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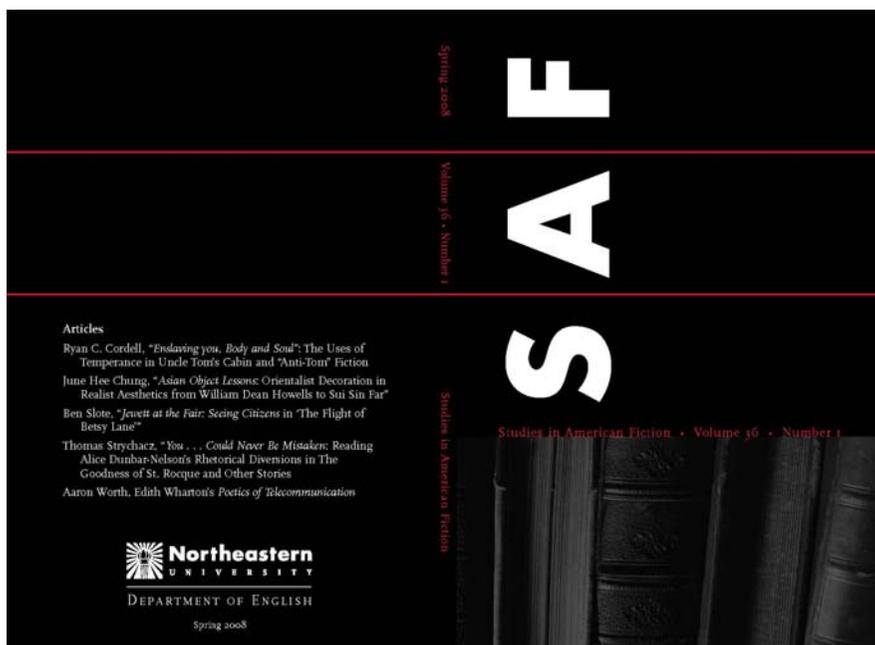
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## Studies in American Fiction

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Elizabeth Duquette, *Accounting for Value in "The Business Man"*

## ACCOUNTING FOR VALUE IN “THE BUSINESS MAN”

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Mind Your Business.  
—Motto on 1787 U.S.  
cent, Benjamin Franklin

At the beginning of “Metzengerstein” (1832), Edgar Allan Poe’s first published tale, a young Baron inherits his “vast possessions”:

Such estates were seldom held before by a nobleman of Hungary. His castles were without number. The chief in point of splendor and extent was the “Palace Metzengerstein.” The boundary line of his dominions was never clearly defined; but his principal park embraced a circuit of fifty miles.<sup>1</sup>

The passage points to the young nobleman’s wealth and power, but what does it mean to say that “his castles were without number”? How many castles must one have for them to be beyond counting, without specifiable numerical value? If it is impossible to count the castles, it is equally impossible to define “clearly” the extent of his holdings; in a tale about the “doctrines of the Metempsychosis” and the permeability of psychic boundaries, the inability to establish material borders troubles not only the possibility of personal possessions, but of self-possession as well (672). As the story continues, narrating the Baron’s fate and depicting various gothic horrors, the question of counting is dropped—for this tale at least.

Indeed, examinations into the meaning of numbers and their operations recur throughout Poe’s career. Although Pym consistently includes latitude and longitude for the journey southward in *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* (1838), a footnote to the text warns the reader about the numbers’ accuracy: “I would also remark, in this place, that I cannot, in the first portion of what is here written, pretend to strict accuracy in respect to dates, or latitudes and longitudes, having kept no regular journal until after the period of which this first portion treats” (848). In both “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846) and “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” (1845), it is a finally intolerable quantity—one too many insults or bedtime tales—that results in gruesome death. And the late cosmological essay and prose poem *Eureka* (1848) proposes that “it is folly to attempt comprehending” the numerical values attached to distances between planets:

I have stated that Neptune, the planet farthest from the Sun, revolves around him at a distance of 28 hundred millions of miles. . . . I have stated a mathematical fact; and, without comprehending it in the least, we may put it to use—mathematically. But in mentioning, even, that the Moon revolves around the Earth at the comparatively trifling distance of 237,000 miles, I entertained no expectation of giving any one to understand—to know—to feel—how far from the Earth the Moon actually *is*.<sup>2</sup>

A thorough, visceral comprehension of what 237,000 miles actually *means* is nothing short of futile, especially given the further fact that it is unlikely that “the man lives who can force into his brain the most remote conception of the interval between one milestone and its next neighbor upon the turnpike.”<sup>3</sup> We assume numerical facts are useful and manipulate them computationally, but Poe is clear that use and comprehension are every bit as far apart as a distance of 237,000 miles. What his writings repeatedly suggest is that where numbers are concerned, fact and fiction might be indistinguishable, even if references to numbers and mathematical operations generate a contrary effect.<sup>4</sup>

