

## EGO-EVIL AND "THE TELL-TALE HEART"

Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the plank in your own? (Matt 7:3)<sup>1</sup>

Those without sight may see and those with sight turn blind. (John 9:39)

**I**N *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Lacanian critic Slavoj Žižek defines Ego-Evil in this way: Ego-Evil refers to behavior "motivated by selfish calculation and greed" (70). Ego-Evil is different from Superego-Evil in the sense that the former is about the elevation of self-love while the latter welcomes evil due to some "fanatical devotion" or an "ideological ideal." Id-Evil, in contrast, is about the perverse enjoyment of wickedness (Žižek 70). In its purest form, Ego-Evil is about the self's overidentification with its views and interests, which easily leads to a narcissistic denigration of the other and a violation of universal laws. If Žižek suggests that Ego-Evil is "the most common kind of evil" (70), this essay argues that it is common because it is related to the politics of the eye. In the Bible, the elevation of the self is linked to a *subjective*, narcissistic viewing process: the self sees not itself but only the splinter in the other's eye. The resulting lack of self-knowledge makes Edgar Allan Poe's narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" judge the old man based on his own (the narrator's) affections, and not the truth. The deliberate (mis)judgment of the other can only mirror the "blindness" of the self, signifying a lack of insight.

This essay foregrounds this interplay between the ego and the eye, although Poe gives his story additional *intersubjective* and *intrasubjective* emphases. That is, the ego sees and judges the other subjectively, but the other has the power to look back and topple the ego, while the other-in-the-self can further derail the self. In turn, *self-splitting* occurs to characterize Poe's version of Ego-Evil: the hero becomes a divided subject that can see what's wrong, or understand the concepts of universal right and wrong through the eyes of the other, and yet he remains blind to his sins. In the story, the eye, the gaze, and the glare all help relate the self to the other, prioritize the self at the expense of the other, push the self to relentlessly judge and eliminate the other, and, finally, wreck the other and the self.

Poe's stories often manifest an intense interest in Ego-Evil and visual politics. In fact, many of his stories illustrate the biblical truths that humans love to impose their views on others and fail to notice the plank

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in their own eyes. However, Poe always sees to it that his heroes do not remain blind to the Truth for long, for the other's inquisitive gaze hystericalizes them to such an extent that they quickly confess their crimes — even though their confessions often in no way lead to redemption, nor imply a recognition of their guilt. For example, in "The Black Cat" the narrator arbitrarily sees that the black cat is bad and kills it, but the police's questioning eye agitates and excites the narrator. The narrator feels compelled to reveal the truth, though he blames the cat rather than himself for his misconduct. In "Thou Art the Man," self-interest makes old Charley Goodfellow kill Mr. Shuttleworthy because he dislikes Mr. Pennifeather, who had once insulted him. When Charley Goodfellow sees that he is in a secure position, the sudden sight of Mr. Shuttleworthy's body makes his eyes turn "inwards," and he becomes "absorbed in the contemplation of his own miserable, murderous soul" (V:306). He quickly pours out "a detailed confession of the hideous crime" and drops dead, seemingly killed by shock rather than remorse.<sup>2</sup> In Poe's stories, Ego-Evil stands out because his hero's frame of mind is utterly corrupt at its root: the villain can recognize his deviance through the other; however, his self-perception is adamantly immune to the notion of right or wrong.

**B**EFORE we examine the story, a brief overview of the critical tradition shows that "The Tell-Tale Heart" is already noted for highlighting the links between the "eye" and "I," although different critics offer different theoretical emphases. Marie Bonaparte features the internal circuit between the narrator and his eye (497). The narrator's problematic "I" originates from his eye, his scopie drive, and his perverse voyeurism. Unlike instinct, the scopie drive is unrelated to the realm of biological need. It therefore pushes the narrator to structure his pleasure by the eye (scopophilia), and seek fulfillment by circling round the object of interest. In 1965, E. Arthur Robinson re-conceptualized the link between the "eye" and "I" in terms of *projective* envisionment: it is the narrator's "evil I" that makes him see the "evil eye" in the old man; hence, the narrator is actually the one who has the evil eye. In Robinson's words, "Vision becomes insight, the 'Evil Eye' an evil 'I' and the murdered man a victim sacrificed to a self-constituted deity" (377). Meanwhile, Daniel Hoffman gives an oedipal slant to the story and argues that the "I" battles with the old man's eye due to *positional* conflicts. The narrator comes to dislike the old man on the grounds of paternalism. The old man is "a father-figure," and the narrator comes to hate the "surveillance of the child by the father, . . . the inculcation into his soul of the paternal principles of right and wrong. . . . [T]he knowledge in a father's (or a father-figure's) eye which a child most likely fears is the

