“Imag(e)ining Poe: The visual reception of Poe in France from Manet to Redon”

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Imag(e)ining Poe: The Visual Reception of Poe in France from Manet to Redon

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ABSTRACT

The influence of Edgar Allan Poe on the nineteenth-century French literary landscape is well established. The translations of Poe by Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé were amongst the most popular texts of that generation. But how significant were visual translations, illustrations and interpretations of Poe's texts in nineteenth-century France? Illustrations have a key influence on how a text is perceived and read, and are deeply related to the political, social, cultural and artistic fabric of the time. Poe was 'illustrated' by two of France's leading artists: Édouard Manet and Odilon Redon. Manet illustrated Mallarmé's translation of Poe's *The Raven* in 1875. As for Redon, he published *To Edgar Poe*, a collection of pictorial responses to Poe in 1882, and produced a series of drawings related to Poe's tales in 1883. The naturalist and symbolist artists have significantly diverging styles and sets of artistic beliefs. This article explores what happens when one author encounters these different pictorial universes, and investigates the dynamic relationship between Poe's, Manet's and Redon's works.

RÉSUMÉ

L'influence d'Edgar Allan Poe sur le paysage littéraire français du dix-neuvième siècle est bien établie. Les traductions de Poe par Charles Baudelaire et Stéphane Mallarmé furent parmi les textes les plus populaires de cette génération. Mais quelle était l'importance des traductions visuelles, illustrations et interprétations des textes de Poe en France au dix-neuvième siècle ? Les illustrations ont une influence déterminante sur la façon dont un texte est perçu et lu, et sont intimement liées à l'environnement politique, social, culturel et artistique de leur époque. Poe a été « illustré » par deux grands artistes français : Édouard Manet et Odilon Redon. Manet illustre la traduction de Mallarmé de *The Raven* en 1875. Quant à Redon, il publie *Pour Edgar Poe*, une collection d'interprétations picturales de Poe en 1882. Redon crée aussi une série de dessins liée aux histoires de Poe en 1883. Les artistes, le naturaliste et le symboliste, ont des styles et des croyances artistiques très différents. Cet article explore la rencontre d'un auteur avec ces univers picturaux et analyse la relation dynamique entre le travail de Poe, Manet et Redon.

The influence of Edgar Allan Poe on the French nineteenth-century literary landscape is well established. Charles Baudelaire's translation of Poe's *Histoires extraordinaires* was published in 1856 and his *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires* in 1857. Auguste Villiers de L'Isle-Adam and Stéphane Mallarmé drew attention to Poe's poetry in the 1870s, and in 1875 Mallarmé's translation of *The Raven* was published with Édouard Manet's illustrations. The interlingual translations (Jakobson 79) of Poe by Baudelaire and Mallarmé were among the most popular texts of that generation. The popularity of Poe in France can be attributed to three factors. First, it can be related to Baudelaire's own influence on the literary landscape and to his on-going defence of Poe[1]. Secondly, it can be attributed to the dramatic biography of Poe, which ties in with the literary myth of the artist prevalent in the second half of the nineteenth century[2]. Finally, it can be linked to the interest in literary circles in psychopathological theories. Camille Mauclair, Émile Hennequin and Teodor de Wyzewa, for example, stressed the literary qualities of Poe, but also his psychological insights (Leeman 182).

It comes as no surprise then, that two major French artists of the second half of the nineteenth century created images for Poe's texts. While Manet had strong links with the literary world, he rarely illustrated texts. In 1875, when Manet undertook the project to illustrate Mallarmé's translation of Poe's *The Raven*, Mallarmé and Manet were already close friends[3]. For Mallarmé it was a way to establish himself as a translator and poet in the line of inheritance from Baudelaire (who had died in 1867). For Manet, who was a friend of Baudelaire's, it was a way to carry on the memory of his lost friend and a token of his current friendship with Mallarmé.

