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Genius or Fudge? The Clouded Alembics of Magister Poe

There comes Poe with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,
Three fifths of him genius and two fifths sheer fudge . . .
—James Russell Lowell, "A Fable for Critics"

FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN LITERARY HISTORY, the aesthetics of taste, or the psychology of literary production and reception, Edgar Allan Poe is nothing less than a gold mine, a test "case," in every sense of the word. At one end of the critical spectrum is Bernard Shaw: "Tennyson, who was nothing if not a virtuoso, never produced a success that will bear reading after Poe's failures. Poe constantly and inevitably produced magic where his greatest contemporaries produced only beauty. . . . The story of Lady Ligeia is not merely one of the wonders of literature: it is unparalleled and unapproached. . . . Above all, Poe is great because he is independent of cheap attractions, independent of sex, of patriotism, of fighting, of sentimentality, snobbery, gluttony, and all the rest of the vulgar stock-in-trade of his profession. . . . His kingdom is not of this world." At the spectrum's other end is Harold Bloom: "Whether either *Eureka* or the famous stories can survive authentic criticism is not clear. . . . They are a permanent element in Western literary culture, even though they are best read when we are very young. . . . Uncritical admirers of Poe should be asked to read his stories aloud (but only to themselves!). The association between the acting style of Vincent Price and the styles of Poe is alas not gratuitous. . . . His tales contrast weakly with Hawthorne's, his poems scarcely bear reading."¹ Or to put it another way, one man's genius is another man's fudge.

A spectrum of opinion this broad has been characteristic of Poe's reputation from the start. On the same day as his funeral in 1849 (age

¹ All of the criticism I refer to can be found among the following four collections: *Modern Critical Views: Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, 1985). *The Purloined Poe*, ed. by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore & London, 1988). *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor, 1969). *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays* (in *Twentieth Century Views*), ed. by Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967). Poe's own writings can be best accessed in the two volumes from *The Library of America* series (New York, 1984).

forty), his unreliable literary executor, Rufus Griswold, published a memorial that set the pattern for Poe's subsequent American reputation as a brilliant mad degenerate. But once he had been taken up by Baudelaire, Poe became an almost sainted writer in France, to be venerated by the Symbolists for his anti-bourgeois, anti-democratic, anti-didactic art-above-all persona. So infatuated was Baudelaire with Poeian aesthetics that he made verbatim use of sentences from Poe's critical essays, promulgating doctrine that almost a century later became gospel truth for the American New Critics: that poetry's only aim is itself, not morality or representation but the incarnation of self-justifying beauty. "Autotelic" was the buzz word of the 1950s. This formalism became a driving force in the American critical academy, which would thoroughly endorse Baudelaire's Poeian claim that "there are no insignificant details in matters of art." Thus, by an ironic sequence of events, Poe can be said to have cast a modernist net that included in its sweep such diverse characters as T.S. Eliot, Brooks and Warren, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath.

But the intervening American century had much to say that was less unequivocally enthusiastic and some of it still retains a vital force in defining Poe, especially in modernism's aftermath, a time when "art" is regarded as not quite enough. Walt Whitman, in particular, is worth a hearing:

Almost without the first sign of moral principle, or of the concrete or its heroisms, or the simpler affections of the heart, Poe's verses illustrate an intense faculty for technical and abstract beauty, with the rhyming art to excess, an incorrigible propensity toward nocturnal themes, a demoniac undertone behind every page—and, by final judgment, probably belong among the electric lights of imaginative literature, brilliant and dazzling, but with no heat.

Whitman would finally question Poe's substitution of other-worldly abstractions for the "democratic concretes" of the body, sex, and the earth, wondering whether such a low degree of sensuality had some connection with "current pathological study."

These concerns about morality and pathology were to be developed by others somewhat later on. In one of the most powerful essays ever written about him, Yvor Winters complained in 1937 that Poe was an "obscurantist" writer fixated on technique at the expense of substance. "It is obvious, then, that poetry is not, for Poe, a refined and enriched technique of moral comprehension. It can be of no aid to us in understanding ourselves or in ordering our lives, for most of our experience is irrelevant to it." Zeroing in on the text of Poe's most outlandish aesthetic manifesto, Winters could be said to have seen Poe as a master chemist, dispensing strange dyes, strange colors, and curious odors from his amoral, vaporous alembics, and metering them out in formalist prosodic teaspoons in order to achieve the

precise effects of style that could produce such a construct as “The Raven” (whose unbelievably self-conscious genesis Poe claimed to be faithfully describing in “The Philosophy of Composition,” an account sometimes derided as a hoax).

