

UNRELIABLE HOMODIEGESIS AND THE TRACE OF INFLUENCE: THE WORK OF E.A. POE

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People seem to think there is something uncanny about [Poe], and the strangest stories are told, what is more, believed, about his mesmeric experiences, at the mention of which he always smiles.

Letter from Mary E. Hewitt (?) to Sara Helen
Whitman, 1846.¹

[Poe] should be judged primarily not as a poet or prose writer or critic, but as all three at once

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ABSTRACT

The present article elaborates on the question of influence from the perspective of Reader-Response Criticism to extend Umberto Eco's distinction of three paths of literary influence (contemporary, linear, and *Zeitgeist*) into a fourth one that involves the aesthetic dimension of literary works as artistic manifestations. The literary and critical work of E.A. Poe is used to show the functioning of both direct and reverse influence between Poe and contemporary (Charles Dickens) or later authors (Paul Bowles, Vladimir Nabokov and Thomas Pynchon). Influence is traced through three main textual tools: specific images, unreliable homodiegesis, and the construction of a final effect. Analysis proceeds from first, ascertaining Poe's influence on the above-mentioned authors; and second, exploring the nature of this relationship.

¹ In *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Olive Mabbott, 3:1028.

The result of this analysis shows the addition of symbolism and plot development to Dickens' work; and of international, contemporary recognition to Poe's. It also shows the development of the postcolonial and the metafictional in the 20th-century understanding of Poe's work, and the process by which Poe as an author is characterized to enter the world of fiction.

KEYWORDS: Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Paul Bowles, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Influence, Unreliable homodiegesis.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo desarrolla la cuestión de la influencia desde la perspectiva de la crítica de la recepción del lector para extender la distinción que Humberto Eco hace de los tres patrones de influencia literaria (contemporánea, lineal y *Zeitgeist*) hasta un cuarto modelo que implica a la dimensión estética de las obras literaria como manifestaciones artísticas. La obra literaria y crítica de E. A. Poe se utiliza para mostrar el funcionamiento de la influencia directa e inversa entre Poe y autores contemporáneos (Charles Dickens) y posteriores (Paul Bowles, Vladimir Nabokov y Thomas Pynchon). La influencia es analizada a través de tres instrumentos textuales: imágenes específicas, la homodiegesis no fiable y la construcción de un efecto final. El análisis comienza con la confirmación de la influencia de Poe en los autores anteriormente mencionados y prosigue con la exploración de la naturaleza de esta influencia. El resultado de dicho análisis muestra la contribución de Poe al simbolismo y desarrollo de la trama en el trabajo de Dickens, así como el reconocimiento contemporáneo de la obra de Poe a nivel internacional. También muestra el desarrollo de las visiones postcolonial y metafictional del trabajo de Poe en el siglo veinte, y el proceso por el que Poe como autor se convierte en un personaje que puede ser asimilado por el mundo de ficción.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Paul Bowles, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Influencia, Homodiegesis no fiable

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL INFLUENCES OF "POESIS"²

In his work on the influence of financial prospects on literary production in antebellum America, Terence Whalen pictures Edgar Allan Poe at the terrible economic *impasse* which prevented him from becoming the poet he intended to be as a young man and turned him into the prose writer, author of both creative writing and criticism, of his later life. According to Whalen, having to adapt to the mass-culture publishing format of literary magazines diverted Poe's literary ideals from the search for aesthetic pleasure to the theory of the single effect, including

² For Socrates, *poesis* (meaning *making*) was imitation of the world around us and came to signify artistic creativity in all its media and forms. It was not problematic to him, but Plato, in *The Republic*—arguably the first ever and best text of literary theory and theory of criticism—pointed out its more complex role in human life and society. What is interesting for Poe's *poesis* is not so much the nice pun as the fact that *The Republic* was itself a fiction, and thus is a precedent for the complicated relationship between Poe's fiction and his criticism.

the principles of novelty and length (Whalen 83). This necessary change seems to have produced a double magnetic fluctuation of rejection and attraction between high culture and metaphysical depth (Frogpondianism) on the one hand, and on the other, mass-culture and popular recognition (the unreasoning mob).

Poe's considerable critical legacy as a literary reviewer and essay writer has often been questioned, when not directly used against him, in that it was presumably prompted by expediency—economic hardship—rather than academic interest. It is held that he either had no academic background or taste, or had read but little, and only through secondary sources (Wood 17, Tate 38).³ It might be argued that as a literary critic, he used to show the coherent and somewhat tendentious inclination both to attack what he would not do himself as a writer and to praise what he had already done (Buranelli 29). Yet paradoxically enough, both coherence and tendentiousness can also be questioned by the fact that Poe often parodies his own critical work in his literary writing, especially when it differs from what he has asserted in his criticism.⁴ For instance, he parodies what he had said in "How to Write a Blackwood Article," and ridicules his own ideas on art in "A Predicament" (Davidson 144). Also, in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, he would recommend prose extension to be between half an hour and two hours when read aloud, but wrote much longer works, such as *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. These are just a few examples. Therefore, either Poe could not be trusted as a literary critic or he could not be taken seriously as a writer of fiction—or both.⁵ Each position has been extensively argued, and both add up to other commonplaces in criticism on Poe, such as the influence of German black romanticism on his poetry and tales (González 20); of Coleridge (Wood 27, sarcastic accusation of plagiarism included) and the philosophical work of Schelling on his critical writings; and the use of (pseudo)scientific learning for both his critical (Beebe 122) and literary writings (Buranelli 30, 49, 54).

