201). Literary / poetic

texts can be adequately *heard* only by the so-called interior ear. However, when Gadamer speaks about the interpretation of an artwork, he metaphorises it as *reading*. All artworks in the world must be *read* so that they should become *present* in the Heideggerian sense. As for Paul Celan's poems, we may state that a poetic text always carries some message and has some truth value – even if in a negative way. In Celan's case, the message is perhaps pronounced by its *withdrawal*, its negative form of pronunciation. In the 20th century literature a new norm of truth appeared that belongs to the essence of poetry (Gadamer 1994: 200). Celan's poems tell the truth to the reader in a way that by their hermetism, hard interpretability and self-enclosed nature *withdraw* themselves from the reader and from the word. The truth is expressed in a negative form, seemingly withdrawing itself from the poem, not explicitly stating itself. Connected to the metaphor according to which the whole understanding of the world is not else but *reading*, it may be worth having a glance at one of Celan's late poems entitled *Unlesbarkeit – Illegible*:

JOHN FELSTINER'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

ILLEGIBLE this
world. Everything doubled.

Staunch clocks
confirm the split hour,
hoarsely.

You, clamped in your depths,
climb out of yourself
for ever.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

UNLESBARKEIT dieser

Welt. Alles doppelt.

Die starken Uhren
geben der Spaltstunde recht,
heiser.

Du, in dein Tiefstes geklemmt,
entsteigst dir
für immer.

Based on this poem the *illegibility of the world* means that things, phenomena of the world in their complex relations cannot or can hardly be interpreted, understood in any way. The nature of all phenomena is *doubled*, on the one hand, they are visible and tangible, but there must be some hidden essence behind everything – and this hidden essence, this *behind* is not reachable or tangible. The only way to *read* the world, says Celan poem, may be that the subject should *climb out of oneself*, alienates oneself from one's own identity. In the state of this ecstasy one may experience the world in a more immediate, deeper way, at least in the world of Celan's poem. It is, certainly, only one of the possible interpretations of the poem above, and it can be acceptable only in a poetic context, since it contradicts the hermeneutical principle according to which no form of understanding is possible without mediation and mediality.

Perhaps it is an acceptable reading of the text that literature, the literary text is some kind of partaking in some experience that would otherwise finally deny us itself. The art of the past, due to mediality and material representation, may serve the needs of the men of the present (Stierle 1996: 286). Following Gadamer, it is possible only through media – one cannot step out of historical time, and one's existence in time has its end. Certain artworks can become permanent within time, becoming classic works, and – even if it is not an adequate statement within scientific frameworks – they may place themselves out of space and time, becoming eternal.

Literary text can be an eminent example of the phenomenon when something is not an answer to some question, but the representation of real things within imaginary frames. Lyric poetry may be the best example of the often debated relationship of artworks and media. Poetry can also be interpreted as the transgression between the schemas of literary genres (Stierle 1996: 270). A literary text through the written / printed material mediates much more towards the reader than just itself. The “You” appearing in lyric poems, the addressee of a given text can always refer to several subjects, can have an inter-subjective character. Considering Celan’s late poems often referring to themselves, it can be an interpretation that not simply the poetic speaker speaks to the reader / addressee, but the text becomes the speaker itself, and this way, the degree of mediatedness between speaker and addressee may be reduced. Even if the text of a poem is a phenomenon of language, something mediated by the medium of language, the artwork-character and literariness of the work fills the whole medium. After McLuhan’s notion, in a poem the message and the medium may be able to become one, and speak to the addressee in a more immediate and less mediated manner, even if mediality cannot be completely ceased. However, it seems that poetry, and in the present case Celan’s hermetic poetry makes an attempt to cease the mediated nature of reality.

Possible References to Optical and Electronic Media in Celan’s Poetry in the Mirror of the Poem Fadensonnen – Threadsuns

As stated above, writing, written and printed texts can be treated as optical media, it is only a question of approach. Paul Celan’s poems permit the interpretation according to which written texts may be considered as a kind of primary medium, at least for the poet, and written texts are able to mediate and archive information and meanings which are lost or incompletely mediated in spoken language.

