

## Chapter 1

# Life

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What has been termed the “enigma” of Edgar Allan Poe remains very much with us, even though he died in 1849. Some aspects of this enigma, which amount to slanting the truth, or to outright lies, originated with Poe himself.<sup>1</sup> Others were supplied by persons who knew him, by others who supposed that they knew about his personal circumstances and career, or by still others who falsified the record because they took suspect “facts” at face value. Consequently, a “Poe legend” emerged, which retains widespread currency today. One may not exaggerate in remarking that a biography, brief or lengthy, of Poe is published nearly every year, although exceedingly few facts about his life and career have been discovered since the late 1930s/early 1940s, and much must remain speculative about that life. The most reliable biography continues to be Arthur H. Quinn’s *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, which dates from 1941, but which as a factual narrative account of Poe’s life maintains its value.

An introductory book about Poe, such as this, requires sensible biographical treatment. Much in his life was anything but sensational; more often it became downright drudging, but drudgery did not suppress or distort Poe’s amazing creativity. Whether personal circumstances provided the mainspring in his creativity may, however, be questionable. Poe is often associated with the South because he spent most of his first twenty years in and around Richmond, Virginia. He was born, though, in Boston, Massachusetts, 7 October 1809, because his parents, David Poe, Jr. and Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins Poe, an emigrant from Great Britain, were traveling stage actors, who happened to be working in Boston when Edgar was born. Their older son, William Henry Leonard Poe, born 1807, had been left in the care of his father’s parents, David Poe, Sr. and Elizabeth Cairnes Poe, Baltimore citizens. “General” Poe, as the grandfather was called because he had contributed his fortune to assist the Revolutionary War, was a well-known personage in that city.

Baptized just Edgar, this second child of David and Elizabeth Poe at the age of two years entered a world vastly different from that of itinerant actors. Elizabeth Poe’s acting abilities surpassed her husband’s, and, after the birth of a third child, Rosalie, in 1810, employment took her to Richmond, Virginia in the

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autumn of 1811. David Poe had earlier that year deserted his family, although the precise causes for his decamping have never been determined. Mrs. Poe became ill and died in December. Local citizens rallied to support the dying woman and, shortly, her orphaned children, Edgar and Rosalie. Taken into the home of Mr. and Mrs. William Mackenzie, Rosalie became known as Rosalie Mackenzie Poe and lived thereafter in the Washington, DC area. Edgar became the foster child (he was never adopted) of childless John and Frances Valentine Allan, Richmond dwellers. Scottish John Allan had emigrated to Richmond, where he operated a mercantile business in partnership with Charles Ellis. Edgar later signed himself “Edgar A. Poe” (the “Allan” part of his name is frequently misspelled). During his youth he was much indulged, chiefly by Mrs. Allan and her sister, Nancy Valentine, of whom Edgar retained fond memories.

Poe received such private schooling as was then deemed suitable for educating children in prosperous families, and during these early years he apparently maintained cordial relations with the Allans. In 1815 John Allan decided to travel to Great Britain to promote his firm’s commercial interests. His family accompanied him, first to Scotland, then to England, where Edgar attended the Reverend John Bransby’s Manor House School, at Stoke Newington, a rural area near London. The school would later figure in “William Wilson.” Poe left no other reminiscences of his years in Great Britain; the Allan family returned to Richmond in 1820. There Poe studied for several years in the school of Joseph H. Clarke, then at another for what was essentially instruction in Classics and Mathematics. Poe in these years befriended Robert Stanard, whose mother, Jane Stith Stanard, is often cited as the inspiration of Poe’s poem “To Helen,” published in his *Poems* (1831).

Life for the Allans changed with the death of John Allan’s uncle, William Galt, in 1825. Allan inherited immense wealth, and Edgar assumed that, as a foster son, the wealth would eventually pass to him. Allan philandered, however, fathering several illegitimate children, and those alliances were to prove disastrous for Edgar. Poe’s own romantic attraction to Sarah Elmira Royster, a neighbor, was thwarted by her father, who may have considered the pair too young to marry. Their letters were intercepted, a situation of which Poe remained unaware until long after Elmira had married Alexander B. Shelton, a husband much older than she, and wealthy, who was approved by her father.

