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POE: THE ART OF PLAGIARIZING

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of Poe's several allegations of plagiarism against a host of his contemporaries, notably Hawthorne, and the resulting counter allegations broadly hinting at Poe's own acts of plagiary, presumably to Poe's great delight, this paper posits that Poe's accusations were not an attempt to distract his readers from his own plagiary but rather a deliberate attempt to focus attention on it. An in-depth analysis of **Ligeia** reveals how Poe, the quintessential parodist, uses different devices and techniques to throw clues, as it were, at the few Legrands and Dupins among his audience in the hope that this would enable them to unravel his cryptograms and ciphers and thus savour the satiric undercurrent of meaning in his tales.

KEYWORDS: Plagiary, Parody, Ligeia, Cryptograms

INTRODUCTION

Poe in his *Review of the Twice-Told Tales,* accusing his contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne of plagiarizing from W*illiam Wilson* says: "In *Howe's Masquerade* we observe something which resembles a plagiarism –but which may be a very flattering coincidence of thought" (Works of E.A. Poe, Vol. V, p.301). His reviews and his *Marginalia* are riddled with similar allegations against Hawthorne, Longfellow and a host of other writers, for exposing literary theft seems to have been his pet obsession. Robert Regan in his very interesting article on *Hawthorne's Plagiary; Poe's Duplicity (*NCF, Vol.25, 1971)proves that Hawthorne could not be guilty of the charge because his *Howe's Masquerade* appeared in the Democratic Review a year before Poe's *William Wilson* appeared in *The Gift.* What is even more significant is Regan's establishment of the fact that the same issue of *Graham's Magazine* which contains the review of *Twice-Told Tales,* contains also his own *The Mask of the Red Death* and that the similarities between *Howe's Masquerade* and Poe's own story are, as he shows, obvious to the careful reader. My conjecture is that Poe must have intended them to be and that this was as direct a hint as he could give to his reader that his story was to be read as a parody of *Howe's Masquerade* and that Poe's accusation against Hawthorne can be interpreted not as an attempt to distract his readers from his own plagiary but rather as a deliberate attempt to focus attention on it. In his review of Moore's *Alciphron,* he writes of "that class of composition in which there lies beneath the transparent upper current of meaning an under or suggested one." (Works, Vol. VI, 1909) An analysis of *Ligeia* will reveal how, far from seeking to disguise his plagiary, Poe tries various devices to draw attention to it in a vain attempt to make his readers call to the surface the satiric under-current of meanings. His pose as "arch-plagiarist –hunter" (to use Regan's phrase) is only his means of revealing himself as arch-plagiarist.

Parody, by its very nature, is plagiaristic and the delight that it occasions comes from recognition of its source: the parodied object. Parody, according to Barbara Godard, is a "sophisticated literary form, inviting the complicity of a highly perspicacious reader who shares the irony of recognizing difference at the heart of similarity, in order to activate its full complexity of meaning."(Barbara Godard, in *Canadian Poetry, Vol.* 21, 1987) That the majority of Poe's readers missed the satiric intention of his works altogether; that they failed to see ***The Balloon Hoax*** and ***M.S. Found in a Bottle*** as

parodies of the then popular art form, explains not only the increasing over-subtlety (to the point of escaping detection altogether) of his parodies but also his deliberate efforts to call to the attention of his more intelligent readers, the parodic nature of his writing. Poe was forced to write for two audiences at the same time: the large, superficial, naïve and gullible audience on whom he, unfortunately, depended for his sustenance, and the small, select intelligent audience he hoped for- the little Dupins and Legrands who would use the little clues Poe threw at them to decipher and unravel ciphers and cryptogams in order to relish the real meaning of the tales.

Poe's early tales were written as Davidson suggests, "w*ith the primary intention of burlesquing the popular and bestselling tales in the magazines of the day, tales of passion, of horror, … in short, of that staple of popular reading consumption which so delights an unintelligent audience."*(E.H. Davidson, Poe :A Critical Study, 1967). To this end, he plagiarized flagrantly, taking from his contemporaries and predecessors plots, situations, conventions, and even rhetorical expressions. But apart from these direct borrowings from other writers and from the gothic tradition in general, much of Poe's mature work turns on self-parody and as such reveals borrowings and displacements of plots and situations from his own early stories. There are, for instance, several similarities between ***The Assignation*** (1834) and ***Ligeia (***1838). Both stories may be seen as parodies of the gothic romance and German transcendentalism but, even more significantly, as parodies of each other. Both stories deal with the possibility of permanent, spiritual, even transcendental union between lovers, and in both stories, such union is attained differently. The Marchesa di Mentoni and the Prince achieve it through their togetherness in death. But what if the beloved dies before the lover? Ligeia has an answer to that: ***will*** her back to life or let her ***will*** herself back to life; let her possess the very person of another – an unloved second wife!

