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“The Infinite World of the Soul, . . . the Horizons of Unseen Supernatural Skies”: Liudmil Stoianov on Edgar Allan Poe

Nikita Nankov
Indiana University, Bloomington

This paper deals with two forgotten articles on Edgar Allan Poe published in 1919 and 1921 by the Bulgarian writer Liudmil Stoianov. They, along with an essay by Stoianov's literary friend Geo Milev, are the most important Symbolist interpretations of this American writer in Bulgaria. I analyze Stoianov's opinions of Poe as formed by the interaction of (at least) two major contexts: first, modernist European (and to a much lesser extent American) ideas about Poe, and second, some major tendencies specific to Bulgarian modernism.

The earlier, 1919 article, the preface to the three-volume collection of Poe's tales translated by Stoianov, comprises a biographical sketch and a critical treatment. The sketch is replete with factual errors (which is something common for Bulgarian presentations of Poe’s life before and after Stoianov) and draws on sources that were outdated even in 1919. Stoianov quotes Théophile Gautier's introduction to Charles Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du mal [Flowers of evil] and an early note on Poe by the Russian Symbolist Konstantin Bal'mont. Stoianov takes up the well-known legend, linked mostly but not solely with Baudelaire, of Poe as a genius victimized by an American society hostile to artistic creation. Yet the Bulgarian critic changes this legend considerably. For Baudelaire, social and cultural factors determine Poe's tragic position as artist, and this tragedy has concrete historical and aesthetic meaning. Baudelaire's three major articles on Poe (in fact, prefaces to his translations of Poe's tales) elaborate a sophisticated social and aesthetic theory of modernism: the modern writer is a victim of the contemporary social reality that is inhospitable to art (Baudelaire's first article, "Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Works" [1852], presenting Poe's biography); therefore, he escapes from it either through his psychological writings (the second article, "Edgar Poe, His Life and Works" [1856], dealing with Poe's tales) or through his transcendental ideas of literature (the third article, "New Notes on Edgar Poe" [1857], about Poe's aesthetics and literary criticism). Stoianov, however, regards the misfortunes of the American writer as mere results of the finger of inexplicable fate. He presents Poe's life one-sidedly by ignoring the dynamic between artist and social and historical forces emphasized by Baudelaire. According to Stoianov, Poe's life is just "a poem of despair" [edna poema na otchaiti-nieto] (9). This Poe, a helpless victim, resembles the image of "the wretch" [neudachnikút] as described by Petko Todorov, one of the founders of Bulgarian modernism: a new and typically modernist character in early-twentieth-century Bulgarian literature. Since Poe is a sufferer for Stoianov, the Bulgarian critic does not speak of his intellectual power, which, for many of his most outstanding European admirers, often verges on the demoniacal. The poet as a victim of an imímical materialistic society—in the most general, vague romantic and modernist sense—is a thesis that Stoianov considers pivotal, for he formulates it, five years before the 1919 article and without referring to Poe, in the preface to the first collection of his own poems:

I know the ostracism to which, from birth, is condemned every poet, small or great—particularly in a society of the unenlightened chandala. But I do not lose confidence and, as William Blake says, the uglier the life becomes, the more determinedly shall I draw angels.

[At znatnata otvorenost, na koito ot rozhdenie se osuzhda vseki poet malûk ili golûm - osobeno v edno obeshtevo na bezprosvenata Chandalà. No az ne go buvia uevernost i - lakto kazva Viliam Blek -, kolkoto psejzaobrazen stava zhivota, toldkova po-usûrdno shite risuvam angel.]

In other words, for Stoianov, Poe's wretchedness is a concrete illustration of a universal (romantic-modernist) principle.

Stoianov's critical evaluations of Poe stand closest to Bal'mont's, and that is hardly a surprise given the fact that Stoianov all his life re-
mained an ardent reader and translator of Russian literature. On the other hand, he did not know French—the major language through which Symbolism influenced Bulgarian literature—so most of his modernist inspiration came either through the Russian Symbolists or through his literary friends who knew French. (This is why I do not detail Stoianov’s use of Gautier, since most probably he had heard these things from his friends.) Because Bal’mont in many respects follows Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé in their interpretations of Poe, the evaluation of Poe’s work that Stoianov lays out in his 1919 preface (and elaborates, to some degree, in the 1921 review) does indirectly owe much to these French thinkers. Stoianov’s evaluation can be summarized in three points: first, Poe is a psychological writer; second, he is also a writer of the transcendental; and finally, these two peculiarities are expressed best in Poe’s superbly crafted poetry.

For Stoianov, Poe is a psychological writer who describes “the horror of the sick soul” [(u)zhasa na bolnata dusha] (9). Similarly, Baudelaire stresses the psychological penetration that is so important in the tales of his American idol, Poe’s probing into the “maladies of the mind.” He also writes about “Edgar Poe, this incomparable Poet, this irrefutable philosopher—who must always be quoted in regard to the mysterious maladies of the mind” [Edgar Poe, ce poète incomparable, ce philosophe non réfuté, qu’il faut toujours citer à propos des maladies mystérieuses de l’esprit]. The Swedish modernist Ola Hansson details parallel views in light of the psychological concepts of the end of the nineteenth century. Remy de Gourmont considers that “Poe is the most subjective of the subjective poets” [Poe est le plus subjectif des poètes subjectifs]. For Brinsov, Poe and Nietzsche mark the outset of modernist literature, which reflects the world not as an objective reality but as a subjective reality. The “sick soul” [bolnata dusha] is fashionable stock of Bulgarian modernist literature, from the days of both the Thought [Misûl] circle and the Bulgarian Symbolists, who developed and at the same time challenged the ideas and traditions of that circle. The “sick soul” permeates the lyrical discourse of the time and the personal letters of Bulgarian modernists. As a literary theme, it has not only serious specimens in high modernist literature but also parodic artistic and critical incarnations.

