

Poe and Ravel: *mécanisme intérieur*

Time and time again, when asked in interviews about the greatest influences on his compositions, Maurice Ravel would answer that “[q]uant à la technique, mon maître, c’est certainement Edgar Poe.” For the student of Poe, his “Philosophy of Composition,” which purports to analyze *The Raven*, is central to an understanding of his aesthetic theory and Ravel would have come across both works in French in the celebrated 1857 edition of Charles Baudelaire. For the student of Maurice Ravel, his deliberately repeated statement that Poe’s analysis of *The Raven* was so important to his compositional method thus appears as a deliberate invitation on the part of the composer, tempting all who wish to understand Ravel into perusing Baudelaire’s rendering of the essay for secrets of his craft. But is Ravel leading us astray? This article better contextualizes the reception the American poet received in France and attempts to understand Ravel’s commentary in reference to his compositional method and contemporary notions of dandyism. Is Ravel’s indebtedness to Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” a cultural by-product of an overwhelmingly fashionable author, an empty or quasi-empty cipher contrived by Ravel to mischievously deceive us, or is there a real and substantial resonance between Ravel’s and Poe’s “mécanisme intérieur,” to use Baudelaire’s description of Poe’s method?

Maintes et maintes fois, lorsque questionné en entrevue à propos des figures qui avaient eu la plus grande influence sur ses compositions, Maurice Ravel répondait : “[q]uant à la technique, mon maître, c’est certainement Edgar Poe.” Pour celui qui étudia l’œuvre de Poe, la lecture de “La genèse d’un poème”, qui présente une analyse du *Corbeau*, fut centrale à sa compréhension des théories esthétiques de l’auteur. Les deux œuvres ont pu être appréhendées par Ravel à travers la célèbre traduction en français de Charles Baudelaire de 1857. Pour celui qui étudie l’œuvre de Maurice Ravel, les affirmations répétées de l’importance de l’analyse du poème *Le Corbeau* dans ses méthodes de composition apparaissent donc comme une invitation délibérée du compositeur à lire la version de Baudelaire des textes de Poe pour y découvrir les secrets de son travail. Mais Ravel cherchait-il plutôt à confondre? Le

présent essai met en contexte la réception de l'oeuvre du poète américain en France et tente de comprendre les commentaires de Ravel en lien avec sa méthode de composition ainsi que la notion contemporaine de dandysme. La redevabilité de Ravel envers *La genèse d'un poème* est-elle un dérivé culturel de l'oeuvre d'un auteur alors immensément à la mode, un cryptogramme vide ou presque vide conçu malicieusement par Ravel afin de décevoir, ou y a-t-il des résonances réelles et substantielles entre le "mécanismes intérieurs" de Ravel et de Poe, pour reprendre la formule de Baudelaire?

"Maintenant, voyons la coulisse, l'atelier, le laboratoire, le mécanisme intérieur, selon qu'il vous plaira de qualifier la *Méthode de composition*" (160). Thus Charles Baudelaire introduces his translation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," which proports to outline the strategic and analytical method that was followed in the composition of *The Raven*. Baudelaire's *La Genèse d'un Poème* consists of an introduction by the translator, then the poem *The Raven* which is in turn followed by this sentence, and finally Baudelaire presents "The Philosophy of Composition" itself.

Baudelaire appropriates imagery central to Poe's essay on the inner workings of artistic composition by referencing first *la coulisse*, which in the 1850s designated the space between pieces of scenery through which an actor makes his or her entrance and exit. Not only does *la coulisse* underline the notion of Poe as actor but it resonates with Poe's own theatrical imagery in his analysis of the "behind the scenes" epiphany of the artist in the full flight of fancy – Poe asks his readers to imagine the "wheels and pinions [...] step-ladders and demon-traps [...] the red paint and black-patches" of the backstage area of the artist's imagination (163). But Baudelaire also portrays his beloved American as a meticulous scientist, whose *mécanisme intérieur* has been carefully quantified in his *laboratoire*. Baudelaire unveils Poe's essay with all the excitement of a carnival-caller – one senses that we are on the brink of a cathartic new "doctrine," to use Paul Valéry's expression, who understood that "Poe was opening up a way, teaching a very strict and deeply alluring doctrine, in which a kind of mathematics and a kind of mysticism become one" (qtd. in Vines 168).

