

# Literature and Psychoanalysis: Whose Madness is it anyway?

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Examiner/examined, analyst/analysand, subject/object, sane/mad, science/art: the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature appears to conform to this binary logic, with the first term in each set clearly privileged over the second. The realm of the literary is populated with an impressive assortment of mad characters and mad authors: killers, junkies, drunkards, the paranoid, the depressed, the suicidal, the abandoned or the simply alienated. Literature inhabits and is inhabited by the pathological, or so it must have seemed to the armies of psychoanalytic critics who repeatedly turned to it. We seek to deconstruct this particular binary view of literature-as-madness, psychoanalysis-as-saneness by showing how a critic's preoccupation with the pathology of an author can sometimes expose his/her own unconscious complexes, desires or fears. With this in mind, we thus momentarily turn the examiner into the examined.

**Keywords:** literature; madness; psychoanalysis; unconscious; Bonaparte; Poe; critic.

*When it locates madness in literature,  
psychoanalysis is in danger of revealing nothing more  
than its own madness: the madness of its interpreter.  
Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness**

In the top authors with the most psychoanalytic critics buzzing around them, Shakespeare undoubtedly and unsurprisingly comes first. In fact, it would be hard to imagine psychoanalysis without him. After Freud, Hamlet and Oedipus have almost merged into one entity, proving how the dividing line between psychoanalysis and literature can be a deceitful one. This article, however, does not focus on Shakespeare, but on a writer occupying the close second position in our hypothetical top, a writer by the name of Edgar Allan Poe. Like his Elizabethan counterpart, Poe certainly does not need any introductions. We will only briefly mention the fact that, for various reasons, his life and works have attracted generations of psychoanalysts from Freudians to post-Freudians, from Lacanians to post-Lacanians and beyond. The multitude of psychoanalytic explorations of Poe is so vast that one may describe three distinct phases in its development: the early biographical, the textual and the more recent reader-oriented one (Caraman, 2012: 21). Yet it is not Poe himself who will be of interest to us here, but one of his interpreters, one of his analyzing subjects who shall, in the following, switch roles and become, temporarily, for the purpose of this inquiry, the analyzed object.

Princess Marie Bonaparte, an eccentric and fascinating character, descending from Napoleon himself and first analysand, then close friend of Freud, belongs to the first phase of psychoanalytic critics of Poe. Her lengthy *Edgar Poe: étude psychanalytique*, published in 1933 and translated into English in 1949, although considered outdated by many, constitutes nevertheless the first piece in the domino of the readings of the readings of *The Purloined Letter* by Lacan, Derrida and Johnson. In an uncanny re-dramatization of Poe's short story where Lacan, Derrida and Johnson

seem to duplicate the positions of the Minister, the Prefect and Dupin, Bonaparte, like the Queen, is only briefly mentioned, or rather alluded to in the Lacanian seminar. For a long time, however, her study was considered a seminal work in Poe criticism. In what follows, we shall describe some of the fundamental contentions that Bonaparte makes about her literary analysis and to show how deeply engaged she was with the question of the pathological in literature. After demonstrating how she establishes the pathological as the domain of literature, we intend to move towards the key point of discussion which concerns the genesis of her critical work, the unconscious reasons behind her analysis of Poe. The essential question we will endeavor to address is the following: is Marie Bonaparte's critical interest motivated by Poe's pathology or rather, unconsciously, by her own?

