



## **“All the events of a dream”: the “Real” Ligeia from Homer to Poe**

Krešimir Vuković, D.Phil. (Oxon.)

Postdoctoral Fellow / Poslijedoktorand

Catholic University of Croatia/ Hrvatsko Katoličko Sveučilište

### **Abstract**

Since its first publication in 1838, Poe’s “Ligeia” has stirred a lot of debate and evoked a great number of responses. The aim of this paper is to offer a psychoanalytic reading of a story that was inspired by a dream. Lacan's interest in Poe's work is well known and "Ligeia" provides an ideal case study for a Lacanian reading of Poe. The description of Ligeia is presented in symbolic terms (dominated by classical references) while her character presents features of the Lacanian Real. Her great volition in dying and seemingly coming back to life fit the notion of the Lacanian death drive. Hence the paper applies Lacanian theory to “Ligeia” in order to show how Poe’s and Lacan’s explorations of the human psyche have much in common, in spite of differences in form.

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Since its first publication in 1838, Poe's "Ligeia" has stirred a lot of debate and evoked a great number of responses. "Ligeia" is still one of the most discussed of Poe's stories, and he advertised it as his personal favourite (Sova 2001, 96). The aim of this paper is to offer a psychoanalytic reading of a story that was inspired by a dream. Lacan's interest in Poe's fiction is well known, especially his comments on the "Purloined Letter", which resulted in a famous debate between Lacan and Derrida (Muller and Richardson 1987; Peebles 2004, 54-61). However, few have recognised Lacan's interest in Poe's other works, although Lacan's own statements encourage exploration in that direction. This paper will apply Lacanian theory to "Ligeia" in order to show how Poe's and Lacan's explorations of the human psyche have much in common, in spite of differences in form.<sup>1</sup>

### **Dream Elements**

As opposed to the other great classic of Poe's fiction, "The Fall of the House of Usher", "Ligeia" is perceived by most of its critics as an unreliable account. The readers can be subsumed under several loose categories representing their view of the extent of the narrator's unreliability. Many critics see only Ligeia's "revivification" as a hallucination or a dream (Byers 1980, 40-46). Most critics claim Ligeia herself to be, in one way or another, fictitious or imaginary (Davis, 1970, 170-176; Bronfen 1992, 326-335; Person, 1999, 1-7; von Mücke 1999, 53-75). Others interpret her ideal and ethereal figure as a metaphor for a work of art, and others as the Jungian anima, or some other aspect of the narrator's psyche (Bennet 1981, 1-6; Howard 1988, 36-43; Adriano 1986, 27-31; Zlotnick-Woldenberg 1999, 403-412; Weeks 2002, 148-163; Carter 2003: 45-57). Why does much of the extant literature on "Ligeia" interpret her character as metaphorical, fictitious, even non-existent? In search of an answer to this question, one must look for the origin of the story "Ligeia", which will also to reveal the origin of Ligeia the person.

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<sup>1</sup> The roots of the ideas presented in this paper go back to my Master's thesis at the Department of English Studies, University of Zadar. I would like to thank my supervisors Marko Lukić and Mario Vrbančić for helping me develop them. The two anonymous readers and the editor of *PsyArt*, Samir Dayal, carefully read the text and gave most valuable suggestions for its improvement for which I am very grateful. Finally, I owe a great debt to my friends: Jasminka Vejmelka who first introduced me to the work of Jacques Lacan (this paper testifies to all our discussions over the years) and Bonnie McMullen who has shared my enthusiasm for the work of Edgar Allan Poe for many years.

Only a small number of readers have paid attention to Poe's statement in a letter to Sarah Helen Whitman concerning the dream that inspired "Ligeia" (although Mabbott 2.306 mentions it at the very beginning of his introduction to "Ligeia"). Whitman had a bound set of the *Broadway Journal*, which she claimed Poe had given her in October 1848. There, he refers both to the poem ("To Helen Whitman"), which he had sent her, and to the story "Ligeia":

N. B.—The poem which I sent you contained all the events of a dream which occurred to me soon after I knew you. Ligeia was also suggested by a dream. Observe the eyes in both tale & poem. (quoted in *Works*, 1.444)

Among numerous critical perspectives that have been used to interpret the works of Edgar Allan Poe, psychoanalytic theory has played a considerable part. As Freud (2010, 604) said, dreams are the royal route to the unconscious. Nothing opens the repositories of the unconscious as much as dreams. In the case of "Ligeia", one finds an emphasis on dream interpretation at least since Roy Basler's (1944, 364-365) stress on "the narrator whose psycho-emotional experience weaves the plot". This thread is continued by James Gargano (1962, 337-342) who offers the first interpretation that overtly elaborates on the narrative as a dream. Gargano takes the vagueness and idealization of Ligeia and the narrator's madness as arguments for dream interpretation, pointing out that Ligeia lacks a local habitation and a name: the narrator cannot remember where he met his beloved who "came and departed as a shadow" (*Works*, 2.311). He also notes the frequent recurrence of the word "dream" throughout the tale (Gargano 1962, 338-339). Gargano believes the third part of the tale to be the narrator's private fantasy where his wish for the return of his ideal world (represented in Ligeia) is fulfilled. Ligeia is an imaginary agent; she is there to prevent, in Poe's words from Usher, "the bitter lapse into everyday life, the hideous dropping off of the veil" which was caused by his marriage to Rowena (Gargano 1962, 340-341).

Thus, even if Poe had not explicitly revealed the origin of his story in a dream, one could easily recognize its obvious dreamlike nature from the text itself, as Gargano did for "Ligeia" and others did for the "The Fall of the House of Usher" (Wilbur 1966, 255-77; Thompson 1972, 16-20). Although making a significant breakthrough, Gargano's analysis does not list all of the overwhelming evidence testifying to the dreamlike nature of the story. I can add a number of other instances, beyond the explicit

examples cited by Gargano. Modern Lacanian psychoanalytic theory may not only help reveal a greater number of these details, but also explain their presence and significance. It is my intention to do so through a close reading of Poe's text, especially the dream tale, in the light of Lacanian theory.

The very first sentence of the tale reveals its dreamlike nature: "I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia" (*Works*, 2.310). The narrator continues: "Yet I believe that I met her first and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine" (*Works*, 2.310). The fact that the narrator cannot remember any of the circumstances of his first meeting Ligeia sets the much discussed vague and mysterious tone of the tale. Moreover, we learn that he has already met her many times, but the fact that this happens "first and most frequently" in some (again) undesignated city reveals a recurrence which is characteristic of dreams. Dreams, especially those of persons of great importance, recur quite often, but not always in the same surroundings. After summoning her "Ligeia! Ligeia!", the narrator adds: "Buried in studies of a nature more than all else adapted to deaden impressions of the *outward world*" (*Works*, 2.310, emphasis added). As Freud (1953, 4066-67) had already explained in comparing psychosis and dream, dreaming is preceded by sleep and sleep excludes the external world and its stimuli, functioning in primary process, which is a different mode from diurnal experience. In other words, dreams weaken the impressions of the outward world and focus on one's own internal world.

The narrator continues his description claiming that by invoking the name Ligeia he brings before his eyes "in fancy the image of her who is no more" (*Works*, 2.311). Indeed, his description fits very well with one given by a dreamer who recounts the image of his dream which has passed ("is no more"). The narrator has not forgotten, but has "*never known*" her "paternal name". In explaining this, he adds: "I but indistinctly recall the fact itself—what wonder that I have utterly forgotten the circumstances which originated or attended it?" (*Works*, 2.311). This additionally obfuscates the narrator's account. Yet the true explanation is quite simple. How many times have we recounted a figure from our dreams, unable to determine who exactly this person should be?

