In Memoriam: “The Most Poetical” Casualties of Western Romanticism

Review by Mary Claire Brunelli


*Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* by Elisabeth Bronfen; Routledge, 1992, 460 pp.

There is no shortage of dead or dying women in the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe. In fact, she is the emblem of his entire aesthetic theory. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe reasons that the combination of Beauty and Melancholy produces the best literature. With Woman being the superlative of Beauty, and Death being the superlative of Melancholy, the writer arrives at the following conclusion: “The death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally it is beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” Poe’s celebrated statement, morbid as it may be, certainly won the agreement of his nineteenth-century readers and may not seem so surprising to us today.

Elisabeth Bronfen uses Poe’s words to launch a complex exploration into the pervasive representations of dead, beautiful women in art. Focusing primarily on verbal and visual media from the modern period (mid-eighteenth century to the present), her arguments draw from the literature of psychoanalysis, semiotics, and deconstruction to reveal this cultural symptom as an articulation of unconscious knowledge and desires repressed by social constructs. The title of her project, *Over*
*Her Dead Body*, actualizes the myriad figural meanings emerging from the feminine corpse. Working within Freudian theory, Bronfen’s central claim is that the convergence of Femininity and Death\(^1\) intimates the uncanny return of the repressed into the stabilizing and ordered realm of the Aesthetic, governed by the (male) survivor-artist whose vision we inherit. Fascination and pleasure in this figure is the result of the psychic substitution of the triple threat of mortality, sexual impotence, and incompleteness or lack with this vision of Otherness that affirms the Self. Bronfen’s formalist technique pursues a feminist agenda, emphasized in the problematic: “Wherein does the power, the necessity, the fascination and the danger inherent in the conjunction between femininity and death lie?”\(^2\) Bronfen’s five-part critique investigates the dead women and dead letters that give birth to immortal artists, authors, and viewers, and readers.

Part One begins with an analysis of the painting *Der Anatom* by Gabriel von Max from 1869 in which a male physician gingerly pulls back the shroud concealing the statuesque cadaver of a beautiful woman. By indicating the semantic relationships underlying visual points on the canvas – in this case, the physician’s hand, the woman’s breast, the skull and texts on the table, and the dead moth (Greek symbol for the soul/psyche departing form the dead body – Bronfen describes how the corpse serves as a the interstice of death drive and sex drive. With the female nude as a trope for castration (genitals safely hidden beneath the shroud, breast proffered awaiting the scalpel) and its uncanny, unnatural beauty poised in the

\(^1\) Bronfen also clarifies that the individual notions of woman and death, while signs of absence in and of themselves, are insufficient as the grounding system of cultural representation. Rather, it is the ambivalent conjoining of the two that serves the cultural imaginary.

\(^2\) Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, p. xii
precarious moments between sexuality (as in life) and decay (as the final stages of death), the male physician is brought into the intimate study of his greatest fears, an experience of the Other necessary for his own subjectivity. Not only does it grant him the exciting “death by proxy” of the unscathed survivor, it also enables him to examine, analyze, and write his own texts. Highlighting the metaphoric analogy between corpse and texts guides Bronfen to read the painting as “the conjunction of two contradictory forms of self-articulation.” One secures his authorship, his survivorship, his gaze, and his masculinity; the other acknowledges his own ultimate mortality.

The following chapters of Part One considers the feminine corpse as the site of articulation and delve further into the analytic terminology and theories of such influences as Freud, Klein, Lacan, Kristeva, Blanchot, and Derrida. Here,Bronfen also takes the opportunity to express her own critical position, that of a sober yet insightful feminist willing to embrace and learn from works tainted with traditional misogyny. She comments on the effect that the woman-death convention has had on western culture and historical reality not to say that it should or could be denied, but to raise awareness and interrogate its power over us.

Part Two focuses on the treatment of death and femininity as images. It opens with a discussion of Poe’s “most poetical topic” linked to myths of femininity and beauty to show how the feminine corpse harbors the exchange of figural and literal meanings in a work. In revisiting The Philosophy of Composition, Bronfen understands Poe’s insistence that Death is the founding principle of the best

3 Ibid., p. 12
literature (in terms of narrative structure, themes, and tone) as desire to return to the inanimate state. His logical substitution of Woman for Beauty and Death for Melancholy further emphasizes the death drive insofar as a beautiful woman, for a heterosexual male subject, is inherently inscribed with his own death.

