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The murders in the rue Morgue : neurosis

Acta Neophilologica 10, 161-168

2008

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE: NEUROSIS¹

Key words: crime story, psychology, neurosis, reinterpretation, E.A. Poe

J.A. Leo Lemay begins his essay *The Psychology of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"*² with a focus on the final paragraph of the story where the detective Dupin comments on the Prefect:

the Prefect is too cunning to be profound. In his wisdom is no stamen. It is all head and no body, like the pictures of the Goddess Laverna³ – or, at best, all head and shoulders, like a codfish.⁴

Lemay calls the first sentence a generalization and in the following two recognizes three metaphorical arguments designed to support it. Further on he discusses "three tropes" pointing to "a head-body dichotomy" and all concerning sex. Stamen is compared to male genitalia, Laverna stands for the corpse of Madame L'Españaye, and the codfish is another "sexual suggestion"⁵. A psychoanalytical approach like that distinctly reflects a rather fossilized Freudian psychology and gives the impression of an overinterpretation of Poe's metaphors and similes.

The head-body dichotomy in the above quoted passage appears only once: "It is all head and no body". The simile "all head and shoulders, like a codfish" is a cooky but actually non-sensical expression. The codfish, like any fish for that matter, has no

¹ From time immemorial, in every society, it has been realized that there are many mentally disturbed individuals who are neither insane nor feeble minded. They differ from normal persons in being plagued by feelings of inferiority, doubt about the motives of others, inexplicable shyness, and unreasonable fears; or they behave in ways that are upsetting to those around them and to society.

² J.A.L. Lemay, *The Psychology of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"*, in: L.J. Budd & E.H. Cady (eds.), *On Poe*, London, Duke University Press 1993, p. 223.

³ Laverna: in Roman mythology the goddess of thieves and cheaters.

⁴ E.A. Poe, *The Complete Illustrated Stories and Poems*, London, Chancellors Press 1994, p. 102. Future citations from this edition will be included parenthetically in the text.

⁵ J.A.L. Lemay, op. cit., p. 224.

shoulders, and the distinction between the head and the torso is in fish practically absent, or at least much less observable than in higher vertebrates. “Wisdom and no stamen” is a more curious and perplexing statement. Stamen is the pollen-bearing organ of a flower, consisting of the filament and the anther. The aforementioned critic transfers this meaning from flora to fauna and associates the word stamen with human sexual organs. But why should Poe contrast wisdom and the penis? No, he does not juxtapose the brains and the bottom, but the muscle and the mind, the ingenious and analytical facilities. Wisdom or ingenuity, says Poe, are of limited efficacy if they lack the imaginative analytic power. In the final paragraph Poe returns to the argument which opens *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. He brings out the difference between ingenuity and analysis, saying that the ingenious man who has “the constructive or combining power” may otherwise border “upon idiocy”. The analytic man, on the other hand, is “necessarily ingenious” and also “truly imaginative”. These two types of intellect are then illustrated by the mental skills characteristic for the player of chess and the player of draughts. The former calculates but does not analyze, the latter analyzes and “throws himself into the spirit of the opponent”. And once more Poe draws the line between the two types of investigating mind when Dupin refers to Vidocq⁶. He says that:

Vidocq was a good guesser, and a persevering man. But, without educated thought, he erred continually by the very intensity of his investigations. He impaired his vision by holding objects too close. He might see, perhaps, one or two points with unusual clearness, but in so doing he, necessarily, lost sight of the matter as a whole. [p. 86]

All these examples serve the purpose to prove that the capacity for comprehension is more important than the data input.

When the treaty on analysis and ingenuity is finished the narrative kicks off with the entrance of the nameless narrator and his colleague Dupin. Little does the former say of himself, instead in a detailed manner, he delivers plenty of background information about the amateur detective Dupin. We are told that he is “a young gentleman of an illustrious family [...] reduced to [...] poverty” by “a variety of untoward events”. The narrator is astonished “at the vast extent of his reading” and feels his “soul enkindled [...] by the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of [Dupin’s] imagination”. Lemay writes that “Dupin is a doppelganger for the narrator”⁷. Contemplating various pairs, doubles, dichotomies and bifurcations in which the story is abundant (two men, two women, two voices, two intellects), the idea of a doppelganger is not to be readily dismissed. However, it is a completely different doppelganger than that in *William*

⁶ Francis Vidocq (1775–1857), the Chief of the French Police Department.

⁷ J.A.L. Lemay, op. cit., p. 231.

*Wilson*⁸. There the counter-hero, the second William Wilson, from the very beginning appears as a fantastic being which accompanies, pursues, and competes the first William Wilson. Here, Dupin's associate, the narrator, is an ordinary man possessing a separate entity. He could live without ever meeting Dupin and Dupin would survive without him as they have nothing vital in common.

