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## Mesmerization with the Lights On: Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"

# ABSTRACT

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Edgar Allan Poe's eerie short story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" is a particularly noteworthy example of the sublime, a psychological state in which one is overwhelmed by the magnitude of that which is perceived by the mind. Valdemar exemplifies the sublime in that his death has somehow been suspended in time because he was under hypnosis as part of a medical experiment at the moment of his passing. However, the story also draws particular attention to the means by which insight into the nature of death is acquired by the hypnotist who narrates the story. For a more comprehensive understanding of the sublime experience, one may turn to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and the postmodernist work of Slavoj Žižek, which lead to the conclusion that the dramatic chain of events in "Valdemar" is an example of the sliding signifier, and, moreover, that the instability of the signifier may explain the sublime effect.

**Keywords:** Edgar Allan Poe, the Sublime, Jacques Lacan, Immanuel Kant, Slavoj Žižek.

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“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” is Edgar Allan Poe’s celebrated short story in which a dying man is hypnotized (or “mesmerized,” in nineteenth-century parlance), consequently goes into a sort of death-like trance for several months, murmurs upon being brought partially out of his trance that he is indeed deceased and that his current situation is an unspeakable horror, and finally collapses into a stinking puddle of slime when fully de-mesmerized.<sup>1</sup> The story was enormously popular when published in the 1840s, and today is often analyzed by postmodernists who typically focus on language issues such as Valdemar’s enigmatic statement “I am dead.”<sup>2</sup> I would like to take the argument in a different direction by refocusing on both the words of Valdemar, as well as his ultimate dissolution as a representation of the sublime and the Lacanian sliding signifier. In other words, the narrative builds to a conclusion in which the narrator realizes that our own bodies will inevitably run down and that we are helplessly subject to an irrevocable universal law. However, it is more than a static image of a corpse in decay, as well as the articulation of the words “I am dead” that creates the sublime experience, so in effect I hope to employ the sliding signifier to demonstrate how the story achieves its dramatic linguistic effect.

This approach is justified because the story is told from the point of view of the hypnotist himself, which means that our own perception of the words “I am dead” are different than they would be if the story were in third-person. If the story were narrated from an omniscient point of view, the talking corpse would undoubtedly be frightening, but would not provide the perspective of a living witness to the events. With first-person narrative, the reader is forced to realize that the newly acquired knowledge of death is an act of living, while dying remains a mysterious function of the Other. What exactly does Valdemar mean by saying “I am dead”? The answer is important, but one must also take into consideration that the answer will come only through the filter of the narrator’s consciousness. Therefore, one productive pathway toward reconciling the experience is thus to approach

<sup>1</sup> The story is widely anthologized and readily available online. In this paper, all quotations are taken from the three-volume *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* edited by Mabbott.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, for example, includes an analysis of “Valdemar” in *Speech and Phenomena* that focuses on Valdemar’s statement “I am dead” and the meaning of the first-person pronoun “I” in the context. Roland Barthes considers the statement “I am dead” to be a “scandal of language” because it “isn’t descriptive, isn’t constative, it yields no other message than its own utterance” (10–11). Jacques Lacan, who will be discussed much more substantially in this paper, cites “Valdemar” only glancingly in “The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956” as an analogy of “how the association created by Freud metaphorically lives on in its collective being, but here it is a voice that sustains it, the voice of a dead man” (406).

the narrator's point of view in terms of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, and, particularly, his concept of the sliding signifier.

A linchpin in Lacan's reworking of Freudian psychoanalysis, the mirror stage refers to the early point in our lives when we first perceive that the comfortable unity of experience we are born into is deceptive in that we are discrete individuals. This is the beginning of our notion of the self, but a very complicated one because at this stage we are also confronted with the inevitability that our presence in the world is a construct. As Lacan explains, the result is "the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" ("Mirror" 76). Seeing ourselves as discrete entities thus bears a relationship to seeing others in the world, and this interchange between ourselves and our refracted presence has some interesting implications in relation to "Valdemar."

