

Negotiations of Anxiety in the Discourses of Melanie Klein and Edgar Allan Poe

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Abstract

In my discussion of a selection of Poe's tales, I intend to reveal the latent Kleinian dynamics which abound in texts that pivot on the dialectic between aggression and reparation: the narrative can be thought of as negotiating the representation of phantasies which are deployed to avoid intolerable anxiety, requiring most often than not a withdrawal from reality. The texts under analysis seem to play out with acute awareness the pain of fragmentation and disintegration and the ambivalent phantasies arising from the need to mitigate the pain of the internal situation. Poe's characters' traumatic encounters will foreground the struggle, fraught with ambivalence, to separate from and discern that which is other.

Keywords: aggression; mental fragmentation; reparation; forgiveness; Edgar Allan Poe; Melanie Klein

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Introduction

When we enter the fictional space conjured up by Edgar Allan Poe, we are plunged into a world in which words are deadly weapons, capable of annihilating their victims. The power of language to inflict violence, to objectify and aggress, is explored with sharp sensitivity by Poe's prose. It is a prose that seduces readers into an awareness of their complicity in that violence inflicted through language, a phantasied collusion that is highlighted through an understanding of the Kleinian dynamics of aggression. As a consequence, the experience of reading Poe's tales can be likened to a Kleinian narrative that charts the inner world in terms of reflecting and re-creating states of frustration and fulfilment, or complex phantasies of gratification and idealisation, fraught with ambivalence. In relation to them, the dynamics of separation, ambivalence, and reparation, in all their intricacies, are re-staged at pivotal moments in the text. Throughout my discussion of these areas, which clearly overlap in multiple ways, I investigate the role of anxiety in the expression of dynamics delineated by Melanie Klein, showing that, by revealing the ubiquity of phantasy in everyday life, Klein gave us new ways of viewing a horror text.

Throughout this article, I focus on moments of dynamic interplay between disintegration and reparation, 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 (Cârstea 2022). 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.

The dynamics sparked off when a reader engages with a literary text are woven into a network of word patterns, the same as those engendered within the subject in relation to the object, which Klein portrays with great vividness. What Klein describes are the needs and fears of the subject who must engage in the complex, fraught process of relating to objects, in a continuous attempt at renegotiating these relations to objects. The same conflicts of overcoming separation and ambivalence are re-enacted in the literary text, which also plays with, "endlessly reformulates, and reworks" these dynamics within its parameters (Guran 2021, 115).

My working hypothesis for the ensuing analyses will rest on and be informed by the assumption that violent emotions are integral to psychic structure and have a very important bearing on creativity. The assumptions are based on the conclusions reached by Joyce McDougall in an essay entitled "Violence and Creativity" (1999), which establish definite connections between violence, in particular violent emotions (like personal dramas or traumas) and the individual's capacity for expression in a creative manner.

Joyce McDougall is very emphatic in considering Melanie Klein to have emphasised the importance of violent emotion for the structuring of the "substratum of the human

psyche” (1999, 210). In putting forth the notion that artistic creativity is connected to tumultuous object relations, she shone new light on the inner world of the creative person. Klein (1996) linked artistic creativity to fraught object relations and hence attributed creative blockage to the failure to integrate envy and destructiveness. In McDougall’s interpretation, other contributing factors appear to be equally important. She identifies violence as a key aspect of any creative production. “Apart from the force and intensity of the creative urge, innovative individuals are indeed intrinsically violent to the extent that they exercise their power to *impose* their thought, image, dream or nightmare on other individuals in the external world” (McDougall 1999, 210). McDougall proposed that the creative drive bears an unconscious resemblance to a volcano, a “continuing source of energy that demands release” (1999, 210).

According to Meg Harris Williams, who also tackles the problematics of creativity, the latter is accompanied by the overwhelming impression that it is used by internal objects “as a medium to relay knowledge to the world” (2005, 39). Williams holds that creativity does not require an integration of the self, but an integrated combined object well internalised. Klein’s capacity for creativity differs from that defined by Wilfred Bion as “the publication of creativity,” according to which, in order to make public one’s own work, the creative person must possess the capacity “to *represent* the new ideas as they have taken form in the structure of his personality” (Bion 2004, 46).

From this standpoint, the evolution of creativity requires the pre-eminence of what the same Wilfred Bion termed K—that is, the wish to understand. The predominance of K is the enabling factor for what John Keats called “negative capability”—the ability to discontinue action, the potentiality of fostering doubts, the desire to fathom the complexity of an issue, to “search for truth instead of rushing for solutions” (Bion 2004, 45–50). According to Bion, while love and hate can push with urgency towards action, K is the element that allows the person to become a thinking being (2004, 45–50).

