

Mythopoetic Justice: Democracy and the Death of Edgar Allen Poe

PHILIP D. BEIDLER

AFTER MORE THAN 150 years, the strange death of Edgar Allan Poe continues to attract the kind of attention worthy of a tale of mystery and imagination by Poe himself. Discovered in the streets of Baltimore on Election Day, October 7, 1849, in a combined state of exhaustion and alcoholic stupor, did he simply meet his end, as asserted by contemporary detractors, as a form of drunken just deserts? Or, as the more charitable were prompt to suggest, was there an underlying physical cause: epilepsy, perhaps, or brain fever? Recent medical readings of the evidence have pointed to diabetic hypoglycemia and even hydrophobia, the consequence of being bitten by a rabid animal. Alternatively, interpreters of a detective bent have postulated extreme physical ill treatment: a series of beatings or some fatal blow to the head. One of these, John Evangelist Walsh, has now gone further to posit a murder scenario where, on a northward journey to complete arrangements for his marriage to Elmira Royster of Richmond, Poe is pursued and waylaid by that lady's brothers, forcibly made to ingest whiskey, and thereby launched on what turns out to be a fatal binge.

One can hardly fault the speculation; indeed one can hardly resist it when the mysterious circumstances in question and the complex of events surrounding them involve the demise of a writer who himself had made a career asserting the essentially mythopoeic character of existence in nineteenth-century America—the essential reciprocity, in a world largely void of the traditional markers of cultural identity, of myth and reality, imagination and experience, art and life. Poe, mourning the death of his beloved Virginia, undertakes a set

of increasingly frantic and hallucinatory peregrinations, revisiting the locales of his luckless career. Leaving New York one last time, he sets out for Richmond. Along the way he becomes convinced that he is being pursued by shadowy assassins.

In Baltimore, he reverses course, returning to Philadelphia, where a drunken spree lands him in prison. In a humiliating legal spin on the literary-cultural celebrity he has so long coveted, he is released by a judge who recognizes him as "Poe, the poet" and resumes his southward progress. In Richmond, he alternates between decorous social intercourse and visible binge drinking. Persuaded that he may be able to marry Elmira Royster, a sweetheart torn from him during his youth, he makes a great show of joining the Sons of Temperance and undertakes a headlong return journey to New York to settle outstanding business and to fetch Virginia's mother back with him for the ceremonies. He never gets there. Possibly again going as far north as Philadelphia this time and then reversing course for Baltimore, he gets off the train in that city, the place of his paternal ancestry. He then disappears for a week before he is discovered in the street outside a tavern doubling as a "crib" for repeat voters. Taken to a hospital, he lives for four days, where his last communications with the world comprise a series of oracular, melancholy utterances, some of them with seemingly literary connections to his own mysterious texts.

The whole business is all almost too Edgar Allan Poe-like to be true. It is Poe's last gothic tale of terror: the great exegete of American existential and aesthetic loneliness vanishes into one of his own nightmare worlds of self-creating and self-annihilating reflexivities. Alternatively, it is his last great tale of detection: afoot in some master final conjuration of plot, simple and odd, the ghost of Poe awaits the Dupin who will accomplish the great unriddling, find the obvious, single thing, there for all the eye to see, that will set everything in place.

As importantly, however, at its obdurate circumstantial core—Poe, discovered dead drunk, or nearly so, in front of a tavern notorious as a collecting point for derelicts herded from polling place to polling place to cast fraudulent multiple votes—it also becomes the realization, I would propose, of a single political nightmare that Poe had been fabulating with increasing obsessiveness in the last decade of his life: the vision of sottish, addled, irrational *homo democraticus* in general and of tumultuous, anarchic nineteenth-century American participatory democracy in particular.

Two of Poe's most visible anti-democratic satires of the period, although omitted now from most anthologies, remain fairly well known. In "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839), the latest backwoods military upstart elevated to the status of popular political demigod is revealed to be a disembodied collection of prostheses. In "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" (1842), an American student of dementia visits a French model institution where the inmates have literally taken over the asylum.