For the student of Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" is central to an understanding of his aesthetic theory. For the student of Maurice Ravel, his deliberately repeated and remarkable statement – that "[q]uant à

la technique, mon maître, c'est certainement Edgar Poe" (12) – appears as a deliberate invitation on the part of the composer, tempting all to look to Poe for clues. But is Ravel – the wearer of masks, the prankster – leading us astray? Jankélévitch's seminal 1939 biography of the composer points out the dangerous critical path we all cautiously tread: "Ravel is friend to *trompe-d'œil*, deceptions, merry-go-round horses and booby-traps; Ravel is masked" (qtd. in Mawer 1). Is the path to Poe, the one encouraged and suggested by Ravel, another "booby-trap"?

Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" exerted an enormous attraction to French thinkers and artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the surface the piece appears to be a dry and mathematical elaboration and dissection of the creative process, and indeed for many anglophones this was precisely how it was received and critiqued. For French readers however, encountering the piece in Baudelaire's spectacularly erudite 1857 translation, Poe's method instead encoded remarkably prescient musings on the place of the world in the work and the work in the world. Here is an extraordinary example of conceptual translation and metamorphosis on the level of global exchange, in which an American poet's "how-to" method becomes a source of transcendental inspiration for French artists. T. S. Eliot recognized this in 1949, saying that "we all of us would like to believe that we understand our own poets better than any foreigner can do but I think we should be prepared to entertain the possibility that these Frenchmen have seen something in Poe that English-speaking readers have missed" (qtd. in Quinn 11). Poe's own careful tracing of the effect that the creative work has on the world, the world's influence on the work itself, and the tight web of interconnections that Poe emphasizes are problematic to try and untangle the work from the world have parallels also with his reception in France. Poe's work had a lasting effect on the French-speaking world, and so too did the world of North America have a lasting effect on the artistic work of Maurice Ravel. If we follow Poe's French incarnation we need to understand the challenges of trying to analyze connections that might threaten to destroy the contingent and meaningful connections between the world and the work (Poe's "unity of effect"). I believe this is precisely what French artists saw in Poe and is also what anglophones might have missed.

Transnational influence *contra* French national traditions were of course at the very core of post-Dreyfus musical politics. French regional music and French ancient music was considered by d'Indy and others on the right wing of politics as necessarily rejuvenative to a perceived French national music

in decline. Composers on the left wing, such as Ravel, thought that French music stood to gain from inspiration from all times (whether modernity or antiquity), all races, and all cultures. Ravel was unusually vocal in this regard, observing in 1932 that nationalities were not dependent on race but on “a cultural community crystallized out of many different races.” He underlined the ludicrous concept of “purity” in any so-called national music, suggesting that “it will be found that national music is usually an accumulation from many sources” (qtd. in Mawer 18). He refused to join the National League for the Defences of French Music because they wanted to ban contemporaneous German and Austrian composers, and he wrote to Colette regarding the composition *L'enfant et les sortilèges*: “What do you think of a cup and a teapot, in old black Wedgewood, singing a ragtime? I confess that the idea of having two Negroes singing a ragtime at our National Academy of Music fills me with great joy” (qtd. in Fulcher 140). Ravel’s pluralist, international, and open-minded approach to global exchange places him amongst that group of post-Dreyfus artists who looked outwards for inspiration, borrowings, and appropriations.

Many biographers and critics have been tempted to draw direct parallels between Poe and Ravel and have essayed resonances between “The Philosophy of Composition” and Ravel’s own compositions and creative process. Poe writes: “It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in [the composition of *The Raven*] 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” (163). Ravel echoed this statement by saying “I range and order [these half-formed musical ideas] like a mason building a wall. As you see, there’s nothing mysterious or secret in all this” (qtd. in Nichols 55). Consequently, in musicology and music theory since Ravel’s death, scholars have traditionally traced Ravel’s interest in “The Philosophy of Composition” to Poe’s objective and analytical account of the creative process.

