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Burton R. Pollin

*The City University of New York*

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## THE "RAVEN" PARODY THAT CAPTIVATED ABE LINCOLN

Burton R. Pollin

*Emeritus, CUNY*

There is nothing remarkable in the fact that the *Quincy Whig*, a newspaper of western Illinois, on March 18, 1846, published a parody of the celebrated poem of 1845, "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe, or that Abe Lincoln, a friend of the editor of the *Whig*, should have expressed his warm appreciation of the verses in a letter. This occurrence has long been mentioned in Lincoln annals and, recently, in a footnote to a Poe volume. But what seems remarkable is the apparent willingness of all scholars to leave the parody itself unretrieved, unreprinted, and unexamined. Fortunately, there is still extant one copy of the paper, which thus furnishes direct evidence of the spread of Poe's fame and of Lincoln's susceptibility to the muse.<sup>1</sup> The background circumstances can be quickly viewed, before we attend to Lincoln's remarks and the parody itself. Poe's "Raven" came out in the February 1845 *American Review* and in the January 29, 1845 *Evening Mirror* (New York) and its February 8 weekly edition. Catching the admiration of varied readers and all the "free loading" editors, it quickly became fair game for copying into the provincial newspapers throughout the country; this practice was aided through the provision of a text in the book, *The Raven and Other Poems* (November 1845).<sup>2</sup> The publication of parodies was proof also of its farflung popularity and of its author's notoriety, especially as instigator of the "Little Longfellow War" in the *Broadway Journal* and as perpetrator of the "Al Aaraaf" hoax at the Boston Lyceum on October 16, 1845. The ensuing parodies of "the bird" that filled out editorial columns of newspapers far and wide played upon two major themes for their titles and their contents: animals (and birds) or satire or criticism (often of inebriation). Preceding the burlesque in the *Quincy Whig*, "The Pole-Cat" (i.e., the skunk) were verses named after the owl, black cat, gazelle, whippoorwill, turkey and "The Veto," "The Craven" by "Poh," "A Vision," "A Gentle Puff," "A Fight with a Dog," "A Visit to Le-Knocking" (on Temperance), and "The Tom Cat."<sup>3</sup> Several of these might have come, in "exchange papers," to the attention of Andrew Johnston, editor of the *Whig*, who may be considered to be the author of the poem.<sup>4</sup>

## "RAVEN" PARODY

Printed on the first page of the newspaper of March 18, 1846 (volume 8, columns 2 and 3), it hints of the writer's familiarity with other parodies, which usually adapt the refrain of Poe. Cleverly, this versifier frees himself from the burden of this rhyme and archly suggests that Poe delimits his rhyming in the "imitation" of "The Pole-Cat" that he dares to call "The Raven." Here is his prefatory note:

Mr. Editor:—I should probably never have published the enclosed poem, did I not feel it a duty to the republic of letters, to expose a culprit, who disregarded its laws. Mr. Edgar A. Poe, to whom it was shown in confidence, has, in his parody called "The Raven," most shamefully plagiarized both my stanza and my subject, with such silly alterations in both, as, in his feeble cunning, he thought would disguise the theft. Such, for instance, is the perpetual repetition of the rhyme, "Evermore" and "Nevermore"—a wretched shift to conceal the poverty of his invention: and such his transformation of the formidable pole-cat into a dull jackdaw, whose vocabulary is as monotonous as his own. Less I could not say in justice to my own pretensions, and more I cannot add, without doing violence to the proverbial modesty of

Your obedient servant,  
MARMADUKE MAR-RHYME.

Quincy, Illinois, March 3d, 1846.

He correctly compares the similar stanzaic pattern of the original and the parody and also, by a stretch of concepts, of the subjects, both being natural "critters" or raven and skunk. The rough hewn topic of this "new" poem would appeal to a wide range of *Whig* readers, including "Honest Abe," whose log cabin home it recalls. Before considering his response, let us examine the verses helpfully "exhumed" by the Illinois State Historical Society.<sup>5</sup>

## THE POLE-CAT.

By the fire-side I was sitting, and my wife she was a  
knitting;  
And a new heel she was fitting, to a stocking half worn  
out:  
Joe was in the chimney corner, spelling how young Jacky  
Horner  
Ate the plum, which from the pie his greedy fingers had  
torn out—

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Plum, from out the Christmas pie, by him so greedily torn out:

    This our Josey was about.

