

## Poe's Appalling Life

Poor Poe. No other American writer of equivalent fame led such a consistently miserable life as he. Abandoned by his father in infancy; orphaned at age three and entrusted to the care of a rich Richmond merchant, John Allan, whose love and/or money was ever in short supply; renounced by Allan and cut out of his will; perpetually impoverished and obliged often to sell his best work for a pittance; saddled with a wife and mother-in-law as poor as he (who were, as well, his first cousin and aunt) in a marriage that was probably unconsummated; an alcoholic with a penchant for disgracing himself at those rare intervals when a glimmer of sunlight appeared through the clouds of his consistently wretched life; thwarted in virtually all his ambitions. There can have been little happiness for Poe except such times as he was in the embrace of his Muse, and she was fickle, frowsy, and not always *compos mentis*. Little wonder that the last year of his life seems a headlong, hell-bent rush to suicide.

Poor Poe, but poor Kenneth Silverman, too. For to explore Poe's life and lack of character as extensively as a biographer must is to invite certain disenchantment with both the man and his work. Poverty rarely ennobles. Stifled ambition breeds envy and vindictiveness. Practiced liars are liable to become self-deceivers. To these rules Poe was no exception. Even when he was good (i.e., writing well) he was rather pathetic; but when he was bad he almost out-Heroded the libels written about him by his first biographer, mortal enemy, and (by his own request) literary executor, Rufus Griswold, who printed his calumnies as an appendix to the first full-scale edition of Poe's works, thereby securing for Poe the eminence he has enjoyed ever since as Americans' premier *poète maudit*—a wastrel, drunkard, opium addict, and all-round demoniac. Poe was undoubtedly indulging his own Imp of the Perverse in putting Griswold in charge of his posthumous reputation, but he was also exercising his usual instinct for self-promotion. Subsequent biographers have exposed Griswold's lies and forgeries, but none have been able to make Poe look quite human. He remains the object of our baleful fascination, a semi-

---

Review of *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance*, by Kenneth Silverman.

charlatan whose florid poems and lurid tales we can't keep from reading, re-reading, and remembering.

Silverman's is in every respect, including its relative brevity, the best biography of Poe yet written, a position held heretofore by Hervey Allen's *Israfil* of 1934. Allen is much more inclined than Silverman to take Poe at his word, to extenuate his faults, and simply to like him. He is also inclined to gush, and his critical perceptions rarely exceed forty watts. A representative judgment by Allen: "Poe's own mysticism was purely personal, and the subliminal landscapes which he created . . . were the refuges and spiritual lands of his own darkened soul. It was for this reason that his poetry was more original than that of any other American poet of the age." Silverman casts a much colder eye. He is willing to dismiss most of Poe's criticism as bombast and pedantry, his hatchet-jobs inspired by envy and his raves by sycophancy. He would accuse other writers—especially his nemesis, Longfellow—of plagiarisms visible to no eye but his own, while he was an unconscionable plagiarist himself. Silverman quotes a letter in which Poe praises himself for "an inveterate habit of speaking the truth," and comments, "Actually he had fallen into a routine of easy lies and half truths since at least his adolescence."

Nothing in Poe's life so disgraced him as the leaving of it, and the last quarter of Silverman's book is devoted to the period from the summer of 1848 to his death in October of 1849. His child-bride, Virginia, had died of tuberculosis the year before, and Poe, his creative energies seemingly exhausted, turned fortune hunter, wooing several prospective brides simultaneously. The extensive correspondence that has survived shows Poe at his most oleaginous. To a wealthy widow in Providence he wrote, after their first meeting:

I saw that you were Helen—my Helen—the Helen of a thousand dreams—she whose visionary lips had so often lingered upon my own in the divine trance of passion—she whom the great Giver of all Goods had preordained to be mine—mine only.

This is excerpted from a letter twelve pages long.

When his drunkenness caused his first engagement to be broken off, he returned to his hometown of Richmond, where he had a second widow in reserve. Evidently he had a way with the ladies. Indeed, in drawing room mode, Poe could come across as the beau ideal of gothic romances then and now—a dark, brooding, Byronic figure doomed to wander the earth in torment until he found the Helen of his dreams. His problem was rather in moving from the drawing room to the nuptial

