

The Lost Soul Of America

by Allen Salisbury

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In Europe it is often said that you can tell the spirit of a region by its wine. If that is true, then you most assuredly must be able to discern the true soul of a nation by the way in which it honors its poets. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the great poet Friedrich Schiller's memory and spirit are kept as a living tradition, albeit by a small and aging core of devoted followers. In Italy, despite attempts to purge the *Commedia* of Dante Alighieri from the public schools, there are still enough who know him that we may band together to prevent such an occurrence. In Greece, there is still great pride among sections of the population that their country was the birthplace of perhaps the greatest poet of them all, Plato.

In Spain, Cervantes is still revered by an admittedly too small elite. I think that even in the Soviet Union some still take pride in the work of the great Russian poet Pushkin. But in America, here in America, which has, for the last 200 years, been the recipient of the benefits of the best minds the rest of the world has to offer, the nation has allowed its only poet to be treated in such a despicable manner that one can argue that the very soul of the country has departed.

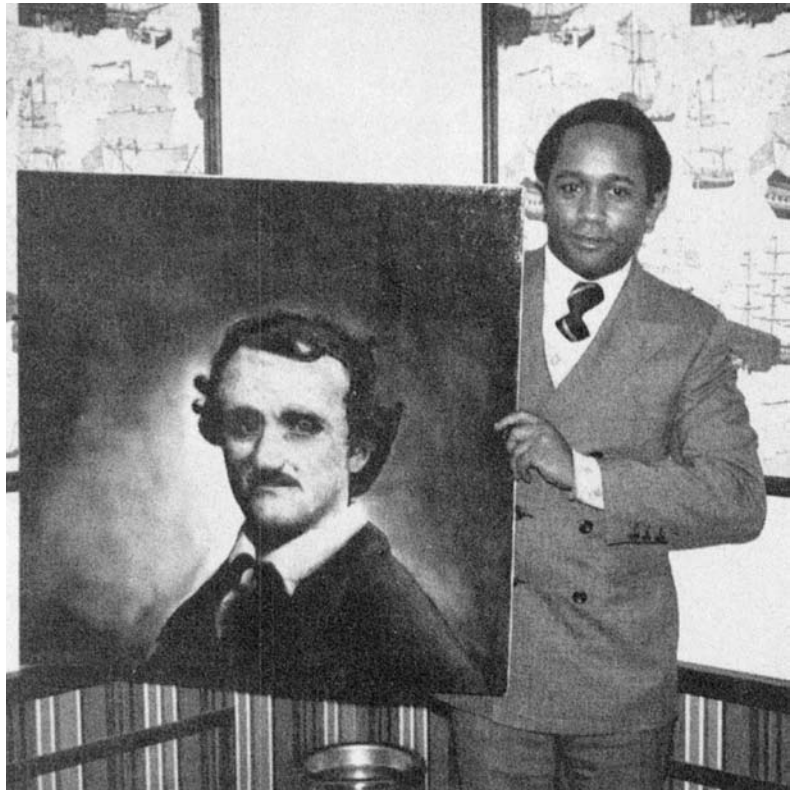
This statement is not what some may wish to call hyperbole, others poetic license, still others, metaphor. It is a simple statement of fact.

I do not hold you, the reader, responsible in this matter, because you have been lied to on the subject of poetry and art in general, to the point that most of you recoil with visions of Andy Warhol's soup cans or some group of nuts performing a pagan ritual on stage accompanied by electronic grunts, groans, and screams.

To prove that most of you have been lied to, what do you think of when you hear the name Edgar Allan Poe?

The great majority of you have been told, perhaps by an ignorant or misinformed junior high school teacher, that Poe was some sort of alcoholic or opium-eater. A greater majority of you have images of Vincent Price's performances on the Late Late Show or Chiller Theater. In fact, your minds have been filled with so much of this garbage that you have forgotten the intense joy and excitement you experienced when you first read a poem or a tale written by Mr. Poe.

It is my purpose in this excerpt to give an accurate account of who Edgar Allan Poe really was, as well as to show you exactly how, by whom, and for what purpose you have been deliberately misled.



Americans have been lied to about the great American poet and patriot Edgar Allan Poe. Allen Salisbury, pictured here, with a portrait of Poe, presented to him during a lecture tour in 1979, sets the record straight.

