



# Edgar Allan Poe and the limits of the psychoanalytical approach

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**Mémoire présenté par**  
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**sous la direction de**  
**Jocelyn Dupont,**  
**en qualité de directeur de recherche**

**EDGAR ALLAN POE AND THE LIMITS OF THE**  
**PSYCHOANALYTICAL APPROACH**

Présenté le 28 mai 2021 devant un jury composé de

Jocelyn Dupont, Maître de Conférence, Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, Président

Pascale Amiot, Professeur des Universités, Université de Perpignan Via Domitia



To my beloved grandfather.



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## INTRODUCTION

I have absolutely no pleasure in the stimulants in which I sometimes so madly indulge. It has not been in the pursuit of pleasure that I have periled life and reputation and reason.<sup>1</sup> (Edgar Allan Poe in a letter addressed to Sarah H. Whitman)

Edgar Allan Poe, acclaimed poet, novelist, short story writer, editor and literary critic, certainly is one of the most misunderstood literary figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Born in 1809, Edgar Poe died at the age of forty, leaving behind him a substantial cultural and literary heritage. He wrote a great number of short stories, one novel and many poems, for which he is mostly known. He published his first collection of poems in 1827 under the title *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. Eleven years later, in 1838, he released his sole novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. 1840 is most likely the date to remember regarding Poe's work: the publication of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, which still stands as one of the most known collections of short stories of all time. The distinction between the "Grotesque" and the "Arabesque" lies in the author's intent to extract categories out of Gothic fiction into subbranches. The tales of the "Grotesque" are imbued with a sense of bizarre and macabre. The tales of the "Arabesque" rather explore the psychology of terror, hallucinations, and the tricks of the mind.<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, some critics described the "Grotesque" tales as meant to prompt feelings of disgust while they depicted the "Arabesque" tales as frightening for the reader.<sup>3</sup>

Edgar Allan Poe is still thoroughly associated with dark, macabre and horrific stories. Yet, stating that Poe wrote only such stories is ill-founded. Indeed, he asserted himself as a master of the mystery and the macabre, as a writer of short stories in which the horrific atmosphere remains unrivalled, yet he also tackled science fiction ("The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall") and adventure literature (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*). He stands as the initiator of the modern detective story with his very famous detective Dupin. Indeed, "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is considered the first detective fiction to be written, thus paving the way to masterpieces to come such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's. He developed an interest in the human mind and the themes of love, grief, guilt, violence, vice, and self-destruction, all to be found in most of his short stories. Alongside science fiction and adventure narratives, Poe was also the author of many critical works among which "Review of Hawthorne's "Twice-Told Tales" in which Poe reviewed Hawthorne's collection of the same name, or *The Poetic Principle* (1850) and *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846), in which he

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore. « Poe to S. H. Whitman » (1848). *Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*. August 2009. Available at : <https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4811030.htm> (Access date : 02/04/2020)

<sup>2</sup> GRELLET, Françoise. *Literature in English*. Hachette (Paris : 2015), p. 259.

<sup>3</sup> POE, Harry Lee. *Edgar Allan Poe: An Illustrated Companion to His Tell-Tale Stories*. New York: Metro Books, (2008), p. 65–66.

developed the method he had followed to write some of his prose and poetry and structure his well-known “effect”, as we shall examine. Throughout his lifetime, Poe was not particularly considered a noteworthy writer. He may have been deemed a writer “on the rise” during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet he never had a chance to taste artistic glory during his lifetime.

All along his literary journey, Edgar Poe continuously questioned the motives of the human psyche, orienting his work towards its literary exploration. Through his carrier, Poe developed his inclination for psychological mechanisms in the existing psychiatric research, then an embryonic scientific field whose official name was first coined in 1803 by German physician Johann Christian Reil.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, Poe soaked up these theories to comprehend the functioning of the mind in scientific terms, but also to feed on distressing effects, as they shall be examined. As a journalist, he attended several murder trials, among which James Wood’s who appeared before the court on a charge of murder. In *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger*, Poe published a short article entitled “The Trial of James Wood” detailing how serene the murderer was and already mentioning “the cunning of maniac” which also epitomises his narrators-protagonists.<sup>5</sup> The article was one opportunity amongst others for the writer to publicly manifest his interest in mental disturbances, more precisely in the behaviour of neurotic subjects.

The notion of “madness” has sparked debate for decades. Authors like French philosopher Michel Foucault attempted to clarify such a complex term. According to Foucault, the way in which madness was regarded back in time is a far cry from its modern conception. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, people deemed “mad” were considered by some people as being gifted with what could be regarded as a sixth sense, enabling them to see things normal people cannot, much as seers.<sup>6</sup> Insane people were also largely persecuted on religious ground during this era for psychological disturbances were considered as signs of sinfulness, added Brazilian philosopher José Merquior in response to Foucault’s examination.<sup>7</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, unsound minds began to be gradually insulated from society as allegations of moral responsibility gained influence. Madness was then hailed as a deliberate choice. The confinement of insane people sparked interest in their mental condition and paved the way to science-orientated considerations. The 18<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of the first institutions and a will to better comprehend and cure mental disorders.<sup>8</sup> Such concerns forecast

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<sup>4</sup> Commission des Citoyens pour les Droits de l’Homme. « Les origines de la psychiatrie ». Available at: [https://www.ccdh.fr/Les-origines-de-la-psychiatrie\\_a53.html](https://www.ccdh.fr/Les-origines-de-la-psychiatrie_a53.html) (Access date : 15/01/2020)

<sup>5</sup> POE, Edgar. « The Trial of James Wood » in *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger*, vol. 4, no. 14 (Philadelphia : April 1840), p.2. Available at : <https://www.eapoe.org/works/misc/awm40m02.htm>

<sup>6</sup> GUTTING, Gary. "Foucault and the History of Madness." *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* 2 (2005): 49-73.

<sup>7</sup> MERQUIOR, José Guilherme. *Foucault*. Vol. 853. University of California Press (1987), p 80. Available at : [https://books.google.fr/books?hl=fr&lr=&id=WtbpUHuCK-IC&oi=fnd&pg=PA111&dq=merquior+foucault&ots=00xB0p547Y&sig=TJOECzgl6cu7zfjgSxgqDeQBYMc&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=merquior%20foucault&f=false](https://books.google.fr/books?hl=fr&lr=&id=WtbpUHuCK-IC&oi=fnd&pg=PA111&dq=merquior+foucault&ots=00xB0p547Y&sig=TJOECzgl6cu7zfjgSxgqDeQBYMc&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=merquior%20foucault&f=false)

<sup>8</sup> GUTTING, Gary. "Foucault and the History of Madness", p. 49-73.

the growing interest in the brain and nervous system to come. With the advent of new technologies (the MRI scan for instance), psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis developed and split into several sub-branches such as forensic psychiatry, cognitive psychology or Lacanian psychoanalysis, themselves being divided into sub-categories. Despite the profound evolution of brain studies, the definition of madness remains uncertain and largely subject to prejudices. In the scope of this dissertation, madness will be hailed as a “manifestation of a behavioral, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the individual” to quote the definition established by the American Psychiatric Association.<sup>9</sup> These dysfunctions are to be understood as disparate structures of one’s organism caused by traumas and diseases or by a genetic context.<sup>10</sup> Poe’s characters are indeed subject to dysfunctional mental patterns such as various forms of neuroses (generally characterised by severe anxiety and irrepressible impulses) or monomania (obsessive thoughts).

Poe’s exceptional knowledge of the mind partakes in the mimetic dimension of his tales, that is to say the representation of real phenomena in the tales which is pushed to an extreme degree of verisimilitude. Poe brilliantly mimicked the discourse of disturbed subjects. The originality of the author’s enterprise is not to have the theoretical and conceptual tools (as they are well-established nowadays with the development of brain studies) at his disposal to explore poetically the human psyche. Poe’s take on the mind stems from a brilliant personal interpretation framed within an approach of research as previously mentioned. The tools in question would emerge no less than half a century subsequent to Poe’s work with the advent of psychoanalysis whose pioneer, Sigmund Freud, gave analytic reports of the diverse operations of the psyche, while evoking such concepts as “drives”. One may question Poe’s degree of anticipation regarding psychoanalysis. Neurosciences also played an important role in the comprehension of mental life. From its early stages in the early 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries with the birth of phrenology to the enthusiasm of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries for brain studies with the establishment of fundamental theories and the development of new technologies (for instance, brain imaging in the early 1990s), neurosciences have contributed in many ways to our understanding of the mind.

Well ahead of the advent of psychoanalysis, Poe deconstructed the individualist idea according to which each one is his own master. Conversely, Poe highlighted, despite himself, that man does not control everything, and even more ambitiously, that the lack of control might be unconscious. Poe’s enterprise rested upon the wish to rationalise what seems completely subjective, as Valérie de Courville Nicol proposed.<sup>11</sup> The “subjective” at stake is to be found in the psychological state, proper

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<sup>9</sup> USSHER, Jane. “Madness” in *Encyclopaedia of Critical Psychology*. Springer Verlag (Oct 2014), p 1112.  
Available at : [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269576509\\_Madness](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269576509_Madness)

<sup>10</sup> WAKEFIELD, Jerome. “Biological Function and Dysfunction”. *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, 2015, p. 878-902.

<sup>11</sup> DE COURVILLE NICOL, Valérie, « Du Gothique à l’Empirisme Psychologique : la rationalisation de la Peur » in *Edgar Allan Poe. Une Pensée de la fin*, Canada, Liber, Chassay J.-F, Côté J.-F, Gervais B, January 2001, p. 37-55.

to each one regarding feelings, sensations and perceptions and their various forms of manifestations. Regarding biological structures, diseases and traumas, the equality of each person before the psyche is well and truly questioned. Poe's tales wax and wane sometimes as attempts at philosophical rationalisation, like in "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse", sometimes as fictional murder stories. The reader must face up the "extreme madness coexisting with extreme rationality" throughout his reading, perpetually questioning the nature of such excessive reasoning as a pathological symptom rather than a sign of sanity.<sup>12</sup>

From his lifetime to nowadays, Edgar Poe has been pointed at for being a madman, an alcoholic and a drug addict. Many critics have taken the debated path of psychoanalysis to account for Poe's mysterious work. How can a writer be so accurate in his representation of madness (as compared to scientific observations of neurotic subjects for example) except that he himself is mad ? The major tension lies in the fact that these assertions were sustained by Poe's main biographers, among which Marie Bonaparte, also known as Princess Marie Bonaparte for she was Napoleon I's great-grandniece and Princess of Greece and Denmark. Biographers such as Marie Bonaparte along with critics like Joseph Wood Krutch influenced the perception of the author and are still referred to when it comes to understanding Poe. One of her major works was Poe's biography entitled *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* in which she gave an analytical account of Poe's works on the basis of biographical elements. To Bonaparte, Poe's writings were a mere retranscription of his own psychological disturbances.<sup>13</sup> This way, she did not detach the author from his work yet, on the exact contrary, closely linked them, drawing information from the author's life to unearth unforeseen aspects of his works. Indeed, tragedy pervaded Poe's life from beginning to end. With regards to loss and addiction, Poe had a rather unfortunate life oscillating between loss, death and poverty. Poe was persistently confronted with death throughout his life. His mother, Elizabeth, died two years after his birth. His father, David Poe, abandoned him the same year. His presumed godfather, John Allan, a merchant, took good care of him with his wife, Frances Allan, who was dear to Edgar Allan Poe's heart. Unfortunately, she died in 1829, in Richmond, when Poe was only 20. He fell in love with his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm and secretly married her, but she died of tuberculosis in her twenties. Thus, Bonaparte's approach relied on drawing links between the traumatic events that occurred throughout the author's life and those taking place in his fictional stories. As we shall examine, Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalytical biography of Poe is a perfect case study to demonstrate that one cannot appraise literature merely following psychoanalytic concepts and forgetting at the same time about the literary aspect of the text and the creative process. More

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<sup>12</sup> DUPONT, Jocelyn. "Mad I am not"...or am I? Poe's Voices of Madness. *Inventive Linguistics*, PULM, 2010, p.189-200.

<sup>13</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. « On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches » in *The Purloined Poe*. John, P. Muller (ed.), William, J. Richardson (ed.). 1988.

recently, many prominent literary critics, such as Henri Justin and Shoshana Felman, have taken the opposite view of biographical analyses to point out the limits of the psychoanalytic approach. The tension between the psychoanalytical mechanisms (such as forms of neuroses) at stake in Poe's writings and the overlooked stylistics is at the heart of this dissertation. Poe's tales are first and foremost literary texts.

Indeed, Edgar Poe scrutinised the dark side of the mind along with the figure of the madman. The pathological pervades the text in its various forms. By tackling such matters, Poe's publications fell in line with Gothic tropes. Gothic writers embodied the rejection of 19<sup>th</sup> century materiality, moderation and order. The Gothic movement was not thoroughly homogeneous but evolved from its embryonic state in the late 18th century with notable works such as Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) to its more mature form in the second half of the 19th century with major publications like Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The early productions of the Gothic movement focused on horrifying peripeteia undergone by heroines, often abducted and locked up in some medieval setting, the ideal stage for supernatural incidents.<sup>14</sup> However, late 19th century Gothic writings rather enhanced the dark side of the mind through extensively introspective narratives written in the first person, told by unreliable narrators in a sombre tone.<sup>15</sup> Along the same lines, Patrick McGrath, a British author and literary critic who greatly contributed to research works about Poe, highlights the status of the Gothic movement as a backlash against the main fashion in the literature of the time, which favoured content over stylistics:

"The Gothic tends always to assume this posture in relation with the dominant values of a culture. It negates. It denies. It buries in shadow that which had been brightly lit, and brings into light that which had been repressed."<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, as McGrath argues, Gothic writers went against the tide of glorification of human goodness.<sup>17</sup> Transcendentalist works like Henry David Thoreau's indeed flourished as celebrations of human worth and spirituality. To transcendentalists, men should be confident in their intuition for they are God's creation.<sup>18</sup> Gothic authors laid emphasis on transgression, wrongdoings and loss of control, which is a key issue in Poe's work. In this respect, Edgar Poe is still hailed as one of the figureheads of the movement for he succeeded in "bring[ing] into light that which had been repressed", to quote McGrath, by placing the psyche at the centre of his interest. He became "chef de l'Ecole de

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<sup>14</sup> GRELLET, Françoise. « The Gothic Novel » in *Literature in English*, p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> GRELLET, Françoise. « Romanticism and the American Renaissance » in *Literature in English*, p. 241.

<sup>16</sup> McGRATH, Patrick. « Transgression and Decay » in C. Grunberg (dir.) *Gothic : Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art*. MIT Press, (London: 2000), p. 53-158.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> GRELLET, Françoise. *Literature in English*, p. 255.

l'Etrange" as Jules Verne puts it in his sole literary analysis "Edgar Poe et ses oeuvres" (1864).<sup>19</sup> With hindsight, Poe largely contributed to the renown of Gothic fiction as the literature of the macabre and horror, horror "from the soul" to quote the expression of the Chinese scholar Chunyan Sun.<sup>20</sup>

To an attentive modern reader, the link between Poe's tales of murder and psychoanalysis is crystal-clear. Nevertheless, to avoid any anachronism, it must not be forgotten that the psychoanalytic notions at stake within the text were not yet conceptualised in the 1840s. Poe's writings predate both psychology (initiated by German physiologist Wilhelm Wundt in the 1870s) and psychoanalysis (founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud) but are subsequent to psychiatry that came into its primitive existence in the late eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The term "psychiatry" was coined in 1808 by German physician and psychiatrist Johann Christian Reil, as noted previously.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the basis of knowledge on which psychiatry relied remained rudimentary in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Psychoanalysis derives from psychology, namely the study of the human mind. Psychoanalysts focus on the unconscious and aim at unearthing repressed thoughts, emotions, desires and traumas. In reading Poe, psychoanalysis is particularly useful for it enables one to enrich the interpretation of the tales on the strong basis of a body of established theories. Although psychoanalysis, in the same way as psychology, has suffered from a lack of empirical evidence from its early development, modern neurosciences have largely confirmed a large number of hypotheses about brain functioning that were established by prominent psychoanalysts like Freud. In literature, psychoanalytical criticism exists. Yet, the aim of such studies either relies upon interpreting literary texts to shed light on the authors' mental states or to simply, to quote author Phyllis Tyson, to determine "which concepts are operating in the text in such a way as to enrich our understanding of the work".<sup>23</sup> This dissertation does not fall in line with the first purpose as it will be illustrated as the analysis goes by but adopts a conceptual approach, consisting in using key psychoanalytical notions to better grasp the complexity of Poe's texts. For pragmatic purposes, that is to say to avoid any speculation about the author's private life, the psychoanalytical examination does not concern the author but the narrators-protagonists whose information is gathered within the texts.

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<sup>19</sup> RICHARD, Claude. *Edgar Allan Poe*. Editions de l'Herne (Paris: 1974), p. 318.

<sup>20</sup> SUN, Chunyan. "Horror from the Soul – Gothic Style in Allan Poe's Horror Fictions". *English Language Teaching*. Canadian Center of Science and Education. Vol. 8, No. 5, 2015, p.1. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1075227.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> CHERRY, Kendra. « The Origins of Psychology From Philosophical Beginnings to the Modern Day ». *Very Well Mind*, (March 09, 2019). Available at : <https://www.verywellmind.com/a-brief-history-of-psychology-through-the-years-2795245> (Access Date : 09/05/20)

<sup>22</sup> HANSEN, Leeann. « From Enlightenment to Naturphilosophie: Marcus Herz, Johann Christian Reil, and the Problem of Border Crossings ». *Journal of the History of Biology*. Vol. 26, No. 1, (1993). Available at : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4331243?seq=1> [Access Date : 09/05/20]

<sup>23</sup> TYSON, Phyllis, and TYSON, Robert L. *Psychoanalytic theories of development: An integration*. Yale University Press, (1990). Available at : [https://books.google.fr/books?hl=fr&lr=&id=P2COUkHmw4sC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=phyllis+tyson&ots=H1uNwS24wh&sig=tGd0iaB0WmpBlak6jOuQy53YJ2M&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=phyllis%20tyson&f=false](https://books.google.fr/books?hl=fr&lr=&id=P2COUkHmw4sC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=phyllis+tyson&ots=H1uNwS24wh&sig=tGd0iaB0WmpBlak6jOuQy53YJ2M&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=phyllis%20tyson&f=false) (Accessed on 14/01/2021)

In this respect, this dissertation shall examine the psychoanalytic concepts at stake in the corpus under study, namely "Loss of Breath" (1832), "Berenice" (1835), "William Wilson" (1839), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), "The Black Cat" (1843) and "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845). The choice of such tales relies upon a close observation of the themes, motives and literary devices along with the thematic and stylistic construction of each tale. Although these six tales are fairly independent of one another, they all interweave at a thematic level. The six of them deal with the human psyche and its most obscure drives. Their existence confirm that human beings are also creatures of wrongness, as opposed to the Transcendentalists' claim that human beings are fundamentally good, and offer an insight into the more enigmatic motives of the human mind. The selected tales follow a main narrative arc around the theme of death (whether to cause or to approach death) and form a coherent whole. As it will be demonstrated in chapter 2, they share not only common contents but also stylistic features to such a degree that the six tales may sometimes appear to echo one another despite different plots. Thus, to study tales such as "The Gold Bug" or "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall" would not enable us to correctly underpin a psychoanalytical study in view of their respective thematic orientation : treasure-hunting and adventure. Through the previously mentioned corpus, Poe tackled madness and attempted in varying degrees to rationalise it. Thus, imagination and rationality are always intertwined to the point that the frontier between fiction and non-fiction is blurred in each tale. Indeed, the narrative oscillates between philosophical exploration of the mind alongside fictional accounts, especially in "The Imp of the Perverse", "The Black Cat" and "Loss of Breath". The narrators of "William Wilson", "Berenice" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" do not interrupt the narrative to offer a philosophical reflection upon the human psyche nor upon what urges people to act so wrongly. Nevertheless, the philosophical investigations (especially regarding perverseness) to be found in "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" are at stage in these three tales. With regards to psychoanalysis, the selected tales are deeply interconnected in the light of the narrators-protagonists' common features. Their dispositions are fairly comparable, as it shall be highlighted in chapter 1. For example, they all are characterised by hubris in terms of story and unreliability narration-wise. To finish, the thirteen years separating the first tale ("Loss of breath") from the latest one ("The Imp of the Perverse") open the way for a chronological comment of the evolution of Poe's writing of madness. Moreover, "The Imp of Perverse", which is eminently the least known tale of the corpus, is remarkably interesting to examine since it was published a couple of years after "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" and postdates "William Wilson", and "Berenice" by nearly ten years. From the early tales to the late ones, Poe's reflection upon the perverse mind as well as its enactment throughout fictional narratives profoundly evolved.

The first chapter of this dissertation strives to notice the psychoanalytical mechanisms on display within the six tales under study. One will pinpoint how psychoanalysis takes on its full meaning within



the texts, how it is at work at a diegetic level, bearing in mind that the corpus stands as one of the first attempts to understand the functioning of the disordered mind. Indeed, although both psychology and psychoanalysis progressed decades after the publication of *Tales of the Arabesque and the Grotesque*, Edgar Poe had succeeded in providing accurate support for the concepts to come. Edgar Poe achieved a *mise-en-art* of the human psyche more than half a century prior to the advent of psychoanalysis. He indeed grasped the complexity of such phenomena as drives decades before their theorisation. Drives are particularly at stake in the tales. Based on Sigmund Freud's fundamental works, drives are defined as a “dynamic process” initiated by a form of pressure that urges the organism to “fulfil its purpose”.<sup>24</sup> According to Freud, a state of tension is at the root of drives. They aim to suppress this “tyrannical” state through an object (that is to say that by which drives achieve satisfaction). The analysis of drives easily runs into terminological hurdles since drives, which may also be called 'instincts', differ from 'the instinct' whose main characteristic is its pre-determination. The instinct is innate contrary to drives/instincts that are acquired. Thus, the first chapter will investigate the selected tales in the light of such psychoanalytical concepts to understand to what extent Edgar Poe contributed to this scientific field and, on the contrary, how psychoanalysis has helped better grasp Poe's work. Chapter 1 is an opportunity to demonstrate that a psychoanalytical study is achievable at a diegetic level by referring to established theories which set out the framework within which interpretational liberty develops. Thus, the rigorous use of a set of theorised notions will likely minimise the risk of erroneous speculation about the author's life.

