

## Poe's Economies and "The Fall of the House of Usher"\*

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### I. Introduction: Edgar Allen Poe and the Idea of Poetic Economy

The notion of poetic economy has a considerable pedigree. According to the *OED* (2nd ed.), the earliest instance of the use of *economy* in a literary context is found in Milton's preface to *Samson Agonistes*, where the term functions as a synonym for the old rhetorical concepts of disposition and decorum.<sup>1</sup> Following this precedent, poetic economy would have to be chiefly concerned with the formal organization of a discourse, "the structure, arrangement, or proportion of [its] parts," in the words of the *OED*, with a view to their rhetorical efficacy (*OED* IV.7.). However, this particular understanding of "economy" is already colored by anterior meanings of the word: in accordance with its Greek etymology, the term may also refer to "the management of a household" and "the careful management of resources, so as to make them go as far as possible" (*OED* I.4.; the meaning which was picked up on by the emerging field of political economy); or it can denote "the method of the divine government of the world" (a concept that was central to natural theology far into the nineteenth century; *OED* II.5.a.). Transposed into the literary domain, these definitions point to different ways of conceptualizing poetic economy and the rules it imposes on art: the latter invites us to see the author's effort to order his work in relation to the divine order of the cosmos, whereas the former emphasizes the idea that the artist works under constraints which compel him to a prudent and efficient use of the resources at

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his disposal. In the case of Milton, these constraints were the rules of neoclassical poetics. What such constraints might consist in, once they can no longer be justified through an appeal to tradition, is, it can be argued, the essential question of literary aesthetics under the conditions of modernity. Whether or not a literary text is “economical,” whether its means and ends stand in a proper relationship, can only be decided if one has a sense of the purpose or the principles that have guided its construction; once the text itself becomes the primary evidence in this regard, the claim that it satisfies the requirements of poetic economy easily lapses into circularity and becomes just another way of saying that one considers it to be aesthetically successful. When we speak of poetic economy, it is therefore necessary to spell out the nature of the constraints through which a poetic composition achieves its form—whether, for example, economy of construction is to be understood as a “purely” aesthetic imperative; whether it mimics the generative principles of nature itself (as Coleridge argued in his defense of organic form in Shakespeare’s plays, thereby justifying what earlier critics had dismissed as a lamentable lack of formal discipline); or reflects extrinsic social or technological constraints on the production and reception of literary art (one may think, e.g., of the use of epithets and other forms of verbal redundancy for mnemonic purposes in oral poetry).

It is precisely this wide range of poetological problems which the term “poetic economy” entails that makes it a useful lens through which to view the oeuvre of Edgar Allen Poe. The term bundles a set of concerns which figure centrally in Poe’s writings, where, however, they often appear in confusing diffraction. A closer examination of Poe’s conception of poetic economy can therefore, I hope, also throw light on some of the striking contradictions which have always confounded scholars of Poe’s work—between his aggressive commercialism and his haughty aestheticism, between the images of Poe as either coldly-calculating literary hack or drug-addled Romantic visionary.<sup>2</sup> What I wish to argue in the following is that these contradictions can be understood as issuing from the tension between

two distinct inflections of the notion of poetic economy. On the one hand, there is Poe's lucid account of the way in which economic necessities in the age of the steam-press fundamentally reconfigure literary production, forcing writers to work within limitations imposed by the literary marketplace. On the other, there is his conception of the poet as a minor demiurge, who must capture and recreate within his work a portion of the perfection which characterizes the divine natural order, so that the poetic economy of the literary work can be understood as a miniature model of God's economy. In the first instance, the problem which the poet faces is how to heighten the effect of his work so as to compete successfully for the attention of his readers; in the second, the problem is that of producing a sense of the infinite within the confines of an individual work of art. All of Poe's reflections on his craft bear the traces of his struggle to make these two different sets of constraints congruent, to establish the economy of the work of art as a kind of common denominator between the commercial and the divine.

