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The
Complete Poetry of
EDGAR ALLAN POE



WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Jay Parini

AND AN AFTERWORD BY
April Bernard



SIGNET CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

I.

When Edgar Allan Poe died in 1849, only forty but ravaged in body and spirit by alcohol, his standing in the world of literature was by no means high. Indeed, it would take a major effort on the part of his admirers to revive his damaged reputation in his own country. To this day, critics argue about his literary merit, although his work has earned a solid place in the hearts of readers throughout the world.

In a sense, Poe has suffered from the vast success of a few poems. I can still remember standing before my eighth grade class, over thirty years ago, reciting the whole of "The Raven." That poem and "The Bells" were for much of the past century a staple of school curricula. Their mesmerizing rhythms have haunted generations, and may have kept them from noticing many of Poe's finer, more original works, such as "To Helen" or "The City in the Sea."

Of course Poe the poet stands in fierce contention with Poe the storyteller. Historians of literature often credit him with the invention of the modern short story, and no collection of great American fiction is complete

without "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Pit and the Pendulum." In these genuinely frightening tales, Poe's feverish imagination is vividly on display, and his literary reputation spread rapidly throughout Europe in his own lifetime.

As a critic, Poe also achieved considerable fame. Working for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, one of several journals that he edited in his brief lifetime, Poe wrote groundbreaking essays on poetry and fiction as well as scathing reviews of contemporary writers. His most important aesthetic statement was contained in "The Poetic Principle," where he famously argued for the importance of lyric over narrative poetry, illustrating his discussion with quotations from Tennyson, Byron, Shelley, and Longfellow. Most tellingly, he held that long poems could not be good poems, at least not all the way through. "A long poem does not exist," he wrote, contentiously. "I maintain that the phrase 'a long poem' is simply a flat contradiction in terms." Here, as elsewhere, he lobbied for unity as the defining feature of major literary works, calling it "the vital requisite of all works of Art."

Poe's reputation as a writer has certainly suffered from the melodramatic quality of his life, which has made him a prime target for biographers. Born in Boston in 1809, where his parents were acting in a traveling repertory company, he was soon set adrift. His father abandoned his mother before his first birthday, and his mother died when he was three. Fortunately, a prosperous merchant, John Allan, adopted him because his wife had been a friend of the deceased Mrs. Poe, although Poe later came to detest his stepfather as much as he adored his stepmother.

The Allans took young Edgar to England in 1815, and he was put into a strict English boarding school—a setting that Poe later used for "William Wilson," his

story about a double identity that Robert Louis Stevenson apparently used as a source for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. (Stevenson also used Poe's story "The Gold Bug" as a model for *Treasure Island*.)

Back in Baltimore in his early teens, Poe developed a crush on Mrs. Jane Stannard, the young mother of a schoolmate, and her death a year after they met affected him deeply. Young Poe brooded incessantly on Mrs. Stannard, and these thoughts seemed to have morbidly shaped his imagination. In his poems he would often dwell on the early deaths of beautiful women and would specialize in melancholic laments for their passing.

In 1826 Poe entered the University of Virginia, but wild drinking and gambling led to his early withdrawal and added to the tensions that already existed between him and his stepfather. In 1827 he worked intermittently at odd jobs and managed to get a small Boston firm to print his first book of poetry: *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. The book made no impression on the literary world, and Poe resorted to joining the army. After rising to the rank of sergeant-major, he was honorably discharged in 1829, the same year that he published a second slim volume: *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems*. Once again, he escaped public notice as a poet.

In what must count as one of the more peculiar turns in his life, he was appointed as a cadet at West Point in 1830. There he found himself drowning in expenses that his obviously skeptical stepfather refused to pay. "The army does not suit a poor man," he noted wryly in a letter. A year later he was court-martialed and expelled for unbecoming behavior. But he had by this time made such an impression on his fellow cadets by writing witty satirical poems about the Academy that they took up a collection to finance the publication of his third book of poems, published as *The Poems of*

Edgar A. Poe in New York in 1831. (When the cadets got their copies, they were furious because it did not contain the poems they had remembered.) Not until 1845 would he publish another volume, *The Raven and Other Poems*—the book that finally made his name as a poet.

On leaving West Point, Poe turned to prose, hoping to make a living by his pen. Book reviews, humorous anecdotes, fantasy, travel essays, and short stories poured forth, though he seemed always to be short of cash. To survive, he went to live with his favorite aunt, Mrs. Maria Clemm, and her nine-year-old daughter, Virginia, with whom he fell in love. They were married five years later—shortly before her fourteenth birthday.

