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“The Raven” and its Afterlives

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to describe some ways of seeing Edgar Allan Poe’s work through some of its afterlives, many of them literary but also intermedial ones – drawings, paintings, films, plays and musical pieces. Products inspired by the poem “The Raven” will be characterized as adaptation, translation, ekphrasis, transmediation, representation or else – in their new configurations: drawings, concrete poems, films, novels, paintings, charges, comic books, graphic novels, pieces of music and so on. Because Poe’s work is so extensive and appreciated – and therefore imitated – a variety of processes can be exemplified.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven”, adaptation, translation, intermediality

1. Edgar Allan Poe

In the latter half of the 19th century not even the harshest critics could deny the brilliance and genius of Edgar Allan Poe. Author, poet, editor, literary critic and a member of the Romantic Movement, he is known for his stories involving mystery and the macabre, besides being considered the creator of the detective story and for his inputs to the sciencefiction genre.

An orphan of travelling artist parents, Edgar Allan Poe was taken in by a couple who never formally adopted him. In spite of a stint in the Army, he always led an unruly life. Poe was one of the first poets who tried to make a living as a writer. His work, also present in popular culture nowadays, influenced both American and world literature. His subjects are victimization, power and its absence, dehumanization and the relationship between body and soul, memory and mourning for the dead, the yearning for transcendence and spiritual affirmation. His writing, presented in plays and critical articles, reflected his theory, which instituted brevity and concentration as criteria for textual quality.

2. “The Raven”

Edgar Allan Poe’s career began with a collection of poems, of which “The Raven”¹ is the most widely known and one of the most famous poems ever written. It was

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven> (retrieved on 29.9.2022).

composed with logic and method, as the author explains in his article “The Philosophy of Composition”, that intends to be a report of how he has written “The Raven”, and to describe the deliberate choices he has made on writing the poem. Poe’s essay points to three central theories to write literature: brevity (the work must be read in a single seating); method (writing is analytic and not spontaneous) and unity of effect (first decide how will be the end and the intended emotional reaction and then the other aspects – one theme, effect, setting, conflict, plot – will come afterwards). The poem was partly inspired by a novel by Charles Dickens and, although Poe added some inner rhymes to each of its stanzas, he recognized his debt to Elizabeth Barrett Browning for its metric.

The piece, a ballad made up of eighteen six-line stanzas, is narrated in the first person and its subjects are loss and self-analysis. It personifies the feeling of grief and loss, exploring the world of emotions that individuals face during their lives. In a dark and cold December night, the speaker sits at his writing desk mourning the death of his beloved Lenore when a raven appears which makes a single sound, “Nevermore”, a word uttered at the end of each stanza, each time with a new meaning. Our narrator sees the bird as a prophet, as he thinks of the meaning of its words and of its answers to his questions. Although he treats the bird amicably, the man believes the raven will depart from him soon, just as his friends have done.

The word “Nevermore” rhymes with Lenore, his beloved’s name, and implies finitude, something that will never be recovered just like time, youth and lost love. With this refrain, the poem pays homage to love and to the finality of death, implying that madness looms and that one can do nothing against it. Thus, the bird embodies grief and loss, and explores the world of emotional conflicts endured by human beings, battles that leave scars even if they are not physical.

First issued in 1845, the piece was re-printed several times and seen as a challenge by translators from several languages, a test that consisted mainly in trying to preserve to the fullest the rhythmic and sonorous framework of the piece and, at the same time, be faithful to the story it tells. There are Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish, Czech, Swedish, Portuguese, and Yiddish translations. Although unhappy and strange, Poe’s life allowed that he was the first American poet internationally known. Since his death his work has influenced other authors and artists. “The Raven”, many times reedited and translated, was also parodied and illustrated, besides adapted to other media.

