

LITERARY CRITICISM OF EDGAR ALLAN POE-A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) was the first major American writer explicitly to advocate the autonomy of poetry, the freeing of poetry from moral or educational or intellectual imperatives. Poe’s genius has often been seen as pathological: he lost both his parents at an early age, was informally adopted and later broke with his adoptive parents; he abandoned his studies at the University of Virginia, which he had entered in 1826; he was expelled from West Point Military Academy in 1831; he led a controversial life as a contributor to, and editor of, journals; he indulged in bouts of drinking, suffered from depression and paranoia. He also urges that the poet should keep “originality always in view” (PC, 178). This effect, he insists, must be produced as a “unity of impression.” Poe does not believe that such a unified impression can be achieved by a long poem; since poetry “intensely excites, by elevating, the soul,” and since intense excitement must by nature be brief, a long poem “is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones – that is to say, of brief poetical effects” (PC,180). Hence poetry should not be realistic, merely copying or imitating the beauties that lie before us. Rather, poetry is “wild efforts to reach the Beauty above . . . to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone”; it is a “struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness” (“PP,” 894). Poe defines the “poetic principle” as “the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty,” a quest for an excitement of the soul that is distinct from the intoxication of the heart or the satisfaction of reason. Truth may be instrumental in this quest inasmuch as it leads us to “perceive a harmony where none was apparent before.”

KEY WORDS- *Edgar Allan Poe, Romantic like Emerson’s, The Black Cat, The Philosophy of Composition, Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense*

INTRODUCTION-

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) was the first major American writer explicitly to advocate the autonomy of poetry, the freeing of poetry from moral or educational or intellectual imperatives. His fundamental strategy for perceiving such autonomy was to view poetry not as an object but as a series of effects.

Hence, while his views are broadly **Romantic like Emerson’s**, they differ deeply from Emerson’s in that they present an affective and expressionist view of poetry. While he is usually considered a Romantic, Poe’s concern with technique and construction exhibit a formalist disposition and anticipate some of the more modern formalistic theories.

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Yet his image as an outcast, his emphasis on beauty rather than morality or truth, his view of poetry as affording us a glimpse of an ideal world, as well as his insistence on the close union of poetry and music, exerted a considerable fascination and impact on writers such as Baudelaire, who translated a number of his tales, and Mallarmé, who translated his poems, as well as Lacan, who published in 1966 his seminar on **Poe’s story The Purloined Letter**.

Poe’s most famous tales include **The Black Cat, The Fall of the House of Usher (1839), and The Cask of Amontillado (1846)**, and among his notable poems are **To Helen, Israfel, The City in the Sea, and The Haunted Palace**.

His poem *The Raven* (1842) was widely popular. Some of Poe's radical insights into poetry and criticism are expressed in his essay **The Philosophy of Composition (1846)**, which purports to explain the origins of his own poem *The Raven*. Other critical essays include *The Poetic Principle* and *The Rationale of Verse*. In *The Philosophy of Composition*,

Poe urges that a poet should begin with the "consideration of an effect," i.e., the response that will be produced in the reader or listener.

He also urges that the poet should keep "originality always in view" (PC, 178). This effect, he insists, must be produced as a **"unity of impression."** Poe does not believe that such a unified impression can be achieved by a long poem; since poetry "intensely excites, by elevating, the soul," and since intense excitement must by nature be brief, a long poem "is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones – that is to say, of brief poetical effects" (PC, 180).

A poem such as *Paradise Lost*, Poe argues, is at least one half composed of prose, with which the poetic passages are interspersed. Hence the first poetic requirement, unity of impression, cannot be satisfied in a long poem.

Poe's second major claim for the nature of poetry is that it must be "universally appreciable," and it is beauty that has the power universally to please. Hence, "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem . . .

That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful" (PC, 181). Poe points out that beauty is not, as is commonly supposed, "a quality, but an effect," an "intense and pure elevation of soul – not of intellect, or of heart."

Truth, which is the aim of the intellect, or passion, which represents an excitement of the heart, says Poe, are both more easily attainable in prose than poetry. In fact, both of these are antagonistic to beauty, "which is the atmosphere and the essence of the poem" (PC, 182).

Hence beauty – not truth, or emotion, or goodness – is the peculiar province of poetry. Moreover, beauty is reconceived by Poe not as a quality belonging to an object but as an effect in the subject; his views, perhaps influenced by **Kant via Coleridge**, stop short of Kant's sophistication. Whereas, for Kant, beauty was a mode of apprehension on the part of the subject, for Poe it is a response caused in the reader or listener by the literary object or poem.

