Buried Alive: The Gothic Awakening of Taphephobia

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In 1919 Sigmund Freud wrote about the fear of being buried alive in his essay on the uncanny. Expanding on ideas he had developed in *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13), he suggested that this fear, "taphephobia", was linked to wider terrors relating to the un/dead and that it manifested a return of latent, psychic energies:

> Many people experience the [uncanny] feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. . . . There is scarcely any other matter . . . upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times. . . . To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psycho-analysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness – the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence (Freud 241).[1]

Thus live burial is uncanny, unsettling, and terrifying because it manifests both a hideous form of awakening and a dialogue between worlds that should remain disengaged. Like the dead, memories of intra-uterine existence are subterraneous forces that ought to remain buried yet, in thoughts of live burial, they rise up and occupy a troubled space in the conscious mind. More importantly, Freud characterised notions of premature burial as an embodiment of forbidden movement between the living and the dead. Images of the un/dead hark back to times in our development, he says, when the boundaries between life and death were less rigid. Before the Enlightenment standardised methods of thinking about mortality in ways based on principles of scientific rationality rather than benighted superstition, it was a common belief that death was not necessarily the end of one's worldly affairs. For instance, "the concept of the vengeful ghost was so engrained in popular belief", notes Owen Davies, "that it was thought that the living could determine to haunt someone after death as an act of malice or retribution" (6). In 1609, one woman reported how a man had threatened to "kill himself and . . . when he was dead his ghost should tear her in pieces" (Davies 6). From the early nineteenth century onwards, however, it was more commonly understood that there was no such coming back from the dead; if one could be sure of anything in life, it was that *death* was absolutely final. Yet in images of live burial, the deceased figuratively and literally rise up; their graves stand tenantless and the sheeted dead creep uncannily across the boundaries between this world and the next. The concept of live burial is thus paradigmatic of a connection between worlds that *should* remain separate. It is a symbol of trespass – signifying that what "ought to have remained secret and hidden . . . has come to light" (Freud 225).

This essay's aims to suggest that, throughout the nineteenth century, live burial was paradigmatic of unexpected movements and unwelcome forms of understanding. The idea of being buried alive emerged as a ghastly emblem of knowing – *truly* knowing – what it was to be beleaguered, victimised, and terrified. What is more, the notion of premature interment, symbolic of movement between

disconnected forms, flitted between Gothic and medical literature throughout this period. The resulting exchange of ideas and imagery allowed taphephobia, the fear of premature burial, to emerge as a diagnostic label in the 1890s.

This is a story that begins with the first-wave Gothic literature of the late eighteenth century. Literary scholarship has noted how this literary formation, like no genre predating it, developed methods of outlining, in full and spine-tingling detail, how characters *feel* when faced with something terrible – particularly imprisonment and/or finding themselves face-to-face with the un/dead. Angela Wright notes:

> In appalled and helpless fascination, when we read a Gothic novel which is replete with violent emotion and action, we can only continue to watch or read passively as the violence continues. In a sense, as readers, we also become victims as well as complicit literary voyeurs. (110)

Ann Radcliffe, that most famous exponent of the Gothic style, believed Edmund Burke's famous theory that terror produced "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke 36)[2] and therefore chose to privilege, in *her* novels, the feelings and experiences of characters undergoing frightening encounters or moments of unpleasant realisation. In the following scene from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), for instance, Emily D'Aubert notices that she has been locked in a room featuring a sanguinary cadaver and numerous instruments of torture. Because the concern here is with the techniques that Gothic novelists use to frame the fear of spatial privation and death, it is necessary to quote at length:

