Delaney Cecil Page will graduate from the University of Memphis in the spring of 2014. He takes pride in belonging to the English Honors Program and the Philosophy Honors Program as well as in preparing to graduate summa cum laude with University Honors with Thesis. His academic studies have become his hobbies; he is most interested in literary theory and its connections with aesthetic and continental philosophy. In an attempt to combine these passions, he wrote “The Soul that Vexes Itself: The Philosophy of Poe’s Perverseness” in the fall of 2013. This essay explores the relationship among religion, self-awareness, and the ability to choose to do wrong in Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories, particularly “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse.” He is currently working on a second thesis project that addresses a similar issue in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*.

Delaney Page was awarded the prize for best paper in the Humanities category.
Delaney Page
The Soul that Vexes Itself: The Philosophy of Poe’s Perverseness

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“Oh, tell me, who first announced, who was the first to proclaim that man does dirty only because he doesn’t know his real interests; and that were he to be enlightened, were his eyes to be opened to his real, normal interests, man would immediately stop doing dirty, would immediately become good and noble, because, being enlightened and understanding his real profit, he would see his real profit precisely in the good, and it’s common knowledge that no man can act knowingly against his own profit, consequently, out of necessity, so to speak, he would start doing good? Oh, the babe! oh, the pure, innocent child!”

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Notes from Underground

Edgar Allan Poe’s recurring use of unreliable, even insane, first-person narrators has attracted such attention as to become a leading signifier of his style. J. Gerald Kennedy says, “Poe was… the first important American writer to foreground violence and to probe its psychological origins. Especially in stories like ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ and ‘The Black Cat,’ he portrayed brutality from the subject position of the perpetrator, fetishizing the desire for power or ‘ascendancy’ over an adversary” (4). Kennedy claims that this first-person account of derangement, in which Poe puts the reader behind the eyes of a madman, is a primary reason for Poe’s continued popularity into the twenty-first century. The speakers in some of Poe’s most popular stories intrigue readers by questioning their own sanity. “Mad indeed would I be” to expect the reader’s belief in the coming tale, says the narrator of “The Black Cat” in his opening paragraph, “[y]et mad am I not” (348-349). Rather, he considers himself awestruck, and he seems hopeful in suggesting, “Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the common place—some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own,” a mind that will be able to attribute his ghastly story to “an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” (349). Reading Poe’s work becomes an active process of deduction because the reader must constantly evaluate the reliability of the storyteller.

Perhaps because Poe’s narrators are so frequently insane, critics tend to investigate these characters as psychological case studies. In her extensive psychoanalytic interpretation of Poe and his writings, Marie Bonaparte, student of Sigmund Freud, diagnoses the speaker of “The Black Cat” as a sadist and masochist with an intense fear of castration that she relates back to the author. For David Leverenz, Poe’s speakers seek the pleasure and pain of sensations in order to experience the relief of submission as the author inverts social hierarchies. Most commonly, critics
explain the skewed morality of Poe’s fictional worlds as a result of his characters’ mental abnormalities. For example, Susan Amper and James W. Gargano insist that the narrator of “The Black Cat” must be a liar, seeking to fool either his prosecutors or himself and allay his guilt by identifying as a victim of what Poe calls “perverseness,” or the inexplicable urge to do wrong for its own sake.¹

