

Modern Language Association

Poe and Mesmerism

Author(s): Sidney E. Lind

Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Dec., 1947), pp. 1077-1094

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/459150>

Accessed: 02/02/2009 08:10

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POE AND MESMERISM

IN three of his stories, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," "Mesmeric Revelation," and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," Edgar Allan Poe reflected the interest of his day in what was by all odds the most fascinating of the new "sciences." Mesmerism, first as a somewhat frightening novelty in the hands of its "discoverer," Anton Mesmer, during the closing decades of the eighteenth century, and then as the handmaiden of medicine in the first half of the nineteenth century, had achieved enormous popularity throughout Europe and the United States.¹ To compare such popularity with the spread of the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Jung, and Adler in the twentieth century is to make but a feeble analogy, considering the difference in time and the development of science between the two ages. In addition, the interest manifested in mesmerism contained far more sensationalism and mysticism, and therefore had a more direct and widespread appeal. The extent of interest becomes clear when it is realized that in 1815 a commission was appointed in Russia to investigate animal magnetism, with a "magnetical" clinic being subsequently established near Moscow; that by 1817 doctors in Prussia and in Denmark were the only ones authorized to practice mesmerism, and were compelled to submit their findings to royal commissions; and that by 1835 a clinic had been established in Holland, and in Sweden theses on the subject were accepted for the doctorate.²

In the United States and England interest in mesmerism became just as intense.³ During June and July of 1841 a committee consisting of prominent citizens, clergymen, and doctors was organized in Boston for the purpose of witnessing a series of experiments performed by Dr. Robert H. Collyer, a rabid supporter of animal magnetism.⁴ In London there was established in April, 1843, *The Zoist: A Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism*, and in New York there appeared in June, 1842, the short-lived *Magnet*, which immoderately declared itself "Devoted to the Investigation of Human Physiology, Embracing Vitality,

¹ "Mesmerism" and "animal magnetism" were terms used interchangeably in the nineteenth century.

² Charles Poyen, *Report on the Magnetical Experiments* (Boston, 1836), pp. lxxvi-lxx.

³ The collection of works on the subject in the New York Public Library, admittedly incomplete, shows nineteen books published in the United States from 1841 through 1845, and eight published in England from 1843 through 1845.

⁴ The committee refused to commit itself, being content to state that no collusion existed between the mesmerist and his subjects. Cf., Robert H. Collyer, *Psychography* (New York, 1843), p. 38.

Pathetism, Psychology, Phrenopathy, Neurology, Physiognomy and Magnetism." Periodicals frequently carried articles and letters attacking or defending mesmerism and its practice or malpractice.⁵ Almost without exception the writings on mesmerism published at this time owed much to the earlier works of Joseph P. F. Deleuze (1753–1835), naturalist, Secretary of the Paris Museum of Natural History, and translator of Darwin's *Love of the Plants* (1790) and Thomson's *Seasons* (1801–06). The fame of Deleuze as a proponent of mesmerism was established with his *Histoire Critique du Magnétisme Animal* (1813), and further spread by his *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism*, translated and published in the United States in 1837.

It is safe to say that the terminology of mesmerism was bandied about in much the same manner as the language of psychoanalysis was to be eighty years later, and with, in all probability, as little real comprehension on the part of the public. The subject was in the air, and it was logical that Poe, as a journalist sensitive to popular interest, should have exploited it.⁶

His first venture in this direction was "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," published in *Godey's* for April, 1844.⁷ "Mesmeric Revelation," published in the *Columbian Magazine* for August, 1844, and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," which appeared in the *American Review* for December, 1845, reflect both a continuing interest in mesmerism on Poe's part and the fact that, as will be subsequently shown, he drew upon a specific work on mesmerism for ideas and fictional material. The result is that these three stories constitute a series within which the mesmeric experiment becomes more profound, irrespective of plausibility or implausibility, or of whether or not Poe in at least two of the three was hoaxing his readers. "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" is a case study in mesmerism; "Mesmeric Revelation" concerns itself with metaphysical discussion between the narrator and his mesmerized subject, who dies

⁵ As typical may be instanced the following: an anti-mesmeric article in *The Yale Literary Magazine*, III (December, 1837), 61–67, containing a satire reprinted from *Blackwoods* for September, 1837; a letter to the *New Yorker*, IV (November 18, 1837), 547 f., from a doctor, defending animal magnetism in its medical use; an editorial note in the *New World*, IV (February 12, 1842), 111, praising the forthright stand taken by Charles Dickens, together with a letter from Dickens, at that time in Boston, supporting the cause of mesmerism.

⁶ Poe published three acts of an anonymously written five-act play, *The Magnetizer; or, Ready for Any Body*, in his *Broadway Journal*. The play, a completely inconsequential comedy, ran for three successive issues (September 6, 13, 20, 1845). Whether the two remaining acts were ever written, or whether Poe terminated the publishing arrangements, is not known.

⁷ For Poe's reliance upon Macaulay's *Warren Hastings* for locale, see Henry Austin, "Poe as a Plagiarist and His Debt to Macaulay," *Literature*, August 4, 1899, p. 83.

while in the trance; and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" goes yet further in applying mesmerism to keep alive a man who should, according to the doctors attending him, have expired. It is my purpose to analyze these three tales with reference to the extent of Poe's reliance upon the theories of mesmerism prevalent in his day.

