RE(-)MEMBERING WOMEN IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S (PRE)RATIONATIVE FICTION

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Abstract: *The present study proceeds in completion of a distinctive Poesque representation of womanhood, expanding the critical concern for the languish dark ladies of the Gothic stories, already departing from the diaphanous muses of the poems, towards the feminine victims, exposed in their posthumous decaying physicality, in the tales of ratiocination. In an attempt to explore the detective triad as illustrative of Poe's ambivalence towards women and as addressing with rational means what is considered by the American author to be the most poetical topic in the world (Poe, 1846: 165), the mystique of the feminine characters will be subsumed to the controlled formulation of "the mystery with a repeatable solution" (Irwin, 1994: 2). Throughout these detective accounts, Poe's fictional ways of re(-)membering women become strategies of coping with telling absences under – and despite of – requirements of privacy that condition the domestic space, forensic lenses applied to a grotesquely fragmented physicality lending itself to psychoanalytical interpretations, narratives blurring the lines of a feminine profile, unfolded between the private and the public, between journalistic factuality and crime fiction.*

Keywords: *women, detective fiction, Poe.*

Detective fiction's treatment of death has got a resuscitative effect. It being more often than not a fictional matter of life and death indicates not only a signifying preference for murder over other types of crime, hence the catchy death-detection formula, but also an insistent interrogation of the ultimate conundrum of human existence, death, often and tellingly articulated around the figure of the life-giver, the woman, which supports on a metafictional level the genre's defence of literariness. This thematic focus goes against persistent beliefs that "Poe never truly wrote about women at all, writing instead about a female object and ignoring dimensions of character that add depth or believability to these repeated stereotypes of the beautiful damsel" (Weekes, 2002: 150). Without necessarily subscribing to the theories about a feminist Poe either, one cannot ignore the decisive positioning of his female characters. The more specific treatment of "the death of a beautiful woman" under violent circumstances allows reframing the stories around issues of reproductibility, patriarchal control, persistence of the memory of a meaningful (in more than one way marked) other as pretext, but more importantly as *post-text*, for narration, as the author of death – that is, of the murder - overcomes the author of life in a lethal conquering act.

It is yet to be established if Poe's female characters remain simply "a receptacle for their narrator's angst and guilt, a *tabula rasa* on which the lover inscribes his own needs" (Weekes, 204: 150 or an "emotional catalyst for her partner"(Weekes, op. cit., 148). All the more so as they constitute elements of continuity throughout the American writer's eclectic work. The dark ladies anticipate the victims in the detective tales, through passivity, objectification, their rebounding fate, and untimely deaths. The forerunning characters in focus for the time given are Berenice, Morella, and Ligeia, figments of memory ideally reconstructed along the narrator's confessional drive.

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Three Precedents of Feminine Darkness

Thematically, Ligeia complies with the narrative recipe of "the death of a beautiful woman". It is the story of a mysterious raven-haired woman, as narrated by yet another one of Poe's untrustworthy narrators, a selectively forgetful husband obsessed with her idealized memory, mourning in admiration for her beauty and superior intellect. Applying a detective reading grid, the supernatural mystery turns into a psychological one, in which the reliability of a biased witness/suspect is questioned, a hasty substitution with another woman aggravates the circumstances of death, the feminine mystery lurks in the vagueness of a lover's remembrance, and the management of the fantastic element is carefully calibrated to the very end, in an "anticlosure". As Heller notices, "Ligeia withholds the full development of the fantastic enigma until virtually its last sentence. When the revivified corpse of Rowena is apparently transformed into Ligeia, all of the preceding narrative becomes new" (Heller, 2002). This strategy, meant to trigger retrospective reconsiderations upon facts, accounts for the story's inexhaustibility, which also stands as a condition for the detective fiction's literariness. Furthermore, Heller refers to anticlosure as a central device that "makes the narrative into a trap: the surprise leads to questions, and the questions lead to the terrifying entrapment of the real reader in the role of the implied reader" (ibidem). Given this circular structure, Ligeia's story too qualifies as "a mystery with a repeatable solution," managing to frame the woman within in another oval portrait.