Who Was Edgar Allan Poe?

Perhaps a better title for this section would be “How to Smell a Rat While Reading History Books.” The key to unlocking Poe’s identity is rejecting at once the repeated and hysterical denials by most Poe scholars that Poe was not anything like the detective C. Auguste Dupin he created in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Purloined Letter.”

Once the matter of Poe’s philosophical and political outlook is settled by actually reading what the man wrote—his poetry, tales, and critical essays—one can glean through various biographies and history books, actually using the method of Dupin’s search for the purloined letter, to determine the significance of the lie being retailed to find the relevant empirical proofs that remain in letters and archives to satisfy the ordinary reader that it is a lie.

The particular untruth that Poe was unlike Dupin usually goes along with an assertion that Poe never left the United States, despite what Poe says to the contrary. The evidence usually presented for this assertion comes from the French nut Charles Baudelaire, and consists of pointing out that there are no street names in Paris such as the ones given in Poe’s detective stories.

All this is asserted despite the fact that ample evidence exists to the contrary.

The following letter, written by Alexandre Dumas to an Italian police official, proves not only that Poe visited France, but also hints at the nature of Poe’s visit and proves conclusively that Poe’s detective stories were, among other things, autobiographical in nature:

It was about the year 1832. One day an American presented himself at my house with an introduction from his fellow American James Fenimore Cooper. Needless to say I welcomed him with open arms. His name was Edgar Poe. From the outset I realized that I had to deal with a remarkable man; Two or three remarks which he made upon my furniture, the things I had about me, the way my articles of everyday use were strewn about the room and on my moral and intellectual characteristics impressed me with their accuracy and truth.

On the very first day of our acquaintance I freely proffered him my friendship and asked for his. He must certainly have entertained for me a sympathy similar to that I felt for him, for he held out his hand to me and the understanding

between us was instantaneous and complete.

At this time my mother’s ill health . . . required that she enjoy purer air than that afforded by the more central parts of Paris. She was living in the Luxemburg district, while I had a little house all to myself in the Rue de L’Ouest. I offered to let Poe have two rooms in this house for the duration of his stay in Paris.

Edgar Poe accepted my offer confessing that his financial resources amounted to little more than 300 francs a month accruing to him on a credit from M. Lafite. . . . Only, he made his acceptance conditional on one essential stipulation which was that in his mode of life under my roof he should be free to do entirely as he wished, and to comport himself as if the house were his and not mine. . . . From the very first day of our association I realized why he had laid down the conditions to which I have referred.

Poe had one curious idiosyncrasy. He liked the night better than the day. Indeed, his love of darkness amounted to a passion. But the Goddess of Night could not always afford him her shade and remain with him continually, so he contrived a substitute. As soon as day began to break he hermetically sealed up the windows in his room and lit a couple of candles.

In the midst of this pale illumination, he worked or read or suffered his thoughts to wander in the insubstantial regions of reveries, or else he fell asleep not being always able to indulge in waking dreams. But as soon as the clock told him darkness had come, he would come in for me, and take me out with him if I was there or go forth alone if I was not.

As a general rule I must confess I was ready waiting for him, for these nocturnal expeditions in his company were a source of veritable pleasure. In these rambles I could not help remarking with wonder and admiration (though his rich endowment of ideas should have prepared me for it) on the extraordinary facility of analysis exhibited by my friend. He seemed to delight in giving it play and neglected no opportunity to indulge himself in that pleasure. He made no secret of the enjoyment he derived from it, and would remark with a smile of proud satisfaction that for him every man had an open window where his heart was. And as a rule he accompanied that assertion with an im-

mediate demonstration which having me for its object could leave no doubt in my mind concerning Edgar's power of divination.

Now consider the following description of Poe's Detective Dupin from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

Residing in Paris during the spring and part of the summer 18-- , I there became acquainted with a Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin. This young gentleman was of an excellent—indeed of an illustrious family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to . . . poverty. . . . It was a freak fancy of my friend . . . to be enamoured of the Night for her own sake; and into this *bizarrie*, as into all his others, I quietly fell; giving myself up to his wild whims with a perfect abandon. At the first dawn of the morning we closed all the massy shutters of our old building; lighted a couple of tapers which, strongly perfumed, threw out only the ghastliest and feeblest of rays . . . until warned by the clock of the advent of the true Darkness. Then we sallied forth into the streets. . . .

