

Edgar Poe

THE ANNOTATED

POE

EDITED BY KEVIN J. HAYES

WITH A FOREWORD BY WILLIAM GIRALDI

THE BELKNAP PRESS OF
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

2015

Foreword

William Gibaldi

It's the most recognizably anguished face in American letters, impossible to be mistaken for any other—the face of the writer we think we know—a doughy face, lopsided in letdown, harrowed and blanched by loss. With Whitman you get the searing soulfulness, with Melville the fixed intransigence, with Thoreau the contented sedition, and Dickinson is that milky, marble-eyed beauty from beyond. But in S. W. Hartshorn's famous 1848 daguerreotype of Poe, so much of his work is somehow perfectly there, myriad threads from the poems and tales. In this pallid photo, Poe's face speaks the dread truth of his depth.

The forehead is glaringly wide, both temples slightly dented, the hairline in retreat, the hair itself styled by a storm—all that messiness atop an endless intellection, a daimonic imagination, the introduction of chaos into the reliable obedience of order. There's a pinch between his brows, another pensive strain—even now, even here in front of Hartshorn's camera, Poe can't stay the wonder, the probing of possibilities, and the confusion he feels is the confusion of his hard life, yes, but also the confusion of eons. Under thatched brows the eyes are averted to his left, not because the lens would thief his soul, and not in the fashion of the time, but because Poe is forever looking past what stands before us—our essence lies behind what we typically see, above the tangible, in the mysterious folds of some other domain.

Those devastating crescents sag beneath his eyes in exhaustion, in evidence of too much time looking into the dark, questing for whatever hints of us are to be found in the nooks and corners most are too afraid to step into. The mustache is unevenly shaven, longer on the right side, perhaps in an attempt to balance his skewed face, the left jawbone fuller, that cheek droopier than its twin; and it occurs to you how much of his work is an effort in equipoise, at augmenting appearances, the balancing of a nature split against itself, insisting that the night have its say against the common revelations of day, that dreams be allowed their fruitful intrusion into our waking selves—Poe was intent on “dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream be-

fore.” There’s the faintest trace of disgust in his visage—the tight mouth, the rueful stare—as if the quotidian crush of our lives, of which photographs are a part, vex and irk a poet, leaving him eager for the shadows, where he can croon a truth in hiding. Not a beautiful man, Poe spent his art in pursuit of higher beauty, and this photo is what the agonized beauty of genius looks like.

The heartwreck you glimpse in the photo is lifelong and inherited. A debtor and drunk, flustered and ineffectual, Poe’s father abandoned the family and disappeared. Poe was almost three years old when he watched his loving twenty-four-year-old mother die of consumption. A pretty, tiny woman, an able actress and singer, she’d suffered horrendous losses most of her life. Poe and his two siblings were separated after her death, adopted by families who would never be real families. Imagine that child, just shy of his third birthday, at his cherished mother’s bedside as she dies; imagine the sunder inside him, the searing, the cosmic aloneness and fear—“the dawn/ Of a most stormy life.” How does such a sensitive boy, a boy born with darkness in his strands (“Darkness there, and nothing more”), ever recover from a blow such as that? He doesn’t. How is he ever whole again? He isn’t. “From childhood’s hour I have not been/ As others were—I have not seen/ As others saw.”

All through his childhood and adolescence he was smitten with young maternal figures who were ill and guaranteed to die on him. It will happen again in a major way, again when the woman was twenty-four: his cousin-wife, Virginia Clemm, a miniscule beauty like his mother, her middle name the same as his mother’s first name, “Eliza”—she was thirteen years old when she married Poe and was dead of consumption eleven years later. Poe was inconsolable; he slept at her grave. (“And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side/ Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride.”) His imagination was fired by remembrance of these frail ingénues, wisps of women filched from him by some foul wind—“the wind came out of the cloud, chilling/ And killing my Annabel Lee.” In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe writes that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.” Even if you find “unquestionably” a tad questionable, you take Poe’s point if you understand his life. Alluring as death was for him, a beautiful woman made it all the more alluring, which goes to show how his interest in women was meta-sensual, unerotic, ethereal.

