

The Poe's Last Year

— His final days as mysterious as much of his writing —

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Poe's life was dominated by dying women; his mother died of consumption when he was only two, his stepmother when he was twenty, and his wife, Virginia, died of the same disease and at the same age as his mother. It was these deaths, together with Poe's miserable childhood, that led to such dark and dazzling tales as 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and 'Berenice', although it was with publication of 'The Raven' that the writer finally achieved the recognition of which he dreamed. Success couldn't save him from himself, however, and he was dead by the age of forty, his final days as mysterious as much of his writing.

He was trying to look ahead. In February 1849 he wrote a relatively optimistic letter to his old friend, Frederick Thomas, in which he claimed that 'I shall be a litterateur at least all my life.' In the same period he told Annie Richmond that 'I have not suffered a day to pass without writing from a page to three pages.' By the spring he completed the final version of 'The Bells' and began the poem he entitled 'Annabel Lee'; he was also writing one of his most peculiar stories, 'Hop Frog', about the vengeance wreaked by a dwarfish clown forced to entertain various noble and royal patrons. He also wrote a 'hoaxing' story, 'Von Kempelen and His Discovery', on the possibility of turning lead into gold. He claimed that he had not been drinking and, indeed, that he was 'in better health than I ever knew myself to be'. He and Maria Clemm had taken the cottage at Fordham for another year. There was another reason for confidence. A prospective patron for the Stylus had unexpectedly emerged. A young admirer of Poe, Edward Patterson of Oquawka, Illinois,

had offered to subsidise a literary magazine under Poe's exclusive control. Poe wrote back in enthusiastic terms. All would be well.

But then there came the inevitable reaction. The journals, from which he had been hoping for funds for his contributions, collapsed one after the other. By April Poe had become once more seriously unwell. 'I thought,' Maria Clemm wrote to Annie Richmond, 'he would die several times.' He had relapsed into nervous despair. He reported to Annie that 'my sadness is unaccountable, and this makes me the more sad. Nothing cheers or comforts me. My life seems wasted — the future looks a dreary blank.' It was the necessary response to that period of hysterical turmoil in his twin pursuit of Annie Richmond and Helen Whitman.

Yet once more he travelled down to Richmond, in order to deliver a series of lectures. He may also have welcomed the opportunity of renewing his approaches to Elmira Shelton, the wealthy widow who had once been his belle. And he wanted to find new subscribers for the proposed journal. 'I am now going to Richmond,' he told one correspondent, 'to "see about it".'

So, on 29 June 1849, Maria Clemm saw him off on the steamboat to Philadelphia. His words of farewell, according to her memory, were 'God bless my own darling Muddy do not fear for your Eddy see how good I will be while I am away from you, and will come back to love and comfort you.' He was, essentially, going home. She never saw him again.

He had intended to travel through Philadelphia on his way to Richmond, but a recurrence of his old sickness detained him. He began to drink. His suitcase, which contained two of the lectures he was about to deliver at Richmond, was lost at the railway station. This was not a good sign. The next two or three days are enveloped in haze. Poe told Maria Clemm, in a hysterical letter written a week later from Philadelphia, that 'I have been taken to prison once since I came here for getting drunk; but then I was not. It was about Virginia.' The only problem with his confession is that the available prison records show no evidence of Poe ever being arrested. In turn it has been suggested that he was detained for his own safety; that he was

recognized in court, and acquitted. But the most likely explanation seems to be that Poe was suffering from delirium tremens or some form of paranoiac hallucination.

On the day after his supposed arrest, for example, he called upon an old acquaintance, the engraver and publisher John Sartain, looking 'pale and haggard, with a wild and frightened expression in his eyes.' He pleaded with him for protection and explained that 'some men' were about to assassinate him. Then in his tormented state he entertained the prospect of suicide and asked Sartain for a razor. He wished only to shave off his moustache, however, so that he could escape detection from the possible murderers. Sartain then performed the deed with a pair of scissors. (Here we may entertain a cavil of doubt about Sartain's memory. Poe had a moustache on his arrival in Richmond soon afterwards.)

That evening they made an expedition to the local waterworks by the Schuylkill River where, according to Sartain's account, foolishly they mounted the steps to the reservoir. Poe then confided to him his visions, or hallucinations, while incarcerated in the Philadelphia jail. They included the sight of Maria Clemm being frightfully mutilated. He went into a 'sort of convulsion', and Sartain had to help him carefully down the steep steps to safety.

Poe stayed with his protector for two or three nights, and on the second morning he was recovered sufficiently to leave the house unaccompanied. On his return he confided that his recent delusions were 'created by his own excited imagination'. Sartain may have already come to that conclusion. A few days later Poe wrote to Maria Clemm, complaining that 'I have been so ill — have had the cholera, or spasms quite as bad.' He asked her to come to him immediately on receipt of the letter, with the ominous warning that 'we can but die together. It is no use to reason with me now; I must die.' He sent the letter to the care of Sarah Anne Lewis, in Brooklyn, but Mrs Lewis wisely did not pass it on to Maria Clemm. Mrs Clemm, meanwhile, fretted and worried about poor Eddy.

