

Edgar Allan Poe across Disciplines, Genres and Languages

Edited by

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CHAPTER FOUR

“WE COMMENCE, THEN,
WITH THIS INTENTION”:

PRAGMASTYLISTIC ASPECTS IN THE ITALIAN TRANSLATIONS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE’S *THE RAVEN*

LINDA BARONE

And begin again to make soundsense and sensesound kin again
(J. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*)

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. It may be, indeed, that here this sublime end is, now and then, attained in fact. We are often made to feel, with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which cannot have been unfamiliar to the angels. And thus there can be little doubt that in the union of Poetry with Music in its popular sense, we shall find the widest field for the Poetic development.

(E. A. Poe, *The Poetic Principle*)

Stylistics, Pragmatics and Pragmastylistics

This paper discusses translation issues mainly dealing with stylistic and pragmatic, or pragmastylistic, aspects applied to Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven* (1845). As already stated in a previous essay on the translation of Poe’s short stories:

My decision to deal with the translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s works has a twofold motive, the first being my devotion to the author while the second is related to my first encounter with him, or rather with his translated stories, about thirty years ago. I made Poe’s acquaintance through the filter of translation (Manganeli, 1983) and that was a very unpleasant

experience. My first impressions after reading *I Racconti* were predominantly negative; in particular, I encountered difficulties at a syntactic and a lexical level, which made it arduous to understand some parts of the stories. I therefore ended up labelling Poe as an inflated and artificial author until I eventually found myself reading him in the source language which, despite being rich in technical and complex terms and in elaborate wordings, did not present all the difficulties and hurdles I had, paradoxically, encountered in my own language. (Barone 2015: 125)

I then decided to also investigate Poe's poems¹ from the same pragmastylistic perspective in order to ascertain whether the Italian translators of Poe's poems behaved differently from translators of his short stories.

It is quite difficult to list in the limited space of this paper the most important studies in the fields of pragmatics, stylistics and pragmastylistics, but mention will be made of those scholars and theories which have proved to be significant from a translation perspective.

As far as pragmatics is concerned, we should mention the *Speech Act Theory* (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), the *Cooperative Principle* and the *Conversational Implicature* (Grice 1975, 1981), the *Relevance Theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1986) and the *Theory of Utterance-Type-Meaning* (Levinson 2000), all of which are of primary importance in translation studies. As for stylistics, mention must be made of the fundamental works by Jakobson (1960), Enkvist (1973), Fowler (1971, 1977, 1995), Hoover (2004, 2007), Halliday (1985), Simpson (1993, 1996, 2004), Leech and Short (2007), Jeffries and McIntyre (2010), and Stockwell (2002, 2006), among many others. Then there is the more specific area of pragmatic stylistics, or pragmastylistics (Hickey 1993, Black 2006) which takes into account the pragmatic dimension of stylistic analysis. In sum, we have the study of language in use, the study of meaning originated in specific contexts and intentions and the study of style, which focuses on the form and meaning of literary (and non-literary) texts.

Pragmatic and stylistic theories have been applied to translation studies because it seemed imperative to draw attention to the fact that texts are not isolated samples of language and that they are strictly connected with their author's intentions (Snell-Hornby 1988: 2). This has led to the concept of 'pragmatic equivalence' thoroughly described in the collection of essays

¹ This paper is dedicated to "The Raven" in particular. A similar analysis will be conducted for other poems by Poe and the results will be collected in a monograph entitled *Corpus linguistics, genre analysis, pragmastylistics and translation. An inquiry into the language and style of Edgar Allan Poe*.

The Pragmatics of Translation edited by Hickey in 1998, which presents works by Malmkjaer, Gutt, House, Hatim, and Mason, among others.