For one, the Lacanian mirror stage enormously complicates any suggestion that the sublime experience of witnessing Valdemar's dissolution is a simple "fear of death" because the Kantian sublime is not a simple panic at the thought of bodily destruction, but rather a mental state in which one actually reflects on this very mental state itself as it is influenced by the sublime object. The question of the symbolic comes into play because the hypnotist is obliged to trust his visual and aural observations in order to figure out what is going on with his hypnotic subject. What I am suggesting is not a biological response, but an intellectual apperception of the biological response made possible by a combined visual and aural experience. As Philip Shaw explains in his book *The Sublime*, Lacan's approach to the sublime addresses "the void at the heart of symbolization" (135).

Furthermore, this interpretation does not slight Poe's aesthetics in the least. One of Poe's most famous remarks concerned poetic depictions of the death of a beautiful woman, and the work in which these words appear—"The Philosophy of Composition"—also defines Poe's notion of beauty.<sup>3</sup> In the familiar essay, Poe writes that "[w]hen, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect." Granted, "Valdemar" is far from a depiction of the beautiful that we find in Poe's essay, but surely the effect of the appearance of Valdemar to the

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<sup>3</sup> The entire quotation is as follows: "Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?' Death—was the obvious reply. 'And when,' I said, 'is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious—'When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover'" ("Philosophy").

narrator is a crucial detail that should be contextualized.<sup>4</sup> The death of Valdemar is not particularly melancholic, given that he is terminally ill, is at the end of his productive life, seems reconciled to his fate, has no one to mourn him, and is neither beautiful nor a woman. What we are left with is the concept of death, and more precisely, a dynamic depiction of the concept of death, and this should be taken into consideration in any discussion of Poe's aesthetics. It is in this vein that I approach "Valdemar" as a story that is far from a contemplation of the beautiful, but neither is it a simple revelry in the gruesome. In fact, I think that the bright distinction of "Valdemar" in this regard is the very fact that Valdemar not only articulates his existential state with the words "I am dead," but then proceeds to visually drive home the point with his subsequent collapse into a putrescent mess. As Theodor Adorno explains in *Aesthetic Theory*, "[a]esthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze" (241). If the body of Valdemar is the "artwork," then it becomes clear that a time-integration is necessary to bring about the entire sublime experience. The mere mouthing of the words is not enough: instead, the words followed by the rotting of the body must be integrated to provide the entire experience.

"Valdemar" as the story of a speaking corpse that subsequently collapses into putrescence is thus a dramatic example of the sublime in that the possibility of an alternate reality of an afterlife is simply bigger than anything that we can comprehend, and of the proper character to remind us of and dazzle us with our own cognitive limitations. The sublime, in fact, has been defined by Philip Shaw as "the moment when thought trembles on the edge of extinction" because of the sheer power or magnitude of the object confronting us, and because we are aware of our own smallness relative to the object (148). In the case of Poe's story, the object is the sight of a rotting corpse, but the words coming from the mouth of the deceased are quite beyond our understanding. In a sense, we understand that there are things which we do not understand, which is a rough generalization of the Kantian sublime as developed in the *Critique of Judgement*.<sup>5</sup>

However, a focus on the Kantian sublime brings us back to Lacan because it is the narrator's viewpoint rather than the corpse's experience that dominates our perception, although there would be nothing for

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Dan Shen has argued that a fundamental difference exists between the aesthetics of Poe's poetry and his fiction. Whereas the former indeed treats of beauty, Shen explains, the best way to approach Poe's tales is by understanding precisely what he meant by "truth."

<sup>5</sup> I employ the British spelling of the word "judgement" because my quotations are taken from the Oxford edition. Like most Americans, I customarily write the word as "judgment."

the narrator to view if not for the corpse. Hence, we must deal with the intersubjectivity of the encounter, and this is where Lacan comes in. As Sean Homer explains in his useful guidebook *Jacques Lacan*, the Hegelian notion of the dialectic is an integral component of Lacan's mirror theory. "Dialectics are a mode of philosophical thought that stresses the interconnectedness of phenomena and the unity of opposites," Homer writes (23). "It was Hegel's great insight, contends Lacan, to reveal how 'each human being is in the being of the other'" (24). In other words, if the narrator's lack of knowledge about the nature of death is the "thesis" and the death-experience of the corpse is the "antithesis," then the "synthesis" is the narrator's newfound understanding.