Joe huge lots of fun was quaffing, loud and long the lad was laughing.

Wife and I were more than half inclined to join him in his glee;

Till the urchin, silent grinning, ceased the roar of his beginning,

Only chuckling, shuffling, shinning, smiting often on his knee—

Smiting hard upon the patch—the gray cloth patch, upon his knee,

    As he looked at wife and me.

'Twas on Saturday, at night, and the fire was burning bright,

And my heart was glad and light, for my weekly toil was o'er,

All my Sunday chores were done up, and "I swon," says I, "till sun up

I will lie a-bed and sleep, and if so be as I should snore,

If, in sleeping long and deep in bed, I happen for to snore,

    'Tis what I have done before."

Presently I thought I heard a cackling, as of barnyard bird,

Suddenly alarmed or stirred, by some stealthy enemy;

But methinks "It is a rustle, of Dame Bunty with her bustle,

Crowding closer, just to jostle other hens from off the tree—

Crowding on the rival hens to jostle them from off the tree—

    The old black locust roosting tree.

Therefore quietly I sot, and the noise I heeded not,

Till at last my old wife got up with her new stocking heel,

And she says, "Now Jeremiah" (and her voice was getting higher.)

"Get up, sir, and leave that fire, and go out, right off the reel—

Quit the fire, and go out-doors, straight away, right off the reel,

    And see what makes the chickens squeal!

I am very peaceable, and in all things feasible

“RAVEN” PARODY

I submit—for she’s able for to judge what’s best for both:  
Quickly to my feet I rose—only stopped to blow my nose,  
And, with staff in hand, I goes, albeit I was very loth;  
Out of doors, with staff in hand, goes I, albeit very loth,  
Thinking—something like an oath.

Stoutly strode I towards the tree, grumbling, growling  
sullenly,  
“For,” says I, “I’ll only see what at first I understood:”  
But full soon I stood aghast,—ere to that old tree I past,  
Old Dame Bunty breathed her last, fluttering in a pool of  
blood—  
At my feet old Bunty lay, flutt’ring, flapping, in her  
blood—  
Dying—where aghast I stood.

Savagely I looked around, up the tree and on the ground,  
If the villain might be found, who had done my hen to  
death:  
“’Tis some thievish, murderous owl, in midnight darkness  
prone to fowling,  
Or some bloody weasel prowling, that has stopped poor  
Bunty’s breath—  
Some assassin, vile and bloody, choked the poor old lady’s  
breath;  
May he die a felon’s death!”

This in grief and anger spoken, in the grass I went a-  
poking,  
Lest perchance it might be cloaking the foul rogue I wished  
to seize:  
Reckless was I of his biting, all my soul was bent on  
fighting,  
and—my fierce, insane, delight in—down I went, upon my  
knees—  
Through the grass, my wild delight in, scrambling on upon  
my knees—  
“Gad!” says I, “I’ll raise a breeze!”

Groping in the hazel bushes, eager here and there I pushes;  
Suddenly the caitiff rushes right before me, straight ahead:  
Madly on his track I pitches, scuffling through the hazel  
switches,  
Naught care I for ragged breeches, so I strike the murderer  
dead—

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Burn my breeches! tear my shirt! only strike the murderer  
dead,

I'll go home without a thread!

Fast the felon fled, but faster followed fierce and fell  
disaster,

Naught avails "The Poor Man's Plaster" for such blows as  
then I dealt:

But while I thus swung my flail, in haste the devil tucked  
his tail in,—

Flung it out with his last failing breath—oh! scissors! how  
it smelt!

That last flourish, in my nose, eyes, ears, mouth, stomach,  
it was felt—

Oh! Jemima! how it smelt!

Back I staggered, poison-tainted—how I wished that I had  
fainted—

Ne'er from bones of martyrs sainted, such ethereal essence  
flows:

And though relics may convert you, by their power to heal  
or hurt you,

None here such immortal virtue, as that ether in my nose,

No such deathless, deadly, odor, as the horrid steam that  
rose

From that pole-cat to my nose.

All that night I washed and scrubbed me, long with soap  
and sand I rubbed me,

Still next day my dear wife snubbed me, "Jeremiah: how  
you stink!"