2.1. Translations

In his book, “*O Corvo*” *multilingue* [The multilingual Raven], Serravalle de Sá (2015) refers to the history of the poem and its translations. He says that the success of “The Raven” is due to its characteristics: musicality and stylized language, supernatural atmosphere, infallible metric and hypnotic rhythm, simple structure

with descriptions and metaphors and archetypal symbolism. Inspired by a discipline he taught at the University of Santa Catarina, "Introdução ao estudo do texto poético e dramático" [Introduction to the Study of Poetic and Dramatic Text] he gathered and analyzed some translations of "The Raven" into the languages studied there: versions in English (by Poe in 1845 and 1849); versions in French (by Charles Baudelaire, 1856 and Stéphanie Mallarmé, 1875); in Germany (Carl Theodor Eben, 1869); in Spanish (Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde, 1887); in Italian (Ernesto Ragazzoni, 1896) and three versions in Portuguese (Machado de Assis, 1883; Fernando Pessoa, 1924 and Milton Amado, 1943). According to the author, those versions were chosen for historical reasons, taking into consideration the impact when published and their ability to remain relevant. His conclusion was that there are no two equal translations because any reading reveals the reader's experience and sensibility.

Although there are almost fifty translations of "The Raven" into Portuguese, the most famous are the ones by the Brazilian Machado de Assis and by the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa.

In his text, Sergio Bellei (1978) affirms that Machado and Pessoa are obviously doing something radically different with Poe's poem. Pessoa practiced poetically what he had elsewhere preached about poetics, in a sermon derived from Poe's own theories. He always proclaims fidelity to translate "rhythmically conforming to the original", and the result is a remarkable poetic achievement (Monteiro, 1988, p. 136).

According to Defenu (2021, p. 171),

[t]he schematic construction of the rhythmic and phonetic effects of the poem allows Pessoa to perform an empirical demonstration of his own conception of a poetic text as a combination between rhythmic effects and visual images, and considers Translation to be an instrument to explore the unbounded expressive possibilities of poetry.

On the other hand, Machado de Assis changes Poe's rhythm significantly, choosing to render the poem in shorter lines and ignores the power effect of Poe's internal rhymes. He does not try to reproduce an equivalent of sound and meaning in Portuguese as Pessoa does. With this act, Machado puts in practice the ability to make one's own what is foreign and strange, as the modernist Brazilian writers believed and propagated. As a severe critic of his times and contemporaries, he gave the poem a different touch from the original, with diverse meter and prose-like style so as to approach the Portuguese metric style and maintain a certain literary independence with regards to the original (Phillippov, 2011). To be a man of his time, he absorbed Western Culture, but "to be a man of his country, [...] he misreads, distorts and adapts foreign texts, so that, by means of this act of appropriation, what is foreign becomes part of an alternative context" (Bellei, 1978, p. 60). Pessoa certainly translates Poe but Machado consciously misreads the American poet.

A very creative and singular translation of “The Raven” is the concrete poem by the Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos, titled “Transcorvo” [Trans-raven], published in his book *Despoesia* (2016), “a visual poem that presents, in the stylized shape of a bird (with three dimensional letters forming wings that evoke also a cross), a version of the last stanza of ‘The Raven’” (Kennedy & Peeples, 2019, p. 631). Campos calls this version “intradução” (in-translation) in which structure, metric and rhythm are sacrificed in order to distribute the text in the desired format.

2.2. Parodies

As mentioned before, as soon as it was published, “The Raven” “proved eminently imitable, [becoming] a 19th century meme, with people taking up its verse-form and scenario for their own ends, be they comic, satiric, or serious” (Murray, 2022). In Murray’s site we can find parodies and comic poems, political satires, advertisements, tributes to Poe, sequels to “The Raven”, non-parodic imitations, fraudulent predecessors, “chanelled poems”, prose parodies etc. At least 48 works are included.

