

"The Jingle Man" and the Transcendental Issues

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe neither cherished nor appreciated the fundamental standing points of American Transcendentalism, never missing the opportunity to express his "disagreement" with the ideas discussed by some leading figures of this religious, literary and philosophical movement in antebellum America. He criticized their "obscurity for the sake of obscurity", their being prone to vagueness and imprecision as well as the way they perceived the Universe, the Oneness, the Soul of the World and the Soul of the Individual. The aim of this paper is to highlight Poe's perspective on Transcendentalism, both on the literary scene of the day and in some of his short stories.

Keywords: *Transcendentalism; antebellum America; short story; reviews.*

As Shelley Costa Bloomfield stated, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edgar Allan Poe had things in common "but really no opportunities to discover them" (Costa 2007: 216). Both of these two great minds of antebellum America were interested in the inner recesses of one's being, both of them were interested in good writing, public lectures, journal editing. However, the "gap" between two of them was great, at some points even "unsurmountable". Poe did not appreciate Emerson's Transcendental ideas; he did not have more positive opinion of his followers either. Poe condemned mysticism and "exaggerated" optimism as well as obscurity for the sake of obscurity which he identified in the writings of Transcendentalists. He ridiculed the way Emerson and Transcendentalists envisaged the divine, the

Over –Soul that can be revealed in Nature, the “omnipotence” and “benevolence” of Nature, or, to put it in another way, “a corporeal, material Nature corresponding in all aspects to the world of Spirit, a universe suffused by the Deity” (Yannella 1982: 11). Emerson “cherished” a similar vision of his literary colleague. When he was once asked about Poe, he exclaimed, rather provocatively, “Oh, you mean the jingle man” (Costa 2007: 216).

Though Poe was born in Boston and his first collection of poetry *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827) was signed by “a Bostonian”, this city would become a frequent target for his literary and critical harsh comments as well as a spot of an unforgettable fiasco. When he was a guest lecturer at the Boston Lyceum (October 1845) he introduced his recitation with remarks against didacticism in poetry. Afterwards, the recitation of his long and highly complex poem “Al Aaraaf” followed, and, at the demand of the audience, he read “*The Raven*”. Considering his “little war” with Longfellow, the distinguished and prominent New England man of letters and “the darling of New York editors like Lewis Gaylord Clark” (Ljungquist in Hayes 2007: 14) with whom Poe neither had much in common nor was close to his Knickerbocker brotherhood, it is not surprising that Poe became a “target” of the Boston editors such as Cornelia Walter (The Boston Transcript) or Leander Streeter (The Boston Star). Poe “fired back” when he claimed that “Al Aaraaf” was a juvenile poem “chosen for the occasion because he could not have been expected to produce a new, original poem for a Boston audience” (Ljungquist in Hayes 2007: 14). As if this was not enough, Poe claimed that he was drunk when he performed his recitation at the Boston Lyceum, adding that the poem suited perfectly well since it was meant for “an audience of vague thinkers, that is transcendentalists” (Ljungquist in Hayes 2007: 14 -15). In his Editorial Miscellanies (from The Broadway Journal, November 1845) he discusses satirically his visit to Boston and the public appearance in front of the audience which proved to be scandalous. Poe claims that he likes Boston as a place of his birth but “perhaps it is not to mention that we are heartily ashamed of the fact” (Poe 1984:

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1086). Poe proceeds with the things he likes in Boston and those that he could not "tolerate". Therefore, the Bostonians are very well "in their way" but "have no soul", and they are well-bred "as very dull persons" (Poe 1984: 1086 -1087). Though their hotels are bad, they have very delicious pumpkin pie to offer; though in Boston the common thing proves to be far from being the common thing, though their poetry "is not so good", Poe claims that he accepted the invitation out of mere curiosity, to experience the phenomenon of being "publicly hissed" and see the result he could "produce with a neat little impromptu speech in reply" (Poe 1984: 1086).

