

POESQUE MEDIA FOR POESQUE TIMES!

By Ron Kenner

All too often in today's media we sense that cause, effect, meaning and reason are dissipated in a postmodern cloud of manifest complexity. Our Poesque times seem to justify focus on Edgar Allen Poe as a way of articulating the problem of emptiness and insubstantiality in so many of our questionable "out of context" communications; especially in a kind of modern time warp that ignores past and future and in which the extremes fight over the heads of the innocents.

I'm reminded once more of an opportune lunch I had years back with the late Ed Keating, original publisher and founder of *Ramparts* magazine that would persist through near three decades of smoke screens and ignorance as the leading protest voice against the Vietnam War. As Keating told me then, so many people worry about the radical left and the radical right but what scared the hell out him, he asserted, was invariably "the radical middle."

Of course the radical middle, too, is heavily dependent for its information on the honored traditions, the schools, the white house, the media; a *radical middle* also heavily dependent on the books it reads, all the while near totally unaware even of the thought of censorship and self-censorship in books, as though mere *publication* of a book somehow precluded censorship.

Just how myopic this can be—frequently lacking in awareness of cause, effect, meaning and context—must be, finally, little short of Poesque. And here I'd point to the 19th century author E.A. Poe and to his legacy as a leading example of insubstantiality and unmentionables in our communications.

Thus beyond the problems up close and personal of the particular victim of the Poesque tale, with a few notable examples what we really get—rather shocking when one thinks about it—is a near complete absence in Poe, the supposed master of the horror story, of the larger horrors that too often afflict or threaten mankind. Despite some significant contributions in the techniques of writing, Poe, for example, seemed barely aware of this larger perspective on the world. Nor did he seemingly share any credible connection, let alone bond, with his fellow men as did his near contemporaries Samuel Clemens and Jack London.

There are those 'art-for-art's sake' defenders who would not fault Poe for his apparent disinterest or even general lack of awareness of the larger problems of the world—the way, in our age of "globalism," maybe hundreds of millions, even billions, live in nightmarish conditions. That's the larger picture, as compared to any one particular Poesque protagonist who thrills us as readers as he soon finds himself buried alive or going insane or falling into the likes of a whirlpool.

Yet Poe himself, though not without considerable talent, was as he was and grew up as he did and made of himself what he could; and similarly, in fairness to the media, we shouldn't entirely shoot the messenger when he shows up empty-handed or with limited info on the real world; it is, after all, the media that draws on the likes of the White House's staged or near-non-existent press conferences.... It's the media that's typically unable to penetrate secret meetings by Vice President Dick Cheney and the like who go duck hunting with a Supreme Court justice who later rules on the legality of the secret meeting... and it's the media that's typically unable to break loose from the conventional mentality that so easily sidesteps the discomforts of our times.

Today's increasingly 'bottom-line' downsized media is, as well, not only busy but (supposedly, as with the all-too-late-complaining retired White House press secretary Scott McClellan) uninvited to the inner circle. Thus the media remains supposedly dispassionate, relatively uncomplaining, frequently unquestioning, and often is found pandering. And here, too, to take the larger view, the media (some 80-90 percent owned by a half-dozen or so monolithic corporations, from Disney to Rupert Murdoch) can only emerge, itself, as part of a larger insubstantiality in our society—amid our revisionist, history (sometimes inoffensive to the point of denying the Nazi holocaust), our denuded and not-infrequently irrational science; that is, currently facing a kind of mind control or censorship over evolution theory, stem cell research, birth control information.... And not least, there's small media focus on the tangible problems of the cities, even of the infrastructure—including our roads, bridges, levees and our schools, hospitals and emergency rooms while we turn to more intangible "values" in the suburbs or to other concerns nationwide over abortion, gay marriage, even whether or not our politicians wear flags in their lapel pins.

Similarly our literature (novels, too, to a considerable extent) has shifted focus not only to a narrower spectrum but often to a more blurred, thin-textured depiction. With the inherent common sense logic of one of the more masterful short stories by James Joyce, say, the characters are *pushed* by highly credible circumstances into the inevitability of their actions. By

contrast, the less credible Poesque character normally seems *pulled* toward some mystery as though by an invisible rope, so that with this character there's invariably little or no comprehensible physical sense or reason for the action (whether internally or outside the character) beyond the a priori *given* of some strange compulsion or fear or that unaccountable Poesque happening. Thus Poe's characters typically come out of *nowhere* and, without exactly violating any logic, might as well end up *anywhere* so long as the arrival point is sufficiently deadly and exciting. If all else fails, there is the end point as justification. One moves in a particular direction, usually toward death, because that is one's destiny.

In such literature (as though the rationale were coming right out of GWB's White house) we seem short on explanations and long on destiny. It is remarkable how much of Poe's poetry, especially, and his Philosophy of Composition, too, reminds of our current White House with its almost smug optimistic explanations for our role in Iraq, not to mention W's curious rationales for our perilous economy, his distractions and evasions from our failed policies on energy, health, poverty, justice....

Admittedly, sometimes we seem to accomplish our aims—the cold war over and the Soviet Union dissipated, and then Iraq occupied and Saddam Hussein in prison—yet what we feel is frustration. As exemplified in Poe, the writing remains unsatisfying if only because it short circuits; it is tendentious and designing yet anti rational; it seeks order yet promises nihilism; it is escapist yet takes us nowhere. Essentially, though admittedly the horror itself can be exciting, such communications (whether from Poe's tale or Bush's tale) offer little meaning or substance to hang onto and even less to build upon.

And if not to communicate something, anything, then the objective (reminiscent perhaps of much modern-day television) becomes to have an effect: to create a mood, to excite, to shock, to mesmerize, to horrify, or perhaps simply to keep the reader in a kind of holding pattern the way in Vietnam days we waited in suspense for the light at the end of the tunnel. Any of these Poesque 'communication techniques' may serve to convince, but even altogether one might question the credibility, whether as literature or as some credible story for the times.

Finally the Poesque effect seemingly occurs for no other reason than to put the reader, or the citizen, into the storyteller's pocket; if nothing else, diverting attention (a peculiarly modern trait)—like the shifting rationales for our invasion of Iraq—from the lack of substance,.

