

With compliments of  
C. Alphonso Smith.

THE AMERICANISM OF POE\*

BY <sup>Charles</sup> C. ALPHONSO SMITH

The continental tributes to Poe which were read this morning recalled an incident in which the name of the founder of this University and the name of its most illustrious son were suggestively linked together. In the Latin Quarter of Paris it was my fortune to be thrown for some time into intimate companionship with a young Roumanian named Toma Draga. He had come fresh from Roumania to the University of Paris and was all aflame with stimulant plans and ideals for the growth of liberty and literature in his native land. His trunk was half filled with Roumanian ballads which he had collected and in part rewritten and which he wished to have published in Paris as his contribution to the new movement which was already revolutionizing the politics and the native literature of his historic little motherland. He knew not a word of English but his knowledge of French gave him a sort of eclectic familiarity with world literature in general. Shakespeare

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he knew well, but the two names that were most often on his lips were the names of Thomas Jefferson and Edgar Allan Poe. Time and again he quoted in his impassioned way the Declaration of Independence and the poems of Poe with an enthusiasm and sense of personal indebtedness that will remain to me as an abiding inspiration.

Let the name of Toma Draga stand as evidence that the significance of genius is not exhausted by the written tributes of great scholars and critics, however numerous or laudatory these may be. There is an ever-widening circle of aspiring spirits who do not put into studied phrase the formal measure of their indebtedness but whose hands have received the unflickering torch and whose hearts know from whence it came. And let the names of Jefferson and Poe, whose far-flung battle-lines intersected on this campus, forever remind us that this University is dedicated not to the mere routine of recitation rooms and laboratories but to the emancipation of those mighty constructive forces that touch the spirits of men to finer aspirations and mould their aspirations to finer issues.

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In an address delivered at the exercises attending the unveiling of the Zolnay bust of Poe, Mr. Hamilton W. Mabie declared that Poe alone, among men of his eminence, could not have been foreseen. "It is," said he, "the first and perhaps the most obvious distinction of Edgar Allan Poe that his creative work baffles all attempts to relate it historically to antecedent condition; that it detached itself almost completely from the time and place in which it made its appearance, and sprang suddenly and mysteriously from a soil which had never borne its like before." That Mr. Mabie has here expressed the current conception of Poe and his work will be conceded by every one who is at all in touch with the vast body of Poe literature that has grown up since the poet's death. He is regarded as the great *déclassé* of American literature, a solitary figure, denationalized and almost dehumanized, not only unindebted to his Southern environment but unrelated to the larger American background,—in a word, a man without a country.

My own feeling about Poe has always been different, and the recent edition of the poet's

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works by Professor James A. Harrison, reproducing almost four volumes of Poe's literary criticism hitherto inaccessible, has confirmed a mere impression into a settled conviction. The criticism of the future will not impeach the primacy of Poe's genius but will dwell less upon detachment from surroundings and more upon the practical and representative quality of his work.

The relatedness of a writer to his environment and to his nationality does not consist primarily in his fidelity to local landscape or in the accuracy with which he portrays representative characters. Byron and Browning are essentially representative of their time and as truly English as Wordsworth, though the note of locality in the narrower sense is negligible in the works of both. They stood, however, for distinctive tendencies of their time. They interpreted these tendencies in essentially English terms and thus both receptively and actively proclaimed their nationality. If we judge Poe by the purely physical standards of *locale*, he belongs nowhere. His native land lies east of the sun and west of the moon. His nationality will be found as indeterminate



as that of a fish, and his impress of locality no more evident than that of a bird. No landscape that he ever sketched could be identified and no character that he ever portrayed had real human blood in his veins. The representative quality in Poe's work is to be sought neither in his note of locality, nor in the topics which he preferred to treat, nor in his encompassing atmosphere of terror, despair, and decay. But the man could not have so profoundly influenced the literary craftsmanship of his own period and of succeeding periods if he had not in a way summarized the tendencies of his age and organized them into finer literary form.

If one lobe of Poe's brain was pure ideality, haunted by specters, the other was pure intellect, responsive to the literary demands of his day and adequate to their fulfillment. It was this lobe of his brain that made him not the broadest thinker but the greatest constructive force in American literature. He thought in terms of structure, for his genius was essentially structural. In the technique of effective expression he sought for ultimate principles with a patience and persistence worthy of

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Washington; he brought to his poems and short stories an economy of words and a husbandry of details that suggest the thriftiness of Franklin; and he both realized and supplied the structural needs of his day with a native insight and inventiveness that proclaim him of the line of Edison.

