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The Confession of an Uncontrived Sinner: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"

1. The Entomological Prelude

Before the story begins we ought to introduce its hidden protagonist(s). There are two candidates, close relatives, competing for this title. One is called *xestobium rufovillosum*, the other *anobium pertinax*.[1] Both species produce ticking or clicking sounds which occur when the beetles bump their heads or jaws against the sides of tunnels of old furniture and wood they are boring into. Their Polish names bear interesting onomatopoeic traits. Thus, *tykotek pstry* (*xestobium rufovillosum*) derives from the verb *tykać* which denotes the ticking of a clock. *Anobium pertinax*, on the other hand, stands for *kołatek uparty*. The verb *kołatać* denotes, and at the same time imitates, tapping and rattling. It can be furthermore associated with a sound produced by a door-knocker—it therefore announces the presence of somebody at the door of our house, possibly a stranger (an uninvited intruder, rather than a longed-for visitor?), whom we may admit with a sense of apprehension or even anxiety, and who always will be approached with a dose of Derridean *hostipitalité*, i.e. an inseparable mixture of *hospitalité* (hospitality) and *hostilité* (hostility) (*Acts of Religion*, qtd. in Idziak 56). (It seems worth recalling here the famous knocking episode in Macbeth, which not only serves as a comic interruption following the bloody scene of Duncan's murder, but is also a serious confirmation that the porter at Macbeth's castle indeed opens the gate of hell when he admits Macduff and Lennox

[1] The importance of the deathwatch for the rationalization of the plot of Poe's Gothic was first pointed out by John E. Reilly. He argues for the occurrence of the so-called lesser death-watch, which is not a beetle but a smaller pscoid insect, in Poe's narrative. My interpretation takes up the general idea of Reilly's argument, rather than paying attention to the particular entomological distinctions, but for the sake of precision I invoke here his line of reasoning. Reilly writes: "It is the narrator, giving us a glimpse of himself alone in his own bedchamber, who has hearkened to the death-watches. Herein lies the source of the sound that the narrator believes to have been the heartbeat of the old man. Death-watches are insects that produce rapping sounds, sounds that superstition has held to presage the death of someone in the house where they are heard. There are two common varieties of the insect. The 'greater' death-watch, or *Xestobium rufovillosum*, is a wood boring beetle of the family *Anobiidae*.… The other insect, the 'lesser' death-watch, or *Liposcelis divinatorius*, is a louse-like psocid that thrives upon mold. It is commonly called *Atropos divinatoria*, but has also been called *Pediculus pulsatorius* and simply book louse. Much smaller than the beetle, the lesser death-watch emits a faint ticking sound believed to be produced by means of stridulatory organs. On the basis of the sound described by Poe's narrator, the insect in 'The Tell-Tale Heart' is the lesser rather than the greater death-watch" (3).

a moment after the king has been slaughtered (II, ii, 64- II, iii, 41). That fact that, according to the stage directions, the knocking is heard *within* may suggest that it is not those who wait *outside*, still unaware of what has just happened, but rather death which now lurks *inside*, waiting most impatiently to be let out in order to plunder at large the outside world.) Last but not least, especially in the context of some acute but undefined anxiety associated with the fear of the unknown, the Polish verb *kołatać* may also be connected with the unhealthy, hasty thumping of the heart which signals nervous irritation or can be a symptom of a severe heart condition. The popular saying: *dusza się w nim ledwo kołacze*, which literally means: "his soul is barely ticking," denotes a man on the verge of death and goes hand in hand with the aforementioned suggestions.

All through Europe, boring beetles have a fatal reputation for forecasting an approaching death. In fact, the sound is a signal meant to attract the attention of the females: the louder the beat, the stronger and therefore more attractive the unseen contender. However, the ominous superstition is reflected in many countries and languages. In German and Spanish, for instance, both species are called, respectively, *Totenuhren* and *relojes de muerte*. The English name reflects the belief that they were often heard by people "on watch" when an ill person was on the verge of death. Hence the ominous tag: the deathwatch.

