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Edgar Allan Poe's Chaotic Drive to Unity

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Abstract

*In his philosophical prose-poem **Eureka**, Edgar Allan Poe argues that true unity negates physical matter. By extension, disunity is a necessary part of existence. Additionally, Poe's theoretical essays stress the importance of the 'unity of impression' in writing, by which means a single effect is elaborated and sustained throughout a poem, and to which all aspects of that piece of writing contribute.*

With these theories in mind, this paper explores the drive towards unity in Poe's polar fiction, the unified space as a place of revelation, and its effect on the act of writing. These stories demonstrate a complex relationship between the antithetical states of unity and disunity; whirlpools in particular become a symbol for this space where unity and disunity coexist. Poe's voyagers are forced to make a choice between achieving unity, and with it ultimate knowledge, at the expense of communicating their discovery, and abandoning their quest and returning with nothing to communicate.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, Polar, Revelation, Nothingness, Writing

Unity and disunity permeate the work of nineteenth-century American writer Edgar Allan Poe; the concepts are integral to his fictional, theoretical, and what may loosely be termed philosophical works. Two works in particular exemplify their centrality. In 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846), Poe outlines – in his characteristically mathematical way – how best to write an effective piece of poetry. He speaks of the 'immensely important effect' of the 'unity of impression' and how, through this unity, the writer may best 'intensely excite, by elevating, the soul'; though 'all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief' (Poe, 1984a: 15). He therefore demands that the work should be short, its length equivalent to what may be read in 'a single sitting'; 'for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended

effect' (*ibid.*: 15). With self-invested authority, Poe asserts that the ideal poem is precisely 'a hundred and eight' lines long (*ibid.*: 16).

Elsewhere, Poe speaks of how intrinsic unity and disunity are to the very structure of the universe. In one of his most complex works, *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe* (1848), Poe constructs a – highly poetical – theory of the composition of the universe. He describes how the physical universe exists only as a consequence of the forces of Attraction and Repulsion – that is, unity and disunity (Poe, 1984b: 1354-1355). He proposes that in 'the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation' (*ibid.*: 1261). He suggests that the universe was dispersed from one original unity, towards which it will return, whereupon matter will no longer exist – because in a state of pure unity, the forces of Attraction and Repulsion cannot exist, and so matter itself, which is composed of the interaction of these forces, cannot exist (*ibid.*: 1354-1355). Instead, the universe will be reconstituted as 'a purely Spiritual and individual God' (*ibid.*: 1357). The universe will go on to irradiate and unify 'at every throb of the Heart Divine' as God continues to move between a state of unity and the disunity through which the material universe comes into existence, extending 'the joy of his existence' by passing 'his Eternity in perpetual variation' (*ibid.*: 1356-1358). Of particular relevance to his fiction is Poe's claim in *Eureka* that, for man, true unity is impossible to perceive, and therefore appears to be Nothingness.

There is, then, an overarching concern with unity in both Poe's literary theory and scientific theory: the ideal structure for a piece of creative writing is reflected in the overall structure of the universe – or perhaps vice versa – where both strive towards a unified state. The relationship between physical creation and language is neatly demonstrated in Poe's short story 'The Power of Words' (1845), in which the act of speaking becomes a literally creative force. One of the two angelic figures in the narrative explains how 'all motion, of whatever nature, creates', to the extent that, 'with a few passionate sentences, the angel Agathos spoke an entire world into being, where 'brilliant flowers are the dearest of all unfulfilled dreams' and 'raging volcanoes are the passions of the most turbulent and unhallowed of hearts' (Poe, 1984b: 825). This is an ominous indication of the difficulty in achieving unity through an act of composition, where the generation of new matter inevitably increases disunity. And it is in 'The Power of Words' that another important aspect of Poe's fiction is given attention: the quest for knowledge. Agathos explains that happiness is found 'in the acquisition of knowledge [...] but to know all were the curse of a fiend'; when asked 'does not The Most High know all?', Agathos replies 'That (since he is The Most Happy) must be still the *one* thing unknown even to HIM.' (*ibid.*: 822).

