The Seminar

George Egon Hatvary

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Abstract
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directions. She’d just have to be very careful to keep heading south once she reached the bottom. At least the overhangs would give some shade.

Kelley was glad of that shade as the afternoon wore on. She did find a small clump of prickly pear growing by what had once been a pond; the leaves gave a little moisture.

How could it be taking this long to get back? She knew she wasn’t moving very fast, but surely she wasn’t down to less than half of last night’s speed. She’d taken time to take pictures then.

Maybe it was at least cool over there where several mushrooms were still joined at the top. There was even some greenery showing between the stone columns.

And there was water. Kelley knelt beside it, scooped up a handful—and spat it out immediately. It was so alkaline that her tongue felt burned after even that brief contact. She lay down and wept, knowing she was losing water in those tears and not caring.

Then she heard it again, a clear ringing sound, softer than before but very close. The unicorn looked gravely back at her when she raised her head.

She stayed where she was, propped up on one elbow. Seeing it now when it was not enraged or frightened, she could tell that it was even more lovely than she’d known. The eyes were a clear blue-green.

The forehead above them was wide, tapering down to a muzzle more delicate than any Arabian’s. The hooves shone like a diamond-dust mirror; their edges gleamed like knives. And the spiraling horn gleamed and shimmered all along its length.


The unicorn advanced to the edge of the pool and dipped its horn into the water. It stayed there motionless for several long moments. Suddenly it raised its head and wheeled, with a scream that sounded like laughter, to disappear among the rocks.

The water tasted more pure than any Kelley had ever tasted in her life. She made herself drink slowly, feeling the water soaking in like life itself.

Days later, after a white-knuckled drive into Ft. Hinton and a dull drive home, Kelley met Ed in Carson Springs. Over pizza at The Squared Pi, he returned her photograph.

"It's very skillfully done," he said. "I just don't have much use for this sort of thing. One of the fantasy calendar publishers might. Did you ever manage to capture that illusion again?"

Kelley smiled. "Now, Ed, how can I capture an illusion?"

**THE SEMINAR**

_by George Egon Hatvary_

Perhaps the idea was on the foolishly sentimental side, but it did not seem so when it was first brought up. We were members of a small seminar in Poe, and when at the end of one of our sessions someone said that we ought to celebrate Poe’s coming birthday by having dinner in his honor, Professor Dixon’s reaction was favorable, and which one of us could have failed to appreciate the great scholar’s willingness to meet us socially? We promptly appointed Leon Jarvis, one of the first supporters of the idea, as a one-man committee to make the arrangements. When a week later he reported that he had reserved a banquet room at the Hotel Taylor we gave Jarvis—in reality, Professor Dixon—applause.

We were a congenial group. Possibly, we were excessively interested in biography at the expense of criticism, but this seemed unavoidable in light of Professor Dixon’s own work. His recent Life of Poe was a great event in Poe scholarship, superseding Quinn’s biography, which had reigned as the definitive work for nearly fifty years. Our topics reflected our inspiration. We were investigating such subjects as the stormy relationship between the young Poe and his foster father John Allan; Poe’s supposedly diabolic literary executor, Griswold; and Poe’s marriage to his child wife, Virginia.

Poe’s birthday happened to fall on a seminar night, and we arrived in class in a festive mood. Our dinner reservation was for eight o’clock so that we would have a somewhat shorter session than usual. We began with research reports. Someone had just enumerated instances of irrational behavior on Poe’s part, and Professor Dixon was in the process of explaining that Poe’s alcoholism was the allergic type—a chemical revolt of the body against the smallest intake of alcohol—when the stranger made his soft entrance into the room. We were all absorbed in the professor’s remarks and hardly paid attention to the opening and closing of the door. Students sometimes enter the wrong classroom. But on glancing up I noticed that someone was still standing at the door. The professor’s voice faltered, stopped, and by now we were staring mesmerized at the dark-clad
It took us some time to get over our first shock. But it seemed to be a friendly, rather than sinister, visit--appropriate to this day. There was a faint smile on the stranger's face, encouraging Professor Dixon, after his momentary perplexity, to say affably, "What an unexpected honor! Won't you please join us?"

