

Edgar Allan Poe across Disciplines, Genres and Languages

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Edited by

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<i>Linda Barone</i>	
Section I: Edgar Allan Poe in Language, Literature and Translation Studies	
Chapter One.....	7
Poe's Gothic Ambience	
<i>Peter Stockwell</i>	
Chapter Two	25
A Labovian Approach to Poe's <i>The Tell-Tale Heart</i>	
<i>Christiana Gregoriou</i>	
Chapter Three	37
Poe in the EFL Classroom: On the Pros and Con	
<i>Bruna Di Sabato</i>	
Chapter Four.....	53
'We commence, then, with this intention': Pragmastylistic Aspects in the Italian Translations of Edgar Allan Poe's <i>The Raven</i>	
<i>Linda Barone</i>	
Chapter Five	75
Edgar Allan Poe's <i>Metzengerstein</i> : Machine vs. Human Translation	
<i>Roberto Masone</i>	
Chapter Six.....	91
'Marquis pour le mal': Baudelaire and Poe	
<i>Daniela Liguori</i>	
Chapter Seven.....	109
Science Fiction Spaces in Some of Poe's Short Stories	
<i>C. Bruna Mancini</i>	

Chapter Eight.....	121
E.A. Poe and E.T.A. Hoffmann: A Case of Influence	
<i>Eriberto Russo</i>	

Section II: Edgar Allan Poe in Communication and the Arts

Chapter Nine.....	139
The <i>word-vision</i> : Edgar Allan Poe and Cinema	
<i>Alfonso Amendola</i>	

Chapter Ten	151
<i>The Tell-Tale Heart</i> ... of mine: Poe Told by Stewart Copeland	
<i>Paola Attolino</i>	

Chapter Eleven	167
The Theatrical Principles of Vision: Edgar Allan Poe and the Imagination of American Theatre in the Second Half of the 20 th Century	
<i>Vincenzo Del Gaudio</i>	

Chapter Twelve	185
Edgar Allan Poe's Words as Musical Inspiration	
<i>Iain Halliday and Mariateresa Franza</i>	

Chapter Thirteen.....	203
Steps to a Metropolitan Mode: Cinematographic Tales by Edgar Allan Poe	
<i>Sara Matetich</i>	

Chapter Fourteen	215
Gothic Clouds and Threatening Shadows: Edgar Allan Poe and the Comics—A Sociocultural Analysis	
<i>Mario Tirino</i>	

Appendix

The Philosophy of Composition	239
The Poetic Principle	250
The Fall of the House of Usher.....	272
The Masque of the Red Death	288
The Tell-Tale Heart	293
Metzengerstein	298
The Cask of Amontillado	306

The Black Cat	312
The Raven.....	320
Contributors.....	325

CHAPTER TWELVE

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S WORDS AS MUSICAL INSPIRATION

IAIN HALLIDAY AND MARIATERESA FRANZA

Introduction

In this paper we seek to provide a general introductory overview and explanation of some features of Poe's writing that have inspired many musicians, before giving more specific attention to a relatively recent and celebrated product of such inspiration – Lou Reed's album *The Raven* (2003), in which Poe is described in one lyric as “not exactly the boy next door”. It would be possible to use up a lot of the available space here by simply listing the names of musicians who have been inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's writings and the works those musicians have created – in recent times from Antony and the Johnsons in the US in 2004 to William Wilson in Sicily in 2015 (more of them below), and, in a completely different genre, from Claude Debussy in 1918 to Gordon Getty in 2014 – but that information, that list, is readily available elsewhere and is in any case a work in constant progress. Throughout the world, all of the time, there are musicians reading Poe and recreating his words in or with music. (And there are bloggers and Wikipedia editors following their progress.) What we are more interested in attempting to do here, however, is to begin to explain why this should be, why Poe's words inspire musicians.

