

The Urge to Tell vs. the Need to Conceal: Confession as Narrative Desire in Poe's "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse"

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ABSTRACT

Relying on Peter Brooks' concept of "narrative desire," the paper seeks to identify and explore its applicability and manifestations in three of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories: namely, "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse." Focusing on the role and nature of the narrators' confessions in these three tales, this article seeks to show how the need or the urge to tell, constituting a recurrent preoccupation in Poe, may be further integrated within a framework of psychoanalytic criticism in which the emphasis is shifted from either the author or the text toward critical reading itself. As a result, the paper draws attention to the fundamental ambivalence permeating the construction of these texts, between telling and concealing. These contradictory tendencies are placed within Brooks' theory of "textual energetics" and discussed in relation to his formulations on initiatory desire as well as the desire for the end, concepts which Brooks further connects to Freud's model of instinctual drives in the form of Eros and Thanatos.

KEYWORDS

E.A. Poe, short story, confession, murders, narrative desire, Peter Brooks, unconscious, ambivalence, instincts, psychoanalytic criticism

In three of Edgar Allan Poe's tales, "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse," perhaps the most puzzling or the most "perverse" aspect lies not necessarily in the madness or the cold-bloodedness of the three narrators, but rather in the paradox of their respective confessions. What is noteworthy is the nature of these confessions: their inexplicable, irrational quality, as if driven by a certain kind of urgency, by a force seemingly independent of their will. If the crimes committed appear more or less calculated, their confessions by contrast are almost unaccountably impulsive. It is therefore at this point in Poe's short stories that we truly find ourselves in what may be termed as the realm of the unconscious: an unconscious which manifests itself in the form of the irrepressible urge to tell, an urge even stranger as it appears to spring from otherwise perfectly undetectable crimes. The murderous narrators all act as if suddenly possessed by something incomprehensible, even to themselves. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," for instance, while conversing with the unassuming officers the narrator places his chair in the very spot under which his victim lay dismembered: "[...] I brought chairs into the room," he says, "and desired them *here* to rest from their fatigues; while I ... placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim."¹ Deafened by the sound of the beating heart, in a sudden paranoid outburst, his confession erupts: "I admit the deed! — tear up the planks! — here, here! — it is the beating of his hideous heart!"² Something of a similar nature can be found in "The Black Cat" when our main

1 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart," in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. II. (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1896), 574.

2 Poe, "The Tell-Tale," 575.

protagonist, wanting to reassure the officers of his innocence, suddenly and surprisingly, even to himself ("I scarcely knew what I uttered at all"), knocks on the precise spot where he had entombed his wife: "I rapped heavily, with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom."³

As in the other two tales, in "The Imp of the Perverse," this irresistible, "perverse" urge to confess also proves uncontainable: "I felt a maddening desire to shriek aloud," the narrator tells us until, he says, "the long-imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul."⁴ In this irrepressible confession, he acts as if possessed by something which he cannot account; the "secret," even to him, appears to simply "burst out." The narrator dissociates to such a degree that he seems to lose all memory of his confession: "They say," he tells us, "that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry."⁵ If in "The Tell-Tale Heart" it is the beating of the old man's heart and in "The Black Cat" it is the "informing voice" of the cat which "consign" these narrators "to the hangman," in "The Imp of the Perverse" it is his own sentences which literally "sentence" him to death: "[...] the brief but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell."⁶ It is also interesting to note how the narrator speaks about "the" sentences and not "his" sentences, as if they belonged to someone else, to something from "without." Already from these examples we may begin to distinguish two major opposing drives: a need for concealment (for the crimes to go undetected), paralleled by a paradoxical urge to tell (all three narrators finally confess).

A number of critics have focused on "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" as tales of confession. Marie Bonaparte, for instance, one of the earliest psychoanalytic critics of Poe, speaks in 1949 about the "confessional urge"⁷ in Poe's "The Black Cat." For her, the narrator's confession is both self-punishing and exhibitionary. It appears, she says, "motivated by two apparently opposite trends: the pressure of conscience [...] and our instinctual urges towards criminal activities, which may even reach the exhibitionism we find here."⁸ The narrator's confession, she believes, illustrates the concomitant action of the super-ego (through conscience) and the boisterous, exhibitionary activity of the id. As a result, she locates the ultimate "perverseness" of these tales in the "exhibitionist and self-punishing confessional urge."⁹

Arthur Brown in 1994 focuses on Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" as "the story of a confession" or "a tale of telling." The narrator's confession, for him, fulfills a double function: in the first instance, it "dramatizes the announcement of death in language," speaking of the "displacement of both the murder victim and the self" and, on the other hand, it establishes a relationship between the narrator's condemning himself to death and the birth of his tale.¹⁰ By articulating the sentences which literally send him to death, the narrator gives birth to the text and it is only through his death that the story may live. For Henry Sussman, what constitutes "one of literature's most compelling attractions"

3 Poe, "The Tell-Tale," 430.

4 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse," in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. II. (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1896), 535-36.

5 Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse," 536.

6 Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse," 536.

7 Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-analytic Interpretation*, trans. John Rodker (London, Imago Publishing, 1949), 463.

8 Bonaparte, *The Life and Works*, 463.

9 Bonaparte, *The Life and Works*, 464.

10 Arthur Brown, "Death and Telling in Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 31 (1994): 197.

is the fact that it permits the transgression of the boundaries between the private and the public “without devastating consequences.”¹¹ The impossibility of such transgression in our lives and its realization in works such as that of Poe, Dostoyevsky or Kafka sets the ground for a discussion of what he calls one of the “formative instances of literary transference.”¹² “A carefully chosen and well-formulated literary image,” Sussman says, “can perform this transference at the same time that it constitutes an inexhaustible object for interpretation.”¹³

This specifically literary “confounding of the public and the private” is also what lies at the core of Poe’s tales. Turning to “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Sussman sees it as more than a mere depiction of a madman, but rather as a “chronicle of acting-out” which, as such, “describes the site from which literature is produced.”¹⁴ The term “acting-out” which he employs is used in its Freudian sense. It may be remembered that in Freud’s theory of transference, the analysand “acts out” previous relationships instead of remembering them. More interestingly however, Sussman translates Freud’s concept of acting out into the literary context of Poe’s tale: “Within the assessment of its own status that ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ provides, ‘writing out’ is but a hair’s breadth away from ‘acting out’.”¹⁵ This concept of “writing-out,” that is made public can be further integrated with the model of creativity in Freud’s essay “Creative Writing and Day-dreaming.” What separates creative writing from play or fantasy, as Freud points out, is precisely this public dimension mentioned by Sussman. Unlike the pleasures of playing and day-dreaming, which are private, what Freud terms the “fore-pleasure” of writing takes place, by contrast, in public.¹⁶

While Sussman also mentions other instances of transference within the text such as the narrator’s transferring of his “terror” to his victim as well as the sado-masochistic transferring of affect and aggression to the old man, perhaps the most important issue that the commentator touches upon is the tale’s fundamental ambivalence between its desire for expression (for making public) and its need for concealment (for keeping private). As Sussman observes, the ironic dimension of the narrator’s acting-out is provided by a profound ambivalence between his urge to tell, that is, to make the private public and on the other hand his fear of apprehension. The need to tell in Poe’s narrator ultimately overwhelms his fear of discovery. Sussman’s observation can be extended to other Poe tales. In “The Visionary” (an early version of what would later become “The Assigination”), concerning the matter of his full name, the narrator tells us: “it is a name, moreover, which for reasons intrinsically of no weight, yet in fact conclusive, I am determined to conceal.”¹⁷ Similarly, in Poe’s “Berenice,” for instance, while Egaeus does disclose his “baptismal name,” he “will not mention” the name of his “family”¹⁸ In “William Wilson” as well one may find this recurring need for concealment in the

11 Henry Sussman, “A Note on the Public and the Private in Literature: The Literature of ‘Acting Out,’” in Edgar Allan Poe’s *“The Tell-Tale Heart” and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 66.

12 Sussman, “A Note,” 56.

13 Sussman, “A Note,” 66.

14 Sussman, “A Note,” 58.

15 Sussman, “A Note,” 61.

16 Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writing and Day-dreaming,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. IX. (London: Random House, 2001), 153.

17 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Visionary [The Assigination]” in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (1834): 40-43.

18 Edgar Allan Poe, “Berenice,” in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol.III. (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1896), 75.

self-maintained secrecy surrounding Wilson's real name: "Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson," the narrator says, "the fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation."¹⁹

Yet to return to Sussman's discussion of the role of confession within "The Tell-Tale Heart," Sussman adapts what psychoanalysis describes as the compulsion to act out, which occurs in transference, to the literary scene's compulsion to write-out. Yet the reverse also constitutes a possibility. A specifically literary concept such as irony, acquires, in Poe, a psychological dimension. "The Tell-Tale Heart's" ambivalence over the desire to tell and the fear of discovery represents in its transgression of the private and the public an ironic dimension. Yet irony for Sussman constitutes more than a rhetorical device; it corresponds instead to "a structure" which defines the very basis "of our psychological life" and whose effects manifest both in life and in reading:

[I]rony becomes a structure at the basis of our psychological life. Irony first defines the watershed between knowledge and expression, and then militates for its bridging over, both in the form of acting out and in literary artifacts. The vision of irony compels us, both as individuals and readers, toward the brink where our privacy opens into the public domain. The results are to be found both in the living and in the reading.²⁰

Addressing similar issues, Christopher Benfey remarks that Poe's "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse" are tales which center more on the confession of the crimes rather than the idea of detection. What constitutes the most "perverse" aspect of these confessions to Benfey is the fact that they appear without motive, especially as the crimes of the narrators could have easily gone undetected. As such, they represent "confessions within confessions": Poe's murderers "need to confess the perverse act of having confessed."²¹ Thus the fear of the narrators does not constitute a fear of being caught, but rather the fear of being "misunderstood."²² Like other critics, Benfey also notes how the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" continually strives to persuade us of his sanity. Nevertheless, the main emphasis of tale does not revolve around the narrator's madness or his sanity, but on the text's "need to communicate" and its "fear of being cut off, of becoming incommunicado."²³ This is why, for him, "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" are tales "of telling," that is, tales which capitalize on the need to tell.

The need to tell, an issue which both Sussman and Benfey discuss in relation to Poe's tales, also constitutes a core concept in Peter Brooks' narratological model of "textual energetics." According to Brooks, the main driving force of any plot is what he calls "narrative desire." Desire, it may be remembered, also occupies a central role in Lacan's theory of transference. The analyst in the Lacanian model constitutes a "subject of desire" who must in turn locate and identify the analysand's unconscious desire. This is why Lacan defines the transference relationship as a "relation of desire to

19 Edgar Allan Poe, "William Wilson," in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol.III. (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1896), 44.

20 Sussman, "A Note," 66.

21 Christopher Benfey, "Poe and the Unreadable: 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" in *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 37.

22 Benfey, "Poe and the Unreadable," 37.

23 Benfey, "Poe and the Unreadable," 37.

desire."²⁴ Lacan's "desire of the analyst" therefore speaks of both the analyst's desire and the analysand's desire for the analyst. Peter Brooks, on the other hand, combines Lacan's notion of desire with the erotic drive of Freud's pleasure principle, which he then applies to the dynamics of the literary text. The "desire of the narrative" for Brooks capitalizes on both the text's need to tell and the reader's need for the narrative. In Poe, it may therefore be argued that the narrators' confessions capitalize on both their desire to articulate the narrative and our desire to consume it. The paradoxical confessions of the "mad, un-mad" narrators are construed on this relation of desire to desire: the storyteller's desire, which sets out to locate the unconscious desire of the reader. The need to tell in Poe can therefore be connected with Brooks' concept of narrative desire. Yet, at the same time, it may also be related to what may be termed as "literary seduction," or that particular feature which draws the reader into the text. This "primary human drive" in the form of the need to tell says Brooks:

seeks to seduce and to subjugate the listener, to implicate him in the thrust of a desire that never can quite speak its name-never can quite come to the point-but that insists on speaking over and over again its movement toward that name.²⁵

In "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse," it may be therefore said that the narrators' urge to tell ultimately animates both what Brooks calls "the narrative of desire" (the text's desire for its own articulation) and the "the desire of narrative" (the reader's desire for the narrative). The urge to tell is additionally reflected, for instance, in the title of "The Tell-Tale Heart" which creates together with the text a *mise en abîme* effect: "The Tell-Tale Heart" is literally the tale of the telling of a heart. Johann Pillai similarly takes note of the "abyssal, self-mirroring" nature of the title of Poe's short story "by which the tale names itself as an organ without a body, a fragment which tells a tale about a fragment which tells a tale."²⁶ At the same time, adapting Brooks' model of "textual energetics" to Poe's tales, it may be further added that in Poe the need to tell is paralleled by an antagonistic drive in the form of the need to conceal. It is this fundamental ambivalent nature of his texts, torn between two opposing drives, the desire to tell and the need to conceal, which constitutes an element of literary seductiveness.

If Freud speaks of transferences as "new editions," Lacan describes transference phenomena in terms of the "dead desire." Yet, as Brooks points out, the paradox of the dead desire is that it continues to live on. We are therefore dealing with a dead desire which cannot completely die, but comes back in the form of "new editions." This idea of the "dead desire" may be related to what Brown identifies, in Poe's tales, as "undying death":

24 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1998), 235.

25 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 61.

26 Johann Pillai, "Death and Its Moments: The End of the Reader in History," in *Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 107.

In 'Berenice,' 'Morella,' 'Ligeia,' 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' 'The Black Cat,' and 'The Cask of Amontillado,' either the dead literally come back to life or undying death is given form in the event of premature burial.²⁷

The "dead desire" which continues to live in "new editions" also can be found in Poe's texts as the doubling of previous characters in new forms. In "The Black Cat," for instance, this is reflected in the apparition of the second cat which, although different, bears a striking similarity to Pluto, the original one. In "Morella," it may be said that the "dead desire" continues to live on through Morella's daughter. The second cat and Morella's daughter both represent examples of transferential "new editions," of desires which cannot die but perpetually resurface in new forms. In tales such as "The Black Cat," "Morella" or "Ligeia" one may thus observe how the original element is ultimately transferred upon a subsequent relationship.

Peter Brooks refers to various manifestations of desire in the literary text. He describes, for instance, desire as something which is expressed within the narrative, i.e. "desire as narrative thematic;" desire as a force which propels the narrative or "desire as narrative motor;" as well as desire which acts as motivating force for beginning the narrative or "desire as the very intention of narrative language and the act of telling."²⁸ In Brooks, narrative desire and death are also intimately connected. Superimposing Freud's model of the life instinct and the death instinct, of Eros and Thanatos, upon the literary text, Brooks posits that the text is inhabited, not only by the desire of the narrative as catalyzing creative force, but also by what he calls the "desire for the end":

If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*.²⁹

In consequence, what pushes the narrative forward is desire as Eros, as Life Instinct (the confessions themselves in these three tales by Poe), yet what finally determines meaning is Thanatos or "the desire for the end;" in "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse," the articulation of the stories determines the end of both the narrators' lives and that of the narrative. This simultaneous desire for the narrative and desire for the end is what constitutes the literary text's contradictory nature:

Any narrative plot, in the sense of a significant organization of the life story, necessarily espouses in some form [...] the realization of the desire for narrative encounters the limits of narrative, that is, the fact that one can tell a life only in terms of its limits or margins. The telling is always in terms of the impending end.³⁰

as has previously been mentioned, in "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and the "Imp of the Perverse," the birth of the text comes with the death of the narrators: telling and dying, in these texts, are therefore related. In the same vein, Brooks remarks that

27 Arthur Brown, "Literature and the Impossibility of Death: Poe's 'Berenice,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50 (1996): 449.

