In the early morning of September 27, a Thursday, Poe began the first leg of his return to the North, setting out from Richmond for Baltimore on the 4 A.M. steamer,¹ with a trunk containing some clothing, books, and manuscripts.

No reliable evidence exists about what happened to or within Poe between that time and October 3, a week later, when a printer named Joseph Walker saw him at Gunner’s Hall, a Baltimore tavern, strangely dressed and semiconscious.²

It was Election Day for members of Congress, and like other local watering holes² the tavern served as a polling place. Poe seemed to Walker “rather the worse for wear” and “in great distress.” Apparently flooded with drink, he may also have been ill from exposure. Winds and soaking rains the day before had sent Baltimoreans prematurely hunting up overcoats and seeking charcoal fires for warmth. . . . Poe managed to tell Walker that he knew Joseph Evans Snodgrass, the Baltimore editor and physician with whom he had often corresponded while living in Philadelphia. As it happened, Walker had worked as a typesetter

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¹. **steamer** (STEE MUIHR): steamship, or ship driven by steam power.
². **watering holes**: informal for “bars; taverns.”
for Snodgrass's *Saturday Visitor*. He sent Snodgrass a dire note, warning that Poe needed “immediate assistance.”

When Snodgrass arrived at Gunner’s Hall, he found Poe sitting in an armchair, surrounded by onlookers. Poe had a look of “vacant stupidity.” He wore neither vest nor tie, his dingy trousers fit badly, his shirt was crumpled, his cheap hat soiled. Snodgrass thought he must be wearing castoff clothing, having been robbed or cheated of his own. He ordered a room for Poe at the tavern, where he might stay comfortably until his relatives in Baltimore could be notified. Just then, however, one of them arrived—Henry Herring, Poe’s uncle by marriage, who somehow had also learned of his condition. A lumber dealer now nearly sixty years old, he had wed Muddy’s sister, and spent time with Poe during his early days in Baltimore and later when both families lived in Philadelphia. But he refused now to take over his care, saying that on former occasions, when drunk, Poe had been abusive and ungrateful. Instead, he suggested sending Poe to a hospital. A carriage was called for. Poe had to be carried into it, Snodgrass said—insensible, muttering.

Through the chilly wet streets Poe was driven to the hospital of Washington Medical College, set on the highest ground of Baltimore. An imposing five-story building with vaulted gothic windows, it afforded both public wards and private rooms, advertised as being spacious, well ventilated, and directed by an experienced medical staff. Admitted at five in the afternoon, Poe was given a private room, reportedly in a section reserved for cases involving drunkenness. He was attended by the resident physician, Dr. John J. Moran, who apparently had living quarters in the hospital together with his wife. Moran had received his medical degree from the University of Maryland four years earlier and was now only about twenty-six years old. But he knew the identity of his patient—a “great man,” he wrote of Poe, to whose “rarely gifted mind are we indebted for many of the brightest thoughts that adorn our literature.” He as

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3. **Muddy’s**: Muddy was Poe’s nickname for Maria Clemm, his aunt and mother-in-law. Poe had married his cousin, Virginia Clemm.
well as the medical students, nurses, and other physicians—all considered Poe, he said, “an object of unusual regard.”

According to Moran and his wife, Poe reached the hospital in a stupor, unaware of who or what had brought him there. He remained thus “unconscious” until three o’clock the next morning, when he developed a tremor of the limbs and what Moran called “a busy, but not violent or active delirium.” His face was pale and he was drenched in sweat. He talked constantly, Moran said, addressing “spectral” and imaginary objects on the walls.” Apparently during Poe’s delirium, his cousin Neilson Poe came to the hospital, having been contacted by Dr. Moran. A lawyer and journalist involved in Whig politics, Neilson was just Poe’s age. In happier circumstances Poe would not have welcomed the visit. Not only had Neilson offered Virginia and Muddy a home apart from him; his cousin also, he believed, envied his literary reputation. Years before he had remarked that he considered “the little dog,” as he called Neilson, the “bitterest enemy I have in the world.” The physicians anyway thought it inadvisable for Neilson to see Poe at the moment, when “very excitable.” Neilson sent some changes of linen and called again the next day, to find Poe’s condition improved. 

Poe being quieted, Moran began questioning him about his family and about where he lived, but found his answers mostly incoherent. Poe did not know what had become of his trunk or when he had left Richmond, but said he had a wife there, as Moran soon learned was untrue. He said that his “degradation,” as Moran characterized it, made him feel like sinking into the ground. Trying to rouse Poe’s spirits, Moran told him he wished to contribute in every way to his comfort, and hoped Poe would soon be enjoying the company of his friends. . . .

