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By

William Whipple

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POE'S POLITICAL SATIRE

By WILLIAM WHIPPLE

My political principles have always been, as nearly as may be, with the existing administration, and I battled with right good will for Harrison when opportunity offered.¹

EDGAR ALLAN POE thus summarized his claim for political preferment when, on June 26, 1841, he replied to F. W. Thomas' letter suggesting he try for a clerkship under President Tyler. For the next two years Poe lived in expectation of such an appointment, but it was not to be.² Nevertheless, we are curious about what Poe felt was a "battle" for Harrison. Was this one of his myths? Certainly there is no evidence that Poe engaged in stump speaking, originated campaign songs, or wrote political essays.³ In what, then, did his service for Harrison consist?

It seems unlikely that Poe was alluding to the occasional political references found in his stories, for example, the editorial exchanges of political reviews,⁴ the people's interest in radicalism and the new "march of intellect,"⁵ the burlesque misquoting of a Spanish poem to read "Vanny Buren . . . Pork and pleasure,"⁶ or the tautology of Thomas Hart Benton.⁷ It is more likely that he was referring to two of his tales, "The Devil in the Belfry" and "The Man That Was Used Up," satires directed at President Martin Van Buren and Vice-President Richard M. Johnson. Before turning to a discussion of these two satires, we are encouraged by the indefiniteness of Poe's claim that he battled for Harrison "when opportunity offered" to speculate on whether Poe attempted political satire before 1839.

¹ John H. Ingram, *Edgar Allan Poe, His Life, Letters, and Opinions* (New York, Ward, Lock, Bowden and Co., 1891), 182.

² Arthur H. Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York, D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc., 1942), 321-81. Quinn has adequately covered Poe's attempts to find some political position that would offer financial security.

³ Killis Campbell has credited Poe with a stanza entitled "Fragment of a Campaign Song." Since it was written in the winter of 1843-44 and was not printed until after Poe's death, it could not have been the contribution to which Poe refers in his letter. See Killis Campbell, *The Mind of Poe and Other Studies* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1933), 207.

⁴ Arthur H. Quinn and Edward H. O'Neill, *The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1946), I, 113.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 164. Printed June, 1835.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 246. Printed November, 1838. As late as 1849, in his "Marginalia," Poe was making satiric reference to the "little magician." James A. Harrison, *Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1902), XVI, 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 693. Printed February, 1849.

Two stories, "Four Beasts in One" and "King Pest," are analogous enough to events occurring at the time they were written to suggest that Poe may have attempted political satire as early as 1833.⁸

Actually, the reign of King Andrew I⁹ did not begin until Jackson took the oath of office on March 4, 1829. The mildly demonstrative inaugurations which had preceded the election of Jackson had not prepared Washington for the noisy excitement, raucous laughter, exultation, and enthusiastic drinking of the hordes of people who swarmed the White House lawn on Jackson's inaugural day. Among the throng were some who saw this inauguration as the blinding flash heralding a democratic millenium. One such observer rejoiced that "it was the people's day, the people's president, and the people would rule."¹⁰ Still others saw not light but darkness in the crude, illiterate mob who seemed to expect a personal part in running the government. Justice Story wrote in despair that: "he [Jackson] was visited by immense crowds of all sorts of people, from the highest and most polished, down to the most vulgar and gross in the nation. I never saw such a mixture. The reign of King Mob seemed triumphant. I was glad to escape from the scene as soon as possible."¹¹ Conservatives who regarded the rise of the common man with trepidation gravitated to the Whig party.¹²

President Jackson's term of office was not the happy one of cheering mobs and triumphant marches that this first day augured. On December 22, 1828, his wife, Rachel, died—hastened to her death, Jackson believed, by the vicious attacks on her character during the election campaign. The naming of the Cabinet brought on the strange battle that became known as the Eaton Affair. Jackson, always loyal to his friends, demanded that Washington society accept Mrs. Peggy Timberlake Eaton; but he was to learn that while a general may hang a recalcitrant Indian to restore discipline a President is powerless against a Washington matron who has taken the warpath against immorality. Secretary of State Van Buren, a bachelor, earned President Jackson's affection by sponsoring invitations for Mrs. Eaton. Nevertheless, the

⁸ Quinn, *Poe: A Critical Biography*, 199-202.

⁹ Roger Butterfield, *The American Past* (New York, Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1947), 92.

¹⁰ James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1860), III, 169-71. John B. McMasters, *History of the People of the United States* (New York, D. Appleton & Co., Inc., 1926), V, 525.

