

1-1-1991

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#### Recommended Citation

Lavin, Audrey (1991) "A Birder's Re-reading of Poe's "Romance"," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 9 , Article 18.

Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new/vol9/iss1/18](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol9/iss1/18)

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## A BIRDER'S RE-READING OF POE'S "ROMANCE"

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Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Romance" (intermediate version 1831; final, 1845) turns on a comparison of two bird symbols—the paroquet and the condor—which reflect a division in the narrator's life. Because the meaning of these two avian symbols has become canonized in the United States, students often find in the poem a paean to exotic Romance. However, if we restore these birds to their nineteenth-century American context, "the wild wood" (l. 9), we can come closer to the interpretation Poe probably intended, and re-read his poem to find Romance rooted in the quotidian.

To do so, we must look beyond Mabbott's commonly accepted explanation of the two bird symbols. In a note to *Poems, No 6*, he explains that Poe connects the paroquet "with the carved and painted figure of a bird, in Scotland locally called a papingo, hung from a pole outside a church tower to be shot at by archers." He adds:

the custom was kept up from the fifteenth century until 1686 at Kilwinning Abbey at Irvine, Ayrshire, where Poe stayed for a time as a boy. It is clearly referred to in his story, "The Bargain Lost," published in 1832, where it is said of a character wearing brightly colored garments: 'The paroquet, upon a certain cathedral, resembled nothing so much as Pedro.' The passage is not included in the several later versions of the story called "Bon-Bon."<sup>1</sup>

Mabbott also identifies Poe's contrasting avian symbol, the condor, as an ornithological reality, but ignores its presence in North America. He says simply, "Condors, the largest bird of prey, are noted for voracity; Poe refers to them also in 'The Conqueror Worm'" (1: 127). Other explanations that complement Mabbott's also see the paroquet as foreign, and emphasize it as a conceptualization of distant romance.

But was this Ayrshire paroquet the sole source for Poe's symbol? Certainly it was not the most immediate. We must consider that Poe's choice of symbols was also influenced by the time and place in which he lived and the books he reviewed. In doing so, we continue to agree with Mabbott that the poem "is a declaration of the poet's dedication to Romance, in the voice of Nature" (1: 127), but we find that Romance is to be found closer at hand, in a more accessible Nature.

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Poe lived during a time of intense interest in the work of the renowned ornithologists Alexander Wilson (1766-1813) and John James Audubon (1785-1851), whose publications and debates were part of a broader reckoning and cataloging of nature's unexplored frontiers that stirred contemporaneous intellectual and literary life.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Poe was open to the stimulation of these new American discoveries and explorations because Emerson and others repeatedly exhorted the American artist to be concerned with American subjects. For example, in 1825, prominent classicist Richard Ray directed the American Academy of Fine Arts in New York: "the Genius of your country points you to its stupendous cataracts, its highlands...place on the canvas the lovely landscape and adorn our houses with American prospects and American skies" (Merritt, 11).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Poe was fascinated with science and with the physical world around him, as is evident in books he owned, discussed, and reviewed for publication. These books, which include *Animal and Vegetable Physiology*, *The Rambler in North America*, and *Discourse on the Objects, Pleasures, and Advantages of Science*,<sup>4</sup> point to Poe as an amateur naturalist with a scientific bent.

Most important for this birder's re-reading of "Romance" are the facts that the California condor (plate 2) was a known American bird and that the Carolina parakeet (plate 1)<sup>5</sup> was commonly viewed during Poe's lifetime.

Though the Carolina parakeet has been extinct since 1913, dense flocks of these small, raucous, fast-flying birds inhabited the Atlantic coastal plains of the United States in the nineteenth century, from Florida through Virginia, giving Poe ample opportunity to sight them. Their range and frequency indicate that Poe could well mean what he clearly says, the "painted parakeet hath been—a most familiar bird—" (ll. 5-6). With its large, white beak, the Carolina parakeet was a highly "painted" bird whose orange and blue colors bled off into shades of green and yellow. Audubon first painted and described this *psittacid* in his 1827 (U.S., 1839) landmark work, *The Birds of America* (plate 1).

The California Condor has a nine- to ten-foot wing span; it is an immense vulture that supports Poe's metaphor of the ominous "Condor years" (l. 11). Audubon's watercolor shows this *cathartid* as an ugly, eagle-like bird with a small naked head suitable for entering carrion (plate 2). During Poe's lifetime the condor's eating habits were looked upon with disgust. As late as 1894, *The Encyclopedia Britannica* called the condor's characteristic feeding on carcasses an "obscene habit." In

"Romance" the negative figure of the carrion-eating condor marks a tumultuous period in the narrator's life, the dark and thunderous years.<sup>6</sup> The narrator says (ll. 11-15) that the tumultuous, ugly, eternal activities of these recent condor years have kept him so occupied that he has no time for the romance of younger days symbolized by the paroquet, the gentler bird of his innocence. He bemoans his present loss of time for what are now "forbidden things" (l. 10): romance and poetry.