At such times I could not help remarking and admiring . . . a peculiar analytic ability in Dupin.

I might add that the Dumas letter was written four years prior to the first publication of Poe's Dupin series. Despite the fact that such evidence points us in the proper direction to gather biographical data concerning Poe, it is either denied or dismissed out of hand. For example, historian Harvey Allen says on the very first page of the preface to the second edition of his *Israfel—The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe*:

Since the publication of this biography not a great deal of important material about Poe, from a biographical standpoint, has come to light. What of interest has recently been turned up by scholars I have sometimes availed myself of, now and then, incorporating a few minor facts into the text with the necessary acknowledgment and reference. In that connection it is proper to say that I have not felt it incumbent upon me to mention in the body of the text the so-called "letter" from Dumas the elder to an Italian officer of police, which purports to tell of Dumas's meeting with Poe and Fenimore Cooper in the year 1832 in Paris, although through the courtesy of the present owner

I was permitted to examine the "letter" and the material connected with it. . . .

This is the kind of stuff meant to intimidate Master's or Ph.D. candidates from treading too far into an area which has been marked off limits. Scholars like John Ward Ostrum, Daniel Hoffman, and others echo this view that Poe was far less a character than Dupin, that the inventor of the story was less than his invention.

Quite the contrary, the evidence points to the fact that in the early 1830s Poe was assisting James Fenimore Cooper in the Marquis de Lafayette's attempts to establish a French republic for the second time. The Marquis de Lafayette headed the European branch intelligence services for the Society of Cincinnatus, which he founded with George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, and which included Quartermaster General David Poe, Poe's grandfather and close collaborator of Lafayette during the Revolutionary War.

Cooper's public activities in France at that time consisted of organizing for a republic in France as well as in Poland. He was instrumental, along with Lafayette, in countering a vicious anti-American propaganda campaign being conducted by British magazines and British-influenced journals in France. Cooper also solicited the aid of his, and later Poe's, American publisher, economist Mathew Carey. Carey was requested to send to France a refutation of the British propaganda line which claimed that it was cheaper to run an aristocracy like Britain than to run a republic like the United States. Carey had been an associate of Lafayette's since he worked as an Irish emigré publishing the dispatches of Benjamin Franklin from Franklin's print shop in Passy.

The Dumas letter also mentions that Poe was receiving a 300-franc-per-month credit from one M. Lafite. This Lafite was a famous French financier and the architect of much of France's post-1830s industrial development. Lafite was also part of Lafayette's political network in France. His family vineyards still produce some of the finest wines in Europe under the name Lafite Rothschild.

That Poe planned to go to France to aid the allies of Lafayette is clear in this letter that he wrote to Commandant Thayer of West Point shortly after his departure from the Academy:

Sir:

Having no longer any ties which can bind me to my native country . . . I intend by the first op-

portunity to proceed to Paris with the view of obtaining through the interest of the Marquis de Lafayette, an appointment (if possible) in the Polish Army. In the event of the interference of France in behalf of Poland this may easily be effected—at all events it will be my only feasible plan of procedure. The object of this letter is respectfully to request that you will give me such assistance as may lie in your power in the furtherance of my views.

A certificate of standing in my class is all that I have any right to expect. Anything further—a letter to a friend in Paris—or to the Marquis—would be a kindness which I should never forget.

The name C. Auguste Dupin has also been the subject of much debate among Poe scholars. I will not bother here with some of the suggested sources for the name Dupin, since Poe could have been referring to one person only: Charles A. Dupin of Paris, a leading figure in the Ecole Polytechnique circles of Gaspard Monge, Lazard Carnot, and their associates. It is the Ecole Polytechnique method of scientific investigation that is the subject of Poe's detective tales, or "tales of ratiocination," as Poe more properly termed them.

This is no matter of mere conjecture or guesswork. Poe very early in life came under the influence of Supreme Court Justice John Marshall and General Winfield Scott in his home in Richmond, Virginia. In his early teens, Poe was selected to serve as second in command of the Richmond Junior Volunteers honor guard that accompanied Lafayette during his 1824 visit to the city. Lafayette's visit to Richmond, part of a months-long tour of the United States, was organized by the Cincinnatus Society to secure the Presidential election of John Quincy Adams and to raise funds for Lafayette's forces in Europe.

