

Poe, Freud, and “Romantic Rationalism” _____

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In this study I would like to show how Edgar Allan Poe was a Romantic, but a Romantic of the school of Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling, i.e., a rationalist Romantic who elaborates, promotes, and delivers to following generations a model of reason much deeper and more alive than that of the Enlightenment (and, later on, Positivism). Like many thinkers during the Enlightenment, the German and Italian Romantic rationalists (such as Alessandro Manzoni) thought that Reason and not Feelings should be the guide of human life. But, unlike many other Enlightenment intellectuals, they thought that reason should be concerned with such issues as the Universe, God, and the depths of the Soul—that is, the very three ideas that the most intelligent thinker of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, had wanted to exclude from the use of human Reason (see Williams).

Poe’s mind, in particular, was fertile. It was brimming with many ideas that have survived him even until today. In particular, his ideas of “analysis” and “bi-part soul philosophy” helped influence Sigmund Freud and constituted an important inspiration for one of the strongest expressions of Romantic (i.e., Non-Illuminist, Non-Positivist) Rationalism of the twentieth century: psychoanalysis.¹

Paradoxically, as an individual, Poe succeeded despite all the personal challenges he faced. Orphaned at the age of two, dead at the age of 40 (perhaps from alcoholism), poverty-stricken, probably impotent (see Bonaparte 29–30), quarrelsome and possessing few lasting friends, he nonetheless managed to acquire a vast interdisciplinary culture in the most varied fields of knowledge. In this he resembles, perhaps, no other person of the nineteenth century apart from Hegel. In any case, he became the most original and influential American writer ever. As the historian of science John Tresch writes:

Despite the myths and clichés about him, Poe was not a morbid, melancholy dreamer, prone to slip at the slightest suggestion into an earth-shaking alternate reality—or rather, he was that, and something more. Poe experienced great misfortune, much of which he brought upon himself. But as his portrait suggests, he faced up to his life with dignity, kindness, a sense of duty, and a sense of fun. One of the first Americans to earn his living by literature alone, he forced himself through unprecedented contortions to capture readers and fame. But he aimed higher. Glancing compulsively up to the skies, he was an analyst, a philosopher, and a detective, seeking to crack the code of the universe. With exceptionally keen eyes, Poe followed the dazzling trail of the strange and contradictory nation that produced him and the sublime, terrifying modernity it was bringing down to earth. (Tresch 10)

Education

Poe attended an excellent grammar school where he learned classical culture at a very high level—a level seldom seen today. For instance, if one reads his “Theory of Poetry” (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 1–94), one realizes how knowledge of the ancient classics, which Poe had mastered, has diminished over time. His command of classical Greek ideas and terms, and his familiarity with classical Greek authors, were both impressive, and his knowledge of Latin writings was even deeper. He was also familiar to some extent with Hebrew and biblical literature, as shown, for instance, by his precise lexical and grammatical commentaries on the Hebrew text of Isaiah and Ezekiel (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 936).

However, in addition to knowing ancient culture, Poe was also familiar with a wide range of more recent disciplines. The United States in those years saw an accelerating growth in sciences and philosophy (Tresch 18–22, 30–33, 110), and Poe, to cite just one example, himself became an expert on seashells (the subject of his one best-seller; see Gould). His writings also show his knowledge of many ancient, medieval, and modern philosophers, and he was also familiar with many accounts of travel and exploration. He read extensively in phrenology and mesmerism and was intimately

familiar with recent American and international literature (Poe, 1984, 1055–216). In fact, he intimately knew Italian, French, and German and, therefore, read directly literary works in those languages. Finally, he was not only acquainted with natural philosophy and natural theology (Tresch 91) but was also familiar with a very wide range of authors from many places and eras, including Æschylus, Alfieri, Archilochus, Ariosto, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Bacon, Berkeley, Burke, Byron, Calderon, Callimachus, Carlyle, Cervantes, Chateaubriand, Chaucer, Cicero, Coleridge, Demosthenes, Donne, Euripides, Foscolo, Fourier, Gassendi, Gibbon, Helvetius, Hugo, Jacobi, Jonson, Lamartine, Lucretius, Manzoni, Milton, Montaigne, Montesquieu, Ovid, Pindemonte, Pliny, Plutarch, Quevedo, Quintilian, Rabelais, Sallust, Sand, Sappho, Schelling, Schiller, Schlegel, Shakespeare, Shelley, Sophocles, Spenser, Swift, Tacitus, Tennyson, Thiers, Virgil, Voltaire, and Wordsworth (to mention just a few).

