

***Evermore: Edgar Allan Poe and the Mystery of the Universe***

Harry Lee Poe

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Reviewed by: Philip Edward Phillips

In this book, Harry Lee Poe reevaluates Edgar Allan Poe's life and explores questions central to his thinking and writing, especially his interest in unity. Poe's philosophical prose-poem, *Eureka* (1848), occupies center stage in this informative and provocative study of Poe and the universe. In *Eureka*, Poe "proposes the Big Bang theory, speculates about what we call black holes, rejects the scientific understanding of the universe through which gravity works, and declares that time and space are one thing, all the while constructing a theology of creation and a philosophical answer to the problem of suffering" (ix-x). Writing for a broad audience, the author offers a highly readable and engaging treatment of Poe's lifelong engagement with the human "problems" of suffering, Beauty, Love, justice, and the universe itself. A descendent of Poe's cousin, William Poe, Harry Lee Poe approaches his subject with sympathy, and, as a Poe scholar, with considerable literary-historical expertise.

The first chapter addresses popular perceptions and misperceptions of Poe, the most heinous of which is Rufus Griswold's infamous *Memoir*, in which he promulgated malicious slanders about his life. Rather than dwelling on the many misfortunes in Poe's life, Harry Lee Poe highlights how Poe thought about the negative problem of suffering alongside "the positive problems of Love and Beauty," which are central topics of concern in his works (1-2). While popular audiences associate Poe with death, horror, and the gothic, the author justly argues that Poe's central interest in his artistic work is unity. In *Eureka*, for example, "Poe concluded that suffering, Beauty, Love, and justice come together in a meaningful and rational way in the unity of effect intended by the 'author' of the universe" (2). The artist's imagination bridges the divide between "matter and spirit" as well as the "frontier of death" (2). Poe posited

God as the source of creation and the universe as God's perfect plot in *Eureka*, which he considered to be his greatest work.

Poe's understanding of the "problem" of Beauty developed over the course of his entire career. According to the author, it was "realized in *Eureka*, in which [Poe] describes Beauty in relation to math, physics, and the cosmos. Poe realized that Beauty involves more than merely an emotional response to some stimulus but constitutes a cognitive criterion for judgment and response" (80). Poe's desire for greater perfection in his writing—as evidenced by his revisions of such works as "To Helen"—paralleled his search for the ideal, for Beauty, for order—in art and in the universe. According to Harry Lee Poe, "Beauty constituted to Poe evidence that human experience is not bound by time but belongs to eternity" (83). But the questions remain concerning the preservation of individual identity throughout eternity.

According to Harry Lee Poe, Poe proposed the original Big Bang theory at a time when the world was not ready to accept it. As he puts it, Poe "believed he had unraveled a mystery that comprehended a unity to the universe. Beauty and Truth, science and religion, mathematics and poetry, matter and spirit all had an intertwining relationship" (134). And Poe reached that conclusion through his imagination.

But what of other "problems," such as suffering in the world? According to *Eureka*, the universe will expand, then contract to return ultimately to its primal nothingness. In returning to God, all individuality is absorbed into God, a prospect that is both exhilarating and frightening. The rhythm of an expanding and contracting universe parallels Poe's theory of poetry in "The Philosophy of Composition" as the "rhythmical creation of beauty." For Poe, the universe is God's plot, which expands and contracts like a beating heart. This conception of the universe provided Poe (at least temporarily) with a solution to the problem of suffering. The author notes that, like young C.S. Lewis, Charles Darwin, and the Buddha, Poe resolved that "some sort of deity existed, but not one who stood too close or could actually make a difference" (162). It makes sense, then, that such a solution would

not be sufficient for one who lost all the meaningful women in his life — his mother, the mother of a childhood friend, and his beloved wife, Virginia—to early deaths. Although many read Poe as a macabre writer, in the author's view, Poe hated death. Indeed, Poe focused instead on "attraction" and revised his conception of God to include "the continuity of human consciousness beyond death. In the end, the problem of Love seems to have overcome the problem of evil" (162-3). Following the death of his wife and his subsequent debilitating grief, Poe reached the view that "individual identity continues so that people may know and love each other, for without individual identity, Love does not occur. Love requires relationship, even for God" (163).

Poe's conclusion, then, requires another layer of understanding in respect to the deity, which Harry Lee Poe reserves for his cleverly-titled postscript, "Ex Poe's Facto." Poe was not a habitual churchgoer, except in his childhood, when he attended St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond. However, in his final year, Poe "signed the pledge" at a Sons of Temperance Meeting. The author notes that many scholars fascinated with Poe's mysterious final days have overlooked the potential significance of this pledge. Poe did not merely pledge to abstain from alcohol but he made a public profession of faith in the evangelical tradition. Perhaps Poe took this step to convince the widowed Elmira Shelton (his boyhood sweetheart) to marry him, or perhaps Poe had a "conversion experience." Harry Lee Poe suggests the latter in his reading of the event, arguing that Poe hoped for "the continuation of personal identity beyond death" (171). For Poe, then, the expansion and contraction of the universe, which he conceived in *Eureka*, intimated that there is "something else." Poe came to believe that "Love, Beauty, and justice all point beyond themselves in the physical world to their eternal origin, and by these means, God draws people toward him" (175). Harry Lee Poe "cannot say" if Poe concluded that *Eureka's* "philosophical and theological concerns are satisfied in Jesus Christ" so that Poe, in good conscience, could have "affiliated with an evangelical Christian organization" (175), but he makes a credible case worthy of consideration.

While *Evermore* offers an extended exploration of Poe's conception of the universe, it provides much more in its reevaluation of Poe's life, his concern with perennial human problems, and his view of God. I recommend this book to anyone interested in philosophical and theological approaches to one of America's most widely-recognized but least-understood authors.

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