

## CHAPTER I

*The student and the book*

I loitered away my boyhood in books, and dissipated my youth  
 in reverie . . .

“Berenice”

Ellis and Allan, a Richmond, Virginia, import/export firm established by Charles Ellis and John Allan in 1800, became profitable enough during the following decade and a half for the partners to decide to open a London office after the War of 1812 had ended. In 1815, John Allan left Richmond for London, taking with him his family: his wife Frances; her unmarried sister, Ann “Nancy” Valentine, who had long been a member of their household; and Edgar Poe, the young boy John and Frances had unofficially adopted some years before. After spending time in Scotland, they reached London in the first week in October. By month’s end, they had found lodgings in Bloomsbury. Allan wrote home to his business partner, describing his family and their cozy accommodations, depicting himself seated “by a snug fire in a nice little sitting parlour in No. 47 Southampton Row, Russel[l] Square where I have procured Lodgings for the present with Frances and Nancy Sewing and Edgar reading a little Story Book.”<sup>1</sup>

That young Poe was busy reading is unstartling. John Allan had already recognized the child’s precocity and purchased some books for him before they left the United States.<sup>2</sup> The books Allan had purchased, schooltexts by the English grammarian Lindley Murray, may have been useful for Poe’s education, yet they would hardly have appealed to him as much as the day’s storybooks. Allan obviously acquired additional volumes for the boy during their first months in Great Britain. The storybook young Poe was reading in late October could have been any one of several recently published chapbooks. He later expressed his familiarity with *Sinbad the Sailor*

and *Jack and the Beanstalk*; new London editions of these two works appeared the year the Allan family came to England.<sup>3</sup> So did new editions of *The History of Little King Pippin* and *Tom Thumb*. (In one of his lectures, Poe would praise a “penny edition of Tom Thumb.”<sup>4</sup>) *Mother Goose’s Melody*, a work Poe would mention in “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob,” appeared in a London edition the following year.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Love Peacock’s *Sir Hornbook, or, Child Launcelot’s Expeditions: A Grammatico-Allegorical Ballad*, which went through two editions in 1815, combined grammar and adventure to create a work with greater appeal for a six-year-old than Murray’s *Grammar*. As the poem begins, Childe Launcelot approaches the castle of Sir Hornbook who joins the young knight and leads him on a series of adventures, encountering such valiant knights and ladies fair as Sir Syntax and his love, Lady Prosody, and culminating at the Muses’ gates where Sir Hornbook leaves the youthful knight:

Childe Launcelot pressed the sacred ground,  
 With hope’s exulting glow;  
 Some future song perchance may sound  
 The wondrous things which there he found,  
 If you the same would know.<sup>6</sup>

James Pedder’s *The Yellow Shoe-Strings, or, The Good Effects of Obedience to Parents* had appeared in 1814 and had quickly become a popular book among English children or, more precisely, a popular book for British parents to give to their children. Reviewing one of Pedder’s subsequent works, Poe wrote that the author was “well known in England, as the composer of one of the most popular juvenile books of the day, ‘The Yellow Shoe-strings’ – three words familiar in nursery annals. To indite a really good work of this kind is a task often attempted in vain by men of high literary eminence. In truth the qualifications for success depend not a little upon a clear head, but still more upon a warm heart.”<sup>7</sup> The work’s didactic sentimentalism has doomed it to obscurity since, yet Poe remembered *The Yellow Shoe-Strings* with fondness. His kind words, however, may have been personally motivated. During the 1830s, Pedder moved his family from England to Philadelphia, and Poe developed a close friendship with him and his daughters, Anna and Bessie, who occasionally aided the impoverished Poe family and to whom he inscribed a copy of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* in 1839.<sup>8</sup>

Some literary classics of the previous century were available in

highly abridged versions designed for young readers and illustrated with woodcuts. In 1815, chapbook editions of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe* were published in London, as they had been for many years. Poe later read an unabridged *Robinson Crusoe*, but his first exposure to the work likely came through one of the many chapbook versions. Though John Allan was not much of a literary man, his family would have kept a copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. About the book, Poe later remarked, "It has become a household thing in nearly every family in Christendom."<sup>9</sup> Writing in the editorial first person plural, Poe recalled his childhood memories of the book with great affection: "How fondly do we recur, in memory, to those enchanted days of our boyhood when we first learned to grow serious over Robinson Crusoe! – when we first found the spirit of wild adventure enkindling within us, as, by the dim fire light, we labored out, line by line, the marvellous import of those pages, and hung breathless and trembling with eagerness over their absorbing – over their enchanting interest!"<sup>10</sup> *Robinson Crusoe* fostered Poe's interest in imaginary voyages, an interest other contemporary publications would have perpetuated. The following year, *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, a highly abridged version of Munchausen's *Travels*, appeared as part of the "New Juvenile Library."