Biographers differ on whether Poe ever consummated his marriage to his cousin. W. H. Auden rather uncharitably said that Poe was “an unmanly sort of man whose love-life seems to have been largely confined to crying in laps and playing house.”¹ And Richard Wilbur floated a similar notion: “What he sought from all these women, with the frantic anxiety of a lost child, was the equivalent of adoption.”² Notorious as a cutthroat critic when the writer was a talented male, Poe was also notorious as a fawn when the writer was a talentless female—it was as if he believed a

poetess would devote herself to him, nurse him to health with her love, *become his mother*, if only he praised her promiscuously in print.

Poe's dead girls remained for him as alive in death as they were in life—he imbued the dead with life and at every turn in life spied death. Catalog his losses and it all makes sense, the warmed flesh of the dead and the corpselike cold that brushed across the living. In his essay “The Poetic Principle,” he speaks of “the glories beyond the grave,” and those aren't Christian glories, to be sure, but glories that are both pagan and uniquely Poesque—he wants it both ways: “determined to depart, yet live—to leave the world, yet continue to exist,” as he puts it in “Hans Phaall” (a tale about a moon mission that beat by thirty years Jules Verne's popular novel *From the Earth to the Moon*).

Everywhere in Poe's work “Death looks gigantically down”—such a masterful mobilizing of an adverb in that line—and everywhere you are confronted with a cocktail of youth and demise, of the female and the Ideal, of death and beauty: “I could not love except where Death/ Was mingling his with Beauty's breath.” His narrators and poetic personas—in “Berenice,” in “Morella,” in “Ligeia,” in “Lenore,” in “Annabel Lee”—are helpless to keep from losing their fairy queens, and helpless to keep from pining after them once they're gone, from attempting to reach them in that misty realm of the dead, a realm that begins to look and feel a lot like our own. The “other side,” it's often called, but for Poe the deceased inhabit the selfsame side as the living. In his poems and tales the dead don't really ever die because they heave still in the heart, breathe still in dreams. They prowl the daytime cloaked as ghosts and at nightfall disrobe to reveal themselves in flesh.

Poe's limited conception of flesh stays prelibidinal, and his asexuality, his erotic lacuna, is one of the factors that endears him to adults who feed him to schoolchildren. Curious how Poe has often been considered suitable for young readers—“The Raven,” especially: at the apex of Poe's fame children would accost him on the sidewalk with chants of “Nevermore!”—because the truth is that he's not altogether easy to understand. T. S. Eliot was never more wrongheaded than when he accused Poe of having a “pre-adolescent mentality,” and although I'm loath ever to disagree with Henry James, his snipe about Poe, “enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection,” misses the mark in a most un-Jamesian way.³ The sing-song lilt of Poe's poems might appeal to the ears of youth—Emerson, bothered by Poe's lack of gravity, dubbed him “the Jingle Man”—but break from the lulling of his meter, look at the individual words and, with scant exceptions, his syntax and diction need much unknitting.⁴ Add to that Poe's ceaseless courtship with death, his “mournful and terrible *engine* of horror and of crime,” as he describes the gallows in “The Black Cat,” and you must have some mightily perplexed, upset children.

It's something of a platitude to say that Poe can't shake his death obsession. What major writer does not unleash his talents upon the problem of our mortality? All of

literature has only two motors, love and death, and everything else—envy, hatred, sin, devotion, whatever else you can name—is a variation, a capillary off those two throbbing arterioles. That rule holds in tragedy and comedy both. Poe’s reclusive sleuth, Auguste Dupin—the character who would help inspire the creation of Sherlock Holmes—is “enamored of the Night for her own sake,” but that doesn’t quite describe Poe himself. His gothic grasping after the occult, after the mysteries of death, was no affectation, no mere wish to join the alphas at the altar of literature. If you could take Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud and distill them, shave their work to the bone, extract their dark marrow, you’d have someone who looks a lot like Poe. It’s fruitless, because obvious, to apply Freud to Poe, but apply Poe to Freud and you’ll be on to something.

