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Tracing the origin of hybrid text across cultures: The influence of Edgar Allan Poe's genre experimentation on Baudelaire's invention of the prose poem

Sonya Isaak

Résumé

À la recherche de l'origine du texte hybride à travers les cultures : le jeu d'Edgar Allan Poe avec les genres et son influence sur « l'invention » du poème en prose par Charles Baudelaire.

L'un des traducteurs d'Edgar Allan Poe parmi les plus importants en France, Charles Baudelaire, a absorbé les idées et le style de son alter ego américain. L'article analyse la forte attraction réciproque, inhérente à l'œuvre des deux écrivains. Il trace les parallèles perceptibles en ce qui concerne l'expérimentation avec des genres différents. En outre, il se propose d'éclairer les allusions que Baudelaire fait à l'œuvre de Poe dans ses *Petits Poèmes en prose*. Il traite des affinités biographiques, intertextuelles, thématiques et stylistiques entre les deux œuvres.

Abstract

Cross-cultural genre expansion: The influence of Edgar Allan Poe's use of hybrid text on Baudelaire's conception of prose poem.

As one of the first significant translators of Edgar Allan Poe in France, Charles Baudelaire absorbed the ideas and writing style of his American alter-ego. The paper analyzes an astounding cross-cultural reciprocal attraction inherent in the works of both writers, tracing parallels in genre experimentation, exploring allusions to Poe in Baudelaire's prose poems and shedding light on biographical, intertextual, thematic and stylistic affinities.

As one of the first significant translators of Edgar Allan Poe in France¹, Charles Baudelaire became so immersed in Poe's writing, theories and style that it became difficult even for him to pinpoint where Poe's identity differed from his own: "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 auparavant²."

Both writers reveal strikingly similar biographies as well as reciprocal interest in the language and culture of the other.

Though the reception was unilateral since Poe never got a chance to meet Baudelaire, the American's interest in France and the French language manifests itself in his writing. Two of his best known tales are set in France and many stories use French names, or even titles such as "The Duc de l'omelette". Poe, who, like Baudelaire, was fond of spreading rumors about himself (and who left it to posterity to decide whether or not there was any truth to them)

¹ Isabelle Meunier was the first significant French translator of Poe. Baudelaire was familiar with her translations.

² Baudelaire, Charles, *Correspondance*, Tome I, Paris, Gallimard, Edition de la Pléiade, 386.

claimed he had been to France. Alexandre Dumas even confirmed that Poe visited him in Paris in 1832³. Biographers have found no evidence thereof. Despite this, Baudelaire and the Symbolists received the writing of the Francophile poet and prose writer warmly and to this day some critics believe his writing has a greater impact in France than in the United States. T.S. Eliot once stated caustically that Poe appealed to the French because their disability in perceiving fine nuances in the English language prevented even the most educated of Frenchmen from realizing that the American author's writing was in fact, as Harold Bloom would later state, of "a badness not to be believed"⁴.

Regardless of how poorly Poe's works may have been received in the eyes of a few of his contemporaries and critics, Poe stands out as one of the greatest literary minds of America in the 19th century. Even today it would be difficult to find a high school student who is not familiar with Poe's "The Raven." This poem is one of the few translated by Baudelaire, who mainly focused on the tales⁵. It provides an excellent example of a nascent generic change that may have influenced Baudelaire.

Though "The Raven" is lyric in nature as it rhymes and follows established, though unusual schemes of versification, it tells a story, almost bordering on fiction. This in itself is not a novelty. Many romantic ballads or even medieval poetry served such a purpose. As Abrams points out, "the prose translations of the poetic books of the Old Testament in the King James Bible [...] approximate the form that in the nineteenth century was named the prose poem." As examples of prose poems he cites Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose*, Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (1886) and "passages in Walter Pater's prose essays, such as his famous meditation on Leonardo da Vinci's painting *Mona Lisa* in *The Renaissance* (1873)". Abrams defines prose poems as "densely compact, pronouncedly rhythmic, and highly sonorous compositions which are written as a continuous sequence without line breaks"⁶. This definition would apply to Poe's *Eureka*, though not to the 'Raven', since the latter uses line breaks, characteristic of poetry.

