It’s About Time They Gave the Man a Decent Burial: Funeral as Stage Play

By Paul A. Karpuk

In July 2009, while in Washington D.C. for a long weekend, I took advantage of my chance proximity to Baltimore to visit the Poe House and Museum there. Though a native of Baltimore and teacher of courses on Poe, I had never been to the museum nor been fully aware of it until a colleague gave me literature from there. As a matter of professional obligation, I could not neglect the opportunity, and together with my son David, we went there on a Saturday afternoon, the one time it was going to be open during my four-day sojourn in the area. At the time we visited the museum, it was being run by one part-time curator, with summer hours of operation restricted to Wednesday through Saturday, 12:00 to 3:30.¹

The house is in west Baltimore, at 203 N. Amity St., slightly north of the intersection of that street with Lexington, at the south end of the short block bordered on its north end by Saratoga (Fig. 1). We had considerable difficulty finding it, and, in pursuit of the tiny blue signs directing us to the Poe House, zigzagged through a maze of residential streets in a dilapidated neighborhood which looked positively dangerous, past run-down brick row housing, overgrown lots, and corner grocery stores sprayed with graffiti. Without the signs, we would never have found the place, and drove past it the first time without seeing it. The house is a narrow two-story brick building of a type with the surrounding row housing, across the street from a weed-choked, deserted lot next to a boarded-up house overrun with thistles. The one helpful landmark was a unique old-fashioned lamppost outside the house.

One is reminded by the venue that Poe and most of his extended family lived at or below the poverty line. The house was built for a working class family on what was then the western edge of the city, a few blocks north of the Baltimore and Ohio train station built only a few years before Poe’s sojourn there, in 1830, at about the same time as the house. The proximate soot, noise, and fumes can easily be imagined. Literature issued by the museum (“Secrets of the Poe House”) explained that, unlike the residences of some other writers, the curator did not reside on the premises, as “a quick glance at the size should make it obvious that there is no space for someone to live on the premises” (and have room for a museum; the house was used as a residence at least until the 1940’s; Quinn 205), and for the same reason, there was no space to accommodate a climate control system that would help forestall perennial moisture damage. Still, when Poe moved into the house in 1832, four people were already living there, his widowed paternal aunt, Maria Clemm; two cousins, Virginia and Henry Clemm; and his grandmother Elizabeth Cairnes Poe. Edgar probably slept in the garret, insufferably hot in the summer, and would have been forced to walk upstairs to it through the bedroom below him (“The Baltimore Poe House and
Museum”). The family moved out of even this tiny dwelling when Poe’s grandmother died, as they could not afford the rent without the pension she received as the widow of a Revolutionary War veteran.

Visitors parked along Lexington or Amity Streets, there being no private parking for the museum. I was legitimately worried about the car being stolen while we were inside, but ultimately, Poe mattered more than my car, plus we found a parking space close by, two houses up the street. A gentleman sitting on his front porch with his (black!) cat next to the Poe house proved very congenial and would, presumably, have deterred car thefts in broad daylight, plus, other visitors were pulling up and driving away constantly.

A sign posted on the door instructed visitors to “Knock on door gently! Please be patient! Guide will answer.” Probably, the curator controlled the flow of visitors through the house because of its diminutive size, narrow staircases, priceless interior, and only himself to monitor security cameras. One would think there was no more room for the cameras than there was for a climate control system, but given the extraordinary value of Poe artifacts, they could not be done without. The smallness of the house limits the number of exhibits it can accommodate, and its chief source of interest remains the simple fact that Poe lived there. On the first floor was the original bronze medallion stolen from Poe’s tombstone sculpted in 1875 to mark the new burial site when the writer’s remains were relocated from deep inside Westminster Churchyard to the present site in its northwest corner at Greene and Fayette Streets (Fig. 2). The stolen medallion, defaced and worn, resurfaced after it had been replaced. There was also an intriguing exhibit about Washington Medical College where Poe died (which later acquired a horrific reputation because of its association with body-snatching, so much so that local residents tried repeatedly to burn it down). On the second floor were engravings illustrating lines from “The Raven.”

For me, the focal point of our visit was my conversation with the curator, Jeff Jerome, a tall, scholarly-looking gentleman with receding gray hair and glasses who has indefatigably promoted the city as a nerve center of Poe-related activities. I naturally found common ground with him, and we conversed for perhaps an hour, though frequently interrupted by the mandated knocks on the door and his recitation of recommendations concerning parking and security to each set of visitors. As the house is remote from any other tourist attraction, in a neighborhood that must discourage visitors, no tourist could blunder upon it by accident, but would have to set out on purpose to find it and come during the few hours it was open. Nevertheless, there was a fairly constant stream of visitors, testifying to the enduring popularity of the writer. Mr. Jerome produced or made available a surprising amount of informative literature to accompany the exhibits, and sold replicas of the original manuscripts of Poe’s most famous works.

