

University of Florida Document Delivery



ILLiad TN: 1122456

**Journal Title:** New Essays on Poe's Major Tales

**Volume:**

**Issue:**

**Month/Year:** 1993

**Pages:** 27-44

**Article Author:** Christopher Benfey,

**Article Title:** "Poe and the Unreadable: 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'

**Imprint:**

**Call #:** PS2642.F43 N48 1993

**Location:** WEST BK

**Item #:**

**ILL #:**



**System ID:** OCLC

**CUSTOMER HAS REQUESTED:**

Hold for Pickup

Richard Burt (0494-2321)

## Poe and the Unreadable: "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart"

CHRISTOPHER BENFEY

Two fears should follow us through life. There is the fear that we shan't prove worthy in the eyes of someone who knows us at least as well as we know ourselves. That is the fear of God. And there is the fear of Man – the fear that men won't understand us and we shall be cut off from them.

–Robert Frost<sup>1</sup>

POE aimed to puzzle his readers. Tale after tale begins or ends with an invitation to decode or decipher a peculiar sequence of events. Some of Poe's most memorable characters are themselves solvers of riddles – amateur scientists, private detectives, armchair philosophers who glorify in what Poe calls "that moral activity which *disentangles*."<sup>2</sup> The modern-day Oedipus, according to Poe, "is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of *acumen* which appears to the ordinary apprehension praeternatural" (528).

Poe's critics have tended to divide into two camps: on the one hand, those who claim to have keys to the puzzles, and on the other, those who find the puzzles impossible or unworthy of solution. In the first group one finds a wealth of extraordinary psychoanalytic readings of Poe – surely no other writer other than Freud himself has so engaged the psychoanalytic literary community, from Marie Bonaparte's pioneering reading of Poe to Lacan's famous interpretation of "The Purloined Letter" and the further commentary it inspired. In the first group one also finds psychologically astute – though not explicitly psychoanalytic – readers like the poet Richard Wilbur, who finds in Poe's tales representations of the ordinary phases of falling asleep.<sup>3</sup>

In the second group – the resistant readers – belong such dismissive critics as Harold Bloom, who claims to find Poe's prose literally unreadable. "Translation even into his own language," Bloom acidly remarks, "always benefits Poe."<sup>4</sup> To this group also belong such historically minded critics as David Reynolds, for

whom Poe's puzzles are interesting primarily as literary conventions, the sort of lure for the masses that Poe, writing at mid-nineteenth century for a magazine-reading public, had no choice but to employ.<sup>5</sup>

I do not propose to steer a middle course between these two camps, even if it were easy to say what such a course might be. My aim instead is to show how one kind of puzzle – perhaps not the most obvious or “crackable” kind – is at the heart of some of Poe's best known tales. This sort of puzzle concerns the ways in which people are themselves enigmas to one another: people (that is characters) both within the stories and on either side, so to speak (the author and the reader). Poe was an early student of the ways in which human beings have access, or are denied access, to the minds of other people. Twentieth-century philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin have devoted a good deal of attention to what has come to be called “the problem of other minds,” trying to answer the arguments of skeptics who claim, for example, that we cannot know for certain that another person is in pain. Poe's tales, it seems to me, address such questions from oblique and unexpected angles. If figures from as divergent cultural and historical milieux as Poe and Freud can be invited into useful dialogue, the same could be said for Poe and Wittgenstein. (The latter, by the way, came of age in precisely the same turn-of-the-century Viennese culture as did Freud.)

Poe was fascinated by mind readers and unreadable faces, the twin fantasies of utter exposure and complete secrecy. His private eye Auguste Dupin is the preeminent example of the former. In a scene from “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Dupin astonishes the narrator by reading his mind, having boasted that “most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms” (533). Dupin pulls off this feat by being extraordinarily attentive to psychological association, a process Poe relates to the solving of puzzling crimes. In “The Purloined Letter,” Dupin retrieves the hidden letter by reproducing the mental calculations of the deceitful minister D. The devil, in the less familiar story “Bon-Bon,” has kindred powers – he can even read the mind of a pet cat (a subject to which we will return).