A text is a whole object, composed of meaning, form, and intentions (the pragmatic dimension) that cannot be separated. In this respect, Hatim and Mason (1990: 9) argue that

To modify style on these grounds, however, is to deny the reader access to the world of the SL text. [...] One has only to think, for example, of the peculiar Englishness of the dialogue in many of Harold Pinter's plays to realise that any attempt to modify it in translation, for the sake of the TL stylistic conventions, would inevitably transform the characters into different people and, no doubt, affect the unstated undercurrents of meaning on which in the plays depends. In such cases the 'style' is the 'meaning'.

The significance of modern stylistics is well described by Stockwell (2006: 746):

One central tenet in modern stylistics has been to reject the artificial analytical distinction between form and content. Contrary to the practice of traditional rhetoric, style cannot be merely an ornamentation of the sense of an utterance, when it is motivated by personal and socio-cultural factors at every level and is correspondingly evaluated along these ideological dimensions by readers and audiences. Style is not merely free variation. Even utterances which are produced randomly (as can be seen in surrealist and nonsense works) are treated conventionally against the language system in operation. Moreover, there can be no synonymy in utterances, since the connotations even of close variations are always potentially significant.

Style is not simply an embellishment of meaning, and this should be taken into consideration when translating literature, and poetry in particular. A balance between meaning and form is almost always desirable, which involves trying not to sacrifice *naturalness*, one of the fundamental levels of translation discussed by Nida (1964) as a key principle in his model of *dynamic equivalence*, and by Newmark (1988), who considers naturalness to be a necessary element together with three other levels, namely, the textual, the referential, and the cohesive levels. An effective translation can be considered 'natural' when we do not perceive it as a translation and when the language that is used flows. However, other elements should be considered, in particular in the field of literary translation:

The target text should also tend to respect the style, the intentions, the register, the lexical choices, the sentence structure, the punctuation, the

graphological features and the overall textual rhythm of the source text if they are used for a precise purpose; any gratuitous manipulation, such as trying to make the text more poetic and more archaic than it is, would simply lead to an unnatural outcome. (Barone 2015: 135)

In this regard, it is useful to make a reference to Lawrence Venuti's invisibility in translation. Venuti opens his well-known work (1995: 1–2) by arguing that:

A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the 'original.' The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator's effort to ensure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning. What is so remarkable here is that this illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator's crucial intervention in the foreign text. The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text.

'The illusion of transparency' and 'this illusory effect' are crucial expressions because they create a paradox. Often, translators – ignoring questions of form, style and intentions – translate very different authors in the same way, making them uniform. I happened more than once to read translations of different works and authors done by the same translator and they seemed to me to be very similar. I recognized the translator's style and not the authors', even if they were widely different in the original versions. Sometimes, there is a tendency to flatten for the sake of domestication and supposed naturalness, and the paradox is that translators become visible and the authors become invisible. At other times, instead, translators want to be visible for reasons other than naturalness and domestication, and they intentionally alter the style of the source text, adjusting it to their own. This usually happens when translators are also authors. This deliberate choice is particularly evident, for example, in the translations of Poe's stories by Giorgio Manganelli, whose work was analysed in a previous and already mentioned paper.

Phonaesthesia in Poe's Prose

Almost all of Poe's short stories display intentional musicality and rhythm. One example among many can be found in the last part of *The Fall of the House of Usher*:

Not **hear** it? –yes, I **hear** it, and have **heard** it. **Long–long–long–many** minutes, **many** hours, **many** days, have I **heard** it–yet I **dared not**–oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! –I **dared not**–I **dared not** speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I **heard** her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I **heard** them–**many, many** days ago–yet I **dared not**–I **dared not** speak!
(Poe 1985: 182)

Here, a skilful use of epanaphora and epizeuxis, together with punctuation rich in exclamation marks and dashes that emphasize incidental clauses, aims to give the narration a hysterical rhythm and clearly shows Poe's parabolic style—in this case, an intensive repetition for emotional purposes (Stauffer 1996: 459). As Corbett points out, 'this scheme is usually reserved for those passages where the author wants to produce a strong emotional effect' (1990: 438). This emotional effect is particularly evident here and it is amplified by means of dashes, which add to the shock of the speaker (and of the readers). Manganelli decides to delete all the dashes and to not respect all the repetitions, thus causing inevitable losses in terms of tone, atmosphere and rhythm:

