The “contemplative imagination” of Edgar Allan Poe

A “imaginação contemplativa” de Edgar Allan Poe

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RESUMO: Os primeiros filósofos cristãos, a exemplo de Santo Agostinho, foram inspirados pela metafísica e epistemologia de Platão. O pensamento de Agostinho sobre Deus enquanto fonte de absoluta beleza, bondade e verdade refletiu a Teoria das Formas, de Platão, segundo a qual cada entidade no mundo representa uma forma ou ideia perfeita daquela entidade. Para Santo Agostinho, Deus é a fonte das formas. Segundo Edgar Allan Poe, nos últimos dias de sua vida literária, “os planos de Deus são perfeitos”. Aspectos do Neoplatonismo nos escritos de Poe têm sido examinados de diversas maneiras. Vários autores discutiram a conexão entre a prosa ficcional de Poe e as especulações cosmológicas presentes em Eureka (1848). Alternativamente, pesquisadores examinaram a interação entre seus ensaios, cartas e os argumentos filosóficos de seu longo “Poema em Prosa”. O propósito deste ensaio é correlacionar alguns argumentos filosóficos de Eureka ao Neoplatonismo de Santo Agostinho. O objetivo é propor uma análise comparativa entre aspectos da filosofia de Santo Agostinho e a visão neoplatônica de Deus apresentada por Poe. Os resultados são discutidos à luz de uma perspectiva literário-filosófica e sugerem similaridades entre o pensamento de Poe e o Neoplatonismo cristão de Santo Agostinho.


ABSTRACT: Early Christian philosophers like Saint Augustine was inspired by Plato’s metaphysics and epistemology. Saint Augustine’s understanding of God as a source of absolute beauty, goodness and truth mirrored Plato’s thinking idea of “forms.” For Plato, every entity in the world represents a perfect form or idea of that entity. For Saint Augustine, God is the source of the forms. For Poe, near the end of his literary life, “the plots of God are perfects”. Aspects of the Neoplatonism in Edgar Allan Poe’s writings have been examined in a variety of ways. Many scholars discussed the connection between his prose fiction and the cosmological speculations presented in Eureka (1848). Alternatively, researchers examine the interaction between Poe’s essays, letters and the philosophical arguments of his long “Prose Poem”. The aim of this essay is to correlate some philosophical arguments of Eureka to Saint Augustine’s Neoplatonism. The objective is to propose a comparative analysis between features of Saint Augustine’s philosophy and Poe’s Neoplatonic vision of God. The results are discussed in the light of a literary-philosophical perspective and suggest similarities between Poe’s thought and Saint Augustine’s Christian Platonism.


The expression used to title this essay was employed by Brian Stock in his study on Saint Augustine’s philosophical notion of self. Stock proposes “[...] that Augustine, in his writing about the self, brings together the reading techniques of lectio divina and classical rhetorical thinking on the literary and creative imagination” (STOCK, 2017, p. 47). Lectio divina, which roots lies in Jewish tradition, is the prayerful study of Scripture. Its ultimate aim is contemplative and involves the hermeneutic of Scripture. “One of the important

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developments was the evolution of *lectio divina* into a flexible type of interpretive reading that was known after the thirteenth century as *lectio spiritualis*” (STOCK, 2001, p. 7):

In *lectio divina* the centralizing element in the contemplative process was the biblical text itself. This was the constant reference point for the author’s reflections and therefore for his or her conception of literary identity. In *lectio spiritualis* the centralizing element was the thinking subject, who was the source of the continuity of the contemplative process and therefore the source of literary identity. (STOCK, 2001, p. 107).

Saint Augustine’s endeavour to improve the sacred reading is in the core of this contemplative process, and its goal is an intimate dialogue with God. Considering Saint Augustine’s model of *lectio divina*, the aim of this essay is to identify similarities between Saint Augustine’s epistemological approach to knowledge of God and Edgar Allan Poe’s Neoplatonic metaphysic of matter. The initial part of this study remarks speculative and philosophical excerpts of Poe’s writings that allude to knowledge of God – a tale, a letter, and a “Prose Poem.” The next part relates Poe’s epistemic and poetical reflections on God to Saint Augustine’s model of *lectio divina*, taking theoretical statements on the subject from works by Brian Stock, Frederick Von Fleteren, Phillip Cary, David Stamos, Pierre Hadot and others.

In principle, it is necessary to consider how death, the leading theme of Poe’s poetry and fiction, is crucial to his theory about the essence of God. While David Halliburton (1973, p. 48) declares that “Poe’s ‘religion’ is a kind of Calvinism, but without the belief. Man suffers, in Poe, because he must”; James M. Hutchisson (2005), on the other hand, comments that Poe’s “[...] attitude is more an embracing of secular cosmology than a religious faith. In some ways Poe answered the question of what form God took in his cosmological treatise, *Eureka* (he felt that God was material, and thus matter was ‘God’).” The cause why Poe did not follow entirely the Christian notion of afterlife could be justified by the peculiar connection between his life and his works. “The persistent question of his fiction was how to die and yet live” (HUTCHISSON, 2005, p. 195) or how to relieve the grief after losing the loved ones suppressing the gap between the otherworld and the material one. In the nineteenth century particularly, the doctrine of salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was an alternative answer to such impasses.

