

Dickens and Poe

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欧米言語文化研究 *Fortuna* 第28号 抜刷

欧米言語文化学会

平成29年3月31日 発行

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I The Personal Relationship between Dickens and Poe

In February 1836, Charles Dickens (1812-70) published his first book, *Sketches by Boz*, in two volumes. In May of the same year, a pirated edition of this book was published in America as *Watkins Tottle and Other Sketches Illustrative of Every Day Life and Every Day People* and in June, a review of this edition appeared in *Southern Literary Messenger*. The reviewer was Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49). Poe was “apparently the first American to publish a review of Dickens” (Bracher 109) and therefore Grubb maintains that “Poe was, perhaps, the first American editor to evaluate rightly the importance of Dickens” (Grubb 1).

In addition, as Grubb says that “Poe recognized Dickens’s genius as a writer of short pieces when the latter had nothing to his literary credit beyond *Sketches by Boz*” (215), Poe noticed Dickens’ literary talent before Dickens established his fame as a great novelist. But at that time, not only Dickens but also Poe, even though he had already published a collection of poems, was still a writer of no reputation.

The fact that Poe wrote this review when both Dickens and Poe were unknown signifies not only that Poe was conscious of Dickens’ importance, but also that it is highly probable that Dickens had some influence on Poe’s growth as a writer. Poe appreciated Dickens as a writer of short stories. And when we consider the influence of Dickens as a writer of short stories on Poe, the following passage has a great significance.

On the other hand—unity of effect, a quality not easily appreciated or indeed comprehended by an ordinary mind, and a *desideratum* difficult of attainment, even by those who conceive it—is indispensable in the “brief article,” and not so in the common novel. The latter, if admired at all, is admired for its detached passages, without reference to the work as a whole—or without reference to any design—which, if it even exist in some measure, will be found to have occupied but little of the writer’s attention, and cannot, from the length of the narrative, be taken in at one view, by the reader. (Poe, “Watkins” 46)

From these words, we can read Poe's literary view, that is to say, his ideology that a short story is a more desirable literary form than a novel. Moreover, it calls to mind a passage in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), one of Poe's most famous essays:

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed. (196)

By comparing his review of *Sketches by Boz* with "The Philosophy of Composition," it becomes clear that in this review, Poe not only rated Dickens high but also gave his opinion on an ideal literary form. It could be inferred that Poe's literary ideal, which, in later years, he was to express in "The Philosophy of Composition," had its origin in this review. As Galvan pointed out, Poe's experience of reading Dickens' work helped him to develop as a writer:

Poe was the first American critic to recognize Dickens' talents, from the very first book he published, *Sketches by Boz* (1836), which Poe reviewed very favorably in the June 1836 issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Reading these sketches helped Poe shape his own ideas about the short story and the unity of effect.... (13)

When we examine Dickens' contribution to the growth of Poe as a writer, it is important to take into account not only "the unity of effect," but also the form of magazine writing. *Sketches by Boz* is a collection of many sketches and tales which Dickens published in some magazines between 1833 and 1836, with three unpublished pieces added. Poe appreciated *Sketches by Boz* as magazine literature and Dickens as a magazine writer.

There are here some as well conceived and well written papers as can be found in any other collection of the kind—many of them we would especially recommend, as a study, to those who turn their attention to Magazine writing—a department in which, generally, the English as far excel us as Hyperion a Satyr. (Poe, "Watkins" 47)

In fact, one of "those who turn their attention to Magazine writing" was Poe, who also published stories in magazines. So it can be said that the reason Poe felt strong affinities with Dickens lies in this point. Tresch places Poe in the context of nineteenth-century Western

literature as follows:

Like Balzac in France and Dickens in England, Poe in the USA was one of a new generation of authors whose works reached their primary audience through journals.
(13)

From these points of view, it was quite natural that Poe was fascinated with Dickens as a literary man who launched into the field of magazine literature. Silverman explains that “[h]e saw Dickens as having achieved what he aimed at himself, securing a large popular audience without compromising his aesthetic standards” (198). It may be that Poe thought that they had the same aim of pioneering magazine literature, and tried to find in Dickens what a magazine writer should be like. Thus, it could be concluded that Poe regarded Dickens as an ideal writer who showed him the path that he should follow.

