

Article

“Mesmeric Revelation”: Art as Hypnosis

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between percipient and the narrative purpose in Poe’s “Mesmeric Revelation”, arguing ultimately that the various questions raised by this relationship have a great deal in common with altered-state theories of hypnosis. It challenges predictable interpretations of this short story in an effort to open up a new avenue for exploring not only the art of fiction, but, by logical extension, all other branches of creative activity as well. Primary emphasis is given to the nature of the percipient’s reduced peripheral awareness as (s)he appreciates a work of art, in this case, “Mesmeric Revelation”, and how, according to Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition”, the cultivation of this focused attention lies at the heart of the most effective artistic products.

Keywords: hypnosis; percipient; suggestion; Mr. Vankirk; “Mesmeric Revelation”

Experience is defined as everything that is perceived by or perceptible to the senses, and, as such, is constantly informing our psyches about how it should be understood. John Dewey says that experience consists of “environing conditions” that are “involved in the very process of living” [1]. Art, like all other experiences, is an “environing condition” that causes us to recognize that it does not enjoy the same apparent external existence as every other experience. What is it that makes us identify one experience as different from another? Or, to narrow the discussion, what is it that leads us to identify some experiences as those of art?

When we experience a medium that has been organized with the intent of being meaningful, that is, when we are essentially manipulated into believing that its interrelations have meaning, we are likely to automatically regard the product as “art” and the experience of it as “aesthetic”.

Possibly the oldest “manipulative” art-form of all time is storytelling. Poe understood that the effectiveness of storytelling lies in making the central character one that the reader/listener finds

fascinating. S(he) is then more likely to become suggestible to the story itself and so to react *as if the story were real*.

The very process of organizing a certain medium, wields a certain control over the way we think of the product of this process. Organizing sounds, for example, in a manner that is meant to be heard as music results in a creative product that is experienced in precisely that way. When we are experiencing music, we are doing so because that is how the sounds were intended by the composer or performer to be heard. This holds true even if what is beautifully harmonious and melodious to one listener elicits reactions of detestation in another: both may yet agree that the sounds, whether produced by instruments or voices, have been arranged and played in order to create an effect. This is due to a quality that remains constant in spite of differences of taste that Swami Bharati Krishna Tirtha says are “not due to any difference within the thing in itself.”

In an art gallery, for example, in an exhibition of art, we find a painting adored, eulogized in superlative terms by a great artist. Another artist of similar authority and prestige in the art world, says, “It’s all rubbish; it is not even elementary drawing”. That kind of, not mere difference of opinion, but extreme difference of opinion, is possible even with regard to a matter which we can decide with our eyes. But the eyes do not give the same evidence. They do not give us the same assessment of the value, the importance, the beauty or the ugliness and so forth, of the painting before us [2].

Yet both artists’ assessments, with their opposing comments on its good and bad qualities, are of something neither would doubt to be a creative work, even if perhaps a poor one. Although our tastes may differ, the intentions of the artist, expressed in the way his or her art is created, exist independently of these differences, and are yet rife with signifiers that are analogous to hypnotic suggestions or commands: despite subjectivity, the artist via the artwork is trying to tell people how to respond to it, what meanings may be derived from it, what values may be ascribed to it, what functions it is intended to serve, *etc.* If this is not true, and none of these contextual influences are acting upon the experience we have of art, then creative activity is pointless. Art is saturated with both liminal and subliminal suggestions or commands that are attempting to induce us to internalize these ideas that have been put into our minds, and to become what it would make of us.

Art is thereby no less a multidimensional phenomenon offering multidimensional experiences. Yet in a real and very important sense, all aesthetic experiences share the same thing in common: the deliberate introduction into the percipient’s mind of that which causes him or her to identify art *as art* despite its innumerable forms and its susceptibility to personal interpretation. It is difficult to try to identify what that something is. Nevertheless, an attempt seems warranted because there is something in the mutual human experience of Art that appears to be related to hypnosis. The Russian Formalists of the 1920s defined literature as a means of defamiliarizing, estranging, or alienating one from casual perception. “The technique of art”, wrote Viktor Shklovsky, “is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’” ([3], p. 12). Dream, delirium, hypnosis, and other altered states of consciousness would also seem to favor the dissolution of the normal Kantian ontologies that keep us from “genuine existential contact with things and the world” ([3], p. 55).