Odilon Redon, like Manet, was an avid reader. Redon believed that reading was a tool to explore the imagination, 'to affect the spirit of another' (in Leeman 178). While he later claimed not to be influenced by

[1] Baudelaire mentions him or his stories in numerous pieces on literature, art criticism or contemporary artists. He also dedicates a few texts to the writer, such as 'Edgar Poe I : Notice sur la Traduction de *Bérénice* d'Edgar Poe' (583-85), 'Edgar Poe II : Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses oeuvres' (591-618), 'Edgar Poe III : Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe' (619-39) or 'Edgar Poe : Révélation Magnétique' (816-18).

[2] The dramatic life of Poe, which Baudelaire describes as 'eccentric and stormy' ('excentrique et orageux', 584), matches the literary myth of the artist that spreads in nineteenth-century France. For more on this, see Émilie Sitzia, *L'Artiste* and Marie-Françoise Melmoux-Montaubin, *Le Roman*.

[3] For more on the origins, complicated print history and reception of this book, see Juliet Wilson-Bareau and Breon Mitchell, 'Tales of a Raven'.

writers, Redon mingled mostly with literary figures rather than with other artists (Seznec 281). He started planning a series of drawings linked to Poe from the late 1870s, and from the 1880s onwards began making drawings directly inspired by Poe's texts. In 1882 he published the album *To Edgar Poe*. He later claimed that the title and captions were solely meant to gain public attention, even though his friend, the critic Boissé, had already described Redon's previous album, *Dans les rêves*, as being 'in the manner of Edgar Poe' (Druick et al. 128). Furthermore, in 1883 Redon drew four images directly linked to Poe's tales: *The Mask of the Red Death*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *Cask of Amontillado* and *The Teeth*. They were possibly linked to Hennequin's translation of Poe's tales (Leeman 183). However, the project was never finalised and published. A new edition of Poe's *Histoires extraordinaires* and *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, illustrated by various artists in 1884, probably made the project unprofitable from the publisher's viewpoint (Leeman 183).

Manet's and Redon's images are fascinatingly divergent. On the one hand we have dark, clear and sophisticated narrative pictures and on the other, fantastical and nonsensical dream-like images. These images of Poe's texts in nineteenth-century France are significant for two reasons. Firstly, they testify to gradual cultural changes in the perception and practice of illustration in France at that period. Secondly, they reveal a shift in the critical reception of Poe's texts.

Changing perspectives: the gradual autonomy of the illustrator

The default position in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially in literary circles, was that the illustrator needed to see through the author's eyes. It is important to keep in mind that the art world at the time was mostly controlled by the literary world through the dealer/critic system (Moriarty 19). Théophile Gautier is representative of that position when he explains that:

> The work involved when the pencil draws over the line of the quill requires a particular talent. The artist must understand the poet [...], it is not about [...] copying reality as one sees it [...]. The illustrator, if one allows us this neologism, which is almost no longer one, must only see through someone else's eyes. (227)[4]

[4] Translation by the author: 'Ce travail où le crayon repasse sur le trait de la plume demande un talent tout particulier. Il faut que l'artiste comprenne le poète [...], il ne s'agit pas [...] de copier la réalité comme on la voit [...]. L'illustrateur, qu'on nous permette ce néologisme, qui n'en est presque plus un, ne doit voir qu'avec les yeux d'un autre [...]'.

Illustration was then seen as a rather systematic process: scenes that are key to the narrative development were illustrated, and images were perceived as subjected to the authority of the source text. However, this position was, at the time, challenged by artistic practices. While some illustrators stayed as close to the text as possible, others departed from this practice, asserting their authority as translators of the text. In his essay 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', Roman Jakobson distinguishes three types of translation: intralingual (or reformulation), interlingual (or translation in its most common use) and intersemiotic (or transmutation from one sign system to another) (79). This last category corresponds to illustrative practices. Generally, illustration is considered as either literal (Gautier's position) or interpretative. But following from the principle that illustration is a form of intersemiotic translation from words into images, it seems that illustrations are always to some extent interpretative and that a certain amount of cultural adaptation and transfer takes place.

