



**HAL**  
open science

## Baudelaire's Poe: an influential (mis?) reading?

Tim Farrant

► **To cite this version:**

Tim Farrant. Baudelaire's Poe: an influential (mis?) reading?. *Loxias*, 2010, Edgar Poe et la traduction, 28. hal-04537311

**HAL Id: hal-04537311**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04537311v1>**

Submitted on 25 Nov 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial 4.0 International License

## Baudelaire's Poe: an influential (mis?) reading?

Tim Farrant

### Résumé

Cet article propose de réexaminer la traduction et la lecture de Poe par Baudelaire dans le contexte des normes génériques contemporaines du conte. Il se penche sur la traduction baudelairienne dans la perspective de la théorie et de la pratique du conte, c'est-à-dire, en ce qui concerne Baudelaire, du « poème en prose ». Il considère dans quelle mesure on peut parler d'une éventuelle « fausse » lecture chez Baudelaire, pour en explorer les suites et les transformations dans des propres récits et essais critiques, suggérant que c'est dans les *Petits poèmes en prose* de Baudelaire, même plus que chez Poe, que les principes poétiques de ce dernier trouvent leur épanouissement.

### Abstract

This article suggests a reassessment of Baudelaire's translation and interpretation of Poe in relation to contemporary generic norms of the tale. It looks at Baudelaire's translation of Poe in relation to his theory and practice of short fiction – in Baudelaire's case, of the *poème en prose*; at how Baudelaire reads or misreads them in the contemporary French context, and reworks them in his own critical writings and fictions, taking Poe's poetic principles to, perhaps even beyond, their realization in Poe's own writing in his *Petits poèmes en prose*.

Even today, Baudelaire is still the preeminent French presenter of Poe<sup>1</sup>. Although not his first French translator, he was the most influential, devoting some fourteen years of his life to translating Poe's tales and, minimally, criticism<sup>2</sup>. That Poe did not make his catalytic impact on Baudelaire until 1851, four years after his first Poe encounter<sup>3</sup>, is due to more than just the events of 1848 leading him away from Poe until the arrival of the Empire<sup>4</sup>. The intervening years were spent questing elsewhere precisely what Poe would give him: unity, transcendence, coherence, meaning, form. In 1847 Baudelaire was still struggling with forces as diverse as Hugo, Fourier and the bourgeois, Champfleury and Realism – all as much potential sources of unity as Poe would soon become. If the 1846 *Salon* makes short work of Hugo, it sees eclecticism as the enemy as it wrestles with nature in a quest for transcendence through the real<sup>5</sup>. Nature, in '46, is still a dictionary, not yet the *pâturage de l'imagination* it will

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Henri Justin and Juliet Simpson for key suggestions and Aleksandra Urakova for her generous advice; mistakes and misapprehensions are my own. French works cited are published in Paris.

<sup>2</sup> *Histoires extraordinaires* (1856); *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires* (1857); *Les Aventures de Arthur Gordon Pym* (1858) and *Eureka* (1863); *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses* (1865); cf. J.-M. Maguin and C. Richard, E.A.Poe, *Contes, Essais, Poèmes* (Laffont, 1989, Bouquins; hereafter Bouquins) 1584-6, W.T. Bandy 'Baudelaire et Edgar Poe', *Revue de littérature comparée* 41 (1967) 180-194, C. Pichois and J. Ziegler, tr. G. Robb, *Baudelaire* (London: Vintage, 1991) *passim.*, esp. 144-6, 182-3, 216-9, who show that Baudelaire's Poe translations earned him considerably more than all his other works together, 381.

<sup>3</sup> Via Isabelle Meunier's translation of « Le Chat noir » (*La Démocratie pacifique*, 27 Jan. 1847).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. Justin, *Avec Poe jusqu'au bout de la prose* (Gallimard, 2009; hereafter Justin), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Baudelaire, *Salon de 1846* in *Curiosités esthétiques*, ed. H. Lemaître (Classiques Garnier, 1961), 168-70.

become in 1859<sup>6</sup>. The epoch's central problem: how to find a unifying system, an overarching ideology to give meaning in both life and art, is symbolized by Champfleury's *Chien-caillou*, with its opening inventory of Chien-caillou's garret, and its contrast of *style romantique* and *style réaliste*<sup>7</sup>. *Style romantique* may be gratuitously elaborate, but *style réaliste* is impassively factual, refusing the imaginative illumination which might give meaning. Transcription is the watchword of Realism, but the danger with a list is that it could be infinite, stupidly enumerating without ever hierarchizing or giving meaning.

