

*...the said Henry ...  
...the said Edward ...  
...set all and every ...  
...warrant and forever defend by  
...hereunto set our hands and  
...and twenty ...  
Edgar et Poe  
for the ...  
Henry ...*

# Romancing the Shadow

Poe and Race

EDITED BY

J. GERALD KENNEDY &

LILIANE WEISSBERG

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J. GERALD KENNEDY & LILIANE WEISSBERG

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Far down within the dim West,  
 Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best  
 Have gone to their eternal rest.  
 There shrines and palaces and towers  
 (Time-eaten towers that tremble not!)  
 Resemble nothing that is ours.  
 Around, by lifting winds forgot,  
 Resignedly beneath the sky  
 The melancholy waters lie.

(Mabbott, 1:201)

Critics have usually identified the city with the legendary ruined cities of the Dead Sea, but Poe's reference to "a strange city" in "the dim West" also suggests the spiritual destiny of America as "a city upon a hill" (Winthrop, 49) and Enlightenment notions of the advance of civilization westward, which Poe associated with the rise of industry, the city, republican government, "omni-prevalent Democracy," and the emancipation of slaves (Mabbott, 2:610). Although the city lacks specific historical reference, here, as elsewhere in Poe's writings, the association of figures of blackness ("the long night-time of that town") with the vision of apocalyptic doom that closes the poem ("Down, down, that town shall settle hence. / Hell, rising from a thousand thrones") registers a widespread—and still prevalent—cultural fear of the fall of the West that will come as a result of some sort of catastrophic uprising of the dark other, associated with blackness, the satanic, the Orient, the city, and death. In 1845, Poe underscored the prophetic dimension of his poem when he published it under the title "A City in the Sea: A Prophecy." Unlike the apocalyptic warnings proliferated in other mid-century works, including most notably "the wrath of Almighty God" that closes Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 (629), Poe's prophecy is grounded not in fear of punishment for the contradiction of slavery in the American republic but rather in his fear that the logic of the American republic—founded on "the queerest idea conceivable . . . that all men are born free and equal" ("Mellonta Tauta," Mabbott, 3:1299)—would lead to the emancipation of slaves or, even worse, as Jefferson had predicted, to the extirpation of the white masters.

### *Nat Turner, Slave Insurrection, and Pure Poetry*

Only a few months after Poe published "The Doomed City" in his 1831 *Poems*, his fear of some sort of apocalyptic uprising of blacks assumed

palpable bodily form when, in August 1831, Nat Turner led the bloodiest slave insurrection in United States history in Southampton County, Virginia. “Whilst not one note of preparation was heard to warn the devoted inhabitants of woe and death,” wrote Thomas R. Gray of Turner’s revolt, “a gloomy fanatic was revolving in the recesses of his own dark, bewildered, and overwrought mind, schemes of indiscriminate massacre to the whites—schemes too fearfully executed as far as his fiendish band proceeded in their desolating march” (Gray, 4). The insurrection, which resulted in the death of sixty whites, the torture and execution of scores of innocent blacks, and a widespread hysteria about the possibility of further uprisings, led to a tightening of slave laws and an increasingly vigorous defense of the institution and culture of slavery throughout the South. Emancipation would lead to the South’s “relapse into darkness, thick and full of horrors,” wrote the proslavery apologist Thomas Dew in his influential defense of the institution of slavery following the debates about the future of slavery in the Virginia legislature in 1831–32 (Dew, “Abolition of Negro Slavery,” 57).

It was into this heightened atmosphere of panic about the possibility of bloody slave insurrection and hysteria about the security and survival of the institutions and culture of the Old South that Poe entered when he returned to Richmond, where he would serve as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* between 1835 and 1837.<sup>11</sup> In a much-disputed review of two proslavery books, *Slavery in the United States* by J. K. Paulding and *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists* by William Drayton, which appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger* under Poe’s editorship in April 1836, the reviewer asserts the relation between the logic of progressive history, as signified by the French Revolution and the rights of man, and the specter of black emancipation, violent or otherwise.<sup>12</sup> Commenting on the irreligious fanaticism of the French Revolution, he warns: “[I]t should be remembered now, that in that war against property, the first object of attack was property in slaves; that in that war on behalf of the alleged right of man to be discharged from all control of law, the first triumph achieved was in the emancipation of slaves” (*Works*, 8:269). Alluding to the violent slave insurrection in San Domingo (Haiti), where blacks rose up, killed their white masters, and, in the name of liberty and individual rights, set up as an independent black nation in 1804, the reviewer calls attention to the “awful” significance of progressive history for the South: “The recent events in the West Indies, and the parallel movement here, give awful importance to these thoughts in our minds” (*Works*, 8:269). The South is haunted by “despair,” “apprehensions,” foreboding “superstitions,” and “vague and undefined fears” in response to these “awful” events (*Works*,