> When her spirits had overcome the first shock of her situation, she held up the lamp to examine, if the chamber afforded a possibility of an escape. . . . she perceived no furniture, except, indeed, an iron chair, fastened in the centre of the chamber, immediately over which, depending on a chain from the ceiling, hung an iron ring. Having gazed upon these, for some time, with wonder and horror, she next observed iron bars below, made for the purpose of confining the feet, and on the arms of the chair were rings of the same metal. As she continued to survey them, she concluded, that they were instruments of torture, and it struck her, that some poor wretch had once been fastened in this chair, and had there been starved to death. She was chilled by the thought; but, what was her agony, when, in the next moment, it occurred to her, that her aunt might have been one of these victims, and that she herself might be the next! An acute pain seized her head, she was scarcely able to hold the lamp, and, looking round for support, was seating herself, unconsciously, in the iron chair itself; but suddenly perceiving where she was, she started from it in horror, and sprung towards a remote end of the room. Here again she looked round for a seat to sustain her, and perceived only a dark curtain, which, descending from the ceiling to the floor, was drawn along the whole side of the chamber. Ill as she was, the appearance of this curtain struck her, and she paused to gaze upon it, in wonder and apprehension.
> . . . she wished, yet dreaded, to lift it, and to discover what it veiled: suddenly conjecturing, that it concealed the body of her murdered aunt, she seized it, in a fit of desperation, and drew it aside. Beyond, appeared a corpse, stretched on a kind of low couch, which was crimsoned with human blood, as was the floor beneath. The features, deformed by death, were ghastly and

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> horrible, and more than one livid wound appeared in the face. Emily, bending over the body, gazed, for a moment, with an eager, frenzied eye; but, in the next, the lamp dropped from her hand, and she fell senseless at the foot of the couch. (Radcliffe, *Udolpho* 347-48)

What is important about this passage, and Radcliffe's style in general, is how the character's realisation of horror and consequent fear is portrayed exactly as it is experienced. The events are narrated sequentially and focalised through Emily's own observations, via which the reader views the objects of terror as they come into focus. Radcliffe chooses to lead the reader towards the crimson curtain *with* Emily, supplying no indication of what to expect. The aim is for the reader to feel the same curiosity that the heroine feels, and to share her "apprehension" and "horror" when the corpse, languishing in its blood, is unveiled. The effect Radcliffe's style produces, then, is a phenomenological portrait of fear: presented in no abstract fashion, horror is understood entirely through the lens of human experience. In her posthumous essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826), Radcliffe observed and admired a similar pattern in Shakespeare's Danish tragedy:

> Every minute circumstance of the scene between those watching on the platform, and of that between them and Horatio preceding the entrance of the apparition, contributes to excite some feeling of dreariness, or melancholy, or solemnity, or expectation, in unison with and leading on toward that high curiosity and thrilling awe with which we witness the conclusion of the scene. (Radcliffe, "Supernatural" 314)

What is spectacular about the opening of the play, Radcliffe suggests, is its ability to synchronise its audience's feelings with those of the characters experiencing the supernatural.

Such conjunctions of *understanding* fear and *experiencing* the same are crucial to many narratives of live burial written in Radcliffe's wake. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Premature Burial" (1844), which will be considered in more detail later, notes that "*no* event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremeness of bodily and mental distress, as is burial before death" (262-63). Whether by accident or by design, Poe's conceptualisation of the "supremeness" of terror corresponded with Burke's notion of the sublime potential of the same. In the *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), Burke noted that modes of "obscurity" and "privation", including spatial (confinement) and visual (darkness) like those experienced during live burial, unlocked sublime levels of fear: "All *general* privations are great", he says, "because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude* and *Silence*" (65). These four abstract nouns strike the keynote of how it must feel to experience premature burial, as Poe's story exemplifies:

> I writhed, and made spasmodic exertions to force open the lid: it would not move. I felt my wrists for the bell-rope: it was not to be found. And now the Comforter fled for ever, and a still sterner Despair reigned triumphant . . . and then, too, there came suddenly to my nostrils the strong peculiar odor of moist earth. The conclusion was irresistible. . . . I had fallen into a trance while absent from home – while among strangers – when, or how, I could not

> remember – and it was they who had buried me as a dog – nailed up in some common coffin – and thrust deep, deep, and for ever, into some ordinary and nameless grave.
>
> As this awful conviction forced itself, thus, into the innermost chambers of my soul, I once again struggled to cry aloud. And in this second endeavor I succeeded. A long, wild, and continuous shriek, or yell of agony, resounded through the realms of the subterranean Night (Poe, "Burial" 267)

