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"Silence": Its Creation by Edgar Allen Poe and Thomas Hood

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"SILENCE":
ITS CREATION BY EDGAR ALLEN POE
AND
THOMAS HOOD.
Silence is a strange, eternal force. It was a consecrated music to Keats, a sadness to Hood, and a shadow to Poe. It is one of those abstract realities that all men live with but none understand.

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I am writing this in the mood of genial speculation. That Poe did read "Silence" by Thomas Hood is fairly certain but that his own poem, "Silence", is a reply, or merely an outgrowth of the problem posed in his fable, or parable, "Silence", is a matter for query, wonder, and surmise.

I have included the two sonnets at the end of the essay.
It has long been a favorite indulgence among poets to reply with creations of their own to poems expressing ideas which displeased them. Many of the more successful of these replies have been either parodies or humorous "take-offs" on the object of their particular bedevilment. The Marlowe-Raleigh affair is an instance where the original poem was eclipsed by parody.

Edgar Allen Poe's sonnet "Silence" appears to be a reply to Thomas Hood's sonnet of the same name. But Poe's mind apparently did not pattern itself readily to the usually successful burlesque of an intellectually disturbing idea. He chose rather a method of analysis; a grim and determined study devoid of humor and, in this case, unsuccessful.

Poe's sonnet is a study in contrast; the contrast of a rather innocuous, generally passive, silence which is in possession of the various resting places of human souls; graveyards, deserted shrines, and melancholy "grass o'ergrown" sites, with the highly vicious, terror-inspiring silence which casts its grim, relentless shadow over those places where man has never been. The idea seems to be that wherever man has been there remains something intangible, rather wraithlike, which called "No More", is a personified silence that forever watches the bodies and souls within its keeping. The particular spot, because of this silence, has a beauty of forgotten joy, a grace, a charm of memory and a sanctified atmosphere. This is all very nice but when we come to the "nameless elf", shadow of the corporate silence, the spectre-Nemesis which is a torture and a threat, an active breeder of terror, and from which only prayer can save, it seems a little over-romanticised, a bit too forbidding and uncomfortable to be any more than so much intellectual raving. It is perhaps poetically permissible to endow an abstraction with life, ubiquity, and a sort of schizoid psychosis, and then to, rather artificially, create an intellectual compromise with
an idea, much more lyrically expressed, and worthy of greater antagonists.

I am reminded of the lines by John Jarmain:

"Oh, send me great opponents.................

By fate opposed

Men prove their purpose, in the dangerous hour

Their brief excellency is disclosed;

When threatened most the soul puts forth its flower."

When Thomas Hood's "Silence" is examined the first striking quality

is its lyrical grace and simplicity. No nameless terror stalks the reader
threatening momentary destruction, but rather a sadness that these great
products of man's creative force and his range of being should be desolate
and destroyed. I can feel, too, the silence that must exist in these
places "where no life is found." It seems to be the silence of nature,
of undefiled wilderness, of majesty and limitless perspective, of horizons
that are not bound by men's weak eyes but by infinity. This silence has
a power and a splendor unequalled by any awe-inspiring, life-endangering
silence that Poe's mind could create.

In the "green ruins" or "desolate walls", the vanished pride, the now
forgotten triumph of life, is felt and is pervasive as a great sadness
known would be if keenly ZZZ and understood by some cloistered watcher on a
far-off planet viewing the tragedy of Earth. When Thomas Hood calls this
silence, "self-conscious and alone," he has uttered the eternal cry of
men who feel in the impact of a ruin upon the sensibilities a certain
hardly definable quality, a lost hope, a dying dream, the has-been of a
promise. As Yeats once said:

"All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old.............

Are wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart."
What Yeats probably meant by this is that things destroyed hurt and cause suffering to the beauty in man's heart. Whether this beauty be thought of as Platonic and suffering with the man, or as a "beauty grown sad with its own eternity", or because it is innate in all things, this reciprocal suffering has been a theme long hungered after, and worked with, by poets.

To compare these two sonnets any more than has been done is not necessary. There is merely the question of whether the Poe method so well expressed in his essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," is a product more suited to short stories and essays than to poetry. The deliberate analysis of an abstraction and its insertion into 15 lines of rather diffident sonnet structure is a lame excuse, or response to, the lyrical intellectual force of Thomas Hood's "Silence."

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Excellent subject well handled. When did you run across Hood? I didn't know any one had him any more.

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