

『영미연구』

제52집 (2021): 53-80

<http://doi.org/10.25093/ibas.2021.52.53>

# Paradox of American Individualism in “William Wilson”

Kwangtaek Han  
(Chungbuk National University)

## [Abstract]

This paper examines Edgar Allan Poe’s critical reflection on the paradox of individualism during the Jacksonian Era in “William Wilson.” Wilson, mortified by his doppelgänger’s absolute identity with him, seeks his own singular identity, but in vain. The story shows Poe’s sustained inquiry into the paradox that the very awareness of the lack of genuine individuality triggers one’s urgent yet deluded striving to secure his own autonomy and singularity; what he chases after is, as Wilson finds eventually, nothing but an empty entity of individuality. Representing the Jacksonian democracy characterized by paradoxical singular identity and identical individuality, Poe complicates and challenges the contemporary Tocquevillian and Emersonian notion of true individuality. Poe indicts this public injunction as a double delusion: first, it posits the discursive conception of a self-possessed and distinctive individual as a historical entity, and then it proclaims the loss of such proper individualism, which is therefore considered the urgently sought-after object. In “William Wilson” Poe precisely captures this doubly misleading delusion as central to the American individualism of the Jacksonian Era.

**Key Words:** Edgar Allan Poe, American individualism, paradox, Jacksonian democracy, William Wilson

## I. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's political affiliation has long been labeled as anti-Democratic due to his participation in a Philadelphia presidential campaign for Whig candidate William Henry Harrison and his strong aversion to the Jacksonian "Era of the Common Man" as expressed in his "Some Words with a Mummy" and "Mellonta Tauta." It is notable that "Some Words with a Mummy" was published in *The American Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art, and Science* in 1845, a New York City-based monthly periodical whose aim was to advocate "the permanent maintenance of Whig principles and improvement of American literature." Also notable is that the magazine's prospectus stressed that it would oppose "pernicious" and "dangerous" policies of the Jacksonian democracy formed by "Jacobinical opinions, from which, if suffered to gain ground, we can look for nothing but the corruption of our morals, the degradation of our liberties, and the ultimate ruin of the Commonwealth." Whereas "Some Words with a Mummy" was published two months after the defeat of Henry Clay, the Whig candidate for the 1844 presidential election, "Mellonta Tauta" was published in February 1849, two months after the victory of Whig candidate, Zachary Taylor, in the 1848 presidential election. In the two satirical stories Poe indicts the Jacksonian paean to the American embodiment of "the great beauty and importance of Democracy," particularly the institution of "suffrage *ad libitum*" or "universal suffrage" (italics in the original). For Poe, the extension of the right to vote to a wider range of common (white) men

would inevitably degrade into "the most odious and unsupportable despotism" whose "usurping tyrant" is "Mob" (*Tales and Sketches Vol 2* 1194, 1300). Hence the long-held image of Poe denigrating the Jacksonian mobocracy as synonymous with egalitarian chaos and political turmoil.

Critics have in recent decades tended to reconsider Poe's daunting vision of Jacksonian democracy in terms of its profound menace to individualism by noting the representation of such a crisis in his short story such as "William Wilson." This new critical orientation especially focuses on Wilson's solipsistic selfhood negated by the intrusion of his identical double, viewing him as referential to the foreclosure of individual autonomy and singularity as well as self-isolation. Such a twofold crisis of individualism is construed to indicate that democracy homogenizes individuals to form a same entity. For instance, challenging the dominant psychological and moral readings of the doppelgänger narrative in "William Wilson," some have considered Poe's problem with individualism beleaguered by democracy in juxtaposition with Tocqueville's and Emerson's common advocacy of the individual against the collective as encompassing their respective concern about individual seclusion and homogenization (Britt 197-210, Renza 167-88). In this light, Poe seems to be aligned squarely with Alexis de Tocqueville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the contemporary champions of the inviolable dignity and value of self in the face of democratic equalization and seclusion; for these critics Poe's denunciation of mob impulse and rule should be regarded in the same light with Tocqueville's angst over the homogeneous collective mass of detached individuals and Emerson's loathing of the herd mentality—all warning against the democratic liquidation of proper individuality.

This recent critical tendency, however, not only ignores Poe's ingrained skepticism of self-sustaining agency but also eclipses his incisive critique of the contemporary intellectual urge—mainly Tocquevillian and Emersonian—to retrieve the individual

marred by permeating social democratizations. Poe chastises this public injunction as a double delusion, for this delusion first posits the discursive conception of a self-possessed and distinctive individual as a historical substance and then it proclaims the abstraction unredeemable as the urgently sought-after object. Poe precisely captures this doubly-mistaken delusion in “William Wilson.” Note that Wilson, contemptuous of the utter democratization of his name of “a noble descent” into “the common property of the mob,” is mortified by his namesake/doppelgänger’s “most absolute identity” with him, a case of extreme interpersonal identification which depersonalizes his agency by rendering him a mere part of the “twofold repetition.”<sup>1)</sup> Poe’s particular inquiry into the way in which the bare reality of the desubjectivized individual leads readers to realize that what the narrator perceives and pursues is, as he finds in the end, nothing but a nonentity that has deluded his dogged chase after it. Hence, Poe is not a champion of individualism. Rather he demystifies the false logic of democratic individualism.