Io non lo odo? Sì, lo odo e non da adesso. Da gran tempo, da molti minuti, molte ore, molti giorni lo odo e tuttavia non ho osato... (abbiate pietà di me, miserabile sciagurato!) non ho osato parlare! Noi l'abbiamo messa nella tomba ancora viva! Non ho detto che i miei sensi sono acuti? Io ti dico che ho sentito i suoi primi deboli movimenti nella cavità della bara. Li ho sentiti, molti, molti giorni or sono, e tuttavia non ho osato parlare! (Poe 1983: 173)

A more faithful translation respecting both intention and style, could be:

Non lo **sentite**? – sì, io lo **sentito** e l'ho **sentito**. Lo **sentito** da **molto – molto – molto – molti** minuti, **molte** ore, **molti** giorni – tuttavia **non ho osato** – oh, abbiate pietà di me, miserabile sciagurato! – **non ho osato – non ho osato** parlare! L'abbiamo messa viva nella tomba! Non ho detto che i miei sensi erano affinati? Ora vi dico che ho sentito i suoi deboli movimenti

nella cavità della bara. Li ho **sentiti** – **molti**, **molti** giorni fa – tuttavia **non ho osato** – **non ho osato** parlare! (Barone, 2015: 141)

Poe is famed for his sensitivity to sound and rhythm. Oscar Wilde called him ‘this marvellous lord of rhythmic expression.’ (1886). This tendency to musicality is particularly evident, of course, in poetry, but Poe makes use of sound devices everywhere in his works, from the short stories to the essays:

Poe displays his sensitivity to sound not only in his fiction and poetry, but even in his literary criticism. Note (again) the repetition of the short *e* sound in this passage from ‘The Philosophy of Composition’: *We commence, then, with this intention. The initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression.* Perhaps, Poe’s noticeable use of this appeal to the reader’s ear, even in a work of literary criticism, relates to his suggestion in his review of *Peter Snook* that a critique might be ‘a work of art in itself’ – and his complaint that, typically in America, at least, such is not the case. (Zimmerman, 2005: 148)

Another short and particularly interesting example, before we move on to poetry, is the end of *The Masque of the Red Death*, where, within a few words, the obsessive repetition of the consonant *d* (for ‘death’), amplifies the sense of dread.

And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

Here, the letter *d* is repeated nine times and this is, obviously, a clear intention of the author. In the Italian translations by Manganelli and Vittorini-Cinelli this effect completely disappears, disregarding, once again, Poe’s will:

E le Tenebre e il Disfacimento e la Morte Rossa tennero illimitato dominio sopra ogni cosa (Manganelli 1983: 304)

E le tenebre, la rovina, la Morte Rossa stabilirono su ogni cosa il loro dominio senza limiti. (Vittorini-Cinelli 1985: 192)

In Italian, *death* is *morte*, so one should try to create alliterative (or consonance) effects with the letter *m*, but this does not seem possible. What seems feasible, however, by means of a compensation strategy, is

the reiteration of the letter *s* (*rossa*) because the colour *red* plays a key role in the story. Possible translations could be:

E l'oscurità e lo sfacelo e la morte rossa si impossessarono di ogni cosa

or

E l'oscurità e lo sfacelo e la morte rossa presero possesso di ogni cosa

in which the *s* is repeated ten times.

Phonaesthesia in Poe's Poems

As already stated, sound symbolism is particularly evident in Poe's poetry and, before analysing *The Raven*, I would like to briefly consider two striking examples, *The Bells* and *The Conqueror Worm*.