Poe as Rationalist Romantic

Writing his last great work, the cosmological treatise *Eureka*, Poe distanced himself from the new current of Positivism which—on the model of some natural sciences—insisted on the importance of the senses in any effort to understand mere “facts.” On the contrary, he assumed that without knowing mathematics and metaphysics mere “empiricists” remain more ignorant than thinkers who at least know that they do not know. In this respect he was indebted to the three great Greek philosophers: Socrates (who was aware of the limits of reason), Plato (who prevented those who did not know mathematics from entering his school), and Aristotle (who explored the metaphysical dimensions of the natural sciences). Few poets, especially Romantic poets, know Aristotle because they find Plato far more congenial. Not so Poe, who in his nonfiction prose mentions Aristotle three times as often as he mentions Plato. On the one hand, Poe was well aware—in the passionate dramas of his personal life—of the “cathartic” function of art analyzed by Aristotle (Bonaparte 2: 293). On the other hand, introducing the detective Auguste Dupin in

“The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe makes Dupin’s interlocutor (who resembles Conan Doyle’s “Watson”) say “Observing [Dupin] in these moods, I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul, and amused myself with the fancy of a double Dupin—the creative and the resolvent” (“The Murders” 166). And, in “The Purloined Letter,” he makes Auguste Dupin say of that story’s culprit: “As Poet and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all” (“The Purloined Letter” 43). Stephanie Craighill, therefore, rightly comments:

Poe’s work was profoundly influenced by Aristotelian theory . . . [and] Poe’s “old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul” emerges from Aristotle’s ancient philosophy of the bipartite psychology. . . . Broadly speaking, Aristotelian ethical theory posits that “the soul may be divided into two parts—the rational and the irrational.” The rational component accounts for the “intellectual virtues” . . . In contrast, the irrational half is responsible for the “moral virtues or vices” of the character. (39–40)

Thus, according to Aristotle, the five intellectual virtues are practical wisdom, intelligence, science, ability, and theoretical wisdom, while the moral virtues are justice, courage, temperance, meekness, generosity, benevolence, humor, and many others.

Like Aristotle’s philosophy, Poe’s thought is anti-irrationalist. He rejects the typical Romantic emphasis on mere feeling and is, instead, committed to the ideal of reason. Thus, he rejected the irrationalism of such thinkers as Rousseau. He writes, for instance, that the

theorizers on Government, who pretend always to “begin with the beginning,” commence with Man in what they call his *natural* state—the savage. What right have they to suppose this his natural state? Man’s chief idiosyncrasy being reason, it follows that his savage condition—his condition of action *without* reason—is his *unnatural* state. The more he reasons, the nearer he approaches the position to which this chief idiosyncrasy irresistibly impels him; and not

until he attains this position with exactitude—not until his reason has exhausted itself for his improvement—not until he has stepped upon the highest pinnacle of civilisation—will his *natural* state be ultimately reached, or thoroughly determined. (“Marginalia”)

Rousseau, in addition to arguing that the intellectual virtues make man unhappy, argued that the intellectual virtues (arts and sciences) come from moral vices such as greed, lust, and pride. In other words, Rousseau assumes that good comes from evil. In contrast, Poe, reviewing Beverly Tucker’s novel *George Balcombe*, strongly rejects this kind of thinking, as when he writes that when, for instance, “we say that the effect of the frequent ‘experience of fear’ upon the mind is to engender courage, we are merely uttering the silly paradox that we fear less in proportion as we fear more” (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 978).

