The Cacophonic Politics of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells"

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Published in 1848, and then revised in 1849, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells" still triggers a rift between some of his critics. Certain readers approach the poem as satirical, antagonizing, or fatalistic; other readers approach the poem as transcendent, a lyrical masterpiece that perfectly distills Poe's poetic principles. It remains relatively uncommon, however, for readers to approach "The Bells" as a *political* text, perhaps for the reasons that I have already mentioned: its nihilistic overtones suggest existential—rather than earthly—concerns, and its purported purity as a poem ostensibly removes it from the messy business of politics and raises it to a higher level of contemplative art. But neither Poe nor his reader can fully evade political concerns; "The Bells" reflects, in particular, a palpable fear that post-Jacksonian America was rapidly declining into mindless repetition, clamorous discourse, and craven spellbinders. This essay analyzes the political valence of "The Bells" by excavating from the poem a number of Poe's political concerns as well as the likely concerns of his larger audience. Due in part to its intertextuality and in part to its deliberately Platonic design, "The Bells" subtly rails against the inherently corrupting influences of American democracy.[1]

Poe drew "The Bells" into four quarters, each of which represent a different season in a human life through the sounding of bells. The jolly first quarter signifies birth as well as the Christmas season via "tinkling" sounds, while the equally uplifting second quarter evokes marriage through "molten-golden notes" (Poe 1984, 92).[2] The penultimate quarter, in contrast, marks the arrival of danger as a fire alarm rings out to create a veritable frenzy among the masses. Finally, in the fourth quarter, the quarter to which this essay will mostly attend, the poem tilts its ear to iron bells, conjuring the sound of funeral bells as well as the accompanying sense of mortal dread. On its surface, "The Bells" compels its reader to contemplate the monotony of existence. The seasons march ever onward and the progression causes listeners to feel wearier and wearier. Yet I contend that the third and fourth quarters of "The Bells" convey

[1] For further discussions of Poe's well-known distaste for democracy, see Faherty (2005), Rodriguez (2011), and Whipple (1956).

[2] All references to Poe's works in this essay are to *Poe: Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984).

a political subtext. Just who is the devilish ringer of the bells, and who are the riotous people below that so fervently obey its orders? By pivoting from the hysteria of the madding crowd to despotic, ghoulish bells, "The Bells" underscores the latent horrors of democracy: a mode of government, Poe regularly maintained in his works of fiction and nonfiction alike, that generates unrest and leads invariably to an authoritarian nightmare. Each stanza, and eventually the poem as a whole, moves into alignment with the cacophonic bells being rung by a despot.

But would Poe's contemporaries have been able to understand the political valence of "The Bells"? Is it reasonable to assume that Poe's nineteenth-century reader would have understood the symbol of noisy bells to be a correlative to the political discourse of the day? When and where were bells employed by Poe with the explicit intent of producing a political soundscape? Throughout the nation's first century of existence, bell-ringing remained a sign of revolutionary feeling, or "a rhythm of cascading excitement" (Linebaugh 2013, 236). During the Revolution, and then again during the War of 1812, bells alerted American audiences to encroaching forces and marshalled them into sharing patriotic sentiments in concert with calls for revolutionary fervor. Clamorous bells, however unconsciously, attuned the listener's sensorium to a swelling revolutionary chorus. For multiple reasons, Poe would have been repulsed by the resultant din. The story goes that Poe composed "The Bells" after a sleepless night in New York City in 1848; his hostess, Marie Louise Shew Houghton, prompted him to respond to his frustration with the never-silent city. But it seems probable that Poe was at least in part channeling his own long-standing discomfort with blind obedience to so-called patriotic bells. After all, one of the pealing bells that he heard from Houghton's apartment was the New York Liberty Bell, housed in nearby Middle Collegiate Church. This special bell arrived in America prior to its twin in Philadelphia, and it was deemed so important symbolically that American forces moved the bell to protect it during the Revolution. Moreover, Poe had relocated to Philadelphia a decade earlier in 1838, the same year that he published "The Devil in the Belfy" (discussed below), and he would have witnessed first-hand the much-hyped naming of the other major Liberty Bell. Paul Haspel demonstrates how the Liberty Bell became a symbol of abolitionism, and how "the promulgation of Liberty Bell ideology"—sounded through bell-themed propaganda—would have negatively impacted Poe (Haspel 2012, 46). As a relatively isolated person and a political outsider, Poe would have very probably felt himself constantly harangued by both the New York Liberty Bell and the bells of the Philadelphia State House, rung incessantly on patriotic occasions such as George Washington's birthday,

Independence Day, and so forth. Poe's poetry and fiction reveal a writer who loathed the idea that the ringing of bells could shepherd the populace into a state of sheep-like docility. In Poe's estimation, democracy in particular paved the way for demagogues, since democracy catered to the appetites of an unleashed crowd and allowed mobs to bypass the sage counsel of ruling elites. He appears to have equated these incessant bells with what he perceived to be the shortcomings of America's democratic ideals: in his numerous accounts, to ring the proverbial bell was the primary occupation of the populist tyrant, and to join the ensemble of obstreperous bells was the primary occupation of individuals seeking to participate in the ill-fated *demos*. "Their king it is who tolls," and the ghoulish people—"ah, the people"—swing to the rhythm of their nefarious leader. For Poe, there is something intrinsically demagogic about ceaseless bells.

