

# A Posthumanist Reading of 'The Sphinx' and 'Mesmeric Revelation'

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## *Abstract*

This article proposes a new reading of Edgar Allan Poe's two short stories 'The Sphinx' and 'Mesmeric Revelation'. The moth/monster conversation in 'The Sphinx' dramatizes Poe's speculation of the world. The monster-like cosmos is mysterious and elusive, however human beings endeavor to contain and stabilize it into the hierarchy of human knowledge. 'Mesmeric Revelation' goes beyond the surface stability and unearths a hidden world of becoming. This process also marks a progression from anthropocentrism to posthumanism. In this posthumanist world, the decentering of human beings enables the equality of multiple species and their harmonious symbiosis. Poe's hypothetical world of particles further consolidates this posthumanist reading: all things originate from indivisible particles, and particles are in a constant process of becoming and coalescing, capable of infinite potentialities. Once the particles are perceived by human organs, they will configure into reality in accord with human idiosyncrasy. 'The Sphinx' accentuates the scientific aspects of moth/monster, and 'Mesmeric Revelation' highlights the mysterious dimensions of the issue; together they outline the obscure path from anthropocentrism to posthumanism in Poe's epistemology.

Keywords: Posthumanism; 'The Sphinx'; Monster; 'Mesmeric Revelation'; Becoming; Science

Anthropocentrism assumes the centrality of human beings and uses a human standard to measure all species. Posthumanism repositions mankind in the world and endeavors to construct an egalitarian existence of species. This article proposes a new reading of Edgar Allan Poe's two short stories: 'The Sphinx' and 'Mesmeric Revelation' overcome anthropocentrism and usher the readers in a posthumanist world of multiple species. Furthermore, Poe's hypothetical world of becoming provides a metaphysical ground for species equality and thus expands posthumanism studies. However, Poe's posthumanist concept of

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'becoming' differs from that of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. For these two modern theorists, becoming is a centrifugal force flitting away from 'centered systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21), and forms a rhizome with something else. The accentuation, for Deleuze and Guattari, is deterritorialization: becoming is an effective strategy to 'dismantle the strata,' to mobilize 'deterritorialized flows,' and to assemble a rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 71). Although deterritorialization is an initial step to decenter anthropocentrism, it fails to address an essential concept of posthumanism: species equality. In this respect, Poe's concept of becoming not only highlights the ontological equality of species but also reveals the metaphysical ground of their equality. 'The Sphinx' and 'Mesmeric Revelation' complement each other and become an edifying illustration of Poe's progression from anthropocentrism to posthumanism, specifically his concept of becoming.

'The Sphinx' is an intriguing story. During the New York cholera epidemic in 1832, the narrator sojourns with his friend in a cottage on the banks of the Hudson River. The narrator witnesses a gigantic monster on the distant hill, but the host, after a thorough investigation, concludes that the monster is actually a moth on the window. Critics prefer the host's scientific explication. David Halliburton asserts that the cholera epidemic led to a morbid imagination within the narrator, producing 'the illusion that a bug on the window near his eye is a monster approaching from afar' (Halliburton 1973: 349). Likewise, Kevin J. Hayes reads the story in a similar vein: 'Poe juxtaposes a nearby insect with a faraway landscape to make it resemble a distant monster' (Hayes 2009: 23). Benjamin F. Fisher also maintains that 'nearly all of Poe's protagonists evince paranoias, and some also power mania' (Fisher 2008: 22). Elmar Schenkel even proposes that the narrator has contracted cholera without knowing it. 'The crumpled ocular muscle' produces a distorted vision which 'temporarily affects the whole arrangement of the material world' (Schenkel 1985: 98-99). Williams Marks III arrives at a more balanced interpretation of the story. The narrator and the host present 'opposed fragments' of the authorial self: Poe's imaginative side and intellectual side. Therefore, according to Marks, we should avoid 'both the narrator's mistake of imagining more than he sees and his host's mistake of seeing more than he imagines' (1987: 50). Despite the profusion of critical foci, the above-mentioned scholars have confined themselves within the boundary of the discussions

of visual facts, and they have never attempted to go beyond. It is highly probable that the monster physically appears in the story and betokens a concealed world beneath our perceived facts.

