

Poe's Faltering Economies: A Response to Hannes Bergthaller*

DENNIS PAHL

As a writer associated with Gothic tales of terror and obsession as well as with critical essays detailing, in an almost scientific way, how he creates his poetic "effects," Edgar Allan Poe has always had the reputation for being as much a romantic artist as a pragmatic craftsman. How is one to sort out such differing images of the author? Is Poe the dreamy, melancholy poet (perhaps as hypersensitive as some of his characters) caring only for supernal Beauty and Truth? Or is he more the clever manipulator of emotions, the "coldly-calculating literary hack" (Bergthaller 14), shaping his aesthetic commodities to gain as large a readership as possible? In his essay "Poe's Economies and 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" Hannes Bergthaller argues that the "the striking contradictions that have always confounded scholars of Poe's work"—contradictions, as he sees it, between Poe's "aggressive commercialism and his haughty aestheticism" (14)—stem from "two distinct inflections of the notion of poetic economy," one oriented toward the literary marketplace and the other revolving around art as an approximation of "divine natural order" (15).¹ Focusing on these "economies" in Poe's work, Bergthaller tries to show how "Poe's reflections on his craft bear 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" (15). Bergthaller's prime example of Poe's ability

*Reference: Hannes Bergthaller, "Poe's Economies and 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Connotations* 22.1 (2012/2013): 13-31. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbergthaller02201.htm>>.

to establish a sense of unity, of congruence, between the two economies is the Gothic tale "The Fall of the House of Usher," which Bergthaller analyzes toward the end of his essay.

Obviously inspired by the historicist turn in Poe criticism and especially by Terence Whalen's *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (1999), which reconnects the romantic Poe to his cultural-historical world and attempts to see Poe's writing within the context of the nineteenth-century literary marketplace, Bergthaller makes use of "economy" as a term enabling him to draw together, and offer insight into, both the divine and commercial implications of Poe's aesthetics. Finding evidence of Poe's romantic idealism, of his divine economy, is not difficult, especially in Poe's "poetological essays" (18), where his theoretical remarks, taken at their face value, convey a view of literary art that is amoral and ahistorical and that mainly concerns the abstractions of Beauty and Truth. To detach the cultural-historical implications, the commercial aspects of Poe's art, from his purely aesthetic concerns, however, requires more maneuvering on Bergthaller's part. And in this regard his method is to demonstrate Poe's hoaxing nature, his making seemingly "ludicrous" (18), "quasi-scientific" (19) pronouncements about his "philosophy" of composition, as a vehicle for *selling* his science of writing. Furthermore, as Bergthaller asserts, Poe's artistic interest in "brevity" and "unity of impression" (18)—aesthetic principles articulated both in Poe's Hawthorne review and in "The Philosophy of Composition"—has mainly to do with capturing readers who could experience aesthetic pleasure with the least cost in terms of time spent away from their working schedules. That Bergthaller uses for this argument Poe's critical essays on poetry is a bit daring, given that Poe, as Whalen has pointed out, initially turned to writing tales rather than poetry for strictly commercial reasons, so as to reach a wider audience (Whalen 9). This does not of course negate some of the commercial implications of his "poetological" essays; but one wonders if the argument being made for Poe's commercial poetics becomes somewhat strained, and if it does not obscure the more crucial features of an aesthetics that, while profoundly mate-

rialist, is not so thoroughly guided by the forces of the marketplace as one might believe.

To understand Poe's scientific pronouncements, as Bergthaller does, as a kind of "intellectual grandstanding" (18) for the purpose of gaining commercial respectability is to overlook the fact that behind the posing is a serious aesthetic intention—one inclined less toward the spiritual or the cosmic (the second "economy" Bergthaller discusses) than toward empirical interests. One may scoff at the so-called "grandstanding," or may even think of Poe's intellectual pose as a way for him to market his works better, but this is to fail to recognize the philosophical sources of Poe's writing. For throughout his essays, he is echoing the aesthetic principles of the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke, whose empirically defined categories of the Beautiful and the Sublime become important to Poe's literary aims. However "hyperbolic" (18) Poe's scientific-sounding statements may be, his compositional theory has its basis less in a commercial desire for a mass audience than in a devotion to Burkean aesthetics. His artistic consciousness, one might say, is geared more toward producing sensory effects than toward producing saleable commodities, even if sensationalism, as a byproduct of his aesthetic viewpoint, becomes an important aspect of his public appeal.

