

1841

THE COLLOQUY OF MONOS AND UNA

Edgar Allan Poe

Poe, Edgar Allan (1809-49) - American poet, short-story writer, and critic who is best known for his tales of ratiocination, his fantastical horror stories, and his genre-founding detective stories. Poe, whose cloudy personal life is a virtual legend, considered himself primarily a poet. Colloquy of Monos and Una (1841) Conversations between two Athenians who have experienced life and death several times. They are frustrated because mankind never seems to learn from the past.

COLLOQUY OF MONOS AND UNA

These things are in the future.

SOPHOCLES- Antig.

UNA. "Born again?" MONOS. Yes, fairest and best beloved Una, "born again." These were the words upon whose mystical meaning I had so long pondered, rejecting the explanations of the priesthood, until Death itself resolved for me the secret.

UNA. Death!

MONOS. How strangely, sweet Una, you echo my words! I observe, too, a vacillation in your step, a joyous inquietude in your eyes. You are confused and oppressed by the majestic novelty of the Life Eternal. Yes, it was of Death I spoke. And here how singularly sounds that word which of old was wont to bring terror to all hearts, throwing a mildew upon all pleasures!

UNA. Ah, Death, the spectre which sate at all feasts! How often, Monos, did we lose ourselves in speculations upon its nature! How mysteriously did it act as a check to human bliss, saying unto it "thus far and no further!" That earnest mutual love, my own Monos, which burned within our bosoms- how vainly did we flatter ourselves, feeling happy in its first upspringing, that our happiness would strengthen with its strength! Alas! as it grew, so grew in our hearts the dread of that evil hour which was hurrying to separate us forever! Thus, in time, it became painful to love. Hate would have been mercy then.

MONOS. Speak not here of these griefs, dear Una- mine, mine, forever now!

UNA. But the memory of past sorrow- is it not present joy? I have much to say yet of the things which have been. Above all, I burn to know the incidents of your own passage through the dark Valley and Shadow.

MONOS. And when did the radiant Una ask any thing of her Monos in vain? I will be minute in relating all- but at what point shall the weird narrative begin? UNA. At what point? MONOS. You have said.

UNA. Monos, I comprehend you. In Death we have both learned the propensity of man to define the indefinable. I will not say, then, commence with the moment of life's cessation- but commence with that sad, sad instant when, the fever having abandoned you, you sank into a breathless and motionless torpor, and I pressed down your pallid eyelids with the passionate fingers of love.

MONOS. One word first, my Una, in regard to man's general condition at this epoch. You will remember that one or two of the wise among our forefatherswise in fact, although not in the world's esteem- had ventured to doubt the propriety of the term "improvement," as applied to the progress of our civilization.

There were periods in each of the five or six centuries immediately preceding our dissolution, when arose some vigorous intellect, boldly contending for those principles whose truth appears now, to our disenfranchised reason, so utterly obvious principles which should have taught our race to submit to the guidance of the natural laws, rather than attempt their control. At long intervals some masterminds appeared, looking upon each advance in practical science as a retro-gradation in the true utility. Occasionally the poetic intellect- that intellect which we now feel to have been the most exalted of all- since those truths which to us were of the most enduring importance could only be reached by that analogy which speaks in proof-tones to the imagination alone, and to the unaided reason bears no weight- occasionally did this poetic intellect proceed a step farther in the evolving of the vague idea of the philosophic, and find in the mystic parable that tells of the tree of knowledge, and of its forbidden fruit, death-producing, a distinct intimation that knowledge was not meet for man in the infant condition of his soul.

And these men, the poets, living and perishing amid the scorn of the "utilitarians" or rough pedants, who arrogated to themselves a title which could have been properly applied only to the scorned- these men, the poets, ponder piningly, yet not unwisely, upon the ancient days when our wants were not more simple than our enjoyments were keen- days when mirth was a word unknown, so solemnly deep-toned was happiness- holy, august and blissful days, when blue rivers ran undammed, between hills unhewn, into far forest solitudes, primeval, odorous, and unexplored.