During this conversation I found out that in October there would be a “do-over” funeral for Poe on the occasion of the bicentennial of his birth, which the city had
been celebrating with events throughout the year. Nobody familiar with the story of Poe’s burial service in 1849 would be surprised at its being done over, though actually, this would be his third funeral, counting his exhumation and reburial in 1875. (One wonders if there will be a fourth one to mark the bicentennial of his death.) The writer died on October 7, 1849 and was hastily interred the next day, in a ceremony attended by fewer than ten mourners and lasting no more than three minutes (Silverman 436-437). The ceremony was described by one observer as “cold-blooded and unchristianlike” (Meyers 256), though its brevity may have been partly owing to the unseasonably cold weather. Another circumstance was that, despite the connection of the writer and his family with Baltimore, he was not residing there, but only passing through en route from Richmond to New York. Most individuals with whom he associated, and who, given (any) advance notice, would have attended his funeral, lived elsewhere.

This funeral, the crown jewel of the city’s year-long celebration of the bicentennial of Poe’s birth, consisted of several events spread over five days. Billed as the funeral Poe never had, to the extent possible it was carried out as if the writer had just died, necessitating a bona fide memorial service, with publicity referring to the sadness of the occasion, mourners, the (real) possibility of ordering flowers through Cedar Hill Florist, and a private burial service, attendance at which, at the family’s request, was restricted to immediate family and invited friends. The inevitable anachronisms were minimalized, though opportunities for ghoulish humor were seized upon, albeit tastefully, and as appropriate given the nature of Poe’s writings. The content of the service was dictated largely by the motive for it, to rectify old injustices.

The first occasion presenting difficulties due to the elapse of one-hundred sixty years between the writer’s death and his “real” funeral was the open-casket viewing of the writer’s body at the Poe house, on Wednesday, October 7 from 12 noon to 11:00 P.M. For this, there were neither tickets nor waiting lists; people lined up and paid five dollars at the door. During my conversation with Jeff Jerome in July, I expressed bewilderment at how a viewing was possible. The organizers could not intend to dig the writer up and display his corpse only to rebury it; could they? Poe’s stories often refer to exhumation of corpses, and so disinterment might be weirdly appropriate, but it militated against the respect towards the writer this occasion was designed to reinforce, and viewings are customarily of the recently alive, not skeletons. Moreover, Poe had already once been disinterred and reburied. On that occasion, it had been to relocate the body, but no such motive presented itself this time, and there were no medical or criminological mandates for exhumation. When I asked Mr. Jerome, then, how this difficulty would be resolved, he hesitated, looked at me cryptically, and declared: “He’ll be there.” What I did not know then was that he himself was one of the chief organizers of the funeral, and would not have been answering on someone else’s behalf, as this determination was largely up to him. Among the possibilities I considered was that an actor would lie in the casket and avoid being seen to breathe, or that a manikin would be dressed to look like Poe. The
latter speculation seemed most likely and, as it turned out, was close to the truth. It is probable that when I spoke with him, Mr. Jerome did not yet know exactly how Poe would be “there,” except that exhuming the poet was, apparently, never considered. One wonders what private burial service there could have been.²

I was unable to attend the wake or the all-night vigil at the Poe gravesite, which began one hour after the closing of the house, at midnight on the morning of Thursday, October 8. This was an opportunity for members of the public to offer their own eulogy or tribute to Poe, “in simple spoken words, poems, or music” (“All Night Vigil at the Poe Monument”). Assigned times were given to people wishing to pay homage to Poe, who used a signup sheet on the Poe bicentennial website. However, I was not going to miss the main event if at all possible. Two services were planned for Sunday, October 11 at 12:30 and 4:30 P.M., the first preceded by the funeral procession from the Poe house to Westminster Hall. There would be no procession before the second service, but (because the house was not generally thought to be within walking distance of the church) there did not seem to be an assumption, either way, that mourners would accompany it on foot. Two services were planned, probably to accommodate the anticipated high demand for tickets and limited seating capacity of the church; even then, only three hundred tickets per service were to be put on sale. If Mr. Jerome was right, these six hundred would sell out instantly. As per his advice, I sent an order the moment the announcement went up on the website in mid-August, requesting tickets for the first service, as I wanted, if feasible, to follow the funeral procession from the house to the church. I correctly assumed that the first service would be the preferred option, as, even if attendees did not accompany the casket on its journey through town, they would want to watch its arrival at Westminster Hall. Though I thought that, even with my prompt action, I was probably too late, in early September I received notification that my request for tickets for the 12:30 service would be honored, and considered myself extraordinarily fortunate, though as it turned out, I probably could have gotten into the first service even had I waited until early September.

On the Sunday morning of the event, having left my hotel early in order to ensure a parking spot at the Baltimore Grand, the public garage near Westminster Hall referred to in the publicity, I arrived at 10:00 A.M, but now with two a half hours before the funeral. As early as it was, a few people were already lined up for the first service. The funeral train was scheduled to leave the house at 11:30 A.M., and now that I might have time to do it, I began seriously to consider walking to the house so that I could accompany it back to the church. In the publicity, Jeff Jerome had insisted that one was not within walking distance from the other, but I had driven it and it seemed doable in an hour and a half. After conferring with the volunteer staff and getting them to sketch out the intended route of the procession on my map, I set out for the Poe House with the expectation of intercepting it on its way to the church, but ended up walking all the way and arrived there at 11:00 A.M., a half hour before departure. En route, I enjoyed the crystal clear, deep blue autumn day in Baltimore, a complete rarity from what I
remembered of living there, and the inverse of the reportedly inclement weather on the day Poe was originally buried. About two dozen people were already milling about, not local residents, so others had thought the departure and/or procession worth watching. In the next half hour, that number grew to perhaps fifty or seventy-five, and to about one hundred and fifty by the time we reached Westminster Hall, when the crush of people around the casket as it was lifted out of the hearse became so dense as to make it unapproachable. (I had expected thousands.) During this half hour I conversed with other “mourners” including a couple from Moscow on whom I exercised my rusty Russian and a Poe fan from Vermont who had mistaken me for a well-known local Poe scholar. I also asked Jeff Jerome about the feasibility of keeping pace with the procession on foot, as the organizers were planning to traverse the distance in a half-hour or less, twice as fast as it had taken me to get to the house; albeit it was a funeral, so how fast could it go? Though on edge with preparations, he was polite and reasonably cordial, telling me that the procession would move at a fast walk but that I should be able to keep up though I would have to stick to the sidewalks. (He did not remember me.)

