

## “Relevancy” and Its Vagaries in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”

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1. In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe’s notoriously fictitious account of the genesis of “The Raven” (58), we are told that “it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word ‘Nevermore.’ In fact, it was the very first which presented itself” (679). If, as Lacan repeatedly points out in *Ecrits*, truth does sometimes have “the structure of fiction” (451, 742, 808), this certainly applies to Poe’s observation, and it matters little whether, in the words of T.S. Eliot, “[t]he Philosophy of Composition is a hoax, or a piece of self-deception, or a more or less accurate record of Poe’s calculations in writing the poem” (41). In Poe’s reflexive wording the word “nevermore” was not really the object of a deliberate choice: by presenting “itself”—much as the bird who, one evening, came tapping at his speaker’s chamber door—, the word seemed like the best possible choice to convey the melancholy tone he was quite deliberately aiming for. Its addressor, however, remains concealed behind the reflexive syntax of the verb. For all the deliberateness he exhibits throughout “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe thus admits that the word “nevermore” *addressed itself* to him. Likewise the crescendo effect obtained by the speaker’s increasing agony each time the bird pronounces the word “nevermore” is depicted by Poe not as an “opportunity” but as something which was “forced upon [him] in the progress of the construction” (680).
2. In the wording of Poe’s critical metanarrative, “The Raven” thus proceeded from a double erasure of the positions of addressor and addressee. Parallel to this gesture was Poe’s dismissal of its theme’s possible relevance to his own private circumstances. The list of losses Poe personally suffered in the years preceding the writing of “The Raven” is quite long, though not unusual for the time: it included the death of his mother the actress Eliza Arnold Poe from tuberculosis when Poe was not yet 3 years old, the death of his surrogate mother Jane Stith Stanard in 1824, of his foster mother Frances Allan in 1829, and of his brother Henry

in 1831. Yet in “The philosophy of Composition” Poe denies that loss has any personal relevance to himself. Instead, he reduces it to a “pretext for the continuous use of the one word ‘nevermore’” (679): much as the raven’s words to Poe’s fictitious narrator, loss is thus implicitly declared irrelevant to the writer, one dismissal being the mirror image of the other.

3. If, therefore, as is widely acknowledged by critics, a strategy of *denial* underlies the speaker’s deafness to the bird’s message addressed to him in the inverted form of a “nevermore” symmetrical to the unspoken “forever” which is the formula of his self-cancelling desire to perpetuate the death of desire by electing the limbo of melancholy as his permanent address, the concept of address proves central to Poe’s own account of the dynamics of his most memorable poem, including in what he keeps concealed despite all his seeming willingness to afford his readers a more than generous glimpse into the artist’s workshop. The success of “The Raven” is indeed contingent on its speaker’s initial failure to fill the place of the addressee, and its dramatic build-up a direct function of the slowly dawning “relevancy” of the bird’s mechanical croakings to the narrator’s predicament. Whether it is deposited in volumes of “forgotten lore” or embodied in the form of Athena’s bust, knowledge is superabundant in Poe’s poetic narrative whose underlying theme boils down to the question: how does this knowledge address a subject, and what subject does it address?
4. Reduced to its narrative contents, “The Raven” may be said to trace a letter’s itinerary from “the Night’s Plutonian shore” to “the pallid bust of Pallas just above [the speaker’s] chamber door.” Its plot, in other words, revolves around a change of address and its painfully slow decoding by a speaker whom Poe paradoxically portrays as an adroit reader, skilled in elucidating “forgotten lore”—one thanks to whom signifiers which would otherwise be dead letters are salvaged from oblivion; a restorer of extinct signifiers’ broken trajectory, who obtusely refuses to perceive the relevance of the single word conveyed to him in the form of the refrain “nevermore” by the raven from across the river of forgetfulness, i.e., from the locus of the Other as automaton or “pro-phet,” that which addresses and speaks *for* the subject as the depository of unconscious knowledge yet unacknowledged as truth.
5. This resistance on behalf of the speaker partially stems from the a-subjective nature of the message and the uncertainty surrounding its origin. From the outset, the narrator’s hermeneutic know-how is mobilized in order to answer two seemingly straightforward questions: whom does the rapping address? What does it convey? The answer to these queries is stated in the third stanza, where the line “T’is some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door” (l. 16) marks the beginning of the interpretive process. Of course, there is reason to doubt, at this stage, whether “interpretive” is the right adjective pertaining to what hardly qualifies as a sign. At first sight, the initial rapping is a letter whose

message precludes multiple readings: it betokens a presence behind the door, or at the very least a physical cause, thus corresponding to Peirce's notion that "the index is physically connected with its object" or even more to the point:

A Sign degenerate in the lesser degree, is an Obsistent Sign, or Index, which is a Sign whose significance of its Object is due to its having a genuine Relation to that Object, irrespective of the Interpretant. Such, for example, is the exclamation "Hi!" as indicative of present danger, or a rap at the door as indicative of a visitor. ("Minute Logic")

6. Readers familiar with Poe's other poems, however, immediately suspect that what the narrator later calls "the beating of my own heart" (l. 15) may be the true source of the knocks heard at his chamber door, notably in light of "Ulalume" (61), another text of mourning where Poe revisits the *topos* of *psychomachia* in order to stage an inner monologue in the form of the speaker's seeming dialogue with "Psyche," i.e., his own soul. If the rapping at the door is read as a projection of the speaker's own heartbeat, then the raven itself may prove a projection of the speaker's bereft psyche, in which case his description of a Gothic interior (a chamber wrapped in darkness, with a few "dying embers" [l. 8] in the hearth, "purple curtains" [l. 13] hanging from the walls, and a "sculptured bust" [l. 53] above its door) resolves into a trope of his own mind, and what references to liminality are scattered throughout the text (shore, chamber door) mark a porous boundary that does not only separate the narrator's study from what lies outside, but also two distinct inner spaces, the space of remembrance, and that of forgetfulness, placed under the aegis of the two symmetrically stressed trisyllabic signifiers "nevermore" and "nepenthe" (l. 82). While the trajectory of address can be followed across the limit between these two adjacent spaces, it is thus from the start filtered through the prism of metaphor, and what few indices seem available to the speaker immediately break down into plurivocal signs—an effect which is only amplified by the paradoxical temporality presiding over address in certain sections of the poem.

7. Significantly when he first musters the courage to address his presumed visitor in stanza IV, the narrator speaks to a closed door *before* he has had a chance to ascertain the origin of the rapping:

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,  
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;  
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,  
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,  
That I scarce was sure I heard you" — here I opened wide the door;—  
Darkness there and nothing more.

(19-24)

8. Meaning being thus anticipated, the letter is read before the door/envelope has been opened, so that the response here precedes the Other's address, thus situating it in the future anterior. In this reversed temporality the other's message can only be construed as having been

spoken retroactively, from a future that precedes the response it elicits—a fact which, it deserves to be pointed out, is quite consonant with several other data. First, Poe’s own statement in “The Philosophy of Composition” that “the poem may be said to have its beginning—at the end” (680), since in its alleged genesis the refrain “nevermore” pre-dated the questions which, in its *diegesis*, precede it. Second, the conflicting tenses in certain versions of the relative clause “whom the angels name Lenore,” where the verb is conjugated in the preterit. Though this may be a misprint, since it is only found in 2 out of the 20 printings of the poem that came out between 1845 and 1850, it may also be a bit of a *felix culpa*. By situating in the past an action supposed to be contemporaneous to the time of utterance, when Lenore, now conversant with “the angels,” can no longer be named in the sense of “addressed,” by the living, the preterit contributes to unsettling the moment of her naming, i.e., of her being *addressed* by name, and removes it into the same paradoxical temporal sphere as that in which the message mentioned above is sent and received.

9. That the time of address is out of joint in “The Raven” also becomes clear in how the speaker not only addresses his visitor prematurely but also endorses his own utterance belatedly. Indeed, the origin of the speaker’s own utterances suffers from the same indeterminacy as the knocking he hears at his chamber door, as is evidenced by the fifth stanza:

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,  
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;  
But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,  
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore!"  
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!" —  
Merely this, and nothing more.

(25-30)

10. Caught between two echoes of itself, the origin of invocation becomes nearly untraceable here due to the odd backwards logic and syntax of the penultimate and antepenultimate lines, “And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, ‘Lenore!’/ This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, ‘Lenore!’” What the speaker calls “the only word there spoken” appears to be designated by the deictic “this.” It becomes clear, however, that the first mention of “the whispered word ‘Lenore!’” actually refers to an echo of the narrator’s own whisper, although the use of the impersonal passive form and the order in which the two whispers are mentioned (first the reverberation, then its origin) both make it virtually impossible to decide which of the two utterances precedes the other: while the tenor of the message is easily identifiable, its sender remains in the dark. It is a letter whose content, being reduced to a single proper name, becomes formally indistinguishable from its missing signature. In Poe’s symptomatology of mourning and melancholia, the shadow of the object falling upon the ego translates into the grieving speaker’s own name being thus placed under erasure by the name of his lost lover.