Poe continued to write reviews of Dickens’ novels thereafter. Among those reviews, the most famous is the one on *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), published in May 1841. In this review Poe ventured some predictions about the development of the novel which was still appearing serially. Many of them did not prove true, but he saw through the trick that the man who is supposed to be a victim is actually a suspect. As Grubb states that “[t]aken all in all, from the first appearance of *Sketches by Boz* in 1836 until Dickens’s first visit to America, Poe was well disposed toward the novelist both as a man and as a writer” (18), Poe respected him and placed high value on his work. Therefore, when Dickens visited America in 1842, Poe requested an interview with him.

On the other hand, it seems that Dickens had not known much about Poe until they met each other. If there was any connection between Dickens and Poe, it was that “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and other four works of Poe appeared anonymously in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, a monthly magazine, of which Dickens was a former editor and in which *Olive Twist* (1837-9) was serialized. But it is not clear whether Dickens read them or not.

The first extant letter that Dickens wrote about Poe was the one he sent to Poe on March 6, 1842, the day before Poe visited him. He wrote as follows:

I shall be very glad to see you, whenever you will do me the favor to call. I think I am more likely to be in the way between half past eleven and twelve, than at any other time.

I have glanced over the books you have been so kind as to send me; and more particularly at the papers to which you called my attention. I have the greater pleasure

in expressing my desire to see you, on their account.

Apropos of the "connection" of Caleb Williams. Do you know that Godwin wrote it backwards—the last Volume first—and that when he had produced the hunting-down of Caleb, and the Catastrophe, he waited for months, casting about for a means of accounting for what he had done? (Dickens, *Letters* III 106-7)

The writings Dickens alluded to are supposed to be *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) and the review of *Barnaby Rudge*, which Poe had sent to the hotel Dickens was staying at. As for the reference to *Caleb Williams*, Poe was later to quote, according to him, literally in "The Philosophy of Composition," though Poe actually changed some words. We do not know exactly what they discussed, but from the letter Poe wrote to James Amy Lowell on July 2, 1844, we can get a glimpse of it:

I had two long interviews with Mr. D. when here. Nearly every thing in the critique, I heard from him or suggested to him, personally. The poem of Emerson I read to him. (Poe, *Letters* 258)

As for Dickens, he told his impression of Poe in the letter he wrote to John Forster during his stay in America on April 15, 1842:

But on the other hand I am really indebted for a good broad grin to P. .E. . , literary critic of Philadelphia, and sole proprietor of the English language in its grammatical and idiomatical purity: to P. . E. . , with the shiny straight hair and turned-down shirt collar, who taketh all of us English men of letters to task in print, roundly and uncompromisingly, but told me, at the same time, that I had "awakened a new era" in his mind.... (Dickens, *Letters* III 194)

Judging from this letter, it is likely that not only Dickens but also Forster, a literary critic, did not know much about Poe and that at that time Poe was still an unknown writer in England. And it is also inferred that Poe wanted to identify himself with Dickens as a writer of "a new era."

When they met each other, Poe asked Dickens to help publish his works in England. At that time, for American writers to be successful in their own country as a literary men, it was necessary to publish their work in England and prove their ability (Tobin 120).

This was the first and last time that they met face to face. But after Dickens went back

to England, they corresponded with each other. For example, Dickens sent Poe the following letter on November 11, 1842:

I should have forwarded you the accompanying letter from Mr. Moxon before now, but that I have delayed doing so in the hope that some other channel for the publication of your book on this side of the water would present itself to me. I am, however, unable to report any success. I have mentioned it to publishers with whom I have influence, but they have, one and all, declined the venture. And the only consolation I can give you is that I do not believe any collection of detached pieces by an unknown writer, even though he were an Englishman, would be at all likely to find a publisher in this metropolis just now. (Dickens, *Letters* III 385)

This letter shows that Dickens did not forget Poe's request and tried to seek a publisher for him. He also hinted his intentions to continue to help Poe, but it is not clear to what extent he tried to help him. By saying 'an unknown writer' Dickens unconsciously intimated that Poe was not known in England. It is not certain whether this offended Poe. Needless to say, Dickens did not mean any harm. To borrow Grubb's words, "it was a simple statement of fact from his British point of view" (220).