As for pathology, Marie Bonaparte’s 1933 magnum opus, *The Life and Letters of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-analytic Interpretation*, for all its brilliantly attentive readings and pioneering explorations can hardly be read in 1992 as anything other than a parody of an entire episteme:

The devil who bets and wins Mr. Dammit’s head, and the symbolic bridge which beheads him with its iron bracings, were, as we saw, displacements first of the avenging father and then, of the danger-fraught vagina with its imaginary, fearsome teeth. Innumerable are the displacements which went to construct “The Pit and the Pendulum” nightmare. The cell as the contractile womb of the mother, the vaginal pit, and the penis-scythe of Time, are but the most striking.

Though one cries for mercy after mantras such as this, Bonaparte by no means marks the end of the psychoanalytical dispensation, since history reveals her to have been merely John the Baptist for the true and only Christ, Jacques Lacan, whose 1955 seminar on “The Purloined Letter” spawned an entire postmodernist academic industry. But Lacan’s unfathomable, unquotable essay has even less bearing on any actual reading of Poe than Bonaparte and since its principal interest is the debate it provoked with Jacques Derrida, die-hard readers are free to consult *The Purloined Poe* to learn how in the intellectual world, as in the planetary, there is profligate energy-inefficiency, justified for the sake of keeping academic loggers busy at their choppings, while the spotted owl of “literary experience” becomes an increasingly endangered species.

Valéry, Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Aldous Huxley, Allen Tate, Richard Wilbur—everybody has had a go at it, but T.S. Eliot was most judicious in assessing Poe’s achievement. In his essay, “From Poe to Valéry” (whose first American appearance was in *The Hudson Review* of Autumn 1949), he offered one useful observation after another: on close inspection Poe’s writing seems “slipshod,” “puerile,” “haphazard,” not just gothic and romantic. His poems echo those of Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron, yet without seeming English—or American! Poe “is not at home where he belongs, but cannot get to anywhere else.” The pleasure we take in his poems and tales is greatest in childhood, but we are not eager to re-read them. “That Poe had a powerful intellect is undeniable: but it seems to me the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty.” He was a person who did not so much “believe” in ideas as “entertain” them. Yet for all this negativity (a negativity that other New Critics rejected),

Eliot's positive conclusion about Poe seems correct: that it is not any particular specimen of his work that matters so much as the effect his whole *oeuvre* has had upon French and Anglophone writing. Thus, Poe as the *poète maudit*, the Byronic rebel against society, the art-for-art's sake technician, the aesthetic theorist who went beyond Coleridge into realms of the forbidden and subterranean, the self-conscious experimenter in poetic effects who strove for a "pure" poetry that not only avoided didacticism but came close to avoiding meaning altogether—all of these were to find their fullest appreciation during the period of late modernism in America.

But read or reread as individual artifacts during our own postmodern *fin de siècle*, Poe's poems and tales still fail to make a very satisfactory showing, even with the exemplary sensitization to his art that the New Criticism afforded us in the fifties and sixties. The poems admittedly have their moments, but most seem derivative and dreadful, with the exception, perhaps, of *The Bells*, a tour de force that actually works (in the terms it sets up for itself), while the tales suffer from faults of construction, rhetoric, and lack of both intellectual and emotional depth (apart from the delvings of depth psychology) that no amount of critical leniency or autotelia can dispel. Whitman and Winters, however much they have been disparaged as moralistic readers of Poe by the New Critics, had a lot to say that was right. Poe's tales do seem unsupported by much sharable feeling (what Whitman called "heat") beyond their overwrought gothic horror, a horror that has been superseded in every way by Hollywood and television, even if their ultimate debt is to Poe himself. The tales do perform like the calculated works of alchemy Poe said (in his critical essays) that he was aiming at, cold and isolated from human life because chiefly concerned with their final "effect." Admittedly, Poe has a considerable range and exhibits real skill: besides the almost unreadably gothic tales such as "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," there are the deft and pioneering "ratiocinative" detective stories, such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Gold-Bug," but their food for non-psychoanalytical thought is strictly low calorie. In the case of the virtuosic terror of "The Pit and the Pendulum," once Poe has performed his hero-in-the-sawmill trick he loses interest and ends the story with a feeble last-minute rescue, concerned more with local *effect* than with the global *affect* of a well-shaped narrative sprung from primal intuitions; and even in such pregnant psychological tales as "William Wilson" and "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe is unable to realize the potentials of his allegorical materials because his constructional machinery can deliver only crude gestures and maneuvers, nor does he seem *really sure* of what it is that he is trying to say, even though he may be on to something major. "The Imp of the Perverse" is spoiled by a baldly abstract exposition that renders anticlimactic the dramatic embodiment that ensues. Though initially powerful, "The Black Cat" col-