Significantly, Poe was not the only recognizable writer during his era to address the political implications of bell imagery.[3] One might think of the cacophonous bells that Herman Melville sounds in *Benito Cereno* (1855). Melville's "drearily" reverberating bells, which toll as though for an execution, alert characters to the omnipresent specter of democratic revolution (Melville 2002, 82).[4] Elsewhere, Nathaniel Hawthorne, an early advocate of Poe's work, recognized the rich symbolic potential of cacophonous bells, especially when it came to addressing the swells of Jacksonian democracy. Hawthorne's short story "A Bell's Biography" (1837) recycles the symbol of the bell to ruminate upon young America's political imaginary. The story personifies a neighborly

[3] Nor would Poe be the last to play with this theme of political bells. In "The Horror at Red Hook" (1925)—a story that focuses in large part upon the ostensible dangers of a multiethnic democracy—the noted horror writer H.P. Lovecraft signaled the corruption of Red Hook in a manner that echoed Poe, one of Lovecraft's greatest inspirations: "The shivery tinkle of raucous little bells pealed out to greet the insane titter of a naked phosphorescent thing" (Lovecraft 2005, 141). This connection between the bells of Lovecraft, an outspoken racist, and the bells of Poe, a figure who often aligned himself with the American South, reveals how their shared anti-democratic sentiments potentially germinate from the seeds of a widespread racism. Indeed, the correlation between anti-democratic attitudes and racism continues to plague the contemporary U.S.

[4] In this context, readers might also consider Melville's 1855 short story "The Bell-Tower," a story about the erection of a "great state-bell" that ultimately collapses under its own weight (Melville 1969, 225). While the story extends a rather obvious critique of overzealous aristocrats, constructing unstable monuments to their own greatness, it also gestures at the relationship between democracy and the story's doomed bell(s). During the building of the bell-tower, "Those who (…) thronged to the spot—hanging to the rude poles of scaffolding, like sailors on yards, or bee on boughs (…) inspirited (the builder) to self-esteem" (224). In other words, Melville appears to implicate, to some degree, the unruly mob in the impending catastrophe, because "the republic's" hunger for a spectacle of "public spirit" leads to disaster (225).

bell who speaks with an iron tongue. Although Hawthorne characteristically equivocated in his depiction of cacophonous bells—at the close of the story, the narrator highlights some of the positive traits of the bell, such as its ability to toll "a requiem for all alike," or its levelling effect—much of the text uses the din of bells as an excuse to rail against the limitations of American democracy (Hawthorne 1974, 109). Hawthorne's bells are forged in France in a hotbed of revolutionary zeal and, in typical Jacksonian fashion, their ringers employ them to "stir up" certain sentiment, like the "beat of (a) drum," in the name of haranguing bystanders into strict compliance with the status quo (105-106). Hawthorne's bells thus retain acutely negative associations: in their "empty repetition," they confuse the "careless multitude" and catalyze "many a revolution… invariably with a prodigious uproar" (103). The titular bell stands out as a "member of that innumerable class, whose characteristic feature is the tongue, and whose sole business, to clamor for the public good"; in other words, the anthropomorphic bell cannot escape from his "noisy brethren, in our tongue-governed democracy" (103). Hawthorne's "A Bell's Biography" anticipates Poe's "The Bells" in a variety of ways, then, but perhaps in no way more significantly than in its political subtext. Whether or not Poe consciously recalled Hawthorne's story during the composition of "The Bells," one can safely deduce that in Poe's age bells remained a highly politicized symbol—and, even more specifically, that this political symbol was frequently sounded as an alarm against democracy run amuck.

The Din of Poe's Many Bells

To read "The Bells" as a political poem, readers must place it both within the context of the 1830s and 40s and within the larger trajectory of Poe's literary evolution. Poe included cacophonous bells throughout his stories in a manner that augmented their political subtexts. Think of "Hop-Frog" (1849), for instance, with its rebellious dwarf Hop-Frog dressed in motley, including the jingling bells upon his cap. Adorning a subversive agent, the dwarf's bells become a *leitmotif* that signals the repulsive nature of democratic revolution. Recognizable by his distinctive cap and bells, the dwarf fools the king and his advisors to dress like Ourang-Outangs before stringing them up and lighting them on fire in a horrifying act of disobedience. While Poe certainly did not paint a flattering portrait of the sovereign, he saved his most grotesque imagery

for the moment of insurrection.[5] Poe's story notes how the chains that secure the royal band, like the bells on Hop-Frog's cap, serve to increase "the confusion by their jangling" (Poe "Hop" 1984, 907). The acoustic profile of the downfall of the king thus involves a steady stream of jingling noises.

Or, consider Poe's (in)famous tale, "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether" (1845). One of Poe's most blatantly political texts, this narrative takes place within an asylum where the inmates have overthrown the guards and now pantomime normality. Poe's title directly alludes to democratic revolution: the system of tarring and feathering is in essence the democratic project (Hawthorne similarly wrung his hands over the latent barbarism of democracy in his 1832 tale "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"). But readers should mark how this supposedly perverse reversal of authority *sounds*—that is, the unique sonic qualities of Poe's Gothic burlesques on the subject of democracy. Poe amplified the dread that simmers beneath the surface of "System" by creating a slow-building soundscape. When the narrator at last realizes that democracy has ushered insane individuals into power, he feels himself to be drowning in a wave of clanging voices from below: "An infinite variety of noises" (Poe "Tarr" 1984, 715).

The political implications of Poe's myriad cacophonies extend into his poetry as well. In "Tamerlane," for example, a powerful leader realizes (albeit too late), that he has prioritized power—or, the *agon*, the political sphere—over love. Once again, Poe represented the theme of excessive politics in an acutely sonic form: "The undying voice of that dead time, / with its interminable chime, / Rings, in the spirit of a spell, / upon thy emptiness—a knell" (Poe "Tamerlane" 1984, 24). In the stanza in question, the narrator addresses his "yearning heart," thereby taking aim at his own political ambition. His use of the word "emptiness" indicates that he now acknowledges the vacuity of a life in politics (24). Poe returns here to the image (and sound) of a bell to underscore the utter inanity of political concerns. The propagandistic bells goad listeners into acting against their own best interest, "in the spirit of a spell," and, at the same time, the bells mark an absence, an emptiness that alerts the listener to the futility of all political pursuits. The bells remain a catalyst of political delusion as well as an alarm meant to awaken citizens from said delusion. Or, let us consider one of Poe's best-known poems "Lenore" (a poem, like "The Bells," almost never interpreted in political terms).