When Poe died, a small Bible was given to him by Mrs. Clemm, in 1846 it was one of the books found in his trunk. C. F. Briggs – “if he can be trusted as a source” – wrote James Russell Lowell in 1845 that the Bible for Poe was “all rigamarole”. Though “his sense of gloom and helplessness” could compel him to profess “the type of fervid evangelical Christianity that particularly permeated the South”, Poe’s “powerful intelligence” presumably strayed him from this realm: “His mind required a doctrine or philosophy more complex than that in order to convince himself that there was still hope” (HUTCHISSON, 2005, p. 195).

“Poe was not a religious man in any traditional sense of the term – he didn’t attend church, but he did possess a belief in God, an unorthodox one not involving Jesus, ritual or prayer”, said David N. Stamos (2017, p. 83). Stamos discussed Poe’s poetical arguments to explain God’s existence and “to inform his theodicy”, concluding that *Eureka* offers “[...] not a regular but an irregular argument for God’s existence.” The idea of a Universe, noted Stamos (2017, p. 87), viewed not as a machine but as a poem with a plot, recall from Poe’s recurring theme of “unity of effect,” the guiding principle that allows the ideal plots and poems, described in “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846). “Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem,” (POE, 1984b, p. 16) and poetry is defined in “The Rationale of Verse
(1848) as “the Rhythmical Creation of Beauty” (POE, 1984c, p. 78). “The natural beauty Poe wrote about spoke to him, as an artist specially, of the existence of God” (STAMOS, 2017, p. 93). In the review of Longfellow’s *Ballads and Other Poems* (1842), it is interesting how Poe (1984a, p. 689) relates the contemplation of Beauty with the Intellect or with the Conscience:

> To recapitulate, then, we would define in brief the Poetry of words as the *Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Beyond the limits of Beauty its province does not extend. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience it has only collateral relations. It has no dependence, unless incidentally, upon either *Duty or Truth*. (POE, 1984a, p. 688-689).

During the later period of his life, Poe attempts to rethink the nature of the relations between matter and spirit. *Eureka* (1848), an enigmatic “prose poem” subtitled as “An essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe,” have long puzzled scholars. Indeed, Poe’s cosmological treatise surpasses the versatility of his tales of mystery and imagination. It is clear when he speaks of the ontological structure of things and its simple material constitution. John Limon (1990) examined *Eureka* comparing the poem to Poe’s view of science: “[... ] Poe, in Eureka, hurls himself into issues of scientific cosmology with abandon. But Science is never absorbed by writers, it is always coopted; it serves as a source either of objective correlates or of solutions to their own dilemmas” (LIMON, 1990, p. 24).

In this sense, Poe’s epistolography offers a singular perspective of his life and writings. In a letter of July 7, 1849 to Mrs. Clemm, he wrote: “[... ] I must die. I have no desire to live since I have done ‘Eureka’. I could accomplish nothing more” (POE, 1966a, p. 452). This brief passage stressed how Poe considered *Eureka* to be of great importance to his intellectual legacy. The work presents an instigating and challenging guide to Poe’s philosophic reflections. Through *Eureka*, Poe (2009, p. 171) presents not only his understanding of the “[... ] Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical – of the Material and Spiritual Universe: – of its essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny”, but also of the “most sublime of poems” written in his life:

> Between “Sonnet – To Science” and *Eureka*, Poe has (admirably, open-mindedly, though ungratefully) discovered that there was a cosmology, a methodology, an epistemology, in short, a Science that kept the universe divine and alive. His radical response to it was to redesign his sense of art in its image. (LIMON, 1990, p. 93).

Substantial aesthetic principles specified in *Eureka* were illustrated in Poe’s literary writings. Three studies are directly correlated by Limon: Maurice Beebe’s “The Universe of Roderick Usher” (1967); David Halliburton’s *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View* (1973); and Thomas J. Rountree’s “Poe’s Universe: The House of Usher and the Narrator” (1972). “All agree that ‘Usher’ (... ) states in narrative terms what Poe was later to formulate conceptually in *Eureka’” (HALLIBURTON, 1973, p. 288 apud LIMON, 1990, p. 200). E. Arthur Robinson’s essay “Order and Sentience in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (1961), “[... ] also reads the tale in the light of *Eureka*, as well as ‘The Colloquy of Monos and Una’”

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2 In “Morella” (1835), the narrator presents the John Locke’s notion of consciousness, but this concept is not the only definition of the term referred by Poe. David Halliburton (1973, p. 321) pointed out other approaches which are mentioned in his fiction. In “The Pity and the Pendulum”, for example, Halliburton argued that consciousness and memory are “two complementary terms”.

Furthermore, as pointed out by Roland W. Nelson, two of Poe’s letters mention ideas developed in *Eureka*:

An examination of Poe’s letters shows, moreover, that such early theories of the universe were not always left by Poe for unconscious expression in his art. In a letter to James Russell Lowell dated July 1844, Poe digresses at some length on the subject of spirituality and materiality and in the process he introduces a sketch of his theory of the universe, as it was formed at that time. (...) In another letter, written a few days after that to Lowell, Poe again alluded to his “particle” or atomic theory of the universe. “All things are material,” wrote Poe, “yet the matter of God has all the qualities which we attribute to spirit; thus the difference is scarcely more than of words. There is a matter without particles – of no atomic composition: this is God.” (POE, 1966b, p. 260 apud NELSON, 1978, p. 183).

Kenneth Alan Hovey’s essay on “Poe’s materialist metaphysics of man” (1996), excludes “[...] from examination the further ramifications of Poe’s metaphysics in cosmology, angelology, and theology”, starting with the analysis of “[...] Poe’s initial conception of metaphysics as a branch of knowledge that required such a reformation as that suggested to him by the antipopular and misunderstood but noble and imaginative Epicurus” (HOVEY, 1996, p. 349).

