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POE'S RECEPTION IN ROMANIA. A FEW CONSIDERATIONS

Abstract: Edgar Allan Poe's first known text in Romanian is The Pit and the Pendulum, translated anonymously in 1861, under the title Puţul şi pendula. Following a slow start, versions of the American author's works began to appear extensively in the Romanian press of the Regat (the Romanian Old Kingdom), as well as in publications in Transylvania and in Banat. Great Romanian writers would practice their talent in translating Poe, including Eminescu and Macedonski, but particularly I. L. Caragiale. At the time, the most widespread language in the artistic and political elite in Romania was French (in the Regat, because in Transylvania and in Banat it was the German language). This explains why E. A. Poe became known in Romanian by translating editions belonging to the great French authors. The critic Titu Maiorescu would also use these French sources when he would discuss, in 1867, Poe's concepts on poetry and on art in general. Poe also met with remarkable success in Romania during the communist era, when quality editions of his work were published.

Keywords: Poe, Romania, Maiorescu, Eminescu, Calinescu.

Reference points and directions of evolution

Poe's influence in the Romanian literature would be quite ample and would spread in several directions. The people who would feel attracted to the author's fictional, theoretical and journalistic universe would play an important role. Poe's reception would more likely occur in a post-romantic context, and later in full modernist expansion, i.e. in a space of cultural negotiations and interferences, coinciding with that of a boom in analysis and theorizing, gathered in numerous and important tomes. This orientation towards an academic approach was doubled by the expansion of mass culture, which meant simplifying in order to enable access for a growing public in the process of alphabetization and not reserving it for the elites only. Thus, there would be a boom in popular press, along with the diversifying and specializing of the entire media universe. Academic publications, supported mainly by young university scholars, would make their presence felt. Numerous literary-artistic magazines would circulate, forced, however, to follow the public's taste. The general press would represent, in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, a fierce contender for the academic and specialized cultural publications.

The great writers, as well as numerous historians, linguists, sociologists and philosophers, would continue to publish in general periodicals; the feuilleton or the literary pages dedicated to this would be constantly fueled by important names of the scientific and cultural life. As we have seen, many of them would become involved in editing publications belonging to all literary genres, often activating as journalists, or even as field reporters. They would deal with translating into Romanian and publishing works from the universal literature, with a main focus on the French, German or English writers, but also Russian or Hungarian. These would not be only classical works, but, as the barely cultured public's taste would have a say in it, more accessible works would also be published. No wonder that Jules Verne met with success starting with his first published novels, translations of these quickly appearing worldwide. Due to the fact that, during the same period of time, versions of Poe' works would appear in France, his reception would become easier, though, evidently, the American writer's

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literature possesses both a greater depth and a greater originality. The boom of the astronomical novel and the cultivation of the taste for travel literature, as an internal, terrestrial and cosmic adventure, would represent an essential element for Poe's somewhat unexpected success in France, and from there on worldwide.

In this context we can pinpoint four directions for E. A. Poe's reception in the Romanian, three of which are manifest, and one is implicit:

1) The recognition of Poe's value as a theoretician of art and science, the American writer himself allowing the ambiguity float in differentiating the two areas. It is a direction initiated by Titu Maiorescu and followed by Vladimir Streinu, Dan Petraşincu, Tudor Vianu, Matei Călinescu, Nicolae Manolescu, Nicolae Balotă and others;
2) Echoes of the romantic Poe inclined towards gloomy characters and environments. We find him in these hypostases reflected in Eminescu's poetry and prose, as well as with a pleiad of writers such as Alexandru Macedonski, Dan Botta, Emil Botta, Alexandru Philippide, Ion Barbu, Ion Vinea, Mihu Dragomir, Oscar Lemnaru or even Tudor Arghezi and Mircea Eliade;
3) Poe's influence as an explorer of new worlds, as an adventure of knowledge, in a realistic-satirical register. This is a path opened by I. L. Caragiale, as the translator of prose belonging to the overseas literary man, but also by means of the influence felt in his own creative work. This is the path on which we can pinpoint themes of the „astronomical" novel, extremely popular in Romania, particularly at the beginning of the 20th century;
4) A dimension represented by Poe the model as a journalist and editor. Although no direct correlations can be established, it is clear that there are similarities. Many of the Romanian writers earned their living (and many still do so today!) working as journalists and editors of various newspapers, including those dealing with the general press.

