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Pretty Letters

Megan Marshall

- *Poe: A Life Cut Short* by Peter Ackroyd [Buy this book](#)

Where to begin? It's the biographer's fundamental dilemma. These days it's a rare biography that opens with a recital of its subject's pedigree, then works its way methodically from cradle to grave. Chronology is both a gift and a curse, offering an attractively simple narrative structure but risking the tedium of ever-forward motion. Why not borrow the sure-fire novelistic tricks of flashback and flash-forward to elude that soporific 'and then'?

So, it is little surprise to find the prolific genre-bender Peter Ackroyd beginning his brief biography of Edgar Allan Poe with a recounting of his subject's final days. Never mind that Paul Strathern's recent biographical study, *Poe in 90 Minutes*, and a new novel by Matthew Pearl, *The Poe Shadow*, made the same opening gambit. It is a span of six days that has baffled first Poe's family and friends, and then his biographers, since his death in 1849 at the age of 40. As Ackroyd writes, 'like his narratives and fables, Poe's own story ends abruptly and inconclusively; it is bedevilled by a mystery that has never been, and probably can never be, resolved.'

On Thursday, 27 September 1849, Poe was to have boarded a steamer in Richmond, Virginia, bound for New York by way of Baltimore. The last sighting was by a doctor Poe consulted the night before for a fever; he administered a 'palliative'. Was there alcohol in the dose? Poe had recently joined a temperance society, finally acknowledging the dire effects of what he called the 'mania a potu' that seized him in moments of elation and depression. It took just one drink to send him off on a spree. Poe's luggage remained behind in his Richmond hotel, but surely he left the room wearing his customary black cape, waistcoat and cravat. Not without reason he'd been nicknamed 'the Raven' after his poem, published four years earlier, brought him a measure of the fame he craved. The dark-haired, black mustachioed Poe cultivated a likeness to the bird.

Poe left no trace of his whereabouts, but the following Wednesday he turned up in a Baltimore tavern, nearly comatose and wearing a straw hat and ill-fitting clothes, sans waistcoat and neckcloth. He was taken to a local hospital, and spent the next day in a delirium. The resident physician noted his 'constant talking – and vacant converse with spectral and imaginary

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objects on the walls'. Poe recovered his senses long enough to tell one of his obscurely motivated lies – he had a wife waiting for him in Richmond, he told the doctor, when in fact his much younger wife, his first cousin Virginia Clemm Poe, had died two years before – and to recoil in horror when the doctor suggested that friends would soon arrive to care for him. Friends? Poe declared the best thing any friend could do for him would be to take a gun and blow his brains out. By Sunday morning he was dead anyway.

Poe's biographers, like so many post-mortem enablers, have tried to come up with an explanation other than alcohol for his lost six days and early death. Ackroyd runs through most of them – tuberculosis, 'lesion of the brain', diabetes. Matthew Pearl recently made headlines suggesting evidence of a brain tumour. 'The well is too deep for the truth to be recovered,' Ackroyd concludes, insisting, in his turn, that Poe was 'not an alcoholic': merely 'a habitual drinker'.

Yet, consciously or not, Poe surely engineered this terminal drama, both by failing to break off his long-standing love affair with the bottle, begun the first time he tasted liquor as a 16-year-old freshman at the University of Virginia, and by deliberately cultivating the impression that he was a doomed man. As one of the young women he wooed unsuccessfully in his early twenties recalled, 'he said often that there was a mystery hanging over him he never could fathom.' Or, as Poe himself wrote in one of his earliest tales, 'it is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge – some never to be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction.' He was not 'the Victim' – the title Ackroyd gives to this opening chapter – although he tried to present himself that way. Like the boy who cried wolf, he was the perpetrator of a hoax but fooled himself most of all. His recurrent complaint that he was on 'the very verge of despair', designed to elicit just one more handout, loan, or the publication of a manuscript, finally caught up with him. The cousin who found him inebriated in the Baltimore tavern refused to take him in; he'd tried and failed with Poe too many times before.