¹¹ Parton, *op. cit.*, 170.

¹² Charles A. Beard, *The American Party Battle* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1928), 66-72.

impasse could be relieved only by the resignation of the Cabinet. But while tension was still mounting over the status of Peggy Eaton, Andrew Jackson learned that Vice-President Calhoun had suggested, during a meeting of President Monroe's Cabinet in 1813, that General Jackson be brought to military trial for his misconduct in the Florida campaign. William H. Crawford, the paralyzed and disappointed presidential candidate and enemy of Calhoun, revealed this information to Jackson—causing an immediate split between Jackson and Calhoun and securing the nomination for Vice-President for the waiting Martin Van Buren.¹³

President Jackson's second term was largely involved with such questions as the Bank of the United States, hard money, and nullification. Colonel Thomas Hart Benton, senator from Missouri, led the attack on the bank and supported the coinage of gold. For this faith in hard money Benton was nicknamed "Old Bullion," and gold coins were referred to as "Benton mint drops." Jackson's famous Kitchen Cabinet was made up of such men as Francis Preston Blair, editor of *The Globe*; Amos Kendall, Jackson's Postmaster General; William B. Lewis, Auditor of the Treasury, and Isaac Hill, editor of the *New Hampshire Patriot*.¹⁴ The newspapers furnished their own presidential advisors. Seba Smith's Major Jack Downing of Downingville was the most popular; cartoonists, while varying in their conception of him, usually represented him as a tall, uncouth, sometimes hawk-nosed, soldier-citizen who stood by to direct the president.¹⁵

"Four Beasts in One," the first of the four stories to be examined, was

¹³ George M. Stephenson, *American History to 1865* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1940), 296–95. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The United States: 1830–50* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1935), 392. William M. Meigs, *The Life of John Caldwell Calhoun* (New York, Neal Publishing Co., 1917), II, 399–412. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1945), 34–55.

¹⁴ Stephenson, *op. cit.*, 292 ff. William M. Meigs, *Life of Thomas Hart Benton* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1904), 262–63.

¹⁵ Mary Alice Wyman, *Two American Pioneers* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1927), 32–93. For Poe's attitude, see also Harrison, *op. cit.*, XV, 200. For cartoon conceptions of Jack Downing, see William Murrell, *A History of American Graphic Humor* (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935), I, ills. 119–23, 141; Seba Smith, *The Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing* (Boston, Lilly, Wait, Colman, and Holden, 1833); and *Select Letters of Major Jack Downing of Downingville Militia* (Philadelphia, Whithington and Davis, 1834). The Major became so popular it seemed that he would supersede both Brother Jonathan and Uncle Sam as the symbol for the American people. *Ibid.*, 132. In 1832 he made himself available as a candidate for the Presidency and in 1834 published his own life of Andrew Jackson. Wyman, *op. cit.*, 76, 84–85.

written in 1833.¹⁶ The reader is returned in the Year of the World 3830, to the city of Antioch, to watch the triumphant procession of the King of Syria. The King, whose courtiers fawn upon him and kiss his heels, is a giraffe. A brief uprising forces the King to run for his life. He gains the sanctuary of the amphitheater and the celebration continues. Obviously, such a slight story has its only significance in the portrayal of the relations between the king and his subjects. Insofar as we have been able to discover, Poe had no specific political event in mind when he wrote this tale. Nevertheless, Jacksonianism is certainly under attack. The King of Syria becomes a tall, lanky individual like Jackson. He is followed by two concubines, harking back to the rumors about Mrs. Jackson and Peggy Eaton. Even the idea of the race may have come to Poe from political cartoons, for it was a favorite device in depicting an election. The courtiers' desertion of the giraffe when danger threatens recalls E. W. Clay's cartoon of Jackson's cabinet, published in 1831, entitled "Rats Leaving a Falling House."¹⁷ The courtiers' practice of giving the King extra titles, such as "Prince of Poets," may be a covert thrust at Jackson, who was referred to as the "Hero of New Orleans," "The General," "King Andrew," and "Old Hickory." By the beasts which turn on their masters we can be reasonably sure that Poe meant the "mob," for such a jibe is in line with his later, more caustic comments on the baseness of mobs.¹⁸ In spite of these allusions the satirical pattern of the story is general rather than specific.

