

Water Specters and Sea Changes by Women around Surrealism: Re-envisioning Poe's Maritime Gothic¹

Margarida Vale de Gato
University of Lisbon, Portugal
margaridagato@edu.ulisboa.pt

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2026.17.1.5890>



Abstract

For the Surrealists, the sea was inspiring due to its sociobiological construction, its allure of voyages to the unknown, and its psychodynamic connection with the unconscious. Women artists, too, revised the tropes of the sea, particularly elaborating on the maritime Gothic (nightmarish shipwrecks, vortexes, trapped treasures, and bodies) as a means of resurgence for the oppressed, as well as the repressed. This analysis is based on artwork from women who engaged with Edgar Allan Poe's writings (especially Dorothea Tanning and Leonor Fini), particularly focusing on the novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and contrasting interpretations with their male counterparts. The central inquiry will be on how these women, without discarding the energy of the logocentric subversion of the masculine artists, experimented with putting versions of themselves into their paintings, and tended to feminize the Gothic. They achieved this through the imagery of pubescent or latent figures, as well as nursing motherly figures, and by exploring their entanglement with other species, as well as the links between the unconscious and the more-than-human elements that dwell, and often subside, in the sea.

Keywords: Maritime Gothic, women surrealists, Edgar Allan Poe, Leonor Fini, Dorothea Tanning.

Resumen

Para los surrealistas, el mar resultaba una fuente de inspiración debido a su construcción sociobiológica, su capacidad para evocar travesías hacia lo desconocido y su conexión psicodinámica con el inconsciente. Las mujeres artistas también interpretaron los tropos del mar, reelaborando en particular el gótico marítimo (con sus naufragios oníricos, remolinos, tesoros atrapados y cuerpos sumergidos) como un espacio de resurgimiento para los oprimidos y los reprimidos. Este análisis se basa en el arte visual de mujeres que dialogaron con el legado de Edgar Allan Poe (especialmente Dorothea Tanning y Leonor Fini), centrándose en la novela *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* [*La Narración de Arthur Gordon Pym*] y contrastando sus interpretaciones con las de sus homólogos masculinos. La cuestión central radica en explorar cómo estas mujeres, sin renunciar a la energía subversiva logocéntrica de los artistas varones, experimentaron con versiones de sí mismas en sus pinturas y tendieron a feminizar lo gótico. Lo lograron mediante la representación de figuras púberes o latentes, así como de figuras maternas lactantes, y a través de la exploración de su vínculo con otras especies y de las conexiones entre el inconsciente y los elementos más-que-humanos que habitan, y a menudo yacen, en el mar.

Palabras clave: Gótico marítimo, mujeres surrealistas, Edgar Allan Poe, Leonor Fini, Dorothea Tanning.

¹ I would like to acknowledge ULICES – University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies (research unit funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology within the scope of the projects UIDB/00114/2020 and UIDP/00114/2020) for research support necessary for this paper. Also, thanks are due to the peer reviewers and the editorial board of *Ecozon@*, for their helpful suggestions and care in handling this text.

When André Breton proclaimed in his first surrealist manifesto, “Poe est surréaliste dans l’aventure” (“Poe is surrealist in the adventure”) (39), quite likely he was thinking of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, along with his other tales and poems of mystery and exploration of strange realms and elements, including bodies of, in and under water. In fact, the water imagery pervades *Poisson Soluble*, the set of “automatic” prose poems following Breton’s manifesto in 1924. In the words of Allan Sekula, “the surrealists were the last aesthetic movement to claim the sea with any seriousness” (51).² The surrealists elaborated on mythologies about the sea, including those of medusas, sirens, mermen, and mermaids, often rereading the Romantic canon and Gothic tropes of the sea. My contention, however, is that women, never fully within the surrealist circle (that carried on a spectral vision of the female), dealt with the “adventurous” imagery of the sea in critical and/or subversive ways. Their works might therefore benefit from and enlarge practices converging with what Astrida Neimanis terms “hydrofeminism.” Conceptualized as feminine, water is not specific to women, and we should beware of an essentializing position that equates women with liquidity (lacking structure, imbued with placidness, amniotic, fresh and fertile, etc). However, Neimanis is right to point out that water has been marginalized and abstracted by the same inattention to its material conditions that have impaired women’s self-fulfillment. In her words, “embodiment is still a feminist question; thinking as a watery body has the potential to bathe new feminist practices and concepts into existence” (“Hydrofeminism,” 89). This article’s task is to contribute, then, to a feminist revision of the sea in surrealism, departing from its predominantly male social construction and/or psychoanalytical archetypalization as the mother-fusional “oceanic.”³ The women counterparts of the surrealists may well have revitalized tropes of the “nautical gothic,” or of the “more-than-human” creatures of marine mythology (sirens, medusas) to release the burden of the repressed and the oppressed.

The “nautical gothic” is a critical lens formulated by Dennis Berthold to emphasize the intrusion of the fantastic within supposed nautical realities, adding: “This is the stuff of which [Edgar Allan Poe’s] *Pym* is made, a sort of nautical gothic which later writers, more experienced with ships and sailing, would strive to correct” (46; see also Adler 1-2). My essay will draw significantly on pictorial references to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, especially by Dorothea Tanning (with a brief mention to Lenora Carrington) and Leonor Fini (who did ten watercolors for a French edition of the novel in 1955). Considering this book’s ambivalence between attention to sea-creatures and harm to the natives of an eerily threatened Antarctic region, I will explore how Fini linked these themes to the unconscious regression to (as well as repulsion of) the mother, based on contemporary psychoanalytical interpretations

² The affirmation should be revised in the contemporary literary scene, as the “sea turn” seems to be taking place in poetry, fiction and nonfiction with environmental concerns and/or spurred by a sense of crisis and deterritorialization.