This affliction in his art was not his choice. I submit that an imaginative writer doesn’t choose his tenor, his topics, his taste, any more than you chose your parents. The death impulse in Poe’s work seems intelligible enough: it derives from his perennial mourning, his fanged grief over the loss of so many beloveds. At about the time Poe knew for certain that he’d become a writer, and just as he’d reestablished contact with him, his older brother, Henry, from whom Poe was estranged most of his life, drank himself into the grave at the age of—guess—*twenty-four*. Tidy as it is to spot the nexus between Poe’s losses and his literary expression of those losses, something much more complex is going on in his gruesome vision.

The horror of so many of his tales happens through claustrophobia, yes—in Poe’s best known work (“The Black Cat,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Pit and the Pendulum”), he favors the cramped indoors, as if in reminder that the grave is never far away—but also by virtue of unfolding during “the raven-winged hours,” because Poe also favors the dark. We take it for granted that horror happens after nightfall, that the dark is the proper place for a vampire such as Poe (that was D. H. Lawrence’s typically colorful assertion, that Poe didn’t write about vampires as much as he was himself a vampire). There are evolutionary reasons for our fear of the dark: bedded down in a sable thickness on the African savanna, our ancestors were vulnerable to nocturnal predators, to those monsters that came to devour us, and our double helix has never forgotten that fright. Like every horror artist, Poe exploits our fear of the dark—even when he doesn’t have to, when he isn’t in horror mode, as with Auguste Dupin’s preference for drawn shutters—but that exploitation is only half the point. Poe favors the dark because only in the dark do we stand naked; only in the dark is the truth open for detection. If you want someone to tell you the truth, said Wilde, give him a mask. The dark is Poe’s mask, and his mission is Truth with a hollering upper-case.

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” as Roderick Usher slumps further into a madness from which he will not recover, the narrator perceives “the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality,

poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe in one unceasing radiation of gloom.” That begins to get at an important part of Poe’s reaching for Truth: the “inherent positive quality” of darkness. Harold Bloom once suggested that “Poe’s genius was for negativity and opposition,” and that’s accurate in a certain sense—and certainly in Poe’s novella, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*—but not when it comes to key tales in which our essence is illuminated by darkness.⁵ In Poe’s worldview, the illuminating darkness is a positive quality because truth always trumps falsehood: better to be true in the dark than false in the light.

The tale “Manuscript Found in a Bottle,” about a ghost ship swallowed by an abyss, makes reference to “the severe precincts of truth.” Again, in his essay “The Poetic Principle,” Poe writes that “the demands of Truth are severe,” and in the same paragraph, he contends that “in enforcing a truth, we need severity.” He might have been writing there about the technical methods and applications of poetry, but you see how the truth/severity duet sings inside his own themes. Look at the opening of “The Premature Burial,” when the narrator admits that “certain themes . . . are with propriety handled only when the severity and majesty of Truth sanctify and sustain them.” You see what he means: hard to think of a fate more horrible than being buried alive, and our presumption is that only the morbidly misfit would choose to tell or hear such a story. Many over the decades have accused Poe of just that: R. L. Stevenson said Poe was so morbidly misfit that he had “ceased to be a human being,” and, worse, that “one is glad to think of him as dead.”⁶ But the “severity and majesty of Truth” demands that the severest tales be told and heard, because they unveil something intrinsic to the human makeup, and that unveiling, contra Stevenson, doesn’t make Poe less human—it makes him more.

In Poe’s cruelest tale, “The Black Cat”—about a man who cuts out the eye of his cat before lynching it, and then axes his wife’s skull before entombing her in the basement—the narrator is certain that “perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart.” You rightly think him a madman, until you run it by your own heart, a heart that has known, if you are honest, the pitch of the perverse. This is what Bloom means when he says that Poe depicts “the universalism of a common nightmare.”⁷ We all of us have a darkness thrumming within; the difference between most individuals and the narrator of “The Black Cat” is that he can no longer discern the distinction between a nightmare and a common night.