Yet these noble exceptions from the general misrule served but to strengthen it by opposition. Alas! we had fallen upon the most evil of all our evil days. The great "movement"- that was the cant term- went on: a diseased commotion, moral and physical. Art- the Arts- arose supreme, and, once enthroned, cast chains upon the intellect which had elevated them to power. Man, because he could not but acknowledge the majesty of Nature, fell into childish exultation at his acquired and still increasing dominion over her elements. Even while he stalked a God in his own fancy, an infantine imbecility came over him. As might be supposed from the origin of his disorder, he grew infected with system, and with abstraction. He enwrapped himself in generalities. Among other odd ideas, that of universal equality gained ground; and in the face of analogy and of God- in despite of the loud warning voice of the laws of gradation so visibly pervading all things in Earth and Heaven- wild attempts at an omni-prevalent Democracy were made. Yet this evil sprang necessarily from the leading evil- Knowledge. Man could not both know and succumb. Meantime huge smoking cities arose, innumerable. Green leaves shrank before the hot breath of furnaces. The fair face of Nature was deformed as with the ravages of some loathsome disease. And methinks, sweet Una, even our slumbering sense of the forced and of the far-fetched might have arrested us here. But now it appears that we had worked out our own destruction in the perversion of our taste, or rather in the blind neglect of its culture in the schools.

For, in truth, it was at this crisis that taste alone- that faculty which, holding a middle position between the pure intellect and the moral sense, could never safely have been

disregarded- it was now that taste alone could have led us gently back to Beauty, to Nature, and to Life. But alas for the pure contemplative spirit and majestic intuition of Plato! Alas for the mousika which he justly regarded as an all sufficient education for the soul! Alas for him and for it!- since both were most desperately needed when both were most entirely forgotten or despised.¹ Pascal, a philosopher whom we both love, has said, how truly!- “que tout notre raisonnement se reduit a ceder au sentiment,” and it is not impossible that the sentiment of the natural, had time permitted it, would have regained its old ascendancy over the harsh mathematical reason of the schools. But this thing was not to be. Prematurely induced by intemperance of knowledge, the old age of the world drew on. This the mass of mankind saw not, or, living lustily although unhappily, affected not to see. But, for myself, the Earth’s records had taught me to look for widest ruin as the price of highest civilization. I had imbibed a pre 1 It will be hard to discover a better [method of education] than that which the experience of so many ages has already discovered; and this may be summed up as consisting in gymnastics for the body and music for the soul.”- *Repub. lib. 2.* “For this reason is a musical education most essential; since it causes Rhythm and Harmony to penetrate most intimately into the soul, taking the strangest hold upon it, filling it with beauty and making the man beautiful-minded... He will praise and admire the beautiful; will receive it with joy into his soul, will feed upon it, and assimilate his own condition with it.” *Ibid. lib. 3.* Music mousika had, among the Athenians, a far more comprehensive signification than with us. It included not only the harmonies of time and of tune, but the poetic diction, sentiment and creation each in its widest sense. The study of music was with them in fact, the general cultivation of the taste- of that which recognizes the beautifulin contra-distinction from reason, which deals only with the true.

science of our Fate from comparison of China the simple and enduring, with Assyria the architect, with Egypt the astrologer, with Nubia, more crafty than either, the turbulent mother of all Arts. In history² of these regions I met with a ray from the Future. The individual artificialities of the three latter were local diseases of the Earth, and in their individual overthrows we had seen local remedies applied; but for the infected world at large I could anticipate no regeneration save in death. That man, as a race, should not become extinct, I saw that he must be “born again.” And now it was, fairest and dearest, that we wrapped our spirits, daily, in dreams, Now it was that, in twilight, we discoursed of the days to come, when the Art-scarred surface of the Earth, having undergone that purification³ which alone could efface its rectangular obscenities, should clothe itself anew in the verdure and the mountain-slopes and the smiling waters of Paradise, and be rendered at length a fit dwelling-place for man:- for man the Death-purged- for man to whose now exalted intellect there should be poison in knowledge no more- for the redeemed, regenerated, blissful, and now immortal, but still for the material, man. UNA. Well do I remember these conversations, dear Monos; but the epoch of the fiery overthrow was not so near at hand as we believed, and as the corruption² “History,” from *istorein*, to contemplate.

³ The word “purification” seems here to be used with reference to its root in the Greek, *pur*, fire.

you indicate did surely warrant us in believing. Men lived; and died individually.

