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Writing trauma: aesthetic experience, projection and the mechanics of representation

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Edgar Allan Poe's tales represent one of the most finely-wrought conjurings up of trauma-generated fears in literature. Like the writings of Melanie Klein, Poe's fiction offers a way of getting inside dread, of writing it, re-creating it, and of transforming it into a beautiful thing. In Klein's intensely lived dramas of objects transformed through destruction and reparation, dread—of persecutors from outside, of fragmentation from within—is experienced with devastating rawness. Viewed in this light, Poe's discourse of trauma can be seen to re-figure, over and over again, the painful struggle of acknowledging disintegration in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. By plunging the narrator so completely into the subjective viewpoint of his narrator, Poe dramatises uniquely phantasies of omnipotence and the struggle, not only to acknowledge that which lies outside the self, but to preserve the ego from the threat of internal disintegration.

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Introduction

The thrust of this article is to think together the concepts of trauma, testimony (which “ensures” the imparting of the traumatic event’s ingrained unavailability to consciousness) and the cognate concept of narrative, in relation to a selection of writings by Edgar Allan Poe.

My project sets out to reveal the ways in which Edgar Allan Poe’s writings operate as testimonies to the reality of trauma with, however, some caveats attached: the tales will not be read as coded autobiography. This amounts to a comprehensive blueprint for putting Poe’s literary testimonials to trauma on a psychoanalytic footing. Cathy Caruth considers both psychoanalysis and literature events of speech: their testimony will be understood “as a mode of truth’s realisation beyond what is available as statement, beyond what is available, that is, as a truth transparent to itself and entirely known, given, in advance, prior to the very process of its utterance” (Caruth, 1996).

The emergence of the narrative which is being read is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance—in Caruth’s words—the “knowing” of the event is brought forth, with the reader instrumental in the re-creation of knowledge.

Calling upon psychoanalysis, I intend to draw on the work of Melanie Klein to better understand Edgar Poe’s narratives of trauma. The choice of author and methodology alike comes from a long-standing inquisition into the possibilities of interpreting and most especially understanding and receiving Edgar Allan Poe’s much debated writings (Cârstea, 2022; 2023).

In Shoshana Felman’s words, “perhaps no [writer] has been so highly acclaimed and, at the same time, so violently disclaimed as Edgar Allan Poe” (Felman, 1993). Deemed by some the paragon Gothicism, Poe would call his tales “phantasy-pieces,” a term he derived from Hoffman’s *Fantasiestücke* and it will be Felman’s contention that the “critical disagreement is itself symptomatic of a poetic effect,” and that the critical contradictions to which Poe’s writing has given rise are themselves indirectly significant of the nature of his writing (Felman, 1993).

Poe hermeneuts have always contended that the difficulty of contextualising the author within an American tradition is due, by and large, to the “obstinate fact”—in Gerald Kennedy’s words—that his writing “resists assimilation into the broad interpretive paradigms constructed to define [American] national literature during its so-called ‘renaissance’” (Kennedy, 1996). To date Poe has remained the quintessential outsider largely because of “the excesses and cruelties” (Tien, 1990), which have become the staples of his work, to the point of assimilation with the latter or interchangeability between the two. For Joseph Krutch—to name only one of the several critics who shares Morris Tien’s take—there could be no doubt that Poe’s writing was totally a product of his morbidity.

Among major writers of the American Renaissance, Edgar Allan Poe is the most appealing to psychoanalysts as well as literary critics of the psychoanalytic persuasion. Lacan’s first collection of published essays, the *Écrits*, opens with a chapter entitled “The Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*” (Lacan, 1969). This so-called “Seminar”, which is in fact the written account of a year-long course, is devoted to the exploration of a short literary text, one of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales of Imagination*.

Poe’s life story has been one of the main reasons why he so appeals to the psychoanalysts, who have, by and large, construed Poe’s writing as a product of his morbidity (see Krutch (2002) (1926), who tried to evaluate Poe’s writings solely as manifestations of psychic conflict without regard to their aesthetic character) or tried to address the question of Poe’s power over his readers, arguing that the pathological tendencies to which Poe’s text gives expression are an exaggerated version of drives and instincts universally human, but which “normal” people have

simply repressed more successfully in their childhood (see Marie Bonaparte, 1980).