Stoianov holds that Poe’s artistic subjectivism is best demonstrated in his self-expressive poetry: “It is deeply individual, singular and inseparable from his soul” [Tia e dûlboko individualna, edîнная i nerazdelenâ ot negovata dusha] (11). Baudelaire writes, “the character in Poe . . . is Poe himself,” and other French critics after him have noticed the lyrical autobiographical in Poe’s fiction. Some Bulgarian modernists and later some scholars term such autobiographical in Bulgarian modernist literature individualism, expression of the self, and so on.

Poe’s work is not only subjective, Stoianov claims, but transcendental, leading the reader beyond this world:

[Poe’s] imagination, in the exceptional hours when the soul is overwhelmed by the thrill of the Unknown, draws in front of his amazed eyes superb images and countries with novel, unique nature where he lives in reality, a greater reality than in the actual world.

[Negovata fantazia, v izkluchitelnitie chasove, kogato dushata e obzeta ot trendy na Neizvestnoto, risuva pred smeâna mu pogled chudni obrazi i strani s nova, nevidena priroda, deto to zhibee realno, po-realno, nezhele v deistvitelniia sviat.] (10)

Baudelaire, too, recognizes the transcendental ideal of beauty and the transcendental poetry in Poe’s essay “The Poetic Principle.” Baudelaire’s Platonic interpretations have been taken up by Mallarmé and the Symbolists following him, as well as by American and European scholars of Poe. Bulgarian Symbolists interpret Poe as a predominantly transcendental poet akin to Mallarmé; the most striking example is Mîlev’s article on Poe from 1919.

The ideas of the subjectivist and transcendental identity of Poe as a writer have had a three-fold effect widely discussed in American, European, and Bulgarian literary criticism and scholarship of that time. Each can be traced in Stoianov as well. First, the artistic escape from reality (whether subjectivist or transcendental) turns Poe into a writer who, as Stoianov puts it, “does not belong to any nationality” [ne primadlæhzi kûm nikio naatsionalnost] (9). Until the 1920s, American literary criticism and scholarship did not succeed in affiliating Poe with American national literature. To the objective specificities in the development of literary history as a discipline, and Poe’s idiosyncratic life and works (two topics which I cannot discuss here), European modernism added an affinity toward ahistorical, “eternal”—subjective and divine—values. It is mainly for these three reasons that from the middle of the nineteenth century until the late 1920s or even the 1930s Poe was considered a writer of all ages, a prophet of modernism and Symbolism, yet without a proper and firm place in American cultural tradition. Bulgarian analogues to the European modernist revolt against the “here and now” are, for instance, the
satires, the philosophical poetry, and the Christian utopias of Stoian Mikhailovski,22 and the psychologically treated folklore themes typical of the writers from the Thought circle. The project of Milev’s literary youth also falls in this category: he writes of “the cosmos and the cosmic elements: the ideas” [kosmosüt i kosmicheske elementi: ideite] and the “merger of the I with the cosmic elements, with Plato’s idea” [slivaneto na Az s kosmicheske elementi, s Platonovata ideia].23 Milev’s tenets are followed by many Bulgarian Symbolists as well.

The second effect of Poe’s double identity as a psychological and transcendental writer, as Stoianov articulates it, is that he presents maximum realistic experience against the background of maximum unrealistic settings: “all these ‘extraordinary’ tales ... are written with almost mathematically precise presentation” [vsichki tiia “ekstraordinernia” razkazi ... sa napisani s edna realizatsiia pochti matematicheska] (9). Baudelaire notes that, in certain of Poe’s tales, “we find pure fantasy, modeled on nature and realistically presented, in the manner of Hoffmann.”24 Dostoevsky, Hansson, Bal’mont, and the Bulgarian scholar Mikhail Arnaudov have, in their own ways, treated this peculiarity of Poe’s fiction.25 At the time of Bulgarian modernism this literary technique was usually labelled “psychological realism.” The genesis of that type of fiction has to be sought, generally speaking, in the American intellectual climate, and, in concrete terms, in the literary and journalistic practices in the United States and Great Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century.26

The third effect can be traced in Poe’s angel-like women characters imbued with lethal woe; more attention will be allotted to them when I analyze Stoianov’s second article.

Stoianov’s third major point in the 1919 article is that these strong subjectivist and transcendental trends in Poe are expressed in his poetry through virtuoso and consciously welded verse:

In well-balanced stanzas, which testify to diligent and careful polishing as well as a taste for the specific value of each word, coupled with the composure of an artist entwined with the sharp-edged steel reason of a rigorous mathematician, the whole complex mechanism of the human soul [that is, Poe’s subjectivism], standing in awe in front of the gates of the Mystery [that is, Poe’s transcendentalism], is unfolded to us.

[V izmereni strofi, kototo izdavat staranie i grzhiliva obrabotka, kako i vkus kim spetsialichnata tserna na slovoto, i s edno sporokolovie na hudozhnik sudechik na ostrussia zhelezen um na strog matematik, pred nas e izrazen tselka slozen mehanizhim na choveshkata dusha, zastina na pred vratile na Tsvata.] (10)

The poetic achievements of Poe have been evaluated skeptically rather than praised in the United States, though “The Raven” ranks among the most popular poems written in English. However, Poe is acknowledged as a world celebrity in poetry by the French and European modernists and Symbolists. Baudelaire thinks highly of Poe’s verse, yet it remains peripheral to his interest in the American writer. Mallarmé is the most authoritative follower, translator, publisher, critic, and promoter of Poe as a poet and theorist of poetry. Speaking of the American master, Mallarmé emphasizes, first, the poetic effect upon the reader attained through patient and conscious work on the verse and, second, the bond between poetry and beauty in Poe. The young Paul Valéry reiterates some of the opinions of Mallarmé.27 Bal’mont claims:

Edgar Poe is chronologically the first significant poet Symbolist of the nineteenth century, if we understand artistic symbolism in this particular sense which they ascribe to it recently.