These are the general points made in Poe's essay, the remainder of which attempts to explain the stages of the composition of **"The Raven."**

Poe's subsequent essay, *The Poetic Principle* (1850), offers a fuller account of his aesthetics. Here also, he urges that a long poem is a contradiction in terms since it cannot sustain the unity, the "totality of effect or impression," **that is the "vital requisite"** in all works of art. Poe warns also that a poem may be "improperly brief" such that it degenerates into epigrammatism. A poem that is very short cannot produce "a profound or enduring effect" (PP, 890).

One of Poe's chief endeavors in this essay is to identify and undermine what he calls "the heresy of The Didactic," which refers to the view that "the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth" and that every poem **"should inculcate a moral."** **As against this**, Poe insists that the most dignified and noble work is the "poem per se – this poem which is a poem and nothing more – this poem written solely for the poem's sake" (PP, 892– 893).

This is perhaps the first insistence on artistic or poetic autonomy by an American writer; it may be significant, as emerges later in his text, that Poe somewhat aligned himself with Southern values and resented the domination of American letters by Northern liberalism, as instanced by the influence of the **North American Review** (PP, 899). Poe himself wrote for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, eventually rising to the editorship of this journal.

In this context, Poe's insistence on artistic autonomy may have been a call to consider the beauty of a poem regardless of its political, as well as its moral, content; given that his notion of beauty was somewhat Platonic, it may also have been an attempt to lift art out of and above the sphere of everyday life and its entanglement in bitter political and social struggles.

At any rate, Poe makes a sharp distinction between "the truthful and the poetical modes" of apprehension and inculcation. Truth, he says, demands a severity of language: "We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned." **Such a mood, says Poe**, "is the exact converse of the poetical" ("PP," 893).

Such a seemingly Platonic distinction between the language and mode of philosophy as against those of poetry has of course been challenged by many modern writers. Poe locates his views in a broader model of the mind which somewhat recalls Kant's location of aesthetic judgment as situated between the realm of understanding (which addresses the realm of phenomena) and the realm of practical reason (comprehending the realm of morality). Poe likewise divides the mind into three aspects: **"Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense."**

He places taste in the middle, acknowledging that it has “intimate relations” with the other two aspects; but he observes a distinction between these three offices: the intellect is concerned with truth; taste apprehends the beautiful; and moral sense disposes us toward duty (“PP,” 893).

By situating his view of poetic autonomy within such a scheme, Poe is following a Kantian procedure of both identifying a subjective faculty specifically as aesthetic, and establishing boundaries between distinct human endeavors or attributes, boundaries which cannot be violated. Poe admits that the precepts of duty or even the lessons of truth can be introduced into a poem; but they must subserve the ultimate purpose of art, and must be placed “in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem” (“PP,” 895).

Hence poetry should not be realistic, merely copying or imitating the beauties that lie before us. Rather, poetry is “a wild effort to reach the Beauty above . . . to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone”; it is a “**struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness**” (“PP,” 894).

Platonic passages such as these, urging the poet to rise above the transient world and to focus his gaze upon the eternal form of Beauty, must have attracted Baudelaire and some of the French Symbolists such as Mallarmé. Poe uses the term poetry in a broad sense, to cover all of the arts; but he sees a very close connection between poetry and music; in fact he defines poetry as “The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty. Its sole arbiter is Taste . . .

In the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, of the soul, which we recognize as the Poetic Sentiment, and which is so easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the Heart” (“PP,” 895).

CONCLUSION

What is not Platonic, however, is the isolated exaltation of Beauty over truth and goodness; the harmony that was possible, even in theory, in Plato’s system, between these forms or essences, between these multifold dimensions of human endeavor, has disintegrated into a desperate craving for a beauty that is not found in the actual world, and a retreat from the increasingly troubled realms of truth and morality.

Poe defines the “poetic principle” as “the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty,” a quest for an excitement of the soul that is distinct from the intoxication of the heart or the satisfaction of reason. Truth may be instrumental in this quest inasmuch as it leads us to “perceive a harmony where none was apparent before.”

The experience of such a harmony is “the true poetical effect” (“PP,” 906). Once again, we glimpse here reflections of Kantian ideas, refracted perhaps through Coleridge. The poet, according to Poe, recognizes in many phenomena the ambrosia that nourishes his soul, especially in “all unworldly motives – in all holy impulses – in all chivalrous, generous, and self sacrificing deeds” (“PP,” 906).

What is interesting here is that all of these phenomena appear to pertain to morality: the very morality that is expelled from the poet’s quest for beauty returns as the very ground of this quest, resurrected in aesthetic form on the ground of its own beauty. In other words, morality becomes an integral part of the aesthetic endeavor, and becomes justified on aesthetic grounds. Once again, art is seen as salvific, displacing the function of religion in serving as our guide to the world beyond.

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