Illustration as translation: Manet's 'Raven'[5]

Mallarmé's translation of *The Raven* is a text in free prose. Mallarmé focuses on rendering the circular and broken rhythms of the original. This rhythmical choice is also visible in Manet's illustrations.

Manet used the dark texture of the images (Figure 1, plates 1-4) so that the regular hatchings of the strokes visually transcribed the systematic rhythm of the text. The technique, transfer lithography, allows for an energetic and spontaneous effect of the brushstroke and for depth of colour[6]. The images attempt to echo the tone, rhythm and speed of the original text[7]. While the use of flattened space is sometimes attributed to the influence of Japanese art on Manet, here it echoes the claustrophobic effect of the original poem and of its translation. As in the poem, space in the images is limited, contained and oppressive (especially in Figure 1, plates 1 and 3). But Manet, like all good translators, adapts the text to the

[5] This analysis of Manet's illustration is developed from my analysis of this work in *Art in Literature, Literature in Art in 19th-Century France* (Sitzia 140-42).

[6] For more on the technique used, including a precise description of the process, see the catalogue by Manet et al. (384). For more on the critical debate around the technique used by Manet, see Wilson-Bareau and Mitchell 275-91.

[7] Tone, rhythm and speed are analytical tools recommended by Liliane Louvel for interdisciplinary studies in her seminal book *Texte, Image: Images à lire, textes à voir* (12).

public he addresses, transferring the tale to a Parisian environment[8]. The man in Manet's images (particularly in Figure 1, plate 1) bears a troubling resemblance to Mallarmé rather than Poe[9]. In his illustrations Manet mostly addressed a Parisian public, and on the horizon we can see the roofs of Paris (Rubin 145). In order to help the public to relate better to the text, Manet culturally adapted and transferred the tale.

FIGURE 1a: Édouard Manet, *The Raven*, 1875, plate 1.
Transfer lithography (51 x 34.8 cm). © Library of Congress.

FIGURE 1b: Édouard Manet, *The Raven*, 1875, plate 2.
Transfer lithography (51 x 34.8 cm). © Library of Congress.

[8] Interestingly, Baudelaire also talks of translation when commenting on Alphonse Legros's illustration of Poe (1861). See Baudelaire, 'Peintres et aqua-fortistes' (413).

[9] For more on the use of Mallarmé's portraits for these illustrations, see Wilson-Bareau and Mitchell 274-75.

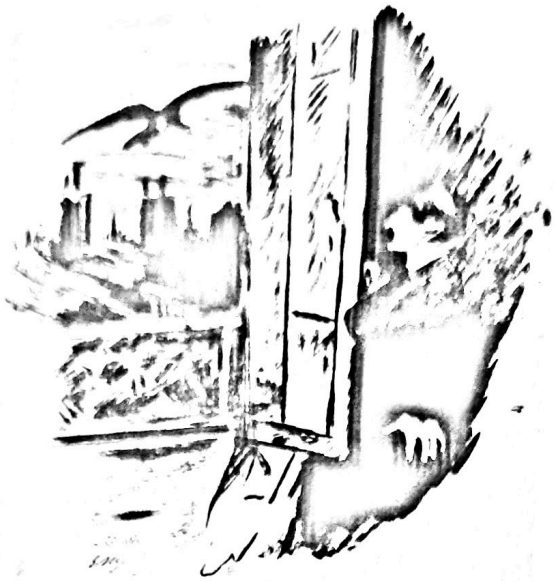

FIGURE 1c: Édouard Manet, *The Raven*, 1875, plate 3.
Transfer lithography (51 x 34.8 cm). © Library of Congress.

FIGURE 1d: Édouard Manet, *The Raven*, 1875, plate 4.
Transfer lithography (51 x 34.8 cm). © Library of Congress.

For this illustration, Manet used Sumi ink, frequently employed in Japan for calligraphy as well as graphic arts, creating a bridge between the written and the visual (Florence 35-36). This illustration of Mallarmé's translation of Poe engages us in 'an infinite circularity of the codes' (Barthes 62): the English sentences find their equivalent in French; they

are then translated into images which, side by side with the text, enter a dialogue with its words. The relationship between word and image is no longer one of dependence but one of dynamic dialogue on a common heritage.

