

# Poe's Raven says more than "nevermore"

*O Corvo de Poe diz mais que "nunca mais"*

Renata Campello Teitelroit<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to analyze Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* in light of Freudian concepts and Romantic manifestos with the intention to identify traces that might lead one to believe that the poetic persona of the poem is, in fact, facing itself. This possibility stems from the impression that certain contrasts, at times paradoxical, in expressions, technique choices, as well as in subject matter, may reveal broader meanings to the poem *The Raven* and the essay "The Philosophy of Composition", especially regarding the unconscious. The theoretical reflections shed light on what the analysis of the poetic self may give away in terms of culture and of concerns inherent to the human condition. The argumentation is mainly based on Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) and "The uncanny" (1919), and on Dennis Pahl's essay "De-composing Poe's Philosophy" (1996).

**Keywords:** Poe; Freud; Poetic Self; Romanticism.

## RESUMO

O artigo ocupa-se em analisar o poema *O Corvo*, de Edgar Allan Poe, à luz de conceitos freudianos e de manifestos românticos, tendo a intenção de identificar traços que nos levem a crer que o eu lírico está, na verdade, em diálogo consigo mesmo. Tal possibilidade decorre da impressão de que certos contrastes dos quais o autor lança mão, por vezes paradoxais, em expressões, escolhas técnicas e temática, são capazes de revelar sentidos mais amplos tanto no poema *O Corvo* como no ensaio "A Filosofia da Composição", especialmente no que diz respeito ao inconsciente. A reflexão teórica lança luz acerca do que o eu lírico em questão pode expressar em termos culturais, bem como em termos de determinadas inquietações inerentes à condição humana. A argumentação baseia-se principalmente em "Luto e Melancolia" (1917) e "O Estranho" (1919), de Sigmund Freud, e no ensaio "De-composing Poe's Philosophy" (1996) de Dennis Pahl.

**Palavras-chave:** Poe; Freud; Poética; Eu Lírico; Romantismo.

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<sup>1</sup> Graduada em Letras pela Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). E-mail: rct92@hotmail.com

## Introduction

Many regard “The Philosophy of Composition”, Poe’s seemingly revealing account on his own poetic composition process, as a sort of hoax. As T. S. Eliot puts it, “*the ‘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*” (p.42, 1965). Dennis Pahl, in “De-composing Poe’s Philosophy”, shares a similar opinion and relates Poe’s possible self-deception in the essay to another possible self-deception of the poetic persona in the poem *The Raven*. I confess that my first reading of Poe’s explanation in question, years ago, and as an old fan of his work, might have been quite naive. Having read it for a second time, and then for a third time, I was able to notice that, leastways, in his attempt to ascribe composition to mere rationality, he lacks in throwing light to the essential in *The Raven*: emotion. Or even, in Freudian terms, to what is unconscious.

Imagination also seems to be cast aside, and significant factors such as the choice of the notorious word “nevermore”, as well as of the creature that utters it, come – almost supernaturally, as if by magic – to his mind (or to his chamber door), not holding any elucidatory resolution to the reader. Contradictorily, it might in fact serve to suggest what Poe himself denies at the very beginning: which is that writers, mostly poets, prefer to have people think that they elaborate their work

by means of a sort of “frenzy” or “intuition”. Poe seems to likewise deny his over-rationalizing thesis when, as indicated by Pahl in the above-mentioned article, he attempts to expiate on a poet’s workshop (fifth paragraph of the text) by emphatically mentioning pain and desperation. As to the particular (lengthy) sentence,

Most writers – poets in especial – prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy- an ecstatic intuition- and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought- at the true purposes seized only at the last moment- at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view- at the fully-matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable- at the cautious selections and rejections- at the painful erasures and interpolations- in a word, at the wheels and pinions- the tackle for scene-shifting- the step-ladders, and demon-traps- the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion*. (POE, 2004, p.3)

Pahl claims that “again Poe’s accumulation of details in a sentence that seems endless calls attention to anything but a notion of limitation and containment” (PAHL, 1996, p.6.), quite inconsistently, I would say. Other strong cases made by Pahl rely upon certain aspects of the poem’s rhetoric, such as the posing of questions to which the essay’s persona already

knows the answer for, as if in a rhetorical monologue, thus imitating the poem's persona, and the fact that the essay is curiously concluded by the poem's last stanza. The latter would suggest that the language of the essay is articulated "*as if having learned it from the poem by rote*" (PAHL, 1996, p.5) to then deduce that "*in the same way that the scholar comes under the shadow of the raven in the poem, Poe's 'Philosophy' comes under the shadow of the poem 'The Raven'*" (PAHL, 1996, p.5).

