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Goran J. Petrović*
University of Belgrade
Faculty of Philology
Belgrade, Serbia
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0594-0367

METAPHORICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF HUMAN LIFE IN A SELECTION OF POETRY BY H. W. LONGFELLOW AND E. A. POE

Abstract
This article focuses on how human life is represented, in ontological (metaphysical) and metaphorical terms, in a selection of poetry by two American 19th-century poets – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe. The analysis includes three poems by Longfellow ("A Psalm of Life", "The Beleaguered City", "Victor and Vanquished") and one poem by Poe ("The Conqueror Worm"). Although both poets include God in their respective ontological systems, those systems, in fact, differ considerably in their very spirit, as well as in their metaphors. The article stresses the value and significance of the juxtaposition of the ontological concepts of these two American Renaissance authors for the world history of ideas and, pointing to their apt indicativeness of the philosophical clashes of the nineteenth century, argues that the American literature of the 1800s, though still in search of its independence from Europe at the time, deserves great appreciation and continued scholarly attention.

Keywords: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, ontology, metaphysics, metaphor, optimism, pessimism, teleology, American literature, poetry.

* goran.petrovitch@outlook.com

1. Introduction

The Renaissance marks an important turning point in the history of philosophy, as it was in this epoch, which linked the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Age, that Western civilization put an end to the absolute supremacy of the credo "philosophia ancilla theologiae" and began to look for explanations outside of the narrow-minded ontological framework set up by medieval scholars. The quest for new, non-dogmatic truths was slow and difficult and in the first couple of centuries at least, it was seldom completely atheistic and totally contrary to the main dogmas of the Church. Yet novel voices speaking about the makeup of the Universe and man's place in it were a fitting prelude to the complete freedom of thought that was to come, in most parts of the Western civilization, by the late nineteenth century, when science finally became an independent mode of philosophical enquiry, free from the supervision of religious authorities (Fyfe & van Wyhe 2024). By 1860, ontological standpoints had become quite diversified in the works of philosophers, scientists and literary figures, who were, all of them, freely expostulating their views on how this world came into being, on what place man had in it, and on what was to become of it in the future. Western Europe was the center of such intellectual activity, but the young United States of America was also increasingly making its contributions to these efforts.

In the first half of the 19th century, the United States was a rapidly advancing country, seeking to assert its recently won independence from England in all areas of life. In literature, this path was especially thorny given the considerably lesser number of able and prolific writers compared to the European continent, and also given their relatively unsuccessful efforts to form a clearly authentic American literature, distinct from that of England (Fitzmaurice 2006: 13–16). However, regardless of this state of affairs, the United States did produce, prior to the closing decades of the nineteenth century, a number of noteworthy authors who made intriguing and lasting contributions to the ongoing philosophical debate about ontological questions.

This article aims exactly to deal with two such figures – namely, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), as some of the most memorable poets of 19th-century American literature. Although these two men shared certain similarities in terms of both their biographies and their writing styles, their ontological outlooks significantly

differed, in keeping with the different reactions to the great personal losses that they faced in their lives and that were, to some extent, their sources of poetic inspiration. This work will try to accurately present and compare the different ways in which Longfellow and Poe conceived of human life and its purpose, including here their views of the divine and man's relationship with it. The determined goal is to be achieved by examining a number of poetic works containing more or less clear ontological messages – namely, "A Psalm of Life", "The Beleaguered City", and "Victor and Vanquished" by H. W. Longfellow and "The Conqueror Worm" by E. A. Poe. The study will, naturally, pay attention to whichever other works by these two authors are necessary for the appropriate development of the arguments to be set forth. Importantly, the entire analysis of the aforesaid poems, as directed toward unveiling the broad ontological standpoints of Longfellow and Poe, will be spun around the different metaphors by means of which these two poets conceptualize human life. Their different ontological outlooks and their different views of man's relationship with God are to be shown as being related to the different metaphors that they use for the linguistic representation of life. Ultimately, by pointing to the still enduring currency of the questions dealt with by Longfellow and Poe, and by highlighting their different approaches to those questions, this article will stress the importance and value of these two writers and of 19th-century American poetry in general, despite the fact that, in the mid-1800s, a genuinely American literature, different from that of Europe in terms of ideas and style, was still in its infancy and eclipsed by the literary achievements of "Old World" writers.

