

The Raven Caper and the Writing Curse

SEVERAL SUMMERS AGO, while I was teaching fiction at the Virginia Commonwealth University Writers' Conference in Richmond, my wife and I visited the Poe Museum at 1914 East Main Street. We have always enjoyed historical tours, and find that our enjoyment increases with the years, being old enough to understand that the rumor is true and the past really is our destination, so that we increasingly find comfort in contemplating those who've gone before.

The museum consists of three buildings. One, a stone dwelling built about 1740, is the oldest standing house in Richmond. Brick walls eight to ten feet high connect it with the Memorial building, and a converted carriage house, making the enclosure into an old-fashioned courtyard and garden. Poe and his child-wife, Virginia, may have lived here briefly in the 1840s; other than that, however, there is no personal connection with the poet.

Still, everything is of the right time and place, and interestingly authentic. The buildings are filled with antiques of the period, along with Poe memorabilia. On our visit I saw in a glass case either a first edition or facsimile copy of *Tamerlane*, Poe's first book, published at such a young age that Poe later repudiated it and tried to buy copies back so he could destroy them. This famous book is understandably of enormous value, the rarest of all titles of an author who is difficult and expensive to collect in any way, at any level.

The buildings that house his memorabilia epitomize the charm of early Richmond. The old-fashioned courtyard is elegantly landscaped and tended. When they are escorted through it on the tour from the residence to the museum and carriage house, visitors inhale the dense, warm odor of tobacco from the Phillip Morris factory across Main Street. Although some visitors might find this pungency offensive, even injurious to their health (or at least peace of mind), I personally found it rather pleasant, for it seemed only natural. Part of the atmosphere.

One of the striking artifacts inside the museum is a heavy, white-plaster bust of Poe. This bust, completed in or about 1909, was modelled from a bronze image of the poet now kept at Fordham University. It is a glowing presence when visitors first enter the room. For a long time it was prominently displayed in the courtyard, but then, on a cool October night several years ago, just before Halloween, it was stolen.

The theft was widely reported, even in the national media. And a year or so afterwards, it was the occasion for a question on the TV show *Jeopardy*—a sure sign of notoriety or fame. Who could have taken the bust of the famous poet? And why? Unlike a diamond necklace or Rolex watch, it's unique and too well-known to be fenced. Had it been purloined by muscular thugs hired by a wealthy and eccentric bibliophile, to be ensconced in a private library, where it could be cherished in secret?

Or maybe it was simply a Halloween prank. Because the bust weighs seventy-five pounds, and had to be hoisted over the high brick wall that embraces the museum buildings and courtyard, it was assumed that two or more thieves had collaborated. Of course, a single man could have managed it if he was strong enough, and capable of devising some safe and effective way to hoist it over the wall without shattering it.

Some of the suspense ended, however, just before midnight two days later when a young man dressed in western boots and cowboy hat walked into a roadside tavern carrying the seventy-five pound statue and placed it on a table. This was enough to quiet even the drinkers in *The Raven*.

Inn, who silently watched him as he sat down and told the bartender what was variously reported as: "Please take care of my friend here," or: "My buddy, Ed, wants a beer," or: "This is my drinking buddy. I found him in an alley."

After the beer was served, the stranger in the boots and cowboy hat departed, leaving the bartender and customers of The Raven Inn perplexed and a bit stunned. The clientele was not what you'd call literary. But what if they *had* been literary? What exactly do you *do* with a statue sitting alone with a glass of beer on the table where its right hand should be?

The answer came an hour later when the local police arrived to fetch the bust and return it to the Poe Museum on Main Street. They later reported that they'd received an anonymous phone call from a man who'd told them the bust was waiting at the Raven Inn. The police found it exactly as promised, along with a paper bag upon which was handwritten two stanzas from "Spirits of the Dead," one of Poe's obscure early poems.