Flaubert would find a different answer to this problem, using transcription and impassive mimesis not to give but to suggest negative meaning, to be 'bête comme la vie'. But for Baudelaire it was Poe who was decisive. The demand for overarching meaning is answered, as for Flaubert, by form, something encapsulated in *The Poetic Principle*<sup>8</sup>:

An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly, a sense of the Beautiful. This it is which administers to his delight in the manifold forms, and sounds, and odours, and sentiments amidst which he exists. And just as the lily is repeated in the lake [...] so is the mere oral or written repetition of these forms, and sounds, and colours, and odours, and sentiments, a duplicate source of delight. But this mere repetition is not poetry. [...] There is still a something in the distance which he has been unable to attain. We still have a thirst unquenchable, to allay which he has not yet shown us the crystal springs. This thirst belongs to the immortality of man. [...] It is the desire of the moth for the star [...] a wild effort to reach the Beauty above [...] And thus when by Poetry – or when by Music, the most entrancing of the Poetic moods – we find ourselves melted into tears [...] through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate joys. The struggle to apprehend the supernal Loveliness – this struggle, on the part of souls fittingly constituted – has given to the world all *that* which it (the world) has ever been enabled at once to understand and to *feel* as poetic<sup>9</sup>.

'We struggle, by multiform combinations' writes Poe in the same passage, 'to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone'. The 'multiform combinations' of 'the things and thoughts of Time' are explored most deeply in Poe's major philosophical essay *Eureka*, first published 1848, and translated by Baudelaire in 1863, but mentioned as early as 1852<sup>10</sup>. For Poe, unlike Coleridge, the imagination creates not *ex nihilo*, but by reordering the elements of this world<sup>11</sup>: here is the real world as *pâturage de l'imagination* later identified in Delacroix, and the stress on music as expression of unity and harmony foreshadowed in the 1846 *Salon* and made explicit in 1859. For Baudelaire, Poe is 'l'auteur d'*Eureka*'<sup>12</sup>, and its theory informed Baudelaire's theory and his practice, along with his relentless labour on Poe's tales. Poe, literally, shaped Baudelaire, giving him hands-on training in story-writing, in shaping something written rather than as voicing a discourse<sup>13</sup>, and, crucially, an almost haptic appreciation of the ways and means of creating form and poetry in narrative prose. Poe makes of the tale a new form, indeed, makes of it a *form* where

---

<sup>6</sup> Classiques Garnier, 119, 326. It was, however, in the *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* (1857) that Baudelaire first described imagination as 'la reine des facultés', attributing this view to Poe: Classiques Garnier, 629.

<sup>7</sup> Champfleury, *Contes*, ed. G. Secchi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1973), 72-3.

<sup>8</sup> Never translated by Baudelaire but used in his 1857; Introduction to *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*: Bouquins, 1463.

<sup>9</sup> *The Poetic Principle* in Poe, *Selected Writings*, ed. D. Galloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984; hereafter Penguin) 505-6.

<sup>10</sup> *Corr.* I 186 and in *Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses œuvres*: Classiques Garnier, 603.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Eureka*, ed. S. & S. Levine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004) and Bouquins, 974 *et seq.*

<sup>12</sup> *Edgar Poe*, Classiques Garnier, 609.

<sup>13</sup> On the distinction between the tale / *conte* as a discursive mode and a more consciously formed genre (in French, the *nouvelle*), see Justin 130-2.

before it had been first and foremost a discourse, a mode of entertainment or transmitting moral messages. Rejecting morality, his ‘didactic heresy’, he makes the tale (and later, the poem) a matter of effect, and effect contingent on brevity:

‘All high excitements are necessarily transient [...] without unity of impression, the deepest effects cannot be brought about [...] As the novel cannot be read at one sitting, it cannot avail itself of the immense benefit of *totality*.

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression [...] [*Paradise Lost*] being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, *totality*, or unity, of effect’<sup>14</sup>.

In France the *conte* had been seen, pre-Baudelaire (with the salient exception of Mérimée<sup>15</sup>), as essentially discursive, governed not by brevity but extension<sup>16</sup>, characterized by freedom, diversity and licence, as aver the 1830s collections’ very titles : *Contes bruns*, *Contes grivois*, *Contes lycanthropiques*, *Le Salmigondis*, *Contes de toutes les couleurs*. And the *conte* was told in a context – in the case of these examples, in the volatile context of post-July Revolution France, often evoking the *conte* as vestigially, vitally, oral phenomenon, narrated live to an audience: ‘le phénomène oral qui fait la puissance de l’acteur et du conteur’ celebrated by Balzac and Gautier<sup>17</sup>.

