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## Apocalypse and Hoax: From Poe's Social Texts to *Social Text*

Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich

In the spring of 1996 the editors of *Social Text*, a journal of Cultural Studies, published a special issue, entitled "Science Wars" and devoted to Science Studies, that is, to the sociological or deconstructive or otherwise critical analyses of the institutions and practices of science today. Included in the issue was an article by Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University (also the home of *Social Text*), entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." As Sokal announced in a "confession" published shortly thereafter in another journal, *Lingua Franca*, the article was a hoax, designed to parody and expose what he claimed to find and deplore in *Social Text*: sloppy thinking obscured by trendy jargon, general ignorance of science, unfounded claims to the political Left, and so forth. The affair was reported on the front page of the *New York Times*, after which, as the editors of *Lingua Franca* put it, "an avalanche of discussion" was set off, "the internet was inflamed," and comment and controversy were everywhere.

I remember reading that *Times* report with the usual appreciation of a trick successfully pulled off, and the usual *Schadenfreude* at the embarrassments it caused to others and not to me. But I didn't expect the fire storm – the science wars become Armageddon, it seemed – and my first surprise came just three days later, with the appearance of Professor Stanley Fish's angry defense of *Social Text* on the *Times* Op-Ed page. This piece has received at least as much notice and commentary as the original Sokal article (it has certainly been more widely-read), particularly for its uncharacteristically benign exposition of the nature and meaning of social construction, as well as deconstruction, and for its now more or less notorious comparison of the laws of physics with the rules of baseball. It represented an escalation in the status and visibility of participants in the debate that was continued with the response to it of Nobel physicist Steven Weinberg, whose article "So-

kal's Hoax" appeared in *The New York Review of Books* the following August.<sup>1</sup> And Fish's article performed another sort of escalation as well in the terms it used for what Sokal did, which progress from "prank" (in quotation marks, indicating a word "gloated" by Sokal himself), to "deception," to "fraud" (as defined elsewhere and here introduced indirectly) thus:

In a 1989 report published in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, fraud is said to go "beyond error to erode the foundations of trust on which science is built." That is Professor Sokal's legacy, one likely to be longer lasting than the brief fame he now enjoys for having successfully pretended to be himself. ("Professor Sokal's Bad Joke": A23)

The parting shot about brief fame, nice in its unspoken implication that this was the goal of the deception all along, is also predictive. In her own witty and succinct commentary on the Sokal affair, which appeared in *The Nation* a month after the Op-Ed piece, Katha Pollit refers to "the development in the 1980s of an academic celebrity system that meshes in funny, glitzy ways with the worlds of art and entertainment" – and of which she and her readers recognize Professor Fish himself to be an early and enduring star (9). And this subject of celebrity becomes an integral part of the ongoing series of comments, analyses, charges and counter-charges. It would be amusing to pursue it at least as far as the article by Judith Butler (whose very name is evoked by Pollit as a buzz word of the postmodernists), in which Fish's hint is picked up in remarks on the relationship of parody to envy, wherein "the one who performs the parody aspires, quite literally, to occupy the place of the one parodied . . . territorializing the position of that other and acquiring temporary cultural fame" (35). But for the moment I would like to return to

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<sup>1</sup>Weinberg's article provoked letters printed in an issue of the following October from professors at Yale, Rutgers, Princeton, and UCLA; in the meantime, Sokal and the *Social Text* editors exchanged attacks and defenses in *Lingua Franca* as well as in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, where they were joined by still greater numbers of partisans and commentators from an ever-widening range of disciplines and institutions. The debate spread abroad immediately, becoming particularly active in the letters columns of the *TLS* and even more so in France after the 1997 publication there of a book by Sokal and his Belgian colleague Jean Bricmont, *Impositions Intellectuelles*, a self-explanatory title (the targets are contemporary French philosophers and critics of special influence in American universities). The data base I consulted during the summer of 1998 on the Sokal affair listed over a hundred titles in scholarly journals alone (that is, excluding the newspapers and popular weeklies, where it has from the start received remarkable coverage). Although I managed to look at most of these, I cannot pretend to (want to) keep pace with the continuing output of material, nor to offer even a selective list of, much less commentary on, what I myself have read. A presumably complete up-to-date bibliography is available at [www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/index.html](http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/index.html).

that surprise I noted on first reading Fish himself. It grew out of my sense that his climactic denunciation of Sokal quoted above, however (characteristically) eloquent it might seem, depended not only on a rhetorical trick but on a kind of willful (and uncharacteristic) ignorance of the context into which I had immediately put, and frankly put away, Sokal's accomplishment, that is, within the long – and we could even say distinguished – *tradition* of hoaxing that exists in American letters and culture. This was the origin of the investigations which have led me to the present subject.

So an alternative title to this paper could be, "The American Hoax and Its Tradition, or, Apocalypse: The Flip Side." And the alternative within this alternative (that useful 'or . . .') reflects my conviction that the American tradition of hoax *is* apocalyptic, even though not all hoaxes are about Revelation or the end of the world. A great number are, of course, and I will have occasion to look at the best known of these in some detail. But I want to pursue a connection between the two, between a kind of apocalyptic vision and the impulse towards hoax (hoaxing or being hoaxed), which is at once looser and deeper. And I must add the caution – it may be so obvious as to go without saying, and hence need saying – that flippancy is precisely the attitude that the successful hoax must conceal. The successful hoax, in other words, is an "unsuccessful" parody, a spoof not detected and hence accepted by those hoaxed, as the *Social Text* editors were flattered into accepting for publication as serious (or, depending on your take on the affair, as sincere or honest) an actually parodic (or deceptive or fraudulent) piece of work. In the final chapter of his critical study of Poe, entitled "The Cultural Logic of the Hoax," Jonathan Elmer takes a somewhat different view of the phenomenon. He refers to Poe's predilection for hoax as "the expression of a cultural contradiction" that involves a kind of complicity between hoaxer and hoaxed, who share a "regime of deception and lack of seriousness" that "is also our own," and hence, as I take this to suggest, tinged with our own postmodern ironies. Building on Neil Harris's work, Elmer compares Poe's to Barnum's successes, which "depend less on a massive duping of his public than on the mobilization of a dynamic in which deception and enlightenment operate together as inextricable complements" (187). But as I've tried to suggest, such a dynamic of shared winks indicates the degree to which success is only partial: the true hoax is perforce, until the moment of revelation, in deadly earnest – perforce, or revelation itself is denied. Elmer may go further in accounting for Poe's numerous failures in this line: he did have a fatal tendency to wink. In fact, the critic goes too much further, I think, in suggesting that "all Poe's work, which even when it is admired does not allow itself to



be trusted,” might be read as hoax (211) – at which point the term itself becomes useless to me.