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[5] Katrina Bachinger focuses upon the carnivalesque aspects of "Hop-Frog" and how Poe capitalized upon the carnivalesque in the name of "dethroning the establishment" (Bachinger 1991, 394). Yet I would argue the story's "competing voices" are, like the dwarf's jangling bells, cacophonous—and the cacophony of a rebellious public is far from the ideal melody that Poe elsewhere espoused.

To read "Lenore" politically requires an appreciation of its density, which is to say, its thick allusions and intertextual reference points. I ought to begin with the name De Vere, which would have signified aristocratic refinement for readers in Poe's day. That sense of refinement stemmed in part from the bestselling British novel, *De Vere; Or, the Man of Independence*, published in 1827 and positively reviewed by Poe. The author of the novel, Robert Plumer Ward, was himself an English barrister who helped to found and edit *Anti-Jacobin*, a publication that fueled anti-revolutionary sentiment. I am not the first reader to note the name De Vere, or the correlations that exist between Ward and Poe, artistically or politically speaking. Burton Pollin points out that Poe would have been attracted to the name because of its anti-political signification, and Poe also recycled another name from the Ward corpus—Poe's use of the name Lady Tremaine in his short story "Ligeia" may be a gesture at Ward's novel *Tremaine; Or, The Man of Refinement* (1833). Killis Campbell likewise makes this connection, if in a more understated manner: "*De Vere* in Poe's *Lenore* may have been suggested by the title of another of Ward's novels" (Campbell 1913, 67).[6] Yet I would argue that the connection to Ward's titular protagonist yields greater fruit than Pollin or Campbell acknowledge. Ward characterized the eponymous De Vere as an aristocrat who resists the corrupting influence of a life in politics. Like Poe, Ward viewed commoners as akin to Ourang-Outangs, and he lamented the very notion that "the descendent of a hundred barons [De Vere] should be content to pass a life in mere parliamentary maneuvering" (Ward 1827: 48). De Vere thus stands head and shoulders above the political crowd, those cavorters participating in their "masquerade," each of whom winds up "a mere instrument of party politics" (349 – 50).[7] With this context in mind, let us turn to Poe's "Lenore," a poem that involves the conflict between a group of villagers and a gentleman named De Vere. The crowd wants to

[6] Indeed, Ward's *Tremaine; Or, The Man of Refinement* echoes the thesis advanced in *De Vere*: it is a novel dedicated to the ideal of the country gentleman, both aristocratic in temperament and divorced from the noise of political brawling. At his best, Tremaine, like De Vere, distinguishes himself from the "mere vulgar crowd" (Ward 1825, 7). Throughout the three volumes of *Tremaine*, its eponymous hero must come to terms with a life in which he no longer throws himself "into party," learns to prefer Plato to the cynics, sets aside his reading of "party tracts" by figures like Walpole, and gradually accepts missing out on "the greatest activity [that] prevailed in politics" (50, 74, 79). In short, Poe's multiple gestures at Ward's fiction may indicate a common set of concerns between the two writers, including a belief that landed gentry should remain elevated above the political fray.

[7] Poe sounds a good deal like Ward in one of his earliest poems, "O, Tempora! O, Mores!"—a poem that compares commoners to apes and then chides individuals who choose a political career: "A little while / Will change me, and as politicians do, / I'll mend my manners and measures too" (Poe "Tempora" 1984, 22).

mourn Lenore's passing and Lenore's lover De Vere wants to celebrate it. This heated conflict manifests in a debate about the ringing of bells. The crowd cries out, "Let the bell toll!" To which De Vere retorts, "Let no bell toll" ("Bells" 68 – 69). Poe's possible reference to Ward's novel *De Vere* adds a uniquely political dimension to Poe's poem by pitting a singular man against the so-called mob. Ever-compelled to bell-ringing, the mob threatens to strip the nobility of their innate dignity. De Vere rejects public clamoring in the name of protecting the private sphere from the gross paws of the people. Echoing Ward's novel, "Lenore"—indeed, a good number of Poe's poems—reveals itself to possess a layer of political meaning that might otherwise be ignored.

Most aptly for my discussion of "The Bells," though, I must highlight Poe's satirical tale "The Devil in the Belfry" (1839). In the Dutch borough of Vondervotteimittiss, townspeople march in accord with the chiming bells in the steeple of the House of the Town-Council. The belfry-man, charged with the maintenance of the bells, holds dominion over the slow-witted populace below. Poe portrayed the locals as simplistic to the extreme, capable only of carving cabbages and clocks. Indeed, he likened the locals to pigs: "Corpulent and lazy… the very pigs look up to (the belfry-man) with a sentiment of reverence" (Poe "Belfry" 1984, 301 – 2). Poe's "Devil" mocks the assumed orderliness of petty tyrants, deposing the despot as well as the doomed masses that depend upon despots to organize their daily lives. Critics have surmised that Poe was ridiculing Martin Van Buren, heir apparent to the Jacksonian machine and an exceedingly influential politico charged with oiling the gears of a vast political apparatus. "'Two!' continued the big bell; and 'Doo!' repeated all the repeaters" (304). The town starts to fall apart when a "scoundrel" commandeers the clock, forces it to strike thirteen, and sets off a chain reaction of idiocy: "In his teeth the villain held the bell-rope, which he kept jerking about with his head, raising such a clatter that my ears ring again even to think of it" (305-6). Once more, Poe equates the clattering of bells with the assumed failures of a democratic experiment: this time, the bells mark the gaslighting enacted by a populist charlatan as well as the empty-headed, chaotic character of a crowd unmoored from the (necessary) dictums of a centralized authority. Poe's burlesque makes clear overtures to Washington Irving, thanks in part to its comical Dutch designations. Yet beneath the cosmetic similarities, one can likewise trace a deeper resonance between Poe and Irving in their shared distaste for democratic advances. "The Bells," too, involves an unhinged belfry-man—"he dances and he yells"—who takes over the steeple to initiate the unhinged blathering of the rabble: "Tolling, tolling, tolling" (94). The illustrator Edmund Dulac ostensibly perceived this correlation between the clamoring of the bells and the noisy

demands of the democratic polis (see figure 1). It is in this context that Poe's readers can detect the political undertones of "The Bells." In stories like "Devil," Poe laughed at the notion of a democratically-engaged electorate and encouraged his more enlightened readers to view populist leaders as deranged belfry-men and democratic mobs as being comprised of obstreperous fools.

