

*Charles Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe: From 'The Chimes' to 'The Bells'*<sup>1</sup>

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It is perhaps not sufficiently known that among Charles Dickens' significant early critics there figures the name of Edgar Allan Poe. Dickens' American contemporary (born three years before him in 1809), described his fellow writer as a novelist of 'genius', able to satisfy both popular and critical taste: 'His close observation and imitation of nature ... have rendered him popular, while his higher qualities ... have secured him the good word of the informed and intellectual'<sup>2</sup>. As early as 1836, Poe reviewed the first series of *Sketches by Boz*, 'strongly recommending' the book and astutely praising its as yet unknown pseudonymous author<sup>3</sup>. He also reviewed *Pickwick Papers* (briefly)<sup>4</sup> and, at greater length, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, enthusing over its 'ideality'<sup>5</sup>, and, twice, *Barnaby Rudge*, attempting, for the most part correctly if not entirely so, to predict the last-named novel's plot in the first review (of the earlier chapters) and then – a shade grudgingly - admitting his errors in the second<sup>6</sup>. Grip, the raven from *Barnaby Rudge*, is an ancestor of Poe's own bird in 'The Raven', his celebrated poem of 1845<sup>7</sup>; and the almost equally celebrated lecture-essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846), in which Poe purports to explain how he wrote 'The Raven', opens sesame-like with the magic words 'Charles Dickens', followed by a citation of the British master on the art of plotting<sup>8</sup>.

Despite this visible Dickensian presence in Poe, the personal and professional relationship between the two writers can only be called vexed. Its course has been charted over the years by various specialists, most recently by the Spanish scholar Fernando Galván (2010)<sup>9</sup>. Poe met Dickens in his Philadelphia hotel in March 1842,<sup>10</sup> during the latter's American tour of that year. One of the subjects discussed was the possibility of Dickens finding Poe a publisher

<sup>1</sup> This text was delivered as a paper at the international conference 'Charles Dickens and His Time' at the New University of Lisbon (Portugal), 18-20 June 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Poe, review of Charles James Lever, *The Irish Dragoon* (1842), *Essays and Reviews*, 311-20, 313.

<sup>3</sup> Poe, review of *Watkins Tottle, and other Sketches* [i.e. *Sketches by Boz, First Series*] (1836), *Essays and Reviews*, 204-06, 206.

<sup>4</sup> Poe, review of *Pickwick Papers* (1836), *Essays and Reviews*, 207.

<sup>5</sup> Poe, review of *The Old Curiosity Shop and Master Humphrey's Clock* (1841), *Essays and Reviews*, 208-18, 216.

<sup>6</sup> Poe, reviews of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841 and 1842), *Essays and Reviews*, 218-24 and 224-44.

<sup>7</sup> See Poe's comments on Barnaby's raven in both the first and the second review (*Essays and Reviews*, 222, 243).

<sup>8</sup> Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846), *Essays and Reviews*, 13-35, 13. He refers to a letter ('a note now lying before me') which Dickens had, indeed, sent him on 6 March 1842 (quoted in Galván, 8). Poe also appears to have read *Oliver Twist*, judging from passing references in his *Old Curiosity Shop* review (214) and his review of Frederick Marryat's *Joseph Rushbrook* (1841, *Essays and Reviews*, 325-28; 326). Galván (2010, 15-6, 13) states that Poe also read *Nicholas Nickleby* (apparently reviewed by him in 1838; corroboration appears in a reference, again, in the *Old Curiosity Shop* review - 209) and *American Notes* (citing an anonymous review of 1843 in which some see Poe's hand). Neither of the two reviews evoked by Galván, however, appears in *Essays and Reviews*.

<sup>9</sup> For the Poe-Dickens meeting and its aftermath, see Galván, 7-12 and Silverman (1992), 198-200; see also, for the two writers' relationship, the earlier studies by Grubb (1950) and Nisbet (1951).

<sup>10</sup> In a letter of 2 July 1844 to James Russell Lowell, Poe claimed there were two meetings, but it now seems there was only one, probably on 7 March – see Pollin (1998, Internet reference); Galván, 11; Silverman, 199.

in the UK – a legal one, that is, for both deplored the absence of an international copyright agreement and book piracy on both sides of the Atlantic. After his return, Dickens wrote to Poe regretting that he had been unable to find a publisher<sup>11</sup>. It appears that, following this episode and the appearance in England of an unsigned anthology review which mentioned Poe unfavourably and which he (it now seems wrongly) ascribed to Dickens<sup>12</sup>, Poe's enthusiasm for the British writer and his works cooled, and the only work by Dickens which he seems certainly to have read between their meeting and his untimely death in 1849 is the story to be discussed in the present paper, 'The Chimes'. Nonetheless, that story proved to be a major influence on what was to become one of Poe's best-known poems, 'The Bells'.

