THE ENIGMA OF POE ACCORDING TO T. S. ELIOT

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Abstract: Poe is now recognized as a literary genius, and original in various fields. But his reputation as a writer was for many years ignored both in the United States of America and in Great Britain. T. S. Eliot, in his essays, did much to call attention to the importance and to the genius of Poe and showed that the French writers in the later part of the nineteenth century perceived his genius and his importance. Eliot helped to bring the great writer to his deserved place in the history of literature in the English language. His famous essay “From Poe to Valéry” is a masterpiece of critical appreciation and summarizes the view of Eliot on the importance of Poe.

Keywords: Poe · Eliot · revaluation

Resumo: Poe hoje é reconhecido como um gênio literário, e original em vários campos. Mas esta reputação como escritor foi por muitos anos ignorada tanto nos EUA quanto na Grã Bretanha. T. S. Eliot, em seus ensaios, esforçou-se por chamar atenção para a importância e o gênio de Poe e mostrou que os escritores franceses na última parte do século dezenove perceberam sua genialidade e sua importância. Eliot ajudou a trazer o grande escritor ao seu merecido lugar na história da Literatura na Língua Inglesa. Seu famoso ensaio “From Poe to Valéry” é uma obra prima da apreciação crítica e resume a visão de Eliot sobre a importância de Poe.

Palavras-chave: Poe · Eliot · reavaliação

Two hundred years after the birth of this troubled genius, Poe has finally been recognized as a great writer, a creative genius opening up the fields in tradition literary with his detective and horror stories and now recognized for his contribution to Literature in the English language and in world literature. But this recognition has not always been given. But Eliot must have been one of the first to see this greatness.

In the September part of 1920, T. S. Eliot’s mother decided to move from St Louis, where Eliot was born, up to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her husband had died in 1919. She packed up things and in her letters, we always find her writing as an affectionate mother and Thomas, in his answers, was always something of the child. It is not always so marked as when he wrote her, after the death of his father in 1919: “I do long for you. I wanted you more for my sake than yours – to sing the Little Tailor to me.” But there is a special warmth in all of them. In August, his mother tells him: “This is a list of two boxes of books I have packed. I do not know whether it includes all. I wish you would mark all you would like and I will send them when I can”.

Eliot marked what he wanted and told his mother that there was also a Century Dictionary, certain French books and two little Sanskrit books omitted on the list.

But it is interesting to see what books Eliot had left at home when he went off to Europe for his doctorate studies in Philosophy in France, Germany and Oxford England. Besides the books of philosophy and books on classical literature, one notices that there were 38 volumes of Shakespeare, six volumes of Browning and Milton’s poems and the lovely text of Religio Medici. There are four Romantic writers, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Burns and

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1 ELIOT. The letters of T. S. Eliot, p. 398.
among the Victorians, besides the full Browning, there is only, Wilde, Pater and Tennyson. What most calls attention in the list of books is that there were no books of American literature except Poe’s Poems. This is interesting because it gives us some ideas of the early reading of Eliot which prepared him for his poetic creation, his criticism and his literary tastes. And in the case of Poe, it shows that from the start he perceived Poe as a very special writer.

Eliot tells us that he does not want to enter the literary revaluation of Poe, but he does this in a sly Eliotian way he opens the essay entitled “From Poe to Valéry” with this rather damming statement:

> What I attempt here is not a judicial estimate of Edgar Allan Poe: I am not trying to decide his rank as a poet or to isolate his essential originality. Poe is indeed a stumbling block for the judicial critic. If we examine his work in detail, we seem to find in it nothing but slipshod writing, puerile thinking unsupported by wide reading or profound scholarship, haphazard experiments in various types of writing, chiefly under pressure of financial need, without perfection in any detail.  

This is the sort of balanced judgment of contemporary critics and in a lecture delivered at the library of Congress in Washington in November 1948, it must have struck the right tone. But in the next sentence, he begins his sly revaluation. He states bluntly, “This would not be just”. He goes on to say that despite the imperfections, half a dozen of his poems “are as well known to as large a number of people, are as well remembered by everybody as any poems ever written”. He goes on to say that some of his tales have an important influence on authors. Again, Eliot is pointing out in his lecture, a real lasting value of the work of Poe, which was not recognized as such in the English speaking academic world.

