

**STRIVING FOR ATTENTION:  
FURTHERING A COMPARATIVE READING OF  
ROBERT BROWNING AND EDGAR ALLAN POE**

**BUSCANDO ATENCIÓN:  
LECTURA COMPARADA DE ROBERT BROWNING  
Y EDGAR ALLAN POE**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the possible influence between certain works by Robert Browning and Edgar Allan Poe, composed and published very close in time, which deal with similar themes and share literary strategies and techniques. Although the possibility that they might have been reading each other's work is supported by their respective correspondences with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the similarities between their works could also be attributed to literary experimentation as a means of standing out in a fiercely competitive literary market that had to pander to both popular and critical taste. This article compares the similarities in choice of tone and sensational event, as well as the use of voice in a short list of titles that coincide in both time of publication and topic, to raise the issue of influence in a controversial historical context when plagiarism and radical innovation were equally problematic.

**Keywords:** Robert Browning, Edgar Allan Poe, influence, short story, dramatic monologue.

**Resumen**

El presente artículo explora la posible influencia entre ciertas obras de Robert Browning y Edgar Allan Poe, que fueron compuestas y publicadas en fechas muy

cercanas en el tiempo, tratan temas similares y comparten estrategias y técnicas literarias. Aunque la posibilidad de que pudieran haber estado leyendo el trabajo del otro está respaldada por sus respectivas correspondencias con Elizabeth Barrett Browning, estas similitudes entre un cierto número de sus obras también podrían atribuirse a la experimentación literaria como medio para destacar en un mercado literario ferozmente competitivo que debía complacer tanto el gusto popular como el crítico. Este artículo compara las similitudes en la elección del tono y el evento sensacionalista, así como el uso de la voz, en una lista restringida de títulos que coinciden tanto en el tiempo de publicación como en el tema para plantear la cuestión de la influencia en un contexto histórico controvertido cuando el plagio y la innovación radical eran igualmente problemáticos.

**Palabras clave:** Robert Browning, Edgar Allan Poe, relato corto, monólogo dramático.

## 1. Introduction

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Despite the undeniable quality of their literary work, the 1830s and 1840s were particularly difficult times for Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Browning as they sought the popularity they needed to make a living from their art. Overwhelmed by eternal debts and faint success in the United States, Poe fruitlessly tried to get Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's help to gain visibility in Britain, but the quality of his work would be acknowledged by the British Pre-Raphaelites only after his death. In Britain, similar circumstances framed the literary career of Robert Browning in the same period (1830s-1840s). Browning Jr., the brilliant son of a senior clerk in the Bank of England, managed to write neither the poetry that pleased Victorian critical taste, nor the drama that would have granted him full economic independence as a professional playwright. Thus, while Poe wrote short literary and critical pieces for diverse magazines, Browning self-published his poetic and dramatic work at his father's expense.

At the time, US poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson enjoyed the reflection of Harvard's glow while James Fenimore Cooper had already returned from England with a medal from the Royal Society of Literature. In Britain, Dickens published and edited compulsively, Barrett was widely read and admired, the Spasmodic poets enjoyed wide critical recognition for their imitation of Keats's poetry, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson pleased the Victorian readership with the type of dramatic monologue ("Ulysses", w.1833; p. 1842) they could rhythmically and morally accept. Browning's monologues, on the contrary, were distasteful, difficult to understand, and did not read like poetry at all. For his part, Poe refused to deal with the religious and political matters that

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would have gained him critical favor in his country, where his poetry would not receive critical recognition until the publication of “The Raven” in 1845.

Their attempts at writing drama for literary success would not work either. When he began to write a play, Poe tried to adapt the sensationalist reports of “the Beauchamp-Sharp Tragedy” (also known as the “Kentucky Tragedy”), an 1825 real-life murder case that was followed in journals and magazines at national level and that found several ways into fiction. But the melodramatic morbidity that attracted the attention of the masses did not quite fit in the Jacobean format Poe designed for *Politian*, which was unsuccessfully published in instalments in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835 and, therefore, never fully completed. Although it was also inspired by the then highly popular subgenre of melodrama (Erickson 1984: 41), Browning’s abstract drama was too involuted for his Victorian audience, while the influence of popular melodrama only found a way into Browning’s plays by systematically altering rhythm with no dramatic justification (Erickson 1984: 42). So they also failed with drama. Still, their failure was a happy one because, in their search for the artistic originality that would bring them popular recognition, Browning and Poe would develop the novel genres that would eventually make them known to the reading public over the centuries: the dramatic monologue and the short story.

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The letters the Brownings exchanged between 1845 and 1846 show that Poe and Browning never met in person but were aware of each other’s work thanks to the fertile publishing industry crossing the Atlantic Ocean at the time, as well as the mutual interest both authors had in making their work known beyond the limits of their own national readership. Although a much less obvious influence of Poe’s “Metzgerstein” (1832) was acknowledged by Browning (Fisher 1999: 54) in “Childe Roland” (1852), there is no other documented evidence that they were reading each other’s work before 1845 (Fisher 1999: 52). In that year, Poe would send copies of his recently published *Tales* and *The Raven and Other Poems* to Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, and would hold an 1846 copy of Browning’s failed *Strafford* in his library (Hayes 2000: 83), although Elizabeth had only praised Robert’s “Paracelsus” and “Bells and Pomegranates” in a letter to Poe in 1845.

