George A. Smathers Libraries
Public Services Division/Access Services
Interlibrary Loan

245 Library West
PO Box 117001
Gainesville, FL 32611-7001
352-273-2535
352-392-7598 Fax
illiad.uflib.ufl.edu/illiad/ill.html

Electronic Delivery Cover Sheet

If you receive a copy that is missing pages, smudged or unreadable, please contact the UF ILL Office so we may obtai clean copy for you as quickly as possible.

NOTICE WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs that making a photocopy or o reproductions of copyrighted materials. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproductions. One of these specified conditions is that the photocop reproduction is not to be .used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.. If a user mak request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of .fair use,. that user may be liable copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment,
fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.
This notice is posted in compliance with
Title 37 C.F.R., Chapter II, Part 201.14

The Foundation for The Gator Nation

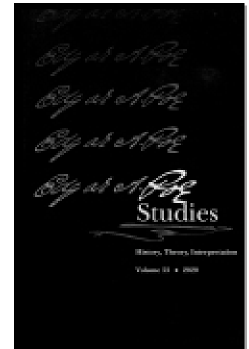
An Equal Opportunity Institution

The Genesis of Poe's "The Raven"

Jorge Luis Borges, Sergio Waisman

Poe Studies, Volume 53, 2020, pp. 140-143 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/770691

[Access provided at 9 Nov 2020 18:08 GMT from Wellesley College Library]

The Genesis of Poe's "The Raven"

JORGE LUIS BORGES

Translated by SERGIO WAISMAN

In its installment of April 1846—the first year of the war with Mexico, the year the polygamous heresiarch Brigham Young and his wagons made the journey across the Mississippi—Philadelphia's *Graham's Magazine* published a two-column article by its correspondent Mr. Poe, entitled "The Philosophy of Composition." In the article, Edgar Allan Poe sought to explain the morphology of his already glorious poem "The Raven." Various translators—from the Venezuelan Pérez Bonalde to Carlos Obligado—have connected that poem to the Hispanic literary tradition. It behooves us, however, to set aside their knowledge and proceed to the glacial revelations of its own creator.

He starts by alleging that phonetic motives indicated to him the use of the melancholic refrain *nevermore* (nunca más). He then states his need to justify, in a plausible manner, the periodic repetition of that word. How to reconcile such monotony, that "eternal return," with the exercise of reason? An irrational being, able to articulate the precious adverb, was the evident solution. A parrot was the first candidate, but immediately a raven replaced it, more decorous and gloomy. Its feathers, in turn, recommended erecting a marble bust, as a contrast to its ingenuousness and that darkness. It would be the bust of Minerva, of Pallas: because of the Greek euphony of the name, and to correspond with the books and the studious spirit of the narrator. From there to everything else . . . I will not reproduce the fine reconstruction undertaken by Poe; suffice it for me to recall just a few of the steps here.

It is pointless to add that this long retrospective process has earned the incredulity of critics, when they were not mocking it, that is, or outraged by it. That the interlocutor of muses, that the poet scribe of some dark god, should be but the mere weaver of reason! Lucidity instead of inspiration, comprehensible intelligence and not genius: such disenchantment for the contemporaries of Hugo, and even for those of Breton and Dalí! There was no shortage of those who refused to take Poe's declarations seriously: these were

Vol. 53 (2020): 140–143 © 2020 Johns Hopkins University Press and Washington State University

no more, they said, than some maneuver to use the notoriety of the poem, one of those cunning second parts "that were never good." The conjecture is plausible, but let us be careful not to confuse "lucrative" and "bad," "opportune and worthy of condemnation" . . . Another critic, more intelligent and lethal, could have denounced in those pages a Romantic vindication of the ordinary procedures of Classicism, a most inspired anathema against inspiration. (Therein lies Valéry's lifelong task.) Others, barely believing, feared that the central mystery of poetic creation had been profaned by Poe, and they rejected the entire article. One might guess that I do not share those opinions. If I did, I would not articulate my comments here, I would not so impertinently suppose that merely stating my support was sufficient to validate them. I—naively perhaps—believe in Poe's explanations. Discounting some possible bit of charlatanism, I think that the mental process that he puts forth corresponds, more or less, to the true process of his creation. I am certain that this is how intelligence proceeds: through regrets, through obstacles, through eliminations. The complexity of the operations described does not trouble me; I suspect the actual elaboration must have been even more complex, and much more chaotic and faltering. As far as I understand it, Poe limited himself to supplying a logical, ideal outline from the many possible and perplex paths of creation. Without a doubt, the complete process was irrecoverable, not to mention tedious.