Figure 1. Edmund Dulac, Illustration for *The Bells and Other Poems* by Edgar Allan Poe. Published by Hodder and Stoughton, NY, 1912.

The Politics of Pure Poetry

Yet most critics have read Poe's "The Bells" as apolitical. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. conveys a widely-held belief when he describes Poe as a "solitary genius," presumably self-alienated from the flow of American politics (Schlesinger 1922, 211). One reason for this apolitical analysis is the fact that "The Bells" has been almost exclusively catalogued as a representative sound poem. Sound poetry by design appears to reject social or political layering. Stephen J. Adams contends that Poe peddled in sound poetry to gesture at a realm of "Platonic purity" (Adams 2018, 63).[8] By stripping poetry down to its

[8] Jonathan Elmer argues that Poe "sticks in the memory as one who trades more in musical affects than in significant poetic meaning" (131). For Elmer at least, Poe's "The Bells" recreates a tension between the programmed affects of modernity and the "failure of such a technocratic compulsion" (Elmer 1997,

musical core—that is, to its formal sound, its capacity to strike the ear without the pesky intrusion of critical insight—Poe sought a degree of separation from what he saw as the quotidian political concerns of his day. "The Bells" recreates the experience of hearing church bells: the immediacy of their sound; the soulful transcendence they provoke. It plays with "the spiritual relationship of bells to the Divine" (Adams 2018: 79). Because they endure as non-referential signifiers, Poe meant for his bells to defy his critics, especially critics looking to outwit the poet and spot the hidden meaning of the poem. Hervey Allen Israfel muses, "The croak of the raven is conveniently supposed to be purely lyric" (Israfel 1926: xi). Pollin likewise amplifies "the graphic quality" of Poe's poetry by demonstrating the ways in which Poe aimed to present the word as a thing—not a thing to be decoded but to speak to listeners directly (Pollin 1980: 169).[9]

Sonic bells retain "originality and theoretical purity" and so they reach listeners at a level that cannot be swayed by mere political concerns (Adams 2018, 93). Poe's "The Bells" reveals itself to be apolitical, then, on at least two fronts: first, because the "cosmic Truth" of the sounding bells purportedly evades political analysis, and second, because the relationship between bell and listener remains an intensely private one, an invitation to "spiritual self-cultivation" ("Bells" 89, 93). As one of the most recognizable American sound poems, "The Bells" obfuscates political reading at the basic level of poetic form.

In turn, Jerome McGann makes a compelling case that Poe challenged his readers to transcend the trap of political meaning-making. Ever-decadent, Poe aspired to glimpse "the encompassing harmony that the poetry desires to reach" (McGann 2014, 180). In "The Bells" specifically, Poe pushed his readers to recite the poem aloud and thereby make specific choices about how to articulate themselves, elevating a sort of ethical reading above what one might refer to as a political reading (in this context, "political" means stubbornly partisan, or anchored to the concerns of its specific historical moment). McGann continues:

> The absence of manifest referential content, its aggressively literary and formal qualities, have led many readers to… seek out coded references to race, politics, and gender. But in reading Poe we have to be specifically wary of all such moves since they can so easily lead us to retranslate the

143). While this reading retains obvious political implications, it also seemingly puts Poe at odds with politics—a separation that carries with it a number of significant blind spots.

[9] Pollin continues, in an interview with Barbara Cantalupo, to unpack Poe's self-defined "graphicality," which is to say, his use of "images that are striking and startling, in their nuances and the particular adumbrations… those objects, images… in language" (Cantalupo 2001, 109).

> work back into conceptual—Poe called them "Didactic"—terms. Poe's great subject is poetic representation itself. (150)

Said another way, contemporary readers might be lulled into transposing Poe's poetic form into prose, or into a narrative explanation of his poem in overtly political terms. But Poe maintained that "form is everything" and so "The Bells" ostensibly privileges a staunchly ethical, rather than political, hermeneutic (169).[10]

Conventionally formalist analyses of "The Bells" confirm a broader tendency to treat Poe as an apolitical writer. In his influential study, Larzer Ziff claims that Poe stood out as "a man without a country […] unconcerned with social matters" (Ziff 1981: 67). For Poe, Ziff continues, poetic beauty offered "a release" from the political weights of the world (69); art was an occasion to strain inward, to "the closed world of the troubled mind," or to the deeply personal realm of one's "inner depths" (70). "The Bells" prepares its audience to transcend petty political squabbles. Art, that is, restores "psychic processes otherwise ignored, denied, or maimed by bourgeois democratic institutions" (80). I would not fully disagree with McGann or Ziff, since "The Bells" unquestionably appeals to an apolitical sensibility. Its carefully crafted cacophony is meant to move the listener in primal ways, minus the critic's arrogant interventions. However, it would be an error to assume that being apolitical is not, in and of itself, a political position.[11] Even as Ziff argues that Poe's output lacked a "social correlative," he admits that Poe thought the American Revolution was "a failure" (75, 72). The fact that Poe sought to overcome "bourgeois democratic institutions" betrays an anti-democratic substrate within Poe's works. As a poem meant to unshackle the listener from the mediation of conscious interpretive processes, such as, say, the democratic process, "The Bells" further unveils Poe's particular political program: a program meant to undermine the presumed political affinities of American

[10] Jonathan Elmer argues that "The Bells" produces a tension between Poe's attempts to formalize, that is, to "program affects" and the (inevitable) "failure of such a technocratic compulsion" (Elmer 1997, 143). In other words, Poe poses as both an agent of modernity, with his technocratic repetitions, and as a critic of this modern condition. Through his exhaustive formal inventiveness, Elmer argues, Poe sought to evade capture within the dominant paradigms of his day.