The central question with Poe was not "How may I write a beautiful poem or tell an interesting story?" but "How may I produce the maximum of effect with the minimum of means?" This practical, scientific strain in his work becomes more and more dominating during all of his short working period. His poems, his stories, and his criticisms cannot be thoroughly understood without constant reference to this criterion of craftsmanship. It became the foundation stone on which he built his own work and the touchstone by which he tested the work of others. It was the first time in our history that a mind so keenly analytic had busied itself with the problems of literary technique. And yet Poe was doing for our literature only what others around him were doing or attempting to do in the domain of political and industrial

efficiency. The time was ripe, and the note that he struck was both national and international.

Professor Münsterberg,<sup>1</sup> of Harvard, thus characterizes the intellectual qualities of the typical American: "The intellectual make-up of the American is especially adapted to scientific achievements. This temperament, owing to the historical development of the nation, has so far addressed itself to political, industrial, and judicial problems, but a return to theoretical science has set in; and there, most of all, the happy combination of inventiveness, enthusiasm, and persistence in pursuit of a goal, of intellectual freedom and of idealistic instinct for self-perfection will yield, perhaps soon, remarkable triumphs." He might have added that these qualities may be subsumed under the general term of constructiveness and that more than a half century ago they found an exemplar in Edgar Allan Poe.

It is a noteworthy fact, and one not sufficiently emphasized, that Poe's unique influence at home and abroad has been a structural

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1. In "The Americans," p. 428.

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influence rather than a thought influence. He has not suggested new themes to literary artists, nor can his work be called a criticism of life; but he has taught prose writers new methods of effectiveness in building their plots, in handling their backgrounds, in developing their situations, and in harmonizing their details to a preordained end. He has taught poets how to modulate their cadences to the most delicately calculated effects, how to reinforce the central mood of their poems by repetition and parallelism of phrase, how to shift their tone-color, how to utilize sound-symbolism, how to evoke strange memories by the mere succession of vowels, so that the simplest stanza may be steeped in a music as compelling as an incantation and as cunningly adapted to the end in view. The word that most fitly characterizes Poe's constructive art is the word convergence. There are no parallel lines in his best work. With the opening sentence the lines begin to converge toward the predetermined effect. This is Poe's greatest contribution to the craftsmanship of his art.

Among foreign dramatists and prose writers



whose structural debt to Poe is confessed or unquestioned may be mentioned Victorien Sardou, Théophile Gautier, Guy de Maupassant, Edmond About, Jules Verne, Emile Gaboriau, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Hall Caine, and Conan Doyle. In English poetry the debt is still greater. "Poe has proved himself," says the English poet-critic Gosse, "to be the Piper of Hamelin to all later English poets. From Tennyson to Austin Dobson there is hardly one whose verse music does not show traces of Poe's influence." A German critic,<sup>2</sup> after a masterly review of Poe's work, declares that he has put upon English poetry the stamp of classicism, that he has infused into it Greek spirit and Greek taste, that he has constructed artistic metrical forms of which the English language had not hitherto been deemed capable.

But the greatest tribute to Poe's constructive genius is that both by theory and practice he is the acknowledged founder of the American short story as a distinct literary type. Pro-

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2. Edmund Gündel in "Edgar Allan Poe: ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis und Würdigung des Dichters," Freiberg, 1895, page 28.

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fessor Brander Matthews<sup>3</sup> goes further and asserts that "Poe first laid down the principles which governed his own construction and which have been quoted very often, because they have been accepted by the masters of the short story in every modern language." It seems more probable, however, that France and America hit upon the new form independently,<sup>4</sup> and that the honor of influencing the later short stories of England, Germany, Russia, and Scandinavia belongs as much to French writers as to Poe.

The growth of Poe's constructive sense makes a study of rare interest. He had been editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*

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3. See "The Short-Story: Specimens Illustrating Its Development," 1907, page 25.