My own position on the issue of whether Edgar Allan Poe’s own embattled life, fraught with personal dramas and traumas, suffered an unmediated transfer into his fiction and storytelling style is that, while partial reflections of the biography could be recognisable in Poe’s choice of themes, for example, a conceiving of his fiction as a symptom of his dysfunctional psychic life is far-fetched.

Consequently, my working hypothesis for the ensuing analyses will rest on the assumption that violent emotions are a foundation stone of psychic structure and have a very important bearing on creativity. The assumptions are based on the conclusions reached by Joyce McDougall in a fairly recent essay (“Violence and Creativity”, 1999).

Psychoanalytically-specific instruments are applied to core elements of the trauma studies-specific terminology, resulting in an enhanced understanding of such concepts. By means of an example, the core element in the formulation and structure of the trauma event, the *Nachträglichkeit*, is defined by trauma studies theoreticians as delay in response, deferred reaction, yet such glossing seems insufficient for a correct fathoming of the catastrophic inner reality that it presupposes. Kleinian psychoanalysis will equate the phenomenon with a literal inhabiting of life by death, which considerably improves the perception of the dimensions of trauma events.

The choice in methodology, namely the employing of the tools put forth by relational psychoanalysis rests heavily on the fact that relational psychoanalytic models best contextualise the individual within a world in the aftermath of a traumatic episode, which is more often than not the case of Poe’s characters. Through a reading of Poe within the Kleinian dynamics, it will be possible to observe the subtle operations of phantasied aggression in his creation. Klein is concerned with the projection of relations to internal objects onto an external world, with how the latter can be known through the coloured filter of phantasy. A reading of Poe in the light of Klein may enable an anchoring of the threads out of which the poetic construct is woven in traumatic narratives.

While sidestepping a steep lodging in a disquisition that would read Poe’s biography into his work, in what follows I argue that Edgar Allan Poe’s fiction conveys a process of internalising outer reality, with a subsequent irradiation of this outer-turned-inner reality from within (processes which could be accounted for, in Kleinian terms, by means of splitting and projection).

Edgar Allan Poe depicted this outer-inner movement particularly eloquently in the course of writing his narratives of trauma, which evoke the futile warding off of outer reality, which does not protect the inner world, but leaves it, instead, a place of dread. The experience of dread, an extreme form of fear generated by horror and terror, is perceived as substantiated in the shapes of a “dreaded self” and a “dreaded state of the self,” according to a definition put forth by Ehud Koch (Koch, 2017). These representations reflect psychic dangers “ranging from a common, feared identification to states of disconnection, desolation, ego dissolution, and nonexistence” (Koch, 2017).

The more familiar term of “fear” is deemed insufficient to circumscribe the range of experiences connoted by dread. Koch settles the conundrum by presenting as a defining feature the additional notion of “awe,” itself described in terms of “terror” and “horror,” notions that bear a stronger unconscious underpinning than fear and a greater intensity. The use of *dread* in this article is informed by this supercharge of powerful affective meaning, in acknowledged indebtedness to Koch, with a view to better encompass the range of low-level trauma, or the death

equivalents, to represent those experiences indicated by the constructs of dreaded self and dreaded state of the self.

Conjointly, I argue that facing the outer world—including facing death, one of the sources of trauma in Poe’s literary testimonials to evil—is the means by which what is externally visible is transformed into what is invisible.

Throughout this essay, I attempt to focus on moments at which patterns of phantasies emerge through language, thus tracing the mechanics of the text and revealing tensions between an anarchic, wild destructiveness, and a unifying, reparative desire to make whole. In highlighting the struggle involved in separation from the object/ text, the Kleinian model enables the reader of Edgar Allan Poe to trace the unassimilability of trauma and evil in the paranoid stances of characters in the text.

Poe’s discourse of trauma may be interpreted to symbolise and elaborate, in a fictional form, the fraught paranoid-schizoid position depicted by Klein. This observation brings us to one of the principal points of contact between the psychoanalytic writings of Klein and the prose poems of Poe. The work of both thinkers could be said to express and theorise, in very different ways, the problems encountered by the human subject who seeks to conceptualise a world of objects.