At first, newspapers had reported soberly on the theft, but when the bust was returned, suggesting the heist was nothing more than a prank, they frolicked. They lost all inhibitions, and the headlines showed no mercy. POE-TIC RETURN and TO ROAM 'NEVERMORE' were two of them. Another announced: THE RAVEN KNOWS. Still another story, soberly titled POE RETURNS, began: "On a night dark and dreary disappeared one of Richmond's statuary. Why it was taken was not clear, even when it surfaced for a beer." As verse, this reaches heights that verge upon the mystical, for it is stupendously, ineffably wretched. The best that can be said of it is that it might have served to relieve some neural itch in the nervous system that scratched at it.

Of course it was only proper that the newspapers should have had fun with the episode. Maybe they shouldn't have gone so far as to write what was just quoted or, in a grotesque impulse toward whimsy, refer to the culprit as the "Fiendish Filcher," but the direction of such waggery is understandable, if not its excess and barfable taste. The theft itself was obviously conceived in a spirit of whimsy, perhaps

even mirth, and to neglect such an opportunity in a world of rising budget deficits, riots, media events, congressional hearings and international monetary chaos would be almost too much to expect of a newspaper person.

And yet the whimsy is not without its darker side. More than most, this caper had a symbolic meaning. Stealing that seventy-five pound bust of Edgar Allan Poe and hoisting it over a ten-foot wall (the inside height; the outside is eight feet) is not the same sort of thing as your everyday neighborhood punks stealing hubcaps or vandals painting ELVIS LIVES in spray paint upon the walls of a pizza parlor. The latter messages may smell of symbolism, but there's no whiff of brains in them.

The theft of Poe's bust is a different sort of act. It is one that speaks to a higher sensibility. There is something wistful and almost sardonic about it; its spirit is not entirely that of levity or flimflam. It is understandable how easily this measure might be lost upon mere witnesses, overworked newspaper reporters, and other outsiders. But I can testify to the presence of a nobler inner meaning, because I know the culprit himself, and in a way interviewed him. His name is John A. (as Poe himself might have signified him), and he was a member of my fiction workshop. And, at a conference cocktail party one evening, he told me all about it. He confessed everything.

Naturally, I was intrigued. For one thing, his feat brought to mind the protagonist of my novel, *The Tale of Asa Bean* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1971) because Asa spends much of his time and the reader's time contemplating what he judges to be a gratuitously symbolic, as well as utterly unnecessary gesture. Whimsical, muscular Asa also is fixated upon an art object. He contemplates slashing a painting, which is not unlike the more vivid and committed gesture of John A. as he climbed that brick wall late one October night, picked up the bust, wrapped it in his leather jacket, tied the arms of the jacket securely around his neck, and then climbed back over the wall and dropped down on the other side, the pale, heavy and lugubrious statuary intact.

That's the way John managed it, and it was an admirable

exploit, requiring strength and determination to bring it off safely. What followed happened generally as reported in the press, although there were certain important, or at least colorful, details lacking. For example, what sort of beer did the mysterious stranger in a cowboy hat order for Poe? It was Lowenbrau Dark. (Poe would have savored the name as well as the contents.) And what were his first words after he'd placed the bust on the table? "Please take care of my friend, here." More surprisingly, none of the eyewitnesses mentioned a mustache. John had taken care to conceal his identity by wearing a false mustache, along with the cowboy hat, when he carried the bust into The Raven Inn. But, what's the point of taking pains to disguise yourself if nobody even notices the disguise?

In spite of such deliberate preparations, however, John A. swears he did not go to the Poe museum in a spirit of premeditation. Like other symbolic ventures relating to Poe, this was inspired by alcohol. It belongs to the class of legendary rituals. There is an old story that flowers and a bottle of cognac appear mysteriously on Poe's grave every year on the eve of his birthday; and the next day, the flowers and cognac are both gone, while the bottle remains. Then there is the story about some Baltimore *literati* who got drunk one night and decided to go to Poe's grave and urinate upon it in a spirit of reverence. Another symbolic act, or something.

Although John's theft wasn't like either of those, in spirit it was more in the flowers and cognac mode. What you have to remember is, John A. was drunk. That was when and how it all started. He says he was sitting in a tavern and drinking and couldn't stop thinking of a postcard that shows the bust of Poe superimposed over a photo of the museum. He kept thinking of how exposed and vulnerable that bust was. And, how *accessible* it was, for at that time it simply rested on a pedestal in the open courtyard. He kept on brooding about it, and couldn't seem to get it stopped.