4. "'La Morte Amoureuse' [by Gautier], though it has not Poe's mechanism of compression, is otherwise so startlingly like Poe that one turns involuntarily to the dates. 'La Morte Amoureuse' appeared in 1836; 'Berenice,' in 1835. *The Southern Literary Messenger* could not have reached the boulevards in a year. Indeed, the debt of either country to the other can hardly be proved. Remarkable as is the coincident appearance in Paris and in Richmond of a new literary form, it remains a coincidence."—Introduction to Professor Charles Sears Baldwin's "American Short Stories" (in the Wampum Library), 1904, page 33.

only two months when in comparing the poems of Mrs. Sigourney and Mrs. Hemans he used a phrase in which he may be said to have first found himself structurally. This phrase embodied potentially his distinctive contribution to the literary technique of his day. "In pieces of less extent," he writes,<sup>5</sup> "like the poems of Mrs. Sigourney, the pleasure is *unique*, in the proper acceptance of that term—the understanding is employed, without difficulty, in the contemplation of the picture *as a whole*—and thus its effect will depend, in a very great degree, upon the perfection of its finish, upon the nice adaptation of its constituent parts, and especially upon what is rightly termed by Schlegel the *unity* or *totality of interest*." Further on in the same paragraph he substitutes "totality of effect."

Six years later<sup>6</sup> he published his now famous criticism of Hawthorne's "Twice-Told Tales," a criticism that contains, in one oft-quoted paragraph, the constitution of the modern short story as distinct from

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5. *Southern Literary Messenger*, January, 1836.

6. In *Graham's Magazine*, May, 1842.

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the story that is merely short. After calling attention to the "immense force derivable from totality," he continues: "A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents,—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one preëstablished design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel."

In 1846 he publishes his "Philosophy of Composition"<sup>7</sup> in which he analyzes the

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7. In the April number of *Graham's Magazine*.



structure of "The Raven" and declares that he confined the poem to about one hundred lines so as to secure "the vastly important artistic element, totality or unity of effect." In 1847, in a review of Hawthorne's "Mosses from an Old Manse," he republishes<sup>8</sup> with hardly the change of a word the portions of his former review emphasizing the importance of "totality of effect." The year after his death his popular lecture on "The Poetic Principle" is published,<sup>9</sup> in which he contends that even "The Iliad" and "Paradise Lost" have had their day because their length deprives them of "totality of effect."

This phrase, then, viewed in its later development, is not only the most significant phrase that Poe ever used but the one that most adequately illustrates his attitude as critic, poet, and story writer. It will be remembered that when he first used the phrase he attributed it to William Schlegel. The phrase is not found in Schlegel, nor any

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8. In the November number of *Godey's Lady's Book*.

9. In *Sartain's Union Magazine*, October, 1850.

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phrase analogous to it. Schlegel's "Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature" had been translated into English, and in Poe's other citations from this great work he quotes accurately. But in this case he was either depending upon a faulty memory or, as is more probable, he was invoking the prestige of the great German to give currency and authority to a phrase which he himself coined and which, more than any other phrase that he ever used, expressed his profoundest conviction about the architecture of literature. The origin of the phrase is to be sought not in borrowing but rather in the nature of Poe's genius and in the formlessness of the contemporary literature upon which as critic he was called to pass judgment. Had Poe lived long enough to read Herbert Spencer's "Philosophy of Style," in which economy of the reader's energies is made the sum total of literary craftsmanship, he would doubtless have promptly charged the Englishman with plagiarism, though he would have been the first to show the absurdity of Spencer's contention that the difference between poetry

and prose is a difference only in the degree of economy of style.

Schlegel, it may be added, could not have exerted a lasting influence upon Poe. The two men had little in common. Schlegel's method was not so much analytic as historical and comparative. His vast learning gave him control of an almost illimitable field of dramatic criticism while Poe's limitations made his method essentially individual and intensive. The man to whom Poe owed most was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The influence of Coleridge grew upon Poe steadily. Both represented a curious blend of the dreamer and the logician. Both generalized with rapidity and brilliancy. Both were masters of the singing qualities of poetry, and both were persistent investigators of the principles of meter and structure. Though Coleridge says nothing about "totality of effect"<sup>10</sup>

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10. The nearest approach is in chapter XIV of the "Biographia Literaria:" "A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part."

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and would not have sanctioned Poe's application of the phrase, it is undoubtedly true that Poe found in Coleridge his most fecundating literary influence.

