

The Death of a Beautiful Woman

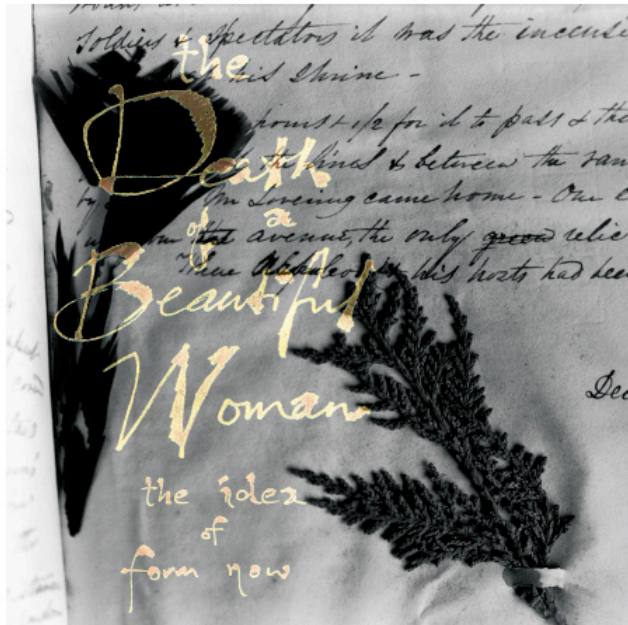
Walter Benn Michaels

This is the text of a talk I gave in November 2007 at Columbia University. It's part of a work in progress—The Death of a Beautiful Woman—on the idea of form and the ontology of representations in recent photography, poetry and film.

A version of the film part, The Death of a Beautiful Woman: Christopher Nolan's Idea of Form is available here:
<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/detective>.

I begin with the poster, designed by Amelia Saul, and made from a photograph by James Welling, because Welling's work has always been important to my ideas about form and because, as what follows will suggest, it raises issues similar to those in Susan Howe's poetry, which I also admire and which is the talk's central topic.

The Lionel Trilling Seminar



Walter Benn Michaels, Speaker

Charles Altieri and Amanda Anderson, Discussants

Thursday 15 November, 2007 6:15pm

Davis Auditorium, the Schapiro Center

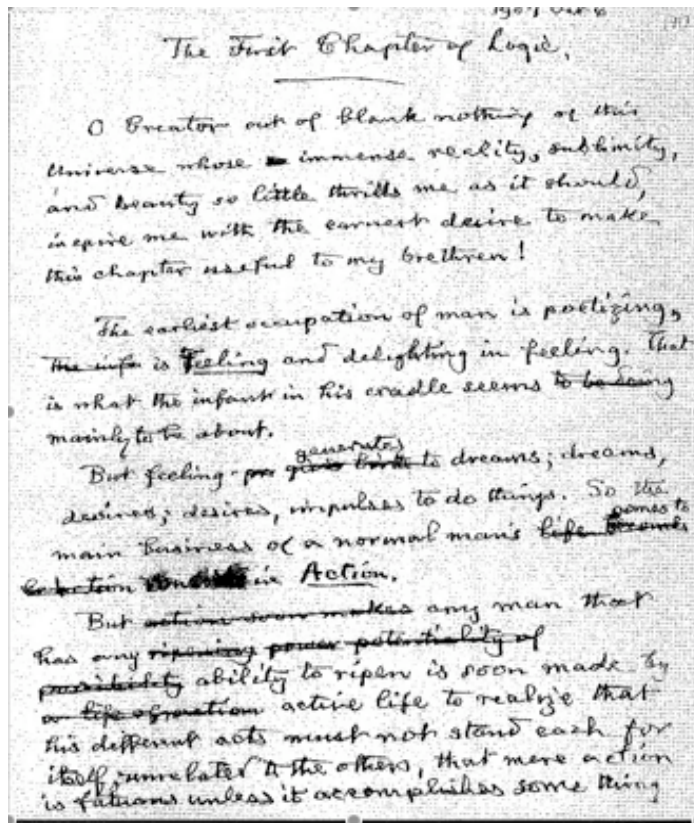
This event is free and open to the public.

Seating is on a first come, first served basis. No tickets, no reservations necessary.



