"The Raven" and "Knocking on the Door"

Peking University   Gu Zhengkun

The excellence of the lyrical prose "Knocking on the Door" by Shen Yanbing (1896–1981) has now been recognized with the prose’s entry into college Chinese, a textbook meant for millions of college or university students either in the arts or science. It is, however, against this very background that I make bold to strike up a different chord: the originality of the prose, if taken for granted by some Chinese scholars, is to be challenged by the following argument of mine—the prose, to a considerable extent, is a narrative imitation of "The Raven", a well-known poem by Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), "a Li Changji (李长吉, i.e. 李贺, 790–816) in the west” as Mr. Wu Mi (吴宓) once called him. My argument is backed up by (1) the striking similarities between the two pieces in plot, theme, imagery, mood and specific diction, and by (2) Poe’s direct and indirect influence upon Shen’s writing. Furthermore, I hope the following comparison will help throw a new light upon the essential significance of those similarities and dissimilarities in a historical context.

- The article is published in memory of Mr. Zhou Jueliang (周觉良), the late well-known professor of Beijing Foreign Languages University, who read and corrected it in 1985. — The author.
context as well as an artistic point of view.

Poe's "The Raven" first appeared in 1845; its instant success—this was, unfortunately to say, within a few years of his death—won him international fame. Capitalizing on the sensation the poem created, Poe wrote an article "The Philosophy of Composition" that strives to illustrate the making of poem. Whether or not Poe's "professed method has merit" is still a question on which the critics are widely divided.

One thing, however, is certain, i.e. the techniques Poe restored to writing "The Raven" have been eagerly studied or followed both at home and abroad. Foreign writers like Charles Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarme or August Strindberg actually idolized Poe and drew him "for their aesthetic ideas". It is, therefore, only too natural that some "The Raven"—like poems can be found in the literature of other countries. "Knocking on the Door" is just such an example.

The appearance of "Knocking on the Door" (KOD) marks a depressing phase of Shen Yanbing's life; it was the year (1928) when Shen, disillusioned by the failure of what is called the Great Revolution of 1927, left the Chinese Communist Party; harsh reality mercilessly blew to atoms all that the young writer had cherished deep in his heart. The confrontation between the social tragedy and the poet's early Utopian ideals evoked in Shen this painful piece of lyrical prose in which we can well see the author who sees ahead only a black wall and well hear the author who weeps and shouts with indignation, cynicism and biting satire.

Reading these two pieces together with the background information above, one is apt to notice that certain outward similarities between them can be roughly grouped as 1) both are
written by middle-aged authors: Poe, 36 and Shen, 34; 2) both include grievances from hearts saddened by profound social or personal tragedies; 3) both are in lyrical forms; 4) both are of similar length: "The Raven" consists of 18 stanzas; "Knocking on the Door", 17 paragraphs. Our comparison, however, will not concentrate on these nonessential similarities but will look past them for more significant findings from both texts.

The most obvious, perhaps, is the similarity in plot. In "The Raven" we are told that "once upon a dreary midnight" (L. 1) "in the bleak December" (L. 7) the weary poet is suddenly greeted by a faint "tapping at the door" (L. 4); the poet can’t decide if it is "some visitors entreatying entrance" (L. 16). When the knock comes again, the poet opens "wide the door" (L. 24), and he find nothing but darkness. When the poet “heard again a tapping somewhat louder than before” (L. 37) only to find this time a black "stately raven" (L. 38) outside, and then follows a sort of dialogue between the poet and the bird.

Similarly, in Shen’s "Knocking on the door", we also find that, "at midnight" (L. 20) near the end of the winter,® the poet awakens to the gentle tapping "Tap, tap, tap!" (L. 1) "Is there someone knocking at my door?" (L. 3), he wonders. And then, he hears the knock again, but the sound seems to change into howling wind. He calls, yet there is no reply when he is awakened the third time, he "flings the door open" (L. 29) only to "find nothing but a black dog crawling at door" (L. 33); and, too, there comes the author’s sentimental utterance to "the poor dark gray creature" (L. 36).

To be more specific, the comparison shows 1) similarity in time: at midnight in a deep winter; 2) similarity in place: in a room; 3)
similarity in the character: a weary scholar; 4) similarity in point of view: the first person "I"; 5) similarity in the beginning knocking at the door; 6) similarity in the middle: the hesitation to open the door and the final determination to fling the shutter/door open; 7) similarity in discovery: a black raven/dog; 8) similarity in ending: Poe's talk to black raven, Shen's speech to the black dog. If the similarity in plot happens to be accidental, there are still more similarities in imagery, mood and diction which combine to prove the influence. The following are the lines or phrases taken from the two texts; on reading them, a careful reader might easily reach a conclusion bordering upon mine.

