

POE IN SPAIN: TRANSLATION AND RECEPTION

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Introduction: the French Passageway

Edgar Allan Poe's body of work has received ample attention on the part of Spanish translators, and a wide number of his novels had been translated into Spanish soon after the author's death in 1849. As Ferguson has stated in *American Literature in Spain* (1916), of all authors the works of whom reached the Spanish territory, Poe undoubtedly constituted the most interesting case study as he received not only respectful treatment on the part of the critics, but also a growing and persistent interest amongst Spanish audiences, who received his work with special enthusiasm (Ferguson 1916: 55).

Indeed, literary critics have marvelled at the discrepancy between Poe's reception in his home country and his reception and influence abroad. In the United States, Poe's reception was ripe with opinions ranging from widespread critical acclaim to downright scorn. Henry James, for instance, stated:

With all due respect to the very original genius of the author of the *Tales of Mystery*, it seems to us that to take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection. Baudelaire thought him a profound philosopher, the neglect of whose utterances stamped his native land with infamy. Nevertheless, Poe was vastly the greater charlatan of the two, as well as the greater genius (in Meyers 2000: 271).

James' dismissive words contrast with William Carlos Williams's, who argued that "in [Poe] American Literature is anchored, in him alone, on solid ground" (Williams 1925: 256). Similarly, playwright George Bernard Shaw also emphasized Poe's contribution to

American Literature by downplaying the wide array of rumours that circulated after the author's death:

Poe died and was duly explained away as a drunkard and a failure, though it remains an open question whether he really drank as much in his whole lifetime as a modern successful American drinks, without comment, in six months. [...] Poe constantly and inevitably produced magic where his greatest contemporaries produced only beauty. [...] Poe's supremacy in this respect has cost him his reputation. [...] Above all, Poe is great because he is independent of cheap attractions, independent of sex, patriotism, of fighting, of sentimentality, snobbery, gluttony, and all the rest of the vulgar stock-in-trade of his profession (Shaw 1909: 256).

Edgar Allan Poe's presentation in Europe took place via the first translations into German and French. Poe's popularity both in Germany and France was more than notable. In France, the name of Baudelaire has remained inevitably linked to that of Poe, which ironically granted the French poet with a wider recognition if possible (Farrant 1). Indeed, Baudelaire's fascination for Poe's personality and work took him to dedicate long hours to the translation of his short stories -which he undertook between 1852 and 1865- and some attention was also paid to Poe's critical body of work. The first short story to be published in Baudelaire's translation was "Mesmeric Revelation", a text which appeared in a wide number of journals but which was originally published in the 1844 August edition of "Columbian Magazine". Baudelaire translated the story as "Révélation Magnétique" and published it in *La Liberté de penser*, a literary journal, in 1848. After a first period of publication in journals and magazines, the translations by Baudelaire were finally published in volume form. In 1856, the Michel Lévy publishing house issued a selection of short stories translated by Baudelaire under the title *Histoires extraordinaires*. Further volumes would swiftly follow in 1857 and under the title *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*. As literary critic Tim Farrant argues, Poe's short stories and his theories on fiction as developed in such essays as "The Philosophy of Composition", "The Poetic

Principle” or “Eureka” proved decisive influences in shaping Baudelaire’s literary style. Poe constituted Baudelaire’s inspiration in exploring a myriad new ways for the development of the short story as a form in French literature (Farrant 2010: 3). In his study of the relationship between Baudelaire and Poe, Jonathan Culler builds on the discrepant reception of Poe's texts on both sides of the Atlantic and states that:

the relationship between the writings of Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire is a tantalizing problem for literary history, literary criticism and, hence, for literary theory. Nowhere else in world literature as far as I know, has a writer been so scorned by the literati of his own language and so celebrated by the best minds of another culture and language" (Culler 1990: 61).