This essay argues that the dominant mode of reading Poe’s fiction through a psychological framework overlooks the philosophical problems that his texts raise, particularly regarding perverseness, a concept Poe intends as a philosophical question rather than a psychological malady. Perverseness surfaces as a guiding problem in many of Poe’s tales, and in order to prove that he intends to make an ethical claim about it, this article will analyze the two stories in which Poe defines the sentiment and in which it plays an explicit role in characters’ decisions: “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse.” In an attempt to distinguish the philosophical implications of perverseness from those of a psychological exemption from guilt, this analysis will focus particularly on the role of authority as it exists as moral guidance in these pieces, mainly through reverence to God, serving at least as a threat of punishment for wrongdoing. This essay will evaluate Poe’s perverseness as it is described by his narrators—that is, unlike the work of most of Poe’s critics, it will trust these narrators at least in their fundamental claims—and under this condition, perverseness will be shown to represent an authentic philosophical question regarding the possibility of knowingly doing a wrong or evil action. It is in this sense that perverseness is most valuable as an ethical concept.² This article aims to expose the limitations of psychological readings of Poe—specifically, the phenomenon that he details in “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse” has a universal quality that psychology struggles to incorporate. While psychology may attempt to preserve understanding by explaining perverseness as deviant, philosophy will try to systematize it as a universal component of humankind’s ethical decisions. This essay will conclude by examining the relationship between perverseness and self-consciousness as Poe promotes it in “The Philosophy of Composition,” an essay concerning his aesthetic theory of writing.

1. Poe’s Perverseness in Philosophical History

Poe utilizes both theme and form to alert the reader to the importance of perverseness. In “The Black Cat,” he relays the first-person
account of a struggling alcoholic who, overcome by a mysterious desire to do wrong, kills his once-loved pet, an enormous black cat named Pluto, before eventually murdering his wife in a rage provoked by a second black cat adopted as Pluto’s replacement. Published in 1843, the tale includes Poe’s first explicit explanation of perverseness. Rather than attempt a full psychological analysis of a character developed in such a short piece—despite being one of Poe’s masterworks, the story can now be anthologized in a mere seven pages—this reading will focus on the narrator’s claim that he is a victim of perverseness and will, for the most part, assume that the narrator means to and is capable of telling the truth.

The speaker first notices the feeling of perverseness after he drunkenly cuts out one of Pluto’s eyes. As the cat begins to avoid him thereafter, he claims, “I had so much of my old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of perverseness” (350 emphasis in original). The narrator imagines perverseness as a spirit, as some entity with a will apart from his own, that is the culmination of a painful process beginning with grief and continuing through irritation. This spirit leads him to kill Pluto, to hang him from a tree limb, solely for the sake of doing evil by completing his assault on the animal. He seems to attribute the original maiming to his intemperance, but perhaps this initial violence can be attributed as much to perverseness as his following act.

Then, Poe shifts the verb tense to suggest that perverseness exists outside the psyche of the individual storyteller. A narrative of recent events, the story is naturally told in the past tense, but here, in his explanation of perverseness, the speaker slips into the present tense as if making a timeless philosophical argument. He emphasizes this connection to philosophy, claiming, “Of this spirit philosophy takes no account,” before immediately changing his tack and interpreting perverseness as part of humankind’s essence rather than an invasive spirit: “Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man” (350). So while perverseness feels like a foreign force, perhaps particularly at its onset, Poe’s speaker is sure that it is a faculty or sentiment that arises out of human nature.

Two years after the publication of “The Black Cat,” Poe would
take up perverseness in even more explicit detail in “The Imp of the Perverse,” another brief piece of philosophical fiction that will aid in the analysis of perverseness as a moral concept. The plot of the second story is similar to that of the first: again, a man scheduled to hang for murder tries to justify to his reader the seemingly incomprehensible reasons for his actions. In the later piece, however, Poe aligns perverseness not with the crime itself but rather self-condemning confession. This essay will trust the second narrator’s account, including the claim that he feels no guilt for his crime and thinks that confessing will do him harm. Before discussing his crime, the speaker of “The Imp of the Perverse” explains perverseness in a philosophically styled disquisition that, as in “The Black Cat,” relies on the present tense for emphasis. Here, he focuses especially on his recognition of perverseness as a universal phenomenon.

The narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse” claims in the opening passage of his story, “In the consideration of the faculties and impulses—of the prima mobilia of the human soul, the phrenologists have failed to make room for a propensity which, although obviously existing as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment, has been equally overlooked by the moralists who have preceded them” (402 emphasis in original). The language here—“a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment”—reinforces the claims in “The Black Cat” that cast perverseness as an essential quality of humankind, rather than a pathology reducible to individual psychology. Based on this early evidence, and many other relevant similarities, Poe is certainly dealing with the same phenomenon, the same perverseness, in both of these stories. Again, the speaker of the second tale echoes his counterpart by insisting that perverseness has yet to be considered by phrenologists—nineteenth-century doctors who thought that the shape of one’s skull could be analyzed to reveal information about the brain and mental capacities—and of course moralists, the practitioners of philosophy as it is referenced in “The Black Cat.” As is often the case, Poe is a bit more elaborate in the later story. “Its idea has not occurred to us, simply because of its seeming supererogation. We saw no need for the propensity in question. We could not perceive its necessity,” says the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse” (402 emphasis in original). Perverseness has remained unaccounted for because humankind has assumed that it understands itself and its motives; the theory that these characters are presenting, that one might harm oneself by choosing wrong merely for the sake of choosing wrong, seems superfluous, or unnecessary—or perhaps, because
of humankind’s naivety, always obsolete. Poe undermines psychological inquiries into perverseness, questioning one’s ability to truly understand oneself. However, his narrators are driven to expose and accredit perverseness within a moral framework.

With his simplified claim in “The Black Cat” that “philosophy takes no account” of perverseness, Poe is incorrect, likely intentionally incorrect in order to draw attention to his own philosophical theorizing. By denying that philosophy has yet to take appropriate notice of perverseness, Poe is announcing that he is about to write some philosophy of his own. In fact, the passage is studded with philosophical language: the certainty of one’s own being, or the knowledge of the existence of one’s soul, echoes Descartes’s “cogito ergo sum”; and the interest of determining those faculties that define humankind’s character, its essence or function, has occupied many Western thinkers, notably Plato and Aristotle. The descriptions of perverseness as “one of the primitive impulses” and “one of the indivisible primary faculties” of human beings lead Gargano to determine that Poe cannot be intending a true philosophical argument, because belief in an irreducible urge to do wrong would undermine any theory of common-sense morals. However, in his stories that feature perverseness, Poe does not seem concerned with consequences or overturning moral order—his perverse narrators are headed to the gallows to pay for their gruesome deeds. Rather, he is interested in the foundations of ethics, that is, why and how moral decisions are made and what effect that has on how right and wrong are conceived. His ethical claims are descriptive, in that they aim to explain how humans actually function in moral scenarios—not normative, or prescriptive as to how humans ought to act—and therefore offer little incentive to change standards of morality.

Again, Poe was not the first to entertain the possibility of knowingly doing wrong, or doing wrong for wrong’s sake; a similar ethical theme puzzled the early Greek philosophers. Socrates claims that virtue can be understood like a craft that promotes one’s own good, or happiness; virtue, for him, depends only on having the knowledge of what will produce that happiness. To maintain that being virtuous requires only knowledge, Socrates denies the possibility of acting against one’s knowledge, a condition deemed incontinence or weakness of will, the Greek akrasia (Irwin, “Virtue and Knowledge” 283-284). He therefore implies that it is impossible to choose what would be bad for oneself, the wrong or evil.

Socrates determines that when one chooses to do what one knows
is wrong, one temporarily, at least, confuses that wrong action with what is right and justifies it to oneself as such, therefore never acting against one’s knowledge of what is right and will promote one’s happiness. One cannot choose what one knows to be wrong because one cannot act in a way that one knows will cause oneself harm. Incontinence, then, stems from an ignorance of comparative benefits between short and long-term effects (Irwin, “Virtue and Knowledge” 283-284). Socrates’s claim that one cannot knowingly choose what is wrong opposes the perverseness that Poe later explains in “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse” so directly that Poe must certainly have had this ethical question, if not Socrates’s specific formulation, in mind when constructing this theme.