The second part will underline the creative aspect of the tales, long forgotten by a line of biographers. As mentioned before, Poe has been deemed mad for decades with regards to the accuracy of his depiction of madness and the way in which he brilliantly mimicked the discourse of the madman. Biographical analyses such as Marie Bonaparte's severely harmed the reputation of the Gothic writer by overlooking the link between psychology and aesthetics.<sup>25</sup> Chapter 2 aims at illustrating the assertion whereby Poe's works are not devoid of intention. Quite the contrary, Edgar Poe vowed to control the effect produced by his tales to a significant degree. Consequently, it is convenient to notice and comment upon the many literary devices which are employed by the author to achieve his purpose. Indeed, psychoanalysis merges with literature. This chapter will consider the stylistic strategies developed in the six tales under study, since Edgar Poe was in control of the writing. Madness is simulated, mimicked, following a very careful intended strategy. The latter, as we shall see, evolved from the early tales to the late tales, yet always with the avowed intent to produce a particular effect on the reader. In this respect, Poe's critical works will be of unparalleled utility, for the author

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<sup>24</sup> « Pulsion » in LAPLANCHE J., PONTALIS J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Presses Universitaires de France, (2007), p. 370

<sup>25</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. « On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches » in *The Purloined Poe*. John, P. Muller (ed.), William, J. Richardson (ed.), 1988, p.4.

explained his method in a very detailed manner,. Poe's tales of murder are not a 'mere report of the unconscious', even though there is a great temptation to interpret them in the light of psychoanalysis only.<sup>26</sup> This chapter falls in line with the statement of Shoshana Felman, one of Poe's most eminent critics, according to which psychoanalysis in Poe is "intraliterary", that is to say that psychoanalytical studies and literary inquiries "mutually inform and displace each other".<sup>27</sup> It is thus necessary to devote this chapter to the examination of the literary devices to illustrate how the phenomena depicted in chapter 1 take their shape through literature and stylistics.

Finally, the third chapter shall be dedicated to the limits of authorship. Despite a fervent wish to control the effect produced on readers, the reception of his work has partly eluded from the author's grasp. To do so, chapter 3 will focus on the reception of Poe's work, which has been contradictory. The question of the status of the author, either as a genius or a sheer madman, has sparked debate for decades and is evidence of the variety of reader-responses. The analysis of Marie Bonaparte's reading of the tales will highlight the hurdles encountered by psychoanalytical interpretations, hence the necessity to provide beforehand a more appropriate interpretation in the first chapter for the sake of the comparison. Throughout this final chapter, one will examine the relation between the author and the work. Should they be regarded separately, or should one use the author's biography to interpret a literary text? One will also question the legitimacy of biographical information as a critical instrument. Finally, the active role of the reader in the actualisation of the meaning of Poe's work will be established by referring to key notions of literary criticism such as the horizon of expectation. The suitability and effectiveness of Poe's pre-established effect must be reassessed in view of the substantial function of the reader. Yet, on the contrary, the reader must cope with a very calculating author who turns the interpretational process into a genuine conundrum.

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<sup>26</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. « On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches » in *The Purloined Poe*. John, P. Muller (ed.), William, J. Richardson (ed.), 1988, p.4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

# **CHAPTER 1 :**

## **A Psychoanalytical Approach to the Selected Tales**

## **1. The Pathological in Poe's tales**

### **1.1. Are Psychoanalytical Interpretations Legitimate ?**

Along with the thematic content, which is rife with psychoanalytical concepts, the possibility of the psychoanalytical interpretation relies upon Saussure's concepts of "signifier" and "signified" then re-examined, if not transformed, by Jacques Lacan. In terms of linguistics, the combination of the signifier (to simplify, the form, for example several letters forming a word) with the signified (the concept) generates meaning.<sup>28</sup> Along the same lines, it can be admitted that some words are equivocal and, therefore, that these various connotations legitimate the very existence of interpretation. Language can be symbolic. Thus, it may be necessary to decipher the multi-layered understandings as well as the semantic ambiguity. In the context of psychoanalysis, the elements of a dream as reported by a patient may symbolise something else. The interpretation may go beyond the literal meaning. Words can become symptoms. It is therefore convenient to examine the language, that is to say the signifiers that compose it, in order to read between the lines. The mere necessity of probing the language is a sign of repression. Poe's texts indeed bristle with signifiers whose "signifieds" are without the characters' reach on account of the unconscious process of repression. To put it simply, the individual may not be conscious of the effects of meaning that derive from certain signifiers and, most importantly, their combination, presence and absence. As previously developed, Poe's tales are likely to be examined under the light of psychoanalysis in view of the texts' extensive equivocality. Consequently, this first chapter shall adopt such an approach by interpreting a number of diegetic elements under the light of key concepts developed in psychoanalysis.

### **1.2. Death Drives: Identity and Time**

The concept of death drives is central to psychoanalysis. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, published in 1920, Sigmund Freud develops the duality of death instincts/life instincts. In view of psychoanalytic theories, death is considered a state of non-being, namely an inorganic state, a "return to lifelessness".<sup>29</sup> Inorganicity brings the subject back to a state of nothingness, broadly speaking, a

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<sup>28</sup> LIPPI, Silvia. « Héraclite, Lacan : du logos au signifiant », *Recherches en psychanalyse*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2010, p. 55-62.

<sup>29</sup> JONES, Ernest (ed.). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) by Sigmund Freud. The International Psycho-analytical library. London, s. d., p.31. Available at : [https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/assets/pdf/freud\\_beyond\\_the\\_pleasure\\_principle.pdf](https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/assets/pdf/freud_beyond_the_pleasure_principle.pdf) [Access Date : 25/05/2020]

speck of dust, deprived of any organ. Death is the state *par excellence* in which the 'I' does not exist. Following the Freudian conception of death, to die amounts to losing one's identity. To fully grasp the complexity of death instincts, it is necessary to define life instincts. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud states:

“Our discussion so far results in the establishing of a sharp antithesis between the 'ego-instincts' [death instincts] and the sexual instincts [life instincts], the former impelling towards death and the latter towards the preservation of life [...] For according to our hypothesis the ego instincts spring from the vitalising of inanimate matter, and have as their aim the reinstatement of lifelessness. As to the sexual instincts on the other hand: it is obvious that they reproduce primitive states of the living being, but the aim they strive for by every means is the union of two germ cells which are specifically differentiated.”<sup>30</sup>

Life instincts are identified by neurologists, among which Freud, as the formation of ever-growing unities as well as their conservation.<sup>31</sup> Naturally, the subject seeks to preserve his existence (by means of reproduction, cooperation, healthiness and safety). In contrast, death drives urge the subject to annihilate these vital unities. Murder exemplifies such a movement bringing the individual closer to death. According to Freud, death instincts may be directed inward, therefore being self-destructive, or, when they are directed towards an external object, destructive, harmful to others. Death drives exhort the subject to suppress the pressure in order to reach a state of unconditional rest.

To some scholars, the concept of death drives becomes intelligible once the individual has experienced a feeling of identity, namely when he has formed his 'I'. The threat of disintegration of the self is central to the theory of death drives, for fear ignites a reaction. As far as "William Wilson" is concerned, the threat of annihilation of identity is deeply experienced by the protagonist. Throughout the tale, the narrator-protagonist seeks relief by running away from his *doppelgänger*. His double may be understood as a manifestation of the narrator's conscience who vainly compels him to behave well. The murder embodies the narrator's inability to assert his legitimacy as an individual subject facing his double. By the end of the tale, the protagonist murders himself, bringing himself back to a state of lifelessness, of nothingness, which is not without recalling the aforesaid concepts.

In 1955, psychoanalyst Kurt Robert Eissler argued in *The Psychiatrist and the Dying Patient* that the conception of death may be altered in the case of insanity. On the one hand, Eissler notes the interesting relation of the madman to the future. Indeed, the madman does not project himself. Any representation of the future is excluded. The same applies to Poe's tales which are bare of references to near and far future. Whenever the future is evoked, it is never positively referred to. In "The Imp of the Perverse", the narrator-protagonist petrifies at the idea of confessing the murder unwillingly.

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<sup>30</sup> JONES, Ernest (ed.). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) by Sigmund Freud, p.31

<sup>31</sup> « Pulsion de Vie » in LAPLANCHE J., PONTALIS J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p. 378

Conversely, Poe's narrators often refer to the past over and over again. Both "Berenice" and "The Black Cat" open with melancholic recollections of the past. According to Eissler, the neurotic subject extracts himself from time.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the absence of future prospects results in the absence of fear regarding death. To a sane subject who aspires to self-fulfilment, to "reason and sensation", death is hailed as "the enemy".<sup>33</sup> Indeed, death entails the loss of what the subject grants importance to (identity, self-development...). Conversely, psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung argues in *Métamorphoses de l'âme et de ses symboles* that death is "welcomed" by subjects whose quest for identity is experienced as a "painful burden".<sup>34</sup> By and large, the sentiment conveyed by Poe's tales of murder relies upon a different vision of death, seemingly ordinary, familiar and pervasive. The protagonists do not shun death but tackle it. Murders depart from their usual symbolism. To the narrators-protagonists, the act of murdering appears to be liberating instead of being traumatic. The long, conceited and careful accounts of murders, specifically of the concealment of corpses, are highly representative of the feeling of pleasure delivered by the act of murdering.<sup>35</sup>

"If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha!" (536)

Beyond mere pleasure, the narrator can be very cynical as the use of the mocking exclamation "ha! ha!" reveals. In a very calm manner, the protagonists expound on how they proceeded to hide the body, down to the very last detail. However, death, through murders, always engenders the protagonists' own falls. The end of each tale under study leaves a tragic impression on its reader: the character has reached a point of no-return, sign of his dreaded failure. The endings of Poe's tales often contrast with the narrators' seeming sense of control, as seen in their depictions of concealments, since they all eventually cause their own fall either by confessing their deeds ("The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Imp of the Perverse"), losing temper ("Berenice", "Loss of Breath", "William Wilson"), and through exaggerated self-confidence ("The Black Cat").

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<sup>32</sup> GORDON, Rosemary. « La pulsion de mort et ses rapports avec le soi », *Cahiers jungiens de psychanalyse*, vol. 107, no. 2, 2003, p. 67-84. Available at : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-cahiers-jungiens-de-psychanalyse-2003-2-page-67.htm> (Access Date : 26/05/2020)

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 22.

<sup>35</sup> "Conceited" is to be understood as part of the narrators' hubris. The accounts of the murders are always imbued with a sense of pride.

### 1.3. Destructive Instincts, Self-Preservation and Hubris

None of Poe's characters succeeds in eluding their murderous instincts (which, as a reminder, are thoroughly different from “the” instinct). Berenice’s muddled story implies that Egaeus brutally mutilated his cousin in her grave; “Loss of Breath” opens with the narrator’s violent outburst of anger; William Wilson fails to resist the urge to murder his double by the end of the tale; the protagonist of “The Tell-Tale Heart” experiences the sudden irrepressible impulse to murder the object of his torment; “The Black Cat” is punctuated by brutal and cruel death; and, finally, the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse” brings his tale to a close with the account of the murder he committed. All characters, at some point or another, fall prey to Poe’s imagination that submits them to their drives.

Death drives bring the individual back to an “inorganic” state, namely a primitive state which is sign of a loss, a lack.<sup>36</sup> Death drives are symptomatic of a deterioration. They either aim at the inner self, referred to as “self-destruction”, or at exterior objects, and fall in line with “destructive instincts”.<sup>37</sup> Both are death instincts derivatives. The opening scene of “Loss of Breath” is particularly evocative of such concepts:

« Thou wretch!- thou vixen!- thou shrew!” said I to my wife on the morning after our wedding; “thou witch!- thou hag!- thou whippersnapper- thou sink of iniquity!- thou fiery-faced quintessence of all that is abominable!- thou- thou-” here standing upon tiptoe, seizing her by the throat, and placing my mouth close to her ear, I was preparing to launch forth a new and more decided epithet of opprobrium, which should not fail, if ejaculated, to convince her of her insignificance [...] »  
(« Loss of Breath », 127)

In “Loss of Breath”, the opening betrays the state of tension affecting the narrator. Tension is directed against his wife in the form of hatred. Along the same lines, British psychiatrist Hanna Segal adds that death instincts are to be considered as “drives to annihilate the need, to annihilate the perceiving experiencing self, as well as anything that is perceived ”.<sup>38</sup> When death drives manifest, annihilation follows. Interestingly, the narrator seeks to convince his wife of her “insignificance”, that is to say, to annihilate her “self”. The line between self-destruction and destruction of others is blurred to such a point that the reader may understand that the outburst is in fact the result of the character’s depreciative assessment of his own significance. Such self-protective reactions unleashing aggressive behaviours are central to a wide range of psychological theories, amongst which Steven J. Spencer, Mark P. Zanna and James M. Olson’s, all specialists of psychology, who documented in *Motivated*

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<sup>36</sup> LAPLANCHE J., Pontalis J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, pp 371-377.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371

<sup>38</sup> SEGAL, Hanna. *On the clinical usefulness of the death instinct*. International Journal of Psychoanalysis (1993), p. 55–61.

*Social Perception* (2003) how people who display low self-affirmation tend to adopt such defensive behaviours.

Similarly, in "The Tell-Tale Heart", the mad narrator is urged to annihilate, strictly speaking, the object of his torment: the eye. The narrator shifts the blame to external objects, here the eye, overlooking the fact that the genuine source of his pain lies within his mind. Thus, the eye may be heard as the "I", the subject, thus betraying the narrator's unconscious struggle against himself. The alleged release the narrator is yearning for through the act of destruction, is a mere illusion. The murder always catches up with the murderer, as the French scholar Henri Justin puts it in *Poe dans le Champ du Vertige*.<sup>39</sup> To go further, the release in question continually shifts from one focus (getting rid of the eye) to another one (annihilating the eye, killing the old man, confessing the murder...). In each tale, the release of accumulated pressure is conditioned by the commitment to criminal actions.

In their Freudian denominations, drives find their origins in physical excitement. From this point, a state of tension builds up. In the event that drives gain ascendancy and that the purpose is completed, the state of tension is suppressed.<sup>40</sup> Considering our corpus, the reader might grasp the peculiar construction of the short stories around the pattern of drives. In the first place, the narrator shares the object of his torment. For instance, in "The Black Cat", the narrator is initially obsessed with his cat:

"For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse." (535)

The narrator's feelings, between hate and love, partake in the setting up of a state of tension throughout the text. The disappearance of the cat, even more than the death of his wife, releases the accumulated tension. The same process can be applied to all five tales. When the protagonists yield to their drives, they are, indeed, brought back to a primitive state that entails them to submit to a "hate relationship" (both with themselves and with the object of their obsession) and to a "struggle for self-preservation".<sup>41</sup> They switch from master to mastered.

The hate relationship is particularly palpable in "The Black Cat". The narrator goes through crises of hubris each time Pluto shuns him, gives heed to someone else, or, on the exact contrary, is too emotionally demanding. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, hubris can be identified as "extreme pride, especially pride and ambition so great that they offend the gods and lead to one's downfall".<sup>42</sup> Hubris is particularly relevant to the personalities of Poe's narrators who are convinced

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<sup>39</sup>HENRI, Justin. *Poe dans le Champ du Vertige, des Contes à Eureka : l'élaboration des figures de l'espace*, Paris, Editions Klincksieck, (1991), p. 103.

<sup>40</sup>LAPLANCHE J., Pontalis J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p. 371-377.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>"Hubris." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hubris>. (Accessed 28 Mar. 2020).



of their flawlessness. They generally pride themselves on carrying out perfectly executed plans. They are incredibly phlegmatic. Thus, going back to the “The Black Cat”, the alteration of the animal’s behaviour betrays the fear directed against his master and underscores the narrator's own alteration. He experiences disgust because the animal acts as a mirror, reflecting his vice as well as his weaknesses. The same pattern applies to his wife who epitomises his past goodness and reminds him of his lost calmness and self-control. Poe’s narrators seek the recovery of their loved one through destruction because it creates the illusion of regaining some degree of mastery, to refer to Justin’s analysis.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, by immuring his wife and his cat, the narrator also immures what he represses. He deprives them of their mirroring effect. To hide the corpses amounts to hiding the evidence of his psychological alteration, given that they embody the disturbances of his mental system. In addition, it corroborates the assertion that the narrator confines himself to denial.

When the sources and motivations fall in line with those of the instincts of self-preservation (also categorised as “needs”, as Laplanche and Pontalis specify), the process is referred to as *anaclysis*.<sup>44</sup> In order to preserve himself (as said previously, to preserve the ‘I’), William Wilson experiences the irrepressible need to murder his opponent, unconsciously submitting to the fight for self-preservation.

“The contest was brief indeed. I was frantic with every species of wild excitement, and felt within my single arm the energy and power of a multitude. In a few seconds I forced him by sheer strength against the wainscoting, and thus, getting him at mercy, plunged my sword, with brute ferocity, repeatedly through and through his bosom.” (329)

The confrontation condenses all the elements of life preservation, giving the impression of a gladiator's fight, which is moreover underpinned by the location of the action, Rome. The narrator fights for his own self-preservation, more precisely for the protection of what he believes to be his identity. Once more, Poe’s narrator believes that the murder of his opponent would recover his control over the situation. The narrators’ obsessions are always directed towards external objects (the cat, the cousin, the teeth, the eye, the wife...) instead of focusing on inner conflicts (pathological obsessions, neurosis, relation to death...).

"You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also – dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope! In me didst thou exist – and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself." (329)

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<sup>43</sup> HENRI, Justin. *Avec Poe jusqu’au Bout de la Prose*, Paris, Editions Gallimard (2009), p. 296-299.

<sup>44</sup> LAPLANCHE J., PONTALIS J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p.148.

Yielding to his destructive instincts, the protagonist murdered his own conscience who, through its acts ("in my deeds you exist") or its being ("in me did you exist"), constituted the only way out from wrongness.

#### 1.4. Instinct for Mastery and Clashing of Realities

Poe's narrators, among whom Egaeus, are subject to specific drives, which may be referred to as instinct for mastery, that urge them to exercise control over the object of their obsession to recover control over themselves. Nevertheless, this recovery remains a lure, as in "Berenice". Teeth become ideas:

"I pondered upon their conformation. I mused upon the alteration in their nature. I shuddered as I assigned to them in imagination a sensitive and sentient power, and even when unassisted by the lips, a capability of moral expression. Of Mad'selle Salle it has been well said, "que tous ses pas etaient des sentiments," and of Berenice I more seriously believed que toutes ses dents etaient des idees. Des idees! —ah here was the idiotic thought that destroyed me! Des idees! —ah therefore it was that I coveted them so madly! I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason." (231-232)

To the narrator, the teeth represent the connection to reality, the ability to comprehend the world. To own the teeth would hypothetically symbolise the narrator's reconnection with reality, which he is in fact deprived of. Egaeus severely lacks experience with sensitive reality due to his secluded life. He is trapped in his own fanciful version of reality. What is real to him is mere imagination to the reader. In contrast, what Egaeus regards as imagined is real to the reader. After having excavated Berenice, he tells the reader that he feels as if he had just woken up from a dream.

"I found myself sitting in the library, and again sitting there alone. It seemed that I had newly awakened from a confused and exciting dream." (231)

However, the reader understands that the narrative ellipsis is also a mental ellipsis within the narrator's memory and is evidence that he committed the gruesome deed. A majority of Poe's characters evolve within a completely distinct reality in which murders seem self-evident, as "*allant de soi*", to quote Justin.<sup>45</sup> The narrator of "The Black Cat" ironically calls them "mere households events", thus marking right from the outset the discrepancy between the reader's and the narrator's realities.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, Egaeus and the reader do not share the same conception of reality either. First of all, Egaeus grew up secluded from any social interaction except with his cousin Berenice, in

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<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>46</sup>POE A. Edgar, « The Black Cat » in B. Sova, Dawn (ed.), *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, Barnes & Nobles, Inc. (2015), p. 531.

his "chamber" or his "palace of imagination" as he tells the reader. The theme of enclosure is central as the protagonist is both trapped in the library and inside his over-imaginative mind. He no longer sees things as real but as "visions." The books in his library have been his only source of reflection. Even the books which constitute the "peculiar nature of the library's content" are all related to subjects apart from sensible events. They deal with supernatural occurrences. Curio's treatise, St' Austin's work and Tertullian's "De Carne Christi" deal with heretical religious matters, concerning the supernatural manifestation of God. They narrate the peripeteia of either God or the Devil. Therefore, Egaeus all the more supplants the sensible reality with imagination and beliefs as he grew up with them. Valérie de Courville's theory of deviant reason is here fully actualised. According to her, when reason is sealed off from sensitive reality, it leads to excessive and deviant minds and brings about madness.<sup>47</sup> She quotes "Berenice" as an example to demonstrate that the narrator does not regard sensibility and subjectivity as significant parts of reality. Conversely, the tale emphasises a form of imagination devoid of purpose.

Freud's "Principle of reality" and "Pleasure principle" are very useful to comprehend the narrator's behaviour. A professor at the Khan Academy detailed these two concepts by means of analogies. To put it simply, the "Pleasure principle" is compared to the reaction of a child in front of a candy. He immediately wants it in order to have "straightaway pleasure".<sup>48</sup> Waiting is unbearable. We "immediately want to fulfil our need" and therefore, to circumvent pain.<sup>49</sup> Over the years, the individual matures. The teacher carries on the analogy by re-introducing the candy which may this time be "someone else's candy".<sup>50</sup> Taking this candy may be dangerous since it does not always belong to us. To go even further, it may be "socially inappropriate".<sup>51</sup> Now it is necessary to wait. Reality has substituted pleasure. The pleasure that used to be immediate is replaced by "long-term gratification".<sup>52</sup> For both principles, the purpose is fulfilment. Nevertheless, the "reality principle" which requires the subject to find his place in the real world, also calls for patience and delay. In the tales, the protagonist's psychic apparatus has failed to conform to the "principle of reality" as much as it has failed to overcome the effortless and comfortable immediacy of the "pleasure principle".

Laplanche and Pontalis give further details about these two principles. The mental apparatus is ruled by the "avoidance" and the "discharge of unpleasant pressure".<sup>53</sup> The "principle of reality"

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<sup>47</sup>DE COURVILLE NICOL, Valérie, « Du Gothique à l'Empirisme Psychologique : la rationalisation de la Peur » in *Edgar Allan Poe. Une Pensée de la fin*, Canada, Liber, Chassay J.-F, Côté J.-F, Gervais B, January 2001, p.37-55.

