

THE LIFE AND ART OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

FEW authors present such different aspects to different minds and different moods as does Edgar Allan Poe. According to the angle of vision, he appears as a man of exalted genius or as a man of depraved imagination. But the most unsympathetic must admit that he was an extraordinary artist, and the most sympathetic must admit that his art sometimes deteriorates into artistry—that is to say, into mannerisms and tricks for spectacular effect. W. Robertson Nicoll has said that Poe is “one of the most illusive and evasive creatures in literary history.” Only an “illusive and evasive” creature could excite so much controversy and so many contrary opinions. Hardly any other English-speaking writer of the nineteenth century has been so dear to the hearts of those people who mistake controversy for criticism and literary gossip for literary appreciation. The controversies about Poe would fill a library of respectable size, and they include nearly everything that concerns his life, his character, and his work.

There have been controversies about the year of his birth, though that is now settled—1809; and hot controversies about the place of his birth, whether Baltimore or Boston, which, according to the manner of such debates, continued after it had been established by all the rules of evidence that he was born in Boston. His originality has been challenged, and there is grim irony in that, because he set an inordinate value on originality and was himself a veritable weasel in ferreting out literary plagiarisms; attempts have been made to prove that his peculiar poetic manner was “lifted” bodily from a forgotten Georgian versifier.

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His character has been dissected and anatomized in a manner that few characters could bear and remain anything worth calling character. He has been pronounced an habitual drunkard, a confirmed drug fiend, a libertine, and even a thief—this last dreadful charge because extreme poverty sometimes prevented him from repaying small loans of money, and because, it is said, he once failed to return a borrowed book—which, by the way, he did return; if all authors were pilloried for that last-named offense, authorship would be in even worse repute than it is. For a long time his name was excluded from the New York Hall of Fame because of his alleged bad habits—which was scarcely logical even if all the charges had been proved, for this professes to be, not a Hall of Morality, but a Hall of *Fame*, and, as some one pertinently asked, "If Edgar Allan Poe is not famous, who is?" On the other hand, his defenders have been correspondingly vehement and extravagant, not content to set him forth as an ordinarily honest and decent man, but seeking to establish him as a sort of libeled archangel. If departed spirits pray, poor Poe has cause to pray earnestly for deliverance from both friends and foes.

He spent much of his stormy life in quarrel and controversy, and from his death to the present time he has been the subject of controversy. He made Rufus W. Griswold his literary executor. Griswold was a litterateur whom Poe had attacked pretty severely, but Poe seemed to think that they were reconciled before his death, and that Griswold was his friend. But he reckoned without his Griswold. Apparently Griswold was not a man who easily forgave, and probably he sincerely disapproved of Poe's character. It was, perhaps, allowable for Griswold to disapprove of Poe's character, but to disapprove so hotly and at the same time to consent to be his official biographer and ostensibly

his chosen executor—this was hardly excusable. Moreover, Griswold was either too careless or too unintelligent to get his facts straight. And so the first biography of Poe was a jumble of misinformation and misinterpretation. Poor Poe was as unfortunate in his official biographer as in nearly everything else in his feverish and ill-regulated life.

For the life of Poe is the record of the disaster that must follow the neglect of self-control. It was not debauchery which destroyed Poe. Such debauchery as there was was an effect rather than a cause. He drank too much, but even a little would have been too much for one of his excitable nature, and Poe drank more than a little. There would be months and even years of abstinence, but again he would succumb to drink from unhappiness, and alas! sometimes from insufficient nourishment, for it may cost less money to get drunk than to eat enough. Sometimes he took drugs, and he was just the sort of man who should have preferred to die, to go insane, to do anything rather than touch an opiate. Narcotics are bad for anybody, but ruinous to one who feels the need of them as much as did Poe. He was indiscreet in his relationships with women, but—and this should be emphasized—all the fine-tooth combing of his career has failed to show that he was immoral in his relationships with women. To deny that Poe was dissipated is to speak falsely, but to assert that his misery was the direct result of dissipation is to confuse cause and effect. His misery was the cause of his dissipation, and both were the results of undirected energies and an undirected life.

