

## ANALYSIS

*Eureka* (1848)

Edgar Allen Poe

(1809-1849)

"I was twenty and believed in majesty of thought.... I had dipped into a few mystics.... It was at this point when *Eureka* fell into my hands. My studies under my dull and woebegone professors had led me to believe that science is not love; that its fruits are perhaps useful, but its foliage very spiny and its bark terribly rough.... In a few moments *Eureka*...introduced me to Newton's law, the name of Laplace, the hypothesis which he proposed, and the very existence of speculations and researches which were never mentioned to adolescents... These sciences now taught so coldly were founded and developed by men with a passionate interest in their work. *Eureka* made me feel some of this passion.

I confess that I was greatly astonished and only partially pleased by the preposterous claims and ambitions of the author, the solemn tone of his preamble, and the extraordinary discussion of method with which the volume opens. These first pages, however, gave indication of a central idea, although it was enveloped in a mystery which suggested partly a certain powerlessness, partly a deliberate reserve, and partly the reluctance of an enthusiastic soul to reveal its most precious secrets.... To attain what he calls *the truth* which he seeks can only be grasped by immediate adherence to an intuition of such nature that it renders present, and in some soft perceptible to the mind, the reciprocal dependence of the parts and properties of the system under consideration. This reciprocal dependence extends to the successive phrases of the system: causality becomes symmetrical. To a point of view which embraced the totality of the universe, a cause and its effect might be taken one for the other; they could be said to exchange their roles....

We must agree that the notions of cause and adaptation lead almost inevitably to this conclusion... The universe is formed on a plan the profound symmetry of which is present, at it were, in the inner structure of our minds. Hence, the poetic instinct will lead us blindly to the truth. One frequently meets with analogous ideas among the mathematicians.... All the consequences developed in *Eureka* are not deduced with the exactness, not led up to with the degree of clarity, which one might desire. There are shadows and lacunae. There are interventions which the author hardly explains. There is a God....

The fundamental idea of *Eureka* is...a profound and sovereign idea. It would not be exaggerating its importance to recognize, in his theory of consistency, a fairly definite attempt to describe the universe by its *intrinsic properties*. The following proposition can be found toward the end of *Eureka*: 'Each law of nature depends at all points on all the other laws.' This might easily be considered, if not as a formula, at least as the expression of a tendency toward generalized relativity. That this tendency approaches recent conceptions becomes evident when one discovers, in the poem under consideration, an affirmation of the symmetrical and reciprocal relationship of matter, time, space, gravity, and light. I emphasize the word symmetrical, for *it is, in reality, a formal symmetry which is the essential characteristic of Einstein's universe*. Herein lies the beauty of his conception. But Poe does not confine himself to the physical constituents of phenomena. He introduces life and consciousness into his plan....

Poe's intuitions as to the general nature of the physical, moral, and metaphysical universe are neither proved nor disproved by the extremely numerous and important discoveries which have been made since 1847. Certain of his views could even be incorporated, without excessive difficulty, into fairly recent conceptions. When he measures the duration of his Cosmos by the time necessary to realize all possible combinations of the elements, one thinks of Boltzmann's theories and of his estimates of probability as applied to the kinetic theory of gas. Carnot's principle is also foreshadowed in *Eureka*, as the representation of this principle by the mechanics of diffusion; the author seems to have been a precursor of those bold spirits who would rescue the universe from its certain death by means of an infinitely brief passage through an infinitely improbable state....

The reader of *Eureka* will see how Poe has extended the application both of nebular hypothesis and the law of gravity. On these mathematical foundations he has built an abstract poem, one of the rare modern examples of a total explanation of the material and spiritual universe, a cosmogony. It belongs to a department of literature remarkable for its persistence and astonishing variety; cosmogony is one of the oldest of all literary forms."

Paul Valery  
"On Poe's *Eureka*"  
translated by Malcolm Cowley  
*Variety* 1 (1927)

"The complete vision, of which the early work represent an approximation, immediately precedes his death. The proposition of which *Eureka* is to provide the 'proof,' he states at the beginning: 'In the original unity of the first thing lies the secondary cause of all things, with the germ of their inevitable annihilation.' This 'nothingness' is a dialectical conversion, not of one symbol into its opposite by analogy, as we see it in Dante, or even in Donne, but of an abstraction into its antithesis.