These concerns are central to one of Poe’s lesser-known works, a satire from the early 1840s entitled “The Business Man.” In this tale, the narrator, Peter Proffit, recites a rags-to-riches story that celebrates the value of method in achieving financial success.<sup>5</sup> Although the tale’s emphasis on method builds on issues raised in the masterful Dupin trilogy, the focus of this article is the tale’s critique of American-style moral economy, an undertaking that is enabled by Poe’s ongoing exploration of numerical meaning and that takes aim at the assumption that there is a moral currency in which we trade.<sup>6</sup> Thus “The Business Man” asks us to account for why certain narratives count or have especial worth in the construction of cultural values and moral norms; with any “idea of a criterion,” Stanley Cavell observes, the issue is raised about how it is that we “[count] something as something.”<sup>7</sup> Delving into the nature of the thing, Poe challenges assumptions about value, calculation, and the belief that time and selves can be divvied up into discrete units with fixed costs. Peter Proffit’s first-person narrative, which has been insightfully likened to Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, replicates—and skewers—the efficacy of the exemplary moral narrative by asking what criteria should be used in shaping our examples, models, or norms. As the narrator’s name suggests, the punning conflation of profit and prophet necessarily raises doubt about the value of the message being delivered and who, precisely, reaps its rewards. The tale’s emphasis on accounting (“telling as num-

bering or computing” contains, that is to say, an exploration of the premises of recounting (“telling as relating or narrating”); on Poe’s view, the stories we value as purveyors of truths, particularly those that recount moral accounts, are predicated on beliefs about value that rely on the *effect* of moral clarity and epistemological certainty.<sup>8</sup> The special problem of “The Business Man” is that what counts as parody and what counts as normal are so intertwined that discriminating between the two is difficult, a problem that is precisely the point of the satire.<sup>9</sup>

The key to the parody in “The Business Man” is located in an invoice Proffit proudly copies from his day-book so that the “reader [can] judge for himself” how successful his business methods have been:

July 10. To promenade, as usual, and customer brought home,	\$00 25
July 11. To do do do	25
July 12. To one lie, second class; damaged black cloth sold for invisible green,	25
July 13. To one lie, first class, extra quality and size; recommending milled satinet as broadcloth,	75
July 20. To purchasing bran-new paper shirt collar or dickey, to set off gray Petersham,	2
Aug. 15. To wearing double-padded bobtail frock (thermometer 706 in the shade),	25
Aug. 16. Standing on one leg three hours, to show off new-style strapped pants at 12 ½ cents per leg per hour,	37 ½
Aug. 17. To promenade, as usual, and large customer brought (fat man),	50
Aug. 18. To do do (medium size), <sup>10</sup>	25
Aug. 19. To do do (small man and bad pay),	6
	\$2 96 ½ <sup>11</sup>

The repetition of “do” in a text that lists what is due to its narrator plays with the putatively easy translation of money, activities, and time. Moreover, the nineteenth-century “do” not only referred to book-keeping, it also carried a host of slang connotations. An abbreviation for “ditto,” “do” here underscores the centrality of seemingly mindless repetition to both commerce and language.<sup>12</sup> The iterations are identical in one way (all depicted by “To do do do”) but actually differ in terms of remuneration—once the pay is said to be “bad”—relative to the size of the customer. Chief amongst contemporary implications of the verb, however, was the belief that “to do” someone was to cheat, swindle or take advantage of him or her.<sup>13</sup> If systems of exchange require norms or standards to guarantee their accuracy, how are we to account for the correlation of “do” and “due” when their basis is ei-

ther arbitrary or fraudulent?

Even beyond the invocation of fraud, the reiteration of “do” empties the word of its content as Poe asks us to “judge” what it means to be obsessed with the value of doings. The techniques Poe employs to accomplish this goal in the invoice parallel those Tom Cohen identifies at work in “The Bells” (1849). According to Cohen, in that poem Poe “performs a violent critique of mimesis and the logos as such. . . . Not only is repetition itself shown to establish verbal sense or identity, but it proceeds to dismember words into syllables through rhyme and, finally, turn each into a clang (of) itself.”<sup>14</sup> While “The Bells” might be more sophisticated in its method, Proffit’s invoice performs a similar critique. By pushing the repetition basic to signification to its absurd limit, Poe disparagingly suggests that the repetition of fraud has emptied both American culture and language of meaning. The repetition of to’s—both the preposition and the number—creates an oscillation of similarity and difference that connects the two signifying systems, the numerical and the linguistic. Once aligned, however, what becomes unclear is how and if “to” still means. While some of the play is visual, as with the “12 ½” cent charge from August 1 where numbers repeat but make meaning differently, the document as a whole moves well beyond the particular business satire critics have tended to assume it to be into a more general reflection on the nature of exchange itself—semantic and commercial. The repetition upon which exchange relies slips, in this invoice, into madness, even monomania. This is a regular observation in Poe’s works; whereas “Berenice” (1835) associates repetition with insanity—Egeus “repeat[s], monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, it ceased to convey any idea whatever to the mind” (644)—in “The Business Man” repetition of this sort is business as usual.