His tempestuous nature needed an excessive amount of discipline, and he got very little discipline. That, as I see it, is the supreme tragedy in the character of Poe. The more one sees of life, the more clearly must he realize that much of its stormiest tragedy, as well as its mere ineffectuality, is

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due to lack of training, lack of discipline, lack of control. Men hold God and Fate responsible for that over which God never has and never will assume responsibility, the training and directing of the powers that He gave. Common charity inspires pity for the intense and feverish temperament which was Poe's inheritance, not his fault, and the same pity for all the unfortunate lack of wise care, which, again, was not his fault but his misfortune. But it would be mere sentimentality to excuse Poe himself from all responsibility, for he refused to accept the opportunities when they were offered. At the University of Virginia, and later at West Point Academy, there was proffered just what he needed, mental training and discipline of character, and he wilfully flung it all away, broke bounds, and ran his own wild course whither it led him. For that Poe must stand judgment in the calm wisdom of men.

Poe's father was, of course, a member of the distinguished Baltimore family, but a ne'er-do-weel son of a father who disinherited him for his escapades, which culminated in his going on the stage. This David Poe married an English actress, a woman of fine character and much charm, but pursuing a profession which in those early days in America had small reward and less honor attaching to it. Three children were born of this marriage, and they were all virtually babies when their parents died. The orphans were scattered, and Edgar was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. John Allan of Richmond, Virginia, who gave him their surname for a middle name. Mr. Allan was a man of wealth, in the tobacco business on a large scale, and indulged the child in many things, including travel, and five years in an English school, where the lad got the impressions he afterward used in describing the school of "William Wilson." In view of the sequel, it was careless, if not worse, for Mr.

Allan to set the six-year-old child on the table to pledge the health of guests in wine; and then one remembers how, when Edgar was yet younger, a babe in arms, the old Welsh nurse, who attended the actor's children in their garret home, would quiet them in their restlessness by feeding them bread soaked in gin.

On his return to America the boy completed his preparation for college, at school and with private tutors, and at the age of seventeen he entered the University of Virginia. Here, by cleverness rather than industry, he stood well in Latin and French, and here he drank, as all Virginia students drank in 1826, but, it is explicitly stated, not more. And here he gambled, as most students gambled then, but much more. So much more that Mr. Allan was outraged, took him from college, and put him in his office. Here, in confinement and unhappiness, Edgar broke down in health. Then he left Mr. Allan's home and became a wanderer, friendless and practically penniless. He went to Boston, inveigled a young printer into publishing a book by him, a book of poems, his first, things in the gloomy manner of Byron. Then he enlisted in the army under the name of Edgar A. Perry, served for about two years, rose to the rank of sergeant-major, procured his release through Mr. Allan, and on the same gentleman's rather cold recommendation was appointed a cadet at West Point, grew weary of that, and by deliberate neglect of duty got himself court-martialed and dismissed. Amid all these adventures he contrived to get two other books of poems published.

He was now quite alone in the world, for Mrs. Allan had died, and Mr. Allan had married again and was done with the headstrong youth. Poe went to Baltimore, and here he wrote his first story, in competition for a hundred-dollar prize offered by the "Saturday Visiter." The story was "A

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Manuscript Found in a Bottle," and it won the prize. Probably none of the contestants needed the money so much, for Poe was in rags and all but starved. But he had found his profession—literature. He joined the staff of "The Southern Messenger," published at Richmond. From Richmond he went to Philadelphia, where he was editor, first of Burton's "Gentleman's Magazine," and afterward of "Graham's Magazine," which under his management became the best known literary journal of the day in America. From Philadelphia he went to New York and was on the staff of the "Evening Mirror," and later of the "Broadway Journal." For these various papers he wrote the great mass of his stories and essays, but the money returns were small, and when his contributed articles were collected into books, the books did not sell.