11. In this light, what elements of foreshadowing the poem contains paradoxically contribute to substituting for the linear trajectory of inter-subjective address the circularity of self-address in the very formal make-up of Poe's poetic narrative. The descriptive detail, "each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor" (l. 8), where the embers are seen crossing the limit of the hearth, prefigures the raven crossing the night's Plutonian shore. The poem thus functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy where the irruption of the prophet-bird is staged metaphorically before it takes place. By virtue of the bird's address of "nevermore" crossing a threshold to haunt the speaker being inscribed in the text's narrative fabric, foreshadowing thus redoubles in its letter, i.e., on the level of narrative technique, the scenario in which we have seen the narrator apostrophizing his visitor from behind a closed door, i.e., reading the message before unsealing it.
12. At work in the poem are two contradictory forces which affect the destiny of its letter, and it does not come as much of a surprise that those are directly brought to bear on the word "Nevermore." In its unrelenting returns, "nevermore" partially functions as an increasingly meaningless dead weight or "burden" that drags down each stanza towards its unavoidable close. Yet depending on whether the word appears within or without quotes, as foreign to or incorporated within the speaker's discourse, it is also an infinitely pliable signifier whose automaton-like reiterations — a burden being also a refrain — push the poem forward by bringing the subject closer to the moment of encounter when the gap is bridged between un-addressed knowledge and a truth which bears added "relevancy," be it at the cost of an expropriation or forced change of address, namely the substitution of one allegory for another, since in the poem's final stanza through a metaphorical displacement, the raven supersedes Athena's owl on "the pallid bust of Pallas" (l. 104): the allegory of loss thus ultimately dethrones the allegory of knowledge while the signifier "nevermore" asserts its mastery as the quintessence — or degree zero — of elegiac/lyrical address deploring loss and proclaiming its inevitability in a perfect merger of the familiar *topoi* of *ubi sunt* and *memento mori*.
13. Quoth Poe in "The Philosophy of Composition": "It will be observed that the words, 'from out my heart,' involve the first metaphorical expression in the poem" (684). The poem's climax thus corresponds with the delivery of its metaphorical meaning, concomitant with the completion of its speaker's hermeneutic quest. The text as a whole thus appears to have followed a vector from misreading—as in the raven being mistaken for a sign of hope in stanza X—to interpretation. This trajectory culminating in the final disappearance of the quotes keeping "nevermore" at a distance from the speaker's predicament and utterances, predictably translates into a rhetorical shift from metonymy to metaphor. The metonymic order prevailed in the narrator's mental processes "linking/fancy unto fancy" (69-70) as well as in the formal make-up of the stanzas

where concatenated rhymes abound (“unbroken/token/spoken”, ll. 26-7, “that is/lattice/thereat is,” ll. 33-4). As the raven’s address reaches its final destination and fulfills its destiny by naming the speaker’s own melancholy fate simultaneously to the final vanishing of the quotes, as the speaker recognizes himself to be that “unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster/ Followed fast and followed faster” (ll. 63-4), metaphor catches up with him and displaces metonymy as the poem’s master trope. The visual equivalent of this process is the paradigmatic superimposition of the raven’s shadow over the speaker’s soul in the lines, “And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/ Shall be lifted – nevermore!” (ll. 107-8). Though there is no evidence that Freud was familiar with Poe’s poem, those lines seem oddly consonant with his description of melancholia as that mechanism whereby “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (156).

14. Organizing this anachronistic encounter between two texts is a gesture which, of course, creates its own problems in terms of address. Given a subject to whom this poem is not addressed directly, and who nonetheless receives it, namely a post-Freudian reader who notices the a posteriori “relevancy” of this text to Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*: by taking upon him- or herself the task of ascertaining the truth of Freud’s text, this reader also verifies in the act of reading the Lacanian view that “a letter always reaches its destination” (*Ecrits* 41), which turns him or her — into a purveyor of truth in charge of guaranteeing that the message sent from “the night’s Plutonian shore” is delivered to the right address — or rather, to the right *addresses*, since this situation is further complicated by the poem’s pathos, which narrows the gap between the speaker, in his increasing subjection to the signifier “nevermore,” and the reading subject, increasingly pressured into identifying with the function of the addressee as the refrain hits closer and closer to home and the quotes disappear. As the poem draws to a close, what Poe calls “this revolution of thought, or fancy, on the lover’s part” upon discovering the raven’s emblematic significance, “is intended to induce a similar one on the part of the reader” (683). What is at stake in this mechanism goes well beyond empathy: Poe unveils here what may be the paranoid core of all readings—critical readings included—of lyrical address into which the critic cannot help but read—ever more.