2. An Analysis of Longfellow's Poems

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the most famous American literary figure in his lifetime and for a little while after his death in 1882 (Williams 1964: 15–25). He was highly respected in Europe, as well his native country, and translated a lot into various languages (Williams 1964: 15–25). Yet, his fame and his reputation as a poet abruptly dwindled after World War One, so much so that today he is regarded as a minor poet, a schoolchildren's poet at best (Williams 1964: 22). Few authors in the history of letters have posthumously experienced such a drastic loss of esteem and popularity, basically from America's most beloved poet, and

the first non-Briton to be paid homage with a bust in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner, to a minor author with very limited influence on Western culture (Williams 1964: 15–25). The reason for Longfellow's steep decline in popularity is the fact that the poetry he produced throughout his life was rendered outmoded in terms of both form and content in the twentieth century. Longfellow's devotion to traditional metric and rhyming patterns gave way to free verse, his simple and direct language was disenthroned by ambiguous, symbolic, and semantically richer modes of expression, while his progressive optimism and his Christian faith in a positive outcome of man's journey on earth were replaced by growing pessimism, atheism, and, generally, a greater interest in the wicked, aggressive, greedy and lustful facet of human nature than in the noble, knightly aspect thereof (Williams 1964: 15–25). The twentieth century, with its world wars, economic crises, and ruthless destruction of nature had dispelled the idealistic illusions of the Romantic 19th century so that Longfellow, with his sentimental and idealistic approach to life, lost his appeal among readers (Williams 1964: 15–25). The "Victorian American" is how he pejoratively came to be known in the twentieth century, because of his obsolete, rosy belief system (Gorman 1967). As Cecil Williams (1964: 16) summarized this state of affairs, "[t]he nineteenth century could have Longfellow; he had nothing to say to the twentieth".

Longfellow's optimistic and romantic outlook, full of gentlemanhood, chivalry, and faith in the victory of good over evil in both this world and the next, is manifest in his, definitely, best-known short poem titled "A Psalm of Life", written in the summer of 1838 and published in 1839 as part of his book of poetry *Voices of the Night* (Austin 1883: 252–253; Williams 1964: 74). The poem was one of the most beloved works of literature in the 19th century, and, albeit very optimistic in its messages, it was actually written "from the depths of [...] despair" (Williams 1964: 74). With it, Longfellow was striving to encourage himself to overcome the grief that had befallen him following the deaths of two dear persons within a span of merely a month over the course of 1838 – namely, his own wife Mary Longfellow, and his brother-in-law George W. Pierce (Williams 1964: 74).

In the poem Longfellow dispels his lethargy by saying that life is more than just "an empty dream", and extols the Puritan work ethic (which was his own familial background) as the proper way to make one's life "sublime" (Longfellow 1839a). He calls the reader (and, actually, first and foremost himself) to stoically embrace the hardship of life and seek for

self-fulfillment through hard labor and faith in the benevolence of God, despite everything. Greatness, in Longfellow's view, is achievable through a constant and fair perseverance toward one's goals, and especially through art which he believed was the most ennobling activity, linking earthly self-realization to heavenly one (Fitzmaurice 2006: 19–20). God, as the poet believes, will, in the end, grant happiness on earth to the zealous worker and believer, and also a life of bliss in the hereafter. "A Psalm of Life" is a fine example of a simultaneous attempt to inspire both oneself and others to "pursue happiness"[1] and is, in spite of its greatly diminished popularity in the twentieth century, an enduring legacy of Longfellow. In support of this thesis, one should only call to memory the immensely popular cinematographic Rocky franchise by Sylvester Stallone (b. 1946). Stallone's fictional boxer seems to adhere to the same belief system as Longfellow, and so both of these works of art (Stallone's films and Longfellow's poems) clearly embody the American dream as the essence of American culture and as a concept that, more or less successfully, still endures today. Whether Stallone is an admirer of Longfellow or whether he read the poet's works at all is not known, but the fact remains that the spirit of Longfellow's poetry (as a full-blooded American, Puritan spirit) still lives, ever finding its new exponents, whether in a direct or indirect way.

A particularly interesting detail in "A Psalm of Life" is the way in which the poet metaphorically conceptualizes life. In the fifth stanza, Longfellow didactically and encouragingly exclaims:

> In the world's broad field of battle,
> In the bivouac of Life,
> Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
> Be a hero in the strife! (Longfellow 1839a)

Clearly, life is conceptualized as battle, the world being presented as the field where this battle is fought. The battle, which, according to Longfellow, is fought for a purpose (the purpose being to overcome one's own melancholy, and, even further, to win a place in the Kingdom of Heaven), has a bright perspective, in spite of all the difficulties and uncertainties that life carries with itself. It is this bright perspective that made the people of the twentieth century ridicule this, as they saw it, naive psalm of life, a

[1] This phrase is from the US Declaration of Independence which, just like Longfellow's poetry, enshrines the authentic American spirit.

psalm which, as it is useful to note, has a Unitarian dimension in it, given that it was this particular strain of Protestant Christianity that Longfellow was affiliated with, a strain which emphasized noble deeds, rather than strict adherence to any dogmas, as the way to salvation (Williams 1964: 132; Hirsh 1964: 21–22). The positive worldview, centered around the metaphor LIFE IS BATTLE,[2] also makes the fabric of the other two poems by Longfellow to be discussed here.