Poe made many enemies, the worst of whom was himself. He had the irritability of genius to an exaggerated degree, and most of his business arrangements broke up in violent quarrels. He was proud, imperious, quick to anger, moody, reserved, and he had the dreadful fault of looking for the cause of his unhappiness everywhere except in himself. He blamed his circumstances, his fate, his associates, but not himself, to whom chiefly his misfortunes were due. He was one of the most brilliant men of his generation, and he knew it too well, and had a contempt for men of duller minds. The quality of the greatest of all genius he entirely lacked,—the humility of genius. And he lacked another important quality, humor—that humor which enables a man to laugh at himself, and sometimes by laughter to produce a better self. If one cannot have the grace of God in his heart, he should try for a sense of humor.

This lack of geniality, of humor, and of sweet humanity is betrayed in Poe's writings. They reveal an extraordinary

brain and a startling imagination, but they do not disclose a personality. The charm of literature is chiefly the result of charming personality, and Poe's writings, with all their power and fascination, lack charm. It is at this point that Hawthorne and Stevenson, with whom it is so natural to compare him, surpass him. The writings of those men discover nothing more delightful than themselves. The personality of Hawthorne was somber, but gentle, tender, and loving; the personality of Stevenson was gallant, gay, debonair, loving and lovable. But in Poe's writings no such personality is encountered.

With all of this, however, there was another side to Poe, practically never betrayed in his writings, and seldom shown in his life, to men, though often to women. Mrs. Francis Sargent Osgood, who knew him well, wrote thus of him: "I have never seen him otherwise than gentle, generous, well bred, and fastidiously refined. To a sensitive and delicately nurtured woman there was a peculiar and irresistible charm in the chivalric, graceful, and almost tender reverence with which he invariably approached all women who won his respect. It was this which first commanded and always retained my regard for him."

There were two women who saw more of this side of Poe, and saw it more constantly, than did any others: one was his wife, and the other was—let the comic paragraphers take note—his mother-in-law. The devotion of these three was the most beautiful and touching thing in Poe's life, and also one of the saddest, because of the women's forbearance with poverty, and because of the long and cruel illness and early death of the wife.

If we are to believe a rather nebulous story, Poe was very much in love with a girl named Mary who lived in Baltimore. This was just after he had been dismissed from

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West Point. There was a quarrel, and Poe wrote some bitter Byronic verses upon woman's fickleness, entitled them "To Mary," and published them in a Baltimore paper; whereupon Mary's uncle, an elderly gentleman, undertook to hold Poe to account; whereupon Poe thrashed the old gentleman, and threw the whip at Mary's feet with a truly Byronic gesture of scorn. But previous to these tropical proceedings, and while the course of true love was running fairly smooth, Poe used to write the customary notes to Mary, and send them by his little cousin, Virginia Clemm, a beautiful child, ten years old.

Virginia, at any rate, is entirely authentic, whether the Byronic and theatrical story of Mary is or not. Virginia was the child of Mrs. Maria Clemm, a sister of Poe's father. This lady was in straitened circumstances, and to support herself and her little daughter took in lodgers and did dressmaking. But Mrs. Clemm was not too poor to give a home to her impoverished young nephew, and so the young man of twenty-odd and the little girl were under the same roof. When Virginia was twelve years old Poe took out a license to marry her. This was violently opposed by a male relative, but fully consented to by Mrs. Clemm herself. It is uncertain whether a marriage took place at that time, but two years later, when Virginia was fourteen, they were publicly married in Richmond, Poe being then twenty-seven years of age. From that time until Virginia's death, these three lived together in beautiful devotion, though in such stress of poverty that at intervals Mrs. Clemm had to take boarders to keep the wolf from the door. One night, when they were living in Philadelphia, Virginia while singing burst a blood-vessel and all but died. She partly recovered, but remained an invalid, watched over by her mother and husband for the rest of her broken life, in Philadelphia,

in New York, and in the little cottage at Fordham,—the little cottage that has become so famous,—where she finally died.