In itself, of course, the suggestion that Poe's work is shaped by the conflict between the imperatives of the market and those of his artistic imagination is hardly new—although it took a relatively long time for Poe criticism to catch up with the historicist turn of the 1980s and 1990s (presumably because the field was so much under the sway of psychoanalytical and other approaches whose focus lay on the writer's individual psychology). Michael Gilmore's *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (1985) had suggested that the careers of several of the US's major authors during the antebellum period evolved in response to contemporary developments in the publishing industry. Although Poe lends himself in obvious ways to an interpretation along these lines, Gilmore did not include him in this study. It was Terence Whalen who, in *Edgar Allen Poe and the Masses* (1999), presented a thorough-going account of the ways in which commercial pressures and the changing dynamics of the literary marketplace shaped Poe's work. Whalen's study burrows deeply into the archives and draws on a wide array of secondary material so as to place Poe

within this historical context. By contrast, this essay will focus on only a handful of well-known texts (which, however, figure only marginally in Whalen's account) and show how they fold the two divergent inflections of poetic economy into a single principle. The name for this principle which Poe settled on in his cosmological treatise *Eureka* is "symmetry" (96)—the most basic principle of generating a multiplicity of new forms from a simple pattern, of producing a maximum of order with a minimum of effort, of converting the one into the many and *vice versa*.<sup>3</sup> In the need for symmetry, the formal specifications for an ideal artistic approximation of the cosmic order and for the perfect literary commodity converge. At the same time, however, he also remained highly ambivalent towards the principle of symmetry, associating it with mere duplication, with the derivative, and with the spirit's imprisonment in a world of gross materiality. This tension marks not only his critical writings, but also his short fiction, where symmetry is one of the most pervasive sources of the uncanny.<sup>4</sup> As I will show in the concluding section of this essay, it finds particularly eloquent expression in "The Fall of the House of Usher"—a story that is perhaps Poe's most successful attempt to reconcile the demands of poetic economy both in its commercial and in its aesthetic inflection.

## II. Poetic Economy and the Literary Marketplace

The sheer bulk of Poe's critical writings, exceeding by several times the volume of all his fiction, is in itself sufficient indication that Edgar Allen Poe was very much intent on bringing the "oikos" of literature under the "nomos" of rational principle. In most of these texts, Poe presents himself not only as a keen analyst of the changing conditions of literary production but in a manner that departs quite sharply from the Romantic sensibilities of his contemporaries (and that some critics, such as Kent Ljungquist, see as deriving from neoclassical antecedents), he also claims to have successfully articulated a coherent set of rational rules for the composition and evaluation of literary works.

These are rules that primarily concern questions of structure, composition, or, in the terminology of classical rhetoric which also underlay Milton's version of "poetic economy," of disposition. As befits an enterprise that both continues and refashions the tradition of classical rhetoric, the foundational concept for Poe's theory of poetic economy is *effect*—as he explains repeatedly, a literary work of art is to be judged above all by the state of mind it induces in its reader.<sup>5</sup> In his well-known review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, he declares: "A poem must intensely excite. Excitement is its province, its essentiality. Its value is in the ratio of its (elevating) excitement" ("Tale-Writing" 151). It is on the basis of this assumption that Poe can reach his notorious conclusion that "the phrase 'a long poem' embodies a paradox" because, he argues, such a state of intense excitement cannot be sustained for much longer than half an hour—the length of a single "sitting" during which the reader is able to shut out "worldly interests" from his mind ("Tale-Writing" 151, 153). Any poetic form exceeding this limit thus loses what Poe on several occasions designates as the hallmark of the successful work or art: "unity of impression" or "totality [...] of effect." On this basis, Poe dismisses *Paradise Lost* as a fundamentally flawed composition ("The Philosophy of Composition" 196) and pronounces flatly that Homer's *Illiad* is "based on a primitive sense of Art" ("Tale-Writing" 151), while championing non-epic poetry and the short tale as the ideal literary genres for the expression of poetic sentiment.

The pose which Poe strikes in these passages is that of an "engineer of sensations" (Arac 75)—an expert craftsman devising ever new ways of stimulating the "souls" of his readers who "during the hour of perusal" are, as Poe puts it, "at the writer's control" ("Tale-Writing" 153). Poe is mockingly dismissive of Romantic notions of poetic creation as originating in "a species of fine frenzy" or "an ecstatic intuition"; once the psychological foundations of literary art are properly understood, he boasts, the production of aesthetic experience in the reader can be approached with "the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" ("The Philosophy of Composition" 195,

196). This is not the only passage where Poe's hyperbolic assertions of technical mastery border on the ludicrous; in the same essay, one reads: "Within this limit [of a single sitting], the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit—in other words, to the excitement or elevation—again in other words, to the degree of true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing [...]" (196-97).