<sup>48</sup>« Freud – Death Drive, reality principle, and pleasure principle ». Khan Academy. Course available at : <https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/behavior/theories-personality/v/freud-death-drive-reality-principle-and-pleasure-principle>

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>« Principe de Plaisir » in LAPLANCHE J., PONTALIS J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p. 360.

influences the “pleasure principle” in that it regulates the impulses of the latter, the main constraint being the outside world. With regards to Edgar Poe, the protagonists similarly obey the “pleasure principle” for they often seek immediate alleviation when they are subject to great pressure. They yield to their instincts instead of reflecting upon long-term remedy. It echoes the neurotic subject's inability to project himself in the future. In "Berenice", the narrator becomes so obsessed with her cousin's teeth that it takes less than a day for him to brutally excavate his relative and wrest the teeth. He confesses that the teeth symbolise the only way for him to find peace ("I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason", 232). More than just peace, the teeth are “ideas”.

“[...] of Berenice I more seriously believed que toutes ses dents etaient des idees. Des idees! —ah here was the idiotic thought that destroyed me! Des idees! —ah therefore it was that I coveted them so madly! I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason.”

Yet, in the philosophical sense of the word, ideas serve “l’intelligibilité du monde”.<sup>54</sup> Ideas are the means by which the mind relates to reality. Thus, to the narrator, the possession of the teeth, as ideas, symbolises a hold on reality.<sup>55</sup>

### 1.5. Obsessional Neurosis

Most Poesque narrators are characterised by a form of obsessional neurosis causing obsessive thoughts and mental cogitation, sometimes resulting in undesired and undesirable acts. They nevertheless attempt to resist these obsessions, vainly, as in ending scene of “The Imp of the Perverse”:

“But there arrived at length an epoch, from which the pleasurable feeling grew, by scarcely perceptible gradations, into a haunting and harassing thought. It harassed because it haunted. I could scarcely get rid of it for an instant. [...] In this manner, at last, I would perpetually catch myself pondering upon my security, and repeating in a low undertone, the phrase "I am safe".” (719)

The narrator-protagonist does not control his thoughts, finds himself trapped within an inner conflict that simultaneously requires and hinders his energies, thus arousing inward doubts.<sup>56</sup> Both thoughts and actions are inhibited, precluding the character from restraining himself. Poe’s narrator consider several fallbacks: either to deny the obsessive thoughts and shun them temporally or to make them come to an end by means of self-destruction. Drives are, at the very basis of their definition,

<sup>54</sup> HANSEN-LOVE, Laurence. « Idée ». *La Philosophie de A à Z*. Hatier : Paris, 2011, p. 217.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218-219.

<sup>56</sup> LAPLANCHE J., Pontalis J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p. 284.

uncontrollable. On the one hand, their triggering may be relatively restrained if the excitement is external, leaving space for deflection (that is to say not to encounter the object causing the excitement for example). “William Wilson” exemplifies such a deflection, which is not necessarily effective. “I ran but I could not escape” (327), confesses the narrator who eventually ends up murdering his conscience. On the other hand, it cannot be controlled in the case of endogenous excitement. Poe's protagonists cannot escape from the object of their inner pain. They are haunted by obsessive thoughts. In some cases, the neurosis is such that it produces needs for self-punishment, a symptom of obsessional neurosis. The subject must unconsciously punish himself for the accomplishment of a particular desire and thus becomes “un bourreau de lui-même”, as Laplanche and Pontalis put it.<sup>57</sup> The need for self-punishment is highly paradoxical since psychological pain mingles with pleasure. The confession of the murder constitutes at the same time a climax of anxiety and a climax of release.

“They heard!- they suspected! - they knew! - they were making a mockery of my horror!- this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! [...] I felt that I must scream or die!” (501)

A second crisis of hubris may be observed through the spectrum of the narrator's neurosis. Poe's narrators log entire paragraphs describing how faultless, cunning and meticulous their hiding of the body had been, almost equalling the perfection of God's creation. Their self-confident egos could not bear the humiliation of the discovery of the crime, which would be a discredit.

“Could I have torn out my tongue, I would have done it, but a rough voice resounded in my ears—a rougher grasp seized me by the shoulder. I turned—I gasped for breath. For a moment I experienced all the pangs of suffocation; I became blind, and deaf, and giddy; and then some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back. The long imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul.” (720)

The need for punishment is less a matter of tension between the ego (that is to say the self or the ‘I’ which “acts in the surrounding physical and social world”) and the superego (the “ethical component” of the mind in charge of moral standards”) than an expression of hubris occurring at the end of the tales.<sup>58</sup> The narrator's mental apparatus does not seem overtaken by a masochistic ego or a sadistic superego because, as far as Poe's narrators are concerned, the assimilation of moral norms and prohibitions has already failed. The issue at stake is not related to remorse but to the impossibility for the protagonists to fail.

<sup>57</sup> LAPLANCHE J., Pontalis J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p. 284.

<sup>58</sup> « Ego » and « Superego » in *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.* February 06, 2020. Available at : <https://www.britannica.com/science/superego> (Access date : 27/05/20)

## 1.6. Fate Neurosis

Poe's narrators log extensive paragraphs arguing for their own cause. They utterly deny the state of insanity even though they mention it. Often started right from the beginning, the defence speech undertaken by the narrator either aims at convincing the reader of his sanity or at demonstrating that his dreadful deeds are indeed due to circumstances. The narrator of "The Imp of Perverse" senses the "consummation of his fate"; Berenice and his cousin suffer from diseases that "fell upon them"; "The Tell-Tale Heart"'s main protagonist is mentally "haunted", passivity is enhanced in "Loss of Breath" and, finally, the narrator of "The Black Cat" insists upon the fact that he had to undergo an "ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects". Beyond the extreme rationality displayed by these narrators, they all seem to fall prey to their own fate, that is to say that they would not have been able to act any differently, being in thrall to destiny. Fate neurosis typifies people who "give the impression of being pressured by their fate", that their existences have taken a "diabolical orientation".<sup>59</sup>

"I would fain have them believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of fatality amid a wilderness of error. I would have them allow —what they cannot refrain from allowing —that, although temptation may have erewhile existed as great, man was never thus, at least, tempted before —certainly, never thus fell." (314)

The subject undergoes unpleasant repetitive experiences and positions himself as the victim of circumstances. Furthermore, the madman refutes his insanity. In many of Poe's tales, madness is at the very centre of all stories but, ironically, all narrators repudiate it, while failing to justify their psychological stability. What is evidence of their madness to the reader is the evidence of their sanity to the protagonists. In "The Tell-Tale Heart", the narrator declares:

"TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? [...] I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then am I mad? Harken: and observe how calmy I can tell you the whole story." (498)

The opening epitomises the narrator's inability to recognise his insanity. The obsessive mention of madness already hints at the narrator's unreliability. The demonstrative enterprise betrays the madness here on display. Furthermore, his degree of reliability fizzles out as he jumps from serenity to anxiety several times in the same paragraph. "The Black Cat" follows the same pattern for the narrator refutes madness and seeks alleviation in a compassionate reader. On the face of it, the tenacious valuing of the reader's critical opinion appears to be a quest for alleviation and is symptomatic of great narcissism.

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<sup>59</sup>LAPLANCHE J., Pontalis J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p. 279.

The reader is thus confronted with insanity, specifically through the figure of the "fou raisonnant", the "reasoning madman", which can be applied to Poe's tales.<sup>60</sup> Teacher and writer Lars Bernaerts depicted the figure as imposing full authoritative control over the tale. Poe's narrators indeed leave no room for argumentation. "You deny it? —let us not argue the matter. Convinced myself, I seek not to convince." asserts Egaeus. They display hyperrationality, or what would be designated as a simulacrum of rationality. Another example can be found in the "The Imp of the Perverse", in which the narrator contends about philosophical matters and develops his theory of "perverseness", absorbing three-fourths of the tale before accounting for a murder and its uncontrolled confession. The reasoning madman addresses the reader. Indeed, he attempts to weave links with the reader, falling within an approach of manipulation regarding its audience. All narrators perform sincerity through painful confessions, often emphasising an inevitable destiny. In this respect, they tend to influence and alter the reader's critical stance, either through pity or by means of authoritative discourse, thus encouraging the reader to condone.

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<sup>60</sup> BERNAERTS, Lars. "Tell-Tale Minds : The Rhetoric of Mad First-Person Narrations" in *Les narrateurs fous/ Mad Narrators*. Eds. N. Jaëck, C. Mallier, A. Schmitt et R. Girard, Pessac : MSHA. [s. d.]. 185-206, quoted in Dupont, Jocelyn, « Le Récit désaxé : relire le « Chat Noir » d'Edgar Poe », Perpignan, Crossways Journal, Crossways, (2019).

## **2. The theory of "Perverseness"**

### **2.1. Early Theories of "Perverseness"**

As the reader comes across the word "perverseness", related concepts such as "perversion", "perversity" or "the perverse" may come to his mind. "Perverseness" was first mentioned in "The Black Cat", first published in 1943 in the *Saturday Evening Post*, prior to "The Imp of the Perverse" which was published two years later.<sup>61</sup> In "The Black Cat", one single paragraph is allocated to the exploration of the notion whilst the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" develops the notion of "perverseness" for the three-fourths of the tale, namely a couple of pages. Although the word "perverseness" is not mentioned in the texts, the three other tales under study, "William Wilson", "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "Berenice", seem to serve as the medium by which Poe's theory of "perverseness" is on display. For instance, the narrator-protagonist of "The Tell-Tale Heart" does not raise the issue of "perverseness" but clearly exemplifies it. Although the old man has never wronged him, he cannot resist the murderous impulse. Contrary to "The Imp of the Perverse" and "The Black Cat", "The Tell-Tale Heart" leaves no room for philosophical investigation but immerses the reader in the narration and description of fictional peripeteia. Thus, intertextuality, with regards to the closeness between the text under study to another text or source (for example between the thematically related "Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat"), plays a significant role in the critical analysis of the short story. Indeed, the theoretical tools developed through the notion of the "perverse" are indubitably on display in Poe's murder short stories. An attentive reader will notice the thematical relation existing between these short stories, although each tale is to be taken as a unique piece of writing, all gathered into a collection.

Nevertheless, the notion of "perverseness", proper to the author, was not the first attempt to clear up the mystery of the mind. A noteworthy philosophical enterprise belongs to Cartesian philosophy. More precisely, it is recognised as Descartes' investigation of the "evil genius" in his *Meditations of First Philosophy*, published in 1641. In a brilliant essay, scholar Russell Sbriglia sustains that Poe's theory of "perverseness" is a "resurrection of Descartes' evil genius".<sup>62</sup> In *Meditations*, Descartes declares:

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<sup>61</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. « The Black Cat ». *Encyclopædia Britannica* (October 01, 2013). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Black-Cat-short-story-by-Poe> (Access date : April 19, 2020)

<sup>62</sup> SBRIGLIA, Russell. "Feeling Right, Doing Wrong: Poe, Perversity, and the Cunning of Unreason." *Poe Studies*, vol. 46 no. 1 (2013), p. 4-31. *Project MUSE*. Available at [muse.jhu.edu/article/533924](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/533924) (Access Date : 24/04/2020)



"I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things; I shall remain obstinately attached to this idea, and if by this means it is not in my power to arrive at the knowledge of any truth, I may at least do what is in my power [i.e. suspend my judgment], and with firm purpose avoid giving credence to any false thing, or being imposed upon by this arch deceiver, however powerful and deceptive he may be."<sup>63</sup>

First of all, the term "evil genius" is striking because, within the scope of an investigation of Poe's tales, it interestingly echoes two main characteristics of Poe's narrators : their empowering intellectual superiority along with their inclination for vice. According to Descartes, the existence of an evil entity accounts for man's wrongdoings. Mighty and devious, it influences men in their beings to such a degree that it seems to take control of one's mind. As for Poe's narrators, the subject is taken back to an inorganic state, even pushed to its paroxysm (as previously quoted : " I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses"). The subject struggles to preserve himself, his ego, from this primitive state.<sup>64</sup> Edgar Poe refers to "perverseness" either by calling it a spirit ("the spirit of perverseness" in *The Black Cat*), or, as an imp ("*The Imp of the Perverse*"), a small demon.<sup>65</sup> Poe's examination of "perverseness" falls in line with the Cartesian philosophy by means of prosopopoeia, namely by attributing human features to something originally abstract. Human beings fall prey to a superior entity, beyond the perceptible, guiding each of their gestures towards a sinful finality. Both Descartes and Poe's narrators implicitly argues that men are not responsible for their wrong deeds because they are being controlled by some transcending external energy. Nevertheless, Descartes' enterprise relies upon a wish to demonstrate, as the full title indicates, the "existence of God and the immortality of the soul". Thus, the treatise remains highly theological whilst Poe's theory largely relates to the mind and its impulses ("radical, primitive impulse[s] – elementary", as evoked in "*The Imp of the Perverse*"). It must not be forgotten that Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* is a philosophical treatise whereas Poe's "Imp of the Perverse" is a fictional short story. In a more subtle way, religious themes are nonetheless evoked in the tales dealing with "perverseness", specifically in "*The Black Cat*".

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<sup>63</sup> DESCARTES, René. *Meditations of First Philosophy* (1641). In *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge University Press), 1911, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane, p.8. [PDF] [https://yale.learningu.org/download/041e9642-df02-4eed-a895-70e472df2ca4/H2665\\_Descartes%20Meditations.pdf](https://yale.learningu.org/download/041e9642-df02-4eed-a895-70e472df2ca4/H2665_Descartes%20Meditations.pdf) (Access date : April 19, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> FREUD, Sigmund. « Das Ich und das Es ». *Zeit Online*. October 8, 1982. <https://www.zeit.de/1982/41/das-ich-und-das-es> (Access Date : 25/04/20)

<sup>65</sup> "Imp" in *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imp>. (Access date : 12/04/2020)

“I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it—if such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.” (533)

The lexical field is theological ("the soul", "judgment", "sin", "God"). In this respect, "The Imp of the Perverse", published two years after "The Black Cat", appears to be a more mature reflection upon the concept of "perverseness". Poe entices his reader into leaving religious theories aside to examine everyday life events viewed as real experiences.

“It would have been wiser, it would have been safer, to classify (if classify we must) upon the basis of what man usually or occasionally did, and was always occasionally doing, rather than upon the basis of what we took it for granted the Deity intended him to do. If we cannot comprehend God in his visible works, how then in his inconceivable thoughts, that call the works into being?” (716)

Indeed, "The Imp of the Perverse" is a turning point in the exploration of "perverseness" as it raises it to a philosophical level, blurring the frontier between fictional and factual writings.

## 2.2. Adam Smith's "Man Within the Breast"

More than one century after Descartes' *Meditations*, the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790) in which he inquired into human psychology, specifically through the spectrum of morality and sympathy. In contrast to Descartes's evil genius, Smith develops the idea of an entity which guides man towards goodness. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith states:

“It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forcible motive which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration. It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator. It is he who shows us the propriety of generosity and the deformity of injustice; the propriety of resigning the greatest interests of our own, for the yet greater interests of others, and the deformity of doing the smallest injury to another, in order to obtain the greatest benefit to ourselves”.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> SMITH, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790). Meta Libri. (Sao Paulo: May 15, 2006), p. 120. Available at : <https://delong.typepad.com/files/moral.pdf> (Access date : 01/05/20)

The figure of an entity taking possession of the body was a recurrent image in the early attempts of apprehension of the human mind. Smith's "man within the breast" seems to be the antagonism of Descartes' evil genius. Indeed, Smith's inner judge, located in the breast, as he reiterates about seventy times throughout *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is a guiding entity, embodiment of moderation and virtue, which prevents individuals from transgression and misbehaviour. In the scope of this research, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is relevant since it mirrors Descartes' theory on the one hand and points out the threat of hubris on the other hand. Indeed, as previously developed, an equally significant aspect of Poe's narrators is hubris. Smith argued that excessive self-esteem may engender "resentment, abhorrence and execration".<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Poe's narrators are heavily blinded by their hubris to such a point that nothing measures up compared to themselves. The interests of others do not carry weight in their choices. This condition is at the same time the reason for their elevation and the cause for their fall.

### 2.3. Poe's Investigation of "Perverseness"

Thus, the concept of "perverseness" is at the centre of the corpus. The word has nowadays become part of the English language although it remains fairly rare. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "perverseness" as the nominal form of the adjective "perverse" which means "to show a deliberate and obstinate desire to behave unacceptably".<sup>68</sup> Thus, the definition, which emphasises immorality, derives from Henri Justin's description of "perverseness" as the temptation of the unknown, of the forbidden. As far as Poe is concerned, he designates it as the "spirit of perverseness", as mentioned previously, a primitive human drive located within the heart, which we now know to be psychological:

"Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? [...] This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute." (533)

Poe stresses the universality of the phenomenon, thus including the reader. "Perverseness" is to be considered as an inclination, at various degrees, to act contrary to what is positively good. The narrator develops examples which apply to everyday life, such as the fear of heights, in order to lighten the brutal character of his murder. The border between "perverseness" and madness is unclear, however. According to Justin, the protagonists use the concept of "perverseness" to substantiate their

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<sup>67</sup> SMITH, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

<sup>68</sup> « Perverse ». Oxford English Dictionary. Lexico. Available at : <https://www.lexico.com/definition/perverse> (Last checked on 03/05/2020)

actions. Yet, the enterprise is not efficient because it "accounts for nothing", and is not given serious consideration.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Poe's concept of "perverseness", as it is purported by his protagonists, sometimes seems at the edge of the mystic, as if a spirit inhabited his martyr (the protagonist) and urged him to commit murders. With hindsight, "perverseness" is the evidence that human beings are not mere rational and reasoning creatures but also desiring beings. As Justin proposed, in the case of a perverse mind, the more reason struggles to gain ascendancy over desires, the more they intensify.<sup>70</sup> A temptation for what is forbidden, dangerous and unknown does exist in each one of us but is not to be confounded with pathology (which presupposes a form of disease). Poe's originality lies in the exploration of the temptation to fail, if not the temptation to succeed, which is pathological when pushed to such an extreme. The temptation to succeed is embodied by the narrators' attempts to slip through the net, to go unnoticed after such murders. The narrators jubilate from long-thought murders and imperceptible concealments until the obsessive thoughts come to haunt them again. In "The Black Cat", "The Imp of the Perverse" and "The Tell-Tale Heart", the space granted to the sequence of murderous events and their detailed, meticulous, mathematical description is significant. The narrators aim at impressing the reader. The thought of a perfect crime participates in the realisation of it because it provides them with an intense sentiment of self-satisfaction.

In his exploration of "perverseness", Henri Justin cunningly quoted *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal's well-known posthumous book;

« Le plus grand philosophe du monde, sur une planche plus large qu'il ne faut, s'il y a au-dessous un précipice, quoique sa raison le convainque de sa sûreté, son imagination prévaudra. »<sup>71</sup>

The vertiginous image found in "The Imp of the Perverse", and approached by Justin, is highly efficient. The tension lies in the moment of action: to fall or not to fall, to kill or not to kill. The sane subject will not go beyond the stage of temptation. Poe's characters, on the contrary, transgress this stage through their commitment to action. They persist in acting in contradiction to the rational, against themselves.<sup>72</sup> With regards to the image of vertigo, Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and writer, analyses the analogy in depth.

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<sup>69</sup> HENRI, Justin, *Poe dans le Champ du Vertige*, p. 89.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in JUSTIN, Henri. *Poe dans le Champ du Vertige, des Contes à Eureka : l'élaboration des figures de l'espace*, Paris, Editions Klincksieck (1991), p. 203

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

”On peut comparer l’angoisse au vertige. Quand l’œil vient à plonger dans un abîme, on a le vertige, ce qui vient autant de l’œil que de l’abîme, car on aurait pu ne pas regarder. De même l’angoisse est le vertige de la liberté, qui naît parce que l’esprit veut poser la synthèse et que la liberté, plongeant alors dans son propre possible, saisit à cet instant la finitude et s’y accroche. Dans ce vertige la liberté s’affaisse. [...] Au même instant tout est changé, et quand la liberté se relève, elle se voit coupable. C’est entre ces deux instants qu’est le saut, qu’aucune science n’a expliqué ni ne peut expliquer. L’homme qui devient coupable dans l’angoisse, sa culpabilité est aussi ambiguë que possible. L’angoisse est une défaillance [...] où la liberté s’évanouit, et psychologiquement la chute n’a toujours lieu qu’en état de défaillance [...] Dans l’angoisse cet infini égotiste du possible ne nous tente pas, comme lorsqu’on est devant un choix, mais nous ensorcelle et nous inquiète de sa douce anxiété.”<sup>73</sup>

Kierkegaard noticed a moment of "lowering of liberty" experienced by the subject when anxiety reaches its climax.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, on the one hand, this lowered liberty echoes the narrators' loss of control during climactic moments. They do not seem capable of changing the course of events when they are overcome by anxiety. Interestingly, on the other hand, the protagonists constantly challenge the concept of liberty by transgressing rules. As mentioned previously, they are "tempted to success" for they confidently infringe both judicial rules and moral standards, considering that they will not be punished for their deeds. Transgression deeply kindles their defiance, especially when they encounter law enforcement officials, like in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart". Nevertheless, transgression also entails their fall. As they experience unbearable pressure (for instance when the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" inadvertently wakes the old man from his sleep), their own liberty, more precisely their ability to freely be in control of themselves, lowers. Thus, they yield to it. They move into action in order to escape the state of "intolerable tension" previously discussed, but also to fulfil an unhealthy desire.<sup>75</sup> These experiences, painful but simultaneously pleasant, are repeated by the protagonists, just like the narrator of the "The Black Cat" who, through morbid experiences, vainly attempts to gain back control over and over again. The ambivalent character of "perverseness" is patent in the tales. For instance, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" deliberately directs the ray of light upon the object of his torment, the eye, instead of deflecting any visual contact. "Perverseness" also lies in the duration (eight nights in a row). The narrator makes it a point of honour to show the wall behind which the body is hidden, to such an extent that he raps the wall. He even notes that he "scarcely knew what [he] uttered at all" (537), a sentence which is highly symptomatic of his loss of control. In the same manner, the protagonist of "The Tell-Tale Heart" places his chair on the floorboard under which the body is concealed. They act in complete opposition to their own purposes (not to be exposed). The characters are obsessed with what frightens them and find themselves

<sup>73</sup> VAN REETH, Adèle. « Comment tromper le désespoir ? » in *Les Chemins de la Philosophie*. Episode 4 (September 2017). Available at : <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-chemins-de-la-philosophie/comment-tromper-le-desespoir>

<sup>74</sup> HENRI Justin quotes Soren Kierkegaard who referred to an « affaïssement de la liberté ». HENRI, Justin. *Poe dans le Champ du Vertige, des Contes à Eureka : l'élaboration des figures de l'espace*, Paris, Editions Klincksieck (1991), p. 203.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

trapped in a vicious circle. The pathological lies in the excessive amount of satisfaction obtained by placing themselves in situations of tension. Once they have transgressed the primary stage of temptation, they face a point of no return.