Edgar Allan Poe “Outside In”: transforming unnameable traumatic experiences

Poe’s account of the transformation of what is outward into what is invisible within the subject/ fictional character will fall in the backwaters of “the revolution”, in Janet Sayers’ words (Sayers, 2000)—in using psychoanalysis, poetry and art “to advance our understanding” of the inside-out as well as the outside-in dynamic of Kleinian psychology, brought about, among others, by Ronald Britton and his insights into the importance of this outer-inner process in his book *Belief and Imagination* (1998).

Most of Poe’s critics perceive “the matter” that shapes his fiction to fall under the heading of annihilation and disintegration, widely considered to be the themes of his work. Annihilation and disintegration are, for example, the explicit subjects of *Eureka*, the cosmogony written as a poem in prose. In *Eureka*, physical annihilation precedes spiritual fulfilment, or a return to the “unparticled unity” by which Poe defined God.

As Poe himself sums up “Eureka”, “[i]n the original unity of the first thing lies the secondary cause of all things, with the germ of their inevitable annihilation” (Poe, 1965). Creation itself, the atomic universe, is “in a state of radical disequilibrium, every atom striving to disengage itself from material forms and to return to the original centre” (Poe, 1965). In the end, every individual, along with creation itself, “by a reverse motion of the atoms, will contract, as into its annihilation. God destroys himself in the eventual recovery of his unity” (Poe, 1965). “APoalyptic” annihilation, (the term is used by Gerald Kennedy in *The Violence of Melancholy*, 1996) then, is simply a larger frame of reference of the personal disintegration of the individual.

For Melanie Klein, imagination is what helps the individual transcend their experience of loss through symbolic reparation, in an attempt at restoring the relationship with the lost primary object from which satisfaction is sought. Hanna Segal, taking this further, showed that the artist can, through his creation, repair his internal objects which are damaged, lost or annihilated in phantasy (Segal, 2007).

I think Edgar Allan Poe’s stories of trauma caused by resurgent evil provide a strong example of an attempt at validation of self and reparation of internal objects through art. He anticipates Klein’s theory of *internal objects*, that is, “the installation of the *qualities* of the external object into an *inner world*, where they are represented by personification as *objects*” (Britton, 1998). “The

essence of this transaction with the object” is, according to Britton, “the recognition of its separate and distinct identity. Thus, there is an interface between self and object, between what is internal and what is external. At this interface between psychic and material reality is the symbol. The tendency to eliminate the difference between what is mental and what is material is ubiquitous, and the temptation to deny either or reality and to opt for one or the other is perennial” (Britton, 1998).

To all intents and purposes, Poe develops characters who fear perceiving some lifeless object or seeing some live object in a dead way, particularly visually. This *thoughtless state*, in which the external world was treated as the incarnation of a psychic ideal, was a defensive denial of something dreaded, *the dead object*. It is best symbolised in his tale “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”.

Yet the facts could hardly be verified. The experiment narrated does not concern agnostic mastery or therapeutic value (neither doctor nor patient holds out hopes of recovery). Its justification resides in exploring the limits of knowledge—Scott Brewster is poised to believe (Brewster, 2000)—mainly because even before the experiment Valdemar causes an ontological and temporal hesitation: he “is (or was) particularly noticeable for the extreme spareness of his person” (Poe, 1965). His ‘inadequacy’ as a subject for mesmeric experiment, other than his terminal condition and consent to be the object of enquiry, derives from his moderate resistance to the narrator’s power: “His will was at no period positively, or thoroughly, under my control, and in regard to clairvoyance, I could accomplish with him nothing to be relied upon” (Poe, 1965). Although Valdemar appears to be physically and mentally in thrall to the mesmerist, the patient’s death transfixes both.

During the catastrophic conclusion, the narrator fails to wake Valdemar through “total abeyance of the will”, a loss of agency that transmits itself to all the witnesses of the event. If the object is not experienced as something missing, as the presence of loss, it is felt to be the presence of something—something dreaded, something from which to fly. In the paranoid-schizoid mode the absent object is felt, not to be lost, but to be present as a bad or fearful thing. In other words, the frightful fiend changes its character from fiend to deadly object, now dreaded because of its deadliness, which is dreaded as nullifying.