For the sheer horror of a diseased psyche, Edmund Wilson, for one, preferred Poe to Kafka (and that pairing, so stylistically inapposite at first glance, becomes outright tantalizing the more you look at it). Every diseased psyche has its own idiopathic rationale, and in Poe’s psyche, his mother and his cousin-bride are perfect pictures of beauty. If they live still in death, if their beauty abides still in the murky glow of dreams, and if beauty is indeed the Keatsian assurance of Truth, as Poe believed it was, then death itself becomes a revealer of Truth—not just the physical truth of the

fate of every living thing, but a Platonic Ideal wherein the world spins in equilibrium and souls are once again fused (“Morella” begins with an epigraph from Plato: “Itself, by itself, solely, ONE everlasting, and single”). This is, above all, what the Dupin stories show, especially “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Roget”: the gruesomeness of death is occasion for the uncovering of Truth. Dupin feels his way to a truth that becomes Truth—he’s all hubris and intuition; whatever logic he asserts is unimportant because he has already ascertained the truth by poetical guessing—just as Poe was convinced that the poeticizing of death, through the bringing forth of deathly dreams, would itself become its own Truth.

Poe’s life was downright miserable, “a Sahara of dreariness, pain, and drudgery,” in Richard Wilbur’s unimprovable wording.⁸ The first two lines of “Berenice” are: “Misery is manifold. The wretchedness of the earth is multiform,” and although it’s normally the uninspired reader-as-voyeur who wants to spy an author in every crevice of his work, Poe’s well-advertised anguish invites such searching. His is a heart “whose woes are legion”—the exaggerator of much, he didn’t exaggerate about that. It’s no shock he took some consolation in imagining death, in death as a work of art, death augmented by fillips of beauty (“the delight of its horror,” as he puts it in “The Imp of the Perverse”). Let’s also give him credit for his fearlessness in staring down the Reaper—“The Masque of the Red Death” hammers home the pitiful futility of denying death’s grip—and let’s not look upon him as a reality dodger who dreamt away his talents.

In its manufacture of dreams, sleep is a kind of portal to death: “By sleep and its world alone is *Death* imagined,” he writes in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” and by “imagined” he intends “experienced.” His preference for dreams over reality won’t be a mystery to fellow depressives because they know how hard it is to be alive, and they know that dreams, after all, happen in sleep. And sleep—a cavernous sleep that presses comfortingly upon you, a sleep with heft that hovers just above your body—is about the only place a depressive finds relief. Poe would have chosen a round-the-clock dream state if he had been able. In the tale “Eleonora,” he writes: “They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night.”

It occurs to you that Poe’s tales aren’t actually happening to his characters, but are instead unfurling inside Poe’s sleep, deep inside his dreamland. These aren’t stories as we normally understand stories, not those Gogolian models of perfection, not even fables or black fairy tales, but fever dreams we’ve been allowed access to, fever dreams whose logic is loyal only to Poe’s personal syntax of seeing. (In “Ligeia,” the narrator describes the vision of his beloved as “the radiance of an opium-dream.”) “The typical Poe story,” Richard Wilbur writes, “is, in its action, an allegory of dream experience” that happens “within the mind of a poet; the characters are not distinct personalities, but principles or faculties of the poet’s divided nature.”⁹ In

other words: the characters aren't really characters at all, but ciphers in two meanings of the term: nonentities, and messages in code. They are embodiments of psychic states.

The realist conception of character that has come to reign over so much of American literature, a conception codified in the mid-to-late nineteenth century after Poe's death, would have struck him as somewhat beside the point. Who needs another representation of played-out reality, another simulacrum of the actual? Look around you—there it is. Instead, Poe's tales strive to impart a different reality altogether, a reality that awakens while consciousness slumbers. In "The Assigination," the narrator remarks, "There are surely other worlds than this—other thoughts than the thoughts of the multitude—other speculations than the speculations of the sophist." In this sense Poe was a true Romantic despite his struggles to ditch the Romantic blueprint: literature should not reflect the world but transform it, imbue it with a new and fiercer fire, and in his creative capacities, in his forging of worlds, the poet achieves his own apotheosis.