Poe, and in his wake, Baudelaire will remove the tale from the audience in a rejection of society: Baudelaire’s *Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses oeuvres* makes him virtually the first *poète maudit*<sup>18</sup> as well as his own self-portrait and manifesto. He also espouses Poe’s formal stipulations on the tale, his concern with unity and totality of effect. Yet his Poe translations intermittently introduce what Henri Justin elsewhere in this volume calls ‘transitivité’, incorporating (for example) direct object or personal pronouns in French sentences where, in Poe’s original, there are none:

I awaited fearlessly the ruin that was to overwhelm / j’attendis sans trembler la catastrophe qui devait **nous** écraser (*Ms. Found in a Bottle*, Pl. 174);

Ye who read are still among the living / Vous qui **me** lisez (*Shadow*, Pl. 477);

Of her family – I have surely heard her speak / Quant à sa famille, très certainement elle **m’en** a parlé (*Ligeia*, Pl. 241);

And then slowly opened *the eyes* of the figure which stood before me / Et alors **je vis** la figure qui se tenait devant moi **ouvrir** lentement, lentement *les yeux* (*Ligeia*, Pl. 257)<sup>19</sup>.

Such examples introduce a connectedness, via notation absent from the originals, restoring a social connectedness central to the social function of the pre-Baudelaire *conte* but signally lacking in Poe. Baudelaire’s renderings lose the strangeness of Poe’s formulations, the way his sentences stop short, shock us, leave us high and dry. Poe’s utterances expose language as an absolute, yet also aleatory, the ultimate reality of the text – something revealed even more completely in Poe’s verse (e.g. *Ulalume*, *The Raven*, above all *Annabel Lee*), whose

<sup>14</sup> Poe’s emphasis: review of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales* (1842); *The Philosophy of Composition*, Penguin, 446, 482. Penguin, 446.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g. R. C. Dale, *The Poetics of Prosper Mérimée* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966), esp. ch VI.

<sup>16</sup> « La nouvelle, c’est une course au clocher. On va toujours au galop, on ne connaît pas d’obstacles ; on traverse le buisson d’épines, on franchit le fossé, on brise le mur, on se brise les os, on va tant que va son histoire » (J. Janin, « Le Piédestal », *Revue de Paris*, 1832, 43.103).

<sup>17</sup> Balzac, *Une conversation entre onze heures et minuit* in *Contes bruns*, ed. M. Milner (Marseille 1979) 5-6; Gautier, *Celle-ci et celle-là* and *Le Bol de punch : Les Jeunes-France* (Éditions des autres, 1984), 145, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Classiques Garnier, 597-599, 603.

<sup>19</sup> Examples given by H. Justin. Cf. e.g. also C. Richard, Bouquins, 1367 n. 12, 1371 n. 12.

incantations amplify the very materiality of language, the status of words as things, the building blocks both of verse but also of the world – Mallarmé’s ‘cas littéraire absolu’<sup>20</sup>. The shock of social disconnection, of psychopathic dysfunction, present in many Poe narratives (*The Gold-Bug*, *The Domain of Arnheim*), or of aberrant reconnection (the narrator’s obsession with the old man’s eye in *The Tell-Tale Heart*) is partly lost by such translation failings – or overcompensations? For these ‘flaws’ betray a(n unconscious?) desire to naturalize Poe, filling his unnerving semantic gaps - which, like Mallarmé’s, are often negative plenitudes - with a syntactical, grammatical logic absent from the original, creating a new, if unfaithful, completeness, yet diminution, of meaning.

These very translation ‘failings’ perhaps connected Poe to his new French audience more effectively than closer renderings, or than Poe’s originals to his first American readers back home. Yet Baudelaire’s ‘transitivités’ nonetheless correspond to something which is already present, connoted by Poe’s generic label *Tales*. Poe’s choice of this designation, in *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, evokes the folk narrative roots and resonance of the story, tales told to an audience, implying a teller as well as a hearer or a reader. Many of Poe’s start traditionally, with a first-person narrative about an acquaintance, the voice of personal experience: *The Gold-Bug*, for example, *The Purloined Letter*, *The Domain of Arnheim*, or *The Man that was Used Up*. Other significant traditional features are taken up and transmuted. The most fundamental is repetition. Repetition, here understood syntactically and morphologically, rather than psychoanalytically or philosophically<sup>21</sup>, is a founding feature of folk narrative<sup>22</sup>, which depends on repetition both for its transmission and as its very *raison d’être*: the folk-tale or legend is repeated from teller to teller, from generation to generation, and the purpose is to pass on wisdom: tales are always told at least twice. Indeed, repetition is the pivot between poetry and prose, common to both the folktale and the ballad – as Poe recognized<sup>23</sup> but only Baudelaire could fully realize, in the swirling circularities of the aptly-named *Petits poèmes en prose*.