Perhaps this is merely to quibble over terms and definitions, an activity endemic to Poe studies; certainly it is to anticipate. I begin the American tradition of hoax with Poe – inaccurately, if not wholly arbitrarily – because he claims to be its originator even as he laments the lucky precedence of others, and because he did originate so many other elements of American literary culture, like the detective story and science fiction and, if you read *Eureka* the way he would like you to, the Big Bang theory of the universe. But for the sake of the more obviously apocalyptic content (what I might call the bigger bang) I begin my review of the tradition with its most notorious and thus by definition most successful instance, that is Orson Welles’s *Martian Invasion* of 1938. And in view of the limits of time and space within which it will proceed, I take the added precaution of anticipating my own end. I thus propose three proleptic conclusions about the apocalyptic hoax.

First, no matter what the initial motivation of the hoaxer, assuming hoax and not fraud (a distinction often blurred in the Sokal case), the activity itself involves a desire to fool and hence to make foolish the person or persons hoaxed: *the hoax is an act of aggression, and the relation of hoaxer to hoaxed is the beginning of its politics*. Although the point in Poe’s case has been made more recently and in more fashionable terms, I believe that Constance Rourke got it right in 1931: “His purpose in the hoaxes was to make his readers absurd, to reduce them to an involuntary imbecility. His objective was triumph . . .” (131) of, I will add (and later elaborate), an often immediately palpable kind. The content of the hoax is thus inevitably political, and this content draws on a context or climate that is crucial to the mechanisms of its success, to what makes for credulity or its opposite. The context furnishes those elements which are to be used in deadly earnest.

Second, with remarkable consistency we find that *this politics will involve the disciplines* (how we organize knowledge) *or the professions* (how that organization takes institutional form). If I may make use of a more fashionable term myself, the hoax involves a kind of identity politics, wherein the privileged identity offered by professional certification or recognition is evoked, challenged, feels itself menaced. The hoax draws on a context of disciplinary and professional instability, on situations of transition or reformulation. One modern, secular version of Revelation is, after all, that specialized and exclusive knowledge – so often possessed of a prophetic aspect, a power in the present by virtue of its claims on the future – of which disciplinary and professional boundaries are the custodians. A hoax like So-

kal's, and we can see this reflected in Fish's angry response to it, is the flip side of custodianship and its discontents.

Finally, this type of hoax is open-ended, which is another way of saying that exposure does not by itself bring resolution. Reactions to and commentary on it may threaten, as they do in the Sokal affair, a kind of self-engendering endlessness. More important, *response provoked by the hoax tends to replicate or reenact the hoax itself*. We can see this very clearly in the case of the Martian Invasion, to which I now turn.

On the evening of 30 October 1938 a radio broadcast was aired of an adaptation of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, performed by Orson Welles's Mercury Theatre group in their weekly program out of the New York studios of CBS. The adaptation was specific to the medium: in it an announcer "interrupts" a program of dance music with a special bulletin about a mysterious explosion on Mars; the program resumes, is reinterrupted with notice of further explosions and landings on earth, and finally continuous "news coverage" takes over. This was heard by an estimated six million people nationwide, an estimated one million of whom believed in the truth of what they were hearing, namely that Martians were landing in New Jersey and acting hostile, indeed proceeding to wipe out the human race, or at least its American branch. These believers panicked, jamming streets, highways, railway stations, making their own sightings of the invading forces – repeating and extending, in other words, the scenes depicted or "reported" in the broadcast. The next morning Welles "found himself on the front page of the *New York Times*," to quote one biographer, "as the perpetrator of a hoax that had panicked the nation. . . . Overnight he had made himself known around the world," inspiring resentments this writer calls "global" (Leaming 67). But in fact, Americans seem to have been remarkably good sports about the whole thing. Apparently, and I draw now on adaptor Howard Koch's memoir of the affair, a post-crisis camaraderie took hold, the sort that has people exchanging anecdotes and reminiscences almost instantly, constructing a history which they have collectively struggled through and survived. ("Where were you when Kennedy was shot?" is a question Americans began asking each other, as I can attest, the day after the event.) A cleverly negotiated contract with CBS and, probably more, a very different *Zeitgeist* from our own saved Welles from lawsuits or any kind of prosecution for damages.

I mention these details for the contrast they provide with what would happen in similar circumstances today, but in what I call the professional response to the hoax we are more likely to find similarities. For this I am

fortunate to have a work by one Hadley Cantril, a social psychologist (evidently), entitled *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* and published in 1940 as part of a series of studies sponsored by the Federal Radio Education Committee, funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to Princeton University for research on the role of radio in American life. I have actually simplified the institutional arrangements, and I must leave implicit the question of Cantril's professional status in the context of the relatively new discipline of social psychology. What I want to stress is how emphatically institutional the presentation of the work is: officially sanctioned, authoritative, impersonal, above all removed from the recent event which is its subject. Cantril and his team have interviewed scores of those not so removed – specifically those listeners to the broadcast who believed and panicked, who were successfully hoaxed – , and they come up with a wealth of details and interpretations of them that support most forcefully my proleptic conclusions.

