

**Dignifying Signifying:  
A Meditation on Interpretation**

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*... the spirit of intolerance may be hunted out of ethics as  
it has been from metaphysics: and then where will it take  
refuge? Obviously, in aesthetics.*

Lytton Strachey<sup>1</sup>

*... we may find that in our anxiety to write about  
literature we have forgotten how to read it.*

Northrop Frye<sup>2</sup>

Of all the activities of literary criticism and of the scholarly organization that supports criticism, interpretation is of paramount importance. By interpretation, I mean simply statements about the meaning of a work, a poem or a fiction, however much these statements have to have taken into account formal cues. And these statements about a work's meaning are important because they are somewhat of a guarantee that fictions and poems are worthwhile, bringing not nonsense but sense into our world. The motive or motives for interpretation may well be a deep desiring, the serious questing for understanding that is an integral part of good reading and of life itself. But whatever the compulsion to interpret, interpretation, as words on a page, is simply statements about the meaning of a poem or a fiction.

<sup>1</sup>'Avons-nous changé tout cela?' *Characters and Commentaries*, London, 1933, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup>*Fables of Identity*, New York and London, 1963, p. 9.

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But to-day linguistics has achieved what Roman Jakobson encouraged it to do: the practice of poetics.<sup>3</sup> And so linguistics is within the scholarly organization that supports literary criticism (or literary aesthetics, as it should be called); and it tells us that there is no single meaning of a poem, that there is no authoritative author of the poem; that the poem is, if not infinitely polysemous, indefinitely polysemous with the bourgeois reader dead along with the author and re-birthing as a worker, producing meanings and owning the means of production, the text. All these notions and more, set *en l'air* by Saussure, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan and Derrida, mixed sometimes with Althusser or Macherey, are encapsulated for English-speaking students in *Critical Practice* by Catherine Belsey, *Poetry As Discourse* by Anthony Easthope or *Literary Theory* by Terry Eagleton,<sup>4</sup> to name only a few.

Certainly the history of taste and the history of the critical reputation of a writer show that interpretation of a work, a strong determining factor in critical evaluation, changes from era to era, from critic to critic and even day to day. Hamlet it cannot be denied has had a varied career as a Romantic wimp, as an over-burdened Existentialist and as an incestuous anti-hero. This is, of course, a long way from infinite interpretation. Nor are these interpretations equally plausible. But it does show that, because of the obvious facts of literary history and the history of taste, let alone because of linguistic theorizing, literary criticism cannot simply assume that the interpretation of a particular text is unchanging or that it ought to be unchanging.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Although Jakobson freely admits that verbal works of art have semiotic features outside the linguistic, he encouraged linguistics to see poetics as within its domain, contributing to setting up something of a tussle between linguistics and the traditional practitioners of poetics in English Literature departments. See 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', *Style In Language*, ed. T. A. Sebeok, New York and London, 1960, p. 350.

<sup>4</sup>London and New York, 1981; London and New York, 1986; Oxford, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>No one has seriously maintained this. The paradigm of a single consciousness creating a poem that is not only univocal but also received as univocal by all its readers is a fiction, the polemical stratagem of the straw man all too easily knocked down and shown to be totally wrong. This stratagem can be seen in the opening paragraph of Anthony Easthope, 'The Problems of Polysemy and Identity in the Literary Text', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, XXV, iv (Autumn 1985), p. 326. A similar reductive strategy occurs repeatedly in Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice*, in discussion of

But the reasons for interpretative shifts are not a source of dismay for literary critics or departments of literature. Shifts may occur for good reason, when, for instance, new evidence, the exciting stuff of scholarship, comes to hand. This may be the discovery of an original draft of a work, showing a different early version of it; a new dating of a work; a new source; a new fact about the cultural, social, or political environment of a writer that might clear up a previous ambiguity; new facts about the revisions of a published work indicating a late change of technique or change merely in compliance with a house-style; and so on. Knowledge of fine details is important and enormous and a scholar knows one cannot theorize them out of existence, but must learn them and weigh them.

