Frantic Forensic Oratory: Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”

I have no idea what Ezra Pound meant when he complained that Poe is “A dam’d bad rhetorician half the time” (qtd. in Hubbell 20). Perhaps he was referring to Poe’s literary criticism, but what concerns me here is the rhetoric of one of Poe’s murderous narrators, for John P. Hussey is certainly correct when he notes that “Poe created a series of rhetorical characters who try to persuade and guide their readers to particular ends” (37). Let us consider the protagonist of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” It has been customary to see that tale as a confession, but it becomes clear that the narrator has already confessed to the murder of the old man who was his former living companion. The tale, then, is not so much a confession as a defense: “The Tell-Tale Heart” is actually a specimen of courtroom rhetoric—judicial, or forensic, oratory. This is not to say that he is necessarily arguing in a court of law; he may be speaking to his auditor(s) in a prison cell—but that he is telling his side of the story to someone (rather than writing to himself in a journal) is clear by his use of the word “you”; and that he is speaking rather than writing is clear by his exhortation to “hearken” (listen) to what he has to say. The important point is that his spoken account is forensic insofar as that means a legal argument in self-defense. To this end, the narrator has a considerable grasp of the techniques of argument but, like a damned bad rhetorician, he fails in his rhetorical performance even while striving desperately to convince. That does not mean that Poe himself is a damned bad rhetorician, for what John McElroy says of “The Black Cat” is equally true of “The Tell-Tale Heart”: the story has “two simultaneous perspectives: the narrative and the authorial” (103). The author, Poe, puts various rhetorical figures of speech and thought, as well as argumentative appeals, into his narrator’s explanations of the horrible events he has initiated, and then Poe sits back with his perceptive readers to watch the narrator fall short in his attempts at persuasion. The result is an irony that alert readers detect and a conviction—on my part, anyway—that Poe is a better literary craftsman than even some of his critical champions have realized.

Poe and the Tradition of Rhetoric and Oratory: His Time and Place

We cannot say for sure with which rhetorical handbooks Poe was familiar, but that he was familiar with some is shown by a remark he makes in “The Rationale of Verse”: “In our ordinary grammars and in our works on rhetoric or prosody
in general, may be found occasional chapters, it is true, which have the heading, ‘Versification,’ but these are, in all instances, exceedingly meagre” (14: 211). To be more particular, scholars attempting to demonstrate a nineteenth-century writer’s familiarity with the rhetorical tradition often begin with the eighteenth-century Scottish divine and professor of rhetoric, Hugh Blair, whose Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres “went through 130 British and American editions between 1783 and 1911” (Short 177n). Hussey shows no diffidence at all in insisting that Poe’s art is grounded “in the specific injunctions of the [rhetorical] handbooks,” Blair’s in particular. For Eureka, specifically, Poe needed appropriate personae for his narrator and a rigidly structured pattern or mold, for which he turned to the “classical address, again as Blair describes it, with six major sections: the Introduction (Exordium), Proposition and Division, Narration, Reasoning or Arguments, the Pathetic, and the Conclusion (Peroration)” (41). Although these divisions are centuries old and as such did not originate in Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, Hussey makes a case for Poe’s indebtedness to Blair by showing how the poet-cosmologist follows certain dicta expounded in the Lectures. Although he makes no attempt to prove his case, Donald B. Stauffer takes for granted that Poe took some of his ideas about style from Blair (454).

While Blair’s rhetoric was most prevalent in Eastern colleges until 1828—in fact, “Until the middle of the nineteenth century it was one of the most widely used textbooks of rhetoric” (Thomas 204; see also Corbett 568)—other extant works were George Campbell’s Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776), which achieved a circulation comparable to Blair’s after 1830 (Thomas 204), Richard Whately’s Elements of Rhetoric (1823), and Professor Samuel P. Newman’s Practical System of Rhetoric (1827), which would go through more than sixty editions (Matthiessen 203n). Another well-circulating work was Alexander Jamieson’s Grammar of Rhetoric and Polite Literature, first published in 1818 and “in its twenty-fourth American edition by 1844” (Short 178n). Other works known in American colleges include Charles Rollin’s Belles Lettres, John Stirling’s System of Rhetoric (1733), John Holmes’s popular Art of Rhetoric Made Easy (1739), John Mason’s Essay on Elocution and Pronunciation (1748), John Lawson’s Lectures Concerning Oratory (1758), John Ward’s influential System of Oratory (1759), James Burgh’s Art of Speaking (1761), Thomas Sheridan’s Lectures on Elocution (1762), Joseph Priestley’s Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism (1777), John Walker’s Elements of Elocution (1781), John Quincy Adams’s two-volume Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory (1810), and William Enfield’s The Speaker (1826). Less widely circulated were contributions to the teaching of oratory and rhetoric by American college professors, including Princeton’s John Witherspoon, “whose lectures on rhetoric, delivered at the New Jersey college from 1758 to 1794, were posthumously collected and printed”; then there is Lectures on Eloquence and Style, by Ebenezer Porter, holder of the Bartlett Professorship of Sacred Rhetoric at Andover Academy from 1813 to 1831 (Thomas 205). He also produced Analysis of the Principles of Rhetorical Delivery
as Applied in Reading and Speaking (1827), “one of the most widely used college elocutionary texts before 1850” (Thomas 207n2).