This introductory section is followed by a topic “on which my memory fails me not” (*Works*, 2.311), a description of her person with many allusions to its dreamy nature. It is especially prominent in the sentence describing the beauty of her face: “It was the radiance of an *opium dream*—an *airy* and *spirit-lifting vision* more wildly divine than the *phantasies* which *hovered* about the *slumbering* souls of the daughters of Delos” (*Works*, 2.311, emphases added). This considerably long paragraph continues with the description of Ligeia’s forehead, hair, nose, mouth and smile to finish with her chin. All the elements are described in terms of such idealization and perfection that critics have rightly concluded it could refer to music and poetry rather than to a living person (Bennet 1981, 1-6). Roy Basler (1944, 366) concludes that Ligeia is the narrator’s “object of desire” and “not merely a woman, but a goddess...who possesses in apotheosis all the attributes of his own wish”.

Indeed, in the terms of dream interpretation, her description would be one of ultimate wish fulfilment (“the radiance of an opium dream”) as all of her characteristics are extraordinary, with sublime epithets making her perfect in all respects. Her “exquisite beauty”, “immense learning”, “the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language”, “the majesty...of her footfall”, “lofty and pale forehead...faultless”, “the skin rivalling the purest ivory”, “the gentle prominence of the regions above the temples”; “and then the raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally-curling tresses”, “the delicate outlines of the nose”, “the sweet mouth...the magnificent turn of the short upper lip” (*Works*, 2.310-312), all testify to not a flesh and blood creature, but a dream creation. The final description of the chin is even overtly oneric with a “contour which the God Apollo revealed but in a *dream*” (*Works*, 2.312, emphasis added).

### **Ligeia as Mother**

Another feature that the narrator stresses early on is the temporal length of his acquaintance with Ligeia. Already, as to her family, he says: “That it is of a remotely ancient date cannot be doubted” (*Works*, 2.310). Especially interesting in this sense is again the very beginning of the story where the history of their acquaintance is given in very vague terms (*Works*, 2.310). There, the unreliable narrator provides us with two

options: either his suffering has somehow erased his memory or all the grandeur of Ligeia has advanced so slowly that he cannot retrace the procedure. How does one account for this? Moreover, how does one account for the description of Ligeia as a divinity and his relation to her as an admirer?

I have already noted that the narrator is describing a dream figure, but on which model from real life is the dream figure constructed? If one cannot remember the circumstance of meeting a woman, yet knows her for “long years” and her grandeur is so overwhelming that it had to be imbibed at a steady pace, the most probable explanation is that this woman is his mother. The greatest progress in this direction was made by Kleinian psychoanalysts (Zlotnick-Woldenberg, 1999, 403–12; Keetley 2005, 1-16) who argued that the narrator’s dependence on his wife should in psychological terms be understood as the relationship of a child to his mother. Indeed, there is also a great amount of evidence pointing in this direction. The most explicit are the confessions: “Without Ligeia I was but as a child groping benighted” (*Works*, 2.316) and “the learning of Ligeia: it was immense—such as I have never known in woman” which resembles the statement of a naïve child admiring his mother. This is elaborated in a longer sentence: “Yet I was sufficiently *aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation ...*” (*Works*, 2.316, emphasis added). His overbearing wife teaches him like a child who is only more than willing to obey.

The strong characterization of Ligeia as mother is so striking that many critics have interpreted the narrator’s idealization and adoration of Ligeia as a consequence of his obsession with an ideal that was unable to substitute his long lost mother (Keetley 2005, 13-14). When referring to one’s mother, it is quite natural to invoke a figure of an ideal woman (especially if the mother is dead). The idealized depiction is perhaps to be expected in the dream, which is, as the familiar Freudian lesson says, primarily a wish-fulfilment. Mary Oliver (1998, 121-122) points out the similarities between the appearance of Poe’s heroines and the portraits or descriptions of Eliza Poe (his mother), Frances Allan (his stepmother), and Virginia Clemm (his wife). Eliza and Virginia both feature a high forehead, and they all had long, black hair and dramatically dark eyes. These are features that figure prominently in Poe’s descriptions of his heroines, especially that of Ligeia.

If Oliver is right about the hair and eyes of the three most important female figures in Poe's life (his mother, his stepmother and his wife), it is natural to expect these features to appear in his description of Ligeia. This would reflect the fact that the story was inspired by Poe's dream. These three persons would then be united in one figure by (at least) one shared common feature, which is well known in dream interpretation as the mechanism of condensation. Ligeia, as the result of Poe's dream, is prone to take the outlines of his unconscious and is then rendered in terms of wish fulfilment (the fantastic descriptions) and condensation.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the case of "Ligeia", it is not the case, as many critics believed,<sup>3</sup> that Poe "never truly wrote about women at all" (Weeks 2002, 150). Rather, this sort of unbelievable and aestheticized description is to be expected when dealing with dream figures, condensed by the dream mechanism and then translated into a story "suggested by a dream".<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, regardless of what influence women in Poe's life might have had on his dream, and consequently the story, in "Ligeia", the narrator's relationship to his wife most resembles to that of a child admiring his mother. As to the mother's inexplicable character, Dawn Keetley connects Ligeia to Morella explaining that one's memories of a mother can never be fully attainable and that the mother's eyes and voice forever remain in the shadowy unconscious as traces of very early experiences. In doing so, Keetley exhausted the Kleinian approach stumbling upon a detail of which the narrator's analysis of Ligeia also falls short, and which, if anything, is made for a Lacanian analysis. In the case of "Morella", the objects around which the story revolves are the teeth, and we shall see that in "Ligeia" these are most of all the eyes. In order to set up the framework in which these ineluctable objects in "Ligeia" should be analyzed, I will briefly present similar examples of objects central to the plot of Poe's other tales.

Kay Stockholder (2000, 299-334) interprets Poe's detective tales as the narrator's dream and focuses on their traumatic core. In "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt"

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<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of the story the narrator explicitly portrays Ligeia as a dream figure: "and with the manner of one bewildered in a dream, the thing that was enshrouded [Ligeia] advanced boldly and palpably into the middle of the apartment" (*Works*, 2.329).

<sup>3</sup> Monika Elbert (1991, 32, n. 32) makes an indicative remark on such one-sided critics is: "Essentially, both Williams and Dayan participate in killing off the mother once more". I agree with much of Elbert's interpretation as the dream female figure is largely constructed on the model of the mother. She interprets the narrators' depression in "Morella", "Berenice", "Eleonora" and "Ligeia" as the result of their inability to be separate from the mother who, once dead, represents a radical impasse (Elbert 1991, 24-27).

<sup>4</sup> This is the only point where I venture into a biographical connection, which I consider likely (since Poe himself admits the story was inspired by his dream), but not necessarily true.

and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” the element obviously central to the plot is the act of murder, committed by a sailor and a naval officer’s orangutan, respectively. In “The Purloined Letter”, this violent and obscure element is not explicitly given and Stockholder finds it in the very last lines of the tale that carry an allusion to the myth of Atreus. The classical reference implies that Dupin’s intervention in the case of the purloined letter is an act of revenge against the unsuspecting minister, an act in which Dupin compares himself to Thyestes who wooed his brother’s (Atreus) wife and took his throne by deception. In the myth, Atreus’ revenge was more cruel: he cooked Thyestes’ son and served it to him for dinner!

The pattern Stockholder reveals in the detective stories is to be found throughout Poe’s fiction. The element in question does not have to be as violent as murder (a typical case in detective fiction) but, as in “Ligeia”, something that eludes analysis. A seemingly insignificant feature becomes the very core around which it revolves and on which it depends.<sup>5</sup> Some “thing”—for lack of a better term—which escapes the confines of language, comparison and symbolization or which is exempt from the discourse itself, as in “The Purloined Letter”.