Some mention of what might be called the antidemocratic mythopathy in Poe's satires—comparable to that found, for instance, in such acerbic fables of egalitarian excess as Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" or Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"—has been made by commentators, most notably Daniel Hoffman. What distinguishes it from the work of contemporaries, however, is the compounded violence *and* virulence of the literary grotesquerie. In the first case, the symbology is that of mutilation and dismemberment. In the second, it is that of madness and incarceration. The composite effect suggests a totality of loathing, a uniform, pathological contempt.

Were one to attempt a current entitling spin on "The Man That Was Used Up," it might be re-styled as *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail, 1839*. In fact, the vernacular title stems from a political slogan trailed through the narrative as a running joke. The narrator, styling himself a kind of roving election correspondent in search of the inside story on the

popular military candidate, Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith, hero of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Wars, repeatedly arrives on scenes of conversation about the latter in which one speaker begins promisingly by saying "He's the man . . ." only to have the sentence completed by another's non-sequitur.

Deciding to interview the luminary in person in his chambers, the narrator at length supplies the punch line with a vengeance. The disembodied reification of a violent colloquialism—"I'll use you up!"—that has come down through backwoods generations as a threat of being whipped to flinders, Smith is a man who literally has been flogged to physical nothingness. To wit: having sacrificed his body parts on the altar of the republic in a series of Indian conquests, he himself is revealed only to exist as formless protoplasm reconstructed from the ground up out of artificial body parts—even down to his sonorous vocal apparatus (*Complete Stories*, 356-57). The man of the hour or man of the moment, he is in fact, the man who has been used up.

To be sure, even today it all reads nicely for an age of media candidates all properly concocted by handlers and focus groups, their appearances reduced to slogans and sound bites. While admiring such prescience, however, one too easily misses the bite of the contemporary political humor. As a violent historical creation "Smith" is clearly that stock figure of early American humor, the frontier *miles gloriosus*, Nimrod Wildfire, the Lion of the West, now literally resurrected *and* reconstructed out of political spare parts into the latest canebrake Napoleon.

Further, given the subtitling of the story as "A Tale of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Wars," the bloodthirsty populist picture could not be more complete. "Smith's" exalted brigadier generalship is a "brevet"—a temporary field promotion, likely a militia rank, in that era most frequently conferred by politicians, on condition of conquering native peoples, in hope of some eventual quid pro quo. His imposing initials confer an

equally dubious genealogy, the alphabet as American pedigree.

“Smith” speaks for itself, the great man as democratic everyman. And finally, of course, there is the ground of heroism itself: the various wars of Indian removal and extermination that in the early decades of the century became the launching pads for innumerable political careers. The prototype of the figure was, to be sure, Jackson himself, by no coincidence, in 1836, at the end of his presidency, having completed his martial triumphs of the early decades of the century with the last of the great Indian removals east of the Mississippi.

There was also, however, General Winfield Scott, more recently in the limelight for his campaigns against the Seminoles and his military supervision of the final Creek and Cherokee removals, including the notorious Trail of Tears. And in fact, in the election of 1840, which the story most likely concerns, Scott was at least initially advanced as a prospective presidential candidate.

These are both good guesses. But there are two better. The first was the military hero as Indian fighter who turned out to be the election’s actual man-on-horseback nominee. That was William Henry Harrison, a well-born Whig Virginian who, for campaign purposes styling himself a log-cabin populist, must have seemed to Poe a particularly noxious amalgam of class traitor and political sellout. The victor of an Indian battle years earlier at Tippecanoe Creek in Indiana, he managed to resurrect its memory long enough to engineer a rallying cry—“Tippecanoe and Tyler Too”—ingeniously marrying his decades-old martial feat with the name of his running mate. The other was, of course, the Democratic incumbent and Jackson’s anointed successor, the oily, diminutive, decidedly un-Jacksonian Martin Van Buren, the Red Fox of Kinderhook, the Little Magician, the ultimate politician as protean midget. The Whigs, it turns out, had some memorable words for him as well. “Van, Van,” they went, “He’s a used up man” (Lynch, 453).

Thus, in Poe's complex play on contemporary political sloganeering, we arrive at the core of political loathing lodged at the heart of his satire. "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too!" "Van, Van, He's a Used Up Man!" Here is the political flaying not of one politician but two, of the political process at large, of the whole ghoulish, grotesque masquerade of man-making that passes for electoral ritual in participatory American democracy. To be a candidate for office in America, Poe tells us, is to be the man of the hour; and to be the man of the hour is to be, inevitably, a candidate for the title, "The Man Who Was Used Up."

