METEMPSYCHOSIS AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE BLACK CAT"

METEMPSICOSIS E IDENTIDAD INDIVIDUAL EN "EL GATO NEGRO", DE EDGAR ALLAN POE

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ANNA MICHELLE SABATINI
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)
amsabatini@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3669-3902>

Abstract

Pythagoras and Empedocles are not generally believed to have left an indelible imprint on Edgar Allan Poe's oeuvre, despite the direct allusion to each of these Presocratic thinkers in the poet's writings. It is also quite remarkable that "The Black Cat" (1843) has not typically been considered a tale of metempsychosis, even though this motif is clearly present in the story. Moreover, the fact that Poe allows transference to occur from one cat to another hints at his acceptance of the contentious Pythagorean premise that the transmigration of souls is not restricted to the human body. In addition, while a number of scholars have acknowledged the ambivalent nature of the daemon in other works by Poe, most studies of "The Black Cat" portray it as an unequivocally dark and malevolent entity. In contrast, this article conceives of the daemon as an ambiguous being that reemerges in feline form to inflict punishment on the protagonist for his vile acts. In this disturbing narrative, Poe once again explores a question that haunted him throughout his life —namely, whether individual identity can survive bodily death.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, Pythagoras, Empedocles, metempsychosis, daemon.

Resumen

Pitágoras y Empédocles no suelen considerarse influencias indelebles en la obra de Edgar Allan Poe, a pesar de que el poeta alude directamente a ambos pensadores presocráticos. También resulta sorprendente que tradicionalmente "El gato negro" (1843) no se haya clasificado como un relato de metempsicosis, aun cuando la temática está claramente presente en dicha narración. Es más, el hecho de que Poe permita que la transferencia se produzca de un gato a otro, sugiere una aceptación de la controvertida premisa de Pitágoras de que la transmigración del alma no se circunscribe al cuerpo humano. Asimismo, aunque varios estudiosos han señalado la naturaleza ambivalente del daemon en otras creaciones de Poe, la mayoría de los escritos sobre "El gato negro" retratan a la criatura como inequívocamente oscura y maligna. El presente artículo la concibe en cambio como un ser ambiguo que, encarnado en un felino, resurge con el propósito de castigar al protagonista por sus viles actos. En la inquietante narrativa que nos ocupa, Poe explora de nuevo una de las cuestiones que más le obsesionó a lo largo de su vida, a saber, la posibilidad de que la identidad individual perdure tras la muerte física.

Palabras clave: Edgar Allan Poe, Pitágoras, Empédocles, metempsicosis, daemon.

You alone were born to judge
deeds obscure and conspicuous.
Holiest and illustrious ruler of all,
frenzied god,
you delight in the respect
and in the reverence of your worshippers.
I summon you […].
The Orphic Hymns, "To Plouton"

1. Introduction. Revisiting the Daemonic in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat"

The depth of Edgar Allan Poe's knowledge of early Greek philosophy cannot be ascertained and remains a subject of controversy. Nevertheless, there is no doubt as to the Hellenic influence on his writing. More specifically, a valuable source that has often been overlooked is that of the Presocratics. The theme of metempsychosis in such stories as "Metzengerstein" (1832), "Morella" (1835), "Ligeia" (1838) and "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" (1844) has been explored

by several critics (Quinn 1957; Fisher 1971; Rowe 2003). Rather surprisingly, however, "The Black Cat" (1843) has not traditionally been included in this group, although Thomas Ollive Mabbott does acknowledge that Poe used the idea of the transmigration of souls in the piece (1978: 15). Various authors have also rightly pointed to the ambiguity of the daemonic in Poe's writing (Ljungquist 1980; Andriano 1986), but it is particularly striking that the daemon in "The Black Cat" is often viewed as an exception and typically associated almost exclusively with sin and wickedness.