In this period of their lives, Poe’s and Browning’s experiments with genre, as they aimed to please the popular and high-brow tastes of both literary critics and the literary market, led to the development of the short story and the dramatic monologue, respectively. The apparent divergence in their final results may certainly distract from a similarity in strategy, which might easily be explained as an early Victorian —understood in this article as a temporal and cultural, rather than geographical reference— tendency in stylistic innovation. In this article, I provide textual evidence pointing to specific similarities regarding their use of tone, theme,

sensational event, voice and closure in a series of titles whose composition and publication dates —between 1834 and 1843— make them intriguing in terms of a possible mutual influence in the creation of the short story and the dramatic monologue. A quick look at Table 1 below shows that works that were almost coincidental in time of composition or publication share similar thematic and technical features.

	1834	1835	1836	1838	1839	1842	1843
Poe	Berenice [C] <sup>7</sup>	Berenice [P] <i>SLM</i> (Mar)		Ligeia [P] <i>AM</i> (Sep)	William Wilson [P] <i>TG</i> (Oct)	Oval Portrait [P] <i>GM</i> (Apr) The Pit and the Pendulum [C]	The Pit and the Pendulum [P] <i>TG</i>
Browning	Porphyria [C]		Porphyria [P] <i>MR</i>		Cloister [C]	Cloister, [P] <i>DL</i> My Last Duchess [P] <i>DL</i> (Nov)	

Table 1. Thematic and technical features common to Poe and Browning’s work between 1834 and 1843

Generally speaking, “Berenice” and “Porphyria” share a fetishistic component (teeth and hair, respectively) added to the murder of a female partner by a mentally unstable male who half confesses his crime homodiegetically. “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “Cloister” have the common ingredient of a Gothic treatment of Spanish Catholicism. Yet the voice in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” is not the same voice as the one depicted in “The Pit and the Pendulum”, and neither is its rhythm or effect. “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” is rather more similar in its use of voice, rhythm and effect to Poe’s “William Wilson”, whose representation of obsession with a male schoolmate bears a closer psychological resemblance to the portrait rendered by Browning’s Spanish monk. Finally, “The Oval Portrait” and “My Last Duchess”, both written and published during the same year, are based on the same motif of the deceased wife in a painted portrait that serves as evidence of her suggested murder. The sources behind these works have been traced back by previous research to disparate origins sharing the common nexus of

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the periodical publications of the time (either tales published, or books reviewed in them), implying that both authors sought thematic inspiration in them.<sup>1</sup>

Still, it is my claim that the works of Poe and Browning might also have reached each other's eyes in the 1830s and 1840s, based on the many thematic and stylistic similarities that can be found between the works themselves. This article explores similarities between some of Poe's short stories and Browning's dramatic monologues that are particularly interesting if we consider that they were innovative at the time in terms of effect, voice and sensational theme and tone. Poe recommended a short length for literary compositions based on effect, while Browning preferred the dramatic monologue rather than full-length drama, which allowed him to keep tone intensity high enough to hold his reader's attention along the whole composition. Also, in both cases, the choice of subject and tone make a mixture of gothic sensationalism and melodramatic excess, with a subjective use of voice (homodiegetic in Poe and dramato-lyrical in Browning), that also aims at pleasing the popular taste and engaging their readers' subjectivity.

## 2. Common Recourse to Sensational Themes

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The public's appetite for scandal in the UK and the US in the early decades of the nineteenth century made sensation a condition for popularity in both fiction and non-fiction, the news in the daily newspapers and even scientific discourse (Reynolds 1988; Sachsman and Bulla 2013). In clear contrast to a Victorian morality advocating the edifying mission of art, the contemporary public's demand for journalistic sensationalism, melodramatic theatre, supernatural fiction, sensation novels, and mesmerism was a powerful adversary of the almost spiritual character required by lyrical poetry. In order to attract their readers' attention to their own entertainment products, the blooming publishing and stage industries at the time entered into a fierce competition to supply them.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the sensational was disliked by literary critics, who considered it an easy way to raise interest and emotion in readers, and to build or solve plot development.

Compared with this popular demand for sensation, Browning's and Poe's ideas about lyric poetry were platonically romantic in essence, which doomed their lyric production to be ignored by the masses. Between the aesthetic need to be critically acknowledged and the economic motive of popular recognition, both authors seem to have needed a stylistic recipe that would meet the conflicting demands of their time. As Poe most accurately noticed in the same letter to Thomas W. White, where he apologizes for the excesses of "Berenice", "to be appreciated, you must be *read* and these things [sensation] are invariably sought after with avidity".<sup>3</sup> Although Browning would not acknowledge his surrender to popular sensationalism

so overtly, his turn to drama in the mid-thirties and his choice of subject and tone for his compositions speak for themselves. Popularity was an objective that both of them sought not only as the mere satisfaction of artistic recognition, but as the means to earn a living from their art. Browning defended the actions of men as a lyrical theme for the objective poet, the allegedly moral purpose of his literary production and his insistence on detaching himself from the characters and situations described in his monologues. These arguments might, however, disguise his artistic guilt in employing thematic and (stylistic) sensationalism in his poetry for the sake of popularity. Britta Martens argues that despite Browning's "resistance to the pressures of the literary market and readers' expectations [...], [his] need to be acknowledged by both the general readership and the critics" conditioned the development of his poetic identity (1985: 11). In "The Philosophy of Composition", Poe would more sincerely express his aim to develop a single style that could satisfy "both the popular and critical taste" (1846: 163).

