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The Oval Frame of Translation: Poe's "The Oval Portrait"

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1. Introduction

Many of Poe's stories and poems deal with the complex relationship between life and death as the main theme. Time and time again, the narrator or voice of Poe's fictions and poems describes in minute detail the narrator's observations of the act of another dying and then reviving, the process of another being transformed from life to death and from death to life. Poe's work "The Oval Portrait" seems to cry out the strongest for the supreme act of transformation: the painter transforms the life of his wife into a lifeless model for his painting. The relationship between the painter and his live model, or between the model and the portraits, can be compared to the one established between the original text and translation which is meant to reproduce it. In

"The Oval Portrait," this supposedly invisible painter-translator takes on an explicitly visible authorial role, sacrificing the life of his wife for the benefit of his art, thus subverting the traditional hierarchy of the original text and its translated copy, of the author and the translator. The oval frame of the portrait, into which the model is forced, can be read as a metaphor of translation, signifying the possibility of an egg-shaped rebirth in the life of artistic representation. Death is not completed in one instantaneous act of destruction, but rather implies a procedure, a transition or passage to another form of life. In this paper, I propose to read Poe's "The Oval Portrait" as the most explicit and extreme example of translation, the translation from life to death, from death to life, examining in particular the ways in which the model is resuscitated or reproduced into the cultural image of an ethereal woman as the painter is rather faithful to his mother tongue and culture in reproducing the wife in the form of art. I intend to prove that the point of translation, for Poe, lies not in the faithful relation to the original but rather in the reproduction of the aesthetic pleasure for the reader of the target language and culture, the idea unmistakably implied in Poe's philosophy of composition and translation.

2. The Oval Frame of Portrait

Poe's tale “The Oval Portrait" is simply about a "desperately wounded," feverish narrator who chances to pass a night in an abandoned chateau. He seeks refuge in one of the building's smallest apartments situated in a remote turret of the building where he is taken by many paintings adorning the walls. Suffering from "incipient delirium," the narrator decides to rest in the bed perusing a volume of art criticism found lying on his pillow. By accidentally changing the position of the candelabrum at his bedside, he chances to see in a dark niche the hitherto unnoticed portrait of a beautiful young woman. It is the oval portrait of "a young girl just ripening into womanhood" whose

"absolute lifelikeness of expression" startles the narrator (Poe 1966 569). Searching for an explanation for his feeling about the portrait, he goes back to read the volume which happens to describe the paintings in the bedroom. As we learn, she was "a maiden of rarest beauty" who "loved and wedded the painter" (Poe 1966 569). The painter was passionate but studious, and as much in love with his painting as he was with his wife. Consequently, although the wife "lov[ed] and cherish[ed] all things, she hated "only [her husband's] Art which was her rival: dreading only the pallet and brushes and other untoward instruments which deprived her of the countenance of her lover" (Poe 1966 569). On the other hand, the "wild and moody" painter who had "already a bride in his Art," worked so obsessively as not to realize that his young wife "grew daily more dispirited and weak" as the portrait grew more life-like (Poe 1966 570). The painter did not notice his wife's health failing day by day in proportion to the progress of the portrait and so completed his masterpiece only to discover that his beloved bride was dead.

> he would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him. And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed Life itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved:- She was dead! (Poe 1966 570)

This tale provides an interesting allegory of death, life, and art which implies an antagonism between living beauty and its artistic representation. What makes the tale truly revealing is "the tortured relationships" evidenced in the text: "between the painter and his young bride, between the woman and

her painted likeness, between the haunting portrait and the wounded narrator, and between the 'quaint' anecdote in the art book and the narrator's truncated story" (Kennedy 1987 61). According to Gerald Kennedy (1987), each paring figures "an opposition between life and art, between one who gazes and one who is gazed at" (61). In other words, each of these parings implies a relationship similar to the one between translator and text or between text and translation. "The painter translates his wife into a lifeless model while the narrator, for his part, translates the painting into writing, into a text which is twice removed from the original" (Kennedy 1987 61).

> I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute life-likeliness of expression, which, at first startling, finally confounded, subdued, and appalled me. With deep and reverent awe I replaced the candelabrum in its former position. The cause of my deep agitation being thus shut from view, I sought eagerly the volume which discussed the paintings and their histories. Turning to the number which designated the oval portrait, I there read the vague and quaint words. (Poe 1966 569)

In this brief account of his gazing at the picture, we see him first startled, then agitated, then subdued, and finally "appalled." It is only after he is deeply agitated and affected by the "lifelikeness of expression" that he picks up the volume of art criticism to read a story about the painting. We must not overlook that the narrator is led to find an explanation that is legitimate to his feeling about the paining, rather than to the original tale in the volume which is now lost in the course of this narrator-translation.