15. Having raised the issue of readerly paranoia, it seems only fair that we should make a detour via one of Poe’s possible sources of inspiration in writing “The Raven” (Mabbott 353), namely the French poet Jean-Baptiste Louis Gresset (1709-1777), who wrote a longish comic and satiric poem about a talking parrot called *Ver-vert* (1734) that speaks both nonsense and religious truths. The bird of the tale is transported from his native shores to a convent where he becomes the nuns’ pet. Here are a few lines from the poem in the original French:

Ver-Vert (c’étoit le nom du personnage)  
transplanté là de l’indien rivage,

fut, jeune encor, ne sachant rien de rien,  
au susdit cloître enfermé pour son bien ;  
il étoit beau, brillant, leste et volage,  
aimable et franc comme on l'est au bel âge ;  
né tendre et vif, mais encore innocent ;  
bref, digne oiseau d'une si sainte cage,  
par son caquet digne d'être en couvent.  
Pas n'est besoin, je pense, de décrire,  
les soins des sœurs, des nones, c'est tout dire ;  
et chaque mère, après son directeur,  
n'aimoit rien tant ; même dans plus d'un cœur,  
ainsi l'écrit un chroniqueur sincère,  
souvent l'oiseau l'emporta sur le pere.  
Il partageoit dans ce paisible lieu,  
tous les sirops dont le cher pere en Dieu,  
grace aux bienfaits des nonettes sucrées,  
réconfortoit ses entrailles sacrées.  
Objet permis à leur oisif amour,  
Ver-Vert étoit l'ame de ce séjour ;  
exceptez-en quelques vieilles dolentes,  
des jeunes cœurs jalouses surveillantes,  
il étoit cher à toute la maison.  
N'étant encor dans l'âge de raison,  
libre, il pouvoit et tout dire et tout faire ;  
il étoit sûr de charmer et de plaire.  
Des bonnes sœurs égayant les travaux,  
il becquetoit et guimpes et bandeaux :  
il n'étoit point d'agréable partie,  
s'il n'y venoit briller,  
caracoller, papillonner, siffler, rossignoler ;  
il badinoit, mais avec modestie,  
avec cet air timide et tout prudent,  
qu'une novice a même en badinant.  
Par plusieurs voix interrogé sans cesse,  
il répondoit à tout avec justesse.  
Tel autrefois César, en même tems,  
dictoit à quatre, en stiles différens.  
[...]

On juge bien qu'étant à telle école  
point ne manquoit du don de la parole ;  
l'oiseau disert, hormis dans les repas,  
tel qu'une none il ne déparloit pas :  
bien est-il vrai qu'il parloit comme un livre,  
toujours d'un ton confit en sçavoir vivre.

16. This poem's comic dimension is a feature that will be worth remembering later on when we examine the same feature in "The Raven." I will also return to the threat that Gresset's bird, in pre-Flaubertian fashion, posed to Catholic theology.
17. For the time being I want to point out the premise that Poe's poem and its forebear have in common, namely the seeming relevance of the birds' squawkings to human affairs. In both instances a specific *Che vuoi?* is addressed to the reader, more precisely: what do you want to believe? In other words: out of a set of meaningless, purely imitative sounds, do you wish to construct a paranoid scenario? As is the case in the convent where

the parrot Ver-vert initially prospers before being cast out into the world, the increasing relevancy of the raven's "nevermore" allows the speaker to entertain the fantasy that an Other of the symbolic Other controls the seemingly mechanical, meaningless repetition of the refrain and orchestrates its rhythmical returns. This leads Slavoj Žižek to observe that

This "Other of the Other" is exactly the Other of paranoia: the one who speaks through us without our knowing it, who controls our thoughts, who manipulates us through the apparent "spontaneity" of jokes [...]. The paranoid construction enables us to escape the fact that "the Other does not exist" (Lacan) —that it does not exist as consistent, closed order—to escape the blind, contingent automatism, the constitutive stupidity of the symbolic order. (18)

