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American Notes : Charles Dickens's Version of Gulliver's Travels

Miyuki AMANO

Charles Dickens (1812-70) traveled with his wife Catherine in America for about six months from January to June 1842. While traveling, he wrote about his experiences, expressing his delight, discovery, suffering, and anger to his friend John Forster, from which he produced *American Notes* (1842) and then *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44). The distinct features of the letters, the travel book and the work of fiction are disillusionment, harsh criticism of and disgust with Americans, and they remind us of *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) as some critics have pointed out.

For example, Eugene Didier wrote about the similarity in his review of *The Letters of Charles Dickens* in *The North American Review* for March 1880:

We regret to say that nothing in his correspondence removes from our mind the impression that Dickens's feeling towards America was something like Dean Swift's feeling for mankind — he hated mankind, but loved a few men — Pope, Gay, Bolingbroke, etc.: so Dickens disliked America but he liked a few Americans — Irving, Longfellow, Fields...¹

As to *American Notes*, Patricia Ingham points out the fictionality of this travel book, and places it in the tradition of journey as a progress in the Western literature:

Leaving the purely documentary aside, Dickens embarks on something akin to *Gulliver's Travels*. The journey as a progress to knowledge through varied encounters is a long-established tradition in Dante, Chaucer, Bunyan or Swift. Despite the previous travel writing ..., this is still the inbuilt assumption in the early part of *American Notes*: that the trip is going to be an adventure involving a fresh assessment of what is encountered. Dickens will tackle the problem of categorizing a 'basically' English society that had gone democratic and egalitarian. (Ingham xx) (emphasis added)

The present essay basically takes the same view with Ingham as to the fictionality and idea of journey, but explores more in detail "something akin to *Gulliver's Travels*." It will show that this work not only tackles the problems of America but also presents those of Britain and more universal issues.

I

"Custom familiarizes one to anything."² Dickens the traveler says in *American Notes*. Dickens bitterly criticizes customs in America, and it was one of the main reasons for the adverse response in America when *American Notes* was published.³ However, his criticism goes beyond that. He also criticizes the customs in England, and most importantly, warns against the familiarization which makes people narrow-minded,

insensitive, and impervious. In addition, he reveals that the problem of familiarization is related to that of imagination. In bringing into light the trap and horror of familiarization and its relation to imagination, Dickens effectively uses a method and satirical style like that used in *Gulliver's Travels*.

Let us begin by clarifying the common features of these two works. First, both Gulliver and Dickens the traveler are first-person narrators who give their interpretations of what they encounter. Their judgment is based on their sense of value formed in Britain, and gradually their evaluation of Britain changes. Secondly, both Jonathan Swift and Dickens show the different points of view and senses of values through the relativity of size. Third, the bitter satire of Gulliver and Dickens the traveler is also turned back on them.

In Lilliput where he first drifted ashore, Gulliver is a patriot who judges the laws and customs of Lilliput by those of England: "There are some Laws and Customs in this Empire very peculiar; and if they were not so directly contrary to those of my own dear Country, I should be tempted to say a little in their Justification."⁴ The size difference forms the power relationship which makes Gulliver feel easy. He, "the *Great Man Mountain*" (19; pt. 1, ch. 2), attracts great admiration by defeating a number of enemies by himself, while he finds the tiny country to be the most "entertaining Prospect" like "a continued Garden" (14; pt. 1, ch. 2). He can also afford to admire "the Sharpness of their [Lilliputians'] Sight towards Objects" (44; pt. 1, ch. 6) which are too small for him to recognize because he has a sense of superiority toward Lilliputians. Such a power relationship, however, is overthrown in Brobdingnag, and Gulliver, in his misery and fear, realizes the relativity of size:

In this terrible Agitation of Mind, I could not forbear thinking of *Lilliput*, whose Inhabitants looked upon me as the greatest Prodigy that ever appeared in the World.... I reflected what a Mortification it must prove to me to appear as inconsiderable in this Nation, as one single *Lilliputian* would among us. But this I conceived was to be the least of my Misfortunes: For, as human Creatures are observed to be more Savage and cruel in Proportion to their Bulk; what could I expect but to be a Morsel in the Mouth of the first among these enormous Barbarians who should happen to seize me? Undoubtedly Philosophers are in the Right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison.... (77; pt. 2, ch. 1) (emphasis added)

Here Gulliver can imagine the feelings of Lilliputians in his helplessness for the first time. His fear comes from a prejudice against the giant, which Paul Turner argues is a traditional view implied in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*: "O, it is excellent / To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous / To use it like a giant" (2.2.108-10) (note, *Gulliver* by Swift 325). Gulliver, however, learns at least an important lesson: relativity of size, and later his prejudice is also broken down because Brobdingnagians turn out to be the most humane and the least corrupted. Here a satire on the absurdity of Gulliver whose arrogance has been crushed, is warning against the trap of judgment based on the traditional view, in other words, the trap of familiarization.