Complicating matters further, the total of the charges listed is wrong: it should be \$2 95 ½, not \$2 96 ½. Although contemporary editors often correct the error, it is present in both the 1840 and the 1845 editions of the tale; that Poe makes minor changes to the invoice but does not correct the computational mistake suggests that the numbers do not figure properly because Poe’s numbers here, as elsewhere in the tales *and* his own record-keeping, generate only the effect of accuracy.<sup>15</sup> The arbitrariness of the numerical value attached to the activities forces a reflection upon the nature of exchange and the status of money (or its invisibility, if July 12 is any indication). Is the value of an action any more or less arbitrary than the 25 cents Proffit charges for “do do do”? The temperature, 706 in the shade, is surely nonsensical according to any actual system of measurement but ad-

equately captures the sense of what it is to be absurdly hot; is it possible that numbers are available for metaphorical reading or does such a use make them unreadable? Is this temperature an example of being overheated or, to borrow an idiom from “Metzengerstein,” a heat “without number”? The sundry lies, implicit (the extreme temperature of Aug. 15) and explicit (July 12 and 13), contribute to the confusion. Poe’s complicated joke relies on various homophonies, the repetitive rhyming of to and do, the reader’s supposed familiarity with average businesses and their basic practices, the obviousness of the manner in which the invoice is presented, and the nonsense it depicts. All these contribute to this satire of American business culture, a satire that seemingly includes a jab at people who think accounting can either justify courses of action or make possible accurate judgments concerning character and commerce.

In a culture of this sort, then, one might even read the invoice as a poem, or as indistinguishable from a poem. This is a point that becomes clear, I believe, when considering Poe’s proposal for a new method of scanning the poetic line. In the 1848 essay “The Rationale of Verse,” Poe lays out a numerical system for measuring “the exact relative value of every syllable employed in Verse,” extolling the “simplicity” of this mode of reckoning and the “time, labor, and ink saved.”<sup>16</sup> A numerical charting of relations of stress and value would improve upon the standard graphic marks, Poe demonstrates with reference to some lines from Christopher Pearse Cranch, because they would come closer to conveying specific and accurate information about the relationships between language and time that is the basis of poetry:

				3/2
Many are the	thoughts that	come to	me	
6	6	6	2	2
In my	lonely	musing,		
2	2	2		(ER, 59)

Compared to the clarity of the above numerical system, “[d]oes the common accentuation,” he asks, “express the truth, in particular, in general, or in any regard? Is it consistent with itself? Does it convey either to the ignorant or to the scholar a just conception of the rhythm of the lines?” (ER, 60). Poe concludes that each of these questions requires a negative response because a series of graphic marks—crescents or bars—“express *precisely nothing whatever*” (ER, 60). Building, and punning, on the intimate historical association between numbers and verse, an association Alexander Pope pointed to when he chided “As yet a Child, not yet a Fool to Fame,/I lisp’d in Numbers, for the

Numbers came,” Poe suggests that we translate the poetic line back into a numerical equation.<sup>17</sup> The economy of such a system is evident in the time saved (a mere twenty-six accents are needed to convey information that had required forty-one) and in the accuracy about time imparted. Linking time, rhythm (“from the Greek arimos, number” [ER, 56]), mathematics and poetry, Poe concludes that “the pleasure received, or receivable” from poetry relies on the effect created by “mathematical relations” (ER, 39). And if Pope could babble numbers as a babe, why can’t Poe rhyme them as an adult, playing in all seriousness on the metaphorical association of numbers with poetry and the contemporary commercial debasement of literature? Proffit’s invoice also translates experience into a numerical accounting of time that seeks to get to the truth of the matter but, in an inversion familiar to readers of Poe, translating time into these equations “express[es] precisely nothing whatever.” The invoice manipulates the sounds of signification, establishing relations between time, language, and value, getting paid by the line for doing so. Is this so different from the popular writers Poe hypocritically derided, who wrote for financial, rather than literary, effect?<sup>18</sup> If fiction is a lie of sorts, then doesn’t it also have a price tag, like the lies of July 12 and 13? That Americans had already accepted the equation of time and money further clarifies this point; if poetry is predicated on time, and time and money are exchangeable, then an invoice is surely a poem.<sup>19</sup>

Poe’s (somewhat bitter) joking about money, language and their respective values is evident, finally, in another (albeit disputed) work from the same period; in the “Epigram for Wall Street,” Poe writes that the way to wealth is found primarily in a plan that plays on how words are put together. “I’ll tell you a plan for gaining wealth / Better than banking, trade or leases,” he writes. “Take a bank note and fold it up, / And then you will find your money in *creases!*”<sup>20</sup> Without “danger or loss,” the poem continues, such a “wonderful plan” “Keeps your cash in your hands, where nothing can trouble it; / And every time you fold it across, / ’Tis as plain as the light of day that you *double* it!”<sup>21</sup> The pun associates the poem, further, with contemporary anxieties about the illusory value of paper money, which one pamphleteer claimed was “founded on the great principle of making money out of nothing.”<sup>22</sup> When it points to “in *creases,*” the poem literalizes the metaphors of value of the invoice while indicating that these values are properly illusory.