"King Pest," published in September, 1835, seems to have been Poe's next attempt at political satire. As Ruth Leigh Hudson has pointed out, the main plot of the story seems to have been borrowed from Benjamin Disraeli's "Palace of the Wines" digression in the novel *Vivian Grey*.¹⁹ Miss Hudson suggests that perhaps Poe was satirizing Disraeli's use of the grotesque or satirizing the theory underlying the grotesque as an artistic form.²⁰ It may be suggested, however, that perhaps Poe was not satirizing Disraeli but, instead, found his plot an excellent vehicle for a satire on a political situation.

In "King Pest" two sailors, called Legs and Tarpaulin, skip their

¹⁶ Quinn, *Poe: A Critical Biography*, 199-202. "Four Beasts in One" was published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* under the title "Epimanes."

¹⁷ Murrell, *op. cit.*, 102, 109-10, 122.

¹⁸ Harrison, *op. cit.*, XVI, 160-61. Quinn, *Poe: A Critical Biography*, 94-95.

¹⁹ Poe's characters differ from Disraeli's even though Poe has borrowed Disraeli's technique of exaggerating a single feature of each character. See Benjamin Disraeli, *Vivian Grey* (New York, M. Walter Dunne, 1904), II, 57 ff.

²⁰ Ruth Leigh Hudson, "Poe and Disraeli," *American Literature*, VIII (January, 1937), 402-16.

tavern bill by running down St. Andrew's stairs into the plague-ridden part of the city (London). Eventually they stop in front of an undertaker's parlor in which they hear sounds of revelry, and break in to find a party of six people engaging in a drinking bout. The leader, called King Pest the First, is tall and emaciated, yellow-complexioned, with a high forehead. The Serene Consort is an extremely fat, dropsical woman with a red face and a large mouth. The Arch-Duchess Anapest is a slender, graceful woman with a hectic glow on her cheeks and an air of *haut ton*. Her nose is grotesquely long. The man sitting next to her, a proud type, has cheeks which rest on his shoulders, and his leg is bandaged. In contrast to him is a thin man with "the horrors" whose large ears prick up at the sound of a cork. And finally, there is a paralyzed man lying in a coffin, whose huge eyes gaze on the ceiling. Legs and Tarpaulin join the revelers, but in an argument over drinking "Black Strap" a fight ensues and they escape, taking with them the Serene Consort and Arch-Duchess Anapest.²¹

Poe has subtitled this story "A Tale Containing an Allegory" and has given it the motto: "The Gods do bear and will allow in kings/The things which they abhor in rascal routes."²² "King Pest" contains many of the Gothic elements of Poe's arabesque stories: the devastation by plague, the foreboding atmosphere of death, and the gloomy, oppressive surroundings. These elements Poe did not burlesque, as he did in his earlier "Bon Bon" and "Duc de Omlette"; instead, he used the atmosphere which they created to add to the effectiveness of his grotesque.

If Poe meant "King Pest" for political satire, and for speculative purposes let us suppose he did, what initial political spark kindled his imagination? It is possible that he was struck by the linking of cholera and politics which was current in the election campaign in 1832, when Washington, like Baltimore, was being swept by cholera. He may even have read such remarks as those by the Whig editor who wrote, "the only effectual cure, under existing circumstances, for genuine Jacksonianism is equally genuine Asiatic Spasmodic Cholera."²³ Or Poe may have been prompted by his Whig sympathies to see in the debacle of the wine cellar the banquet held for President Jackson on January 8, 1835, to celebrate the anniversary of his victory at New Orleans and the occasion of the abolishment of the national debt.²⁴ The highly

²¹ Quinn and O'Neill, *Poems and Stories*, I, 195.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Claude G. Bowers, *The Party Battles of the Jackson Period* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), 242, 247, 249.

²⁴ Ben Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (Philadelphia, Hubbard Brothers, 1886), I, 170.

publicized banquet was attended by two hundred and fifty party leaders, men like Van Buren, Benton, Blair, Kendall, and Johnson. It was a bibulous affair with an unusually large number of toasts, many similar to Colonel Richard M. Johnson's: "He prevented booty, and he protected beauty."²⁵ It may even be that the attempted assassination of Jackson three weeks later, January 30, contributed something toward Poe's choosing an undertaker's establishment for the setting.²⁶

