

Chapter Two

The Raven

The most famous poem in American history has its origins in an actual, individual bird. Following the runaway popularity of *The Pickwick Papers*, Charles Dickens settled into work on *Barnaby Rudge*, a book that would prove a troubled labor and a mixed success. With part of the manuscript written, Dickens began publishing it in serial installments in his own short-lived magazine, *Master Humphrey's Clock*. But he quickly bogged down, partly because his wife was in the midst of a difficult pregnancy of her own. Sitting at his desk “staring with an appearance of extraordinary interest” at the same page of a book for hours on end, he would occasionally ramble down to the stable where the family kept a pet raven named Grip, whom Dickens had taken a particular shine to. Grip’s propensities for biting the children on the ankles and burying his pocket change in the yard Dickens wrote off as mere play, and he found the bird’s movements and mimicry hypnotizing. His “accomplishments [have] been daily ripening and enlarging for the last twelve months to the increasing mirth and delight of all of us,” said a friend.

For whatever reason, Grip’s bouncing about seems to have leavened Dickens’s spirit and inspired him with the idea to immortalize Grip in the book itself. Writing his illustrator, George Cattermole, in late January 1841, Dickens asked: “I want to know whether you *feel* ravens in general, and would fancy Barnaby’s raven in particular. Barnaby being an idiot, my notion is to have him always in company with a pet raven who is immeasurably more knowing than himself. To this end, I have been studying my bird, and think I could make a very queer character of him.” With that Dickens was off and running. By February he could write proudly: “I have...done a very fair morning’s work, at which I have sat very close, and been blessed besides with a clear view of the end of the volume. As the contents of one number usually require a day’s thought at the very least, and often more, this puts me in great spirits. I think—that is, I hope—the story takes a great stride at this point, and takes it *well*. *Nous verrons*. [We shall see.] Grip will be strong.”

Unfortunately, precisely as Grip was being immortalized as a fictional character his real-life counterpart determined to consume the shiny bits of a chaise-and-four parked at the stable. Returning from a writing retreat in early March, Dickens found that his pet had “ripped the lining off the carriage and eat[en] the paint off the wheels.” If he’d had all summer, “I think he would have eat it all bodily,” Dickens laughed. But then Grip began swooning around like Hamlet, having “lost all his mirth and foregone his customary exercises.” Dosed with castor oil and fed his favorite gruel, Grip rallied enough to bite Toppings, the coachman, which Dickens took as a promising sign. But the next day, Toppings appeared at his writing desk to say that the bird had died. “He did it with great caution and delicacy,” Dickens noted, “preparing me by the remark that ‘a jolly queer start had taken place’; but the shock was very great notwithstanding.”

Dickens sent a note of condolence to circulate among Grip’s local admirers. He wittily narrated the bird’s final moments in the accepted style, signed the letter “in profound sorrow,” and sealed it in black wax, with a depiction, added by his illustrator, of Grip’s ascension to heaven. Beneath all the playful insouciance, however, Dickens had loved the bird. In the strange confluence of his own writer’s block, his wife’s pregnancy, and Grip’s oddities of character, there was something that Dickens wanted preserved. And so he had Grip stuffed, encased in glass, and installed in his study to be his permanent writing companion.

Two months later, Grip’s literary alter-ego had a profound effect on another writer, who reviewed the first few installments of *Barnaby Rudge* for the *Saturday Evening Post*. For Poe, the decision to make the raven and Barnaby essential each to the other—to complete each other in some mystical way—was both “beautiful” and “strikingly original,” and he predicted that Grip’s “frequently, appropriately, and prophetically heard” croakings were to be responsible “for some of the most exciting incidents of the story.” Ten months later, in a second review in *Graham’s*, this time of the whole of *Barnaby*, Poe admitted that he had been *slightly* disappointed in the uses to which Dickens put the raven. Not having Dickens’ fondness for the original, he thought the fictional Grip occasionally too comical when he ought more consistently to have been the prophetic voice of doom.

This criticism Poe offered as one writer to another, and, indeed, the whole review reads as if he intended Dickens to read it and to find in him a transatlantic peer when it came to narrative strategy. And almost surely this was precisely his intention, because, by the time he wrote the review, Dickens was at the start of his American tour.

“I can give you no conception of my welcome,” Dickens wrote of his arrival in America. “There never was a King or Emperor upon the earth so cheered and followed by crowds, and entertained at splendid balls and dinners and waited upon by public bodies of all kinds.... If I go out in a carriage, the crowd surrounds it and escorts me home; if I go to the theatre, the whole house (crowded to the roof) rises as one man, and timbers ring again. You cannot imagine what it is. I have five public dinners on hand at this moment, and invitations from every town and village and city in the United States.” Dickens was not exaggerating, but he soon wished he had been, for what began as a gratifying reception swelled into an annoying and occasionally alarming love-fest. In Philadelphia a

throng of four hundred surrounded his hotel and Dickens had to suffer “his arm to be...shaken off” rather than risk a city riot. So many women wanted snippets of his signature curls that newspapers began joking that there was no way he would make it back to England anything short of bald. “Eying his profuse flow of ‘soap locks’ with a most envious glance,” noted the *Public Ledger*?, women seemed to be plotting how the author could be “thrown into a mesmeric sleep, that they could plunder his cranium of its drapery undiscovered.” (No worries, noted a savvy advertiser. If the Boz was snatched bald there was a “Balm in Gilead”—the “Balm of Columbia”—which rubbed on any “bald pate [restores] hair to its pristine luxuriance and beauty.”) In fairness, no one actually tore locks of Dickens’s hair, but, during one gala women did bribe a waiter to retrieve his hat from the hat-checker and “the lovely dears plucked off all the nap, and put it in their bosoms as a memento.” (When Dickens retrieved his hat at the end of the evening he said “he imagined it had the small-pox.”)

Now, Poe was an avid fan of few writers. But to the extent that he worshipped anybody, he worshipped Dickens. The question was: how to get his attention? Surely he didn’t need yet another sycophantic American lapping at his heels. (Or as a Philadelphia newspaper critic put it: “Let us dine Boz—let us feed Boz, but not let us lick his dish after he has eaten out of it.”) So, like any desperate admirer, Poe decided to take a chance. Instead of purely puffing *Barnaby Rudge* he would read it more closely than any other critic and dare to point out all the little places and ways in which it might have been *improved*. To make sure that Dickens would take his critique in the right way, Poe first noted that with *Barnaby Rudge* the Boz had at last destroyed the publishing “dogma that no work of fiction can fully suit, at the same time, the critical and the popular taste.” He also began with a parable. Once upon a time, the god Apollo had written an excellent poem and submitted it to a critic, who had offered up a severe censure of what all knew was a beautiful work of art. Apollo then asked the critic to list some of the beauties of the work, but the critic had “only troubled himself about the errors.” In the parable, Apollo then gives the critic a sack of unwinnowed wheat and told him “to pick out all the chaff for his pains.” But “we have not fully made up our minds that the God was in the right,” Poe concluded, whereupon he proceeded to compose his clever list of close-readings and critical-improvements. Rhetorically it’s a work of genius. He has flattered Dickens vanity by calling him a god, and he has implied that even gods get lonely—they want to trade secrets and talk shop with true peers who can evaluate and appreciate their work. It is as if Poe said to Dickens: you are a god; but I am a god too, if a smaller one; come play with me.

Dickens might have rewarded Poe with the social equivalent of a sack of unwinnowed wheat. Instead he gave him an interview. With the invitation to meet and a copy of the review, Poe had sent along his own *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Dickens had barely noticed it—he “glanced” over it, he said—but he did look “more particularly at the papers to which you called my attention” and concluded “I have the greater pleasure in expressing my desire to see you on this account.” Clearly, Apollo had to cuff the critic a little. But Dickens appended some chatty insider-stuff about one of the writers Poe had mentioned in his review: “Apropos of the ‘construction’ of *Caleb Williams*, do you know that Godwin wrote it backwards,— the last volume first,—and that when he had produced the hunting down of Caleb, and the catastrophe, he waited for months, casting about for a means of accounting for what he had done?” This was a hopeful sign: two gods conversing about a third.

Thus it was with rare happiness that Poe attended upon Dickens on March 7, 1842, at his room at the United States Hotel in Philadelphia. In preparation for their talk, he had procured an advance copy of Rufus Griswold’s forthcoming anthology, *Poets and Poetry of America*. He had wanted the book not merely so he could read some of his poetry to the Boz but to show it displayed alongside the work of such American luminaries as Halleck, Bryant, and Longfellow. Unfortunately, Dickens didn’t think Americans as a rule were very bright. His friend, Thomas Carlyle, he knew, was always making an exception of Emerson. The rest, Carlyle had said, “belong alas, alas, to the species Bore.” (Mrs. Carlyle had been even more savage, claiming that Emerson was the only person worth knowing in America.) Thus it seems that Dickens listened politely through one or two readings of Poe’s own poems before asking if the volume contained any Emerson. Poe, with mixed emotions, must have admitted that it did, and began Emerson’s ode to “The Humble Bee”:

BURLY, dozing humble-bee,
Where thou art is clime for me.
Let them sail for Porto Rique,
Far-off heats through seas to seek;
I will follow thee alone,
Thou animated torrid-zone!
Zigzag steerer, desert cheerer,
Let me chase thy waving lines;
Keep me nearer, me thy hearer,

Singing over shrubs and vines.

Now, suffice to say, Poe and Emerson would not have seen eye-to-eye on the idea of the humble-bee as a “yellow-breeched philosopher” (line 53); and probably Poe didn’t even understand what he was reading when he pronounced: “Wait, I prithee, till I come / Within earshot of thy hum,— / All without is martyrdom” (lines 17-19 Poe himself had said in print, just two months before, that “Emerson belongs to a class of gentlemen with whom we have no patience whatever”— self-enraptured obscurantists whose impenetrable notions become popular precisely because no one understands them. Emerson, however, preached a gospel of self-reliance, Poe the gospel of the self-unreliable. Nevertheless, here he was, in an American hotel room, reading poetry to Charles Dickens, and, undoubtedly, he was satisfied at that.

To be sure, Poe also hoped his new connection with the great Boz could be put to selfish ends. The reality of an American writer’s situation was only too well-known to him. As he himself had written in 1836, Americans would only read “the productions of our native writers...after repeated assurances from England that such productions were not altogether contemptible.” (Alexis de Tocqueville had said the same: in making “up their minds upon the merit of their authors, [Americans] generally wait till his fame has been ratified in England.”) It was imperative to Poe then that he secure an English publisher for an edition of his tales, and given his exorbitant fame, Dickens could have done a great deal for him if he had been inclined.