In *The Bells* (Poe, 2006: 78-81) Poe tries to accentuate the musical effect as much as possible, by means of onomatopoeia to emphasize the acoustic effect of the four bells ringing and also by means of obsessive repetition, refrain, rhyme, alliteration and assonance in an attempt to make the poem sound like a musical composition. Reading the poem aloud allows us to fully appreciate its crescendo, and the reader becomes aware that, with the passing of lines, the sound of the bells becomes louder and louder, engendering a gripping climax. *The Bells* is a musical score in its own right.

The poem starts with the telling verb 'Hear' and consists of four stanzas, each dedicated to the sound of different bells, *silver*, *golden*, *brazen* and *iron* bells. Through a skilful use of all the aforementioned sound devices, our mood changes with the progress of the poem and we move from an uplifting and joyous 'What a world of merriment their melody foretells!' (third line) to a negative and alarming 'To the moaning and the groaning of the bells' (last line).

As already stated on several occasions, Poe chooses words in a meticulous way and many times these words are selected for 'sound and vision' purposes: 'Poe has woven the diction of "The Bells" into a harmonious whole by creating haunting and evocative word images that bring the components of the individual stanzas into positions of balance and unity' (Fletcher, 1973: 64).

Another illuminating example of Poe's mastery in creating sound and visual effects is *The Conqueror Worm* (Poe, 2006: 64-65), one of his most successful poems, in which he is able to go beyond

the mere ability to establish felicitous sound values through poetic rhymes. [...] Beginning with line two, “Within the lonesome latter years!” Poe establishes an alliterative resonance in the poem which he successfully reiterates through repetitions as “bewinged, bedight”, “Mutter and mumble low”, “shift the scenery”², “self-same spot”, and “scenic solitude” as the stanzas progress (Fletcher 1973: 56)

The Conqueror worm

Lo! ‘t is a gala night
 Within the **lonesome latter** years!
 An angel throng, **bewinged, bedight**
 In veils, and drowned in tears,
 Sit in a theatre, to see
 A play of hopes and fears,
 While the orchestra breathes fitfully
 The music of the spheres.

Mimes, in the form of God on high,
Mutter and mumble low,
 And hither and thither fly—
 Mere puppets they, who come and go
 At bidding of vast formless things
 That **shift the scenery** to and fro,
 Flapping from out their Condor wings
 Invisible Wo!

That motley drama—oh, be sure
 It shall not be forgot!
 With its Phantom chased for evermore
 By a crowd that seize it not,
 Through a circle that ever returneth in
 To the **self-same spot**,
 And **much of Madness**, and more of Sin,
 And Horror the soul of the plot.

But see, amid the mimic rout,
 A crawling shape intrude!
 A blood-red thing that writhes from out
 The **scenic solitude**!
 It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
 The mimes become its food,

² Fletcher includes “shift the scenery” among the examples of alliteration, even if, as Tolkien pointed out “the so-called ‘alliteration’ depends not on letters but on sounds” (Tolkien 1940: xxxiii).

And seraphs sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued.

Out—out are the lights—out all!
And, over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall,
Comes down with the rush of a storm,
While the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, ‘Man’,
And its hero, the Conqueror Worm.

What happens to all of these alliterations and repetitions in translation? In Pisanti’s *Il verme trionfante* (2012: 155) we see that ‘lonesome latter years’ becomes ‘desolati recenti anni’, while the other alliterations, or letter repetitions, are translated as follows:

bewinged, bedight	alati, avvolti
Mutter and mumble	bisbigliano e parlottano
shift the scenery	muovono gli scenari
self-same spot	stesso identico punto
scenic solitude	deserto della scena

Once again, it is evident that little remains of Poe’s alliterations, and the sound effects, so dear to him, get completely lost in translation.