I

According to the traditional interpretation, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" is an exceedingly well contrived mixture of the real and unreal, of hypnotism and metempsychosis.⁸ Following such an interpretation, a summary of the tale would be very much as follows:

The narrator makes Bedloe's acquaintance in the fall of 1827. Impressed by his curiously aged appearance, and the observably degenerative condition of his body, the narrator goes into a detailed account of Bedloe's treatment by Dr. Templeton for neuralgia through mesmerism.⁹ Bedloe's addiction to morning doses of morphine and his habit of taking long walks every afternoon in the Ragged Mountains are mentioned. On one day near the end of November Bedloe does not return from his walk until after dark. He then renders a remarkable account of the day's events. He describes his walk through a hitherto undiscovered gorge, its peculiar atmosphere, and the ensuing dream-state which envelops him. He then describes his dream experience, pausing only to express doubt that it was a dream. At this point Dr. Templeton urges him to continue, anticipating his next sentence. He is rewarded by a look of "profound astonishment" from Bedloe, who picks up the narrative and develops it to its fatal conclusion when he is struck in the right temple with a poisoned arrow. The narrator now breaks in with the suggestion that such a death proves the episode to have been a dream, and is astonished to see that Bedloe refuses to reply to his jesting observation, or even to continue his story until Dr. Templeton, who now seems almost petrified by horror, hoarsely urges him to proceed. From this point onward, the episode is rapidly terminated: Bedloe views his own corpse and then, possessed of an unearthly lightness, "flits" away from the scene, back to that part of the gorge where the experience had begun, there to resume his normal state. Templeton then presents the miniature of his dead friend, Mr. Oldeb, pointing out the

⁸ Thus, A. H. Quinn, in *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1941), describes it as "the realistic treatment of the supernatural" (p. 401), and G. E. Woodberry, in *The Life of Edgar Allan Poe* (2 vols., New York, 1909), calls it "a picturesque story of metempsychosis ascribed to the influence of Hoffmann . . ." (II, 109). Palmer Cobb, in *The Influence of E. T. A. Hoffmann on the Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* (Chapel Hill, 1908), finds parallels in the use of the doctrine of metempsychosis by both authors (p. 50 f.). Cf., Killis Campbell, *The Mind of Poe* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 9 f., and Margaret Alterton, *Origins of Poe's Critical Theory* (Iowa City, 1925), p. 16. Whatever the facts of Hoffmann's influence upon Poe, metempsychosis is an element of minor importance in Poe's tale.

⁹ The mesmeric literature of the day contains numerous cases of various ailments successfully treated by mesmerism. Cf., *The Zoist*, I-V (1843-47), *passim*.

remarkable resemblance to Bedloe, and recounts the circumstances of Oldeb's death during the 1780 Indian insurrection in which he himself had been involved. He concludes his story by stating that at the very moment that Bedloe was undergoing his strange experience, he had been writing an account of the events of forty-seven years ago. One week after this episode Bedloe's death occurs as the result of the accidental introduction of a poisonous black leech to his temple by Dr. Templeton in an attempt to reduce by bleeding the fever he had contracted on that strange afternoon in the mountains. The narrator points out to the editor of the newspaper carrying the announcement that an *e* has been omitted from the end of Bedloe's name, and the editor admits the typographical error, especially since, to his knowledge, Bedloe is spelled with an *e* "the world over." The narrator turns away, muttering, "Then indeed has it come to pass that one truth is stranger than any fiction—for Bedlo, without the *e*, what is it but Oldeb conversed? And this man tells me it is a typographical error."¹⁰

At first, the tale appears to conform to the common interpretation: it is a combination of hypnotic theory and metempsychosis. However, if this interpretation be accepted and the summary is examined critically, then the following questions arise:

1. Why, if this is a story of metempsychosis, should Poe have complicated the plot by having Dr. Templeton write the incidents of the Indian mutiny *precisely* while Bedloe was experiencing the hallucination?
2. Why should Dr. Templeton have been first so calmly anticipatory when he interrupted Bedloe's self-questioning of his experience on the basis of its realistic nature, and then so horrified when Bedloe later described his death? In other words, what is Dr. Templeton's actual part in the story?
3. If the basis of the story is metempsychosis, why is the hypnotic element so heavily emphasized at the beginning of the tale?

If the tale be reconsidered from the point of view suggested by these questions, it will be immediately observed that while the metempsychotic basis shrinks in importance, that of mesmerism takes on a greater significance. A reinterpretation of the tale based upon the three following suppositions will, I believe, clarify a large part of the narrative's obscurity.

1. The only "scientific" basis for the tale is the theory of mesmerism prevalent in Poe's day.
2. Poe's statement, "It is only now, in the year 1845, when similar miracles are witnessed daily by thousands, that I dare to record this apparent impossibility as a matter of serious fact,"¹¹ refers to *mesmeric phenomena* and not to metempsychotic phenomena.

¹⁰ *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison, 17 vols. (New York, 1902), v, 176. This edition will be referred to henceforth as *Works*.

¹¹ *Works*, v, 165.

3. There is no metempsychotic basis in this tale as there is, for example, in "Morella" and "Ligeia." Rather, *it is Dr. Templeton who believes in metempsychosis.*

A critical summary of the tale in terms of these suppositions follows:

The narrator makes Bedloe's acquaintance in the fall of 1827. He is struck by Bedloe's physical condition, ascribing his emaciation and appearance of extreme age to "the long series of neuralgic attacks,"¹² and attributing the curious condition of the eyes to Bedloe's heavy addiction to morphine for purposes of dulling the neuralgic pain ("It was his habit to take a very large dose of it immediately after breakfast each morning.")¹³ Bedloe is under the care of Dr. Templeton, who is a practised hypnotist, and who has, consequently, developed the condition of *rapport* between them to the point where he can, "by mere volition," and over any distance, place his patient in an hypnotic trance. *In addition, Dr. Templeton subscribes to the theory of metempsychosis; this is why he had in the first place taken Bedloe on as a patient years before at Saratoga:*

"When I first saw you, Mr. Bedloe, at Saratoga, it was the miraculous similarity which existed between yourself and the painting, which induced me to accost you, to seek your friendship, and to bring about those arrangements which resulted in my becoming your constant companion. In accomplishing this point, I was urged *partly, and perhaps principally*, by a regretful memory of the deceased, *but also, in part, by an uneasy and not altogether horrorless curiosity respecting yourself.*"¹⁴ [Italics mine.]