The next poem to be analyzed is "The Beleaguered City", an early poem by Longfellow from the *Voices of the Night*, his 1839 book of poetry which also contained "A Psalm of Life". This poem, the idea for which may have been borrowed from a book by Walter Scott (1771–1832) (Wagenknecht 1986: 65), is set in a fairy-tale-like, German setting which Longfellow was well familiar with, given his extensive knowledge of the German language and literature (particularly his appreciation of Goethe) and his numerous visits to various parts of Germany, especially in his youth (Williams 1964: 11, 82). The poem, in its beginning, tells of a legend about "a midnight host of specters pale" laying siege to the walled city of Prague, on the banks of the river Moldau (the German name of the present-day Vltava) (Longfellow 1839b). The army of menacing ghosts abandons its nightly assault on Prague at dawn, when the sound of the church bell calls the faithful to a morning prayer. The poem then goes on to compare this anecdotal siege of Prague to what the poet describes as the siege of the human soul by "phantoms vast and wan" (Longfellow 1839b). The phantoms may be understood as demons from the Christian metaphysical belief system who come to threaten the spiritual well-being of a human being. Their siege takes place "beside Life's rushing stream, / In Fancy's misty light", and it is clear that, through the use of metaphor, Longfellow raises the legend of a ghost army's siege of Prague to a metaphysical, even eschatological level (Longfellow 1839b). The possessor of the besieged soul becomes a fighter not only for the preservation of their own sanity but also for their successful transition to the realm of heavenly bliss, as Longfellow certainly believed in the Christian version of the afterlife (particularly indicative of this is his poem "God's Acre"). Of course, the outcome of this siege, as in the case of the legendary siege of Prague,

[2] Conceptual metaphors are, throughout this article, provided in block capitals after the fashion of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who coined the term "conceptual metaphor" and, to a considerable extent, established the field of cognitive linguistics with their 1980 book *Metaphors We Live By*.

ends happily, given that the menaced soul sets itself free from the ghostly aggressors when "the solemn and deep church-bell / entreats the soul to pray" (Longfellow 1839b).

"The Beleaguered City" clearly exalts the power of prayer and faith to defend one from all fears, anxieties, and all depressing thoughts which, prior to the advent of the modern scientific age, were often described as caused by demons and evil spirits, in accordance with the biblical view on these matters. Although it would not be right to say that Longfellow belonged to a pre-scientific age, it is nevertheless indubitable that, with his Christian outlook, the poet was not altogether modern either – at least not as modern as Poe, whose work will be discussed later and who wrote works of science fiction, a genre that is, perhaps, more than any other, emblematic of the modern scientific age. The penultimate line from "The Beleaguered City" – "Faith shineth as a morning star" (the morning star referring to the break of day, which is metaphorically conceptualized as good, as opposed to the night, which is conceptualized as evil) (Longfellow 1839b) – emphasizes the importance of faith in one's struggle to secure personal mental well-being, and strong faith, coupled with noble deeds, was, for Longfellow, a sure path to salvation.

In this poem, life is conceptualized as a river which rushes through the field of battle, between the besieged soul and the attacking army:

> Upon its midnight battle-ground
> The spectral camp is seen,
> And, with a sorrowful, deep sound,
> Flows the River of Life between. (Longfellow 1839b)

Life is a precious thing that the human soul strives to protect from the forces of evil. It is an object that is fought over and that one's soul attempts to guard by means of Christian prayer and faith. Man's inner being is a battlefield, where his soul (conceptualized as a city) fights to protect itself from being breached and to prevent the takeover of the course of its life (conceptualized as a river course near the city) by evil demons. The soul's activity, that is, mental activity or thinking, is conceptualized as a (defensive) battle, or as some kind of psychomachia (or even potamomachia, given that battle is fought not only for the soul, or city, but also, for the possession of life, that is, river), the aim of which is to decide between good and evil, between hope and fear, between staying the possessor of one's soul and letting the spectral army enter. This struggle, that is, the constant danger

for one's soul that lurks from evil demons makes life sorrowful (the sound of the river of life is sorrowful) but certainly worth fighting for.

Altogether, this is a rather complex combination of metaphors which shows a different conception of life than in "A Psalm of Life" where the battlefield of life is external, rather than internal. In "A Psalm of Life", the battle of life is fought in the world, "in the world's broad field of battle", while in "The Beleaguered City", the battle is fought within man's mental framework. Ultimately, the differences, though by all means existent, are subtle because, even in "A Psalm of Life", the prerequisite for a successful life in the sense of fighting off external threats is one's victory against one's inner enemies. Overall, both of these poems have LIFE IS BATTLE as their overarching metaphor, and this is even so in "The Beleaguered City" despite its concrete conceptualization of life as a river course and its use of battle for the conceptualization of mental activity rather than life, because thinking is living, at least according to Renes Descartes who famously said "Cogito, ergo sum" (Duignan 2015), and if thinking is living then living, or life, is, just like mental activity, a battle. So, in both poems, life is, from a general point of view, envisaged as a battle, a battle against both internal and external forces of opposition.[3]