"The Raven"

Once upon a midnight dreary (L. 1)
it was in the bleak December (L. 7)

"Knocking on the Door"

这样的夜半 (L. 19)
我也明知道不是真雷, 那在目前也还是太早 (L. 24)（见注6）
“北风的怒吼”

And each separate dying embers wrought its ghost upon the floor. (L. 8)

头上的电灯洒一些淡黄的光在我的惺忪的脸上 (L. 4)

filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before (L. 14)

頃带些凄厉的气氛 (L. 28)
梦中惊醒（L. 2）；我的血沸腾（L. 8）

As of some one gently tap-ping，tapping at my chamber door（L. 4）

" Tis some visitor entreat-ing entrance at my chamberdoor"（L. 16）

Long I stood there wondering （L. 24）
the beating of my heart （L. 15）
all my soul within me burning （L. 31）

我迷惘地这么想。我侧耳静听。（L. 3）紧裹在沉思中（L. 14）但是我的血沸腾（L. 8）

dreaming dreams no mortalever dared to dream before （L. 26）

朦胧地又半人梦（L. 6）
But the silence was unbroken，
and... the only word there spoken
was the whispered word... and
an echo murmured back the word
... merely this，and nothing
more（L. 27-30）

许多面孔，错落地在我眼前跳舞（L. 14）

巨声却又模糊了，低微了，消失了；蜕化下来的只是一段
寂寞的空虚（L. 10），这股殷然的声音只是我的耳朵的自鸣
（L. 25）

Soon again I heard a tapping
somewhat louder than before （L. 32）
“Sir,” said I, “or Madam truly your forgiveness I implore... /That I scarce wassure I heard you”... /Darkness there, and nothing more (L. 36)

“是谁呢？有什么事？”我不耐烦地呼喊了，但是没有回音。

“Wretch,” I cried../“Prophet” said I, “thing of evil!” (L. 38)

只是一段寂寞的虚空（L. 10）/什么也没有。（L. 31）

Tis the wind, and nothing more.（L. 36）

In there stepped a stately Raven of saintly days of yore; /with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door/... perched, and sat, and nothing more (L. 38-42)here I opened wide the door (L. 23)

Open here I flung the shutter (L. 37)

是你这工于吠声吠形的东西，丑人作怪似的惊醒了人。

是北风的怒吼吧？（L. 8）

只是条黑狗在门口，侧着头，象是在那里偷听听什么……

慢慢地挨到檐前的地板上……缩成了一堆……什么也没有

我跳起身来，拉开了门往外望。（L. 29）

this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore (L. 71)

这可怜的灰色的畜生（L. 37），工于吠声吠形的东西。

the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer /

swung by angles whose faint footfalls tinkled on the turfted floor (L. 80)
With so many resemblances in plot, imagery, mood, diction, it seems reasonable for us to expect a thematical similarity; and indeed we find it; both authors avow themselves "oppressed by a sense of doom" and both inwardly entertain a persistent hankering for those faded hopes. In Poe we can hear the dominant idea coupled with sadness and terror sounding hellishly musical; in Shen, we feel the theme tends to be a heart-rending lamentation for the irrevocable loss of past ideals, a lamentation that resembles a battle cry echoing in an empty World. With Poe, the theme of despair and terror serves only as a piece of thread stringing together all those rhythmic capabilities of a poetic universe in which lies the beauty Poe constantly seeks. With Shen, the theme of disillusionment is rather a dagger with which he stabs the world the hates, a trumpet through which "he gives vent to his pent-up grievances". If this is the difference, it is the difference that marks the true values of the respective poets.

There are other things that add to the complexity of the differences. I often assume an ambivalent attitude toward the following statement of Poe: "Regarding, then beauty as my province, my next question referred to the tone of its highest manifestation and all experience has shown that this tone is one of sadness. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones." I hold that what Poe preaches rings true on one hand and what Poe does in "The Raven" seems a bit inconsistent with
his preaching on the other. In other words, I intuitively feel that the sadness permeating the poem does not sound genuine enough. Poe obviously loves his share of pain and was an instance of the fact that man takes keen delight effective means to create a poetic beauty, not as an end itself. Here then lies the significant difference between Poe and Shen; the former chants for the sakes of beauty to coax “the sensitive soul” into tears, its sadness possibly being feigned; the latter weeps and shouts for the sake of giving vent to his true grief and eager, though in a derivative fashion. We have discussed both text as far as their themes, plots and the other relevant elements are concerned; there seems to be little doubt about the fact that these two literary efforts conspicuously resemble each other. But there are, indeed, a world of literary outputs which geographically and historically exist far apart yet all bear a surprising resemblance, I therefore need to produce more positive evidences to support my argument in the opening paragraph that “Knocking on the door” is very likely a prose imitation of “The Raven”. To prove the argument means to measure the extent to which Poe’s writings exerted a direct influence upon Shen in “Knocking on the door”. Add Poe’s influence on Shen, as we shall see, is not only direct but very strong.