How was it after that? "It was like living in a 3-D fiction," John A. said. He claims it was like the unfolding of a short story, the way he writes them—beginning instinctively, heu-

ristically, without a clearly structured sense of what the ultimate form and action might prove to be, the action in life unfolding the way the action in a story does. A sort of "existence precedes essence" business, the kind that is more likely to occur in a local saloon than in, say, the main office of the Virginia Federal Bank or in one of the checkout lines of a local supermarket.

So the next thing you know, it's gotten pretty dark out and you're headed down East Main Street toward the Poe Museum. Maybe you started without any clearly defined idea of what you might do, but somewhere in your cortex there gradually emerges a clearly *undefined* idea. Because, by the time you breach that brick wall, you revert to the third-person, past tense. John A. was prepared. For example, he had obtained the assistance of a friend as a combination designated/getaway driver, and he'd gotten a tape recorder. Now all that remained was to test the security system of the Poe Museum. Or maybe even liberate the bust where it glowed chalkwhite in the moonlight on its pedestal. Both of which John did, very much as described.

And yet the adventure was hardly begun, and much of it the press could not have known about. For example, after settling his prize in the back seat of his car, John had his getaway driver take him to the nearest tattoo parlor. It was closed, of course, but after persistent pounding on the door, a second-story window flew open and a big beefy fellow with long hair and beard stuck his head out.

"I want to get a tattoo of a raven!" John yelled up at him.

"What in the hell's the matter with you?" the bearded man called down. "Can't you see we're closed?"

"I want to get a raven tattooed on my buddy's forearm," John called back.

"Get lost!" the tattooer muttered and slammed the window.

The next stop was a palmist, but she was closed, too. I'm not sure what a palmist could have done with statuary whose hands were as ghostly as its forearms; but that's where John said he stopped, and I believe him. After knocking on her door for a while, without any answer, John re-

turned to his car and muttered his frustration in the direction of his designated/getaway driver and tape recorder, reporting on this latest phase of the adventure.

After that, he stopped fooling around and asked to be driven straight down the Jeff Davis Highway—which, he likes to point out, had been Edgar and Virginia Clemm Poe's honeymoon route 150 years before. Finally the three of them arrived at The Raven Inn, which he entered alone, carrying the bust—with some version of the previously quoted dialogue taking place.

What still needs to be emphasized is that this is not the sort of shenanigan that would occur to just anyone. The notion would come only to one of unique sensibility, playful and rash, with a dash of impudicity. In doing what he did, John A. showed a flair for stylish impracticality—the sort necessary for, say, writing short stories directed toward the literary quarterly market. All of this fits John A. That he is a gifted young writer was immediately apparent when I read his stories in my workshop. His fiction is exuberantly alive; his characters have human needs and are filled with cranky notions; they're in danger of exploding if they don't do something crazy. The world he creates is colorful and vivid. In reading his fiction you get the idea that the author is the sort of person who keeps walking in and out of his stories, looking for a place to sit down.

But what if he *does* write good stories? Who needs them? There is no more justice in the world of letters than in any other slice of the human pie, and John A. is simply not as widely published as he deserves to be. He is too good a writer to be consigned to a niggardly obscurity, but that is pretty much where he finds himself. And yet whoever promised him anything more? In the likely prospect of disillusion, bafflement, and ego trauma, writing fiction is a superbly, defiantly cruel undertaking. For the overwhelming majority, to launch upon a writing career is to purchase a ticket promising little beyond sustained, unjust, demoralizing frustration. Or, as it is sometimes called, "rejection." When

young people ask if they should become writers, there is only one honest and benevolent answer: "Not if you can help it."