Published in 1844 as the second in Dickens' series of Christmas Books (he produced five in all, between 1843 and 1848), 'The Chimes' came into existence at least partly in fulfilment of a contractual obligation with his publishers to produce a follow-up to the highly popular 'A Christmas Carol' (1843), in whose shadow, despite its not inconsiderable merits, 'The Chimes' has lived ever since (though Poe, strangely, nowhere mentions the 'Carol' and may never have read it). This second 'Christmas Book' is technically not a Christmas offering at all, but, rather, a tale for the New Year, being set at that time and subtitled 'A Goblin Story of Some Bells that Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In'. Written in Genoa in 1844, it was inspired in the first place by the chiming of the church-bells there. It was published on 16 December 1844, and had good initial sales: Dickens even made a profit on the print-run of 20 000 copies to the tune of over one thousand pounds, a return the impecunious Poe could only have dreamed of. The first of several dramatisations was staged at London's Adelphi theatre before the year was out, and years later in 1858 Dickens produced an abridgment for public reading. However, the stage versions achieved little success, and Dickens proffered only ten readings of the story. 'The Chimes' was not destined to triumph in other media or in public delivery alongside the 'Carol'; and despite its initial commercial success, it has never been a critical favourite and remains a relatively less-read element of the Dickens canon<sup>13</sup>. Nonetheless, in our time Dickens' biographer Michael Slater has signalled 'The Chimes' as 'his most fiercely polemical story' and as 'the most overtly Radical fiction he ever wrote' – designations suggesting a stark contrast with the largely amoral, apolitical and aestheticist Edgar Allan Poe, who even so fell strongly under the influence of this Dickens tale.<sup>14</sup>

That Poe was familiar with 'The Chimes', apart from being an inevitable deduction from the text of 'The Bells', has been established by the Poe scholar Burton R. Pollin, in an article of 1998. Poe's editor Thomas Ollive Mabbott, in his 1969 edition of the poems, doubts the link between 'The Chimes' and 'The Bells'<sup>15</sup>, but Pollin effectively refutes Mabbott's scepticism. 'The Chimes' first appeared in the US, hard on the heels of its British debut, pirated in the 28 January 1845 issue of the newspaper *The New York Mirror*; three US editions in book form, all also pirated, followed, two in the same year and a third in 1847. Pollin establishes that in reality Poe did mention Dickens' tale as a source for 'The Bells' in his correspondence, citing passages from a now lost book called *Recollections of E.A. Poe* which are nonetheless reliably

<sup>11</sup> Dickens, letter to Poe of 27 November 1842, quoted in Galván, 9.

<sup>12</sup> This was a combined review of several anthologies of American poetry, including one featuring Poe, namely *The Poets and Poetry of America*, edited by Rufus W. Griswold (1842). Published in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1844, the review is not thought today to be by Dickens (see Galván, 17-18; Silverman, 199); Pollin attributes it to Dickens' friend and biographer John Forster.

<sup>13</sup> See Schlicke (2011), 97-98.

<sup>14</sup> Slater, 93, 229.

<sup>15</sup> Poe ed. Mabbott (1992), 432n.

quoted by the editor of an extant volume of Poe's poems, published in 1911<sup>16</sup>. In the same article, Pollin offers an initial comparison of the Dickens and Poe texts – by no means definitive, but certainly forming the groundwork for future studies.

'The Bells', for its part, though one of Poe's best-known poems, is actually a posthumous work. It first appeared in its final, four-part, 112-line form, in the Philadelphia publication *Sartain's Union Magazine* on 15 October 1849, scarcely a week after Poe's death on 7 October. This version was finalised in May 1849; a much shorter earlier version, in two parts and 17 lines, jointly composed in May 1848 by Poe and a woman friend, Mary Louise Shew, was published, also by Sartain, in November 1849. One striking aspect of the final poem should immediately connect Poe with Dickens. Sonorous and onomatopoeic, 'The Bells' is a poem that cries out for performance. If Dickens' public readings from his novels and stories form a celebrated facet of his life's work, Poe too incarnated the writer as performance artist - in his readings from his poems (especially 'The Raven'), and of his lecture-essays such as 'The Poetic Principle' and even his lengthy cosmological work *Eureka*. Had Poe lived, he would surely have performed 'The Bells' in his readings, as Dickens did with 'The Chimes'.