Bonaparte's study has been intensely criticized and deeply lauded, often both at the same time. Scott Peeples calls it "one of the great achievements of Poe scholarship" and notes the ambivalent critical reception which it received, being both "hailed" and "ridiculed": "only a few commentators", he says, "have condemned Bonaparte's reading of Poe without paying homage to her tenacity and inventiveness" (2004: 37-38). Her methodological approach rests on the identification of the production of the work of art with the dream: "their construction", she says "resembles that of our dreams" (Bonaparte, 1949: 101). If Freud emphasizes the association between creative writing and day-dreams, she extends this association to include night dreams as well. Both literary works and dreams, according to her, "act as safety valves to humanity's over-repressed instincts" (126). Bonaparte further classifies literary works according to what she calls "a scale of subjectivity", placing, at one end, "works written almost impersonally" such as "the writings of Maupassant or Zola", and at the other end, "the works of a Poe or a Hoffman" (101-102). For her, Poe's texts belong in the category of works that are "wholly subjective, loaded with their creator's unconscious memories", making them similar not only to "adolescent daydreams", but also "the night dreams of man" (102). Bonaparte believes that "(...) an author's ontogenetic complexes will always seek ways of expression in the choice of theme and its elaboration" and often mentions, when discussing Poe, "the deep infantile sources" from which "his inspiration was drawn" (102). The main objective of her study of Poe is, she asserts, "to show (...) that this safety valve operates under waking conditions exactly as do dreams in respect to our instincts" (127). In order to achieve this, she uses the tools provided by psychoanalysis which she believes are essential. In her paper *Deuil, nécrophilie et sadisme à propos d'Edgar Poe*, Bonaparte argues that before the advent of psychoanalysis, a dynamic understanding of Poe would have been impossible (2005: 109).

To argue her thesis, Bonaparte proceeds to a lengthy demonstration of how the "elaboration" of works of literature is similar to the dream-work. At the center of both she places the process of "displacement of psychic intensities" by which "thought-pictures" or "representations" lose their "affect" when they "sink into the unconscious" being subsequently transformed into "more or less allied representations" (1949: 104-105). Among other mechanisms involved in the construction of literary works, she mentions "the moral censor" whose role is to hide via displacement "from authors, as from dreamers, the nature of the instincts which dreams, or works of art, reveal" and the "regard for representability" which, in literature refers to "the tendency to replace abstract concepts by sensory images, mainly visual" (107-108). Apart from the obvious Freudian influence, one may also find incorporated into Bonaparte's study, previous claims made by other Poe commentators such as Lorine Pruette or Joseph Krutch. The question of Poe's sadism and masochism which had been previously raised by Pruette is featured as well, as is the speculation on Poe's impotence formerly advanced by Krutch. Regarding Krutch, Bonaparte maintains, to his merit, that he was the first who dared point out of the significance of Poe's psychosexual development in the understanding of his life and works (2005: 109). His hypothesis regarding Poe's impotence is reiterated and reinforced: "il semble en effet qu'Edgar Poe ait été un inhibé sexuel total" (109).

To these previous claims, however, Bonaparte adds a few psychoanalytic hypotheses of her

own. And it is these which shall prove of great interest for the present inquiry. Anyone browsing through her book will remark, for instance, that the motif of the mother occupies a central place in her analysis, one even more central than that of Poe himself. His works are divided into “tales of the mother” and “tales of the father”. The mother becomes, for Bonaparte, a pivotal, totalizing symbol present in every feminine character, whether in human or animal forms, in animate or inanimate ones; horses, buildings, chimneys, rooms, everything points to one source: Poe’s biological mother, Elizabeth Arnold. His life, she argues, was an “eternal mourning after his mother” (2005: 113). In *The Angel of the Odd* she finds a condensation of the mother symbol through “the mother (bottle=breasts) and milk (alcohol)” (1949: 111). *The Pit and the Pendulum* reveals, upon Bonaparte’s examination “wish fantasies to possess the mother in intracloacal fashion” (124). In *The Murders in Rue Morgue*, the chimney represents “the maternal cloaca into which the daughter is thrust”; similarly, the horse in Poe’s *Metzengerstein* translates as a symbol of the mother: “Poe represented the mother”, she writes, “in totem guise, as the giant horse”. The male tomcat in Poe’s *The Black Cat* becomes a symbol both of female genitalia and of the “wicked mother” (465-466) and *The Purloined Letter*, she contends, is a tale about the “missing maternal penis” (130). Even *The Gold-Bug*, a short story with an all-male cast, is, for her, a tale about the mother. Marie Bonaparte performs a classification of the tales according to the symbolism of the mother. She speaks about categories such as the “live-in-death mother series of tales” which include *Berenice*, *Morella*, *Ligeia* or *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the “mother-as-landscape tales” such as *The Gold Bug* or *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* or the “murdered mother tales” like *The Black Cat* or *The Murders in Rue Morgue* (105).

