

THE PASSING SHOW

My tantalized spirit
Here blandly reposes,
Forgetting, or never
Regretting its roses,
Its old agitations
Of myrtles and roses.

For now, while so quietly
Lying, it fancies
A holier odor
About it, of pansies—
A rosemary odor
Commingled with pansies.—
With rue and the beautiful
Puritan pansies.

—Edgar Allan Poe.

The Shakespeare society of New York, which is really about the only useful literary organization in this country, is making vigorous efforts to redress an old wrong and atone for a long neglect. Sunday, Sept. 22, it held a meeting at the Poe cottage on Kingsbridge road near Fordham, for the purpose of starting an organized movement to buy back the cottage, restore it to its original condition and preserve it as a memorial of Poe. So it has come at last. After helping build monuments to Shelley, Keats and Carlyle we have at last remembered this man, the greatest of our poets and the most unhappy. I am glad that this movement is in the hands of American actors, for it was among them that Poe found his best friends and warmest admirers. Some way he always seemed to belong to the strolling Thespians who were his mother's people.

Among all the thousands of life's little ironies that make history so diverting, there is none more paradoxical than that Edgar Poe should have been an American. Look at his face. Had we ever another like it? He must have been a strange figure in his youth, among those genial, courtly Virginians, this handsome, pale fellow, violent in his enthusiasm, ardent in his worship, but spiritually cold in his affections. Now playing heavily for the mere excitement of play, now worshipping at the shrine of a woman old enough to be his mother, merely because her voice was beautiful; now swimming six miles up the James river against a heavy current in the glaring sun of a June mid-day. He must have seemed to them an unreal figure, a sort of stage man who was wandering about the streets with his mask and buskins on, a theatrical figure who had escaped by some strange mischance into the prosaic daylight. His speech and actions were unconsciously and sincerely dramatic, always as though done for effect. He had that nervous, egotistic, self-centered nature common to stage children who seem to have been dazzled by the footlights and maddened by the applause before they are born. It was in his blood. With the exception of two women who loved him, lived for him, died for him, he went through life friendless, misunderstood, with that dense, complete, hopeless misunderstanding which, as Amiel said, is the secret of that sad smile upon the lips of the great. Men tried to befriend him, but in some way or other he hurt and disappointed them. He tried to mingle and share with other men, but he was always shut from them by that shadow, light as gossamer but unyield-

ing as adamant, by which, from the beginning of the world, art has shielded and guarded and protected her own, that God-concealing mist in which the heroes of old were hidden, immersed in that gloom and solitude which, if we could but know it here, is but the shadow of God's hand as it falls upon his elect.

We lament our dearth of great prose. With the exception of Henry James and Hawthorne, Poe is our only master of pure prose. We lament our dearth of poets. With the exception of Lowell, Poe is our only great poet. Poe found short story writing a bungling makeshift. He left it a perfect art. He wrote the first perfect short stories in the English language. He first gave the short story purpose, method, and artistic form. In a careless reading one can not realize the wonderful literary art, the cunning devices, the masterly effects that those entrancing tales conceal—they are simple and direct enough to delight us when we are children, subtle and artistic enough to be our marvel when we are old. To this day they are the wonder and admiration of the French, who are the acknowledged masters of craft and form. How in his wandering, laborious life, bound to the hack work of the press and crushed by an ever-growing burden of want and debt, did he ever come upon all this deep and mystical lore, this knowledge of all history, of all languages, of all art, this penetration into the hidden things of the East? As Steadman says, "The self training of genius is always a marvel." The past is spread before us all and most of us spend our lives in learning those things which we do not need to know, but genius reaches out instinctively and takes only the vital detail, by some sort of spiritual gravitation goes directly to the right thing.

Poe belonged to the modern French school of decorative and discriminating prose before it ever existed in France. He rivalled Gautier, Flaubert and de Maupassant before they were born. He clothed his tales in a barbaric splendor and persuasive unreality never before heard of in English. No such profusion of color, oriental splendor of detail, grotesque combinations and mystical effects had ever before been wrought into language. There are tales as grotesque, as monstrous, unearthly as the stone griffens and gargoyles that are cut up among the unvisited niches and towers of Notre Dame, stories as poetic and delicately beautiful as the golden lace work chased upon an Etruscan ring. He fitted his words together as the Byzantine jewelers fitted priceless stones. He found the inner harmony and kinship of words. Where lived another man who could blend the beautiful and the horrible, the gorgeous and the grotesque in such intricate and inexplicable fashion? Who could delight you with his noun and disgust you with his verb, thrill you with his adjective and chill you with his adverb, make you run the whole gamut of human emotions in a single sentence? Sitting in that miserable cottage at Fordham he wrote of the splendor of dream palaces beyond the dreams of art. He hung those grimy walls with dream tapestries, paved those narrow halls with black marbled and polished onyx, and into those low-roofed chambers he brought all the

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treasured imagery of fancy, from the "huge carvings of untutored Egypt" to "mingled and conflicting perfumes, reeking up from strange convolute censers, together with multitudinous, flaring and flickering tongues of purple and violet fire." Hungry and ragged he wrote of Epicurean feasts and luxury that would have beggared the purpled pomp of pagan Rome and put Nero and his Golden House to shame.

And this mighty master of the organ of language, who knew its every stop and pipe, who could awaken at will the thin silver tones of its slenderest reeds or the solemn cadence of its deepest thunder, who could make it sing like a flute or roar like a cataract, he was born into a country without a literature. He was of that ornate school which usually comes last in a national literature, and he came first. American taste had been vitiated by men like Griewold and N. P. Willis until it was at the lowest possible ebb. Willis was considered a genius, that is the worst that could possibly be said. In the North a new race of great philosophers was growing up, but Poe had neither their friendship nor encouragement. He went indeed,

sometimes, to the chilly *salon* of Margaret Fuller, but he was always a discord there. He was a mere artist and he had no business with philosophy, he had no theories as to the "higher life" and the "true happiness." He had only his unshapen dreams that battled with him in dark places, the unborn that struggled in his brain for birth. What time has an artist to learn the multiplication table or to talk philosophy? He was not afraid of them. He laughed at Willis, and flung Longfellow's lie in his teeth, the lie the rest of the world was twenty years in finding. He scorned the obtrusive learning of the transcendentalists and he disliked their hard talkative women. He left them and went back to his dream women, his *Berenice*, his *Ligeia*, his *Marchesa Aphrodite*, pale and cold as the mist maidens of the North, sad as the Norns who weep for human woe.

The tragedy of Poe's life was not alcohol, but hunger. He died when he was forty, when his work was just beginning. Thackeray had not touched his great novels at forty, George Eliot was almost unknown at that age. Hugo, Goethe, Hawthorne, Lowell and Dumas

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