In 1826 Poe entered the University of Virginia, where he did well in Classics and Modern Languages. He also accrued high gambling debts because of Allan’s parsimony in providing him funds, which lack of money much distressed Poe. Allan refused to pay Poe’s debts, so the young man enlisted in the army

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as “Edgar A. Perry.” He was stationed on Sullivan’s Island, off the coast of South Carolina, a locale he would use later in “The Gold-Bug,” one of his most popular stories. He was subsequently reassigned to the Boston area. His first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), published by Calvin S. Thomas of that city, read on the title page “By a Bostonian,” perhaps to forestall identification of the author if the book was abusively reviewed.

That Poe chose to be a poet instead of preparing to join Allan’s firm, that Poe’s early poems too nearly resembled those of Byron and Shelley, and that his performance at the university displeased his foster father: these and other circumstances (Poe’s possible awareness of Allan’s affairs and resulting illegitimate children) worsened relations between the two men. The death of Frances Allan, plus Allan’s remarriage and several more children, led to additional conflicts, as did Poe’s second book, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* (1829), published in Baltimore by Hatch and Dunning. Allan did permit Poe to shift military activities so that the young man could matriculate into the military academy at West Point. Again Poe excelled as long as he saw fit to pursue the mandated regimen, but, disliking life in the Academy, he got himself court-martialed and expelled.

At West Point, Poe trained specifically as an artificer, one who makes bullets and other explosives. Such care as must be exercised, else explosive consequences occur, may account for Poe’s careful and parallel structuring in many of his poems and fictions, which often move very carefully from low-key openings to sensational endings.<sup>2</sup> During his stay at West Point Poe prepared another volume entitled simply *Poems* (1831), published in New York City by Elam Bliss. This book was dedicated to the West Point cadets, whose expectations that it would contain comic poems aimed chiefly at activities and persons at the Academy led to their underwriting publication costs. Poe may have composed humorous takeoffs on local activities and persons while he remained at West Point, but the poetry as published embodied no mirth, running instead to visionary, idealistic, often gloomy substance. Alongside the Byronic “Tamerlane” and Shelleyean “Al Aaraaf” appeared “Irenë” (later revised as “The Sleeper”), a realistic poem depicting grief in the survivor of a beloved woman, as well as funeral customs of the era, and “To Helen,” an exquisite lyric (the first of two Poe poems with that title).

Leaving West Point, Poe made his way into New York City, where he negotiated publication of his *Poems*, thence to Baltimore, where he joined others in the home of his grandmother, Elizabeth Poe, widowed and invalided, cared for by her daughter, Maria Poe Clemm. The household included Virginia and Henry, Mrs. Clemm’s children, and Poe’s older brother, who was ill and soon died. The family was extremely poor, having vainly attempted to obtain a pension

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from the federal government for Mrs. Poe because of her late husband's efforts for Revolutionary War causes. Edgar himself tried, unavailingly, to secure her such remuneration.<sup>3</sup> From the time he left the Allan household, Poe's major demon, so to speak, was poverty. More than any other cause, hardships and worries regarding scanty financial means troubled Poe's life.

Receiving no income and little renown from his poetry, but determined to pursue a career in authorship, Poe in the early 1830s shifted his talents to the writing of fiction. These years remain the most vague period in his life, but he evidently undertook an extensive-intensive course of familiarizing himself with what constituted best-selling short fiction, which then highlighted either horrors, derived from antecedent Gothic tradition, or comic themes, or combinations of humor and horror. These features were especially noticeable in tales published by *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, though that periodical was not the sole purveyor of terror tales. Either from his desperate need for money or because he divined the nature of horror fiction, Poe initially created short stories which, like many of his poems, often, though not exclusively, feature a trajectory from fairly low-key openings to sensational denouements. Thus he adapted the popular terror tale, so prominent especially in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.