suspicion that he has been seen in a forbidden act" (Hoffman 223). Robert Con Davis further points out that the eye often functions as the "Symbolic Gaze of the father." Thus Poe's various narrators often "busy themselves by walling up, burying, dismembering, analyzing, and rationalizing" the other (Davis 993). The heroes "wish to escape the gaze of another who, in turn, in a nightmare of victimage, would transform them into being mere objects of attention" (Davis 993). Finally, William Freedman theorizes a *relational* view of the old man's "eye" and "I": in spite of his hatred, the narrator is dependent on the old man's eye. Hence, "the murder of the eye would entail self-murder. . . . The eye that reduces the perceived imager to an object must be shut. But since that eye not only diminishes but also determines, in effect creates, the victim's identity, to close it is to blind the gaze that glares one into being" (108-9).

In my view, "The Tell-Tale Heart" foregrounds different stages of Ego-Evil as the narrator defines himself through the narcissistic eye, the malicious glare, and the enigmatic gaze of the other. The first stage denotes the eye's *supercilious self-empowerment*. The story opens with the process of "I see myself seeing you," featuring the narrator's egoistic positioning of the self and the other. Poe's narrator sees that he is a *Master* with good powers of observation. He boldly tells the readers that he "heard all things in the heaven and the earth. [He] heard many things in hell" (88). The narrator implies that he does not need others to form him; on the contrary, he condescendingly sees that "you" are simply wrong — "why will you say that I am mad?" (88). Although readers immediately think that Poe's narrator is psychotic, these words actually tell us that the narrator perceives himself to be a self-positing character, with a view to installing and maintaining his own consciousness and laws. As the subject sees the other from a singular perspective, Edward Davidson rightly observes that Poe's narrator lives in a universe in which there is "no other god but the self as god" (194). In the story, the narrator clearly grounds himself as a powerful Master who can determine all values. As a result, he sees that he is sane, and that his disease is good. His disease has merely "sharpened [his] senses — not destroyed — not dulled them" (91). He remains an absolute Master who has an eye for the ultimate Truth, hence he can "calmly tell [the readers] the *whole* story" (88, emphasis added).

This episode foregrounds the way of the eye, which is always on the side of the Subject and its narcissistic fantasy. In the Lacanian context, the eye allows the self to see itself as a unified creature and as a judge, hence the eye is essentially related to the imaginary "identity-building" process. However, as the eye sees what it wants to see, "sight" or "insight" can mean bias. As noted by Ellie Ragland, the eye gives a narcissistic perspective of "unification and fusion" that does not guarantee truth, though it cer-

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tainly offers a personal "principle of law or judgment" (95). In the story, the eye's bias shows itself when the narrator immediately views the old man's disease in a negative light. The old man's cataract is seen to be the "Evil Eye" (89). If we borrow Martin Buber's concept, we may as well call it the "I-Thou difference." John Cleman believes that the narrator's mental condition is crucial in leading to this conclusion. He quotes Isaac Ray and points out that "madness is not indicated so much by any particular extravagance of thought or feeling, as by a well-marked change of character or departure from the ordinary habits of thinking, feeling and acting, without any adequate external cause" (qtd. in Cleman 629). However, humans do not need to be mad to slight others and prefer the self. In fact, this deliberate (mis)recognition is typical of the politics of the eye — for the self sees that my possessions are good, yours are bad, my rebelliousness is a virtue and your deviance is monstrous. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator simply looks at the old man and dislikes him based on his subjective response. The old man has to go because the narrator's "blood [runs] cold" whenever he sees the old man. He thinks his disease makes him a better person with an "over acuteness of the senses," but the old man's disease can only turn him into a freak with the "Evil Eye" (89).