[Edgar Po - pervyi po znacheniiu, - pervyi khronologicheski, - poët-simvolist deviatnadatsatogo veka, esli ponimat’ khudozhestvenni symvolizm v tom osobennom smysle, kakoi emu pridaiut za poslednee vremia.]

He also praises Poe as “the greatest among the Symbolist poets” [velichaishii iz poëtov-simvolistov Edgar Po].28 Mallarmé describes almost every poem of Poe translated by him in the first part of the book Les Poèmes d’Edgar Poe as “a unique masterpiece” [un chef-d’œuvre unique]. Bruisov, who in his work on poetic theory draws on the critical and practical contributions of the American poet, adds, “almost every one of [Poe’s] poems is original both in terms of metrics and in stanzaic pattern” [pochti kazhko ego stikhovorenii original’no i po metru, i po strofe].29 The Symbolists regard Poe primarily as a poet, and in their opinion even his fiction is poetry.30 French scholar-ship of the 1920s–40s reiterates the same praise of Poe’s poetry at the expense of his prose, judging his influence on French poetry to be considerable, profound, and lasting but the impact of his fiction short-lived and transient.31 The Bulgarian poet and critic Milev, who trusts the opinions of Gourmont and at that time was a close friend of Stoianov’s, similarly regards Poe primarily as a poet.32 Bulgarian modernism altogether prefers poetry and evaluates both Bulgarian and world literature via the standards of Symbolist poetry.33

Stoianov appreciates Poe as a poet of suggestive symbolism: “Suggestion, rather than sincerity, is his favorite poetic principle” [Vmuše-nieto, poveche otkolkoto iskrenostta, e negovia
llubim poeticheskii printsip] (11). Mallarmé applies to Poe his own theories about suggestive, indirect poety that is loaded with subtle implications. In Mallarmé’s view, the American poet is not only a strictly conscientious creator, as is evident from “The Philosophy of Composition,” but also a skilled artist who knows how to conceal the sophisticated intellectual frame of his poems through intuitively tuned effusion, preceding the poetic conception, how to melt this frame into the blank space between the stanzas, turning it into “meaningful silence that is no less beautiful to compose than the verse” [significatif silence qu’il n’est pas moins beau de composer, que les vers].

Mallarmé repeatedly refers to the musicality of Poe’s poetry, which he interprets in accordance with his own ideas about the kinship between music and poetry. Thus, Mallarmé becomes one of the initiators of the popular yet historically incorrect idea (which would prevail throughout the next several decades in Europe and to some extent in America as well) that Poe’s poetry is to be read by means of the Symbolists’ fusion of music and poetry.

The young Valéry, who bases his appreciation of the American poet on the views of Mallarmé, writes to the latter: “I cherish, in poetry as in prose, the so profound and so perfidiously clever theories of Edgar Poe[,] I believe completely in the power of rhythm and above all of the suggestive epithet” [Je chéris en poésie comme en prose, les théories si profondes et si perfidement savantes d’Edgar Poe, je crois à la toute puissance du rythme et surtout de l’épithète suggestive]. Bal’mont ascribes to Poe Symbolist symbols that are different from allegory: “in their pure consummate state [the Symbolist symbols] emerge for the first time in [the poetry of Edgar Poe]” [v chistom zakonchennom vide on (simvolizm) poavlietsia u Edgara Po v pervyey].

Briusov, assuming Symbolist notions of creative work, views Poe as a poet even in many of his tales. In poetry, holds Briusov, one creates through the word which evokes images and expresses thoughts; in fiction, words are merely a means, while the creative process proceeds from images and concepts expressed by words. In the more familiar terminology of Roman Jakobson, in poetry the poetic function of language dominates, and the artistic sign refers to its own structure, whereas in fiction other language aspects dominate, and the sign refers to things other than itself. Poe, continues Briusov, always remains a poet because he “yield[s] himself to the element of the word” [podchiniv sebe stikhiu slova].

The critical dispute between the two generations of Bulgarian modernists—that of the Thought circle and that of the Symbolists—results from opposing models of poetic verse: the Thought circle’s clarity versus Symbolist obscurity; and the Thought circle’s stumbled, ponderous style versus Symbolist ideals of freely flowing verse. Poe, as interpreted by Stoianov as well as by the Symbolists, stands for the latter principles of these two oppositions.

II

The second article by Stoianov, published in 1921, reviews the second edition of Poe’s poems translated by Mikhailov and illustrated with five black and white drawings—which are classic—by Sira-K. Skitnik, a modernist writer, critic, and artist. Stoianov repeats and develops some of the ideas about Poe he laid out in the earlier article. Yet here he decisively abandons the consciously rationalist assets of Poe’s works emphasized by European and Russian modernism and the Thought circle, thus coming closer to Gourmont, in whose opinion “The Raven” is the fruit not of conscientious effort but of intuitive creativity. Milev, in his article on Poe from 1919, also sees Poe, as well as each modernist writer, as intuitive and irrational. Stoianov’s second article on Poe addresses four major theses: first, Poe holds a pivotal role in contemporaneous art and culture; second, he is a subjective, intuitive-irrational, and transcendental writer; third, he is one of the founders of modern culture; and finally, his poetry is the most important part of his work.