Gulliver also realizes the relativity of beauty affected by size in Brobdingnag:

I must confess no Object ever disgusted me so much as the Sight of her [Nurse's] monstrous Breast, which I cannot tell what to compare with, so as to give the curious Reader an Idea of its Bulk, Shape and Colour. It stood prominent six Foot, and could not be less than sixteen in Circumference. The Nipple was about half the Bigness of my Head, and the Hue both of that and the Dug so varified with Spots, Pimples and

Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous: For I had a near Sight of her.... This made me reflect upon the fair Skins of our *English Ladies*, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own Size, and their Defects not to be seen but through a magnifying Glass, where we find by Experiment that the smoothest and whitest Skins look rough and coarse, and ill coloured. (82; pt. 2, ch. 1)

The direct allusions to *Gulliver's Travels* in *American Notes* are also about the size of objects which disturbs Dickens the traveler. The railroad car at Lowell segregating black people from white people is "a negro car; which is a great blundering clumsy chest, such as Gulliver put to sea in, from the kingdom of Brobdingnag. There is a great deal of jolting, a great deal of noise, a great deal of wall, not much window, a locomotive engine, a shriek, and a bell" (72; vol. 1, ch. 4). The "negro car" is a symbol for the discrimination against the black people in American society, and its comparison with Gulliver's box emphasizes their powerlessness. Gulliver was scared to death, "expecting every Moment to see my Box dashed in Pieces, or at least upset by the first violent Blast, or a rising Wave. A Breach in one single Pane of Glass would have been immediate Death" (137; pt. 2, ch. 8). The comparison is at the same time very ironical as Gulliver's box became the means of his escape from Brobdingnag, while black people could not escape their oppressed situation.

Dickens also uses the comparison with Lilliputian size to create the effect of comicality. From Springfield to Hartford, he sails the Connecticut River by "a small steam-boat" whose cabin "looked like the parlour of a Lilliputian public-house, which had got afloat in a flood or some other water accident, and was drifting nobody knew where" (82-83; vol. 1, ch. 5). He conveys the danger of the journey and his spirit trying to laugh away the danger and anxiety. In fact, he and other passengers enjoy the journey:

The river was full of floating blocks of ice, which were constantly crunching and cracking under us; and the depth of water, in the course we took to avoid the larger masses, carried down the middle of the river by the current, did not exceed a few inches. Nevertheless, we moved onward, dexterously; and being well wrapped up, bade defiance to the weather, and enjoyed the journey. (83; vol. 1, ch. 5)

This spirit and strength of mind enabled Dickens to face his difficulties from the beginning of his journey. This journey began by a great surprise at the incredibly small size of a "state-room" of the ship:

I shall never forget the one-fourth serious and three-fourths comical astonishment, with which, on the morning of the third of January eighteen-hundred-and-forty-two, I opened the door of, and put my head into, a 'state-room' on board the *Britannia* steam-packet, twelve hundred tons burden per register, bound for Halifax and Boston, and carrying Her Majesty's mails.

That this state-room had been specially engaged for 'Charles Dickens, Esquire, and Lady,' was rendered sufficiently clear even to my scared intellect by a very small manuscript, announcing the fact, which was pinned on a very flat quilt, covering a very thin mattress, spread like a surgical plaster on a most inaccessible shelf. But that this was the state-room concerning which Charles Dickens, Esquire, and Lady, had held daily and nightly conferences for at least four months preceding: that this could by any possibility be that small snug chamber of the imagination, which Charles Dickens, Esquire, with the spirit of prophecy strong upon him, had always foretold would contain at least one little sofa, and which his lady, with a modest yet most magnificent sense of its limited dimensions, had from the first opined would

not hold more than two enormous portmanteaus in some odd corner out of sight (portmanteaus which could now no more be got in at the door, not to say stowed away, than a giraffe could be persuaded or forced into a flower-pot).... (9; vol. 1, ch. 1)

