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AND HIS RIVAL TRANSLATORS**

Reference: Marilyn Gaddis Rose (ed.) *Translation in the Humanities*,  
New York, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1977,  
p. 59-66.

## POE, BAUDELAIRE AND HIS RIVAL TRANSLATORS

by  
*Haskell M. Block*

Baudelaire's discovery of Poe and his devotion to the establishment of Poe's greatness in France is one of the crucial events of modern literature. So clearly are the thought and art of Poe and Baudelaire intertwined, that at over a century of distance, we cannot consider the one writer without almost at once thinking of the other. In a letter of 1930 Valéry provided a striking illustration of this tendency: "tous les Baudelairiens se sont toujours réclamés d'Edgar Poe, comme s'ils ne pouvaient séparer ces deux esprits et les admirer distinctement. Mallarmé est l'exemple le plus remarquable."<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire himself on several occasions insisted not only on his profound admiration for Poe's genius, but also on a mysterious sense of identity with his American predecessor. As he put it in a letter to Théophile Thoré, written perhaps in June 1864, well after Baudelaire's translations of Poe had come to be acclaimed and accepted:

Eh bien! on m'accuse, moi, d'imiter Edgar Poe!  
Savez-vous pourquoi j'ai si patiemment traduit  
Poe? Parce qu'il me ressemblait. La première fois  
que j'ai ouvert un livre de lui, j'ai vu, avec  
épouvante et ravissement, non seulement des sujets  
rêvés par moi, mais des PHRASES pensées par moi,  
et écrites par lui vingt ans auparavant.<sup>2</sup>

In this rather mystical formulation of joint authorship, we may see Baudelaire as a living part of Poe's eternity, "Tel qu'en Lui-même."

It was not always so. Baudelaire did not begin his literary career as Poe's translator, and he was not a famous writer when he published his first translation of Poe, "Révélation magnétique," in 1848. His sustained efforts as Poe's translator were to begin five years later, but the translation of 1848 is important, not only as an early indication of Baudelaire's interest, but also for its statement of Baudelaire's theory of translation at the outset of his enterprise. Baudelaire had a deep and wide ranging theoretical mind, and based his literary and art criticism on clearly articulated aesthetic principles; but somewhat surprisingly, he did not speculate at great length on the theory of translation, and for this reason, the note accompanying the translation of "Révélation magnétique" is of special importance. Here, near the end of his remarks, Baudelaire insists on the need to translate Poe's tale literally rather than freely:

Il faut surtout bien s'attacher à suivre le texte littéral. Certaines choses seraient devenues bien autrement obscures, si j'avais voulu paraphraser mon auteur, au lieu de me tenir servilement attaché à la lettre.<sup>3</sup>

Baudelaire's servility is no doubt the attitude of an inexperienced translator, not altogether sure of the language of the original, but it is also a mark of his respect for Poe's text and an expression of the high importance

he was to place on exactitude throughout the 17 years of his labors as Poe's translator.

In our time Baudelaire's translations are the standard texts in which Poe's writings are read in France. There are inexpensive reprints of most of Baudelaire's versions in several editions, and whenever Poe is cited or reprinted in French, it is always in Baudelaire's translation. It was not always so, and to understand why Baudelaire's translation has become canonical, it is instructive to attempt to replace his effort in the context of the work of other translators in mid-nineteenth century France, rivals whom he was compelled to dislodge and supersede to maintain his preeminence. This aspect of Baudelaire's career as a translator was explored to some extent by Léon Lemonnier in his study, *Les Traducteurs d'Edgar Poe en France de 1845 à 1875: Charles Baudelaire* (Paris, 1928), of which a summary is presented in Lemonnier's introduction to his edition of Poe's *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires* in the Classiques Garnier series. Lemonnier's study remains useful to anyone interested in Baudelaire and his rival translators of Poe, but his discussion is more informative than critical, and his information is not always accurate. Owing in great part to the efforts of W.T. Bandy, we know much more about the subject today than was available fifty years ago.<sup>4</sup>