Poe was equally interested, however, in the opposite phenom-



enon of the unknowable mind, the mind that remains, despite all attempts at access, ultimately mysterious. One of his best known tales, “The Man of the Crowd” – it drew commentary from Baudelaire as well as from the great modern critic Walter Benjamin – begins and ends by comparing certain people to the sort of book that “does not permit itself to be read”:

Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes – die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not *suffer themselves* to be revealed. (506–7)

It is to this theme of the unreadable in human relations that my subtitle refers. It is not by accident that Poe should invite us to compare reading minds with reading books, or that his stories should involve both activities. He saw the most intimate relation between these two acts of reading, constantly drawing analogies between them. We will now turn to two such tales: “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat.” We will also give some attention to a third text, a sort of hybrid of essay and tale entitled “The Imp of the Perverse.”

These tales are not whodunits – we know right from the start who the murderer is. They are closer to the genre now called thrillers, where the crime itself and the psychology of the killer are more the focus than the question of who committed the crime. If there is a mystery in these tales, it is the mystery of motive; not who did it but why. Poe’s fascination with the idea of a crime without a clear motive has proved to be one of his richest bequests to later writers, informing such works as Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, André Gide’s *Lafcadio’s Adventures (Les Caves du Vatican)*, and Camus’s *The Stranger*, all three of which test the idea that human freedom is most convincingly exhibited in an extreme and gratuitous act, specifically an act of murder with no obvious advantage to the murderer. Poe’s interest in motiveless crime, however, had less to do with human freedom than with human knowledge. He was drawn to two ideas connected with it: one, the ways in which the murderer is a mystery to himself (a dominant idea in “The Black Cat”), and two, the related ways in which the

~~The~~ murder results from some barrier to the killer's knowledge of other people (a major theme in "The Tell-Tale Heart").

"The Tell-Tale Heart" begins *in medias res*, in the midst of things. We seem to be overhearing a conversation – one that began before our arrival on the scene – between a murderer and his interlocutor. The identity of the latter is never specified; it could be a prison warden, a doctor in a madhouse, a newspaper reporter, a judge. The very indefiniteness makes it easy for the reader to imagine that the killer is speaking directly to him or her.

True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story. (792)

The first word is a concession – this speaker wants to communicate, to persuade. He thinks that by giving some ground ("granted I'm nervous"), he can win the battle ("but I'm not crazy").

Like other characters in Poe's tales (and to some degree, apparently, Poe himself), the narrator believes that certain diseases of the mind can actually sharpen mental acuity. In "Eleonora," for example, another half mad speaker tries to persuade us that he is sane: "Men have called me mad," he says, "but the question is not yet settled . . . whether all that is profound – does not spring from disease of thought – from *moods* of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect" (638). And when the narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" tries to explain Dupin's extraordinary powers, he remarks: "What I have described in the Frenchman was merely the result of an excited, or perhaps of a diseased intelligence" (533). If the speaker in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is willing to admit that he's the victim of a disease, madness he will not concede. Like much else in the tale, the nature of the disease remains unspecified, unless it is the general nervousness that he mentions.

He does make perfectly clear what madness is. It is the inability to communicate. His proof of his sanity will therefore be his ability

*"The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart"*

to "tell... the whole story" [my emphasis] – the verb is crucial – "healthily" and "calmly." ~~Sanity is equated in this character's mind with telling tales.~~ He invites us to gauge how healthily and calmly he can recount the story of the murder.