³ In his 1949 essay "From Poe to Valéry," T.S. Eliot described Poe's work as "puerile thinking unsupported by wide reading or profound scholarship, haphazard experiments in various types of writing, chiefly under pressure of financial need, without perfection in any detail" (209, 218). Also, in an introduction to his translation of Poe's critical writings, Julio Cortázar would describe Poe's literary background, academic learning and accuracy in the following terms: "*No vacila en citar equivocadamente de memoria, variando las lecciones, repitiéndose. Tiene pasajes favoritos que el lector reencuentra cada tantas páginas, aplicados a distintos temas. Inventa autores, obras, opiniones si es necesario*" (21).

⁴ In this direction, there seems to be general agreement on the particularity of Poe's taste for posing (Cox 114), by which he would hide or erotically suggest his "true" personality and his literary and critical intentions under different layers of interpretive conjecture (Wilbur 99). Later in this article, a similarity is suggested with Thomas Pynchon's elusive identity as literary author.

⁵ Psychoanalytical approaches to Poe's work would even argue that such contradictions are to a large extent the reflection and/or result of Poe's perturbed mental state (Wood 29, Davidson 47, Rollason 836).

The critical approach to Poe's work requires background knowledge on the tall-tale tradition of the American border, *Blackwood's* German gothicism and the birth of the detective story, this latter genre embodying a logical approach distinct from the critical boasting and literary horror that Poe renders in the first two. Within the scope of two pages, Bruce Mills describes Poe's critical work as "a legacy of criticism that seems to reduce the poetic process to a scientific or numerical enterprise" (48) and at the same time describes how he induced himself into a sort of temporary mesmeric state so as to have access to the pure Imagination required by the creative process (49). Both positions read much like literary-salon posing, and both would certainly have charmed the ladies. If we consider the possibility that Poe combined all of the above-mentioned available means through his genius to create credible images both for literary fiction and professional pose, a holistic critical exercise may reveal the compositional workings and combinations at play in his *oeuvre* as it was—and would be—originally written.

The search for an assumed anxiety of influence in Poe's work might also reveal a dialogic play that both contemporary and posterior literary authors would sustain with him. The writings of such authors would materialize the "virtualization"—as Iser (1978) would call it—of a "reincarnated" Poe who kept writing through them⁶ because, as the virtual Poe and his work are inscribed into the works of others, the former are also revealed not as mere passive objects of actualization, not as simple listeners to voices distant in time and space, but as "erotically" engaged through desire in the production and filling of textual gaps that reveal and anticipate possible future writings. Poe's mastery of unreliable homodiegesis might be considered much more than the mere technical device aimed at increasing an intended effect of horror in his readers. Since Poe's particular unreliable homodiegesis also extends to his poetic and critical work, other functions might be attributed to it that involve not only readers' response, but also literary influence. An analysis of the processes involved in such compositional play of influences becomes necessary in order to dissect elementary movements and notions before they are seen at work.

In discussing Jorge Luis Borges' possible influence on his own work, Umberto Eco traces two possible patterns that would describe in a simple way the mechanisms of supposed literary influence between two given authors, A and B: 1) that A and B wrote in the same period of time and knew (of) each other; 2) that A would chronologically precede B and therefore exert the influence. However, Eco's simple paradigm gets more complex when he includes the possibility of 3) a universal culture or *Zeitgeist*, where ideas are in the air, and it is difficult to assign

⁶ A similar analytical perspective is proposed by Castillo when she suggests the possible influence of Pynchon's novels on Borges' short stories: "In a like manner a critic who carried out in practice the implications of a postmodern conflation of temporal schema might speculate on the possible influences of Thomas Pynchon's novels on the Borges short stories of the 1940s and 1950s, instead of merely producing a more conventional influence study that respects standard chronology" (29).

priority or weight (130). The consideration of this third possibility of rhizomatic implications threatens the apparently simple chronological direction of the first two since they are not mutually exclusive at all, nor do they exclude the third. However problematic, Eco's distinction is useful for the critical analysis of literary influence and could even be extended into a fourth pattern of literary influence that considers intertextual reference as the compositional materialisation of a *virtual* text in which 4) A would *virtually* "succeed" B.

So, as a critic, one might wonder how much of the Poe we read today is the result of the different aspects of his circumstances (material conditions, literary influences, or *Zeitgeist*, previous and contemporary); how much they weighed in the intended effect Poe wanted his work to produce; and—finally—how much of a retrospective view we can afford ourselves to take on the assumed firmness of his textual ground. For some contemporary and later criticism has obsessively "rewritten" Poe's work using Poe's exact words—just as the character of Pierre Ménard does in Borges' homonymous tale. Thus, Davidson argues that "Poe was one of the first modern symbolists to inquire into the rationale of the single self" (155); Buranelli sees some passages of "Eureka" as foreshadowing "our [twentieth-century] mathematical logic" (53) and pointing "forward to the revolution of science through more imaginative thinking—to non-Euclidean geometry, Relativity, and the Quantum Theory" (54), his critical views prefiguring New Criticism (113). But Buranelli does so because "his [Poe's] judgements about himself are not always to be taken at their face value" for they may contain "a latent meaning [. . .] that the artist may not hold overtly in mind. Since the 'chemistry' of his combinations may give rise to effects that he has not foreseen, he is not necessarily alive to all the beauties, meanings, and analogies in the materials with which he works." He thus claims the right to interpret Poe's work beyond the chronologically limited vision of the author himself (71). We may count among the tasks of the literary critic that of trying to find out not only which of the above-mentioned interpretive cues is most likely to have influenced Poe's literary and critical work and which of the four possible patterns of influence they respond to, but also whether Poe's texts can testify to his unconscious use of technical devices that Buranelli's critical license might entitle us to show. The present article intends to use Eco's three models of literary influence together with the fourth one here proposed as an analytical instrument for the study of Poe's technical devices in the production of literary and critical texts and their virtual, reciprocal influence on the work of contemporary and later literary authors. Once such dialogical influence is tested as historically and physically possible, it is ascertained by textual evidence as can be seen in specific imagery, scenery and technical devices. The work of Charles Dickens, Vladimir Nabokov and Thomas Pynchon have been chosen as a few among the many that would render such results when subject to a similar analysis.