### **3. Freudian “Perversion” and Sexuality in the Selected Tales**

#### **3.1. Terminological Issues**

Interestingly, Freud’s theory of “perversion” differs from both Cartesian philosophy and Poesque “perverseness”. To Freud, “perversion” is exclusively linked with sexuality and is not to be taken literally since its meaning has evolved. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud gives an insight into his vision of “perversions”.

“The normal sexual aim is regarded as being the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct—a satisfaction analogous to the sating of hunger. But even in the most normal sexual process we may detect rudiments which, if they had developed, would have led to the deviations described as “perversions”. [...] Perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.”<sup>76</sup>

As we may notice, Freud’s definition is strictly sexuality-related. “Perversion” is nowadays considered in a bad light. *The Cambridge English Dictionary* defines “perversion” as a “sexual behaviour hailed as strange and unpleasant by most people, that is unnatural and morally wrong”.<sup>77</sup> The Austrian neurologist’s theory of “perversion” must be read with great care since the term has evolved in a rather pejorative fashion. In this respect, Heather Wood, a member of the British Psychoanalytic Council, rightly endorsed that the word “perversion” is “an unfortunate one”.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, other words such as “paraphilia” were coined to circumvent the pejorative aspect of the term, although such terms are still questioned by some scholars who insist in assimilating sexual deviations with disabled minds, regardless of their true meaning. They read the term “perversion” literally, regardless of its history, although Freud’s intent was thoroughly different, for the notion of “perversion” is linked with Freud’s approach to human sexuality.

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<sup>76</sup>FREUD, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Global Grey. (2018), p. 23. Available at : <https://www.globalgreybooks.com/content/books/ebooks/three-essays-on-the-theory-of-sexuality.pdf> (Access date : 01/05/20)

<sup>77</sup>« Perversion ». *The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus*. Cambridge University Press. Available at : <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/perversion> (Access Date : 02/05/20)

<sup>78</sup> WOOD, H. “Psychoanalytic Theories of Perversion Reformulated”. *Reformulation*, Summer (2003), p.26-31 Available at : [https://www.acat.me.uk/reformulation.php?issue\\_id=18&article\\_id=275](https://www.acat.me.uk/reformulation.php?issue_id=18&article_id=275)

### 3.2. “Perversion” and Abnormality

In the first section, entitled “Anatomical Transgression”, the psychoanalyst describes “other parts of the body [that] participate as sexual aims”, the mouth for instance, while arguing that these sorts of “perversions” have now become common, even though hailed as “perversions”.<sup>79</sup> They are not the sign of a disturbed mind, except for those that become pathological.

“In the majority of instances the pathological character in a perversion is found to lie not in the content of the new sexual aim but in its relation to the normal. If a perversion, instead of appearing merely alongside the normal sexual aim and object, and only when circumstances are unfavourable to them and favourable to it—if, instead of this, it ousts them completely and takes their place in all circumstances—if, in short, a perversion has the characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation—then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom.”<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, Freud distinguishes “perversions” which are frequent sexual manifestations (touching, looking) from abnormal sexual manifestations (necrophilia, cruelty). When abnormal sexuality is (unconsciously) considered normal by the subject, the “perversion” becomes pathological. In view of Freud's previous statement, the supplantation of the normal by the abnormal is extremely relevant since it falls in line with Henri Justin's depiction of the murders taking place in the tales as “*allant de soi*”.<sup>81</sup> Just as extreme “perversions” (necrophilia for instance) become normal for the subject, murder is a logical option for Poe's narrators. As said previously, it is always executed, if not performed, in a very careful manner, almost instructional. Post factum, Freud's “perversion” and Poe's “perverseness” share common features regarding detachment from reality as a sign of abnormality. Indeed, Poe depicts a compelling force seizing the subject, then cut off from reality, and curtailing his power over the present moment until satisfied. Contrary to Freud, Poe never states the pathological aspect of “perverseness”. The pathological is nevertheless patent in the tales in view of the previous analyses developed in this chapter. In Freud's view, the reality in which the subject evolves is also altered by the substitution of the “normal” for “perversions”. However, one must be cautious not to investigate Poe's works through the sole grid of Freudian concepts, for the creative and literary aspects are equally essential. This dimension will be discussed in depth in chapter 2.

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<sup>79</sup> FREUD, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Global Grey. (2018), p. 25.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> HENRI, Justin. *Poe dans le Champ du Vertige, des Contes à Eureka : l'élaboration des figures de l'espace*, Paris, Editions Klincksieck, (1991), p. 235.



### 3.3. Theories Exploring Sadism

In the second part, “Fixation of Precursory Sexual Aims”, Freud accounts for new intentions, new sexual aims that may replace the regular aims. Sadism and masochism are central to this part and are also frequently discussed by critics in the case of Poe’s work. Despite the strict sexual orientation of Freud's definition (“to cause pain to the sexual object”) and the absence of references to any sexual intercourse in the tales, some critics have interpreted Poe's tales as essentially related to sexuality and its disorders.<sup>82</sup> For instance, they have endorsed that the tales are metaphors of sexual relationships, to be understood in a secondary level of understanding. A few academic theses, alongside articles, have scrutinised the sexual tension implied between the old man and the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart".<sup>83</sup> Yet, very few research-based analyses have been led to explore the thematical issue of sexuality in Poe's tales. Each reader should reconsider the modern definition of “sadism” that has evolved and largely distanced from Freud's vision. The modern conception of sadism is equivocal and tends to be employed apart from the sexual meaning. It can simply characterise a cruel subject but may also typify a subject who experiences pleasure in inflicting pain during the sexual intercourse. Therefore, the question of sexual enjoyment may be raised when it comes to Poe's tales of murder, yet the enterprise quickly meets its limits.

“One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, ginnurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity. When reason returned with the morning—when I had slept off the fumes of the night’s debauch—I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.” (500)

In this excerpt from "The Black Cat", the ambiguity lies in the contrast between the feeling of thrill ("I blush, I burn, I shudder", 532) and the sentiment of horror ("I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse", 532) experienced and expressed by the narrator. The latter goes through a painful yet alleviating episode. From the outset, Pluto, the cat, embodies the good side that remains from the narrator's past life which he describes as a period of joy, tenderness and empathy. Later, the narrator accounts for the mistreatment of his wife as well as of all the other animals, except for Pluto.

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<sup>82</sup> FREUD, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Global Grey (2018), p. 25.

<sup>83</sup> In her thesis entitled « Homoerotic encounters in the fictions of Edgar Allan Poe », an American student named Judy Ann Connolly endorses that homosexuality is central to Poe’s tales, that one should « discover the covert texts that Poe's narrators obscure » regarding sexual relationships. CONNOLLY, Judy Ann. « Homoerotic encounters in the fictions of Edgar Allan Poe ». Florida Atlantic University (December 2003), p.9. (Available at : <http://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A9933>) (Access Date : 23/05/2020).

He is still capable of "restraining himself"(532). Thus, when the narrator assumes that Pluto is deflecting him, he unconsciously realises that the remaining virtuous part of himself is about to vanish. He cannot fathom why the cat, who has not yet fallen prey to the waxing and waning of his unpredictable disposition, shuns him on no grounds, contrary to the other inhabitants of the house whose mistreatments he is no stranger to. The reader has grounds to believe that the text is imbued with a sense of sexual fulfilment. The sentiment depicted by Poe's narrators, whether in "William Wilson", "The Black Cat", "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "Berenice", is assimilated to a form of pleasure when it comes to violence and murder. Indeed, William Wilson contends that he was "frantic with every species of wild excitement", providing him with the "energy and the power of a multitude" (336). Berenice's cousin also alludes to a form of excitement by referring to his "excited imagination", longing with "a phrenzied desire" (232) for the teeth. By the end of the tale, the narrator "shudders" at the sight of the small box (233). Finally, the scene of murder taking place in "The Tell-Tale Heart", along with the analogous scene in "The Black Cat", seems to be fairly imbued with a sense of libidinal discharge. The narrator draws out the pleasure for eight nights until he eventually comes into action. In this respect, Edgar Poe succeeded in conveying the thrill experienced by the protagonist especially through the pace of the story. Sometimes time-jumping, at times focusing on a particular instant in a very detailed manner, the suspense becomes almost unbearable for the reader.

“And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. [...] The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once—once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done.” (500)

One shall notice the mention of excitement, once again emphasising the conflicting emotions (horror mingled with enjoyment) experienced by the protagonist. Distinguishing excitement from terror is a perilous exercise. Indeed, the narrators of the six tales under study are all subject to ambivalent feelings, to such an extent that the line between pleasure and pain is thin.

### 3.4. Limits Encountered by Sexual Interpretations

Thus, a sexual interpretation of the tales may follow naturally from these observations to account for the sense of libidinal enjoyment to be found within the texts. However, it must be approached carefully. Is it legitimate to endorse that the protagonists are subject to their sexual drives ? Are the murders taking place in the tales sexually motivated ? The persistent theory of sadism would reduce these acts to a desire to find pleasure, whether sexual or not, in the mistreatment of the cat, in the

murder of the old man or Berenice's cruel death. Following a psychoanalytical perspective, it is first necessary to define the notion of sexuality, as well as sexual drives. In psychoanalysis, sexuality must be read with great care. It is at the same time a fundamental element in psychoanalytical theory and a bone of contention with all its contradictions and its grey areas. Therefore, asserting the presence of sexuality as a thematical element in Poe's tales is destined to fail if not well comprehended. Sexuality is another tricky term whose meaning diverges from its common use. Indeed, sexuality not only refers to genitals-related activities but to a wide range of arousals procuring pleasure from the fulfilment of fundamental physiological needs.<sup>84</sup> J. Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis quote “breathing”, “hunger” and “defecation” as examples.<sup>85</sup> The two psychoanalysts tackle a significant issue, altogether suitable to the Poesque case, by formulating the following question:

“Cet élargissement de l'extension du champ de la sexualité [beyond the mere genital arousal] conduit nécessairement Freud à chercher à déterminer les critères de ce qui serait spécifiquement sexuel dans ces diverses activités. Une fois marqué que le sexuel n'est pas réductible au génital [...], qu'est ce qui autorise le psychanalyste à attribuer un caractère sexuel à des processus d'où le génital est absent ?”<sup>86</sup>

How, then, is it legitimate to attribute a sexual nature to Poe's texts ? Further elements are to be found in the definition of sexual drives, or sexual instincts. Once again, the term covers a wider range than its ordinary appreciation. On top of that, the Freudian notion of sexual instincts matured over the course of the years. At first associated by Freud with the “pleasure principle”, they were then conjoined with life instincts. Sexual drives fulfil several criteria, namely their non-predetermination (contrary to the instinct which is pre-fixed) and the variability of the ways and means of satisfaction.<sup>87</sup> Sigmund Freud underlined the role of sexual drives in inhibition, in other words what is repressed in the unconscious. Regarding sexuality in Poe's tales, one should not investigate potential implicit sexual content but the complete absence of sexuality, in its modern sense, while feminine figures are often included in the short stories. Sexuality, in its common sense, is absent from the text.

As a reminder, sexual instincts were tackled in the very first part concerning death drives. Indeed, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud associated the “ego-instincts” with “death drives” and opposed them to “life instincts” also known as “sexual instincts”.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, if sexual drives partake in the preservation and formation of ever-growing vital unities, as said previously, sexual instincts

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<sup>84</sup> “Sexualité” in LAPLANCHE J., PONTALIS J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Presses Universitaires de France (2007), p. 443.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> « Pulsion sexuelle » in LAPLANCHE J., PONTALIS J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Presses Universitaires de France (2007), p. 384.

<sup>88</sup> JONES, Ernest (ed.). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) by Sigmund Freud, p.31.

are not part of Poe's tales. Sexuality falls within an approach of union, of “connection” whereas death drives are linked with disintegration and loss.<sup>89</sup>

Sexuality constitutes a literary aporia when it comes to studying Poe. Very few scholars have undertaken an analysis in depth of the role of sexuality with regards to the poesque material. In addition, sexual interpretations often leave drives aside on behalf of theories about sadism and homoeroticism. This dissertation does not aim at examining sexuality and gender in depth, yet one will notice that the few psychoanalytic study led in the scope of these themes were doomed to failure, for the narrator was mistaken for the author. Here is an excerpt from one of them.

“Mais c'est son obsession de pureté, plus encore que son impuissance, qui explique le sadisme de Poe. C'est pour délivrer les femmes de la chair qu'il les tue. C'est pour sublimer son désir, qu'il se satisfait de substituts symboliques. Dans 'Bérénice', c'est un fétichiste qui fixe son désir sur les dents. Dans Ligéia, c'est un voyeur qui contemple les spasmes du cadavre [...] En voyeur, il conserve cette distance qui est comme un respect très pur. **Voyeur, nécrophile, sadique, fétichiste**, s'il rêve de tous ces vices, c'est par besoin de pureté. [...] Tout l'esthétisme de l'œuvre de Poe semble de même nature que la sublimation sexuelle qui inspire ses amours.”<sup>90</sup>

The previous quotation paves the way towards the next section. Indeed, these types of psychoanalytical readings are severely detrimental to fiction authors. Firstly, they completely overlook the creative and poetic effort in the aid of biographical connections. Secondly, they tend to confidently affirm instead of interpreting. Psychoanalysis is fundamentally theoretical and interpretative, yet nonetheless scientific. Psychoanalysts aim to be “objective towards the subjective”.<sup>91</sup> As far as the previous quotation is concerned, the author displays great subjectivity towards the subjective.

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<sup>89</sup> « Pulsion de vie » in LAPLANCHE J., PONTALIS J.-B., *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, p. 378.

<sup>90</sup> CABAU, Jacques. *Edgar Poe par Lui-même*. Écrivains de Toujours, (1968). Available at : [https://books.google.fr/books?id=WHB6DwAAQBAJ&pg=PT88&hl=fr&source=gbv\\_toc\\_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q=voyeur&f=false](https://books.google.fr/books?id=WHB6DwAAQBAJ&pg=PT88&hl=fr&source=gbv_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q=voyeur&f=false) (Access date : 28/05/2020).

<sup>91</sup> SIGNOL, Arnaud. « La psychanalyse est-elle une science ? ». *Le Journal des psychologues*, vol. 291, no. 8 (2011), p. 54-58.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **The Aesthetics of Perverseness**

## 1. Madness : a mise-en-art

### 1.1 A Note on Stylistics

The first chapter highlighted that Poe's short stories may be approached under the light of psychoanalysis, the purpose of this second chapter is to explore what lies behind the diegetic level. Although Poe's writings are greatly imbued with madness – which largely contributed to the author's reputation –, the tales are above all textual material. In this respect, it is essential to bear in mind that Poe studied medical theories, mental diseases, in particular, Valérie de Courville Nicol comments, to produce “distressing effects”.<sup>92</sup> The short stories must not be considered apart from stylistics. How are the narrators' deranged minds translated in the convolutions of the text? To what extent does stylistics – the study of literary devices in texts - enable to enact drives and perverseness at a textual level?

In order to better understand the issue at stake, it is essential to recall Shoshana Felman's statement about the limits of psychoanalytical studies - as the title of her article in *The Purloined Poe* “On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches” implies. Indeed, the American critic undermined various psychoanalytic theories about Poe, among which Marie Bonaparte's, to remind the readers that they should not forget about the poetic aspect. This dissertation endorses the assertion according to which Edgar Poe's stories are cautiously constructed and the effects purposely planned. Shoshana Felman argues that many of the aforesaid studies failed to “investigate the link between psychology and aesthetics”.<sup>93</sup> They “reduce poetic to cause outside itself”, poetic being overlooked in favour of biographical inquiries.<sup>94</sup> The tension between a discourse *on* madness and a discourse *of* madness led part of the readership into mistaking the narrator for the author. However, madness is “acted out in language” as this second chapter will strive to demonstrate.<sup>95</sup> Thus, an in-depth study of stylistics will validate the hypothesis according to which Edgar Poe carefully controlled his writing.

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<sup>92</sup> DE COURVILLE NICOL, Valérie, « Du Gothique à l'Empirisme Psychologique : la rationalisation de la Peur » in Edgar Allan Poe. Une Pensée de la fin, Canada, Liber, Chassay J.-F, Côté J.-F, Gervais B (January 2001), p.38

<sup>93</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. « On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches » in *The Purloined Poe*.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. *Writing On Madness*. Stanford University Press. (California : 2003), p. 252.

## 1.2. Pace

Studying pace in Poe's tales is essential for the latter enables the author to imitate the unreliable and unstable discourse of the madman. In his article "Mad I am not"...or am I? Poe's Voices of Madness", Jocelyn Dupont notices that a change of pace in "The Tale-Tell Heart" and in "The Black Cat" highlights the "urgency of the speech" as opposed to moments of deceleration.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, Poe uses short sentences, repetitions, repeated exclamations as well as unusual punctuation – namely an excessive use of dashes - to make this "urgency" tangible. Comparatively, Poe's "Loss of Breath" has similar features. The short story opens with the narrator's outburst of verbal and physical violence against his wife.

"Thou wretch!- thou vixen!- thou shrew!" said I to my wife on the morning after our wedding; "thou witch!- thou hag!- thou whippersnapper- thou sink of iniquity!- thou fiery-faced quintessence of all that is abominable!- thou- thou-" here standing upon tiptoe, seizing her by the throat, and placing my mouth close to her ear, I was preparing to launch forth a new and more decided epithet of opprobrium, which should not fail, if ejaculated, to convince her of her insignificance, when to my extreme horror and astonishment I discovered that I had lost my breath. (127)

Surprisingly, the narrator then declares very calmly, one paragraph later :

"There is a good genius, however, which has never entirely deserted me. In my most ungovernable moods, I still retain a sense of propriety, et le chemin des passions me conduit- as Lord Edouard in the "Julie" says it did him- a la philosophie veritable." (127)

The first quotation encapsulates Poe's talent at imitating the discourse of the deranged mind. Indeed, he employs an excessive number of exclamation marks, namely eight in one sentence. The latter is divided into multiple juxtaposed short sentences or repeated utterances thus accelerating the rhythm and perturbing the regular pace of the sentence. The eight dashes also participate in reproducing the narrator's nervousness. Usually used to mark a pause, dashes seem to underline the narrator's loss of control. There are no less than 140 dashes in "Loss of Breath". As Jocelyn Dupont notices, dashes pervade the narrative in "moments of great mental agitation".<sup>97</sup> In this respect, the monologue at the end of "Loss of Breath" is highly representative of the link between dashes and nervousness.

"[...] not a word I beseech you- been here some time myself- terrible accident!- heard of it, I suppose?- awful calamity!- walking under your windows- some short while ago- about the time you were stagestruck- horrible occurrence!- heard of "catching one's breath," eh?- hold your tongue I tell you!- I caught somebody elses!- had always too much of my own met Blab at the corner of the street-

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<sup>96</sup> DUPONT, Jocelyn. "Mad I am not"...or am I? Poe's Voices of Madness". p.189- 200.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

wouldn't give me a chance for a word couldn't get in a syllable edgeways- attacked, consequently, with epilepsies Blab made his escape- damn all fools!-" (134)

The reader loses track because of the apparently disorganised narrative, the intermingled stories and the invasive punctuation. Poe succeeds in imitating the madman's unstable inner speech that a healthy mind cannot follow. Jocelyn Dupont notes that pace seems to be an opportunity to "mimic the pulse of the madman in the pace of the prose".<sup>98</sup> Indeed, he refers to Benjamin Rush's *Inquiries*, also known as *Medical Inquiries and Observations on the Diseases of the Mind*, published in 1812.

"The connection of this disease [madness] with the state of the pulse has been further demonstrated by a most satisfactory experiment, made by Dr. Coxe, and related by him in his *Practical Observations upon Insanity*. He gave digitalis [a natural plant with sedative properties] to a patient who was in a furious state of madness, with a pulse that beat 90 strokes in a minute. [...] He was finally cured by lessening the doses of the medicine so as to elevate his pulse to 70 strokes in a minute, which was probably its natural state."<sup>99</sup>

In this first chapter of his *Medical Inquiries and Observations on the Diseases of the Mind*, Rush draws a parallel between unhealthy mental conditions and the heart rate, the latter being higher than usual for most patients. Whether Poe was acquainted with these pioneering theories or not is scarcely ascertainable. Be that as it may, it is clear that Poe achieved a mimetic effect by aligning his stylistic strategy with the reality of insanity. The author mimicked the madman's accelerated heart rate at a textual level by deconstructing the regular punctuation rules and creating various effects of rhythm.

### 1.3 Text-time and Story-time

In his essay entitled *Narrative Discourse : An Essay in Method*, Gérard Genette intends to provide students with a "manual" of the study of fiction and its techniques, as he declares in his foreword.<sup>100</sup> In the section entitled "Duration", Genette points out the impossibility of measuring the duration of a narrative based on the equivalence between "text -time" (how long it takes to read a passage for instance) and "story-time" (how long a scene lasts).<sup>101</sup> However, he underlines that variations in the

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<sup>98</sup> DUPONT, Jocelyn. "Mad I am not"...or am I? Poe's Voices of Madness.", p.189- 200.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin Rush is known for being one of the significant political figures who signed the 1776 United States Declaration of Independence. Nevertheless, he was also a widely recognised physician and practitioner who published key works about physical and mental diseases. RUSH, Benjamin. *Medical inquiries and Observations on the Diseases of the Mind*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Philadelphia : Grigg, (1830), p 18-19. Online access : <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-66551140R-bk> (Visited on 11/11/2020).

<sup>100</sup> GENETTE, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse : An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press. New York (1980), p. 3. Available at :

[https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ec7b/4f0c6f39851a81cd63de192b088b490cc53d.pdf?\\_ga=2.163659647.1397665976.1605187735-160306950.1604671651](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ec7b/4f0c6f39851a81cd63de192b088b490cc53d.pdf?_ga=2.163659647.1397665976.1605187735-160306950.1604671651) (Visited on 12/11/2020)

<sup>101</sup> GENETTE, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse : An Essay in Method*, p. 3.



distribution of time within a text can be a subject of analysis. Indeed, the relationship between the length of a scene in the story and the textual space allocated to the scene in question causes various effects.

