CHARLES DICKENS, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of Barnaby Rudge, says—“By the way, are you aware that Godwin wrote his Caleb Williams backwards? He first involved his hero in a web of difficulties, forming the second volume, and then, for the first, cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done.”

I cannot think this the precise mode of procedure on the part of Godwin—and indeed what he himself acknowledges, is not altogether in accordance with Mr. Dickens’ idea—but the author of Caleb Williams was too good an artist not to perceive the advantage derivable from at least a somewhat similar process. Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis—or one is suggested by an incident of the day—or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative—designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or autorial comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent.

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. Keeping originality always in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place, “Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?” Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone—whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone—afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would—that is to say, who could—detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say—but, perhaps, the autorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause. Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in
despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock’s feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary histrio.

I am aware, on the other hand, that the case is by no means common, in which an author is at all in condition to retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained. In general, suggestions, having arisen pell-mell, are pursued and forgotten in a similar manner.

For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor, at any time, the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions; and, since the interest of an analysis, or reconstruction, such as I have considered a desideratum, is quite independent of any real or fancied interest in the thing analyzed, it will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the modus operandi by which some one of my own works was put together. I select “The Raven,” as the most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.

Let us dismiss, as irrelevant to the poem, per se, the circumstance—or say the necessity—which, in the first place, gave rise to the intention of composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.

We commence, then, with this intention.

The initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. But since, ceteris paribus, no poet can afford to dispense with anything that may advance his design, it but remains to be seen whether there is, in extent, any advantage to counterbalance the loss of unity which attends it. Here I say no, at once. What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief. For this reason, at least one-half of the Paradise Lost is essentially prose—a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, inevitably, with corresponding depressions—the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity, of effect.

It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting—and that, although in certain classes of prose composition, such as Robinson Crusoe, (demanding no unity,) this limit may be advantageously overpassed, it can never properly be overpassed in a poem. Within this limit, the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit—in other words, to the excitement or elevation—again in other words, to the degree of the
true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be
in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect:—this, with one proviso—that a
certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all.

Holding in view these considerations, as well as that degree of excitement which I
deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste, I reached at once what
I conceived the proper length for my intended poem—a length of about one hundred
lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight.

My next thought concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed: and
here I may as well observe that, throughout the construction, I kept steadily in view the
design of rendering the work universally appreciable. I should be carried too far out of
my immediate topic were I to demonstrate a point upon which I have repeatedly
insisted, and which, with the poetical, stands not in the slightest need of
demonstration—the point, I mean, that Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the
poem. A few words, however, in elucidation of my real meaning, which some of my
friends have evinced a disposition to misrepresent. That pleasure which is at once the
most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the
contemplation of the beautiful. When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean,
precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect—they refer, in short, just to that
intense and pure elevation of soul—not of intellect, or of heart—upon which I have
commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating “the beautiful.”
Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious
rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes—that objects should
be attained through means best adapted for their attainment—no one as yet having been
weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation alluded to is most readily attained in the
poem. Now the object, Truth, or the satisfaction of the intellect, and the object Passion,
or the excitement of the heart, are, although attainable, to a certain extent, in poetry, far
more readily attainable in prose. Truth, in fact, demands a precision, and Passion, a
homeliness (the truly passionate will comprehend me) which are absolutely antagonistic
to that Beauty which, I maintain, is the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul.
It by no means follows from anything here said, that passion, or even truth, may not be
introduced, and even profitably introduced, into a poem—for they may serve in
elucidation, or aid the general effect, as do discords in music, by contrast—but the true
artist will always contrive, first, to tone them into proper subservience to the
predominant aim, and, secondly, to enveil them, as far as possible, in that Beauty which
is the atmosphere and the essence of the poem.

Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the tone of its
highest manifestation—and all experience has shown that this tone is one of sadness.
Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive
soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.

The length, the province, and the tone, being thus determined, I betook myself to
ordinary induction, with the view of obtaining some artistic piquancy which might serve
me as a key-note in the construction of the poem—some pivot upon which the whole
structure might turn. In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects—or more
properly points, in the theatrical sense—I did not fail to perceive immediately that no
one had been so universally employed as that of the refrain. The universality of its employment sufficed to assure me of its intrinsic value, and spared me the necessity of submitting it to analysis. I considered it, however, with regard to its susceptibility of improvement, and soon saw it to be in a primitive condition. As commonly used, the refrain, or burden, not only is limited to lyric verse, but depends for its impression upon the force of monotone—both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity—of repetition. I resolved to diversify, and so vastly heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of the application of the refrain—the refrain itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried.

