

1932

A Critical Study of Two Tales by Amado Nervo

John E. Englekirk, Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Englekirk, Jr., John E.. "A Critical Study of Two Tales by Amado Nervo." *New Mexico Quarterly* 2, 1 (1932).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol2/iss1/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

A Critical Study of Two Tales by Amado Nervo

By JOHN E. ENGLEKIRK, JR.

THE present article is submitted for a two-fold purpose: first to offer, in translation, two of Amado Nervo's characteristic prose sketches; and second, to point out and suggest an explanation for the presence of certain Poesque elements that these tales contain. The mere fact that such elements exist need not indicate that Poe has directly influenced the Mexican author. There is a marked similarity in spirit and in purpose in much that these men have written, but these similarities, in my opinion, are due more to the factor of spiritual relationship than to the direct influence of the former over the latter. I shall not attempt, therefore, to prove that these tales are the direct result of an admiration for and imitation of Poe's art as a storyteller. I shall merely point out that they may be very favorably compared with certain of Poe's tales.

Amado Nervo (1870-1919), was, after Dario the greatest poet of the Modernista movement in Spanish-America. He, like the Nicaraguan and most of his contemporaries, showed a deep interest in Poe and was undeniably influenced by him in both his poetry and his prose. Does not Nervo confess in *El Éxodo* that in his conversation with other modernists the discussion turned quite naturally to Dante, Baudelaire, and Poe?¹ Has he not criticized his fellow-writers in their modernistic attempts at new lines and new metrical combinations? He told them that that must ever be a difficult task in any language "since Poe, who in *The Raven* obtained with much diligence a great originality, did not attempt to conquer a new meter, only contenting himself with an unusual combination of known meters."²

1. *El Éxodo*, p. 176.

2. *La lengua y la literatura*, pp. 41-42.

54] *The NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY*

Whereupon he goes on to quote Poe's ideas about versification and originality, finding in them a new conception of composition that the modernists would do well to follow! But Nervo does not confine himself to Poe's poems and to Poe's poetical theories as expressed in his essay *The Poetic Principle*. In *Crónicas* he tells us that Poe's stories will ever be known as the works of one "who tells us his tale of fantasms, while above us centers all the silent arcanum of the inaccessible night in which unknown worlds tremble."³ Why does Nervo call them "eternal tales of the stars"? Because he, like Poe, sought to sound "the inaccessible night" as he lived retired "in a room opened to the distant peaks and to the sky of Madrid, among books and papers, with a telescope that served him as a Pegasus to escape this world and wander among the friendly constellations." on a balcony facing the sierra, he would aim his telescope at the heavens and would pass in his imagination from star to star. But he has revealed us his secret:

"Te engañas: más lejos fuí
que la estrella más lejana."

No small wonder then that Nervo should have been captivated by Poe's tales and that in his volumes of prose—*Ellos*, *Almas que pasan*, *El Éxodo*, *Mis Filosofías*—we find constant references to Poe and to many of his works

Nervo reached no great heights in his prose. His theme is always superior to his style. But he was gifted as a conversationalist and as a story-teller, and these characteristics sufficed to redeem it. He was ever fond of new sensations, uncommon words, unusual subjects, in a word, of such themes as would insure the success of his tales with the periodical public. These odd bits of prose can scarcely be called tales, however; in many cases they are nothing more than anecdotes that concern death, adventurous scientific theories, mysterious presence of the unknown elements

3. *Cronicas*, p. 146.