A few years later, something happened that might have damaged their relationship, even though Dickens had nothing to do with it. In January 1844, an article appeared in *Foreign Quarterly Review*. Poe complained that it accused him "of 'metrical imitation' of Tennyson" (Poe, *Letters* 246). Poe wrongly assumed that it was written by Dickens. In the letter to James Russel Lowell, Poe mentioned that "[i]t has been denied that Dickens wrote it—but, to me, the article affords so strong internal evidence of his hand that I would as soon think of doubting my existence" (Poe, *Letters* 246). It is supposed that this review was written by John Forster, but Poe formed a rash conclusion that it was by Dickens.

However, even though Poe might have had an ill feeling toward Dickens for a while, his admiration for him underwent no change. In fact, among Poe's stories and poems written after this incident, there are some that were influenced by Dickens. For example, it is supposed that Poe got an idea for "The Raven" (1845), one of his most famous poems, from *Barnaby Rudge* and Poe is said to have admitted that "The Bells" (1849) was influenced by *The Chimes* (1844). Moreover, from the letter Dickens sent to Poe on March 19, 1846, it is certain that Poe asked Dickens to help publish his works in England again. Even though in 1845 a publisher in New York published Poe's works in New York and London, Poe still wanted a publisher in England to produce his books. Therefore, he asked Dickens once more.

This letter is thought to be the last letter that Dickens wrote to Poe.

More than ten years later, however, Dickens made mention of Poe in a letter to James McCarroll, an Irish journalist, who, like Poe, asked Dickens' help to publish a book. Dickens said that "[t]o the best of my remembrance, the last trial I made in this wise, was on behalf of Mr. Edgar Poe, then only known in the United States" (Dickens, *Letters* X 40).

This letter proves that Dickens actually endeavored to find a publisher for Poe (Mason 1951 207). Moreover, it implies that after years Dickens still remembered Poe, though it is also probable that Dickens referred to Poe's name just because he tried to persuade McCarroll that he could not render any service to him.

No other records in which Dickens mentioned Poe exist. It is certain that Dickens received some letters from Poe, but they no longer exist. Moreover, it is not evident whether Dickens was an enthusiastic reader of Poe's work and whether Poe influenced on some of Dickens' novels.

As for Poe, after writing a review of *Barnaby Rudge*, he did not write any review of Dickens' work until his death in 1849. Although Poe requested Dickens to help find a publisher and "The Raven" drew inspiration from *Barnaby Rudge*, there is no evidence that Poe actually read Dickens' novels written after *Barnaby Rudge*, such as *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) and *Dombey and Son* (1846-8). Nevertheless, Poe was still mindful of Dickens. Grubb assumes that "[a]lthough it cannot be said that there was a deep and abiding friendship between Dickens and Poe, still it is unjust to both men to say that there was any lasting animosity between them...." (221).

Although there was misunderstanding about the author of the article in *Foreign Quarterly Review*, Poe continued to admire Dickens. However, since Dickens did not refer to Poe frequently, it can be argued that Dickens neither favored nor disfavored Poe. For Dickens the interview with Poe might have been a trifle matter. Poe was just one of many whom Dickens met during his stay in America. Moreover, there were some other American writers who had closer relationships with Dickens than Poe had. But it is certain that meeting with Dickens had great significance on Poe.