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Blending the sensational thematic component required for popularity with the higher artistic standards established by the critics became, for both authors, a means to attain their purposes. The critical point of articulation is provided by the response Coleridge gave to Wordsworth's 1801-1802 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* in his *Biographia Literaria*. In 1817, an acknowledged critical authority such as Coleridge postulated that the suspension of disbelief in the supernatural (a recourse to the implausible for the sake of heightened effect) allowed for the expression of the dramatic truth of the emotions raised, as happened with his famous text "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798). With this, Coleridge justified the use of artistically "inferior" (although undoubtedly more popular) means by putting them at the service of higher poetic effects. A similar approach is taken by Poe and Browning in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) and "Essay on Shelley" (1851), respectively. While the former establishes a connection between sensationalism in topic (death) and the (most poetic) spiritual effect of elevating the soul of his readers through melancholy (1846: 164); for Browning, it is an adequate use of instrumentality (composition), and not thematic choice, that accounts for greatness in a work of art (1851: 1004). Therefore, the "objective poet, in his appeal to the aggregate human mind, chooses to deal with the doings of men [...] the noisy, complex yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him" (Browning 1851: 1003).

The "rise of an urban, working class and the penny newspapers that served them" (Sachsman and Bulla 2013: xxi) displaced small-circulation party presses from the 1830s onwards. A change in readership also changed the topics and tone of the contents of weekly periodicals, which turned from party-press political and ethical ideas to penny-press "human interest and crime stories" (Sachsman and Bulla

2013: xx). In the nineteenth century, the wide diversity of sensational themes demanded by the working class was organized around two main interests of the Victorian middle class: morality and reason. In their introduction to sensational literature in the mid-1800s, Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (2006) remark on the supremacy of subjects such as sexual deviation from patriarchal rule (including adultery, divorce, incest, and homosexuality), ethical deviation from civic behavior (crime in general, with a clear preference for murder), and intellectual deviation from positivism (supernatural events and mental imbalance).

Both Browning and Poe used all of these in their tales and dramatic monologues as sensational elements that would raise considerable interest in the periodical publications of the time, which were more conditioned by the demands of wide readership than by literary quality. There is illicit sex in “Porphyria”, who escapes “to-night’s gay feast” to meet “one so pale/ For love of her” (ll. 27-29) and suggested adultery in “My Last Duchess”. There are references to a “scrofulous French novel” (l. 57) that would send Brother Lawrence directly to hell in “Spanish Cloister” in case his lecherous leering at Brown Dolores and Sanchicha (ll. 25, 27) were not enough. Poe would be more subtle in his inclusion of sexually deviant practices, but also more extreme. In “Berenice”, he would suggest Berenice’s adultery, her “unhappy malady” affecting mostly her “moral condition” (2002: 584, emphasis in original), which was reflected in her unrepentant, “smile of peculiar meaning” (584). In this tale, Poe also suggests mild incest (more obvious in “Morella”) and necrophilia, which frames the whole piece in the opening epigraph and also appears at the end of the tale: “*Dicebant mihi sodales, si sepulchrum amicae visitarem, curas meas aliquar tulum fore levatas*”.<sup>4</sup> In general, male deviant sexual behavior is represented in Poe’s tales by the absence of sexual interest, which is explained within the context of some undecided mental imbalance, like in “The Oval Portrait”, or same-sex desire, which is suggested in Poe’s treatment of the Doppelgänger in “William Wilson”.

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In some cases, the mere presence of erotic elements adds up to the sensational load of the tale or monologue. Browning provides Porphyria’s long, yellow hair and bare shoulder (ll. 17-18); Brown Dolores and Sanchicha washing their “Blue-black, lustrous [tresses], thick like horsehairs” (l. 29) in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”; and the duchess’ seductive looks and smiles (ll. 24, 43, 45, 46) in “My Last Duchess”. Berenice would cast her “smile of peculiar meaning” framed by “innumerable ringlets, now of a vivid yellow” (Poe 2002: 584). However, the “rarest beauty” of the lady in “The Oval Portrait” is described merely in terms of “[t]he arms, the bosom, and even the ends of the radiant hair” (248).

In Victorian times, sensationalized eroticism was often reinforced by the criminalization of sexual deviation, which was also represented in literary fiction in

correlation with other criminal behaviors such as murder, torture, or mutilation. Live burial and mutilation are present in “Berenice”, the painter’s young wife is buried alive in her oval portrait, and the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum” suffers torture by the Spanish inquisition while William Wilson is repeatedly stabbed to death. In the monologues, Porphyria is strangled with her own hair; the duchess is murdered by some servant; and it will not be long before Brother Lawrence is killed by the soliloquist’s mere hate.

