

## POE'S PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION

ANDRZEJ KOPCEWICZ

*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

This paper will not deal with Edgar Allan Poe's aesthetic ideas except in so far as they touch upon the structural theories expounded in *The Philosophy of Composition*. Poe's literary theories fall into two parts: the search for beauty and the search for order. It is his interest in the search for order that has secured him his position as one of the first genuine American writers, since according to Robert E. Spiller American literature, to be truly American, did not necessarily have to render the physical outward aspect of the contemporary scene, but should subject it to an artistic reshaping and "evolve from them an organic form"<sup>1</sup>. Such a writer was Edgar Allan Poe, who was first of all concerned with form as an expression of the palpable experience, which naturally had to be American as no other experience was immediately available to him. His influence on the French symbolists is well known; and whether or not their admiration for him was well grounded it was not with his tongue in his cheek that Mallarmé said:

"The further I go, the more faithful I shall be to those severe ideas which my great master Edgar Poe, has bequeathed me. The wonderful poem *The Raven* was conceived thus, and the soul of the reader enjoys exactly what the poet wanted to enjoy"<sup>2</sup>.

It is customary to say of Poe's literary theories that their influence came to American literature, well over a half century later mainly through the good offices of the French and their American followers, thus completing a full circle.

"Whatever the merit of his enormous activity in its time and place," writes René Wellek about Poe "... they would not give Poe a claim to a place in an international history of criticism. But the claim is justified and can be sub-

<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Spiller, *The American Literary Dilemma and Edgar Allan Poe in Carle Bode, ed, The Great Experiment in American Literature*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1961, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> William K. Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism. A Short History*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1959, p. 592.

stantiated by an appeal to two essays *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846) and *The Poetic Principle* (1848, published 1850) . . . . Seen from the vantage point of our time, and through the eyes of the French Symbolists in particular, Poe appears as a propounder of theories that in themselves may not be original and may not be defensible as a coherent critical system, but have the distinction of suggesting the main motifs of much later thought on poetry."<sup>3</sup>

The incantatory effect of much of his poetry must have had an appeal to the Symbolists. In this alone Poe's contribution to the future theories of "trans-sense" language<sup>4</sup> deserves the credit. His structural theories are of equal importance. Stanley Edgar Hyman writes that T. S. Eliot got his impersonal theory of poetry from Pound, who got it ultimately from Poe<sup>4</sup>. This puts Poe in the foreground of modern critical thought not limited to America alone.

Tracing influences, between such disparate writers as Eliot and Poe, is a tricky business; yet a reading of *The Philosophy of Composition* reveals an amazing resemblance to Eliot's concept of the objective correlative — the most important aspect of his depersonification theory and of symbolic forms in poetry. This is not to say that Eliot got it directly from Poe, although that is not unlikely considering that Eliot thought him, "not only a heroically courageous critic . . . but a critic of the first rank"<sup>5</sup>. The concept of the objective correlative as an aspect of depersonification was felt but not yet formulated at a time when literature was trying to get rid of the veristic, didactic method which hampered the expression of the more complex and relativistic experiences encountered in the new times. That Poe should come to similar views so early only proves his critical perspicuity which was not possessed by many of his contemporaries of far greater literary standing. Still, Poe's poetic merit is dubious. Viewed by many, mainly European and Latin American writers, as a poet of the first rank, his reputation as a poet among Anglo-American writers seems to be nil; he could offer hardly any valuable model for these among them on the lookout for new modes of expression rather than a simple repetition of the trite and wornout. The analysis of *The Philosophy of Composition* can perhaps account for this phenomenon.