Michael Lanford has proposed a new reading of *Boléro* much along these lines, underlining what he calls the repetitive “expression of ethereal thematic material through a scrupulous attention to detail during the compositional process” (265). Jessie Fillerup notes that “[j]ust as Poe’s conscientious dissembling encourages readers to revisit his tale[s] for [their] secret[s], so too does *La Valse* invite listeners to reinterpret perceptions formed in the first hearing” (354). Michel Duchesneau cautiously suggests that Ravel’s description of the composition of the Sonata for Violin and Piano correlates with Poe’s method of first determining extent, then effect,

and finally tone. Ravel relates that he conceived the work's "quite singular form, the instrumental writing, and even the character of the themes in each of the three parts before 'inspiration' whispered any of the themes to me" (Ravel, "Lettres" 326).¹ Peter Kaminsky and Roy Howat have highlighted a mathematical and Poe-like approach to Ravel's compositional method, identifying hidden but apparently preconceived layers of meaning in pitch-based analyses. The most perceptive and sophisticated account of the relationship between Poe and Ravel is a wide-ranging discussion of Ravel's poetics and his literary influences by Stephen Huebner. Huebner evaluates different iterations of Poe's influence on Ravel and other contemporaries and points out that Ravel's compositional method might best be interpreted "in a Poe-influenced strategic negotiation between originality and convention" (18).

I would only add to these readings the possibility that the so-called "Poe aesthetic" is also one of the dandy – it is a "hoaxed aesthetic" that blurs the line between the world and the creative work and like the persona of the dandy is "a modernist empty sign: obscure, tantalizing, all probing deflected by the burnished surface" (Whitesell 73). As many commentators have noted, personal reminiscences and biographical accounts of Ravel consistently affirm his dandyism in both dress and behaviour (see Figure 1). I think the key here is, first, to understand Baudelaire's own commentary on Poe as apprehended by Ravel and second, to connect this perspective more strongly with the persona of the dandy, much along the lines suggested by Michael J. Puri's discourse of sublimation surrounding Ravel's personality (Puri, "Dandy"). The French predilection for Poe's hard-edged clarity resonates in the minutely organized and strategically constructed personality of the dandy and the consciously conceived choices that governed the physical appearance, public persona, and creative disposition of artists like Ravel.

To begin to comprehend Poe's influence on Ravel we need to contextualize the somewhat astonishing reaction on the part of the francophone world to Poe's work. The idea of appropriating Poe into French culture was already apparent in Baudelaire's mission statement of 1856 when he wrote "Edgar Poe, who isn't much in America, *must* become a great man in France – at least that is what I want" (qtd. in Quinn 9). For anglophone critics from the 1890s to the 1930s Poe was an enigma often explained away in language that could be interpreted as barely disguised xenophobia. Poe had been, in effect, colonized by the French, and British critics adopted a decidedly negative stance in response. Just as Frenchmen were juvenile, arrogant,



Figure 1 Competitors for the Grand Prix de Rome, 1901. From right to left: Maurice Ravel, Albert Bertelin, André Caplet, unnamed attendant, Aymé Kunc, Garbiel Dupont, unnamed attendant (Lebrecht Collection, London). Ravel's dandyist fashion contrasts with the bohemian styling of his colleagues. Note Ravel's pocket square, boater, white shoes, and patterned socks (Whitesell 67).

and inferior, so too was Poe. Directing his comments obliquely at French readers, Henry James wrote that “an enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection,” and Paul Elmer More thought Poe “the poet of unripe boys and unsound men” (qtd. in Quinn 15, 12). Yeats thought “The Raven” to be “insincere and vulgar,” and Aldous Huxley thought it “shoddy and slipshod” (qtd. in Kopcewicz 104). In another veiled barb at intellectuals such as Paul Valéry, Yvor Winters quipped that anyone who found literary merit in Poe was of “a very frail delusion” (qtd. in Quinn 11). Eliot, whilst astutely analysing the chimerical nature of the French Poe, had ambivalent feelings about Poe's love of cryptograms and his childish puzzles and hoaxes – Eliot's Poe had the precocious “intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty” (qtd. in Vines 15).

And yet for the French Poe was their “great master.” For Valéry, “Poe is the only impeccable writer, he is never mistaken” (qtd. in Quinn 12).