Describing the sources that could inspire Poe’s literary-philosophical discourse, Hovey quoted a letter of 1844 to the poet Thomas Holley Chivers. In this letter, Poe declared, “My own faith is indeed my own” (POE, 1966b, p. 259 *apud* HOVEY, 1996, p. 347). According to the author, when Poe tells Chivers, “You mistake me in supposing I dislike the transcendentalists – it is only the pretenders and sophists among them” (POE, 1966b, p. 259 *apud* HOVEY, 1996, p. 347), he suggests that his faith is related to transcendental idealism and materialism, philosophies traditionally opposed to one another.

Poe proceeds to explain to Chivers: “[...] that you will find [my faith], somewhat detailed, in... an article headed ‘Mesmeric Revelation,’” summarizing for the poet some of doctrines of his mouthpiece in that tale, Mr. Vankirk: “There is no such thing as spirituality. God is material. All things are material” (POE, 1966b, p. 259-260 *apud* HOVEY, 1996, p. 347). “The Domain of Arnheim” (1846) reaffirmed Poe’s materialism. On October 18, 1848, he sent to Sarah Helen Whitman a copy of the *Columbian Magazine* with a note in the margin that the tale contained “more of myself and of my inherent tastes and habits of thought than anything I have written” (POE, 1978a, p. 1266 *apud* HOVEY, 1996, p. 347). A mouthpiece character, Mr. Ellison, is described in the tale as “tinged with what is termed materialism in all his ethical speculations” (POE, 1978a, p. 1371 *apud* HOVEY, 1996, p. 347).

Even though most recent scholars agree on Poe’s transcendental idealism, Joan Dayan’s *Fables of Mind* (1987) states that the overall materialism of Poe is derived from Locke. “Poe must have to know this speculation not only from the *Essay on Human Understanding* itself, but also from the chapter on metaphysics in his favorite philosophical sourcebook, Bielfeld’s *Universal Erudition*, where it is quoted and favorably discussed” (HOVEY, 1996, p. 347-348).

In “Transcendentalism” (2013), an interesting topic of Heidi Silcox’s contribution is focused mainly on two issues related to *Eureka* and mentioned in Poe’s fiction: “the matter of God” and the key “needed to any secret of Nature” (POE, 2009, p. 224). Silcox affirms that in spite of Poe’s aversion to mysticism, many of his tales testify how “[...] he was also enthralled
with realities beyond what science can definitively answer.” The narrators of “Manuscript Found in a Bottle” (1833) and “A Descent into the Maelström” (1841) sink in a whirlpool. The surviving character, the one who has seen the great vortex of the Maelström, “[...] however, believes he witnesses ‘a manifestation of God’s power.’ This passage suggests that Poe believed in God’s existence and power. By extension, he thought deeply about what life after death must be like” (SILCOX, 2013, p. 272). Eric W. Carlson exposed the same opinion in his essay “Poe and the Soul of Man” (1973):

In each of the sea tales the psychic mariner makes an illuminative “discovery” of the Unconditional but that Discovery includes not only the abyss and the primal scream, but also a sense of awe in the presence of God’s power and beauty. This suggestion of some transcendent reality should give us pause in labeling Poe as an out-and-out ironist or absurdist. For Poe, God is not dead. (CARLSON, 1973, p. 7)

Complementing Silcox’s analysis, it is interesting to note that Poe differentiates “Faith” from the notion of “intellectual belief.” According to his explanation in *Eureka*, although the mind cannot be capable of devising – by the reasoning of logical thoughts or “by any such blundering ratiocination as that which is ordinarily employed” (POE, 2009, p. 192) – the idea of “Infinity itself:”

We believe in a God. We may or may not believe in finite or infinite space; but our belief, in such cases, is more properly designated as Faith, and is a matter quite distinct from that belief proper, from that intellectual belief, which presupposes the mental conception. (POE, 2009, p. 193).

According to Silcox, the letter to Chivers suggests Poe’s belief in God, singularly defined as a being made of “a matter without particles – of no atomic composition” (POE, 1966b, p. 260 *apud* SILCOX, 2013, p. 273). Stamos (2017, p. 18) pointed out that “[...] the majority of the main themes found in *Eureka* are also found identical, or nearly so, in Poe’s works from around 1844-1845”. In “Mesmeric Revelation” (1844), it is admitted that “there are gradations of matter.” “God” is a kind of “rarity or fineness” matter, the “ultimate, or unparticled matter” and “[...] not only permeates all things but impels all things – and thus is all things within itself” (POE, 1978b, p. 1033). Every human being is God “individualized” by particled matter, “[...] that thought, whether we call it God’s or ours, is unparticled ‘matter in motion’, and that pleasure cannot exist without pain” (STAMOS, 2017, p. 18-19). Fictional narratives such as “Mesmeric Revelation” and “The Domain of Arnheim” operate as an approach to “the Cloud-Land of Metaphysics” exposed in *Eureka*. But despite their similarities, the precise meaning of some expressions shared by these writings remains volatile:

It is hard to know precisely what Poe means by a thing composed of matter without particles. He does his best to enlighten readers when he suggests that God is a kind of material unlike “rudimentary” human beings, who are individualized “by being incorporated in the ordinary or particled matter.” (POE, 1966b, p. 260 *apud* SILCOX, 2013, p. 273).