Immediately before this, Dr. Templeton, in reply to Bedloe's expression of doubt that the experience in the hills had been a dream, had said: "Nor was it" . . . with an air of deep solemnity, "yet it would be difficult to say how otherwise it should be termed. Let us suppose only, that the soul of man to-day is upon the verge of some stupendous psychal discoveries. Let us content ourselves with this supposition."¹⁵

It is Templeton, therefore, who believes in metempsychosis. The startling facial resemblance between Bedloe and Oldeb—and are we to presume that Templeton has missed the relationship between the surnames?—has resulted in his incessant preoccupation over the years of his association with Bedloe with the idea that behind such likeness lies a deep and perhaps terrible significance. However, at this time he has not recognized, or perhaps lacks the courage to recognize, the belief which lies just below the level of his conscious realization.

Bedloe went daily for a walk in the hills. Why, then, did the experience

¹² v, 164.

¹³ v, 166.

¹⁴ v, 174.

¹⁵ v, 174.

befall him on this particular day? The answer is obvious: it was on this day that Templeton sat down to write of the incidents which had occurred so long ago:

"You will perceive by these manuscripts," (here the speaker produced a notebook in which several pages appeared to have been freshly written) "that at the very period in which you fancied these things amid the hills, I was engaged in detailing them upon paper here at home."¹⁶

Templeton's failure to realize the connection between his writing and Bedloe's "fancies" is important in that it is consistent with his lack of awareness throughout the tale that metempsychotic implications exist only in his mind. His hypnotic hold on the mind of his patient, so strong that "sleep was brought about almost instantaneously, by the mere volition of the operator,"¹⁷ together with his concentration upon the writing of the details of Oldeb's death, suffice to throw Bedloe into the trance in which he experiences what Templeton is writing. The fact that Bedloe was affected over a distance of miles does not in the least weaken this interpretation; mesmeric theory of Poe's day permitted of such corollaries. For example, in a typical work on mesmerism written in 1841 will be found the following observations:

In order that one individual should act upon another, it is necessary that there should be a moral and physical sympathy between them, and when this sympathy is produced, we say that the parties are in perfect communication. . . .

Magnetism can be conveyed to great distances, when persons are in perfect communication.¹⁸

In another book published three years later will be found an elaboration of the first observation which further illuminates the story and indicates how thoroughly it integrates with contemporary mesmeric theory. All of these excerpts, it may be mentioned in passing, derive from the writing of Deleuze.

Before undertaking a Magnetic treatment, the Magnetiser ought to examine himself. He ought to ask himself whether he can continue it, and whether the patient or those who have influence over him, will put any obstacle in the way. He ought not to undertake it if he feels any repugnance, or if he fears to catch the disease. To act efficaciously, he should feel himself drawn toward the person who requires his care, take interest in him, and have the desire and hope of curing, or at least relieving him. As soon as he has decided, which he should never do lightly, he ought to consider whom he Magnetises as his brother—as his friend; he should be so devoted to him as not to perceive the sacrifices that he

¹⁶ v, 175.

¹⁷ v, 165.

¹⁸ *The Animal Magnetizer, By A Physician* (Philadelphia, 1841), p. 22 f.

imposes upon himself. Any other consideration, any other motive than the desire of doing good, ought not to induce him to undertake a treatment.¹⁹

Thus, Bedloe's strange experience is revealed in its true light as being a mesmeric trance transmitted from Templeton's mind, and not the workings of metempsychosis. This accounts for Bedloe's bewilderment at suddenly finding himself in a strange, oriental land, and his belief that it was not a dream:

"You will say now, of course, that I dreamed; but not so. What I saw—what I heard—what I felt—what I thought—had about it nothing of the unmistakable idiosyncrasy of the dream. All was rigorously self-consistent. At first, doubting that I was really awake, I entered into a series of tests, which soon convinced me that I really was. Now, when one dreams, and, in the dream suspects that he dreams, the suspicion *never fails to confirm itself*, and the sleeper is almost immediately aroused. Thus Novalis errs not in saying that "we are near waking when we dream that we dream." Had the vision occurred to me as I describe it, without my suspecting it as a dream, then a dream it might absolutely have been, but, occurring as it did, and suspected and tested as it was, I am forced to class it among other phenomena."²⁰

The completeness with which Bedloe has been immersed in the trance also accounts for his unexpected reaction to the narrator's jesting observation upon his statement that he was struck by a poisoned arrow and died.

"You will hardly persist *now*," I said, smiling, "that the whole of your adventure was not a dream. You are not prepared to maintain that you are dead?"