The Heyman Center for the Humanities
Columbia University

This photograph appears in Susan Howe's poem *Pierce-Arrow* (1999):



It's "from the original manuscripts of Charles Sanders Peirce now at the Houghton Library," she says, and was "not shot from microfilm copies or photocopies" (ix). Her "not" here insists on a certain proximity of the illustrations to the originals, by contrast anyway to the distance that would be implied by photographing microfilm copies, which you can only read in a machine that first reproduces the document "in a size too small to be read by the naked eye" and then "enlarges [it] to be read on a reading machine combining a light source and screen together in a compact cabinet" (6). Of course, neither the photograph nor the microphotograph gives you the "original"—just the opposite, they are both technologies for keeping the original from you, for making sure that the original remains untouched and undamaged. "The original remains perfect by being perfectly what it is," Howe says, "because you can't touch it." But from this perspective, the microphotograph—which not only renders the original "untouchable" but is itself (as Howe says elsewhere) "incorporeal"—does more than preserve the perfection (the untouchability) of the original; it reproduces that untouchability by being itself untouchable. Rather than being a proximate reproduction of the materiality of the original, it is a translation of that materiality into the immaterial, the incorporeal.

At the same time, however, this incorporeality is a somewhat compromised one (which is why one word Howe will use to name objects like these is "ghost") since, she says, "Microreproduction gives the trace of someone or something" (14) and the trace of a person or thing cannot be entirely immaterial. The

way Peirce himself famously put this was to say that photographs belonged to the class of sign he called the index—"a real thing or fact which is a sign of its object by virtue of being connected with it as a matter of fact and by also forcibly intruding upon the mind, quite regardless of its being interpreted as a sign" (*Collected Papers* 4.447). Smoke is an indexical sign of fire; footprints (like those of the "little Blood boy" who, in *Pierce-Arrow*, brings Peirce the mail in the snow) are indices since they are, in Howe's terms, the trace of the little Blood boy—marks made in the snow by his shoes. The photograph of a ms. (like the Peirce photo) has an indexical relation to the thing it's a photograph of—it's connected to its object as "a matter of fact" and it "affords evidence from which positive assurance as to truth of fact may be drawn." But the photograph is also something more than an index. It's not only causally connected to the object it's a photograph of (like smoke to fire and his footprints to the Blood boy), it also (a little like the footprint but not at all like the smoke) *resembles* the object it's a photograph of, and is thus what Peirce called an icon as well as an index. The photograph of a page from the Peirce papers both looks like the page and, because the page played a causal role in its production, testifies to its existence. In *Pierce-Arrow*, then, the photograph instantiates Howe's commitment to the primacy of the manuscript (the "original")—which is to say, to the icon as index. If the original remains perfect because you can't touch it, the photograph as trace provides a kind of materiality because you can touch it. And the fact that you can is associated by Howe with poetry—the original is what it is because you can't touch it but "In poetry all things seem to touch so they are" (13).

One way, then, to begin thinking about *Pierce-Arrow* is to think of it as being organized around the question of what—in the work of art—can and can't be touched. The photographs—the trace—can. What about the words? According to Peirce, they can't. A word, he says, is "conventional," by which he means that its "fitness to represent just what it does represent lies in nothing but the very fact of there being a habit, disposition, or other effective general rule that it will be so interpreted" (*Collected Papers* 4:47). It doesn't, in other words, have a physically causal connection to the thing it represents (like the index) or a resemblance to the thing it represents (like the icon). Indeed, according to Peirce, the word itself is not, properly speaking, a physical entity. The word "man," for example, "does not consist" in what he calls the "three films of ink" that his pen (or my printer) have produced. The way Peirce puts this is to say, entirely straightforwardly, that a "word is not a thing." It does not consist of the marks it's made up of—the three films of ink (which *are* things)—it consists instead in some use to which the interpreter puts those marks, or in the rule applied to those marks. In this sense, *Pierce-Arrow's* photographs of Peirce's words are traces not of the words (because words, not being things, can leave no traces) but of the marks, the ink. And if *Pierce-Arrow's* other technology of reproduction—quotation from the Peirce papers, often in fragments and completely out of context—is not, like photography, indexical, it isn't exactly—what Peirce says words are—a symbol. When Howe quotes from one of Peirce's letters to Lady Welby—"perfect accuracy of/ thought is suspect"—the marks she makes aren't meant to function as conventional symbols of the marks he made.

The point here is that we can understand *Pierce-Arrow* in part as an inquiry into (or a taxonomy of) the kinds of signs it (or any poem) can be made of.

Insofar as it's made of words, it's made of symbols, which (unlike both the index and the icon) are conventional. Insofar as it's made up of photographs, it's made up of indices. But the quotation of a word is neither a symbol of the word nor an index (it's not a trace of the thing being quoted). The photograph of what Peirce wrote is a reproduction in two senses: it is both physically caused by what he wrote and it looks like what he wrote. But the quotation is not physically caused in the same way; its relation to the thing it represents is one of resemblance only. In Peirce's terms, as we have seen, the photograph is both an index and an icon. It is caused by the thing it represents and it has a "likeness" to the thing it represents (indeed, photographs are one of his primary examples both of indices and icons). But the quotation has neither a conventional nor a causal relation to what it represents. It's an icon only because its relation is the relation of likeness only. Quotation, in other words, is a form of mimicry—in writing, the reproduction of someone else's marks; in speech, the reproduction of someone—or something—else's sounds.