In examining "King Pest" we find that the revelers strongly suggest political figures close to Jackson. King Pest the First seems to point to Jackson since the President himself was caricatured as King Andrew the First. King Pest is tall, gaunt, emaciated, with a high forehead. One needs only to look at the cartoons of Jackson to realize how closely the description fits.²⁷ Queen Pest, the Serene Consort, is much like Rachel Jackson, whose face was reddened by farm work and who was said to be so fat she showed how far the skin could stretch.²⁸ The long-nosed Arch-Duchess Anapest could easily be a satire of the social climber Peggy Eaton, famous for her Greek profile and lovely complexion.²⁹ The man with pendulous cheeks and bandaged leg compares closely with the egotistical Colonel Benton, who possessed a massive head and was known for his opposition to paper money or "shin plasters."³⁰ He was noted, too, for wearing the same cut of double-breasted frock coat all during his thirty years in Congress,³¹ and the corpulent man in Poe's tale is proud of his surtout. The thin man with the shakes may well be Francis Blair, editor of the *Globe*. Blair's duties made him attend a great many social affairs, and his wife prescribed for his health a shot of whiskey to be taken after each meal.³² Although nearly six feet tall, he weighed only 107 pounds.³³ The paralyzed man lying in the new coffin is more difficult to identify with certainty. It would seem, to make this Kitchen

²⁵ *Globe* (Washington), IV (January 14, 1835), 1.

²⁶ Parton, *op. cit.*, 582 ff.

²⁷ Murrell, *op. cit.*, 102, 109-110, 122. Butterfield, *op. cit.*, 92. Nevins and Weitkamp, *A Century of Political Cartoons* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 42.

²⁸ Marquis James, *Andrew Jackson the Border Captain* (Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1933), 279.

²⁹ Bowers, *op. cit.*, 117.

³⁰ William M. Meigs, *Life of Benton*, 146, 262, 436, 451 ff. Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, 126-27. Benton refused to accept anything but coin in change. On one occasion he is reported to have said, "What! Do you want a coroner's jury to sit and say, 'Old Bullion died of shin plasters?'"

³¹ Poore, *op. cit.*, I, 68.

³² Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, 71.

³³ William E. Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1933), I, 62.

Cabinet complete, that he should be Amos Kendall. Yet the reference to his paralyzed condition, the fact he is wearing a new coffin, and the eye trouble mentioned all point to William H. Crawford, who died in September, 1834, hardly a year before Poe's story was published.⁸⁴ Tarpaulin, the sailor, seems to have been intended as Martin Van Buren. This is suggested by his stature, by his placement at the head of the table, and by his courtesy toward the Arch-Duchess Anapest.⁸⁵ The identification of Legs is too tenuous to be made confidently. He seems to reflect characteristics associated with the redoubtable Major Jack Downing. But the identification is suggested rather than confirmed. He has Jack's coarse, impulsive—somewhat violent—personality. He has Jack's physical characteristics—tall, thin, with a hawk nose—and he has the Major's respect for the President. And, finally, it is through Legs's eyes that we are shown the Pest family, just as Jack Downing was the observer of the Jackson administration. One is led to speculate, too, whether the symbolical character of Jack Downing might not illuminate Poe's reason for the subtitle, "A Tale Containing an Allegory," that is, the American people and the probable next president journeying down into the pestilential depths of Jackson's reign.

The other allusions—the men's escape from the ship "Free and Easy," their presence in St. Andrew's parish, and their descent down St. Andrew's stairs into the plague-ridden part of the city—all seem to strengthen the impression that Poe has borrowed Disraeli's incident, "The Palace of the Wines," and used it for a satire with political implications, implications which may depend upon a political viewpoint contemporaneous with Poe's own for their full understanding.⁸⁶ Although this satiric tale retains the reader's interest without awareness of its allusions, certain puzzling questions still remain. For instance, if this is simply a Gothic tale, what is its allegorical meaning? If this tale is merely a readaptation of Disraeli's "Palace of Wines" incident, what is the significance of the motto? Why do the grotesque characters differ from their originals? If we consider the story only as another arabesque tale, we find no satisfactory answer to these questions. On the other hand, if Poe did intend the tale for a political satire, then the Gothic and

⁸⁴ Philip Jackson Green, *The Public Life of William Harris Crawford* (Chicago, University of Chicago Libraries, 1938), 29. J. D. E. Shipp, *Giant Days* (Americus, Ga., Southern Printers, 1909), 213.

⁸⁵ The gossip of the period linked both Jackson and Van Buren with Mrs. Eaton. See D. T. Lynch, *An Epoch and a Man* (New York, Horace Liveright, 1929), 357; and A. B. Norton, *The Great Revolution of 1840* (Cleveland, The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1888), 26.

