Postmodern Openings

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Abstract:

The purpose of the present study is to serve as an introduction to a postmodern reading of Edgar Allan Poe's short prose. Adventurous approach, as the author manifested himself as a writer in the first part of the 19th century, when romanticism revived and modern paradigm was founded. Based on the assessments expressed on postmodernism and using the tools proposed by various field researchers, we discover in Poe's work anticipations of the narrative structure method specific for our present times. His concern for the newspaper reader, the insertion of general press topics and articles in his prose, the use of the sensational side of events in his newspaper reports, the ironic approach of real and diegetic facts allow a fresh reading, revaluating this surprising writer. Remarkable are his projections which come close to the SF genre, his confidence in the progress of science and the permanent impairment of this confidence, generated by the fear of world destruction. The conclusion would be that Poe's prose allows certain postmodern anticipative projections to be decoded and the research to be extended beyond the conventional boundaries of modernity.

Keywords: *posmodernism, Poe, mass-media, modernism, scientific, hoax, science fiction*

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1. Contextualization

Innovative spirit by excellence, Edgar Allan Poe would modernize the prose. The purpose would be to clean it and find its specificity. The critique of his work would speak about his defection from the moralistic dimension, existent with some of his predecessors and contemporaries, the most frequently recalled being Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Brockden Brown or Benjamin Disraeli. At the same time, Poe would go beyond modernity, already introducing the sketch (the draft) of a trend (and a lifestyle) to be recognized after more than one century, in the late 19th century. Postmodernism would also be recomposed from the eclecticism of certain approaches, which became profound and distinct as artistic and creative products. The American author would linger in the pure prose area, and during two decades of activity in this field he would incline to reduce explanatory, theoretical introductions and to focus on dynamic elements. At the same time, he would go accross various fields, and some of his prose approaches would be similar to the journalistic style. The mixed interest for science and adventure would carry his literature in the space discovery area. Imagination would self-censor in the contexts of verisimilitude, and he would not use the fantastic tools, but those currently available: ships (later, boats) and balloons. It is a challenge that few writers and journalists had managed to deal with.

Our opinion is that postmodernism represents a majestic transgenic eclecticism. We won't get involved in the large debate, which, for half a century, has been a concern for the scientific world regarding postmodernism and postmodernity. We agree that opinions vary and that we are far from reaching an agreement in terms of construction. The consensus might work when admitting that the subject incited to fervent debates, which contributed to the revival of the research and analysis, despite the divergent results! Ever since 1989, Linda Hutcheon would underline this self-destructive and regenerating power of postmodernism: "In general terms, it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undetermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight,' and to subvert, or 'subvert,' and the mode is therefore a 'knowing' and ironic – or even 'ironic' – one." (Hutcheon, 2002: 1) It would be a duality in reporting and receiving, frequently met with Poe's prose.

However, the vitality of the postmodern paradigm would be proved by the diversity of approaches and by the possibility of crossing over the genres in his studies (trans- and multi-disciplinary). From architecture and gardening to re-editing classic authors and from neurology and emotional intelligence to newgatherism and television in an individual manner, the fields of human deeds are being redefined by means of losing the boundaries and revaluating the elements which make them singular. Architecture, history, geography, journalism, literature, political science and other subjects are being restructured into the new type of speech. The Canadian female author defines this withdrawal: "It is one which juxtaposes and gives equal value to the self-reflexive and the historically grounded: to that which is outward-directed and belongs to 'real life' (such as history). The tension between these apparent opposites finally defines paradoxically worldly texts of ultimately compromised politics." (Hutcheon, 2002: 2)

Everything is being defined and redefined within the social context. Regardless of the concerns, there is a lack of determination in actions, sometimes confusedly perceived, some other times accurately perceived, in a diversity of connections and delimitations specific for the human being. However, there are not missing the beliefs and ideologies, the politics and policies, which, according to Victor Burgin, structure the social aspect, influencing the literature, mass-media and visual arts, from the popular culture forms (mass culture) to elite art (Burgin, 1986: 55). Crossing through genres, inserting scientific elements in his writings, imagining alternative societies or fantastic worlds, approaching all of these with irony and satire, Poe would go beyond the modern base (hardly installed), setting out a few postmodern structuring elements. His relationship with ideologies and politics would be delicate, but, in his texts, we would frequently find references (mostly sarcastic) to people and facts from his close reality. If not through journalistic texts, he would express them in his tales, disguising the immediate recognition through literary devices.