The honor guard for the procession was the Loch Raven Pipes and Drums, who must have been selected for the job partly because of their name. When I arrived, a dozen of them were rehearsing in the deserted lot opposite the house, in the small circle of sand not overrun with weeds (Fig. 4). Around the corner was the old-fashioned hearse with glass sides, yet to be harnessed to the horses brought from Kentucky for the occasion (Fig. 3). As the time for departure neared, a few nosy people opened the door of the Poe house and peeked in. A clear sign of departure was that two members of the honor guard stationed themselves on either side of the front door. Four other members of the honor guard bore the cedar coffin out the door and lifted it into the hearse from the rear, though it got stuck on the lip of the compartment and needed considerable maneuvering to be hoisted over the obstruction (Fig. 5). The effect of the cedar coffin seen through the glass side of the hearse, draped by dark red curtains, was stunning, but reflections in the glass of other onlookers taking pictures rendered some of my own pictures anachronistic. The most curious anachronism was the sight of Jeff Jerome seated next to the driver on the coach box and talking on his cell phone.

The Loch Raven Pipes and Drums led, the hearse followed, and with pedestrians streaming along both sidewalks, the procession headed east onto Lexington St. and then immediately right onto Poppleton (Fig 6.), parallel to Amity, but unlike it, providing access onto Baltimore St., four blocks to the south (see map, Fig. 7). The second cross street, Fayette St., continues eastward parallel to Baltimore St., directly to the intersection at which Poe is buried, but runs one way westward; necessitating that we turn left onto Baltimore St., the first through street to the south which crosses Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. eastward into downtown (Fig. 8). The procession continued with only one brief stop (for a cell phone call ... ) under a tree to the west of Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. En route I
had a pleasant talk with a gentleman in Dickensian period dress whose “day job”
was loading trucks at a meat-packing plant.

East of Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., the route crossed Greene St., which one
block to the north intersects with Fayette at the corner where Poe is buried; but
as, again, Greene runs one way north to south, we continued to Paca St., on the
east side of the churchyard, then turned left, and left again onto Fayette St., thus
approaching the entrance to the hall from the east. The steps up to the main
entrance of Westminster Hall swarmed with onlookers, photographers, and
security personnel, plus several women in period attire who, it turned out, were
generic “mourners” assigned to the first row of seats immediately before the
casket but not identifiable as (actresses playing) specific acquaintances of Poe.
As I could not get close enough to the coffin to see it, I positioned myself at the
top of the stairs so that when the pallbearers brought it through the front door, as
I assumed they had to, I would see it at close range. My heart sank when I saw
the coffin veer to the left, up a ramp towards a side entrance through which, I
thought, they intended to carry it. Suddenly, however, the pallbearers veered
back to their right, bringing the coffin to a stop right at the front entrance where I
had milliseconds to snap a picture at point-blank range before bodies interposed
themselves. The picture shows, behind the lead pallbearer, on the right side of
the coffin the actor playing Poe’s friend Nathaniel P. Willis seen looking askance
at the parallel figure on the left side, the stand-in for the infamous Rufus Griswold
(Fig. 9), whose defamatory obituary notice and forgery of letters supposedly
written by Poe blackened the writer’s reputation for most of a century, before
Arthur Hobson Quinn exposed the forgeries. Many were surprised that Rufus
Griswold had been chosen, not only as one of the pallbearers, but as one of the
speakers. The only explanation given was that Poe had important professional
dealings with him and, good or bad, he had been an inescapable fact of his
existence. Subsequent events proved the decision to include him to have been
quite calculated and extraordinarily clever.