18. It is precisely this kind of construction which underlies T.S. Eliot's lamenting the fact that "[a]n irresponsibility towards the meaning of words is not infrequent with Poe" (32). Eliot also writes:

Poe had, to an exceptional degree, the feeling for the incantatory element in poetry, of that which may, in the most nearly literal sense, be called "the magic of verse." [... His poetry] has the effect of an incantation which, because of its very crudity, stirs the feelings at a deep and almost primitive level. But, in his choice of the word which has the right sound, Poe is by no means careful that it should have also the right sense. (31)

19. Irresponsibility is a shortcoming found in one who will not answer for his words or actions. An irresponsible author, quite literally, is one whose command over his material is flawed, one whose claim to *authorship* is not backed by his *authority* over the verbal medium that he uses and, at times, misuses. Eliot's adoption of the double negation "not infrequent" shows clearly where in his view the chief problem lies, namely in Poe's own in-consistency or "lack of coherence" (35), as Eliot puts it in "From Poe to Valéry," in his inability to guarantee that "the exigencies of rhyme" (33) will always come second after those of "sense." Eliot's litotes, the trope of self-restraint par excellence, acts as an antidote to Poe's propensity to shun his own duty as the all-controlling addressor/originator of his poem and his all-too willing surrender to the imperatives and vagaries of the letter. It is interesting to note that in its own ambiguity (since "not infrequently" does not exactly mean the same thing as "often"), Eliot's formula also betrays his own uneasy position as self-appointed upholder of the fundamental law that "the dictionary meaning of words cannot be disregarded with impunity" (32) all the while acknowledging the possibility that "the sense may be apprehended almost unconsciously" (32), in other words, that the workings of the signifier exceed the boundaries set by dictionary definitions.

20. A case in point, in "The Raven," is the statue that Poe's eponymous bird chooses as his permanent address. In "The Philosophy of Composition" we are told that "the bust of Pallas [was] chosen, first, as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, Pallas, itself" (682). The connotative potential of the signifier "Pallas," however, does not limit itself to the somewhat vague



effect that Poe designates under the label of “sonorousness.” It does not suffice to observe that the protracted vowel sound in the word’s initial phonemes [pae:l] adds to the dominantly dark tonality of the poem as a whole, especially when brought into close association with the otherwise unrelated adjective “pallid,” in line 104, thus implementing Poe’s design to impart to the dénouement “a tone of the most profound seriousness” (682). To the extent that the *graphemes* that the words “pallas” and “pallid” share in common are homophonous with the word “pall,” designating a heavy cloth draped over a coffin, they also fore-shadow (when they are first heard in line 41) and/or reiterate in the *letter* of the text the casting of the pall of melancholy over the narrator’s soul already metaphorized in the form of the raven’s “shadow” in the final stanza, thus contributing to the mechanism of textual self-address that I pointed out earlier. Equally noteworthy is the fact that “Pallas” anagrammatically contains the word “alas” which captures the deploring tone of the poem, a feature that may be more than fortuitous given the reference to Jeremiah (l. 89), the prophet after whom the word “jeremiad,” i.e., a specific form of *lament* was coined. Elsewhere the bust is described as “plac-id,” almost as if to direct the reader’s attention to the infinity plasticity of the signifier “Pallas.” Like the embers which cast their ghost upon the floor, the night’s Plutonian shore has sent to the narrator’s chamber its own ghost in the shape of the ungainly bird who, by roosting on the bust of Athena quite literally turns the statue into a haunted Pallas/palace, thereby directing the reader towards “The Fall of the House of Usher.” It so happens that this text published six years earlier contains a reference to what may be the origin of Poe’s inspiration in writing “The Raven,” a reference which happens to be situated in the immediate vicinity of the poem placed at the center of the tale, exactly two paragraphs below “The Haunted Palace.” In his discussion of “The Raven”’s possible precursors, Mabbott points out that “in Roderick Usher’s library (in “The Fall of the House of Usher” of 1839) Poe placed the poem *Ver-vert* (1734) by Jean-Baptiste Louis Gresset, which”, as we have seen, “concerns a parrot to whose remarks more meaning is attached than the poor bird understands” (Mabbott 353). Not unlike the purloined letter as phallic signifier in Lacan’s reading of Poe’s tale, the locus of origin (of the poem) is thus located in plain sight, or rather, within earshot, in the homophony that unites the signifiers “palace” and “Pallas.” In some respects “The Raven” may be seen as the poetic translation of the logic unveiled by Lacan in “The Purloined Letter,” notably through the obsessive recurrence of the refrain “nevermore” which brings to mind Derrida’s objection to Lacan: “Le phallus grace à la castration, reste toujours à sa place, dans la topologie transcendantale dont nous parlions plus haut. Il y est indivisible, et donc indestructible, comme la lettre qui en tient lieu” (493). In light of the previous analysis, however, I would suggest that in order for this letter to reach its poetic destination, it needs to be opened in the sense that its entire phonic and graphemic spectrum needs to be analyzed, i.e., divided and multiplied unlike its

