

**The Aesthetics of Phrenology in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue":
Re-Examining the Lost Paragraph**

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English

When Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" was initially published in 1841, Poe was an avid believer and pseudo-practitioner of phrenology. Consequently, the now-removed first paragraph of the original publication's manuscript detailed how phrenological studies relate to one's intellectual and analytical abilities, prefacing the function of analysis in the story. In this essay, I will re-situate the original paragraph to properly contextualize how Poe initially wanted readers to remark on Dupin's detective skills and his ideas on processes of analysis. Throughout the narrative, Poe often provides readers with explicit references to phrenology, establishing guiding principles that dialectically relate phrenological science to analytical, moral, and imaginative expression. Investigating these aesthetics of phrenology opens up discussion points to the role of primitive thinking: in order for Dupin to have made the conclusions he did, he had to fashion his thoughts to include characteristically inhumane possible causes. The aesthetics of phrenology thus open discourse on the philosophical meaning behind the murderer being an animal and how we identify what animals and humans are similarly capable and responsible of when it comes to murder. Further, if one were to prompt a racialized reading of the perpetrator as a stand-in for the American slave, as many scholars before myself have done, the aesthetics of phrenology assist in examining the commentary on the analytic and moral ability of oppressed black bodies.

Phrenology, an early attempt to establish a science capable of expanding comprehension of human behavior, was the process of examining the shapes and contours of human skulls to posit their connection to personality traits. Phrenology practitioners hypothesized that by palpating an individual's head, they could discern aspects such as parental aptitude, artistic ability, intelligence, proclivity towards criminal behavior, and various other mental and moral faculties. While phrenology eventually gained global recognition, its early stronghold was notably in the fledgling United States. Reports of Franz Joseph Gall's scientific endeavors surfaced in American newspapers as early as 1805, but it wasn't until the 1820s that phrenology started to gain substantial traction. The influence of phrenology in the United States escalated when practitioners like Charles Caldwell, among the earliest American advocates of the discipline, imported it from their European studies. A pivotal moment for the proliferation of phrenology in America occurred in 1832 with the visit of Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, Gall's disciple. Landing in New York City, he embarked on a journey up the east coast, being hailed as a medical celebrity by physicians and local politicians at every stop. Spurzheim fell ill and passed away before completing his tour, but his death catalyzed the formation of the Boston Phrenological Society, a pivotal player in popularizing phrenology in America. In 1840, George Combe undertook a two-year tour across the United States, mirroring Spurzheim's impact by delivering widely attended lectures and engaging with influential figures, thus further contributing to the rise of phrenology's popularity.ⁱ

The first historical evidence of Poe's interaction with phrenology occurred in 1836 when he reviewed Mrs. L. Miles' *Phrenology and the Moral Influence of Phrenology: Arranged for General Study, and the Purpose of Education, From the First Published Works of Gall and*

Spurzheim, to the Latest Discoveries of the Present Period in the March edition of *Southern Literary Messenger*. He begins the review passionately:

Phrenology is no longer to be laughed at. It is no longer laughed at by men of common understanding. It has assumed the majesty of a science; and, as a science, ranks among the most important which can engage the attention of thinking beings — this too, whether we consider it merely as an object of speculative inquiry, or as involving consequences of the highest practical magnitude... In regard to the uses of Phrenology — its most direct, and, perhaps, most salutary, is that of self-examination and self-knowledge. It is contended that, with proper caution, and well-directed inquiry, individuals may obtain, through the science, a perfectly accurate estimate of their own moral capabilities.

