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A QUESTION OF BIRDS: POE AND BAUDELAIRE

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Resumo: Poe e Baudelaire criaram pássaros que ficaram famosos: o corvo de Poe, o cisne e o albatroz de Baudelaire. Uma investigação detalhada da forma como os pássaros funcionam a nível textual ajuda-nos a entender como a poesia europeia e americana evoluiu ao longo do século 19, da imagética e tom românticos à experimentação em termos de versificação, conteúdo e tropos. Ou seja, estes ícones ornitológicos demonstram o modo como a poética de cada um dos autores se alterou face às exigências cada vez maiores da modernidade. O artigo argumenta também que se verifica uma progressão cumulativa da poética em Baudelaire, tradutor de Poe e influenciado por ele. Baudelaire foi buscar a Poe a ideia do poema em prosa e da importância da melancolia. Os tropos e figurações dos pássaros na poesia destes autores é, assim, um bom indicador da evolução do conceito e função da poesia.

Palavras-chave: Poética; poesia; Poe; Baudelaire.

Abstract: Poe and Baudelaire produced famous birds: the Raven for Poe, the swan and albatross for Baudelaire. By

looking closely at how these birds function textually, we can get a better grasp of how European and American poetry itself changed in the nineteenth century, evolving from distinctly romantic imagery and tone, to experimentation in versification, content, and tropes. These ornithological icons, in other words, demonstrate how the poetics of each poet is developed, in confronting the increasingly insistent demands of modernity. The essay also argues that there is a cumulative progression of poetics in Baudelaire, who draws from and translates Poe. Among many other aspects, Baudelaire drew from Poe's idea of the prose poem and of the importance of melancholy. The evolution in the notion and role of poetry can be discerned by looking at the tropes and figuration of the bird that each poet images.

Keywords: Poetics; poetry; Poe; Baudelaire.

And yet one cannot be sure that one's own writing has
not been influenced by Poe.

T. S. Eliot

This is an essay about some famous birds: Poe's "The Raven," and Baudelaire's swan as well as his albatross. The move from Romantic poetry to the verse of modernity is, most scholars of literature agree, evident in the progressive changes produced in turn by the works of the two poets in question. Moreover, as is well known, Baudelaire translated Poe and was deeply influenced by his writings. Baudelaire claimed that Poe and the monarchist (and very right-wing) Joseph

de Maistre had both taught him how to think. The two poets then, starting with Poe, perform what Longinus called *accumulatio* – Poe straining to leave the Romantic poets behind even as he integrates their images, and Baudelaire incorporating some of Poe’s precepts into his own poetry.

In forging his own poetics, Poe himself was famously caught between a decidedly romantic tone and imagery, and a struggle for a “new poetry.” The young Poe had thought of himself as first and foremost a poet, but became increasingly disillusioned with his verses. He had failed, he concluded, to write poems “of much value to the public or very creditable to [him]self.” Indeed, particularly in the United States, Poe is best known for his gothic tales and some of his literary criticism. Baudelaire, for his part, was (as Walter Benjamin was to argue) the principle herald of modernity, though he often used classical forms in his poetry, even as he frequently experimented with the prose poem. It is principally because of the content, not the form, of his poems that Baudelaire can be seen as modern.

But let us return to the birds. The profound changes in poetry evident in these two seminal poets – from Poe’s fraught and eerie verses, through Baudelaire’s powerful descriptions of the modern city – these changes can be demonstrated palpably by considering the iconic function of each textual bird. The birds in these works are like talismans that acutely manifest varying and changing poetics; poetics that were, of course, to have an immense influence on subsequent poets in Europe and the Americas.

We begin then, with Poe. Having just noted that in the United States, Poe is largely known for his prose works, we come to the exception: “The Raven,” known by all readers and students of poetry. Indeed, it is almost impossible to say anything about that poem without lapsing into particularly tired clichés, or repeating what endless critics have already noted. These pitfalls notwithstanding,

I will start with a brief consideration of the raven itself.¹ Generally considered a bird of ill omen (Poe's poem says this explicitly more than once), the raven plays, conversely, a good role in the Hebrew Bible. In the story of Elijah, a draught causes a famine; God tells Elijah to hide by a brook, and adds "I have commanded the Ravens to feed you there" (Kings I, 17: 5). The story continues, "And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening..." (*idem* 7). The raven in Christian art is thus the emblem of God's providence. *Brewer's Dictionary* notes that St. Oswald holds a raven with a ring in its mouth, that St. Benedict has a raven at his feet, and that St. Paul the Hermit is depicted with a raven bringing him a loaf of bread. All of these are allusions to the ravens feeding Elijah (Brewer and Evans 755).² This aspect of ravens – doing God's bidding, by God's direct command – also raises controversy, such that St. Isidore of Seville (7th century CE)