You yourself sickened, and passed into the grave; and thither your constant Una speedily followed you. And though the century which has since elapsed, and whose conclusion brings us thus together once more, tortured our slumbering senses with no impatience of duration, yet, my Monos, it was a century still.

MONOS. Say, rather, a point in the vague infinity. Unquestionably, it was in the Earth's dotage that I died. Wearied at heart with anxieties which had their origin in the general turmoil and decay, I succumbed to the fierce fever. After some few days of pain, and many of dreamy delirium replete with ecstasy, the manifestations of which you mistook for pain, while I longed but was impotent to undeceive you- after some days there came upon me, as you have said, a breathless and motionless torpor; and this was termed Death by those who stood around me.

Words are vague things. My condition did not deprive me of sentience. It appeared to me not greatly dissimilar to the extreme quiescence of him, who, having slumbered long and profoundly, lying motionless and fully prostrate in a midsummer noon, begins to steal slowly back into consciousness, through the mere sufficiency of his sleep, and without being awakened by external disturbances.

I breathed no longer. The pulses were still. The heart had ceased to beat. Volition had not departed, but was powerless. The senses were unusually active, although eccentrically so- assuming often each other's functions at random. The taste and the smell were inextricably confounded, and became one sentiment, abnormal and intense. The rosewater with which your tenderness had moistened my lips to the last, affected me with sweet fancies of flowers- fantastic flowers, far more lovely than any of the old Earth, but whose prototypes we have here blooming around us. The eyelids, transparent and bloodless, offered no complete impediment to vision. As volition was in abeyance the balls could not roll in their sockets- but all objects within the range of the visual hemisphere were seen with more or less distinctness; the rays which fell upon the external retina, or into the corner of the eye, producing a more vivid effect than those which struck the front or anterior surface. Yet, in the former instance, this effect was so far anomalous that I appreciated it only as sound- sound sweet or discordant as the matters presenting themselves at my side were light or dark in shade- curved or angular in outline. The hearing at the same time, although excited in degree, was not irregular in action- estimating real sounds with an extravagance of precision, not less than of sensibility. Touch had undergone a modification more peculiar. Its impressions were tardily received, but pertinaciously retained, and resulted always in the highest physical pleasure. Thus the pressure of your sweet fingers upon my eyelids, at first only recognized through vision, at length, long after their removal, filled my whole being with a sensual delight immeasurable. I say with a sensual delight. All my perceptions were purely sensual. The materials furnished the passive brain by the senses were not in the least degree wrought into shape by the deceased understanding. Of pain there was some little; of pleasure there was much; but of moral pain or pleasure none at all. Thus your wild sobs floated into my ears with all their mournful cadences,

and were appreciated in their every variation of sad tone; but they were soft musical sounds and no more; they conveyed to the extinct reason no intimation of the sorrows which gave them birth; while the large and constant tears which fell upon my face, telling the bystanders of a heart which broke, thrilled every fibre of my frame with ecstasy alone. And this was in truth the Death of which these bystanders spoke reverently, in low whispers- you, sweet Una, gaspingly, with loud cries.

They attired me for the coffin- three or four dark figures which flitted busily to and fro. As these crossed the direct line of my vision they affected me as forms; but upon passing to my side their images impressed me with the idea of shrieks, groans, and other dismal expressions of terror, of horror, or of wo. You alone, habited in a white robe, passed in all directions musically about me.

The day waned; and, as its light faded away, I became possessed by a vague uneasiness- an anxiety such as the sleeper feels when sad real sounds fall continuously within his ear- low distant bell tones, solemn, at long but equal intervals, and commingling with melancholy dreams. Night arrived; and with its shadows a heavy discomfort. It oppressed my limbs with the oppression of some dull weight, and was palpable. There was also a moaning sound, not unlike the distant reverberation of surf, but more continuous, which beginning with the first twilight, had grown in strength with the darkness. Suddenly lights were brought into the room, and this reverberation became forthwith interrupted into frequent unequal bursts of the same sound, but less dreary and less distinct. The ponderous oppression was in a great measure relieved; and, issuing from the flame of each lamp, (for there were many,) there flowed unbrokenly into my ears a strain of melodious monotone. And when now, dear Una, approaching the bed upon which I lay outstretched, you sat gently by my side, breathing odor from your sweet lips, and pressing them upon my brow, there arose tremulously within my bosom, and mingling with the merely physical sensations which circumstances had called forth, a something akin to sentiment itself- a feeling that, half appreciating, half responded to your earnest love and sorrow,- but this feeling took no root in the pulseless heart, and seemed indeed rather a shadow than a reality, and faded quickly away, first into extreme quiescence, and then into a purely sensual pleasure as before.