Let us begin with the question of motivation: was the hoax intended at all? The play was introduced as a play at the beginning of the broadcast, but this was a time when the majority of listeners were tuned to a rival show (Welles gained listeners during its first commercial, when many switched over to his program: he was engaged in something of a ratings war at that time). It was interrupted at least twice during the hour for program identification, but this seems to tell us more about the mechanisms of panic and credulity in the face of no matter what than it does about intention. The effective mechanisms of credulity can in fact be located in the context or political climate surrounding the broadcast. Consider the following: Americans, who, according to a survey Cantril cites, trust radio more than newspapers (50% to 17%) to be unbiased, rely on it wholly for continuous reportage of ongoing crises, as millions today rely on CNN. One model for Koch's adaptation was the previous year's live news coverage of the Hindenburg disaster, during which the reporter present at the landing site reacted vocally to the aircraft's explosion as it happened, sobbing on the air and thus inviting in his listeners an immediate and sympathetic reaction (incidentally, the site was in New Jersey). Most important, the great crisis of 1938, Hitler's invasion of Austria, has come to these same Americans as radio news, and often as news that, as in the Welles broadcast, interrupts regular programming. More than one of Cantril's interviewees slipped and called the Martians Germans. Some consciously assumed that the Martians *were* Germans in camouflage (surely the wrong term here) as invaders from outer space.

Many commentators took the panic as a warning of American unpreparedness, and another biographer has ascribed this possible, secret motive to Welles. I am quite sure this is benighted: if Welles had a particular purpose in mind, it certainly had more to do with the ratings war and pressures from CBS. But we must not forget the overriding question of aggression. Welles's mass duping of his public resonates with the role and character of the demagogic press lord, the figure who will soon become his great alter ego. It is much easier to imagine Citizen Kane (or Hearst) staging the whole thing and then claiming motives of public interest and the greater good than it is to see the young artist doing so. Yet it is more intriguing still to imagine Welles's performance as a kind of flip over to the dark side of his own genius.

And the question of the professions? The role Welles plays in the adaptation is that of the Scientist, whose pedantic pronouncements on the Martians order and interpret the raw data conveyed by the increasingly excited reporters, even as they confirm the general panic these "facts" produce. Cantril elicits from several of his subjects the admission that what their general trust in the radio did not achieve, their faith in the reliability and authority of the scientist did. Indeed, although the academic study repeatedly (and rather scoldingly) wonders why more people did not seek outside confirmation of the events they were hearing reported, it is clear from many of the interviews that the scientist served this function: the reporters were "inside" the world of the radio broadcast, if you will, and the scientist came from, and carried into it, a world "outside." By extension I would venture that the radio itself is inside the world of its listeners, as it is literally inside the house or apartment or automobile, whereas the scientist is not. In fact, Cantril makes use of this trope in his consideration of the conditions friendly to panic. After surveying the destabilizing effects of the stock market crash of '29, still prevalent in the attitudes as well as the economic and social circumstances of many listeners, he goes on to "the mystery of science" itself:

For certain people without scientific training or without sufficient personal ability, initiative, or opportunity to investigate the mechanisms surrounding them, the telephone, the airplane, poison gas, the radio, the camera are but specific manifestations of a baffling power. The principles by which such things operate are completely unknown. Such devices come *from a world outside* and lie within a universe of discourse completely foreign to the perplexed layman. Scientists in general are frequently referred to as "they." (172, my emphasis)

What the perplexed layman lives with without understanding, the expert has in charge; but that expert is not always perceived as benign.

And it is here, I believe, that the professional commentator also replicates the hoax. In the "Preface" to his work, Cantril describes the event he has chosen for analysis as "a kind of freely provided experiment," which can "give us insight into the psychology of the common man and, more especially, the psychology of the man of our times" (vi). To study it is to produce much more than a mere "study of panic. For – and here the justification rises to celebration –

the situation created by the broadcast was one which shows us how the common man reacts in a time of stress and strain. It gives us insights into his intelligence, his anxieties and his needs, which we could never get by tests or strictly experimental studies. The panic situation we have investigated had all the flavor of everyday life [invasion by Martians?] and, at the same time, provided a semi-experimental condition for research. Students of social psychology should find here some interesting research tools. (vi-vii)

I suppose it is easy enough for me at the end of the century to be amused by the professor at the Ivy League University, who, some half-century ago, felt no self-consciousness about such references *de haut* to the common man. But Cantril is strikingly, nay bizarrely blind to the presence within the hoax he studies of references to himself, as it were, in his professional guise. Immediately after this celebration of the unprecedented opportunity here given to study the common man in his habitat, in stress, inside and out, appears the text of the radio play. It, too, has a Preface of sorts, in which Welles – introduced by name as director and star – sets the stage with a brilliant evocation of the expert as all-too-recognizable alien. Notice the quietly effective (and effectively repeated) first three words:

We know now that in the early years of the twentieth century this world was being watched closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own. We know now that as human beings busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency people went to and fro over the earth about their little affairs. . . . Yet across an immense ethereal gulf . . . intelligences vast, cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. (4)

Here we have, by analogy, the common man as amoeba. The Martian appears in two guises: as an Angel of the Apocalypse (a suggestively fallen one, like Lucifer, envious) who will bring destruction to mankind, and on the other hand, as an emphatically *mortal* scientist – the man with a microscope



– who studies to understand and master. Extending the analogy beyond the hoax to what I have called its professional response, we can very neatly invert it: here we have the social scientist – Cantril’s self-description: he is, say, the man with a tape recorder – as a kind of Martian, an observer about to become invader, with all the political if not apocalyptic implications that that entails. Of course we hesitate to extend the apocalyptic into this real world, where what we have is familiar enough: an academic getting on with the job, after all, cementing his place in the institution, advancing the boundaries of his discipline along with the progress of his career. (And of course, I am tempted to add, we cannot be expected to ironize our professional selves.) But if we keep the apocalyptic implications in mind, we might advance somewhat in our understanding of the furor surrounding the Sokal affair.