Eventually the moribund patient pronounces his own death, “an unearthly statement at once confirming and affronting the medical opinion of those gathered at his bedside” (Brewster, 2000). The horror of the group that surrounds Valdemar is excited not “by the inevitable physical decline, but by the voice that simultaneously ushers in and suspends death” (Brewster, 2000): “*I am dead!*” The cavernous sound has the power to induce madness: “no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ears of humanity” (Poe, 1965). That voice, traversing “a vast distance”, causes the student to swoon, nurses to flee and produces an intensely affective response in the narrator: “it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch” (Poe, 1965).

In the story’s final, terrible, in defiance of the narrator’s hypnotic power, Valdemar’s body exhibits what his voice declares:

For what really occurred, however, it is quite impossible that any human being could *have* been prepared. As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of ‘dead! dead!’ absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips or the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk away beneath my hands (Poe, 1965).

Valdemar does not play dead: he identifies mimetically, unreflexively, spontaneously with death. It is possible to resituate,

Brewster maintains, Valdemar's 'impossible' trance in terms of Foucault's description of writing as a space into which the subject disappears (Brewster, 2000). The hypnotic episode does not provide a stage for the patient/ subject to unveil its 'truth', but inaugurates a space where subjectivity is deconstituted, a space into which all figures who might securely authorise the mesmeric *mise-en-scene* disappear, leaving otherness to 'speak.'

I read Poe's Valdemar as a paranoid-schizoid text, recalling the fact that Klein worked the death instinct into her formulation of the paranoid-schizoid position, going beyond the notion of the fear of retaliation on the part of bad objects. Dread of retaliation becomes a deflection of the death instinct outwards as a consequence of the dread of annihilation from the death instinct from *within*, which makes it possible for the paranoid-schizoid position to be described as the struggle to deflect the death instinct, in order to prevent the ego from falling into pieces.

Klein begins with an anxiety, an ego which experiences itself as fragmented (a self-aware ego): in defensive response to this dread of disintegration from within, the ego splits off and projects the death instinct outwards. This deep fear of disintegration emerges palpably through the texture of Klein's writings. It is "felt as a fear of annihilation (death) and takes the form of a fear of persecution experienced as a fear of an uncontrollable overpowering object, the anxiety of being destroyed from within" (Klein, 1986).

Concurrently, the life instinct is likewise projected. This creates an ideal object which is split off and preserved, and with which the primitive ego seeks to identify in order to preserve it from persecutors. In the words of Hanna Segal, "out of chaos a primitive organisation emerges", echoing Klein's "Notes of Some Schizoid Mechanisms", where she offered a model of primitive organisation, a narrative of light emerging from darkness, order from chaos, that carries strong overtones of the creation in *Genesis I* (Segal, 2007).

In both Klein's theory and Poe's work, we can trace the desire to give shape to a devastating, paranoid fear, which gnaws and threatens to engulf from within. The dread of being obliterated by a harmful force within, to which the ego responds by falling to pieces or splitting itself, can be seen to be elaborated throughout the tales of trauma in imagery of fragmentation, projected and recognised in the phenomena which the characters encounter: fear in itself is experienced as shattering. For Klein, splitting and projective identification are powerful defence mechanisms in the paranoid-schizoid position, which is one of the reasons why I am poised to construe Edgar Allan Poe as the poet of—not in—the paranoid-schizoid position. Ronald Britton launches a similar hypothesis in connection with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his book *Belief and Imagination*.

In his testimonials to trauma, Poe describes and brings to life the sense of fluidity of boundaries between the subject and the external world. The objects encountered are in phantasy invested with threatening and invasive qualities, they possess the power to destabilise entirely the sense of the self as separate from the external world, presenting it in an otherworldly light in which nothing is familiar any longer.

He seduces the reader into identification with the narrator who undergoes a series of paranoid experiences, by presenting strange, shattering experiences from the inside, from a totally subjective point of view, without the artifice of an 'objective' authorial standpoint: through carefully-constructed prose, he conjures up the *beauty* of alienation. For if, as Ronald Britton asks in his *Belief and Imagination*, "the realisation of beauty depends upon our capacity for enduring terror, how does an artist come to trust, take possession of, and even love fear itself?" (Britton, 1994). It is the struggle to gaze into and love the abyss itself, which Poe's characters in trauma stories figure.