counterpart in Derrida's critique of Lacan's eagerness to uphold the "locality or indivisible materiality of the signifier" (493).

21. Which takes me back to the earlier observation that two antagonistic forces are brought to bear on the poem's dynamics. I indicated earlier that the poem's success depends on the increasing "relevancy" of its refrain, which, according to Poe, culminates with the metaphor "take thy beak from out my heart."

22. When Poe's speaker first opens his door, looking for the origin of the rapping he has just heard, we are told that "the darkness gave no token" (l. 127). The darkness, however, does eventually give a token, at least in the sense that a token is an *emblem*, the very function the raven turns out to have been intended to assume, as Poe himself points out in the last paragraph of "The Philosophy of Composition," referring to the last two stanzas of the poem: "The reader begins now to regard the Raven as emblematical—but it is not until the very last line of the very last stanza that the intention of making him emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* is permitted distinctly to be seen" (684). According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, the definition of an emblem is: "a didactic device consisting, normally, of three parts: a 'word' [...], a woodcut or engraving symbolically expressing the 'word', and a brief verse *explicatio* or application of the idea expressed in the combination" (217). Now it so happens that when the poem was first published by *The American Review* (in Feb. 1845), Poe signed it under the pseudonym Quarles. The emblematic reading programmed by this transparent reference to the author of a famous book of *Emblemes divine and moral, together with Hieroglyphicks of the life of man* (1635) did occur as planned, since in the *New York Morning Express* of Feb. 5, 1845 the editor wrote: "Nothing can be conceived more effective than the settled melancholy of the poet bordering upon sullen despair, and the personification of this despair in The Raven settling over the poet's door, to depart thence 'Nevermore'" (Qtd. In Mabbott 362). To anyone who remembers Poe's strictures against "the heresy of *The Didactic*" in "The Poetic Principle" (700), it may seem odd that he should have resorted to a literary form primarily devised to convey moral truths to "people who read little else save the Bible" (Mabbott 360) by means of illustrations aimed at reducing ambiguity in order to guarantee that the message was clearly understood. No less odd is the fact that while thus making sure that the letter reached its destination, Poe should have in the same gesture concealed the identity of its sender behind a pseudonym, all the while insisting on the latter's mastery over the effects targeted by his poem:

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its denouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the denouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention. (675)

23. Poe's own assertions of control over the means adduced in order to attain the desired impact on his readers are not simply the negative image of his speaker's own incompetence when it comes down to identifying the purport of the single sign that is addressed to him. I would suggest that by overemphasizing the role of the emblem as the poem's final destination, and the speaker's deciphering of this emblem as the token of his realization that "*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*" was the message addressed to him in the form of the raven's "nevermore," Poe intentionally un-names metaphor and thus unsettles the rhetorical status of the final trope, locating it at the wrong address in a gesture that is the precise counterpart of his signing the poem under the pseudonym "Quarles": much as the poem's author/addressor is spurious, so is its final trope, a metaphor passing itself off as a non-visual emblem in the image of a raven posing as an owl. When the signifier "nevermore" finally seems to hit home, what puts an end to metonymy is thus the election of a rhetorical false address.
24. That a misnomer is used by Poe to characterize the poem's final destination is itself emblematic of the ambiguities of naming in the rest of the text. While in line 12 the lost Lenore is said to be "nameless here forever more," meaning that naming Lenore is now the prerogative of "angels," this does not preclude her name recurring at regular intervals throughout the poem's eighteen stanzas. Death, to the speaker, thus seems a condition of nameable namelessness that precludes direct address, since when he whispers the word "Lenore," it is less of an apostrophe than a mere exclamation.
25. Mabbott's certainty that "'Nameless here' means 'not called on by name or spoken to in this world'" (Mabbott, note 12, p. 371) leads the editor of Poe's *Complete Poems* to italicize the deictic in his critical edition of the text. In the absence of a manuscript version of "The Raven," it is impossible to know whether the adverb was italicized by Poe himself. It is worth noting, however, that in the February 1845 issue of the *American Review*, which is the accepted first version of the poem as it was set in type from the manuscript, the word is not italicized, even though italics are used elsewhere in the text (on "is" and "she," for instance). Abbott's editorial intervention is thus quite misleading in its intent to make sure that, despite the deictic's slippery enunciatory status, it reaches what the critic deems to be its proper destination in the reader's interpretation of the location to which it is supposed to refer. The absence of italics in the original version, however, delimits a much more problematic textual space: the limbo of an a-topic "here" where Lenore may be declared "nameless" yet constantly invoked—a place where signifiers are left hovering and have no fixed address, and which merges the narrator's here and now, confined to the singularity of a particular "midnight dreary" and a specific "chamber" and the iterability implicit in the odd gnostic generalizations of the ninth stanza ("for we cannot... as 'Nevermore'") as well as in the reduplication of the metrical and phonological pattern of those other rooms or chambers which are the poem's stanzas. "The darkness gave no token" (27) may be