Poe's first five published tales appeared anonymously in a newspaper, the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, during 1832. Poe entered a competition sponsored by the *Courier*, for the best tale, but the prize went to another. Given the imperfect copyright conditions at the time, Poe's works could be published without his consent or even his knowledge. The opening of the first one published, "Metzengerstein," may well characterize much in his creative writing: "Horror and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages. Why then give a date to the story I have to tell?"<sup>4</sup> The narrator's thoughts might be Poe's own when he wrote fiction, because most of his tales, even when they contain comic elements, follow this paradigm.

Poe soon competed for another prize, sponsored by the Baltimore *Saturday Visitor*, a weekly newspaper, which offered money awards for the best poem and the best tale. The writings were submitted anonymously, and the judges were astonished upon discovering that they had awarded the prizes for poem and tale to Poe. They gave him the prize for the tale "MS. Found in a Bottle," but, thinking that the same writer should not take both prizes, they awarded John Hill Hewitt's "Song of the Winds" that for poetry. Since Hewitt was associated with the *Visitor*, Poe was angered at what he assumed was complicity; consequently he assaulted Hewitt, thus making an enemy who long outlived him, and who published reminiscences unflattering to Poe late in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

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More important for Poe's literary career, one of the judges in the *Visiter* contest was John P. Kennedy, an established older writer, who became acquainted with and sympathetic to Poe's literary aspirations. Kennedy's influence led to the impoverished young writer's obtaining work on a new magazine owned by Thomas White, in Richmond, Virginia, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and to the publication of some of Poe's tales in literary annuals and gift books. Thus Poe's career as author and literary critic commenced with what seemed to be a dynamic start. His critical opinions, set forth in many reviews he published in the *Messenger* and other magazines, won widespread notice in an era when the print media were gaining importance across the USA. Poe the critic often caustically responded to what he considered inferior writing, earning him the nickname "Tomahawk Man."

Among Poe's *Messenger* reviews, two doubtless engendered particularly intense and long-lasting hostility from the powerful literary establishment in New York City. Poe absolutely demolished a novel, *Norman Leslie*, by Theodore Sedgwick Fay, a prominent New York author; and he was no less virulent in evaluating Morris Mattson's novel *Paul Ulric* (both 1835). Poe accurately condemned both for bad writing, and he accused Mattson of plagiarizing Sir Walter Scott's *Anne of Geierstein*. These novels were published by the prestigious, powerful Harper and Brothers, in New York City, where both writers were important. Therefore Poe came rapidly into ill repute with persons such as Lewis Gaylord Clark, editor of the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, in the pages of which Clark later spared no effort to calumniate Poe. The "Paulding-Drayton Review" (1836), a sympathetic assessment of two pro-slavery books, has been erroneously ascribed to Poe, though the author was actually Nathaniel Beverley Tucker. That Poe would share the sentiments in this review is debatable; White insisted on publishing in the *Messenger* what he himself wished, and he cultivated Tucker's acquaintance.

Presuming on a steady income, Poe married Virginia Clemm, his cousin, in 1836, and provided a home for her and her widowed mother, but differences with White led to his leaving Richmond in 1837 to seek literary work in northern publishing centers. The Poes went first, briefly, to New York City, though their sojourn there and especially the year 1838 remain biographically unclear. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, the early chapters of which were published in the *Messenger* for January 1837, appeared in book form in 1838, published in New York by Harpers in July and in London by Wiley & Putnam in October. In September 1838 the Baltimore *American Museum* published "Ligeia," which Poe several times was to cite as his finest tale, and in November "How To Write a Blackwood Article" ("The Psyche Zenobia"); its sequel, "A Predicament" ("The Scythe of Time") also appeared there.

