

Pitch of Poetry

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Abstract Edgar Allen Poe’s aestheticism, as expressed in his essay “The Poetic Principle” (1848), favors sensation rather than moral sentiment. For Poe, didacticism leads poetry away from its true calling. This is a specifically Western conception of poetic value — poetry for poetry’s sake — that makes a striking contrast to Chinese poetics. But there is a point of connection and that is in the idea of the “blank.” For Poe, transient sensation in a poem allows for an engagement with temporality and process, as he says, in his most famous line from “The Raven,” “Only this and nothing more.” This force of “nothing” is explored in poems by Stéphane Mallarmé, Emily Dickinson, and William Carlos Williams.

Key words American poetry; poetics; nothing; Edgar Allen Poe; Emily Dickinson

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Poetry is a weak thing and that is its strength.

Moral Politics

In *Moral Politics*, the linguist George Lakoff has emphasized the linguisticity of cognition, as in Ludwig Wittgenstein: relation to poetry/poetics.¹

This connects to the work of sociologist Erving Goffman and his *Frame Analysis*: what the “event” is (including a poem) is determined by the frame (often

there is more discussion/commentary about an event than the event itself; the discussion brings the event into focus); new frames often push out other frames and some frames stick (e.g. “stigma”); frames are cued or keyed; what is out-of-frame is often most significant. Frames are related to ideology (in Louis Althusser’s sense) and also “metaphors we live by” and categories: that through which we perceive/value. Compare also Wittgenstein’s “seeing as” in Part II of *Philosophical Investigations* and especially his notion of “aspect blindness” (duck/rabbit).

Lakoff, in *Moral Politics*, contrasts the “nurturing parent” and the “strict father”: relativist vs absolutist, contingency vs invariance, loose vs strict.

Poetics is an ethical engagement with the shifting conditions of everyday life. If it is poetic license to contrast ethics, as a dialogic practice of response in civil society, with morality, as a fixed code of conduct and belief, then poetic license I will happily claim.

Ethics is ironic, morality sincere. Ethics secular, morality religious. Poetics is the ethical refusal of morality in the name of aesthetics.

Poetics is an activity, an informed response to emerging circumstances. As such, it cannot claim the high ground of morality or systematic theory. Poetics is tactical, not strategic. Indeed, it is the lack of strategy, the aversion to the high ground, that often causes poetics to appear weak or confused or inconsistent or relativistic.

Yet, in the struggle between ethics and morality, ethics has the advantage even when it appears to be wandering in the wilderness. This advantage is too rarely taken advantage of. What is needed is a *poetics of poetics*; that is, a defense of the ethical grounding of poetics. In that sense, my approach is closely related to what George Lakoff argues in *Moral Politics*: that we must be as strong in our advocacy of our values, what he calls the values of nurturing parents, as the moralists are for their values, what he calls the values of the strict father (qtd. Bernstein, “Practice of Poetics” 34-35).

$L=A=G=U=A=G=E$ (the approach to American poetry I advocate) acknowledges the inevitability of metaphor, the linguisticity of perception, the boundedness of thought, the passion of ideas, the beauty of error, the chains of logic, the possibilities of intuition, and the uncanny delight of chance. In contrast to the syllogistic rationality of expository writing and more convention poetry, this poetics is situational, shifts with the winds, courts contradiction, feeds on inconsistency (qtd. Bernstein, $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ *POETICSX*).

The Poetic Principle

The tomb of Edgar Poe is the birthplace of pataque(e)rics.

I love the irony that Poe's poetics — Poe is, after all, an emblematic American writer (to use his term from "The Poetic Principle") — remains largely unread, its aestheticism roundly rejected ("only this and nothing more"). "The Poetic Principle" (1848) is a founding document of the pataque(e)rical line of American poetics.

I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth.²

Poe recognized early in American literary history that high-minded moral and didactic principles suffocate aesthetic creation, as a body buried alive, even in a coffin made of the finest Brazilian mahogany and lined with pages of Longfellow, slowly and painfully loses consciousness. Worse, aversion to transient and non-productive sensation cripples ethical judgment, as a steady diet of stale bread not only takes away the taste for fresh goods but also makes the habitué of the desiccated contemptuous of flavor.

In Poe's lampooning of poems with superstructural import that rely on ideas rather than "Taste," moreover that view taste and sensation with suspicion, he echoes William Carlos Williams's formulation 75 years later, "Say It! No ideas but in things" (263-66). Ironically, Williams would insert the relatively short multipart poem where his aphorism first appears — indeed he liked the aphorism so much he repeats it three times in that poem — into *Paterson*, his foray into the long poem form, which, to echo Poe, reads better as a series of short hits than an epic.