Poe is thought to have learned about daemonology through sources as varied as Plato (c. 427-347 BCE), British Romantic poetry, Jacob Bryant (1715-1804), Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), the fairytale novella *Undine* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué (1777-1843), Gnostic philosophy and Near-Eastern lore, among others (Ljungquist 1980). The term δαίμων traditionally carried several meanings in ancient Greece. It often denotes a god, goddess, godlike power or fate (Beekes 2010: 297). Daemons can also take on the role of a guardian or tutelary deity and link humans to higher gods (Primavesi 2008: 259; Liddell and Scott 1846: 305-306). Plato's *Symposium*, from which the epigraph to Poe's "Morella" is taken, defines a δαίμων as an entity that is "intermediate between the divine and the mortal" (1920a: 328). In other contexts, it can also refer to the soul (Primavesi 2008: 275). Only in works by more recent authors does the daemon come to designate a departed soul, an evil spirit or the devil (Liddell and Scott 1846: 305-306). As Ljungquist aptly points out, the daemon takes on an ambiguous meaning in Poe's fiction (1980). In his writings, Poe transcends the myth of the fallen angel and, as in the Hebrew and Greek traditions, the daemonic and the angelic become intertwined. The Romantics echo the Greek notion that Socrates (c. 470-399 BCE) was guided by a personal daemon. They often conceive of daemons as half-mortal, half-divine intermediary spirits who do not necessarily possess evil qualities, and as guardians of humankind that are responsible for determining individual fate. Such theories appear to have informed Poe's characterization in several of his stories, some examples of which are "Morella", "Ligeia", "The Power of Words" and, of course, "The Black Cat". In the first three tales, these entities are endowed with extraordinary skill and vast knowledge, while the last narrative exemplifies Poe's fascination with the ancient tradition that associated human fate with daemonic force. For Poe and other Romantic writers, those who are possessed by daemons acquire inner strength and divine poetic inspiration. However, they also perceive the daemonic as a hidden and mysterious source of power, so possession can be both an elevating and a ghastly experience. This, in turn, is reminiscent of Gothic sublimity, a heightened feeling of fear and awe which defies measurement and representation (Ljungquist 1980).

In Ljungquist's view, the black cat in Poe's story symbolizes a supernatural daemonic force. Rather puzzlingly, however, he associates these feline creatures with dark powers alone, in accordance with medieval superstition. He speaks of "oppression or weight that could hamper human breathing", "a feeling of being frozen or paralyzed" and "daemonic dread" (1980: 34). Equating the cat in Poe's tale with a purely evil spirit is undoubtedly perfectly plausible. Still, the fact that this animal has a noble character renders an association with the less explicitly malignant Greek conception of the daemonic much more tenable. It is true that the protagonist refers to his wife's "frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise" (Poe 1978a: 850). Nonetheless, this remark appears to be an attempt to baffle the reader, as he immediately adds, "[n]ot that she was ever serious upon this point —and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered" (850). This is hardly surprising, as it is customary for Poe to be deliberately cryptic, to raise epistemological doubts by blurring the line between illusion and reality, or dreams and waking states. He frequently employs the trope of the unreliable narrator and displays a profound distrust of the senses, creating a physical world which is chaotic, ever-changing and insubstantial (Folks 2009: 58, 60-61). He also uses magical lore to enhance the mystery and sublimity of his stories, to create an alternate reality and to encourage a suspension of disbelief in the reader (Rowe 2003: 44-45). In his review of Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*, published in *The Southern Literary Messenger* in September 1836, Poe states that the writer of a tale of metempsychosis should deploy certain techniques, such as "avoiding […] *directness* of expression" in order to leave "much to the imagination" and "the result as a wonder not to be accounted for" (1997: 286, emphasis in original).

Several academics have suggested that the narrator's cat Pluto is in fact the Greek god of the Underworld (Moreland and Rodriguez 2015; Tsokanos and Ibáñez 2018). Although this interpretation is logical and very convincing, most critical analyses of "The Black Cat" tend to focus on the negative aspects of the chthonian deity, who is almost entirely associated with wickedness, violence, rage and the diabolical (Moreland and Rodriguez 2015; Tsokanos and Ibáñez 2018). Admittedly, as the ominous god of the dead and even of death itself, Hades was to be greatly feared but, paradoxically, it was believed that he performed good deeds for mortals from his abode in the Underworld. Hades was described as hateful and malignant, but also as the renowned one and a god of good repute. Furthermore, Hades was alternately known as Pluton, which signified wealth. As a precaution, the living were reluctant to utter the name Hades, but this was not the case with Pluton, who responded to prayer and offerings. Pluton was therefore a more positive designation for Hades and became the divinity's most common moniker during the fifth century BCE,

both in myth and in cult (Hornblower et al. 2012: 640; Liddell and Scott 1846: 1198). Poe may well have taken this favorable association into consideration when choosing the name Pluto for the feline protagonist of his story. Perhaps it is no coincidence that, on the very night of the day the narrator mercilessly kills his cat Pluto, his house is completely destroyed by fire, and the man declares, "[m]y entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair" (Poe 1978a: 852).