A later story, "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" (1842), is displaced to France. The title, however, makes a precise assignment of more localized political geography and practice. The "system" for treating mental illness it describes, as imaged in the phony, inflated titles borne by the American originators it purports to honor, is no system at all. The grand project of "Tarr" and "Fether," and dreamed up, as it turns out, by a rebellious lunatic, is organized insanity, the logic of the smooth-talking leader of the demented mob. So the particular institutional setting is distinctly "American" as well; it is an asylum that has been taken over by the inmates.

Again, the narrator is a somewhat dimwitted roving observer, in this case something of a parody of the friend of Roderick Usher, continually persuading himself that everything is normal despite frequent naggings of unease and suspicion. The inmates, cast into the role of keepers, seem most nervously sane. The keepers, cast by the inmates into the dungeons, constantly protest that it is they who are sane and the others mad. It is altogether a model asylum. The overthrow, it turns out, has been made possible by a permissive treatment of madness, invented by the Americans of the title, called the "system of soothing"—itself a mocking reference to the "moral treatment" asylum method instituted by the English reformer William Tuke and his French counterpart Philippe Pinel—in which lunatics are granted the "apparent

freedom” of walking around in normal clothes as if they were in their right mind (*Complete Stories*, 293).

The ringleader, one Maillard, elected head lunatic, treats the narrator to a dinner—an opulent banquet of grandees in ill-fitting borrowed aristocratic dress complete with dissonant orchestra. It is a lavish feast, full of opulence and plenitude, but with “very little taste in the arrangements” (296). Conversation among guests runs to tales of favorite lunatics, who think they are chickens, teapots, and the like.

One, “Bouffon Le Grand,” fancies himself with two heads, one of Cicero, the other a composite of Demosthenes and Lord Broughton, in honor of his passion for oratory (298-99). Meanwhile, Maillard extols the new philosophy of “soothing.” The product of “a better system of government,” he calls it, a “lunatic government” (303). As the narratives continue, the behavior of the guests becomes increasingly erratic.

Apace, Maillard, a vain, voluble popinjay, becomes so boastful of his own schemes that he can’t help spilling the story that is really being played out under his orchestration, even as the counterrevolution occurs and the imprisoned storm upward from the dungeons. He is last seen hiding under the buffet.

Meanwhile, the general upheaval brings the final triumph of anarchy, a frenzy of dancing on the tables to the mad playing and singing of “Yankee Doodle” (304). A “perfect army of what I took to be Chimpanzees, Ourang-Outangs, or big black baboons” (304), the narrator tells us, rushes in to restore order. He himself receives a serious beating and is imprisoned for more than a month until things are sorted out. Only then is the full plot revealed. Maillard, as it happens, was actually the keeper of the asylum until he himself went insane, thence conniving with the inmates to overthrow their guards. It has also been those latter, in their own tar and feathers, whom he has mistaken for apes.

As a fable of mob politics, American-style, it is again all beautifully circular and complete. As at Jackson’s inauguration, the democratic rabble take over the mansion, a mob

breaking furniture and throwing crockery and drunkenly dancing on the tables. Yet when the counterrevolution occurs, it seems mainly a mob of avenging semi-anthropoids, with the innocent narrator among those violently assaulted and imprisoned. It has all been very confusing, he says. Further, he concludes, in his opinion at least, at the particular *Maison de Sante* in question, the contest of systems remains very much in the balance. "The 'soothing system,' with important modifications," he says, "has been resumed at the chateau; yet I cannot help agreeing with Monsieur Maillard, that his own 'treatment' was a very capital one of its kind. As he justly observed, it was 'simple—neat—and gave no trouble at all—not the least'" (305). A good American to the end, he would seem to cast his vote in a given instance for whatever set of inmates happens at the moment to be running the asylum.