Throughout the nineteenth century, the fear of premature burial seems to have been ubiquitous. Apprehensions on the subject had been felt for centuries but "hasty mass burials during nineteenth-century cholera epidemics gave rise to this fear. Medical tests for determining death were not always reliable, and for most of the Victorian era, it was widely believed that people might well be buried alive while in a death-like coma or trance" (Willis 159). Such worries were exploited in a short story written by John Galt in 1821. Printed in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and entitled "The Buried Alive", the text outlines the story of a man mistakenly pronounced dead by medical professionals. "I had been ill for quite some time", the narrator observes, then,

> one day towards evening, the crisis took place. – . . . For a short time a terrible confusion overwhelmed me, – and when it passed off all my recollection returned with the most perfect distinctness, but the power of motion had departed. . . . I exerted by utmost power of volition to stir myself, but I could not move even an eyelid. (Galt 262)

Such events are what taphephobics fear the most: awareness of imminent burial combined with an inability to avoid it; the fear concerns a conflict between the wakefulness of the mind and the slumbers of the body.

In 1837 Charles Dickens wrote about one man who had become so afraid of the possibility that he could not exorcise the images of death and funerary from his thoughts. He was the father of the pantomime artist Joseph Grimaldi and

> was in the habit of wandering about churchyards and burying places for hours together, and would speculate on the diseases of which the persons had died; figuring their death-beds, and wonder how many of them had been buried alive in a fit or a trance; a possibility which he shuddered to think of, and which haunted him both through life and at its close. Such an effort had this fear upon his mind, that he left express directions in his will that, before his coffin should be fastened down, his head should be severed from his body, and the operation was actually performed in the presence of several persons. (Dickens, *Grimaldi* 12)

Such preventative measures were not uncommon though these are particularly gruesome and extreme. Grimaldi's father, according to Dickens, was a successful writer of pantomimes and melodramas; because of his obsession with premature burial, "gloomy ideas haunted the unfortunate man's mind [and] even his merriment assumed a ghastly hue . . . His comicality sought for grotesque objects in the grave and the charnel-house" (Dickens, *Grimaldi* 13). John Carey, Andrew Sanders, and Harry Stone are just three of a number of critics who have documented, convincingly,

how Dickens himself drew upon images of death, funerary, and the macabre when constructing some of his most grotesque characters. The theme of live burial appears to have been a preoccupation of Dickens, especially in the later novels. For example, both Mrs Clennam and Miss Havisham moulder, sedentarily, in their decaying houses and may be said to have been buried alive. Miss Havisham is compared to "a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement", which now has "dark eyes that move" and look at a petrified Pip (Dickens, *Expectations* 49). Mrs Clennam narrowly escapes being buried alive when her charnel-like house collapses; she spends the rest of her life in a zombified state, which suggests, also, that the many senile, demented, and vegetative characters that Dickens developed throughout his *oeuvre* may experience, at least figuratively, this unhappy fate.

Yet, it is the fiction of Poe that appropriated, most effectively, the period's prevalent fears of live burial. The most famous of these fictionalisations appears in the "accidental" entombing of Madeline in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). In lurid and dramatic style, Madeline's brother Roderick listens for indications that his sister has been inhumed alive:

> Now hear it? – yes, I hear it, and *have* heard it. Long – long – long – many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it – yet I dared not – oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! – I dared not – I *dared* not speak! *We have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them – many, many days ago – yet I dared not – *I dared not speak!* . . . [There stood] the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. (Poe, "Usher" 245)

In keeping with the focalisation techniques of Ann Radcliffe, the horror of Madeline's hasty burial is amplified by the fact that it is filtered through the acute senses of an astonished witness ("I hear it, and *have* heard it"). Like Pip's first sighting of Miss Havisham in the ashes of a rich dress, the hearing, then seeing, of the un-dead in "The House of Usher" causes a paralysing fear ("I *dared* not speak!"). In both texts, onlookers are met with a seeming confirmation of one of the worst horrors known to mankind: once the subject of speculative folklore, the spectre of live burial rises up now, hideously, to be heard, seen, and experienced.