First Spanish Translations

The question of the first translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s work into Spanish remains a contested case of study for critics and academics interested in the discipline of translation and reception. Thus, the groundbreaking study written in 1916 by John De Lancey Ferguson, *American Literature in Spain* constituted one of the earliest approaches to an issue, which will later be retaken and expanded upon by such authors as John E. Englekirk and E. Herman Hespelt (both in 1934).

According to Ferguson, the first short story by Poe published in Spain is anonymous and bears the title "La semana de los tres domingos" (a translation for "Three Sundays in a Week"). It was published in *El museo universal* (volume 1, page 22), a journal that would later change its name into *Ilustración española y americana* (Ferguson 1916: 56). As Ferguson goes on to argue, the publication of this short story, which bears striking similarities with the original text, opens a series of questions; all the more so since it happens to be a title which was not translated by Charles Baudelaire for his volume *Histories Extraordinaires par Edgar Poe* (Ferguson 196: 56). In relation to this, Ferguson feels the need to address a series of strange circumstances, which lead to the

publication in Spain of this first short story; particularly in relation to the gate of entrance, which seems to be a direct access from the English original, not the French translation by Baudelaire.

Following on the arguments inaugurated by Ferguson, John E. Englekirk will publish *Edgar Allan Poe in Hispanic Literature*, a 1934 study that ponders on the arrival of translations of E. A. Poe both in Spain and in the South American continent. This monographic study centres on a close examination of the chronology of Poe's reception in Spain, particularly that which took place two decades after the author's death in 1846. As regards the ignition of Poe's popularity in South America - reference should be made to the fact that Englekirk does not refer to any specific countries- it is undoubtedly related to a version of "The Raven" which Pérez Bonalde undertook in 1887. This translation inaugurates a long and fruitful period of absolute devotion on the part of South American readers towards the Bostonian author.

One of the key issues in Englekirk's study is that of the first translation which appeared in the Spanish market. The author follows the research line inaugurated by Ferguson which identifies the mysterious short story "Three Sundays in a Week" / "La semana de los tres domingos" as the first text by Poe translated into Spanish. The place of publication also coincides: it is the journal titled *El museo universal*, which was published in Madrid on February 15th, 1857. It will not be until the publication of a review of Englekirk's study on the part of E. Herman Hespelt that such a hypothesis will be utterly dismissed. According to Hespelt:

[a]s a matter of fact, at least one of his stories, a translation of 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains,' appeared four years earlier in *El Correo de Ultramar*. It was called 'Una aventura en las montañas Rocheuses' and was signed at the end 'Traducción d'Edgar Poe, por Carlos Baudelaire' (Hespelt 1934: 423).

As can be inferred in the above words, Hespelt identifies a translation previous to the 1857 unsigned one. It might have appeared as early as 1853 in a journal titled *El Correo de Ultramar*, a Spanish publication located in Paris. That same issue

included eight texts by Nathaniel Hawthorne and two selections by Donald Grant Mitchell, a.k.a. Ik Marvel, a feature that Ferguson’s extensive bibliography does not seem to compile. In fact, Hespelt himself alludes to the bibliographical difficulties implied in the research through 19th-century periodical archives. It would seem that a wide majority of these are incomplete, by which Hespelt admits that it might be possible that even earlier translations might be discovered as further sources may be examined in the future.

The revision of the original thesis as formulated by both Ferguson and Englekirk and timidly rebuffed by Hespelt is directly put into question by Juan Gabriel López Guix who, in his article entitled “Sobre la primera traducción de Edgar Allan Poe al castellano” starts off from the void which he located in both critics in order to proceed to question their statements:

[...] el asunto de la primera traducción española de Poe es un caso cerrado hace más de noventa años, sin que se haya considerado oportuno dar mayor importancia al hecho discordante señalado por todos los investigadores. En efecto, todos mencionan el hecho de que Poe, cuya introducción en la cultura hispánica se llevó a cabo abrumadoramente -y durante varias décadas- a través de las traducciones francesas de Charles Baudelaire, hiciera su primera aparición de forma anómala a partir de una versión directa del inglés. Sin embargo, dicha conclusión nació, como se acaba de ver, de una conjetura de Ferguson (“apparently translated from English, since this story was not included in Baudelaire’s 1856 collection”). El argumento sería imbatible si no existieran traducciones de Poe al francés anteriores a la publicación de las *Histoires extraordinaires*. De no ser así, corre el riesgo de convertirse en un ejemplo de generalización indebida, una conclusión equivocada a partir de pruebas insuficientes. Y sabemos que Baudelaire no fue el único traductor al francés de Poe, ni siquiera el primero. Antes incluso de su publicación en 1854 del cuento “Révélacion magnétique”, se editaron traducciones o adaptaciones a cargo de Gustav Brunet, Emile Forgues (los protagonistas del juicio por plagio citado por Englekirk), Amédée Pichot (redactor jefe de la *Revue Britannique*, que tradujo con los pseudónimos A. B. y Alphonse Borghers) o Isabelle Meunier (esposa del fourierista Victor Meunier); y, a ellos se

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sumaron, en los años siguientes, William L. Hugues y Paul Roger, entre otros (López Guix 2009).

López Guix's article continues with a contrastive analysis of the opening sentence in "Three Sundays in a Week", together with the opening sentence of the translation, which appeared in *El museo universal* on February 15th, 1857. From this contrastive analysis, significant differences may be observed, by which López Guix concludes that, in fact, the opening sentence which appears in the Spanish journal is, in reality:

[...] la primera frase de la traducción de Léon de Wailly (1804-1863), un importante traductor de literatura inglesa en los años centrales del siglo XIX. La traducción se publicó en *L' Ami de la maison* el 10 de abril de 1856. Un mes antes, el 6 de marzo, De Wailly había publicado en ese mismo semanario una traducción de "The Oval Portrait". *L'Ami de la maison* sólo tuvo un año de vida y era propiedad de Édouard Charton, editor de varias publicaciones (entre ellas, *L'illustration*, donde De Wailly publicó ese año mismo tres traducciones más de Poe)" (López Guix 2009).

With such a surprising statement, López Guix seems to be solving the mystery, which both Ferguson and Englekirk had inaugurated and left unanswered. The earlier critics had presumed that the text had been a direct translation from the English original but, as López Guix solidly proves, the translation published by *El museo universal* starts off from a previous French translation, which effectively served as a model for the translation of the text into Spanish.

Reception

One of the more fascinating aspects in relation to the reception of E.A. Poe in Spain is precisely the language and terms utilized by some of the critical works around this literary figure. A brief study of the use of language in this discipline will help us propose a hypothesis based on the circulation of critical literature originally

from the United States which influences and models the reception of this author overseas.

Some of the diverse translators who translated Poe into Spanish, together with those who wrote a critical text to be published alongside the translation tend to use critical language strikingly similar to the one used by North-American critics. They also focus on aspects related to the author’s biographical record that were also widespread in the reception of the author in his country of origin. One of the questions that these similarities bring up is the presumed monitoring on the part of these authors of what was being published in the United States, both as regards the discipline of fiction and criticism.

We might take, as an illustrative instance, the case of Pedro de Alarcón, the author of one of the earliest critical contributions to the work of Poe. He published this under the title *Juicios literarios y artísticos* (1883). In this piece, he highlights the singularity of Poe, who was able to conceive of a very personal aesthetics (“una estética toda suya”, as it reads in the original). That is to say, Alarcón proposes that Poe created an aesthetic posture, which was clearly differentiated from that of his contemporaries. In this sense, Alarcón’s appreciation of Poe’s oeuvre is interesting in so far as it picks up on one of the most heated debates in the North-American literary scene of the first half of the 19th century as regards the figure of Edgar Allan Poe.