While John Quincy Adams and Joseph Priestley do indeed appear in Pollin’s Word Index to Poe’s Fiction, we find no reference there to any of the above texts (Blair is mentioned in Exordium)—and none appears in Killis Campbell’s survey, “Poe’s Reading.” Still, it seems almost inconceivable that Poe would not have been familiar with at least some of these, especially when we consider that, as Kenneth Cmiel puts it, “From the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century, rhetoric saturated American culture” and was “critical to the school curriculum, pulpit, political forum, and court of law.” Poe’s career as a schoolboy and professional author fits, after all, between the years 1820 and 1860, “the golden age of American oratory” (592). Robert Jacobs calls oratory “the most admired form of Southern rhetorical expression in Poe’s time” (76). “It was,” says biographer Hervey Allen, “the age of the spoken word” (176). Indeed! In a brief history of American oratory from 1788 to 1860, Aly and Tanquary tell us that “speechmaking went on in the daily exercise of life in situations and under conditions that defy classification. And if no situation requiring speechmaking was at hand, then one was invented. The literary society, the ‘bee,’ the debating society, and the lyceum were largely given over to speechmaking in one form or another” (89).

It certainly looks as if speechmaking went on at Poe’s childhood home, for his domestic environment and education were responsible for initiating Poe’s knowledge of rhetoric as both eloquence and persuasion. An early biographer, George Woodberry, tells us that, at the home of his foster parents, the Allans, Poe as a young boy was encouraged to give speeches to visitors: “his talent was to declaim”—an aptitude he had “perhaps by inheritance,” both dead parents having been actors (15). A later biographer, James Harrison, confirms and elaborates by quoting a former acquaintance of Poe, Col. Thomas H. Ellis, who paid tribute to Poe in the Richmond Standard on May 7, 1881: “Talent for declamation was one of his gifts. I well remember a public exhibition at the close of a course of instruction in elocution which he had attended [. . .] and my delight when, in the presence of a large and distinguished company, he bore off the prize in competition with [. . .] the most promising of the Richmond boys” (1: 24; see also Quinn 84). In fact, it is hard to imagine a precocious Virginia boy being unaware of rhetoric, given his environment: “Little Edgar’s childhood and youth were passed in an atmosphere of sociability, open-air sports, oratory, and elocution. Patrick Henry, the great orator of the Revolution, lay in the neighboring churchyard of Old St. John’s; Chief-Justice Marshall, the greatest of the justices of the Supreme Court, and John Randolph of Roanoke, celebrated for silver voice and stinging sarcasm, were familiar figures in Richmond streets; retired presidents like Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe” were also to be seen occasionally (1: 13). Biographer Jeffrey Meyers goes further—probably following Arthur Quinn (102)—speculating that Poe had met the author of “The Declaration of Independence,” one of the most brilliant pieces of rhetoric ever
penned by an American: “Every Sunday Mr. Jefferson regularly invited some of the students to dine with him at Monticello, and Poe must have met him on several social and academic occasions” (22).