If the narrator were merely looking on at death articulating itself, then Lacan's mirror stage would probably be adequate to explain the phenomenon. The mirror stage assumes that every individual differentiates himself by learning to look at the "other" as a reflection of himself, which results in the formation of one's ego.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that the ego is a sort of entity-under-construction that is pliable in one way, but fixed in another in that it is the individual's employment of the imaginary as a means of mentally constructing a world beyond himself. But this imaginary construction is subject to subsequent input from the world, and this is where the symbolic becomes an issue. As Lacan states in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'": "The teaching of this seminar is designed to maintain that imaginary effects, far from representing the core of analytic experience, give us nothing of any consistency unless they are related to the symbolic chain that binds and orients them" (6). The solution is to turn to the symbolic. But to complete the thought on the imaginary, it is always a qualified understanding that allows the narrator to think that he can apprehend the nature of Valdemar's fate simply because he learned long ago how to imaginatively respond to the "other." The fact remains that the narrator is simply not the deceased. Therefore, the narrator's imaginative response is predicated on his very limitations as a healthy individual who is not dying. We needn't assume that he is separated from some ethereal realm of death-in-life, but rather from the source of the dynamic nature that performs as a built-in limitation of our physical continuance. The actual experience of the narrator and other witnesses of the Valdemar communication from the Beyond is thus an inherent conflict between the fragility of human life and the much more powerful notion that such fragility is built into the very fabric of reality. This, in Kant's words, "raise[s] the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace,

<sup>6</sup> Homer defines the uncapitalized word "other" as "imaginary others" who "as reflections of ourselves . . . give us the sense of being complete whole beings" (70).

and discover[s] within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (91).

In this sense, Kant provides us with an adequate overview of the sublime moment of the encounter with Valdemar that can be summed up in the imaginary, but only if we stop with a single image. The question is what Lacan brings to the table, and my answer is that we can find the key in one of his most celebrated essays: “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious.”

“The Instance” goes far in explaining indirectly why the experience of the narrator in “Valdemar” is complete only with the full apprehension of Valdemar’s dissolution. Explaining that the signifier is not tied in a one-on-one relationship with its referent, Lacan states that “[w]hat this structure of the signifying chain proposes” is “the function of indicating the place of this subject in the search for truth” (420–21). Lacan’s example is the metonymy “thirty sails,” which most readers immediately recognize as a statement that 30 ships are the referent. But as Lacan explains, most ships in the pre-mechanical era had far more than one sail apiece, which in turn leads to the assumption “that the connection between ship and sail is nowhere other than in the signifier, and that metonymy is based on the *word-to-word* nature of this connection” (421). Applied to “Valdemar,” this means that the narrator’s experiences are varied and not merely a monolithic revelation of the nature of Valdemar’s death.

Therefore, “I am dead” is a sliding signifier because the understanding of death that is imparted to the narrator and other witnesses in “Valdemar,” despite the strange nature of the plot, is actually a mainstream explication of the afterlife. If there is indeed a life after bodily death, then it follows that an ethereal realm must exist for the spirit to dwell, or else the realm of death is merely another physical part of the universe of material and normal biological function. But if such a realm indeed exists, then a normally functioning biological entity is by definition excluded from it while still alive, unless there is some spectacular communication between the real world and the realm of death as depicted in “Valdemar.”

Thus, the realm of death is not only separated from us, but also powerful enough to evoke the dynamical sublime because we can do nothing as human beings to control it. Whatever the rules of the afterlife (if it exists), and whichever entities are ultimately in charge, we living humans are aware that those forces are more powerful than ourselves and thus worthy of all the respect that a sublime object can raise in us, while still not evoking a simply primitive dread of the unknown. This is because we “know that we do not know” in the case of an afterlife that communicates by way of the dead Valdemar, and because such an experience exercises our reason to

the utmost. If we merely panicked at Valdemar's communication, then the experience for us would be no more than panicking before the witch doctor we do not understand. That we exercise our reason in grappling with that which is more powerful than ourselves is the essence of the sublime.

