

Horror and Madness in Poe's genius

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*“There are things you know about,
and things you don't, the known and the unknown,
and in between are the doors—that's us.”*

(Jim Morrison)

Introduction

Psychoanalysis discovered a psychological link between genius perception and mental dissociation, which is present in a conflictual yet creative fashion in artists suffering perception disorders in their own neurosis. The mechanistic conception of positivist psychiatry, instead, almost always referred to abnormality as a mental disease, denying, therefore, the creative implication deeply linked to the perception world. Just like for the oyster that, thanks to a little defect of its shell, allows a small grain of sand to enter inside generating a pearl, for those having perception reality disorders, the pearl becomes art. Jungian psychoanalysis discretely suits to a study linking unconscious with the brilliant and neurotic expression of the American visionary, as myth perception is directly affected by the archetype. Even if I do not even think of introducing an analytical speech on the complex and genius mind of the known poet, I can still try to imagine a psychological examination -even though only intuitive- of the remarkable artistic creativity of the writer and undoubtedly state that often the most brilliant minds are the most sensible and, in a way, also the most devastated, due to their particular way of perceiving reality, which goes over the common to better investigate the hidden. Concerning perception, in Marginalia Poe wrote: *«That intuitive and seemingly casual perception by which we often attain knowledge, when reason herself falters and abandons the effort, appears to resemble the sudden glancing at a star, by which we see it more clearly than by a direct glaze; or the half-closing the eyes in looking at a plot of grass, the more fully to appreciate the intensity of its green.»*

It also needs to be clarified that I consider unreliable the major part of Freud's psychoanalysis, therefore I reject in full the absurd interpretation of Maria Bonaparte (1882-1962). I believe it is also wrong and deterministic to analyse the author's psyche only from the critical context of his work, or analysing oneiric expression exclusively as an unconscious revelation of inhibited emotions. We can never be certain of psychoanalytical solutions, due to the complexity of the human psyche, especially if it is a brilliant psyche. Before starting to analyse visionary experiences, it should be highlighted that Poe was used to assume drugs, eg laudanum, that certainly altered his predisposition to mental dissociation¹ in favour of an amplified perception of reality, able to release the symbolic contents of unconscious in Poe's art. Obviously, these drugs only partly helped to release Poe's creativity, which was actually caused by multiple factors.

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Meta-symbolic literature

According to psychoanalysis, if the artist can simulate the dream through his own imagination until becoming the interpret of the unconscious, then he is able to unveil and amplify the oneiric hemisphere through observation. The intertwine between dream and reality becomes the tool to investigate and reveal the enigmas of reality. If we live in a dream without being aware of that, due to our limited perception, then it means that we can instead go beyond our perception limits through a surreal art. In Poe's literature, the oneiric universe becomes a symbolic language aimed at manifesting a metaphysical delirium of the soul in a "*meta symbolical*" synthesis originated from the archetype that is present in the collective unconscious. Therefore, Poe's terror becomes a meta symbolic and gothic art able to generate the mythopoetic imagination which is unconsciously manifesting in reality. If the myth reveals our real hidden identity, obviously the archetypal imagination living and governing inside us is not only a tool to know ourselves, but it is mainly a perceptive key to understand the world. From this perspective, Poe inserts gothic figures to highlight the conflict between rational and unknown, meaning between the light of reason and the deep dark of the human psyche. Even just thinking about the torch, which represents the recurrent symbol of the illumination of the soul in various short stories. In "*The Oval Portrait*" the torch enlightens the occult presence of a vampire. A romantic heart beating inside a rational mind is typical of Poe's genius.

Dream and art are linked to the universe's myth and minorly to the repressed universe, but if psychoanalysis sees art as a compensative act between unconscious exigencies and the conscious world, then we can hypothesize the mythopoetic expression as outburst of human desire, to go back to the ancient or primitive in front of morally and rationally repressive reality. The myths become a kind of primordial force able to unconsciously interfere with the expression of art, like it happened with gods in ancient Greece. One example is the short story "*The Devil in the Belfry*", where a mysterious individual, by manipulating a clock, confuses a functional and mechanistic society. The dark and evil disruptor working against a perfect system can be seen as Pan god working with the inhuman highly technical world.