It may be important to know that Dr Johnson restored 'hugger mugger' to *Hamlet* in his editing of Shakespeare's works; that the Nahum Tate version of *King Lear* has a happier ending than the one Shakespeare gave it. It is indeed important to know Suckling, Waller, Milton, Cowley or Dr Johnson would not have used fruition to mean success as we do to-day.<sup>6</sup> It is important to know which ending of *Great Expectations* Dickens wrote first; to know Hawthorne left in early editorial meddling in certain of his works and to know that Emily Dickinson's editor, T. H. Johnson, did not. It is important to know that Edgar Allan Poe did not follow a very systematic order in arranging his poems in book form and Wordsworth and Yeats did. It is important to know exactly what editing Ezra Pound did for Eliot's *The Waste Land*. There is an enormous, various and continuous learning that supports literary criticism and its most difficult function, interpretation. And, of

<sup>6</sup>This example is among several reminders Frederick A. Pottle gives in his essay, 'Synchrony and Diachrony: A Plea for the use in Literary Studies of Saussure's Concepts and Terminology', *Literary Theory and Structure*, ed. F. Brady, J. Palmer, M. Price, New Haven and London, 1973, 3-21.

'expressive realism' or the New Critics or Northrop Frye. Even a critic like E. D. Hirsch, who asserts determinacy of meaning and validity of interpretation, does not deny that criticism produces various interpretations. See his *Validity In Interpretation*, New Haven and London, 1967, and *The Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago and London, 1976. M. H. Abrams also denies that as a traditionalist he asserts only univocality. See his discussion 'The Deconstructive Angel', *Critical Enquiry*, III, iii (Spring, 1977), 425-38 and J. Hillis Miller's deconstruction, 'The Critic as Host', in the same issue, 439-8.

course, interpretation does not wait at the end of a queue of information until all 'facts' are known, for it cannot know all that will be discovered or discarded, nor can it cover all other available interpretations before it does what after all science frequently does—use a hunch based on experience and current evidence to jump the queue of information, as I will be doing too.

Even without new information, interpretative shifts that occur should not be lamented. The main reason for such shifts is the nature of interpretation itself and not that a work can mean anything and everything. That is to say, interpretation, statements about the meaning of a work, is a limited discourse, while the poem or fiction is not. The poem or fiction is extremely complicated. The poem, say, even a short one, is made as a veritable Rubik's cube, simple enough on the outside as words on a page but extraordinarily rich and complex in its simultaneous interrelations of thought, feeling, sense, memory, and words, all of which and more inhere in it and are set going by it and by a reading changing sign to signal, as it were. Interpretation has an embarrassment of riches, which should be a source of joy, not dismay, to lovers of literature and scholarship and an energizing force sufficient to reverse the entropy of current critical thinking that has produced such titles as *Superstructuralism*, *Beyond Deconstruction*, *The Crisis of Criticism*, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, *Words about Words about Words* or *The End of Literary Theory*.<sup>7</sup>

Mere interpretative discourse is at fault, not literature—since interpretation makes its statements about a work's meaning, handling only one at a time or a few at a time of the relations of various levels of consciousness simultaneously set going by the words on the page. If interpretation does not make these statements about a work, it, of course, ceases to be known to others, and it

<sup>7</sup>Richard Harland, *Superstructuralism* (New Accent Series), London and New York, 1987; Howard Felperin, *Beyond Deconstruction: The Uses and Abuses of Literary Theory*, Oxford, 1985; W. E. Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies*, Baltimore and London, 1987; Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*, New Haven and London, 1980; Murray Krieger, *Words About Words About Words: Theory, Criticism and the Literary Text*, Baltimore and London, 1988; Stein Haugom Olsen, *The End of Literary Theory*, Cambridge, 1987.

ceases to be known as a critical problem. But interpretation—endless volumes of it on the world's library shelves—does make statements about a work's meaning and by the very nature of its own limited discourse, can interpret the vastly more complicated discourse of poetry or fiction only a little at a time.

No matter how much learning the interpreter of a text has gained from sound editing, literary or social history, psychoanalysis, etymology, linguistics, stylistics or any of the perspectives of the latest critical trends, no matter what the learning that supports his search for meaning, he can render that meaning only in statements and cannot duplicate the work's simultaneity of meaning and medium, which medium is as much memory, feeling and thought as words. In fact, if the interpreter wishes to duplicate the simultaneous workings of meaning and medium in a work, he must simply re-read it for himself, reconstitute the work. He then ceases to be an interpreter. He becomes again the reader—perhaps a better reader for it all, but still a reader, unable to speak the text's plenary meaning, but perhaps able to experience it.