A reading of these encounters in terms of Kleinian dynamics is therefore deeply revealing from two perspectives: first, it allows these fictions of trauma to emerge in all their vicissitudes and manifestations, and enables the dynamics involved in writing trauma to come into view (Ducey, 2021; Guran, 2021; Bulz, 2021). Secondly, it opens out into an exploration of projection. The traumatic phenomena encountered are so haunting because they dramatise the processes involved in it. Moreover, since in the case of aesthetic experience the projection of a part of oneself upon the work of art has the function of relating the spectator more closely and intimately to the work of art, thus forging a link between subject and object, we may well be entitled to regard it as a process of projective identification. Poe's fiction thus highlights and problematises the question of whether or not it is ever possible to glimpse external reality through the filter of phantasy.

A tentative answer to this question could be attempted in a new analysis of one of Poe's many stories of dread, "Berenice", which will potentially yield some insights into Poe's characters' mobilised mechanism of defence against dread, namely objectification. In "Berenice", the outlandish occurrence of the female character's 'teeth' is an indicator of objectified dread, of fear-turned-object.

I would propose looking at the text in reverse, as Joan Dayan goes about in her analysis of the short story, in "The Identity of Berenice, Poe's Idol of the Mind", starting from the penultimate section of the tale, which opens with a door shutting, and the male character's (Egeus) "looking up" to note the absence of his (dead) cousin, Berenice, who is substituted by her 'teeth'. "In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thoughts but for the teeth" (Poe, 1965). Evening closes in, darkness comes, and then day, and a second night. As the "*phantasm* of the teeth" still maintains its terrible "ascendency," he hears a cry, throws open the library doors, to see a servant "all in tears" who reports "Berenice was no more! at the closing in of the night, the grave was ready for its tenant, and all the preparations for the burial were completed." The "multiform, manifold wretchedness of earth" is likened to the "overreaching" colours of the rainbow. This is when an "I" that goes unnamed, asks the question which prompts the entire narrative:

How is it that from beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness, from the covenant of peace, a simile of sorrow? But as, in ethics, evil is a consequence of good, so, in fact, out of joy is sorrow born. Either the memory of past bliss is the anguish of today, or the agonies which *are* have their origin in the ecstasies which *might have been* (Poe, 1965).

As "that brief period of her smile" had fixed itself on his memory, the narration brings with it a final rumination on memory—revealed as depth and surface:

Yet its memory was replete with horror—horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity. It was a fearful page in the record of my existence, written all over with dim, and hideous, and unintelligible recollections. I strived to decipher them, but in vain; while ever and anon, like the spirit of a departed sound, the shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice seemed to be ringing in my ears. I had done a deed—what was it? I asked myself the question aloud, and the whispering echoes of the chamber answered me—*What was it?* (Poe, 1965).

In all likelihood, no mental space exists for non-consequential phantasy about events in absentia. In such circumstances here and there, now and then, collapse into one time-space, so that everything becomes "retroactivity", with a term that Juhani Linde employs as he proposes his own understanding of the

mechanics of trauma (Lindell, 2001). And retroactivity, or delayed response/inscription—in Cathy Caruth’s terminology—is a proof that “there is always a supply of unbound drive within the psyche”, whether this happens in the presence or the absence of the self, as in Egaeus’ case (Britton, 1994). The latter’s query over if and what had occurred, evincing all the signs of a lack of inscription at the time of the occurrence, reinforces the trauma theorists’ tenet that symptoms only begin in the aftermath of trauma (*nachträglich*), when delayed development makes it possible to symbolise a prior traumatic stimulation in a new way. Experience continues to be formed retroactively. “Representation does not correspond to the event, it is only based on it. Truth is in the future, it is the future perfect, it is in what the subject will have been”, Lindell reinforces (Lindell, 2001).

