

Poe Translated by Baudelaire: The Reconstruction of an Identity

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Poe Translated by Baudelaire: The Reconstruction of an Identity," Anne Garrait-Bourrier argues that Poe and Baudelaire seem to have developed what could be described as a father-son or teacher-student relationship. Baudelaire devoted half of his life to the translation into his mother tongue of Edgar Allan Poe's tales and the other half to the creation of poetry which was inspired, to say the least, by the American writer. Garrait-Bourrier proposes that the influence Poe exerted is undeniable and particularly manifest in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, so akin to Poe's spirit of "spleen" and the systematic deconstruction of the romantic tenets that many scholars and critics have been suspicious about this intellectual similarity. Garrait-Bourrier refers to the fact that Baudelaire admitted openly that Poe had a discernible impact on his own work but that he systematically rejected any accusation of plagiarism. The purpose of Garrait-Bourrier's study is to come to a better understanding of this very unusual literary relationship and try to define it.

## Anne GARRAIT-BOURRIER

### Poe Translated by Baudelaire: The Reconstruction of an Identity

Poe and Baudelaire seem to have developed what could be described as a father-son or teacher-student relationship. The latter devoted half of his life to the translation into his mother tongue of Edgar Allan Poe's tales, and the other half to the creation of poetry which was inspired, to say the least, by the American writer. The veritable influence Poe exerted is undeniable and manifest particularly in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, so akin to Poe's spirit of "spleen" and systematic deconstruction of the romantic tenets that many critics have been suspicious about this intellectual similarity. Baudelaire openly admitted that Poe had a discernible impact on his own work but he systematically rejected any accusation of plagiarism, declaring to Edouard Manet, the Impressionist, "Do you know why, with such infinite patience, I translated Poe? It was because he was like me! The first time I ever opened a book by him I discovered, with rapture and awe, not only subjects which I had dreamt, but whole phrases which I'd conceived, written by him twenty years before" (Starkie 218). These words suggest a very special, unusual relationship which we shall here attempt to define. Is there any rational explanation to be found for the strange attraction felt by Baudelaire towards Poe, or is it just the expression of an unconscious psychological process of identification?

#### Translation: A Process of Vampirization?

As far back as the 1850s, Baudelaire was already devoting his time to the rehabilitation of Poe's work in France, translating his tales and poems and writing the prefaces to these translations. To improve his English, that he knew to be rather poor, Baudelaire would frequent a wine shop in Paris where British ladies and gentlemen gathered, so as to be able to drink and chat with them. Baudelaire used to call Poe "mon frère, mon semblable" (345) and as well as a literary brotherhood, they shared a very similar vision of the world, and more particularly, of the notion of modernity. For them, modernity was the combination of individual freedom and self-assertion; thus progress is not possible unless man is totally independent from the society he lives in. Baudelaire is one of the first French intellectuals who wrote about the notion of modernity and who tried to find a conceptual definition of it, which is exactly what Poe also tried to do, albeit in a more pragmatic way, through his writing. In his essay, "Le peintre de la vie moderne" (1863), Baudelaire defines modernity as "the eternal drawn from the temporary" (553); creation being an unceasing process of the succession of life and death.

Modernity can be perceived as what is left intact and does not die in time after this series of mini-destructions. Poe's fascination with death, the only possible access to eternity, reveals a deeper fascination with modernity described by Baudelaire as indestructibility born from destruction. Baudelaire, like Poe a few years before him, realizes that his era is not moving towards modernity and that nothing new and constructive seems to be stemming from the ravages caused by progress -- certainly not the moral and mental equilibrium of modern man. Baudelaire's vision is one of a world of "Spleen" surrounding him. The word "spleen" is the English word for *ennui* that Baudelaire uses in his poetry to qualify the devilish attractions or bad pulsions which pull the subject downward to self-destruction and create a state of anguish and moral depression. The modern figure of the dandy emerges from this very state of depression. Roaming the streets of big cities, the dandy is looking for beauty and transgression: "Anonymously elegant, the dandy slips through ... the streets, ever aware of exciting transgressive possibilities" (Komins <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss1/6/>>).

