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# Found in Translation: The Complexities of Edgar Allan Poe in Translation by Charles Baudelaire

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### Abstract

Literary critics have traditionally lauded Charles Baudelaire's work in translation in the explanation of the success of Edgar Allan Poe in France. While his voice and editorial choices did affect the pieces he translated, the success of the Poe translations was not entirely due to his choices. An idiosyncrasy in the relationship between Poe's writing style and the structure of French syntax is one of several factors which help Poe in translation and suggest a more complex situation than critics have realized. Understanding the context of a translation and the constituent factors of its success (or lack thereof) allows readers to predict and parse the ways a translation will function in the target culture.

### Cultural Context

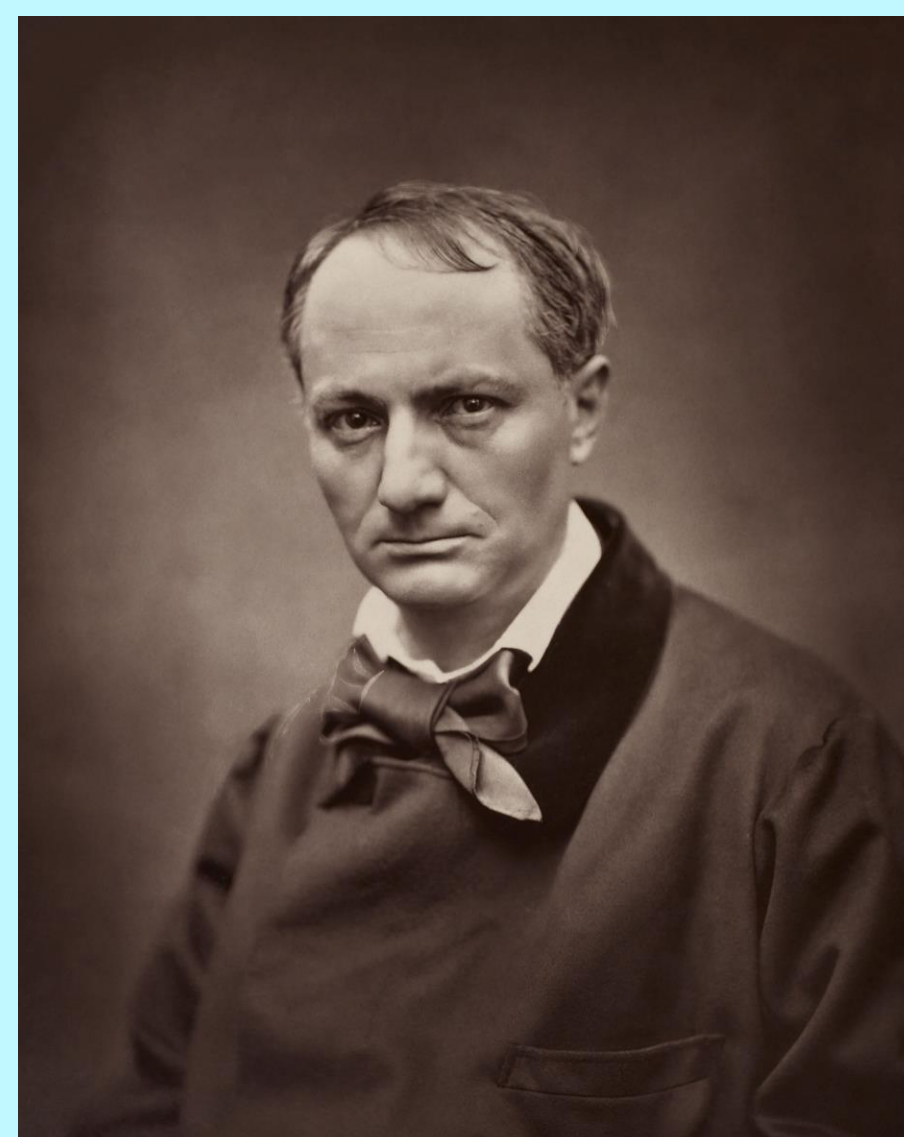
Translations prior to the 19th century were frequently treated as something foreign that had to be "tamed" or made palatable to the French sensibility, which had preferred works of "precious" or romanticized perfection. The result of this kind of content-driven revision was called "belles-infideles": the beautiful unfaithfuls, referring to how the translation, though beautiful to the palate of the target reading culture, was unfaithful to the spirit of the original. Baudelaire wrote several pieces adapting or translating in this style. This makes his literalist translation of Poe all the more interesting. He clings carefully to the original Poe texts. When asked why he translated Poe so literally, he responded

[b]ecause he resembled me. The first time that I opened one of his books, I saw with delight and horror not only subjects about which I had dreamed, but sentences I had thought, and that he had written down, twenty years prior to me. (Baudelaire 362)

Baudelaire's literal translation of Poe could therefore be staying true to his own voice, and not the revolutionary move scholars have suggested.