'The Chimes', though ostensibly a supernatural tale, is above all a harsh satire on the doctrines of political economy and, notably, the population theories of Thomas Malthus. Formally, it is a third-person narrative, located somewhere on the edge of London and set on New Year's Eve. Its protagonist, Trotty Veck, is an impoverished old man who stands at a church-door cadging occasional employment as a 'ticket-porter', or occasional messenger. His daughter Margaret plans to marry her blacksmith sweetheart, Richard, on New Year's Day, but an encounter with a puffed-up local politician and a flinty political economist named Filer has a dissuasive effect on the three representatives of 'the poor'. Trotty concludes the marriage is off, and, in despair, all but internalises the Malthusian notion that the poor should restrain their numbers, telling himself that he and his entire social class are 'born bad' (102). That night, he imagines himself ascending the church tower to the belfry, where he is received by a host of phantoms, headed by the 'Goblin of the Great Bell' (127). In an extended dream-sequence, the spirits show him images of a worst-case future: himself dead, fallen from the tower; Richard become a drunkard; his daughter reduced to homelessness and, finally, to the very verge of child-murder and suicide. Goaded by the spirits, the chastened Trotty renounces Malthusian negativity and regains belief in himself and his class. He awakes safe at home, to find the marriage is on again: the tale concludes with a joyous New Year's dance.

For its part, Poe's poem evokes and onomatopoeically reproduces the sound of four different kinds of bells and the emotions they arouse: silver sleigh-bells, golden wedding-bells, brass 'alarum bells' and, in its last and longest section and the part where it converges with Dickens' tale, iron bells in a church steeple, rung by phantoms ('They are neither man nor woman - / They are neither brute nor human - / They are Ghouls!' - 85-87) and with their 'king' as chief ringer. Differing in length, genre and much of their content, the two texts visibly converge around the locus of the church tower and the apparently supernatural figures of the phantoms of the bells, Dickens' goblins and Poe's ghouls. They are also brought into contact by their respective titles. 'Bells' and 'chimes' are effectively synonymous, though 'chimes' can refer either to the bells as such or to their sound. Dickens employs both terms, while Poe uses only 'bells' (did he eschew 'chimes' to occlude the Dickensian connection?)

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<sup>16</sup> See Pollin (Internet reference). The lost book, *Recollections of E.A. Poe* by Frederick W. Thomas, is quoted in J.H. Whitty, ed., *The Complete Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (1911). According to Whitty as quoted by Pollin, Poe told Thomas that "'The Chimes" by Dickens was his final inspiration' for 'The Bells'.

Both, too, manifest a similar structure, 'The Chimes' being divided into four 'quarters' (a bell-ringing term) and 'The Bells' into four numbered parts.

'The Chimes' is a fiercely ethical text: if 'A Christmas Carol's message was one of generosity and goodwill, its grimmer successor sent out a strong signal to England's poor, as individuals and as a class, enjoining them to abjure self-deprecation, raise their self-esteem and view themselves as human beings entitled to marriage, family life and self-respect. This is a highly realist agenda – visibly social and potentially political, with Dickens affirming the dignity of the poor and the indignity of the authorities, as he had done already in *Oliver Twist* and would do again in *Hard Times* or *Our Mutual Friend*.

The curiosity is that in this story, the vindication of the poor is textually achieved by the manipulation of supernatural motifs. The protagonist is re-moralised by the bells, by their spirits' insistent message of human dignity and social equality. The church-bells and their phantoms pervade all four 'quarters' of Dickens' text. The first quarter begins with an evocation of sleeping in a church at night; Trotty climbs the belfry in the second, to be haunted and pursued at intervals by the bells' tutelary goblins across the third and fourth. The language of their pursuit is insistently rhythmic, alliterative and repetitive, indeed verging on the onomatopoeic: 'Drag him to us, drag him to us, Haunt and hunt him, haunt and hunt him' (122); 'Up, up, up; and climb and clamber' (124): 'Gigantic, grave and darkly watchful' (126); and, finally and benevolently: 'melodious, deep-mouthed, noble Bells; cast in no common metal, made by no common founder; when had they ever chimed like that, before!>' (158).