The eye brings forth evil because it promotes self-conceit. No one who has read "The Tell-Tale Heart" will fail to notice the narrator's obsession with the *right* day, the *right* hour, the *right* angle of viewing things, thereby mirroring the eye's supreme egoism. The eye defends a unified perspective, and makes the self compulsively hate, abhor, and pursue with intent to "destroy all objects which are a source of unpleasurable feeling for it" (Freud 18). In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator says he likes the old man: he knows that the old man "had never wronged [him]. He had never given [him] insult." "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man" (88). However, for all his logic and love, everything is insufficient to stop him from murdering the old man or canceling his hatred. As the eye cannot tolerate difference, the entire being of the old man is negated on account of *one* disproportionately small thing. Robinson mentions that, interestingly, "it is always one eye that is mentioned, not two" (374); but it turns out that *one* eye is more than enough to rouse the subject's repulsion, for the old man's presence is deliberately misrecognized as a "threat" that disturbs his peace. Poe's narrator makes it very clear that the murder is an *impersonal* business: the old man courts his death because he has the hideous "pale blue eye, with a film over it" (88). The idea of murder can only give Poe's narrator a "light heart" (93).

The narrator literally turns a blind eye to his evil self and takes pride in his duplicitous behavior. We may as well say that the eye is evil because it carries with it two contradictory laws, one proudly favoring the harsh law,

and the other abandoning all laws for its own interests. Having visited the old man's bedroom at midnight for a week, the narrator does not find it hypocritical to call the old man "by name in a hearty tone" in the morning (89). Likewise, the art of disguise is deemed a positive asset in "The Cask of Amontillado":

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation. (VI:167)

In addition, if the eye puts down the other, it also seeks the other with a view that the other is to praise the grand self. In the story, the narrator actively invites the reader to see him in action: "You should have seen how wisely I proceeded," for "I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him" (88-9). In fact, the more the narrator observes the old man, the more he can see the old man's defects. The more he talks to his imaginary reader, the more he can sense his own cleverness. He alone is a Subject of "sagacity," a man with a lot of "foresight," "audacity," and "wise precautions" (89, 93, 92).

**I**RONICALLY, the gaze puts the self in an object position, only to lead to a different kind of Ego-Evil in the form of *voyeuristic unease*. We must notice the different mechanics of the narcissistic eye and the enigmatic gaze. If the eye is self-sufficient, the gaze operates at two levels: to gaze and to be gazed at. In the story, the narrator gazes at and is gazed at by the old man. Let's talk about the first gaze. When the narrator is about to kill the old man, he cannot bring himself to do the deed. As long as the old man's eye is closed, the narrator finds it "impossible to do the work" (89). Even when the old man opens his eye, for some time the narrator remains inactive, and he "refrain[s] and [keeps] still" (91). Hoffman explains the narrator's inability to act on the grounds that the old man is a "father-figure." His presence makes the narrator feel the "surveillance of the child by the father" (223). Gita Rajan follows this argument and further suggests that the old man denotes "patriarchal scrutiny or social control" (292). However, I believe that the reversal of power takes place because of the voyeuristic gaze. Previously, the eye led the narrator to feel no fear before the paternal figure and so he handled the old man well; but the narrator feels increasingly powerless and fearful before the (sleeping) old man because the voyeur's position predetermines his status. The pleasure/evil of voyeurism lies in the fact that a voyeur loves to be in the position of power/powerlessness because of his scopic drive: he becomes a Sub-

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ject (voyeur) because, paradoxically, he can dominate the other through his gaze, and yet he is subject to the object of desire/fear/power and feels hopelessly excited or anxious before the object at which he is gazing.<sup>3</sup> In the story, the narrator is upset as gaze can also generate a sense of disorientation: he seeks something that repulses/fascinates him, and he ends up seeing something that he longs to see but cannot bear. He wants to see the phantasmal object, the “dull blue,” “hideous veil” (91) which is hidden behind the eyelids; but, like all voyeurs, instead of controlling the object, the narrator becomes obsessive and is lost in the object, henceforth losing self-control. This loss of dominance does not imply giving up his project, though the narrator begins to attribute power to the old man. The old man’s eye becomes the “vulture eye” (91).