First of all, the nature of Beauty is unnatural perfection, demonstrating the quality of the inanimate: “The idea of beauty’s perfection is so compelling because it disproves the idea of disintegration, fragmentation and insufficiency, even though it actually on serves as a substitution for the facticity of human existence one fears yet must accept.” Second, Bronfen applies Freudian theory in seeing the figure of Beauty substituting for Death as an iteration of wish-fulfillment predicking the translation from anxiety (of death) to desire (of beauty). She writes: “Pleasure at the beauty of Woman resides in the uncanny simultaneity of recognizing and misrecognising it as a veil for death.”

Bronfen then shows the significance of the gender of the corpse. Since death wipes away the gendered constructs of a body, clinging to the “fantasy” of gender allows the viewer to eradicate death: “If the renunciation of the feminine is what is required for the figure of death to emerge, then conversely, culturally constructed femininity protects man (and androcentric culture) from death.” The image of the beautiful body of a dead woman is the best way eliminate death’s castrative threat to the male subject. It is therefore fitting that the “bereaved lover” be the most capable artist, according to Poe’s aesthetic ideal.

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Bronfen supports her thesis by recalling cultural myths of femininity that serve to obfuscate the boundaries of home-womb-tomb contained within the figure of Woman. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir’s conception of Woman as Other, Bronfen debates the contradictory Christian paradigms of Eve and the Virgin Mary, as well the Greek snake-haired monster Medusa. These cultural figures belie the uncanniness of Woman in that she represents wholeness, completion, and fulfillment, as well as lack, absence, and incompletion. For patriarchal western culture, Woman is both fantasy and frustration, so the conflation of femininity and death is not only pleasing but also logical.

Bronfen returns to Poe’s thesis via corpus, a word that refers to both a dead human body and a body of texts. She interprets the image of the dead, beautiful woman as a moment of self-reflexivity in a work of art of text. “Poetical” indicating the privileging of signs over objects (according to Jakobson), the “death of a beautiful woman” speaks not only to the apparent scene but also to the effectiveness of the text itself. She concludes: “Poe’s poetics seem to endorse a spectatorship that ignores the referent, the non-semiotic body and focuses its reading exclusively on the image as a self-reflexive, materialized sign.”

The rest of Part Two describes other instances of this poetical self-reflexivity involving the translation from feminine corpse into artistic corpus. In these chapters she also comments on the dangerous porosity between concepts of femininity and death that so often leads to the depersonalization and objectification of Woman. She notes the following paradox: “While in cultural narratives the feminine corpse is

\[7 \text{Ibid., p. 71}\]
treated like an artwork, or the beautiful woman is killed to produce an artwork, conversely, artworks emerge only at the expense of a beautiful woman’s death and are treated like feminine corpses.”

Woman is the necessary sacrifice to secure the work of art as the dream of mankind.

Part Three considers representations in which the death of a beautiful woman is seemingly essential for the salvation or preservation of a culture. The prevailing cultural subjectivity of the West being masculine, femininity is ascribed the position of Other against which the Self is defined. Themes of these chapters include sacrificial violence (Julia Kristeva), liminality (Victor Turner), second burial (Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry), typology of gender (Jacques Lacan), and allegory (Walter Benjamin).

Bronfen’s attempt at a “socio-historical discussion of death since the mid-eighteenth century and its relation to the new value ascribed to femininity during this period” (xiii) may be compelling, well researched, and well articulated, but it is also dangerously universalist. It makes the same pitfalls of traditional psychoanalytic literature in considering a single (white, androcentric) perspective. What about representations of old dead women or black dead women or impoverished, sickly, ugly dead women? Her argument would benefit from at least commenting on the lack thereof.

The theme of dead brides carries over to Part Four, where we also see the return to Edgar Allan Poe on two counts. The first is in a chapter entitled “Risky Resemblances” that discusses the “return” of the first dead bride (or beloved) within

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8 Ibid., p. 73
the body of the second. The next, in “The Dead Beloved as Muse” reflects on how the
dead woman continues to serve her bereaved lover as the site of storytelling. Both
analyses treat Poe’s biography as essential to an understanding of his texts, namely
“Ligeia” and “Annabel Lee.” However, Bronfen may be working from an incomplete
understanding of Poe’s relationships with women. Citing his youthful and ever-
ailing bride Virginia Clemm as the sole muse, Bronfen ignores all the other women –
nymph-like temptresses and ersatz mothers – that complicated Poe’s romantic and
creative output. Specifically, her argument, which relies heavily on the Freudian
notion of the maternal body, does not recognize Eliza Poe, Fanny Allan, “Annie”
Richmond, or “Muddy” Clemm whom Poe sought for motherly comfort at various
points in his life.