¹ I will occasionally be using crow and raven interchangeably, even though there are subtle differences. The website of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology says the best way to tell the two apart is by their voices. The voice of the raven says "kaaa kaaa," while that of the crow says "caw caw." "Similar Species: crows and ravens." (n.d.) *All About Birds*. <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/page.aspx?pid=2501> I believe this is a sufficiently minor difference to allow for the occasional (and in general usage) equation crow=raven, though any ornithologist would take issue with such a simplification. Indeed, Aesop's fable "The Crow and the Raven" makes the same point about voice serving as the distinction between the two black birds. In the fable, the crow is jealous of the raven, "because he was considered a bird of good omen." The crow then attempts to be a raven, cawing "as loud as she could" in order to make travelers think she too can predict the future. But one of the travelers, Aesop relates, reassures his companion by saying, ". . . it is only the caw of a crow, and her cry, you know, is no omen." Aesop's conclusion is that "Those who assume a character which does not belong to them, only make themselves ridiculous." It should be added that Aesop's other fable, "The Fox and the Raven" (which La Fontaine was to copy) is often translated as "The Fox and the Crow." The French insists on the confusion between the two birds, since both raven and crow are translated as *corbeau*. "The Crow and the Raven." (n.d.) *Aesop's Fables*. <http://www.aesopfables.com/cgi/aesop1.cgi?1&TheCrowandtheRaven>

² The raven also appears in Job 38:41 and again in Proverbs 147:9, both passages telling of how God provides for young ravens when they cry out in hunger. Moreover, the first bird that Noah sends out from the arc is a raven; the dove is second. The raven is thus both protected by God, but it is in the list of birds that are an abomination and cannot be eaten. (Leviticus 11: 13, 15).

is brought to warn, in book XII of his *Etymologiae*, that it is wicked to think that God gives ravens his counsel. The warning is repeated by Bartholomaeus Anglicus (13th century CE).

For the ancients, however, the raven is the bird of ill omen, though Aesop labels the bird a good omen. Good omen or bad, it is obviously this ability to presage that motivates Poe's poem. There is a Roman legend that the raven once had white feathers ("as white as a swan's," says *Brewer's*, adding that ravens were "not inferior in size" to swans). But Apollo, angry at the bird for tattling on a faithless nymph whom the god loved, first shot the nymph with his arrow, and then, as Addison's translation of Ovid puts it, "He blacked the raven o'er, / And bid him prate in his white plumes no more."³ The Roman legend thus has the raven descending from a swan-like ancestor, which is not insignificant to our purposes here. There is a fable by Aesop, "The Raven and the Swan," that also connects the two birds, though in this case with an emphasis on unalterable difference. In that fable, a raven envies the snow-white plumage of the swan, and tries to wash his own black wings to make them white. He washes his feathers for so long, since they continue to be black, that he dies for lack of food. "Change of habit," reads the moral, "cannot alter nature." The characteristic of ill omen comes, it would seem, from the raven's feeding on carrion, bringing infection and hence bad luck. The very presence of a raven and its hoarse croaks has come to mean a prophesy of death. Indeed, the verb *to croak* originally meant a prophesy of evil or misfortune, a now archaic usage. Cicero, meanwhile, was warned of his death by a flock of ravens, and as legend would have it, a raven entered the orator's

³ Ovid, 4. B. A. o. 1. A., Dryden, J., Pope, A., Congreve, W., & Addison, J. (1833). *Ovid*. London: A. J. Valpy. Qtd. *Brewer's*, *ibid*. In a similar vein, Benvolio says to Romeo, "I will make thee think thy swan a crow." (Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*. Act I, Scene 2).

bedroom and “pulled the clothes off his bed” on the day he was murdered. The raven also predicts rain (a less sinister presaging).

The stamp of ill omen notwithstanding, the raven is also known to have several characteristics deemed laudable by various scholars. Like the eagle and the swan, the raven is monogamous, and continues to feed its young even when the latter have learned to fly. Moreover, notes Bartholomaeus Anglicus, “the mildness of the bird is wonderful,” because “when father and mother in age are both naked and bare of covering feathers, then the young crows cover and hide them with their feathers, and gather meat and feed them.”⁴ Perhaps it is this characteristic that explains God’s choice of the birds to bring food to Elijah. Ravens also lead storks when they migrate, and defend them from other birds (Steele). The Aberdeen Bestiary (ca. 1200) uses the raven as an example of good parenting, admonishing parents to “learn from the crow’s example, and its sense of duty, to love their children.”⁵ And the bird is intelligent; Pliny the Elder writes, for example, that if a nut is too hard for a crow to crack, it will drop it on rocks or roofs until it breaks. In Danish mythology, Odin, the god of war, has a raven on each shoulder – Mind and Memory.