2. Elitism and mass culture

The structure of Poe's literary speech by means of valuating different influences is thus bearing an increase, initially unidentified, of rupture from the barely accomplished modern accuracy. Linda Hutcheon would believe, in a credible manner, that the underground resetting, still

undetected, would be performed under the pressure of parody and metafiction, constitutive elements of the American writer's prose. The layering is important as a general theoretical mark: "On the one hand, the postmodern obviously was made possible by the self-preferentiality, irony, ambiguity, and parody that characterize much of the art of modernism, as well as by its explorations of language and its challenges of the classic realist system of representation; on the other hand, postmodern fiction has come to contest the modernist ideology of artistic autonomy, individual expression, and the deliberate separation of art from mass culture and everyday life." (Hutcheon, 2002: 14-15) There are easily detectable aspects with Poe, through his concern for the public and the topics from mass-media or written in a journalistic style.

Deeply distinctive authors, like E. A. Poe, urge the reargumentation of the recognized analysis methods. We can accept his evident contribution to the consolidation of modernism, with all his ambitions of stability, fluency, noncontradiction, promotion of well-defined values, from the social and political field to the aesthetic's autonomy. However, at the same time, we are to notice in some works, the first signs of adopting a policy of shifting off the barely stabilized values, of crossing across styles to the extent of making them indistinct, of searching an integrating speech, although marked by contradictions, imposing the reshaping of analysis criteria, and, in some cases, of those able to provide a key to understanding. Under such conditions, modern and postmodern do no longer mean successive cultural or ideological periods, but overlapping ones, sometimes with elements that collide, and sometimes mutually assorting and developing one from the other. Poe holds forth this pattern of uprootal from the indistinct and of genre impress, but also their reshaping through amalgamation, continuously redistributing initial meanings. This double game of meanings would constantly be found in his work.

It's strange this cleavage which occured in the American literature of English language in the early 19th century, when, beside the moral-phylosophical approaches, the writings overflowing with fantasy, grotesque, horror and sensational, out of which the travel adventure novel and the astronomical novel couldn't miss, the classical literary canon (although it recently used to be... romantic!) would exclude the science fiction genre, although it initially included it! We deeply find it in Edgar Allan Poe's work, just like we find the other already mentioned

literary features. The police, detective novel (considering that the police officer is not always an investigator, perhaps the bluecoats are not all of them that able and competent, meanwhile the detective shouldn't be considered as a mere security guard), is certainly rather successful with the American writer.

Poe also proves to be complex through his ability to create new dimensions of the imaginary. Preserving the dreadful elements, we can go beyond the nightmare within a system of appreciation redeeming the dream frames which can intuitively be pervaded. Thus, "Poe is a dreamer (in the largest sense of the word) and any analytical study on his work should take into consideration his activity as a rationalist, scientist, joker, humorist and literary and social reviewer" (Buranelli, 1966: 18). The hoax (the joke, the feigning) represents a benchmark in the American writer's works. It is mainly present in the „astronomical" writings, currently classified within the SF genre. The texts are the result of imagination, but we don't necessarily have to believe that everything is mystification. The author himself takes care to arrange things, playing the trick until the end, but also giving us hints on how we should understand the facts. Out of *Hans Pfaall*, a short story considered by most of the researchers as a mystification, we find that the hoax is not a... hoax: "Some of the over-wise even made themselves ridiculous by decrying the whole business; as nothing better than a hoax. But hoax, with these sort of people, is, I believe, a general term for all matters above their comprehension. For my part, I cannot conceive upon what data they have founded such an accusation" (Poe, 2004: 530).

3. Ironical elements

Modernism tends to consider the hoax, the irony and the satire less serious features of the artistic style. Poe would never refuse playing and he would have several works entirely written in this style. He would thus set out an element of dichotomy specific for his activity in fiction: consolidating and, at the same time, disrupting modernism, giving shape to early postmodernism. The implications of his attitude would be recognized in the classical analysis of postmodernism, although, as I already set out, his name wouldn't be always underlined.

Following Umberto Eco, Linda Hutcheon would notice: „Many of the foes of postmodernism see irony as fundamentally antiserious, but this is a mistake and misconstrue the critical power of double-voicing. As

Umberto Eco has said, about both his own historiographic metafiction and his semiotic theorizing, the critical 'the game of irony' is intricately involved seriousness of purpose and theme. In fact irony may be the only way we *can* be serious today" (Hutcheon: 1988: 39). This also used to be Poe's way of deeply relating to the realities of his world.