Let me illustrate more fully what I mean about the nature of the poem and the nature of interpretation by reference to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven'. It is relatively uncontroversial nowadays. Indeed the time may be right in Poe scholarship to think that interpreting his work is not the Sisyphus-like task I have suggested interpretation is; for Poe criticism has been listed in thorough bibliographies; his works have been edited and re-edited; his life has been psychoanalyzed again and again and has been placed against the history of his time, its politics, publishing, economics, medicine and psychology. And his canonical status, as Americans accept the French estimate of Poe, is no longer in dispute. Consistently anthologized, 'The Raven' itself is a 'canonical' poem, and it comes with a ready-to-hand basic interpretation that nearly everyone agrees to: that it is a poem about the endless grief of a lover over his lost love, Lenore. This forms the starting point of nearly all interpretations whether they develop into allegorical or psychoanalytic or merely psychological exegesis or whatever.

In case this 'basic' interpretation is taken to be merely a paraphrase, may I pre-empt a debate about terms by suggesting what a paraphrase is, however fine and perhaps unimportant the

distinction may seem. I consider the following a paraphrase: ‘“The Raven” itself is a mere narrative of simple events. A bird which has been taught to speak by some former master, is lost in a stormy night, is attracted by the light of a student’s window, flies to it and flutters against it. Then against the door. The student fancies it a visitor, opens the door [sic], and the chance word uttered by the bird suggests to him memories and fancies connected with his own situation and the dead sweetheart or wife. Such is the poem.’ Such is a paraphrase, a description of the content rather than intent or inner content of the poem by a reviewer, J. M. Daniel, of 1849. His comments, with some premature evaluation, are interpretation, when he says: ‘In the last stanza is an image of settled despair and despondency, which throws a gleam of meaning and allegory over the entire poem—making it all a personification of that passion—but that stanza is evidently an afterthought, and unconnected with the original poem.’<sup>8</sup>

The ‘basic’ interpretation that I will refer to for brevity and convenience, that is, that ‘The Raven’<sup>9</sup> is about the endless grief of a lover for his deceased love, Lenore, is not any less than the complicated interpretations of Bonaparte<sup>10</sup> or Davidson or

<sup>8</sup>Introduction to ‘The Raven’, in the *Richmond Examiner*, 25 September, 1849, *Edgar Allan Poe, The Critical Heritage*, ed. I. M. Walker, London and New York, 1986, p. 146. Daniel was the editor of the *Examiner* and discussed the poem with Poe.

<sup>9</sup>Quotations from ‘The Raven’, and Poe’s other poems and tales, are from *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. T. O. Mabbott, 3 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1969, Vol. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Marie Bonaparte, *Edgar Poe, étude psychanalytique*, 2 vols., Paris, 1933, tr. by John Rodker as *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe, A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* (Foreword by Sigmund Freud), London, 1949. Hereafter referred to in the English edition as Bonaparte. Bonaparte’s interpretation builds on the ‘basic’ interpretation that the poem is about a lover grieving for his lost love. She takes the lost love to be Poe’s mother and the raven to be Poe’s father as Poe re-enacts the Freudian primal curse, which Bonaparte sees him doing obsessively. See the French edition, I, 166-8 and the English translation, 131-2. Psychoanalytic interpretations such as Bonaparte’s, as distinct from psychological interpretations, do not necessarily free a text and its complex interrelations for a ‘radical’ interpretation but seem often to superimpose doctrinaire Freudianism, to leave as much of the text unaccounted for as any other single perspective and to distort the few interrelations it does deal with. In ‘On Reading Poetry’, *Modern Critical Views: Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Harold Bloom, New York, 1985, 119-39,