When I said these words, I of course expected some lively sally from Bedloe in reply; but to my astonishment, he hesitated, trembled, became fearfully pallid, and remained silent. I looked towards Templeton. He sat erect and rigid in his chair—his teeth chattered, and his eyes were starting from their sockets. "Proceed!" he at length said hoarsely to Bedloe.²¹

Bedloe's being thrown into a mesmerized state where all events had the air of reality, and, indeed, were for him as real as the facts of Templeton's recollection, would explain his conviction that it was not a dream, whether or not he made any "tests." The sense of reality would also explain his refusal to reply to the narrator's jest, and his turning pale as the vividness of his own violent death returned to him. The explanation of Templeton's reaction of horror and perhaps fright follows the same path. It is at this point that his place in the story becomes clear. Templeton has no realization that he has projected the scenes he has written

¹⁹ Charles P. Johnson, *A Treatise of Animal Magnetism* (New York, 1844), p 18.

²⁰ *Works*, v, 171.

²¹ v, 173.

through space to Bedloe's mind. To him it is not an illustration of the "perfect communication" enjoyed by him as the mesmeric operator and by Bedloe as the subject; rather, it is a sudden and shocking revelation and confirmation of that in which he has hitherto half-believed—the actuality of metempsychosis. Where before he had casually anticipated with an interposed sentence Bedloe's adventure, he is now horrified at the full meaning of what he has heard, for to him it means that the body of Bedloe is possessed by the soul of Oldeb. By the time Bedloe has reached the end of his account, Templeton has recovered his equanimity to some degree and can calmly present the facts as he knows them, *facts which are identical with those of Bedloe's experience*. He can make the observation, being now convinced by what he has heard, "with an air of deep solemnity, 'that the soul of man of to-day is upon the verge of some stupendous psychal discoveries.'"²²

There are several additional points which require explanation with respect to the new interpretation I have proposed for this tale. The first of these concerns Bedloe's reference to his death and subsequent return to what may be called the post-hypnotic state. After being struck by the arrow and dying, Bedloe spends some minutes in a state of non-existence, "of darkness and non-entity. At length, there seemed to pass a violent and sudden shock through my soul, as of electricity." He leaves his body, and floating through the air, makes his way out of the city and back to the ravine, where his adventure had begun. At this point he "experienced a shock, as of a galvanic battery; the sense of weight, of volition, of substance, returned. I became my original self, and bent my steps eagerly homewards."²³

These experiences, too, have been transmitted from Templeton to Bedloe. The figures of speech and the description of consciousness after death are the verbalization of the ideas Templeton has arrived at by the time of his writing them. Thus, the references to electricity and the galvanic battery constitute the strongest shock it is possible for Templeton, as a man of science, to imagine. In the larger sense, of course, the comparison is Poe's, and it is precisely for this reason that no significance need be placed upon its use. These terms were in fairly common use in Poe's day. Hawthorne, writing of Hepzibah Pyncheon's desperate lunge into her new shop, says: "The haste, and, as it were, the galvanic impulse of the movement, were really quite startling."²⁴

²² v, 174.²³ v, 173.

²⁴ *Complete Works* (Riverside Edition, 1883), III, 54. Hawthorne's repugnance to spiritualism and mesmerism, and his harsh delineation of Dr. Westervelt, the crafty mesmerist in *The Blithedale Romance*, may be recalled as a treatment of the subject from an inimical point of view.

However, accepting mesmerism as the broad foundation for the imaginative plausibility of the tale, and relegating metempsychosis to the interior position it assumes as a portion of Templeton's characterization necessitates a critical readjustment. Viewing the tale from this new approach, the reader must be prepared to grant a series of coincidences:

1. Bedloe resembles Oldeb to a startling degree. It is Templeton's recognition of this fact that sets off the train of events.
2. The circumstances of Bedloe's death duplicate in a general way those of Oldeb's death, although here it may be assumed that Bedloe was neither the first nor the last to meet with a tragic death owing to the confusion of a poisonous with a non-poisonous leech. The significance of the accident lies only in its coincidental context.
3. The "typographical error" involved in spelling Bedloe's name without the final *e* causes it to be read as Oldeb in reverse. This incident is introduced by Poe to intensify the mood of the tale.

I am not prepared to urge acceptance as anything more than a subconscious reaction on Poe's mind the fact that Oldeb was struck in the temple by a poisoned arrow, Bedloe was poisoned through the temple by a leech, and the name of the doctor is, of all names—Templeton. Of the muttered reply made at the close of the tale by the narrator to the newspaper editor's statement that Bedloe's name was misspelled ("for Bedlo, without the *e*, what is it but Oldeb conversed? And this man tells me it is a typographical error"), it may be said that he has suddenly been struck by the sinister sequence of events, even though he is imperfectly aware of either their supposed implications or their true significance. But such half-understanding would seem to imply the workings of metempsychosis throughout the story. Poe, however, was unable to resist the temptation to prolong the mood of the tale beyond its real termination, to end it on a reverberating, somewhat ambiguous note. How much better the tale's unity would have been had Templeton, in the narrator's presence, spoken these words to the editor!

The story was therefore intended by Poe to be a study in hypnosis, with the theme of metempsychosis subordinated to one character, Dr. Templeton. There is nothing whatever of the supernatural in it as there is in "Morella" or "Ligeia." "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" may of course be thought of as a subtle variation on the theme of metempsychosis, but only to the extent that it is part of the characterization of Dr. Templeton, who, by this reinterpretation, takes on a greater importance than has formerly been given him.