"Victor and Vanquished" does not belong to the poems of Longfellow's youth, but rather to the ones written in his old age. Nevertheless, according to Percy Boynton (1919: 273), this work, published in the last year of the poet's life (i.e., in the 1882 collection of poetry titled *In the Harbor*), is "[t]he finest of all his lyrics". In this piece, Longfellow meditates about the inevitability of death, which he correctly felt was soon coming, and for one last time asserts his view that life, owing to the truthfulness of Christ's gospel, is stronger than death, and that corporal demise should be met with a peaceful, reconciled mind. The poem contains the poet's description of himself as a knight who has fought for a long time against

[3] Longfellow is known to have suffered occasional bouts of depression, which came from both his inner doubts (internal "enemies") and from the misfortunate accidents that happened to befall him (external "enemies") (Hirsh 1964: 22). However, when it comes to the external threats that he faced in his life, it is especially important to mention attacks from the critics of his literary oeuvre. Although these were rare in Longfellow's lifetime, one severe critic particularly stood out – namely, Poe, who, in the 1840s, accused Longfellow of plagiarism and excessive didacticism. Being already very popular and despising quarrels, Longfellow decided not to reply to this unprovoked act of verbal aggression, but, privately, he admitted to being emotionally hurt by Poe's scathing criticism (Whitehouse 2023).

another knight (the personification of death) avoiding defeat and demise, but now the weaker knight (that is, the teller of the event), bleeding and teetering, his "sword broken at the hilt" and his "armor shattered", is compelled to accept the imminence of defeat (Longfellow 1882). He decides to "stand unmoved" and await the deadly blow with a serene heart but without surrendering, his serenity coming from his belief that "triumphant Death" is "but a phantom and a wraith" (Longfellow 1882). The poem is a clear proof of Longfellow's Christian, Unitarian belief that those who have fought bravely throughout their life and done good deeds have no reason to fear death, no matter how horrifying it were, because it is only one's body that must die, while the soul lives on in perpetuity through the benevolence of God and his son Jesus Christ. This is another confirmation of Longfellow's lifelong belief in the immortality of human soul and in the teleological benignity of the world, despite all the hardship that it has in itself (Wagenkecht 1986: 214).

Interestingly, life is again metaphorically represented as a battle – only this time the poet does not talk about a siege or any kind of "world's broad field of battle", but rather, specifically, about a tournament-like one-on-one joust between two medieval knights. Quite in tune with Longfellow's adherence to the Victorian adoration of chivalrous ideals, "the Victorian American" chooses a knightly setting for his chthonic encounter with death. Yet, he clearly emphasizes that his fight is not entirely like those that would have taken place in medieval tournaments, as in this case there is neither surrender nor mercy, and, on top of that and quite miraculously, the defeated and unyielding party ends up being victorious: This is no tournament where cowards tilt;[4] / The vanquished here is victor of the field (Longfellow 1882).

The vanquished in this metaphysical battle is the victor and the victor is vanquished because, according to the Gospel, death is only a temporary winner because, for all believers in the word of the Bible, eternal life is guaranteed through Christ's victory over death on the third day after his crucifixion. In the vein of not only the Christian lore that Longfellow would have held especially dear, but also the lore of pre-Christian mythologies that the poet would have also known well and liked (e.g., Greek tales or Norse ones), heroes do not die because God will save them on account of the love and faithfulness that they have shown throughout their lives. "Victor and Vanquished" is a beautiful testimony about an old man's unswerving

[4] "Tilt" is to be understood here as "fight", or "participate in a joust".

dedication to his lifelong religious beliefs and his final statement of ontological optimism despite his awareness that life is not all sunshine and rainbows.

3. An Analysis of Poe's "The Conqueror Worm"

In spite of certain similarities between Poe and Longfellow in the sense that both of these authors were fond of formal poetry with all of its rhyming and metric regularity, that they both endured great losses throughout their lives,[5] and that they both saw poetry as a sublime activity that made one closer to the divine, these two contemporaries were actually quite different. While Longfellow led a decent life, unmarred by any scandals, Poe was all immersed in vice, struggling with his erratic nature, gambling debts, as well as alcohol and opium consumption. From this difference comes the difference that is of relevance in this work – namely, the fact that these two contemporaries differently coped with the sorrowful events that had marked their lives, and consequently focused on different aspects of human nature. While Longfellow always sought some kind of light to get him through the times of darkness and hardship and always strove to concentrate on what is good, Poe on the other hand concentrated on the wicked and dark facet of nature and human character, and rarely ever saw anything mythical on the horizon coming to save the day for the sufferer. In the context of this difference, it is no wonder that Poe's ontological or metaphysical outlook, as manifested in his poetry, differed from that of Longfellow. In Poe's work, or to be more specific, in his 1843 poem "The Conqueror Worm", there is a significantly different view of man's relationship with the world's maker and of man's posthumous prospects compared to what is found in the above-examined poems of Longfellow. There is also a different overarching metaphor.