In his later, more detailed analysis of the theme in "The Premature Burial", Poe makes the horror even more abundant by suggesting that it was a common occurrence. Written deceptively in essay format, the narrative combines feeling with apparent fact:

> To be buried while alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of . . . extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality. That it has frequently, very frequently, so fallen will scarcely be denied by those who think. 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? . . . We have the direct testimony of medical and ordinary experience to prove that a vast number of such interments have actually taken place. I might refer at once, if necessary, to a hundred well-authenticated instances. (258-59)

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This passage shrewdly pinpoints a paradox inherent to medical knowledge of the time. As Poe correctly indicates, the possibility of live burial was authenticated by medical scientists, and such verifications highlighted systemic failings in an area that was the site of some scientific confidence: the ability to tell the difference between the living and the dead. Writing on live burial in 1865, Alfred Swaine Taylor asserted with ill-assumed confidence that "mistakes of this kind are not likely to be made by medical men" (1: 78). Notwithstanding, the belief that medical mistakes were both possible and common energised many tales of premature burial. Such is illustrated by Poe's outline of the 1831 case of Edward Stapleton. Dying (apparently) of typhus fever, Stapleton's "cadaver" becomes the source of scientific interest because his illness displayed some "anomalous symptoms" (Poe, "Premature" 261). Medical men ask his family whether they may keep the body for *post-mortem* study. Their request is refused so they have the body exhumed by grave robbers anyway. As experiments commence on the disinterred remains, something ghastly occurs:

> It grew late. The day was about to dawn; and it was thought expedient, at length, to proceed at once to the dissection. A student, however, was especially desirous of testing a theory of his own, and insisted upon applying the [electric] battery to one of the pectoral muscles. A rough gash was made, and a wire hastily brought in contact; when the patient, with a hurried but quite unconvulsive movement, arose from the table, stepped into the middle of the floor, gazed about him uneasily for a few seconds, and then – spoke. What he said was unintelligible; but the words were uttered; the syllabification was distinct. Having spoken he fell heavily to the floor. [Witnesses of the scene] were paralysed with awe. (262)

This is a scene that resurrects the fantastically lurid scene, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), where the galvanised creature opens its "dull yellow eye", breathes hard, and moves with a "convulsive motion" (38-39). After the curious and incestuous dream of his fiancé turning into his mother's cadaver, Frankenstein wakes – also with convulsive motions – to find the "miserable monster", "jaws opened", muttering "some inarticulate sounds" (39-40). As in "The House of Usher", the roles of the spectators are themselves the focus of the scene in "The Premature Burial": medical men invert the actions of the unfortunate Stapleton by standing "paralysed" and speechless "with awe". This may be the story of a man who has been buried alive, but it is the reactions of the witnesses that fascinate Poe; the spectacle of live burial provides him with the opportunity to highlight worrying levels of ignorance in the medical profession. Contrary to Dr Taylor's confident avowal that medical men can tell easily the difference between life and death, the specialists in this tale could not be more surprised when Stapleton awakes.

Despite Poe's clever attempts to indicate otherwise, Stapleton's story is actually a fictional one. There is no record of any man of that name being exhumed in the year of 1831. Indeed, it is more likely that Poe was inspired by the earlier short story of John Galt. Like Poe's tale, Galt's "Buried Alive" provides uncompromising descriptions of the horror of being inhumed, exhumed, and almost dissected:

> Soon after, a few handfuls of earth were thrown upon the coffin . . . the shovel was employed, and the sound of the rattling mould, as it covered me, was far

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more tremendous than thunder. But I could make no effort. The sound gradually became less and less, and . . . I knew that the grave was filled up, and that the sexton was treading in the earth. . . .

I heard a low and under-sound in the earth above me . . . I felt the hands of some dreadful being working about my throat. They dragged me out of the coffin by the head, I felt again the living air, but it was piercingly cold. . . . I learnt that I was that night to be dissected. . . .

Previous to beginning the dissection, [the demonstrator] proposed to try on me some galvanic experiment. . . . When they had satisfied themselves with the galvanic phenomena, the demonstrator took the knife, and pierced me on the bosom with the point. I felt a dreadful crackling, as it were, throughout my whole frame. . . . The ice of death was broken up – my trance ended (263-64).