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These forms of moral deviant behavior were also linked to several forms of madness (Foucault 1988: 247-248). Thus, the manifestations of madness as unrestrained, animal passion, gain sensational potential by themselves. In the social imaginary of the nineteenth century, the connection of the madman with physical and mental imprisonment makes madness a most apt instrument for the development of Gothic fiction as one more manifestation of sensational literature. The supernatural elements that characterized early Romantic Gothicism would intermingle with madness via the common element of irrationality in the Victorian period. The madman is not only responsible for the fear he causes in the sane. Because it might disturb the physical and social integrity of people around him, madness itself is a threat for the Victorian sane introspective subject seeking moral adequacy. On their part, Poe’s homodiegetic madmen cause terror in fictional and nonfictional witnesses and victims of their imbalance, but they are themselves victims of a claustrophobic sort of madness they cannot possibly escape. Such also are the monomaniac cases of Browning’s madhouse-cell monologuists: Porphyria’s lover (obsessed with yellow hair, porphyria being itself an illness affecting the brain) and the Spanish monk who seeks his own damnation as he seeks Brother Lawrence’s. The impossibility of having a version other than the Duke of Ferrara’s monological report of the events in “My Last Duchess” leaves room for the possibility that the duchess’s supposed adultery was the result of the Duke’s monomaniac obsession with the honor of his family name rather than with his wife’s actual adulterous behavior. Such also is the case of Egaeus’s monomania in “Berenice” (teeth), the homodiegetic narrator in “William Wilson” (identity) and the painter in “The Oval Portrait” (art). Torture and imprisonment turn the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum” into “an imbecile —an idiot” as his torturers “nearly annihilated all [...] [his] ordinary powers of mind” (Poe 2002: 243). In certain tales by Poe, such as “Ligeia” or “William Wilson”, the sensational representation of madness is emphasized by the suggestion of the supernatural gothic. In a similar line, Browning’s “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” reaches its climax with an invocation to Satan and a possible quotation from a medieval manual of magic formulae ascribed to Peter of Abano (Loucks 1974: 167).



Moreover, Gothic sensationalism is also present in the claustrophobic use of gloomy settings. As the interest in natural philosophy turned from the outer to the inner world, gothic settings became symbolic in the interior dialogue that madmen entertained themselves with as part of their treatment (Foucault 1988: 247). Browning's madhouse-cell compositions take place in a retired cottage during a stormy night ("Porphyria's Lover"), a Catholic cloister ("Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"), and a private room in a castle ("My Last Duchess"). Ancient and often derelict mansions abound in Poe's tales, not only reflecting the unbalanced mental state of their homodiegetic dwellers, but even contributing to —when not directly causing— their madness. In the nineteenth-century social imaginary, the madhouse was seen as the means of containment of mental, moral, and physical disease, but also as the physical space where these diseases are born and from where they can spread to the rest of the population (Foucault 1988: 207). Fear and morbid interest in settings, characters and events that are hidden from the view of the reading public justify their use in sensational literary manifestations that are characterized by disclosure of what is hidden (John 2009: 3).

In this regard, the contemporary popularity of pseudo-scientific lectures in public theatres was also related to this sensational appeal of the disclosure of what was socially or intellectually hidden. These popular lectures often incorporated sensational topics such as mesmerism or phrenology, which were explained to the general public by (melo)dramatic means bordering on vaudeville/the circus as they were usually related to the supernatural in the figure of the medium or clairvoyant (Oppenheim 1988: 7). Mutual borrowing from the fictional and the (pseudo)scientific was liable to render the similar effects that were demanded by the early Victorian audience. Both Browning and Poe made an analogous sensational use of scientific discourse in their compositions, which they justified with the respectability of academic interest in such topics. Psychology was a most suitable discipline to justify the sensational representation of madness that was exploited in Poe's tales and Browning's monologues. Many of Poe's tales (both dark and humorous) typically include an introspective reflection on the biological or contextual reasons that explain their homodiegetic narrator's uncommon behavior and provide a scientific frame to the tale that justifies the reader's interest in its contents on a pretended logical (rather than sensational) basis. Furthermore, scientific interest was held as justification for the sensational elements accounting for the popularity of the travel narrative tradition, which often required the form of the personal journal as a device to guarantee the reliability of narration in the age of empiricism (Oppenheim 1988: 57). The use of exotic settings also contributed to raising interest in readers owing to the sensational ingredients that are inherent to their strangeness. The political, religious, and moral corruption of Continental Europe provided a suitable context for the sensational characters and

actions that appear in the tales and monologues. As in a trial, the homodiegetic narrative voice of travel journals (most evident in exploration journals) bore unmediated witness to sensational events with the same perceptual instruments as the scientific experimentalist (Oppenheim 1988: 200). Distant locations in time and place add exotic interest to “My Last Duchess”, “William Wilson”, “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”, “The Oval Portrait”, and “The Pit and the Pendulum”.

Such discursive traditions are relied on only to be subverted through the use of voice in Poe’s and Browning’s compositions, their main contribution being precisely their unreliability as they displace the reasoning/analytical function from the narrative/monological voice to the reader. In Poe’s tales, this subversion is most complete when he conveys the mental imbalance of his homodiegetic narrators by exposing their reasoning powers as they try to explain their deviant experiences by rational means. Similarly, Brother Lawrence and the Duke of Ferrara build on religious and social discourses, respectively, to justify their behavior in rational terms. In the case of “Porphyria’s Lover”, the monologist organizes his reasons to attack Porphyria around a logical pattern that has no logic. The supposed rationality of the argumentative presentation of action in both cases is subverted by the suggested unreliability of voice, which is revealed to be the main subject of the tales and monologues as they reach their thematic climax.