He was not inclined. Returned to England, Dickens lost Poe’s letter, then blamed his secretary, then waited nine months before claiming he had mentioned Poe’s book to all the publishers with whom he had any influence and “one and all [had] declined the venture.” (In fact, Dickens had written to *one* publisher, Edward Moxon, and then only to secure a rejection he could forward to Poe. “Pray write me such a reply as I can send to the author,” he said, that I may “get absolution for my conscience in this matter.”) Dickens then assured Poe: “Believe me that it never, for a moment, escaped my recollection [to do] all in my power to bring [this] to a successful issue [and] do not for a moment suppose that I have ever thought of you but with a pleasant recollection.” By successively drawing Poe’s attention to the very idea he was denying, Dickens seems to have been, as he later proved, disingenuous. The coup de grace came, appropriately, at the end: “The only consolation I can give you,” he told Poe, “is that I do not believe any collection of detached pieces by an *unknown* writer, even though he were an Englishman, would be at all likely to find a publisher in this metropolis just now.” It is never inspiring to be called an unknown, particularly by an idol. But Dickens was the best-known writer in the English-speaking world, Poe consoled himself, and anyone would be an “unknown” by that standard. And so Poe tried not to read between Dickens’s lines, tried not to see in the Boz’s protestations of regard the labor of a man who doth protest too much.

And then Dickens published his anonymous review of “American Poetry” in the January 1844 issue of *Foreign Quarterly Review*. “Before we close this article,” the author promised, “we hope to satisfy the reader that, with two or three exceptions, there is not a poet of mark in the whole [American] Union.” Reading the review for the first time, Poe’s heart must have quickened. Would he be one of the few singled out for praise? Was it possible there had been a *mutual* recognition of genius in his interview with Dickens? The first prize for originality went to Longfellow, but he had the unfair advantage of a European education so “we have some doubts whether he can be fairly considered an indigenous [American] specimen.” This left a single slot for a truly original American poet, and that went to...Emerson and his humble bee. “Without being in the slightest degree an imitation [the poem] constantly reminds us of the gorgeous beauty of L’Allegro,” the anonymous critic intoned. And “there is pleasant wisdom hived in the bag of [this] ‘yellow-breeched philosopher’.” Emerson had not written much poetry, the critic admitted, but this was to his credit also. “Mr. Emerson evidently cares little about any reputation to be gained by writing verses; his intellect seeks other vents, where it is untrammelled by forms and conditions. But he cannot help his inspiration.” His was a native, natural, American genius.

Poe must have been mildly crushed at this. Dickens wouldn’t even have known about Emerson’s “yellow-breeched philosopher” if Poe hadn’t read it to him. Then the review worsened. Where Emerson was an American original who had won a reputation without trying, Poe, the review concluded, was an American “mocking-bird,” a semi-skilled “imitator” of Tennyson who could sing but “a solitary note” of his own. Though the article went on to handle other poets even more roughly, Poe was devastated. Friends sought to assure him that Dickens hadn’t really written it, and there was a great deal of speculation in the press as to the identity of the anonymous critic who could so cavalierly dismiss virtually the whole of American poetry. “THE ARTICLE in the *Foreign Quarterly*...is attributed by many to the pen of Dickens,” noted the *Spirit of the Times*. “We know not why. It certainly bears not one of his characteristics. We don’t believe the rumor.” Poe did believe it. “It has been denied that Dickens wrote it,” he said to a friend, “but, to me, the article affords so strong internal evidence of his hand that I would as soon think of doubting my existence.” “Nearly every thing in the critique,” he continued, “I heard from him, or suggested

to him, personally. The poem of Emerson I read to him.” There could be no doubt. Poe had gone to Dickens’s hotel room hoping to find a kindred spirit. But Dickens had chosen Emerson before Poe even stepped in the room.

Poe took the blow relatively well. He continued to believe and to say that Dickens had a “vigorous, glorious *imagination*” and wielded his pen like “the wand of an enchanter,” and that it was almost impossible to speak too well of some of his work. But he was also inclined to defend himself and his countrymen. “*We are* a poetical people,” he assured his fellow Americans. Yes, the work of taming a continent had taken precedence and given Americans a reputation for practicality. “But the arena of exertion, and of consequent distinction, into which our first and most obvious wants impelled us, has been regarded as the field of our deliberate choice,” Poe noted. “Our necessities have been mistaken for our propensities. Having been forced to make rail-roads, it has been deemed impossible that we should make verse. Because it suited us to construct an engine in the first instance, it has been denied that we could compose an epic in the second.”

And so in a mix of homage and showing off and pain at his rejection, Poe set out to distinguish himself by taking Dickens’s own materials and showing him what he had missed. In his review of *Barnaby Rudge*, Poe had said that more might have been made of Grip. Dickens had littered his novel with possibilities. Grip was constantly “conducting himself... in a more than usually thoughtful, deep, and mysterious manner”; he was engaged in “his own grave pursuits,” burying and unburying things, “whispering secrets to the earth and covered them up, but the reader knows they won’t stay buried. At one point Barnaby responds to another’s curiosity about the bird: “You had good reason to ask me what he is for sometimes it puzzles me... to think he’s only a bird.” And when the bird helps reveal the truth, Barnaby has “a dark cloud overhanging his whole previous existence, and never cleared away.” Finally “the bird himself advanced with fantastic steps to the very door of the bar, and then cried, ‘I’m a devil, I’m a devil, I’m a devil!’ with extraordinary rapture.” When Grip is first making noise, someone remarks, “What was that—him tapping at the door?” The answer is “’Tis some one knocking softly at the shutter.” Yes, in the novel, the bird seems a creepily displaced aspect of Barnaby, but Barnaby is a half-wit: something is obviously missing, damage has too obviously been done by others, by history. But what if the central character was a genius, and still not whole? What if the damage is self-inflicted? What if the bird kept burying unburyable secrets in his master’s bosom—like the truth about Virginia? Dickens had said that Poe was the sort of bird who could croak only a single note. Poe would give him a note to remember, and he would do it from his dead pet’s own throat.

The *American Review* gave Poe \$9 for “The Raven.” Because the journal made it a policy to only “publish poems either unsigned or with pseudonyms,” Poe chose “Quarles”—a mash-up of quarrel and Charles [Dickens]. Hoping to get his authorship of the poem on the record, however, he asked his employer at the *New York Mirror*, Nathaniel Parker Willis, to run an “advance copy” on the back page of the issue for January 29, 1845. Poe had been so steady, Willis was happy to do it; he even inserted an endorsement: “In our opinion, it is the most effective single example of ‘fugitive poetry’ ever published in this country; and unsurpassed in English poetry for subtle conception, masterly ingenuity of versification, and consistent, sustaining of imaginative lift and pokerishness [ability to excite fear]. It is one of these ‘dainties bred in a book’ which we feed on. It will stick to the memory of everybody who reads it.”

Willis was right. No poem has ever, or will ever, create so instantaneous a sensation. Within days it was being reprinted in the New York papers. Within weeks it had spread to Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Richmond. (“Everybody reads the poem and praises it,” summarized the *New World*. “It is written in a Stanza unknown before to gods, men, and booksellers, but it fills and delights the ear strangely with its wild and clashing music.” This was not entirely true—Poe had borrowed the rhyme and rhythm from an Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem—but it certainly *seemed* new.) And within months, the poem had skipped the pond and Browning herself was writing to Poe: “Your ‘Raven’ has produced a sensation, a ‘fit of horror,’ here in England. Some of my friends are taken by the fear of it and some by the music. I hear of persons haunted by the ‘Nevermore,’ and one acquaintance of mine who has the misfortune of possessing a ‘bust of Pallas’ never can bear to look at it in the twilight.” (So far as is known, Dickens never commented on the irony of his own Grip returning from the dead to incite a “fit of horror” in his native country. One can hope he had the decency to read the poem to its inspiration, his writing partner, the raven-under-glass.)

Poe had scored other successes in his career, particularly with “The Gold Bug”—but, as he put it, the “bird beat the bug... all hollow.” “The Raven” is “the talk of the town,” admitted Julia Ward Howe. “‘The Raven’ has taken rank over the whole world of literature,” echoed the *Southern Literary Messenger*. “Soon the Raven became known everywhere, and everyone was saying ‘Nevermore,’” remembered Elizabeth Oakes Smith. The whole nation had gone stark, Raven-mad. Arriving at the theater, Poe was not long in his seat before one of the actors contrived his lines to place a heavy emphasis on the word, “nevermore,” and the effect was apparently chilling. The assembly “took up the allusion” en masse, he later said. “A thrill seemed to pass through the whole audience, and the sensation, together with its cause, were not to be mistaken.” Poe could hardly believe it, perhaps especially because

it was what he had always wanted. Toiling for years in various genres, ginning up column inches on whatever nonsense would keep the wolf from the door, grubbing about as a “sub-editor” or assistant editor or assistant to the editor: it all seemed to be coming to an end. With one poetic breakthrough, Poe had forced his contemporaries to notice him anew. “He has squared out blocks enough to build an enduring pyramid,” marveled an author for *Graham’s*, “but has left them lying carelessly and unclaimed in many different quarries.” Seizing the opportunity, Wiley and Putnam issued a volume of Poe’s *Tales* in June and a collection of his poetry, *The Raven and Other Poems*, in November.

There were some among his fellow poets who, out of artistic scruple or professional jealousy, found “The Raven” too popular. Fanny Longfellow, wife of the poet, allowed that “The Raven” was “most artistically rhythmical but ‘nothing more.’” Emerson himself could “see nothing in it” and had to have Poe’s name repeated twice before exclaiming, “Ah, you mean the Jingle-Man!” Even Poe’s own biographer gives his signature effort a rather scathing review: “To a cold critical eye the dance-craze rhythms and Technicolor alliteration can seem pointlessly deft, verbal equivalents of rolling a half-dollar across one’s knuckles. William Butler Yeats, for one, thought the poem ‘insincere and vulgar.’ ‘Analyze the Raven’ he said, ‘and you find that its subject is a commonplace and its execution a rhythmical trick. Its rhythm never lives for a moment, never once moves with an emotional life.’ For many [of] the most discriminating critics, Poe succeeded all too well in suiting the popular taste, producing a work fatally destined to be Beloved, a poem for people who don’t like poetry.”