In this essay Poe maintains that good art depends upon brevity for its unity, which is the totality of a single "impression" or effect. Since

<sup>3</sup> René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, The Age of Transition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966, p. 592.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley E. Hyman, *Poetry and Criticism T. S. Eliot in The American Scholar*, Winter 1960—61, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> William K. Wimsatt, *op. cit.*, p. 520.

this effect is essential for good art, no poem should exceed one hundred lines. The most important part of *The Raven*, it seems, is its dénouement, which should naturally contain the climax of the "effect" — the greatest amount of emotional impact. This brought Poe to the idea that poetry could be written backwards, that is, the climactic stanza set down first and all the remaining parts played down so that they should not thwart the impact of the dénouement. This insistence upon the priority of the dénouement, the single "effect", as well as his decision to use a room as the setting are revealing here. Poe was obviously aiming at a certain kind of concentration and concretization of the emotional meaning.

Poe begins the act of creation with what T. S. Eliot has called the "rhythm" and what he called "the tone" — an unidentified feeling which he defines broadly as "sadness" or "melancholy" (as no other feeling would do for his idea of poetry as the expression of Beauty). Having established or decided on the quality of the emotion, he begins casting about, so to speak, for a stylistic device, or an image that could justify or perhaps explain it. He found that the most suitable thing pertaining to the quality of melancholy lay in the phonetic possibilities of the word "nevermore". This led him to select the raven as the concrete image most capable of justifying and carrying the full meaning contained in the "nevermore". He decided that the bird should repeat it automatically like a well learned lesson. At the same time Poe devised the plot for the poem — the death of a beautiful woman and the sorrow of her lover, thus supplying the poem with "logical structure". The problem which he faced next was how to combine the idea of a lover lamenting his dead mistress and the raven repeating the word "nevermore". He solved this by increasing the emotional intensity from a tone almost of amusement to that of high seriousness at the end of the poem when the protagonist is given the ultimate answer, "nevermore", to his question concerning the mystery of existence and is precipitated into the state of spiritual death. "And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/shall be lifted — nevermore!" This, in fact, seems to be the proper dénouement of the poem and not the stanza indicated by Poe in his essay.

If this reading of the essay is correct and not merely a reading between the lines, then it is evident that Poe was deliberately trying to construct his poem according to the ideas contained in the theory of the objective correlative. This is the initial emotion, the event which is supposed to carry this emotion, and, above all, there is the image of the raven whose purpose is to focus and reflect the basic emotional meaning. There is the tendency towards the objectivization of the emotion

in the concrete so that the concrete can evoke in the reader the feelings or emotion, the meaning of the poem in fact, which it is endowed with. "He speaks of him (the raven)" writes Poe, "as a grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt and ominous bird of yore and feels the fiery eyes burning into his bosom's core. This resolution of the thought or the fancy, on the lover's part, is intended to induce a similar one on the part of the reader - . . .".

Of course much more is needed than an outward description of the object, however persuasive, for it to turn into a successful image. Still the attempt is evident. In order to carry it out successfully, both the lover and the raven, the emotion and the object, should undergo a process of identification, which, on the whole, the poem lacks, with one notable exception, namely its final stanza. It seems that Poe did not know how to carry it out and his resolution of obtaining it through the gradual increasing of emotional tone could hardly secure it. That the last stanza should eventually meet this aim is only the natural consequence of the method he used.

One should be justified in expecting a poem written according to so skillfully executed a piece of structural analysis to be equally satisfying. The discrepancy in this case between the theoretical assumption and the practical results has been noticed on several occasions.

"*The Raven* which has impressed many readers especially in France and Russia" wrote Aldous Huxley "must be described as a *tour-de-force*, a virtuoso exercise which, in detail, is often shoddy and slipshod"<sup>6</sup>.

Yeats' criticism of it is scathing indeed.

"Analyse *The Raven* and you find that its subject is commonplace and its execution a rhythmical trick. Its rhythm never lives for a moment, never once moves with an emotional life. The whole thing seems to me insincere and vulgar"<sup>7</sup>.