The goal here is to show the similarities between weakness of will and perverseness and to contend that Poe’s conception ought to be considered philosophically. In light of the claims of Socrates—which illustrate how philosophy is primarily interested in the fundamental or the universal, that is, what is generally true or possible of humanity and its connection to the world—Poe’s philosophy of perverseness recalls an ancient ethical question about the relationship of knowledge and action to conceptions of right and wrong. Rather than trying to explain away traditional notions of right and wrong, Poe appears to be examining the functioning of these moral ideas.

In “The Black Cat,” his explanation of perverseness grounds the phenomenon in questions of ethical knowledge. “Who has not,” the speaker asks, “a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not?” (350 emphasis in original). This question also works to make perverseness philosophically universal. The litotes “who has not” implies that everyone has, in fact, countless times acted against his or her knowledge of what is best. Furthering his refutation of Socrates’s view of incontinence, Poe not only claims that humankind can act against his knowledge of virtue, but that humans do frequently act in opposition to this knowledge, and for no logical reason; everyone occasionally acts in ways “he knows he should not.” Poe’s narrator continues, “Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such?” (350 emphasis in original). Perverseness constantly frustrates judgment and understanding, and by incorporating and emphasizing another major philosophical idea, the Law, Poe intimates the ethical connection between the individual and society. At the
same time, the use of the first-person plural “we” and “our,” as well as the rhetorical questioning, implicates the reader, a technique that Poe expands in “The Imp of the Perverse.”

The speaker of the second story explains the connection between knowledge and evil in this way: “In the sense I intend, [perverseness] is, in fact, a mobile without motive—a motive not motivirt” (403 emphasis in original). He first defines perverseness as consisting of motiveless actions, and then offers another understanding that may be more accessible and links it more directly to ethical knowledge. He says, “Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object. Or if this shall be understood as a contradiction of terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say that through its promptings we act for the reason that we should not” (403 emphasis in original). Rather than join these last two sentences with a comma and make for smoother reading, Poe uses a period to induce a hard stop, and he begins the second thought a bit unnaturally with a conjunction. For this reason, and because the speaker admits to a slight modification for the sake of logic, the second sentence feels less like a renaming and more like a derivation—a conclusion based on the first. If one can act without motive or object then one can choose to do what one should not, what is wrong and ultimately bad. In order to act for the reason that one should not, one must know what one should not do—kill an innocent animal or confess to a crime for which no remorse is felt—and one must act against this prohibitive knowledge.

“This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow,” the speaker of “The Black Cat” decides, returning to narration and the past tense. “It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for wrong’s sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute” (350 emphasis in original). Here, Poe offers his most fulfilling explanation for the incontinence he seems to promote: one does wrong, his narrator says, in order to foil oneself. The object of one’s action—here, Pluto—is innocent. The soul desires to confuse itself in a way that it cannot comprehend. Perverseness serves to further human-kind’s lack of self-understanding. Wrong is done for its own sake—as an end in itself—and for proof, the storyteller suggests, with “who has not,” that his reader consider his or her own actions alongside those encountered in the tale.

Similarly, the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse” asks his reader
to examine his or her own relationship to perverseness, saying, “An appeal to one’s own heart is, after all, the best reply to the sophistry just noticed” (403). The speaker half-jokingly labels his own claims as *sophistry*, or insincere philosophy practiced more for the practical benefit of the instructor than the student—a charge sometimes leveled against Socrates. He then tries to provide situations, that are less severe than murder or confessing to murder, which might allow the reader to relate to and better understand the feelings of perverseness: circumlocution, procrastination, and, at greatest length, suicide. With these examples, he wants to gain the reader’s sympathy by detailing the onset of an attack of perverseness.