As to Poe's most vicious critiques of democracy, democratic man, and democratic process at large, however, one looks to the far more explicit content of what might be called the mouthpiece or ventriloquist sketches, all clustered in the latter part of the 1840s. Here, the mode is that of Cooper, the bitterness and acerbity of whose anti-democratic politics Poe's most closely resembled. Yet in contrast to the elitist japery of Cooper's traveling bachelor in *Notions of the Americans*, for instance—itself modeled on that in a host of popular works of the era by literary travelers from abroad come to dissect and caricature the follies of the great democratic experiment—what distinguishes the anti-democratic comment in comparable works by Poe such as "Mellonta Tauta" or "Some Words with a Mummy" is their sheer essayistic blatancy. In both cases, Poe's correspondents travel in time; and in both cases such journeys supply the barest pretexts for fulminating expressions of a political contempt so profound that it appears simply apropos of nothing. Transmitted across the ages from future or past, the message to history is virtually identical. Democracy is the dominion of King Mob.

"Mellonta Tauta," published in 1848, is set in the year 2848. (The title, roughly translated, allegedly means "it shall

come to pass.”) The speaker in the tale is Pundita, with a pundit’s views on a variety of matters. Since she is a Poe narrator on a fantastic balloon voyage through time and space, these include metaphysics, astronomy, and celestial navigation. Closer to home, however, she also provides some distinctly time-bound remarks on a political phenomenon of a thousand years earlier, now mercifully consigned to ancient history, called participatory democracy. She is astounded, she tells us, to hear from her husband Pundit “that they ancient Americans *governed themselves!*” (*Complete Stories*, 379). She goes on:

—did anyone ever hear of such an absurdity?—that they existed in a sort of every man-for-himself confederacy, after the fashion of the “prairie dogs” that we read of in fable. He says that they started with the queerest idea conceivable, viz.: that all men are born free and equal—this in the very teeth of the laws of *gradation* so visibly impressed upon all things both in the moral and physical universe. Everyman ‘voted,’ as they called it—that is to say, meddled with public affairs—until, at length, it was discovered that what is everybody’s business is nobody’s, and that the “Republic” (so the absurd thing was called) was without a government at all. (379)

This notion in turn led to the equally “startling discovery that universal suffrage gave opportunity for fraudulent schemes,” called at the time popular elections, “by means of which any desired number of votes might at any time be polled, without the possibility of prevention or even detection, by any party which should be merely villainous enough not to be ashamed of the fraud.” Further, “a little reflection upon this discovery sufficed to render evident the consequences, which were that rascality *must* predominate—in a word, that a republican government *could* never be anything but a rascally one” (379).

Reform, however, was balked, when “the matter was put to an abrupt issue by a fellow by the name of *Mob*, who took everything into his own hands and set up a despotism, in comparison with which those of the fabulous Zeros and Hell-ofagabaluses were respectable and delectable.” Rumored of

foreign origins, "this Mob," we are told further, "is said to have been the most odious of all men that ever incumbered the heart. He was a giant in stature—insolent, rapacious, filthy; had the gall of a bullock, with the heart of a hyena and the brains of a peacock" (379).

Fortunately, his own chaotic energies insured his eventual self-extinction. Still, the speaker notes from her position of future enlightenment, "he had his uses, as everything has, however vile, and taught mankind a lesson which to this day it is in no danger of forgetting—never to run contrary to the natural analogies." And, "as for the "Republicanism" that spawned him, she concludes, "no analogy could be found for it upon the face of the earth—unless we except the case of the 'prairie dogs,' an exception which seems to demonstrate, if anything, that democracy is a very admirable form of government for dogs" (379).

Compare a similarly extended passage from "Some Words with a Mummy," published in the *American Whig Review* of 1845. The titular character is an ancient Egyptian, Count All-mistakeo. Resurrected by a friend of the narrator, one Dr. Ponnonner, after several millennia of sleep, he discourses on myth, metaphysics, art, and architecture. Finally he turns to the historical folly of a certain form of experimental government tried during his time. "Thirteen Egyptian provinces," he recalls bemusedly, "determined all at once to be free, and to set a magnificent example to the rest of mankind. They assembled their wise men, and concocted the most ingenious constitution it is possible to conceive. For a while they managed remarkably well; only their habit of bragging was prodigious. The thing ended, however, in the consolidation of the thirteen states, with some fifteen or twenty others, in the most odious and insupportable despotism that was ever heard of on the face of the earth."

The narrator goes on:

"I asked what was the name of the usurping tyrant."

