

Edgar Allan Poe

Earl C. Davis

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I approach this subject with a certain sense of modesty such as, on theoretical grounds at least, the ordinary person should feel when coming into the presence of such a genius as Edgar Allan Poe was. But my sense of modesty is not so sharp and self-assertive as modesty should be, because, like most humans, I cling tenaciously to that most exasperating and most delightful pastime of managing other peoples' lives for them. However blundering and foolish we are in managing our own minds and lives, when we come to the task of estimating that of another, whether it be in his long or his short suits, we inevitably feel that we speak with the authority of an expert. Realizing full well his strengths and his limitations, we at once become competent to declare not only what was, and what was not, but we are also quite as enlightened as to what should not have been and what should have been. We are able to point out with unquestionable exactness just where the mistakes and errors of life are made by other men, and are sure that we could improve mightily on the things that they did. Fortunately for us we are never called upon to make good the assertions of our capacity to live other lives. Hence it is with less of modesty and fear that we presume to express our opinions of the life of another. In such a case as the one in hand, when we are at the safe distance of one hundred years from the date of birth, and sixty years from the date of his death. We not only have the advantage of considerable perspective, but we also have the great advantage of being able to view the life as a complete whole. Poe never had that opportunity. He had to take things piecemeal. Then we do have to fear the contradictions of the unexpected. In the face of all these advantages, our modesty recedes, and our complacent sense of capacity to estimate and to judge asserts itself.

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<sup>1</sup> This manuscript can be dated by the reference to it being written sixty years after Edgar Allan Poe's death in 1849.

To be sure we are somewhat abashed by the fact that Poe has always been regarded as a genius, but why should a living plodder fear to approach life of a dead genius? We are not to be overcome by such absurd considerations as that. Yet in spite of all our self-assurance, when we actually come near the spot in history where Poe lived, and poured forth the cryings of his soul, we are arrested by the light of the flame that burns and does not consume the bush. Somehow we feel that we are on holy ground.

It is the common thing nowadays to study the life of a person from what is called the psychological point of view. This means simply that instead of narrating the objective and obvious facts of his life, we attempt, by the power of enlightened sympathetic imagination, we try to enter into the spirit of his life, try to understand the great thoughts and purposes, the passions and limitations that made him what he was, and caused him to produce what he did. No one can begin to touch the hem of Poe's garment until he is able to break through the facts and get a glimpse of that delicate, hungering weather-beaten spirit, tossed back and forth for a period of forty years between the hell of the flesh and a heaven of a wild and romantic idealism.

#### Facts of Poe's Life

It will be necessary to recall just the brief outline of the facts of Poe's life. Born in Boston January 19, 1809. His parents, who followed the stage life, died while he was yet a mere child of two years. He was adopted by a wealthy merchant of Richmond, by the name of Allan. When the child Edgar was six years of age, the Allans took him to England where he became a pupil of the Manor House School, at Stoke Newington, over which Dr. Bransby ruled as master. He here remained until 1820, when the Allans returned to Richmond. Under Master Joseph H. Clark, in the Academy at Richmond, and for a year under private tutors, he prepared for college. In 1826 he matriculated in the University of Virginia. Here he spent a year, and left the institution to become an accountant in obedience to the will of Mr. Allan.

Chaffing under the restraint of this life, he ran away to Boston, where he attempted the publication of some poems.

May 26, 1827, he enlisted in the United States Army as a private. Later, through the influence of Mr. Allan and others, and probably at the dying request of Mrs. Allan, he left the Army, and entered West Point, July 1, 1830. His stay here was very brief. He was court-martialed and dismissed from the institution Jan. 28, 1831.

Then began that ever saddening literary career, always full of hope, and always terminating in despair. At Baltimore, at Richmond, at Philadelphia, at New York, he established himself and family, and entered upon successive business relations such as afforded him the greatest opportunity for a literary life. In each case the most assuring beginnings were followed by the most dismal failures. In the midst of the dramatic tragedy of these years, there runs the golden thread of his tragic home life, with his child wife, and her mother. The whole thing ends in the pathetic death of his wife, Jan. 30, 1847, and the still more pathetic tragedy of his own death October 7, 1849.