McDougall appreciates that the drive towards self-destruction is hovering in the backdrop of all creative undertaking. Sensations of self-hatred, depression, frustration and anger, conducive to a desire to shatter the work underway, are oftentimes experienced. In *Violence and Creativity*, she comes to the assumption that creative activity, “among its many other aims, also serves, unconsciously, to heal the drive to destruction of oneself and/or others and thus overcome feelings of fragmentation and disorientation” (2003, 211–12). Creative persons, although largely oblivious of it, are usually coping with fragmented parts of themselves that need and seek to find a sense of coherence through their created works. At the end of her essay, Joyce McDougall reaches the conclusion that the very traumas, which violent experiences have generated, are a “primal source of creativity itself” (2003, 211–12).

It is a measure of the versatility of the Kleinian model that it enables the reader to see conflicts of separation, aggression and reparation, frustration and gratification, as they are played out in very different manifestations. Each text necessarily reveals its

dynamics, and may thus enable us to come to a fresher engagement with the various facets of Klein's writing.

Through seeking to write and transform alienating encounters into language, Poe's characters could be read as fictional representations of projective identification through a succession of narrative sequences. The experiences narrated in his tales figure and re-enact the desperate striving to write trauma when one cannot step outside it: "words are pushed to the limits of that which can be expressed, imbued with alienation" (Cârstea 2022, 106). The struggle to represent powerful imagery of the world inside the mind is rendered "hauntingly tangible" (Gal 2022, 39).

Loss, Reparation/Restitution and "Psychic Retreats"

The following analysis involves readings of two similarly tailored short stories by Edgar Allan Poe, "Ligeia" and "Eleonora." In it, I seek to trace the development of the acknowledgment of loss in the text, with regard to destructive urges, moving to possible reparation, in the light of the projection principle, omnipotence, and the significance of magical reparation.

This involves a detailed examination of the mental states ascribed to fictional characters, with particular reference to the disavowal of reality as a response to the unchangeable nature of some truths which are felt to be unbearable. Hence my analysis of the mentioned works of fiction is located within the theoretical framework attributable to the Kleinian analytic tradition, the objective being to illuminate deep structures of feeling as portrayed by the fictional characters.

I suggest that both "Ligeia" and "Eleonora" can be read as concerned primarily with mental states that correspond to what John Steiner has called "psychic retreats," that is, mental refuges from reality, "where phantasy and omnipotence reign supreme, untrammelled by the exegeses of reality and therefore where anything is permitted" (Steiner 2013, 285). What Poe's character envisions in "Eleonora" is the possibility of an eternal relationship in which he could live apart from the world, protected by the promises of romantic love.

Needless to say, this vision of "delirious bliss" is a desperate fantasy that merged and confused an entire spectrum of emotional and spiritual needs, a fact that Poe's narrator appears to acknowledge in characterising the lovers as enclosed "within a magic prison-house of grandeur and glory" (Poe 1965, 470). Cushioned by the "river of silence," the happy valley which serves as setting for the tale is filled with tropical birds, golden and silver fish, and brilliant flowers. It is an Arcadian fantasy, a personal dream of happiness, while at the same time registering, by its very existence, the overwhelming pressure of life driving the narrator to such need for retreat from the world.

“Ligeia” shares the theme of evasion, but can also be understood as an evocation of remorse for destructive urges and a simultaneous wish to repair, raising important questions regarding the distinction between manic restitution and genuine reparation.

Although, traditionally, it has been interpreted as a fantastic tale in which the will of the dead woman is powerful enough to conquer death,¹ Poe’s “Ligeia” might also be construed as a text in which the narrator, showing loose boundaries and poor reality testing, hallucinates that Ligeia kills Rowena and returns from the dead. In this reading, it is the narrator’s will—made manifest through his fantasy, compounded by the use of opium—more than Ligeia’s will that sees her back to life. In truth, even though the story’s title is “Ligeia” and it purports to be about the strength of her will, its main emphasis is actually on the narrator, and, in all likelihood, it is his psychological (mal)functioning that sits front and centre in the tale.

Poe’s exploration of what might be understood, in psychoanalytic terms, as narcissistic object relating, is finely wrought. Both of these tales may be construed as defensive responses to what is felt to be unbearable and traumatic: the deaths of the female characters Ligeia and Eleonora. The surviving male characters are often seen to portray deep-seated phantasy, acted out and externalised, with dire consequences and struggle with the pain inherent in accepting the abhorred aspects of reality. Evasion of the truth, however, has its own painful consequences, and it is these which I now wish to explore.