Whereas 'The Sphinx' concentrates on optic phenomena, 'Mesmeric Revelation' goes beyond the surface and lays bare the invisible world of becoming. In the story, the narrator, Mr. P, is mesmerizing the dying Mr. Vankirk who discloses an enlightening world in his clairvoyant state. Douglas Anderson interprets the tale as 'a pseudoscientific confirmation of conventional beliefs regarding the relationship between the body and the soul' (Anderson 2009:166–167). John Tresch goes a step further and views the short story as an imaginary journey 'into the regions hitherto uncharted' (Tresch 2004: 117). Likewise, Daniel Hoffman holds the opinion that the 'counterclockwise' voyage in the story unlocked the secret 'cabinet in which the nature of Nature was hidden behind the painted screen of appearances' (Hoffman 1972: 165). For Peter Swirski, the story directs us 'towards a new epistemology': Poe develops 'a theory of knowledge that is to revolutionize all thinking' (2000: 27).<sup>1</sup> Swirski is justified in advocating 'a new epistemology', because Poe has an impulse to transcend the world and make connections with the unknown. If we consider 'The Sphinx' in light of the revealed world in 'Mesmeric Revelation,' this article argues, the obscure path from anthropocentrism to posthumanism in Poe's stories will emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> There is scholarly controversy over the validity of the story's content. Many critics read "Mesmeric Revelation" as a scientific investigation. The reprint of the story in the September 1845 issue of the *American Phrenological Journal* is suggestive of its medical status. However, Poe was upset by people's misunderstanding of his literary work because "the story is pure fiction from beginning to end"; see Dawn B Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Facts On File, 2007), 115. Debate over the story as science or fiction polarizes critical contentions. I would adopt the view of Thomas Ollive Mabbott: that the story contains Poe's metaphysical speculation of and scientific investigation into the constitution of the world. "The tale is entirely fictional, but some of the ideas propounded by the principal speaker were hypothetical opinions of the author." See Mabbott (1978), "Introduction to 'Mesmeric Revelation,'" 1025.

*The Janus Face of the Moth/Monster*

The relationship between the monster and moth in 'The Sphinx' coalesces the tension between two different concepts of the world, represented respectively by the narrator and the host. For the narrator, the world, like 'omens,' is interconnected and mysterious: one event can foreshadow the occurrence of another one and yet their cryptic bond can never be made transparent to human beings. In contrast, the host, a man of 'richly philosophical intellect,' holds a scientific view of the world, and maintains that the narrator's 'faith in such matters' is of 'the utter groundlessness' ('Sphinx': 1247). Their responses to the monster dramatize this distinction. 'Near the close of an exceedingly warm day' in summer, the narrator is reading a book at a window (1247). Suddenly, he catches sight of a monster climbing down a distant hill, the face of which is denuded by 'a landside' (1247). The monster has 'an immense quantity of black shaggy hair' as if gathered from 'a score of buffaloes,' a mouth 'as thick as the body of an ordinary elephant,' and two pairs of one-hundred-yard wings which are 'thickly covered with metal scales' (1248).

The host pursues a scientific investigation of the narrator's report. First, he 'rigorously' scrutinizes the detailed appearance of the creature (1249). After his rigid analysis, he reassumes 'a cruel calmness' and takes out a book on 'Natural History' (1250). The text reveals that the monster has a match. The 'genus Sphinx' has the following characteristics: 'mouth forming a rolled proboscis,' four wings 'covered with little colored scales of metallic appearance' and the inferior ones 'retained to the superior by a stiff hair' (1250). Therefore, the host confidently arrives at his conclusion: the monster the narrator witnessed, in fact, is 'a genus Sphinx.' The mysterious monster is inserted into existing human knowledge and becomes a tamable object under human control. It is a 'genus Sphinx, of the family *Crepuscularia* of the order *Lepidoptera*, of the class of *Insecta*—or insects' (1250).

Furthermore, the host also scientifically accounts for the discrepancy in the size between the book's Sphinx and the narrator's monster. The monster, according to the narrator, is 'far larger than any ship of the line in existence' (1248). The host deems this to be an illusion, and again resorts to science to demonstrate the point by conducting a simulation. Specifically, the host places 'himself accurately in the position' where the narrator beholds the monster and starts the experiment (1250). A moth is wriggling its way down a spider thread from the window sash, and the

narrator imaginarily projects it as a gigantic monster in the faraway river. He reassures the narrator: the moth is 'about the sixteenth of an inch in its extreme length, and also the sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of [his] eye' ('Sphinx': 1251). The host's narration succeeds in producing the impression of science's unquestionable authority. The story then abruptly ends. Science becomes the ultimate determiner and all other possibilities are rejected. It becomes the only acceptable way to interpret the world, and secures irrefutable authority in the mind of the readers.