Poe

As we might expect of one who does not conform to standard norms, Poe is a polarizing writer. Often readers are either enraptured or repelled by his texts – it would be a rare event to come across a reader left indifferent by them. This polarizing effect seems to have been present even in Poe's relations with other people, some of them very significant people in his

life. In his 2008 biography, *Poe: A Life Cut Short*, Peter Ackroyd quotes from the correspondence between Poe and his adoptive father John Allan during the sixteen-year-old's first (and only) year of attendance at the University of Virginia. I say he quotes from the correspondence between the two, but in fact the words that follow actually come from John Allan's annotations on the letters and envelopes he received from Edgar during this period (1826), i.e. words not intended to be read by the young Poe: "I do not think the Boy has one good quality [...] I cannot believe a word he writes" (42). Which is strong stuff indeed, full of significance, full of drama, above all regarding the attitude of the young writer's only father-figure.

But others came to believe in Poe's words, and believed big time. Ackroyd also recounts one of Poe's most famous hoaxes, a journalistic one with inevitable literary elements, which took place in 1844, five years before his death. Poe convinced the editor of the *New York Sun* to run an article about a transatlantic balloon flight that although an invented story was recounted in such a way as to make it seem real. The paper sold so well on publication that Poe was unable to find a copy for himself. The story was, of course, retracted – it would be another 75 years before anyone actually flew across the Atlantic – but, to borrow Ackroyd's words, "After a chorus of disbelief and disapproval ... the power of his pen had been proved beyond doubt" (96).

The histrionic, the performance-related element in Poe's life and work is an important and consistent feature in drawing many readers into his imagination and in keeping them there in his poems and his prose. But before considering some of the specifics of Poe's potential as a muse for musicians, it will be useful to give some attention to links between linguistics and literature, poetry in particular, together with an acknowledgement of the links between poetry and music. The linguist Roman Jakobson, writing in 1960 in his seminal essay, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", mentions Poe several times, the first in connection with Poe's predilection for the unexpected and the binary:

Quite naturally it was Edgar Allan Poe, the poet and theoretician of defeated anticipation, who metrically and psychologically appraised the human sense of gratification for the unexpected arising from expectedness, both of them unthinkable without the opposite, "as evil cannot exist without good". (363)

So, Jakobson acknowledges and highlights the binary measure – suggesting even a sort of Manichean measure – in Poe's writing, in the very words, the very language the writer chose to make use of in his work.

And the binary measure is perhaps ultimately the measure of all poetry, and all music:

Measure of sequences is a device which, outside of poetic function, finds no application in language. Only in poetry with its regular reiteration of equivalent units is the time of the speech flow experienced, as it is—to cite another semiotic pattern—with musical time. Gerard Manley Hopkins, an outstanding searcher in the science of poetic language, defined verse as “speech wholly or partially repeating the same figure of sound.” [...] The reiterative “figure of sound,” which Hopkins saw to be the constitutive principle of verse, can be further specified. Such a figure always utilizes at least one (or more than one) binary contrast of a relatively high and relatively low prominence effected by the different sections of the phonemic sequence. (358–359)

And Jakobson, as other scholars have also done, identifies too in Poe's work a heightened concern with sound itself, wherein his use of classes of phonemes, even contrasting classes of phonemes, contributes to the “undercurrent of meaning”, to use Poe's own expression from his 1846 essay, “The Philosophy of Composition”, an expression Jakobson defines in his essay as “picturesque”, perhaps simply because it is more metaphorical, more “poetic” than it is academic and “scientific”. In other words, Poe was conscious that the sounds of his words contributed to their significance when read and thus to their overall effect on his readers.

The musician, whatever genre she or he may inhabit at any given moment, is always on the lookout, consciously or unconsciously, for stimuli that provide and maintain the urge to compose, to sing, to play. Foremost among those stimuli is the desire to move, to affect both oneself and an audience. Edgar Allan Poe's literary works in general and his highly-crafted use of language in particular have performance-related characteristics that are particularly conducive to stimulating the process of musical creation and performance. Perhaps a useful way of entering into this discourse is to quote some of Poe's own words, from his essay, “The Poetic Principle”, first published posthumously in 1850:

He must be blind, indeed, who does not perceive the radical and chasmal differences between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation. He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth. [...] It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the Poetic Sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supernal Beauty.