"Who's Who" in Eco's three patterns of influence: attempting a chronological arrangement of "contemporaneity."

In 1842, acclaimed by both literary critics and the reading public, a successful Charles Dickens made a lecture tour of the United States. He graciously agreed to have a meeting with an American author so far completely unknown in England but who introduced himself to Dickens with some examples of his own writings. These included a critical piece, a review of the early part of Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* (1840-1), which Poe had written in 1841, that is, quite some time before all the instalments of the serialized publication had come out. Although it soon emerged that Poe's main objective was to have Dickens help him find an editor in England, the literary discussion also took place physically and had some literary effects. Of especial interest to Dickens had been Poe's comments concerning the structure of *Barnaby Rudge*, whose dramatic tension he considered excessive for a *dénouement* that, in relation to the build-up, he argued, could not fail to disappoint the reader. The then unsuccessful Poe made two technical suggestions to the extremely popular Dickens with respect to this matter: either he should do without a *dénouement* altogether or, rather belatedly, he should have planned the dramatic peak of the whole work better at the outset.⁷ The first of these was impossible given the length of the novel, which made it impossible for Dickens to end it abruptly or without resolution. The second was a little delicate suggestion very much to Poe's critical taste, and Dickens did not fail to answer it in the note he wrote agreeing to the meeting: "Apropos of the 'construction' of *Caleb Williams*. Do you know that Godwin wrote it *backwards*—the last volume first—and that when he had produced the hunting-down of Caleb, and the catastrophe, he waited, for months, casting out for a means of accounting for what he had done?" (*Letters* 107). Dickens' appeal to Godwin's literary *auctoritas* for his self defence would be rejected by Poe three years later, in *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846).

Poe's review of *Barnaby Rudge* also praises Dickens' parallel and complementary composition of the characters of the idiot and his pet raven, and even offered a prediction of the development and end of the novel. The two contributions would be mutually productive: the latter turned out to be visionary, as was proved when Dickens finally published the last instalment of his novel. As regards the first, what Poe had found to praise in the idiot and his raven served him as inspiration for both "The Raven" (1845) and a year later for the *Philosophy of Composition*. It is common knowledge today that Dickens' pet raven Grip inspired the figure of the raven in *Barnaby Rudge*, and that Poe's interpretation of this "character," "whose

⁷ "This is a conception admirably adapted to whet curiosity in respect to the character of that event which is hinted at as forming the ground-work of the novel; and so far is well suited to the purposes of a periodical story. But this observation should not fail to be made — that the anticipation must surpass the reality; that no matter how terrific be the circumstances which, in the *dénouement*, shall appear to have occasioned the expression of countenance worn habitually by Mrs. Rudge, still they will not be able to satisfy the mind of the reader. He will surely be disappointed. The skilful intimation of horror held out by the artist produces an effect which will deprive his conclusion, of all" (review of *Barnaby Rudge*, 1841).

croakings are to be frequently, appropriately, and prophetically heard in the course of the narrative" (1841), led to the composition of "The Raven." And yet, it was Dickens' as yet unwritten work that would make the real contribution to the writing of the *Philosophy of Composition*.

Dickens might not admit to having followed any of Poe's advice on composition, even though the closure of the plot of *Barnaby Rudge* reads very much as Poe predicted it. But Poe did not hesitate to suggest that the popularity of the novel was a consequence of his technical advice to its author: "the vast popularity of *Barnaby Rudge* must be regarded less as a measure of its value than as the *legitimate* and inevitable result of certain *well-understood critical propositions* reduced by genius into practice" (in Thompson 226, emphasis added). Plus, in the interim, there was Forster's unfortunate article on "American Poetry," where he commented but poorly on Poe's work,⁸ and which Poe suspected to be really of Dickens' authorship.⁹ Was it then admiration or revenge that led Poe to publish about one year later a poem that would show Dickens how to fulfill the expectations of readers?¹⁰ In any case, Poe intended the reference to Dickens to be clearly explicit in his poem. Thus, in *Barnaby Rudge* it reads: "What was that—him [Grip the raven] tapping at the door?" and the response is: "'Tis someone knocking softly at the shutter" (43). And in "The Raven" Poe would write: "'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door. [. . .] Open here I flung the shutter." Poe's reference to Dickens is more overt in the *Philosophy of Composition*, where he even mentions him and his 1842 note in what seems to be a pretext to introduce the topic of composition. However, Poe's suggestive use of language makes his mention of Dickens something more than a mere reference.

In fact, the whole of the *Philosophy of Composition* seems to be written to criticize the techniques of Dickens' writing and to prove that Poe himself could write much better. In 1844, Poe bitterly resented that Dickens (Forster, in fact) had accused him of "metrical imitation" of Tennyson, "citing, by way of instance, passages from poems which were written & published by me long before Tennyson was heard of" (letter from Poe to J. R. Lowell, March 30, 1844). So in the *Philosophy of Composition*, Poe referred to Dickens' 1842 note where the latter justified what in Poe's view was careless planning of the dramatic tension in *Barnaby Rudge*, affirming that the note was "now *lying* before me" (emphasis added). The expression is ambiguous enough to suggest that either Dickens was not telling the truth about

⁸ In January, 1844, Forster publishes article on "American Poetry" in *The Foreign Quarterly Review* (xxxii, 291-324) praising Poe's poetry on account of it being in the manner of Tennyson.