One of the fairly well-known poems by Celan may refer among others to the technicalising culture and optical and electronic media of our present. This poem is called *Fadensonnen – Threadsuns*.

JOHN FELSTINER’S ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

THREADSUNS

over the grayblack wasteness.

A tree-

high thought

strikes the light-tone: there are

still songs to sing beyond

humankind.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

FADENSONNEN

über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.

Ein baum-

hoher Gedanke

greift sich den Lichtton: es sind

noch Lieder zu singen jenseits

der Menschen.

The above poem, similarly to other minimalist and hermetic poems by Celan, permits several possible interpretations, even if the number of possible readings is not endless. The text consisting of only seven lines turned the attention of literary scholars to itself a number of times during its history of reception.. We may presume that the text speaks about not more than the transcendent character of poetry, and the *songs to sing beyond humankind* refer to transcendent meanings that cannot be mediated by everyday language, only by art, namely poetry (Gadamer 1997: 112). In parallel the poem permits an ironic interpretation, according to which nothing more exists *beyond humankind*, reaching the transcendent in any way is impossible, and the poetic speaker is only thinking about it in an ironic manner (Kiss 2003: 175-177), and this way under no circumstances can we take the statement of the last line serious.

The phrase *beyond humankind* and the songs sung there / from there may refer to the transcendent, metaphysical world beyond the visible universe (either the world of platonic ideas or the underworld in the religious sense), but it is also possible that this *beyond* is to be understood in time, in an age from where *humankind* has already disappeared in the physical sense.

Is it possible that Celan's poem does not only refer to mystical, transcendent entities and meanings, but also to the quickly evolving technical media of the poet's own age? It cannot be decided whether this interpretation is legitimate or arbitrary, but if we read Celan's poetry from the direction of mediality and mediatedness, it can evidently prove an interesting approach.

Examining the opening line of the poem the poetic text makes the reader *see threadsuns* (the sun's radiation through the clouds?) over a certain *grayblack wasteness*. A landscape is presented to the reader; that is, the poetic text is based on the sight, the imaginary sight created by the power of the words before the eyes of the reader. As we read the text further, we may *read a tree-high human thought that strikes the light-tone*, which is an acoustic and optical medium at the same time. Light-tone, as John Felstiner translates it, *Lichtton* in German is not Celan's neologism, but an existing technical term used in film-making; that is, the name of an optical medium.

The technique called *Lichtton*, namely *Lichttonverfahren* in German, translated in English as *sound-on-film* (apart from Felstiner's possible misunderstanding / poetic interpretation of the text) refers to one of the oldest film-making technologies. It implies a class of [sound film](#) processes where the sound accompanying picture is physically recorded onto photographic film, usually, but not always, the same strip of film carrying the picture, and this process did not count as a very new technology even in Celan's age, in the middle of the 20th century. As the poem suggests, the human thought is *recorded on film* – mediated by light, an optical medium, and sound, an acoustic medium at the same time. The dual usage of these media may also make us remember the more developed technical media of the present days, for example DVD-player, television or the multi-medial, virtual world of the internet. Is it possible that this *striking* of the *light-tone* is, as a matter of fact, equal to the *songs beyond*

humankind? The mystery of the connection between the opening and the closing lines of the poem may be solved by this interpretation.

Medial cultural techniques and the incredibly quick development of electronic technical media in the 20th century provided completely new types of experience to people, and in the modern age it also led to the radical change and re-formation of poetry (Ernő Kulcsár Szabó 2004: 166-178). Mechanical archiving systems and discourse networks were invented, discourses multiplied themselves, and it is not clear at all to whom messages – if we can still speak about messages at all – are addressed in the seemingly chaotic context of human culture that is mediated multiple times. Medial changes also caused changes in the field of literature, and Celan's poem which has been interpreted many times, may be considered as the imprint of these changes.