(“Review of Phrenology” 252-53)

By 1838, Poe more than likely familiarized himself with Combe’s *Lectures on Phrenology*. During Poe's residence in Philadelphia in 1839, Combe presented a series of lectures at the Philadelphia Museum, and it is possible that Poe was in attendance (Hungerford 214). Poe, accredited as the inventor of the detective story, included phrenology in a number of his other works, including “The Gold Bug,” “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” (Panek 7, 50). Consequently, Poe both participated and helped create the tie between phrenology and crime fiction. Narratives falling within this genre of literature portrayed phrenology as a prognostic science concerning criminal conduct. Phrenologists were depicted as capable of identifying wrongdoers even before the commission of the crime. As Courtney Thompson points out, “Phrenological detective stories were part of an emerging genre responding to social conditions, transformations in the literary market and journalism, and anxieties about law, crime, and human nature” (Thompson 119). The ramifications of

phrenological credibility in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" align seamlessly with this observation, as they keenly mirror the prevailing scientific principles embraced by both courts and military authorities during the time.ⁱⁱ

The original first paragraph of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" appears in the April 1841 issue of *Graham's Magazine*. The edition begins:

It is not improbable that a few farther steps in phrenological science will lead to a belief in the existence, if not to the actual discovery and location of an organ of analysis. If this power (which may be described, although not defined, as the capacity for resolving thought into its elements) be not, in fact, an essential portion of what late philosophers term ideality, then there are indeed many good reasons for supposing it a primitive faculty. That it may be a constituent of ideality is here suggested in opposition to the vulgar dictum (founded, however, upon the assumptions of grave authority,) that the calculating and discriminating powers (causality and comparison) are at variance with the imaginative — that the three, in short, can hardly coexist. But, although thus opposed to received opinion, the idea will not appear ill-founded when we observe that the processes of invention or creation are strictly akin with the processes of resolution — the former being nearly, if not absolutely, the latter conversed. (166; 1841 ed.)

Poe also included the paragraph when he reprinted the tale in his 1843 book *Prose Romances*. However, he removed it before the release of his 1845 collection *Tales of Edgar A. Poe*, most likely due to a growing disbelief in the pseudo-science.

The initial contribution the re-establishment of this paragraph provides is the resolution to the previously undisclosed issue hindering the narrator's ability to think like Dupin. Without the context of the original paragraph, readers may chalk up Dupin's incredible detective abilities to a

good education, a knack for observation, and a natural capacity to think creatively. It remains constant in both versions that the narrator is not as intelligent as Dupin and is persistently “on the verge of comprehension without power to comprehend” (400; 1993 ed.). In the subsequent first paragraph, where the only explicit mention of phrenology still remains, the narrator disregards phrenology as a legitimate practice:

The constructive or combining power, by which ingenuity is usually manifested, and to which the phrenologists (I believe erroneously) have assigned a separate organ, supposing it a primitive faculty, has been so frequently seen in those whose intellect bordered otherwise upon idiocy, as to have attracted general observation among writers on morals. (381; 1993 ed.)

Yet, when the original first paragraph is re-established, it is clear that this line is not meant to be a humorous jab at phrenology but rather a joke at the expense of the narrator’s own intelligence. Edward Hungerford argues that if Poe “had regarded phrenology as pseudo, he would not have referred to it, for it would have spoiled his effect in this story. He must give the impression that he [Dupin] is more scientific than science itself” (Hungerford 224). In other words, Poe originally intended the narrator to appear as less intelligent than Dupin through his disregard of phrenology, not through his natural inability to analytically rival Dupin.

When re-considering the inclusion of the missing paragraph, the subsequent first paragraph of the redacted original is transformed into a highly suggestive chronicling of the relation between mental ability and physical prowess. The paragraph begins with the narrator arguing that we tend to appreciate mental features of analysis “only in their effects,” and that when they are “inordinately possessed,” they provide the individual a “source of the liveliest enjoyment” (379; 1993 ed.). Per the original paragraph, the “enjoyment” derives from the

existence of a brain that contains calculating, discriminating, and imaginative abilities. The described individual is not only using his mental ability to exist purely informed by facts but acquires pleasure from his mental ability, a process of invention via derision from an emotionally void stasis that is “strictly akin with the processes of resolution” (166; 1841 ed.). In the following sentence, the narrator posits that “as the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his *muscles* into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*” (379; 1993 ed., first emphasis mine). Without the context of the original paragraph, readers may interpret this as a likening of a high-functioning thinker to someone flexing their physical traits. Yet, when we include the original paragraph in the context, the tie between the two becomes established as a solidified phrenological phenomenon.