Poe would have understood this perfectly, even though he has to be accounted a successful writer. But success didn't help. When he was alive, he was both famous and infamous (though much of the infamy came later, with the Rev. Mr. Rufus Wilmot Griswold's biography). But his financial rewards were pathetically meager, and most of his adult life was spent in chronic anxiety as he tried to sustain his patrician ideals, self-image, and artistic standards in chronic and desperate poverty. He and Virginia often went hungry and, according to one story, on cold nights they coaxed their housecats onto the bed as a sort of purring blanket.

Young writers today are not likely to suffer so dramatically, for there are many ways to support oneself while writing. The world Poe inhabited seems colorful to us—and never more colorful than in the museum that bears his name—but measured against the humanitarian values of today, he lived in a brutish and insensitive time, with little tolerance for a poet and Virginia gentleman. Emerson was his contemporary, it is true, but so was Mike Fink, who was half horse and half alligator and in a playful moment shot off the protuberant heel of an African-American and may have come nearer defining the daily life of the time than did the Sage of Concord.

The world Poe inhabited was so rigidly structured socially that Poe's options were virtually nonexistent, relative to those today, when young writers can teach or work as stevedores or beauticians or carnival barkers or police officers or just about anything else imaginable, and be enriched, for all experience is grist for the writer's mill. But to Poe and his contemporaries—committed to rigid ideals of gentility—such options would have been shockingly incomprehensible.

And yet, with all the rich advantages and openness and social mobility of modern life, plenty remains to fill writers with despair. All realize how lonely and isolated they are, for each is only a solitary individual among that vast multitude who spend their nights in silence, exile and cunning, their

typewriters and word processors chattering away in the rabid pursuit of "getting published." How large are those multitudes? God knows. In 1950 I read that there were five million people "trying to write." So how many would that make today? Would their numbers have increased with inflation and population growth? Perhaps. Do I hear ten million? Twenty? Thirty?

Whatever the figure, it is enough to show the appalling disparity between hope and eventuation, promise and delivery. Not only that, the fiction market has shrunk pathetically, and sometimes you are visited by the dark suspicion that there are more people writing it than reading it. It's possible that eventually, with a shrinking market, the number of writers will decrease; but if one can judge from enrollments in creative writing classes and writers' conferences, that won't happen soon.

Years ago James Dickey said that booze, madness, and suicide were the great dangers writers face, misfortunes that tend to be intricately connected. They're also connected with the extraordinary competition every writer must contend with, along with the tyrannical irresponsibility that prevails in what is sometimes called the "Literary Establishment." People used to claim that every good manuscript would eventually find its way into print. Critics used to say that; editors said it; writers said it; *everybody* said it. But does that make it true? Not unless goats play cribbage and ducks moo.

Of course it often happens that good fiction, having run the gauntlet of editors (themselves survivors splattered with bloody red ink and beleaguered by haste and the strictures of editorial policy, reflecting ghosts of a benighted and impatient readership) . . . it often happens that good fiction will stagger and blunder its way into print, but the process is so far from perfect that the idea of perfection might as well not exist. And yet, maybe that is only natural, because it wasn't *designed* to be perfect. In fact, it wasn't designed at all.

The imperfections of the literary scene notwithstanding, a writer cannot escape the simple reality of how success is de-

finer. Henry James said that getting published is a writer's primary goal. Being one of the least commercial, as well as one of the most thoughtful, artistic, and "literary" of writers, James speaks with special authority. But young aspiring writers don't need his testimony regarding such a gloomy truth. An unpublished story may be worthwhile; it may even show promise of being literature, it may even be a masterpiece; but until it is published somewhere—no matter where or how small the printing—it is only fetal and inchoate.

Years ago I wrote a story about a madman who could not stop writing stories, anymore than he could get them published, so he bought a mimeograph machine and spent his evenings in his basement, running off copies in the hundreds, which he stacked in great towering piles all round him. The crazy fellow was one version of myself, of course, an utterly unsuccessful but utterly compulsive creator of narratives. A bad dream of myself gone bad, he was as grandiose and crazily heroic as he was helpless in his delusion.

