

Repetition and Anticipation in E.A. Poe's Creative Writing

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Abstract

In Freud's theory of mind anticipation seems to be most intimately related to his conception of the mechanism or automatism of repetition. In this paper we rely on both Freud's and Lacan's explanation of the clinical phenomenon of the compulsion to repeat in order to shed more light on some aspects of the life and work of E.A. Poe. More specifically, we argue that Poe's biography as well as his *Tales of mystery and imagination* and above all, his poetry, witness both of the repetition determined by the signifier (*automaton*) and of the repetition of what has not been (*tuché*).

Key words : repetition, chance, anticipation, creative writing, E.A. Poe

1 Introduction

Two years ago, we argued that the Freudian thesis that any *finding* of an object is always a *refinding* of it – thesis that can be traced throughout Freud's writings, e.g. in his *Project* (1950a), in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci (1910c) or in his paper on 'Negation' (1925h) – implies that this refinding of an object is to be considered as a "present unconsciously anticipated coincidence" and that it is "determined in a circular and interconnected way": i) by the drive as an active and constant force in the present which repetitively isolates a partial object from the environment; ii) by chance conditions; iii) by a genuine anticipatory characteristic of the human mind, i.e. its readiness, its always being engaged in actively "completing the similarity of past and present into an identity" (Geerardyn et al., 2002: 227).

Apparently, in Freud's theory of mind, anticipation is intimately related to the concept of repetition. In this paper, we explore the further development of this concept in Freud's and in Lacan's works and take this psychoanalytical framework as a starting point for the interpretation of some aspects of E.A. Poe's biography and creative writing. Firstly, we turn to Freud's essay *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920g) in which he further elaborates his explanation of the clinical phenomenon of the mechanism of repetition, or even of the automatism of repetition, by the introduction of the death drive. Secondly, we refer to E.A. Poe's biography and creative writing as a most convincing illustration of the Freudian compulsion to repeat. Thirdly, we briefly

point out Lacan's conception of the Freudian notion of repetition as elaborated (i) in his seminar on E.A. Poe's *The purloined letter* (Lacan, 1957), text that can be considered as a comment on Freud's *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920g) and that provides a formal model for the determination of the subject by the signifier; (ii) in his seminar (1973) on *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* – being: the unconscious, repetition, the drive and transference –, in which Lacan further elaborates his conception of the repetition mechanism, now with help of Aristotle's distinction between *tuché* and *automaton*. Finally, relying on this theoretical framework, we return to E.A. Poe and argue that his life and work witness both of the insistence of the signs (*automaton*) and of the repetition of what has not been (*tuché*).

2 How Freud dealt with repetition

In *Beyond the pleasure principle*, Freud describes the phenomena that obliged him to reformulate his theory in which hitherto he “ascribed dominance over the course of processes of excitation in mental life” to the pleasure principle (1920g: 23). Reflecting on psychoanalytic technique, Freud states that at first the aim of psychoanalysis consisted in the becoming conscious of what was unconscious. To reach that aim, the fundamental rule of free association on the one hand, and the technique of interpretation on the other hand, seemed at first to be sufficient. But now Freud admits that as a rule his patients “cannot remember the whole of what is repressed” in them. They are obliged to repeat what they cannot remember as a “contemporary experience instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past” (Ibid.: 18).

When we take a closer look at these reproductions it appears that: (i) they emerge with “unwished-for exactitude”; (ii) they always have as their subject “some portion of infantile sexual life – of the Oedipus complex, that is, or its derivatives”; (iii) they are “invariably acted out in the sphere of transference” (Ibid.: 18); (iv) the greater part of what is re-experienced under what Freud terms “the compulsion to repeat” must cause the ego unpleasure, a fact that does not astonish Freud and does not contradict the pleasure principle, for in his theory of mind unpleasure for one system (e.g. the ego) is very well compatible with pleasure for another system (e.g. the id); (v) most important and remarkable, “the compulsion to repeat also recalls experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since long been repressed” (Ibid.: 20).

