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“Mad I am not”...or am I? Poe’s Voices of Madness

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It is generally agreed that Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales* gave his contemporary readers a radically new vision of insanity. As such, they stand as a landmark in the history of literature, and generations of critics have since praised Poe’s genius and ability to put to writing the “the disintegrative vibration” (Lawrence 21) of the human mind. From the mid-1830s to the mid-1840s, Poe’s narrators’ demented stories provided an unprecedented insight into extreme states of minds¹, shattering the frame of rationality. Poe’s approach to madness is ambivalent. While anchored in the Romantic tradition according to which the creative imagination is visionary and designed to trigger a profound resounding echo in the psyche, it simultaneously anticipated the popular trend in the 1960s and 70s which was to consider the madman as a seer, one for whom the doors of perception have been flung wide open. Some, such as neo-gothicist Patrick McGrath, also see Poe as a forerunner of Freud’s case studies and the latter as a mere “usurper” of Gothic insights into the psyche². Yet one would beg to differ, as it seems that the power of internal focalization in Poe’s most celebrated tales of madness outdo, from a reader-response perspective, Freud’s clinical descriptions in the third person, no matter how unsettling they often are.

As Shoshanna Felman observed, there is in Poe’s tales of madness something of a “uniquely striking and undeniable manner, what might be called a *genius-effect*: the impression of some undefinable but compelling *force* to which the reader is subjected” (120). The word “manner” here seems to call for further development. First, Poe’s manner can be understood as a means to reach a goal, as a method, a method in madness, as it were. The written representation of the madman’s inner speech is an extremely challenging task, not to say an impossible one, at the outer limits of representation. The texts of diagnosed “mad writers” such as Nerval, Artaud and to a lesser extent Woolf or Joyce, provide arresting examples of authentic representations of “*l’infini turbulent*”, to use Henri Michaux’s phrase. However, in the case of a writer like Edgar Allan Poe, who never was clinically diagnosed as insane, the situation is different. For him, the aim of the writing is not the unleashing of wild

¹ With the exception, perhaps of some of Brockden Brown’s most deranging narratives, particularly *Wieland*, yet with a somewhat lesser degree of intensity.

² In “Transgression and Decay” (1997), he writes that: “The wealth of psychological insight that the Gothic raised from the darkness of the unconscious (...) was usurped by Freud” (McGrath, 1997: 157)

inner voices, but the careful, controlled and conscious elaboration of the madman's discourse, which was to provide a paradigm for the literary representation of all the psychopaths or "moral monsters" (McGrath, 1991: 240) that were to flourish in the late 19th and century and still abound today in contemporary literature. This leads us to consider the second meaning of the word "manner", as Poe's "uniquely striking and undeniable manner" is primarily linguistic, as words are the stuff his madness is made of. Baudelaire, in his famous *Notes sur Edgar Poe*, thus commented that he was no less than "*le premier Américain qui, à proprement parler, ait fait du style un outil*" (1019).

The aim of this paper is to suggest that Poe's "genius effect" lies primarily in his linguistic creativity. "Berenice", "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat", the three tales under study here rank among Poe's most famous. They all are confessional narratives purported by psychopathic first-person intradiegetic narrators, often murderous ones. As such they share not only thematic features but also what Genette called the narrative mode and are thus apt for stylistic and linguistic comparison. On a diegetic level, they could almost be seen as perfectly identical. Does this also hold true on a linguistic level? How do these three tales linguistically stage madness?

First, it is important to bear in mind that Poe was writing at a time when psychiatry was only just emerging. In her compelling study of Poe's contemporary discursive framework, Elizabeth Phillips observes that the poet was most likely to have read two main books of his time dealing with mental disorder, namely Benjamin Rush's *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812) and Isaac Ray's *Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity* (1838). In spite of his fascination with interior entropy, Poe was not really acquainted with contemporary psychiatric science of his time. His approach to mental decay was primarily poetic and literary, his main concern being the "metaphysics of mania"³. Elizabeth Phillips rightly observes that "[Poe] shows no awareness of medical theories connecting "dissipation" with mental disturbance; the language in which he described the disturbance predates that of early nineteenth-century 'psychiatry'"(102).