But even if the preceding explanation covers the breathtaking moment in which we react primitively to a dead body saying "I am dead," it does not adequately cover all the dimensions of Poe's story. After all, "Valdemar" is narrated by a mesmerist with scientific credentials—or at least he would have us think so—and in a manner so as to further complicate what might be described as the "Gothic" elements that would normally appear in a story concerning a voice from the other side. In other words, there are no possessions or hauntings to draw a shocked reaction from either reader or from the individuals who witness Valdemar's "case." Granted, the story has its eerie elements, but the primary emphasis is on the nature of death, and especially on our mental reaction to certain unsettling observations about death. In short, the story invokes the sublime, but also possesses a dimension by which the narrator's role and circumstances are employed for a purpose.

However, it is the instability of the signifiers and signifieds that are the key to the narrator's experience. The specific allusions to science and indirect cultural references to traditional conceptions of the afterlife are not nearly as important as the fact that the signifiers can never be assigned to any of these conceptions in particular. As Lacan explains, "[i]t is by touching, however lightly, on man's relation to the signifier . . . that one changes the course of his history by modifying the moorings of his being" ("Instance" 438). In other words, the narrator is compelled to confront the Other, which Homer defines as the symbolic order itself (70).

The first place in the story where we may find this very instability is the title. Roland Barthes in "Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe" makes much of the wording of the title in asserting that the very word "facts" inevitably invites the conclusion that the story will be an "enigma."<sup>7</sup> I would add that the title also refers to empirical observations that perhaps involve some sort of objective scientific or medical study. "The facts in the case" thus leads us to assume that the story will have something to do with medical science as a process of tweaking out the otherwise resistant facts about the workings of nature through controlled

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<sup>7</sup> I should also credit Barthes with the notion that the story implies a melding of interests. "This alloy is in fact cultural: the mixing of the strange and the scientific had its apogee in this part of the nineteenth century to which Poe roughly belongs," Barthes writes; "The supernatural took a scientific, rationalist alibi. Such is the *cri du coeur* of this positivist age: if only one could believe *scientifically* in immortality! This cultural code, which, in order to simplify, I have called scientific code, will have a major importance in the whole narrative" (4–5).

experiments, or else through objective observations of a patient's natural condition. In effect, the story could also be viewed as an anticipation of the sort of medical experimentation that goes on today, in which a patient who will likely die soon from a terminal illness is given the option of trying a new drug that may or may not work—or that may even make the patient worse. The benefit to the patient is the possibility of a cure that would otherwise not occur, while the benefit to the medical community is a trial-run with a new drug or treatment that may prove to be of benefit if it can just be tested on an acceptable number of human subjects. Another scenario is the situation in which a terminally-ill patient is asked if he will agree to postmortem tests or something of the sort in order to provide one last service to the humanity he leaves behind. This latter scenario is more similar to Valdemar's situation.

Therefore, the title of the story, as well as the rhetorical style of the narrator, establish a scientific veracity that, as previously mentioned, complicates and perhaps even distorts the elements of horror and terror that another writer might well favor in any recounting of a voice of the dead. But one may also consider that the narrator is in the business of mesmerizing people. This is not to say that he earns his living through mesmerizations, although such a conclusion is neither supported nor contradicted by the text. But by "business," I mean that one can also assume that perhaps the mesmerizer is an amateur scientist in much the same manner that Benjamin Franklin was in the "business" of characterizing the nature of the electric charge. The narrator tells us only that his "attention, for the last three years, had been repeatedly drawn to the subject of Mesmerism," and due to the use of passive voice, we are not even certain whether he is the experimenter to whom he refers: "[I]t occurred to me, quite suddenly, that in the series of experiments made hitherto, there had been a very remarkable and most unaccountable omission:—no person had as yet been mesmerized *in articulo mortis*" ("Facts" 1233). If the narrator is referring to his own experiments, then he naturally has absolute knowledge of what he has and has not done in the way of experimentation, although one might consider it a bit strange if he takes his own actions or omissions as "remarkable." If he is referring to the world of hypnotists, then it is difficult to imagine how he could possibly know that no one has yet tried to hypnotize a person at the point of death because to do so would be to prove a negative. If he is talking about the published literature, then the wording could be improved by his stating as much, but doing so would perhaps inject a bit too much anticipation of the horrors to come. In other words, to say that no one has done the experiment means that the report leaves open the possibility of a mundane and predictable ending that would be similar to the vast majority of other scientific experiments. To say, on the