Poe was still ill and impoverished. He visited a Philadelphia reporter,

George Lippard, in his offices. He was wearing only one shoe. He had no money, and had not eaten. He said that he had no friends, having conveniently forgotten about Sartain. Lippard quickly raised some money from sympathetic local publishers, and Poe finally scraped together the fare to make his way to Richmond.

He found his suitcase at the railway station; but, to his dismay, it had been opened and his lectures stolen. It is not clear what thief would have been interested in Poe's lucubrations on the state of American poetry.

Richmond had been his destination all along, but he arrived much later than he expected. The whole experience in Philadelphia became for him a phantasmagoria of suffering, brought on by what he described as 'mania-a-potu' or alcoholic madness. It is the first indication that he realised the nature of his true condition. The sequence of events in Philadelphia is not at all clear, and it is not wise to take the later recollections of Sartain or of Lippard at face value. There is always much myth-making in stories of Poe. That he did face some kind of crisis, however, is not in doubt. Lippard later recalled that, on their leave-taking at Philadelphia, 'there was in his voice, look and manner something of a Presentment that his strange and stormy life was near its close'. This is known as the benefit of hindsight.

As soon as Poe arrived in Richmond he wrote to Maria Clemm, explaining that for the last weeks 'your poor Eddy has scarcely drawn a breath except of intense agony'. He added towards the end that 'my clothes are so horrible, and I am so ill'. Then five days later, he seems to have recovered his spirits. He was in better health and wrote to Maria Clemm that 'all may yet go well. I will put forth all my energies.' He had the most extraordinary powers of recuperation — or it may be that the wild alterations in his moods (and in his physical well-being) had more to do with words than with realities. He took lodgings in the Swan Tavern, and paid calls upon old friends and acquaintances. He renewed his ties with his sister, Rosalie, with whom he had previously lost contact. And he began earning money by lecturing. He was, in fact, something of a public figure. 'Mr Poe is a native of this city

and was reared in our midst,' one newspaper reported, '... he reappears among us with increased reputation, and a strong claim upon public attention.' He reported to Maria Clemm, in August, that 'I never was received with so much enthusiasm.'

There are several descriptions of him in Richmond, generally of a contrary quality. To one contemporary he seemed 'invariably cheeful, and frequently playful in mood'. To another his mouth displayed 'firmness mingled with an element of scorn and discontent'. In general he was, when sober, cordial and courteous; he seemed rarely to smile, but to exercise an overwhelming self-control. There was 'much sadness in the intonation of the voice'. There were times when he lapsed into old habits. On one occasion he was taken so ill from excessive consumption of alcohol that he had to be nursed by friends. It was said by a Richmond contemporary that for some days 'his life was in imminent danger' and that it was the opinion of his doctors that 'another such attack would prove fatal'. He is supposed to have replied that 'if people would not tempt him, he would not fall'. Under the circumstances, it was not perhaps the most convincing response. He spent some time in the offices of the Richmond Examiner, however, where he was surrounded by convivial spirits who might indeed have 'tempted' him. Mint-julep was a favourite drink in Richmond.

He was sturdy enough, however, to renew his advances towards Elmira Shelton. He called upon her several times and by the summer there were widespread rumours that he had become engaged to her. One contemporary reported, at a later date, that 'the lady was a widow, of wealth and beauty, who was an old flame of his'. But the path of true love is not often smooth. Two of Mrs Shelton's children apparently opposed the match, and her dead husband had bequeathed his estate to her on condition that she did not remarry. Poe's intentions were also not entirely clear. He wrote a letter to Maria Clemm in which he suggested that she leave Fordham and remove herself to Richmond. And he added that 'I want to live near Annie ... Do not tell me anything about Annie — I cannot bear to hear it now — unless you can tell me that Mr R. is dead.' So on the brink of an engagement with Elmira Shelton he was still

expressing his devotion to another woman. Three weeks later he had softened somewhat towards Mrs Shelton. 'I think she loves me more devotedly than any one I ever knew,' he wrote to Maria Clemm, '& I cannot help loving her in return. Nothing is yet definitely settled.' Four days later, on 22 September an engagement was tentatively envisaged. On the same day Elmira Shelton wrote to Maria Clemm explaining that 'I am fully prepared to love you, and I do sincerely hope that our spirits may be congenial.' She assured her that Poe was 'sober, temperate, moral, & much beloved'. So he had made a considerable effort to reassure his new innamorata. On the same day, too, it was reported that he had joined the local temperance society.

He was invited to lecture on 'The Poetic Principle', two days later, and Mrs Shelton sat in the front row before his lectern. A contemporary noted 'her straight features, high forehead and cold expression of countenance ... a sensible, practical woman, the reverse of a poet's ideal'. And so it proved. Mrs Shelton said later, when questioned about the alleged affair, that 'I was not engaged to Poe when he left here, but there was a partial understanding, but I do not think I should have married him under any circumstances.' As in all matters concerning Poe, the stories are convoluted and difficult to unravel.