This bird symbolism penetrates Poe's poem too deeply for our sole concern to be solely with the wooden archer's mark. Poe describes Romance as a living bird. It "nods and sings" (l. 1); the reader can almost see "the drowsy head" tucked under the "folded wing" (l. 2). Its distanced reflection in the "shadowy lake" (l. 4) is not that of a still statue of a bird atop a steeple, but that of a living bird that has come to light or fluttered on a branch "among the green leaves," (l. 3) causing those leaves to "shake" (l. 3) a bit. Alluding to the belief that all members of the parrot family can be taught to talk, Poe uses the paroquet to represent Romance as the teacher. Romance has taught the youthful narrator his alphabet<sup>7</sup>, the positive and simple basics of life, or, to expand the conflict for the author, the basics also of writing, or self-expression which have been displaced by the concerns of his mature, condor years.

Thus, if we enter the text of "Romance" through its nineteenth-century ornithological context, we can see Poe's experiments with an American iconography and hear his American voice where "things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote."<sup>8</sup> More, by recognizing the condor and the paroquet as real American birds, instead of one actual bird and one Scotch wooden target, we grant a deeper parallelism to the multiple contrasts Poe establishes in "Romance": small vs. large, delicate vs. powerful, beautiful vs. ugly, colorful vs. black, gentle vs. fierce, good vs. evil, teacher vs. competitor, and east vs. west. This structuring of opposition in nature that metaphorically reflects contrasts in the narrator can be seen also as Poe's tacit riposte to contemporaneous landscape painters and transcendentalists who saw Nature as the repository of only the sublime.

Recognition that Poe's use of avian symbols could be based in the physical world suggests that beautiful and delicate Romance is not merely an exotic state of being or a foreign mark at which to aim, but can also be taught to us by "familiar" (l. 6) objects in our natural environment; Romance is within reach.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thomas O. Mabbott, ed. *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 1: 127. A variation of this explanation appears in Mabbott, ed. *Selected Poetry and Prose of Edgar Allan Poe*. (New York, 1951), p. 407.

However, in "The Bargain Lost," *Philadelphia Saturday Courier*, 1 Dec. 1832, p. 1, the parouquet metaphor refers to clothing style and coloration. Neither Pedro nor his fanciful clothes can be construed as a target at which to aim—quite the contrary. In the later version of "Bon-Bon," "Pedro" becomes "Pierre" and the parouquet becomes a bird of paradise. Poe's description of the still too gaudily dressed protagonist then reads, "It was difficult to say whether Pierre Bon Bon was indeed a bird of Paradise or the rather, a very Paradise of perfection" (Mabbott, 2:100).

<sup>2</sup>For example, from 1814 to 1831 a continuous and raucously public debate took place concerning the relationship between Wilson and Audubon. Evidence discussed centered in part on Wilson's 23 March 1819, diary entry regarding a parouquet. Robert Henry Welker, *Birds and Men*. (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 48-53.

<sup>3</sup>This selection is part of a longer passage quoted by Howard S. Merritt, ed. *Thomas Cole 1801-1848*. (Rochester, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>Burton R. Pollin, *Dictionary of Names and Dates in Poe's Collected Works*. (New York, 1968). In addition, Pollin lists the following (103-181):

*America and the American People*. Raumer. (Reviewed by Poe)

*American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge for the year 1837*. (R)

*Baltimore Museum (for American Museum of Science, Literature, and the Arts)*. (Discussed by Poe)

*Christian Florist: Containing the English and Botanical Names of Different Plants*. (R)

*Life on the Lakes: Being Talks and Sketches Collected During a Trip to the Pictured Rocks of Lake Superior*. Gilman. (R)

*New and Comprehensive Gazeteer of Virginia, and the District of Columbia*. J. Martin. (R)

*Pleasant Peregrination through the Prettiest Parts of Pennsylvania*. A. Nichelin. (R)

*The Rambler in North America*, Latrobe. (R)

<sup>5</sup>Slides from the Collection of Audubon Watercolors, courtesy The New York Historical Society, New York, N.Y.

<sup>6</sup>In Greek mythology the vulture or condor is sacred to Aries, the God of War, which reinforces the negative image of the

'eternal condor years' (11). That the California condor is now on the endangered species list makes it a more rarified symbol in 1990 than perhaps it was in 1831.

<sup>7</sup>Poe was not the only writer of the American Renaissance who saw Nature as a teacher of life's alphabet. Seven years after the final version of "Romance" was published, Melville wrote (1852), "Say what some poets will, Nature is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood." *Pierre or The Ambiguities*, ed. Harrison Hayford et. al. (Chicago, 1971) p. 342.

<sup>8</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar." *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1950), p. 61.

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Plate 1.



Plate 2.

