The Black Sheep's Book of the Dead

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Reading and Interpreting Edgar Allan Poe

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Opening Note

Patrick F. Quinn states that Edgar Allan Poe wrote poems at an age "too young to have any knowledge of the world but from his own breast," and attributes Poe's decision to leave flaws in his "smaller pieces" intact to "[fondness fostered by] his old age" (Quinn 9). While readers might insinuate the value of Poe's earliest writings as of little consequence from Quinn's preface, *hoc novimus est nihil*—we know this is nothing. All of Poe's writings offer insight into humanity's corporeal condition, especially those composed during his youth. If man reaches other worlds only through shedding himself of his body, then his reach grasps closest to the great beyond when man nears his conception and death. Thus, even Poe's "[smallest] writings hold value.

The following introduction seeks to bring forth the value of eight of Poe's pieces by unearthing an inner trend: Poe's writings depict a poet, who while still alive, aspires to enter other worlds, but also provides readers a chronological account illuminating man's transformation into Unity. I intend this edition for those near death, who wish to conceptualize their impending transformation to the best of their living abilities. Still, this edition also offers consolation for those recently suffering the loss of a beloved. Interwoven, Poe's writings assuage humanity's ubiquitous fear of the unknown: the horror that is Death.

To accomplish the task of reaching as many readers as possible, I position a selection of Poe's writings in a familiar format from antiquity. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE) documents numerous transformations of men; however, his characters typically take the form of flora or fauna. Although in transition, Ovid's men always reside in the land of the living. We must move to an earlier text. Poe's writings lie at a position, osculating between life and death, more similar

to the Egyptians' *Book of Coming Forth by Day* (~1550 BCE), commonly referred to as the "Book of the Dead." Both collections work to simultaneously pull closer the other realm and extend man's reach through various literary devices. Furthermore, Poe's writings grasp to relay man's experience of entering into an other-worldly state in a manner akin to ancient Egyptians' codified approach to the afterlife. A strong resemblance emerges between the two collections' approaches to Death and the afterlife—in nigh an uncannily fashion—the further this edition pursues its inquiry. By interlaying Poe's writings within four sections of the "Book of the Dead," we stand to gain insight into Death's mysteries.

Part One: Procession to the Necropolis

Historians note four sections in the "Book of the Dead," which categorize the book's lists of spells and formulas for entering the underworld ("Book of the Dead"). The first 16 chapters recount the deceased man's descent into the tomb. While the narrator presumably breathes in Poe's "Ulalume—A Ballad," his procession to Ulalume's tomb discusses what the journey toward Death feels like for the living. The opening line, "[the] skies they were ashen and sober," hints of the tragedy to come, which the narrator rediscovers in the third-to-last stanza (Poe 89:1). The depth of the first stanza's mournful incantation lulls the reader's heart into a stillness, which breaks abruptly when the narrator describes his own passionate, "volcanic" heart (89:13). The dark image of the narrator moving through the "ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir" contrasts with the lighter vision of the narrator traversing "the realms of the Boreal Pole" with "Psyche, [his] soul" (89:9, 12, 19). The sudden shift in spirit and light recalls the reader to the first stanza, and makes the hopeful undertones of the second stanza unsettling.

The proximity of the two passages suggest that the "misty mid region" continues to cloud the narrator's vision. The tendency for the narrator to move fitfully in and out of dark and light, back and forth between comprehending the night's "[senescence]" and the "[luminosity]" of his love's eyes, pervades the narrator's mind until he reaches Ulalume's tomb (89:30, 90:50). This erratic movement mirrors that of the "Book of the Dead," in which the recently deceased wanders—endlessly, if his family does not bury him with the book—to find the chamber to the underworld. The narrator's soul, Psyche, sooner realizes the light's deceit, and senses the direction the two, not remembering the "night of the year," head toward (89:24). The 14th formula of the "Book of the Dead" exists to "[remove] blindness from the heart of man," for a similar purpose as to why Psyche notes her "mistrust" of the stars ("Book of the Dead;" Poe 90:52). The man who keeps "blindness" in his "heart" dooms himself to endlessly wander, according to the ancient Egyptians. In the Egyptian's underworld, ravenous monsters watch for ambling souls to devour, so the longer a soul takes to direct himself, the greater the risk he places his immortal soul in. Hence, the dead's need for spells such as formula 11, which shows one how to defend oneself "against one's enemy in the underworld" ("Book of the Dead"). In Poe's writings, the blind narrator leaves himself vulnerable the horrible rediscovery that his love is dead. Similar to how his love's death in "October" still hurts his heart, the rude awakening of her death's persistence threatens to finish the job of ripping up his soul (Poe 91:85). Vulnerability spans both texts, and naïve thinking harms both the man and his soul.