The largeness of the ship and the dignity of its mission of carrying mail under supervision of the royal family comically and ironically are contrasted with the smallness of the stateroom and its poor bedclothes. The “small snug chamber of the imagination” has been hugely expanded by the expectation of Dickens and his wife. As he himself said in his speech in Boston, he “dreamed by day and night, for years, of setting foot upon this shore, and breathing this pure air” (*Speeches* 19). His works had made him one of the most successful novelists both in Britain and America, and he had been invited with great enthusiasm to visit America. Such circumstances must have been the food for imagination. The gap between what was created by imagination and reality bears comicality and irony, especially due to the continual references to the size of objects. Following the above quotation, he calls the stateroom as “this utterly impracticable, thoroughly hopeless, and profoundly preposterous box,” (9; vol. 1, ch. 1) which recalls Gulliver’s box. The repeated phrase “Charles Dickens, Esquire, and Lady” not only reveals their pride and vanity, but also shows that Dickens views and mocks himself from a distance. Above all, it is worth noting that his “one-fourth serious and three-fourths comical astonishment” leads to the “peals of hearty laughter” and the agreement between he and his friends “that this state-room was the pleasantest and most facetious and capital contrivance possible” (11; vol. 1, ch. 1). He never loses his sense of humor.

There is another direct allusion to *Gulliver's Travels*. At the House of Industry in Boston, the branches of which receive old or helpless paupers, orphans and pauper infants, Dickens finds some children “are such little creatures, that the stairs are of lilliputian measurement, fitted to their tiny strides” (57; vol. 1, ch.3). The small size symbolizes the consideration for those who had to seek a shelter there. This reminds us of Glumdalclitch, the nurse of Gulliver in Brobdingnag, who took care of him, a Lilliputian for her, with affection and consideration. It is she that prepared the small box for travelling in which he was put to the sea by accident. She “had lined it on all Sides with the softest Cloth she could get, well quilted underneath; furnished it with her Baby’s Bed...; and made every thing as convenient as she could” (90; pt. 2, ch. 2). Such affection creates a bond between her and Gulliver which makes him lament the separation from her in spite of his strong desire for escape.

Dickens further tells of thoughtfulness for children in the Boston institution:

The same consideration for their years and weakness is expressed in their very seats, which are perfect curiosities, and look like articles of furniture for a pauper doll’s-house. I can imagine the glee of our Poor Law Commissioners at the notion of these seats having arms and backs; but small spines being of older date than their occupation of the Board-room at Somerset House, I thought even this provision very merciful and kind.

Here again, I was greatly pleased with the inscriptions on the wall, which were scraps of plain morality, easily remembered and understood: such as ‘Love one another’ — ‘God remembers the smallest creature in his creation:’ and straightforward advice of that nature. The books and tasks of these smallest of scholars, were adapted, in the same judicious manner, to their childish powers. (57-58; vol. 1, ch. 3)

Dickens is deeply impressed by the consideration for every aspect of children, especially education, and cannot but make a sarcastic remark about the workhouse in England. As he represented in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), children often could not receive enough food, let alone proper education at the workhouse. It is not the only institution which impressed Dickens. He generally highly values the public institutions and charities in America, and above all admires those of Boston as “nearly perfect, as the most considerate wisdom, benevolence, and humanity, can make them” (36; vol. 1, ch. 3). His detailed description of and admiration for them are indirect but heavy criticism of those in England.

II

As is well known, Dickens went to America with a belief that America was an ideal land, and warmly expressed his yearning for the country at a banquet in his honor in Boston: “[I]f I had wandered here unknowing and unknown, I would — if I know my own heart — have come with all my sympathies clustering richly about this land and people — with all my sense of justice as keenly alive to their high claims on every man who love God’s image” (*Speeches* 19). He, however, was disillusioned, and gradually come to hate Americans. Dickens’s criticism of American customs and manners was so harsh and his disgust so intense in *American Notes*, that soon after its publication they drew much attention from critics, and some newspapers attacked him with rage and contempt.⁵ It should be noted, however, that Dickens continues to warn against the trap of familiarization throughout the book. The warning is aimed at all people even in apparent attacks on Americans.

In Lowell, he presents the question of prejudice against the class, pointing out the intellectual activities of women working at a factory: They have “a joint-stock piano” in their boardinghouses, subscribe to circulating libraries, and publish a periodical called *The Lowell Offering*, which is a “repository of original articles, written exclusively by females actively employed in the mills” (78; vol. 1, ch. 4). Anticipating that readers regard these activities as “above their station,” Dickens asks:

Are we quite sure that we in England have not formed our ideas of the ‘station’ of working people, from accustoming ourselves to the contemplation of that class as they are, and not as they might be? I think that if we examine our own feelings, we shall find that the pianos, and the circulating libraries, and even the Lowell Offering, startle us by their novelty, and not by their bearing upon any abstract question of right or wrong. (78-79; vol. 1, ch. 4) (emphasis added)

He points out how we tend to adhere to some fixed idea and consequently refuse novelty without thinking about the essence of things. At the same time, he insists on the importance of allowing intellectual activities with the possibility of the intellectual improvement of working-class people.

