The Georgia Review LVIII.4 (Winter 2004), 802-15.

J. T. Barbarese

Taking Poe Seriously

SEVERAL years ago I was teaching a survey of nineteenth-century American literature and spending considerable time on Poe's short fiction, especially "The Fall of the House of Usher." One of my students noticed that we were avoiding Poe's poetry as aggressively as we embraced the prose and I sidestepped the issue. To read the poetry is to read "The Raven," and to me reading "The Raven" is like having to carry out a painful family obligation.

The same student later took me aside and said, "Did you ever notice that between 'The Raven' and 'Bartleby the Scrivener'"—a story I consider the greatest written in that century—"there are these symmetries?" Symmetry is the right word—an apparently innocuous character, one a bird and the other a person, who appears and never leaves, an aggressively self-regarding narrator whose sense of self-possession is ultimately scarred by the experience, and the darkly ironic treatments of both. Not long after, in the midst of a reading of "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," I caught myself about to launch as established fact my hunch that Whitman had been influenced by "The Raven." "'Demon or bird' sounds like a phrase," I actually did say, "right out of Poe."

Whether it is or was Poe-inspired is better left to intuition. "The Raven" was one of the most anthologized poems of the nineteenth century, and nobody would be surprised to have found Melville or Whitman reading it, perhaps enjoying it for its subliminal pleasures. The story it tells, moreover, is more impressive than the language, which is memorable for the wrong reasons. Still, it sticks with you.

The memorability of "The Raven" is partly owing to those "symmetries." Literature is filled with stories of hidden forces that dispatch some agent, natural or supernatural, to spy out and break through human reserve. The poem quietly alludes to a wider pagan tradition, a pantheist one, in which Nature

does the work that humanity (or deity) can or will not do. "The Raven" is the crisis of what comes to stay and refuses to leave. That the visitant is a bird has struck me at times as Poe's deliberate attempt to make not himself but the hopelessly earnest narrator look ridiculous. While Romantic art is essentially optimistic, and optimists don't usually write satire, Poe was unique among American Romantics. He struggled with Romantic ideals—and he had a sense of humor. The poem also sticks because it expresses something dark, a crisis in Poe's understanding of himself, and of his own influences. What was it that came and never left?

"The Raven" also reverses the nature-human polarity ordinarily found in Romantic poetry, specifically in Wordsworth. Wordsworth is too complex to render into philosophical generalities, but on the other hand, whether he believed them or not, he made claims for the restorative power of nature that unsettled his contemporaries and still unsettle us. "One impulse from the vernal wood,"

> Can teach you more of man
> Of moral evil and of good
> Than all the sages can,

he wrote, infuriating Blake (whose "There Is No Natural Religion" is a response) and driving Shelley to write those amazing lines in "Mont Blanc" about the wilderness and its

> mysterious tongue
> Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
> So solemn, so serene, that man may be,
> But for such faith, with nature reconciled.

Nearly a century later the young Yeats was still complaining about those poets who lacked what he called "the vision of evil," unruly optimists like Whitman who bought Wordsworth's claims about benign nature. I think Poe too must have struggled, with stubborn humor, against Wordsworth. Was the raven *sent* by nature, or did it just happen by? If sent, the sender never reveals itself, and it certainly does not seem benign or Wordsworthian—not the "guide and soul" of our moral being but dark, ferocious, and unforgiving.

Against the poem's darkness is its buoyant versification and arguably moralistic undertones. For "The Raven," the truest "symmetry" is with the fairy tale. In fact it is nearly an anti-fairy tale, written against the idealism

that produced that explosion of children's literature in the nineteenth century. This winged herald leads no questing child to a secret garden but instead drives the narrator crazy. It is the stark opposite not only of the swallows that helped Cinderella sort the lentils but of Coleridge's and Keats's more grown-up nightingales and Shelley's skylark. Its only motive is to burst the narrator's isolation.

Isolation, of course, is usually a positive value in Romantic poetry. Wordsworth calls his "vacant" and "pensive" moods, when he can zone out and quietly recollect the day, the "bliss of solitude." Sitting up by himself and staring at a fire in "Frost at Midnight," Coleridge's confidence in God is renewed. Then there's Shelley:

> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
> If to the human mind's imaginings
> Silence and solitude were vacancy?