As he remembers/inscribes, Egaeus turns his mind inside out, imaging memory as a “fearful page” in the written “record of my existence.” After he asks the question aloud, he sets the scene, revealing a decor that holds the key to the tale’s mysteries:

On the table beside me burned a lamp, and near it lay a little box ... my eyes at length dropped to the open pages of a book, and to a sentence underscored therein. The words were the singular but simple ones of the poet Ebn Zaiat:—“*Dicebant mihi sodales si sepulchrum amicae visitarem, curas meas aliquantulum fore levatas*” (Poe, 1965).

Upon seeing these words, which promise alleviation of misery, he wonders, “Why did the hairs of my head erect themselves on end, and the blood of my body become congealed within my veins?” More than “merely a typical Poe come-on, impelling us toward the next paragraph’s disclosure, these words again summon up the idea of a burial and a release or deliverance, bringing this graveside visit in conjunction with an earlier plea for recovery,” “I felt that their [the teeth’s] possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason” (Dayan, 2004).

The idea of transforming the fears into a ‘thing’, (Berenice’s teeth) a concrete object that can therefore be conquered through possession, suggests that for Poe catharsis is caught up in the dynamics of possession and letting go. This is a view of the creation of the work of art as a means of catharsis, as the means by which characters survive and effect a ‘working through’ of an intense personal crisis.

The re-introjection of the object of projective identification reinforces the subject’s fears of persecution. This figuration of the dynamics of trauma opens up a way of getting inside Poe’s text in order to illuminate the fictional traumatic encounters with phenomena by which the characters in tales of trauma feel threatened and mesmerised. As Klein writes in *A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States*: “It seems to me that, though, on account of persecution anxiety and suspicions, a very strong and acute power of observation of the external world and of real objects is developed, this observation and the sense of reality are nevertheless distorted, since persecution anxiety makes [one] look at people from the point of view of whether they are persecutors or not” (Klein, 1986).

In this rite of possession and loss, ravage and redemption, Poe prepares us for the most bizarre of resurrections: “There came a light tap at the library door—and, pale as the tenant of a tomb, a menial entered tiptoe.” So begins the next paragraph, joining library and tomb, and then, the “broken sentences” of his report to Egaeus introduce a series of ruptures:

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!* (Poe, 1965).

Unearthed by Egaeus, Berenice has been saved from premature burial, but profaned. At the end of this tale, faced with a now “empty cabinet,” we are filled with what Poe claims as the proper poetic effect—“indefinite sensations.” And yet the elevation felt here is not as simple, nor as straightforward as Poe’s theory of composition: “That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure is found in the contemplation of the beautiful” (Poe, 1965).

I have implied earlier that dread is turned into a concrete object, a symbolic object, creating a relation to which many object-relations psychoanalysts assign a psychotic nature. Hanna Segal threw more light on and described symbolic development in psychotic modes of thought. These modes not only characterise actual psychotic states, but can also be found in obsessiveness, addictions, and, of course, in art.

What she demonstrated was, according to Britton, “that in these modes of thought where we would expect to find symbols” we found instead what she termed “symbolic equations” (Britton, 1994). Symbolic equation is taken to be the original object transformed, unlike the true symbol. Thus, Segal’s symbolic equation is different from the symbol proper in that it is psychic made matter not matter imbued with psychic significance. “In the symbolic equation, the symbol substitute is felt to *be* the original object. [It] is used to deny the absence of the ideal object” (Segal, 2007). In contrast:

[T]he symbol proper is felt to *represent* the object. It arises when depressive feelings predominate over the paranoid-schizoid ones, when separation from the object, ambivalence, guilt and loss can be experienced and tolerated. The symbol is used not to deny but to overcome loss (Segal, 2007).

I would agree with Ronald Britton when he states that the symbolic equation arises from “an arrested development of the symbolic process at the point of the relinquishment of the original object. The object is falsely preserved by a sustained projection of the self into the place vacated by the absent object and which denies its disappearance” (Britton, 1994). In such thinking, there is no world outside the mind: existence of self and object world are “coterminous,” in Britton’s words:

With a shriek I bounded to the table, and grasped the box that lay upon it. But I could not force it open; and, in my tremor, it slipped from my hands, and fell heavily, and burst into pieces; and from it, with a rattling sound, there rolled out some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with thirty-two small, white, and ivory-looking substance that were scattered to and fro about the floor (Poe, 1965).