If one takes these pronouncements as aesthetic theory in the strictest sense, it is easy to dismiss them as mere intellectual grandstanding by a poseur determined to elbow his way into the nation's literary establishment—and this is indeed the conclusion which some critics have come to (e.g. Bloom 13). One must look past the histrionics to see that what Poe's poetological essays really provide is an account of how the commodification of literary texts impinges on their aesthetic structure, and how the formal economy of the work of art must accommodate itself to the exigencies of the market. If the notion of poetic economy implies an exterior limit on one's resources which compels their prudent use, then that limit for Poe is marked by the necessity to command his readers' attention. Readerly attention is the scarce resource for which Poe sees writers competing, and it is a resource which must be used with the utmost efficiency. Clearly, this is not a purely aesthetic consideration: the "half hour" during which the reader can turn away from mundane business is not a limit imposed by man's natural sensory apparatus. Rather, it is an effect of the modern socio-economic order where most readers simply do not have the requisite leisure to take in *Paradise Lost* in a single "sitting," and where each literary text must find a way to distinguish itself from a flood of printed matter.

The poetic economy which one thus finds outlined in Poe's poetological essays—i.e., the rational principle according to which the component parts of a work of art can be arranged to the greatest possible effect—thus reflects very directly the commercial pressures under which he was laboring and his life-long struggle to capture a commercially viable readership for his work. Brevity and "unity of impression" are principally strategies for competing on the literary

market place. Poe is proposing, one might say then, an aesthetics of the literary commodity in the guise of a quasi-scientific normative poetics, where *decorum* is no longer determined by the established rules of traditional genres—what is proper and fitting in a work now is so because it was ingeniously tailored to the aesthetic sensibilities of a mass audience. In his letters, more than in his essays, where he carefully honed his public image as inspired literary genius and polymath, Poe wrote frankly about his conviction that verbal economy was not a purely aesthetic, but just as much a commercial imperative. In a letter to prospective donors for his ill-fated magazine project, for example, he wrote that the spirit of the age tends to "Magazine literature—to the curt, the terse, the well-timed, and the readily diffused, in preference to the old forms of the verbose and [...] the inaccessible" (*Letters* 1: 271; see also "Marginalia" 82). It is against this background that Terence Whalen has interpreted Poe's turn from poetry to tales and essays, as well as the prevalence of pointedly lurid subject matter such as madness, incest, and necrophilia especially in the early tales, which were written in the economic aftermath of the Panic of 1837, as a calculated response to the pressures of the literary market of the Antebellum era: "Far from being the wild offspring of an autonomous or diseased mind, Poe's tales were in many ways the rational products of social labor, imagined and executed in the workshop of American capitalism" (9).

### III. Poetic Economy and Cosmic Order

It may seem, then, as if Poe's version of poetic economy as it is formulated in his poetological essays was but a literary huckster's sleight-of-hand, an attempt to pass off as aesthetic axioms what were in fact commercial exigencies—in a bid, perhaps, to make palatable to himself what in other circumstances he denigrated as vulgar pandering to the masses (for example in the "Marginalia" 30, 165-66), or to achieve a specious sense of intellectual mastery over the economic forces that were, in a very basic sense, mastering him. And yet, such a view fails

to take the full measure of the tenacity and ingenuity with which Poe pursued the articulation of a rational principle that would allow the artist to produce works at once commercially successful and aesthetically superior. It is not only because the average reader cannot spare more than half an hour of undivided attention for the consumption of a magazine story that meticulous construction is of the utmost importance for Poe. As he attempts to demonstrate in many of his essays, “unity of impression” is far more than merely a rule for the production of “effective” literary texts. Rather, such literary texts are effective because they approximate the constructive principles underlying the universe itself. In imparting the experience of the beautiful to the soul, they point beyond the sensory limitations of the natural body and towards that encompassing cosmic order which contemporary natural theologians described as God’s economy.<sup>6</sup> This divine order pervades the phenomenal world; symmetry, repetition and other kinds of patterning are the basic natural forms in which it announces itself, without ever becoming fully manifest.

