Mesmerism and Fear of Institutionalization in Poe

Edgar Allan Poe’s fascination with mesmerism and the confinement of the human mind and asylum can be seen in his themes of madness, death, and afterlife. He studied Franz Mesmer’s theories, but ultimately focused on the devolution of the individual form or “self” and the limitations of the human consciousness. The boundaries of the mind, once recognized, drive us to a state that would, at Poe’s time, have been recognized as madness. To be considered “mad” in the 19th century would result in admittance to an insane asylum. As Michel Foucault presents in *Madness and Civilization*, the institutions enforced cruel punishment and a prison-like atmosphere on the so-called “patients” of the asylum and the people who were considered mad were separated from society and therefore confined. Poe fears and fixates on the confinement of not only the mind, but of the institution, and one can observe this most clearly in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In recognizing the boundaries and limitations of our consciousness (in the practice of mesmerism), one would be driven mad and must then face further, cruel confinement of the institution; such fear illuminates Poe’s entire dark body of work.

Franz Anton Mesmer was a German physician whose theory known as mesmerism was studied at length in the 19th century. Mesmer believed that human beings were affected by the gravitational attraction of the planets due to an invisible fluid in our bodies and throughout nature. This magnetic attraction drew all atoms (animate and inanimate) together harmoniously.
Mesmerism was so greatly accepted, that a citizen wrote into the *Boston Courier* in 1837 saying that “Mesmerism gives man universal knowledge…as knowledge, is power, the energy and capacity of man will be hereafter unlimited” (“Mesmerism”). The fascination with mesmerism reached Poe, who naturally gravitated toward the mental phenomenon. With new theories surrounding the human consciousness on the rise, the recognition of madness and the fear of the asylum also set in.

As Michel Foucault explains in *Madness and Civilization*, fear and anxiety surrounded the institutionalization of those who were considered “mad.” From the Renaissance to the 19th century, the definition of madness had undergone a great shift. In the Renaissance era, the mad were seen as individuals whose cognitive abilities surpassed even those with reason, but beginning in the 19th century, these individuals were separated from society and were forced to undergo “treatment.” As Foucault explains, the madman was “treated…in such a way that he may always be maintained in his duty, in his appearance and habits, by warnings, by remonstrances, and by punishments immediately inflicted” (186). The harsh treatment of those considered to be insane was very prison-like and resulted in the patients’ societal and self-deprecation. Poe’s critique of the institution is presented in “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (1845); a story in which the narrator visits a “madhouse” and learns that the doctors treat their patients using the system of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether. After many odd instances, the narrator finally uncovers the truth: that the so-called doctors are actually the patients who have tarred and feathered the real doctors and have been storing them in underground cells. Poe’s ridicule of the institution is apparent, and the story also reveals his fear and anxiety over the actual system of the institution itself and what is considered “mad.” In regards to the mindset of the mad individual, Foucault states that in the “19th century, the initial
model of madness would be to believe oneself to be God, while for the proceeding centuries it had been to deny God” (264). To align oneself with God is, in Poe’s opinion, the ultimate result of mesmerism and is the unity that is reached once the human body undergoes a “collapse” (Taylor). Therefore, it is clear that Poe’s fixation with mesmerism ties directly to the 19th century definition of madness.

Poe’s interpretation of mesmerism (extensively explained in “Eureka—A Prose Poem”) focuses more on the loss of the individual, the self, and the human form itself and the freeing of the consciousness. A letter written to his mother on July 7, 1849 reveals Poe’s pride and high regard for his theories expressed in “Eureka:”

My dear, dear mother, I have been so ill…and can now hardly hold the pen…It is of no use to reason with me now; I must die. I have no desire to live since I have done “Eureka.” I could accomplish nothing more. (Woodberry 312)

Considering the utmost esteem Poe holds for “Eureka,” we must assume that the subjects and speculations addressed in the poem are crucial in understanding his entire body of work and creative process. In “Eureka,” Poe primarily addresses the confinement of the human mind in the following passage:

Thought is its self-cognizance; and, with some little equivocation, it may be said that no fog of the mind can well be greater than that which, extending to the very boundaries of the mental domain, shuts out even these boundaries themselves from comprehension.

(Poe “Eureka”)

The realization of confinement sets in once the individual has recognized the limitations of the human consciousness. The boundaries of the mind, when fixated upon, begin to haunt the individual. As one might notice, all of Poe’s narrators are haunted by the sense of Furthermore,
Poe goes on to express his theory that the universe will ultimately “end in an inevitable re-collapse into a restored unity, a process already evident in gravity” (Poe “Eureka”). Due to all atoms’ attraction, the universe (including the human form) must collapse as the bonds of all things continue to strengthen with gravity.