Marshall had been influential in helping to establish the Society of Cincinnatus, and Winfield Scott later became an honorary member of the society, with specific charge over matters of military intelligence. General Scott, together with Commandant Thayer, made several trips to Paris for the specific purpose of acquiring the necessary textbooks and related materials to firmly establish the tradition of the Ecole Polytechnique at West Point.

The military-artillery training acquired directly from the French military genius Carnot was taught to West Point upperclassmen at Fortress Monroe, where

Poe had enlisted under the pseudonym Edgar Perry. Poe's commanding officer at Fortress Monroe was Colonel Worth, an aide de camp to General Scott and the former commandant of cadets at West Point. It was Colonel Worth, along with General Scott, who obtained for Poe his cadetship at West Point after Poe had already completed the advanced training. The following letter from Poe to his foster father should prove the point.

... I made the request to obtain a cadet's appointment partly because I know that ... the appointment could easily be obtained either by your personal acquaintance with Mr. Wert or by the recommendation of General Scott, or even of the officers residing at Fortress Monroe, and partly because in making the request you would at once see to what direction my future views and expectations were inclined. ...

[The appointment] would be an unprecedented case in the American Army, and having already passed through the practical part of even the higher portion of the Artillery arm, my cadetship would only be considered as a necessary form which I am positive I could run through in six months.

It is also a matter of note that a good portion of the American intelligence community was in France during Poe's visit. To name a few, these included General Scott, Colonel Worth, James Fenimore Cooper, and the inventor Samuel Morse. Of course, any biography of these individuals will say that their trips to Paris were for reasons of health. Funny how so many great men seem to get sick all at once. ...

The Poetry of Politics

By the time Poe entered on the American literary scene it was infested with a mad variety of sects and cults. Transcendentalists, Carlylists, Knickerbockers, Fourierists, and spiritualists were crawling all over the place. Poe assessed the situation in his very first editorial statement for the *Southern Literary Messenger*:

When shall the artist assume his proper station in society . . . ? How long shall the veriest vermin of the earth, who crawl around the altar of Mammon, be more esteemed of men than they, the gifted ministers to those exalted emotions which link us to the mysteries of Heaven? To our own query

we may venture a reply. Not long. A spirit is already abroad at war with it.

Poe's proper and most urgent concern, among his other duties, was to reestablish the universal rules of Platonic poetic composition which had earlier been the root of American culture. It was because of his efforts to accomplish this that he incurred the wrath of the literary charlatans, and still angers them today. Poe's warning that this literary conspiracy was destroying the very soul of America was the subject of many of his tales, including "Mellonta Tauta," from which I quote a relevant passage.

... It appears that long, long ago, in the night of Time there lived a Turkish philosopher (or Hindoo possibly) called Aries Tottle. This person introduced, or at all events propagated what was termed the deductive or *a priori* mode of investigation. He started with what he maintained to be *axioms* or "self-evident truths," and thence proceeded "logically" to results. His greatest disciples were one Nueclid [Euclid—AS] and one Can't [Kant—AS]. Well, Aries Tottle flourished supreme until advent of one Hog, surnamed "Ettrick Shepherd," who preached an entirely different system, which he called the *a posteriori* or *inductive*. His plan referred altogether to Sensation. [Poe is having a little fun here at the expense of Francis Bacon and James Hogg, a Scottish writer for *Blackwood's Magazine* sometimes called the Ettrick Shepherd.—AS] He proceeded by observing, analyzing, and classifying facts—*instantiae naturae*, as they were affectedly called—into general laws. Aries Tottle's method, in a word, was based on *noumena*; Hog's on *phenomena*. Well, so great was the admiration excited by this latter system that, at its first introduction, Aries Tottle fell into disrepute; but finally he recovered ground, and was permitted to divide the realm of truth with his more modern rival. The *savants* now maintained that the Aristotelean and Baconian roads were the sole possible avenues to knowledge.... Now I do not complain of these ancients so much because their logic is, by their own showing, utterly baseless, worthless and fantastic altogether, as because of their pompous and imbecile proscription of all *other* roads of Truth, of all *other*

means for its attainment than the two preposterous paths—the one of creeping and the one of crawling—to which they have dared to confine the Soul that loves nothing so well as to *soar*....