Later on in the lecture, Eliot points out the importance of Poe in the history of prose. He tells us,

> It is recognised that Poe’s tales had a great influence upon some types of popular fiction. So far as detective fiction is concerned, nearly everything can be traced to two authors, Poe and Wilkie Collins. The two influences sometimes concur, but are also responsible for two different types of detective. The efficient professional policemen originates with Collins, the brilliant and eccentric amateur with Poe. Conan Doyle owes much to Poe, and not merely to Monsieur Dupin of The Murder in the Rue Morgue.

This type of recognition is rarely made. In the constant companion of some students of English and American Literature, The Penguin companion to literature, the summing up of the author of the text on Poe is pretty damming. He states,

> Yet the felicities of both verse and prose tend to emerge only momentarily from cadences or periods too mechanically contrived. His best short stories expose a disturbing strain of morbid feeling, but all is writing is permeated by a hint of theatrical vulgarity.

It is from this type of damnation that Eliot redeems Poe.

As an example of unregenerate British attitude, we may cite a chapter in Aldous Huxley’s Vulgarity in literature:

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2 ELIOT. To criticize the critic and other writings, p. 27.
3 ELIOT. To criticize the critic and other writings, p. 27.
4 ELIOT. To criticize the critic and other writings, p. 27.
5 ELIOT. To criticize the critic and other writings, p. 30.
6 BRADBURY. The Penguin companion to literature, p. 208.
There we find exposed most of the artifices and mannerisms which have made it difficult for many of us to retain beyond our school-days much enthusiasm for the author of *The Bells* and *Annabel Lee*. ‘The substance of Poe is refined’, but it is his form that is vulgar. He is, as it were, one of Nature’s Gentlemen, unhappily cursed with incorrigible bad taste.7

Yet a generation or two of refined French poets could accept the practical demonstrations and even the most uncouth contrivances of Poe’s taste as part of a technique that they continued seriously to imitate and extol.

In 1852, having translated a selection of the tales of Poe, Charles Baudelaire sent the copy of his work to Sainte-Beuve. In 1574, Baudelaire then published a prose translation of “The raven”, illustrated with five of Manet’s drawings. Fourteen years later, he dedicated a group of translations from the poems of Poe, including *Le Corbeau*. In an essay first published in 1920, the claim that Poe was a ‘grand homme’ was revived by the most distinguished of Mallarmé’s disciples, Paul Valéry, who affirmed that Anglo-Saxons alone refused to accept Poe as a poet. And André Fouilhan seems to have made a no less partial, if less dignified, protest: “Why the devil’, he asked of an American correspondent, ‘won’t your fellow-countrymen admit, once and for all that Edgar Poe was one of the most wonderful, most influential and most profound poets who ever lived”.

The contradiction in attitudes seems insoluble, unless we shift our ground, as Eliot did, from the poet to the ideologue. We might then tentatively agree on a conclusion of this kind. If the quality of Poe’s achievement leaves us in doubt as to whether he was often a good poet or just invariably a successful versifier, the original example set by his tales and the germinating power of many of his notions about the nature and the art of poetry are beyond question. It would be futile to deny the enormous fascination that his tales, his ideas, and his legend have exercised even outside France. And though we might still refuse to impute greatness to Poe, we may have to agree with Eliot when he defends the French standpoint: We might even have to agree with Edward Shanks that it its plausible to maintain that he was the true parent of that movement which swept over Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

In the main part of his essay, Eliot goes on to study the influence of Poe on three great French symbolist poets, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry. He points out that Baudelaire was most concerned with the personality of Poe and say in his life, his isolation and his worldly failure, the prototype of “le poète maudit”, as the outcast from society. This type was to realize itself in different ways in Verlaine and Rimbaud and Baudelaire saw himself as a distinguished example. This nineteenth century archetype descends from the Continental myth of Byron.

Eliot tells us that the interest of Mallarmé is rather in the technique of verse, although he admits that the versification of Poe does not lend itself to the French language.