Silcox emphasised another important theoretical issue of *Eureka* quoted in the letter to Chivers: Poe’s definition of the relationship between spirit and matter to explain the
difference that separates the human from the unknowable essence of the divine. After the death, the essence of God would be cognizant:

There is, therefore, a difference between two types of matter: one made of particles, and the other devoid of particles. As a result of their particled state, humans remain distinct and separated from God. Yet God’s true nature remains a mystery. Poe told Chivers that, at death, people take “a new form, of a novel matter, pass everywhere, and act all things, by mere volition, and are cognizant of all secrets but the one – the nature of volition of God.” It seems that in spite of Poe’s efforts to define the human and the divine, God’s nature remains partly obscure. (SILCOX, 2013, p. 273).

In *Eureka*, Poe quoted the Baron of Biefeld: “We know absolutely nothing of the nature of essence of God: – in order to comprehend what he is, we should have to be God ourselves”, and added: “With a phrase so startling as this yet ringing in my ears, I nevertheless venture to demand if this our present ignorance of the Deity is an ignorance to which the soul is everlastingly condemned” (POE, 2009, 195). This question suggests the idea of separation, the existence of a hiatus between God and the souls, due to “our present ignorance of the Deity”. Poe’s fiction and poetry are replete with symbolic or objective experiences of separation.

To Dwayne Thorpe (1996, p. 90), in Poe’s poetry, melancholy is evoked as “[...] longings for the eternal in a world of time, as becomes clear in ‘The Poetic Principle’ (1848), his analysis of the dialectic of poetry as a consequence of the tripartite nature (Pure Intellect, Taste and Moral Sense) of ‘the world of mind’”.

Many characters of Poe’s tales are melancholic persons that scrutinize the abysses of their nostalgia, solitude and sense of incompleteness as a result of past events. The main character often seeks to decipher the disruptive double, the uncanny, the bizarre or even the beauty and the authentic experience of God as an attempt to eliminate an absence or the otherness itself, consequently:

He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of *acumen* which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural. His results, brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition. (POE, 1978d, p. 528).

In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and *Eureka*, Poe values the intuition as cognitive sense that involves the “mental features discoursed of as the analytical” and the imagination, assuming that the mind “[...] *truly* imaginative never otherwise than analytic” (POE, 1978d, p. 531). However, Poe distinguishes the intuition from the act of observing. “To observe attentively is to remember distinctly, and, so far (…) all afford, to his apparently intuitive perception, indications of the true state of affairs” (POE, 1978d, p. 529-530). “The analytical power”, however, is simultaneously imaginative and harmonises a double aspect of the intellect, “the creative and the resolvent”. Recognizing “[...] that the mind may be able really to receive and to perceive an individual impression”3 (POE, 2009, p. 171), in *Eureka* he

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3 According to Peter King (2010, p. xi), “[...] in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine speaks of the mind accepting or rejecting the impressions with which it is presented in the course of sensory experience – fundamental points of Stoic doctrine, which he handles correctly”.

conceives the intuition as a more viable alternative to apprehend “the Incomprehensible” through “[...] a distinction which, for all intelligible purposes, will stand well instead a definition” (POE, 2009, p. 195):

We have attained a point where only intuition can aid us; but let me recur to the idea which I have already suggested as that alone which we can properly entertain of intuition. It is but the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression. (POE, 2009, p. 196).

In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, Dupin’s discourse is very vivid and plausible. “He can, for instance, recreate the image of a murderer attacking his victim, the victim’s vain plea for mercy, and the fatal blow, followed by agony and death” (STOCK, 2017, p. 54). When the sagacious sleuth asks to his friend: “Let us now transport ourselves, in fancy, to this chambre” (POE, 1978d, p. 550), “the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions” are translated into a persuasive discourse, which is prefaced by a detailed account of Dupin’s “analytic” abilities described as a mental construct:

Between ingenuity and the analytic ability there exists a difference far greater, indeed, than that between the fancy and the imagination, but of a character very strictly analogous. It will be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fanciful, and the truly imaginative never otherwise than analytic. (POE, 1978d, p. 530-531).

These considerations are needed to discuss the value that Poe attributes to the “truly imaginative” mind, when he compares the Universe to “a plot of God”. Quintilian proposes the concept of inner visual representations, which the Greeks call phantasiae and the Latins visiones. A proficient rhetorician is a person who is capable of representing in the mind the images of absent things in such a vivid manner that he would be able to present words, thinks and actions to himself as if they very true and real. He also “[...] will be able to recreate genuinely felt emotions in his audience. Note that is involves a double representation, first in his mind and later in the mind of his listeners” (STOCK, 2017, p. 53).

Quintilian employs the term enargeia to describe the vividness of such scenes when they are represented in the mind. Cicero translates the term by illustratio (vivid representation) and evidentia (clarity, distinctness). As a result of this sharpness of view, the speaker gives a verbal account of what has taken place; “[...] he also appears to be showing or demonstrating the events, and thereby more easily arouses the emotions of the listeners, since they can readily envisage themselves as being at the scene of the crime themselves” (STOCK, 2017, p. 54).

In Quintilian, Gerard Watson (1988, p. 69 apud STOCK, 2017, p. 55) notes “[...] a variation of the theme of phantasia producing what it has not seen: here it is a case of the listener seeing something that has not been said”. The difference, added Stock, “arises between images expressed in words and images arising from words.” From the perspective of the scriptural exegesis, for Saint Augustine’s hermeneutics, the understanding of a written text implies the role of imagination:
These techniques of imagination, namely phantasia and enargeia, are placed within the framework of sacred reading by Augustine in his consideration of the activity of imagination in the creation of the self. I refer to this combination of disciplines as the work of “the contemplative imagination,” giving equal weight in this notion to the roles played by sacred reading and images in the mind. (STOCK, 2017, p. 56).