In Poe's tales, the distribution of time throughout the text is central to understand the writing of perverseness. Whether in "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Black Cat" or "The Imp of the Perverse" – all three being tales of deliberate murder –, the distribution of paragraphs betrays the narrator's perverseness. Indeed, in "The Black Cat", the number of sentences dedicated to the concealment of the body is symptomatic of the narrator's unhealthy interest in the process.

"[...] And in this calculation, I was not deceived. By means of a crowbar I easily dislodged the bricks, and, having carefully deposited the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position, while with little trouble, I re-laid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself: "Here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain." (536)

Although this excerpt only corresponds to one third of the descriptive passage, it is nevertheless representative of the "minutest care" with which the narrator accounts for the concealment. In a very mathematical manner, the narrator details the whole procedure. The extensive text-time allocated to the concealment of the body discloses the narrator's abnormal obsession for details. He gets satisfaction from all that has to do with corpses. Bearing in mind, the previous analysis of death instincts, this inclination once again brings the narrator closer to death. Death is not terrifying; it is a source of satisfaction. In addition, the absence of anxiety, guilt or disgust in the description strengthens the maniac effect. Similar phenomena occur in both "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse" in which Poe achieved an effect of "time paralysis". Entire pages are dedicated to the narration of the brief moments before the murder or to the meticulous elaboration of a murderous plan. The vocabulary employed in these passages seems mindfully chosen. For example, in "The Black Cat", the lexical field is rich and very specific ("crowbar", "mortar", "plaster", "brickwork" 536), almost clinical ("calculation", "precaution", "I prepared", "carefully", "minutest care" 536). It gives the reader the impression that he is reading a manual explaining the procedure point by point. These depictions often contrast with the chaotic discourses studied previously. Punctuation is very ordered. Sentences are organised logically, as opposed to the moments when the narrator loses his temper. The use of such a device lures the reader into believing that the narrator displays great self-control. Yet, the reader who anticipates the protagonist's reactions by projecting his own behaviours

most likely expects the narrator to be unsettled when narrating such horrors. On the contrary, the narrators are unruffled. The effect produced by a deceleration in time and length variations betrays the narrator's disturbed obsessions. The discrepancy between the readers' expectations (committing a murder should be traumatising) and the narrators' behaviours (concealing a body as an exciting experience) drives the first to understand that the two of them are not endowed with equal mental balance.

#### 1.4. Narrative Ellipses

In literature, ellipses can be understood either as an omission of words within the structure of a sentence (grammatical ellipses) or as omitting "larger spans of time"(narrative ellipses).<sup>102</sup> According to French literary critic Gérard Genette, an ellipsis is a moment of "infinite speed", a space "where a non-existent section of narrative corresponds to some duration of story".<sup>103</sup> In this respect, "Berenice" is perhaps the most representative example of the use of narrative ellipses as means to create confusion.

"[Berenice] had been seized with epilepsy in the early morning, and now, at the closing in of the night, the grave was ready for its tenant, and all the preparations for the burial were completed.

\* \* \*

I found myself sitting in the library, and again sitting there alone. It seemed that I had newly awakened from a confused and exciting dream. I knew that it was now midnight, and I was well aware, that since the setting of the sun, Berenice had been interred. But of that dreary period which intervened I had no positive, at least no definite comprehension. Yet its memory was replete with horror—horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity." (232)

In this excerpt from "Berenice", it is clear that the reader is deprived of the account of the events that occurred between the moment when Berenice's burial is announced and the moment when the narrator carries with his telling a few hours later. In addition, Berenice's death is never clearly stated. The narrator mentions a seizure yet he does not precise whether the incident was lethal or not. Textual blanks are left for the reader to fill. The narrator gives the reader "an opportunity of employing the wonderful sagacity of which he is master" thus leaving room for him to make "his own conjectures".<sup>104</sup> As far as "Berenice" is concerned, the space left in which the reader can "exercise his talents" seems to be a few hours.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, the author of

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<sup>102</sup> « Ellipsis ». *Literary Terms*. Available at : <https://literaryterms.net/ellipsis/>. (Visited on 23/10//2020)

<sup>103</sup> GENETTE, Gérard. "Duration" in *Narrative Discourse : An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press, (New York: 1980), p. 93.

<sup>104</sup> RIMMON-KENNAN, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction*. Methuen & Co (New York: 1983), p. 53.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

*Narrative Fiction*, notes that the way time spans across a literary text helps the reader grasp the significance of the events. "Acceleration" (short paragraphs describing a long period) and "deceleration" (long paragraphs describing very brief events) guide the reader throughout his reading because they both are "indicators of importance and centrality".<sup>106</sup> To put it in a nutshell, an ellipsis is often the sign of less important moments in the story while very detailed descriptions are symptomatic of key events. It is also used to avoid heavy repetitions. However, the use of the ellipsis as a literary device in "Berenice" is unconventional. Indeed, Berenice's burial is completely elided whereas it should be a central event. It is evidently a way for Poe to confuse the reader. It also hints that something serious occurred during this blank because the ellipsis contrasts with the feeling of horror experienced by the narrator. Something crucial happened yet the reader will not know about it until the end. The ellipsis creates an effect of confusion so that the reader feels as bewildered as the narrator. It could also conceal the movement from a state of relative sanity to a state of delirium, namely the moment when the mad protagonist excavates Berenice. As readers, we are granted access to the madman's inner speech, yet we are not allowed to experience the climactic moments of delirium, just as he does not seem to experience them consciously. The ellipsis takes on its full sense at the very end when the instruments of dental surgery and the teeth are discovered. The link between the teeth and the forgotten memory, the "deed" (232) he has done becomes clear. Ellipses break the usual evolution of a text and, in the case of "Berenice", strongly unsettle the reader. The text becomes a jigsaw puzzle testing the reader's ingenuity. The latter strives to draw the logical links that the narrative has deprived him of.

Poe often made use of ellipses in his tales. In "The Black Cat", the narrator omits entire days of narration ("The second and third day passed [...] 537). Similarly, the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" does not explain precisely what happened during the seven nights before the murder ("I undid [the lantern] just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights [...]" 498). The reader knows how the narrator got into the old man's room, yet he is not made aware of what happened for the rest of the night. At the end of "William Wilson", the scene of the fight, which is of great importance, is left out. "The contest was brief indeed" (328) the main protagonist states, leaving the reader wondering. The use of ellipses is a strategic choice, particularly effective in "Berenice" and "William Wilson". Edgar Poe imitates the process of repression, a term that had not been yet defined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, endured by the neurotic person. In the article "Lacan, Poe and Narrative Repression", scholar Robert Con Davis asserts :

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<sup>106</sup>RIMMON-KENNAN, Schlomith. *Narrative Fiction*. Methuen & Co (New York: 1983), p. 56.

“Gaps appear distinctly like hatchmarks across the narrative to mark what is repressed – what has been pushed down from the surface level of narration and relegated to the unconscious system.”<sup>107</sup>

The elliptic blanks in the text can be understood as part of the narrator’s unconscious. The reader attempts to fill the gaps in the same manner as the psychoanalyst would to clarify the subconscious motives of the protagonist’s acts, like what motivates the hatred against the old man’s eye in “The Tell-Tale Heart” or who the other William Wilson truly is. In “William Wilson”, repression seems to be particularly emphasised. Indeed, the protagonist constantly flees his doppelgänger, moving from one place to another. In agreement with the theory according to which Wilson’s twin is the impersonation of his conscience, the ellipsis takes on its full meaning. Each time the protagonist spurns his double, he represses his superego (in other words, the moral conscience), specifically the unacceptable thoughts of his misdeeds, the evidence of his incline towards vice.

Nonetheless, the frequency of ellipses partakes in the complexity of the text (the key to the plot is rarely given) and therefore discloses the author’s playfulness at his reader. The latter, gifted with a rational mindset, is repeatedly deprived of causal connections. For instance, Berenice’s sudden “death” is not clarified in “Berenice”. In “The Black Cat”, the reader is not granted access to key information as far as the cause of the alteration of the protagonist’s temperament is concerned. He must leave it to his interpretative qualities. The answers he requests are not given to him and he is consequently impelled to interpret. The strength of Poe’s tales also lies in wide interpretative openness. Unresolved questions indeed maintain an unbearable suspense until the end of the story.

### 1.5. The Arabesque

Studying the “arabesque” in Poe’s tales features major difficulties for the word is equivocal. Poe himself did not precisely assess what was postulated by entitling his collection *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque*. In his foreword, the author nevertheless declares that “the epithets “Grotesque” and “Arabesque” will be found to indicate with sufficient precision the prevalent tenor of the tales here published”, leaving the reader with very few information.<sup>108</sup>

In his article entitled “Poe’s Arabesque”, Levi Moffitt Cecil notes that the word “Arabesque” used to be the equivalent of “Arabian” as it was first defined in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>109</sup> Usually, the “Arabesque” is linked with both painting and literature. Arabesque decorative

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<sup>107</sup> DAVIS, Robert Con. “Lacan, Poe, and Narrative Repression.” *MLN*, vol. 98, no. 5, *JSTOR* (1983), p. 983–1005. [www.jstor.org/stable/2906057](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2906057). Accessed 9 Feb. 2021.

<sup>108</sup> POE, Edgar A. *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque* (1840). Project Gutenberg Australia (Australia: 2006, p. 1. Available at: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0603401h.html#01>

<sup>109</sup> CECIL MOFFITT, Levi. “Poe’s “Arabesque” in *Comparative Literature* (Vol.18), 1966, p. 55-70.

arts can be defined as the intertwining of several elements— usually leaves and other natural elements -, intricate in appearance, resulting in an eye-pleasing unit. Later, it gradually characterised a particular decorative art. As far as literature is concerned, several attempts were made to find a consensual definition of the “arabesque”. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the pictorial notion of “arabesque” was reappropriated by German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel as part of his philosophy of romanticism. As Schlegel studied various literary forms – among which the novel and the short story -, he endorsed that they mingled different qualities – fiction, critical discourse, scientific discourse, et caetera – and together formed “une unité dans la diversité” to quote Alain Muzelle’s study of Schlegel’s theories.<sup>110</sup> Through this “arabesque littéraire”, genuine meeting point between various forms, Edgar Poe sets his short stories between fiction and non-fiction, between dream, if not hallucination, and reality.<sup>111</sup> In “The Imp of the Perverse” for example, the narrative hovers between the rational and the irrational, between madness and reason. To quote Jocelyn Dupont, “extreme rationality, no matter how destructive, becomes the gateway to insanity”.<sup>112</sup> Poe plays with this literary arabesque to confuse the reader. How can such a rational narrator be so mad? How can such a madman be so rational? In “The Imp of the Perverse”, the lexical field of philosophy (“reason”; “existence”; “causality”; “Spurzheimites” [716]) and the lexical field of the impulse (“delight”; “pleasurable feeling”; “tormented” [719]; “maddening desire”; “passionate hurry” [720]) merge. In his article, Levi Moffitt Cecil also mentions Arthur Hobson Quinn, who published *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* in 1941:

“A.H. Quinn, in attempting a definitive classification of Poe’s tales offers perhaps a clearer statement of the traditional principle of division. He quotes from a letter to T. W. White, dated April 30, 1835, in which Poe characterizes popular fiction as consisting of “the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque, the fearful colored into the horrible, the witty exaggerated into the burlesque, and the singular heightened into the strange and mystical.” The first and third of these qualities, Quinn avers, Poe incorporated into his Grotesques, [...]. Presumably, this leaves the remaining qualities (i.e., “the fearful colored into the horrible” and the “singular heightened into the strange and mystical” to characterize the Arabesques.”<sup>113</sup>

Indeed, Poe cunningly mingled the colourful and the horrible, life and death, reason and madness. He gave madness an aesthetics. A parallel between the “Arabesque” as a decorative art, pleasing and intricate, and Poe’s tales can be drawn. Poe makes madness pleasant to read. Each selected tale is an

<sup>110</sup> MUZELLE, Alain. “L’arabesque. La théorie romantique de Friedrich Schlegel à l’époque de l’Athenäum”. Presses de l’université Paris-Sorbonne. (Paris : 2006). Quoted in « Comptes rendus. Arts », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2010/6 (65e année), p. 1473-1515. DOI : 10.3917/anna.656.1473. URL : <https://www.cairn-int.info/revue-Annales-2010-6-page-1473.htm>

<sup>111</sup> PACQUET, Clara. « Comptes rendus. Arts », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2016, p. 1473-1515. Available at : <https://www.cairn-int.info/revue-Annales-2010-6-page-1473.htm>

<sup>112</sup> DUPONT, Jocelyn. “Mad I am not”...or am I? Poe’s Voices of Madness, pp.189- 200.

<sup>113</sup> CECIL MOFFITT, Levi. “Poe’s “Arabesque”, p.55-70.

appealing unit, an intriguing mix between horror and fascination, chaos and order, which captivates the reader from the very first lines.

Through the aforesaid literary devices, the writing of madness is controlled by its author. In this respect, Poe alters the pace of the story, by dint of ellipses for instance, accelerates and decelerates the narrative, plays with punctuation and duration and opposes literary forms. By employing these devices, Poe inscribes the madman's derange mind at a textual level. Besides, language is also a way for Poe to perform sincerity, thus to delve further in the representation of perverseness.

## 2. The Language of Persuasion

### 2.1. Negation

“FOR the most wild yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream.” (“The Black Cat”, 536)

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“TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story. (“The Tell-Tale Heart” 500)

The incipits of both “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” are the most representative examples of denial as part of the rhetoric of madness. The repression of insanity is repeatedly found in Poe’s short stories. Repression - as the rejection of thoughts, states, feelings, desires - out of one’s conscious mind - pervades the writing: negative clauses (including “no”, “not” or “none”) are reiterated nearly fifty times in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, sixty times in “The Black Cat”. To a modern reader, repression corroborates the narrators’ neurosis, as studied in chapter one. In the case of Poe’s narrators, the overload of negation leads to the exact contrary: confirmation. Poe uses and overuses negative clauses in order to hint at the possibility of madness. The degree of repression seems to evolve proportionally to the degree of dementia. The more the frantic narrator repudiates his own disorder, the more the reader grasps the severity of his condition. In *Writing and Madness*, Shoshana Felman comments upon the significance of denial in the discourse of madness:

“To talk about madness is always, in fact, to deny it. However one represents madness to oneself or others, to represent madness is always, consciously or unconsciously, to play out the scene of the denial of one’s own madness. [...] If the rhetoric of madness is a rhetoric of denial, denial is itself inhabited by the madness it denies.”<sup>114</sup>

Indeed, the narrators emphatically attempt to assert their sanity by vouching for their honesty and therefore by providing the reader with evidence. In line with Felman’s statement, they reject madness through language. They unsuccessfully impersonate the figure of the healthy man in a “theatre of unconscious discourse” to quote Robert Con Davis’ words in his article “Lacan, Poe, and Narrative Repression”.<sup>115</sup> The mere mention of madness betrays the narrator, for no vindication was requested. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the incipit of “The Tell-Tale Heart” in which the chaotic

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<sup>114</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. *Writing On Madness*. Stanford University Press. (California : 2003), p. 250.

<sup>115</sup> CON DAVIS , Robert. “Lacan, Poe, and Narrative Repression.” *MLN*, vol. 98, no. 5, (1983), p. 983–1005. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2906057](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2906057). Accessed 11 Jan. 2021.

rhetoric mirrors the narrator's mental disorder. The excerpt oscillates between affirmations, negations and interrogations in addition to the ponderous punctuation previously mentioned. Poe's excessive use of negation engenders an abundance of paradoxes, for the main protagonist advocates his sanity which is then deceived by unconventional pace, punctuation and tone.

## 2.2. Tone

The peculiarity of the tone(s) of speech in Poe's short stories is worthy of interest. It is convenient to start the discussion with a short definition of tone in literature. In his article entitled "The Importance of Tone in the Interpretation of Literature", Canadian professor Laurence Perrine defined the chief tenets of the notion of tone. To her, tone is most likely "the most important part of meaning" for the tone of voice prevails over the choice of words.<sup>116</sup> Perrine defines tone in literature as "the element of an utterance which indicates the speaker's or writer's attitude toward his subject, his listener, or himself".<sup>117</sup> Through the way in which the narrator utters his ideas, we, as readers, learn as much about him as we do about his actions.

"I made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect any thing suspicious. And in this calculation I was not deceived. By means of a crowbar I easily dislodged the bricks, and, having carefully deposited the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position, while with little trouble, I re-laid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. [...]" (The Black Cat, 536)

Poe was very likely aware that the choice of a peculiar tone would produce a particular effect. The excerpt from "The Black Cat" right above epitomises the use of a common device in many of Poe's tales. The choice of a rather serene and determined tone contrasts with the context (bearing in mind that the protagonist is immuring his murdered wife). In both "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart", the murderous protagonists draw pleasure and pride from their mathematical concealment of bodies. The discrepancy between the horror of the situation and the tone employed by the narrator hints once more at his perverseness. Moreover, Poe's narrators' instable mindsets are reflected in the constant variations of tones. The tone is at times charged with anxiety, at times with serenity, even pride when the narrator-protagonist accounts for the careful concealment of the body. Speech often switches from one tone (confident) to its opposite (nervous) throughout the story. Indeed, it urges the reader to grasp the unreliability of the narrator which stems from his perverseness. First

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<sup>116</sup> PERRINE, Laurence. "The Importance of Tone in the Interpretation of Literature." *College English*, vol. 24, no. 5 (1963), p. 389–395. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/373555](http://www.jstor.org/stable/373555). (Accessed 22 Jan. 2021).

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*



of all, the narrator is exceedingly erratic and fails to pull himself together. On the other hand, the choice of tone is rarely in keeping with the context. Poe displays great playfulness as far as tone is concerned. In “The Tell-Tall Heart”, the narrator vouches for his sanity by stating that he is able to tell his story very calmly. On the contrary, anxiety quickly supplants the narrator’s alleged composure as he narrates moments of vehemence. The overload of exclamation marks and dashes betrays the protagonist. “Mad am I not”, declares the tale-teller of “The Black Cat” as a guarantee of sanity. However, the light treatment of such horrors encourages the reader to consider the “contrasts and incongruities” in the narrator’s language and therefore reassess his reliability.<sup>118</sup>

### 2.3. Hyper-rationality

It is suitable to begin this discussion about hyper-rationality in a literary work by mentioning the source of this notion. In the book *Les Narrateurs Fous: Mad Narrators*, Dutch professor Lars Bernaerts studies the figure of the madman in the chapter entitled “Tell-Tale Minds: The Rhetoric of Mad First-Person Narration”. Amongst notable features, Bernaerts mentions hyper-rationality. At the root of hyper-rationality is excess. The hyper-rational person makes reason “absolute” and pushes rationality to an extreme.<sup>119</sup> Nathalie Jäeck, Bernaerts’ editor, comments upon hyper-rationality in an article about madness in literature entitled “Mad Narrators: oxymoron or pleonasm ?”:

“Now Sherlock Holmes disguises his aptitude and taste for delirium behind a mask of linguistic hyper-rationality — he is “a fou raisonnant”, and wants his fiction to pass for the truth, to “make sense”: he thus uses language as a seemingly harmless rational decoy.”<sup>120</sup>

In the same manner, Poe’s mad protagonists are exceedingly concerned about the impression they make. The selected short stories are genuine pleas against madness in which the narrators ceaselessly advocate for their sanity and their intellectual superiority. Signs of hyper-rationality can be identified in the narratives. Indeed, the narrators display their linguistic abilities through very persuasive speeches and the devices stemming from it.

“We have suffered its existence to escape our senses, **solely** through want of belief—of faith;— **whether** it be faith in Revelation, **or** faith in the Kabbala. The idea of it has never occurred to us, **simply because of** its supererogation. [...] We could not understand, **that is to say**, we could not have understood, had the notion of this primum mobile ever obtruded itself;—we could not have understood in what manner it might be made to further the objects of humanity, **either** temporal **or** eternal. It cannot be denied that phrenology and, in great measure, all metaphysicianism have been

<sup>118</sup> RIMMON-KENNAN, Schlomith. *Narrative Fiction*, p. 103.

<sup>119</sup> MENDIS, Michael. « Hyper-rationality ». Big Think (05 April 2006). <https://bigthink.com/hyper-rationality> (Accessed 23/01/2021).

<sup>120</sup> JÄECK, Nathalie. « Mad Narrators : Oxymoron or Pleonasm ? ». *Mad Narrators*. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01609196/document> (Accessed 23/01/2021), p. 16.

concocted a priori. [...] Having **thus** fathomed, to his satisfaction, the intentions of Jehovah, out of these intentions he built his innumerable systems of mind.” (The Imp of the Perverse, 716)

The vocabulary employed is rare, complex and very specialised (“supererogation”; “primum mobile”; “metaphysicianism”)., Poe uses and overuses both introductory and linking words, among which conjuncts adverbs, conjunctions and prepositions, which typically belong to persuasive speaking, to imitate the discourse of the intellectual. The narrator lures his reader into believing that he can be a master of himself, thus insisting upon extreme rationality to outshine insanity. In the excerpt above, the conjuncts adverbs (“thus”), the conjunctions (“whether”; “or”; “either”) and the prepositions (“because of”) form complex clauses. Similar textual devices can be detected in the great majority of Poe’s short stories.

« I **then** took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I **then** replaced the boards **so** cleverly, **so** cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. » (The Tell-Tale Heart, 500)

The numerous adverbs (both adjuncts adverbs as “then” and adverbs of intensity as “so”) are part of a strategy of misleading rationality. The murderer details the process by following a mathematical and logical scheme which counterbalances the instability of his mental condition. “Mad am it not!”, the protagonist of “The Black Cat” assures. “You might either have misunderstood me altogether, or, with the rabble, have fancied me mad”, the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse” states. “Ha! – would a madman have been so wise as this?”, the murderer in “The Tell-Tale Heart” declares. Poe’s narrators take shelter in excessive rationality to fend off the opposite: unreason, insanity. They shun insanity through the working of reason. In the case of Poe’s mad narrators, hyper-rationality is a defence mechanism ignited by their denial of insanity. Once more, the reader questions the narrators’ claims of sanity.