8:269), which appear to include the San Domingo slave insurrection, the “triumph” of Haiti against the French empire in 1804, Nat Turner’s insurrection in 1831, the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies in 1834, the rise of the abolition movement in the 1830s in the United States, and the attack on “Domestic Slavery,” which is “the basis of all our institutions” (*Works*, 8:269). Whether this review was written by Poe, as some believe, or by his friend Beverley Tucker, as a defense of “all our institutions” and “all our rights” written from the collective point of view of the South—and presumably reflecting the views of the *Southern Literary Messenger* and its editor—it shares Poe’s own grim vision of democratic history as a triumph of blacks, blood, and dark apocalypse.

Haunted by similarly “vague and undefined fears” in response to “recent events in the West Indies, and the parallel movement here,” Poe’s poetry and tales of the 1830s and 1840s continue to be spooked by the terrifying logic of progressive history, the fear of black emancipation, the specter of blood violence, the ongoing attack on the institution of slavery, an apocalyptic vision of the triumph of “blackness,” and a flight away from history into fantasies of whiteness and purity: pure white woman, pure white beauty, pure white art, pure white poetics. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) makes explicit the phobia about the dark other, the fear of black insurrection, and the flight into an otherworldly space of pure whiteness that remain just beneath the surface in several of Poe’s poems. Influenced by the specter of blood violence in both San Domingo and the American South, the “massacre” of whites by the natives of the all-black island of Tsalal leads Pym to assert: “In truth, from everything I could see of these wretches, they appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, blood thirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men on the face of the globe” (*CW*, 1:201). Referred to interchangeably as savages, barbarians, desperadoes, and “warriors of the black skin” (*CW*, 1:186), the natives of Tsalal suggest the ways antiblack feeling intersects with a more generalized phobia about the racial other—Indian, Mexican, African, or other—in the American cultural imaginary.<sup>13</sup> Here as elsewhere in Poe’s poems and tales, the narrative underscores the ways the terror of what Pym calls “the blackness of darkness” (*CW*, 1:175) drives the imaginative leap toward an otherworld of pure whiteness: Faced with the prospect of “brute rage,” “inevitable butchery,” and “overwhelming destruction” in the concluding passages of the story, the protagonists rush into the milky white embrace of a “shrouded human figure”: “And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow” (*CW*, 1:206). But while the ending appears to promise entrance into a utopian world of “perfect whiteness,” as the multiple and conflicted readings of *Pym*’s conclusion sug-

gest, the precise nature of this “shrouded human figure” is at best ambiguous: Is it biblical apocalypse or metaphysical sign, utopian dream or perfect terror, pure race or pure hoax? It might be the “White Goddess,” or mother, but it might also be the ghost of the all-black Nu-Nu returned from the dead.<sup>14</sup>

As in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe’s seemingly stable taxonomies of black and white would continue to be spooked by fantasies of mixture, seepage, revenge, and reversal. In “The Haunted Palace,” which was initially published in April 1839 and incorporated a few months later into his story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the poet’s dream of “perfect whiteness” is corroded by the “encrimsoned” spectacle of invasion and dark apocalypse that closes the poem. Associated with “the monarch Thought’s dominion,” the palace is, in its unsullied form, an emblem of white mind: it is fair, yellow, golden, pallid, luminous, wise, harmonious, beautiful, and, in the original version of the poem, “Snow-white” (Mabbott, 1:315, 317). The poem enacts the compulsive dream-turned-bad of mid-nineteenth-century American fantasy—the fall of white mind to the dark and “hideous throng”:

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,  
 Assailed the monarch’s high estate.  
 . . . . .  
 And travellers, now, within that valley,  
 Through the encrimsoned windows see  
 Vast forms that move fantastically  
 To a discordant melody,  
 While, like a ghastly rapid river,  
 Through the pale door  
 A hideous throng rush out forever  
 And laugh—but smile no more.  
 (Mabbott, 1:316–17)