But Poe’s rationalism is not Enlightenment or Positivist rationalism. It does not emphasize merely practical purposes, material experience, and quantitative logic. It is the rationalism of some Romantic authors such as Fichte, Hegel, and Manzoni, a rationalism that, while giving priority to Reason over Feelings, continues to believe that the field of reason is vast and, therefore, that reason can help us understand the feelings of the individual, the historical traditions of the past, the speculations of metaphysics, and the yearnings of religion and art. Not all rationalists, says Poe, are capable of a deep analysis of reality: “The analytical power should not be confounded with ample ingenuity; for while the analyst is necessarily ingenious, the ingenious man is often remarkably incapable of analysis” (“The Murders” 11–12). Poe believed it is mistaken to identify reason in general merely with specific quantitative-mathematical reason, and that it is this confusion that caused much inquiry in the moral sciences to fail. Thus, Poe’s great detective, Auguste Dupin, argued that simple

“mathematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity. The great error lies in supposing that even the truths of what is called pure algebra, are abstract or general truths.

And this error is so egregious that I am confounded at the universality with which it has been received. Mathematical axioms are not axioms of general truth. What is true of relation—of form and quantity—is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. In this latter science it is very usually untrue that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole . . . There are numerous other mathematical truths which are only truths within the limits of relation. But the mathematician argues, from his finite truths, through habit, as if they were of an absolutely general applicability—as the world indeed imagines them to be.” (Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” 182–83)

Therefore, although Poe’s writings use all the “Gothic” material of Romanticism, he actually belongs to the group of Rationalist Romantics mentioned above, and not to the group of Irrationalist Romantics such as Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin, François-René Chateaubriand, Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, and Giacomo Leopardi. As Darlene Unrue puts it:

There is no question that Poe’s thought and art incorporate romantic, and more narrowly, Gothic and Transcendental properties. . . . There are, however, certain important differences. . . . The romantic writer who exalts nature, primitivism, solitude and individuality and exults in subjectivity and emotion, recollected in tranquillity or not, stands decidedly apart from Poe, who is indifferent to nature and primitivism, is miserable in solitariness and is frustrated by the restrictions of the subjective perspective. (113)

Thus, the Reason of Romantic Rationalists, such as Poe, has the power to investigate matters that the Enlightenment and Positivists consider to be outside and beyond reason’s capacity—matters such as fantasy. Indeed, for Poe “fantasy” is completely analyzable by the powers of Reason, because every so-called birth of the imagination can never derive from something that does not exist:

The mind of man can imagine nothing which does not exist:—if it could, it would create not only ideally, but substantially—as do the thoughts of God. It may be said—“We imagine a griffin, yet a

griffin does not exist.” Not the griffin certainly, but its component parts. It is no more than a collation of known limbs—features—qualities. Thus with all which claims to be new—which appears to be a *creation* of the intellect:—it is re-soluble into the old. The wildest effort of the mind cannot stand the test of the analysis. (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 277)

In fact, Poe even disagrees with the ancient proverb *de gustibus non est disputandum* [“there is no disputing about tastes”] and thinks that clinical psychology (then called phrenology) can demonstrate that even tastes can be analyzed by reason:

Not the least important service which, hereafter, mankind will owe to Phrenology, may perhaps, be recognised in an analysis of the real principles, and a digest of the resulting laws of taste. These principles, in fact, are as clearly traceable, and these laws as readily susceptible of system as are any whatever. (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 679)

Sixty years later these ideas, I believe, probably influenced Sigmund Freud. More explicitly and accurately than in Hegel in his *The Subjective Spirit* or in Schelling in his *Philosophy of Nature* or in Fechner in his *Elemente der Psychophysik*, Poe provided subsequent thought with certain doctrines or snippets of doctrines concerning the relation between the conscious and unconscious mind. As for Freud, so for Poe, the trust in reason (or in “emotional intelligence,” we would say today) led him to believe that all the contents of the mind can eventually be thought and expressed in words:

How very commonly we hear it remarked, that such and such thoughts are beyond the compass of words! I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language. I fancy, rather, that where difficulty in expression is experienced, there is, in the intellect which experiences it, a want either of deliberateness or of method. For my own part, I have never had a thought which I could not set down in word. (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 1383)

At first glance, it would seem that there are indeed pre-verbal images (which Freud will say are acquired by the individual in infancy, before we learn to speak). Poe would agree, as when he writes that there is in fact

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. . . . They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquillity I am aware of these “fancies” only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 1384)