Having expressed his admiration for Dupin's "peculiar analytic ability", the narrator says: "I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy or the Bi-Part Soul⁹, and amused myself with the fancy of a double Dupin – the creative and the resolvent". The detective's split personality is hinted at in this passage; creative and dissolvent, complex and profound, good and evil. Richard Wilbur in his *The Poe Mystery Case*¹⁰ maintains that all figures in the story are versions of one person, Dupin, who is the controlling faculty. But extending Dupin's presiding power over all characters in the story renders the argument brittle. It is effortlessly observable that he psychologically dominates, to an overwhelming degree, the narrator. Nonetheless, the other characters (the sailor, the Prefect, the witnesses) are not ectoplasmic effusions of his, however prodigious, intellect. At the time of the showdown, Dupin elicits the intelligence he has been seeking not by using the power of his mind, but by interrogating the sailor at the gunpoint.

Wilbur points out parallels between the narrator – Dupin pair and Madame – Mademoiselle L'Espanaye. Dupin and the narrator live in "perfect seclusion". So do the two women. The men admit "no visitors", and the L'Espanaye's neighbors testify that "no one was spoken of frequenting the house". The women tenant two rooms on the fourth floor, and so do the detective and his friend. On top of it Lemay says that "Poe suggests that homosexual relationship exists between Dupin and the narrator, and between Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye". To infuse this assumption with some evidence the critic quotes following lines: "the society of such a man would be to me a treasure beyond price"; "our seclusion was perfect"; "we existed within ourselves alone"; "we sallied forth into the streets, arm in arm"¹¹. Only the last phrase can be regarded as a pointer of a homosexual bond. On no account can such a relationship be validly confirmed as existing between the mother and daughter. That the tobacconist deposed that Madame L'Espanaye would buy "small quantities of tobacco and snuff" does not mean that she tended to be mannish but that she used to smoke, and the sole fact that the two lived together "an exceedingly retired life" is as close to

⁸ Another story by Poe, in which the central figure, a passionate youth, leads at school all his companions except one, a boy of his own age and appearance who bears the same name of William Wilson. He frightens and persecutes Wilson who flees from the school. He travels about Europe becoming degenerate and vicious. At critical times his double invariably appears to warn him or destroy his powers over others. Finally at Rome, when the double appears to prevent his planned seduction of the Dutchess Di Broglio, Wilson is infuriated, and murders him. In the closing paragraph it transpires that the double Wilson was a pure delusion existing only in Wilson's diseased mind.

⁹ "The old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul": an ancient theory referring to the double nature of the soul supposed to consist of a material and an ideal substance.

¹⁰ R. Wilbur, *The Poe Mystery Case. Responses: Prose Pieces*, New York, Harcourt, Brace 1976, p. 127-137.

¹¹ J.A.L. Lemay, op. cit., p. 235.

denoting a homosexual relationship as Venus is to Neptune. Such an argument seems to be too far fetched and invites almost any imaginable sexual parallels, for example between the Prefect and the ape. Even if there actually is a queerish undercurrent referring to Dupin and the narrator, it is not what attracts the interest of the reader. The mysterious homicide itself, inexplicable *modus operandi*, gory descriptions of the mangled bodies, these are the mind-teasers which do not let the reader put the story down before it has ended.

The Murders in the Rue Morgue concerns an analytical method of solving a murder case plus psychological contexts underlying and modifying the composition of characters. When reading the text for the first time, the reader may be on the brink of understanding, or fearing, the nature of the murderer(s), but remains unaware of his motives. Thus the narrator's function is so invaluable. He is naive and totally innocent of any knowledge that might direct him towards comprehension of the grim event. Dupin, precisely explaining every single step in his chain of reasoning, leads the narrator – and the reader with him – from the obscure beginning to the elucidating finish. We take a pure delight at observing how Dupin disentangles, or unriddles the murder case which is full of cunning windings. After perusing the newspaper reports of the murders and quoting all witnesses, Dupin arrives at the conclusion announced at the beginning of the tale: there are two types of investigating mind, two sorts of intellect, only one being truly effective. The Parisian police searched the crime scene thoroughly and yielded no results that might lead to the perpetrator. Dupin comments:

We must not judge of the means [...] by this shell of an examination. The Parisian police, so much extolled for acumen, are cunning, but no more. There is no method in their proceedings, beyond the method of the moment. [p. 85]

And concludes that the results obtained by the police are often surprising, but “brought about by simple diligence and activity”, not by an imaginative and analytical mind that decodes, solves, interprets, and logically explains.

