

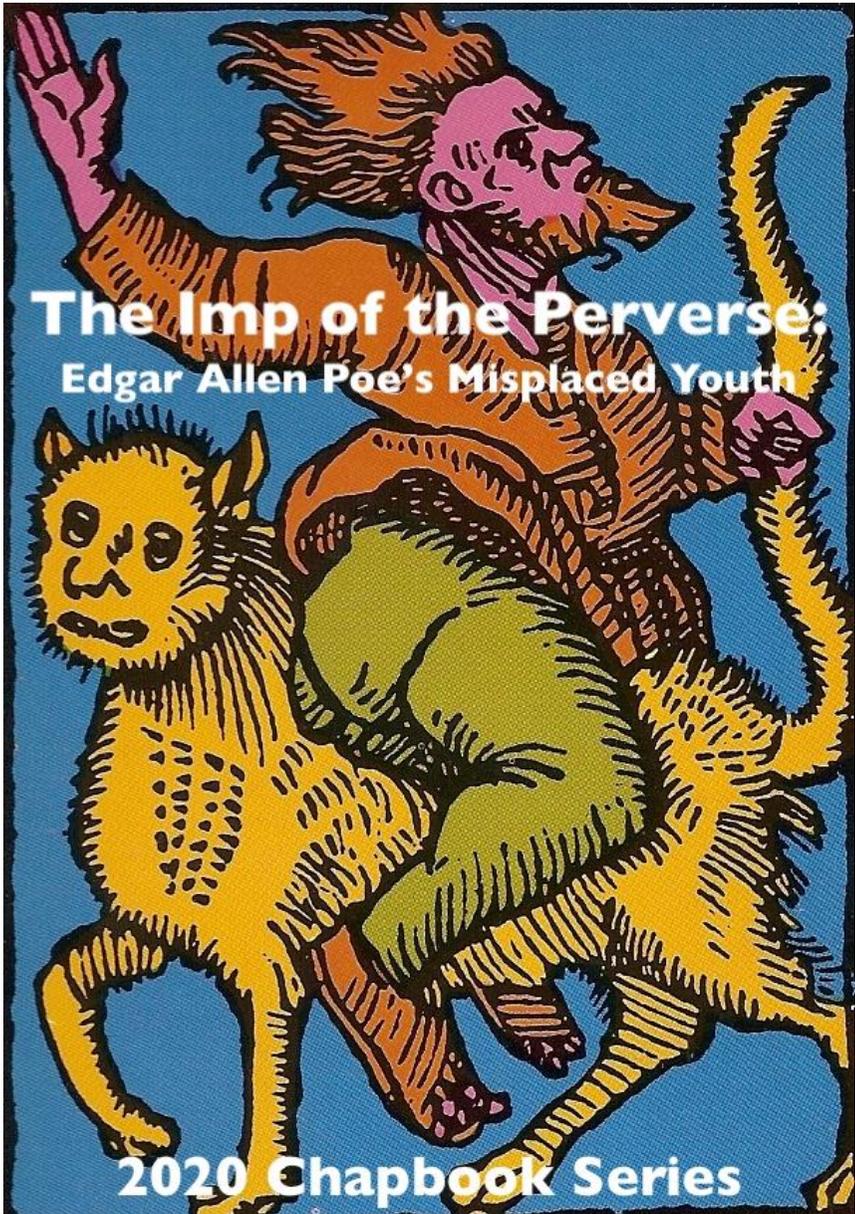
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THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE: Edgar Allan Poe's Misplaced Youth
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THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE

From childhood's hour I have not been
 As others were — I have not seen
 As others saw — I could not bring
 My passions from a common spring —
 From the same source I have not taken
 My sorrow — I could not awaken
 My heart to joy at the same tone —
 And all I lov'd — *I* lov'd alone —
Then — in my childhood — in the dawn
 Of a most stormy life — was drawn
 From ev'ry depth of good and ill
 The mystery which binds me still —
 From the torrent, or the fountain —
 From the red cliff of the mountain —
 From the sun that 'round me roll'd
 In its autumn tint of gold —
 From the lightning in the sky
 As it pass'd me flying by —
 From the thunder, and the storm —
 And the cloud that took the form
 (When the rest of Heaven was blue)
 Of a demon in my view —

Poe was already an accomplished poet at the age of twenty when, in May 1829, he inscribed this poem in the autograph album of Lucy Holmes, a young lady of his own age whom he had befriended while he was living with his relatives in Baltimore.¹ The poem was written during a low period in Poe's life, only three months after the death of his doting foster mother, Frances Valentine Allan, when there was growing conflict, ill will, and distrust between Poe and his foster father, John Allan.

Things had not always been thus between Edgar and John Allan. Precocious, intelligent, and adorable, the young Edgar had been doted on by both Allans when they had taken him in after his mother's death. He was not yet three years old. His mother, English-born actress Elizabeth Arnold Poe, once celebrated for her grace, charm, and talent, had been abandoned by her husband, actor David Poe, Jr., and was living with Edgar and his infant sister Rosalie in desperate straits in a wretched rented room in the back of a dressmaker's shop in a working-class section of Richmond, when she came down with pneumonia. Her son, William Henry, two years older than Edgar, had lived with his father's family in Baltimore since he was a few months old. During their mother's illness, Edgar and Rosalie were looked after by an old woman who had come from England with Elizabeth, and who had resorted to feeding the children dried bread crusts dipped in gin "to keep them quiet."² When Elizabeth died on December 8, 1811, she was only twenty-four years old.

She had nothing to leave her children but an empty jewel box for one-year-old daughter Rosalie, commemorative locks of hair in a pocketbook for Henry, and her portrait in miniature for Edgar. Her jewelry, clothes, furniture, and all of her

possessions had been pawned. On the day after Christmas, 1811, just weeks after her death, the Richmond theater burned to the ground, burying sixty victims in its ruins. The surviving actors in the company that had employed Elizabeth were left without means of livelihood and fled the city, abandoning her two small children, half-naked and half-dead from hunger.

Mrs. Allan and her friend, Mrs. Mackenzie, were Richmond matrons who had come to the aid of Elizabeth Poe. After her death, Mrs. Allan took Edgar, and Mrs. Mackenzie took Rosalie. The two women were cousins, and their husbands were business colleagues. When Frances and John Allan became Edgar's foster parents, they had been married for eight years and had no children of their own. They had both been orphaned in childhood, awakening their sympathy to the children's plight.

Edgar's family in Baltimore were living in straitened circumstances, and they were relieved when Edgar and Rosalie were taken in by well-to-do families. Poe's father's father, David Poe, Sr., emigrated from Ireland as a child and established a shop in Baltimore that manufactured wheels for clocks and spinning wheels. In the Revolutionary War and again in the War of 1812, he proved himself an ardent patriot. Commissioned Assistant Deputy Quartermaster General for Baltimore in 1779, he used his own funds to purchase uniforms for hundreds of troops under Lafayette's command, earning the lifelong gratitude of the French general. But the fame of the "General," as Poe's paternal grandfather was known, eclipsed his fortune, and after his death in 1816, his paralytic, bedridden widow had to subsist on his small military pension, cared for by her daughter Maria.

Poe's father, David Poe, Jr., disappointed his family when he abandoned his legal studies at the age of nineteen to pursue the theater. There he met and married the young widowed actress, Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins. Not only Elizabeth's husband, but also her mother had died, and she was alone, eighteen years old, and in need of protection. She came to regret her marriage. David Poe's acting talent was not equal to his ambition; his performances received negative notices, and he developed a drinking problem.

In contrast to her husband, Elizabeth was a compelling performer, equally gifted in comedy and tragedy, with a charming voice and graceful figure. Born in England to a family of actors, she had acted since childhood. It galled David Poe that his wife was more in demand for theatrical roles than he was. He sunk lower and lower. His last stage appearance was in October 1809, when Edgar was nine months old.

The fate of Poe's father is the first of the many mysteries of Poe's life. Edgar and his older brother Henry always claimed that their father died several days after their mother. However, the date and place of David Poe's death have never been documented. He had not lived with Elizabeth for five months before her death and probably longer, and a number of people, including John Allan, believed that David was not Rosalie's father.