We stood up. Two students moved apart so as to provide a place, but it was of course taken by Professor Dixon, who had hospitably relinquished his own seat at the head of the table to our distinguished and most unusual visitor.

As it happened, I was close enough to be able to observe him clearly. The shiny alpaca of his coat seemed gray rather than black, as if it were dusty or simply old. In places the material was wrinkled, and at the elbows almost threadbare. The collar under the black neckcloth was less than white, suggesting that it had lain for many years in some trunk; the edges were faintly yellow. But the hands were sensitive, with sparsely grown hair and long, thin fingers and carefully kept oval nails.

All this time a certain superstitious awe had prevented me from looking our visitor fully in the face. The class had once again become tense; finally the silence was broken by the professor's hesitating words, "Perhaps, sir, you would honor us with one of your poems." Amidst the ensuing shuffling of feet and squeaking of chairs, I lifted my eyes to that remarkably intense face dominated by two focal points--the almost black moustache and a pair of the most penetrating eyes I had ever seen. I took in the rest of the features--the high, curving forehead and delicate nose and under the thin, ever so slightly twisted mouth, the strong, cleanly shaven chin. But those twilight-gray eyes shining out of the pallor of the face drew my glance back to themselves and held me in their spell.

"What do you desire to hear?" our visitor asked in a deep, softly resonant Southern voice.

Silence. We looked at each other with astonishment that he was real enough to speak to us. Loon Jarvis proved to be the bravest among us, saying, although a little hoarsely, "Why, anything, sir.--whatever you choose to recite would be received with the greatest enjoyment and deepest gratitude."

"How handsomely put! Well, let us see--" His thoughtful expression, as he glanced at Stephanie Green, dissolved in a courtsly smile that astonished us. Men no longer smile like that at women. "Why don't we let the beautiful lady decide?"

Stephanie Green blushed. She was brilliant, aggressive, but not especially beautiful, and this was the first time I had ever seen her blush. There were smiles around the room, as if daring her to choose a love poem.

"How about 'A Dream Within a Dream'?"

Poe recited,

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Take this kiss upon the brow
And, in parting from you now,
Thus much let me avow--
You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream...
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There were no histrionic intonations, no gestures, only the gentle rise and fall of his deep voice made especially enchanting by those Southern vowels. Yet after he concluded,

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Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?
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he sat with heaving chest, as if the sedate recitation had cost him great anguish. The class was silent, reluctant to break the spell by applauding. But we did applaud, and then Professor Dixon said, "As you know, I hope, the poem you just heard is really a revision of 'Imitation,' which Mr. Poe wrote twenty-two years earlier--but so thorough a revision that there is not one line that corresponds between the two versions. It certainly shows the hard work Mr. Poe put into his poems--"

Poe seemed perplexed. "'Imitation'? I never wrote a poem called 'Imitation.'"

Professor Dixon let the contradiction go, evoking our admiration for his tact. He went on, "But then Mr. Poe would be the first to insist on a methodical way of writing a poem: I make reference to his 'Philosophy of Composition.' Except, sir--" his tone was now infused by an almost jocose familiarity--"'in that essay you tell us everything about the composition of your 'Raven' except how long it took you to write it."

Poe had sat with bowed head, in an attitude of modesty, but now he looked up to meet the professor's eyes. He gave a stroke to his moustache with a tremulous little finger. "I don't remember," he said.

"To be sure," Professor Dixon said patiently, "the question is relative; ideas, fragments may float in the mind sometimes for years before they are fixed in the conscious process of composition." He looked at us almost as if apologizing for Poe's inability or unwillingness to answer.

But we sat in a state of uneasiness. I wondered how long Professor Dixon would be able to keep up his courteous tone. A clash seemed to be inevitable, for Dixon was known for his relentless pursuit of truth. All eyes were on him as he continued: "Then, too, with Mr. Poe's statements about his own works there is always the problem of--well--let me ask you, sir, bluntly, are you familiar with my recent book about you?"

Dixon's book was considered a masterpiece of objectivity, an astonishing piece of helmmsmanship among the whirlpools of Poe scholarship.

The Mythic Circle #14, pg. 38
Poe shook his head.