Differences between the texts rest on the condition of man. Whereas the "Book of the Dead" guides a deceased's soul to and *into* the gates of the underworld, Poe's narrator only reaches "the door of [Ulalume's] legended tomb" (91:79). The narrator cannot pass through the "[vault's]" entrance because he still breathes. Also, the deceased Egyptian's soul remains in the

underworld upon reaching it. Contrastingly, Poe's narrator completes multiple journeys to the underworld's gates, his beloved's tomb (91:85-94). The discrepancies between the texts spring not from a division in thought, but from the storytellers' vantage points: the "Book of the Dead's" spells direct themselves at a dead soul, while the narrator of Poe's "Ulalume—A Ballad" still lives.

Still, another one of Poe's poems suggests that this separating factor is transient. "The Conqueror Worm" establishes the finality of man's fate, and thus rectifies the source of distinction between Poe's writings and the "Book of the Dead." Death takes all men. "Mimes, in the form of God on high" act as "mere puppets" on life's stage, under the knowing eyes of "an angel throng" (78:3, 9, 12). No communication takes place between the actors and their angel crowd since the "[mimes']" mouths stay sealed shut. The angels gaze onward at the "Horror," "the soul of the plot" (78:24). They know not by man's word that he suffers in life, but know as witnesses to the "vermin fangs/[in] human gore imbued" that man suffers exceedingly so in the moments immediately before Death rips him of his body (78:31-32). Perhaps, if the angels could converse with man, then man would know better to expect Death and thus not fear so greatly his arrival.

This limitation creates the tragedy within the "motley drama" (78:17). Man's inclination to fear Death arises from his inability to know what becomes of his soul after meeting Death. Both Poe and the "Book of the Dead" seek to remedy the impact that constrained communication between man's world and the angels' other world has on man's emotions. The latter accomplishes this task by providing man with protective spells, which he can employ to "emerge in peace from the house of Osiris [god who weighs man's soul against the feather of truth]" ("Book of the Dead"). The book tells deceased men exactly how to act in the underworld,

and how to interact with the underworld's gods to ensure their souls' peaceful passage from death into eternity. Although Poe writes of the horrors of man's life in "The Conqueror Worm," the work accomplishes a similar purpose as the ancient Egyptians' spells: assuage earthly fear. Both collections emphasize the horribleness of man's demise, yet alleviate man's greater fear for that of which he cannot know until Death cloaks him by describing the process of what man might expect to occur upon meeting Death. These texts explain to their readers how Death will come, and what to do once Death *intrat*.

Part Two: Godly Origins and Regeneration

Depending on the period of the text, chapters 17 through 63 in the "Book of the Dead" cover either the godly origins of the world and gods themselves or the regeneration of the deceased's being into a fully capable soul of the underworld. Poe's writings span both topics. "The Power of Words" clarifies that "[in] the beginning *only*, [The Most High] created" (Poe 823). With "one movement of the hand," "the Deity" set into motion all creation. Similarly, "the first word spoke into existence the first law" by which we understand "secondary creation" around us. The "Book of the Dead" supports the notion that the universe arose instantaneously as the result of a divine intervention. As the sun rises for the first time, the "first occasion," the singular instance of direct creation, occurs (Allen 466). Both Poe and the "Book of the Dead" dedicate words to the history of creation because of its inherent complexity.

