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**ON SEXUAL RELATIONS
IN POE'S
«BERENICE» AND «MORELLA»**

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«Dans les Nouvelles de Poe, il n'y a jamais d'amour», claimed Baudelaire in 1856⁽¹⁾. Nonetheless, many of the tales of Edgar Allan Poe (US, 1809-49) signify sexual/emotional relations between men and women. At the same time, any reader must agree with Cortázar (1956) that the texts are marked violently by «la falta de una sexualidad normal»; and that «la pasión amorosa... asume los rasgos propios del sádico, el masoquista y el necrófilo, escamotea todo proceso natural y lo sustituye por una pasión que el héroe es el primero en no saber como calificar»⁽²⁾.

If Poe's fiction signifies the psychopathology of sexuality, this should be seen as an instance of a general tendency in his work, towards **signification of the extreme**; above all, of psychological extremes. For Valery, Poe was «le psychologue de l'exception»⁽³⁾; for Baudelaire, «l'écrivain des nerfs», who narrated «les exceptions de la vie humaine»⁽⁴⁾. Over the C20, such hints as to the psychological emphasis in Poe's writing have been developed into a whole tradition of reading the texts

1) Baudelaire, p. 166.

2) Cortázar, p. 46.

3) Valery, p. 599.

4) Baudelaire, p. 171.

from a broadly psychoanalytic viewpoint; this tradition opposes itself to mystical or supernaturalist readings of the tales. Its first major instance is Marie Bonaparte's massive «Edgar Poe: étude psychanalytique» (1933); Eng. trans. 1949), which applies classical Freudian analysis to Poe's life and works⁵⁾. The volume has a brief preface by Freud in which the founder of psychoanalysis acclaims Poe as a «great writer»⁶⁾. More recently, important studies by Helene Cixous (1972)⁷⁾ and Barbara Lanati (1978)⁸⁾ have attempted to read the texts in terms of sex-role problematics and schizophrenia respectively. Within the broad framework of this tradition, I wish to analyse, rather than well-known texts such as «Ligeia» or «Usher»⁹⁾, two lesser-known tales on the theme of sexual relations, «Berenice» and «Morella».

Some theoretical considerations will be useful first. Franco Moretti, in a recent study of terror fiction, 1978 observes that «much of nineteenth century bourgeois high culture (treats) Eros and sex as **ambivalent** phenomena», in texts in which «fear and desire incessantly overturn into one another»¹⁰⁾. Moretti's examples include Poe's «Ligeia» (1838); in which, indeed, the male narrator is «at once... delighted and appalled» by his wife's eyes¹¹⁾; one could add Hawthorne's «Rappaccini's Daughter» (1844), in which the «belle empoisonneuse» Beatrice is viewed by the male protagonist with simultaneous «love and horror»¹²⁾.

5) See Bibliography.

6) Bonaparte, p. xi.

7) See Bibliography.

8) Idem.

9) I have written on «Ligeia» in «Ideologia da Vontade, Sexualidade e Forças Produtivas em Poe e Balzac», «Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais» (Coimbra), No 4/5, Oct. 1980, pp. 215-242.

10) Moretti, p. 79.

11) Mabbott II, p. 315. «The Celestial Railroad, etc».

12) Hawthorne; pp. 222, 233. See Crews, pp. 117-135, for a reading of this text in terms of fear of female sexuality.

It must further be asked, however: what are the possible cultural reasons for the presence of such ambivalence over sexuality in C19 literature?

Freud's final views on female sexuality may provide illumination. His final position (much modified from earlier views) is expressed in the 1931 essay «Female Sexuality»¹³⁾, and has been reinterpreted from a materialist perspective by Juliet Mitchell in «Psychoanalysis and Feminism» (1974)¹⁴⁾. According to Freud, «normal» female sexuality divides into two phases: the first, **pre-Oedipal** phase, up to age 4, is primarily **active**, with the **mother** as love-object; the second, Oedipal phase is primarily **passive**, with the **father** as love-object. The traces of the active phase are, at least in Freud's culture, «typically» subjected to «an act of massive repression» (Mitchell)¹⁵⁾, but remain in the unconscious and can be reactivated. Female sexuality thus contains, in potential, **both** active and passive components –(as, indeed, does male sexuality in the Freudian model)¹⁶⁾; although for cultural reasons, the passive component is generally dominant in the female subject's consciousness. Once ideology is winnowed off from science in Freud's writings, the above model can be re-presented as a **descriptive** model of what happens in patriarchal culture, and not a prescriptive recommendation¹⁷⁾. At this point it can become useful for materialist analysis; if active sexuality is «normally» repressed in the socialisation of the female child, this process also provides the basis for the repression or devaluation of women's active characteristics in general, and

13) See Bibliography.