⁸⁶ Campbell, *op. cit.*, 137.

grotesque elements become focused toward a unity of purpose that is otherwise absent. Also, there are possibilities, as we have shown, of an allegorical interpretation. The motto, too, has significance if it alludes to the latitude that might be allowed a Jackson as contrasted to that which might be allowed a Van Buren. And, of course, an identification of the revelers with political figures would explain Poe's altering Disraeli's grotesque characters while still clinging to the general plot. The evidence in favor of a political interpretation of this tale is strong if not conclusive, particularly when we realize that Poe returned to the use of political satire in 1839.

"The Devil in the Belfry," the third of Poe's four political satires, was published in May, 1839. Although it retains some of the obscurity of the two preceding pieces, its political references are more pointed and its satire more effective. It is a story of a sleepy little Dutch village whose primary interests are cabbages, pigs, and the time. All goes well until a stranger upsets the town council clock and thus throws the whole village into a state of uncertainty and confusion.³⁷

"The Devil in the Belfry" makes an interesting Irvingesque tale, quite aside from its political implications; but unless one recognizes the object of its satire one is uncomfortable with the intrusion of the grotesque in the story. The humor of the conception is not enough to explain the exaggerated conformity of the villagers, the identification of the stranger with the devil, and the stress on cabbages, pigs, and repeaters.

President Martin Van Buren was just under five feet six inches tall—trim, slender, a dandy in dress, and fastidious in his habits. His nose was prominent and slightly hooked; he wore sideburns which came down to the points of his jaw, and "he retained always the same disarming smile, the guileless blue eyes, the courtly mannerisms and stylish tastes." It was always a puzzle to Washingtonians where Van Buren had learned his bows, his elaborate manners, and his Old-World ways. Gossip spread the rumor that Van Buren wore a bedroom rug threadbare while standing before a mirror rehearsing these bows and steps. Also, Van Buren was addicted to snuff, but unlike his contemporaries he could make a pinch of snuff serve a political purpose.³⁸

Van Buren's political rise was accomplished in a manner unlike that

³⁷ Quinn and O'Neill, *Poems and Stories*, I, 248-54.

³⁸ Holmes Alexander, *The American Talleyrand* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1935), 10, 47, 122-73, 313-15. Lynch, *op. cit.*, 373-74. Clay made an eloquent appeal to Van Buren, as he was presiding over the Senate, on the bank issue. It was worded so that any answer would have had political repercussions. Van Buren listened attentively, arose from his seat and beckoned a senator to preside (as was customary when the Vice President addressed the floor), walked to where Clay

of his predecessors. His political sagacity fortunately was supported by a powerful political machine which was perfectly disciplined and brilliantly managed. The Regency, as Van Buren's machine was called, attained almost complete control of New York politics. And it was Van Buren, more than Jackson, who gave America its basic lesson in the use of political patronage.³⁹ Trading votes, importing people at election time, keeping party workers happy, and getting out the vote were all skills of which Van Buren was master. David Crockett's account of his visit to "Fivepoints," near the center of New York City, illustrates a Whig's view of the New York Democratic machine:⁴⁰

This is the place where Van Buren's warriors came from during the election, when the wild Irish, with their clubs and bludgeons, knocked down every one they could find that would not huzza for Jackson. . . . We came to a place where five streets all came together; and from this it takes the name of the "Five-points." The buildings are little, old frame houses, and look like some little country village. . . . It appeared as if the cellars was jam full of people; and such fiddling and dancing nobody ever saw before in this world. . . . This is part of what is called by the Regency the "glorious sixth ward"—the regular Van Buren ground floor. . . . Another thing seemed queer to me and that was a bell hanging outside the steeple of the Hall.

Poe lived in New York in 1837 and 1838 and, like Crockett, must have known this rapacious political monster—the Regency.⁴¹

Like any president, Van Buren was an easy target for political writers and cartoonists. His stature, background, and political wiliness earned him the nicknames "Little Van," "The Fox," "The Magician," "The Flying Dutchman," and many others.⁴² Crockett likened him to a pig feeding from the public trough.⁴³ A cartoon in 1836 pictured Van Buren as a farmer feeding his "Regency" pigs.⁴⁴ There was scarcely a Whig song in the 1840 campaign that did not make some reference to sending him back to Kinderhook to raise cabbages.⁴⁵ Illustrative of the tenor of Van Buren's opposition is this stanza from the campaign song "Harrison and Liberty":⁴⁶

had resumed his seat, and asked for a pinch of his "excellent snuff," then turned and walked out of the Senate without a word in reply to Clay's plea.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 122-73, 251-53.

⁴⁰ *The Autobiography of David Crockett* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 158-59.

