

# NON-LINEAR TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S SHORT FICTION

JUDIT ANNA BÁNHÁZI  
judit.anna.banhazi@gmail.com

The goal of my article is to familiarise the reader with the notions of 'non-linear temporality' and 'non-linear temporal experience.' Based on studies of memory and neurobiology, I would like to highlight that episodic memory is a narrative process, and the past-present-future trichotomy is a bias, which can be overruled in so-called 'non-neurotypical' states of mind, such as trauma-induced shock and psychological illness. Edgar Allan Poe's characters often present symptoms of psychological illnesses undefined in the early/mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with surprising accuracy, among them displaying common symptoms of NLTE (Non-Linear Temporal Experience). I aim to outline how these experiences are manifest in the particular context of his short fiction.

*Keywords: time, non-linear time, temporal experience, Edgar Allan Poe, non-neurotypicality*

## 1 Introduction

I have been researching the philosophical ramifications of non-linear temporal experiences (NLTE) for years, with the main emphasis on understanding how fictive NLTEs relate to real-life NLTEs, and what they can tell us about the nature of time and temporality. The outcome of this research, as I will argue in this article, is that modern, historical, neurotypical people are linearly biased due to the workings of their brain, societal conventions, and the fundamental physical build-up and rules of the universe. Since NLTEs override this bias, they can communicate intriguing potentials about time and temporality. Approaching the subject from an integrationist point of view, as opposed to focusing on what separates reality from fiction, I found intriguing clues in fictive works which inherently communicate something about a pronounced NLTE that has extratextual relevance as well. In general, I found that non-neurotypical authors (especially those with pronounced psychological illnesses) communicate NLTEs through their characters in a manner that definitely calls for a careful interpretation, investigating real temporal reference. I try to abstain from drawing only autobiographical parallels, and also observe the literary context in which these fictive works are created. In this article, I will outline the following ideas:

1. What non-linear temporal experience means, derived from both the philosophy of time and the neurobiological experience of time. I will focus on the so-called neurological “linear bias” to explain why and how non-neurotypical authors are prone to communicate extratextually relevant NLTEs through their characters.
2. Edgar Allan Poe’s life, non-neurotypicality and literary significance, and what constitutes the temporal horror in his particular version of Gothic fiction. I will try to synthesise how his psychological predisposal, combined with his literary approach, result in very peculiar NLTE-ridden characters.
3. I will investigate three short stories, and their main characters in detail: “The Pit and the Pendulum,” where NLTE is a vessel to a transcendental epiphany, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” where it drives the narrator insane, and “The Premature Burial,” where the focus is on how the story portrays with poetic detail the encounter with a real-life, completely non-fictional NLTE, catalepsy. This horrifying medical enigma began living its own life outside of literary texts, haunting the 19<sup>th</sup>-century society’s collective unconscious, through, at least in part, Poe’s imaginative virtue.

## 2 Linear and Non-Linear Temporal Experience

In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade argues that the conception of the Bible was of decisive influence in the formation of the European concept of time. As opposed to previous narratives by ‘primitive’<sup>1</sup> societies about gods and mankind, this Judeo-Christian text presented a catalogue of events ordered on a straight temporal line, carving out individual and unrepeatable moments, or what may be called *moments of history* (whether fictitious or real, in this particular case). It also proposed a set of individual characters who bear their own personal narrative and become recognizable through their tales of faith and suffering (1954, 104). From Eliade, we can conclude that the ‘birth’ of this Judeo-Christian historical narrative was pivotal in the ‘birth’ of the individual. Primitive cyclical time had little respect or care about humans as individuals. It divided moments into the sacred (rituals through which human beings unite with the eternal, non-temporal, sublime dimension of gods) and the profane (parts of individual life without a sacred function, hence forgettable, unimportant, and unrecorded; 1954,

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<sup>1</sup> Predominantly cyclically temporal, with little to no intention of recording history and individual human narratives.

35). Circularity is an idea based on observing grander, external units, existing independently from us, such as nature itself. Linear time, in contrast, is the time of the individual.

Though Eliade makes fairly reasonable points when he claims that a prominent linear temporal disposal originates with the Bible, this article is inclined to argue with him to a certain extent. According to Ronald C. Hoy, even as far back in time as 500 BC, Greek society as a whole (and not only the educated philosophers) had “common temporal beliefs” similar to modern societies (2013, 10-11). These entailed a belief in “a determined (fixed) Past, and some indeterminate and open Future” (2013, 10), a belief that objects can be past, present or future, that evolution prompts us to be concerned about the future, not the past, or that future things are moving towards us” (2013, 10). If we carefully study pre-Christian scholars, we can find a myriad of examples of linear inclinations, embedded even within the ideas of e.g. Aristotle<sup>2</sup> or Heraclitus.<sup>3</sup> It has to be noted that Eliade bases his comparisons on juxtaposing ‘natural’ societies with limited capacities or will to record history with more ‘modern’ societies that did so, but I still find it interesting that whilst making his argument about the transition from cyclical to linear schemes, he predominantly disregards Greek antiquity as a whole.

Linear temporality has been explained by many pertinent and often similar notions throughout history, such as the acknowledgement of a certain irreversibility of moments. As per Stephen Hawking (as far as his proposals on the Big Bang and the Big Crunch are concerned, which are ideas he started second guessing at some point), linear temporality includes the notion that time has a beginning and an end point. Saint Thomas Aquinas argued that time is a string of events which infinitely stretches backwards (McGinnis 2013, 74), and John Philoponus claimed that it infinitely stretches both backwards (“ante parte”) and then forward (“post parte”) (McGinnis 2013, 79). Up until Albert Einstein, linear temporality also entailed the idea of uniformly flowing time.