As one permits the panorama of this life to pass before his imagination, realizing the delicate, beauty-loving, sensitive, idealistic personality of Poe, on the one hand, and the conditions material, both within himself and without, against which he struggled, and by which he was defeated, on the other hand, one can recall with a vivid conception of its meaning the closing scene and closing words of one of the greatest books of modern literature. You will remember, if you happened to have read Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the relentless moral logic with which he draws the curtain upon the stirring scenes of the tale. Tess, a noble type of womanhood by nature, in the face of circumstances, that conspired to cheat her of very noble womanly right, at last driven to desperation by the cruel treachery of which she had been a victim, kills her persecutor. One is constrained to say that if ever the taking of one life by another is justified, it is in her case. But she herself meets death at the hands of the law. Two people, the one her sister, and the other, the one who would have been her husband, both always true to her, are witnesses and actors in the following scene.

Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes (i.e., the lover and sister) were riveted to it. A few minutes after the hour had struck, something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.

Justice was done, and the President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess. And Durbeville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless; the flag continued to move silently. As soon as they had strength, they arose, joined hands again, and went on.<sup>2</sup>

Thus does one feel in the presence of the drama of the life of Poe. On the one hand, we have the personality of a great genius, in whom all the great noble aspirations of the human soul can be traced. He is just such a one in his personality as a child as the world longs for and strives to produce. Yet by the caprice of fortune that rarely refined and delicate soul never had the conditions of life such as it hungered for. Thus we watch the process of its remorseless buffeting with which it is hurled into its hellish end.

For consider this relationship of his inner life to the circumstances under which he lived, and this is really the thing that I wish to bring to your attention this evening, so that we may arrive at a righteous judgement of one of the choicest products of our American life. Having once seen what he was within, the literary fruit of his life becomes the transparent and indeed the transfiguring monument of a soul that out of darkness cried unto God.

I think that I can make clear what I have in mind by calling to your attention one or two characteristics. Poe has been called a dreamer. He was an idealist, and if one may judge from his works and the undoubted influence of hereditary impulses,

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), English novelist and poet. He wrote *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in 1891. This quote is from the conclusion of the novel.

this idealism was the natural and the commanding power of his personality. The idealist sees things not so much as they are but as they ought to be. He is moved not so much by convention and established principles and motives, as he is by the vision of a world that will be. The light of truth shines clear in the firmament of tomorrow, and becomes the guide of the idealist in the things that his hands find to do.

One of the great characteristics of the idealist is his natural spirit of non-conformity. He is by nature, and must of necessity be, unconventional. Poe was by nature such a one. Yet we can see the reaction, the revolutionary reaction of his unconventionalism as it chafed against the bars of its bondage in the early home life and school days. The family into which he had been adopted was not one to which he was akin by ties of sympathy. Mr. Allan was a commercial man, who dealt with things and there is no evidence that there was much room for anything else in his makeup. Like many of our own time, he seems to have measured life by the measuring rod of things. His wife was apparently of a finer nature, and had some sympathetic understanding of Poe. But even she was not of the same quality as he. There is a pathetic strain in the incident to which he refers in one of his letters late in life, to the effect that as a boy while visiting one of his school friends he was so attracted by her womanly charm as to have won his childish heart. The truth is that there was in Poe in an unusual degree that tender affectionate love and respect for womanhood, that belongs to the nature of man. Under fortunate conditions that emotion is first centered about the mother, and under her guiding hand and sympathetic influence is nurtured and pruned, cared for and purified until at length it becomes [a] potent force of manhood. Poe had it, but his mother was dead, and Mrs. Allan was not able to do the finer work of the mother. She could provide food, and clothing, and doubtless perform all those duties, and some of the other finer things, but to be the understanding companion, and sympathetic guide over the slippery paths of youth, she could not. We say this, not in criticism of her, but simply to note an apparent fact that had a tremendous influence on the life of the child. The truth is that he wanted and needed the deepest kind of parental love and affections, strong, firm, but withal understanding. As a matter of fact he got things such as money could buy, he got form and conventionality, such as his whole being rebelled at.