But Nature rewards Poe's poor narrator by turning isolation into a form of punishment. Isolation becomes incarceration with a talking bird, but one that says only one word, the mechanically iterated, darkly trisyllabic, and frankly ridiculous *Nevermore*. Worse, Nevermore turns out to be the Raven's *name*. The narrator seems doubly doomed. Not only is he stuck in his room with a bird that won't leave, but he will forever represent a version of Poe himself, the American *poète maudit*, aggressively miserable, hopelessly self-absorbed, and responsible for a poem we oft wish we had never heard.

Poe makes a subtle difference in, and greater contribution to, the way American literature carried on its conversation with British Romanticism, and hard as it is to admit, the contribution of "The Raven" is antagonistic and indispensable. Early in his career Poe sounded typically Romantic enough, writing poems filled with the usual Romantic props and stays. In "Sonnet: To Science," he complains that the spirit of analysis has driven the dryad from the wood and dispelled his dreams. The note in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* tells you that the poem is "built on the Romantic commonplace that the scientific spirit destroys beauty, a notion well exemplified by Wordsworth's 'The Tables Turned,'" and on the surface both versions of the poem (it was revised in 1845) bear this out. But it seems directed less at "The Tables Turned" than against "The World Is Too Much with Us"; it's an American sonnet arguing back at a British sonnet. Poe's first line makes the routine equation of analysis with plodding duration ("Science! meet daughter of old Time"), though he

adds the interesting touch that the spirit of analysis is female. The first quatrain aligns Science with a vulture and poetry with Prometheus—again, nothing surprising. What is surprising is the poem's intellectual violence. The spirit of analysis enters Arcadia and *drags* "Diana from her car," *drives* the dryads from the woods, and in the original 1829 version, *tears* the naiad from the fountain. Wordsworth's complaint in "The World Is Too Much with Us" is that we see little in nature that is ours, not because something is wrong with nature, or because we've stripped nature—Wordsworth was no environmentalist—but because we can no longer imagine alternatives like those he smuggles into the sestet. Wordsworth's work is about power, and is ultimately positive. But Poe's sonnet reverses Wordsworth. Poe emphasizes all the negatives—the loss of vision, the displaced faith, the surrender of Arcadia—that Wordsworth turns inside out. While Triton rises to blow his wreathed horn of prophecy, Poe is left trying to dream under a tamarind tree. From Wordsworth's point of view, people like Poe, who can lose their ability to dream, are the problem.

Poe's pursuit of Wordsworth was as inconstant as his own confidence in nature. What's more, his stance toward Romanticism was troubled. His first dissent was from Wordsworth's twin exaltations, of Nature and childhood, optimistic abstractions that Poe, if the poems are evidence, found empty. Wordsworth claimed that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy," that childhood is a microparadise we occupy and lose when the "glory and the dream" flee us and leave us anxious adults. The very physicality of nature—or Nature (nature being ultimately a psychological work product for Wordsworth)—stimulates a longing for a distant childhood. Conversely, the closer you are to childhood the nearer you are to natural selfhood, your "better self." So to close the distance between adult and child is to return to nature, but nature must be understood as our original psychological health. All those epithets Wordsworth lavished on the child in "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" seem silly unless you remind yourself that Wordsworthian children are not innocent, they are *strong*. Wordsworthian childhood means strength, not innocence, because there is no "sin" in Wordsworth. The attributes he heaps on Hartley Coleridge—the "Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!" and "Eye among the blind"—point to still existing adult potentials. Childhood is an intrinsic property of human consciousness that protects it from external corruption. At the head of the class of children is Wordsworth himself. I suspect this is why section 6 of the "Intimations Ode" begins with "Behold the child!" To *behold* is to hold an image in the mind's eye. It is not merely to see. The human standing

adds the interesting touch that the spirit of analysis is female. The first quatrain aligns Science with a vulture and poetry with Prometheus—again, nothing surprising. What is surprising is the poem's intellectual violence. The spirit of analysis enters Arcadia and *drags* "Diana from her car," *drives* the dryads from the woods, and in the original 1829 version, *tears* the naiad from the fountain. Wordsworth's complaint in "The World Is Too Much with Us" is that we see little in nature that is ours, not because something is wrong with nature, or because we've stripped nature—Wordsworth was no environmentalist—but because we can no longer imagine alternatives like those he smuggles into the sestet. Wordsworth's work is about power, and is ultimately positive. But Poe's sonnet reverses Wordsworth. Poe emphasizes all the negatives—the loss of vision, the displaced faith, the surrender of Arcadia—that Wordsworth turns inside out. While Triton rises to blow his wreathed horn of prophecy, Poe is left trying to dream under a tamarind tree. From Wordsworth's point of view, people like Poe, who can lose their ability to dream, are the problem.

