In which the poem “Annabel Lee” is fit to the four humors, via some poetic tricks such as the double, travel through time, levels of meaning, and contamination. You should really memorize the poem to see how it works in the mouth, ear, and mind rather than just on the page.

YES, THE STUDY OF ART is confusing. Not because what we study is complex; it is not; it could not survive unless it were simplicity itself. The confusion comes from the fact that we are looking for and finding what was never meant to be looked for or found. The structures and devices that make art work are under the hood, in a black box, sealed with the warning “NO USER SERVICEABLE PARTS INSIDE.” There is really no need to see them in the open. Those who learn to use them do so by feel, the most reliable method. With hands beneath the covers, they palpitate, jiggle, twist, twiddle, squeeze, stroke, flick, and otherwise manipulate these magic devices until they know them as well as the back of the hand that feels them. This is the best way. To look at them destroys the mystery of their concealment and nearly kills them through overexposure.

There is an advantage in the visual shortcuts encouraged by the art idea. By seeing all at once some of the machinery of art, the “non-artist” will feel at least some amazement for the way simplicity is coupled with effectiveness. In an age where every machine breaks two days after the warranty period expires, where no highly polished German auto is immune from rust, such perfection is to be admired if not blatantly copied. Admittedly, some of the visual devices we use to translate the otherwise invisible devices of art are crude and inaccurate. They are not intended to be working blueprints but, rather, vague treasure maps showing trees and beaches that have long since vanished. The treasure, of course, is still there.

We undertake a poem for the sake of immersing ourselves in the stuff of art. After our initiation in the labyrinth of humors, elements, symptoms, narrative forms, fates, etc., this is our “first time out.” New eyes, new ears, new everything. The poem is the place to go because poems most commonly defeat the professional as well as the dogmatist. The poem waits for the ingenu(e), the earnest amateur. But, it does not tolerate laziness or a lack of curiosity. It can aid a poor nose, put corrective lens on eyes grown weak from television, cleanse the palate, and give the feet wings; but the poem cannot remedy a lack of attention or a hardened heart.

A poem has two kinds of things in it: stuff that is “about” some things; and stuff that holds the poem together. For the “about” part, use the term “representation.” For the practical function of hanging together, use “artifact.” Artifact, in general, means something that is made. Our use expands on that to cover anything that has to be made in the process of producing a work of art. Some artifacts of a painting are paint, canvas, the frame; also the structures, motifs, and conventions that go into the formation of the image. A poem’s artifacts include structure, sounds, words, colors, etc. These produce an image that gives the poem its values and meanings. We begin by thinking of representation and artifact as two separate things. It often seems as though they must be separate, in fact opposite. The artifact should be invisible, a backstage thing. Representation is the stage-show, what the audience sees and, hopefully, appreciates. That this is not always the case makes art more interesting, however. Artifact “contaminates” representation. That is, art is often “about” itself — not in the narcissistic sense but in the way in which art is already in life, and specific works of art get at that essence.

The poem to look at in our particular situation is “Annabel Lee,” by Edgar Allan Poe. It is 41 lines (six verses) worth of wonder. “Wonder” is in this case also “wander,” for the essence of a poem or any work of art is movement — in particular, “displacement.” The poem doesn’t so much communicate ideas to us as it displaces our thought from its ordinary hang-outs onto universal substances shared by generations of humans, readers, poets.
Annabel Lee

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee;
With a love that the winged seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsman came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me—
Yes! that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in Heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

Of Edgar Poe there is much to be said, but
not here. He was a poet and critic of the first water. He was idolized by at least a generation of French poets who saw in his criticism and verse the basis for the symboliste movement. He came along just when European Romanticism was getting watered down into sentimental trash. Before this happened, Romanticism, as it was envisioned by top-notch figures such as Goethe, was a means of escaping Classical formalism, of forming a bond between man and nature made out of art. By this time, humans were in need of some kind of bond, having burned so many bridges as they did through industrial devastation, population displacement, national revolutions, a few famines, and colonialism. Nature was close to being a memory. Romanticism promised two things: a new contract, and personal relationships. The new contract was “the sublime,” an esthetic idea revived from an ancient source known as “pseudo-Longinus” and dusted off by Samuel Burke and Immanuel Kant — no small fry. The sublime embraced the ugly along with the beautiful, the immense along with the modestly formed. It was the perfect esthetic for an expanding and often frightening world, a world more fascinated with death and spirits than traditional theological concepts.