In later years, when it was too late to be of any great molding influence this, he gave and received from his wife's mother much of that parental affection for which in his childhood he had longed. There is a deep and significant touch in the words with which Mrs. Clemm speaks of his homelife, "At home he was simple and affectionate as a child, and during all the years he lived with me I do not remember a single night that he failed to come and kiss his mother as he called me, before going to bed."<sup>3</sup> In his letters to his wife, whom he loved with all the devotion and feeling that his undisciplined soul could pour forth, and in his letters to Mrs. Clemm, his wife's mother, there is always the touch of that feeling which as Kipling says must exist between the boy and mother if the nation is to live. The truth of his early home life with the Allans is that his whole being asked for love and deep parental affection and sentiment, and he was given the comfort of luxury of things. He asked for restraint and strong lessons in self-control and discipline, and he received indulgences, and a self-willed pride.

In his school life he was not less unfortunate. One can hardly imagine a less suitable place for a lad of his nature than the school, and the master under whose influence he came while in the Manor House School between the age of six and eleven. Allowing for all the exaggeration that his imaginative mind would weave into the facts in his tale, "William Wilson,"<sup>4</sup> we have a picture of the impression left upon his mind by the school. In speaking of the village church and the school life he says,

Of this Church the principal of our school was the paster. With how deep a spirit of wonder and perplexity was I wont to regard him from our remote pew in the gallery, as with step solemn and firm, he ascended the pulpit! This reverend man, with countenance so demurely benign, with robes so glossy and so clerically flowing, with wig so minutely powdered, so rigid and so vast, could this be he who, of late, with sour visage, and in snuffy habiliments, administered, ferule in hand, the Draconian Laws of

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<sup>3</sup> This quotation can be found in J. Montgomery Gambrill, ed., *Selections from Poe*. New York: Ginn and Co., 1907, p. xix.

<sup>4</sup> "William Wilson" is a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, published 1839.

the academy? Oh, gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution.<sup>5</sup>

There may be autobiography in these sentences taken from the same tale, and speaking of his early school life,

I long, in passing through the dim valley, for the sympathy—I had nearly said the pity—of my fellow men. I would fain have them believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of fatality amid the wilderness of error.<sup>6</sup>

For myself I do see, and what I want to suggest is that the oasis of fatality lies in the fact that this child, fine-grained, affectionate, idealistic in his nature, was thrown by the caprice of circumstances into a home and surroundings that were not suitable. He hungered for love and affection and he received things; he wanted realities and received conventional forms. In the midst of this ill-conditioned world of his, he chaffed, and instead of growing up into the noble self-controlled discipline, intelligent spirit such as an intelligent genius should become, he developed into a proud self-indulgent, undisciplined dreamer. That in his natural character, which should have shown up in his manhood as a noble responsibility in his life, appeared as a pride which can be described as little less than vanity; that mental capacity, his greatest endowment, disciplined and trained, should have appeared as far-reaching intelligent prophetic insight, dominated as a moral purpose, but unfortunately it actually does appear as little more than an unrestrained dreamy imagination, garnished with a few vague facts and poisoned by that most subtle of all moral poisons, a hidden and disguised selfishness. His whole personality suffers from discipline, and gradually breaks up into a disorganized wreck, majestic even in its weakness and its ruin.

With this idea of the eternally losing conflict between Poe as he is and Poe as his genius of idealistic aspiration would

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<sup>5</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, from "William Wilson," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, London: Ward, Lock and Tyler, 1866, p. 243.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, from "William Wilson," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, London: Ward, Lock and Tyler, 1866, p. 241.

have him in mind, we may venture still further into the sacred enclosure where he dreamed and fought and lost. Here I hope we shall get a still better background for an understanding of him. The last important thing that he did was to write his *Eureka*.<sup>7</sup> This book purports to be a philosophical or rather metaphysical treatment of the deeper questions of life and existence. For our purposes, it is hardly necessary to attempt to unravel its mystery, yet there are three things connected with it that throw light on the life of Poe.

The first point to be noted is the keen insight which he had into the problems of philosophy. It has been held by some that in this book he has foreshadowed all the best philosophical thought and moments of scientific illumination that have characterized the intellectual life since his time. This is hardly to be maintained, yet he does, even amid the fantastic vagaries of this discourse, show some glimpse of his capacity of thought. The introduction to his work is a criticism of the types of thought that were at his time in the field. The criticism takes the form of a letter written by a man two hundred years hence. It is a semi-humorous treatment of inductive and the deductive methods of reasoning and thinking. In his exposition of what he calls the method of consistency, which clings to neither the one or the other, but makes use of those in establishing the consistency of thought systems and their adaptable unity, he comes very close to the modern pragmatic idea.