In Polish literature, the deathwatch features, quite appropriately, in the famous Romantic drama by Adam Mickiewicz, based on the Polish-Lithuanian folk tradition of summoning the souls of dead people, celebrated at the time of the Christian feast of All Saints. It drew the attention of Jan Kott, who analyzed this episode in one of his essays, written at the time when he was recovering from a heart-attack; no doubt the critic's inner hearing was then sharply focused on the beat of his heart as he felt the presence of approaching death (181). The noise described in the poem is a persistent, quick and regular sound, which resembles the sullen ticking of an old watch hidden under a pillow. Most importantly, however, like the knocking heard *within* Macbeth's castle (and no doubt echoed in his troubled mind), it calls in doubt the clear-cut distinction between the "outside phenomena" and "inside sensations." We can likewise say that death is both a part of life and the most radical opposite of life, something that is the most intimate, the most dependable companion of each living creature and at the same time its absolute, totally inconceivable Other. The "ticking" of a deathwatch beetle, mixed with the uneasy heartbeat of an agitated, frightened or ill person, is also both "within" and "outside," both factual and fanciful, realistic and whimsical, trustworthy and unbelievable, an observable natural phenomenon and a figment of imagination. Herein (or should we rather say: out there?) lies the key to Mickiewicz's and Poe's literary-entomological riddles:

Tak tak, tak tak, tata, tata!
A dalibóg̀że, kołata,
Jak zegarek pod poduszką.
Co to jest? tata, tek, ta tek! (Mickiewicz 67)

The onomatopoeic lines "say" nothing and carry no symbolic meaning as long as they represent the mere sound of nature (a beetle) or technology (a watch), but as soon as this sound becomes associated with a supernatural message, it becomes a voice charged with significance and enveloped in mystery (whose unseen hand could be so close as to plant the invisible watch under the pillow?). The question: *Co to jest?* ["What is it?"] is in fact an apostrophe to the unknown, unseen presence which demands an answer. In the end, the mechanical clatter changes into an articulate appeal from a tormented soul, begging for remembrance and prayer: *Proszę o troję paciorek* ["I beg for three *Pater nosters*"] (91). It is no longer a sound produced by a beetle of ill-omen or a mysterious watch, but the impossible, unthinkable utterance of a dead person. In the real world, where reason is the highest authority, such a transformation would be deemed scandalously absurd; in the realm of literary fiction it relies on the use of prosopopeia, a rhetorical figure of counterfeit voice. The ticking of a deathwatch resonates in dead wood as if logs could talk; likewise the figure of prosopopeia gives voice, i.e. life, to the mute, to absent and inanimate beings, absent or dead people; moreover, it can put on the mask of a life on the very essence of non-being, that is on death itself.

The drumming of *xestobium rufovillosum* and/or *anobium pertinax*, so much like the ticking of a watch hidden under the pillow, or the beating of a troubled heart, which grows ever louder and faster as death bends carefully over the patient's bed and overshadows his sight, will also set the pace of our interpretative endeavor. The following analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic narrative "The Tell-Tale Heart," first published in 1843, is therefore going to wrap itself around just this one, monotonous and ominous sound, the mating call of deathwatch beetles and the fanciful transformations it may undergo in fiction thanks to the use of a literary prosopopeia.

2. Beyond Reason and Language

"True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (97)—the memorable opening of Poe's short story has certainly retained its provocative appeal. To begin with, the exclamation sharpens the contrast between the nature of literary fiction and the narrator's obvious craving for veracity,

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which he, most unwisely, seems to privilege over deception and illusion. Or does he? Despite all the appeals to matter-of-factedness, precision, accuracy or exactness, in short: the *truth* of the story, this narrative is, after all, a perfect instance of a stunning manipulation. From the start, the protagonist of Poe's story is perfectly aware of the fact that he will be diagnosed, or even worse "classified" as an unreliable narrator. Since he knows it in advance, he does not propose or deny anything, but instead confronts us with a challenge encapsulated in the almost jubilant, proud acknowledgement of a nervous disposition ("very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am"), followed by the provocative rebuke: "but why *will* you say that I am mad?" The question is at the same time an invitation for medical scrutiny, as it immediately casts the reader in the role of an analyst, and a preventive dismissal of the easily foreseeable, logically motivated verdict. On the other hand, it helps us pursue the problem of critical analysis to its logical limitation: projecting as it does, in a manner that anticipates the Foucauldian critique of reason, the internal restrictions of rational discourse. In a mental asylum, says Foucault, madness is muted insofar as it does not acknowledge its own guilt and does not take the form of a confession. The question remains, however, as to whether Poe's narrator is indeed confessing his crime?