⁴¹ Quinn, *Poe: A Critical Biography*, 263-68.

⁴² Samuel P. Orth, *Five American Politicians* (Cleveland, The Burrows Brothers' Company, 1906), 160. Alexander, *op. cit.*, 377.

⁴³ Crockett, *op. cit.*, 260.

⁴⁴ Nevins and Weitenkampf, *op. cit.*, 42.

⁴⁵ *The Log Cabin Song Book* (New York, Log Cabin Office, 1840).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

No more we'll trust to cabbage-heads,
 Or Kinderhook Physicians,
 No more we'll bow to Cabinets
 Or Fox-like sly Magicians.

If we steep ourselves in the political atmosphere of the late eighteen thirties, we no longer find the allusions in "The Devil in the Belfry" obscure. We see in the little devil who bows and pirouettes, whose hair is tied in curlpapers, who is constantly smiling and seems so self-satisfied, a delightful parody of Van Buren's dandyism and consciously acquired courtly mannerisms. We are reminded of the nickname Flying Dutchman when this stranger pigeon-wings up to the belfry. When the devil claps the *chapeau de bras* (hat of power) on the belfry keeper we think of the Regency's control not only of New York's politics but of the nation's too. The pigs with the repeaters tied to their tails are a clear allusion to New York machine politics.⁴⁷ But even if these escape us we are caught again by the stranger's sitting on the belfry keeper and fiddling a double jig, "Paddy O'Rafferty," for the delight of the Irish riffraff described by Crockett.⁴⁸ The hooked nose of the devil, the gold snuff-box, and the people's deference to the steeple clock all corroborate evidence that Poe was satirizing a particular individual, President Martin Van Buren.

To what extent Poe was fusing New York, Kinderhook, and Washington in delineating the village of Vondervotteimittiss would be difficult to determine, for we know that at the time Poe published the story President Van Buren was making preparations for his triumphant visit (June, 1839) to both Kinderhook and New York.⁴⁹ Under the circumstances it seems unreasonable, as one biographer has done, to go back to Poe's childhood in Irvine, Ayrshire, Scotland, to find the source of this Dutch village.⁵⁰

And finally, in the light of the approaching elections, we cannot mistake the political significance of Poe's appeal:⁵¹

Let us proceed in a body to the borough, and restore the ancient order of things in Vondervotteimittiss by ejecting that little fellow from the steeple.

⁴⁷ Lynch, *op. cit.*, 459. Mr. Lynch gives evidence that the use of "repeaters" was practiced by both parties.

⁴⁸ Francis O'Neill (ed.), *O'Neill's Music of Ireland*, arr. by James O'Neill (Chicago, Lyon and Healy, 1903), 177.

⁴⁹ Alexander, *op. cit.*, 357-61.

⁵⁰ Mary E. Phillips, *Edgar Allan Poe the Man* (Chicago, John C. Winston Company, 1936), I, 571-72.

⁵¹ Quinn and O'Neill, *Poems and Stories*, I, 254.

That Van Buren was ejected from the presidency in 1840 would argue that other voters besides Poe wished to "restore the ancient order of things" in the national government, although Poe's satire could hardly have influenced this outcome.

Poe's most successful political satire was the burlesque entitled "The Man That Was Used Up," published in August, 1839. The narrator in this tale attempts to find the explanation for a subtle peculiarity in the otherwise perfect person of General John A. B. C. Smith, a man reputed to have performed prodigious deeds of valor in a swamp fight against the Indians. The narrator discovers that as a consequence of his great daring the General was literally shot to pieces and is now a completely artificial man—a "used up" man.⁵² The story seems of little consequence; yet Poe accorded the tale a value incomprehensible to us.⁵³ Once we recognize the object of the satire, however, we can understand why Poe valued it so highly, for the satire was aimed at Richard M. Johnson, Vice-President of the United States.

Colonel Johnson, then a congressman from Kentucky, gained his reputation for valor in the Battle of the Thames in October, 1813, when General Harrison's forces overtook the retreating British army. The British set their battle lines so that their left flank was secured by the Thames River, and their right flank was protected by the swamp and by the Indian forces under Tecumseh, who had taken defensive positions behind the swamp.⁵⁴

General Harrison ordered Johnson to charge the British columns with his mounted regiment. Instead, Johnson divided his regiment into two battalions, sending one battalion, commanded by his brother James, against the British while he led the other battalion through the swamp and against the Indians. Before crossing the swamp Colonel Johnson organized a spearhead of twenty volunteers, called The Forlorn Hope, which he led in the attack. After they had crossed the swamp Johnson's troops found the Indians ensconced behind logs and trees, and they dismounted. Colonel Johnson alone remained mounted during the battle. Eye-witness accounts of the battle vary in detail, but the report of Samuel R. Brown is typical:⁵⁵

The Colonel most gallantly led the head of his column into the hottest of the enemy's fire, and was personally opposed to Tecumseh. At this point a

⁵² *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵³ Quinn, *Poe: A Critical Biography*, 283.