Poe’s fascination with mesmerism and its connection to the consciousness and human form is obvious in his stories “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845) and “Mesmeric Revelation” (1844). In “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” the narrator mesmerizes Valdemar at the point of death and leaves his corpse in a mesmerized state for seven months. The narrator asks the corpse questions and the dead tongue responds with the voice of the consciousness. Once released from the trance, the body decomposes rapidly into an abominable liquid. The story reveals Poe’s deep fixation on the collapse of the human form when it gives way to the consciousness. Mesmerism and death are central themes in “Mesmeric Revelation” as well. The narrator mesmerizes a Mr. Vankirk who is suffering immense bodily pain, but is mentally at ease. Once mesmerized, Vankirk blurts that he “must die” and that the idea of death does not affect him, saying “If I were awake I should like to die, but now it’s no matter. The mesmeric condition is so near death as to content me” (Poe 45). The idea that the mesmeric state is nearest to death is parallel to Poe’s belief that the state resembles “ultimate life” which is achieved when the human form falls away and allows the consciousness to at last find unity and relief (Taylor).

Once the collapse occurs and the consciousness is no longer confined by the human mind, “Individual intelligences become blended…into One…the general consciousness” (Poe “Eureka”). After the individual intelligences merge after the collapse, Poe believes we will reach spiritual unity with God. He states that “In order to comprehend what [God] is, we should have
to be God ourselves” (Poe “Eureka”). After understanding Foucault’s definition of madness in the 19th century as believing “oneself to be God,” Poe’s fear of madness and the institution is certainly realistic considering his theory of spirituality and mesmerism.

Poe’s fear of mesmeric fixation resulting in institutionalization is most evident in “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). In the story, the narrator is summoned to the home of his childhood friend, Roderick Usher, who has fallen ill and has succumbed to madness. The narrator immediately picks up on the gloom of the home and describes it as though it possesses life. The setting becomes the narrator’s own emotional state, and the story embodies the mesmeric concept that “atmospheres reside in things and then possess persons” (Taylor). When contemplating the house, the narrator states: “It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered” (Poe 171). Roderick lives in the crumbling, daunting, and imposing family mansion with his twin sister with whom, to the narrator’s understanding, is Usher’s lover. The incestuous relationship is a metaphor for the close bond between the atoms of all humans. In Poe’s physics, all attractions are incestuous because we are all composed of like matter (Taylor). Applying mesmerism to the story, we are able to understand that the house and Usher have formed a material bond because Usher is a recluse and is bound to his surroundings. Also, Usher’s mental ailment of hypersensitivity is a result of his heightened awareness of the attraction of all things to one another. Usher is displayed as being mad and is therefore institutionalized in his own home. The bond between Usher and the metaphoric asylum represents Poe’s fear of mesmeric thought resulting in institutionalization. Therefore, Roderick Usher embodies Poe’s greatest fear.

Roderick’s burying of his sister alive represents Poe’s fixation with death and the human consciousness being freed from the body; their fatal collapse onto one another represents the
“ultimate life” that is found in unity, and the fall of the house represents the release from the institution. The attraction between Usher and his sister represents the magnetic force that compresses and ultimately collapses the human form. Usher’s devolution is seen as a relief because, as Poe states in “Eureka,” “the self’s death is the necessary cost of transitioning from a body capable of capturing only a small, contingent spectrum of the totality of being to a state of absolute harmony” (Poe “Eureka”). Roderick’s death frees his consciousness, and the fall of the house frees all of the characters from the looming horror of institutionalization. The narrator finds relief in fleeing the scene, and reflects: “my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters…” (Poe 183). Here, the narrator acknowledges the conscious effect the destruction of the house has on him; he, too, had begun to feel and form a material unity with the house. The mind of the narrator feels the fall of the house because the attraction between his consciousness and the building had already grown strong. Also, the narrator feels a mental pull as the house collapses because we are to believe it ends his feelings of madness that he believed were “creeping upon” him due to the fact that the home also represents an institution (Poe 179). Therefore, “The Fall of the House of Usher” presents the fear of the confinement of the human mind in relation to mesmerism and the resulting institutionalization in an asylum.

Poe’s interpretation of mesmerism reveals his fixation with the death of the human form and the freedom of the consciousness. In recognizing the limitations of our consciousness, we are overcome by the hyper awareness of the suffocating attraction of all matter. Ultimately, all atoms must collide and result in a collapse into harmonious unity with God. Clearly, the darker interpretation of mesmerism took root in Poe’s mind and laid the foundation for all of his theories and physics. Acknowledging the devolution of the self and unity with God that is
brought on by mesmerism is, in Poe’s time, a form of madness and therefore must be met with institutionalization. The fear and anxiety surrounding the confinement of not only the mind, but the asylum positively drenches the body of Poe’s work. It is clear, now, why Poe’s statement to his mother that he “must die” is one of relief (Woodberry 312). Poe understood that in death he would be free from the constraints of the human mind, from the institution, and submerged in pious harmony with the universe and God.
Work Cited


Taylor, Matthew A. “Edgar Allan Poe’s (Meta)Physics: A Pre-History of the Post-Human.”
