Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition”

For most of his two-decade long career as a writer (his first book of poetry was published in 1827 when he was eighteen; he died in 1849), Edgar Allan Poe struggled, often un成功的, to support himself and his family. His greatest success came in 1845 with the publication of his most famous poem, “The Raven.” First appearing in the New York Evening Mirror on January 29, 1845, the poem quickly caught fire, being republished numerous times in various newspapers and magazines over the next few months, and leading to Poe publishing The Raven and Other Poems by the end of the year. With the success of “The Raven,” Poe was able, for a short time, to stabilize his finances, establishing a home in a respectable neighborhood in New York. Of equal importance, he began to feel he had achieved the recognition he so desired and thought he deserved. Yet, while many critics celebrated the poem, others attacked it (perhaps in response to Poe’s long-standing reputation as a “tomahawk” critic himself), and numerous parodies quickly appeared. Furthermore, by early 1846, the Broadway Journal, the magazine Poe had edited, had folded, leading him to move out of the more affluent neighborhood he and his family had inhabited following the success of “The Raven.” In response to the criticism he faced and to his increasing financial needs, Poe penned one of his most famous and extensive pieces of literary criticism, “The Philosophy of Composition.”

“The Philosophy of Composition,” first published in Graham’s Magazine in April, 1846, offers itself as an explanation of Poe’s process of composing “The Raven” and as a template for the composition of poetry more generally. Few readers have taken it as a literal transcription of the composition process Poe took in writing his most famous poem or as a true prescription for writing poetry. In fact, some critics have read the piece as an elaborate hoax on Poe’s part, a satiric attack on his critics and a ploy to keep interest in his poem (and his writing in general) heightened. At the same time as there are moments where Poe most likely exaggerates or falsifies his process, however, his central critical ideas in this essay—on the importance of the unity of effect, on beauty being the chief province of the poem, and more—are ones that he reiterates throughout his criticism, and, as such, the essay offers a key exposition of his poetic theory.

As Poe explicates it in “The Philosophy of Composition,” “The Raven” follows the increasing frenzy of a young student who mourns the death of his beloved Lenore. Told from the student’s perspective, the poem begins with his near-slumber being disturbed by a raven tapping at his window. After he opens the window and the bird flies into his room, the student first hears the raven croak “nevermore.” At first, the student takes the bird’s word lightly, dismissing it as simply the one word the raven had been taught by some owner. But the word resonates with his thoughts about his lost love, and indulging in what Poe describes (in “Philosophy of Composition”) as “the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrow,” he begins to devise questions to which the raven’s reply further enflame his melancholy and grief. Along the way, despite rationally...
knowing that the raven is simply a bird, the student begins to imagine the raven as a messenger from beyond death, as a “thing of evil,” a “prophet,” before recognizing his avian visitor as symbolizing the unending sorrow he feels.

In providing an account of his poem, Poe foregrounds the importance of design, of having a clear sense of purpose in constructing a literary artwork. Most significantly, he aligns this point of view against those poets who “prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition.” While the idea of poetry emerging from an ecstatic experience has played a prominent role in Western thought since classical Greece, the Romantic movement had brought this idea to new heights. Against the Romantic emphasis, as William Wordsworth famously phrased it in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, of seeing poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” Poe foregrounds the importance of the poet carefully crafting the poem in order to elicit strong feelings in the reader. In other words, rather than poem being an expression of emotion, it requires “the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” in order to capture and convey psychological states to the reader.

For Poe, in “Philosophy of Composition” as elsewhere, literary design begins with the idea of effect, an effect or impression on the reader that should be both “novel” and “vivid.” Poe repeatedly emphasizes that this effect needs to be “universally appreciable,” that it should “suit at once the popular and the critical taste.” Poe deigns to discuss “the circumstance—or say the necessity” of universal appeal, but at least part of the reason has to do with the nature of the literary market of the time. In any event, two of Poe’s most important critical emphases emerge out of his focus on effect. First is his focus on the central importance of “unity of impression” in an artwork. Throughout his critical work, Poe returns to this point, a point (as we will see later in this course) that leads him to view the short story as a superior art form to the novel. What Poe means by unity of impression is that every element of the poem (or short story) should work towards creating the same effect in the reader. This emphasis on unity leads Poe to two of his more curious ideas. First is his emphasis on extent, the idea that any artwork, in order to maintain such unity, must be consumable in one sitting. This limit is particular true for the poem, for its chief effect lies in “elevating the spirit,” an effect that, due to “psychal necessity,” can only be maintained for a brief period of time. The second point follows, that, despite centuries of criticism to the contrary, there is no such thing as a long poem. Thus any epic, such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (an example he uses here and elsewhere) is not truly a poem but at best a series of poems interspersed among more prosaic moments.