All of these somewhat contradictory attributes are at play in Poe’s figure of the raven. In the seventh stanza, the raven steps into the narrator’s chamber after he opens the window to find the source of the rapping. The raven is here described as “stately” with “mien of lord or lady,” and from “the saintly days of yore.” Poe is clearly aware of the raven’s biblical connections and its regal presence in some Christian imagery. The raven’s choice of the bust of Pallas on which to roost underlines its intelligence and ferocity; Pallas, after all, is

⁴ Macaulay, *History of St Kilda*, cited by Brewer’s, *Ibid*.

⁵ “Crow” (2011, January 15). *The Medieval Bestiary*. <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast252.htm>

the goddess of war and wisdom. She is thus aligned with Odin, also god of war. Hence, ferocity. Indeed, in stanza thirteen, the raven's eyes are "fiery," burning "into my bosom's core." Odin, however, has the two ravens, Mind and Memory, on his shoulders. The wisdom of Pallas, in other words, seems for Odin to be embodied by the ravens that remain affixed to him. Memory is already present in the previous stanza (twelve), when the bird is described as an "ominous bird of yore," a phrase that is repeated just before the narrator (who seems to be a student, with books strewn around him) wonders what the bird meant in croaking "Nevermore." The raven is then not from the present; it is rather ghost-like and, like Pallas, represents a lost time. It follows then that the next stanza (thirteen) brings up the lost Lenore who is lost as well to the present and will never again press the cushions of the student's chamber.

Stanza fourteen opens with iconic religious allusions: seraphim and angels. They have been sent by God, the narrator decides, to give him "respite and nepenthe" from his grief on losing the fair Lenore. The combination of Homeric and Christian allusions matches the layered connotations of the raven. Moreover, the narrator is unable to drink the nepenthe and "forget this lost Lenore." Memory and Mind, we might say, in the form of the raven, refuse him escape from grief and remembering. The following stanza calls the raven "Prophet," and declares that whether the bird comes from the "Tempter" or from a "tempest," it is nevertheless a prophet. The student here asks, to which there will be the usual reply, "*is there balm in Gilead?*"

The question is a nearly exact duplicate of the biblical verse in Jeremiah⁶. In that book, God is angry with his people because they have taken to worshipping other gods. God gives the prophet

⁶ For the religious and philosophical roots of Poe's thinking, see Forest (1928). Poe was clearly aware of the Jeremiah passage.

Jeremiah the inspiration to speak for him, and to explain to the people that a great drought will ensue as a result of the peoples' worshipping of Baal. God punishes thus Jerusalem and Judah, and promises to punish as well those Israelites who have gone to Egypt. But in Jeremiah 8:18-19, the prophet laments the retributive destruction of the land of Judah, personified by him as the daughter of his people: "My grief is beyond healing, my heart is sick with me. Hark, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land. . .". Dismay, the prophet says, has taken hold of him, "for the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded." (8: 21). It is in this context of lamentation that Jeremiah asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?" (8: 22). The question is never answered. Later in Jeremiah the balm from Gilead comes up again, this time in reference to Egypt, which had been defeated by the Babylonians: "Go up to Gilead, and take balm, o virgin daughter of Egypt! In vain have you used many medicines; there is no healing for you" (46: 11). Poe, in the fifteenth stanza, takes up the question from the first passage again, this time (as it were) demanding an answer: "Is there – *is* there balm in Gilead? – tell me – tell me, I implore." The italics here serve to restate Jeremiah's question with urgency. The raven, of course, is then made to reply that there will never again be such a balm in Gilead.

There is an aspect worth noting in the biblical passages about the balm from Gilead. Jeremiah laments that his "grief is beyond healing," and that his heart is sick with him, "for the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded." In an opposing context, when the prophet addresses himself to those in Egypt (also personified as a woman – the virgin daughter of Egypt), Jeremiah similarly says that there is no healing for her. This repetition serves to emphasize that, in the case of the prophet, his grief is so great

that it cannot be healed; in the case of Egypt, her evil is such that she is beyond healing as well. In both cases, then, the damage is so great that it is beyond cure, even with the balm from Gilead. Moreover, Jeremiah identifies so much with the punished land of Judah that he says her wound is the same as the resulting wound in his heart. The overall effect then is utter hopelessness and sorrow, which are precisely what Poe wants as the effect of his poem. The tenor of the biblical passage then, to which Poe alludes, exemplifies a tone of extreme melancholy – the tone that, in “The Philosophy of Composition,” the poet had stated was the intended one for “The Raven.” “Melancholy,” he writes, “is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones” (*Great Short Works* 533).⁷ The leitmotif of the poem is grief that will never be healed.