Today the rival translators of Poe are almost totally forgotten, but they deserve at least some attention, for they helped to create a climate for the dissemination of Poe's writings among the French reading public, and they stimulated Baudelaire's efforts. There are seven principal translators in addition to Baudelaire, not all of equal importance, but all are worthy of mention even in a brief survey: Gustave Brunet, Amédée Pichot, Emile Forgues, Isabelle Meunier, Alphonse Borghers, Léon de Wailly, and William L. Hughes. As Charles Asselineau suggests, it is likely that Baudelaire first came upon Poe's writings through the mediation of Mme Meunier.<sup>5</sup> Her translation of five tales of Poe, published in the newspaper, *La Démocratie Pacifique* in 1847 and 1848, is an important event in the history of Poe's works in France. Her version of "Le Scarabée d'or," serialized in three issues of the newspaper in May 1848, is in some way superior to the translation published by Baudelaire in 1856. Mme Meunier is sometimes more accurate in diction and tone, especially in her handling of dialect. While Borghers and Forgues, among the early translators, modified Poe to the point where their work is often closer to adaptation than translation, Mme Meunier translated with careful regard to the text. Born in Brighton, England, and married to a Frenchman, her maiden name was Isabella-Mary Hack; she was a scrupulous journalist whose translations are, on the whole, accurate and competent. Like others among Baudelaire's contemporaries, she tends to omit and to condense passages that prove difficult, but she is reasonably exact and, unlike some of the others, she does not seize upon Poe's text as a basis for free-wheeling elaboration.

Forgues seems to have been the worst offender. He signed his contributions by the pseudonym "Old Nick," and may have operated a translation factory. An unscrupulous and litigious journalist, he was denounced by Baudelaire as "canaille littéraire." Baudelaire was not motivated merely

by a desire to discredit a competitor. Forgues showed an utter lack of scruple in his free embellishment of Poe's texts, and did not hesitate on occasion to pass off Poe's work as his own. His tale, "Une Sanglante Enigme," published in 1846 under the initials of Old Nick, contains no mention of Poe, although the story is clearly an adaptation of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which both phrases and events are plagiarized.<sup>6</sup>

Baudelaire's most serious rival was William L. Hughes, born in Dublin in 1826. He began publishing translations of Poe's tales in periodicals in 1854, at a time when Baudelaire was also contributing translations to literary journals of the day. Hughes was more competent as well as more energetic than Baudelaire's other rivals. His published translations of Poe extend over a 31-year period, from 1854 to 1885, and include two substantial collections in book form, *Contes inédits d'Edgar Poe* (1862) and *Œuvres choisies d'Edgar Poe* (1885), as well as smaller collections. The frequency of appearance of Hughes's versions in contemporary periodicals bears a direct relationship to the success of Baudelaire's *Histoires extraordinaires*,<sup>7</sup> for immediately after 1856 it clearly became difficult for Hughes to place his translations.

A detailed comparative study of the work of Poe's translators in France in the middle years of the nineteenth century would be a valuable contribution to scholarship. Such a study might help to explain why Baudelaire's translation became canonical and why the work of other translators rapidly faded from public attention. Even a brief comparison of representative texts might be suggestive in this regard.

It must be recognized that not all of Poe's French translators worked from the same English text. Poe's revisions of his tales were often extensive, and textual variants often lead to striking differences in translations. Most of the translators worked from collections of Poe's tales in book form, either the *Tales* published by Wiley and Putnam in New York in 1845 and in London the following year, or the three-volume Redfield edition of *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, published in 1850. Baudelaire owned copies of both works,<sup>8</sup> but he also had access to an extensive file of *The Southern Literary Messenger* from which some of his texts were taken. His sustained activities as Poe's translator date from 1853 when he obtained a copy of the Redfield edition.<sup>9</sup>

Yet despite the presence of divergent texts, Poe's French translators sometimes worked from the same text. Such seems to have been the case for "A Descent into the Maelström," which presents the same text in both the 1845 and 1850 editions. This striking account of a night of horror at sea engaged the interest of at least three of Baudelaire's rivals as well as of Baudelaire himself, and the comparison of four texts of a representative passage is a most instructive experience. The original and the translations read as follows:

"Here the vast bed of the waters . . . burst suddenly into phrensiéd convulsion — heaving, boiling, hissing — gyrating in gigantic and innumerable vortices, and all whirling and plunging on to the eastward with a rapidity which water never elsewhere assumes except

"Dans ce vaste lit . . . livrées à des convulsions furieuses, indomptables, — gonflées, sifflantes comme sur la fournaise, — tordues en spirales gigantesques par d'innombrables tourbillons, elles roulaient, luttant de vitesse et de colère; on eût dit un torrent sur quelque pente abrupte, — et toujours dans la direction du levant."