In Poe's *The Man of the Crowd*, the narrator is a dandy who spends his time following a man in the crowd. He is fascinated by the stranger but eventually finds out that he cannot establish any contact with him as "the man of the crowd" is not a dandy but an individual victimized and dehumanized by the society he lives in: "This old man, I said at length, is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him nor of his deeds" (Poe 289). This, together with the decay of man when submerged in this unavoidable condition of spleen, are true hints of the shrinking of the senses of a human being victimized by progress. Progress is considered by Baudelaire in the same way as

Poe considered materialism or utilitarianism, i.e. as an obstacle to the harmonious development of man, a prison keeping him away from Art. The Baudelairean appeal to what he calls in his essays "The Ideal." which is the second aspect of his artistic creation -- spleen and ideal being at the same time exclusive and complementary -- is an exhilarating call for a return to individual, creative freedom full of exultation.

As regards their literary and artistic choices, Poe and Baudelaire have been proved to be very close to each other. Baudelaire, despite being above all a poet, was very much tempted by brief compositions and well-turned synthetic art forms, which led him to write many short, prose-like works of poetry. These prose-poems are not very different in form from Poe's shortest tales and they can be seen as a sort of silent heritage of Poe's creative poetic strength. Here we have the beginning of the process of identification. Slowly but surely, and in a very insidious way, Poe loses his American identity to become a pure French product, the result of a European mould just because Baudelaire decided it should be so: "Edgar Allan Poe, who isn't much in America must become a great man in France -- at least that is what I want" (Meyers 268). Poe's work was now enjoying a formidable reputation in France when it was still largely being ignored on the American continent. But what intellectual recognition did Poe gain in such a context? In America, Rufus W. Griswold, Poe's first biographer and posthumous literary manager, as well as his most invidious enemy, chose to besmirch Poe's memory by accusing him of unseemly behaviour, inexcusable alcoholism and virtual insignificance. His account of Poe's death was generally believed to be the truth, creating an aura of ill-repute around Poe and discouraging the puritan American public from enjoying his work.

Baudelaire literally fell in love with this dissipated reputation even before coming into contact with Poe's texts. He saw him as a "poète maudit," the image of himself, an alienated modern artist, which was not really Poe's situation in real life. Poe was a hard worker, never lost in utopian reveries. He was not the dandy Baudelaire wrote about in "Le peintre de la vie moderne." The strange thing is, though attracted to the transgressive liberty incarnated by the dandy, Baudelaire himself was not an idle aesthete. Benton Jay Komins, quoting Walter Benjamin, insists upon this essential paradox: in his "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," Walter Benjamin makes the point that Baudelaire -- despite thoughts to the contrary -- was never a dandy himself. At the end of his life, Baudelaire was "not able to move through the streets of Paris as a stroller" because unlike his idealized rich and idle dandy, "his creditors pursued him [and] ... illness made itself felt" (70; see also Komins <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss1/6/>>).

Whereas Poe published his tales in newspapers to generate an income and provide his young wife with a decent life, he never let inspiration drive him off the track he had chosen to follow. Although Baudelaire wanted Poe to be a literary martyr of the crass industrialism of mid-nineteenth century America, he was in fact a pathetic victim of his own self-destructive character and of Griswold's hatred and jealousy. Some critics never understood Baudelaire's obsession with Poe. They tried to uncover in this passionate attraction intellectual logic or coherence when it was probably unconscious and thus not easily explainable. In a critical paper about *The Flowers of Evil* in the review *The Nation*, in 1876, Henry James penned harsh criticism about both Poe and Baudelaire: "For American readers, furthermore, Baudelaire is compromised by his having made himself the apostle of our own Edgar Poe. He translated, very carefully and exactly, all of Poe's prose writings, and, we believe, some of his very valueless verses. With all due respect to the very original genius of the author of the *Tales of Mystery*, it seems to us that to take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection" (qtd. in Clarke 209). This biased judgment became famous and could be considered as the consequence of Griswold's devastating artistic defilement. It also allows us to comprehend why Baudelaire's project to recreate Poe's artistic personality was an important one: Poe had to be saved from the Americans and from himself. Someone had to help him shake off this bad *literary* reputation by emphasising his bad *moral* reputation, and this was perfectly suited to the decadent French artistic world of the second half of the nineteenth century.

