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Memorializing Poe through Narrative Placemaking

Joe Rohde, a former Disney Imagineer and current Experience Architect for Virgin Galactic, defines narrative placemaking as “taking the principles of narrative and imbuing it into the experience itself” (Guice). Narrative placemaking is typically discussed in relation to community development or themed entertainment and experiences such as themed lands, rides, or escape rooms. These physical locations are intentionally designed in such a way that the architecture supports the overarching narrative of the space. The concept of narrative placemaking is also used in the design of historical and national landmarks. The artists for these projects often use intentional design elements to portray specific information about the person, place, or event being memorialized. The “Poe Returning to Boston” statue is an example of the use of narrative placemaking for monuments as the design of the statue incorporates subtle nods to several narrative details about Edgar Allan Poe and his life: the position of the statue shows Poe’s back turned against the Boston Common, an area associated with the publishers that Poe quarreled against during his lifetime; he is facing and walking toward the location of his birth; and the papers spilling from his briefcase are texts either written about or published in Boston (Kim 22).

Poe has been memorialized with several monuments and statues around the world. One of the earliest monuments to Poe is the statue that was commissioned by the Poe Memorial

Association in Baltimore in 1911. This statue, known simply as the “Edgar Allan Poe Statue,” was created by Sir Moses Ezekiel. Ezekiel, born in Virginia and a self-reported admirer of Poe, passed away before the unveiling of the statue and before making remarks about the design choices he made and how they were meant to be representative of Poe’s life in Baltimore (Krainik 55).

Ezekiel briefly comments on his artistic choices concerning the statue in his autobiography, *Memoirs from the Baths of Diocletian*, but his comments consist of a mere two sentences. The lack of commentary on the statue from Ezekiel leaves the meaning and narrative details open to interpretation. By studying the details of the statue, Ezekiel’s personal biography, and the literature Poe produced during his time in Baltimore, it may be possible to deduce (much like C. Auguste Dupin) Ezekiel’s personal impression of Poe and which narrative details Ezekiel thought were the most important to include in his design.

Ezekiel began designing the Poe Statue when he was commissioned to create the statue by Mrs. John C. Wrenshall on behalf of the Edgar Allan Poe Memorial Association in 1911. In her original letter to Ezekiel, Wrenshall asked for the approximate cost of a “seated statue” of Poe (Krainik 52). In his reply, Ezekiel describes his design intent as such:

I should also prefer to make a seated statue of the Poet, in an inspired moment, with his pencil and paper in hand, seated on a rock, with thorns or thistles growing near it --- & I think I might throw a cloak over his shoulders, so as to obtain, grace & dignity in the figure --- and if the statue is to be in the open air, I think Bronze is best for the Statue, with the base of dark grey stone. If it is to go in doors, I would prefer to carve it in marble... This is one idea. Another would be --- if the means are sufficient to allow it. A

marble pedestal out of which a herm of Pallas¹ would arise, and on the top of the Bust of Pallas, to place a black Marble Raven, and in part of the herm of Pallas --- a seated statue of the Poet --- in Bronze, in an attitude of inspiration, & on the herm of Pallas, I would inscribe the titles of his best poems, as if they were in the safe keeping of Minerva (Savoie, "Re: May I pick your brain?").²

In a subsequent letter, it seems as though Ezekiel combines his ideas, as he describes a sketch of the statue which incorporates Poe seated on a rock and the herm bust of Pallas topped with a raven. Ezekiel details which materials he would use for each part of the sculpture, including grey volcanic stone for the rock, bronze for the statue of Poe, marble for the herm of Pallas, and basalt or black marble for the raven (Savoie, "Re: May I pick your brain?").

Surprisingly, the only design element that Ezekiel utilized from these letters was that of the seated Poe. When describing the statue in his memoir, Ezekiel states, "I conceived the idea of representing him as seated listening and rapt attention to a divine melody and a new rhythm in his art" (442). Instead of being seated on a rock, the statue features Poe sitting in "the Chair of Fame" (Turnball 307). A large piece of fabric is draped over the back of the chair and into the seat where Poe sits. A book sits on the back right corner of the chair, tucked just under Poe's right arm. Poe is postured to be leaning forward. His head is slightly cocked so that the left ear appears to be listening to the divine melody described by Ezekiel, and his left hand is raised in a way that almost appears to be conducting or moving to a melody. Each side of the chair has relief panels. The right panel depicts a winged human, presumably an angel, playing what

¹ In reference to "The Raven."