This does not mean that the arcane mystery of poetic creation—of that poetic creation—was revealed by Poe. In the steps examined, the conclusion the writer derives from each premise is, of course, logical; but it is not necessarily the only one. For example, the need for an irrational being capable of articulating an adverb led Poe to a raven, after first having considered a parrot; he could just as well have arrived at a lunatic, a solution which would have transformed the poem. I formulate this objection among a thousand others. Each step is valid, but between one step and the next there remains a particle of darkness, of incoercible inspiration. In other words: Poe articulates the various moments of the poetic process, but between each one and the next there remains—infinitesimal—the moment of invention. There is another general, arcane mystery: that of preferences. What inevitable necessity drove the poet to compose this particular poem? What longing in him was satisfied by the two symbols of the raven and the marble? I understand that these questions (and the ones the reader might want to ask) are valid; I understand just as well that merely hoping for an answer is too much to venture. It is enough for us to understand that Edgar Allan Poe liked those two symbols.

This understanding is not as laughable as it might seem. The mind, from some German superstition about "profundity" that I don't know, tends

to magnify the value of the (conjectural) content of symbols and ignore the charms of its plastic or verbal form. The forms of a pirate, of Gary Cooper, of a knife-wielding gaucho, of one of Carlos XII's grenadiers, of a "cowboy," are diverse figures manifesting the idea of courage, but anyone can see the attractions or repulsions peculiar to each. Another side of this truth: verse works according to a delicate verbal adjustment, the "sympathies and differences" of their words, not because of the firmness of the ideas in which knowledge later resolves them. Let me find a classic example, an example that the most incorruptible of my readers will not want to dismiss. So, I come to Quevedo's distinguished sonnet to the Duke of Osuna, "horrendous in galleys and ships and armed infantry."

It is easy to demonstrate that in this sonnet the magnificent effectiveness of the couplet

> *Su tumba son de Flandes las campañas*
> *y su Epitaphio la sangrienta Luna*
> [The bells from Flanders his grave
> and his Epitaph the bloody Moon]

comes before any interpretation, and does not depend upon it. I would say the same about the following expression: "military cry," whose "meaning" is not debatable, although it is trivial: "the cry of military men." As far as the "bloody Moon", it is better to ignore that it is the symbol of the Turks, eclipsed by I know not what meritorious piracies of Don Pedro Téllez-Girón. In general, I suspect the possible logical justification of those verses (and of all verses) is nothing but a kickback to intelligence. The pleasure—the sufficient, maximum pleasure—is in the difficult equilibrium, in the heterogeneous contact of the words. Of the word, sometimes. In *The 1001 Nights*, in all the novels of Islam, it is common to find the case of a hero who falls in love with a woman to the point of pallor and death, solely from the charm of her name.

What conclusions can be deduced from the previous facts? I believe them to be as follows: first, the validity of the analytic method exercised by Poe; second, the possibility of recuperating and fixing the diverse moments of creation; third, the impossibility of reducing the poetic act to a purely logical scheme, since the writer's preferences are irreducible.

The value of Poe's analysis is considerable: affirming lucid and awkward intelligence while denying foolish inspiration is not trivial. However, the nebulous *amateurs* of the mystery need not be overly alarmed: the central problem of creation remains to be solved.

Copyright

"La Génesis de 'El cuervo' de Poe" by Jorge Luis Borges. Copyright © 1935, by María Kodama, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

Original Publication

"La Génesis de 'El cuervo' de Poe." *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), August 25, 1935, sec. 4:1.

Translated from the Following Reprinted Version

"La Génesis de 'El cuervo' de Poe." In *Textos Recobrados (1931–1955)*, 120–23. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 2001.