In *Pierce-Arrow*, the figure for such mimicry is called Tristan. He is both Tristan L'Hermit, the author of "Le page disgracié" and, of course, Tristan, the lover of Isolde. Isolde's Tristan, according to Bedier, was famous for his ability to imitate bird-song, an ability that *Pierce-Arrow* identifies with his ability to disguise himself as a nightingale. Tristan the disgraced page has no such imitative gifts but he appears in *Pierce-Arrow* because of his failed effort to procure for his master a singing linnet, a bird noted for the beauty of its song. Although in reality, the linnet is a bird whose song is frequently imitated by other birds; in the poem, the linnet itself is given a "mimic reputation" (140). And, of course, just as Peirce remarks that the origins of language are in "Mimicry" and the ability to produce "imitative" sounds or "words" (*Collected Papers* 2.280), the imitation of bird song plays a particular and distinctive role in standard accounts of the origin of poetry as well. Here the fact that *Pierce-Arrow* is dedicated to Howe's dead husband, the sculptor David von Schlegell, makes a difference. For if one originary scene of language is the scene of imitation (like the imitation of birdsong), in an even more standard originary scene of poetry, the imitation of birdsong is deployed in the effort to bring one's lover back from the dead. Indeed, it is this effort—or, rather, the failure of this effort that counts as the creation of the poet. In *Pierce-Arrow*, the point of the story about the disgraced Page is that the linnet he procures to comfort and to help cure his sick master won't sing, and what interests Howe about this story is that it's the "linnet's silence," she says "that provokes Tristan's *je*" (139). The bird's refusal to use its voice brings the poet into possession of his voice; his first words in the *page disgracié* are spoken as a kind of replacement for the birdsong. When his master asks why the bird "does not say a word," Tristan responds that "her failure to speak does not indicate that she is not thinking about it" (translated by Robert Levine). In the disgraced page, the master will die—the linnet doesn't speak and the page's effort to speak for it cannot keep him alive. But it's because the birdsong doesn't work that Tristan, as Howe says, gets his *je*—he begins to speak in his own person because he cannot produce the birdsong he promised.

And, of course, this failure is at the heart of what is probably the most important account of the birth of the poet in American poetry, Whitman's *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*. The imitative words in *Out of the Cradle*—the "Shine!

Shine! Shine!" and "Soothe! Soothe! Sooth!"—first reproduce the mockingbird's song and then are called upon to summon her back. Onomatopoeia—an exemplary instance of the icon in Peirce—is deployed here in the Orphic project of overcoming death. Ordinary language—the signs that Peirce called symbols—can play no role in this project. Indeed, the very possibility of the ordinary word is a testimony to the necessity of a poetic language. This is because ordinary words function as ordinary words precisely insofar as there is no connection between their ability to signify something and the presence or absence of the thing they are signifying; somebody talking about the song of the linnet doesn't make you hear the song of the linnet. But onomatopoeia is supposed to do just that. Where the name of the bird functions as a name just insofar as it functions in the possibility of the bird's absence (the symbol, as Lacan famously put it, is the death of the thing, although he didn't mean exactly what I mean by it), the imitation of the birdsong is just the opposite—it marks the birdsong's presence rather than the structural necessity of its absence. It not only names the sound of the bird song, it *is* the sound of the bird song, it is the thing it names.

In *Out of the Cradle*, then, poetry is understood as the failed effort to produce a language that overcomes the loss that produces the need for the song in the first place—the she-bird's disappearance moves the poet to song; the purpose of the song is to bring the she-bird back; the success of the song would be to produce what would in effect be a kind of metaphysical onomatopoeia, a language that by naming what was absent succeeded in making it present. But poetic language fails. Indeed it has to fail, because if it succeeded—if the poet could get what he wanted; if the word that named the thing could be the thing—then the poet would cease to be what he is. So when the "outsetting bard" declares that "Never more" will he "escape, never more the reverberations, / Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from" him, the permanent dissatisfaction—the inability to bring back what has been lost—is the condition of poetry's possibility, the psychology of desire that matches the ontology of the word. This is why, when the poet describes himself as "singing uselessly, uselessly all the night," the useless is not exactly a complaint. And when he nonetheless discovers what the poem calls "The word final, Superior to all," the word that would on the onomatopoeic model not only name what has been lost but in naming it recoup that loss, what the word names is loss itself. The sea's answer to the poet's request—"O give me the clew... O if I am to have so much, let me have more"—is the word "death," "the low and delicious word death," "[a]nd again, death, death, death, death." The repetition gestures here toward the more literal onomatopoeisis of the earlier birdsong ("Soothe, soothe, soothe," "Loved, loved, loved, loved, loved"), but the word "death" does not sound like death. This is what I meant by calling the onomatopoeia metaphysical, and by saying that its success nevertheless perpetuates rather than overcomes the principled uselessness of poetic language. On the one hand, the word "death" is imagined as not just naming death's absence but, by naming it, as making it present. On the other hand, what it makes present is absence itself.