Halliburton<sup>11</sup> a signal of one of the problems of interpretation as a discourse. Interpretation is reductive, partial. However much it may take into consideration formal cues and other scholarly knowledge, it can only state a limited set of relations in the poem, leaving out all sorts of its simultaneous workings, some of which are not strictly verbal but musical, necessitating more than linguistically oriented poetics to assist interpretation and evaluation. While it acknowledges the 'plot' of the lover grieving over his past love as 'real', it leaves out that simultaneously there is a Lenore who seems more a 'surreal' force than a real, dead person; a raven structurally supplanting her; longing and grief of quite excessive proportions; the hubristic episode of the scholar trying to put down the bird with his rational superiorities; the duality of the scholar/lover; suspense as to the bird's identity; irony as to the bird's identity; a totally 'impossible' situation of a talking bird staying for an 'impossible' length of time—evermore; and a forward surge to the rhythms of the poem with a countermovement that is stymied at the end of the poem.

Let me try to take these formal cues into account in my own attempt at interpretation, that is, my own attempt to make statements about the meaning of the poem. For the sake of brevity I will try to avoid fighting a rearguard action against other interpretations, legitimate as this is and impossible as it is to canvass them all here.

<sup>11</sup>Edward H. Davidson, *Poe, A Critical Study*, Cambridge, Mass., 1957; David Halliburton, *Edgar Allan Poe, A Phenomenological View*, Princeton, 1973, a real addition to detailed exegesis of 'The Raven'; see 122-42.

Shoshana Felman criticises both Bonaparte and Joseph Wood Krutch and his *Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, 1926 for their approach to Poe's work and urges a more 'radical' Freudian reading than theirs that would attempt to explain poeticalness. Whether what she urges will bring about less biographical and more formalistic psychoanalytic approaches to an art work remains to be seen. Certainly the psychoanalytic work on 'The Purloined Letter' is a purloining of the story for the purposes of psychoanalytic theorizing, perhaps in-fighting, ignoring all sorts of formal cues. See J. P. Muller and W. J. Richardson, eds. *The Purloined Poe, Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, Baltimore and London, 1988, in which Felman's essay is reprinted. The debate about the usefulness of psychoanalytic technique comes under scrutiny in 'The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis', *Critical Inquiry*, XIII, ii (Winter 1987) and in Frederick Crews, *Out of My System*, New York, 1975, and *Sceptical Engagements*, New York and Oxford, 1986.

It is enough to say that, in spite of previous interpretations—even Jakobson's and Halliburton's outstanding examples—the poem, so rich and complex, can bear one more interpretation, which is the only justification for doing one more interpretation.

The lost Lenore, the talking raven, the enclosed colour-coordinated study decked in purple silk with purple cushions, the dying of the fire (and of the year in December)—all the imagery of the poem has just enough 'reality' to it to be visualized and accepted as a 'real' situation, a pretext for the poem's curious plot. But there are cues that the imagery is non-real or 'surreal' too, so that the poem cannot be read only in a simple 'representational' way as a lover grieving for his lost love somehow with a very talented raven crowing over him.<sup>12</sup> The poem's imagery accompanied by excessive emotion (and the fact that the scholar/lover could have dreamt it all, as he was napping at the opening of the poem) cues a reading of the poem as a profound happening within the scholar/lover's mind—and, of course, as a spooky and unforgettable happening for the participating reader too. Poe's oral delivery of the poem also suggests this innerness. As Davidson says, Poe recited the poem 'very quietly, as though it were an interior monologue or a "stream of consciousness"'.<sup>13</sup> Lenore is more a force, a power over the scholar/lover than a dead sweetheart. The bereaved scholar/lover seems to have settled into a period of anguished, self-protective stability in his enclosed study, sticking to his books and supervised by the goddess of wisdom, Pallas Athena. Although Poe scolded Hawthorne for allegorising, Poe's propensity for well disguised allegory is clear in this and other works, and I will refer to it later. But Poe need not have had Pallas rule the scholar/lover's efforts to re-establish his equilibrium. As it is, he does—and Pallas he significantly displaces in the poem by the raven who brings his own

<sup>12</sup>Giving just enough concreteness to a noun to create a plausible 'realistic' pretext for the innerness of a poem's theme is one of Romanticism's great achievements, a subtler technique than personification. An outstanding example of this giving and taking away of concreteness to cue differing levels of consciousness or onticity is Shelley's 'To A Skylark'. See my 'On Figurative Language: A Reading of Shelley's, Hardy's and Hughes's Skylark Poems', *Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association*, LXVI (November 1986), 205-17.