Only a little less famous than the cottage is the letter in which Poe related to a correspondent the tragedy and all that it meant to him—a statement not at all exaggerated, as the evidence goes to show. It was written less than a year after Virginia's death, and a little over a year before Poe's own death, a worn-out and broken man: "Six years ago, a wife whom I loved as no man ever loved before, ruptured a blood-vessel in singing. Her life was despaired of. I took leave of her forever and underwent all the agonies of her death. She recovered partially, and I again hoped. At the end of a year the vessel broke again. I went through precisely the same scene. . . . Then again—again—and then once again, at varying intervals. Each time I felt all the agonies of her death—and at each accession of the disease I loved her more purely and clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity. But I am constitutionally sensitive—nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank—God only knows how often or how much. As a matter of course, my enemies referred the insanity to the drink, rather than the drink to the insanity."

Thus Poe's own experience brought home to him what he held to be the most melancholy and at the same time the most poetic of things. In his essay on "The Philosophy of Composition" he had written, "The death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." This had been the theme of much of his best poetry and many of his best tales—"The Raven," "Ulalume," "Lenore," "Annabel Lee," "To Helen," "Ligeia," "Berenice,"

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“Eleonora,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and others. Most of these were written before Virginia’s death.

The lady who haunted the waking dream of Poe was not his wife, was not any actual woman who had ever been, but was an ideal, a Platonic idea, though probably the idea was suggested to his intense and tenacious imagination by an experience of his boyhood. Here is the story as told by others: “While at the academy in Richmond, he one day accompanied a school-mate to his home, where he saw for the first time Mrs. H. S. [really Mrs. Jane Stith Stanard], the mother of his young friend. This lady, on entering the room, took his hand and spoke some gentle and gracious words of welcome which so affected the sensitive heart of the orphan boy as to deprive him of the power of speech, and for a time almost of consciousness itself. He returned home in a dream, with but one thought, one hope in life—to hear again the sweet and gracious words that had made the world so beautiful to him. . . . The lady afterward became a confidante of all of his boyish sorrows. . . . She died, and for months after her decease it was his habit to visit nightly the cemetery where the object of his boyish idolatry was entombed.”

Thus to this excitable boy, at the most impressionable of ages (he was fourteen), came the experience which is reflected in so much of his writing, beauty and death, a woman’s soul and the tomb. For his theme is not love, warm and life-giving, but the death of the loved one; and yet so often with the intimation that death does not and cannot “dissever the soul from the soul” of the loved object. One of Poe’s editors goes so far as to call this the “dominant idea” in Poe’s work,—the idea of “Ligeia,”—the idea that the human spirit may remain in the world after death.

It is not religion, it is not the Christian’s hope of immor-

tality. It is purely psychic, and it is connected with all the moldy circumstances of the grave, with all the shiver of ghosts, with all the eeriness of the graveyard, of moon mists, of sheeted forms, and the hushed tones with which people recite strange and unlawful things after the clock has tolled midnight. The haunting terror in Poe's tales has to do, not with the spiritual mystery of death, but merely with the effect on mortal mind of mortal's contact with the phenomenon of death. He sends the icy currents down our spines, not with descriptions of awesome objects, but with the effect of these on the human mind. None, unless it is Maupassant, has described fear so fearfully.

The "effect" was the thing which absorbed Poe in literature, because he was pure artist and regarded it as the purpose of art to produce certain calculated effects on spectators and auditors. He was a self-conscious artist—that is to say, he was a man, like his master Coleridge, with clearly defined theories as to how art should be expressed. As magazine editor and critic he had occasion to write numerous reviews of contemporary authors, including many in America; and while some things that he wrote were ill-judged, some ill-tempered, some too lavish of praise, some too emphatic in condemnation, the general effect of his critical writings was good for America in the 1830's and '40's.