The opening sentence of Foucault's seminal study is a quotation from Blaise Pascal: "Men are so necessarily mad, that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness" (xi). It perfectly fits the predicament of Poe's patient/narrator whose chief aim is what Foucault decries as "reason's subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime or disease" (xii). The impossibility of the madman's endeavor in Poe's story consists in his belief that he can persuade the sane, while at the same time his frighteningly logical discourse derives precisely "from the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non- reason" (Foucault xii). It forgets that as soon as madness and non-madness, reason and non-reason come into existence, i.e. as soon as they enter social discourse, they immediately cease to exist "for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange which separates them" (Foucault xii). What follows is the impossibility of communication.

> As for common language there is no such thing; or, rather, there is no such thing any longer; the constitution of madness as a mental disease, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords the evidence of a broken dialogue, posits the separation as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those stammered, imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between reason and madness was made. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such silence. (Foucault xii)

"The Tell-Tale Heart" confirms the impenetrability of this sound-proof barrier by merely reversing Foucault's premise: the entire story is a monologue of madness about reason. Nevertheless, it contains no spurious, broken, stammering words. It does not narrate a crime of passion which would simplify our response and set a clear boundary between reason and un-reason (which is reckless, sudden, wild and thoughtless); on the contrary, the focus falls on postponing the actual murder, on calculation, cunning and premeditation. The reason for this well-prepared misdeed is the murderer's fear of the victim's "evil eye." The precise nature of this penetrating sight remains unclear; we only know that the old man's eye resembled that of a vulture: "a pale blue eye with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (98). What never fails to grasp the reader's attention is how the narrator's compulsive repetitions focus on precisely these features of character which would stand in sharp contrast with any form of nervous compulsion: "You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight... I went to work!" (98). Wisdom, of course, is the opposite of folly, caution must be juxtaposed with rashness, and, last but not least, foresight would make up for the madman's *apparent* short-sightedness (the reader is invited to employ here *at once* all the contradictory meanings of the word "apparent," like: noticeable, evident, seeming and deceptive) and/or his *actual* lack of the forethought. Here once again "The Tell-Tale Heart" agrees with Foucault's findings: "At the secret heart of madness, at the core of so many errors, so many absurdities, so many words without consequence, we discover, finally, the hidden perfection of a language" (89).

3. The Voice of Another

Most literary fictions rely on the textual constructs which, despite the actual experience of silent letters on the page, effectively appeal to the recipients' imagination and willy-nilly activate his sense of hearing. The notions of "poetic image" and "counterfeit voice" merge in the time-honored idea of poetry, denoting all forms of fictional narratives, as a "speaking picture." This notion pertains to two important literary tropes, that of ekphrasis: the verbal equivalent of a visual object, and prosopopeia: the figure of imagined voice given to a lifeless object (e.g. a piece of wood), a mute creature (an insect) or an absent/dead person (the victim of a crime). Both these tropes are strongly connected with each other. A striking parallel can be drawn, for instance, between Poe's tale and its ekphrastic twin, Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess,"

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first published in 1842, one year before Poe wrote his "Tell-Tale Heart." The two texts present some form of murderous obsession which nevertheless hides itself under the mask of good sense. Browning's persona, as we all remember, is first and foremost a great connoisseur of the arts and a generous patron of artists (whom he would rather call artisans) who depict in sculpture and paintings *his* dominion over time and space. At the same time, however, the Duke of Ferrara is a slave of passions which force him to order the killing of his wife. When he realizes that the Duchess is too independent in her joys, too much in love with life itself, he replaces a living person with an ideal image. Together with the visitor who enjoys the privilege of viewing the picture carefully safeguarded in the Duke's private apartments, the area excluded from the public space downstairs and therefore closed for "the company below," the reader is encouraged to engage his/her imagination and "look with his ears," recovering from the blank words on the page the vivid portrait of a beautiful woman. But what is most important in Browning's dramatic monologue remains unsaid. The casual, conversational tone of the speaker is a splendid mask which hides murderous ambition, covetousness and envy. The revelation of the crime comes about suddenly and is most unexpected:

> This grew; I gave commands;
> Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
> As if alive. (67)

Most importantly, this crucial passage of Browning's poem points to the insufferable weight of suppressed passions which are released by the gaze of a woman who, even after her death "looks as if she were alive" (in the double sense of somebody who *appears* to be alive and whose accusatory *glance* still has the power to disturb the guilty conscience of the murderer). To be sure, the Duchesses's portrait says a lot, especially to the man who had her killed in order to prevail over the intolerable anarchy of her insolent joy and roving looks. Fixed in a frame, her gaze has become sharp and insightful, penetrating the inmost recesses of the murderer's soul.