³ I refer to the notion of “oceanic feeling,” proposed by Romain Rolland and rejected by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) as a childish religious feeling or a delusion wherein the boundaries of the self became limitless.

of the novel. Tanning will be shown to “medusify” both the maritime Gothic in Poe and in Gustave Doré.

Surrealism was fundamentally an interarts movement, and I will be comparing paintings to texts without treating the former as mere illustrations. Along with the possibilities of “close reading” paintings along texts, the advantage of an intermedial angle is that the visual brings forth the materiality of the icon and the plasticity with which it can be recomposed. We shall see how these women feminized the maritime Gothic by engaging with material and organic transformation, including animal-like features, as well as states of pubescence, pregnancy, or nursing, hinting at subtler undercurrents of exploration, oppression, and resurgence.

Arthur Gordon Pym and the Nautical Gothic

Let us start with a brief account of Poe’s only novel. Published in 1838, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* has divided critics regarding Poe’s talent for longer prose fiction. The work reads seamlessly until chapter 13. After a youthful and drunken sea adventure that barely kills him, Pym decides, nevertheless, to leave Nantucket and stow aboard the whaler *Grampus*, with the complicity of his friend Augustus, son of the ship’s captain. He stays trapped much longer than planned and wakes up, again nearly dead, to discover from Augustus that the black cook has led a mutiny, and the commanding crew was slaughtered or driven away. Pym, Augustus, and an accomplice, Dirk Peters, plot a successful counter-mutiny. Still, only four men survive on the boat: the three of them and the former mutineer Richard Parker. Starvation and sleep deprivation follow, until, in chapter 10, they spot a potentially saving vessel, which is, after all, “a large hermaphrodite brig, of a Dutch build” (*Narrative* 80), soon disclosed as a phantom ship. The *Grampus*’s survivors mistake for a sailor the composite figure of a seagull eating on a carcass, and that plants in their heads the thought that one of the men should be eaten for the sake of the others’ survival. As they draw lots, the doomed one is the least important character, Richard Parker, but Augustus soon gets very ill and dies. Only Dirk Peters, a half-Indian sailor, and Pym are left, and then they face shipwreck, but at the last minute are saved by the *Jane Guy*, a ship set to explore the South Seas. From then onwards (chapter 14), the book and the sailing go in different, sometimes tedious, directions. Subsequent chapters describe the social structures of penguins, albatrosses, and other seabirds in the islands around Cape Hope. At a certain point, the decision is taken to sail further South, and, as they approach the South Pole, the crew comes upon Tsalal and its inhabitants, all black with black teeth, that apparently cry Teke-li-ki every time they see anything white, like an albatross. In the final chapters, most of the *Jane Guy*’s crew is ambushed and killed by the Tsalalians. However, Peters and Pym manage to depart in a canoe, taking with them the native Toowit, who is literally scared to death at the sight of “the luminous glare” of a cataract arising from “the milky deaths of the ocean” (174). Carried away by a strong current amid completely anomalous weather conditions, the canoe and the story reach an abrupt end, as a chasm opens and “a

human figure emerged, veiled, with dimensions much larger than any inhabitant of the Earth, and with skin as white as snow" (175).

The novel displays many tropes—incarceration, ghostly appearances, riots of the repressed, infringement of taboos and of liminal worlds—that allow for its inscription under the label “nautical gothic,” with “strong elements of romance” accounting for “erroneous versions of the maritime” (Adler 2). Moreover, Poe, even if not very experienced with sailing technology, was well-read on many of his day’s developments in natural history. Hence, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*—as well as Melville’s *Moby Dick* or *The Encantadas*—was attuned to the rise of a new kind of sublime along with that of vast, wild, and desert land or seascapes. I’m referring to what Natalie Deam has identified as “the aesthetics of the biological sublime” in the late works of the historian Jules Michelet, provoked by the sobering acceptance of Darwin’s “progressive evolution” along with “the sheer scale of marine biodiversity and [...] the confusing, alien forms of the sea” (86). Divided into four books, Michelet’s monumental *La Mer* was published in 1861, and preceded Jules Verne’s speculative fiction on the sea, including the famous *20 000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) and the lesser known *An Antarctic Mystery* (or *Le Sphinx des Glaces*, 1891), a novel that purported to continue the adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym where they were left off.

The Surrealists and Poe’s Nautical Gothic

Arguably, the French discovery of new ways of creating through the sea (including a rich array of symbolist poetry) contributed to the good grace of both Melville’s and Poe’s sea stories throughout the twentieth century.⁴ In contrast, the cultural and literary tradition of the United States became more landlocked.⁵ Moreover, both Poe’s *Histoires Extraordinaires* (according to the generic title of the lasting translations of Baudelaire) and Verne’s *Voyages Extraordinaires*, particularly the coupling of the sphynx with the polar imaginary, stirred the imagination of the early French and Belgian surrealists, such as Breton, Max Ernst, René Magritte and Robert Desnos. The latter, for instance, published in 1927, *La liberté ou l’amour!* whose fifth chapter relates the theme of the sphinx to the initiate’s adventure journey, which becomes a parody of an expedition to the North Pole. Here we recall that Poe’s only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, deals with Antarctic exploration. In

⁴ Actually, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* was only translated into French in 1941, by Jean Giono, but it was met with a thriving reception due to the French author’s preface (which became a separate publication as well, *Pour saluer Melville*), a fictional biography modeled like an imaginary voyage. We should note that the way American authors influenced this rediscovery of the sea by French artists was mediated by translation and by commentary from French intellectuals, which here, for reasons of legibility and space constraints, will be represented preferably in English (all translations mine, unless otherwise noted).

⁵ Hester Blum notes in *A View from the Masthead* that, besides the sea being the first material border crossed by immigrants to the US, the maritime transatlantic trade and the Pacific routes were crucial for the avid reception of sailor novels by the popular imagination in the United States. However, she argues, the civil war and the westward expansion by railroad marked a decline of sailing culture (8).

contrast, the remote, semi-mythological island of Ultima Thule, where Poe locates his famous poem, "Dream-Land," was to be found in the far north.