II Dickens's influence on "The Man of the Crowd"

The question then arises about the extent to which Poe was influenced by Dickens when he created his stories. Poe admired Dickens as a writer of short stories and as Grubb says that "[e]xcept in the handling of short pieces, Poe never did accord Dickens a high place as a constructor of plot" (219), Poe did not think as highly of Dickens' novels as of his short stories. Therefore, here I would like to investigate Dickens' influence on Poe by focusing on

"The Man of the Crowd" (1840), which is considered to have been inspired by *Sketches by Boz*. Regarding this story, Thomas Ollive Mabbott, an authority on the study of the source used by Poe for his work, points out that "[t]he source of much of the description of the old man and his behavior is in Dickens' 'Thoughts about People'...." (511). In "Thoughts about People" (1835), after mentioning people who live and die without being noticed by anyone, the narrator pays attention to a man at Hyde Park, begins to observe him, and imagines his daily life and furthermore daily lives of people in London. The followings are a passage from "The Man of the Crowd" and one from "Thoughts about People" which, it is inferred, Poe referred to:

With my brow to the glass, I was thus occupied in scrutinizing the mob, when suddenly there came into view a countenance (that of a decrepid old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age,)—a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression I had never seen before. (Poe, "The Man" 139-40)

There was something in the man's manner and appearance which told us, we fancied, his whole life, or rather his whole day, for a man of his sort has no variety. (Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* 216)

They are similar in that the narrators were attracted to a man. As stated above, in "Thoughts about People," the narrator then imagines the man's everyday life. Likewise, the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd" confesses, "I felt singularly aroused, startled, fascinated. 'How wild a history,' I said to myself, 'is written within that bosom!' Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—know more of him" (140). Thus, both stories have the same framework. The narrators take interest in a man and begin to fancy what kind of life he leads.

Moreover, the influence of "Gin-Shops" (1835) is also detected in "The Man of the Crowd." Rachman's study highlights a similarity between these two stories. "Gin-Shops" was one of Poe's favorites. At the end of the review of *Sketches by Boz*, Poe cited the whole text of "Gin-Shops" and recommended that the readers read it. The followings are a passage from "The Man of the Crowd" and one from "Gin-Shops" which Poe obviously referred to:

Suddenly a corner was turned, a blaze of light burst upon our sight, and we stood before one of the huge suburban temples of Intemperance—one of the palaces of the fiend, Gin. (Poe, "The Man" 140)

You turn the corner. What a change! All is light and brilliancy. The hum of many voices, issues from that splendid gin-shop which forms the commencement of the two streets opposite.... (Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* 184)

Both stories delineate a situation in which, after turning a corner, a brilliant light from a gin-shop illuminates the scene. Therefore, it is easy to notice a close resemblance between them. As a child, Poe stayed in London from July 1815 to August 1820 because of his step-father's job, but it is not probable that Poe could make himself familiar with streets of London, particularly what they were like at night. However, because Poe had the experience of reading Dickens' writings of London, he could depict a scene with which he was not acquainted well. In "Gin-Shops" the narrator states:

We will endeavor to sketch the bar of a large gin-shop, and its ordinary customers, for the edification of such of our readers as may not have had opportunities of observing such scenes.... (Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* 184)

As Dickens intended, his description served as a guide to a gin-shop for Poe. Moreover, "The Man of the Crowd" is the only story of Poe that is set in London. As Rachman points out that "Poe borrowed details from Dickens to pretend to the same kind of intimate knowledge of the city" (75), Dickens' work served for Poe as a guide not only to a gin-shop but also to London itself.

There are other expressions in "The Man of the Crowd" that were probably inspired by some other pieces of *Sketches by Boz*. Ranchman claims that "[m]any of Poe's details can be found in similar phrasing in other sketches by Dickens" (75) and takes "The Street—Night" (1836), "The Pawnbroker's Shop" (1835), and "The Prisoner's Van" (1835) as examples. These sketches are set in London with a narrator that walks about the streets of London, sometimes at night, observing people whom he comes across, and imagines their lives.