First, Shen retranslated Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” into plain Chinese though five versions of the same story had appeared before Shen’s.

Second, even nine years before writing “KOD”, Shen regarded Poe as “an original writer rising above his contemporaries” and he also added that “Poe’s creation is that of beauty.”

Third, there is an assumption that Shen’s “KOD” was probably inspired by the theme of Poe’s The Tell-Tale Heart; the
assumption, though not so sound, at least confirms the fact that Poe had influenced Shen's writings. The most convincing evidence, however, is that early on October 10, 1922, Shen actually wrote of Poe's "The Raven", saying "it is extremely well composed and very hard to be translated-or we may say, it simply escapes any translation; for it employs a low-toned and dull-sounded word 'more' as its ending rhyme which can be never imitated in the target language." As if to challenge Shen's allegation, only one year later in 1923 the first version of "The Raven" come out in Literary Weekly (1923) (《文学周报》), its influence was immediately felt among the Chinese scholars. And, too, as if to verify Shen's early conclusion, the first version was soon severely condemned as "riddled with errors" by Zhang Bo-fu, a critical review of the rendering appeared in two issues of Creation Weekly (《创造周刊》). But four other versions followed up starting an interesting translation dispute. Even the classical scholars of the Xue Heng (学衡) school turned their attention upon the effort. Gu Qianji (顾谦吉) retranslate it into the classical Chinese poetic form typical of the Chu Ci (楚辞, 4th B.C.) style. It was here that Wu Mi, the editor-in-chief of Xue Heng, first labeled Poe as a Western Li Changji (李长吉).

Some readers also joined in the dispute making the discussion remarkably attractive. The year 1925 saw the publication of another "R" version by Yang Mei (杨梅), which, to my mind, is the most readable in plain Chinese. Whether or not Shen Yanbing took part in the controversy is still a question to be answered by further research, but it may not be so arbitrary for me to say that, as a man of letters, full of energy and sensitive to all literary happenings, Shen could not have been ignorant of the controversy over the different
versions.

However, to say "The Raven" has an influence upon "Knocking on the Door" is not to exclude the possibility of influence coming from some other sources. Reading Shen's lyrical prose carefully, we can not help detecting a familiar note reverberating in Ou Yangxiu's "Ode to the Autumnal Breath" (《秋声赋》) where we can hear the autumn wind whispering late at night, and then growing louder and louder and finally changing into a roar of angry waves, into a howl of wild storm; then the author asked the boy-servant to make it out what is was, the boy returned with the report that "there's nothing around but the wind among the trees." 

It is worth mentioning that Ou Yangxiu's "Ode to the Autumn Breath" was also compared to "The Raven" by Guo Moruo. In Guo's opinion, the structure of "The Raven" strongly takes after both Ou Yang's prose and Jia Changsha's (贾长沙, also named Jia Yi, 贾谊, 200 – 168B. C.) "Ode to the Raven" (《鹏鸟赋》), but Poe's "The Raven", he added, lacks the naturalness of "Ode to the Autumnal Breath" and the simplicity of "Ode to the Raven". Gu Qianji went so far as to practically render Poe's "The Raven" into classical Chinese in the exact style of Jia Yi's "Ode to the Raven", even under the same title of Jia's 《鹏鸟赋》. So that Poe in one way or another took advantage of Jia's or Ou Yang's ode, but the fact that these few pieces have so many things in common with each other suggests the possibility of influence.

If Shen's "Knocking on the Door" turns out to be a plagiarism of "The Raven", "The Raven" itself, as is shown above, may not be able to escape a similar charge; Guo Moruo, for instance, conjectured that "The Raven" was likely influenced by Shelley's "Lament" where
the poem also ends its stanzas with "nevermore" as dose "The Raven"; and the similar mood is most strongly felt in stanza 11 of "Lament". Jean-Paul Weber, after a more thorough study, concluded that "The Raven" reveals its curious and profound similarity to "The Devil in the Belfry" by Poe himself. Even if Poe did not imitate other's writings, he at least copied his own products. The case may show how hard it is for a writer to go beyond his own particular mode of creation.