II

In the *Broadway Journal* for April 5, 1845, Poe wrote a review of W. Newnham's *Human Magnetism*. In this review, which is nothing more

than an extended quibble over Newnham's faulty use of the word "counterfeit," and which gives no indication that Poe had read the book in its entirety, he took occasion to say:

. . . most especially do we disagree with him in his (implied) disparagement of the work of Chauncey Hare Townshend, which we regard as one of the most truly profound and philosophical works of the day—a work to be valued properly only in a day to come.²⁵

The review was reprinted in revised form, with most of the extravagant praise of Townshend considerably toned down, as part of *Marginalia* no. 7 in *Graham's Magazine* for November, 1846, but here too Poe found that Townshend's work would be "valued properly only in a day to come."²⁶ The "work" of Townshend referred to was his very popular *Facts in Mesmerism*.²⁷ This book, more cogent than most of its kind, was published originally in London in 1840; reprinted in Boston in 1841 by Little, Brown; reprinted in New York the same year and again in 1842 and 1843 by Harper and Brothers, and finally reappeared in a revised and enlarged London edition in 1844, or perhaps in December of 1843.²⁸ It was undoubtedly, therefore, one of the most popular books on mesmerism to appear at this time.

Poe had sufficient reason to eulogize Townshend, for he was heavily in debt to the English writer's book. Whether or not he went to any particular edition of *Facts in Mesmerism* for technical background for "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," it is difficult to determine; almost any of the other works on the subject would have been sufficient for his purposes in that tale. However, for "Mesmeric Revelation" and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" he probably went directly to the London 1844 edition of *Facts in Mesmerism*, and from it borrowed generously.

Hervey Allen in *Israfel* hints that Poe's attendance about the middle of 1844 at lectures given "on mesmerism, transcendental theories, and psychic phenomena" in New York by Andrew Jackson Davis, a noted spiritualist and clairvoyant of that day, may have provided him with ideas for his stories.²⁹ Although there may be some truth in this so far as

²⁵ I, 210 (*Works*, XII, 123). Newnham's book was reviewed in detail the same month in *The Zoisist* (III, 102-116). The precision of this review reflects only too clearly upon Poe's superficial treatment of the book.

²⁶ XXIX, 247 f. (*Works*, XVI, 113-115).

²⁷ Rev. Chauncey Hare Townshend (1798-1868), poet, graduate of Eton College and Trinity Hall, Cambridge; B.A., 1821; M.A., 1824; entered the clergy, but was kept from active service by illness.

²⁸ The revision and enlargement consisted solely of the addition of a "Notice to the Second Edition" of 22 pages, bringing the book up to date.

²⁹ 2 vols! (New York, 1926), II, 688 n. Allen's reference to Davis's books will be found in

Eureka is concerned, there is no basis for such an assumption, or at best an inconsequential one, in the case of the three tales. Allen cites three books by Davis in which Poe is mentioned. In the first, *The Magic Staff*,³⁰ Davis reports a visit from Poe during which they evidently discussed "Mesmeric Revelation," with Davis "assuring him that though [Poe] had poetically imagined the whole of his published article upon the answers of a clairvoyant, the main ideas conveyed by it concerning 'ultimates' were strictly and philosophically true. At the close of this interview he departed, and never came again."³¹

The second book, *Events in the Life of a Seer*, is a collection of on-the-spot notes and observations. The paragraph on Poe, presumably made during the interview recorded in *The Magic Staff*, contains at least one keen insight into Poe's personality ("He is, in spirit, a foreigner"), but reveals nothing beyond the impact of one sensitive person upon another.³² In the third book, *Answers to Ever-Recurring Questions*,³³ Davis merely says that while the clairvoyant (in "Mesmeric Revelation") may not have been true, the points made by Poe in the tale *were* true.³⁴

Evidently, Poe did not react as warmly to Davis, for he has left but one unsatisfactorily brief opinion on "The Poughkeepsie Clairvoyant," the eleventh of his "Fifty Suggestions" published in *Graham's* in May, 1845: "There surely *cannot* be 'more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of' (oh, Andrew Jackson Davis!) 'in your philosophy.'"³⁵ The pungency of this comment, whatever its brevity, indicates the lack of respect Poe may have entertained for Davis's theories, and leads to the belief that Poe was not influenced by him. In any event, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" had been written before Poe went to the lectures, and "Mesmeric Revelation" and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" owe their inspiration to another source.

"Mesmeric Revelation" has been very adequately characterized as "a prelude to *Eureka*."³⁶ Here Poe established a framework of mesmeric experimentation as the basis for his venture into metaphysical speculation. The tale³⁷ opens with a paragraph setting forth "the *rationale* of mesmerism," and then the narrator relates

the very remarkable substance of a colloquy, occurring between a sleep-waker and myself.

II, 758 n. The possible connection between Davis and Poe was suggested to Allen by S. Foster Damon, who, in his *Thomas Holly Chivers Friend of Poe* (New York, 1930), limits the influence of Davis on Poe to *Eureka* (p. 158 f.).

³⁰ New York, 1857.

³¹ Page 317.

³² New York, 1868, p. 18 f.

³³ Boston, 1868.

³⁴ Page 63.

³⁵ *Works*, XIV, 173.

³⁶ Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

³⁷ *Works*, v, 241-254.

I had been long in the habit of mesmerizing the person in question (Mr. Van Kirk) and the usual acute susceptibility and exaltation of the mesmeric perception had supervened. For many months he had been laboring under confirmed phthisis, the more distressing effects of which had been relieved by my manipulations; and on the night of Wednesday, the fifteenth instant, I was summoned to his bedside.³⁸

Van Kirk tells the narrator that he has decided to have himself placed in a mesmerized state during which he will answer the narrator's questions. Thus he will be able to determine the actuality of the soul's immortality. The narrator agrees to the experiment and puts Van Kirk asleep. The two then discuss God, materiality, and the nature of man's soul. Suddenly, the narrator notices that Van Kirk's face has undergone a change of expression. He attempts to awaken him, but finds that he is dead, and is left wondering whether Van Kirk, during the latter part of their conversation, had been speaking "from out the region of the shadow."

