

LA CONTINUIDAD DE UNA POÉTICA. ALGUNAS OBSERVACIONES SOBRE UN CUENTO DE CONRAD AIKEN

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ABSTRACT

Poe's influence in the narrative field has been deep. The Poesque conception of the short story, the Poesque themes and, also, the Poesque narrative language are aspects that can be easily detected in several writers. Conrad Aiken is one of them.

"Just as the day dawns to the friendless and houseless beggar who roams the street throughout the long desolate winter night - just so tardily - just so wearily - just so cheerily came back the light of the Soul to me".

E. A. Poe, *The Premature Burial*.

La evolución de la narrativa breve a través del tiempo se produce, de forma similar al resto de las especialidades literarias, dentro de un marco limitado por numerosas concepciones estéticas, tanto personales como de escuela, divergentes todas ellas en orientación, intensidad y trascendencia. En este desarrollo del relato como género diferenciado y sin infravalorar otras aportaciones, la obra de Edgar Allan Poe tiene una innegable importancia, a pesar de la diferente acogida que han recibido sus creaciones y su ideario sobre el hecho literario y, en particular, sobre el cuento¹. En la narrativa norteamericana, la influencia ejercida en diferentes niveles por Poe se advierte en casi todos los autores que han elegido el relato como modalidad de creación literaria. Uno de estos escritores es Conrad Aiken.

Conrad Aiken comparte su trabajo en el terreno literario entre la poesía —aspecto por el que quizás sea más ampliamente conocido y valorado— y la "short story". Sus poemas y relatos resultan de un mismo ideario estético y formal que presenta, dentro de sus características más destacadas, el análisis psicológico como técnica primordial no sólo de investigación temática sino también de desarrollo argumental, la preferencia —en ningún momento disimulada— por el tratamiento de la materia literaria desde la óptica subjetiva, la creación efectiva de ambientes, el deseo constante de la musicalidad en el texto y, como núcleo ideológico irreductible, la búsqueda de una belleza estética abstracta a partir del acto creativo.

*Silent Snow, Secret Snow*² es una de las piezas más logradas de la producción narrativa de Aiken, y en ella se aprecia claramente la influencia de Poe. El protagonista principal de este relato es Paul Hasleman, un niño en edad escolar

que ocupa la mayor parte de su tiempo en ensoñaciones sobre la nieve, cuando la realidad es bien distinta: ni un solo gramo de esta materia cubre las calles o los tejados de la localidad donde él vive, un lugar en el que la nieve no parece ser un componente habitual del entorno. Paul descubre que estas fantasías son para él mucho más significativas y agradables que la vida real, que progresivamente va perdiendo sentido e interés. El prefiere imaginar —y lo hace con total entrega espiritual— la lenta caída de los copos, los pasos del cartero sobre la nieve y los ruidos cotidianos de su ciudad, apagados por la presencia del blanco elemento. Estas imaginaciones suponen para Paul un acto de afirmación de su carácter de individuo frente a la colectividad, un acto de disfrute personal, y también constituyen una protección, una defensa contra el mundo real:

“The thing was above all a secret, something to be preciously concealed from Mother and Father; and to that very fact it owed an enormous part of its deliciousness. It was like a peculiarly beautiful trinket to be carried unmentioned in one’s trouser-pocket—a rare stamp, an old coin, a few tiny gold links found trodden out of shape on the path in the park, a pebble of carnelian, a sea shell distinguishable from all others by an unusual spot or stripe— and, as if it were any one of these, he carried around with him everywhere a warm and persistent and increasingly beautiful sense of possession. Nor was it only a sense of possession—it was also a sense of protection. It was as if, in some delightful way, his secret gave him a fortress, a wall behind which he could retreat into heavenly seclusion”. (p. 332).

El niño también se da cuenta de las desventajas que la cuestión de la nieve, su secreta y silenciosa posesión, presenta, en especial porque puede originar incompreensión e, incluso, conflicto con sus padres. Se ve abocado así a llevar una especie de doble vida. De un lado tiene que ser el individuo Paul Hasleman una persona del mundo real que tiene obligaciones familiares y sociales. De otro lado, tiene que explorar el atrayente mundo recién descubierto. Intentar guardar el equilibrio en una situación de estas características constituye un esfuerzo baldío. Por ello, de forma progresiva, el niño encuentra dificultades en articular adecuadamente su conducta habitual con su “vivencia” de la nieve. Así,

“Each day it was harder to get out of bed, to go to the window, to look out at the—as always— perfectly empty and snowless street. Each day it was more difficult to go through the perfunctory motions of greeting Mother and Father at breakfast, to reply to their questions, to put his books together and go to school. And at school, how extraordinarily hard to conduct with success simultaneously the public life and the life that was secret”. (p. 339).

Paul comienza a perder la necesidad del contacto con las personas que lo rodean y únicamente se siente a gusto en su secreta y hermosa vida interior. En ella, la nieve llegará a tener voz y movimientos propios.