According to Stock (2017, p. 73), from a branch of Platonic thinking, Saint Augustine assimilated the perspective that was essential for the mind, in its “[...] interpreting function, to pass judgment on sensory impressions, in order not only to shown what they have in common and how they differ, but to inquire the source, nature, and validity of the impressions themselves”. This though complies with the idea established by Poe “[...] that the mind may be able really to receive and to perceive an individual impression” (POE, 2009, p. 171). The Latin translation of Plato’s Timaeus (360BC), widely ready in Late Antiquity, is the more probable source for Saint Augustine’s reflections on the imagination.

Under its influence, the Bishop of Hippo substantiated his thinking on interpretation, emphasizing the passage of the objective time. On this view, two primordial kinds of knowledge correspond to different levels of being or existence, represented respectively by the eternal world of God and the temporal world of mortals. The one, source of truth, can be understood through the mind, while the other is perceived by means of the senses. This second level is sustained, as Plato argue, principally by doxa or opinion. In exceptional circumstances, glimpses of truth are permitted to mortals. But truth is widely known only by God. “It is here that the Augustinian notion of the imagination came into play, both as an interpretative tool and, as noted, as an element in self-construction, in the Confessions” (STOCK, 2017, p. 74). Similarly, Poe (2009, p. 194) assured that the “very boundaries of mental domain,” are “in accordance with the vacillating energies of the imagination”. Through the intuitive and sensorial perception, the “[...] Spirit individualized (...) reaching a degree of sensitiveness involving what we call Thought and thus attaining Conscious Intelligence” (POE, 2009, p. 320).

This material “Conscious Intelligence” can discern “the very idea of God, omnipotent, omniscient”. Again in this matter, Poe brought insights from the Plato’s philosophical tradition. The two levels of knowledge, represented by the temporal world of mortals and the eternal world of God, in Eureka are related to “each soul” of “Nature” and “its own Creator”: “That Nature and the God of Nature are distinct, no thinking being can long doubt (...) With Him there being neither past nor future, with Him all being now.”⁴ (POE, 2009, p. 256). The emergence of the “Conscious Intelligence” as related to self could be a reference in Eureka to the Platonic distinction between true being and sensible reality:

⁴ In Timaeus, Plato wrote: “If one wished to test this by checking it against experience, one would ignore the difference between the human and the divine condition; for only a god knows well how different elements can be mixed together into a Whole, in order to dissociate them later, and he is also the only one capable of this. Yet no man is capable of doing either one at present, and no doubt he will never be so in the future” (PLATO apud HADOT, 2006, p. 156, emphasis added). This excerpt from Saint Augustine’s letter shows a peculiar similarity with Plato’s view: “He (God) knew much better than man what it is suitably adapted to each age... He knows as well what and when to give, to add to, to take away, to withdraw, to increase, or to diminish, until the beauty of the entire world, of which the individual parts are suitable each for its own time, swells, as it were, into a mighty song of some unutterable musician, and from thence the true adorers of God rise to the eternal contemplation of His face, even the time of faith” (SAINT AUGUSTINE, 1953 apud LOMBARDI, 2007, p. 237).
Plato himself did not locate this other world in the soul but rather in what he called “the intelligible place,” a realm of being whose elements are not material and therefore not visible to the eyes of the body but rather are “intelligible”, that is, understood by the intellect alone. (CARY, 2000, p. 11).

As interpreter of Saint Augustine’s writings, Frederick Van Fleteren pointed out how the bishop of Hippo summarizes Plato’s physics defending the principle that God cannot be defined as a body but transcends all mutables bodies and spirits. All mutable things – “inanimate objects, plant life, sentient life, rational life to created spirits” – are originated from God, who truly and simply exists unchangeably. In Timaeus, Plato ascribed the motive of creation as good being diffusive of itself, while in The City of God (426 C.E.), Saint Augustine claimed that God himself is not made and good works were made by a good God. “Therefore, a hierarchy of being exists in which the immutable is highest, and below that are all other things subject to change” (FLETEREN, 1999, p. 653). The view of a God acting as a perfectly endowed intelligence to create “good works” is respectively mentioned by Poe in Eureka and suggested in the letter to Chivers:

In the construction of plot, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the incidents that we shall not be able to determine, of any one of them, whether it depends from any one other or upholds it. In this sense, of course, perfection of plot, is really, or practically, unattainable – but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God. (POE, 2009, p. 317).

[...] yet the matter of God has all the qualities which we attribute to spirit: thus the difference is scarcely more than of words. There is a matter without particles – of no atomic composition: this is God. It permeates and impels all things, and thus is all things in itself. (...) Man and other beings (inhabitants of stars) are portions of this unparticled matter, individualized by being incorporated in the ordinary or particled matter. – Thus they exist rudimentally. Death is the painful metamorphosis. (...) But for the necessity of the rudimental life, there would have been no stars – no worlds – nothing which we term material. These spots are the residences of the rudimental things. At death, taking a n[e]w form, of a n[o]vel matter, pass every where, and act all things, by mere volition, and are cognizant of all secrets but the one – the nature of the volition of God – of the agitation of the unparticled matter. (POE, 1966b, p. 260).