14) See Mitchell, esp. pp. 53-60, 109-132.

15) Mitchell, p. 112.

16) Bisexuality... is present... in the innate disposition of human beings» (Freud, 1931, p. 374).

17) Mitchell, esp. p. XV: «Psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one».

hence for their insertion in society as passive subjects.

For a patriarchal culture, any emergence of active femaleness becomes immediately threatening. In the C19 US, for women to demand active participation in education and public life was to threaten the cultural division of roles between male activity and female passivity. Thus both the sexually and the intellectually active woman were typically seen as dangerous. In the literature of the period, both figures converge, in Poe's *Ligeia*, and in Hawthorne's *Zenobia* («The Blithedale Romance», 1852) –both of them fictional women presented as fascinating but destructive.

Feminist movements appeared in the US, in the general context of reform movements, from the 1830s. Hawthorne's *Zenobia* is a feminist writer and publicist⁽¹⁸⁾, based on the historical Margaret Fuller (1810-50), writer of «*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*» (1845). Poe, as a typical product of the hyper-patriarchal South⁽¹⁹⁾, was unequivocally hostile to feminism. In an article on Fuller (1846), he politely accepts her talent, but isolates her as a freak, an atypical woman: her book is seen as one which «no woman in the country would have published, with the exception of Miss Fuller»; and, further, attacks her for ignoring «the intention of the Deity as regards sexual differences»⁽²⁰⁾. In a less guarded private letter, Poe refers to Fuller as «that detestable old maid»⁽²¹⁾. Nonetheless, in spite of his conscious anti-feminist position, Poe's fiction is haunted by the spectre of the active woman (active sexually and/or intellectually), whose existence undermines and terrifies the

male protagonist.

I wish now to consider «*Berenice*» and «*Morella*», both published in 1835.⁽²²⁾ The first tale presents an engagement between cousins; the second, marriage and childbirth; while both are shadowed by death. Both tales have male first-person narrator (the lovers of the respective women) who cannot be considered completely reliable, since both show developing tendencies towards schizophrenia⁽²³⁾.

In «*Berenice*», the narrator, dominated from the outset by his fantasies, becomes increasingly dissociated from the external world, finally entering a state of split consciousness in which he loses conscious control over his actions. His cousin and fiancée, Berenice, falls victim to a strange illness which transforms her entire person, and, specifically, her **teeth**, with whose image he becomes obsessed. Berenice apparently dies (in fact it is an epileptic fit) and is buried; the same night, her fiancée breaks into the tomb, and without consciousness of his actions, extracts the teeth from the still living body. Only hours later is he able to reconstruct the sequence of his actions, confronted with the material evidence of: «some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor».

Over the text, the narrator's attitude to Berenice undergoes various mutations. At first he sees her in terms of an idealist discourse of spirituality, attempting to desexualise her in the interests of domination; she appears as a «sylph», a «Naiad», indeed is disembodied altogether by being reduced to an «abstraction»: «In the silence of my library at night, she had flitted by my eyes, and I had seen her –not as the living and

18) See Hawthorne, «*The Blithedale Romance*», esp. pp. 95-6.

19) See Marchand, esp. pp. 35-7, for Poe's hostility to feminism. Poe was born in Boston but educated in Richmond and Charlottesville, Virginia.

20) Poe, «*Sarah Margaret Fuller*» («*Godey's Lady's Book*», Aug. 1846; *Harrison XV*, pp. 73-83), p. 74.

21) *Harrison XVII*, p. 333.

22) References to «*Berenice*» are to *Mabbott II*, pp. 209; to «*Morella*», to the same volume, pp. 229-236.