And perhaps that is what the poem has become. But to dismiss it so easily is to dismiss the feelings of the thousands of people who lived through it. “I wish I could convey to you the impression which the ‘Raven’ has made upon me,” confessed John Reuben Thompson, editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. “Like Sinbad in the Valley of Diamonds, I find a new jewel at every step. The beautiful rhythm, the mournful cadence, still ring in the ear for hours after a perusal—whilst the heart is bowed down by the outpourings of a soul made desolate not alone by disappointed love, but by the crushing of every hope, and every aspiration.” Poe’s genius (to the extent it could be called such) was in implicitly understanding that the human heart might want to practice dying by littles, might want, for a moment, to feel crushed of every hope and aspiration.

Take, for instance, a successful member of the New York literati, Charles Fenno Hoffman. When he read the anonymous lines in the *Review* he instantly recognized not only Poe as the author but something of himself in the narrator. Hoffman was universally popular in literary circles; he was financially sound; his book-length account of his ramblings in the west had sold well and won him a nice reputation. He had in his boyhood mistimed a jump from a pier to the deck of an incoming boat, and his leg had been mangled against the pilings and amputated above the knee, but he had easily stared down that physical injury to become a renowned outdoorsman and athlete. It was rather a mental injury, unrelated to the accident, which afflicted Hoffman, a crushing sadness that seemed assigned to him at birth. “Father was four times as distinguished at five and twenty as [I] shall ever be,” he wrote his brother, and “thou art the ultima spes generis Hoffmani.... I am [but a] desperate...concern.” Though remembered far better than his father or brother, Hoffman succumbed to depression and nervous exhaustion in 1849; he spent his remaining thirty years in an insane asylum. But in 1845, he had been just one of a thousand “desperate concerns” who turned to the back page of the *American Review* to find not a “yellow breeched philosopher” but a message in a bottle, washed up onshore, cast into the human sea from another island beyond redemption. “It is greater than Poe realizes,” Hoffman said when he finished reading “The Raven,” and he rushed off to share it with his friend, the author Elizabeth Oakes Smith.

“I had not yet seen it,” Smith admitted later, “when one evening [Charley Hoffman] called with the *Review* and read it to me. He was a fine reader and read the poem with great feeling. His reading affected me so much I arose and walked the floor.”

“It is Edgar Poe himself,” I said. “Every production of genius has an internal life as well as its external. Now, how do you interpret this, Mr. Hoffman?”

“It is despair brooding over wisdom,” he said simply.

When Poe later heard Hoffman’s assessment from Smith, he “folded his arms and looked down, saying, ‘That is a recognition.’”

And indeed it is this *illusion of recognition* that makes celebrity work. We can’t understand what “The Raven” meant to the nineteenth century because we have pop music and dirge-y break-up songs looping endlessly in aural bubbles of exquisite self-torture. But in the nineteenth century, it was poetry that agitated the feelings and bedded them back down, poetry that made people rise and walk the floor, poetry that made people feel the crushing weight of their own sadness, or at least their own capacity to feel. Poets, then, were the rock stars of their day (even if some, like Longfellow, were easy listening), and their lyrics, “re-performed” by readers in their own parlors, became the medium through which feeling itself was experienced. As the spiritual sponsors of that experience, poets became the first modern celebrities.

Now, there have been famous people for all of recorded time. But the ginning up of “celebrities”—the marketing and packaging of a few of us to sell back to the rest of us—this is a business that emerged only in the 1840s. The lifeblood of celebrity culture (its circulatory system) is mass media, which for all practical purposes didn’t exist until 1843, when Richard M. Hoe of the Bronx invented the steam-powered lithographic rotary printing press, capable of churning out a million copies a day. Such technological advances, coupled with developments in transportation and distribution, made possible monthly (and then weekly) magazines, which is where the project of producing the glitterati began.

Byron was the prototype. Attractive, permissive, profligate, he had a “morbid love of a bad reputation” and fed his own phenomenal notoriety by inventing the worst stories himself. “There was hardly an offense of which he would not, with perfect indifference, accuse himself,” marveled a friend. “An old school fellow, who met him on the Continent, told me that he would continually write paragraphs against himself in foreign journals and delight in their republication by English newspapers as in the success of a practical joke. Whenever anybody has related anything discreditable to Byron, assuring me it must be true, for he heard it from himself, I always felt that he could not have spoken on worse authority.”

But Byromania was not a celebrity culture in itself. Rather it exposed the itch that the celebrity culture would emerge to scratch. Byron was only one man after all. A celebrity culture requires a cadre of men *and women* whose talent, sex appeal, and nightly antics become the preoccupation of a great number. For generations, few women had been given that kind of sexual license or allowed to play that sexual role. (Indeed the typical euphemisms for prostitutes—“public women” or “ladies of the town”—suggests the degree to which Victorians saw only one reason a woman might intrude upon the public sphere.) Gradually, though, singers, actresses, and then authors were given a little more latitude. When Lydia Sigourney began signing her own poetry in 1827, her husband had complained of her “lust of praise, which like the appetite of the cormorant is not to be satisfied” and hectored her for an “apparently unconquerable passion of displaying herself.” “Who wants or would value a wife who is to be the public property of the whole community?” he wondered. (To compensate, Sigourney had served up a poetry of bereavement and religious consolation upon infant mortality that had all the sex-appeal of an expiring nun delivering a eulogy on a dead cherub.) But by Poe’s day, mores were changing. The magazines reported on the literary salons; the literary salons became a stage on which one performed for the magazines; and the public swallowed it all.

Poe, it should be said, was a magazinist before he was anything. Today he’s remembered as a poet and writer of tales. To his contemporaries, at least before “The Raven,” he was a critic. But all Poe ever wanted to do was be a successful magazinist. “The whole tendency of the age is Magazine-ward,” he exulted. “The Quarterly Reviews have *never* been popular. Not only are they too stilted, (by way of keeping up a due dignity,)...their issues, also, are at too long intervals; their subjects get cold before being served up. In a word, their ponderosity is quite out of keeping with the *rush* of the age. We now demand the light artillery of the intellect; we need the curt, the condensed, the pointed, the readily diffused—in place of the verbose, the detailed, the voluminous, the inaccessible. On the other hand, the lightness of the artillery should not degenerate into pop-gunnery—by which term we may designate the character of the greater portion of the newspaper press—their sole legitimate object being the discussion of ephemeral matters in an ephemeral manner.” Only the magazine, then, could create and sustain a Dickens—a celebrity of substance, a man who at once satisfied the critical and the popular taste, a man who sold copy but didn’t sell out, a man who could have his dignity and eat it too. Poe wanted that kind of celebrity for himself, and, more than this, he wanted the power to make and break such celebrities, on his side of the ocean, as America’s critic-at-large.

And he was never closer to this goal than he was in February 1845, when he stepped into Anne Lynch’s parlor to make his New York salon debut.

* * *

Anne Lynch was one of those New Yorkers who earns her immortality as a socialite. Thirty, thin, single, beautiful, she had moved to New York in 1845 to teach composition at the Brooklyn Academy for Young Ladies. She and her mother had moved just off Washington Square, at 116 Waverly Place, just three blocks from the Poes, and there established what became the most successful literary salon in the city. Now, salons were constantly blooming and dying in the city; any woman with a sufficiency of interest and a husband with a sufficiency of means was apt to start one. But Lynch’s operation thrived because of her personality and her formula—simplicity. Where other salon dames force-marched their guests through lavish meals and amusements, Lynch served her guests only lemonade and themselves. In her open parlor, conversations knotted in the den, on the stoop, on the stairs. On any given Saturday, Ralph Waldo Emerson might be talking humble bees to Margaret Fuller; Horace Greeley or Daniel Webster might be declaiming to all in earshot; Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, Julia Ward Howe, William

Cullen Bryant, Fanny Kemble, and hundreds of others lost to history would read each other poetry and try to outdo each other with witty compliments on a lady's dress or hair or eyes. And moving among them was always Lynch herself with manners unassailable. "Her demeanor is dignified, graceful," Poe said, "and noticeable for repose." No one guessed that beneath that repose lurked an almost depressive personality—a girl who felt prematurely wise, who attributed "whatever success she had had in life...to her early recognition of her own limitations," and who generally found everyone, including herself, slightly disappointing. This she never let on, however, instead flitting from group to group, making each guest feel equal and equally welcome, and when the doorbell rang, one remembered, you had to study her face very carefully to detect whether she was welcoming a perfect stranger or an old friend. Miss Lynch is enthusiastic, chivalric, self-sacrificing, 'equal to any Fate,' capable of even martyrdom in whatever should seem to her a holy cause." And so far as her guests knew, *they* were her holy cause, her "monarchs of the mind," as she put it in one of her poems, the "gifted and the great."

When Poe stepped into her parlor, he looked about as good as a penniless man can. He had been sober for months; Muddy kept his threadbare clothes well-brushed and stitched-tight. His Philadelphia binges had stolen a little from his looks but had committed no grand larceny against him. He was still handsome. (Or, as one socialite who knew the talk, put it: "Whatever may have been his previous career, there was nothing in his look or manner to indicate the debauchee.") Having heard "shockingly bad stories" about Poe's conduct in Philadelphia, Charles F. Briggs was startled to discover that Poe's "whole demeanor" contradicted them. "I like Poe exceedingly well," he wrote a friend. "He conducted himself with as much propriety on the occasion as a young lady at her first party, and astonished everybody by his perfect good manners, gentleness, and ready replies to all questions."

And so it went for months. "He is the observed of all observers," noted a witness. "His stories are thought wonderful, and to hear him repeat the Raven, which he does very quietly, is an event in one's life. People seem to think there is something uncanny about him, and the strangest stories are told, and, what is more, *believed*, about his mesmeric experiences, at the mention of which he always smiles. His smile is captivating!... Everybody wants to know him; but only a very few people seem to get well acquainted with him."

As multiple witnesses attest, Poe's conversation at these salons was invariably excellent, though perfectly mirthless. He smiled rarely, and even then it could come across as a sneer; his face at rest seemed almost resentful. He could be amused by the sham or the ridiculous, but he never laughed. He did not monopolize conversation, but when he did speak, it was always in almost preposterous earnest. He seemed genuinely at war with all that was not ethereal, ideal, beautiful, but his battlefields could be strange ones. Bad punctuation was a moral repugnance. Slavery was not.