Poe and Baudelaire thus appropriate the tale, turning this vestigially-oral mode of social discourse and exchange into a written, literary form. The linearity of the *conte* is supplanted by the structured concentration of what Poe calls elsewhere ‘the Short Prose Tale’ – almost a short story in all but name<sup>24</sup> – along with stipulations that tales should create ‘unity of impression’ and be ‘read at one sitting’. In his *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* and his 1859 Gautier article, Baudelaire repeats and develops Poe’s views<sup>25</sup>; but he turns Poe’s ‘tale’ into ‘nouvelle’, adding more written and formal implications, as well as the suggestion both of novelty and reality, along with, often, subject-matter dealing with emotions or relationships<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Edgar Poe’, *Quelques médaillons et portraits en pied* in Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. B. Marchal (Gallimard, Pléiade, 2003), II 145. Richard sees in this musicality of language a theological truth in *Eureka* and in *Annabel Lee* (Bouquins, 963-81, 1577), something more recent scholars have disputed (Justin, 126).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Lacan, *Écrits* (Seuil, 1966); B. Johnson, ‘The Frame of Reference: Poe, Derrida, Lacan’, *Yale French Studies*, 55-6 (1977), 457-505; G. Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (PUF, 1968 and reprints).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. e.g. V. Propp, *Morphologie du conte* and *Les Transformations du conte merveilleux*, tr. M. Derrida, T. Todorov, C. Kahn (Seuil, 1970); C. Velay-Vallantin, *L’Histoire des contes*, (Fayard 1992).

<sup>23</sup> E.g. in *The Poetic Principle*, Penguin, 505-506 cited above.

<sup>24</sup> In *Tales of the Folio Club* (1833): Justin 127. The term ‘short story’, with all that it implies about self-consciously constructed narrative, was invented by Brander Matthews in 1884: ‘The Philosophy of the Short Story’, *The London Saturday Review* (5 July 1884), *Lippincott’s Magazine* (July 1885). Matthew’s evokes ‘Poe’s paradox that a poem cannot greatly exceed a hundred lines in length under penalty of ceasing to be one poem’: cit. C.E. May (ed.), *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens, Ohio, Ohio U.P., 1994), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Classiques Garnier, 619-39, esp. 630, 633-634; ‘Théophile Gautier’ IV, *L’Artiste*, 13 March 1859, Classiques Garnier, 677-8.

<sup>26</sup> Justin, 130; cf. A. Jolles, *Formes simples* (Seuil, 1972), ch. 8, esp. 179-182.

Poe's 'single sitting' becomes Baudelaire's 'lecture accomplie toute d'une haleine', substituting a dead metaphor for what in Poe's words is putatively still very much a live activity, of experiencing a narrative in a given place and for a certain time – a time which, in fact, in chronometric terms, is anything other than certain, but which is conceived of as a whole, a unity ('single sitting') and results from an implicit agreement between narrator and audience. Poe's 'definition', or perhaps rather characterization or assessment of the tale, still implicitly acknowledges its oral forebears, that stories are recounted in real time (even if only the fictional real time of the printed frame story) ; Baudelaire tidies this up, making the tale a matter of definition and constraint, feeding his own poetic conception of intensity into Poe's craftsmanlike and analytical views about effect: Baudelaire echoes Baudelaire, as much as Poe: 'la nouvelle jouit des bénéfices éternels de la contrainte'<sup>27</sup> is mirrored, less than a year later by a remark on verse: 'parce que la forme est contraignante l'idée jaillit plus intense'<sup>28</sup>. In some respects Baudelaire's seems like a deliberate misreading, a taking of the wrong end of Poe's philosophical telescope for the pursuit of his own goals: this notion of an idea spurting forth from form, for example, is the absolute conceptual opposite of Poe's very sensationalist, not to say sensational, stress on effect. Yet in both cases form is a way of containing dysfunction, an attempt to shore up something which might otherwise collapse. In both Poe and in Baudelaire, 'folk' and traditional forms are subverted – and not just by the accident of Baudelaire's translations. In Poe, the stories which start with an acquaintance, with a seemingly normal social situation, end with something awful: the narrator's friend in *The Gold-Bug* turns out to be a madman, and a madman precisely because he is excessively rational, his friend in *The Domain of Arnheim* to be a crazed recluse. In *The System of Professor Tarr and Doctor Fether*, we begin with a seemingly normal situation in an admittedly abnormal setting – the Governor's drawing-room in an asylum – before gradually discovering that everyone, even the asylum-keepers (even the narrator?), are mad. In Poe, the social becomes the psychotic.