"As the class knows, I tried in that work to show that one of the difficulties in studying Mr. Poe is the mass of contradictory evidence, resulting very often from the pleasure Mr. Poe took, when interviewed by one of his contemporaries, in—well—actually altering some of the facts of his life." The professor took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead and waited.

We sat in absolute silence. The painful but necessary charge was made. It was up to Poe to make an explanation—something for which the world had waited for over a hundred and forty years.

But Poe said nothing.

The professor went on, looking at the class, "For example, did not Mr. Poe tell his literary executor, Griswold, that he had been born in 1811, whereas the correct date is 1809? Did not Mr. Poe state subsequently that he had been abroad to fight, as did Byron, for Greek independence, whereas he had been to Europe only as a child? Did not Mr. Poe, while taking Longfellow to task for supposedly plagiarizing, plagiarize himself, systematically, from a little-known contemporary who called himself Landor?"

Poe sat in silence, his fine brow distorted by a frown, his long, thin fingers drumming on the polished table. Slowly he lifted his head and looked around the room. "Perhaps I should not have come," he said. He did not seem to understand that notwithstanding our admiration and sympathy for him, it was our duty as scholars to pursue the truth.

"Such deviations from either truth or consistency," the professor went on, not unkindly, "may have been the product of those periods of irrationality we have spoken of. As I suggested, Mr. Poe's particular affliction was an allergic type. There is evidence that on just one glass of wine he could lose complete control of himself. That is not an exaggeration—is it, Mr. Poe?"

"My habits," Poe replied, "were rigorously abstemious. I rose early, ate moderately, drank nothing but water."

We exchanged looks of astonishment at this barefaced lie. For the first time since our association with Professor Dixon we saw his gentle face invaded by anger. His small white hands were flexing the edges of a batch of index cards.

"Mr. Poe, do you recognize the following words: 'Sometimes I took a glass of wine, became excited, went among friends...?"

Poe shook his head.

"They are your own words. They appear in one of your published letters."

"That letter is a forgery."

Whispers among us became a general murmur. Professor Dixon motioned us to silence.

"Mr. Poe's alcoholism is sufficiently established," he went on sternly yet with superb restraint. "More perplexing is his use of drugs. We know he took opium in its various forms, but in what doses and how frequently and to what extent his creative life depended on drugs remain open questions. Were drugs—was alcohol, for that matter—a significant factor in his numerous quarrels?" He stopped abruptly because Poe had looked up as if about to speak. Poe cleared his throat and his lips began to move. His eyes burned with fierce intensity as he said, "I used no drugs whatever."

A member of our seminar lost control. He jumped to his feet and shouted, "It's a lie! In another one of your published letters you refer to buying laudanum."

Immediately he sat down—doubtless as embarrassed as we all were. The room relapsed into painful silence.

We expected Poe to call that letter a forgery too, but his face was impassive—as if he didn't see us, as if we didn't exist.

We refused to be disheartened. When Stephanie Green raised her hand we pinned our hopes on her. A long time seemed to have lapsed since Poe's recital of "A Dream Within a Dream" at her request, but perhaps she, being a woman, might be able to get through to him and convince him that we were not against him. We were not such scholars as he might have known in his own time, who could not distinguish between literary and moral judgments. We were modern. We were objective, but also understanding. We were interested in the facts of his life but would never condemn him. He too seemed ready for some form of conciliation. As he turned his face to her there appeared a touch of that former courtly smile around his lips.

But she was first a scholar, unwilling to compromise. "Virginia Poe brings us to another important biographical area," she said matter-of-factly, addressing herself to Professor Dixon. "When one considers a young man of twenty-seven marrying his first cousin before her fourteenth year, one wonders—"

"These are family matters, madam!" Poe said sharply, cuttingly, grasping the edge of the table, his mouth a twisted line.