The word "psychiatry", according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* did not appear in the English language until 1846, that is to say very shortly after the stories were written. Accordingly, this lexical item does not feature in any of Poe's tales, while phrenology is mentioned repeatedly in "The Imp of the Perverse". On the other hand, a grotesque story such as "The System of Dr Tarr and Professor Fether" suggests some acquaintance with Pinel's

³ This sentence is taken from "The System of Dr Tarr and Professor Fether" and was rather inappropriately translated by Baudelaire as "*la physiologie de la folie*".

modern therapeutic practices. The contextual and discursive framework in which the stories were written is obviously of some significance for a study of Poe's "linguistics of madness"; it shows at least that the madman's speech was going to be as heuristic as poetic. The coining of the adjective "*psychal*" in the tale "A Magnetic Revelation" (1844) is, as Henri Justin rightly observes, first evidence of the poet's intuitive anticipation of the future linguistic tools of psychoanalysis⁴.

1. The vocabulary of mania and pathology in "Berenice".

"Berenice" was published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835, that is to say close to ten years before the other two—something French readers are usually unaware of, as Baudelaire's *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires* (1857) totally upset the chronological order of the stories' publication. Its significance in Poe's dealing with demented narrators is essential "because the story launched him in the kind of subject matter he was later to treat with unquestionable coherence, lucidity, and skill" (Phillips 120). It must therefore be seen as the prototype or blueprint of the later two, which are arguably his most famous tales of madness. Interestingly, the language of "Berenice" is far less agitated than that of the other tales studied here. The dominant mood is one of profound melancholy⁵. Reading it, one does not feel immediately confronted with the voice of a madman. The opening lines are solemn, with a ponderous simile verging on the parable, followed immediately by a reflection of a narrator questioning his singular, sombre mood:

Misery is manifold. The wretchedness of earth is multiform. Overreaching the wide horizon as the rainbow, its hues are as various as the hues of that arch, — as distinct, too, yet as intimately blended. Overreaching the wide horizon as the rainbow. How is it that from beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness? (189)

Aegus, the intradiegetic narrator, strives for logic and refined words in the most of the story. Sentences are often long, the syntax extremely intricate, only interrupted by dashes — an aspect to which we shall return— and one long succession of exclamations, yet one which reads more like a rhetorical lament, a mournful ode, than a demented speech:

⁴ See Henri Justin, *Avec Poe jusqu'au bout de la prose* (Paris : Gallimard, 2009), pp. 220-226.

⁵ It is well-known that melancholy was seen as one the main mental afflictions before the birth of modern psychiatry. The word, however, is only used once in the story in the physical description Berenice, insisting on the "reigning **melancholy** of the countenance. (194, my emphasis)

Berenice! – I call upon her name – Berenice! – and from the grey ruins of memory a thousand tumultuous recollections are startled at the sound! Ah! vividly is her image before me now, as in the early days of her light-heartedness and joy! Oh! gorgeous yet fantastic beauty! Oh! sylph amid the shrubberies of Arnheim! – Oh! Naiad among its fountains! (191)

Immediately following this emphatic address to the departed one, the syntax becomes more ruptured and fragmented while simultaneously the word “disease” appears for the first time, and is repeated in the same sentence: “Oh! Naiad among its fountains! – and then – then all is mystery and terror, and a tale that should not be told. **Disease** – a fatal **disease** – fell like the simoom upon her frame” (191, my emphasis). This example of syntactic dislocation is however exceptional in the tale. “Berenice” does not exactly attempt to stage madness through syntactic innovations, it rather does so on a lexical level. The lexical item “disease” occurs repeatedly—6 times altogether—and is associated with “disorder” (193) and mostly “monomania” (repeated three times), the affliction Aegus is often remembered for. These items, together with other terms and descriptions, construct an elaborate and pervasive isotopy of pathology in the whole text, preparing for the grand finale, that is to say the achievement of the single effect Poe is justly famous for, in this case the ultimate periphrastic revelation that during the night he has savagely extracted all of Berenice’s teeth with a spade.

At the time when Poe was writing, the word “mania” encompassed more or less all kinds of known psychopathological disorders. The diachronic evolution of the terminology is of course significant, and as Elizabeth Phillips remarks, Aegus, in today’s psychoanalytical terms would be diagnosed as suffering from no less than “ ‘schizoid tendencies’ as well as tendencies to ‘obsessional ruminations’ and an epileptoid attack, followed, as is generally the case, by amnesia” (116). In other words, the narrator is raving mad. Yet it must be stressed that this adjective—mad—together with the derived noun—madness—are entirely absent from the whole story, unlike in the two later tales.