### **The Symbolic and the Real**

*For I decipher here in Poe's fiction, which is so powerful in the mathematical sense of the term, the division in which the subject is verified in the fact that an object traverses him without them interpenetrating in any respect, this division being at the crux of what emerges at the end of this collection that goes by the name of object a. (Lacan 2006, 4)*

Stockholder has pointed to an important psychological aspect of Poe’s stories by isolating a mysterious object as their narrative centre. In the above citation, Lacan himself recognises the focus on objects as a central feature of Poe’s narratives and as the reason why they attracted his attention and admiration. No wonder, for he considers objects as essential in relation to a subject: the character is defined by his relation to an object. This is exactly what one finds in the narrator’s relation to “Ligeia”. As we have

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<sup>5</sup> Stockholder (2000, 325) finds that “generalized images of violence constitute the circumference of a circular dream structure at the centre of which will be found the act of perverted sexuality”. This corresponds to Shi Yaohua’s view of the centre of “Ligeia” as an impasse, the inability to convey the character Ligeia in words (while her reappearance is paradoxically the proof of this inability). Yaohua (1991, 495) rightly concludes: “Like the Freudian navel of the dream, 'Ligeia' must be left in the dark”.

seen, Ligeia's character is dreamlike and in dream interpretation her description would be one of ultimate wish fulfilment as almost all of her characteristics are extraordinary, making her perfect in all respects. However, this perfection goes only up to a certain point. The way the narrator scrutinizes Ligeia is so meticulous that D.H. Lawrence (2003, 70) compared him to "an anatomist anatomizing a cat". His impression of divine Ligeia is experienced through a fragmented series of (her) objects which are compared to mostly classical models. "Yet", he says, "her features were not of that regular mould which we have been falsely taught to worship in the classical labors of the heathen" (*Works*, 2.312). Not all of Ligeia's object characteristics are perfect and readily interpretable. The point where the narrator's description lingers and where his analysis most fails him are Ligeia's eyes: "'There is no exquisite beauty,' says Bacon, Lord Verulam, speaking truly of all the forms and *genera* of beauty, 'without some *strangeness* in the proportion'" (*Works*, 2.311/312). This strangeness is, by a paradoxical twist, presented as an essential part of one's beauty, and in this case the narrator finds it in Ligeia's eyes, which fascinate him to perplexity. As William Crisman (2005, 68) has noted, through the repetition of Byron's statement on the strangeness of beauty "the word takes on an extra sense of 'estrangement,' of Ligeia's beauty not being part of herself as a whole person". Indeed, the focus on the eyes is reflexive of the narrator's general attention captured by objects, by Ligeia not as a whole person, but a fragmented sum of objects, which he anatomizes "as a cat".

These objects are regularly compared to classical models (Homeric epithet, Hebrew nose, spirituality of the Greek, Venus de' Medici, etc.) and, as Ortwin de Graef (1989, 1110-1113) observes in his deconstructionist critique, such comparisons and models are stereotypes which have the effect of flooding the text with references to other texts so that the arising intertextuality strengthens the process of signification. Although Ligeia is so divine and perfect as to bewilder the narrator, he manages to symbolize her beauty in almost all its formal aspects (face, nose, lips, cheeks, forehead, hair, smile) by a series of comparisons that have a cultural value, drawn as they are from classical antiquity. This process of signification through models is operative in all but one object, the eyes: "For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique" (*Works*, 2.312).

The narrator then attempts to find the source of the strangeness (“to which Lord Verulam alludes”) of Ligeia’s eyes and starts from their extraordinary size: “They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad” (*Works*, 2.313). Here we notice a change in the process of signification. While other body objects were compared to classical models, the size of the eye is compared to a less known literary model with the stress on the fact that the object surpasses the model by far (“even fuller than the fullest”). The fullness of the eyes becomes noticeable in moments of her intense excitement when her beauty is to the narrator “the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth—the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk” (*Works*, 2.313), which is another obscure literary comparison (West 1964, 23-25).<sup>6</sup> In contrast to classical metaphors, these comparisons do not demonstrate a correlation of the object to a model. Rather, they demonstrate the impossibility of a correlation and the inability to grasp it. Hence, the search for the mysterious origin of the strangeness of the eyes continues through “the formation, or the color or the brilliancy of the features”, but, as the narrator fails to find it there, he concludes that it “must, after all, be referred to the *expression*” (*Works*, 2.313). He then confesses that “expression” is a “word of no meaning!” Modern critics have rightly recognized that expression, as “the word of no meaning” conveys but the inability to signify, expression is “an empty signifier, a mere sound”(von Mücke 1999, 62).

Thus, in contrast to the process of signification which was widely operative in the case of other Ligeia’s (object) features, her eyes become a positive mystery whose meaning will not be revealed; it will not be symbolized. In Lacanian terms, while the other objects are rendered meaningful through symbolization (comparisons with models, references) the gaze cannot be symbolized. Thus, in Lacanian terms, the gaze, which the narrator locates in the eyes, belongs to the register of the Real. Lacanian register of the Real encompasses all those elements that elude analysis, elements that escape the confines of language (they cannot be put into words), as in the case of Ligeia, they cannot be expressed or signified by means of metaphor or comparison. The Real

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<sup>6</sup> West also found the source for both “valley of Nourjahad” and “Houri of the Turk” in Isaac d’Israeli’s (Poe’s favourite author) romance “Mejnoun and Leila”.

is fascinating and perplexing and has as its origin a traumatic point which eludes, but simultaneously calls for ceaseless analysis. And this is what we find our narrator doing:

How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it — that something more profound than the well of Democritus — which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What *was* it? I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! those large, those shining, those divine orbs! they became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers (*Works*, 2.313).

Thus, the eyes are an obsession, a point of incessant return, yet at the same time, a point of no return. The narrator's futile struggle fails as he takes the eyes to be the gaze, for it is in the eyes that he sees the traumatic quality of the gaze, its castrating and imponderable Real value. The eyes therefore tirelessly call for new analysis, new comparisons, which is to say, new failures as the meaning is never settled, the object never completely symbolized. It is this resistance to symbolization that lends the Real its traumatic quality.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we are not surprised to find the narrator stumbling in his constant search which always fails. In his futile quest, what he always stumbles on are merely "the commonest objects of the universe, a circle of analogies to that expression". He lists a series of natural phenomena which evoke a sentiment such as he felt "aroused...by her large and luminous orbs" (*Works*, 2.314). What follows is a very long "circle of analogies", behind which lie the bewildering eyes of Ligeia as the traumatic Real core of the dream. In dream language, the long list consists of but a series of displacements. The attention usually absorbed by the traumatic object is redirected to other objects, that is to say, it is displaced. Moreover, before these acts of displacement, the narrator finds himself "*upon the very verge of remembrance*", upon the verge of uncovering the meaning of the eyes of Ligeia, but as he gets closer to it, each time it suddenly escapes:

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<sup>7</sup> A similar phenomenon is to be found in Poe's "The Oval Portrait", a very short story in which a wounded narrator is mesmerized by a portrait of a beautiful lady which he finds too "*lifelike*". As Paula Kot (1994, 1-6) explains, the story was originally entitled "Life in Death" and contained a passage which Poe erased in all later editions: "I could no longer support the sad meaning smile of the half-parted lips, nor the too *real lustre of the wild eye*" (*Works*, 664, emphasis added), a description almost identical to that in "Ligeia" (with a *real* Lacanian twist).

And thus how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression — felt it approaching — yet not quite be mine — and so at length entirely depart! (*Works*, 2.313-314)

How does one account for this phenomenon which Poe believes was never “noticed in the schools”? This might have been true in Poe’s time, but Freud and consequently Lacan have elaborated on the role of repetition in the unconscious and Lacan devoted to this issue the whole first part of his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Lacan explains that Freud’s unconscious is found in dream elements that represent a split, stumbling or impediment. What is produced in these gaps of meaning “is presented as *the discovery*”. The discovery is, at the same time, a surprise as the subject finds much more than he expected, as our narrator does. This discovery, however, is to become a rediscovery always anew as the seemingly discovered signifier is effaced, even obliterated (from Latin *oblivisci*-forget) and thus repeatedly sought after, again and again. In Lacan’s words: “Now, as soon as it is presented, this discovery becomes a rediscovery and, furthermore, it is always ready to steal away again, thus establishing the dimension of loss” (Lacan 1977, 25).