No matter which school of thought we follow, it can be argued that linear temporality entails that time *flows from past to present to future*, or that time is *divided between moments of earlier and later*. Such classification is by no means an original conclusion of the author of this article. It is actually paraphrasing the arguments of British Idealist philosopher J.M.E. McTaggart. His seminal essay, “The Unreality

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<sup>2</sup> Andrea Falcon, upon discussing Aristotle’s puzzles about time, cites a variety of examples that outline how Aristotle questioned the nature of time, based on what I believe to be linearly biased paradigms. These include that time can be described with words such as “now,” “recently,” “long ago,” “suddenly” etc. (cited in Falcon 2013, 48) or using the past-present-future trichotomy in his arguments (qtd. in Falcon 2013, 50).

<sup>3</sup> Hoy quotes Heraclitus’s famous claim: “You cannot step twice into the same river” (2013, 15).

of Time,” first published in 1908, ordered linear time (or what he called, back in that particular moment of history, time in its entirety) into the so-called A, B, and C Series. In this particular article, I am introducing his A and his B Series. The A Series, or what McTaggart calls a dynamic notion, is the idea that time flows from moments of the past through moments of the present to moments of the future. The B Series is a fixed notion because it entails that moments have a position on a straight temporal line as being earlier or later, and these positions will never change (the birth of my mother is always earlier than the moment of my birth) (1908, 459).<sup>4</sup>

The intriguing part about McTaggart’s essay is when he starts pondering on the fact that however well these notions describe time as per our human experience, they are either contradictory (A Series) or insufficient (B Series). Hence in the end, he renders time unreal (1908, 464). Regardless of the discrepancy between what McTaggart claims to describe (time itself) and what he actually describes (linear temporal experience), he undoubtedly unravels the internal paradox that lies within a temporal scheme projected onto reality due to the workings of none other than our own brains with a staggering, almost poetic sensitivity.

Human perception made linear temporality a reigning paradigm that we project onto the world, even if on the grander schemes, it is not necessarily a viable idea. This self-projection involves coming up with a system of conventions (such as measuring time with months, days, etc.), which, at some levels, is based on educated guesses or careful measures that take into account certain celestial physical schemes (the orbiting of the Earth around the Sun, etc.). Though it even echoes a cyclical origin, it is ultimately a linear, biased doctrine. This self-projection only kept getting stronger and stronger in time, as society progressed to living in modern, urbanised settings, as clock time, chronological time rose to more and more prominence, and as the human sense of individuality grew increasingly stronger. Regarding Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” my interpretation will focus on how the narrator is quite literally driven into insanity by his own brain, unable to consolidate between the discrepancy of a strong urge to perceive time as linear, and a fundamental, underlying circularity, which awakens harrowing anxieties of cessation for someone like him: a modern individual with a linear narrative of the self.

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<sup>4</sup> The C Series is a particularly intriguing idea: McTaggart claims that events may actually only have a fixed, atemporal sequential order of e.g. M, N, O, P, and then some mysterious element (such as e.g. change, an idea embedded in the A Series) adds the illusion of temporal progress to this static, non-temporal, quasi-numeric order. In a previous article, “Madmen In and Out of Time: A McTaggartian Reading of Madness in Fiction” (*Pro&Contra*, 2019, 5–30) I decoded this series in regards to its potentiality to suggest that the underlying reality around us is not spatiotemporal but numeric (such as a computer program, as proposed even by pop cultural references, such as *Matrix*).

The peculiar ways in which our brain reinforces (or most likely creates) the linear projective urge is rather complex and fascinating. What I fundamentally rely on here is a certain philosophical discussion of time, which, however, utilises insight from natural sciences such as neurology and modern physics, as I strongly contend that the interdisciplinary angle helps to occasionally ‘validate’ certain philosophical proposals, such as McTaggart’s perplexity of (linear) time. Hence, this approach contributes to establishing a particular interdisciplinary analytical framework concerned with temporal experience, in the context of which we can unpick certain (and perhaps) less orthodox interpretations of Edgar Allan Poe’s works. It has been long known and understood by those extensively studying memory that the past-present-future trichotomy is *indeed* created internally, as sensitively presupposed by amongst others, McTaggart, due to the human brain being hardwired on a cause-and-effect order. In other words, our brains are linearly biased. Paula Droege, in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory*, outlines that once someone loses the ability to remember to some extent, that person will also lose their ability to anticipate. Cerebrally, intellectually they may still comprehend the idea of ‘past’ or ‘future,’ but their ability to act upon it is impaired. Droege also quotes Pascal Boyer’s theories about the potential repercussions amnesiacs’ behaviour pose on social cohesion and ponders on whether they are more prone to partake in perilous activities due to not being able to viscerally comprehend that *if* they do something hazardous in the *present*, it will have an influence on their *future* (Droege 2017, 107). Amnesiacs’ deficient *feeling of pastness* influences their ability to anticipate because our brains do not technically differentiate between ‘past’ and ‘future.’ The same parts of the brain are responsible for creating the sensations of memory and anticipation (De Brigard 2017, 137). The past-present-future trichotomy is an epistemological bias force-fed to us by a brain hooked on ordering everything into cause first, and then effect. However, it is not only our brains that do not technically differentiate between past and future – the laws of science seem to follow the same pattern.<sup>5</sup>

Hawking pondered on the direction of time quite extensively in *A Brief History of Time*, and whilst he could not pinpoint *why* the direction of time is past to present to future (a.k.a. cause to effect, a.k.a. order to chaos), he underlined that in our universe, for whatever reason, the law is that in any given closed system, entropy always grows

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<sup>5</sup> According to Hawking, “The laws of science do not distinguish between the past and the future. More precisely, as explained earlier, the laws of science are unchanged under the combination of operations (or symmetries) known as C, P and T. (C means changing particles for antiparticles. P means taking the mirror image, so left and right are interchanged. And T means reversing the motion of all particles: in effect, running the motion backward.) [...] In other words, life would be just the same for the inhabitants of another planet who were both mirror images of us and who were made from anti-matter, not matter” (2016, 163).