From the very inception of the tale, Poe relied upon *Facts in Mesmerism*. It is difficult not to believe that the following words in Townshend's book gave him the idea for the tale:

I must now pause to set before my reader my own state of mind respecting the facts [of mesmeric experimentation] I had witnessed. I perceived that important deductions might be drawn from them; and that they bore upon disputed questions of the highest interest to man, connected with the three great mysteries of being—life, death, and immortality. On these grounds I was resolved to enter upon a consistent course of inquiry concerning them. . . .³⁹

In the opening paragraph of "Mesmeric Revelation," Poe offers a summary, as it were, of the workings of mesmerism. Actually, this paragraph is nothing more than a précis of Townshend's book. The resemblance between Poe's first sentences, and those at the beginning of Book I of *Facts in Mesmerism* will be noted:

Poe

Whatever doubt may still envelop the *rationale* of mesmerism, its startling *facts* are now almost universally admitted. Of these latter, those who doubt, are your mere doubters by profession—an unprofitable and disreputable tribe. [p. 241]

Townshend

. . . I am fully aware of the obstacles which I have to encounter. The fatal word *Imposture* has tainted the subject of my enquiry; and *Ridicule*, which is *not* the test of truth, has been pressed into the service of talent in order to annihilate the supposed absurdity before the dread ordeal of a laugh. [p. 1]

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

³⁹ *Facts in Mesmerism*, p. 51.

In his text, Townshend explains very carefully why he has eliminated the traditional word *somnambulism* from his book, replacing it with a new and more descriptive term. In doing so, he gives credit to John Elliotson, another and equally famous English practitioner and writer, for having suggested to him "the substitution of Mesmeric Sleepwaking for Induced Somnambulism, on the ground that Somnambulism, strictly speaking, was not always, nor necessarily, an adjunct of the condition I wished to describe."⁴⁰

The word *sleepwaking* is used throughout the volume, and serves in addition as a portion of the title of Section III, Book II: "Showing certain of the physical and metaphysical Conditions of Sleepwaking." With one unimportant exception,⁴¹ I have been unable to find this expression in the work of any other writer on mesmerism. That Poe was appreciative of the forcefulness of Townshend's reasoning is attested by his use of the word in both its forms (*sleepwaker*, *sleepwaking*) no less than five times in the tale. Indeed, it appears to have been used deliberately—one might say almost self-consciously—for in a letter to Lowell written July 2, 1844, subsequent to the writing of "Mesmeric Revelation," he says, in the course of repeating some of the ideas contained in the tale:

. . . At death, the worm is the butterfly,—still material, but of a matter unrecognized by our organs—recognized occasionally, perhaps, by the sleep-walker directly—without organs—through the mesmeric medium. Thus a sleepwalker may see ghosts.⁴²

This return to the use of *sleep-walker* would seem to indicate that *sleepwaker* was still too recent an acquisition to supplant the more traditional word. However, by March, 1848, Poe had evidently settled on the propriety of the use of *sleepwaker*. In his *Marginalia* for that month he lashes out at the London *Popular Record of Modern Science*:

. . . It had the impudence, also, to spoil the title ["Mesmeric Revelation"] by improving it to "The Last Conversation of a Somnambule"—a phrase that is nothing at all to the purpose, since the person who "converses" is *not* a somnambule. He is a sleep-waker—*not* a sleep-walker; but I presume that "The Record" thought it was only the difference of an *l*.⁴³

⁴⁰ Page 10.

⁴¹ William Lang, *Mesmerism, Its History, Phenomena, and Practice* (Edinburgh, 1843). William Lang of Glasgow, as he was referred to, was a friend of Townshend, who wrote a supplement for the 1844 edition of Lang's book. In this work Lang pays tribute to Townshend's contributions to mesmerism, quoting portions of *Facts in Mesmerism* which contain the word "sleepwaking" (pp. 29, 31). Although Lang approves in the main of Townshend's use of the word, he does not himself use it in the book, adhering instead to the more formal "mesmeric sleep." ⁴² Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

⁴³ *Graham's Magazine*, xxxii, 179. This section of *Marginalia* is neither reprinted nor listed in the bibliography of *Works* (xvi).

Beyond this, Poe was probably influenced, to some extent, in his language by Townshend. For example, his use of the words *exaltation of the mesmeric perception*, and *mesmeric exaltation*, seems to be derived from the Supplement to *Facts in Mesmerism*, which consists entirely of testimonials. One of these is from a doctor in Milan and concerns one M. Valdrighi, of whom the doctor says:

M. Valdrighi, advocate, had his sense of hearing so exquisite and *exalted* that he could hear words pronounced at the distance of two rooms.

The *exaltation* of life which is observed in some patients attains such a height, that one of them could see the most delicate and minute objects in the greatest darkness. This is noticeable in nervous and very delicate persons. [*Italics mine*]⁴⁴

It is probable that Poe may have derived the name of his character, Van Kirk, from *Facts in Mesmerism* also. Among the testimonials in the Supplement are two from A. Vandevyver and M. van Owenhuysen. They are, like all the others, listed in the table of contents. Poe may have made an adaptation of these names to his own purpose.⁴⁵

There is one observation which must be made at this point in connection with Poe's indebtedness to Townshend. Any of the editions of *Facts in Mesmerism*, with the exception of the first American edition published by Little, Brown in 1841, which contained the Boston Committee Report in place of the Supplement,⁴⁶ could have been used by Poe. The circumstances of his borrowing from the 1844 text for "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," however, lead me to believe that he probably used the same edition for both stories.