The Jungian psychoanalyst James Hillman (1926-2011) interprets imagination and world mainly through the mythologic point of view, where the archetypes structure our oneiric and imaginary life. It is certainly inappropriate to delegate to art the sole task to express a dimension between an oppressive reality and a consequent imagination, which satisfies and compensates, instead, our intimate aspirations. Art can be a metaphysic projection of mythological into reality. This is possible by creating a meta symbolic expression, where reality transcends in favour of the oneiric imagination of the ancient or ancestral, represented by the archetype at the origin of the myth.

Dream is Death.

Poe narrated the analysis of death in the psychological nightmare, where the real magisterially merged with the dream in the mental dissociation of the protagonist that, immersed in a timeless labyrinth, acted with a lucid madness in an evil death plan. In the nightmare, soul and death were madly and rationally intermingled. Deeper we go in the abyss of the soul, more we see death. In a perfect symbiosis with Hillman's statement "*the dream is the soul and the soul is death*"². The link between dream and death is very ancient and, indeed, for primitives the world of dreams is the underworld. This concepts emerges again in Hillman's psychoanalysis that, exaggerating in definitely rejecting Freud's concept of the unconscious as a manifestation of diurnal repression, he sees in the dream only Ades, meaning the underworld, the hell governed by gods or myths of ancient Greece.

In my opinion, Poe's art interpretation well fits the mythological imaginary proposed by Hillman with his "*Old Age Psychology*", because the dream emerges from the underworld where the soul dwells. In the short story "*Ligeia*", the protagonist sees in the night a shadow behind the reflex of the censer, indicating the soul wandering in the underworld. Indeed, in Poe's oneiric universe, there was often the ancestral myth as a symbolic recall of death, where the terror of the soul developed.

Another common feature between Poe and Hillman's thought is ascertaining that oneiric images aim towards a final goal, meaning that symbols, like the animals appearing in Poe's nightmares as black cats or horses, pursue a specific goal, towards death. This association is feasible because in psychoanalysis the dream's figures have a specific premeditation. Entering Hillman's hell, almost seems to enter in Poe's hell, as the psychoanalyst's understanding of the dream gets closer to Poe's interpretation of the nightmares, mainly considering the process of identification of the symbol, that in Poe's art often appears as a gothic image.

Concerning the metaphysical and symbolic genre, Franz Kafka (1883-1924) might be similar, due to the link among dream, reality and myth. There is a sort of affinity between the figures of castle and horse in Kankan and Poe's art. Kafka describes in the "*Ein landarzt – a doctor in the countryside*" (1916-17) alien horses as powerful and untameable, similar to the mysterious horse of Metzengerstein.

The visionary

According to Poe's thought, daydreamers developed a great fantasy and were able to understand reality in its whole, paying with a state of visionary dissociation aimed at expressing a "*supreme intelligence*". The altered psyche was the tool to develop a creative fantasy, because it allowed the emergence of the unconscious in the perceptive sphere. A feature of a brilliant perception was the mutual penetration between dream and reality provoked by altered mental states, perhaps due to psychological traumas or drug consumption, when dissociation from reality occurs. Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) examines very well the phenomenon in which an individual loses reality cognition to leave space to the unconscious.

«The forces erupted from collective psyche bring confusion and mental blindness. A consequence of the dissolution of persona is that imagination gets loose, that is what collective psyche does. This break-in of fantastic elements violently spread in the conscience materials and impulses whose existence nobody had any doubts. All the treasures of thought and mythological feeling are found out. It is not always easy to resist such overwhelming sensations. This phase is listed among those representing a real danger during analysis, danger not to be underestimated. It is easy to understand that this condition is so unbearable that man wants to end it as soon as possible, as its resemblance with mental alienation is that strong. The most common form of madness, early dementia or schizophrenia, basically consists in the fact that the unconscious expels and replaces the functions of the conscious mind. The unconscious seizes the functions of reality and substitutes them with a reality of its own. Unconscious thoughts are audible as voices, or are perceived as illusions or body hallucinations. They show themselves as senseless yet unmovable decisions, made in opposition to reality. As persona dissolves in collective psyche, the unconscious is similarly yet not identically driven into conscience. The only difference from the mental alienation state is that the unconscious is brought on the surface through conscious analysis; at least this is what happens to the principle of analysis, when strong cultural resistances are still to be overcome. Then, after