In fact, the host's scientific interpretation is just one of many possibilities, and even a misinterpretation of the world. Douglas Anderson makes a compelling argument against the validity of the host's confident statement. Mainstream critical voices construe the story as an obvious satire on the narrator who mistakes a moth for a monster. We concede this interpretative possibility because Poe's cryptic story contains the seeds of many possibilities. However, one of the possibilities is Poe's serious consideration of the monster beneath the façade of the seemingly ironic tone. Anderson's pioneering work casts doubt on the authoritative moth interpretation: the Sphinx moth 'is not found in North America' and 'such a creature could scarcely wriggle up a strand of spider's web' (Anderson 2009: 12). Anderson cogently challenges the seemingly irrefutable authority of the knowing host, overthrows the monopoly of science, and opens the gate of potential possibilities. What the narrator beholds 'on the banks of the Hudson' ('Sphinx': 1246), this paper argues, might be an actual monster rather than a hallucinatory figment.

The Hudson River Monster has been witnessed and recorded many times. *The New York Times* had several reports of the cryptid in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1886, the monster 'appear[ed] in the Hudson River below Albany' on September 3 ('Sea Serpent'). In 1899, *The New York Times* published several articles about the monster. One of the articles is entitled: 'SHARK OR SERPENT? Bathers in the Hudson River Startled by a Monster That Chased Them from the Water' (Jun. 9). Then, in 2006 *The Times* had another report of a weird creature in the river. This time it was a manatee. 'Added to the chronicles of greatest beasts that have descended upon New York City in the year 2006 is one that is arguably the greatest of all them. A beast, upwards to 1000 pounds and a cousin to the elephant' (Lee). The occasional and fleeting appearances of the monster produce volatile impressions on witnesses and accrue an aura of mystery. There is a high probability that the narrator happened to see the grotesque monster,

and his description bears ample resemblance to the recorded account. ‘The greatest beast’ finds its counterpart expression in the huge size of Poe’s monster which is ‘far larger than any ship of the line in existence’ (‘Sphinx’: 1248). Similarly, the elephant and manatee also have their reverberations in the narrator’s delineations: the animal has ‘an immense quantity of black shaggy hair—more than could have been supplied by the coats of a score of buffaloes’ and its mouth is ‘about as thick as the body of an ordinary elephant’ (‘Sphinx’: 1248). Some scholars might point out the absence of a proboscis in the recorded accounts which exists in the narrator’s description. The variations of the reports are justifiable because of the different circumstances of the witnesses. In fact, observatory discrepancies mythologize the elusive monster rather than negate the narrator’s beholding of the enigmatic creature.

Furthermore, extreme weather also induces the monster’s appearance. From occasional delineations of the scenes, we can infer that there was flooding in the Hudson River during the narrator’s sojourn at the cottage. On an ‘exceedingly warm day’ in summer, a distant hill on the banks of the Hudson ‘had been denuded by what is termed a landslide, of the principal portion of its trees,’ and only left ‘the few giants of the forest which had escaped the fury of the land-slide’ (‘Sphinx’: 1248). The emphatic repetitions of ‘the land-slide’ and the ravage of ‘gigantic trees’ reinforce abnormal weather. Large scale ‘land-slide[s]’ usually result from excessive rain, which in turn engenders rampant flooding. Together deluges and avalanches had enormously disturbed the habitat of living creatures and induced the monster’s appearance. Finally, the title of the story, ‘The Sphinx,’ further consolidates the Janus face of the moth/monster. The title, for the host and many critics, explicitly refers to a genus Sphinx and exemplifies the host’s scientific investigation into a distorted optic phenomenon. However, if we go beyond the façade of scientific explanation, we will discover the other side of the Janus face: the riddled reality is as mysterious as the Sphinx. The removal of the scientific interpretation of ‘a genus Sphinx’ opens the mysterious world of ‘the Sphinx.’