III

In "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," Poe again represents his leading character in the last stages of phthisis.⁴⁷ M. Valdemar gives the narrator permission to keep him alive through mesmeric means beyond the point where agonal death should occur. This is done, and for a period of seven months Valdemar is kept suspended in the state of life-in-death. Finally, in response to his frantic appeal, the narrator attempts to awaken him, with the result that the body of Valdemar immediately decomposes.

Inspired by a provocative idea he had found in *Facts in Mesmerism*,

⁴⁴ Page 338.

⁴⁵ Would Poe have been especially attracted to the latter case because the subject's initials were E—A—? ⁴⁶ Cf. *ante*, p. 1077.

⁴⁷ To say that phthisis was a favorite illness of romantic literature is to overlook, perhaps, the morbid perversity with which Poe transferred his own wife's fatal malady to so many of his characters.

Poe wrote "Mesmeric Revelation." For "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,"⁴⁸ however, the debt was not nearly so intangible; Poe utilized not an idea but an actual case reported by Townshend, and expanded it in detail, if not beyond, then at least to the limits of horror. In the "Notice" to the 1844 London edition, Townshend reported a case which particularly impressed him:

I have watched the effects of mesmeric treatment upon a suffering friend, who was dying of that most fearful disorder—Lumbar Abscess. Unfortunately, through various hindrances, Mesmerism was not resorted to till late in the progress of the disease, so that, of course, that it should effect a cure was out of the question. . . . I have no hesitation in saying, that, under God, the life of my friend, R. T. was prolonged, at least, two months by the action of Mesmerism.⁴⁹

It is this reference which leads me to believe that Poe relied upon the London, 1844 edition, for it is the only one which contains the "Notice." The remainder of Townshend's account parallels in a very general way Poe's tale, and may have served him as a guide for the order of presentation of narrative incident. There are correspondences to be found throughout the two accounts, the most notable being that between the second sentence of the foregoing excerpt and Valdemar's words: "Yes, I wish to be mesmerized . . . I fear you have deferred it too long."⁵⁰

In addition, it can hardly be coincidental that Poe's title, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," should so closely resemble Townshend's title, *Facts in Mesmerism*. Indeed, Poe's comment concerning "the startling facts" of mesmerism at the beginning of "Mesmeric Revelation" seems to indicate that had he not thought of the more appropriate title for that tale, one which would point up its extraordinary aspects, he might well have called it "The Facts in the Case of M. Van Kirk." As it is, however, both tales are suitably entitled. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," resembling its source, is a logical, pseudo-medical case-study, once the impossible premise has been granted. As for Poe's selection of the name "Valdemar" for his character, here again I am inclined to believe that he adapted it from the Supplement, specifically from the "M. Valdrighi, advocate," mentioned earlier.⁵¹

As long ago as 1855 the source of Poe's description of the deathbed scene was discovered. In that year a book bearing the title *Rambles and Reveries of an Art Student in Europe* was published anonymously in Philadelphia.⁵² In the section devoted to a surprisingly spirited defense of

⁴⁸ *Works*, VI, 154-166.

⁴⁹ Page xvi.

⁵⁰ *Works*, VI, 158.

⁵¹ *Ante*, p. 1090.

⁵² Published by Thomas T. Watts. Woodberry, in his *Life of Edgar Allan Poe*, attributes the authorship of *Rambles and Reveries* to Watts (n, 407); Campbell, in *The Mind of Poe*, repeats the error (p. 169 n.).

Poe,⁵³ considering that the Griswold campaign of vilification was far from its decline, the author takes Poe to task for being too free in his charges of plagiarism against other writers, notably Longfellow and Willis. The author holds this to be particularly ungracious especially in view of Poe's liberal "borrowing." Among the works and authors cited as sources for Poe's plagiarism, there is mentioned a book which had been advertised, along with other Harper publications, in the *Broadway Journal* for August 2, 1845.⁵⁴ This was *The Seeress of Prevorst*, by Justinus Kerner, translated from German into English in 1845. The book is a mystical hodge-podge, professing to set forth the clairvoyant and mesmeric experiences of Mrs. H—, the seeress, whose dying moments are graphically recounted in a paragraph on the last page. The author of *Rambles and Reveries* quotes from both the *Seeress of Prevorst* and the tale,⁵⁵ demonstrating beyond all question Poe's indebtedness. Owing to the comparative scarcity of both books, the comparison may again be made:

The Seeress of Prevorst

On the 5th of August, 1829, she became delirious, though she had still magnetic and lucid intervals. She was in a very pious state of mind, and requested them to sing hymns to her. She often called loudly for me, though I was absent at the time; and once, when she appeared dead, some one having uttered my name, she started into life again, and seemed unable to die—the magnetic relation between us not yet broken. She was, indeed, susceptible to magnetic influences to the last; for, when she was already cold, and her jaws stiff, her mother having made three passes over her face, she lifted her eyelids and moved her lips. At ten o'clock her sister saw a tall bright form enter the chamber, and, at the same instant, the dying woman uttered a loud cry of joy; her spirit seemed then to be set free. After a short interval, her soul also departed, leaving behind it a totally irrecognizable husk—not a single trace of her former features remaining. [p. 119]

"The Facts in the Case of
M. Valdemar"

It was evident that, so far, death . . . had been arrested by the mesmeric process. [p. 164]

I made use of the customary passes. . . . The first indication of revival was afforded by a partial descent of the iris. [p. 165] . . . At ten o'clock I left the house in company with the two physicians. . . . [p. 164]

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of "dead! dead!" absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely *rotted* away beneath my hands. . . . [p. 166]

⁵³ Pages 33–47.