[11] In a retrospective on Poe's works, Evert Augustus Duyckinck described Poe as "what Napoleon named an ideologist—a man of ideas" (Duyckinck 1850: 337). To illustrate Poe as an ideologist, Duyckinck interestingly compared the writer to a bell ringer, "a Campanologian, a Swiss bell-ringer, who from little contrivances of his own, with an ingeniously devised hammer, strikes a sharp melody, which has all that is delightful and affecting" (338).

readers by training these readers to aspire to achieve a purportedly purified understanding of the world as well as their place within it.

A heavy emphasis on poetic form therefore engenders a kind of anti-politics, what John Bunzel has described as "the rejection of politics in the name of some nonpolitical 'truth'" (Bunzel 1979, 3). Just as Plato privileged the intellectual elite while downgrading the masses, Poe routinely retreated into contemplative solitude; accordingly, "The Bells" appears to avoid the corrosive influence of politics by fueling the white-hot conviction of a private person in a state of existential crisis. Like his contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson, a figure often categorized as one of Poe's many literary antagonists, Poe effectively reduced the density of human experience to a singular man and the music that he alone can hear. What ostensibly has no place in "The Bells," in either form or content, is the "the spontaneity, variety, and continuous unrest of democratic politics" (10). But I would counter that "The Bells" ultimately does take aim at a political target. To encounter the poem as purified sound, with all of the assumptions that attend this perspective, is to overlook the poem's dependence upon a common political theme in Poe's work (democracy as the cacophony of bells) as well as the poem's layers of intertextual meanings.[12] To unpack the issue of intertextuality, I now turn to one of the most prominent examples, one that carries with it a particular political valence.

The Dickensian Toll

The remainder of this essay places "The Bells" in dialogue with a vital antecedent to Poe's work: Charles Dickens's sequel to his enormously popular text *The Christmas Carol* (1843). Poe was unquestionably indebted to *The Chimes: A Goblin Story of Some Bells that Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In* (1844); he confessed the debt in a letter to his good friend Frederick William Thomas (Israfel 1926, 749). Indeed, Poe added two stanzas to the original poem in 1849 after engaging in detail with Dickens's work. Poe met Dickens in Philadelphia during the latter's tour of the U.S. in 1842—a meeting that both men eagerly anticipated. "If there was a British author whom Poe admired and appreciated

[12] Because of Poe's bathos, his contrivances, and his emphasis on the drone of convention, Daniel Hoffman frames Poe as a signifier of some essence that exists outside of the political arena: "Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe, the name resounded, soon becoming not a name at all but now a note, a tone struck upon some inward anvil of my being, one syllable in a chord I strained to hear, an ineffable harmony plucked from some sphere beyond the meshes of our common feelings" (Hoffman 1985, 2).

throughout his career […] that was Charles Dickens" (Galván 2009, 13).[13] Dickens's *The Chimes* departs from its predecessor due in no small part to its much more aggressive political message, and this departure itself reveals a good deal concerning the role of *The Chimes* as source material for Poe's poem. Katrina Bachinger makes the case that Poe was no stranger to British politics due in part to the influential years he spent living in London from 1815 – 1820. During those influential years, Bachinger asserts, it is likely that Poe would have become familiar with the politician George Canning and his followers the Canningites. Canning too expressed a great wariness concerning the concept of an unchecked democracy like the one that he saw taking hold in Jacksonian America. Poe maintained a life-long interest in British political discourse, and he would channel Canning when he made what Bachinger calls "Canning-like" comments (Bachinger 1991, 224).

Assuming that Poe would have been a well-informed political reader of *The Chimes*, I propose interrogating Dickens's work in terms of its unique political profile. In so doing, Poe's reader better equips herself to bridge the apparent divide between this text and Poe's "The Bells." Just what are the political meanings behind Dickens's (in)famous sequel? What are some of the politicized debates that endure in the wake of its publication? *The Chimes* was beloved by Dickens, who felt that this book spoke more effectively than *A Christmas Carol* against the social diseases that the author sought to expose. Echoing Poe's sleepless night in New York City, Dickens apparently composed the work in response to bells that he regularly heard during a sojourn to Italy. The protagonist Trotty begins the text with a firmly-held belief that the working class is inherently wicked. In addition to the dreadful tolling of the bells, Trotty encounters two government officials that affirm his bleak outlook. After a nighttime visit to the local steeple, in which he, like Ebeneezer Scrooge before him in *A Christmas Carol*, experiences visions as well as an epiphany, Trotty realizes that the bells do not mark the drudgery of a wicked existence, but the hopeful march of humanity's inevitable progress. The story of Trotty's transformation calls for a better treatment of the poor and clearly caricatures the wealthy and politically well-connected. On the surface, then, there is a glaring difference between *The Chimes* and "The Bells": Dickens's text holds out hope for the future, while Poe's poem gradually devolves into anarchy and death.

[13] In one particular review of Dickens's works, Poe was uncharacteristically profusive in his praise: "Mr. Dickens, through genius, has perfected a standard from which Art itself will derive its essence" (qtd. in Thomas 1978, 216). To an extent, then, Poe fell prey to what his friend George Lippard described as "Boz Fever" (qtd. in Thomas 324).