Poe's deadpan insistence that the long poem does not exist rests on Zeno's paradox by way of *The Confidence Man*. The logic is impeccable: no matter how much the long poem tries to make a whole greater than its parts, the parts, the "intense" "moments" of "excitement," as he puts it in "The Poetic Principle" are, "when" — not *where* — "the meanings are," to quote Dickinson (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 185). This is a poetics of temporal *now*ledge rather than atemporal knowledge.

Only This and Nothing More

— Say it, no ideas but in things —
nothing but the blank faces of the houses

and cylindrical trees
 bent, forked by preconception and accident
 split, furrowed, creases, mottled, stained
 secret — into the body of the light — (263 265 266)

“Nothing but the blank”: while Williams is alluding to the bareness of winter, “nothing but the blank” is “the cry of its occasion / Part of the res itself and not about it” in Wallace Stevens’s famous formulation.³ “Nothing but the blank,” as Williams goes on to evoke it, is the pataque(e)rical sublime: bent, split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained. The words reference themselves, mark their place in the poem, saying no more nor less than their bare enunciation. In “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso,” Gertrude Stein fires a series of blanks with a “Now. / Not now. / And now. / Now.”⁴ These nows and nots, which toggle presence and absence like a love-sick boy pulling at daisies, attain to a seriality that Poe, in “The Poetic Principle,” terms “brief and indeterminate glimpses,” as a strobe light makes a scene pulsingly vibrant with its flash moments of intoxicating intensity, what Emily Dickinson calls the “art” of stunning oneself with “Bolts of Melody.”⁵ Poe writes against the viral didacticism of duty-bound poems. Is it a wild leap to see this quote as relevant to us now, or is that merely the error of an ahistorical rhapsode?

It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea; and we Bostonians, very especially, have developed it in full. We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem’s sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force: — but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified — more supremely noble than this very poem — this poem per se — this poem which is a poem and nothing more — this poem written solely for the poem’s sake.

“This poem which is a poem and nothing more”: “Only this and nothing more” is Poe’s better-known pronouncement, from a poem that wraps, rap, raps itself in kitsch to cast an indelible aesthetic spell.⁶ “Only this and nothing more” marks its words’ being in time, scores their presence, the utterance of immediacy, phatic (but not vatic) haecceity. It is the motto, as Poe insists, of art for art’s sake,

art without ulterior purpose, in and as its presence in sound, its immediate, present (gift) of rhythm and, “nevermore,” echo. Nothing/never: an echoic negation of all but the event of sound and rime as sublime and blank, full and empty, here / not here. *The thing itself*: “Nameless here for evermore”? A present absence, now / not now, the “shivering” (Poe’s word) making loss palpable.

Dare I name her? *Lenore*. A figure of speech that is all. (Craig Dworkin takes up some 20th-century examples, such as John Cage’s “4’33” in *No Medium*.)

“Le Corbeau dit: Jamais plus,” as they say in France, at least in the signal translations of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Baudelaire translates: “Only this and nothing more” as “ce n’est que cela, et rien de plus,” while for Mallarmé the line becomes simply “cela seul et rien de plus.” In “Un coup de Dés” Mallarmé gives his own version of Poe’s insignia “cela seul et rien de plus” with silent insinuation: in the sixth spread, top left bottom right, mirrored, italic is “*COMME SI*” — *as if* — but also *like so* and *like this*, nothing more, marking a self-reflective “shivering delight” in the poem, if not to say, in the echo, a perfect semblance of a *mise en abyme*.⁷ Four spreads later, on the upper left, on its own, is “RIEN,” followed by a possible commentary on the crisis of its occasion (“de la mémorable crise / ou se fût / l’événement”). After all, what might seem to be the first word in “Coup de Dés,” at the top of the third spread, is the Raven’s echo:

JAMAIS.

Dickinson, the antinomian in Susan Howe’s account, hears it: “Nothing is the force / That renovates the World” (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 1077).