The links with body snatchers and dissectors locate Galt's story, like Poe's "Premature Burial" within a tradition of Gothic texts that harvest their most disturbing aspects from real events in the history of medicine. As we shall see, the belief that live burial "frequently, very frequently" occurred was not unsupported by medical writers. Moreover, Galt's story draws on the phenomenological portraits of fear developed by the first-wave Gothic by telling the tale from the perspective of the individual *undergoing* the hideous experience. In Poe's work, descriptions of live burial stick initially to the perspective of third-party witnesses yet moves to first-person perspective when speculating about the *experience* of being buried alive:

The unendurable oppression of the lungs – the stifling fumes of the damp earth – the clinging to the death garments – the rigid embrace of the narrow house – the blackness of the absolute Night – the silence like a sea that overwhelms – the unseen but palpable presence of the Conquerer Worm – these things . . . carry into the heart, which still palpitates, a degree of appalling and intolerable horror from which the most daring imagination must recoil. We know nothing so agonizing upon Earth – we can dream of nothing half so hideous in the realms of the nethermost Hell. (Poe, "Burial" 263)

Live burial is a fate worse than death and here, as in Galt, the fear is represented and induced most effectively through the filter of human experience. Galt and Poe accessed the full horrors of being interred alive by anticipating the feelings, both physical and psychological, of the un-dead. In the example above, the reader's imagination is successfully manipulated to evoke feelings of panic, suffocation, and terror. And, consequently, it is difficult not to feel one's chest tighten at "the unendurable oppression of the lungs – the stifling fumes of the damp earth – the clinging to the death garments – the rigid embrace of the narrow house".

Of course, one of the main factors that appears to have terrified Victorian taphephobics was the confirmation, writ large in medical books, that live burial could take place. Poe was right to observe that "we have direct testimony from medical and ordinary experience" to prove that live burials really did happen. In 1846, physiologist and anatomist Herbert Mayo wrote a series of articles for *Blackwood's* entitled "Letters on the Truths contained in Popular Superstitions". Among the numerous superstitions that he attempted to discredit he included vampires. Attempting to reassure his readers that such monsters do not exist, he provided the even more

chilling notion that so-called vampires were ordinary people that had been buried alive:

> Let us content ourselves for the present with a notion less monstrous, but still startling enough: That the bodies, which were found in the so-called vampyr state, instead of being in a new and mystical condition, were simply alive in the common way; that, in short, they were the bodies of persons who had been buried alive. . . . Now it is analogically by no means very improbable, that the functions of the nervous system admit of being brought to a complete stand-still, the wheels of the machinery locking, as it were, of a sudden, through some influence directly exerted upon *it*, and that this state of interrupted function should continue for a very considerable period, without loss of power or recovery. . . . So [we may] presume, that in the singular cases [of vampirism] we are considering, the body is but in . . . [a] fit, which suspends the vital phenomena, and reduces its vitality to that of the unincubated egg, to simple life, without change, without waste or renewal. The body does not putrefy, because it is alive; it does not waste or require nourishment, because every action is stilled within it. (Mayo 436-37)

Alfred Taylor, an expert in exhuming corpses for medico-legal analysis, praised Mayo's article and verified "the absurdity of [the vampire] superstition" (1: 81). Mayo dispensed with the absurdities of the paranormal but he replaced them, effectively, with a "reality" that was even more startling because it had the weight of science behind it. Mayo's way of writing, using specialised, medical terminology, indicated that he was an authority to be trusted; he denied the existence of vampires but verified a horror that haunted many individuals with a greater tenacity.

The narrator of Poe's "Premature Burial", for example, is convinced that *his* body is able to enter the state of trance, identified by Mayo as "catalepsy", and that, during this condition, it is impossible for others to tell whether or not he is still alive:

> For several years I had been subject to attacks of the singular disorder which physicians have agreed to term catalepsy. . . . [Describing the condition] sometimes the patient lies, for a day only, or even for a shorter period, in a species of extreme lethargy. . . .[Sometimes] the duration of the trance is for weeks – even for months; while the closest scrutiny, and the most rigorous medical tests, fail to establish any material distinction between the state of the sufferer and what we conceive of absolute death. (263)

According to Mayo in 1846 this "extreme lethargy" could, and often *did*, occur. Further evidence may be found in a rather curious case reported to *The Lancet* in 1837. It concerned the story of an Indian man who was buried alive for a month. He was able to enter *himself* into the cataleptic state and, when exhumed thirty days later, he was still alive. H. M. Twedell, the man who shared this implausible story with the readers of the journal, said that