The glory that calls the analyst to “disentangle” in the subsequent first paragraph is the same glory that calls the individual containing a stronger organ of analysis to inherit “the capacity for resolving thought into its elements” (166; 1841 ed.). The narrator reveals that a thinker with an organ of analysis derives pleasure from “the most trivial occupations bringing his talent to play” and “is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of *acumen* which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural” (379; 1993 ed.). When it comes to Dupin’s expression of his intellect, the narrator comments:

I could not help remarking and admiring (although from his rich ideality I had been prepared to expect it) a peculiar analytic ability in Dupin. He seemed, too, to take an eager delight in its exercise --if not exactly in its display --and did not hesitate to confess the pleasure thus derived. (382; 1993 ed.)

The reader is able to assign characteristic traits to Dupin’s character by the way he handles information. Here, he is an individual who ties his analytic ability to his identity by externally

expressing the joy he takes in being able to process particulars in a higher capacity. That is, an ego, or a narcissism, is attached to his natural ability to analyze.

This ego is evinced through how lightly Dupin regards the murder in comparison to his participation. By the time Dupin had cracked the mystery, the narrator complains that “it was his [Dupin’s] humor, now, to decline all conversation on the subject of the murder, until about noon the next day” (393; 1993 ed.). Dupin further displays the connection between his social identity and intellectual prowess by gatekeeping information in light of a murderous orang-outang still on the loose in order to provoke a joke meant either for the narrator (who is unable to comprehend the full powers of phrenological ability, as stated prior), himself, a rhetorical audience, or all of the former. With the re-established context of the original first paragraph, it is evident that Poe, or Poe’s narrator, believes that being able to think at a higher capacity is denoted by an intentional expression from the individual, thus evincing a trait of aesthetic underlying principles that guide the manifestation of the phrenological belief. That is, the aesthetic expression of phrenology is composed of intellectual, moral, and analytical ability in conjunction with conduits of physical signifiers; this is the aesthetics of phrenology.

In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” whenever Dupin provides an intellectual expression, remark, or deduction via the calculating, discriminative, and imaginative powers mentioned in the original first paragraph, they are aided by the employment of physical organs working both on and off-screen. When the narrator first describes Dupin’s process of analyzing, he is keen to mention that Dupin’s “manner at these moments was frigid and abstract; his eyes were vacant in expression; while his voice, usually a rich tenor, rose into a treble which would have sounded petulant but for the deliberateness and entire distinctness of this enunciation” (383; 1993 ed.). Then, later in the story as Dupin is asserting his conclusions, “his voice, although by

no means loud, had that intonation which is commonly employed in speaking to some one at a great distance. His eyes, vacant in expression, regarded only the wall” (395; 1993 ed.). It is clear that when Dupin works to arrive at the conclusions he does, his body works irregularly in a socially peculiar manner. Whether it is necessary for his body to behave in such a way is not something the narrator nor the audience can answer since it is predicated on the phrenological belief that Dupin’s body and mind work entirely dialectically. What is physical becomes mental and vice versa. One instance of evidence is when the narrator comments that “there was not a *particle of charlatanerie* about Dupin” (384; 1993 ed., emphases mine). Dupin’s intellectual agency is made physical through its assignment as a particle, and in this case, a particle that alludes to the composition of Dupin’s actual body.

By Poe’s original standard, this synthesis of body and mind, a type of Cartesian Dualism, allowed Dupin to think ingeniously, extending the relation Poe would have imagined phrenology had to the capacity to analyze. Ultimately, understanding that Dupin considers pseudo-science a viable way to conjure conclusions changes how readers should appraise Dupin’s employment of “the imaginative,” as mentioned in the original first paragraph. Since his methods of analysis take phrenology seriously, his means of legitimate investigation become discredited. Dupin becomes no longer a detective of reason but one of intuition. He is dated not by the technology available to him in his day but by his subscription to and utilization of phony science.