Taking these characteristics into consideration, another work of Dickens, or to be exact, the opening of a novel that was written just prior to the publication of "The Man of the Crowd" immediately springs to mind. That is the chapter one of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), in which a very similar depiction to those in these sketches can be found. At the beginning, Master Humphrey, the narrator, says, "Although I am an old man, night is generally my time for walking" (Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* 1). He confesses that he likes to go out for a walk at night and explains the reason:

I have fallen insensibly into this habit, both because it favours my infirmity, and because it affords me greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets. (1)

Master Humphrey is a man who, while taking a walk, observes people passing by out of curiosity. And one day he happens to come across Nell, who asks him the way, then takes an active interest in her, and follows her to her house. And it can be said that *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a story in which readers see Nell through until she dies. Therefore, the opening of *The Old Curiosity Shop* has the same framework as "The Man of the Crowd" in that both narrators observe a person from curiosity and imagine what kind of person he or she is.

From this point, it can be inferred that "The Man of the Crowd" owes much not only to *Sketches by Boz*, but also to *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The question then arises as to whether Poe actually read *The Old Curiosity Shop* before composing "The Man of the Crowd." Poe published the review of *The Old Curiosity Shop* in *Graham's Magazine* in May 1841. Poe rated this novel highly as "the best of the works of Mr. Dickens" (Poe, "The Old Curiosity Shop" 155). Poe read a pirated edition of this novel. The first volume of the original was published in September 1840 and the second in March 1841 by Chapman and Hall. However, originally, before its publication in book form, *The Old Curiosity Shop* was serialized in a weekly magazine, *Master Humphrey's Clock* and its monthly numbers, composed of four or five weekly numbers, were also published. It is highly probable that Poe may have read these monthly numbers before reading *The Old Curiosity Shop* in book form. On May 1, 1841 before its serialization ended, Poe published the review of *Barnaby Rudge*, which firstly appeared in *Master Humphrey's Clock* from February 13 to November 27, 1841. According to Poe, he read monthly Parts 1, 2, and 3 published in America, and as for these parts, Grubb claims that "if the Parts printed in America corresponded with the monthly Parts as published in London in *Master Humphrey's Clock*, 1, 2, and 3 would equate the original Parts 11, 12, and 13" (11). The first chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which originally appeared in the weekly number of *Master Humphrey's Clock* on April 25, 1840, was printed in Part 1 of the monthly number published in London. So it is possible to suppose that, like the case of *Barnaby Rudge*, Poe could have read a pirated edition of this original monthly Part 1 before *The Old Curiosity Shop* was published in book form. Moreover, since Poe published "The Man of the Crowd" in December 1840, though there is no decisive evidence, it is highly probable that Poe had already read the first chapter of *The Old Curiosity Shop* before the composition of "The Man of the Crowd."

Taking these things into consideration, it becomes clear why in "The Man of the Crowd" there are many traces of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Sketches by Boz*, which was published four years earlier than *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Poe probably got an idea of "The Man of the Crowd" from the opening part of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, then decided to depict London and reread *Sketches by Boz* in which Dickens treated various people in London. Thus "The Man of the Crowd" shows the depth of influence which Dickens exerted on Poe.

To point out too many similarities may lead to misunderstanding that "The Man of the Crowd" consists of many depictions extracted from Dickens' writings and that, if maliciously interpreted, Poe just plagiarized Dickens' work. However, the ending of "The Man of the Crowd" is quite different from those of Dickens' work. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a story in which, firstly, Master Humphrey, and then, readers, follow Nell to the end of her life, and the pieces in *Sketches by Boz*, though fragmentarily, give vivid descriptions of people who live in London. On the other hand, at the close of "The Man of the Crowd" the narrator says, "*He is the man of the crowd*. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds" (145). That is, at the very end, the narrator gives up interpreting what kind of man he is. In Dickens' work, readers are told the details of the people the narrators are interested in, but in "The Man of the Crowd," they are not. Therefore, "The Man of the Crowd" has a different conclusion from those of Dickens' work.

In conclusion, Poe adored Dickens as a writer of short stories and "The Man of the Crowd" demonstrates how deeply Dickens influenced Poe. Besides "The Man of the Crowd," there are some other stories of Poe that are assumed to have been inspired by Dickens, for example, "The Black Cat" (1843). These stories are fertile grounds for future review.

* This paper is based on my presentation at the 131st meeting of the Society for Western Language and Culture held at Nihon University on December 6, 2015.

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