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The Poes moved next to Philadelphia, where Edgar secured editorial work with *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, which published two of his finest tales in late 1839: "The Fall of the House of Usher" (September) and "William Wilson" (October). Poe also contemplated establishing his own literary periodical, the *Penn Magazine*, which project did not come to fruition. His two-volume hard-cover *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1839, but dated 1840), published by Lea & Blanchard, included mostly tales published earlier in periodicals, with little new material. As Vincent Buranelli notes, though, publication of this book constitutes "one of the great events in American letters."<sup>6</sup> Since *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* contains some of Poe's finest work, Buranelli's statement is well taken. Poe's name was also given as author of *The Conchologist's First Book* (1839), a book about animal life. The book was actually the work of Peter S. Duval and Thomas Wyatt, though Poe lent his name and some editorial work for what was a new edition, cheaper than the original, published by Harpers, who declined to reprint, so the new edition was published in Philadelphia. Poe performed like service for Thomas Wyatt's *A Synopsis of Natural History* (1839), though he was not named as author.

Poe and Burton eventually quarreled, so Poe was discharged, but in November Burton sold his magazine to George R. Graham, who merged it with his own *Casket* to become *Graham's Magazine*, with Poe as editor. He continued to publish his own works in the magazine, notably "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), which proved to be the first of three tales centered in the investigations and revelations of a French amateur sleuth, Monsieur C. A. Dupin, whose exploits are narrated by an imperceptive, nameless narrator. These two furnish the model for Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, as well as many other such pairs in the annals of crime fiction. This tale provided many other foundations that continue into the present-day detective story. Other notable tales from this time are "The Oval Portrait" (1842, as "Life in Death") and "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842, as "The Mask of the Red Death. A Fantasy"), and an important review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* that same year. His renowned "solution" to Charles Dickens's novel *Barnaby Rudge* appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 1 May, and another of his most important tales, "Eleonora," in *The Gift for 1842* (1841).

During these Philadelphia years Poe became well acquainted with literary circles and figures, including Henry B. Hirst, a writer/attorney, and Thomas Dunn English, a medical doctor/writer. A third writer, Frederick W. Thomas, also came to figure significantly in Poe's career desires. Poe had less than favorably reviewed Thomas's first novel, *Clinton Bradshaw* (1835), in the *Messenger*, but he later expressed a more favorable opinion of the novel, and the two men

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remained friendly. Thomas was to be instrumental in Poe's attempt to seek political office, at a time when, imagining that he had "written himself out," Poe considered other career options than literary work, during the administration of President John Tyler, though that endeavor came to naught.<sup>7</sup> Poe did not cease to write, however, and two of his notable tales, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" and "The Tell-Tale Heart," appeared respectively in *Snowden's Ladies Companion* (1842–43) and in a new, short-lived periodical, *The Pioneer* (1843), edited by James Russell Lowell.

Disagreements with Graham over content for the magazine led to Poe's resignation and temporary unemployment. During this time he went to interview with President John Tyler for a political post, with assistance from Frederick Thomas and Jesse Dow, who knew Tyler's son. Poe got drunk, however, thus ruining any chance for a presidential appointment. He contributed to Thomas C. Clarke's weekly mammoth newspaper, the *Saturday Museum*, where a biographical sketch of Poe by Hirst, with information supplied by Poe, appeared in February and was reprinted in March 1843. For a time, once again attempting to produce his own literary magazine, Poe negotiated with Clarke about that venture, but no publication ever saw light. Poe published "The Gold-Bug," yet another prize-winning tale, in the *Philadelphia Dollar Newspaper* (21 and 28 June). This tale was widely reprinted, was dramatized by Silas S. Steele, and became Poe's first genuine national success. He also negotiated with William H. Graham, brother of George R. Graham, to publish a series, *The Prose Romances of Edgar A. Poe*. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Man That Was Used Up," a gruesome and a comic tale, appeared in pamphlet form, but no more parts followed. In late 1844 "The Purloined Letter" appeared in *The Gift for 1845*, and "Thou Art the Man," a parody of his detective – or, as he preferred, ratiocinative – tales, in *Godey's*.