Most Poe scholars mention Dickens’ pet raven Grip as the main influence for Poe’s poem, and there is no doubt that Grip played a major role in the inspiration. When Grip died, in 1841, Dickens had him stuffed, and in the same year (at his children’s request) wrote the bird into the historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge*.⁸ Also in the same year, Poe wrote a review of the novel, drawing attention to the raven, “whose croakings are to be frequently, appropriately and prophetically heard in the course of the narrative. . .” (1841). He added that Grip was “human-looking” and that his voice was like music mixed into the whole. Four years later, Poe wrote “The Raven;” “The Philosophy of Composition,” the essay that purports to explain the source and production of the poem, was published the

⁷ Poe’s *Great Short Works* (1970) are hereafter *GSW*.

⁸ The stuffed Grip can be viewed today in a shadow box in the rare books department of the Philadelphia Free Library. There is also a crow in *Bleak House*. Another influence may have been the texts and drawings of Audubon. See Ziser, Michael (2007, December) Poe, Lacan, Von Uexküll, and Audubon in the Zoosemiosphere. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 12(3), 22 ff. Ziser says that Poe may actually have heard a lecture on birds by Audubon, when the latter was in Philadelphia in 1841.

following year. Poe had originally intended to use a parrot as the bird in the poem; perhaps Grip played some part in Poe's decision to use a speaking raven. In any case, Dickens' raven was almost certainly an influence in Poe's choice of that bird for his poem.

The intent of "The Philosophy of Composition" is somewhat problematic. One edition of Poe's works refers to the essay as "half tongue-in-cheek" (*GSW* 563), Baudelaire, however, had translated the essay, and taken it to be of crucial and grave importance. Mallarmé, for his part, dubs the essay "pure intellectual play," and refers to a "recently revealed letter" from Poe to a friend, in which the American poet says that the method of composition outlined in the essay had nothing authentic about it. Mallarmé continues, "The idea [for the essay] came to [Poe], suggested by the critics' commentaries and investigations, that the poem could have been thus composed. He consequently produced this connection, simply for the purpose of an ingenious experiment. It amused and surprised him to see this idea so promptly accepted, like a *bona fide* made declaration." Nonetheless, concludes Mallarmé, an idea is an idea, and the pages Poe produced are no less congenial to Poe, and sincere (*Oeuvres complètes* 771-72).⁹

Whether seriously or in jest (or both), Poe produces a lucid account of his poetics in "The Philosophy of Composition," and it is thus worth revisiting the more salient aspects of the essay. To begin with, there is that is not willed in the creation of "The Raven," writes Poe – nor should there be in poetic composition *tout court*. There is, to repeat, no accident of composition here. Poe writes that nothing of "The Raven" "is referrible [sic] either to accident or intuition – that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion

⁹ Mallarmé's *Oeuvres complètes* are hereafter *O.C.* Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (GSW 530).

The poem must also, continues Poe, elevate the soul: “It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul” (GSW 531). Beauty, moreover, is “the sole legitimate province of the poem.” Beauty is not a quality, “but an effect,” and is not intellectual or sentimental, but rather, he repeats, “the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul” (*idem* 532). Poe next discusses tone, and concludes, “Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.” Refrain is of the essence, and the word that embodies melancholy best is “Nevermore.” Since Monotony (or repetition) is key, Poe decides that an animal, rather than a human being, should repeat “Nevermore.” He rejects the parrot, and chooses the Raven “equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended *tone*” (*idem* 534). As to melancholy, Poe decides that the most melancholic of all topics is “Death,” and concludes that, “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.” To this he adds the bereaved lover.

Poe explains that his poem builds on the bird’s repeated word, first with the narrator asking commonplace questions and ending, of course, with the devastating conclusion that the narrator will never again “clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.” But, concludes Poe, poems need complexity as well as “some amount of suggestiveness – some undercurrent, however indefinite of meaning.” There must not be an “*excess* of the desired meaning,” however, or the poem will turn into prose (which Poe derisively notes describes “the so called poetry of the so called transcendentalists”) (*idem* 541). Hence the final two stanzas, which are meant to “pervade all the narrative which has preceded them.” Thus “take thy beak from out *my heart*,” is “the first metaphorical expression in the poem.” Combined with “Nevermore,” the reader is

brought to a moral. The Raven becomes “emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*” (*idem* 542). And the Raven, clearly, along with the melancholy he inspires, are never going to leave Lenore’s bereaved lover.