Instances of such reproductions that cannot be explained by the pleasure principle can easily be traced in neurotics: the “sense of inferiority” that is so common in neurotics is for the greater part a repetition of the loss of love and failure inherent to infantile sexual life; their complaints such as “I can't accomplish anything; I can't succeed in anything” refer to experiences that are repetitions of their childhood sexual researches that never could have led to a satisfactory conclusion because of the inadequate physical development of the child.

As a psychoanalyst Freud is confronted with such manifestations in the phenomenon of what he calls the “transference neurosis”, that is the present repetition of the earlier neurosis. But he stresses the fact that the compulsion to repeat can also be

observed in the lives of 'normal' people: "The impression they give is of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some 'daemonic' power; but psychoanalysis has always taken the view that their fate is for the most part *arranged by themselves* and determined by early infantile influences" (Ibid.: 21).

Freud gives several examples of normal people all of whose human relationships have the same outcome: the benefactor who time and again is abandoned in anger by the one he protected; the man whose friendships all end in betrayal; the man who time and again raises someone else into a position of great authority and then himself upsets that authority and replaces him by a new one; the lover whose love affairs all pass through the same phases and reach the same conclusion. This "perpetual recurrence of the same thing" (Ibid.: 22) is still more impressive in cases where the subject appears to have a passive experience, over which he has no influence as in the case of the woman who married three successive husbands each of whom fell ill soon afterwards and had to be nursed by her on their death-beds.

3 Repetition in E.A. Poe's *Tales of mystery and imagination*

Impossible here not to think of the example of E.A. Poe, in whose biography and creative writings, i.e. in his *Tales of mystery and imagination* as well as in his poems, the compulsion to repeat becomes manifest. When we take a look at his *Tales of mystery and imagination*, we are confronted with whole series of tales that time and again elaborate the same theme, which can be considered as repetitions with more or less variation. E.g. the cycle formed by *The assignment* (1834), *Berenice* (1835), *Morella* (1835), *Metzengerstein* (1836), *Ligeia* (1838), *The fall of the house of Usher* (1839), *Eleonora* (1842) and *The oval portrait* (1842), elaborates the theme of the idealised woman who falls ill and eventually dies, but who not really dies, who beyond death still lives and as such attains a kind of supernatural status.

To give just one example, in *The oval portrait* (1842), the narrator and main character is hypnotised, captured by a portrait – which in itself is something dead –, but then the portrait, perhaps only in the eyes of the beholder, starts to live: apparently the narrator is captured more precisely by the small border between life and death, by death as it is implied in life, or by life as it is implied in death.

This kind of repetition, i.e. the elaboration time and again of the same theme, with more or less variation, the recurrence of specific signifiers and plots, is something that can be observed easily in the works of many creative writers (e.g. Paul Auster, Marguerite Duras...). And many of them witness of the fact that for them writing is a matter of compulsion, *their* compulsion. Also creative writing, just as speech in analysis, is at least partly a matter of conscious and unconscious anticipation. That is, more often than not a creative writer consciously anticipates or intends to communicate or to elaborate a specific idea or a specific plot. But even when in doing so he considers himself a being a mere instrument of God or of some inspiring Muse, once his story is written he cannot but recognize the result of his writing as his own. To put in other words: creative writing is no more a matter of chance than a genuine Freudian slip of the tongue.

4 With Aristotle's help: Lacan's elaboration of the compulsion to repeat

With reference to Lacan's elaboration of the compulsion to repeat, we would qualify the repetitions at stake in creative writing as repetitions on the symbolic level that are determined by the signifier. And it is precisely in E.A. Poe's story of *The purloined letter* that Lacan (1957) detects the idea of repetition as determined by the signifier, through his interpretation of the purloined letter as the pure signifier. In other words, in *The purloined letter*, Poe demonstrates his 'knowledge' of the determining power of the signifier. Later on, in his seminar (1973) on *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*, Lacan qualifies this kind of repetition as Aristotle's *automaton*, which is strictly to be distinguished from *tuché*, mere chance, or in Lacan's terms, the traumatic real that by no means could have been anticipated.