<sup>13</sup>Edward H. Davidson, ed. *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, Boston, 1956, p. 496.

'wisdom'—which the scholar/lover is to pass on to the reader. (I assert Poe as the 'authorizing' author who makes choices because so clearly he does. And the choices are not just lexical, but semantic. He chooses Pallas, not Venus, and the raven, not a parrot or an owl, although there were strong and recent literary precedents for these birds.)<sup>14</sup>

All too easily the antiquarian scholar/lover's precarious state of scholarly numbness is upset by the renewal of passion, come as thoughts of Lenore. It is significant that the scholar/lover is in a precarious state (like other protagonists in Poe's Gothicizing works); he experiences both the thrill of the sensuously rustling purple curtains (which stirs his memory of rustling skirts?) and the terror of that thrill (l. 14). The conflicting emotions, the thrill and the terror, and the conflicting of past and present, are more important than the 'real' events, and indeed are depicted as so excessive that they demand foregrounding, putting a representational reading to rout, demanding a reader not just observe a 'real' situation but experience an inner one. The 'actual' events—a tapping on the chamber door at midnight, then on the window—are a pretext to the psychic happening: the release of pre-empting passion and the victimization of the scholar/lover by the power of Lenore who is present in the poem as a power and not just as a past and dead sweetheart to be grieved over. The scholar/lover's equilibrium is tipped at the very thought—absurd and irrational though it is—that the visitor could be the return of his dead sweetheart; in other words, the inner happening is the giving way of the scholar/lover's rationality and controls at the resurgence of passion. I use the word passion not just because it is encoded as only ardent 'love' in so many nineteenth century poems and novels, but because the excessiveness of this 'love' indicates 'passion'—a purple passion to match his purple cushions and curtains, no doubt. So—although Lenore does not walk through the door out of the grave as he unreasonably wants, she is back in the scholar/lover's life as a power over him, that is, as an aspect of his own mind.

The ambiguity of this happening is cued at this early point in the poem by the funereal erotica of the study, causing both thrills and terrors, by the darkness in which the scholar/lover cannot see,

<sup>14</sup>See Mabbott, I, 354-7.

and the vulnerable daring of the scholar/lover's dream. Once he has opened the door, he dreams 'dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before' (l. 26). The patent and almost panting rhythm is by now established as expected, powerful and inevitable, and accompanies his overwhelming resurgence of longing, of passion, now pushing it on, now carrying it along with threatening inevitability.

By stanza four the scholar/lover is losing control. In intense longing, he answers the door to the exigent tapping and whispers Lenore's name. Everything gets worse from now on. He hears his whisper echoed. It could be Lenore calling him or a prolepsis of his tricky new mentor, the raven, but it is an echo. It is his own voice, suggesting again the innerness of the plot's events: Lenore is an aspect of himself, whatever else she is. At this point Poe uses the language of passion and damnation to describe the scholar/lover's state: 'all my soul within me burning' (l. 31), and he makes the tapping now at the window, louder, more exigent.

Still making an effort to 'explore' (l. 34) the mystery rationally, but nearly overwrought, the scholar/lover opens the window only to let in—not Lenore—but a substitute, a raven. The scholar/lover, now more scholar than lover, ironically describes the 'stately' raven's entrance (l. 38). He sees no threat in this bird that promptly proceeds to take over him and Pallas and his study.

By stanza seven there is a distinct change of tone in the poem. The patent rhythm now is a witty accompaniment to the stateliness of the raven's entrance and the scholar/lover becomes somewhat superior towards the raven. He describes it in terms that make it attractive—it enters with a flirt and flutter (l. 37)—as Lenore once did? Not such an accomplished antiquarian as he should be, the scholar ignores the raven's provenance as a bringer of doom and says he is from the 'saintly days of yore' (l. 38). (The goddess Athena or Pallas was associated with the owl and the crow [raven] was considered its enemy, not venturing onto the Acropolis, as Dr Harold Tarrant of the Greek Department, University of Sydney, kindly reminds me.)