4. Prólogo de Enrique Díez-Canedo to *Almas que pasan* (You are mistaken: for I went beyond the most outlying star.)

in life, and the like. As, for example, when in the delightful sketch, *The Clouds*, he tells us with much scientific assurance that some distant day, through forces that are now at work, complete evaporation will come to pass and a rarity indeed will be the passing of a fleecy cloud through heavens of an uncontaminated blue.⁵ Or when, as in *One Hundred Years Sleep*, he foresees the day when man, "because of a more scrupulous study of certain cerebral regions" may choose to "span oceans of time to return to life on more hospitable shores among better men and more refined!"⁶ (Nervo here confesses that such is the imagination of Poe in his tale of the mummy!) Or again, when in *Upon Returning, Someone has Entered*, he writes, "Because I feel that there are invisible eyes that read over my shoulder as I read. I know of eyes that watch me as I write, that in this very instant are looking at what I am writing, and yet they have been closed to life for a long time."⁷ And when, as a final illustration, in his *Fear of Death* (upon the title page of which, by the way, is a Raven perched on a skull!) he finds these words in the last message of a suicide, "—This obsession of death has so mastered me of late that I can do nothing but speak and think of it alone.—I can stand it no longer and I am going to have recourse to the most absurd, to the strangest, to the most illogical, but still the most effective of remedies. ...! I am going to kill myself! Yes, kill myself; can you imagine that? Kill myself because I'm afraid of death!"⁸

Of a similar nature are most of Nervo's prose sketches. Throughout, the pervading note is characteristic of Poe. That such a tone prevails is not surprising after having observed Nervo's interest in and many references to Poe, and when, from a study of their lives and works we find how remarkably alike were these two spirits in their melancholy preoccupation with death and in their search for the beautiful, the ideal and the unknown.

5. *Ellos*, pp. 51-57.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-170.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-74.

8. *Almas que pasan*, pp. 45-58.

56] *The* NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY

I have chosen Nervo's *The Automobile of Death*⁹ because it seems to me that it may very well have been suggested and influenced by Poe's technique as developed in *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Nervo's capital sentence is brief, suggestive of what is to follow, and holds our interest immediately. It may be most favorably compared to Poe's opening line in *The Cask of Amontillado*: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." Poe goes on to tell us that he did not give utterance to a threat, but resolved his vengeance at length to preclude the idea of risk. So, too, had these peasants, after having suffered most humbly the brutal indifference of the tourists—whose least insult was their constant throwing of dust in their care-worn faces—deliberately planned a mode of punishment that would fit in well with Poe's thought: "A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser." And were justice to find them out could they not reply as did those oppressed townsfolk of Fuente Ovejuna, that village that suffered from the despotism of the comendador:

"¿Quién mato al comendador?
Fuente Ovejuna, señor."

Poe begins *The Tell-Tale Heart* in much the same way: "True!—nervous—very very dreadfully I had been and am! but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. *Above all was the sense of hearing acute.*" And he plans cautiously, and with dissimulation, to rid himself of the eye forever.

In such introductions lies much of the secret of Poe's art. Has not Nervo been influenced by the American's technique, if not by any one particular tale?

Nervo, contrary to Spanish prose tendencies, refuses to digress. He carries his tale forward rapidly, in short

9. *Ellos*, pp. 149-154.

A CRITICAL STUDY

[57]

concise phrases, omitting all but the details necessary to bring about the desired effect: an ending that is quite effective as we too, after following the automobile of death through the swift, dark night, stare with the people of the well-lighted garage at the indescribable, inexplicable *that* on the leather of the cushions.

But Nervo falls very short of impressing us as convincingly as does Poe. Poe sweeps us away with him, never allowing us a moment to turn back and ask ourselves whether we, after all, are not being duped at his expense. Not so with Nervo! He makes certain impositions on our credulity. He refrains from exposing us to the utterly impossible, absurd, or inconceivable. He interweaves the necessary facts to increase the likelihood of his tale. But through it all, we know that Nervo does not want, nor does he expect us to take his story in all seriousness. And so, although he plays upon our credulous nature, he conveys throughout an undercurrent of humor, good will, and friendliness that adds greatly to his tale. Lacking too is that personal touch which Poe so effectively employed to win our credence. Nervo is but the story-teller. He has not witnessed the crime, nor taken part in it, nor felt all the pent up hate of these simple folk! Then too, Nervo has these peasants seek revenge, not so much on the occupants of the car, nor even on this particular car, as on the impersonal, implacable machine, symbol of the devastating inroads that material progress is inflicting in the peaceful idyll of these peasants and in the solitary, pensive existence that Nervo sought on the shores of some "Wagnerian lake" that no frivolous eyes had ever contemplated!¹⁰ After having noted how differently, in many respects, Nervo has attacked a Poesque theme, we may very well wonder what untold tales of unspeakable horror and of death, Poe would concoct, were he living in this age of speeding cars, "crack" trains, railroad crossings, airplanes and countless dastardly inventions of war and of crime!