> this [case is] interesting to future philosophers, . . . showing, that air, food, and water, are not entirely necessary to sustain existence, and that a man may betake himself to the grave, and pass away a month, comfortably, if assured that a shovel will be exerted to release him at the appointed hour. (257)

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The notion of a man betaking *himself* to the grave is a tableau worthy of the macabre and uncanny fictions of authors like Poe. Like legends of vengeful ghosts, it is an uncanny dissent from the view that the boundaries between life and death are rigid and insuperable; the idea of catalepsy introduced a troubling, yet scientifically verified, grey area between the two worlds. In 1865, Alfred Taylor corroborated as much in his *Principles and Practice of Medical Jurisprudence*:

> There are some forms of disease affecting the nervous systems, as, for example   . . . catalepsy, the systems of which are occasionally such, as closely to simulate death. Respiration and circulation appear either to cease entirely, or to be carried on so feebly, that, to uninformed observers, the person affected may seem to be really dead. Catalepsy, or, as it is vulgarly called, *trance*, in which the person lies in an unconscious state, may thus assume the appearance of death. (1:43)

He admitted that live burials were possible, but he also stipulated that the extent to which they had been perpetrated had been grossly exaggerated.

Indeed, exaggeration and irrationality are elements quintessential to the fear of live burial and they signal one of the key ways in which Gothic literature played a role in the development of phobia theory. Grimaldi's father experienced *his* fear of live burial, remember, as haunting him continually and the plays he wrote "assumed a ghastly hue" as a result. In Poe's story on the same subject, the narrator admits:

> In all that I endured there was no physical suffering, but of moral distress an infinitude. My fancy grew charnel. I talked of 'worms, of tombs, of epitaphs.' I was lost in reveries of death, and the idea of premature burial held continual possession of my brain. The ghastly Danger . . . haunted me day and night. In the former, the torture of meditation was excessive; in the latter supreme. (Poe, "Burial" 264)

The prospect of being buried alive, to venture stating the obvious, is a hideous consideration; but fictional descriptions of the obsessive *fear* of live inhumation were disproportionate, in size and impact, to the frequency with which it occurred. What appears to have been most terrifying about live burial, in the nineteenth century, was not the frequency of the actual event, but the epidemic status it acquired as an anxiety.

Wilkie Collins's late novel *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880), explored this seeming lack of proportion between the fear and risk of live burial. Collins was himself reportedly terrified of live immurement; he would leave instructions at the side of his bed specifying how his remains should be disposed of if he should die in his sleep (Willis 161). Towards the end of his life, when ill health indicated that death would not be far off, he included an example of another such safeguard in *Jezebel's Daughter*.[3] Typically sensational in style, the novel depicts the wealthy Englishwoman Mrs Wagner being poisoned by the *femme fatale* Madame Fontaine. Consequently falling into a death-like trance, Mrs Wagner is carried off to the *leichenhäus* (or "dead house') where she is laid out with bells attached to her fingers. The trance eventually wears off:

> There was a sound – a faint, premonitory, rustling sound – over the door.

> The steel hammer moved – rose – struck the metal globe. The bell rang.
>
> . . . Not a cry, not a movement escaped Madame Fontaine [who has followed the body]. The life seemed to have been struck out of her by the stroke of the bell. It woke [the watchman]. Except that he looked up, he too never moved: he too was like a living creature turned to stone.
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> A minute passed.
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> . . . The figure appeared, in its velvet pall. On the pale face the stillness of repose was barely ruffled yet. The eyes alone were conscious of returning life. (Collins 392-93)

Leichenhäuser and the practice of attaching bells to the digits of the newly-deceased were common in nineteenth-century Europe. As Collins explains, "the dread of premature interment – excited by traditions of persons accidentally buried alive – was a widely-spread feeling among the people of Germany" (354); hence it was felt that some insurance was necessary. The recently dead would be held in the *leichenhäuser* until putrefaction – that surest guarantor of death – set in. As the man whose job it is to watch over the "corpses" in Collins's novel suggests, however, such measures are, more often than not, surplus to requirements:

> The Dead who come our way, my little friend, have one great merit [they are quiet]. We are supposed to help them, if they're perverse enough to come to life again before they're buried. There they lie in our house, with one end of the line tied to their fingers, and the other end at the spring of the alarm-bell. And they have never rung the bell yet – never once, bless their hearts, since the Deadhouse was built! (348)

Thus, until Mrs Wagner rings her bell and validates the precaution, the widely-spread dread of live interment appears to be wholly exaggerated and irrational.