To complete this lexical survey of psychopathology in the tale, let us also note the use of the word *phantasma* (italicized, moreover) during the climax of the narrator’s anxiety as Berenice, seized by a violent epileptic fit, is struggling for her life:

And the evening closed in upon me thus-and then the darkness came, and tarried, and went – and the day again dawned – and the mists of a second night were now gathering around – and still I sat motionless in that solitary room; and still I sat buried in meditation, and still the *phantasma* of the teeth maintained its terrible ascendancy as, with the most vivid hideous distinctness, it floated about amid the changing lights and shadows of the chamber. (195)

Phantasma, a word that has existed in the English language with its current spelling since the 16th century, is, like misery, manifold. First, it can refer to a spectral apparition, a ghost-like vision, an image, in the sense of the Greek etymology. Accordingly, the phrase was translated by Baudelaire as “*le fantôme des dents*” (334). Could it have been otherwise, given that the translation predates by almost half a century the second, psychoanalytical meaning of the word, where *phantasma* refers to a creation of the imagination or fancy, a fantasy⁶? Similarly, can the modern reader but help reading “the *phantasma* of the teeth” as “*le fantasme des dents*” rather than their “*fantôme*”? Isn’t Poe here successfully exploiting this particular lexical item for the literary representation of madness, thereby anticipating Freudian phantasmatic narratives? Gothic spectres become figments of a demented mind and gothic tropes are internalised—“Berenice” is consequently not only the first tale to stage a demented narrator, it is also the first text inclined on turning the physical material into mental material, starting with Berenice’s teeth, Aegus “seriously believ[ing] *que toutes ses dents étaient des idées*”⁷ (195). In a similar fashion, language had to adapt this internalization process; by, for instance, turning ghosts into fantasies.

2. Madmen in “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”.

In “The Black Cat”, another famous tale of psychological terror, the word phantasm is used twice, and its spelling slightly updated. The two occurrences seem to illustrate the word’s semantic ambivalence; the first one leaning on the psychological—the narrator mentions “some intellect (...) which will reduce [his] phantasm to the commonplace (563) — while the second is definitely more spectral: “I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat”, he says after murdering Pluto (567). Yet the “The Black Cat”, written eight years after “Berenice” shows a clear evolution in Poe’s linguistics of madness. To begin with, the word “mad” inaugurates the narrative, occurring twice in the opening lines:

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. But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburden my soul. (563)

⁶ Although the *OED* provides the following definition, dating back to 1656: “Phantasm is that, to which we are attracted by that frustraneous attraction, which happens in Melancholy or Mad Persons”. Such a definition does seem to bridge the gap between the spectral and the psychological.

⁷ In French in the original text.

The famous authoritative statement “mad I am not”, whose grammatical inversion annihilates the originally intended denial of madness through a process of double negative (grammatically negating what is firstly semantically negated), is arguably Poe’s best achievement in his literary tackling of madness. It certainly is the most economical. Besides, his rejection of dreams gives evidence of Poe’s choice of method in the literary handling of insanity. Unlike Nerval, whose *Aurelia* (1855) relies extensively on dreams to convey the quality of unconscious experience and seeks to “develop a metamorphic style that recreates the processes of mental pathology, particularly schizophrenia” (Feder 248), Poe’s efforts to reach the fluctuations of the unconscious are carried out through a conscious manipulation of language. Isn’t madness, after all, “an over-acuteness of the senses”, as the narrator of the “Tell-Tale Heart” puts it (315)?⁸ In Poe’s tales, extreme rationality, no matter how destructive, becomes the gateway to insanity. This of course is one of the factors allowing to rank Poe among the *fantastiqueurs* as in such stories, one is led to wonder whether “*la folie n’est pas en fait une raison supérieure*” (Todorov 45).

Although no sane reader could possibly doubt that Poe’s narrators are insane, the latter keep negating their conditions, particularly in the later tales and most vehemently in “The Tell-Tale Heart”. Published in *The Pioneer* in 1843, this tale is probably that in which Poe’s linguistics of madness are used most inventively and experimentally. As such, it pioneered a whole generation of texts which were thereafter to give literary texture to the inner representation of the collapse of the psyche such as Patrick McGrath’s *Spider* (1991), written a century and a half later.

The differences in language, style, tone and pace with “Berenice” are blatant. Melancholy and emphasis yield before the urgency of the speech. A mere glance at the incipit suffices to illustrate this change of strategy:

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. (313)

⁸ This exact same phrase is also used in “The Fall of the House of Usher”.