Hence, we have unearthed a buried probability in the story: the actual monster, in the science-minded host’s interpretation, becomes a moth. For the narrator as well as Poe, the world, like a mysterious monster, can never

be completely comprehended by human beings.<sup>2</sup> The cryptic world is elusive and troublesome. To contain the monster, human beings apply the most approximate item available within their knowledge grid to designate it, classify it and discipline it. In other words, the monster-like world is inserted into the procrustean bed of knowledge hierarchy and is rendered into a manageable thing within human grasp. Besides, human interpretation creates the world they are living in. Science claims to be the only valid interpretation of the world and gradually the interpretation structures the human experience of reality. The host epitomizes this human practice. In contrast, the narrator exposes a buried fact: human beings assume their interpretation as the actual operation of the world. Behind the moth/monster discussion lies Poe's critique of anthropocentrism: the prioritization of human understanding and the consequent advocacy of human measurement as the universal yardstick. If we juxtapose 'The Sphinx' with 'Mesmeric Revelation,' we can detect a grand picture of Poe's philosophy, especially his concept of progression from anthropocentrism to posthumanism.

#### *Human Organs and Anthropocentric Perception*

'Mesmeric Revelation' is a philosophical investigation into the dramatized phenomenon in 'The Sphinx.' Each species has its unique organs to perceive the world and makes corresponding adjustments in the interest of survival. Poe, through the mouthpiece of Mr. Vankirk the protagonist in

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<sup>2</sup> Some critics might have an impression that the article engages in a debate with fictional characters (the host and the narrator). 'The Implied Author,' according to Wayne C. Booth, represents a writer's view on a specific issue and functions as the ultimate standard to judge everything in the story. However, which character embodies the writer's voice and works as 'The Implied Author' becomes a debatable issue. For mainstream scholars, such as David Halliburton, Kevin J. Hayes, and Benjamin F. Fisher, the science-minded host expresses Poe's opinion and is the criterion to measure the delusion of the narrator who imagines a moth to be a monster. In this article, however, I argue the opposite: the narrator (who is also a character in the story) represents Poe's real view of the world: the unrealities of becoming (like the volatile impressions of the monster) is concretized into one possible form (like the moth interpretation). In either case, the fictional characters—the host and the narrator—speak for different groups of social opinions about reality. And engaging in a debate with fictional characters, in fact, is a discussion of clashing opinions on reality.

‘Mesmeric Revelation,’ recapitulates the characteristics of human cognition.

The vibrations generate similar ones with 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. (Poe ‘Mesmeric’: 1038)

The quoted passage outlines three features of human perception in terms of their organs. The first trait is seeing. Among the five senses, sight became the dominant organ used by human beings to perceive the world. According to Sigmund Freud, walking upright enabled man to look ahead and think ahead, and privileging sight over the lower senses of smell and touch became a turning point in distinguishing human beings from animals. Man’s adoption of ‘an upright gait’ propels the chain of development, ‘through the devaluation of olfactory stimuli ... to the time when visual stimuli were paramount and the genitals became visible, and thence to the continuity of sexual excitation, the founding of the family and so to the threshold of human civilization’ (Freud 1976: 4495). Poe’s detailed analysis of sight-formation, through the retina and the optic nerve to the brain, not only accentuates the science of vision, but also reveals the inseparable relationship between seeing and thinking. The second trait is thinking. Sight involves a likely penetration from the surface of the examined object into its underlying structure. Observation enables human beings to accumulate knowledge of the world and acquire its subsequent control. Science epitomizes a perfect integration of observation and thought, and becomes a prestigious hallmark of human activity.

Science’s rationale is that reason is an anthropocentric benchmark to distinguish men from animals. This provides an insightful explanation of the scientific investigation in ‘The Sphinx.’ First, the host uses reason to rigorously ‘question’ the witness about the detailed appearance of the monster, then he sets himself in the identical spot of inspection, and finally he arrives at a scientific conclusion: it is a ‘mis-admeasurement of [visionary] propinquity’ and the small creature is only ‘about the sixteenth of an inch distant from’ the observer (‘Sphinx’: 1250–1251). This scientific explanation not only mollifies their uneasy feeling about the mysterious monster, but also leads to the third point of the quoted passage: human interpretation creates the world they are living in. The way humans

perceive and understand the world also becomes the mode by which they 'communicate with the external world' ('Mesmeric': 1038). People do not regard their understanding of the world as an interpretation, but as the way the world manifests itself. To illustrate the point, Poe defines 'substance'—the actual matter consisting of the world—as the perception of reasoning creatures. 'This, probably, is because you have no sufficiently generic conception of the term "*substance*" itself. We must not regard it as a quality, but as a sentiment: — it is the perception, in thinking beings, of the adaptation of matter to their organization' ('Mesmeric': 1039).