For the remainder of this paper, I turn to the questers for ultimate knowledge in Poe's polar sea narratives: 'MS. Found in a Bottle' (1833) and his only novel-length work, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838). In these works, the voyage towards unity with the universe suggests the opportunity to acquire hidden or transcendent knowledge (a knowledge sought by so many of Poe's protagonists), which is yet complicated by the disunity and destruction encountered at the end of the voyage; to reach a knowledge beyond the physical world entails reaching that unity that precedes it, yet risks the Nothingness posited in *Eureka*. The argument put forward is based on the necessity of disunity in those efforts to experience a supreme sense of

unity. Poe's works are deeply unified pieces, held together by a specific theme, structure or tone, and the chaotic disunity that appears to pervade Poe's worlds – highly visible in his sea fictions – are not opposed to this unity, but serve to reinforce it, heightening the perception of each narrative's central concern; as Poe puts it, one may deviate from the designated theme to 'serve in elucidation, or aid the general effect, as do discords in music, by contrast.' (Poe, 1984a: 17) Yet the unity it suggests is inevitably, continually deferred.

The 'MS. Found in a Bottle' follows an unnamed narrator's voyage towards the South Pole aboard what is heavily implied to be a ghost ship. The crew of the ship does not acknowledge the narrator's presence and speak an unknown language. The narrator breaks into the captain's cabin to record events as they occur. In the last moments, as he reaches the southern-most point of his voyage, the ship is borne 'madly within the grasp of a whirlpool' and the narrator throws the manuscript overboard, ensuring the survival of his writing but not his self (Poe, 1984b: 189-199). *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is a somewhat sprawling exploration narrative, of which the final moments are of interest at present. Pym has escaped an island of savages and is sailing in a canoe towards the South Pole – the precise nature of which in Poe's day was still a matter of speculation. The seascape, its animals, and the sky, turn a milky white as he progresses southward and a large veil-like cataract looms on the horizon. The final moments of the narrative read as follows:

Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekeli-li!* as they retreated from our vision [...] And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow. (Poe, 1984b: 1179)

There the narrative ends, though a Note appended to the end of the novel states that Pym did indeed survive this experience but has died in the act of writing about it. The narrative, therefore, will never be complete. Both narrators are writers, and both hope to discover something at the Pole: the narrator of the 'MS.' speaks of how 'a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions predominates even over my despair' (Poe, 1984b:199); Pym hopes to open 'to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention.' (*ibid.*: 1134) Their narratives, then, are accounts of what they hoped to discover in unexplored parts of the world, but both accounts are incomplete.

These polar spaces tempt writing because they are uncharted or unwritten; the whiteness of Pym's South Pole, in particular, like Melville's white whale, has been read as a symbol for the blank page (Poe, 2010: 243, n. 2). But the act of writing inevitably concludes as they are drawn into the cataract or the abyss. The final image of Pym is of him rushing 'into the embraces of the

cataract' (Poe, 1984b: 1179), as a white figure rises to meet him; the 'MS. Found in a Bottle' ends with 'the ship [...] quivering—oh God! and—going down!' (*ibid.*: 199) In each instance, the protagonist is left forever on the brink, on the border between life in the physical world and the discovery of a world beyond this known universe, at which point communication necessarily ceases. Such an ending recalls that of *Frankenstein*, where the Creature assures Walton that he will immolate himself on the Arctic ice and Walton sees him 'borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance' (Shelley, 2003: 225). This leads Christopher Small to note that the promised immolation 'is not reached in the book and, we suspect, has not yet been enacted' (Small, 1972: 195). We may say something similar of Poe's tales: revelation has not yet been reached, and never will be since Pym does not come out on the other side of the cataract and the ship does not reach the bottom of the whirlpool – the texts' narrative structures precludes this.

This coming-up-short, this separation between an anticipated revelation and the total lack of revelation, points towards the disunity or fragmentation embedded in Poe's sea tales. It is perhaps not unreasonable to expect a certain amount of disunity in sea narratives, and there is certainly a compulsion for seafarers to write – harking back to Walton and Coleridge's verbose Ancient Mariner – by which means the unified self is sustained in uncharted waters, into which it could easily dissolve unless it constantly articulates itself. But the episodic nature of sea travel, where many days can be spent in the middle of an unvarying ocean, produces accounts that stop and start; the content of the writing itself is disunified, even if its aim is to retain unity. Lisa Gitelman makes a case for the intended disunity of Pym's narrative, which is often cited as one of the primary defects of the novel, by arguing that the disunity is a 'signal [of] the success of the novel as a fictional comment on varied and popular literature of exploration'; she notes how digressive material forms a large part of published accounts of voyages to such an extent that 'a description of sea slugs was, by 1838, a virtual set piece in the literature of exploration, which was gradually becoming more and more conventional' (Gitelman, 1992: 354).

Poe's desire for structural unity is then at odds with the demands of the genre, and within the narratives a breaking-down seems to be occurring in the sea-spaces. This appears especially in the languages and noises around the Pole, suggesting both the impossibility of any human comprehension of its revelations and the fragmenting of coherent narrative. The author of the 'MS.' shares a ship with an ancient crew who speak 'a foreign tongue', whose voices reach the narrator from what seems 'a distance of a mile'; and they descend into the whirlpool 'amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest' (Poe, 1984b: 198-199). In *Pym*, though the landscape 'emit[s] no sound', 'gigantic and pallidly white birds' fly 'from beyond the veil, and their scream [is] the eternal *Tekeli-li!*' (*ibid.*: 1179) – a word shared with the islanders from whom Pym has escaped. Human and animal languages merge, and loud, primitive voices are sent forth into the physical world from a space beyond the polar end-zone. The vocal elements seem repeatedly to be stressed, where shrieking, roaring and screaming are all indicative of a rudimentary form of articulation, yet it is a language that the writers cannot comprehend. There is also some suggestion that these polar regions are intrinsically linked with the past; time itself is fractured. Remoteness in space is equated with remoteness in time, and the fluidity of the ocean spaces through which Poe's seafarers journey are dislocated 'out of SPACE—out of TIME,' to quote from Poe's 'Dream-Land' poem (Poe, 1984b: 79).

The impossibility of translating into words the revelations – if revelations they be – of this space is perhaps rooted in this primitive, or at least unknown, language combined with the fluidity of an oceanic space that rejects or opposes the stability and unity that a written account would give to the polar seascape; that is, writing seeks to give permanence to a space that is naturally impermanent, in constant fluctuation, and is thereby frustrated in its efforts. In both the ‘MS.’ and *Pym* language breaks down the closer it comes to the Pole, becoming more and more disjointed. The writer of the ‘MS.’ begins his narrative in complete, grammatically sound sentences, but the final lines of the story are fragments of description and emotion, broken up frequently by hyphens, until we get: ‘the circles grow rapidly small—we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool—and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering—oh God! and—going down!’ (*ibid.*: 199) The text acts out visually what another of Poe’s seafarers, the mariner of ‘A Descent into the Maelström,’ describes as the physical effects of a whirlpool: breaking one down, ‘body and soul’ (Poe, 1984b: 432). Similarly in *Pym*, the narrative’s final chapter is rendered in the form of short journal entries. Through the journal format Pym is able to relinquish the responsibility of having to provide a unified narrative, and simply presents a series of broken descriptive pieces (Irwin, 1980: 163-164).

But despite this compositional disunity, the sea-space itself is strangely unified, as seen in the all-pervading whiteness of *Pym*’s polar region. Fragmentation is simply one step in Poe’s idea of how unity may be achieved. As Robert Shulman notes, ‘Poe’s cosmological theory [i.e., *Eureka*] ... stresses disintegration as a prelude to Unity with Divine Beauty’ (Shulman, 1970: 247). And this drive towards unity is most apparent around Poe’s whirlpools and cataracts. In these places there is a destruction of materiality, as the ship is pulled into the whirlpool; conversely, however, the sense of unity is arising from the point towards which all this matter is drawn, as all objects move towards the centre of the vortex. Indeed, the polar seascape begins to sound a lot like *Eureka*, as the narrator compares the whirlpool to ‘the walls of the universe’ (Poe, 1984b: 198).