## II. Jacksonian Democracy and Individualism

After his 1831 visit to the U.S., Alexis de Tocqueville published two volumes of *Democracy in America* to inform French readers how America “has attained the consequences of the democratic revolution” (18). One significant effect of the young public’s political democratization is, Tocqueville states, that “[a]t the present day the principle of the sovereignty of the people has acquired, in the United States, all the practical development which the imagination can conceive” and furthermore, in the unprecedented system of thorough political democratization “the nation participates in the making of its laws by the choice of its legislators, and in the execution of them

by the choice of the agents of the executive government" (51). What strikes Tocqueville in particular is the extended suffrage for white men, which was granted in most states by eliminating property requirements for voting and eligibility for office by the mid 1820s (Sexton 62). During Andrew Jackson's two terms, most states completely eliminated property or tax-paying qualifications for voting. This pivotal reform drew an increasing number of common voters into national politics. Parties began to make efforts to appeal to the mass of voters by selling their leading candidates as the best choice for public good and prosperity.

The two presidential elections in 1828 and 1832 showcased the emergence of the new popular dynamics of political democratization, a dynamic unique to American politics. The two elections won by Andrew Jackson also marked the appearance of national political conventions and campaigns, as well as public verbal brawls and harsh mudslinging between candidates and supporters. Now the "public will" and "public opinion" began to the center of national politics; common people were now the driving force of national politics. Tocqueville describes these new scenes on election day: "[a]s the election draws near, the activity of intrigue and the agitation of the populace increase; the citizens are divided into several camps, each of which assumes the name of its favorite candidate; the whole name glows with feverish excitement" (109-10).

Abreast of this pervasive political democratization was its economic counterpart, also observed and recorded by Tocqueville. To Tocqueville's eyes, America was the young republic incarnating John Locke's possessive individualism and Adam Smith's principle of *laissez-faire*: "The American republics of the present day are like companies of adventurers, formed to explore in common the waste lands of the New World, and busied in a flourishing trade. The passion which agitates the Americans most deeply, are not their political, but their commercial passions" (242). As a matter

of fact, the Jacksonian federal government exhibited a strong will to develop a capitalistic economy based on the doctrine of noninterference or economic liberal individualism; under Jacksonian economic philosophy and policy, the federal government refrained from granting special privileges and allowed free competition in the marketplace.

As a result, unrestrained enterprise capitalism led by a multitude of aspiring entrepreneurs gradually replaced the former agricultural economy and contributed exponentially to the growing national wealth during the Jacksonian era. In addition, revolutionary innovations in transportation and communication facilitated a vibrant economy of finance, transportation, and information, helping liberal economic democracy to penetrate deep into all corners of the nation. During this era of progress, Emerson proudly accorded high praise to the “awesome hunger for land, material security, and personal success” as a “benign force that summoned the creative force of the people.” For Emerson, the new epoch was especially remarkable for the “immense creation of property and so by the increase of the political importance of individuals everywhere, or the steady progress of the democratic element” (Field 154-55). In the same vein, he extolled in his 1836 essay “Nature” the “new importance given to the single person” as “a sign of the times” (Emerson 103).

However, the auspicious progress of Jacksonian democracy was drastically derailed by the outbreak of the Great Panic. In early 1840, the estimated economic losses after the Panic were estimated to be six billion dollars (Qtd. in Silverman 130). The Panic “engulfed all classes and all phases of economic life within its toils; and for seven long years the people of this land struggled to free themselves from its oppression” (McGrane 1). The intellectual response to the worst depression of the national economy was to urge despondent Americans to reclaim their lost

self-confidence. On August 31, 1837, Emerson delivered a public address later entitled "The American Scholar," which was an attempt to hold out hope during a period of unprecedented economic hardship. Emerson began his address with the promise that the start of a new academic year would offer hopeful prospects in order to evoke a renewed sense of a fresh start in his audience. Thinking anew, he then insisted, can be achieved only by means of "self-trust," a self-conscious attainment of inner confidence and resolve. Emerson's emphasis on self-possessed individuality would reappear with a much stronger tone in his 1838 lecture, "Divinity School Address," which Oliver Wendell Holmes praised for redefining "the [individual] soul as the supreme judge in spiritual matters" (Holmes 116).