Poe's call for brevity in literary art, then, is not to appeal to his busy readers' limited leisure time or to short attention spans but to create certain emotional and psychological effects—such as feelings of melancholy, suggestive of Burke's category of the Beautiful; or a sense of nerve-wracking terror that occurs when melancholy (such as that which we observe in the narrator of "The Raven") gradually turns into mad obsession and sublime self-torture. Intended mainly to produce "true poetical effects," such as "intense excitements" ("Philosophy" 62), Poe's aesthetic principles cannot be reduced simply to a set of commercial ploys. To suggest that they are mainly market-directed would be not only an overstatement but also a distortion of Whalen's cultural-historical assessment of Poe. As Whalen points out, while Poe might have considered profits and public taste, he "never-

theless took pains to distinguish between the mass of readers who made a text popular and the small group of critical readers who appreciated “true literary merit.” Moreover, Whalen notes that Poe’s concern with the literary work’s “unified effect” is not necessarily related to his desire for mass appeal, since, after all, his readership, being a “divided and deeply stratified audience,” precluded any sense of unity: “Poe assumed a great and permanent division among readers, as if the permanence of this division might somehow protect him from being sullied or engulfed by the literate masses” (95-96).²

If one feels compelled to link Poe’s poetic theory to the economic-industrial world, however, one need look no further than Poe’s statements about his own labor as a poet who proceeds, not by some “fine frenzy” (“Philosophy” 61), but by the painstaking efforts to employ verbal imagery and musical rhythms that would help create the most potent emotional effects. This aesthetic interest, however oriented toward affecting the reader, need have nothing to do with salesmanship. In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe cordially invites the reader into his literary laboratory to view the way his science, the product of his intellectual labor, at once serious and playful, forever keeps the reader off balance with an irony and power of language that prove disturbing, dizzying, and finally self-subversive.³ As I’ve shown elsewhere, his “Philosophy of Composition” is its own poetically charged text, assuming the role of Poe’s most important poetic statement about his art while, at the same time, dramatizing such undercurrents of meaning that make problematic any clear distinctions between Poe the romantic poet and Poe the empirical scientist and laborer-craftsman.⁴ His “Philosophy,” with its wit and slippery language, *enacts* Poe’s aesthetics, mirroring, in a disorienting way, the very poem (“The Raven”) it is supposed to master. Even if Poe’s essay is partially constructed for the purposes of commerce, and even if his writing in general sometimes takes on the aspect of a “literary commodity” (19), its inscription in the marketplace seems, in an uncanny way, to depend on a wholly other economy from which it cannot detach itself—the economy of pure aesthetics that Bergthaller opposes

to the marketplace economy and that he views in divine or cosmic terms. Only seeming to be spiritual and “inaccessible to the physical senses” (21), this economy of so-called “pure” aesthetics is actually steeped in the physical world, its material impulse having its source in what Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, calls “the natural and mechanical causes of our passions” (139). What Bergthaller sees as Poe’s “divine” art, or cosmic economy, incorporates the very empirical, mechanical, labor-intensive processes that Bergthaller would quickly dismiss as part of Poe’s “ludicrous” scientific pretensions.

However Bergthaller would like to characterize the economy of pure aesthetics, of poetry on a cosmic order, it nevertheless becomes, in Poe’s critical essays, but another economy that turns out to be unstable, faltering as it does under the pressure of a stubbornly materialist aesthetics that associates itself with the sensory-emotional power of Poe’s literary language. Bergthaller’s contention is that Poe’s interest in unity of effect and symmetry (as outlined especially in *Eureka*) indicates his desire to create a literary art that is analogous to a natural or divine order. But while such “poetological” essays as Poe’s review of Longfellow’s *Ballads* and “The Poetic Principle” specifically refer to Poe’s metaphysical inclinations, his supposed interest in the cosmic harmony of the natural world would, in Bergthaller’s analysis, put Poe in practically the same camp as the very New England Transcendentalists whom Poe satirized and whom he often humorously referred to as “frogpondians.”