There are problems that arise when a writer's characters are not bone and blood human beings but stand-ins for the rips and rasps of a psyche—"the disintegration-processes of his own psyche," as D. H. Lawrence put it.¹⁰ One of those problems was noticed by Edmund Wilson, who claimed that there's no love in Poe's world, and it's true: love is usually the first casualty of the insistently allegorical.¹¹ Write about Love and love takes a hit. Another of those problems is one that Leslie Fiedler pointed out: Poe's tales are bereft of sin, of the pitched awareness of sin, and so have no moral weight. Across the decades a quiver of critics has been eager to conflate the lack of moral reckoning in Poe's work with the absence of morality in Poe himself, a folly any way you cut it. Poe had great surfeits of love in him, and felt great responsibility to care for his young wife and mother-in-law.

Moral reckoning—morality transferred and fertilized, imagined and asserted in style—might be the highest aim of some writers, but it is also, somewhat paradoxically, the quotidian concern of churchgoers, and Poe was having none of that. His essay "The Heresy of the Didactic" blasts the "happy idea" that literature "should inculcate a moral." Poe's concerns were of an entirely different order, *beyond good and evil* in the Nietzschean sense of dismissing the dichotomy.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Fiedler makes a vital observation about Poe's understanding of the soul or spirit. Poe doesn't mean what we typically mean by those terms—the Christian soul, the spirit redeemed through sacrifice—but rather, says Fiedler, he means something more akin to "sensibility."¹² The problem with sensibility in a work of fiction—sensibility only, unaided by the strafings and strainings of the soul—is that it has no consequence, no inevitable way to be enacted, no necessary manifestation and so no urgency. This is the reason, by the way, it won't quite do to speak of Poe's tales as investigations of evil, as some in-

sist on doing: true evil is no metaphysical mystery, no obscurantist's plaything, but rather the real result of real human beings doing the worst that can be imagined.

Evil has heavy consequences for the soul, so when your idea of soul is "sensitivity," then those consequences are neutered. "Poe lacks as a writer *a sense of sin*," writes Fiedler, "and therefore cannot raise his characters to the Faustian level which alone dignifies gothic fiction."¹³ That "alone" might be contestable, but nothing else in Fiedler's idea is. "Poe fails finally to transform the gothic into the tragic," says Fiedler, because of his "immunity to Calvinism," by which he means the pervasive sense of original sin that permitted Melville his soaring to heights both tragic and sublime.¹⁴ When Ahab bleeds, you check yourself for bleeding too. When Poe's people bleed, the blood is movie blood, colored corn syrup.

But as Wilbur suggests, we must not confer on Poe's people "a credibility of character, motive, and feeling which they do not possess. . . . Poe's characters escape our everyday understanding, and are meant to."¹⁵ That's precisely what we love about Poe: his eschewing of typical comprehension. Say what you will about him, he's always compelling, and he's never afraid. More important, there's William Carlos Williams's assertion, in his essay-length airing of frisson from *In the American Grain* (1925): "Poe gives the sense for the first time in America that literature is *serious*, not a matter of courtesy but of truth."¹⁶

Poe seems to me to hold a rather shaky status as a particularly American mind. Whereas Whitman's exuberant American-ness is barely containable (without Whitman, American selfhood is an impotent affair), and Hawthorne's and Melville's aesthetic is a kind of religious roar augmented by American individualism, Poe's relationship to our national identity presents a bit of a problem. There's his penchant for setting his tales outside America, in Paris or Italy, in the Netherlands or the Arctic, or in some hallucinatory locale he considered more exotic than Baltimore or Richmond or Philadelphia, even though he knew those cities best. His chosen settings are necessary for his storytelling mission of disassociation, of course, but there's something else going on there. Although, in his *Marginalia*, Poe foresaw such a gripe as mine: "That an American should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea—and at best is a questionable point."

Still, reading Poe you can see quite clearly that he doesn't feel much like crooning homage to America, and it's no wonder when you look at how he suffered in this supposed land of plenty—in his unstinting poverty and daily drudgery, hyperaware of his own genius and ability, repeatedly passed over for literary awards and jobs that were beneath him, always unable to start the magazine he'd intensely dreamed of, Poe must have felt that America had let him down, that the notion of American promise did not apply to him. He despised the national worship of money; in his essay "The Philosophy of Furniture," he laments that Americans yearn for a large "purse" while not giving a damn about the size of their "soul." He tended to see his

fellow countrymen as not very bright, as easily, eagerly bamboozled, willing to lionize writers who didn't deserve it, such as Longfellow, about whom Poe penned an annihilating critique. Unlike the darling Longfellow, Poe was orphaned in more ways than one, the quintessential outcast, at home nowhere—and every outcast feels resentment at last.