The best-known and most direct surrealist allusion to *Arthur Gordon Pym* must be René Magritte's "La Reproduction interdite" (or "Not to be reproduced"). This 1937 work depicts a man in a suit (believed to be Magritte's patron, Edward James) standing in front of a mirror, but the image reflected is that of the back of his head, rather than his face. This is clearly an indoor portrait, with the mirror surrounded by a golden frame, but its sill oversteps the thresholds of the mirror and the window. On top of the sill rests a book, *Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym*, Charles Baudelaire's translation of Poe's novel. In true surrealist fashion, "La Reproduction interdite," does not (like other Magritte paintings that allude to Poe) constitute a direct literary illustration, even if it might hint at the ending of the novel and its inscrutable figure.⁶ Notably absent is the sea as an adventurous possibility; the work invites reflection on urban wistfulness and anonymity, perhaps on the consequences of surrealist defacement and its dislike for portraiture. It might as well be a commentary on the limits, ever more framed and difficult to replicate, of the surrealist revolution, which had by then been curbed with a series of "interdictions" by Breton himself, including his ban on Poe in the second surrealist manifesto of 1929: "Crachons, en passant, sur Edgar Poe" (81)—"let us, in passing, spit on Edgar Poe"—abhorring his ratiocinative claims and accusing him of "policing" the novel.

Interestingly, in the prose poems of *Poisson Soluble*, Breton had proclaimed the shipwreck of reason, namely in its seventh piece, where we seem to discern echoes of Poe's *Pym*:

We are the creators of wrecks; there is nothing in our minds that anyone will manage to set afloat again. We take our place at the under water command post of these balloons, these bad vessels built on the principle of the lever, the winch, and the inclined plane. We start up this or that, in order to assure ourselves that all is lost, that this compass is finally constrained to pronounce the word *South*, and we laugh up our sleeves at the great material destruction underway. (Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* 73-4)

While instruments of force and precision (lever, winch, compass) seem to be analogous to the craft of writing (pun intended), the real quest appears to be under water, facing the debris, as O'Hanlan emphasized in her article, "The shipwreck of reason: the Surrealist diver and modern maritime salvage." Possibly nodding to Pym's exploration of the South Pole, Breton's phrase "material destruction" could apply to the end of most of Poe's writings, arguably leading to the appeal of other (worldly realms), in a process that Poe scholar Richard Wilbur has termed "destructive transcendence" and sees as part of the struggle to reach the "Eden of dreams" (259, 267).

Despite this will to destruction, correlative of the malfunction of a machinal world, we should note that the surrealist artist, as represented in the quote above,

⁶ See Weinstein for this and other links to Poe's novel, as well as ties between Magritte's 1962 "The Domain of Arnheim" and Poe's story with the same title; earlier, Goldhurst gave a comprehensive overview of motifs and understandings of perception common to both artists.

does not seem to hand over “the command post” of *his* craft in imaginary voyages, and the track of these voyages appears quite masculine. Even if in 1953 Breton would declare that the woman was the “greatest promise” of surrealism, his statement was not only late but had a misogynist slant, for the woman was equated with conquest: “the one who remains after being attained” (in Debenedetti and Baudiffier 225).

Mermaids and Self-Portraits: Women Artists in the Waters of Surrealism

With a few exceptions (like Léonor Fini, whom we will discuss later), the women artists in surrealism were also conquests of the men. Lenora Carrington, for instance, was a promising painter and writer who left her family at 20 to live with the 46-year-old Max Ernst, a relationship that was marked by the forced separation of the war and her breakdown. Around the close of the 1930s, Carrington wrote stories that “surrealized” Poe’s plots, like “The House of Fear” and “The Oval Woman,” and were in turn the object of Ernst’s collages and interventions. By the same time, Carrington did her “Portrait of Max Ernst” (1939), which, with its polar environment and the presence of two figures turned into mermaids (Ernst himself, with an all-furry body, and a frozen white horse that recalls both a unicorn and a sphynx) might be reminiscent of Poe and Verne (Ernst is carrying a glass ball with what seems to be a sphynx trapped inside). What is most interesting in the painting, is that, through resetting a common surrealist sea-trope, the mermaid turned merman on top of an iceberg, its effect is highly ambivalent, since the lover-artist might be populating an inhospitable environment or freezing all else that surrounds him, or—possibly—both.

Jean-Michel Devésá has discussed the concomitant use of the mermaid and the monstrous enchantress by the male surrealist writers, even if nuanced by the alchemical and arguably emancipatory qualities of “Mélusine,” a figure revisited by Breton in his emblematic works *Nadja* (1928) and *Arcane 17* (1945). Dorothea Tanning, the American artist who was Max Ernst’s last partner, took a persistent interest in the motif and her approach was quite diverse, as she often just depicted a part or organ of the mermaid imagery—algae hair that might make up the skirt of the 1942 “Birthday,” or the hint of a tail under murky waters in her two paintings “Pour Gustave l’adoré” (1966, 1974) and in “Dantedoré” (1982). These latter are, according to Victoria Carruthers and Catriona McAra, in their study “Mermaids and Metaphors: Dorothea Tanning’s Surrealist Sea,” a revision of Doré’s *Les Océanides*, commenting bittersweetly on the erotic exposure of nude naiads in the nineteenth-century artist: “The fact that we can only see the lower half is to rob the viewer of any titillation felt when looking at the Doré” (220). Moreover, unlike Doré’s naiads, who are mostly above water lounging on a rock under streaming light, Tanning’s mermaid’s tail appears as a flash in the middle of a dark immersion (even if perhaps lying on a floundered board), which, I think, speaks to her fixation on the Gothic sea and fabulous creatures as part of a wider attraction to the oceanic as a mode of introspection rather than of expansive exploration. The reading of Carruthers and

McAra's article led me to the idea that women surrealists might be using the sea, and the ghostly, monstrous, or otherwise half-human sea trope, to comment not only on their feminine condition but also on male fantasies of exploring the "outlandish".