Poe's unusual marriage to his cousin and his adoration of her mother are enough to drive any Freudian critic mad with speculation. In fact, biographers have little to go on here, apart from a few letters by Poe and the testimony of his friends. By every account, the young writer was devoted to his wife and aunt, and they were similarly fond of him. Virginia's tragic death a decade later was a dreadful, insurmountable obstacle in Poe's emotional life. When the French poet Charles Baudelaire published a translation of the American poet's work some years later, he dedicated the volume to Mrs. Clemm, "the woman who was always so gentle and kind to him—as you bound his wounds with your love, so he will preserve your name with his glory."

It is clear that Virginia's death in January 1847 had dire consequences on the emotional life of Edgar Poe, who died less than three years later. The years after Virginia were chaotic for him: he drank heavily, tried vainly to woo various matrons of society, and wrote little. In the summer of 1849 he made a sentimental journey to Richmond, where he had lived for many years with Virginia, and by chance encountered Sarah

Royster, a woman he had once loved many years before. After a short time, he proposed marriage and she accepted, but soon his drinking got the better of him. He was found wandering the backstreets of Baltimore in late September 1849, and he died on October 7 in the Washington College Hospital.

At the time of his death, William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and James Russell Lowell were among the most revered American poets, and they largely refused to acknowledge Poe as a real poet. Emerson called him "the jingle man," refusing him a place in his prestigious anthology, *The American Parnassus* (1847). Lowell, at least, saw fit to mention Poe in *A Fable for Critics*, although he wrote about him somewhat derisively:

Here comes Poe with his Raven, like Barnaby Rudge—

Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge;
Who talks like a book of iambs and pentameters
In a way to make all men of common sense d—m
meters;

Who has written some things far the best of his kind,
But somehow the heart seems squeezed out by the
mind.

Even Walt Whitman, the greatest American poet of the century, dismissed him, claiming Poe ought to be regarded as "among the electric lights of literature, brilliant and dazzling, with no heat."

It was left mostly to French readers and critics to elevate Poe to the literary pantheon: Baudelaire adored and translated him, Stéphane Mallarmé called him "my great master," and Paul Valéry considered him "profound and so insidiously learned." André Gide described Poe as "the only impeccable master." Even-

tually—some fifteen years after his death—Poe was recognized in his own country by a memorial volume edited by Sara Sigourney Rice. Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes joined Tennyson and other Europeans to proclaim Poe's originality and genius as a poet and storyteller. Lord Tennyson struck the most vivid note when he called Poe "the most original genius that America has produced," one "not unworthy to stand beside Catullus, the most melodious of the Latins, and Heine, the most tuneful of the Germans."

II.

"Tamerlane" was Poe's first important poem, and it remains a fascinating work. The historical figure on whom the poem is based was born in Samarkand, in central Asia, in the fourteenth century. This ruthless conqueror ruled an empire extending from the Black Sea to central China, but relatively little is actually known about the historical Tamerlane. Certainly Poe knew next to nothing about him, as he admitted in his preface to that volume, and so the Tamerlane of his poem is a glorious invention. Indeed, Poe begged the reader's pardon for making his hero "speak in the same language as a Boston gentleman of the nineteenth century."

The poem, which shows the direct influence of Lord Byron, is typically Romantic in style, echoing popular themes of the period: the thirst for power, blighted love, and fate. In Poe's hand the poem becomes an allegory of the poet's own ambition and an elegy for lost love. In a telling moment, the aging conqueror admits to a Christian friar that his worldly quest for power had actually thwarted his desire to attain human love:

How was it that Ambition crept,
Unseen, amid the revels there,
Till growing bold, he laughed and leapt
In the tangles of Love's very hair?

"Tamerlane" was reproduced in Poe's second volume, two years later, along with another long poem, "Al Aaraaf." The title refers to a state of limbo described in the Koran, which Poe identifies here with a mysterious star discovered in 1572 by the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. Running to 264 lines, the poem is rambling and diffuse, echoing Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) in many places. It is best read as a sequence of disconnected lyric moments, as in the following hymn to Ligeia, the goddess of harmony, where Poe's mastery of the two-beat line is gorgeously in evidence:

Ligeia! Ligeia!
My beautiful one!
Whose harshest idea
Will to melody run.
O! is it thy will
On the breezes to toss?
Or, capriciously still
Like the lone Albatross,
Incumbent on night
(As she is on the air)
To keep watch with delight
On the harmony there?

The poem celebrates a place out of time where absolute beauty may be experienced directly instead of through earthly things, which are inevitably disappointing. Poe sings this perfection in some lovely lines: