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Poe, E.: Near A Raven

(...)

The poem below, which bears an uncanny similarity to a certain famous poem by Edgar Allen Poe, is one of my recent (and challenging) attempts at constrained writing. Constrained writing is the art of constructing a work of prose or poetry that obeys some artificially-imposed condition. For example, there are two published novels from which the letter 'e' is absent - Gadsby, by Ernest Vincent Wright (1938), and La Disparition by George Perec (still in print, and even available in a very recent English translation (A Void, translated by Gilbert Adair) that also obeys the constraint!).

Poe, E.
Near A Raven

Midnights so dreary, tired and weary.
Silently pondering volumes extolling all by-now obsolete lore.
During my rather long nap - the weirdest tap!
An ominous vibrating sound disturbing my chamber's antedoor.
"This", I whispered quietly, "I ignore".

Perfectly, the intellect remembers: the ghostly fires, a glittering ember.
Inflamed by lightning's outbursts, windows cast penumbras upon this floor.

Sorrowful, as one mistreated, unhappy thoughts I heeded:
That inimitable lesson in elegance - Lenore -
Is delighting, exciting...nevermore.

Ominously, curtains parted (my serenity outsmarted),
And fear overcame my being - the fear of "forevermore".
Fearful foreboding abided, selfish sentiment confided,
As I said, "Methinks mysterious traveler knocks afore.
A man is visiting, of age threescore."

Taking little time, briskly addressing something: "Sir," (robustly)

"Tell what source originates clamorous noise afore?
Disturbing sleep unkindly, is it you a-tapping, so slyly?
Why, devil incarnate!--" Here completely unveiled I my antedoor--
Just darkness, I ascertained - nothing more.

While surrounded by darkness then, I persevered to clearly comprehend.
I perceived the weirdest dream...of everlasting "nevermores".
Quite, quite, quick nocturnal doubts fled - such relief! - as my intellect said,
(Desiring, imagining still) that perchance the apparition was uttering a
whispered "Lenore".
This only, as evermore.

Silently, I reinforced, remaining anxious, quite scared, afraid,
While intrusive tap did then come thrice - O, so stronger than sounded afore.
"Surely" (said silently) "it was the banging, clanging window lattice."
Glancing out, I quaked, upset by horrors hereinbefore,
Perceiving: a "nevermore".

Completely disturbed, I said, "Utter, please, what prevails ahead.
Repose, relief, cessation, or but more dreary 'nevermores'?"
The bird intruded thence - O, irritation ever since! -
Then sat on Pallas' pallid bust, watching me (I sat not, therefore),
And stated "nevermores".

Bemused by raven's dissonance, my soul exclaimed, "I seek intelligence;
Explain thy purpose, or soon cease intoning forlorn 'nevermores'!"
"Nevermores", winged corvus proclaimed - thusly was a raven named?
Actually maintain a surname, upon Pluvius seashore?
I heard an oppressive "nevermore".

My sentiments extremely pained, to perceive an utterance so plain,
Most interested, mystified, a meaning I hoped for.
"Surely," said the raven's watcher, "separate discourse is wiser.
Therefore, liberation I'll obtain, retreating heretofore -
Eliminating all the 'nevermores' ".

Still, the detestable raven just remained, unmoving, on sculptured bust.
Always saying "never" (by a red chamber's door).
A poor, tender heartache maven - a sorrowful bird - a raven!
O, I wished thoroughly, forthwith, that he'd fly heretofore.
Still sitting, he recited "nevermores".

The raven's dirge induced alarm - "nevermore" quite wearisome.
I meditated: "Might its utterances summarize of a calamity before?"
O, a sadness was manifest - a sorrowful cry of unrest;
"O," I thought sincerely, "it's a melancholy great - furthermore,

Removing doubt, this explains 'nevermores' ".

Seizing just that moment to sit - closely, carefully, advancing beside it,
Sinking down, intrigued, where velvet cushion lay afore.
A creature, midnight-black, watched there - it studied my soul, unawares.
Wherefore, explanations my insight entreated for.
Silently, I pondered the "nevermores".