In this light, Dorothea Tanning's stunning "Self-Portrait" of 1944 can be contrasted both with Magritte's "La reproduction interdite" (Not to be reproduced) and with Carrington's "Portrait of Max Ernst." In Tanning's work, there is a figure who, like in Magritte's painting, turns her back to the viewer. Still, she is not a man in a suit, but rather a puny, pubescent girl in a swimsuit, facing a vast landscape that is literally *dépaysé*, or detached from land, with the blue tinges suggesting the half-frozen Antarctic Ocean. Carruthers points out that although the model for this was the canyon-scape of Sedona, Arizona, where she would live with Ernst, "the dry, red desert earth has been transformed back into the blues and greens of an oceanic world that, in fact, existed eons ago in its geological history" (2022). Upon closer inspection, the land or cliff mold at the left of the painting cradles a feminine, motherly face, perhaps a projection of the artist's unseen one, thus compounding Carruthers's suggestion that the swimmer should "dive in and return to the cool immersion of the ancient water" (2022). This is a water that can be gestational at an amniotic or at a more general creational level, without the maternal watery forces having to be exclusive to women, but rather, in Neimanis' words, "material metonyms of a planetary watery milieu that interpermeates and connects bodies" (*Bodies of Water* 39).

Note that despite this back-turning self-portrait, Tanning, like other women artists, gradually countered their male counterparts' avoidance of portraiture, or its subversion by replacing head or visage, particularly of women, with incoherent collages, as suggested by the insidious title of Ernst's artbook *La Femme Cent Têtes* (1929). In the words of Xavière Gauthier in her pioneering *Surréalisme et Sexualité* (1971), "The Surrealist woman", mostly "a male forgery," is "rather a woman without a head (*sans tête*) than a woman of a hundred heads (*femme cent têtes*)" (192). But the women painters not only reclaimed the face of their painted bodies, as they often profited from the occasion to revamp the male fantasies of Mélusine's, Medusa's, or Gorgon's heads, hair, and costumes, as in Tanning's abovementioned "Birthday."

It is interesting to place "Birthday" alongside the much later "Poem" (1987), a portrait of Edgar Allan Poe, to study how the artist feminized the maritime Gothic. From her own account, Tanning was then deliberately engaging in portraiture: "Wanting to try for a portrait, who could I choose but Edgar Allan Poe, with his burning gaze and great brow. Here he is enmeshed in tangled black with three colors bringing up the rear" (quoted online in Gallery of Surrealism). The entanglement recalls a liquid environment (of purple water? of blood? of "wine-dark-sea," as Homer would have it?) in which Poe's head is afloat. Why the supposition of liquid? Probably because the word "poem" below the head seems encircled in a piece of land, or a South island, that, upon a closer look, might resemble an animal, or even recall, in a sketchy way, the same griffin standing next to the woman in "Birthday." Curiously, the griffin was, for Poe, an illustration of his dispute with Coleridge about the difference of fancy

and imagination: unlike the British romantic, who thought the latter was capable of actual artistic creation, Poe defended that both combined already existing things:

All novel conceptions are merely unusual combinations. The mind of man can *imagine* nothing which has not really existed; [...] It will be said, perhaps, that we can imagine a *griffin*, and that a griffin does not exist. Not the griffin certainly, but its component parts. (Poe, *Essays* 277)

Weren't the exquisite corpses of the surrealists also combinations, montages, collages, of parts—or rather, dismembered parts entangled with others? Moreover, don't these composite beings, griffins as well as mermaids, suggest a more-than-human conception based on the link between animal kinship and the supernatural?

The disheveled, inky air of Poe's head in Tanning's portrait gives it a Medusa-like appearance. Symptomatically, the monstrification of the drowning hero's head had been the choice of the promising artist Jean Solé for a cover of *Les Aventures de Arthur Gordon Pym* in 1977 for the Gallimard Folio collection: a head vaguely resembling Poe sunk near a ship, and the sea, instead of showing its reflection, duplicated a devilish mask. The colors of the water are mostly blue, turning to red near the bottom, while Tanning has a wine-based tone all around arabesques of black and purple that seem to flow from the head and compose a liquid hair. This color choice is likely associated not only with Poe's drunkenness but with the way he often qualifies water in his poetry—"scoriac rivers" in *Ulalume* or the "redder glow" of the rising ocean in "The City in the Sea"—associating it, as Gaston Bachelard pointed out, with primal and childhood images of hell (68). Moreover, in *Arthur Gordon Pym*, there is a famous passage when approaching the archipelago of Tsalal where "the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue" (136) which can mean "blood-water", qualifying this narrative as journey of the unconscious through the organic body (Bachelard 73), both vital and death-headed. We are perhaps bordering here the "biological unconscious," a notion recuperated by Neimanis from Freud's student Sandor Ferenczi: our bodies harbor the memory of terrestrial invasion and the loss of the sea, along with the enmeshment with all bodies of water. Neimanis calls this a "Thalassian proposition" (*Bodies of Water* 133), from the Greek word meaning sea, *Thalassa*, which might have inspired the name of Tsalal chosen by Poe for the island where Gordon Pym goes adrift. The inky flowing arabesques of Poe's head in the wine-stained sea in Dorothea Tanning's painting suggest also an immersion in oily darkness; they are not a reflection but a conjunction. In Donna Haraway's terms, there seems to be a "making with," or "sympoietic threading" encompassing masculine, feminine, animal, "more-than-human," and the elemental supernatural (31).