Still with their vile ingratitude staring us in the eyes, it could scarcely be supposed that we would put ourselves to the trouble of composing for the Bostonians anything in the shape of an original poem. We did not. We had a poem (of about 500 lines) lying by us - one quite as good as new - one, at all events, that we considered would answer sufficiently well for an audience of Transcendentalists. That we gave them - it was the best we had - for the price - and it did answer remarkably well. Its name was not 'The Messenger-Star' - who but Miss Walters would ever think of so delicious a little bit of invention as that? We had no name for it at all. The poem is what is occasionally called a 'juvenile poem' - but the fact is, it is anything but juvenile now, for we wrote it, printed it, and published it, in book form, before we had fairly completed our tenth year. [...]We do not, ourselves, think the poem is a remarkably good one: - it is not sufficiently transcendental. Still, it did well enough for the Boston audience [...]. (Poe 1984: 1087)

It is known that Poe was a very strict literary critic, demanding seriousness and professionalism in writing and journalism. It is also very well known that the "Tomahawk Man" occasionally exaggerated with his harsh and ironic comments. The "notorious" American

"Zoilus" in his review of William Ellery Channing¹ (Graham's Magazine, August 1843) points out that Mr. Channing was inoculated with the virus from Tennyson and Carlyle. While he pays tribute to Lord Tennyson, the great bard of poetry, he objects to his quaintness. For Poe, Lord Tennyson is only quaint but not obscure while Mr. Carlyle is only obscure and seldom quaint. According to Poe, Channing deduced from these two prominent men of letters "an opinion of the sublimity of every thing odd, and of the profundity of every thing meaningless", as well as considered himself "a poet of unusual depth, and very remarkable power of mind" (Poe 1984: 461). Highlighting his opinion that the Boston critics consider poets to be porpoises, he recommends putting Mr. Channing to an appropriate "school" since the Boston critics could not make up their minds on this "serious" issue. Therefore, Poe suggests the following:

We say the Bobby Button school, by all means. He clearly belongs to that. And should nobody ever have heard of the Bobby Button school, that is a point of no material importance. [...] Bobby Button is a gentleman with whom, for a long time, we have had honor of an intimate acquaintance. His personal appearance is striking. [...] He wears a perpetual frown of contemplation. His words are slow, emphatic, few, and oracular. His 'thes', 'ands', and 'buts' have more meaning than other men's polysyllables. (Poe 1984: 461)

As if this was not enough, at the very beginning of the review, while commenting on "a very neat little volume" of Channing's

¹William Ellery Channing and his wife settled in Concord primarily to be close to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Channing's major activity soon proved to be "walking companion for Henry Thoreau – not, as Henry had been at some pains to make clear, a paying proposition" (Miller 1957: 247). Once Thoreau declared that Channing's style could be depicted as the "sublimo-slipshod". There is no doubt that Channing became "the movement's most spectacular and sustained failure. How much he learned [...] is difficult to say" (ibid.).

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poems, Poe states that he is prone to use rather the indefinite than the definite article – Channing “is a, and by no means the” since he is “only the son of the great essayist deceased” and he can not be treated too “softly” by the critics (Poe 1984: 459). On the contrary, he “must be hung. He must be hung in terrorem and for this there is no help under the sun; but then we shall do him all manner of justice”, [...] he must be hung “gingerly and gracefully with a silken cord” (Poe 1984: 459), the same way as the Spaniards had hung their nobles. Poe detected numerous “blemishes”, “faults” and mistakes” pointing out that the greatest mistake undoubtedly was that these poems had been printed at all, obviously not in English but in “Channingese”. They “recall” the “Italian pavoneggiarsi, ‘to strut like a peacock’” and the German “‘the sky-rocketing’, schwarmerei” (Poe 1984: 459).

In his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* and *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Godey's *Lady's Book*, November 1847), after commenting on Hawthorne's specific style of writing, advantages and faults of his narrativity, his particular use of allegory, naming him peculiar but not original, Poe concludes his review with a masterful “intrusion” of *The Dial*² and an inevitable “attack” on Transcendentalists:

Let him mend his pen, get a bottle of visible ink, come out of from the Old Manse, cut Mr. Alcott, hang (if possible) the editor of “*The Dial*”, and throw out of the window to the pigs all his odd numbers of *The North American Review*. (Poe 1984: 587 -588).

² The journal of American Transcendentalists, *The Dial*, was issued for four years. In July 1840 the first number of this quarterly was published. It was edited by Margaret Fuller for two years, the next editor was Ralph Waldo Emerson. “The magazine never made any money, and never attained more than three hundred subscribers. [...] Judged by modern standards of journalism, it was an abysmal failure; judged by other standards, it was a first and memorably gallant effort of the mind in America” (Miller 1957: 138).

