A ROMANIAN'S CRITICAL RECEPTION OF E. A. POE'S FANTASTIC TALES

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Abstract*: The paper is based on three articles on E.A. Poe's fantastic tales, signed by Oscar Lemnaru, Matei Calinescu and, respectively, Maria-Ana Tupan. We aim at demonstrating that the Romanian critics discover and analyse some important features of the fantastic in Poe's tales, and all of them insist on the paradoxical relation between fantastic and reason as a main characteristic of Poe's fantastic work.*

Keywords: criticism, fantastic, reason.

The fascination exerted by Poe upon Romanian culture resulted in a large number of translations of his work, this including, in many cases, various versions of one single piece, and in a sum of critical articles about his work, both about his poetry and poetics and about his prose. The attribute of "fantastic" as characterizing some of his short stories was much used by the three critics we selected for the purpose of this article: Oscar Lemnaru (who was not famous as a critic, but rather as a writer of fantastic stories), Matei Calinescu and Maria-Ana Tupan.

Oscar Lemnaru may have been the first Romanian critic to use the term "fantastic" when refering to Poe's tales. In 1946, he published the article "Nuvelele fantastice ale lui Poe" ("The fantastic short stories of Poe") in the magazine "Revista româno-americană", no. 2-3. A writer of fantastic short stories himself, Lemnaru presents his conviction that fantastic literature is the literature of the future and his arguments are: the development of sciences such as psychology as well as a future world where democracy will create a realm of honesty. It is within such a context that fantastic literature will develop, by assuming the role of inventing problems which science cannot solve and by using truth in order to give verisimilitude to the unbelievable[1]. The germs of such literature are to be found, according to Lemnaru, in American literature, especially in Poe's short stories, as he seems "the only American writer who […] created a literature resulted from the coordinates of American spirituality."[2]

What differentiates Poe from the European writers of the fantastic, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ramon Gomez de la Serna, Kleist, Ewers, is that he does not write fantastic tales in order to escape from reality, but in order to *replace* reality by another type of reality. Thus, the universe he creates is "not phantomatic, but surreal; not legendary, but abstract; not delusive, but true; not arbitrary, but of a logical coherence, of a mathematical consequence, of a geometrical rigidity." Moreover, it as an "exercise for annihilating the conditions of concrete existence in order to convert it to a cosmos obeying only to geometrical rules."[3] The style Poe uses for materializing his theoretical

[1] see Lemnaru, O., "Nuvelele fantastice ale lui Poe" in "Revista româno-americană", no. 2-3, 1946, p. 242.
[2] ibidem, our translation.
[3] idem, p. 243, our translation.

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ideas agrees with his aim of creating a scientific-like universe: it is an objective, scientific style, with cold, aloof descriptions which create the sensations of verisimilitude and probability[1].

Lemnaru supports his theoretical statements by treating some tales in point of plot and of style: *The Facts of M. Waldemar's Case, The Imp of the Perverse, The Tell-Tale Heart, The Purloined Letter, The Gold Bug, The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. The conclusion after analysing these tales is that Poe chooses as the subject of his work some singular cases which represent exceptions from reality, but for him these exceptions encapsulate the general. The method used by Poe to find and impose the truth in his tales is extremely effective: with the help of logic, he creates an absolute void around the problem concerning the respective tale and thus his conclusion imposes rapidly just like a mathematical result (as is the case of the story *The Facts of M. Waldemar's Case*). Tales like *The Imp of the Perverse, The Tell-Tale Heart* reveal the inferno of human perverseness, while *The Purloined Letter, The Gold Bug, The Murders in the Rue Morgue* insist on the omnipotence of human intelligence which can solve any riddle[2].

A second contribution to the study of Poe's fantastic tales belongs to Matei Calinescu and it was published in 1965 as a preface to the volume *Prăbuşirea Casei Usher*[3]. The article, entitled "Structura fantasticului în proza lui Edgar Allan Poe" ("The Structure of the Fantastic in Edgar Allan Poe's Prose"), integrates Poe's fantastic prose within the whole American cultural phenomenon of the 19th century. The fantastic during Romanticism is seen by Calinescu as a critical reaction to the pragmatism and optimistic certainties of the bourgeoisie. In America, the fantastic manifested itself as an imitation of the European fantastic, in the beginning, yet little but little original fantastic works appeared due to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe.

Matei Calinescu identifies the main sources of inspiration for Edgar Allan Poe, insisting upon the American tradition of the fantastic initiated by Washington Irving, from whose works Poe borrows the "knickerbocker" spirit by creating descriptions with comic effects of the New-York Dutch mentality in a short story like *Hans Phaal*. The main European sources of Poe's fantastic are, according to Matei Calinescu, the English gothic novel and the German Romantic fantastic tales. Yet, above all these influences, Edgar Allan Poe synthesizes the whole tradition of the fantastic in general and, at the same time, develops it by imposing some new directions[4].

Just like Oscar Lemnaru, Matei Calinescu also intuits the paradox of Poe's fantastic: although he uses, like in any fantastic work, suggestion as a main literary device, Poe also provides the intellectual factor, the logical investigation with an important role, by using analysis as a second important device (fact which highly contradicts the tradition of the fantastic). Moreover, with Poe suggestion is a *device*, not just the result of a flash of imagination, as it happened with the Romantics. Calinescu's conclusion at this point is that Poe is the writer who invented the "lucid and analytical" type of fantastic[5].