Sympoietic, or even "symchtonic" and "tentacular" (Haraway 33), i.e., entangled with earthly, as well as under- and above-earthly beings, are terms that aptly apply also to the self-portraits of the Argentinian-Italo-French artist Léonor Fini, constantly metamorphizing and morphing herself into other figures and species. Speaking about her paintings, she said: "People are free to see in my works what they desire. For myself, I experience an erotic world where there is no divergence, no hostility, where everything mixes [...] I like to feel myself in a state of metamorphosis

like certain animals and certain plants" (Fini 105). Dialoguing with the writings of Edgar Allan Poe in visual media created throughout several years (her first illustrations of four of his women tales came out in 1952, and the six-volume deluxe edition *Œuvres imaginatives et poétiques complètes d'Edgar Allan Poe* in 1966), Fini transformed herself also into his human and animal characters.

Ultimately, Fini envisaged her artwork for literature as a conjoint authorship. In the frontispiece of her 1952 collaboration for *Contes mystérieux et fantastiques*, Léonor Fini depicted herself as a pregnant she-raven with fledglings on her hair. Therefore, her coauthorship in Poe's work was arguably of a *persona*, or implied artist, just as Poe created narrators that readers tended to confuse with the empirical writer. Fini elaborated on never saying "I" in her paintings as an act of travesty and translating the exiled self from "my own self" (*moi-même*): "the me who will express herself travestied, masked, translated, retracted, stateless of *moi-même*" (194). We might further add that she resignified the grotesque as she re-faced and re-embodied the female not as an ideal but as her wanton whim, a multipliable fantasy, both her own and shareable with other women, and other species—or, to use another term from Donna Haraway, "companion species" (10-11).

Poe's poem suggests the bird comes from "Plutonian shores" and belonged to an "unhappy [sea-]master" (*Poems*, 366). Fini's impersonation of a pregnant raven not only eroticizes the trope of the sea-animal but can be treated as feminized nautical Gothic irony. While Tanning with her alluring body parts of mermaids recalled the underworld associated with these liminal creatures and somehow exposed their grim alterity,⁷ Fini takes a more playful approach to the creation of monsters who, after all, can themselves create, gestate, invoke sexual power. With such reenactment and claim for participation in (authorial) mastery, Fini also takes her place in a tradition of French women, unparalleled in any other Modernist culture, who "mothered" Edgar Allan Poe, while arguably enhancing his "secretive feminine flame of the art seeker" (Vale de Gato 264). This was a task laid out by the biographies of Poe authored by Arvède Barine in her monograph *Poètes et névrosés* (1908), Lucie Delarue-Mardrus in the long article "Œuvre, vie, amours d'Edgar Poe," which occupied two issues of *La Revue de Paris* in 1924-25, and Marie Bonaparte in her monumental work of literature and psychoanalysis, *Edgar Allan Poe: étude psychanalytique* in 1933. These three female intellectuals worked hard, in between the twentieth century's world wars, to rehabilitate or at least vindicate the figure of Edgar Allan Poe as an alcoholic, slanderous, and horrific person that was propagated by his first American biographer, Rufus Griswold, and which partially made him, via Charles Baudelaire and the symbolists, the favorite French "poète maudit." In particular, the 900-page and three-volume study by Freud's student and patroness, the princess Marie Bonaparte, would nourish the surrealist imagination. Robert J. Belton states that, along with the essays by Freud that Bonaparte translated, her work on Poe made quite a stir in bohemian

⁷ About the ambivalence of mermaids as composite, liminal creatures, but also reifications of a "radical alterity" see Robertson 303-305 and Mortensen 204-205.

Paris, and “Dali once noted that it was discussed in the cafés for some time.” Belton then proceeds to read one Max Ernst painting inspired by Poe (“Bérenice,” 1935) as an elaboration on Poe’s fear of the *vagina dentata*, which agrees with Bonaparte’s interpretation of the painting.⁸

Leonor Fini, Marie Bonaparte, and Her Rendering of *Arthur Gordon Pym*

It seems to me that if, on the one hand, Bonaparte signaled in Poe’s work many castration metaphors that would be crucial for the surrealists (e. g. the pierced or piercing eye, the knife or serrated object in entrapped places, or indeed women’s and other creature’s teeth or claws), on the other, she did not do so to agree with the theories of her mentor Freud, but rather to rehabilitate the feminine factor which she does equate with maternity, but as a nurturing force for creation. She construed deaths in Poe’s stories, either as reenactments of the loss of the mother or of acts of revenge on the adoptive father, and feminicides as desperate attempts to replace misguided heterosexual attachments. Unlike Freud, the corollary is not that man will not build his real ego until he stops nibbling the mother and become a penetrator, but instead that men will not be freed from loss as long as they feel abandoned by feminine nurture and latency, or, worse, abandon it themselves through conquer and assault—of property, belongings, other lives, bodies, lands, seas. Although Bonaparte’s speculations about maternal anxiety and the fear of loss of phallus lack the linguistic implications of later psychoanalysts and philosophers such as Lacan and Derrida, who will relate it with discursive fragmentation and delegation (namely in the case of Poe’s *Purloined Letter*),⁹ her remarks on womb nostalgia are quite perceptive. It is thus that Bonaparte reads, for instance, Gordon Pym’s constant entrapments on the ship’s hold as mirroring the adopted Poe’s struggle with a surrogate womb inside the vaster womb of the sea, *la mer*, which for her is the mother the narrator truly longs for, *la mère*, repeating a pun that had widely been disseminated by Jules Michelet before her, in his abovementioned work.