Not only did the young Poe have the example of contemporary orators such as Jefferson (“Old Man Eloquent”) constantly in front of him but his formal education acquainted him as well with the great rhetoricians of the past. When a young scholar in England, Poe attended John Bransby’s school at Stoke Newington where he learned Latin, so important for a knowledge of ancient rhetoric. Back in America, in the English and Classical School of Richmond, Virginia, a barely adolescent Edgar “read the ordinary classical authors of the old preparatory curriculum” (Woodberry 19). Quinn is more specific, quoting the schoolmaster Joseph H. Clarke, who wrote in an 1876 letter, “When I left Richmond [. . .] Edgar’s class was reading Horace and Cicero’s Orations in Latin [. . .]” (83). At Jefferson’s newly opened University of Virginia, Poe enrolled in the Schools of Ancient and Modern Languages, later to excel in French and, again, Latin (Norman 72). Harrison records that Poe impressed his associates with “his remarkable attainments as a classical scholar” (1: 48). As another biographer, Kenneth Silverman, notes, Poe also joined “the Jefferson Society, a debating club, [where] it was said, [he] ‘grew noted as a debater’” (30). What better forum for the practice of rhetoric?

These scholarly achievements are reflected occasionally in Poe’s writings, where we certainly find some references to rhetoric and oratory. In “Some Words with a Mummy,” Poe provides a rather comical picture of modern oratorical gestures: “Mr. Gliddon [. . .] could not make the Egyptian comprehend the term ‘politics,’ until he sketched upon the wall, with a bit of charcoal, a little carbuncle-nosed gentleman, out at elbows, standing upon a stump, with his left leg drawn back, his right arm thrown forward, with the fist shut, the eyes rolled up toward Heaven, and the mouth open at an angle of ninety degrees” (6: 125). Poe would have known this cartoon orator to be partaking of the “mechanistic” concept of elocution, which was overwhelmingly popular in the 1800s. In other words, here Poe shows his awareness of the last of the traditional five parts of rhetoric: delivery. Mechanistic delivery concentrates on “the use of pitch, intensity, rate, and quality of the voice, as well as movements of hands, head, eyes, and other parts of the body” (Thomas 203). Vocal and physical communication was extremely important, and Walker’s *Elements of Elocution* was one of the principle books devoted to the movement of the orator’s body; Walker based his teaching “on observations of dance, musical, and theatrical performance” (Covino and Jolliffe 43). William Russell (see below) and Porter were both Walker adherents, but the most monumental book devoted to mechanistic oratory was Gilbert Austin’s *Chironomia; or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery: Comprehending Many Precepts, Both Ancient and Modern, for the Proper Regulation of the Voice, the Countenance, and Gesture* (1806). Covino and Jolliffe say that Austin “grounded his teaching in a self-proclaimed scientific study
of effective delivery” (see also Thomas 206). This book contains dozens of figures of gestures involving the hands, feet, and entire bodies (poses that would strike us as hilarious today and would get a modern speechifier laughed off the stage). Books published in nineteenth-century America that show Austin’s influence, and that Poe may have known, include Increase Cooke’s *The American Orator* (1819), Russell’s *American Elocutionist* (1844), Rufus Claggett’s *Elocution Made Easy* (1845), Merritt Caldwell’s *A Practical Manual of Elocution* (1845), and C. P. Bronson’s *Elocution; or Mental and Vocal Philosophy* (1845), in its fifth edition by 1845 (see Robb and Thonssen xviii). In the same oratorical tradition is Dr. James Rush’s *Philosophy of the Human Voice*, “the greatest single influence upon the development of elocation in America. [. . .] The book was immediately popular, and [. . .] remained the supreme authority on voice through most of the nineteenth century” (Thomas 207). Relating oratorical animation to the histrionic tradition is Henry Siddon’s *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action; Adapted to the English Drama* (1822). It is hard to imagine that the histrionic Poe would not have been attentive to issues of rhetorical delivery.

Poe also displays knowledge of rhetorical “dogma,” both ancient and modern. In “The Purloined Letter,” Dupin suggests to the narrator that “some color of truth has been given to the rhetorical dogma, that metaphor, or simile, may be made to strengthen an argument, as well as to embellish a description” (6: 47; see also 10: 143-44). And that Poe was knowledgeable about both ancient and modern rhetoric is shown by some remarks he makes in his Marginalia:

> We may safely grant that the effects of the oratory of Demosthenes were vaster than those wrought by the eloquence of any modern, and yet not controvert the idea that the modern eloquence, itself, is superior to that of the Greek. [. . .] The suggestions, the arguments, the incitements of the ancient rhetorician were, when compared with those of the modern, absolutely novel; possessing thus an immense adventurous force—a force which has been, oddly enough, left out of sight in all estimates of the eloquence of the two eras.