In turning back a hundred years from Welles to Poe, I am going to emphasize, at the cost perhaps of the artist most readers recognize, the hack whose ghost might have groaned with envy of the former’s success – that is, the writer of satires, parodies, and hoaxes.<sup>2</sup> Such works account for more than half of Poe’s published stories, although not of those most commonly collected. I call them “social texts” for reasons I can make clearest by reverting to the useful if inexact distinctions between “high” and “low.” In contrast to the serious or high tales, which are marked by spatial and temporal vagueness, the social or low are locally precise and immediately topical in reference. The social text calls out for and indeed depends on verification by reference to what is external to itself: this is true of a parody or satire, which depends on comparison with another text or circumstance for its humor, and it is true of the hoax, a parodic text which depends, as I have mentioned, on concealing the nature of its imitation of something else for its success, that is, for the belief on the part of the hoaxed that it *is* something else. Then we have the pleasure, or, if you like, the triumph of the hoaxer, who

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<sup>2</sup> The centrality of this type of work is commented on by his editor and biographer James Harrison as early as 1902: hoaxing is “an ingrained element of Poe’s intellectual make-up, and he has, in our opinion, carried it to a far greater distance and into far more mysterious realms than his students and biographers have hitherto noticed” (198). Recent students and biographers, as well as editors and critics of all sorts, have paid increasing attention to the subject (indeed complaining of and rescuing Poe from neglect has been a constant in his posthumous career, or canonical history, since the executorship of Rufus Griswold). See for example editions by Harold Beaver (1976) and David Galloway (1983) and extended critical analyses by David Ketterer (1979), Jonathan Elmer (1995), and David Hirsch (1968, 1996), all of which provide useful reviews of other work in this area.



exposes the error within the apparent fidelity of reference – the balloon or the Martians never landed, were never launched; *pi* is a constant, is not and could never be historically contingent – and so the error of belief.

In chapter two of *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode distinguishes between those fictions “consciously held to be fictive,” such as the literary, and the myths into which fictions can degenerate whenever they are not so held; the former call for a conditional, and the latter for an absolute belief. It is only by a kind of willful misprision that I can apply the distinction to the one I make between Poe’s high tales and social texts, but let me do so for the moment conditionally, on the understanding that viewing the hoax as a special subset of myth – a fiction demanding blindness to its fictiveness, demanding absolute belief that it can be experimentally confirmed or verified – will help us to see the apocalyptic implications that are also the subject of Kermode’s book. Kermode refers to the propensity of myth to test its own validity by its success in or impact on the world. Again in contrast to the high tales, Poe’s hoaxes are meant to have an immediate and palpable impact on the social world that provides their subject and audience. Poe would have loved to cause panic in the streets; panic in the streets (or, cf. Fish, “Professor Sokal’s Bad Joke”: “in the offices of learned journals”) is the hoax’s confirming proof.

To take one example: Poe must have been the only man in the Republic who thought he might, however briefly, stem the tide of the California Gold Rush. In a letter to Evert Duyckinck of 8 March 1849 he explained that his carefully crafted hoax “Von Kempelen and his Discovery” – an “experiment in the plausible or verisimilar style,” which reports the successful transmutation of lead to gold – should, “acting as a very sudden, although of course a very temporary, *check* to the gold fever . . . create a *stir* to some purpose” (XVII.341). The text that Poe covertly parodies in the story is not the scientific treatise but rather the popular journal report or profile of a scientist become newsworthy – precisely the kind of “real” piece the targeted public would be likely to read (it begins with a promise *not* to be unduly scientific, which is placed amid invented references to other scientific treatises and reports). The letter to Duyckinck is fascinating for its critical treatment of this and others’ hoaxes: Poe is convinced that his own “is the first deliberate literary attempt of the kind on record,” an attempt “to deceive by verisimilitude”; and he shows great astuteness in pinpointing the ruinous effects in another writer’s efforts of “a tone of banter” (XVII.342). Yet his own essay is weakened by that fatal tendency to which I referred. For instance, the reporter ridicules a rival claimant to Von Kempelen’s discovery in terms rather

too broadly humorous, and his conclusion that the claim as published “has an amazingly moon-hoaxy air” (VI.247) amounts to a broad wink with dig in the ribs. He goes on to associate his man, Von Kempelen, with “Maelzel, of Automaton-chess-player memory” (VI.249), although any reader of decent memory will thereby recognize a hoax exposed by Poe himself. There is coy reference, repeated from earlier hoaxes, to “researches about the protoxide of azote” and its “translatibility” to nitrous oxide, that is laughing gas, and so forth.

It may be that some quirk of temperament or genius simply prevented Poe from staying consistently within the plausible or verisimilar style no matter what the context. In the high tales he employs it to best effect in the service of antithetically fantastic or supernatural elements, as in “The Black Cat” or “William Wilson,” to cite two of numerous possible instances. A remarkable reflection on this process, a sort of technical *mise en abîme*, can be found in chapter 8 of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, where in order to overcome and hence save themselves from the murderous crew of mutineers, the stowaway Pym and his two companions, Augustus and Peters, devise a plan whereby he will surprise and terrify the crew by appearing as the risen corpse of one of their victims. Pym’s disguise is verisimilar to the point that on seeing his own reflection he is “so impressed with a sense of vague awe at my appearance, and at the recollection of *the terrific reality which I was thus representing*” (III.88, my emphasis) that he is almost paralyzed – the effect he intends to have on the others. Pym does manage to act, however, bursting in on the crew once Peters has primed them with conversation about ghostly and other supernatural phenomena. At this most conspicuously dramatic point in the narrative, he interrupts the action for explanation. “The intense effect produced by this sudden apparition is not at all to be wondered at when the various circumstances are taken into consideration” (III.91), begins a scientifically informed analysis, of stultifying length, of why this hoax in deadly earnest succeeded beyond the hoaxers’ greatest expectations. The effect is less of the magician exposing the trick than of the philosopher of composition setting forth the quasi-scientific calculus of ineffable poetic effect.

