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NEITHER
GENIUS
NOR FUDGE:
EDGAR ALLAN POE
AND
EUREKA

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Abstract || *Eureka* (1848) has been taken at face value as an expanded version of a lecture on cosmology that Poe gave earlier the same year. However, its seriousness as a work of science should be questioned. Its treatment of themes found in other works by Poe shows the author's unconcern for consistency, and the text unlikely to have resulted from a serious engagement with scientific argument. Instead it should be approached as a hoax: an attempt to reveal the gullibility of its readers. Poe's hoaxes relied for their effect on the trust created in readers by their recognition of generic conventions, and *Eureka* exploited and ridiculed public trust in cosmological lecturers such as John Bovee Dods.

Keywords || Poe | *Eureka* | Ether | Mesmerism | Hoax.

0. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's *Eureka* (published in 1848) has been read as a serious work of cosmology, and as a hoax¹; as an essay demonstrating "virtuosity in the use of logic, [...] philosophical profundity, [and] currency in scientific theory" (Schaeffer, 1971: 353), and as a work where the science and the philosophy is bad, and nothing is profound (Holman, 1972). Such opinions seem irreconcilable—as Harold Fromm wryly observes (echoing an early review), "One man's genius is another's fudge" (1989: 201)—and to make matters worse, even if it is granted that the latter reaction is possibly extreme, in that much of the work's science was sound for the time in which it was written², it is hard to be certain whether Poe was presenting it with a straight face. After all, we would expect there to be convincing details in a hoax. As Poe would explain, in the appendix added to "Hans Phaall" (1835) when the work was republished in 1839³, the success of a hoax depends on "verisimilitude [...] in the application of scientific principles" (1983: 1001). Or, as Christopher Norris has observed (2000: 94), a hoax needs to be laced with "just enough" generally-accepted science for readers to discount any possibility of irony on the author's part. In the present instance, it could be argued, we have just enough Laplace, Newton and other luminaries to fool the unwary—and if there is not enough to demonstrate scientific genius, demonstrating that was never Poe's intention. (The same ambiguity can be seen in Poe's marginal revisions to copies of the printed text: it is clear that he thought he could improve his argument, but it is far from clear why he wanted to do so).

A similar caution might also be thought appropriate when faced with Poe's insistence that the work was "*not* [...] *literary* at all"—and his rather melodramatically telling his mother-in-law that he had no desire to live since he had done with *Eureka* (Ostrom, 1948: 2, 359, 452). This is not just because Poe "had fallen into a routine of easy lies and half truths since at least his adolescence" (Silverman, 1991: 146); even if there were no such grounds for suspicion, so that we could generally take Poe at his word, we might still suspect his claims were it the case that *Eureka* was a hoax. Poe would have learned from the effect of premature disclosure—as when he admitted writing a report of the crossing of the Atlantic by balloon (Goodman, 2008: 244)—, that too much honesty in such cases could be a mistake if one wished for financial success, and in 1848 Poe certainly did. As with Poe's science, although one might credit his protestations of seriousness, one does not have to do so.

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1 | The first suggestion that *Eureka* was a hoax came from Epes Sargent, who suggested in a review for the *Boston Transcript* that 'The mocking smile of the hoaxer is seen behind [the author's] grave mask' (Walker, 1986: 292, 281; cf. Beaver, 1976).

2 | Poe attempted to have his tales "conform to current scientific ideas, as he understood them" (Mabbott, 2000: 94); for nineteenth-century criticism of Bacon (Poe's controlling concern) (Hesse, 1964: 149).

3 | The story tells how a burgher of Rotterdam (Hans Phaall) constructs a balloon and sails to the moon in order to escape his creditors.

1. Contexts

One way to escape uncertainty as to the script Poe was following (cosmological lecture or hoax), is to read *Eureka* alongside other works of his that treat similar themes⁴—most particularly the 1844 tale of mesmerism, “Mesmeric Revelation”—. This tale has frequently been thought of as a rehearsal for the later work, in that (as Matthew A. Taylor notes) both make “‘our’ death—the death of the individual, the death of the human—a precondition of full transcendence” (Taylor, 2007: 204; cf. O’Donnell, 1962: 87; Falk, 1969: 546), and the seriousness (or lack of it) in one would necessarily affect a reading of the other.