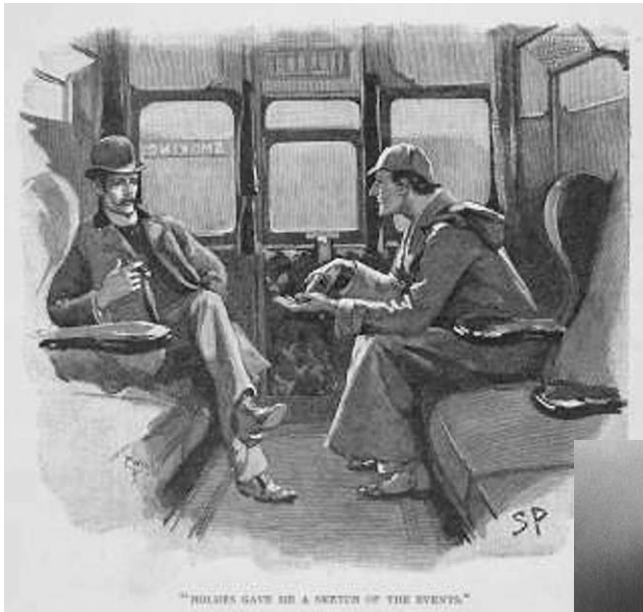
It was this Platonic method of "soaring" that Poe correctly identifies as responsible for the discoveries of Kepler and the musical compositions of Mozart and Beethoven. It is the same method that Poe elsewhere identified with Leibniz's principle of "sufficient reason." It is the method of Plato's golden souls of the Phoenician myths, as well as the method of Dante's *Commedia*, most emphatically of Dante's "Paradise."

The Baconian method of "creeping" sense-certainty is relegated to the lowest regions of Dante's Hell ["Inferno"], where dwell Plato's bronze souls. The Aristotelean method of "crawling," deduction from an assumed set of "facts," is at best in the lower regions of Dante's "Purgatory," or associated with Plato's silver souls. Hence, Poe writes: "I am but defending a set of principles which no honest man need be ashamed of defending, and for whose defense no honest man will consider an apology required."

From this standpoint, all of Poe's tales and poems ought to be immediately comprehensible to English-speaking audiences. Poe's essays and literary criticisms are the explication of Poe's method of composition. To this day, what is left of Poe's book, *The History of English Literature*, of which his "Philosophy of Composition" and "Rationale of Verse" are chapters, is probably the best-known text for teaching the principles of poetic composition to English-speaking audiences.

Poe often had a great deal of fun composing tales that mocked the methods employed by the leading British literary journals. One of Poe's favorite targets in this regard was *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Blackwood's was notorious for its sense-certainty literary style, and this style was the source for two of the most hilarious satires written by Poe, "How to Write a Blackwood Article," and "A Predicament."

In the former, our heroine Suky Snobbs receives instructions as to how to write a tale, of course making sure that she has an experience from which it will be worth recording her sensations. In the latter, she has such an experience, and records her sensations as her head is severed by a pendulum and first her eyes, then her head roll into a nearby gutter. Then, of course, she becomes very properly confused as to whether her identity is in her head or her body. Suky Snobbs, of course,



British Intelligence operative Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (right) created the detective Sherlock Holmes in opposition to Poe's Inspector Dupin. Where Dupin relies upon reason, Holmes favors deductions from a bad infinite of empirical "clues." Above: The Aristotelian Holmes, with his alter-ego Dr. Watson.



is none other than Margaret Fuller, a leading American Transcendentalist.

Poe singled out Margaret Fuller not only because he disliked her writing, but because she was a political tool of the British SIS [Secret Intelligence Service]. During her stay with Thomas Carlyle in England, Fuller, under Carlyle's direction, had secretly supplied the Italian terrorist Giuseppe Mazzini with an American passport and escorted him through France and safely into Italy. Mazzini was the head of Young Italy, a creation of the same Edinburgh SIS and Venetian oligarchist networks that created Young America, Young France, etc., as post-Jacobin battering rams against the surviving republican currents in those countries.

