

# The Minimal Text of Edgar Allan Poe's Raven: A Derridean Meditation

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*ABSTRACT: We enter the room of Poe's midnight reader and witness the uncanny visit of the raven. We begin to notice that the repetition of the word 'nevermore' is strange in that it seems to carry within it despair, as well as a promise. And so we listen carefully and begin to read a dissemination of this single word, a word that takes us on an unforgettable journey. But to do so we must disseminate ourselves so that we can remain with our reader while flying with the raven toward the disseminating sounds within the word: 'evermore', 'more', 'or'. Our raven guide leads us toward wonders beyond imagination: toward other ravens flying with coded messages, toward an apocalyptic sunrise where we think that we perhaps saw the lost Lenore. But we return to the midnight study, knowing that we will see her 'nevermore'.*

*RÉSUMÉ: Nous pénétrons le cabinet du lecteur de minuit imaginé par Poe et sommes témoins de l'inquiétante visite du corbeau. Nous sommes frappés par l'étrangeté du mot «nevermore», «plus jamais», qui traîne avec lui désespoir et promesse. Nous prêtons alors une oreille attentive et entreprenons la dissémination de ce mot qui nous conduira à une dissémination de nous-mêmes. Portés par le jeu des sonorités, nous nous envolons vers des mondes fantastiques dans lesquels se retrouvent d'autres corbeaux portant des messages codés, où point une aube apocalyptique où nous croyons avoir perçu Lenore. Mais nous devons retourner au cabinet, sachant que nous ne la reverrons «plus jamais».*

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.'

We sit quietly in the dark corner of Poe's reader's midnight room. We like readers; we find their company calming, enriching. But tonight is not going to be like previous nights. We sense something different in the air. Our reader, melancholy by nature, is more meditative than usual, and perhaps has had one more glass of some burgundy coloured liquid than usual, and is a bit sleepy. In fact, he is nodding, "nearly napping" when "suddenly there (comes) a tapping As of some one gently rapping, rapping at (his) chamber door".

But the rapping continues until our reader opens wide his door — "Darkness there and nothing more". Curious, we stand beside him, "Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before". Reality lifts and we enter the dreams, or perhaps just enter the text that our reader is reading. The text in his hands, or that of his life, we do not know.

But now we see what he sees and we are amazed. A beautiful black bird of gigantic wing span, "a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore" steps in and lights upon "a bust of Pallas just above (his) chamber door — Perched, and sat, and nothing more".

But the amazement does not cease for what then occurs is surely the stuff of dreams. The bird speaks. Its vocabulary, besides the word 'Lenore', is limited to one word, but this limitation is strange in that it seems to carry within it despair and a promise. The constantly repeated word 'nevermore' reverberates with boundaries, limits, while at the same time echoing with sounds of something beyond all boundaries, all limits.

Now we have no choice but to remain with our midnight reader, for we begin to have an overwhelming desire to remain with this bird of such rich black plumage, but we shall have to endure some discomfort for the fire in the fireplace that has kept us warm is composed now of only dying embers. Nevertheless, we wish to read this exotic text in order to come closer to the mystery of our own lives.

And so we listen to, read the minimal text of the Raven and think that if we persist that we shall begin to read a dissemination of its single word, a word that may take us on an unforgettable journey. And so we begin. We know nothing of what we may discover on this journey, only that it has to do with the loss of a "rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore — Nameless here for evermore". We are filled with hope, awe and terror.

Slowly the minimal text which our black feathered friend presents us seems to ignite the embers of the ashy fire in our reader's room, or rather, to ignite the cinders that cling to this single word, cinders, traces of ancient words, sounds. His eyes are "fiery" and "burn[ ] into [our] bosom[s]' core." We become aware that if we wish to understand better this Raven text that we must somehow disseminate ourselves. We must remain here with our midnight reader while simultaneously following our bird on an invisible

flight. We must follow this "ebony bird" as it arises from its perch to fly toward the non origin origin of its only word, "nevermore".

To leave this midnight study is difficult, for we must fly "Deep into that darkness" into which we had been peering, "wondering fearing". We are filled with doubt for now we too are "dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before". Flying high into the darkness, we experience a sense of the abyss such as we never thought possible. We feel that we are flying in a kind of unimaginable formation with our "Ghastly grim and ancient Raven" toward "the Night's Plutonian shore". But just when we ask if this is our destination, the Raven says, "Nevermore". Thus, we are flying in absolute darkness within an endless abyss in which we have a sense of free falling as well as of soaring.

What we gradually begin to realize is that the minimal text has opened upon what appears to be an infinite darkness, one that we fear could take us toward annihilation, toward a nihilism that will dash all hope, all promise forever. The word 'nevermore' becomes more and more ominous. The lost radiant maiden Lenore has surely been annihilated within this black night.