Even more striking is the similarity between the grotesque opulence of the disordered chambers in the two stories: Prince Mentoni's dream-chamber and the bridal chamber prepared for Rowena. About the Prince's chamber the narrator writes:

In the architecture and embellishments of the chamber, the evident design had been to dazzle and astound. Little attention had been paid to the ***decors*** *of what is called* ***keeping****, or to the proprieties of nationality. The eye wandered from object to object, and rested upon none - neither the grotesque of the Greek painters, nor the sculptures of the best Italian days, nor the huge carvings of untutored Egypt. Rich draperies in every part of the room trembled to the vibration of low, melancholy music. (*Poe: Complete Tales and Poems, 1975, p.297*)*

Does not this call to mind the hideous disharmony of Rowena's bridal chamber with its Saracenic censer, its candelabra " of eastern figure" its bridal couch …"of an Indian model" and its "grotesque specimens of a semi-gothic semi-Druidal device"? And here the narrator writes that there "was no system, no keeping, in the fantastical display, to take hold upon the memory" (p.660). The gothic extravagance of the two rooms is appropriate to Poe's parodistic intention. The careful reader misses neither the jesting over-play of the gothic nor the subtle indications of the chaotic mental state of the interior decorators of the two rooms. In ***Ligeia***, he says:

Alas I feel how much even of the incipient madness might have been discovered in the gorgeous and fantastic draperies, in the solemn carvings of Egypt, in the wild cornices and furniture, in the bedlam pattern of the carpets of tufted gold. (660)

If the narrator is insane, just how seriously can one take his story? This is just another clue to the reader that the story must be read as a parody.

All literature is thus repetitive and imitative, and these relationships are often placed in new relationships with one another so as to create new meaning. Poe's use of the epigraph is a case in point. Although the epigraph was essential to his

'parodistic' apparatus for creating the counterfeit gothic romance, he later found a much more artful possibility of exploiting it, one which adapted itself organically to the overall structure of the story and added both to its over and undercurrent of meaning. Poe played with this convention of the gothic tale just as skillfully as he did with all the other conventions. In ***Ligeia,*** the epigraph occurs at least thrice in the story. "*Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will":* these are the words that the dying Ligeia shouts out in protest against the "Divine Father" after the narrator-husband has read aloud her poem about the conqueror worm. These again are the words she utters in a low murmur just before the breath of life leaves her diseased frame. Is it at all surprising that her husband should see the final transfiguration into Ligeia? Are we not prepared for it? Doesn't the narrator tell us at the very outset that his beloved Ligeia's eyes reminded him of those very words of Glanville which he uses as an epigraph to the story, those very words which Ligeia persistently repeats? This aphorism clearly becomes the leit-motif of an interesting gothic plot.

But we are, perhaps, taking the plot too seriously. As far as gothic stories go, ***Ligeia*** is certainly an exquisite work—Poe's proof that he could out-gothic the gothickers. But this could not be his soleintention. Poe always aimed at two audiences, and if this was the plot intended for the large audience, what was the secret under plot, the undercurrent of meaning that his coterie audience was expected to decipher and decode? The story can be interpreted as a work combining "Gothic over plot with satiric underside- an "allegory of terror almost perfectly coordinated with the subtlest of allegorized jests" in which Ligeia "symbolizes …the very incarnation of German idealism, German Transcendentalism provided with an allegorical form "and Rowena "symbolizes an impoverished English Romanticism, as yet "unspiritualised by German Cant."(Robert Regan, p.293) But this under plot, this suggested meaning(to use Poe's words) "runs through the obvious one in a very profound under-current, so as never to interfere with the upper one without our own volition, so as never to show itself unless called to the surface."(Literary Criticism, p.118) As usual Poe aids the careful reader to detect the under plot; he leaves significant clues of which the epigraph is a striking instance. The epigraph is supposedly an aphorism from Glanville but according to E.H. Davidson, the source has so far "escaped detection."(Poe: A Critical Study, p.77). It is, indeed very likely that Glanville never did say or write this, that it is just Poe's way of subverting the very convention he uses. We cannot wave aside the possibility that Poe himself invented these lines which he repeatedly and insistently ascribes to Glanville—(Glanville was Poe's big clue to the intelligent reader.) Glanville was the seventeenth century scholar who upheld both the objective study of nature and the truth of witchcraft. Thus from the very outset, Poe suggests to his reader that he can choose between science and witchcraft, reason and belief, reality and illusion to interpret the strange transformations in the story. We can safely affirm that there are two plots and two meanings, and the quotation from Glanville operates on both levels as an organic element of the total structure.