lapses into Poe-etic tics at the moment the protagonist accidentally murders his wife. "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," a lengthy novella, has long stretches of grippingly rendered adventure, told with great fluency, but the story is congested by tedious technical digressions, suddenly shifting rhetorical gears from realist to symbolist in the final few pages. Before reaching a conclusion, it simply stops, appearing essentially unfinished and confused. And could anyone except an ambitious assistant professor now actually read *Eureka* from beginning to end without skipping? Of the well-known tales only "The Cask of Amontillado" seems without flaw—perfect in diction, construction, and overall control of aesthetic materials.

The serious limitations of Poe's individual productions can be grasped by calling to mind a later southern American creator of "gothic" horror: Flannery O'Connor. Whether one likes her beliefs or not, she luminously exemplifies the distinction between *entertaining* ideas and *believing* them, altering one's consciousness indelibly and forever, unsettling and betraying the deepest of self-assurances. "Revelation," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Good Country People" are as implicated with "art" as anything by Poe but have been generated by an interiority connected to a recognizable world whose presence in Poe is only fitful and rare. Poe's unquestionable commitment *was* to art—and sheer survival—but he was heavily dependent upon a laboratory of manipulative alchemies that served as surrogates for "authenticity," for a "center" whose absence makes his writings inscrutable. O'Connor's commitment was to identify and represent the enigmas of human life and to expose the varied but self-deluding subterfuges her protagonists employed to justify themselves in relation to these enigmas, a vocation that *generalized* her art away from aesthetically dangerous private pathology.

The consensus on O'Connor came fast, but a century and a half after Poe's death, it is still not clear how much of his work is genius, how much fudge. When he is seen in terms of his creative potential, his critical/aesthetic insights, and his influence on literary history, one is prepared to grant a good deal of genius. But when he is seen in terms of the finish, the quality of workmanship, of his individual productions, whose unidentifiable psychological centers invite the acrobatic decodings of a Marie Bonaparte and the sometimes extravagant aesthetic claims of New Critics, much can be said for fudge. So one turns for help with eager, probably unrealistic, expectations to the first major biography in fifty years, and what one finds in Kenneth Silverman's *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* is itself ambivalent. Silverman is a master biographer who has pulled together prodigious material into an eminently readable narrative—sane, judicious, intelligent, professional in every way. Although his is not a "critical" biography, it does examine many of the writings and offers balanced, impartial opinions of their quality that reinforce

one's confidence in his judgment. To maintain narrative continuity and avoid ponderousness, Silverman generally avoids reference to critics and their works, so the critical tradition, while not wholly absent, is played down and Poe's writings are used principally to enrich the ongoing psychological portrait. Moreover, Silverman is loath to press a thesis or a doctrinaire critical approach, because he clearly wants this account to remain valid for a long time to come (as it certainly will). "As this biography is not an argument but a narrative, no attempt will be made to 'prove' that the psychoanalytic prototype of the bereaved child applies to him, still less to examine by its light his every word and action."² Despite this disclaimer, however, Silverman's approach is unambiguously Freudian. Indeed, Silverman's theme, as represented in his subtitle, is in the line of Marie Bonaparte, who quotes from Poe's tale, "Morella" ("Thou shalt bear about with thee thy shroud on the earth. . . .") and remarks that these are "words which might equally have been spoken by Elizabeth Arnold to the little son whom, by her fate [of early death], she doomed to eternal mourning." Bonaparte continues: "Due, however, to the original incest prohibition, which imposed a sex barrier between mother and child, the boy's first resentment is later visited on the wife [Virginia Poe], with the result that his 'joy' fades 'into horror,' " screwing him up for the rest of his life. Despite Bonaparte's excesses, this thesis works well enough not only in her account but in Silverman's too, yet Silverman's approach is not as theoryless as he would seem to have wished and at times even *his* Freudianism becomes oppressive: "In current psychoanalytic thinking about persons suffering prolonged and unresolved grief, the wish to devour also represents primitive attempts at preserving loved ones, incorporating them so as not to lose them, filling oneself to make up for (and to that extent deny) the loss. The lip-smacking devil in 'The Bargain Lost' is just such a gourmand of the dead." Particularly vexing is his insistence throughout the biography on Poe's obsession with the names "Allan" (his betraying benefactor) and "Poe" (his absconding father), which he loads with *importance* but not with really rewarding *significance*: "The asylum is superintended, it might be added, by a Monsieur Maillard, a name in which *Allan* again nearly resurfaces, as it also does in keeper-inmates named Laplace, Boullard, and Gailard." "The name Tsalal . . . again encapsulates the double *l* double *a* of Allan." "Like the painter, Prince Prospero (twice or thrice *Poe*) . . .," and so on. The returns on this investment are small.