⁵⁴ II, 63.

⁵⁵ Page 37 f.

Although it is not, properly speaking, relevant to this paper, there is one further observation which may be made. Poe gives this description of Valdemar's physical condition:

The left lung had been for eighteen months in a semiosseous or cartilaginous state, and was, of course, entirely useless for all purposes of vitality. The right, in its upper portion, was also partially, if not thoroughly, ossified, while the lower region was merely a mass of purulent tubercles, running one into another. Several extensive perforations existed; and, at one point, permanent adhesions to the ribs had taken place. These appearances in the right lobe were of comparatively recent date. The ossification had proceeded with very unusual rapidity; no sign of it had been discovered during the three previous days. Independently of the phthisis, the patient was suspected of aneurism of the aorta; but on this point the osseous symptoms rendered an exact diagnosis impossible.⁵⁶

In the *Marginalia* for March, 1848, previously referred to, Poe said in defense of his description of Valdemar's symptoms against the *Morning Post's* charges that he either was fabricating or knew little about consumption:

. . . I represented the symptoms of M. Valdemar as "severe," to be sure. I put an extreme case; for it was necessary that I should leave on the reader's mind no doubt as to the certainty of death without the aid of the Mesmerist—but such symptoms *might* have appeared—the identical symptoms *have appeared*, and will be presented again and again.⁵⁷

What is very curious about this controversy is that the main point should have been so obscured. Poe quite obviously took his diagnosis from some contemporary medical textbook, probably combining two or more cases to insure "certainty of death." However, it would be a rare doctor then, or now even with the aid of x-ray and fluoroscope, who could diagnose Valdemar's ailment with such precision. Poe must have taken one or more *post-mortem* reports without realizing that his tale, as he developed it, never permitted of Valdemar being examined except while alive!⁵⁸

A recognition of the deep sense of mysticism pervading the body of Poe's work, both prose and poetry, permits of the assumption that he, like so many others in his day, accepted mesmerism as a valid and efficacious sub-branch of science.⁵⁹ Each of the three tales is a fictional if

⁵⁶ *Works*, vi, 157.

⁵⁷ *Graham's Magazine*, xxxii, 179.

⁵⁸ Dr. R. W. Haxall's *Dissertation on the Importance of Physical Signs in the Various Diseases of the Abdomen and Thorax*, which Poe reviewed in the *Southern Literary Messenger* for October, 1843 (*Works*, ix, 164-166), contains similarities of language only, as does the contemporary classic work in the field, Laennec's *Diseases of the Chest*, translated from the French by John Forbes (New York, 1838).

⁵⁹ Joseph Jackson, in his edition of *The Philosophy of Animal Magnetism by a Gentleman of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1928), attempts to attribute this book to Poe. His argument

impossible extension of contemporary mesmeric theory, and it is this fictional quality which makes it difficult to believe that Poe intended "Mesmeric Revelation" and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" to be hoaxes from the start. The evidence indicates, rather, that Poe intended them as serious fiction, even though they were of the "horror" variety, but that when they were greeted with enthusiasm by mesmerists, spiritualists, and sundry mystics, and with cries of incredulity by the skeptics, he declared them to be hoaxes in order to capitalize upon the attendant publicity. Certainly, he went to inordinate lengths to convince his friends that the tales were hoaxes, once widespread comment had been aroused, even though he maintained at the same time, if only briefly, a certain ambiguity regarding their authenticity.⁶⁰

It may also be argued from another approach that Poe's literary activities in general lend credibility to the inference that the two tales were not intended as hoaxes. Mesmerism as a theme for fiction was, like metempsychosis and the exploration of the realm of the conscience, so well suited to Poe's principles of literary composition that it was natural for him to work this new field, to attempt to achieve the sensational without deliberately attempting to mislead. The ironic conclusion suggests itself that if anyone was hoaxed, it was Poe, for he was forced by public clamor to acknowledge, ultimately, that which he never intended. His little fictions were no more fraudulent in the 1840's than they are today. It is only the superimposed controversy concerning their truthfulness, a controversy in which Poe permitted himself, evidently with relish, to be involved, which is fraudulent. This is another, if for once harmless, instance of Poe's inability to resist complicating an issue which should have been disposed of immediately it arose.⁶¹

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Rutgers University

is ingenious but inconclusive. All that can now be said is that Poe *may* have had a hand in it; there is no evidence that he did. The problem at best is moot.

⁶⁰ It will be noted that in the *Marginalia* for March, 1848, Poe nowhere takes the stand that his fiction was intended to hoax. His insistence upon the differentiation between "sleep-waker" and "sleepwalker" (cf. *ante*, p. 1089) appears to be a deliberate attempt to beg the issue, and his statements throughout avoid the larger problem. Against this may be set his successive references to animal magnetism: *Broadway Journal*, II, 174, 255 (in "Words with a Mummy"), 390 f.; *Graham's Magazine*, XXXII, 178 f.; John W. Robertson, *Edgar A. Poe* (San Francisco, 1921), p. 316; T. O. Mabbott, "The Letters from George W. Eveleth to Edgar Allan Poe," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, XXVI, 180; James Southall Wilson, "The Letters of Edgar A. Poe to George W. Eveleth," *Alumni Bulletin*, University of Virginia, XVIII, no. 1, 47; *Works*, XVII, 268 f., 276, 284 f., 342; XVI, 71.

⁶¹ I am much indebted to Professor Nelson F. Adkins of New York University for his valuable editorial suggestions.