23) See Lanati, esp. pp. 47-60, for the question of the progress of Poe's characters towards schizophrenia. «La rinuncia... al corpo, alla materia, alla fisicità, conduce per gradi allo stato schizofrenico della mente» (46).

breathing Berenice— but as the Berenice of a dream». He admits that «most surely I had never loved her»; instead of recognising her subjectivity as Other, he reduces her to even less than object status to an image in his dreams, and thus to a mere epiphenomenon of himself as subject.

But her illness forces him to recognise her physicality; the «fatal disease» makes him aware of «startling changes... in the **physical** frame of Berenice», and the lexis here indicates he now admits her body as concrete reality. But this transformed body produces **fear** in him, through the teeth «long narrow, and excessively white». In their «terrible development», they are clearly vampiric –but vampirism here is metaphoric, in the sense that the woman represents, at least in the narrator's imagination, an alien and threatening force⁽²⁴⁾.

This force is, almost certainly, that of active female sexuality, perceived as destructive by the male subject. The narrator becomes dominated by the teeth as their image assumes a hallucinatory autonomy: «But from the disordered chamber of my brain... would not be driven away the white and ghastly **spectrum** of the teeth... still the **phantasma** of the teeth maintained its terrible ascendancy, as, with the most vivid and hideous distinctness, it floated about... the chamber». The extreme fear produced in him by the teeth, and repeatedly signified in the lexis of terror («ghastly», «terrible», «hideous»), can be read as, ultimately, castration fear. Bonaparte relates the teeth to the castration complex, via the idea of the «vagina dentata» –the fantasy, often clinically verified, that the vagina is furnished with castrating teeth⁽²⁵⁾. In her view, the fear signified in Poe's text is, ultimately, fear of the castrating mother; it may,

24) The concept of vampirism is a commonplace in Poe criticism. The relation of the vampire theme to the question of sexual politics is, however, less noted. In Bram Stoker's «Dracula» (1897), female vampires are explicitly presented as sexually deviant and dangerous.

25) Bonaparte, p. 218.

however, be read in more general cultural terms as corresponding to a fear of active and aggressive femaleness. The woman becomes endowed with «long, narrow» appendages capable of penetration and destruction.

The narrator reacts to his own fear of the teeth with the desire to **possess** them: «For (the teeth) I longed with a phrenzied desire... I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace». To possess the teeth he has to **dispossess** Berenice of them; hence his nocturnal visit to the grave, which can be seen as a symbolic and violent restoration of the cultural «order» a reinstatement of the male-female power structure reversed in the image of the teeth. If Berenice acquires phallic power through teeth, then their extraction symbolically castrates her; the narrator's act of «dental surgery» destroys her sexuality, reducing her back to subordination⁽²⁶⁾. Hence the extreme violence of the operation, which with its «violated grave», «disfigured body» and «garments clotted with gore», is a virtual rape.

And yet the woman, who has not previously assumed any active role outside the man's imagination, now makes her first and last active gesture. The violator discovers later that his hands are «indented with the impress of human nails»: to the act of male repossession of power, the woman reacts with a failed, but active, resistance.

In «Berenice», then, repressed fear of female sexuality comes to the surface in the narrator's near-schizophrenic mind. The fear remains **displaced**, however, on to an **image**, i.e. the teeth. In «Morella», there is a parallel displacement of fear, but this time on to an **idea** –that of the woman's.

The tale opens with the narrator's claim that his relation

26) Cf. Crews' reading of Hawthorne's «The Birthmark» (1843) (Crews, p. 126): the husband's removal of his wife's birthmark is seen as the destruction of her sexuality.

with Morella was totally non-sexual: «With a feeling of deep yet most singular affection I regarded my friend Morella... my soul from our first meeting, burned with fires it had never before known; but the fires were not of Eros... I never spoke of passion, nor thought of love». Nonetheless, they marry; and the narrator's disclaimer, rather than being taken literally, may be read as indicating an unusual degree of repression⁽²⁷⁾— a repression perhaps intensified by the unusual qualities of his partner as woman.