We are in a better position now to recognize the importance of Jeremiah’s lamentations as another “undercurrent” pervading the “The Raven.” Poe’s declaration that a poem must establish tone, and that melancholy is “the most legitimate of all the poetical tones,” finds its tonal pitch in Jeremiah’s sorrowful outpourings. Perhaps most significantly, Jeremiah provides the notion of grief without healing; a grief so great that even the balm from Gilead is helpless to assuage. Death, which Poe calls the most melancholy topic, is for him particularly so when a beautiful woman has died. It will have been noted that Jeremiah refers to Judah as the daughter of his people, and to the people in Egypt as a virgin. Melancholy thus is gendered in the feminine, a point worth noting even though the Bible often contains metaphorically feminized lands or cities. My point here, however, is that Jeremiah’s hopelessness is, as Poe was to argue in his essay, made more acute by the trope of a beautiful and/or virginal daughter. Jeremiah wishes his “head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” (9: 22) He is like Poe’s bereaved lover, his own heart wounded “for the wound of the daughter of my people.” “Take thy beak from out my heart,” cries Poe’s narrator.

Poe’s raven is the personification of sorrow – whether ill intended or sacred – with a mixture of pagan and Christian allusions. On the one hand, the narrator refers to “that God we both adore,” placing the raven in the Judeo-Christian context. On the other hand, the fact that the raven comes from “the Night’s Plutonian shore,” is on the bust of Pallas, and other such allusions to what is “ancient” place the raven in the tradition of Greco-Roman paganism. Moreover, Poe externalizes his Raven until the end, when it has penetrated his very

heart, not unlike Jeremiah's wounded heart. Finally, whereas Poe emphasizes, in his essay on the poem, that the purpose of poetry is to elevate the soul, the student who tells his story is left, at the end, with his soul forever unable to lift itself "from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor." The shadow, of course, is that of the raven. Like Jeremiah, the raven is a prophet – but we are left with ambiguity as to whether it comes from God or the devil. The reader at the end recognizes the raven as *emblematic*, Poe tells us, of mournful and never-ending remembrance. But there is also an aspect of self-torture here, as Poe points out in his essay. The student is impelled, Poe explains, "by the human thirst for self-torture. . .". He is given to "the luxury of sorrow, through the anticipated answer 'Nevermore.'" (*GSW* 541). It is this luxury of sorrow and the need for self-torture and superstition, that separate the student from the poet. There is, in other words, an inherent irony in the poem – a distance between the narrator and the implied author.¹⁰

* * *

He makes a swan-like end, / Fading in music
Shakespeare, *Othello*

¹⁰ Most Poe scholars agree that Poe is particularly influenced by the *Frühromantiker* Friedrich Schlegel, and that it is the latter's notion of irony that most influenced Poe. For a good variety of articles on Poe, see *Critical Essays on Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Boston: G.K.Hall & Co., 1987). See G.R. Thompson (1973) Thompson, however, somewhat overplays his thesis that Poe is comical, tongue in cheek and full of satirical play. See also Thompson's Introduction to *GSW*, where he claims that "the true horror, the true *Gothic* quality, of Poe's tales lies in their substantive irony, for Poe's tales are more than ironic in mode, more than supercilious hoaxes. . . The insinuated burlesque, the ironic modes of language, and the ironic themes merge with ironies of plot and characterization in the creation of an absurd universe." (44-5) This view is, in my opinion (and in that of other Poe scholars) very much an overstatement.

In Baudelaire's great swan poem on exile, there is also irony, but it is dark, produced by the contrast between the exiled figures in their present environment, and the unrecoverable one that they long for. The poem is dedicated to Victor Hugo, and Baudelaire writes directly to the exiled writer in December of 1860. Baudelaire explains that in the poem, he wanted to say quickly "all that an accident, an image, can contain in suggestions, and how the sight of a suffering animal pushes the mind toward all those beings whom we love, who are absent and who suffer, toward all those who are deprived of something that will never be found again." (*Oeuvres complètes* 1007).¹¹ Whereas Poe had begun with a tone for his poem, and then moved to find what figures could inspire the melancholic tenor he wanted, Baudelaire's poem is inspired by a chance encounter that puts memory into the foreground. The movement is then the opposite of Poe's; Baudelaire happens upon a suffering swan, which becomes the talisman that triggers the poem and all of its allusions. Those allusions produce a series of images that seem unrelated until one senses what the Baudelaire scholar Pierre Jean Jouve describes as "the secret association" (*OC* I, 1004).¹² The secret association here is, of course, exile – from one's destroyed homeland (Andromache, with both Troy and her husband Hector lost forever; the Negress who longs for her home and its palm trees, Victor Hugo himself), to sailors forgotten on a desert island, to the vanquished, the forgotten, captives, to the old city of Paris itself, lost forever under Haussmann's tireless bulldozers. Finally, there is the central figure of exile – the one that inspires

¹¹ Baudelaire's *Oeuvres complètes* (1975) are hereafter *OC*.

¹² Jouve's idea of a discordance in the "chain of ideas" and the unifying "secret association" is reminiscent of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. That work too presents an apparently discordant series of musings (that is, the different perspectives in the letters, principally between Usbek, and Rica and, later – and dramatically – Roxanne). It is Montesquieu himself who claims that there is a "secret chain" unifying the whole of the novel.

the entire chain of allusions – the suffering swan, fluttering in the dust and reproaching God for the lack of rain.