The poem describes a throng of angels sitting in a theater and watching "a play of hopes and fears" (Poe 2004: 942). The poet tells of "mimes, in the form of God on high", chasing a "Phantom" that they can never manage to seize despite all their efforts (Poe 2004: 942). The mimes keep repeating their unsuccessful chase "through a circle that ever returneth in

[5] Poe lost both of his parents when he was a very small child and, perhaps most unfortunately for himself, he also lost, later in life, his wife Virginia Clemm, who died of tuberculosis (Boynton 1919: 173–187).

to the self-same spot", being mere "puppets" whose actions are dictated by "vast formless things" pouring "from out their Condor wings / Invisible Wo" (Poe 2004: 942). The play, the soul of whose plot is "Horror", reveals itself as a tragedy in the end, when a writhing "Conqueror Worm" appears on the stage to devour the godlike mimes and thus put an end to their misery, full of madness, sin, and failure (Poe 2004: 942–943).

As has been well established in the criticism of "The Conqueror Worm", this play is a metaphysical and metaphorical representation of human life on earth, with both humans and spiritual beings included. The poet uses the motif of *theatrum mundi* (Lubbers 1968: 377–378), or the metaphor HUMAN LIFE IS A TRAGIC THEATER PLAY, to present his ontological concept, which, indeed, is very original, far more original than the orthodox[6] Christian one of Longfellow. According to Poe, human life (mimes are a metaphor for humans) is a futile search for happiness (the metaphor for it, according to T. O. Mabbott, is the Phantom) (Howard 1988: 38), a career of horrifying, repetitive suffering filled with sin and madness, at the end of which comes death (metaphorically represented by the Conqueror Worm eating the mimes). God, the creator of the world and man in His own image, is a distant creator who has left the governance of earthly affairs to malign angels ("vast formless things" with "condor wings" raining down "invisible wo" on humanity). The benign angels are passive spectators who weep at the sight of the Conqueror Worm's "fangs / in human gore imbued" but can do nothing to save man either from his painful existence or from his tragic and bloody end. When the curtain eventually comes down on the stage, the impression is clear that the Conqueror Worm as the play's hero is victorious, with no prospect for

[6] Longfellow was a Unitarian throughout his life, and Unitarianism is not really part of mainstream Christianity, given that it denies the dogma of Triune God and, hence, regards Jesus as a man – a special one, but certainly not a deity. However, Wagenknecht (1986: 213) explains that Longfellow was affiliated with early Unitarianism, which had not yet become burdened with petty denominational questions, so that in his theological view, Jesus, "though not coexistent with the Father, was still a Divine Being", and not 'mere man'". According to E. J. Bailey, Longfellow believed in "the three important fundamental doctrines, the goodness of God, the divinity of Christ, and the immortality of the soul" (Wagenknecht 1986: 214). For this reason, Longfellow, although officially not affiliated with mainstream Christianity, is, justifiably, presented here as an exponent of the traditional or orthodox Christianity, though with a somewhat more liberal, gentler view of God as more of a kind father than punisher of mankind (in "orthodox Christianity", "orthodox" is not capitalized because it does not refer to eastern, Greek Christianity, but rather to mainstream western Christianity).

the slain human beings continuing their life in any kind of hereafter. "Out – out are the lights – out all!", exclaims Poe, cementing the impression of finiteness and purposelessness of human existence (Poe 2004: 943).

The image that Poe creates strikes the reader as rather unique in the history of ideas. His ontological concept is one that resembles Deism as a philosophical outlook that was very common in the 17th and 18th centuries, during the Enlightenment Age, and that still had some popularity in Poe's day. Deists were natural theologians and believed that God withdrew from the world after creating it and left in it his laws of nature (physical and biological) to govern it (Pailin & Manuel 2025). Importantly, all those thinkers held that those laws were benevolent because their creator was benevolent, and that, in addition, there were also laws of philanthropic love bestowed upon humanity by God at creation, so that a happy life of the human race was altogether believed to be not only willed by the transcendental Maker but also achievable (Pailin & Manuel 2025). Hence, the Deist and, more broadly, natural theological concepts of the world[7] were optimistic and founded on the belief in the goodness of the world and in the perfectibility of mankind (Pailin & Manuel 2025).