In Edgar's early years, the prosperous Allans dressed Edgar "like a prince," and "he gamboled about proudly on his pony, at the head of his dogs, followed by his negro groom."³ The Allans possessed a parrot that could speak the English alphabet; in later life, Poe claimed to have learned speech and letters from this bird. In his poem, "Romance," he wrote: "To me a painted paroquet / Hath been — a most familiar bird — / Taught me my alphabet to say — / To lisp my very earliest word."⁴

At their dinner parties, the Allans enjoyed showing off the young boy's talents to their guests, as they might display the tricks of their trained parrot. After the table had been cleared, they would encourage their prodigy to mount it and recite a passage from Shakespeare (Cassius's speech to Brutus was a favorite) or a poem by Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns, beloved by the Scottish Allans.

Possessed of a natural acting ability, this son and grandson of actors delighted guests by his sensitivity to rhythm, meaning, and intonation, and his preternatural ability to suggest emotions beyond his years. According to a witness, his flashing eyes and mobile mouth powerfully expressed contempt, disdain and passion.⁵ The Allans indulged their vanity by encouraging their childish ward, a descendant of alcoholics, to follow his recitations with toasts to their guests, glass in hand.

In his autobiographical story, "William Wilson," Poe described his youthful influence over his guardians:

I am the descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable; and, in my earliest infancy, I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character. As I advanced in years it was more strongly developed; becoming, for many reasons, a cause of serious disquietude to my friends, and of positive injury to myself. I grew self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions. Weak-minded, and beset with constitutional infirmities akin to my own, my parents could do but little to check the evil propensities which distinguished me. Some feeble and ill-directed efforts resulted in complete failure on their part, and, of course, in total triumph on mine. Thenceforward my voice was a household law; and at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions.⁶

Although the Allans had rechristened their foster son Edgar Allan, they never legally adopted him. Nor did the Mackenzies legally adopt Rosalie. Without legal status, both children's connections to their guardians were dependent upon their guardians' goodwill. Edgar was doted on, indulged, petted, and obliged to perform. He loved his foster mother, and she loved him. Slight, delicate, and frail, Fanny Allan had not been blessed with children of her own, although she deeply desired them. In her husband's correspondence, he consistently notes that his wife is unwell, sick, indisposed. Allan's comments suggest a sexual incompatibility, borne out by the fact that, in addition to supporting Edgar, John Allan helped to support two illegitimate children by different women in Richmond, one of whom, Edwin Collier, went to school with Edgar.⁷

While Edgar grew up assuming he would be heir to his foster father's large fortune, Allan did not see it that way. In addition to his illegitimate sons, Allan contributed to the support, in Scotland, of several unmarried sisters, an elderly aunt, and several orphaned cousins. He also gave large gifts to his nieces and nephews, one of whom was his wife's godchild. He considered Edgar one more dependent, who would have to prove his worth.

Of the many antagonists in Poe's life, John Allan was the first and the most consequential. The conflict between them had dire consequences for Poe and

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affected everything that came afterwards in his life.

Born in 1780 in Irvine, in Ayrshire, Scotland, given only a primary education, John Allan had come to Richmond as an orphaned youth to work for his wealthy childless uncle William Galt. Galt conducted a large import-export trade, mostly in tobacco. Here Allan learned the business and later established his own firm, Ellis & Allan, with another Galt employee, Charles Ellis. Ellis & Allan dealt with every commodity they could broker, including tobacco, grains, tea, coffee, cattle, wines and liquors, cattle, slaves and even plantations. Allan himself owned three slaves.

William Galt amassed a huge fortune by virtue of his diligence and parsimony. John Allan took greater risks and as a consequence suffered ups and downs as a merchant. After the Napoleonic wars and the lifting of shipping restrictions, Allan made preparations to establish a branch of his business in London.

In June, 1815, Allan, his wife, her sister Nancy, and six-year-old Edgar embarked on the month-long voyage to the British Isles. They left their parrot with their friends, the Dixons, but while they were abroad, it sickened and died. Allan's first stop was a family visit in Irvine after an absence of twenty years. Allan had planned to leave Edgar in the care of his eldest sister Mary, but Edgar refused to stay with her, and Allan, relenting, took Edgar to London by a long detour through Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle and Sheffield.

Through a fortunate deal, Allan was able to establish his business in London's fashionable Russell Square. At the end of the year, Allan sent Edgar to his sister Mary, but Edgar did not like sharing a room in his aunt's house, and was unhappy at the local grammar school, where he was bullied by the other boys. After he threatened to run away, Allan brought him back to London and placed him in a boarding school three miles from Russell Square, in Chelsea, kept by the Misses Dubourg, the sisters of one of his employees George Dubourg. (There is a Pauline Dubourg in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"). There Edgar remained until the summer of 1816, when he accompanied his foster mother, who was ailing, to take the waters at Cheltenham. In England, the Allans acquired another parrot, this one French-speaking, occasionally lodging it with George Dubourg.

In the beginning of his English sojourn, Allan prospered, and in January, 1817, he enrolled Edgar in Manor House, a private school for the well-to-do, in Stoke Newington, a suburb of London. There for the substantial tuition and board of thirty-three pounds per term, Edgar remained for two-and-a-half years (not five as he later claimed). The headmaster, Rev. John Bransby (whose name found its way into *William Wilson*), judged his new pupil quick and intelligent. "He would have been a very good boy," claimed the reverend, "if he had not been spoilt by his parents, but they spoilt him and allowed him an extravagant amount of pocket money, which enabled him to get into all manner of mischief."⁸

Allan was pleased with Edgar's progress, but had to withdraw him from school two years later after his business suffered in the recession after the Napoleonic Wars. Allan was forced to liquidate, and his uncle William Galt came to his rescue and paid his creditors. The Allans would have returned to Richmond right away, but Mrs. Allan was suffering from ill health and dreaded another sea voyage. The following year, she was deemed well enough to travel, and, after a rough crossing, the family reached Richmond by way of New York City in August, 1820. The five years

that Edgar spent as a boy in England and the education he received there were to exert a profound effect on his imagination.

Upon their return to Richmond, the Allans at first lived with Allan's business partner Charles Ellis before settling in a modest house, but despite straitened finances, Allan was still committed to Edgar's education and placed him in the best classical school in the city, where he excelled at Latin, modern languages, and history. He was a nimble athlete, a fleet runner, and a scrappy boxer. At the Episcopalian Church he attended with his foster mother (John Allan was not a churchgoer), he met his close friend Ebenezer Burling, who taught him to swim in Richmond's rivers and lakes. Like his idol, Byron, Edgar was proud of his swimming prowess: "I swam from Ludlarn's Wharf to Warwick (six miles) in a hot June sun," he boasted a decade later in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, "against one of the strongest tides ever known in the river. Any swimmer in the falls in my days would have swum the Hellespont and thought nothing of the matter."⁹

Even as a child, Poe possessed the morbid imagination that distinguished him as a writer. Rosalie's foster brother John Mackenzie recalled, "The most horrible thing which Poe could imagine as a child was to feel on his face in a room as dark as the grave an icy hand and to see a horrible face unveiled. Such visions haunted him so much that he hid his face under the covers until he nearly smothered."¹⁰

A gruff, no-nonsense Scotsman, Allan had little patience for Edgar's high-strung, delicate nature. He did not understand Edgar or approve of him, although at first he did not discourage his ward's poetic vocation. At school in Richmond, Edgar composed poems in imitation of Horace's *Odes* that he wished to publish. Allan was willing to pay the cost of publication but was dissuaded from doing so by Edgar's teacher, Joseph Clarke. Edgar was vexed. However, when Edgar won the school's Thespian prize, Allan disapproved. Although he had encouraged Edgar's boyhood recitations, he did not want him to become an actor like his parents. The rift between the two widened when Edgar ridiculed Allan's business and disparaged Allan's mercantile instincts.

Like many a rich man's son, Edgar considered it his prerogative to rebel against his upright, demanding, moralistic father. But Allan didn't see it that way. He never considered Edgar his son. He often reminded Edgar of his status and threatened to disown him, arousing Edgar's rebellious anger and disobedience. Edgar's devotion to poetry baffled Allan, and Edgar's attitude of snobbish superiority infuriated him. The dramatic and self-aggrandizing qualities the Allans had encouraged in Edgar's childhood performances awakened Allan's resentment when they were used against him. In Richmond, Edgar lived with the Allans as a gentleman's son, but he was never quite accepted, as if there were something counterfeit about him.