By stanza eight, the scholar/lover, still bemused and ironic, unaware of the momentousness of his letting in this visitor, starts to question the raven; in stanza ten he even sees it as a friend who

might leave him; he ignores the implications of the word 'Nevermore' as the 'stock and store' vocabulary (l. 62) of some tragedy undergone by its master which indeed it turns out to be; and he wheels his velvet cushioned chair up in front of the bird, almost making fun of it as he questions him, calling him grim, ungainly, ghastly and gaunt (l. 71) and saying he croaks 'never more'.

By stanza thirteen the scholar/lover is no longer quite so bemused or ironic. While he reclines with his head 'at ease' guessing (l. 75) the bird's meaning, he now feels its 'fiery eyes' are burning 'his bosom's core' (l. 74). This hyperbolic, impossible figure clearly bespeaks the inner happenings of the poem and the raven's message is starting to be understood. This coupled with the 'gloating' of the lamplight over the cushions that once held Lenore (ll. 76-7) makes the scholar/lover again vulnerable and the raven become what the reader understands or fears before the scholar does, that is, a bringer of doom.

But the doom comes first in the form of a seeming new love. The scholar/lover thinks amid the perfume and the footfalls that a new love is possible, helping him forget Lenore (ll. 80-4). The raven says not so. This curious incident—that the scholar/lover is temporarily disloyal to the 'real' Lenore and thinks he can love again—is an important impediment to the interpretation of the poem as merely about a lover grieving for his lost love. He wants to love again. The raven—with knowledge that supplants Pallas Athena's—tells him he never will.

The scholar/lover doomed not to love again in this world wants to meet Lenore in the next. Now he describes her as she 'realistically' was in the poem's outer story, as 'sainted' (l. 94). Lenore is not now the power in the poem that she was at the beginning. She is more the 'real' dead sweetheart from stanza sixteen on. The raven has taken up her previous role as a power over the scholar/lover and negates all the longing, all the passion the scholar/lover has shown himself capable of in the poem—for either Lenore or a new love.

With a shriek, signalling a profound inner happening, the scholar/lover now on the brink of insight into the raven's message,

tries to fend it off: 'Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!' (l. 101). The longing of the scholar/lover of the opening stanzas, his ironic superiority to the bird in the middle stanzas, and his present rebellion are but a weak counter-movement to the inevitable, which is foreordained with every advancing, expected rhythm.

The inevitable happens: the message is understood by the scholar/lover just as the reader apprehends it. The scholar/lover learns he has no future; his 'soul' is 'dead'. Passion is 'fatal'. This is why the device of the hyperbolic and 'unrealistic' ending is apt—the raven's shadow forever crosses or cancels the scholar/lover's soul, and he remains 'forever' in the present, suffering in his room or tomb—a death-in-life, a paralysed *angoisse*, a damnation that Baudelaire, one of Poe's most fervent admirers, understood.

This interpretation of 'The Raven' can try to validate itself, that is, seek consensus, both in the short run and the long. In the long run it would offer reassuring knowledge of Poe's other work and perhaps even his life. Indeed Poe has left quite a gloss on 'The Raven' in 'The Philosophy of Composition'<sup>15</sup> by pretending it was rationally constructed according to certain poetic principles; principles that were to hold the French symbolists in awe from Baudelaire's time to Valéry's. It is to be trusted as much as Poe's other remarks about the poem. Validating knowledge would come more from seeing how Poe worked in other poems and tales, from looking at recurrent techniques or themes. This would be an immense effort, but in it, I would include that there are sad and happy love poems written in the mature period, and the happy or triumphant ones like 'For Annie' or 'Annabel Lee' triumph over physical passion. In 'For Annie' the poet/lover finds peace at last, having given up 'the river/Of Passion accurst, (ll. 35-6), his 'old agitatio-nions/Of myrtles and roses ...' (ll. 57-8) for no less than 'Puritan pansies' (l. 66), led by Annie, his guide. In 'Annabel Lee,' the triumph comes in the union of the husband and wife only in death—incorporeal Annabel Lee in heaven is again the female guide, and the husband/lover is to lie in her sepulchre enjoying only spiritual union.

<sup>15</sup>R. H. Stoddard, ed., *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 6 vols., London, 1896, Vol. 5, 157-74.