A different sort of undead corpse is at the center of “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” in which a man on the point of death is put into a hypnotic trance that sustains or suspends his body in an unchanging state for an impossibly long period of time; when the trance is broken, the flesh dissolves at once into the “mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity” (VI.166) that it had or should have become, so to speak, long since that earlier point.

The title of the tale alerts us to the technical realism used to sustain the fantastic element at its core. Poe cannot have been blind to the irony of this serious tale's inadvertent or accidental success as a hoax: in London it was taken to be, and reprinted as, a factual medical report. But the irony does not seem to have been unpleasant to him, and he took pride in the error of others to the extent of occasional (and inconsistent) suggestions that it was intentional on his part. The question is, could Poe succeed in an intention thus deliberate?

It may be, rather, that Poe was simply envious of others' success and, by a comparable process of retrospect, tended to appropriate it to (or consider it as appropriated from) himself. He claimed, for instance, that he was persuaded against his will to turn a hoax about balloon travel to the moon (he had planned a straight-forwardly scientific report, "believing the public, in fact, more gullible than did my friends") into "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfall," a tale he styled "half-plausible, half-bantering" (XV.128), which begins as a satire of leaden facetiousness and becomes, most improbably, a kind of astronomical treatise of apparent seriousness before ending, wholly impossibly, as a fantasy with overtones of religious allegory. Then, for the rest of his life, Poe claimed that Richard Adams Locke, whose 1838 report of a moon landing was probably the most successful American hoax before Welles's, had stolen the idea from that tale. Locke's success and notoriety rankled terribly. When Poe tried again with what he called a hoax in earnest, he went to great lengths to insure public attention and, of course, belief. Headlines in the *New York Sun* for 13 April 1844 announced with no marks of irony or play the invented event:

*Astounding Intelligence by Private Express from Charleston via Norfolk!*  
*Atlantic Crossed in Three Days!!*  
*Signal Triumph of Mr Monck Mason's Flying Machine!!! (Poe Log 457)*

The issue promised sale the following day of a special report of the landing (Poe's "Balloon Hoax" proper, in the form of a news broadside). The author's later claims that excited crowds snapped these up in minutes cannot be verified, but enough copies circulated to provoke scathing responses in the rival press. Thus an editorial in the *New York Herald* of 15 April denounced this recent imposition on an "exasperated" public of a "ridiculous" and "preposterous" hoax, no more than "a poor imitation of Locke's" and due to some inept editor's greed.

When this blundering blockhead had an intention of getting up something in the hoaxing line, he ought to have engaged some person who had common sense and information enough to preserve localities and other necessary circumstances. (*Poe Log* 460)

We should note, while recalling the differences between the reactions provoked by Welles and Sokal, that there is no mention here (or anywhere else that I have seen) of fraudulent misuse of the news medium. A hoax is accepted as it is well or ill done; in the latter case, it is an imposition on our time or an insult to our intelligence; in the former, it is presumably an instructive hence worthwhile type of entertainment. We do seem closer here to "cultural contradiction" expounded by Elmer to which I referred above, the world of those Americans who, to quote Baudelaire on Poe's readers, "aiment tant à être dupés." Poe himself evokes such complicitous tolerance and the instructional standard on which it rests when, in the guise of an anonymous *Sun* editor, he defends while retracting as "unconfirmed" the balloon-landing report:

The description of the balloon and the voyage was written with a minuteness and scientific ability calculated to obtain credit everywhere, and was read with great pleasure and satisfaction. We by no means think such a project impossible. (*Poe Log*, 460)

Profiting from the freedom of out-of-town publication, Poe could report to the readers of his regular "Doings of Gotham" letter to the *Columbia*, PA, *Spy* that this same story had caused "a far more intense sensation than anything since Locke's 'Moon Story.'" And yet he undermines this wishful report with an implicit admission that the many were not taken in:

The more intelligent believed, while the rabble for the most part rejected the whole with disdain. Twenty years ago credulity was the characteristic trait of the mob, incredulity the distinctive feature of the philosophic: now the case is exactly conversed. (*Doings of Gotham* 33)

The politics of Poe's hoaxes is essentially anti-democratic: that ravening beast Mob is the perpetual target of his satire, and his own power to play on its ignorance and credulity (to create panic in the streets) would, as I have suggested, be the satire's confirmation. This brings me back to my dissent from Elmer's argument about the cultural logic of the hoax: in my reading Poe rejects all notion of complicity with the democratic many. We may see this rejection in terms of inability on Poe's part, for example to sustain a

consistently verisimilar style; what I would suggest is a more fundamental inability to sustain that ambivalently populist sympathy with, or participation in, mass attitudes that is the mark of the successful press lord. Or we may look at it in terms of the inability of others: the masses are unequal to Poe's superior plausibility of invention – too ignorant, too lacking in “personal ability, initiative, or opportunity to investigate” the wonders and possibilities of “a world outside” the narrow one they inhabit, with its easy complacencies and disdainful cynicisms. Poe will enter into complicity, rather, with the philosophic few, whose superior play of mind permits, if not complete credulity, at least the suspension of disbelief. It is likely that Poe's habit of encoding the joke in his text represents a gesture towards these compatible few.<sup>3</sup> The guide rope trailing from balloon car to ground counteracts the effects of additional weight on the craft without need of discharging ballast; and – “If, on the other hand, any circumstance should cause *undue levity* and consequent ascent, this levity is immediately counteracted by the additional weight of rope upraised from earth” (V.231, my emphasis).