10. Cf. *El hago Encantado, Ellos*, pp. 129-137.

THE AUTOMOBILE OF DEATH

The country-folk were indignant, with that indignation that tramples everything underfoot, that no longer considers either the extent or the consequences of its acts.

In the morning, at about ten o'clock, an enormous machine, and a very powerful one—130 H. P.—was coming along at a mad speed over the main highway.

A flock of geese, fat and shining white, were crossing at the time. The chauffeur did what he could to avoid them; but the fickle creatures—geese after all—instead of escaping, banded together in the middle of the road.

There was no longer any possibility of stopping the machine. To attempt it was to go *al panache*, that is, to death.

The chauffeur took a sudden resolution and passed over the geese:

Clack! Clack!

A noise like that of bursting bladders, of spattering grease, and a whirlwind of white feathers.

Justice would demand that the machine come to a stop, that it retrace its steps, and that the automobilist pay the damages; five dead geese at twenty francs per, at least!

But the automobilist, who in his long sporting career, had already seen himself involved in other reclamations, feared the anger of the peasants, the difficulties with the owner, the bother at the Justice of the Peace. . . , and continued at full speed, at some one hundred and more per hour, leaving behind a rivulet of feathers and of impotent indignation.

In the afternoon, as if that had not sufficed, another machine came into violent contact with a placid cow that paid no heed to the horn as she engaged in the quiet Buddhism of a ruminant.

The animal didn't die; but remained badly shaken up, upside down in the ditch.

As the cow was with calf, the proprietor, a poor fellow who owned nothing else in the world, was given over to

desperation, feeling sure that the terrible blow would have fatal results.

At nightfall, the state of mind of those wretched people was truly lamentable.

The two aggressive machines that had ruined them with such sudden and such formidable injustice, had disappeared like shadows.

When the owners of the geese and of the cow reached the scene of the tragedy, the only trace of the automobiles was a little dust and a smell of benzine. Impossible to see either the numbers of their licenses or where they came from. They had committed the wrong with scandalous impunity, with the crushing indifference of their one hundred and odd horses, and had disappeared immediately down the dusty, well-tracked road.

"My best geese!" groaned the one, "more than 100 francs, bread for three months."

"My cow!" exclaimed the other. My beautiful cow that is worth 200!"

Soon a compact body of laborers, farmers and shepherds gathered around the mourners. At first a silent wrath, that later became a clamor, issued from those rugose and shaggy breasts against the implacable, haughty, brutal machine that mows down lives and pulverizes farms with the indifference of a Hindu Juggernaut; that never has pity, that the least it does is throw its dust in the faces of the poor, of those who do not possess for their peregrinations other than the elasticity of their feet or the gentleness of their burro.

Which of the peasants suggested the evil idea? Quién sabe? But in those perturbed spirits it caught fire instantaneously.

That was it! They must seek vengeance! The automobiles would soon return, and the first one to pass by would receive the punishment. The tremendous punishment!

60] *The* NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY

From an enclosure they cut a long wire and stretched it across the road, tying it firmly to two trees, at a well-studied height.

Then they took refuge in a shady grassy spot; and silent and fatal as destiny, their wrath already subdued in the face of the approaching, desired reprisal, they waited.

They didn't wait long.

Night had fallen and in the distant bend of the road appeared, palpitating and snorting, with its enormous flaming eyes sweeping the shadows, a large automobile full of laughter, of perfume, and of white, blue, and red floating veils.

On they came: the chauffeur, four ladies, pretty and refined, and one of their husbands; a certain titled sportsman, only too well-known in Paris, Biarritz, and Madrid.