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### 3. Use of Voice and its Impact on Closure

Although the literary forms created by Browning and Poe were finally divergent in terms of genre classification, the narrative and lyrical voices that gave their works concrete expression are discursively similar —when not identical. It could be argued that Browning’s failure at writing for the stage was caused, ironically, by his excessive compromise with popularity, as he exclusively focused on monological climax, disregarding the circumstances that would build his plots into such climactic moments. He would preface his failed *Strafford* with the justification that his play was “one of Action in Character rather than Character in Action” by which “considerable curtailment will be necessary” in plot (Browning 1837: iii). Paradoxically, the same sensational features that made his drama unfit for the popular stage would perfectly match the expressive lyrical form that appealed to the critical mind. This was a happy coincidence that resulted in the production of the dramatic monologues. Although Poe would more consciously master the gradual development of plot into a climax and its following *dénouement* (as he explains in “The Philosophy of Composition”), the “supplying details” that Browning would disregard as “not required” (1837: iii) for the reader of *Strafford* are managed by Poe in their literal and symbolic dimensions as subservient to a

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complex picture of his homodiegetic narrators. It is just as paradoxical that Poe's careful treatment of sensational "details" to construct characters is precisely what distinguishes his tales from contemporary *Blackwood* articles that used similar details without subservience to character.

It can be seen, therefore, that rather than dealing mainly with the sensational elements that appealed to the popular reading interest, the tales and monologues are dynamic self-portraits of the invisible, psychological, and moral dimensions of their homodiegetic narrators, which are built by the details provided as the action unfolds. It could be argued that the circumstances external to character work as props that help in character construction and totally depend on it. In the tales and monologues, plot is visibly subordinated to character development, which is proved by the fact that, in all cases, the climax of tales and monologues focus on character rather than the culmination of action.

The sensational murders of Porphyria and the duchess of Ferrara take place by mid monologue, off the focus of poetic climax, while Brother Lawrence's death or induction to eternal condemnation is projected into the future outside the monologue. Except for "The Oval Portrait", where the initial homodiegetic narrator reports the artist's —and not his own— final anagnorisis, all the tales analyzed in this article reach their climax in terms of the realization and portrayal of their true subjective nature. The climax in "William Wilson" and "Berenice" is not the moment of the murder or mutilation, but the final anagnorisis that reveals the monomania of their homodiegetic narrators as Doppelgänger and maimer, respectively. The final rescue of the narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum" is a *denouement* of his climactic despair, as he realizes that the real purpose of his torture was always eternal condemnation by inducement to commit suicide.

The subjective approach in the tales and monologues was explained above by the combination of the high-brow lyrical expression of the poet's soul with a more sensational approach to psychological deviations, such as melodramatic climax or gothic madness, in order to appeal to the interests of the contemporary popular readership. Other possible sources such as pseudoscientific discourse and the travel journal tradition have also been suggested above, but the first-person approach might also rely on a long tradition of equally successful forms that helped develop subjective narrative focus in the early Victorian period. The eighteenth-century epistolary novel (*Pamela*, 1740) and its gothic, sensationalist revision (*Justine*, 1787), the personal journal or diary, or religious meditations and confessions were widely circulated in volumes enjoying high popularity since the seventeenth century. Therefore, the technique was already well tested and developed enough to be subverted into new artistic forms and adapted to the new ways of literary consumption that Poe and Browning would explore, as I describe below.

The vertical (character) and horizontal (plot) construction of Poe's tales and Browning's monologues responds to a rhetoric of revelation and occultation that is directly related to the subjective expression and narration of the speaker's subjectivity. This reflexive exercise (partially absent from "The Oval Portrait") moves in two opposite directions of pornographic (sensational) exposure and erotic (lyrical) suggestiveness that simultaneously attract the readers' attention by seemingly satisfying their morbid interest in exposure, and requires their engagement in completing the necessary partial account of subjective perspective.<sup>5</sup>

The sensational features described above raise interest and emotion by providing immediate satisfaction of readers' morbid interest in exposure of physical sex/gore and moral deviation. However, when the climactic moment of psychological exposure is revealed to be the origin and target of literary composition, readers are forced to face the representative limitations of subjectivity that leave the texts in need of closure. Rather than exposed, the promised end of the tales and monologues are deferred by means of suggestiveness to be dialogically completed by the reader. In doing so, the pictures presented by these compositions are also reflective of the reader's own, as both overlap at the climactic end.

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Although Poe's homodiegetic narrators and Browning's monologists are built as individual characters that can be distinguished from authorial voice (as they are portrayed by their particular subjective identity), and set in a fictional context (since they address equally fictional interlocutors), their subjectivity is vague enough to leave room for ample interpretive possibilities. In the tales and monologues, the dramatic and narrative voice is in some cases genderless and often nameless or loosely located in time and space. Except for the clear cases in which these voices are explicitly made masculine (the Duke of Ferrara in "My Last Duchess", Egaeus in "Berenice", and the master of a valet in "The Oval Portrait"), their gender is determined by setting (William Wilson's school for boys and the Spanish Cloister), or the reader's expectations concerning social conventions (Porphyria's lover is masculine by heteronormative expectations). Finally, "The Pit and the Pendulum" provides no clue whatsoever for a possible readerly choice of its assumed masculinity. The Duke of Ferrara only has a title and a family name, but even that is explicitly denied to the reader by Egaeus in "Berenice". The rest of the voices analyzed in this article are nameless, with a special emphasis on the case of William Wilson, the uncertainty of whose identity is the thematic core of the tale.