Poe's binary distinction here between "Poetry and Truth" and their "obstinate oils and waters" further confirms Jakobson's view of the binary mechanism, even though at the same time Poe's conviction regarding the incompatibility of these two "modes of inculcation" would seem to defeat the purpose behind Jakobson's essay. Jakobson wrote "Linguistics and Poetics" in order to show that the science of linguistics has a duty to turn its attention to poetry as well as a useful contribution to make in doing so. The quotation from Poe, however, confirms that behind his own vision of poetry – and his poetry in particular has inspired many musicians – there was an awareness of music and music's "supernal" potential, music's potential for lifting us up out of the terrestrial and towards the celestial. For the moment let us leave aside the fact that music is not always a major lift, there are also minor falls to be negotiated, just as there are falls, many of them, and some not so minor at all, in Poe's works, in his poetry and in his prose. For the moment let us consider Poe's desire for literary and linguistic effect, both rising and falling, that becomes affect in his readers.

Though it is difficult to imagine, to envision Edgar Allan Poe riding a roller coaster, this is, metaphorically, the effect he sought in his writings. And this is also precisely what a composer seeks to make happen in a piece of music, from the simplest song to the most complex symphony. And such is the mystery of human artistic endeavour and perception that there is "supernal Beauty" to be found at both the zenith and the nadir, at the very top and at the very bottom of the rise and fall, of the major lifts and the minor falls.

Poe and Music

On Friday 13 November 2015 the present writer went to see William Wilson, a young singer-songwriter from Florida, near Siracusa, perform in a club in Catania. The date remains memorable not only because of the music, but unfortunately also because of the infamous terrorist attack on the Bataclan concert venue in Paris – news of this unfolding event was communicated and discussed after the concert in Catania. William Wilson is of course a stage name, taken directly from the alliterative title of Poe's first-person narrative story about a young man who meets and interacts with his own double. Both name and surname are common in the Anglophone world, as is their combination with its attractive alliteration and matching syllables. The fact of his choice of stage name already tells us something of the artist's "visceral love for the American poet" (to translate and quote from an email received from him before the gig). The set included an acoustic rendition of his version of Poe's poem, "A Dream

Within a Dream" (1849), and that evening he also played "A Song for Allan", a moving and atmospheric song of his own dedicated to his cat.

The intensity of William Wilson's attachment to Poe is evident, but also evident is the way in which Poe's text, "A Dream Within a Dream", lends itself immediately to sung performance:

Take this kiss upon the brow!
 And, in parting from you now,
 Thus much let me avow —
 You are not wrong, who deem
 That my days have been a dream;
 Yet if hope has flown away
 In a night, or in a day,
 In a vision, or in none,
 Is it therefore the less gone?
 All that we see or seem
 Is but a dream within a dream.

I stand amid the roar
 Of a surf-tormented shore,
 And I hold within my hand
 Grains of the golden sand—
 How few! yet how they creep
 Through my fingers to the deep,
 While I weep—while I weep!
 O God! Can I not grasp
 Them with a tighter clasp?
 O God! can I not save
 One from the pitiless wave?
 Is all that we see or seem
 But a dream within a dream?

In essence written in iambic tetrameter with a predominance of full-rhyming couplets, this poem is rhythmically very attractive to a reader, or a singer. But it is also the occasional variation from the overall scheme that renders the lyric interesting and allows the reader or singer room for his or her own interpretation and emphasis in performing – the repetitive line "While I weep—while I weep!" in the second verse, for example. And of course the couplet that ends both verses (and which provides the poem's title) lends itself in particular to the reiterative repetition that is common in the chorus of many songs and which William Wilson makes use of in his "Dream Within a Dream".