In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the murders were committed by an ourang-outang that has caused much debate between scholars as to whether the primate was a stand-in for black slaves or merely an escaped animal. Most notably, Christopher Peterson and Ed White’s contrasting scholarship on the matter has considered both interpretations within the circumstances of Poe’s cultural, historical, and geographical background. Adding to the

conversation, the context of phrenology adds yet another dimension to the ongoing scholarly debate since phrenology was often used as an oppressive science to further justify slavery in light of the supposed physical superiority of European races. As Cynthia Hamilton has observed, phrenology was “a contested space that could be colonised by pro- and anti-slavery supporters as well as by those who opposed slavery while affirming the inferiority of African Americans on racial grounds” (181). In the aftermath of the American Civil War, fresh cultural perspectives and assumptions emerged regarding race and crime. Although apprehensions about European immigrants did not vanish, the newfound freedom of the emancipated population and lingering resentment in the South, fixated on the Lost Cause, instigated a transformation in the connection between race and crime. Despite certain European immigrant groups still being viewed with suspicion, individuals of African descent were also recast as threats. Thompson writes, “Pre–Civil War, the subjugation of slavery rendered Black bodies abject. Post–Civil War, these bodies were reimagined as potentially violent” (122). Thanks to phrenology, unbiased beliefs could be reinforced in the public’s eye and by the law.

Because the historical tie between phrenology and the oppression of black bodies is so explicit, it is paramount to consider how this affected Poe’s intended message. More specifically, how does Dupin’s process of investigation and knack for thinking primitively elicit racialized readings and moral interpretations of Africans? Ed White’s article “The Ourang-Outang Situation” argues that Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is a direct response to the American slave rebellions. He writes:

For here we have a humanoid captured in a distant land by sailors; brought to a metropolitan center for sale... holed up in a ‘closet’ from which it spies upon the master

shaving... frightened by the master's whip into fleeing the streets, where it finds two white women who are murdered with brutal ferocity. (95)

White's argument draws on the language that Poe employs to describe the ourang-outang's captivity and escape to assert the presence of racial undertones. Not only do the words "escaped," "fugitive," "dreaded whip," and "master" relate to the slave narrative, but they conjure the ourang-outang into an almost human-like economy. That is, these words do not explicitly label a free-ranging ourang-outang; instead, they assimilate the ourang-outang into comparable relationships with humans through relational titles that require pre-conceived participation both on the part of the animal and detective. White supports this stance by noting that Poe was proximate to Nat Turner's rebellion of 1831, residing close by in Baltimore that same year, suggesting that the ourang-outang was a symbolic stand-in for the fugitive slaves.

If one were to continue White's train of thought through phrenological lenses, one would quickly acknowledge Dupin's consideration of an African suspect, which he quickly concludes as invalid since there are "neither Asiatics nor Africans abroad in Paris" (396; 1993 ed.). Nonetheless, this disavowal of suspicion towards an African suspect is faced with the fact that Dupin had to consider their innocence prior to an inhuman possibility. In both the original and subsequent first paragraph, Poe addresses that the phrenological organ that assists in thinking is a "primitive" faculty. In order to understand Dupin's utilization of phrenology and, consequently, understand Dupin as a detective, readers must understand what exactly is meant by "faculty," as well as other phrenological jargon such as "constituent of ideality" and "causality" (166; 1841 ed.). In *A System of Phrenology*, Combe explicitly utilizes the term "primitive faculty" numerous times to describe the part of the brain that dictates various intersections between feeling and

thinking, such as benevolence, hope, wonder, secretiveness, and so forth. Combe attacks deniers of phrenology, writing:

A person does not know the primitive faculties of the mind, nor their modes of manifestation; and he does not know whether different parts of the brain have or have not different functions. He cannot point to one portion of the convolutions, and say, this manifests such a power, and, when it is diseased, *this* power, and no other, will suffer. He cannot say that it is an organ at all. (101, vol. 1)