### 3. Poe's Intentions

#### 3.1. The Influence of Gothic Fiction

The work of Edgar Poe indeed emerged out of an influential context, in other words out of nearly a hundred years of Gothic publications, carried by noteworthy figures such as Horace Walpole (*The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story*, 1764), Anna Laetitia Aikin ("On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror", 1773) and Matthew Gregory Lewis (*The Monk*, 1796), to name but a few. Poe belongs to three hundred years of enthusiasm for Gothic tropes, in all arts and all forms. It must not be forgotten that Poe was first and foremost a magazine critic. He published hundreds of articles, columns and essays in which he reviewed literary works such as Dickens' and Percy Shelley's for newspapers like *The Southern Literary Messenger*.<sup>121</sup> His active involvement in literary criticism confirms his acquaintance with the literature of his time, among which Gothic works, and therefore with the existing Gothic tropes.

Such tropes evolved throughout this history of the Gothic, especially because it covers a wide spectrum of arts and an extremely extended period (from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to nowadays) and geography (from English Gothic writers to American Gothic writers). Nevertheless, the authors of *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* note that some features have remained relatively constant.<sup>122</sup> Some of these features can be found in Poe's work. The Gothic story is generally located in an "antiquated space" like castles and old grand houses (Poe's "William Wilson", "Berenice", "The Fall of the House of Usher" to quote some of them), emphasises hidden secrets (concealed bodies in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart"), forms of haunting (Poe's protagonists are haunted by obsessive thoughts such as in the end of "The Imp of the Perverse"), conflicts, and "oscillates between the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of supernatural" (in all selected tales, the frontier between hallucinations and reality is blurred). Thus, it is clear that Poe exploited the tropes of Gothic fiction to contribute in its turn to this popular genre. For instance, the influence of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which is often hailed as the first gothic story of all time, over the work of Poe is quite palpable for similar narrative devices can be identified. It is not here a question of usurpation of Walpole's work. The aim is to highlight the influence of established Gothic tropes over the tales of Edgar Poe. In Walpole's *Otranto*, readers are often left in suspense (it takes a couple of paragraphs before the servant finally announces what he saw: the helmet) just as in Poe's "Tell-Tale

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<sup>121</sup> Poe worked for *The Southern Literary Newspaper* from 1835 to 1837.

<sup>122</sup> HOGLE E., Jerrold (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, 2002, p. 2.

Heart” in which the protagonist opens the door very slowly. The most striking echo lies in the “possibilities of supernatural” to quote the words of Hogle. Whether in *Otranto* or the *Tales*, the distinction between real events and hallucinated manifestations is not clearly established. Quite the contrary, it is played with. Walpole’s narrator depicts ghosts as “imperfect ray of clouded moonshine gleam” which the protagonist sees as a human-shaped ghost. Nonetheless, this apparition could also be understood as an hallucination experienced by the protagonist who underwent a severe trauma in the story. Similarly, the possibility of the supernatural is manifest in Poe’s tales. The phenomenon is particularly at stake in “William Wilson” in which Wilson’s *doppelgänger* seems to be a real human being at some point, perceived by other characters as such (when he discloses Wilson’s gambling trick for example), but the relative certainty of his existence is shattered by the doppelgänger’s extrasensory capacities (he is able to follow Wilson everywhere) and by the very disturbing ending scene.

Thus, Poe’s work comes within the scope of the Gothic because it exploits a number of recurrent tropes in terms of settings, motives and narrative devices (death, hidden secrets, dark atmosphere, suspense, physical and psychological pain). Nevertheless, Poe largely contributed to what was later called “Dark romanticism”, a sub-branch of Romanticism. As Dark romantics, authors like Poe, Lord Byron or Mary Shelley focused on self-destruction, anxiety, transgression and the perverse. They established the Gothic not only as the genre of terror and horror, of the supernatural and the macabre but also as the genre of psychological torments. Therefore, it is key to remember that Poe’s *oeuvre* took shape in very specific literary context. Considering the significant influence of Gothic fiction, the argument, which will be examined in the third chapter, according to which Poe’s tales are biographical retranscriptions of his unconscious thoughts and desires tends to be once more undermined. The literary context created an extremely favourable situation for such works to be published. Within this context, Poe’s contribution to literature was his wish to establish a literary method, which is all the more evidence of his authority over his texts.

### 3.2. An Introduction to Critical Writings

As established in this chapter’s previous parts, Edgar Poe produced various effects – by virtue of his avant-garde apprehending of what is nowadays known as drives - by dint of textual devices (variations of pace, tone, time...) to represent drives and perverseness. Bearing in mind the aforesaid hypotheses, the author seemed to maintain a certain degree of control over his writing. But to what extent?

Poe is one of the rare authors who concurrently published several critical works about their own publications. Indeed, Poe offers insights into his writing techniques in his three main works of literary criticism: chronologically *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846), *The Rationale of Verse*<sup>123</sup> (1848) and the posthumous *Poetic Principle* (1850). Poe endeavoured to identify the scheme he followed in the process of writing. The valuable existence of such works enables to rule out the hypothesis according to which Poe's tales are but mere transcription of the author's own madness. Indeed, as it will be demonstrated, these critical writings document the author's intentions by accounting for his method in a very fathomable manner. Moreover, it is convenient to study Poe's method for writing in view of the similar narrative construction of his short stories. Admittedly, they share thematic features. However, they also share textual and stylistic qualities. In each one of the selected tales, the narrative evolves similarly, opening with an introductory segment followed by a series of events divided between climactic moments of anxiety and a more careful, argumentative speech, and ending with a sudden revelation producing a specific effect (astonishment, shock, release...). The same process is repeated from one tale to the other with a different narrator and plot. It is, therefore, suitable to study Poe's method for it applies to the selected tales and provides us with further information concerning the author's purpose.

### 3.2. Effect, Impression, Unity

Along with *The Poetic Principle*, *The Philosophy of Composition* is Poe's most famous essay. The latter is divided between general statements and a more precise exploration of the poem "The Raven". To sum it up, Poe asserted, in accounting for what he had done, that one should always bear the *dénouement* in mind. the outcome should constantly be kept in one's sight. Throughout the essay, Poe also refers to the choice of a particular tone which shall serve a particular effect as we will study hereinafter. Then, he explores the notions of intuition and totality, therefore theorising the "unity of effect".<sup>124</sup> This essay is an open window into the writer's mind.

In his study of Poe's essay, English scholar Person Leland, reveals that "for most readers *The Philosophy of Composition* is less important as an account of how Poe actually wrote "The Raven" than as a statement of his general poetic theories".<sup>125</sup> Indeed, *The Philosophy of Composition* is a posthumous essay in which Edgar Poe thoroughly detailed his writing method in the poem "The

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<sup>123</sup> Given the orientation of this essay (poetry exclusively), *The Rationale of Verse* will not be used in this discussion.

<sup>124</sup> POE, Edgar Allan. *The Philosophy of Composition*. (1846). Available at : <https://jerrywbrown.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Edgar-Allan-Poe-The-Philosophy-of-Composition.pdf>

<sup>125</sup> PERSON, Leland S., Jr. "Poe's Composition of Philosophy: Reading and Writing "The Raven"." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 46 no. 3 (1990), p. 1-15.

Raven”. Nevertheless, contrary to *The Rationale of Verse* which is strictly limited to poetry, some sections in *The Philosophy of Composition* deal in broad terms with the author’s intention while composing along with the reader-response. Moreover, the author admitted in the essay that he chose “The Raven” among others for it is the most popular of his texts. Such statements can be deemed as part of Poe’s literary theory. Poetics is clearly at stake in this essay, for Poe theorises the notion of effect (to be found 29 times in the text):

“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. »<sup>126</sup>

According to Poe, this “effect” either amounts to a form of spiritual elevation (the “soul elevation”) in poetry or a form of intellectual elevation reserved to prose.<sup>127</sup> Writerly mastery together with its force and effects upon the reader paves the way to the “satisfaction of the intellect”.<sup>128</sup> The idea that Poe’s texts are intellectually appealing is by far not a new thought. Critics like Shoshana Felman have often evoked Poe’s “genius effect” that would prompt the reading act, as it will be examined in the third chapter of this dissertation.<sup>129</sup> Before embarking upon composition, Poe chooses a final impression that will be experienced by the reader. Several parameters will then serve this purpose, including the atmosphere, tone, length, duration, intensity and repetition some of which were studied previously. Not only is the very existence of an effect crucial but most importantly the choice of an effect, the intention of impact, also helps realise that Poe minutely controlled his writing. Poe’s statement about non-intuitive writing is key to better grasping the writer’s degree of control. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, he notes:

“Most writers- poets in especial- prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy- an ecstatic intuition [...] 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 [...] 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.”<sup>130</sup>

<sup>126</sup> POE, Edgar Allan. *The Philosophy of Composition*.

<sup>127</sup> “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 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”.

<sup>128</sup> POE, Edgar Allan. *The Philosophy of Composition*.

<sup>129</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. “On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches”.

<sup>130</sup> POE, Edgar Allan. *The Philosophy of Composition*.

He points out the usual deceiving conception of the author as someone who is inhabited by a “fine frenzy”, an “ecstatic intuition” and then opposes this idea by claiming his ability to list each of the steps he followed to write the poem. With the “precision of a mathematical problem” – which is not without recalling the rigorous precision of Poe’s narrators –, he follows a very organised logic. The existence of a pre-established method substantiates the consideration of similar narrative constructions that we mentioned earlier. Poe’s literary theory corroborates the hypothesis according to which his works “are constructed objectively by a will absolutely in control of itself” to quote poet Camille Mauclair.<sup>131</sup> In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe develops his concept of “totality” or “unity of effect” which is fundamental to fully assess the extent of mastery.

“Unity of effect”, also called “totality”, is central to Poe’s literary theory. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe gives insight into this particular notion in an expected methodical manner.

“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.”<sup>132</sup>

Poe attempts to condition the reading act as much as possible. Indeed, the effect derived from various rhetorical devices (tone, repetition...) is also inherent in form and structure. By determining an ideal length, Poe seeks an increased intensity so that the reader would be fully immersed in the story. Various sources echo Poe’s theory of totality: Aristotle’s *Poétique* (IV<sup>th</sup> century) and August Schlegel’s *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1815).<sup>133</sup> In his ultimate critical work *Poétique*, Aristotle mentions the idea of unity through the “unity of action”, that is to say a necessary continuity towards the *dénouement*. The writer must therefore focus on the primary plot, thus leaving subsidiary actions out. In *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, Friedrich Schlegel’s brother, August Schlegel, develops his own conjecture on the notion of unity:

“Collectively, however, they [the separate parts of a work of art] are all subservient to one common aim, namely, to produce a joint impression on the mind.”<sup>134</sup>

There, unity is not confined to action but expanded to encompass time and place. In addition, Schlegel considers an *impression* on the reader which strongly echoes Poe’s *effect*. Whether Poe was acquainted with these critical works remains a closed book. Nevertheless, Poe’s conception of unity is in keeping with these early theories. Brevity is at the root of all effects. To Poe, brevity enhances

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<sup>131</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. “On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches”.

<sup>132</sup> POE, Edgar Allan. *The Philosophy of Composition*.

<sup>133</sup> KELLY, George. “Poe’s Theory of Unity.” *Philological Quarterly* 37 (1958), p. 34.

<sup>134</sup> SCHLEGEL, August. *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1815). Project Gutenberg (Dec 2004). Available at : <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7148> (Accessed on 02/02/2021).

the effects engendered by the meticulous selection and organisation of all literary devices. As a result, the reader is more likely to be absorbed in the story. Along with the choice of effect, totality is a way for Poe to control – to a certain degree - how his story will be perceived by the readers. Beyond content, Poe's observations about unity uphold the postulation that he exercises prior control over his texts to the detriment of intuition.

In *The Poetic Principle*, published four years after *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe resumes his discussion about the aforesaid literary theories. Indeed, he restates his idea of *effect* as well as intensity and soul elevation in a more contentious manner. Most of Poe's statements have already been developed in *The Philosophy of Composition* except for his critical analysis of a series of poems.

*The Philosophy of Composition* has come under harsh criticism from Poe's successors. Kenneth Burke declared that the American author was willing "to compensate for his own personal shortcomings by representing himself as a paragon of rational control".<sup>135</sup> To Romanian literary critic Romulus Bucur, the "mentality of the target audience", namely the reader's disposition which has been influenced by past experiences, supplants Poe's initial intended impression upon the reader. To him, briefness is closely linked with the expectations of the "educated upper-middle-class" to which time is precious. However, this argument may be disputed with regards to the disapproval Poe received from publishers. In his article for *The Guardian* entitled "Edgar Allan Poe: Dividing Audiences for Nearly Two Centuries", writer and editor Sam Jordison examines a series of letters either addressed to Poe or written by the author. In a 1836 letter, American writer James Kirke Paulding, who then worked for publisher Harper and Brothers, refused to publish Poe's texts.

"Secondly, because they consisted of detached tales and pieces; and our long experience has taught us that both these are very serious objections to the success of any publication. Readers in this country have a decided and strong preference for works (especially fiction) in which a single and connected story occupies the whole volume, or number of volumes, as the case may be; and we have always found that republications of magazine articles, known to be such, are the most unsaleable of all literary performances."<sup>136</sup>

Throughout his life, Poe was frequently turned down and had to revise his writings to harmonise with the publishers' prerequisites. An intriguing contradiction persists, for *The Philosophy of Composition* is either considered a desperate attempt by the author at magnifying his own productions, or, on the contrary, is viewed as Poe's underestimation of his intuitive talent at writing. Be that as it may, providing a method implies that anyone should be able to produce comparable texts by using the principles itemised by the author. Through *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe's texts appear very impersonal. However, Poe's texts cannot be strictly limited to

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<sup>135</sup> BURKE, Kenneth. *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*. Univ of California Press. (1966), p. 25.

<sup>136</sup> JORDISON, Sam. "Edgar Allan Poe : Dividing Audiences for Nearly Two Centuries". *The Guardian* (Oct 30, 2013). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/oct/30/edgar-allan-poe-audiences-readers> (Accessed on 04/02/2021)



a mere method in view of the ingenuity of his works and the virtuosity of his writing, which have endowed the author with the stature of master of horror and “founding father of crime fiction”, to quote British author Andrew Taylor.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> TAYLOR, Andrew. « Two Centuries Have Not Aged Poe’s Writing ». *The Guardian*. (Jan 19, 2009)

## **Chapter 3 :**

**From Authorship to Readership: Intra and Extra-Linguistic Inquiries**

## **1. The Limits of Authorship**

### **1.1. Critical Contradictions: Poe's Genius, Poe's Madness ?**

As demonstrated previously, Poe took his readership into consideration, always bearing in mind one particular impression, the “single effect”. Ironically, the overall reception of Poe's works, composed of various criticisms and appraisals still thriving nowadays, is a far cry from being “single”. Indeed, the reception of his work has depended on a number of unsteady parameters, whether geographical, social or chronological. The disparity between the French reception – Poe being very popular - and the American reception of long underestimation is one example of these phenomena. One of the French specialists of Edgar Poe, Claude Richard, speaks of a “rich history of Franco-American misunderstanding”.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, the breadth of the critical contradiction is evidence of something that eluded the author's grasp, despite his anticipatory efforts. As the plethora of answers, all distinct from one another, reveals, reader-response has gone beyond the author's expectations. Some readers experienced the intended effect while others enjoyed another type, moment and intensity of effect. The French author Françoise Grellet the tension between two major receptions of the tales. On the one hand, Poe is either considered a “depraved opium addict”.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, he is hailed as a “misunderstood genius”.<sup>140</sup> Similarly, American literary critic Shoshana Felman suggests that Poe is simultaneously a “most admired” and “most decried” author.<sup>141</sup> She carries on by mentioning a “genius effect”, or “Poe-tic” effect, to define a “compelling force to which the reader is subjected”.<sup>142</sup> Along the same lines, many writers and critics, among whom Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Philip Pendleton Cooke or James Russell Lowell, stresses the author's “genius”, an indefinable yet alluring something which might likely result from the achievement of the pre-conceived effect. As Felman endorses, the mere fact that people have been continuously enticed into reading Poe has turned his work into an “analytical case”, especially as they account for an “indescribable something”, in Felman's words, experienced while reading.<sup>143</sup>

As studied in the first chapter of this dissertation, Poe's tales can be examined at a diegetic level in light of various psychoanalytical concepts, although one must exercise restraint. As a gothic author,

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<sup>138</sup> RICHARD, Claude. « Destin, Design, Dasein: Lacan, Derrida and "The Purloined Letter" ». *The Iowa Review*. Vol 12 (Iowa : 1981), p. 2. Available at : <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3335&context=iowareview>

<sup>139</sup> GRELLET, Françoise. *Literature in English : Anthologie des littératures anglophones*. Hachette Supérieur (France : 2015), p. 258.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. « On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches ».

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

Edgar Poe investigated the “psychology of terror, exploring dreams and hallucinations” by means of unreliable narrators, as Françoise Grellet puts it in *Literature in English*.<sup>144</sup> Therefore, there is legitimately room for psychoanalytical interpretations, for the texts are infused with analogous themes and concepts. In this respect, the psychoanalytical perspective was adopted by a large number of critics and biographers to decipher Poe’s texts, the most known work being Marie Bonaparte’s *Edgar Poe: Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre; Etude Analytique*.

In this biographical work published in 1933, Bonaparte, then Freud’s student, offered a comprehensive analysis of the author’s life and work. A closer insight into Bonaparte’s psychoanalytical investigation is necessary to illustrate the assertion whereby the reader-response largely eludes the author’s grasp. Quite surprisingly, Freud’s foreword does not leave room for any misunderstandings: the author’s personality accounts for the content of his texts.

“Mon amie et élève Marie Bonaparte a, dans ce livre, projeté la lumière de la psychanalyse sur la vie et l’œuvre d’un grand poète aux tendances morbides. Grâce à son travail d’interprétation, on comprend à présent quelle part des caractères de cette œuvre fut conditionnée par la personnalité de l’homme, et l’on peut aussi voir que cette personnalité était le résidu de puissantes fixations affectives et d’expériences douloureuses de sa toute première jeunesse.”<sup>145</sup>

To that end, Marie Bonaparte dedicates nearly a thousand pages to the analysis of the author’s prose as literal transcriptions of his unconscious. In her biography, the tales are held as signs of the author’s pathology and neurosis. As the analysis goes by, Bonaparte mingles biographical elements, psychoanalytical concepts and personal conjectures with considerable assertiveness. The lexical field of speculation pervades the writing. For example, literature is at one with alcoholism in the first volume.

“On peut s’imaginer Poe, dans un attendrissement larmoyant d’alcoolique, traçant sur le papier ces appels véhéments à la mort et à la mère [...]”<sup>146</sup>

A few pages later, she adds:

“Fantasmes de désir comme les rêves, les œuvres d’art constituent pour leur créateur – comme ensuite pour ceux qui en jouissent – une sorte de soupape de sûreté à la pression trop forte des instincts refoulés. Si Poe n’avait pas possédé le don génial lui permettant de sublimer en ses récits ses redoutables instincts, de vêtir ceux-ci du voile brillant de l’esthétique, il aurait peut-être passé un certain nombre de ses années à la prison ou à l’asile”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> GRELLET, Françoise. *Literature in English : Anthologie des littératures anglophones*, p. 259.

<sup>145</sup> BONAPARTE, Marie. *Edgar Poe : Sa Vie, Son Œuvre ; Etude Analytique*. Presses Universitaires de France (Paris : 1958), p. 1.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

Indeed, Bonaparte made an extensive use of the vocabulary and rhetoric of supposition, from verbs like “pouvoir”, which usually refer to various degrees of possibility, to conditional forms (“si Poe [...] il aurait [...]”) along with adverbials of probability (“peut-être”). In addition to inaccuracy, the excessive resort to such elements has urged many critics to question Bonaparte’s interpretation which had yet been long described as a major work of psychoanalysis by her contemporaries.<sup>148</sup>

Although her appraisal granted her with the status of an acknowledged psychoanalyst during her lifetime, a number of her assertions caused her much discredit a posteriori.

“Que Poe ait été un “innocent”, au sens d’impuissant, non seulement ce que nous savons de sa vie, mais son oeuvre en témoigne, cette oeuvre où comme le dit Baudelaire, “il n’y a pas un seul passage qui ait trait à la lubricité ou même aux jouissances sensuelles”, nous dirions à l’amour complet.”<sup>149</sup>

For instance, Bonaparte draws a parallel between the scarcity of romantic matters and Poe’s impotence, if not some sentimental disability. To her, the absence of a particular theme in the artist’s work was symptomatic of its non-existence in the author’s life. To carry on, the prevailing choice of the theme of murder could be explained by the sadistic instinct of aggression, awaiting trigger, in each one of us.<sup>150</sup> In her analysis of “The Tell-Tale Heart”, Bonaparte associates the predominance of darkness and vision with the child’s desire to see his parents being intimate.

“Mais si, au temps où l’enfant est encore tout petit, les adultes ne craignent parfois pas d’accomplir devant lui l’acte sexuel à la lumière, bientôt ils se protègent contre ses yeux, qui pourraient s’éveiller, par le rempart qu’ils croient impénétrable, des ténèbres, ces ténèbres si bien enchantés dans le « Coeur Révélateur » [...] et si les ténèbres épaisses, pareilles à la poix, à travers lesquelles le vieillard dormant – le coeur battant – est épié, sont pourtant percées par le rai de lumière émané de la lanterne, il faut sans doute voir là le reflet du désir intense de l’enfant, autrefois, de voir, de voir quand même, malgré l’obscurité.”<sup>151</sup>

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the enthusiasm around Bonaparte’s psychobiography gradually wore off as an increasing number of scholars heavily criticised her assumptions. Three years after Marie Bonaparte’s death, French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan did not mince his words when responding to his reading of the biography. In his 1965 “leçon” from the seminar “Les Problèmes Cruciaux pour la Psychanalyse”, Lacan refers to the psychobiography in question, declaring :

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<sup>148</sup> AMOUROUX, Rémy. *Marie Bonaparte : entre biologie et freudisme*. Presses universitaires de Rennes. (Rennes : 2012). Available at : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-psychanalyse-2014-4-page-1200.htm>

<sup>149</sup> BONAPARTE, Marie. *Edgar Poe : Sa Vie, Son Œuvre ; Etude Analytique*. Presses Universitaires de France (Paris : 1958), p. 265.