One way we might put this is by saying that onomatopoeia is deployed in Whitman as the engine of a poetry that would transcend representation, indeed, would transcend meaning itself. The imitation of bird song doesn't exactly mean the bird song, it is the bird song. More generally, the "likeness" of the icon to the

thing it's a likeness of makes them—when the likeness is of one sound to another or of one set of marks to another—indistinguishable. And “Never more [will] the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me” both commemorates the need for this transcendence of meaning (you want the word to be the thing because you want not just to name what you’ve lost but, by naming it to undo the loss) and its origin, since Whitman’s repeated “never mores” invoke Poe’s Raven, who means nothing by them. Indeed, the reason it’s a Raven (or, anyway, not a person) who recites the refrain in *The Raven* is just because it would have made no sense, Poe says, for a “creature” able to exercise “reason” to keep on “continuously” and “monotonously” saying the same thing over and over again. Hence the desirability of a “non-reasoning creature,” one that could plausibly keep on saying the same thing because it wasn’t really saying anything (“The Philosophy of Composition” in *Poetry, Tales and Selected Essays* 1378). The raven, in other words, is himself engaged in a form of onomatopoeia. When he speaks, he is imitating what counts for him as the song of persons; he is reproducing the sound of a word rather than a word. And the word itself, Poe claims, was chosen without regard to its meaning; which is to say, what was chosen was the “sound” (the o’s and the r’s, “sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis”) rather than the word. It’s as if the author of *The Raven* meant no more by “Nevermore” than its speaker does.

But what is the difference between the sound and the word? We have already begun to see how, following Peirce, *Pierce-Arrow* asks this as a question about the difference between the word (like the word “man,” which is not a thing) and the marks (three films of ink) in which the word is written. And the already famous closing lines of the poem both produce the problem and, like Whitman, allude to its origin. In “lyrist come veil come lure/echo remnant sentence spar/never never form wherefor” (144) we see the Orphic Tristan, whose veil is a black sail, one that condemns him to death because it announces that he will never see Isolt the Fair again. And we also see the “never forever” of the poem’s very last line in the “never never form wherefor” which, out of the literal materiality of its sound, produces, just as literally its “form.” Poe chose nevermore, as we have seen, because the o’s and the r’s made it “sonorous,” a word that (sort of like nevermore) almost makes its way into *Pierce-Arrow*—Howe quotes Peirce saying that he “might have called” his philosophy “practicism but...”, leaving out what follows the “but”: “pragmatism,” he says, “is more sonorous.” But even though she leaves out “sonorous,” its o’s and the r’s make their appearance in “never forever” and “never never form wherefor,” and the fact that they are the sounds the Raven makes (in the meter the Raven makes them in) rather than the words he utters has its own importance. The emergence of “form” out of “nevermore” (or, in the poem’s own terms, the return of “micro-form”) is the return of the “original” as what she calls the “incorporeal” in the material. It’s the form that gives the sound or the marks their meaning, that connects the same marks to two different things, or different marks to the same thing.

Thus Tristan involves himself with Isolt Blanchemains in part because she bears the same name as Isolt the Fair—“‘Heavens’, he would often say, ‘how far I have gone astray over this name’” (Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan, with the Tristan of Thomas*, trans. by A.T. Hatto 291). He is torn by the suffering he has

caused both the Isolts (“je m’en duil pur duple Isolt,” he says; Howe quotes the last two words, “duple Isolt”) (Thomas 472), and his death will be a consequence of the difference that the sameness of name obscured. Wounded in battle by a poisoned spear, he sends for Isolt the Fair to cure him, and when Isolt Blanchemains lies about the color of the sail (white means Isolt the Fair is coming; black means she isn’t; “Love’s sail is black,” says Howe), he expires on the spot, killed, from one point of view, by the venom on the spear or, from another point of view, by his love for Isolt, which, of course, is a consequence of the “love-drink” prepared by Isolt’s mother (also named Isolt!)— “poison vs. potion,” as Howe puts it in the line above her citation of “duple Isolt” (92). With “duple Isolt,” the same name attaches to two different things; with poison and potion (two words which were once the same), different names attach to the same thing, or to two things that only seem to be different, that produce the same effect.