Forgues

"Le vaste lit des eaux éclata . . . en une convulsion frénétique, s'agitant, sifflant, bouillonnant, formant des tourbillons gigantesques, innombrables, et tout tournoyait et se précipitait vers l'est avec une rapidité que l'eau ne prend jamais qu'en tombant le long des pentes rapides."

Meunier

"Là, le vaste lit des eaux . . . éclatait soudainement en convulsions frénétiques, — haletant, bouillonnant, sifflant, pirouettant en gigantesques et innombrables tourbillons, et tournoyant et se ruant tout entier vers l'est avec une rapidité qui ne se manifeste que dans des chutes d'eau précipitées."

Baudelaire

"Sur cet espace, la vaste nappe liquide . . . se déchâna soudain avec une rage frénétique, se soulevant, bouillonnant, sifflant, formant des cercles gigantesques, innombrables, qui roulaient et se dirigeaient vers l'est avec une rapidité que l'eau n'acquiert nulle part ailleurs, sauf sur la pente abrupte d'un précipice."

Hughes

Forgues's version is without question the poorest of the lot. His method is one of free elaboration in which the translator in effect displaces the author. Thus, "boiling" becomes "sifflantes comme sur la fournaise," although no furnace is indicated in Poe's maritime description. Forgues's sentence structure is marked by clumsy disjunction, and throughout the passage, he betrays a casual indifference to the claims of the original. His conclusion marks an abandonment of any serious effort to translate the final phrase. If this selection is at all representative — and it seems to be — Forgues's translations of Poe can only be described as crude hack work.

Mme Meunier's version is much easier to read than that of Forgues. It is quite close to Poe's text, workmanlike and rather literal, except for the use of the past tense in place of Poe's present participles near the end of the phrase. Her version follows Poe's sentence structure closely, and while not particularly striking, constitutes a competent rendition.

Baudelaire may have benefited from Mme Meunier's effort, for their texts offer some similarities, but there are also noticeable differences. Meunier does not adequately translate "gyrating" by rendering it as "formant"; Baudelaire's "pirouettant" may introduce an image of a dance, but it at least represents a more deliberate effort to come to terms with

"gyrating" than is found in either of his predecessors. In his version of the final phrase, Baudelaire makes "rapidity" rather than "water" the subject, but the essential meaning is retained by way of "des chutes d'eau" at the very end of the sentence. Baudelaire's concluding passage is at once bolder, more vigorous and more striking than the more literal version of Meunier.

Hughes's renditions seem to be almost as good as those of Baudelaire. Not only is Hughes generally quite accurate; he captures many of Poe's nuances. Hughes made a serious attempt to come to terms with "gyrating," although he needs four words ("formant des cercles gigantesques") to accomplish what Baudelaire did in one. The end of the passage, as in Meunier's version, is fairly literal and close to the original. Unlike Baudelaire, however, Hughes does not quite manage to convey the plural form of "precipitous descents." His version is rather good but Baudelaire's is even better.

Forgoes apart, the rival translators we have glanced at are far from contemptible. While Meunier's versions are not especially literary, they are accurate and readable. Hughes's efforts must be taken more seriously. He was Baudelaire's most challenging competitor and as the author of short stories in his own right,<sup>10</sup> he was not lacking in literary skill or experience.

It is therefore instructive to compare Baudelaire and Hughes more closely. One of the most mystical of Poe's fantasies, the tale "Eleonora" is especially important for its illumination of the nature of dreams. We should note in passing that both Poe and Baudelaire shared the Romantic preoccupation with the interplay of poetry and dream. This concern is obsessive in Poe from the early poems to the very end of his career. In *Eureka* the cosmic poetization of reality is described as a vast dream. Baudelaire in his criticism frequently uses the term "rêveur" as a synonym for poet, and his speculations on the relationship of poetry and dream, notably in *Les Paradis artificiels*, are if anything even more detailed and more elaborate than what we may find in Poe. "Eleonora" is a crucial text in the assertion of a general theory of dream in Poe's work, and we may be sure that its importance was not lost on Baudelaire.

