

The Imp Of The Perverse

by

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

With A Commentary On Freud, by Eric Miller © 2008

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NOTE: ALL ITALIC IN BRACKETS ARE BY ERIC MILLER, COMMENTATOR, AS WELL AS ANY UNDERLININGS. ALL COMMENTS ARE IN SEPARATE PARAGRAPHS IN ITALIC. ALL OTHER ITALICS ARE IN POE'S ORIGINAL TEXT.

Introductory Note:

The below text of *The Imp of the Perverse* is, I believe an amazing document, not only as it specifically relates to the psychology of the serial killer, *per se*, and *par excellence*, but how it uncannily adumbrates the dark psychic mechanisms of Sigmund Freud's own parallel serial killer profile. The parallels are so amazing, one is almost involuntarily left with the surmise that Freud must have known this piece and *intentionally* copied aspects of it into his own perverse autopsychobiographical portrait—in particular, one feels that this *must* be so as to the point of the snatches from an opera that taunts and torments him, which is almost verbatim taken, it appears, from Poe as the reader will see below. That Freud habitually plundered other's literary works, played off of them, referenced them, "garnered," appropriated, or simply plagiarized them for his purposes is well known and well documented.

Of course, Edgar Allen Poe, is universally regarded throughout the world as one of, if not *the* greatest literary genius America has ever produced. His uncanny insight into the mind of murderers and the subject of horror in general is unrivaled. It may very well be that Poe's insight into the psychology of the serial killer surpasses all other commentators in the field. If Freud really did not know of *The Imp of the Perverse* it would be all the more amazing that his own disease fitted so perfectly that presented by Poe.

For those who wish to read the text first without any interpolations click on the below link:

http://sami.is.free.fr/Oeuvres/poe_the_imp_of_the_perverse.html

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 all the moralists who have preceded them. In the pure arrogance of the reason, we have all overlooked it. We have suffered its existence to escape our senses solely through want of belief – of faith; – whether it be faith in Revelation, or faith in the Kabbala. The idea of it has never occurred to us, simply because of its seeming supererogation. We saw no *need* of the impulse – for the propensity. We could not perceive its necessity. We could not understand, that is to say, we could not have understood, had the notion of this *primum mobile* ever obtruded itself; – we could not have understood in what manner it might be made to further the objects [*or objectives*] of humanity, either temporal or eternal.

In Poe's opening remarks he focuses on the psychological issue of prima mobilia or "first causes" or mental impulses and characteristics of the human mind that the phrenologists have "failed to make room for" in their system of thought. I think we should do very nicely to merely substitute the term "phrenology"—the pseudo science of "reading" mental characteristics by the morphology (or the conformation or shape of the skull) – with that of "psychoanalysis." As I shall throughout make the point that the strange and rather unique characteristic that Poe addresses is one most pronouncedly found in serial killers. The reader should bear in mind that the "first person" author of this piece is a confessed murderer.

It cannot be denied that phrenology [*psychoanalysts*], and in great measure, all metaphysicianism, have been concocted *à priori*. The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs – to dictate purposes to God. Having thus fathomed to his satisfaction, the intentions of Jehovah [*or in Freud's case, the Devil whom he objectifies and identifies with*], out of these intentions he built his innumerable systems of mind. In the matter of phrenology, for example, we first determined, naturally enough, that it was the design of the Deity that man should eat. We then assigned to man an organ of alimentiveness, and this organ is the scourge with which the Deity compels man, will-I nill-I, into eating. Secondly, having settled it to be God's will that man should continue his species, we discovered an organ of amativeness, forthwith. And so with combativeness, with ideality, with causality, with constructiveness, – so, in short, with every organ, whether representing a propensity, a moral sentiment, or a faculty of the pure intellect [*see my comments on Freud's view that "every living organism wants to die, but in its own way—to murder*]. And in these arrangements of the *principia* of human action, the Spurzheimites [*the inventor of phrenology, substitute Freudians*], whether right or wrong, in part, or upon the whole, have but followed, in principle, the footsteps of their predecessors; deducing and establishing everything from the preconceived destiny of man, and upon the ground of the object[ives] of this Creator.

It would have been wiser, it would have been safer to classify, (if classify we must,) 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 [*i.e.*, *the desire to murder one's father and have sex with one's mother, via the Oedipus-complex*]. 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?

Induction, *à posteriori*, would have brought phrenology [*psychoanalysis*] to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call *perverseness*, for want of a more characteristic term. In the sense I intend, it is, in fact, a *mobile* without motive, a motive not *motivirt* [*that is to say a motive without a motivation*]. Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object[ive]; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say, that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should *not*.