When Oinos mentions a dream in which "[he/she/it] should at once be cognizant of all things," Agathos counters that even "The Most High" must not know whether he knows all (Poe 822). Man strives to understand the universe's conception in its entirety, and conversation proves the most effective way of attaining knowledge. Oinos gains knowledge by asking "angels

freely," and begs Agathos for further instruction in "earth's familiar tones" (822-833). The "Book of the Dead" too initiates a conversation of the inner-workings of the great beyond, the other world man reaches in death. Additionally, the book shares this information in the same fashion that Oinos concludes as the only way "a spirit new-fledged with immortality" can understand this new, other world (822). "[Earth's] familiar tones" translate into the spells and formulas that constitute the "Book of the Dead." The book utilizes the familiar form of instructions and sacred incantations to instruct the deceased's spirit how the world and gods came into being, and thus how best man can navigate his newly found, infinite realm.

Navigating the other world requires the spirit, shed of its corporeal restraints, to take on a new form. "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" details how in "that last hour" all men lose their bodies (359). The story refers back to the notion of conversing "in the old familiar language of the world," to ensure full understanding on Eiros' part as well as Charmion's well-established part. Charmion knows the "naked fact of the catastrophe itself," and knows not how the calamity occurs. Conversely, Eiros describes how the world ends, but only knew that the world would end upon its occurrence and upon reflection. Man's body knows how events unfold; the higher entity knows only that the event would occur at its specified time. Sharing information as to how and why the event occurs only happens once Eiros joins Charmion in a "novel existence" (358). The "Book of the Dead" also hints that regeneration must occur for a past-man to attain knowledge in the 26th formula. Eiros comes into his "novel existence" just as the deceased's soul "exists in the sky" (Poe 358; "Book of the Dead"). Man cannot enter a higher existence when his body clings to him, and when his soul remains unchanged. Achieving greater understanding requires divine discourse. Therefore, the inability to converse freely, because his body entombs his soul, amongst the angels in an earthly manner results in man's anxious

sentiments toward Death. This tragic irony appears when the "learned" seek "perfected knowledge" over "allaying…fear:" man cannot discern perfect knowledge, but attempts to do so at the high price of instilling anxiety over his constrained, corporeal condition (361).

Part Three: Transfiguration

Chapters 64 through 129 of the "Book of the Dead" focus on man's transfiguration. Encounters with transfiguration in Poe's writings occur under two perspectives: a man attempting to transform his present wife to his deceased first wife, and an entity, which recently underwent the transformative process. "Ligeia" exists in the narrator's mind as a woman of superior "learning" and mysterious origins (262, 266). After witnessing Ligeia's energetic struggling fail to stop Azrael from severing her soul, the narrator sinks into "mental alienation" (267, 270). The full extent of Ligeia's strength and affection arises from her death, or the transition of man's body into an entity far more beautiful (267). The narrator becomes drunk—or high using opium—off of witnessing his first wife's transfiguration. Even the slightest glimpse of its occurrence proves too strong for a breathing man. Then, like an addict, the narrator seeks out a second transfiguration in his second wife because his own earthly body cannot come any closer to the transformation without undergoing it. Ligeia transfigures into beauty the narrator cannot conceive, and Lady Rowena Trevanion becomes the most captivating being the narrator has ever seen, Ligeia. Death's radiation directly impacts the form of his wives, while the narrator survives its indirect influence, showing only symptoms. The "Book of the Dead" includes spells to help those control their spiritual bodies in the Underworld (formulas 90, 106, and 115). Perhaps, the narrator's mental anguish derives itself from not being able to access these formulas? Thus, regaining control over his mind and body seem impossible.