Death as a solution for a “rudimental” existence and this “painful metamorphosis” is often connected to the search of a philosophical definition of the “consciousness which always accompanies thinking” (POE, 1978c, p. 226). In “Meyengerstein” (1832), “William Wilson” (1839), “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1842) and “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845) the self-destruction of the characters results from troubles of “consciousness”. When represent a perverse disposition to evil, “they exist rudimentally” (POE, 1966b, p. 260).

Some of Poe’s works “that might be called Existentialist Fables of the Human Condition”, according to Carlson (1973, p. 5), “[...] within a personal frame, view death as a comfort to the soul, even a kind of transfiguration”.

“What man among the peoples is not troubled, when the conscience is smitten?”, asks Saint Augustine (2012, p. 25) in *The Expositions on the Psalms* (390-420 CE). The philosophical Problem of Evil is crucial in Saint Augustine’s writings on the “consciousness”. This question was a starting point for the search that led him to seek answers in some “books of the Platonists”. “The most important philosophical influence on Augustine was not skepticism, though, but rather late neoplatonism”, argued Peter King (2010, p. xii). This influence elucidated the kind of knowledge accessible by the intellect directly: “[...] Augustine tells us that it was from neoplatonism that he learned the distinction between the material and the immaterial, and how to conceive properly of the latter” (KING, 2010, p. xii).

“Obviously Augustine’s notions of what constitutes physical Science differs remarkably from our own” (FLETEREN, 1999, p. 653). However, Saint Augustine’s reading of Neoplatonic metaphysics on the Problem of knowledge establishes that the reality is hierarchically structured by three primary cosmological principles: One/Being, Mind/Intelligence, and Soul/Life. This core system acts as “[...] a threefold unity with respect to the world, the product of his creative overflow. The relations among these principles are essential, eternal, and indescribable, since the One/Being exceeds Mind/Intelligence, which it generates (KING, 2010, p. xii-xiii). Saint Augustine’s perspective on idea that God “permeates and impels all things”:

[...] is that only bodies have the kind of being that is defined by locality and confined to one place, so only bodies can be from each other in space. God is present everywhere and undivided, so no spatial distance can separate anything from him (“Nothing is far from God”). Such presence is impossible to conceive unless one notices that the soul too is a being not extended in space. Though not immutable, the soul is like God in its nonspatial mode of being. It changes in time (for instance, from ignorant to wise, or from unhappy to happy), but it does not move around in space. Therefore, like God, it cannot be separate from anything in space (as if it needed to travel some numbers of miles to be reunited with it), but unlike God it can be separated by disordered will and misdirect attention (CARY, 2005, p. 10-11).

If the idea that “God is present everywhere and undivided” resonates in *Eureka*, there is, however, a vital distinction. “Only sin separates us from God, as Augustine explains (…) This is a point of Platonist ontology expressed in biblical language”, according to Cary (2005, p. 11). The metaphysical freedom of soul is responsible for this separation, postulated Saint Augustine in *Confessions* and *On Free Choice of the Will*: “No one can lose Truth or Wisdom unwillingly. For no one can be separated from it in space. What is called separation from Truth or Wisdom is actually a perverse will, by which lower things are loved” (AUGUSTINE, 1993, p. 57 *apud* CARY, 2005, p. 11). This separation is possible even after death: “The soul’s separation from God is not in space, but in its own proper dimension of will and love and vision, the inner space of the soul which is not literally a space (‘an inner place, not a place,’ as Saint Augustine puts it)” (CARY, 2005, p. 11). In Poe’s view, only after death “[…] myriads of individual Intelligences become blended (…) into One (…) gradually merged in the general consciousness” (POE, 2009, p. 326).

Equally interesting is that in *Eureka* Poe divides his panpsychism into two kinds: those being that are conscious “of a proper identity,” (whatever that means, although
presumably he means a sense of identity as an individual being,) and those beings that are conscious “by faint indeterminate glimpses, of an identity with God.” Upon death, as conscious beings of the second kind, “we shall lose our individual identity,” our subjectivity, our personal self of me, but we should take consolation in the fact that we shall eventually become “blended,” an “absorption,” along with the “bright stars,” indeed with “all other intelligences (that is, of the Universe)” into “the Spirit Divine,” into the Universe returned unto itself, which is God without any diffusion or differentiation, namely, “the One.” (Think, perhaps, of emptying a bucket of water onto a concave hard surface and seeing the water break into thousands of water drops, followed by the drops coalescing back into a single body of water.) Why would Poe produce such a theology? (STAMOS, 2017, p. 82).

Stamos (2017, p. 108) believes that Poe was attempting to solve “the problem of evil, including the problem of ugly.” The answers should be given in “close connection with his literary theory” and perhaps this reason explains why Barbara Cantalupo (1996, p. 324) commented on the various definitions used by Poe to delimit his subject: “this book of Truths,” “Art-product,” “Romance,” “Poem,” “Prose-Poem,” and “Essay.” This variety of categories, “[...] his manner of presentation and his language moved Éureka far into the literary domain.”

Discussing aspects of the religious culture assimilated by literary writings during the nineteenth century, Inessa Medzhibovskaya (2008, p. 3) argued that:

In the modern era, conversion was increasingly becoming a matter of individual conscience and personal choice. In the West, confessions of faith and public declarations of one’s religious change became an all-important open forum.” Most Enlightenment thinkers believed that through the gift of reason noticeable in Spinoza’s amor intellectualis Dei or Descartes’s “mind’s eye,” God has already accomplished the conversion of man to Himself.