Poe is often accused of playing a double game. Susan Weiss thinks that his account of the creation of the poem was not true and was not intended to be received as true:

"The idea had occurred to him — suggested by the comments and inquires of the critics — that the poem *might* have been so composed, and he accord-

<sup>6</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Vulgarity in Literature*, René Wellek, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>7</sup> William K. Wimsatt, *op. cit.*, p. 480.

ingly produced this account, merely as an ingenious experiment, and had been surprised and amused at its being readily accepted as a bona-fide statement"<sup>8</sup>.

René Wellek thinks the composition of *The Raven*

"...a *posteriori* stunt (if not a hoax) and should not be taken seriously. But the basic idea is obviously meant seriously"<sup>9</sup>.

Also Wagenknecht recognizes the validity of Poe's theoretical statement:

"Whether it is literally true or not *The Philosophy of Composition* does give a reasonable idea of the workings of the essential creative process and his attitude toward them"<sup>10</sup>.

Why is it then that Poe "failed" to transform his material into a symbolic form as his essay suggested? Several reasons suggest themselves. One of them is his romantic ontology, which confronted him as something of a dilemma. According to H. Davidson it consisted in a conviction that: "either the imagination is real and reports reality in real words which have some durable meanings or there is a world of fact that though words are *real* forever resist any bridging between itself and the mind of man"<sup>11</sup>. He was aware of the reality existing outside the imagination which the imagination tries to comprehend but which always defies any definition or understanding. What the mind makes then is not the only reality, yet he would still maintain, that the mind is after all a creator and knower. Thus, to reshape the ordinary and the sensible into something transcending the limitations imposed upon man by his senses would be an act of artistic necessity as well as futility, if not a kind of usurpation. It is the fate of the artist, nevertheless, to follow the course set for himself as a seer and creator. This dualism had an effect on much of Poe's writing and it is certainly reflected in the structure of *The Raven*. It explains the particular care Poe took to supply his writing with a rationalization in order to explain the unique and the unreal. That is why he found it necessary to furnish *The Raven* with a kind of circumstantial evidence which makes the structure of it astonishingly lopsided. In the first part he tries to assure the reader that the whole described event is after all a hoax, that the raven, how-

<sup>8</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> René Wellek, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> Edward H. Davidson, *Poe*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 65.

ever foreboding and ominous, is only a mechanical instrument. The image of the raven connotes by means of the sheer strength of its customary association. It is a static symbol hardly carrying any meaning at all because Poe did not mean to translate it into anything meaningful. It is in the second part of the poem that the image takes on the thematic meaning and only at the end does its ultimate significance become coherent. The second half of the poem can thus justly be called an action in disorder because it is here that the poet was moving towards the concretization of the emotional meaning, as his method demanded, and which he both instinctively resisted and thought necessary at the same time. His dual perception of reality urged him towards creating a symbol but also held him back. He must have known that his method led him to a symbolic form. That is why he added the following to his essay, as if in afterthought:

"But in the subject so handled, however skillfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness which repels an artistic eye. Two things are invariably required — first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and secondly, some amount of suggestiveness — some under-current, however indefinite of meaning. It is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that *richness* . . . . Holding this opinion I added the two concluding stanzas of the poem — their suggestiveness being thus made to pervade all the narrative which has preceded them. The undercurrent of meaning is rendered first apparent in the lines — "Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door! /Quoth the Raven, Nevermore!/" It will be observed that the words, from out my heart involved the first metaphorical expression in the poem. They with the answer "Nevermore", dispose the mind to seek the moral in all that has been previously narrated. The reader begins now to regard the Raven as emblematical — but it is not until the very last line of the very last stanza, that the intention of making him emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* is permitted distinctly to be seen:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting,  
On the pallid bust of Pallas, just above my chamber door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of the demon that is dreaming,  
And the lamplight o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
Shall be lifted -- nevermore".