Condensed narrative: illustrations as symbols

As Fred Leeman remarked, Redon's 1883 drawings *The Mask of the Red Death*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *Cask of Amontillado* and *The Teeth*, 'summarise essential features and situations' (183). I would like to go further and argue that they are a condensed form of narrative that plays on the tension between the diachronic dimension of the text and the synchronic quality of images.

In Poe's story *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator murders an old man whose eye irritated him. He hides the body under the floorboards but thinks he can still hear the beating heart of the old man, which is so loud that it betrays him to the policemen who are investigating the man's disappearance (203-06).

FIGURE 2: Odilon Redon, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, 1883.
Charcoal on brown paper (40.2 x 33.3 cm). © Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

In his image (Figure 2) Redon does not illustrate a specific scene from the narrative. He uses the instantaneity of the image to evoke the storyline, but the image itself is not tied to a specific moment in the narrative development. Redon chooses visual elements (the eye and the wooden floorboards) and combines them into a single image. This process is rather similar to popular novels' advertisement posters of the time. These posters needed to simultaneously reveal and conceal the narrative (see Place-Verghnes). Using symbols from the story, the image generates emotional angst in the viewer, similar to that of the main fictional character. The use of symbols has an instant impact on the viewer through the synchronic quality of the image. Its effect is similar to that created over time on the reader of Poe's story through the diachronic quality of literature. However, the strength of the image is dependent on the narrative content: if one does not know the story, the image seems strange and breeds a sense of unease; it looses its efficacy. The relationship between word and image is here one of mutual dependence as it expands into a web of decipherable symbols.

Connection in spirit: *To Edgar Poe*

Redon departs from the perceived narrative obligations of illustrations with his 1882 album *To Edgar Poe* (Figure 3). The critical reception of Redon's *To Edgar Poe* showed a range of perceptions of the relation between Redon and Poe, from 'inspired by' Poe (*Le Paris*, 1882), 'interpreting' Poe (*L'Événement*, 1882), to 'illustrating' Poe (*Le Rappel*, *L'Intransigeant*, 1882) (see Gamboni 132). All these different terms betray the fluctuating perception of distance between the original text and the images, and different perceptions of the role of illustrations.

Redon's working process started with an in-depth reading of the text to 'let [his imagination] wander free, in a docile way' (Leeman 188). Then, instead of creating a new image to accompany the text, he looked through his older drawings to find the ones that were connected in spirit (179). In this process the chosen image is an independent variation on a thought or a feeling, creating a dynamic between text and image as equal components. The image functions fully even without the text and the text also functions without the image, but when brought together they enter a dialogue: links are created, and dynamic meaning making takes place. In this case, the role of illustration shifts: illustration can enter the realm of poetry, detaching itself from narrative and story-telling constraints.

This shift parallels artistic developments in nineteenth-century France, where the mimetic and/or narrative function of art diminished to leave

room for visual experimentation[10]. The old adage that the text evokes and the image fixes is challenged as the image is allowed to create, recreate and reinforce the ambiguities and associations of the text and use fantasy and metaphor. The illustrator then develops an independent pictorial language that enriches the potential interpretations of the text rather than fixes a single interpretation. To Redon, text and image had to be of equal importance and enhance each other.

FIGURE 3: Odilon Redon, *In the Spheres*, plate 5 from *To Edgar Poe*, 1882. Lithograph (43.82 x 31.12 cm). © Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

One can wonder if such images are still illustrations. Redon himself saw the word illustration as negative and misused in the case of his own works:

[10] On this topic, see, for example, Philippe Hamon, *Imageries*, Evanghélia Stead, *La Chair du livre* or Émilie Sitzia, *Art in Literature*.