From Poe more than from any other one person, America learned the important lesson that literature is a fine art, and that its main purpose is to give pleasure. Poe vehemently opposed the idea current in America, and to some extent in England, that literature should be didactic, that it should have for its main purpose a lesson, intellectual or moral.

Poe was right, even though we admit that he pushed his theory too far. America was flooded with books of useful information, which were usually books of useless misinfor-

mation, and books of moral teaching written by men so intent on a good moral that they could not tell the truth. It would have been a dreadful thing in the conception of the typical maker of books in America in the first half of the nineteenth century to state the plain fact that George Washington got very angry and cursed one of his generals at Monmouth battle. To record that would have been contrary to good morals, for in this conception of literature and morality, truth and morality had very little to do with each other. The hotter the war on that sort of book-making, the better it is for everybody concerned, and perhaps Poe deserves no more hearty thanks from us than for the service he rendered in calling attention to the fact that it is not the sole purpose of books to teach moral lessons. Equally is it true that when Poe was writing there was almost nothing of pure art in America outside the writings of Washington Irving and Hawthorne.

Poe's error in practice was the result, not so much of his theory, as of his temperament. He might have learned from Hawthorne, whose work he sincerely admired, that it is entirely possible to write as pure artist, and at the same time to clarify the reader's thoughts about the most important of all human business, the business of right living. Hawthorne, like Poe, instinctively perceived that the prime purpose of literature is not to teach moral lessons, but to give that high and grave satisfaction which comes from art. But he also saw that, all other things being equal, that art is greatest which draws its material from the fundamental things of life; that the law of art and the law of truth are the same; that the law of art cannot be different from the law of life on which art is based; and that the law of life is that it is impossible for men to escape the consequences of their deeds. Hawthorne did not create Dimmesdale to admonish

us against adultery, and Donatello to warn us against murder, and Colonel Pyncheon to counsel us against injustice. Hawthorne simply based his art on the eternal and important truths of life, and then he left the readers to do their own moralizing. The inhibitions we get from these cases are entirely a matter of our own applications, of our own consciences attesting the truth of Hawthorne's pictures.

Poe was not interested in the important and eternal truths of life, but rather in some secondary truths, such as the nervous phenomena accompanying physical fear. The editor of the collection of Poe's tales in the "Everyman" edition puts the matter so well that it is useless to try to state it better: "The whole of Poe's imaginative work, his verse as well as prose, . . . is marginal, not central; it comes, not out of the main way of life, but out of the border of existence. Poe gives us experiences that are on the margin of sanity or on the border of unconsciousness."

Hawthorne was also interested in psychic phenomena, and Dimmesdale has mental experiences which would have delighted Poe's imagination had he lived to read the novel. But these psychic phenomena are incidental to a larger and deeper experience that Dimmesdale is having, the experience of a soul lacerated with the consciousness that he has violated his own principle of right, has transgressed the laws of God and man.

Or again, one might compare Poe with Stevenson—say the story of "William Wilson" with the story of "Markheim," both studies in that "other self," that mysterious, importunate, inescapable person who walks with us in all our walking, who haunts our thoughts by day and our dreams by night, who may sometimes announce himself to us as "conscience," *sometimes merely* as "subconscious self," but who, under whatever alias he travels, gives man all the

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evidence he needs that, no matter how much other theology the world has outgrown, it has not outgrown and never can outgrow the truth of the doctrine of hell. Both Poe and Stevenson were interested in the mystery of the subconscious self. But Poe's interest ends with the scientific mystery, whereas Stevenson's interest passes from that to a consideration of the moral aspects of the case, as, for instance, the great and terrible fact that if a man persistently indulges his weaker and baser self, the time must come when he will be entirely possessed by that self, when he will become incapable of doing good, though he may earnestly desire to do good.

The sympathetic reader is entertained by the stories of both Poe and Stevenson, but the effect of Poe's story ends with entertainment, whereas after perusing Stevenson the reader falls to thinking of his own estate, and that pet foible which he has been pampering, and perhaps he shudders, and perhaps he takes a resolution. That is what Aristotle meant by his famous saying that great tragedy "purifies" us by "fear"; but Poe once wrote, in effect, that Aristotle did not know what he was talking about.