The two also clashed on issues of gender. Although he was athletic, Edgar was not a "manly" boy. His closest friends were girls. The loss of his mother when he was practically an infant had left a wound that never healed. Edgar was deeply attached to his foster mother and upset by his foster father's infidelities. In their problematic marriage, he was allied with Fanny Allan.

A bereft son in search of a mother, Edgar was attracted to maternal figures all his life. His first important attachment after his foster mother was to his classmate Robert Stanard's mother, Jane Stanard, who died suddenly when he was fifteen, prompting nightly visits to her grave and inspiring a number of poems, including

“Visit of the Dead,” which would be printed in his first collection, *Tamerlane*, self-published in Boston in 1827:

The breath of God will be still;
And the mist upon the hill
By that summer breeze unbroken
Shall charm thee—as a token,
And a symbol which shall be
Secrecy in thee.

After Jane Stanard died, Edgar developed an attachment to Sarah Elmira Royster, a pretty girl near his own age. From Edgar's bedroom window to the back of Elmira's house was an unbroken view, and the two teenagers used to wave handkerchiefs at each other out of view of Elmira's parents, who disapproved of Edgar and may have been wary of the Allans, since Royster had loaned money to John Allan in 1810.¹¹

After Allan's return to Richmond, his business did not prosper. He put Edgar to work in the shop running errands, which Edgar hated. Allan's business affairs came to a crisis in 1822, when he made a personal assignment with permission to retain his property. In 1824, the firm of Ellis and Allan was dissolved by mutual consent, and Allan was facing bankruptcy when his uncle William Galt, by then one of the richest men in the state of Virginia, once again intervened with his creditors and bailed him out. The Allans moved to a house owned by Galt. Galt's will, signed in March 1825, the day before his death, made Allan his principal heir. Overnight, Allan went from near ruin to great wealth. In June, three months after Galt's death, Allan purchased one of the finest homes in Richmond (long since torn down) on an ample lot on the southeast corner of Main and Fifth Streets, consisting of two lofty stories with wide porches and high ceilings. Edgar's room, on the second floor, northeast corner, had its own porch with a view of the river and surrounding countryside. On his porch stood a telescope, brought by Allan from England, sparking Edgar's life-long interest in astronomy.¹² At last Edgar was living in the style to which he had long aspired, and he could truly imagine himself an American Byron.

During the summer and fall of 1825, the friendship between Edgar and Elmira grew closer. They spent long afternoons in the parlor of the Royster house, she playing piano and he accompanying her on flute.¹³ The Allans' wealth and splendid residence gave them entrée into Richmond society, and in their home, Edgar came into contact with the city's business and political leaders. All his life, Edgar remained true to the reactionary politics of this clan, as an elitist, a defender of slavery, and a staunch Southern conservative. His rebellions were literary and cultural; he was no revolutionary but believed himself to be an aristocrat of spirit and a man of genius.

In addition to the formal education in Richmond that Edgar received first in the school of Joseph Clarke and then William Burke, he also studied with a private tutor to prepare him for the University of Virginia. If he had taken advantage of his opportunities and had played his cards right, he might have continued to rely on his guardian's support throughout his life, as Allan had relied on his own guardian, William Galt, but he could not prevent himself from continuing to antagonize Allan.

Time and again in Poe's fiction, we encounter a narrator who perversely insists on acting against what he knows to be his best interests. Driven to self-destruction in spite of himself, he cannot resist self-sabotage. So it was with Edgar and Allan. Their relationship led to great disappointment on both sides. In Allan's point of view, Edgar squandered every opportunity Allan gave him. Then Edgar would expend enormous energy in persuading Allan to help him again. After a while, Allan was convinced by Edgar's rebelliousness and failed promises that he had never intended to reform in the first place. The help that Allan gave Edgar became more and more miserly and piecemeal, as if Allan, too, intended his young ward to fail. After Edgar failed, Allan seemed determined to make him suffer, to put him in his place, and that place was at the bottom.

The University of Virginia

On the cold February day in 1826 when Edgar arrived in Charlottesville to be enrolled in the University of Virginia's second graduating class as its 136th pupil, the discord between Edgar and Allen was severe enough that only Frances accompanied her "dear Eddie" on the rough, twelve-hour 60-mile journey over mountain roads from Richmond to Charlottesville in the coach left to them by William Galt. Like the university itself, Edgar's education was underfunded and under-supported from the beginning. One has the sense that Allan was eager to get rid of Edgar by shipping him off to college. But Allan never supplied Edgar with all the resources he needed to go to school.

Of the University of Virginia's dropouts, Edgar Allan Poe is perhaps the most notorious. For nearly two centuries, legends continue to circulate of his gambling, drinking, and general dissipation that led to his exit from the University after less than a year. What were the extent of his errors and misdeeds and the causes of the problems that plagued him in Charlottesville? In order to arrive at a better understanding of his college year, it is useful to place Edgar's experience within the context of the history of the University of Virginia itself, in its earliest days, when he was a student.

The University had only opened the previous year in 1825, and in 1826, when Edgar arrived, the buildings were still under construction, and the campus had a rough, half-finished appearance. Years in the planning, a long-held dream of its founder, Thomas Jefferson, its inception was mired in controversy, and if not for Jefferson's tenacity and generosity, his reputation as a former President and his cultivation of powerful allies, it never would have happened. Although many of the educational reforms Jefferson advocated are now the norm at most institutions of higher learning, at the time they were considered radical.

Jefferson's insistence that the university be public and not be affiliated with any religious creed or institution nearly sank his project from the start. Unlike every other university, there was no chapel on the campus, religious doctrines were not forced on students, nor religious worship required of them. What Jefferson insisted was "religious freedom" was denounced as "godlessness" by his detractors. Because the presidents of universities were ministers at that time, Jefferson intended that the university would have no president. Instead the professors would assume the duties

of president on a rotating basis. Because Jefferson believed that fear was not a proper motivating force for young men, the only sanction was to appeal to the students' "pride of character, laudable ambition, and moral dispositions: to curb any excesses."¹⁴

Jefferson had envisioned an Oxford of the New World embodying Rousseau's ideas about education, the aristocratic ideal of the English gentleman, and the democratic ideal of the American citizen. From the first, the reality fell short of this Jeffersonian vision. The sons of wealthy merchants and planters who came to the new university from all over the South were indifferent to Jefferson's patriotic and humanitarian principles. They moved into the unfinished quadrangle and campus with their horses, dogs, and slaves, and blithely ignored their studies in favor of drinking hard, playing for high stakes, fighting and dueling, and visiting all the amusement spots for thirty miles around. In vain were the admonitions of the illustrious professors (six out of eight were European scholars). Disorder and excess reigned.

Jefferson was an idealist with a lofty vision of the democratic principles on which a free nation might be founded. He had a wide-ranging curiosity and intelligence, a deep love of nature and connection to agriculture. He was cultured and well-read, an inventor and architect, with an open mind and a free spirit. The educational reforms he instituted at the University of Virginia spoke to these strengths. But when it came to human motivation and behavior, his understanding was sorely deficient. He lacked shrewdness and insight into other people and tended to overestimate the goodness of others.

Perhaps it was hard for Jefferson to see other people as individuals who weren't like himself. His relationships with women and with blacks were fraught and complicated. For all of his democratic principles, he seemed most comfortable in unequal relationships. Although he denounced slavery in theory, he only freed his slaves with his death, and then only some of them. Nor did he ever intend to open his university to women or grant them equal rights with men. He was under the illusion that the sons of planters and merchants forming the student body were serious, dedicated scholars as he had been. If he had fathered sons (other than slaves) he might have had more insight into the motivations of these young men, but he had raised only daughters.

In 1819, after three decades of efforts, Jefferson finally succeeded in winning the Virginia legislature's approval for the University of Virginia by a close margin. At the same time, the Erie Canal was being planned in New York. Jefferson thought the canal "little short of madness" but it would create a unified national market economy out of little hamlets and farmlands and help turn New York City into a commercial colossus, just as Jefferson believed he was educating the future leaders of the republic and hoped his university would turn Charlottesville into the nation's center of intellectual inquiry. Both opened in the same year, 1825.¹⁵

Chief among the educational reforms instituted by Jefferson was a modern curriculum based on electives, where a student could come and study for as little as a year or as long as he liked. Subjects included ancient languages, modern languages, physic (called natural philosophy), botany, and zoology, anatomy and medicine, mathematics, government and history, municipal law, grammar, ethics and rhetoric, literature, and fine art. Unlike other universities, there was no faculty of divinity;

instead, ethics professors would lecture on “proofs of God’s existence.” Students had the choice enrolling in up to three schools: School of Ancient Languages, Modern Languages, and Natural Philosophy (sciences). One professor’s lectures cost fifty dollars; two cost sixty dollars, and three cost seventy-five dollars. In its early years, the university did not award diplomas. Most students did not stay for four years. Examinations were written rather than oral, a new innovation; and attendance at classes, which met three times a week for two hours, was compulsory.