"As well as the Count could recollect, it was *Mob*." (*Complete Stories*, 461)

So it goes with Poe's voyagers throughout history. Whether scathingly uttered by the futuristic Pundita of "Mellonta Tauta," or by the back-from-the-dead titular informant of "Some Words with a Mummy," it is all the same with participatory electoral democracy. In fact, the commentaries are virtually word-for-word in their bitter identicalities of phrasing and sentiment. Pursued throughout time and space by the politics of the age, Poe turns about only to confront near the end of his life a despised democratic present. It was as if he could not find enough venues toward the end to register this vision of political apocalypse. History was indeed for Poe a nightmare from which he could not awake. And the nightmare was the omnipresent specter of nineteenth-century American mobocracy.

Do such texts make Poe anything more than an *occasional* political allegorist or barely-disguised anti-democratic editorialist? Certainly one can point elsewhere to a fascination with images of anarchy and mob violence. In his well-known review of Longstreet's *Georgia Sketches*, Poe put himself on record as a partisan of the Southwestern Whig humorists of the era, themselves well-known and applauded for their grotesque, violent depictions of the backwoods bully, the buffoon, the Jacksonian rabble. In a similar southern-frontier vein, the mutineers launching the travails of the titular character in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* include a bloodthirsty Negro and a dim, suggestible half-breed.

Again, the obsessiveness of the content becomes markedly pronounced in works of the 1840s. A political reading of "The Masque of the Red Death" suggests that the plague, the contagion threatening at any moment to break down the doors of the castle, may be the Terror. The western geography suggests so. Likewise does the name of the monarch of the western realm, Prince Prospero. Correlatively, in "The Imp of the Perverse," the condemned murderer madman, one of Poe's frequent hyper-cerebral and aestheticized manipulations of the popular press formula of the likeable criminal, transmogrifies before our eyes into the ultimate man of the crowd.

Another of Poe's aristocrats of the intellect, preening, disdainful, smugly arrogant and safe among the throng of lesser mortals with his secret knowledge of the perfect crime, he gradually breaks down, descending back into madness precisely as he recounts at length how he has blurted out the confession of his crime after being hunted down and nearly lynched—by a mob attracted by his odd behavior.

Even in works of a primarily aesthetic orientation, such politically-nourished intellectual elitism had always been the core emotion of Poe's persona. The poetic dreamer of "Sonnet—To Science," complaining of his being awakened from an aesthetic afternoon's nap under the tamarind tree, easily became the dark aphorist of the *Marginalia*, decrying the inevitable link between superior genius and popular misunderstanding. (Entries from 1849, the year of his death, include, "The nose of a mob is its imagination. By this, at any time, it can be quietly led" [193]; and, "In drawing a line of distinction between people and a mob, we find that a people aroused to action are a mob; and that a mob, trying to think, subside into a people" [195].) During two decades before the public eye, Poe, the self-proclaimed apostle of supernal, sublimely non-political and non-utilitarian imagination flaunted his aestheticism in a cash-and-carry democracy, all the while eking out its professional literary artist's pittance against page-filling and meeting editorial deadlines.

In a land where the homely charms of democratic art were supposed to mildly instruct and uplift, Beauty—and its cognate Taste—were part of a signature vocabulary brandished by Edgar Poe against his popularly beloved three-name poet-contemporaries—the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, and John Greenleaf Whittier—in all the perverse glee with which Richard Nixon used the trademark double V-for-Victory sign in crowds of anti-war protestors. Beauty in a land where art was supposed to popularly instruct and uplift was a barely disguised term for political contempt.

So too, the formula phrase "the heresy of the didactic," erected a blasphemous religion of art against the popular pol-

itics of poetry as a celebration of civic virtue and domestic piety. Finding genuine popular celebrity *as a poet* near the end with “The Raven,” he even then made box-office success the occasion for making his audience sit through an insulting tutorial on an aestheticism beyond their lumpish concerns for usable meanings and morals.

“The Philosophy of Composition” promises an inside look at the mysteries of the creative process while simultaneously unwriting and demystifying the poem back down to a collocation of technical cheap tricks—the literary equivalent of prostheses. Like the other lecture of the era, “The Poetic Principle,” with which it is virtually interchangeable, or the recycled aesthetico-political harangue—suggestively, probably again, as Daniel Hoffman speculates, by “Pundita”—that begins *Eureka*, it is at once a valedictory stump speech on art and a last bitter hoax on the mob, the tasteless, unreasoning rabble to whom he had been beholden throughout his life for his meager living and reputation. Aesthetic defiance, grounded in profoundly political contempt, conquers history itself, the belief that outside the present age, timeless genius will yet prevail.

