

Death of Edgar A. Poe — obituary signed Ludwig

New-York Daily Tribune | 1849-10-09 | Newspaper page 2, column(s) 3-4

Text PDF - complete article excerpt. AI-assisted transcription visually checked by Codex against the complete article; no independent human proofread. Line wraps, spacing, type emphasis and quotation marks regularized. Historical wording and apparent factual errors retained; scan is authoritative for typography and faint punctuation. The Edgar Allan Poe Society transcription was used as a draft reference and corrected against this scan; its editorial insertions are omitted. Both columns, quotations, all six stanzas of Annabel Lee and the final Ludwig signature are included.

Editorial context: A sharply critical contemporary obituary signed “Ludwig,” identified by the Edgar Allan Poe Society as Rufus Wilmot Griswold. Its biographical stories, judgments and claims about Poe are the author’s assertions, not verified archive findings. The conclusion expressly says the circumstances of death were not known to the writer. Includes Annabel Lee and a quotation from The Raven.

Death of Edgar A. Poe.

EDGAR ALLAN POE is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it. The poet was known, personally or by reputation, in all this country; he had readers in England, and in several of the states of Continental Europe; but he had few or no friends; and the regrets for his death will be suggested principally by the consideration that in him literary art has lost one of its most brilliant but erratic stars.

The family of Mr. Poe — we learn from Griswold’s “Poets and Poetry of America,” from which a considerable portion of the facts in this notice are derived — was one of the oldest and most respectable in Baltimore. David Poe, his paternal grandfather, was a Quartermaster-General in the Maryland line during the Revolution, and the intimate friend of Lafayette, who, during his last visit to the United States, called personally upon the General’s widow, and tendered her acknowledgments for the services rendered to him by her husband. His great-grandfather, John Poe, married in England, Jane, a daughter of Admiral James McBride, noted in British naval history, and claiming kindred with some of the most illustrious English families. His father and mother, — both of whom were in some way connected with the theater, and lived as precariously as their more gifted and more eminent son — died within a few weeks of each other, of consumption, leaving him an orphan, at two years of age. Mr. John Allan, a wealthy gentleman of Richmond, Virginia, took a fancy to him, and persuaded his grandfather to suffer him to adopt him. He was brought up in Mr. Allan’s family; and as that gentleman had no other children, he was regarded as his son and heir. In 1816 he accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Allen to Great Britain, visited every portion of it, and afterward passed four or five years in a school kept at Stoke Newington, near London, by Rev. Dr. Bransby. He returned to America in 1822, and in 1825 went to the Jefferson University, at Charlottesville, in Virginia, where he led a very dissipated life, the manners of the college being at that time extremely dissolute. He took the first honors, however, and went home greatly in debt. Mr. Allen refused to pay some of his debts of honor, and he hastily quitted the country on a Quixotic expedition to join the Greeks, then struggling for liberty. He did not reach his original destination, however, but made his way to St. Petersburg, in Russia, where he became involved in difficulties, from which he was extricated by the late Mr. Henry Middleton, the American Minister at that capital. He returned home in 1829, and immediately afterward entered the Military Academy at West-Point. In about eighteen months from that time, Mr. Allan, who had lost his first wife while Mr. Poe was in Russia, married again. He was sixty-five years of age, and the lady was young; Poe quarreled with her, and the veteran husband, taking the part of his wife, addressed him an angry letter, which was answered in the same spirit. He died soon after, leaving an infant son the heir to his property, and bequeathed Poe nothing.

The army, in the opinion of the young cadet, was not a place for a poor man; so he left West-Point abruptly, and determined to maintain himself by authorship. He printed, in 1827, a small volume of poems, most of which were written in early youth. Some of these poems are quoted in a reviewal by Margaret Fuller, in The Tribune in 1846, and are justly regarded as among the most wonderful exhibitions of the precocious development of genius. They illustrated the character of his abilities, and justified his anticipations of success. For a considerable time, however, though he wrote readily and brilliantly, his contributions to the journals attracted little attention, and his

hopes of gaining a livelihood by the profession of literature were nearly ended at length in sickness, poverty and despair. But in 1831, the proprietor of a weekly gazette, in Baltimore, offered two premiums, one for the best story in prose, and the other for the best poem. — In due time Poe sent in two articles, and he waited anxiously for the decision. One of the Committee was the accomplished author of “Horse Shoe Robinson,” John P. Kennedy, and his associates were scarcely less eminent than he for wit and critical sagacity. Such matters are usually disposed of in a very off hand way: Committees to award literary prizes drink to the payer’s health, in good wines, over the unexamined MSS, which they submit to the discretion of publishers, with permission to use their names in such a way as to promote the publishers’ advantage So it would have been in this case, but that one of the Committee, taking up a little book in such exquisite calligraphy as to seem like one of the finest issues of the press of Putnam, was tempted to read several pages, and being interested, he summoned the attention of the company to the half-dozen compositions in the volume. It was unanimously decided that the prizes should be paid to the first of geniuses who had written legibly. Not another MS. was unfolded. Immediately the ‘confidential envelop’ was opened, and the successful competitor was found to bear the scarcely known name of Poe.