The state’s allocation to the university amounted to only \$15,000 per year, when the cost of the campus construction was \$300,000. From the beginning, the university’s funding was inadequate, and because the legislature had to approve funding annually, the university was always at risk of losing it. The venture began deeply in debt and dependent on the goodwill of the state legislature, which was always on the verge of shutting it down. In order to secure funding, the Board of Visitors, the governing body of the university, tended to downplay or conceal evidence of problems or discord, until the chaos became too overwhelming to ignore, and the beleaguered professors threatened to resign.

Ever an advocate of less government, Jefferson sought to apply his principles to his university. The intention was for the students to govern each other. According to his original plan, students accused of serious wrongdoing would appear before a court of their peers. Jefferson advocated a clear separation of town and gown and wanted the university to have its own jail so students wouldn’t have to be locked up with common village miscreants. But Virginia’s General Assembly refused to authorize the construction of a jail on campus or to fund a campus police officer. Nor were students obligated to testify against one another. According to the March 4, 1825 rule, instituted just before the university opened its doors to its first students on March 7: “When testimony is required from a Student, it shall be voluntary, and not on oath, and the obligation to give it shall be left to his own sense of right.”¹⁶

Besides holding students’ behavior to unrealistic expectations, this rule conflicted with the students’ culture of honor, the established set of rules under which men of the upper class functioned in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Honor defined appropriate conduct and established rituals to resolve conflicts. A man’s reputation was defined by his sense of honor, and a man who did not understand or follow the code was not accepted among the elite. In theory, the honor code prevented and resolved conflicts by restraining behavior. However, in Southern culture, disputes involving honor frequently led to fights involving fisticuffs, swordplay, pistol shots, and duels.

The responsibility for keeping order was next placed upon the hotel keepers of the six hotels Jefferson had built on the outer rows of dormitories. Hotel keepers paid rent to the university and charged students for meals and housekeeping. Jefferson envisioned that the hotel keepers, chosen from among the leading families of Virginia who were now in straitened circumstances, would act as guides and friends to the students for whom they catered and ensure that they abided by the university rules which forbid drinking and gambling. In practice, the functions of discipline and catering proved incompatible, since the hotel keepers depended on the students for their livelihood. Students complained bitterly about the quality of the food, and the hotel keepers complained that their profit margins were too small to allow them to serve better. Though forbidden, cards and punch plagued the campus and were frequently a source of profit for hotel keepers.

The unruly students at the University of Virginia, aided by their youth and alcohol abuse, found reasons to insult and be insulted simply to invoke the code and provoke violence. Students stalked the Lawn, ready to fight and prove themselves. They used the honor code not as a restraint but to shield wrongdoers. In their interpretation, the code forbade them from informing on each other, and the court of students refused to punish their classmates.¹⁷

The first class of 63 students entering in March 1825 swelled to 125 the following September, all white male teenagers from all over the South but mostly Virginia, some as young as sixteen, who had come to attain a gloss of education before assuming their lives of wealth and privilege. Many of them, set free from their homes for the first time, were determined to run as wild as they pleased, and set about abusing their privileges as soon as they could. They drank, entertained prostitutes, mutilated cows belonging to university employees, kept pets in their rooms against regulations and didn't clean up after them, and beat their slaves.

On Sept. 30, 1825, just six months after the university opened, a full-fledged riot broke out on campus. It began with a bottle of piss thrown by student Philip Clayton of Culpeper County, Virginia, through the window of Professor George Long's pavilion, one of the ten elegant brick structures Jefferson had designed to serve as professors' homes, at the same time cursing the "European professors," challenging them to come out "that they may be taken to the pump," an apparent threat to beat them.¹⁸ Professor Long, a 25-year-old Englishman and a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, was the Chairman of Ancient Languages.¹⁹

The next night, fourteen students, "animated first with wine," slipped masks over their faces and congregated on the lawn, creating a loud uproar. Chemistry Professor John Emmet and faculty Chair George Tucker, professor of law and moral philosophy, stepped out to quell the disturbance. Surprised by the resistance they met, Tucker grabbed the first student he could who turned out to be Jefferson's own great-nephew, Wilson Miles Cary. At the time, shielded by his mask and darkness, his identity was unknown. They struggled, and Tucker tore Cary's clothes. Cary punched the professor and rallied fellow students to him with the cry, "that damned rascal has torn my shirt." A sense of honor demanded that no one seize a gentleman by the collar. Cary armed himself with bricks from the unfinished construction, and the other students followed, picking up bricks and sticks to use as weapons or cudgels. A brick and stick flew past Professor Emmet's head. It was a riot. Emmet and Tucker each "seized an offender, demanded their names (for they could not distinguish them under their disguise), but were refused, abused, and the culprits calling on their companions for a rescue, got loose, and withdrew to their chambers."²⁰

The following day, October 2, the seven professors insisted that the entire student body appear before them and that the rioters identify themselves or be identified by others. The students "refused, answered the address in writing and in the rudest terms and charged the professors themselves with false statements," Jefferson later reported.²¹ "A Paper was handed and signed by 63 students expressive of their determination not to act the part of Informers and of their indignation at the aspersion thrown upon them by the Faculty in expressing a belief that they were capable of such baseness. They denied the fact of any assault having been made upon any Professor and asserted that on the contrary two Professors had attacked one student and he was justified in making resistance." This letter was signed by eight

students. Consequently, fifty-five others, who had been in their rooms and in no way were implicated in the riot, also signed, making common cause with the rioters against the professors. Six months after the university opened, half of its student body was joined in disobedience against the faculty.

The professors recruited by Jefferson were by and large a tough lot, willing to settle in a backward rural town in the wilds of Virginia because of Jefferson's persuasion and prestige, but now they were upset. They wrote a letter to the Board of Visitors overseeing the university, threatening their unanimous resignation if the campus were not policed. Professors Thomas Key and George Long did not wait for a reply, but announced their intention to resign, both willing to pay a penalty of \$5,000 to break their contracts.

The Board of Visitors was scheduled to meet at the University the next day. Because of ill health, the 82-year-old Jefferson had not planned to attend, but he rose from his sick bed and made the difficult eight-mile journey on horseback over rough mountain roads. He would recall the moment when he stood before the assembled student body in the crowded hall of the still unfinished Rotunda as "the most painful event" of his life. Jefferson could not understand what had motivated these young men. He had worked so hard to give them this benevolent institution to enhance their knowledge, nurture their wisdom, and mold their characters. They had the opportunity to accomplish so much, and instead they seemed intent on destroying his dream through their insolence and frivolity. As one witness recalled, Jefferson gazed on the students "with the tenderness of a father," struggling with his anger, disappointment, and humiliation, as they stared back in hostile defiance, expecting a tongue lashing.

Instead, for perhaps the first time in his life, Jefferson was overcome. He opened his mouth, but no words came out: "His lips moved—he essayed to speak—burst into tears and sank back into his seat! —the shock was electric."²² At the long table, his fellow board members looked on at his humiliation, including former President James Madison, his Secretary of State, and the prominent generals, lawyers, and statesmen who sat on the Board. Unable to speak, Jefferson turned aside for fellow Board member Chapman Johnson, who, denouncing the outrages, demanded that the perpetrators come forward. Whether it was Johnson's insistence or "Jefferson's tears [that] melted their stubborn purpose," the culprits came forward to turn themselves in. When Jefferson discovered that the main perpetrator of the riot was his own great-nephew, Wilson Miles Cary, he was overcome with shock and fury. As a result, three students, including Cary, were expelled, and eight others were reprimanded.²³ The Board of Visitors instituted stricter rules and penalties for infringement and allowed greater latitude to the professors to enforce them. Jefferson believed that the stricter rules and emphasis on discipline would satisfy his critics and save his university. But as the students continued to create havoc and mayhem, the university's critics continued to protest, and the future of the university was far from assured.