Baudelaire accentuates this tendency. His translates the *Tales* of Poe's title as *Histoires grotesques et extraordinaires*, downplaying the original's echo of folk-narrative, and develops the aberrant in his own brief narratives, the *Petits poèmes en prose*, of which so many recount shocking happenings expressing a breakdown in social or interpersonal relations: *Le Mauvais vitrier*, *Le Gâteau*, *La Corde*, *Mademoiselle Bistouri*. The traditional is turned into something specifically urban and modern. If the single, shocking event found in both writers concurs both with canonical modern definitions of the *nouvelle* (Goethe's stress on surprise, explicit in his stipulation of the 'unerhörte, sich ereignete Ergebenheit'<sup>29</sup>, Heyse's *Falke*) it also looks back, like Heyse's definition, to the traditional – to the role played by the surprising falcon in Book V story XI of Boccaccio's *Decameron*<sup>30</sup>.

So it is also with repetition. The repetition which is the very structural template of traditional oral narrative, the measure of meaning and memory, and its means of transmission, becomes instead circular, a pathologically obsessive act. In *The Tell-tale Heart*, repetition, in expression and in action, as, for example, the 'seven long nights' in which the narrator spies on the old man, is a mark of obsession, not the incantation necessary to memorizing or

<sup>27</sup> Classiques Garnier, 677.

<sup>28</sup> Letter to A. Fraisse, 18 Feb. 1860, *Corr.* I, 676.

<sup>29</sup> 'Was ist eine Novelle anders als eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit?' J.-P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, 25 January 1827, cit. R. Paulin, *The Brief Compass* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 93.

<sup>30</sup> For Heyse, the *Novelle* should have 'eine starke, deutliche Silhouette... deren Umriss, in wenigen Worten vorgetragen, schon einen charakteristischen Eindruck mache': *Jugenderinnerungen und Bekenntnisse* (Berlin, 1900), 348.

transmitting narrative, culminating in ‘the beating of his hideous heart’<sup>31</sup>. Repetition, in the beating of the heart, in the ticking watch to which it is compared, becomes the transcendent reality, paralleling the narrator’s nervousness at the beginning and in the middle of the story, which is impossible to locate temporally: does it happen in the past, when the events were occurring, or now, as he recounts the tale, or at both times at once, as its very first line implies: *The Tell-Tale Heart* is thereby suspended between *viva voce* oral and written retrospective narrative, between the *conte* and Poe’s ‘Short Prose Tale’.

In *The Cask of Amontillado*, the story is structured around a larger pattern of recurrence, in which the initial pattern of apparently normal social contact – the narrator’s disingenuously friendly approach to Fortunato – is soon undermined as he leads him through a pattern of repeated phrases and preoccupations (‘I have my doubts’, ‘Let us go’, ‘the nitre’, ‘the Amontillado’) and a labyrinth of passages to the cellar where he walls him in, leaving him to die. Similarly, in *Un hémisphère dans une chevelure*, Baudelaire’s prose version of *La Chevelure*, patterns of repetition in prose stand in for the tight-knittedness of rhyme and metre in verse: the repetition of ‘longtemps, longtemps’, ‘comme’, ‘contiennent’, ‘tout’, the anaphoric incipits of ‘Dans l’océan de ta chevelure, j’entrevois’, ‘Dans les caresses de ta chevelure, je retrouve’, ‘Dans l’ardent foyer de ta chevelure, je respire’. Rather in the manner of Poe’s first-person narratives, *Un hémisphère* reverses focus from the verse-poem’s focus on the other conceived of as an object of desire, to the more subjective, tale-like focus on the love-object’s impact on the narrator. But it is a tale in stasis, a reflection on a beatifically-suspended present, in which (re-)iteration is the repetition of plenitude. It is a realization of Poe’s notion of repetition as ‘a source of delight’ proposed in *The Poetic Principle*<sup>32</sup>. Yet the repetition is also not unlike that of, say, *Annabel Lee*, leading ultimately not to intensity but to death : the ‘cheveux élastiques’ which give the impression of eating memories feed but ultimately bleed him of life.