1.1. Mesmerism

Poe published three tales of mesmerism in 1844-45: “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains”, “Mesmeric Revelation”, and most famously “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”; tales which offer increasingly adventurous claims for the power of mesmerism to cross the borderline between life and death. In the first, Templeton’s mesmeric control of Bedloe leads the latter—in a mesmeric trance—to seem to die in just the same way that Templeton’s friend Oldeb had died in Benares fifty years before; in the second, the dialogue between the narrator and Vankirk climaxes *with* the latter’s death; and in the third, P.’s mesmeric control extends the physical life of Valdemar. The subject’s imaginative (mesmeric) experience of another’s death becomes the subject’s understanding of his own death, and then the experimenter’s power to inhibit death itself. However, this increasing seriousness on the part of Poe’s magnetizers should not be seen as the elaboration (or development) of a consistent philosophy, but something less intentional—as explorations of the nova suggested by his reading.

In 1844 Poe had read Chauncy Hare Townshend’s *Facts of Mesmerism* with interest, and seen story ideas in what it reported. For authors like Townshend, it was a demonstrated fact that that “the magnetizer may act upon [the one magnetized] at a distance”, and a matter of concern that doing so may “give rise to mischievous results” (Townshend, 1840: 365; cf. Deleuze, 1884: 208; Lind, 1947: 1082)—and as Lind pointed out some sixty years ago this was the situation of “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains”. Also in Townshend, and indeed in most contemporary texts on mesmerism, was the discovery, first made by the Marquis de Puységur, that those mesmerized could converse with others and speak with authority on subjects on which when awake they thought themselves ignorant⁵. This is what we find in “Mesmeric Revelation”—along with a working out of the suggestion that mesmerism could hasten death in cases of tuberculosis.

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4 | Levine and Levine note this in their introduction to their edition of *Eureka* (2004).

5 | See Walmesley, 1967: 144; Laurens, 2008. Contemporary interest is shown by the 1844 controversy aroused by Harriet Martineau’s “Letters on Mesmerism” in the *Athenæum*, in which she claimed that her maid, Jane Arrowsmith, was clairvoyant (Pichanick, 1980: 129-37).

—“In pulmonary phthisis in the last stages”, J. F. Deleuze had reflected, rather than effecting a cure, “it is [...] to be feared that [...] it accelerates the final crisis” (1884:183, 333). And as for “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”: not only does it draw on reports of the effect of galvanic action on a corpse⁶, it exploits contemporary speculation “that mesmerism could redraw the line between life and death” (Winter, 1998: 121). Justinus Kerner had told, in his *Die Seherin von Prevorst* (1829; an English translation was published in the summer of 1845) of a woman’s life being unnaturally preserved by mesmerism (Lind, 1947: 1092; Taves, 1999: 393-94, n60), and a similar story was being told by Andrew Jackson Davis at the time (Smith, 1845: 25). Poe added little to these accounts except literary control.

The unsystematic nature of Poe’s borrowings in these stories should not surprise. He was, after all, a working journalist. (In 1844 he was living hand to mouth in New York). “In my ‘Valdemar Case’”, he would protest, somewhat disingenuously, “[...] I had not the slightest idea that any person should credit it as anything more than a ‘magazine-paper’” (Ostrom, 1948: 2-433), and although we might doubt that he did not suspect that the tale would be taken seriously by readers, there are no reasons to believe that Poe himself ever thought of it as anything more than a clever piece of magazine fiction.⁷ The same should be said for the other tales, clever enough as far as they went, but not going very far; and that being the case we might wonder why *Eureka* should be thought any different. Certainly we should not put much trust in the similarities between it and “Mesmeric Revelation” (if the one is a *jeu d’esprit*, or even a hoax, why not the other?)—and, besides, the differences between the works are more significant than the similarities. In “Mesmeric Revelation” individual personality survives death, in *Eureka* it does not; and there is no reason to think that Poe was especially committed to one scenario rather than the other, or, for that matter, that he believed the suggestion in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” (1841) that, though consciousness does survive death, it just consists of an awareness of time and place.

1.2. The Luminiferous Ether

No less telling as a guide to the reading of *Eureka* is Poe’s unconcern for consistency concerning the interstellar ether. Some inconsistency might have been expected, given the way the word was used in contemporary science. Those working on the wave theory of light had long taken it for granted that there was a medium for the propagation of light waves, and that this medium—the luminiferous (“light carrying”) ether—pervaded the universe. In the words of the scientific popularizer Thomas Thomson, the ether was “a peculiar matter, extremely subtle, capable of penetrating the

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6 | An experimental subject might “make violent gesticulations with his hands, move his head, roll his eyes, and chatter his teeth”, and not surprisingly—as in Poe’s tale—those unfamiliar with the phenomena had been known to run from the scene or faint away (Dods, 1847: 23-24; Poe, 1983: 840).