After a while, it became a little difficult to take seriously, and while some came to worship him as a mesmerist and necromancer, a few penetrating minds began to suspect that it was all an elaborate put-on. To Margaret Fuller, Poe seemed "shrouded in an assumed character." To Elizabeth Oakes Smith, who otherwise liked him, Poe had "one radical defect of character... He never inspired confidence. There was that something, which lawyers call *malice prepense*, not to be mistaken in him. He always seemed to have a design—to *be acting a part*."

And so he was. Indeed, as one witness who penetrated the mask came to understand, "Poe believed his own fictions for the time being, or *he would have you think so*; he became a part of them; he filled up incident, and iterated congruities like a man who is savagely intent upon making you believe him, while underneath he carries a Mephistophelean smile that can not be hidden." And that odd smile, which others took for a sneer, was actually Poe's struggle to suppress his amusement, to stay in character, to be always "The Raven." Socially awkward, he assumed that everyone in the parlor was performing a self, staging a living fiction, as many of them were. But, in ways he couldn't quite grasp, their performances were more subtle, less demanding on the credulity of their audience. To be sure, many were quite happy to believe in drawing room necromancers. But for an important few, Poe seemed not "intense" or "mysterious," but simply annoying. "He can do nothing in the common way," complained T.D. English, "and buttons his coat after a fashion peculiarly his own. If we ever caught him doing a thing like any body else, or found him reading a book any other way than upside down, we should implore his friends to send for a straitjacket, and a Bedlam doctor. He were mad, then, to a certainty."

But the madness had a method, as Byron would have understood. A bird had become a poem and a poem had become a man. In one of the stranger alchemies of literature, Poe had compounded his resentment of Dickens, his emulation of Dickens, his unswerving affection for Dickens, and his overweening desire for Dickens' own popularity, to create publishing gold. Wrapped in Grip's skin, his nightly performances of and as "The Raven" were the toast of New York, and he had only to sit back and wait to be admitted into the pantheon of American poetry. Instead he decided to use his new fame to wage relentless war on the man Dickens had called "unquestionably the first of [America's] poets"—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Chapter Three

The Imp of the Perverse

Like Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had realized early on that he was “irrecoverably” a poet and, again like Poe, he had written his father vainglorious pronouncements of his coming fame. The great difference was that Longfellow had a father who grudgingly sustained him. “I will not disguise it in the least,” Henry told his father, “the fact is, I most eagerly aspire after future eminence in literature, my whole soul burns most ardently after it, and every earthly thought centres in it... I am almost confident in believing, that if I can ever rise in the world it must be by the exercise of my talents in the wide field of literature.” Rather than deliver a harangue about his imprudence, Stephen Longfellow sent his son to Bowdoin and then on a three-year European tour (the very one the *Foreign Quarterly* alluded to when it claimed that Longfellow’s “European education” explained his emergence as America’s only truly great poet).

During his travels, Longfellow perfected his Spanish, French, and Italian, and returned to the United States to take a job at his alma mater before Harvard called to offer the Smith Professorship of Modern Languages. Once in Boston, he met Fanny Appleton, daughter of the industrial magnate, Nathan Appleton, who had helped establish Lowell, Massachusetts as the center of the burgeoning textile industry. Upon their marriage, Appleton bought the building in which Longfellow had rented a room and gave it to the couple as a wedding present. Known as Craige House, or Craige Castle, it had been a headquarters to George Washington in the Revolution. “We have decided to let Father purchase this grand old mansion,” Fanny wrote her brother. (The couple was also content to let him purchase the land across the street “so that their view of the River Charles many not be intercepted.”)

The Longfellows’ marriage was a happy one. Henry doted on his six children and when he attended a dance without his wife he could honestly complain that “the lights seemed dimmer, the music sadder, the flowers fewer, and the women less fair.” Most gratifying, his career as a poet exceeded the starriest pronouncements of his youth. In 1840, his poetry brought in a mere \$219; by 1850 it was bringing in ten times as much; and by 1874, he was paid \$3,000 for a single poem. “No other poet [has been] so fully recognized in his lifetime,” a friend marveled, which really is the most convenient time to be recognized. He is “our chief singer,” pronounced Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., “OUR Poet, who has taught the Western breeze / To waft his songs before him o’er the seas.” There was a gentle yearning in his poetry, a sort of innocence regained. “Filled with a sweetness born of happier spheres,” Holmes said, Longfellow “wins and warms...kindles, softens, cheers...calms the wildest woe and stays the bitterest tears!” Longfellow was no croaking Raven, then, a black omen hoping to bury his beak in the human heart. He was an American nightingale. “Where shall [this] singing bird a stranger be,” Holmes asked rhetorically, “that finds a nest for him[self] in every tree?”

Despite his successes, Longfellow occasionally fell into “periods of neurotic depression with moments of panic.” In 1842, the weather in his head grew so stormy he took a six-month leave of absence to take the water cures in Germany. Not every man can afford such a recuperative regimen, however. More important was the social support he received. “Will this parting note reach you? I write, not knowing; but the chance of again uttering a word to yr soul, before you descend upon the sea, is enough.---We are all sad at your going; but I am more sad than the rest; for I lose more than they do. I am desolate. It was to me a source of pleasure & strength untold, to see you, &, when I did not see you, to feel that you were near, with your swift sympathy & kindly words. I must try to go alone; hard necessity in this rude world of ours! For our souls always in this life need support, & gentle beckonings, as the little child when first trying to move away from its mother’s knees. God bless you! My dearest friend, from my heart of hearts! You know not the depth of my gratitude to you. My eyes overflow as I now trace these lines.” The feeling was mutual. “[Your letter] made my heart swell into my throat,” he told Sumner. “I treasure your kind, parting words in my inmost soul; and will read you letter over again far out at sea, and hear in it friendly voices from the shore.” He seemed always to be associated with one another elite quintet: the Five of Clubs, a group of Boston intellectuals that included a Harvard president and a Massachusetts Senator; the Copperplate Five, whose laurelled-likenesses adorned the seminal anthology *Poets and Poetry of America*; or The Five Fireside Poets, whose honeyed word-tea warmed the cockles of the American heart. “the careful moulding by which art attains the graceful ease and chaste simplicity of nature” “one of the very few in our time who has successfully aimed in putting poetry to its best and sweetest uses” As scholar Bliss Perry wrote, Longfellow was so highly praised that criticizing him was a criminal act like “carrying a rifle into a national park.”

None of Longfellow’s successes, none of his advantages, should be held against him. Men have inherited far more and bequeathed the world far less. But it is instructive to realize that, in *his* quest for literary immortality, Poe operated at staggering disadvantages. His parents left him nothing; his foster father disowned him; he married a penniless woman for something like love; his threadbare suits betrayed him as barely a gentleman; and, stinking of penury, his desperation allowed editors always to pay him less than his labor was worth. From the day “The Raven”

was published until now, the poem has netted Poe and his heirs exactly \$9. Poe's entire income for 1843 has been estimated at \$252 dollars. His political and literary fortunes rose slightly in 1844 (\$424), crested in 1845 (\$549) and then began to crash: \$307 in 1846; \$287 in 1847; and \$166 in 1848. His total lifetime earnings as an author, poet, editor, and lecturer were around \$6200. As Poe's friends might have put it, no other major poet had been so stinted in his lifetime.

To his credit, Poe did not immediately resent the disparity between his own and Longfellow's success. Indeed, he fawned over Longfellow's poetic debut, *Voices of the Night*. "A poet of high genius [has] at length arisen amongst us," he told readers. "[I] am tempted to speak of him not only as *our* finest poet, but as one of the noblest poets of all time." Much as he had with Dickens, however, Poe assumed his right as a critic to make a few professional suggestions. To secure an "enduring reputation," he said, Longfellow should do three things. First, he needed to steer clear of didacticism, which Poe considered a cardinal sin in poetry. Second, he needed to beware of imitativeness, (especially his tendency to riff on Europeans like Tennyson). And third, he needed more edge, more bite, more punch, more "force of imagination." Longfellow possessed all the "loftiest qualities of the poetical soul," Poe believed, but if he wasn't careful he would end his life having written a scrum of pretty ditties and nothing achingly sublime.

Longfellow took none of this advice. As he aged, he became more didactic, less original, less edgy, and he ended his career as a (very wealthy) children's poet—"Listen, my children, and you shall hear / Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere...." This was his prerogative, obviously. But what gradually began to gall Poe was the fact that every time he criticized Longfellow, one of the man's editors or entourage acted as if he had slapped a bishop. In reviewing Longfellow's edited collection, *The Waif*, Poe exulted that Longfellow wrote "more and better than any man living" and claimed that, in a book choc-a-bloc with the likes of Shelley and Browning, Longfellow's own contribution was "the worthiest composition in the volume." "It is a *singular*—a remarkable poem," Poe said. Only at the very end of the review did he offer up a criticism, and even then he phrased it as a question: "Is this a mere freak of our fancy?" he asked. "We shall be pleased if it be so; —but there *does* appear, in this exquisite little volume, a very careful avoidance of all American poets," especially those "who may be supposed...to interfere with the claims of Mr. Longfellow." Perhaps Poe was thinking of himself; perhaps his biographers are right to attribute the complaint to personal resentment. But Poe also had a point. In a volume dedicated to underappreciated poets and poetry, Longfellow had included forty-six Englishmen and only four Americans (one of whom, inevitably, was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Given his considerable star power, couldn't Longfellow have cast some small amount of reflected light on his own countrymen? Did he really need to underline the case made by the *Foreign Review* that there were only a handful of poets of mark in the whole Union?

As much as it piqued Poe that the *Foreign Review* had given Emerson the silver medal for American poetry, it galled him doubly that Longfellow had won the gold. Yes, Longfellow was a great poet—Poe had always allowed that—but was he really *that much* greater than the rest of them? "Taking leave of the others" (including Poe), the review had concluded, "and coming suddenly upon Longfellow's lyrics, is like passing out of a ragged country into a rich Eastern garden, with the music of birds and falling waters singing in our ears at every step." After likening Poe's poetry to "ragged country," the review went on to praise the very qualities that Poe had said Longfellow either didn't possess—"severe intellectual beauty"—or shouldn't want—a "dulcet sweetness" that would later prove cloying. (The *Review* even had the gall to accuse *Poe* of being an able and avid mimic of Tennyson—the very charge he had made against Longfellow.)