And, of course, the potion itself raises a version of the question we’ve been concerned with. That question, as A.T. Hatto (the editor and translator of Gottfried’s *Tristan*) puts it, is “Was it a cause of love, or a mere symbol” of it? The alternatives might be put more usefully for us by citing the internist Gunther Weitz’s suggestion (in the *British Medical Journal*) that the love potion (he’s interested in the version of it that appears in Wagner’s *Tristan*) might well be made up of “an anticholinergic compound,” perhaps derived from “plants of the Solanaceae family” (cf. <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/327/7429/1469>) and by contrasting Weitz’s view of it to Thomas Mann’s—that the lovers might as well “have drunk a glass of water” (cited by Weitz). From Hatto’s standpoint the issue here is essentially an historical one. He thinks that if the potion isn’t the cause of their love, it must count as a symbol of the “unconscious” love that they already feel for each other and, since the very idea of “unconscious” love seems to him a “modern” one, he doubts that it makes sense to think of Gottfried as having anticipated it. But for Mann and for others, especially Jean-Paul Sartre, who have interested themselves in the potion, the question has more to do with the nature of love itself. Sartre denigrates the “mechanical” and “automatic” implications of the potion—what you want, he thinks, is not a lover who’s been turned into a kind of automaton but one who loves you freely.¹ At the same time, however, you don’t want a love (indeed, you can’t quite imagine a love) that is free in the sense of being chosen, the way one might freely choose to enter into a contract. The difficulty here is about desire, which must, on the one hand, be uncoerced while, on the other hand, it can’t be chosen.

And the opposition between Weitz’s anticholinergic compound and Mann’s water produces the same problem in a slightly different register. If love is nothing more than the effect of a drug, it’s hard to see why we should be more or differently interested in it than we are in the body’s response to any other drug—some plants make you break out in a rash, others make you want to sleep with Isolde. “Love,” Howe says in the Dedication to *Pierce-Arrow*, “is in the mind”; the rash isn’t. But it’s not as if the love of Tristan and Isolde is in the mind *instead of* the body. Nothing is more important about Tristan and Isolde than what Howe

¹ “Si Tristan et Iseut sont affolés par un philtre, ils s’intéressent moins...” (*L’être et le néant*, 407).

herself calls “the beauty of their persons” (138), a remark she makes in the course of quoting Gottfried’s description of the beautiful things they wore at court (“Emerald, jacinth, sapphire”), which is itself a description that comes at the end of a passage in which he lingers lasciviously over Isolde’s robe (it fits her “intimately...clinging between her knees”) and her mantle (which falls “unhampered...revealing this and that”) (186-7). The point, according to Gottfried, is Isolde’s beauty “in spirit” and “in body,” and the point in Howe is not that love isn’t in the body but that it involves an action or activity of the body that is different from breaking out in a rash. When, to return to an earlier example, you’re looking at the Peirce manuscripts on the microform machine, you’re looking at something you “can’t touch.” You can’t touch the original, the thing the microfilm is a sign of. And you can’t, if you’re reading it, touch the microfilm either. Because the original “is reproduced in a size too small to be read by the naked eye,” the reproduction needs to be put in a reading machine so “the human mind,” she says, “can understand” it —what she actually says is “can understand” it “far from it” (6). Understanding takes place at a distance (like the “Distance” invoked in “For David”) from what can be touched even when what is understood *can* be touched because what is understood is not identical to what is touched.²

Part of Howe’s point, then, is the identification of the “human mind” with cognition (*Pierce-Arrow* calls Peirce a “master mind”) and part of the point is the identification of cognition with love (*Pierce-Arrow* also calls Isolt a “master-mind”). The insistence on the mind here, and the imbrication of mind and desire (knowing and loving) bring what we might, in this tradition, describe as the purpose of art (the recovery of what has been lost) into contact with its status (the thing that makes it art). For Whitman, *The Raven* sets the thematic scene. Poe identifies poetry with Beauty and Beauty with loss, hence, “the death...of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.” *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* both enforces this dictum and, with its plea for the metaphysically onomatopoetic “word final, superior to all” (“if I am to have so much, let me have more!” Whitman says), seeks to overcome it. What Howe finds in *The Raven*, however (or in Tristan disguised as a nightingale or in the linnet or in the photograph) is not only loss and the ambition for a language that will bring back what has been lost but the problem or opportunity that ambition produces for the idea of the work of art.

What I mean by this is that *The Raven*’s refrain—“Nevermore”—embodies a set of questions—Is “nevermore” (in the mouth of the Raven) a word? If something resembles a word (looks like it or sounds like it), does that make it a word? Or is a word something you can’t, as Howe would say, touch?—that are foundational not for Whitman’s romanticism but for what we used to call postmodernism. I don’t mean to be flip here in consigning “postmodernism” to the past; what I would want to say instead is that what we’ve called postmodernism has consisted in one set of answers to those questions but that the art of the last

² Peter Nicholls’s “The Pastness of Landscape” in *Contemporary Literature* (Autumn, 2002) is a wonderful reading of distance in *Pierce-Arrow*, which approaches many of the issues raised here but from a very different angle.

forty years has been marked more by the importance of the question than by any unanimity about the answer. And this is as true of critical theory as of art. The debates about whether a blank canvas can count as a painting or about the wave-poem hypothetical in "Against Theory," which is to say, about whether the immaterial (hence untouchable) difference between marks produced intentionally and identical marks produced by chance matters to the question of whether those marks can count as words, are entirely about the relation between form and materiality, about the relation between the representation and the critique or transcendence of representation.

More recently—particularly in response to my own writing—this question has been asked as a question about experience and, in particular, aesthetic experience. In slightly different ways, both Vince Pecora and Lindsay Waters (in *American Literary History* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* respectively) object that the difference between experiencing a work of art and understanding (or misunderstanding) its meaning that is so central to *The Shape of the Signifier* actually functions to make the work of art as art irrelevant, to reduce it to a set of ideas. And, of course, this worry about the threat to art has been central to academic criticism at least since Cleanth Brooks's "The Heresy of Paraphrase." Pecora produces it in a relatively weak because psychologized form: the difference between "Type A personalities" "who refuse to acknowledge the valuable..." and Type B personalities, who don't worry so much about logic and are more interested "in experience than in knowledge." But personality has nothing to do with the irrelevance of the question what does the raven mean when it says "nevermore," or with its replacement by the question of what "nevermore" makes the speaker of the poem think of. The difference here is between the meaning of a text and the effect on its hearers. And when Poe asserts that the proper "province" of poetry is not truth or passion but the "effect" of "beauty," his point is not about what Pecora calls "human psychology" but about the specificity of the work of art. He calls beauty an effect rather than a "quality" because he wants to insist (much more radically than Pecora) that it must be experienced rather than understood. (It's not as if Poe's bereaved lover either understands or misunderstands what the Raven is saying.)

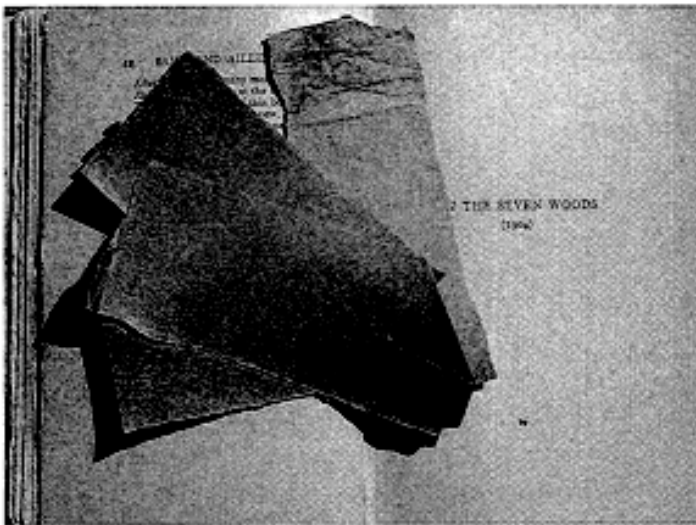
And this, of course, looks like exactly the opposite of what I say in *The Shape of the Signifier*, which is that the replacement (or identification) of the meaning of a text with its effect is, in Michael Fried's terms, a kind of literalism that makes textuality disappear altogether. After all, everything in the world produces effects; everything makes us think of something. When it's the sounds the raven makes rather than the meaning the raven intends that matter—which is, after all, the whole point of its being a raven—the speech act, the work of art, is being turned back into what Fried, in "Art and Objecthood," called an object. From this standpoint, the raven's "nevermore" inaugurates the critique of representation (the transformation of meaning into effect, which is to say, of what the work means into what it makes you think of) that's at the heart (only apparently paradoxically) both of the postmodern critique of the work of art and the post-postmodern defense of it. The idea in both cases is to disarticulate the specifically aesthetic character of the work of art from its meaning. (Sometimes this is called antiformalism; sometimes it's called the rediscovery of form.)

