

Rocky Redglare

The Rise and Rise of William Wilson: A Meditation on Southern Ferocity and Edgar Allan Poe

Well – here we have it! This is the book- the book par excellence –the book be-puffed, be-plastered, and be-Mirrored...”

E.A. Poe, reviewing *Norman Leslie* by Theodor S. Fay in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, December, 1835.

In his justly influential (and all the better for its onomatopoeic title) study *Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe*, Daniel Hoffman remarks at length on his subject’s alleged masochism, touching upon allegations from other allegers of the writer’s “psychic impotence”-

Whether he could get it up or not (and the evidence of the tales is pretty one-sided), you don’t have to have a certificate from Dr. Freud to recognize Poe’s sad and crippling obsession; he put into his writing an intense energy as great as that which a libidinous seducer would have expended upon the breaching of a thousand virgins. Poe was born to suffer, to thrill to the exquisite torment of those sufferings, to transmute them by his symbolic imagination into paradigms of man’s divided nature, of man’s heroic efforts to escape his fate.¹

Very pretty. Even *true*, in light of Edgar Allan’s delight in hoaxes, satire and literary combat for their own jokey sakes. He couldn’t expect to caper like a proto Bugs Bunny on the insecure Parnassus of a democracy newly cleared of treestumps without acquiring formidable enemies, and find them he did. Given the impolitic, puckish and ferocious way Poe made his career, to accuse him of masochism seems as gratuitous as any bioporn

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cooked up by Freudians. In speaking of “William Wilson- A Tale,” Poe’s best-known parable of twinning and double-dealing, critics correctly see that the author is being self-revealing, but place too-great an identification, with the authorial “I” of the tale, the willful aristocrat on run from a malignant double. I maintain Poe’s own critical and writerly practice put him squarely on the side of William Wilson II, revenant and dealer in death.

Sidney P. Moss, writing in *Poe’s Literary Battles*, devotes many pages to Poe’s use of the critical “tomahawk” in book review columns throughout his career. Literary America then, as now, was in the hands of a New York-based coterie of little talent but great influence, with members “puffing” each other’s ghastly volumes as expressions of emerging national



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genius.² Professors of litcrit like to depict the impecunious Poe as consumed by jealousy at the success of such “rivals” as Fay and Willis Clark, but academics are professionally obliged to see the world in those terms.³ Actual *writers*, those having to pen-scratch a living rather closer to the pavement than schoolteachers willingly go, find the thrill of literary combat sharpened by the public’s willingness to pay to see butchery on the page. Done with sufficient flash and gusto, the blood would splatter onto other journals, so much the better for a clever man making his way.

It should surprise no one knowing Poe from *Tales of Mystery & Imagination* that the author of “The Cask of Amontillado” was a gleeful popper of human skin-balloons, quite happy to publicly savage the inept among the swollen herd of writers grazing our then-fruited plain. Let it be remembered that there was once a time in America’s history when newspapers, magazines and literary journals of every description were necessary ornaments of any provincial capital pretending to culture and all such places did. Moss takes admirable pains rendering the social background of Poe’s various journalistic feuds and homicides and the picture he paints of logrolling, cliquishness, editorial fraud and wholesale plagiarism staggers even at this remove. A few isolated voices were already making a stand against the prevailing dishonesty before Poe waded into the question. The evolving aesthetic standards he later codified into “The Philosophy of Composition” (1844) were nowhere near as exciting as the waterboarding the critic gave Fay, William Cullen Bryant and Willis Clark, before doing a long whipsong over the twitching hide of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, convincingly condemned the Good Grey One of plagiarism and tin-eared mediocrity. Commenced in 1841, the “Longfellow War” was, in some ways, paper precursor to the Civil War to come, as Poe (Southern by upbringing, sympathies and temperament) took on the entire Yankee literary establishment as a promising short route to fame at least as dazzling to him as the glories that must’ve turned the head of George Pickett while contemplating Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg.⁴

Southern men, as W. J. Cash reminds us, are imperious creatures by climate and culture- “Inevitably, then, the dominant trait of this mind was an intense individualism the world has seen since the Italian Renaissance and its ‘men of terrible fury’”.⁴ Males of Poe’s education and breeding were scarcely less so, as the first business of any aristo in such rough ‘n’ ready company as antebellum Dixie is imposing himself upon his human surroundings. Bastard child of an actress though he was (and Irish to boot), Poe was raised as an Allan of Richmond in a cold and severe household dominated by adopted father John, an art-hating, moralistic businessman of great rapacity but little actual skill. Young Edgar craved old Allan’s approval until the foundling could turn it no more into cash. Coining his

imagination, he soon became famous for his musical verse (Emerson dismissed him as “the jingle man,” indicating, as far as professional jealousy went, he was more sinned against than otherwise) and stories of maddened European gentry who tend to behave suspiciously like the contumacious Virginians of the era. “A thousand injuries bore I at the hands of Fortunato” cackles Montessoro at the opening of “A Cask of Amontillado”, like an elderly Tidewater grandee recalling a duel, “but when he stooped to insult, I vowed to revenge.”

In the 19th century, Southern society was paternalist, honor-based and violent to a degree that present-day Southerners find uncomfortable to Beponder and non-Southerners of every era find unsettling. Beneath the soft words and bookish manners was frontier paranoia combined with an omnipresent terror of slave insurrection, with the whole presided over by Judge Lynch and a bounded by a moral code that required geysers of blood to acquit. Bertram Wyatt-Brown in his classic *Southern Honor* takes hundreds of pages to tie almost everything we know about the region’s culture to brute, indeed “pagan”, concepts of personal and clan honor.⁵

Poe was reared in a culture prizing ferocity in all things, even what little literature it produced. Much has been made of the South’s infatuation with the aristocratic airs-and-graces of Sir Walter Scott, but even a relative commoner like William Gilmore Simms could fire paper bullets on behalf of chivalry, joining tiny Harriet Beecher Stowe in sectional combat. Poe declared fellow Virginian Simms “the best novelist America as a whole has produced,” which likely amounted to as much a deliberate slap at Nathaniel Hawthorne literary than an endorsement of Simms’ spread-eagle Southern nationalism.⁶ Simms’ “anti-Tom” novel *The Sword & the Distaff*, depicts the much-reviled slaveocracy in rosy terms any neo-Confederate heritage-hound today would take as documentary truth. The only other Southern writer of national note during Poe’s era was Johnson Jones Hooper, North Carolinian and chronicler of the shameless rogue Simon Suggs. A bald-faced and charming sociopath and swindler, Suggs is an acceptable amalgam of the very worst traits ascribed to both redneck and gentry south of the Mason-Dixon line.⁷ Between Simms, Hooper and Poe, the literary trope of Southerner as dissolute and prickly- half jaunty Byron and half walking infernal engine –was a fair match in the minds of literate Americans as the impetuous pro-slavery Fire Eaters in soon to arise in Congress.

Poe, it seems, owed some of such popular success as he knew to fitting the emerging cultural image of the spoiled and truculent Southern boy. Past master, Moss grants, of the gore-flecked “hanged, drawn and *Quarterly*” system of book reviewing, Poe had every encouragement from publishers and public to lay on with a will. This one man auto-da-fe was to cost the Virginian heavily, making enemies who were anything but amused