Suppose these three men—Hawthorne, Stevenson, and Poe—were going to write stories about a woman who in a sudden fit of rage committed a murder and then fainted. All three would describe with psychological truth and power the sudden metamorphosis of the woman by the mania of anger. Then Hawthorne would in a single phrase, an indirect phrase, let us know that the murderous blow had been struck, not dwelling on the physical fact at all. From that he would pass on to show the sudden reaction in the woman's emotions, so sudden that she fainted. Then he would bring her back to consciousness, and proceed, by the most deliberate narrative, to show how the memory of her crime

never left her throughout the remainder of her life, how her nature was slowly transformed, perhaps a steady degeneration into hopeless moral degradation and ultimate insanity, perhaps (as in the case of Hester Prynne) a slow purification by suffering; and Hawthorne would be sure to let us see that the suffering begotten by this crime was not confined to the committer of the crime, but that others also were involved in the consequences; for, as he himself has said, "Every crime destroys more Edens than our own."

Stevenson would describe the blow vividly and in detail. The sickening sound of the cudgel striking the flesh, then the sprawling limbs of the prostrate body, the contortions, the quivering and twitching nerves as life slowly departed. Then he would show the frenzy of horror in the woman's mind; then her collapse. Then he would bring her to, bewildered, catching pin-point gleams of consciousness, like light coming through a heavy curtain; then slowly—very slowly—she would begin to remember what it was that she had done, all with a sense of unreality, a thought that it was not she, could *not* have been she, who had done this thing; that it was all the delusion of a dream, a hideous nightmare from which she would presently awake. Then there would probably be strange touches of incongruity, a temptation to laugh, an almost irresistible impulse to rush out into the street and shout her crime aloud so that all the world might hear. Other reactions would ensue, and there would be all the agony of concealment, the doom of living the rest of life with the consciousness that there was a skeleton shut up in the closet.

Poe would be less calculable in his mere narrative because he had different narrative styles; therefore he might tell of the blow as vividly as Stevenson, or he might describe it in a plain phrase as dry and matter-of-fact as Defoe's style.

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(The opening paragraphs of "The Gold Bug" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" form an interesting study in contrast: the first is a simple statement introductory to pure narrative, the second is shot through with impressionism introductory to a story of inward experience.) But after the blow had been struck there is little doubt as to how Poe would proceed. The woman would begin to faint; seconds and fractions of seconds would be prolonged like hours, and slowly, stage by stage, Poe would relate what was going on in the woman's brain, as consciousness by degrees grew less and less until there came the blackness of oblivion. Psychically, this prolongation is quite true, for it is a commonplace of life that in moments of supreme excitement time elongates itself, and in the tick of a watch one in great mental agitation will think of more things than he could recall in a normal day. The power of Poe is in depicting these mental states so that they seem entirely true, entirely typical of human minds in distress. But with the last gleam of consciousness, with the lapsing of the woman into oblivion, the story would end. It was that mental process that interested Poe, not the moral experiences that follow the awakening.

But psychics and personality are different things. Poe had extraordinary power of analyzing mental conditions, but practically no power of creating human beings. His admirable stories of crime are based on certain well-defined theories as to how human brains in general work. In one of the best of these, "The Purloined Letter," he has the great detective Dupin explain his method, by the parable of a boy, whom he once knew, who was clever at winning marbles on a rationalized theory of the way different human minds work. Dupin is describing a game called "Even and Odd": "This game is simple and is played with marbles. One player holds in his hand a number of these toys, and de-