It is worth noting, briefly, how advances in the use of anaesthesia gave rise to the related fear of consciousness during a surgical procedure. Also based on medical failure, this terror became the basis of H. G. Wells's short story "Under the Knife" originally published in the *New Review* in 1896. The narrator says: "I know that I was killed, though my body still clung to me" – an extraordinary statement that may also be applied to victims of live burial (72). Wells makes the link between these two forms of unsolicited consciousness when he describes the narrator's morbid feelings prior to his operation:

> I had never before thought of Regent's Park as a cemetery, but now through the trees, stretching as far as the eye could see, I beheld a flat plain of writhing graves and heeling tombstones. There seemed to be some trouble: the rising dead appeared to stifle as they struggled upward, they bled in their struggles, the red flesh was tattered away from the white bones. (69)

There is no resting in peace for the dead in "Under the Knife" and resurrection offers nothing like the hallowed cleansing experienced by Jesus Christ. Instead, waking up consists of feelings that underscore its awful unnaturalness: powerlessness, struggle, and suffocation.

The theme's potential crippling sovereignty over the mind was a uniform part of its place in Gothic fiction throughout the nineteenth century, suggesting that later identifications of it as a phobia had much to learn from literature. In the Spring of 1891, Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli said that fears of premature burial were so problematic that it was necessary to offer a diagnosis. He came up with the term "taphephobia" ('taphos" and "phobos" are Greek, respectively, for "grave" and "fear') and specified that "the sick person's [is] plagued . . . by a fear of the possibility of being buried alive . . . this fear becoming the source of a terribly distressing anguish" (Morselli 107). His description also emphasised that a fundamental characteristic of the phobia, like other phobic conditions, was its relative irrationality combined with heightened levels of obsessive thinking:

> The taphephobic . . . is an unhappy person, his every day, his every hour being tormented by the sudden occurrence of the idea of being buried alive, that is, in the state of not being truly dead. He has heard or read terrible stories of people being in a state of apparent death, and he fears that the same might happen to him. . . . He feels powerless to avoid or prevent [this], especially since at that moment he would be unconscious, or, even if he were conscious, he would be unable to move himself, or by any sign or action or word to inform the people that he was not yet dead, but still alive. (108-09)

There are echoes of Radcliffe, Galt, and Poe in this definition. Unlike Freud, Morselli never appears to have acknowledged the impact that Gothic writers had on his field, yet fiction certainly enlightened the sensitive understandings of terror that typified phobia-based psychiatry.[4] Literary descriptions of terror, often finessed into stories of live burial, gave Morselli the tools and vocabulary he needed to define taphephobia in 1891. More specifically, the awakening of the condition, as a medical diagnosis, could never have occurred without the complex, phenomenological understandings of fear and obsession that emerged from the Gothic. Morselli perceived himself to be responding to a new and distinctly-modern phenomenon, yet he actually contributed to a fashion for naming and describing phobic conditions in the 1890s. The fact that he created the label "taphephobia" at that time indicated, not an increase in people suffering from the fear, but two other, interlinking developments: psychiatry's growing penchant for diagnostic labels and Gothic literature's popularization of focalized horror. It is more commonplace to assert that nineteenth-century literature responds to, or reflects, scientific discourses and practices, yet the example of taphephobia shows how the model might be reversed: perhaps in discussions of the human mind the investigative praxis of literature has something to teach science.

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Notes

      1. Michelle A. Massé is one of many modern critics to link psychoanalysis with the Gothic. She argues that there are "affinities between [their] central concerns'; particularly in their shared interest in "beliefs and perceptions [that] are sometimes at odds with empirical evidence" (230). See also Wright,97-124.

      2. Radcliffe reveals her indebtedness to Burke's association of terror with the sublime in her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826).

      3. In Sensation Fiction, the term "buried alive" was often used as a metaphor for imprisonment and, more generally, women's limited social freedom. See Furneaux.

      4. Much of Freud's work was inspired by works of fiction; his thoughts on the uncanny, in particular, were inspired by the Gothic fictions of E. T. A. Hoffman. See Freud 227-33.

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