Moreover, Poe resorts to numerous subjective notions, such as Beauty, Melancholy and naturalness (e.g. "natural termination", p.15), preserving them unexplored and therefore personal, instinctive, intuitive and somewhat obscure; he also decides not to mention any emotional symptom or consequence triggered by mourning, treating melancholy merely as a powerful poetic topic – although his own language in the essay, and, most importantly, *The Raven*, gives it away by themselves. Thus, undoubtedly, Poe betrays himself throughout the essay.

One may query, though: does he deliberately do so? Or, in the case of a negative reply to this question, would not he be confused by his double, i.e. his poem? After all, the poem seems to be an extension of his psyche, as the raven seems to be the extension of the scholar's psyche, evoking a disquieting cloudiness. Such possibility may refer us to two concepts formulated – or, better said, sophisticated – by Sigmund Freud: the uncanny and the double.

## The uncanny and the double: structural and thematic contrasts

Freud's definition of the uncanny factor within anguish, in "The Uncanny", corresponds to a frightening element that remounts what is, actually, deeply familiar. Thus, we should discard the uncanny as a frightening element that is unfamiliar. Freud also discards the idea that the uncanny derives from intellectual disorientation, not discarding, however, that the uncanny may evoke intellectual disorientation. Freud begins by providing the reader with notes on the etymology of the word *heimlich*, out of German dictionaries, in order to support his definition.

Among the many nuances in meaning, there is one that coincides with its opposite: *unheimlich*. Such transition seems to come from the idea that much of what is familiar to some, is invariably unfamiliar to others. If we think of certain habits, such as one of a family having potatoes for breakfast, for instance, which might be unusual to other families, the very habit of having potatoes for breakfast can be both familiar and unfamiliar. The term may also refer to something that is kept occult, unseen, latent. The *unheimlich* locus is often regarded as a place that is haunted by ghosts. Freud, in the attempt to ground his theory of the unconscious, makes use of the term to corroborate the thesis of the unintentional return of the repressed. Needless to say, Freud additionally calls upon literature, analyzing it as he would

analyze his patients (always attentive to language), with the same purpose.

The Raven produces, predominantly, a disquieting effect. Such effect may be explained by Freud's return of the repressed in combination with his idea of double in case the raven be regarded as the poetic persona's double. Another Freudian insight can explain the cause for disquietude, dereliction and disturbance of the persona in question: the complex of castration, since the raven reminds the scholar that he has been deprived of his object of passion. A desire that has been repressed returns, in the form of a bird of yore, which is evidently also associated to death (this matter will be further approached in time), provoking a downfall. The double, or the duplicate, has its origins in childhood, in its every gradations and development steps.

According to my understanding, it depends upon the child's confusion of the self, at a moment when the child is not yet able to apprehend his/her own identity in relation to his/her mother, considering that, once, mother and child have shared a same body. This is, curiously, how Freud explains the psychotic personality. But the double derives as well from a child's natural development, throughout which consciousness is built, repressing what would compose the "I" of the past (more instinctive and emotional) to make room for the "I" of the present (more repressed and rational). The double is, actually, a token of the overcoming of childhood and of primitivism, guaranteeing survival: an auto-critical censorship. However, at the

moment when the figure of the double becomes somewhat disassociated to the self, and later strolls back, unexpectedly, it will likely take shape of something terrible.

An indication of loneliness which actuates terror is observable in the verses "This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "*Lenore!*"— / *Merely this and nothing more.*" At the beginning of the poem, the fact that the scholar converses with himself is marked, and the echo of his own words convey the meaning of a mirror. Later the reader acknowledges a disruption from rationality, a mental confusion, as if his double, as a raven, was painfully inflicting on him a warning sign: your primitive repressed fears exist and you shall retrieve them now. Axel Nesme in "Relevancy" and its vagaries in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*", provides us with pertinent remarks regarding Freud's concept of the uncanny in relation to *The Raven*:

[...] 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. [...] 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 [...] resolves into a trope of his own mind. (NESME, "Relevancy" and its vagaries in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, 2013, p.6)

The macabre raven, or a macabre self, announces what he dreads the most: his repressed and unachievable

desires. “Nevermore” thus stands for death and closure, but most importantly, to permanence: the bird will never leave his home (or his mind). In an alternative reading, what the bird represents is the unconscious made conscious.

In “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud regards mourning as a “regularly reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which have taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, or so on.” (p. vii, 1919) Melancholy, however, is characterized as prolonged mourning, and therefore pathological (we would perhaps call it depression nowadays). It is worth providing grief’s circumscription in Freud’s words:

The testing of reality, having shown that the loved object no longer exists, requires forthwith that all the libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to this object. Against this demand a struggle of course arises – it may be universally observed that man never willingly abandons a libido-position, not even when a substitute is already beckoning to him. (FREUD, 1919, p. viii)

The only notable difference in symptoms between grief and melancholy is that a melancholic person also presents a fall in self-esteem, which might culminate in self-reproaches and delusional expectations of self-punishment. The scholar in the poem seems to be suffering precisely from the latter. If that is so, it is not hard to devise his love for Lenore as likely obsessive, which is an indicator, to

Freud, of narcissist love. What the poem tells us about Lenore is scarce; she seems to be more of a figure to play a role, an accessory, than a real woman, since readers know nothing about her – would not one in love or in pain naturally refer to particularities of the significant other they miss? –, except for vestiges of her purity, which would set the feeling of grief more associated to loss of a more ideal nature. The real focus, on the other hand, is on the poetic persona’s own afflictions. All indicates that the “I” of the poem is prevailing, such as the self-centered feeling of melancholy.

