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# *THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION* REVISITED, OR WHY DOES MODERN POETRY BEGIN IN THE USA

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***Abstract:*** *The present paper aims at resituating Edgar Allan Poe in the canon of modern poetry. To this intent, a re-reading of the* Philosophy of Composition *is made, in the context of his prose work, and considering technical details invoked there as pioneering steps in establishing formats which now constitudes* de facto *standards in entertainment industry. Far from being, as considered by T. S. Eliot, the result of a misunderstanding, the influence of Poe, along with that of the other great American poet of 19th century, Walt Whitman, have shaped the poetry of the 20th, and, probably, the 21st century.*

***Key words:*** *canon, modern poetry, Romanticism, science.*

The standard – using a handy pun, one can even call it canonical – version of the canon of modern poetry is, simplifying, the following: Edgar Allan Poe, who influenced Baudelaire, whose influence, in its turn, divided into the two known directions, that of the 'artists', and that of the 'visionaries' (Raymond 61), to which a list of names, become mandatory references, can be added (e. g., poets discussed by Friedrich).

As far as Poe is concerned, things are not so simple: the rapport between his explicit poetics (his theoretical writings) and his implicit one (his poetical creation) is unbalanced, the poet taking part "only through his theory to the modernist concept (canon) of poetry" (Martin 3), or, as it has been noticed, the meditation equivalent to poetry is even superior to it (Friedrich 49). There is also a profound difference in the reception of Poe, across the Atlantic, or, changing the geographical criterion for the cultural and linguistic one, between the Anglo-Saxon world and that dominated, up to a certain point, by French language: "In fact *Edgarpo* is to the French almost another person than Edgar Allan Poe, as the English-speaking world knows him"(Cunliffe 65); in a way, it can be said that, without this character, somehow invented by Baudelaire and Mallarmé, the significance of Edgar Allan Poe cannot be fully realised (Cunliffe 71). Similarly, T. S. Eliot's essay, *From Poe to Valéry*, starting from what it seemed obvious to the author, the fact that *The Philosophy of Composition* was written *after* having composed *The Raven*, concludes that the influence of Poe upon three major French poets, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry is due to a misunderstanding.

Our hypothesis is that the whole discussion about the priority in composing

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the poem or the essay is irrelevant, and that a close re-reading of *The Philosophy of Composition* could give us reasons to reassert its importance as a founding text of modern poetry, and, more, to push its origins beyond the Atlantic.

One of the first things that occur to the author is the possible journalistic impact of his essay: "how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would – that is to say, who could – detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 1); one hypothetical explanation for the probable rejection of such an idea by most of his contemporaries is the predominant, at the beginning of the 19th century, conception of romantic inspiration, "a species of fine frenzy – an ecstatic intuition" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 1), or, in M. H. Abrams' terms, expressive theories (Abrams, 21–26).

Ordering a bit, although Truth, as "the satisfaction of the intellect" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 2), (Poe, 15 Dec. 2008, 4), here is defined also as "satisfaction of the Reason" (Poe, 15 Dec. 2008, 5) (Poe, 15 Dec. 2008, 15) is opposed to Passion, "the excitement of the heart" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 3), and asks for precision, (Poe, 8 May 2008, 3), it does not imply that it "may not be introduced, and even profitably introduced, into a poem for they may serve in elucidation, or aid the general effect, as do discords in music" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 3); more, it can not be claimed that "even the lessons of Truth, may not be introduced into a poem, and with advantage; for they may subserve incidentally, in various ways, the general purposes of the work" (Poe, 15 Dec. 2008, 5).

This is his approach in a good deal of his fictional work, both in detective fiction (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt*, *The Purloined Letter*), and in that of scientific speculation, even if, by present-day standard, it is about pseudo-science (*The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*), or in a story like *The Gold-Bug*, where one cannot help noticing the similarity of structure between the steps followed by William Legrand in deciphering the secret message and in finding the treasure, and the objective set forth in *The Philosophy of Composition*, that is, "to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition – that the work proceeded step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 2).