**Translation: An Unavoidable Linguistic Betrayal?**

Aldous Huxley is another writer who criticized and rejected Poe's work strongly, finding his words aggressive and shocking and his prose insulting and vulgar. His viewpoint, though excessive, is nevertheless interesting insofar as the notion of language switch is concerned, for it sheds light on the fact that translation can be considered as intellectual betrayal, however respectful and honest the translator may be: "Was Edgar Allan Poe a major poet? It would surely never occur to any English-speaking critic to say so.... We who are speakers of English and not English scholars, who were born into the language and from childhood have been pickled in its literature -- we can only say, with all due respect, that Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry are wrong and that Poe is not one of our major poets ... Not being English, they are incapable of appreciating those finer shades of vulgarity that ruin Poe for us" (qtd. in Clarke 251). This quote gives us an insight into the crucial differences existing between an English-speaking person reading Poe and a French-speaking reader. Also, what Huxley perceives as "shades of vulgarity," could be termed by someone else "shades of subtlety." Thus, we are dealing with subjective interpretation and personal taste. Of particular interest is that all these nuances of style and tone were probably too subtle to be grasped by a non-native speaker like Baudelaire. French people loved Poe's original text and we dare to suggest that this blind adoration may be due to a reduced linguistic perception, that is they did not completely understand its most subtle lexical innuendos. Both Paul Valéry and Paul Claudel praised Poe's essay *Eureka* which, to English-speaking intellectuals was no more than a tedious mixture of pseudo-science and metaphysical fancy. But did the French betray the artist by loving the man too much? Did we all create a French Poe through our translations and our reading of them?

The translation of Poe effected by Baudelaire could, then, be perceived as "vulgar," to use Huxley's word. In less crude terms, translation involves the desacralization of a work of art by separating it from its context and the sources of its inspiration. It is definitely more emotional than linguistically perfect and, with this in mind, the word "betrayal" is justifiable even if not conscious on the part of Baudelaire. The discrepancy between the two languages is to Huxley a handicap, an obstacle to objectivity. Yet, interestingly, the second writer, being unavoidably subjective during the work of translation is even more creative and his writing process can be said to acquire veritable autonomy, distinguishing it from the original. To illustrate this notion of autonomy and independence, let us go back to the original classification of the tales and try to see how Baudelaire can be said to have betrayed the original artistic project of Edgar Allan Poe. The division suggested by Baudelaire in 1856 was accepted without query by the French public throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. The French reader only knew Poe through Baudelaire's translations, which necessarily produced some side effects: on the one hand it allowed Poe to become famous in spite of Griswold and to become the canon he wanted to be, but on the other hand it generated some doubts about the authenticity of this public recognition. Did people like Poe or did they love the Baudelairian portrayal of Poe? Would the American Poe have accepted this French double, would he have loved or hated him, would he have recognized himself in him?

So many questions remain unanswered. By recreating Poe, Baudelaire certainly tried to better understand his own troubled self. As in the eponymous tale *William Wilson*, Baudelaire pursues and harasses his original, he copies and follows his gestures and choices. Poe-William and Baudelaire-Wilson are the two sides of one complex individual, like the twins in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Like the Other in *William Wilson*, the pursuer looks for fusion and reunification, he tries to perfect the original by correcting his mistakes. This is what Harold Bloom denominates a process of *tessera*, i.e. the bringing to perfection of the precursor's work by the second writer in order to fight against his growing "anxiety of influence" (6). Baudelaire undoubtedly tried to elevate Poe to what he perceived as an ideal of perfection: his own creation.