Here, with this announced psychological doctrine, Poe, in the persona of a murderer announces that mankind sometimes acts "without a comprehensible objective;" that there is potentially inherent in the human psyche an impulse to act in a manner that it should not act (in reference to our own "comprehensible" best interest).

In theory, no reason can be more unreasonable; but, in fact, there is none more strong. With certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible. I am not more certain that I breathe, than that the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution. Nor will this overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake, admit of analysis, or resolution into ulterior elements. It is a radical, a primitive impulse – elementary [*i.e.*, *Freud's Death Instinct to kill oneself is pertinent*]. It will be said, I am aware, that when we persist in acts because we feel we should *not* persist in them, our conduct is but a modification of that which ordinarily springs from the *combativeness* of phrenology [*psychoanalysis—in Freud's psychoanalysis combativeness is primary*]. But a glance will show the fallacy of this idea. The phrenological [*psychological*] *combativeness* has for its essence, the necessity of self-defence. It is our safeguard against injury. Its principle regards our well-being; and thus the desire to be well, is excited simultaneously with its development. It follows, that the desire to be well must be excited simultaneously with any principle which shall be merely a modification of *combativeness*, but in the case of that something which I term *perverseness*, the desire to be well is not only not aroused, but a strongly antagonistical sentiment exists

This doctrine of our murderer is exactly Freud's doctrine of the manifestation of the Death Instinct to kill oneself—see my remarks on Seltzer's book Serial Killers posted on this website. Indeed, it was in Seltzer's book that I first learned of Poe's Imp of Perverseness which Seltzer mentioned specifically in regards to the difficulty of psychoanalysis to account for this very phenomenon which seems to be an important

element of the serial killer and the conflict of Freud's apparently irrational concept of the Death Instinct and legal responsibility. Seltzer seems to have no inkling of Freud's personal SK (Serial Killer) profile.

An appeal to one's own heart is, after all, the best reply to the sophistry just noticed. No one who trustingly consults and thoroughly questions his own soul, will be disposed to deny the entire radicalness of the propensity in question. It is not more incomprehensible than distinctive. There lives no man who at some period, has not been tormented, for example, by an earnest desire to tantalize a listener by circumlocution. The speaker is aware that he displeases; he has every intention to please; he is usually curt, precise, and clear; the most laconic and luminous language is struggling for utterance upon his tongue; it is only with difficulty that he restrains himself from giving it flow; he dreads and deprecates the anger of him whom he addresses; yet, the thought strikes him, that by certain involutions and parentheses, this anger may be engendered. That single thought is enough. The impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, and the longing (to the deep regret and mortification of the speaker, and in defiance of all consequences,) is indulged.

Interestingly, our murderer protagonist makes an appeal of his "own heart" as proof of the universality of his own psychological perverseness. Freud, too, held that he had at first just a "wish" for another's death, and describes how it became a "desire" and how the desire became "an uncontrollable longing." Freud, while admitting to this progression, nonetheless pretends that it was "unconscious" in him. Referring to his desire to kill a colleague and take his place in professional advancement Freud wrote:

If it were indeed true that my craving to be addressed by a different title was as strong as all of that, it showed a pathological ambition which I did not recognize in myself and which I believed was alien to me.

See my Passion for Murder pgs 21-4. The "different title" was to have a higher academic title and to eliminate his contender for it. The "if" is mere B.S. as the whole point of his confession is to announce that he did have such pathological ambitions. Poe's protagonist, or should I say antagonist, continues with a discussion of the psychological "cravings" of which Freud himself confessed.

We have a task before us which must be speedily performed. We know that it will be ruinous to make delay. The most important crisis of our life calls, trumpet-tongued, for immediate energy and action. We glow, we are consumed with eagerness to commence the work, with the anticipation of whose glorious result our whole souls are on fire. It must, it shall be undertaken to-day, and yet we put it off until tomorrow; and why? There is no answer, except that we feel *perverse*, using the word with no comprehension of the principle. Tomorrow arrives, and with it a more impatient anxiety to do our duty, but with this very increase of anxiety arrives, also, a nameless, a positively fearful, because unfathomable, craving for delay. This craving gathers

strength as the moments fly. The last hour for action is at hand. We tremble with the violence of the conflict within us, – of the definite with the indefinite – of the substance with the shadow. But, if the contest has proceeded thus far, it is the shadow which prevails, – we struggle in vain. The clock strikes, and is the knell of our welfare. At the same time, it is the chanticleer-note to the ghost that has so long over-awed us. It flies – it disappears – we are free. The old energy returns. We will labour *now*. Alas, it is *too late!*

Freud's "ghost" is his "primal murder" of his half-brother, Johann whom I claim was given the Jewish name of Moses as well. Freud habitually refers to John and other of his victims as his returning "ghosts" and he referred to his return to his Moses in the last years of his life, in his book on the subject of Moses, as his "unlaid ghost."