Add to this brew the United States’ contribution to the sublime, the War Between the States. Here, we enterprising New Worlders invented a form of warfare that multiplied firepower exponentially and computed death in megatons. The human spirit could barely hold up against such horror, and to some extent Romanticism had to pull its metaphors of the sublime back into the garage for new protective coatings. Poe’s “retreat” was an estheticism of cleverness and pure poetry. His poems are less about “subjects” of common concern than they are generators of effects. Who can forget the onomatopoeia of “The Bells” or the black catastrophe of the short story “The Mask of the Red Death.” For Poe, horror was the last surviving bit of the human soul in the face of increased mechanization of everything else. He held on to it for, lacking any escape into the beautiful, horror was the only choice.

He was not unlucky in this strategy. Pure horror is a simple and not necessarily poetic reaction. Poetry displaces horror into the genre known as “the Fantastic.” Here, fiction constructs a balance-point between known reality and the
uncanny, the unreal. Without being told which is the correct answer, the audience is put in the position of acknowledging “alternative realities.” Just what these might constitute is as mundane or sophisticated as the audience. At the simplest level, it is the “supernatural,” the spook story. As the audience is educated to the genre, spooks are traded for other entities that are even more wondrous in that they hold up to intellectual skepticism.

Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee” seems to be pitched to the audience’s lowest common denominator. It has blatant sentimentality (boy loses girl), cheap rhythmic and rhymic effects, and enough clichés per square inch to satisfy Hallmark Cards. This fluff has an important practical function. It “gets rid of” the meddling of the mindless crowd, like hamburger thrown to a guard-dog. Once we indulge our appetite for sop, we can move on into the more interesting depths of this poem.

What depths? Isn’t this just a simple ditty? Yes and no. The “no” has to do with the function of artifact in the structure of representation. Our idea of the poem is the story of love, loss, and a macabre reunion in the tomb. The artifact is, however, made up of sounds. If we look closely, we can see how the poem moves from the brain to the mouth. Poems are usually made to reside in the ear. This poem is designed for the ear, to be sure, but the mouth is its real goal. It wants to live in the mouths of the audience, our mouths.

the parasite

Think of the hidden meaning in the word “parasite.” The most traditional meaning has to do with Poe as a poet and, hence, a professional parasite. The meaning hidden beneath this is that the poem is a “site” that occupies a space “beside” (para) our normal human scene, as does all fiction. The story format, “It was many and many a year ago” (Line 1), has the same effect on adults as “Once upon a time” does on children. It gets us to relax. It takes us to a place where stuff really doesn’t matter. It takes us to the hidden meaning of “parasite,” a place beside. Where are we when we read this or any poem? Both “here” and “not here.”

As if to confirm the hidden meaning, Poe constructs a literal site that is also beside something: a kingdom by the sea. At this edge of things there are all the primary elements: air, earth, fire, and water, brought into their edge-like (“liminal”) states. There are two people, two children, who are on the edge of being adults. Brought by passion to another parasite, the world in which lovers live, which admits no outsiders. There are other para-sites that don’t depend on any interpretations from us, however. Not only is the kingdom by the sea, there are things that, naturally paired, exist side by side, such as two lovers, rivals (the lovers and the angels in Heaven), and the final act of necrophilia where the author lies down by the corpse of his ne’er-to-be bride.