What Silverman does supply to perfection is an account of the activities of Poe's forty years of life, an unmitigated horror of loss, poverty, and disappointment. His mother, an actress from childhood, died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four while his father, David,

² EDGAR A. POE: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance, by *Kenneth Silverman*. HarperCollins Publishers. \$27.50, pp. 77-78.

had deserted her sometime earlier. Poe and his brother and sister were farmed out to different foster parents, Edgar ending up with John and Fanny Allan in Richmond, Virginia. Though Allan was affluent and supported Edgar well, enabling him to attend the newly-founded University of Virginia for a year, until he dropped out because of gambling debts and bad behavior, Allan never adopted him, a traumatic blow from which Poe never recovered. Schooled for a while in England, with subsequent short terms in the U.S. Army and at West Point, Poe started publishing his writing while still in his teens. But as his relationship with Allan became increasingly fractious Edgar was more or less abandoned altogether, though he made various unsavory attempts to recover Allan's esteem and, more urgently, his financial support. After one unsuccessful attempt at betrothal to another woman, he ended up marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm and not only lived with her and his aunt until Virginia died at twenty-four of tuberculosis, like his mother, but continued to be taken care of by Maria Clemm until his own death in 1849.

Poe went through a series of connections with literary periodicals of varying levels of sophistication, generally improving their circulation as editor while contributing large quantities of tales, poems, criticism, and "marginalia," often using the same materials more than once. But his professional liaisons were short-lived and never produced much money, so that there were times when he literally did not know where his next meal was coming from. Alcoholism and drug-taking frustrated his larger opportunities, such as a government sinecure in Washington that was never offered because of his drunken and eccentric visit there. Though a few of his writings, "The Raven" and "The Gold-Bug," caught on and made him a popular figure, even in France, and though he wrote bitter, hypercritical reviews of his contemporaries that made him notorious but avidly read, his skill at messing up his life was virtuosic. When his beloved Virginia died after years of suffering and decline, he was literally kept alive by the ministrations of his aunt that included begging friends and relatives for money for their food and rent. Poe's last few incredible years of ill health and psychological derangement were spent trying to get three or four different women to marry him, though as each episode moved closer to consummation his terror grew greater. He died mysteriously in the streets of Baltimore, possibly from alcohol or drugs, on returning from arrangements to marry a childhood sweetheart in Richmond.

Against this background of misery, Silverman appreciates Poe's varied and substantial achievements, some of which I have already outlined, but the overall effect of his narrative is damaging, probably more than he actually intended. Poe's mendacity was pathological, including misrepresentations of his family roots and social class, claims of travel to countries he never visited, exaggerated reports of his athletic