Indeed, the more Poe investigated the matter, the more he felt like the victim of collusion. Dickens had definitely had a hand in the review, but so too had his friend John Forster, the *Foreign Quarterly's* editor. "Forster is a friend of some of the Longfellow clique here," Poe learned from Boston, "which perhaps accounts for his putting L[ongfellow] at the top of our Parnassus." Poe didn't know the half of it. Forster and Longfellow had first met in 1842, when Longfellow had spent a month in London, cozying up to Dickens. "You and I...were the jolliest of all the youths at Dickens' table," Longfellow wrote Forster. "What a charming visit that was to me! A memory of delight forever." The feeling was evidently mutual. Just before getting to work on the article that would crown Longfellow America's first (unofficial) poet laureate, Forster wrote that if they were ever needed, he and Dickens would be just where Longfellow left them, "smacking our lips...in brimming bumpers in honor of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow." "I have never thanked you, directly," Longfellow wrote Forster after the review was published, "for the cordial praise of me in the *Foreign Quarterly*, which I am confident you had a hand in, and for which I beg you now to receive my warmest thanks."

Perhaps Poe was being paranoid. Perhaps Forster didn't praise Longfellow because they were friends. Perhaps they became friends because Longfellow was so praiseworthy. Regardless, it was exactly the kind of cliquishness that exasperated Poe about the book business. In a collusion that spanned the sea, a chosen few authors were anointed, protected, and puffed, and the rest were beaten back like beggars from the table. And why? Because,

Poe believed, Americans only *thought* they were reading books they liked. Actually they were reading books they were told they liked by the people who sold them. "As a literary people, we are one vast perambulating humbug," he lamented. "Organized *cliques*, hanging like nightmares upon American literature, manufacture at the nod of our principal booksellers, a pseudo-public opinion by wholesale." Stuffing reviews into magazines instead of ballots into boxes, the book business operated not as a meritocracy but as a political machine as corrupt as Tammany Hall. The literary press, like the political press, was partisan; it was designed to protect jobs and revenue streams. Perambulating the halls of Harvard or Castle Craige, Longfellow hardly knew how untouchable he had become, how much he was protected from on high by the editors and underlings who had helped to put him on that Parnassus. But Poe knew, because every time he attempted the merest criticism of the man he was met with a phalanx of ridiculous denials and denigrations. "It seems to me that the whole state of the case may be paralleled thus," Poe said of his many attempts to review Longfellow. "A accosts B, with—'My dear friend, in common with all mankind, and the angels, I regard you as a demi-god. Your equal is not to be found in the country which is proud to claim you as a son. You are glorious—you are great—you are delightful; the fact is, you are transcendently so, and therefore I lack words to express my sense of your perfection,—but, permit me! there is a very—a *very* little speck of dust on the extreme end of your nose—oblige yourself and your friends by brushing it away.' 'Sir,' replies B, 'what you have asserted is wholly untrue.... I consider you a malignant critic, and wish to have nothing further to do with you—for, know that there *are* spots upon the sun, but my proboscis is a thing without spot!'"

But everything was different now. As "The Raven," Poe had an entire city's ear. Shortly after the poem's publication, the New York Society Library had invited him to give a lecture on American poetry, and the city's papers were unanimous in urging people to attend. "Mr. Poe has shown himself to be a poet of no mean order," noted the *Daily Tribune*, "and it may be concluded that he will freely sympathize with the 'Poets and Poetry of America.'" Those who knew Poe better correctly predicted that he would be coming at his enemies with knives. "The decapitation of the criminal who did not know his head was off till it fell into his hand as he was bowing," noted Willis in the *Evening Mirror*, "conveys an idea of the Damascene slicing of the critical blade of Mr. Poe."

The Society library was the oldest and most prestigious in New York. In its original location, it had been patronized by George Washington, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton. (Washington is still accruing late fees for two books he checked out during his presidency; the six-figure fine will be waved when the books are returned.) By 1840, the library collections had moved into a majestic brown-freestone temple on the corner of Broadway and Leonard. The lecture hall seated about three-hundred, and were packed with the "literati and the 'would-bes' of the City." And remarkably for a Poe production, they all agreed on its value. It was a stupendous performance; scathing but heart-felt, full of rage and sadness, "force and pathos," that had the entire audience transfixed. Poe "becomes a desk," Nathaniel Parker Willis concluded. "His beautiful head showing like a statuary embodiment of Discrimination; his accent drops like a knife through water, and his style is so much purer and clearer than the pulpit commonly gets or requires, that the effect of what he says, besides other things, pampers the ear."

There was nothing pampering about his message, however. Without preamble, Poe launched into a devastating take-down of the American book business, and, as the full force of his exordium began to wash over the audience, some men began to stifle nervous laughter or to squirm in their seats. The *Foreign Quarterly* was right, Poe said; American literature was anemic and derivative. But whose fault was that? It wasn't the fault of American authors generally, nor of American audiences. It was the fault of the behemoth that stood between them, the fault of men sitting in this very room, the fault of the great "mountebanks of American literature": the editors who puffed their "house authors" and panned the rest; the Dunderheaded critics too scared, ignorant, or venal to say anything independent and constructive; the magaziners who spat in the eye of international copyright and published Dickens for free rather than pay a nickel to local talent; and, worst of all, the cliques of "literary hucksters" who surrounded low-talent dilettantes and packaged them for public consumption. While scathing in his tone, Poe's manner throughout, remembered witnesses, was well-modulated. He seemed like a surgeon. His remarks were "keen, cutting...withering." He gave a "great and cutting description of the arts which are practiced...in obtaining unmerited reputation for literary worth." He seemed like a "resolute man, applying to a hideous sore a keen and serviceable knife."

But Poe was just beginning. To the shock and glee of some in the audience, he turned next to the naming of names. For fully fifteen minutes, he "demolish[ed] the Poetical reputation of the Misses Davidson," two consumptive girls whose poetry of religious consolation had become popular. The girls had died well, not written well, Poe said, and they deserved pity, not fame. But because editors had seen a dollar in it, the sisters' inadequate words lived on to give Death a cloying sweetness and God a commendation for killing children.

And when he had dispensed with the Davidsons (and a few lesser offenders among female poets), Poe turned to "attack the male portion, if possible, in stronger terms." Of course, he reserved his choicest remarks for Longfellow, who had a talent he could never improve because he was apparently beyond criticism. No one better

demonstrated the “pernicious influence of the coteries,” especially those around Boston that trafficked in a self-righteous sentimentality. Poetry should never be deliberately about Truth, Poe said—that was hubris. Rather a poem should attempt to draw out some small portion of the awful beauty of who we are and what we do, and to the extent that it succeeded *as art*, it was probably, incidentally, and in some small way, also true, but it could never hope to be The Truth. An industry around Longfellow seemed determined to turn poetry into a form of preaching. A moralizing “aristocracy of dollars” was strangling American art, serving up an endless stream of pap because, “imbued with an imitative spirit,” it existed not to create something original, but to reproduce itself. Poe concluded by offering up a few Waifs of his own—all Americans, all men and women who needed a leg up. (“As a body, men of genius are proverbially poor,” Poe explained, and the cliques exist to keep them that way.)

When Poe was done, the applause was general and sustained. At the very least, he had given them an evening to remember. “The lecture throughout was the severest piece of criticism that has come within our recollection for some time,” noted one witness. Another described it as “acute and fearless.” “I took occasion to speak what I know to be the truth,” Poe admitted, “and I endeavored so to speak it that there should be no chance of misunderstanding what it was I intended to say. I told these gentlemen to their very teeth that, with a *very* few noble exceptions, they had been engaged for many years” in a “general editorial course of corruption and puffery” that “more than any other one thing in the world, had tended to the depression of American literature.”

Poe’s lecture marked the apex of his popularity and power in New York. “One of the most readable and saleable of *books* would be a dozen of such Lectures by Mr. Poe,” said Willis in the *Mirror*, “and we give him a publisher’s counsel to print them.” “It would be difficult to exaggerate the merit of his closing disquisition on the general purposes and construction of poetical composition,” noted the *Morning News*. “Competent persons who heard it, will perhaps not decline to rank the author with a Hazlitt or a Coleridge.” But others could only shake their heads. Poe’s talk had been fearless, yes, but advisable? He had told gentlemen “to their very teeth” that they were frauds. As another reporter put it, his remarks may have been “pungent and amusing although perhaps not in all respects judicious.”

But judicious or no, Poe was ecstatic finally to be striking blows that his enemies might *feel*. “Could I, at the moment, have invented any terms *more* explicit,” he said of his lecture, “I should have employed them... [and] should I think of anything more expressive *hereafter*, I will endeavour either to find or to make an opportunity for its introduction to the public.” Poe did not have to wait for long. Six weeks after his first lecture, the Society Library invited him to deliver a second. Unfortunately the evening proved a horrendous one as a “sour, spitting” Nor-easter deluged the city with a mix of rain, sleet, and hail. Reluctantly Poe mounted the rostrum to tell the dozen dedicated souls that they would receive their money back at the door. The boy who helped Poe around the office was among the attendees. “Badly as I was disappointed,” he said later, “I could see upon his face that my master was much more so. It was a little thing, it is true, but he was a man easily upset by little things.” But the lecture was not the problem. Virginia had begun coughing again, and with a long, wet evening ahead of him, Poe felt too sorry for himself not to get drunk. He had been sober for eighteen months; the pinnacle of literary power in New York was within his grasp. But now he contemplated returning home, without his lecture fee, to the empty-stomached dependents who counted on him. He would be met at the door, and he would explain, and they would suppress their disappointment. They might even pet him a little in consolation, as a victim of the weather. And then they would all spend a close, damp evening minimizing the meaning of Virginia’s latest gasps and spasms. Given such a prospect, Poe left the library in search of a bottle. He meant to do some damage. With his enemies sharpening their knives around him, he decided to cut his own throat, and like Willis’s criminal he would “not know his head was off till it fell into his hands as he was bowing.”

* * *

“What has ‘broke loose’ in Poe?” Graham asked Longfellow in a letter. “I see he is down on you in the New York papers.” ‘*Down*’ didn’t begin to cover it. For a month, Poe had been hacking at Longfellow with maniacal fury. The “Little Longfellow War,” as Poe called it, had begun mildly enough with an article he wrote for the *Broadway Journal* reiterating some of the points he had made in his lecture about Longfellow’s imitativeness. But as Poe warmed to his subject, he found that the first article necessitated a second, the second a third, a fourth, and a fifth. His editor, the relatively inexperienced Charles Briggs, stood by somewhat flabbergasted. “[Poe] is bent on riding [his hobby] to death,” he complained, but “I think the better way is to let him run down as soon as possible by giving him no check.” (Ultimately Briggs would turn the whole of the *Broadway Journal* over to Poe.)