We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss – we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness, and dizziness, and horror, become merged in a cloud of un-nameable feeling. By gradations, still more imperceptible, this cloud assumes shape, as did the vapor from the bottle out of which arose the genius in the *Arabian Nights*. But out of this *our* cloud upon the precipice's edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. 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 – for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it.

And in the above description we have one of the most accurate ever given of the "symptoms" that serial killers often confess to and the kind of "loathsome" and gruesome images of death and suffering that they become obsessed with and of which they cannot rid their souls—images and feelings which compel them to murder again.

And because our reason violently deters us from the brink, *therefore*, do we the more impetuously approach it. There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him, who shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge. To indulge for a moment, in any attempt at *thought*, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but urges us to forbear, and *therefore* it is, I say, that we *cannot*. If there be no friendly arm to check us, or if we fail in a sudden effort to prostrate ourselves backward from the abyss, we plunge, and are destroyed.

Examine these and similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the *Perverse*. We perpetrate them merely because we feel that we should *not*. Beyond or behind this, there is no intelligible principle. And we might, indeed, deem this perverseness a direct instigation of the Arch-Fiend, were it not occasionally known to operate in furtherance of good.

That Freud himself repeatedly declared himself to addicted to the “psychological perverse,” to have a compelling affinity for the “grotesque” and the gruesome and was himself ruled by the Arch-Fiend of “Lucifer-Amour,” who resided are the core of his being is not to be doubted. I have abundantly documented the fact in Passion for Murder and in my essays posted at this website.

I have said thus much, that in some measure I may answer your question, that I may explain to you why I am here, that I may assign to you something that shall have at least the faint aspect of a cause for my wearing these fetters, and for my tenanting this cell of the condemned. Had I not been thus prolix, you might either have misunderstood me altogether; or with the rabble, you might have fancied me mad. As it is, you will easily perceive that I am one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse.

How remarkably these words, and so many of the words of Poe’s murderer, sound exactly like Freud in sum and substance. The need to be prolix is obvious in Freud, who wrote thousands of letters and some two dozen books recounting detail after detail of his own murder mania and its “explanation” as being but the by-product of a universal mania for murder. Freud, as with Poe’s murderer shows his contempt for others, the “rabble” who fancied him as “mad.” Freud frequently made the same observations as Poe’s murderer.

It is impossible that any deed could have been wrought with a more thorough deliberation. For weeks, for months, I pondered upon the means of the murder. I rejected a thousand schemes, because their accomplishment involved a *chance* of detection. At length, in reading some French Memoirs, I found an account of a nearly fatal illness that occurred to Madame Pilau, through the agency of a candle accidentally poisoned. The idea struck my fancy at once. I knew my victim's habit of reading in bed. I knew, too, that his apartment was narrow and ill ventilated. But I need not vex you with impertinent details. I need not describe the easy artifices by which I substituted, in his bed-room candle stand, a wax-light of my own making, for the one which I there found. The next morning he was discovered dead in his bed, and the Coroner's verdict was, ‘Death by the visitation of God’.

I cannot but involuntarily summon up Freud’s quote, featured on the Home Page where he says he gives and he takes life away and for this he should be blessed forever and concluded with “Amen.” Here the mockery of a “visitation of God” is, as with Freud, a visitation of himself as murderer in the guise of “God.”

Having inherited his estate, all went well with me for years. The idea of detection never once entered my brain.

The psychological penchant for the serial killer to imagine that, as Freud stated it, “I am ten to fifteen years ahead of everyone and none of them will catch me up.” Serial killers don’t imagine they will get caught. They are too superior to the police or the

detectives. For the most part, for the serial killer, “The idea of detection” hardly ever enters their minds—except, when, as described below. . .

Of the remains of the fatal taper, I had myself carefully disposed. I had left no shadow of a clue by which it would be possible to convict, or even to suspect me of the crime. It is inconceivable how rich a sentiment of satisfaction arose in my bosom as I reflected upon my absolute security. For a very long period of time, I was accustomed to revel in this sentiment. It afforded me more real delight than all the mere worldly advantages accruing from my sin.

Interestingly Freud frequently expressed enormous satisfaction with himself that they will never catch him. He is able, he tells us, to make confessions even of his crimes so cleverly that he is as happy as the “Celtic Imp” whose name no one can guess!