Poe had “an extraordinary influence” [izkliuchitelno vliianie] on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century art and culture in general, writes Stoianov—an assertion based on an enormous array of evidence of Poe’s popularity in Europe and in Bulgaria at that time. The following examples of Poe’s impact on modernist culture are not exhaustive but, rather, illustrative of a broader phenomenon. The five volumes of his prose fiction translated by Baudelaire were classic even for his day. According to Gautier, Baudelaire’s “translations produce the effect of original works and have the complete perfection of genius” [les traductions produisent l’effet d’ouvrages originaux et ont toute la perfection géniale]. Arthur Symons, one of the most prominent champions and popularizers of French Symbolism in England, goes even further and states that this is “a translation which is better than a marvelous original.” It is mainly through Baudelaire’s translations that the work of the American writer became popular in the Romance-language countries of Europe and Latin America. Another well-known edition of Poe includes the poems translated by Mallarmé and illustrated by Edouard Manet. Mallarmé, in 1875, also
dedicated a poem of his own to Poe: “Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe” [The tomb of Edgar Poe]. French as well as West European criticism and scholarship from the 1850s through the 1930s recognized Poe’s influence on the whole of French literature.41

In Russia, the fame of Poe at the beginning of the twentieth century was so great that it virtually eclipsed the rest of American literature. The very solidly written History of Western Literature (1800–1910), published in Moscow in 1912–14, presents nineteenth-century American literature in two chapters: one covers the whole of that literary tradition except for Poe, and the second (the article by Briusov already mentioned) is dedicated solely to Poe.42 Edvard Munch, the Norwegian painter, greatly appreciated Poe and acknowledged that he was the writer who, besides Dostoevsky, had influenced him most. Several of Munch’s drawings were inspired by the American writer. Aubrey Beardsley writes that Poe’s tales provide excellent opportunities for illustrating, and in 1894–95 he planned eight such illustrations (but completed only four). Henri Matisse drew a portrait of Poe. Sergei Rakhmaninov and Claude Debussy wrote music to Poe’s works. In 1928, Jean Epstein shot one of the classic silent movies, La Chute de la maison Usher, on themes from Poe’s tales “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Oval Portrait.”43

The enormous influence of Poe reflected in such artistic responses, maintains Stoianov, developing the second point in the 1921 article, is due to his being a subjective, intuitive-irrational, and transcendental writer. When Stoianov claims that Poe affected Jules Verne and Conan Doyle in “a rather negative way” [edno tvürde otritsatelno vliianie], he, in reality, rejects the rationalist line of interpretation of the American writer that had deep roots in France. The rationalist line paralleled and at times intersected the modernist approach to the writer. These tendencies were based mainly on the “detective” and “science fiction” works of Poe,44 as well as on narrative techniques of detailed veracious description. In France and Russia, scholars and critics debated whether Poe should be valued for his scientific and detective fiction. In 1925, for instance, Camille Maucclair pointed out that Mallarmé overlooked Poe’s plots of horror, insanity, and fantasy, whereas French critics emphasized these very plots as characteristic of Poe. Briusov also did not consider the “ratiocinative” tales of Poe as high literature. Hervey Allen, one of Poe’s finest biographers, who tended to recognize primarily the late romantic tendencies in him, contended that when Poe deals with architecture, science, prediction of the future, and technology, his works are inferior in artistic merit to his most famous tales focused on insanity and horror. The French scholars of the 1920s and the 1930s who dealt with the relation between Poe and French Symbolism and modernism shared the view (upheld by Stoianov as well) that the link between the writer and science fiction and detective stories is superficial and without significant value for French literature.45

Stoianov’s reluctance to praise Poe as a master of science fiction and detective stories can be explained by the fact that the philosophical and aesthetic texture of Bulgarian Symbolism is intuitive, irrational, and often imbued with mysticism, which means that in it there is hardly any space for genres that represent the world from a rational point of view. Emanuil Popdimitrov, a Bulgarian poet, fiction writer, critic, and scholar, for instance, affiliates French Symbolism with powerful intuivist doctrines in philosophy and science at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, and ties the name of Henri Bergson to Symbolism and Expressionism.46 Milev asserts in 1914:

The new aesthetics—such as it is created by the new art—is no longer logic and knowledge, but—even though it sounds rather paradoxical—intuition. The aesthetics of modern art is—as is art itself—metaphysics.

[Moveta estetika - takava, kakvoto ia sūzdava novo izkustvo - ne e povche logika i poznanie, a makar che zvuchi dosta paradoksano - intuitsiia. Estetikata na modernoto izkustvo e - kato i samoto izkustvo - metafizika.]47

Milev’s declaration should be understood in the context of a long discussion in Bulgarian criticism and literature, during the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, about the rational or irrational character of art and creativity. Milev’s main opponent in this debate, from the early 1920s on, was Arnaudov,48 who all his life propagated the conscious character of creativity—an idea presented with great elaboration in the book Psikhologiia na literaturnoto tvorchestvo [Psychology of literary creativity]. On more than one occasion, Arnaudov analyzed Poe as an artist demonstrating “the role of consciousness in creativity” [rollata na suznatelna faktor pri tvorchestvot].49

Stoianov, insisting on the intuitive-irrational rather than the rationalist interpretations of Poe, is close in his opinions to Chavdar Mutafov, a contemporary fiction writer, art critic, and member of the Scales circle, who writes that “the hidden basis of Poe’s poems” is “the irrational” [skritata osnova na poemite na Edgar Po: iratsionalnoto].50 Stoianov describes Poe as a writer of “the subcon-
scious world” [podsúznatelní sviat] who “pushed art into the infinite world of the soul, unfolding new possibilities for it and expanding the horizons of unseen supernatural skies” [tlašna izkustvoto v bezkrainia sviat na dushata, razgurda pred nego novi vůzmožnosti i nu otvori krúgozorite na nevideni svrůkhhestveni nebesa]. This quotation is another example of the already familiar combination between subjectivism and transcendentalism in the modernist interpretation of Poe. Here Stoianov comes close to other Bulgarian modernists. According to Popdimitrov, for instance, Bergson’s philosophy makes possible the transition from subjectivity to the world beyond in the act of artistic creation: “let the subconscious speak up, it actually is superconsciousness” [trieba da ostavim da zagovori podsúznanicto, kocot vsůsítnost e edno svrůkhšůznání]. In his article, Stoianov relates Poe to Bergson: with “his sick spirit” [svola bohen dukt] the American writer fertilizes “the spirit of the new age” [dukha na novoto vreme] and becomes ancestor and conferee of Bergson, this “most sophisticated representative” [naí-sůvůršen predstavitel] of “contemporary thought” [svůrcemnata misil]. Like the names of Doyle and Verne, the name of Bergson is used here metonymically, as a representative of modernist thought, which makes it difficult to estimate how well Stoianov knows these authors. What is unquestionable, however, is that this metonymic use has, first and foremost, rhetorical, not educational, motives. Broadly speaking, this article by Stoianov can be regarded as a part of the overwhelming intuitivist tide characteristic of the Symbolist critics in Bulgaria.