Another spiritual leader who reaffirmed the significance of self-mastery was William Ellery Channing. In his "Self-Culture," an introduction to a series of public lectures delivered in 1838, Channing argued that "we are able to discern not only what we already are, but what we may become, to see in ourselves germs and promises of a growth to which no bounds can be set. ... This is indeed a noble prerogative of our nature. Possessing this, it matters little what or where we are now; for we can conquer a better lot, and even be happier for starting from the lowest point." He went on to stress that what he termed "the self-forming power" which "makes self-culture possible" now "slumbers in most men unsuspected, unused!" (Channing 10-11). Both Emerson and Channing put symbolic and practical emphasis on the true potential of self-centered individuality as the creative power to overcome the troubled world.

The first half of Poe's literary career, from 1829 to 1841, overlapped with Andrew Jackson's two consecutive terms and Jackson's loyal successor Martin Van Buren's one term and this era saw the flowering of unprecedented political, economic, and cultural democratizations, as well as their deflected ramifications.

Many new voters created by the extension of the franchise fell prey to massive political mobilizations which intensified the unbridgeable factional confrontation between Jacksonians and anti-Jacksonians; the widely promoted and pursued laissez faire doctrine of the Jackson and Van Buren administration gave rise to the frenzied and competitive land boom and speculative fever leading to the Great Panic of 1837. In the wake of the Panic, the unprecedented national depression transmuted the existing democratic literary culture and market into a highly competitive industry serving the now commercialized tastes of common readers. As a consequence, “Poe’s career,” as Jonathan Elmer has pointed out, “is marked by alternate solicitations and repudiations of mass popularity, both a desire for merger with the general taste and an equally intense compulsion to distinguish himself from it” (32). According to Terrence Whalen, the second half of Poe’s literary career after the Panic was, in fact, profoundly affected by his predicament during this period of socioeconomic turmoil and the reshaped terrain of the literary market under the influence of the troubled political economy (21-57). It is in this new complex context that “William Wilson” registers Poe’s profound critical reflection on the paradox of individualism in American democracy, which reflects the more profound paradox of American individualism in Jacksonian democracy.

### III. Paradoxical “Absolute Identity”

“William Wilson” first appeared in the annual *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year’s Present for 1840*, which was published in mid-1839 and was later reprinted in the October 1839 issue of *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*. It has been read as a meditation upon the familiar narrative of the psychological and moral struggles



between good and evil twins—oftentimes interpreted as a complicated allegory for a bipartite soul consisting of two internal selves that contradicts each other—and the ultimate triumph of the evil over the good. Indeed, the narrator himself shows his intent to frame his narrative as a moral confession by introducing himself as “an object for the scorn – for the horror – for the detestation of my race,” dwelling upon his own “unparalleled infamy” ascribable to his “later years of … unpardonable crime” and thus trying to narrate how “in an instant, all virtue dropped bodily as mantle.” In the first paragraphs of the story, beneath the hyperbolic self-criticism that effectively conveys a moral message to his audience, is the narrator’s subtle yet significant indication of a profound ontological question that has constantly haunted his fallen life. Wilson’s “later years” have been, he narrates, filled with not only “unpardonable crime” but also “unspeakable misery” (426). Both are attributed to the fact that he has been “in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control.” In the following narrative, the irresistibly determinant “circumstances beyond human control” are alluded to as sharply at odds with his self-assured control of his own agency.

Wilson is, as he states, “the descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable; and, in my earliest infancy, I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character.” This “remarkable” personality of Wilson is inseparably associated with his being “self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions.” Hence the unbridled constitution of his own individualism: “my voice was a household law; and at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions” (427). As a self-centered individual, Wilson once believed that “[t]he teeming brain of childhood requires no external world of

incident to occupy or amuse it,” and he is still convinced of his uncommon singularity: “Yet I must believe that my first mental development had in it much of the uncommon – even much of the *outré*” (430). Wilson’s boyhood autonomy and self-assurance would become more overtly pronounced later in his school years, as “the ardor, the enthusiasm, and the imperiousness of my disposition, soon rendered me a marked character among my schoolmates, and by slow, but natural gradations, gave me an ascendancy over all not greatly older than myself” (431).

However, Wilson’s singular individuality and its unchecked power are soon confronted with “a single exception” that would not conform to his imposing personality. “This exception,” he explains, “was found in the person of a scholar, who, although no relation, bore the same Christian and surname as myself; a circumstance, in fact, little remarkable” due to the social democratization pervasive in Wilson’s time: “for notwithstanding a noble descent, mine was one of those everyday appellations which seem, by prescriptive right, to have been, time out of mind, the common property of the mob.” For this reason, Wilson uses a pseudonym, explaining that “In this narrative I have therefore designated myself as William Wilson, — a fictitious title not very dissimilar to the real” (431). This democratic “circumstance,” for Wilson, accounts for the very “unspeakable misery” he mentions, and it renders him “the slave of circumstances beyond human control.” Wilson never veils his loathing of the democratic circumstance. At the outset of his narrative, Wilson asks the reader to “call myself, for the present, William Wilson” because of his unforgivable crime and ignominy. As he confesses several pages later, however, “I had always felt aversion to my uncourtly patronymic, and its very common, if not plebeian prænomen. The words were venom in my ears” since “a second Wilson,” as he calls his identical copy, is the object of loathing because he is “the cause of its twofold repetition, who would be constantly in my presence, and whose concerns, in

the ordinary routine of the school business, must inevitably, on account of the detestable coincidence, be often confounded with my own" (434).

