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The Poetics of Transcendence in Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry

A Thesis

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Abstract

The current study explores the poetics of transcendence in the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe. It shows how Poe theorizes and practices the quest for transcendence in his poetry. The circumstances of Poe's life are considered to justify his aspiration for transcendence. The main objectives of the study are to tackle the different types and manifestations of transcendence in Poe's poetry, to highlight Poe's vacillation between success and failure in his quest for transcendence, and to show Poe's wavering between escapism and transcendence in his poetry . Furthermore, this study investigates the mechanisms Poe utilizes in his persistent attempt to go beyond physical reality. It describes the type of reality Poe aspires to transcend and the moral vision he communicates by advocating transcendence. It also attempts to find out if this state of transcendence is always attainable. The study attempts to find answers to the following questions: What is the concept of transcendence in general and as Poe understands and practices it in particular? Why is transcendence a topical theme in the poetry of Poe? What is the poetic code that Poe follows thematically and technically to achieve this state of transcendence? What type of reality does Poe attempt to transcend? What is the moral vision that Poe communicates by advocating transcendence? What are the obstacles that sometimes make such transcendence inaccessible in Poe's poetry? How is Poe's escapism developed to be a step towards transcendence? How does Poe strike a balance between the elements of logic, imagination, and rhetoric in his poetry? How does Poe draw boundaries between reality and fantasy? What controls Poe's imagination? The complexity and universality of Poe's poetic production call for an interdisciplinary approach that can encompass the formal, aesthetic, biographical, psychological, cultural and social aspects shaping and informing the poems selected for analysis and discussion. The study draws on the critical studies of a number of major scholars who dedicate much of their critical effort to reviews and analyses in defense of Poe's poetry. It also primarily draws on the critical essays, letters, and other primary sources authored by Poe in order to acquire a comprehensive view of his poetics. This study mainly focuses on Poe's poetry for one reason: Critics produced dozens of analyses of Poe's fiction, but almost none of his poems have been analyzed. Transcendence is often a major theme in Romantic poetry; however, no study explored Poe's poetics of transcendence. A close analysis of Poe's poems shows that he describes experiences of transcending ordinary reality on all levels. More importantly, the study also tackles all Poe's poetry not just specific selected poems.

Key Words: Edgar Allan Poe, Escapism, Poetics, Transcendence.

Chapter One

Edgar Allan Poe: The Blighted Poet of the Transcendental and Otherworldly

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1.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the history of two key terms in the thesis: poetics and transcendence. It shows the theoretical development of these concepts and then traces how these two major concepts are treated in the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe. After tackling each concept separately, the chapter concentrates on what is meant by the poetics of transcendence. It shows how Poe theorizes and envisions transcendence and how he practices it in his poetry thematically and technically. The difficult and miserable life of Poe is displayed on the personal and social levels to justify this quest for transcendence and the obsessive desire to achieve transcendence on all levels: poetic, cultural, religious, linguistic, epistemological, metaphysical, inner, secular, aesthetic and vertical.

This chapter relies on the critical studies of a number of major scholars among whom are Gerard Genette, B. M. Reed, Elaine Showalter, TzvetanTodorov, Stein Haugom Olsen, Peter Brooks and Roman Jackbson. Those critics are particularly chosen to show the broader sense of poetics as a theory and a system of composition that governs a certain work. The interdisciplinary approach is adopted to show the different manifestations of transcendence in a number of disciplines such as philosophy, religion, psychology, literature, and culture. Therefore, this chapter is based on critical views of philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Heidegger, Thomas Aquinas, Hegel, Leibniz, and Barcuch Spinoza. It also draws on the critical views of a number of thinkers, theologians, sociologists, and psychologists, such as the

psychologists Abraham H. Maslow, Nira Liberman, YaaCovTrope and John T. Marcus; the sociologist Thomas Luchmann; the theologians Abraham Heschel, John Macquarri and Harold Koenig; the secular humanist Paul Kurtz; and the Islamic thinker Abdel Wahab El Messirri.

Regarding the American poet and his poetry, a number of critics are chosen to justify and explore his motive for transcendence such as Lorine Preutte, Haldeen Braddy,Vincent Braunelli, C.M. Bowra, Lisa Borenstein, Robert A. Lee, Brian Yothers, Robert Regan, Richard Wilbur, Floyd Stovall, Eric W. Carlson, Roy Harvey Pearce, Richard Thompson and Edward Davidson. This chapter also draws on the critical essays, letters and other primary sources authored by Poe in order to acquire a comprehensive view of his poetics, such as "The Philosophy of Composition," "The Poetic Principle," "Letter to B," "Marginalia," " Anastatic Printing," " Eureka," and " A Chapter of Suggestions".