Stoianov, in the 1921 as well as in the 1919 article, adds morbid touches to Poe's portrait: the American is “a poet of the mystery” [poet na tainata], and therefore he enchants “all souls condemned to wander along the blind crossroads of our poor planet” [vsichki dushi, osiđeni da bluzhdujat v bezizhodnite krústopítishata na nashata bedna planeta].

However curious it might appear, it is a logical coincidence that American Joseph Wood Krutch, the shrewd early Freudian biographer and interpreter of Poe, expresses opinions close to these of Stoianov. He asserts that Verne and Doyle are not genuine successors of the writer whose tales abound in “[h]orror and logic.” Logic is only temporary escape from the horror that in fact engenders Poe’s tales; therefore, his genuine successors are the French decadents “who write with their nerves” as does Poe, “the real inventor of the neurotic genre.” The subjectivist and idealistic premises of Krutch and Stoianov bring forth similar attitudes in criticism.

Stoianov’s third major point in the 1921 article is that he regards the subjectivist, transcendental Poe as a founder of modern culture. He interprets the relations between the American writer and Baudelaire as a kinship between two modern poets who are forerunners of Bergson and the spirit of intuitivism. Stoianov echoes the reiterated ideas that will be summarized by Bruce Archer Morrissette at the beginning of the 1930s as follows:

The principal value of Baudelaire’s additions to Poe’s theories consists in developing and explaining the ideas about correspondences and the notion of the poetic resources of certain states of the mind that are analogous to the state of dream, the fertile intuition that the unconscious or the subconscious seems to furnish to the consciousness or the knowledge of the poet.

[La valeur principale des additions de Baudelaire aux théories de Poe consiste à développer et éclaircir les idées de correspondances et la notion des ressources poétiques de certains états d’esprit analogues aux états du rêve, l’intuition féconde que l’inconscient ou le subconscient semble fournir à la conscience ou à la connaissance du poète.]

This view of Morrissette, which in fact formulates one aspect of the understanding of Poe of that time, would be overcome during the 1950s, when additional research suggested that the relation between Poe and Baudelaire (focusing on ideas of creativity as an intuitive and subconscious process) resulted from essential additions to the ideas of the American writer arising from French Symbolism and modernism.

Stoianov follows in the French and Russian tradition by speaking of Poe as a classic world author. When Stoianov writes that “Anaxagoras, Plato, Christ” [Anaksagor, Platon, Krhistos] are “a beginning” [nachalo] of everything related to Poe, the Bulgarian critic, in reality, appropriates values of the past by ascribing to them contemporary meanings that present these values as pre-Symbolist. This interpretive modernist move of seeing in the great past all the values of the present was popular among Bulgarian modernists (and indeed, measuring the past through the needs of the present, not the other way around, is typical for the modern era in general). Milev writes in much the same vein of Mallarmé:

World poetry has never known another such teacher around whom all the poets of one young generation stay in sincere awe, listening to his prophetic words: as in the past, in the time of the great teachers—Buddha, Plato, Jesus, the Apostles.

[Vsemirnata poezia ne poznava drug uchitel', okolo ko-goto s iskreno strakhopochitanie da sa stoiali stúbran}
vsihki poeti na edno mlado pokolenie, zaslushani v pro-
rocheskite mu dumi: kakto niakoga, vuv vremenata na
velikite uchitel - Buda, Platon, Isus, Apostolite.\[50\]

In his 1921 review, Stoianov reiterates the
argument that Poe’s poetry is the most significant
part of his work—and this is the fourth major
point in this text. That idea prevailed so powerfully
among the Symbolists and in the literary scholar-
ship adherent to them at the time that Louis
Seylaz, neglecting the obvious facts, asserts that,
although Baudelaire liked Poe’s tales, he preferred
his poetry and his theory of pure poetry.\[51\] In fact,
the reverse is the case: Baudelaire’s translations
and three major articles on Poe testify that he was
chiefly interested in the American writer’s social
status, tales, and aesthetics, not his poetry. In his
second article, Stoianov discusses two additional
themes in Poe’s poetry: the tragedy of death and
the eternal parting with the beloved woman, and
the transformation of death into a “cosmic idea”
[kozmichna ideia] through which one transcends re-
ality and plunges into the world beyond.

What are the roots of these two themes so much
relished by modernism and Symbolism?\[52\] Poe
was shaped as a poet in the South and in some re-
pects was close to its amateur poets. The general
awareness of the decline of the Southern aristoc-
racy, the romantic melancholy palpable even across
the Atlantic, and the popular amateurish literature
of the South that attributes major significance to
the personal feelings of the author on some con-
crete occasion—these seem to be some of the ma-
jor reasons that mourning for the death of the
beloved woman becomes a main theme in Poe’s
poetry. In his theorizing on poetry, Poe deviates
from the Platonic tradition, according to which love
for something beautiful leads to love for all beauti-
ful things and finally to love for the ultimate idea
of beauty. In his criticism, Poe includes experi-
ence, a philosophical and aesthetic category bor-
rowed from Scottish common-sense psychological
aesthetics of the eighteenth-century. Poe thinks
that pain (over the death of the beloved) makes
man seek not transient but eternal beauty in the
world beyond. The divine mission of the poet is
to make the audience long for this timeless beauty,
which can be reached through aesthetic experience
that is different from love passion, moral torment,
or the joy of intellectual effort. Thus, indirectly,
poetry preaches contempt for reality.