In his activity, Poe would permanently and undifferentiatedly make appeal to two types of sources. The literary ones, which means the product of imagination. product of imagination. The others are factual events, from the immediate reality. Everything can become subject for writing, provided it is properly enclosed in the diegetic universe. Idea spotting would be performed according to the aesthetic potential. In this context, Vincent Buranelli would notice: „Poe is an objective artist, using all the sources: the Romantic tradition, the work of other writers, the crime and adventure reportages, events that he discovered, the products of his imagination, of his contracted nerves" (Buranelli, 1966: 84). At this point, it is important to make a specification regarding the way in which influences were reflected on Poe's literary activity chart. His editorial geography, the sequence of comments and notes to different re-editions would always be completed by references to the possible and real sources of his writings. The Mabbott Editions (certainly the most comprehensive) are representative for the endeavour put in order to identify even the minor overlappings. There are some texts, like the *King Pest*, for example, where several previous works on the same subject are being identified. This aspect can become disorienting, since it certainly diminishes some of the writer's great originality. Apparently, it is different when there are suspicions of plagiarism. There are cases when the debate is probably never ending. Our approach focusses on highlighting influences, when they are clearly related to the literary work, yet rather opting for its inner analysis, in its conjectures with less approached fields, like journalism and science fiction.

4. Journalistic diversity

There would be a permanent pressure on the talented, but underpaid writers, to join editorial offices (of general or literary press) in order to make their living, working hard, many hours a day. In such circumstances, they would hardly find the time to write a genuine, „clean", piece of work. The journalistic routine would crush in the egg many important works, although we don't have the means to prove this

statement. Often, it is a painful division, only once in a while the authors having the opportunity for the work in journalism to alow them to write artistic works. Poe would be that lucky, because when he became a publisher he was a prolific enough literary author. However, he would still be underpaid. The system defines the era, being recognized by the researchers: „Profesional writers, bereft of time, generally lacking the education of their amateur counterparts, and unable to finance the publication of books independently, were forced to opt for literature specific to the magazines: social commentary, reviews, short fiction l literature that popular estimate of the day was meant to be consumed immediately and forgotten promptly"(Tomc, 2002: 27). This would represent a way to associate the literary activity to the one of the general press, thus becoming a necessity. However, we shouldn't omit that, in other cases, the writers would willingly opt to be journalists, sometimes with apprehension...

There are confluences where the classical doublets real-imaginary and natural-supernatural lose their explanatory capacity. The easy recipes on how to make literature are rejected by Poe by going beyond the starting points and patterns. The disjunction would be identified by a researcher of his work: His youtful sonnet *To science* voices the stock objection of the romanticists: That the a scientific atitude reduce everythingg to the moust prosaic reality. Yet, in his prose, it proves to be a source of vitually poetic inspiration. It is a not simple magical, as it may seem with Hawthorne's elixirs – or, for that mater, the conjurations of Hoffmann and Balzac" (Levin, 1958: 137). Poe would go beyond such rather easy solutions, placed both in the extension of folkloric literature and the popular one, hereby with the meaning given by the expression „popular culture", which is mass culture, closer to subculture in the Romanian context... His originality would also stand on other delimitations, and on a swing of the swelling perceptions. The writer does not believe in simple solutions and does not promote them either. He prefers difficult approaches: „Rather, by believing in all the claims of all the sciences and pseudo-sciences, by expecting almost anything from nature, Poe can almost dispense with supernatural. Like Brockden B, he is a rationalist, seeking to cast enlightenment on dark places. But the forces of the irational have their revenge in jeopardizing the status of reason itself" (Levin, 1958: 137).

The references to publications, in general, and to the work of publishers and journalists would be quite frequent in A. E. Poe's literature. Managing this area of personal relations with the press world would take him time and skills. Sometimes, disputes would arise, especially emphasized in the author's correspondence. The letters (to publishers or close acquaintances) would underline a pronounced involvement. In his writings, such references would be more discrete, in the guise of irony and even burlesque. It's no secret that Poe dedicated entire works to journalism, and made references in the others. For our discussion it's important to mention the story called *X-ing a paragrab*. The work proves to be important for several reasons. As a re-enactment of an era and of a profession, it gives us details on a 12 years old type setter life, forced to compose letter by letter quite complicated texts for the newspapers of that time. In this way appears the misterious „X", the unknown from mathematics, and the letter that printers would use in order to substitute another character missing from the printing shops' colophons. The overnight theft of all the „O" vowels from the type setter's box would determine him to replace them by „X", thus resulting a misterious text, able to arise many discontent readers' indignation. The publisher of the newspaper, author of the inculpative article would have to leave the town and lose his trace. It was, actually, a dispute between two publications, in a city where only one existed until then. Poe is laborious in his satire of the newcomer: „It was solely, therefore, on account of having been misinformed, that Mr. Bullet-head found himself in Alex-suppose we call it Nopolis, 'for short'—but, as he did find himself there, he determined to keep up his character for obst—for firmness, and remain. So remain he did; and he did more; he unpacked his press, type, etc., etc., rented an office exactly opposite to that of the 'Gazette,' and, on the third morning after his arrival, issued the first number of 'The Alexan'—that is to say, of 'The Nopolis Tea-Pot'—as nearly as I can recollect, this was the name of the new paper" (Poe, 2004: 383). The text is rich in play upon words, which make the feast of the initiated reader and put through a big test the skills of his translators all over the world.