## The Fitness of Things

In "The Business Man," the relationship between value, exchange and profit is reducible to the thing itself but what counts as a thing is under constant examination. In the first lines of the tale, Proffit asserts that "Method is *the* thing, after all" (413). Slipping from an idiomatic sense of "*the* thing," this claim points to the collapse that can occur between systems of value.<sup>23</sup> Put differently, the computational and representational dilemmas in the invoice are refracted throughout the story as it persistently questions how we assign value, our method of accounting for worth and the criteria it presupposes.

One of the first judgments Proffit makes in the story is between the genuine or true business man and the false genius. Always going "off at a tangent into some fantastic employment, or ridiculous speculation, entirely at variance with the 'fitness of things,'" the doings of the genius have "no business whatever to be considered as a business at all" (413). Fortunately, the genius is easy to spot, for he will invariably be a "merchant or . . . manufacturer . . . or something of that kind" (413). Another way to characterize the genius would be to say that he is interested in things as they function within social formations and systems of value. The things that geniuses make, trade, buy and sell are, in truth, less things than *objects* for "the sort of objectification that takes place during these operations . . . produce use value, sign value, cultural capital."<sup>24</sup> One might even say that the complaint Proffit has about geniuses is that they define the uses and needs that transform random things into necessities; notably among the professions he derides are the cotton or tobacco trades and hardware or grocery stores. Engaging in these businesses, he complains, is "entirely at variance with the 'fitness of things'" (413). On the one hand, then, Proffit seems to object to the commodification of things, to the idea that value resides in use; this would provide a plausible reading of the diacritical emphasis on the "fitness of things" in the tale. On the other hand, the narrator's lack of interest in objects obviously does not translate into a rejection of commerce for the narrative does little beyond explaining his various false starts on the road to wealth.<sup>25</sup> It is important to stress, in other words, that for Proffit the problematic genius corresponds to what readers would likely have assumed was the entirely ordinary man of commerce. In associating the idea of the genius, so important to various brands of Romanticism, with grocers, Poe mocks writers like Emerson who were trying to define what the American genius would look like; the genius United States culture is

willing to celebrate, he seems to suggest, would have to be found amongst the “new breed of young men looking to capitalize on growing economic opportunities,” a man of commerce and capital.<sup>26</sup> Proffit’s confusion about genius and the value of things suggest that in Poe’s critique of political economy the commercial genius is always already a perversion of the concept and even those figures who might try to break the mold can only ever aspire to a status that is, at best, mean and, at worst, soul-less. The successful genius incorporates, in “The Business Man,” losing his soul in the process. What becomes clear in Poe’s story, through Proffit’s attempts to distance himself from the values he embraces, is that in such a world there is no escape from an obsession with things.

Proffit’s perverse dance of denial and embrace is mirrored in the tale’s use of things, which proliferate wantonly at the level of the word. ‘Thing’ appears in the story at least seventeen times, yet the last thing the reader should expect from this proliferation is a clear sense of what comprises a thing. Proffit’s final venture (to which I will return shortly) notwithstanding, each of his occupations avoids things almost entirely, trading instead on appearance, absence, silence; he is paid, for instance, to stop playing a street-organ and not to splash passers-by with mud. The thing in “The Business Man” is characterized by its absence, a realization that could readily prompt the suggestion that what Poe is driving at is the thing-in-itself that Kant brackets in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; in other words, the thing is unknowable so, literally, it is no thing. Tempting as this might be, and while this basic Kantian premise would have been available to Poe through popular essays on German philosophy, I believe he is after something different with his talk of things. These nonproductive occupations correspond to Proffit’s sense of the “fitness of things.” The story allows us to wonder, in other words, what happens when we make commodities of nothing, of silence, of views, of theories? Like paper money, which generates an illusion of value which functions in exchange as the real thing, or numbers that we cannot understand but employ anyway, such services proliferate in a market economy that presupposes and trades on the value of intangibles. The equivalence inherent in the commodity form necessarily turns nothings into things.