The Real (of the eye qua gaze) is such that it lures, one feels it approaching, but the more it calls for analysis, the more it eludes it. Just as, when retelling a dream, one feels “upon the very verge of remembrance”, the word (i.e. meaning, signification, symbolization) being on the tip of your tongue, yet not quite yours and so at length, one feels it “entirely depart”. This phenomenon, which Poe claimed “was never noticed in the schools”, is well known in psychoanalysis as repetition automatism, a compulsion to repeat, to pursue an object in a search which never yields its meaning.<sup>8</sup>

A careful reading has enabled us to perceive that the eyes point to a gap in the symbolic web of references that appear in the narrator's repetitive quest for their expression (in nature or otherwise). This break in the symbolic reveals an aspect of the Real because Lacan (1977, 54) says: “the Real is that which always lies beyond the

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<sup>8</sup> “Where do we meet this real? For what we have in the discovery of psycho-analysis is an encounter, an essential encounter—an appointment to which we are always called with a Real that eludes us” (Lacan 1977, 53). See also what Lacan says about repetition automatism (*Wiederholungszwang*) in both the first part of *The Four Concepts* and in *Écrits* (2006, 33-34).

automaton”. Poe himself emphasized that the eyes owe their presence in the story to their appearance in his dream. The eyes then deserve a closer inspection.

### **The Eyes as objet a**

There have been many speculations on the meaning of Ligeia’s eyes, some more and some less fortunate. Critics have seen them as an expression of poetic sentiment (Person 1999, 2), beauty (Bennet 1981, 2) or artistic vision (Carter 2003, 50). For Dorothea von Mücke (1999, 62) the eyes stand for “the virtual materiality of the signifier”. A number of critics recognize that eyes signify the castrating gaze of death or simply death (de Graef 1989, 1118; Davis 1983, 997; Kot, 1994, 2-4). There is one step, however, which needs to be taken into consideration before jumping to the interpretation of the castrating gaze of death.

In Lacan’s topography there are a few objects that are essential in relation of the child with the mother. These are ambiguous objects that can belong to the symbolic web of signifiers but can also have a Real dimension in so far as their position in the symbolic is compromised by a loss or lack. They are the breast, the excrement, the voice and the gaze. All of these have a dimension of mystery as they are perceived as outside from oneself, as separate entities. They participate in the symbolic in as much as they are included in the game of difference (presence-absence). The breast is first perceived not as a part of the mother, but as a part of the child which can be turned towards or turned away from. The excrement bears the symbolic form of a gift that can be retained or expelled. One’s voice is always perceived as outside the self (the surprising moment of hearing one’s own voice recorded) and it can be absent as in silence, or overtly present as in screams or auditory hallucinations. The gaze is enigmatic as one’s own look is never within the field of sight. Even when looking in the mirror, one can never see the moment of eyes being shut (Lacan, 1990, 85-87; Leader 1996, 121-126).

It is in the dimension of loss that these objects partake of the Real which lies behind *objet petit a*. Each one of them needs to be renounced and controlled in order for them to enter the symbolic. “The gaze is not the eyes” as Lacan (1977, 104) warns

us, but “the eye may function as objet a...at the level of the lack”.<sup>9</sup> In fact, as desire arises from a lack, any object can function as *objet petit a*. How does this lack or loss arise? When a child demands of the mother the satisfaction of his need, what it receives is much more than just this, there is a surplus of enjoyment which Lacan calls *jouissance*. The next time it feels a need (e.g. to be fed) it will express it in much the same way (crying). The key is not in the child who intentionally gives these signs, but in the mother who interprets them and thus induces the child into the network of desire, the universe of the Other’s desire. The child will try to achieve new satisfaction (*jouissance* with the Other) by means of his demands, as in crying. It is here that desire, mediated by a demand, takes precedence over the need. It is no longer just the satisfaction of the need that the child desires in his demand, but the surplus enjoyment (*jouissance*) that follows after and surpasses the mere satisfaction of the demand. The essential point is that the child can express his/her desire only through demand, it needs to signify its demand, and in this process of signification (that precedes language proper), it experiences a fundamental loss. In the very act of signification, there is a discrepancy between the signified (what is desired, in this case the Other or *jouissance* with the Other) and the provisional signifier (expressed as a demand) (Dor 1997, 179-190).

What the child desires then is *jouissance*, enjoyment with the Other, the desire to occupy the whole of Other’s desire, but in the act of signification it loses the ability to express this. The Other as the provider of *jouissance* is sought after and awaited, but remains out of reach and so it becomes the Thing (*das Ding*) whose desire the child desires. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan (1959-1960) interrogates the Thing and, in this connection, begins to elaborate on the topic of desire as involving an impossible object. The Thing is *unnamable*, and its essence is doomed to an “impossible symbolic saturation” in that the very fact of designation confirms the impossible relation to it. The further demand extends, the wider becomes the distance from the Thing. From one demand to another, desire is therefore structured as a desire of an impossible object beyond the object of need, an impossible object that the demand struggles to signify (Dor 1997, 191-192).

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<sup>9</sup> See also Vrbančić (2011, 227-48).

In “Ligeia”, the impossible object that the narrator struggles to signify is the eyes and, as noted, the “impossible symbolic saturation” which confirms the impossible relation to the eyes is manifested in the circle of analogies where the narrator enumerates a series of natural phenomena, unable to convey the eyes' expression—“a word of no meaning”. In this sense, desire is always grounded on a lack, on the void left by the unattainable Thing so that the void is as much the cause of desire as its aim. In the sense that it merely comes in the place of this void, *objet petit a* can be any object. It does not, strictly speaking, exist, but only to designate the eternally missing object. “Because it bears witness to a loss, *objet a* is in itself a *lack-producing object*, since it is impossible to make up for this loss” (Dor 1997, 192). This is why the eyes are so fascinating, yet also perceived as “strangeness in the proportion” of beauty. They are perceived as somehow lacking and testify to a loss.

This may seem like complex Lacanian theory, but it finds corroboration in psychoanalytic practice and can be applied to well-known literary works such as “Ligeia”. The eyes of Ligeia are *objet petit a* that occupies the space of the Thing, which is the lost or already absent mother, Ligeia herself. As common wisdom has it and noted by critics such as Von Mücke (1999, 62) the eyes “traditionally stand for a person’s alterity, individuality, and psychic interiority”. In this sense, the eyes of Ligeia are a synecdoche for her person as such, they are the object that stands in the void left by the Thing, the (M)Other. They are the object of desire and their analysis is an attempt on the part of the child to fill the void by asking the question: “What am I for the Other? What does the Other want of me?” Lacan’s formula for desire is “Le désir de l’homme est le désir de l’Autre” (the desire of man is the desire of the Other). The subject poses a question about the Other’s desire hoping to find the answer to one’s own desire, and consequently one’s own existence. Thus, *objet a* is not just a helpless attempt at attaining the Thing which is forever lost, but also an attempt to answer the question of why it is lost, to solve the enigma of the Other’s desire. Therefore, it is not the eye of the observer that fascinates and torments the subject, as in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “Ligeia”, but rather the eye of the Other or, as Lacan (1977, 76) says, what we are “for others, and...caught in their butterfly net”, in the “grid of desire”. As far as the Real goes, this is its most enigmatic point. The “over-averaged size” and dark depth of Ligeia’s eyes, intensified by their blackness compared to the profound well of

Democritus, stands for the enormity of, in Žižek's (2006) words, the "unfathomable abyss" of the Other's desire.<sup>10</sup>

In this same sense, *objet a* is also fundamental to one's own subjectivity. This is basis of the subject-object relation that Lacan found fascinating in Poe's stories. *Objet a* is an indivisible remainder, a left-over scrap stuck after the process of symbolization as the one Real object. This Real aspect of *objet a* sticks out from the world of the signifiers (the symbolic), as the one fascinating, mysterious Real element, with a promise to answer the question of one's identity. In his comment on the works of Sartre, Lacan concludes that the gaze constitutes the subject in the function of the subject's desire (Lacan 1977, 84-85):

Is it not clear that the gaze intervenes here only in as much as it is not the annihilating subject, correlative of the world of objectivity, who feels himself surprised, but the subject sustaining himself in a function of desire?