And it is *tuché* rather than *automaton* that can make intelligible what Freud meant by the compulsion to repeat that "recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure" (Freud, 1920g: 20). Indeed, for Lacan "it is a question, then, of revising the relation that Aristotle establishes between the *automaton* – and we know, at the present stage of modern mathematics, that it is the network of signifiers – and what he designates as the *tuché* – which is for us the encounter with the real" (1973: 52). In Lacan's interpretation, the *automaton* comes down to the network of signifiers as *cause*, whereas the *tuché* stands for the encounter with the real, also as a *cause*. This real, as cause, cannot be positioned but beyond the *automaton* of the "return, of the insistence of signs to which we are commanded by the pleasure principle". Moreover this encounter with the real is always a missed encounter – "une rencontre manquée" – as has been demonstrated in the clinical experience of traumatism (Knockaert et al., 2004: this vol.), but which is present and even constitutive for every human being, in that the encounter with infantile sexuality is always a missed encounter, for reasons that are proper to the human condition as such. In this sense, the *tuché* always refers to the repetition of something *that has not been*.

5 *Tuché* and *automaton* in the life and work of E.A. Poe

Let us now return to E.A. Poe who for sure was "pursued by a malignant fate or was possessed by some 'daemonic' power" (Freud, 1920g: 21).

From his biography we learn that his life consisted of an endless series of periods of alcoholism in which he drank himself a delirium, of periods of addiction to opium, of severe depression, of series of financial and other failures. Most striking and even horrifying is Poe's specific and recurrent missed encounter with women: he always fell in love with women that were, in one sense or another, out of reach: the mother of his best friend, women whom he asked for marriage but who could not but refuse him, or, most horrifying, women that were severely ill and were doomed to die soon (Virginia, Frances Osgood and Hélène Whitman). Most instructive is his relation with his niece Virginia whom Poe married in 1836 when she was only 13 years old. Apparently in their marriage she was more a sister to him rather than a wife and their

relationship was a.o. characterised by the total absence of sexuality. However, when in 1842 she became severely ill something changed: to his own horror he again was confronted with a dying love object. It was as if the memory of his watching his own mother die haunted him.

Born in 1809 as the second son of David Poe and Elisabeth Arnold, E.A. Poe had accompanied his mother who travelled around as an actress and singer. He never had really known his father, an alcoholic attained by TBC and who had left his wife and children before Poe's younger sister was to be born in 1812. At the age of two and a half years, during months Poe had witnessed the illness and deteriorating condition of his mother who eventually died in 1812. That is, from within his childhood bed he had witnessed the fainting away of the light in the eyes and the silencing of the voice of his mother. And now, in 1842 and during the years to come, he found himself before his slowly dying Virginia.

Is it much of a shock then that in his creative writings Poe tried as it were to master this ever recurring and missed encounter (*tuché*) through the elaboration (*automaton*) of specific themes and plots (e.g. the theme of dying women who come back to life, the theme of being buried alive) that gave expression to his own horror? Indeed, many of his *Tales of mystery and imagination* explore death in manifold ways to the effect that often they awaken uncanny feelings or even horror within the reader. But perhaps Poe reached the aim of mastering or symbolising the unbearable real at best in his poetry. Some of his most beautiful and famous poems 1. precisely were addressed to the women he could not reach or to his dying love objects; 2. refer to the very recurrent themes he elaborated in his *Tales*; 3. in addition, exploit rhythm (repetition that is) to the effect that they attain an exceptional musicality.