The analyses so far may be an indication of the fact that Poe’s narratives of trauma represent one of the most finely-wrought conjurings up of trauma-generated fears in literature. Like the writings of Klein, Poe’s fiction offers a way of getting inside dread, of writing it, re-creating it, and of transforming it into a beautiful thing. In Klein’s intensely lived dramas of objects transformed through destruction and reparation, dread—of persecutors from outside, of fragmentation from within—is experienced with devastating rawness.

These fears are expressed in haunting prose: for example, the dread of the male character in another tale by Poe, “Morella”, that “the mysterious [Morella] cannot be recuperated into his economy of identity” becomes an expression of depressive fear in cosmic proportions. The narrator recounts the moment of Morella’s threatening transformation “from a nameable Other

into a radical alterity” (Kim, 2001): “And thus, joy suddenly faded into horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous, as Hinnon became Gehenna” (Poe, 1965).

When his language fails to translate her otherness, the “beautiful” Morella becomes the “hideous” hell of fires. There is a sense in which, in tales such as this, Poe gives words and voice to the unsayable, to unnameable fears generated by traumatic experiences or by the witnessing of evil. He attempts to catch the slipperiness of dread and the impossibility of fully assimilating/cognising it in language. The dread that the “beautiful” “music of [Morella’s] voice” may be irredeemably turned into a “terror” could be read as harbouring a depressive concern that the loved object may be damaged by phantasied aggressive attacks. The male character in the short story cannot exhaust the complete otherness of Morella, but inevitably encounters the horror of the “unfathomable abyss”:

I met the glance of her meaning eyes, and then my soul sickened and became giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and unfathomable abyss (Poe, 1965).

Morella’s speech, which is decentred and marginalised in the narrator’s remembrance, destabilises even his confident act of remembrance. In other words, the confidence yields to the uncertain tone of “if I err not,” “or I forget myself,” and “unless I am greatly mistaken” (Poe, 1965). His writing/remembering as an act of enclosing the traumatic past events is “constantly disrupted and undermined by the spectres of Morella” (Kim, 2001).

Viewed in this light, Poe’s narratives of trauma can be seen to re-figure, over and over again, the painful struggle of acknowledging disintegration in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. By plunging the narrator so completely into the subjective viewpoint of his narrator, Poe dramatises uniquely phantasies of omnipotence and the struggle, not only to acknowledge that which lies outside the self, but to preserve the ego from the threat of internal disintegration.

Poe’s characters stand as a monument to a terror whose expression takes one to the limit of the linguistic articulation of paranoid fear. Their grief expresses itself as cruelty, thus producing the devastating run-in with “the grim phantasm, FEAR”, always dreaded by Poe (Poe, 1965). Alongside “Berenice” and “Morella”, these narratives can be deemed to represent, in Gerald Kennedy’s interpretation, “the violence of melancholy, the profound anger of a sorrow never assuaged by mourning” (Kennedy, 2005).

The world which Edgar Allan Poe’s characters encounter and represent is coloured by their own projective identifications: it is fragmented, shattered by aggression. Dread of annihilation is elaborated on every level of the text, from imagery of disintegration to the level of narration itself in the fragmented storytelling of some of the tales.

Coda

The experience of reading Poe’s tales of trauma can be likened to a Kleinian narrative which charts the inner world in terms of the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position. The tales can be seen to enact these Kleinian dynamics on different levels: first, on the level of language, where the imagery itself reflects and re-creates states of frustration and fulfilment. Secondly, complex phantasies of gratification and idealisation, fraught with ambivalence are projected onto and, through the tissue of language, woven into the representation of the characters. In relation to them, the dynamics of separation, ambivalence, and gratitude, in all their intricacies, are re-staged at pivotal moments in the text.

In the work of both Klein and Poe, it is possible to engage with a mind attempting to formulate its relations to a world of objects, which surround it and are perceived as separate, as outside. Through a reading of Poe for Kleinian dynamics, it is possible to observe the subtle operations of phantasied aggression in his creation and investigation of literary objects, which enables the reader to experience his own complicity in these phantasied activities through reading.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study. This research does not involve the analysis or generation of any data.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

Additional information

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