In 1844 the Poe household relocated to New York, finally settling in rural Fordham, where Poe spent the remainder of his life. In 1842 Virginia began to display symptoms of tuberculosis, which resulted in her death in January 1847. Poe's career took an upward direction for several years, commencing with publication of what has become his best-known poem, "The Raven," in the New York City *Evening Mirror* (29 January 1845) and the *American Review* (February), continuing with his lecture "Poets of America," being honored with a biographical sketch by James Russell Lowell in *Graham's Magazine* (February), for which Poe himself supplied much of the information, and reaching a peak when he began to write for, then to edit/own, a new literary weekly, *The Broadway Journal*, which continued publication into early 1846. In assuming control he alienated a former owner, Charles F. Briggs, who would cruelly caricature him in a novel, *The Trippings of Tom Pepper* (1847). Poe also

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formed friendships with other writers, notably Frances S. Osgood, Nathaniel Parker Willis and Evert A. Duyckinck.

Poe's friendship with Duyckinck led to two volumes of his work appearing in Wiley & Putnam's "Library of America" Series, *Tales* (Summer 1845) and *The Raven and other Poems* (November, but dated 1846). Poe objected to the contents in the former volume, complaining that Duyckinck had selected the tales, twelve in all, and that he, Poe, would rather not have included all three of his Dupin stories and "The Gold-Bug," i.e. his ratiocinative tales. Nevertheless, the books were noticed. Combined with the attention given to "The Raven," which was frequently reprinted, these books promoted awareness of Poe throughout America. In England, too, Wiley and Putnam books enjoyed good sales, and several of Poe's writings had been circulating, beginning with the London branch of Wiley and Putnam's pirating *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. *Bentley's Miscellany* during 1840 pirated "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Assignment" (using its earlier title, "The Visionary"), from *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, without crediting Poe's authorship. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," in several pirated reprints (and with a different title), caused a sensation in Great Britain, where readers could not distinguish what might have been scientifically verifiable information from fiction.

Several less pleasant events assisted in bringing Poe's reputation into question in America. Invited to read an original poem to the Boston Lyceum on 16 October 1845, Poe instead first spoke about poetry, then read "Al Aaraaf," which performance puzzled and outraged the audience and led to denunciations of him in the press. Poe responded in the *Broadway Journal*, stating that he had been drunk during the performance and that he had intentionally perpetrated a hoax upon his listeners. Poe's reputation sank lower when he became involved in scandalous rumors concerning letters written to him by Mrs. Osgood and by another New York writer, Mrs. Elizabeth Ellet, the latter attempting to capitalize on her acquaintance with him to further her own literary ambitions. A nasty encounter with Thomas Dunn English was just one result of the trouble started by Mrs. Ellet. English henceforth became a relentless enemy of Poe, defaming his writings and morals in columns of a comic periodical, the *John-Donkey*, and long afterward, in reminiscences in the *Independent*, English unfavorably portrayed long-dead Poe.

The demise of the *Broadway Journal* in January 1846, from financial losses, left Poe without a publication he could control, though he continued to write and bring out his works in other periodicals. One essay that has long retained influence, "The Philosophy of Composition," in *Graham's Magazine* (April 1846), purports to reveal his creative methods in "The Raven." Poe evidently

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wrote this essay to promote himself since his poem had attracted widespread attention, though many readers still overlook comic possibilities in the essay. Poe told Frederick Thomas that “the bird beat the bug [“The Gold-Bug,” which had been popular] all hollow,”<sup>8</sup> and so he wanted to maintain the vitality of “The Raven,” however he might.

Moreover, Poe did not have to visit graveyards to gain inspiration any more than he had to have himself buried alive (temporarily) in order to write such convincing tales as “The Cask of Amontillado,” “Loss of Breath,” “The Fall of the House of Usher” or his hoax on that theme, “The Premature Burial.” Furthermore, that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic of all themes may involve wordplay on Poe’s own name and career. The death of a beautiful woman being the most *Poe-etic* [emphasis mine] of all themes adds ironic implication to this oft quoted/cited dictum. Poe may have comprehended what he did well – though dying young women and men were popular literary characters in his era – and enjoyed insinuating wordplay into “The Philosophy of Composition.” Like wordplay on his name occurs in the tale “Silence – A Fable,” to be discussed in the section on fiction.