In fact, establishing a connection with the reader appears to be the main goal of the later piece. The speaker describes the approach of perverseness as gradual yet irresistible. His most powerful example has the reader imagining that he or she is standing on the edge of a cliff and looking over. “By slow degrees our sickness, and dizziness, and horror, become merged in a cloud of unnameable feeling,” he claims, before insistingly that at the culmination of this process, we are left unable to refuse the yearning for the experience of jumping into the abyss (404). “And this fall—this rushing annihilation—for the very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination,” the speaker says, “—for this very cause do we now the most impetuously desire it” (404 emphasis in original). Again, Poe emphasizes the seeming senselessness of perverseness, one’s desire to do what one understands as wrong for its own sake and to foil oneself.

These three illustrations serve to implicate the reader and universalize perverseness, pushing it into the realm of ethics. Furthering his “who has not” claim from “The Black Cat,” Poe writes in “The Imp of the Perverse,” “No one who trustingly consults his own soul will be disposed to deny the entire radicalness of the propensity in question” and, regarding his first example, “There lives no man who, at some period, has not been tormented, for example, by an earnest desire to tantalize a listener by circumlocution” (403 emphasis added). Perverseness, as it is described, exists not only in the minds of the deranged, but is at least possible, if not necessary, in the minds of everyone. In his example of circumlocution, or conversational rambling, Poe uses a third-person subject, “the speaker,” and the singular pronoun “he” (403-04). In the second and third cases, though, those of procrastination—“We have a task before us which must
be speedily performed. We know that it will be ruinous to make delay… It must—it shall be undertaken to-day—and yet we put it off until to-morrow” (404)—and suicide, in the cliff example already considered, he smoothly adopts the first-person plural subject “we” in order to force the reader to evaluate his or her own encounters with perverseness.

Finally, the narrator of the second piece tells of his confrontation with the implacable imp after which his story is named. At the onset of a fit of perverseness, he recalls similar experiences from his childhood and notes, “I remembered that in no instance had I successfully resisted their attacks” (406). Once recognized, the imp is inescapable, yet the speaker tries to outrun the “cat-like” (406) phantom that he admittedly imagines following him through the streets he had been wandering. He fears confronting the imp, or even acknowledging it in his thoughts. By describing this process, Poe’s narrator begs his reader to entertain the idea that perverseness exists as a universal sentiment that may be responsible for bouts with circumlocution, procrastination, suicidal thoughts, and unqualified confession, among other more seriously self-detrimental acts, like the murder of “The Black Cat.”

2. An Ethic of Perverseness

In this reading of perverseness as a philosophical concept, Poe rather surprisingly emerges as a kind of ethical philosopher. Yet the legitimacy of his ethics depends in part on the sincerity of his fictional characters. Poe establishes his speakers’ genuineness by having them appeal to moral authority throughout the stories. After trying to explain perverseness, the narrator of “The Black Cat” tells how and why he killed his first cat: “I…hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offense” (351 emphasis in original). Accentuating the word “because,” Poe again conveys the incomprehensible, paradoxical nature of perverseness, this time in the context of his story. Most vividly, the speaker claims, “I…hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it—if such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God” (351 emphasis in original). The descriptiveness of this language is enough to guarantee its sincerity; referring to these lines, Bonaparte claims, “A son who had murdered his mother could hardly speak more strongly” (464). At the end of perhaps the weightiest section of the tale, Poe makes it clear
that his speaker believes not only in the irreducible spirit of perverseness but also in an omnipotent yet merciful God to whom he is responsible for his evil deeds.

Poe’s attention to religion as a source of moral authority, if only the threat of condemnation in the afterlife, pervades the entire work. At the beginning of the story, the narrator displays great interest in animals as they function in a master-pet relationship. As the piece progresses, though, he is more likely to refer to Pluto or his replacement as a beast or creature, rather than a pet. Though once a “playmate” (349), Pluto becomes a creature—“a creature which had once so loved me” (350)—after the speaker cuts out the animal’s eye. The second cat is a creature from its first appearance—“the very creature of which I was in search” (352). The narrator becomes attentive to the existence of the cats as creations of God, and though once enamored by house pets of all kinds, he is now frightfully reminded by these two of his relationship to religious and moral authority. His interactions with the animals, though, deflower them of this original status; eventually, they inspire within him “[t]he fury of a demon,” “a more than fiendish malevolence” (350), and later, “a rage more than demoniacal” (353). Whether as works of God or tools of evil, the two black cats represent to the narrator religious symbols that he takes seriously.