1.2 Poetics

Any literary work is shaped and governed by a particular code, that is, a unified theory or abstract structure. Generally referred to as the "poetics" behind the text, this code constitutes both the vision which informs the text and the general laws, or generic conventions, which preside over its composition. Recognition of such systematic principles is the key to a better understanding of literary forms in general and poetry in particular. The English word "poetics" (c., 1727) is derived from the Latin "poeticus" and the Greek "poietikos" which mean "pertaining to poetry," or, literary, "creative, productive" ("Poetics"). Indeed, the term "poetics" has diverse definitions that stress different aspects of the concept. One of these meanings of the term is the theoretical background of art or any literary form, not just poetry. In *Essays in Aesthetics* (2005), Gerard Genette defines

poetics as the "theory of literary forms" or "theory of literature" (14). Sandra Richter draws on Wilhelm Dilthey as the hermeneutic philosopher who "understands poetics as a theory or as 'the logic' of the humanities" (10). In this sense, Genette and Dilthey use "poetics" so broadly as to denote the concept of the theory itself.

However, B. M. Reed declares that poetics can be used in both a narrow and a broad sense since, on the one hand, it deals specifically with poetry, focusing on "its characteristic techniques, conventions, and strategies," as well as "the compositional principles to which a particular poet subscribes," and on the other hand , the term may be used more broadly to discover "the structures, devices, and norms that enable a discourse, genre, or cultural system to produce particular effects." Therefore, concepts such as "poetics of space," "poetics of postmodernism," "poetics of feminism," "Colonial Poetics," and "poetics of prose" start to emerge far away from any connotations concerning poetry. In other words, poetics is not limited to one specific field, but it can be extended as a necessary tool for historians, scientists, and even philosophers. Employed in this expanded sense, 'poetics' is opposed to hermeneutics .i.e. the practice of interpretation (in Green, Cushman and Cavanagh 1058-1059). Interpretation, the central theme of hermeneutics, has to deal with the process of interpreting texts. While interpreting, readers should encode the system governing the literary works. They should consider the rules and the conventions that shape the process of creating meaning.

Poetics became synonymous with "literary theory" or "literary criticism;" it refers to the rules that govern literature. According to Jacobson, it attempts to answer this question: "what makes a verbal message a work of art" (in Newton 71). Guillen defines poetics as a process towards "systematization" (203). In this sense, poetics is a system that consists of

principles, rules, patterns, choices, contrasts, regularities, and polarities. It is a theory that is based on a whole system of exclusion and inclusion created by the author in such a way as to achieve his vision. Poetics as a system has a trace in scientific and structuralist poetics that is concerned with the text itself. In structuralist poetics, the poetics' task is to figure out the structure beyond language, and the rules that govern the whole discourse. In an essay entitled "Definition of Poetics," the literary structuralist critic TzvetanTodorov states that poetics questions "the properties of that particular discourse that is literary discourse" (in Newton 87).

In his essay "What is poetics?," Olsen states that poetics is a scientific and systematic way of studying literature. This view of the term was revived during the years of the twentieth century in the work of the Russian Formalists, American New Critics, and the school of structuralism; all of which treat the literary work as "a piece of discourse possessing certain characteristics which make it what it is" (338). These literary schools treat the text as an autonomous object that should be studied scientifically. In *The Poetics of Prose* (1977), Todorov declares that what unites these twentieth-century critical schools is that they "do not seek to name the meaning of the text but to describe its constitutive elements" (336). In other words, poetics is rather concerned with how something works, not with what it means. It aims at emphasizing the systems of meaning and how texts make sense. In "Aesthetics and Ideology," Brooks gives poetics priority over aesthetics as the value and aesthetic judgements should be delayed till we "explored thoroughly the realms of textuality and the relation of individual texts to generic expectations, the way they use and play against conventions, the way they relate to systems of meaning making"(510-511).