An important observation to point out in this context is that the philosophical thought of John Locke separated reason and faith into two distinct realms of human activity and placing each in its own respective sphere. New scientific achievements call into question the occurrence of miracles and, with them, the plausibility and nature of revelation, “of which reason, this ultimo ratio, served the verifier. According to Locke, reason should ‘declare for it (revelation) as for any other truth’” (LOCKE, 1995 apud MEDZHIHOVSKUAYA, 2008, p. 3).

In the nineteenth century, more precisely in 1848, one finds the idea of the Universe as Poem once again in Edgar Allan Poe’s “Eureka.” It describes the great pulsation and the eternal return of the universe, the play of the forces of dilatation and contraction, of diastole and systole, in a prose poem whose very beauty, Poe declares, is the guarantee of its truth. The Universe is thus identified with a work of art, and the work of art with the universe. (HADOT, 2006, p. 209).
Paul Claudel, “who placed at the head of his Art poétique the famous phrase of Saint Augustine, ‘Velut Magnum carmen cuiusdam ineffabilis modulatoris’,” was considered by Hadot (2006, p. 209) an heir of this idea on “[...] a poetical art of the universe, or a philosophy of Nature that reveals the secret correspondences that link things together in time.” In Eureka, the imaginative representation of the aimed key “needed to any secret of Nature” (POE, 2009, p. 224) recalls from a Plato’s principle defended in Timaeus and quoted by Hadot (2006, p. 156): “The birth of the world and all natural processes are divine secrets. Human beings, by contrast, can understand only what they can produce by their art”. Poe’s letter to Chivers expresses the hope that death was the key which would become the soul “cognizant of all secrets” (POE, 1966b, p. 260). His notion of a divine mind, beyond the limits of time and space, draws a parallel with Plato’s argument on the crucial difference between the human and the divine condition – the fact that no matter how skillful the man seems, he can’t reach the secrets of nature carried out by the gods. Poe (1978d, p. 528) believes in “the higher powers of the reflective intellect”, developed by intuitive and “self-conscious” mind “[...] accustomed to the introspective analysis of its own operations” (POE, 2009, p. 192). This “higher powers” may exalt the intellect, which discerns that no one can create like God:

The only means accessible to mankind is discourse. From this perspective, when it comes to the secret of the fashioning of the world, we should try to imitate the generation of the universe – that is, by a divine being – through the generation of discourse; in other words, we should try to rediscover the genetic movement of things in the motion of discourse. This is why the Timaeus is presented as a poësis, that is, as both a discourse and a poem, or an artistic game that imitates the artistic game of that poet of the universe, the divinity. (HADOT, 2006, p. 156).

In Eureka, Poe seeks to demonstrate that the creation of the universe by God mirrors the ideal process of poetical composition. Representatives works of poet’s intuitive imagination are attempts to interpret the creative “Thought of God”. But the human intellect is precarious to understand how perfect are the plots of God (POE, 2009, p. 317). In Saint Augustine’s view, these mysteries remain veiled, intellectually challenging for the human finiteness, albeit lift the mind through the contemplative imagination from the visible to the invisible. “Behind all this as a theological justification stands the often quoted I Corinthians 13:12 (‘now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror’)” (POLLMANN, 1999, p. 428).

“God’s way of writing narrative”, noted Elena Lombardi (2007, p. 123), is a metaphysical aspect of Christian theory of history and biblical allegory. But while Saint Augustine’s Confessions proposes “[...] the general awareness that final knowledge of God is possible only by grace” (POLLMANN, 1999, p. 428), Poe’s letter to Chivers suggests that final knowledge of God is possible only “At death,” when the souls, “[...] taking a n[e]w form, of a n[o]vel matter, pass everywhere, and act all things, by mere volition, and are cognizant of all secrets but the one – the nature of the volition of God” (POE, 1966b, p. 260). Thus, in Eureka, Poe was also dealing – or improving, if we consider his previous writings – a theory of knowledge, similar to Saint Augustine’s notion that “[...] self-knowledge and

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5 “Saint Augustine speaks of world harmony of the universi saeculi pulchritudo, the Magnum carmen creatoris et moderatoris (“a mighty song of some unutterable musician”), as conceived in terms of time; its is an hymn scanned by God, since God allots the convenient things to the convenient time” (LOMBARDI, 2007, p. 237).
knowledge of God stand in a dialectical relationship: the souls turns inward, to itself, in order to ascend to knowledge of God”, said Robert Crouse (1999, p. 488).

Saint Augustine aims to expose how this cognitive investigation involves “[...] an essential unity and equally of the personal powers of memory, intellect and will” and Poe (2009, p. 323, emphasis added) concludes Eureka “[...] entertaining a belief – let us say, rather, in indulging a hope – that the processes we have here ventured contemplate will be renewed forever and forever, and forever, and forever”: The basic orientation of Saint Augustine’s theory of knowledge expressed his desire to know God and the soul. To achieve this objective, the thought is always “[...] from the things which are external to the things which are within, and from those inner things to the things above” (AUGUSTINE, 2012 apud CROUSE, 1999, p. 486). Poe’s hermeneutics of knowledge follows a similar attitude in Eureka. When he discusses “the great principle, attraction”, or the “modus operandi, of the attractive force in general” “in the terms of the Newtonian definition of gravity”, Poe emphasizes the intuition as goal to understand “the action of God:”

The reversal of our processes has thus brought us to an identical result; but while in the one process intuition was the starting-point, in the other it was the goal. In commencing the former journey I could only say that, with an irresistible intuition, I felt simplicity to have been made the characteristic of the original action of God; in ending the later, I can only declare that, with an irresistible intuition, I perceive unity to have been the source of the observed phenomena of Newtonian gravitation. (POE, 2009, p. 214-215).