(2016, 164), which entails that we go from order to chaos, from cause to effect. We will knock over a teapot and see it falling on the ground and breaking into pieces. We do not go around seeing cracked pieces of teapot on the floor magically lift themselves up to gracefully land on a table and recompose into an unbroken teapot. This, in the understanding of this article, could well explain the brain's predisposal to the cause-and-effect order: we physically manifest and accustom and habituate ourselves to exist in a material dimension mainly independent from us which ordains any given system to function by following a certain physical and neuro-temporal order. Divergence from this system is semi-impossible and semi-terrifying. In a coming subchapter, I will discuss a physiological condition pertinent both in the society and the fictive works of Poe which somehow makes the whole body and mind unanimously riot against the thermodynamical arrow of time, "the direction of time in which disorder or entropy increases" (Hawking 2016, 164). However, it does so with the terrifying consequence of making the victim of this curious condition, catalepsy, appearing to be dead whilst still staying alive.

In fact, in recent years, a number of studies surfaced which underline that the brain's learning is quite potentially controlled by the rule of entropy (see e.g. Goldt and Seifert, 2017, 1–7). What is even more awe-striking, is that "consciousness could simply be a side-effect of entropy" (MacDonald based on Guevara Erra et al 2017, 1–18). Guevara Erra et al discuss the idea that the brain mirrors entropy because it has an innate need to mirror its environment: "Because the brain functions to maintain a predictive model of the environment (the reason the brain evolved is to model the environment, after all), then perhaps the brain's global configuration has to 'copy' what is out there: and out there energy distributes in all possible microstates (second principle of thermodynamics)" (2017, 9). If we accept that entropy imposes a certain linearity on the universe, in theory it can be responsible for imposing linearity, including a certain temporal directional thinking on our brains as well. My arguments regarding entropy modifying temporal awareness will be vital whilst talking about catalepsy, and its effects on both the narrator of Poe's "The Premature Burial," and a general societal anxiety present in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in connection with this condition. Discussing entropy with regards to temporal awareness allows for a vastly different reading of the *dead alive* body and the anxieties of being buried alive, as well.

But whether our brains are hardwired on the cause-and-effect order due to the thermodynamical arrow of time or not, the proof still stands that the brain surrenders many pivotal elements of mental human experience to creating functioning, linear narratives. One such experience is the experience of memory, or more precisely, as Daniel D. Hutto argues, "one special sort of memory – autobiographical reverie – has a strong claim for being indelibly narrative in nature." He goes on to point out that

“autobiographical memory and narrativity may be inescapably bound together” (2017, 192). To specify what autobiographic memories are, we resort to José Luis Bermúdez, who claims that they are explicit, declarative and episodic in nature (2017, 181). Droege outlines that as per recent scientific findings, episodic memory (the part of memory which “keeps track of the self in time”) is much more of an act of recreation than remembrance (2017, 105). We do not retrieve episodic memories by ‘picking’ them out of some sort of storage – every time we remember something episodic, we essentially recreate the scenario. And the more gaps there are in our understanding or remembrance, the more our brains are inclined to fill in the gaps with functioning, linear story-pieces which contribute to a consequential narrative where everything retains a certain relation of elements (cause-and-effect order). To put it simply: our brain adores creating stories, or making connections where there are none.

These ideas, on the one hand, can underline the relevance of interdisciplinary research and an integrationist approach whilst studying fictive temporal experiences, especially ones related to trauma as well. Fiction, narration, time and remembrance are interlinked with a myriad of little threads. On the other hand, it also suggests the *objective*, external non-existence, or at least, somewhat diminished relevance of linear time. There are internal contradictions between certain canonised and still valid linear doctrines, and the often very visceral, chaotic, traumatic emotional, mental or fictive moments of awakening or terror when a character begins to consciously or unconsciously question the relevance or the ultimate truth value of this paradigm. Linear time is by no means an obsolete concept with no real use for society – however, whilst investigating non-neurotypical characters’ temporal experiences, I propose the application of a rather lenient lens which allows their experiences to be judged based on the merit of their *potential* for truth value.

In terms of Poe’s short fiction, the potential fictionality of linear time, and our inability to fully understand or even get to know what time truly entails is of pivotal importance. Robert Tally argues that the basis of Poe’s horror is not simply the fear of the unknown, but the fear of unknowability, meaning that the subject dreads what they cannot ever really get to know (2010, 3–4). He claims that there is a strong subversive urge in Poe’s fiction regarding the “truth telling” ability of narratives and narrators: Poe’s narrators know *not* that they do not know, but that they cannot know. Hence, according to Tally, Poe’s works often defy any attempt to decode a unanimous ‘meaning,’ as the horror itself lies in the fact that some comforting meaning cannot and will not reveal itself. “A foundational project in many tales seems to be the critique of knowledge itself” (Tally 2010, 4). I contend that for the most part, philosophical (and even scientific) discussions of time are often faced with the same dilemma. As if time was forever paradoxical to human minds, something that we cannot ever really get to know, or decipher – an irresolvable

enigma. I contend that engaging with NLTE is a prominent attempt at trying to tackle the dread of this unknowability – through (at least, partially) liberating our brain from the linear bias, we can engage with different temporal schemes, perhaps more true, more relevant to the reality of time than our linear projection. This urge is prominently observable in Poe’s short stories.

My main thesis is that time is fundamentally unknowable. Temporal unknowability is present due to the biased human brain being unable to fully grasp what temporality could mean. During NLTEs, the brain is liberated enough from the linear bias to understand that its own experience is potentially flawed, but still incapable of fully surrendering to the experience, hence, in most cases, a sort of mental overload or ‘malfunction’ (mainly madness and mania) ensues. Observing these reactions related to unknowability is my main focus.