However, the style, tone, and some of the words employed in the "Raven" strongly remind one of prose. Here Poe, though still fundamentally a poet, begins to experiment with genres subtly. The opening lines: "Once upon a midnight dreary" are a take on the classical "once upon a time", which announces the beginning of a fairy tale, a prose genre. "Midnight dreary" constitutes a precise time reference analogous to the more vague expression "time" used in the above expression characteristic of fairy tales. Surely one would assume that the choice of such a first line was no coincidence. The use of a raven capable of speech as an allegorical representation of the student's melancholy, or else as an embodiment of Satan is also unusual in a fairy tale; the talking beast reminds us vaguely of the animals in Jean de La Fontaine's seventeenth century fables, though in the case of the *beast fable* animals are more loquacious and represent human types⁷.

³ See W. Roberts, "A Dumas Manuscript. Did Edgar Allan Poe visit Paris?", *The Times Literary Supplement* (Nov.21,1929):987, and Lois Davis Vines, *Poe in France*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1999, 13.

⁴ Bloom, Harold, ed. and author of the introduction. *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Tales of Poe*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, 1.

⁵ Baudelaire translated also *Eureka* and the poems that Poe had inserted into the tales he have chosen to translate.

⁶ Abrams, Meyer Howard, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993, 172.

⁷ Abrams, Meyer Howard. *Glossary of Literary Terms*. Fort Worth, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993, 6.

The style of the poem is reminiscent of prose, especially the use of complex words and sentences such as:

For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door-
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door
with such a name as “Nevermore”.

Ironically, in his expository work *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe considered “The Raven” to be his poem *par excellence*, which should serve as a model for writing other poems. Is *The Philosophy of Composition* to be read literally, or are most critics just taking Poe too seriously? Perhaps here, as in many other instances, he was trying to broaden his readers’ horizons, to challenge established notions of what constituted the genre “poetry”.

At one point, Poe admits that though his use of rhythm and metre may not be original, his idea of combining “octametre actaelectic”, “heptameter catalectic” and “tetrameter catalectic” as lines into a stanza is unprecedented: “Now, each of these lines taken individually has been employed before, and what originality the “Raven” has, is their *combination into stanza*; nothing even remotely approaching this combination has ever been attempted”⁸.

Though not explicitly referring to generic expansion here, Poe is making the reader aware that lines or elements that do not seem combinable can be employed at will freely. One must dismiss old notions of versification to allow for the new to follow. As we will soon see, Baudelaire would later share strikingly similar discoveries with his readers. It is noteworthy that Baudelaire’s two translations of “The Raven” resulted in prose versions of the poem.

Poe establishes rules only to break them later on. He does not adhere to his own ideas of what constitutes an ideal poem in many of his works. Some of his descriptions of how he had gone about writing “The Raven” are surely exaggerated, explicit to the point of seeming sarcastic. According to Thomas Mabbott, Poe “admitted freely that his *Philosophy of Composition*... was not expected to be taken as a literal truth”, although his “intentions [were] serious” and though it “*may [have been] true that he planned the antepenultimate stanza first*”⁹. If Poe’s manual on how to write a poem does not merely contain purely serious considerations as most critics in the past have assumed, one can begin to think whether Poe was deliberately taking himself too seriously to provoke his contemporaries. If one is not convinced that this is the case, one should consider that he abandoned his own principles when he wrote *Eureka*, which according to Poe’s preface was to be judged as a “poem only” by posterity. This text constitutes a more audacious attempt at genre experimentation. Its considerable length by far exceeds what Poe set out in his *The Poetic Principle*. According to Poe, “a long poem does not exist.” If a poem is too long, one loses sight of its unity and reading it becomes tiresome. Why would he write a poem that contradicted his own terms?

The subtitle of *Eureka* is “A Prose Poem”, which is a clear indication that Poe was deliberately seeking to hybridize the genre “poetry”. He was aware, that this “poem” was going to be prosaic in nature. Not much remains of Poe’s previous notions of poetry. While his earlier combinations of prose and poetry into one genre were subtler, as in “The Raven” or as in the case of his blatant insertion of poems or passages of poems into his prose or tales,

⁸ Poe, Edgar Allan. Quinn, Arthur H. and O’Neill, Edward (eds), “The Philosophy of Composition“ in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1992.