The speaker of “The Black Cat” is worried about the safety of his eternal soul. He admits, “I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity” (350). He is uncomfortable reliving the events with his reader. In the presence of the police, he notes, “I burned to say but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness” (355 emphasis added). While he experiences mixed feelings regarding the guilt of his deeds, the narrator is certainly worried about the consequences he will face in the afterlife. The most convincing evidence comes in the story’s penultimate paragraph, when the speaker’s wrap on the wall is answered by a screech from the cat which he accidentally entombed with his murdered wife. Leverenz says, “[T]he beast’s voice now seems the narrator’s maker, witness, and judge, a three-in-one God” (119). Condemned at last, the narrator pleads, “But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend!” (355). He dreads suffering in hell for his sins, imagining the pain to be sharp and inescapable like the fangs of a cat. Placed at strategically dramatic points in the story, his appeals to God demonstrate the legitimacy of his guilt and suggest that perverseness be read in the sense that the narrator presents it—foremost, as
a questioning of the role of knowledge in sin.

In “The Imp of the Perverse,” Poe also employs a religious tone, even in his most descriptive, philosophical passages. In his introduction to perverseness, the introduction to the piece as a whole, the speaker says, “It cannot be denied that all metaphysicianism has been concocted á priori. The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs—to dictate purposes to God” (402 emphasis in original). The narrator argues that the study of metaphysics has been undertaken primarily on the basis of á priori knowledge, or theoretical knowledge derived from definitions and logic. This type of understanding often has at its roots the will of a higher power—for Poe, God’s purposes. While the speaker of “The Imp of the Perverse” will promote a different source of knowledge, he retains a prestigious place for God.

“It would have been safer,” he claims, “—if classify we must—to classify upon the basis of what man usually or occasionally did, and was always occasionally doing, rather than upon the basis of what we took it for granted the Deity intended him to do” (403). Through his narrator, Poe is promoting a different foundation for metaphysical knowledge. It is this á posteriori knowledge, or practical knowledge based on observation and extrapolation, that leads to the discovery of perverseness. The incomprehensibility of perverseness, its seeming senselessness, makes it invisible from a strictly á priori point of view, but the speaker insists that its existence is strikingly obvious if considered á posteriori, as it is common for humans to act outside of what they perceive to be their best interest. However, rather than dismiss God, he places him on a pedestal beyond the understanding of humankind. Again relying on humanity’s limited intellectual capacities, the speaker asks, “If we cannot comprehend God in his visible works, how then in his inconceivable thoughts that call the works into being? If we cannot understand him in his objective creatures, how then in his substantive moods and phases of creation?” (403). God, then, in this story, is humankind’s creator, but is mystical beyond humanity’s understanding and authoritative solely through his presence.

Despite losing favor as a source of philosophical knowledge, God exists in “The Imp of the Perverse,” as in the earlier story, as a basis for moral authority—as humankind’s judge—through the threat of eternal condemnation. At the end of the piece, the speaker describes his confession as “brief but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to Hell” (406). The words swell inside of him like a developing life
before bursting out and determining his fate. Like in “The Black Cat,” the narrator mentions his sojourn to hell in his parting words, a strategy that makes these claims particularly dramatic and memorable. Attention to the religious components of these tales helps to clarify Poe’s endeavor into ethics; his work cannot seek to undercut morality as a whole, because belief in an omnipotent God entails belief in the inherent value of certain ethical virtues. Also, the narrators’ reverence to God, as a moral authority, eliminates a certain psychological reading of “The Black Cat”—and likely “The Imp of the Perverse” by extension—that makes perverseness into a delusion or self-deception, for with their pleas to God, the speakers are undoubtedly accepting the guilt and consequences of their perverse actions.