The Raven

Another theory which is particularly important for translation purposes from a pragmastylistic perspective, and which perfectly fits in with the translation of *The Raven*, is the *Relevance Theory*, the foundations of which were established by Sperber and Wilson in *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (1986):

According to the principle of relevance, it is the speaker’s or writer’s task to communicate their utterances or texts in the most ostensive way so that their addressees’ decoding efforts are not too great. [...] The translator, by mediating between the original author and the target language reader, should be able to ensure the latter’s appropriate recognition and understanding of the former’s manifested intentions. This final condition implies that the translator should know and take into account the psychological, linguistic, sociological, cultural and encyclopaedic contexts displayed by the ST’s author in his/her work; d) the stylistic features

(poetic effects) displayed by the ST should be paralleled in the TT; and finally e) the TT should adequate its lexical selection and (if possible) grammatical layout to the original ST, encoding a set of propositions similar to those in the ST. (Martinez, 2009: 3)

It is not always easy to understand the intentions of a writer ‘so that their addressees’ decoding efforts are not too great’, but there exist cases in which the author’s intentions are not only apparent, but openly declared in writing, as is the case with *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846) in which Poe, in describing the birth of *The Raven*, explains that nothing was left to chance in the creation of the poem and that it was the result of an extremely detailed work made of precise, logical and at times mathematical steps:

...it will not be considered a breach of decorum on my part to show the modus operandi by which some one of my own works was put together. I select ‘The Raven’ as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem. (Poe 1846: 163)

This quotation is crucial from a translation perspective. The translator should take the utmost consideration of Poe’s meticulous, detailed and scientific work behind the composition of *The Raven*. The first step Poe considers is the effect (pragmatics) and the effect is built through style (pragmastylistics).

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect...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?’ (Poe 1846: 163)

After some remarks about the unity of effect, the ideal length of a text, the province and the tone of the poem, Poe focuses on the choice of the refrain:

In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects—or more properly points, in the theatrical sense—I did not fail to perceive immediately that no one had been so universally employed as that of the refrain. The universality of its employment sufficed to assure me of its intrinsic value, and spared me the necessity of submitting it to analysis. I considered it, however, with regard to its susceptibility of improvement, and soon saw it

to be in a primitive condition. As commonly used, the refrain, or burden, not only is limited to lyric verse, but depends for its impression upon the force of monotone—both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity—of repetition. I resolved to diversify, and so heighten the effect, by adhering in general to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of the application of the refrain- the refrain itself remaining for the most part, unvaried.

These points being settled, I next bethought me of the nature of my refrain. Since its application was to be repeatedly varied it was clear that the refrain itself must be brief, for there would have been an insurmountable difficulty in frequent variations of application in any sentence of length. In proportion to the brevity of the sentence would, of course, be the facility of the variation. This led me at once to a single word as the best refrain. (Poe 1846: 165)

In this section of the essay, Poe explains the choice of ‘nevermore’ and makes, once again, reference to sound:

That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt, and these considerations inevitably led me to the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant.

The sound of the refrain being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had pre-determined as the tone of the poem. In such a search, it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word ‘Nevermore’. In fact, it was the very first which presented itself. (Poe 1846: 165)

‘The long *o* as the most sonorous vowel in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant’ of ‘nevermore’, together with the obsessive repetition of ‘more’, ‘evermore’, ‘nothing more’, etc., are key elements in translation and we immediately feel disappointed if we look at the choice of ‘mai più’ made by almost all of the Italian translators who will be taken into account (Bruno, Pisanti, Montanari and Vacca) and which seems quite inappropriate. In this regard, it must be stressed, of course, that the name ‘Lenore’ rhymes with ‘nevermore’, and that therefore this effect is also irreparably lost.

As difficult, and at times impossible, as it is to preserve the effect desired by Poe, I strongly believe that in some cases it can be preserved, and this is what I would like to try and prove in the following pages of this work. Bearing in mind that in poetry translation there is always a clash, a tension between the communication of meaning and the aesthetic function

(truth and beauty) of the text, and that the language of poetry is often designed to please the senses by means of sound devices and figures of speech, it is easy to see that on some occasions form is more important than content. If we completely remove and ignore the form created by a poet, what is left is only the story told, which is content without a container, without shape—a soulless and inexpressive body.