As Joan Dayan convincingly argues, Poe, in his aesthetic essays, is actually “parodying the Emersonian sublime” (13).⁵ Even if such metaphysical rhetoric is employed, it is, as Dayan shows, fraught with contradictions. Poe’s seeming idealism is couched in an ironically earthly desire for heavenly fulfillment. Alluding to the poetic sensibility in terms of a “burning thirst,” a “prescient ecstasy” and a “wild effort to reach the Beauty above,” Poe views poetry as an art born of raw emotion and passion, even as the poet searches for “those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses” (“Poetic Principle”

184). Bergthaller does well to point to Poe's awareness of the material world's fallibility, of its inability to become symmetrical to God's laws. Unfortunately, he stops short of acknowledging Poe as a serious empiricist who, as Dayan argues, "attempts to disclose a manner of speaking *about* God, of translating divinity into language" (48). Viewing language as matter, as substance, and recognizing that word-images and word-sounds possess sensory power, Poe, it should be emphasized, defines his cosmology, and particularly the apocalyptic return to "Original Unity," in decidedly materialist rather than spiritual terms. According to Dayan's interpretation of the prose-poem *Eureka*: "The end of all things Poe defines paradoxically as '*Matter no more*,' thus affirming his stubborn refusal to wipe out matter in any privileged sign of spirit" (48-49).

Bergthaller does, quite admirably, point to Poe's "ambivalence" (23) toward the principle of symmetry, which Bergthaller sees as important to Poe's divine economy. If overused, as Bergthaller eloquently puts it, "Mere physical symmetry may [...] 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" (23). Here Bergthaller invokes Poe's metaphysical perspective, but without showing some of the ironic undercurrents in his language that actually emphasize "mere matter." It is perhaps no accident that Bergthaller relates the issue of flawed symmetries to "scientific music" (24), a concept referred to in "The Rationale of Verse," one that Bergthaller believes Poe disparages for its potential excesses whereby the "sentiment is overwhelmed by the sense" (24). Although Bergthaller is, as he says in a note (30n10), unable to sort out the meaning of "scientific music," the term is nevertheless suggestive of the empirical and the sensory, precisely the concepts which Bergthaller downplays (or tries to assimilate into the commercial economy) but which Poe finds essential to his poetics. It is in "The Rationale of Verse," for example, where Poe underscores the empirical-sensory side of poetry, the rational, material *sense* of the rhythms and sounds of musical verse.⁶ Poe's notion of poetry as a kind of

“scientific music” (“Rationale” 88) can be seen in his belief, articulated early in the essay, that the subject of poetry, far from residing within the “cloud-land of metaphysics,” is far simpler and more commonsensical, and that “nine tenths” of it “appertain to the mathematics” (“Rationale” 81).

Science and music are also linked in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and the concept of “musical science” (116) refers in this case to Roderick Usher’s penchant for creating and reciting rhapsodic poetry. Poe does not, as Bergthaller contends, disparage scientific music *per se*, just its excesses. In pointing to the flaws of Roderick’s musical science, Bergthaller tries to advance his theory that Poe’s character overuses the principle of symmetry, developing as he does an “excessive sensitivity” to it, which then leads to “a form of pathological self-reflexivity” (26). According to Bergthaller, Roderick loses his sense of the cosmic order, of God’s symmetries, while being subject to the house’s “corrosive effect” (26) as well as (he might have added) to the house’s ever affecting “sentience” (“Usher” 124).⁷ Although Bergthaller reads “Usher” as a “cautionary tale which dramatizes the danger of confusing poetic and cosmic economy” (28), and which also represents the failure to locate divine symmetry, the opposing and yet strangely interfused structures in the story do not bespeak a moral lesson as much as they put Poe’s deconstructive, sensory poetics on dramatic display. If the Usher mansion “fails to rise above the material world,” it does so not because its “composition” (26) conflicts with Poe’s supposed moral or spiritual aims, but because, exactly in line with Poe’s materialist poetics, the house as verbal artifact is grounded in a sensory language designed to create intense, disturbing, and disorienting effects.