A confession of a flawed memory comes at an opportune moment, after the initial quote on will power, suggesting that rather than an inability to remember, this might be a matter of an unwillingness to remember. The convenient fact that the circumstances of their first encounter are buried within his memory serves to efface any previous identitary marks and to restrict her description to a biased male perspective: "I cannot for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the Lady Ligeia. Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering." (Poe, 2004: 123). In a distorted portrayal, memory and forgetfulness serve as filters: "his lack of memory serves to dehumanize Ligeia and propagates the idea that the narrator is not concerned with the real Ligeia but more with the figure of Ligeia he has created in his memory" (Lee, 2015: 11). Moreover, forgetfulness derived from intense suffering indicates a traumatic experience. However, contrary to the frequent abruptness of traumatic events, the inability to pin down such a momentous turn in his life is further explained through a progressive insinuation, through the subtlety with which she grows on him, which better paces the delicate rhythms of the heart, yet raises suspicions of witchcraft. The failure belongs to the kind of paradoxical experiences that, however significant, cannot be grasped in specific temporal and spatial terms.

Nonetheless, the feminist potential of the tale derives from an association between memory and will power represented by a woman who does not wish to die and be forgotten. Moreover, the force of this refusal acquires threatening dimensions as "The narrator is terrified by Ligeia's reappearance not so much because it means she has conquered death but because she does it through an act of vehement will, a powerful volition that renders him prostrate" (Weekes, 2002: 159) Feminine energy, that "intensity in thought, action, or speech" (Poe, 2004: 126), counteracts a waning tendency with a fierceness to endure.

The filtered objectifying perception of Ligeia seems to sharpen in a more vivid recall of "the *person* of Ligeia" (Poe, 2004: 124), depicted in subjective close-ups, a

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vivid projection performed by a man "buried in studies", living in an abstract world of dead ideas, aesthetically shed upon a living thing. Despite the insistence on her physical features that expands this reference, it is the strangeness and unconventional nature of her beauty that exerts fascination, a beauty that is coextensive with her illness (Block, 2010: 95) and that lends itself to a "hermeneutics of pathology" in similar ways in which the corpses of Marie Roget or Madame L'Espanaye serve as texts for forensic interpretation. Their resistance to being killed, transpiring from the violent marks on their bodies, remind to a certain point of Ligeia's will to live, subverting a more submissive ideal of woman: "That women are supposed to acquiesce to death or murder rather than fight back is at once implicit and explicit throughout much of the Western canon, among others." (Block, op. cit.: 109-110). This would be the ultimate sign of expected conformity.

Berenice is one of the most gruesome stories of the dark ladies series. Published in 1835 in the Southern Literary Messenger, it is the story of two cousins, Egeus and Berenice, complementary in nature and united by a passionate incestuous feeling. In his monomania, Egeus becomes obsessed with Berenice's teeth, which he ultimately – and unawarely – removes while the woman is still alive. This detail has been interpreted, on the basis of Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalytical study, as an act of fear towards the female reproductive organ, the "vagina dentata". To the half-closed "mental eye" that represents the hypnagogic state, the half-closed teeth-revealing mouth acquires a disquieting expression, at once sensual display and suggestion of a harsh predatory interior, of the persistent skeletal structure.

Berenice allows multiple connections with the detective stories as well: not only are the teeth evidence of murder to the very murderer, but they are also ideas, that is objects for speculation aimed at with an acute attentiveness to detail. In Joan Dayan's opinion: "Those cherished teeth of Berenice are material presences, keys to operations of mind and memory" (Dayan, 1984: 493). Their metonymical value ranges from that of unusual keepsakes to ubiquitous memento mori clues. "The teeth!—the teeth!—they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them, as in the very moment of their first terrible development" (Poe, 2004: 218). This focus on the teeth as the most visible part of skull is indicative of an obsessive contemplation of death and decay: "The visual impact of disease dominates these tales, suggestive of the conflict mourners faced when expected to confront physical deterioration with tenderness and reverence." (Stobert, 2000: 288)

In Berenice, we can already notice a shift in the perception of the woman from an object of admiration and even of veneration to an object of analysis to be regarded with a detective-like inquisitiveness: "I had seen her – not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream...not as a thing to admire, but to analyse – not as an object of love, but as the theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation" (Poe, 2004: 216). Interestingly enough, she is a *theme*, that is a topic of discussion, verbalized in absence of firm evidence, described and remembered *despite of* rather than *for* herself. Moreover, she has a hidden side, she is a mystery, and as such she is submitted to a compulsive gratuitous deciphering exercise.