The next day the publisher called to see Mr. Kennedy, and gave him an account of the author that excited his curiosity and sympathy, and caused him to request that he should be brought to his office. Accordingly he was introduced: the prize money had not yet been paid, and he was in the costume in which he had answered the advertisement of his good fortune. Thin, and pale even to ghastliness, his whole appearance indicated sickness and the utmost destitution. A tattered frock-coat concealed the absence of a shirt, and the ruins of boots disclosed more than the want of stockings But the eyes of the young man were luminous with intelligence and feeling, and his voice, and conversation, and manners, all won upon the lawyer’s regard. Poe told his history, and his ambition, and it was determined that he should not want means for a suitable appearance in society, nor opportunity for a just display of his abilities in literature. Mr. Kennedy accompanied him to a clothing store, and purchased for him a respectable suit, with changes of linen, and sent him to a bath, from which he returned with the suddenly regained bearing of a gentleman.

The late Mr. Thomas W. White had then recently established The Southern Literary Messenger, at Richmond, and upon the warm recommendation of Mr. Kennedy, Poe was engaged, at a small salary — we believe of \$500 a year — to be its editor. He entered upon his duties with letters full of expressions of the warmest gratitude to his friends in Baltimore, who in five or six weeks were astonished to learn that with characteristic recklessness of consequences, he was hurriedly married to a girl as poor as himself. Poe continued in this situation about a year and a half, in which he wrote many brilliant articles, and raised the Messenger to the first rank of literary periodicals.

He next removed to Philadelphia, to assist William E. Burton in the editorship of the Gentleman’s Magazine, a miscellany that in 1840 was merged in Graham’s Magazine, of which Poe became one of the principal writers, particularly in criticism, in which his papers attracted much attention, by their careful and skillful analysis, and generally caustic severity. At this period, however, he appears to have been more ambitious of securing distinction in romantic fiction, and a collection of his compositions in this department, published in 1841, under the title of “Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque,” established his reputation for ingenuity, imagination and extraordinary power in tragical narration.

Near the end of 1844 Poe removed to New-York, where he conducted for several months a literary miscellany called “The Broadway Journal.” In 1845 he published a volume of “Tales” in Wiley and Putnam’s Library of American Books, and in the same series a collection of his poems. Beside these volumes he was the author of “Arthur Gordon Pym,” a romance: “A New Theory of English Versification.” “Eureka,” an essay on the material and spiritual universe: a work which he wished to have “judged as a poem;” and several extended series of papers in the periodicals, the most noticeable of which are “Marginalia”, embracing opinions of books and authors; “Secret Writing,” “Autography,” and “Sketches of the Literati of New-York.”

His wife died in 1847, at Fordham, near this City, and some of our readers will remember the paragraphs in the papers of the time, upon his destitute condition. His wants were supplied by the liberality of a few individuals. We

remember that Col. Webb collected in a few moments fifty or sixty dollars for him at the Union Club; Mr. Lewis, of Brooklyn, sent a similar sum from one of the Courts, in which he was engaged when he saw the statement of the poet's poverty; and others illustrated in the same manner the effect of such an appeal to the popular heart.

Since that time Mr. Poe had lived quietly, and with an income from his literary labors sufficient for his support. A few weeks ago he proceeded to Richmond in Virginia, where he lectured upon the poetical character, &c.; and it was understood by some of his correspondents here that he was this week to be married, most advantageously, to a lady of that city: a widow, to whom he had been previously engaged while a student in the University.

The character of Mr. Poe we cannot attempt to describe in this very hastily written article. We can but allude to some of its more striking phases.

His conversation was at times almost supra-mortal in its eloquence. His voice was modulated with astonishing skill, and his large and variably expressive eyes looked repose or shot fiery tumult into theirs who listened, while his own face glowed, or was changeless in pallor, as his imagination quickened his blood or drew it back frozen to his heart. His imagery was from the worlds which no mortals can see but with the vision of genius. Suddenly starting from a proposition exactly and sharply defined in terms of utmost simplicity and clearness, he rejected the forms of customary logic, and by a crystalline process of accretion, built up his ocular demonstrations in forms of gloomiest and ghastliest grandeur, or in those of the most airy and delicious beauty — so minutely, and distinctly, yet so rapidly, that the attention which was yielded to him was chained till it stood among his wonderful creations — till he himself dissolved the spell, and brought his hearers back to common and base existence, by vulgar fancies or exhibitions of the ignoblest passion.