The discussion on 'substance' in the story reveals that people often indulge in the ostensibly transparent world and forget the limits of human perception. Human understanding of the world becomes the organization of the world, and people tend to believe that the world becomes transparent to them. In fact, Poe's image of the monster in 'The Sphinx' is a challenge to this concept of transparency. The world is always mysterious to our comprehension, and elusive to our representation. It is distressing yet salutary to acknowledge the limits of human cognition. Physical human organs constrain their understanding of the universe. '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' ('Mesmeric': 1037). After this general introduction to human organs, Poe underscores the limitations of human cognition. 'The organs of man are adapted to his rudimental condition, and to that only' and 'the external world is, to the rudimental life, *limited*, through the idiosyncrasy of its organs' ('Mesmeric': 1038). There are three interconnected steps in Poe's conception. To begin with, there are multiple constructs of the world. Each species has its idiosyncratic organs to perceive the matter and develop its own reality. Plural representations from different species, however, are equally valid. Likewise, humans, as one of many species, also have unique physical structures to perceive the world, such as eyes and brains, which establish, to borrow Poe's words, a 'sensible' world 'to the exclusion of other classes and forms' ('Mesmeric': 1037). Second, distinct from non-human species, human beings assume that they have conquered the earth and become the center. They have also come to believe they are the only creatures endowed with reason and agency. Thus, human knowledge becomes the universal yardstick to measure everything. How to get out of this anthropocentric arrogance? This becomes the third point. One effective approach is to realize the limitation of human

cognition. The world perceived through ‘the idiosyncrasy’ of human organs, as Poe claims, is ‘limited’ (*‘Mesmeric’*: 1038). The confrontation with human deficiency enables us to accept plural criteria of multiple species. This transforming process implies the progression from anthropocentrism to posthumanism.

Anthropocentrism came into existence in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, which roughly coincides with Poe’s life. Anthropocene refers to the ‘human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene’ (Crutzen 2002: 23). The advancement of technology enabled human beings to occupy a dominant position on the earth and these human activities exerted a profound influence on global ecology. Paul Crutzen ascribes the first significant anthropocene technology to the refinement of the steam engine in 1784. ‘The Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784’ (Crutzen 2002: 23). At the incipient stage of anthropocentrism, humans felt proud of their glorious achievements and became confident about human beings as a species. As Poe writes in another short story: ‘We are a wonderful people, and live in a wonderful age.’ In addition to steam-boats, railroads, and parachutes, ‘There is really no end to the march of invention. The most wonderful—the most ingenious—[...]the most truly usefully—mechanical contrivances are daily springing up like mushrooms’ (Poe *‘The Man’*: 382). This mode is derived from the Enlightenment period. Progressive European intellectuals of the Enlightenment held that ‘the tremendous intellectual and scientific progress of the age’ and embraced ‘the expectation of the age that philosophy (in the broad sense of the time, which includes the natural and social sciences) would dramatically improve human life’ (Bristow). Technology further concretizes human intelligence into tangible facts and boosts human illusion of their superiority.

Anthropocentric arrogance was also prevalent in intellectual circles in nineteenth century America. From 1838 to 1842, the Wilkes Expedition to the Northwest coastal areas brought back unprecedented knowledge from these unknown ocean territories and enormously expanded American understanding of a new vast land. In the 1840s, the transatlantic telegraph achieved instantaneous communication, erased temporal distance, and

ignited the imagination. These marvelous accomplishments fueled human enthusiasm but also kindled their arrogance. It is less a coincidence than an implied response that Poe wrote 'The Sphinx' in 1845 and 'Mesmeric Revelation' in 1844. Poe intensifies these anthropocentric percussions in many of his stories, yet he also goes beyond anthropocentrism and plants the seeds of posthumanism.