One of Poe’s earliest attempts to sketch out the linkage between aesthetics and eschatology can be found in his review of Longfellow’s *Ballads* (1842), in several passages which he was later to recycle in the better-known lecture “The Poetic Principle.” In the review, Poe begins by defining art as a method for amplifying the pleasure taken in natural objects, in imitation of the principle of duplication that is at work in nature itself: “[T]he sense of Beauty [...] ministers to [man’s] delight in the manifold forms and colors and sounds and sentiments amid which he exists. And, just as the eyes of the Amaryllis are repeated in the mirror, or the living lily in the lake, so is the mere *record* of these forms and colors and sounds and sentiments—so is their mere oral or written repetition a duplicate source of delight” (71). However, Poe insists that this is not yet sufficient to constitute “Poesy”:

There is still a thirst unquenchable, which to allay [simple repetition] has shown us no crystal springs. This burning thirst belongs to the *immortal* essence of man’s nature. It is equally a consequence and an indication of his

perennial life. [...] Inspired with a prescient ecstasy of the beauty beyond the grave, it struggles by multiform novelty of combination among the things and thoughts of Time, to anticipate some portion of that loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain solely to Eternity. (71-72)

The economy of the work of art—the disposition of “the things and Thoughts of Time” into novel combinations—must seek to encapsulate, one may paraphrase Poe here, the perfect unity proper to the divine economy, but inaccessible to the physical senses. It is necessarily a futile effort, because only after the death of the material body will the soul be able to fully grasp the “supernal Beauty” of the cosmic order—“a beauty,” as Poe repeatedly points out, “which is not afforded the soul by any existing collocation of earth’s forms—a beauty which, perhaps, *no possible* combination of these forms would fully produce” (73).<sup>7</sup> The formal principles which generate what Poe, in speaking of literary texts, designates as “unity of impression” or “totality of effect” (“The Philosophy of Composition,” 196) are, in essence, identical with the laws of God’s creation.

Poe would pick up this point again in a note in the “Marginalia” (1844; 9) and develop it further in the review essay “The American Drama,” published in 1845, three years after the Longfellow review. There, he also explicitly advertises his own thought as continuing the work of natural theology by referring to its most popular contemporary expression: “All the Bridgewater treatises have failed in noticing the *great* idiosyncrasy in the Divine system of adaptation: that idiosyncrasy which stamps the adaptation as divine, in distinction from that which is the work of merely human constructiveness. I speak of the complete *mutuality* of adaptation” (45).<sup>8</sup> Poe explains this “idiosyncrasy” as a perfectly reciprocal relationship between the parts of a whole, such that it becomes impossible to distinguish between causes and effects, and goes on to proclaim it as the implicit ideal towards which all art is striving: “The pleasure which we derive from any exertion of human ingenuity, is in the direct ratio of the approach to this species of reciprocity between cause and effect” (46). In illustrating this hypothesis, he arrives at his most forceful statement of the analogy between poetic and divine economy:

In the construction of *plot*, for example, in fictitious literature, we should aim at so arranging the points, or incidents, that we cannot distinctly see, in respect to any one of them, whether that one depends from any other or upholds it. In this sense, of course, perfection of plot is unattainable in fact – because Man is the constructor. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God. (“The American Drama” 46)

This passage was to recur almost verbatim in Poe’s cosmological treatise *Eureka* (1848), which he regarded as the summation of his work. *Eureka* is Poe’s most grandiose (and, it must be said, hubristic) attempt to fuse aesthetics and natural theology,<sup>9</sup> and it is here that he gives a definite name to the formal principle which had also underpinned his earlier efforts: Poe singles out “the sense of the symmetrical” (96) as the central principle of his reasoning. It is, he writes, “an instinct which may be depended on with an almost blindfold reliance” because symmetry is “the poetical essence of the Universe—of *the Universe* which, in the supremeness of its symmetry, is but the most sublime of poems” (96). The central problem in Poe’s cosmogony *more geometrico* (25) is the passage from the One (the “absolute Unity in the primordial Particle”) to the Many (“the utmost possible multiplicity of *relation*”), in such a manner that the “character” of unity is “preserved throughout the design” (23-24). In a perfectly constructed plot, each individual incident implies and is in turn implied by all the other incidents, so that the whole remains virtually present in all of its parts. Likewise, “each law of Nature is dependent at all points upon all other laws, and [...] all are but consequences of one primary exercise of the Divine Volition” (62). Thus it is the perception of symmetry in the phenomenal world that points the mind to that oneness which is not only its origin but also its final purpose—leading Poe to stipulate that the necessary, because symmetrical, endpoint of the universe will be its collapse back into original unity. The universe, in this account, is a kind of self-consuming artifact, with the principle of symmetry guaranteeing the essential homology between the minds of artificers both human and divine.