The analogy seems indeed outstanding (not to say: eye-catching), for Poe's murder is equally concerned with his victim's piercing gaze, although in his case it haunts him before, not after the deed. This is the reason why he keeps visiting the old man's room for seven successive nights. Each time he must withdraw, for he is convinced that he ought to see the evil eye before he can commit the crime. It is only on the eighth night that he may finally carry out his plan. The evil eye forces him to murder the man who is reduced to an anonymous shade enveloped around a black hole, the gate of hell. The victim has no name, no body and no face:

> It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness—all a dull blue with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray, as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot. (101)

Jean-Luc Marion, a contemporary French continuator of Martin Heidegger's philosophical reflections, claims that the apple of the eye is the only and minimal spot on the body of another where I can see nothing (not even the color of the iris that surrounds the black hole) except for the invisible gaze which the other lays on me like a heavy weight—"when it falls on me it must be endured" (283). "The other is a burden," repeats Marion after Levinas (283), most adequately in the context of Poe's outstanding narrative whose focal point is marked precisely by the ray of light which disappears in the impenetrable depth of "the damned spot." There is only one difference between the two accounts that must be dutifully recorded, for if in Marion's analysis the Other stands for divine transcendence which requires moral responsibility for the life of our neighbor (very much like for Levinas); for Poe it is a contemptuous, diabolical sneer from the depths of hell, an urge to kill.

A moment after he has spotted the hateful eye, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" reminds us that he is also endowed with an exceptionally acute sense of hearing which had an equal share in pushing him ahead:

> And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses?—now, I say, there came to my ears a *low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*. I knew *that* sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage. (101, emphasis added)

This is not the first time he has heard that noise. It has accompanied him ever since the old man stirred for the first time that fatal night, disturbed by the faint clatter at the door. Even before that the murderer has been acquainted with the ominous portent of his own deed, the ticking of a deathwatch which sounded exactly the same as the beating of the old man's heart:

> I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in the bed, crying out, 'Who's there?'
> I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed, listening;

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> *just as I have done night after night hearkening to the death watches in the wall*. (99, emphasis added)

The following account is not only an in-depth psychological analysis of a panic-stricken mind but also an indispensable addition to the Kierkegaardian divagations on the concept of dread. It describes the unbearable anxiety which cannot be dismissed with any kind of rational explanation. Worth noticing is also the fact that Poe reverses the traditional pattern of Gothic suspense, provided for instance in Anne Radcliffe's novels, where the reader usually shares the point of view of an oppressed heroine who cannot identify the exact nature of the threatening presence that waits at the door of her bed-chamber or lingers unrecognized in the darkest corners of the room. Someone or something walks out of sight, hangs around, patiently waits for an opportune moment. In the case of Poe's story, on the other hand, we are invited to follow the villain's motions and, however bizarre it may sound, to share his dread. The narrator states very clearly that the fear of the old man merely repeats and reflects his own emotions which pushed him towards the fatal deed:

> Presently, I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself—'It is nothing but the wind in the chimney, it is only a mouse crossing the floor,' or, 'It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.' Yes, he has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions; but he had found all in vain. *All in vain*, because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim. (100)

Paradoxically enough, we can say that the old man is killed by his own fear, as indeed, his anxiety echoes and teases that of his murderer. In the end, it is not the unbearable *gaze* of another which is the immediate reason for attack, but the *sound* which resonates both within both men and outside—perhaps in worm-ridden wooden floors or furniture of "that old house" which will soon become a scene of crime:

> But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder, every instant. The old man's terror *must* have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous; so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old man's hour had come! (101-102)

No doubt Poe's story can be read as a masterpiece analysis of various vocal phenomena: the agitated heartbeat of the victim who dies out of fear and the pulsation of blood in the ears of a murderer who kills out of fear; the ominous sound of the deathwatch which may have provoked the incident and provides a perfect equivalent for these two dreadful melodies in the outside world; and, last but not least, the voice of a narrator, who in the crucial moment leading to the revelation of the crime listens simultaneously to all these sounds: overlapping each other, imitating one another, contending between themselves.