Lois Davis Vines (1999, p. 175) recalled that Paul Valéry referred to Poe’s cosmogony “[...] as an abstract poem constructed on mathematical foundations. Poe’s attempt to explain the origin of the universe was the noble effort of the mind to come to grips with its own genesis”, through “[...] the mental process by which the human intellect attempts to construct the concept of universe”.

Thus, Eureka presupposes a whole system that works like a prism of many faces, reflecting images and theories of Poe’s previous writings. If this system proposes a singular hermeneutics of the “Universe”, it also involves Saint Augustine’s Platonic concept of time. According to J. Merleau-Ponty (1978, p. 333), this concept “[...] conceived of God’s eternity as a present that does not extended itself into past and future. That extension, which is time, results from the creation.” God precedes all the time of the world and this precedence is not included within the order of time.

Saint Augustine focuses the process of self-knowledge as a path forwards the Christian conversion of the souls and Poe focuses self-knowledge as a form of contemplation to imagine the idea of “a novel universe” as a “Heart Divine”:

And now, this Heart Divine – what is it? It is our own. Let not the merely seeming irreverence of this idea frighten our souls from that cool exercise of consciousness, from that deep tranquility of self-inspection, through which alone we can hope to attain the presence of this, the most sublime of truths, and look it leisurely in the face. (POE, 2009, p. 323).

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6 The contribution of “the sense of identity – of repetition” to the poetical idea of “unit” was exposed in “The Philosophy of Composition (1984b, p. 17).
This passage suggests that Poe drew a clear analogy between the human imagination, the intuitive thinking, and the conscious exercise of self-inspection, just as in the model of Saint Augustine’s sacred reading. Also, in the linked practices of lectio divina and lectio spiritualis this triad can reach the invisible, and eventually discerns glimpses of the creative activity of God. “All of Augustine’s philosophical writing may be seen as an attempt first to awake belief and then to raise it to the level of knowledge”, remarked Thomas Williams (1993, p. xvii). The parallels between Saint Augustine’s and Poe’s view of God suggests that they employ principles and language of Plato’s philosophy as a vehicle for the tendency to mystical speculation, supported by the analysis of consciousness, considering the imaginative human mind as an essential but limited instrument of knowledge.

In Poe’s “Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe,” Eureka, the Neoplatonic implications of the work of imagination explore the poetical interpretations of the experience of self-contemplation. His more diffuse Neoplatonism assimilated the Plato’s “One,” the idea of unit of matter, considering the cosmos as a paradigm. In terms of poetry composition, the poem demands “Unity”. The imagination is capable of organizing this unity, aesthetically and in accordance with any forms prescribed by the “Beauty”. In “The Philosophy of Composition,” he theorizes:

Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes – that objects should be attained through means best adapted for their attainment – no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation alluded to, is most readily attained in the poem. (POE, 1984b, p. 16)

Imagination, as a pilgrim in a foreign land, is seeking to contemplate the Beauty, the “merit” of a poem, “the excitement or elevation,” “the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing” (POE, 1984b, p. 15). Emotion (“excitement”) directs this journey towards the “sole legitimate province of the poem” (POE, 1984b, p. 16) only through knowledge and aesthetic imagination as intermediaries. It is not unusual for him to align creativity, aesthetic sensitivity and imagination with a method of composition which preconizes that “[...] the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit” (POE, 1984b, p. 16).

For Saint Augustine, explained the philosopher and theologian John Navone (1996, p. 54), belief and knowledge are not directly distinguished when the soul ascends to spiritual beauty through the contemplation “[...] of the beauty of the One who is also the Good and the Beautiful. Christian theological traditions indebted to Plato have readily integrated the notion and the experience of beauty into their theology”. In this regard, Poe’s concept of beauty and theory of poetry demonstrate the complementary nature of imagination and knowledge:

[...] the key to understanding Poe’s theology as well as he theodicy, his argument from beauty for God’s existence, including our own immortality following the grave. It is not that beauty proves the existence of God, even probabilistically – not the beauty of a face, or of nature, or even the elegance of the laws of nature as discovered by science. Neither do we find in Poe the idea that beauty proves that we shall survive death. All of this is ridiculous, and is not Poe. Instead, it is the effect that beauty has on our soul. It “elevates the soul,” yes, it does so proximately, but ultimately what matters is what beauty conveys. (STAMOS, 2017, p. 108).
“In De vera religione, Augustine summarizes his aesthetic theme,” as Philip Tallon (2012, p. 116) pointed out: “The universe, when seen from the vantage point of totality, remains beautiful, just, and rationally ordered by the providence of God”. For Plato, Saint Augustine and Poe, it is necessary to consider the role of imagination as a contemplative joy that invites us to scrutinize the universe. In this experience, transcendent and interior beauty is inseparable from the idea of an imaginative contemplation, the faculty of the mind that organizes intuition and perception, required to separate reality and fantasy, in memory or in imagination. Invented or fictional images, by the use of a literary imagination, according to a Neoplatonic definition of “contemplative imagination”, would be able to envisage the Beauty and the soul as part of God’s existence, in both hemispheres, Saint Augustine’s and Poe’s theory of knowledge.

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