We may find it more disturbing in, or I should say rather to, Poe's work that such levity recurs in the differently intended “high” art. Harold Beaver refers, for example, to the “reckless playfulness [that] invades even the august vision of *Eureka*” (xvi). And yet it is precisely in this invasion or infection of high seriousness by low humor that *Eureka*, Poe's most apocalyptically prophetic text, replicates the structure and tone – the very politics, I would suggest – of the hoaxes. Through the labyrinth of Poe's work and career runs a thread linking society to cosmos and social exposure, say of the predations of the democratic monster Mob, to an apocalyptic revelation of Last Things. From “Hans Pfall” to “Mellonta Tauta” to “Some Words With a Mummy,” from “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” to “Monos and

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<sup>3</sup> Thus the contradiction Poe is caught in: his undisguised desire is to dupe the masses – that is his political triumph – , but only these compatible few are capable of intellectual assent or credence. The Sokal affair is odd in the tradition of hoax in that it inverts the expected politics. Sokal, assuming the stance of a populist, attacks an exclusive elite on behalf of the democratic many. Defending the ethics of his trick in the *Lingua Franca* confession, he referred to the enclosed nature of the “self-perpetuating academic subculture” represented by *Social Text* and asked, predictably enough, “how can one show that the emperor has no clothes?” (“A Physicist Experiments” 63). Thus, when editors Robins and Ross rejoined, in a letter to the *New York Times* following the newspaper's report of both hoax and confession, that they had never, as there claimed, challenged the “reality” of the physical world that is the domain of science but only “the priestly organization and lack of accountability to the public” of the scientific community, the populist position they strove to assume was already preempted (“Scientific Priesthood”: A23). This is a case of adversaries calling each other Emperor, with the title going, or rather sticking to the loser.



Una" to *Eureka* itself, the range might be from depths to heights, but the line is unbroken: the prophetic text drives towards its visionary catastrophe, but something else from within it is dragging on the earth.

Another way of looking at this politics is to ask the question central to prophecy itself: whence its authority? who, if anyone, will recognize or heed the prophet? For Poe it is the question, a vexed one throughout his career, of professional identity. It is worth noting that Poe the professional writer does not, strictly speaking, write literary hoaxes, which tend at this time to be antiquarian impersonations like Chatterton's or Macpherson's; his vision is rather futuristic, and his favorite impersonation is of the Man of Science.<sup>4</sup> Yet he is paradoxically looking backwards as well to the era of Franklin and Jefferson (and of course before, all the way back to the figure in *Eureka* named Aries Tottle), when the man of letters and the man of science and the man of affairs could merge in the one figure of the Philosopher, say, as Emerson would have understood the honorific and no doubt wished to be accorded it. I agree with Beaver that Poe aspired to be "the theorist and seer of the electro-magnetic age" that was his own, but not that he could still, "poised [as he was] between the old Newtonian order and the new Professionalism," feel confident of his power to fill the role or of the public's willingness to acknowledge and respect it (viii). In a late letter to George Isbell, Poe offers a critique of such new (or mere) professionals that could stand as an epigraph to some of the more severely accusatory works of Science Studies today:

One thing is certain; that the objections of merely scientific men – men, I mean, who cultivate the physical sciences to the exclusion in a greater or less degree, of the mathematics, of metaphysics, and logic – are generally invalid except in re-

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<sup>4</sup> The American writer who (covertly) takes up the hoaxing mantle of Poe and makes it literary is Henry James. He exposes his own "trickery" in what are probably the most direct and revealing addresses to his readers that he made in his professional capacity, the Prefaces to the New York Edition of 1907. In one of the first of these, to his early novel *The American*, James echoes (again covertly) the passage from Poe's "Balloon Hoax" just cited. The description of the guide rope goes on to explain its "most important office" as that of indicating "the *direction* of the balloon. The rope *drags*, either on land or sea, while the balloon is free" (V.231, Poe's emphasis). Compare this to James's definition in the Preface of "Romance," which deals with "experience liberated" and "exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it and, if we wish so to put the matter, *drag* upon it. . . ." (33, my emphasis; the term *drag* is repeated twice more in extended and rather peculiar metaphors.) As James famously goes on: "The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length . . . by [which] we know where we are; and from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated," and so forth (33-34). Indeed, all of the Prefaces bear comparison with Poe's work.



spect to scientific details. Of all the persons in the world, they are at the same time the most bigoted and the least capable of using, generalizing, or deciding upon the facts which they bring to light in the course of their experiments. (I.277)

Disdainful as the tone may be here, its echoes of resentment and uncertainty seem to me equally strong. *Eureka* represents one challenge to these limited clinicians, and one release of or antidote to the dissatisfactions they inspire. The hoaxes are another.

In the century following Poe's death, the gulf separating philosopher and scientist – or we could say, separating professional scientist from everyone else – widened and deepened to an extent that I doubt he could have credited or absorbed. The now classic expression of this gulf is, of course, C.P. Snow's "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution," a paper originally delivered and published in the 1950s, which is automatically evoked, by my unsystematic count, in about three quarters of the contributions to the Sokal debate. Its title has entered the language (references to Snow's two cultures are assumed to require no gloss), as its underlying assumption seems to have embedded itself in our attitudes, to have been naturalized, as it were, so much so that we are likely to forget that at its publication the piece was as controversial as Sokal's. Indeed, the analogies that this deadly earnest jeremiad bears to the later "prank" are surprising.

First, it was immediately and widely disseminated, translated into dozens of languages and commented on around the world. It made Snow far better known than his novels ever would, an effect which brings to mind Jacques Derrida's crocodile tears for "le pauvre Sokal," who will be known henceforth for his mean-spirited trick and not for any science he ever does. It was also, as I suggested, immediately and furiously controversial: F.R. Leavis's *ad hominem* fury was apparently so great that legal advice and Snow's own permission were sought before editors would put it into print.