When the University of Virginia was founded, Albemarle County had a population of 9,000 whites and 11,500 slaves. Its roads were rocky and unpaved, its mountain streams forded by rough-hewn logs. The town of Charlottesville consisted of a collection of homes, a gristmill, sawmill, tannery, distilleries, a courthouse, and a

jail. Public health and hygiene in the early nineteenth century were abysmally low compared to contemporary standards. Cows, pigs, sheep, chickens, and wild dogs roamed the ragged Lawn of the University, defecating. The privies stank, especially in summer. Black chimney smoke, flies, and garbage fouled the grounds and the air. Students and professors bathed infrequently, sharing a bathhouse; the stables were pungent. A typhoid epidemic spread by the unsanitary conditions would kill ten percent of the students and nearly shutter the university in 1829.

Slavery was omnipresent. Slave labor built the university and was responsible for keeping it running. Despite the university's progressive principles, enslaved people toiled at the school as if it were a plantation. On the edge of campus was a whipping post for slaves. Crowds of half-naked enslaved children were a frequent sight. According to the 1830 census, sixty-six slaves were attached to the eight professors' households. The slaves lived in the cellars of the stately pavilions. Some of the professors bought slaves once owned by Jefferson's relatives or Jefferson himself. Many of the students brought their slaves and horses with them.

Edgar brought neither slaves, nor horses, nor dogs. He began his studies at the University of Virginia at a financial disadvantage, because John Allan had given him only enough money to study with professors in two of the schools. Because he excelled at languages, Edgar chose the School of Ancient Languages with Professor George Long and the School of Modern Languages with Professor George Blaetterman. Professor Blaetterman, a native of Germany, had been living in London when he was offered the professorship on the recommendation of Professor George Ticknor of Harvard, a friend of Jefferson who acted as his educational consultant. Edgar's subjects were Latin and Greek including Classical history and geography and French, Spanish, and Italian.

Edgar excelled at his studies, placing near the top of the class in his examinations. In Professor Blaetterman's class, he was the only student to take on the challenge of translating the Italian poet Tasso, with praiseworthy results. He was fond of reciting his poetry and others' and became known for his artistic as well as literary talents when he drew a life-sized portrait of Byron on the ceiling of his room (Room 13 on the western side of the quadrangle) in crayon, copied from the engraved frontispiece in his collection of Byron's *Poems*, so that Byron's image, peering down from the ceiling, lit by soft candlelight, would inspire him as he lay in bed. He also sketched figures on the walls of his room. He joined the Jefferson Literary and Debating Society, where he argued on the topic, "Heat and Cold." In a long jump competition, he outperformed his classmates by jumping twenty feet.²⁴ He practiced military drill in the Rotunda with a West Point instructor. He also exercised mental gymnastics, writing with both hands at the same time, claiming that he wanted to be like Napoleon and accustom his mind to follow two thoughts at once.

By his own account and by others who knew him as a university student, his personality was divided into extremes: the sensitive poet and artist and solitary explorer of the nearby ridges, enjoying rambles amid scenery "of dreary isolation"²⁵ and the reckless, dissipated drinker and gambler. According to his classmate Thomas Tucker, Edgar drank not from enjoyment or pleasure, but out of compulsion: "He was not attracted by the taste of drink, without sipping it or moistening his tongue with it, he took a full glass of rum and, without water or sugar, swallowed it at a single draught, without the slightest appearance of pleasure... a single glass overexcited his

nervous nature which broke out into a flow of words whose very wildness fascinated all those who listened to him.’ Such was the strange manner of drinking which Poe adopted at seventeen. He kept to it more or less all his life.” The French poet, Charles Baudelaire, a great admirer of Poe and his French translator, called it “drinking like a barbarian.”²⁶

Nevertheless, on a campus notorious for the dissipation of its students, Edgar’s excesses attracted no official censure. Two letters exist that were written by Edgar to John Allan during his ten-month term at the university, both describing bacchanalian student behavior. The first one, dated May 1826, followed a visit from Allan. Two drunken students had attempted to waylay a professor’s carriage as he returned to his pavilion from church. The violence became so widespread that a Grand Jury was convened at the university’s request to end the “disturbances.” Edgar wrote, “The Grand Jury met and put the students in a terrible fright—so much so that the lectures were unattended, and those whose names were up on the Sheriff’s list—traveled off into the woods and mountains—taking their beds and provisions along with them—there were about 50 on the list—so you may suppose the college was very well-thinned...some were reprimanded, some suspended, and one expelled...there have been several fights since you were here...a common fight is so trifling an occurrence that no notice is taken of it...[Dixon] struck [Smith] with a large stone on one side of his head, whereupon Smith drew a pistol (which are all the fashion here) and had it not misfired would have put an end to the controversy.”²⁷

Edgar continued to excel in his studies and did not instigate fights or acts of violence. He was never summoned to appear before the Albemarle County Grand Jury. Yet, in an autobiographical fragment found among his papers, he wrote, “I led a very dissipated life—the college at that period being shamefully dissolute. I took the first honors, however, and came home greatly in debt.”²⁸

As the university’s turmoil continued, Jefferson’s health worsened. By the end of June 1826, he was bedridden. On July 4, 1826, on the fiftieth anniversary of the United States Declaration of Independence, Jefferson died in his bed in Monticello on the same day as his predecessor and rival, former President John Adams. Although students expressed their admiration of Jefferson and their grief at his death, they wasted no time in resuming the very behavior that threatened the existence of his university. Not only drinking and gambling, but one student was caught trying to explode a bomb made of a quart bottle of gunpowder outside a dorm room. A mob of students attacked the house of a Mr. Crawford and ripped the clothes off one of his slave girls, claiming “that she was one of the women who had infected the students with disease,” with the implication that Crawford had hired her out as a prostitute.²⁹

In Edgar’s letter to Allan dated September 21, 1826, he wrote about the students’ consternation regarding upcoming exams, the beauty of the library in the nearly finished Rotunda, and included a vivid description of the escalating student violence: “We have had a great many fights up here lately—the faculty expelled Wickcliffe last night for general bad conduct—but more especially for biting one of the student’s arms with whom he was fighting—I saw the whole affair—it took place before my door—Wickcliffe was much the strongest but not content with that—after getting the other completely in his power, he began to bite—I saw the arm afterwards—and it really was a serious matter—it was bitten from the shoulder to the elbow—and it is likely that pieces of flesh as large as my hand will be obliged to be

cut out.”³⁰

The students' most vicious behavior was reserved for the treatment of enslaved people. Student Thomas Jefferson Boyd of Albemarle County once beat a slave so violently with a stick that it broke, and blood ran freely from the slave's head. When hotelkeeper Warner Minor complained to the faculty chairman, Boyd expressed his “astonishment & indignation” that Minor would complain “for so trifling an affair as that of chastising a servant for his insolence.” Apparently, Boyd had demanded butter from the slave and felt the slave muttered insolently. Boyd later turned on Minor for complaining, calling him a coward and saying, “If you ever cross my path, you or I shall die.” Although the faculty expressed its disapproval, it took no action, implicitly allowing students to abuse enslaved people.³¹

Four years after Edgar left the University of Virginia, in January 1831,³² he wrote Allan a detailed, thoughtful letter in which he explained that he had been driven to gambling because Allan had never given him enough money to pay for his college expenses. When Edgar sent this letter, Frances Allan had been dead for twenty-two months, and his relationship with Allan was on the verge of a complete break. He wrote from West Point, where he was a cadet, that he was about to resign his commission, because he said he was facing the same problems he had faced in Charlottesville. As he made one of his final appeals to his foster father, he felt the need to set the record straight:

You may probably urge that you have given me a liberal education. I will leave the decision of that question to those who know how far liberal educations can be obtain in 8 months at the University of Va. Here you will say that it was my own fault that I did not return—You would not let me return because bills were presented to you for payment which I never wished nor desired you to pay. Had you let me return, my reformation had been sure—as my conduct the last 3 months gave every reason to believe—and you would never have heard more of my extravagances. But I am not about to proclaim myself guilty of all that has been alleged against me, and which I have hitherto endured, simply because I was too proud to reply. I will boldly say that it was wholly and entirely your own mistaken parsimony that caused all the difficulties in which I was involved while at Charlottesville. The expenses of the institution at the lowest estimate were \$350 per annum. You sent me there with \$110. Of this \$50 were to be paid immediately for board--\$60 for attendance upon 2 professors—and you even then did not miss the opportunity of abusing me because I did not attend 3. Then \$15 more were to be paid for room-rent—remember that all this was to paid *in advance*, with \$110.--\$12 more for a bed—and \$12 more for room furniture. I had, of course, the mortification of running into debt for public property—against the known rules of the institution, and was immediately regarded in the light of a beggar. You will remember that in a week after my arrival, I wrote to you for some more money and for books—you replied in terms of the utmost abuse—if I had been the vilest

wretch on earth you could not have been more abusive than you were because I could not contrive to pay \$150 with \$110. I had enclosed to you in my letter (according to your express commands) an account of the expenses incurred amounting to \$149—the balance to be paid was \$39—you enclosed me \$40, leaving me one dollar in pocket. In a short time afterwards, I received a packet of books consisting of *Gil Blas* and the *Cambridge Mathematics* in 2 vols: books for which I had no earthly use since I had no means of attending the mathematical lectures. But books must be had, if I intended to remain at the institution—and they were bought accordingly *upon credit*. In this manner debts were accumulated, and money borrowed of Jews in Charlottesville at extravagant interest—for I was obliged to hire a servant, to pay for wood, for washing, and a thousand other necessaries. It was then that I became dissolute, for how could it be otherwise? I could associate with no students, except those who were in a similar situation with myself—although from different causes—they from drunkenness and extravagance—I, because it was my crime to have no one on Earth who cared for me, or loved me...

According to Poe's biographer, Arthur Hobson Quinn, the expenses enumerated by Poe to Allan are correct, perhaps even underestimated. Six months after Poe left the university, his hotel keeper, George W. Spotswood, a distant, impecunious relative of George Washington, was still writing Allan to try to collect payment for the enslaved servant who attended Edgar (students were required to pay for this service):

1st May, 1827.

Dear Sir,

I presume when you sent Mr. Poe to the University of Virginia you felt yourself bound to pay all his necessary expenses — one is that each young man is expected to have a servant to attend his room. Mr. Poe did not board with me but as I had hired a first-rate servant who cost me a high price — I consider him under greater obligations to pay me for the service of my servant. I have written you two letters & have never recd. an answer to either I beg again Sir that you will send me the small amt. due. I am distressed for money — & I am informed you are Rich both in purse & Honour.

Very respectfully

Geo. W. Spotswood

Similarly, two years after Poe left the university, Samuel Leitch, a Charlottesville merchant and occasional agent of Ellis and Allan, was still writing Allan to try to collect clothing expenses for Poe of \$68.46. The university mandated a dress code, although few students abided by it, and students were expected to deposit \$114 with the school's financial officer for clothes and pocket money. Allan saved this sum by sending the uniform required by the university but failed to send any pocket money at all. Quinn commented:

To a college where the proctor estimated that the great majority of the young men spent at least five hundred dollars in one session, Poe was sent by John Allan deliberately, without a decent allowance, or even the minimum charges of the institution. There is no possible escape from this conclusion. Allan was in easy circumstances, and yet he refused to contribute for a year's expenses less than a third of the amount he had paid in England when he was not by any means so well off... There seems to have been an almost incredible meanness in one of the actions to which Poe refers, the abusing of the boy because he did not take three courses instead of two... knowing that he did not have the necessary funds... The natural inference is that he wished to have Edgar Poe out of Richmond as cheaply as possible.³³

If Edgar was driven to gamble at cards from need rather than profligacy, he took to gambling recklessly, in a spirit of self-destruction. The future expert in ciphers and cryptograms seems not to have applied his skills at ratiocination to games of chance. Like some of the characters he would come to memorialize in his short stories, he acted irrationally on sudden impulses. His biographer Mary E. Phillips cites the recollection of Peter Pindar Pease, who in his youth was apprentice in a Charlottesville harness-makers shop that also traded in pictures and books. One day a rare copy of Hogarth's prints came into the shop, which Pease bought in installments. In May 1826, after Pease had made two payments, Poe entered the shop, saw the book, expressed interest in it, and was informed that the clerk was saving for it. Poe suggested to throw dice for the book, and if he lost, he was to pay the full price to Pease. If Pease lost, he was to continue his payments and turn the book over to Poe. Poe lost, and promptly paid the money.³⁴

Only once does Edgar's name appear in the University of Virginia's *Faculty Minutes*, when, questioned about certain hotel keepers who were in the habit of gambling with students, he denied it. The record of his examination reads: "Edgar Poe never heard until now of any Hotel-Keepers playing cards or drinking with students."³⁵ His biographer Mary E. Phillips claimed to have found evidence that Poe was the victim of cheating: "Unknown to Poe, all his card-table losses were not the results of fair play... [his classmate] Douglas Sherley wrote that 'Poe's University enemies were of the most dangerous and contemptible order—secret enemies—fellows ready to give you the stab from behind under cover of darkness. A band of envious cowards.'"³⁶

James Galt, William Galt's nephew, claimed Edgar's debt amounted to \$2,500. That is a huge sum considering that college expenses were estimated at \$350; most students spent \$500; and Allan had given Edgar \$110, later \$40 more, and finally an additional \$100, for \$250 total. However, as Quinn points out, as John Allan's future executor and contingent beneficiary, Galt was hardly a disinterested party, and had refused Poe's request for help, so he may have been tempted to exaggerate the amount.³⁷

In a memoir composed twenty years after Poe's death in 1869, William Wertenbaker, the university librarian appointed by Jefferson, recalled a cold December night in 1826 spent with Poe in his room shortly before his departure from the university. Not having enough wood for the fire, Poe recklessly burned up

his table and candles while regretting his indebtedness, which Wertenbaker remembered Poe estimated at \$2,000. Wertenbaker's recollection is impossible to verify.³⁸ Whatever the amount, Edgar's debts were substantial, and he had no way of paying them, unless Allan came to his aid.

In the University of Virginia's early years, outrageous displays of student insubordination and violence were tolerated, and criminal behavior excused as folly and high spirits because the perpetrators were entitled, upper-class young men, who regarded drinking and gambling as their birthright. Poe's biographer Mary E. Phillips noted, "In 1826 gaming did have its hidden sway among these gay young Virginia blades. It was openly the way of their fathers and their fathers before them... Their earliest recollections were associated with horses, guns, full decanters of social duties, and cards as among usual drawing-room topics and diversions."³⁹

During Edgar's year, a student named Sterling Edmunds lost \$240 in a single night and horsewhipped another student, Charles Peyton, who, he believed, was cheating him.⁴⁰ Edgar's wealthy classmates were cavalier about the consequences of their destructive behavior, because they knew they were returning to lives of wealth and privilege. They had no problems flouting their parents' wishes while they continued to live off them. In a diary he kept for several months while attending the University of Virginia in 1835, Charles Ellis, the son of Allan's former business partner, complained about "the blowing up Father gave in his last letter, but it seems that whenever he sends money, he is privileged to tack on a long yarn of advice."⁴¹

Ellis could depend on his father in a way that Edgar could never depend on Allan. Other fathers might not approve of their sons' drinking and gambling, but they did not withhold help. Perhaps Allan's unwillingness to pay Edgar's gambling debts is understandable, particularly if Edgar had been the victim of cheating. However, Allan's refusal to pay Edgar's debts to tradesmen and hotel keepers for legitimate expenses was a deliberate attempt to inflict damage on his ward. The laws of Virginia regarding imprisonment for debt were stringent. Until the debts were satisfied, Edgar would be pursued by warrants and face imprisonment if he returned to the county where the debts had been contracted. By withholding aid, Allan made it impossible for Edgar to continue his university education, despite his stellar academic record. Eventually, Edgar would have to flee the state to escape his creditors. Poe's biographer Hervey Allen wrote, "Whatever indiscretions Poe may have committed, there is no evidence that he deserved a punishment which involved the whole of his future. Mr. Allan was not legally responsible for the gambling debts, but a few hundred dollars would have staved off the merchants of Charlottesville...Poe lost the opportunity of a university education and had to face alone the demands for the payments of his debts."⁴²

Though Allan possessed a great fortune, \$250 was the limit to his promise to give his foster son a good education. Thanks to the generosity of his own guardian, Allan was one of the richest men in the state of Virginia. If his fortune was \$750,000, as Edgar claimed, the amount Edgar needed was inconsequential. Allan's behavior towards Edgar cannot only be explained by stinginess. There were darker forces at play.