During the spring of 1816, Poe entered the London boarding school of the Misses Dubourg. If he had yet to devote much time to Lindley Murray's textbooks, the school would have given him the opportunity. Murray's *English Spelling-Book; With Reading Lessons Adapted to the Capacities of Children* supplemented his education, but it was not the main spelling book the Misses Dubourg used, for John Allan had to purchase a copy of William Fordyce Mavor's *The English Spelling Book, Accompanied by a Progressive Series of Easy and Familiar Lessons* after Edgar had entered the school. Murray's *The English Reader: Or, Pieces in Prose and Poetry, Selected from the Best Writers*, a work that had gone through numerous editions since its original publication in 1799, introduced Poe to many British belletristic writers. The work was broken down into two parts, prose and verse, and each part was subdivided into separate chapters devoted to different types of writing – narrative, didactic, argumentative, descriptive. The prose section of the book contained quotations from Joseph Addison, Hugh Blair, Oliver Goldsmith, David Hume, and Samuel Johnson, among many others. The poetry section provided generous

excerpts from the work of Mark Akenside, William Cowper, John Milton, Alexander Pope, James Thomson, and Edward Young.

While there is no way to know precisely how much attention Poe gave these textbooks during his early years in England, his later writings reveal his familiarity with Murray's works, which would become a kind of touchstone in Poe's criticism. *The English Grammar*, Murray's most well-known schooltext, figures prominently in his review of Theodore S. Fay's *Norman Leslie*. In the review, Poe quibbled with Fay's and, indirectly, with Nathaniel P. Willis's grammar: "As regards Mr. Fay's *style*, it is unworthy of a school-boy. The 'Editor of the New York Mirror' has either never seen an edition of Murray's Grammar, or he has been a-Willising so long as to have forgotten his vernacular language." Poe pointed out several grammatical errors and concluded: "There is not a single page of Norman Leslie in which even a schoolboy would fail to detect at least two or three gross errors in Grammar, and some two or three most egregious sins against common-sense."<sup>11</sup> Another amusing reference to Murray came in a footnote to a poem of Murray's reprinted in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Poe called Murray "that celebrated grammarian" but ended his footnote with the comment, "It is somewhat remarkable that the present lines involve an odd *grammatical* error of construction in the concluding stanza."<sup>12</sup>

The ease and confidence with which Poe noticed grammatical errors in others' works suggests that he paid close attention to his early schoolbooks. Reviewing Hugh A. Pue's *Grammar of the English Language, in a Series of Letters, Addressed to Every American Youth*, Poe found numerous grammatical errors and concluded that "whether Mr. P.'s queer little book shall or shall not meet the views of 'Every American Youth,' will depend pretty much upon another question of high moment – whether 'Every American Youth' be or be not as great a nincompoop as Mr. Pue."<sup>13</sup> While a good grammarian, Poe nevertheless bristled at the kind of regimentation grammatical rules imposed. In his "Fifty Suggestions," written near the end of his life, he wrote, "Let the noblest poet add to his other excellences – if he dares – that of faultless versification and scrupulous attention to grammar. He is damned at once. His rivals have it in their power to discourse of 'A. the true poet, and B. the versifier and disciple of Lindley Murray.'"<sup>14</sup>

Young Poe was introduced to the fundamentals of the Anglican Church at the Dubourg school, too. A *Book of Common Prayer* and a

copy of John Lewis's *The Church Catechism Explained by Way of Question and Answer*, a work which had been in use for over a century, were among other expenses John Allan paid to the Dubourgs at the time.<sup>15</sup> Beyond its religious value, the *Book of Common Prayer* would have impressed Poe with the elegance of the English language. Most of the selections in Murray's *English Reader* came from the Augustan Age, but the prose of the Anglican prayer book, with its formal diction and long periods, hearkened back to the Elizabethan.