Wilson's open abhorrence toward the "uncourtly" and "very common" rather than the "plebeian" indicates that Poe understood modern democratization not as a sociality of Roman-like commoners sharing civic rights and virtues but as a sociality of the unrefined modern masses whose "very common" attributes are characterized by rudeness and coarseness, that is, lacking a proper sense of one's own individual position in relation to others. The fundamentally unindividuated democratization is already devoid of the very locus of proper individuality itself. For Poe, that is, the essential condition of "very common" democratization, as Wilson's name exemplifies, disallows the possibility of a sense of individual self and its individualist approach to others. Individuality in thorough democratization exists only in the mode of naught or, in other words, the absent individual is the condition of possibility of thorough democratization. "[R]epitition" and "coincidence" are, in this regard, constitutive of democratization, not its side-effects.

Poe's sense of the absent individuality is more clearly indicated in the latter part of Wilson's narrative. He states that his "namesake alone ... refuse[s] implicit belief in my assertions, and submission to my will - indeed, to interfere with my arbitrary dictation in any respect whatsoever." What the namesake nullifies is "a supreme and unqualified despotism ... the despotism of a master-mind in boyhood over the less energetic spirits of its companions" (431). Here, Poe suggests that Wilson's individualism is grounded in his childish solipsism. Since the ground is insubstantial, his relation and response to the identical copy is groundless, as well. More significantly, Wilson confesses that he "secretly felt that I feared him, and could not help thinking the equality which he maintained so easily with myself, a proof of his true superiority ... Yet this superiority - even this equality - was in truth

acknowledged by no one but myself” (431-32). Wilson’s fear of his identical double is attributed to his understanding of the “equality” they share as evidence of the copy’s “true superiority” that “so easily” enables him to be identical to the original. Physically, his fear results from the confrontation of what is believed to be impossible to reproduce (i.e., the original) and the lack of a sense of self-superiority. Ironically, he loses confidence in his superiority as he literally faces himself; what he sees, Poe suggests, is what he actually fears to see.

Furthermore, he goes on to confess his self-contradictory feelings that now undermine the very ground of his solipsistic individualism: “It may seem strange that in spite of the continual anxiety occasioned me by the rivalry of Wilson, and his intolerable spirit of contradiction, I could not bring myself to hate him altogether” (432-33). More inexplicably, “[i]t is difficult, indeed, to define, or even to describe, my real feelings towards him. They formed a motley and heterogeneous admixture; – some petulant animosity, which was not yet hatred, some esteem, more respect, much fear, with a world of uneasy curiosity. To the moralist it will be unnecessary to say, in addition, that Wilson and myself were the most inseparable of companions” (433). The uncanny homology, if not friendship, Wilson notices in his troubling relation to his copy is self-negating. The first Wilson who overtly loathes “a similarity of mind, person, or condition” (434) becomes impossible to dissociate from his copy. Indeed, he becomes “the slave of circumstances beyond human control,” the circumstances of thorough democratization. His ambivalent feelings toward his double decisively reveal that there is no substantial agency with which the original can defend his “true superiority.”

To highlight this point, Poe provides a striking case that evidences the void of Wilson’s originality. The event occurs when he is stealthily trying to play a trick on his double at night in order to make the copy feel the original’s “malice.” Wilson

secretly sneaks into his double's room to plot "ill-natured pieces of practical wit at his expense" and looks at his "countenance." Then, he is completely appalled at what he finds: "I looked; — and a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame. My breast heaved, my knees tottered, my whole spirit became possessed with an objectless yet intolerable horror." What terrifies him is "the lineaments of William Wilson" which paradoxically "were" and "were not" his at once. It is obvious, he exclaims, that he shares "[t]he same name! the same contour of person! The same day of arrival at the academy! And then his dogged and meaningless imitation of my gait, my voice, my habits, and my manner!" and yet there is something that is not exactly the same in the double's face. Not solving the mystery, he leaves the chamber and the halls, "never to enter them again" (437).

Wilson's horrified confrontation with another Wilson's oxymoronic sameness with him suggests to the reader that his self-assured identity is not exactly identical to what he really is like. If the identical does not look exactly like the original, then logically the original is not what he should be like. Or the original cannot define what he is like, if he fails to recognize any difference in the copy. In either case, the original's authenticity is in question. Significantly, after this shocking incident Wilson confesses that "I could now find room to doubt the evidence of my sense; and seldom called up the subject at all but with wonder at the extent of human credulity" (438). As the original Wilson begins to suspect his own sense and the judgment of his subjectivity, the copy exudes an "inscrutable tyranny" from which the original has to "at length flee, panic-stricken, as from a pestilence." However, as Wilson laments, "to the very ends of the earth *I fled in vain*" (445).