And now, from the wreck and the chaos of the usual senses, there appeared to have arisen within me a sixth, all perfect. In its exercise I found a wild delight yet a delight still physical, inasmuch as the understanding had in it no part. Motion in the animal frame had fully ceased. No muscle quivered; no nerve thrilled; no artery throbbed. But there seemed to have sprung up in the brain, that of which no words could convey to the merely human intelligence even an indistinct conception. Let me term it a mental pendulous pulsation. It was the moral embodiment of man's abstract idea of Time. By the absolute equalization of this movement- or of such as this- had the cycles of the firmamental orbs themselves, been adjusted.

By its aid I measured the irregularities of the clock upon the mantel, and of the watches of the attendants. Their tickings came sonorously to my ears. The slightest deviation

from the true proportion- and these deviations were omni-prevalent affected me just as violations of abstract truth were wont, on earth, to affect the moral sense. Although no two of the time-pieces in the chamber struck individual seconds accurately together, yet I had no difficulty in holding steadily in mind the tones, and the respective momentary errors of each. And this- this keen, perfect, self-existing sentiment of duration- this sentiment existing (as man could not possibly have conceived it to exist) independently of any succession of events- this idea- this sixth sense, upspringing from the ashes of the rest, was the first obvious and certain step of the intemporal soul upon the threshold of the temporal Eternity.

It was midnight; and you still sat by my side. All others had departed from the chamber of Death. They had deposited me in the coffin. The lamps burned flickeringly; for this I knew by the tremulousness of the monotonous strains. But, suddenly these strains diminished in distinctness and in volume. Finally they ceased.

The perfume in my nostrils died away. Forms affected my vision no longer. The oppression of the Darkness uplifted itself from my bosom. A dull shock like that of electricity pervaded my frame, and was followed by total loss of the idea of contact. All of what man has termed sense was merged in the sole consciousness of entity, and in the one abiding sentiment of duration. The mortal body had been at length stricken with the hand of the deadly Decay.

Yet had not all of sentience departed; for the consciousness and the sentiment remaining supplied some of its functions by a lethargic intuition. I appreciated the direful change now in operation upon the flesh, and, as the dreamer is sometimes aware of the bodily presence of one who leans over him, so, sweet Una, I still dully felt that you sat by my side. So, too, when the noon of the second day came, I was not unconscious of those movements which displaced you from my side, which confined me within the coffin, which deposited me within the hearse, which bore me to the grave, which lowered me within it, which heaped heavily the mould upon me, and which thus left me, in blackness and corruption, to my sad and solemn slumbers with the worm.

And here, in the prison-house which has few secrets to disclose, they rolled away days and weeks and months; and the soul watched narrowly each second as it flew, and, without effort, took record of its flight- without effort and without object.

A year passed. The consciousness of being had grown hourly more indistinct, and that of mere locality had, in great measure, usurped its position. The idea of entity was becoming merged in that of place. The narrow space immediately surrounding what had been the body, was now growing to be the body itself. At length, as often happens to the sleeper (by sleep and its world alone is Death imaged)- at length, as sometimes happened on Earth to the deep slumberer, when some flitting light half startled him into awaking, yet left him half enveloped in dreams- so to me, in the strict embrace of the Shadow, came that light which alone might have had power to startle- the light of enduring Love. Men toiled at the grave in which I lay darkling. They upthrew the damp earth. Upon my mouldering bones there descended the coffin of Una.

And now again all was void. That nebulous light had been extinguished. That feeble thrill had vibrated itself into quiescence. Many lustra had supervened. Dust had returned to dust. The worm had food no more. The sense of being at length utterly departed, and there reigned in its stead- instead of all things- dominant and perpetual- the autocrats Place and Time. For that which was not- for that which had no form- for that which had no thought- for that which had no sentience- for that which was soulless, yet of which matter formed no portion- for all this nothingness, yet for all this immortality, the grave was still a home, and the corrosive hours, co-mates.

THE END