overthrowing the barriers set up for years, the unconscious spontaneously intrudes upon conscience and sometimes burst into the mind like a torrent. In this phase resemblance with mental alienation is very strong. But it would be about real madness only if unconscious contents became a reality which replaced conscious reality; in other words, if the subject gave credence to them.»³

Only Poe's mind was ready to accept the invasion of the unconscious without completely succumb in the complete mental alienation, because the writer was genially able to take advantage of perceptive dysfunction as a tool to know reality, using the rational analysis of his fantasy. As a consequence, Poe was not a schizophrenic that had completely lost the sense of reality, but rather a strong talented visionary, able to consciously interpret his visions. Jungian analysis on the dissociation from reality through visions is mirrored in the writer's description of his mental state when he was daydreaming in the essay "Marginalia", imprecisely referring to his sudden "fantasies".⁴

«There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are not thoughts, and to which, as yet, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use the word fancies at random, and merely because I must use some word; but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquillity-when the bodily and mental health are in perfection-and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams. I am aware of these "fancies" only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable point of time-yet it is crowded with these "shadows of shadows"; and for absolute thought there is demanded time's endurance. These "fancies" have in them a pleasurable ecstasy, as far beyond the most pleasurable of the world of wakefulness, or of dreams, as the Heaven of the Northman theology is beyond its Hell. I regard the visions, even as they arise, with an awe which, in some measure moderates or tranquillises the ecstasy.»⁵

An important analysis fitting the artistic vein of the American writer and, similarly, that of Jung - where the neurotic psyche dissociation helps the artist to deeply understand the labyrinthic dimension of reality- comes from the psychoanalyst Augusto Romano in an essay concerning Poe.

«Out of metaphor, the treasure is the unconscious libido, the creative energies lying in the deep, and that the structures of an orderly world and of a steady conscience tend to refuse. Such refusal has plenty and valid reasons, for the risk is serious, and it is called psychic inflation and psychosis. On the other hand, life gradually dries up and burns out if it is not supplied by new energies. In fact Jung has stressed the positive function of neurosis, as an extreme attempt by the psyche to lead the ego to a greater integration of unconscious procedures, and consequently to a more articulated view of reality. Human condition is, from this basic point of view, dramatic and contradictory, as man struggles between the need to keep contact with the unconscious and the risk to be absorbed by it.»⁶

Schizophrenia.

I think that dissociation from reality enabled Poe to be a great exegesist of the psyche. I mean, as it is testified also from the thoughts in Marginalia, the writer consciously but involuntarily dissociated from reality-meaning without becoming psychic altered- ends up to analyse and study the soul until understanding, paradoxically in a dissociated way, the dark face of the psyche described in his

schizophrenic characters and in his short stories. Therefore, it is totally false and absurd what Maria Bonaparte says:

«In order to prevent his strange, unstable and obsessed nature from being a real criminal or insane, Edgar Allan Poe had also an unusual “drug”- ink, with which he impressed on paper his beautiful and well-finished writing, macabre “images”, horrible but comforting, that relieved him of his grief.»⁷

The writer actually uses his own dissociation not to save himself from madness, but to deeply investigate in other people's madness. His writing was not a way to escape from his madness, but to get deeper into other's people craziness. Likely Poe was a genial psychologist, so brilliant to use his own neurosis to understand human schizophrenia. In this view, Poe was mentally healthy because, differently from insane people, he was good in understanding himself and the others. Only a person in the right mind can understand when the reason becomes overt madness, because it becomes excessively instrumental or maniacal, due to a strong dissociative disturb that is going to result into schizophrenia.