Hoaxing was a passion of Poe's. Five years before his death, in April 1844, with his vocation firmly established on the basis of 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' and 'William Wilson', and his literary aesthetic asserted in dozens of reviews as well as prefaces to his poetry and story collections, he pulled off one of the most famous stunts in newspaper history. Somehow he persuaded the editor of the *New York Sun* to publish an article about a balloon flight: 'The Atlantic Ocean Crossed in Three Days!!' In the language of straight news reporting, he described the intricate machinery of the flight and the route taken so persuasively that New Yorkers bought out the morning edition, and the *Sun* published an 'extra' that afternoon. Poe himself couldn't get his hands on a copy. When the *Sun* retracted the story two days later, Ackroyd writes, 'after a chorus of

disbelief and disapproval . . . the power of his pen had been proved beyond doubt.' Ackroyd credits Poe's elaborately plotted 'balloon hoax' with leading the way for Jules Verne and H.G. Wells – not to mention the great 20th-century hoaxer, Orson Welles.

He wasn't to be trusted. But what was never in question was his talent – or genius, as he rightly preferred to call it. Born into a down-and-out theatre family and left an orphan at the age of two, Poe was adopted by a childless Richmond couple who initially recognised and supported his abilities. The Allans, whose name Poe inserted between his own first and last, were prosperous enough to send him to good schools, where he excelled at Latin and Greek and at an early age began writing poetry. Later he would claim that he'd written some of the poems published in his first book at the age of 14. This seems plausible, considering that his teacher called him a 'born poet', and discouraged Allan from publishing the boy's early verse only because it might, in Ackroyd's words, 'lead to excessive flattery'. At 15, a sturdy boy, proficient in swimming, boxing and field sports, he scribbled these lines on a page of his adoptive father's accounts, the earliest of his compositions to survive:

Last night with many cares and toils oppress'd
Weary . . . I laid me on a couch to rest.

Poe's unmistakable style, and his plaints, were already established.

The intertwined pages of Allan's and Poe's correspondence are among the more intriguing sources Ackroyd cites. Although Allan soon reached a point of exasperation with his adopted son's importuning and melodramatic letters from college and stopped answering them, he saved the letters, along with their envelopes, on which he noted such observations as: 'Pretty letter', or 'I do not think the Boy has one good quality . . . I cannot believe a word he writes.' The practice of composing such petitions would stand the writer in good stead, even if they rarely yielded the handout that the devotee of peach brandy, mint juleps and the gaming table was looking for. Despite his ward's stellar academic record, Allan refused to support Poe beyond his freshman year at college. After a brief stint in the army and a botched semester as a cadet at West Point, Poe was forced to rely on his pen to make a living, which he did by blurring the line between the imagined and the real with a formidable repertory of seductive cons. The story of 'ratiocination' (now known as detective fiction), the science-fiction fantasy and the psychological thriller all arguably got their start with Poe.

Ackroyd's great strength in this compact appraisal of Poe's life and career is his evaluation of Poe's achievement, issued with the perceptiveness and assurance of a fellow artificer. 'He had an instinctive understanding of what would attract, and hold the attention of, a newly formed reading public,'

Ackroyd writes. 'He understood the virtues of terseness and unity of effect; he realised the necessity of sensationalism and of the exploitation of contemporary "crazes".' Both stories and poems, Ackroyd explains, ride on 'some undertow of meaning, which the reader shares with the author; they are both in the same condition of growing awareness' – which nonetheless is never fully achieved. 'All of his endings are abrupt and inconclusive, thus prolonging a mood of uncertainty and even of anxiety.'

There is nothing unfinished about the works themselves. Poe revised and polished to such a degree that he even subjected his handwriting to intense scrutiny. According to Ackroyd, Poe's hand was 'a model of calligraphy, transcribed on neatly rolled manuscripts, as if all were brought into exquisite order'. He wrote on 'narrow strips of paper, pasted into long rolls' (a more fastidious Jack Kerouac), allowing the narrative to flow unchecked by page breaks. The 'music' of words obsessed him; in the early story 'Berenice', Ackroyd notes 'the melodies of Poe's prose' and 'his consummate control of cadence and of open vowel sounds'.