> I have never used the defective word 'illustration'. You will not find it in my catalogues. The right term has not yet been coined. I can only think of 'transmission', of 'interpretation'. Still these are not sufficiently precise to completely express the [process] by which one of my readings [prompts] me to go through my organised noirs. (quoted in Leeman 194)

Similarly, Jules Destrée, in his reception of Redon's works, does not see the images as illustrations: 'Among these remarkable plates, there are no illustrations [... but a] correspondence, the same thrill of art, expressed by different means' (quoted in Leeman 177-78). However, as the literary experience is translated and transposed the images function as illustrations. It is the illustrations' role that is changed: images do not fix or clarify the narrative but make it more layered and complex through an elaborate maze of associations.

In both Manet's and Redon's illustrations we see a gradual emancipation of the image from the text. As the images gain their own voice, they express a view of the text, and as such can be looked at as a form of critical reception.

Shifts in the critical reception of Poe in France

If we consider illustrations as translations, condensed narratives or interpretations connected in spirit, then illustrations can be used to study the reception of a text in a specific cultural environment and time[11]. As Françoise Forster-Hahn underlined:

> However earnest the attempt to achieve a 'faithful' transference of word into image, the artist always brings pictorial conventions into play, not only literary interpretation, and, by dint of its imaginary surfeit, the illustration manifests intricate links to the political and cultural fabric of its own period. (511)

As with all translations, illustrators adapt the translated text to their public's cultural, social and political background. Therefore, just as there cannot be completely literal translations, there cannot be completely literal illustrations. The illustrators' interpretations of the text incorporate their cultural backgrounds and readings of the text. These interpretations accompany the text and therefore have a significant influence on how it is read. The illustrator's reading has a great impact on the reader as it gives an instant impression of the text to the reader: the atmosphere and choice of scenes or characters will change the reader's perception of the text. So

[11] See, for example, Françoise Forster-Hahn 511-36.

illustration can be considered a form of critical reception of the text, and a very influential one at that. What can the illustrations of Poe by Manet and Redon tell us about the reception of Poe in France?

Poe, Manet and the Gothic narrative

The choice and sequencing of the scenes illustrated by Manet underline the increasing angst of the poet, which ultimately results in his complete disappearance from the image – a spiritual death of sorts. Only the haunting shadow of the raven is left (Figure 1d). Manet puts the emphasis on death and absence through the choice of scene to be illustrated. This 'aesthetics of absence' (Loyd-Smith 123) is typical of Gothic fiction. The printing process used by Manet, transfer lithography, provides a deep black colour which enhances the eerie atmosphere and gives prominence to the isolation of the character. The unusual, unbalanced composition of the image showing the dialogue between the poet and the raven creates a visual tension and an uncanny effect. This tension makes the viewer doubt the veracity of the scene: the apparition could be the result of impending madness. The images emphasise motifs of death, madness, the uncanny and solitude, which are typical motifs of Gothic fiction[12]. Furthermore, each image provides a milestone within the story, advancing the narrative arc and reinforcing this aspect of the poem. Manet presents Poe's poem as a Gothic narrative. In this interpretation he remains close to Baudelairean Romantic ideals.

Poe, Redon and symbolist poetic evocation

By the time Redon published his *To Edgar Poe* album, Poe's status was even more anchored in the French landscape. It has been suggested that Redon used Poe as an 'act of self-representation' (Druick et al. 134). Baudelaire had carried out the same self-representation exercise thirty years earlier when he translated Poe. Redon and the publisher saw Poe as iconic and as a forefather of French Decadent culture. Furthermore, one could argue that this publication is also an act of re-appropriation – away from Manet's Gothic narrative reading towards a symbolist poetic reading of Poe. In his images Redon distils Poe's narrative as key images focusing on the psychological impact of the story on the reader rather than on the developing narrative as can be seen in his 1883 series. The fin-de-siècle symbolists saw reality as an assemblage of signs revealing the spiritual

[12] For more on Poe and the American Gothic, see Donald Ringe, *American Gothic*.

world. This was based on Baudelaire's correspondence theory and developed further by Albert Aurier. This leading theorist of symbolism saw art as the 'materialised expression of some spiritual combination' (Leeman 175). When Redon presents Poe's text through sets of symbols he collected in the story, Redon interprets his work as poetic and evocative, as anti-classical and anti-realist – which is the stance of the symbolists. Redon establishes Poe as the father of the arts of imagination.