2. "The Modified Παλιγγενεσια of the Pythagoreans" and the Principle of Individuation

Like the inner world of the feline protagonist in "The Black Cat", the life of Pythagoras of Samos (c. 570-c. 495 BCE) is shrouded in mystery. Adored and despised in equal measure, he left nothing in writing and, if he did, none of his original work survives. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that he taught the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Pythagoras's metempsychosis states that, since our soul's present and future are determined by our current choices, not all mortals share an equal fate. This, in turn, seems to suggest that we must assume full responsibility for our decisions. Indeed, already in Hesiod (c. 750-650 BCE) we find that a fortunate person is a eudaemon —εὐδαίμων, meaning one who has a good daemon. Another Greek term for this virtuous entity is agathos daemon —ἀγαθός δαίμων (Hornblower et al. 2012: 37, 410, 640; Beekes 2010: 484). The fact that Agathos is one of the blessed immortal spirits in Poe's "The Power of Words" (1845) indicates that, even though this prose poem was published two years after "The Black Cat", Poe may have been aware of this distinction before he wrote the latter. As Agathos himself proclaims in "The Power of Words", "no thought can perish, so no act is without infinite result" (Poe 1978a: 1213).

Poe's direct allusion to Pythagoras in "Morella" (1835) corroborates that he knew of this enigmatic polymath's theory of the soul, and that same paragraph in Poe's tale evidences that he had also come into contact with at least some of the metaphysical principles upheld by Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854) and John Locke (1632-1704):

> The wild Pantheism of Fichte; the modified Παλιγγενεσια [Palingenesia] of the Pythagoreans; and, above all, the doctrines of *Identity* as urged by Schelling, were generally the points of discussion presenting the most of beauty to the imaginative Morella. That identity which is termed personal, Mr. Locke, I think, truly defines to consist in the sameness of a rational being. (Poe 1978b: 230-231, emphasis in original)

Although the terms palingenesia and metempsychosis do not carry the same meaning, they are sometimes used interchangeably to denote the transfer of life or the soul from one body to another, that is, the transmigration of souls. Pythagoras believed that metempsychosis could occur from a human being, an animal or a plant into a new body belonging to any of these three groups. It is important to note that he did not explicitly define the soul as immaterial or make a clear distinction between the corporeal and incorporeal. He thus took all that exists to be of a material nature (Burkert 1972: 32). Poe shares with metaphysical idealists like Schelling and Fichte the belief that physical and chemical laws do not suffice to explain all natural phenomena. However, the influence of Greek materialism can also be felt in his work. In fact, like Pythagoras, Poe does not conceive of the soul as a spiritual entity. For instance, in "Mesmeric Revelation" (1844), he writes: "[t]here is no immateriality […]. That which is not matter, is not at all" (1978a: 1033). Later on in this tale, he refers to God as matter so infinitely minute that it becomes "[t]he ultimate, or unparticled matter", which "not only permeates all things but impels all things —and thus *is* all things within itself" (1033, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, it must be noted that for Poe, the line that separates matter and spirit is blurred, and his views with regard to the nature of the universe are not unequivocal. Revealingly, to Schelling and other Romantics, matter is not perceived as solid or impenetrable, but instead as the product of dynamic forces. Moreover, Schelling upholds that the manifestations of nature and the structures of the human mind are governed by a metaphysical principle he refers to as the world soul (Sha 2018: 34; Barkhoff 2009: 210). Poe himself argues that Matter contains so-called "spiritual Ether" that imbues it with life and consciousness. Indeed, the fusion of the physical and psychic realms is a recurring theme in Poe's work. In his prose poem *Eureka*, which he wrote towards the end of his life, Poe speaks of "true Epicurean atoms" (1984: 1322) but also describes God as both a material *and* spiritual being that will ultimately revert to its incorporeal essence. When the cosmos eventually sinks into One and all heterogeneity is lost, Matter will expel the Ether that has kept atoms apart. Matter will hence become "Matter without Matter" or "*Matter no more*" (1355, emphasis in original).

The fact that Poe brings together such disparate philosophers as Fichte, Schelling and Locke in the aforementioned fragment of "Morella" is surprising and disconcerting, given that the idealism of the former two thinkers stands in stark contrast to the empiricism of the latter. Admittedly, Poe is not usually considered a philosopher. As he wrote in a letter to Charles F. Hoffman in 1848, "there is no absolute *certainty* either in the Aristotelian or Baconian process —[…] for this reason, neither Philosophy is so profound as it fancies itself— and […] neither has a right to sneer at that seemingly imaginative process called Intuition" (Poe 2008: 688, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, it is also true that Poe was well-versed in

the field of natural philosophy, which only began to be considered as separate from science at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Fichte, Schelling and Locke share a deep preoccupation with moral order. More to the point, all three explore the principle of individuation. Poe was drawn to them as a result of his obsession with the question of whether consciousness and individual identity could survive physical death, as is evidenced by the excerpt in "Morella" which immediately follows his allusion to the aforementioned philosophers:

> And since by person we understand an intelligent essence having reason, and since there is a consciousness which always accompanies thinking, it is this which makes us all to be that which we call *ourselves* —thereby distinguishing us from other beings that think, and giving us our personal identity. But the *principium individuationis*, the notion of that identity *which at death is or is not lost forever*, was to me, at all times, a consideration of intense interest […]. (Poe 1978b: 231, emphasis in original)

One of the most fascinating aspects of Pythagoras's metempsychosis is precisely its affirmation that individual identity survives bodily death when it takes on a new form or appearance. Neither Fichte, Schelling nor Locke endorsed this view. However, as we have seen, the fact that Poe mentions them in conjunction with Pythagoras points to the poet's preoccupation with personal identity and more specifically with the possible survival of some form of consciousness after death. In what Poe refers to as Fichte's "wild Pantheism" (1978b: 230), even Nature is regarded as thought, since all reality is contained in consciousness. Fichte identifies God with the unattainable Absolute, which the Self must strive for *ad infinitum*, resulting in a constant decay of individuality. As a consequence, a hypothetical fusion of a human being with the ideal would require the complete disintegration of individual identity (Fichte 1970: 109, 113-114). Unlike Fichte, Schelling does not contend that self-consciousness can explain the objective realm and instead argues that subjectivity and objectivity both emerge from the primordial identity of the Absolute (Moreland and Shaw 2012: 60). Death for Schelling is but a *reductio ad essentiam*, whereby the soul is stripped of all that is accessory and extrinsic so that only the essence of our true Being remains. He insists that this transition does not entail a separation from physical life but solely from *this* existence (Schelling 1994: 237). Poe's horror fiction also conveys this notion of the dissolution of individual identity in the universal but, contrary to Schelling, who conceptualizes it as a self-realizing event, the poet sees it as self-destructive. For his part, Locke makes the radical and controversial assertion that personal identity is neither founded on the body nor the soul, nor in the union of both, but on consciousness alone. He maintains that on the Day of Judgment the dead will be resurrected to answer for their deeds in this life. The saved will be admitted into an eternal state of bliss, while the guilty will be condemned to a second and final death (Locke 1847: 175, 210, 231).

3. The Oracle of Doom

In *Eureka* (1848), Poe declares that ultimately "the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness" (1984: 1358). However, an eventual collapse into the Absolute is not at odds with the idea that the soul can survive death and exist as separate from what he terms the rudimental body (Poe 1978a: 1037). In fact, Poe continuously explores this possibility in such stories as "The Premature Burial" (1844), "Some Words with a Mummy" (1845), "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845) and "Mesmeric Revelation" (1845). In the latter, he describes bodily demise as a mere process of transmutation:

> There are two bodies —the rudimental and the complete; corresponding with the two conditions of the worm and the butterfly. What we call "death", is but the painful metamorphosis. Our present incarnation is progressive, preparatory, temporary. Our future is perfected, ultimate, immortal. The ultimate life is the full design. (Poe 1978a: 1037)

This "painful metamorphosis" is analogous to the cycle of purification related by Empedocles of Acragas (c. 490-c. 430 BCE), a close follower of Pythagoras's doctrine of metempsychosis. The fact that Edgar Allan Poe was familiar with Empedocles is evidenced by a direct reference to him in Poe's writings: "Empedocles professed the system of four elements, and added thereto two principles which he called 'principium amicitiæ' and 'principium contentionis'. What are these but attraction and repulsion?" (Poe 1985: 93). For Empedocles, it is the fallen daemon that preserves its continuity through its various incarnations, in accordance with what he refers to as "an oracle of Doom" (in Plutarch 1959: 569). He identifies himself and others with this "exile from heaven", who, having "[d]efile[d] himself with foul and sinful murder", is compelled to wander through a succession of lives before finally being able to return to his original divine state (B 115 607c-d, in Plutarch 1959: 569). In his past lives, Empedocles allegedly recalls being "a boy […], and a maiden, [a]nd bush, and bird of prey, and fish, [a] wanderer from the salt sea" (B 117, in Hippolytus 1921: 40). Pythagoras and Empedocles "assert that there is a single legal condition for all living beings and […] proclaim that inexpiable punishments await those who have done violence to an animal" (D27b, in Laks and Most 2016: 379). Plato, who is believed to have derived his doctrine of metempsychosis from Pythagoras, proposes a rather disturbing variation on this maxim. In *Laws*, he alludes to the widespread belief that the perpetrators of crimes of violence are punished both in Hades and once again when they return to this world, where they will be forced to die in exactly the same manner as their victims (Plato 1920b: 615). Compellingly, in Poe's story "The Black Cat", the protagonist brutally hangs his feline companion only to see the creature reemerge, now a harbinger of doom, the gallows on its chest unmistakably announcing that an

equal fate awaits his slayer. The prophecy is fulfilled, and the narrator is ultimately sentenced to death —also by hanging.