The "Colloquy of Monos and Una" depicts a complete transfiguration as hindsight from a "[born] again" being (Poe 449). The essence of material man does not dissipate, yet it transforms into a state beyond the labels of mankind (452). "[From] the wreck and the chaos of the usual senses," a "sixth sense [arises]" in Monos, which enables him to perceive beyond his bodily capabilities (455). Monos describes to Una that the "novelty of the Life External" confuses her mind and oppresses true sources of pleasure (449). Still, Monos only know this because "Death himself resolved…the secret." Without Death's influence, fathoming the great beyond and transforming into a being greater than Monos' human form stay impossibilities. Transfiguration requires exiting man's realm of consciousness since man cannot conceive of anything more beautiful than what his conception confines him to know. The "Book of the Dead's" provides formulas as steps for moving away from the soul's human body and into an immortal form. Thus, man takes the first steps to achieving true transformation by undergoing transfiguration. Transfiguration acts as a stepping stone to becoming one with all.

Part Four: Ascension into Unity

To realize ultimate Unity, man must release his earthly consciousness. The final section of the "Book of the Dead," chapters 130 through 162, lists spells, such as formulas 142 and 148, for the newly formed being to use to "[make his] transfigured spirit excellent" ("Book of the Dead"). The "deceased assumes power in the universe as one of the gods," according to the ancient Egyptian text. This notion finds its mirror image in "absolute Unity," which Poe describes in "Eureka" (1355). Readers might construe the process through which man achieves Unity as brutal; however, Poe suggests that man perceives the Unity as the "End" because of his body's limitations (1354). He writes:

> In sinking into Unity, it will sink at once into that Nothingness which, to all finite perception, Unity must be—into that Material Nihility from which alone we can conceive it to have been evoked—to have been created by the Volition of God. (1355)

To understand the sinking process, man needs to see outside of the crunching black hole, beyond his "finite perception." Our sight's reliance on being whole prevents man from being able to know logic asides from his own, and see past mankind' volition to his creator's. Man perceives Unity as the End because he cannot envision a purpose for his "Spirit individualized" following the crunch. The nature of absolute Unity entails all individuals melding together, and directing their individual essences into a singular Unity's essence (1354). Aside from his human body, man's actions and mindset also prevent man from becoming God. Man "[feels] himself lost amid the surges of futile efforts at understanding, or believing, that anything exists *greater than his own soul*" (1357). For this reason, while the "Divine Being" may pass "in perpetual variation of Concentrated Self and almost Infinite Self-Delusion," man exists in a single form (1358). Man's body traps his mind. Unknowingly, man's mind seals the lock around his body.

Nonetheless, "[Attraction's]" pulsations consolidate all men and beings to the source, and "Matter…[returns] into absolute Unity" (1286, 1355). During this time, souls become equal in superiority (1357). The inferior and the superior, Man and God, coalesce into omniscience, all-encompassing Unity. The "Bood of the Dead" notes a similar occurrence in its spells, some of which instruct transfigured beings of excellence how to be beside gods. Reciters of formula 184 shall "[be] beside Osiris," the god of Death, Life, and Resurrection ("Book of the Dead"). Behold the ascension into godliness. Man's sight opens! Finally, when the "individual"-become-"general consciousness" awakes, Man "[recognizes] his existence as that of Jehovah" (Poe 1358). Man is God, and God is man.

Concluding Note

Man completes the journey Death spurs him into upon reaching absolute Unity. Thus, I conclude this edition by returning to a poem written by a younger Poe, a poet, who could not possibly know "*[during his] Youth*" how Death would greet and change him (1356). Poe's "Israfel" inscribes the aspirations of a Man to reach beyond. If only his fingers could brush that Other World. The narrator believes he might produce a "bolder note," if he could be "[where] Israfel / [hath] dwelt" (64:46-47, 50). Alas, there lies the fault: the narrator must *know*, but cannot due to him being merely a man—ah, but only for these moments. We are that man, leaping like a small child to catch the clouds on high. One day, we shall sleep on those clouds. Persons who feel Death grow nearer, people who sense Death enter their communities' gates, take heart, for "[that] God may be all in all, *each* must become God" (1359)! The "Book of the Dead" carried the ancient Egyptians through Death, and led them spell by spell through the unknown, unharmed. Death's mysteries be gone, for the master of mysteries guides us. Do not fear the "shrouded human figure" (1179). Read Edgar Allan Poe's heartening horrors!

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