In another vein, Poe's tales such as "The Pit and the Pendulum" are often mistaken for mere horror stories. No doubt Vincent Price is responsible for this. But, "The Pit and the Pendulum" is another exposition of the utter futility of sense-certainty methods of investigation. The hero of the story, trapped in a pit (an obvious allusion to Dante), begins investigating his circumstances using his senses of touch and smell to measure the dimensions of the cell. By this method, he comes very near to falling into an abyss while the pendulum

swings closer. Driven to the point of despair by this method, our hero finally begins to soar—that is, to reason a solution to his predicament.

In his tale of ratiocination "The Purloined Letter," Poe presents us with a problem that is unresolvable by methods of "creeping"—sense certainty. Here we have a problem concerning the letter and its whereabouts. Yet the prefect of police, carrying sense-certainty methods to their extremes, cannot locate it. Dupin, using superior methods, does. Poe's story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is a case where reason succeeds, while mere deduction from certain clues fails.

On this point, Edgar Allan Poe drove Arthur Conan Doyle into hysterical fits of defending the deductive method. For example, in his introduction to *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle has Sherlock Holmes react the following way when Watson informs him that it is the Earth that revolves around the sun:

"Now that I do know it I shall do my best to forget it." "To forget it!"

"You see," he [Holmes] explained, "I consider that a man's brain is like a little empty attic, and you have to

stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now, the skillful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order. It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. Depend upon it, there comes a time when for every addition of knowledge you forget something that you knew before. It is of the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones."

"But the solar system!" I protested.

"What the deuce is it to me?" he interrupted

impatiently; “you say that we go round the sun. If we went round the moon it would not make a pennyworth of difference to me or to my work.”

Later Holmes defends Euclid, the Aristotelean whom Poe attacked. Still later, he attacks Poe’s method directly:

“No doubt you think that you are complimenting me in comparing me to Dupin,” he observed. “Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends’ thoughts with an *a propos* remark after a quarter of an hour’s silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine.” On this same point—that of having the ability to look into the very soul of another—Arthur Conan Doyle’s countryman Charles Dickens believed Poe possessed some sort of mystical powers. It was Poe’s habit to guess the ending of the Dickens novels which appeared in serial form in American magazines. Having successfully “guessed” the ending of several novels, Poe proceeded to explain why it was so easy to determine the ending of a novel written by formula.

The reader should not be amazed at this ability. It is somewhat akin to the way you are able to predict the outcome of so many of the “made for television” movies that you watch every night, bored, but glued to the chair as you await the next jiggle of sensation to flash across the boob tube.

Our present-day police detectives would learn a lot from a comparison of Poe’s tales of ratiocination to Doyle’s detective stories. It would spare them the problem of waiting for a mute dog to show up. . . .

Epilogue

As I have stated throughout, America owes a profound debt to Edgar Allan Poe, and the author owes a profound personal debt to Poe. Few Americans are even aware of the debt they owe Poe. But the last great President this nation ever had acknowledged his personal debt to Poe.

Abraham Lincoln [whose Bicentennial we also celebrate this year—ed.] not only used Poe in his campaign literature for the 1860 election campaign, but Lincoln is recorded as saying that he owed a profound debt to the poet for his own philosophical outlook.

America has been living off the wellsprings of Lincoln’s four years in office for more than a century. It is past time to replenish those wellsprings, lest the soul of this country becomes lost beyond redemption.

During the last years of Poe’s life before he was murdered, Poe gave lectures on the principles of poetry and music before audiences that numbered as many as three thousand. I don’t think such events have been replicated since. If you, the reader, have learned anything from reading this excerpt, I request that you join with me and my collaborators in organizing a series of Poe celebrations in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Richmond, Virginia. We need musicians, elocutionists, teachers and students, and just plain interested citizens to join in redeeming Poe’s good name and our country’s soul once and for all time.

Edgar Allan Poe: ‘El Dorado’

Gaily bedight,
A gallant night
In sunshine and in shadow,
Had journeyed long,

Singing a song,
In search of El Dorado.
But he grew old—
This knight so bold—

And—o’er his heart a shadow
Fell as he found
No spot of ground
That looked like El Dorado.

And, as his strength
Failed him at length,
He met a pilgrim shadow—
“Shadow,” said he,

“Where can it be—
This land of El Dorado?”
“Over the Mountains
Of the Moon,

Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,”
The shade replied—
“If you seek for El Dorado.”