

THE MONOSYLLABIC RAVEN

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Poe's poem "The Raven" has been rewritten for *Word Ways* under various kinds of literary constraint. The editor's homoliteral raven (each word shares at least one letter with its successor) and heteroliteral raven (each word has no letter in common with its successor) were published in the May and November 1976 issues. Howard Bergerson and J.A. Lindon both wrote an automynorcagrammatical raven (Night In Gloomy House. Trouble-filled, 1 Nurse...); the former appeared in November 1975 and the latter in November 1980.

This version of Poe's poem is made of words with one syllable. To simplify its reading, each line begins with the beat on the first syllable. One line in the original is monosyllabic; can you spot it?

Once at twelve on one night's drear, 'twas while I, weak and tired
thought here
On the words in lots of quaint and odd old tomes of mind's lost
lore,
While I dozed, so near a nap, there came but then a soft, quick
tap,
As of one who made a rap, a rap at my front room's closed door.
"'Tis some guest," I spoke, voice low, "who taps at my front room's
closed door,
Well, just this, and not much more."
Ah, how clear it is now still; it was the twelfth month's snow and
chill,
And each grey burnt coal that died had wrought its ghost down
on the floor.
How I wished the morn would come -- in vain I'd sought a word
from some
Books to lift the numb, numb gloom for all the long-lost love of
'Nore.
For the rare and bright young girl, whom all the saints had once
named 'Nore.
Not named here at all, no more.
And the silk, so sad, not sure -- the noise of blinds so mauve
and pure
Thrilled me -- filled me with sheer fears I had not felt since days
of yore;
So that now, to still the beat of heart, I said, on my two feet,
"'Tis some guest out there that begs to be let in through my front
door --
Some late guest out there that begs to be let in through my front

door --

This it is and not much more.

All at once my soul grew strong; and with a pause, but not too long,

"Sir," said I, "or Ma'am, please bear no grudge at me, in truth I swore,

But the fact is in my nap, you must have come to make your rap, Which was like a soft short tap, a rap that tapped on my front door,

That I scarce was sure I heard you" -- here I oped quite wide the door --

Dark out there and not much more.

Deep in all that dark I peered, and long I stood there, gawked, and feared,

Dreamt some dreams no one has dreamt, at least not since the days of yore;

But the dark was still out there, as though a hush had filled the air,

And the one lone word that could be heard was just the sighed word "'Nore?"

This I sighed, and off the wall, a sigh bounced back, the sigh of "'Nore."

That was it and not much more.

Back in here I must have turned; my soul in me, alas, had burned;

Soon once more I heard a tap, yet now it seemed more like a roar.

"Sure," said I, "oh, sure, but that is loud, louder than a bird or bat is;

Let me see, then, what the rat is, and I'll bring it to the fore --

Let my heart be still for now, and so I'll bring it to the fore --

'Tis the wind and not much more."

Here I oped the blinds quite wide, when, with a bit of flint and pride,

In there stepped a Crow that came here from the saints' fine days of yore:

Not the least of small bows made he; not a short while stopped or stayed he;

But, with sharp, gold claws out, bade he, perched on top of my front door --

Perched right on a bust of Zeus that's just up there on my front door --

Perched, and sat, and not much more.

Then this bird with hue of jet, it made me smile, though sad, and yet

What a grave and stern look on its face from beak to back it wore: "Though thy crest be shorn and shaved," I said, "thou art not to be craved,

Grim and stark old Crow that now has crept in from the dark Night's shore --

Tell me, Lord, what is thy name who crept in from the dark Night's

shore!"

Quoth the Crow, "Oh, not much more!"

Much I gazed in awe to hear this coarse and crude old fowl be
clear,

Though its words meant naught -- for what it said to me was aimed
to bore:

For we can't help think the best since no one else has yet been
blessed

With a bird of any breed that perched on top of his front door --
Bird or beast on some carved bust that perched on top of his front
door

With such name as "Not much more."

But the Crow that sat up high on that calm bust spoke out a sigh,
That one phrase, as if his soul in that one phrase he tried to pour.
Not much else, though, then he said -- and not a wing then touched
his head --

Till I said or hummed or sighed "I lost my friends in days of yore--
In the morn he'll leave me as my hopes left in the days of yore."

Then the bird said, "Not much more."

Shocked to hear the words that broke, I turned and thus again

I spoke:

"I don't doubt that what it says is all that's in its stock and
store;

Caught from some sad man who owned the bird at which he must
have groaned

When his luck got bad so fast that all his songs had seemed to
bore --

Till the hymns of hope in him, that mood, that state of mind, would
bore

With 'Not much, no -- not much more.'"