> The finest Philippic of the Greek would have been hooted at in the British House of Peers, while an impromptu of Sheridan, or of Brougham, would have carried by storm all the hearts and all the intellects of Athens.

> (16: 62; see the nearly identical remarks in a Poe review [10: 58-59])

Elsewhere in the Marginalia we find a reference to Cicero’s speeches: “The best specimen of his manner [Professor Charles Anthon’s] is to be found in an analysis of the Life and Writings of Cicero, prefacing an edition of the orator’s Select Orations. This analysis [. . .] is so peculiarly Ciceronian, in point of fullness, and in other points, that I have sometimes thought it an intended imitation of the Bruttus, sive de Claris Oratoribus” (16: 103). In fact, Poe reviewed Anthon’s *Select Orations of Cicero* for the *Southern Literary Messenger* in January, 1837 (9: 266-68). In “The Man of the Crowd,” the narrator refers to “the mad and flimsy rhetoric of Gorgias” (4: 134), the fourth-century Sicilian rhetorician and chief adversary of Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias*. The forensic oratory of Gorgias employed “highly musical forms of antithesis, involving isocolon, homoioteleuton, parison, paramoion
and—above all—abundant paranomasia” (Cluett and Kampeas 33)—figures Poe himself uses on occasion in his own prose. Poe shows his familiarity with another ancient rhetor in his discussion of the mystical Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Quintilian mentions a pedant who taught obscurity, and who once said to a pupil ‘this is excellent, for I do not understand it myself’” (15: 260). At any rate, Allen Tate, after acknowledging Poe’s “early classical education” (and Christian upbringing), is certainly wrong when he goes on to say that Poe “wrote as if the experiences of these traditions had been lost” (49).

We do not have to be denouncing bitterly the King of Macedon or carrying on in the British House of Peers to engage in the art of persuasion, however, for we employ rhetoric every day of our lives, usually for the most ordinary of needs and unconsciously; nor do we need to have all our mental faculties in good working order to exploit rhetoric—as Poe demonstrates through the desperate narrators in his tales of criminal homicide. In, for instance, “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Imp of the Perverse,” the mentally disturbed murderers want to convince their auditors of the reasonableness of their crimes—to make their audience understand that these things are comprehensible according to ordinary motives of human behavior and psychology. The profound irony, of course, is that these protagonists employ the traditional, the classical, language of reason (and primarily the Aristotelian appeal to logos) to justify and defend the actions of unreason. Readers should adopt the same stance of ironic detachment as Poe himself enjoys; that is, we should be aware of the discrepancy between his narrators’ irrational actions, motives, and their techniques of rational argument, their forensic oratory. Like another American literary psychologist, Herman Melville, Poe recognized that victims of mental diseases do not appear to be psychologically ill all the time—that hysterical ravings and incomprehensible babblings do not always identify the insane (also the lesson in “The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether” [especially 6: 72]). Poe would have appreciated Melville’s psychoanalysis of John Claggart:

Though the man’s even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption from that law, having apparently little to do with reason further than to employ it as an ambidexter implement for effecting the irrational. That is to say: Toward the accomplishment of an aim which in wantonness of atrocity would seem to partake of the insane, he will direct a cool judgment sagacious and sound. These men are madmen, and of the most dangerous sort [. . .].

(*Billy Budd* 76)

Like Melville’s Ahab, Poe’s madman in “The Tell-Tale Heart” particularly employs reason not only to carry out irrational acts but also to justify them. He behaves like an orator striving to convince an audience to take up a cause or like a defense-attorney advocating a point of view. We have to acknowledge that Poe’s depraved rhetoricians—like Ahab, many of Shakespeare’s evil characters, and the Satan of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—have fairly impressive powers of argument even while we recognize the absurdity of their attempts to justify themselves, or recognize at least the pathos of their attempts to explain the events in which they have played a role.
Elsewhere (Zimmerman) I demonstrate that the killer in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is a paranoid schizophrenic, noting that symptoms of that disease include anxiety and argumentativeness (American Psychiatric Association 287). These symptoms, especially his disposition to dispute, are manifested not only when he “arose and argued about trifles” (5: 95) but also throughout the narration. “The Tell-Tale Heart” is in fact an extended example of what classical Greek and Roman rhetors called *antirrhesis* (the rejection of an argument or opinion because of its error, wickedness, or insignificance). Obviously, the prisoner’s captors have named his crime for what it is, the act of an anxiety-ridden madman; *this* is the argument that the narrator—illustrating another symptom of schizophrenia, lack of insight—rejects as erroneous, impertinent, absurdly false; this is the thesis to which he attempts to provide the antithesis. Acting as his own defense-lawyer, he is not concerned with the issue of his responsibility in the crime, with the quality of the evidence against him, with the nature of the law broken, or with determining the extent of harm done to the victim—all important issues in forensic oratory (see Corbett 137-38). That is, he is not concerned with *whether* something happened but with the *quality* of what happened: his motives—the causes of his murderous actions and his subsequent maneuverings. He wants to demonstrate, rhetorically, that they were the actions of a sane rather than an insane man—wants, therefore, to refute not the charge that he committed the crime but the charge that he is mad. In doing so he bases his argument on the topos of comparison, specifically the sub-topic of *difference* (“I differ from homicidal madmen in several important respects”).