Baudelaire writes to his mother in the same year of 1860, making it clear that he knows he has composed poetry out of the ordinary. He has produced, he tells her, “new and passably singular verses.” (OC I, 1008) Hugo, for his part, responds to Baudelaire’s letter promptly, describing the swan poem in language that seems to anticipate Mallarmé’s own swan sonnet: “Like everything that you do, Monsieur,” writes Hugo to Baudelaire, “your *Swan* is an idea. Like all true ideas, there are depths. This swan in the dust has beneath it more abysses than the swan of Lake Gaube’s bottomless depths. One glimpses these abysses in your verse, which is full of shivers and shudders” (*idem* 1007). Hugo senses the cold void that underlies Baudelaire’s anguished swan in the city; Mallarmé will make such a glacial terrain explicit. Hugo’s choice of Lake Gaube powerfully makes the point; the Lake, high in the Pyrenees, is known for its alluvial glaciers. Hugo is aware of the newness then, of Baudelaire’s verses. In a letter responding to another of Baudelaire’s poems dedicated to him, Hugo tells Baudelaire that he has created “un frisson nouveau.” (qtd. Pichois *idem*: 1011).

The traces of Poe’s “Raven” are evident in the Baudelaire poem. They are already in the letter to Hugo, as we have seen, when Baudelaire explains that his encounter with the suffering swan made him think of “all those who are deprived of something (*quelque chose*) that will never be found again.” The penultimate stanza of the second part of the poem formulates such irrevocable loss precisely: “[I think of] anyone who has lost that which cannot be retrieved / Never, Never.” Poe’s word “Nevermore” is echoed here, and for the same reason: like the lost Lenore in “The Raven,” *le cygne* is about what is irretrievably absent. But there is a difference: Baudelaire’s poem includes *things* and *places*, as well as people that are lost. Thus Hugo, Andromache, the Negress and the swan itself have

lost, not a lover, but their homelands. And thus the poet himself has lost the Paris he knew so well; he is surrounded by ruins of the past (the demolished streets and buildings to make way for Haussmann's new wide avenues), and the ruins of the future (the columns and fragments of stone and marble that will make for the ostentatious edifices in the new Paris of the Second Empire). The present, however, like that of the swan, is intolerable.¹³

Baudelaire's homeland is, in fact, the city of Paris, and he feels as exiled in the new one under construction as do the more literal exiles in places far from home.¹⁴ This sense of being a foreigner in what is supposed to be native soil produces what some critics have called *étrangeté* (or strangeness) in the poem, not unrelated to the Russian Formalists' *ostranenie*, or to what Brecht called the *Verfremdungseffekt*. Such strangeness is also close to Freud's notion of the Uncanny; the poet, in other words, is somewhere that is long familiar (Paris), and that is now unrecognizable to him. Hence the lines, "The old Paris no longer exists (the form of a city changes faster, alas! than the heart of a mortal)." The notion that the city

¹³ For a reading on Baudelaire and time in this regard, see my *Seeing Double* (2011), 208-28 ff.

¹⁴ The young Baudelaire had written a poem called "L'exilé" while at school; it was written in Latin and French. The verses won Baudelaire first prize in Latin poetry at the collège Louis-le-Grand in 1837. The poem is taken from Chateaubriand's *Le génie du Christianisme* (Part I, Book V, Chapter xiv). In that passage, Chateaubriand argues that the most moral of man's instincts is the love of country. The harder the climate, he continues, the greater the attachment to one's native soil. He then tells the story of "a Frenchman obliged to flee during the Terror." With his last remaining coins, the man buys a boat and, with his wife and two children, sails on the Rhine, fishing to stay alive and attempting to avoid being beaten by the xenophobic population. His only consolation was "at times to breathe air that had passed over his country." ([1866] *Le génie du Christianisme par M. Le Vicomte de Chateaubriand*. Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils, 78). The schoolboy Baudelaire renders this consolation as being more fragile (despite the addition of flowers): a *small* consolation remains, he writes, because "those in exile breathe air that *perhaps* caressed the flowers in the gardens of their native land" (*O.C.* 230; emphases mine). Thus the theme of exile was long in the poet's thoughts, and he was well versed in the works of Chateaubriand, another exile who longed for his homeland.

changes more than the human heart is reinforced in the opening of the poem's second part, which will lead to a list of the building blocks and fragments lying on the ground in preparation for building the new Paris: "Paris is changing! But nothing in my melancholy has moved!" After describing the debris that clutters Paris, the poet writes, "everything for me becomes allegory, and my beloved memories are heavier than rocks."