The version of Poe's poem "The Lake" (1827), recorded in 2004 by Antony and the Johnsons, is further evidence of the facility with which his texts can be performed:

In youth's spring, it was my lot
 To haunt of the wide earth 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 trees that tower'd around.
 But when the night had thrown her pall
 Upon that spot—as upon all,
 And the wind would pass me by
 In its stilly 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 undefin'd,
 Springing from a darken'd mind.
 Death was in that poison'd wave
 And in its gulf a fitting grave
 For him who thence could solace bring
 To his dark imagining;
 Whose wild'ring thought could even make
 An Eden of that dim lake.

Many of the feet in the metre of this poem are anapaestic – two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable, a fact reflected in the accompanying music with its reiterative repetition of three descending chords on the piano, the third of which is stressed and held longer. Once again, the rhyming couplets provide important boundaries to the units of sound and sense and the couplet rhyming with "awake" and "lake" provides ample opportunity to make of it a reiterative chorus. The lyric with its structure and its slight moves away from that structure allows Antony Hegarty to create and maintain a captivating and powerful melody.

Scholar Harry Witchel recently (2010) wrote an interesting book titled, *You Are What You Hear: How Music and Territory Make Us Who We Are*. As you can guess from the title, the book is more about the ways in which music is received and used by listeners rather than the ways in which music is created, but in his afterword – "The Power of Music" – Witchel makes a point that is very significant about why striving for musicality is such a widespread human activity. In making his point he quotes from Dr

Samuel Johnson, "Music is the only sensual pleasure without vice"¹ (181). Dr Johnson's consideration brings us back to that concept of "supernal Beauty" and perhaps in his striving for musicality in his writing, Poe was somehow searching for the viceless, for some sort of purity of form, so powerful and so different from the disordered reality of his own life. Before turning to concentrate on the case study of Lou Reed's *The Raven*, let us quote at some length from Megan Marshall's *London Review of Books* review of Peter Ackroyd's biography of Poe:

Poe revised and polished to such a degree that he even subjected his handwriting to intense scrutiny. According to Ackroyd, Poe's hand was "a model of calligraphy, transcribed on neatly rolled manuscripts, as if all were brought into exquisite order". He wrote on narrow strips of paper, pasted into long rolls" (a more fastidious Jack Kerouac), allowing the narrative to flow unchecked by page breaks. The "music" of words obsessed him; in the early story "Berenice", Ackroyd notes "the melodies of Poe's prose" and "his consummate control of cadence and of open vowel sounds". (19)

Even that compulsion to revise and revise again is akin to the processes (composing, rehearsing) behind musical creation and performance. There is no doubt that Poe was a repetitively obsessive writer and repetitive obsession is certainly a necessary quality for anyone involved in music.

Lou Reed and Edgar Allan Poe

In 2003 Lou Reed released his ambitious concept album *The Raven* recounting the short stories and poems of Edgar Allan Poe through word and song. It was the final solo rock album by Reed. The recording was simultaneously released as a two-disc set of recordings with eighteen tracks together with eighteen recited and one instrumental tracks, followed by an edited single-disc version with seventeen songs, one instrumental and three recited tracks. Probably it constituted the most impressive and complex project by Reed. It also featured actors such as Willem Dafoe, Steve Buscemi, Elizabeth Ashley, and Amanda Plummer and guest artists like David Bowie and Ornette Coleman. *The Raven* was originally a

¹ In seeking to trace with some precision the origin of this quotation, Witchel himself was of no help. Google was even less helpful, though the words themselves are readily available on many sites. In the end it was necessary to turn, vintage style, to a print copy of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* where we find, "Of music Dr Johnson used to say that it was the only sensual pleasure without vice. In *European Magazine* (1795)."

commissioned work for an international stage production called POEtry, an adaptation of Poe's work by stage director Robert Wilson performed in Germany in 2000, a musical journey into Poe's imagery. This collaboration also led to a graphic novel, titled *The Raven* published in 2011 and illustrated by Italian cartoonist Lorenzo Mattotti. This multi-stratification of Poe's imagery through different media is quite representative of the contemporary appeal of this immortal author. As Reed himself acknowledged, from the beginning the project proved to be one of the most ambitious and greatest things he has ever achieved. It would be a mere oversimplification to look for biographical analogies in Poe's and Reed's lives, however tracing their common background seems a necessary starting point to our analysis. There is an extraordinary common biographic line which seems to join these two emblematic figures: both brilliant minds, outsiders and damned, alcoholics and drug-addicts, both ahead of their time in depicting disturbing scenarios of terror and despair with their provocative and visionary art. Undoubtedly, Reed and Poe were kindred spirits, as the singer declares in his introduction to the album, which seems to be a sort of manifesto of his complex and dark aesthetics:

For sure Edgar Allan Poe is that most classical of American writers – a writer more peculiarly attuned to our new century's heartbeat than he ever was to his own. Obsessions, paranoia, willful acts of self destruction surround us constantly. Though we age, we still hear the cries of those for whom the attraction to mournful chaos is monumental. I have reread and rewritten Poe to ask the very same questions again: "Who am I?" and "Why am I drawn to do what I should not?" I have wrestled with this thought innumerable times: the impulse of destructive desire – the desire for self-mortification. To my mind Poe is father to William Burroughs and Hubert Selby. I am forever fitting their blood to my melodies. Why do we do what we should not? Why do we love what we cannot have? Why do we have a passion for exactly the wrong thing? What do we mean by "wrong"?

Certainly Reed has always experienced the legacy of the Beat Generation and his reference to Burroughs and Selby seems quite purposeful in this context. The necessity to repossess Poe through a rewrite by Reed comes from an impellent desire of investigation upon the unconscious territories of the mind. He acknowledges Poe as an established figure, the Beat Generation's great father. Reed's enthusiasm for this monumental project witnesses a long and vivid interest for the poet, as this lively metaphor, again from the introduction to the album, testifies:

I became enamored of Poe – once again – and when given the opportunity to bring him to life through words and music, text and dance – why I leapt at it – I surged towards it like a Rottweiler chasing a bloody bone – I read and then recited him out loud and for the first time understood “The Tell Tale Heart”.

Indeed, it is quite significant that his total understanding of Poe's poetry occurs in the recitation of one of his most famous tales. I believe this is a crucial aspect to be taken into account: it soon leads us to issues related to sound, musicality, and performance. In 2011, Lou Reed was invited to the Strand Bookstore in New York to discuss his album. During the question time, when asked about when and how was the first time he read “The Raven” he answered that he read it many times at school but the moment when he totally understood it was when he heard it read out loud. This is because one of the important levels at which poetry works is the phonosemantic level, and as such the interpretation ought to be primarily performative – as one insists that interpreting a piece of music means executing a deliberated performance. Thus, its internal constraints of rhyming, pitch and tone constitute its quintessential element.

Poe was always aware of these formal limitations and much has been written about the controversial issue of the sound dimension in Poe's poetry. Not incidentally, he was satirically apostrophized by Ralph Waldo Emerson as “the jingle-man” for his ability to create repeated refrains in his poetry. While his major concern for sound and metrical effect may lead, sometimes, to the dissolution of meaning, his constant and feverish struggle for musicality and perfection allows us to focus on the intimate interconnections between poetry and music. In his famous essay, “The Philosophy of Composition”, Poe recounts the idealized process by which he says he wrote “The Raven” and lists the three fundamental elements of his philosophy of composition: length, method and unity of effect. He affirms:

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. Keeping originality always in view – for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest – I say to myself, in the first place, “Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?” Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone – whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone – afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

Given the predominance assigned to the effect in poetry, it would not be risky to establish a solid analogy between the performative nature of a poem and that of a song. Many scholars, including John Blacking, have been involved in defining the very nature of music and its fruition by a targeted audience:

In music, satisfaction may be derived without absolute agreement about the meaning of the code; that is, the creator's intention to mean can be offset by a performer's or listener's intention to make sense, without any of the absence of communication that would occur if a listener misunderstood a speaker's intention to mean. In music, it is not essential for listeners or performers to understand the creator's intended syntax or even the intended meaning, as long as they can find a syntax and their own meanings and music. (10)