'Ulalume' is a 'sad' love poem of the late period with several features reminiscent of 'The Raven'. It has the extraordinary device of the lover wishing to love again: led by a pure and trustworthy female guide, Psyche, he retraces a past love in a state similar to that in 'The Raven'. Vulnerable and unsettled by his memories, he starts to follow Venus Astarte, the star of the goddess of love and rejects Diana, the goddess of chastity. At the very instant that he declares himself for Astarte and longs to love again in stanza eight, he comes to a tomb: passion and death are once again associated as in 'The Raven'. Luckily he and Psyche (he does not lose his mind or psyche in this poem) escape on time, taking the lesson the 'pitiful' and 'merciful' ghouls (l. 97) give them. What 'secret' is in Ulalume's tomb (l. 99)? The fatality of passion, the great Romantic theme. As in 'The Raven', the voice of the poem, that of the lover who remembers, is literally the voice of experience and he gives the reader the benefit of this in writing the poem, he is warning. Not didactic, not glaringly allegorical, both 'Ulalume' and 'The Raven' are hauntings, recreating for the reader both the allure and the torment of passion.

In 'The Bells', which also belongs to the 'sad' love poems of the late period, this tendency to allegory is strongest. The poem traces the irony of consummated passion: instantly after the golden bells of wedded bliss come the alarm bells and terrors of consummated passion, followed by the iron bells tolled by the king of the soulless ghouls, who taunts the lovers. He gleefully peals the bells but the bells sob (l. 104) and moan and groan (l. 112).

The moral is clear. And a case could be made for Poe as a moralist as much as a *poète maudit*.

This latent allegorizing, the pattern of wishing to love a second time, and the duality of scholar/lover, even exist in the earlier Gothic tale, 'Ligeia' of 1838, which Poe thought his best, according to statements he made in 1846.<sup>16</sup> Ligeia (perhaps named after the siren in Milton's *Comus*) is an ambiguous love, like Lenore—and an aspect of the scholar/lover's mind: he never knows her last name yet marries her; she enters his closed study like a

<sup>16</sup>Mabbott, II, 305-06.

shadow as if by magic; she is a great power over him—dominating his erotic as well as intellectual life. She is another of Poe's female guides, but not a good guide like Psyche. Poe's description of her identifies her with the trickster raven. Her beauty is not reassuringly bland, but strange; she is dark; her tresses are raven-black; and her nose is aquiline (p. 312), her eyes are black holes it seems the lover could fall into (p. 313);—although she has dimples and a voluptuous mouth. She is indeed an ambiguous love that Poe asks to be constantly interpreted by the reader. She is not a simple power of will over death, which interpretation does not account for the fact that her return kills Rowena, the second love. She is tantamount to death for the scholar/lover's second love. Having had the ultimate passion, his soul is dead. Passion in the form of Ligeia is fatal. She returns a murderess. The scholar/lover's harrowing shriek at the end when she reappears is not a welcoming cry but the sound of someone terrified. Ligeia's powers can be interpreted at last—she has fatal powers.<sup>17</sup>

How can one put the Gothicizing, the doomed eroticism of the tales and poems together with the detective fiction? The detective fiction, if I may mention it briefly, ends 'happily ever after', as it were. The hero is rationality. There are still Gothic horrors, murders and mysteries, but rationality equipped with irony conquers all, as Poe pretends to conquer in 'The Philosophy of Composition'. He pretends he has lucid free will that rationally shaped the materials of what is one of his most gothic horrors. Rationality is Poe's hero, his Gothic anti-heroes have given in to passion and remain in a kind of hell. It is this split in Poe's mind, emblemized in the scholar/lover duality, or in the pattern of Gothic/passion or detective/reason works, that is Poe's agonizing drama that any scholar would hope was healed in 'Eureka'. Further exploration of it might contribute to validating my interpretation of 'The Raven'. But such validation can only be done in the long run.