The temporal frame is only precise in "The Pit and the Pendulum", with the French army entering Toledo in 1808. The action in "My Last Duchess" is only loosely set in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but largely indefinite in the rest of the tales and monologues. More concrete spatial references are provided in

“The Pit and the Pendulum” (Toledo) and “My Last Duchess” (Ferrara), but they are restricted to country in the case of “William Wilson” (England), “The Oval Portrait” (Italy), and “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”. “Berenice” and “Porphyria’s Lover” could be set anywhere. This uncertainty with respect to character and setting leaves plenty of room for reader identification, and despite the subjective, partial perspective, it conveys a certain universal projection (a mixture of dramatic pathos and lyrical universality).

The necessary (intrinsic) partiality of a subjective focus is thus reinforced in the tales and monologues by this vagueness in characterization on which plot (and character) reliability and internal coherence build. Partiality and vagueness make an unstable basis for readers to cling to as they complete textual decoding. Still, this subjective focalization is further weakened by the added unreliability of the isolated or combined effects of madness, intoxication, slumber, or torture. These deflect the otherwise straightforward, reasonable, reliable accounts of the narrative and monological voices of “William Wilson”, “Berenice”, “The Oval Portrait”, “The Pit and the Pendulum”, “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”. In the case of the Duke of Ferrara, his possible monomania about his family name as it is threatened by his wife’s suggested adultery adds to the social pressure that forces him to order his wife’s murder and hide his reasons at the same time. The otherness that is suggested as an absence in the subjective construction of character and plot of the tales and monologues is filled in by readers, who contribute to construct the absent text as they complete the gothic portrait of psychological terror.

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Also, the climactic moments of narrative or lyrical revelation in the tales and monologues are presented to the reader as thematic questions —rather than in terms of textual (dis)closure. Readers are made to wonder about the reasons behind the violent assaults on Berenice and Porphyria. They only have themselves to ask how the soliloquist of the Spanish cloister would materialize his hatred against Brother Lawrence —if he would— or if the narrator between the pit and the pendulum would have condemned his soul by jumping into the abyss rather than be slaughtered by the pendulum. Finally, readers are left to guess whether the head in the oval portrait actually moved or the duchess of Ferrara was really adulterous.

Still, the erotic suggestiveness of these texts is more masterfully achieved by textual oddities implying meanings that are not immediately obvious. The abruptness of Browning’s enjambments defers the syntactic closure of certain lines into the following lines, but syntactic deferral points outside the text as the expected modifiers of crucial lexical units are left to be supplied by readers. The duchess’s smiles to her husband and everybody else lack a reason, while her husband’s commands lack a purpose. Because of this, readers are forced to supply the quality

of her smiles and the content of his commands, which are nothing less than the thematic basis of the monologue. Even the duchess's climactic death is deflected by the comparative "*as if* she were alive" (l. 2, emphasis added) towards readers, who must provide the sensational details of her death by themselves. The vagueness of "*all*" (l. 29, emphasis added) that was in vain in "Porphyria's Lover" and the reason why its monologist should "debate[d] what to do" (l. 35), or what the syntactic connection might be between those considerations and the "thing" he found to do (ll. 37-38), equally require the reader's collaborative completion.

The very odd interjections that frame the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" ("GR-R-R—") promise a sensational disclosure at the beginning of the poem that is continuously deferred along a series of juxtaposed thematic units loosely identified with stanzas the triviality of which does not fulfill the reader's expectations. When the soliloquy involutes upon itself by closing with the same interjection, the initial promise is deflected from text to the reader's own subjective contribution. A similar device is to be found in the construction of "William Wilson", where the expected conventional reading of the sentences beginning and ending the tale is finally revealed in their literal sense as they directly appeal to readers for completion. Only when readers reach the end of the tale does the dying William Wilson ambiguously reveal that "in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself" (Poe 2002: 567). The intentionally ambiguous use of personal pronouns does not only endlessly defer the identity of their referent between subject and object (murderer and victim), but also directly appeals to readers as the interlocutors of the homodiegetic narrative voice that reflects ("see by this image, which is thine own") their own identity. Moreover, readers are not only required to engage in the mirror game with the homodiegetic narrator. In the light of this last sentence, the sentence opening the tale ("Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson") gains literal meaning in the imperative "Let" by implying that the whole narrative occurs only by this readerly concession as they engage and are caught in the composition.