Edgar returned to Richmond before Christmas in 1826 under a cloud. He was not yet eighteen years old, and his formal education was practically over. Fanny Allan greeted him warmly, but John Allan did not. Compounding Edgar's misery was his discovery that Elmira Royster's father had intercepted his letters, and she had never received them. The Roysters had sent Elmira away to visit family in Georgia and the Carolinas in order to prevent her from seeing Edgar. He was unable to communicate with her or find out where she was.

In one fell swoop, Edgar had lost his hopes for the future. Unable to face the Allans' Christmas Eve party, Edgar went on a drinking binge with his old friend Ebenezer Burling. Afterwards, Edgar expressed his keen regrets and sincere sorrow for his losses. Fanny forgave him and tried to intercede with her husband on his behalf, but Allan would not relent. He refused to settle any of Edgar's debts, not even when Edgar's creditors pursued him to Richmond, and he had to flee up the James River to the Allans' Lower Byrd Plantations.

Just as Allan had criticized Edgar for not taking three courses when he only had money for two, he now accused him of "eating the bread of idleness," but the only position he offered Edgar was unpaid. According to Poe's biographer, James Whitty, Poe wrote a letter to The Mills Nursery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with whom the Allan firm had dealings, asking for employment. The Mills Nursery sent the letter to Allan, and Allan nixed Edgar's chances.⁴³ The blowup that resulted in Edgar's leaving the Allans' home forever on March 19, 1827, seems to have been deliberately provoked by Allan:

Dear Sir,

After my treatment on yesterday and what passed between us this morning, I can hardly think you will be surprised at the contents of this letter. My determination is at length taken—to leave your house and endeavor to find some place in this wide world, where I will be treated—not as *you* have treated me—

This is not a hurried determination, but one on which I have long considered—and having so considered my resolution is unalterable—You may perhaps think that I have flown off in a passion and that I am already wishing to return; but not so—I will give you the reasons which have actuated me, and then judge—

Since I have been able to think on any subject, my thoughts have aspired, and they have been taught by *you* to aspire, to eminence in public life—this cannot be attained without a good Education, such a one I cannot obtain at a Primary school—A collegiate education therefore was what I most ardently desired, and I had been led to expect that it would at some future time be granted—but in a moment of caprice—you have blasted my hopes because I disagreed with you in an opinion, which opinion I was forced to express.

Again, I have heard you say (when you little thought I was listening and therefore must have said it in earnest) that you had no affection for me.

You have moreover ordered me to quit your house and are

continually upbraiding me with eating the bread of idleness, when you yourself were the only person to remedy the evil by placing me to some business—

You take delight in exposing me before those whom you think likely to advance my interest in this world—

You suffer me to be subjected to the whims of caprice, not only of your white family but the complete authority of the blacks—these grievances I could not submit to, and I am gone. I request that you send me my trunk containing my clothes and books—and if you still have the least affection for me, as the last call I shall make on your bounty, to prevent the fulfillment of the prediction you this morning expressed, send me as much money as will defray the expenses of my passage to some of the Northern cities and then support me for one month, by which time I will be enabled to place myself in some situation where I may not only obtain a livelihood but lay by a sum which one day or another will support me at the University...I am in the greatest necessity. If you fail to comply with my request, I tremble for the consequence.

Yours,
Edgar A. Poe

P.S. It depends upon yourself if hereafter you see or hear from me.⁴⁴

If Edgar had thought that Allan would make a gesture of goodwill, he was mistaken. Allan ignored his letter, and the following day, Edgar wrote in increasing desperation:

Dear Sir,

Be so good as to send me my trunk with my clothes—I wrote to you on yesterday explaining my reasons for leaving—I suppose by my not receiving either my trunk, or an answer to my letter, that you did not receive it. I am in the greatest necessity, not having tasted food since yesterday morning. I have nowhere to sleep at night but roam about the streets—I am nearly exhausted—I beseech you as you wish not your prediction concerning me to be fulfilled—to send me without delay my trunk containing my clothes, and to lend if you will not give me as much money as will defray the expense of my passage to Boston (\$12) and a little to support me there until I shall be enabled to engage in some business—I sail on Saturday—A letter will be received by me at the Court House Tavern, where be so good as to send my trunk—

--Give my love to all at home,

I am yours,
Edgar A. Poe

I have not one cent in the world to provide any food.

Among Allan's papers is his cold reply to Poe, only half finished and apparently never sent:

Sir:

Your letter of Monday was received this morning. I am not at all surprised at any step you may take, at anything you can say, or anything you may do, you are a much better judge of the propriety of your own conduct and general treatment of those who have had the charge of your infancy and have watched with parental solicitude and affection over your tender years affording you such means of instruction as was in their power which was performed with pleasure until you became a much better judge of your own conduct, rights, and privileges than they. It is true I taught you to aspire even to eminence in Public Life, but I never expected that Don Quixote, Gil Blas, Joe Miller and such works were calculated to promote the end.

It is true and you will not deny it, that the charge of eating the Bread of Idleness was to urge you to perseverance & industry in receiving the classics, in presenting yourself in the mathematics, mastering the French, etc. How far I succeeded in this you can best tell, but for one who had conceived so good an opinion of himself and his future intentions I hesitate not to say, that you have not evinced the smallest disposition to comply with my wishes, it is only on this subject I wish to be understood, your Heart will tell you if it is not made of marble whether I have not had good reason to fear for you in more ways than one. I should have been justly chargeable in reprimanding you for faults had I had any other object than to correct them.

Your list of grievances require no answer the world will reply to them--& now that you have shaken off your dependence & declared for your own independence & after such a list of black charges—you tremble for the consequences unless I send you a supply of money.⁴⁵

Here the letter breaks off in rage, echoing Edgar's words back at him. Allan did not send any money, but Fanny dispatched a servant who delivered money to Edgar and a bag of his belongings. According to Judge Robert Hughes, who worked at the *Richmond Examiner* and knew Poe at the end of his life, Poe and Ebenezer Burling had made an arrangement to work their way to England in a sailing vessel whose owner traded with Allan's firm. In later years, the owner of the vessel told Judge Hughes that Allan was aware of these plans and had no objection, but when Fanny found out, she "went into hysterics," and at her urging, Allan convinced the owner of the vessel to change his mind. Yet Poe determined to go through with the plans, and he and Burling shipped out on another vessel. Burling soon changed his mind and deserted at Norfolk, the first stopping point, returning to Richmond. But Poe kept going.

Later Poe would weave a fantastic web of stories about the adventures that befell him on his journeys. "I set out in the world as the Norman conqueror on the shores of Great Britain; and in my assurance of victory I burned the boats which alone could cover my retreat; I had to conquer or die; success or shame."⁴⁶ He claimed he had sailed to England and then made his way to France, and from thence, "if one would believe his numerous confidantes, made a Don Quixotic expedition, ran all over Europe, accomplished great deeds of prowess in Hellas, dared a thousand dangers in Russia, benefited by the intervention of the American consul in St.

Petersburg, escaped a heartrending death by a miracle, had his portrait done in London (with no resemblances), and finally, regained his native America.”⁴⁷ His tales convinced many of his contemporaries as well as early admirers and biographers. Charles Baudelaire was convinced that Poe had walked the boulevards of Paris. Later biographers disputed Poe’s mythologies. And, indeed, the reality turned out to be quite different.

Upon his return to Richmond, Burling told the Allans that Edgar had gone abroad. Fanny was inconsolable. She had fainting spells and took to her bed. she wrote to Edgar, begging him to return and absolving him from all blame in the Allan family matters. Over the next year, she received two letters from Edgar, with European postmarks. They have not survived.

Shortly after Edgar left the Allans’ home, a letter arrived for him dated March 25, 1827, from Edward Crump, a college classmate from Dinwiddie County to whom he owed money that was not a gambling debt:

Dear Sir,

When I saw you in Richmond a few days ago I should have mentioned the difference between us if there had not been so many persons present. I must of course, as you did not mention it to me inquire of you if you ever intend to pay it. If you have not the money write me word that you have not but do not be perfectly silent. I should be glad if you would write to me even as a friend. There can certainly be no harm in your avowing candidly that you have no money if you have none but you can say when you can pay me if you cannot now. I heard when I was in Richmond that Mr. Allan would probably discharge all your debts. If mine was a gambling debt I should not think much of it. But under the present circumstances I think very strangely of it. Write me upon receipt of this letter and tell me candidly what is the matter.