⁹ In 1844, Poe writes a letter to Lowell suspecting Dickens' authorship because the review repeats everything he or Dickens said in their 1842 interviews, including quotes from Emerson's "To the Humble Bee" that Poe had read to Dickens.

¹⁰ "The Raven" was in fact one of the few compositions whose success Poe enjoyed non-posthumously; he was even asked to do public readings of the poem.

composing *Barnaby Rudge* backwards on purpose just to follow Godwin's pretended directive, or that Poe was not telling the truth in this work either (Dickens lied *before* Poe did). Firstly, he directly refutes Dickens: "I cannot think this the precise mode of procedure on the part of Godwin [. . .]—but the author of 'Caleb Williams' was too good an artist" ("unlike Dickens" is rather clearly suggested). Then Poe goes on to theorize about how to compose a literary work of art by suggesting a list of deductively logical steps that seem to describe the anti-Dickensian literary work; it favours effect over plot, short narrative over long works and poetry over narrative. And although his *Philosophy of Composition* describes the composition of a poem, when talking about the convenience of choosing an effect before any choice of incident (plot) or tone is made, he refers to narrative, and not to the lyrical. Most intriguingly, one more veiled reference to Dickens can be found within the context of composition, and it concerns both originality and honesty: "Keeping originality always in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest" (20). This time, Poe is not suggesting that Dickens might lie to him, but to himself; and in relation to the originality of his works, he might be pointing to the fact that *Barnaby Rudge* was written following Poe's critical predictions.

But the homodiegetic voice speaking in the *Philosophy of Composition*—astonishingly similar to that of the Chévalier Monsieur Dupin in both tone and expository technique—would not be Poe's if it were not overtly unreliable. He boasts that he can trace back each step in the process of composition of "any" of his works:

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would [that is to say who could] detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion [. . .]. I am aware, on the other hand, that the case is by no means common, in which an author is at all in condition to retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained [. . .]. For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor at any time the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions. (20-21)

Poe is so adamant on the point of the strict procedure of composition that he loses credibility. Did he really choose a short format because he wanted to give his work "unity of impression" or because he could not get a longer work accepted for publication in serial format? Did he really choose for his poem the effect of pleasure "in the contemplation of the beautiful" and the "intense and pure elevation of the soul" (23) because he considered it to be the intended effect of poetry? Did he choose the word "nevermore"¹¹ for the refrain because "o" is the most sonorous vowel (26) when he could have argued the same for "e," which occurs twice instead

¹¹ The forlorn refrain of "The Raven" (1845) is no doubt consciously echoed by Dickens twice in *David Copperfield* (1849–50): once when David has a premonition that he is seeing

of only once? Poe insisted that he could be so methodical in his process of composition that he could remember every single step and detail of it afterwards. And yet he “forgets” to mention the fact that it was Dickens’ raven that “inspired” his most popular poem, and that the topic of a beautiful deceased lady was not altogether “original” as he had used it before himself.

In fact, “Ligeia” was published seven years before “The Raven” and it included two rather than only one young and beautiful but deceased ladies. It must therefore be a case of *Zeigeist* that at the moment of her “resurrection,” Lady Ligeia’s hair is described as “blacker than the raven wings of the midnight.” But the fact that the homodiegetic voice in “Ligeia” is so overtly unreliable (Basler 57, Gargano 166, 170) is certainly a highly polished technique also present in “The Raven”, and that Poe *forgets* to mention in the *Philosophy of Composition* except, perhaps, when he refers to “some amount of suggestiveness some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning” (35-36). The narrator, the husband of the two ladies, Lady Ligeia and Rowena, takes pains to underline the fact that both his memory and perception are not to be relied upon. The story begins with his direct assertion that “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where,” the events occurred. He goes on with more direct or indirect allusions to the unreliability of his knowledge: “I have never known the paternal name of her”; to his absentmindedness: “this one point [. . .] has forced itself, at this late period only, upon my attention”; to his unbalanced emotional state: “I groaned in anguish”; and questionable mental health: “in my heated fancy”, “incipient madness”; or his use of drugs: “I had become a bounden slave in the trammels of opium.”

This homodiegetic unreliable voice might be aimed at suggesting the narrator’s implication in the murder of both ladies. It is “for [his] soul” that he “cannot remember”; “the ever-placid Ligeia, was the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of [the narrator’s?] stern passion”; at some point the narrator “saw that she *must* die” (emphasis added); “the struggles of the passionate wife were”, to his astonishment, “even more energetic” than his own. He also reflects: “[t]hat she loved me I should not have doubted”, as if that were the reason for killing her, and describes how “[f]or long hours, detaining my hand, would she pour out before me the overflowing of a heart.” The unreliable voice and nature of the narrator is also seen in relation to his second wife, the lady Rowena. He accepts that “my wife dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper”; he repeats twice that she “was *attacked* with sudden illness” (emphasis added), “no attendants were [conveniently] within call” during the whole, long night of her agony, and finally, seeing that “she had now partially recovered” he offers her a drink into which he sees fall “three or four drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid”, after which she finally passes away. And yet, he does not overtly confess, but leads us to believe that the poison

Steerforth alive for the last time (498) and again when David pictures Steerforth abandoning Emily (738).

was dropped into the glass by Lady Ligeia, who has apparently come back from the dead. But that he, the narrator, seems as guilty as in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," composed four years later (1842), where the Duke, in his unreliable ravings, reveals that he is the murderer of his wife. The homodiegetic unreliable voice is an effective technique in that it does not offer readers or listeners any other, external point of view that might settle the question for them, and thus the *dénouement* does not lessen the dramatic tension of the plot. It would later appear as the poetic voice in "The Raven," also as a guilty, remorseful lover who—for some reason—would not be able to meet Lenore in "the distant Aiden" or be calmed by the "balm in Gilead."¹²