Poe's unequalled *Annabel Lee*, addressed in 1846 to his dying child/woman Virginia (Bonaparte, 1933: 161), seems to exorcise his experienced horror through the poetic narrative of a romantic fairy tale:

*It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.*

*I was a child and she was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea:
But we loved with a love that was more than love –
I and my Annabel Lee;
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Coveted her and me.*

Obviously, these verses refer the fantasy of a happy encounter between two peers (*I* was a child and *she* was a child) to a scenery in the remote *past* – a poetic

screen memory as it were in answer to the *present* repetition of the missed encounter with the object of his love (his ill and dying Virginia). But even *what has not been* cannot endure and must come to an end: jealousy makes its entrance (their childish love in harmony was “coveted” by the “winged seraphs of heaven”):

*And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her high-born kinsman came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.*

Not mere chance or *tuché*, but jealousy, envy and a chilling wind killed his beloved:

*The angels, not half so happy in heaven,
Went envying her and me –
Yes! – that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.*

Whereas in Poe’s experience his craving longing for *what has not been* (a happy encounter) manifests itself in recurrent horror and failure, at least in his poetry death is overcome by love – not just by any love, but by the love bonds of childhood that in the depths of our souls are indestructible:

*But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we –
Of many far wiser than we –
And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee,
For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling – my darling – my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea.*

What is met here, in this horror turned into melody, if not the distant voice of his mother? The latter was indeed an actress and a singer and at a very early age, Edgar accompanied his mother to the theatre. This circumstance might explain the exceptional musicality of Poe's poetry that is even better illustrated in *The bells*, a poem he addressed in 1848 to Marie-Louise Shew (Bonaparte, 1933: 201-203):

*Hear the sledges with the bells –
Silver bells!
What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
In the icy air of night!
While the stars that oversprinkle
All the heavens seem to twinkle
With a crystalline delight;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
From the bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells –
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.*

...

This 'song' of the "silver", the "golden", the "brazen" and the "iron" bells goes on for pages and to many reader it is a joy to read and reread it aloud, which might give us an idea of the pleasure that governs the "insistence of the signs", the return of signifiers anticipated by rhyme and rhythm, by grammar and syntax. The pleasure thus attained in the act of writing or 'composing' (*automaton*) a poem is only momentarily and can never turn the constitutive missed encounter with the real, with mere chance (*tuché*), into a happy or successful encounter. To put this relation between *automaton* and *tuché* in another way: neither Poe's biography nor his creative writing *name* or *symbolise* that real once and for all. The *automaton* on the symbolic level cannot but *reach* for *what has not been* in a vain and recurrent endeavour to make it exist.

6 Conclusions

The psychoanalytical theory of mind makes intelligible the striking phenomenon of the automatism of repetition that has been observed clinically and otherwise (e.g. in creative writing). Obviously, in the case of Edgar Allan Poe repetition occurs on four levels: (i) on the level of his life history from which appears that to his own horror he time and again fell in love with dying women (Aristotle's *tuché*), fact that from a psychoanalytic viewpoint is considered as the repetition of the traumatic loss of his mother (*tuché*); (ii) in his story on *The purloined letter*, Poe demonstrates his 'knowledge' of what Lacan termed the "the insistence of the signs", i.e. the repetition determined by the signifier (Aristotle's *automaton*); (iii) the latter can more generally be

traced throughout his creative writing as the instrument 'par excellence' with which he tried to master the repetitive missed encounter with his lost object – cf. the recurring themes and signifiers (*automaton*) in the plots of his *Tales of mystery and imagination*; (iv) eventually, in the musicality of his poetry Poe attained by rhythmic repetition of signifiers (*automaton*). E.A. Poe's case and Lacan's distinction between *tuché* and *automaton* shed more light on the phenomenon of the refinding of an object defined as "present unconsciously anticipated coincidence". The coincidence or chance condition that determines repetition is the original trauma as *tuché* or "what has not been" signified or symbolised. Beyond this original trauma – which is constitutive for the human being as such – all its repetitions only *seem* to be determined by chance but in fact are 'anticipated' by the drive that actively seeks to repeat the trauma, be it only in the vain hope to make it undone.

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