Standing in line inside the front entrance to pick up my ticket, I heard the man in
front of me give his last name as Poe, who affirmed to the ladies beaming at him
reverently that indeed he was a descendant of the author (necessarily indirect, as
Poe had no children). Though reason dictated this to be no merit of his but an
accident of heredity, proximity to Poe blood gave me a momentary thrill, even so.
However, I was at the same time moved because I received my ticket, program,
and commemorative fan (Fig. 13), constituting proof that I, also, was worthy of
admission to this event. My seat was fairly good, on the left side at floor level
midway up. Next to me was a publisher of Dark Fantasy from Atlanta (his
business card referred to Unnameable Press) whom I at once engaged in
conversation. Poe creates an instant sense of community among his devotees:
among others as neurotically morbid as yourself, whatever personality disorders
have fueled your devotion to Poe are reason, for once, to feel included. A
reporter from the Baltimore Sun had been eavesdropping and asked my neighbor
if he would step out for a minute to be interviewed for his reaction to the event;
evidently he had struck him as charismatic and, perhaps, a good source of appropriately weird or eccentric comments. Indeed, the *Sun* article printed next day twice quoted “writer and actor Michael N. Langford, who arrived from his home in Atlanta in top hat and cravat” (Little, “Proper Reburial”), which fairly accurately describes the attire of my interesting interlocutor. His comments were well-informed but more-or-less mainstream for an educated admirer of Poe (an abridged version of the article in the *Hartford Courant*, also on October 12, contained one of the same two quotes; Little, “Master of the Macabre ‘Reburied’

The service was moderated by Jeff Jerome and John Astin, who had played Gomez in the Addams Family television comedy of the sixties, now a drama instructor at Johns Hopkins and fixture at local Poe events. The speakers, each wearing a black armband, filed up the staircase and formed a semicircle on stage, from left to right in the order in which they were to speak (Fig. 10): H.B. Latrobe, the Reverend Rufus Griswold, Sarah Helen Whitman, Nathaniel P. Willis, George Lippard, Marie Louise Shew, and Dr. John Moran to the left of center; Walt Whitman in the middle; and to the right, Charles Baudelaire, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H.P. Lovecraft, and Alfred Hitchcock, these four, like the preceding, having returned from the afterlife to pay homage to the poet, but not acquaintances, nor even contemporaries save Baudelaire, having been included instead because of Poe’s influence on their work. The final three, as John Astin explained during the service, had the distinction of actually playing themselves: Ellen Datlow, Mark Redfield, and Gris Grimly. This order was altered from that printed in the program (Fig. 12), for reasons which, in some cases, the speeches made clear.

The two services differed primarily in that different musicians or ensembles performed the interludes, except for soprano Paula McCabe who sang two solo numbers at each service. The moderators alternately occupied a lectern to the right of the stage, with the coffin at floor level between the stage and the “mourners.” I discovered only later, by way of photos from next day’s article in the *Baltimore Sun* sent me by a colleague (Little, “Proper Reburial”), that the ceremony was open-casket, which had escaped my notice for the duration of it, as at no point could I see Poe’s body: the mourners blocked my view of the coffin except for the foot of it. A photo I took when the casket was being borne out of the church seems to barely show the head seen through the burial shroud (Fig. 11), but I was granted no real opportunity to judge its likeness to that of the real Poe as I imagine him to look from iconic photographs.

The “body” was an effigy of Poe created by a makeup artist, Eric Supensky of EFX, using a living subject, actor Mark Redfield (identified as the model for it in the Sunday, October 4 *Baltimore Sun*; Kaltenbach), for the plaster cast or “death mask” which served as the foundation for a reshaped clay bust and then a final version in latex rubber. A blog article posted on October 22, 2009 on the Poe Bicentennial website described the process which generated the effigy, a hybrid
of plaster casting, sculpture, theatrical makeup, costuming, and mortuary science; a metaphor for the entire experience. Supensky was quoted as saying that Mark Redfield was chosen partially because he had played Poe and shared with him certain similar facial characteristics, but as he was one of the organizers of the event whom Supensky already knew well, one suspects that the main reasons were his availability, commitment to the project, continual close association with Poe-related events in Baltimore, and willingness to submit himself to the uncomfortable, slightly ghoulish process of supplying a living model for a death mask. I do not see any likeness between him and Poe, but his role in the process was owing, probably, to the fact that it required a living subject, as such, more than one who looked like Poe, as the clay model based on the plaster cast could be, and was, refashioned to increase the resemblance to him.³

H.B. Latrobe, the first speaker, was one of three judges in the Baltimore Saturday Visitor contest to which, in 1833, Poe submitted six tales. The writer won first place in the competition for prose with “M.S. Found in a Bottle” and second place in poetry for “The Coliseum,” runner-up status in the latter having been dictated, said Latrobe, by the fact that it would have looked suspicious for Poe to win both categories. But if the choice was made to avoid the appearance of impropriety, it is odd that the winner was the newspaper’s editor, John Hill Hewitt, who entered under a pseudonym, Henry Wilton; which subsequently precipitated a quarrel between Hewitt and Poe. In his eulogy, (the actor playing) Latrobe said he was struck that Poe came by his office, as well as the offices of the other judges, to thank him for the award, and commented that the writer was well-spoken and gentlemanly, his clothes somewhat the worse for wear but still neat and presentable. This characterization may have been drawn from an account Latrobe gave of this meeting in his address at the Poe Memorial Exercises in Baltimore in 1877, quoted by Quinn in his biography (203-4).