The devil, astronomy and the Romanian adventure

Regarding the „astronomical" literature, also representing the beginning of science-fiction as a freestanding genre, the most significant receptiveness would be felt in France, during the second half of the 19th century. The connection would be made by the great French authors – admirers and translators of Poe. The most important in this undertaking would be Charles Baudelaire, with a book of well-written and well-received translations, as well as other authors. These great French writers evidently also had their own models to follow either in France or in neighboring Germany. E. T. A. Hoffmann, also known by Poe, is the name of reference in this context. However, the scientific novel genre would develop in parallel with the profound, elevated, classical writing. Camille Flammarion and Jules Verne would write using a different register from Charles Baudelaire's, though none of them can deny the ascending Poe! The cultural influence would also be felt at the mouths of the Danube, in the United Principalities, which would later become the Kingdom of Romania. Mihai Eminescu (together with Veronica Micle, according to some sources) would translate *Morella*, a work close to his spirit. I. L. Caragiale would complete several translations, preferring the more amusing ones, including *The Devil in the Belfry*[1].Alexandru Macedonski, probably at Titu Maiorescu's initiative, as a connoisseur of the American writer's works, practiced his

[1] *Dracul în clopotniță*, retranslated, under the same title, by Liviu Cotrău. It must be mentioned that Liviu Cotrău put together two remarkable volumes containing Poe's works. Other books, comprising Poe's prose from the second part of his life, remained in the project stage for several years. However, the material would be printed in two volumes, as more popular than critical editions. In the *Addenda* of the 1990 volume, the editor also included these first translations by Caragiale, Eminescu, Macedonski, by anonymous or less known authors.

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translating, just like the two classics of the Romanian literature, also using the French sources, perhaps even the book translated by Baudelaire, with the short story *Metzegerstein*.

Regarding the frame of reception in Europe, Zoe Dumitrescu would note, in the preface to one of Poe's best editions in Romanian: "Among the great names of the American literature, the first to enter the space of universal literature was Edgar Allan Poe. He is among the first writers of the new world massively received on the old continent, and his appreciation was very similar to that given by Europe to the German E. T. A. Hoffman"[2]. The reception in Romania of the activity of poet and prose writer Edgar Allan Poe is somewhat peculiar. Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga constantly mentions his activity as a journalist. Liviu Cotrău makes explicit references in this sense, provides quotes and carries out frequent incursions into the writer's journalistic field, though he seems to minimize the journalist role, just like his English and American editors. Closer to present, Daniela Linguraru does not give E. A. Poe the journalist any attention or any chance.

These standpoints need detailing, because they highlight the pertinent attempts to outline the dimensions of the writer's activity. In an idealistic reflection on the arguments brought to outline the author's biographical profile, Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga would note: „First a soldier without a calling, dreaming himself a fighter, like Byron, who had fought for the freedom of Greece, then a journalist working for mediocre provincial magazines, forced to write sensational pieces, often for the satisfaction of the doubtful taste of a philistine public, Poe suffered all humiliations, all foulness. Not because he hadn't been offered the opportunity to emerge from the obscure life that he was leading, but because, it seems, he had constantly refused to compromise"[3]. However, it must be mentioned that the term „journalist", used by the author is not that of a general press journalist. The term "periodical writer" would be more appropriate, or even that of "literary periodical writer". The destiny of Poe the man is indeed a common one, but one that the writer would brilliantly overcome. In the Romanian context, he can be recognized in Eminescu's tumultuous life, or even in that of the not all that fictional Ladima, from the book *Procust's bed* ("Patul lui Procust") by Camil Petrescu (though Ladima wasn't a well-known writer).