A homage paid to Poe came from a National Football League team. As Poe lived in Baltimore for a time and was buried there, residents of the city elected to honor Poe by naming their league team “The Baltimore Ravens”, after the poem. The three mascots for the team are three ravens named: “Edgar”, “Allan” and “Poe”.

One of the most interesting and creative parodies was a campaign by students at Harvard University called “Safe, Free and Green Tap Water” aiming at encouraging people to drink tap water instead of bottled water, which is both environmentally costly and economically inefficient. “‘The Faucet’: a Parody of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Raven’” is a youtube clip in which someone listens to a tapping but it is not a tapping on the door, as in the poem by Poe, but a dripping tap. Then, the person goes to the bathroom to close the tap and urges everybody to drink tap water.

A very creative parody of “The Raven”, aired in the third episode of the 1990 season of the *The Simpsons* series for television “Tree House of Horror”, was not concerned with reproducing the original work to the letter. This series undertook several re-readings of literary works, introducing them to the public through parody. In the instance of this episode, it took the form of a trilogy of frightening tales in celebration of Halloween.

In this adaptation the poem gains a new interpretation: the characters and the story itself are updated to the 20th century. Only ten of the eighteen stanzas are transposed to film, and are recited in voice-over by Lisa, the daughter of Homer, the family patriarch. The comic tone of the animation, contrasting with the poem’s melancholy and sadness, is achieved both by the presence of Homer at two levels

of the story and by the rather irreverent image of the crow. As the lines are spoken, Homer performs and exhibits, in the same dark and dismal atmosphere of the poem, the character's actions, behaviors, and feelings. On the other hand, the girl's brother, Bart, mocks the situation, since, although it is aired during *Halloween*, the episode is anything but frightening. Bart takes the raven's form, and says at one point: "Eat my shorts" instead of "Nevermore". The story culminates with Homer chasing the Bart-raven around the study before the last stanza is repeated and the bird throwing books of other stories by Poe onto Homer. Thus, Poe's text creates new meaning by its reconfiguration through the use of parody, and can, thus, be seen as an adaptation.

2.3. "The Raven" in visual arts: Painting

Poe had a decisive influence on the visual arts in France. Particularly after his death, this influence dominated the emergent modernist movements, such as the decadent poetry of Charles Baudelaire and his Symbolist disciple Stéphane Mallarmé. Both translated "The Raven" into French. This is the case in the work of two artists of the late 19th century: Gustave Doré and Édouard Manet, who illustrated translations of the poem into French.

In 1875, the illustrations by Édouard Manet, one of the creators of Impressionism, for "The Raven" were published in an "artist's book", a bilingual edition with the translation into French by Stéphane Mallarmé commissioned by Richard Lesclide (Mitchell, 1981, p. iv). Although illustration traditionally fulfills the purpose of bringing something to light, in this book images and words cannot be separated, since the illustration is integral to the work, suggesting unspeakable thoughts and feelings that cannot be verbalized. The technique employed by Manet was the lithograph, which allows the use of the lithographic pencil or brush directly over the matrix. Lines combined with heavy dark stains create textures that enrich the images. Here they also imply that the desolate anonymous narrator could be the young poet himself, with his unmistakable moustache, thus illustrating both the sharing of ideas of the artists on life and art, and the relationship between the American writer and French art and literature. The publication of this book was an avant-garde event both in literature and painting, as it united both artforms in a single physical object: images and words are balanced and it is impossible to take them apart. However, in spite of being conceived in the spirit of the time and illustrated with original lithographs by a painter of prestige, the book was a commercial failure.