Like Empedocles's daemons, the narrator in "The Black Cat" is in a state of bliss at the outset, and his suffering only begins when he becomes corrupted by evil. This in truth occurs long before he engages in the first act of violence against his cat Pluto. Therefore, it is not his ugly deeds that are attributed to the daemonic power, but rather the divine retribution which ensues. Even though he will eventually be confronted with this deific force, only he can be held responsible for his wicked and perverse behavior. The manner in which he describes the dastardly murder of the poor animal leaves no room for doubt:

> One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree; —hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; —hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence; —hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin —a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it— if such a thing were possible —even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God. (Poe 1978a: 852, emphasis in original)

James W. Gargano considers this extreme self-condemnation "an outrageous excess" (1960: 173). However, Pythagoras and Empedocles would have undoubtedly taken issue with this assertion. They would also have likely disagreed with Gargano's assessment that the narrator's initial affection towards non-human creatures is "an unhealthy overdevelopment of the voluptuary side of his nature" and "an abnormality" (173). Either way, as Gargano rightly argues, the protagonist does appear to have an ambivalent, divided and possibly schizophrenic personality. He continuously refuses to take responsibility for his vile actions and instead chooses to ascribe them to his being "an erratic plaything of an inscrutable force" (172). In effect, the main character's cruelty to animals is an indubitable sign of his moral deterioration, which will eventually result in him killing his own wife.

As we have seen, Plato's doctrine of metempsychosis seems to have been inspired by Pythagoras. In the myth of Er, which appears at the end of the *Republic*, Plato provides an alternative description of Orpheus's descent into the Underworld. In Plato's account, which contradicts that of Homer (c. 750 BCE), the soul can in fact leave Hades by reincarnating into either an animal or a human being. All souls choose their model of life, which form they wish to take on, and the daemon that will guide them. Er asserts that these choices must be made with the utmost caution, as even the impious can aspire to a satisfactory existence rather than a wretched one. In life and death, all souls must strive to become more just and disregard all other considerations (Plato 1992: 285-290). He goes on to explain

how the first to be asked rashly chose a life of tyranny, only to deeply regret his decision after learning that it would result in him having to eat his own children. Very much like the protagonist of "The Black Cat", "he blamed chance, daimons, or guardian spirits, and everything else for these evils but himself" (Plato 1992: 290). According to Plato's theory of metempsychosis, the truth is that the narrator selects his own daemon, which will in turn shape his fate. Hence, only he can be held accountable for his despicable acts. Nevertheless, as frequently occurs with Poe, there is a masterful twist in his tale. The psychopathic killer was once a compassionate and affectionate human being, seemingly guarded by a good daemon. There is a critical event in the story that marks a point of no return —the definitive departure of this entity, the main character's agathos daemon, his true and better self. It is an occurrence that immediately precedes his vicious mutilation of the innocent feline creature. Poe explicitly alludes to this instance: "[m]y original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame" (1978a: 851). In fact, the narrator claims that he has previously been "instantly possessed" by "[t]he fury of a demon", but as he himself confesses, his "general temperament and character" had already "experienced a radical alteration for the worse" (851) long before this incident. It is true that his cat Pluto had so far been spared and had "only" started to feel the effects of his bad temper, but his wife had by then begun to endure his verbal and physical abuse. Additionally, he had been neglecting and behaving violently towards his pets. He attributes his misfortune to excessive drinking and to this so-called "instant possession", but it is *his own* moral decline that subsequently results in the absolute and irrevocable desertion of his eudaemon. However hard the narrator of "The Black Cat" tries to attribute his viciousness to a supernatural force, his fate is driven by the compulsion to ravage his own soul and, as Poe puts it, "to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (852). Much the same as the man who chose tyranny in Plato's myth of Er, the reckless slayer in Poe's tale inadvertently summons a powerful deity, who will ultimately return in the form of a resurrected Pluto to exact his severe and inescapable retribution.