Morella aligns to the gallery of undead women, dealing with the problem of identity, tightly connected to consciousness and reason and situated at the very centre of detective stories. It is a direct addressing that provides valuable hints at the theories here contained:

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> That identity which is termed personal, Mr Locke, I think, truly defines to consist in the sameness of rational being. And since by person we understand an intelligent essence having reason, and since there is a consciousness which always accompanies thinking, it is this which makes us all to be that which we call ourselves, thereby distinguishing us from other beings that think, and giving us our personal identity. But the *principium individuationis*, the notion of that identity which at death is or is not lost for ever, was to me, at all times, a consideration of intense interest (Poe, ibidem: 278).

At this point, a parenthesis on John Locke's theories on personal identity is due, so as to emphasize the importance of memory as a factor of consistency and self-definition[1] in light of a concern with the resurrection of the body. According to the English philosopher, the ability to remember one's actions, to be conscious of one's deeds (from the past), is essential in accounting for them, in taking responsibility, which is suspended in Poe's narratives of unreliable narrators haunted by perverse instincts, failing at times to remember their actions. It is precisely in this revised forensic sense of moral blame and praise that issues on personal identity approached in *Morella* are worth revisiting through a detective lens, turning a narrative about resurrection into one about responsibility and agency, from a fascination with the supernatural to an intriguing self-destructive tendency in atonement for an indirect criminal intention. In the final ceremony of baptism, the imp of the perverse, which has often served to re-establish order in tales such as *The Black Cat* or *The Tell-Tale Heart*, resurfaces against reproductive instincts, through the inflicted loss of their progeny in the act of naming her. Interestingly enough, in detective fiction, the questions of identity are extended beyond the strictly personal level: "The quest to discover the identity of the person responsible for a particular crime has come, in many cases, to serve as a pretext for, or to provide a framework for a wider interrogation of society or of what constitutes criminality. The adaptability of the genre is such that it can be used to affirm and also to undermine all concepts of identity, be these at the level of nation, ethnicity, culture, or at the level of gender and genre."(Krajenbrink & Quinn, 2009: 1)

All this taken into consideration, the images of gradually fading women contrast with the shocking sight of female corpses in the detective tales, the latter revealing a physicality seemingly at odds with the diaphanous portraits of the poems. However, the tales of the dark ladies facilitate this transition by dealing with a "spiritual materiality".

Other stories that prepare the detective tales focus on male characters. Such are the cases of *The Man That Was Used Up* or *The Man of the Crowd*. For a better understanding of the way in which feminine characters are constructed it is worth pointing out a factor essential in the definition of one's (sexual) identity, namely desire. As Peter Goodwin notices, "In the place of this idealized but elusive figure, Poe posits a fractured masculine subject whose potency derives not from self-sufficiency but from desire" (Goodwin, 2011: 50). By resituating the same source of power in a feminine character a fatality.

[1] In reflecting upon personal identity, Locke refers to "the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person" (Locke, 1999: 319)

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Detecting Womanhood: Three Cases of Auguste Dupin

Without further ado, the tales of ratiocination are worth examining in light of these preparatory texts. Three of Poe's short stories have been grouped as marking the invention of the detective genre, namely: *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* (1842), and *The Purloined Letter* (1845/44). They all feature the detective C. Auguste Dupin, dominating the narrative with his hypertrophied intellect, counterbalancing a hypertrophied emotional – and therefore distorting - narratorial voice on the background of his grotesque tales, which underpins a dichotomial male-female representation. Moreover, Jordan would perceive Dupin as androgynous: "Here the investigation of overt and seemingly isolated crimes against women uncovers a network of covert gender-related crimes that pervades the entire social order and the task of solving both the obvious and the hidden crimes calls for a detective with an awareness that other men lack. In the androgynous Dupin, Poe created a new and unquestionably heroic caretaker of social and political order, and Dupin fulfills these responsibilities by going beyond the imaginative limits of the male storytellers around him and fully recovering the second story – the woman's story – that has previously gone untold" (Jordan, 1989: 135). On the other hand, this shift of perspective can also be seen as a radicalization of male authority, given the muteness/graphical passivity of female corpses or the requirement of discreteness deriving from the threat of affecting a woman's reputation. The heroic portrait of the detective, leaning with inquisitiveness upon the lady in distress, turns into a matter of saving another man's reputation, for what is worth a man who stands for the power of the state, a man of law.