Irrespective of whether Leonor Fini read Bonaparte’s work on Poe, the visual art she produced seems to have been informed by some knowledge of the princess’s interpretation, namely in what concerns *Les Aventures d’Arthur Gordon Pym*, the last volume of said Viletay edition. Of the ten watercolors in the book, the first is the most traditional in style, displaying a sailboat on the tip of a scraggy brown form that might be a piece of land, but is duplicated, in a Rorschach manner, by a smaller similar shape on the top of the page, where the sky is likely forming a dark cloud with a red flaring contour, that might illustrate the stormy weather Pym and his friend Augusts face in the adventure of the book’s initial chapter. However, isolated from the narrative, this

⁸ Marie Bonaparte herself needs being rehabilitated from a too narrow focus on her “diagnosis” of Poe’s neurosis. Recently, Scott Peoples lauded the Princess’s admirable close-reading skills, and Sandra Tomc has defended her brand of feminine criticism in the edited collection *Poe and Women*.

⁹ See, *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, edited by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson.

picture could point to a different context: the two mirrored shapes are somewhat reminiscent of the American continent in its globality, North America with the red coast, and the gap between the two signaling perhaps the point of Columbus's arrival in San Salvador. Could this signify a revisionist stroke, a reminder of the historical blood shed by the white masculine fantasy of the explorers and early sailors who, in their chronicles, spoke of the "new" world as free for the taking, just as Dirk Peters will later do, "a world of novelty and amusement [...] the perfect security and freedom from all restraint to be enjoyed, but, more particularly, [...] the deliciousness of the climate, [...] the abundant means of good living, and on the voluptuous beauty of the women" (Poe, *The Narrative* 46).

Despite the gullible expectations of female pleasures in uncharted territory, there are few women in this mostly men's tale, as Bonaparte herself notes. Nevertheless, she can feminize the maritime Gothic by insisting on the motherly presence of the sea and the symbolic wombs, the boats. Pursuing a psychoanalytical focus on sexual trauma, she also notes that the same vessels that are wombs penetrate phallically (and extractively, one may add, in a more historical reading) the sea as mother. The Dutch phantom-brig of *Pym's* chapter X is described as "hermaphrodite" (Poe, *The Narrative* 80). Keenly, Bonaparte spots, inside that brig, between the galley and the counter (for which the French translation is "cuisine/kitchen"), one of the few instances where women are referred to in the novel: "Shall I ever forget the triple horror of that spectacle? Twenty-five or thirty human bodies, among whom were several females, lay scattered about between the counter and the galley in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction" (81). Fini, on her part, illustrates this scene with a striking composition of jumbled bodies, some quite cadaverous or already ghostly, and at least one woman among them, occupying the center. Below her rosy-nipped and skirted female corpse, there is a fleshy phallic form, in line with what may be called Bonaparte's psycho-feminist reinterpretation of Poe's nautical Gothic:

The fact that this vessel exhaling such a stench symbolizes the dead and decomposed mother is perhaps confirmed by the information that among the putrefied carcasses some women are expressly mentioned. Nothing in the context seems to imply that there would be women on board... but undoubtedly the unconscious was ordering it from somewhere else. (Bonaparte vol. 2, 392)

It is worthwhile to mention that while Bonaparte hints that these women manifest a return of the repressed, more recently Karen Montwieler and Mark Boren have suggested that their presence exposes the treatment of women as commodities in the transatlantic trade:

What was their purpose, one wonders—prostitution, slavery, marriage? The prostitution suggestion comes from the "tawdry gilt" figurehead and the women's bright dresses; the slavery suggestion comes from the fact that this ship is of Dutch build; and the marriage suggestion—well, it's the one that is left. One could argue they are merely passengers, but in this text, with all that is going on thematically, that is unlikely. (49)

It is unfathomable where the two critics deducted the "bright dresses" from, since it is nowhere in Poe's text, but Fini does paint in pink the flimsy garment of the central

woman, the only touch of color apart from the blue in the pants of the man next to her.

In addition to this representation of maimed bodies, Fini also dwells on the topos of the severed heads, which reappear in three illustrations as either floating or dormant. The book's final plate displays an elaborate skull, spotted with shadows, seemingly feathered and perhaps also furry. Not solely human, it might evoke the singular hybrid-animal carcass that, some pages before the end, precludes the natives' ominous cry—"Tekeli-li." This more-than-human carcass, or composite creature (much like the earlier-mentioned griffin), is first spotted drifting above water as the *Jane Guy* sails southward with occasional glimpses of an unknown coast:

[...] the carcass of a singular-looking land-animal. It was three feet in length, and but six inches in height, with four very short legs, the feet armed with long claws of a brilliant scarlet, and resembling coral in substance. The body was covered with a straight silky hair, perfectly white. The tail was peaked like that of a rat, and about a foot and a half long. The head resembled a cat's, with the exception of the ears; these were flapped like the ears of a dog. The teeth were of the same brilliant scarlet as the claws. (Poe, *The Narrative* 130-131)

The carcass reappears when the Tsalalians set a trap for the *Jane Guy* crew, and its white body hair is the probable cause of the frightened interjection "Tekeli-li" (157), as the reader apprehends it is uttered by the dark natives whenever they spot whiteness, a grotesque inversion of the shadow of blackness that haunts the white colonialists.

In the novel's narrative arc, this carcass also recalls the earlier one that served as fodder for a seagull and was mistaken for a living sailor. Besides a possible ecogothic reading of the carcass as embodying the fear of nature and of the human destiny of decomposition, it arguably excites as well fear of the loss of mastery and of being subdued by a different race or species (speciesism).¹⁰ Furthermore, the abrupt appearance at the end of Poe's novel of a monstrous figure—at once human and more-than-human—with a white skin hue invites a deconstructive reading of the symbolic polarity of the fair human species and all the dark bestial others:

Now we rushed into the embrace of the waterfall, where a chasm suddenly opened to swallow us. But then, in our path, there appeared a shrouded human figure, much larger in size than anyone among humans. And the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow. (Poe, *The Narrative* 175)

It is difficult to determine whether Fini recognized the novel's undercurrent of Manichean and racial stereotypes. Still, she was surely drawn to the idea of the seat of reason, the human head, being a grotesque organ. Furthermore, she might have agreed with Bonaparte's interpretation of that white figure, which she relates to the description of the tinged water with gray vapor and ashes that gradually acquire a

