

THE READER ERECT:  
EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE PREMATURE BURIAL"

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the function of metanarrative as well as the ways in which the binary systems of truth and fiction, indeed, life and death, are deconstructed through Poe's narrative of structure and lexical choices. The author seeks to illustrate the "unsettling partnership" formed between speaker and reader and the dual personae of the reader as both observer and participant. "The premature burial" also acts as a reference point for a discourse among several of Poe's other works as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece "The Minister's black veil". Ultimately, this essay will leave the reader with a better understanding of the various mechanisms at work in "Burial", and a sense of the literary, and literal, impact of Poe's work upon the human psyche.

At the beginning of Poe's "The cask of Amontillado", the smooth-talking Montresor steps out of the narrative and verbally grabs the reader by the throat: "You, who so well know the nature of my soul" (Stern 1977: 309). Poe's critics have long been aware that Montresor's sidebar establishes an unsettling partnership between him and the reader: apparently we too possess, and are possessed by, a vengeful shadow-self that lurks just beneath the smooth surface of our civilized consciousness(es). Charles Baudelaire, Poe's greatest foreign aficionado, turned Montresor's disquieting line to his own uses in the famous poem entitled "To the Reader", from *Flowers of evil*: "Hypocrite reader, You! My twin, my brother" (1987: 5). In Baudelaire's case, the speaker accuses the unsuspecting reader of sharing his own predilection for *ennui*, or boredom, that existential conqueror worm that dwells in the heart of modern life.

In "The fall of the House of Usher", Poe's shifty narrator, himself a victim of *ennui*, implicates the reader through the act of interrupting his own narrative. Like us, the narrator is reading a book. Like the narrator, we are obliged to pause *in media res*:

At the termination of this sentence, and for a moment, paused; for it appeared to me (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me) – it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly, to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stifled and dull one certainly) of the very crackling and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described. (Stern 1977: 264)

Even as the narrator pauses to listen to the actual echo of a sound produced in the imaginary tale he happens to be reading, so we are obliged to pause lexically, i.e. parenthetically, between the doubled lines “it appeared to me”. The “author” of this narrative within a narrative is the apocryphal Sir Launcelot Canning. Launcelot Canning is, of course, Edgar Allan Poe,<sup>1</sup> who replicates this doubling, or mirroring, in the sudden and startling rapprochement between the narrator of “The fall of the House of Usher” and the reader.

These *rapprochements* continue to the very last line of “Usher”: “... the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher’” (Stern 1977: 268). If, as Poe’s commentators have long noted, the anthropomorphized house with its eye-like windows *is* Roderick Usher, then the “fragments” of the doomed house are also the fragments of Usher’s own speech: “Long – long – long – many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it – yet I dared not – oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! – I dared not – I dared not speak!” (Stern 1977: 266). Moreover, as Joseph N. Riddel was the first to point out,<sup>2</sup> the fact that the story’s final reference to the “House of Usher” is set in quotation marks also emphasizes the story’s notorious self-reflexivity. In the case of “Usher”, that most writerly of all Poe’s short stories, the sullen and silent tarn also closes over the fragments of the House, both lexical and literal.

In “The premature burial”, Poe enlists the reader’s cooperation in a different way.<sup>3</sup> The story begins by disavowing itself as a work of fiction: “There are certain themes of which the interest is all-absorbing, but which are entirely horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction.” And: “... [I]n these accounts [of prema-

ture burial], it is the fact – it is the reality – it is the history which excites. As inventions, we should regard them with simple abhorrence” (Stern 1977: 173). From a reverse angle, we may better understand Poe’s narratological *modus operandi* in “The premature burial” by contrasting it with that of Nathaniel Hawthorne in his short story, “The Minister’s black veil”. Attached to the suspicious subtitle of “Veil” (*A Parable*) is a curious footnote:

Another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine, who died about eighty years since, made himself remarkable by the same eccentricity that is here related of the Reverend Mr. Hooper. In his case, however, the symbol [i.e. a black veil worn about the face] had a different import. In early life he had accidentally killed a beloved friend; and from that day till the hour of his own death, he hid his face from men. (McIntosh 1987: 97)