4. Doppelgängers and Collapse into Oneness

Metempsychosis provides Poe with an ideal framework to develop another of his recurring themes, that of the *doppelgänger*. In much of Poe's fiction, including "The Black Cat", the double is associated with survival after death and an avenging conscience, in this case symbolized by the punishing daemon embodied in a reincarnated feline (Herdman 1990: 89). A shapeless white mark on the breast of

the second cat, which will gradually become the image of the gallows, is the only feature that distinguishes it from the first. Indeed, the eerie similarity between the two animals —both are black and have only one eye— further contributes to the uncanniness of this story (Kennedy 1987: 136; Nadal 2004: 459). Several critics have noted that the narrator projects his feelings toward his wife onto the feline creature, and thus conceives of the cat as a surrogate of the spouse (Hoffman 1972: 236; Amper 1992: 479; Dern 2017: 163). Even though the wife is not resurrected, one could also argue that she forges an alliance with Pluto which extends beyond their worldly existence. Revealingly, the cat and the woman's violent demise precede the moment they succeed in wreaking their vengeance on the offender (Nadal 2004: 459; Dern 2017: 174). Kenneth Silverman points to the concurrence of the afterlife and the double in Poe's writing: "to have twins, doubles, and twos means that […] one can be here and not here, can die and still survive" (1991: 151).

In "The Black Cat", the protagonist's identity is fragile, fragmented and volatile, blurring the boundaries between self and other. He projects everything he despises about himself upon another being. Hence, his murderous deed could be interpreted as a desperate attempt to annihilate the darker side of his own nature. However, once the crime is perpetrated against his other, the main character is appalled to discover that even bodily demise cannot rid him of the tormenting presence. The man is repelled to find that he is breathing in the air exhaled by Pluto, petrified to learn that he cannot flee from the ψῡχή (psyche) —aspiration, breath, soul, spirit— of this implacable daemon or from its godlike power: "I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face, and its vast weight —an incarnate Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off— incumbent eternally upon my *heart*!" (Poe 1978a: 856, emphasis in original). The evil he attributes to the cat is in truth a wickedness that stems from within. The real source of his dread is the darkness of his own soul and its ineludible fate, but the object of his fear has become indiscernible from the self. In Poe's fiction, the inner and the outer realms frequently become indistinguishable. In this regard, he is consistent with many of his contemporaries. As Linda Nash explains, "[for] nineteenth-century Americans, the body itself was not a clearly bounded entity, separate and distinct from its surroundings; rather, it was porous and permeable" (2006: 24). According to Matthew Taylor, Poe impels us to transcend the human through his "paradoxical simultaneity of sameness and difference" (2013: 39) as "self and not-self are collapsed into a common union" (33). Subject and object are hence conceived as versions of being, intrinsically woven into an inexorable oneness. Moreover, this dissipation of boundaries results in a disruption of the anthropocentric view of the cosmos.

According to various critics, it is the narrator's wish to end his own life that manifests as aggression towards his cat Pluto. Thus, the feline's eye, which the protagonist cruelly removes from its socket, is a projected symbol of his own death anxieties (Kennedy 1987: 135, 137; Nadal 2004: 459). This organ may also represent moral conscience and omniscience. Its destruction could therefore be understood as a pathetic attempt to assuage his guilt or as a refusal to accept the malicious nature of his actions. As Robert Shulman points out, "in cutting out the eye of the black demon, the narrator is also irrationally […] seeking to destroy his own demons, his own unacknowledged impulses and affinity with evil" (1970: 256). According to Ansu Louis, the despised enemy is truly within, but to the narrator, the cat embodies all that his superego-dominant personality wishes to subdue (2022: 316). Either way, the man's fundamental blindness, his inability to recognize the true origin of his degeneracy, will inexorably lead to madness and self-annihilation. Any attempt to degrade, brutalize, subjugate or vanquish his ever-present companion ultimately involves an act of self-harm and suicide. The protagonist does initially seem to be aware of his predicament, as he admits that the cat's hanging was driven by his own "perverseness", by the "unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*—to offer violence to its own nature" (Poe 1978a: 852, emphasis in original). This is a remarkable acknowledgement because he is conveying that by harming Pluto he is in fact hurting himself (Taylor 2012: 365). Still, further on in the story, he displays a deep contempt for the creature: "*a brute beast* to work out for *me* —for me a man, fashioned in the image of the High God— so much of insufferable wo!" (Poe 1978a: 856, emphasis in original). This haughty sense of entitlement, his violation of the sacred Pythagorean and Empedoclean law which connects all animate beings, will only serve to precipitate his doom. Paradoxically, by indulging his own obsessive phobia, the narrator is inextricably reunited with the very source of his angst (Taylor 2012: 365-366).