However, Poe's vision of the world and of man's place in it is not an optimistic one, because the forces that are left by God to govern human affairs (the equivalent of Deist God-made laws of nature and inter-human interaction) are not benign. They flap their condor wings (the mention of condor, a scavenging bird, ominously points to their association with death and, hence, their malignity) pouring out wo and misery into the world of humanity which, in the poem, is a theater stage. Moreover, the subsequent appearance on the stage of the play's human-eating hero, the Conqueror Worm, is also indicative of the malignity of Poe's world. The Conqueror Worm is the triumphant hero, death as the inescapable certainty and the tragic reality of human existence. It is not, as in Longfellow's "Victor and Vanquished", just "a wraith" and a passing victor. It triumphs fully and definitely, and there is no way for man to strike back and turn the tide of

[7] Except for Deists, who understood God in an entirely non-biblical fashion and sought to reveal God only through studying nature, there were also other natural theologians who combined the biblical Revelation with their efforts to understand God through the study of nature. The most famous of these was William Paley (1743–1805), whose "watchmaker analogy" (the idea that the world was a clockwork perfectly wound by a benevolent God) became a byword for natural theology at large (Abersold 2018). When this is applied to Poe's case, however, the world's metaphysical clockwork obviously turns out not to be wound perfectly, or at least not wound by a benevolent deity.

battle through any kind of (deserved) divine mercy in the afterlife. With its insistence on the finality of death, "The Conqueror Worm" is strangely reminiscent of the Darwinian evolutionary worldview, which would start to be developed only sixteen years after the publication of this poem.

In the fall of 1859, Charles Darwin published his book *On the Origin of Species* and kicked off a fierce debate about the beneficence of the world mankind lives in. The debate would go on for decades but, ultimately, victory would belong to Darwin's acute observation that there was too much unnecessary pain, from a purely functional point of view, in the animal world, so that the old thesis on the beneficence of God and His creation held by natural theologians (both Deists and non-Deists) no longer seemed credible.[8] The view that the world is essentially a malign place, with no higher purpose in it, is today the scientific norm, and this is exactly the message that Poe conveys through his metaphysical outlook in "The Conqueror Worm". It is true that Poe's vision of the world and human life contains a God and angels, both good (passive) and evil (active) ones, which Darwin and Darwinists agnostically or even atheistically remain silent about, but the fact remains that the ontological concept of the American poet exudes an air of excessive suffering and futility, all of which is part and parcel of the Darwinian evolutionary worldview. In this way, Poe, albeit a believer in some sort of "pessimistic Deism" (if one were to judge solely by "The Conqueror Worm"), emerges as an anticipator of the modern Darwinian outlook on human life and on what may or (more likely) may not become of it following the cessation of all vital functions in a human body.

Speaking of the similarity between Poe's ontological conception of life and that of Darwinian evolutionism as a scientific philosophy that took teleology and anthropological optimism away from the understanding of human life (by instituting blind chance in lieu of progressivism into philosophy), it is interesting and useful to draw a comparison between "The Conqueror Worm" and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by H. G. Wells. Wells's 1896 novel, which sprang from the evolutionary philosophy of Darwin's friend and defender Thomas Huxley, uses a different metaphor to present human existence as a futile and extremely painful course of events. The metaphor that Wells uses is HUMAN LIFE IS A SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENT, with God being metaphorically conceived of as a doctor, or

[8] For Darwin's doubt about the inherent goodness of the world, see his letter to a priest Asa Gray dated May 22, 1860 (Darwin 1911: 105).

mad scientist, and humans as very strange artificial creatures produced by the doctor's vivisection and combination of different parts of different animals into one organism. So, it is *theatrum mundi* versus *laboratorium mundi* as two different ways of metaphorically conceptualizing the world (THEATER vs. LABORATORY). In both cases, human life is depicted as full of hardly bearable suffering as willed by some higher power, and, worst of all, to no noble end, but instead just to please the playful instincts of the callous creator. Yet, while Wells's novel clearly draws on the Darwinian evolutionism of his university professor T. H. Huxley and, actually, speaks of God only in a figurative sense with Doctor Moreau representing not so much real God as evolution as an impersonal, blind, whimsical (and sadistic) force of nature (Bergonzi 1961: 104–105), Poe's poem earnestly and literally speaks of God and ascribes to him a disinterestedness and blindness to the suffering of his most intelligent creatures, which is a uniquely original idea in Western civilization, at least since the victory of Christianity therein. Overall, Poe's poem stands out as being particularly original, and not only because of its use of pessimistic Deism, but also because of its use of ideas similar to Darwinian evolutionism years before this, still reigning, scientific theory came into existence.