In fact, however, Poe's own aesthetic, although it is indeed an aesthetic of effect rather than meaning, works very differently. For the effect that's most important to Poe, and that he notoriously associates above all with the short poem, is the effect of what he calls "unity" or "totality." It's associated with the poem because the poem (if it's kept to the right length—*The Raven* is 108 lines) "can be read at one sitting" whereas for the novel or the epic, at (the very) least two sittings are required, and if "two sittings" are "required, the affairs of the world interfere and everything like totality is destroyed." That's why there's no such thing as a long poem and "What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that it to say, of brief poetical effects." For Poe, in other words, it's precisely the distinction between the effect produced by the work and the affairs of the world that's crucial, and it would be easy to show how this difference hinges on the difference between the effect the work of art is supposed to have on you and the effect it actually has, which is to say, how it hinges entirely on the appeal to understanding and/or misunderstanding. You may or may not experience the effect of the work of art but, in order to make Poe's distinction between the work and the world, you need at least to know what that effect is supposed to be. To put it in the terms of *The Shape of the Signifier*, you need to know the intended effect.

In a way that's more directly relevant to the terms of our discussion today, however, we can see how the question of what's part of the world and what's part of the work is at the center of Howe's concerns. In its relatively anodyne form, this just looks like an interest in manuscripts and a complaint about scholars who don't pay enough attention to them. Why are "manuscripts," she wonders, "so underestimated in all academic disciplines?" (22). But the claim, for example, that you can't read the poems of Emily Dickinson unless you're reading them in her own handwriting (or on the pieces of paper on which she wrote them) goes far beyond the idea that consulting the manuscripts is useful in the effort to establish a correct text; it involves the further claim that the manuscript is itself the text and that anything that looks different from the manuscript is not just a corruption of the text but is something else altogether. More generally, it involves the claim that aspects of the work that may seem irrelevant to it as a work—like the size of the spaces between the letters, like the shapes of the letters themselves—are relevant, indeed definitive, after all. To put this in Poe's terms, we can say that she's describing the spaces between the letters as part of the work not the world.

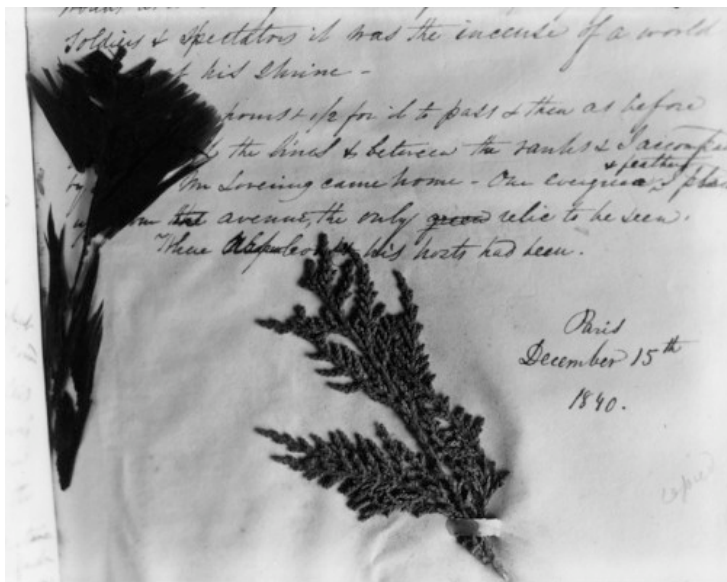
We can see the issue here in Howe's initial description of the photographs in *Pierce-Arrow* as "illustrations." In most contexts, the illustrations in a text can correctly be understood to have at best a contingent relation to that text. If we're reading, say, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, we don't regard the question of whether our edition includes the original Daniel Beard illustrations as critical. We treat it as the same text whether it does or doesn't. But I think it's pretty obvious that an edition of *Pierce-Arrow* that left out the photographs would not count as an edition of *Pierce-Arrow*. And this is even more vividly true of *The Midnight*, where there are many more photographs, where they are often located within the text (rather than on facing pages) and where some of them (of open books and paper on paper) begin to look as if they were made by James Welling. Compare this page of *The Midnight*, for example,

the wing. Allingham's unreal reality points to the cold mystery of



windows lit in strange houses as opposed to your own house when you are outside looking in.

to this photograph—it's the one that was used to make the poster—from Welling's *Diary* series:



I also think it's pretty clear that the photographs are crucial to Howe not only because their presence in the physical object that is the book raises the question of their presence in the text but because, as index and as icon instead of symbol (as trace and likeness instead of representation), the photograph emblemizes the attraction of the onomatopoeic, the transformation of the word into a

thing. And it's only if you feel the attraction of turning the word into a thing that you can also feel the desire to deny that it is a thing. It's only—to put the point in terms that are even more explicitly Howe's—if you feel the force of the claim that "In poetry, all things seem to touch so they are," that you can also feel the need to insist on "words we can never touch."