Towards the end of his narration, Wilson, once the dictator of his associates and himself, reveals an awareness of his "utter weakness and helplessness" (446), a bitter, frank confession of the groundless construct of his self-centered despotism.

Paradoxically, it is the occurrence of “the most absolute identity” that drives him to face the veiled truth of his lack of individual autonomy and singularity. In this sense, the denouement of the story does not remain ambiguous; the death of the two Wilsons is an inevitable corollary of the vain battle between the absent original and its vacant copy. The irony is that death has always haunted the original ever since he found the absence of his own singularity in his copy’s face. The spectral identification tells the horrible truth of the myth of individual identity.

#### IV. Paradoxical Individualism in Jacksonian Democracy

In several respects, “William Wilson” reflects the paradox of American individualism in Jacksonian democracy. Jackson’s stubborn character and unprecedented popularity made his opponents seek and contrive more effective tactics to prevent his second term in the 1832 election. The election featured the first appearance of the third party to join the presidential race, the Anti-Masonic Party, which introduced important political innovations to American politics, such as nominating conventions and the adoption of party platforms, two new institutions that catered to the voting public and changed the contours of political democratization. The new minor party first emerged as a public movement to prevent Masonic figures from assuming public office, and yet in early 1828 its strong anti-Masonic feeling formed and intensified through a series of mass meetings, quickly transformed into a strong anti-Jacksonian political faction that sought to prevent Jackson’s second presidency on the grounds that Jackson was actually a high-ranking Mason. To consolidate and promote their new

party, anti-Masons invented the national nominating convention, in which locally elected delegates would select state candidates to pledge their loyalty and mobilize the increased number of voters, and the party platform, in which they officially specified their principles and doctrine for the public.

On September 26, 1831, the Anti-Masons held the first national political party convention to nominate their presidential candidate. The new procedural innovation proved more successful than expected; the public selection process gave the party publicity and its candidate legitimacy. Whigs and Democrats quickly recognized its effectiveness and rushed to hold similar national conventions to anoint their candidates; on December 12, 1831, the National Republican Convention nominated Henry Clay, and on May 21-22, 1832, the Democratic Party Convention nominated Jackson for reelection. In the 1832 election, Anti-Masonic party candidates won 10 percent of all House races, and the party's Presidential candidate, William Wirt, carried Vermont and won almost 8 percent of the popular vote nationally.

Central to the election of 1832 was the singular individuality of Jackson, who embodied the popular idea of advocating for the common man. His political character was inseparable from the most heated issue of his administration: the existence of the Bank of the United States. During his first term, Jackson made all possible effort to dismantle the Bank of the United States because it had too many foreign investors, it favored the rich over the poor, and it restricted loans for western expansion and development plans. For these reasons, Jackson promptly vetoed the legislation passed by the Senate to renew the bank's charter in 1831. When the House and Senate voted to reauthorize the bank in July 1832, Jackson announced a second veto stating "[i]t is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes...When the laws undertake, ... to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society, the farmers,

mechanics and laborers, who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors for themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their government.” Soon after this Congress overruled Jackson’s veto and both sides continued the confrontation. As the 1832 campaign approached, the question of the Bank’s survival became the pivotal debate between Jacksonians and Anti-Jacksonians. Whereas the National Republican platform assailed Jackson’s “character” and equated it with his policy, the Democratic Party shrewdly issued no platforms that might displease lukewarm Jacksonian voters (Holt 15). In a famous National Republican cartoon, he was portrayed as “King Andrew the First,” and the 1832 election was the first substantial popular national election in American political history, one that decided whether Jackson was a popular tribune or a democratic despot, a referendum on Jackson himself.

In the election, Americans favored Jackson’s singular character, regarding it as representative of their interest and voice. Jackson easily won his reelection, proving himself more popular than the National Bank. He later interpreted the overwhelming victory as “a decision of the people against the bank.” Early in his second term, Jackson ordered the removal of the government’s deposits and funds from the National Bank in order to distribute them to local state banks. Shocked, the Senate, which was controlled by Whigs, passed a resolution demanding that Jackson open the cabinet’s documents related to the 1831 veto. When Jackson refused to release the documents, on March 8 in 1834 Congress officially censured the President for the first time in American history. However, the politically symbolic censure failed to stop Jackson from demolishing the federal banking system. Though Jackson’s battle against the National Bank and the privileged seemed to be a fight for the common man, historians have agreed that the National Bank was not abolished because of public opinion (Howe 386). Rather, as one historian trenchantly sums it up, “[t]he



killing of the BUS [Bank of the United States] was primarily the work of one man, and that man was Andrew Jackson" (Remi 43). Indeed Jackson took his fight against the Bank personally; the Bank "is trying to kill me," he told Vice President Van Buren, "but I will kill it." Ultimately, the decision was Jackson's own and nothing but his personal popularity could have overridden the complaints of the privileged and the elite.