Morella is intellectually active: «Morella's erudition was profound... her powers of mind were gigantic». The couple study German philosophy together, and in these studies Morella acts as her husband's mentor, thus **dominating** him: «I abandoned myself implicitly to the guidance of my wife». The «knowledge» they study is described in terms of **prohibition**: «poring over forbidden pages, I felt a forbidden spirit enkindling within me»; while the husband becomes increasingly intimidated by Morella, by «the mystery of my wife's manner», and above all by her eyes: «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». In the end he comes to hate her and desire her death: «joy suddenly faded into horror... I longed with an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease».

Although sexuality is never directly signified, her husband's antagonism to her can be seen as originating in, precisely, fear of her sexuality as potentially active. Morella reverses role

27) Cf. Cortazar's remark, noted on p. 1 above, re. «una pasión que el héroe es el primero en no saber como calificar». See also Zanger, on the narrator of «Ligeia» and «Morella»: «They (i.e. the women) remain uncomfortably close to the sexual reality they are intended to suggest and disguise. Consequently their husbands must deny... all sinful intention towards them» (p. 537). Zanger suggests as a reading tool for these texts, the idea of the narrator «as self-deceiver or even as hypocrite» (ibid.).

stereotypes, more consciously than Berenice, by her intellectually active and dominant position⁽²⁸⁾; it is worth recalling here Virginia Woolf's observation that intellectually active women were traditionally seen as sexually suspect: «It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women (writers) even... in the nineteenth century»⁽²⁹⁾. Meanwhile, the «forbidden» knowledge into which Morella initiates her husband can be read, metaphorically, as sexual knowledge⁽³⁰⁾; Freud associates the human desire for knowledge with the child's sexual curiosity⁽³¹⁾, so that the narrator's reference to a «forbidden spirit enkindling within (him)» would give the lie to his previous disclaimers of sexual interest. Further, the «abyss» which he discovers in her «meaning» eyes may be identified with her threatening but indeed significant sexuality, whose «meaning» implies his own loss of «masculine» identity⁽³²⁾; hence what he hates in this dominant woman is no less than her existence as active sexual being.

Morella dies, and her child is born in the same moment. The daughter is the «perfect resemblance» of her mother, and is at first loved by her father with a pure affection». But she grows with precocious speed, and her growth produces «gloom, and horror, and grief» in him. He watches «her maturing form», and detects «the wisdom (and) the passions of maturity» in her «full and speculative eye»; and so sees in the child, ever more clearly, the reincarnation of the mother—Here is the same, sexually

28) Cf. Cixous's analysis of the figure of Ligeia, who similarly exercises intellectual domination over her husband. For Cixous, Ligeia becomes «masculinised» by this process (see esp. pp. 311 and 318).

29) Woolf, p. 52.

30) Cf. Bonaparte: «the forbidden, «accursed» lore—doubtless sexual knowledge» (p. 222); and see Zanger, pp. 535-7.

31) See Freud (1905): «The instinct for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them» (pp. 112-3; passage added 1915).

32) Cf. Zanger, p. 539, for the sexual symbolism of the «abyss».

charged, «bewildering meaning» in her eyes. These «suspicions, of a nature fearful and exciting» increase and become «hourly.. more hideously terrible en their aspect». This sense of terror (which is yet at the same time «exciting») can be explained as deriving, not from any literal reincarnation, but from the narrator's revulsion (tinged with fascination) at the **emergence of sexuality** in the child³³⁾. Admittedly, she is only 10 but if this growth seems over-precocious and the narrator is imagining sexual maturity where it does not exist, such a fantasy would itself be revelatory of his unconscious obsessions. The sexuality he feared in the mother returns, whether objectively or in his imagination, in the child.

Meanwhile he attempts to **control** his daughter, shutting her off from the «scrutiny of the world», in «rigid seclusion»³⁴⁾. But her sexuality cannot so easily be controlled. The girl remains unnamed, while the dead mother's name is never pronounced: «Morella's name died with her at her death. Of the mother I had never spoken to the daughter –it was impossible to speak». The taboo on Morella's name implies that to name her would be to name the unnameable– to signify female sexuality, the knowledge of which he disavows in himself and wishes to withhold from his daughter. Yet at the baptismal ceremony, delayed until her tenth year, he names the child –Morella, acting under a process of unconscious compulsion, unable completely to repress his knowledge of female sexuality: «What fiend spoke from the recesses of my soul, when... I whispered... the syllables– Morella?. The child cries out: «I am here!», falls prostrate and dies. The father buries her in the family vault and –«laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no traces of the

33) Cf. Bonaparte: «At ten, she is already a grown woman, the physical counterpart of her mother» (p. 220); and see Zanger, p. 542.