mands of another whether that number is even or odd. If the guess is right, the guesser wins one; if wrong, he loses one. The boy to whom I allude won all the marbles of the school. Of course, he had some principle of guessing, and this lay in mere observation and admeasurement of the astuteness of his opponents. For example, an arrant simpleton is his opponent, and, holding up his closed hand, asks, 'Are they even or odd?' Our school-boy replies, 'Odd,' and loses; but upon a second trial he wins, for he then says to himself, 'The simpleton had them even upon the first trial and his amount of cunning is just sufficient to make him have them odd upon the second; I will therefore guess odd.' He guesses odd, and wins. Now, with a simpleton a degree above the first, he would have reasoned thus: 'This fellow finds that in the first instance I guessed odd, and in the second he will propose to himself, upon the first impulse, a simple variation from even to odd as did the first simpleton; but then a second thought will suggest that this is too simple a variation, and finally he will decide upon putting it even as before. I will therefore guess even.' He guesses even, and wins."

This theory of what we might call psychological types is what makes the "detective stories" of Poe the classics that they are, and of course all the world knows that Poe practically invented this type of fiction. His lack of dramatic ability was itself a negative assistant to him in making these stories so excellent, for the best detective stories really have nothing to do with personalized character. We are not in the least interested in the emotions of these puppets of crime and its detection; we are interested only to see the ingenious puzzle worked out, and the admirable Mrs. Anna Katherine Green, and the author of the "Mystery of a Hansom Cab," and all that multitude of public entertainers, have no excuse

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whatever for their attempts to enlist our sympathy in the "hearts" of their marionettes, except it be to pad their stories and make them longer. They are excellent, these authors, so long as they keep to their real trade—puzzle-making; they are preposterous when they invade the precincts of personality. Poe had not the power of creating personalities, and he had too much the instinct of the artist to attempt what he could not do, with the result that his stories of crime, admirable in so many other ways, are also admirable in keeping our undivided attention on the mystery and its solution.

All the cleverness and psychics of Poe did not produce personality,—could not. For a story of crime, it is proper to assume that a mind will work in a certain way, as the boy assumed it in his game of marbles, but the interesting thing about human life is that real people are continually doing the irrational and incalculable thing, the thing suggested not by their reason but by their emotions, and emotion is seldom logical, emotion declines to be typified.

Of course every human being is to a certain degree "a type." Hamlet was a type,—a type of man afflicted with melancholia and hysteria. It was "typical" for Hamlet to meditate suicide, for so melancholiacs do. It was "typical" for Hamlet in moments of excitement to break into "wild and whirling words," for so hysterical people do. But those brief cryptic sentences in which we first hear Prince Hamlet respond to the solitudes of King Claudius ("a little more than kin and less than kind"; "not so, my lord, I am too much i' the sun") are not typical. Those veiled sarcasms, so light, so baffling, so detached, were a part of Hamlet's individuality. And all through the play Hamlet blends individual peculiarities with typical qualities, with the result that he is the most created character in all English literature.

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He is so entirely an individualized human being that we know him just as we know our best friends. We know him so well that we cannot explain him, which is exactly our experience of our friends, unless perhaps they are very simple-minded friends. You can explain a type, but you cannot explain an individual.

Poe's creations are not personalities; they are adumbrations of the processes of the human mind in emotion. This is not said in the way of critical disparagement, but rather as critical exegesis. Poe was not trying for the dramatic in the sense in which "dramatic" means individualization. He was a teller of tales, a practitioner of one of the most ancient of the arts. In the tale, stress is laid on incident; in the dramatic story, on the personalities of those who figure in the incident. Poe's art is the art of Boccaccio, not the art of Balzac.

And if we catch the point of all of this, there is nothing contradictory in the fact that this most emotional of men was also most intellectual and critical. He who was so fond of working out all manner of puzzles, games, "ciphers," committed crimes, etc., had the same curiosity about the mystery of the human brain in excitation.

Even his gospel of art is an intellectualized gospel. A poet like Keats was satisfied with the gospel of art for its own rapturous esthetic sake, but Poe must logically analyze the constituent elements of the arts, and find a metaphysical basis for their effects. His dicta on the short poem and the short story (that long stories and long poems are contradictions in terms, that all true literary art must be art in brief) may not be convincing as abstract theories, but when we read the results in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "Ullalume" we see that the theory in practice could produce some fascinating results.