He was at all times a dreamer — dwelling in ideal realms — in heaven or hell — peopled with the creatures and the accidents of his brain. He walked the streets, in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses, or with eyes upturned in passionate prayer, (never for himself, for he felt, or professed to feel, that he was already damned), but for their happiness who at the moment were objects of his idolatry — or, with his glances introverted to a heart gnawed with anguish, and with a face shrouded in gloom, he would brave the wildest storms; and all night, with drenched garments and arms beating the winds and rain, he would speak as if to spirits that at such times only could be evoked by him from the Aidenn close by whose portals his disturbed soul sought to forget the ills to which his constitution subjected him — close by the Aidenn where were those he loved — the Aidenn which he might never see, but in fitful glimpses, as its gates opened to receive the less fiery and more happy natures whose destiny to sin did not involve the doom of death.

He seemed, except when some fitful pursuit subjugated his will and engrossed his faculties, always to bear the memory of some controlling sorrow. The remarkable poem of The Raven was probably much more nearly than has been supposed, even by those who were very intimate with him, a reflexion and an echo of his own history. He was that bird's

—— Unhappy master,
Whom unmerciful disaster
Followed fast and followed faster,
Till his songs the burden bore —
Till the dirges of his hope, the
Melancholy burden bore
Of "Nevermore," of "Nevermore."

Every genuine author in a greater or less degree leaves in his works, whatever their design, traces of his personal character: elements of his immortal being, in which the individual survives the person. While we read the pages of the Fall of the House of Usher, or of Mesmeric Revelations, we see in the solemn and stately gloom which invests one, and in the subtle metaphysical analysis of both, indications of the idiosyncrasies, — of what was most remarkable and peculiar — in the author's intellectual nature. But we see here only the better phases of this

nature, only the symbols of his juster action, for his harsh experience had deprived him of all faith, in man or woman. He had made up his mind upon the numberless complexities of the social world, and the whole system with him was an imposture. This conviction gave a direction to his shrewd and naturally unamiable character. Still, though he regarded society as composed altogether of villains, the sharpness of his intellect was not of that kind which enabled him to cope with villainy, while it continually caused him by overshoots to fail of the success of honesty. He was in many respects like Francis Vivian in Bulwer's novel of "The Caxtons." "Passion, in him, comprehended many of the worst emotions which militate against human happiness. You could not contradict him, but you raised quick choler; you could not speak of wealth, but his cheek paled with gnawing envy. The astonishing natural advantages of this poor boy — his beauty, his readiness, the daring spirit that breathed around him like a fiery atmosphere — had raised his constitutional self-confidence into an arrogance that turned his very claims to admiration into prejudice against him. Irascible, envious — bad enough, but not the worst, for these salient angles were all varnished over with a cold repellent cynicism, his passions vented themselves in sneers. There seemed to him no moral susceptibility; and, what was more remarkable in a proud nature, little or nothing of the true point of honor. He had, to a morbid excess, that desire to rise which is vulgarly called ambition, but no wish for the esteem or the love of his species; only the hard wish to succeed — not shine, not serve — succeed, that he might have the right to despise a world which galled his self-conceit."

We have suggested the influence of his aims and vicissitudes upon his literature. It was more conspicuous in his later than in his earlier writings. Nearly all that he wrote in the last two or three years — including much of his best poetry — was in some sense biographical; in draperies of his imagination, those who had taken the trouble to trace his steps, could perceive, but slightly concealed, the figure of himself.

There are perhaps some of our readers who will understand the allusions of the following beautiful poem. Mr. Poe presented it in MS. to the writer of these paragraphs, just before he left New-York recently, remarking that it was the last thing he had written:

ANNABEL LEE.

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of ANNABEL LEE;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea.
But we loved with a love that was more than love —
I and my ANNABEL LEE —
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful ANNABEL LEE;
So that her highborn kinsmen came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in heaven,
Went envying her and me —
Yes! — that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my ANNABEL LEE.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we —
Of many far wiser than we —
And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful ANNABEL LEE:

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful ANNABEL LEE;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful ANNABEL LEE:
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling — my darling — my life and my bride,
In her sepulchre there by the sea —
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

We must omit any particular criticism of Mr. Poe's works. As a writer of tales it will be admitted generally, that he was scarcely surpassed in ingenuity of construction or effective painting. As a critic, he was more remarkable as a dissector of sentences than as a commenter upon ideas: he was little better than a carping grammarian. As a poet, he will retain a most honorable rank. Of his "Raven," Mr. Willis observes, that in his opinion "it is the most effective single example of fugitive poetry ever published in this country, and is unsurpassed in English poetry for subtle conception, masterly ingenuity of versification, and consistent sustaining of imaginative life." In poetry, as in prose, he was most successful in the metaphysical treatment of the passions. His poems are constructed with wonderful ingenuity, and finished with consummate art. They illustrate a morbid sensitiveness of feeling, a shadowy and gloomy imagination, and a taste almost faultless in the apprehension of that sort of beauty most agreeable to his temper.

We have not learned the circumstances of his death. It was sudden, and from the fact that it occurred in Baltimore, it is to be presumed that he was on his return to New-York.

"After life's fitful fever he sleeps well."

LUDWIG.