

Poe at the End

by R.H.W. Dillard

October. Poe in Baltimore. Poe
At the end, going North, away
From Virginia, keeping promises
Despite the black beak of despair,
Laid over, waiting for the train,
But just now, drunk, out of the coop,
Leaning in Lombard Street
Against the window of a store,
Making his pitched and stammered way
Toward Cooth & Sergeant's Tavern—
(Sergeant Major Poe, First Artillery,
Honorably discharged so many years ago)—
Slow way of starts and fits,
The drink and drugs sluing his heart
Into blind staggers and sways.

Away from Virginia and toward
Virginia in the grave. She played
The harp that January night and sang,
It was a good song, too,
But so soon, so quickly a tiny vessel
Popped in her throat like a New Year's squib
Just as she reached her last high note.
And for five years it broke and broke
Again, until she died, was laid away,
And Poe learned an awful truth:
*Helter skelter or catcher in the rye,
Art kills as often as it saves.*

On Lombard Street in Baltimore, memory
Twists him, presses his forehead against the glass,
His heart wheezing like wind through the cottage wall
In Fordham where Virginia lay. His heart lifts
In his chest, flaps clumsily aloft
Like a great white bird, then settles back,
And Poe is grounded, left in the lurch
As he was abandoned by his party friends
After voting all morning under a dozen names:
His own, Usher, Reynolds, Dupin, Pym,
Raising his hand again and again, taking the oath,
Swearing he was who he was and was not,
Swearing he was.

Hart Crane asked him
Nearly a century later whether he denied
The ticket, but how could he deny a thing,
He who was all things that day and none,
A multitude of beings and only one,
Leaning on a window, his forehead on the glass,
His eyes unfocused or focused deep within.

And yet he does see past Virginia
With blood on her blouse, past Elmira
Left behind in Richmond, jilted
Before she ever reached the altar,
Past even the bloated face of Edgar Poe
Reflected in the window, drawn and drawn out
In the wobbly glass, the sodden man
In a stranger's threadbare clothes
With only Dr. Carter's borrowed cane
Still clutched in that familiar hand,
Sees through the tortured glass
To a display of pewter and silver
Laid out within the shop, slick knives
With thin images of a singular man
Upon each blade, rounded shining cups
With a bulge-nosed alien face
In each curved surface, two large
Silver plates with his own desperate stare
Reflected plain in each, the brow,
The carved out cheeks, blue lips
Beneath the sad mustache.

But he
Looks beyond this olio of images,
These hard lies and harder truths
Displayed before him, to find
A large silver coffee urn, beknobbed
And crusted with handles and thick
Vines, blossoms and twisted ribbons,
Its surface flat and curved and rounded,
Concave, convex, and convolute,
And in its turbulent reflections
He sees a young man's face,
A young man with dark hair
And uneven eyes, a young man
Leaning on a cane with promises
To keep, a face he recognizes
But cannot name, knows but cannot claim,
That looks him steadily eye to eye.

His heart will soon calm down enough
For him to stutter on, reach Cooth &
Sergeant's, fall onto a bench, be found,
Be carried to the hospital, lie there in fever,
Call Reynolds' name, ease out of delirium
Only to say, gently, "Lord help my poor soul,"
And die, having for one moment on Lombard Street
Learned still another awful truth:
*Pell mell or waiting just to die,
Art saves as often as it kills.*



Anarchy and Family in the Southern Tradition

by George Garrett

For this issue of *Chronicles* we have assembled the thing in and of itself, examples of Southern literature as it is here and now, a couple of appropriate poems and a work of fiction by one of the South's finest writers, together with some good talk about contemporary letters in the South. I would rather not be redundant (the rhetorical effect of which is always to generate a chorus of huge yawns among readers); so I will here merely point out that most of the questions and some of the answers about the nature of Southern literature, past and present, are at least touched on in the pieces that follow. Perhaps most interestingly, R.H.W. Dillard's new poem, "Poe at the End," and Fred Chappell's long story/short novel (shall we go ahead and call it a novella? Why not?), "Ancestors," using both fact and fable, directly address the happy and probably insoluble problem of defining Southern literature. Among other things.

I commend each and all of these pieces to you. Including the work by Dillard and Chappell, and the poem by James Seay, we have work by the latest generation of Southern writers, all of them already established and altogether likely to be at once active and influential in the decade ahead and the early years of the new century. That gives us, not counting the newest of the new and the youngest of the young, three living generations of Southern writers. Al-

though we have lost Robert Penn Warren and Walker Percy we still have so many others around and about: Andrew Lytle and Cleanth Brooks, for example; Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor and Shelby Foote, for instance, each having by now earned more than regional honors and recognition.

When you think of all these, together with many others, a surprising number, at one end of the living tradition and, at the other, the younger writers who are gathered here and represent their own generation, you have a sense of the continuity and variety of the Southern tradition in our time. Missing, but their long shadows remain, are a crowd, a cloud of elders and witnesses who link the great flowering of Southern writing in this century to its historical and literary past: first and foremost, of course William Faulkner, who mapped the territory for us even as, in different forms and strange contexts, he influenced and changed the literature of the wide world in all its babbling languages; the great and greatly influential Agrarians and Fugitives—Tate and Ransom and Donald Davidson and Carolyn Gordon and Brooks and Warren, and, of course, their own pupils, people like James Dickey and Randall Jarrell and Madison Jones; the remarkable independents, people like Thomas Stribling and Stark Young and John Gould Fletcher; the first generation of women who made their way, and their living, as writers—Ellen Glasgow and Mary Johnston and Elizabeth Madox Roberts and Evelyn Thomson and so many others, not least among them being Margaret Mitchell. And all of this should not slight or ignore the no-longer separate and equal tradition of black Southern writing, from, say, Ralph Ellison (who sometimes identifies himself as a

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