Baudelaire took great pains with the opening paragraph of his translation of "Eleonora." He published a first version twice, in 1859 and 1861, in literary journals of the day, and then presented a second version of the opening lines in *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses* (1864). It should also be noted that the text in modern reprints of "Eleonora" in Baudelaire's final collection differs slightly from the 1864 text, in that the capital letter for "Science" has been replaced by lower case, and the missing auxiliary verb has been supplied.<sup>11</sup> I do not know if these changes were made by Baudelaire or by a subsequent editor. More important are the differences between the opening two sentences of Baudelaire's first and second versions. Baudelaire's revisions of his own translations of Poe would be worthy of detailed study. In this instance it is clear that the second version is less literal but more literary and livelier as well as more oracular and decisive in tone. It is also evident that the felicities of the first version are carried over into the second.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly one reason for Baudelaire's success as Poe's translator was his willingness to work at the

improvement of his text. He took his task seriously and he gave himself to it with energy and passion.

Hughes's version of "Eleonora" appeared in his *Contes inédits d'Edgar Poe* in 1862, two years before the publication of Baudelaire's revision of his earlier translation. It is instructive to compare the opening sentences:

"I am come of a race noted for vigor of fancy and ardor of passion. Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence — whether much that is glorious — whether all that is profound — does not spring from disease of thought — from *moods* of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect. They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in waking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret."

Poe, Eleonora

"J'appartiens à une race connue pour la force de son imagination et l'ardeur de ses passions. On m'a appelé fou; mais savons-nous encore si la folie est ou n'est pas autre chose qu'une intelligence sublime? Savons-nous si une grande partie de ce qu'on appelle la gloire, si tout ce qu'on nomme profondeur n'a pas son origine dans une maladie de la pensée, dans certaines *phases* d'un esprit qui s'exalte aux dépens de ses facultés générales? Ceux qui rêvent le jour ont connaissance de bien des choses qui échappent à ceux qui ne rêvent que la nuit. Dans la pénombre grise de leurs visions, ils entrevoient comme des éclairs de l'éternité et ils tressaillent, au réveil, de voir qu'ils ont été sur le point de découvrir le grand secret."

Hughes

"Je suis issu d'une race qu'ont illustrée une imagination vigoureuse et des passions ardentes. Les hommes m'ont appelé fou; mais la Science ne nous [a] pas encore appris si la folie est ou n'est pas le sublime de l'intelligence, — si presque tout ce qui est la gloire, si tout ce qui est la profondeur, ne vient pas d'une maladie de la pensée, d'un mode de l'esprit exalté aux dépens de l'intellect général. Ceux qui rêvent éveillés ont connaissance de mille choses qui échappent à ceux qui ne rêvent qu'endormis. Dans leurs brumeuses visions, ils attrapent des échappées de l'éternité et frissonnent, en se réveillant, de voir qu'ils ont été un instant sur le bord du grand secret."

Baudelaire

These passages deserve careful study. Perhaps neither version is altogether satisfactory, yet both are very good and do credit to the sensitivity and skill of both translators.

His opening phrase reveals Baudelaire's sure command of the resources of language. Poe's narrator begins with an archaism, "I am come of a race." Hughes captures this notion literally ("J'appartiens à une race") but Baudelaire renders it in a more accurate as well as livelier way by

his own use of archaism ("Je suis issu d'une race"). Perhaps in such a detail we may see the difference between the translator native to the language he uses, and one who translates into a language that he has acquired. Both translators have difficulty with Poe's phrase, "moods of mind," and both make the same mistranslation in exalting the mind rather than its *moods*. Neither Hughes's "*phases d'un esprit*" nor Baudelaire's "*mode de l'esprit*" is adequate for "moods of mind." A translator at the end of the century might have rendered it by "*états d'âme*," and perhaps this should have occurred to Baudelaire. In any case, "mode" is a mistranslation. It is somewhat surprising that two very capable translators should stumble over the same passage. Either "sentiment" or "humeur" would have been nearer the mark than "*phases*" or "mode." There are other interesting variations. Both translators render the final two sentences rather well, but Baudelaire boldly expands the activity of the dreamer. Hughes is accurate enough in translating "They who dream by day" as "*Ceux qui rêvent le jour*," but Baudelaire enters into the psychology of the dreamer by converting an expression of time into an attribute of human activity ("*Ceux qui rêvent éveillés*"). Hughes suffers from clumsiness in the final sentence ("*ils entrevoient comme des éclairs de l'éternité*") where Baudelaire is less literal but more direct in writing "*ils attrapent des échappées de l'éternité*." Syntax apart, Baudelaire's version clearly places more emphasis on the activity of the dreamer.