Thus, from the birth of the new Republic at the end of the 18th century, the new country has to face the arduous task of building a national identity based on the Republican values upheld by the Declaration of Independence (1776) first and by the Constitution of the United States later (1787). Such a country was thoroughly occupied in solving political and social aspects; therefore, the arts do not constitute an immediate priority. For this reason, the period known as *fin-de-siècle* is commonly considered, from the point of view of literature, a moment of transition which provided predominantly political writings. The beginning of the 19th century breathes in new energy to the will of creating a national literature, which will be different from the English literature –the predominant mode so far on American soil. Therefore, such writers as Charles Brockden Brown will strive to forge a literary language

which will identify itself as representative of a new literature, a vibrant new canon clearly detached from the English and, by extension, European traditions.

Alarcón continues with his critical analysis of Poe's work and points out at the "search of beauty through different means" ("la búsqueda de lo bello por diferente camino"). This emphasizes one of the most controversial aspects of the North-American author.

While the country as a whole cried out for a literature which could be described as specifically North-American as a liberating expression of British rule, Poe is bitterly criticised precisely because his texts do not seem to connect to his country in a concrete manner. In other words, they do not respond to Emerson's call. In this sense, Alarcón celebrates such a quality in Poe, his geographical detachment which gives birth to a literature that refuses to establish a direct compromise with immediate reality, together with the creation of a national literary identity. In this way, the literary critic Alarcón aligns himself with Poe's own aesthetic presumptions as expressed in his critical essays. Poe's aesthetics defend art for art's sake while they coincide with the author's own contradictions, most clearly in his mathematical type of character. Alarcón's text does not refuse to address such contradictions and he discusses the mathematical quality of Poe's writing, even going as far as describing his writing of "scientific poetry". These comments presuppose a shared emphasis on rationality as expressed by Poe in "The Philosophy of Composition", a critical exercise through which he meant to prove how it is possible to compose a text via a scientific composition; that is, step by step, from one stage to the next.

Conclusion: Poe in Spain

The present article has examined some of the reasons behind the attention on the part of Spanish translators for E.A. Poe's body of work. Starting off from a review of the discrepancy between Poe's reception in the United States and his influence abroad, we have concentrated in what we have deemed as the "French Passageway"; that is, Baudelaire's translation of Poe's short stories, which he

undertook between 1852 and 1865 and which exerted a decisive influence both on the French author's literary style and on the development of the short story as a form in French literature.

The question of the first translation of Edgar Allan Poe's work into Spanish has become a source of debate for critics and academics alike. From the early proposal of John De Lancey Ferguson in 1916, to the contributions of John E. Englekirk and E. Herman Hespelt in 1934 one may gather that "La semana de los tres domingos" is the earliest text -it dates from 1857- by the American author to be translated into Spanish. The text itself has remained a source of mystery for quite a long time, since it is an anonymous translation presumably from the original English - instead of via the French proposal by Baudelaire. A review of Englekirk's study on the part of Hespelt dismisses earlier hypotheses and proposes the 1853 translation of "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains" as the first of Poe's texts to be published in the Spanish language.

The revision of the original thesis formulated by both Ferguson and Englekirk and rebuffed by Hespelt is openly rejected in an article by Juan Gabriel López Guix who, in a very interesting contrastive analysis, demonstrates that the translation published by *El museo universal* starts off from a previous French translation which effectively served as a model for the translation of the text into Spanish.

The second part of the article focused on the reception of Poe in Spain and, particularly, on the language and the terms used by some of the critical works around his figure. A brief study of Pedro de Alarcón's analysis, *Juicios literarios y artísticos* (1883), proved how the critic picks up on one of the most heated debates in the North-American literary scene of the first half of the 19th century as regards the figure of Edgar Allan Poe. This would provide evidence for the fact that the Spanish academia was well aware of the critical apparatus, which was in circulation in the United States.

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