3. Perverse Consciousness and “The Philosophy of Composition”

So far this article has explained how a philosophical interpretation of perverseness draws attention to several formal and thematic issues in “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse,” particularly as they suggest Poe’s interest in a deistic ethics. This focus on philosophy, rather than psychology, might also promote ethical readings of Poe’s other tales, such as “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “William Wilson,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart,” in which characters seem to intentionally choose to do wrong. More importantly, though, it also suggests a new complexity for “The Philosophy of Composition,” the author’s 1846 essay on the aesthetic theory of writing. In this piece, Poe claims to recount the wholly rational process by which he composed his successful poem “The Raven”: “It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in [the poem’s] composition is referrible either to accident or intuition— that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (676-677). T. S. Eliot summarizes Poe’s theory of composition as being “as conscious and deliberate as possible” and insisting that “the poet should observe himself in the act of composition” (28). Through Eliot, this ideal would become one of Poe’s lasting contributions to aesthetic theory.

Assuming that Poe supports a belief in the philosophical perverseness that he develops in his stories—that is, that he is not satirizing the possibility in the vein of Socrates—an inference that can be made based on the author’s personal encounters with self-destructive perverseness,
the complete self-consciousness that he suggests of writers may appear quite frightening. In “The Imp of the Perverse,” his speaker asserts, “With certain minds, under certain circumstances, [perverseness] becomes absolutely irresistible” (403). When describing the contemplation of leaping from a precipice and the sensations that would accompany one’s impending death, the narrator says, “To indulge, even for a moment, in any attempt at thought, is to be inevitably lost” (405 emphasis in original). And finally, when fleeing from the shadow of the imp, he claims, “Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with a new terror—for alas! I understood too well that to think, in my condition, was to be undone” (406 emphasis in original). Poe supports writers’ self-awareness in “The Philosophy of Composition,” when in fact it is this type of deep thought that most readily induces perverseness.

The process of writing, then, might be conceived to foster the urge to do what one knows is wrong. At the least, an author is more susceptible to perverseness when he or she is lost in the contemplation of beauty, the “intense and pure elevation of soul” and “the sole legitimate province of the poem,” according to Poe (“The Philosophy of Composition” 678 emphasis in original).10 Perhaps the author used—or constructed—this connection to justify his own perverse behavior, which adversely affected his health, his career, and the financial stability of his family. Or perhaps this relationship led him to question the true value of self-awareness to the writer, because in 1848, near the end of his life, Poe composed and delivered as a lecture another work of aesthetic theory, “The Poetic Principle,” in which he abandons the mechanical approach to composition in favor of ideals like genius and inspiration, derived from the Romantic tradition and intimating a very different appeal to higher power than the one that premises the sincerity of “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse.” Whatever the case, Poe’s philosophy of perverseness suggests that his doctrines on writing share the same skepticism of total self-awareness as is found inside his fictional worlds.
Notes

1. For psychological interpretations of “The Black Cat” that cast perverseness as either conscious or unconscious deception towards the end of self-preservation, see Amper and Gargano, respectively.
2. For an interpretation of perverseness through legal history, see Cleman.
4. For Classical accounts that may support incontinence, see Plato, Republic 439A-441C; Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1144b35-1147b17; Irwin, “Aristotle” and “Weakness of Will.”
5. See Plato, Meno 77B-78B.
6. See also Poe, Eureka, p.571-572.
8. For Poe’s influence on aesthetic theory, see Polonsky, especially p. 42-46.
9. Especially through his alcoholism. See Thompson, p. xxxv.
10. Poe considers the aesthetics of poetry, and evinces his preference for the effect of beauty in both “The Philosophy of Composition” and “The Poetic Principle.” He considers the aesthetics of short fiction more directly in “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” a review of two of Hawthorne’s short story collections.
Works Cited