Famous in the 19th century for illustrating the works of writers as Rabelais, Balzac, Milton and Dante, Gustave Doré created in 1884, shortly before his death, a series of twenty-six engravings for the special edition of the translation into French, by Charles Baudelaire, of the classic and dark "The Raven". As in his whole production, the images are richly detailed and, in this case, also delicate,

marked by a *chiaroscuro* effect suitable to the poem's atmosphere. The careers of these two artists, Edgar Allan Poe and Gustave Doré, were full of both success and disappointment. During his life, Doré achieved financial success as an illustrator, but his yearning for recognition was never fulfilled while he was alive: the critics of his time ridiculed his capacity even while he was popularly recognized and famous. As for Poe, he enjoyed the opposite fate: although recognized as a great poet while still alive, he never achieved financial stability. While Doré received a large sum for his illustrated edition of "Le Corbeau", Poe got just nine dollars for his most famous poem.

There are some illustrations of "The Raven" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. One of them, a 1848 drawn, a literal illustration of verses 12–14 of the poem, presents the raven perched on a bust of Pallas and ghostly figures of angels on the wall. The narrator is seated in the foreground and a portrait of Lenore is faintly visible on the far wall.

2.4. "The Raven" on film

Textual elements, and particularly narratives and characters, can be transposed from one medium to another. This is what happens with literary works refigured in film. The influence of Edgar Allan Poe was also felt among film directors. Speaking of adaptations of his works for the big screen is nothing new for fans of the gothic genre: since the dawn of cinema productions based on publications by the American writer have been put to film. The first version of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, directed by Frenchman Henri Desfontaines in 1909, and the films made by Roger Corns are good examples of film adaptations of his works (Peeples, 2004).

"The Raven" has been adapted seven times for the cinema. In the 1930 and 1940s, Universal Studios adapted several Poe's stories. However the most famous film was that of 1963, directed by Roger Corns and including Vincent Price in the cast. In this absurd version, in which special effects are a constant, the audience saw as comical the frightening comings and goings of a troupe of British wizards from the 15th century. The script is an ingenious, imaginative narrative of what takes place when a raven, who is nothing besides a colleague transformed by another wizard (Boris Karloff), knocks on the door of a magician's (Vincent Price) room. The director takes this idea and expands it into a comedy of horror, which climax occurs when Price and Karloff engage in a duel to the death, each employing his black magic tricks (Tudor, 2014). This example illustrates how a work, even when unfaithful to its source for including into it totally foreign elements, turns itself into a horror comedy and can, thus, be recognized as an adaptation.

In 2005, a collection of Poe's films on DVD was released, including a faithful adaptation of *The Raven*, by the director Peter Bradley (2003). It tells the story of a man who is self-tortured over the loss of his beloved and becomes insane. In a way the film captures Poe's world.

The winner of the 2015 Emmy Award (for cinema), *The Raven*, directed by Thad Ciechanowski, has the poem recited in its entirety and narrates the story of a man wrestling with the nature of life after death and with the purpose of his soul over his lost love.

2.5. "The Raven" on music

Since the mid-19th century, the mixture of supernatural and symbolic in Poe's works fascinated Russian and French composers, who used narrative and poetic texts as a support for their musical structures. The affinity between these writings and the music was due to the amorphous, abstract and, at the same time, powerful character of their dramatic illustrations, similar to the same qualities found in the music. Claude Debussy, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Joseph Holbrooke and Jonathan Adams, among classics, and Frank Laine, Jean Leloup and Lou Reed, among pop musicians, are examples of composers whose works were strongly influenced by Poe.

The relations between music and literature are illustrated by the innumerable forms and phenomena made possible by this relationship. Among these phenomena, we can mention the musicalization of literature, that is, the transposition from one medium, literature, to another, music. A specific genre: rock music will be treated in this section. Around the 1950s, the emergence of rock music paved the way for musicalization of poems, that is, the transformation of poems into rock songs.

The fact of a poem being turned into music make us think of medial transpositions, a term employed by Irina Rajewsky (2012) to define "the transformation of a certain media product [...] or of its substract into another medium" (p. 24).