### **Towards the self**

In order that we proceed, it is interesting to point out to brief notions of lyrical expression in generic terms. Lyricism is present in literary manifestations that present a set of traces in common. It is possible to say that there is a poetic (that is, literary) pattern, however diverse the texts and aesthetics may be, and even though there is constant interweaving of what we call literary genres. A text will be lyrical if it presents a combination of elements, such as subjectivity, imagery and rhythm, often dismissing temporal linearity or narrative logic. Perhaps the most relevant concept is that of subjectivity, also understood by the “I”. It is a central voice that expresses emotions, experiences, and psychic dispositions (the “states of the soul”). This notion is a first step to analysis. The rhythm is composed of repetitions of sounds, pauses and breaks, lending

itself to memorization while producing musicality and meaningful effects. In short, I would say that poetry is an exercise of imagination based upon rhythm, upon image and upon the intensity of expression of this "I", altogether.

Romanticism inaugurates not only new poetic principles, but a brand new and powerful vision of poetry. When we think, for instance, of a poet, what sort of poet is the one who first comes to mind? A moderate and ingenious poet who follows the classical tradition, or an inspired sentimental subject, turned to his own hardships and impressions of the world, creatively free? Almost a genius? Particularly, I tend to imagine the second: the romantic poet. Such is the impact of the intellectual currents of thought responsible for the enthusiasm in the bourgeois French revolution, that we in the present-day have not escaped much of this romantic idea of poetry.

As the bourgeoisie expands political activities, a process of both nobility decline and of greater popular strength takes place, as well as much greater circulation of written works, newspapers and more access through literacy. Authorship also comes into play: books become commodities and writers are able to leave their personal marks in the world. Social progress comes with new concerns. The individual awareness is a premise for the exercise of freedom, an ideal of the revolution, and a pulsating need. New demands erupt on the horizon of the individual, who seeks innovation: to represent the world from a new per-

spective, seeking its own distinctive expression grounded in experience.

Lyricism then appears as an assertion of identity, whether individual or collective. This key factor leads poets to establish an aesthetic ideal that breaks down the tendencies of tradition, which appreciated order, clarity, balance, reason, and impersonality. At this moment, ergo, lyricism is manifested through sentimentality, through the cult of nature, through escapement of reality and through the attitude of dissatisfaction (what one may call a "blasé" stance), as well as traces such as carelessness and verbal excess, variety in metrics, intensive use of adjectives, metaphors, and hyperbole. Another important factor to be observed is opposition from the counterpart. Here is where we get to the notion of the grotesque, turning our attention back to melancholy.

Victor Hugo, in the preface to his drama *Cromwell* (1827), which is considered to be one of the most influential romantic manifestos of the nineteenth century, suggests that the boundaries between tragedy and comedy, as well as between the sublime and grotesque, are equivalent to the limits between soul and body: complexly coexist. As, in my standpoint, life is to death and death is to life, since – quite “uncannily” – they are paradoxically subordinated to one another. Contrary to the systematization of the classical paradigm of his time, the author argues that poetry should be "of fullness", i.e. it must present the grotesque element so that it opposes to the sublime element in a relationship

between opposites (the "equation of contrasts"), as well as the mix of genres, which would correspond, in his point of view, to reality.

It is understood from the preface that not only the sublime is conferred from an antagonistic counterpart, the grotesque: human existence is also ambivalent; the subjects are divided by [an eternal] soul and [an ephemeral] body. It is, accordingly, in the perception of subjectivity that sensitivity, through the diffusion of Christianity, is born. Such sensitivity would allow the recognition of the grotesque type as well as of the principle of the "harmony of opposites", conducting poetry to our complex reality or, in other words, to verisimilitude.

In addition to his romantic drama advocacy movement, which constitute in a fusion of tragedy and comedy (covering lyric poetry and epic elements) and in a modern form *par excellence*, there is a proposition concerning a feeling of melancholy that characterizes the conscious individual of his/her contradictory condition: the soul-body paradox. Revolving around his conception of the grotesque and after several reflections, including over the trajectory of literature, Hugo asserts that poetry should embrace contradictory and dual relationships, thus representing this melancholic spirit of [what he calls] the modern man.