It is an extraordinary opening, with its mad dashes and nervous, halting delivery. Among his "Marginalia" Poe has preserved a miniature essay on the expressive powers of the dash. Always attentive to punctuation, he was especially fond of the dash, with its suggestion of mental leaps and quick associations. "It represents," he wrote, "a second thought – an emendation."<sup>6</sup> As our speaker begins his "calm" narrative, turning first to the question of motive, we are attuned to the contrasting rhythms of the dash, and we await its recurrence throughout the tale as a sort of trademark of this speaker's style.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but, once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (792)

~~Note how casually the speaker arrives at the eye as cause, as though he is casting about for the motive, and has just now thought of it – "I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!"~~ [my emphasis] This is no ordinary eye, of course, but what exactly is so troubling about it? For one thing, it has "a film over it." There is something unseeing about it. When we look at someone "eye to eye" we feel in touch with the person, but this eye is blocked, filmed over. Richard Wilbur links this vulture eye with the vulture in Poe's early sonnet "To Science," in which Poe addresses the anti-imaginative spirit of science that changes "all things with thy peer-ing eyes":

Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,  
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?<sup>7</sup>

Wilbur wants to nudge us toward an allegorical reading of the tale, with the speaker-killer representing the imaginative faculty

of the mind and the old man representing the scientific, rational side.

But let us stay within the terms of the story a bit longer, before trying to arrive at its "larger meaning." We are never told the exact relationship between the old man and his killer. We never learn their names, their jobs, what town they live in, or anything much else about them. We simply know that they live together in the same house.

For all the concision with which our speaker tells his tale, eliminating almost every detail that would help us place him in time and space, he goes on at elaborate length about things that might seem peripheral to the main plot of the story. Nearly a quarter of the narrative, for example, is devoted to the seven nights in which the narrator watches the old man sleep. Why such sustained attention to such *undramatic* behavior?

According to the narrator, this patient observation is meant to provide further and conclusive proof of his sanity. All his preparations – the opened door, closed lantern, and so on – are so *deliberate* (a key word in both "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart") that no madman could have accomplished them.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded – with what caution – with what foresight – with what dissimulation I went to work! (792)

It is only in his account of the eighth and crucial night that Poe hints at the significance of this long rigmarole of door, lantern, and eye.

Never, before that night, had I *felt* the extent of my own powers – of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back – but no. (793)

This is a crucial moment in the story. It shows how much the speaker's motivation has to do with secrecy, with keeping his thoughts hidden. (There is a remarkably similar moment of mute

“The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”

triumph in “The Black Cat”: “The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph” [858].) He enters the old man’s room night after night as a sort of ritual to establish this secrecy, this fact of human separateness.

And yet, for all his secrecy, our speaker claims to have access to the mind of the old man. His very privacy, his enclosedness, seem to allow him to see into the minds of other people.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief – oh, no! – it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. (794)

We may wonder how the speaker claims to know this. The answer, he tells us, is by analogy with his own experience and its expression:

I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise. (794)

This scene of mind reading continues a bit longer, as the killer claims to know the very words the victim is thinking:

His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself – “It is nothing but the wind in the chimney – it is only a mouse crossing the floor,” or “it is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.” Yes, he has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. (794)

It is only after this sustained scene of mind reading versus secrecy that the old man’s eye opens, and the murder is accomplished. It is precisely the breach of secrecy, the penetrating-yet-veiled eye, that seems to motivate the murder.

Poe puts unmistakable emphasis on this claim to *knowledge*: “I say I *knew* it well. I *knew* what the old man felt. . . . I *knew* that he had been lying awake” [my emphasis]. It is precisely this claim to knowledge of another’s mind, especially knowledge of another’s



feelings of pain, that has given rise to some of the most challenging philosophical reflections in our century. Wittgenstein, in a couple of classic passages in his *Philosophical Investigations*, defines the issues succinctly:

246. In what sense are my sensations *private*? – Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain: another person can only surmise it. – In one way this is wrong, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word “to know” as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain. – Yes, but all the same not with the certainty with which I know it myself! – It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I *am* in pain?<sup>8</sup>

Wittgenstein, in his characteristically dialogical style, is challenging the skeptic's claim that we cannot “know” another's pain. Wittgenstein appeals to our ordinary use of language – “and how else are we to use it?” – as opposed to some special philosophical use, and argues that it's ridiculous to claim that we never can know that another is in pain. We know this – under ordinary circumstances (the stubbed toe, the woman in labor, the burst blister) – all the time. Wittgenstein, here and elsewhere, wants to cure us of our tendency to step outside our ordinary ways of living our lives, and our tendency to demand, for example, kinds of certainty that are inappropriate to our dealings with other people. (Poe seems to have something similar in mind when he insists that the events in “The Black Cat” are “ordinary.”)

Poe's killers claim to have the very certainty challenged by Wittgenstein. They are always insisting on their special knowledge of others' minds, as though we had been challenging their knowledge: “I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt.” The killer's claim, in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” that he knows the man's feelings by analogy with his own – “I know that he feels *x* when he cries *y* because when I cry *y* I feel *x*” – is another of Wittgenstein's subjects:

302. If one has to imagine someone else's pain on the model of one's own, this is none too easy a thing to do: for I have to imagine pain which I *do not feel* on the model of the pain which I *do feel*. That is, what I have to do is not simply to make a transition in

*‘‘The Black Cat’’ and ‘‘The Tell-Tale Heart’’*

imagination from one place of pain to another. As, from pain in the hand to pain in the arm. For I am not to imagine that I feel pain in some region of his body. (Which would also be possible.)

Pain-behaviour can point to a painful place – but the subject of pain is the person who gives it expression.

Poe’s killer makes oddly parallel claims: “I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom. . . . I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt.” It does seem as though he is “imagining someone else’s pain on the model of [his] own.”

The skeptical view of ultimate human separateness (“We can never know for certain what another person is thinking or feeling”) is intolerable to Poe’s killers; their response is simply to deny it, even to the point of killing in order to prove their certainty. Rather than push the parallels between Poe and Wittgenstein further (perhaps we have already pushed them quite far enough), let us turn to another tale of murder and concealment, namely “The Black Cat.” In comparing the two tales, especially their endings, we might find more to say about the two fears – of total exposure and total isolation – that Poe keeps giving voice to.

“The Black Cat” was first published later the same year, 1843, as “The Tell-Tale Heart.” It resembles the earlier story in several obvious ways, as though Poe were digging deeper in a familiar vein. It too purports to be a killer’s confession, and the murder victim is again a member of the killer’s household. This killer is also eager to assure us of his sanity: “Yet, mad am I not – and very surely do I not dream.” In both stories, furthermore, the police seem almost reluctant to pursue their investigations. The killers must insist on their guilt, even offer proof of it. In each case the discovery of the concealed body is the result of the killer’s own obsessive need to reveal its hiding place.

The ways in which the two stories are told are quite distinct, however. One begins at the beginning (“From my infancy . . . I married early . . .”) while the other begins in the midst of things. “The Tell-Tale Heart” purports to be a spoken narrative and much of its effect is achieved through the illusion of oral delivery. “The Black Cat,” by contrast, presents itself from its opening sentence

as a written narrative: "For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief." What is more, the first of the narrator's series of crimes is explicitly linked to this writing instrument:

I took from my waistcoat-pocket a *pen*-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I *pen* the damnable atrocity. [my emphasis] (851)

The pen may be mightier than the sword, but in this passage Poe skillfully conflates the two. The weapon here is a pen-knife, which was used to sharpen a quill pen. Poe wants us to divine a connection between violence and the act of writing. (Similarly in "The Imp of the Perverse" the murder instrument is a poisoned candle used for *reading*.) Significantly, the murderer doesn't blush, burn, and shudder while committing the crime, but while writing about it later.

The link of pens and pen-knives points to a larger contrast in these tales. For the more we read and reread them, the more we see that Poe is less interested in the *commission* of crimes than in the *confession* to them. These are not so much stories of crime and detection as of crime and confession. For Poe, crime itself is not intellectually compelling. The actual business of murder is hurried through in both tales under discussion. In Poe's fullest exploration of the motiveless crime, "The Imp of the Perverse," the crime takes up almost no space at all. We don't know till we are two-thirds of the way through the largely essayistic text that we're reading a crime story at all.

Poe's murderers are not so much obsessive killers as obsessive *talkers*. Afflicted with what Poe calls in "The Black Cat" "the spirit of PERVERSENESS," their perversity lies not in their need to kill but in their need to tell. Thus, "The Imp of the Perverse" ends with the murderer's sense of safety: He's safe, he tells himself, "if I be not fool enough to make open confession" (1225). This thought is his undoing. "I well, too well understood that, to *think*, in my situation, was to be lost" (1225-6).

Concealment is ultimately unbearable for these killers, for whom

“The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”

secrets are like bodies buried alive, imprisoned souls seeking freedom. Thus, in “The Imp of the Perverse”:

For a moment, I experienced all the pangs of suffocation; I became blind, and deaf, and giddy; and then, some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back. The long-imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul.

Poe gives minute attention to the style of the released confession: “They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption” (1226). Interruption would restore human separateness; these killers long for human transparency.

We have to consider other factors in making sense of the odd balance of crime and confession in these tales. Surely Poe had aesthetic reasons for minimizing the gore in his stories; as David Reynolds has pointed out, he wished to distance himself from popular practitioners of crime journalism, who relied on explicit horror to shock and titillate their readers.<sup>9</sup> It is Poe’s corresponding emphasis on the act of confession that needs explanation. “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Imp” all record a confession – a *perverse confession* since the crimes would otherwise have been undetected. (All three tales purport to be first-person narratives; they represent confessions within confessions – confessions to the second degree. These killers need to confess to the *perverse act of having confessed*. The fear of the criminals is not the fear of being caught, it is the fear of being *cut off*, of being misunderstood. Thus the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse”: “Had I not been thus prolix, you might either have misunderstood me altogether, or, with the rabble, have fancied me mad.” Here, as in the other two tales, the claim to sanity is a response to the fear of being cut off from other people, of being “misunderstood altogether.”

The speaker of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” as we noted earlier, tells his story to convince his audience that he is not mad, not cut off from other people. The tale-telling heart is finally the narrator’s own, for this is a tale about the need to communicate, the fear of being cut off, of becoming incommunicado. The narrator of “The

Black Cat" writes: "Yet, mad am I not. . . . But to-morrow I die, and today I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly . . . a series of mere household events." Communication, for these speakers, is itself a kind of salvation.

With this fear of isolation in mind, we can begin to make sense of what drives these killers crazy. The features these men can't stand are uncannily inexpressive: the eye with the hideous "film" or "veil" over it; the missing eye of the cats; the black fur. Similarly, the meaning of the ever-present walls in these stories is easily decoded. They represent the fantasy of being immured in one's own body, with the voice suffocated inside, the tale-telling heart silenced. Poe is quite explicit in "The Black Cat" when he says that the wall "fell bodily."

What of the beds that recur in so many of Poe's tales? We see immediately the attraction of beds as the site of many interrelated activities: sleep and dreaming; making love and conceiving children; dying. It is astonishing how many of Poe's stories centrally involve beds and bedrooms. In "The Imp" the victim is murdered by a poisoned candle while reading in bed; a bed is the means of escape in the Rue Morgue murders; and there are many tales – "Ligeia" especially – in which a woman lies on her deathbed.

Beds figure more prominently still in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat." In the earlier story the killer, after a week of watching the old man asleep in bed, uses the bed itself as a murder weapon. It is not clear exactly how this is done, and this very lack of clarity makes Poe's choice of the bed more emphatic; he's willing to sacrifice verisimilitude – why not a knife or a noose? – in order to stress the meanings associated with the bed. Here is the description of the murder:

He shrieked once – once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more. (795–6)

“The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Again the wall is clearly enough a stand-in for the body: “it would not be heard through the wall.” But the bed also seems closely related to the body – Poe even appears to be playing on the similar sounds of the two words. The link of bed and dead body is clear enough in the sentence: “I removed the bed and examined the corpse.”

Why should the bed be the murder weapon? Why not something more keyed to the filmed and infuriating eye? The answer, I think, is that whereas the bed resumes meanings associated with the body and its dissolution, it also draws on meanings linked to sexuality. The relationship between killer and victim in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is never specified, but we are told that the killer “loved the old man.” The relation between killer and victim is similarly oblique in “The Imp of the Perverse,” though we learn, in passing, that the killer inherits the victim’s money.