### 3 NLTE as a Source of Pure Horror – “The Tell-Tale Heart”

The plot of the short story can be summarised by saying that the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” turns mad and paranoid due to a certain temporal threat, so much so that he actually murders the personification of that fear. But this dreadful deed does not give him solace: he does not succeed in lulling his fears, or triumphing over time. This description may interpret the ‘journey’ of the (anti) hero, but it does not offer a comforting resolution to the anxieties the story communicates: nothing known to us at this point can give us solace from the horror of cessation, our own passing, or so to say, time murdering us. There is an unresolved, irresolvable paradox embedded within the text. The narrator is captured by the police, but his anxieties will continue to wreak havoc in his heart – and ours. His anxiety is twofold: on the one hand, as already noted above, it presents itself through the narrator engaging with a repressed non-linear temporal pattern (primitive cyclicity), which terrifies him so much that it even turns the so-far thought-to-have-known, safe linear time into a source of horror. On the other hand, it manifests as a terrible anxiety of the unknowable: what he *begins to feel* through cyclicity and what *he thinks he knows* of linearity are so contradictory that this realisation pushes him into a deep state of madness, since he is unable to reconcile the paradoxes. In his madness, he leans back on a certain oversimplification of the horror that haunts him and tries to manifest the entity (time) which haunts him in a tangible, human container (the old man), which he can end before it ends him.

Arguably, when the story begins, the narrator is just a highly sensitive person who is somehow prone to viscerally *live through* and ‘humanise’ the doom of

nothingness, the threat of annihilation, the horror that happens every day at a particular point in time – midnight: “I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me” (2005, 243). According to Eliade’s analysis of cyclical time, the period between the holiday we call ‘Christmas’ today and Epiphany is a pivotal period when time renews and annihilates itself at the same time. It is both birth and death, the time when all logic and causality disappears, when ghosts can come back to life, when everything is permitted and all traces of linear orderliness vanish (1954, 59, 62, 65). I am inclined to argue that midnight does the same on a small scale. Every day, there comes the zero hour, when time annihilates and renews itself. In that sense, our linearly predisposed society in some ways have never actually broken with the tradition of circularity. The idea of constant renewal still echoes in our collective unconscious.

Poe’s narrator, however, is so terrified by *experiencing* this non-linear (or circulo-linear) ‘birthdeath’ that it sends him into a sensory overdrive – he begins to hear everything so loudly that it drives him insane. The threat makes him not just overloaded in sensory capacities, but also extremely paranoid and hostile. I agree with Dan Shen that the narrator’s acute hearing is not a sign of madness, but I would challenge his idea of calling it a “fantastic fictional fact” (Shen 2008, 331) and attribute it to engaging with NLTE. Clearly, as the narrator physically, and in most instances, mentally resides in a dimension that is predominantly linearly temporal, simultaneously engaging with a cyclical pattern that viscerally entails death and birth at the same time; along with the total erasure of individuality, it is something fundamentally incomprehensible for him. Hence his unconscious translates it as a direct death threat: annihilation, the end of it all. He cannot progress towards trying to attain any sort of knowledge or comprehend the ‘reality’ of time, because the first instance of engaging with NLTE (viscerally reconnecting with the individuum-erasing capabilities of cyclical time) fills his heart with horror, and profoundly affects him both mentally and physically. Instead of trying to reach a sort of transcendental insight through NLTE (as it will be the case with the narrator of “The Pit and the Pendulum”), he channels his efforts into annihilating the source of his temporal fears.

NLTE does not only remind the narrator that there is potentially a terrifying, epistemologically relevant temporal paradigm (primitive cyclicity) which can threaten his own existence: it also turns linearity, something so far known and familiar to him, into a source of horror. The old man’s heart embodies clock time, which is now something conflicting, terrifying and unfamiliar – the strikes of the clock are mere, soulless beats marching towards cessation, the end of his finite

narrative. Clocktime in itself incorporates both a sense of linearity (a mechanic progression from past to present to future) and a sense of cyclicity (the repetition of the hours on a daily basis). Hence, it is the perfect symbol to illustrate the discrepancy which is driving the narrator insane: time, simultaneously being both linear and cyclical, and perhaps neither of them, is a strong death threat.

The narrator needs to funnel his fears of an abstract concept into something tangible, something he can control, something he can murder, before it murders him. Soon enough, he begins feeling that the old man he lives with somehow has an ‘all seeing eye’ and is out to murder him. The old man’s heart, lo and behold, beats loud as a clock, driving the narrator even further into insanity: “now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man’s heart” (2005, 244). Arguably, the old man is just an unfortunate personification of an abstract evil, as opposed to some actual supernatural entity. Through the narrator’s paranoia, he becomes a powerful and menacing entity though (just like time).

The dramatic irony is that no one can murder time. Time, if we take the cyclical pattern into consideration, does that to itself on a regular basis, yet it keeps rising like a phoenix from the ashes – something the narrator is not capable of. Even though he murders the old man and buries him, the narrator still keeps hearing the beating of his terrible heart, loud as a clock. There is no escape from the horror, and as far as the narrative is concerned, no escape from his arrest either.

