

## Writing in Vain

*“Literature’s ideal has been the following: to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing.”  
– Blanchot, Literature and the Right to Death<sup>1</sup>*

Satan is an eccentric gentleman, damned forever to act in vain, yet to signify by the very activity of failure a revolution that would be unpresent in the world without him. So is the artist, his doom an incessant attempt of uttering the unutterable, to word the inability of wording the world. Satan and artist are one in their vain attempt of performing the impossible, to realise possibilities of their being that are beyond normal control, that are on the edge of existence and directly oppose rules unalterable. Their only chance and sole alternative is to cheat the rules: to transgress the border without actually crossing it. Now, the trick is called “Kunst” in German, which literally means “art”.

But what is the trick in their cunning operation? How is it possible to cheat reality, to realise possibilities of one’s being which are in fact not given – or at least not given in any straightforward sense. Negation is the key to the enigma of art. Both Satan and the artist succeed in their spectacular failure, precisely because their failure is so spectacular, so radical. Thereby their vain effort becomes a sign itself, signifying the absence of what was intended. As without direct intention on the absolute even their failure is impossible. Such is their tragedy: they have to struggle utterly in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, ed. Sitney, Adams P., trans. Davis, Lydia. New York: Station Hill Press, 1981 : 324. Trans. of "Littérature et le droit à la mort," *La Part du feu*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1949.

fail utterly, that is, for their utter failure to be transformed into an utterance that will utter forth what they themselves are incapable of saying. The act of art is a failure that in the final analysis shows properties of success. It is not the Thing itself, but it is capable of producing the trace of the Thing, a definite and definitive negative absence of the Thing. It is unable to produce a cat, nevertheless it produces a non-cat, which is definitely different from a non-dog.<sup>2</sup>

Why Satan? Because Satan is not omnipotent, yet he reigns over the world, while the artist is not omniscient, yet he reigns over the word. What is this special kinship between the two? Both aim at the absolute, both endeavour to devour it, both work against the reign of God and their business is Death. In their works Satan and artist establish their own kingdoms within, yet directly opposed to the bubble of reality. Powerless to break the rules, they negate order within the system, so much the worst. They turn to terrorism as they are powerless to wage war. The artist's word is within the world, yet by wording the world it falls prey to his terrorist imagination. "Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven" says Satan in *Paradise Lost*. For Milton, also, the Fall appears as the fall into language, as the inevitable consequence of an opposition with God. The rebel is imprisoned yet unsilenced. Act suppressed, he is forced into the fiction. Here again Blanchot is profound and subtle in his remark that "Sade is the par excellence writer."

But I am entitled to concern myself with Poe, and for no arbitrary reason did I talk about Satan and the artist. Poe's self-conscious prose is a prime example of what Blanchot calls "Revolutionary writing", and what is, after all, all literature worth the name. With Poe it is always wise to start with the empirical events in his texts, as they tend to parallel the event of art itself. Almost exclusively all his characters are avatars of Satan. "Satan is an eccentric gentleman, damned forever to act in vain, yet to

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<sup>2</sup> Blanchot's example.

signify by the very activity of failure a revolution that would be unrepresentative in the world without him.” The Masque of the Red Death is a wonderful apropos for summoning some of the sinister chief characters of the short stories. Prospero himself is Satan personified, his best colours black and red like the hue of the lake of fire. His self-created pocket-world displays all the features of the Pandemonium of Satan: a realm in direct opposition with the outer world, of which there is no escape, and the master of the realm is almost omnipotent. It is a place heavy with the faith in the impossibility of death, but also a place of seclusion from the world of the mortal. It is Hell and language at the same time. Language is the poet’s Pandemonium, it seems. Characters in fiction are unable to die, yet unable to live amongst the mortal. What they can do is to haunt the land of the living as the throng of the Masque haunts the traveller in the valley. Anyone passing into the haunted valley of a book is prone to the imagination of the writer, as reflected by the Masque held in the castle of language, and is easily absorbed by the “vast forms that move fantastically”, and the mass of fantasy characters, while the “hideous throng rush out forever, and laugh – but smile no more.” Anyone opening a poetic book and thus creating the valley risks the possibility that words will work no more for her: that meaning and referentiality dissolve in the music – the sound – of language. “Laugh – but smile no more.” Words will say themselves but fail to mean anymore. It is one kind of spectacular failure, commonly achieved by Poe even in his prose writing. On the other hand what do we make of the absence of the smile? For Hegel, naming is killing.<sup>3</sup> Death is the business of the writer just as the Devil. Let’s follow Balázs Béla and Brown here.<sup>4</sup> They say with ardent faith: in art there is no death, but art is the land beyond death: the land of Satan. The boundaries of the land of art are defined by death, just as of all things, but

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<sup>3</sup> Kojève, Alexandre. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. New York: Basic Books, 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Balázs, Béla. *Halálesztétika* [Death Aesthetics]. Budapest: Papyrus, 1907.