<sup>150</sup> “C’est que le thème de l’assassinat, qui est en même temps, ne l’oublions pas, assassinat de soi, et par là flatte déjà l’instinct d’agression sadique endormi en chacun de nous, instinct d’agression que toute notre civilisation [...]” in BONAPARTE, Marie. *Edgar Poe : Sa Vie, Son Œuvre ; Etude Analytique*, p. 537.

<sup>151</sup> BONAPARTE, Marie. *Edgar Poe : Sa Vie, Son Œuvre ; Etude Analytique*, p. 599-600.

“Dans l’introduction d’une sorte de petit apologue emprunté, non pas au hasard, à une nouvelle de cet extraordinaire esprit qu’est Edgar Poe, La lettre volée notamment 76, qui en raison d’une certaine résistance qu’elle offre à ces sortes d’élucubrations pseudo-analytiques à propos desquelles on ne peut que penser que devrait être renouvelé, dans le domaine de l’investigation, quelque chose d’équivalent à ce que vous voyez sur les murailles, DÉFENSE DE DÉPOSER DES ORDURES...”<sup>152</sup>

These flights of fancy are not without recalling similar critical responses. In the 1980s, two major figures questioned the biography, English teacher Claude Richard and historian Pamela Tytell. In *Edgar Allan Poe, Contes, Essais, Poèmes*, Richard qualifies Bonaparte’s work as a “web of exaggerations and misinterpretations” and holds her responsible for Poe’s secular reputation as a mad drunkman.<sup>153</sup> Similarly, Bonaparte’s analyses are described by Tytell as mere “speculations” in her article entitled “La vie et l’œuvre d’Edgar Allan Poe : l’analyse de la princesse Marie Bonaparte”.<sup>154</sup> In the same vein, French author Jean Bellemin Noël brilliantly summarises the issue at stake in his work *Psychanalyse et Littérature*:

“En somme on croit être seul quand on lit, mais inconsciemment on lit avec l’écrivain, en accord, en écho, en résonance avec lui; ce n’est pas une raison pour en déduire qu’on le lit lui, l’écrivain.”<sup>155</sup>

### 1.2. The Relation Between the Author and the Work

The previous discussion regarding psycho-analytical biographies paves the way to a fundamental question which is highly related to Poe’s tales: should a work be considered on its own, apart from its author, or, on the contrary, should the author’s biography serve the understanding of a work ? Poe’s work is indeed at the heart of such a question in view of the plethora of theories which have advocated the use of the author’s life to examine his texts.

Before investigating the matter in depth, a point of clarification is necessary, for the issue has taken a new turn for a couple of years. The separation author/work here studied must not be comprehended in terms of morality (for example, to read or not to read a book published by someone who committed a murder) but in analytical terms, that is to say in order to account for a particular content in a work

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<sup>152</sup> LACAN, Jacques. “Problèmes cruciaux pour la psychanalyse.” *Le Séminaire, Livre XII, (1964-1965)*, unpublished (1964), p. 524.

<sup>153</sup> Translation of « un tissu d’exagérations et de contresens » in RICHARD, Claude. « Introduction générale » in *Edgar Allan Poe, Contes, Essais, Poèmes*, Robert Laffont (Paris: 1989), p. 9-23

<sup>154</sup> TYTELL, Pamela. « La vie et l’œuvre d’Edgar Allan Poe : l’analyse de la princesse Marie Bonaparte » in *La plume sur le divan* (Paris, Aubier :1982), p. 85-94.

<sup>155</sup> BELLEMIN NOEL, Jean. *Psychanalyse et Littérature*, p. 151.

by referring to an event that occurred in the author's life. By way of exemplification, Marie Bonaparte explained the absence of sexual relations in the tales by the author's own impotence.

To fully grasp the complexity of an issue which has sparked debate over the course of time, it is convenient to refer to one major work: Marcel Proust's critical collection *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Published posthumously in 1954, the collection already provides us with elements of answer. That one should separate the work from its author in the analytical process is the cornerstone of Proust's literary criticism. In the scope of this dissertation, it is also central to Poe's *œuvre*. Proust opposed his viewpoint to French literary critic Sainte-Beuve's, to whom a work mirrored the author's life, following this method, studying his or her biography is essential to fully grasp the meaning of a given work. Sainte-Beuve encourages to question the artist's kin in order to collect pieces of answer. On the contrary, Proust stresses the necessity to consider the work apart from the author:

“Un livre est le produit d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. [...] que l'homme qui vit dans un même corps avec tout grand génie a peu de rapport avec lui, que c'est lui que ses intimes connaissent, et qu'ainsi il est absurde de juger comme Sainte-Beuve le poète par l'homme ou par le dire de ses amis. Quant à l'homme lui-même, il n'est qu'un homme, et peut parfaitement ignorer ce que veut le poète qui vit en lui.”<sup>156</sup>

Indeed, to Proust, the work must be regarded independently of its author, arguing that the artist and the individual are two separate entities during the act of writing.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, the critic deplores that stylistics was left aside by Sainte-Beuve in his analyses, a point which is not without recalling the critical stance adopted by Bonaparte's modern detractors. Indeed, what must be noted is that biographical examinations do not investigate the role of both aesthetics (the specific principles found in an artwork) and stylistics (the linguistic devices) in the understanding of a text. As Felman formulates it, one should rather question “what made people read” instead of “what made the author write”.<sup>158</sup> Poetics and external influences are often wrongly assimilated, especially in the case of Poe's texts which have been reduced to mere literary compensation for the author's alleged pathology.

Although Proust's arguments rightly legitimate the supremacy of literature over biographical analyses, he nonetheless adopts a very strict viewpoint of the literary work in itself to the point that the figure of the author is fully obliterated. However, stating that the author's own past and present experiences does not impact a work in any way seems unrealistic. Despite their pertinence, Proust's arguments must be nuanced, for the author of a work is also subjective to various degrees.

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<sup>156</sup> PROUST, Marcel. *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. Collection Folio Essais, Gallimard. (Paris : 1987), p. 24.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>158</sup> FELMAN, Shoshana. « On Reading Poetry : Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches ».

“L’audace des thèmes qu’[Edgar Poe] aborde, qui comme le dit Lacan lors de son séminaire *Le Moi dans la théorie de Freud* vient « jouxter tout le temps des rapports de la vie et de la mort, et d’une façon qui n’est pas sans portée », entraîne la subjectivité du lecteur dans le sillage de celle de Poe”<sup>159</sup>

French psychiatrist Thierry Florentin highlights this twofold subjectivity (author/reader) in his 2010 article “La Folie Edgar Poe”, yet arguing that the choice of such themes as life and death already dismissed any form of objectivity. In this article, Florentin demonstrates that Poe himself values the role of the author’s identity by quoting an untranslated work: *The Literati*.

“The Supposition that the book of an author is a thing apart from the author’s self is, I think, ill-founded.”<sup>160</sup>

How, then, can we approach the issue of the separation of the author and the work ? Subjectivity is one answer. To a certain extent, biographical information can become a critical instrument. For instance, the fact that Edgar Poe was enthusiastic about literary effects, which is legitimated by their recurrent mention and depiction in his critical works, is a biographical element used in this dissertation as a critical instrument to demonstrate that the tales were constructed in such a way as to best produce these impressions. If biographical elements can be used to account for certain aspects of a work, the liberty of interpretation is highly limited. For example, Marie Bonaparte based her analysis of “The Tell-Tale Heart” on the assumption that Poe witnessed a sexual intercourse during his early childhood. Still, speculations are not legitimate in the scope of literary analysis. In addition, the “trauma”, if indeed experienced, is proper to Poe and is considerably subjective. In his article entitled “Biography in Literary Criticism”, Norwegian scholar Stein Haugom Olsen studies the possibilities and limits of biographical arguments. He states:

“The use of biographical information in criticism does, however, give rise to theoretical problems when it occurs as part of an argument aimed at contributing to or changing the reader’s appreciation of a literary work”<sup>161</sup>

Olsen notes that biographical arguments are legitimate as long as there are employed as “expressions of the authors’ personal preoccupations” (for example, Poe’s interest in literary effects or Poe’s knowledge of scientific researches in psychiatry).<sup>162</sup> Conversely, they cannot be used as a “background for the identification of the themes [of the tales]”.<sup>163</sup> To put it simply, Olsen establishes

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<sup>159</sup> FLORENTIN, Thierry. “La Folie Edgar Poe”. ERES. La Revue Lacanienne (2010), p. 17-25.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> OLSEN, H. Stein. “Biography in Literary Criticism”. ResearchGate. Bilkent University (December 2009), p. 9. Available at : [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228051438\\_Biography\\_in\\_Literary\\_Criticism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228051438_Biography_in_Literary_Criticism) (Accessed on 11/05/2021)

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> OLSEN, H. Stein. “Biography in Literary Criticism”, p. 9.



a distinction between factual “information that is introduced” and “background information that is presupposed”.<sup>164</sup> Bearing in mind Bonaparte’s work, her exploration relies upon an extensive amount of presuppositions which are, therefore, invalid arguments, for they are mere conjectures serving the identification of certain motives. Olsen carries on:

“Background information [...] places the author in a world of shared beliefs, assumptions and values which the author is seen to represent or reflect. It does not concern the author as an individual but as a member of a group or society.”<sup>165</sup>

Bonaparte’s perceptions are indeed already prejudiced as she applies generalising hypotheses (for instance, the consumption of alcohol will expose people’s deepest thoughts) to a particular and personal experience on the one hand (because of this consumption, Poe wrote about the death of his mother), and to a fictional event on the other hand (the death of a feminine character symbolises the death of Poe’s mother). Biographers like Bonaparte draw conclusions out of generalising approaches mingled with presuppositions about the author’s private life. Yet, “Poe n’est pas un objet d’étude en soi”, thus including his private life, Henri Justin proposes, but he is “un psychisme coulé dans les circonvolutions des textes”.<sup>166</sup>

Nonetheless, Proust understood the necessity to favour the literary analysis (which is subject to established standards and conventions) in order to prevent prejudiced speculations. To favour the study of a work’s “littérarité”, to quote Russian philosopher Roman Jakobson, is to avoid the interpretational trap of such biographical appraisals, which lies in producing misleading coincidences, value judgements and speculations.<sup>167</sup> The shift of focus from context to content enables one to examine the genuine quality of a text along with the creativity, which are key parameters in triggering the act of reading. The study of the stylistic process also lays the foundation for the understanding of the effects produced. As opposed to psychoanalytical literary criticism such as Bonaparte’s, exploring the content, stylistics and literary effects paves the way to less prejudiced interpretations in view of the methodological constraints, for literary analysis relies upon a set of established rules and shared conventions. Most importantly, such an enterprise serves a better comprehension of one’s language, namely English in the case of Poe. Lastly, the stylistic approach is necessary to recognise the author’s genuine literary craftsmanship.

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<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>166</sup> FLORENTIN, Thierry. “La Folie Edgar Poe”, p. 17-25.

<sup>167</sup> The term « littérarité » was coined by Roman Jakobson to define what makes a text a literary text, more precisely the study of the various writing techniques and linguistic elements within it.

### 1.3. The Plurality of Readers

As far as readership is concerned, Poe perpetually took reception into account in the act of writing. The “single effect” previously considered stems from a meticulous anticipation of reader-response.<sup>168</sup> Nonetheless, the assumption that the pre-conceived effect produced on the reader would be one unique impression across all is relatively doomed to failure. Indeed, one major argument may be put forward: the diversity of readers acts a bulwark against Poe’s expectations. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, he declares:

"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?"<sup>169</sup>

It is clear that Poe advocates the choice of one particular impression, among many, which would occur once at the end of the short story. The “effect”, referred to as a “vivid effect” in *The Philosophy of Composition*, is selected beforehand.<sup>170</sup> He carries on:

“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.”<sup>171</sup>

Poe’s quest for both particularity (the selection of one single effect) and universality (“rendering the work universally appreciable”) appears paradoxical. This contradiction mirrors the wide range of interpretations which have succeeded one another for decades. The act of reading is indeed a multi-faceted experience while the text is unique. Following a structuralist approach, it can be regarded as an enclosed system. A literary work is a sealed organisation comparable to language, language being a closed system of signs. Along the same lines, Poe’s collection is a closed system progressing from a beginning to an end and fixed in time. To summarise, the signs (in this case words) remain while the meaning itself evolves. The extensive potential of a text’s meaning partly relies upon the manifold dimension of readership. Texts are enclosed systems in which the liberty of interpretation develops. It is convenient to note that interpretational liberty is relatively restricted in light of the historical context (to avoid anachronism). Yet, it remains that the diversity of readers generates a multiplicity of interpretations and effects. On the one hand, Poe’s work can be assessed in the light of Saussure’s approach insomuch as the tales are composed of fixed signs. On the other hand, the meaning,

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<sup>168</sup> Poe mentioned a “certain unique or single effect to be wrought out” in his review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* in Graham’s Magazine, published in 1842.

<sup>169</sup> POE, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition." (1846). Available at : <https://jerrywbrown.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Edgar-Allan-Poe-The-Philosophy-of-Composition.pdf>

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

undetermined, is subject to change due to a significant number of variables. Hypothetically, the modern reader, acquainted with recent brain studies, is liable to interpret the tales in quite a different way than a 19<sup>th</sup> century reader would likely do. In her paper entitled “Definition of reader, as a relative concept, in reader-response theories”, Iranian literary critic Shaghayegh Ghandehari stresses here the instability of reception and therefore, the relative difficulty with which an author may predict and affect reader-response.

“This process seems to be quite complicated and intangible; as every individual experiences this process in a unique manner and in a very exclusive and certain atmosphere; considering his age, past experience, knowledge, style of reading, rate of his preciseness, his power for simultaneous analysis and interpretation, how he essentially communicates with the text, his ability or disability to read between the lines, his reading atmosphere, how he seeks his personal pleasure and satisfaction in the book he has and numerous other factors; including psychological aspects.”<sup>172</sup>

In fact, what she underlines is that the degree of anticipation is inhibited because of an extensive number of external parameters (social environment, past experiences, sensitivity, disposition, and so on). In brief, the author does not have full power over the final understanding of his own work. Despite his efforts, Poe cannot entirely influence the experience of the reader, for it is conditioned by external variables. To go even further, as French philosopher, critic and semiologist Roland Barthes phrases it in *The Death of the Author*, the “birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author”.<sup>173</sup> Barthes’s viewpoint, by arguing that “only language acts, performs” also falls in line with Proust’s assertion that the author and the work must be examined separately.<sup>174</sup> The “death” of the author must not be construed as the death of the work, impersonal and authorless, but as a limitation of the absolute status of the author as the only master on board. Considering the variety of responses to Poe’s tales, it is now clear that the author’s solid expectations had to meet with the instability of reception. Whether in his critical papers or in his fictional tales, Edgar Poe always mentioned the “reader” in its singular form. Here, in “The Theory of Composition”:

“The idea of making the lover supposes, 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. [...] This revolution of thought, or fancy, on the lover's part, is intended to induce a similar one on the part of the **reader** [...] The **reader** begins now to regard the Raven as emblematical [...]”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> GHANDEHARI, Shaghayegh. “Definition of Reader, as a Relative Concept, in Reader- Response Theories” *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 70 (2013). Available at : <https://cyberleninka.org/article/n/1155976>

<sup>173</sup> “La naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l’auteur” in BARTHES, Roland. “La Mort de l’Auteur” (1968). *Le Bruissement de la Langue*. Seuil (Paris : 1984), p. 66.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>175</sup> POE, Edgar Allan. “The Philosophy of Composition.” (1846), p. 2.

Nonetheless, the reader is not one consistent entity. Poe's anticipations indeed suffers from the discrepancy between the "implied reader" (who is hypothetically receptive to what the author intended to convey) and "the actual reader" (who is not necessarily) to use German theorist Wolfgang Iser's terms.<sup>176</sup> Poe's texts greatly exemplify these two concepts. Expectations lean on the "implied reader", who is, in theory, to respond in a particular way, as expected. In this case, it cannot be denied that part of the readership indeed experienced "vivid effects", in Poe's words. Yet, the response of the "actual reader", who is all the more conditioned by his background and disposition, differs from what was intended. In the case of our selected tales, some readers are sensitive to the stylistic proposition and praises the author's "genius", others are less receptive, as shown by the diversity of impressions that have been depicted for decades by critics, theorists, scholars and other readers. However, the everlasting interest in Poe's work underscores that it has continuously affected its readers in various manners over the course of time. In a work dedicated to Poe's influence in all arts and literature, French scholars Jocelyn Dupont and Gilles Menegaldo even depicts him as "une figure omniprésente à tous les étages de l'édifice culturel occidental", thus stressing the writer's significance.<sup>177</sup> Undoubtedly, Poe's writings have produced various effects on diverse readers who have been reading Poe for nearly two centuries since its publication, thus contributing to the author's everlasting popularity.

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<sup>176</sup> W. DANIEL, Wilson. "Readers in texts." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (1981), p. 848-863.

<sup>177</sup> DUPONT, Jocelyn. MENEGALDO, Gilles (dir.). *Spectres de Poe dans la Littérature et dans les Arts*. Le Visage Vert (France : 2020), p. 15.

## 2. The “Birth” of the reader

### 2.1. Active Linguistic Inquiry

Poe’s authorial anticipation is jeopardised by the reader’s major involvement in the actualisation of the text’s meaning. Indeed, he is perpetually engaged in the establishment of logical and causal connections (by reducing his scope of hypotheses as the reading goes by). By taking part in the activation of meaning, readers are involved in the proper functioning of the work. In this delayed communication between authors and readers, the latter’s role cannot be minimised, especially in studying Poe’s texts in which the “textual inquiry is imposed”, to quote Henri Justin.<sup>178</sup> As highlighted in the second chapter of this dissertation, the selected tales are all filled with uncertainties, indeterminations (exacerbated by the many ellipses for example) and irregularities (in pace and time) which are the result of a manipulative author as it will be developed later. Poe’s readers are primarily active agents constantly engaged in a process of interpretation. As the reading goes by, they seek, often vainly, to unearth elements of causality which would account for the peculiar events unfolding in the story. In the same vein, British critic Terry Eagleton advocates the active role of readers in his fundamental work *Literary Theory*, published in 1983.

“The reader makes implicit connections, fills in gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches; and to do this means drawing on a tacit knowledge of the world in general and of literary conventions in particular. The text itself is really no more than a series of ‘cues’ to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning. In the terminology of reception theory, the reader ‘concretizes’ the literary work, which is in itself no more than a chain of organized black marks on a page. Without this continuous active participation on the reader’s part, there would be no literary work at all.”<sup>179</sup>

In reader-response theory, the assertion that readers give a text its identity has sparked interest for decades. Along the same line, Wolfgang Iser contributes to literary criticism by developing his conception of the act of reading, reader-response and interpretation in key works like *The Reading Process* (1972) in which he states that “the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence”.<sup>180</sup>

This meeting point between the text and reader is particularly at work in Poe’s tales whose narrators, in this respect, actively address the readers. The role of the reader goes beyond his mere disposition to make connections since the latter is part of the story. Whether in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, “The Black

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<sup>178</sup> HENRI, Justin. *Poe dans le Champ du Vertige*, p. 56.

<sup>179</sup> EAGLETON, Terry. « Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory » in *Literary Theory. The University of Minnesota Press*. (1996), p. 66.

<sup>180</sup> ISER, Wolfgang. “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.” *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1972), p. 279–299. *JSTOR*. Available at : [www.jstor.org/stable/468316](http://www.jstor.org/stable/468316). Accessed 17 Apr. 2021.

Cat”, “The Imp of the Perverse”, “William Wilson”, “Loss of Breath” or “Berenice”, the reader is a direct addressee:

“I would have the judicious reader pause before accusing such asseverations of an undue quantum of absurdity. Anaxagoras, it will be remembered, maintained that snow is black, and this I have since found to be the case.” (“Loss of Breath”, 127)

The narrators appeal to the addressee’s empathy by putting him in the place of the confident. He is asked to assess the narrator’s plea. The intellectual investigation is imposed upon the active reader who must decipher what is true, what is false, what is real, what is not. The unusual variations in tone, pace and time trouble the rational connections the reader is attempting to draw from the text by dint of causal cognition.<sup>181</sup> In addition, the reader must determine what is hidden behind implied meanings (such as the responsibility of the narrator in the violation of Berenice’s grave), beyond the literal meaning. Indeed, Poe has been widely recognised as a main influence over the Symbolist movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Against the backdrop of extremely rational and enlightening discourses, Poe heavily resorts to symbols, suggestions and hints, all being parts of the gaps filled by the reader in the reading process. Yet, the reader’s capacity to actively fill in the blanks does not come under the authority of the author who cannot predict whether the reader will be able or not to interpret the various levels of meanings as expected.

Depending on the author’s intention, the meaning may be relatively fixed when he thoroughly communicates his intent (for instance, by providing an analysis of his own work). Yet, in most cases, the author’s virtual proposition may go beyond his expectations. As previously underlined, the work is an enclosed system while meaning evolves on various grounds (the period, the social environment, the reader’s knowledge, new signifiers...). Therefore, it is not fixed, especially if one considers the variety of readers’ criteria for appraising a text, usually referred to as “the horizon of expectation”.

## 2.2. The Horizon of Expectation

“Le texte nouveau évoque pour le lecteur (ou l'auditeur) l'horizon des attentes et des règles du jeu avec lequel des textes antérieurs l'ont familiarisé ; cet horizon est ensuite, au fil de la lecture, varié, corrigé, modifié, ou simplement reproduit.”<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Causal cognition being « the integration of content information into theory-like representations, with serious implications for processing » serving detection, reasoning and predictions, as defined by Andrea Bender from the Department of Psychosocial Science of the University of Bergen in « What is Causal Cognition ? », *Frontiers in Psychology* (Bergen : January 2000). [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338749621\\_What\\_Is\\_Causal\\_Cognition](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338749621_What_Is_Causal_Cognition)

<sup>182</sup> JARDBINSKI, Foreword, in JAUSS, Hans Robert. *Pour une Esthétique de la Réception*. Gallimard (Paris : 1978), p. 14-15.