However, the boundary between public perception and the correct understanding of Jackson's political strife is still ambiguous. First of all, the public opinion Jackson relied upon was not necessarily formed by the voices of common people. For instance, Amos Kendall, who masterminded much of Jackson's political strategy and composed many of his official papers, wrote editorials that he sent to friendly newspaper editors around the country. He then quoted their friendly articles in his own journal to give evidence of the people's approval of Jackson's policy. Moreover, Jackson's decision was not necessarily the opinion of the Democratic Party; by 1836, twenty-eight Democratic congressmen who had voted to recharter the Bank had left their party (Howe 390). Tocqueville's analysis of the ideological contest over the Bank and Jackson's reelection victory precisely captures the essence of the groundless substance of Jackson's singular authority, believed to represent the public good:

when the president attacked the bank, the country was excited and parties were formed; the well-informed classes rallied round the bank, the common people round the president. But it must not be imagined that the people had formed a rational opinion upon a question which offers so many difficulties to the most experienced statesmen. The bank is a great establishment which enjoys an independent existence, and the people, accustomed to make and unmake whatsoever it pleases, is startled to meet with this obstacle to its authority. In the midst of the perpetual fluctuation of society, the community is irritated by

so permanent an institution, and is led to attack it, in order to see whether it can be shaken and controlled, like all the other institutions of the country. (146)

Here, Tocqueville poses the question of popular rule uniquely central to the American politics. To the French aristocrat concerned with the self-interest and demagoguery peculiar to American democracy, it was apparent that the political imagination was now at the mercy of a charismatic leader's public image, so long as it was equated with the public cause. Connecting the significance of the 1832 election to the 1828 election, Tocqueville points out that Jackson's supporters share the same political psychology and self-affirming delusions:

“General Jackson, whom the Americans have trice elected to be the head of their government, is a man of a violent temper and mediocre talents; no one circumstance in the whole course of his career ever proved that he is qualified to govern a free people; and indeed the majority of the enlightened classes of the Union has always been opposed to him. But he was raised to the presidency, and has been maintained in that lofty station, solely by the recollection of a victory which he gained, twenty years ago, under the walls of New Orleans; a victory which was, however, a very ordinary achievement, and which could only be remembered in a country where battles are rare. Now the people who is thus carried away by the illusions of glory, is unquestionably the most cold and calculating, the most unmilitary (if I may use the expression), and the most prosaic of all the peoples of the earth”. (236)

This passage reveals Tocqueville's acute analysis which especially concerns the political ambivalence of the masses as well as the self-deceiving dynamics of their political desire. This problem, he anticipates, would deepen if American politics centered on the political character of Jackson and the common support for his actions. Indeed, the consequence of Jackson's two terms was, as Harry L. Watson

has noted, that "the President's actions stripped his original supporters down to fighting strength and gave them a strong sense of group identity ... [and] the emerging Democratic Party shared an emotional loyalty to Jackson and his legacy and a fervent desire, in the President's words, to give it "permanent ascendancy" (174).

Jacksonians viewed the 1836 election as another election for their admired hero since the Democrat candidate was Van Buren, Jackson's best advisor with unvarying loyalty and dedicated service, whom Jackson openly designated as his successor and others ratified unanimously. To defeat Jackson's avatar, the Whigs took strategic action. Ignoring the precedence of the last election, they held no national convention to nominate their candidate. Instead, various states nominated three Whig candidates, William Henry Harrison of Ohio, Hugh Lawson White of Tennessee, and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts. The purpose of this decision was twofold; it was intended to heighten and take full advantage of regional hostilities to Jackson and his successor Van Buren, and it was expected that several competitors would split the vote sufficiently to send the election into the House of Representatives. As a matter of fact, this had happened in the 1824 election when Jackson got more popular votes but the decision of the House of Representatives favored John Quincy Adams. But Jackson was still the old hero of common Americans. Van Buren won a clear-cut victory over all other Whig candidates. His victory signifies a now tolerable discrepancy between the original image and its double; regardless of the actual substance, Americans could embrace the identical double of the original image as the real entity. Poe's "William Wilson" captures this new political paradox.