Brown, Arthur A. *Literature and the Impossibility of Death: "Berenice"*. Berkeley: UCP, 1995.

<http://www.ucpress.edu/scan/ncl-free/504/articles/brown.art504.html>

in a more peculiar manner. The sole act of naming commits the suicidal fact and after the event there is no death any more. Now, perhaps, smile is the smile of death, of which words are deprived of. More precisely smile is the smile of death on the body of the thing, of which the thing is deprived when it passes into the abstract area of language, so much so as the soul leaving its rightful place to reside in Hedas. That is how Blanchot can speak about “the immense hecatomb” that precedes language.

But back to the Masque. Observe that no matter how profoundly Prospero acts to counter the Red Death, he acts in vain. He acts in vain because he is the Red Death. Satan is failure itself: he was created out of failure. First, failure to love Christ, son of God, and second, failure to overthrow the kingdom of God. Tragically, as his nature is failure he cannot cease to act it out. But let's proceed. Take Montresor, another ingenious mind. “During the supreme madness of the carnival” he takes revenge on Fortunato, with planned skill and scrutiny. Although he completes his plan bit by bit, he fails to fulfill his definition of revenge. Fortunato loses consciousness before he could grasp the idea of the revenge, and thus “the avenger fails to make himself felt as such”. Proceed. Take the protagonist of the ‘Imp of the Perverse’: a master of theory and practice. His murder is the perfect murder. “It is impossible that any deed could have been wrought with a more thorough deliberation.” Still, he acts in vain. The sole purpose of Satan is to mar the plan of God:

“To do ought good never will be our task,  
But ever to do ill our sole delight,  
As being the contrary to his high will  
Whom we resist. If then his Providence  
Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,

Our labour must be to pervert that end,  
And out of good still to find means of evil;  
Which oft times may succeed, so as perhaps  
Shall grieve him, if I fail not, and disturb  
His inmost counsels from their destined aim.”<sup>5</sup>

The will to mar plans is the essence of Satan, but it is not his skill or ability. Perhaps it is his routine. In all cases, where he absolutely and eternally succeeds is at marring his own plans. He succeeds where he fails and he fails where he succeeds. In this scheme there is no succession for him but only eternal return. What is the key to his eternal failure? The key is the absolute. His aim is the absolute which is unreachable for him because it entails him also. He can mar any plan of God, but God himself as All, as the absolute. And whichever plan he mars, the still greater plan always negates his achievement. The closer he got to the absolute the greater his fall. But he cannot aim at other than the absolute. Even his most petty project is directed against the whole of existence.<sup>6</sup> And such is the lot of the poet as well. Even the tiniest bit of fiction is not without a world<sup>7</sup>, which world – the world of the word – inevitably manifests itself as an alternative to reality, questioning the very roots and rights for the existence of God’s world. The thesis can be worded thus: the word of the poet attempts to emulate the Word of God, origin of reality. The quintessence of Satan is dreadfully similar: he offers his alternative of how things should be – or can be – and thereby raises uncanny attention and alien suspicion about unrealised possibilities of being in a world dominated by a tyrant God.

Nonetheless, given the omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence of God,

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<sup>5</sup> Paradise Lost, I:159.

<sup>6</sup> Speaking of Satan I have Milton and the Faustian tradition in mind. Here: Madách’s Tragedy of Man.

<sup>7</sup> Georg Lukács develops this point in the Introduction to the Peculiarity of Aestheticism.

Lukács, Georg. *Az esztétikum sajátossága* [The Peculiarity of Aestheticism]. Trans.: Eörsi István. Budapest: Magvető, 1978.

eventually all is done in vain. The hero of the Tell-Tale Heart is transformed from an anti-hero into a tragic hero when his perfect murder is integrated into a greater plan, and his attempt on the rules of reality (e.g. “kill not”) cannot pass without being countered. Thus he fails to brake the rule, inasmuch as the rule implicitly implies the statement “kill not – lest you receive the wrath of God”. Before his fatal failure the hero exclaims “they *knew* – they were making mockery of my horror! [...] But any thing is better than this agony. I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer!”. There is a tension unbearable between fact and fiction, reality stretched to the extreme so that it opens up into the realm of death - a realm without death, into the realm of art. The work of the stretch is performed with the deadly tool of language.

As the Masque draws to its end, one cannot pass on without drawing the conclusions of such a sinister party. It seems that the mask is all the same. Poe’s characters appear as the avatars of Satan. They are eccentric gentlemen, damned forever to act in vain, yet to signify by the very activity of failure a revolution that would be unrepresent in the world without them. They are most delicate and subtle gentleman, with the dark flame of genius. Yet even their most intricate plan is condemned to failure by the unsurmountable pattern of reality. In their fall however they fail not to leave a trace still and timeless which marks their destruction. Apparently their lot parallels that of the poet, and even the very act of language. Unable to represent the absolute, they fail spectacularly to reveal faithfully the unutterable. In their eerie operation they outwit the rules of reality and the will of God. Poe inscribes allegories of writing in his works, allegories of writing in vain.

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