These points being settled, I next bethought me of the nature of my refrain. Since its application was to be repeatedly varied, it was clear that the refrain itself must be brief, for there would have been an insurmountable difficulty in frequent variations of application in any sentence of length. In proportion to the brevity of the sentence, would, of course, be the facility of the variation. This led me at once to a single word as the best refrain.

The question now arose as to the character of the word. Having made up my mind to a refrain, the division of the poem into stanzas was, of course, a corollary: the refrain forming the close to each stanza. That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt: and these considerations inevitably led me to the long o as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with r as the most producible consonant.

The sound of the refrain being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem. In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word “Nevermore.” In fact, it was the very first which presented itself.

The next desideratum was a pretext for the continuous use of the one word “nevermore.” In observing the difficulty which I at once found in inventing a sufficiently plausible reason for its continuous repetition, I did not fail to perceive that this difficulty arose solely from the pre-assumption that the word was to be so continuously or monotonously spoken by a human being—I did not fail to perceive, in short, that the difficulty lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word. Here, then, immediately arose the idea of a non-reasoning creature capable of speech; and, very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone.

I had now gone so far as the conception of a Raven—the bird of ill omen—monotonously repeating the one word, “Nevermore,” at the conclusion of each stanza, in a poem of melancholy tone, and in length about one hundred lines. Now, never losing sight of the object supremeness, or perfection, at all points, I asked myself—“Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?” Death—was the obvious reply. “And when,” I said, “is this most
melancholy of topics most poetical?” From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious—“When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—equally is beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.”

I had now to combine the two ideas, of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word “Nevermore”—I had to combine these, bearing in mind my design of varying, at every turn, the _application_ of the word repeated; but the only intelligible mode of such combination is that of imagining the Raven employing the word in answer to the queries of the lover. And here it was that I saw at once the opportunity afforded for the effect on which I had been depending—that is to say, the effect of the _variation of application_. I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover—the first query to which the Raven should reply “Nevermore”—that I could make this first query a commonplace one—the second less so—the third still less, and so on—until at length the lover, startled from his original _nonchalance_ by the melancholy character of the word itself—by its frequent repetition—and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it—is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character—pounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture—propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a frenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the _expected_ “Nevermore” the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrow. Perceiving the opportunity thus afforded me—or, more strictly, thus forced upon me in the progress of the construction—I first established in mind the climax, or concluding query—that to which “Nevermore” should be in the last place an answer—that in reply to which this word “Nevermore” should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair.

Here then the poem may be said to have its beginning—at the end, where all works of art should begin—for it was here, at this point of my preconsiderations, that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza:

“‘Prophet,’ said I, ‘thing of evil! prophet still if bird or devil!

By that heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore,

Tell this soul sorrow laden, if within the distant Aidenn,

It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—

Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.’

Quoth the raven ‘Nevermore.”’

I composed this stanza, at this point, first that, by establishing the climax, I might the better vary and graduate, as regards seriousness and importance, the preceding queries of the lover—and, secondly, that I might definitely settle the rhythm, the meter, and the
length and general arrangement of the stanza—as well as graduate the stanzas which
were to precede, so that none of them might surpass this in rhythmical effect. Had I been
able, in the subsequent composition, to construct more vigorous stanzas, I should,
without scruple, have purposely enfeebled them, so as not to interfere with the
climacteric effect.

And here I may as well say a few words of the versification. My first object (as usual)
was originality. The extent to which this has been neglected, in versification, is one of
the most unaccountable things in the world. Admitting that there is little possibility of
variety in mere rhythm, it is still clear that the possible varieties of meter and stanza are
absolutely infinite—and yet, for centuries, no man, in verse, has ever done, or ever
seemed to think of doing, an original thing. The fact is, originality (unless in minds of
very unusual force) is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition. In
general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought, and although a positive merit of the
highest class, demands in its attainment less of invention than negation.

Of course, I pretend to no originality in either the rhythm or meter of the “Raven.” The
former is trochaic—the latter is octameter acatalectic, alternating with heptameter
catalectic repeated in the refrain of the fifth verse, and terminating with tetrameter
catalectic. Less pedantically—the feet employed throughout (trochees) consist of a long
syllable followed by a short: the first line of the stanza consists of eight of these feet—
the second of seven and a half (in effect two-thirds)—the third of eight—the fourth of
seven and a half—the fifth the same—the sixth three and a half. Now, each of these
lines, taken individually, has been employed before, and what originality the “Raven”
has, is in their combination into stanza; nothing even remotely approaching this
combination has ever been attempted. The effect of this originality of combination is
aided by other unusual, and some altogether novel effects, arising from an extension of
the application of the principles of rhyme and alliteration.

The next point to be considered was the mode of bringing together the lover and the
Raven—and the first branch of this consideration was the locale. For this the most
natural suggestion might seem to be a forest, or the fields—but it has always appeared to
me that a close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated
incident:—it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in
keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere
unity of place.