Like all translation, this process necessarily entails gain and loss, duplication and effacement in the sense that "every translation sacrifices the letter of the original text to reconstitute its spirit in another language" (Kennedy 1987 61). Translation abolishes the originality of the subject when mirroring it: translation both reflects and betrays at the same time. Thus the relationship between the young bride and her picture manifests, what Kennedy

(1987) calls, "the scandal of translation" insofar as the picture lives by virtue of the wife's death (61). After all, the painter as well as the narrator confront "the awareness that their texts have taken on"

> an independent life more real [...] than that of its original. [...] In its preternatural vividness, the portrait has become a frightening double of the young bride. Its 'lifelikeness' simultaneously signifies an immortality and a fatality: while the beauty of portrait will endure. its living counterpart will not; the woman will resemble the sign of herself less and less until she is at last translated into a corpse. (Kennedy 1987 63)

Even though the portrait captures literally the life of the model, it can never be faithful as it tries to resuscitate or reconstitute the spirit of the original in another language or medium. When translation is done, the original is already different and irrecoverably dead. Within such a context, the scandal of translation can be related to the painter's "passionate, studious, austere" ardor to bring the life of the model somehow alive to the canvas, which is ironically responsible for his young wife's death.

> he, the painter, took glory in his work, which went on from hour to hour, and from day to day. And be was a passionate, and wild, and moody man, who became lost in reveries; so that he would not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him. Yet she smiled on and still on, uncomplainingly, because she saw that the painter (who had high renown) took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task, and wrought day and night to depict her who so loved him, yet who grew daily more dispirited and weak. And in sooth some who beheld the portrait spoke of its resemblance in low words, as of a mighty marvel, and a proof not less of the power of the painter than of his deep love for her whom he depicted so surpassingly well. But at length, as the labor drew nearer to its conclusion, there were admitted none into the turret; for the painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work, and turned his eyes from

> canvas merely, even to regard the countenance of his wife. (Poe 1966 570)

Because of the artist's irresistible passion about his art, he "[takes] a fervid and burning pleasure in his task," rarely turning his eyes from canvas "even to regard the countenance of his wife." Perfect lifelikeness, therefore, is achieved not by the painter's studious attention to the model he renders but by his ardor for labor that refuses to perceive it. The painter, wild with the ardor of his work, turns away from the world of the subject to the world of art, which is his own narrative canvas. As Williiam Freedman (2001) points out, "the lifelike expression captured by the portrait becomes, in effect, the narrative itself, the terrible lifelike truth of art as expression: the reality transported into the work is the reality of the artist and his art" (9).

If we consider that the painter, despite his love for his wife, literally devotes all his attention to his work and refuses to regard his model's well-being, sacrificing the latter for the benefit of the first, he clearly violates the traditional principle of translation: fidelity or faithfulness. A translation should accurately render the meaning of the source text, without adding to or subtracting from it, without intensifying or weakening any part of the meaning. So, translation has been generally viewed as a transparent, impersonal activity which is expected to recover the meaning of the original. However, this supposedly invisible translator, in Poe's tale, takes on an explicitly visible authorial role. Instead of repressing his creative, authorial passion, he dares to feel and behave like an author, subverting the traditional hierarchy between the original and translation. The passion of the painter is unrestricted and hence ultimately harmful in his search to immortalize his wife's image. It is his studied indifference to his wife's physical being as well as his passion for art, both prior to and during the consuming act of portraiture, that sacrifices her to "the Art which [is] her rival." Thus, transformation, even the most lifelike transformation of life into art, is inevitably a form of murder. To convert the

living and beautiful object into a work of art is to rob it of its vitality and breath. Art, the tale implies, cannot live without the blood it strives to aestheticize out of existence.[1] The death of the wife, which symbolizes the death of the original or the author, resulted largely from such indifference and ignorance, is the necessary price of the painter's achievement.

Particularly, the "fervid and burning pleasure" taken by the painter to produce his own masterpiece, to create life in death, is motivated by the removal of the source of light. Not only does he fail to see the deteriorating condition of his bride but "he would not see" the effect of light on his bride: initially the wife agrees to sit in the dark turret which the only light comes from above so that he can paint. The repetitive refusal of the painter to face the light—"so that he would not see that the light which fell so ghastily [...] And he would not see that the tint [...]"—is an open confession of the willful blindness (Poe 1966 570). The painting takes place in a "dark high turret-chamber," and his ability to create is contingent on a blindness: he sees only the image he has represented on his canvas, not his model (Poe 1966 570). His passion for art simply overwhelms him to the point where he can no longer see his wife except through the lens of his painting. The absolute lifelikeness of expression, therefore, is achieved by the painter who, "lost in reveries," would not see the light which may carry the model unaltered to his eyes, and to the canvas. Throughout the tale, the image of light is associated with the young bride and, significantly, with the flame of a candle. We are told that as the artist is about to add the final tint to the eye, "the spirit of the lady [...] flicker[s] up as the flame within the socket of the lamp" (Poe 1966

1) This absorption of the model into the picture, for Mario Praz (1970), is a form of vampirism. "The tales of Poe," he argues, "are always a symbolical, mythological translation of the same thirst [...] for that complete fusion with beloved being which ends in vampirism" (p.145). James Twitchell (1981), who also reads "The Oval Portrait" as a tale of vampirism, says that "art itself is involved in the transfer of vitality; the process of creation is vampiric" (p.170).