Thesis: the omniscient intellect of man (of Poe as man) achieves a more than angelic knowledge in comprehending the structure and purpose of the created universe. Antithesis: the final purpose of the created universe is the extinction of its own unity of the omniscient intellect of man. There is no Hegelian synthesis. After the original act of divine creation, God withdraws into his deistic aloofness, leaving the separate and local acts of creation to man. This is the sphere of secondary creations which man as angelic delegate of God is empowered to perform. Thus, says Poe at the end of *Eureka*, not only is every man his own God, every man is God: every man the non-spatial center into which the universe, by a reverse motion of the atoms, will contract, as into its annihilation. God destroys himself in the eventual recovery of his unity. Unity equals zero. If Poe must at last 'yield himself unto Death utterly,' there is a lurid sublimity in the spectacle of his taking God along with him into a grave which is not smaller than the universe.

The material universe is in a state of radical disequilibrium, every atom striving to disengage itself from material forms and to return to the original center; but this is not a center in space. It is the Pascalian center which is the everywhere and nowhere, occupied by nothing. Since matter is merely the dialectical movement of attraction and repulsion, it will have ceased to exist when it rejoins the everywhere and nowhere. Space being emptied of matter, there is not even space, for space is that which is occupied by something. We are beyond the topless and bottomless abyss of Pascal. The image of the abyss is in all of Poe's serious writings: the mirror in 'William Wilson'; burial alive' the 'tarn' into which the House of Usher plunges; the great white figure towards which Pym is being borne by a current of the sea; the pit over which the pendulum swings; the dead body containing the living soul of M. Valdemar; being walled up alive; the vertigo of the maelstrom.

Poe's most useful biographer, Professor Quinn, exhibits testimonials from modern physicists to bolster up with scientific authority a work in which he probably had little confidence. Let us assume, what may well be false, that *Eureka* from the scientific point of view of any age is nonsense. That would not make *Eureka* nonsense. 'The glory of man,' says Valery in his essay on *Eureka*, 'and something more than his glory, is to waste his powers on the void.... Thus it would seem that the history of thought can be summarized in these words: *It is absurd by what it seeks; great by what it finds.*' What did Poe's 'absurd' essay in eschatology inadvertently find, if indeed it found anything but nothing? Valery again (and again the French instruct us in Poe) points, in another context, to the central meaning of *Eureka*, without perhaps quite knowing that he has done so) for Paul Valery was himself an archangel); he says: 'As soon as we leave the bounds of the moment, as soon as we attempt to enlarge and extend our presence outside of itself, our forces are exhausted in our liberty.' Is this always and under all conditions necessarily true? I think not; but it was particularly true of Poe.

It was true of him because in *Eureka* he circumvented the natural world and tried to put himself not in the presence of God, but in the seat of God. *The exhaustion of force as a consequence of his intellectual liberation from the sensible world*--that is my reading of Valery as a gloss upon the angelism of Poe. The intellectual force is exhausted because in the end it has no real object. The human intellect cannot reach

God as essence; only God as analogy. Analogy to what? Plainly analogy to the natural world; for there is nothing in the intellect that has not previously reached it through the senses. Had Dante arrived at the vision of God by way of sense? We must answer yes, because Dante's Triune Circle is light, which the finite intelligence can see only in what has already been seen by means of it. But Poe's center is that place--to use Dante's great figure--'where the sun is silent.' Since he refuses to see nature, he is doomed to see nothing. He has overleaped and cheated the condition of man. The reach of our imaginative enlargement is perhaps no longer than the ladder of analogy...

Poe as God sits silent in darkness. Here the movement of tragedy is reversed: there is no action. Man as angel becomes a demon who cannot initiate the first motion of love, and we can feel only compassion with his suffering, for it is potentially ours. I have not supposed it necessary to describe in detail the structure of *Eureka*, or to call attention to its great passages of expository prose, which seem to me unsurpassed in their kind in the nineteenth century.... I have tried to expound one idea, the angelism of the intellect, as one aspect of one writer."

Allen Tate  
"The Angelic Imagination"  
*The Kenyon Review* (Summer 1952)

Michael Hollister (2014)