By 1840 the two opposing party system, national conventions, and mass rallies defined the more extensively democratic course of the coming presidential race. Both parties were organized down to the regional level, and the proportion of voters in the

presidential election had tripled from 26 percent in 1824 to 78 percent in 1840. Yet, despite the codification and solidification of the party presidential campaigns, the campaigns became more of “personalities and not of issues” (Qtd. in Pessen 168). Indeed, the Whigs recalled the valuable lesson they learned from the last election and accurately adjusted their strategies and tactics. In December 4, 1839 the Whigs nominated Harrison. For the campaign, Whigs popularized three carefully crafted, rousing campaign slogans: “Log Cabin and Hard Cider,” “Tippecanoe and Tyler, too,” and “Van! Van! Is a Used-Up Man!” They were calculated to make the public visualize Harrison as an Andrew Jackson-like Southern war hero and a simple commoner in contrast to Van Buren, whom the Whigs represented as a corrupt career politician indulging in a luxurious, aristocratic lifestyle while the nation’s economy failed. On March 23, 1840, an article in the *Baltimore Republican* argued that “upon condition of his receiving a pension of \$2000 and a barrel of cider, General Harrison would no doubt consent to withdraw his pretensions and spend his days in a log cabin on the banks of the Ohio.” Seizing upon this comment, the Whigs began to portray Harrison as a humble frontiersman in favor of the common people and their lifestyle. However, Van Buren was of humble origins, whereas Harrison was a propertied slaveholder from a renowned Virginian family. Along with campaign newspapers, Whigs also employed a variety of visual and mobile devices such as plentiful placards, large emblems, massive rallies, and catchy campaign songs and slogans. In addition, as the Democratic Party successfully did four years before, the Whig Party did not adopt a platform in order to prevent any possible political conflicts within them. In this extensive democratization of national politics, it became almost impossible to establish a distinction between the original and the identical, as suggested in “William Wilson.”

The consequence was a Whig victory, a death sentence to the twelve years of

Jackson's power. The politics of impersonal identification worked well with the American public. Jackson, who had been the epitome of impersonal identification, wrote scornfully of the Whigs misleading the people by "worshipping coon and sour cider ... [attempting] to degrade the people to a level with the brute creation" (Pessen 169). However, the Whigs only imitated what the Democrats had been doing, but in a more effective way. Thus, an editor of the Democratic Review lamented "they have at last learned from the art of victory! We have taught them to conquer us!" (Qtd. in Gunderson 108).

The three presidential elections in 1832, 1836, and 1840 had shown Americans the predominant logic of impersonal identification at the center of national politics. Though Jackson was idolized and detested as the incarnation of absolutely idiosyncratic political agency, his individuality cannot be easily defined as autonomous and singular. For the democratic individuality he embodied was in constant interplay between the individual and the public; his individuality was always coupled with the democratic will which is not necessarily the expression of the real demos. The paradox of democratic individuality was more egregious in the case of William Henry Harrison as seen in his intentional disowning of his original selfhood and his identification with the image of his political adversary. In these cases of Jackson and Harrison, it is difficult to find the original locus of autonomous and singular agency. Central to what formed and transformed the political contours of 1830s was, as Poe suggests in "William Wilson," the paradoxical logic of impersonal identification.

Towards the end of his narration, Wilson, once the dictator of his associates and himself, reveals an awareness of his "utter weakness and helplessness" (446), a bitter, frank confession of the groundless construct of his self-centered despotism. Paradoxically, it is the occurrence of "the most absolute identity" that drives him to

face the veiled truth of his lack of individual autonomy and singularity. In this sense, the denouement of the story does not remain ambiguous; the death of the two Wilsons is an inevitable corollary of the vain battle between the absent original and its vacant copy. The ultimate irony is that death has always haunted the original ever since he found the absence of his own singularity in his copy's face. The spectral identification tells the horrible truth of the myth of individual identity.

## V. Conclusion

In 1846, Poe wrote that “in this country, which has set the world an example of physical liberty, the inquisition of popular sentiment overrules in practice the freedom asserted in theory by the laws.” (“The Literati of New York” 1134) In “William Wilson” Poe represents the paradox of homogenized individualities. Thus, Poe’s strong and explicit loathing of American transcendentalism should be reconsidered. He disdained Transcendentalists as “Frogpondians” and ridiculed their philosophy of individualism as “metaphor-run mad” which lapses into “obscurity for obscurity’s sake” or “mysticism for mysticism’s sake” (“Editorial Miscellanies from the *Broadway Journal*” 1098-99). Poe once wrote in a letter to Thomas Holley Chivers that he disliked “only the pretenders and sophists among them” (Qtd. in Silverman 169). For Poe, transcendental individualism is a doubly misconceived and misleading hoax since there is in truth no individual autonomy or singularity and thus it is impossible to reestablish or reclaim them. In the same vein, “William Wilson” can be read as an allegory of how “public opinion” deludes the individual into sympathizing for the original and the identical. The strenuous struggle of its narrator is substantial—not simply unreal just because he is misled by a fantasy—because the struggle is

the actual ways in which he sustains his ideological vision. For Poe, a more deeper and significant lesson is the delusive substantiation of the absent, abstract notion of the singular individuality as a tangible, tantalizing entity in democratic social milieus.