In *Pym*, this universal drive for unity is suggested in the complete whiteness of the space at the Pole and the reduction of all physical exertion. Pym and his companion become listless and speech is increasingly difficult, to the extent that they cannot resist the current that draws them through the cataract and cannot provide the articulation necessary to sustain themselves (*ibid.*: 1178-1179). Indeed, the breakdown of language and the increasing problem of inscription in these places may stem from this drive to unity. Where everything is dissolving into whiteness, in a realm of utter sameness, such as would be Poe’s conception of unity, there are no means available by which one can undertake a marking, whereby a mark would be an indication of difference, of disunity. This transcendent unity, then, that the voyagers would communicate is lost in the medium that is fundamentally based on opposition: black ink on white paper. Thus signification becomes increasingly difficult, or must necessarily cease, for Pym, whose narrative concludes at the moment he rushes into the white cataract, and the subjective Pym merges with the objective world, and the reader is left with the final blank, white space or page; unified, but unreadable.

Even the downward circular motion of the whirlpool exemplifies the movement towards unity and the search for ultimate meaning in these

seascapes – or, rather, the constant deferral of the completion of this search. In the ‘MS,’ the circling of the ship around the final polar whirlpool echoes the circling around revelation, as the ship comes ever closer to the point at the bottom of the whirlpool, where the narrator hopes will be revealed ‘some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-imparted secret’ (*ibid.*: 198). But like the summit of the whirlpool, ‘lost in the darkness and the distance’ (*ibid.*: 199; another echo of *Frankenstein* perhaps) this final point is never, and can never, be reached if the narrator hopes to preserve the ‘MS,’ and so preserve the revelation. Moreover, the entire narrative itself is cyclical. The message the narrator throws overboard at the end is, of course, the same as that narrative we read; thus, the end of the story, like the ship’s circling, points right back to the beginning, ouroboros-like. We are forced to hunt for meaning in a story that has been cut off before the meaning we seek has been found. It is impossible for the text to move beyond itself, and in this way it is perfectly unified (because self-contained). Meaning is endlessly deferred by the tale’s structure, but it is a structure that is a prerequisite for the tale.

Such circling around a point is also made by Poe in *Eureka*, and seems to reflect his belief that knowledge will never be complete, that mankind, because of his finite aspect, can only comprehend that there is something beyond comprehension. For this reason, Poe suggests words such as ‘God’ and ‘Infinity’ are not ‘the expression of an idea—but of an effort at one [...] a possible attempt at an impossible conception [...] *the thought of a thought*’ (*ibid.*: 1272). Thus, Poe’s seafarers cannot provide their anticipated revelation because it is impossible to express directly; so Pym moves, like his polar landscape, to blankness, to a unity that is nothingness and to silence.

Dissolution into unity – into that unspeakable oneness with God – is not commensurate with revelation; indeed, it is only during the moment of dissolution itself that there is a sense of approaching both revelation and unity, but it is always deferred. One cannot communicate beyond this moment and the journey towards revelation and any actual revelation partake respectively of the characteristics of disunity and unity. Poe demonstrates that disunity is our proper state in realms of consciousness or physicality; unity, true unity, is a visionary experience unspeakably confined to the individual. Even the spiritual realm (because still predicated on a distinct consciousness) cannot reveal all, therefore it too is negating total unity. In the disunifying act of writing, Poe presents tales whose unity is suggested through disunity, through a breaking-down in event and in language; and perhaps the truly unified piece of work is one that cannot be uttered, that, to be comparable to the godlike unity posited in *Eureka*, must remain unwritten ‘Nothingness’; the presence of writing is one of those ‘discords’ that may heighten the reader’s perception of a unified tone, but simultaneously, and necessarily, negates the totality of that unity.

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Biography

Jimmy Packham is a research postgraduate and part-time tutor at the University of Bristol. He works on American Romanticism, with particular focus on Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville. He is particularly interested in the collapse of language and meaning, in what happens in spaces where language fails to contain that which it would signify, and in the silences and lapses of speech and writing at the moment when things seem to exceed linguistic limits. He also retains a strong interest in the literature of the sea, in polar fiction and non-fiction, and in the Gothic.