In the ample Preface dedicated to Poe in the 1990 book, enclosing a great part of his prose, Liviu Cotrău, a rigorous university scholar, would refer to Poe a few times as a journalist. At one point, he would provide arguments meant to enable the functionality of the two-term entity journalist-prose writer: „Just as important a source was the everyday reality, that Poe, as a professional periodical writer, had the opportunity to get to know in its kaleidoscopic diversity. At a given moment, he had become, as one would say, «the chronicler» of New York life: he describes the city , the circus shows (see *Four beasts in one*) and the exhibitions, the marching races and other sports competitions (see the allusion to Captain Barclay, the famous cross champion, in *Loss of breath*), he talks about the political demonstrations and the closing of coffee shops on Sundays, about the new street paving method, he writes with ease and apparent authority about science, education, medicine, religion, jurisprudence, agriculture and horticulture, explorations of the polar regions, but also about occult, hermetical sciences, which were so much in vogue at that time"[4]. Therefore, Poe manifests himself as an integral journalist, easily taking the step towards prose, which belongs to the land of the imaginary. It thus becomes obvious that the American author needed sources of inspiration, for when he could not find them in the pages of those days' periodicals

[2] *Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)*, preface to Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected writings*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1979, p. 5.
[3] Idem, p 10.
[4] *Preface* to E. A. Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1990, p. 9.

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or in his own experience as a periodical writer, he will not shy away from borrowing ideas from the fictional works of other authors...

The science fiction dimension would be less outlined in Liviu Cotrău's case, Poe's Romanian editor, as the analytical process would follow a classical line, the author being validated, with a rich waste of arguments, in the romantic context. It is interesting how, as we shall see, *Hans Pfaall*, Poe's "classical" SF text, would also be analyzed on a mythical horizon, the connections and references provided belonging to the ascending Greek mythology[5]. The journalistic activity of the American author is invoked by his Romanian editor when he lays out his arguments for what we would call today "the management" of his own creation. And if we are not being too pretentious, Poe is outlined as a literary man concerned with the "marketing" of his works, which would also have to ensure an income. In this context, journalism becomes a means of livelihood: „And, although shaped in the Romantic cult for the superiority of the lyrical form, Poe, with his journalist's flair, soon realized that the fame and comfort of writing, that Charles Brockden Brown or Washington Irving enjoyed, could only be acquired in the genre most appreciated by the public"[6].

Daniela Linguraru has recently carried out an analysis of the first Romanian translations of E. A. Poe's works. From the beginning, she established the research horizon: Edgar Allan Poe's reception as a figure of the literary work (in any of the three hypostases: poet, prose writer or critic, or all of these) is both a tricky and a fascinating matter, even after a century and a half since the appearance of his works"[7]. The entire process is then built around these three features, without making any reference to Poe the periodical or science fiction writer. It is true, however, that the author did not intend to develop such a topic, her applied study being subject to another theme.

Poe and Maiorescu

An impulse in the direction of becoming familiar with Poe's literary works and of internalizing the critical opinions expressed by him would be given by Titu Maiorescu. An innovator of Romanian culture in the second half of the 19th century, when the "Junimea" literary society under his patronage would fundamentally contribute to discerning the indisputable artistic values of native origin but which were also wired to the European modern techniques of literary display, Maiorescu would enable the propagation within the Romanian culture, based on new requirements, of great authors of the world, including E. A. Poe, not yet in vogue, as were some French or German authors. That is precisely why, the American author's reception would occur through mediators, firstly by means of translations by Charles Baudelaire, but also by means of the Frenchman's own literary works, in which we find ideas and experiences belonging to the same aesthetic register as Poe. As Monica Pillat would say, at that time, Poe would be known „first as a poet and theoretician of the modern concept of poetry"[8]. It is interesting that when he would find certain contradictions in Maiorescu's concept of the role of poetry, George Călinescu would use Poe to take apart the standpoints considered confusing. Călinescu thought that Maiorescu was wrong to postulate that poetry „must be understood, must speak to everyone's conscience". He believed that this was

[5] It is interesting that Liviu Cotrău, a vigorous representative of the Cluj philological school, wasn't „contaminated" in his analysis by the science fiction developments. His knowledge in this field is also obvious due to his connection to Mircea Opriță or Cornel Robu, also Cluj scholars, the most important exegetes of the SF genre in Romania.