⁵⁴ Leland W. Meyer, *The Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1932), 122-24.

⁵⁵ *Niles' Weekly Register*, VI (April 16, 1814), 111-12. See also Meyer, *op. cit.*, 130-33, for other accounts of the battle.

condensed mass of savages had collected. Yet, regardless of danger, he rushed into the midst of them—so thick were the indians at this moment that several might have touched him with their rifles. He rode a white horse and was known to be an officer of rank—a shower of balls was discharged at him—some took effect—his horse was *shot* under him—his clothes, his saddle, his person was pierced with bullets. At the moment his horse fell Tecumseh rushed towards him with an uplifted tomahawk, to give the fatal stroke, but his presence of mind did not forsake him in this perilous predicament—he drew a pistol from his holsters and laid his daring opponent dead at his feet. He was unable to do more, the loss of blood deprived him of strength to stand . . . he was wounded in five places; he received three shots in the right thigh and two in the left arm.

The fierceness of the battle is accentuated when we learn that of the twenty who made up The Forlorn Hope fifteen were killed, four were wounded, and only one escaped unhurt.⁵⁶ By March, 1814, Richard M. Johnson was back in Washington attending legislative sessions. *Niles' Weekly Register* reported: ⁵⁷

Although he received several wounds in various parts of his body, it gives us great pleasure to state that his general health is perfectly re-established, and he has the happy prospect of entirely recovering the use of his left arm and hand, which were much shattered.

And Richard Rush, who saw Johnson at some of Mrs. Madison's parties, later described him as "a man upon crutches; his frame all mutilated; moving with difficulty yet an object of patriotic interest with everybody."⁵⁸ Although he gradually regained his health, Johnson was frequently bothered by the re-inflammation of his wounds.⁵⁹

Naturally, Colonel Johnson's military record was used in his candidacy for the Vice-Presidency in 1836 and for his re-election in 1840. Poe was in Baltimore in May, 1835, when the Democratic convention split over the nomination of Johnson for the second place on the party ticket and the Virginia delegation walked out.⁶⁰ Before the Virginia delegates left the convention Mr. Holt, the Kentucky delegate, addressed

⁵⁶ Meyer, *op. cit.*, 128.

⁵⁷ *Niles' Weekly Register*, VI (April 16, 1814), 37.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁶⁰ Quinn, *Poe: A Critical Biography*, 217-18. Quinn writes that Poe was in Baltimore from 1831 until after July 20, 1835. Poe could have attended the convention, although the story idea germinated later. Edward Stanwood, *A History of the Presidential Elections* (Boston, James R. Osgood and Co., 1884), 115-16. *Niles' Weekly Register*, XLVIII (May 30, 1835), 226-27.

to them a long speech eulogizing Johnson's humble birth, humanitarian acts, and liberal legislation, continuing,⁶¹

But, sir, his scarred and shattered frame and limping gate would tell you, too, that the story of his life was not confined to a mere recital of household hospitalities or neighborhood charities. . . . With daring impetuosity he pursued and overtook the enemy—threw himself like a thunder-bolt of war into the thickest of the fight; fought hand to hand and eye to eye with the Briton and his savage myrmydons—poured out his blood like water—triumphed and returned loaded with the richest trophies of the campaign.

When we compare the military career of Vice-President Johnson with Poe's satire we are struck, even at this distance in time, with the obvious similarities: the swamp fight, the prodigies of valor, the shattered body. Any one of these clues was probably sufficient to insure a correct interpretation of the satire by people already beginning to warm to the personalities who made the 1840 campaign a bonfire of political emotionalism.

A glance at the 1840 campaign which followed close on the heels of the publication of Poe's story will show us how fully Poe was aware of the political tension. Whig papers accused Johnson, in his campaign speeches, of laying undue importance and emphasis on his own contribution to the Thames battle.⁶² In his Ohio speeches he was accused of opening his shirt to show his scars of war.⁶³ But even though the Whigs objected to Johnson's use of his war record they could not belittle it. In most of their political bickering they shied away from Johnson, preferring to compare their war hero, Harrison, with Martin Van Buren, the political boss.