Why is Poe’s mother such an omnipresent figure in Bonaparte’s interpretation, one could ask? And is it really about *his* mother? If one looks at her own biography, the answer would clearly be no. There is an overlapping point in both her and Poe’s life: the loss of the mother. In the first case, to tuberculosis, in the second one, to a pulmonary emboli developed soon after giving birth. Evidently, this particular piece of information bears great weight in this question. From Claude Monod-Stein (who analyzes her fictional stories) and some of her own writings on femininity, we also learn that Bonaparte associated womanhood with death and frigidity (being unable to have vaginal orgasms, she underwent multiple elective surgery to shorten the distance between her clitoris and her vagina) and manhood with life and eroticism: women’s pleasure, for her, depended on the vestiges of their maleness (Bonaparte, 1966: 131; Monod-Stein, 1995: 402-403). After possessing this information, her interpretation, for example, of a short story such as *The Purloined Letter* as a tale about the “missing maternal penis”, loses much of its apparent randomness; the “missing maternal penis” reveals unconscious connections to both her missing mother and her unconscious wish to be a man, to possess a penis and the ensuing eroticism and life connected to it (Caraman, 2012: 30). This biographical intersection, at the point of the mother, between her and Poe, the fact that “like Poe, she grew up in the shadow of her biological mother’s death” (Peeples, 2004: 48) has led critics to attribute her interest in Poe to an identification with him. We contend, however, that it is not this identification which lies at the root of her critical preoccupation with Poe, but rather a more complex relation of transference which we will outline in what follows.

In its Freudian understanding, transference refers to the unconscious process of mistranslating the past as the present and the projection of (often) paternal figures onto the one of the analyst. When transference occurs in a clinical setting, the analysand is usually made aware of it by the therapist whose primary task is to recognize it. Yet when it occurs outside analytical situation, it may remain largely unconscious and thus unacknowledged. For a more comprehensive understanding of the factors in the relationship between Bonaparte the analyst and Poe her analysand, we shall turn to a document written by her and published three years into her analysis with Freud. The article in question, called *L’identification d’une fille à sa mère morte* (“The Identification of a Girl with her Dead Mother”) appears in *Revue Française de Psychanalyse* in 1928 and contains important clues about her engagement with Poe’s writing long before she wrote her study of him. In this

autobiographical piece, Marie Bonaparte tells of the impact of her mother's death as well as her subsequent identification with her. Since her mother had died of a pregnancy-related embolus one month after giving birth to her, Bonaparte believed, throughout her childhood, that death was the price paid for becoming a mother. During her analysis with Freud, Bonaparte also uncovers the fact that her mother's death was connected to her unconscious wish to die, and thus take her mother's place. On the other hand, it also ambivalently caused a pathological fear of all things related to death. The haunting presence of her dead mother would be a hallmark of her life. She remembers having had, during a time of illness, at the age of four, a visually striking hallucination in which a very large rainbow-colored bird sat on her chest. It was during her analysis that she was able to interpret this hallucination in light of her mother's death (Bonaparte, 1928: 544-545). Taking these into account, it now becomes even plainer why Bonaparte places the dead mother at the center of her examination of Poe.