### French Syntax

The syntax of the French language plays an important role in Baudelaire's translations, and allows for improvement in each translation's overall clarity and focus.

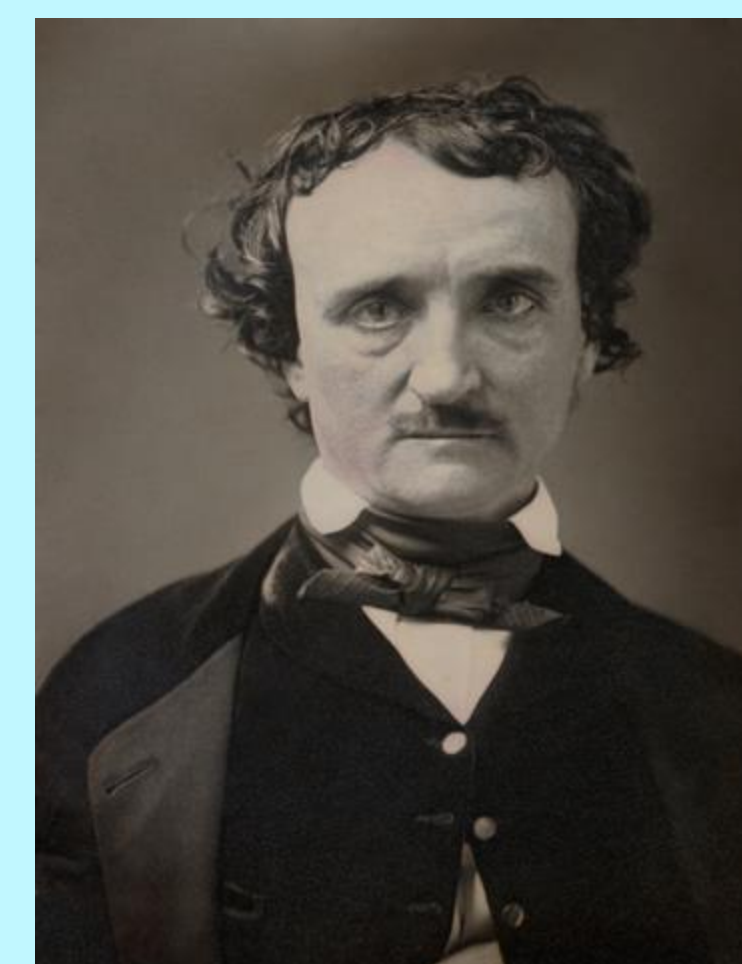


To an Anglo-Saxon reader... Poe's writing often seems overdone. His myriad use of adjectives and postnominal phrases, the length and complexity of his sentences, the frequent insertion of Latin, Greek, and French words make his literary styles as affected as that of an 18th century English essayist... when Poe is translated to French, the structure of the target language acts as a filter which eliminates much of what English readers criticize in his writing. (Faber 255)

### Literal Translation

"My name is Arthur Gordon Pym. My father was a respectable trader in sea-stores at Nantucket, where I was born."

"Mon nom est Arthur Gordon Pym. Mon père était un respectable commerçant dans les fournitures de la marine, à Nantucket, ou je suis né."



Several things are slightly awkward in French here. First, the construction "mon nom est" is not typically used to say, "my name is." Second, in French, adjectives typically follow the word they describe, and articles such as 'a' or 'an' to describe a person's occupation are not used. The Anglicisms Baudelaire keeps remind the reader that they are in fact reading a translation, and it is therefore not Baudelaire's voice that shines, but Poe's.

### Baudelaire's Fame

Baudelaire's fame had an undeniable influence on not only the success of the Poe translations in France, but on their place in French literary history. His translations have stood as a sacred, inimitable prototype. The pieces he translated were not often attempted by other translators, because the consensus was that his translations were unmatched. In addition to questions of whether his work was successful solely thanks to his conscious choices, the canonization of a set of works as inimitable shuts down both conversation on the circumstances and factors which went into their creation, and the potential for new works to enrich and further deepen the artistic community.

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