It is Friedrich Kittler who states that no sense is possible without some kind of physical carrier, medium; that is, our human world and culture are necessarily mediated and medial. However, the notion of noise introduced by Shannon nearly always enters the process of mediation, disturbing factors never can be excluded (Kittler 2005: 455-474). Poetry is maybe one of the clearest manifestations of language, a use of language that in principle should not be disturbed by any noise. The gist of poetry is that it creates its elements as self-referential elements, and it was the well-known model of communication by Jakobson that increased the distance between sign and noise as large as possible. Poetry is a medium, a form of communication that defends itself against disturbing factors called *noises*. If we consider the hermetic poetics of Celan's works and their wish to place themselves out of space and time, out of all networks that can be disturbed by noises, then it can be interpreted as a wish for a kind of immediacy.

Despite all of this, nowadays, numberless kinds of noise shadow the communication in our culture. Today noise can also be technically manipulated, and it is even used to mediate secret, encoded messages, as it can be observed in secret technologies of military communication (Kittler 2005). The relationship between noise and sign has been gradually blurred since it became possible to manipulate their relationship and since the mathematically based communication systems became able to change the nature of noise. It may even lead to the conclusion that it is not certain at

all that the addressee of certain messages can be called *man*. By and large it seems to be compatible with the possible interpretation of Celan's poem according to which the addressee of the songs that are sung *beyond humankind* we necessarily cannot call man / human.

The conquest of the electronic and optical media and the strong tendency of technicalisation in our society make it possible to conclude that we can gain knowledge about our own senses only via media. Art and technical media can serve the goal to deceive human senses. The technical media of our days, similarly to Celan's poetry and the poems cited above, create fictional worlds, illusion. Furthermore, in some cases this illusion may be so perfect that even the definition of *reality* becomes questionable (Kittler 2005: 7-40). These medium are first and foremost optical, and only secondly acoustic, since for the man of the present day the sight, the vision is becoming more and more primary.

Optical and electronic media, compared to the historical past, treat symbolic contents in a completely new manner. While the human body in its own materiality still belongs to the (physical) reality, media are more and more becoming the embodiment of the imaginary, the unreal existence and bring this unreality closer and closer to man. Paul Celan's poem cited above may also turn our attention to this tendency. Perhaps it is worth speaking about technicalisation and the new types of media in a neutral manner, not judging them, but the extreme presence of technology in our society and the possible disappearance of *humankind* as such, the message, the songs *beyond humankind* in a temporal sense may be a fearsome thought. We are not to forget that the poem entitled *Fadensonnen* speaks about a *grayblack wasteness* (a landscape burnt to ashes?), a deserted waste land, in which we may see only a *thought striking the light-tone* – but no human being. Due to the extreme presence of technology in the (material) human culture, certain phenomena can be liberated that cannot be dominated by man anymore. Celan's poem, and the possible negative utopia that it suggests can be read as a warning. Citing Georg Simmel, the tragedy of human culture (mainly in terms of mental values) is in the fact that after a while it may cease itself – man means the greatest danger to oneself, and not some external factor. (Simmel 1999: 75-93).

The Illusion of Immediacy

We may presume a tendency in Paul Celan's poetry according to which the poetic texts intend to cease, or at least decrease mediatedness and mediality, mainly the medium that has been proved to be imperfect for communication by these days: language. However, if art is not able to overcome the mediatedness by language, then it may experience to withdraw itself from all systems and laws of human world, creating its own reality. As it was mentioned above, art frequently mediates the world of the imaginary.

As if some of Celan's poems also tended to make art completely *privative*, ceasing or defying mediality and mediatedness by resigning from any type of mediation. Poems do not *mediate* anything more, only *stand* in themselves, beyond everyone and everything. This intention may be conceived in the late poem entitled *Stehen – To stand*.

JOHN FELSTINER'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

TO STAND, in the shadow
of a scar in the air.

Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.
Unrecognized,
for you,
alone.

With all that has room within it,
even without
language.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

STEHEN im Schatten

des Wundenmals in der Luft.

Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn.

Unerkannt,

für dich

allein.