The close connection of late romanticism
(“late” as a typological, not chronological cate-
gory) and modernism is well known. It has been
argued that in the late romantic view, love, re-
sulting from the split of being into material and
spiritual, becomes completely spiritual.\[53\] Start-
ing from this assumption, the modernists inter-
pret the love theme in Poe as spiritual and ce-
estial; that is, they overstress the late romantic
and modernist characteristics of the theme (while
completely misunderstanding and neglecting the
influence of Scottish common-sense psychological
aesthetics on Poe’s poetic theory and practice).
Stoianov defines the poetry of Poe as “a tragedy of
purity, of helplessness, of mourning, and astral
music” [edna tragediia ot chistota, ot bezsilie, ot skrub
i zvezdna muzika]. Annabel Lee, he continues, “is
transformed into a cosmic idea, fills the Universe
like golden dust of thousands of dead hearts swal-
lowed by eternity, yet still pulsating with love” [se
prevrugshta v kozmichna ideia, izpulva vselena,
podobno zlaten prakh na hiliadi pokoini sursa,
pogilnati ot vechnostta, no vse oslite tupiaishki s
pulsa na liubovta]. Such thoughts have been ex-
pressed many times before, giving special promi-
nence to the female characters of Poe who embody
the angelic virginity of love and are tinged by lethal
sorrow. The theme is one of the few on which
European modernist critics and literary scholars
influenced by them concur with their American
colleagues from the nineteenth and the beginning
of the twentieth century, who are oriented toward
the late romantic traits of Poe. Gautier, for ex-
ample, writes of Poe’s female characters (such as
Morella, Ligeia, Lady Rowena, and Eleonora) that
they are but different incarnations “of one unique
love that survives the death of the adored ob-
ject” [d’une amour survivant à la mort de l’object
adoré]. Briusov, in the poem “In Response to a Confes-
sion” [V ovet na odno priznanie, 1910], uses
imagery that depicts Poe dreaming of pure spiri-
tual love.\[54\] This is in accord with Mallarmé’s ideas
about virginity, where woman, poetry, and the Idea
merge into a theoretical-poetic unity, or with the
theme of eternal femininity [vechnaia zhenstven-
nost’], central to the Russian Symbolists, through
which the earthly and the concrete transcend into
the divine.

Bulgarian Symbolism also has critical and
artistic examples of synonymy between ideas of
woman, love, virginity, angelic divinity, poetry,
and eternal harmony. The critic Bot’o Savov,
for instance, writes of Nikolai Liliev, an outstand-
ing Bulgarian late Symbolist, as a poet who has
thrown away the flesh-and-blood woman, the sin,
and the temptation, and has given himself solely
to spiritual beauty:

The enormous sun has set down in [Liliev’s] world. The
Woman has disappeared: a cosmic element that hovers
above the life of humankind and rules over the fate of
man. Love and beauty are rays torn apart from their
primal source, rays from an extinguished sun. Love and
beauty have no other purpose, but themselves. They are self-purpose.

Ogronmoto slüntse e zaliazio v negovia sviat. Izcheznala e Zhenata: kozmicheksa stikhija, kriat se nosi nad zvihova i chovecestvota i vlade sútđata na múzha. Liubotva i krasotata s učchi tokšiśni ot svoja půrvoistochnik, luchci ot ugasnalo slüntse. Liubotva i krasotata nínant druga ćel, osven sebe si. Te sa sanôteš.[64]

Milev, led by similar notions, compiled The Yellow Rose Anthology: Lyrics of Unhappy Love [Antologija na zhññata roza: Lirika na zločehsta liubov], and included there Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee” in Mikhailov’s translation.65 It is not strange, therefore, that in Stoianov’s writings about Popdimitrov’s poetry much can be found in common between Popdimitrov and the American poet, both of whom appear as exemplary Symbolists:

Such is [Popdimitrov’s] love—all-embracing. It cannot be confined within the boundaries of time—temporal and spatial limitations do not exist for it: because it is a memory of something that has already happened. It has lost its earthly appearance, its concrete image, and has been transformed into a heavenly vision: it is not personified by a woman of flesh and blood, but by a heavenly sphere. Her name may be Laura, or Emma, or Ephrosina, or Magdalene, but she is always the same—The Heavenly Woman, Sophia, the eternal Beatrice.

[Takava e negovata liubov - vseobemna. Tia ne mozhe da se vnesti viv vremeto - za neia ne sushtestvuva vremena i prostranstvena zapretnost: zashtoto tia e spomen za nekto, koeto e vecho stanalo. Tia e izgubila svoia zemen obraz, svoia konkreten lik, i se e prevurnala v nebesno videnie: ne se olitsetviorava v zemna zhana, a v nebesen sračim. Neinoto ime mozhe da e Laura, ili Ema, ili Efrosina, ili Magdalina, no tia e edna i súshta - Nebesnata Zhena, Sofia, vechnata Beatrice.]