“Ligeia” could be read as recounting how a grieving widower becomes entangled in the early stages of mourning after the sudden death of his wife, mourning which could be understood to be complicated by the heightened feelings of ambivalence towards the one whom he lost.

In the classic paper “Mourning and Melancholia” ([1917] 1957), Sigmund Freud describes the process of mourning whereby the loss of the beloved object is faced up to as a series of gradual severances of libidinal attachment to the object. These attachments are withdrawn in conjunction with what Freud called “reality testing,” that is, “to face up to the reality that the object no longer exists. It is a painful and painstaking psychic operation” (Freud [1917] 1957, 250). The outcome of this process is, according to Freud, that, if the libidinal attachments are eventually withdrawn from the lost object successfully, they are then available for reattachment to other objects, and life for the mourner can proceed: “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” ([1917] 1957, 253).

He considers how, with reference to managing ambivalence, the ego splits, making both a narcissistic identification with the loved lost object and, in hatred, “becomes a critical agency sitting in judgement on that part of the ego now identified with the object. In this way relinquishment of the object is avoided and so is the process of mourning” (Keating 2003, 304). The ego, which is enriched by facing up to the reality of loss, is

¹ See Byers’s article “The Opium Chronology of Poe’s ‘Ligeia’” (1980, 40).

by contrast diminished by the deployment of evasions and denial. This is a complex rendition of internal object relations which Melanie Klein and post-Kleinian theorists have explored and expanded upon.

In his book *Psychic Retreats*, John Steiner (2013) adds to Freud's theory, saying:

Today, as we recognize the central role of projective identification in the creation of object relations, we can review Freud's formulation while thinking more in terms of detachments of parts of the self from the object rather than in terms of detachment of the libido. (2013, 61)

From this perspective, a denial of loss gives the illusion that the object, and therefore the parts of the self projected into the object, are preserved. One way, I suggest, that the widower in "Ligeia" avoids the acute pain and anxiety that accompanies his loss is through projective identification with the "abandoning object" (Yoshida 2022, 42). In this way, the process whereby he can accept the terrible significance of his loss through mourning is crucially arrested. The recognition of ambivalent impulses towards the good object, the despair which accompanies phantasies of damage and death that this engenders, and the wish to preserve and protect the object from attack are central to this process and can also be understood to shape the telling of this tale.

Psychic Retreats

As part of the post-Kleinian development, John Steiner has elaborated on the powerful systems of defence which characterise narcissistic object relations. These are deployed to avoid intolerable anxiety and require a withdrawal from reality and avoidance of contact with other people. Steiner calls these defensive systems "psychic retreats," denoting "states of mind in which the subject is stuck, cut off, and out of reach" (2013, 2). They function to avoid anxiety, but they can also be understood as a way of dealing with destructiveness. One significant feature of the psychic retreat is that it is employed as a way to avoid exposure to reality. Steiner writes:

The retreat then serves as an area of the mind where reality does not have to be faced, where phantasy and omnipotence can exist unchecked and where anything is permitted. This feature is often what makes the retreat so attractive and commonly involves the use of psychotic mechanisms. (2013, 3)

The retreat provides a relatively peaceful habitat in which to reside, free from the pressure to engage with what is experienced as threatening in reality. When reading "Ligeia," I think it is worth keeping in mind that both before and after Ligeia's death the world in which the male character resides is familiar with the defensive psychic structures as outlined above. Ligeia's physical beauty is characterised by a vampire-like, ghostly quality (shadowy movement, emaciated form, "marble hand"). The appearance of Ligeia's face is "spirit-lifting," mostly her large, black, eloquent eyes that ooze esoteric, other-worldly beauty. The narrator is never able to fathom this

expressiveness, and he cannot define, “analyze, or even steadily view” the feeling overcoming him (Poe 1965, 265).

The loss of Ligeia, which is assimilated into the good object, threatens to wreck the intrapsychical relational bridges that constituted it in the first place. With the loss of Ligeia, the memories of this self-object relation become internally dim, causing narcissistic incoherence. Like the narrator of “Eleonora,” that of “Ligeia” retreats after the death of his beloved, taking residence in a derelict abbey in a far-off part of England, and like the narrator of “Eleonora,” he remarries. Lady Rowena Trevanion is “the successor of the *unforgotten* Ligeia” (Poe 1965, 270; emphasis added). The mental instability of the narrator implicit in his account of haunting memories of Ligeia following her death repeats a feature of “Eleonora”: “incipient madness,” “feelings of utter abandonment,” “a bounden slave” to opium, because any loss, whether it be of an object, internal or external, or of parts of the self, might prompt the impression that the fulfilment of the desire to retrieve that which was lost is impossible (Poe 1965, 255).