The first one of the series concerns the brutal murder of two women, Madame L'Espanaye, and her daughter, Mademoiselle Camille L'Espanaye, a murder committed by an ourang-outang. The case revolves around a series of testimonies of auditory witnesses that could not quite serve to establish the identity of the author, which is ultimately disclosed as a result of corroboration of the discovery of non-human hair at the place of the crime and a scientific description by the French naturalist and zoologist Cuvier, matching the profile of the murderer.

This story easily lends itself to an interpretation as a case of domestic violence, bringing to the surface the most animalic instincts that go against the basic principles of human cohabitation. Ironically enough, the incident is determined by an attempt of imitating human behaviour, and more specifically male behaviour, that is the routinary act of shaving. Moreover, it both aligns to and subverts the cult of domesticity promoted in the United States in the nineteenth century, confining the woman to the private sphere, yet defying the traditional view of family institution, through an alternate femele-female shared space. The secluded life of the two women has been perceived in psychoanalytical fashion as a indication of posessive tendencies, as „Edgar's wish-fantasy in regard to his mother; the wish of the child to keep all men away" (Bonaparte, 1949: 453). Their tragic death within a confined and therefore problematic area, making the boundaries of the private and the public a thin line for detective enquiry, can be examined against another case of shared solitude, namely that between the detective and the narrator. If male companionship is strenghtened by a series of intellectual concerns, such as "dreams – reading, writing, or conversing"(Poe, 2004: 14), the most popular belief formed around Madame L'Espanaye's occupation is that of her being a fortune-teller, therefore some kind of a witch, which continues the feminine imagery pervading Poe's tales as an unsettling variant of feminine mystique, most poignant in

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Ligeia, not to mention the historical charge that such a representation of womanhood would hold on an American ground.

The second one, considered a sequel to *The Murders*, heavily relies on real-life details of the case of the murder of "the Beautiful Cigar Girl", in New York. Infused with journalistic data, though cautious towards their reliability and their concern with effect over accuracy, Dupin manages to prove, against other popular theories, the existence of a single murderer who had thrown Marie, the victim, off a boat. According to the investigator, the identification of this mobile space of the crime is essential in solving the case.

Marie, the only daughter of the widow Estelle Rogêt, an infirm old lady, seventy years of age, forms with the latter a feminine binomial of inter-dependence, whose transgression (under the pull of male desire) leads to her destruction. In an objectifying manner, her beauty is quantified in the number of suitors and used for commercial purposes, a situation that departs from the melancholy representations in the poems. Nonetheless, the particular circumstances of her death favour a posthumous feminine mythology, outshining even the political topics of the time (Poe, 2004: 44), the narratives of male games of power, and engaging imaginative energies springing from a fascination with murder, with beauty, and with a certain hint of promiscuity, and the fear derived from female sexuality, a theme more transparently treated in the previously mentioned series. Nonetheless, the doubt on the girl's virtuousness can be contrasted with a smoothering beyond-the-grave faithfulness. The feminine mythology is only equaled by Dupin's reputation, acquired after solving the previous case.