But it is not only silence or appearance that become things in such a world: this is also the fate of thought and truth and persons. The presumptive materialism of American culture aligns actions, ideas, theories, and requests with things, a point, indeed, upon which Poe and Emerson were in complete agreement. Writing in 1837, at the beginning of the financial panic that surely informs “The Business

Man,” Emerson expressed his concern about “the alienating implications of the new market society.”<sup>27</sup> “Man,” he explained,

is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship.<sup>28</sup>

The problematic metamorphosis that Emerson describes springs from an “old fable” that narrates how “Man” came to be differentiated into “men” in order to be more “helpful to himself,” a process he likens to the division of the hand into fingers “the better to answer its end.”<sup>29</sup> Even as he cedes the seeming necessity of original division, Emerson deplores its practical results in the conflation of persons and things, of souls and numbers.<sup>30</sup> In his emphasis on the implied spiritual dimension of “Man,” Emerson renders explicit a concern that remains implicit in Poe—that questions about men and things translate the ancient problem of the one and the many into a debased nineteenth-century currency. Despite their many disagreements, Poe and Emerson concur that accounting for persons numerically creates monsters, partial men without the ability to recognize the extent to which they had been handicapped by the ideals of their society or, as Emerson explains, “The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.”<sup>31</sup> This observation would seem to shift us to “The Man That Was Used Up,” but as Poe has demonstrated, it can be hard to tell things (or tales) apart and Proffit’s final venture hints that at the limits of thinking value inheres in the sum of parts.

The closing episode of “The Business Man,” added in Poe’s revisions to the tale, summarizes the narrative reflection on objects and things by returning to the issue of objects and examining what happens when a body is simultaneously an object and a thing. Having failed in seven businesses, Proffit embarks on a final speculation in “Cat-growing,” an enterprise he describes as “a most pleasant and lucrative business and, really, no trouble at all” (490). An infestation of cats, he explains, led the legislature to an unusually “wise and wholesome” law that would offer a reward for evidence that a cat had been

destroyed. Although as originally written the premium would be paid for “cat-heads” the legislation is amended in the Senate and tails are substituted (419). Determined to profit from the “Cat-Act,” Proffit invests his “whole estate in the purchase of Toms and Tabbies” (419).

At first, I could only afford to feed them upon mice (which are cheap), but they fulfilled the Scriptural injunction at so marvelous a rate, that I at length considered it my best policy to be liberal, and so indulged them in oysters and turtle. Their tails, at a legislative price, now bring me in a good income: for I have discovered a way, in which, by means of Macassar oil, I can force three crops in a year. It delights me to find, too, that the animals soon get accustomed to the *thing*, and would rather have the appendages cut off than otherwise. (419–20, emphasis added)

“Tom” will not become the archetypal name for slaves in the United States for another six years, but Poe’s references to slavery are nonetheless clear in this recounting of Proffit’s final business, one that shows him shifting his method by trading in objects. The subtle invocation of the whip (cat-o-nine-tails), a familiar image in abolitionist tracts of the period, and the use of names for the cats (Toms and Tabbies) associate the passage with the business of slavery; but Poe goes farther, yoking Scripture to the description of his trade and even asserting, as did many proslavery writers, that his cats like what is done to them, preferring the removal of their tails to their retention. Although “The Business Man” demonstrates that Poe was thinking about the logical consequences of a culture in which things as objects were over-valued, and other kinds of things were under- or mis-valued, I do not think we can read the story as committing him to a particular position on the issue of slavery. The rhetoric of the legislative decision—heads or tails—points instead to the idea that for Poe the issue was up in the air, the matter of the toss of a coin, yet another example of the sinister mess the US had sown by enthusiastically cultivating commerce.

Indeed, while the episode provides another example of Proffit’s peculiarities, it also encourages us to wonder why we might find the enterprise anything out of the ordinary. The law is spurred by “a petition for relief, most numerous and respectably signed” (419). Unlike Proffit’s other ventures, this one is entirely respectable. Capitalizing on a fine opportunity, Proffit invests his “whole estate” and is quickly successful (419). Far from extraordinary, the tale has become the entirely ordinary story of the American self-made man, a point Poe drives home in the closing sentence: “I consider, myself . . . a made man, and am bargaining for a country-seat on the Hudson” (420). Shifting the

claim forwarded earlier in the story, that method not money made the man, Proffit has acquired the trappings of middle-class respectability by trading in formerly animate objects; unlike Emerson and Thoreau, who advocated various forms of retreat from society, Poe's tale concludes with the recognition that there is no viable solution to the problems posed by economic man when economics and politics are so thoroughly intertwined.<sup>32</sup> In such a nation, all things that could have spiritual value—literature, morals, persons—are sources of profit.