By the palace, Poe wrote Rufus Griswold in 1841, he meant “to imply a mind haunted by phantoms—a disordered brain” (*Letters*, 2:161). Whether “The Haunted Palace” is an allegory of individual mind or the haunted mind of America or the West, the “phantoms” that haunt it conjoin a terror of the dark other and the democratic mob with the specter of insurrection and blood violence and a more generalized fear of madness, dissolution, and the fall of Western civilization. In fact, the connection between Poe’s “Haunted Palace” and the threat posed by the “hideous throng” of Negroes and lower classes in the American city was made quite explicitly by one of Poe’s contemporaries, Henry B. Hirst,

who parodied Poe in "The Ruined Tavern," a poem about a brawl in a Philadelphia tavern frequented by "tough Negroes," which includes the lines: "Never negro shook a shinbone / In a dance-house half so fair."<sup>15</sup>

Against this apocalyptic vision of the blackness and blood of progressive history—a vision that gets powerfully enacted in the story of the collapse of "the last of the ancient race of the Ushers" into "a black and lurid tarn" in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (Mabbott, 2:404, 398)—Poe seeks to define poetry as a separate and purer realm, grounded in an ethos of social subordination, of men over women, imagination over body, and white over black. The "sentiment of Poesy" is, he wrote in a review of 1836, linked with the sentiment of reverence and the hierarchical "relations of human society—the relations of father and child, of master and slave, of the ruler and the ruled" (*CW*, 5:165). In other words, the "sense of the beautiful, of the sublime, and of the mystical" is "akin" to the slave's reverence for the white master: to aspire to Beauty is to aspire to God and thus affirm the "primal" subordination of slave to master (*CW*, 5:166). As in later modernist manifestos, including Ezra Pound's *Patria Mia* (1912) and the Southern Agrarians' *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), in Poe's "Colloquy of Monos and Una" (1841), aesthetic judgment and the poet's craft become forms of social salvation: "taste alone could have led us gently back to Beauty, to Nature, and to Life" and thus "purify" the "Art-scarred surface of the Earth" from the ravages of Enlightenment "knowledge," "progress," "universal equality," and "omni-prevalent Democracy" (Mabbott, 2:610, 611–12).<sup>16</sup>

In his essays and reviews of the 1830s and 1840s, Poe is on a kind of rescue mission to save both poetry and criticism from the "daily puerilities" of public opinion and the popular press (*CW*, 5:164), as well as from the black facts and blood violence of American history. The social and specifically racial shaping of Poe's aesthetics is particularly evident in his reviews of Longfellow and other abolitionist poets of New England. As Kenneth Hovey has argued, "Poe attacked Longfellow and the poets of the Northeast unsparingly for their double error of didacticism and progressivism." "Fearing the advancing truth of what he called 'fanatic[ism] for the sake of fanaticism,' he advocated a beauty no truth could invade, the 'poem written solely for the poem's sake'" (350, 349).

In an 1845 review of Longfellow's *Poems on Slavery* (1842), Poe cites the following lines from "The Warning" as an instance of "absolute truth":

There is a poor, blind Sampson in this land,  
Shorn of his strength and bound in bonds of steel,  
Who may, in some grim revel, raise his hand,

And shake the pillars of the common weal,  
 Till the vast temple of our Liberties,  
 A shapeless mass of wreck and rubbish lies.  
 (*Aristidean*, 133)

Poe blames Northern abolitionist poets for the “grim” prospect of blood violence against the white masters: “One thing is certain:—if this prophecy be *not* fulfilled, it will be through no lack of incendiary doggerel on the part of Professor LONGFELLOW and his friends” (*Aristidean*, 133).<sup>17</sup> At a time when there was an increasing emphasis on the social power of the word, especially the black word, in bringing about an end to the historical contradiction of slavery in the American republic, Poe seeks to strip poetry of its moral imperative, its “truth” claims, and its historical power by establishing “the radical and chasmal difference between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation” (Poe, “*Ballads*,” 248). And yet, for all Poe’s emphasis on the formalist and proto-modernist values of “pure beauty” and unity of poetic effect—as opposed to “instruction” or “truth”—as the sole legitimate province of poetry (Poe, “*Ballads*,” 250), his aestheticism cannot be separated from his political judgment that Longfellow, like James Russell Lowell, is part of a Boston “junto” “of abolitionists, transcendentalists and fanatics” whose writings are “intended for the especial use of those negrophilic old ladies of the north” (*Aristidean*, 130, 131). It is, he writes, “very comfortable” for the professor “to sit at ease in his library chair, and write verses instructing the southerners how to give up their all with good grace, and abusing them if they will not” (*Aristidean*, 132). Poe’s attack on the didacticism of Longfellow, Lowell, and others was not only a defense of pure poetry and the sanctity of art: it was also a defense of whiteness, slavery, and a whole way of Southern life against the increasing threat of Northern and particularly black defilement.