When again we turn our attention from the texts to the authors themselves, we can not help feeling that, even today, Wu Mi's calling Poe "a Li He in the west" still rings true; Poe's essays and poems are those of a genius though shrouded in a sepulchral atmosphere; 'The Raven' is the very Proof. Chen Huimo followed up to say that Poe had his own odd and weird world; "he would rather think about all that transcends the human being, about the supernatural, and describe blood, death and horror not with an inspiration but with an attitude that is prudent and scientific." Similar comments are found on Li He; "Li enjoys using words like 'ghost', 'weep', 'blood', 'death'." Zhang Jie said of Li He's being "odd and weird" while Yan Yu distinguished Li He from Li Bai (李白 701－762) contradicting the saying that the "former is a ghost-like genius and the latter, a celestial genius." In his opinion, the difference between Li Bai and Li He should not be that of talent but that of style. All, however, I think, it is in this sense that Poe finds his counterpart in the far east; and, too, it is just where Shen Yanbing runs counter to Poe; for Shen, no matter how depressed, still dreams of the awakening of "Man", (L. 8) hoping "to ride on the neck " of the north wind
advancing triumphantly in the unbounded space (L. 9)! To be exact, Shen's world, ugly, dark and empty, is a world of Man after all; while Poe's world is dominantly a world of ghosts!

To sum up, the striking similarities between "The Raven" and "The Knocking on the Door" whether in theme, plot, imagery or any other elements and Poe's direct and indirect influence upon Shen convince me that Shen's prose is most likely a prose imitation of "The Raven"; the imitation, in my opinion, is not an accidental phenomenon; rather, it is a political expression of western literature in an eastern culture. It is through the comparison and contrast that the scales of moral values and artistic values manifest themselves demanding some fresh judgements on part of modern Chinese consciousness. To pass a judgement upon those values is like knocking on the door which, perhaps, remains close so far: but let's try!

Notes:
① College Chinese (《大学语文》), Ed. Xu Zhongyu, Southeast Normal University press, 1980. Shen Yanbing (沈雁冰), his pen name is 茅盾。
② Xue Heng (《学衡》), Vol. 45, 1925, PP. 8-12: 吴宓: 译著若以英文诗中之评论（拜伦—— 塞谬）拟李太白, 弥尔顿拟杜工部, 威士顿 (Wordsworth) 拟陶渊明, 白香山, 则阿伦坡其西方之李长吉乎。
③ Daniel Hoffman, PoePoePoePoePoePoe, Avon Books, New York, 1972, p. 77.
④ The Norton Anthology of American Literature, second edition, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1985, p. 1318.
⑤ Mao Dun Studies (《茅盾研究》), Vol. i, Culture and Art press, 1984, p. 131.
⑥ "Knocking on the Door" first appeared in 《小说月报》on January 10, 1929.
⑦ Poets of America, Ed. Edmund Clarence Stedman, Johnson Reprint Company Ltd., New York, 1970, p. 270.
8 Mao Dun Studies, Vol. 1, p. 131.
9 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition”, in the Norton Anthology of American Literature. Pp. 1434-5.
10 Poets of America, p. 270.
11 Essays on Comparative Literature, Peking University press, 1984, p. 170.
12 Eastern Magazine 1920. Vol. 17, No. 18.
13 Essays on comparative Literature, p. 169.
14 《文学丛刊》卷 52, 1922. 10. 10.
15 Creation Weekly 1925, Vol. 45, pp. 14-16
16 Xue Heng《学衡》, Vol. 45, pp. 8-12. 《阿伦玻鹦鸟吟》，顾谦吉译。
17 Ibid. p. 8
18 Creation Weekly, 1925, Vol. 45 pp. 14-16
19 The Sunken Bell《沉钟》1927, a special issue, p. 45.
20 The Highlights of Classical Chinese Proses, 《古文观止》卷下), Guo Ji Shu Dian, Peking, 1982. p. 440.
21 Creation Weekly, 1924, Vol. 45.
22 “A Discussion on the Translation of Poe’s ‘The Raven’”, in Creation weekly, 1924, Vol. 46.
23 Pow, A Collection of Critical Essays, Ed. Robert Reagan, Prince-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1967, p. 83.
24 Xue Heng《学衡》, 1925, Vol. 45, p. 8. 吴宓: “波氏之文与诗，具有仙才，亦多鬼气，于今一篇亦可以见之也。”……编者再识。
25 Cheng Huimo, “On Poe’s Stories”, in the Sunken Bell, a special issue, 1927, p. 12.
26 王思任《李贺诗解序》：“贺既孤愤不遇，……必作淫晦之调，喜用‘鬼’字，‘泣’字，‘死’字，‘血’字。”
27 张戒《岁寒堂诗话》卷上：“贺诗乃李玉乐府中出，瑰奇 怪则似之，秀逸天拔，则不及也。”
28 马端临《文献通考》卷二百四十二, 商务印书馆, 1936 年。“宋景文诸公在馆，尝拜唐人诗云：‘太白仙才，长吉鬼才’。”
29 严羽《沧浪诗话》, 人民文学出版社, 1961 年版: “人言 ‘太白仙才，长吉鬼才’。不然，太白天仙之词，长吉鬼仙之词耳。”