Poe's pursuit of Wordsworth was as inconstant as his own confidence in nature. What's more, his stance toward Romanticism was troubled. His first dissent was from Wordsworth's twin exaltations, of Nature and childhood, optimistic abstractions that Poe, if the poems are evidence, found empty. Wordsworth claimed that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy," that childhood is a microparadise we occupy and lose when the "glory and the dream" flee us and leave us anxious adults. The very physicality of nature—or Nature (nature being ultimately a psychological work product for Wordsworth)—stimulates a longing for a distant childhood. Conversely, the closer you are to childhood the nearer you are to natural selfhood, your "better self." So to close the distance between adult and child is to return to nature, but nature must be understood as our original psychological health. All those epithets Wordsworth lavished on the child in "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" seem silly unless you remind yourself that Wordsworthian children are not innocent, they are *strong*. Wordsworthian childhood means strength, not innocence, because there is no "sin" in Wordsworth. The attributes he heaps on Hartley Coleridge—the "Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!" and "Eye among the blind"—point to still existing adult potentials. Childhood is an intrinsic property of human consciousness that protects it from external corruption. At the head of the class of children is Wordsworth himself. I suspect this is why section 6 of the "Intimations Ode" begins with "Behold the child!" To *behold* is to hold an image in the mind's eye. It is not merely to see. The human standing

before him is not the "real" child, which we can only see with that "inward eye" of imagination. Imagination cannot lie.

This romanced vision of childhood is part of the larger, hidden debate in Romanticism (American or British) over the origins of evil and whether human beings are naturally good, and a good deal of it centers on the Fall. Are we essentially good, as Rousseau claimed, or "stained" (to cite the Baltimore Catechism) by Original Sin? That is why Poe's setting in "Sonnet—To Science" is interesting. Though certainly pastoral, it is not Eden but Arcadia: there were no naiads and dryads in Eden. Eden was a scene of instruction where humanity failed its first test, but Arcadia was the paradise on earth we just forget how to get back to. This is not and was not a trivial distinction. Eden stands for lingering metaphysical guilt; Arcadia stands for perfected physical pleasure, shepherds, sheep, girlfriends named for flowers. Eden represents the subjection of the human to a superhuman agency; Arcadia exalts the human subject, surrounds it with the "naturally supernatural," brings heaven to earth. It is a child's world, fully animated, gods everywhere. When Joni Mitchell sang, in "Woodstock," that "We've got to get back to the garden," she may have been talking about either place, but my guess is that she had in mind not Eden, that police state garrisoned by archangels, but Arcadia, the earthly paradise we simply outgrew. Nostalgia for Arcadia lingers in Romantic topical metaphors like Xanadu and late byproducts like Oz and Neverland and Shangri-la. (In contrast, all versions of "New Eden" are by definition dystopias.) Arcadia is a place you can get to from here, if you know how. But its origins are pagan, and Eden is more guiltily ours. Romantic thought tends to get confused when it invokes the garden, or rather, tends to enter the confusion, and at some point most of the Romantics had a bad moment like the one Coleridge had when he wrote his brother to confess that he was finally over Rousseau and had "embraced John Locke and Original Sin." When Arcadia matured, it became Eden.