In these sentences, Combe is precisely describing someone like the story's narrator. Dupin's phrenology is predicated on the idea that the faculties are divided into "calculating and discriminating powers (causality and comparison)," reflecting the ourang-outang's humanizing guilt. In his confession, the sailor recounts that "the fury of the beast, who no doubt bore still in mind the dreaded whip, was instantly converted into fear. Conscious of having deserved punishment, it seemed desirous of concealing its bloody deeds" (409; 1993 ed.). As the ourang-outang demonstrates an awareness of the moral wrongdoing of its actions, particularly when judged by human standards, it becomes less animalistic. This shift occurs because its actions are not as entirely beyond the scope of human motivation, as concluded by Dupin and phrenology.

Because the ourang-outang is presented in a manner humans can empathize with per its feelings of guilt and regret, particularly in the face of being whipped by a master figure, White's interpretation does not seem to be without merit. As Brett Zimmerman argues, phrenology "vindicated Poe's suspicions of blacks as a horde of Nat Turner types, murderous sociopaths deficient in morality... Phrenology 'proved,' in other words, that the South should be wary of its slaves" (Zimmerman 309-10). If the ourang-outang was intended to serve as a warning symbol to supporters of slavery, then Dupin's method of analysis ultimately serves as a prophetic guideline

to racist ideology. Dupin thinks in a way that criminalizes black bodies by blurring lines between uncontrolled animal behavior and slave narratives, self-righteously legitimized by the flawed science of phrenology.

Conversely, Christopher Peterson argues that performing a racialized reading of “The Murders at the Rue Morgue” philosophically disregards the autonomy of the animal. Peterson writes that if the story is to be read as an allegory to slave narratives, we must consider how it “invokes not only the racist ideology of black animality but also those emergent scientific discourses that threatened to locate *all* humans squarely within the domain of the animal” (157). By denying the orang-outang its right to act according to its own free will through analysis, it ignores questions that help define the relationship between humans, animals, murder, blame, and guilt. During Poe’s time, this was a popular area of philosophical inquiry, exemplified in works like Cesare Lombroso’s *Criminal Man* and Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals* (Peterson 152). Following Peterson’s argument, Dupin’s use of phrenology would not be a conduit for racial discrimination. Rather, it would be used to frame evidence for an explicitly non-human suspect. In this case, phrenology thus provides Dupin a way to separate African bodies from their racist stand-ins.

The original paragraph in Edgar Allan Poe’s first publication of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” in 1841 heavily expounded on the relationship between phrenological studies and intellectual prowess. The re-examination of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” with a focus on phrenology offers a nuanced understanding of how Poe originally intended readers to perceive Dupin’s detective skills and the underlying processes of analysis. The reinstated first paragraph sheds light on the connection between mental ability and physical expression, revealing a complex interplay between body and mind in Dupin’s analytical prowess.

This aesthetic dimension of phrenology, encompassing intellectual, moral, and analytical faculties, serves as a guiding principle for Dupin's character.

Moreover, the racial interpretations surrounding the murders committed by an orang-outang add another layer to the discussion. The historical tie between phrenology and the oppression of black bodies underscores the potential impact of Poe's narrative choices. The phrenological lens prompts a reconsideration of Dupin's thought process, leading to questions about racialized readings and moral interpretations. Whether seen as a warning symbol to supporters of slavery or a philosophical exploration of the autonomy of the animal, the use of phrenology in the story aligns with prevailing scientific principles embraced by the era's authorities. In this re-examination, the aesthetics of phrenology emerge as a crucial element in understanding Poe's narrative choices, providing insights into Dupin's character, the racial dynamics within the story, and the broader societal implications of phrenological beliefs. By delving into the historical context and the interplay between science and narrative, we gain a richer understanding of the multifaceted layers embedded in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

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ⁱ Chapter 1 of Thompson, Courtney E. *An Organ of Murder: Crime, Violence, and Phrenology in Nineteenth-Century America*. Rutgers University Press, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Hungerford, Edward. "Poe and Phrenology." *American Literature*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1930, pp. 209-231, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2920231>.