Debussy proclaimed: “Edgar Allan Poe had the most original imagination; he struck an entirely new note. I shall have to find its equivalent in music” (qtd. in Evans iii). Maeterlinck, the Belgian librettist of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, pinpointed Poe as his creative progenitor: “Edgar Poe has exerted over my work, as over that of all others of my generation, a great, profound and lasting influence. I owe to him the birth in my work of a sense of mystery and the passion for the beyond” (qtd. in Lockspeiser 196). Poe’s attention to detail, his craftsman-like approach to issues of structure and plot, and his sureness of touch seemed to awake a resonance with the needs of the Symbolists, with Jean Moréas responding to a critical attack in 1885 with an unabashed rehash of Baudelaire’s *La Genèse d’un Poème*. Poe became for a whole host of French artists their figurehead and literal spokesman.²

We first hear of Ravel’s fascination with Poe from his childhood friend Ricardo Viñes, who relates that in August of 1892 the 17-year-old Ravel showed him two “dark and sombre” drawings he had made based on “MS. Found in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelstrom” (Orenstein 21–22). Both of these stories deal with the terrifying destructive power of whirlpools and portray the natural world as demonic and dispassionate. The image of the perilous whirlpool would reappear in the context of the composition of *La Valse* in 1920, with Ravel referencing the Comte de Salvandy’s famous aphorism – “nous dansons sur un volcan!” – in his own description of the piece. Probably remembering Poe, Ravel described the climax of *La Valse* as “a fantastic and fatefully inescapable whirlpool” (qtd. in Sullivan 71).

We next hear Ravel speak of Poe in 1924 in an interview with the *ABC de Madrid*:

I consider sincerity to be the greatest defect in art, because it excludes the possibility of choice. Art is meant to correct nature’s imperfections. Art is a beautiful lie.³ The most interesting thing in art is to try to overcome difficulties. My teacher in composition was Edgar Allan Poe, because of his analysis of his wonderful poem *The Raven*. Poe taught me that true art is a perfect balance between pure intellect and emotion. My early stage was a reaction against Debussy, against the abandonment of form, of structure, and of architecture.

This is, in a few words, the essence of my theories ...

(qtd. in Orenstein 433)

A *New York Times* article 1927 recounts how Ravel’s first creative influence was the experience of listening to the machines and mechanisms

of factories he visited as a child, the second was Spanish folk-song sung to him by his mother, and

my third teacher was an American, whom we in France were quicker to understand than you. I speak of the great Edgar Poe, whose esthetic [*sic*], indeed, has been extremely close and sympathetic with that of modern French art. Very French is the quality of 'The Raven' and much else of his verse, and also his essay on the principles of poetry. (qtd. in Orenstein 450)

A year later, in his Houston lecture "On Contemporary Music," Ravel mentions Poe in a discussion of personal influences:

The æsthetic of Edgar Allan Poe, your great American, has been of singular importance to me, and also the immortal poetry of Mallarmé – unbounded visions, yet precise in design, enclosed in a mystery of sombre abstractions – an art where all the elements are so intimately bound up together that one cannot analyze, but only sense, its effect. Nevertheless I believe that I myself have always followed a direction opposite to that of Debussy's symbolism. (qtd. in Orenstein 45–46)

What did Ravel see in Poe? Baudelaire's introduction, missed by many who seek direct parallels between Poe and Ravel, is extremely telling, for he, like Mallarmé, seems to construe the *Méthode* as something of a hoax. Rachel Polonsky points out that Baudelaire's continuous entertainment metaphors ("jongleur," "farceur," etc.) hint at an understanding of the workaday needs of a journalist striving to *entertain* his readers and keep above the poverty line (46). "Voici un poète," Baudelaire says, "qui prétend que son poème a été composé d'après sa poétique. [...] S'est-il fait, par une vanité étrange et amusante, beaucoup moins inspiré qu'il ne l'était naturellement? A-t-il diminué la faculté gratuite qui était en lui pour faire la part plus belle à la volonté? Je serais assez porté à le croire ..." (my emphasis). Baudelaire believes, however, that the unveiling of these techniques will bring greater understanding to readers, and de-emphasizes the deceiving nature of the enterprise with a cosmetic metaphor:

Il sera toujours utile de leur montrer quels bénéfiques l'art de la délibération, et de faire voir aux gens du monde quel labeur exige cet objet de luxe qu'on nomme Poésie.

