



ROMANTIC CRITICISM AND CRITICAL STUDIES OF POE'S THEORY OF POETRY

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ABSTRACT



This paper analyses Edgar Allan Poe as a literary critic who throws a clear light on what makes a poem worth the name. It appears as if he is trying to elucidate the silent features of a poem that can make it good and also great. Naturally he brings out his own theory of poetry. Some critics say that his theory is the outcome of his own poems like "The Soul of a Man". A poet's concern should be the contemplation of beauty alone. Poetry has no concern, except incidentally, with truth or morals. It was this emphasis on beauty in an age of preaching and instruction that caused people to pay immediate attention to Poe's Critical Theory. For him, "the phenomenal world hardly counts, since the only reality is supernal, and poetry's task is to catch glimpse of it." Next, what he demanded from a poet is the expression of this beauty in an intelligible manner. For this, the poet should consider "the tone of highest manifestation." This tone, according to Poe, is the tone of sadness. He finds death as the saddest of the lot. "Death of a woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." Next point in which he mostly differs from the contemporary poets and critics is that poetry is not a means of self-expression. A poem should be judged by how much a poet is able to 'communicate his own intensity to the reader.' While the "poetic principle" and "the philosophy of composition" propound Poe's theory of poetry, "The Rationale or Verse" expresses his views on English meter, rhythm and rhyme. Besides, I have tried to put his criticism side by side with those of S.T. Coleridge, Walter Pater and T.S. Eliot so that a comparative analysis is made of Poe as a literary critic.

Keywords: *Elucidate, Contemplation, Phenomenal, Manifestation, Rationale, Intellect, Conscience, Elevation, Unprecedented, Elements, Melancholic.*

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About "Poe's astounding reputation", Sir Maurice Bowra aptly remarks, "is founded both on his theory of poetry and his practice of it".ⁱ The human self to Poe is neatly divided into three parts---the intellect, the conscience and the soul. The intellect is concerned with truth; the conscience is concerned with duty and the soul is concerned with beauty. Again that pleasurable elevation of excitement, of the soul which we recognize as the poetic sentiment is attained in the contemplation of beauty alone. Poetry, thus, has no concern except incidentally, with truth or morals. It was this emphasis on Beauty in an age of preaching and instruction that gained quick attention for Poe's critical theory. Keats, no doubt, has already laid enough emphasis on the importance of beauty in the realm of poetry, but Poe expressed it in an unprecedented manner with incomparable clarity and logic.

Poe's poetic theory, takes poetry away from, and above the phenomenal world. According to him mere repetition of Beauty is not poetry nor is it appreciation of beauty before us. It is a wild effort to reach the beauty above. Poetry according to Wordsworth was partly inspired by memories of a celestial existence before birth and to Shelley it was "dictated by powers from the ideal world".ⁱⁱ Poe's poetic theory is also based on similar assumptions but he concludes differently. His theory takes poetry farther away from the earth than the beliefs of either of the two above named poets. For him "the phenomenal world hardly counts, since the only reality is supernal, and poetry's task is to catch glimpse of it".ⁱⁱⁱ To Baudelaire and Mallarme, also, it was this other world that reality mattered. They both believed as a poet their task was to catch glimpses of this other world and to express them in an intelligible manner. They aimed at making poetry a vehicle for conveying the supernal beauty. As such when they came to know Poe's theory they honestly confessed that Poe crystallized and clarified ideas which already existed in their minds in a nebulous state. The poet is of the view that one, who simply describes beauty with whatever degree of zeal, cannot be called a true poet. According to him it is the poet's sense of not having attained that which he wished to attain, his feeling of a thirst unquenched, rather unquenchable

that makes his poetry worth its name. He expresses this idea as follows:

It (Poetry) is no mere appreciation of the beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements perhaps appertain to eternity alone.^{iv}

Poe stresses that it is, this struggle to apprehend the supernal loveliness, this desire of the moth for the star; that enables us to feel poetic. The "Poetic sentiment", Poe adds, 'may develop itself in various modes- in Painting, in Sculpture, in Architecture, in the Dance- very especially in Music...."^v And music according to Poe "in its various modes of meter, rhythm and rhyme, is of so vast a moment in Poetry as never to be wisely rejected."^{vi} Thus Poe finds the greatest scope for poetic development when poetry- the "poetry of words" as he calls it, is united with music. Poe holds that it is 'in the contemplation of Beauty alone that we attain', 'that pleasurable elevation, or excitement of the soul which we recognize as the 'Poetic Sentiment'. This 'excitement of the soul', according to Poe "is so easily distinguished from Truth, which is satisfaction of Reason".^{vii} In "the Philosophy of Composition" Poe says that Truth which is "the satisfaction of the intellect and passion" which is "the excitement of the heart can no doubt be attained in poetry also to a certain extent but asserts that they can be attained more easily in Prose". He elaborates the point as follows:

Having established beauty as the 'sole legitimate province of poetry,' Poe proceeds to decide the next question in this regard: "the tone of highest manifestation." This tone according to Poe is the tone of sadness. Describing the composition of 'The Raven' in "The philosophy of Composition" he states the position as follows: Regarding then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the **tone** of its highest manifestation- and all experience

has shown that this tone is one of sadness.^{viii} Hence Poe maintains that melancholy is 'the most legitimate of all the poetical tones'. Thereafter, having decided the refrain and the length of "The Raven", Poe begins looking for the most melancholy of all the melancholic topics. He finds death as the saddest of the lot. But the issue does not end here. Poe carries it further and establishes that this, 'most melancholy topic' is 'most poetical', on occasions when it most closely allies itself to Beauty. He sums up the argument thus, with particular reference to "The Raven":

The death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionable the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of bereaved lover.^{ix}

Another significant point, wherein Poe's critical theory differs from the trend of criticism prevalent in his age, is his belief that poetry is not "a means of self-expression." He opines that a poem should be judged on the basis of its success to communicate the poet's sentiments to his readers. He means that a poem should not win appreciation only if it 'embodies' intense feelings. In order to prove worthy of applause it should also be able to 'communicate' those feelings to the readers with the sense intensity as experienced by the writer. Poe also holds that the object of poetry is 'an indefinite' rather than 'a definite' pleasure. He also observes that poetry should be essentially lyrical in character. He does not consider the epics, narratives and dramatic works to be true poems, though written in verse. He also declares that the phrase 'long poem' is simply "a flat contradiction in terms." Poe explains this point very clearly. The same point is elucidated in "The Philosophy of Composition" as follows:

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression - --- for, if two sittings are required, the affairs of the world interfere,

and everything like totality is at one destroyed.^x

While the "Poetic Principle" and "the Philosophy of composition" propound Poe's theory of poetry, 'The Rationale of Verse' does express his views on English meter, rhythm and rhyme. Herein Poe begins with generally accepted definition of 'Versification' and traces the 'probable processes' of its development step by step. Poe's 'Rationale of Verse' in a sense, is the first treatise on English verse. All other article written earlier on the subjects confine verse to 'mere versification', while it deals with 'verse in general'. Poe in this essay does not use the word 'verse' in its strictest term. He uses it in a sense to express "all that is involved in the consideration of rhythm, rhyme, meter and versification". He refers to the definition of versification given by the English Grammar of Gold Brown and criticizes it at length. The definition, as quoted by Poe says that "versification is the art of arranging words into lines of correspondent length, so as to produce harmony by the regular alternation of syllables differing in quantity".^{xi}

Having proceeded to this stage Poe thinks it necessary to check monotony. He, therefore, says that the first thought in this new direction would be that of collating two or more words formed each of two syllables differently accented but having the same order in each word--- in other terms, of collating two or more iambs, or two or more trochees. Poe says that the syllables are generally of two types - long and short. The natural long syllables are those encumbered ---- the natural short syllables are those encumbered---- with consonants, all the more are mere artificially and jargon. To Poe time is a very significant factor in versification. To relieve the monotony variation at certain points in the principle of equality is, no doubt, allowed, but the point of time is that point which, being the rudimental one must never be tampered with at all. Scansion forms no criterion of good verse and Poe considered it silly to find fault with a verse only on grounds of scansion, so long it was pleasant to the ear. Poe asserts that the object of what we call Scansion is the distinct marking of the rhythmical flow. E.W. Parks rightly remarks:

Poe, in his Rationale of verse, was advocating the loosening up of the technique of versification by allowing for greater variety within the poetic foot, and for making the poetic foot at least approximately equal to a bar of music.^{xii}

Music in its turn “when combined with a pleasurable idea” becomes poetry to Poe. ‘Indefiniteness’ is a significant element of music to him. Music in Poe’s poetry and criticism comes very close to Mathematics. To him ‘the highest order of the imaginative intellect’ is in any case ‘pre-eminently mathematical’ Poe’s critical theory was already expressed in the form of scattered ideas on different occasions and his three critical essays were only compilations of his beliefs expressed earlier. Critics have noted a remarkable uniformity between these essays and the critical opinions of Poe scattered over his different reviews.