In *Waiting for the End* (1964), Leslie Fiedler wrote of Poe: “He is at once too banal and too unique, too decadent and too revolutionary, too vulgar and too subtle, all of which is to say, too American, for us to bear,” and there, I think, Fiedler goes one adjective too many.¹⁷ In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler sees Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* as “the archetypal American story” that would have formidable effects on both *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*.¹⁸ But Fiedler calls *Arthur Gordon Pym* “the private world of his own tortured psyche,” and therein lies the trouble with seeing it as archetypically American: *private* and *tortured* are not American qualities.¹⁹

Luminous others disagree. H. L. Mencken referred to Poe as “this most potent and original of Americans.”²⁰ Van Wyck Brooks was convinced that Poe had birthed an entirely new American literature, wholly apart from Washington Irving's efforts. (Indeed, it's difficult to take *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* seriously after being jolted and convulsed by the demonic energies of Poe.) About Poe's status as an American, William Carlos Williams wrote: “He was the astounding, inconceivable growth of his locality. Gape at him they did, and he at them in amazement. Afterward with mutual hatred; he in disgust, they in mistrust. It is only that which is under your nose which seems inexplicable”—and yet earlier in the essay Williams can't help admitting that Poe's “doctrine” was essentially “anti-American” in its ferocious pessimism.²¹

Like “Kafkaesque,” the term “existential” is bandied about willy-nilly to describe everything from warfare to a rained-on picnic, but Poe is more deserving than most of the tag because his anomic vision results from an outsider's status, from his denied ambitions, from his faithlessness in cultural structures, and from America's rescinded promise of happiness. Put another way: the awful plight of Poe's life and art is partly social, and in that regard he's as American as Dreiser. In some of the most refulgent lines ever set down about Poe, Williams said this:

He is American, understandable by a simple exercise of reason; a light in the morass—which *must* appear eerie, even to himself, by force of terrific contrast, an isolation that would naturally lead to drunkenness and death, logically and simply—by despair, as the very final evidence of a too fine seriousness and devotion.²²

Leslie Fiedler is not alone in seeing Poe the myth as Poe's best creation, but he perhaps overestimates the agency Poe exerted in his own literary immortality.

Choosing an enemy for a biographer (a vitriolic hack with a taste for sensation whose name, Rufus Griswold, perfectly captures the creep he was), concocting stories about himself that aspired to Byronic gallantry and excitation, melodramatizing his own situation (Poe's letters to his family members, in the 1830s especially, are freshets of self-pity about perishing of illness, poverty, or heartache), even drinking in part because he suspected readers wanted their writers outcast and unstrung—all this overlooks how unstrung and outcast Poe actually was. Not to say that he gave no thought to posterity, only that someone continually crushed in the molars of melancholy, someone so persistently pestled by circumstance, doesn't have the gumption to manipulate the levers of fame-making. He's mostly trying just to survive the day.

It's certainly fitting that a writer who made death his muse would himself suffer a death that would help make him a myth. Ask death to be your Muse and she responds by becoming your Siren. We still have trouble saying for sure how Poe died. In October 1849, at only forty years of age, he was found whiskey-soaked and insensate in a Baltimore tavern dressed horrendously in clothes that were not his. The fullest account of Poe's baffling end is given in *Midnight Dreary* (1998) by John Evangelist Walsh: a model of research, it eventually morphs into a circus of extrapolation (in short, Walsh thinks Poe was murdered by his wealthy fiancée's three brothers). Poe would have ascended into his posthumous literary glow without this unclear and sickening fate, but as he understood better than most, all the world loves an enigma. In American history, only JFK's assassination has more competing, and nuttier, theories than the demise of Poe.