In this sense, both Poe and Reed have always been uninterested regarding the meaning of the code, or, that is to say, the meaning is secondary to the aesthetic effect. Their main concern is about the "effect" through a subliminal kind of writing, insisting on the most remote landscapes of the unconscious. In the process of translation, adaptation or re-writing, Lou Reed's huge effort consists in reproducing that same effect Poe was trying to convey in his poems. The first obstacle Reed meets is constituted by the monumental and multi-genre literary material (poems and short stories) he has to deal with. Poe's highly evocative wordy power and multi-faceted meanings had to be made functional and approachable for a large number of people, notably Reed's targeted audience. One of the major constraints an adaptor/translator has to deal with is the problematic issue of reception. As Susam-Sarajeva has pointed out in *Translation and Music* (2008), one of the first systematic approaches to this new field of investigation, the context is essential in order to understand the process of translation:

Further research is also necessary to understand the reception of translation and music. In terms of research on reception, one needs to look beyond individual works and composers and place them in a wider context, ultimately studying whole genres. Why do certain genres gain acceptance while others fail to do so? Why at a certain time? How do changing audiences tastes, needs, expectations and ideologies impact on the translations produced? (193)

Returning to our case study, we can argue that in the case of Lou Reed's adaptation, certainly he was aware of several constraints in Poe's writing but his main concern was certainly not that of satisfying his audience in terms of marketing or commercial fulfilment. The reason behind this

project lies in a pure aesthetic interest about the author and the need to give new life to Poe's obscure but fascinating universe. However, in the process of adaptation and re-negotiation of genres and meanings, Reed has to bring back Poe's imagery to our contemporaneity trying to make it easier to the audience's tastes. He has to face up primarily with the stratification of language and Poe's dignified use of language and its archaisms seem to be the initial difficulties, as he acknowledges in the written introduction to the album:

The trouble with Poe was that his language is so serious – the vocabulary – the words he's using – some of those words were arcane when he used them – and then, architectural terms from Greece. And I, dutifully sitting there with the dictionary, looking all of this up and thinking, certainly, in a song or on the album I don't want to have [things like this] in there – you can just as easily use a word someone knows what it means. [...] For him, great. For me, no. I spent most of the time translating them into English before even starting, but I couldn't wait to rewrite "The Raven," the poem. Mine is like a contemporary version of it, and we have a graphic novel out illustrated by this great Italian artist, Lorenzo Mattotti. [...] Making things that are beautiful is real fun.

In line with Jakobson's codification in his *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, we may argue that Reed opts predominantly for an unusual kind of intersemiotic translation, moving from the text to the music and trying to translate Poe's words and its atmospheres recreating a functional aesthetic product. In doing so, he has to negotiate between the codes of language and music. His first choice regards the text: in order to make his aim more understandable to his listeners it would have seemed quite abrupt to begin his work without an introduction. Therefore, the first song in the album introduces the subject and functions as a preface in a book, presenting the main characters and the themes, essentially an overture to the concept album. A heavy rock background vividly supports Poe's (and Reed's) entire imagery:

*These are the stories of Edgar Allan Poe
not exactly the boy next door
He'll tell you tales of horror
then he'll play with your mind
if you haven't heard of him
you must be deaf or blind.*

*These are the stories of Edgar Allan Poe
not exactly the boy next door
He'll tell you about Usher*

whose house burned in his mind
 his love for his dear sister
 her death would drive him wild.

The murder of a stranger
 the murder of a friend
 the callings from the pits of hell
 that never seem to end.

Introducing Edgar Allan Poe, “not exactly the boy next door” and summing up his literary imagery in a five-minute song, he makes references to titles, themes and atmospheres and gives his audience a stunning example of condensation. But the most representative example of adaptation lies in the track, “The Raven”. Reed does not adapt the poem into a song, but simply changes it with different lines, keeping the sound as a background. It achieves an artistic output of remarkable value: a creepily voiced Willem Dafoe declaims the poem flowing under an uncanny string melody. As Reed himself declares in the introduction to the album, his adaption was meant for his audience, keeping the rhyming but negotiating about the content: his character in the chamber door is no longer the poet’s alter ego, desperately looking for the beloved Lenore. He is rather a kind of present-day heavy smoker, probably drunk and stoned on “cocaine’s glory”. The first stanza is preserved, probably because it perfectly contextualizes the suspense and dark mystery of the poem:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
 Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore –
 While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
 As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
 “‘Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door –
 Only this and nothing more.”