In Poe’s case, truth is stranger than fiction; in Hawthorne’s, fiction is stranger than truth. As the footnote indicates, in “real life”, the black veil can be clearly interpreted as an emblem of shame and sorrow. But “real life” enters the story only in the form of an aside – a humble footnote. In the fictional world of “The Minister’s black veil”, in contrast, Hawthorne denies the townspeople of Milford *and the reader* access to the ultimate meaning of the black veil: Parson Hooper takes his secret to the grave. If the bewitched and bewildered townspeople are engaged in an unending struggle to interpret the meaning of the Minister’s black veil, therefore we, the readers, are engaged in an unending struggle to interpret the meaning of “The Minister’s black veil”.

This is the opposite of what happens in the early going of “The premature burial”, in which the narrator privileges “fact” over “fiction”, with nary a footnote devoted to the “inventions” of the mind of man which we should regard “with simple abhorrence” (Stern 1977: 173). What, then, is Poe up to?

In “The premature burial”, the narrator informs us:

The boundaries which divide Life from Death, are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and the other begins? (Stern 1977: 173)

Following this observation is one more curious still:

... [W]e have the direct testimony of medical and ordinary experience, to prove that a vast number of such internments [i.e. premature burials] have actually taken place. I might refer at once, if necessary, to a hundred well authenticated instances. (Stern 1977: 174)

Instead of referring to a hundred “instances” of *actual* premature burial, however, the narrator offers us only a handful, excluding his own which, as we’ll see in a moment, is bogus. Three of these instances are well worth noting, however,

<sup>1</sup> As many critics have noted, Poe actually used “Sir Launcelot Canning” as his own pseudonym on occasion. See, for instance, Jay (1989: 83-109).

<sup>2</sup> For further detail, see Riddel (1979), the aforementioned Jay (1989), and Johanson (1989).

<sup>3</sup> As far as I know, the first scholar to point to a role Poe has arranged for the reader in the self-reflexive narratology of “The premature burial” was Michael J. S. Williams (1988), in *A world of words: Language and displacement in the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*. Williams cites Poe’s “contempt” for the reader, adding:

Having appealed to the reader’s complicitous *sic* sense of superiority in his condescension toward the products of the ‘mere’ romanticist, the narrator finally exposes him for what he is – a thrill-seeking consumer... (1988: 70).



for they have something in common. In the first, a Baltimore woman, the victim of a “sudden and unaccountable” illness, is interred in her tomb. Three years later, when the tomb is opened, it’s revealed that the woman was indeed buried alive – but in a most unusual position:

... [S]he probably swooned, or possibly died, through sheer terror; and, in falling, her shroud became entangled in some iron-work which projected interiorly. Thus she remained, and thus she rooted, *erect* (italics added). (Stern 1977: 175)

Compare this passage with another of the narrator’s descriptions of premature burial. In this one, an officer of artillery is thrown from a horse and injured. Like the aforementioned woman’s illness, however, the actual cause of death is mysterious: “no immediate danger was apprehended”. Nonetheless, the officer appeared to die and “was buried, with indecent haste, in one of the public cemeteries” (Stern 1977: 177). During the funeral, he suddenly comes to and begins struggling mightily in his shallow grave, whereupon:

[s]pades were hurriedly procured, and the grave ... was, in a few minutes, so far thrown open that the head of its occupant appeared. He was then, seemingly, dead, but he sat nearly *erect* within his coffin (italics added). (Stern 1977: 178)

In both these instances of premature burial, words like “unaccountable” and “seemingly” further serve to blur the biologically hard and fast line between life and death in the reader’s mind.

