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POE AND ALLEGORY

Tadao Katayama

THE perfect critic as envisaged by Poe was one who had "courage to blame boldly, magnanimity to eschew envy, genius to appreciate, learning to compare, an eye for beauty, an ear for music, and a heart for feeling." Of all the qualifications enumerated above, priority was no doubt given to the first, for in another place he declares that the critic's "legitimate task is in pointing out and analyzing defects and showing how the work might have been improved, to aid the general cause of Letters, without undue heed of the individual literary men." The courage he showed in blaming boldly as well as the caustic pen he wielded in pointing out and analyzing defects is evident from Lowell's oft-quoted comment that Poe "seems sometimes to mistake his phial of prussic-acid for his inkstand." Just as noticeable as the above-mentioned trait of his as a literary critic was the manner he employed in showing how a work might have been improved, which was to put it in the Procrustean bed of his preconceived criteria which were more often dogmatic than otherwise. In other words, his criticism was often a disguised justification of his own writings through analysis and judgement of his fellow writers.

In his criticism of Hawthorne as a writer of tales, Poe showed he had real genius to appreciate, but at the same time he blamed boldly to support his own theory of allegory.

While recognizing a writer of the first magnitude in Hawthorne, Poe pointed out Hawthorne's undue use of allegory as something which deprived him of all chances of popular appreciation. His dogmatic contention was that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was "a ludicrously over-rated book, owing its seeming popularity to one or two of

those accidents in critical literature." Poe's evaluation of this classic in allegory which forms a marked contrast with Hawthorne's admiration of the same book is symbolical of their respective attitude toward allegory and the technique they used to express their thoughts through the medium of "allegory."

With regard to allegory as such, Poe's was a negative attitude as is clear from his remark that "in defence of allegory there is scarcely one respectable word to be said." One of the reasons given in justification of his own stand was that allegory "must always interfere with that unity of effect which, to the artist, is worth all the allegory in the world." Another and a more important reason, so far as prose tales were concerned, was that it impaired verisimilitude, which, in Poe's view, was the most important point in fiction. In the domain of poetry, his objection to the use of allegory mainly stemmed from his belief that the excess of the under-current of meaning, which constitutes allegory together with the upper-current, rendered poem into prose. This seems to have come from his declared aversion to any didactic moral expressed in the under-current. Thus it is easy to understand the poor opinion which Poe had of allegory.

It is to be noted, however, that there existed in Poe the counter-balancing force for allegory, or rather allegory as he considered it should be, which was but a natural consequence of his view of literature and the motive behind his writings.

According to Poe the idiosyncrasy of books was thought in contradistinction from deed, hence the realistic works based on "that evil genius of mere matter of fact" occupied the lowest position in the hierarchy of literature, the highest being taken up by the true poem, which aimed at the rhythmical creation of beauty. In between came that species of prose composition in which the artist "having conceived... a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this pre-conceived effect." But in the otherwise flawless work of prose or verse

“there is always a certain hardness or nakedness which repels the artistical eye” unless it has, among other things, some under-current of meaning which gives a work of art “richness.” This open approval of allegory was only natural in view of the majority of his writings which depicted not external appearances but conflict in the inner man. Thus allegory was the inevitable outcome when Poe, the artist, gave literary expression to the conflicting forces which were going on in Poe, the man. His counterchange that “terror is not of Germany, but of the soul” against the charge that his writings contained in the *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* were imitations implies an admission of the allegorical nature of his stories.

The logic of his thinking led to that kind of allegory which should impair neither the unity of effect nor verisimilitude, and in addition, free from a moral in the traditional sense of the word. The modified forms of allegory which resulted from this line of thinking will be discussed later.

The first requirement of a writer in securing the unity of effect was not Fancy but Imagination using the words in the sense as defined by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*. Since Fancy “has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites” the inevitable consequence is that it will produce no fusion, and the resultant combination will strike one as “a difficulty happily overcome.” This is what happens in allegory, in which appeals are made to our sense of adaptation of the real with the unreal, “having never more of intellectual connection than has something with nothing.” On the other hand, Imagination selects from old forms which present themselves to it “such forms as are harmonious.” In contrast with Fancy, Imagination has esemplastic function, which Poe compared to what happens in chemistry where the admixture of two elements will result in something that shall have nothing of the quality of one of them — or even nothing of the qualities of either. In spite of the high status which Poe gave to Imagination it is highly doubtful

whether Baudelaire did justice to Poe when he wrote that to Poe "L'imagination est une faculté quasi divine qui perçoit tout d'abord, en dehors des méthodes philosophiques, les rapports intimes et les analogies." It is true that Poe admitted the existence of "some facts in the physical world which have a really wonderful analogy with others in the world of thought," but Poe, unlike the French poet-critic who was a true-born Swedenborgian, did not share the latter's conviction in "vertical" correspondences that nature was a storehouse of images and that the outer and inner worlds were bound together by mysterious correspondences. What Poe sought in Imagination was the function of combining the most harmonious, natural images which would be conducive to the unity of effect. The fact was that in writing Poe started from thought, and he drew on Imagination for some apposite physical element, using intellect in the selection of images, and not intuition as Baudelaire intimated.