other hand, that there have been no published reports of individuals being hypnotized just before death would perhaps announce that a supernatural story is to ensue: “We’ve heard no reports of vampires in that cemetery” means, of course, that there may indeed be vampires in the cemetery. To tie Lacan back into this analysis, the point is that the “facts” of the title itself are as slippery in terms of the relation between signifier and signified as is the word “I” when referring to the individual.

At any rate, the words of the narrator thus convey an absolute minimum of the standard elements of horror, and also set a tone of scientific veracity. But the narrator is also striving to establish his credibility, and this is the crux of my argument. The biologically sublime object is not centered merely on our realization that our lives are finite, but also on the social value of successfully manipulating the parameters by which life is measured. Also, the narrator reminds us that the question may not be how to determine the value of a life, but how one may gain entry into the set of competencies by which the living and non-living worlds are in communication. In addition, he indirectly reminds us that the conventional terms of understanding in the Judeo-Christian world, as well as in other traditions (that is, the talk of cities of gold or eternal bliss, or, by contrast, the grim warning that one will not take his wealth with him when he dies) all emphasize the materiality of this world and the non-materiality of the next. And finally, he proposes the novel possibility of a new mediator-presumptive in all this.

However, the very instability of the scientific stance of the narrator is predicated on the fact that he is dealing with the Other. He may indeed have discovered a way of becoming a mediator who can delve more closely into the experience of death than anyone has previously done, but he is still alive and Valdemar is still the one who has died. Hence, he is not interacting with an imaginary “other,” but in fact with the symbolic order itself because there is no “other.” In sum, the narrator engages in a commerce of mediation, but it is a transaction that can never actually be completed because if one gets too close to the mediation between life and death, the effect collapses, just as the measurement of a subatomic particle’s position and momentum collapses the wave function in quantum physics.

To invoke Slavoj Žižek, whom Philip Shaw credits with a full elaboration of Lacan’s ideas of the sublime, the narrator is in effect stating that he is aware of the separation between the supernatural realm of death and physical reality, but that there is nonetheless a benefit to be derived if one acts as if the connection somehow exists. Quoting directly from Žižek:

This immaterial corporality of the “body within the body” gives us a precise definition of the sublime object, and it is in this sense only that the psychoanalytic notion of money as a “pre-phallic,” “anal” object is

acceptable—provided that we do not forget how this postulated existence of the sublime body depends on the symbolic order: the indestructible “body-within-the-body” exempted from the effects of wear and tear is always sustained by the guarantee of some symbolic authority. (12–13)

The end-result is a “formal order which supplements and/or disrupts the dual relationship of ‘external’ factual reality and ‘internal’ subjective experience,” Žižek continues (13). “I am dead” also evokes the sublime object as a symbolic overdetermination in that the role of the narrator/hypnotist/mediator is a hopeless enterprise because the communication between the living and the dead cannot be mediated by someone who simply thinks that it is his job to do so. Just as Žižek describes the longstanding fascination with the sinking of the *Titanic* as symbolic overdetermination because it portended chaotic events to befall Europe in the twentieth century (74), the “Valdemar” narrator’s role is likewise overdetermined because humans simply cannot arbitrarily decide that the role of mediator between the worlds of the living and the dead will be a position of gainful employment.