As a specimen of courtroom oratory, “The Tell-Tale Heart” displays several parts of the classical speech: it begins, as it should, with an *exordium* or *prooemium* (introduction), which we might consider the first two paragraphs. Part of the introductory material is the *narratio*, a brief, clear statement of the case—the narrator knows that this is a principal component of forensic oratory. Speeches, however, do not always use or need every part of the classical division, and Poe’s narrator omits a *partitio* (*divisio*—division of the issue into its constituent parts). He then combines the standard fourth and fifth sections—the *confirmatio* (one’s strongest positive arguments) and *confutatio* (refutation of contrary viewpoints—his extended *antirrhesis*); these make up the bulk of the tale and are anticipated in the opening two paragraphs. It is telling that this speech lacks the final part of a classical oration, the *peroratio*—conclusion. Had the narrator been able to retain his initial tranquility, he might have been able to produce some closing remarks (a summary of his case and a terminal flourish), but by the end of the speech his forensic powers have degenerated into complete and utter frenzy: he succumbs to his schizophrenic symptoms again—specifically a violent mood swing comprised of anger and anxiety.

At the start, he knows that his audience has already determined what they think of him—knows that they are hostile and have labeled him a nervous “madman.”
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He is aware, in other words, that his case is what Cicero would have called a “difficult” one (as opposed to being “honorable,” “mean,” “ambiguous” or “obscure”) involving as it does an audience whose sympathies are alienated by the horrendous nature of his crime. Thus, the narrator uses his *exordium* as it is meant to be used: he attempts to win the good will of his auditors, at least to the extent that they are willing to hear him out patiently. While the rest of the speech is an appeal to *logos*, reason, at the beginning he must resort to an appeal to *ethos* in order to lessen the audience’s hostility and make them more receptive. He begins, therefore, with *restrictio* in accepting part of their judgment: “True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am” (5: 88). He makes a concession (*paromologia*), and what better way to capture the audience’s sympathies than by agreeing with their pronouncement, in effect congratulating them on their astuteness, their medical acumen. It is true that he qualifies their diagnosis with his rhetorical questions (“why will you say that I am mad?”; “How then am I mad?”)—in this sense he is using what Richard Whately called the *introduction corrective* (see Corbett 284–85)—but he has already shown his good will (*eunoia*) toward his listeners by agreeing with at least part of their judgment. Corbett discusses the strategic usefulness of the concession as part of the ethical appeal: “The audience gets the impression that the person capable of making frank confessions and generous concessions is not only a good person but a person so confident of the strength of his or her position that he or she can afford to concede points to the opposition” (316).

Poe’s clever forensic rhetorician uses other devices to “soften up,” to *condition*, his audience. The first and second paragraphs of “The Tell-Tale Heart” also involve a device used often by Poe’s narrators: *praeparatio* (preparing an audience before telling them about something done). Several Poe tales begin with short essays on various themes, concepts, that will be illustrated by the following narrative accounts; thus, the narrators prepare the audience to understand the specific cases to follow by illuminating the theories first. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” commences with an essay on certain mental skills before we hear about their display by the amateur detective C. Auguste Dupin. “The Premature Burial” starts with several illustrations of untimely interment before we hear about how the narrator himself was apparently buried alive. “The Imp of the Perverse” begins with a short dissertation on that destructive and irresistible human impulse before the narrator provides three examples of it and finally his own case. I agree with Sandra Spanier (311), who quotes Eugene Kanjo with approval: “This essay-like introduction is not a failure of craft, as one critic contends, but a measure of Poe’s craftiness” (41). This craftiness lies in Poe’s use of the rhetorical tradition—here, in his employment of *praeparatio*. When used to preface a criminal confession, this device can make what would otherwise seem to be merely cold, hard, ugly, incriminating facts more understandable, even more acceptable—or, at least, less unacceptable. At the same time, most significantly, the forensic narrator combines the ethical appeal with the appeal to *pathos* (emotions): he attempts to enlist the sympathies of his
hostile auditors by portraying himself as the real victim. He tries to weaken the charges against him by discoursing of his misfortunes, his difficulties: I loved the old man, but I was persecuted, hounded, harrassed, and haunted day and night by his wretched Evil Eye (Sharon Crowley says “a rhetor’s ethos may be a source of good will if she [...] elaborates on her misfortunes or difficulties” [176]).