The translator's task is precisely to render the source text, the original author's interpretation of a given theme expressed in a number of variations, accessible to readers not familiar with these variations, by replacing the original author's variation with their equivalents in a different language, time, place, and tradition. Particular emphasis must be given to the fact that the translator has to replace all the variations contained in the source text by their equivalents (Lefevre 1975: 99).

Returning to *The Raven* and to *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe provides us with another fundamental passage which further explains his meticulousness, and which deals with versification and originality:

And here I may as well say a few words of the versification. My first object (as usual) was originality. [...] Of course I pretend to no originality in either the rhythm or metre of the 'Raven.' The former is trochaic—the latter is octametre acatalectic, alternating with heptametre catalectic repeated in the refrain of the fifth verse, and terminating with tetrametre catalectic. Less pedantically the feet employed throughout (trochees) consist of a long syllable followed by a short, the first line of the stanza consists of eight of these feet, the second of seven and a half (in effect two-thirds), the third of eight, the fourth of seven and a half, the fifth the same, the sixth three and a half. Now, each of these lines taken individually has been employed before, and what originality the 'Raven' has, is in their combination into stanza; nothing even remotely approaching this has ever been attempted. The effect of this originality of combination is aided by other unusual and some altogether novel effects, arising from an extension of the application of the principles of rhyme and alliteration. (Poe 1846: 166)

The combination of verses of different lengths in the same stanza, the rhymes and the alliterations are the key elements necessary to fully understand *The Raven's* originality, and they are fundamental aspects which should not be sacrificed. I decided to focus on the first stanza of the poem and then on some Italian translations.

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

Let us consider the rhymes. In lines one and three, Poe creates a rhyme between a word in the middle and a word at the end (‘dreary’/‘weary’ and ‘napping’/‘tapping’), an internal rhyme that is used also in line four (‘rapping’). The other rhymes are at end of lines two, four, five and six (‘lore’, ‘door’, ‘door’, ‘more’). All these words are chosen because they rhyme with ‘Lenore’ and ‘nevermore’, which are a leitmotif of the poem. The rhyme scheme is ABCBBB.

As far as versification is concerned, lines one and three consist of sixteen syllables with eight syllable pairs, known as trochaic octameter, while lines two, four and five consist of just fifteen syllables—although here the long *or* sounds at the end act like two syllables. Finally, the last line is a very short seven syllables. This scheme is accurately reproduced throughout the poem, making it rhythmical and hypnotic, and this mesmerizing mood is enhanced by an extensive use of alliteration, repetition and long sounds.

With all this in mind—and considering that rhythm, far from being an empty form in poetry, is one of its primary components—let us look at the Italian translations of *The Raven*. I decided to take into consideration the translation of the first stanza by Antonio Bruno (1932), Mario Praz (1974), Tommaso Pisanti (1982), Raul Montanari (2009) and Antonio Vacca (2009).

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.’

Edgar Allan Poe

Una volta in una fosca mezzanotte, mentre io meditavo, debole e stanco
 sopra alcuni bizzarri e strani volumi d’una scienza dimenticata
 mentre io chinavo la testa, quasi sonnecchiando – d’un tratto, sentii un
 colpo leggero
 come di qualcuno che leggermente picchiasse – picchiasse alla porta della
 mia camera

‘È qualche visitatore – mormorai – che batte alla porta della mia camera’
Questo soltanto, e nulla più.

Antonio Bruno

Una mezzanotte grave, meditavo affranto e frale
Su volumi strani e rari di dottrina ch’or si ignora:
in sopor quasi ero assorto, quando giunse un subito urto,
come s’un picchiasse sordo l’uscio della mia dimora.
Mormorai: ‘Sarà qualch’ospite, ch’urta l’uscio della dimora:
questo sol: null’altro ancora.’