Poe would die three years after publishing *Philosophy of Composition*, but as a character of its narratives, the shadow of his homodiegetic, unreliable voices would haunt the works of many. Among those, perhaps as a posthumous homage, Dickens' 1860 novel *Great Expectations* includes a passage that is heavily influenced by "The Raven" or directly rewritten, either in the guise of plagiarism or intertextual irony. Dickens seems to be granting Poe the authorship of the character, since it was Poe who gave it worldwide literary fame. Considering that Dickens was in fact the original creator of the idea of the raven, is this return to that image a case of self-plagiarism, or unconscious *déjà vu*? Or was the raven (perhaps Poe's raven) already part of some gothic literary *Zeitgeist* that could go back at least to 1768 in Sterne's caged starling of *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*? But that it is Poe's raven that Dickens pays intertextual homage to and no other (the one in *Barnaby Rudge* included) is proved by the complete erasure of the character of the raven except by a strong undercurrent of suggestiveness that materializes through the details of specific imagery, scenery and the use of an unreliable homodiegetic voice. As for scenery and imagery, in Dickens' novel, a young gentleman is reading in his chamber close to midnight. It is a dreary night and he hears a noise outside, opens the door and lets in an old man. The following chart shows specific parallels between the two texts:

¹² Gilead, from the Hebrew גִּלְעָד, "Heap/mass of testimony/witness." There not being "balm in Gilead" here means that witnesses (of his crime) will not forget or be merciful.

Raven

Once upon a (a) midnight (b)
dreary [. . .] (l.1)

while I pondered [. . .],/Over
many a quaint and curious volume
(1-2)

(a) Thrilled me - filled me with
fantastic terrors never felt before
[. . .] sorrow for the (b) lost Leno-
re -/ (13-14)

(a) Presently my soul grew
stronger; hesitating then no long-
er; / (b) 'Sir,' said I, 'or Madam,
[. . .] - here I opened wide the
door; -(c) Darkness there, (d) and
nothing more

Lover's questions disclose past
mystery (dramatic tension intensi-
fied through questions):
This I sat engaged in guessing
[. . .]
1.- [. . .] is there Balm in Gilead?
2.- Tell this soul [. . .] if, [. . .] it
shall clasp a sainted maiden [. . .]

GE (Ch. 39)

(a) [. . .] at eleven o'clock. (559)
(b) It was wretched weather; stormy and
wet, [. . .]
Violent blasts of rain had accompanied
these rages of wind, (558)

as I sat down to read (558)

What (a) nervous folly made me start, and
awfully connect it with the footstep of (b)
my dead sister, matters not (559).

(a) It was past in a moment, [. . .] (c) the
staircase-lights were blown out, [. . .], (d)
for all was quiet. (b) 'There is some one
down there, is there not?' I called out,
(559).

Magwitch's questions disclose past mys-
tery (dramatic tension increased through
questions):

- 1.- 'May I [. . .] as ask you how you have
done well,?' (567)
- 2.- 'Might a mere warmint ask what prop-
erty?' (567).
- 3.- 'Could I make a guess [. . .] at your in-
come since you come of age!' (567)
- 4.- 'Concerning a guardian, [. . .] There
ought to have been some guardian, or
such-like, whiles you was a minor.' (568).
- 5.- did I find you out? (568)

In both cases, a young, male, homodiegetic narrator is struck by the progressive revelation of some information about himself. Progression is built on a question-answer pattern that increases dramatic tension to its peak at the moment of revelation, as described by Poe in the *Philosophy of Composition*. The question-answer pattern makes the homodiegetic voice participant in his own revelation as if it had already known what is revealed and was only then led to notice it. The agent of the revelation (the raven or Magwitch) grows more frightening as some parallelism between the homodiegetic voice and such agent is suggested that identifies them. Yet Poe's presence in *Great Expectations* would not only affect this passage, but

also the construction of the character of the autodiegetic narrative voice, which is portrayed as an unreliable one. In chapter 16, the character morbidly suggests by explicit references to a representation of George Barnwell that he might have killed his sister, who used to mistreat him when he was a child. Similarly, inconsistencies that affect plausibility suggest that the homodiegetic voice might be presenting a version of Miss Havisham's death that would exculpate him. The voice of the older Pip is snobbish, he rejects those who loved him and wants to appear more of a gentleman than he really was; we cannot trust his word. These two possibilities extend the reference to *Ligeia*, *The Black Cat*, and other tales involving the melancholic subject of the death of a woman.

Therefore, let's assume that the idea of the raven as a bird of ill omen is part of some gothic *Zeitgeist* that might be traced back to pre-gothic literature or popular superstition. Let's just remark on the fact that Poe and Dickens wrote in the same period of time, and that they met and discussed literary matters—which should be enough to justify a claim for mutual influence. Still, at its minimum, all literary influence can be reduced to the pattern in which A chronologically precedes B. Thus, Dickens' raven in *Barnaby Rudge* made Poe's review possible and influenced the composition of "The Raven." Also, the Dickens-Poe meeting in Philadelphia influenced *The Philosophy of Composition* and both works by Poe influenced some aspects of Dickens' *Great Expectations*. And yet, the influences perceived do sometimes move in the reverse direction. For Dickens' chapter 39 in *Great Expectations* recalls "The Raven" with the addition of a dimension that was not in the poem before Dickens' novel, but that after the novel, the poem would incorporate as inherent to itself. The pattern is in fact not a rare one. Dickens' raven in *Barnaby Rudge* never had the eschatological importance it would gain after Poe reviewed it in his criticism and revised it in his poem. And this pattern is not the mere result of the influence of A chronologically preceding B, but of B producing a constantly evolving A, composing the A that would henceforth exist after B. Poe was very much aware of this reverse direction of literary influence and even incorporated it into his literary technique and criticism. Monsieur Dupin would render his logically, mathematically deduced explanation of facts before he produced *The Purloined Letter*, and *The Philosophy of Composition* would account for the logical method of composition used in *The Raven* only after the success of the latter was recognised.