Once more to the creek I hasted; scrubbed and washed, and  
prayed, and fasted;

All, alas! was labor wasted, by that fair stream's flowery  
brink,

Vain were soap, sand, prayer, and fasting, by that fair  
stream's flower brink,

"Jeremiah! how you stink!"

And this odour, to my thinking, still is stinking, still is  
stinking,

Deeper in my flesh 'tis sinking, daily it is striking in—

Rotten noisome imp of evil! Ruthless and relentless devil!

Quit thy foul and horrid revel, take thy stench from out my  
skin!

“RAVEN” PARODY

Take thy foul, intolerable, charnel stench from out my skin!

’Tis too bad to rub it in!

This is not being offered as one of the prize parodies on Poe’s celebrated poem, replete with grace or wit or sharp observations on literature or human nature,<sup>6</sup> but primarily as an object of Abraham Lincoln’s amusement and evaluation as well as a sample of the light literature of period, especially in the “provinces.” Lincoln’s letter of April 18 to his editor friend Andrew Johnston (their relationship, lasting at least a year, has never been explicated by Lincoln biographers) has been printed before. The first paragraph discusses “The Pole-Cat”:

Friend Johnston:

Your letter, written some six weeks since [an error for four weeks], was received in due course, and also the paper with the parody. It is true, as suggested it might be, that I have never seen Poe’s “Raven”; and I very well know that a parody is almost entirely dependent for its interest upon the reader’s acquaintance with the original. Still there is enough in the polecat, self-considered, to afford one several hearty laughs. I think four or five of the last stanzas are decidedly funny, particularly where Jeremiah “scrubbed and washed, and prayed and fasted.”<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that Johnston had sent Lincoln the parody because of Abe’s interest just then in verses—a phase of Lincoln’s general culture that may seem remote from his slowly growing mastery of a home spun prose eloquence, as in “The Gettysburg Address.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, there seems to be much evidence of Lincoln’s absorbing into his memory and style a great deal of poetry during his largely self-directed education and development. In addition to the standard classics of Burns, some of Shakespeare, Thomas Gray and Oliver Goldsmith, the lyrics of Byron and the “songs” of Thomas Moore, there were the lighter and humorous verses of Oliver Wendell Holmes and Thomas Hood.<sup>9</sup> He memorized many pieces, which he liked to “deliver” to clients, visitors, and, later, White House guests.<sup>10</sup> He himself dabbled in nonsense verses and doggerel as a child and sometimes indulged in versified bawdy humor.<sup>11</sup> The blunt language of “The Pole-Cat” would be entirely acceptable to this newly elected congressman, in 1846. Melancholy and humor both ranked as important elements in Lincoln’s reading, conversation, and

covert stream of prepossessions, as Herndon, Nicolay, Hay, and many other intimates have asserted. One friend said, "[humor was a device] to whistle down sadness."<sup>12</sup> Curiously, Andrew Johnston anticipated Lincoln's pleasure in the parody because he had just received from him a sententious, trite verse adaptation of Job, iii, and Ecclesiastes, i, written and published (in American texts) anonymously by the Scot William Knox (a friend of Sir Walter Scott), which had become Lincoln's favorite, most quoted poem.<sup>13</sup>

The year 1846 was to prove Lincoln's "annus mirabilis" for verse writing. In the second paragraph of his April 18 letter, he makes a new allusion to a poem "My Childhood Home I See Again," which harked back to his campaigning during 1844 in a section of Indiana where he had been raised fifteen years earlier. "Seeing it ... aroused feelings in me which were certainly poetry," although, he says, he is not sure that "the expression of those feelings was poetry."<sup>14</sup> The "second canto" of this work was sent to Johnston September 6, 1846 for possible anonymous printing in the *Whig*. It concerned Matthew Gentry, a boyhood companion (only three years older) who had become insane, his initial raging madness having changed to a settled melancholy; fear of such a condition greatly troubled Lincoln himself.<sup>15</sup> The third product of those stimulating reminiscences was a poem in twenty-two stanzas, called "A Bear Hunt," also sent to Johnston for anonymous publication. To my mind this is the cleverest in phrasing and the keenest in its comparisons of man as the hunter, the bear as victim, and the dogs as instruments; its tone of mockery slightly reminds us of the parody that Lincoln enjoyed reading—"the stark comedy of frontier life," as David D. Anderson titled an aspect of his taste.<sup>16</sup> Chiefly, however, Lincoln's "Bear Hunt" savors of Burns, Gray, and Goldsmith.