Concerning mental disease, Poe defined “*the imp of the perverse*” a sort of demon of the perverse or an interior stimulus in human soul aimed at making us commit terrible cruelties, due to the sick pleasure of harming. We reach a point where we want to make an awful act with no reason, only for the pleasure of doing it just because we know we should not do it.

The analytical fantasy

The creative power of imagination allows the genius to take advantage of messages from his own unconscious. A proof of that is the analysis of imagination, consisting in the ability of the mind to orchestrate the unforeseen thoughts made of images and feelings, which seem apparently non-significant and disorganized, making them becoming art.⁸ Poe developed what he defined an analytical fantasy, to investigate with a strong rationale the deep nightmares of human soul, to dip them, following a mathematical logics, in fantastic and suggestive, musically surreal darkness. Even Nietzsche believed in the value of analytical rationality to organize creative inspiration.

«In reality the imagination of the good artist or thinker constantly produces good, mediocre, and bad, but his power of judgment, most clear and practised, rejects and chooses and joins together, just as we now learn from Beethoven's notebooks that he gradually composed the most beautiful melodies, and in a manner selected them, from many different attempts. He who makes less severe distinctions, and willingly abandons himself to imitative memories, may under certain circumstances become a great improvisator; but artistic improvisation ranks low in comparison with serious and laboriously chosen artistic thoughts. All great men were great workers, unwearied not only in invention but also in rejection, reviewing, transforming, and arranging.»⁹

The analytical fantasy of the writer is linked to the aesthetic idealism of Schelling (1775-1854), in which the genius artistically interprets the vital energy of nature through the psychic conscious activity that enables him to discover art in the nature of the unconscious. According to Schelling, nature is a sublime, universal, artistic expression: a poem unconsciously able to inspire the conscious of a brilliant artist. A similar concept is also in the transcendental Kantian idealism of S.T Coleridge (172-1834), where artist's imagination emerges as a function of a creative elaboration of

unconscious elements. Schelling and Coleridge are ideal authors to comprehend the aesthetic development of Poe.

The creativity

The writer revealed the key to his creative and perceptive talent in the introduction to the short story *Eleonora*, where he explained the value of madness in terms of invention.

«I am come of a race noted for vigour of fancy and ardour of passion. Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence -- whether much that is glorious, whether all that is profound -- does not spring from disease of thought -- from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect. They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their grey visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in awakening, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret. In snatches, they learn something of the wisdom which is of good, and more of the mere knowledge which is of evil. They penetrate, however, rudderless or compassless into the vast ocean of the "light ineffable," and again, like the adventures of the Nubian geographer, "agressi sunt mare tenebrarum, quid in eo esset exploraturi." We will say, then, that I am mad. I grant, at least, that there are two distinct conditions of my mental existence -- the condition of a lucid reason, not to be disputed, and belonging to the memory of events forming the first epoch of my life -- and a condition of shadow and doubt, appertaining to the present, and to the recollection of what constitutes the second great era of my being.»¹⁰

It was the conscious analysis of the unconscious thoughts enabling Poe to productively take advantage of the unconscious dimension, behind the coherent analysis of his own analytical fantasy. The writer affirmed also in the short story *Berenice*: *«The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn, not the material of my every-day existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself.»¹¹*

Invention, analysed in the essay *"Creativity, the magical synthesis"* by the famous psychiatrist Silvano Arieti (1914-1981) reminds the flair of the American author, similarly to the concept of *"extraordinary creativity"*. For the psychiatrist, differently from schizophrenic and dreamer, only the creative individual is able to manage rationally, meaning without letting himself get involved, the creative process coming from fantasizing, from the dream, from meditation, or from drug consumption and, therefore, the dissociation from reality. The schizophrenic, instead, believes completely to his own fantasy. Differently from the dreamer, that still keeps himself away from his dreams, the schizophrenic is very impressed, as much to hope that it is still possible to live them despite the numerous adversities.

Anyway, we cannot rule out that, having lived in a romantic epoch, the big poet was also a dreamer, at least in youth.