A different variety of humor characterized another cluster of Poe’s writings, a series entitled “The Literati of New York City,” which began in another popular magazine, *Godey’s*, in May 1846. These were fairly satiric sketches of well-known writers, especially those who had earned Poe’s disapprobation. Since several sketches contained unkind remarks about their subjects, Louis Godey ended the series with the sixth installment. Thomas Dunn English’s hostile published response to Poe’s article on him led to a lawsuit, decided in Poe’s favor the next year. The “Literati” sketches did nothing to improve Poe’s standing in the northeastern literary establishment, which began to ignore his submissions for publication.

Because of publishing difficulties, and with Virginia’s illness worsening, Poe resorted to drinking, which continued after her death on 30 January 1847. Mrs. Clemm remained with Poe, managed the household, and mothered the bereft man. “Ulalume,” one of Poe’s greatest poems, was composed during this year. Any autobiographical intent is uncertain. Although Virginia’s death may relate to the speaker’s own sadness over the loss of Ulalume, the situation may also have little or no personal foundation. Poe’s reiterated comment when theorizing about poetry, that the death of a beautiful woman was the most poetic of all themes, is relevant to “Ulalume” in one respect because of brief life expectancy during the nineteenth century. Poe’s interests in astrology may also have motivated his writing of this poem, which appeared in December 1847.

In early 1848 Poe began to lecture on “The Universe,” a topic he expanded into a book, *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, later that year. He also met Sarah Helen

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Whitman, a poet, from Providence, Rhode Island, the “Helen” of his second poem “To Helen.” They commenced a brief courtship, which ended either when Poe’s drinking became too habitual or because he feigned drunkenness to break the engagement. He also befriended Mrs. Nancy Richmond, “Annie,” of Lowell, Massachusetts, and planned a lecture to be delivered in October in that city, but no lecture was given. Poe wrote to Mrs. Richmond that he had taken a life-endangering dose of laudanum, an opium compound in popular use in Poe’s lifetime. Whether he attempted suicide or even took the laudanum has never been determined. He may have fabricated the episode to play upon Mrs. Richmond’s sympathies. Whatever the case, Poe prepared a lecture, which he delivered at the Earl House for members of the Providence Lyceum on 20 December 1848. This lecture was published as “The Poetic Principle,” which appeared posthumously in *Sartain’s Union Magazine* (1850).

The year 1849 was a busy one for Poe. *Graham’s Magazine* and the *Messenger* brought out several of his works, but more of his writings appeared in the *Flag of Our Union*, a Boston weekly. Poe had no high regard for this periodical, but its generous payments kept him returning. Works inspired by the California gold rush, “Von Kempelen and His Discovery” (a hoax tale), “Eldorado” and “For Annie” (poems more positive in theme and tone than those one usually associates with Poe’s poems), and the sardonic tale “Hop-Frog,” were published in the *Flag*. Two more poems, “The Bells” and “Annabel Lee,” were completed and sold to Sartain for the *Union Magazine*. Poe left Fordham for the South in late June, but stopped in Philadelphia, where he seems to have suffered delirium tremens from too much alcohol. Recovering, he went on to Richmond, where he renewed ties with old friends. He also became engaged to Elmira Shelton, his early sweetheart who was now a widow, though her children were not happy with this match. Poe lectured on “The Poetic Principle,” once in Norfolk (14 September), then twice (17 and 24 September) in Richmond. He visited several times with John Daniel (editor of the *Richmond Examiner*, a newspaper), who agreed to publish revised versions of some of his poems.

Poe planned to return to Fordham, then marry. Subsequent events remain unclear because of conflicting testimonies from those who saw him during his final days in Richmond. He apparently left on a steamer for Baltimore on 27 September, after which no trace of his whereabouts can be established until 3 October, when he was found incoherent in a Baltimore tavern. His old friend Dr. Joseph E. Snodgrass and Henry Herring, Poe’s uncle by marriage, took him to Washington Hospital, where he was attended by Dr. John J. Moran, and where he remained unconscious then delirious, until he died early on Sunday morning, 7 October. The precise causes of Poe’s death have never been determined. Hypotheses run a gamut from stroke, to undiagnosed diabetes