Irremediation

Samuel R. Delany makes a compelling case that the homosexual dimensions of Hart Crane’s poetry are inadequately addressed in the critical and biographical literature. His two essays on Crane provide an interpretive frame for understanding Crane’s detractors. Extending Delany’s intervention, I would say that Crane’s “splendid failure,” as R. P. Blackmur puts it in “Notes on a Text of Hart Crane,” might more provocatively be understood as his irresplendent success as pataque(e) rical.⁸

... Perhaps the most careful account of Crane’s failure is first laid out in Yvor Winters’s quite extraordinary [1943] essay, “The Significance of *The Bridge* by Hart Crane, or What Are We to Think of Professor X.” ... There Winters

relates Crane's enterprise to the pernicious and maniagenic [sic] ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson via the irreligious pantheism (read: relativism ...) of Whitman and the glossolomania of Mallarmé. ... It is important to realize that the rejection — or at least the condemnation — of Crane, for Winters as well as for many of Crane's critics, was the rejection and condemnation of an entire romantic current in American literary production, a current that included Whitman and Emerson, with Crane only as its latest cracked and misguided voice. (Delany 192)

For his moralist critics, Crane's poem fails as unified whole, becoming at best a series of overwrought highlights and disconnected lyric bursts that cannot sustain themselves. "Only this and nothing more." But it is just this lack that, on Poe's terms in "The Poetic Principle," marks the long poem's only possible attainment: providing unrequited moments of "shivering delight":

I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal [sic] necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags — fails — a revulsion ensues — and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.

I want to apply Poe's flashpoint aesthetics ("brief and indeterminate glimpses") to Delany's insistence on the fact that, for Crane, the Brooklyn Bridge was an active gay cruising site; that is, a place of intense, promiscuous, transient, non-procreative sexual exchange. "Cutty Sark," says Delany of the third section of Crane's poem, "with its account of the unsuccessful pick-up, is the true center of unspoken homosexual longing, the, yearning for communication, in *The Bridge*" (221). The aesthetic power of *The Bridge* occurs not in spite of, but in connection to, its immediate (moralists would say perverse) bursts of sensation, analogous to transient sexual exchanges on the bridge. My point is not to use aesthetic process as a metaphor for sex but the other way around; indeed, Delany gives a very different frame for "failure" (*animalady*) as drawing a blank, in other words "unsuccessful pick-up" fueling the aesthetic fire ("only this and nothing more"). Moreover, this aesthetic of elevated, intense, excitement, in Poe's terms, let's call it *immediation* relates to Crane's habit of listening, on his phonograph, over and over again,

to the climax of Ravel's "Boléro," as if bolts of melody could obliterate self-consciousness.⁹

But a better word for what I am after is *irremediation*, which registers irremediable failure within an echoic poetics: "never more." "Focus on the loss: I once was timed, but now I am fixed rate."¹⁰ In poetry's negative economy, loss prolongs intensification.

Crane and Poe are in the same boat, without life preservers. The argument against Poe and Crane is pursued, with paradigmatic force, by Yvor Winters in *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry* (1937) and *In Defense of Reason* (1947) and extends to William Logan's 2007 trashing of Crane's, yes, "failure," in the *New York Times* review of the Library of America's magisterial edition of Crane:

Much of "The Bridge" seems inert now — overlong, overbearing, overwrought, a Myth of America conceived by Tiffany and executed by Disney.... his grandeurs might easily be mistaken for grandiosity.... He was drawn to a high-amp schmaltziness he must have taken as the proper emotional tone for a visionary.... "The Bridge" remains a fabulous architectural blueprint that wanted a discipline Crane could never provide. (18)

Logan, the *Times*'s go-to enforcer of cold war ideology, becomes, by means of his *ostensive* Superintendency, a figure of bathos, trapped under a headline, perhaps not of his own making — "Hart Crane's Bridge to Nowhere" — unable to acknowledge that *nowhere* is just where Crane and his readers might want to be.

Crane knew the type. As he writes in his 1926 letter to Harriet Monroe:

The nuances of feeling and observation in a poem may well call for certain liberties which you claim the poet has no right to take. I am simply making the claim that the poet does have that authority, and that to deny it is to limit the scope of the medium so considerably as to outlaw some of the richest genius of the past.¹¹

LXI. Debunking Debunking

Pataque(e)ricals¹² are aversive to what Wittgenstein calls "ostensive definitions": manifest and fixed connections between names and things, meaning and objects, as when we point to a *this* (§§ 6, 9, 28-38) (Only this and nothing more). It's queer, he

notes, that a figure will look one way in one context and another way in a different contexts.

The duck/rabbit is the paradigmatic pataque(e)rical figure because it is more than meets the eye: our “aspect blindness” may cue us to see it one way rather than other. What it is “is” we never can see in a single moment in the eye. We may be able to perceive it all at once, but we see it serially (oscillating dialectically).

Wittgenstein compares the inability to see things without contextual cues to not having “perfect pitch.” (§257) We don’t see *the thing itself* but *see as*, see with and through our metaphoric frames. It is our animalady to suffer from frame lock. Aspect blindness is a rigid adherence to one reading or interpretation of a figure (or poem), a repression of the necessity for context to establish meaning (and for different frames to establish potentially incommensurable meanings). This view is sometimes stigmatized as relativism, or in terms of poetry, as nihilism or aversion of meaning or affect. Wittgenstein suggests that the problem is not in the context dependence of meaning but in stigmatizing (getting stuck on) an ordinary feature of language.

In our failure to understand the use of a word we take it as the expression of a queer [*seltsamen*] *process*. (As we think of time as a queer medium, of the mind as a queer kind of being.) (§196, Anscombe tr.)

What’s queer is that we sublime “the logic of our language” (§38) from its everyday, context-dependent use into axiomatic system of rigid correspondences, which has the effect of creating chimeras (two-dimensional stick figures) in place of living beings. The chimera that holds us captive is that perception does not require mediation: when we reach out to touch it, thinking it is the living proof, it dissolves in our hands, leaving a faint mist in its place.

In Wittgenstein’s account, ostensive definitions map nouns onto the world, as if the fact of the existence of objects in the world pushes language toward deambiguation: a compulsive (dis-eased) state of trying to strip language to its essentials, as if it were a set of labels for a pre-existing world.

But what, for example, is the word “this” the name of in [a] language-game... or the word “that” in the ostensive definition “that is called...”? — If you do not want to produce confusion you will do best not to call these words names at all. — Yet, [queer / *merkwürdigerweise*] to say, the word “this” has been called the only *genuine* name; so that anything else we call a name

was one only in an inexact, approximate sense.... Naming appears as a queer (*seltsame*) connection of a word with an object. — And you really get such a queer [*seltsame*] connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out *the* relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word “this” innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*. And *here* we may indeed fancy naming to be some remarkable act of mind, as it were a baptism of an object. And we can also say the word “this” to the object, as it were address the object as “this” — a queer [*seltsamer*] use of this word, which doubtless only occurs in doing philosophy. (§38, Anscombe tr.)

Only this! Perception is evermore remediated: remediation precedes essence.

My Poetics by Way of Emily Dickinson

By homely gift and hindered Words
The human heart is told Of Nothing —
“Nothing” is the force That renovates the World —¹³

I love this Emily Dickinson poem, which seems so much like a Paul Celan poem. According to Johnson, it’s from around 1883, very near the end of Dickinson’s life, when she was 53. Read as an *ars poetica* it feels so close to me it’s hard for me to consider it on its own terms. Forty years ago, in 1973, I poured over that three-volume Johnson edition in the only class I took after college — a seminar on Dickinson taught by Robin Blaser at Simon Fraser University near Vancouver; but Dickinson’s first impact on me was as a junior in high school, when I studied her work with Richard Feingold (who later went on to teach at Berkeley). Dickinson gave me a fundamental sense of what a poem could be (*be* not *do* as I would usually say). And just this Fall I returned again to Dickinson for my Poetics of Identity seminar, with Marta Werner speaking to us on the late manuscripts, letters, and fragments — the way Dickinson would write on the back of envelopes, transforming scrap to talisman. Werner and Jen Bervin call their recent Dickinson book *The Gorgeous Nothings* referring to this same poem and also what Werner calls, marvelously, Dickinson’s “‘Sudden’ collage made of two, possibly three, sections of envelope”: “the gorgeous / nothings / which / compose / the / sunset / keep.”¹⁴

The first thing to say about this poem is that it is a gift: first to Susan Dickinson, to whom it was sent in a letter, and then to us, readers from a beyond Dickinson could address with more freedom and ferocity than perhaps any of her contemporaries because unconstrained by the demands of publication, or, perhaps,

better to say, constrained by the demands of nonpublication, what she called eternity. The possibility of any one of us receiving this gift is absolutely precarious (if you can accept the oxymoron — I have a feeling you are up for it), given the precarious state of her manuscripts or even the recognition of her poems *as* poems (rather than as sweet nothings, notings). The poem is a (hindered or delayed) gift both into and — that supreme fiction — *for* the unknown (“eternity’s vast pocket”).

Poetry makes *nothing* happen (DON’T EVEN THINK OF NOTHING HERE!), manifest in the cracks (delays, blanks) between words and the frictions of gift. A gift (this gift) is a present made present; as for reciprocity: nothing is given in return.