The log-cabin-hard-cider campaign of the Whigs, with its singing, shouting, demonstrative mobs and jingoistic slogans, caught the Democrats off balance. They were hard pressed to find even such weak catch phrases as "Rumpsey, Dumpsey, Colonel Johnson killed Tecumsey"⁶⁴ to counteract the telling effect of Whig songs and rallying cries. The most popular Whig song, "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too," was written

⁶¹ *Niles' Weekly Register*, XLVIII (June 6, 1835), 246-47.

⁶² *National Intelligencer*, XLI (November 21, 1840), 1. See also the Whig political pamphlet "By a Workingman," *More Than 100 Reasons Harrison Should Be Elected* (Boston, Tuttle, Dennet and Chisholm, 1840), 15. In one of the Whigs' popular propaganda documents, a Mr. A. J. S. Smith admits that Colonel Johnson led the van and performed gallantly but refutes the often-expressed opinion that the plan of the Thames campaign was also Johnson's.

⁶³ Meyer, *op. cit.*, 433.

⁶⁴ Marquis James, *Andrew Jackson, Portrait of a President* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1937), 451.

by a Pennsylvanian, Alexander Ross, in the fall of 1840. The chorus of this song runs,⁶⁵

For Tippecanoe and Tyler too—Tippecanoe
and Tyler too
And with them we'll beat little Van,
Van, Van is a used up man
And with them we'll beat little Van.

It is impossible to say that Ross has directly echoed Poe's phrase, a "used up" man, for the expression was a familiar one in America during the eighteen thirties and forties.⁶⁶ On the other hand, Ross's use of the term to ridicule a Democratic candidate suggests either a consciousness of Poe's satire or a common source of political reference of which we are no longer cognizant.

In any case, the allusions Poe makes to Johnson's military career and the closeness with which this tale parallels the attacks of the campaign bear out the thesis that Poe has written here a satire of a political figure in terms understandable to his contemporaries.

Poe wrote no more satires aimed at specific political figures after the publication of "The Man That Was Used Up." He did not drop political satire entirely, however. In "The Colloquy of Monos and Una," Poe saw democracy as one of the evidences of the dissolution of the world. He presents the "law of gradation" as the reason democracy is not feasible.⁶⁷ That he may have been withdrawing from an identification with either party is suggested by the light satiric touches in "Some Words With A Mummy." He caricatures political stump speakers and even whisks his satiric brush at the Whigs.⁶⁸ This allusion to the Whigs has added significance when we remember that Poe tried to get government employment during Tyler's term but failed.⁶⁹ Poe mocks the whole history of the development of the American republic and, like Justice Story, decries the rule of the mob. In "The Sphinx" he tells us that no one who saw democracy from a distance would consider it a fit government.⁷⁰ And finally, it is from the perspective of the future that Poe discusses democracy in "Mellonta Tauta." This is his most complete

⁶⁵ *Niles' Weekly Register*, LIX (November 7, 1840), 156-57.

⁶⁶ See Richard H. Thornton, *An American Glossary* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1912), II, 921; or Sir William Craigie and James H. Hulbert (eds.), *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1944), IV, 2401.

⁶⁷ Quinn and O'Neill, *Poems and Stories*, I, 360. Printed August, 1841.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 626, 633. Printed April, 1845.

⁶⁹ Quinn, *Poe: A Critical Biography*, 360, 362, 379-80.

⁷⁰ Quinn and O'Neill, *Poems and Stories*, II, 665. Printed January, 1846.

and bitter diatribe. He rests his case as prosecutor on these arguments: the laws of gradation disprove democracy's suitability; universal suffrage is "meddling" and only results in fraudulent vote-getting schemes; rascality always rises to the top in a democracy; and democracy inevitably succumbs to the despotism of the mob—all of which makes it a good government for dogs!⁷¹

In concluding, it seems possible to say that Poe showed a consistent development in his attempts to satirize political foibles and ills. In 1833, 1835, and 1839 he made attempts at direct political satire culminating in the burlesque "The Man That Was Used Up." Yet Poe was gradually withdrawing into a greater conservatism than that represented by the Whig party and by 1849 was attacking democracy instead of Democrats. Had he lived, Poe would probably not again have turned to direct satire of a current political figure. But the bent of his development does seem to indicate that he would have become more Swiftian in his denunciation of the political philosophy of Jacksonianism.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 689 ff. Printed February, 1849.