I determined, then, to place the lover in his chamber—in a chamber rendered sacred to
him by memories of her who had frequented it. The room is represented as richly
furnished—this in mere pursuance of the ideas I have already explained on the subject
of Beauty, as the sole true poetical thesis.

The locale being thus determined, I had now to introduce the bird—and the thought of
introducing him through the window, was inevitable. The idea of making the lover
suppose, in the first instance, that the flapping of the wings of the bird against the
shutter, is a “tapping” at the door, originated in a wish to increase, by prolonging, the
reader’s curiosity, and in a desire to admit the incidental effect arising from the lover’s
throwing open the door, finding all dark, and thence adopting the half-fancy that it was
the spirit of his mistress that knocked.
I made the night tempestuous, first, to account for the Raven’s seeking admission, and secondly, for the effect of contrast with the (physical) serenity within the chamber.

I made the bird alight on the bust of Pallas, also for the effect of contrast between the marble and the plumage—it being understood that the bust was absolutely suggested by the bird—the bust of Pallas being chosen, first, as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and, secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, Pallas, itself.

About the middle of the poem, also, I have availed myself of the force of contrast, with a view of deepening the ultimate impression. For example, an air of the fantastic—approaching as nearly to the ludicrous as was admissible—is given to the Raven’s entrance. He comes in “with many a flirt and flutter.”

“No the lease obeisance made he—not a moment stopped or stayed he,
But with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door.”

In the two stanzas which follow, the design is more obviously carried out:—

“Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
‘Though thy crest be shorn and shaven thou,’ I said, ‘art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the nightly shore—
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!’

Quoth the Raven ‘Nevermore.’

“Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being

Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—

Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,

With such name as ‘Nevermore.’”

The effect of the dénouement being thus provided for, I immediately drop the fantastic for a tone of the most profound seriousness:—this tone commencing in the stanza directly following the one last quoted, with the line,

“But the Raven, sitting lonely on that placid bust, spoke only,” etc.

From this epoch the lover no longer jests—no longer sees anything even of the fantastic in the Raven’s demeanor. He speaks of him as a “grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of vore,” and feels the “fiery eyes” burning into his “bosom’s
core.” This revolution of thought, or fancy, on the lover’s part, is intended to induce a similar one on the part of the reader—to bring the mind into a proper frame for the dénouement—which is now brought about as rapidly and as directly as possible.

With the dénouement proper—with the Raven’s reply, “Nevermore,” to the lover’s final demand if he shall meet his mistress in another world—the poem, in its obvious phase, that of a simple narrative, may be said to have its completion. So far, everything is within the limits of the accountable—of the real. A raven, having learned by rote the single word “Nevermore,” and having escaped from the custody of its owner, is driven at midnight, through the violence of a storm, to seek admission at a window from which a light still gleams—the chamber-window of a student, occupied half in poring over a volume, half in dreaming of a beloved mistress deceased. The casement being thrown open at the fluttering of the bird’s wings, the bird itself perches on the most convenient seat out of the immediate reach of the student, who, amused by the incident and the oddity of the visitor’s demeanor, demands of it, in jest and without looking for a reply, its name. The raven addressed, answers with its customary word, “Nevermore”—a world which finds immediate echo in the melancholy heart of the student, who, giving utterance aloud to certain thoughts suggested by the occasion, is again startled by the fowl’s repetition of “Nevermore.” The student now guesses the state of the case, but is impelled, as I have before explained, by the human thirst for self-torture, and in part by superstition, to propound such queries to the bird as will bring him, the lover, the most of the luxury of sorrow, through the anticipated answer “Nevermore.” With the indulgence, to the utmost extreme, of this self-torture, the narration, in what I have termed its first or obvious phase, has a natural termination, and so far there has been no overstepping of the limits of the real.

But in subjects so handled, however skilfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistical eye. Two things are invariably required—first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness—some undercurrent, however indefinite, of meaning. It is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that richness (to borrow from colloquy a forcible term) which we are too fond of confounding with the ideal. It is the excess of the suggested meaning—it is the rendering this the upper instead of the under current of the theme—which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so-called poetry of the so-called transcendentalists.

Holding these opinions, I added the two concluding stanzas of the poem—their suggestiveness being thus made to pervade all the narrative which has preceded them. The undercurrent of meaning is rendered first apparent in the lines—

“Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”

Quoth the Raven ‘Nevermore!’ ”

It will be observed that the words, “from out my heart,” involve the first metaphorical expression in the poem. They, with the answer, “Nevermore,” dispose the mind to seek a moral in all that has been previously narrated. The reader begins now to regard the Raven as emblematical—but it is not until the very last line of the very last stanza, that
the intention of making him emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* is permitted distinctly to be seen:

“And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting,
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
And the lamplight o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul *from out that shadow* that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore.”