One might go even further and juxtapose the revised ending of "The Business Man" to the debates resulting from the *Creole* rebellion of November 1841, which ended in the liberation of a cargo of slaves by British authorities. Certainly there are no international incidents in "The Business Man," but the introduction of the Senate in registering communal priorities suggests the potential impact of the *Creole* debate to Poe's revisions to the tale. That a cargo can consist of slaves in one harbor and persons in another reveals the contingency of what counts as normal, as well as the moral horrors that can result. Poe points to this dynamic by stressing that the difference between an ordinary practice (slavery) and an extraordinary one (the cat-tail business) is arbitrary; what seems to be chance is stripped of its aleatory aspects and, endorsed by the good citizens of the community, naturalized by the regularizing function of the market, which effectively effaces its brutality. The tale's more ambitious aspect, hidden under the satire, is the claim that when method is indistinguishable from numerical accounting—when philosophy and mathematics are interchangeable—then the only kind of thing that one can make is a Proffit; in such a world, thought itself is up for sale and method becomes a means of discrimination in the fullest sense of the word.<sup>33</sup>

In concluding that Poe uses this tale to reflect on the business of slavery without offering either justification or condemnation, I part company with many distinguished scholars who have sought Poe's explicit endorsement or repudiation of the institution.<sup>34</sup> It seems to me more likely that Poe's manipulation of the rhetorical conventions associated with the increasingly national debate about slavery reflects his own ability to mine (and mock) the cant of the day, in this case the language used to talk about slavery. "The Business Man" will not tell us if Poe found slavery repugnant, but it does suggest that he believed the explanation, and responsibility, for its continued practice could be found by looking at the *nation's* political and economic methods. Thus, Proffit's proposed home is on the Hudson River in New York and the tale is explicit that the legislation is the result of communal will. Divorcing slavery from its association with the South, Poe in-

stead points to the bottom line—the entire nation enjoys the profits of this “peculiar institution.”

### What’s the Use?

Nineteenth-century Americans were far from certain about how to achieve the lofty ideals promised by the nation’s founding documents and, as numerous scholars have demonstrated, regularly expressed concern about their national profile. One remedy for this plight was the conscious crafting of national narratives and models, including the figure of the self-made man as expressive of the values peculiar to the United States. A “popular hero,” indeed a “central symbol of American society,” the self-made man, John Cawelti explains, allowed “Americans . . . to synthesize, under his aegis, many conflicting strands of belief and aspiration.”<sup>35</sup> A wide range of authors, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, conflated the self-made man and the business man, a phrase that entered common parlance in the early nineteenth century, and maintained that this figure “stood as the ideal” of the middle-class.<sup>36</sup> With its pithy sayings and proclamations about how best to manage one’s affairs, “The Business Man” draws upon these assumptions and narrative traditions as it dictates the way to wealth; in this, the tale is not only an attack on American commercialism, it is also a savage parody of the exemplar of the virtuous business man—Benjamin Franklin, patron saint of the socially useful self-made man.

As Leo Lemay has shown, “The Business Man” exposes Franklin’s “Art of Virtue” to be more properly “the philosophy of a scoundrel.”<sup>37</sup> Complementing the tale’s evaluation of method and accounting, in other words, is an assault on the founding father of American moral accounting and the exposure of the dangers inherent in the exclusive or excessive reliance upon a single model—be it citizen, profession, or narrative—in the creation of national character. Looked at in this way, “The Business Man” not only critiques the reliance on moral computation, it also turns its satirical focus on a related assumption, namely that the exemplary narrative is useful and universally applicable. In the opening paragraph of the *Autobiography*, Franklin explains why he has decided to commit the story of his life to paper:

Having emerg’d from the Poverty & Obscurity in which I was born & bred, to a State of Affluence & some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro’ Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducting Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may

like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, & therefore fit to be imitated.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly many eighteenth-century writers defended their texts, fiction and non-fiction both, on the basis that they were models for imitation or instruction; that literature could influence the reader for good or ill formed the basis of many of the objections to the increasing popularity of the novel. While Poe's objections to novels (that they are too long) differ from those of moralists who sought to limit their secular influence, his concern about imitation, particularly how what the determination is made about what is "fit to be imitated," echoes such worries. According to Poe's "The Business Man," Franklin's premises—that his values are "suitable" for imitation *and* that moral economies make moral societies—just don't compute.

A brief glimpse at Kant's discussion of the limitations of the moral example clarifies the extent, and indeed the precision, of Poe's objections to the exemplary narrative of useful business men. While virtue and wisdom are ideas, the wise man—Kant specifies the stoic but one could just as easily select the business man—is "an ideal," "that is a man existing in thought only, but in complete conformity with the idea of wisdom."<sup>39</sup> Thus, "as the idea gives the *rule*, so the ideal in such a case serves as the *archetype* for the complete determination of the copy" (B597/A569). In other words, from an idea, say "wisdom," an individual can generate something that functions like a rule: "It is wise to behave in x-manner given y-situation." This rule, however, is still too abstract to be copied or imitated, to manifest "practical power." To realize this "power" one needs instead an "ideal." The standard for our actions is the conduct of this "man" "existing in thought only" against which we "compare and judge ourselves, and so reform ourselves." "Although we can never attain to the perfection thereby prescribed," this "ideal" man helps orient us in our practical matters (B598/A570). Although there is no "objective reality" for such figures, they should not be regarded as "figments of the brain." Without actually existing *in the world*, such ideals provide human reason with the outlines to copy.