Both it is on Valéry that Eliot delays and points out the root cause of the influence of Poe on the French writers and movement that spread over Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Eliot points out that the interest of Valéry in Poe was an interest based on the theory of poetry and he saw in the works of Poe what the French call pure poetry. In

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7 HUXLEY. *Vulgarity in literature*, p. 75.
8 CAMBRIAIRE. *Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 65.
this theory, poetry, in its third stage of development as Eliot points out: “At this stage, the reader or listener may become as nearly indifferent to the subject matter as the primitive listener was to the style”. It was this concept of pure poetry that the French found in a germinating form in the work and the theory of poetry and it was this idea that fructifies in the poetry of France and of Europe before the start of Modernism in these countries.

Eliot is of course interested in this theory of pure poetry because in his practice and in his literary theories, he himself believed in the value of pure poetry and in his best works, this incantatory element is very strong.

Eliot would defend that the essence of poetry must be sought in the poem itself and, in this sense, he follows an objective theory of poetry. But at the same time, he would not defend that the structure, the architecture and the ambiguity are the elements that constitute poetry. When Eliot speaks of language, he is working at a level below all these, which does not invalidate the other approaches but which is anterior to all of these. Poetic language can represent the universe and we can study its truth; it can please and instruct and we can study its rhetoric efficiency, and it can reflect on the sincerity of the work of poetry as an expression of the emotions recollected in tranquility. But the main job of the writer towards language is before all this. He says in his essay on the Metaphysical poets that

The ideal critic should have both an intense concentration and an indefinite awareness. He should be not primarily concerned with sociology, or with psychology or with politics, or with theology, or with any other ology. He should be primarily concerned with the word and the incantation; with the question whether the poet has used the right word in the right place, the rightness depending upon both the explicit intention and the indefinite radiation of sound and sense.

This is surely what our greatest poet in Brazil, Carlos Drummond de Andrade means also in his poem:

Explore quietly into the realm of words.  
That’s where the poems are waiting to be written  
They are paralysed, but there is no despair.  
There is calm and freshness in the unbroken surface.  
There they are alone and silent, in dictionary form.

We have the incantation, the rightness of the word, the sound and sense. In this context, the dog meat metaphor has its significance. Ideas are there to distract and the poet lies hold of the ideas in circulation in his own age but does not do any real thinking.

“The essential is, that each expresses in perfect language, some permanent human impulse”. He uses the ideas of the time to write poetry, but poetry is not in the ideas but in the rightness of words, the incantation, and sound which distinguishes poetry from all other writing. Because of this the ideal audience would be those who don’t understand the language and the ideas but who respond to the primitive poetifulness of the words. Because of this the real critic has work below the level of representation of expressiveness of rhetoric and see if is the work is truly poetic.

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9 ELIOT. To criticize the critic and other writings, p. 38.
10 ELIOT. Selected essays, p. 246.
11 CARACCIOLO-TREJO. The Penguin book of Latin American verse, p. 84.
12 ELIOT. Selected essays, p. 117.
In order to do this, there are certain qualities that show that the poet is arriving at this true language of poetry: there is the intensity coming from the concentration, there is the sound, there is the right mix of the erudite and the common:

What I call the auditory imagination is the feeling for syllable and rhythm penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality.\(^{13}\)

The poet writes to exorcise an unknown demon in this inglorious struggle but this struggles in brings benefit to society. He helps preserve the language of the nation:

To pass on to posterity one's own language, more highly developed, more refined, and more precise than it was before one wrote it, that is the highest possible achievement of the poet as poet.

The poet also allows people to perceive more clearly the universe in which they live. They have as a mission to bring about this and they “[m]ay help to break up the conventional modes of perception and valuation which are perpetually forming and make people see the world afresh.”\(^{14}\) While doing this through the achieving of true poetry language: “The great poet, in writing himself, writes his time”.\(^{15}\)

This takes us back to Edgar Allan Poe. Because of this influence, because of his genius, let us admit on this second centenary of his birth that, for the last time, that Poe was one of tile most wonderful, most influential and most profound poets who ever lived, as Cambriare states.

WORKS CITED


\(^{13}\) ELIOT. *The use of poetry and the use of criticism*, p. 118.

\(^{14}\) ELIOT. *The use of poetry and the use of criticism*, p. 155.

\(^{15}\) ELIOT. *Selected essays*, p. 117.