Nevertheless, Dickens is not an egalitarian. He certainly has class consciousness though liberal.⁶ Of the factory women being well-dressed, he tells regarding them as a class below him: “Supposing it confined within reasonable limits, I would always encourage this kind of pride, as a worthy element of self-respect” (76; vol. 1, ch. 4). Therefore, it cannot be denied that the above-mentioned objection of Dickens to the prejudice against class bears a certain irony.

While admiring the charitable institutions for their consideration, Dickens points out the lack of imagination when he criticizes the prison system. He expresses a strong objection to the rigid solitary confinement

conducted in the State of Pennsylvania, he indicates the lack of imagination in those who devised the system with an intention of reforming prisoners, which itself is not bad: "I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers..." (111; vol. 1, ch. 7). Then Dickens's strong imagination gives a vivid picture of the agony of the prisoner over two pages. Fear mounts in the prisoner's imagination in a narrow cell:

The weary days pass on with solemn pace, like mourners at a funeral; and slowly he begins to feel that the white walls of the cell have something dreadful in them: that their colour is horrible: that their smooth surface chills his blood: that there is one hateful corner which torments him. Every morning when he wakes, he hides his head beneath the coverlet, and shudders to see the ghastly ceiling looking down upon him. The blessed light of day itself peeps in, an ugly phantom face, through the unchangeable crevice which is his prison window. (119; vol. 1, ch. 7)

Such imagination anticipates the creation of Dr Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), who suffers from the aftereffects of confinement, as some critics have pointed out.⁷ Dickens represents how a lack of imagination can be a cause of terrible affliction which he believes no one has a right to inflict upon his fellow human beings.

The most disgusting customs of Americans for Dickens are the well-intentioned hospitality depriving him of privacy, chewing and spitting tobaccos, and animal-like behaviors. Through these customs, Dickens shows that once accepted, they are followed without doubt, and that they make people narrow-minded and insensible to others' feelings, in other words, fallen into the trap of familiarization.

Dickens tries to accept the difference of customs, but in vain. While he suffers from the lack of privacy caused by the constant visit of people at the hotel, which is regarded as an impertinence in England, he tries to tolerate the situation as the custom of America: "[T]he only desire of a good-natured fellow of this kind, is to treat his guests hospitably and well; and I had no more right, and I can truly say no more disposition, to measure his conduct by our English rule and standard..." (217; vol. 2, ch. 6). Nevertheless, far from being appeased, his anger and disgust increase.

As Swift creates grotesque Yahoos, who resemble human beings and are a symbol for the ugliness of human beings (such as their selfishness, greediness, desire and animality), so Dickens caricatures Americans craving for money as pigs. Dickens also represents the grotesqueness of Americans by referring to them as Yahoos. According to Houyhnhnm, the most odious thing about Yahoos is "their undistinguishing Appetite to devour every thing that came in their Way" (266; pt. 4, ch.7). While going down the Mississippi by boat, Dickens is disgusted with Yahoo-like passengers eating at the same time, in the same manner and with the same observances:

... I really dreaded the coming of the hour that summoned us to table... Healthy cheerfulness and good spirits forming a part of the banquet, I could soak my crusts in the fountain with Le Sage's strolling player...: but sitting down with so many fellow-animals to ward off thirst and hunger as a business; to empty, each creature, his Yahoo's trough as quickly as he can, and then slink sullenly away; to have these social sacraments stripped of everything but the mere greedy satisfaction of the natural cravings; goes so against the grain with me that I seriously believe that recollection of these funeral feasts will be a waking nightmare to me all my life. (189; vol. 2, ch. 4)

Dickens considers having meals with others as containing “social sacraments,” that is, as functions of social exchange, with attendant rules and decorum. Therefore, he cannot bear to be with people who are reduced to animals just gratifying their hunger.