The construction sites in what will be the new Paris are then allegories of the weight of memory. Indeed, memories weigh the narrator of the poem down because he cannot escape them, any more than he can lift the melancholy that, in the face of so much change, is all that remains immovable, even heavier than the huge stones that surround him. The stones and rocks themselves, however, are the symptoms of change, while it is the poet's melancholy that, heavier still, roosts immovably, an internal version of Poe's Raven on the bust of Pallas. Baudelaire's final stanza refers to "the forest in which my mind is exiled," and where a memory (*Souvenir*) blows the hunter's horn. The poet's mind is hiding in the forest, but Memory will find its prey; it sounds the horn to signal that the quarry is near. The poet's mind will not escape, then, and will be hunted down by the inescapability of remembering. It is to be noted that, while the other figures of exile have to do with literal displacement, the poet's mind is described in purely metaphorical terms, since the exile is inward in this case, and thus abstract.

We are, then, far from the imagery of "Correspondances." In that famous sonnet, it will be recalled, man passes through a "forest of symbols," its trees "living pillars" that at times speak in obscure words and observe him with a familiar gaze. The forest of "Correspondances" is like a Celtic sacred grove, emitting runes that man is incapable of deciphering – but there is, somewhere, an innate, if pagan, sacredness. In the swan poem, however, the forest is in the mind, and it is the mind itself that attempts to hide in it, in

order to run from the hunter Memory, which will always succeed in reinserting itself into the poet's thought. The third line of the last stanza adds to the complexity: the poet thinks of sailors forgotten on an island – but in that case, being forgotten is a dreadful fate. What the sailors and the poet have in common is being exiled; but while the poet longs for amnesia (as it were), the sailors conversely hope desperately to be remembered. It is not here a question of the sacred, but rather the burden of memory and the inevitability of melancholy.

The swan, in the midst of these exiled figures, functions as the fulcrum of all the other exiles. It is the iconicization of despair and of being (to return to Freud) *not at home*. The poet is crossing the new Carousel – in full construction and emblematic of the old Paris that is disappearing – when he encounters the swan, that has escaped from its cage and is scratching and dragging its feathers through the rough ground. The image is reminiscent of the albatross in the poem of the same name (written in 1859, around the same time as the swan poem). Once on the ground, the albatrosses, “kings of the azure sky,” are clumsy and shamed, “Pitifully letting their large white wings / Drag next to them like oars.” The swan is graceful on the water, and it too is awkward on land. Both are snatched from their natural surroundings – the albatross by sailors, and the swan by merchants selling their wares in a crowded Parisian square. In both images, the dirt of the ship (the albatross) and the dust of Paris under construction (the swan) are contrasted with the plumage of the birds, trailing on the ground; filth versus purity, in other words. The poet will be likened to the albatross: he too is the prince of the clouds; he too is “[e]xiled on the ground in the midst of taunts”; he too has “giant wings that prevent him from walking.” Thus the albatross, like the poet and the swan, is a figure of exile, displaced and as if imprisoned in territory not its own.

But the swan is more than that. While the albatross functions as a simile (“The Poet is similar to the prince of the clouds. . .”), the swan is an encounter that serves to stimulate the poet’s memory; it is the allegory of mourning a lost home, a sentiment that will be echoed by the poet who longs for the Paris he once knew. The swan crystallizes this sense of not being at home; and the other figures of exile, reinforcing as they do the notion of homesickness, add weight to the despair born of homelessness that permeates the poem. The swan mimes the gestures that are natural on its “beautiful native lake,” by rubbing its “palmed feet on the dry cobblestone”; by opening its beak to a stream without water; by “nervously bathing its wings in the powder.” But in the context of a busy Paris market, those gestures are both senseless and dislocated. In this sense, the swan is like the poet who walks as if in the old Paris, while being constantly reminded that he is in the new one, wherein his usual gestures no longer belong and are nothing more than the symptoms of futile dislocations.

Like the Raven, the swan also speaks. The poem does not mention the legend that the swan sings just before it dies, but the implication is clear. With its “heart full” of its native lake, the swan speaks words of reproach to the natural elements that are lacking in the dry dust of the new city: “Water, when will you finally rain? When will you thunder, lightning?” In the following stanza (the last of the first part of the poem), the poet sees the swan as “this unhappy creature, strange and fatal myth. . .” It looks at times at the sky (“like Ovid’s man”), which is “ironically and cruelly blue” (a line that Mallarmé will recast in his own poem, “L’azur”). The sky presses on the swan’s “convulsive neck” (again, there will be an echo of this in Mallarmé’s swan sonnet) and reaches out with its “grasping head” as if addressing its reproaches to God. Such reproaches, the reader already knows, are useless; the swan, like the poet, is condemned to exile and death. Whence, one

surmises, Hugo's recognition of the "abysses" that lie beneath the city's powdery ground on which the swan is caught. The poem, particularly in its second part, is filled with exclamation points, as if repeating the swan's inconsolable cries (for example: "Paris is changing!" or "worn away by a desire without respite!"). Like Jeremiah's lamentations, Baudelaire too cries for a city being destroyed; but the destructor is the hand of modernity.

