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*"...ev'n ideal things/Flap Shadowy sounds from visionary wings"

--Edgar Allan Poe
"Al Aaraaf"

The free flight of solitary birds hold a special fascination for many sensitive, reflective authors. The symbolic significance of a hawk's lonely song becomes archetypal in the works of some poets. So it is with William Butler Yeats and Edgar Allan Poe, though through the sheer bulk of the first poet's output, Yeats' bird symbolism is more extensively developed. Yet both authors utilized these creatures in astoundingly similar ways, for both were concerned with central issues to the artist's (indeed, every man's) earthly existence. Reality becomes a dubious term in their writings, and the uncertain finality of death provides clues to what the true nature of universal order might be. The birds, with their unique advantage of being either earthly or air-borne creatures, provided the poets a means to express their artistic feelings. Poetic visions of swans, hawks and white sea-birds abound in Yeats, and Poe, though not as specific in many poems, has his drowsing birds, his crying swan, and metaphors of a bird's flight. In this manner, the poet's dreams elevate man above everyday life and provide him glimpses of Poe's vision of supernal beauty and Yeat's view of an ordered, unified universe.

Bird symbols in Yeats often evoke a melancholic wistfulness; we recognize them as something apart from and infinitely better than mankind. They are the images of fulfillment, which man should not hope to obtain, as Yeats darkly points out in "The Wanderings of Oisin:"

I saw a foam-white seagul drift and float
Under the roof, and with a straining throat
Shouted, and hailed him: he hung there on a star,
For no man's cry shall ever mount so far...

Yeatsian birds are often lone creatures, and are sometimes immortal, gilded gold and singing an undying song of beauty.

Through all of these types, Yeats expresses uncertainty of artistic worth and beauty and tension arises, in much the same way as it does in Poe, by trying to come to terms with day-to-day life while attempting to maintain his sublime visions. In "The Hawk", Yeats comments on this very problem. The hawk, symbolizing his scorn for those practical people who demand a utilitarian function for everything from hawk to poet, refuses to "be clapped in a hoos,/nor a cage,/nor alight upon wrist." Yet there is no solution to the conflict, leaving the poet to question the value of his symbols. In "Sailing to Byzantium" and later "Byzantium", his gold enamelled birds sing of the soul, not attempting to deal with the world or birth and death, of flesh and blood. Art, "monuments of unageing intellect," justifies man's existence, and "those dying generations" only prove distraction from contemplation of art. The "Byzantium" poems begin Yeats' search for objectivity through his poetry; his song must be an imitation of the golden bird, who sings "of what is past, or passing, or to come." His song must become immortal and imperishable, "out of nature." How like Poe's claim that poetry gives us glimpses of that supernal unity which is out of space and time.

"Sonnet To Science" introduces us to Poe's visionary world, a world of childhood dreams and imaginings of supernal beauty. Ultimate truth in Poe is reflected in forms of beauty, but science, in the guise of a vulture whose "wings are dull realities," loses sight of the beauty of the greater universe, giving facts which are only small details of a large reality. In dealing with the world in diffusion, science can destroy the poet's heartfelt dreams of supernal beauty. This heart is likened to a wandering bird, soaring "with an undaunted wing" in the real, of imagination and romance. The vulture preys on this free bird, just as science feeds on the center of being (emotion and mysticism) of the poet. The poet, flying above human cares, thinks about ultimate beauty and mortality, wonders at the harmony and balance in the universe. The vulture of science not only destroys the poet, it, in some way, creates an imbalanced universe. In other poems, too, Poe utilizes the swift-winged birds for fancy and imagination. "Al Aaraaf" especially contains

such symbolism, but it fails to deal directly with the dilemma the artist faces. In "Romance," however, he juxtaposes the familiar parakeet and the sinister "condor years" in an attempt to escape this tension. His only realization by the end of the poem, is that he is caught, even bound by this temporal existence.

Yet, he wants his heart to "tremble with the strings" of thoughts out of earthly reality. This conflict is not resolved, for in his attempt to escape into dreams of supernal beauty, he has declared war on those "dull realities." In this sense, Poe even more than Yeats realized the irreconcilability between his dream world and the world of men. For while Yeats seemed satisfied with his golden Byzantium birds who could mock the world of flesh and blood, Poe continued to strain against the cares of the world of mutability, to once more become "a child--with a most knowing eye."