28 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 54.

29 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 52.

30 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 52.

“desiring” and “dying” constitute processes which are intimately connected in literature: “once there is text, expression, writing,” he says, “one becomes subject to the processes of desiring and dying.”³¹

Between its “initiatory desire” and the “desire for the end, the literary text opens into a middle, “dilatory” space. This “dilatory” space frequently becomes, according to Brooks, a site of the manifestations of the compulsion to repeat. Transferring onto the literary text Freud’s compulsion to repeat which defines transference phenomena but may also be found in the mechanisms of trauma and as part of the death instinct, Brooks argues that repetition, both as device and as psychical process, lies at the heart of the literary experience. In what follows, we will briefly approach the matter of repetition within the text itself, discussing its function in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” as well as its connection to Peter Brooks’ model of “textual energetics.”

Brooks explains that in the text repetition and the compulsion to repeat manifest themselves in the form of various literary tropes. Their role, he says, is “to bind the energy of the text so as to make its final discharge more effective.”³² Returning to Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” it soon becomes apparent that the narrator’s discourse exhibits a pregnant repetitiveness, both thematically and at the level of language. One may observe, for instance, how he perpetually and sometimes even quite abruptly returns to the question of his sanity: “[...] but why *will* you say that I am mad?”³³ he asks in the beginning of the text. Two paragraphs later, he returns to the same question: “You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing.”³⁴ After describing the murder of the old man, he again re-centers the focus on his “un-madness”: “If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when [...]”³⁵ A more interesting type of repetitiveness, however, is to be found in the pattern of his speech where the marked tendency towards the emphatic repetition of certain words and phrases soon becomes evident: “nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous,”³⁶ “slowly — very, very slowly,”³⁷ “cautiously — oh, so cautiously — cautiously,”³⁸ “I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily,”³⁹ “a little — a very, very little,”⁴⁰ “how stealthily, stealthily,”⁴¹ “it was open — wide, wide open.”⁴² As the narrative progresses, his repetitiveness becomes more acute. In his description of the murder, for example, he reiterates that the old man “was dead,” “stone, stone dead,” no less than three times, while the word “louder” features four times within the same paragraph:

It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant [my own emphasis]. The old man’s terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! — do you mark me well? [emphasis mine ...] The old man was dead. I removed the bed

31 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 52.

32 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 108.

33 Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” 568.

34 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 568.

35 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 573.

36 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 568.

37 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 569.

38 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 569.

39 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 570.

40 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 571.

41 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 571.

42 Poe, “The Tell-Tale,” 571.

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.⁴³

It is however within the last paragraph that his repetitiveness reaches a culminating point. "Yet the sound increased" he says, reiterating this four more times within the same paragraph: "but the noise steadily increased," "but the noise steadily increased," "but the noise steadily increased," "but the noise arose over all and continually increased."⁴⁴ As his speech becomes more frantic and more fragmented, the word "louder" is finally repeated seven times in the course of the paragraph: "It grew louder — louder — *louder!* [...] I must scream or die! — and now — again! — hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder!*"⁴⁵