Se trata de un típico proceso en espiral hacia la neurosis, la esquizofrenia y la locura. Es una cuestión que también se plantea en algunos relatos de Poe, como el comportamiento cambiante del personaje masculino de *Ligeia* o la evolución mental de Roderick en *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Pero Paul Hasleman, en la ficción de Aiken, no tiene nada que ver con los clichés degenerativos que utiliza Poe. Paul no es un personaje frío y acartonado, sino un personaje natural que cala hondo.

Pero es en el aspecto formal de *Silent Snow*, *Secret Snow* donde se advierte apreciablemente la influencia de Poe. Los esquemas constructivos y la musicalidad textual que caracterizan una buena parte de la narrativa de Poe³ también los encontramos en este relato manejados por Aiken con la misma maestría y el mismo efecto.

“and then, the silence seemed to deepen, to spread out, to become *worldlong* and *worldwide*, to become *timeless* and *shapeless*, and to center inevitably and *rightly*...” (p. 351).

“...it should have been *so* wonderful, *so* permanent...”(p. 333).

“the long white ragged lines were *drifting* and *sifting across* the street, *across* the faces of the old houses, *whispering* and *hushing*, making little triangles of white in the corners of the cobblestones, *seething* a little when the wind blew them over the ground to a drifted corner; and so it would be all day, *getting deeper and deeper and silenter and silenter*”. (p. 335).

“...and then, *progressively nearer, progressively louder*, the double knock at each door, the *crossings* and *recrossing* of the street...” (p. 334).

“Snow *growing* heavier each day, *muffling* the world, *hiding* the ugly and *deadening* increasingly —above all— the steps of the postman”. (p. 337).

“A ghost of snow *falling* in the bright sunlight, *softly* and *steadily*, *floating* and *turning* and *pausing*, *soundlessly meeting* the snow...” (p. 343).

“...with a something else, unnameable, which was just faintly and *deliciously terrifying*...” (p. 343).

“...that the whole thing was just *exactly* and *logically* and *absurdly* what he ought to have known”. (p. 344).

“...as the snow *soothingly* and *beautifully* encroached and deepened.” (p. 345).

“Nor was it only *a sense of possession* —it was also *a sense of protection*.” (p. 332).

“The green and yellow continents *passed* and *repassed*...” (p. 333).

"...he had thought of the *postman*, he remembered the *postman*." (p. 334).

"*It said peace, it said remoteness, it said cold, it said sleep.*" (p. 334).

"...the muffled footsteps thumping and slipping on the snow-sheated cobbles." (p. 335).

"...bell ringing thingly and softly..." (p. 335).

"*It was below the first house that he heard them; and then, a few days later, it was below the second house that he heard them; and a few days later again below the third. Gradually, gradually...*" (p. 336).

"*perhaps the second day, perhaps the sixth...*" (p. 336).

"*How could he be sure? How could he be sure just when the delicious progress had become clear?.*" (p. 336).

"This was, after all, only *what* he had expected. It was even *what* pleased him, *what* rewarded him." (p. 336).

"The thing was his own, belonged to *no one else*. *No one else* knew about it..." (p. 336).

"*The geometry is very easy. The history is very dull. The geography is very interesting.*" (p. 337).

"...*the silent snow, the secret snow.*" (p. 337).

"*It was irresistible. It was miraculous. Its beauty was simply beyond anything, beyond speech as beyond thought...*" (p. 338).

"*One must get up, one must go to breakfast, one must talk...*" (p. 338).

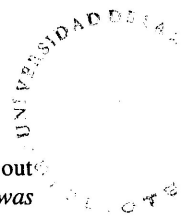
"*How was one to manage? How was one to explain? Would it be safe to explain? Would it be absurd? Would it...*" (p. 338).

"These thoughts *came and went, came and went...*" (p. 338).

"Their presence was *something* almost palpable, *something* he could stroke..." (p. 338).

"...*without* closing his eyes, and *without* ceasing to see Miss Buell..." (p. 338).

"It was falling more *swiftly* and *heavily*; the sound of its seething was *more* distinct, *more* soothing, *more* persistent." (p. 338-339).



"*Each day it was harder to get out of bed, to go to the window, to look out at the —as always— perfectly empty and snowless street. Each day it was more difficult...*" (p. 339).

"And at school, how extraordinary hard to conduct with success simultaneously the public *life* and the *life* that was secret." (p. 339).

"There were *many kinds of* bricks in the sidewalks, and laid in *many kinds of* pattern. The garden walks too were various, *some of* wooden palings, *some of* plaster, *some of* stone." (p. 340).

"*Beyond the thoughts of trees, mere elms. Beyond the thoughts of sidewalks, mere stone, mere brick, mere cement. Beyond the thoughts of his own shoes...*" (p. 342).

"*it was desirable to be kind to Mother and Father ... but it was also desirable to be resolute.*" (p. 342).

"But this too was a notion which he only vaguely and grazingly entertained." (p. 342).