Après tout, un peu de charlatenerie est toujours permis au génie, et même ne lui messied pas. C'est, comme le fard sur les pommettes d'une femme naturellement belle, un assaisonnement nouveau pour l'esprit. (153–154)

And so Baudelaire allows the deception, and even thinks it necessary, when

he unveils the *Méthode* with his invoking of a *mécanisme intérieur*. But was Baudelaire's vision also Ravel's?

Following Ravel's repeated signals to Poe, many early biographers and critics attempted to draw explicit parallels between the two men in the years after the composer's death. In 1939, whilst researching her bibliographical study of musical settings of Poe's works, May Garrettson Evans enquired with Edouard Ravel, seeking clarification. He wrote back that, although Ravel "had always greatly admired Edgar A. Poe, it is impossible to affirm that he considered him 'his model' and that the 'The Philosophy of Composition' had had the consequences which you mention" (6). Orenstein mentions the "spiritual influence" of Poe for Ravel and points out his fascination with "bells, clocks and chimes [...] the obsessive tolling pedal point found in 'Le Gibet' hauntingly conjures up the tension and terror found in Poe's writings" (22). Jack Sullivan and others point out more direct parallels. Ravel deplored large forms (like Poe) and they continue the trope of Ravel as "perfect composer," courtesy of Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition": "'In the whole composition,' Poe wrote, 'there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to one pre-established design.' Substitute *note* for *word* and you have Ravel's philosophy of composition" (Sullivan 72–73). Overall it is the deep regard of both Poe and Ravel for technique and overall effect that finds the greatest resonance with biographers – "the need for discipline in creativity obsessed both men" (Ivry 14).

It seems certain that Ravel admired Poe's orderly and workmanlike approach to the creative process. Lalo's 1899 review of *Shéhérazade* mentions Ravel's program notes to the work, and proceeds to quote them:

Shéhérazade is explained in a programme note by the following prose: "... 1st part: Initial idea in B minor; developments – Episodic theme (muted trumpets), leading to the second idea (in F# major), inspired by a Persian melody – Conclusion of the 1st part. – 2nd part: development of the ... themes. – Bass pedal on the expanded initial idea. – 3rd part: return of the first and second ideas, heard simultaneously. – Return of the introduction serving as the coda." This prose immediately suggests the notion of a clearly constructed work, composed with vigour and directed with certitude. Don't have too much confidence in it: if you look in the music for all that it is indicated in the programme, you'll be hard pressed to find it. (qtd. in Mawer 255)

Ravel's program note sounds remarkably like a preliminary verbal sketch, and, if so, follows Baudelaire's commentary that "un bon auteur a déjà sa

dernière ligne en vue quand il écrit la première” to the letter (Baudelaire 153). Just as Ravel qualifies Poe as an influence in his interviews of the 1920s, gradually shifting the spotlight from “teacher” to “aesthetician,” so too does Poe’s influence become less specific and more diffuse in Ravel’s critical discourse. The carefully preconceived outline of *Shéhérazade* of the youthful Ravel becomes the considered meditation of the older man:

In my own work of composition I find a long period of conscious gestation, in general, necessary. During this interval, I come gradually to see, and with growing precision, the form and evolution which the subsequent work should have as a whole. I may thus be occupied for years without writing a single note of the work – after which the writing goes relatively rapidly; but there is still much time to be spent in eliminating everything that might be regarded as superfluous, in order to realize as completely as possible the longed-for final clarity. (qtd. in Orenstein 46)

This also finds a direct resonance with Poe’s emphasis that originality “demands in its attainment less of invention than negation,” in that elimination of all possible choices is more important than creation of new ones (166).

So how much can we believe Ravel when it comes to Poe? Ravel the “trickster”: who used to show off “rare” Monticelli paintings at his villa and then delightfully inform guests that they were fakes (Orenstein 46). Even such things as a burned-out light bulb became *objets d’art* he cajoled his visitors into admiring before gleefully deflating their reverence with “Mais c’est de faux! Ça vient des grands magasins!” (qtd. in Orenstein 8). And yet it seems that Poe was a subject that Ravel talked about with a passion, and held dear to his heart.