Although he objected to Margaret Fuller's Transcendentalism, condemned her "frequent unjustifiable Carlyleisms", and even caricatured her in some of his stories, Poe recognized her literary potential as a writer, a journal editor and a contributor, highlighting that it was her who contributed to *The Dial* some of the most peculiar papers. In his *Literati of New York City*, a part dedicated to Miss Fuller (*Godey's Lady's Book*, August 1846), Poe refers to her masterpiece *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, claiming that there are just a few women in the United States of the day that would dare to write but not a single one to publish it except Miss Fuller, and considering her style "the very best with which [he is] acquainted". However, he does not miss the opportunity to identify her occasional "reverence for Carlyle" and to describe her poetry as "tainted" with the "affectation of the transcendentalists" (Poe 1984: 1176 -1177). As Walker states, Poe liked her intelligence but not her Transcendental "radicalism" (Walker 1986: 176).

Edgar Allan Poe dealt with these "Transcendental issues" in his short stories as well. He wrote about seventy short stories, among them a series of master-pieces. According to Silverman, Poe's opus within the genre of the short story includes Gothic stories, extravaganzas, hoaxes, post-mortem reveries, imaginary voyages, tales of ratiocination as well as stories about modern life (Silverman 1993: 7 -12).

It is not hard to observe that Poe did not focus too much of his attention on contemporary events, social turmoils and upheavals, although the United States of America of his day was abundant with significant changes and novelties. His opinion on perspective of the current business culture and democracy, or as he once wrote in "Marginalia", mobocracy, was neither too positive nor enthusiastic. However, stories such as "Mellonta Tauta" or "Some Words with a Mummy", in which Poe satirically discusses the contemporary way of life, present an exception. Ridiculing the latest achievements and the general progress of the day, as well as the meticulous interest in Oriental studies, Poe introduces to the reader the mummy which,

“astonished” by the modern age and the overwhelming technological advancement, reproaches harshly the members of the expert team who “dared” to examine it as a “piece” of a museum exhibition. Therefore, presenting sarcastically the trend of the day – being overwhelmed with egyptology – Poe’s narrator in “Some Words with a Mummy” claims the following:

I may as well take this occasion to remark, that all the subsequent conversation in which the Mummy took a part, was carried on in primitive Egyptian, through the medium (so far as concerned myself and other untravelled members of the company) – through the medium, I say, of Messieurs Gliddon and Buckingham, as interpreters. These gentlemen spoke the mother-tongue of the mummy with inimitable fluency and grace; but I could not help observing that (owing, no doubt, to the introduction of images entirely modern, and, of course, entirely novel to the stranger) the two travellers were reduced, occasionally, to the employment of sensible forms for the purpose of conveying a particular meaning. Mr Gliddon, at one period, for example, could not make the Egyptian comprehend the term 'politics', until he sketched upon the wall, with a bit of charcoal, a little carbuncle-nosed gentleman, out at elbows, standing upon a stump, with his left leg drawn back, his right arm thrown forward, with his fist shut, the eyes rolled up toward heaven, and the mouth open at an angle of ninety degrees. Just in the same way Mr Buckingham failed to convey the absolutely modern idea, 'Whig,' until (at Doctor Ponnonner's suggestion) he grew very pale in the face, and consented to take off his own. (Poe 2017: 596)

Poe used this story to “attack” Transcendentalists and Boston, the “Frogpond” or “the headquarters of 'the Humanity clique'” (Ljunquist in Hayes 2007: 15), undoubtedly not for the first time, as well as to point out his vision of progress as illusory, and democracy,

even in the Egyptian form and manner, as "the most odious and insupportable despotism that ever was heard of upon the face of the Earth" (Poe 2017: 604).