Yet what is here called the fourth, reverse-influence pattern should not be mistaken for the practice of revision, since the latter involves an agent's (writer-as-reader B) vision of an object (literary text A). This pattern of influence is only possible if A writes as influenced by B, which requires the presence of a specific compositional character in A. The text that would receive a reverse influence is not just what would be called an *open text* in the sense that it would allow for readerly participation in its virtualization by being incomplete. Such a text would be an *erotic text* in the sense that it seduces into composition through its unreliable narration. The reader-writer B that influences A in the fourth pattern is compelled to provide

a stable, reliable version of a text that would influence A. And it is this seduction into narrative reliability that is part of the compositional technique of A that allows us to consider any of B's revisions of A as an influence on A (A's text is still being written in B's and therefore, can be influenced by it).

Poe's use of unreliable homodiegesis makes his poetic, narrative and critical work particularly liable to be reversively influenced, or virtually read, by the work of later writers. His theory of effect proves that he was much concerned with the role of readers in his work, whereas his critical work shows a mastery of compositional notions that makes it virtually impossible to consider his overt unreliable homodiegesis as a flaw either in composition or in his own mental balance. It must therefore be intentional, and its effect—if not intended, at least inescapable—is to involve readers in the compositional process by making them participate in the workings of the writer, having to decide not only about plot or character development, but about the construction of the narrative voice itself. The acceptance of the fourth, reverse-influence pattern would account for the many often-contradictory portraits rendered by Poe in his works. His posing is completed by the influence of each critic or literary author who accepts Poe's seductive invitation, and still, it is Poe's posing, not theirs. Thus, Poe or some of his characters can be affected by illnesses described by Psychoanalysis; his tales can be influenced not only by mesmerism or magnetism, but also by non-Euclidean geometry, Relativity or Quantum Theory, and his criticism by the New Critics. For how could Poe have anticipated all that? If we are not ready to accept that perhaps Einstein and Böhr were inspired by Poe's gothicism, a fourth pattern of influence should be considered.

PAUL BOWLES, VLADIMIR NABOKOV AND THOMAS PYNCHON: TESTING THE FOURTH PATTERN OF INFLUENCE ON POE'S WORK

One of the first American authors of the twentieth century to recognize a debt to Poe in his writing was Paul Bowles (Caponi 67).

Although Poe was not the only writer to orient him towards the gothic mode,¹³ his gothic imprint in Bowles' work is often more specific than the presence of dark, claustrophobic settings, disorientated or insane characters, physical violence, paralyzing fear or tragic endings. For instance, the two main characters in *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) Port and Kit suffer a high degree of mental and emotional tension and isolation that reminds us greatly of Poe's characteristic portrayal of psychological terror. But there are even more specific references to Poe. Kit's obsession with omens is clearly reminiscent of Poe's use of black animals such

¹³ The influence of his European contemporary Arthur Machen, who specialised in psychological horror, mystery, the supernatural and the unconscious has also been remarked (Folz 2002: 83).

as ravens and cats as the objects of compulsive terror, whereas specific references to Port being “unable to break out the cage into which he had shut himself” (79) builds an intertextual bridge directly leading to *The Premature Burial* (1844), just to mention a few examples among many.

Yet Poe’s work is not only referred to, but also developed in Bowles’ novel. For although Bowles’ use of the desert as a gothic setting is absent from Poe’s work, it is most Poesque. Some aspects such as exoticism, the motifs of exploration and adventure, and a notion of nature as an uncanny, threatening environment, mirroring and adding to the psychological imbalance of characters, are typically Poe’s as can be seen in *MS. Found in a Bottle* (1833), *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), or *A Descent into the Maleström* (1841). In both *The Sheltering Sky* and short stories like “The Delicate Prey,” the desert functions as an uncanny, threatening place.

The postcolonial perspective is added to Poe’s nineteenth century vision not only of nature and adventure—with an undeniable touch of Conrad—, but also of the gothic body. Port’s agony before his death is particularly reminiscent of Poe’s portrayal of bodily anguish in *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1842), and the fact that the political and religious components of postcolonial threatening power relations may build well on Poe’s gothic recreation of the Catholic Inquisition in the early nineteenth-century French invasion of Spain allows us at the end of the twentieth century, beginning of the twenty-first, to describe the gothic body in its violence and pain as “the victim of social, religious, or political tyranny” (Mulvey-Roberts 267). Similarly, Smith and Hughes would consider that the postcolonial threat of racial mixtures and racial othering already circulated in the gothic together with binaries such as Occident/Orient, white/black, civilized/savage, dominant/subservient (2002:89).

The chronological coherence and verisimilitude of Smith and Hughes’ uncovering of the seed of postcolonial power relations in gothicism (A chronologically precedes B) does not imply that Bowles’ re-reading of Poe’s texts permits his readers to find postcolonial elements in Poe’s texts, but that Poe’s ambiguous, unreliable, suggestive writing includes a postcolonial element, or at least a question of power relations between unequal groups, that is not yet inscribed until it finally receives Bowles’ influence.