If we now know why the mother, we still don't know, however, why Poe. But the answer soon becomes apparent as we continue reading through this autobiographical document. Bonaparte proceeds to write about how Poe's short stories entered her life. When she was nineteen, her father to whom (not incidentally) she was deeply attached (Bonaparte acknowledges her strong oedipal complex) handed her a volume of Poe's tales translated by Baudelaire. She began to read it that summer, in the evenings. The fact that it was her father who introduced her to Poe already establishes an important association in what concerns the motivations behind her psychoanalytic study, but the most important piece of information is yet to come. She first read three stories, her father's favorites: *The Purloined Letter*, *The Gold Bug* and *The Murders in Rue Morgue*, but, apparently, they did not really make an impression on her. This changed dramatically, however, when she began reading *Ligeia*, a tale that her father detested. With *Ligeia*, something powerful happened. As she was reading through the description of the living corpse and its vengeance, she suddenly felt so overwhelmed with fear that she abandoned the story and Poe's volume altogether:

Mais ayant commence Ligeia, un conte que mon père méprisait, je fus prise d'une telle épouvante à la description du cadavre vivant et vengeur de la femme, que je ne pus alors, je crois, finir l'histoire. J'abandonnai bientôt le livre terrifiant. (559-560)

There seemed to be "something" in that story whose nature she could not bear. However much she tried, she could not bring herself to overcome this fear and the more she read Poe, the more the fear gripped her. This effect of Poe on her was so powerful that, for twenty-five years of her life, she never once opened his book or any other book that could have contained stories of dead women coming back to life. Undoubtedly, the force of Poe's writing penetrated into the very deepest strata of her unconscious, reopening the wound left there by the death of her mother. The fact that she could not bear to read the story further is indicative of the resistance put up by her ego in self-defense.

Poe and his terrifying stories of dead women was therefore thrown into the repressed part of Bonaparte's psyche, along with the equally-terrifying figure of her dead mother. Yet he didn't remain there indefinitely. The moment and context of Poe's "unburial" from her unconscious is, likewise, a highly significant one: it was done, we are told, during her analysis with Freud. Only as Freud's analysis could she return to *Ligeia*, which she read, she says "with a renewed sense of terror": "Je ne devais oser relire Ligeia qu'au cours de mon analyse, et ceci avec quelle rechute de terreur!" (560). But it was also during her sessions with Freud that the enigma of her curious fear would be solved. *Ligeia* symbolized "the avenging mother" coming back to life to re-take her place near the father. Since Bonaparte had a strong oedipal complex, her reading of Poe elicited both strong fear and unconscious guilt. Up to this point her relationship with Poe can be said to have been a transference one: his writing had activated a deeply buried unconscious content. The tremendous effect that certain short stories had had on her was the effect of her own

repressed fears. The realization of this unacknowledged transference and her newly found ability to read Poe were, she says, “one of the most beautiful therapeutic results of her analysis”:

(...) afin d'apprendre à connaître l'énigme de mon épouvante. Quand Ligeia se fut démasquée pour ce qu'elle était à mes yeux: la mère vengeresse revenant prendre auprès du père sa place, usurpée par Rowena = moi, elle perdit soudain avec son mystère toute sa force d'épouvante. Ce fut même un des plus jolis résultats thérapeutiques de mon analyse. (560)

