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Agrata Swami
Research Scholar
RDVV, Jabalpur, India

The concepts of truth and beauty in the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe

Agrata Swami

Abstract

Edgar All Poe, a great admirer of Kant, shows Kantian influence in his writings particularly in his poetry. Both Passion and Truth demand a precision and a homeliness which, according to Poe are absolutely antagonistic to Beauty. On the other hand, Truth and Beauty go together. Thus the paper aims at correlating poetry with beauty and music which is explored by Poe when he talks of refrain in the construction of The Raven.

Keywords: Passion, antagonist, indefinite, degrading

1. Introduction

Poe better known for his poetry, a number of his poetic works have gained popularity in the popular consciousness. In particular The Raven has seen frequent adaptation on film and on television, and it remains a popular piece for dramatic recital. Among Poe's other works, several of his later poems such as Annabel lee, Lenore and the Bells have been widely read and remembered for their lyrical sound and their effective presentation of unified theme and emotional effect.

Poe has been greatly influenced by Kant in the formulation of his aesthetic theory of poetry. There is the same Kantian contempt for beautiful sound, colours and odours unless they are associated with the Indefinite. He also shares the same Kantian love and exuberance for the 'supernal', sublime and the 'ethereal'. Poe defines Beauty to be; "The pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevation of the soul of intellect, or of heart". It is an "effect" –not a "quality", the "consequence of contemplating the beautiful." Further, "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem." Passion belongs to the heart and is degrading. Truth belongs to the intellect. Both Passion and Truth are "far more readily attainable in prose" than in poetry. According to Poe, "Truth, in fact, demands a precision and Passion a homeliness.... which are absolutely antagonistic to.... Beauty." In the Letter to B, he says: "A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having for immediate object, pleasure, not truth; to romance, by having for its object an indefinite instead of a definite pleasure, being a poem only so far as this object is attained; romance presenting perceptible images with definite poetry with indefinite sensations, to which end music is an essential, since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception. Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music without the idea is simply music; the idea without the music is prose from its very definitiveness". It is easy to see some connection between this view and the theory of Philosophy of Composition.

The theory, as it stands, is too narrow in its scope and, with all its divisions and subdivisions, very vague. One feels why poetry cannot be that which elevates and excites the heart. The heart quite frequently uplifts and excites the soul-the heart in love, for example, either with a human being or with God. Is passion then degrading? Similarly, by banishing Truth from poetry he banishes all satiric and didactic poetry from ancient to modern times, for Truth in some form or other has been expressed by every poet of every age. Moreover, Truth and Beauty go together. Of course for Keats the attainment of one meant the attainment of the other. Poe does not seem to grasp the traditional relation between Truth and Beauty to be that of matter and manner. He does not see that Beauty is a quality of style instead of its subject-matter.

Correspondence
Agrata Swami
Research Scholar
RDVV, Jabalpur, India

Poe attempts to correlate poetry with beauty and music when he talks of refrain in the construction of *The Raven*. In *The Poetic Principle*, he defines Poetry as “The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty” But what kind of music does one find in the *Raven*? Music is attained in poetry not merely through refrain, jingling rhymes, alliteration and assonance, but through purity of sound, through subtleties of rhythm and evocation of tone, and through the genuine force of the poetic mood. These are lacking in *The Raven*. The monotonous trochees get on one’s nerve. One gets tired of the superfluous and forced repetitions and refrains. “Analyse *The Raven*,” wrote Yeats, “and you find that its subject is commonplace and its execution a rhythmical trick. “Its rhythm never lives for a moment, never once moves with an emotional life. The whole thing seems to me to be insincere and vulgar.”

With regard to the ‘tone’ Poe remarks, “Melancholy is.....the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.” It is true that the most perfect beauty has often the note of sadness. But it is not true that this is always the case. Who is to decide, for example, between the *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on Immortality*? Poe’s theory, however, and its elaborate working out, involve the inference that *The Raven* is a finer poem than either, since Wordsworth’s *Ode* is actually joyous, sadder than anything in Keats. Further, sadness stimulated is sadness artificial and morbid. Consequently, *The Raven* does not seem to be moving poem. To be moving, melancholy must be temperamental. Brownell aptly comments: “*The Raven* is in conception and execution exceptionally cold-blooded poetry.”

One cannot agree with Poe that a poem must be completely mechanical as *The Raven*, and must be of a subject-matter “universally appreciable”. A poet often writes to convey a personal and private experience in spontaneity of mood. In a number of cases the experience or the mood is so complex and involved in its conception that to expect the poet to explain his poem logically step by step is to expect the impossible. Poe propounds the theory of commercial production of poetry in *The Philosophy of Composition*. To cite him: “A poem..... should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.” The creative artist must fashion the taste of the public, not vice versa. When a writer like Poe ‘thinks’ of a subject with the intention that it may be ‘universally appreciable’, he is letting down the whole race of poets.

Poe’s views on originality in the same essay are worth mentioning: “Originality.... is by no means a meter..... of impulse or intuition..... it must be elaborately sought, and..... demands in its attainment less of invention than negality in versification, and the unaccountable way in which it has been neglected. He states that he lays no claim to originality as regards the metre or the rhythm of *The Raven*, but only as regards the stanza and extension of the application of the principle of rhyme and alliteration: “nothing even remotely approaching this combination has ever been attempted.” The triviality of his conception of originality is quite obvious, “A poet must be distinct and different species in nature,” as Hopkins asserted. Poe tends to rely upon the mechanically startling preference to the inimitable. This fact is further verified by his extraordinary theories of meter devised in *The Rationale of Verse*.

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