In *L’Invitation au voyage*, the dynamic is the reverse. The repetition is certainly there, perhaps even more than in *Un hémisphère*, as it is in the prose *Invitation*’s versified source poem (*Les Fleurs du mal* 53), not least via anaphora and rhyme; but the effect is quite different from the verse *Invitation*, if closer to *Un hémisphère*. For if the verse *Invitation* keeps both the poet’s and reader’s attention in tension between the love object and the objects which connote or are associated with her, before directing it away in the final refrain (‘Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté/ Luxe, calme et volupté’), and *Un hémisphère* makes of the lover an object, the prose *Invitation* accentuates this tension by the turning circularity with which it focuses on its subject. In its final strophe, the lover becomes an analogue of the poet-narrator, as all object-correlatives are drawn into the vortex of a shared and transcendent subjectivity:

Ces trésors, ces meubles, ce luxe, cet ordre, ces parfums, ces fleurs miraculeuses, c’est toi. C’est encore toi, ces grands fleuves et ces canaux tranquilles. Ces énormes navires qu’ils charrient, tout chargés de richesses, et d’où montent les chants monotones de la manœuvre, ce sont mes pensées qui dorment ou qui roulent sur ton sein. Tu les conduis doucement vers la mer qui est l’infini, tout en réfléchissant les profondeurs du ciel dans la limpidité de ta belle âme ; – et quand, fatigués par la houle et gorgés des produits de l’Orient, ils rentrent au port natal, ce sont encore mes pensées enrichies qui reviennent de l’Infini vers toi.<sup>33</sup>

It is a descent into the maelstrom, yet the opposite of Poe’s: a well of plenitude rather than a pit of despair. The tension between space and confinement which in Poe tales like *The Pit and*

---

<sup>31</sup> *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Penguin, 278, 282.

<sup>32</sup> Penguin, 505.

<sup>33</sup> *Petits poèmes en prose (Le Spleen de Paris)*, ed. H. Lemaître (Classiques Garnier, 1980), 91.

*the Pendulum* or *The Cask of Amontillado* always leads to death, the volcano always figuring a void, becomes in Baudelaire a virtuous circle, a plenitudinous dialectic where space can always mean potential, as for example in *Les Fenêtres*.

The concentration which Baudelaire takes from Poe<sup>34</sup> thus becomes fully justified, not as a traducing of his essentially *viva voce* ‘narrative told at one sitting’, but as a legitimate reconceiving of what short fiction, the tale, might be. This arguably goes further than the mere expression of a Baudelairian unity or transcendence. In its frank admission of the impossibility of moral improvement, it confirms rather something latent more in short prose narrative than in verse, and which Baudelaire’s prose poems first bring out: the impossibility of moral progress even through the tale inviting a reflective more than a conclusive narrative moral message, with a moral agnosticism which is properly poetic in nature. In poesy, as *Eureka* tells us, ‘Poetry and Truth are one’<sup>35</sup>; and *The Philosophy of Composition*’s fundamental lesson is that the most elevating pleasure lies in ‘the contemplation of the beautiful’<sup>36</sup> – that composition is, ultimately, philosophical: etymologically, a placing-together which makes total unity. Baudelaire’s prose poems expose something inherent in Poe and bring it to fruition. It is Baudelaire, perhaps more than Poe himself, who takes poetry in the tale *jusqu’au bout de la prose*, who achieves its true poetic destiny.

**Tim Farrant** : Pembroke College Oxford. Chargé de cours en littérature française du XIXe siècle à l’Université d’Oxford et « Fellow » de Pembroke College, Tim Farrant a publié notamment *Balzac’s Shorter Fictions: Genesis and Genre* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2002) et *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Londres : Duckworth, 2007). Il prépare actuellement un livre sur le conte en France au XIXe siècle.

**Tim Farrant** is Reader in Nineteenth-Century French Literature at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Pembroke College. His publications include *Balzac’s Shorter Fictions: Genesis and Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (London: Duckworth, 2007). He is currently writing a book on short fiction in nineteenth-century France.

---

<sup>34</sup> But, in a different sense, also Emerson: *Fusées, OC*, I, 669.

<sup>35</sup> *Eureka, The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. H. Beaver (Harmondsworth, 1976), 300.

<sup>36</sup> *The Philosophy of Composition*, Penguin, 483.