“I care not whether my work be read now or by posterity. I can afford to wait a century for readers when God himself has waited six thousand years for an observer. I triumph. I have stolen the golden secret of the Egyptians. I will indulge my sacred fury.” So asserts “Pundita” in *Eureka*, writing again from the future, by way of a quote from Kepler, writing from the past (*Selected Prose*, 495). Here, as elsewhere, on the basis of his relentless distancing and projecting of a theory of creative genius into a cosmic aestheticism, Poe is frequently cited among his nineteenth-century American contemporaries as a uniquely apolitical writer. In fact, on the basis of such stratagems, he has been thus characterized by such recent commentators as Jonathan Elmer and Terence Whalen within two major books devoted to his career in relation to mass culture and the popular literary marketplace. And within the context of arguments so framed, the assertion

is correct. As with his critical evenhandedness in refusing to kowtow to a text because it was British, or puff one because it was American, Poe, while deeply attuned to the commercial politics of literary production, does *not* in fact seem to have been notably a political partisan, nor political in the sense that, aside from the occasional satirical reference, he addressed major party figures and issues, Whig or Democrat. What he surely did possess, at the deepest springs of his art and his personality, was a profound contempt for democracy as a concept, social or aesthetic. Accordingly, at the topical political level, his works swirl with a pathological anti-egalitarianism. At the very least—in such an Irving-like work as “The Unparalleled Adventures of Hans Pfall,” for instance—politics is hot air, flatulence, windy chaos; in “Von Kempeln’s Discovery,” a sendup of the California Gold Rush, it also comprehends herd behavior and money-lust; most frequently, it promises a Hawthornean descent into a nether-world fueled by rum and riot, mindless mob frenzy.

Accounts of Poe’s death now at last give us occasion, I think, to rethink just how much, politically, in life and death alike, he was of that turbulent democratic world, and that world of him. Indeed, in 1851, just two years after the fatal episode in Baltimore, the popular artist George Caleb Bingham would produce one of the best known genre paintings of the era: “The County Election.” And if already styled in frontier nostalgia, it also carried a contemporary political bite. The scene is all hubbub and bustle, a small town literally mobbed by voters. One man, corpulent, genial, obviously sated with drink while motioning for more, sits facing us, the tipsy beneficiary of the custom of “treating,”—enjoying a limitless free liquor supply, often provided by political candidates for several weeks in advance of an election (Lender, 54-55). Another, too drunk to stand without help, is being dragged to the polling place. Another, sitting on a bench, drunkenly nurses a broken head. A banner above the door proclaims, “The Will of the People the Supreme Law.”

To update the cultural connection, Poe, it also turns out, could easily have explained to me why, as recently as twenty years ago, in my hometown of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, it was illegal to sell beer, wine, or liquor on election day. Nor would the historic interest of the conversation have been diminished by the fact that the town in question, the seat of the state university *and* the state hospital for the insane, had also once, in its days as the old frontier capital, flourished as one of the literary epicenters of Southwestern Humor, including service as the fictional site of some the most celebrated episodes in the career of the rascalionish hero of Johnson Jones Hooper's 1845 *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*, itself a roistering, vicious parody of Jacksonian campaign biography. There, well into the twentieth century, the custom of election-day treating had continued, including the usual Democratic party roundup of drunkards and derelicts as repeat voters. Indeed, even Prohibition had done little to forestall the anarchic ritual of subsidized election-day drunkenness, and only with passage of specific statutes did a righteous legislature attempt to assure the public of its desire to free the ballot box from the dominion of that twin-headed monster Demon Rum and King Mob.

It was the final playing out of a political theater of the absurd that Edgar Poe would have understood. It may have been the final act of the political drama that he saw in his last moments on earth. Comatosely selling his vote repeatedly for the price of a drink on election day in the city of his aristocratic forebears, Poe, the ultimate anti-democratic mythopath, had met with the ultimate form of mythopoeic justice. Alcohol was the fatal agent; and a rough-and-tumble nineteenth-century American election was the fatal occasion. Democracy, in a word, was the death of him.

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