Having described all circumstances of the crime, Dupin asks the narrator whether he has any theory implicating who might have committed the homicide. The reply would irritate many a reader. Saying: “A madman [...] has done this deed – some raving maniac, escaped from the neighboring Maison de Sante”, the narrator betrays his complete incapacity for a synthetic conclusion derived from Dupin's analysis. Were it Doctor Watson's answer to the query, Holmes would reprimand him harshly. Dupin soothes: “In some respects [...] your idea is not irrelevant”. The lack of the narrator's comprehension is overt because by this point Dupin has already indicated several signs of non-human activity:

[...] an agility astounding, a strength superhuman, [...] a butchery without motive, a grotesquerie in horror absolutely alien from humanity, and a voice foreign in tone to the ears of men of many nations, and devoid of all distinct or intelligible syllabification. [p. 93]

The absence of motive stems from the observation that most (possibly all) valuables were left behind. Dupin concludes that the perpetrator must have been “so vacillating an idiot as to have abandoned his gold and his motive altogether”. Lemay names this sentence an example of “foolish logic” as the detective assumes, and then dismisses the idea that the murders might have been committed by a homicidal robber, and not by a “psychotic sex maniac”. Next, he labels Dupin as “blind to the facts of life”. This conception is hardly acceptable. There is nothing false in the detective’s suggestion to eliminate the human factor from the perpetrated crime because the money was not stolen. He reasons correctly assuming that money is the commonest motive of crime and not sexual drives.

Poe’s intention was not to make the reader sense covert lecherous agendas, but to delight him with an elaborate, who-dunnit criminal story. Dupin’s analysis of the case engrosses and dazzles when we follow his steps of reasoning, each resembling a move in solving a jig-saw puzzle, when a piece slides into the right place with a distinctive click. The detective invites the narrator, and the reader with him, to put himself in the position of the hypothetical murderer in order to understand the mechanism of the grisly deed. When doing so, it soon becomes obvious that there is sufficient evidence excluding the possibility that the crime might have been perpetrated by human hand. The superhuman physical prowess necessary to shove a body up a chimney, the finger impressions on the victim’s throat that would not match the size of even the largest human hand, the non-human tuft of hair clutched in Madame L’Espanaye’s hand – all these lead to the inescapable conclusion that the homicide was not committed by man. The atrocious motiveless killing was not done by a maniac, but by a creature which does not reason.

Then comes the crux passage where Dupin states that the perpetrator of the gruesome mutilations – shattered bones, a part of the scalp ripped off, a head cut off – must have been inflicted by an orang-utan. Here is Poe’s picture of the beast:

The gigantic stature, the prodigious strength and activity, the wild ferocity, and the imitative propensities of these mammalia are sufficiently known to all. [p. 97]

The choice of the animal is highly limited by the kinetics presented in earlier paragraphs: the route of entrance and escape up and down the lightning rod, the acrobatic swing into the room, the use of a razor. Yet to admit that it is the best of all possible choices would be an act of negligence. Orang-utans are by nature calm and introverted, little “wild ferocity” is to be found in them. The selection of a gorilla or a baboon would be more concordant with the above representation.

Marie Bonaparte identifies three symbolic rape scenes in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*: the orang-utan’s entrance into the room, the killings, and the gendarme’s breaking into the house. She equates the gendarme and the ape to symbols of lust and aggression. However, the man of the law uses his bayonet to protect the society whereas the orang-utan uses a razor to attack it. She also conceives that in this tale Poe recapitulates

his mother's love making¹². Improbable though this psychoanalytic reading of the story is, it makes an entertaining distraction from strait-laced digestion of the text.

More likely sexual undertones can be detected in the description of Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye's life habits. The interpretation that they were declared lesbians is an unfounded wild guess, but they may have had certain problems with the recognition of their sexuality. We know that they lived from a small income for several years. Then the mother withdrew a large sum from the bank only a few days before their tragic deaths. On the plot level the proximity of these two dates is entirely accidental. Nonetheless, it is curious why Madame L'Espanaye needed four thousand franks all of a sudden. Her and her daughter's by then secluded lives can be recognized as a symptom of some neurotic fear. They used to lock windows and doors, the safe was concealed under the bed, both had no friends but were "very affectionate" towards each other. It points at the not impossible conclusion that they were afraid of heterosexuality and according to G.J. Barker-Benfield such a phobia may accompany lesbianism¹³. In psychiatric terms, Madame L'Espanaye (debatably her daughter too) suffered from a phobic neurosis: a phobia of heterosexuality. She was overwhelmed by an intense and irrational fear of heterosexual situation. She would have acknowledged that there were no rational grounds for this fear and that the provocative stimulus was innocuous, she was nonetheless powerless to suppress it.