[6] *Preface to* E. A. Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1990, p. 6.

[7] In *The Reception of Poe through French Mediators*, in the Annals of the "Ştefan cel Mare" University, Suceava, The philology series, A. Linguistics, volume XIV, nr. 2, 2008, p. 121.

[8] *Echoes in Romania of Edgar Allan Poe's Work*, in *Revista de istorie şi teorie literară*, volume 29, no. 2, April-July 1980.

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practically impossible, and that it was also a departure from the aesthetic principles previously stated: "However, it is false that a poem's content can ever be understood by everyone. It only needs to be profound, universal. A century can provide at any time a person to penetrate Edgar Poe's visions, thus fulfilling the condition of universality in a straight line; however, the crowd will never rise to the heights of this poetry"[9].

We find a single explicit reference to Poe by Maiorescu, in a note on his innovative study *A critical research on the Romanian poetry of 1867*. The author would be quite….critical about the state of native lyricism at the time, acknowledging a few authors with few valuable pieces. Advancing in text analysis and formulating suggestions for writing and interpretation, Maiorescu would mention at some point: "Compare Edgar Poe, the analysis of his poem *The Raven*, published in French translation in *Histoires grotesques et extraordinaires*"[10]. The passage, as well as the rather ample text, brings interesting pieces of information. Vladimir Streinu, one of the most profound Romanian literary critics, unfairly cast into the shadow, would thoroughly analyze these connections. He would expose the subtleties of the "French path": "Edgar Allan Poe shows the abstract face of his lyrical manner in *The Poetic Principle* and *The Philosophy of Composition*. The fact that Titu Maiorescu hadn't read these printed conferences, in original, is without a doubt true; moreover: *The Poetic Principle*, in 1867, hadn't even been translated by the European cicerone of the American author, by Baudelaire, who, however, making use of his new nuances, in his prefaces to *Extraordinary stories*, as well as in his study on Th. Gautier, had only provided the French version of the second conference to that date, under the title *The Genesis of A Poem*"[11].

Maiorescu's role in Poe's reception in Romania, both as a poet and a prose writer, as well as a theoretician of literature, would be outlined particularly due to the direct influence exercised by him on the most important Romanian writers. It is not coincidental that Mihai Eminescu, I. L. Caragiale and Ioan Slavici (Creangă to a smaller extent) would be concerned with the American author's works. There would also be other influences. And yet, it is advisable to mind a warning formulated by George Călinescu, a topographical landmark in any literary geography: underlining ascendancy has its importance, but an author is first of all judged according to the national particularities and the stratification of value within the cultural perimeter in which he/she evolves. No writer can be directly universal without having been defining for a certain cultural space beforehand: „A Romanian novelist ought to be observed from the entire perspective of our prose without exaggerating the foreign influences, as the basis will be, fatally, due to the geographical element, traditional"[12].

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[11] Vladimir Streinu, *Our classics*, Tineretului Publishing House, Bucharest, 1968, p. 95.
[12] George Călinescu, *op. cit.*, p. 4. In the same place he makes certain observations on poetry, formulating a surprising statement, as he himself admits in its very content: „Taking Conachi, Bolintineanu and Anton Pann as reference points in an article on I. Barbu seems scandalous and insulting. A Romanian poet can only be compared to foreign poets, to Edgar Poe, Mallarmé, Paul Valéry. And yet, the legitimate method is the first one".

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