Poe also studied history and geography with the Dubourgs. He learned geography reading Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy's *Geography for Children: Or A Short and Easy Method of Teaching and Learning Geography*, a text in use since the 1730s, and he studied history with Christopher Irving's *A Catechism of the History of England*. Back in the United States, schoolchildren Poe's age were reading native history and geography texts written from highly nationalistic points of view. Unlike so many other Americans who grew up during and just after the War of 1812, Poe expressed little political animosity toward Great Britain. Far from it. His critical writings sometimes encouraged rapprochement between the two countries. Reviewing John Armstrong's *Notices of the War of 1812*, he wrote, "We are grieved . . . to see, even in the opening passages of the work, a piquancy and freedom of expression, in regard to the unhappy sources of animosity between America and the parent land, which can neither to-day nor hereafter answer any possible good end, and may prove an individual grain in a future mountain of mischief."<sup>16</sup> The dearth of American themes and characters in Poe's writings, aspects that have helped his works rise above the jingoistic breast-beating of his contemporaries, can be attributed partially to the cosmopolitan education he received from the Misses Dubourg.

Sometime in late 1817 or early 1818, Poe left the Dubourg school and began attending the Manor House School, Stoke Newington, about four miles from London. The school and its overseer, the Reverend John Bransby, would receive fictional treatment in Poe's "William Wilson." Most of the schoolbooks were the common property of the Manor House School and passed from one student to the next – if Poe's description in "William Wilson" can be believed: "Interspersed about the room, crossing and recrossing in endless irregularity, were innumerable benches and desks, black, ancient, and time-worn, piled desperately with much-bethumbed books."<sup>17</sup> Here, if not before, Poe began learning Latin. On 22 June, 1818,

John Allan wrote to a correspondent, “Edgar is a fine Boy and reads Latin pretty sharply.”<sup>18</sup> A good Latin education begins with *Aesop’s Fables*, and a copy of *Aesopi Fabulae* formerly in Poe’s possession survived into the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> The Reverend Bransby also exposed his students to British *belles lettres* and Latin verse. Another pupil remembered him as a “thorough scholar” who was “very apt at quotation, especially from Shakespeare and Horace.”<sup>20</sup> Poe also continued his study of English history with John Bigland’s *Letters on English History, for the Use of Schools* and may have read Bigland’s other textbooks treating geography, European history, and natural history.<sup>21</sup>

John Allan was proud of his young foster son’s scholarly prowess and often wrote to his uncle William Galt from London to tell him so. In three letters written during a four-month period which included Poe’s eleventh birthday, Allan wrote that Edgar “enjoys a good reputation and is both able and willing to receive instruction”; “is a verry fine Boy and a good Scholar”; and “by his own exertions he has repaired many Gaps [in his education] both in general literature and the Sciences.”<sup>22</sup> The books young Poe read at Stoke Newington would prepare him for the fine classical education he would receive upon his return to Virginia.

The London office of Allan and Ellis (John Allan had transposed the names in England) proved unsuccessful, so the Allan family returned to Richmond in the summer of 1820. Later that year, Poe began studying with Joseph H. Clarke, a schoolmaster who had recently relocated from Baltimore. In the advertisements for his Richmond school, Clarke stated that he taught the classical languages, writing, arithmetic, bookkeeping, geometry, trigonometry, navigation, surveying, gunnery, optics, astronomy, conic sections, algebra, mechanics, and geography, among many other subjects. Though the list seems hyperbolic, other evidence verifies that he provided his students with a broad education. Clarke, who lived into his tenth decade, recalled Poe reading “Ovid, Caesar, Virgil, Cicero, and Horace in Latin, and Xenophon and Homer in Greek.”<sup>23</sup> Though supplying several names, this recollection actually reveals little, for the works of these authors formed the core of any good classical education. John Allan’s account books show that he paid Clarke for a copy of *De officiis*, Cicero’s ethical treatise written as advice to a son, and an expensive edition of Horace’s works.<sup>24</sup> Besides *De officiis*,