Perhaps this is the reason the most disturbing aspect of reading Poe’s “Mesmeric Revelation” is not simply the noumenally fearful content of the colloquy between Mr. Vankirk and his hypnotherapist,

but the sudden, powerfully rhetorical suggestion that Mr. Vankirk's statements, spoken softly as from physical weakness, age or sickness, do not come from *this* world, but from "genuine existential contact" with the spirit world. Every word of every explanation, every psychic impression that gives rise to reluctance on the part of the interviewer's faculty of reason, every question, every clairvoyant answer given by Mr. Vankirk is designed by Poe for the particular purpose of informing the reader that (s)he is about to have or is having an encounter with something that exists beyond normal sensoriality. Poe's tale enhances the reader's capacity for response to suggestion as much as the mesmerization of Mr. Vankirk increases his. Without stating this with undue assertiveness, it may have as much of an effect on readers as hypnotists have on their patients as they lead them to concentrate intensely on a specific thought or memory. They, like most hypnotized subjects, are engrossed with a single idea [4], made, as they are, to ignore everything except that which is pointed out to them by the hypnotist despite the doctor (identified in the story only as P.) asseverating that the one undergoing hypnosis "perceives, with keenly refined perception, and through channels supposed unknown, matters beyond the scope of the physical organs" [5]. Though the tale begins with what amounts to a preliminary résumé of mesmerization that appeals to the reader's intellectual vanity, the method of storytelling takes full advantage of this effect, so that the further one reads, the factualness of the working-out of this initial potted version of mesmerism takes on a highly convincing, non-fictional quality. As the story is read from the page, the reader sees, feels, and otherwise perceives in accordance with the author's suggestions, which are thus accepted uncritically and automatically. The first-person narration, with the sheer orality of so many of Poe's stories, serves the same function as the process undertaken by a hypnotist to establish the state or conditions required for hypnosis to occur. The language itself is hypnotically inductive: the reader or, shall we say, "the subject is told that suggestions for imaginative experiences will be presented" [6]. As Mr. Vankirk falls into the mesmeric sleep, his susceptibility to it having increased due to the frequency with which he had previously been cast into that state, so, too, do we, mesmerized by the narration, descend with the sleepwalker. This is, of course, precisely what Poe requires of us as percipients: high suggestibility and unconsciousness of all other stimuli. When Mr. Vankirk undergoes changes in subjective experience, so do we. When he experiences alterations in perception, so do we. His hypnosis becomes our hypnosis.

In this altered state of consciousness, we allow ourselves to indulge in a kind of psychological regression yielding creative benefits that are found in primal instincts, free association, the ability to fantasize, imagination, and access to our unconscious processes [7]. Many early psychoanalytic theorists ostensibly regarded these benefits as parts of a single, quasi-Romantic image of the creative phenomenon, usually attempting to address this image in efforts to provide an Oedipal view of the genius' struggle to free himself from tradition [8]. This theory of regression specifically purports creative benefits and can be read, very convincingly, into "Mesmeric Revelation" as a characteristic of this work and as the mechanism that permits us to more fully surrender to the non-rationality that obstructs our apprehension of the tale's acroamatic teachings. Because of the relative success of Austrian psychoanalyst and art historian Ernst Kris' theory of regression that places this mechanism in service of the ego [9], and because of its psychoanalytic validity—who has not read for enjoyment and recreation rather than a merely practical purpose—such a reading of a work like "Mesmeric Revelation" cannot rely too heavily on the insights gleaned from psychological hypnosis or fail, as a result, to acknowledge and illuminate certain elements of Poe's compositional theory as well as the

story's formal qualities. A "fallacious" interpretation that equates the author with the characters in a creative work like a short story might actually succeed here precisely *because* of its tendency to replace the question of Mr. Vankirk's *pronunciamentos* with Poe's own beliefs. Bruce Mills, for instance, contends that Poe himself held that "the most truthful and beautiful art forms arise not from the workings of the rational mind (and deductive and inductive reasoning), but from a way of knowing that goes beyond reason and seems inherent in human existence" [10]. Mr. Vankirk's insights, then, may very well be the same as those of Poe himself. And thus these insights may not be completely fictional in the sense that they really may have been elicited from an altered state of consciousness that is insinuated in what might now be seen as an equivocation, namely, Mr. Vankirk's claim that "With it my reason had nothing to do" ([5], p. 1031). G. R. Thompson pushes the same idea slightly further, acknowledging first that "Mesmeric Revelation", along with all the Gothic tales, features "characters who journey into the 'hypnagogic state', spiraling inward toward void, stasis, and 'unity'...", then asserting that this is the epistemological basis of "Poe's philosophical vision" that decries simultaneously a sensical universe and unambiguous, non-contradictory human experience [11]. Such a theory provides a valuable insight into the authorial context out of which "Mesmeric Revelation" arose, and without failing to address the connections between the creative benefits of psychological regression in the text itself and without giving a misleading or false account or impression of this aspect of hypnosis at all. A fuller picture of the text itself is attainable if we regard the creative benefits of hypnotically induced psychological regression (like those listed above) as consanguine to the point of equivalency, if we are prepared to accept the paradoxical fact that the adaptive regression achieved in Mr. Vankirk's hypnosis is equivalent to a state of enhanced suggestibility, and if we look to Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" for substantiation of this claim.