Meanwhile, the second gaze refers to the gaze of the old man. Under the old man’s gaze, the narrator feels increasingly helpless, for he can’t help being seen. As gaze means that an object-image (e.g. in the mirror) looks back at the self from a place unknown, it leads to a moment of “identity disorientation.” According to Žižek,

Far from being the point of self-sufficient self-mirroring, the gaze . . . functions like a blot that blurs the transparency of the viewed image. I can never see properly, can never include in the totality of my field of vision, the point in the other from which it gazes back at me. . . . this point throws the harmony of my vision off balance. (*Looking Awry* 114)

In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the reversal of power is heightened because the narrator is observing, while being observed at the same time. Although Poe’s narrator feels he is a clever man, he proceeds to tell how the gaze of others can force him to feel a defensive, paranoiac insecurity. On the eighth night, the old man’s uncanny gaze “chill[s] the very marrow in [his] bones” (91) because gaze means objectification. As Lacan describes it,

on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them. This is how one should understand those words, so strongly stressed, in the Gospel, they have eyes that they might not see. That they might not see what? Precisely, that things are looking at them. (*Concepts* 109)

The hero feels threatened because the old man keeps gazing at him in the dark, implying the reversible position of the subject/object, observer/observed, or how the blind can see, while the one with sight seems to be blind and powerless. Even though the old man cannot catch sight of anything, he can sense that someone is in his bedroom and that he is in danger. The old

man becomes very alert, and the narrator feels more and more anxious due to the old man's intense gaze. Davis noted long ago that many of Poe's heroes are reactive instead of active characters, for they "wish to escape the gaze of another who . . . would transform them into being mere objects of attention" (993). In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Roderick Usher has a deadly fear of his sister's gaze. The protagonist has to brick his enemy up in a vault in "The Cask of Amontillado." In "The Black Cat," the narrator walls up the black cat and the wife in order to avoid facing a further accusing gaze. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," after placing himself in the old man's room, the narrator cannot avoid responding to the potent gaze of the old man. This gaze petrifies the narrator, for he can no longer view the old man from a safe, subjective angle. In addition, the old man's uncanny gaze leads to split identification. Instead of simply hating the old man, the narrator cannot help identifying with and feeling for the old man. Thus, the story features the narrator's momentary empathy with the old man — "I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him" (90).

IN "The Tell-Tale Heart," the operation of Ego-Evil is related to the visual dialectic: the eye subjectifies the 'I' to challenge the other; the gaze elevates the other to excite, frighten, and objectify "me"; finally, the glare rouses the self to aggression, to put aside all feelings and eliminate the other. In "The Agency of the Letter," Lacan notes that the self is never in harmony with the other "since, at the heart of my assent to my identity to myself, it is he who stirs me" (*Écrits* 172). The glare thus captures the third stage of Ego-Evil: the self is quick to see the faults of the neighbor, but it *has to* orbit around and watch the neighbor. As a result, the glare implies the presence of three elements — the angry self, the eye's obsession with the neighbor, and a blatant rejection of the neighbor. It operates on the basis of *ressentiment*<sup>4</sup> and generates a powerful agency to scrutinize and hunt down the other. Glare — the act of "watching you" — implies an "identity war" between the self and the other, and the emphasis is not on restoring the self's unity but on condemning its enemy. The glare is always dangerous, for its very nature signifies hostility, malice, and evil ("the winner may not be me, but it certainly should not be you").

In the story, the narrator's aggressive glare goes with the demonization of the old man. Having wakened the old man, the narrator carefully releases only *one* ray of light from his lantern to shine on the eye.<sup>5</sup> The narrator's effort has only one purpose: to create a special visual effect so that he can further glare at and fault the old man. The point is that, even if the narrator feels uncomfortable with the old man's horrid eye, he actually has many choices to view the old man in other ways. However, Poe intends

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for the narrator to want to capture the most *unsightly* moment, to obtain the gratification that affirms his negative opinion of the old man. This is a common device in Poe's stories. In "Hop-Frog," Hop Frog the jester can only kill the much-hated King and the seven ministers after inviting them to dress like apes. He then happily sets them alight. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator actually rejoices at the old man's horrid look. It takes the narrator "seven long nights" in order to get *that* look. The old man's previous power is now defied, and the narrator, though feeling "an uncontrollable terror," has good reasons to glare at the old man and conclude that "the old man's hour had come!" (92). The old man's hideous eye and heart quickly increase "[his] fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage" (91).