4. **stupor** (STOO PUHR): dull, half-conscious state.
5. **tremor** (TREHM UHR): involuntary trembling, especially from a physical illness.
6. **delirium** (DIH LIHR EE UHM): irrational, raving behavior, often caused by high fever.
7. **spectral** (SPEHK TRUHL): ghostly; unreal.
8. **Virginia**: Poe’s wife, Virginia Clemm. She died of tuberculosis in 1847.
Then Poe seemed to doze, and Moran left him briefly. On returning he found Poe violently delirious, resisting the efforts of two nurses to keep him in bed. From Moran’s description, Poe seems to have raved a full day or more, through Saturday evening, October 6, when he began repeatedly calling out someone’s name. It may have been that of a Baltimore family named Reynolds or, more likely, the name of his uncle-in-law Henry Herring. Moran later said that he sent for the Herring family, but that only one of Herring’s two daughters came to the hospital. Poe continued deliriously calling the name until three o’clock on Sunday morning. Then his condition changed. Feeble from his exertions he seemed to rest a short time and then, Moran reported, “quietly moving his head he said ‘Lord help my poor Soul’ and expired!”

The cause of Poe’s death remains in doubt. Moran’s account of his profuse perspiration, trembling, and hallucinations indicates delirium tremens, mania à potu. Many others who had known Poe, including the professionally trained Dr. Snodgrass, also attributed his death to a lethal amount of alcohol. Moran later vigorously disputed this explanation, however, and some Baltimore newspapers gave the cause of death as “congestion of the brain” or “cerebral inflammation.” Although the terms were sometimes used euphemistically in public announcements of deaths from disgraceful causes, such as alcoholism, they may in this case have come from the hospital staff itself. According to Moran, one of its senior physicians diagnosed Poe’s condition as encephalitis, a brain inflammation, brought on by “exposure.” This explanation is consistent with the prematurely wintry weather at the time, with Snodgrass’s account of Poe’s partly clad condition, and with Elmira Shelton’s recollection that on

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9. delirium tremens, mania à potu: “Delirium tremens” refers to an alcoholic state in which the victim behaves irrationally and sometimes violently, hallucinates (sees imaginary things), and trembles. Mania à potu is a Latin phrase, meaning “madness from drinking.”

10. “congestion of the brain” or “cerebral inflammation”: These are terms for conditions of the brain caused by injury or infection.

11. euphemistically (YOO FUH MIHS TUH KLEE): in a manner meant to hide or substitute for something unpleasant or offensive.
leaving Richmond Poe already had a fever. Both explanations may have been correct: Poe may have become too drunk to care about protecting himself against the wind and rain.
Edgar Allan Poe did not die drunk in a gutter in Baltimore but rather had rabies, a new study suggests.

The researcher, Dr. R. Michael Benitez, a cardiologist, who practices a block from Poe’s grave, says it is true that the writer was seen in a bar on Lombard Street in October 1849, delirious and possibly wearing somebody else’s soiled clothes.

But Poe was not drunk, said Dr. Benitez, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Maryland Medical Center. “I think Poe is much maligned in that respect,” he added.

The writer entered Washington College Hospital comatose, Dr. Benitez said, but by the next day was perspiring heavily, hallucinating, and shouting at imaginary companions. The next day, he seemed better but could not remember falling ill.

1. cardiologist (KAHR DEE AH LUH JHST): doctor who specializes in diseases of the heart.
2. maligned (MUH LYND): falsely accused of bad conduct; slandered.
3. comatose (KAH MUH TOHS): deeply unconscious and unable to be awakened.

“Poe’s Death Is Rewritten as Case of Rabies, Not Telltale Alcohol” from The New York Times, September 15, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by The Associated Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the copyright holder. No alterations of any type may be made to this selection without the explicit permission of the copyright holder.
On his fourth day at the hospital, Poe again grew confused and belligerent, then quieted down and died.

That is a classic case of rabies, the doctor said. His study is in the September issue of The Maryland Medical Journal.

In the brief period when he was calm and awake, Poe refused alcohol and could drink water only with great difficulty. Rabies victims frequently exhibit hydrophobia, or fear of water, because it is painful to swallow.