However, poetics has shifted radically from this closed system to the text's relation with outside forces as manifested in post-modern schools that relocate poetry's meaning in social, cultural, and economic contexts. The diversity of literary and critical perspectives in the 20th century resulted in the rise of different theories of literary discourse or poetics. Examples include "feminist poetics," "cultural poetics", "structuralist poetics," "cognitive poetics," "comparative poetics," "ethonopoetics," and "ecopoetics". These various forms of poetics differ in their view of the nature and function of literature, and in the lenses through which literary texts are examined. For instance, in a feminist- informed theory of poetics, poetry does not exist in its own isolated poetic region, but instead the poem is written and read in a context that is charged with social and cultural implications. In an essay titled "Towards a Feminist Poetics," Showalter discusses two distinct types of women: "woman as the consumer of male-produced literature" and "woman as the producer of textual meaning" (in Newton 216).

Indeed, poetics has its origin in early Greek poetics represented by Homer's epics through which poetry is considered as the educator of Men. But the real beginning can be traced to Aristotle's *Poetics* that shows the nature and function of poetry. This work can be read as a defense of poetry against Plato's views in the *Republic* in which he declares that poetry must be dismissed as it stirs passion and irrational thought. For Plato, poetry is an imitation of an unreal world. In response to Plato's claims, Aristotle states that imitation is an innate instinct and a natural human faculty, and that poets do not merely imitate reality, but they invent and create new worlds and scenarios. Aristotle relates the process of creating catharsis as necessary for man's mental balance or equilibrium. He says that after being purged of intense emotions, humans become able to act rationally. These conflicting

views representing the Classical conception or Greek poetics are the first real step towards composing poetics as a philosophical discussion of the nature of literary representation. In fact, Aristotle's approach deals with 'poetics' as a separate branch of knowledge or discipline dealing with the nature and laws of poetry; therefore, " criticism was neither metaphysics nor ethics but poetics – the science of poetry as poetry"(Towbridge 539). For Aristotle, Towbridge declares, the poetics is an empirical and inductive discipline which considers separate literary works and studies them to formulate theories about art and genres (546). In other words, this Aristotelian approach focuses on the formal and internal analysis of works of art. Aristotle starts with literary texts themselves to form a theory of art.

After Aristotle, many different views regarding the nature of poetry and the poet started to emerge and writers had to choose either pleasure or ethics, or mixing pleasure with useful instruction as stated in Horace's *The Art of Poetry*. Each started to look at poetry differently, composing his own 'poetics', and many works began to tackle theoretical views concerning poetry. The article on "poetics" in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2012) traces the development of poetics across literary history. Classical poetics, represented by Platonic and later by the Neo platonic poetics, treats poetry on metaphysical grounds. Medieval and early modern authors worry more about poetry's ability to instruct. In the Romantic and through the modern era, poetics tends towards expressionism as the Romantics see poetry as an expression of the poet's personal experiences and emotions and emphasize the perceiving subject. Twentieth-century literary movements deal with texts in rather ' scientific' terms. In the postmodernist era, poetics tends towards diverse meanings and an infinite circle of meanings against the fixed and closed systems (Reed 1058-1063).

Poetics is a term that is employed differently by different schools and movements; however despite the differences, common features are observed as all of these schools aim at constituting a theory that is used as a tool for interpreting literary works. As opposed to practical criticism, poetics is the theoretical background of a certain approach that includes all the views, opinions, and perspectives regarding art in general. Thus, "poetics of transcendence" means all the ideas regarding this theme, or more specifically how Poe theorizes or envisions it, that is to say, the conceptual framework behind the manifestations of this theme in Poe's poetry or the ways in which this thematic concern is actually represented in his poems. Poetics, then, is understood as a theory and as an underlying system behind a literary work of art. In the case under study, Poe created a poetics of his own governing his poetic creation and critical judgments. This is partly expressed in his critical essays that contain the core of his views and critical insights on poetry. The important essays that shape Poe's poetics and particularly his poetics of transcendence are "Marginalia" (1836), "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), and "The Poetic Principle" (1850). These essays demonstrate how the theme of transcendence is presented, theorized and applied in his own works and those of others.

1.3 Transcendence

Lexically defined, transcendence implies a paradox because the attempt to escape underscores human imprisonment. Actually, the term "transcendence" comes from the Latin word "transcend" which means "rise above or get beyond" the immanent world with all its failures and blessings (Morgan 5). It means going beyond the world of reality, crossing the boundaries of the physical world and evading the restrictions of human existence. Thus, transcendence induces transcendental experiences that explore the unknown and move beyond the ordinary and mundane. All