For the *To Edgar Poe* album, Redon selected existing suggestive drawings but he also created sets of captions (Figure 4). The public and critics assumed that the captions which accompanied Redon's images were taken from Poe's text, when in fact they were Redon's words. Redon exploited the misunderstanding about his captions and affirmed that literature should be used as deception. While it should not send the viewer completely off-track, it should 'prepare [the viewer's] "minds"' and 'always be in the equivocal' (Redon quoted in Seznec 289). So the captions, instead of being an element of clarification of the narrative or one that helps to affirm that the images are determined by the text, were used to thicken the web of symbols.

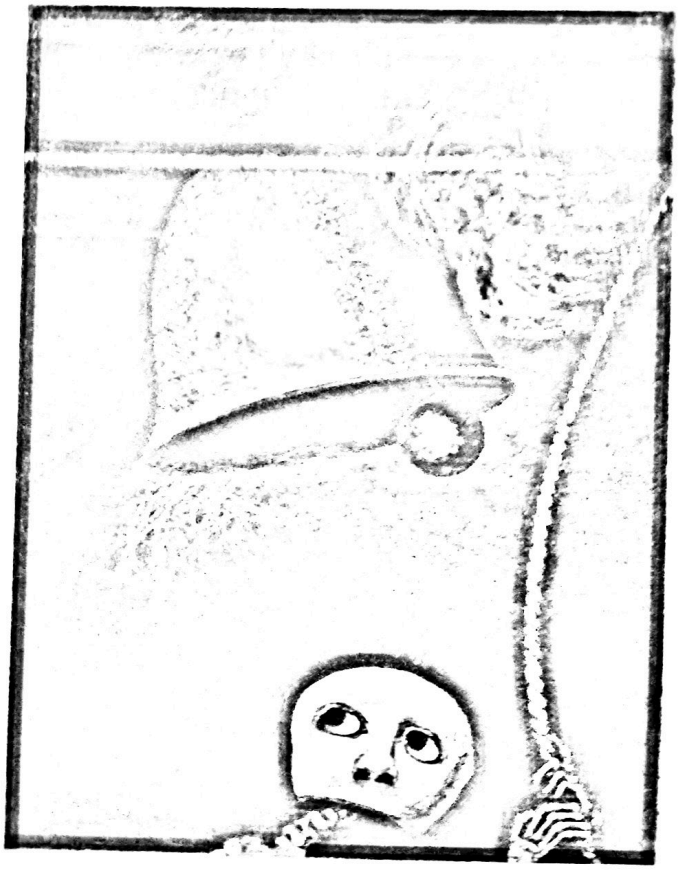

Figure 4: Odilon Redon, *A Mask Sounds the Funeral Knell*, plate 3 from *To Edgar Poe*, 1882. Lithograph (44.77 x 31.12 cm). © Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Redon's images interpret Poe as a forefather of symbolism and emphasise the fantastic, psychological insights, and evocative and poetic aspects of his writing. Manet's and Redon's readings of Poe differ significantly: one is a structured Gothic narrative, while the other is an evocative symbolist poem. The images translated and disseminated these interpretations of the text and offered clear re-readings of the texts.

Illustrations considered as translations, condensed narrative and transmissions connected to the spirit of texts are therefore not literal illustrations but always, to some measure, adaptations. The illustrator adapts his/her interpretation to the public he/she addresses. These illustrations are important because they offer diverse and rich interpretations of a common heritage. Because of their location, side by side with the text, illustrations are greatly influential interpretations of literary works and create a dialogue with the text. Redon's and Manet's images also offer good examples of the evolution of the relation between literature and art in the nineteenth century. Art gradually gained independence from texts and mimesis in general, and illustration was freed from its narrative constraints. Redon supported 'the right to fantasy and to the free interpretation of history' (Redon quoted in Leeman 178) and contributed to the modern, free interpretation of literature by the visual arts.

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