But most revealing of all is the sensational use of absence by which the morbid details and moral judgments are silenced and obscured in the tales and monologues.<sup>6</sup> The narrator in "The Oval Portrait" reacts to his hurried glance at the painting by paradoxically closing his eyes to make sure his "vision had not deceived [...] [him]" (Poe 2002: 247), while the artist himself "turned his eyes from the canvas rarely" (249) so that "he *would* not see" (248-249, emphasis in original) the progressive effects of his portrait on the original as they occurred. In "The Pit and the Pendulum", darkness creates a visual void that prevents identification of the means of torture arranged for the homodiegetic narrator; and when he could finally see the object around him "[b]y a wild, sulphurous luster, the origin of what

I could not at first [nor at last] determine” (241), he “averted” (246) his eyes from the pit. The pit is not only thus obscured; it is also silenced from the text when the narrator, tottering upon the brink, replaces the prepositional phrase that would naturally follow (the brink *of the pit*) by a dash. The “mighty marvel” of transposing life from a human being into a canvas in “The Oval Portrait” is spoken of “in low words” (248) just as Berenice’s plucked teeth are not directly mentioned at the tale’s climax by Egaeus, who refers to them only riddlingly as “thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor” (586). The whole final climax of the tale is a dumb-show with a menial pointing to, rather than naming, the evidence: “He pointed to my garments; they were muddy and clotted with gore”; and then, “he took me gently by the hand: it was indented with the impress of human nails. He directed my attention to some object against the wall [...] it was a spade” (586). The teeth reveal themselves as they fall to the floor while Egaeus either “spoke not” or produced “a shriek” (586) that must be filled with meaning by readers. Finally, God’s silence (l. 60) at the end of “Porphyria’s Lover” can be taken as an ingredient of sinful agnosticism that adds to the portrait of its monologist’s sensational madness, but it can also indirectly appeal to the reader’s engagement in producing the moral judgment that neither God nor the monologist would. Be it lyrical, monological or homodiegetic in nature, the subjective approach in the tales and monologues produces a communicative void that forces the reader’s engagement in their composition following the cooperative principle in conversation.

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The double rhetoric of occultation and exposure that is found in the tales and monologues included—or might have been caused by—a Victorian anxiety for the external (readerly) reception of subjective (artistic) expression. As professional literary writers, Poe and Browning show an unprecedented concern for the effect of their compositions on readers as they tried to improve their literary taste and sought for their recognition. But their innovation would not stop there. A most impressive coincidence between these two new literary forms occurring at the same time is the inclusion of this interest as a central compositional element. Tholoniati argues that what makes the dramatic monologue “dramatic” is that “it is uttered in a critical moment for the speaker” (2011: 435), and it is precisely the climax of an absent plot that remains vaguely untold that readers must reconstruct by themselves to give the text a universal projection. The same brevity required of the tales and monologues by publishing constrictions and the satisfaction of popular demand for sensation is used for (or the direct cause of) the development of the suggestiveness, symbolism and incompleteness that must be filled by readers as they contribute to the creation of the pieces, thus adding their own subjectiveness to them, which also undoubtedly contributes to increasing —by readerly engagement— their effect.

#### 4. Coincidental Use of a Heightened Tone

In Poe's tales and Browning's monologues, the sensational traits that were obvious at the levels of theme and voice are intensified by sensational tone and degree. In their compositions, sensational detail is typically provided by "the appalling minutiae providing the *tone*; particularly modifiers, [...] [and] rhetorical devices such as hyperbole and alliteration", which are intensified in degree by the use of "exclamation points" (Sachsman and Bulla 2013: xxi, emphasis in original). In Browning's monologues, the tone is not so much set by the use of modifiers as by the use of alliteration and hyperbole. The extreme weather conditions at the beginning of "Porphyria's Lover" emphasize the unjustifiably excessive feelings of the monologist as they appear *in media res*. The duchess's light behavior (smile) is exaggerated into the suggested adultery that causes her death, just like brother Lawrence's harmless features and distractions raise the disproportionate wrath of the soliloquist in the Spanish cloister as he perceives them hyperbolically: "—Can't I see his dead eye glow/ Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?/ (That is, if he'd let it show!)" (ll. 30-32). Poe used modifiers in a clearly sensational way when the "disfigured body" of Berenice is described by a menial to her husband, who happens to be "muddy and clotted with gore" (2002: 586). Also, the narrator of "The Oval Portrait" justifies his forcible entrance into the château where he finds the lady's portrait with his "desperately wounded condition" (247). In keeping with this, the homodiegetic narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum" feels nothing less than "delirious horror" and "a most deadly nausea" (237), which can only be compared to William Wilson's "ungovernable passions" (556), "phantasmagoric pains" (557) and "brute ferocity" (567). The above-mentioned menial in "Berenice" makes a hyperbolic entrance looking "pale as the tenant of a tomb" (586), while the mere extinguishment of a few candles makes the narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" feel that "all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades" (238). Finally, "[i]n an absolute frenzy of wrath", William Wilson "felt in [...] [his] single arm the energy and power of a multitude" (567).

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Although the use of alliteration in these tales and monologues can be attributed to their lyrical quality, a certain sensational function might also be sensed when Porphyria's cheek "Blushed *bright beneath my burning kiss*" (1.48, emphasis added). But once more, Browning's monologues are not as notoriously sensational in tone as Poe's tales, where alliteration often serves sensational rather than lyrical purposes. As the French army enters Toledo at the end of "The Pit and the Pendulum", there is "a harsh grating of a *thousand thunders*" (Poe 2002: 246, emphasis added); William Wilson's later years were of "*unspeakable misery, and unpardonable crime*" (555, emphasis added); the resemblance between the model



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and the painting in the oval portrait is described as a “*mighty marvel*”; and “*Misery is manifold*” (581, emphasis added) in “Berenice”.