Mario Praz

Una volta, in una tetra mezzanotte, mentre meditavo, stanco e sconsolato
su molti strani e astrusi volumi d’obliata sapienza,
mentre, sonnecchiando, già il capo mi si chinava, mi riscosse d’improvviso
un battito leggero,
come d’uno che bussasse sommessamente alla porta della mia stanza.
‘È un visitatore,’ borbottai, ‘che bussa alla porta della mia stanza
solo questo e nulla più.’

Tommaso Pisanti

Una triste mezzanotte. Mi attardavo, stanco, esausto
Sulle pagine bizzarre di un sapere ormai scordato...
La mia testa tentennava, quando udii un lieve bussare,
quasi un tocco, e un tocco ancora risuonasse alla mia porta.
Solo questo e niente più.

Raul Montanari

Fu in una tetra mezzanotte, mentre, vacillando sull’abisso dell’oblio di me
stesso
Meditavo sopra vetusti e misteriosi volumi di dottrine dimenticate
Mentre ero in fin vinto dal sonno, che improvviso percepii un lieve
picchiare
Come se qualcuno sommessamente bussasse alla porta della mia camera
‘Deve essere un qualche ospite’ sussurrai confusamente ‘che bussa alla mia
porta,
Solo questo e nulla più.’

Antonio Vacca

A quick read through immediately reveals that none of the translations respect the original versification, and that almost all of the rhymes, alliterations, repetitions, onomatopoeias are lost, with one exception. If we read all the stanzas aloud we immediately notice that one of the five shows a great respect for rhythm and rhymes. Praz’s translation takes into consideration Poe’s sounds, as can be seen, for example, in the respect of

the rhyme scheme ABCBBB (*frate, ignora, urto, dimora, dimora, ancora*). Praz's work is also praiseworthy for another reason that cannot be appreciated in the first stanza of the poem. The raven obsessively utters the word 'nevermore', which rhymes with 'lore', 'door', 'more', 'floor', 'evermore', 'before', 'wore', 'shore', etc., but above all with 'Lenore', and all these rhymes represent the clear intention of the poet to produce a strong emotional effect. Let us consider how the translators coped with the rhyming of 'Lenore' and 'nevermore'.

Bruno: Eleonora / Mai più
 Praz: Leonora / Null'altro ancora
 Pisanti: Lenora / Mai più
 Montanari: Lenore / Mai più
 Vacca: Lenore / Mai più

It is immediately clear that only Praz respected the rhyme, doing justice to one of the most important elements explicitly designed by Poe. In all the other translations, the fine and almost manic work of composition developed by Poe is entirely wiped out. Eco would call these sacrifices 'absolute losses', but are these really inevitable losses?

As already underlined several times, poetry translation is a complex task, and maintaining a balance between content and form is a challenge. Furthermore, as Eco points out, in some cases giving priority to form is not always a good choice because 'ci possono essere traduzioni che, per mantenere metro e rima, perdono immagini, appunto, altamente "poetiche" che si realizzano al livello dei contenuti' (Eco 1995: 142)

Eco's considerations are unchallengeable, but conversely, there are many cases in which form heightens meaning, in which form *is* meaning, and that is precisely the case with *The Raven*.

I attempted to translate the first stanza of the poem, trying to preserve its meaning and above all, its form, paying particular attention to rhythm, rhymes and alliterations, and this is the result:

In una mesta mezzanotte, mentre meditavo, debole e affaticato,
 su più d'un volume stravagante e antiquato d'un passato dimenticato,
 mentre chiudevo gli occhi, assonnato, giunse un colpo inaspettatamente,
 come di qualcuno che picchiasse dolcemente, che picchiasse piano sul
 battente.
 sarà un viandante, mormorai, che picchia sul battente:
 solo questo e più niente.

I am well aware that in this version as well Poe's will has not been respected. However, compared to the other translations, I think that my

attempt takes into consideration sounds, rhythm, end rhymes (AABBB) and internal rhymes (-ato, -ente), alliteration and consonance (see the repetition of *m*) and tries to do justice to the primary element strongly desired by Poe, namely ‘the effect’ (‘I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect’).