The audience, who knew their Poe, were intimately aware of Rufus Griswold’s attempts to destroy the writer’s reputation post-mortem, and hissed as he approached the podium. I allowed myself to say “boo” in an undertone (it was, after all, a funeral), but my publisher neighbor from Atlanta shouted it! However, what would have been the most boorish impropriety at a customary funeral could not be judged by the same standards here, since this was as much stagecraft as memorial service. Actors were used to create an “illusion” which was still a real funeral, the one Poe never had. Even the deceased was not playing himself, and neither were his real-life acquaintances, but everyone did their best to maintain the pretense to the contrary. The actor playing Griswold projected himself as insufferable to the extent possible, drawing in deep breaths and sneering with excessive drama as he pontificated. He did not refrain from issuing praise of Poe, but with so many snide qualifications and insinuations that it was fairly damning. At one point, George Lippard rose from his seat and approached the podium trembling with rage but was restrained by Sarah Helen Whitman and Nathaniel P. Willis. Finally, John Astin interrupted Griswold, asking if he was quite through, but when the latter kept speaking, Astin simply shut him up.
Sarah Helen Whitman was a reclusive poet from Providence with whom, in 1848, Poe conducted a turbulent courtship after the death of his wife Virginia. Though their engagement was broken off largely owing to the machinations of her mother and friends who disapproved of Poe, she cherished her association with the poet and, in 1860, in response to Griswold’s posthumous attacks, published a staunch defense of him, *Edgar Poe and His Critics* (Meyers 262). In her eulogy, she expressed gratitude that she had been permitted to speak after Griswold, and indeed she had come prepared with a letter from the editor George Graham who, anticipating that Griswold would savage Poe in his oration, had prepared a defense in advance (Poe had been an assistant editor for *Graham’s Magazine* in 1841-42). Her recitation of “Annabel Lee” seemed superfluous, as attendees probably knew the poem by heart or nearly so.

Poe worked for Nathaniel P. Willis, one of the editors of the New York *Evening Mirror*, in late 1844 and early 1845, and there “The Raven” first appeared, under the auspices of Willis. During his oration, (the actor playing) Willis spoke at length of his experiences working with Poe on the *Mirror*, the account of his personality and work habits generally confirming the impression conveyed by Latrobe. He commended the writer’s diligence, politeness, and conscientious attitude, remarking that negative traits ascribed to him were often the product of rumor rather than personal interactions which invariably belied the negative judgments.

Though quasi-responses to Griswold, the speeches by Sarah Helen Whitman and Nathaniel P. Willis still partook mostly of the character of prepared remarks. That of George Lippard, however, was scripted to come off as a spontaneous eruption of his indignation against Griswold, against whom he had been visibly fuming since the latter’s speech. The real-life Lippard, a reporter and novelist with whom Poe became acquainted when he worked in Philadelphia, admired the latter as “perhaps, the most original writer that ever existed in America” and disliked Griswold, to whom he referred as a “respectable jackal” (Silverman 211, 217). Lippard rescued Poe when the latter, passing through Philadelphia on his way to Richmond in 1849, suffered a breakdown and showed up on his doorstep destitute, having lost his valise; he helped raise money for him and saw him onto the train for Richmond (Silverman 418-419). The real-life prototype of this “character,” therefore, provided an appropriate model for the role of fanatical defender of the poet against the Griswold slander. At the podium, he frequently turned to glare angrily at Griswold, expressing ferocious indignation that anyone would savage a dead man in no position to defend himself. Towards the end of his oration, he gestured to John Astin that he needed water, which was puzzling as nothing seemed wrong with his voice. He took a cursory sip from the cup and continued. At the end of his speech, he turned to go back to his seat and suddenly flung the water into Griswold’s face! Clearly, this had been scripted beforehand to rectify the old injustice, disclosing why Griswold had been included among the invited speakers, but appeared to erupt in response to the latter’s remarks at the service.4
The memorable parts of the day’s performance were composed for the occasion rather than recapitulating well-known facts or episodes from Poe’s life. Thus, for me anyway, the speech by Marie Louise Shew left little impression, though the real-life person had been an angel of mercy to both Poe and Virginia, nursing them through various illnesses. All I remember about her remarks was first, she was careful to differentiate herself from her father, a bona fide physician who had simply given her medical training at home, and second, she told the story of how she had given Poe the idea for “The Bells,” a well-known episode familiar to the audience from biographies. Dr. John Moran was a peculiar choice for a funeral oration, as his connection to Poe was only as attending physician at his deathbed; he could have had nothing to contribute to a eulogy as such. The inclusion of him, therefore, may have been motivated by perennial speculation about the cause of Poe’s death, perhaps the most famous of unsolved literary mysteries. As is well known, on arrival in Baltimore, Poe vanished for about a week before being discovered outside a polling booth, delirious and not in his own clothes; though speculation was that he had gone on a bender, he could have been suffering from exposure or the effects of a brain lesion. This Moran seemed primarily concerned with dispelling rumors that he had had Poe flung into a filthy drunk tank; though admitting that the room had been used for this purpose, he reiterated that the writer had received the best possible care. The funeral seemed to serve him primarily as an occasion to cover his derriere. This was authentic only to the extent that the real Moran might have wanted to do that in some other context.