Are these all of the para-sites? Actually, Poe is just getting warmed up. These are the ones you can spot with your intellect; the others have to be found using the mouth and the ear, with the memory engaged. These are the pairs of things made by sounds, repetition, rhythms, and echoes. They belong together, in a side-by-side relationship, but they are often scattered. When we gather them up with our ears and mouths, the poem becomes something quite different.

Repetition is a common poetic device, one that would seem barely worth mentioning. Putting it simply, repetition enables a poet to make a poem longer without inventing more. Actually, repetition once served oral poets by providing the essential “mnemonic” crutches to enable them to recite very long poems from memory. This has been called “redundancy.” The great oral poems, such as the Iliad, are very redundant. That is, phrases can be found over and over again, such as “the wine-dark sea” and “Dawn’s rosy fingers.” The poetic attitude is, if it works, don’t
throw it away after one use.

In the age of poetry that is written down to be read and hardly ever memorized, repetition would seem like an obsolete device. Hah hah. Not so fast. Repetition has a SECRET EFFECT on the brain. Neuropsychology has determined that certain repeated patterns actually stimulate production of chemicals in the brain that call for more. Unfortunately, we experience this typically as the phenomenon of “getting a tune stuck in the head.” Usually, it’s not a tune we like. Think of this. If repetition can get us to preserve absolute drivel that we consciously hate, what could it do if it was used with “good stuff”? Yes, poets have known about this for centuries. They slip in a repetition or two, and the audience turns into mental dope fiends. Then they buy electric guitars and turn up the volume . . .

surpluses in annabel lee

How does Poe do it, in a historical period before the electric guitar? There are three distinctive kinds of repetition in “Annabel Lee.” First, words, phrases, and whole lines of poetry are literally repeated. “In a/this kingdom by the sea” occurs five times, and there are faint echoes of it beyond this. “Annabel Lee” appears as “my Annabel Lee,” “The beautiful Annabel Lee,” and transformed as “my darling,” “my life,” and “my bride” towards the end.

Other words and lines are repeated. There is the famous “back-up” sequence where, in line 21, Poe presents the same evidence that occurs in lines 11-16, line for line. The only difference seems to be that, while it was not completely clear whether Annabel had died or just gone away, the second time around we get the death certificate (line 26).

In addition to these repetitions, there are many twins and pairs formed out of meanings and images. The angels in heaven above join forces with the demons down under the sea (line 31) to create an axis running through Annabel’s sea-side sepulchre. In the cross created by these lines are two souls joined forever, the writer’s and Annabel’s. Some words are borderline terms by themselves, suggesting two joined things. Annabel is a “bride,” joining the maidenhood of line 3 with the married life of line 39. Bride rhymes with “tide,” another borderline term appropriate to this setting. In this case, the tide ushers in night rather than water, but the sense of the ordinary tide is present, if subtly, in the surname, “Lee.” A lee is both a shelter, a direction, and a sediment. The lee-side of an island is that sheltered from the wind. The wind blows a boat in a lee-ward direction, and the lee-shore is the shore the boat may crash on if the pilot does not make “lee-way” by steering the boat slightly into the wind or use a “lee-board” that corrects for this motion automatically. The lees of wine or cider bring, however, an unpleasant connotation which comes up automatically if we think of the human corpse and the processes of decomposition. Somewhat more pleasant, because erotic, is the meaning of “lee” as an un-plowed but arable field.

Words are naturally doubles when they combine meanings acquired at different times of their history (etymology). When a single word’s multiple meanings form opposites, or related pairs, poets perk up their ears. “Cleave” and “cleave” (not actually the same word but homonyms) mean the opposite. When history doesn’t provide a steady supply of these, poets invent. James Joyce’s favorite was “twone,” which sounds both like “twin” and the composite of two and one, joined at the ‘o’. Simultaneous meanings force the reader to imagine layers rather than try to resolve the problem in favor of one meaning or another. Single words need not do all of the work, rhyming words can, by their marriage, bring together the Capulet and Montague worlds from which they come. “Beams” and “brings” get hitched and, in so doing, couple the Moon Family and the Dream Family. “Rise” falls for “eyes” and joins the stars with the bright, though dead, Annabel. The triple rhyme, tide-side-bride, are all images of the limit, the threshold. We are given a complex monster: love, death, tomb, womb.