*'The Unorganized Life' and Posthumanist World*

Posthumanism, as a recent intellectual trend, argues against the centrality of human beings and advocates the agency of non-human species. A posthumanist often endeavors 'to find ways of describing agency at work through the interactions of a complex and widely dispersed network of actants, both human and other-than-human.' (Armstrong 2008: 196). Acknowledgement of the limited human perception, as Poe concretizes in the story, is an essential step toward comprehension of the posthumanist world of species equality. To understand the accurate position of human beings in nature, we have to 'stand "under," not above' non-human counterparts and surrender 'the dream of mastery' in the first place (Wolfe 2003: 5). The descent from anthropocentric hubris disengages us from the monopoly of human perspective and opens a channel to broaden the spectrum of agency of other species. 'There are many things on the Earth, which would be nihility to the inhabitants of Venus—many things visible and tangible in Venus, which we could not be brought to appreciate as existing at all' ('Mesmeric': 1039).

Poe describes this posthumanist world as 'the ultimate life.' 'In the ultimate, unorganized life, the external world reaches the whole body, with no other intervention than that of an infinitely rarer ether than even the luminiferous' ('Mesmeric': 1038). Ether becomes the primary means of perception and phases into the body without the interference of idiosyncratic organs. It also becomes the linking anchor to unify all things in the universe. 'To this ether—in unison with it—the whole body vibrates, setting in motion the unparticled matter which permeates' (1038). After these necessary procedures, we can reach the desired goal. 'It is to the absence of idiosyncratic organs, therefore, that we must attribute the nearly unlimited perception of the ultimate life' (1038). Poe imagines an idealized approach of experiencing the world: the corporeal perception absent from the hierarchical structure of organs. Each species has its unique organization of organs to experience reality and formulates its

special understanding of the world. If we abandon the medium of idiosyncratic organs, we can ‘perceive external things directly’ (‘Mesmeric’: 1037). Poe’s idea of ‘the unorganized life’ has a strong intellectual reverberation with the modern concept of deterritorialization. The ‘Body-without-organs’ (BwO) is ‘already under way the moment the body has had enough of organs and wants to slough them off, or loses them’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 150). This ‘disorganized body’ deterritorializes hierarchical systems, undermines meanings, and flights in all directions. ‘The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and signifiacances and subjectifications as a whole’ (151). Such dismantling liberates democratic multiplicity and circulates energy. This dictates an essential step toward the progression into posthumanism: to deterritorialize from hierarchical organization of anthropocentrism and to liberate plural perspectives of multiple species. After that, the body-without-organs vibrates ‘in unison with’ ether (‘Mesmeric’: 1038). The body fuses itself with air, permeates into space, and interacts with a myriad of things. In terms of posthumanism, human beings, no longer under the illusion of anthropocentrism, become an equal member of species in nature. These species, both human and non-human, interact with each other and formulate ecological symbiosis. Then the corporeal constitution, with ‘the absence of idiosyncratic organs’ (1038), fuses itself with other species, and in their interconnection, it mysteriously senses the secrets of the world. To explicate this enigmatic point, we need to explore Poe’s concept of the world of particles.

In Poe’s world of particles, the physical world consists of matter and matter is further divided into molecules, atoms and other smaller particles. ‘There are gradations of matter of which man knows nothing; the grosser impelling the finer, the finer pervading the grosser’ (‘Mesmeric’: 1033). The ‘electric principle’ plays an essential role in this physical process. For example, the atmosphere ‘impels the electric principle, while the electric principle permeates the atmosphere. These gradations of matter increase in rarity or fineness’ (1033). One popular misconception that Poe points out is the notion of ‘atomic constitution’; or, that the atom as the smallest unit of matter. We must ‘destroy the idea of the atomic constitution’ and continue the gradation until we arrive ‘at a unique mass—an unparticled matter’ (1034). The ‘unparticled matter’ or the ‘indivisible’ particle at some point will grow together and unite into a whole. ‘There will be a

degree of rarity, at which, if the atoms are sufficiently numerous, the interspaces must vanish, and the mass absolutely coalesce' (1034). The becoming of particles also follows 'the electric principle' or 'magnetic relation,' and 'incarnate[s]' into the existence of different things (1036). If all things are made up from particles, there will be a primordial cord of connection among things, interlinking them into a whole. Poe seems to present objective laws of particles in the world, but he also accentuates the inseparability of observer from physical phenomena. 'But the unparticled matter, set in motion by a law, or quality, existing within itself, is thinking' (1034). As mentioned in the previous section, if people divest the idiosyncratic human manner of perception, they could transcend the monopoly of anthropocentric perspective and reestablish the primordial interconnection with things. That is, we become 'in unison with' the world and the motion of 'the unparticled matter' becomes synonymous with 'thinking' ('Mesmeric': 1034).