The regulative efficacy of moral examples, then, is linked to their ability to mold conduct and provide standards against which the individual can measure his behavior—which they can do as long as they are *not written down*.<sup>40</sup> "But to attempt to realise the ideal in an example," Kant continues, "as, for instance, to depict the . . . wise man in a romance, is impracticable. There is indeed something absurd, and far from edifying, in such an attempt" (B598/A570). Not only "im-

practicable” but “absurd,” giving an ideal a narrative representation meets with Kant’s immediate and vehement censure. The problem with such narratives, according to Kant, is that they replace morality with imitation; rather than thinking through what should be done in a given situation, the person applies a course of action dictated by the exemplary narrative. This has the effect of impoverishing both the individual and the society in which he or she lives by undermining moral standards and replacing thought with imitation. While the exemplary ideal can play an important practical role in everyday philosophic consideration, once inserted into a narrative, into fiction, it can only participate in a negative fashion—one that is both absurd and confusing. Why is the “ideal” figure assigned a value so markedly below the one existing “in thought only”? Because, Kant insists, examples do not recognize their limits. The “natural limitations” of the example, its narrative constraints, are “constantly doing violence to the completeness of the idea” (B598/A570). Aiming for an illusion that Kant asserts is “altogether impossible,” the example drags the idea down to its level, “by giving it the air of being a mere fiction” (B598/A570).

We see Poe reaching a similar conclusion in “The Business Man,” albeit more satirically. In this tale, the fixed morals of the didactic life narrative reduce fiction and philosophy to a “to do do do” list. Proffit engages in a range of businesses, all of which would make their profit, hypothetically, from ignoring communal interests for personal gain. Indeed, in the organ-grinding episode, Proffit is clear that his goal is to annoy as many people as possible. Yet central to the celebration of the business man is the belief that “No man can promote his own interest without promoting that of others,” as Edward Everett asserted in 1838, giving voice to an enduring American belief in the communal value of self-interest.<sup>41</sup> Not only is self-interest injurious to the community in “The Business Man,” but Poe also questions the efficacy of assuming that one particular figure, especially one as self-interested and narrow as the celebrated self-made man, could prove the ideal representative of a nation’s moral values. “The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind,” Henry David Thoreau writes in *Walden* (1854). “Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of others?”<sup>42</sup> Poe anticipates Thoreau’s question, replying that a world which sacrifices beauty to utility or character to accounting will turn everything of value—art, morals, philosophy—into a mere numbers game.

## Notes

I would like to thank Jonathan Elmer, Robert Levine, Stacey Margolis, and the members of the Princeton Americanist Colloquium, especially Erin Forbes, for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 673. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison, 17 vols. (New York: Cromwell, 1902), 16:280.

<sup>3</sup> Poe, *The Complete Works*, 16:281.

<sup>4</sup> For a related discussion, see Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 218.

<sup>5</sup> First published in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in February 1840, the story was significantly revised at some time before it appeared in the August 2, 1845 edition of the *Broadway Journal*. Thomas Mabbott surmises that in the intervening period, the tale likely was published in one of the papers for which the archive is not complete—the *Philadelphia Saturday Museum* or the *New York Sunday Times*—as the revisions are too extensive to be consistent with Poe's standard practices during the period. Changes between the extant versions include the title, the character's name, and the inclusion of materials that could have been inspired by events of November 1842. See *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas O. Mabbott, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1969), 2:48. In my reading of the tale, I will rely primarily on the later, revised, version. For information on Poe's practice of reprinting while at the *Broadway Journal*, see Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–53* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 189.

<sup>6</sup> While the differences between the detective tales and this seemingly insubstantial satire would suggest that they have little in common, David Halliburton's argument about Poe's compositional practice suggests that such differences have too often distracted readers from noticing basic consistencies between Poe's works. "Poe was in the habit," Halliburton claims, "of playing one work off against its polar complement . . . parodying in one work matters that are treated seriously in another." *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), 232. Halliburton argues that "The Business Man" reprises the sober opening of "MS. Found in a Bottle" from seven years earlier (233) while its narrator recalls the narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (281).

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 126–27.

<sup>8</sup> Cavell, 126–27.

<sup>9</sup> Candace Vogler sees a related operation in “Ligeia,” where the narrator is “ill fitted to productive engagements with [the] world, adapted not to family or established institutions of law and property, not even to the work of self-subsistence, but to the need for repetitive insistence that things have been lost, that there is always human cost in the operation of ordinariness.” “‘Much of Madness and More of Sin’: Compassion, for Ligeia,” *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York: Routledge, 2004), 51.

<sup>10</sup> Present-day slang might lead a reader to associate this entry with excrement, especially given the parenthetical remark about size; there is no evidence, however, that such a connotation would have been current in Poe’s day.