While it remains common for readers to interpret the trajectory of "The Bells" in private, existential terms—that is, as a record of a single human life, from birth to death—this trajectory might be a collective one. The first stanza opens with beautiful silver bells: "*What* a world of merriment their melody foretells!" ("Bells" 92) From its opening line, "The Bells" seems to gesture at a world, not just a solitary experience of that world, and it is ostensibly a better world built upon the premise of melody, harmony, and consensus. The second stanza maintains this utopian gloss, describing how the bells foretell a world that is "all in tune" (93). Poe may not have relegated his reader to a private, existential arc; rather, the "euphony" of the first two stanzas may connote a rapturous political scheme like American democracy, which promises equality and the glorious melding together of a Jacksonian people (93). As a political poem, "The Bells" graphs a devolution, or descent into a maelstrom: a shift from the utopian prophecy of an absolutely harmonious world to the chaos of a fully-realized democracy, driven by the reckless passions of the populace and the craven manipulation of opportunistic populists. This reading would affirm Poe's pessimism in contrast to Dickens's doe-eyed docility. But there is much more to discuss than initially meets the ear.

Like Poe, Dickens's political proclivities cannot be described as truly democratic, in the sense that he neither petitioned for genuine egalitarian ends nor called for greater engagement by the disenfranchised masses. Michael Shelden illustrates how Dickens wrote *The Chimes* with the "singular, coherent political purpose" of advocating a type of free trade radicalism (Shelden 1982, 330). Whereas the conservative Tories purportedly passed the Corn Laws (between 1815 and 1846) to enact a protectionist agenda, Dickens fought for what he thought was the untapped potential of middle-class industrialists, unshackled from feudal landlords. Yet Dickens's faith in industrial progress based upon less restrictive *economic* conditions, rendered sonically in his story by the sounding of the bells, was markedly not accompanied by an investment in the *political* power of everyday citizens. Instead, "Dickens advise[d] the lower classes to exercise patience and restraint" in the face of "the inevitability of change" (349).[14] Poe proved to be even less sanguine, barely disguising his contempt for the so-called rabble.[15] A commonality nonetheless persists: both

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[14] Rob Breton makes a related point: while he supports the notion that *The Chimes* is more political than *A Christmas Carol*, he also highlights the ways in which Dickens's narrative contends disinterest in economics signals a type of moral superiority. But this disinterested moralism only threatens to further remove the compliant reader from participation in the political process.

[15] Burton Pollin points out, "The strong moralistic and social-minded intent in Dickens (a plea for the poor) is absent from Poe's long ending" (Pollin 1998, 222). Pollin contends that "The Bells" lacks "the

writers contended that the antidote to societal ills was decidedly not political empowerment of the general populace.

An echo of Poe on the opposite side of the Atlantic, his critics have frequently accused Dickens of being naively apolitical. Dickens was a proponent of middle-of-the-road ideas that preferred good feelings to political strife (a position, I repeat, that remains always-already political). Accordingly, Michael Slater contends that *The Chimes* is "less Radical than Liberal" (Slater 1970, 507). Dickens fostered a greater sympathy between the classes, as his narratives plead for kindness and a softening of relations rather than outright revolution.[16] Beneath his Victorian love of "progress," an affection that Poe never fully shared, Dickens harbored a political vision that was certainly not democratic in any substantive sense. Slater argues Dickens never advanced an agenda founded upon "complete social equality"; like the well-known Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, a man to whom Dickens looked for support of his own idealism, Dickens clung to the concept of "government by the best and wisest" (Slater 1970, 514). Poe's keen interest in British politics as well as his long-standing appreciation for Dickens likely informed the distinctive political tone of "The Bells," especially in its third and fourth stanzas.

At the same time, *The Chimes* and "The Bells" each respond to historical pressures. Dickens engaged (however unconsciously) with the Chartist movement in Britain: a political movement that demanded suffrage for all eligible male citizens. The Reform Act of 1832 had already extended suffrage to one in five British men. Metaphorically speaking, the unruly bells were ringing out with the sound of revolution, and incremental reformists like Dickens would have been a bit nervous about the rebellious crowds that followed. Poe too spent his adult life resisting a democratic premise that, in his mind at least, foreshadowed anarchy. In "The Bells," the crowd panics at the first sign of trouble, blending into a horrifying composite with the "frantic fire" ("Bells" 93). When faced with an emergency, the people cannot reason their way out of their predicament, instead sinking into a state of "mad expostulation" (93). There is no way to distinguish between the "clamorous appeal" of the bells and a fire that grows steadily "higher, higher, higher" (93). In his well-known study, Elias Canetti unpacks how certain symbols have been used routinely to generate

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Dickensian Leaven of an uplifting message" (226). While I would disagree that "The Bells" lacks a "social-minded intent," I would agree with Pollin that Poe's poem never fully suppresses its melancholy undertones.

[16] Dickens told his biographer John Forster that he felt *The Chimes* to be "a great blow for the poor" (Foster 2020: 133). But the nature of this "great blow" remains the subject of considerable debate.

negative connotations around the democratic crowd. Fire is one such potent symbol: "Fire is the same wherever it breaks out; it spreads rapidly; it is contagious and insatiable; it can break out anywhere, and with great suddenness; it is multiple; it is destructive" (Canetti 1962, 77). Poe's poetic convergence of the people with fire remains injected with political meaning. Dickens and Poe therefore turned to the symbol of the bells, high up in the steeple, to pontificate upon the political changes swirling all around them and threatening to unleash hell.