### *The Croak of the Raven and the Poetic Principle*

“The croak of the raven is conveniently supposed to be purely lyric,” wrote Hervey Allen in 1927 of the contemporary lack of concern with “what Mr. Poe had to say of democracy, science, and unimaginative literature” (xi). While recent critics have turned with renewed attention to the historical and specifically Southern contexts of Poe’s writing, there is still a tendency to pass over Poe’s poems as sources of “purely lyric” expression. And yet, as I have been trying to suggest, whether they are read as forms of aesthetic resistance or as perverse symbolic enactments that



ooze darkness and death over the American dream of progress, freedom, and light, Poe's poems are deeply embedded in the sociohistorical traumas of his time. This is particularly true of his most popular poem, "The Raven," one that, in the words of Arthur Hobson Quinn, "made an impression probably not surpassed by any single piece of American poetry" (439). What does it mean, I want to ask, in the context of the heightening social, sexual, and racial struggles of the United States in the 1840s, for a dead white woman to come back as an "ominous" and ambiguously sexed black bird? While critics have tended to follow Poe in "The Philosophy of Composition" in interpreting the raven as an emblem "of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*" (*Works*, 14:208), I want to suggest that the "ghastly" figure of the black bird "perched" upon "the pallid bust of Pallas" also evokes the fear of racial mixture and the sexual violation of the white woman by the black man that was at the center of antebellum debates about the future of the darker races in white America.<sup>18</sup>

In the July–August 1845 issue of the *Democratic Review*, which had published Poe's essay "The Power of Words" only a month before, John O'Sullivan declared that it was the "manifest destiny" of Anglo-Saxon America "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (5). Critical of those who opposed the annexation of Texas because it would lead to the increase and perpetuation of the institution of slavery in America, O'Sullivan argued that, on the contrary, the "Spanish-Indian-American populations of Mexico, Central America and South America" would provide a kind of national sewage system to "slough off" emancipated Negroes in order to leave the United States free and pure to realize its white Anglo-Saxon destiny: "Themselves already of *mixed and confused blood*," writes O'Sullivan,

and free from the "prejudices" which among us so insuperably *forbid the social amalgamation which can alone elevate the Negro race out of a virtually servile degradation* even though legally free, the regions occupied by those populations must strongly attract the black race in that direction; and as soon as the destined hour of emancipation shall arrive, will relieve the question of one of its worst difficulties, if not absolutely the greatest. (7; emphasis added)

In O'Sullivan's formulation, the United States will, in effect, expel the degraded and "servile" bodies of "the black race" in order to "relieve" the country of the prospect of "social amalgamation."

Although "The Raven" was published before O'Sullivan's article, I

want to suggest that the figure of Poe's "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous" black bird registers symbolically and more pessimistically some of the same national anxiety about "mixed and confused blood" that O'Sullivan expresses in his famous declaration of America's white Manifest Destiny. Moreover, I want to argue that in "The Raven," as elsewhere in Poe's writings, the dead white woman and the ominous black presence are foundational to Poe's poetics, his attempt to achieve "that intense and pure elevation of the *soul*" that he associates with "Beauty" as "the sole legitimate province of the poem" (*Works*, 14:197). In fact, the poem's dramatic contrasts of black and white are productive of its scene of terror and the melancholy tone of sadness, which is Beauty's "highest manifestation" (*Works*, 14:198).

While "The Raven" is not explicitly about race, like Poe's use of the orangutan in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" to commit "*excessively outré*" acts of violence against two white women, his idea of using "a non-reasoning [black] creature capable of speech" in writing "a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste" (*Works*, 14:200, 196) evokes popular notions of blacks as parrots incapable of reason: its story of a dead white woman coming back in the form of an "ominous" black bird of prey who penetrates the heart and overtakes the mind and soul of the white speaker registers the simultaneous fear of and fascination with penetration, mixture, inversion, and reversal that emerges alongside of (and as part of) an increasingly aggressive nationalist insistence on sexual, social, and racial difference, white superiority, and Anglo-Saxon destiny. Perhaps better than other antebellum American writers, Poe reveals the linked processes of demonization, mixture, and reversal in the national imaginary.<sup>19</sup> In "The Raven," as in other Poe poems and tales, the expelled other of American national destiny—the dark, the corporeal, the sexual, the female, the animal, the mortal—returns as an obsessive set of fantasies about subversion, amalgamation, and dark apocalypse.<sup>20</sup>