We might argue, along the lines sketched by Leon Grinberg in his paper on loss and mourning, that the experience of the loss of the object sparked off the hallucinatory fantasy of disintegration in Poe’s character, who believed that he could take refuge in the marriage to Rowena in order to counteract the experience of the loss felt as an intolerable “catastrophic change” (Grinberg 1978, 246). In an attempt to diminish his anxiety, pain and instability, the dispossessed character might be interpreted to have resorted to a measure which acted as a “stop-gap undertaking”² that facilitated containment of anxiety, namely reparation.

Yet this is proven to be brought about only in the revivification of Ligeia, whose spirit seems to make its appearance prior to what he perceives as her actual revivification—after murdering the living Rowena—a fact which is a clear projection of his own wishes. “[W]ild with the excitement of an immoderate dose of opium,” he sees “a faint shadow of angelic aspect—such as might be fancied for the shadow of a shade” and hears “a gentle foot-fall upon the carpet” (Poe 1965, 122). Before her name is even suggested, these images, formerly employed to refer to Ligeia, indicate that she is grasped by the narrator to be the unidentified presence. Then the narrator sees, or “may have dreamed that [he] saw, fall within the goblet ... three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby-colored fluid” (122). In the end, the body saunters to the middle of the room, loosens the wrappings around her head, and opens her eyes. Needless to say, it is the figure of Ligeia.

Yet achieving reparation may not go beyond attempt. As he toys with the omnipotent idea of restoring the dead Ligeia, having her present in the closing scene, we are left to think about the character’s real capacity for mourning and concern. Melanie Klein, describing organisations of the personality based on omnipotence, discriminated

² The term is used by Salman Akhtar in “The Trauma of Geographical Dislocation: Leaving, Arriving, Mourning and Becoming” (2007, 174).

between what she described as “restitution” rather than “reparation,” illustrating the predominance of the wish to reverse the perceived decimation of the inner world over the depressive concern for the object.

If the impetus ascribed to the fictitious narrator is concerned with restitution rather than reparation, as is suggested by the closing scene, then Poe has achieved an attempt at preserving the damaged objects at the expense of reality, informed by what Klein called omnipotent, restorative phantasies. Contained within this process is perhaps another psychic manoeuvre, that of manic reparation.

There are three defence mechanisms specific to the schizoid position that are being used here: projection, omnipotence, and magical reparation. The narrator’s will of disposing of Rowena and being reunited with Ligeia is manifested in the hallucination of Ligeia’s returning from the dead, as was the case with the poisoning of Rowena, but he pins the will and the supernatural power on the idealised and omnipotent Ligeia through projection. Essentially, the hallucination is an example of magical reparation: Ligeia is magically restored, in order to alleviate the insufferable sorrow he has endured on account of the (temporary) loss of his idealised object.

“Ligeia” ends with the disheartened male character still teetering on the edge of making a full reparative statement. The retreat into the fantasy world enabled by his opium break, where his omnipotent phantasies are given free reign, involved an exploration of the psychic strategies employed by the fictional character to avoid knowledge of his loss.

The world which Edgar Allan Poe’s characters encounter and represent is coloured by their own projective identifications: it is fragmented, shattered by aggression. Fear of annihilation is elaborated on every level of the text, from imagery of disintegration (of the body, for example, in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*) to the level of narration itself in the fragmented storytelling of the same novel.

And the question arises: how is the reader positioned, according to Kleinian dynamics? In all likelihood, s/he is placed, most uncomfortably, in the uneasy position of witness to the act of inflicted violence, which covertly slides into complicity with that phantasied aggression. A problem emerges, however, for the critic engaged in a Kleinian reading of Poe: that is the problem of reparation. Poe, in his refusal to offer the reader any reassurance, calls for an approach that works against the grain of Klein’s narratives of reparation. A problematising unravelling of the relations between reparation and the traumatic text can potentially offer a way of reformulating reparation.

Klein’s invention of the concept of reparation represents one of the most interesting nodal points of her theoretical writings, theorising the desire to repair, to sew up the object damaged through the subject’s phantasied aggressive attacks (Cârstea 2023).

In “Some Reflections on *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus” (1963), her posthumously published paper, Klein interprets the characters of Aeschylus’s trilogy as symbolising internal processes and injured internal objects, and *The Oresteia* in terms of “the divided and embattled psyche’s struggle to free itself from the cycle of past suffering and vengeance, and to learn from experience” (Jacobus 2005, 138).