Petur Iordanov, another Bulgarian critic of the time, directly compares the female characters in the poetry of Popdimitrov, who are “brides of Christ,” [nevesti na Krista], with Poe’s women. Similar definitions of Popdimitrov’s poetry, though they do not refer to Poe, are offered by such other writers and critics as Vicho Ivanov, Dobri Iurukov, Vasil Pundev, and Georgi Karaivanov.67

The modernist-Symbolist interpretations of Poe’s idealistic sorrowful love are the most popular, but they are, of course, not the only possible ones. Walt Whitman, for instance, whose ideas of poetry are quite different from those of Poe and the Symbolists, complains that the poems of his compatriot lack the earthly, the material, the healthy, the normal, and the sexual.68 D. H. Lawrence, in a 1919 article on Poe, interprets the American’s works through biological determinism in life and art, and considers love in Poe’s life and works as a sort of nervous tension released by certain physiological centers.69 Lawrence’s inferences accord with the mainstream of American intellectual life during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, which was marked by naturalistic and biological determinism.70 The early Freudian analyses of Poe understand his work and life as expressions of refracted sexuality, and the Platonic female images and real life love relationships as reflections of his psycho-physiological impotence.71 Critics who read Poe primarily as a regional poet point out that, in the sociocultural context of the South, poetry of Poe’s type acquires strong erotic connotations during the funeral ritual.72

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The essence of Stoianov’s critical views of Poe is the adaptation of European modernist ideas about the American writer to the character of Bulgarian modernism and Symbolism. If one evaluates this statement in a paradigm that presupposes a Western (German, French, English) and Russian cultural “center” emulated by a Bulgarian cultural “periphery,” one could paradoxically—and sadly—conclude that the originality of Stoianov’s views is their lack of originality. This kind of reasoning is characteristic for Bulgaria in the first decades of the twentieth century (and even in our time), and in 1924 it is spelled out by Boian Penev, the leading Bulgarian literary historian between the two world wars, in his famous article “Our Intelligentsia (Fragments)” [Nashata intelligentsiia (fragmenti)]:

Most of our writers, when they are influenced by somebody [for Penev, this “somebody” is from Germany, France, England, or Russia], do not commence from a deep knowledge of a certain writer or literature; they are carried away by one single work, by one single poetic form, by one single fortuitous image. And because of this the influence is external, superficial: it does not touch more deeply their creativity, it does not leave traces in their spiritual nature.

[Povecheto ot pisatelite ni, kogato se vliaiät, ne izkhlozdát ot edno cenoavno zapoznanstvo s daden khudozhnik ili dadena literatura; ulicht se ot edno proizvedenie, ot edna poeticheska forma, ot edin slucaen obraz. I po-radi tova vliaianeto e vâshno, povirvâlnostno: ne za-sliâga po-dûlîbko tiakhnoto tvorchestvo, ne ostavia sledi v tiakhnata dukhovna súshtnost.]

This is also the premise of Bulgarian scholarship, from the early 1970s up to this day, with regard to the modernist period in Bulgarian culture.73 However, an approach that dispensed with “centers” and “peripheries,” and the corollary notion of “originality,” would view Stoianov’s ideas of Poe (as well as the whole problem of the “imitative-
ness” of Bulgarian modernism with respect to the West and the “major” Slavic literatures) without the inferiority complexes, the bitter moralistic feelings, and the didactic pathos of Penev and his followers.

NOTES

1 Liudmil Stoianov (1888–1973) was a major Bulgarian writer who started his literary career as a modernist and Symbolist but in the 1930s turned to realism. About that time he became leftist, and after the Communists took power in Bulgaria in 1944 he emerged as a champion of socialist realism. Since orthodox Marxist aesthetics and criticism in Bulgaria regarded modernism with hostility until at least, the early 1970s, Stoianov officially repented of his modernist youth. His place in Bulgarian modernism is still inadequately researched.

Most of the Bulgarian modernists mentioned in this paper—Stoianov, Geo Milev, Georgi Mikhailov, Chavdar Mutev, Sirak-Skitev, Emanuel Popdimitrov, Bot’o Savov, Nikolai Liliev—were literary friends united around Milev’s modernist and Symbolist journal Vezni [Scales, 1919–22].


3 Bulgarian literary modernism is traditionally—but simplistically—divided into two periods: individualism (ca. 1890s–1910s) and Symbolism (ca. 1900–1920s). For working purposes, I use this division in a still more simplified version: for me, individualism is represented by the Thought [Misir] literary circle, and Symbolism by the Scales [Vezni] circle (see nn. 1 and 14). The Western reader can find a sketch of the traditional problematication of Bulgarian modernism in Isabelle Vrinat’s article “Le Modernisme bulgare ou la quête d’une identité européenne,” Revue de Littérature Comparée 68 (1994): 313–28.

4 The three thin volumes of Poe’s works contain “horrible” and “poetic” but non-ratiocinative tales. Stoianov translates from Russian, and it seems that even the title of his collection—Neveratioti razkazi—is suggested by a Russian source. Cf. Edgar Po, Nekotorye razkazi [Unusual/extraordinary stories], translated from the English (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo A. S. Suvarina, [1896]); this Russian edition is listed in The National Union Catalog: Pre-1956 Imprints (London: Mansell, 1976), 462:529.

5 K[onstantin] Bal’mont, preface to Ballady i fantazii [Ballads and fantasies], by Edgar Allan Poe, translated from English by K[onstantin] Bal’mont (Moscow: Izdanie knizhno-gazetnoy vedomosti, 1895), iii–xiv. Stoianov also quotes, without making explicit references, other writings by Bal’mont and Baudelaire on Poe that I have been unable to trace.