² The author would like to extend enormous gratitude to Jefferey Savoie for transcribing previously unpublished letters between Ezekiel and Wrenshall concerning the Poe Statue.

appears to be a lyre harp. The left panel depicts another presumed angel hanging a festoon (Krainik 57). Ezekiel fixed the bronze seated statue to a stone pedestal. Remarkably, the original pedestal contained not one, but two major typographical errors. The inscription on the pedestal was to read, "Dreaming Dreams No Mortal Ever Dared," as written in "The Raven" (Krainik 54). However, Ezekiel omitted the "i" from "Dreaming" and added an erroneous "s" to the end of "Mortal" (Krainik 57). Without access to further letters from Ezekiel, it is difficult to determine what would have led to these design changes and mistakes. It could be possible that limited time and resources meant that Ezekiel had to scale back from his original vision or hasten to finish the statue. Ezekiel was uniquely invested in the Poe Statue, both personally and financially, which may have contributed to a sense of pressure to finish the statue as soon as possible.

Ezekiel was born in 1844 in Richmond, Virginia, which Poe scholars will recognize as the primary American city in which Poe grew up (Krainik 49). Ezekiel stated in his first letter to Mrs. Wrenshall, "I have loved [Poe] from my earliest infancy and have always had his books with me" (Savoie, "Re: May I pick your brain?"; Krainik 53). In his memoir, Ezekiel calls Poe America's "greatest poet" and expresses his appreciation for the poet's work as "... Edgar Poe was the one poet we have whose poetry does not seem to be based upon anything that existed before his own" (441, 442). Not only did Ezekiel respect Poe as a fellow artist, but also as a fellow Virginian. Ezekiel lived in Richmond for all eighteen years of his life, at which point he entered the Virginia Military Institute at Lexington and subsequently fought for the South in the Civil War. After the war, Ezekiel returned to Virginia where he briefly studied anatomy at the Medical College of Virginia. His love for his home state neared a "religious devotion" (Krainik 49-50). It

was this personal investment in Poe as a fellow Virginian that led Ezekiel to make his own financial investment in the statue. Where Ezekiel would usually charge \$20,000 for a statue similar to one in size and scope to that of the Poe Statue, he reduced the charge to \$10,000 for the Poe Memorial Association as his own financial contribution to the memorial.

A hallmark of Poe's literary career and personal life was a repetition of inopportune circumstances which led to continual setbacks, so it seems fitting that the Poe Statue would encounter similar hindrances, therefore limiting the amount of time Ezekiel had to work on the statue. The first plaster model for the statue was completed in 1913, only two years after the first correspondence between Wrenshall and Ezekiel. The model was shipped from Rome to Germany, where it was to be cast in bronze. However, the model was destroyed while it was being held in customs when the warehouse it was in caught fire. The second model was also destroyed in April 1915 due to an earthquake in Rome (Krainik 53). Somehow, Ezekiel was able to finish the third version of the statue, sans the inscription on the pedestal, by January 1916 (Krainik 54). The statue was fully completed and prepared for shipment only weeks before Ezekiel died on March 27th, 1917 (*The New York Times*). It is truly remarkable that Ezekiel was able to finish this statue, his last piece of work, after the first two models were destroyed and only a few weeks before his death. However, the statue would still face more challenges as the onset of the First World War would delay the shipment of the statue from Europe to the United States until April 1921 (Krainik 56). Even after it arrived in the United States, the statue would not be installed and unveiled in Baltimore until October 1921 due to disagreements between the Poe Memorial Association and Baltimore's Municipal Art Commission (Krainik 56). While

none of these setbacks were intentional or foreseen, it is fittingly ironic that the statue of such a dramatic author would have an equally dramatic history.

While other cities in which Poe resided have historically rejected or downplayed their association with the poet, Baltimore quickly claimed Poe as one of its most prominent citizens. Poe continued to struggle financially during his time in Baltimore, but the literary landscape of the city allowed Poe to begin achieving meager success. While not as developed as New York or Philadelphia, Baltimore still had a strong literary scene. There were many bookstores and even a library located in the city (Savoie, "Poe and Baltimore" 103). But most remarkable was the number of periodicals that were announced for publication in Baltimore. Between 1815-1833, seventy-two new periodicals were announced (Savoie, "Poe and Baltimore" 102, Quinn 187). While not all of these periodicals came to fruition, the number indicated that authors saw potential publishing opportunities in Baltimore. Poe himself took advantage of the publishing industry in Baltimore in 1829 when he published *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* (Quinn 156). Baltimore certainly contributed to the literary development of the time, but the city was still considered a "follower and imitator rather than a driver of style" (Savoie, "Poe and Baltimore" 102). It is certainly possible that this aspect of the literary scene frustrated Poe, who was a strong advocate for the advancement of a uniquely American genre, but it also gave him the space to gain some recognition. Had Poe headed straight to New York at this time in his career, it is possible that his works would have been passed over in favor of more well-established authors.