As Ernst Grabovszki has noted, the story is a more than adequate expression of the same interest in the dark side of science as that of Mary Shelley [12]. It begins by addressing a silent auditor who is hopefully capable of appreciating the mind-expanding possibilities revealed by the story's remarkable subject Mr. Vankirk. Within the span of the first paragraph, Poe has all but satisfied what David S. Reynolds describes as a distinctly American, literary exploitation of popular irrationalism: a single speaker narrates to a silent auditor, whom we may identify as a reader whose credulity (in cases like this, rather taken for granted) renders him/her quite ready to accept cues from the speaker so that (s)he will later swallow the author's creative reinvention of pseudoscience [13]. These observations offer insight into the formal qualities of the story, and provide an indication about Poe's intended audience. Carl H. Sederholm observes that stories like "Mesmeric Revelation" make Poe "the watershed figure of the gothic in our time" because he "perceived in popular culture untapped literary resources". Because of this keen valuation, Sederholm does a lot to answer the question of audience. The motivation for the telling and the purpose for relating the dialogue depends, either in part or almost entirely, on the audience. He rightly notes that "Poe's emphasis on the power of a 'vivid effect'...serves as a significant means for grabbing audience attention" [14]. But diagnosing a "vivid effect" as something merely conspicuous is remarkably convenient, because it renders immaterial the problematic question of *why* it is important to grab the attention of the percipient. If the idea of mesmerism, for instance, is that which initially captivates the willing reader, then what must be done to *maintain* the reader's fascination? This query is based, with no more than usual attentiveness, on the combination of precedent from other similar Poe tales (e.g., "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar", "A Tale of the

Ragged Mountains”, and “Some Words with a Mummy”) and further investigation of Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition”, as well as the substantive indications of Mr. Vankirk’s dissociative state within the story. Compare, for instance, the frenzied tone of Valdemar, whose emotional intensity comes from the anticipation of a fulfillment only his death can bring [15], to the easily imaginable, mediumistic rhythm and intonation of Mr. Vankirk’s voice:

Yes; organs are contrivances by which the individual is brought into sensible relation with particular classes and forms of matter, to the exclusion of other classes and forms. The organs of man are adapted to his rudimental condition, and to that only; his ultimate condition, being unorganized, is of unlimited comprehension in all points but one—the nature of the volition of God—that is to say, the motion of the unparticled matter. You will have a distinct idea of the ultimate body by conceiving it to be entire brain. This it is *not*; but a conception of this nature will bring you near a comprehension of what it *is*. A luminous body imparts vibration to the luminiferous ether. The vibrations generate similar ones within the retina; these again communicate similar ones to the optic nerve. The nerve conveys similar ones to the brain; the brain, also, similar ones to the unparticled matter which permeates it. The motion of this latter is thought, of which perception is the first undulation. This is the mode by which the mind of the rudimental life communicates with the external world; and this external world is, to the rudimental life, limited, through the idiosyncrasy of its organs. But in the ultimate, unorganized life, the external world reaches the whole body, (which is of a substance having affinity to brain, as I have said,) with no other intervention than that of an infinitely rarer ether than even the luminiferous; and to this ether—in unison with it—the whole body vibrates, setting in motion the unparticled matter which permeates it. It is to the absence of idiosyncratic organs, therefore, that we must attribute the nearly unlimited perception of the ultimate life. To rudimental beings, organs are the cages necessary to confine them until fledged. ([5], pp. 1037–38).

There is a clairaudient, clairvoyant, and clairsentient quality to the channeler of “Mesmeric Revelation” that might indicate that he is receiving messages from a non-corporeal, non-terrestrial entity through the filter of his own altered consciousness, although Mr. Vankirk is certainly not presented as a peeping, muttering fraud.