But slowly we also begin to realize that the word of our minimal text is disseminating within the abyss of our ebony flight. The sounds within the word begin to disseminate and we hear echoing the sound 'or', 'or', 'or'. Or? Or what? Perhaps there is an alternative to the nihilism within this Raven text that afflicts us and is so terribly affecting our midnight reader. This new sound that we hear implies that perhaps within this text other messages are hidden, brought by other messengers of more comforting mien: maybe a chilly white crane whose ability to open texts toward the immense darkness follows a flight path that might eventually lead toward a dazzling brightness.

Where will the sound of 'or' which we hear over and over lead us? Until the sole word of the Raven text began to disseminate we feared that the cinders of the word would lead us to a hell of death and despair, for our midnight reader had spoken to the Raven as a "thing of evil". The first part of the word, 'never', dominated in such a manner that annihilation of hope was all that the future seemed to hold for us. But now we remember another address of our reader to the ebony bird: "prophet", a word which seemed to fill the air of our reader's study. It seemed that it "grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer Swung by Seraphim whose footfalls tinkled on the tufted floor". But now that we seem to be on the border between language and sound, the word, sound 'or' predominates and all seems different.

This part of the text begins to move beyond language, beyond concepts toward that which is unspeakable, inconceivable, ineffable. The darkness still surrounds us as we fly through endless space under the protection of Raven wings. We have crossed boundaries, and are so far away from the midnight study that we wonder if we have crossed the boundary between being and

nothingness. If so, then we have flown beyond all finite categories of essence, existence, presence, into the space of nothingness, of absence, but we feel that this nothingness is not that which brings despair. Instead, we sense a promise. In our reader's study we had been so sensitive to his sense of the loss, of the absence of Lenore, that we felt that we, too, might succumb to the darkest thoughts. But in this opening part of the text which seems to open more and more as we fly onward, our sense of the absence of Lenore has become a completely different experience. We feel a lightness, a freedom from the questions that our midnight reader asked the Raven. "Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted — On this home by Horror haunted" he had shouted, 'tell me truly I implore — Is there — is there balm in Gilead? tell me I implore!' "Prophet! Said [he], 'thing of evil! — prophet still, if bird or devil! By that Heaven that bends above us — by that God we both adore — Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn, It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore — Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.' Quoth the Raven 'Nevermore'." Quoth the Raven 'Nevermore'."

These questions now belong to a world of language that we have left behind. Instead we pursue the lightness of sound, pursue the 'or' of possibilities. Our midnight reader had questioned our dark bird with only two alternatives in mind: either Lenore was annihilated in death or she was waiting for him in Gilead with the balm of her embrace. In our midnight flight with the whispering sound of the ebony plumaged wings we have abandoned such alternatives, for our minimal text has begun to disseminate too drastically. The whispering sound of 'or' has cleared our consciousness for the possibility of hearing other sounds within our Ravenic text. We hear once again the sound 'morrrrr, more', and wonder what can await us as we soar through the black abyss. There is more to this minimal text than we had ever dreamed. And so the dream goes on. What more can lie within this text, or is the text once again differing from itself to the extent that the overwhelming forces of dissemination are causing an opening into an abyss beyond this one?

Yes, we sense a free fall once again, only this time we hear the sound 'ever'; it seems to draw us toward the infinite, toward an endlessness of flight.

This hypnotic sound of 'ever' which seems to throb subtly to the rhythmic movement of our Raven's wings leads us beyond the limited faith of our midnight reader toward a promise that we cannot begin to fathom. We have flown beyond his world that questions death, the other side of death, whether there is or is not resurrection. We have not flown to the other side of death, for we are truly still alive, in fact, more alive than ever. We have simply flown beyond these questions, for something more wondrous draws us.

The sound of 'ever' reverberates in our ears as we fly toward the non-origin origin of our ebony plumed messenger. We sense that his minimal text has traveled through time for so long that its meaning has deferred from itself infinitely. We realize that this bird is a messenger and our task is to read the message.

We are told by Derrida in his *Memoirs of the Blind* that to experience the fulfillment of the creative process we must pass through darkness. We know what we saw before we departed into this night: Poe's Raven perched upon the head of Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom. We desperately try to remember this visage of our Greek goddess, for we feel that it is some sort of guide toward a wisdom that is beyond all midnight studies, beyond all our concepts of wisdom.

But we decide, at least for the moment, that our true guide, the Raven, is taking us to the source/non-source of the wisdom of Pallas Athena. And so, having read Derrida's *Dissemination*, we fly blind into the darkest of caverns, Plato's famous pharmacy, a place fit for being the home of ebony birds of the night. Here we once more hear the full word of the Raven's text, 'nevermore', echo throughout this endless, cavernous pharmacy, site/non-site where opposites flow in, through, beyond other opposites before opposites operate as such. We realize that 'never' and 'more', true opposites, play with each other's sound in such a manner that what we had heard within our reader's midnight study now sounds to us to be something completely different from what we had imagined it to be, or, perhaps, closer to what we are really experiencing. Whereas once we were certain of the meaning of 'nevermore', now its sound disseminates into so many different sounds that its meaning has disappeared.

Thus, we leave the cave of Plato's pharmacy and continue our flight toward these sounds. As we soar in our night flight we sense that soon our passage through the blindness of darkness may end, but we do not as yet know why or how. Then we remember more clearly what it was that our midnight reader was reading, "a curious volume of forgotten lore". We briefly wonder if this lore spoke of the trickster of ancient peoples, as well as of our North American Native peoples, for their lore always tells tales of the trickster who sometimes appears in the form of the raven. Is our Raven one of these marvelous, but impish creatures? If so, we have no idea what to expect. Are we on a pilgrimage flight toward a form of wondrous transformation or toward a cosmic form of practical joke? In either case, we calm ourselves, for we are told that even the monstrous jokes have the power of transformation.

But another phase of our journey now seems to be upon us, for we think that a dim light is gradually forming before our eyes. Yes, it is. In the great distance we notice a thin line of light that is growing wider, brighter. Above

the horizon we vaguely see some strange formation in the sky. The sounds of 'nevermore' have now disseminated beyond their syllabic structure into simple consonants and vowels and transform themselves into visible sounds. These consonants and vowels spell 'Nevermore', but the individual characters are placed in a sliding lateral formation. We can see them because the co-writers of this Ravenic text, other Ravens, are flying in a formation that writes our word across the sky. Or, at least we think this is what we see. These Raven writers each bring cinders from old texts of which they are a part: old mythologies, religions, legends. Perhaps we are entering a new dream.

The characters of ebony feathers shimmer in the rays of the sun that is just rising. The cinders which have been attached to the birds of writing are glowing more and more, as if about to burst into flame. A more beautiful display of writing we have never seen. And we begin to read in a new way. So much space exists between the letters that we feel as if the word is disseminating radically before our eyes. We begin to play old, forgotten games of making up as many words as possible that begin with each letter of the word, for the black feathered formation invites us to think that each letter begins a word that we must create. The possibilities are endless, and the number of words that we can form might extend from here to forevermore. But most important, we now see the absences of the lateral spaces as absences that speak of hidden promises.

The fact that this ebony writing in the sky is formed by living creatures with consciousnesses of their own, gives us the giddy sense that at any moment this formation could change radically and produce, heaven knows what. We must become a fast, expert readers, for these letters, composed of innumerable raven authors, are unstable. Gaps in the formation could occur at any moment and the differing elements of this living text could suddenly disseminate into the nothingness of the growing brightness that surrounds us.

Then, the growing brightness blazes forth into such a dazzling light that we experience an apocalyptic blindness. We feel that our sight has been restored, but this sight which is beyond the sight we once had is blinding us in a new way. We think that we saw the sun rising just before the moment that this apocalyptic blindness occurred, but we are no longer certain. All we can see now is a blinding light that, nevertheless, allows us to see what we guessed, but never saw, at the beginning of our flight through darkness. We now see our Raven guide for who he really is. Derrida described him in *Dissemination*. He is the engendered son, Thoth, of the ancient Egyptian sun god, Ammon-Ra, the god whose face we thought that we saw rising above the horizon. No wonder that we saw raven writing in the sky, for the birds of the Nevermore formation were, like he, Thoth, the god of writing. They were writing in that space that exists beyond what our minds can see, unless like ours, they have experienced the passage through darkness. The ravens were

writing in that space where the supplement of Ra, Thoth, begins the supplementary journey of writing that is the journey of communication that the withdrawal of the sun god's face has opened.

Now that our sight has been restored, and we can see normally once more, we see the brightness of day over the earth, but the face of Ammon-Ra has withdrawn. It is only a memory, a memory that will quickly disseminate into a ruin that shall then once more lead us through the darkened passage of night.

With our Raven as our guide, we begin our long journey back to our midnight reader of forgotten lore. Through seeming endless night we fly once more, as our precious memory of the glimpse of Ammon-Ra's face above the shimmering glow of dawn falls to ruins. But we bravely, though sadly, fly on for we must return to the midnight study, and we do. And there we see our Raven "On the pallid bust of Pallas [Athena] just above [his] chamber door". "[T]he lamp-light o'er him...throws his shadow on the floor". Our poor midnight reader, unable to take our flight toward the bedazzling light of ancient dawns, is still reading the minimal text of our Raven in the traditional manner. Consequently, "[his]soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor Shall be lifted — nevermore!" But we are far more fortunate than he, better readers than he, for we believe that in that brief moment when we think that we saw the face of the sun god rising above a darkened shore, that we had a glimpse of the rare and radiant maiden named Lenore, whose image has fallen to ruin in our memory, whose shining image we shall see — nevermore.