The next point in Matei Calinescu's study deals with classifying Poe's fantastic tales in three categories: "psychological inner fantastic", "symbolic and allegorical

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[1] see ibidem.
[2] see idem, pp. 243-244.
[3] Poe, E.A., *Prăbuşirea Casei Usher* vol I, Editura pentru Literatură, Bucureşti, 1965.
[4] see idem, p. IX-X.
[5] idem, p. XVI.

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fantastic" and "satyrical and grotesque fantastic"[1]. The first type of fantastic used by Poe in his tales, the psychological inner fantastic, marks a transfer of interest from the objective relations between phenomena that were inserted in the gothic novels towards a *subjective projection* of the facts. Yet, what is fantastic about this is the fact that this subjectivity goes beyond normality, it is the "morbid subjectivity […] of a tortured ego who proposes a deformed image of the world, but this does not mean that the world itself, in its essence, would be governed by supernatural laws."[2] As a successful technique for this type of fantastic, Poe uses the first-person narrative, but this is fruitful only as long as the teller of the story is the hero of the adventure himself, because this way the respective character gives the impression of being insane, maniacal, obsessed, unable to make the difference between the real and the subjective. Yet, as Matei Calinescu rightfully notices, this type of fantastic is extremely restrictive because psychological manifestations mostly represent aspects of reality and therefore do not make much room for the supernatural. To illustrate this type of fantastic, Calinescu selects three short stories, *The Tell-Tale Heart, The Black Cat* and *The Pit and the Pendulum* and analyses the gradual formation of the psychopath's criminal obsession in the first story, the main character's gradual degradation by alcohol in the second and the death convict's psychology in the third.

The second type of fantastic, the symbolic and allegorical, can be applied to those short stories of Poe in which the symbolic aspects become of utmost importance in the economy of the narrative. What can be noticed in these short stories is the way in which Poe's symbols vary and get an intellectual force, but they do not annihilate the effects of magic suggestiveness, the feeling of a mysterious parallelism, the strange and terrifying effects, which characterize the Romantic fantastic[3]. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is an example in point by the interpretation of the house as a symbol, by the omnipresent parallelism man-environment as well as by the direct analysis of the main character's degradation process.

The satyrical fantastic becomes either a modality of mocking the bourgeoisie, with its self-sufficiency, meanness and stupidity, or a modality of staging a comic Romantic demonology, whilst the grotesque type of the fantastic is highly manifest in the stories which debate the romantic categories, foreseeing a crisis that will deepen towards the end of the 19th century. For the latter type, Calinescu uses the analysis of *The System of Doctor Tarr and of Professor Fether* to demonstrate that the fantastic often tends to be abandoned in favour of black humour. The merit of Matei Calinescu is not only that of reiterating Lemnaru's idea of a paradox in Poe's fantastic, but also that of identifying three types of fantastic specific to Poe.

In 1984, Maria-Ana Tupan publishes a well-supported study on the American fantastic prose[4]. More than Matei Calinescu, Maria-Ana Tupan insists on a theoretical approach to the term of 'fantastic', resorting to the traditional definitions and classifications in point (Tzvetan Todorov, Roger Caillois, H.P. Lovecraft). After setting the coordinates of a theoretical background, Tupan deals with the phenomenon of American fantastic and, what is more interesting, she attributes the paradox of introducing reason as a central feature of the fantastic to American literature as a whole.

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[1] ibidem, our translation.
[2] idem, p. XVII, our translation.
[3] see idem, p. XXIV.
[4] *** *Himera. Proză fantastică americană*, vol I, Editura Minerva, Bucureşti, 1984, prefață de Maria-Ana Tupan.

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Thus, what for Lemnaru and Calinescu was the feature of Poe's fantastic is now generalized to the American literature and, more than that, Tupan gives some socio-historical explanations to justify the development of this paradoxical feature. That is, she believes that this reasoning of the fantastic is a consequence of the cruel pragmatism which the inhabitants of the New World proved in their struggle against adverse nature and Indian tribes. As a response to these harsh realities, the American fiction describes the difficulties and dangers of frontier life, of fires and subterranean explosions, of road catastrophes, of death because of frost or snake bite.[1] More than this, Tupan underlines the idea presented in an American article that violence is inherent to the American life, history, politics, literature and life itself. The cause of this violence can be represented from a religious point of view by the fact that the newcomers failed to build a better world on this new continent, and, on the contrary, they implanted a hell-like world where life is a catastrophe, death is violent, the world is haunted by ghosts, genii, monsters, invisible beasts. In this world dominated by materialism and pragmatism, even the miraculous had to be accounted for by means of science or pseudo-science and in this context reason came to be a central modality of creating the fantastic in American literature[2].

The last part of Tupan's study on American fantastic literature deals with the analysis of four representatives: Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James. For Edgar Allan Poe, she selects the story *The Fall of the House of Usher*, but rather than analysing the fantastic of it, Tupan reiterates a meta-literary interpretation of this tale, which seems to be an allegory of the artistic creation in general. Yet, Tupan contributes to the study of Poe's fantastic by integrating it within a whole literary trend and this helps to understand both the genesis and the effects of his fantastic.

As a conclusion, we may argue that the Romanian critics intuited (or at least transmitted some foreign ideas to the Romanian public about) a typical fantastic created on the new continent, of which Edgar Allan Poe's tales are highly representative.

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[1] see idem, p. XVII.

[2] see idem p. XVIII.

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