Mine is a homely poetics, both odd-looking (unattractive, disagreeable, low) and intimate (even private). The doggerel and generally deformed (as you rightly say, hindered, averse, thwarted, delayed, backwardly) rhythms and rimes, bathos, peculiarity and solecisms, have a double function of being *unheimlich* while also being — homesickness even at home and at home with homesickness. I know this sends mixed signals. But I don’t think I am alone in feeling that the unknown is most familiar or that the normal doesn’t feel right. I am not talking about alienation, quite the opposite: an alien nation, making a ground where you find yourself. Recently a reviewer dismissively assumed a hindered lyric of mine was mocking — because, for him, awkwardness signaled parody or more simply badness.

But awkwardness is home ground.

My motto has long been Dickinson’s “Don’t you know that ‘No’ is the wildest word we consign to Language?”¹⁵

That’s different, if related, to zen. I agree with your sense of “socially-minded” but also because it suggests socially unminded. Mind the gap. Unmind in the gap too.

I have nothing to say and I am not saying it. I have nothing to not say and I am saying it. I have nothing to not say and I am not saying it.

I read Dickinson’s poem as close to negative dialectics. Nothing in the sense of not one thing: variants around a blank center.

To be told about nothing is to come face to face with loss, despair, grief; the irreparable.

Nothing repairs the world.

Renovates is something else again: making new again, making new now.

The revolution of the word is the force of nothing.

Poetry is a weak thing and that is its strength.

Notes

1. See Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. See also Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*. For a full account of the relation of Wittgenstein to poetics, see Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*.
2. Edgar A. Poe, "The Poetic Principle," <www.eapoe.org/works/essays/poetprnb.htm>. See McGann, *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe: Alien Angel*, which restores Poe to his foundational role for American, and 19th-century, poetics; McGann's breathtaking scholarship makes Poe's work thrillingly present and hauntingly prescient.
3. Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" XII: "The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it."
4. Gertrude Stein, "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso" (1923): EPC Digital Library <writing.upenn.edu/library/Stein-Gertrude_If-I-Told-Him_1923.html>
5. See *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, no. 505, vol. 2, 387-88. I discuss this poem in "Artifice of Absorption" in *A Poetics*. Poe's "brief and indeterminate glimpses" has a tenuous connection to Walter Benjamin's observation, in "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" (On the Concept of History) that memories, like pictures of history, occur in flashes: "Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit huscht vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten." (The true picture of the past darts by. Like a picture that is never seen again in its instant of recognizability, the past is recorded when, precisely, it flashes up.)" —*Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften* (Frankfurt/Main 1974), Bd.1, S. 25ff.
6. See Robin Seguy's digital edition of "The Raven" interwoven with the translations of Baudelaire and Mallarmé <<http://www.text-works.org/Texts/Poe/>>.
7. This is my son Felix's current favorite term. Once you start to see them, they multiple like rabbits.
8. Delany, "Atlantis Rose: Some Notes on Hart Crane." pp. 192-91. He acknowledges his debt to Lee Edelman's *Transmemberment of Song: Hart Crane's Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire* (1987) on pp. 919-91. A related Delany work on which I have relied in this section is unpublished: Delany's extended review and critique of Paul Mariani's *The Broken Tower: The Life of Hart Crane*. "A Centennial Life from the Roaring Twenties" was first presented at the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania on Jan. 25, 2007; audio available at PennSound <writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Crane.php>. Delany provided me a copy of the ms.
9. Reed, "Hart Crane's Victrola." Researching any prior use of the term "immediation," I discovered an article by Christoph Brunner, "Immediation as process and practice of signaleitic mattering" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol. 4 (2012): <www.aestheticsandculture.

net/index.php/jac/article/view/18154/22833>.

10. “Explicit Version Number Required” in *My Way: Speeches & Poems*, 191.

11. See <english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/crane/metaphor.htm>. The letter also appears in the Library of America edition of Crane.

12. Pataque(e)rical is my coinage. It combines the ‘pataphysics of French writer Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) with “queer” and inquiry (query). Jarry created a “science of exceptions” with special emphasis on the “swerve.”

13. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, no. 1563 , vol. 3, 1076. Facsimile of the ms at <www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/76231?image=2771> suggests:

By homely
 gift and
 hindered Words
 The human
 heart is told
 Of Nothing —
 “Nothing” is
 the force
 That renovates
 the World —

14. Werner, “The Flights of A 821: Dearchivizing the Proceedings of Birdsong,” 299. See also Werner and Bervin, *The Gorgeous Nothings*.

15. The *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, L562 to Judge Otis Lord.

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