If Ackroyd misses anything in his analysis, it is the opportunity to place Poe among what he calls, without naming any of them, America's other 'indigenous' writers of the period. It is hard to read his description of Poe's Gothic aesthetic, let alone his account of Poe's struggle to make a living by peddling stories to newspapers and literary magazines during the 1830s, without wishing for some comparative comment on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe's close contemporary, whose literary tastes and career took a similar trajectory in those years. Although Ackroyd mentions Poe's critical dismissal of Longfellow's poetry, he doesn't acknowledge that the two shared a nearly fatal attraction to singsong metres. Mark Twain was a generation younger, but the great ironist and prankster, a teller of ghost stories whose visionary money-making schemes, like Poe's, always came to nothing, is notably absent from these pages. Instead it is Verlaine and Rimbaud; Mallarmé and Baudelaire; Dostoevsky, Joyce and Conrad, whose debts to Poe concern Ackroyd.

To be fair, there is a sense in which Poe, who spent five childhood years in London with his adoptive parents, does not seem a distinctively American writer. His settings are obscure, and more anciently feudal than New World. Roderick Usher's family manse doesn't feel like the Southern plantation house it must have been – nor is it a New England house of seven gables. Poe's raven might have chosen any chamber door from Boston to Budapest for his diabolical rapping and tapping. The historically and geographically untethered quality of the tales and poems is one source of their disturbing mystery. Although Faulkner is another of the heirs whom Ackroyd fails to mention, Poe's own refusal, or inability, to evoke his region or even his nation, sets him apart from any other American writer of similar stature. In

artistic sensibility he comes closest to the German Romantics: perhaps most of all to the composer Robert Schumann, born just a year after Poe, whose fantasy pieces – inconclusive, fragmentary, whimsical and haunting – Poe probably never heard.

A novelist of Ackroyd's talents could have anticipated the risk involved in starting at the end of his story: no suspense. Ackroyd uses Poe's drunken demise to prefigure the life story he then proceeds to tell. But instead of enticing us to share in a growing awareness of the complexity involved in that life and death, his plainspoken recital of the facts – meant perhaps to mimic Poe's dispassionate style in his tales of ratiocination, all leading to a foregone conclusion – inclines us to give up on the man before he's had a chance to live. 'His fate was heavy, his life all but insupportable,' we are told at the outset. But Poe's was not 'a life cut short'. His story is more triumphal than tragic. As his death reveals, he was not a genius struck down unfairly in the prime of life. The wonder – and Poe's achievement – was that he lived and worked for as long as he did, when he might well have succumbed much earlier to tuberculosis, contracted from his mother, brother or wife, or to the alcoholism which may not have killed him but certainly escorted him to an early grave.

A better place to start might have been with an even greater mystery than those lost six days: Poe's secret marriage at the age of 26 to his 13-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm, a frail, tubercular beauty with whom he had shared a household since she was nine years old. He called her 'Sis' or 'Sissy', from the time they met until she died at 25. The marriage, Ackroyd speculates, was not immediately – if ever – consummated. Might there be cause to wonder whether Poe's drinking, a form of temporary and finally irrevocable self-obliteration, had something to do with a disturbed sexuality – the result of a complex of experiences with women that began with his mother's death? Eliza Poe had married first at 15; when she died, she was a 24-year-old mother of three, deserted during her final illness by her second husband, Poe's father. Poe would ever after seek to replace her, attaching himself to a succession of either elusive or proprietorial maternal figures, including his adoptive mother Frances Allan, who also died young, and his aunt Maria Clemm, his wife Virginia's mother. Before he was 20 Poe had written:

I could not love except where Death
Was mingling his with Beauty's breath.

But what kind of love was this? Poe dreamed of writing 'a very little book' that would 'revolutionise, at one effort, the universal world of human thought'. Its title, he decided, 'should be simple – a few plain words – "My Heart Laid Bare"'. Whether or not we can accept his grandiose notion that a book, even a very little one, devoted to an exploration of his own heart, could

revolutionise human thought, that is the book about Poe we would like to read – and it is the phantom that continues to beckon biographers to his story. Kenneth Silverman has given the most complete and satisfying account to date in his *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (1991). Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalytic biography of 1933 (English translation, 1949), with an introduction by Sigmund Freud, is a fascinating period piece. And now Ackroyd, too, has done a fine job. With all the unsolved mysteries, however, we can only expect, and hope, there will be ever more tellings of this richly suggestive life.

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