In his use of *praeparatio*, the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” differs from the Watson-like biographer of Dupin and the protagonists of “The Imp of the Perverse” and “The Premature Burial” in that he does not provide any general theories or other cases of his particular illness, but he does prepare us to understand it nevertheless. He wants us to recognize, first, that he suffers from overacute senses and, second, that the vulture eye of the old man, not hatred or greed (rather trite, uninteresting, normal motives), is what compelled him to commit his atrocity (here is also *expeditio*, if we can accept the term as meaning not just the rejection of all but one of various reasons why something should be done but also of why something was done). Also embedded within the larger trope, *praeparatio*, is *aetiolegia*—giving a cause or reason for a result: “He had the eye 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” (5: 88). Here the narrator employs another topos frequent in forensic oratory: the topos of relationship and its sub-topic, cause and effect. The pathetic irony in all this, of course, is that the narrator really believes his *aetiolegia* to be reasonable, comprehensible, easily justifiable.

Poe maintains an objective distance with us and watches the ironic *aetiolegia*. In fact, what characterizes most of the rhetorical devices in Poe’s tales of criminal homicide is the conscious, the deliberate, *irony* with which he uses these techniques of argumentation. Overlapping with the ironic *aetiolegia* is *necessum* (*dicaeologia*): defending one’s words or acts with reasonable excuses; defending briefly the justice of one’s cause. As with the *aetiolegia*, what gives an interesting twist to the use of *necessum* in some of Poe’s tales is the extent to which the narrators’ auditors and we, the readers, might find the defense, the excuse, outrageously unconvincing and bizarre. The same is true of the use on the part of the “Tell-Tale Heart” narrator of what Cicero called *praemunitio*—defending yourself in anticipation of an attack; strengthening your position beforehand: “If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body” (5: 92). Here the *praemunitio*, which is a normal component of the confirmation/refutation part of a classical oration, is pathetic, ironic, because clearly inadequate, outrageously unconvincing to anyone except the narrator—more generally, to anyone except those outside society’s codes of moral behavior and lacking the conscience of the *superego*.

The bragging narrator, however, believes that he, as a man of superior powers (note his delusions of grandeur—another sign of schizophrenia), not only can plan and carry out the perfect crime, and conceal the evidence, but can also convince
his prosecutors that his actions were entirely reasonable. “The Tell-Tale Heart” is an extended exemplification of *antirrhesis* but it is, as well, extended *consummatio* (*diallage*), a bringing together of several arguments to establish a single point: his sanity. Argument #1: I am not mad but suffer from overacute senses, especially of the auditory capacity (“And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses?” [5: 91]). Argument #2: “Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work” (5: 88). A lunatic, he believes, would be incapable of sagacity, caution, foresight, and ingenuity in planning and executing a murder (“would a madman have been so wise as this?” [5: 89]). Argument #3: “If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body.” Not only sagacity in execution but sagacity in concealment is also a sign of sanity, he believes.