Like O'Sullivan's essay on Manifest Destiny, "The Raven" is all about boundaries—and the horror of their dissolution. Associated with the name Helen and its derivatives Ellen, Elenore, Lenore—which mean, in Poe's terms, "light" and "bright" (Mabbott, 331)—Lenore is another of those "rare and radiant" maidens whose death enables both poetry and beauty. As Poe famously wrote in his scientific analysis of "The Raven" in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846): "[T]he death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (*Works*, 14:201). In the poem, however, the "lost Lenore," like Ligeia and Madeline Usher, refuses to stay dead. Although her radiant whiteness is at first set against the darkness of time, history, and the col-

ors of the body, in the course of the poem she is confused with, and indeed replaced by, the darkly foreboding and sexually ambiguous black bird of prey. Expecting to find Lenore at his bedroom window, the protagonist opens the shutter to find, “with many a flirt and flutter,” an uppity black bird in human drag, which collapses the boundaries between animal and human, black and white, female and male, body and spirit, real and supernatural, dead and undead:

In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;  
 Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;  
 But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—  
 Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—  
 Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

(Mabbott, 1:366)

While the raven’s hypnotic croak—“Nevermore,” “Nevermore,” “Nevermore”—appears to have a “purely lyric” reference to the death of the “sainted maiden” and the futility of joining her in another world, the “ebony” bird’s physical location on “a bust of Pallas” suggests a broader reference to the negation of whiteness: not only the death of white beauty and white art but also the death of white mind and an entire regime of classical and Enlightenment order, reason, and knowledge associated with Pallas Athena. Although Poe does not say so in “The Philosophy of Composition,” the black bird’s physical presence in the bedroom “perched” on the “bust of Pallas,” a locale that is marked by the bereaved lover’s obsessive repetition—“upon the sculptured bust,” “on the placid bust,” “on the pallid bust of Pallas”—also evokes the specter of sexual violation, racial mixture, and a reversal of the master-slave relation.<sup>21</sup>

At issue is not only the prospect of black domination but also, as in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and “Instinct vs Reason—A Black Cat,” the question of black intelligence. “Startled” by the apparent precience and wisdom of the bird’s “aptly spoken” reply, the speaker assumes that it is merely parroting the words of “some unhappy master”:

“Doubtless,” said I, “what it utters is its only stock and store  
 Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster  
 Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—”

(Mabbott, 1:367)

The speaker’s words link the “croak” of the raven with the master-slave relation and an entire Western philosophical defense of white mastery.

“There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white,” wrote David Hume in 1748 in a defense of the superiority of white, and especially English, civilization. “In JAMAICA, indeed,” he writes, “they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but ’tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, *like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly*” (Hume, 86; emphasis added). Edgar Allan Poe, or at least the sorrowful white scholar of “The Raven,” would “doubtless” agree.

If “The Raven” aspires toward “that pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure” through “the contemplation of the beautiful” (*Works*, 14:197), it is, paradoxically, a pleasure and a beauty that are achieved through the death of the female body and the cultural terror of the black body. This bodily terror is perhaps most startlingly figured in the fluid interpenetration of light and dark in the concluding passage of the poem:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting  
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,  
 And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
 Shall be lifted—nevermore!

(Mabbott, 1:369)

More than a “purely lyric” expression of “*Mournful and Never-ending remembrance*,” the demonic and shadowy figure of the black bird sitting “[o]n the pallid bust of Pallas” also projects some of the culture’s deepest fears about the sexual violation of the white woman (or man) by the dark other, a possible reversal of the master-slave (or male-female) relation, and the apocalyptic specter of the end of Western wisdom and civilization in unreason, madness, and the bodily domination of black over white.

~~In “The Poetic Principle,” which was delivered as a lecture on several occasions in 1848 and 1849, Poe gives more explicit critical formulation to the racially inflected poetics of whiteness that frames his poems.<sup>22</sup> Against “the heresy of *The Didactic*,” the notion that the object of poetry is truth or the inculcation of a moral, Poe asserts the absolute value of the “poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem’s sake” (*Works*, 14:272). Recapitulating in slightly revised form many of the same notions of poetic purity that Poe had originally set forth in his 1842 review of Longfellow’s *Ballads and Other Poems*, this foundational text in the history of modern aestheti-~~