¹⁰ Also, interestingly, the racist and speciesist topoi have accounted for the novel's influence in contemporary writing, namely Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), with a central tiger character named after the mutineer Richard Parker, and Mat Johnson's, *Pym* (2011), a continuation of the novel from an African American perspective. For a critical race approach of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and Johnson's *Pym* see Lavender III. See also Toni Morrison's now classic critical work *Playing in the Dark*, whose chapter "Romancing the Shadow" has extensive commentary on Poe's only novel.

milky consistency. While others see in such a description an index of the mixed-race fear, Bonaparte focuses on the milky prevalence, and envisages Pym's boat entering maternal waters and finally facing the symbolic mother and the trauma of her death, that, according to her argument, accounted for much of Poe's creative drive:

The great maternal divinity, of which the sex is not indicated, but who could be no other, in its veil and shroud, than... The mother calling back its son. In effect, the whiteness of snow in which that new Diane of Ephesus [an ancient figure of Artemisia with many breasts] radiates, and whose color and abundance of milk replace the multiplicity of breasts, is doubly and contradictorily determined: on the one hand she is of the same whiteness as the Austral pole, with its warmness of milk and light, thus recalling the blessed times of breastfeeding; on the other hand, not being compared to milk but to snow, which is coldness and death, she recalls as well the unconscious memory of the wan skin of the dead mother; in that way she condenses the two foremost attributes that Poe associated with his mother: milk and death. (Bonaparte vol. 2, 427)

Fini's plates for *Les Aventures* do not immediately relate to such interpretation; strikingly, though, the duplicity of this mother figure, with "warmness of milk and light" and "wan skin" would be an apt caption for the central character in the artist's celebrated masterpiece "Les bouts du monde" ("The ends of the earth"), painted in 1949 and then revisited in 1952 (in "Les bouts du monde II" or "Donna del Lago"). In the first artwork, we see the naked bust of a Mona Lisa-like woman emerging from a still pool of water among carcasses, brownish twigs, and animal-like leaves, the sky behind her displaying a dark red sunset. In the latter, the woman-figure emerges a little more—her nipples are above water—but she is also rather greyish as if made from cracked stone, and her head is disheveled, reminiscent of the medusas that Fini, too, liked to draw (namely as self-portraits).

Could this be a vision taken from the "shrouded white figure" risen before Pym and Dirk Peters while they sail towards the end of the earth? Irrespective of whether there is a genetic affiliation with Poe's novel, it certainly is a striking summation of the surrealist revisioning of the nautical Gothic, with a feminist twist. Its effect is highly ambivalent. The title "the ends of the earth" signals that there is indeed a terminus to human (and perhaps imaginative) exploration, and the carcasses and dead vegetable life in the pool point to an ecocritical apocalyptic vision as a consequence of exploration leading to extraction. Still, the emergent nursing woman points variably to the possibility of creation under a matrilineal regime (in the first painting), and to the exhaustion of fertility (in the second). Furthermore, these compositions by Leonor Fini have arguably endured in our imaginary through the version that the singer Madonna, in turn, animated for the videoclip of "Bedtime Story," where, her ultra-white body takes the pose of Fini's figure among the carcasses (min 1:52), inviting the viewer to connect the song's lyrics about the hushed language of the unconscious to the condensed aquatic environment. In both artworks, the hydro-imagination is that of the "heavy water" (*eau lourde*) that Gaston Bachelard, in *L'eau et les rêves* associated strongly with Poe and his aquatic images deeper and dreamier than any water found in nature (58). Issued in 1942, this book by Bachelard is also a likely source for Fini's construction of the water imagery—its interpretation

of the doubleness and reflective qualities in the aestheticization of water must have been seductive for this woman who included herself in almost all of her paintings, but refused to stay still in them, rather exploring the performance of alterity.

Lenora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning, and Leonor Fini were hardly silenced women; their male counterparts might have unwittingly relegated them to the edges of the surrealist movement, but free self-expression and fulfilment of different sexualities were no doubt surrealist tenets. The women artists, nonetheless, might have felt suffocated and disappointed by their treatment as unhinged muses (Carrington's life with and after Max Ernst being probably the best illustration for this). It is symptomatic how these women's treatment of the "revenant female" is associated with the mermaid or some other form of composite sea-creature. A few of the works here analysed, like Tanning's mermaids and "Birthday" or Fini's pregnant she-raven, reimagine Gothic tropes while distancing themselves from the romantic "poetic topic" of "the death of a beautiful woman" as propagated by Edgar Allan Poe. In fact, Poe himself and his sailor persona of Arthur Gordon Pym become, in these women's artworks, aquatic hermaphrodites, or medusa-like figures, often entangled in self-portraits with elaborate or composite creatures, fusing human and non-human. The women surrealists plunged, as well as their male counterparts, into the dissolving potentialities of the surrealist sea. But they also remade it: they found in Poe's aquatic material an opportunity to re-envision the maritime Gothic, relating it to cosmogony and eschatology as well as to the dreamworld of an unconscious that claimed for embodiment. They seem to have been particularly invested in the rehabilitation of a type of motherly oceanic presence, not nostalgic, but enabling destruction and recreation, along with companion species. This, however, must remain a tentative conclusion, in need of a broader survey of other male and female surrealist artists' treatment of sea motifs, the nautical Gothic, and their reworking of romantic tropes towards a living and procreative tradition.

Submission received 30 June 2026

Revised version accepted 13 March 2026

Works Cited

- Adler, Emily. "Through Oceans Darkly: Sea Literature and the Nautical Gothic," *Gothic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2018, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.7227/GS.0025>.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. 1942. Librairie José Corti, 1993.
- Barine, Arvède. *Poètes et névrosés: Hoffmann, Quincey, Edgar Poe. G. de Nerval*. Librairie Hachette, 1908.
- Belton, Robert J. "Edgar Allan Poe and the Surrealists' Image of Women." *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1987, pp. 8-12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358334>.
- Berthold, Dennis. "Cape Horn Passages: Literary Conventions and Nautical Realities." *Literature and Lore of the Sea*, edited by Patricia Ann Carlson, Rodopi, 1986, pp. 40-57.