I pointed out earlier that the most bizarre parasite of the poem, perhaps, occurs when Poe backs up the action at line 21. Lines 21 through 26 virtually repeat what was said in 11-16. If we draw this out, we see that the “time” of the reading of the poem can be diagrammed as a ‘Z’ of sorts. The meter of the poem, anapestic tetrameter (“But our love / it was stron / ger by far / than the love” is a perfect line) is, ceteris paribus (all things being equal), a waltz. Although ballroom dancing is pursued seriously only in Great Britain, some of you may have seen the diagram for the waltz-step. The left foot steps forward, the right foot moves out, the left foot slides to join it. Then the action is reversed, with the right foot stepping back. Always, the sliding foot “catches up with” the foot that steps out to the side. The repeat of 11-16 “slides up to” line 27. The forward motion of the beginning of the poem is then echoed by a backward motion leading to the sepulchre.

So, the three-part rhythm of each line is mirrored in (married to?) the three parts of the poem: the opening where the lovers attract the jealousy of
Heaven and are punished; the “forensic” account of that punishment (“Yes! that was the reason . . .”); and the final reunion beyond (but actually in) the grave. Each of the three parts has its own “time” that structures expectations, events, and the sense (or lack of it) of reality. The first part is “venatic” in our terms. A lusting couple attracts pursuers (angels) who come out of clouds with some deadly virus, most likely tuberculosis at this time. The romance is followed by separation which at first seems not necessarily to involve death (“her highborn kinsmen came / And bore her away from me”). The “sepulchre” could, at this point, be just a figure of speech.

At the crosspiece of the ‘Z’, we discover the worst: that Annabel is indeed dead. The evidence of cause-and-effect is put forward forensically, as in a courtroom. Forensic evidence “goes back” (like a ‘z’) to the scene of the crime. It sorts out reasons, motives, facts. Annabel was not only chilled (optimistic verb choice), she was killed. The final “time” of the third part is “festal” in a macabre and poetically intensive sense. We would think there is nothing to celebrate, but in fact the image we have is of Annabel Lee’s assimilation by the cosmos. The moon brings dreams of her. The stars are her eyes. The night permits what day would not allow: the hoped-for wedding. Life and death are joined in the erotic/horrible image of the author spending time in the tomb next to the corpse: the ultimate para-site! But, of course this is only a poetic image. There is no real person doing this, but a poetic person who, through and only through art, has transcended death.

As bizarre as the theme of necrophilia might be to us, the festal effect of the final segment does the impossible. It gets us to accept beauty as an experience, rather than an idea. The festival happens inside the mouth, inside the ear, rather than inside the brain. It’s not enough to just listen, one has to pronounce this poem, preferably by heart. “And neither the angels in Heaven above / Nor the demons down under the sea / Can ever dissever my soul from the soul / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.” What a scope is contained in these redundant sounds! Angels/demons! Heaven/undersea! Ever/dissever! Soul/soul! This is the stuff of gospel church services, such as the one that white folks only may have seen in the movie, The Blues Brothers. Festal is more festal when the conditions for it seem impossible. Your proper but snippy and jaded sensibility says “yech!” but your mouth says “wow!” That’s poetry.

The value of this poem goes beyond the value of its reading, which is at the least open-ended, self-revising, and, in general, miraculous. As practicing arch-critics, we can see how it contains in miniature the essence of art’s ability to displace meaning, to layer it, to create surplus meanings and manage them, to incorporate three forms of time, and to use subtle tricks to do end-runs around the conscious objections of any in the audience who happen to be dumb as sticks.