7 | Poe had described “Hans Phaal” in similarly ambiguous terms, as both a “hoax” and a “jeu d’esprit” that could hardly fool its readers given its tone.

densest bodies, astonishingly elastic, and the cause of heat, light, magnetism, electricity, and even of gravitation” (Thomson, 1830: 4).

However, there was no general agreement as what the ether was, and, indeed, by the mid nineteenth-century the failure to detect any effect of an ether upon planetary motion had led many to question its existence. Thomas William Webb’s explanation that the existence of the ether was “only assumed for the sake of the theory” and it therefore “need not be further noticed”, though only offered in 1883 (5n; cf. Campbell and Garnett, 1882: 394), expressed reservations that could easily have been given earlier. Even by mid-century “ether” functioned as a portmanteau word—a term that could be given any meaning that a theory required.

What might not have been expected, however, is the degree of inconsistency we find in Poe. In “Mesmeric Revelation,” Vankirk announces that “God, with all the powers attributed to spirit, is but the perfection of matter”. And: “The ultimate or unparticled matter not only permeates all things but impels all things—and thus is all things within itself. This matter is God” (Poe, 1983: 722, 720). We should not see this as an idea that Poe took seriously. Despite the drama inherent in Vankirk’s promulgating these ideas in a mesmeric trance, they offered little more than the theological commonplace of the day. In mid-century America it was commonly accepted that, in Thomas Dick’s words, God “pervades, actuates, and supports the whole frame of universal nature” (1846, 1: 65), and while some would identify God’s omnipresence with that of the ether⁸, others, foreshadowing Poe’s terminology, would associate it with that of electricity (or see the ether as electricity). “I am fully sensible”, wrote one advocate of mesmerism, “that electricity is a fluid most inconceivably subtle, purified, and fine. [...] It is almost unparticled matter [...]” (Dods, 1853: 107; cf. Milutis, 2006: xi). Borrowing this talk of “unparticled matter” allowed Poe to make the ideas of “Mesmeric Revelation” sound up to date, yet his doing so was hardly a sign that he took them seriously. Two months earlier, in “The Power of Words” (1845), the ether had been defined differently—as a substance which “pervades, and alone pervades all space” and is the “medium of creation” (Poe, 1983: 1825)⁹, and in *Eureka* it would be defined differently yet again¹⁰. In the later work Poe introduces the ether in order to play with the idea that “substance” is only another name of God, or “God” another name of “substance”. Once again the idea is interesting. A plenist view of the universe had encouraged a Christian materialism for over two centuries¹¹. But it can hardly be thought to be any more an expression of Poe’s beliefs than what we find in the earlier tales.

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8 | God’s influence, Edward Hitchcock would argue in 1851, is “transmitted by means of the luminiferous ether to the limits of the universe” (1854: 433). Similar arguments could be found across the religious spectrum from Methodism to Mormonism: see, for example, Porterfield, 2005: 164; Whittaker, 1991: 199; and for general studies, Cantor, 1981; Mills, 2006: 67-93.

9 | If God really spoke –or thought– the universe into being at beginning of time, then there had to be a medium for the transmission of his words; and if there was such a medium, divine creativity might have a parallel in human self-expression. In Bruce Mills’ summary (2006: 71), “the thoughts of God permeate and impel all things, and similarly human words and thoughts pulse outward from the self”.

10 | I thus disagree with those who argue for *Eureka*’s thematic, aesthetic, and theoretical consistency with the rest of Poe’s work: for this see, for example, Jacobs, 1969.

11 | Equally unoriginal was the idea that nebular condensation could explain the origin of the universe. “Space and duration exist of necessity, and that space was eternally filled with primal matter which I contend is electricity”, John Bovee Dods explained. Everything in the universe has condensed from electricity, “not instantly but gradually”, he added (1847: 36, 40). Mary Somerville, introducing Laplace’s ideas to an English-speaking public, had been less dogmatic. It was generally granted, she noted, that there is “a self-luminous, phosphorescent material substance, in a highly dilated or gaseous state,” a substance that subsided “by the mutual gravitation of its particles” into stars and galaxies, but better

2. Targets

Why, then, was Poe writing? If he was not coming before his public as a scientist, or as a popularizer of science (his ideas change too much for us to suppose that he was), then presumably we should take him seriously when he claimed to be offering *Eureka* as a poem—and recognize that, as Sir Phillip Sidney (and Aristotle) had warned, poetry is unconcerned with the actual. We should, I suggest, read Poe’s cosmological poem as a kind of “lie” with which he intended to capture “the attention (and ideally the imagination) of the public” (Boese, 2002: 2; Poe, 1983: 608)—either for poetic effect, or (what is more likely given its richness of scientific detail) as a hoax.