<sup>11</sup> Poe, *Collected Works*, 415. The spacing between “do” varies in all versions of the original.

<sup>12</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne also uses “ditto” when depicting the stores for Hepzibah’s commercial venture; see *The House of Seven Gables*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 35.

<sup>13</sup> According to the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, the verb “do” later in the century took on additional criminal connotations, including to kill, to rob, to serve time, as well as a variety of meanings relating to social and sexual encounters.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Cohen, *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 108.

<sup>15</sup> Terence Whalen carefully explains Poe’s manipulation of his impact on the circulation of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 58–75. Mary Poovey’s discussion of gestural mathematics in *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998) also shaped the development of my argument about Poe’s interest in computation and calculation.

<sup>16</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 57, 60. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ER*.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Complete Poetical Works of Pope*, ed. Henry W. Boynton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 178.

<sup>18</sup> Not only were “tales about money . . . intended to make money,” but Poe was also keenly aware of the potential profit from his own stories. See Whalen, 197; for a general discussion, see 27–57 and 195–224.

<sup>19</sup> See Clayton Marsh, “Stealing Time: Poe’s Confidence Men and the ‘Rush of the Age,’” *American Literature* 77, no. 2 (2005), 259–89, for a discussion of mechanical models of time and their impact on Poe.

<sup>20</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Epigram for Wall street,” *Evening Mirror*, January 23, 1845.

<sup>21</sup> On contemporary debates about the status of paper money, see Whalen, 198–201.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in David Anthony, “Banking on Emotion: Financial Panic and the Logic of Male Submission in the Jacksonian Gothic,” *American Literature* 76 (2004), 722.

<sup>23</sup> Jan Mieszkowski makes a related argument in “Exhaustible Humanity: Using Up Language, Using Up Man,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (2003), 123–30.

<sup>24</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>25</sup> On the intellectual basis of American political economy, particularly the fusion of rational will and productive labor, see Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820–1920* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002), 16–22.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony, 723.

<sup>27</sup> Sklansky, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Richard Poirier (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 38.

<sup>29</sup> Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 37.

<sup>30</sup> Sklansky (44–45) explains that Emerson’s critique turned not on the property relations upon which the American market economy was predicated but rather the ways in which it affected subjectivity.

<sup>31</sup> Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 38.

<sup>32</sup> Later in his career, especially in *The Conduct of Life* (1860) and *Society and Solitude* (1870), Emerson revised his position that retreat from society was an appropriate response to concerns about the damages resulting from a market culture. See Sklansky, 51, and David M. Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 134–80.

<sup>33</sup> My argument implicitly revises Lindon Barrett’s for the conjunction of reason and racism in the tale; see “Presence of Mind: Detection and Racialization in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue,’” in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 157–76. What “The Business Man” shows is that Poe was working to the conclusion that the crucial point, and perhaps the most brutal one as well, is not that we reason or discriminate (there are both necessary mental activities and not universally pernicious) but rather that the uses we assign to reason and discrimination, the operations we assume to be natural, generate perversions and profits both.

<sup>34</sup> Critics are divided about the extent of Poe's racism, with opinions ranging from those who identify him wholly with a proslavery view—such as John Carlos Rowe, in *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000)—to those who urge a more nuanced approach to the question; see Joan Dayan, "Poe, Persons, and Property," *American Literary History* 11, no. 3 (1999), 105–25, and Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997). Whalen's conclusion that contemporary categories fail to capture Poe's position complements the argument I am making here.

<sup>35</sup> John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man: Changing Concepts of Success in America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), 4.

<sup>36</sup> J. A. Leo Lemay, "Poe's 'The Business Man': Its Contexts and Satire of Franklin's Autobiography," *Poe Studies: Dark Romanticism* 15, no. 2 (1982), 29–30, provides fine contextual information for the cult of business during the period.

<sup>37</sup> Lemay, 29. J. Gerald Kennedy has recently argued that Poe's opposition to "the fetishizing of American subjects" and the "cultural pressure to contract a national narrative" left "telltale evidence in his fiction." "A Mania for Composition': Poe's *Annus Mirabilis* and the Violence of Nation Building," *American Literary History* 17, no. 1 (2005), 6. Poe's writings in 1844 indicate for Kennedy a marked shift in Poe's work to themes that challenge the triumphalist narrative of American exceptionalism (13). "The Business Man" makes clear that Poe was engaged in this process earlier in his career.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), B597/A569. Rather than page numbers, the references indicate the paragraph from which the passage is taken for both the A and the B edition of the volume. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>40</sup> David Lloyd in "Kant's Examples," *Representations* 28 (1989), 34–54, examines the structure of aesthetic education in the *Critique of Judgment*.

<sup>41</sup> Everett made this remark in a speech of September 13, 1838 to the Boston Mercantile Library Association (Lemay, 30).

<sup>42</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, ed. William Rossi (New York: Norton, 1992), 12.