7 Baudelaire, Baudelaire on Poe, 37–144.


9 Many of the most famous admirers of the American writer, such as Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Ola Hansson, August Strindberg, Bal’mont, and Valerii Briusov, stress this characteristic of Poe. All in Poe’s personality, writes Baudelaire, is “at once dark and brilliant” (Baudelaire on Poe, 106). According to Bal’mont, Poe is a “beautiful demon” [prekrasnyi demon] (in “Edgar Po (1809–1849),” Sobranie sochinieni Edgara Po v perevede s angliiskago K. D. Bal’monta [The collected works of Edgar Poe, translated from English by Konstantin] D. Bal’mont, 5 vols. [Moscow: Skorpiyon, 1901–12], i:ix). Strindberg, during his period of interest in the “battle of brains,” that is, in the strong personality that dominates others thanks to intellectual and will power, admires and emulates Poe’s intellect (Carl L. Anderson, Poe in Northlight: The Scandinavian Response to Bio Life and Work [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1973], 103–41). Briusov, Bal’mont’s young challenger in the field of Russian Symbolism and in knowing and translating Poe, analyzes the American as a writer whose whole work is shaped by the intricate interaction of the rational and the scientific, on the one hand, and the supernatural and the mystical, on the other (“Edgar Po (1811–1849),” in Istoriia zapadnoi literatury [1800–1910] [History of Western literature (1800–1910)], ed. F[edor] D[ušitievich] Bal’tushkov, 3 vols. [Moscow: Izd. T-va “Mir,” 1912–14], 3:328–44). In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, in America, France, Russia, and Bulgaria, Poe’s year of birth was regularly taken as 1811, not 1809. The reason seems to lie in Poe’s “Memorandum” giving 1811 as his year of birth; see Complete Works, 1:344–46. In the table of contents of the Russian History of Western Literature, 3:503, Poe’s first name appears as “Edgard”—another mistake made regularly in
France, Russia, and Bulgaria at that time.


14 The Thought circle consisted of Dr. Krüsto Krüstev, the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary journal Thought [Misil, 1891–1907], Pencho Slavekov, Petko Todorov, and Peio Iavorov. Dr. Krüstev was a critic and theorist of modernism, whereas the other three were poets, fiction writers, and critics. During the 1890s and the first fifteen years or so of the twentieth century, they grafted modernist ideas, artistic forms, and taste onto Bulgarian literature. For Dr. Krüstev and Thought, see the work of Georgi Tsankov, D-r Krüsto Krüstev (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo “Kliment Ohridski,” 1987); and Liubomir Stamatov, D-r Krüsto Krüstev: Lichnost i kríticheska sîdha [Dr. Krüsto Krüstev: His personality and criticism] (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1987).

15 For some letters of the Bulgarian writer and translator Dimitir Podvârzhach, written between 1904 and 1911, discussing, among other things, the “sick soul,” see Slavecho Danilov, “Pisma na Dimitir Podvârzhach do Nikolai Liliev” [Letters from Dimitir Podvârzhach to Nikolai Liliev], Literaturna misil [Lighter thought] 23, no. 10 (1979): 137–53.


19 Baudelaire, Baudelaire on Poe, 140–41.


22 See Svetla Guliashka-Balkanska, Stoian Mikhailovski i frenskata filosofska misil i literatura [Stoian Mikhailovski and French philosophical thought and literature] (Sofia: Bulgarski pisatel, 1987); Atanas Natev, “Neprisposobilmat” [The one who refused to be a turncoat], in Stoian Mikhailovski, Bozhhestven razmirnik: Filosofska poezija i proza [A divine rebel: Philosophical poetry and prose] (Sofia: Bulgarski pisatel, 1987), 5–21; and Aleksandur K’osev, “Sîdbata na edno tvorchestvo ili za tvorchestvo na ‘Neprisposobilma’ i negovoto ‘prisposobivane’” [the title is a pun that can be rendered approximately as follows: The destiny of (Mikhailovski’s) creative work or the work of one who refused to be a turncoat and his (social) adjustment], in Mikhailovski, Bozhhestven razmirnik, 679–721; and Dimitir Mikhailov, Stoian Mikhailovski (Sofia: Prosveta, 1994).

23 Milev, Šôchëniastia v tri toma, 2:163, 178.

24 Baudelaire, Baudelaire on Poe, 71; see also 74–75.


27 Henri Mondor, Vie de Mallarmé (Paris: Gallimard, 1941), 579, 582.

28 Bal’mont, preface to Ballady i fantazii, ix; and “Edgar Po,” I.viii.


34 Mallarmé, Œuvres complètes, 872.


47 Milev, Sùchineniia v tri toma, 2:55.

48 See Milev, Sùchineniia v tri toma, 2:316–21.

49 Mikhail Arnaudov, “Tvorchesctvo lichnost” [The creator’s personality], in Tvorchestvo i kritika: Literaturni portreti i karakteristiki [Creativity and criticism: Literary portraits and characteristics] (Sofia: Hemus, 1938), 11.


51 Popdimitrov, Estetikata na Bergsona (1938), 87.


54 Cf. Quinn, French Face of Edgar Poe, 201–2, who echoes Krutch in this respect.

55 Morrissette, Les Aspects fondamentaux de l’esthétique symboliste, 24; for the relation between Poe and Baudelaire, see 24–27.

56 Quinn, French Face of Edgar Poe, 135–68; and Wellek, History of Modern Criticism, 4:435–38, 444–45, 447.

57 For some revealing and curious examples of Poe’s exceptional status in France, see Quinn, French Face of Edgar Poe, 3–4, 14, 283.

58 Matei Calinescu, The Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1987), 13–92. For French Symbolists appropriating the cultural past so that it can serve their values, see Wellek, History of Modern Criticism, 4:433–34.

59 Milev, Sùchineniia v tri toma, 2:163.

60 Seylaz, Edgar Poe et les premiers symbolistes français, 92.

61 This paragraph draws on Jacobs, Poe: Journalist and Critic, 3–19, 439–41.


63 Gautier, “Charles Baudelaire,” 51; Briusov, Sobranie sochinienii v semi tomakh, 2:85.


68 Walt Whitman, “Edgar Poe’s Significance,” in The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism since 1829, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor: Univ. of


74 Cf. Vrinat, “Le Modernisme bulgare ou la quête d’une identité européenne,” who exemplifies this mental-

ity.