⁹ Mabbott, Thomas Ollive, ed. *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, I*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1969, 359 (emphasis mine).

Eureka is a revolutionary declaration, underlined by the very meaning of the title itself, “I have found it!” Perhaps Poe is suggesting that alas, he has found the key to the future of poetry, namely, that in order to be innovative, one must mix genres and registers. It would not have been the first time that Poe was revolutionizing literature. By many, he is called the founder of the detective story; some even go so far as to call him one of fathers of science fiction. Blending of genres can be found throughout his tales and his expository writing. He weaves poems and dramatic dialogues into his tales, mixes registers and even languages. Once again this provocation is deliberate, sometimes even announced bluntly by a title, such as in the case with “The Duc de l’omelette”, where Poe mixes English and French. When one analyzes the sources Poe used in writing many of his tales, many of them are French. For example, Saint-Pierre’s *Etudes de la Nature* inspired “Sonnet-To Science”¹⁰.

It is not surprising that an American with such a bohemian mindset who used European settings and the French language for his tales, should appeal to Baudelaire. It was not merely as a translator that Baudelaire discovered the American writer. He identified with his counterpart to the extent of vampirizing the former, of absorbing Poe’s work completely as a foundation for his own. Baudelaire’s creative process was to some extent, reinvention. Though he developed a unique, memorable style, Baudelaire owed a great deal to his literary forefather.

What Poe had begun subtly, the blending of genres, prose and poetry, fact and fiction, the provocative yet sympathetic direct addressing to his readership to win them over or else to test the extent of their gullibility, Baudelaire took to new heights. He was bold enough to call an entire anthology of his texts “Prose poems”, thus making clear that he was creating a new genre, a genre that combined elements of two genres, which stood in opposition according to the traditional division of literature into prose, poetry and drama.

In his dedication to his publisher, Arsène Houssaye, preceding the anthology *Le Spleen de Paris*, which also bears the alternative title *Petits poèmes en prose*, the French poet makes a case for writing prose poems, listing all of their advantages when one compares them to classical poems: “Considérez, je vous prie, quelles admirables commodités cette combinaison nous offre à tous, à vous, à moi et au lecteur”. He compares the prose poems to a snake which has neither head nor tail and can be taken apart at any time, reassembled and nonetheless understood: “Enlevez une vertèbre, et les deux morceaux de cette tortueuse fantaisie se rejoindront sans peine. Hachez-la en nombreux fragments, et vous verrez que chacun peut exister à part”. In this dedication the Frenchman acknowledges his debt to the poet Aloysius Bertrand, whose work *Gaspard de la Nuit* had inspired him. One should question the sincerity of such a dedication, which, though it precedes the anthology as we know it today, may not even have appeared in the work had the prose poems in fact been published in book form during Baudelaire’s lifetime¹¹. The dedication familiar to us was a “canevas”, or draft found in Baudelaire’s *carnet* notes. However, one must keep in mind that Baudelaire broke with his addressee, the editor Houssaye, since the latter refused to publish the fourth selection of prose poems. Though Baudelaire pays his compliments to Houssaye, calling him “mon cher ami” and mentioning that even his editor had attempted to write a prose poem, the *Vitrier*, Baudelaire himself would write a prose poem entitled “Le Mauvais Vitrier”, which according to Karlheinz Stierle was written as a deliberate provocation¹². Furthermore, Baudelaire

¹⁰ Thomas Ollive, ed. *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, I*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969, 90.

¹¹ They were published individually, or in groups in several magazines and newspapers, such as *La Presse*.