It all begins with the sound of a doorbell announcing the arrival of police officers, who have arrived because the shrieks at night have alarmed the neighbors. The following two paragraphs are worth quoting in full, for they perfectly render the game of the heard and the unheard, real and imaginary, inner and outer noises. The repetition of the phrases which occurred earlier in the narrative contributes to the polyphonic character of this passage, where the voice (or voices?) coming from the inside of the narrator's body and radiating through a space which is exterior to that body interlace with their echoes outside him:

> The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears; but still they sat, and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definitiveness—until, at length, I found that the noise was *not* within my ears.
>
> No doubt I now grew *very* pale; but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was *a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*. I gasped for

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breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly, more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why *would* they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men—but the noise steadily increased. O God! what *could* I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—*louder*! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they *knew*!—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again—hark! louder! louder! louder! *louder*! (103-104)

Firstly and most importantly, one is reminded of a similar tension described in Browning's dramatic monologue. Secondly, Poe's narrator gives us here an account of the condition theorized by Stephen O'Connor in his seminal study: *Dumbstruck. A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*: "A voice… establishes me as an inside capable of recognizing and being recognized by an outside.… If I hear my thoughts as a voice then I divide myself between the one who speaks, from the inside out, and the one who hears the one who speaks, from the outside in" (6). This, I wish to suggest, is the warrant of Poe's psychological investigation.

4. What the Deathwatch Said

What remains to be clarified is the role of the deathwatch in our story. Insects, as we know only too well, lack the skill of articulating speech, but both Mickiewicz's greater deathwatch and Poe's (possibly) lesser deathwatch are anxious to pass on an important message to the reader. "The Tell-Tale Heart" ends with the apparently absurd conclusion that could have occurred in the madman's mind (so indeed the narrator was right, as we indeed finally arrive at the conclusion that his version cannot be trusted!). Tormented by the ticking sound which comes from under the floor, he exclaims: "'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (104). This is the most embarrassing moment of the story for a couple of reasons. First, it brings into sharp focus something that has been an important, but hitherto unacknowledged aspect of the story, namely the recognition of the fact

that both speaking and hearing are games of dissimulation. Paradoxically enough, the narrator of Poe's story associates deceit with reason. When he boasts about how carefully he prepared the murder, he says: "You should have seen how *wisely* I proceeded—with… what *dissimulation*, I went to work!" (98, emphasis added). His narrative blurs the difference between facts and fiction, fancy and reality, his true face and mask. This is, indeed, one of the most outstanding examples of unreliable narration, not because the narrator is inaccurate, cannot or does not want to reveal all truth, but because he is so *ostentatiously* determined to pass for someone he is not: he plays a friendly lodger, a good neighbor, an enemy of an evil eye, and, last but not least, a reasonable man. He is a perfect actor, carefully employing his voice in the service of various roles. He thus reveals the most alarming quality of prosopopeia, whose function is to put a face on a faceless reality, but whose Greek name derives from the word *prosopon* which denotes a theatrical mask.

Secondly, and still more importantly, even if we suspected from the start that the tale would gradually reveal the logic of unreason, we are still surprised by the way it translates the inarticulate background noises into the key pronouncement of the story. In other words, we should say that the mistake of Poe's narrator does not consist in confusing the mating call of a boring beetle (or a book louse, for that matter) with the beating of his victim's heart. It is rather a matter of giving a *human* voice to the inarticulate, instinctive, unspeakable drives and forces which, like the mechanical noise of the deathwatch, constitute the principal soundtrack of this amazing narrative, something that "wells up" from the bosom of a tormented soul, but must remain speechless, like the wooden floor, insects that feed on wood (or on books, if we accept Reilly's hypothesis), and dead bodies concealed underneath the floorboards. Contrary to popular opinion, we shall say then that "The Tell-Tale Heart" is not a story of a man driven mad by the persistent knocking of innocent beetles, but another version of Gregor Samsa'a fantastic metamorphosis recorded by Franz Kafka: thus, instead of a bizarre Kafkaesque narrative about a man who overnight became a beetle we get an anecdote about a beetle disguised as a man and endowed with the power of human speech. In brief: tongue-in-cheek, Poe challenges our naïve trust in literature, confronting his readers with one more version of what Shakespeare's Macbeth would call "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V, v, 25-27).

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