Another question which was of equal importance and which was closely relevant to the unity of effect was that of judiciously subduing the under-current of meaning. This came from Poe's belief that as in poetry the excess of the suggested meaning turns poem into prose, so in prose the same defect deprives verisimilitude of a story. One of the favorite means he employed to subdue the obtrusion of the under-current is explained in the *Philosophy of Composition* which is popularly known as *How I Wrote the Raven*. According to Poe it is not until the last stanza but one that the reader is made aware of the fact that the Raven is emblematical by the metaphorical expression "Take thy beak from out my heart."*

* The last two stanzas of the *Raven* are as follows:

"Be that word our sign of parting, bird or friend!"

I shrieked upstarting —

"Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!

Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!

Leave my loneliness unbroken! — quit the bust above my door!

Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!"

And it is in the very last line of the last stanza that the intention is made plain of making the bird emblematical of "*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*." Notwithstanding this assertion of Poe, it is to be noted that no definite equation is made as is usually the case with allegory proper. All this contributes to subduing the under-current of meaning. Poe's further comment that "They" (=the words, 'from out my heart') with the answer "Nevermore" dispose the mind to seek a moral in all that has been previously narrated is noteworthy in that the word "moral" is devoid of didactic connotation found in the ordinary allegory.

It is a known fact in the annals of literature that a writer is not always true in practice to his theory if he happens to have one. And Poe was no exception so far as his theory of allegory was concerned. Camille Mauclair says that "Tout en lui (=Poe) est allegorie psychologique." This is an exaggeration to say the least. Moreover closer inspection will show that Poe's "allegorical" writings can be classified into three great divisions, two of which deviate from the accepted idea of allegory. This was but natural in view of his modified view of allegory.

First comes the subdivision which differs little from the common form of allegory. This is the kind in which one-to-one relationship is more or less rigidly observed. *The Conqueror Worm* is a case in point. The last two lines of the final stanza clearly show the identity of the Worm.* Another work which belongs to the same category is *The Haunted Palace*. In this poem, a single line "In the Monarch

Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting,
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door,
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light 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!

* That the play is Tragedy "Man"/And its hero the Conqueror Worm.

Thought's domain" in the first stanza gives clue to the rest of the metaphors in the poem, which is an allegorical description of a mind in the process of mental alienation.

William Wilson, the story of a doppelgänger, could be given as an example of the connecting link with the second group. In this story Wilson's double, which stands for the conscience, shows his identity by his voice never rising above "a very low whisper," which is to be equated with the still small voice. Though the identity of the two Wilsons is revealed by slow degrees, it is not so well subdued as in those tales and poems which properly belong to the second group.

If a typical example of the second group in the domain of poetry is the *Raven*, the *Black Cat* may well claim its place as its counterpart in the field of prose. The generally accepted view is that the *Black Cat* is symbolical of the guilty conscience, which fits in well with its description as "the hideous beast whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman."* But this equation would fail when applied to the expression that the beast's "craft had seduced me into murder." It would seem to refer to some ineradicable evil innate in man, represented in this tale by the spirit of perverseness, which is "a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgement, to violate that which is *Law*, merely because we understand it to be such." This is one of the cases where one material image stands for more than one immaterial relation. Poe pointed out the similar use in R. H. Horne's *Orion*, where the hero is described as "the hunter of shadows, he himself a shade." Poe's comment is that this is made "symbolical, or suggestive... of speculative character of Orion, and occasionally of his pursuit of visionary happiness."

* The last sentence but out of the *Black Cat* runs as follows.

Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman.

This multiplicity of meaning is a hall-mark of what I call the third group in which the deliberate absence of definite equation could give rise to several different interpretations.

One of the best examples of this group is afforded by *Eldorado*. Many scholars maintain that the poem is about the Gold Rush, while others find in the same poem "the search for the golden land as the quest of human happiness." Another interpretation would be that *Eldorado* stands for the next world where human soul will enjoy an everlasting life freed from all the worries and cares of the temporal life. The last line intimates that the secret of a future life is not known until one has crossed the boundary of life and death.*

If Symbolism is to be defined as "an attempt by carefully studied means — a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors — to communicate a unique personal feelings," Poe is a symbolist in the third group represented by *Eldorado* and *Ulalume*. The writings in the third group are characterized by the fact that they were written in the last years of his career (*Ulalume*, and *Eldorado*, first published respectively in 1847 and 1849) and that they are lacking in "symbolic" prose tales. Poe died before he produced any really symbolic prose writings as he would have done if he had lived longer. Be that as it may, since the writings in the three groups are roughly in the chronological order, it would not be rash to assert that Poe, the allegorist, consciously turned into Poe, the symbolist, as a precursor of French symbolists.

* Poe expressed the similar thought several times, one of the examples being the concluding passages of the *Ms. Found in a Bottle*.