A second soprano solo by Paula McCabe constituted a musical intermission before the spoken program resumed with the most original and interesting oration of the day. Following the solo came an announcement that C. Auguste Dupin (the detective protagonist of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” and “The Purloined Letter”) was to deliver a speech on behalf of the writer’s characters. Unexpectedly, though, a maniacal voice coming out of nowhere, identifying it/himself as the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” announced that he had murdered Dupin and buried his body under the floorboards! (I never could quite identify where the voice was coming from, but thought I detected movement in the center of the upper back portion of the hall.) As the cackling demonic voice related, all of Poe’s characters had gotten together to elect a spokesman; everyone had been there, including both Wilsons. Montresor (of “The Cask of Amontillado”) had promised the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” his vote but apparently reneged because “you can never trust that man.” As a result, Dupin came in first and the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” second, so the latter bumped off his rival and took his place. The narrator was there to honor Poe as “the grand puppetmaster” for all his characters. But he had to go now because someone in the world was beginning to read “The Tell-Tale Heart”; he came back to life anytime anyone read the story!

This was the highlight of the ceremony, not only because of the clever inside jokes for Poe aficionados and refined plays on the “idea” of a character à la
Pirandello, but also the fact that a disembodied voice had stolen the show. The following speaker, Walt Whitman, was a letdown, though the costume was effective, making him immediately identifiable. I was puzzled at the decision to place him at center-stage, as it is difficult to think of a writer more unlike Poe, who had been only slightly acquainted with him and bore a relatively lukewarm attitude towards his writings. It seemed he was there simply because he was Whitman. The real-life prototype had met Poe because the latter published a poem of his in the *Broadway Journal* during the comparatively brief period when Poe was editor of it (Whitman 725-726). As he stated here, he did not particularly care for Poe’s works because he preferred literature that projected fresh air and sunshine; Poe’s works were, he said, technically brilliant but “light without heat.” Later, though, he came to appreciate them more, and found the circumstances of the poet’s life compelling. As a matter of historical fact, the real Whitman had attended the dedication of the new Poe tombstone in 1875 but not participated in the ceremony.

Charles Baudelaire was a fitting choice to deliver a eulogy as he did more than anyone to popularize Poe’s works during the latter’s lifetime, at least in France, where he came to be appreciated more quickly and to a far greater extent than in his own country. But this presentation was also a letdown, perhaps because the (affected?) French accent together with the acoustics of the hall and some problems with the microphone made him difficult to understand, or at least, to maintain interest in. The one thing that stuck in my memory was that he called the writer simply Edgar Poe because, he said, Poe did not need to inflate his dignity with a middle name. (Poe always signed his name Edgar A. Poe. Allan was not a middle name, but the family name of his foster father.)

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H.P. Lovecraft, and Alfred Hitchcock were present clearly because of the foundational influence of Poe on the works of all three. The creator of Sherlock Holmes gave a rousing tribute, declaring that every detective writer since Poe had been influenced by him, though Poe himself was influenced by nobody; in this genre, all roads lead back to Poe. The actor playing Lovecraft portrayed him as a slightly stooped, shuffling, fidgety and furiously introverted human being. He carried an enormous, ornate book to the podium, which, predictably, turned out to be the Necronomicon (a fictional grimoire or textbook of magic referred to in Lovecraft’s stories). At the podium, he fumbled with his glasses at length before situating them on his nose, and groped in his suit pockets for his folded-up speech which he smoothed out on top of the book. He began with a reading from the Necronomicon in the original language (Greek translated from Arabic?), right arm raised dramatically. After providing a translation, he cracked up the audience by stating that he hadn’t been sure he could pull that off. “Alfred Hitchcock” also played it partially for laughs. He came up to the podium wearing a black bowler, apparently to conceal that he was not bald though otherwise resembling the filmmaker, and turned to present himself in profile, provoking peals of laughter from the audience which was mostly old enough to remember the famous silhouette from the 1950’s
television series “Alfred Hitchcock Presents.” In another reference to the series, he again provoked laughter by drawling out “Good Evening” in classic Hitchcockian fashion, though going on to explain that he understood it was not actually evening!

The last three presenters also formed a distinct group as they are actually alive and played themselves. It had been a conscious decision on the part of the organizers to encompass the entire Poe legacy up to the present. A ceremony populated solely by Poe’s contemporaries would have come off as anachronistic play-acting, whereas the purpose was to pay tribute to the writer in a way proportionate to his importance, best measured by the influence he continues to exert. Accordingly, the fiction (?) was maintained that the deceased speakers had considered the occasion important enough to return from the grave for it.

The three speakers who had the distinction of “actually playing themselves” were Ellen Datlow, Mark Redfield, and Gris Grimly. Datlow was described in the Poe bicentennial blog (October 7, 2009) as an award-winning speculative fiction and horror editor/anthologist. Mark Redfield, the aforementioned actor, director, filmmaker, and artist who posed for the Poe death mask and had also staged a puppet presentation of “Hop-Frog” for the bicentennial birthday celebration of Poe in January, spoke about the influence of Roger Corman’s film adaptations which sparked his interest in the works of Poe (with which I could identify). Gris Grimly is an artist who has illustrated anthologies of Poe’s works, such as *Tales of Mystery and Madness* and *Tales of Death and Dementia*. The blog (September 30, 2009) described him as having made a guest appearance at the Children’s Bookstore in Baltimore to autograph copies of the latter, and quoted *School Library Journal* as having raved about the book, “Grimly’s deliciously malevolent illustrations are the perfect compliment [sic] to Poe’s tales.” I found it peculiar to see an illustrator of Poe’s tales characterized as a children’s artist, but Grimly was more entertaining than his two predecessors. He wore a curious suit with images of skeletons sewn on the lapels which I found somewhat affected. He noted that if he were to go on in his customary monotone, he would put everyone to sleep, so he would confine his remarks to stating that people should read Poe. He confessed that he did not read as a child, and if he picked up a book, the pictures supplied the only interest for him. In college, he developed a taste for reading, though never what was assigned for his courses. He commented that as you read Poe’s stories again and again, Poe got into your head, and you found yourself fighting crazy impulses to murder people who annoyed you, for instance, by axing them or pushing them off a bridge.