Bronfen’s concluding chapters highlight women writers who employ and
oftentimes reconfigure the dead-woman trope to assert a female subjectivity that
uses death as a mouthpiece. In fact, her analyses suggest that the death of the
woman is necessary for the production of women’s writing, including that of Emily
Brontë, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood, and Angela Carter. Bronfen’s
own project is exemplifies this “complex aporia” with complete self-awareness: “I,
like the women writers with whom I ended, hoped to resist the gesture of mere
identification with the referred-to cultural image repertoire, though admittedly my
own readings were never entirely devoid of a certain fond complicity with the
representational corpus I sought to critique.”9 By uncovering the contradictions
inherent to the obvious and unconscious structures surrounding femininity and

9 Ibid., p. 433
death, Bronfen identifies their conjoined image as the “vanishing point of western culture’s self-representation.” The death of a beautiful woman is that irresistible, incorrigible, and uncanny figure that enables creativity.

In the case of Edgar Allan Poe, the death of a beautiful woman is not merely an image but a poignant reality of life. Pulitzer prize-winning biographer Kenneth Silverman recognizes and honors the orphan’s tragedy in Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance. The subtitle, which evokes more than the mysterious bird in “The Raven” may also be a somber lament for Edgar’s birth mother Eliza. Attractive and petite with a childlike slightness of figure, Eliza was a stage actress of considerable success until “private misfortunes” – the financial stress of having children as well as the sudden disappearance of her husband – and then illness saw her to an early death at age twenty-four. Eliza had few possessions to bestow upon her three small children, but it was Edgar, then not yet three years old, who profited the most by this inheritance. Silverman argues that the death of his mother endowed him with the “fragmentary knowledge” of the great ideas that would inform his later works. Indeed, throughout this lengthy and exacting biography, Silverman reflects on the many ways that Edgar’s life and literature evoke a “dim remembrance of herself,” the death of his beautiful mother.

Without having really known her, Edgar cultivated a romantic image of the late Eliza and surrounded himself with women who recalled this ideal in various

10 Ibid.
11 In Philosophy of Composition, Poe declares that the macabre black bird of his poem “The Raven” is a symbol of “mournful and never-ending remembrance,” implying the narrator’s bereavement for the “lost Lenore.”
12 Kenneth Silverman, Edgar A. Poe, p. 7
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
ways. They either displayed maternal qualities – in that they were older, married, or took care of him – or pretty, juvenile frailty – usually resulting in long-lasting sickness or mental instability. By these accounts, Silverman subtly suggests that Poe’s peculiar relationships with women may be the result of the need to be mothered.\textsuperscript{15} While this interpretation by no means dominates the biography, it does imply the connection between Poe’s artistic productivity and his female entanglements.\textsuperscript{16} We should find this claim neither demeaning, nor distracting, nor unusual. After all, Edgar Allan Poe wouldn’t be the first great man taking his cues from the fairer sex.

Over some five hundred pages, Silverman’s biography proceeds in chronological order to detail the journey of one of the most alluring and mystifying personalities of western literature within the greater context of American history and nineteenth-century culture. His work is remarkable not only for its quality of scholarship but also for its refusal to curdle into hagiography or to pander to a prescriptive school of criticism. He writes in the pristine and eloquent style of a novel with the persuasive vigor of an academic: straightforward yet sophisticated, and without the encumbrance of erudite terminology or theorization. Much like the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Silverman’s book is one that can be appreciated by all sorts of readers: historians, literary scholars, and fiction aficionados. Its narrative encompasses an extensive and exceptional body of historical and archival research that is met with thoughtful interpretations and honest reflections unique to

\textsuperscript{15} Eliza Poe died when Edgar was not yet three years old. He inherited a miniature portrait of her, which he cherished until the moment of his own death.

\textsuperscript{16} Silverman subtly presses his interpretation with such lines as “Edgar continued to seek motherly succor” (regarding Fanny Allan (\textit{Ibid.}, p. 26)).
Silverman. Rare it is to find a biography of such a celebrated figure that manages to reveal new connections, share meaningful discoveries, and inspire further investigation.

One of the reasons Silverman’s biography feels so authoritative is its willingness to expose the character deficiencies and behavioral vices of its protagonist, including financial profligacy, tendency to falsehood, romantic inconsistency, intemperance, immaturity, jealousy, boastfulness, and hypocrisy. Silverman affirms that Edgar Allan Poe was no hero, nor was all his work particularly good. He points out moments of Poe’s plagiarism, probably in self-conscious deviance of his own insistence on “originality” as the highest quality of work, as stated in *The Philosophy of Composition*. Silverman offers many examples of this dishonest scheming beginning at a young age with the poetry of his brother Henry and including the works of Samuel Coleridge, John Loftland, George Darley, and many others.\(^{17}\) Poe consistently deflected accusations of plagiarism by pointing it out in other writers, particularly his rival Longfellow (for copying Tennyson).