Unchecked, Poe’s criticism of Longfellow’s imitativeness gradually morphed into accusations of literary larceny on an unprecedented scale. In his fourth article, Poe published Longfellow’s “Midnight Mass for the Dying Year” beside Tennyson’s “The Death of the Old Year” and saw similarities “too palpable to be mistaken.” True, the

“words of the wronged author are avoided,” Poe admitted, but Longfellow was the worst kind of thief, the kind who stole the very essence of other people’s ideas. Indeed, Longfellow’s actions belonged to the “most barbarous class of literary piracy,” Poe said, “in which a man’s most intangible, and therefore his least defensible and least reclaimable property, is appropriated.” In the case at hand, fortunately, he had stolen from Tennyson, a man who could undoubtedly afford it and whose fame ensured that the crime could be discovered. But Poe suspected that Longfellow stole far more from people unknown to history. “Of the class of willful plagiarists,” Poe said, “nine out of ten are authors of established reputation, who plunder recondite, neglected, or forgotten books.”

To Poe, in literature as in life, there were only two kinds of theft: the kind committed by the poor against the rich and the kind committed by the rich against the poor, with the latter being “more general...by far.” A poor man, Poe said, steals out of desperation; he steals once, and he gets caught. Too often he is like the ragamuffin on Broadway who makes off with a “sky-blue dress coat [and] yellow-plaid pantaloons” only to be caught “the next morning before twelve o’clock, in the very first bloom and blush of his promenade down Broadway, by some one of those officious individuals who are continually on the *qui vive* to catch [such men] and take away from them their sky-blue coats and yellow plaid pantaloons.” The ragamuffin, Poe said, is always dismissed as an idiot and made safe as a joke. But the truth is he never thought he had much of a chance of getting away with it. He did it anyway because “luck is every thing...life is short, [and] the weather is fine—and [because] if he can only manage to get safely through his promenade down Broadway in the sky-blue dress coat and the yellow plaid pantaloons, he will enjoy the high honor, for once in his life at least, of being mistaken by fifteen ladies out of twenty, either for Professor Longfellow, or Phoebus Apollo.”

If the ragamuffin was a thief and a laughing-stock, though, what was Longfellow? Men like him stole often and always got away with it because they stole from the “poverty-stricken, and therefore neglected man of genius, on the reasonable supposition that [he] will very soon cut his throat, or die of starvation, (the sooner the better, no doubt,) and that in the mean time he will be too busy in keeping the wolf from the door to look after the purloiners of his property—and too poor, and too cowed, and for these reasons too contemptible, under any circumstances, to dare accuse of so base a thing as theft, the wealthy and triumphant gentleman of elegant leisure who has only done the vagabond too much honor in knocking him down and robbing him upon the highway.”

And Poe ought to know, he said, because Longfellow had stolen *wholesale* from him. Longfellow’s “Footsteps of Angels” had ripped off Poe’s “The Sleeper.” His “Beleaguered City” had been a “palpable imitation” of Poe’s “The Haunted Palace.” His “Spanish Student” had offered up a plagiarism of Poe’s *Politian* the “most impudent ever known.” And yet every time Poe made the slightest move against Longfellow, he was accused of “carping littleness”? How much littler to steal from the starving poor? Suddenly Poe wondered how he had forborne it so long. “I believe that you feel a delicacy in publishing my criticism on Longfellow’s ‘Spanish Student,’” he wrote to George R. Graham (of *Graham’s Magazine*), “and, perhaps, upon the whole, it would be for your interest *not* to do it, as, in a Magazine such as yours, you could not well manage to fight out the battle with Longfellow’s coterie in Boston, which would be the result of your publishing it. But, with me, the case is very different, and if I can only get them all fairly down upon me, I shall know precisely what to do.” Maybe it would be suicidal to give Longfellow both barrels. But like the ragamuffin Poe meant to sashay down Broadway in his sky-blue jacket and yellow-plaid pantaloons. Longfellow, he said, is “the great Mogul of the imitators” and the “most insolent literary thief” in America. His marriage to an heiress and his position at Harvard had made him a celebrity, and his celebrity had made him untouchable. But luck being everything, life being short, and the weather being fine, Poe meant to tell the world the truth: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was American literature’s *entire problem embodied*.

Through it all, Longfellow never raised a pen in protest. His wife demanded that Poe be publicly castigated for his “insolence,” but Longfellow knew that noticing Poe’s charges would necessitate answering them, and battle was beneath him, and unlike him. Why should he descend to Poe’s level? He had “friends” for such things, and in New York he had none better than Lewis Gaylord Clark.

* * *

The longtime editor of the *Knickerbocker*, Lewis Gaylord Clark helmed the most-influential and highest-circulating magazine in New York. Born upstate in Otisco in 1808, Clark had moved to the city in his twenties and quickly cemented a reputation as a professional New Yorker. He attended every event worth attending and glided down the street the way absurdly handsome men generally do. To the public, he presented an image of manly insouciance. His “intellectual peculiarity,” friends noted, was his insistence on finding everything amusing. He called it his “elastic spirit,” a kind of buoyancy that defied the rough seas of life. “He was never else to the world but light-hearted,” a friend remembered, “always kindly disposed, and ever discovering amusement not only in trifling but the most serious events of life.”

Behind this persona was a man who worked night and day for two-and-a-half decades to ensure that the *Knickerbocker* thrived while scores of magazines fell down around it. "My thoughts have a constant Knickerbocker tendency [while awake]," Clark admitted to friends, and "I dream of Knickerbocker in [my] fitful slumbers." Unable to sleep, Clark would sometimes take "stormy sentimental walks on the Battery, where the spray breaks white over the barriers and mingled mist and wind sweeps in from seaward along the dimly-described, many-colored woods of the Bay." "If it be in human exertion, to make a work good and popular," he promised himself, "we mean the *K*. shall be so."

And to his credit, Clark made it so. Three years after taking the magazine over, he had succeeded where hundreds had failed: he had given the country an "Original American Magazine," free of reprints and free of Brits. To make it work, Clark cultivated an air of exclusivity. House authors were well-flattered, well-publicized, and well-paid. There was a certain puffery in the pages, yes, but Clark had a genuine eye for talent. In a single issue he published Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Longfellow, and Whittier.

But it was Clark's own column—the "Editor's Table"—that made the magazine a success. Presiding over its clubby atmosphere, Clark was the ultimate host, a kind of Mr. New York, serving up the succulent doings of literary Gotham. Everything was tasteful at Clark's table; nothing gauche was allowed. "The *Knickerbocker* must look to the proprieties," Clark said, as it has "many old and substantial heads among its 'admiring friends.'" One of those admiring friends went so far as to buy Clark and his wife a \$13,000 home on Henry Street, just off Broadway, where Clark gushed that he had "everything handsome about me." "If ever there was a periodical that could be proud of its class of readers," Clark said, "it is the *Knickerbocker*. There is an affection in the public mind toward it, which I am sure is not surpassed by any kindred work at home or abroad."

In short, Clark was everything Poe wasn't and had everything Poe didn't. Like Longfellow, he had his free house, his society wife, his hair, his friends, his cherubic children, and his "elastic spirit." Poe didn't hate him for these things alone, however. He hated him because he stood at the center of the most formidable clique in New York and had never shown the least interest in Poe or his writing. In Clark's defense, stories about headcases who pull the teeth out of still-living corpses were not in the *Knickerbocker's* usual line. Clark approved of rigor and innovation but only in the service of noble themes. For Poe, such a policy left a whole sector of human drives unaccounted for. "I am not more sure that I breathe," he said, "than that the conviction of the wrong or impolicy of an action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us, to its prosecution." (He knew what he was talking about; as an alcoholic, he was plagued by unconquerable yet destructive urges.) Clark had no such experience. Speaking as much of the man as his magazine, Poe said the *Knickerbocker* "has a huge handsome-looking body, but without a soul. The sooner it dies, the better."

Clark didn't like Poe either though he refused to give him the satisfaction of admitting that he even knew who he was. Indeed, whenever Clark mentioned Poe in his column, which he did rather often, he never used his name and always acted as if it was the first time he had ever heard of him and the last time he would ever think of him. Poe was literally beneath his notice, even when Clark was noticing him, because Poe was such a *small* man: a "small-beer complainant," a "critcling," an "authorling," a ragged little dog who shouldn't be encouraged even with the kick he both deserved and seemed to want. Leave him to his "native insignificance," Clark would always say of Poe, before picking him up to insult him a little more. "Now to *our* mind, one of the most amusing spectacles in life is a mortified but impotent litterateur of this sort," he said of Poe.

Even so, when "The Raven" came out, Clark was impressed. He could hardly afford not to be. He was the pulse of the city where the poem had become a phenomenon. So in his March 1845 column, Clark made a remarkable (if remarkably subtle) offer. Praising "The Raven" as a "unique, singularly imaginative, and most musical effusion," he concluded: "we have never before, to our knowledge, met the author, Mr. Edgar A. Poe, *as a poet* [but] we shall always be glad to welcome him in his new department." One has to know Clark well to parse what he's saying. For the first time, he is mentioning Poe by name. He is *noticing* Poe. And he is putting Poe on notice, too, because he has a proposition: if Poe will bury his tomahawk, Clark will bury the hatchet and Poe will be *always welcome*, in the *Knickerbocker*, *as a poet*. In his ineffable way, Clark was offering Poe a chair at his sumptuous table, alongside the likes of his regular guests, Whittier, Bryant, and Longfellow.

Instead Poe had begun tomahawking Longfellow like a painted savage. Poe had sniped at the *Knickerbocker's* authors before, but this latest tirade was an insolence of a different order. Of all the writers in Clark's stable, Longfellow was the most important. Indeed, the editor and poet had built the illusion of real friendship around their mutual dependence. "My dear friend," Clark began his effusive missives, or "My Dear Fellow: And *long* I may call you..." In letters, Clark suffused his star author in the details of his marriage and his dental surgery, weaving him into a kind of familial intimacy. His infant daughter, who had seen Longfellow probably once, still had the sense to hold up her "small hand [and] waft a kiss" to her "Unco Good Longfelo." "What thrice-sodden ass is abusing your 'Hyperion' in Boston?" Clark demanded to know when Longfellow faced a

lukewarm review in his hometown. And, like a father “forced” to admit his favorite child, Clark made sure to let Longfellow know that his other house authors were nothing in comparison: “Mr. Irving, Halleck, Bryant, distinguished as they are in their department of literature, are not more so, my dear Sir, if you will allow me to say so, than are you in yours.”