But, later he freely changes almost every line trying to adapt the poem to the present-day atmosphere. The reading poet in his chamber has been replaced by a contemporary heavy smoker, probably drunk and stoned by the glories of night before, but the loneliness is unbroken (quoting the poem):

Muttering I got up weakly
 always I’ve had trouble sleeping
 stumbling upright my mind racing
 furtive thoughts flowing once more
 [...]. Hovering my pulse was racing
 stale tobacco my lips tasting

scotch sitting upon my basin
 remnants of the night before
 came again
 infernal tapping on the door
 in my mind jabbing
 is it in or outside rapping
 calling out to me once more
 the fit and fury of Lenore
 nameless here forever more.

As we can notice, he succeeds in keeping the rhyme in a very creative way. One can perceive how the musicality has been preserved: leaving the rhyme structure untouched he effortlessly achieves the same uncanny atmosphere. We dare say that the 'singability' of his adaptation is perfectly accomplished. As Reed declares, during the meeting at the Strand, in the process of rewriting the poem, he has been inspired by Poe's musicality:

His writing to me is very musical and I tried to tune into that meter, every single one of them. There are things that I wrote, that's not a rewrite of them but it's an add saying kind of meter. It's really a songwriter's meter, hardly enough. And if you read it out loud you really hear that. It's so clear that it made life pretty easy how to go from A to B [...]. I mean, easy in the sense of form and rhythm, not in the sense of actual writing.

Peter Low wrote about these specific problems in his essays on "Song Translation and the Question of Rhyme" (2001) and "Singable Translations of Songs" (2003) and presented the following idea: translating songs is like a pentathlon, where the five principles should keep each other balanced. These principles are: Singability, Sense, Naturalness, Rhythm, and Rhyme. It is permissible to pay less attention to one principle if it supports another one. With every translation problem (or, adaptation, in this case) the translator must decide which principles are most important and which are less important. Nevertheless, every principle must be taken into account and, according to Low, the translator cannot choose to leave out any one of the principles. Every principle must be represented in the translation. Moreover, a good song-translation has to achieve what he defines "performability" in "Singable Translations of Songs":

A singable song-translation requires 'performability'. It must function effectively as an oral text delivered at performance speed – whereas with a written text the reader has a chance to pause, reflect or even re-read. (7)

Even if our case study is not properly a song translation but an adaptation from poetry to music, we notice how reading Reed's adaptation out loud

we can perceive the “performability”. On the other hand, anything else would have been quite impossible because Reed is a songwriter and performer, whose competence and professional skills are the essential prerequisites for such a complex process. Further evidence of the singability of Reed’s adaptation is given by the preponderance of pitches. Peter Low again:

Another aspect of singability is the highlighting of particular words in the source text by musical means – they may be high-pitched, for example, or marked *fortissimo*. In these cases the composer is giving them special prominence. Such highlighted words should ideally be translated at the same location, because otherwise the sequential focus of the line will be altered and the musical emphasis will fall on a different word. (8)

This is the case of the word “pathetic” uttered by the raven in Lou Reed’s version, which is an addition to the original source but which is essential to reach the climax in the poem.