John Astin concluded the program by reciting “Eldorado,” the poem penned on one side of the souvenir fan (Fig. 13), and appropriate for this occasion, especially the end of it, as it is really about death. However, I was distressed that Astin hammed it up, thunderously declaiming it as might have been appropriate for an ode but was ill-suited for a meditative poem, the rich musicality of which is sufficient to require no added emphasis. As the audience filed out, two of the
pallbearers pushed Griswold back, refusing to allow him to help bear the coffin out of the church. A display prominently visible to audience members on the way out was a replica of Poe’s original tombstone created for this occasion, that original having been destroyed in a stonecutter’s yard when a train jumped the tracks and smashed into it. One wonders at the peculiar fortune suffered by Poe’s body which seems to have been so strangely active in the afterlife, as was true of many of his characters.

Notably, the annual visits of the famous “Poe Toaster” to the writer’s grave at midnight on the morning of his birthday ceased after this funeral service. The ritual of an unidentified gentleman leaving a partially consumed bottle of cognac and three red roses on the ledge of Poe’s tombstone had gone on for decades, so whatever unfinished business drove him to return year after year may now have been completed. In any case, I found the service at once wildly entertaining and painfully moving, and I am certain that Eddie was looking down on it and saying “Thank you.” There are, to be sure, things that I would have done differently had I organized the event, though I hesitate to critique a funeral; if I allow myself to second-guess, it is only to the extent that the event may be evaluated as a work of literary art, a scripted dramatic performance. Rather than Sarah Helen Whitman, I would have selected Fanny Osgood or Elmira Royster, the former perhaps Poe’s best female friend, with whom he conducted a famous platonic courtship in verse, and the latter his childhood sweetheart to whom he become affianced in the last year of his life. Among male friends of the poet, I half-expected Thomas Holly Chivers or James Russell Lowell, but could have done without Walt Whitman or John Moran. John P. Kennedy, another of the judges for the Baltimore Saturday Visiter contest, became an important patron of and friend to Poe as a result of it, and would have been a better choice than Latrobe, who had no dealings with Poe outside that context. It is difficult to quarrel with the selection of Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Conan Doyle, H.P. Lovecraft, and Alfred Hitchcock, as they were creative titans in their own right whose works were deeply rooted, in some cases, in genres Poe invented, such as science fiction and the detective story. In three of these cases, too, the performances by the actors were superb. The contemporary speakers were only average, though choice may have been motivated by availability. John Astin, best known for his role in “The Addams Family,” was appropriate for the Gothic associations that fact evokes, but lacking in gravitas for the same reason. But this was a Baltimore event drawing on local talent, and Astin frequently officiates at local Poe events. Other performers appear to have been local, such as Tony Tsendeas, who played George Lippard, but recited or dramatized Poe stories on other occasions for the Poe bicentennial celebration, and Mark Redfield (blog, January 19, February 9, March 2, March 10, September 2, September 25, 2009).
Works Cited

“All Night Vigil at the Poe Monument.” 10 October 2009.  


Datlow, Ellen. “The Funeral (that should have been) for Edgar Allan Poe.”  

[Jerome, Jeff.] “Secrets of the Poe House: Actual questions posed to the Curator from visitors to the Poe House and Museum.” [Literature distributed by museum.]


Online postings from the Poe Bicentennial blog (cited in-text by date; arranged here chronologically); 8 February 2010  


“Poe Bicentennial Birthday Celebration in Baltimore: Report on the Final
Weekend at Westminster Hall!”  9 February 2009.


“Poe Performances at the Baltimore Book Festival!”  2 September 2009.


“Poe’s Funeral: Speaker Update! Gris Grimly to Eulogize Edgar Allan Poe!”  30 September 2009.

“Speaker Update! Ellen Datlow to speak at Poe’s funeral!”  7 October 2009.


Users clicking the link www.poebicentennial.com are now redirected to the website www.poeforevermore.com, the site for a new periodical, Poe Forevermore. I cannot find any trace there of the original Poe Bicentennial website, the blog for which I accessed February 8, 2010. I used and have cited a hard copy of the blog I printed out on that date.

The map of the funeral procession, reproduced from the City of Baltimore website (copyright 2010), was designed by Walter Edward Leon of Baltimore city’s Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation, and is used here by permission of the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation, City of Baltimore.

1 Due to city budget cuts, the Poe house was scheduled to close on September 28, 2012 but reopen in 2013 under new management. In actuality, it reopened on Memorial Day 2014 under the auspices of Poe Baltimore, which, this year, is keeping the museum open every Saturday and Sunday from 11:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. between May 23 and December 27. See http://www.poeinbaltimore.org/.

2 In his recently published travelogue about Poe places in America, J.W. Ocker quotes Jeff Jerome as stating that he still has the Poe “corpse” at his house (201).