Actually, it is a play upon words with a much deeper meaning. With it, Poe suggests to reconsider the way in which we look upon the language. It wouldn't be critically evaluated, and no redefinition of the communication wouldn't be generally proposed, like it would be, after

one century and a half, by Ramsey Eric Ramse, among others. Ramsey claims to be a post-metaphysicist and not a postmodernist, afraid of the contradictory diversity proposed by the word postmodernism, yet operating with delimitations exactly in its theoretical area (Ramsey, 2006: 685). The theory that the author developed is important, because it intercepts the large gateways proposed by the Enlightenment. It would not only be the ground for modernism and modernity, with its dominant metanarrations (metanarrations according to Lyotard), but also for other currents, which had lingerred in a receding (underground) state for a long period of time or occasionally erupting in the work of a certain writer or thinker, always assessed as obscure or difficult to classify. Ramsey would speak about the fact that postmodern ideologists were „wrongly called", also admitting the fact that the Enlightenment had several ways of displaying itself (Ramsey, 2006: 684), which allows us to operate the previously mentioned gateway.

5. Scientific and imaginary categories

With Poe, we can easily notice the fact that the conventionally called „scientific" texts are often accompanied by journalistic references, which never happens to the others. The grave stories, of the (mentally) crushed characters, are reserved in relation with such intra- and metatextual references, especially in an ironical register. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is synonymous with the masterpiece. It is complete, round, self-sufficient. On the contrary, *Hans Pfaall* also coagulates from the ambiguous footnotes, through which the author enters a subtle dispute with positions and persons outside the storyline, this one rather being a noveleta. Actually, the author's first note to *Hans Pfaall*, in which Poe explains the fact that it is a work with an astronomic subject (the subject being, however, placed in a humoristic context), „the astronomic" genre being rather popular at that time, but which would subsequently and formidably take off, maybe due to the American writer's influence.

The adventurer astronomic, as a sub-field of the science fiction genre, is one of the directions that Poe manifested himself in. The texts which can be classified here, along the already mentioned *The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Phaall*, are *The Balloon Hoax* and *Mellonta Tauta*. He also develops here tools (technologies) like the balloon, the the galvanic pile (battery), the telegraph and others. Other machineries also appear in other works, a special attention being paid to

them. We should mention *Maelzel's Chess Player*, *The Swiss Bel-Ringers* or *Von Kempelen and his Discovery*. They are prose writings in which the central element is this exact human-machine confusion. We can also include in this sub-field the texts which make use of a funeral technology, to call it that way, present in *A Premature Burial* and less in *Loss of Breath*. However, an important area of Poe's SF is built without technical interventions or with the most common ones. In *Ms. Found in a Bottle* and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* the boats bear the common dates of that time (of course, except for *The Flying Dutchman*, a motif and resort of the fantastic and not SF literature). Their role in the final events of the story is irrelevant. This category of texts preserves the underlayer of adventure and of the discovery of other worlds or at least new territories, but they have a strong speculative component. The level of speculation is high in the mesmeric sub-field, so as to identify it through a term which characterizes some of Poe's SF tales. *The facts in the Case M. Valdemar* or *Mesmeric revelation* can be listed here. They are prose writings where the technical element would almost permanently disappear. Innovating would prove to be the story *The Man that Was Used Up*. The character, General John A. B. C. Smith, is recomposed out of pieces, thus illustrating the theme of the automatic machine, but also of the efficent prosthesis, where simulations cannot be identified anylonger and give a human appearance which cannot be publicly disclosed as altered. Our concern here is the American writer's suggestion of a strong integration of the enclosed artificial components. A highly normal operation is being provided, relieving a technology of high performance. The suggestions are certainly made in two directions: 1. The first would be the development of androids and robots, all of them provided with a human face; 2. The accomplishment of some Robocop-type combinations, between the intelligent and emotional human factorand its mechanical and electronic prosthesis. In the second case, the prothesis inferred by Poe wouldn't stop at rendering certain lost elements, but it would reach the enhancement (sometimes significant) of human performance by adding appropriate devices. There are touches which had been rediscovered in the approaches of postmodern theory: „The figure of the cyborg, originally a psyhical almagam of human and machine, simultaneously emerged as a tantalizing metaphor that signaled potential new relationships between body and mind and the posibility of endlessly transformable identities" (Heise, 2008: 140).