Portraying time as a terrifying murderer is no foreign concept to Poe’s works in general. Slawomir Studniarz analyses Poe’s poems “The City in the Sea” and “The Bells” in relation to how they portray time as a dreadful source, bringing death, decay and annihilation. In “The City of the Sea”, he highlights how a certain “reanimated time” brings movement to the static, undefined space, and causes the sea to move (2016, 164). However, this movement only brings about the final destruction of the city: as if time was a tool of the city’s annihilation (2016, 164–65). This poem is a particularly fascinating example of McTaggart’s paradoxes of linear time in action, and the question whether motion is inherently embedded in temporality (A Series), or motion is added onto a static scheme (B Series). However, both propositions are paradoxical and, as we see in Poe’s poem, serve as a weapon of destruction, since linear time inherently entails ends and beginnings – ultimately, annihilation and death. Primitive cyclical time embraces this eternal circle of death and birth in a way modern, individual human consciousness cannot, for the most part. However, in the next short story, we can witness a very different attitude to this paradox, even though time literally manifests as death itself. The narrator’s approach ultimately results in an unlikely ending, without any remaining, lingering sense of unresolved implanted anxiety.

#### 4 NLTE as a Metaphysical Epiphany – “The Pit and the Pendulum”

In this particular short story, the narrator is actually able to overcome the horror of being *literally murdered by time*. He does so by realising that there is potential in retaining some sort of consciousness after death, and that there is a possibility to think of life as a dream, and whatever awaits after death as a chance to achieve transcendence. Being able to ‘hack’ Poe’s vicious circle of horrors, the narrator turns the horror into the sublime, and fear into transcendental realisation, hence he is rewarded with an unlikely *deus ex machina*. In this short story we can witness what Julia Kristeva describes as the sublimation of the abject. She argues that sublimation is “nothing else than the possibility of naming the prenominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal.” She emphasises the importance of the idea of control, something that arises through virtue of sublimation: “In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control” (1982, 11).

But through what process does this narrator gain back control over the horror which overtakes him? How does he arrive at the conclusion that not all is lost after death, whilst he lies tied up, rendered motionless, unable to escape the sabres descending from the ceiling, directly from a painting of Death with not a scythe but a clock in his hand? He cannot physically move; however, he finds a way to escape – through his mind. Linear time is a paradox embedded within the human mind – it entails our lives having finite narratives. Death is able to acquire different meanings once we free our mind from this paradox. We can argue that Poe’s narrator, given the fact that this thought is very thoroughly and sensitively present in the story, understands that the key to tackling the decay and annihilation brought forth by ‘time’ is by liberating the mind from certain biases that generate this paradox of finitude. No physical force can combat the horrible scythe of Death: only swooning, dreaming, only liberating the mind, by overriding conscious awareness. The shock of cessation, in this narrator’s case, is actually a miraculous aid, as it starts the narrator’s fluctuation between conscious and unconscious awareness, generating an all-encompassing NLTE, which is actually liberating, as opposed to the experience of the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The moment the judges sentence him to death, the narrator shifts to the event horizon of a metaphorical black hole:

“the figures of the judges vanished, as if magically, from before me; the tall candles sank into nothingness; their flames went out utterly; the blackness of darkness supervened; all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades. Then silence, and stillness, night were the universe.” (2005, 161)

This passage serves as a foreshadowing premonition of the experience that is about to commence: nothingness, the greatest threat of linear time – a source of horror. However, soon after he sinks into darkness, we find out that the narrator just passed out. Whilst tied down in his execution chamber, immobile, he starts fluctuating between conscious and unconscious awareness, turning his perception into a flux between the two, the one ordained by linear cause-and-effect order, and the other independent from it. This transition opens his mind to the possibility of survival in some shape or form:

“I had swooned; but still will not say that all of consciousness was lost. What of it there remained I will not attempt to define, or even to describe; yet all was not lost. In the deepest slumber --no! In delirium --no! In a swoon --no! In death --no! even in the grave all is not lost. Else there is no immortality for man.” (2005, 161)

If we assume McTaggart’s proposals to be valid, then this kind of immortality is something that can be directly derived from the unreality of time. If our existence is non-temporal, there is a possibility that it has no end. Hence, when the narrator experiences a momentary shift from the linear temporal paradox, he arrives at this conclusion as well.<sup>6</sup>

Poe’s narrator comes up with elaborate thoughts on the nature of dreams and how they differ from death. He claims that we wake from a swoon or a dream first mentally, then physically, noting that if we were able to recollect what we mentally experienced during a swoon/a dream, we would be able to peek through the cracks of human existence. He is musing on whether these cracks, and as he calls them, “gulfs”, are the same cracks like those one encounters whilst being dead. He makes a direct link between death, dreaming, and being unconscious, and brings it to a new level, claiming that anyone that has ever swooned, will carry strange remnants of that mental experience, and will encounter strange experiences whilst awake, as well. The narrator’s fluctuation between order and chaos, the conscious and the unconscious, linearly ordained versus non-linear time (or even to some extent, complete non-temporality) reaches its climax when he mixes his perceptive experiences in a poetic, highly sensitive fashion, not unlike much later authors, such as Virginia Woolf. As much as language permits it, the passage below communicates a deep sense of transcendental unity, perhaps normally hidden as long as we cannot perceive a synthesis in the place of standalone states of mind or planes of reality:

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that McTaggart often entertained himself with musing on the “immortality of the soul” in a similar fashion (Dickinson 1933, 96). Consciousness as we know it necessarily fades if put in a non-temporal universe. But perhaps not all is lost.

“He who has never swooned, is not he who finds strange palaces and wildly familiar faces in coals that glow; is not he who beholds floating in mid-air the sad visions that the many may not view; is not he who ponders over the perfume of some novel flower—is not he whose brain grows bewildered with the meaning of some musical cadence which has never before arrested his attention.” (2005, 162)

Kristeva describes this transcendental awe in language akin to the above quote in its poetic quality: “As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers – it has always already triggered – a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where “I” am – delight and loss” (1982, 12). She makes a pivotal point here, regarding the expansion of memory. As already argued, memory is one of those paradoxical devices of the brain which keeps reinforcing a linear paradigm, albeit through temporal concepts highly contradictory (such as feelings of pastness, presentness and futureness). The ‘boundless expansion of memory’ is a powerful tool to combat this paradoxical sense of neurological finitude and linearity.