The opposing phenomena of attraction and repulsion which Poe refers to in *Eureka* are analogous to what Empedocles termed Love and Strife. The Presocratic poet believed that these forces alternately dominated the universe. This eternal cycle in which the many emerges from one and one from many resembles Poe's concept of the Heart Divine, with every beat causing a new cosmos to expand into existence and then return into itself (Poe 1984: 1356). Poe considered the possibility that this process of agglomeration and dissolution could occur perpetually, in accordance with the Divine Will. Interestingly, the pairing of positive and negative forces, wherein the former tends toward absolute oneness and the latter creates individuality in nature, is also found in Schelling (Follesa 2021: 271). Empedocles shares with Poe the conviction that everything is eventually restored to perfect unity (Tennemann 1852: 77). According to Empedocles, during the rule of Love, the four elements are fully united and form

a single living being, which he calls the Sphairos. By killing another living thing we are in effect replicating the destruction of the sacred One carried out by Strife. Empedocles states that there is a universal kinship based on the common divine origin of all forms of life, which come into existence during the cosmic cycle (Primavesi 2008: 253, 256-258, 267). For Empedocles and Poe, life is not static or external to matter but rather the result of a creative and dynamic process that pervades all entities alike. Even though there is a clear distinction between humans and animals in their philosophies, Pythagoras and Empedocles contend that to treat any being with justice requires us to respect their nature. This premise does not apply exclusively to the human species, but to all of existence. These assertions remained highly controversial in Ancient Greece for many centuries, as they disrupted the prevailing paradigm, which was strictly anthropocentric. For instance, Empedocles is known to have been ridiculed for his belief that "all things have insight and a share of understanding", including animals and plants (Empiricus 2005: 146; Renehan 1981: 246). For his part, Pythagoras primarily views the soul as the seat of emotions. As such, it differs from the intellect and is closely associated with sentience. The kinship between animals and humans is therefore grounded in the fact that both share this capacity to experience and respond to sensations such as pleasure or pain. When the soul is born in a human body, it is forged by the intellect. Nevertheless, it is not this faculty which passes from one body to another but a personality defined by its feelings and desires (Huffman 2009: 23). Of course, Edgar Allan Poe is far from endorsing this premise. However, he arguably takes Pythagoras's notion a step further in that he even challenges the supremacy of reason over instinct. Tellingly, according to Joseph Stark, "The Black Cat" is in fact a statement on the inadequacy of human rationality (2004: 263). In an article published in *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* in 1840, entitled "Instinct vs Reason —A Black Cat", Poe makes a surprising assertion:

> While the self-love and arrogance of man will persist in denying the reflective power to beasts […], he yet perpetually finds himself involved in the paradox of decrying instinct as an inferior faculty, while he is forced to admit its infinite superiority […] over the very reason which he claims exclusively as his own. Instinct, so far from being an inferior reason, is perhaps the most exacted intellect of all. It will appear to the true philosopher as the divine mind itself acting *immediately* upon its creatures. (Poe 1978b: 478, emphasis in original)

Later on, he speaks of "the perceptive and reflective faculties" which we mistakenly believe pertain to reason alone (Poe 1978b: 479). Indeed, in "The Black Cat", the protagonist's lack of empathy, insight and emotional intuition ineluctably lead to his self-destruction. By comparison, his cat Pluto appears to be a much more reasonable being. Poe thus subverts the Cartesian dualism which places human beings on a higher rung than their animal counterparts. By killing his feline

companion, the protagonist becomes a murderer even before he takes the life of his spouse (Moreland and Rodriguez 2015: 205, 210). From the very moment he disparages his initial "tenderness of heart" (Poe 1978a: 850) and betrays the trust of his human and non-human loved ones, only the most dreadful fate can befall him. Pythagoras and Empedocles state that to defile or obliterate is to act violently and unjustly. If the law of measure is violated, it must be restored. Harmony is understood in terms of cosmic equality, which in turn is a prerequisite to ensure that cosmic justice prevails. As Gregory Vlastos explains, "the order of nature is maintained *because* it is an order of equals" (1970: 57, emphasis in original) and "[p]owers are equal if they can hold one another in check so that none can gain 'mastery' or 'supremacy' […] over the others" (58-59). In *Eureka*, Poe alludes to this inexorable restoration of the natural order:

> The absolute, irrelative particle primarily created by the Volition of God, must have been in a condition of positive *normality*, or rightfulness —for wrongfulness implies *relation* […]. That a thing may be wrong, it is necessary that there be some other thing in *relation* to which it *is* wrong —some condition which it fails to satisfy; some law which it violates; some being whom it aggrieves […]. Any deviation from normality involves a tendency to return into it […]. Rëaction is the return from the condition of *as it is and ought not to be* into the condition of *as it was, originally, and therefore ought to be* […]. (Poe 1984: 1297-1298, emphasis in original)