While the narrator uses the same rhetorical strategy as in “The Black Cat”, consisting in denying madness the better to indirectly assert it, the linguistic changes are evident. In a very “un-Poesque” fashion, sentences are kept extremely short and there is in these lines an immediacy that is totally absent from the tortured confession of Aegus and even from the anonymous narrator of “The Black Cat”. As D.E.S. Maxwell observes, “The hysterical energy of the opening sentences (...) is authentically colloquial, modulating to the speaking tones of insanity, which impinges on the outer world in the experience” (81). Elizabeth Phillips even goes on to suggest that the composition of these lines may have been written so as to mimic the pulse of the madman in the pace of the prose, as Benjamin Rush noted in his *Inquiries* that “the [madman’s] pulse is twenty beats more frequent than in the natural state” (quoted by Phillips, 142). How much more inventive could one be in order to offer, through diegesis, a mimetic representation of the internal entropy, some fifty years before the discovery of the unconscious?

Though the shortest tale of the selection, “The Tell-Tale Heart” abounds with linguistic and stylistic devices aiming at conveying a sense of madness. Addresses to the reader are recurrent: “You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*.” (313)/ “And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but an over-acuteness of the senses?” (315)/ “If you still think me mad, you will think it no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body” (316). However, in a deliberately perverse fashion⁹ these obsessive addresses only serve to reinforce the assumption that one is indeed dealing with a madman.

Repetitions are numerous. They come close to saturating the whole text, which once again may be a way for the writer to mimic the mental short-circuit of the madman. One particular repetitive structure is found in qualifiers. On several occasions, an adjective is repeated after a dash with the double adjunction of the adverb. Such qualifying phrases almost become a *leitmotiv* in the story:

I moved it slowly – very, very slowly... (313)

I resolved to open a little – very, very little crevice... (315)

It was open – wide, wide open... (315)

⁹ In this case, what may be termed a “discursive double negative”: the addressee is told he is not dealing with a madman by the narrator, yet what he is told cannot be told but by a madman. Hence the narrator is mad, and his denial is further evidence of this.

Another repeated adjective is the comparative “louder”, the loudness being of course that of the old man’s heart, the eponymous tell-tale heart of the story. To illustrate the growing sense of anxiety and panic subsuming the narrator, Poe sets up a crescendo effect by repeating the adjective first twice, then thrice, and finally four times until the final revelation:

But the beating grew louder, louder! (315)
It grew louder, louder, *louder!* (317)
hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder!* (317)

Repetitions in “The Tell-Tale Heart” thus end up denoting the mental entrapment of the protagonist in his own madness. While on a clinical level, the psychopathic tendencies of the narrator compare very much with that of Aegus in “Berenice”, the language of the tale, though less ornate, is nonetheless far more intent on producing what may have been, in Poe’s mind’s eye at least, the violence of the madman’s inner voice. With this tale, Poe is also proving inventive on a narratological level. From the tormented, memoir-like confessions of a diseased mind as found in “Berenice” and arguably in “The Black Cat”, we seem to have moved to a raw, dynamic representation of madness at work in language. The final paragraph of the “Tell-Tale Heart”, with its countless repetitions, interruptions, exclamations and hesitations, verges on the stream-of-consciousness as the deluded aural perception drives the delirious narrator to confess his deed. In this case, not only do we read a first-person report of mad deeds, we almost hear the madman think aloud thanks to a narrative technique that verges on free direct speech. The only significant difference between Poe’s text and free direct speech (or interior monologue) is that we remain in a retrospective confession and that the tense used is the simple past, not the present. However, even this confession is somewhat challenged by Poe at the end of his paragraph, with the return to the present tense in an assertion of certainty: “Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! – no, no! They heard – they suspected! – they knew! – they were making a mockery of my horror! – this I thought, and this I think” (317). As a result, the sense of urgency, not to say panic, taking hold of the narrator is made quite palpable. From today’s postmodern vantage point, it is rather interesting to re-read this entire paragraph substituting the present for the past. The effect is striking; one feels almost propelled in *Fight Club* (1995), Chuck Palahniuk’s frantically fast-paced inaugural novel, often hailed by America’s “Generation X” children as their own literary manifesto.