34) Cf. «Rappaccini's Daughter», where Rappaccini similarly secludes his daughter –although with full and conscious awareness of her sexuality.

first, in the charnel where I laid the second– Morella».

The absence of the mother's body need not be taken as indicating reincarnation; it may be a negative hallucination, given the narrator's increasing withdrawal from the external world. Rather, it may be claimed that what is «reincarnated» in the child is not Morella herself, but **her sexuality**. For this reason, perhaps, the text obliges the child to die at 10, at the moment of her (somewhat precocious) sexual awakening; as Dickens, in «The Old Curiosity Shop» (1841), kills off the «pure» Little Nell at, or just over, the threshold of puberty³⁵⁾. Female sexuality is thus both **signified**, in the naming of the mother, and «**punished**», in the death of the daughter; her annihilation corresponds to Berenice's mutilation, as a restoration of «cultural order».

In «Berenice», the woman, passive till the climax but seen by the man as potentially destructive, finally becomes at least defensively active. In «Morella», the mother, active in life, dies, to «re-live» in a potentially active daughter, who herself dies. Activity and passivity (the latter signified by mutilation and death) thus alternate in the texts construction of femaleness. In several other tales, a similar active passive dialectic is evident. In «Ligeia» (1838), the woman, like Morella intellectually active and dominant³⁶⁾, is quite clearly sexually active too, and produces an erotic obsession in her husband. She dies, but «returns» to repossess the body of Rowena, her passive replacement. In «The Fall of the House of Usher» (1839), Usher's sister Madeline, passive and silent in life, «returns» from the grave to provoke the death of her brother, who almost certainly harboured repressed incestuous desire for her. Finally,

35) Nell is killed off at 14 («She... would be a woman soon» (505); her premature death preserves her status as «pure as the newly-fallen snow» (p. 658).

36) «Ligeia» and «Morella» exhibit numerous lexical and thematic parallels.

in «The Oval Portrait» (1842), a painter's wife, effectively killed by her husband's negligence and indifference, takes revenge on men from the grave, terrorising the male narrator through her portrait.

All these texts can be read as repeating the same underlying structure, in diverse manifest forms; beneath all, analysis can discern in operation the repressed male **Knowledge and fear** of active female sexualit. This, then, for these texts would be the repressed material that, according to Freud in this essay on «The Uncanny» (1919), underlies the literature of terror: «What is concerned is an actual repression of some definite material and a return of this repressed material»⁽³⁷⁾. It may be argued that the structure thus disinterred is monotonous, reducing the texts to simulacra of each other. Indeed, psychoanalytic criticism has tended to identify in Poe's tales the repetition of certain basic patterns. Thus Bonaparte finds the persistent traces of sado-masochism, necrophilia and an Oedipal mother-fixation⁽³⁸⁾; Lanati detects the repeated process: «loss of body» –failed search for another body in the Other– total collapse into schizophrenia⁽³⁹⁾; Cixous, closest to the present reading, identifies the structure: woman dominates man –dies–returns to confirm domination⁽⁴⁰⁾. These various structures are not incompatible, but taken together would convert the texts into hyper-repetitive products. However, on the basis of the readings advanced here, it may be argued that the repeated themes in the texts derive from cultural stereotypes (sex-roles) implanted in the subject's unconscious by an oppressive and repressive culture; and that to analyse the operation of those stereotypes and their partial, if temporary,

37) Freud (1919), p. 403.

38) Bonaparte, e.g. pp.222-3, 679.

39) Lanati, e.g. pp. 52, 56.

40) Cixous, pp. 322-4.

breakdown in Poe's texts may be politically educative. If we still live in a largely patriarchal society, Poe's repetitive texts may still bear repeated examination.

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LOVE IN BLACK AND WHITE

A chronological look at the novels of
four XXth Century Black American Women.

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