Baudelaire first purchased Poe's works in London in 1851 (Baudelaire 317). This was his first encounter with the American, and he immediately fell in love with the tone, style and content of these texts. He never wrote anything about the theoretical concepts of literary influence and plagiarism whereas Poe had spent a lot of energy attempting to prove his originality. Baudelaire, inversely, although acknowledging that he felt an intimacy with Poe, always refused to admit that he recreated this intimacy in the works he wrote after his translations of Poe, that is to say, after

1856. He was obviously deeply influenced by Poe's essay *Eureka* presenting the human condition as a simultaneous movement of attraction and repulsion. This phenomenon of unconscious reappropriation is another clear manifestation of Harald Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. Instead of fighting against the influence of the first writer, the second writer, moved by passion, prefers to vampirize him, to suck out his creative substance like the painter absorbs his bride's life in Poe's *The Oval Portrait*. This absorption that Bloom calls a *tessera* (14), both completes and betrays at the same time. Like physical possession, it satisfies temporarily the one who possesses, while stealing some independence from the one who is possessed. This symbolic betrayal linked to the linguistic possession of Poe by Baudelaire is quite relevant when one observes the mistakes made by the French poet in his translations. Baudelaire loved the English language and used it in an instinctive way, whereas translation requires technicity and precision, a full understanding of both the source and target language which he certainly lacked. In a letter written to Maria Clemm, Poe's mother-in-law, and published in France in 1854 in the newspaper *Le Pays*, as a preface to one of his first translations, "Souvenirs de M. Auguste Bedloe," we can read the following lines (in the original French version so as to highlight the strange contrast between the last two words): "Adieu, madame; parmi les différents saluts et les formules de complimentation qui ne peuvent conclure une missive d'une âme à une âme, je n'en connais qu'une aux sentiments que m'inspire votre personne: goodness, godness" (Baudelaire 318). It is not my purpose to translate the whole letter but we will concentrate on the two concluding words "goodness, godness" that Baudelaire adds in English at the end of his friendly message. His desire to play upon words and to show his mastery of the English language results in a poor lexical association that Mrs Clemm must have had some problems in understanding! *Goodness* is an exclamation, quite inappropriate in such a context and *godness* is a neologism, probably used here instead of *godliness* which would not have been correct either.

French readers of our century are now able to read more accurate and academic translations of Poe, like those published by Claude Richard, who devoted years of his university career to the rehabilitation of Poe's work in France and to the correction of the existing translations. It is now impossible to miss the subtleties of Poe's writing, with his stylistic variations and humorous spirit, rendering Baudelaire's translations subject to doubt. Let us have a look at one example of a surface-level discrepancy between the semantic choices of Poe and Baudelaire. Baudelaire translates Poe's essay title "The Power of Words" as "Puissance de la parole," which could be retranslated as "The Might of Speech." The English language is very precise and semantic nuance may be conveyed by a word that the French language will not necessarily identify. To summarize, we can say that for one French word the English language can provide about four synonyms or polysemic varieties, with different linguistic registers and shades of meaning. Referring again to this title "the Power of Words," we can say that "words" are elements of "speech" and not speech itself, so that such a translation amounts to confusing the container and the contents. Baudelaire would have been better advised to translate "words" in the plural by "paroles" or "mots," so as to achieve a better effect and a more accurate rendition of Poe's meaning. Power is very different from "might," which is more religious and more metaphysical. In other words, if Poe had decided to speak in this specific essay about the romantic notion of might of speech he would certainly have chosen different words to express it. Thus, Baudelaire's translation is at best inaccurate and at worst, misleading.