There was another task to which he had to attend. A piano manufacturer from Philadelphia, John Loud, had offered Poe one hundred dollars for the task of editing a volume of his wife's poems. As Poe had written to Maria Clemm at the time, 'Of course, I accepted his offer.' So he was planning to leave Richmond for a while, to complete this remunerative but no doubt wearisome task. He calculated that it would take him three days. He also wished to travel on to New York, where he would make preparations for his new literary magazine.

Two evenings before he left Richmond he visited some old friends, the Talleys, to whom he expressed himself confident and hopeful. He declared that 'the last few weeks in the society of his old and new friends had been the happiest that he had known for many years' and that he believed he was about to 'leave behind all the trouble and vexation of his past life'. Susan Talley

had a postscript to this cheerful meeting. 'He was the last of the party to leave the house. We were standing on the portico, and after going a few steps he paused, turned, and again lifted his hat, in a last adieu. At the moment, a brilliant meteor appeared in the sky directly over his head, and vanished in the east.'

On the following evening, the last before his departure, he visited Elmira Shelton. At a later date she wrote to Maria Clemm explaining that 'he was very sad, and complained of being quite sick. I felt his pulse, and found he had considerable fever.' Mrs Shelton believed that he was too ill to travel the next day but, to her chagrin and surprise, she discovered that he had indeed taken the steamboat to Baltimore. He was beginning the fateful journey that would end in his death, as related in the first chapter of this book. He was found, six days later, slumped in a tavern in Baltimore. No one knew where he had been, or what he had done. Had he been wandering, dazed, through the city? Had he been enlisted for the purposes of vote-rigging in a city notorious for its political chicanery? Had he suffered from a tumour of the brain? Had he simply drunk himself into oblivion? It is as tormenting a mystery as any to be found in his tales. He died in a hospital, on Sunday, 7 October 1849, a sad and beleaguered end to an unhappy and harassed life. He was forty years old.

On the day after his burial Maria Clemm wrote to Mrs Richmond, 'ANNIE, my Eddy is dead. He died in Baltimore yesterday. Annie! Pray for me, your desolate friend. My senses will leave me.'

She may have been following Poe's stated wishes when she left the work of collecting Poe's papers to Rufus Griswold, but the decision had profound consequences for Poe's posthumous reputation. Griswold composed a memoir, as a preface to the third volume of Poe's works, which was part slander and part abuse. The tone had been set in Griswold's obituary of Poe, published the day after the funeral, in which he stated that his death 'will startle many, but few will be grieved by it ... he had few or no friends'. The vituperation of the memoir itself was such that it provoked several rejoinders, but the libels against Poe's name became common currency for the rest of the

nineteenth century.

Charles Baudelaire once remarked that 'this death was almost a suicide, a suicide prepared for a long time'. In truth Poe believed himself to have been marked out by an unlucky destiny from the day of his birth. He had been well versed, from his early days, in what he once called 'the iron clasped volume of Despair'. In one of his earliest stories, 'MS Found in a Bottle', his narrator had written that 'It is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge — some never to be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction.' Poe was fated to die in ignominy. He was fated to die raving. He once said that 'I have often thought I could distinctly hear the sound of the darkness as it stole over the horizon.' That darkness was always rushing towards him.

Maria Clemm settled with the Richmonds for some time, and then became a guest in other sympathetic households; it is clear, however, that she sometimes wore out her welcome. Eventually she found a last refuge in the 'Church Home and Infirmary' at Baltimore. Poe's reputation continued to grow in the years immediately after his death, especially in England and in France. He profoundly affected Verlaine and Rimbaud; Mallarme and Baudelaire both translated 'The Raven' in homage to an American poet who in certain respects seemed a precursor of European Romanticism and in particular to be the harbinger of Symbolism and of Surrealism. Baudelaire declared that, on reading Poe's poems and stories, he had found 'not simply certain subjects, which I had dreamed of, but sentences which I had thought out, written by him twenty years before'. Rémy de Gourmont declared, in fact, that Poe belonged to French rather than to American literature. Valery told Gide that 'Poe is the only impeccable writer. He is never mistaken.'

Tennyson described him as 'the most original genius that America has produced', worthy to stand beside Catullus and Heine. Thomas Hardy considered him to be 'the first to realise in full the possibility of the English language', and Yeats believed that he was 'certainly the greatest of American poets'. The science fiction works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells are heavily indebted to him, and Arthur Conan Doyle paid tribute to Poe's mastery of the

detective genre. Nietzsche and Kafka both honoured him, and glimpsed in his sad career the outline of their own suffering souls. He was admired by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Joseph Conrad, and James Joyce, who saw in him the seeds of modern literature. The orphan, in the end, found his true family.

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