For Lacan, identity is in the imaginary realm but it is heavily structured by the symbolic order. Hence essential for the formation of the subject is *objet a*, which stands for the Other's desire: identity depends on the gaze of Others who introduce the subject into the grid of their desire. The mystery of the Other's desire is "an unfathomable abyss", but as our own desire is always "the desire of the Other", by not being able to decipher the meaning of Other's desire, we are unable to decipher the meaning of our own desire.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the mystery of the eye does not only signify the mystery of Other's desire, but in that mystery, the enigma of the subject's desire and consequently the subject itself. It is in this sense that we should interpret not only the narrator and his fascination with the eyes of Ligeia, but also Poe's famous I/eye homophony which he explicitly uses in "The Tell-Tale Heart". The *eye* as symbolic of the gaze is *objet a*, and the gaze determines our *I*, our *I(dentity)*, what we are for Others, caught in their butterfly net, the net of Others' desire.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Exactly as in "Morella" who in her illness develops an expression in her "meaning eyes" that affects the narrator with "the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and *unfathomable abyss*" (*Works*, 2.232, emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> *Objet a*, which stands for the Other's desire, reveals our own desire as not only contingent (on Other's desire), but also fragmentary (much like the fragmented image in the mirror) as the multiplicity of Others' desires creates a series of different vectors, which influence the divergent formation of our desire.

<sup>12</sup> The same applies to "Berenice" where the teeth play the part of *objet a* with which Poe connected another word play. Joan Dayan (1987, 133-92) is right to recognize the narrator's repetition of the phrase

In the end of his enumeration of natural phenomena, the narrator admits that he felt the same sentiment in them as in Ligeia's eyes, and always when reading a passage from Glanvill. The passage denotes the frailty of human will and the same concept is referred to later on, only in its Latin form: "gigantic volition" which causes "intensity in [Ligeia's] thought, action or speech" and is then also termed "passion" (*Works*, 2. 315). All of these concepts are used as synonyms: will, volition and passion. In them I find what Lacan calls "impossible symbolic saturation", a struggle to designate the one elusive Real object, what Lacan would term "désir". As a child tries to interpret the various actions of his mother, so the narrator observes the ambiguous actions of Ligeia ("calm, the ever-placid Ligeia" versus "prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion") trying to decipher their meaning. He comes to the conclusion that she must be subjected to something in her other than herself. These "tumultuous vultures of stern passion" are the enigmas of Ligeia's (Other's) varying desire of which he "can form no estimate, save by the miraculous expansion of those eyes which at once so delighted and appalled me..." (*Works*, 2.315). Thus, the mystery of this femme fatale's desire is impenetrable, but can be glimpsed, one believes, in *objet a* as the object cause of desire, which is here recognized primarily in the eyes.

Only now can I return to the critics' idea of eyes representing death: for I argue that only after postulating the gaze as *objet a* can one properly recognize its effect of death. Lacan (1977, 77) says: "gaze, qua *objet a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration". As I have argued the subject is faced with *objet a* as a mystery of the Other's desire, but also his own subjectivity. In *objet a*, two lacks overlap as the subject recognizes a lack in the Other, but with this he recognizes his own lack.<sup>13</sup> He faces this as the terrible and ineffable Real and he discovers that his own subjectivity is a void, an empty space, in Žižek's (1992, 137-138) words: "in horror vacui, the 'subject' is nothing but this dreaded 'void' — in horror vacui, the subject simply fears himself, his constitutive void".

In order to illustrate this function of *objet a*, let us consider Lacan's example from Holbein's "Ambassadors". This picture teems with numerous symbols of life that

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*que tous ses dents étaient des idées!* as word play and a "resonant incantation that fuses teeth and ideas". Dayan (1987, 142) aptly concludes that the arising "compound dents/idée makes up identity (identité)" similar to the concept expressed in I/eye homophony.

<sup>13</sup> This is explained by the Lacanian concept of separation. See Lacan (1977, 202) and Žižek (2005, 39).

conveniently represent the Lacanian symbolic, which the skull as *objet a* negates, leaving only the transience of life and mortality, the Real of death. Similarly, the eye of Ligeia as the Real *objet a* stands in contrast to the rest of her (symbolic) coordinates, and this lack both negates Ligeia to be a whole and, with its castrating gaze, negates the subject to be a whole.<sup>14</sup> It works on an “inherently unstable distinction between subject and object, viewer and viewed, male and female, reality and art” (Kot 1994, 4) as it turns the tables on the viewer (subject) and makes him a viewed object, breaking the illusion of control and wholeness, and revealing a lack fundamental to one’s subjectivity. Simultaneously, it is in this lack that we recognize death, as the ultimate lack, the ultimate Real of castration, but to recognize the lack as the Real, we first need the network of the symbolic which it negates. In other words, only after the process of symbolization, the mastery of language, can one recognize the existence of the Real, in this case death, which is inarticulate. As Kay Stockholder (2000, 304) more aptly states:

For Lacan, *The Purloined Letter* is an allegory of man’s relation to the linguistic signifier and thereby to language. Language, by alienating us forever from the biological being that we share with animals, has confronted us with the knowledge of our own death that alone renders us human.

Thus, it is no surprise that the circle of analogies (which the narrator describes as arousing the same sentiment as Ligeia’s eyes), comprises such transient objects as “a rapidly-growing vine...a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a steam of running water...ocean...falling of a meteor...glances of unusually aged people” (*Works*, 2.314). As T.O. Mabbott succinctly put: “All the natural phenomena named are types of mortality and change” (*Works*, 2.332). They are displacements of the primary *objet petit a*, which, as in dreams, still retain the essence of the original meaning—transience (mortality) and death.

It is useful to recall that Poe (in his letter to S. H. Whitman) mentions Ligeia in connection with his poem “To Helen—”. The subject of the poem is the same phenomenon of fascination with woman’s eyes (*Works*, 1.446):

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<sup>14</sup> In her exhaustive study of the literary connections between femininity and death Elisabeth Bronfen (1992) argues that Poe is not the only one to use the ideal beauty of a woman to cover the existence of death. Simply put, the symbolizing we witness in metaphors, epithets and other tropes of Ligeia's beauty serve as symbolic shields to cover the underlying truth of human existence—death, which is here expressed in the castrating gaze of the eyes.

All — all expired save thee — save less than thou:

Save only the divine light in thine eyes —

Save but the soul in thine uplifted eyes.

Every verse seems to depend on the expression of the eyes with their “fathomless a capacity for love”. It is clearly stated that they are “thee—less than thou”, asserting the inseparable connection between the loved person and *objet a*, which Lacan (referring to Plato) also calls *agalma* (Greek “treasure, ornament”) as this is the treasure we seek in the Other.

At the end of “The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis” Lacan (1977, 263-277) gives the definition of *objet petit a* as “that in you I love more than yourself” where we find the same concept as expressed in “less than thou”, with a difference only in perspective. Lacan is quite aware that *objet a* is physically “less than thou”, an eye is less than the whole person, but psychologically it is “more than thou”, as this is the object that constitutes our (at least) erotic love for that person. In this sense, *objet a* can be literally translated as “that small thing in the Other which is the cause of my desire for the Other”. In this sense, Lacan’s (1960/61, 67) literary metaphor for love is enlightening:

the hand stretching out to reach a ripe fruit or an open flower, or to stoke the log that has suddenly caught alight. But if at the moment that the hand gets close to the fruit or the flower or the log another hand emerges to meet your own, and at this moment your own hand freezes in the closed plenitude of the fruit or the open plenitude of the flower – what's produced then is love.

*Objet a* is the fruit that we seek to catch in the Other, the object cause of our desire (which comes from our lack). Love happens only when the hand of the Other reaches to meet our own at this point of the fruit. In other words, love seeks an object in the other, but what it finds is the whole Other person as such. Lacan’s lesson is that love depends on an object, some small insignificant (not necessarily physical) trait for which we love the Other, and which bears a relation to our lack. Thus, Poe’s “less than thou” is Lacan’s “more than yourself” when understood in the context of the essential nature of love as object-dependant.