Dickens’s disgust toward Americans reaches its highest point when he witnesses slavery and its effects on his visit to Richmond. He cannot but feel “an air of ruin and decay abroad” (151; vol. 2. ch. 1), which is admitted even by the warmest advocates of slavery, to exist in all places where the system is maintained. He observes that handsome residences coexist with deplorable houses in a beautiful country, which forces him to realize the depressing fact of coexistence of human virtues and vices. He compares the horrible shock of seeing slaves with that of Gulliver seeing human beings, the kind of Yahoos he detests, after he returns from the land of Houyhnhnms. While worshipping Houyhnhnms who have a natural moral sense and control everything by reason, Gulliver has a virulent antipathy against the animality of the Yahoos who follow their instincts. Recalling such an antipathy, Dickens confesses his shock:

... the countenances in the streets and labouring places, too, are shocking. All men who know that there are laws against instructing slaves, of which the pains and penalties greatly exceed in their amount the fines imposed on those who maim and torture them, must be prepared to find their faces very low in the scale of intellectual expression. But the darkness — not the skin, but mind — which meets the stranger’s eye at every turn; the brutalizing and blotting out of all the fairer characters traced by Nature’s hand; immeasurably outdo his worst belief. That travelled creation of the greatest satirist’s brain, who fresh from living among horses, peered from a high casement down upon his own kind with trembling horror, was scarcely more repelled and daunted by the sight, than those who look upon some of these faces for the first time must surely be. (153-54; vol. 2, ch. 1)

The comparison reveals that Dickens feels revulsion rather than sympathy toward the victims of slavery, and this reality must have been more shocking and depressing for him.

We should note the importance of what he tells of the owner of a plantation: “I believe that this gentleman is a considerate and excellent master, who inherited his fifty slaves, and is neither a buyer nor a seller of human stock; and I am sure, from my own observation and conviction, that he is a kind-hearted, worthy man” (152-53; vol. 2, ch. 1). The most terrifying fact is that even a considerate and excellent person among his peers can be so senseless to what he accepts as custom or tradition.

As we have seen, Dickens presents the trap and horror of familiarization and its relation to imagination in *American Notes*, by effectively using the method and satire similar to that used in *Gulliver’s Travels*. The last chapters of these works also have similarities. Both Gulliver and Dickens the traveler defend themselves by declaring the truth of their writings, and at the same time, they leave the final judgment to the readers. In addition, they show profound bitterness mixed with a slight hope.

Analyzing the national character of Americans, Dickens attributes “all kinds of deficient and impolitic usages” to “the national love of trade” (268; vol. 2, ch. 10). One of the examples he adduces is the problem of copyright: “The love of trade is a reason why the literature of America is to remain for ever unprotected” (268; vol. 2, ch. 10). This word is a protest against pirating writings which people were so accustomed to in America. Dickens’s works also had been pirated because there was no international copyright law, though Britain already had a copyright law (Ingham, note, *American Notes* by Dickens 311). Dickens further accuses the American

press of giving false reports; this was a kind of custom in those days, which he considered to be responsible for a lowering of morality. He severely accuses the press all the more because he knows that the media plays an important role in and has a great influence on the formation of ideas and morality. Thus, Dickens presents an issue which is a universal problem (today, as well), through the theme of the horror of familiarization.

Evaluation of *American Notes* has divided critics since its publication, and there is a tendency to consider it to be a failure which shows Dickens's personal limitations.⁸ This work is, however, very interesting and significant in terms of Dickens's development as a writer because the travel motif becomes increasingly important as a structural principle in his later works.

Notes

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- ¹ Quoted in Slater 36.
- ² Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, Penguin Classics (2000; London: Penguin, 2004) 164; vol. 2, ch. 1. Hereafter the quotations from this work are from this edition, and page number, volume and chapter are shown in parenthesis.
- ³ For details, see Edgar Johnson and Slater.
- ⁴ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, World's Classics (1971; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 45; pt. 1, ch. 6. Hereafter the quotations from this work are from this edition, and page number, part and chapter are shown in parenthesis.
- ⁵ See Edgar Johnson 441-42.
- ⁶ Ingham argues that Dickens is liberal when he feels his social status and his equanimity (xv).
- ⁷ For example, Slater 19.
- ⁸ For example, Edgar Johnson 441-42, 444; Slater 29-30; Carlson; Fielding; Parker; L. H. Johnson; McCarthy.

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American Notes* : Charles Dickens's Version of *Gulliver's Travels

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Abstract

The present paper clarifies how Charles Dickens devised a method and satirical style similar to that used in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, by examining the common features of Dickens's *American Notes* and *Gulliver's Travels*.

"Custom familiarizes one to anything," Dickens the traveler says in *American Notes*. He bitterly criticizes customs both in America and in England, and most importantly, warns against the kind of familiarization which makes people narrow-minded, insensitive, and impervious. Dickens, as the first-person narrator, is a satirist like Gulliver, bringing into light the trap and horror of familiarization and its relation to imagination. He does this through direct allusions to *Gulliver's Travels* and his own keen and effective satire.