If Poe had intended for us to dismiss Mr. Vankirk as a babbling, table-rapping spiritualist, surely he would have written Mr. Vankirk to be precisely that. Poe, as is easily observed, “always emphasizes the magnetic *rapport*, the power of attraction, between mesmerist and patient” ([16], p. 271). He might have taken great exception to anything that militates against any explanation of the phenomenon other than that “the cerebral powers and the physiological transmittance of information are emphasized and the ‘universe of suggestion’ becomes rather a ‘pool of thought’” [17]. If no supernatural explanation is overtly given, then it stands to reason that it is supposed to have a physical—or even scientific—rationale. Considering all things so far, it seems highly unlikely that Poe does not believe the “stranger-than-fiction” statements made by Mr. Vankirk. James W. Gargano writes, apparently in defense of Poe, that it is an “untenable and often unanalyzed assumption that Poe and his narrators are identical literary twins and that he must be held responsible for all their wild or perfervid utterances”, and that “Poe’s narrators possess a character and consciousness distinct from those of their creator” [18]. Gargano’s argument

obviously applies to Poe's narrators, but, in this case, in which the narrator is identified rather tellingly as P., his claim can perhaps be interpreted simply as a proto-poststructuralist alignment with the literary critical view of the early 1960s [19]. While it is not clear that Poe is not P., and P. is not Poe, it is for this reason it could be argued that in Mr. Vankirk, Poe has created yet another spokesman for himself who may therefore be equated with Poe, or at least his beliefs concerning the unimaginable strangeness of nature and the universe. Gargano further contends that Poe "does not require or desire complete surrender to the experience of the sensations being felt by his characters". "Mesmeric Revelation", however, seems to require exactly that: the complete surrender, along with Mr. Vankirk, of one's critical faculties. In this exploration of the relationship between the artwork and percipient *vis-à-vis* the relationship between the artwork and the artist, we find a rather explicit clue to the brilliance of this story. Poe challenges us to give up our "powers of analysis and judgment" [18] while almost continuously thrusting upon us the verbalizations—having to do with the "grosser impelling"/"finer pervading" relationship between infinite gradations of matter ([5], p. 1033ff.), the metamorphosis of man (by virtue of death) from the "rudimental body" to the "ultimate body" ([5], pp. 1037–39), the origin of all things ([5], p. 1033ff.), God ([5], p. 1033ff.), particles ([5], p. 1033), "atomic constitution" ([5], pp. 1034–35), "matter in motion" ([5], p. 1033ff.)—put forward by Mr. Vankirk. Thus, the hypnotized (*i.e.*, Mr. Vankirk) becomes the hypnotist.

All of this is fascinating, but how does it help us to truly understand the esoteric matter in the story's mystical dialogue? From what source is Mr. Vankirk receiving his information? Why is the "mesmeric condition" ([5], p. 1032) the only way to access this information? And why is it so important to Mr. Vankirk to follow this "train of ratiocination" ([5], p. 1031) to its conclusion? Without any real scrutiny of these most significant details of the story—in reference to "Mesmeric Revelation", the *Westminster Review* (1852) seems to have been under the impression that it was an account of actual events [20], while Baudelaire contends in his 1848 translation of "Mesmeric Revelation" that the story's occurrences are "surnaturel" [21] (Lee de Forest, one of the fathers of the "electronic age", had the temerity to refer to the dialogue, both materialistically and philosophically, as a conflation of the physical and the metaphysical that most readers would probably struggle to comprehend) [22]—it would seem foolish to believe that some kind of consensus has been reached on these more profound questions. And yet our comprehension of the story hinges on our ability or inability to answer them. Interestingly enough, much of the critical writing on "Mesmeric Revelation" ignores the one thing we know with absolute certainty about Mr. Vankirk's statements: they do not seem to be subject to scientific experiment and observation. It is remarkable how a reader like de Forest seems to ignore his basic belief in empiricism, giving himself over to the same special, inner-directed, altered state of functioning as Mr. Vankirk himself. Perhaps even more interestingly, most criticism of "Mesmeric Revelation" seems to have very carefully ignored this strange relationship between percipience and authorial intent. Poe opens his story by pointing out that the "mere exercise" ([5], p. 1029) of the power of the mesmerist's will is to be assumed to be the thing that so impresses Mr. Vankirk "as to cast him into an abnormal condition" ([5], p. 1030) of the mind. This cannot be easily dismissed although it is, at first glance, rather simplistic and founded upon an essentially superstitious belief in an invisible natural force exerted by animals. Harder evidence for this assertion, related to the implication of Mr. Vankirk's mediumship, might be gained from an investigation into the possibility that it actually occurs between the story and the reader. After all, the idea of Mr. Vankirk as