interpreted in the light of these observations, since “token” shares the same etymology as the German word “Zeichen” and the corresponding verb “zeigen,” both of which hark back to the Greek *deixis*. The darkness giving no token is thus intimately linked with the wavering status of the “here” from which the poem’s words are uttered: in other words, the undecidability of its address.

26. “It is certainly possible, in reading something in a language imperfectly understood, for the reader to find what is not there; and when the reader is himself a man of genius, the foreign poem read may, by a happy accident, elicit something important from the depths of his own mind, which he attributes to what he reads,” Eliot writes: Poe’s poetry thus places his readers in the reverse situation of that depicted in “The Purloined Letter,” at least to the extent that men of genius finding in Poe’s poems what is not there is pretty much the exact negative of incompetent police officers not finding in the minister’s apartment what is there all along.

27. I want to conclude this analysis with a reference to another man of psychoanalytical genius, taking my cue from yet another one of T.S. Eliot’s observations pertaining to the line, “In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.”

Since there is nothing particularly saintly about the raven, if indeed the ominous bird is not wholly the reverse, there can be no point in referring his origin to a period of saintliness, even if such a period can be assumed to have existed. We have just heard the raven described as stately; but we are told presently that he is ungainly, an attribute hardly to be reconciled, without a good deal of explanation, with stateliness. Several words in the poem seem to be inserted either merely to fill out the line to the required measure, or for the sake of a rhyme. (33)

28. The raven’s allegedly irreconcilable attributes may have already triggered mixed reactions even among Poe’s contemporaries, since the author felt the need to justify this contradiction in “The Philosophy of Composition”:

About the middle of the poem, also, I have availed myself of the force of contrast, with a view of deepening the ultimate impression. For example, an air of the fantastic- approaching as nearly to the ludicrous as was admissible- is given to the Raven’s entrance. He comes in ‘with many a flirt and flutter. (682)

29. Saintliness characterizes objects of worship. Stateliness has to do with the dignity conferred on such objects. Ungainliness, on the other hand, is a comic attribute. I would hypothesize that these features are compatible with the fact that as the purveyor of the law of finiteness the “lordly” raven functions in Poe’s text as the phallic signifier. Reduced to its imaginary trappings, the phallus, like Poe’s bird of ill omen, combines the opposite features of the venerable and the ludicrous in its life-giving power and fragility. His gendering is also problematic since he is addressed as “Sir [...] or Madam” (l. 20) then displays a “mien of lord or lady” (l. 40). Initially

glimpsed roosting on the speaker's "window lattice" (l. 33) he is caught within a frame like the object of fantasy, then breaks free of that frame to perch on the statue of the virgin goddess Athena and emerge as a signifier, a metaphor in emblematic trappings, a trope in either case, completing what Derrida referring to Lacan mockingly calls "le procès de rephallicisation comme trajet propre de la lettre" (474). Here we are once again reminded of the raven's less "stately" ancestor, Gresset's Ver-vert who, as I indicated earlier, did not belong in a convent anymore than Flaubert's parrot did in the holy trinity, since describing the nuns' fondness for the bird, Gresset irreverently points out that the it superseded God the father in the hearts of many of the Lord's servants:

même dans plus d'un cœur,  
ainsi l'écrit un chroniqueur sincère,  
souvent l'oiseau l'emporta sur le pere.