We could, of course, talk of irony rather than deception. Almost everything that Poe wrote was (as G. R. Thomson noted) “qualified by, indeed controlled by, a prevailing duplicity or irony in which the artist presents us with slyly insinuated mockery of both ourselves as readers and himself as writer”, and such a stance would explain much of *Eureka*, without requiring us to see it as an attempt to deceive (1973: 9; cf. Dayan, 1987: 23; Jar’ab, 2003). Yet Poe was a *hoaxer*: one who took pleasure in mocking the public as “believers in every thing Odd”, whose “Credulity:—let us call it Insanity at once”, marks them as “ignorant people” (“Fifty Suggestions”, 1849, no. 28, in Poe, 1984: 1303). Burton R. Pollin charitably suggested that underlying Poe’s hoaxes was “the sheer exuberant humour of his inventiveness” (1970: 174), but, given Poe’s words, Constance Rourke’s earlier observation that Poe’s purpose in the hoaxes “was to render his readers absurd, to reduce them to an involuntary imbecility” seems more persuasive (1959: 181-84; cf. Walsh, 2006: 116; Elmor, 1995: 187).

2.1. Genre Expectations

What is significant in the present context is that Poe’s hoaxes used existing genres in order to exploit readers’ expectations (Burgoyne, 2001). Poe’s hoaxing use of the journalistic scoop is well-known. “*The Atlantic has been actually crossed in a Balloon!*” he had announced in breathless journalese in an extra to the *New York Sun* of April 13, 1844, “and this too without difficulty—without any great apparent danger—with thorough control of the machine—and in the inconceivably brief period of seventy-five hours from shore to shore” (Poe, 1983: 743; Goodman, 2008: 238-45). His doing so, we should notice, did not just require his readers to be uniformed about contemporary technology (and therefore suppose that the Atlantic could be crossed by balloon)¹²; it also relied on their presuming that newspapers could be trusted. They should have known better. There was no need to recall the Moon hoax of a decade before to

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telescopes were needed for the nebular thesis to be considered certain (1831: lxvi). Nevertheless, seventeen years after the publication of *Eureka*, Jules Verne uses the idea of nebular condensation in his *De la Terre à la Lune* (1978: 74-75). Poe’s version of this scenario offered little suggesting that he wrote out of a sense of discovery or personal conviction.

12 | The optimism was premature: the first crossing of the Atlantic by airship would not be until 1919.

recognize that not everything that made the first page was to be believed. The American popular press was driven by sensational reporting and an “unlimited promotion of merchandise” (Lehuu, 2000: 37), and it is this appetite for sensation—rather than scientific ignorance—that made the hoax possible—Harriet Martineau had noted a decade before that, when it came to general education, Americans were “travelling far faster than any other people beyond the reach of [a hoax’s] deception” (1838: 3-24).

Poe’s piece for the *Sun* was not his only exploitation of genre to make his readers feel ridiculous. As we have seen, just a few months after publishing the balloon hoax, he would offer his readers a somnambulist’s oracle. Conservative students of mesmerism warned that “God has revealed what it behoves us to know”—“if we make [somnambulists] reason about mysteries, their imagination will be exalted, and they will give in to all sorts of errors” (Deleuze, 1884: 249). As long as the “soul is still attached to the body”, the German Universalist Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling wrote, “the connection [between the soul and the spiritual world] is not perfect” (“The Nature of Man”, *The Magnet*, 1, December 1842, 158-59, qtd. Taves, 1999: 140n61). Nevertheless, people hoped that truth could come from those who were sleepwalkers, and with deliberate irony Poe pretends to offer a mesmeric revelation, yet gives us a text that reveals nothing.

Again: four years before fooling the world with Vankirk’s revelation, Poe had shown his willingness to subvert reader expectations with stories like “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), in which he leads us to believe that the tale will offer a local colour walk through the city—Whitman would do exactly this with his 1842 “Life in a New York Market” (Rubin and Brown, 1950: 20-22)—, and then disabuse us. As Walter Benjamin noted with quiet understatement, “The Man of the Crowd is no *flâneur*” (1968: 174). And then there is *Eureka*, where Poe takes on and mocks the pretensions of the cosmological lecture (The work, it will be remembered, had first been presented as a lecture titled “On The Cosmography of the Universe”, in New York on February 3, 1848)¹³.