I wish to consider in a bit more detail the two politicians that plague *The Chimes*: Sir Joseph Bowley and the officious Alderman Cute. Notorious due to their willingness to bloviate, Bowley and Cute clang like the clamorous bells above, cueing Dickens's reader into the reality that politics is only so much noise. The superficiality of this din becomes palpable to readers in the gap Dickens imposed between "what Bowley and Cute actually are (Appearance) and what the Chimes represent (Fate)" (Tarr 1972, 211). In other words, a fissure separates politics—a veritable cacophony—from reality, or the moral firmament that supposedly exists beneath political commotion. Dickens's verbose politicians "symbolize a system that is anathema to Justice" (Dickens 2018: 214). In effect, Dickens wanted to expose the deeper chime of Justice, which he depicted in the form of "the deep Bell" (67), at a degree of removal from the ignoble realm of political participation. While it makes sense that Dickens would strive to undercut obstructionist politicos in his apparent attack on the establishment, it is crucial that readers not lose sight of the fact that for a writer like Dickens or Poe to cultivate in his audience a distaste for politics meant simultaneously undermining the very premise of democracy: a system of government that can only function through widespread political commitments. In reality, "Parliament (Bowley is an MP) is never considered for a moment in *The Chimes* as a likely source of help" (Slater 1970: 511). Or, to return to Poe's graphicality for a moment: against the rhetorical trickery of politicians, the use of rhetoric being their primary distinction, Dickens, like Poe, attempted to strike a metaphysical chord and tune into the cosmic frequency of a Platonic Truth. This Platonic resonance elevates kindness, softened relations, and a fuzzy notion of Justice above and beyond the political arena of figures like Bowley and Cute. The purported answer to various social crises is never a democratic one. Poe would have been a willing listener to this particular Dickensian message.

The two political figureheads of *The Chimes* implicate the despotic drift of democracy. Alderman Cute is a "famous man for the common people," while Bowley tells the masses "I know what is good for you; I am your perpetual

parent" (Dickens 2018, 29, 43). These two leaders claim to be mouthpieces of "the people" (a tenuous political construct in and of itself) and, as such, they reveal the flaws of a democratic order. Gullible voters will be easily duped by populist mountebanks. These politicians remain joint to "the great people" (83), in a deadly embrace that unveils the self-defeating nature of democratic politics. I call to mind once more the unhealthy infatuation of Poe's ghoulish mob with its chosen, and unholy, representative: "And he dances and he yells" ("Bells" 94). At the center of it all, in the very closing moments of Poe's poem, readers encounter a king who tolls: a boisterous leader, like Cute or Bowley, recognizable by the fact that his "merry bosom swells" as he issues his decrees (94). The king in the steeple is not an outright tyrant—rather, he sings "Paeans" (94). In the context of Greek democracy, paeans were enthusiastic songs of praise and triumph, and they gradually became a tool for shrewd politicians to tame unruly crowds. Paean was a healing god in the Greek pantheon, and so Poe's king soothes the people below. But instead of stilling the bells, the king's paeans only exacerbate the chaos, inciting ever greater enthusiasm. These paeans "roll" (94); they surge over the masses like a wave accumulating sediment, even as they move in a circular pattern, "rolling" always back to the point of origin: the despot himself. Indeed, the "rolling" of the final stanza evokes a damning circularity that fetters the *demos* to the demagogue.

To convey its undemocratic message, Dickens's *The Chimes* moves through three stages of political imagery. First, with a gesture at the tyrannical Henry the Eighth, Dickens critiqued the bells as aristocratic, "ragged with rust," likened to "indolent and fat" spiders with "long security, swinging idly," and busy erecting themselves gossamer "castles in the air" (Dickens 2018, 3). "The Bells" appears to maintain a similar distinction between aging iron bells, with "the rust within their throats," and the mindless bells that represent the *demos*. Yet I cannot stop at this juncture, because simply establishing oneself as being against feudal authority figures is not automatically the same thing as being pro-democracy. These bells are pushed and pulled, after all, by a "wandering" and "wild" wind—a metaphor for the capricious whims of the populace, whose empty-headed papers, so "full of observations," prove to be windy at best (Dickens 2018, 2, 11). I would jump ahead here to Totty's dream of a future election night, driven by "restless and untiring motion" (70). *The Chimes* envisions the people as the chaotic wind that moves the machine, or the noisy bells that clamor with neither rhythm nor reason. In Bowley Hall, Totty glimpses people "flocking" together, creating "confusion, noise, and opposition" (86). The fluid masses appear to express "some motion of a capsizing nature": a torrent of blusterous opinions caused by "vast multitudes…

incoherently engaged" (85, 77). Dickens summarily denounced the rabble in Bowley Hall as "an abject crowd" (116). The rabble of "The Bells," meanwhile, receives no finer laurels from Poe: "They are neither man nor woman,— / They are neither brute nor human, / They are Ghouls" (94).

The final pivot of Dickens's novel occurs when *The Chimes* rejects both the despot and the aspiring *demos*—fatally entwined, "rolled" into one—in favor of an imagined moral core. Dickens preferred the calming presence of "blended voices," otherwise known as the "Spirit of the Chimes" (Dickens 2018, 76). James E. Marlow argues that Dickens endowed the symbol of the bells with an "evocative potency" that "would eventually trigger associations" for attentive listeners between the bells and "promise" as well as "hope" (Marlow 1975: 28 – 30). Poe similarly endowed his bells with an animistic quality meant to move listeners. But Poe remains the darker of the two Romantics: he viewed the so-called spirit of the bells as possessing an unwitting audience and pushing them, against their will, into a zombified frenzy. Poe's fatal embrace between the *demos* and its demagogue involves a revolutionary spirit that spellbinds the crowd and lets loose their Bacchanalian essence. In the closing stanza, the question of what originally catalyzes the cacophony becomes increasingly convoluted, as the people respond to the tyrant's "tolls." At the same time, the tyrant is compelled to "keep time" (95), with a rhythm being marked for him by the clamoring bells, which is to say, by the people. Poe's nightmarish vision of democracy thus dismantles clear causal chains as well as "natural" hierarchies in favor of an all-consuming din. The stanza's various pronouns ("we," "they," "he") collide and collapse upon themselves; all that remains is a disorienting crescendo of voices crying out in monotonous, grating unison. So much for the democratic delights of harmony promised in the first two stanzas.