Happily I got *that* story published, in an obscure and ephemeral literary magazine on the West Coast. It could not have been read by many people, but that number of readers was sufficient, for there was one among them who liked it and wrote to me, asking if I had "by any chance written a novel." (I pictured him picturing any novel I'd written as mimeographed and stacked in my basement.) This reader was Hiram Haydn, editor of the *American Scholar* as well as an editor at what was then Harcourt Brace and World. While I did not have a mimeograph machine in the basement, I did indeed have a novel, *Hanger Stout, Awake!* which I had just finished, and which I sent to Hiram, and which he liked and published.

That is my own personal testimony of a journey through one of a myriad gauntlets, the sort of gauntlet that, after you survive and come through all right, you look back and realize it was somehow all worthwhile . . . maybe even *fated* to be. And yet I cannot entirely forget the dark anxiety of those beginnings. I remember how black the tunnel looked when I first entered it (the gauntlet is now a tunnel), with not even a clear notion of light at the other end.

So, I remember those late nights when I could almost imagine the sounds of millions of typewriters and word processors chattering in basements, in attics, in bedrooms, in the city rooms of newspapers, in dormitories, in basements, in warehouse offices, on kitchen tables, as writers pounded away, obsessed and hopeful, creating characters doing odd and interesting things, nudged into fictional reality by creating real worlds out of sentences, and then having the reports on those worlds translated into print, so that they might conceivably be read by countless multitudes of people, existing beyond the reach of our imaginations.

Of course the thought of those counter multitudes of competitors shouldn't bother writers essentially; it should not touch them *as writers*, for being a writer is a far more profound commitment than entering some kind of publishing or celebrity contest. Those competing multitudes have nothing to do with what writers are primarily and ideally *about*, once they sense some discrepancy in the world and realize that it contains within it a story that needs to be told, and they alone can tell it.

As writers, they possess their own story ideas and characters with an intimacy available to no one else; and when they are writing, they are oblivious to all that can be seen as competition . . . which is to say, they are interested exclusively in what they are creating and are therefore focused and alive and happy. To be preoccupied with one's own chosen task, Pindar reminded us, is to lose the fear of mortality.

But the sad truth is that writers cannot always be writing, and it is when they stop writing that they fancy they can hear all those other typewriters and word processors chattering away. It's when they're not writing that they stand back and contemplate the disparity between what they have intended and what they have accomplished; and measure their failure in other ways and brood over it, and hear the competition and suspect that they are in danger of going mad.

John A. understands what I'm saying; and Edgar Allan Poe would have understood it, too, with a few tucks and

changes. What binds all of us together is an enterprise that is essentially mystical, for the same degree of industry, talent, and skill expended in almost any other activity would be more profitable, therefore by almost any criterion, more realistic. Our obsession is quixotic, delusional, crazy, unnecessary; it is wildly adventurous in ways that only the wildly adventurous can understand. Asa Bean lived in the configurations of this myth as intensely as that poor drudge mimeographing unreadable stories in his basement, while his wife and children slept the night away above his troubled head. We are all committed to it, each in our own way.

So much is old knowledge. The sacred bards of the ancient Celts were taboo figures, both feared and honored for their possession of the uncanny power to tell stories and create imaginary worlds. Faint echoes of their calling can still be heard; their mystical power can still be felt in the superstitious awe we feel in the presence of realities created from words on a page, which enable us to believe in the truth of people who think and feel and suffer without having any existence in the real world of umbrellas, wrist-watches, and apples.

Edward Dahlberg said that we create fictions so we won't lead a mean existence. This means that we cannot really live without gestures that are both symbolic and practically useless. The world is asleep and we want to awaken it. Things are not what they should be; they are not in the right place. Everything is skewed and out of order and needs adjusting.

John A. understood this one boozy evening and acted out one set of its implications, for the stories we tell are not limited to what we write and say, but extend throughout all we do and remember. I hope John A. will never lose faith in this power as he keeps on writing. Then maybe there will be a day when a reader comes up to him and says, "Do you know something? It was so real to me that I forgot it was only a story I was reading and all of a sudden I found myself in The Raven Inn, and I saw old Ed sitting there at the table, and damned if I didn't think I should buy him a Lowenbrau Dark. And, by God, I did!"