Poe speculates about a cosmic world in which particles are in a constant process of becoming in accord with 'the electric principle' and 'magnetic' relations ('Mesmeric': 1033). In fact, Poe's hypothesis is solidly supported by modern physics. According to James Clerk Maxwell, united magnetism and electricity form 'a simple entity that is now called the electromagnetic field' (qtd in Hayles 1984: 44). In the electromagnetic field, particles are not localized in space as isolated entities, but become interconnected with each other and form waves of energy. To pinpoint the flow of energy at any given moment has already altered its dynamic nature. This arbitrary imposition is called 'observation' (or 'measurement'). Werner Heisenberg's famous experiment with a gamma-ray microscope revealed that the quantum of light used to observe an electron is enough to alter its momentum. Therefore, he concludes: 'what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning' (Heisenberg 1958: 58). It is impossible for us to observe an object without interacting with it in the first place. Our observation turns a plurality of potential possibilities into one actuality, and worst of all, we assume our observation is the actual manifestation of the object. The world of multiple dimensions, and of constant becoming, is rendered into a flat reality with a rigid hierarchy. This is precisely what the story of moth/monster

endeavors to expose: the world is not what we understand it to be, and it is always mysterious and elusive.<sup>3</sup>

*Unrealities and the Becoming of Particles*

Poe's concept of the world of particles sheds much light on our comprehension of the philosophical contention about 'unrealities' and reality between the narrator and the host in 'The Sphinx.' The New York cholera outbreak as the setting of the story is pregnant with metaphysical significance.<sup>4</sup> In 1832, the rampancy of the cholera epidemic struck New York City and claimed more than 3500 lives. It permeated the city with dreadful fatality. To avoid infection, the narrator fled from the city to stay with a relative in his 'cottage ornee on the banks of the Hudson' ('Sphinx': 1246). For the host, the Hudson cottage has a quiet distance from the plagued city and the countryside is sparsely populated, therefore they lead a safe and peaceful life in quasi-quarantine. They had 'all the ordinary

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<sup>3</sup> This might prompt the question: 'is science something that leads to posthumanism?' The paradox is our reliance on science to critique science. Science expands human knowledge and builds up human confidence (then arrogance), but science also reveals our smattering knowledge (ignorance) of the vast universe, and human inferiority to other species which is an initial step toward posthumanism. Therefore, science and the critique of science help the readers to perceive Poe's progression from anthropocentrism to posthumanism in the selected stories.

<sup>4</sup> Many scholars associate the spread of cholera in 'The Sphinx' with the promulgation of democracy. Arthur H. Quinn detects an irony 'to call attention to the undue emphasis laid on democracy by those who see it too near them' in *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1941), 499. Katrina E. Bachinger links the plague with an optical illusion and reconsiders democracy from the perspective of distance maladjustment. 'Democracy might seem at worst to be only a troublesome social insect, but, [Poe] counsels his contemporaries, it may later prove to be a monster if it has had time to infiltrate the social structure.' See Bachinger, 'Peacock's Melincourt and the Politics of Poe's "The Sphinx,"' *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42 (2) (1987): 223. However, Thomas Ollive Mabbott has a more optimistic view of American democracy. If we examine the debate from a historical perspective, we might alter our current view. Therefore, Mabbott asserts that Poe is modifying his condemnation on democracy in 'The Sphinx.' It 'is rather a gentle and philosophical admonition not to judge the democratic experiment too hastily, through a "misadmeasurement of its propinquity."' See Mabbott (1978), 'Note to "The Sphinx,"' 1250.