We may conclude that Baudelaire triumphed over even the best of his rivals because he was a better translator. We should also recognize that the versions of William Hughes are deserving of close comparison with those of Baudelaire. In many instances, notably in the handling of dialogue, he is occasionally Baudelaire's superior. Even the earlier translators sometimes succeeded in rendering a difficult passage that Baudelaire failed to understand. Thus, Jupiter's description of Massa Will in "The Gold-Bug," "as white as a gose," was rendered by Baudelaire and by several others as "*pâle comme une oie*" instead of "*pâle comme un spectre*" or "*un fantôme*." Hughes, who perhaps should have known better, wrote "*aussi blanc qu'une oie*."<sup>13</sup> Here Mme Meunier is unique among the early translators in capturing the slave's dialect in her version, "*blanc comme un monde qu' l'est mort!*" There are other similar lapses in Baudelaire, but it is possible that in this instance both he and Hughes were led astray by a faulty English text.<sup>14</sup> We know that in Baudelaire's own published translations, many of the faults were not of his making. Thus, in describing the periodical publication of his translation of *Eureka*, Baudelaire complains of "*des phrases sautées, des passages tronqués, des contresens faits par l'imprimeur, et autant de fautes d'impression qu'il y a de puces dans la poussière d'un fleuve espagnol*."<sup>15</sup>

Baudelaire's triumph over his rivals depended far more on his own imaginative energy and his *conscience professionnelle* than on his connections in the journalistic and literary worlds. His rivals were also well connected, but they were neither great poets nor great critics, and they could not hope to prevail over so talented an adversary. As we have seen, Baudelaire also had his difficulties. Perhaps translation inevitably includes acts of betrayal. Jacques Lacan's charge that



Baudelaire betrayed Poe by translating "The Purloined Letter" as "La lettre volée" is but one of a long succession of similar charges, but these strictures must perforce be directed to translation itself. Georges Mounin has summed up the dilemma very well in contending that all of the complaints made against translation can be reduced to the following: it is not the original. True enough, but Baudelaire's Poe remains a magnificent achievement.

<sup>1</sup>Valéry, *Lettres à quelques-uns* (Paris, 1952), pp. 186-187.

<sup>2</sup>Baudelaire, *Correspondance Générale* (Paris, 1948), IV, 277.

<sup>3</sup>Baudelaire, *Critique littéraire et musicale* (Paris, 1961), pp. 68-69.

<sup>4</sup>See W. T. Bandy, "Introduction," Baudelaire, *Edgar Allan Poe, sa vie et ses ouvrages* (Toronto, 1973), pp. xiii-xvi.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Asselineau, *Charles Baudelaire: Sa Vie et son Œuvre* (Paris, 1869), p. 39.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Léon Lemonnier, *Les Traducteurs d'Edgar Poe en France de 1845 à 1875: Charles Baudelaire* (Paris, 1928), pp. 30-31.

<sup>7</sup>Léon Lemonnier, "Introduction," Poe, *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires* (Paris, 1961), pp. xxiv-xxvi.

<sup>8</sup>Lemonnier, *Les Traducteurs d'Edgar Poe en France*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup>See W. T. Bandy, "Introduction," Poe, *Seven Tales* (New York, 1971), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup>See Lemonnier, "Introduction," *op. cit.*, p. xxvii.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Poe, *Œuvres en prose*, Editions de la Pléiade (Paris, 1951), p. 909; Poe, *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses*, Le Livre de Poche (Paris, 1973), p. 107.

<sup>12</sup>Baudelaire's earlier text is as follows:

"Je suis issu d'une race qu'ont illustrée la vigueur dans l'imagination et l'ardeur dans la passion. Les hommes m'ont dit fou; mais c'est une question non encore résolue si la folie est ou n'est pas le sublime de l'intelligence, si presque tout ce qui est la gloire, si tout ce qui est la profondeur, ne vient pas d'une maladie de la pensée, d'un mode de l'esprit exalté aux dépens de l'intellect général." (1859)

<sup>13</sup>Poe, *Œuvres choisies* (Paris, 1885), p. 9.

<sup>14</sup>See the note of J.-H. Rosny to his translation of Poe, *Le Scarabée d'or* (Paris, 1892), p. 20, n. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Baudelaire, *Correspondance Générale* (Paris, 1948), III, 42.