The case of Edward Stapleton also raises questions about what it *means* to be dead or, in Stapleton’s case, alive. Stapleton apparently dies of typhus fever, only to be resurrected by a rude galvanic shock administered by an ambitious medical student. Restored to life, the patient observes that life and death, like beauty and ugliness, are in the eye of the beholder:

The most thrilling peculiarity of this incident ... is involved in what Mr. S. himself asserts. He declares that at no period was he altogether insensible – that, dully and confusedly, he was aware of every thing which happened to him, from the moment in which he was pronounced dead by his physicians, to that in which he fell swooning to the floor of the Hospital. (Stern 1977: 180)

Note that the narrator calls Stapleton *Mr. S.* Interestingly, when Stapleton declares himself alive, his verbal skills fall on death ears: “What he said [“I am alive”] was unintelligible; but words were uttered; the syllabication was distinct” (Stern 1977: 180). But if Stapleton’s interlocutors fail to attend to the syllabication of his desperate claim, *so also is the narrator deaf to the syllabication of Stapleton’s name.* Once Stapleton has been restored to life, the narrator refers to him off-handedly, disinterestedly, as “Mr. S.” This new appellation sug-

gests that the narrator, like Stapleton’s doctors, has difficulty in telling the difference, “telling” in the sense of comprehending as well as communicating, between what it means to be alive and what it means to be dead.

To these three *historia calamitata* Poe adds the narrator’s own fever dream of death – of being “immersed in a cataleptic trance of more than usual duration and profundity” (Stern 1977: 184). In this trance, the narrator hears a voice whisper, “Arise!”, upon which, “I sat *erect*” (italics added) (Stern 1977: 184). Lest the reader miss the point, Poe has the voice repeat, “Arise! Did I not bid thee arise?” (Stern 1977: 184).

In relating the cases of the Baltimore woman and the officer of artillery, and then by describing the narrator’s dream, Poe clearly wants us to focus on the word “erect”. “Erect”, of course, is a word associated with postures of the living, not the dead. To be erect is not only to be alive; it is to have one’s being *in the world of the living* – the world of Poe’s readers. In the topsy-turvy world of “The premature burial”, if the living can be “mistaken” for the dead, it follows inescapably that the dead can be “mistaken” for the living. Put another way, one may be just as easily (and frequently) prematurely buried above the earth as below it.

Poe’s morbid reputation notwithstanding, “The premature burial” is a very funny story. Consider the lengths to which the narrator goes to forestall any possibility of premature internment in a tomb:

I had the family vault so remodeled as to admit of being readily opened from within. The slightest pressure upon a long lever that extended far into the tomb would cause the iron portals to fly back. There were arrangements also for the free admission of air and light, and convenient receptacles for food and water, within immediate reach of the coffin intended for my reception. (Stern 1977: 186)

Arrangements for the free admission of air and light, and convenient receptacles for food and water. This is exactly what it’s meant to remind us of: a description, not of a tomb below ground, but a run-of-the-mill domicile above it: a domicile precisely like Everyman’s in the modern world.

At the end of “The premature burial” we’re left with two possibilities. On the one hand, the narrator has learned from his experience: the fear of premature burial is itself a form of premature burial, or death-in-life. From this vantage, “The premature burial” appears to have a happy ending – something that should put every veteran reader of Poe’s fiction instantly on his guard. In fact, the second possibility is much more convincing – namely that the narrator, unreliable to the end, is obliged to disavow the truthful illusions of fiction altogether. In so doing, he conveniently forgets that such artful illusions mirror the life-truths that the readers of imaginary texts who (in the act of reading and therefore privileging “fiction” over “reality”) turn away from.

Has the narrator really become “a new man?” (Stern 1977: 190). The answer is yes – if we ignore the last paragraph of the story, wherein Poe springs his last best readerly trap. For as Poe’s quintessential anti-Lazarus, the narrator of “The premature burial” is forever caught, like a wolf in a trap, in the premature grave that is the be-all and end-all of his earthly existence: “Alas! The grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful – but ... they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish” (Stern 1977: 190).

But of course we recall that the narrator himself, thinking he was prematurely buried, was actually sound asleep on a boat, and that the “vast number” of premature burials are also described as sleepers who “had changed ... the rigid and uneasy position in which they had originally been entombed”. Above all, we remember that in all of Poe’s stories, those who are suffered to “slumber” – i.e. the old man under the floorboards in “The tell-tale heart”, Fortunato in “The cask of Amontillado”, and Roderick’s sister, Madeline, in “The fall of the House of Usher” – always return from the graves of the unconscious to haunt their unwitting doppelgangers. Joining them in Poe’s legion of the damned are the mutually haunted narrator and reader of “The premature burial”.

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