Poe sensed this confusion. He probably feared the possibility that the alternative to a Paradise lost to guilt was an Arcadia recovered by solipsism and cultural amnesia, and perfected over time through isolation. "The woods of Arcady are dead," wrote the early Yeats, "and over is its antique joy." The counterproposal was thenceforth to find consolation in his own subjectivity because "there is no truth / Saving in thine own heart," and he never altered his course. Modernism's exemplary solipsists resolved the dilemma by turning its horns into what Stevens called necessary fictions. For Yeats, Stevens, Hart

Crane, and figures closer to us like Ammons and Ashbery, the imagination has only one countermove against guilt, and that is to replace God's fictions with its own Fiction and join Stevens in saying "God and the Imagination are one." Solipsism is the end of the road to Arcadia. So the pastoral setting that Poe lays out in "Sonnet—To Science" is admittedly a cliché, but so is most of what a poet starts with. If on one hand the conceit merely produced a pretty good sonnet, on the other it raised the central philosophical question that Romanticism was never fully able to satisfy. At deeper levels it is the staging area for a profoundly moral anxiety.

Poe never stopped obsessing over these competing visions of Eden, one with and the other without sin, because he recognized that the Edenic was ultimately all in the creative mind. Even assuming, moreover, that the "bliss of solitude" is the imagination's relaxation and openness to itself, there is always the chance that something might be amiss with the imagination and that being alone might be dangerous. He says, in "Alone,"

> From childhood's hour I have not been
> As others were—I have not seen
> As others saw—I could not bring
> My passions from a common spring—
> From the same source I have not taken
> My sorrow—I could not awaken
> My heart to joy at the same tone—
> And all I lov'd *I* lov'd alone—
> *Then*—in my childhood—in the dawn
> Of a most stormy life—was drawn
> From ev'ry depth of good and ill
> The mystery which binds me still—
> From the torrent, or the fountain—
> From the red cliff of the mountain
> From the sun that round me roll'd
> In its autumn tint of gold—
> From the lightning in the sky
> As it pass'd me flying by—
> From the thunder, and the storm—
> And the cloud that took the form
> (When the rest of Heaven was blue)
> Of a demon in my view—

It is as if Poe took up the theme of childhood just to parody it. Wordsworth looks at a natural phenomenon—a rainbow in the sky, daffodils—feels himself strong again, and says that the Child is the father of the Man. Poe's younger self does likewise but discovers a disquieting "mystery," the one he alludes to in line 12 and that "binds" him still. A terrifying thought: the mind is not only its own place but *bound* to be its own place, held there forcibly and (the other sense of *bind*) destined to be there. The jaggy typography, gapped and broken with dashes that seem to be trying to prevent conflict among the crowding prepositions, mirrors a child's feeling of being overwhelmed, and not consoled, by nature. Whenever I read this poem I think of that shower of prepositions that opens "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," the great American poetic rite of passage. Prepositions are directional terms; Whitman feels life coming from everywhere and his poem's first dozen or so lines begin with prepositions. Poe on the other hand seems literally overstimulated, too sensuously flooded to know where he will go. He can never name the "mystery," only its effects, because both the mystery and its productions are his own fictions, and they do not please him.

This is not a minor point. When you read Wordsworth or Emerson you go to real mapped places, Tintern Abbey or Concord Bridge, and even when Whitman lies about being in Texas (in fact, at the Alamo), you know where that is. Blake writes about London, Shelley's work references the places he occupied (and usually had to flee to avoid his creditors), Byron is a tour guide. And then of course there's Thoreau. But when it comes to the topical, Poe's work is utterly without a representational core. Give me the address of the House of Usher: outside Chicago, in southern Virginia, or up the street from me? From what tower hung those tintinnabulant bells—London's Big Ben or New York City's St. Paul's? Poe's writing lacks external geographical reference because there is no geography outside the mind. So the mystery in a poem like "Alone" is not "in" anything (as the poem makes clear in lines 5–6) but the speaker's mind; he has (to borrow a Coleridge-ism) "filled all nature with himself" and now can't seem to tell what's what. This being the case, whether in Arcadia or Eden, our rapturous communion with our earlier, original, "better" selves either never existed or cannot exist in imaginations disciplined by a different childhood to different imaginings. Those "others" that Poe names, I think sarcastically, in lines 3–4, had more "settled" minds, and this is disturbing to Poe. The tone in fact seems impatient. Beginning with "From childhood's hour I have not been," the poem keeps saying no—to *being, seeing, sympathizing* ("I could not

bring / My passions from a common spring"), and *awakening*, all verbs associated with visionary power, especially the second and third. Poe denies them priority, a denial that would have gladdened a critic like Howells who twenty years later ridiculed Wordsworth and Thoreau for their "hysterical" wilderness enthusiasm. Poe, of course, is writing from within Romantic idealism and not as a conservative polemicist but as a friendly contributor, yet he has his very classical reservations, and in "Alone" he advances a major one. Imaginative isolation, Wordsworth to the contrary, may produce the opposite of thoughts that lie too deep for tears—i.e., anxiety too profound for analysis to reach. There *is* no nature outside the mind. It took moral courage to confess this unfashionable terror, and his honesty discloses a terrible dissent from High Romantic confidence in the individual.