3. The role of the dash.

One characteristic of free direct speech—a typically modernist technique, and thus not usually associated with Romantic or Gothic writers—is the use of a ruptured, almost syncopated syntax aimed at mimicking the instability of the human train of thoughts. One linguistic tool enabling this instability is the dash. Contrary to the full stop or the comma, which generally convey an impression of control, the dash neither closes nor connects; on the contrary, more often than not it “wreak[s] havoc on the sequentiality or the usual logic of linear progression” (Dayan 173). As such the dash would seem a rather appropriate tool for the written expression of interior entropy. It would almost be an understatement to say that Poe makes an extensive use of the dash in the three tales studied here. Whether it be in “Berenice”, “The Black Cat” or “The Tell-Tale Heart”, the use of the dash is as constant as it is pervasive. There are 82 dashes in “Berenice”, 68 in “The Black Cat”, 66 in the “Tell-Tale Heart” (a proportionally speaking high incidence, with one dash for roughly every 30 words). This paralinguistic sign often occurs mostly in moments of great mental agitation, as for instant when the narrator of “The Black Cat” discovers the real nature of the mark on the animal’s chest:

It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name – and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared – it was now, I say, the image of a hideous – of a ghastly thing – of the GALLOWS! – oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime – of Agony and of Death!

In this short passage (65 words only) there are no fewer than 6 dashes, by far the most frequent punctuation mark, compared with four commas, two exclamation marks and, most tellingly, no full stop. In “Berenice”, a text which, as we said earlier, is more solemn and written in a more refined and ponderous prose than the other two, dashes become the agents of disruption, the very *élément perturbateur* of the text’s flow. As in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, dashes are primarily used to support repetitions, or, as we saw before, when the narrator mentions the irruption of the disease. Yet dashes take on a remarkable force at the end of the tale, when the menial arrives to tell Aegus about the night’s events:

What said he? – some broken sentences I heard. He told of a wild cry disturbing the silence of the night –of the gathering together of the household – of a search in the direction of the

sound; – and then his tones grew thrillingly distinct as he whispered me of a violated grave –of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing, still palpitating, still alive! He pointed to garments; – they were muddy and clotted with gore. I spoke not, and he took me gently by the hand; –it was indented with the impress of human nails. He directed my attention to some object against the wall; – I looked at it for some minutes; – it was a spade. (197)

With one dash for every ten words approximately, this linguistic sign is hard to overlook. Interestingly, it is associated with speech, language and perception. Aegus only hears some “broken sentences” (note the inversion of the word order as well) at first, and the dash seems to represent what he does not hear. In the later part of this excerpt, however, the dash becomes associated with the narrator’s own perceptions or mental processes, denoting perhaps the mental progress toward the unspeakable deed he committed during the night, or possibly standing for sole the graphic sign able to represent what is going on in the mind of a schizophrenic subject, one who, as French psychoanalyst Paul-Claude Racamier notes, is doomed to spend his time trying to set down his demented experience: “*Ecrire intérieurement sa vie, chacun le fait sans cesse, le névrosé le fait en hiéroglyphes, et le psychotique sur un écran qui ne prend pas l’encre*” (192).

It seems possible to draw from the preceding observations a certain number of partial conclusions regarding Poe’s literary handling of madness. First, the significance of the intellectual background in which Poe was writing must be insisted upon. It is remarkable that Poe was writing his tales of mental disorder at the exact same period when psychiatry was emerging as a science. Yet Poe, who was above all a poet, dealt with madness primarily from an intuitive and aesthetic angle. His main aim was to trigger in the reader an aesthetic response, located somewhere between Gothic terror, Burkean sublime (the two being of course connected) and interior transcendence. Secondly, and still in keeping with the fact that Poe was writing in the first half of the eighteenth century and was thus unaware both of the notion of the unconscious and of the distinction between signifier and signified, one must reassert in Poe’s tales of madness the implacable supremacy of the conscious over the buried layers of the psyche. In those three tales, one has to recognize, as Daniel Hoffman did with *The Fall of the House of Usher*, “the apocalypse of the unconscious, as told by the conscious mind” (177), and thus the unique nature of Poe’s linguistics of madness. Thirdly, this paper has endeavoured to avoid the question of whether Poe as an individual was mad, which has occupied critics and biographers alike for several decades. It is a well-known fact that ever since Marie Bonaparte, Poe has been the unfortunate victim of many psychobiographical

readings, and even Elizabeth Phillips' essay does not always avoid this pitfall. To try and establish a clinical diagnosis from a literary production seems a flawed endeavour to start with, especially if one fails to take into account the unbridgeable gap that separates the author from his narrators. Let us therefore rather enjoy the workings of an over-acute creative mind and become convinced, like the two policemen at the end of "The Tell-Tale Heart", by the poet's remarkable *manner*.

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