His auditors, however, likely do not share the positive *slant* that he puts on his actions. After all, this shrewd forensic rhetorician seems to make use of what is sometimes considered a rather disreputable device: *paradiastole* (making the best of a bad thing; the euphemistic substitution for a negative word with something more positive). In his introduction to Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, David Wootton calls chapters 16 to 18 of that work “a virtuoso exercise in *paradiastole*, the redescription of behavior in order to transform its moral significance” (xxxiv). For example, what we call hypocrisy in a ruler, Machiavelli would call *craftiness* or *expediency*; in other words, what most people consider a negative trait, Machiavelli considers positive. We see, then, how the device, a technique of argument, can involve essentially a Nietzschean revaluation of values. As part of his forensic oratory, the Machiavellian narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” seems to employ *paradiastole*, especially in the third paragraph. Consider his use of nouns and adverbs: “You should have seen how *wisely* I proceeded—with what *caution*—with what *foresight*—with what *dissimulation* I went to work! [. . .] Oh, you would have laughed to see how *cunningly* I thrust it in!” (5: 88-89; my italics). What we might call *perfidiously*, he calls *wisely*; what we might call *sneakiness*, he calls *caution*; what we might call *scheming*, he calls *foresight*; what we might call *treacherously*, he calls *cunningly*. Even the one word in that catalogue that has negative connotations, *dissimulation*, he would translate as *ingenuity*. Certainly his accusers, those whom he is addressing, have evaluated his conduct and might have expressed it thus: “We should have seen how perfidiously you proceeded—with what sneakiness—with what scheming—with what hypocrisy you went to work! Oh, we would have been appalled to see how treacherously you thrust in your head!” But the narrator, using *paradiastole*, has redescribed his behaviour, putting it in a positive light according to *his* twisted values and assuming that his audience would be persuaded to adopt those values also.

Let us summarize the rhetorical appeals, topoi, and devices that Poe’s paranoid
schizophrenic employs, within a classical arrangement, in order to win the skeptical audience to his point of view. We have seen that he employs four of the six parts of a classical oration. His exordium attempts to make the hostile audience more receptive to his point of view through restrictio and an initial, friendly concession (paromologia), part of his brief appeal to ethos (simultaneously, his introduction is of an inoffensively corrective nature in that he insists that his judges have misunderstood the nature of his illness and, hence, his case). Next, he continues his strategy of softening the auditors with praeparatio. His statement of the case (narratio), told in the plain style as it should be (according to Quintilian), also features expeditio, aetiologia, and necessum. The fourth and fifth parts of this forensic speech, the confirmatio and confutatio, begin with the third paragraph and employ paradiastole, praemunitio, progressio, antirrhesis, and consummatio. Additionally, the narrator’s forensic oratory involves the topos of comparison (with its sub-topos of difference) and the topos of relationship (with its sub-topos of cause and effect); all these comprise a five-page appeal primarily to logos, reason—with a useful bit of ethos and pathos thrown in at the beginning.4

What is so tragic about the narrator’s frantic forensic rhetoric, however, is his psychopathic inability to appreciate the moral gravity of his deeds, despite his—shall we say it?—otherwise brilliant capacity to construct a powerful piece of persuasion, of reasoning. Page Matthey Bynum puts it this way: “Poe’s narrator is maintaining a causal sequence—I can reason; therefore I am not insane—which Poe’s audience had just discovered was false” (148). It is evident immediately to the reader, and increasingly as the narrative progresses, that the narrator is indeed clearly ill and, as John Cleman says, “The irony of ostensible sanity signaling insanity could not have been lost on Poe” (632). Let us narrow the focus from the broad and vague term insanity to the particular illness from which Poe’s forensic orator suffers. His revaluation of values, his paradiastole, is really a manifestation of his schizophrenia, which, remember, refers to a split between thought and feeling: his thoughts of the grisly murder he committed are not accompanied by the feelings of disgust that mentally healthy people would feel. His feelings are of delight rather than disgust. That is why he is able to turn perfidiously into wisely, sneakiness into caution, scheming into foresight, treacherously into cunningly, and to define dissimulation as ingenuity rather than hypocrisy. We recognize this rhetorical revaluation of values as a sign of schizophrenia; the narrator does not.

Peroratio

Despite the glorification of oratory and rhetoric in Poe’s time and place, in “The Tell-Tale Heart” we find Poe demonstrating that rhetoric can fail. Did Poe therefore distrust that ancient art of persuasion? As we know, contempt for and suspicion of rhetoric is a tradition at least as old as Plato, who, in his Gorgias, has Socrates liken that art to teaching a cook how to give poison a pleasing taste. This attitude certainly carried into the Renaissance: in Marguerite de Navarre’s Hep-
tameron, academics are rejected as good storytellers because “Monseigneur the Dauphin didn’t want their art brought in, and he was afraid that rhetorical ornament would in part falsify the truth of the account” (69). In his essay “On the Education of Children,” Montaigne writes of the ideal student who “knows no rhetoric, nor how, by way of preface, to capture the benevolence of the candid reader; nor has he any wish to do so. In fact, all such fine tricks are easily eclipsed by the light of a simple, artless truth. These refinements serve only to divert the vulgar” (77). Even Machiavelli dissociates himself from the tradition in the second paragraph of The Prince: “I have not ornamented this book with rhetorical turns of phrase, or stuffed it with pretentious and magnificent words, or made use of allurements and embellishments that are irrelevant to my purpose, as many authors do” (5). And Shakespeare, most obviously, shows through the many linguistic Machiavellians in his plays the necessity of qualifying Quintilian’s definition of the rhetor as “a good man skilled at speaking.” Poe, like Milton and Melville also, recognizes that bad men could speak well.