2.2. John Bovee Dods

Mid-century Americans had a great appetite for popular cosmology, but of all the lectures I might cite as possible targets I would point to those of John Bovee Dods. Although there is no evidence linking the two men, Dods can easily serve as the kind of “diddler” Poe enjoyed exposing. For six consecutive evenings in 1843, Dods had held the attention of an audience over two thousand Bostonians with his explanation of the cosmos, and according to contemporary reports, “multitudes” were turned away. Not everyone was impressed,

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13 | The use of cosmogony for fraudulent purposes was a theme of Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).

however. The *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* felt that their city was “disgraced” by Dods’ showmanship (Whorton, 2004: 112); and I suggest that Poe agreed. The public’s gullibility faced with Dods’ rhetoric would, I suggest, have made the cosmological lecture a tempting target for Poe’s irony.

Dods was not the only person taking to the lecture circuit to explain his intuitions about the universe. Poe was certainly aware of the success of Andrew Jackson Davis (the “Ploughkeepsie Seer”), whose lectures, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and A Voice to Mankind* (1847), had been dictated in a trance state (Tatar, 1978: 194). Poe was interested enough in Davis to call on him in January 1846 (Davis, 1871: 317), and would no doubt have found him an easy target. “IN THE BEGINNING [Davis had explained] the Univercoelum was one boundless, undefinable, and unimaginable ocean of LIQUID FIRE! [...] It was without parts; for it was a Whole. Particles did not exist; but the Whole was as *one* Particle” (1852: 121). It could be that *Eureka* was written to ridicule such pretensions; and certainly, intentionally or not, Poe outdid them with his intuitions (“altogether irresistible, although inexpressible”), “that what God originally created—that that Matter which, by dint of His Volition, He first made from His Spirit, or from Nihilism, could have been nothing but Matter in its utmost conceivable state of—what?—of Simplicity” (Levine and Levine, 2004: 22; cf. 102-03). Nevertheless, Dods is the more obvious target for Poe’s cosmological irony¹⁴. There are similar rhetorical flights; there is belief (adopted in *Eureka*) that electricity—or something like it—is the spiritual principle of the universe (Levine and Levine, 2004: 27; Dods, 1847: 78). And most importantly, although matching the former clergyman for poetry, Poe demolishes the view of man we find in his lectures. Rather than affirming human immortality, as Dods had done, Poe emphasized human transience—its meaningless in the divine plot.

Dods was conservative in his view of the hereafter. “[W]hen we lie down upon the bed of death, and the embers of life feebly glimmer in the socket of existence,” he explained, “then the Gospel of Christ points us to brighter scenes—scenes beyond the tomb.”

We could look forward to a general resurrection when God’s “dread voice shall speak with a living energy, that the very heavens shall hear, and the dead shall rise to die no more, and turn their eyes from the dark, ruinable tomb on the scenes of eternity!” (Dods, 1847: 64, 76). Poe’s focus was different. Ignoring the individual, he focussed on the race, and anticipated a future when “Man [...] ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah” (Levine and Levine, 2004: 106). Of course,

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14 | Possibly Poe was aware that Dods had sold three thousand copies of his lectures within a month.

to recognize oneself as Jehovah is to cease to recognize oneself as an individual (as E. A. Poe, for example). Challenging the optimism and anthropocentrism of his contemporaries in this way, Poe strips the transcendent of meaning (Taylor, 2007: 204).

Poe's action here was, I suggest, fully deliberate. Some, like Patrick F. Quinn, have seen *Eureka* as an "unintentional poem of death" (1963: 4-7), but I would see its focus on annihilation as in no way accidental and read it as a deliberately provocative work. The work's view of humanity no doubt seemed a cruel joke to those who hoped to find their dignity and significance reaffirmed by the lecture's rhetoric, as it was in those of Dods and Davis; but that is just part of Poe's humour. The ultimate joke was on those who believed such speculations could even be trusted in an age of increasing disciplinary specialization; that the answers to questions about the origins of the universe could come from a clairvoyant, a former Universalist clergyman, or a journalist, even if we suppose them to be familiar with current scientific thinking. Popular science, it has been suggested, was a response to the increasingly arcane nature of nineteenth-century scientific thought (Daniels, 1968: 40-41); with rare exceptions popularizers were not innovators¹⁵. That being the case, *Eureka's* dedication to Humboldt has importance as a reminder of the hubris involved in a layman's offering such a work. Although an account of existing knowledge could be given by a Humboldt (someone whose genius was generally recognized in nineteenth-century America), a new theory of the universe was not to be found in the efforts of fudges competing for the dollars of the American public. That being the case, although there is no reason to doubt that Poe followed accounts of scientific discovery with interest, *Eureka* should be read as hoax rather than a serious essay in cosmology. Poe's genius was engaged in demonstrating that cosmological lectures, such as those of Dods, were nothing but fudge.

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15 | In *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne would ridicule an amateur's capacity to intuitively interpret astronomical phenomena.

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