"Disentangle, nefarious bird! Disengage - I am disturbed!"
Intently its eye burned, raising the cry within my core.
"That delectable Lenore - whose velvet pillow this was, heretofore,
Departed thence, unsettling my consciousness therefore.
She's returning - that maiden - aye, nevermore."

Since, to me, that thought was madness, I renounced continuing sadness.
Continuing on, I soundly, adamantly forswore:
"Wretch," (addressing blackbird only) "fly swiftly - emancipate me!"
"Respite, respite, detestable raven - and discharge me, I implore!"
A ghostly answer of: "nevermore".

" 'Tis a prophet? Wraith? Strange devil? Or the ultimate evil?"
"Answer, tempter-sent creature!", I inquired, like before.
"Forlorn, though firmly undaunted, with 'nevermores' quite indoctrinated,
Is everything depressing, generating great sorrow evermore?
I am subdued!", I then swore.

In answer, the raven turned - relentless distress it spurned.
"Comfort, surcease, quiet, silence!" - pleaded I for.
"Will my (abusive raven!) sorrows persist unabated?
Nevermore Lenore respondeth?", adamantly I encored.
The appeal was ignored.

"O, satanic inferno's denizen -- go!", I said boldly, standing then.
"Take henceforth loathsome "nevermores" - O, to an ugly Plutonian shore!
Let nary one expression, O bird, remain still here, replacing mirth.
Promptly leave and retreat!", I resolutely swore.
Blackbird's riposte: "nevermore".

So he sitteth, observing always, perching ominously on these doorways.
Squatting on the stony bust so untroubled, O therefore.
Suffering stark raven's conversings, so I am condemned, subserving,
To a nightmare cursed, containing miseries galore.
Thus henceforth, I'll rise (from a darkness, a grave) -- nevermore!

-- Original: E. Poe

-- Redone by measuring circles.

Solution:

Despite the rather difficult constraint (to be revealed shortly), observe how this revised version of "The Raven" duplicates the story, tone, and rhyme scheme of the original fairly closely (including the internal rhymes in the first and third line of each stanza). The only major concession to the form is that the original has six lines per stanza, with the fourth and fifth lines usually being very similar. Due to the nature of the constraint I imposed (revealed in the next paragraph), this would have been nearly impossible to do. Therefore, this version eliminates the similar line in each stanza.

Give up? Hint: Start at the very beginning (with the word 'Poe') and write next to each word the number of letters it contains. Put a decimal point after the first digit. Look at the first few digits (or more if, like me, you know the first several hundred by heart). Are you impressed yet?

Even given the rather difficult constraint, I was able to match the original very closely in spots. The very first line, although its meter is wrong, is surprisingly close. Others which are very close, even to the point of using many of the same words, are stanza 4 line 5, stanza 6 line 3, stanza 7 line 4, and stanza 15, line 1.

Note the use of the term "blackbird" a couple of times. Though not, strictly speaking, correct (a raven is a black bird, not a blackbird), the term is particularly appropriate. It is a subtle reference to George Perec's *La Disparition*, which contains another written-with-constraints version of "The Raven" - in this case the constraint being "write it in French without using the letter 'e'". In the English translation of *La Disparition* by Gilbert Adair, the poem is faithfully translated into English, also without using letter 'e'. The English version of the poem is titled (wait for it...) *Black Bird!*

The poem encodes the first 740 decimals of pi. The encoding rule is this: a word of N letters represents the digit N if $N < 9$, the digit 0 if $N = 10$, and two adjacent digits if $N > 10$ (e.g., a 12-letter word represents the digit '1' followed by '2').

(...)

I believe that "Near a Raven" establishes the world record for length

of a pi mnemonic. I would be glad to hear of other wordy attempts, either in prose or poetry. Perhaps someone would like to attempt a short story or a novel?!

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