The peasants, in hiding, held their breath.

Suddenly, something unspeakable, ghastly, took place.

The wire, tense and rigid, lopped off, with as much ease as if it were cutting butter, first two heads, then three.

The chauffeur, because of his being fortuitously bent over the wheel, was saved; and in the midst of the roar and speed he didn't notice those brief, strange noises, like something being rent apart, nor the silence that followed the laughter.

Oh! the automobile of decapitated people, the terrifying automobile of death, with its five bodies thrown back somewhat, and slowly pouring out their life's blood!

Oh! the horrible automobile of guillotined humans, that went on through the night along the great highway!

Two heads had fallen within the car. The others had rolled off into the road with their beautiful hats, with their large streaming veils. Oh! the infamous automobile of the morgue! The odious machine, inundated with blood, that swept on at a mad pace over the great, white, tree-lined ribbon. . . .

A CRITICAL STUDY

[61]

And what a nightmare when the car reached the brilliantly-lighted garage full of people and everyone saw, saw at last, that!

That something indescribable that was there within upon the rich leather of the cushions. . . .

In the following tale, *The Resuscitator and the Resuscitated*,¹¹ we seem to find further proof of the influence and universal popularity of Poe's metaphysical tales, *Mesmeric Revelation* and *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*.¹² When Nervo mentions Poe as the inventor of the life-restoring machine, we are immediately reminded of the American's attempts to master death and solve the mysteries of after-life. We recall Poe's command over death in the tale which "for physical disgust and foul horror has no rival in literature."¹³ It is rather interesting to note that, as in both of Poe's tales, the patient is subjected to the will of the resuscitator, and to observe furthermore that in *Mesmeric Revelation* and in the following work of Nervo, we find the only instance of the use of dialogue by either author. There is, however, none of the profundity of a metaphysical discussion, and none of the disgusting horror of Poe's tales in this entertaining, congenial sketch of the Mexican author.

THE RESUSCITATOR AND THE RESUSCITATED

The Resuscitator: Do you feel better already?

The Patient: Did you say better!

Resc.: Yes, because a moment ago you were complaining about pains, about nausea.

Patient: I was dead, wasn't I?

Resc.: Yes sir, absolutely dead. You had asphyxiated yourself with gas.

Patient: Yes, I know it.

11. *Mis Filosofías*, pp. 161-166.

12. See my article, *The Song of Hollands. An Inedited Tale Ascribed to Poe.*

13. Woodberry, *Edgar Allan Poe*, N. Y. 1885, p. 25.

62] *The NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY*

Resc.: How do you know?

Patient: Because I committed suicide.

Resc.: (disappointed) I beg your pardon, I thought it had been an accident—fortuitous.

Patient: (Impatient) I repeat that I committed suicide. You could have verified that before now. On that console over there, there is a paper as big as life.

Resc.: (Seeing it) Why yes, there is.

Patient: Read it.

Resc.: (Reads) "Let no one be blamed for my death." (turning to the patient) You must admit that there is nothing unusual about this, everybody writes the same thing.

Patient: (Disdainful) I wasn't trying to be original, I wanted to kill myself that's all, and I didn't want anyone to be bothered on my account. You ought to have made sure—

Resc.: I confess that I made a mistake and I have already asked your pardon. I (with dignity) am a respected resuscitator. I use, in this country, through special concession of its inventor, the American, Poe, the apparatus for bringing dead back to life again, that you see here. (Indicating the mechanism) But I only resuscitate those who have succumbed involuntarily. It is not my purpose to revive suicides, that would be going contrary to their expressed wishes. When they sent for me, they told me that you had been the victim of an accident: an open gas jet, a closed door; this happens to anybody. I picked up my apparatus which, as you can easily see, is most simple: two cylinders, one empty and the other full of oxygen, with strong tubes of India rubber that are applied respectively to the nose and mouth of the dead man. Within the cylinders, mind you, there are two embroli that should maintain a rhythmic movement, like respiration.

Patient: (Impatient) You may leave out the details, I am acquainted with the system.