It is natural that the destruction of the old man takes the form of suffocation, for it implies the ego's denial of witnessing the other's suffering. In Martin Buber's terms, it highlights the "I-it" relationship between the narrator and the old man. Furthermore, it proves what Maire Jaanus says: hating the other makes the other "voiceless" (344). Unlike strangulation or stabbing, which involve a face-to-face confrontation, suffocation offers a comfortable gap to protect the narcissistic ego, for the self sees neither what the ruthless hands are doing nor the suffering gaze of the old man. The narrator only views the heavy bed on top of the old man, and the old man is depersonalized, destroyed not by him but by the bed. Once the victim is "stone dead," he is but a stone, a worthless thing. The word "stone" is repeated several times in the narrative to emphasize the old man's complete "it-ness."

After the death of the old man, Poe begins anew the visual dialectic of the eye, the gaze, and the glare. With the old man gone, the narrator is happy and his eye dominates the scene again. Having erased the old man's presence in the house, he eyes himself in a self-satisfying, narcissistic manner and says, "for what had I *now* to fear?" (93). He is not afraid to make himself seen by the imaginary reader either. Thus he says, "you [won't] think [him] mad" when you notice his "wise precautions," for "no human eye — not even *his* [the old man's] — could have detected anything wrong" (92). And when the police knock on his door, "in the wild audacity of [his] perfect triumph" (93), the narrator boldly bids the police welcome and leads them to search the house. He takes them to visit the crime scene, and shows no respect for the dead by placing a chair atop the spot where he buried the old man's corpse.

Before long, however, the narrator cowers due to the dynamics of intersubjectivity, for the narrator feels that the police's gaze "catalyzes a phenomenology of judgment in the form of shame" and "fear," although he also resists the police's gaze fiercely (Jaanus 94). In the story, Poe re-



veals to us that his hero has never been an independent subject. For example, the narrator hurries the death of the old man *because* he fears that any "sound [might] be heard by a neighbor" (92). After the entrance of the police, the visual dynamics work in this way: the narrator sees the police, he also sees that the police are observing him, and he knows that the police see that he is reacting to their observation. The narrator begins to feel insecure due to the enquiring gaze of the Other (as Lacan notes regarding the power of gaze, "[y]ou never look at me from the place from which I see you," (*Concepts* 109)). The narrator fights back, only to be further scrutinized for his act. In the story, "ere long, [the narrator] felt himself getting pale and wished them gone" (93). On the one hand, he doubles his performative power in the hope of subjugating the Other; on the other hand, he takes up the opposite position to feel the otherness of himself. The narrator eyes the distrusting police and thinks, "Why *would* they not be gone?" (94). His action then becomes very strange. The narrator resorts to verbal violence in the hopes of ending this intersubjective tie: he talks "more quickly, more vehemently," he "argue[s] about trifles" with "violent gesticulations" (94). As the police "still [chat]," he foams, he raves, he swears (93-4). He hopes that fighting noise with noise can end the eye-gaze hierarchy. He resorts to further symbolic violence to resist the police's gaze. The narrator swings "the chair upon which [he has] been sitting," and grates "it upon the boards" (94). He finds the "observations of the men" (94) too much for him.

We are in fact drawn to notice the mechanism of *intrasubjectivity* in "The Tell-Tale Heart." As the narrator has "fancied a ringing in [his] ears," all of a sudden, Poe's narrator experiences an inadvertent *doubling* of himself (93). He keeps talking to the police, while his alter-ego hears his own heartbeat and the old man's heartbeat. We are invited to notice that, to the narrator, the old man seems to enjoy a second life after his death, for the old man is now firmly inside his system and becomes more in-him-than-himself. The old man's intrasubjective presence can only madden the narrator, for he feels the rise of an asymmetrical power relationship: the old man's indestructible heartbeat enjoys a triumphant acoustic fullness, while he himself is left to "[grasp] for breath" (94). From a "low, dull, quick sound," the old man's heartbeat fills the room as its noise "continue[s] steadily" (94).