There is no evidence that a rabid animal had bitten Poe. About one fourth of rabies victims reportedly cannot remember being bitten. After an infection, the symptoms can take up to a year to appear. But when the symptoms do appear, the disease is a swift and brutal killer. Most patients die in a few days.

Poe “had all the features of encephalitic rabies,” said Dr. Henry Wilde, who frequently treats rabies at Chulalongkorn University Hospital in Bangkok, Thailand.

Although it has been well established that Poe died in the hospital, legend has it that he succumbed in the gutter, a victim of his debauched ways.

The legend may have been fostered by his doctor, who in later years became a temperance advocate and changed the details to make an object lesson of Poe’s death.

The curator of the Edgar Allan Poe House and Museum in Baltimore, Jeff Jerome, said that he had heard dozens of tales but that “almost everyone who has come forth with a theory has offered no proof.”

Some versions have Poe unconscious under the steps of the Baltimore Museum before being taken to the hospital. Other accounts place him on planks between two barrels outside a tavern on Lombard Street. In most versions, Poe is wearing someone else’s clothes, having been robbed of his suit.

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4. belligerent (BUH LIHJ UHR UHNT): angry and aggressive or ready to start a fight.
5. debauched (DIH BAWCHT): characterized by extreme indulgence in pleasures.
6. temperance advocate: someone who believes that people should not drink alcohol.
Poe almost surely did not die of alcohol poisoning or withdrawal, Mr. Jerome said. The writer was so sensitive to alcohol that a glass of wine would make him violently ill for days. Poe may have had problems with alcohol as a younger man, Mr. Jerome said, but by the time he died at forty he almost always avoided it. A

Dr. Benitez worked on Poe’s case as part of a clinical pathologic conference. Doctors are presented with a hypothetical patient and a description of the symptoms and are asked to render a diagnosis.

Dr. Benitez said that at first he did not know that he had been assigned Poe, because his patient was described only as “E. P., a writer from Richmond.” But by the time he was scheduled to present his findings a few weeks later, he had figured out the mystery. “There was a conspicuous lack in this report of things like CT scans and MRI’s,”8 the doctor said. B “I started to say to myself, ‘This doesn’t look like it’s from the 1990s.’ Then it dawned on me that E. P. was Edgar Poe.”

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7. hypothetical (HY Puh THEHT uh KUHL): theoretical; not actual.
8. CT scans and MRI’s: medical tests that use modern technology. Both tests produce an image of a cross-section of soft tissue such as the brain.
To the Editor:

Dr. R. Michael Benitez, an assistant professor of medicine at Maryland University Medical Center, is wrong to ascribe\(^1\) the death of Edgar Allan Poe to rabies through animal infection rather than to the traditionally maintained cause of alcoholism (news article, September 15).\(^{\text{C}}\)

Poe was found outside a Baltimore saloon in an alcoholic stupor on October 3, 1849, and died four days later. Dr. John J. Moran’s account of his final days is given in a letter to Poe’s aunt and mother-in-law, Maria Clemm, a New York Herald article in 1875, and a book by Moran in 1885. Supplementary accounts of Poe’s alcoholic condition came from Joseph Walker, a Baltimore printer who first found him; Dr. Joseph Snodgrass, an editor well known to Poe; and two of Poe’s relatives. None of these confirm Dr. Benitez’s statement that “Poe was not drunk.” Evidence of Poe’s chronic binges is strewn through his letters, in

\(^{1.}\) ascribe (uh SKRYB): assign or attribute something to a cause.
periodic admissions of “recoveries” and promises to his wife, Virginia, and her mother to “reform.”

Dr. Benitez admits the primary weakness of his theory—lack of evidence of a bite or scratch. In those days, rabies was well known as to causes and symptoms, including itching and other sensations that could affect an entire limb or side of the body. How could Moran and his staff ignore such symptoms in a patient?

And what of Poe’s cat, dearly loved but left behind in the Bronx over three months earlier? Guiltless was the pet Caterina, who, uninfected and showing no sign of rabies, died of starvation when deserted by Clemm after Poe’s death.

In short, there is no need to whitewash the self-destructive behavior of this literary genius and major American poet, critic, and teller of tales.

Burton R. Pollin
Robert E. Benedetto
Bronxville, New York
September 20, 1996

The writers are, respectively, professor emeritus of English, City University of New York, and an associate film professor at the University of South Carolina.

2. whitewash (HWYT WAHSH): cover up the faults or defects of something; give a favorable appearance to something.