In 1947, the date of *The Sheltering Sky*, Bowles, a displaced American, wrote under the influence of Poe and had Poe re-emerge under his influence. At more or less the same time, a displaced Russian, Vladimir Nabokov, was also explicitly paying homage in his writing in America, particularly in his novel *Lolita*, which would come out a few years later, in 1955, to the author he much admired and considered iconic. Appel provides specific references to Poe’s work in Nabokov’s novel such as can be found in parts of names like the middle syllable of Lo-lee-ta and its allusion to Poe’s 1849 poem “Annabel Lee”, or to Pym (31/5, 348 and 75/5, 371). Field (1986: 321) reports the influence of Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” on chapter

35 in part 2 of *Lolita*, which describes the enticing of Quilty by Humbert Humbert into the deep recesses of his bedroom in Pavor Manor where Humbert traps him and rejoices in his agony and slow death. But references to Poe's work extend beyond specific images and phonetic or plot similarities, for Nabokov saw the narrative potential of Poe's unreliable homodiegesis and made it central to the composition of his novel in its contribution to both character complexity and plot development. The all-pervasive homodiegetic presence of Humbert Humbert makes the narrative conspicuously unreliable on the basis of a suggested mental instability too Poesque not to be read as such. And yet, the contribution of Nabokov's novel to the production of Poe's work might be at least as relevant, and—most intriguingly—it flows in the reverse direction through the same channel of unreliable homodiegesis.

There are obvious links between Humbert Humbert and Poe, such as their "child brides".¹⁴ Also, Appel compares the age of Poe (27) to the age of his cousin Virginia Clemm (13) when they married in 1836 (Humbert Humbert was 37 when he met the 12-year-old Lolita in 1947). As a student of Nabokov's at Cornell (as was Pynchon), Appel records that Nabokov told him that he originally intended to call Lolita "Virginia" and title the book *Ginny* (358). But although the coincidences existing between the character of Humbert and Poe's personal life are the design of Nabokov as author, it is the voice of Humbert who makes the more than twenty direct references to Poe that Appel finds in the novel, even if we do not count references like "my darling" (330). It is Humbert who mentions Poe's name many times, even creating childish word-plays on the name: "Monsieur Poe-poe" (43). It is he who signs in as "Edgar" on the "conjugal night" with Lolita (377) and appropriates the identity of Poe the author in order to blend it with that of his gothic male homodiegetic voice. And he would do even more for, as a premise to all those analogical references to Poe, Humbert confesses that he is a murderer by the end of the first dozen lines of his account (9).

By the inclusion of obvious technical parallelisms and the use of specific images and references to Poe's work and life, Nabokov's novel has an impact on the process of our understanding of Poe's literary composition, since it suggests that Poe inscribed his conjugal life in the construction of some of his characters. This suggestion is not at all new; psychoanalytical approaches to Poe's work for instance, have been quite merciless in identifying Poe with the most perverse of his gothic characters. However, what distinguishes Nabokov's contribution to Poe's work is that it does not mistake Poe for his characters. Instead, Nabokov's novel deliberately builds Poe as one more character, one more homodiegetic perspective that adds up to the morbid effect of Poe's short narratives.

In fact, Poe never argued that he used his own obsessions as inspiration for his gothic stories, but he was certainly keen on suggesting certain parallelisms between some of his characters and himself; for instance, the physical description of the

¹⁴ For example, Freeman 1998.

character of Roderick Usher has been remarked as a rather accurate self-portrait of Poe (von der Lippe: 33). As noted above, Poe's self "characterization" or "fictionalization" as a literary author has been put forward by critics such as Cox, Wilbur or Buranelli with reasons ranging from mere narcissism to literary promotion as fostered by the economic urge (Whalen). Under Nabokov's influence, Poe's public display of mysteriousness about himself as noticed by Hewitt in contemporary literary salons is nothing but a performance of unreliable homodiegesis that used Poe's authorial persona as one more character.

Pregnant with intertextual irony as the work of Thomas Pynchon always is, it should not be strange to find Poe among its many literary allusions. Although it is not as obvious as in Nabokov's novel, the suggested presence of Poe in Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997) cannot be missed. In this novel, Pynchon pictures fictionalized versions of the British astronomer and the surveyor who drew up the eponymous Mason-Dixon Line between the colonies of Pennsylvania and Maryland in the mid eighteenth century. The "events" of the narrative precede Poe's birth by about half a century, making an illusory anachronism. This belatedness or double-voicedness may be envisaged as Baudrillardian simulacra (1988), as it produces a "hyperreality" that disturbs distinctions between "real life" and literature, between history (or at least, to assuage postmodern objections, recorded historical views) and historical fiction. In a sense, the "fraudulent" new version becomes as "true" as what it replaces/speaks in place of. Paradoxically, the indistinguishable simulacra's effacement of reality depends on the increasing palimpsestic density produced by successive versions and transformations –Mason wrote his own account of his five years in America drawing up the Line.

The narrator of the principal frame narrative of Pynchon's novel, the Rev. Wicks Cherrycoke, is highly unreliable, and there are enclosed stories like Chinese boxes, which he may or may not have access to. Chapter 53, for example, tells the story of Eliza Fields; it is a captivity narrative of the French-Indian War period that is parodied in its gothic version, Jesuit pervers included. Still, the presence of gothic elements would not suffice for a claim of Poe's intertextual reference were they not specified into more concrete images. This tale turns out to be read by the Le Spark children, Ethelmer and Tenebrae, in the serialized publication of *The Ghastly Fop*. Also, the chapter is introduced by a quotation from an unpublished sermon on bodily resurrection by Cherrycoke. Finally, the character of Eliza Fields "transmigrates" from *The Ghastly Fop* to Cherrycoke's account of Mason and Dixon's adventures, becoming the reincarnation of Rebekah, Mason's deceased first wife, with whose ghost he even has sex at some point in the novel. The reference to Poe's *Ligeia* through the female revenant is obvious indeed.