Whereas Poe organized his tales into four groups, Baudelaire published only three volumes of translated texts. In 1856, he published *Les Histoires extraordinaires*, made up of thirteen texts, then the following year he produced the volume *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, containing twenty-three translated tales, and in 1865 he concluded his work with the publication of ten translated tales *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses*. Baudelaire thus translated forty-six tales written by Poe together with *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (in a separate edition) which is far from the totality of Poe's work. More than thirty tales remain untranslated by Baudelaire, that is to say, unknown to the French public in the nineteenth century. Among them are some texts which were translated in 1991 by the French scholar of American literature, Henri Justin. Edgar Poe has in fact written and published more than seventy tales, some of which are still totally unknown in France,



such as "Why the little Frenchman wears his Hand in a Sling," of obvious interest to the French or "Never bet the Devil your Head," whose title probably did not inspire Baudelaire, despite the presence of the devil. In short, Baudelaire chose and translated the texts he liked best, ignoring the rest of Poe's work.

It then appears that this long work of translation, which slowly becomes the reappropriation of a text by another creator, is symbolic of vampirism. The vampire kills his victim to suck the blood out of him and feed himself with it. Baudelaire is the painter of the *Oval Portrait*, a sort of living incarnation of Poe's imagination. He loves and desires his model but is not allowed to do so as, in the psychological pattern chosen by Poe, the model incarnates the Mother figure, which for Baudelaire would more logically be a father figure - impossible to reach and to possess. By depriving the model of all physical and mortal power of attraction, by killing the model and sublimating her on the canvas, the painter of the tale frees himself from his anguish of castration, like Baudelaire frees himself from his anguish of influence and his attraction to Poe. In addition to sacrificing his own creative work in order to translate Poe, Baudelaire published three essays about Poe in the 1850s. The anxiety of influence was so deeply rooted in Baudelaire that he had to free himself from it in whichever way he could.

### **Poe and Baudelaire: A Homoerotic Relationship?**

Even if chronology prevents us from thinking of any reciprocal link between the poets, the power of attraction existing between Baudelaire and Poe may be even deeper than at first sight. Unlike Hawthorne and Melville, whose works of art were mutually influenced, we can speak in the case of Poe and Baudelaire of a sort of homoerotic intellectual influence. Poe's vision of the blurred dividing line between genders in his fiction suggests a confusion of sexes which is very present in his tales and once again almost predicts the ambiguous attraction Baudelaire felt towards him. This love/hate relationship is accepted by Poe as being totally normal and is manifest in his philosophical essay *Eureka* in which he develops his famous metaphysical theories of attraction and repulsion. Attraction is evident in Baudelaire's relationship with Poe by way of his strong and even sensuous desire to take possession of Poe's intellectual and spiritual essence, that is to say, his creation. *Repulsion* is to be found in the disintegrating act of translation and transformation of words into another language, another body, another soul. By translating Poe, Baudelaire possesses Poe and frees himself simultaneously from his desire of possession. Poe's text becomes like a feminine entity, the object of Baudelaire's craving. We can even wonder if the French poet is attracted to the text as an imaginary work or if his passion is reflected by the text only as a mirror of tormented masculinity; Poe's of course, but also Baudelaire's.

Similar sexual indeterminacy is at the heart of Poe's most famous tales where masculinity and femininity are blurred and finally become reunited in one single genderless unity, a sort of figure of the "Over-Soul," described by Emerson (163). We can cite *The Fall of the House of Usher* as one of the most relevant examples of Poe's inversion/fusion of genders. Like all female characters in Poe's texts, the lady Madeline has an apparently small part to play in the tale. She appears only twice, crossing corridors in a ghostly manner, without any physical detail to allow an imaginary representation of her. More than a character, she is like a spirit moving about on the periphery of two worlds, the world of the living and the world of the dead: "While he spoke, the Lady Madeline passed through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared" (92). Her reappearance in the story ten pages later is much more dramatic since she virtually comes back from the dead to meet her twin brother again and bring him back to the realm of death, which obviously terrifies him: "Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman! ... Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!" (98).