In this short story, there is a dire time lock: as soon as the sabres reach the victim, he dies. Yet, the story keeps breaking the time-pressed plot with philosophical musings, creating a particular tension between immediacy and urgency, and the almost ‘timeless,’ serene ideas related to awareness, the mind, death and time. I contend this story to be a wonderful illustration of the sublimation of temporal horror. As Kristeva argues, “The object is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being” (1982, 11). Time is the same, the threat is the same, but the narrator’s approach is different, and it changes everything. There is a dire contrast in the story between external and internal, as the plot is a deeply symbolic externalisation of an internal anxiety perhaps we have all experienced in some shape or form. Once in a while, we can find solace from these fears: “always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a something added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here, as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy-fascination” (Kristeva 1982, 12).

### **5 Catalepsy in “The Premature Burial” – Blurring the Line between Real-Life and Fictive NLTE**

In “The Premature Burial,” there are multiple efforts that underline the traditional Gothic intent to shock the readers. Poe employs an impeccable dramaturgy by starting the story as an informal set of musings and recollections by an anonymous

narrator: he recalls ‘real’ instances of catalepsy and premature burials by giving spatial markers (such as Baltimore, or France), along with specifying the people involved in the incidents, which make these stories sound tangible, and blur the line between reality, fiction and speculation. By providing gruesome details about how the corpses were recovered in their graves,<sup>7</sup> Poe further escalates the effects of visceral horror for the reader. This alone would not call for a pronounced interest, as there is nothing particularly standalone about a Poe-story, or any other Gothic story, for that matter, aiming to shock its readers. However, in this case, the ‘blur’ between fiction and reality serves to exaggerate fears over a real-life NLTE.<sup>8</sup>

According to *Merriam-Webster*, catalepsy is defined as “a trancelike state marked by loss of voluntary motion in which the limbs remain in whatever position they are placed.” However, the deathlike physical state is not the only thing perplexing about this illness. Encyclopedia.com expounds on the cataleptic mindset by mentioning that it is a “pathological condition of the nervous system” and that the victim of such attacks “remains unconscious throughout the attack.”<sup>9</sup> It is precisely from the vantage point of this non-neurotypical mindset that I intend to conduct my analysis of Poe’s story. There are not many illnesses which not only modify the brain’s neurotypical awareness, but *also* the body’s whole physiology to such a drastic extent. The Gothic fascination with the perplexing, horrifying duality of the illness is nothing to be surprised at: catalepsy unites a mind which, in most cases, surrenders to loss of all consciousness and sensation, and a body which is halted from all motor functions. Cataleptic bodies are the real-life, flesh and bone *dead alive bodies*.

With that said, I am calling catalepsy a real-life NLTE, because through suspending both mental consciousness and physical awareness, entirely freezing both body and brain, cataleptic bodies work against the doctrine of the linear, entropic bias, which quite possibly generates the sensation of linear time, as I have previously argued. As if cataleptic bodies were wishing to be withdrawn from the entropic universe

<sup>7</sup> Or, in one instance, recounting the story of an officer, who was still alive when he got unearthed from his shallow grave, albeit looking dead. However, “he sat nearly erect within his coffin, the lid of which, in his furious struggles, he had partially uplifted” (Poe 2005, 180).

<sup>8</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this condition or illness left so many afraid for their lives that they began purchasing safe coffins with a built-in airhole and a little bell to ring, just in case they wanted to signal to the world that they are still alive. These safe coffins were initiated by a society called “The Society for Prevention of People Being Buried Alive” (Stien 2009, 2632–33). Poe, himself covering the horror of this disease in short stories such as “Berenice”, “The Premature Burial” and “The Fall of the House of Usher,” quite likely contributed to raising the level of awareness to a nationwide hysteria, but no source, at least to the best of my knowledge, could credibly testify that he himself actually suffered from this illness.

<sup>9</sup> Or on occasion, displays “symptoms of intense mental excitement [...] hardly distinguishable from those of hysteria” (Encyclopedia.com).

completely, whilst not *wholly* giving up existence in this cause-and-effect-ordered universe either. Catalepsy is one of the most prominent physiological ‘riots’ against the linear temporal paradigm. The result of this riot is of course, a state of mind and body which forbids the individual from taking an ‘active’ part in the creation of entropy, or, to put it another way, from existing and functioning like other live members of society. All sense of progress and motion is gone, the individual is suspended in an immobile state, almost as if it was an illustration of what could possibly happen to humans if McTaggart’s B Series of time (the static time, the motionless time) was the actual conducting force in the universe. *Change* is out of the question. There is no motion, no progress, no consciousness. This in turn poses the curious theoretical question whether these bodies are actually dead or alive. “The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?” – Poe’s narrator himself muses (2005, 177). He describes the cataleptic body as fully suspended, meaning, it appears to be dead but it does not decompose in any way. It does not cease to exist, it does not surrender to the linear idea that life has an end. It refuses to decay (a process which again, requires energy, hence generating chaos), it stays alive – but it is not *linearly temporally alive*. The body is suspended in NLTE.

Through not only mentally but also physically surrendering the body to NLTE, catalepsy is a terrifying and fascinating idea for minds occupied with questions regarding what possibly lies between the fringes of our understanding on life, death, the finitude of our existence, and the possible irrelevance of linear temporality. This mania is prominently present in the narrator of “The Premature Burial.” The narrator of the “Tell-Tale Heart” translates NLTE as a death threat and decides to murder the personification of his own anxieties. The narrator of “The Pit and the Pendulum” chooses to find transcendence by succumbing to the fringe, the abyss between known and unknown, linearity and non-linearity, life and death. The narrator of “The Premature Burial” has a potent anxiety of being buried alive. Brett Zimmerman highlights that the narrator recalls that this mounting obsession and paranoia is the result of developing catalepsy (2009, 8).