The complex acoustics mechanism portrayed in "The Tell-Tale Heart" mirrors the narrator's inter-and-intrasubjective relatedness to and rejection of the other. Upon the police's entry, the narrator first chats with them cheerily. As soon as he hears the *unsaid* words of the police, he makes an effort to act like a good host and explains that the old man's absence is due to a trip "in the country." Then he begins to hear his body's voice, "a ringing in [the] ears" (93). He reacts by talking faster to "get rid of the

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feeling" (94). Finally, he knows that the voice is "*not* within [his] ears." As he resists the heartbeat by pacing "the floor to and fro with heavy strides," he becomes "excited to fury." To further silence the beating heart, he grates the chair upon the floorboards. And the symbolic "squashing" of the heart makes the narrator imagine that the noise can no longer be repressed. It is now "everywhere" (94). The police hear it; they are merely pretending that they don't hear a thing in the room.

In this polyphonic orchestration of sound (his words, the police's words, his heartbeat, the old man's heartbeat, the sound created by the chair) and the antagonistic interlocking of eyes (I see you, you see me, I see that you distrust me, I see that you know I am reacting defensively to your distrust), Poe chooses to highlight the power of the unsayable subtext. In fact, the repressed content can be as powerful as words, for it is in silence that the self responds to the dialectical connection between the recognition of desire and the desire for recognition. The police's desire is easily recognized by the narrator: their eyes remain searching, though their mouths "[chat] of familiar things" and "smile" (93). We must note that the narrator starts hearing the ringing sound at this moment. The narrator is embedded in a complex network of relations: he has his secrets to hide, but he recognizes the police's desire, and he cannot help responding to the police's desire in order to posit himself in their universe (the desire for recognition, the love of making himself seen). It is this relational tie between the desire of the other and the desire of the self that hystericizes and derails the narrator. To quote Žižek,

"You're saying this, but *what do you really mean by saying it?*" — which established the subject's primordial, constitutive position. The original question of desire is not directly "What do I want?" but "What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I to others?" . . . he serves as a battlefield for the desires of those around him. (*Plague* 9)

In other words, on the surface, the narrator rejects the police's questioning gaze and unspoken accusation; however, he actually responds to their desire ("tell me the Truth!"). Trapped between his self-interest (don't tell) and his fantasy (I will tell you who I am to you, I will make myself seen), the narrator makes the mistake of taking the police to the old man's bedroom, thereby further reinforcing the tie between him and the old man. As he fails to silence the beating heart, he reveals the truth to the police.

I<sup>N</sup> "The Tell-Tale Heart," Ego-Evil is the cause of murder and the reason for confessing the murder. The significant thing is — due to the narrator's supreme ego — not once in the story has he shown any regret or positive regard for human beings. He is constantly annoyed by his relational nature, his connectedness to the eye/voice of people. Once the narrator is subject to the police's gaze and the acoustic demand of the old man's heart, he faces a fierce battle between his desires to listen to the heartbeat, to kill the heart, to hide his crime, to show (off) his crime, to win recognition in their world, and to protect his well-being. As he sees himself as a *victim* of the other, the narrator explicitly denies any presence of the "Evil I." He keeps accusing others, for he presumes that the police and his neighbors are all heartless brutes: they are "making a mockery of [his] horror!" (94). All people are egoistically viewed to be bad because they, together with their wicked eyes, voices, and heartbeats, are trying to "harm" him, to "steal" his peace and "disturb" his life. They have ruined his mental equilibrium and can only pose a threat to his existence. In this excessive fantasy, "the authorization of his desire can only come from himself" (Žižek, *Plague* 73). His consistent behavior lies in the demand to expel the "Evil You."