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Poe's theories, and therefore his practice when that practice is at its best, may all be referred back to his principle of "effect," always a calculation of the reader's reaction to the author's intent. So his ideal was to produce on his reader one single effect in a composition, to strike the note of that effect in the opening paragraph, and then to admit no element that would in any way jar on or diminish that effect. In accordance with this rule he wrote such little masterpieces as "Ligeia," "Silence," "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and many others—prose poems, perfect in atmosphere, rhythm, and unity of impression.

The hardest thing to say about Poe is the thing which I have reserved for the last, a thing which offends some of his devoted admirers, and yet a thing which is surely entirely true,—that, with all his passion for art and all his study of words, he never arrived at that consummate grace of style which makes the greatest masters in verse and prose. Possibly it was because he was so intent on getting his effects that he made the effects sometimes more obvious than artistic; for instance, "The Bells" is a fine medium for elocutionary gymnastics, but hardly a great poem. The onomatopœia is too pronounced—it "hits you in the face"; Tennyson's

"moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees"

is better poetry than all of "The Bells," and yet better poetry than those lines of Tennyson has been written, for, after all is said, these things are tricks. In short, Poe was so intent on his effect that he was sometimes affected, so absorbed in his art that it sometimes became artistry.

There is pathos in the thought of the artistic limitations of Poe's surroundings, limitations which we must believe

reacted on the man's art. The commentators, like Baudelaire in France and Stedman in America, emphasize Poe's esthetic isolation in the America of 1840. That sensitive soul, vowed to one fidelity only,—the religion of beauty,—found more to irritate than to stimulate in his environment. Mr. Stedman patriotically observes that England in the same period was almost as non-esthetic as America, but no Englishman could have been so banished from the realm of beauty as was Poe in America. At least, the Englishman could have escaped from the region of wax flowers and horse-hair furniture and keepsake poetry, and could have gone to see what other Englishmen had done in bygone centuries,—those who built the castles and cathedrals. Poe could not do this. The Englishman lived in a *finished* country, Poe in an unfinished. The crudity of America, which stimulated Walt Whitman, irritated Poe, would have made him dumb had he been less energetic of mind. There was little architecture, less music, no painting, and almost no literature to feed the hungry soul of this aspirant for beauty. There was one thing,—untamed nature,—good for a Byron, not so good for a Poe.

Poe was the apostle of beauty amid crudity, and one must believe that the result is seen in his work, where sometimes the craving is more apparent than the satisfaction. In his descriptions of interiors there is sometimes more display of decoration than good taste; in his phraseology there is more display of learning than delicate allusion; and too often in his style there is more display of rhetoric than illusive charm. Poe's style was frequently a remarkable instrument, but seldom a delicate instrument. If he were writing to-day, it is entirely certain that he would write some things differently, and practically certain that he would write many things better.

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But when all this is said, the fact remains that he did as much, if not more, for beauty in America than any other literary man of his day, certainly more than any one outside of New England. He was a missionary. It probably would have surprised him to hear it said, for one fancies that Poe did not have a great enthusiasm for missionaries, but so his life was planned by a power not his own. And furthermore, the fact remains that in a somewhat restricted region—the region of the prose tale and the region of the psychic thrill—his work surpasses anything that has been done in America. He has taken his place, an assured place, in the admiration of foreigners. When the Frenchman thinks of American literature he thinks first of Poe, and frequently imitates him. When the Englishman thinks of American literature, he also is very likely to think first of Poe. A man of extraordinary endowments whose gifts were never trained, a man of keenest esthetic instincts whose instincts were almost starved, a man who accomplished very great things but who leaves the impression that under more fortunate conditions he would have accomplished yet greater things—such is part of the tragedy of Edgar Allan Poe, in whose life and career nearly everything was tragic.