At the opposite end of the image of Bonaparte the analyst (of Poe), meticulously and coldly dissecting his life and work, one may find Bonaparte the analysand: vulnerable, confused, afraid of femininity and paralyzed by “a fear so great to the point of not being able to read a tale by Edgar Poe”: “(...) j'avais cependant gardé la peur des revenants au point de ne pouvoir lire un conte d'Edgar Poe, jusqu'à ce que l'analyse m'en eût enfin délivrée” (565). As mentioned before, her study of Poe was vastly criticized on account of its flawed methodology and its reductive approach. The strongest and most valid accusation is centered on the fact that Bonaparte treats literature as pathology and Poe as a sick patient in need of psychoanalysis. Yet perhaps the characteristic that exasperates most critics is her tone. Throughout *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, she exhibits an attitude of condescending superiority towards her subject: Poe the impotent, Poe the necrophiliac, Poe the orphan, “small Edgar” and his “infantile sexual investigations” (1949: 121), Poe ridden with all kinds of pathologies, Poe still in the shadow of his mother, writing his mother, Poe the mad one and she, by contrast, the wise analyst, savvy enough to diagnose him, to solve the puzzles of his writings and illuminate his and her readers. One can undoubtedly understand how her approach could offend the great lovers of literature who hate to see their “mistress” belittled and reduced to a symptom. But when this is weighed against the newly discovered image of Bonaparte the analysand, the lesser known Bonaparte before she wrote about Poe, we soon come to realize that the condescending tone can be attributed to the fact her analysis of Poe was more than a critical one; it was, in fact, to her, a therapeutic act.

To master Poe was to master her own unconscious. Her book, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, may appear to us, from the outside, as merely another arrogant and much discussed about book on Poe, an example of how psychoanalysis may “miss the point” when it comes to literature. Yet to her it was the proof of the conquest of her own pathology, as if saying, behind and between the lines, unconsciously: “see, unlike before, I can now read Poe. Look, I can even write about him”. It was Bonaparte the analyst defeating, dominating and mastering Bonaparte the analysand. If transference is defined as the process by which parental figures belonging to the past are re-actualized in the present and past events are relived, instead of being remembered, then the effect Poe's writings had on Bonaparte were clearly transference in nature: they re-actualized the past trauma, bringing back to “life” the repressed figure of her dead mother. Critics had earlier established a link between her biography and Poe's, leading them to believe that it must have been her identification with the unfortunate events of Poe's life which prompted the writing of the critical study. After reviewing the lesser known facts and looking more closely into the details of her life accounted autobiographically in *L'identification d'une fille à sa mère morte*, we may now conclude that Poe had rather been identified with her repressed mother than herself. It was not his “sameness” that attracted her, but his otherness: the otherness of the lost mother and the otherness of the great unknowable, death. To her, these two were intrinsically connected and they both seemed to come alive in Poe's stories of *les revenants*.

Bonaparte's analysis with Freud enabled her to finally face her dead mother, the unconscious fears attached to her and especially their embodiment in Poe's stories. Writing a volume about Poe was, in this sense, a continuation of the analysis, the step further taken from facing towards conquering the formerly repressed unconscious material. Being able to dissect his stories, stories which she had been, for years, unable to read for the fear they had inspired, represents the act of

ultimate control over the unconscious. We have started this paper from the perspective of “Bonaparte the analyst,” a position of assumed objectivity. But her subjective motivations reveal the power of what Shoshana Felman calls the “poe-etic” effect (Felman, 1988: 133): Poe’s power over the reader which often spills over his writings into the literary history and critical discourse surrounding him. For this reason, it is the Poe seen through Bonaparte the analyst which provides a completely different perspective, not only on a piece of criticism, in our case, *Edgar Poe: étude psychanalytique*, but also on the relationship between psychoanalytic criticism and literature. It may be said that through Bonaparte the analyst we may truly comprehend the unconscious command of Poe the analyst. The title question of this paper asks “whose madness is it anyway?”. The case of Edgar Allan Poe and his psychoanalytic interpreter, Princess Marie Bonaparte, featuring, in our analysis, as the interpreted, has demonstrated that madness cannot be attributed to either one or the other since the madness of the critic may become so enmeshed with the madness of the author that it oftentimes requires a painstaking analysis to separate the two. Most times, they are simply indistinguishable from one another. The presumed pathology of the literary object might very well be the projection of the critic’s own pathology. More importantly however, it shows that setting clear-cut dividing lines between literature and psychoanalysis, between object and subject, between the examiner and the examined, between saneness and madness, corresponds to a faulty binary logic which, upon closer investigation and whenever it is given a chance, always ends up deconstructing itself.

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