This demonstrates that the different artistic expressions cannot manifest within the sole limits of rationality, as they tend to be a direct consequence of the impulses of unconscious, requiring a strong and rare perception flexibility that goes over normality. Therefore, *"genius and dissipation"* intertwine when, paradoxically, being dissociated from reality becomes the salt of the associative intelligence enabling the dream to emerge into reality, in a creative *"visionary ecstasy"*.

Synchronicity and Syntropy

Poe's descent into hell becomes a neurotic delirium, transforming into a dissociative tool, which is necessary not only to express the power of the dream in the artistic creativity, but perhaps also to stimulate a certain synchronicity, through the archetype in the abyss of the metasymbolic art, expressing a representation of the quantum world where everything is linked in the universal collective conscience.

Visionary experiences of the American writer particularly remind the studies of the psychiatrist Rick Strassman on psychedelia effects of dimethyltryptamine (DMT) produced by the pineal gland. In these states of expanded consciousness, spontaneously produced through meditation or by specific drugs, is possible to release the mind from the usual rigid mental schemes, to gain access to mystic experiences where having brilliant intuitions. Maybe the visionary states provoked by DMT may facilitate the synchronic link with the archetype, even with the influence of the intelligent entities that Strassman hypothesizes being present in the altered conscious states.

As Jung and Pauli linked the significant connexions with the future, it comes spontaneous to associate synchrony to syntropy. Consequently, in Poe's metasymbolic art, we can hypothesize the description of syntropic events when the prophetic events of death are symbolically described as oneiric visions. Syntropy is a phenomenon discovered by the great mathematician Luigi Fantappiè (1901-1956), who theorized a time flowing in the opposite direction, meaning from the future to the past. In other words, the cause is in the future and the effect is in the past, to achieve a goal. If in Poe's tales, syntropy occurs in the dreams, then we can assume that, as the dream is the soul (Hillman), then the soul is probably the heart of syntropy. Therefore, it comes spontaneous to wonder if prophetic dreams, without ruling out those related to death, are syntropic phenomena, like it happens in Poe's stories. Following this thought, we can try to compare Hillman and Fantappiè based on the possibility that syntropy can manifest in some way even in the process of individuation.

Notes

- 1) For those who want to analyse the effects hallucinogenic drugs have on perception of reality, even though Poe was on opium and not on mescaline or LSD, I suggest the popular book by Aldous Huxley *The Doors of Perception*, and the research of the psychiatrist Stanislav Grof.
- 2) J. Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, Est, 1996, p. 9
- 3) Carl Gustav Jung, *Inconscio, Occultismo e Magia*, Newton Compton Publisher, Roma, 1985, pages 167-168
- 4) We have to pay attention to the correct translation of the word "*fancies*", which we also can translate with "*imagination*". The English text can be found on the following website 'Marginalia by Edgar Allan Poe' (Graham's Magazine, March, 1846) at this link: http://www.4literature.net/Edgar_Allan_Poe/Marginalia/3.html. However, in the text Poe clarifies the term "*fancies*" with "*Psychal Impressions*".
- 5) *Marginalia*, in *Filosofia della composizione e altri saggi*, Napoli, Guida, 1986, pag. 89
- 6) Augusto Romano, *Poe e la psicologia analitica junghiana: nostalgia delle origine e immagini del femminile in E.A. Poe dal gotico alla fantascienza*, Mursia, pag. 267.
- 7) M. Bonaparte, *Edgar Allan Poe. Studio analitico*, Newton Compton, Roma 1976, vol. I, pp. 96-97 in Daniela Fargione, *Giardini e labirinti: l'America di Edgar Allan Poe*, Celid, 2005, pag. 82

- 8) See introduction by Carlo Izzo in *Tutti i racconti e le poesie*, Casa Editrice Le Lettere, Firenze, 1990, pag. XXIV
- 9) F. Nietzsche, *Belief in Inspiration*, in *Human, All too Human*
- 10) Eleonora in Poe, *Racconti del terrore*, Oscar classici Mondadori, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano, VII rist. 1999, pag. 196)
- 11) Berenice in Poe, *Racconti del terrore*, idem, pag. 74