Hence, D.H. Lawrence's (2003, 70) comparison of the narrator's description of Ligeia with "an anatomist anatomizing a cat" is unjustified. Critics who claim that the narrator's focus on partial aspects of his partner indicate his love is unnatural and perverse miss a crucial point. As much as the narrator's scrutiny may seem like an exaggeration, the point not to be missed is that relation to an object is fundamental to forming a love relationship to begin with.

The critics' insistence of Ligeia's non-existence should be reformulated accordingly. The narrator's obsession with eyes stands for the ambiguity of the Real Ligeia as a person, or better yet as M(Other). It is not that Ligeia does not exist, or that she is merely the narrator's hallucination. Rather, as a dream image of femininity in general, she testifies to the Lacanian formula: "La femme n'existe pas" (The woman does not exist). In Ligeia's perception by the narrator and in his delineation of her character we find an image of the woman as Real, which can also be connected to the wider context of the historical period, the woman as *femme fatale*. Naturally, by this formulation Lacan does not mean to say that woman as such does not exist, only that she is never completely incorporated into the symbolic and thus (at least from a masculine perspective) always partly remains in the register of the Real (Leader 2000, 2-5).

Besides the theory of the *objet a*, the strongest argument for Ligeia's person as Real, there are a number of other indications that testify to Ligeia's as the Real woman. The narrator's struggle to come to terms with her ambiguous nature culminates in the description: "she, the outwardly calm, the ever-placid Ligeia, was the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion" (*Works*, 2.315). This ambivalence, expressed in terms of a paradox, sums up the traumatic quality of the ineffable Real.

When discussing a child's relation to his or her mother, I also mentioned the voice as another of Lacan's original *objet petit a*. In "Ligeia" it plays a much lesser role than the eyes, but is expressive of the same qualities of the Real. The most important to note about the dimension of voice in "Ligeia" is her very name. The signifier itself is taken from Homer (via John Milton), where the sirens' voice is described by the epithet λιγυρῆ, itself derived from the adjective *ligyros* (meaning clear-voiced) (Crisman 2005, 72). This sums up the nature of Ligeia as *femme fatale* very well. She has a sweet (clear) voice, but beneath this ideal appearance, beneath the symbolic of the poem, there lurks

a Real dimension of the siren as destroyer of sailors whose song is so Real that Homer does not symbolise even a word of it, although his plot revolves around it (Salecl 1998, 59-79). Ligeia's very name then is a reference to the Real of the voice, but this dimension of the Real is not much exploited in the story. Rather, the function of *objet petit a* is taken by the eyes, as all the signification of them fails and the Real of Ligeia throws the narrator's entire struggle for signification back against him.

Thus, the name of Ligeia evokes the siren, the clear-voiced Muse<sup>15</sup> who enchants with her sweet voice in a song that lies beyond words. In the case of Homer's sirens, we do not know what their song is, only that it is dangerous and sweet-voiced. In the case of Ligeia, we do hear her mortal poem on her deathbed, yet the fatal mystery lies not so much in her voice, as in her eyes, which express the full force of the ineffable abyss of Otherness. The song of the sirens, as well as Ligeia's eyes, is elusive and unattainable but such mysterious objects constitute the narrative centre of a great part of fiction, from Homer to Poe.<sup>16</sup>

### **Death: Drive and Desire**

The *objet a*, however, is not only the centre of narrative, of the story "Ligeia", but as we have seen, also the key element in the relation between the subject (the narrator) and his relation to Ligeia the character. Valerie Rohy explains that the anamorphic blot in "Ligeia" (as in Holbein's "Ambassadors")<sup>17</sup> hides "a lack we strive endlessly to deny... whose message is not death itself, but the deathly insatiability of desire" (Rohy 2006, 76-77). However, she makes no mention of *objet petit a*, but instead concentrates on the death drive, whose repetitive rhythms weave the plot. This omission requires me to explore the relation between desire and the death drive, and ways in which the latter is manifested.

When the narrator describes Ligeia's illness and death, he often stresses how her will and passion are only strengthened in her dying: "But in death only was I fully

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<sup>15</sup> A reference to Homer's "Mousa Ligeia" in *Odyssey* 24.62.

<sup>16</sup> Bennet (1981, 4) rightly concludes that "the desired object is never entirely possessed".

<sup>17</sup> Lacan explains anamorphosis in the context of Holbein's "Ambassadors". Curiously, Barbara Cantalupo (2005, 53-63) has argued that Poe was referring to anamorphosis in his description of the bridal chamber in the second part of "Ligeia".

impressed with the strength of her affection”. Her eyes, which were undecipherable signs of such ineffable will and passion, now seem even more in the extreme: “the wild eyes blazed with a too—too glorious effulgence”. Furthermore, her voice reportedly “grew more gentle—grew more low” and her love (which was “no ordinary passion”) also heightened as her “more than passionate devotion amounted to idolatry” (*Works*, 2.316/7).

Evidently, at the heart of the process of her dying, Ligeia, rather than gradually fading away, wrestles “with fierceness of resistance”, intensified in the aspect of her passion, which I have already translated as desire. The Lacanian concept of the death drive is not the old Freudian death drive (German *Todestrieb*, Greek *Thanatos*), which is opposed to Eros as the life drive. Lacan explains that every drive is in fact the death drive, in the sense that every drive involves the subject in repetition and “every drive is an attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle, to the Realm of excess *jouissance* (where enjoyment is experienced as suffering)” (Evans 2006, 34). Thus, to put it simply, while the Freudian death drive is literally a drive towards death and (self-) annihilation, the Lacanian death drive is the excess of life force, the excess of the drive for life that leads one towards ultimate feeling—*jouissance*. Indeed, the excess of Ligeia's desire is most evident as her death throes are satiated with the presence of the death drive, so much so that its Real nature is once again beyond words, unreasonable, which means unsymbolizable: “Words are impotent to convey any just idea of the fierceness of resistance with which she wrestled with the Shadow” (*Works*, 2.317).

Drives are partial manifestations of desire. They aim to reproduce desire infinitely and do not have an object, while desire does have an object, albeit an illusory one. It is characteristic of the unlimited drive to persevere, to persist—mercilessly and untiringly—through repetition beyond symbols and possibility. Thus, Ligeia's deathbed desire “for life—for life—*but* for life” (notice the repetition) is perpetuated in its manifestation of the death drive, the impulse to simply, in Beckett's words, “go on”<sup>18</sup> in a ceaseless pursuit of no object, in a struggle to simply live even beyond life itself (Žižek 2006, 62-64). It forces the subject to act as if there is no death (“Shadow”), to

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<sup>18</sup> Or, better yet, in Poe's words from “El Dorado”: “ride, boldly ride’ / the shade replied, -/‘if you seek for Eldorado!’” (*Works*, 1.463).

strive with a force beyond mortality, to attune “to a melody more than mortal — to assumptions and aspirations which mortality had never before known” (*Works*, 2.316).

Poe’s vivid description of mortal struggle in “The Conqueror Worm” fits the notion of Lacanian death drive in many ways. The poem was not a part of the first three editions of “Ligeia” and Poe added it in 1845<sup>19</sup> to marvellously fit the space of Ligeia’s death.<sup>20</sup> The poem is set in a theatre where the play metaphorically denotes life itself with its governing forces. Most critics simply equated the Conqueror Worm with plain death,<sup>21</sup> but it is evident that the Worm is rather an agent of Death. Lacanian death drive does not lead directly to death or entropy, as in Freud, but rather engulfs the subject in a search for an excess *jouissance*, which is no longer experienced as ultimate pleasure, as in baby-M(Other) union, but as pure suffering. This Worm is an agent of death, not in the sense that it literally kills, but that it drives us to *jouissance*, which Žižek renders as: “the abyss of traumatic/excessive enjoyment which threatens to swallow us up, and towards which the subject desperately endeavours to maintain a proper distance (like the hero in Poe’s ‘A Descent into the Maelstrom’, who barely succeeds in not being dragged into the maelstrom)” (Žižek 2008, 223). The death drive, like the whirlpool, attaches us to fetish objects that we repeatedly cling to (*objet petit a*) but which never satisfy and fulfil desire, but merely fill in the void left by the lack.