The function of repetition in "The Tell-Tale Heart" can certainly be correlated with Brooks' critical-psychoanalytic model and considered as one of the modalities by which the text "binds psychic energy" towards its more effective final discharge. At the same time, it may also be discussed in relation to what Roland Barthes defines as the "eroticism" of the literary text. In Barthes' view, as repetition provides a primal rhythm to the literary production, it thus constitutes one of the instances of what he calls the "bliss of language."⁴⁶ At one point in her interpretation of "The Tell-Tale Heart," Bonaparte makes a brief, but significant observation on the physical importance of the human heart-beat: "The heart-beat," she says, "is so vitally important that, if it stops, death ensues."⁴⁷ Bonaparte's mentioning of the issue of the heart-beat in Poe's tale is noteworthy because it may be correlated with the function of repetition in the text. The narrator's brief yet poignant repetitions, which increase in frequency as the tale progresses simulate in language the rhythm of a beating heart. The effect they create, it may be said, replicates the sound of a heart-beat. The narrator's hearing of the sound of the old man's beating heart is therefore duplicated by the reader's hearing of the sound of the heart-beat of the text. Yet this is not the only instance where Poe's use of form further advances the effect of the text upon the reader. Brett Zimmerman remarks, for instance, that in "The Premature Burial," Poe's use of "lengthy, left-branching" sentences constitutes "the linguistic equivalent to the physical action of our holding our breath."⁴⁸

The concept of "narrative desire" advanced by Brooks, as shown above, may find multiple applications in Poe's texts. In tales such as "The Imp of the Perverse," "The Black Cat" or "The Tell-Tale Heart" one may therefore speak of various manifestations of narrative desire. In a first instance, the desire of the narrative, in its initiatory function within the text, reveals itself in the confessional urge to tell which all three narrators exhibit. Furthermore, something which Brooks does not mention yet is fully discernible in Poe is the desire to conceal, which co-exists as an antagonistic force alongside the desire to tell. The dénouements of these stories also set the ground for a discussion of the manifestation of the "desire for the end," especially since the end of the texts equate with the ends of the narrators' lives. Between initiatory desire and the desire for the end, in the dilatory space of the texts one may find markers of the compulsion to repeat. In Poe, we have seen, repetition fulfills multiple functions: it replicates psychical phenomena, but it also advances, through form, the effect of the text. Lacan's notion of the "dead

43 Poe, "The Tell-Tale," 573.

44 Poe, "The Tell-Tale," 574-75.

45 Poe, "The Tell-Tale," 575.

46 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 6.

47 Bonaparte, "The Life and Works," 496.

48 Brett Zimmerman, *Edgar Allan Poe: Rhetoric and Style* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 11.

desire," re-appropriated by Brooks, presents itself in the projective transferential images of the double in tales such as "The Black Cat" or "Morella."

In what can be said to constitute the essential "seductiveness" of Poe's tales, that is to say, which elements are responsible for drawing and keeping the reader into the text, a particular characteristic which would stand out would be the "undecidability" of meaning. The intriguing contradictions within Poe's tales, texts which appear perpetually suspended between madness and saneness, generates an "undecidability," an uncertainty of interpretation which is in itself seductive. Therefore perhaps one of the most seductive elements of Poe's tales is provided by their fundamental ambivalence between their simultaneous desire to tell and their desire to hide. This paradoxical force manifests itself in almost all of Poe's short stories. They exhibit a yearning to be read while at the same time a resistance to being read. There is a specific double-edged provocativeness in Poe: aware of its own textuality, each tale draws the reader in, inviting a particular reading while never fully permitting a complete one. It is open and closed, seductive, yet impenetrable. The co-existing need to tell and need to conceal confers Poe's tales a particular *unknowable* quality. We may never fully know why Egaeus takes out his dead wife's teeth or if the narrators of "The Black Cat" or "The Tell-Tale Heart" are or are not truly mad. Yet this unknowable dimension of Poe's texts replicates something of the structure of the unconscious itself, which like the texts can never be fully known, only interpreted through various signs and symptoms, never fully uncovered, only guessed at. The unconscious is, by definition, unreadable. Therefore, it may be finally said that the seductiveness of Poe's tales carries something of the seductiveness of the unconscious itself: contradictory, ambiguous, illogical, paradoxical, ambivalent and indecipherable in their perpetual desire to be deciphered. The challenge of psychoanalytic criticism *vis a vis* Poe may consist not in trying to explain his texts, but rather in endeavoring to locate precisely what is inexplicable in them.

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