3 The text of the article up to this point, along with Figures 1-5 and 9, was printed in the Fall 2013 issue of Off-Center Magazine, a CCSU student periodical, as the first part of a two-part series, with the second part scheduled to appear in the
issue following. However, because *Off-Center* Magazine ceased publication with
the Fall 2013 issue, the second part did not appear. I have posted the entire
article here to make the promised continuation available to interested readers,
with minor editorial changes necessitated by the passage of time, the temporary
closure of the house and museum, and its reopening under a different structure
of governance.

4 Ocker (201) reports that Jeff Jerome “spontaneously” asked the actor who
played George Lippard to throw a cup of water in the face of Rufus Griswold
during his anti-Poe eulogy. But it could not have happened, first of all, when
Griswold was delivering his eulogy, as Lippard spoke after he did and requested
the water only towards the end of his own eulogy, and second of all, it was
clearly planned to the extent that Lippard, while he was speaking, asked for
water he clearly didn’t need.

5 She has posted her eulogy on Live Journal ([http://www.livejournal.com/](http://www.livejournal.com/)).

6 Out of concern for accuracy, I twice wrote to Jeff Jerome asking if a videotape,
audiotape, or transcript of the service was available, but received no answer. I
did not audiotape it myself or take notes, which would have been disrespectful at
a funeral. Therefore, I relied on notes I made upon returning home immediately
after the event, and on the Poe bicentennial website. The program stated that
video recording (presumably, by attendees) on any equipment was prohibited,
and if the organizers made one to preserve the event, to my knowledge it has not
surfaced.

[Photos on pp. 17-29. Except for the map, all photos are by the author. To see
additional photos, go to [http://www.ccsu.edu/page.cfm?p=11902](http://www.ccsu.edu/page.cfm?p=11902) and click the
link for Edgar Allan Poe bicentennial funeral, Baltimore 2009.]
Figure 1: Poe House, 203 N. Amity St., Baltimore, MD, in July 2009.
Figure 2: Poe tombstone, NW corner of Westminster Churchyard, at intersection of Greene and Fayette Streets.
Figure 3: hearse and horses prior to being harnessed, on W. Lexington.
Figure 4: Loch Raven Pipes and Drums rehearse.
Figure 5: honor guard places coffin in hearse.
Figure 6: on N. Poppleton St., going S.
**Figure 7:** Poe funeral route (courtesy Walter Edward Leon-CHAP-City of Baltimore).
Figure 8: on W. Baltimore St., before crossing MLK Jr. Blvd.
**Figure 9:** pall-bearers with coffin at entrance to Westminster Hall. On right: Nathaniel P. Willis. On left: Reverend Rufus Griswold.
Figure 10: orators on the stage. From L to R: H.B. Latrobe, Reverend Rufus Griswold, Sarah Helen Whitman, Nathaniel P. Willis, George Lippard, Marie Louise Shew, Dr. John Moran, Walt Whitman, Charles Baudelaire, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H.P. Lovecraft, Alfred Hitchcock, Ellen Datlow, Gris Grimly; on far R at lectern, Jeff Jerome. Not pictured: Mark Redfield.
Figure 11: the coffin is carried out. Poe’s head and face are barely visible through the shroud, between the last two pallbearers.
Order of Service

John Astin, presiding

Music Participants

Soprano Paula McCabe ***
Violinist Ivan Stefanovic *
Organist Monte Maxwell **
Loch Raven Pipes & Drum
Monumental Brass Quintet *
Baltimore City Men's Chorus **

Order of Speakers

Sarah Helen Whitman
The Rev. Rufus Griswold
Nathaniel P. Willis
George Lippard
Dr. John Moran
Marie Louise Shew

Walt Whitman
Charles Baudelaire
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
H. P. Lovecraft
Sir Arthur Hitchcock

Ellen Datlow
Gris Grimly
Mark Redfield
John Astin
Jeff Jerome

Flash photography is allowed while Poe's casket is being brought into the hall and when it is being escorted out of the hall. Non flash photography is permitted during the services. Video recording on any equipment is prohibited. Mute cell phones please. There will be no intermission.

At the request of the Poe family only immediate family and invited friends will be allowed at the burial. We ask that you extend every courtesy and privacy to the family at this difficult time.

We wish to thank AirTran Airlines, Harbor Magic, McCully Polyniak Funeral Home, Zeller Funeral Home, Visit Baltimore, Cedar Hill Florist, Redfield Arts, EFX (creator of Poe's corpse), John Astin, John Spitzer and all the volunteers that made this melancholy event possible.

*First Service Only
**Second Service Only

Figure 12: program (showing original order of speakers).
Eldorado

By Edgar A. Poe

Gaily bedight,
A gallant knight.
In sunshine and in shadow,
Had journeyed long,
Singing a song.
In search of Eldorado.

But he grew old —
This knight so bold —
And o'er his heart a shadow
Fell, as he found
No spot of ground
That looked like Eldorado.

And, as his strength
Failed him at length,
He met a pilgrim shadow —
“Shadow,” said he,
“Where can it be —
This land of Eldorado?”

“Over the Mountains
Of the Moon,
Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,”
The shade replied, —
“If you seek for Eldorado!”

Figure 13: commemorative fan.