The second idea that develops out of his emphasis on the unity of effect is that poetry, as opposed to prose, has a particular effect for which it is particularly suited, namely Beauty. In making this point, Poe offers a new take on Beauty, arguing that rather than being “a quality” inhering in an object, it actually refers to an “effect” in the reader, the “intense and pure elevation of soul.” Poe contrasts this effect with those that address the heart (Passion) and the intellect (Truth). Poe’s three-part structure here has been traced to Immanuel Kant’s philosophy
and his concern with what he calls Reason, Understanding, and Judgment, but the three parts do not exactly match up. What is most important, perhaps, is that these parts of the mind (or of the total human) correspond with specific forms. Yet, Poe remains quite vague here about what he means by elevation of soul. In his posthumously published essay “The Poetic Principle,” however, he begins to suggest how the elevation of the soul exactly is related to Beauty. There he describes how this “immortal instinct” within humankind, “a sense of the Beautiful,” “belongs to the immortality of Man.” Our “thirst unquenchable” for Beauty “is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above.” The Beautiful object or effect in the material world, then, refers to or suggests a beauty that transcends or exists beyond material existence. It is thus “inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave” and derives from our desire (and inability) “to grasp now, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which through the poem . . . we attain but brief and indeterminate glimpses.” The poem elevates the soul to a height where it can begin to glimpse a joyful harmony that it finally cannot grasp in this life.

This understanding of Beauty can help us to make sense of one of Poe’s most famous statements in this essay, that “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.” Readers have often linked Poe’s claim here to both his life and his works. Poe repeatedly lost women he loved, beginning with his mother in his early youth, continuing with his step-mother, and culminating with his young bride Virginia, who became ill with tuberculosis in 1842 and remained in frail health until her death in 1847. Dead and dying women feature prominently in a great number of Poe’s works, both his fiction and his poetry, often as objects of male obsession or fascination. Critics have read these works both as exemplifying male objectification of women, rendering them nothing but works of art or decaying bodies, and as profound critiques of a male psychology that indulges in such objectification (the men Poe depicts as obsessed with dead or dying women are seldom described positively). As much insight as these approaches provide into Poe’s representation of women, his contention that the death of a beautiful woman is the “most poetical topic” has, as we have seen, a philosophical basis as well, one that provides a foundation for his claim that a melancholy tone is most fitting or effective for conveying beauty. If Beauty, as Poe believes, derives from an object’s ability to hint at a harmony existing only in an immortal, spiritual state, thus leading us to a sorrowful realization that we can never experience that beauty in its completeness in this life, then the loss of a loved one, especially a beautiful woman, most closely approximates this experience of loss and mournfulness.

In concluding his essay on “The Raven,” Poe articulates that the student’s slow realization of “Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance” provides the central “under-current” of the poem, an undercurrent of meaning for which the raven becomes “emblematical.” For the student, in “The Raven,” that remembrance is of his lost love Lenore, but as Poe’s broader poetic theory makes clear such a state of melancholy characterizes the human relationship to beauty in general. In these concluding statements, Poe uses his discussion of
poetic undercurrent to make a swipe at the “so called transcendentalists” like Ralph Waldo Emerson for over-emphasizing symbolic meaning in their poetry. Poe frequently attacked the literary artists of New England, including not just Emerson and the transcendentalists but also, most prominently, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, for being part of a literary elite, for writing poor poetry, for their abolitionist politics. His poetic theory is strikingly different from Emerson’s emphasis on a kind of ecstatic inspiration and his lack of attention to the importance of poetic form. But Poe’s notion of Beauty referring to a harmony derived from some divine source aligns him more closely with the romanticism of Emerson and the transcendentalists. As such, we need to recognize their distinct differences and their implications for the writing and enjoyment of poetry as similarly emerging from the broad framework of early-nineteenth-century romanticism.