And yet, this endorsement of symmetry as the intellectual passkey to all the riddles of the universe comes with a caveat. One must recall

that in the review of Longfellow's *Ballads*, Poe dismissed the mere duplication of natural beauty, as in the mirror image of the Amaryllis or of the lily in the lake, as in itself insufficient to signify a higher realm of existence. In *Eureka*, too, he cautions that man must be careful "lest, in pursuing too heedlessly the superficial symmetry of forms and motions, he leave out of sight the really essential symmetry of the principles which determine and control them" (62). Mere physical symmetry may, in other words, seduce the soul into being content with the beauty of earthly, temporal forms, rather than reaching for supernal beauty. It may tether the soul to the realm of mere matter, rather than assisting it in the ascent towards higher, more spiritual states of being. The same ambivalence towards the principle of symmetry is expressed in the essay "The Rationale of Verse," which appeared in the same year as *Eureka* and signals Poe's interest in formulating the principles of a poetic economy already in its title. There, he sets out by stipulating as the source of all aesthetic experience the "idea of equality" which "embraces those of similarity, proportion, identity, repetition, and adaptation or fitness" (218). As his object of demonstration, he chooses a crystal:

We are at once interested by the equality between the sides and between the angles of one of its faces: the equality of the sides pleases us; that of the angles doubles our pleasure. On bringing to view a second face in all respects similar to the first, this pleasure seems to be squared; on bringing to view a third it appears to be cubed, and so on. I have no doubt, indeed, that the delight experienced, if measurable, would be found to have exact mathematical relations such as I suggest [...]. (218-19)

Here, the finite object's symmetrical form allows it to produce a pleasurable sensation of order that quickly tends towards the mathematically infinite. One cannot help but wonder what recipient would be able to tear himself loose from an artifact with such seductive properties. What Poe seems to envision here is not far removed from the fatal video tape around which the narrative of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* revolves; like in the latter, the danger posed by excessive symmetry is that of a deadly and sterile self-absorption, as Poe makes

clear in his discussion of “scientific music.”<sup>10</sup> Such music, he explains, requires an extraordinarily acute listener who would be able to take “pleasurable cognizance, through memory, of equalities the members of which occur at intervals so great that the uncultivated taste loses them altogether” (219). Yet taken too far, such an overstimulation of the sense of symmetry may weaken the soul: “In its excess it is the triumph of the *physique* over the *morale* of music. The sentiment is overwhelmed by the sense” (219). In verging on the monotone, a work of art characterized by such an excess of symmetry is endangered by “self-destruction from excess of self” (220).

#### IV. Poetic Economy in “The Fall of the House of Usher”

This—the danger of being ensnared and destroyed by an excess of symmetry—is precisely the theme of “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), probably Poe’s most popular and arguably his most “economically” constructed tale, which critics have often singled out to illustrate the doctrine of “unity of effect” (cf. Evans; Obuchowski). Although this text precedes the poetological essays discussed above by several years, it anticipates not only their general argument but even their terminology. These resonances are palpable already in the story’s opening sequence. As the unnamed narrator arrives at the family mansion of the Ushers, he stops to ponder the effect which the scene has on him:

I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or the terrible. I looked upon the scene before me [...] with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. (397)

The sensation which the house produces in the soul of the onlooker is a parody of the type of aesthetic experience Poe celebrates in his poetological speculations. By characterizing the sensation as that of a

contrast between two domains of experience ("after-dream," "lapse," "dropping [...] of the veil"), the concluding sentence of the passage makes clear that the image of the mansion points towards the possibility of a higher plane of existence only through its negation, i.e. by providing an image of the material imprisonment of the soul. Finding himself unable to determine the principle underlying the scene's peculiar effect on him, the narrator resorts to an experiment:

I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion that while [...] there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify [...] its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows. (398)

In seeking to explain the *effect* which the house has on him, the narrator is asking the fundamental question of Poe's aesthetics. The terms to which he resorts in this attempt are likewise those of Poe: the capacity of the "simple landscape features of the domain" (397) to affect the observer in the way they do is attributed to their peculiar "combination" or "arrangement"—in rhetorical terms: their *dispositio*. Like a well-constructed work of art (and like the universe as it is described in *Eureka*)<sup>11</sup> the house of Usher forms an economical unity in which there is, as the narrator notes, "perfect adaptation of parts" (400), in such a manner that the whole seems to be self-supporting, set apart from the ordinary world: "I had so worked up my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity [...]" (399). That the house of Usher is to be understood as a metaphor for the work of art, and particularly for the literary text,<sup>12</sup> is underscored by a later passage where Usher expresses his views about the fateful psychological effect of his dwelling that parallel those of the narrator:

“The conditions of the sentence had been there, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement [...]—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the waters of the tarn” (408). The word “sentence” here ostensibly refers to the curse resting on Usher’s family, yet in the proximity of terms such as “collocation” and “arrangement,” it is difficult not to read it as also self-reflexively pointing to the status of “The House of Usher” as a verbal artifact displaying precisely the kind of symmetry Poe expounded in his poetological writings.

Yet again, the house of Usher does *not* induce an experience of supernal beauty; to the contrary, the image of the mansion in the adjacent tarn—like the Amaryllis mirrored in the lake in “The Poetic Principle”—creates a purely material symmetry which, instead of directing the soul towards the spiritual order of the cosmos, merely points back at itself, multiplying the terror of the soul’s imprisonment in the world of temporal forms. Like the Amaryllis mirrored in the lake, the Usher’s mansion fails to rise above the material world; as the narrator says, it exudes “an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven [...]” (399). The house thus embodies that negative type of symmetry against which Poe would warn in *Eureka* and “The Poetic Principle.” Indeed, Usher is introduced to the reader as a devotee of “musical science,” and the corrosive effect which the composition of his mansion has on its inhabitants is described in exactly the same terms in which Poe disparages “scientific music” in “The Poetic Principle”: Usher, the narrator tells us, is convinced that the decline of his mental condition is attributable to “an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had [...] brought upon the *morale* of his existence” (403). Usher’s fatal weakness is an excessive sensitivity to symmetry that leads him into a form of pathological self-reflexivity. This motif is reiterated throughout the story in many different forms; it is articulated with particular succinctness in the poem “The Haunted Palace,” placed in the exact middle of the tale and

functioning as its *mise-en-abyme* (cf. Peeples 179). The narrator presents it as an example of the musical *improptus* Usher produced in his state of "intense mental collectedness and concentration" and interprets it as the sign of "a full consciousness on the part of Usher of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne" (406). "The Haunted Palace" narrates the downfall of a "fair and stately palace," clearly identified with the mind of a king, whose dissolution is precipitated by the entrance into the palace of symmetry incarnate: through the "palace door [...] came flowing, flowing, flowing, / A troupe of Echoes whose sweet duty / Was but to sing, / In voices of surpassing beauty, / The wit and wisdom of their king" (407). The poem's conclusion laments his descent into melancholy and mental ruin.

This will also be the fate of Usher, who, shut in by the house that bears his name, has lost the ability to distinguish between the echoes of his mind and true symmetries of the cosmic order. His fate is sealed in the farcical concluding scene of "The Fall of the House of Usher," where the narrator reads to him from the "'The Mad Trist' of Sir Launcelot Canning," in the hope of jolting Usher out of his absurd imaginings. While this fictional chivalric romance is characterized by "uncouth and unimaginative prolixity" (413) and thus fails utterly to meet Poe's criteria of poetic economy, it is the house of Usher itself which furnishes the symmetries required to produce an "intense excitement of the soul," leading the narrator's attempt at soothing Usher through the application of a narrative anodyne to backfire in spectacular fashion: each description of a noise in "The Mad Trist" is echoed by a similar sound from within the depths of the mansion, inducing a steadily growing terror in both Usher and his companion, until at last Usher's sister, whom he had prematurely entombed, stands in the door. After the two siblings have collapsed dead into each other's arms, the mansion begins to disintegrate as well, and the narrator escapes the scene just in time to watch as "the deep and dank tarn [...] closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of "The House of Usher" (417). With this self-referencing conclusion, Poe reflects the tale back on itself, turning it into a self-consuming artifact—again, like

the universe of *Eureka*, where perfect symmetry also necessarily entails self-annihilation.