Thus he authorizes unlimited artistic possibilities and the insertion of antagonism in the literature – from then on regarded as considerably important. These antagonisms are not

only noticed in the *The Raven*, but also appointed by Poe in "The Philosophy of Composition". One is able to detect contrasts between the stirring storm outside, and the serenity of the indoors, between the solid, sleek and unruffled marble bust of Pallas, and the black raven's ragged feathers, the erudition that the bust is intended to signal besides the bird's brutal animalism, or even rationality opposing emotion. However, the reading that interests me the most lies upon the contrast between the conscious and the unconscious that, as some elements already alluded to, are contrasted, though in contact.

Afterward a boisterous discussion that permeates the relationship between ideas and signs (the order of the language and the natural sequence of ideas), the origin of languages and the condition of those who are deprived of it, in "Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient" (1749), Denis Diderot proclaims: the lesser the speech, the more language withholds energy, and therefore the greater the Beauty. To Diderot, the hieroglyph represents a single expression of various ideas, or rather, the transformation of extensive speech in concomitant language, which would also give rise to multiple interpretations. Expression would thus be closer to the original unity of thought, since the senses would enable the soul to simultaneously perceive in many a way, while successive speech damages impressions or the perspicuity of concepts.

The sincerity of expression is to sincerity in romantic writing;

thought (represented by a hieroglyph) is singular, individual and hence original. From this conception of poetry, there is a commotion (which can be understood as cathartic as purification through emotional release, yet unobstructed by an Aristotelian peremptory nature) which provides a moment of enlightenment, generating, above all, self-analysis. Diderot also presents questionings that lead to a corroboration of romantic individualism and make reference to discrepancy in interpretations: are we all affected by a same order of ideas? When Diderot reflects on a natural sequence of thought, it seems to me that to him (as to Rousseau), our nature should not be corrupted by something external – either society or tongue – while for classicists one should not pierce established precepts. In the mid-eighteenth century, poetry seemed to be reduced to the rhetorical field. This set of ideas contributed to what is called the romantic aesthetic mold, and individualism stands out sovereign. So much that, contemporaneously, and this I assert empirically, one hardly ignores the "I" in artistic expressions – especially concerning literature.

### Concluding remarks

Poe, in "The Philosophy of Composition", seems to be forthcoming both in representing Diderot's hieroglyphic synthesis considering verbal economy and in his effort to delimit a certain extent to the poem in order to produce an immediate effect, although the considerable number of syl-

lables in the first verses of the stanzas, as well as the considerable number of internal and external rhymes, confer to the poem, in turn, little verbal economy. *The Raven* converges with Diderot's remarks regarding personhood (taken here as a characteristic expression of the poetic persona of less universalizing character, as in a report of a specific experience). Poe is, indeed, representative of Dark Romanticism, and the issue of individuality (*vide* the prevailing use of the first person in his literary work) is unreservedly expressed.

Moreover, one would not dare to claim that the poem lacks originality, especially in respects to form. As much as he establishes fixed rules for his composition in the essay, such rules are innovative. The rather extensive first verses of each stanza seem to be broken, i.e. paused, by their internal rhymes, conveying the impression of a continuous growing tension, that later descent in the fourth and fifth verses, until a major break in the sixth verses, with the closing "nevermore" ("nothing more" in the first seven stanzas), leaving the reader or listener with a certain sensation of vacuity, which is precisely what "nevermore" (or, most literally, "nothing more") bears, as in a fatal howl of lament for which there is no repair, giving rise to large-scale self-analysis. Romantic values, such as sentimental and symbolic expression, override established prescripts and the autonomy of form – and the ardor of mourning is made evident.

According to Otto Rank in "Der Doppelgänger" (1914), the dou-



ble was, originally, a sort of guarantee against the extinction of the “I”, in his words, an energetic denial of the power of death, and the idea of an immortal soul, the first double of the body (hence, one might add, having Freud in mind, the fear of ghosts or evil spirits). Harold Bloom, in “Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens” (1976), influenced by Freud and Nietzsche, defends the thesis that great poets write in fear of death – an interesting (and rather poetic, verging mysticism) assumption –, and poems express psyches in a battlefield with other great poetry (or “great psyches”), be it past or contemporary. The emphasis on the “I” relates directly to Romanticism and also may lie in

the advent of the author and of literature as merchandise.

The idea of the affirmation of the self, evidenced also by a Freudian interpretation that will take the unconscious into consideration, reminds us of the human need for an “inner” dialogue: a constant search for self knowledge and some portion of peace of mind, regardless of circumstances. As to death, it is definitely the most uncanny and disquieting of topics due to its character, corresponding to its certainty combined with its unknown territory: a paradox, indeed – not necessarily beautiful, but patently existential, rendering countless sinister dialogues to oneself, forever to live in our memories or not.

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