One of the first remarks one can make about the essay is the highly anti-romantic appeal to a large audience; Poe considers "composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 2). This concern for the audience, otherwise put, for success, leads to establishing an appropriate length of the poem, exactly as long as it can fit in a single poetry reading. And we might think that not the psychological aspect of the unity of impression, as it was Poe's claim, although not negligible, is important, but the mentality of the target audience: the educated upper-middle class, for which time means money, and for which, also, if the poet needs another poetry reading to finish his poem, it might mean that he failed fulfilling his objective. And the correspondence between the available amount of time and the length of the piece is also a proof of competence, of a good management of resources, among which time is a most precious one. Insisting upon technical details, Poe signals that he is able to control his lyrical production, which will result in a quality product. One based on rewriting romantic themes and motifs, without emotional involvement, and, if possible, without the irrational factor of inspiration, present in the poetics of

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romanticism. Although, for Georges Poulet, the *romantic is a being who discovers himself as being situated in the centre* (Poulet 132), and most of Poe's work satisfies this characterisation, if we take into account the three factors stated by Wellek as fundamental for romanticism, that is, imagination, nature, and symbol and myth (Wellek 167), we can notice that, with Poe, nature has been substituted by technology; a good example it would be *The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade*, where rewriting is present together with the estrangement of science and technology, which take the place of nature, as it actually happens in the modern world.

It is also to be noted that shortness does not favorise the poem either: "it is clear that a poem may be improperly brief. Undue brevity degenerates into mere epigrammatism" (Poe, 15 Dec. 2008, 2), and that, returning to the balance between the success with the audience, and that with criticism, "that degree of excitement which I deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical taste" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 2), Poe establishes an ideal dimension of the poem, compared to which, the real dimension has a more than acceptable tolerance: "a length of about one hundred lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight" (Poe, 8 May 2008, 2). Taking into account the fact that poetry readings represented an income for writers, then the preoccupation for fitting in a time-interval can be seen as a pioneering attempt of establishing formats, such as it actually happened in American popular culture – the length of a movie, of an episode of a soap, of a song on a vinyl record, all a reflex of the standardisation come with industrialisation.

Summing up, *The Philosophy of Composition* can be read as a document of the American way of thinking; either as a pragmatic, empirical approach to writing (the engineer's way), or as a technical book of a product that has to be sold – by paid poetry readings, by subscriptions to the poet's books – (the marketing executive's way). And, from the success it had, at least in Europe, we may conclude it was an inspired approach.

Poe's innovation, that of inverting *the succession of the poetic acts postulated by previous aesthetics* (Friedrich, 49) was considered by MacLuhan as that which *allowed him to pave the way for the detective story* (McLuhan, 1997, 74), and, also the *method of crime fiction, symbolist poetry and modern science* (McLuhan, 1975, 86); it is important to notice, on one hand, the unity of his work, and on the other, that of modern culture.

While Poe is so influenced by European literature, that his American character has to be unearthed, the other great American poet of the 19th century, Walt Whitman, is clearly American – the *Preface* to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* states it unambiguously, so unambiguously that he became *the* American poet:

"The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses" (Whitman).

Comparing their influences, one can see that, even misunderstood, Poe's novelty came from his American background, and dominated the end of 19th century European poetry, while Whitman dominated 20th century poetry, both American and European.

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Poe influenced mostly the branch of the 'artists' in modern poetry, out of which outstanding for their further influence upon Pound and Eliot are the French symbolist poets; his influence returned indirectly to the United States, through the poets influenced by Pound and Eliot, and also, through those influenced by French poetry, among whom the most outstanding is Wallace Stevens.

Whitman influenced a lot of American poets whose concern was that of expressing various aspects of America, such as William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and, after World War II, the poets of the *Beat* generation; his fate can be somehow better traced, stage by stage, from acknowledging (and repenting for) the former rejection (in Ezra Pound's *A Pact*), to transforming it into a myth (in Allen Ginsberg's *A Supermarket in California*) and, finally, to deconstructing the myth (Ishmael Reed's *The Gangster's Death*).

Both poets are the two faces of the paradoxical destiny of the United States – a country born directly into the modern age, without a cumbersome tradition behind, and, on the other hand, having enough ties with the world it originated from to recognise it, to draw an inspiration from or to feel complexes towards it. While in the case of Whitman this seemed quite obvious, for Poe it was needed a new reading, in order to re-establish the balance.

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