Stephanie Green ignored his protest and kept her eyes on the professor. "Virginia's mother, Mrs. Clemm, states that Mr. Poe 'did not love his cousin, except as a dear cousin, when he married her,' but she also states that 'while she lived he devoted himself to her with all the ardor of a lover.' Now there are still those who speak of Mr. Poe's impotence, and nothing short of an inquiry into the exact nature of his sexuality—"

She was cut short by a crash, which was Poe's overturned chair. He was standing, his whole thin, nervous frame quivering. "The agonizing indecency—" he cried, struggling for breath, his face twitching, his intense eyes shifting wildly. "Is this the hellish state into which woman has let her curiosity?—" He stopped abruptly. "How dare you speak of my wife, madam? How dare you peer at our love through your own gross sensuality?" His hand ran across the pronounced ridge
of his brow and his voice wavered. "That winter evening on Coates Street when she-" He stared blankly ahead, his eyelids hanging half over his eyes. "She was playing the harp and singing, then suddenly—she reached for her throat and coughed. Blood was running down her gown. I carried her upstairs. Then in a state of near-madness I ran out in search of Dr. Mitchel—" He stopped abruptly and clutched his heart. His face was white and he broke out in a sweat.

The room was silent. That painful incident was well known to us all and we genuinely sympathized. At the same time we were confronted with a mind hopelessly behind the times; we were weary of Poe; the miracle of his presence among us now seemed a banal occurrence.

We didn't want him at our dinner—this seemed understood. Yet we were uneasy about crudely ditching him—pretending that we would be dispersing after class. I daresay we all felt a little guilty.

It was time to go. Professor Dixon glanced at his watch and closed the notebook before him.

"I'd like to make a suggestion," Leon Jarvis said suddenly. "This is Mr. Poe's birthday, I propose we take up a collection. We all know he is poor—"

We applauded our clever classmate, now for the second time, and we reached for our wallets. I am sure I was not the only one thinking of those pathetic requests for loans, advances, money in whatever form, that Poe made of his friends, employers, and, sadly, even of his enemies, throughout his career.

I saw some five, ten, even twenty-dollar bills as Jarvis counted the money. We were all absorbed in our generous donations—until a gasp from one of us made everyone look at Poe. He had begun to fade. The contours of his face were blurring, the expression around his eyes and mouth was uncertain. It was as if a fog had descended between us, or cataract had formed over our eyes. Only his voice came distinctly still, in a mellifluous almost chanting drawl.

"Lie—truth—they all become one in the dream. You do not understand the dream. You do not understand that you too are dreamed up. I took laudanum yet I never took laudanum. Oh but you will never understand. You think you can analyze the love I bore my Virginia but you can only make paltry calculations. Those who read my works will know what I mean. You are not imaginative, you are not poets. You are dreamed up but you do not dream. You cling to your foolish consistency. You grovel in the dust, you blaspheme in the dust."

He was no longer in the room. I was thinking desperately of what Professor Dixon once said: "Perhaps we scholars lack the poet's divine fire, but ours is the equally grave, if humbler and less rewarded, responsibility to know, to judge, to exile, or preserve." That speech now sounded shabby and pathetic in my mind.

Jarvis spread out the bills on the table and we took back our contributions. It was as if Poe were returning our money, in spite of his dire poverty, to shame us. There seemed to be a single feeling reigning in the room: our consciousness of our intellectual pomposity and our presumption. We had nothing to celebrate. Finally Jarvis offered to call the Hotel Taylor and cancel our reservation.

Poe's appearance had a blasting effect on our further efforts to study him. Soon after, Professor Dixon died; Stephanie Green got married and left academia; Jarvis went into banking. Those of us who clung to scholarship fled into other areas of specialization.

"Naughty or Nice"
by E.D. Schafer

"Charles Michael Dare put the cat down, and I mean do it now!" Pesker-cat watched the kitty-litter gray carpet rush toward his face. Chuckie Dare shrugged his shoulders. "Gee, Mom, I thought cats were always suppose to land on their feet."

"Charles, can't you just be good for a little while? I know you're bored during your Christmas vacation, but Mommy has got a lot of work to do."

Chuckie smirked and ran his index finger through the gingerbread cookie dough his mother had just mixed. "Nope." Pesker, recovering from his fall, groomed himself while he watched Chuckie's mother shape gingerbread animals, stars and Santas.

Chuckie sucked the dough off his finger. "That's a stupid cat you and Dad brought home. I don't know why you ever picked him up."

"It was sleetin g that night, Charles, we've already told you. Pesker would have frozen if we had left him on that highway."

"Stupid cat." Charles picked up the hose attachment by the sink, pointing it at Pesker.

"Charles, I'm warning you," Margaret Dare said as sternly as she felt was possible.