Poe read several of Cicero's orations, knowledge of which was required for admission to the day's universities.<sup>25</sup> Ciceronian rhetoric, Marshall McLuhan has argued, significantly influenced Poe's outlook as well as his discursive style.<sup>26</sup>

Clarke also remembered Poe writing verse at the time, so the boy's interest in Horace is understandable. Schoolmate John T. L. Preston recalled Poe's enthusiasm: "He was very fond of the Odes of Horace, and repeated them so often in my hearing that I learned by sound the words of many, before I understood their meaning."<sup>27</sup> When his schoolbooks did not occupy his time, Poe read the important British belletristic writers. Lord Byron was an early favorite, and he admitted having modelled his youthful verse on Byron's. At this time he likely read such other modern British poets as Samuel T. Coleridge, Thomas Moore, and Percy Bysshe Shelley and such essayists as William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and Charles Lamb. Poe also recalled reading Washington Irving in his youth.<sup>28</sup> *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* had appeared in parts in 1819 and 1820; from then, complete editions were steadily available.

Poe spent three years at the school, but when Clarke left Richmond to return to Baltimore in 1823, his pupils transferred to William Burke's school. Like Clarke, Burke was a good classicist. Since he had already published a pamphlet, *Prosody of the Latin Language* (Richmond, 1816), Latin-versifying would have occupied a prominent place in Burke's teaching. Poe himself later admitted, "I have made prosody, in all languages which I have studied, a particular subject of inquiry."<sup>29</sup> Poe's extensive discussion of prosody, "The Rationale of Verse," may owe a modest debt to Burke. Later, Burke would publish a basic Latin textbook. The work would appear too late for Poe to use, but it provides a good indication of Burke's teaching approach. Since Burke based his textbook on Thomas Ruddiman's *Rudiments of the Latin Tongue*, a work generations of young Latin scholars had been using since the 1750s, Burke presumably taught from Ruddiman when Poe was his student.

There was little that Poe could learn from Burke that he had not already learned from Joseph Clarke, however. The reminiscence of Andrew Johnston, a fellow student at Burke's school, bears this out: "Poe was a much more advanced scholar than any of us; but there was no other class for him – that being the highest – and he had nothing to do, or but little, to keep his headship of the class. I dare say he liked it well, for he was fond of desultory reading, and even

then wrote verses.”<sup>30</sup> The relationship between Poe and the world of books Johnston described aptly conveys the attitude toward print culture Poe had formed during his childhood and adolescence. On one hand, books provided systems of knowledge, ways of organizing the world into knowable facts; on the other hand, books freed the imagination, allowing the reader to journey backward to antiquity and forward into the imaginary future. Young Poe may not have articulated himself precisely in these terms, but, as he read Byron while his classmates were reading Ruddiman’s *Rudiments*, he understood how the printed word could free as well as constrict the mind.

After opening its doors the year before, the University of Virginia began its second session on 1 February, 1826. The young man destined to become the most famous student matriculating that session had yet to reach Charlottesville, however. Poe did not arrive until mid-February at which time he registered for classes, signing up for Professor George Long’s Ancient Languages and Professor George Blaetterman’s Modern Languages. Most students took three courses, but, according to Poe, John Allan had not provided him with enough money to afford the tuition for a third class, which would have been mathematics. Nor did Poe have enough money to purchase the textbooks he needed. A week after he had arrived, he wrote home “for some more money, and for books.” He continued to write home for more books as needed, including a copy of Tacitus’ *Historiae*. Other necessary textbooks Poe purchased locally, buying them on credit at usurious rates.<sup>31</sup>

Outside the University, there were a few places students could go to get books. Retail shops selling general goods stocked some basic school texts: Cicero, Homer, Livy. They also stocked recent novels and other contemporary belletristic works. Jones’s bookstore was not far from campus. Since Poe could scarcely afford necessary textbooks, it seems unlikely he made many book purchases beyond the essential, but Jones, if his establishment were anything like other contemporary American bookshops, ran an informal circulating library. Here Poe may have found many books published the year he entered the University, several of which he came to know, including James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans*; Benjamin Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey*, a work which Poe would spoof in “King Pest”;<sup>32</sup> and Timothy Flint’s *Recollections of the Last Ten Years Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi*.