The passage and the final stanza deserve to be quoted in full. They constitute the most important part in the whole argument. First, Poe maintains that his method produces a hardness that "repels an artistic eye". It is only inevitable that it should. Second, he intends to tone down the hardness by introducing a metaphorical identification between the protagonist and the object, between the image and the idea. This

identification is also the corollary of the method with all the semblance of the objective correlative and as such can be expected. Thus the raven, says the poet, becomes an "emblem" of "Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance". This he holds to be the theme of his poem. "The subject of *The Raven* was a difficult one", writes H. Davidson "namely, the mind's loss of any hold on reality or the steps towards imaginative *madness*" and elsewhere, "*The Raven* is a virtual admission of universal disparity: the imagination is lost in the shadow that lies upon the floor, while the inanimate objects, bird, bust, stare out in triumphal rigidity"<sup>12</sup>. The identification of the self with the object indicates that the raven should be interpreted as a symbol of a state of mind and not separately from it. The shadow cast by the raven from which the protagonist's soul shall never be "lifted" signifies not only a remembrance but also an experience and an insight into the reality of existence that in a way surpasses his understanding of the quality represented by the raven. The reunion with his beloved that he had expected and which was denied him is only a different way of stating the crises in man's expectations of life after death. The "demon" of doubt entered into his heart leaving him in a perpetual "shadow". On the other hand the "emblem" could be taken to mean literally messenger of the "Night's Plutonian Shore", just as the protagonist sees him, and then there is ample room for various speculations along the traditional lines of reward and punishment.

In the metaphorical part of the poem the raven is thus meant to represent the mystery of existence or the illusion of reality. It is identified with the protagonist through such figures as "shadow" and the "beak in the heart". This part of the poem is symbolic. The reason why the symbol is still shadowy and can hardly be definitely pinned down lies in that the raven as a symbol finds no justification in the veristic part, which is the predominant section of the poem. The symbol is not sustained through the whole poem. On the whole it is only a pretext for the protagonist's musings with himself. The deliberate transformation of the mood, or the tone is in this way upsetting the structural unity, rendering the poem misty and indefinite, whereas if Poe trusted his own method the images would have displayed his theme vividly and concretely.

This combination of the veristic and symbolic becomes only a structural flaw when considered in the light of such devices as the objective correlative and modern theories of structure which the essay in fact justifies. "Poe", writes René Wellek "is in no way symbolist. Since he

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

distrusts even metaphor and simile, he has no concept of correspondences or analogy, no grasp of the poetic symbol"<sup>13</sup>. He considers imagination only combinatory and unlike Coleridge, his teacher, he had no concept of the independent world of imagination. This explains why Poe did not go all the way as his essay indicated he would, or should, in creating a symbolic poem. He put more faith in incantation than in image. His sense of artistic balance recognized its necessity but his ontology resisted it.

The value of the essay as an important historical document is beyond doubt. Three questions still should be answered. First, is the poem a failure? Second, is there really such a great discrepancy between the poem and its analyses in the essay? Third, did Poe want to play a trick on his readers? Studied against the essay the poem is a failure because it does not fulfill its theoretical assumptions. However, since no reading of poetry should rely too much on external evidence, viewed independently then, it is one of the most successful romantic statements of its time and the great popularity it enjoys proves that its author managed to fire the imagination if only of a rather popular mind. The essay shows that Poe hit upon a method which he did not know what to do with. He was grappling with unfamiliar material and his vision of the world told him that he was denying himself because he did not trust the image. If the essay was after all meant to be a hoax then it is a successful one and very important for understanding the theoretical lines along which poetry moved from the romantic assumption to the symbolic poetry of the new century. Poe was too deeply rooted in the romantic tradition to simply cast it aside and create a "modern" poem. Concrete poetry clashed with his idea of Beauty and the incantatory and hypnotic effects that produced the deliberate vagueness which he thought essential in poetry. He seemed to be at home with what Coleridge handed down and the time was not yet propitious for an Eliot.

<sup>13</sup> René Wellek, *op. cit.*, p. 153.