Your friend,
Edward G. Crump⁴⁸

Edgar never received this letter, as it was still among Allan’s papers at his death. On the back of the letter, Allan wrote the note, “Edward G. Crump, Mar. 25, 1827, to E.A. Poe, alias Henri Le Rennet,” showing that he knew the alias Edgar was using to evade his creditors. In a letter written to his sister in Scotland two days later about the disposition of William Galt’s estate, he complained of his wife’s health, “Though Mrs. Allan occupies one of the airiest & pretty places about Richmond it seems to make no improvement in her health,” and then remarked without comment, “I’m thinking Edgar has gone to sea to seek his own fortunes.”⁴⁹

Notes:

¹ Unpublished in Poe's lifetime, the poem was untitled in the autograph album, which also contained an untitled poem by Poe's older brother, William Henry Poe, beginning "I have gazed on woman's cheek..." The autograph album's owner, Lucy Holmes (1809-81), later became the wife of Isaiah Balderston, Chief Judge of Orphans Court, the same court on which Edgar's cousin and antagonist, Neilson Poe, later served (beginning in 1878). The poem was given the title "Alone" by Eugene L. Didier, who rediscovered it in the album which had been passed down to Mrs. Balderston's daughter, Mrs. Dawson. Didier arranged for the poem's first publication in September 1875 in *Scribner's Monthly*, where it created quite a stir.

² Emile Lauvrière, *The Strange Life and Strange Loves of Edgar Allan Poe*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1935, p.30.

³ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁴Text: Thomas Ollive Mabbott (and E. A. Poe), "Romance," *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe — Vol. I: Poems* (1969), pp. 127-129

<https://www.eapoe.org/works/mabbott/tom1p031.htm#pg0128>

⁵ Lauvrière, p.38.

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, "William Wilson." (1839) (http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/poe/w_wilson.html)

⁷ Lauvrière, p.52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.41.

⁹ <https://www.eapoe.org/works/misc/swimming.htm> Text: Edgar Allan Poe,

"Swimming," *Southern Literary Messenger*, vol. I, no. 9, May 1835, 1:468

¹⁰ Lauvrière, p.44.

¹¹ Poe's biographer Hervey Allen found the receipt for Royster's loan to Allan among the papers of Ellis and Allen, Dec. 22, 1810. Hervey Allen, *The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe*, 1934. Note. 188.

<https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/hva34c08.htm#tf0187>

¹² T.H.Ellis's description of the house, written for Woodberry (see his *Life*, II, 364-6)4, has been followed by all later biographers, including Arthur Hobson Quinn,

<https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn04.htm#pn04025>

¹³ According to Hervey Allen, <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/hva34c08.htm#tf0187>

¹⁴ Rex Bowman and Carlos Santos. *Rot, Riot, and Rebellion: Mr. Jefferson's Struggle to Save the University that Changed America*. University of Virginia Press, 2013. [kindle edition don't know page]

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Thomas Jefferson's daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph reported the incident to her daughter, Ellen Randolph Coolidge in a letter Oct. 13, 1825 cited in *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Despite his youth, George Long had already established a reputation as a scholar when Jefferson brought him to Charlottesville The first of the European professors to arrive in Virginia, Long went to meet Jefferson at Monticello. "Are you the new professor of ancient languages?" he asked. "I am, sir," replied Long. "You are very young," commented Jefferson. "I shall grow older, sir," replied Long. (quoted in *Ibid.*)

²⁰ In a letter from Jefferson to his grandson-in-law, Jefferson, *Writings*, 18:344 quoted in *Ibid.*

²¹ Jefferson, *Writings*, 344, quoted in *Ibid.*

²² Contemporary eyewitness account by Margaret Bayard Smith, recounted in *Ibid.*

²³ Expelled from the University of Virginia, Wilson Miles Cary, Jefferson's great-nephew, ended up rehabilitating himself. On the advice of General John Cocke, a member of the University's governing Board of Visitors, Cary studied law by working in a circuit court clerk's office, became a lawyer, moved to Maryland, and served in its state senate. *Ibid.* According to Arthur Hobson Quinn, A public-spirited citizen and supporter of Jefferson, General Cocke was a friend of John Allan, and it is probably that Poe was sent to the University at his suggestion. <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn05.htm>

²⁴ Mary E. Phillips, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man*, section 3, 1926

<https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/mep1ch03.htm#pg0294>

²⁵ The quote is from Poe's story, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," set "during the fall of the year of 1827, while residing near Charlottesville, Virginia," but not published until 1844.

²⁶ Lauvrière, p.60. and Phillips, <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/mep1ch03.htm#pg0294>

²⁷ The Valentine papers in the Library of Congress and the Valentine Museum, Richmond includes Allan's business records, accounts, and other correspondence, including twenty-eight letters from Poe to Allan. This passage is from the earliest, dated May 25, 1826.

<https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p2605250.htm>

²⁸ Quoted in Bowman and Santos *Rot, Riot, and Rebellion: Mr. Jefferson's Struggle to Save the University that Changed America*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ From Poe to Allan, Sept. 21, 1826, from the Valentine papers,

<https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p2609210.htm>

³¹ Minutes of the Faculty, June 6, 1828, recounted in Bowman and Santos *Rot, Riot, and Rebellion: Mr. Jefferson's Struggle to Save the University that Changed America*.

³² Valentine papers, pp. 259-262. The letter is dated Jan. 3, 1830, but as Poe's biographer, Arthur Hobson Quinn, points out, the actual date is Jan. 3, 1831 (like many people, Poe took a few days to adjust to writing the date of the new year), as he is about to leave West Point, and he didn't enter West Point until June 1830. Quinn, Ch V, note 22 <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn05.htm#fn05022>

³³ Quinn, Ch V <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn05.htm#pn05028>

³⁴ Phillips, section 3, 1926, <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/mep1ch03.htm#tn030004>

³⁵ *Faculty Minutes of the University of Virginia*, Dec. 26, 1826, cited in Quinn, ch V,

<https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn05.htm#pn05021>

³⁶ Phillips, section 3, 1926, <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/mep1ch03.htm#tn030004>

³⁷ Quinn was skeptical of James Galt's claims: Ch 5,

<https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn05.htm#pn05021>

³⁸ Quinn was skeptical of Wertenbaker's reliability Ch 5

<https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn05.htm#pn05021>

³⁹ Phillips, section 3, 1926, <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/mep1ch03.htm#tn030004>

⁴⁰ Quinn, Ch 5 <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn05.htm#pn05021>

⁴¹ Quoted in Bowman and Santos *Rot, Riot, and Rebellion: Mr. Jefferson's Struggle to Save the University that Changed America*. Ch. 10.

⁴² Allen, <https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/hva34c08.htm#tf0187>

⁴³ James Whitty, "Memoir", *The Complete Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York and Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1911. <https://www.eapoe.org/works/whitty/jhw1102.htm#pgxxxix>

⁴⁴ Letter EAP to JA, March 19, 1827, in the Valentine papers,

<https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p2703190.htm>

⁴⁵ JA to EAP, March 20, 1827, in the Valentine papers.

<https://www.eapoe.org/misc/letters/t2703200.htm>

⁴⁶ Quoted in Lauvrière p.68.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p.72.

⁴⁸ Crump to EAP, March 25, 1827. In the Ellis & Allan papers in the Library of Congress, Poe volume.

<https://www.eapoe.org/misc/letters/t2703250.htm>

⁴⁹ Allan's letter is in the Ellis & Allan papers in the Library of Congress, Poe volume.

<https://www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1921/quinn05.htm#pn05033>

About the writer:

The Imp of the Perverse: Edgar Allan Poe's Misplaced Youth is the third of a series of essays about Edgar Allan Poe. Anne Whitehouse is also the author of seven poetry collections, most recently *Outside from the Inside* (Dos Madres Press, 2020), as well as a novel, *Fall Love*, and short stories, essays, and reviews. Ethelzine has just published *Surrealist Muse*, her long poem about Leonora Carrington, as a mini-chapbook.

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