Poe's dissent, to call it that, is based on his sense of his own disconnection from things. He feels no continuum or organic link between himself and the world, and unlike Wordsworth, this internal disruption is beyond nature's power to repair. I think that this is why both his fiction and poetry condemn every one of his catastrophically unlucky protagonists to suffer some version of this disconnection, which many of them call "madness." "Alone," which has come down to us as a fugitive or notebook item, is just another diagnostic.

So, too, is "The Sleeper," a long descriptive swoon that reminds one, alas, that Poe is not only the global representative of American Romanticism but the quintessential American hack. The poem is intensely overwrought, with a dead girl, a tomb, and lots of fuzzy topography. The girl's name is Irene and the narrator prays "that she may lie / Forever with unopened eye, / While the dim-sheeted ghosts go by." I had read this poem years ago and dismissed it until I decided to take Poe seriously and looked again, more closely. The ghosts, I noticed, are not "in" the room but are the motions of the curtains and the shadows: "o'er the floor and down the wall, / Like ghosts the shadows rise and fall!" The infinite evasions of *as*, or of *like*! The speaker takes metaphor for reality and replaces the contents of the room (curtains, bedclothes) with the contents of his mind. Poe, in on the joke, exposes both the speaker and the ghosts in the phrase "dim-sheeted"—Irene, after all, sleeps the sleep of death. Moreover, line 19 says that the "lady bright" would, as a child, throw rocks against the family mausoleum and pretend that the sounds were groans. The speaker is doing exactly what Irene did, taking metaphor for reality—only she was a child. One rarely thinks of Poe and verisimilitude simultaneously, but the detail is psychologically realistic. In fact, it is reportorial, and launched into

the merely pictorial context—the usual Poe—it transforms the run-of-the-mill supernatural terror into what Poe is known for, psychological horror. Like every protagonist in Poe, poem or story, the speaker is never *really* capable of seeing what's actually going on in the outside world:

> Soft may the worms about her creep!
> Far in the forest, dim and old,
> For her may some tall vault unfold—
> Some vault that oft hath flung its black
> And winged panels fluttering back . . .
> Some sepulcher, remote, alone,
> Against whose portal she hath thrown,
> In childhood, many an idle stone—
> Some tomb from out whose sounding door
> She ne'er shall force an echo more,
> Thrilling to think, poor child of sin!
> It was the dead who groaned within.

The fact that the same child who threw the stones against the portal ends entombed behind them is merely ironic, and the fact that she is a girl-child was mildly titillating to a century obsessed with images of and poems to dead children. That she might now be among the ghosts she once imagined to be behind sounds she herself made is, however, deeply disturbing. Do we live the consequences of our pretending? If the mind is its own place, is it a place that goes on forever—even the sick mind?

What has happened to her and the speaker happens often in Poe. A natural fact (tossed stones echoing against a vault) gets peeled away from its interpretive value (ghostly groans), and the next thing you know everything you thought you knew is wrong. In the "House of Usher," it produces serial collapses, ultimately of the house itself; in "The Raven," it leads the narrator to assimilate the bird's arrival to his own guilt. Loveliest of all, the detail of the thrown stones is a surprising touch of the everyday in all this phantasmagoria, and it points to what children do all the time: kids exaggerate, especially kids in literature. But the phrase "poor child of sin!"—a phrase no good Wordsworthian would ever utter—alters the poem's register completely. Her exaggerations, if not sinful, were the products of her sinful origins. The mind is not only its own place, it's a fallen place. There are no innocents in Poe. The human child, and not the natural world, is permanently defective, and—since

nature itself is finally one more work product of imagination—so is nature. It doesn't matter whether you call the flaw human nature or original sin. Once here, it never leaves.