Poe's Raven is a prophet that comes in from the cold (it is a "bleak December") to settle on the bust of Pallas in the student's luxurious rooms. By virtue of repetition, and as a result of the student's own masochistic questions, the Raven intones its word and thus makes the loss of Lenore a final and eternal one. As Poe himself says, in "The Philosophy of Composition," the Raven becomes "emblematic" in the last two stanzas, which "pervade all the narrative." (GSW 541) But is only in "the very last line of the very last stanza," that the Raven becomes clearly emblematical of "*Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*" (*idem* 542). The Raven then, if we follow the definition of emblematical, is a symbol of mournful and endless memory.¹⁵

Baudelaire's swan, however, is not the symbol of memory; rather, the poet's chance encounter with that bird – and its suffering – triggers his memory of a series of exiles. The swan, in other words, is an outward manifestation and fulcrum of the poem's gradual trope of internal exile. The swan is then not a prophet, but rather a figuration of deterritorialization (to use Deleuze's term) – the swan's wild gestures make the poet's dislocation come into focus, and the poem's achievement is the clarity with which such dislocation (for the poet as well as the reader) comes into sharp view. Neither a prophet nor a symbol (nor an emblem), Baudelaire's swan is an allegory of

¹⁵ "Emblem," in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970: "a symbol linked pictorially with its referent."

the loss of native ground. Such a loss is as final as that of the lost Lenore, but Baudelaire manages to elicit melancholy (which was, it will be recalled, Poe's primary intent) as a symptom of modernity (the new Paris) rather than as a somewhat supernatural encounter with a Raven and the death of a beautiful woman. The loss of the old Paris is made explicit by the swan's desperate gestures. There is an autobiographical aspect to Baudelaire's poem, as there is to Poe's, but Baudelaire's lyrical "I" writes the destruction, not only of a city, but of a way of life and of being-in-the-world as well. It is in this sense that Baudelaire has performed a shift in modern poetry: modernity, with its new urban centers, crowds and bulldozers, has destroyed a way of life for the poet, whose mind hides in a forest to escape the inevitability of dislocation, and the sorrowful burden of memory.

The swan externalizes what the poet experiences; the other exiles, including those in the last stanza, accumulate to emphasize the leitmotif of mental exile from the triumph of industrialization and the bourgeois capitalism that supports it. The poet's writing of the modern city becomes another gesture of despair, like the swan's convulsive neck and vain entreaties to some sort of god. It will be noted that the swan's beak is not in the poet's heart, unlike in Poe. Rather, it is the swan's heart that is full of melancholy when it speaks its agonized pleas. The trope of the swan, then, functions as a talisman of the ills of modernity and of the poet's ensuing melancholy. So too, the rocks and stones that surround the poet become analogies of the heaviness of that melancholy: everything becomes an allegory for the insistence of modernity, as the poet tries in vain to escape the memory of the past.

* * *

Poe's Raven is a bird of ill-omen, and the poem tells the story of a mind torturing itself and watching itself go beyond the limits of the real, into (the reader surely surmises) self-destruction. We might say that its gothic tone is the offshoot of Romanticism, steeped in the imagination and in individual subjectivity, pushing toward a vague supernatural that defines, among other aspects, the gothic and its ancestor, the German fairy tale. The hallucinatory aspects of "The Raven" are made palpable, such that "some undercurrent, however indefinite of meaning" that Poe calls for, is attained. Yvor Winters quipped (voicing a common American opinion) that Poe was second-rate, one of many whose gift for language is inadequate to their task. This view is no doubt the result of a differing notion of poetics today – what was hugely popular in Poe's day sounds somewhat corny to the modern ear. That change in taste begins, as we have seen, with the verse of Baudelaire.

Poe wrote that "When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect. . ." (GSW 532). His raven is meant to provide such an effect, and to make the reader dream of "glories beyond the grave." Not so Baudelaire's swan – a real animal on the dusty street, triggering the poet's memories of the lost, forgotten and homesick. Baudelaire sees in his swan the consequence of an unforgiving, insistent and triumphant modernity. He does not strive for a melancholic tone (as does Poe) nor speak of his own sterility (that was rarely his problem and not often mentioned in his *oeuvre*). Nor does Baudelaire (unlike Mallarmé, his disciple) question the ability of language to convey. It is rather the paralyzing and immovable presence of an inescapable melancholy that Baudelaire confronts in the city; a melancholy that the suffering and exiled swan both embodies and allegorizes for the poet of modernity.

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