the purveyor of hypnotic suggestions from “Azrael’s hand” ([5], p. 1040) to the reader would seem to explain a great deal. This supposition provides an unspoken impetus for both the session itself as well as its documentation. It also forces us to consider the possibility that hypnosis is the mistress of suggestion or, by logical extension, the possibility of literature as a psychological process (comparable to hypnosis) of written, rather than necessarily verbal, suggestion.

Among the very few facts of the story that we are able to accept in a normal state of consciousness: the critical hypnosis session occurred after a period of many months and there does not appear to have been the slightest hint of the “psychal impressions” ([5], p. 1031) that had caused Mr. Vankirk such inner distress, anxiety, and discomfort since his course of hypnotherapy began. The period of time between the beginning of the hypnotherapeutic treatment and Mr. Vankirk’s psychic restlessness is significant, though not necessarily for the reasons that would most readily come to a reader’s conscious mind. In responding to the question of this interim, Teilhard de Chardin may have, hypothetically speaking, regarded the elapsed months as an indication of Mr. Vankirk’s evolution (in tandem with the universe), and assumed, based on essentially no other evidence than the “mesmeric exaltation” ([5], p. 1031), that Mr. Vankirk, very much upon his deathbed, must be pursuing his own personal Omega Point [23]. The only other evidence to which Teilhard might have alluded in support of the Omega Point interpretation comes in the dialogue of the story in Mr. Vankirk’s direct address: “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” ([5], p. 1033). This utterance could be used to suggest that Mr. Vankirk, while dying, is arriving at a conclusion of a vision of a supreme point of cosmic complexity and consciousness to a hypnotherapist who is well acquainted with the nature and state of Mr. Vankirk’s physical and psychological health. But there are significant problems here. First there is the tone of the story. Nothing about Mr. Vankirk strikes the reader as particularly super-personalized [24]. There is, in fact, a certain *impersonality* in his dialoguing with P., and indeed that same impersonality is present throughout the entire interrogation. Furthermore, Mr. Vankirk need not have adopted such a transcendent aspect for the “catechism” ([5], p. 1032) if, as John G. Bennett argues, the universe is developing toward the “overcoming of separateness” [25].

So if it is not out of any semblance of super-personalization that Mr. Vankirk speaks, why bother with a Teilhardian hypothesis? Mr. Vankirk, if he was hypnotized enough to follow his weird “train of ratiocination” ([5], p. 1031) at all, must have known on some level that according to his own “profound self-cognizance” ([5], p. 1032) his revelations would not count unless he was actually making contact with something supremely complex, supremely conscious, supremely transcendent in relation to and independent of the ever-changing cosmos. Someone might ask whether he was just experiencing a surge in brain activity in the moments before death. Are his last words the result of a run-of-the-mill “near-death” experience? It seems far more likely, based on Mr. Vankirk’s tone coupled with the condescending nature of his revelatory expatiations, that they are meant to be didactic and his auditor not so much a guide as someone who is himself in need of a guide. On the other hand, it is equally likely that Mr. Vankirk’s delivery of his reports to P. is some kind of demonstration of the lengths one must go in order to achieve supramental perception as it is that Mr. Vankirk is in any way undergoing the heightened state of conscious awareness of the final active death stage [26]. The “ultimate, or unparticled matter” ([5], p. 1033) then, that “not only permeates all things but impels all things—and thus is all things within itself” ([5], p. 1033) is so only because the neurotransmitters in

Mr. Vankirk's brain are shutting down. This hypothesis might be, *au fond*, quite flawed, however. Of course, anything at all might have happened over the course of the months that elapsed between the beginning of P.'s ministrations and Mr. Vankirk's fateful recitation, but on the evening of the story's hypnosis session, Mr. Vankirk does not send for P. for medical reasons and later refers to P. as a man whose objections are as unanswerable as they are answerable, apparently suggestive of a reality that is as comprehensible as it is incomprehensible. But then again, the months of treatment would seem to have been more than enough time for Mr. Vankirk to read Victor Cousin and Orestes A. Brownson, and any such studies would, in all likelihood, have uncovered Cousin's postulation of the existence of a spiritual reality that transcends human reason [27] and Brownson's dialecticism which tends to reject all dualisms such as that which separates science and spirituality [28]. As with other hypotheses, however, the absence of evidence for a Teilhardian exegesis is not the evidence of absence.