All told, in "William Wilson" which reveals his critical reflection on the paradox of individualism during the Jacksonian Era, Poe expresses his growing concerns with the increasingly dominant logic of democratic homogenization and impersonalization. Wilson, mortified by his namesake/doppelgänger's "most absolute identity" with him, seeks his own singular identity in vain. The story shows Poe's sustained inquiry into the paradox that the awareness of the lack of genuine individuality triggers one's urgent yet deluded striving to secure his own autonomy and singularity; what he chases after is, as he finds eventually, nothing but empty entity of individuality. The story thus chastises the contemporary intellectual—mainly Tocquevillian and Emersonian—urge to retrieve the proper individual sphere marred by the democratic logic of homogenization and impersonalization. Poe indicts this public injunction as a double delusion: first it posits the discursive conception of a self-possessed and distinctive individual as a historical entity, and then it proclaims the loss of such proper individualism, which is therefore considered the urgently sought-after object. Poe precisely captures this doubly misleading delusion as central to the American individualism of the Jacksonian Era.

---

#### Notes

- 1) Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales and Sketches Vol. 1: 1831-1842*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000), 431, 448. Further references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

## Works Cited

- Britt, Theron. "The Common Property of the Mob: Democracy and Identity in Poe's 'William Wilson'." *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1995, pp. 197-210.
- Channing, William Ellery. *Self-Culture: An Address Introductory to the Franklin Lectures, Delivered at Boston, September, 1838*. Dutton and Wentworth, 1838.
- Elmer, Jonathan. *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, & Edgar Allan Poe*. Stanford UP, 1995.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature and Selected Essays*. Edited by Larzer Ziff, Penguin Books, 2003.
- Field, Peter S. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.
- Gunderson, Robert Gray. *The Log-Cabin Campaign*. U of Kentucky P, 1957.
- Holmes, Oliver Wendell. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1885.
- Holt, Michael. *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War*. Oxford UP, 1999.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- McGrane, Reginald Charles. *The Panic of 1837: Some Financial Problems of the Jacksonian Era*. U of Chicago P, 1965.
- Pessen, Edward. *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics*. U of Illinois P, 1985.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*. Edited by G. R. Thompson, The Library of America, 1984.



- \_\_\_\_\_. *Tales and Sketches Vol. 1: 1831-1842*. Edited by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, U of Illinois P, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Tales and Sketches Vol. 2: 1843-1849*. Edited by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, U of Illinois P, 2000.
- Remi, Robert Vincent. *Andrew Jackson and the Bank War: A Study in the Growth of Presidential Power*. Norton, 1967.
- Renza, Louis A. "Poe and the Issue of American Privacy." *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by J. Gerald Kennedy, Oxford UP, 2001, pp. 167-88.
- Saxton, Alexander. *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. Verso, 2003.
- Silverman, Kenneth. *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*. HarperCollins, 1991.
- Watson, Harry L. *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America*. Hill and Wang, 2006.
- Whalen, Terrence. *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America*. Princeton UP, 1999.

## 국문초록

### 「윌리엄 윌슨」과 미국 개인주의의 역설

한 광 택

단독 / 충북대학교

본 논문은 「윌리엄 윌슨」에서 잭슨 민주주의 시대의 개인주의의 역설에 대한 에드거 앨런 포의 비판적 성찰을 고찰한다. 「윌리엄 윌슨」에서 주인공 윌슨은 자신과 절대적으로 동일한 정체성을 지닌 도플갱어와 대결하며 자신만의 고유한 정체성을 구축하려하지만 결국 실패한다. 이를 통해 포는 진정한 개성의 결여에 대한 인식이 자신의 자율성과 특이성을 확인하려는 노력을 유발한다는 역설을 탐구한다. 윌슨이 쫓는 것은, 그가 결국 발견하듯이, 자신의 독자적인 정체성이라고 믿었지만 공허한 실체에 불과하였다. 잭슨 민주주의의 특징이 역설적인 독자적 정체성의 뒷면과도 같은 동일한 개성임을 통찰한 포는 동시대의 토크빌과 에머슨이 강조했던 진정한 개별적 주체성이라는 개념을 비판한다. 그는 개인주의에 대한 공적 강조를 이중적인 망상으로 간주하고 비판하는데, 그것은 우선 자아 중심적이고 변별되는 개인 개념을 마치 역사적인 실체처럼 담론적으로 전제한 후 마치 그와 같은 개인주의의 핵심이 상실된 것처럼 주장하기 때문이다. 「윌리엄 윌슨」에서 포는 이와 같이 이중적으로 오인된 개인주의에 대한 망상적 개념이 잭슨 민주주의 시대의 미국 개인주의의 요체라는 사실을 비판적으로 드러낸다.

주제어: 에드거 앨런 포, 미국 개인주의, 역설, 잭슨 민주주의, 윌리엄 윌슨

논문접수일: 2021.05.17

심사완료일: 2021.06.07

게재 확정일: 2021.06.25

이름: 한광택

소속: 충북대학교 사범대학 영어교육과 부교수

주소: (우) 28644 충북 청주시 서원구 충대로1

이메일: seerblest@gmail.com