But I do not believe that Poe—the contemporary of Thomas Jefferson, Chief-Justice Marshall, John Randolph, Daniel Webster—held the rhetorical tradition in contempt. Like the Renaissance humanists cited above who claimed to despise rhetoric, he was trained in it and put it to good use. Yet, like them, he was wise enough to recognize how powerful a tool it could be and to hold it in suspicion. As well, he was simply fascinated by the ironic spectacle of the actions of unreason being justified through the linguistic tradition of reason—the jarring collocation of insanity employing the Aristotelian appeal to logos. Poe the Southerner may indeed have been trained in the classical tradition—the brilliant oratory, rhetoric, and logic of the wisest ancient Greeks and Romans—but he was also a student of the new science of abnormal psychology. Poe, the devotee of sweetness and light, gives in to the impulses of Dark Romanticism. A Poe narrator may strive to convince us that his mind is a Greek temple with its glorious friezes, fluted Doric columns, solid stylobates—but we know what kind of ruin it is. The classical man will give way: Cicero will succumb to the barbarian hordes of his psyche, Quintilian to the inner demons, Aristotle to the beast within.

Notes

1 That is worth repeating: Poe took a course in elocution. Thomas informs us that courses devoted to the delivery of speeches were developed at American colleges in the early 1800s. The teaching of speech came to be recognized “as a separate and distinct subject field”:

In 1806 John Quincy Adams was appointed to the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard. It was the first such appointment in the United States. Previously the subject had been taught by some tutor who also instructed in numerous other fields and was frequently not specifically prepared for teaching speech. But after Adams began his duties, other colleges established similar professorships.
Note that schizophrenia refers to a split between thought and feeling, not to a split between personalities. Literary scholars seem especially prone to make this error.

We might also consider the narrative an extended example of progressio, building a point around a series of comparisons—in this case, between the narrator and a true “madman.”

I have suggested in the first half of this essay that Poe was acquainted both with contemporary and classical rhetors. Many of the ancient terms I have been using (typically Greek)—certainly those naming the parts of an oration and the three appeals (pisteis)—could be found in both ancient and modern books. On the other hand, many of the names for the rhetorical figures are more likely to be found in the ancient texts, so I propose that Poe—who was, remember, classically trained—could have picked up such terms as paradiastole, paromologia, and praeparatio from them. Still, that proposal begs the question of whether Poe was even familiar with such esoteric terminology. In his review of Bulwer’s Night and Morning, he demonstrates his awareness of the rhetorical name for personification: “Nor does the commonplace character of anything which he wishes to personify exclude it from the prosopopeia” (10: 131; see also 10: 75). In “The Rationale of Verse,” he illustrates his knowledge of another fancy Greek term: “Blending is the plain English for synaeresis—but there should be no blending” (14: 231); Poe uses the adjective synaeretical in Eureka (16: 187). In his review of The Dream, and Other Poems, Poe displays his familiarity with the device solecismus: “Mrs. Norton will now and then be betrayed into a carelessness of diction; Mrs. Hemans was rarely, if ever, guilty of such solecisms” (10: 100). That Poe knew the esoteric name for personification, and that he knew the little known synaeresis and solecism, shows that he was indeed familiar with some of the classical terms for literary devices. Even if he did not know all the names for the figures I have identified at work in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” these figures nevertheless are there. Thus, we can conclude either that Poe’s classical background gave him the labels for these devices (paradiastole, paromologia, praeparatio, and so on), of which he made conscientious use for the rhetorical maneuverings of his characters, or that he did not know all the terms but had an intuitive understanding of the rhetorical strategies that they describe. Either way, he shows himself to be a master rhetorician, despite the rhetorical failings that he deliberately (and brilliantly) gives his narrators.

Works Cited


1984.