- Blum, Hester M. *The View from the Mast-Head: Antebellum American Sea Narratives and the Maritime Imagination*. University of Pennsylvania, 2002.
- Bonaparte, Marie. *Edgar Allan Poe: Etude psychanalytique*, 3 vols. Preface by Sigmund Freud, Denoël et Steele, 1933.
- Breton, André. *Manifestes du surréalisme*. Gallimard, 1975.
- . *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1969.
- Carruthers, Victoria. "'Swimming Upstream' and the Creative (Re)turn." *The Kasmin Review*, 2022. <https://review.kasmingallery.com/weekend-long-reads/swimming-upstream-and-the-creative-return/>. Accessed June 19, 2025.
- Carruthers, Victoria, and Catriona McAra. "Mermaids and Metaphors: Dorothea Tanning's Surrealist Ocean." *Framing the Ocean, 1700 to the Present: Envisaging the Sea as Social Space*, edited by Tricia Cusack, Routledge, 2014, pp. 211-222.
- Deam, Natalie. "The Great Melancholy Mother: Michelet's Evolutionary Ocean in *The Sea*." *The Aesthetics of the Undersea*, edited by Margaret Cohen and Killian Colm Quigley, Routledge, 2018, pp. 83-96.
- Debenedetti, Jean Marc, and Serge Baudiffier. *Le Surréalisme et ses alentours*. Éditions Larousse, 1992.
- Delarue-Mardrus, Lucie. "Oeuvre, vie, amours d'Edgar Poe." *La Revue de Paris*, 15 November 1925, pp. 270-301; 1 December 1925, pp. 578-600.
- Desnos, Robert. *La liberté ou l'amour*. 1927. Gallimard, 1982.
- Devésa, Jean-Michel. "Sirènes, fées et autres créatures marines dans le surréalisme (Breton, Desnos, Crevel)." *Le Monstrueux et l'Humain*, edited by Danièle James-Raoul et Peter Kuon, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2012.
- Fini, Leonor. *Le Livre de Leonor Fini*. Collab. José Alvarez, Clairefontaine-Vilo, 1975.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. 1930. Translated by J. Strachey, with an introduction by C. Hitchens and a biographical note by P. Gray. W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.
- Gallery of Surrealism. <https://www.surrealism.gallery/>. Accessed December 30, 2025.
- Gauthier, Xavière. *Surréalisme et sexualité*. Gallimard. 1971.
- Goldhurst, William. "Literary Images Adapted by the Artist: The Case of Edgar Allan Poe and René Magritte." *The Comparatist*, 1979, pp. 3-15.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Lavender III, Isiah. "'It Was All So White:' Mat Johnson's Afrofuturist Retelling of Poe." *Poe Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2023, pp. 83-101.
- Montwieler, Kare, and Boren, M. E. "Hybridity, Anxiety, and Wombs of Destruction in Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*." *PsyArt* 19, 2015. <https://www.psyart.org>. Accessed June 24, 2025.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage Books, 1992.

- Mortensen, Peter. "'Half Fish, Half Woman:' Annette Kellerman, Mermaids, and Eco-Aquatic Revisioning." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 2018, vol. 29, no. 2 (102), 2018, pp. 201-221. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26627621>.
- Muller, John P., and William J. Richardson. *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*. The Johns Hopkins Press, 1988.
- Neimanis, Astrida. "Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water." *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice*, edited by Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 85-99.
- . *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- O'Hanlan, Sean Theodora. "The Shipwreck of Reason: The Surrealist Diver and Modern Maritime Salvage." *The Aesthetics of the Undersea*, edited by Margaret Cohen and Killian Colm Quigley, Routledge, 2018, 137-154.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym*. Translated by Charles Baudelaire with cover illustration by Jean Solé., Gallimard, 1975.
- . *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, edited by J. Gerald Kennedy, Oxford University Press, 1998.
- . *Contes mystérieux et fantastiques*. Translated by Charles Baudelaire and illustrated by Leonor Fini, Société Normande des Amis du Livre, 1952.
- . *Essays and Reviews*, edited by G. R. Thompson, The Library of America, 1984.
- . *Œuvres imaginatives et poétiques complètes*. Translated by Charles Baudelaire et al., illustrated by Léonor Fini. 6 vols., Vialetay, 1966.
- . *Poems*. In *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 1, edited by T. O. Mabbott, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Robertson, Venetia Laura Delano. "Where Skin Meets Fin: The Mermaid as Myth, Monster and Other-Than-Human Identity." *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2013, pp. 303-23. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.v26i3.303>.
- Sekula, Allan. *Fish Story*. Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Richter Verlag, 1995.
- Tomc, Sandra. "'The Vast Pantheon of Speculation:' Edgar Allan Poe and his Women Biographers." *Poe and Women: Recognition and Revision*, edited by Amy Armiento and Travis Montgomery, Lehigh University Press, 2023, pp. 1-20.
- Vale de Gato, Margarida. "Startling Restitutions, Significant Partialities. The French come to the Rescue of Edgar Allan Poe." *Anthologizing Poe: Editions, Translations, and (Trans)National Canons*, edited by Emron Esplin and M. Vale de Gato, Lehigh University Press, 2020, pp. 249-276.
- Weinstein, Cindy. "La Reproduction Interdite: Magritte's Reproduction of Pym." *Poe Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2022, pp. 32-58. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/864936/pdf>.
- Wilbur, Richard. "The House of Poe" (1959), repr. in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Eric W. Carlson, The University of Michigan Press, 1966, pp. 255-277.