The almost pure speculative component, where the technical (tehnological) element is permanently missing, is present in other tales which can be classified as SF. It is a criteria which brings together *William Wilson*, *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion*, *The Man of the Crowd*, *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains* or *Some Words with a Mummy*. The speculative fiction is another name for science fiction, also designating the component dealing with this non-mechanized area of the genre, somehow „philosophical" and „psychological", to use two attributes of circumstantiation.

Methodologically re-arranging the previously identified sub-categories, in the technological SF and the speculative SF, we notice that Poe covered the entire range . In agreement with the ideas expressed by Harold Beaver, John Tresch synthetizes this division, also revealing the consequences in the further development of the genre: „As for his status as 'pioneer' of the genre, at the very least we can be sure that with the rigorous attention to detail aiming al logically consistent verisimilitude that Poe aplied in *Phaall*, *The Balloon Hoax*, and other tales, Poe prepared the way for the speculative fictions of the century to follow" (Tresch, 2002: 116).

6. The end of the world theme

The pressman Poe would prove to be a complex one. He would not only perform in the literary area, but he would also practice the scientific journalism, close to this genre as we know it today. It would be a fresh one, the journalist being interested in many fields of activity, but especially in discoveries. The geographic ones, but also discoveries from medicine, agriculture and astronomy, the last field being of his permanent concern. The ascent, the mechanisms and means for gravity conquering, going beyond the already known speed limits, the inner investigation of the oceans and earth would be frequent topics. The miracle of science in journalism and the scientific miraculous in literature would be the two twin fields. Certainly, without the author's mixing up the specific tools. He would militate for a clear dissociation between the literary component, where imagination becomes unstoppable, and the informative side, where fantasy takes the proportions of farce, lie and misinformation. This is the underlayer of his subtle polemic with Richard Adams Locke, after the issue of *Hans Pfaall*.

However, it is difficult sometimes to say whether the texts written by Poe belong to a certain field or to another. A classical situation is the one from *A prediction*, text which remained among the author's manuscripts and was posthumously published. By means of an intervention of the editors, it was classified in the writer's SF work area. Liviu Cotrău specifies, in a note: This short prose, believes T. O. Mabbott, deserves its place next to Poe's tales and sketches, due to its imaginativa character and its relation to *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion"* (Poe, 2005: 407). Actually, the quoted story is even mentioned by the author himself in the end of the sketch *The Prophecy*. This might be the reason for its classification among literary works. However, the text looks like one of the many articles that the author wrote on similar topics. Poe himself considers it as such: „Ever since I wrote this article, a closer look to its content made me slightly change my opinion on the origin of satellites" (Poe, 2005: 311). It may also certainly be a clever move of Poe to disguise the SF content of the sketch by presenting it in the journalistic manner. The SF topic is explicite, the type of speech yet being a vulgarizing one. The author (journalist or writer?) invokes astronomers (Laplace and Kepler), and also some cosmic discoveries. He formulates an eschatological hypothesis, anchored in the Apocalypse, but also in one of his prose writings, as I've seen it. Due to the intensification of sun activity, but through the global heating, the end of the world is the closest topic to science fiction, an end which is anticipated in this sketch-article, as catastrophic forecasts also represent a topic of great interest for the press of all times. This phenomenon can also be indetified in the end of *The Prophecy*. The fear of the nuclear darkness would be an intensely exploited postmodern theme. Although no solution was yet found for it, the debate continues, since the solution suggested by Poe (of a post-Apocalyptic spiritualized existence) is easy to imagine and impossible to accomplish, for the time being. Ursula K. Heise would make the present-day decoding: In the aftermath of World War II, however, this admiration of the power of psyhics became more and more mixed with fear and revulsion: not only had the detonation of two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki alerted the world to a whole new technological destruction" (Heise, 2008: 142). With Poe, disasters really happen...

7. An open conclusion

In conclusion, Edgar Allan Poe would succeed in identifying the major themes of the contemporary literature and media communication evolution. He would significantly contribute to the implementation of the dominant metanarrations, imposed by the Romantic current. His prose would further adjust itself and take off, setting the grounds for what we would subsequently call modernism, in attachment for order and stability. The third side of Poe's written literature would prove to be important. An underground trend would cross through his prose writing, coagulating science fiction elements and making use of mass communication structures, specific for the mass-media. Hardly felt or noticed as a curiosity, this feature of his prose can be nowadays construed and, moreover, recognized and valued in a postmodern context.

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