In the short run—and in the long run too—any attempt at validating my interpretation of 'The Raven' would have to test its adequacy to the formal cues. There are many that I have not accounted for, trying to pay attention to the surreality of Lenore and

<sup>17</sup>I agree that 'For Poe, death is a metaphor of sexuality ...' Daniel Hoffman, 'The Marriage Group', *Edgar Allan Poe, Modern Critical Views*, p. 102.

the duality of the protagonist. For instance: the cancelling effect of the reversal of the r--n construction in raven/never that Jakobson deals with;<sup>18</sup> the effects of the internal rhyme; the use of the gerund; the way the vocabulary alters the meaning of the rhythm; the use of the poem as a remembering of what is a long time a memory (although I imply that it is a strategy to set an 'inner' story going); the use of differences in reader knowledge to narrator knowledge; the extra-linguistic and crucially important musical effects;<sup>19</sup> and so on. Without going into all these in detail, I think that findings about them would support my interpretation. But my interpretation can claim no validity if it tries to eliminate elements in the poem, skewing the cues and avoiding a test of adequacy. In so far as it is an attempt to deal fairly with as many formal cues as possible, an interpretation is valid—for the present moment.<sup>20</sup>

Its justification is that it presents itself to be measured for adequacy and that it does supersede, say, Daniel's 1849 interpretation in which he felt the poem had no purpose and no allegory with the last stanza an afterthought.<sup>21</sup> Or it supersedes, say, Bonaparte's insistence on Lenore as merely Poe's mother and the raven as Poe's father—with the consequent evaluation that the poem is mechanical and stagey.<sup>22</sup> But tentatively valid as it claims to be, interpretation and my interpretation are only that: partial and reductive statements of a work's meaning that wait to be pushed aside by another interpretation that seeks validity. If this is

<sup>18</sup>Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', 371-3.

<sup>19</sup>Poe's use of musical strategies is very impressive. Not only does he use rhythm and tone to enhance feeling, the musical ordering enacts meaning. It may well be that music in poetry constitutes meaning preverbally. As T. S. Eliot warns us '... the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist' (*On Poetry and Poets*, London, 1957, p. 30). There are over 260 compositions based on Poe's work. See May G. Evans, *Music and Edgar Allan Poe, A Bibliographical Study*, New York, 1968 (reprint).

<sup>20</sup>Anthony Easthope's dazzling demonstration of the polysemy of Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Windhover' is really a series of very cursory 'interpretations' that are not all 'equal'. Most of what he calls interpretations ignore important formal cues. See 'The Problems of Polysemy and Identity in the Literary Text'.

<sup>21</sup>*Critical Heritage*, p. 146.

<sup>22</sup>Bonaparte, tr., 131-2.

'pluralism'<sup>23</sup>—varying interpretations seeking validity, seeking consensus at any one time across the world of scholarship—then it is not relativism. If this is pluralism, pluralism is the acknowledgement of what has always been so in interpretation—the endless desire to make sense of a work and the acknowledgement that the escaping plenary meaning is in the reading, not the interpretation.

Assisted by aesthetic joy, this desire, this questing, is not finished with one poem, but seeks to know more, to know an *œuvre*, then to know and understand the writer behind it. The quest for meaning is irresistibly to understand a mind, a spirit that created an art work for us, a spirit that lived, loved, learned, suffered, endured and created meaning from words and music and memory and feeling and thought—the *bricolage* of experience-in-this-world, and that went to the publicity of publishing to give to us, who live, love, learn, suffer, endure—and luckily read.

Interpretation is criticism's most arduous task. Criticism can best help it by not theorizing fallacies that protect each theory's inner coherence, nor systems, relying on factitious binary opposites, that stop whole methods of approach, and that blinker awareness of formal cues so vital to interpretation and to the aesthetic function, the joy of the word. Whatever theorizing does, it must accept the genial but stubborn chaos of literary studies as empirical fact. What Frederick Crews says about psychoanalysis is true for all criticism and its theorizing: 'A critic's sense of limits, like Freud's own, must come not from the fixed verities of a doctrine but from his awe at how little he can explain. And that awe in turn must derive from his openness to literature—from his sense that the reader in him, happily, will never be fully satisfied by what the critic in him has to say'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Discussions of pluralism and relativism abound and both terms are confused. See 'Pluralism and Its Discontents', *Critical Inquiry*, XII, iii (Spring, 1986).

<sup>24</sup>*Out of My System*, p. 185.