

An Order Honored in the Breach: An Answer to Dennis Pahl*

HANNES BERGTHALLER

I have read both responses to my essay on “Poe’s Economies” with great interest and pleasure. Whereas William E. Engel makes the piece a starting point for an argument that is largely his own, Dennis Pahl’s response takes the form of a direct critique of some of my claims. In the following, I will therefore address myself primarily to Pahl’s essay, which provides me with a welcome opportunity to revisit my original argument and to clarify, defend, and, where necessary, amend it.

To a considerable extent, Pahl’s misgivings seem to spring from a sense that I failed to take Poe’s theoretical efforts as seriously as they deserve to be taken. “To understand Poe’s scientific pronouncements [...] as a kind of ‘intellectual grandstanding’ for the purpose of gaining commercial respectability is to overlook the fact that behind the posing is a serious aesthetic intention,” Pahl writes (18). I may have invited this misunderstanding by overstating the case for a “mercenary” reading of Poe’s critical essays in the opening sections of my article; yet I would insist that it is a misunderstanding, nonetheless. My point was not that Poe entirely subordinated his artistic goals to commercial interests. It was, much more simply—and, I suppose, less controversially—, that he found himself torn between the conflicting demands of two different economies that placed very distinct re-

*Reference: Dennis Pahl, “Poe’s Faltering Economies: A Response to Hannes Bergthaller,” *Connotations* 23.1 (2013/14): 16-25; William E. Engel, “Echoic Effects in Poe’s Poetic Double Economy—of Memory: A Response to Hannes Bergthaller and Dennis Pahl,” *Connotations* 23.1 (2013/14): 26-48. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debberghaller0221.htm>>.

quirements on his work: on the one hand, the commercial economy of the literary market place; on the other, the economy of the work of art which, with regard to its formal principles, ought to emulate the divine economy of nature.

As Poe's remarks in the "Marginalia," in "The American Drama," and in *Eureka* make quite clear, his understanding of the structure of this latter economy hewed rather closely to traditional natural theology as it had found expression in the nearly contemporaneous Bridgewater Treatises (see for example Poe's argument about "complete mutuality of adaptation" in "The American Drama" 45; but dare one suggest that the prize money of £ 1,000 awarded to the several authors may have played a role in Poe's fascination with the Bridgewater Treatises?). Any actual work of art would of necessity find itself placed in the field of tension between these two poles of the commercial and the poetic, and Poe continually struggled to produce literary forms that would satisfy the demands of both without sacrificing either. The intellectual persona Poe crafted for himself in his essays, I argued, has to be seen as a response to this particular situation. Poe was eager to make it absolutely clear—not least, to himself—that he was nobody's fool, that he could play to the tastes of a mass audience without compromising his artistic integrity.

It turns out that Poe's brief discussion of "scientific music" in "The Rationale of Verse" bears directly on this problem, albeit not in the way I originally assumed. At the time when I wrote my essay, I was unable to pin down the reference of this phrase, and speculated somewhat inconclusively about its cosmological implications. As I found out later, the phrase "scientific music" was actually in common usage during the antebellum period to designate a new style of church music which took the work of European composers such as Handel, Haydn, and Mozart as its model. It was promoted by a group of reformers from the Northeast, most prominently one Lowell Mason, who aimed to elevate the quality of congregational singing and tried to replace traditional hymnals. The latter were mostly comprised of home-grown folk hymns, often based on popular ballad tunes (such

as “Auld Lang Syne”), which Mason and his peers decried as rude, uncivilized, and unsuited for devotional purposes (see Rhoads). While the reformers were highly successful in the North, their ideas about musical progress failed to catch on in the South and West of the country. In commenting on this debate, Poe thus took a qualified stance against expert authority and in favor of popular tastes; to quote the relevant passage once more: “scientific music has no claim to intrinsic excellence; it is fit for scientific ears alone. In its excess it is the triumph of the *physique* over the *morale* of music. The sentiment is overwhelmed by the sense. On the whole, the advocates of the simpler melody and harmony have infinitely the best of the argument [...]” (219).

This distinction between “*physique*” and “*morale*” is also crucially important for my reading of “The Fall of the House of Usher.” As I pointed out, Usher uses the very same terms to describe the deleterious effects of his material surroundings (and specifically of the doubling of the mansion’s image in the tarn) on his mental state. Surely, Roderick Usher and Lowell Mason have altogether rather little in common; yet they both slip into the same error against which Poe warns in *Eureka*: “in pursuing too heedlessly the superficial symmetry of forms and motions, [they] leave out of sight the really essential symmetry of the principles which determine and control them” (62). Within the larger context, this sentence must be read as a dig against the authority of the burgeoning class of professional scientists, and it reiterates and reaffirms one of the central ideas in *Eureka*, namely the superiority of spontaneous intuition over mere empiricism—not so much in order to proclaim the primacy of poetry over science, or of spirit over matter, but to assert their ultimate unity.

This is an aspect of Poe’s aesthetics that Pahl systematically underplays. The connections he draws between Edmund Burke’s materialist aesthetics and Poe’s literary practice are compelling, and I find myself in full agreement when he argues that it is impossible to draw “any clear distinctions between Poe the romantic poet and Poe the empirical scientist and laborer-craftsman” (19). But the impossibility of

conclusively disentangling these two sides of Poe in no way contradicts my claim that they stand in continuous and productive tension with each other. Pahl emphasizes the “irruptive ironies [...] which [...] result in enriching, while at the same time making problematic and unstable, his otherwise unified narrative structures” (24n1). Again, I have no quarrel with such a characterization of Poe’s work; yet, whereas Pahl suggests that these “irruptive ironies” should be seen as a mark of Poe’s craftsmanship, I argue that they are symptomatic of a deeper struggle to reconcile conflicting impulses—artistic, intellectual, and also commercial—which pervades his entire oeuvre. If Poe arrived at a resolution to this conflict, it would have to be a strategy of making failure the paradoxical condition of success—as indicated by his argument in *Eureka*, where the perfect symmetry of the cosmos stands as an ideal which the artist must aspire to, yet will of necessity fail to attain. The divine economy of nature represents an order that can only be honored in the breach. Because this process does not lead to anything that could be characterized as a stable synthesis, and since—as Pahl rightly insists—materiality is never entirely superseded, I am not quite sure whether I would be willing to refer to it as a “dialectical tension,” as William E. Engel paraphrases my argument (33). But it arguably holds a potent key to Poe’s fascination with collapse, decay, dissolution, perversion, and ruin—and it marks the point where he diverges from his Transcendentalist contemporaries, with whom he otherwise held so much in common.

National Chung-Hsing University
Taichung, Taiwan

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