¹² Stierle, Karlheinz, *Der Mythos von Paris. Zeichen und Bewusstsein der Stadt*, München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1993, 889-890.

claimed with false modesty that he realized as soon as he had written the work, that it could not live up to that of his role model, Aloysius Bertrand. He then established himself as a pioneer, by stating that he had instead created something entirely new and different “by accident”¹³. He further advertised his “invention”, calling it a miracle: “Quel est celui de nous qui n’a pas, dans ses jours d’ambition, rêvé le miracle d’une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s’adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l’âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience?”¹⁴ ”

By choosing the insignificant and unknown Bertrand as his official role model, Baudelaire could easily establish his own superiority. The chances of anyone knowing Bertrand were slim, and his prose poetry could surely not live up to that of Baudelaire. Acknowledging Poe as an influence would have implied a greater risk. There was a chance that Baudelaire might remain in his shadow. If one gives Baudelaire the benefit of the doubt, perhaps the influence was too obvious to be worth mentioning, or else it was subconscious, but it seems that he was deliberately trying to appear more original by refraining from mentioning his alter-ego. He makes a case for his own creativity by excusing himself, stating that what he had written had little to do with what he had intended to write from the onset and that it was entirely different and revolutionary: “je m’aperçus que... je faisais quelque chose... de singulièrement différent”¹⁵.

Baudelaire’s prose poems may be unique, but they owe a great deal to Edgar Allan Poe. First, one will recall, that Poe subtitled *Eureka* “A Prose Poem”, coining a term that Baudelaire would later choose to appropriate when he gave his anthology *Le Spleen de Paris* the alternative title *Les Petits Poèmes en Prose*. Just as Poe had mentioned that he had done something innovative by combining lines in a new way in his *Philosophy of Composition*, Baudelaire believed he had created something entirely new and unexpected with his prose poems, as we saw before. Strangely and perhaps wisely, he refrains from acknowledging his debt to Poe in his prose poems. However, these poems reveal some striking parallels and allusions to Poe’s works. Obviously, Baudelaire was incredibly familiar with Poe when he wrote the prose poems in 1869, having translated much of his work.

The twelfth prose poem in the anthology, “Les Foules”, is inspired by Poe’s short story, “The Man in the Crowd.” While he does not do so in the prose poems, in his essay on Constantin Guys, Baudelaire acknowledges that he used Poe’s tale as a source: “Vous souvenez-vous d’un tableau (en vérité c’est un tableau!) écrit par la plus puissante plume de cette époque, et qui a pour titre *L’Homme des foules*?”¹⁶ Baudelaire’s “Les Foules” can be read like an interpretation, a comment on Poe’s story. In both the prose poem and the tale, the protagonist enjoys dipping into and out of other people’s thoughts, becoming drunk in this universal communion, “communion universelle” as Baudelaire puts it. In Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd*, the narrator, who had been ill, is now convalescent and in the best of moods— a mood so happy that it is the “converse of *ennui*”. The narrator’s attention shifts from his own interior world to the outside world. He begins to observe groups of people who share common interests he distinguishes in the crowd, contemplating gamblers, clerks, pick-pockets and “modest young girls returning from long and late labor to a cheerless home” just to name a few. The protagonist is able to empathize with these people. He believes he has the ability to “read, even in that brief interval glance, the history of long years.” Suddenly, his attention becomes riveted to a single man, his contemplation proceeding further and further inwards.

¹³ Baudelaire, Charles. *Œuvres Complètes* I. Paris, Gallimard, « Pléiade », 1976, 276.

¹⁴ Baudelaire, Charles. *Œuvres Complètes* I. Paris, Gallimard, « Pléiade », 1976, 276.

¹⁵ Baudelaire, Charles. *Œuvres Complètes* I. Paris, Gallimard, « Pléiade », 1976, 276.

¹⁶ Baudelaire, Charles. *Œuvres Complètes*, I, Paris, Gallimard, « Pléiade », 1976, 1316.

The protagonist's only goal from this point consists in understanding the man, whom he follows through the streets of London as his subject ambles aimlessly about. When finally, at the wake of the second evening, he accosts the wanderer, staring him "steadfastly in the face", the man fails to notice the protagonist. He concludes that perhaps it is for the better that the man is not decipherable. He calls him the "man of the crowd", stating that some people are like books that are unreadable. In the case of the people this may be a good thing, since such people bear the worst evils of humanity in their souls.

In "Les Foules", Baudelaire described a poet, who unlike most men, is able to thrive in a crowd: "jouir de la foule est un art". He then refers to multitude and solitude as synonyms, and this is also reminiscent of Poe's tale, where the man of the crowd remains anxious and alone in the crowd, for the narrator observes something "even more intense than despair" on the "countenance of the singular being whom [he] had watched so pertinaciously"¹⁷. Just as the narrator delights in observing the crowd, so in Baudelaire's poem, the lone wanderer rejoices: "Le promeneur solitaire et pensif tire une singulière ivresse de cette universelle communion"¹⁸. For the poet, this prostitution of the soul when it gives itself completely to a stranger is so orgiastic that love seems pale in comparison.

