

Poe Through French Eyes

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HE attempt to appreciate the genius of one nation by comparison with that of another is to bring into futile association wholly dissociated things. However, it is not out of place to seek a basis of comparison in the litterateurs of two countries, whose democratic spirit, ideals and enthusiasm are landmarks of history. Though literature presents a wide field of general research, yet when considered in its creative aspects, it offers specialized problems and reveals all mankind governed by norms and subject to identical factors of susceptibility and enthusiasm. So it is that in the French criticism of Edgar Allan Poe national characteristics do not stand out, on either side, as clearly as one might expect. This arises from the peculiar spiritual affinity between Poe and his French translators, interpreters and admirers.

It is an undeniable fact that Edgar Allan Poe stands as an enigma to the American literary world. It was ever Poe's fate to be bitterly criticised. Men have arisen who have attacked him violently, as Griswold and Thurston. And they have written of him in this wise. Poe lived as one who had lost all faith in man or woman. This conviction made him a shrewd and unamiable character. Passion in him included many of the worst emotions, which militated against human happiness. You could not contradict him but you raised quick choler; you could not speak of wealth, but his cheek paled with gnawing envy. He had to a morbid excess that desire to rise which in the vulgar is called ambition. Not wishing for the esteem and love of his species, his ardent wish was to succeed, not shine or serve—succeed, that he might despise a world which galled him in his self-conceit. Thus they would blacken the name of Poe.

Others, as Ingram and Willis, claim such a criticism to be dastardly and, what is worse, false. They in their turn eulogize the man in this fashion. Poe had the finest touch of soul for beauty; a delicate and hearty appreciation of worth. In the world of mind he was king. As a critic he was despotic, supreme. So we must remember that the very organization of such a mind

as Poe; the very tension and tone of his exquisitely strung nerves; the passionate yearnings of his soul for the beautiful and the true, utterly unfitted him for the rude jostling and fierce competitorship of trade. "Could he have stepped down," says Ingram, "and chronicled small beer; made himself the shiftless toady of the hour, sounding the glory of third rate ability with a penny trumpet, he would have been feted alive and perhaps praised when dead. But this was not his sense of duty. Literature was for him a religion and he the high priest. And with a whip he scourged the money-changers from the temple. Again no one was more quickly touched by kindness, no one more prompt to atone for injury."

In such a perplexing attitude Americans gaze at Poe. Unless, therefore, one has a grasp on the man through study and has formed ideas of his own, the student stands face to face with a most tangled problem. However, a foreign solution of the unriddled questions of one's native land, representing as it does the opinion of one who has viewed the controversy from afar, is rarely, if ever unappreciated. This fact to most minds will render the French estimate of Poe most attractive and interesting.

Facts show that Poe has exercised a particular fascination upon the French, who from the beginning have been, perhaps, the most ardent of his admirers and imitators. This is patent, since practically a dozen Frenchmen have written of him. And among these we find such authors as Gautier, Baudelaire, Fontainas and Lauvrière, men who have been eminent in the French world of letters. "Upon him," says H. I. Brock of the New York Times, "is based a whole school of French fiction deliberately contrived to send unjustified shivers down the spine, to play shrewd variations upon the emotion of fear." We consider Poe and his works in relation to their influence in France.

Charles Pierre Baudelaire, who has translated Poe into the French tongue with such exact correspondence in style and thought that the work produced the effect of the original, says, that the author of "The Raven" is a man after his own heart and feeling. It was with a keen desire then, or better perhaps, with a sense of mutual sympathy, that Baudelaire went to work on his translation. For Baudelaire, on first reading Poe, said that this author expressed the same ideas that had always haunted

him, but which he had tried in vain to express. Reading his sonnet on autumn and bearing in mind Poe's unending heart-call for his rare and radiant maiden, "whom the angels name Lenore," we may feel that there is something common to both, and charitably neglect to mention that Baudelaire was more or less a slave to opium and other dream-producing drugs, while Poe was never considered a model of temperance.

In his sonnet Baudelaire sings :

I, too. Love's ancient arrow know,
 Crime, horror, folly, O pale Margarite.
 Thou art as I, a bright sun fallen low,
 O, my so white, my cold Margarite.

From this side of the Atlantic Poe has sounded the same yearning note :

"Prophet," said I, "thing of evil—prophet still, if bird or devil!
 By that heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
 Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
 It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore,
 Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
 Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore'."

Soon appeared Baudelaire's translations of Gordon Pyn, *Eureka*, *Histoires Grotesque et Serieues*. The acclaim which Poe's works received from the French people bespeaks the genius of the translator and shows that, in his ability to put into another vernacular the thoughts of Poe, which feat depends very often for its appeal on the power and manipulation of words, he was nearly as great as his subject. That Baudelaire had the interests of Poe at heart may be deduced from this emphatic statement in his correspondence: "I must say, that I, Baudelaire, desire that Poe, who is not very great in America, should become a great man in France." Thus it was that Poe, mainly through this attachment of Baudelaire, was endeared to the French people.