Developing this argument, Poe becomes bolder:

Now, so entire is my faith in the power of words, that, at times, I have believed it possible to embody even the evanescence of fancies such as I have attempted to describe. In experiments with this end in view, I have proceeded so far as, first, to control (when the bodily and mental health are good) the existence of the condition. . . . I mean to say, merely, that now I can be sure, when all circumstances are favorable, of the supervention of the condition, and feel even the capacity of inducing or compelling it; the favorable circumstances, however, are not the less rare else had I compelled, already, the Heaven into the Earth. (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 1384)

Here I am immediately reminded of Freud’s Virgilian epigraph to his *Interpretation of Dreams: flectere si nequeo Superos, Acheronta movebo* [If I cannot bend the heavens above, I will move hell]. Freud had in fact convinced himself, through experiments, that by producing some conditions of “tranquillity”—first through hypnosis and then within the psychoanalytic setting—it was possible to bring unconscious mental contents to consciousness. He claimed to have realized, in a systematic and scientifically controlled way, what in an occasional and qualitative way Poe had already seen:

I can startle myself from the point into wakefulness—and thus transfer the point itself into the realm of Memory—convey its impressions, or more properly their recollections, to a situation where (although still for a very brief period) I can survey them with the eye of analysis.

For these reasons—that is to say, because I have been enabled to accomplish thus much—I do not altogether despair of embodying in words at least enough of the fancies in question to convey, to certain classes of intellect, a shadowy conception of their character. (Poe, *Essays and Reviews* 1384; Poe's italics)

Poe was aware that he was not a “clairvoyant,” a person endowed with particular experiences and particular abilities, but he thought that what he had seen was a phenomenon belonging to all human beings, a phenomenon that he hoped to be able to treat more systematically in a special study (although, in fact, he never did).

In any case, all the ideas just discussed imply that for Poe the “terror” that his tales often provoke does not come merely from the kind of literary technique initiated by the fabulists of German Romanticism but, instead, “comes from the soul” (Bonaparte 1976, 1: 103,110). Indeed, Poe's ideas about the soul foreshadow the psychoanalytic view that dreams result from the conscious mind's investigation of the day's events (Freud's “dream thoughts” and “day residues”) and the unconscious mind's representations rooted in childhood:

Upon retiring to rest after a fatiguing day of either corporeal or mental exertion, should a dream present itself either as recapitulatory of, or connected with, the past events, this I should say was produced by the immaterial mind, which, unlike the body, was still in a state of vigor and activity; and reflecting or re-enacting at night the scenes which had occupied its attention and energies during the day. But when slumbering, should a vision be induced either concerning Heaven or Hell, or any mystical and apparently prophetic forewarning of a coming event, and in connection with which the awakened visionist can trace no analogy to his thoughts or actions, this, I say, must proceed from the *soul*; as the mind cannot have any thing to do with that it has not been engaged upon, as we all know

that the mind only expands, and is active in proportion to its various degrees of employment. Not so the soul; that of the infant is as ripe as the man's. (Poe, "An Opinion on Dreams"105)

Detective Stories and Sigmund Freud

It has been noted that psychoanalysis and detective stories have much in common, partly because, as Guiliana Proietti puts it, "both study evidence," examine clues, "reconstruct stories," and "try to find causes." Proietti continues:

The genre, begun by Collins, Poe and Conan Doyle, was then greatly transformed by the contributions of Sigmund Freud and his theories. In fact, many writers of mystery books cite the personal history, childhood experiences, most important interpersonal relationships, and most significant events of their [characters' lives], just as a psychoanalyst would do in his clinical cases. (Proietti 2018)

Although Poe was not the only or even the most important influence on Freud, he definitely was one of them. Freud certainly knew Poe, because he praised him when introducing *Maria Bonaparte's Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (1934). Bonaparte was one of Freud's disciples, but even a famous patient of Freud, the so-called "Wolf-man," claimed that although Freud has "read attentively" Conan Doyle, he added that Freud was also deeply interested in Poe's Dupin, who possessed

the gift of arriving at the most extraordinary conclusions by means of exact observation of human behaviour and weighing all the circumstances. Thanks to these unusual gifts, which Poe designates as "analytic," Monsieur Dupin, this prototype of Sherlock Holmes, succeeds in reconstructing and solving a most complicated and mysterious crime. (The Wolf-Man 1973, 164–65)