In his admiration for Coleridge and in his antipathy to Carlyle, Poe was thoroughly representative of the South of his day. The great Scotchman's work was just beginning and Coleridge's career had just closed when Poe began to be known. Carlyle and Coleridge were both spokesmen of the great transcendental movement which originated in Germany and which found a hospitable welcome in New England. But transcendentalism in New England meant a fresh scrutiny of all existing institutions, social, political, and religious. It was identified with Unitarianism, Fourierism, the renunciation of dogma and authority, and the increasing agitation of abolition. "Communities were established," says Lowell, "where everything was to be common but common sense." The South had already begun to be on the defensive and now looked askance at the whole movement. Coleridge, however, like Burke and Wordsworth, had outgrown his



radicalism and come back into the settled ways of institutional peace and orderliness. His writings, especially his "Biographia Literaria," his "Statesman's Manual," and his "Lay Sermon," were welcomed in the South not only because of their charm of style but because they mingled profound philosophy with matured conservatism. No one can read the lives of the Southern leaders of ante-bellum days without being struck by the immense influence of Coleridge and the tardy recognition of Carlyle's message. When Emerson, therefore, in 1836, has "Sartor Resartus" republished in Boston, and Poe at the same time urges in the *Southern Literary Messenger* the republication of the "Biographia Literaria," both are equally representative of their sections.

But Poe as the disciple of Coleridge rather than of Carlyle is not the less American because representatively Southern. The intellectual activity of the South from 1830 to 1850 has been on the whole underrated because that activity was not expended upon the problems which wrought so fruitfully upon the more responsive spirits of New

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England, among whom flowered at last the ablest group of writers that this country has known. The South cared nothing for novel views of inspiration, for radical reforms in church, in state, or in society. Proudly conscious of her militant and constructive rôle in laying the foundations of the new republic, the South after 1830 was devoting her energies to interpreting and conserving what the fathers had sanctioned. This work, however, if not so splendidly creative as that of earlier times, was none the less constructive in its way and national in its purpose. Poe's formative years, therefore, were spent in a society rarely trained in subtle analysis, in logical acumen, and in keen philosophic interpretation.

Though Poe does not belong to politics or to statesmanship, there was much in common between his mind and that of John C. Calhoun, widely separated as were their characters and the arenas on which they played their parts. Both were keenly alive to the implications of a phrase. Both reasoned with an intensity born not of impulsiveness but of sheer delight in making

delicate distinctions. Both showed in their choice of words an element of the pure classicism that lingered longer in the South than in New England or Old England; and both illustrated an individual independence more characteristic of the South than than would be possible amid the leveling influences of to-day. When Baudelaire defined genius as "l'affirmation de l'independance individuelle," he might have had both Poe and Calhoun in mind; but when he adds "c'est le *self-government* appliqué aux œuvres d'art," only Poe could be included. Both, however, were builders, the temple of the one visible from all lands, that of the other scarred by civil war but splendid in the very cohesiveness of its structure.

I have dwelt thus at length upon the constructive side of Poe's genius because it is this quality that makes him most truly American and that has been at the same time almost ignored by foreign critics. Baudelaire, in his wonderfully sympathetic appraisal of Poe, considers him, however, as the apostle of the exceptional and abnormal.

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Lauvrière,<sup>11</sup> in the most painstaking investigation yet bestowed upon an American author, views him chiefly as a pathological study. Moeller-Bruck,<sup>12</sup> the editor of the latest complete edition of Poe in Germany, sees in him "a dreamer from the old motherland of Europe, a Germanic dreamer." Poe was a dreamer, an idealist of idealists; and it is true that idealism is a trait of the American character. But American idealism is not of the Poe sort. American idealism is essentially ethical. It concerns itself primarily with conduct. Poe's Americanism is to be sought not in his idealism but in the sure craftsmanship, the conscious adaptation of means to end, the quick realization of structural possibilities, the practical handling of details, which enabled him to body forth his visions in enduring forms and thus to found the only new type of literature that America has originated.

The new century upon which Poe's name now enters will witness no diminution of

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11. "Edgar Poe, sa vie et son œuvre: étude de psychologie pathologique." Paris, 1904.

12. "E. A. Poe's Sämtliche Werke." Minden i. W., 1904.



interest in his work. It will witness, however, a changed attitude toward it. Men will ask not less what he did but more how he did it. This scrutiny of the principles of his art will reveal the elements of the normal, the concrete, and the substantial, in which his work has hitherto been considered defective. It will reveal also the wide service of Poe to his fellow-craftsmen and the yet wider service upon which he enters. To inaugurate the new movement there is no better time than the centennial anniversary of his birth, and no better place than here where his genius was nourished.

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