Poe's bells, by contrast and especially in the poem's long fourth section which most clearly bears the imprint of Dickens' tale, ring out a carillon devoid of ethical content and devoted to abstraction and sonorous pleasure. The ghoulish king of 'The Bells', unlike his goblin counterpart in 'The Chimes', has no social or behavioural axe to grind. He rings out the chimes in a grotesque celebration of pure music-making joy: 'And his merry bosom swells / With the Paeon of the bells! / And he dances and he yells'. Musicality morphs into near-abstraction, in the image of the ghoul 'Keeping time, time, time, As he knells, knells, knells, / In a happy Runic rhyme / To the rolling of the bells / Of the bells, bells, bells: - / To the tolling of the bells' (92-94, 103-107). Alliteration, repetition and rhythm dominate here as in Dickens' purple prose; Poe's poem culminates as 'The Chimes' does in a dance; yet the implications could not be more different, as the strange epithet 'Runic' suggests. Referring to the Anglo-Saxon or Nordic runes or esoteric script, this term effectively converts the ghoulish monarch's cavortings into a pure abstraction, thus displacing Poe's poem light-years away from the harsh reflections on social identity of 'The Chimes'.

The sheer musicality of Poe's poem is self-evident, and is borne out by its later history in various media. In France, it anticipates the quasi-abstract 'pure poetry' of Stéphane Mallarmé, who was to translate it, or Paul Valéry. Sergei Rachmaninov turned it into a choral symphony (*The Bells*, 1913), based on a Russian translation. On the American folk music scene, Phil Ochs recorded a slimmed-down version in 1964<sup>17</sup>, while Bob Dylan claims in his memoir *Chronicles Volume One* (2004) that in New York in 1961, he too set Poe's poem to music<sup>18</sup> (curiously, Dylan is also the author of two bells-and-chimes songs, 'Chimes of Freedom' and 'Ring Them Bells'<sup>19</sup>). In the world of English poetry, John Betjeman confessed in 1960 to

<sup>17</sup> On his album *All The News that's Fit to Sing* (1964).

<sup>18</sup> See Dylan (2004), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Recorded respectively on his albums *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964) and *Oh Mercy* (1987).

having learned Poe's poem by heart in his verse autobiography, itself entitled *Summoned by Bells*<sup>20</sup>. 'The Bells' seems, indeed, to have become the very type of the onomatopoeic sound-poem.

All this, a shade surprisingly, is in some ways not that far removed from Dickens. 'A Christmas Carol', with its five 'staves', the (mis)quotation from the carol 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen', sung to Scrooge by a street-urchin<sup>21</sup>, which supplies the story's title, Tiny Tim's Christmas song, and other musical details, almost calls out – as has been done – to be made into a musical. 'The Chimes' follows on from its predecessor in its musical title, the bells clang and resound throughout the narrative, and the tale concludes with a New Year's dance, complete with 'a band of music', 'the Drum', and 'the bells; not the Bells, but a portable collection on a frame' (159).

Notwithstanding the eloquent echoes of Dickens' chimes in Poe's bells, it is clear that, if one confronts these two texts and despite their common exploitation of the supernatural, the differences have to outweigh the similarities. Dickens viewed literature, as entertainment certainly, but to higher social and ethical ends; Poe abhorred the didactic and affirmed the supremacy of what in 'The Poetic Principle' he called 'the poem written solely for the poem's sake'<sup>22</sup>. The contrast is especially acute for 'The Chimes' and 'The Bells': both activate similar ghostly machinery, yet Dickens takes a concretely polemical and ethical stand, while Poe's 'Runic rhyme' adumbrates an aesthetic approximating literature to abstraction. The paradox is that the afterlife of 'The Bells' is also that of 'The Chimes', since Poe's poem could not have existed without Dickens' story. At the same time, this surprising case of literary influence illuminates the multifaceted nature of Dickens' art, and its capacity to inspire even a contemporary like Poe possessed of all but totally opposed aesthetic beliefs.

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<sup>20</sup> Betjeman (1960), 29 (Chapter III, line 60).

<sup>21</sup> The boy sings 'God bless you merry gentleman / May nothing you dismay!', misquoting the carol's opening lines, which should be: 'God rest you merry, gentlemen / Let nothing you dismay' ('A Christmas Carol', 15).

<sup>22</sup> Poe, 'The Poetic Principle' (lecture, 1849; posthumously published, 1850), *Essays and Reviews*, 71-94, 76.

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