There is a sense in which we can view all of Poe's tales as a series of quotations, of displacements. According to Ronald Schleifer, autobiography is a form of quotation which "appropriates the past; it achieves autobiography's ambitious task of 'authoring' the past…" (*George Moore* in Genre, 1979). Robert Crossley calls them "closet monologues" whose narrators are "isolated monologists …solitary brooders composing first-person memoirs in the confinement of their writing closets." (*Poe's Closet Monologues* in Genre, Vol. X, 1977, p.218). This explains the paucity of dialogue in Poe's stories. He quotes David Halliburton's comment:

How few are the narrators in Poe who function orally in a community of men; speech between characters is scandalously opaque. I am suggesting, then, that writing is a substitute for speech, allowing men who cannot talk directly to other human beings to record their experience. (p.218)

They are story writers, not story-tellers. Being so totally alienated from an audience, the narrator of Poe's tales writes for the "only person capable of attending and responding to his printed anguish—himself." (Robert Crossley). And even what he does write are only those snatches, those quotes from his experience that he can bear to consciously confront even in the solitude of his closeted memoirs.

The memoirist of **Ligeia** is an excellent example of a monologist who uses "quotation's ability to simultaneously take in and leave out, to remember and forget." (Ronald Schleifer) He begins his tale protesting that he cannot "remember how, when, or even precisely where, (he) first became acquainted with the Lady Ligeia." (p.654) Losing all sense of time and place, of communicable reality, he becomes the paradigm of the isolated self. He does not even remember her paternal name although "of her family (he has) heard her speak." Thus, Ligeia remains as anonymous as the isolated narrator. Immense suffering is his explanation for the lapse of memory. Maybe so, or maybe it is just willful negation of such memories. Whatever the reason, these details of the event are omitted, they are not quoted.

But the narrator does remember Ligeia's person in minute detail: the ivory like skin, the hyacinthine raven-black hair, the Hebraic nose, the sporting dimples and, above all, those all- encompassing black eyes. In spite of this exquisite almost classical physical beauty what the narrator adored most about her was her supposedly awesome intellect. After an elaborate description of these ideal qualities which the narrator obviously enjoys recapitulating, he very abruptly writes about her sudden illness. The circumstances leading to this illness are totally ignored. His last few moments with this God-like creature are captured and sealed in writing. He recalls that even as she died, she muttered the aphorism from Glanville. After her death, the insane monologist recalls marrying the blue-eyed Rowena Trevanon of Tremaine whom he does not love at all. Yet, strangely enough, how well he remembers her name and her place of origin! How well he remembers in the minutest detail the bizarre arrangement of her bridal chamber. He remembers too his still unquenched longing for Ligeia and his opium dreams which caused him to call out her name.

During the silence of the night, or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathways she had abandoned—ah, could it be forever?—upon the earth. (pp.661-662)

The highly inflated, almost hysterical style with the mournful question: "Ah, could it be forever?" is characteristic of Poe's insane narrator. The verbal structures of this story are "affectations of narrators acutely conscious that they are composing sealed texts, self-sustaining monologues. Clearly the rhetoric is not confessional or intimate, neither directed to auditors nor responsive to readers." (Robert Crossley)It is 'penned talk' but cautious and selective penning, nonetheless. His euphoric exclamation helps the narrator to avoid acknowledging that Ligeia was only a figment of his imagination, a victim of his idealistic mind. Both, in terms of the details and the manner of expression**, Ligeia** is the closet monologue per se and as such necessarily a form of quotation. By so recognizing it, the reader calls to the surface yet another undercurrent of meaning.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus Poe's numerous charges of plagiarism cannot be taken any more seriously than his praise of originality for he knew that absolute originality was neither possible nor desirable and that all literary art, particularly satire or parody had to be drawn extensively from other sources. Poe must certainly have been aware that all writing is based on the principal of displacement and that it is not the borrowing of an element from another source that determines the quality or originality of the writer but rather the use to which he puts the displaced element. He proved himself to be an extremely conscious and clever artist by the very skillful use to which he put the diverse displaced elements in his writings: plots, themes,

expressions and quotations. Whether his work would have been any better with a more intelligent and, consequently more responsive audience is subject to conjecture. What we can be thankful for is that because of his writing for two audiences, even so many years later his readers can savour the ingenuity of his writing.

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