Generally, Poe's representation of life in "The Conqueror Worm" can be aptly viewed in the context of a letter that he sent to his friend and fellow poet J. R. Lowell in 1844. In this letter, written just one year following the first publication of "The Conqueror Worm", Poe wrote as follows:

> I really perceive that vanity about which most men merely prate, – the vanity of the human or temporal life. I live continually in a reverie of the future. I have no faith in human perfectibility. I think that human exertion will have no appreciable effect on humanity... I cannot lose sight of man the individual in man the mass. – I have no belief in spirituality. I think the word a mere word.
>
> You speak of "an estimate of my life" – and, from what I have already said, you will see that I have none to give. I have been too deeply conscious of the mutability and evanescence of temporal things to give any continuous effort to anything – to be consistent in anything. My life has been whim – impulse – passion – a longing for solitude – a scorn of all things present, in an earnest desire for the future (Boynton 1919: 182–183).

When these words are borne in mind, it becomes easier to understand why Poe wrote about a continual, unprogressive, purposeless repetition of one and the same cycle over and over again in human lives and why there was no afterlife for human beings in "The Conqueror Worm" (spirituality as a mere word) even though man may have been originally created by God as a spiritual entity.

However, despite this rather dark and strange ontological system of Poe's in his 1843–1844 period, it should be noted that this is not all he ever wrote or said on ontological matters. For instance, in 1845, he republished his 1838 story "Ligeia", now with all the stanzas and lines of "The Conqueror Worm" included as part of Ligeia's dying speech, following which she asks herself whether the Conqueror Worm really has to be victorious, that is, whether death really has to prevail over life, without any chance of continuing one's existence spiritually (Poe 2004: 123–136). The answer soon comes in the form of Ligeia appearing, at least for a moment, in the body of the just deceased Rowena, which shows that there were moments when Poe was more seriously considering the possibility of afterlife or return from the dead (Poe 2004: 123–136).

Also, in 1848, Poe published *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, his comprehensive essay on the makeup of the Universe. In this work, he unambiguously argued in favor of the existence of afterlife. He expressed the view that the Universe was made through the diffusion of God, that is, divine matter (material and spiritual), which makes up everything that exists in the world today (Poe 1848). Human life is full of pain and imperfect because, due to divine matter being diffused, humans are no longer one with God, that is, they no longer share the same identity and consciousness with the Deity, as was the case in the time before the creation of the Universe, that is, before the diffusion of divine matter (Poe 1848). Only occasionally do they get close to unity with God by writing exquisitely musical poetry, by means of which they attain "supernal beauty" (this idea is from "The Poetic Principle", the essay he wrote probably in the course of 1848 and which was published posthumously in 1850) (Poe 1850). Even greater unity with God and greater happiness is achieved after death, while complete unity with the Deity and complete happiness is attained when all the diffused matter, physical and spiritual, contracts, that is, regathers once again, ending the existence of the material world (Poe 1848). Following this collapse, the Universe again expands, and the cycle of life and extinction of life repeats itself indefinitely (Poe 1848).

"Throbbing heart" is the phrase that Poe uses to describe his ontological (metaphysical) viewpoint, which, unlike the one from "The Conqueror Worm" as published on its own, can be referred to as, not pessimistically deistic, but pantheistic (because God is everything that exists, including man) (Poe 1848).

This is another original concept of the Universe by Poe, which, in certain respects, even anticipates modern cosmology (contraction and expansion of the Universe), but it is mentioned here only as evidence that this imaginative author dallied with different ontological concepts, sometimes denying and sometimes supporting the existence of afterlife. Just as he described himself – his life was whim, and as a whimsical man, he entertained different ideas throughout his life, thus making it difficult to discern his truest belief or stance apropos of God, the makeup of the world, and man's posthumous life. However, in this article, precedence is given to the view expressed in the text of "The Conqueror Worm" as viewed on its own, because this study primarily focuses on the selected poetic works of Longfellow and Poe. Returning once again to Poe's pantheistic ontological system from *Eureka*, even though it does, unlike "The Conqueror Worm", include an explicit belief in the afterlife and a teleological dimension (in the sense of reaching perfection following death and the end of one cycle of the world's existence), it is still a far cry from the purposefulness of Longfellow's orthodox Christian ontological system where history and human life are perceived as linear, as ending in eternal bliss, without any new alternations between the periods of the diffusion of divine matter (birth and expansion of the material Universe, marked by imperfection of human life) and the periods of its re-concentration (death of the material Universe, marked by the perfection of human life in a spiritual realm).