Clark was nothing if not savvy. He struck first at the source of Poe’s social power, “The Raven.” In the April 1845 *Knickerbocker*, he noted that Raven parodies were already circulating widely, a sure sign that the poem was making itself ridiculous by continuing to obtrude itself upon the public. (Of all the send-ups, Clark had “seen nothing so faithful to the original, nor so well executed” as “The Black Cat.” In the poem, a young man is roused at midnight by scratches at the door and talks himself into a fit of terrors rather than let the cat in. Clark claimed the poem “slipped from the hat of a wild-looking young man, as he rushed from the door of a respectable house in one of our inland towns” and served to show the ludicrous effect of “The Raven” on “country minds.”)

Continuing his sniping in the July number, Clark declared Poe’s critical judgment to be so bad that “the less he was struck” by something “the more credit would it reflect upon the periodical which contained it.” This insult was evidently fresh in Poe’s mind when he bumped into Clark in late June on Nassau Street. According to fellow poet Thomas Holley Chivers, who witnessed the resulting altercation, Poe had just emerged from a tavern where one of his saloon-mates was bidding him a lusty good night, standing on the street corner and “spouting at the top of his voice” that Poe was the “*Shakespeare of America*”! Poe then saw Chivers and grabbed him by the collar. “By God! Here is my friend now!” Poe said to Chivers, “Where are you going? Come, you must go home with me!” Chivers obliged and steadied Poe with an arm, but he would later admit that he had been appalled to find a poet he admired mingling with a “promiscuous crowd” and “tottering from side to side, as drunk as an Indian.” “What under heaven could have put you in this fix?” Chivers asked. “What fix?” Poe demanded to know, his mood suddenly darkening. Then he saw Clark.

Instantly, Poe began pulling from Chivers grasp, swearing that he meant to attack. Chivers restrained him, partly because he didn’t want to be involved in a public spectacle and partly because, a poet himself, he thought it imprudent, at least, to be attacking editors in the middle of the street. Poe was tugging so insistently, however, that a spectacle was already being made, and Chivers allowed himself to be half-dragged up to Clark, who was engaged in a conversation with a man who took one look at Poe and excused himself. To Chivers’s relief, Poe did not immediately attack, but instead offered Clark his hand. “Why, Poe! Is this you?” Clark asked, after the introductions were made. “Yes, by God, This is Poe!” Poe responded before demanding in a “belligerent tone”: “What business had you to abuse me in the last Number of your Magazine?” Clark demurred that he had not realized that the critic he had abused had in fact been Poe, and bowed himself out of the conversation. Poe then exclaimed in an “indignant chuckle” that Clark was “a damned coward!” and returned his arm to Chivers, though he was “so far gone,” Chivers said, “that it was with the greatest of difficulty that I could keep him from falling prostrate in the Street.” Somehow Chivers managed to get Poe home, where he found ample evidence that Poe’s spreeing had become a familiar routine. Mounting the steps, he noticed Virginia peeking out of the bedroom window. “Suddenly [she] drew her head back, went back into her room and locked herself up.” Muddy then poured Poe onto a sofa, saying “Oh! Dr. C! How I have prayed that my poor Eddy might not get in this way...but I knew, when he went away from here this morning, that he would not return in his right senses! Oh! I do believe that the poor boy is deranged!”

There is other evidence too that the period of the Longfellow War coincided precisely with Poe’s first conspicuous New York spree. Fellow poet, James Russell Lowell had corresponded often with Poe, and had been excited to finally meet him, but when he called by appointment at Poe’s home, he had a tough time determining whether Poe was still soggy from the night before or already drunk in the middle of the day. Muddy and Virginia welcomed Lowell and then sat in embarrassed silence and with folded hands while Poe prattled on in “the over-solemnity with which men in such cases try to convince you of their sobriety.” Later Poe’s partner at the *Broadway Journal* wrote to Lowell that he would have to “haul down Poe’s name as he has lately got into his old habits and I fear will injure himself irretrievably.” A young admirer, Richard Henry Stoddard, called at the *Journal* offices and found Poe in his sanctum. “He was awakened either by myself or his publisher,” Stoddard recalled, “and was in a very stormy mood. When summoned back to earth he was slumbering uneasily in a very easy chair. He was irascible, surly, and in his cups.” But it wasn’t just that Poe was drunk at home or drunk at the office. These might have been forgiven. It was whom he drank with, and whom he became when he drank. Poe’s habit, his willingness, his seeming enthusiasm, for some of the least savory bars and least savory characters stank in the noses of New York’s literary high society. “There is Poe,” noted editor Duyckinck, “continually putting himself on a level with the lowest blackguard through a combination of moral, mental and physical drunkenness.”

Poe capped off his self-destructive run with the single-most damaging public appearance of his career. In the middle of his escalating tirade against Longfellow, the editor of the Boston *Evening Transcript*, Cornelia Walter, had offered him a challenge: “If [Poe] were to come before a Boston audience with such stuff,” she said, “they

would *poh* him at once.” Perversely, Poe then not only accepted an invitation to appear in Boston but agreed to deliver an original poem. He had been savaging Longfellow and the Boston clique for months—he had told the world that one of Boston’s favorite sons was the “Great Mogul” of imitative art—and now he would voluntarily stand before a Boston audience and invite them to critique an original poem *he did not have*.

Built in 1794, the Odeon was the oldest theater in the city. Designed by Charles Bulfinch with the backing of John Quincy Adams and Paul Revere, it presented a sparsely elegant brick exterior with a thirty-foot wide interior dais set between unadorned columns. (To save the whole from plainness, a large painted banner sprawled across the front interior wall declaring, “All the world’s a stage.”) The October 16 program opened Boston’s fall lyceum season, and the Odeon was “densely crowded” with the city’s dignitaries and intelligentsia. Poe was preceded on the rostrum by Caleb Cushing, the outgoing U.S. Ambassador to China, who held forth for almost three hours on the subject of diplomatic relations with Britain. Poe then rose to deliver his “original poem.”

Surviving reviews of Poe’s performance are mostly negative. All agree the audience had been “pre-exhausted” by Cushing. All agree Poe began with an extended, seemingly extemporaneous, series of excuses and preambles. Some few thought he was immersed in a blank verse effort of some kind, and were just confused. Others vaguely grasped that he was dissertating on the poetic fallacy of didacticism, and that the poem he was about to offer would likely prove unpalatable to a Boston audience. Poe would later claim he meant this as an insult, but to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, then a student at Harvard, the preliminaries were just awkward and pained. Poe seemed to be shrinking, almost imploding, on stage, and his caveats came across as a mix of “nauseous flattery” and “deprecation of expected criticism.” After twenty-minutes lowering the bar, Poe launched into the poem itself.

One can only speculate as to why Poe chose to read a modified version of “Al Aaraaf,” the longest and most impenetrable poem in his oeuvre. Written at nineteen (or earlier), it tells the story of two seraphim whose disobedience to God and preoccupation with each other resulted in their ascension to a halfway heaven of the sweetest sorrow. When first published in 1829, the poem met with mixed reviews. Some thought it obviously immature and over-laced with allusions, but nevertheless the work of a potential genius. Others complained that all the “brain-cudgeling” in the world couldn’t force a man to parse it, and speculated that the author must have been “struck dumb with palsy.” Poe himself once admitted that while it contained some “good poetry,” “Al Aaraaf” was also laden with “much extravagance, which I have not had time to throw away.”

Repackaged as “The Messenger Star,” the poem fared little better in its reintroduction to the public. One witness called it a “tangled tissue of bright words and confused imagery.” Another thought it “literally *crushed* with ornaments” and “hardly adapted to the occasion.” All agreed that the audience was restless and that at least a tenth of the crowd noisily departed. Many stayed, though, and some few found it all rather beautiful. Yes, the poet had begun strangely, his voice “thin, tremulous [and] hardly musical.” But once he found his footing, his words “seemed attenuated to the finest golden thread.” “Every syllable was accentuated with such delicacy,” remembered Higginson, “and sustained with such sweetness as I never heard equaled by other lips.”

Once “The Messenger Star” had burned out, one of the event organizers, N.W. Coffin, bounced up and attempted to salvage the evening by having Poe recite “The Raven.” The program then complete, the featured speakers were feted at an after party that included Edwin Whipple, one of Boston’s leading literary critics, James T. Fields, junior partner at the publishing house of Ticknor & Fields, and Henry N. Hudson, the renowned Shakespeare scholar. Over champagne, the men exchanged the perfunctory compliments such events require. If Poe had simply accepted them and steered the conversation into a safer pasture, all might have been well. Instead, he elected to turn what had been a disappointing public appearance into a disastrous one by admitting that the poem wasn’t original and “confessing” that it had been written before the age of twelve. Hudson turned around and reported his remarks to the press.

Why did Poe make this “confession”? He would later claim that the whole lyceum appearance had been intended as a hoax. He had gone to Boston knowing that nothing would satisfy an audience of his enemies, and so he had put himself to the littlest trouble, and his audience to the greatest inconvenience, by reading a juvenile poem he himself didn’t understand. But this is all bunkum. Poe had read “Al Aaraaf” because he partly liked it, because he thought it ambitious and knotty and incandescent enough that a transcendental audience might find it brilliant, or at least baffling. He read it because he thought he could get away with it, and because he didn’t have a better option, and because it was the very opposite of Longfellow. “Al Aaraaf” conveys no lesson, promulgates no Truth; it has the thinnest narrative thread. It is mostly just pretty words, celestial allusions, and prismatic rhymes resolving, barely, into a kind of astral yearning and cosmic disappointment. Instead of armoring up for an appearance before the Boston clique, Poe had come naked. He had read the very poem he was writing when he determined that he was “irrecoverably” a poet.

So why not leave well enough alone; why not let his decision stand; why not take satisfaction in the fact that he had read the poem for some private reason? Probably because as Poe washed down his vague embarrassment

with a glass of champagne, his resentment began to rise—resentment at his friend, James Russell Lowell, for inviting him in the first place and giving him fifty dollars he really needed; resentment at Boston for being so infernally intimidating a place that it had stymied his muse; resentment at himself for having failed, utterly, to rise to a challenge. It would all be exposed anyway, so why not expose it himself? Life seems such a farce sometimes, so why not make it a bigger one?