But there arrived at length an epoch, from which the pleasurable feeling grew, by scarcely perceptible gradations, into a haunting and harassing thought. It harassed because it haunted. I could scarcely get rid of it for an instant. It is quite a common thing to be thus annoyed with the ringing in our ears, or rather in our memories, of the burthen of some ordinary song, or some unimpressive snatches from an opera. Nor will we be the less tormented if the song in itself be good, or the opera air meritorious. In this manner, at last, I would perpetually catch myself pondering upon my security, and repeating, in a low, undertone, the phrase, “I am safe.”

Incredibly, the exact phenomena described by Poe’s murderer regarding the sound of some “ordinary song” harassed and haunted him specifically applies to Freud. Freud wrote that the Song of John Marlboro pursued him everywhere—the song was written on the occasion of the supposed death of John Marlboro and was linked with Freud’s theory of hysteria, resulting, incidentally, at least in part from his murder of John Freud. And, amazingly, uncannily, Freud, too, just as with our murderer was also tormented by “snatches from an opera,” as the below quotation from PFM indicates:

The amazing degree to which Freud had a psychotic reaction to the name of John and his associations with that name is particularly evidenced in Freud's commentary on his reaction to even hearing the name of Don Giovanni (Don Juan) spoken or alluded to. Freud wrote: "What I mean is this. If a few bars of music are played and someone comments that it is from Mozart's Figaro (as happens in Don Giovanni) a number of recollections are roused in me all at once, none of which can enter my consciousness singly at the first moment. The key-phrase serves as a port of entry through which the whole network is simultaneously put into a state of excitation. It may well be the same in the case of unconscious thinking. The rousing stimulus excites the psychical port of entry ... " [The Interpretation of Dreams, p. 535]

One day, whilst sauntering along the streets, I arrested myself in the act of murmuring, half aloud, these customary syllables. In a fit of petulance, I remodelled them thus: – “I am safe – I am safe – yes – if I be not fool enough to make open confession!”

No sooner had I spoken these words, than I felt an icy chill creep to my heart. I had had some experience in these fits of perversity, whose nature I have been at some trouble to explain, and I remembered well, that in no instance, I had successfully resisted their attacks. And now my own casual self-suggestion, that I might possibly be fool enough to confess the murder of which I had been guilty, confronted me, as if the very ghost of him whom I had murdered – and beckoned me on to death.

Freud habitually refers to the fact that he has terrible secrets that cannot be told but which he is obviously under a compulsion to tell. Again, as I abundantly document in PFM, the ghost of John habitually returns to him and is one of those who are “returned from the dead;” that “it is a shame one must keep one’s mouth shut” about the most important things in one’s life; and there are various discussion in Freud’s letters to Fliess that certain dreams had to be “killed” because they come too close to making his confession to his murders. A number of examples of these instances are cited in PFM and many more are cited in my new book, in progress. The point is, the compulsion to “tell” (if not “confess”) what murder deeds were committed can be an overwhelming impulse (the “imp of the perverse”) in murder types such as Poe’s murderer and Freud himself. The ghosts of the murdered “beckoned him on to death.”

At first, I made an effort to shake off this nightmare of the soul. I walked vigorously – faster – still faster – at length I ran. I felt a maddening desire to shriek aloud. Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with new terror, for, alas! I well, too well understood that, to *think*, in my situation, was to be lost. I still quickened my pace. I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. At length, the populace took the alarm, and pursued me. I felt *then* the consummation of my fate. Could I have torn out my tongue, I would have done it, but a rough voice resounded in my ears – a rougher grasp seized me by the shoulder. I turned – I gasped for breath. 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.

Jung, Reich, Jones, Ferenczi, from Freud’s inner-circle, Freud himself, and numerous Freud scholars since have all made the point over and over again that Freud had a secret that he was longing to confess that involved the theme of murder. His doctor succinctly summed it up by saying Freud himself had a “Cain-complex” (Brother Murder) as well as a Oedipus-complex (Father Murder/Mother Incest) which ruled the inner workings of his dark, obsessed, psychopathic mind—his serial killer mentality. Anyone who is intimately familiar with Freud’s biography and personal letters as well as his writings will be aware that many of the precise symptoms that Poe’s murderer confesses to having had were the exact symptoms Freud habitually complained of when he was seized with the sensations of his murder mania.

They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis, and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman, and to hell.

Having related all that was necessary for the fullest judicial conviction, I fell prostrate in a swoon.

But why shall I say more? To-day I wear these chains, and am *here!* To-morrow I shall be fetterless! – *but where?* THE END