Poe’s poem, which is evidently a psychological drama (from its very beginning “a play of hopes and fears”), tries to represent, by various metaphors, the mysterious forces that govern the psyche. Thus, the actors (mimes)

hither and thither fly—  
mere puppets they, who come and go  
At bidding of vast formless things

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<sup>19</sup> The poem “The Conqueror Worm” was incorporated into the text when the story was published in the February 15, 1845 issue of the *New York World* and reprinted in the September 27, 1845 issue of the *Broadway Journal* (Sova 2001, 98).

<sup>20</sup> See Brad Howard (1988, 36-43) for a great number of parallels between the poem and the larger story as a whole.

<sup>21</sup> There are a number of other amusing interpretations, to cite but the most obscene (as qtd. in Keetley 2005, 14, fn. 22). Joel Porte (1969, 73) has read Ligeia’s poem as describing the “tragedy ‘Woman’” rather than the tragedy of man, and he sees the hero as “the conquering male organ”. Eva Cherniavsky (1995, 54) also interprets the worm as a phallus. Keetley (2005, 6) claims that “the ‘blood-red thing’ that writhes and crawls brings to mind a newborn baby”. Such interpretations validate Peeples’ remark (2004, 52) that psychoanalytic readings are a personal activity as they show a strong authorial presence.

That shift the scenery to and fro (*Works*, 2.318)

The drive is here compared to “a vast formless thing” which denotes not only its unrepresentable aspect, but, by its size connotes the pure unbridled energy of libido, similar to Hitchcock’s grand film objects (Žižek 2006). The result of this fatal, mechanic operation is “Invisible Woe”, the overwhelming of *jouissance*, experienced as suffering.

*Objet petit a*, which was the subject of an excruciating struggle for incorporation in the previous part of the tale, is here rendered as a “Phantom chased forevermore,/by a crowd that seize it not”. If Poe’s stories and poems, as some argue, seem too pessimistic, Lacan’s view of subjectivity makes one equally humble. Our actions are unconsciously formed on traces of the Real, we depend on fantasies of traumatic objects which haunt us like phantoms. The subject himself identifies with an indivisible remainder of symbolization ( $S \diamond a$ ), an object of obsession and fascination, always chasing a phantom, an ever-elusive object that will not be seized. Poe’s word “Phantom” conveys the message of the elusive object of the desire incredibly well. There is some imagined phantom that momentarily *seems* (Greek *fainesthai*—to appear, to seem) to provide the fulfilment of desire, but which never satisfies desire, but merely fills in the void left by the lack. This is why the insatiable drive persists anew, never stopping its relentless circle thus returning “to the self-same spot”.

An example from classical mythology can illustrate this process. The Lacanian Jean-Claude Milner (1985, 45–71) explained the myth of Sisyphus,<sup>22</sup> which for centuries puzzled philologists and philosophers alike. Sisyphus was punished for his attempt to deceive death with a mission to eternally roll a stone up the slope of a hill in the underworld. However, the moment before he could reach the summit, the stone would roll back down to the bottom and he would have to start the whole process again, thus forming a circle that always returns “to the self-same spot”. Rather than perceiving this as an alien, fantastic myth, we should perceive it as a metaphor of our everyday experience, following Albert Camus, but also along the lines of Lacanian distinction between the goal and the aim of the drive (Lacan 1977, 179). The goal of the drive is its destination (in this case the summit), while the aim is the way taken to achieve the

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<sup>22</sup> See also Žižek (1991, 1-5).

goal (traversing the slope of the hill). In the urge of the drive the aim paradoxically takes precedence over the unreachable goal. Žižek (1991, 5) concludes:

The real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movement of this closed circuit. Therein consists the paradox of Sisyphus: once he reaches his goal, he experiences the fact that the real aim of his activity is the way itself, the alternation of ascent and descent.

The indestructible and relentless drive can be recognised as the “Conqueror Worm” which takes central stage in fourth stanza of the poem. There, the death drive is given a corporeal form, embodied as a terrible monster that persists (“it writhes, it writhes”) in simply annihilating life itself (“the mimes become its food”). Although one may, as many critics have, conclude that this is death itself, the context begs for the interpretation of the Conqueror Worm as the incarnation of the death drive. Namely, the poem as such is a pure psychological allegory as revealed at the end: “the play is the tragedy, ‘Man,’/ And its hero the Conqueror Worm”. Through the first two stanzas, the death drive was introduced in the form of “vast formless things/that shift the scenery to and fro”, the ever-elusive *objet petit a* was rendered as the Phantom, and now the death drive is endowed with the quality of a monster which represents its life force and thus shapes the course of life (the subject of the poem). Generally, one finds the embodiment of death drive in monsters and partial objects throughout literature. Žižek’s common examples are the creature from “Alien” and the undead in horror films (or in Stephen King’s fiction). These are rooted in Lacan’s own formulation of the lamella as “the libido, qua pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life” (Lacan 1977, 198). All these manifestations are, as Poe’s “Maelstrom” and his “Conqueror Worm” metaphorical representations of the impossible life force that destroys everything in its path, at the same time persisting as immortal and indestructible. The lesson is fairly simple, death drive (as a metaphor of our life force) is completely unrepresentable, the absolute mystery, the ultimate Real, and we then render it in such uncanny fantasmatic depictions as the living dead, as life beyond death. The motivation that drives a human life does not spring from its postulated meaning (which is an act of signification) alone. There is also an even less palpable force, which acts through the unconscious need to persist regardless of meaning. Hence, the struggle to signify this mechanism often ends

up with some monster, “a blood red thing” whose excessive life force stands for the invincibility of the death drive.

### **The Will of God**

Ligeia’s death makes a conclusion of all the psychological phenomena comprising “The tragedy ‘Man’”. She dies with the much-discussed citation from Glanville on her lips (*Works*, 2.319):<sup>23</sup>

O God! O Divine Father! — shall these things be undeviatingly so? — shall this Conqueror be not once conquered? Are we not part and parcel in Thee? Who — who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield him to the angels, *nor unto death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.

Ligeia openly asserts the belief that will is to blame for man being subject to death. There is nothing strange in attributing the cause of human suffering to God,<sup>24</sup> but to explain the will of God in Poe, one must look into Poe’s theology, his own conception of God. Poe’s theology, if it can be so called, is best illustrated in his “Eureka”. There he comes as a sort of religious mystic, influenced more by Oriental conception of the divine (reincarnation, cycles, etc.) than the Christian tradition. He concludes “Eureka” (which he classifies as “poem”) with the belief that all creatures are part of God and are now only in a divided condition, but will one day return to their “original Unity” as God, who is in fact this union, the totality. He sees all particular identities of the creatures as just that, particular or partial, a temporary divided part of the “Divine Being, who thus passes his Eternity in perpetual variation of Concentrated Self and almost Infinite Self-Diffusion” (*Eureka*).

It is in this light that we should interpret the sentence “God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness”. The feeble desire of a particular creature is a partial manifestation of God’s will and it is never able to reach God’s

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<sup>23</sup> See most recently de Prosopo 2011, 64-5, n. 3.

<sup>24</sup> To quote a classic of comparative religion, Mircea Eliade (2005, 100): “Almost everywhere we come upon the archaic concept (predominant among primitives) according to which suffering is to be imputed to the divine will, whether as directly intervening to produce it or as permitting other forces, demonic or divine, to provoke it”.

totality, available only through original Unity. In the last passage of Eureka, Poe further elaborates this perception of God in relation to joy and suffering:

He now feels his life through an infinity of imperfect pleasures — the partial and pain-intertangled pleasures of those inconceivably numerous things which you designate as his creatures, but which are really but infinite individualizations of Himself...*all* these creatures have, in a greater or less degree, a capacity for pleasure and for pain: — *but the general sum of their sensations is precisely that amount of Happiness which appertains by right to the Divine Being when concentrated within Himself.* (Eureka, emphasis in the original).