Any number of additional hypotheses about this story can be forwarded based on, say, the perception of sickness of both the witness and the delirious or this story's historical context in a time of epidemic cholera, but to forward these kinds of analyses is fundamentally missing the point. For example, any attempt to definitively identify God, as Mr. Vankirk refers to it, is to assume the gullibility of a suggestible, manipulatable—and perhaps desperate—patient. Why would or should we presuppose Mr. Vankirk's unreliability when his contribution to the dialogue is characterized by such power to influence or persuade that many of its original readers found it impossible to believe it was fiction [29]? Authoritarian-type suggestion is the predominant device in the story, but it is not the *effect* of the story [30]. The effect is *dependent* on suggestions made in an authoritative manner, but we do not feel this the same way we feel compelled by Mr. Vankirk's sophisticated logic. The story is not, however, necessarily characterized by this logic, the full effect of the strangeness of which we may not feel upon the first reading. If we feel it the first time around, it is fugitive and perhaps tinged with a sense of quaintness. The story's potential to traumatize our "Kantian *a priori* neural organizing" category-distinguishing rationality, however, is only possible when we subsequently recognize the violation of the supposedly inviolable law of non-contradiction, the truly imponderable questions, the *universal* subjugation by authoritarian-type suggestion, and the true identity of that which overrides what Philip K. Dick referred to as "our standard reality convictions" [31] and which Mr. Vankirk calls God.

If we accept that Mr. Vankirk uses or is being used to make authoritative-type hypnotic suggestions, then this particular usage may obviate the question of trying for a personal Omega Point while at the same time opening up a number of other possibilities for deeper existential horror. By addressing his auditor in this fashion, Mr. Vankirk is reducing the peripheral awareness of P.'s and, by extension, our conscious mind to focus solely upon the ideas *he* voices, establishing a relationship between himself, P. and us that should not exist; all Mr. Vankirk's words come to function in the same manner as his command to P.: "You must begin at the beginning" ([5], p. 1033). It is as if Mr. Vankirk ceases to regard P. as the hypnotherapist, nor do we know anything of the true source of Mr. Vankirk's communications. The irony is compounded by the fact that, as Mr. Vankirk's quietly peremptory tone ostensibly suggests, the individual reader is not being made privy to this conversation so much as being held captive by it, spellbound, lured, and controlled exactly as millions of other readers are and have been. Appalled by how easily we ourselves can be mesmerized by this story, we recoil from it, but the only way for us to do that is to bring ourselves out of the trance, to wake up to the implications of the oxymoronic, non-dualistic nature of unparticled matter and thus become a real participant in the

knowledge of something occult. The more frequently we encounter the story, the more comfortable we become with the self-contradictory nature of Mr. Vankirk's claim of the equivalence of matter and spirit. And the more comfortable we become, the more we realize, as Paisley Livingston rightly points out, that "the largest part of the text consists of a transcription of the narrator's last conversation with Vankirk who, under mesmeric influence, details a metaphysical revelation in which *the dualism of mind and matter is resolved*" (Emphasis mine) [32].

As a whole, art possesses the unique capacity to render the reader, the viewer, or the listener susceptible to whatever it suggests. Ellen Dissanayake's answer to the question of what art is and the effect it has on people is deeply explanatory:

In whatever we are accustomed to call art, a *specialness* is tacitly or overtly acknowledged. Reality, or what is considered to be reality, is elaborated, reformed, given not only particularity (emphasis on uniqueness, or "specialness") but import (value, or "specialness")—what may be called such things as magic or beauty or spiritual power or significance ([33], p. 92). (Emphases in original)

Dissanayake goes on to say that art

seeks to shape and embellish reality (or experience) so that it appears otherwise additionally or alternatively real...Reality is converted from its usual unremarkable state—in which we take its components for granted—to a significant or specially experienced reality in which the components, by their emphasis or combination or juxtaposition acquire a meta-reality ([33], p. 95).