The mystery of the female body is dissected into forensic considerations on human decomposition following drowning and strangulation. As a matter of fact, a close-up on the neck as target is telling in terms of strangulation, referred to in a recurrent use of the verb *to throttle*, being a physical method of control and restriction, hence confirming male superior physical strength, in addition to the neck being an erogenous and distinctively appealing body part. The disarray of Marie's corpse, comparable to the crime scene in *The Murders* (in which, there is also a severed head and a body forcefully pulled through the chimney), requires the re-assembling skills of the detective, performing a re-membering act that is supposed to restore both physical and moral integrity and to cease a state of pending death. This is a rehabillitating act in many ways, dealing with a belief that "a dying woman who remains beautiful is to be adored as a poetic inspiration, but one who has poor grace to show the ravages of disease is to be eskewed, as she is merely a token of inevitable decay without the redeeming virtue of impregnable beauty"(Weekes, 2004: 154). The contradiction of pity and admiration experienced in the contemplation of a dead beautiful woman can be reconciled in a strictly professional interest as the male gaze turns into forensic inquiry, thus creating a resistance towards an otherwise intolerable sight. If in the doomed ladies' situation, their ephemerality is specific to their condition as women, summed up in a line such as "Yet was she woman, and pined away daily" (278), the sudden murders spare the standers by the death bed from the torment of a prolongued disease, as the emotional turmoil becomes an exercise in reasoning the criminal out. The memory of the women is a memory drained of sentimentality and constructed from pieces of testimony, sometimes coming from people who barely knew the victims. In this sense, collective memory replaces personal memory.

Last but not least – and in my opinion the most accomplished of Poe's detective tales – , *The Purloined Letter* concerns the theft of a certain letter whose content is not disclosed, with the mention that this letter might severely compromise a

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woman's reputation. The detective's restorative abilities are once again put to the test, continuing the series of written clues to be submitted to the investigator's deciphering skills, ranging from the published testimonies in the Morgue case to the incriminating suicidal note of Mary's lover. It being a written-yet-not-read document temporarily indicates an unfulfilled potential and a lack of personal involvement with the case, which will turn out to be a matter of redirecting an actual biased search – of settling accounts with another male character – by marking the (territorial?) gesture in a written form of identity disclosure.

This time the pressure of the male gaze exerted upon the woman is part and parcel of a visual dynamics, an "intersubjective complex" of three glances (Lacan, 1987: 32), as Lacan famously identified in his Seminar. After a transient positioning in a comfortable blindspot, the scene in the royal boudoir captures such pressure, experienced as a paralyzing force, as her being observed forbids her from acting and facillitates the theft. As a matter of fact, the very choice of the setting favours an interpretation as a violating act, bridled solely by an exchange of glances. This emphasis on vision allows for a feminist reading, by questioning women's tendency of self-vallidation according to external perception, regardless of their status.

Although the content of the letter is not revealed, the choice of this type of writing as document for investigation is significant in the way it alludes to a genre "particularly suited for the female voice", namely the epistolary novel. Firstly, without being didactic, *The Purloined Letter* implicitly deals with the morality of the female character, ironically suspended in an ambiguous role of victim or villain, as well as and in a written form of communication that would become "the favoured mode of moral instruction for women."(Gilroy and Verhoeven, 2000: 2).

Furthermore, without many details, the letter is referred to as "a certain document of the last importance" (Poe, 158), which contradicts the usual perception of this written form "traditionally focused on domestic life or on love" (Gilroy and Verhoeven, 2000: 2). Epistolary writing in general is of a rather private nature, focused on domestic or frivolous issues of the heart, thus providing an outlet for marginalized otherwise silenced voices of women. In this sense, the fact that the rightful owner of the letter is of royal blood or, for what is worth, "a personage of most exalted station"and that concepts such as "honour and peace" are at stake favour a reconsideration on the value of this type of document.

Last but not least, given the blur between reality and fiction ocurring in letter writing, the mentioned genre interferes with the suspension of disbelief, by requiring a specific discerning effort from the reader, solicited on other ocasions as well, for instance in Poe's literary hoaxes. This effort engages memory, by selecting what is relevant and by checking for consistency throughout the accumulation of "trivial" details. Nonetheless, on this ocassion, the reader is not drawn into such a procedure of selection, but rather remains at the surface, pondering upon a strategy relying on a venerable dichotomy between reality and appearance, on the deceiving shift between the inside and the outside.

All in all, it is worth further exploring the question of femininity in Edgar Allan Poe's work as a factor that might offer a more unitary understanding of his writings, a binder between his tales of the grotesque and those of ratiocination, and generally a thematic constant that can be subsumed to the exploration of functioning of memory in detective fiction.

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