There are two diametrically opposed ways, then, in which one can read "The Fall of the House of Usher." On the one hand, it can be understood as a serious attempt by Poe to create a work of art whose formal economy approximates the Creator's perfect economy, and where ultimate failure is the inevitable consequence of reaching for an ideal which, however, is not invalidated by that failure. Thus Richard Wilbur interpreted the story as "a triumphant report by the narrator that it is possible for the poetic soul to shake off this temporal, rational, physical world and escape [...] to a realm of unfettered vision" (110); and Ronald Bieganowski has likewise suggested that it is precisely the "self-consuming" nature of the story which allows it to successfully "signify [...] the ideal" (187). On the other hand, in the light of Poe's deep ambivalence with regard to the principle of "symmetry" and the compositional techniques he associates with it, one can also read "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a cautionary tale which dramatizes the danger of confusing poetic and cosmic economy, and, as a consequence, allowing mere "physique" to overwhelm "morale." It seems probable enough that one of the chief sources of this ambivalence was Poe's struggle to reconcile aesthetic and commercial imperatives, his suspicion that he might be degrading Pegasus to a lowly circus horse. That it is next to impossible to settle conclusively for either one of these two interpretations, however, is an indication that, in "The Fall of the House of Usher" at least, Poe's poetic economy successfully reconciled the laws of art and those of the market.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"It suffices if the whole Drama be found not produc't beyond the fift Act, of the style and uniformitie, and that commonly call'd the Plot, whether intricate or explicit, which is nothing indeed but such oeconomy, or disposition of the fable as may stand best with verisimilitude and decorum [...]." Milton also inveighs against "the error of intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons" and champions the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action (332).

<sup>2</sup>Thus two of the founding figures of American Studies, Vernon Parrington and F. O. Matthiessen, excluded Poe from the American literary canon because they saw him as lacking both moral depth and aesthetic sincerity. For an overview of these debates, see Bloom, who writes that "Poe's survival raises perpetually the issue as to whether literary merit and canonical status necessarily go together. I can think of no American writer, down to this moment, at once so inevitable and so dubious" (3).

<sup>3</sup>It may initially seem counter-intuitive to associate symmetrical construction with poetic economy, since the latter might be seen to entail the elimination of redundancies. However, this apparent contradiction is resolved when the criterion for a work's poetic economy is that all its parts must stand in an intelligible relationship to the whole so that no part disturbs the unity of the overall composition. This, I argue in the following, was Poe's understanding of the idea.

<sup>4</sup>Among the best-known examples are "William Wilson," "Ligeia," "Morella," and "The Black Cat"; the motif is frequently interpreted as an allegory of the split soul. For an extensive discussion of uncanny doublings in Poe's tales, see Garrett 69-80.

<sup>5</sup>All of Poe's best-known poetological essays emphasize this point, most notably "The Philosophy of Composition," "The Poetic Principle," and "The Rationale of Verse."

<sup>6</sup>The most widely-known expositors of natural theology at the time were the authors of the *Bridgewater Treatises* (cf. Robson), on which Poe commented favorably on several occasions and which also helped to shape his aesthetic and cosmological theories, especially in *Eureka* (Whalen 254-56)—a point to which we shall return shortly.

<sup>7</sup>The idea is elaborated at some length in "The Domain of Arnheim" (cf. Bergthaller) and also recurs in Poe's pseudo-platonic dialogues between angelic creatures ("The Colloquy of Monos and Una," "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion").

<sup>8</sup>The single example Poe provides in order to illustrate this "idiosyncrasy"—marine mammals which produce train oil are most abundant in the Arctic, where people need this type of food the most—is physico-theological standard fare; of course, this does not deter him from claiming the honor of first discovery.

<sup>9</sup>In his letters, Poe suggested that *Eureka* would put him on par with Newton; for a discussion of the text's contemporary reception (which was largely negative) and its relevance for Poe's aesthetics, see Cantalupo.

<sup>10</sup>What precisely it is that Poe meant by this term is unclear, and his other writings on music offer no clue to resolve this question (as a matter of fact, the only other occurrence of a near-synonymous term—"musical science"—appears in his work appears in "The Fall of the House of Usher" 399; see below). While the context leaves no doubt that Poe is in fact referring to music in a literal sense, the already demonstrated proximity between his aesthetic theory and his cosmological speculations suggests a link to texts such as Kepler's *Harmonices Mundi*, whose relevance for early modern poetics Heninger discusses in *Touches of Sweet Harmony*.

<sup>11</sup>That the construction of "The Fall of the House of Usher" parallels the cosmogony of *Eureka* was first suggested by E. Arthur Robinson; see also Beebe 120-21.

<sup>12</sup>This argument has also been advanced, in a somewhat different context, by Dennis Pahl and Harriet Hustis.

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