30. There follows in Gresset's poem a comparison between the parrot and Julius Caesar which, in Poe's own text, translates into the raven's "lordly" (47) attributes.

31. To close this discussion of address and its vagaries in "The Raven" it may be worth remembering a few observations from Lacan's development on drives and their vicissitudes, and their connection to the comic dimension.

La comédie nous fait retrouver ce que Freud nous a montré être présent dans l'exercice du non-sens.

Ce que nous voyons surgir, c'est le fond, quelque chose qui se profile au-delà de l'exercice de l'inconscient, et où l'exploration freudienne nous invite à reconnaître le point par où se démarque le Trieb [...]. Car le Trieb n'est pas loin de ce champ de Das Ding vers quoi je vous incite cette année à recentrer le mode sous lequel se posent autour de nous les problèmes. (*L'Éthique* 108)

32. These remarks follow a discussion of moral conscience as the begetter of a self-hatred which is not incompatible with the comic, as Lacan finds evidenced in the title of a Latin comedy called *He-who-punishes-himself*.

33. In Poe's own diagnosis of his melancholy speaker's symptoms, the character is said to slowly surrender to "that species of despair which delights in self-torture" (171). It is that "human thirst for self-torture" (176) which compels the speaker to find in the raven's mechanical "nevermore" a source of increased suffering despite the word's intrinsic meaninglessness, i.e. what Lacan calls "l'exercice du non-sens," an exercise which, on the narrator's part, involves creating ever-more relevant contexts to the bird's purely imitative croakings. That this pre-Freudian characterization of the workings of the death-drive is structurally if not artistically consonant with the comic element that T.S. Eliot found so disquietingly dissonant with the poem's otherwise sombre atmosphere, is borne out by Lacan's excursus on comic phallacy in the closing chapters of *Seminar VII*.

C'est dans la dimension tragique que s'inscrivent les actions et que nous sommes sollicités de nous repérer quant aux valeurs. C'est aussi bien d'ailleurs dans la dimension comique, et quand j'ai commencé de vous parler des formations de l'inconscient, comme vous le savez, c'est le comique que j'avais à l'horizon.

Disons [...] que le rapport de l'action au désir qui l'habite dans la dimension tragique s'exerce dans le sens d'un triomphe de la mort. Je vous ai appris à rectifier — triomphe de l'être pour la mort, formulé dans le *mé phunai* d'Œdipe, où figure ce *mé*, la négation identique à l'entrée du sujet, sur le support du signifiant. [...]

Dans la dimension comique, en première approximation, il s'agit, sinon de triomphe, du moins de jeu futile, dérisoire de la vision. Si peu que j'aie pu jusqu'à présent aborder devant vous le comique, vous avez pu voir qu'il s'agit du rapport de l'action au désir et de son échec fondamental à le rejoindre.

La dimension comique est créée par la présence en son centre d'un signifiant caché, mais qui, dans l'ancienne comédie, est là en personne — le phallus. Peu importe qu'on nous l'escamote par la suite, il faut simplement que nous nous souvenions que ce qui nous satisfait dans la comédie, nous fait rire, nous la fait apprécier dans sa pleine dimension humaine, l'inconscient non excepté, ce n'est pas tant le triomphe de la vie que son échappée, le fait que la vie glisse, se dérobe, fuit, échappe à tout ce qui lui est opposé de barrières, et précisément des plus essentielles, celles qui sont constituées par l'instance du signifiant.

Le phallus n'est rien d'autre qu'un signifiant, le signifiant de cette échappée. La vie passe, triomphe tout de même, quoi qu'il arrive. Quand le héros comique trébuche, tombe dans la mélasse, eh bien, quand même, petit bonhomme vit encore.

Le pathétique de cette dimension est, vous le voyez, exactement l'opposé, le pendant du tragique. Ils ne sont pas incompatibles, puisque le tragi-comique existe. (362)

34. Poe's stated rationale for introducing the comical element of the raven's ungainliness was the desire to maximize contrast and heighten the reader's thrill as it reaches its climax in the final stanza. The letter does, however, reach a slightly different destination. To mock Freud's own *Triebe und Tribschicksale* in parrot- or raven-like fashion, my tentative conclusion is that one of the most intriguing vagaries of the raven's address is that it also addresses the tragi-comic poetic vicissitudes of the death-drive.

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