As expected, Poe's performance was quickly pilloried in the Boston press. His "confession" that he had written the poem before the age of twelve was undressed for what it was: a laughable excuse that made his original failure more complete. After a couple of days, the Boston papers were inclined to relent. "The public have had some fun," the *Evening Transcript* noted, "so let it pass." But instead of letting it pass, Poe lashed out. From the pages of the *Broadway Journal*, he claimed that Henry Hudson had "an elocution that would disgrace a pig, and an odd species of gesticulation of which a baboon would have excellent reason to be ashamed." He pronounced Cornelia Walter a "pretty little witch" and a "little old lady" actuated only by "revenge for something that we did to Mr. Longfellow (who admires her very much)." When Edmund Burke, editor of a Boston temperance journal, claimed that Poe had been intoxicated on stage and even more so after, Poe shot back that Burke was a "little old lady" too, as were all the literary men of Boston. "The fact is," he said, "we despise them and defy them (the transcendental vagabonds!) and they may all go to the devil together." As to the charge of intoxication, he said, "In the first place, why cannot these miserable hypocrites say 'drunk' at once, and be done with it? In the second place, we are perfectly willing to admit that we *were* drunk—in the face of at least eleven or twelve hundred Frogpondians [Poe's nickname for the Bostonians] who will be willing to take an oath that we were *not*? We are willing to admit either that we were drunk, or that we set fire to the Frogpond, or that once upon a time we cut the throat of our grandmother. The fact is, we are perfectly ready to admit anything at all—but what has cutting the throat of our grandmother to do with our poem, or the Frogpondian stupidity? We shall get drunk when we please. As for the editor of the 'Jeffersonian Teetotaler' (or whatever it is), we advise her to get drunk too, as soon as possible—for when sober she is a disgrace to the sex, on account of being so awfully stupid." Poe had no illusions as to why he was being so roundly abused. The Bostonians, he said, "have always evinced towards us, individually, the basest ingratitude for the services we rendered them in enlightening them about the originality of Mr. Longfellow. When we accepted, therefore, an invitation to 'deliver' a poem in Boston—we accepted it simply and solely, because we had a curiosity to know how it felt to be publicly hissed."

By the end of 1845, Poe's curiosity would be more than satisfied. Far more than the ridiculous stunt of reading "Al Aaraaf" in the first place, his homicidal rants about getting drunk and cutting throats did his reputation permanent damage. Indeed, he seemed from the outside to be gleefully blowing up his own celebrity. Byron had done this too, but Byron had had a fortune and a title and a European public that half-admired a good Romantic scandal. America was more puritanical and Poe's self-destructiveness seemed more embarrassing than grand. Even Henry Hudson, whom Poe had likened to a pig and a baboon, felt sorry enough for him that he wrote New York editor Evert Duyckinck, suggesting that someone needed to save Poe from himself. "Can you not, Mr. Poe's friend and adviser, dissuade him from this vile blackguardism?" Hudson asked. "I write you this at the suggestion of some of Mr. Poe's friends in this city, who are shocked and alarmed at his late remarks.... I do not recollect ever to have seen anything so mean, and dirty, and wicked, as his last paper." Edwin Whipple, "the course he is taking is perfectly damnable, and, if persisted in, will inevitably damn him and everybody that has any connection with him." "Poe has earned some fame by various tales and poems," noted the Brook Farm ?, "which of late has become notoriety through a certain blackguard warfare which he has been waging against the poets and newspaper critics of New England, and which it would be most charitable to impute to insanity."

And then suddenly Poe seemed inclined to agree; it was as if he had woken up with a pile of scalps on his desk and wondered why there was a bloody tomahawk in his hand. "For the first time during two months I find myself entirely myself," he wrote a friend in November, "dreadfully sick and depressed, but still myself. I seem to have just awakened from some horrible dream, in which all was confusion, and suffering.... I really believe that I have been mad." "I will make a fortune of [the *Broadway Journal*] yet," he wrote. "By & bye I shall have time to breathe."

But he had no time to breathe. "If I can only get them all fairly down upon me," he had said in March, "I shall know precisely what to do." But now that they were all fairly down upon him, he didn't know what to do. "The manner in which we are maltreated, of late days, is really awful to behold," Poe said in early December. "Every body is at us, little dogs and all." Even the Board of Trustees at the Boston Lyceum bothered to draw up an official censure of Poe. "The Board had invited this person on the strength of his literary reputation and were not aware of his personal habits or the eccentricities of his character. For the merit or faults of his literary productions, he, of course, is alone responsible. The public were disappointed as well as ourselves in the poem, and his subsequent

abuse of our city and its institutions, show[s] him to be an unprincipled man, while the venom which he ejected against us, only defiled himself.”

Fortunately for the Board, the December speaker was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who went on to become one of the most successful public intellectuals of the nineteenth century, earning the kind of money for lecturing that Longfellow would earn for poetry. Longfellow, in fact, was sitting in the audience for Emerson’s December triumph and would later write him a personal note of praise. “My dear Sir,” Longfellow gushed, “Your volume of Poems reached me yesterday, and my wife read it to me last night. It gave us both the highest and keenest delight. A precious volume! The very Gold-coast of Song; along which we sailed, enjoying delicious sights and sounds of Nature and seeing the auriferous streams pour out their tribute into the sea.... A signal triumph awaits you...and, believe me, among all your admirers none will more heartily rejoice in your success than I.” For his part, Emerson thought Longfellow stymied by his “palace, & servants, &...wine glasses, & fine coats”; he was a filigreed sort of “music-box,” pumping out a “poetry of conventional life.” (But all this he kept to himself.)

Meanwhile Poe was waking to the fact that, for months, he had been filling his *Journal* with a mix of tomahawk-criticism, mediocre poems from coquettes he had met in the salons, and reprints of his own pieces that had already appeared in book form. No wonder then that the *Journal* was “fast decreasing in circulation.” Poe, perhaps rightly, also felt that something more malicious was afoot. “On the part of one or two persons who are much embittered against me,” he said, “there is a deliberate attempt now being made to involve me in ruin, by destroying *The Broadway Journal*.” Hoping to salvage his magazine, Poe called on his friend, Thomas Dunn English, who convinced his next-door flat-mate, Thomas Lane, to take half of Poe’s interest in the *Journal* (and all of its debt) and hold up the business end of things while Poe concentrated on the content. This arrangement worked for all of two weeks before Poe went “off on one of his fits of drunkenness,” according to English, and left Lane with an issue only “partly finished.” After attempting “for several days to get Poe into sobriety,” Lane decided to “close the publication entirely.”

Poe had borrowed from many friends in his attempt to make a go of the *Journal*. Now none of them would be paid back. He had taken Lowell’s Lyceum invitation and used it to burn up the Frogpond, and he had taken English’s friend Lane for a short and costly ride. Crowing over her rival’s downfall, Cornelia Walter noted that Poe’s greatest problem was that he was running out of friends: “To trust in friends is but so so, / Especially when cash is low; / *The Broadway Journal*’s proved “No go” / Friends would not pay the pen of Poe.” Lowell struck a similar theme when he noted that, ultimately, Longfellow was just easy to like, and Poe enormously hard. “Who—but hey-day! What’s this? Messieur...Poe, / You mustn’t fling mud-balls at Longfellow so, / Does it make a man worse that his character’s such / to make his friends love him (as you think) too much?... / You may say that he’s smooth and all that till you’re hoarse / But remember that elegance also is force.”

Lewis Clark got his knife in too. He had lived down another magazine: the *Knickerbocker* was thriving; Poe’s *Journal* was dying. The drunkard who had seemed inclined to take a swing at him in the street had instead punched himself in the face. Perhaps most important, a year’s worth of criticism hadn’t put the smallest dent in his star author. “Every where in the country it is evident that Memory, that best of critics, treasures up and cherishes the effusions of Longfellow’s muse,” Clark noted. “Of the writings of his detractors and sneering commentators, how much is remembered, or, laid up in the heart?”

Longfellow was characteristically magnanimous in victory. Privately he felt that Poe had “grossly abused and maligned him,” but publicly he “displayed only sorrow for an unfortunate and half-crazed adversary.” Poe’s “bitterness was, doubtless, due to a deplorable literary jealousy,” he said. “The harshness of his criticisms I have never attributed to anything but the irritation of a sensitive nature, chafed by some indefinite sense of wrong.”

The fact that Poe had been animated by a *quite definite* sense of wrong was lost to time, lost on his enemies, and lost amid the fog of the Longfellow War. He had intended to respond constructively to the *Foreign Review* (which he continued to maintain, even in his last issues of the *Journal*, could have come “from nobody in the world but Charles Dickens”). He had meant to call for a great reformation of American literature—for rigorous criticism, copyright protection, and a living wage for authors. But in the cut-and-thrust of battle, he had found himself more often lashing out at Longfellow, defending himself from the *Review*’s ridiculous claim that he, not Longfellow, was the imitator of Tennyson. Why couldn’t Dickens just have fulfilled his promise and found a way to put a British imprimatur on Poe’s career? Why had Dickens launched him on a wild campaign that his enemies were “charitably” imputing to “insanity” or a “deplorable literary jealousy”? Already, he was beginning to morph in the popular mind from a fearsome critic and a Byronic wizard to a deranged inebriate. “I have made up my mind to a step which will preserve me, for the future, from at least the greater portion of the troubles which have beset me,” Poe said at the end of the year. Probably he meant that he had decided to move his family out of the city, which he soon did. Without a journal (or a job), he had no daily business in town, and the countryside would leaven his spirits and keep him out of the saloon. He would also be moving away from the limelight, however, from his celebrity, and

his access. He would never own a journal again; never be an editor, never a house author. He had done himself too much damage, and it was too late to reintroduce himself to the public.

But Martin Farquhar Tupper didn't know that at the end of November when he wrote the editor of the London *Literary Gazette*. He had received a volume of Poe's short stories—the stories Dickens had “glanced” over—and he wanted to offer up his judgment: “I volunteer a critique for your *Gazette*: the book is worth all I say of it: if you find the extracts too long, you can shorten them; but perhaps you will find room for all. I have no other cause to serve in this...except to give a foreign genius some encouragement amongst us Britishers.... How say you? Shall we, or shall we not, make Edgar A. Poe, famous?”