Hippocrates drew a distinction between normal fears and phobias¹⁴, that is, morbid fears. Westfall in 1871 was the first to give morbid fears the status of a disease¹⁵. Mild phobias of darkness, solitude, animals, thunder and lightning, and high places are commonplace in childhood; some persist into adult life and may be culturally acceptable, such as fears of snakes, spiders, or mice. In phobic neurosis, however, the phobia is intense and disabling. The person affected is chronically fearful of a particular situation and may be extremely anxious or panic-stricken and incapacitated when placed in a situation which evokes the phobia. For example, it may be impossible for the patient to leave the house except when attended by a friend, to mingle in a crowd, walk across a bridge, or travel by plane. The person may be unable to eat certain foods, eat in public, stay in places from which escape might be difficult, or have sexual intercourse as it might have been in the case of the two slain ladies in Poe's story.

¹² M. Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, New York, Humanities Press 1971, p. 454, 457.

¹³ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York, Harper and Row 1976, p. 39.

¹⁴ One must not confuse the terms "phobic neurosis" and "anxiety neurosis". The term "anxiety neurosis" was introduced by Freud in 1895 to describe a syndrome consisting of general irritability, anxiety attacks, and nightmares. Anxiety neurosis is a chronic disease, punctuated by recurrent attacks of anxiety or panic. The anxiety attacks are the hallmark of the disease and as dramatic as convulsive seizures. The patient is assailed by a feeling of strangeness, as though his body had changed or the surroundings were unreal (depersonalization, derealization). He is frightened, most often by the prospect of imminent death (*angor animi*).

¹⁵ C. Westfall, *Die Agoraphobie: Eine neuropathische Erscheinung*, Arch. Psychiat. Nervekr. 1871-1872, 3, p. 138; 219.

Other common phobias are those of closed places, dogs, cats, dirt, AIDS, cancer, and death.

Treatment of phobic neurosis is best left to the psychiatrist. The aim of the treatment is to reduce the patient's fear to the extent that exposure to the phobic situation can be tolerated. The most popular form of therapy in the 1990s was so-called systematic desensitization¹⁶, which consists of graded exposure of the patient to the object or the situation that arouses fear.

Madame L'Espanaye could not seek help with a psychiatrist because her life ended before morbid fears or phobias were recognized by the medical science. But it may be presumed, that she (and her daughter) decided to do something themselves in order to desensitize their neurotic psyches. The large sum might denote that they endeavored to change their lives. Their might have been going to terminate their seclusion and start to participate actively in the society. Whether their transformation from asexual types to heterosexual ones could have been a success we will never know due to their premature deaths.

Dupin solidly states that the women were not "killed by spirits" but by material force. An overinterpretation that the L'Espanayes' suppressed sexuality created a monster to kill them is to little avail. Let the victims be lesbians or sufferers from neurosis, still their deaths are not metaphors but gory deeds done by means of a sharp razor. The women's fear of (male) society was to be overcome when they were preparing to sequester themselves from their rigidly antiquated sexless habits. They came close to achieving their goal and what turned their hopes into nothingness was not a fate swollen with sexual symbolism, but a wrong window opened at a wrong time.

An ape turned out to be the murderer. An orang-utan roving through the neighborhood razor in hand, slaughtered whimsically two women in their apartment and then, "conscious of having deserved punishment [...] seemed desirous of concealing its bloody deeds". This description of the beast's behavior furnishes the ape with an intellect, however rudimentary. A biological implausibility which Poe did not have to drag in if he wanted to explicate the ape's actions. They could be interpreted in a more mechanistic way drawing on the concept of conditional reflexes – the theory which explains how animals learn things. Unfortunately, the Russian physiologist Pavlov who originated the science of conditional and unconditional reflexes was born in the year of 1849, the same which saw Poe's death.

Dupin represents an intellectual who has mastered the skill of logical analysis. The narrator is an oaf struggling to tune into the detective's chain of reasoning. A bright reader will solve the criminal puzzle much earlier than Dupin's colleague whose brain fires on all mental cylinders with little effect. In the concluding paragraph Dupin returns to the distinction between two types of intellect. He hits a raw nerve when comparing the Prefect to a head without body. The head in this metaphor represents

¹⁶ J. Wolpe, *Psychotherapy by Reciprocal Inhibition*, Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press 1958.

the calculating, cunning, observing mind characteristic for ordinary, regular intellectuals. The body denotes the analytic, imaginative, and scrutinizing mind typical for people like Auguste Dupin, or Poe himself for that matter.

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Summary

The Murders in the Rue Morgue: Neurosis

The article deals with E.A. Poe's story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* which centers on a mysterious murder case. Several acknowledged critical appreciations of the tale are presented and reevaluated. The paper endeavors to uncover inconsistencies in the traditional critical approaches as well as to unveil Poe's sporadic literary incongruities embedded in the text. Stress is laid on the contrast between the traditional psychoanalytical readings of the story and the views of modern psychology and psychiatry. The article is intended to shed an alternative light on possible interpretations of the tale written by the 19th century pioneer in the field of the detective story and novel.