Poe's story "How to Write a Blackwood Article" presents an explicit satire of the popular genre of the Blackwood magazine. It is considered a companion literary work to "A Predicament". Poe's focus was on Signora Psyche Zenobia, an unsuccessful and unfulfilled person, famous among her enemies as Suky Snobbs, though she is, first of all, the corresponding secretary to the "Philadelphia, Regular, Exchange, Tea, Total, Young, Belles, Lettres, Universal, Experimental, Bibliographical, Association, To, Civilise, Humanity" or, in short PRETTYBLUEBATCH (Poe 2017: 429-430). The typical short story written in the vein of the famous British magazine, according to May, is characterised by the focus on a particular extreme situation which destroys and devours reality and everyday life, and the special attention is focused on details primarily to show the reader that truth can be even stranger than reality. This is how Mr. Blackwood advises Psyche Zenobia, a perfect student and follower of his "high level" doctrines, "a pupil after [his] own heart":

The first thing requisite is to get yourself into such a scrape as no one ever got into before. The oven, for instance, that was a good hit. But if you have no oven, or big bell, at hand, and if you cannot conveniently tumble out of a balloon, or be swallowed up in an earthquake, or get stuck fast in a chimney, you will have to be contented with simply imagining some similar misadventure. [...] Nothing so well assists the fancy, as an experimental knowledge of the matter in hand. 'Truth is strange', you know, 'stranger than fiction' – besides being more to the purpose.' [...] However, my instructions will apply equally well to any variety of misadventure, and in your way home you may easily get knocked in the head, or run over by an omnibus, or bitten by a mad dog, or drowned in a gutter. (Poe 2017: 432)

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Poe does not miss the opportunity to satirize the Transcendentalists in his recognizable manner. Consequently, while discussing the tone or manner of Psyche Zenobia's narration, he states the following about the "unique" Transcendental style:

A little reading of the Dial will carry you a great way. Eschew, in this case, big words; get them as small as possible, and write them upside down. [...] Put in something about the supernal oneness. Don't say a syllable about the infernal twoness. Above all, study innuendo. Hint everything – assert nothing. If you feel inclined to say 'bread and butter', do not by any means say it outright. You may say anything and everything approaching to 'bread and butter'. You may hint at at buckwheat cake, or you may even go so far as to insinuate oatmeal porridge, but if bread and butter be your real meaning, be cautious, my dear Miss Psyche, not on any account to say 'bread and butter'! (Poe 2017: 433)

In this story Poe ridicules the attempts of some men of letters of his day to make their literary works more sophisticated and profound by referring to things that are not sufficiently known or even seem unreliable. Although Poe's well-known irony comes forth in this passage, it is widely known that he himself was prone, though occasionally, to use quotations from other languages, French or Latin, for example. In the story "A Predicament" the writer does not only depict the situation in which the protagonist is caught in the "progression of time", but he uses the very metaphor in the literal sense, thus achieving a masterfully comic effect. The climax of the situation occurs at the moment Miss Zenobia is decapitated. Zenobia broods over a thorny problem of whether "the head or the body is the real Psyche Zenobia – a mind /body split that Poe uses in a number of more serious stories" (May 1991: 30).

My eyes, from the cruel pressure of the machine, were absolutely starting from their sockets. While I was thinking how I should possibly manage without them, one actually tumbled out of my head, and, rolling down the steep side of steeple, lodged in the rain gutter which ran along the eaves of the main building. The loss of the eye was not so much as the insolent air of independence and contempt with which it regarded me after it was out [...] I was presently relieved, however, by dropping out of the other eye. In falling it took the same direction (possibly a concerted plot) as its fellow. Both rolled out of the gutter together, and in truth I was very glad to get rid of them. [...] I was not sorry to see the head which had occasioned me so much embarrassment at length make a final separation from my body. It first rolled down the side of the steeple, then lodged, for a few seconds, in the gutter, and then made its way, with a plunge, into the middle of the street. (Poe 2017: 445)

Conclusions

Edgar Allan Poe, a poet, a short story writer, a literary critic, a journal editor and contributor, was known for his high critical and professional standards. In his critical reviews he occasionally exaggerated with his statements and “merciless” comments. American Transcendentalists, their basic ideas and literary oeuvre, unfortunately, were the frequent point of interest of American “Zoilus”. He criticized their “obscurity for the sake of obscurity”, “mysticism for the sake of mysticism”, their being prone to vagueness and imprecision as well as the way they perceived the Universe, the Oneness, the Soul of the World and the Soul of the Individual, Me and Not Me. As we have shown, Emerson and his followers were not delighted by the appearance of the “jingle man” on the literary scene of the day either.

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