Art, according to Dissanayake, is a function of the intentional ways its components have been treated. If something is called art, it is because the artist has worked his or her materials to make them look, sound, and interact so that the experience of the resulting artwork is the same as being instructed, as through a TV commercial, to accept it as a work of art, although such acceptance is really just a function of the embodiment of the power of suggestion of formed materials. Poetry, for example, could thus be defined as the act of offering meaningful elements of speech for consideration as something other than prose, involving a psychological occurrence of uncritical acceptance of such a thing so offered in the exact manner in *which* it is offered (*i.e.*, as poetry). It is therefore the consequence of a suggestion imparted to a person as if in the hypnotic state, by which (s)he is induced to alter the perception of words as the constituents of ordinary language. As a consequence of a directive to a percipient (analogous to a subject in a trance), the interpretation of lexical stimuli as poetry is accomplished virtually instantaneously. The features of the percept that are used in the brain's interpretation of the perception have changed as a corollary of suggestion, giving rise, therefore, to the impression of the absolute, self-sufficient, objective existence of a poem.

Every percipient of art is, in effect, a hypnotized subject, and art is the outcome of a direction given to the percipient for the recognition of art as art that takes place during the act of regarding the percept, namely, the artwork itself. The subject is not necessarily consciously aware of this phenomenon, yet follows the direction nonetheless. The vague but unshakeable awareness of our susceptibility, typically coupled with nescience and/or the fear of "dream-states" that Mary Ellen Snodgrass points to as a reflection of the psychological basis of mid-19th-century Gothic fiction [34], is more frightening than

the most explicit examples of the horror genre. And Poe's mastery can render readers susceptible even to the most absurd yet disturbing suggestions. Despite this, we, as readers, do not necessarily see ourselves as victims, as it were, of a certain *desideratum* found in "The Philosophy of Composition" having to do with this very susceptibility. Yet take note of the unfathomability of the story's notion behind the word "ultimate". Through the pairing of it with other words (*i.e.*, matter, future, life, body, condition), and through the iterative, yet skillful handling of the word, Poe forces us, however subtly, to face the challenge of adaptation to an inconceivable complexity. If Mr. Vankirk is directly experiencing the "unlimited perception of the ultimate life" ([5], p. 1038), we experience it only as "some amount of suggestiveness" in the indeterminable meaning of the language, as "some undercurrent, however indefinite of meaning". With the word "ultimate", simultaneously an admission of inexpressibility and an unrealistic request for us to imagine the unimaginable, we are made to run the risk "of confounding with *the ideal*" the hidden richness it imparts to this story. As percipients of art, it seems likely that we can all agree on this much: we are perpetually engaged in the process of searching for an artwork's "suggested meaning". The locus of that meaning will depend on whether the artist has made it "the upper instead of the undercurrent of the theme", but heedful as we are of where and how we find it, we tend to be disappointed when it is excessive or rather rendered as the upper-current [35]. Poe understands this as well as any artist, and so provides us with stories that require us to first assume the role of hypnotic subject or patient before we can make anything of the deeper, subliminal suggestions at all. He takes us to the brink of madness in "Mesmeric Revelation", thereby, allowing us a possible glimpse into an ontic realm.

If we are the "ultimate" fantasizers, the true dissociaters of this tale as it certainly appears we are, then to what end? What possible purpose can Poe have for telling us all this? Why would he have Mr. Vankirk expand upon something he cannot truly communicate to persons without the same frame of reference? One might suggest that this is a means of easing our percept-system's natural rejection of the violation of the law of non-contradiction, that Poe has Mr. Vankirk utter ultimately incommunicable, self-contradictory things because he realizes that most readers do not know what it is like, by analogy, for the brain to metabolize a hallucinatory chemical agent. Perhaps a transcendental/metaphysical interpretation is mistaken, and Poe was merely using a mesmerized Mr. Vankirk as a pretext for expressing the alienation, isolation, the high strangeness, the paranoiac sense of irrational linkages that are the inevitable outcome of a psychedelic quest for reality, whether induced by psychosis, hypnosis, or drugs. Or perhaps Poe wants us to know that Mr. Vankirk's statements, whether descriptive of something real or unreal, are immaterial; *anything* that unhinges the individual to the point of removing them from human culture reveals him/her to be a quasi-Leibnizian monad of such indestructible indivisibility that the Cartesian distinction between mind and matter is *dissolved* [31]. None of these arguments, however, completely satisfactorily connects the percipient with the percept. There is another possibility, however, that *does* connect the percipient with Poe's purpose in writing the story: the belief in an invisible energy, an exoteric influence. I can think of no possibility more ominous than this. In the months leading up to the crucial session, Mr. Vankirk's traumatic experience with his "phthisis" ([5], p. 1030), which must have caused the most intense negative emotions (e.g., overwhelming fear, deep depression, deep sorrow), helped render him somewhat involuntarily susceptible to intercourse with the denizens of a spiritual world, and thus able to translate as far as language allows everything about that world except direct experience. There were

utterances made by a “somnambule”. Yes, of course, “precious revelations”. To many in the 19th century this was proof that they *must* have come from “superhuman sources” [36].