"something which already *teased at the corners of his eyes, teasing also at the corner of his mind.*" (p. 342).

"Its beauty was paralyzing —beyond *all words, all experience, all dream.*" (p. 343).

"*He was being hurried —he was being rushed.*" (p. 344).

"...he would make his approach down the snow-filled street *so soundlessly, so secretly...*" (p. 344).

"A *vague* feeling of disappointment came over him; a *vague* sadness, as if he felt himself deprived of *something* which he had looked forward to, *something* much prized." (p. 345).

"...the audible compass of the world thus daily *narrowed, narrowed, narrowed...*" (p. 345).

"...and submitted silently to the usual thumpings and tappings." (p. 345).

"But it was all a nuisance, *this necessity for* resistance, *this necessity for* attention." (p. 347).

"Then I will begin to tell you *something* new! *something* white! *something* cold! *something* sleepy! *something* of *cease and peace...*" (p. 348).

"His father's voice came *softly* and *coldly* then." (p. 348).

"*something* alien had come into the room —*something* hostile." (p. 352).

Otros elementos constructivos también son manejados para crear una sensación de ritmo, una resonancia musical. Las enumeraciones descriptivas y las concatenaciones de interrogaciones producen estos efectos:

“a rare stamp, an old coin, a few tiny gold links ... a pebble of carnelian, a sea shell...” (p. 332).

“In the little delta... were lost twigs..., dead matches, a rusty horse-chestnut burr, a small concentration of sparkling gravel..., a fragment of eggshell, a streak of yellow sawdust... a brown pebble, and a broken feather.” (p. 341).

“It was his own little cobbled hill-street, his own house, the little river at the bottom of the hill, the grocer’s shop with the cardboard man in the window.” (p. 343).

“How was one to manage? How was one to explain? Would it be safe to explain? Would it be absurd? Would it merely mean that he would get into some obscure kind of trouble?” (p. 338).

“Had he indeed ever left his room, in all this time? since that very first morning? Was the whole progress still being enacted there, was it still the same morning, and himself not yet wholly awake? And even now, had the postman not yet come round the corner?” (p. 343).

“Did it mean.. that he would never hear the postman again? that tomorrow morning the postman would already have passed the house, in a snow by then so deep as to render his footsteps completely inaudible? that he would made his approach down the snow-filled street... that he, Paul Hasleman, there lying in bed, would not have waked in time, or, waking, would have heard nothing?.” (p. 344).

“What was this? this cruel disturbance? this act of anger and hate?” (p. 352).

“...was he to be defrauded of the one thing he had so wanted —to be able to count... the last two or three solemn footsteps, as they finally approached his own door? Was it all going to happen, at the end, so suddenly? or indeed, had it already happened? with no slow and subtle gradations of menace, in which he could luxuriate?” (p. 345).

Pero no se agotan aquí las posibilidades rítmicas de la lengua literaria. La repetición acompañada de complementos o de otros elementos de la frase también sugiere una sensación rítmica:

“The wrens were enjoying *other houses, other nests, remoter trees.*” (p. 342).

“...where *the birds and butterflies*, and even *the snakes*, were like living jewels.” (p. 333).

“It was *in the corners of the room, ...under the sofa, behind the half-opened door...*” (p. 348).

“Miss Buell was now telling them *about the tropics, the jungles, the steamy heat of equatorial swamp...*” (p. 333).

“...and without ceasing to see *Miss Buell and the schoolroom and the globe and the freckless* on Deirdre’s neck.” (p. 338).

“other branches very *thin and fine and black and desiccated.*” (p. 340).

“...as if one were merely *a trained seal, or a performing dog, or a fish...*” (p. 347).

Notas

1. La doctrina de Poe sobre el relato viene implícita en sus varias decenas de creaciones y aparece recogida de modo formal a propósito del juicio crítico que hace de *Twice-Told Tales* de Nathaniel Hawthorne y en otras referencias dispersas en su obra crítica y en *Marginalia*. Además, teniendo en cuenta el carácter manifiestamente global y unitario de la teoría literaria de Poe, junto a las consideraciones doctrinarias establecidas para la narrativa breve, hay que tener en cuenta que la mayoría de los principios teóricos de la poesía —que Poe recoge de modo especial en *The Philosophy of Composition* y *The Poetic Principle*— son aplicables al cuento, siempre en el marco de unas coordinadas generales del hecho literario. Del conjunto de todas estas consideraciones teóricas se desprende que el proceso creativo del relato supone para el escritor americano la síntesis armónica de diversos factores imprescindibles e interdependientes.
2. Manejo la edición publicada por Wallace y Mary Stegner, *Great American Short Stories*, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1970, pp. 332-353.
3. Cfr. F. J. Castillo, “Notas sobre la estructuración sintagmática ternaria en la narrativa de Edgar A. Poe”, RCEI, 5, 1982, pp. 95-102, y “*The Fall of the House of Usher*: acercamiento a su ritmo narrativo”, RCEI, 8, 1984, pp. 149-160.