Only in “The Black Cat” are these themes of intimacy and violence explored. We find ourselves amid walls and beds again after the killer’s perverse act of hanging his cat – after he has “hung it *because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offense.*” The following night the killer awakes to find “The curtains of my bed were in flames.” When he returns to the ruins of the house he finds the following scene:

The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was found in a compartment wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house, and against which had rested the head of my bed. (853)

A crowd has assembled around this wall: “I approached and saw, as if graven in *bas relief* upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat.*” The word “graven” is a brilliant stroke, for this is the cat’s grave as well as his engraved monument. Poe is again – as with the pen/pen-knife and the poisoned reading candle – associating the violence of writing with the violence he is describing. Similarly, the “head of the bed” reminds us of the relation between bed and body.

Many critics have seen in this tale a close link between the cat and the wife, but this seems to me to place too much emphasis on marriage for at least two reasons. First, Poe is interested more

in the issue of access to other minds – “hung it because *I knew* that it had loved me, and because *I felt* it had given me no reason of offense” [my emphasis] – and second, Poe is as interested in our access to the minds of cats as to the minds of people. (This is as good a place as any to acknowledge that I am leaving out two aspects of the narrative that are of obvious importance to a full reading of “The Black Cat” but are tangential to the themes of this essay: the issue of alcohol abuse and the issue of violence against women.)

The evidence for the second point lies in such essays as “Instinct vs Reason – A Black Cat,” in which Poe speculates about the inner life of cats. After describing in some detail how his cat has mastered the art of opening the complicated latch of a door, he concludes that “The line which demarcates the instinct of the brute creation from the boasted reason of man, is, beyond doubt, of the most shadowy and unsatisfactory character” (477). Poe’s meditations bear a surprising similarity to some of Wittgenstein’s regarding the difference between animal thinking and that of humans. “Why can’t a dog simulate pain?” asks Wittgenstein. “Is he too honest?” (250) Both writers speculate on how animals regard the future; Wittgenstein asks why we have difficulty imagining a hopeful animal (“And why not?” [174]), whereas Poe claims that the way his cat negotiates, step by step, the act of opening the latch demonstrates almost prophetic powers.

We are more interested, however, in the other focus of Poe’s concern: our access to other (human) minds. “Unmotivated treachery, for the mere intent of injury, and self violence are,” according to Allen Tate, “Poe’s obsessive subjects.”<sup>10</sup> This seems to me partly an oversimplification and partly wrong. Poe’s killers do have motives, but these motives remain concealed from the killers. In the space remaining in this essay, I want to specify the link in Poe’s tales between the profession of love and the need to confess. Both arise from what Frost, in our epigraph, called “the fear of Man – the fear that men won’t understand us and we shall be cut off from them.”

We need to understand what the teller/killer of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is really telling us when he claims that “Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man.” He is, despite

himself, providing both object (or motive) and passion. It is precisely his love for the old man that makes him kill, just as the man’s love for the cat – “hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me” – prompts the murder of the cat and, presumably, the wife as well. At this point I must acknowledge the work of the philosopher Stanley Cavell in relation to the nature of Shakespearean tragedy. In plays like *Othello* and *King Lear* Cavell finds a repeated pattern of what he calls “the avoidance of love.” Tragedy results from the burden that Lear and Othello find imposed by the love of others. In some sketchy and speculative remarks about Poe’s “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse,” Cavell invites us to look for “some relation between the wish to be loved and the fear of it.”<sup>11</sup>

The man we encounter in “The Black Cat” seems (and I am not claiming this is necessarily Cavell’s view) to find the devotion of others repulsive. When the second cat follows the narrator home, he finds that “its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed.”

With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. (855)

Even in his dreams he finds the cat with him, and awakens “to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight . . . incumbent eternally upon my heart!” Our suspicion that Poe wishes, with the word “incumbent,” to remind us of the sexual attentions of the mythical *incubus* and its counterpart the *succubus* is confirmed in the sentence immediately following: “Beneath the pressure of torments such as these, the feeble remnant of the good within me *succumbed*.”