Another significant stylistic device is preserved in Reed’s adaptation: alliteration. Its predominance in the poem was widely discussed by Poe himself in “The Philosophy of Composition” where he defines it as one of the fundamental devices available to the poet, through which he can reach the “effect”. Here, Reed achieves a high degree of equivalence – in the translational connotation – making use of alliteration in a musical way, as in this verse: “Askance, askew / the self’s sad fancy smiles at you I swear / at this savage viscous countenance it wears” where we can perceive how the use of the phoneme “-s” gives the verse a strong effective power. However, in a clever balancing process, Reed’s adaptation of the content is achieved by relinquishing every reference to the classics and the Bible, the presence of which in Poe’s poem was preponderant. In Poe’s poetry the raven perches upon “the pallid bust of Pallas”, the goddess of knowledge, thus emphasizing the symbolism of the two contrasting colours (black/white) and the usual opposition (nature/culture). Then, the reference to the “Night’s Plutonian shore” or the unseen censer swung by “Seraphim” or the supposed comfort of the “balm in Gilead” contribute to create that peculiar symbolic and decadent background, always preeminent in Poe’s poetry. In Reed’s rewrite the symbolism is replaced by a deep pragmatism in the sense of a distinctive contemporary dark, or better to say, “punk” taste. The raven is described as “sleek and ravenous as any foe” or “fowl and salivating visage / insinuating with its knowledge,” as “ghastly grim” or even as a “sweaty arrogant dickless liar”. Every adjective or expression, unburdened by its solid symbolic background but strengthened by its vigour, keeps the reader/listener stunned and

mesmerized. There is even an added sexual reference: "And the raven sitting lonely / staring sickly at my male sex only" thus probably emphasizing the vicious and lascivious nature of the raven as a messenger of evil. Commenting on his rewrite of Poe's poetry, Reed declared that his love for "The Raven" derived from his utter identification with the protagonist. This is why he turns the lonely poet in his nineteenth century chamber into an outsider and solitary drug addict:

Then I felt the air grow denser
 perfumed from some unseen incense
 as though accepting angelic intrusion
 when in fact I felt collusion
 before the guise of false memories respite
 respite through the haze of cocaine's glory
 I smoke and smoke the blue vial's glory
 to forget at once the base Lenore
 quoth the raven, "nevermore."

The repeated obsessive refrain "nevermore" is predictably preserved in Reed's adaptation, as it was the distinctive feature of the poem, whose importance was methodically stressed by Poe himself in "The Philosophy of Composition":

I had now to combine the two ideas of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word "Nevermore." I had to combine these, bearing in mind my design of varying at every turn the application of the word repeated, but the only intelligible mode of such combination is that of imagining the Raven employing the word in answer to the queries of the lover. And here it was that I saw at once the opportunity afforded for the effect on which I had been depending, that is to say, the effect of the variation of application. [...] Perceiving the opportunity thus afforded me, or, more strictly, thus forced upon me in the progress of the construction, I first established in my mind the climax or concluding query – that query to which "Nevermore" should be in the last place an answer – that query in reply to which this word "Nevermore" should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair.

The same amount of sorrow and despair Reed tries to reproduce in his adaptation, however the climax is here achieved not in the repetition of the refrain, but at the end of the poem, where he deliberately adds these last lines, full of desperate desolation for the ungrateful lover:

I love she who hates me more
 I love she who hates me more

and my soul shall not be lifted
 from that shadow
 nevermore

The substitution of the object personal pronoun “her” with the subject “she” gives the text an extra emphasis on the sorrow of the protagonist. Simultaneously, as the poem is almost at its end, the musical background changes slowly and turns into an uncanny melody with a gradual fading out, thus emphasizing the mysterious atmosphere surrounding the event. Thus, the “effect” – in the meaning that Poe gave to this word – is here totally achieved.

Conclusion

Lou Reed, just like Poe, has always been looking feverishly for the “effect” throughout his life, in every possible meaning one can add to this word. Today, as listeners and readers, we can be reasonably sure about the remarkable output he has achieved in terms of valuable artistic products, whose intrinsic value goes far beyond their commercial success. Needless to say, the same has happened and still happens for Poe, as his innumerable and continuous rewrites, adaptations and translations testify. This is why Poe is still read today as why Reed’s songs are still listened to.

These two great poets will never be forgotten by their readers and listeners throughout time: Poe’s words will continue to inspire readers and musicians and the effect of Reed’s interpretation of *The Raven* will persist *evermore* in the recording of the album and in the recordings of his live performances of the tracks on it.

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