Mit allem, was darin Raum hat,

auch ohne

Sprache.

The poem places itself out of the dimension of time – it is also testified by the infinitive form of the first word of the text, lacking grammatical aspect or tense. This *standing* does not take place sometime, even the *where* of the poem (*in the shadow of a scar in the air*) is questionable. We may not even state that it is some poetic speaker who *stands* – no more speaker, no more subject exists, it is merely the poem itself that withdraws itself from everywhere, into its own reality where nothing else exists beside it. This standing is also imaginable *even without language*, as the poem says – no more language, no more medium is necessary anymore, since nothing more is mediated. McLuhan's statement according to which all media contain another medium (McLuhan 1964) is suspended in this poetic context, since the poem refers to only itself without mediating any linguistic or non-linguistic message, placing itself out of technical media, meanings, or anything tangible. From outside the poem is not graspable anymore, and anything can be valid only in its enclosed world. This way, the enclosed and seemingly unreachable world is able to create the illusion of immediacy, lacking any kind of mediation and mediality. Certainly, we can ask the question how understanding is possible if the poem speaks merely within its own reality, mediating, carrying no more meaning. This statement is evidently valid only within imaginary, artistic, poetic frameworks, and just for a certain time, since the reader, nevertheless, is

granted something from the poetic world of the poem defining itself unreachable and free of mediation by reading and interpreting the text, at least receiving the splinters of this poetic reality, remaining at the level of intuition and suspicion, even if complete understanding does not seem possible anymore.

Essentially, the same idea of the cessation of mediality may be conceived in one of Celan's last poems entitled *Schreib dich nicht – Don't write yourself*:

JOHN FELSTINER'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

DON'T WRITE YOURSELF

in between worlds,

rise up against
multiple meanings,

trust the trail of tears
and learn to live.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

SCHREIB DICH NICHT

zwischen die Welten,

komm auf gegen
der Bedeutungen Vielfalt,

vertrau der Tränenspur
und lerne leben.

In the above poem the metaphor of understanding the world as *reading* repeatedly appears – the poetic speaker / the poem itself calls itself on not *writing itself between worlds*; that is, it should not take the role of the medium or experiment to mediate anything between the different dimensions of existence, for example between man and man, subject and subject, since due to the *illegibility of the world* and the extreme mediatedness the exact mediation of meanings is maybe impossible. The tragedy of language – and of other media – is in the fact that after a while they tend to eliminate themselves. Human culture evidently needs media (Pfeiffer 2005: 11-49), and medium can even be the synonym for art in certain contexts. However, a question arises: what sense does it have to try to mediate anything, if nothing can be perfectly mediated? Certain pieces of Paul Celan's oeuvre lead to the conclusion that they give up the intention of any form of mediation. The poem *rises up against multiple meanings* and does not intend to mediate anything from the chaotic and dubious flow of meanings, departing to a lonely travel (Celan 1996) and reach a world where mediatedness and mediation is no more necessary. This world is concealed within the poem itself. The poem can only trust *the trail of tears* – the tears shed for the pain of the lack of immediacy and the multiple mediatedness of the world. The poem can *learn to live* only if it reaches the self-enclosed state of immediacy, standing for itself alone, where it is not exposed to language or any other technical medium. Certainly, this poetic withdrawal is only illusory, yet for a moment, perhaps, we may feel as if the experience of immediacy became possible.

It may be an interesting observation that after the gloomy decades of the linguistic scepticism the desire for immediacy gradually recurs in the discourse of literature and literary studies of the present days (Kulcsár-Szabó 2003: 272-307), as it also seems to appear in some of Paul Celan's late poems. Although we know well that our culture and all human experience are originally mediated, and mediality belongs to the essence of human existence, the immediate experience of phenomenon seems to be impossible, it is good to hope that somehow it is possible to bypass mediality. Art and poetry within it as a way of speaking clearer and perhaps more immediate than everyday language – as Celan's poetry intending to demolish linguistic limits – may

grant us the hope that we can experience certain phenomena in an immediate way, accessing their substance.

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