My idea, then, about *Pierce-Arrow* is that it takes an ambition about poetic language and turns it into a problem about poetic form. The ambition for poetic language—thematized in the desire for a language that can bring your lover back from the dead—is that it will become the thing it represents. But as a problem about form, it involves a pair of conflicting or competing ambitions. One is that the word (the poem, the work of art) will become a thing by ceasing to represent—that it will function as an object to be experienced rather than understood (or misunderstood). This ambition is at the heart of what has been variously called literalism, postmodernism and (in its political form) posthistoricism. It finds its primary theoretical expression in the claim that the meaning of works of art is in principle either indeterminate or illusory and, in Howe at least, it finds its primary aesthetic expression in the attraction to the text as a kind of object, in the identification of the text with the object and, therefore in the disappearance of text as text. In her recent work, we might say that the photograph emblemizes this ambition; in her earlier work, a similar role would sometimes be played by the manipulation of type, sometimes of lines arranged at angles so that they overlapped, and hence of words that touched each other.

But it's the ink that touches, not the words. Thus in pages like this

Whether the words be a command
words be a command
Dissenting from authority or counsel
might drift sheds earth knowledge
gathered in the place
First anything says
Where he says
Upon Che-lateran
in deep ocean
Must have been astonished
He
dark background (Gardener
Pure Sacrosanct Negator
I John bright picture
What are the
suddenly unperceivable time from place to place
Effectual crucifying knowledge
All other peace

from *The Nonconformist's Memorial*

the materiality of language seems to be deployed as an obstacle to interpretation, and so as a way, first, of asserting what Peirce understood as the non-identity of the ink and the words and, second, of exploiting that non-identity to replace the words with the ink. It's as if the goal—or, at least, the limit case—is a certain illegibility: what you can't read, you can see and feel but not understand. At the

same time, however, this materialist reduction (in Peirce's terms, of words to ink) is a kind of anti-materialist transformation (in Poe's terms, of world to work), since the white space that, in a more standard distribution of the lines, would function only as a kind of support for the poem, here functions as part of the poem, and since the thematization of that fact makes illegibility legible. Thus the ambition to turn the representation into a thing is matched by the ambition to turn the thing into a representation.

I've already mentioned both "Art and Objecthood" and "Against Theory" as arguments for the inevitability of this transformation, for the irreducibility of the representation. Fried's insistence on the frame and Knapp's and Michaels's insistence on the intention are both ways of marking the difference between what belongs to the work and what doesn't, and it would be possible to show that, from Derrida's parergon and John Searle's Chinese Room through Ruth Millikan's work on teleosemantics and ongoing debates over the indexicality of the photograph (see *Photography Theory*, 2006) and the theory of affect (see Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*), the question of the ontology of representations remains central. The correct answer to the question—in case anyone is wondering—is that things either mean what their makers intend them to mean or they don't mean anything at all; the ontology is a function of the intentionality. But the argument of today's paper has been that the fantasy of a language that would mean without reference to its speaker's intentions is crucial even if the reality of it is not. In Whitman—perhaps we might say, in Romanticism more generally—that fantasy appears as the imagination of a distinctively poetic language, the metaphysically onomatopoetic word final, superior to all that (because it is the thing it names) means without reference to what anyone means by it, without reference, one might say, to meaning.

In modernism/postmodernism the same fantasy seeks fulfillment not in the ambition toward a certain kind of language, but as an investment in and revelation of the materiality of the language we've already got, an investment more generally in the ways in which the affective (what you can see and touch) can replace the cognitive (what you must understand or misunderstand). Hence the attachment to the photograph, which has a material connection to the thing it's of and which (precisely because of that material connection) looks like it without representing it. (Photographs of Peirce manuscripts look just like the manuscripts but they are not representations of them, any more than the footprint left by the Blood boy is a representation of his shoe.) But the recent history of photography involves the effort to overcome that fact (to find ways for the photograph to declare its meaning) and Howe's work—with its insistence that the work is known as well as experienced and that the difference between what we know and what we experience is, like love and form in *Pierce-Arrow*, in the mind—produces a parallel project. The ambition to undo representation is definitive for a certain kind of (avant-garde) work; the defeat of that ambition is definitive for the emergence of that avant-garde's idea of form.