This is the argument of Poe's "The Lake," which moves through a series of reversals of Wordsworth:

> In youth's spring it was my lot
> To haunt of the wide world a spot
> The which I could not love the less—
> So lovely was the loneliness
> Of a wild lake, with black rock bound,
> And the tall pines that towered around.
> But when the night had thrown her pall
> Upon that spot, as upon all,
> And the wind would pass me by
> In its still melody,
> My infant spirit would awake
> To the terror of the lone lake.
> Yet that terror was not fright,
> But a tremulous delight—
> And a feeling undefined
> Springing from a darkened mind—
> Death was in that poisonous wave,
> And in its gulf a fitting grave
> For him who thence could solace bring
> To his lone imagining—
> Whose solitary soul could make
> An Eden of that dim lake.

Poets remember other poets' words—Whitman, as I suggested, remembered Poe's demon bird—and sometimes spend a lifetime working up to use them without getting caught. That "spot" in lines 2 and 8, given the context and theme, bears a powerful family resemblance to all those natural haunts, bowers, crèches, hermits' cells, and isolated mini-Edens that Wordsworth is "loathe to leave" and where "Nature hems you in with friendly arms," like "the spot" in *The Excursion* where

> haply, crowned with flowerets and green herbs,
> The mountain infant to the sun comes forth,
> Like human life from darkness.

"Consecrated be / The spots where such abide," says Wordsworth through one of his characters. For a joyful communion of the self and the physical world, head for such a "spot," which usually (and always in Wordsworth) welcomes the return of the prodigal nature worshiper back to his forest church.

In one of his letters Pound called Wordsworth a "dull sheep"— in *Hommage to Sextus Propertius* he uses *Wordsworthian* as a synonym for mentally slow—but I think Pound was jealous. Wordsworth may not have understood Burke on the sublime, but he understood something about himself that every poet since has tried to forget. His powers of sublimation were so absurdly thorough that whatever he said about nature is sublimated to whatever he said about himself. (Charles Altieri somewhere remarks that Wordsworth's landscape descriptions are extended descriptions of himself.) Wordsworth's trickiest emotional proposition is that the mind is self-repairing. Moreover, the repair job always starts off as a return (in memory) to a childhood "spot of time." This is why Wordsworth is always tacitly asking himself the same question: why don't things feel the same way now as they did then? Success is measured by how much now *is* then.

It's impossible, I think, to imagine Poe asking that question. Either he didn't want to remember or didn't want to return. By 1827, when he wrote this poem (and Wordsworth was in his late fifties), the *lot / spot* rhyme was a poetic sign-countersign. Here comes another poem about a youthful convert to Nature and "natural piety." But Poe reverses the emphasis to show how different such a "return" might be. "But when the night had thrown her pall / Upon that spot," the infant spirit of the poet "awakes," not to power, vision, or natural consolation but to "the terror of that lake alone," and there he discovers his own permanent littleness. The mind's disconnection from the natural world is a fearful knowledge; it is what Emerson near the end of his life finally conceded was ultimate reality, the choice between the I and the Abyss, the self and nothing.

Poe must have learned this lesson very young. This is probably why he finds nothing consoling about childhood or isolation. The "lone lake" is inhuman, uninhabited, and unsettling. The boy who "haunts" it experiences the physical isolation you feel in the presence of the Sublime, but only that—the pain with the pleasure deleted. The terror seems powerfully connected with the "tremulous delight" that, the poem says, "springs" fountainlike from a "darkened mind."

Coleridge once boasted in a letter how he was "habituated to the Vast" from the time of his childhood, but Poe was no Coleridge. The magnitude of what is not us, the Not-Me, alarmed him. Nor was Poe an Emersonian. Emerson said that nature was a product of the mind—"mind precipitated"—but Emerson was not scared off by what he found there. The boy in Poe's poem is not prepared for such truth; instead, he plays a mirror game with the lake, the fluid reflection of mental terror, and his script is the Narcissus story. If this turns "The Lake" into a cautionary tale, so be it, for it concludes, like "Alone," on a note that carries moral weight. He who would calm his "dark imaginings" by drowning them in a lake is asking for trouble—death by immersion in the image of one's (*sick, darkened*) fancies. I would call this Poe's Second Stipulation, a version of the law of unintended consequences: not only is what you find in nature what you put there, but whatever that is, it is probably more or less than you intend.