Silverman ultimately redeems the troubled writer by his greatest virtue: an art that is innovative without being revolutionary, refined without being recondite, sensational without being crude. Some of the most delightful moments of this otherwise historical text are the careful literary analyses of various poems and tales sprinkled throughout. Treating each piece as an artifact, Silverman’s primary aim is to situate it within the history and culture of its day while drawing connections to specific people and events in the author’s life.

\(^{17}\) Examples found in Silverman, pp. 70-72.
A very good example of this is one of Poe’s lesser-known novels, titled *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*.\textsuperscript{18} As with almost all of the literature that Silverman chooses to dissect, *Pym* supports the melancholy theme of bereavement: “Like some submerged elegy, *Pym* in fact memorializes many dead figures in Poe’s past.”\textsuperscript{19} He points out the puns, anagrams, and symbols that may evoke certain persons in Poe’s family and reemphasizes the theme of longing for his lost mother: “A deeper but also more elusive presence in the book is Eliza Poe. She seems most specifically recalled in...But Eliza’s presence in the novella is more diffuse, to be sought rather in its maternal imagery. *Pym* is a book largely about hunger...Pym’s desire is not only to feed but also to be consumed.”\textsuperscript{20} Silverman’s perspective certainly has a Freudian flavor, but does not press into a complex discussion of repression, reversal, doubling, and other such psychoanalytic jargon perplexing to an average reader. Rather, each time Silverman ventures into his subject’s emotional cortex, his findings seem terribly logical, for even a child will understand how painful it is to miss one’s mother.

Importantly, Silverman discusses the historical and cultural circumstances that allowed for Poe’s work to be popular in its time. The so-called “cult of memory” was a key factor in securing his readership. Religiously motivated anxiety about mortality, moral distress about the booming commercialism of the industrial age, and scientific discoveries on the physicality of life and death, encouraged Americans to embrace burial and grief with a special reverence and even pleasure. A

\textsuperscript{18} Silverman’s analysis of *Pym* can be found on pages 132-139. He also includes a summary of the action in the Appendix.

\textsuperscript{19} *Ibid.*, p. 135

\textsuperscript{20} *Ibid.*, p. 136
considerable volume of morose popular literature emerged that included lessons in mourning, practices of entombment, tales of woe, lugubrious lyricism, and sentimental epithets. Silverman concludes that the already-existing tradition of “mournful and never-ending remembrance” enabled Poe’s literary success.\textsuperscript{21} He even comments on the favorite topic of dead brides, as in Poe’s “Irenë,” “A Paean,” “To Helen,” “Ligeia,” and “Annabel Lee.” Throughout his life, Poe addressed these romantic poems to various love interests and sometimes altered certain verses to make them more apt to the woman or the circumstances of their relationship. Unlike Bronfen, Silverman avoids making a totalizing claim identifying the muse behind the manuscript.

He does, however, engage with a Freud in discussing the psychology of grief, explaining: “Lacking a substitute, the child delays or never undertakes the ordeal of attenuating the parent’s image, expecting more or less consciously that the parent will return.” Orphaned children, being unable to adequately mourn the dead, are inscribed with the sentiment of loss as well as the fantastical hope that their parents are somewhere alive. Silverman believes that this accounts for Edgar’s morbid imaginings recorded in his writing in which “the dead are not simply alive but too alive; the problem is to keep them buried.”\textsuperscript{22} Silverman’s diagnosis seems perfectly reasonable and appropriate, stopping short of what could be a more uncomfortable Oedipal reading. Most importantly, it is expressed in such a way as not to undermine the value of Poe’s literary genius.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 72
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 75
Overall, Silverman is a conscientious storyteller even when presenting unalterable nonfiction. The success of this biography is due to its adherence to historical truth while exploring different types of critical analysis. In tracing the connections between Poe’s life and work, Silverman uses basic psychology to explain our perpetual affinity for an art predicated on death:

Yet the enduring popular appeal of Poe’s work represents no overcoming of his personal history, but in a specific sense his entrapment in it. The shocks of a past that he still mourned continued to shape his literary expression... The continuing popular appeal of Poe’s works is owing to their power to confirm once-real beliefs from which most people have never entirely freed themselves, and which his own past kept particularly alive in him: that one can be devoured and annihilated, that the darkness is astir, that the dead in some form survive and return.23

The works of Edgar Allan Poe are timeless and relatable precisely because of their personal specificity within a life lasting from 1809-1849. As long as we cherish those departed from our own lives, we have yet to see the death of this Author.

23 Ibid., p. 210