For Dickens, unlike Poe, history still moves in a predictable manner: a sign of the metaphysical vision of "progress" to which he paid consistent homage. Beneath the clamor of his lesser, political bells, Dickens's deeper, apolitical Bell remains "dear, constant, steady" (Dickens 2018, 122). Although Poe's "The Bells" does not mimic Dickens's optimistic conclusion, stressing instead a more "melancholy meaning," Poe nevertheless shared with Dickens a belief in some hidden frequency, a melody, a harmonious consensus accessible to the select, well-attuned few ("Bells" 94). Dickens and his admirer Poe refused the democratic dance of crowd and tyrant in their similar pursuits of a musical consensus that would require little or no input from the masses. On the one hand, "The Bells" recreates a grotesque illusion of democratic harmony, generated by the populist spellbinder in his efforts to enchant the ghoulish, toiling masses: the "out of tune" clamoring of the third stanza falls into a strict

rhythm by the close of the fourth stanza, as the poem shifts into its final hammering repetitions. Enthralled citizens slowly syncopate to a beat imposed from atop the proverbial soapbox at the center of town. At the same time, like Dickens, Poe used this false melody of the demagogue to gesture at a higher form of prosody, recognizable only to the cultivated ear of the expert. The poem reveals that "the ear, it fully knows" of the dangers that surround it; "yes, the ear distinctly tells" how the "jangling" and "wrangling" of the political theatre imposes a kind of metronome and marks the capriciousness of a democratic society enslaved to public opinion, or "the sinking or the swelling" of the people's "anger" (94). Said another way, only an omnipotent, divine ear can delineate melodies heard at a loftier frequency from the base cacophony of democratic noise.

To interpret "The Bells" in this way does not require that I dismiss McGann's assertion that Poe was responding to what he felt was a deficient political imaginary. Poe did in fact conceptualize an ethical position defined by a prioritization of pure prosody. Not unlike his contemporary Hawthorne, Poe at times ruminated upon "the potential hiatus between ethical theory and its distortion by partisanship" (Davis 2005, 32). It would therefore be entirely too reductive to argue that Poe was always and everywhere political, or that the political truth of his poetry remains its "only truth" (Davis 2005, 9). Yet by accepting the notion that "form is everything," the critical pendulum can swing too far in the opposite direction. An excessive emphasis upon the formalism of "The Bells" risks upholding the misconception that Poe "rarely" commented upon "political events of his time" (McGann 2014, 169, 146). Poe remained in truth an active participant in the political discourses of his day, be they British or American. Try as he did to rise above the proverbial fray, Poe kept one foot firmly set in the *agon*; like Hawthorne, he occasionally sought "the political capital" of an "avowedly apolitical, artistic position" (Davis 2005, 93). Ernest Marchand effectively demonstrates how Poe's anti-politics was, in fact, a political choice with real-world consequences.[17] Although readers will do well to recognize how "The Bells" was forged from the furnace of nineteenth-century aesthetico-ethical ideals, they should also keep in mind the layers of political meaning-making that accompany analyses of the poem, then as well as now. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, whereas various authoritarian-leaning

[17] Marchand contends that, in an age defined by social planning, "Poe had little faith in social reform" (Marchand 1993, 30). More important still, Poe often shared the sentiments of "the propertied classes"—his imagined inheritance as a tenuous member of the Southern aristocracy—in his outspoken "scorn for Democracy" (39).

individuals turn politics into art, a more emancipatory perspective turns art into politics. Readers can—indeed, I would posit, must—reclaim a political Poe.

In closing, I urge Poe's readers to attend in greater detail to the political underpinnings of one of his best-known poems. Whenever Poe recycled bell imagery, he was dependably advancing a critique of petty despots, their zealous ringing of bells to command the masses below, and the blind obedience of a cacophonous mob. "The Bells" offers both political and formal satire, as the poem demands absurd repetition from its audience. It forces a literal reenactment of the droning mimicry of populist sloganeering as it re-enforces Poe's critique of a mindless, obedient populace, one conditioned by democracy to align itself thanks to the sorts of noxious repetitions that typically galvanize a mob. Poe's reader must occupy, simultaneously, the unenviable role of the haranguing despot standing atop his soapbox, reciting mindless drivel with a heightened sense of self-seriousness, as well as the pitiful role of hapless citizen, compelled to parrot the nonsensical ravings of a charlatan. I would again point to evidence for this reading in Poe's biographical connection to the revolutionary bell-ringing of Philadelphia; in stories like "The Devil in the Belfry," a pointed satire of president Martin Van Buren, Poe revealed a proclivity for this type of gesture. Moreover, Poe was well-aware of Dickens's *The Chimes* and, as an active consumer of British political discourse, he would have understood well the broader political implications of that text. While it has become relatively common for readers to interpret *The Chimes* as well as "The Bells" as apolitical—especially in their refusal to look to politicians for answers—these interpretations are, themselves, hardly apolitical. At best, these readings maintain a blind spot when it comes to politics (see, once more, the widely-embraced interpretation of "The Bells" as Platonic sound poetry); at worst, to interpret "The Bells" as apolitical risks ignoring the anti-democratic impulse in so much of Poe's work, since aspiring to bypass mediation and elevate oneself above the masses as an elite listener always-already indicates a degree of willingness to pivot away from democracy toward something else—say, a patrician elite looking down upon the so-called rabble, the members of which remain woefully deaf to the grand sounds of enlightenment thought. It was no accident that one of Poe's contemporaries once deemed him "Dictator Poe, of Scribbler's Row" (qtd. in Moss 1970, 13). In short, Poe's "The Bells" extends the poet's not infrequent commentary upon the deficiencies of American democracy. This added layer of meaning should render Poe's poem all the more tantalizing to contemporary audiences.

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