In fact, the truth comes out because of the narrator's Ego-Evil, for he confesses due to his aggressive, *self-righteous* negation of the "hypocritical" police. He "[can] bear those hypocritical smiles no longer!" He feels that "[a]nything [is] better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision!" (94). He hates the police because he thinks that they deride him, and they disgust him due to their *refusal* to speak the truth. As a result, it is not self-incrimination that leads him to confess, but the condemnation of these "dishonest" characters that prompts him to be an "honest" character. He asks them to "dissemble no more" (94). The face-off against the other is the ultimate motivating force that drives him to face his crime — for he sees that the acknowledgement of his crime is still *morally superior* to their glaring hypocrisy (they know but they don't tell). In other words, his admiration of himself prompts him to do "good" for the sake of evil: confession is a means for him to look down on these hypocrites, even though the cost is death. Poe's narrator remains lawless, for he still does not respect the police, and he does not admit his wrongdoing in killing the old man. The dissolution of the social bond lies ultimately in the narrator's inability to love or put up with the other in his system. From beginning to end, he sees himself as the only "good guy." Even though he "admit[s] the deed," the inversion of good and bad is complete in the story as the narrator believes that the others are monsters but not himself. The dead old man is characterized by "the beating of his hideous heart"; the police are "dissemblers" and "villains" (94).

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Poe characterizes his hero with a prominent split mindset. Although the narrator confesses his crime, the confession comes with the intention of indicting others. Meanwhile, the narrator's autobiographical writing (the story of "The Tell-Tale Heart") denotes a desire to communicate his story to others, as well as a final cutting off of himself from all human values and ties. What draws our attention is that, in Poe's many stories, his heroes' recordings of their guilt do not mean the recognition of normative morality. In fact, the love of evil often defines Poe's narrators, for it is an "active, positive force resisting the Good" (Žižek, *Plague* 238). In "The Black Cat," the narrator sees murders as "mere household events" (V:143). In "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrator sees his confessional urges as "fits of perversity" (VI:152). In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator's character is shown in the fact that he would rather give his version of the story and have his last word on everything than to let the others watch him, mock him, or define his conduct. What's more, his confessional writing denotes a pathological attempt to re-define himself, to posit himself as a victor/victim and a subject/object. The act of writing offers him the chance of "seeing himself see himself," and re-presents himself to his satisfaction. It is through writing that the narrator can launch a counter-castrating act to spurn the law and the punishment inflicted on him. If the law dooms him, he is still the narratorial master who can fascinate himself and the world.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" offers no solution to terminate Ego-Evil. The story tells us that even though the narrator can be linked heart-to-heart to the old man, he does not want to see eye to eye with him. Poe reveals to us that, with a heart biased by self-love, the narrator's eye can only be diseased, and the mind confused. The narrator believes that the old man victimizes him with a tell-tale heart, a heart that refuses to die and makes sure the murder will come to light. In fact, Poe shows us that the narrator likewise possesses a tell-tale heart, even though it is a heart that "hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed" (John 3:20). The narrator gives us an autobiographical story that foregrounds simultaneously a love of self-exposure and a lack of self-knowledge. Like a hardened sinner, he writes with the desire to convey the "whole story" to the reader (88), but his first-person (unreliable) writing can only mean the elevation of his ego, with a view that he can "see and see," and "not perceive" the truth of his heart (Is 6:9). As the narrator judges according to his own affections, and not according to the truth, he notices not his error, the "plank" in his own eye. He thinks he can see, but the loss of true judgment can only mirror the blindness of the tale-bearing heart.

## KI

### Notes

1) All biblical references are to the Jerusalem Bible.

2) All references to Poe's works are from Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vols. I-XVII, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1979).

3) Interestingly, Lacan believes that the voyeur observes through the keyhole, only to unsee the reality. The voyeur is fascinated by X, so he has the firm conviction that he can never really see the thing. Thus Lacan says, "what he is trying to see, make no mistake, is the object as absence. What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind a curtain. There he will phantasize any magic presence, the most graceful of girls, for example, even if on the other side there is only a hairy athlete" (Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan [London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977], 182).

4) Nietzsche defines *ressentiment* in this way: "While the noble man lives in trust and openness with himself, the man of *ressentiment* is neither upright nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul *squints*; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as *his* world, *his* security, *his* refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble" (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage, 1989], 38).

5) We are reminded of our behavior: how often do we sit still and wait for the persons that we don't like to fall into a trap, to make the faux pas?

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