While living in Baltimore, Poe transitioned from writing poetry to short stories (Savoie, "Poe and Baltimore" 106). It seems that the number of Poe's short stories vastly outnumbered

the poems he wrote during this period. One of the most notable short stories from Poe's time in Baltimore is "MS. Found in a Bottle," which won the writing contest hosted by the *Baltimore Saturday Visiter* (Savoye, "Poe and Baltimore" 109; Quinn 202). In addition to "MS. Found in a Bottle," Poe also submitted "Epimanes" (later titled "Four Beasts in One"), "Lionizing," "Siope" (later titled "Silence"), and "The Visionary" (later titled "The Assignation") to the *Visiter* contest under the title *Tales of the Folio Club* (Quinn 202). "The Assignation" was later published in *Godey's Lady's Book*. Poe also had success publishing "Metzengerstein," "Duc de l'Omelette," "A Tale of Jerusalem," "Loss of Breath," and "Bon Bon" in the *Saturday Courier* during his time in Baltimore (Hammond 174-175; Mabbott). These eleven tales are generally accepted as the basis for a collection of works that Poe originally titled *Eleven Tales of the Arabesque*, and later, *Tales of the Folio Club* (Hammond 25; Quinn 202). *Tales of the Folio Club* was most likely inspired by a previous literary institution in Baltimore – The Delphian Club. The club ran from 1816-1825 and consisted of "elite citizens, engaging in literary pursuits chiefly for their own artistic and social pleasure... These members met regularly to exchange epigrams, squibs, barbs, and puns, sing songs and present their own more extended creations, generally of a humorous nature, in terms of stories, poems, and essays" (Savoye, "Poe and Baltimore" 104).

The activities of The Delphian Club stand in stark contrast to the serious literary criticism that Poe would later develop, and it leads one to question how Poe viewed the literary revelry of the elite. A clue to his feelings may be revealed by his own description of *Tales of the Folio Club*: "The Folio Club is, I am sorry to say, a mere Junto of *Dunderheadism*. I think too the members are quite as ill-looking as they are stupid. I also believe it their settled intention to abolish Literature, subvert the Press, and overturn the Government of Nouns and Pronouns"

(Poe, "The Folio Club" 595). It seems like much of the *Folio Club* was meant to be a burlesque on not only criticism but also on popular tales from the period as well. In a letter to Thomas White of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe explains that he studied the nature of the popular magazines and articles at the time and identified the nature as, "the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical" (Quinn 211). This perhaps explains why Poe transitioned from primarily writing poetry to writing short stories during his time in Baltimore. He had the insight that, to become a popular and ergo well-paid author, he should imitate the style and nature of what was currently in demand by readers. While Poe was unable to gain widespread recognition with these short-story publications, he did attract the attention of John P. Kennedy, a previous member of the Delphian Club, with his entries into the *Saturday Visiter* contest. Kennedy would later recommend Poe to White of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, under whom Poe would grow his reputation as a writer and literary critic (Savoie, "Poe and Baltimore" 104, 111). It could be said that Poe's success as a writer could be traced back to the short stories that he submitted to the Baltimore magazine.

Since the short story, and specifically, the stories that were intended for the *Folio Club*, were the main products of Poe's time in Baltimore, one would expect the statue of Poe in that city to pay homage specifically to those works. However, there are no noticeable representations of this collection featured in the Poe Statue. The book positioned near the back of the chair and under Poe's right arm could be interpreted as a symbolic representation of Poe's prose, but this seems unlikely. The original design of the statue on top of the pedestal would have obscured the view of the book. Ezekiel would have been aware of this, and thus it

can be assumed that the book is largely symbolic of Poe's literary work in general rather than a specific nod to the *Folio Club* or any other title (Savoye, "Re: May I pick your brain?"). Ezekiel never mentions the *Folio Club* tales in his correspondences with Mrs. Wrenshall. The only work that he alludes to when planning the design of the statue is "The Raven." By his own description, it seems that Ezekiel was more interested in depicting Poe as a poet or muse rather than an essayist or short story writer. Remember that in the final version of the statue, Poe's figure is positioned as if to be listening to something far away, and the position of his hand appears to be almost conducting. This posture is indicative of someone listening to music, which aligns with Ezekiel's description of the statue in his memoir and with Poe's ideals and philosophy that intertwined the concepts of poetry and music.