This extract from Jean Starobinski's foreword in Hans Robert Jauss' *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* highlights the main principle of the notion of « horizon of expectation » which is to be understood as an active production of hypotheses and anticipation on the basis of the reader's past experiences. The process of interpretation relies upon his degree of acquaintance with a set of conventions. Consequently, the notion of "horizon d'attente" corroborates the subjective dimension of the act of reading. In accordance with Jauss' theory, interpretation is inherently personal, subjective, because it is conditioned by historical and social parameters. To go even further, the reading hinges upon each reader's inclination. Just as meaning, the horizon of expectation is not fixed. On the contrary, it is intrinsically instable considering that each reading participates in the modification of the horizon. For instance, readers who are familiar with the work of Edgar Poe may gradually assimilate the narrators' exacerbated honesty as a sign of unreliability. In further readings, such motives may produce inferences (unconscious links, predictions and then conclusions) and act as unconscious warnings. In a very unconscious mental process, such inferences might then influence the reader's understanding of a narrator's "honest" confidence in a completely different work. The reader's expectations attached to the concept of honesty will therefore be confirmed or revised. Authors like Edgar Poe were naturally not acquainted with the notion of horizon of expectation, which was theorised and developed in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, such reception theories provide us with further elements of answer regarding the question of the extent of the author's power over his text. Indeed, Jauss presented three main aspects which, in the scope of this dissertation, corroborate the surmise that Poe's expectations have been compromised by various subjective factors. First of all, the horizon of expectation relies upon the experience that the reader already has with the works of a specific genre. In the case of Poe's tales, the interpretational process will be influenced by the reader's knowledge of Gothic fiction. The degree of familiarisation with the conventions of the genre is liable to sway the reader's anticipatory capacities. For example, a Gothic-savvy reader is likely to expect a forthcoming death considering that he has recognised beforehand elements of Gothic fiction (such as eerie settings, psychological introspection, signs of madness...) throughout his reading. He is not likely to be caught unawares by the brutal and gory death of one of the characters, as opposed to a reader who is used to reading romance novels. Thus, the outcome of the effect is not in Poe's hands. Coming back to Jauss' theorisation of the horizon of expectation, this also holds true for thematic and stylistic presuppositions, both affecting the reader's expectancy.

"The new literary work is received and judged against the background of other works of art as well as against the background of the everyday experience of life."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> JAUSS, Hans Robert, BENZINGER, Elizabeth . "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory." *New Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1970, p. 7–37. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/468585](http://www.jstor.org/stable/468585). Accessed 3 May 2021.

Lastly, indeed, the understanding of a literary work is conditioned by the reader's "everyday experience of life". Interpretation is all the more uncertain for the personal context must come under consideration. As the actualisation of the intended effect(s) greatly relies upon such a plurality of extra-linguistic parameters, proper to each reader, it appears that the author's possibilities of anticipation are exhaustively inhibited or expanded. Thus, the variety of extrinsic factors to which Poe's tales have been subjected eventually explains why some readers have interpreted the tales as the product of a madman while others have praised the author's genius. The text largely eludes the author's grasp.

### 2.3 Readers and Poe: a Labyrinthine Communication

Nonetheless, although the reader plays a substantial role in the actualisation of meaning, he is not as much in control as we would expect in the Poe's case. The aim of this final section is not to minimise the reader's role after having emphasised its significance or to focus on the figure of the author once again, but to briefly examine the limits of readership. The case of Poe's texts is a singular one in that he purposely interferes in the reader's part by making comprehension increasingly difficult. In addition to the aforesaid textual gaps filled by the reader, Poe adds even more uncertainties to the various literary devices described in chapter 2 (instable pace, ellipses...).

Authors may indeed toy with the horizon of expectation to create specific effects. Despite the impossible prediction of the efficiency of the effects, one may sustain that Edgar Poe was nevertheless eminently calculating and displayed great playfulness towards his readers. This manipulative shell game between author and reader is particularly at work in the selected tales. The reader is in charge of the actualisation of meaning yet the task is jeopardised by a playful, cunning author. In his extensive book entitled *Edgar Allan Poe*, Claude Richard gathered Poe's major critical essays and articles among which "Les Contes de Poe", translated in French by Richard, which was published on October 1845 in the *Aristidean*. The peculiarity of some turns of phrase, Richard comments, already used in previous articles, the reference to a letter he was the only one informed of, and to an article that he himself had written ("Our Book Selves") along with the development of ideas he also referred to in the ongoing *Philosophy of Composition* (1846) proved that the article had been written by Poe himself.<sup>184</sup>

"Le but est d'inciter le lecteur à croire à quelque intervention surnaturelle et de le laisser dans l'erreur jusqu'au dernier moment. [...] Il faut que l'écrivain ait une croyance absolue en ses déclarations ou simule cette croyance à la perfection de telle sorte que l'esprit du lecteur soit

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<sup>184</sup> RICHARD, Claude. *Edgar Allan Poe*. Editions de l'Herne (Paris: 1974), p. 119.



totalement absorbé par la lecture. Seuls les génies les plus hauts possèdent cette faculté de simulation. Elle procède d'un équilibre spécial des facultés cérébrales. [...] Il élimine tout mot qui ne tend pas à renforcer l'effet. "<sup>185</sup>

It is clear that the cited article is of great value for it substantiates our claim that Poe's *oeuvre* is not a bare written transcription of the author's unconscious thoughts but a carefully planned and well thought out work. Most importantly, he profoundly reflected upon the reading experience so that he could develop a smoke screen of verisimilitude. As a result, Jacques Lacan himself praised its achievement. The French psychiatrist highlights "une vraisemblance parfaite" in his 1956 "Séminaire sur la Lettre Volée".<sup>186</sup> Thus, Poe turns his readers into consistency seekers. Throughout the reading, they attempt to establish the causal connections (for example, unravelling the mystery of Berenice's deteriorating condition) and restore the lack of coherence. Yet, Poe compromises the coherence by purposely misleading the reader. The frontier between fiction and non-fiction is troubled by a semblance of verisimilitude whose illusion is harboured by the narrator's extreme rationality, the richness of details and, most importantly intertextuality. The narrators all refer to a plethora of external texts such as Coelius Secundus Curios's *De Amplitudine Beati Regni Dei*, St. Austin's "City of God" or Tertullian's "De Carne Christi", all dealing with religious matters. In "The Imp of the Perverse", Poe refers to a wide range of scientific theories such as Johann Spurzheim's. Such an extensive use of external texts established a form intellectual superiority over the average reader, which participates all the more in the mad narrator's hyper-rationality and empowerment. Bearing in mind that the reader is not acquainted with such references, the narrator is the only one possessing knowledge. "Berenice" is the most representative example of such a process. The narrator mentions a couple of books which influenced him, quoting an excerpt from "De Carne Christi", in Latin: "credible est quia ineptum est" (230). Once again, the reader must inquire. He is compelled to dabble in various language (usually English, Latin and French) to fully access information. The epigraph can be translated by "it is by all means to be believed because it is absurd". One interpretation relies upon the notion of belief. When something is absurd, lacking logical links, we have no choice but to believe it on the basis of no reliable evidence. This applies to all beliefs. In the light of this interpretation, a parallel may be drawn between the cited extract and the tale itself, which is at times devoid of sensible connections. For instance, the disturbing evolution of Berenice's health is not clarified. Similar phenomena can be observed in most of Poe's tales of murder. Edgar Poe infuses his narrators with an acute sense of intellectual curiosity, forcing the reader to be inquisitive in his turn. Poe's tales are intellectually stimulant. Yet, the rich intertextuality adds even more complexity to the understanding

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>186</sup> LACAN, Jacques. "Le séminaire sur la lettre volée". *La Psychanalyse*, n°2, (1956), p. 12. Available at : <http://staferla.free.fr/Lacan/La%20lettre%20volee.pdf>

of the tales, which is in addition troubled by a very cunning author and by his mastery of the English, French and Latin languages.

In his article entitled “La Folie Edgar Poe”, French psychiatrist Thierry Florentin stresses the author’s playfulness, turning the reading act into an intellectual jigsaw.

“Dans son travail d’écriture, comme dans sa vie, Poe ne cessait de jouer avec le signifiant, de le distordre, passait d’une langue à l’autre, usait abondamment de l’équivoque, de l’homophonie, des anagrammes, de l’emploi du français, tous jeux linguistiques le plus souvent ignorés ou simplement écartés par la traduction de Baudelaire, et qui constituent au-delà du contenu ou du style du récit une œuvre dans l’œuvre. »<sup>187</sup>

In light of the literary analysis conducted in the second chapter of this dissertation, Poe’s craftiness finds its proper place in this demonstration. Indeed, the argument that the tales are the stage of the author’s unconscious is not tenable considering Poe’s active involvement in the shaping of the reading act. The shortness of the tales is in sharp contrast with the extent of intellectual involvement required to fully grasp the subtlety of the texts. Ironically, the illusion of insanity is pushed to such an extreme that some readers fell into the trap and yielded to the temptation of prejudiced criticism. Indeed, a majority of Poe’s contemporaries, who were very “attentive to content”, underlined Françoise Grellet, were not sensitive to the writer’s virtuosity.<sup>188</sup> His first critics did not mince their words. “An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection”, declared Henry James in *French Poets and Novelists* (1878).<sup>189</sup> The intellectual jigsaw has not always been received as expected. In a letter addressed to William Dean Howells, Mark Twain confessed: “To me, his prose is unreadable, like Jane Austen’s”.<sup>190</sup> In the same spirit, the journalist Paul Elmer More reduced Poe to “the poet of unripe boys and unsound men” in “A Note on Poe’s Method” (1923).<sup>191</sup> Quite the contrary, some writers recognised Poe’s literary virtuosity. Baudelaire praised his work as “une littérature toute nouvelle” in “Edgar Allan Poe, sa vie et ses ouvrages”.<sup>192</sup> To a certain extent, he had anticipated Jules Verne’s statement according to which “[Poe] a reculé les limites de l’impossible, il aura des imitateurs”.<sup>193</sup> Indeed, Poe’s literary and cultural is considerable. “Le génie poésque”, to quote Robert Louis Stevenson, has not ceased to be a source of inspiration for many readers, writers, poets and filmmakers.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> FLORENTIN, Thierry. “La Folie Edgar Poe”, p.21.

<sup>188</sup> GRELLET, Françoise. *Literature in English*, p. 259.

<sup>189</sup> GARGANO W. James. “Henry James and the Question of Poe’s Maturity,” *Poe and His Times: The Artist and His Milieu*, Baltimore: The Edgar Allan Poe Society (1990), p. 247-255.

<sup>190</sup> COMEAU, Robert C. “Reading Poe on Salary: Mark Twain’s Use of ‘The Raven,’ ‘Hop Frog’ and ‘William Wilson’ in ‘The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut.’” *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1996), p. 26. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20078166](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078166) (Accessed 17 May 2021).

<sup>191</sup> GARGANO W. James. “Henry James and the Question of Poe’s Maturity”, p. 247-255.

<sup>192</sup> RICHARD, Claude. “Edgar Allan Poe, sa vie et ses ouvrages”. *Edgar Allan Poe*. Editions de l’Herne (Paris: 1974), p. 292.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion undertaken in the scope of this dissertation only reveals an infinitesimal part of the richness of Poe's inexhaustible heritage. In the first chapter, we presented several psychoanalytical notions (death drives, destructive instincts, instinct for mastery, obsessive neurosis, fate neurosis, perversions) which all originate from the early psychoanalytical principles developed by Sigmund Freud in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A primary observational approach of the tales enables us to consider the psychoanalytic richness to be found in Poe's tales of murder. "William Wilson", "The Tell-Tale Heart", "Berenice", "The Imp of the Perverse", "Loss of Breath" and "The Black Cat" are all thematically interconnected. Right from the outset, the main protagonist, who is also the narrator, sets himself up as a victim of circumstances and therefore attempts to institute a would-be trust-based relationship with his reader. Edgar Poe grasped the complexity of madness to mimic the discourse of the madman within his tales. Thus, it is not surprising that a great number of psychoanalytic notions may be detected in the work of Edgar Poe. Poe indeed explored the downside of the human psyche, the unconscious. Drives pervade Poe's narratives. His narrators-protagonists meet all the criteria of neurotic subjects, haunted by obsessive thoughts.

Before Poe, a number of prominent philosophers, among which René Descartes and Adam Smith, had already harboured such theories to better grasp what urges men to act wrongly. The in-depth examination of Poe's theory of "perverseness" highlighted the author's contribution to the secular debate over the nature of human beings and the inclination of some for iniquity. Before the modern conception of the perverse, Poe depicted a compelling force (which can be named drive) impelling men to act without motive "for wrong's sake" as Poe specified.<sup>195</sup> This appetite for transgression, which is usually constrained by a set of established societal rules, can become pathological in its most extreme forms and symptomatic of a psychological disturbance. Whether in "William Wilson", "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Black Cat," "Loss of Breath", "The Imp of the Perverse" or "Berenice", all narrators exemplify unbalanced mental states for they gain satisfaction from the commitment to violent deeds and dreadful murders. The discussion developed in the first chapter demonstrated that the psychoanalytical approach is legitimate, coherent and enriching when it is cautiously carried out. It nourishes a better comprehension of the stories at a diegetic level. The confession format enabled us to shed light on a secondary level

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<sup>195</sup> POE A., Edgar. "The Imp of the Perverse". *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. DAWN. B, Sova (ed.). New York, Barnes & Nobles, Inc., (2015), p. 718.

of understanding, behind a veil of simulated rationality. Nevertheless, the reader is able to decipher the signs of an unreliable narrator which are made relatively obvious by a cunning author.

This manifestation of symptoms is permitted by an elaborated construction of the narratives. Indeed, the second chapter provided an exhaustive literary analysis of the six tales in order to underline that the literary and psychoanalytical approaches should complete one another. Indeed, the use of a range of literary devices enables one to produce various effects, which, in Poe's case, serve the psychoanalytical mechanisms considered in the first chapter. For instance, variations of pace at a textual level strengthens the obsessive dimension of neurosis. Chapter 2 gave to Poe what belongs to Poe, that is to say his mastery of the language. Indeed, his permanent attentiveness towards every single word employed in his short stories was more than once central to his critical essays and articles. To assess the limits of psychoanalytical approaches, it was essential to emphasise the complementary relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. One limit is indeed not to consider the role of stylistics in the texts under study. It is necessary to question what psychoanalysis brings to traditional literary analysis, and, on the contrary, in what way the literary examination enriches psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, as a sum of psychological theories put into practice to investigate psychological disturbances, is at the heart of all selected tales for it helps better grasp the complexity of the narrators' dispositions. It stands as a form of translation which teaches us more about ourselves than about the stories. By understanding the protagonists in their most repressed thoughts, we better comprehend ourselves. This process of identification is all the more favoured by the stories' remarkable verisimilitude which results from Poe's fervent interest in the scientific research of his time along with his active involvement in murder trials as a journalist. The reader is absorbed in a reality in which transgression is permitted "*en bonne conscience*".<sup>196</sup> He can get away without being held accountable, while the protagonists are trapped within the stories and within their minds over which they have minor control. As far as literature is concerned, the many literary devices analysed in the second chapter (unreliable narration, variations in pace and time, narrative ellipses, punctuation, negation, tone) all participate in emphasising the aforesaid mental disorders. In this respect, it was demonstrated that the six tales under study are certainly not mere written transcription of Poe's unconscious, as if his quill exposed him *à son insu*, but are the fruit of a very elaborate reflection conducted beforehand. The purpose of this second chapter was to stress the author's authority over his own work. He indeed made use of a wide range of literary techniques to produce an intended effect on the readers, an assertion that is a far cry from the supposition that Poe was one way or another betrayed by his own texts. Conversely, the author's literary skilfulness has long been recognised

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<sup>196</sup> BELLEMIN NOEL, Jean. *Psychanalyse et Littérature*. Presse Universitaire de France (France : 1978).

by many prominent scholars and critics, Jean Bellemin Noël, Henri Justin, Patrick McGrath, Shoshana Felman and Claude Richard to name but a few. The demonstration of alleged intentions is facilitated by Poe's critical essays and articles which are rife with arguments in favour of our critical enterprise. Consequently, we examined *The Philosophy of Composition*, published in 1846, through which Poe detailed in a very rigorous manner his preliminary method of composition. The latter relies upon the selection of a specific effect and the choice of a certain length which will maximise the intensity of the final effect. Each sentence, each word is then set down on paper with the avowed intent to favour the realisation of the effect. Now considering that Poe was exceedingly concerned about his method, this does not go without saying that the text does not utterly elude from the author's grasp. Both style and content were carefully pondered.

Lastly, the third chapter nuanced the previous one by laying emphasis on readership. Readers indeed have a significant role to play in the reception and interpretation of a work. It is crucial to mention readership while studying the limits of psychoanalytical approaches because the reader is in charge of the actualisation of the meaning. The excesses of some psychoanalytical studies of Poe's work, nowadays widely criticised, result in an erroneous comprehension of the texts by a number of readers. Such drifts occurred, and still occur, as the result of the reader's crucial part played in the reception of a work, regardless of the author's degree of anticipation. Therefore, chapter 3 enabled us to examine one major psychoanalytical work conducted by Freud's student, Marie Bonaparte. The psychobiography *Edgar Poe, sa vie, son œuvre : étude analytique* (1933) was very positively received by her contemporaries who praised the originality of the method. On account of the popularity of Bonaparte's analysis, her psychobiography was a perfect case study to stress the limits of such an approach which was largely criticised a couple of decades later. Intellectuals like Claude Richard, Jacques Lacan, Georges Walter or Pamela Tytell condemned Bonaparte's excessive speculations, drawing ill-founded links between the stories and the author's presupposed personal life. In the same vein, we defined a valid framework for psychoanalytical examinations by distinguishing two levels of biographical elements, the information about the author's concerns and the presumed information about the author's private life. Respectively, the first type may be used as a critical instrument to decipher certain effects at a textual level. For example, we can assert that Poe was interested in literary effects based on his declarations in his critical articles (in this respect, we reviewed "The Philosophy of Composition"). Thus, we may use such information to describe the particular stylistic and thematic construction of the tales, which tends to favour the intensity of the effect through their style and content, as the second chapter illustrated. The second type deals with all presupposed biographical information. For example, Marie Bonaparte justified the frequent references to death in the tales by suggesting that Poe was likely under the influence of alcohol during the writing

act. As a result, he got carried away by his repressed emotions and thoughts. With hindsight, the use of such conjectures is not legitimate. More importantly, Bonaparte's assumptions discredited psychoanalysis as a discipline of extrapolation and speculation. Nevertheless, she influenced a number of scholars who published similar analyses in turn. The question "Was Edgar Allan Poe insane?" gives no less than ten million results on Google. This explains why the third chapter is allocated to reader-response. Despite Poe's anticipating efforts, the reader has a significant hand in appreciating a work of art. He is influenced by his past experiences, whether life experiences or literary experiences, which shape his appreciation of a work. The difficulty for authors to anticipate reader-responses was underlined in this last chapter in order to demonstrate that Poe's meticulous writing method met its limits in view of the diversity of readers.

By and large, the dynamic of this dissertation relied upon a wish to provide a just interpretation of the six selected tales in the frame of a psychoanalytical perspective, which is known to be a debated one. In the analytical process, literary critics have often been torn between what is true and what is false, concerned about the validity and legitimacy of their statements. "Literary interpretations are sometimes just, sometimes false but never true", scholar Jean-Jacques Lecercle declares, in his article "Interpretation as Pragmatics" (1999).<sup>197</sup> This dissertation falls in line with Lecercle's assertion, for its purpose does not rest upon a quest for absolute truth. Nonetheless, this exploration of Poe's tales aimed to provide answers regarding the exploration of the human psyche, which was so central to Gothic writers and, therefore, regarding the role of psychoanalysis in a better understanding of such stories. Edgar Poe's work indeed influenced a large majority of writers among which Jules Verne (who published a sequel to Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*), Oscar Wilde (who was inspired by Poe's "Oval Portrait" for his famous *Picture of Dorian Gray*) or Howard Philips Lovecraft (who confessed his esteem for the author) to name but a few.

In the end, the endless fascination for Poe's psychological tales betrays our own interest in the human psyche and its most unexpected properties. Most importantly, our difficulty to grasp the psychological complexity of Poe's narrators (which has been debated for two centuries) seems to be the sign of a dearth of comprehension of our own psyche. More than a complex apparatus, the human psyche seems to be a source of anxiety for we fear the minor knowledge we have over it, just as Poe's protagonists fall prey to their own drives. Moreover, this sense of anxiety is strengthened by the sudden change in the narrators-protagonists' characters. "I grew day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others", the narrator of "The Black

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<sup>197</sup> LECERCLE, Jean-Jacques. « Interpretation as Pragmatics ». *The Language, Discourse, Society Reader* (1999), p. 386-393. ResearchGate (January 2004). Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304606818\\_Jean-Jacques\\_Lecercle\\_Interpretation\\_as\\_Pragmatics\\_1999](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304606818_Jean-Jacques_Lecercle_Interpretation_as_Pragmatics_1999)

Cat” declares. In the tales, radical, unexpected alterations also bring about much anxiety, for they seem to affect anyone. They impel readers to reflect upon their anxieties, towards life, death and themselves by questioning the psychology of terror instead of focusing on men’s goodness, which was conversely at the core of the transcendentalist vision. This invitation to introspection is proper to Gothic fiction which has perpetually brought undesirable concerns out of the shadow. In the same manner as psychoanalysis, Gothic writers like Poe already shed light upon buried uncertainties more than a century before George H. W. Bush designated the 1990s as the “Decade of the Brain”, finally acknowledging the importance of studying neurological and psychiatric disorders. It was not before the 1990s that significant progress was made in understanding the cause of many brain disorders (neurodegenerative diseases for instance). Notwithstanding, Gothic works dealing with the human psyche such as Poe’s *Tales*, Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) have been extremely popular for decades. In addition, cinematic adaptations have also been thriving. Poe’s *Tales* also had their share of cinematic adaptations, too numerous to list here. More than fifty directors adapted Poe’s work on screen, among which Roger Corman’s notable eight films dedicated to Poe’s *oeuvre* in the 1960s. From the early years of the seventh art to nowadays, the collection *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* has been a source of inspiration for a broad spectrum of directors and scriptwriters, which is evidence of an everlasting interest in Poe and in psychological terror. Yet, this endless, secular appetite for psychological stories contrasts with the late scientific dedication to brain studies which have flourished since the invention of brain imaging in the early 1990s, favouring empirical demonstrations. To some scholars, psychoanalysts and psychologists “usurped the knowledge” of Gothic writers, in the words of Patrick McGrath. To others, psychoanalytic considerations and literature “mutually inform and displace each other” in a complementary relationship. We may nonetheless confidently affirm that pioneering spirits like Edgar Poe were quite ahead of their time and highly contributed to the ever-lasting fascination for the human psyche.

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