The narrator muses on whether he developed catalepsy due to his fears, or his fears appeared because of the experience of catalepsy. In this endless circle of thoughts on either being afraid from or self-provoking catalepsy, he lacks a unanimous answer of what came first. The uncertainty keeps mounting in the narrator like a sort of perpetuum mobile. The way in which this anxiety manifests is the perfect illustration of the temporal paradox which provokes it to begin with. Namely, whether we can surrender temporal dynamism (the A Series), which is the most canonically accepted way for us to physiologically exist in (albeit entailing our own finitude), to a temporal staticness, which could in theory overrule this finitude, yet is unbearable for us to

physiologically exist in. Catalepsy is a strong effort to ‘break out’ the individual from a paradigm which entails the individual’s own death and decay. However, it creates a state which is in turn extremely close to the one meant to be bypassed in the first place: death. As if the universe (or simply our bodies and minds) permitted us to explore what lies outside of the linear paradox by ‘rewarding’ us with reinstating our most prominent fear, related to that linear paradox. Our physiology cannot seem to interpret engulfing us in a non-linear, quasi-static, atemporal paradigm – at least, this is one of the conclusions which can be derived from Poe’s narrator’s mania related to cataleptic experiences.

The ‘solution,’ the story suggests, is to stop being afraid of the most dreadful possibility embedded within the cataleptic experience (being buried alive), by actually experiencing something similar. This whole vicious circle of anxieties arises by virtue of being afraid of having to experience death and life simultaneously, which is contradictory to our linear temporal experience but may be plausible in other temporal schemes. Hence, the best way to combat the anxiety is to surrender to it, and see where it leads. In Poe’s narrator’s case, it leads not to actually being buried alive, but experiencing a situation that feels akin to it: falling asleep in the berth of a ship and mistaking it for a coffin. Zimmerman argues that by underlining that this shock can actually help to ease the narrator’s fears, Poe anticipates the modern psychotherapeutic method of “flooding”<sup>10</sup> (2009, 8). However, the solution is not final, as this self-sustaining circle of anxieties, lack of answers or knowability, can only be neglected for the time being, but never overstepped:

There are moments when, even to the sober eye of Reason, the world of our sad Humanity may assume the semblance of a Hell—but the imagination of man is no Carathis, to explore with impunity its every cavern. Alas! the grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful—but, like the Demons in whose company Afrasiab made his voyage down the Oxus, they must sleep, or they will devour us—they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish. (Poe 2005, 190)

## 6 Edgar Allan Poe’s Temporal Horror

Being non-neurotypical, whether we are talking about a fictional character or a real-life person, predisposes one to having a broader, or different perspective on time, on accounts of successfully (though for the most part, only partially) bypassing the brain’s

<sup>10</sup> Flooding is “a behavior therapy technique where the person is exposed directly to a maximum intensity anxiety-producing situation or stimulus, either in the imagination or in reality” (N. 2013).

inherent linear bias. I do contend that it is important to acknowledge that there are non-pathological temporal non-neurotypicalities, such as childhood (Nelson and Fivush 2006, 242 qtd. in Hutto 2017, 195)<sup>11</sup>. However, for now, my focus rests on psychopathological tendencies which somehow work towards stirring up the linear bias, as they are prominently present not only in the characters I have analysed above, but also their author. I do aim at avoiding intentional fallacy for the most part; however, when it comes to Poe, multiple researchers sacrificed years if not decades to decode his bizarre life and mind, and there is abundant secondary literature to allow educated guesses about his mental health without claiming anything to be an absolute certainty.

Hannah J. Dean and Ryan L. Boyd conducted a computational analysis to determine the potential role depression played in Poe's life, and according to their findings, "[s]ignificant, consistent patterns of depression were not found and do not support suicide as a cause of death. However, linguistic evidence was found suggesting the presence of several potential depressive episodes over the course of Poe's life – these episodes were the most pronounced during years of Poe's greatest success, as well as those following the death of his late wife" (2020, 482). Francisco Pizarro Obaid, in his article "The Dead-Living-Mother: Marie Bonaparte's Interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories" outlines the staggering potential influence Poe's mother's death had on his life, and particularly his fascination with undead women as characters (2016, 183–203). Though Bonaparte's arguments need to be read carefully, as her approach which strongly relies on autobiography has been widely disputed since then, I believe the relevance of almost pathological fascination with undead women in Poe's fiction still makes for a convincing argument. Carl W. Bazil, MD, PhD devoted a whole article to the study of seizures in Poe's life and works (1999, 740–743), and Roger A. Francis, M.D., F.A.C.R. conducted a differential diagnosis in "The Final Days of Edgar Allan Poe: Clues to an Old Mystery Using 21<sup>st</sup> Century Medical Science" to map and decipher from a medical point of view what happened just before Poe died under mysterious circumstances (2010, 165–73). Zimmerman, in "Poe as Amateur Psychologist: Flooding, Phobias, Psychosomatics, and 'The Premature Burial'" emphasises Poe's uncanny ability to portray in his characters with a remarkable accuracy psychological conditions which were completely unknown at the time, for instance in the schizophrenic anti-hero of "The Tell-Tale Heart" or the monomaniac of "The Premature Burial" (2009, 7).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "In sum, by SIT's lights, children only come to be able to think about their pasts in autobiographical terms towards the end of their pre-school years, because they have begun to master narrative practices through which they "are exposed to an ever-widening circle of understanding people as temporally extended persons with temporally extended minds."