It is another act of unbearable intimacy – when cat and wife insist on “accompanying” him into the cellar, and the cat follows him down “the steep stairs” so closely that it “exasperated me to madness” (856) – that incites the man to kill his two closest companions. We don’t need Freud to point out the erotic connotations of steep stairs in dreams to feel that this man finds intimacy intolerable.



*New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*

What Poe is giving voice to in these murders is the second fear Frost names: "the fear that we shan't prove worthy in the eyes of someone who knows us at least as well as we know ourselves." Frost calls this the fear of God, but it could as well be called the fear of Love. Here I am reminded of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's extraordinary reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son. Rilke interprets this tale of another once-tender man who flees into intemperance as "the legend of a man who didn't want to be loved." The picture Rilke paints is remarkably like the speaker in "The Black Cat." Here is Poe:

From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals. (850)

And here is Rilke:

When he was a child, everyone in the house loved him. He grew up not knowing it could be any other way and got used to their tenderness, when he was a child.<sup>12</sup>

Both Poe's narrator and Rilke's prodigal come to find this intimacy unbearable. Rilke:

He wouldn't have been able to say it, but when he spent the whole day roaming around outside and didn't even want to have the dogs with him, it was because they too loved him; because in their eyes he could see observation and sympathy, expectation, concern; because in their presence too he couldn't do anything without giving pleasure or pain.

The son's flight is from what he perceives as the prison of love — the way it defines and confines us.

The dogs, in whom expectation had been growing all day long, ran through the hedges and drove you together into the one they recognized. And the house did the rest. Once you walked in to its full smell, most matters were already decided. A few details might still be changed; but on the whole you were already the person they thought you were; the person for whom they had long ago fashioned a life, out of his small past and their own desires; the creature belonging to them all, who stood day and night under the influence of their love.

Both Poe and Rilke (who would have known Poe’s works through Baudelaire’s essays and translations if through no more direct way) find in the very walls of the house and the eyes of pets the confining nature of domestic life, of what Poe calls “mere household events.”

If there is salvation for Rilke’s prodigal in learning to love, and in accepting, eventually, God’s love, there is none for Poe’s murderers. As Allen Tate remarked, “He has neither Purgatory nor Heaven.”<sup>13</sup> Poe’s narratives can be read as cautionary tales – “Go thou and do otherwise” – but rightly read their warning is more complex. Poe seems, like Frost, to be saying: These fears are always with us – the fear of love and the fear of isolation. Taken to extremes, they both lead to disaster: One cat avoids us and is blinded, another cat follows us and is killed. To live life is to steer a dangerous course between these extremes and there is no point at which the current widens. To declare oneself safe – as the imp of the perverse tempts us to do – is to be lost.

#### NOTES

- 1 Robert Frost, “Introduction” to Edwin Arlington Robinson, *King Jasper* (New York: Scribner’s, 1935), p. vi.
- 2 *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 528. All future page references to this edition are indicated in parentheses in the text.
- 3 Richard Wilbur, “The House of Poe,” in *Edgar Allan Poe: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), pp. 51–69.
- 4 Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 8.
- 5 David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), pp. 225–48.
- 6 Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1426.
- 7 Richard Wilbur, “Poe and the Art of Suggestion,” in *Critical Essays on Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), p. 166.
- 8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958). The numbers attached to this and later references to Wittgenstein refer not to pages but to numbered sections of the *Investigations*.

*New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*

- 9 Reynolds remarks that "Poe . . . avoids repulsive accounts of violence or blood, shifting his attention to the crazed mind of the obsessed narrator. By removing us from the realm of horrid gore to that of diseased psychology, he rises above . . . tawdry sensationalism" (*Beneath the American Renaissance*, p. 232).
- 10 Allen Tate, "Our Cousin, Mr. Poe," in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 46.
- 11 Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 137. See also Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 481-96.
- 12 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 251-60.
- 13 Tate, "Our Cousin," p. 46.