"La Fausse Monnaie" illustrates Baudelaire's philosophical solidarity with Poe. This prose poem relates the story of two friends, one wealthy, the other of moderate means, who are approached by a beggar who surprises them by succeeding at instilling incredible pity in them. While the first person narrator (the man of moderate means) gives a small amount, his wealthy friend surprises the beggar by giving him an apparently incredibly valuable coin. This coin, he soon reveals to his friend with satisfaction, is fake. He is pleased with himself at having done evil, and the narrator thinks about all of the consequences the action brings with it. He concludes that though his friend was obnoxious, his deed is more excusable than if he had not been aware of his evil nature: "on n'est jamais excusable d'être méchant, mais il y a quelque mérite à savoir qu'on l'est: et le plus irréparable des vices est de faire le mal par bêtise." Along with Poe and de Maistre, Baudelaire is taking the opposite stance of Rousseau, who believed in the goodness of mankind. For these authors, human nature is innately evil¹⁹.

A striking parallel to Poe lies in Baudelaire's choice of title for the prose poem "Anywhere out of the world". It alludes to a line from Thomas Hood's *Bridge of Sighs*, which Poe had cited in *The Poetic Principle*. Baudelaire's poem deals with escapism, a soul that wants to escape anywhere out of its familiar surroundings, possibly even through death. Poe cites Thomas Hood's poem in full, stating that its "vigour is no less remarkable than its pathos."²⁰ It relates the sad and sudden death of a homeless young girl who drowned in a river in the cold month of March:

Mad from life's history,
Glad to death's mystery,
Swift to hurl'd—Anywhere,
anywhere out of this world!²¹

¹⁷ Poe, Edgar Allan. Quinn, Arthur H. and O'Neill, Edward, Eds. "The Philosophy of Composition." in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1992, 314.

¹⁸ Baudelaire, Charles. *Petits Poèmes en Prose (Le Spleen de Paris)*, ed. Robert Kopp, Gallimard, 1973, 45.

¹⁹ Baudelaire, Charles. *Petits Poèmes en Prose*, ed. Robert Kopp, Gallimard, 1973, 95 and see notes 222.

²⁰ Poe, Edgar Allan. Quinn, Arthur Hobson and Edward H. O'Neill (eds). *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1992, 1037.

²¹ Poe, Edgar Allan. Quinn, Arthur Hobson and Edward H. O'Neill (eds), *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1992, 1035.

The harsh reality of life, of the here and now and the need to escape by means of revolt, drugs or death is common to both Poe and Baudelaire.

The affinities above are striking and one could go on to trace many more parallels to Poe in Baudelaire's prose poems. The influence of Poe on Baudelaire's prose poems is perhaps disregarded, because usually, Baudelaire is credited with having invented the prose poem. In general, the French author enjoyed associating his literary reputation with that of Poe. Regardless of his intentions, he neglects to mention that he is indebted to Poe for this innovation as well. Perhaps he considered himself so akin to the American that he no longer deemed it necessary. Throughout his life, he had always defended his literary forefather from what he considered to be unjust accusations, even rewriting essays he found that placed Poe in a negative light as a man, thus assuring his idol's success in France. By leaving it to posterity to discover the hidden "correspondences" which he did not explicitly reveal, Baudelaire was assuring that his literary legacy would be at least as significant as Poe's. Perhaps towards the end of his life, he was beginning to feel that he was in secret competition with his literary forefather, Edgar Allan Poe, and that at least to some extent, he had to break free.

ABRAMS Meyer Howard, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Fort Worth, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993

BAUDELAIRE Charles, *Correspondance I, II*. Paris, Gallimard, « Pléiade », 1976

BAUDELAIRE Charles, *Œuvres Complètes I, II*, Paris, Gallimard, « Pléiade », 1976

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BLOOM Harold, (ed. and author of the introduction), *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Tales of Poe*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1987

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