On his part, Poe uses exclamations for the intensification of sensational degree at the climactic moments of the tales, when the reader is to be most impressed by the tale’s effect. But he also uses them to create suspense earlier in the plot by having exclamations anticipate an intensity or degree of emotion that will actually take place only at the end. Such is the case in the fifth paragraph of “Berenice”, the second paragraph of “The Pit and the Pendulum”, or at any moment in which an atmosphere of excess is required to build up emotion on an empty basis in “William Wilson”. Finally, even though the employment of sensational tone might not be as excessive in Browning’s monologues as it is in Poe’s narrative, the monologues are obviously excessive in terms of sensational degree. Browning does not only use exclamations to signal the climax of the three monologues, he also uses rhetorical questions for the same sensational purpose in “My Last Duchess” and “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”, where swearwords and insults make up a considerable percentage of the monologue.

David Sachsman and David Bulla describe how, at the time, these “[r]hetorical devices often were critical to sensationalized content” in periodical publications. Curiously enough, they also notice that “[s]uch stories sometimes were written in a poetic manner, one in which the words almost bounced along as if written to some internal rhythm” (2013: xxiii). Thus, the repetitions that create a certain poetic rhythm in Poe’s tales might in fact answer to a sensational and not a lyrical imperative. Or perhaps the pre-eminence of emotion in lyrical poetry is comparable in intensity and perspective—if not in taste and quality—to that of sensational literature, which would explain that these two seemingly distant genres share certain textual features that would have a similar function in different literary genres. Thus, the experimental blending of the dramatic and lyrical subjective in the tales and monologues suggested above might be completed by the sensational, penny-press narrative convention of heightened tone and degree.

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### 5. Conclusion: Evidence in Coincidence

Although there is no documented evidence allowing us to ascertain that Poe and Browning actually read each other’s work before Poe’s approach to Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1845—other than Browning’s acknowledgement that Poe’s “Metzengerstein” (1832) had influenced his composition of “Childe Roland” (1855)—the fact that they published their works in countries sharing similar literary interests and markets at exactly the same time in history, together with the fact that they were acquainted with the same literary circles, suggests they might

have known each other's work. The detailed comparison of some of the works they published between 1834 and 1843 offered in this study shows evidence that Poe and Browning also shared similar literary devices, such as their concern for literary effect and dialogical engagement with readers, or the use of sensational details and a subjective approach, and so the possibility that they were acquainted with each other's work becomes plausible.

It might also be plausible that under similar personal circumstances and in the same historical context, pressed by similar critical demands and a similar publishing industry and market, both authors would have conducted literary experiments that simply achieved similar results. The need to attract the short-spanned attention of a reading public saturated with sensational excess in periodical format might have led Browning and Poe to reduce the length of their compositions from full drama to dramatic monologue and from novel to tale, employ popular sensational themes, draw on heightened tone, or have readers make the stories their own by subjectively engaging them in completing the texts' meaning.

108 But the absence of documented evidence relating their respective works during these years might also be totally intentional, since acknowledging the influence of still unsuccessful contemporaries, similarly despised by high-brow criticism at such an early stage in their respective careers, would have been quite unwise, not to say devastating for both literary egos. And yet the fact that all these coincidences should appear in texts with a similar thematic approach published or composed within the same year adds further evidence to the possibility that Poe and Browning might have known each other's work and been mutually influenced by their respective literary innovations.

## Notes

1. "The Oval Portrait" seems to have been inspired by a painting by a friend (Mabbot 1978: xxi), while "My Last Duchess" was based on Richard Henry Wilde's *Conjectures and Researches Concerning the Love, Madness, and Imprisonment of Torquato Tasso* (1842) (Monteiro 1985: 194). The sources of "Porphyria", have been identified in John Wilson's "Extracts from Groschen's Diary" (Blackwood 1818) and Bryan Procter's "Marcian Colonna" (1820) (Maxwell 1993: 27-28). A long list of contemporary magazines count among the many sources inspiring "Berenice" in "taste",

but the most widely acknowledged regarding subject matter are found in *The Baltimore Sunday Visiter* (1833) (Campbell in Forclaz 1968), and *The New York Mirror* (1833) (Forclaz 1968: 24-26). Llorente's 1817 *History of the Spanish Inquisition* (Alterton 1933: 349), and a paragraph in Dick's 1825 *Christian Philosopher* (Mabbot 1978: 680) are well documented sources of Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum", together with Charles Brocken's 1799 *Edgar Huntley*, and four other Blackwood's tales (Clark 1929: 351; Hirsch 1969: 35). The sources for "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister", however, have been found

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in much more erudite works such as Abano's *Heptameron* (Loucks 1974: 167), the Beauvais *Orientis Partibus* (Pitts 1966: 339-340), and Hone's 1823 *Ancient Mysteries Described* (Aiken 1979: 380).

2. For an extensive review of the impact that a new kind of readership had in early nineteenth-century writing, see Newlyn (2000). For a summary of the recent historicist approach to the impact of attention on narrative strategies, see Bennet (2018: 13-15).

3. Letter to Thomas W. White of April 30, 1835 (LTR-042).

4. "My companions said to me that my troubles would in some measure be relieved if I would visit the tomb of my sweetheart" (Beard 1978: 611).

5. For a comprehensive description of the psychological model within reader-response criticism, see Mailloux (1982: 19-39).

6. Although unrelated to the use of voice, such is also the case of the duchess's portrait, conveniently covered by a cloth, and Porphyria's absent look as her lover "warily oped her lids" (l. 44).

7. [C] Composition; [P] Publication.

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