

The Imp of the Perverse

Edgar Allan Poe

1845

Available from www.DunwichReader.com



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 inner teachings of the spirit. 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. We could not understand - that is to say, we could not have understood, had the notion of this *primum mobile* ever obtruded itself - in what manner it might be made to further the objects of humanity, either temporal or eternal. It cannot be denied that all metaphysicianism has 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, out of these intentions he reared his innumerable systems of Mind. In the matter of Phrenology, for example, we first determined, naturally enough, that it was the design of Deity that man should eat. We then assigned to man an organ of Alimentiveness, and this organ is the scourge by which Deity compels man to his food. Again, 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. And in these arrangements of the *principia* of human action, the Spurzheimites, whether right or wrong, in part, or upon the whole, have but followed, in principle, the footsteps of their predecessors; deducing and establishing every thing from the preconceived destiny of man, and upon the ground of the *objects* of his Creator.

It would have been safer - 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. 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 to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something which, for want of a better term, we may call *Perverseness*. In the sense I intend, it is, in fact, a *mobile* without motive - a motive not *motivirt*. Through its promptings

we act without comprehensible object. 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*. In theory, no reason can be more unreasonable, but in reality there is none so strong. With certain minds, under certain circumstances, it becomes absolutely irresistible. I am not more sure that I breathe, than that the conviction of the wrong or impolicy of an 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. 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. But a glance will show the fallacy of this idea. The phrenological 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 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 prevails.

An appeal to one's own heart is, after all, the best reply to the sophistry just noticed. No one who trustingly consults his own soul will be disposed to deny the entire radicalness of the propensity in question. It is not more incomprehensible than distinct. 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, in such case, 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 a shadow seems to flit across the brain, and suddenly the thought strikes that, by certain involutions and parentheses, 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, in defiance of all consequences, is indulged.

Again: - 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, and our whole souls are on fire with the anticipation of the glorious result. It must - it shall be undertaken to-day - and yet we put it off until to-morrow. And why? There is no answer except that we feel *perverse* - employing the word with no

comprehension of the principle. To-morrow 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 have proceeded thus far, it is the Shadow which prevails. We struggle in vain. The clock strikes and is the knell of our welfare, but at the same time is the chanticler-note to the Thing that has so long overawed us. It flies. It disappears. We are free. The old energy returns. We will labor *now* - alas, it is *too late!*

And yet again: - 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, and yet, unaccountably, we remain. By slow degrees our sickness, and dizziness, and horror, become merged in a cloud of unnameable 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 on 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 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 impetuously desire it. And because our reason strenuously deters us from the brink, *therefore* do we the more unhesitatingly approach it. There is no passion in Nature of so demoniac an impatience as the passion of him who, shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge. To indulge, even 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 throw ourselves backward from the danger, and so out of its sight, 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 principle that men, in their fleshly nature, can understand; and were it not occasionally known to operate in furtherance of good, we might deem the anomalous feeling a direct instigation of the Arch-fiend.

I have premised thus much that I may be able, in some degree, to give an intelligible answer to your queries - that I may explain to you why I am here - that I may assign something like a reason for my wearing these fetters and for tenancing the 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.

It is impossible that any deed could have been wrought with 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 candle-stand, a wax-light of my own making for the one which I there found. The next morning he was dead in his bed, and the verdict was "Death by the visitation of God."

Having inherited his estate, all went merrily with me for years. The idea of detection never obtruded itself. Of the remains of the fatal taper I had myself carefully disposed, nor had I left the 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 reveled in this sentiment. It afforded me, I believe, more real delight than all the mere worldly advantages accruing from my sin.

There arrived at length an epoch, after which this pleasurable feeling took to itself a new tone, and grew, by scarcely perceptible gradations, into a haunting and harassing thought - a thought that harassed because it haunted.

I could scarcely get rid of it for an instant. It is quite a common thing to be thus annoyed by the ringing in our ears, or memories, of the burden of an ordinary song, or some unimpressive snatches from an opera. Nor will we be the less tormented though the song in itself be good, or the opera-air meritorious. In this manner, at last, I would perpetually find myself pondering upon my impunity and security, and very frequently would catch myself

repeating, in a low, under-tone, the phrases "I am safe - I am safe."

One day, while sauntering listlessly about the streets, I arrested myself in the act of murmuring, half aloud, these customary syllables. In a fit of petulance at my indiscretion I remodeled them thus: - "I am safe - I am safe - yes, *if I do not prove fool enough to make open confession.*"

No sooner had I uttered these words, than I felt an icy chill creep to my heart. I had had (long ago, during childhood) some experience in those fits of Perversity whose nature I have been at so much trouble in explaining, and I remembered that in no instance had I successfully resisted their attacks. And now my own casual self-suggestion - that I might possibly prove fool enough to make open confession - confronted me, as if the very ghost of him I had murdered, and beckoned me on to death.

At first I made a strong effort to shake off this nightmare of the soul. I whistled - I laughed aloud - I walked vigorously - faster and still faster. At length I saw - or fancied that I saw - a vast and formless shadow that seemed to dog my footsteps, approaching me from behind, with a cat-like and stealthy pace. It was then that I *ran*. I felt a wild desire to shriek aloud. Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with new terror - for alas! I understood too well that *to think*, in my condition, was to be undone. I still quickened my steps. I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. But now the populace took alarm and pursued. Then - then I felt the consummation of my Fate. Could I have torn out my tongue I would have done it. But a rough voice from some member of the crowd now resounded in my ears, and a rougher grasp seized me by the arm. I turned - I gasped for breath. For a moment I experienced all the pangs of suffocation - I became blind, and deaf, and giddy - and at this instant it was no mortal hand, I knew, that struck me violently with a broad and massive palm upon the back. At that blow the long-imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul.

They say that I spoke with distinct enunciation, but with 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.