One cannot but be struck, first of all, by the remarkable appearance of logical completeness which it presents, for once its premises are granted the conclusions are drawn with the same elaborate clarity which is characteristic of Poe’s ratiocinative tales. In the second place, it is evident that they do contain certain elements of truth. The definition of Beauty does at least describe very clearly a kind of beauty, and thus though the doctrines may not have the universality claimed for them, they do succeed in doing in their own way all that the best set of critical principles has ever done, which is, not to lay down the laws which govern all art, but to define, as accurately as possible, a style.^{xiii}

It is indubitably clear that Poe established early in the nineteenth century a definite standard of criticism. Later on the critics, not only in America but also in England and on the continent, recognized his genius and originality fully well. Baudelaire, the great

admirer of Poe, calls him ‘a profound philosopher’ and his literary art also was considerably influenced by philosophy. The literary criticism of his times led Poe to believe that ‘philosophy was an important factor in attaining excellence in writing’. His acquaintance with Wordsworth’s essays confirmed his notion that there was a vital link between philosophy and literature. He was familiar with Dugald Stewart and Locke also and his knowledge of their philosophy as well, led him to consider the relation which philosophy has with poetry. He was soon convinced that the study of philosophy was ‘the great want of American letters.’

At an early stage in his study Poe came to realize the existence of ‘an unvarying law in the universe.’ From this ‘unvarying law’ he worked out a literary theory including suggestions for both the subject-matter and the technique. He stresses the bearing of philosophy on technique and not on the subject-matter----a suggestion borrowed from Coleridge. In the review of *The Book of Gems* he ‘reveals himself a student of Coleridge’s attitude’ in this regard and his study of *Biographia Literaria* made himself apply the philosophical understanding of ‘unity in variety’ to literary technique. Tracing the affinity with Plato, Margaret Alton finds that like Plato, Poe also held that ‘the soul, by nature longs for true beauty’. Again, like Plato he thought that the beauties of earth and heaven “encourage man to long for supernal beauty”. According to him this longing for absolute beauty is, on the part of the lover and the poet, a longing for immortality. He therefore believed that the soul always “struggles to create”. Indeed to him, the desire to create is a necessary consequence proceeding from the longing for immortality. To quote Alton once again, according to Platonic doctrine it is “not by imitating the world of sense, but by being inspired by the beatific vision that the poet proves himself worthy of title. In the *Poetic Principle*, Poe also said that poetry is ‘no mere appreciation of beauty before us but a wild effort to reach the beauty above.’

Poe’s, linking philosophy with science on the one hand and poetry on the other, opened unique vistas of literary speculation---- far transcending the existing ones. But then, this was nothing new that Eliot’s criticism attempted to, do Poe in ‘The

Philosophy of Composition' and 'The Poetic Principle' had already established this conception of poetry an Eliot, as a matter of fact, was treading the path paved by Poe. Hence Edmund Wilson has to admit that Eliot and Valery follow Coleridge and Poe in their theory as well as in their verse. According to the French critics, Poe, "was the most unusual, the most original and the most marvelous writer who ever enriched English literature with gems of purest ray".^{xiv} The symbolists in France found his poetry and critical ideas of great interest. Poe's critical theory, as a matter of fact, proved to be the starting point of French symbolism, as far as its desire to attain the suggestiveness of music is concerned. It was Poe who, for the first time combined 'the half developed thoughts' of the French symbolists like Baudelaire to perfection and presented them in the shape of a 'logical formula for a poem'.

To sum up, it must be admitted that as a critic, Poe made a remarkable contribution to the critical standards in America by laying down an ideal of criticism in an age devoid of critical principles.

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ⁱⁱ Sir Maurice Bowra- *The Romantic Imagination*-P.179.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid- P.179.

^{iv} Ibid- P.1026

^v Ibid- P.1026

^{vi} Ibid- P.1026

^{vii} Ibid.....P.1027

^{viii} Ibid.....P.981

^{ix} Ibid.....P.982

^x Ibid-*The Philosophy of Composition*-P.979-980.

^{xi} Quinn A.H.and O'Neill (Editors) - *The Rationale of Verse* – P.988-89.

^{xii} Parks, E.W.....op-cit. P.86

^{xiii} Krutch, J.W- op.cit.....P .230

^{xiv} Quinn, Patrick F- *The French face of Edgar Poe*...P.53.

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