However, Poe's presence permeates Pynchon's novel at levels deeper than the mere intertextual reference. Pynchon's interest in science is reflected in all of his novels as he blends it with fiction to make an amalgam that could not be exactly called "science-fiction," but could be defined as Poe's French contemporary notion

of *le merveilleux scientifique*.¹⁵ Pynchon uses science as the discourse that both questions fiction and bridges a way from the metaphorical level into the real. The eponymous heroes of *Mason & Dixon* are scientists who suffer in their flesh attempts by Enlightenment scientists to meddle with Time (the crucial problem of the calculation of Longitude). Relative Time is suggested by Pynchon to hypothesize on the possibility that Mason could have actually lived through the “chronologick Wound,” (555) inflicted by the eleven days excised in the calendar reform of 1752. At the end of *Ms. Found in a Bottle*, an unidentified narrative voice that is not the homodiegetic one of the tale and that is supposedly Poe himself makes an uncanny commentary on the reliability of the tale by comparing the settings in it described with the maps of Mercator. The uncanniness of it resides in the fact that despite the claim for the existence of scientific evidence of the reliability of the tale, this heterodiegetic voice affirms he [?] was not acquainted with it until many years afterwards. In both cases, the borders between the scientific and the fictional are blurred to suggest an equal level of analogy with the real. Although Poe’s use of pseudo-science for gothic purposes has a very clear precedent in Mary Shelley’s 1818 *Frankenstein*, his characteristic pseudo-scientific references include an invitation to reflect on the nature of fiction that could now be called metafiction—after receiving Pynchon’s influence.

Unreliable homodiegesis as it is constructed in Poe’s literary and critical works can be added to other techniques used by Pynchon to increase narrative tension through uncertainty. The superimposition of narrative layers with different fictional statuses, the rupture of verisimilitude by parodic exaggeration or rampant anachronism invite disbelief rather than its suspension as narrative tension builds up. Following Poe’s advice for the construction of this narrative tension in *The Philosophy of Composition*, Pynchon would not relieve tension at the end by the revelation of all of its many mysteries. That would have led to a disappointing dénouement. Instead, he piles up old and new references to plots and subplots that suggest meanings beyond the plain text, and leave readers awed at their irresolution.¹⁶ Like Poe’s stories, Pynchon’s are suggestive of many meanings and receptive to many influences. But the assertion should rather be made the other way round in order to be more accurate, since Poe’s suggestive invitation to influence is to a large extent the result of Pynchon’s answer to his invitation.

In his article “Plot, Ideology and Compassion in *Mason & Dixon*”, Tom Schaub designates the deixis of the novel “the remembered futurity of a nation about to be born” (201). But the reference can be extended to the nation’s literature in general as it remembers its future development, or rather suggests it. Thus, Poe’s review could not only “remember” having read the future plot of *Barnaby Rudge*, but also

¹⁵ *Le merveilleux scientifique* is defined by González as a rational explanation of the supernatural by scientific laws that contemporary science does not accept yet (103).

¹⁶ On the complexity of the narrative and the plot, see Duyfhuizen 132–142.

his “Raven” “remembers”, in *The Philosophy of Composition*, the intricacies of its production, equally, Ligeia’s raven-black hair points to the future in the “Nevermore” refrain. Similarly, the undecidedness and suggestiveness of Poe’s texts as expressed by their unreliable homodiegesis foreshadows the gothic development of Bowles’ postcolonial subjects and landscapes, the development of his authorial persona into Nabokov’s paedophilic, detective-story murderer; and also anticipates the veiled metafictional presence of Pynchon-as-author as Poe playfully questions the borders between history and hoax.

CONCLUSION

The question of influence in Poe as is seen in the Poe-Dickens dialogical intertextualities makes it difficult to discern between Eco’s three patterns of literary influence and opens up the question of regressive literary—and critical—influence as an inescapable technical mediation of composition. The question is not excluded from Poe’s vision, since he would not only make reference to it in his personal letters when refuting the imputed influence of Tennyson’s poetry on verses he had written before, but he also used it in the structure of his detective stories (by providing the solution and later explaining the logic leading to such a solution) and critical writings (by writing “The Raven” and later explaining the method used for its composition). Thus, influenced by the French symbolists, the impressionism of symbols was added to Poe’s work to intensify either gothic effect or the sublime as beauty. Freud’s theories were so impressive that some of Poe’s characters were completed into a psychoanalytical diagnosis. But the second half of the twentieth century would bring further virtual readings of Poe’s work. It emerged that the postcolonial element could be easily inscribed into Poe’s gothicism through Bowles’ influence; and that New Criticism “textualizes” Poe himself, or his development as author into a literary character through the work of Nabokov. Finally, Poe’s works offer a reading as metafictional constructs under the postmodern influence of Pynchon.

Lancelotti would connect this particular temporality with the compositional essence of the tale, in what he denominates “an active past” (37), a notion that very much resembles Pynchon’s “remembered futurity,” to put it in Schaub’s terms. The thetic or propositional nature of the tale, he argues, is given by its formal, *a priori* character (48) by which the author proceeds from the reader (49) to explore the very possibility and modality of its founding act (36). Be it due to literary precedent (German black romanticism and British poetic notions of the sublime in beauty), artistic principles (the pursuit of beauty and pleasure, through the choice of a melancholic topic), technical imperative (intensification of effect through augmenting the uncertainty that increases terror), publishing market conditions determining form and content, and/or inescapably revisionist criticism, what Lancelotti finds to be the compositional essence of the tale permeates the whole of Poe’s work. Poe’s

technical use of unreliable homodiegesis made many mistake voice and author, which was possibly—or even probably—the intended and required effect for both marketing and literary purposes. Its impact extends not only over his fiction, but also over his criticism. The latter he seems to have understood to be so much a part of his literary practice as to make the idea of a hoax a latent suspicion for the reader, who must therefore be always alert for any suggested—or remembered, future—possibility.

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