This is not to state emphatically that there is no afterlife or that there is no hope of communicating with the dead, but merely that modern humans are likely to approach the question with a certain amount of awe, and, as Kant would observe, are moreover likely to do so while cognizant of their being mentally dazzled by the very magnitude of the question. What they fail to achieve is the awareness that their desire for such a mediation is an object that can never be approached, because (to once again borrow Žižek’s phrasing) it is an “ideological figure” of an enhanced value to life that “is a way to stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system” (49).

Returning once again to the words of the narrator, what precisely does he hope to accomplish in hypnotizing a man near death? As a good scientist, amateur or otherwise, and in much the same formatting as one would find in the introduction to a modern paper in *Science* or *Nature*, he states his goals very precisely:

It remained to be seen, first, whether, in such condition, there existed in the patient any susceptibility to the magnetic influence; secondly, whether, if any existed, it was impaired or increased by the condition; thirdly, to what extent, of for how long a period, the encroachments of Death might be arrested by the process. (Poe, “Facts” 1233)

The narrator is therefore not promising any sort of communication between the world of death and the world of the living, but merely a closely-focused gaze at the physical details of the process of dying. For all we know at this point, the narrator draws a bright line between life

and death, and would perhaps even postulate that any activity from the presumably dead is a contradiction in terms and that the deceased is, in fact, not yet deceased. What the narrator promises, instead, is a tantalizing and never-explained observation that the arresting of the “encroachments of Death” is “immensely important” in the “character of its consequences” (“Facts” 1233).

If the narrator’s goal is one of disinterested scientific inquiry, supplemented perhaps by his desire to perform some socially valuable good, then is he successful in his goals? The answer is that his three conditions are conclusively determined. First, he discovers that a person near death can indeed be hypnotized; second, he finds that Valdemar, at least, can be put in a very deep and very successful hypnotic trance; and third, he determines that the duration of a hypnotic trance at the point of death can apparently go on indefinitely and that the dead body is incorruptible until the hypnotist releases the body from the trance. Moreover, the experiment is falsifiable in that failure to hypnotize the subject near death would be obvious because the subject would merely display the usual and predictable signs of death and consequent bodily decay.

Whether the narrator is successful in arresting death is, naturally, a decided no. In fact, a traditional reading of the story is that death is inevitable and that humans who figure out some technological way to confound its normal course will inadvertently unleash some horrific nightmare, such as a body that collapses in “a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity” (“Facts” 1243). But to return to Lacan, the question is a bit more complicated. What is the social necessity that the narrator addresses? Is it society’s need for a stable order in the physical world that also has dominion over the communication lines with the afterlife? If so, then are the complicated details of Valdemar’s death a means of allowing for a repetition that will permanently enact a change in the symbolic order? This possibility also efficiently explains why Valdemar has to be reanimated, only to decompose dramatically and horrifically at the end of the story. In order to meet the necessity of altering the symbolic order so that the fictional society of the story can come to grips with a world in which hypnotism can indeed change the timing of death’s final dissolution, Valdemar must exit the world in a truly dramatic fashion. After all, the story begins with the narrator’s observation that “I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion” (“Facts” 1233). If the Valdemar episode is a change in the symbolic order of Poe’s fictional world, then the narrator/hypnotist’s rhetorical style of scientific-sounding veracity can also be explained in his function as a herald of the changes to come.

Nonetheless, the social function of the narrator and his relation to the sublime might well elicit a “so what” attitude in a reader, except that the fate of the living Valdemar is indeed of sufficient magnitude to overwhelm the imagination. We are in awe of the narrator in his role simply because we are subdued by the inexorable fate of Valdemar himself. Valdemar is dying of tuberculosis, or “phthisis,” as the narrator diagnoses his condition in his ongoing program of providing himself scientific and/or medical veracity. The very precise description of Valdemar’s final travails is simply intended to show his inexorable decline and imminent death. If the question of how Valdemar is related to infinity is especially pertinent now that he is about to somehow join in that infinity, then the answer to such cosmic questions also draws attention back to the narrator as mediator. The enclosure of Valdemar’s experience within a report, in fact, insulates the narrator from interrogation by the reader. In other words, the reader is less likely to pore over every enigmatic statement or nuance in the narrator’s account in attempting to ascertain whether the report is indeed reliable in recounting a voice from the realm of death. We are told again and again that the casebook study is a reliable medical report, and the minuteness of description throughout the brief story is sufficient to discourage our suspicion of the narrator.