4. Conclusion

This analysis shows that Longfellow and Poe concerned themselves with major ontological questions in their poetry, and in ways that are much more different than they are similar. The only similarity found in their ontological systems is the presence of God as the creator, but the roles of God are very different. While in Longfellow's orthodox Christian (albeit Unitarian) system God is not only a creator but also a savior of human

beings (of all those who make any effort to be saved),[9] in Poe's ontological outlook, which was termed "pessimistic Deism", God is only an aloof creator who withdraws from the world after creation and leaves malign angels to pull the strings of human life, with benign, compassionate angels being unable to make human lives on earth less miserable or save human souls in any kind of a spiritual afterlife. Longfellow's outlook is a classic pre-industrial Christian outlook, where man strives, primarily through good deeds but also through faith, to earn the love of God and then blissfully enjoy the eternity of the hereafter, whereas Poe's outlook is more original and far less optimistic, boiling down to an image of incessant, repetitive futile suffering for mankind, full of madness, sin, and horror, and to no end whatsoever. These two very different – actually, diametrically opposed – god-believing worldviews resulted from this article's analysis of four poems in total – three by Longfellow ("A Psalm of Life", "The Beleaguered City", "Victor and Vanquished") and one by Poe ("The Conqueror Worm"). In Longfellow's case, the situation is quite clear, given that his ontological worldview stayed the same throughout his life, whereas in Poe's case, the situation is less clear, given his whimsical character and his embrace of a pantheistic ontological concept toward the end of his life, in a way that is less morbid than the image from "The Conqueror Worm" but still not as teleological as the traditional Christian ontology of H. W. Longfellow.

Importantly, Longfellow and Poe use different metaphors to present their ontological systems. In Longfellow's selection of poetry, the metaphor LIFE IS BATTLE was found as the overarching metaphor common to all the three poems. Longfellow, as was shown, conceived of life as a knightly battle against the forces of evil, fear and despair, and mortality, at the end of which the worthy knight is awaited by a well-deserved reward in the Kingdom of Heaven, through the mercy of the Christian God. His worldview is a Victorian, Romantic worldview, enamored of gallantry, gentlemanhood, and medieval knightly codes of conduct derived from the Christian religious tradition that by no means lacked in purposefulness. Poe, however, uses the metaphor LIFE IS A TRAGIC THEATER PLAY which fully corresponds

[9] Longfellow's Unitarianism, by all means a form of liberal theology, was a belief in William Ellery Channing's (1780–1842) God, a very benevolent and forgiving God, one that seemed much less terrible and much readier to forgive and save than the Puritan God of the poet's forefathers of the seventeenth century (Hirsh 1964: 21; Williams 1964: 190; Wagenkecht 1986: 2).

to his view of human life as an unhappy and futile phenomenon. In "The Conqueror Worm" God is a playwright who composes a tragedy with man as its tragic figure and death as the victorious hero, and with good angels as weeping, passive spectators in the metaphysical amphitheater and evil angels pulling the strings behind the scene in the absence of the indifferent and cold-hearted God. The way Poe made up his ontological concept, it is quite reminiscent of the Darwinian evolutionary worldview that came into existence over a decade and a half after the first publication of "The Conqueror Worm", an important difference being the fact that Poe's poem mentions God as a creator, albeit one that is aloof to human suffering and not interested in creating an afterlife for them, while Darwinian evolutionism has no need of explicitly including a deity in its deliberations about the makeup of the visible Universe. In relation to the last said, this article drew an interesting parallel between "The Conqueror Worm" and H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau,* both works representing human life as excruciating suffering willed by a higher power, apparently just for its own entertainment.

The examined ontological concepts of Poe and Longfellow are important because they reflect the atmosphere of the 19th century, when older, more traditional worldviews were, perhaps, most fiercely clashing with the newer, more scientific ones, before science finally got the upper hand of theology at the turn of the twentieth century. In this context, Longfellow's ontological system is representative of the old orthodox Christian worldview, while Poe's ontological concept stands for newer, more original ways of explaining the world's makeup. Although Poe's ontological outlook, though not entirely scientific, is very similar to today's reigning Darwinian ontological system, and thereby more popular today than that of Longfellow, which lost much of its appeal after the greatly disenchanting First World War, this does not mean that the juxtaposition provided in this article will any time soon lose its power to intrigue. Both of these metaphysical views, even Longfellow's old one, will continue to have relevance for countless people all over the world because they constitute two different methods for coping with the grim realities of life – namely, with the fact that life is difficult and devoid of any blatantly visible purpose. One method, that of Longfellow, is to put one's trust in an imagined deity and, with an optimistic mindset, act in good faith and hope for the best, while the other method, that of Poe, is to accept the futility of life in all its darkness and comfort oneself with the thought that, if one lives, at

least one does not have to live in self-delusion. One method stresses hope, the other stresses honesty. Hence, both are valuable and by no means obsolete, and both will continue to exist as long as man continues to be a thinking being and an ontologically discontent one, unhappy with the difficulties of life and its finiteness, because even modern science has so far proved unable to make life free of pain or ever-lasting. So, the offered juxtaposition may be described as, in addition to many other things, a lasting legacy of nineteenth-century American poetry and literature to the world history of philosophical ideas and their artistic expression, and, for this reason, it might not be altogether improper to view the relationship between European literature and American literature as more equal than has hitherto been the case, especially than was the case in the nineteenth century itself when the cultural production of "the New World" was mostly still seen as merely replicating the ideas and cultural patterns of "the Old World", and with only relative success.

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