Respect in translation should be a primary concern, as Eco points out at the end of *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (2003: 364) where he rightly concludes that if you look for a synonym for the word ‘fidelity’ in a dictionary, you will not find ‘accuracy’, but you will find loyalty, honesty, respect and piety.

Thus, my attempt tries *to say almost the same thing*, also with respect to versification. If we count the syllables this is the result:

in-u-na-me-sta-mez-za-not-te-men-tre-me-di-ta-vo-de-bo-le-e-af-fa-ti-ca-to
(24 syllables)
 su-più-dun-vo-lu-me-stra-va-gan-te-e-an-ti-qua-to-dun-pas-sa-to-di-men-ti-
 ca-to **(24 syllables)**
 men-tre-chiu-de-vo-gli-oc-chi-as-son-na-to-giun-se-un-col-po-i-na-spet-ta-
 ta-men-te **(24 syllables)**
 co-me-di-qual-cu-no-che-pic-chias-se-dol-ce-men-te-che-pic-chias-se-pia-
 no-sul-bat-ten-te **(24 syllables)**
 sa-rà-un-vian-dan-te-mor-mo-rai-che-pic-chia-sul-bat-ten-te **(16 syllables)**
 so-lo-que-sto-e-più-nien-te **(8 syllables)**

The first four lines consist of 24 syllables, the fifth of 16 and the last of 8. Lines five and six can also be read together, forming another line of 24 syllables.

Poe’s versification is not respected, but five lines of the same length could be considered an additional element that gives harmony and rhythm to the text.

Final Remarks

It is not always easy to respect the intentions and the style of an author because sometimes they are difficult to grasp; we can only interpret and assume them. However, this consideration cannot be applied to *The Raven* because we have in our possession a precious document, *The Philosophy of Composition*, in which Poe explains his intentions down to the smallest detail. There is no room for interpretation and supposition because the author does not leave anything to chance – every aspect is clearly delineated, from the poem’s genesis to its intentions, from its structure to its contents, and for this reason the translators of *The Raven* should have

studied *The Philosophy of Composition* in full before attempting any translation of the poem.

I have included the opinions of several translation scholars here, but maybe the most effective and convincing words are those written by Poe himself, who, reasoning on the translation of *Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugene Sue claims:

The translation (by C. H. Town) is very imperfect, and, by a too literal rendering of idioms, contrives to destroy the whole tone of the original. Or, perhaps, I should say a too literal rendering of local peculiarities of phrase. There is one point (never yet, I believe, noticed) which, obviously, should be considered in translation. We should so render the original that the version should impress the people for whom it is intended, just as the original impresses the people for whom it (the original) is intended. Now, if we rigorously translate mere local idiosyncrasies of phrase (to say nothing of idioms) we inevitably distort the author's designed impression. We are sure to produce a whimsical, at least, if not always a ludicrous, effect—for novelties, in a case of this kind, are incongruities—oddities. (Poe 1846: 245–247)

The Italian Poe seems to have mislaid many of his original *designed impressions*. Most sound and rhythmical elements have vanished, and this has led to the irredeemable loss and to the destruction of one of the most important, most recurring and most fascinating elements in the author's production: the evocative force of sound.

To conclude, what Neil Gaiman suggests in a beautiful preface to a collection of Poe's poems and stories (2004) seems to become meaningless if applied to the Italian translations:

But there are secrets to appreciating Poe, and I shall let you in on one of the most important ones: read him aloud. Read the poems aloud. Read the stories aloud. Feel the way the words work in your mouth, the way the syllables bounce and roll and drive and repeat, or almost repeat. Poe's poems would be beautiful if you spoke no English (indeed, a poem like 'Ulalume' remains opaque even if you do understand English— it implies a host of meanings, but does not provide any solutions). Lines which, when read on paper, seem overwrought or needlessly repetitive or even mawkish, when spoken aloud reshape and reconfigure.

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