A CRITICAL STUDY

[63

Resc.: Well, as I was saying, I picked up my apparatus. I applied it to your orifices and proceeded to move the emboli. The embolus of the empty cylinder drew out the deleterious gases that had accumulated in your organism, while the other filled your lungs with pure oxygen. The rest you know. I erred unintentionally. I repeat that I am a respected resuscitator, and I hope that you will pay the fees.

Patient: (Furious) Fees! And you want fees besides. So that after bringing me again into a world from which I had decided to depart, you ask me for fees.

Resc.: (Insinuating and humble) Oh! but they are very reasonable. Here are my rates. (Handing him a little card).

Patient: (Reading in affected voice) "Pedro Ramírez, sole agent of the Resuscitator, A. Poe, in this country" — "resurrections at the following unbelievable prices:

For a cat -----	15 pesetas
For a dog -----	20 pesetas
For children under ten -----	50 pesetas
For children from ten to eighteen -----	80 pesetas
For young people of both sexes from eighteen to thirty --	100 pesetas
For ladies and gentlemen from thirty to forty -----	200 pesetas
From forty years on -----	conventional prices
Calle de Iazaro, 3	Telephone No. 333

Immediate service at any hour of the day or night
Secrecy guaranteed

Patient: (Ironically) Ah! I understand; so I, being more than thirty and less than forty, will have to pay you 200 pesetas.

Resc.: (Smiling) Yes sir!

Patient: Well, you're a brilliant fellow.

Resc.: May I ask why?

Patient: Because I committed suicide on account of debts—Do you understand?

64] *The* NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY

Resc.: Oh!—I am not an exacting creditor. You will pay me in time. If all my money were as secure as in this case. . . .

Patient: But I do not see such security.

Resc.: Well, I do.

Patient: I don't, because you must know that this very night I am going to commit suicide again.

Resc.: All right and I will resuscitate you again tomorrow.

Patient: (Indignant) But that is an abuse.

Resc.: I must collect my money. I repeat once again that I am an honorable resuscitator. Had I known that you were a suicide, I would not have resuscitated you; but since, through an error committed by those who called me, I came and operated my machine, taking an hour of my time, it is but right that you pay me. I have a family—wife and six children—one of them resuscitated. You now see what an upright man I am. I could have left him dead; it would have been one mouth less. But, no sir, I resuscitated him. I believed that it was my duty. But we were saying that if you pay me you will be able to commit suicide again tranquilly. I am the sole concessionary in this country for the working of this invention, as I have had the honor to tell you, and no one will come and molest you with another resurrection. You will sleep definitely in peace. On the other hand, if you continue owing me these 200 pesetas, I shall see myself obliged to resuscitate you every time you commit suicide. Do you understand? I know that what I am saying is disagreeable, there's nothing more distasteful than a resurrection, but I can do nothing else—do you see?

Patient: (Understanding the difficulties of the situation) Yes, now I understand—now I see. This very afternoon you will have your 200 pesetas. You may bring me the receipt, I shall wait for it until six or seven. Don't forget that in the evening I shall attempt to asphyxiate—

Resc.: Agreed! I will not make you wait. I thought we would come to some agreement.

Kindred spirits are Nervo and Poe. From Nervo's many references to Poe and his works, we may readily believe that the American excited a strong spiritual influence on the Mexican author. That such an affinity exists between Poe's tales and many of Nervo's is quite apparent. But to say that a very definite and particular influence may be proved in the above tales is beyond the scope of this article and the purpose of its author.

Tick Tock

By KAY BOWERS

"Life is real, life is earnest."
 Is a catch-word
 Among us "youngsters,"
 A joke . . . hilariously hailed.
 To us life is just
 A silly toy, laughed at,
 Tinkered with. (We are curious
 As to what makes it tick.)
 But sometimes,
 In my gloomier moments
 (After having thrust
 An experimental forefinger
 Into this amusing mechanism
 Called Life, and
 Having it severely burned)
 I wonder
 Can we, the youth,
 The hope, of the world
 Be Wrong?