Indeed, it must not be imagined that the name of Poe is revered and honored by all the critics of France. For just as in America, so also in France litterateurs arose, who attacked him, and perhaps the foremost of these French adversaries is Emil Lauvière. This author, being an associate professor of literature at the Lycée Charlemagne, has made a careful study of Poe from a pathological point of view. From Poe's inordinate tendency to drink Lauvière concluded that the American was

affected with dipsomania, which is a characteristic nervous state of general instability commonly called degeneracy. This degeneracy, which he claimed was in Poe, appeared both in his haggard features and in his works, that is to say, in his physical and mental bearing. In his stories and in his poetry the morbid genius of the man seems gifted with that instinctive precocity and that fatal fixity, which characterize his innate tendencies. In fact, Poe's tendency to dream was not only excessive but it had a special feature leading to abnormalcy. His soul was ever looking back on the past. Yet he continually was thwarted by the world of reality and this irritated him against the world. Still Lauvrière attests that Poe has revealed to mankind in a masterly manner some of life's rarest aspects and most sublime emotions. He says, that Poe is not as guilty or as dangerous as some have made him. He prefers to consider him as a patient whose ailment is as edifying as it is instructive, when one understands. The sad and touching spectacles that Poe has portrayed are the best he could give and he gave them in a very artistic manner.

This thesis of Lauvrière is proclaimed by some Frenchmen as an unwholesome innovation. Fontainas in his "Life of Edgar Allan Poe," edited in Paris, 1919, calls it a fine hypothesis in psychological pathology, built upon rumor and not upon facts. Poe, he repeatedly says throughout this volume, was neither a dipsomaniac, nor a drunkard, nor an opium fiend. He was really and truly a great genius and was never excited by a mental disorder or any abnormalcy caused by the over-indulgence in intoxicants and opiates. Fontainas thinks that Poe has been calumniated and misunderstood. He affirms that Poe was ardent in his affections, noble, honorable and gentlemanly in his own life and in his associations with others. However, he became the plaything of destiny, the prey of circumstances which opposed his nature, broke down his courage and subjected him to the torments and horrors which, to a man of his highly strung temperament, were doubly disastrous. This criticism of Fontainas is purely a defense of Poe, the man.

Théophile Gautier, our concluding French analyst of Poe, has written no particular work pertaining especially to the American author. To obtain his opinion one must sift his works to grasp the desired kernel. However, from the fact that he

was one of the most interesting and conspicuous figures of the Parisian literary and art world during the lifetime of Poe, and also judging from his extensive knowledge of facts, persons and places acquired through much travel, his verdict may be considered as a most accurate and unprejudiced estimate of the French temperament.

Gautier in his work on Baudelaire turns in the most casual manner to a brief treatise of Poe. He introduces his criticism of the necromancer of English literature in this wise. "If Poe had regulated his genius and applied his creative powers in a way more appropriate to America and American ideals, he would have become a money-making author; but the fact is, he was undisciplined and would rather work when he liked and on what subject he pleased. His roving disposition made him roll like a comet out of its orb from Baltimore to New York; from Philadelphia to Boston and Richmond, without being able to settle anywhere. In his moments of ennui, distress or breakdown caused by some feverish work, he drank brandy." And here the Frenchman ironically adds, "a fault for which he has been bitterly reproached by Americans, who as everybody knows, are strict prohibitionists." He continues: "As a grave and competent director of a journal Poe was well intentioned. It is true it was difficult for him to obtain employ. Editors gave him less because his style was above the vulgar. . . . What an admirable reason! Because he would not pander to the American business mind, to its growing institutions, to the theme of its declarations, they ignored him. In fact, because he would not bend his knee to the American god of the dollar, but loving poetry for itself, and preferring beauty to utility, he was libelled and ostracised. For acting in this wise was enormous heresy to the American mind."

Concerning Poe and drink, Gautier comments: "Poe was not under the delusion of the effects of this disastrous vice when he wrote 'The Black Cat,' in which this line occurs: 'What illness is comparable to alcohol?'" He says, "Poe drank without drunkenness—just to forget. However, this deplorable habit had no influence on his intellect or his manners, which always remained those of an accomplished gentleman. Nor did it mar his beauty, which was remarkable to the end. He drank just to find himself in a happy mood in regard to his work, or even to

escape ending an intolerable life by the scandal of suicide. Briefly, one day seized in the street with delirium tremens, he was carried to the hospital where he died." Thus Gautier concludes his consideration of the American poet and story-teller.

We have selected enough French opinions for our purpose. Just as at home, so abroad we find a conflict of opinion as to the merits of Poe. Lowell, a representative American critic, thus irreverently hails the bard:

"Here comes Poe with his 'Raven' like Barnaby Rudge,
Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge."

Baudelaire and Fontainas swallow him whole; to Lauvrière he is taboo; to Gautier he is accepted with reservations. Yet from out the controversy we may come to some definite conclusions. Practically all French critics admit his real creative ability as a writer. Furthermore, as to his personality and character they are willing to be his champion even against his own countrymen. In reading their comments we seem to feel that they have made their own the sentiment of Father Tabb's quatrain:

"If any critic peck on Poe,
His peccability to show,
'Tis well for him that such a foe,
Can no longer return the blow."

His literary merit seems to them to cover a multitude of sins, which they are careful to interpret as more or less amiable weaknesses. Viewed in this light, we are not surprised to find that Edgar Allan Poe has become the inspirer, friend and guide of one noted French author; that through him he is introduced as one of their own into the mould of French literature, where having survived the breakers of critical minds, his place and influence are secure. Indeed, we take a second look at the French picture to resolve the doubt about the halo.