From this perspective, the plethora of details on the state of Valdemar’s lungs is merely intended to show that the discrete changes in his internal tissues are more than modern medicine can successfully address. But whether or not the precise observations of Valdemar’s internal organs would require modern lung X-rays and microbiological assays and the like, the fact remains that the “ossification had proceeded with very unusual rapidity; no sign of it had been discovered a month before” is indicative of the biological sublime because the doctors, in their own way, are just as overwhelmed by the progress of the disease as is Valdemar; the only way the doctors have attained a bit of power for themselves over nature is their very precise prediction of Valdemar’s estimated time of death: “M. Valdemar would die about midnight on the morrow (Sunday)” (“Facts” 1235–36).

However, to return to the point that the story primarily invokes sliding signifiers, I will draw attention to the very minor detail of the narrator’s returning to address his subject once again as “M. Valdemar.” As Roland Barthes notes, the “M” is stated for a good reason:

Saying “M(onsieur) Valdemar” is not the same thing as saying “Valdemar.” In a lot of stories Poe uses simple Christian names (Ligeia, Eleanora, Morella). The presence of the “Monsieur” brings with it an effect of social reality, of the historically real: the hero is socialized, he forms part of a definite society, in which he is supplied with a civil title. We must therefore note: social code. (4)

At this point in the story, the narrator has referred to Valdemar first as “M. Valdemar,” then as “M. Ernest Valdemar,” another three times as “M. Valdemar,” once as “Valdemar” immediately after relating a note that Valdemar has signed in the same manner, and then consistently as “M. Valdemar” for the remainder of the story, including in all direct quotations when he addresses the patient. There is too much of the narrator and his social role to conclude other than that Barthes is correct in his estimation: the “M.” is indeed indicative of a social code—and, to develop the argument, of a further codification of the narrator’s function in apprehending sliding signifiers. The question of whether Valdemar is subject to death, after all, is mundane insofar as all humans must eventually die, which leads to the conclusion that the question of whether there is indeed a realm of death is equally mundane if we contemplate for a moment the true meaning of the term “afterlife.” In fact, there must be a point literally “after life” that follows the experience of death.

However, the question of whether an individual has succeeded in breaching the gap between living and death, even if only in terms of communication, is a different matter. Therefore, one must conclude that there is an element of the uncanny in the narrator (of whom we know very little), as well as in the dead Valdemar. Once the plug is pulled, so to speak, Valdemar decomposes and ceases to occupy the world in any recognizable human form. The narrator undoubtedly has a social function, but it is a strange public role that he performs—one in which he seemingly drifts between the social world of worried rumor and clients politely referred to as “monsieur,” as a scientist of marked ability and as a trusted shaman. The narrator’s social role also explains one final conundrum: why does he bring Valdemar out of the trance? More pointedly, why does he do so, and why does he *tell us* he has done so? The first answer is seemingly straightforward because the dead Valdemar has told the narrator that his present situation is intolerable: “For God’s sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or quick!—waken me!—quick!—I say to you that I am dead!” (“Facts” 1242). However, the situation is in fact ambiguous, for Valdemar has actually said that the only situation he cannot abide is the state of being raised out of his trance to the point where communication can take place. He therefore wishes either to be returned to a deep trance, or else to be brought entirely out of the trance and suffer the consequences.

One might also note that “I say to you that I am dead” could mean that Valdemar has not been conscious of the several months that have transpired since his last communication exchange with his hypnotist. “I say to you” could in fact mean that he thinks (if such a word can be used for a dead man) that he said the original words “I am dead” just seconds previously. The implications are that the lapse of time means more to the

narrator (and the reader) than it does to Valdemar, and that the several-month state of Valdemar as being a corpse in suspension is a fact that awes only those of us who still dwell in the normal state of human existence.