The poem "Fanny," which is attributed to Poe, appeared in the Saturday Visitor magazine in 1833, signed by 'Tamerlane.' The poem contains an overriding sense of doubt: doubt about the validity of his childhood memories, doubt of supernal beauty and his dream of the great unity of all. It's a deceptively simple love poem, for it isn't simple at all and one could question if it really concerns love. The swan's "wild death song" is too powerful of a symbol, and the tremendous significance of "let memory of something dark and thrillingly horrifying in this poem: glimpses of annihilation. This is one of the few poems in which Poe links a bird symbol with death and the supernal beauty it infers, while doubting these visions he has of it. In Poe, beauty, truth, and death are hardly separable, for all are included in his supernal vision of "matter no more." As one critic pointed out, "he loved beauty as a revealer of truth beyond the scope of reason." There is a serene peaceful beauty in the first stanza, broken in the second by the "first glance of that eye" and continuing in a more sinister and terrible vein until the end. His doubt arises, I think, not from fallen love, but from his dreadful error, mistaking physical beauty for supernal beauty. In some ways, the tone of this poem is akin to his prose-poem "Ligeia," though the

effect is not so stunning. But the dying swan is, in every way, connected to Yeats, whose dying swan symbol is unparalleled in its significance.

Mortality is constantly shown from surprising angles of vision in Yeats: the angry cry of a sea bird, the peaceful song of a dying swan, the pattern of a flock of wild swans--all are spun into Yeats' final work. Birds reinforced his belief in the validity of the soul, especially swans, who paradoxically came to embody a sort of immortality, even while on the verge of death. The swans of "The Tower" or "Nineteen Nineteen," in their spiritual happiness prior to death, are out of life and wholly objective. In this state, the unity and wholeness of life and death are accepted and, in the immediate lack of temporal concerns, identity is lost. The state is something akin to Poe's horror/thrill encounter with annihilation, but more peaceful and, somehow, more accepting. As evening falls, in "The Tower," the "bird's sleepy cry" fades "among the deepening shades." The swan of "Nineteen Nineteen" is more dynamic, as wild as Poe's vision of death, it leaps "into the desolate heaven" and becomes an image which "can bring wildness, bring a rage/To end all things."

There is an illusion of immortality present in "The Wild Swans at Coole." These swans, seen through a sensitive eye, seem to defy time, they "scatter wheeling in great broken rings." This circling above land is an image of eternity. But the final stanza is as mysterious as the swans themselves:

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

Is death (his awakening) the end to illusion and the confirmation of true immortality? For it seems as though the pattern of man survives, as do the patterns of the swans. This is no more than an uncertain hope, however, for later a "visionary white sea-bird" cries out against death in

"In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen," and "with that cry" Yeats raises his own. Yeats was as fascinated with final, tragic moments as Poe was, though perhaps more doubtful of what day on the other side.

Both poets believed that the vision of beauty is lost through aging. In Yeats' poem, "The Wanderings of Oisín," man is seen as withering into death, only to emerge renewed and revitalized--the swan's song is recognition of this truth. The narrator of the poetical story "Ligeia" welcomes annihilation to connect him once more with that dream of supernal beauty. The similarities between Yeats and Poe are carried out through their poetic techniques also. Both believe that ultimately a work of art is a unified 'word,' which stands for feeling (in Yeats, mood; in Poe, effect) and becomes symbolic of high emotions and thoughts which cannot be expressed any other way. Their visions give us illusions of an order beyond this world of diffusion and chaos. The concern for unity in a world of seeming imbalance and opposing forces is evident, and birds, symbolic of truths as represented by their beauty, are one vehicle to show their separate, yet very close ideals: Poe's image of supernal beauty and unity, and Yeat's encompassing vision of order and unity. Everywhere in their poems is evidence of an invisible, but active spiritual world, greater than the temporal world of humans. Their belief in the power of words caused both to utilize poetry as a defense against the overwhelming hostilities of the surrounding world.

Creation of unification and balance out of chaos is the basis for their private searches, though their terminology and conclusions vary. Poe is uncertain of his temporal life, but intuitively knows that annihilation will lead him to ultimate good. Yeats, on the other hand, comes to certain ideals about art and the artist in society (in that they must be concerned with matters above and out of it), while doubting the immortal beauty and order art gives us glimpses of. Their birds are lonely, solitary beings, giving the reader a sense of one angry cry against the shouts of an undefined multitude, a cry which symbolizes something greater than mankind. On the surface, their poems can be deceptive, in that there are

several different levels of interpretation; new and provocative ideas appear with each reading, and yet their poems can be read with simple superficiality, upon which the reader might comment "Ah! Here is a poem about love." But with either poet, if the reader pause and reflect a moment upon a circling bird or the solitary winging of a graceful gull, he may find himself caught up with the poet's reverie as "he pursues a beauty, half seen, which flies before him."

/ Charla Johnson /

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