Second, and one of the reasons for the fury, it begins with rather testy observations on the appropriation of a hitherto inclusive category or quasi-professional identity – that of the intellectual – by a narrower or more limited group termed by Snow "the literary intellectuals" (4). We can compare this with the realignments of philosophy and science in Poe's day (what is lost or appropriated by "merely scientific" men?) as well as with the jockeying that seems to go on between practitioners and critics of Cultural Studies in our own. Snow is more exuberant than today's scientist in his depictions of the scientific ignorance or "illiteracy" of others: among the literary intellectuals, he believes, "the pole of total incomprehension of science radi-

ates its influence on all the rest,” and he characterizes the whole group as “natural Luddites” (22). On the other hand, he remarks only casually and in passing on the “bizarre” absence of twentieth-century science from twentieth-century art (“one used to find poets consciously using scientific expressions and getting them wrong” [30] but no longer), whereas the entire question of the use or misuse of scientific terms and theories by today’s critical theorists and philosophers – as metaphor, as analogy, or (as I mentioned above, depending on your take on the matter) as show-off window dressing – is at the very heart of the controversies surrounding the Sokal hoax and Science Studies in general.

But these are differences of degree only, and whether or not the analogies I have noted are merely coincidental, there is one respect in which Snow’s essay touches directly on my subject. That is, although there is obviously nothing of the hoax about it, it is in the end an apocalyptic text. Snow, the public figure who is (who self-importantly and dubiously presents himself as, Leavis would emend) both scientist and man of letters, emerges finally as a most reluctant prophet, the force of whose warning lies precisely in the degree to which he shrinks from it. Thus his conclusion: “The danger is, we have been brought up to think as though we had all the time in the world. We have very little time. So little that I dare not guess at it” (51). Very little time, I ask myself each time I read this, before what? Before The Bomb goes off? Or very little time *for* what? The manifest logic is that we have little time to institute the educational reforms that Snow proposes, much as Cantril does towards the close of his book, as remedy for the evils he has inferred from the existence of and abysmal gap between the two cultures. The danger of our failing to institute such reforms is that we leave control of the fate of mankind to the ignorant – either to men of affairs, who are ignorant of the very tools of power and destruction that they wield, or to merely scientific men, who are ignorant of the world of affairs or the corridors of power, not to mention of the humanizing effects of novels. This, at least, is where the manifest logic of “The Two Cultures” leads.

But it seems to me that there is a latent structure at work here that also bears analogies not only to the Sokal affair but to the apocalyptic visions of Poe and others after him. As a way of approaching this I would like to return briefly to the work by Frank Kermode to which I referred earlier. In chapter two, “Fictions,” Kermode proposes to draw analogies between the eschatological fictions (apocalypses) he has already treated and literary fictions, but in fact the chapter is given over to a wide and at times bewildering range of fictions that are distinguished from one another according to the different

types or degrees of belief (or "belief") accorded to them. Part of the difficulty we may experience in negotiating Kermode's argument has to do with its frequent references to a scientific discourse or domain that we do not ordinarily associate with fictions in the first place. And this is in itself further compounded, I believe, by the argument's proceeding at one level according to an impeccable, if subtle, logic and at others by a less clear pattern of association.

Consider, for example, the "ethical problem" raised at the beginning. "If literary fictions *are* related to all others," Kermode writes, "then it must be said that they have some dangerous relations" (37). He quotes Nietzsche on the value of opinion – independent of truth or falsity, dependent on how it functions in the world, on how it is life-furthering, species-preserving, and so forth – and then illustrates how such a "relatively innocent theory" that recognizes "the gulf between being and knowing, the sense that nature can always be made to answer our questions, comply with our fictions" can lead into danger elsewhere.

This [sense of compliance] is what Wordsworth curiously and touchingly predicted when he asserted that "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her." In its purely operational form this is the basis of the theoretical physicist's life, since he assumes that there will always be experimental confirmation for positions arrived at by pure mathematics. Naturally, the answers, like the questions, are purely human. "Nature is patient of interpretation in terms of laws that happen to interest us," as Whitehead remarked. But on the other hand you have the gas chambers. Alfred Rosenberg used the innocent speculations of William James, John Dewey, and F.C.S. Schiller to argue that knowledge was at the service of "organic" truth, which he identified with the furthering of the life of what he called the "German race." If the value of an opinion is to be tested only by its success in the world, the propositions of dementia can become as valuable as any other fictions. The validity of one's opinion of the Jews can be proved by killing six million Jews. (37-38)

From one point of view, at least, this is outrageous. What is the theoretical physicist doing in this paragraph? Can any theory that is experimentally confirmed fit in any sense into the category of opinion-as-fiction? One might say, for example, that a physicist's prediction of the effects of splitting the atom is confirmed by the explosion of the Bomb; but the explosion itself, however humanly triggered, is neither a "human answer" nor an historically contingent one. And to suggest an analogy between such an event and proving "the validity of one's opinion of the Jews . . . by killing six million Jews" is worse than absurd: it is to image the Holocaust as a kind of chain reaction

– triggered by human agency, but once again begun then beyond it, impersonal and unstoppable. Drawing out the analogy to such a conclusion, unintended, surely, but no less repugnant, simply demonstrates that the physicist's theoretical positions are *not* fictive in the sense that demented opinions are.