The memoirs of Joseph Szigeti recount how Ravel spoke at length about Poe, the violinist admiring “the intensely illuminating critical flashes in Ravel’s conversation.” It seems that Ravel was approaching the subject of asking Szigeti to perform *Tzigane* with him.

I suppose my being Hungarian has something to do with it, but I never have been able to overcome the resistance I always felt and still feel towards this brilliant and (to my mind) synthetically produced pastiche of Ravel’s. He must have sensed this, for I distinctly remember that his conversation swerved suddenly to Edgar Allan Poe’s elaborate description of the genesis of *The Raven*. Then ... taking Poe’s essay as starting point, he expounded on his pet theories of conscious cerebration, which insure the mechanical excellence of whatever a composer sets out to do, in however remote a field, what idiom he chooses to write in. My somewhat chauvinistic “hands-off”

attitude when it came to Hungarian folklore may have nettled him, and may, too, have been the reason for the otherwise reticent master's going into such detailed theorizing. (qtd. in Ivry 147–148)

This intimate story might suggest a connection and affinity with Baudelaire's vision of the *Méthode* as a deflative discourse. Ravel is here partitioning a defense of *Tzigane* by talking about the "conscious cerebration" that was needed to combine the "synthetically produced" elements that Szigeti felt made up the over-the-top gypsy violinist "pastiche." The authenticity of *Tzigane*, silently challenged by the Hungarian violinist, is not an issue for Ravel – more to the point is how consciously artificial the work is, and how consciously artificial Ravel had to be in order to engage with such an exotic and "remote" subject matter.⁴ One of Ravel's most famous quotes places his compositional distancing and creative discipline in perspective, replete with his own dexterous use of paradox: "Does it not occur to these people that I might be artificial by nature?" (qtd. in Sullivan 71).

Thus Ravel was more willing than Mallarmé or Baudelaire to publicly confirm that Poe was actually telling the whole truth and nothing but. Much in the same spirit as his conversation with Szigeti, Ravel affirmed in an interview with *La Petite Gironde* in 1931 that "Mallarmé might well have suggested that this ['The Philosophy of Composition'] was merely a myth but I remain convinced that Edgar Poe really did write his poem 'The Raven' in the way he describes" (Ravel, "Lettres" 13). As we have seen, this expostulation of faith in Poe's constructivism seems to have been an *idée fixe*, a touchstone, a ready answer, for any enquiry into Ravel's compositional method. Somewhat exasperated, Ravel once said, "Inspiration – what do you mean – no – I really don't know what you mean ... What is most difficult for a composer, you see, is choice, yes, choice" (qtd. in Huebner 18). Out of an infinite universe of ideas and creative possibilities, one only has to choose. The dandy, however, who deflects truth and sincerity with artifice, acknowledges that the possibility of choice is the very foundation of creativity, as Ravel himself attested: "I consider sincerity to be the greatest defect in art, because it excludes the possibility of choice" (qtd. in Orenstein 433). Here Ravel anticipates Valéry's critique of Stendhal, in which sincerity is seen to be reduced to the instinctive or the natural, a potential danger to art predicated on the power of illusion. Here might be the essence of the French face of Poe: the Poe of Valéry, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé.

Ravel commented to his American guests that the French were much quicker than anglophones in appreciating the genius of Poe. As Walter Benn Michaels points out in an entirely different context in *The Beauty of*

a *Social Problem*, the originality and novelty of Poe's essay can be located in its attempt to lay down a scheme that separates the writing of the poem from the author's feelings.⁵ *The Raven* and *The Philosophy of Composition* functions to disconnect the protagonist from the poet and the subject from its origin. French thinkers of the dandyist persuasion (Ravel, Baudelaire) seem to have responded most strongly to this essential element of Poe's theory, as the dandy himself needs a "public"; the dandy can only play a part by setting himself up in opposition (51). As Camus noted in *L'homme révolté*, "[the dandy] can only be sure of his own existence by finding it in the expression of others' faces" (51).