prowess and victory in fistfights, pretenses at knowing languages he actually could not read, denials of his addiction to drink and drugs, and wholesale plagiarism committed while simultaneously attacking other writers for their own literary robberies. His "Letter to B _____," an early critical manifesto, depends for its most important moment ("A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having, for its *immediate* object, pleasure, not truth . . .") on a theft from Coleridge, but this is just the tip of an iceberg, for "he had fallen into a routine of easy lies and half truths since at least his adolescence." Even as regards his dead wife, Virginia, he told Helen Whitman, one of his later marriage prospects, that "he regarded Virginia as a sister and a child who 'could not enrich his life,' with whom he could experience 'little reciprocity of thought,' whom he had married solely for her own happiness," a series of preposterous lies about a woman, as he earlier wrote a friend, "whom I loved as no man ever loved before." (Admittedly, nothing that Poe ever said can be trusted.) Silverman excels in providing insight into these vices: "Yet like his early imitation of Byron, his various pseudonyms, and his appropriating his brother's adventures, Edgar's ease in taking over and passing off as his own the ideas, opinions, and expressions of other people does imply a feeling of not being someone definite." He is especially good on "The Philosophy of Composition," which he regards as "but a larger and more fortified hedge against his increasing irrationality. Patiently, lengthily, minutely dissecting 'The Raven,' he showed that he wrote the poem by exercising a methodical, total control. . . . Poe's fearful preoccupations and anxious state repeatedly emerge through the philosophical reasonings meant to master and conceal them. . . . The voice that speaks . . . throughout 'The Philosophy of Composition' recalls that of the crazed narrators in some of Poe's tales, whose tone of eerie calm is intended to demonstrate their lucidity and self-control, but arouses only the reader's fear and pity."

Where Silverman falls short is in his capacity as literary critic. Beyond demonstrating the biographical connections between Poe's art and his life and the neurotic symptoms that underlay them, he does not know quite what to do with the tales and poems as literary constructs. As in the case of the Allans and Poes imputedly permeating the works, after Silverman's literary discussions the reader is inclined to say, "Very well, very well, but what can you tell me about this tale as meaningful art?" One illustration will serve for many:

Getting his hero in trouble and keeping him there, Poe created in *Pym* a classic adventure story, through which he gave body to the classic theme of illusion. The deceit begins with the preface, a dizzying verbal hall of mirrors that confuses author and protagonist, fact and fiction. The narrative proper brings both Pym and the reader into a treacherous world of disguises, forgeries, and impersonations where appearances lie. Pym's friendly dog Tiger threatens to devour him. . . . the seemingly fiendish Dirk Peters befriends

him, and the capsizing of his ship reveals not new perils but a keel encrusted with nutritious barnacles that save him from starvation.

Silverman goes on to enumerate examples of the characteristic Poeian theme of life and death simulating each other, points out the repeated breakdown of order, and recalls people from Poe's past whose names are used or echoed in this novella, observing along the way that "a deeper but more elusive presence in the book is Eliza Poe," and "Pym's desire is not only to feed but also to be consumed." All of this information, of the sort only an expert can provide, is valuable and enlightening, but it rarely gets to the semantic or aesthetic heart of any of the stories. "Why is this tale the way it is and not otherwise?" is the baffled reader's cry. One feels much sympathy for Silverman's critical inadequacy, because trying to locate the heart of a Poe work is the crux that any sensitive reader is destined to face for himself. Yet, however unfairly, one continues to hope for more.³

Thus the "ambivalence" with which I earlier characterized this biography would seem to have arisen from Silverman's desire to present Edgar Poe as a major American author while providing a scrupulously detailed confrontation with materials that—as things turn out—end up darkening our sense of his character and his life. At the same time, however, this penetration into the deepest shadows both clarifies our misunderstandings and obscures our understandings of Poe's writings. The center of Poe's life and art recedes yet further to a nebulous *world elsewhere*, a world that neither psychoanalytic nor aesthetic theory has adequately managed to render. Success in this endeavor would consist not so much in psyching Poe out once and for all as in enabling us to understand a body of writing—*piece by piece*—whose key seems ever more elusive. But it is hard to envision what form such success could possibly take. Insofar as Poe's oeuvre has appealed to a large number of readers and exerted its influence on literary history, theory, and taste, it would have to be taken as already successful. But insofar as suffocating theories are needed to make intelligible the individual poems and tales (writings that many qualified readers cannot bear), one has a sense of failure. Silverman's biography, a major contribution to literary history, does not otherwise alter this status quo. For the moment, at any rate, T.S. Eliot's emphasis on the value of Poe's work *as a whole* continues to be rewarding. Whether Poe's stories and poems can still actually be read past adolescence—or even at all, in a TV era he helped to create—remains an open question.

³ As Lacanian analysis begins to wear itself thin, the latest wave in Poe studies may very well belong to the cultural materialists. Like the Henry James industry, *E. A. Poe & Associates, Inc.* seems to be involved with such questions as Poe and his sources (in his case, plagiarism as well), Poe and the mass market, etc.