Roderick, the twin-brother, is a weak individual who has developed a mysterious disease which makes him hypersensitive and unable to bear the burden of life. He stays in his tomb-house alone with his sister, also infected with the same "family curse." He has a feminine part which makes him receptive to arts and aligned to the romantic standards of what used to be called the "weaker sex." Delicate and emotional, he is definitely more feminine than Madeline who fights death and is inhabited by a super-human will-power. She wishes for a reunification with her original double, to go back to their matrix shelter here symbolized by the house. She leaves her vault, forces her way

into her brother's room and physically kills her twin with a view to reaching a genderless wholeness. Masculinity and femininity are constructed and developed simultaneously in this tale, albeit via a relationship featuring absorption wherein the feminine vampirizes the masculine. This is enhanced by the narrative process of embedding texts, presenting fictional doubles of the main heroes. Madeline's double is a young chivalrous knight, Ethelred, who conquers a dangerous dragon hidden in a cave. The link between Ethelred and Madeline serves to prove that she has the power over the main text which Roderick brutally understands in the final scene: "And now -- to-night -- Ethelred -- ha! ha! -- the breaking of the hermit's door and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangour of the shield! -- say, rather the rending of her coffin" (98). Clearly, Ethelred appears as Madeline's inverted portrait, her dark double, as Baudelaire is of Poe.

In a similar manner, Baudelaire is inspired by this vision of a gender-free world. Femininity is frequently annihilated in his poetry, sublimated and thus transformed into a divine creation. In Baudelaire's reconstructed universe, a living female is a loose woman and if the poet can live with such a woman, and have sex with her (her main function), he surely cannot love her nor be inspired by her. Thus femininity does not exist as such for the poet, but only through sublime disembodied images to be worshipped like for example a woman's hair, in the magnificent poem "La chevelure." Here again, the figure of the dandy is appropriate. His pursuit of luxury and loose pleasures destroys the romantic notions of respect and pure love. To some extent, Baudelaire's vision of women and femininity was influenced by *dandysme*, as Benton Jay Komins underlines: "In this world of narcissistic satisfaction, no space is opened up for the subjectivity of others ... the urban dandy's profound self-centeredness, emphasis on beauty, and sexuality still haunts the contemporary imagination" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss1/6/>>).

We know that Poe fought a continuous battle against the demon of plagiarism and the twisted perversion of influence. He even declared war on his fellow-writer Longfellow, accusing him of plagiarism of which he was himself not entirely innocent. Passion and influence have their dark sides not only manifest in literary plagiarism -- which we note in Baudelaire's translations of Poe -- but also in what may be deemed a confusion of identity or quest for an *alter ego*. Translating Poe became for Baudelaire a real search for the definition of his own personality and even his understanding of gender. Baudelaire's text is a mixed entity, a complex unity like most of Poe's characters, a unity composed of scattered elements. The "Flowers of Evil," are filled with Poe's own experience of despair and doubt about the world and about human beings, blended with Baudelaire's spleen and bouts of ideal. Both writers were divided into forces of Good and Evil, love and hate, masculine and feminine, they were like two images reflected in the mirrors of their creations so perfectly inverted that the reader does not know who inspired whom. Alter egos of each other, these two monsters of selfishness and misanthropy would probably have hated each other if they had had the opportunity to meet. Looking at oneself in a mirror can be very upsetting as the hero of William Wilson discovers in the last lines of this eponymous tale. Baudelaire chose to exalt Poe's character as Griswold presented it because he had many features in common with this portrait. Baudelaire identified with Poe in a very self-centered egotistical way. Both had a strain of masochism and a taste for self-destruction certainly provoked by parental rejection. Baudelaire's most palpable self-destructive action was the translation of Poe's works. From this peculiar and unique encounter of two geniuses was born a new universal poet, we could name *Poedelaire*. Half European, half American, the writings of this desexualized creator are tinged with black humour, sensationalism, and sprinkled with a touch of French preciosity.

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