They are not, as are the latter, a form of myth.<sup>5</sup> But 1965, the year Kermode delivered the lectures that make up *The Sense of an Ending*, is within the same Bomb-haunted post-war period as 1959, the year of Snow's "Two Cultures." I do not mean to liken the brilliantly complex and learned work of Kermode to Snow's somewhat obtuse and more obviously dated essay. But I believe the theoretical physicist appears in Kermode's paragraph about the ethical problem of testing and proving "fictions" in the world at least in part because he is historically implicated in its dangers – the mass catastrophe we have just experienced, the menace that our future seems to have become. The physicist's presence underscores by negative association the value of the literary fiction that demands only conditional belief, the beauty of Wallace Stevens's idea that serves to postpone the moment of concord,

to postpone the End – when the fiction might be said to coincide with reality – for ever; to make of it a fiction, an imaginary moment when "at last" the world of fact and the *mundo* of fiction shall be one. Such a fiction – the last section of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* is, appropriately, the place where Stevens gives it his fullest attention – such a fiction of the end is like infinity plus one and imaginary numbers in mathematics, something we know does not exist, but which helps us to make sense of and to move in the world. *Mundo* itself is such a fiction. (36-37)

I have quoted Kermode at such length because it seems to me that passages like this one echo very strongly in the exchanges between scientists and hu-

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<sup>5</sup> At a later point Kermode finds an example of "a concord-fiction which has its origin not in theology or in literature but in physics" in the Principle of Complementarity that resolves the wave/particle duality of light in quantum theory; but since this principle is an aspect of mathematical formalism and does not "affect" the behavior of matter – is not tested or proved by it – it works perfectly well as an illustration of a type of fiction, that which brings our beliefs or expectations into concord or congruence with the world as we observe or experience it. Indeed, it works well to illustrate the dangers of such fictions when pressed too hard over too much of the world, as they are by enthusiasts like Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr. For a fascinating discussion of the latter's dangerous applications of quantum theory to other domains see Beller. The most effectively flip challenge to the social construction of science that I know of is accomplished by Richard Feynman, who remarks (parenthetically and in passing) in one of his early Lectures on Physics, "Nature does not care what we call it, she just keeps on doing it" (*Lectures on Physics* I.17).

manities professors that have followed on and extended the Sokal affair. We have constructed the so-called laws of modern physics, the science critic insists; they are historically contingent, arising from the conditions and needs of those who constructed them as much as from the observations they are made to measure and explain. No, emphatically no, the scientist returns: the laws of physics are *not* like the rules of baseball; they are determined by the phenomena observed and would be the same – have been, are, or will be the same – no matter who the observers, no matter where or under what conditions the observations: humans on earth, Martians on Mars (or, we may suppose, vice versa). They are incomplete, and at any given time they can be discovered to be incorrect; but the very possibility of correction is proof of the reality to which they conform. The physicist no less than the cultural historian or science critic can draw dangerous political implications from his opponent's position. Steven Weinberg alludes to the holocaust on the basis of a logic not much different from Kermode's, *assuming the fictiveness of scientific theory*, which is precisely what he intends to reject. "These are not entirely academic issues, in any sense of the word 'academic,'" Weinberg concludes his essay on Sokal's hoax:

If we think that scientific laws are flexible enough to be affected by the social setting of their discovery, then some may be tempted to press scientists to discover laws that are more proletarian or feminine or American or religious or Aryan or whatever else it is they want. This is a dangerous path, and more is at stake in the controversy over it than just the health of science. As I mentioned earlier, our civilization has been powerfully affected by the discovery that nature is strictly governed by impersonal laws. As an example I like to quote the remark of Hugh Trevor-Roper that one of the early effects of this discovery was to reduce the enthusiasm for burning witches. We will need to confirm and strengthen the vision of a rationally understandable world if we are to protect ourselves from the irrational tendencies that still beset humanity. (15)

This is not remotely the discourse of postmodernism in any sense of the word "postmodern" – nor, for that matter, is it that of many contemporary academics, many of whom were quick to deconstruct it in terms of its dualism, positivism, or "priestly" arrogance (see, e.g., Holquist, et al.). As I "concluded . . . finally" towards the start of this paper, the responses generated by the Sokal hoax can seem to generate each other with apparent endlessness.

But is this not the point that Kermode illuminates for us? Is not the postmodern philosopher or literary theorist or most especially the sociologist (that is, the critic and theorist of Culture) engaged in a kind of indefinite



postponement of the End, of that moment when theory demands to coincide or be congruent with the world? Can it be that the problem of a physicist like Sokal is that he refuses to participate in, or cannot enter into play with, such postponement, that he insists – in his either/or dualism or naive positivism – on forcing the End? The scientist, and since mid-century especially the physicist, is associated with the direct and catastrophic results of matching theory to world, of “proving” that the congruence is there. This is to speak globally or even cosmically, of course, and I am speculating here on a much smaller professional or institutional scale. But I did begin by wondering why so many academics or intellectuals representing so many different fields and disciplines should have reacted to a particular hoax as if it were the end of the world.

I referred to the manifest logic of Snow’s apocalyptic essay and to the possible latent structure that might underlie it. It has to do as well, I think, with this idea of postponement, or to change the terms a bit, with the idea of a universe (or University) in which diverse and conflicting and even incompatible elements (or epistemologies) are suspended and at play.<sup>6</sup> Now it is not uncommon to find in prophetic texts like Snow’s a certain note of nostalgia; indeed, it is a characteristic of the jeremiad in general. There are points in “The Two Cultures” where we might well feel ourselves inside the structure of *Eureka* – positing or “remembering” an original Unity and observing, and suffering from, its present fragmentation or dispersal or, to use Poe’s term, Multiplicity. But to drive towards a reintegration of what is catastrophically divided may be in effect to drive towards catastrophe, towards the moment of concord when text coincides with referent and Origin and End are one. Without pressing the analogy too hard, I have tried to suggest that such a state of suspension in our professional lives – of transition or instability or, if you like, of uneasy or uncertain multiplicity – is one most receptive or vulnerable to the hoax. Indeed, of this state the hoax might be seen as an anomalous kind of symptom, or – again, always depending on your take on such affairs – as an oddly flippant kind of Revelation.

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Fish’s recent book *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (1995) argues against any practical impact on or within society of interpretive work by academics – an effect his colleagues in such “postmodern” fields as Cultural Studies often seem to claim for what they do. Although Fish devotes considerable space at the start to anticipating and refuting critics to whom the work will seem “retrograde and reactionary” or indicative of such a change in his own politics, it nevertheless startles, especially as coming from the defender – a short year after its publication – of *Social Text*.



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