To get back to the question, the narrator chooses the latter course of action and elects to bring Valdemar out of the trance, but his explanation is once again couched in the maddening bureaucratise of the passive voice: “I was thoroughly unnerved, and for an instant remained undecided what to do. At first I made an endeavor to re-compose the patient; but, failing in this through total abeyance of the will, I retraced my steps and as earnestly struggled to awaken him” (“Facts” 1242). I say “passive voice” because the best we can do in unpacking the narrator’s words is to break them down into two sentences: “I tried to re-compose the patient” and “The re-composition was defeated by total abeyance of the will.” Whose will was responsible? The narrator has already informed us that Valdemar when healthy was a good hypnotic subject, but not a perfect one because of his strong personality, so we are simply not able to determine whether Valdemar’s old recalcitrance has once again returned, or whether the narrator has finally lost his nerve—or some combination of the two. Once again, if we look at the details of the exchange between the two men very closely, we find that our ability to reason out the “facts of the case” is indeterminate.

At any rate, the narrator proceeds with bringing Valdemar out of his trance: “I retraced my steps and as earnestly struggled to awaken him. In this attempt I soon saw that I should be successful—or at least I soon fancied that my success would be complete—and I am sure that all in the room were prepared to see the patient awaken” (“Facts” 1242). Here, it becomes obvious that the narrator possesses at least some of the knowledge already possessed by the dead Valdemar: both are laboring under the mistaken assumption that an awakening from the trance will be at least a momentary return to life. If this were not the case, then Valdemar would presumably have said, “either put me back to sleep or bring me out of sleep and let me die.” By extension, one can also infer that Valdemar does not have any supernatural knowledge of death that has come to him by dint of merely being dead. The answer to Stephen Dedalus’s question of who told King Hamlet in the afterlife that he was a victim of murder is simply, in the case of Valdemar, that no entity or principality has told him anything at all. But even if Valdemar is indeed being sly and is merely trying to get the narrator to hasten his death and stop the torment, we are still confronted with the indeterminacy of death’s true nature, of the possibility of a separate realm where dead souls abide, and finally, whether the narrator can indeed prolong the death of an individual while “awake.” In other words, we are once again in just as much a state of perplexity as the public for whom the narrator is composing his case-notes. Therefore, the question of why

the narrator relates the story is because that is his social role; but the explanation only reinforces his own sublime role as an uncanny participant in a function that can never be explained or understood.

In conclusion, the reading of “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” that I advocate is predicated on the assumption that the details of Valdemar’s death can best be approached in terms of the Lacanian sliding metaphor, and furthermore is enhanced by Žižek’s notion of the sublime object. In other words, the existential situation of Valdemar as he approaches death and then apparently undergoes some sort of life-in-death reality, coupled with the role of the narrator in showing us that his social role is necessary in making some sense of the Valdemar affair, demonstrate that our having to deal with an unstable symbolic order defeats our ability to rely on reason as an ultimate arbiter. Without both the age-old mystery of life as demonstrated by Valdemar’s experience, and the scientific veracity of the narrator’s role as purveyor of a reproducible phenomenon, we would be faced with the choice of either a moral tale about the wisdom of not playing God, or else a different moral tale incorporating a “man versus nature” theme. Instead, the combination of the two sources of the sublime provides a hybrid tale in which science is indeed the backdrop, but our sense of awe is engendered as much by the realization that society nurtures a will to control life’s destiny as it is by the very physical nature of that destiny.

Here, the question is not whether reality is structured in such a way that an awesome undertaking is always doomed to failure, but whether we interpret symbols in such a way that we are at least partially conscious of the stakes involved. Thus, we are aware that we are unaware, but are still unable to fully apprehend this lack without a collapse of the sublime object. However, this is not to say that full awareness collapses the ethereal dimension in which Valdemar somehow simultaneously dwells as he maintains some form of bodily life-in-death, but that we collapse that which serves us socially as the enticing “if only” when we become fully aware that the sublime object is a symbol rather than a reality—and a sliding symbol at that.

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