Is it accidental that in the later, 1845 version of this poem Poe makes significant revisions? He adds some window dressing ("the mystic wind went by / Murmuring in melody"), inserts the melodramatic dash, and retires the adjective "infant" probably to salvage the meter. But he also directs the poem to an unnamed beloved in the triplet that breaks out in line 15 ("A feeling not the jeweled mine / Could teach or bribe me to define— / Nor Love—although the Love were *thine*") and replaces the "darkened mind" with the obfuscating "jeweled mine." The later version fails because Poe lost his nerve and forgot Stipulation Two. He backs away from the admission of the earlier version, that the splendor in the grass and the glory in the flower may not be apprehensions available to all—certainly not to a child whose mind has been dimmed by intuitions beyond its understanding. He throws himself partly back on Wordsworth's consoling idea of a "spousal intimacy" that obtains between the mind and nature. He hedges and introjects love as a redemptive force. Yet like Hawthorne, that other Romantic at war with himself, the poetry says that our origin is initially a unity but our destiny is endless division, and he is self-condemned to work out the consequences.

Which brings me back to "The Raven." Though I am still totally fed up with it, its tinnyness and its incredible appeal to Goth kids and those who like it for the wrong reasons or who read nothing else, I'm impressed with how much the shorter lyrics, reorganized as a critical retrospective on Romanticism, seem nearly its preamble. Nothing really prepares you for its industrial-strength prosody, its unresolved tone, and especially its preposterous plot, which for

all its accessibility seems hard to get at—for a narrative poem. Because nothing happens. Even stationed beside something that has the same outrageous appeal to the young, like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, "The Raven" is not a poem on which critical analysis feasts or, to change the metaphor, the editorial mind can get much traction (check out the footnotes to any edition of the poem). Its prosody is maddeningly self-undermining, like the *Dies Irae* set to the tune, and tempo, of *Seventy-Six Trombones*. As usual, other than the fact that it's a "bleak December," we know nothing about the setting, which could be anything from a room in New York to a basement in the Usher mansion. The narrator's queer self-absorption seems at first ridiculously exaggerated and outrageous, even for the creator of Roderick Usher, Prince Prospero, et al.

And yet, and yet . . . isn't this a restaging of the psychological calamities recounted in "Alone," "The Lake," and "The Sleeper"? A restaging that extends the borders of the poetic dialogue of self and soul and that assigns one of nature's deputies to represent that "outside" world and remind the narrator that it might still exist? Isn't this narrator just one more overgrown narcissist—and they're all over Poe, from the narrator of the Usher story, to Roderick himself, and Prince Prospero—who has confused his image with the world's and graduated from narcissism to solipsism? Or perhaps that is the point: he was *about* to graduate when the bird arrived, exposing his anal-retentive need to know everything and complicating his fussily organized so-called life. And as in the lyrics, where we learn absolutely nothing about that lake, or that demonic firmament, or even that sepulcher, the natural agency that gives its name to the poem tells you nothing useful about itself, except possibly that the things that enter and do not leave may have been sent. Perched on the "pallid" bust of Athena, goddess of wisdom, art, and the recovered hearth, it inverts that ancient distinction between the higher and the lower natures, with man above and the beast below. If Nature dispatched it, it seems to belong more to Jack London or to Darwin than to the Lake Poets. As always in Poe, the narrator, like the cuckold, is always the last one to get the message. He suspects the bird has been sent to punish him, but he claims to be innocent; he is Poe's answer to Job, trying to justify himself before not God but a raven. Of Lenore, as with the Sleeper, we learn only the outcome (she died), but no details because the narrative is stingy with them. And finally, teasingly, there is that backhanded fairy-tale opening, the *Once upon a* gesture that replaces *time* with "midnight dreary," substitutions that deflect serious attention as much as they reflect, I would argue, the deep autobiographical struggle Poe carried on all his life:

not only with Wordsworth, that greatest of autobiographers, but with the Romantic tradition of self-discovery that teaches that the child is the father of the man—the tradition Poe felt compelled to disregard in as much as it had, so his own childhood must have taught him, long before disregarded him.