Klein dwells significantly on *The Eumenides*, the third and final section of the play, which sees the end of Orestes’s persecution by the unforgiving Furies. To her, the afflicting Furies represent the unforgiving, tortured and persecutory parts of the *self*. There is a characteristic of the Furies, connected with dread of misbehaving, that she reinscribes in the order where justice and forgiveness are reconciled in the closing scenes. Mary Jacobus considers that Klein essentially associates literature with symbolic action, along with psychic integration: “Literature enacts the integration that is ultimately unachievable in the ordinary span of human life, serving as a counter-force to the Kleinian emphasis on destructiveness. Envy, aggression, and the death instinct do not have things entirely their own way in the furious *psychomachia* waged within unconscious phantasy” (Jacobus 2005, 172).

Klein’s considerations on *The Oresteia* reflect her viewpoint that, once the ego’s own destructiveness has been acknowledged, it becomes more understanding, tolerant and forgiving. Mary Jacobus contends that the dispensation Orestes himself was granted in the end legitimately allows for a comparison between Klein and another twentieth century woman scholar whose accomplishments may be recognised alongside Klein’s: Hannah Arendt.

Arendt’s concept of forgiveness seems to overlap, philosophically, the Kleinian concept of psychoanalytical reparation—the only action that could be undertaken in order to be extricated from the endless loop of revenge. To fall back on Arendt, the consequences can never be escaped, unless we can forgive and be forgiven. Forgiveness, unlike vengeance, which binds to the original wrongdoing in an endless loop, fosters a new beginning, “acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it” (Arendt 1988, 63).

In *The Human Condition*, throughout the chapter entitled “Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive,” Arendt rests her system of redemption on the idea of human making, fabrication (*homo faber*), while referencing “the interrelated faculties of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces use objects” (62). But, given the impossibility of undoing what has been done, the only way to compensate for it is “the faculty of forgiving.”

Philosophers of forgiveness Arendt and Jacques Derrida have made, each in their own way, forgiveness a “threshold of humanity: to be human is to forgive” (Oliver 2003, 281).

In *On Forgiveness*, Derrida discussed forgiveness as a gift whose inherent feature is ambiguity: “Sometimes, forgiveness (given by God, or inspired by divine prescription) must be a gracious gift, without exchange and without condition; sometimes it requires, as its minimal condition, the repentance and transformation of the sinner” (Derrida 2001, 40). His claims are made within the context of the heritage that has imparted us our notion of forgiveness, a heritage he terms Abrahamic, “in order to bring together Judaism, the Christianities, and the Islams” (2001, 41). For Arendt, too, forgiveness has the capacity to break up the loop of vengeance, “the automatic reaction to transgression” (Chiba 1995, 526).

Although clearly distinct from one another, forgiveness and reparation share the same desire to make good again, which lifts the subject out of the endless repetitions of defence mechanisms and renders a renewal of creative energy possible. It could be argued that reparation breaks the chain of aggression and fear, and inaugurates narrative, making new stories possible.

Viewed in the context of the dynamics described by Klein, if reparation as an analytical tool is really to be set to work upon literary texts, it must shake off its disguise as wish-fulfilment and reveal itself in the subtle permutations of action, in its workings through literary fictions. Her theorisation of reparation as the desire to repair, to sew up the object damaged through the subject’s phantasied aggressive attacks has an intrinsic narrative movement, a dynamic, a logic.

But reparation, according to Klein’s definition of it, is not present in Poe’s fiction. Genuine concern for the object of violence cannot be said to emerge: instead, endless mechanisms of defence are triggered, as the subject fears retaliation. A striving towards reparation appears excluded as a structural component of narrative.

To all appearances, there is no potential strand of reparation in Poe’s text. Where could the desire to make reparation be located in a text in which defence mechanisms appear to dominate? Perhaps the desire to repair the object damaged in phantasy, which for Klein underlies the desire to create art, can be traced in the beauty of the prose in which Poe narrates experiences of alienation, disintegration and trauma. The very articulation of this dread, which is felt at times to be too threatening to turn into speech, can be said to move towards concern for the object and a desire to repair damage inflicted in phantasy.

Coda

Poe’s texts may be interpreted to symbolise and elaborate, in a fictional form, the fraught dynamics of separation and reparation depicted by Klein. This observation brings us to one of the principal points of contact between the psychoanalytic writings of Klein and the literary project of Poe. The work of both thinkers could be said to express and theorise, in different ways, the problems encountered by the human subject who seeks to conceptualise a world of objects.

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 from the standpoint of Kleinian dynamics, it is possible to observe the subtle operations of phantasied aggression in his creation.

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