Michaels makes the important point that one of Poe's central tenets is his concern for timing and brevity, this being done so that the unity ("the vital requisite in all works of art") of the work can be experienced in its totality. Poe's other theoretical essay, *The Poetic Principle*, makes this point too, although in that work Poe is concerned with keeping the reader exhilarated and emotionally engaged, whereas in "The Philosophy of Composition" he is speaking about sustaining the attentiveness of the reader. Here was an element that anglophones found glib and facile: "I conceived the proper *length* for my intended poem – a length of about one hundred lines." The key here is that "if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world intervene, and everything like totality is at once destroyed." Poe's totality marks out the boundaries between the work and the world and the effects that both the world and the work produce: "it's only in the world that the work can have an effect, and it's only the world that the work can have an effect on" (Michaels 7). To try to separate the two might therefore potentially separate the work from its effects. Michaels observes a tension that of course became the predominant theme for any criticism of modernism, which critiqued this idea that the work "*in and of itself*" could "have a fixed and transhistorical meaning" (Crimp 17). Poe's prescient attempt to begin to articulate some of these concepts resonated with French thinkers and artists for which these dissonances were fundamental to their theoretical or creative discourse. Ravel's music is full of simulacra; not for nothing did Lawrence Kramer call him a "proto-postmodernist" (205).

T. S. Eliot asked the same three questions of Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" that we ask of Ravel's indebtedness with Poe and, at least for Eliot, it didn't matter whether Poe's essay was, in itself, "a hoax, or a piece of self-deception, or a more or less accurate record of Poe's calculations" (qtd. in Valéry 218). Taking his cue from Poe's own deliberations on the importance of *effect*, Eliot focuses instead on the consequence of Paul Valéry's

ruminative critical method, an “effect” Eliot understood to have been “suggested” to Valéry through Poe’s essay. There is no direct nor substantial correlation between Poe’s ideas and Valéry’s critical discourse even if Poe’s work casts a strong influence. One can only sense its effect, but one can’t pin it down. The world of the moment is in the work of the moment and the work of the moment is in the world of the moment, and neither can be ideally apprehended without the other. Whether the world of the moment is precisely the contemporaneous world at the time of the work’s creation appears, to Poe, to be immaterial. And yet any attempt to remove the work from *any* world is perilous. The impossibility of knowing means that the we can only “sense” the effect of Poe’s influence on the composer and thus are in a sense forbidden to “analyze” it, which echoes Ravel comments on Mallarmé’s poetry (“all the elements are so intimately bound up together that one cannot analyse, but only sense, its effect”, qtd. in Kaminsky 172). Take Ravel’s work out of the world and it loses its effect, at least according to Poe.

In any critical attempt that seeks to explore Ravel’s *mécanisme intérieur* we are constantly engaging with a composer whose distancing techniques and intense privacy found a natural outlet in allying themselves with this aesthetic of Poe, a hoaxed aesthetic already once removed, if we understand Baudelaire’s interpretation, from the subject. This kind of double-distancing must have appealed to Ravel the dandy, particularly if he took Baudelaire’s commentary to heart. According to Ricardo Viñes’s private journal, the 22-year-old Ravel lent him a copy of Barbey d’Aurevilly’s *Du dandysme et de George Brummell* (1845) on 8 May 1897. D’Aurevilly notes in a footnote that “un Dandy peut mettre s’il veut dix heures à sa toilette, mais une fois faite, il l’oublie. Ce sont les autres qui doivent s’apercevoir qu’il est bien mis” (47). Once one has dressed, once one has taken the significant time and effort to compose oneself, or to compose, it is for others to do the perceiving, to do the analyzing. After all, as Baudelaire reminds us, “un peu de charlatanerie” such as this “est toujours permis au génie” (153–154).

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Notes

- 1 Huebner offers an nuanced critique of Duchesneau’s thesis (17).
- 2 Huebner deftly discusses the contrasts and comparisons made by commentators between Ravel and Debussy and situates this against a background of both composers’ affinities for Poe. He also shows how Ravel and his biographers were careful to

- distinguish between Debussy and Ravel's style despite both declaring a predilection for Poe (10).
- 3 The sentiment echoes Wilde's famous aphorism from his 1889 essay "The decay of lying": "The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art."
 - 4 Huebner makes the astute point that "of all of Ravel's postwar compositions, this is the one in which the composer's personal musical style is the most difficult to discern" (16).
 - 5 I am indebted to Knox Peden for bringing this book to my attention.

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