<sup>12</sup> "On the other hand, in the days when the science of mind was in its infancy, Poe sometimes depicted characters in modern clinical detail so precise that he seems positively clairvoyant. [...] In 'The Premature

All these diverse resources underline the idea that the psychological and physiological disposal of Poe has been a source of fascination both for literary scholars and medical professionals alike. It is quite possible that Poe was non-neurotypically disposed. His *exact* conditions are, of course, impossible to know for certain. I am content to settle with the idea that somehow, potentially, he was more attuned to NLTEs, either due to poetic hypersensitivity, psychological distress, or a combination of both. Being non-neurotypical is by no means a prerequisite for creating non-neurotypical characters. However, as far as the ‘truth value’ of fictive temporal experiences is concerned, it is possible to argue that non-neurotypically disposed authors potentially have a more authentic angle of presenting such experiences, since it could well be the case that the character’s experiences somehow consciously or unconsciously are drawn from or inspired by their own. The fictive character creates a sort of epistemological borderline, through which the authors can present not only their conscious and known, but also their unconscious or unreflected experiences or anxieties related to temporality.

However, Poe was not only a potentially non-neurotypical author, but also, more specifically, a potentially non-neurotypical Gothic author, and as such, Christopher Benfey argues that he continuously strived to “puzzle his readers” (1993, 27). Creating mystery, the unknowable, the grotesque, the awe-striking in his fiction permeated his public persona, especially what is left for us to decipher after he has been long dead. Poe is not simply a writer, but an emblem, a literary and subcultural icon and symbol. His strange sensibilities find themselves mirrored in the souls of people all through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Lou Reed mentions in his tribute to “The Raven” that “Poe’s obsessions, paranoia, wilful acts of self-destruction surround us constantly” and notes that “Poe’s fears of death and psychological disintegration are not very different from our own” (qtd. in Lima 2010, 22). I contend that the obsession to decipher Poe is related to the obsession reflected in the works of Poe, which in turn poses the question: how much of the enigma is him, and how much of it is a playful (if albeit perverse) literary device which began permeating collective memory around him?

Unreadability is at the core of Poe’s specific take on Gothic fiction. Marita Nadal argues that “the Gothic is linked to trauma: both are characterized by disruption and excess” (2016, 179). She elaborates on the parallel by saying that “both trauma and Gothic are concerned with violence, fear, hauntedness, stasis and entrapment, memory and the past, and emphasize the role of the unconscious” (2016, 180). In my reading, the trauma that haunts the characters, related to time and temporality,

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Burial,’ Poe provides a narrator whose severe terror of untimely interment amounts to a monomania.” (Zimmerman 2009, 7)

is what Tally expounds on as unknowability, that certain ideas *were never completely familiar to begin with*. This ‘revelation’ of unknowability unfolds in Poe’s stories mostly accompanied by a sort of corporeal shock, mania, anger or anxiety. In terms of temporal experience or temporal horror, many of these revelations unfold during NLTEs, as outlined in my three analyses in the preceding sections of this article.

Tally also argues that “Poe cannot be captured by labels like romantic, gothic, transcendentalist, irrationalist, and so on” (2010, 10). He acknowledges that Poe “clearly maintains affiliations with various modes and schools of thought,” though. Romanticism and the Gothic mode are definitely two of these prominent affiliations. Nonetheless, I do contend that ‘unlabelling’ Poe is a beneficial idea. We need to acknowledge Poe’s playfulness and resistance, which Tally compares to “Focault’s mocking persona” (2010, 10). Poe, as stated before, was fascinated by puzzles, unsolvable human paradoxes, and deep-seated strange perversities. There are certain critics, such as Harold Bloom – as Benfey argues – who acknowledge that Poe cannot be deciphered, he cannot be “read.” Others, like Marie Bonaparte, present a way to decode his stories, for the most part, through psychoanalysis (1993, 27).

## 7 Conclusion

Though fundamentally my approach is much closer to Tally’s or Bloom’s, in this essay I did attempt to ‘decode’ a small set of temporal riddles which unravel themselves through a careful reading of Poe’s peculiar narratives. However, what my focus rests on in these stories (temporal experience), defies the quest for unanimous meaning, reassuring conclusions or inextricable truth. My argument is that time is fundamentally unknowable to human beings. Starting from the philosophical ideas of J. M. E. McTaggart, I attempted to expound on how his doubts find themselves mirrored in interdisciplinary studies and how these different disciplines mirroring each other altogether strengthen this point. I tried to observe how the paradox of temporal unknowability affects three different characters in Poe’s three different short stories featuring their so-called non-linear temporal experiences.

Once faced with NLTE, the three characters react in fundamentally different ways: in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator’s all-consuming fear turns into active, murderous mania, in “The Pit and the Pendulum,” there is an uplifting embrace of potential transcendence, and in “The Premature Burial,” we can witness a deep-seated anxiety at work, which is confronted but not altogether alleviated. All three reactions are understandable once we acknowledge that the fundamental anxieties we can decode from these stories (time is unknowable, what we think we know of it might be flawed,

and what presents as an alternative is not necessarily a viable option for our modern, highly individualised personalities) are irresolvable. Hence, any effort I made to ‘decode’ these stories was only to underline that we cannot ever fully ‘decode’ or resolve the temporal anxieties which are manifest in them to begin with.

The short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, displaying a persistent angle of temporal horror through characters stuck between different paradigms of time, are a rich territory for exploration, whether canonised and (over)analysed or not. Poe is arguably one of those strange, enigmatic authors who manages to link poetic sensitivity with a sense of psychological and neurobiological accuracy, a zest of quantum-physical undertones, and an uplifting sense of transcendence, or the harrowing lack of it. His short stories have the potential to show us a complex picture of NLTE in human beings, and lend themselves to interdisciplinary research, not to challenge the existing readings out there, but to hopefully complement them.

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