In "The Poetic Principle," Poe explains his personal philosophy of poetry. This piece is widely discussed as it reveals Poe's opinions on the proper length of a poem, his feelings on the "heresy of *The Didactic*," and the concept of the Poetic Sentiment. Part of this piece that is seemingly overlooked is the connections Poe draws between poetry and music. Poe describes the poet's struggle to "reach the Beauty above" and "to attain a portion of that Loveliness... appertain to eternity alone" (Poe, "The Poetic Principle" 701). Poe saw poetry, and more specifically music, "the most entrancing of the Poetic moods," as an avenue to "attain brief and indeterminate glimpses" of the supernal Loveliness that transcends our own conceptions of earthly beauty (701, 702). It is clear from "The Poetic Principle" that Poe saw music as the primary vessel for the expression of the Poetic Sentiment. But he also saw poetry and music as inarguably linked through their use of meter, rhythm, and rhyme. He saw this "union of Poetry

with Music” as “the widest field for the Poetic development” (702). This is why Poe defined “the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*” (702).

Poe saw a spiritual significance in poetry. This is perhaps best demonstrated in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” and “Al Aaraaf.” Both of these works deal with angelic beings who exist in the realm beyond our physical world. “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” specifically seems linked to “The Poetic Principle,” as Monos discusses issues regarding taste, pure intellect, and moral sense, which Poe specifically mentions in “The Poetic Principle.” When discussing how the world ended, Monos states that “taste alone could have led us gently back to Beauty,” but the harsh mathematical reason of the schools and “the leading evil, Knowledge,” doomed humanity to its destruction (Poe “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” 280-282). The way that Monos discusses the “poetic intellect” and the supremacy of The Arts places them in opposition to Man and aligned with Beauty, Nature, and Life, which, as demonstrated in “The Poetic Principle,” Poe saw as existing within a heaven-like plane.

This idea of Beauty existing in the spiritual beyond is most prominent in “Al Aaraaf,” where Nesace – beauty personified – inhabits a spiritual dimension between what would traditionally be known as heaven and hell (Cairns 36). “Al Aaraaf” is difficult to understand narratively, but it is very possible that the poem is not meant to be a story, but rather a representation of Poe’s concept of supernal Beauty. Quinn argues that the poem, instead of relaying a story, is “an experiment in the translation of *feeling* into the harmony of sound” (Quinn 161, emphasis added). By positioning Beauty in this spiritual place beyond our earthly existence, Poe positions the poet as almost a spiritual guide who is responsible for experiencing the “ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave” and translating what they have seen

through poetry so that others might glimpse the Beauty for themselves (Poe, “The Poetic Principle” 701). Thus, it is more than fitting for the Poe Statue to feature two angelic beings, as much of Poe’s work was grounded in the philosophies described in “The Poetic Principle.”

The citizens of Baltimore who worked to commission and fund the Poe Statue felt strongly that Poe was an integral part of the city’s history and deserved recognition. Almost immediately following his death, individuals began working to memorialize the man who temporarily called Baltimore his home. This is even more impressive considering the resistance other cities, such as Boston and Richmond, have shown when it comes to “claiming” Poe. His time in Baltimore was mostly defined by his short stories and his mysterious death, however, neither one of those things are the subject of the statue made to memorialize him. The misalignment between the poet’s representation in the statue and his actual time in the city may just be a product of the time in which the statue was created. As the statue was officially commissioned only sixty years after his death, it is possible that while Ezekiel claimed to be familiar with Poe’s work, he was not familiar with Poe’s biography. Without knowing what works Poe completed in Baltimore, Ezekiel would have no reference of which works to represent on the statue. It may be equally possible that Ezekiel was only familiar with Poe’s more famous works. Ezekiel was evidently quite familiar with “The Raven,” but it’s possible he had not been exposed to Poe’s earlier poems or short stories.

While the Poe Statue in Baltimore might not be reflective of the work that Poe did during his time in the city, it does reflect the writer that he would become. The short stories composed by Poe in Baltimore had a direct influence on the rest of his career. Without his submissions to the *Saturday Visiter*, it’s unlikely that Poe would have captured the attention of

John P. Kennedy. Without the recommendation of Kennedy, Poe may not have received his position at the *Southern Literary Messenger*. The literary roots that Poe established in Baltimore directly led to the poetry for which he became most famous. While the statue in Boston may have a stronger unity of effect due to the rich symbolism and narrative details imbued in the statue's design, the Poe Statue in Baltimore represents Poe as he was known amongst his fans and colleagues immediately after his death. That the city and its residents could have so much respect and admiration for Poe following his defamation by Griswold is a true testament to the literary scene of Baltimore. These admirers understood the impact that Poe had and would continue to have on American literature, and his memorial is a fitting tribute to the writer that Poe was able to become because of his time in Baltimore.

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