The rock genre became popular in the 1960s, and developed subgenres such as "soul rock", "folk rock", psychedelic rock and "hard rock". A new genre came out from this stylistic mixture: progressive rock, a musical form in which musicians started to combine classical music with jazz and rock forms. New compositional arrangements and musical styles arose that imitated classical music prototypes, exploring symphonic forms and long instrumental forms (Redling, 2015, p. 504). Conceptual albums, created around a wide-ranging unified theme and a set of interconnected songs, became part of "progressive rock".

Progressive rock reached its apex with the release, in 1976, of the conceptual album *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* by the rock group *The Alan Parsons Project*. The album title was inspired by the homonymous work by Poe published in 1908. The structure of this album, which was the group's first one, was based on the stories and poems by Allan Poe, and the "Raven" track stood out. The project comprised many albums, but critics were never unanimous in its acceptance. In spite of the interesting verses and musical themes – recounting the horror stories and reciting Edgar Allan Poe's poems – the album had a limited audience. Among

its eleven tracks, “Raven” and “Cask of Amontillado” are directly connected with the American writer. Just like the members of the *Alan Parsons Project*, the composer Lou Reed widened the limits of rock including art and literature in his musical *POEtry*, a musical journey through the works of Poe. This, a kind of “rock opera”, was a collaboration between himself and the theatre director Robert Wilson, and included songs, an opening and a *libretto*. It was staged for the first time in February 2000, at the Thalia theatre in Hamburg, Germany. Reed worked with some themes found in the verses by Poe, set them to music and infused them into the bodies and voices of the Theatre’s cast. In December 2001, the show was taken to the *Brooklyn Academy of Music*, where characters from the visiting works, among them an eight-foot sculpture of a raven and some characters such as Lenore, Usher and Annabel Lee filled the stage. The poem “The Raven” was accompanied by electronic music and staged by a man (Poe, as a narrator) and two women, all dressed in black, in a dark blue stage (Flick, 2003).

In 2003, Lou Reed released the solo album “The Raven”, a reprise of the musical, a post-modern pastiche in which Poe’s words are mixed with originally silent characters who are given a voice. In the track dedicated to “The Raven” the poem, recited by Reed himself to the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar, remains almost unchanged.

More recently, Lou Reed hired the artist Lorenzo Mattotti to make visible his extraordinary collaboration with Robert Wilson, since the musical’s performance and setting could not be captured in images. The result was a compilation of the songs, stanzas and narratives that made up both projects (the musical and the CD) in a compendium illustrated by Lorenzo Mattotti, with images dedicated to each of the pieces. According to Reed himself, the goal was to “illustrate the pages with the gracefulness, the energy and passion that Lorenzo’s work would bring, and compel the intermedial combination of words and images, as strong as any union, along with the mixture of sensitivities, to finally make their home in the pages of the illustrated book” (*The Raven*, 9).

3. Conclusion

The examples discussed above raise interesting questions, examined by Kate Newell (2017) in her work: What kinds of textual and artistic compromise can be considered adaptations? What elements were prioritized in the process? What were the strategies used by the artist to involve the audience? How does the public interact with each product? What are the theoretical differences used in each of the mediums? Where is the limit between the mediums and what happens to them during the process? The answers to these questions will broaden the concept of adaptation.

In this text, it was claimed that, by means of manipulations of a literary work, some artists (poets, painters, filmmakers, composers) have proven that adaptation

is a revisionist act that communicates with a larger network of similar actions and also contributes for the expansion of this network. The examples presented also illustrate the fact that the public – readers, spectators, listeners – does not wish to experience the work in a single mode of interaction, in a single medium. Works, that in the past were considered as dependent, perform an important role as they lead readers to other interpretations and conclusions, depending on the aspects emphasized and remembered. So, according to Leitch (2017, p. 700), the adaptation oscillates between a) the back and forth movement between adaptation and authorship; b) the movement between archives dedicated to the preservation and the performance with the goal of telling, retelling and transmitting stories, and c) the challenge posed by the meeting of mediums which leads to the discussion about the role of adaptation today.

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