But the Crow still tried to trick me, fool me, make me start to
smile;

Straight I wheeled a soft, stuffed seat in front of bird and bust
and door;

Then, on plush I sat in frown and let my frame sink quite far
down,

While one whim linked to the next in fear of this bad bird of
yore --

Now just what this grim, coarse, crude, gaunt ghost, yes, this
bad bird of yore

Meant to croak in "Not much more."

This I sat and wished to guess, but not one word could mean much
less

To the fowl whose eyes of fire now burned into my own
breast's core;

This and more I sat and learned, and now and then my head I
turned

On the seat whose crown was plush, next to the lamp whose light
glowed o'er,

But whose crown was soft mauve plush next to the lamp whose light

glowed o'er,

She shall press, ah, no, no more!

Then, I thought, the air grew dense and smelled so good my nose
could sense

Where the saints had burned some spice in bowls and swung it
o'er the floor.

"Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee -- by these saints he
thus hath sent thee

Rest -- sweet rest and drink that rent thee from thy thoughts of
time with 'Nore;

Quaff, oh quaff this kind of drink, and you won't dwell on your
lost 'Nore!"

Quoth the Crow, "No, not much more."

"Seer!" said I, "you thing of ill! -- and yet a seer you must be
still! --

If Old Nick had sent, or if a storm had tossed thee to this shore,
Full of gloom though brave in ways, from lands of sand and sun's
hot rays --

On this home by Fright who dwells there -- tell me, now, and don't
get sore --

Is there -- is there balm -- do tell me, tell me now, and don't
get sore!"

Quoth the Crow, "No, not much more."

"Seer!" said I, "you thing of ill! -- and yet a seer you must be
still! --

By that Place that bends down to us -- by that God who keeps
the score --

Tell this soul that's far too sad if, with the far thoughts in each
pore,

It shall clasp a young girl's soul, whom all the saints had once
named 'Nore,

Clasp a rare and bright girl's soul, whom all the saints had once
named 'Nore."

Quoth the Crow, "No, not much more."

Be that phrase our sign to leave, you bird or fiend!" I would
not grieve --

"Get thee back, back to the storm and get thee to the Night's dark
shore!

Leave no black plume as a sign that speaks that lie thy soul
thinks fine!

Leave my mood in one full piece -- and quit the bust that's on
my door!

Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my
door!"

Quoth the Crow, "No, not much more."

And the Crow now does not flit, but still does sit, and still does
sit

On the wan old bust of Zeus that's just up there on my front door;
And his eyes have all the schemes of one of hell's own crew who
dreams,

And the light that o'er him streams has cast his shade down on
 the floor;
 And my soul from out that shade which lies and floats down on
 the floor
 Shall be saved -- no, not much more!

LOGOLOGY BY THE LITERATI

The French literary workshop, Oulipo, has been briefly described to the English-language reader in the May 1976 *Word Ways* and more fully in two chapters of Martin Gardner's *Penrose Tiles and Trapdoor Ciphers* (Freeman, 1989). Those who wish to experience unfiltered Oulipo must, of course, know French. However, Warren Motte, French professor at the University of Nebraska, has made a fine translation of parts of two Oulipan anthologies: *Oulipo, La Littérature Potentielle* (Gallimard, 1973) and *Atlas de Littérature Potentielle* (Gallimard, 1981). Here one can experience the birth-pangs of Oulipo's somewhat self-congratulatory effort to understand and enhance creativity (they call it "inspiration") by proposing various lexicographic, phonetic or semantic restrictions on the writer.

The Oulipans assert that a total absence of constraint leaves the writer with too much choice, leading to triviality; those who bridle at rules are reminded that the rules of spelling and grammar aid clear communication, and the discipline of rhyme-schemes and meter have not prevented poets from producing a varied and brilliant corpus. The problem is to find new rules which will prove to be as valuable as the old, not an easy task. The Oulipans are, perhaps, too anxious to transfer mathematical concepts to the literary sphere, leading to a number of trivial structures such as Mathews' Algorithm (a rule for shuffling letters to change words into other words, or semantic kernels to change sentences into other sentences). Similarly, Queneau's construction of a story or play with branches (the ones to be followed selected by the reader or audience) is a rather trivial application of a graph theory network. On the other hand, Calvino proposes that the computer help the author determine which scenarios in a murder mystery are possible and which are not. It seems fair to emphasize the potentiality of Oulipo: they propose an immense variety of restrictions for the writer to consider, a few of which may eventually prove fruitful.

Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature (1986) is available in paperback for \$9.95 from the University of Nebraska Press.