Both Empedocles and Poe propound universal sentience, as to them all of matter is imbued with mind. In fact, when alluding to the Sphairos, Empedocles writes, "It lives,/ One holy mind, ineffable, alone,/ And with swift thoughts darts through the universe" (B 134, in Leonard 1908: 61). Pythagoras understands the cosmos as an animate and breathing entity, albeit constrained by a mathematical structure (Wright 2008: 421). Pythagoras and Empedocles are believed to have claimed that "we have a certain commonality not only towards one another and the gods, but also towards the non-rational animals. For *there is one breath reaching through the whole world like a soul*, which also unites us with them" (Empiricus 2012: 28, emphasis added). In *Timaeus*, Plato subsequently depicts the world as "a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence" (1920c: 14). This reverberates with the aforementioned metaphysical principle that Schelling himself termed the world soul. Schelling, who worked extensively on Plato's *Timaeus*, shares this conception of the universe as a great animal wherein all the parts are organically and reciprocally connected to the whole (Follesa 2021: 270). For Poe, the expansion of consciousness across the cosmos casts doubt on whether human beings are in truth the very culmination of this sentience. Indeed, he questions this assumption and even grants consciousness to inanimate beings. In "The Island of the Fay" (1841), he states that we are merely the inhabitants of "one vast animate and sentient whole" (1978b: 600), and in *Eureka*, he writes the following:

> All […] creatures —*all*— those whom you term animate, as well as those to which you deny life for no better reason than that you do not behold it in operation —*all* these creatures have, in a greater or less degree, a capacity for pleasure and for pain […]. These creatures are all, too, more or less, and more or less obviously, conscious Intelligences; conscious, first, of a proper identity; conscious, secondly and by faint indeterminate glimpses, of an identity with […] God. (Poe 1984: 1358, emphasis in original)

According to Empedocles, everything, including gods and daemons, will eventually fuse into a fundamental unity, the Sphairos. As we have seen, Poe shares this vision of ultimate fusion into oneness. In "The Black Cat", universal unification translates into the protagonist's particular demise. Matthew Taylor envisages the returning cat as a material herald and synecdoche of Poe's vision in *Eureka* —the fatal compaction of all entities into one another (2013: 40, 43). The conflation of the narrator and the feline's identities erodes the mind's integrity and individuality, rendering the man unable to discern between his psyche and the outside world. Furthermore, the merging of the inner and outer realms completely undermines his autonomy. He can therefore no longer rely on his senses, and physical reality becomes elusive. This dissolution of ontological boundaries ultimately implies that the supposed destructive other cannot be distinguished from the indwelling enemy, which is the corruption of his own soul. Hence, the attack is perpetrated from within and without by means of cosmic convergence and a disintegration of the self.

5. Conclusion

In "The Black Cat", Edgar Allan Poe accepts the premise that metempsychosis can occur from one feline creature to another. He thus embraces the Pythagorean and Empedoclean notion that it is not an exclusively human phenomenon. Both Presocratic philosophers contend that by inflicting violence and needless suffering on animals, one is not only defying the Hellenic sacred law, but also disturbing a natural order, which must finally be reinstated. Moreover, according to Plato's perturbing dictum, killers are condemned to a death equaling that of their victims. Since Pythagoras and Empedocles claim that any creature can potentially be bestowed with a human soul, it follows that by cold-bloodedly hanging his feline companion, the narrator becomes a murderer long before he commits homicide against his wife. For this reason, it is perhaps no coincidence that the protagonist is himself sent to the gallows. In fact, in Poe's story, it is a human being and not an animal that behaves irrationally and self-destructively, which in turn subverts the traditional hierarchy of reason over instinct.

The daemon in "The Black Cat" has often been depicted as a purely malicious presence. The aforementioned hegemonic reversal, however, points to a more ambiguous ancient Greek conception of the daemonic, and the true origin of evil in Poe's tale remains as mysterious as the universe itself. Striving for unity of effect, Poe steered away from straightforward explanations so as to leave the reader in a perpetual state of wonder, a result which he undoubtedly achieves in this work. In fact, the protagonist's sadistic behavior precedes the moment when he is purportedly possessed by a so-called daemonic fury. While he is clearly intent on ascribing his vile acts to anything but the deterioration of his own soul, he also alludes to his spirit of perverseness and inclination to commit violence against his own nature.

In addition, various analogies can be drawn between Empedocles and Poe's cosmologies. In "The Black Cat", Poe creates a microcosm in which to explore his metaphysical principles. Both writers argue that, in time, all that exists will eventually lapse into complete unity. In this tale, the narrator's psyche and individual identity merge with external physical reality so that the inner-outer and human-animal boundaries are confounded. Thus, in the same way as it is impossible to obliterate one's shadow, the protagonist cannot rid himself of the ubiquitous and avenging feline creature. Indeed, any effort to do so only hastens his own annihilation.

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