A more definite result of this episode was his determination to seek out the original, "The Raven." He seems to have enjoyed it thoroughly and to have committed it to memory for use as a piece for private elocution.<sup>17</sup> One wonders whether the poignant lines about "lost Lenore" revived sad memories for him of his early love for Anne Rutledge, whose death had plunged him into deep, irrational grief, according to Herndon, Sandburg, and other chroniclers of the life of this gaunt, candid, and sensitive president.<sup>18</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Numerous biographies of Lincoln (see notes below for pointed references to several) mention the letter alone, thus perhaps misleading T. O. Mabbott's collaborators into causing him to say,



## "RAVEN" PARODY

"The poem probably was not printed," in his edition of Poe's *Poems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 1: 352, no. 10 of his list (footnote 4). For locus of the extant issue of the paper see note 5 below.

<sup>2</sup>For details of other printings during Poe's lifetime, see T. O. Mabbott, *Poems*, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup>For publication data of the first nine see *Poems*, p. 352. The last three I have found in the Saint Louis *Reveille* of May 4, 1845, the *Weekly Mirror* of 29 November 1845, which reprints it from the *Boston Post*, and the *Yale Literary Magazine* of June, 1845.

<sup>4</sup>This inference is drawn from its being the first item of reading matter on page 1, the use of a colorful pseudonym instead of a true name, and Johnston's later printing of Lincoln's verses (see below) as part of his and his readers' partiality for verse. Andrew Johnston also practiced law in the town, according to Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, 1953), 1: 367; his wearing two hats was likely in Quincy, first settled in 1822, incorporated as a town in 1834, and termed "a city" in 1839.

<sup>5</sup>My thanks are due to J. Ericson at the Society in Springfield, Illinois, for a search of the paper for this and other data. The library at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, seems to have lost the 1846 issues of the paper, and I have received no response from the only other possible holder, as listed in Gregory's *Union List of Serials*.

<sup>6</sup>The fullest collection of such "Raven" parodies is in the compilation by Walter Hamilton, *Parodies of the Works of English and American Authors* (London, 1885 and 1888), 2: 27-96 and 5: 287-288, 322-323).

<sup>7</sup>For a full reprint of the letter, see Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York, 1946), pp. 184-185; also, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, eds., *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Cumberland, Tenn, 1894), 1: 288-290.

<sup>8</sup>Perhaps the best discussion is in Nicolay and Hay, 1: x-xxx, "Lincoln as a Writer," and in David D. Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1970), pp. 71-78, discussing the poems mentioned in my text, below.

<sup>9</sup>See William E. Barton, *Abraham Lincoln and His Books* (Chicago, 1920), pp. 7-19; and D. J. Harkness and R. G. McMurty, *Lincoln's Favorite Poets* (Knoxville, 1959), pp. 3-15.

<sup>10</sup>See Henry B. Kranz, *Abraham Lincoln: A New Portrait* (New York, 1959), pp. 114-115.

<sup>11</sup>See Nicolay and Hay, *Works*, 1: 288-290; Barton, *Abraham Lincoln*, p. 16; and Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, pp. 294-295.

<sup>12</sup>See Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None* (New York, 1977), p. 100; see also p. 249; see Hertz, p. 67, for his poem, now lost, on suicide, and also pp. 167-168; also Ralph G. Newman, *Lincoln for the Ages* (New York, 1960), pp. 130-134, on his "hypo" counteracted "by laughter."

<sup>13</sup>This now seemingly "rare" poem is treated fully by M. L. Houser, *Lincoln's Favorite Poem* (Peoria, Ill., 1935), pamphlet of 15 pages.

<sup>14</sup>See Basler, pp. 184-185.

<sup>15</sup>In addition to the books given in n. 8 above, see Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1928), 1: 383-385; 521-525.

<sup>16</sup>See Anderson, pp. 76-78, for the best study of this poem.

<sup>17</sup>See Beveridge, 2: 228; Basler, p. 185, and Kranz, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup>For this much-mooted "love" see Emanuel Hertz, pp. 66, 163-165; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years* (New York, 1970), pp. 52-53; and William E. Barton, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Indianapolis, 1925), 1: 211-222.