Although various scholars have discussed how Poe may have inspired Freud, I, for my part, would like to emphasize how Poe and Freud both shared a knowledge of—and esteem for—Aristotle. I have already mentioned Poe's regard for the great Greek philosopher, just

as I have already mentioned Freud's own interest in Aristotle's ideas of catharsis and how he employed a "cathartic method," first through hypnosis and then through psychoanalysis, even if he preferred to use the word "abreaction" (which seemed more "scientific" in the medical environment influenced by Positivist philosophy).² Most importantly, however, Freud studied Aristotle directly under the tutelage of the Aristotelian philosopher Franz Brentano, in the only explicitly philosophical course Freud ever took, when he was still undecided whether to enroll in Philosophy or Medicine.³ Both Poe and Freud admired Aristotle's use of analysis to explore the complexities of the human mind. And both Poe and Freud shared many of the same approaches to such analysis.

Thus, if we examine a few of S. S. Van Dine's famous "20 rules" for writing a detective story, we can certainly see some important traits that detective fiction shares with Freudian psychoanalysis. First of all, just as Van Dine argues that both detective and reader must share the same information about a "case," so we can argue that neither member of the "psychoanalytic couple" (the analyst and the patient) must hide information from the other. Instead, in both cases the explanation of the mystery (whether criminal or psychological) must be discovered only through logical deductions rather than through mere confession. Moreover, the mystery in both cases must be solved, as Van Dine says of detective fiction, only "by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods for learning the truth as slate-writing, Ouija™ boards, mind-reading, spiritualistic seances, crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo," just as Freud also excluded from psychoanalysis any use of visual images, pendulums, music, Wundt-like machines, etc., and relied only on the power of words. Furthermore, the mystery in any good detective story, according to Van Dine, must always be important in the plot of the story and never a secondary matter, just as for Freud occasional, extemporaneous and incidental encounters in the patient's life are not significant, although "primary objects" are. Finally, the motives for crimes in detective fiction must always be personal and psychologically relevant to the life of individual people and never involve larger motives of, for instance, international politics, just as for Freud

each case of psychoanalysis must be understood as an attempt to understand the psychology of a unique and unrepeatable individual, in his intimate and personal relationships since infancy.

No wonder, then, that Freud read and admired Poe, just as both of them read and admired Aristotle. Both Poe and Freud valued reason as the crucial key to analysis. Both were suspicious of any reliance merely on emotions or feelings or any view of reason as limited simply to practical matters or merely to abstract sciences such as mathematics. Both wanted to use reason to explore the human mind and soul, even if doing so meant discovering the odd, the strange, and even, sometimes, the terrifying.

Notes

1. On how the romantic philosophy of nature affected psychoanalysis, the essential and irreplaceable study is by Ellenberger.
2. “The role of Freud in the choice of the denomination ‘cathartic’ was . . . perhaps more important than it is usually considered. It was probably influenced by Gomperz, who could have explained Bernays’s interpretation of Aristotle’s catharsis to Freud (but obviously also to Breuer, who was also his doctor). . . . It now remains to explain the fact that Aristotle is never mentioned in the *Studies*: the authors leave it to the reader to recognize the source of the term ‘cathartic.’ This reticence is due to the scientist’s habitus that Freud has not yet abandoned, according to which a scientific writer does not quote a pre-scientific author such as Aristotle” (Stok 63).
3. “The relationship between psychoanalysis and philosophy had its roots in Freud’s early interest in philosophy that began even before commencing his medical education. . . . Freud attended philosophical lectures from 1874 to 1875, given by the eminent Viennese philosopher Franz Brentano, a noted Aristotle scholar at the University of Vienna. Inspired by Brentano, Freud read Aristotle and wrote to his boyhood friend Eduard Silberstein: ‘under Brentano’s fruitful influence I have arrived at the decision to take my PhD in philosophy and zoology’ (Freud to Silberstein on March 7, 1875, p. 95)” (Applebaum 117).

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