But right in the midst of his brilliancy and keenness we come upon his great weakness. It shows up here to especial disadvantage, because the work in hand is not a tale of the imagination, but a serious work in philosophy. He was not a scholar. While he had been brilliant in his work at school, and had read widely in some directions, the fact remains that he did not know, or at best he had only the most superficial knowledge. Lacking in knowledge, he let his imagination supply him with facts and theories both. This same tendency appears in all his literary works, and not less conspicuously in his dealings and statements concerning himself. He was never able to distinguish between fact and fancy. That is an asset in his imaginative fiction. It becomes grotesque in a serious work such as *Eureka* purported to be, and it is immoral in relations of life. It is

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<sup>7</sup> *Eureka: A Prose Poem* by Edgar Allan Poe, published in 1848.

however a pertinent illustration of the fact to which I referred above. His tremendous intellectual powers and genius had never been properly disciplined and trained. It was in the end hardly more than at the beginning, a power of childlike precocity.

Yet in spite of this limitation which renders the work worthless for the purpose for which it was written, there is a tone of uplifting daring that takes us out of the mud of thought, and gives a momentary insight into the grandeur of the universe and the mystery of the life that we live. At least Poe was not an earthworm crawling along, seeking only that which it may devour. There is a flight and loftiness to his conceptions that make the opportunism, and commercialism of our time blacker than the deepest hell that Poe ever descended to. I will quote just one sentence to show the power of his imaginative flight,

Guiding our imagination by that omniprevalent law of laws, the law of periodicity, are we not, indeed, more than justified in entertaining a belief—let us say rather in indulging a hope—that the processes that we have here ventured to contemplate, will be renewed forever, and forever and forever; a novel Universe swelling into existence, and then subsiding into nothingness, at every throb of the divine heart?

And now—this Divine Heart—what is it? *It is our own.*  
(Works, vol., 9, page 134).<sup>8</sup>

But passing from the realm of the Universe about which his imagination led him to speculate, we pass to the thoughts of the inner life. Upon this he spoke with the authority of bitter experience. In his tales of conscience we get an insight into the struggle between good and evil in his own life at least. To my mind, this is one of the most interesting and illuminating portions of Poe's work. Here he is indeed prophetic. In the first place we note that the sanction of moral conduct rests not on any outside authority, but in the very nature of man himself. His life is the battlefield of good and evil, the ideal and the base, the moral and the sensual. Read carefully the tale of William Wilson to which I referred, and not the constant juxtaposition of the ideal or true personality against the base and the sensual and the mean. He does flinch at bringing the

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<sup>8</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, from *Eureka* in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed., John H. Ingram, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1875, p. 192.

tale to its morally logical conclusion, even though he himself is the victim. After various defeats, the base self thrusts home the fatal blow that destroys the true self, and the true self, dying, says to the base self,

You have conquered and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead—dead to the World to Heaven and to hope. In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou has murdered thyself.<sup>9</sup>

This I take to be a good statement of a profound truth. We live by virtue of the ideal life that is in us, and when we crush out that, we kill all.

Poe's life from the beginning to the end was one continual battlefield and the battlefield was never larger than the limits of his own personality. Here we find him struggling, planning campaigns and being defeated year after year, and each defeat leaves him less able to continue the struggle. The truth is that Poe never master of himself, lived his whole life within his own personal interests. He was a victim of the most poisonous selfishness that one comes in contact with. His relationship with magazines and his own ideal of having a magazine of his own illustrate this side of his nature. On the surface he wished to render the literary world of his time a great service. He became irritated and unreasonable when his own personal whims and notions were restrained in the least. This irritability of temper together with his moral relapses causes his relations with each successive periodical to become severed, and that under conditions not always to his credit. In all these affairs there is not a tinge of the spirit of the reformer that is willing to eliminate the self in the interests of the ideal. That Poe had a certain literary ideal is not to be denied. But his ideal was of such a character...<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, from "William Wilson," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, London: Ward, Lock and Tyler, 1866, p. 263.

<sup>10</sup> Here, unfortunately, the manuscript ends, incomplete.