The act of relating this incident thus largely becomes a sort of journalism, rendering irrelevant the need for a readership with an over-readiness to believe. Mr. Vankirk’s search for answers finds him venturing deeper and deeper into psychological automatism, into another mind, in a seemingly fruitful quest for something the presence of which is quite unexpected and highly conspicuous. In the end, Mr. Vankirk advances an idea that begs for further explanation and for just a moment his otherworldly connection seems to begin to experience fatal variations in the signal, so to speak. A great deal, as one might expect, could be made of the moment when Mr. Vankirk’s countenance changes. It might be the result of having reached a point of absolute incommunicability, intended to remind us of Mr. Vankirk’s finiteness and elicit awe. Vincent Buranelli might argue that this is another of Poe’s analogies, as our intuition would easily accept Mr. Vankirk’s alarming facial expression to help us arrive at the truth about the similarity between the limit of human understanding and the end of the trance only to have P. discover a furtherance of the analogy to be found in Poe’s reasoning from the trance to death—though this reading would conveniently ignore Mr. Vankirk’s radiant smile and its appearance subsequent to P.’s effort to awaken him [37]. Frank Kujawinski, on the other hand, regarding the concurrence of Mr. Vankirk’s awakening and expiration, might argue that this is just another instance of Poe’s ubiquitous trait of denying the non-overlapping magisteria of the real and the psychological [38]. Neither of these hypothetical readings, however, is completely convincing. If Mr. Vankirk smiles at this moment in the story, perhaps it is in retrospect as he finds himself metamorphosing into the same perfected incarnation to which he had earlier referred. His rudimental body falls away and the condition of the worm becomes the condition of the butterfly ([5], p. 1037). Death and ultimate life are conflated, and conflated in the same way that so many other aspects of the story are conflated. The bliss he apparently experiences at finding himself, finally, in “the truly substantive vastness of infinity” ([5], p. 1039), shines into the moment itself. Thus it is left to us to solve the final Delphian mystery, and our desire to supply a solution becomes another indication of our hypnotic susceptibility. We have been “brought to appreciate” so much “nihility” that we are frustrated on some fundamental level at the thought of the utter impossibility that Mr. Vankirk could have made such a mind-bending antinomy without also providing some possibility of reconciling the indubitable propositions of “substance” and “sentiment” ([5], p. 1039). By taking us for hypnotized subjects, by invoking or evoking some equivalency between us and the somnambulist, Poe relieves himself of the need to provide such a possibility by “permissively” sending us to search for one [30]. And the ineffability that we may ascribe to Mr. Vankirk’s final thesis is, by definition, something that would drive us to madness (e.g., Poe’s “matter without matter” [39] in his 1848 short story “Eureka” that bears comparison with the shared identity of matter and spirit in “Mesmeric Revelation”) [40] especially in light of Thomas M. Disch’s contention that the madness readers assign to Mr. Vankirk belongs to the readers themselves: “...in that marvelous conflation of wish fulfillment, pop theology, and pseudoscientific persiflage,” there it is that “Poe will persuade...those longing to be buffaloes...” [41]. Through the rapt attention we provide, we come to know something of what it is to be hypnotized; Mr. Vankirk’s own purposes are as naive as his ensuing messages are intellectually inscrutable, and yet his search becomes our search. But while Mr. Vankirk’s final omission is a disconcerting hypnotic suggestion to the reader, Poe’s omission is his *modus operandi*. By rendering us susceptible to the final

double bind, that is, by conflating our search with Mr. Vankirk's, Poe leads us into the dark, startling world in which mutually exclusive things can both be true in the same sense at the same time, the world of our own psyches in which "substance" ("materiality") can be "sentiment" ("immateriality") simultaneously ([5], pp. 1039–40). That Mr. Vankirk, who can give virtually every detail of a bizarre cosmology, might have been the dummy of some higher-dimensional ventriloquist is terrifying. That we esteem the story, willingly making ourselves receptive to its suggestions, and allowing ourselves to be controlled without coercion to attempt to define the exact nature of the paradoxical situation in which we are finally caught should be equally so.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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