One of Poe's acquaintances recalled a local harnessmaker named Hermann Tucker who became successful enough at his trade to be able to expand his retail business into "a sort of curio store filled with second-hand articles." During Poe's time, Tucker's stock included books from a library "which had fallen under the auctioneer's hammer in order to satisfy a plantation debt."<sup>33</sup> According to the recollection, Poe became especially fond of a copy of Hogarth's prints from the library. That Hogarth appealed to Poe is unsurprising – George Bernard Shaw would associate the two.<sup>34</sup> Hogarth's depictions of London streetlife, with all its earthy detail, would have jived with the memories of anyone who spent their childhood there. Since Poe later devoted much thought to printed illustrations when he imagined his ideal magazine, his early attention to Hogarth takes on further significance. Like that of any Virginia plantation owner, the collection Tucker acquired would also have included many historical works and a wide variety of *belles lettres* including the *Spectator*, Chesterfield's *Letters*, Charles Johnstone's *Adventure of a Guinea*, and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, to name a few possibilities among the numerous eighteenth-century belletristic works Poe came to know.<sup>35</sup>

Of all his sources for books, Poe's fellow classmates were his likeliest. Since he had no qualms about borrowing money from other students, it seems unlikely Poe would have refrained from borrowing books from them. Few commodities are easier to borrow (or more difficult to return) than books.<sup>36</sup> Among a group of generally intelligent and well-to-do young men, Poe had the opportunity to talk about literature and exchange ideas with others, the kind of experience John Allan had seldom encouraged. Poe joined the Jefferson Literary Society and became its secretary. Members discussed what books they had read, made recommendations for reading, and shared writings of their own composition.

The attitudes expressed by members of the Jefferson Literary Society are not difficult to guess. Among the various literary genres, the most well respected were poetry and history. Though some eighteenth-century fiction writers had achieved considerable respect – Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett – fiction, by and large, still held a second-class status as a literary genre. Thomas Jefferson made no place for it in his organizational scheme for the University's library.<sup>37</sup> Writing histories or other non-fiction works was much more highly regarded than fiction-writing. Members of an

early nineteenth-century literary society could talk seriously about poetry or history-writing but seldom about novels. Sir Walter Scott, of course, was the major exception among contemporary writers of fiction, but his works were better labelled historical romances than novels. The example of Scott suggested that the only way to make fiction-writing respectable was to steep it in history.

Thomas Goode Tucker, a fellow student, remembered Poe voicing his opinions about literature multiple times. On one occasion, Poe read a lengthy story he had written only to have it laughed down by his friends. He became so incensed that he flung the manuscript into the fire.<sup>38</sup> Tucker further recalled that Poe was “fond of quoting poetic authors and reading poetic productions of his own” and also that he and Poe read the histories of David Hume and John Lingard while at the University of Virginia.<sup>39</sup>

The first three volumes of Lingard’s *History of England* appeared in 1819, and additional volumes were published during the 1820s. Lingard’s was the first serious, scholarly history of England to appear since Hume’s *History of England*. Though Hume’s work had achieved status as a literary classic by Poe’s day, it was by no means unassailable, and Lingard had set out, unostentatiously and inoffensively, to refute Hume historical era by historical era.<sup>40</sup> Discussing Hume and Lingard during the first half of 1826, Poe and Tucker were absolutely *outré*, for the contemporary British quarterlies were also discussing the relative merits of the two historians. Both the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review* attacked Lingard. Robert Southey, who wrote the *Quarterly Review* article, censured Lingard’s treatment of the Reformation. Reading and discussing the two historians, Poe and Tucker kept themselves abreast of one of the day’s important literary controversies. Though the quarterlies squabbled over religious issues, Poe may have noticed another key difference between the two works. Lingard’s was a political history while Hume had made literary history a part of England’s general history, the first important historian to do so.

While comparing Hume with Lingard was in vogue, Hume had long been compared to fellow Scottish historian, William Robertson. Such comparisons appeared in both the British and the American periodicals of Poe’s day. A contributor to Joseph Dennie’s *Port Folio* concluded that Hume “is often loose and careless in construction; and though he is unquestionably a graceful and an elegant writer, and, perhaps, unrivalled in the clearness and fluency of his narrative;