Whitman felt the "indescribable magnetism" of Poe's myth (and Whitman was the only major presence at the ceremony to give Poe's grave a headstone, an unforgivable twenty-six years after his death—America has a shameful track record of treating its writers poorly, but nowhere is that track record more shameful than in the neglect of Edgar Poe).²³ The true magnetism of Poe, naturally, is generated by the work, a wand which transforms the quotidian into the wondrous, the mundane into the macabre, or as Poe himself once expressed it: "the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque; the fearful colored into the horrible; the witty exaggerated into the burlesque; the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical."

He eventually resented being known as the cartoonish author of "The Raven," and for good reason: in its gimmickry and plumed metaphors, the poem lives several zip codes over from his best work. There have been vociferous claims made for his originality—by Mencken, by Wilson, by Williams—and yet Poe was, to be a gentleman about it, a great borrower of others' ideas. He also borrowed tropes from the German and British Gothic traditions in making a challenge to all that was knowable and trusted in the world, and in showing that our lives will not be denuded of the strange just because science has explained away the supernatural. His poem "Sonnet—to Science" follows Keats in damning the imagination-killing materialism of the scientific worldview.

To one extent or another, all writers are robbers, and so what's indisputable about him is this: without an understanding of Poe—his methods, his meanings, his dazzling magic—there is simply no complete understanding of American literature. Williams maintained that “in him American literature is anchored, in him alone, on solid ground,” and Edmund Wilson spoke of “the masterpieces excreted like precious stones by the subterranean chemistry of his mind” —there's no quarrelling with that, with either the quality of the chemistry or with the torque of the mind.²⁴

Edgar Poe was the saddest writer who ever lived. That enormous sadness is, ultimately and unforgettably, what you see in S. W. Hartshorn's 1848 daguerreotype. We can't wish that it had been any other way unless we're willing to admit that we can go without his genius. He transformed the tremors of his beaten soul, the storm and stress of his psyche, into an exuberant literature of the night, a disturbed chronicle of those innermost journeys that both tempt and repel us. Doyen of diabolism, he understood that “the world of our sad Humanity may assume the semblance of a Hell.” About the “demon in my view” and his question “what demon has tempted me here?” Those are our demons, too, our own devilish temptations. In his conjuring of the irrationalism that would blitz the twentieth century, Poe was our first truly modern sage, our seer of the absurd. For that reason we remain in need of him—we require his darkling truths and the witness he gave to those ancient, unspoken urges in us.

NOTES

1. W. H. Auden, *Prose: Volume III, 1949–1955*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 222.
2. Richard Wilbur, *Responses: Prose Pieces, 1953–1976* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 44.
3. T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 35. Henry James, “Comments,” in Eric W. Carlson, ed., *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism Since 1829* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 66.
4. William Dean Howells, *Literary Friends and Acquaintance: A Personal Retrospect of American Authorship*, ed. David F. Hiatt and Edwin H. Cady (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 58.
5. Harold Bloom, ed., *The Tales of Poe* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 12.
6. Robert Louis Stevenson, “Literature,” *Academy*, January 2, 1875, 1.
7. Bloom, ed., *Tales of Poe*, 8.
8. Wilbur, *Responses*, 43.
9. Wilbur, *Responses*, 58.
10. D. H. Lawrence, “Edgar Allan Poe,” in Carlson, ed., *Recognition*, 110.
11. Edmund Wilson, *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1950), 391.
12. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 428.
13. Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 428.
14. Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 430.

15. Wilbur, *Responses*, 50-51.
16. William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (1956; reprinted, New York: New Directions, 2009), 216.
17. Leslie Fiedler, *Waiting for the End* (New York: Stein and Day, 1964), 199.
18. Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 393.
19. Fiedler, *Love and Death*, 393.
20. H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (1949; reprinted, New York: Vintage, 1982), 481.
21. Williams, *In the American Grain*, 226.
22. Williams, *In the American Grain*, 222.
23. Walt Whitman, "Edgar Poe's Significance," in Carlson, ed., *Recognition*, 74.
24. Williams, *In the American Grain*, 226; Wilson, *Classics and Commercials*, 113.