means of summer amusement,' such as 'rambling in the woods, sketching, boating, fishing, bathing, music, and books' (1246). However, the narrator remains apprehensive of the deadly epidemic. The unknown world contains omens; and one event mysteriously connects with another and foreshadows the occurrence of the next episode. The narrator has unreserved trust in 'the popular belief in omens' because 'a popular sentiment arising with absolute spontaneity' had an undeniable truth (1247). The host criticizes 'the utter groundlessness of faith in such matter' and refutes the narrator's apprehension as 'unrealities' ('Sphinx': 1246). In fact, the unrealities of the cholera epidemic accurately capitulate the essence of Poe's concept of the world of particles. In the nineteenth century, people had scant knowledge about cholera. One popular belief was the miasma hypothesis. Many European doctors insisted that the outbreak of the disease originated from rancid carcasses. The global cholera pandemic seemed to consolidate this hypothesis. Dr. George B. Wood depicted the 1832 epidemic as unstoppable. 'No barriers are sufficient to obstruct its progress. It [cholera] crosses mountains, deserts, and oceans' (McNamara). The spatial proximity between the infested city and the Hudson cottage intensifies their vulnerability to the onset of the flowing miasma. The narrator's apprehension that 'the very air from the South seemed to us redolent with death' is less a metaphoric exaggeration than a literal depiction of the popular belief of cholera spreading ('Sphinx': 1246).

The popular belief in cholera transmission accentuates the fluid nature of miasma: air consists of molecules and is ceaselessly in motion.<sup>5</sup> These

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<sup>5</sup> This article also proposes another possibility: Poe's intuitive perception of close relationship between water and cholera. The Hudson River, a link between the epidemic city and the surrounding countryside, especially its tidal estuary, might become a common source of virus transmission. 'During the dread reign of the Cholera in New York,' the narrator and host frequent the Hudson river, 'boating, fishing, bathing' ('Sphinx': 1246). Their intimate connection with the river increases the risk of contracting cholera. Besides, John Tresch makes another insightful study of 'vital fluids' in Poe's science fiction. 'Studies of light, electricity, and magnetism continued to rely upon the concept of the ether, the "imponderable" fluid medium whose nature was obscure but whose theoretical utility made it indispensable' (120). These fluid media play an essential role in Poe's imagined voyages, such as 'movement[s] by air, by sea, and by thought' (117). Tresch's research emphasizes the bridging role of these fluid means in

features also characterize Poe's hypothetical world of particles. The physical reality is made from matter which follows 'gradations of matter' and is further divided into particles. These particles, under the law of 'absolute coalescence,' are constantly in motion and formulate a myriad of things ('Mesmeric': 1035). 'Unrealities,' with its original accentuation of plurality in Poe's story, imply the flow of particles and infinite potentialities of their subsequent configurations. 'Observation,' or 'measurement,' has turned the infinite potentialities of these unrealities into one tangible reality, due to the 'idiosyncrasy' of human organs. The host represents such a view of the world: the reality is safe, since his quarantined cottage is isolated from the plagued city and located in a sparsely populated countryside. With scientific confidence, he regards this as the exclusive reality and resolutely denies any other possibilities. The dramatization between unrealities and reality reveals its vulnerability: beneath the seemingly monolithic reality underlies multiple unrealities of becoming.

In short, 'The Sphinx' excavates a mysterious monster-like world, but human beings resort to science to construct a comprehensible reality. Humans not only regard their understanding of the world as the standard of everything, but also perpetuate their interpretation as reality itself. Poe goes beyond anthropocentric monopoly and ushers the readers into a posthumanist world of species equality. Poe's hypothetical world of particles in 'Mesmeric Revelation' consolidates the posthumanist agenda: the removal of centrality of human beings, the equality of multiple species criteria, and the harmonious symbiosis of human and non-human species. Moreover, Poe's speculation of becoming justifies species equality and broadens posthumanism studies. The world we are living in is merely the perceived product of human organs and one instantiation of the unrealities of becoming. 'The Sphinx' and 'Mesmeric Revelation' complement each other and their juxtaposition illuminates the obscure world of posthumanism in Poe's epistemology.

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facilitating human connection with unknown regions. This essay has a different focus: the fluid particles are in a constant process of becoming and coalescing, constituting and reorganizing the world. For more information, please see John Tresch, 'Extra! Extra! Poe Invents Science Fiction!' in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), especially part 5 ('Space ships, time machines, and electric rays; or, nineteenth century science'), 118–120.

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