How is one to psychologically explain this depiction of God as a great will pervading all things, one who possesses ultimate joy in Unity, but feels only partial “Sorrow” and “Joy” in the divided state of his innumerable creatures? The answer is quite simple. God is pure *jouissance*. While explaining the concept of *jouissance*, I have referred to its original position in relation to the Mother. The child does not feel itself as an individual, but rather as one with the Mother, in unity with whom it feels ultimate enjoyment—*jouissance*. Once the child becomes an individual, it experiences a loss of Unity with the Mother, and the arising desire becomes that of *jouissance*, that of re-experiencing the original Unity. However, it is unable to express this desire through demand, and the gap between these presents an insurmountable lack, lack-in-being (*manqué-a-etre*). The desire, which Poe names “feeble will”, always strives to reach the fullness of *jouissance*, but is never able to succeed. The child thus comes to the conclusion that *jouissance* rests with the mother, with whom it had been able to experience it as such. It will be able to experience it only as one with the Mother, in other words: “*Happiness which appertains by right to the Divine Being when concentrated within Himself*”. Thus, Poe’s idea of God, as in many other religions<sup>25</sup> rests on a sublimation of the original relation with the Mother whereby God becomes the sole possessor of ultimate *jouissance*. It is clear that Poe’s divine conception sprang from unconscious remnants of early childhood, and this is supported not only by

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<sup>25</sup> For example, psalm 22 metaphorically unites God and mother at the beginning of one’s life: “But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly” (King James Bible 22. 9-10).

psychoanalytic theory, but by his own admission in Eureka that these are “Memories” acquired “during our youth”.

Thus, in the last words of Ligeia, the narrator finds that she, the ethereal and perfect creature of his admiration, is also prone to a lack and that her “gigantic volition”, her “great will” is feeble as any human will in relation to the divine Will of God. In other words, he can be compared to a child who discovers that his mother is at fault, that she is also deficient and lacking. The story then shifts in the relation between the subject’s own lack and the Other’s lack. I have previously established that the recognition of *objet petit a* as the other’s lack arouses in the narrator the sense of his own lack (through the concept of separation). However, what happens now in Ligeia’s dying is Hegelian ‘de-alienation’ as the narrator realizes that the secret she hides (in *objet petit a*) is already a secret for herself. In other words, the Other itself feels that it is lacking (Žižek 2005: 39-40).<sup>26</sup> Metaphorically speaking, Ligeia herself has a mother, and that is God whose *jouissance* is unobtainable in the same sense in which it is unreachable by any human being.

Ligeia’s designation of “Divine Father” can be compared to Lacan’s reading of Freud’s myth of the primordial father in *Totem and Taboo*. Rather than arguing about the anthropological value of this story, Lacan interprets it as a myth, which does not mean that it is untrue and dispensable. On the contrary, for Lacan “truth has the structure of fiction” and myth is an “attempt to give an epic form to what is operative through the structure” (Lacan 1990, 30). In the primordial father who is killed by his sons for keeping all the women to himself, Lacan recognizes the act of monopoly on *jouissance* (the father is the only who has full access to enjoyment). The primordial father is also the structural basis for law, by facilitating the superego principle of prohibition. This sort of figure does not in fact exist because no one has full access to *jouissance*, and Lacan concludes that the law prohibits full *jouissance* to anyone as a matter of structure, not as a matter of morality (Ragland 1995, 90). Since *jouissance* exists as a psychological reality, originally related to the Mother, there arises a need to invent an imaginary figure who is its possessor, such as Ligeia’s “Divine Father” or Freud’s primordial father.

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<sup>26</sup> Ligeia’s illness reveals her lack, but not in the traditional sense of weakening and dying, but rather in the sense of desire. Ligeia too, is defined by a lack, by passion, by an insatiable desire.

I have analysed a number of key themes in “Ligeia” with reference to Lacanian concepts. The tale’s ending provides a logical conclusion to a story constructed as a dream with its emphasis on the Real of Ligeia in her eyes. The narrator seems to resurrect Ligeia in a moment of fantasy that confronts him with the Real traumatic core of the dreamtale. Freud’s epochal discovery of wish-fulfilment did not quite capture the whole picture of dreams. While Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* revolutionized the Western perception of subjectivity Lacan argued that dreams always have something more shocking. A dream is always a wish-fulfilment, but at the same time it is an encounter with a Real traumatic element (Lacan 1977, 55).

Lacan’s famous example is taken from Freud’s “The Interpretation of Dreams”. Freud retells the dream of a father who watched over his gravely ill son for days until the boy finally succumbed. The structure of his dream is indicative of dream structure in general. First, there is the element of wish fulfilment (the son appears to be alive) and then, usually at the end of the dream, the encounter with the traumatic Real (the dead son admonishes the father of his guilt). What is encountered in dream, then, is something Real, more real for the subject than the immediate reality itself.<sup>27</sup>

The same collusion of elements applies to “Ligeia.” The relentless drive is at work again and causes momentary traces of life which grow so strong so as to fulfil the narrator’s desire of reviving Ligeia. But her revival is not merely a wish-fulfilment. It ushers in the appearance of the traumatic kernel of the dream, the essential encounter with a traumatic Real, that one strange element of Ligeia before which words cease and all symbolization stops, the Real of Ligeia’s gaze, her eye which (qua gaze) stands for her enigmatic desire. Ligeia is alive, but opening her eyes she once again reveals the ineffability of her desire, the Other’s desire, represented in the terrifying aspect of her gaze, the unsymbolizable Real of *objet a*.

Having reached its culmination with the advent of the Real, the narrator’s dream ends. His imaginary resurrection of Ligeia resulted in the emergence of the Real in her, the traumatic point which fantasy seeks to avoid, but which, if dream fantasy is forced to the end, is acted out in all its terrible intensity. As a result of this traumatic enactment

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<sup>27</sup> For a compelling argument on the value of both Lacan’s interpretation and the repercussions of Freud’s psychoanalysis see Žižek (2006).

of fantasy, the subject experiences *aphanisis*—annulment (Lacan 1977, 56-57).<sup>28</sup> It is thus no accident that the narrator’s diageitic account ends here, here of all places, and that this is the only place in the story where direct speech appears. His direct speech, as his subjectivity, comes at the point of the traumatic enactment of his fantasy. His last words are “Here then, at least...can I never — can I never be mistaken — these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes — of my lost love — of the lady — of the LADY LIGEIA!” (*Works*, 2.330). Recognizing that his fantasy has come true as the eye, the Real *objet petit a*, and exposed to its castrating gaze, the narrator is lost for words, speechless and powerless before the traumatic quality of the Real of the Other’s desire.

In conclusion, the arguments here expressed demonstrate that “Ligeia” can be used as a case study of the applicability of Lacanian theory to Poe’s fiction. It explains both what drew Lacan to Poe’s fiction, and what is dreamlike in a story that has “all the elements of a dream”. The fact that the most widely read psychological fiction author and the most widely used modern psychoanalyst match in giving essentially identical (but formally different) formulations of the basic truths of the human psyche, tells us much about the one and the other. If Lacan is an instrument to read Poe with, so is Poe an excellent author to explore the concepts of Lacanian theory, as Lacan himself recognised and demonstrated by analysing “The Purloined Letter”. Finally, if Lacan is right in saying that “the truth has the structure of fiction”, Poe’s fiction is an artistic endeavour of great quality and a place to look for that truth, a truth about the human psyche which both Poe and Lacan took great pains to elaborate, each in his own terms, but essentially conveying the same message. This paper, with its analysis of “Ligeia”, is then only a starting point, a beginning of the elaboration of the numerous parallels existing between Poe’s fiction and Lacanian theory and, hopefully a basis for further exploration into the truth of the human psyche which both of these authors were eager to grasp.

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<sup>28</sup> The Greek word is semantically opposed to *fantasia* as appearance, thus *a-phanisis* would literally mean “dis-appearance”, the self-obliteration of the subject.

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