At issue here are the economies of the real and the imaginative coming into forceful conflict, as Roderick and the reader find themselves in a house of mirrors, a world of art and language that begins to confuse itself with the real—a world in which language (or art) proves to be just as substantial a force as so-called reality. Roderick’s metaphysical interests, not to be mistaken for Poe’s own, collide with the

power of the physical world, that is, with the house and its environment. If there is any cosmic order to reckon with, it all but vanishes, swallowed up by the material substance of the house. And what Bergthaller refers to as Poe's other economy, the commercial economy, seems here beside the point (except in what Bergthaller sees as the crowd-pleasing "unity" of Poe's story). More central to the story, and making a fuller impression, is Poe's science of poetics, as the terrifying, sublime sounds in the house reveal the material power of representation, of language, of art—the story inside the narrative proper, "The Mad Trist," being figured as having enough force, enough power to mobilize events and to inspire the house's collapse. With the confusion of science (the empirical reasons for the events) and poetry, of the real and the representation, of the material and the spiritual, it is somewhat hard to see how the story becomes, in Bergthaller's words, a "struggle to reconcile the commercial and the aesthetic imperatives" (28). Even more difficult to understand is Bergthaller's final, unsubstantiated argument that Poe's narrative, despite its faulty symmetry and its images of structural disorder, reconciles these imperatives after all.

Perhaps more to the point is the way "The Fall of the House of Usher," as an allegory of Poe's aesthetic theory, illustrates how the power of language, far from reconciling opposing structures or economies, operates instead to shatter them, leaving them in the same condition as we find the Usher mansion: faltering and in a state of fragmentation. Indeed, like the house itself, the story demonstrates the material effects of language, as constructed by Poe's "scientific music." Here Poe's poetic language, with its disruptive force, precludes any sense of cosmic harmony. The Usher house may disappear into the tarn, but its disappearance does not resolve its alienating effects, nor does the narrator ever find a sense of wholeness and relief. The narrator, on the contrary, is left shaken and staring into the watery abyss, presumably into his own mirror image, his own split self, his re-presentation. And the fragments of the story itself, of "The House of Usher" ("Usher" 131), are finally all that remain, as language asserts

itself in all its stubborn materiality. Such fragments, embodied in the fragmentary sentences at the end of the story, suggest that in Poe's sublime, disorienting poetics, sensory language does not vanish into some natural or transcendent realm. Moreover, as an eruptive and destabilizing force, it does not easily surrender to the "mystification" ("Rationale" 80) of organic unity, structural wholeness, or economic reconciliation.

Long Island University
Brookville

NOTES

¹While it is unclear whether Poe considered his own works in economic terms, we know that another American writer, Henry James, used precisely this language, referring in one of his prefaces to the New York edition of his fiction to the way an author must exert "perfect economic mastery." For James, the author must keep in mind "the general sense of the expansive, the explosive principle in one's material thoroughly noted, adroitly allowed to flush and colour and animate the disputed value, but with its other appetites and treacheries [...] kept down" (278). Although James is alluding here to the expansive quality of his own writing, which must be managed carefully and "kept down," his metaphorical language is suggestive for understanding the eruptive forces within Poe's very different kind of poetics. Despite Poe's concern with aesthetic unity, we find in his writing irruptive ironies and "under-current[s] [...] of meaning" ("Philosophy" 70), which, inasmuch as they cannot be contained or "kept down," result in enriching, while at the same time making problematic and unstable, his otherwise unified narrative structures. Hence "Poe's economies," despite Bergthaller's attempt to define them as coherent identities, are less unified and less stable than one might imagine.

²Whalen points out that, aside from the principle of "unified effect," "suggestiveness," as another principle in Poe's theory of poetics, is also something Poe refuses to compromise for the sake of the public taste: "The surplus meaning or 'suggestiveness' associated with symbolism may therefore be seen as a subversion—however petty and ineffectual—of the Capital Reader's insistence that [Poe] 'lower himself' to the intellectual level of the masses" (98).

³See Pahl, "Sounding the Sublime" (52-55), where Poe's works are shown to represent the material, sensory power of language—and thus the way in which "pure aesthetics" and material sensation begin to have more in common than one might expect.

⁴See Pahl, "De-Composing" 10-15.

⁵See also Carton, 98-105, for other examples of the way Poe parodies the romantic sublime and "puncture[s] his own metaphysical ideals and pretensions" (17). My own reference to "the sublime" in Poe pertains not to Emerson's views but rather to Burke's understanding of the concept and to Poe's remodeling of it according to his notion of the Gothic sublime.

⁶This emphasis on the *sense* of rhythms and sounds is as true for Poe's review of Longfellow's *Ballads* as it is for "The Rationale of Verse."

⁷Bergthaller misspells "sentience," substituting for it the word "sentence." This leads to a misinterpretation of the word's meaning in his story, which has some consequences for the argument of the essay. It should be pointed out that Poe's middle name is also spelled incorrectly in the printed version of the essay.

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