570).

In addition, the candle flame, which symbolizes the spirit of the young wife, is shunned not only by the painter but by the narrator. We are told that the narrator is also displeased by the position of the candelabrum whose rays accidently fall upon the portrait that startles him. He is then forced to replace the candelabrum, thus casting the portrait back into the shade, so that "the cause of his deep agitation [is] thus shut from view."

> The position of the candelabrum displeased me, and outreaching my hand with difficulty [...] I placed it so as to throw its rays more fully upon the book.[...] The rays of the numerous candles (for there were many) now fell within a niche of the room which had hitherto been thrown into deep shade by one of the bed-posts. I thus saw in vivid light a picture all unnoticed before. It was the portrait of a young girl just ripening into womanhood.[...] I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute life-likeliness of expression, which, at first startling, finally confounded, subdued, and appalled me. With deep and reverent awe I replaced the candelabrum in its former position. The cause of my deep agitation being thus shut from view, I sought eagerly the volume which discussed the paintings and their histories. (Poe 1966 568-569)

With the candelabrum replaced, the narrator's illumination starts opening the textual or second portrait while closing off the "real" or painted copy of the model. And in this moment, the narrator of the visual and verbal texts replaces the candelabrum, turning towards the written commentary on the portraits as it waits him on his pillow. Both the narrator and the painter therefore dexterously remove the source of light in favor of their own illusion, as art requires the effacement of the world so that it can recapture things in a way that is satisfactory.

After all, it is this feverish, wounded, heavily drugged narrator who tells us of the painter and his wife through "vague and quaint words." The narrator is by no means a reliable source of the tale. If we look at the first version of the

tale, "Life in Death" which Poe published in 1842,[2] we learn more about the narrator's peculiar state: he is seriously wounded, has lost a lot of blood and his fever has been "excessive and of long duration." Now, in such a desperate state, he has decided to swallow some of his opium which may help him forget his pain and indulge in a soothing illusion. It is therefore this "incipient delirium" which has "caused [him] to take a deep interest" in the paintings.

> MY fever had been excessive and of long duration. All the remedies attainable in this wild Appennine region had been exhausted to no purpose.[...] At length I bethought me of a little pacquet of opium which lay with my tobacco in the hookah-case; for at Constantinople I had acquired the habit of smoking the weed with the drug. [...] No doubt it was this very reeling of my senses--it was the dull delirium which already oppressed me--that prevented me from perceiving the incoherence of my reason[...] in these paintings my incipient delirium, perhaps, had caused me to take deep interest; so that having swallowed the opium, as before told, I bade Pedro to close the heavy shutters of the room (Poe 1980 200-201)

Because of the opium use, one cannot help but question the stability and condition of the narrator's mind. The narrator, deeply distraught, thus unable to distinguish fantasy from reality, might have created the lifelikeness image of the woman in his mind. The narrator's self-confessed "habit of smoking the weed with the drug" therefore makes us wonder whether the events he is telling us are real or unreal, whether the image is simply a hallucination of a

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2) "The Oval Portrait" was first published as a longer version titled "Life in Death" in *Graham's Magazine* in 1842. "Life in Death" included a few introductory paragraphs explaining how the narrator had been wounded, and that he had eaten opium to relieve the pain. Poe probably removed this introduction because it gave the impression that the story was nothing more than a hallucination. The shorter version, renamed "The Oval Portrait" was published in the April 26, 1845 edition of *Broadway Journal*.

drug induced addict. What Poe's plot seems to suggest is that "the translator's alleged capacity to recreate life is, quite probably, only a product of the narrator's feverish delirium" (Arrojo 2003 178).

Because of the unreliable narrator, the whole story is indeed doubly framed, first by the frame of the portrait, and then by the frame of the narrative. The word 'frame' usually means the angle of view at which the object is captured by the eyes of the observer. Frame serves the double purpose of making a deliberate choice about the object to be circumscribed and keeping the focus on the framed object. Framing here suggests by no means mimesis but rather a circumscription of the object, which results in representing it rather than presenting it. The arabesque frame of the portrait signifies an act of performance to turn the natural into an artificial realm. The arabesque frame works as artificial circumscription of the young wife just as the frame of the unreliable narrative works as a soothing explanation of the narrator's feeling about the painting. Particularly, the richly framed picture hanging in an eccentric manner on the wall corresponds to the weirdly constructed interior not only of the narrator but of the chateau he dwells in. The confusing and deceptive architecture of the chateau creates a dreamlike atmosphere with a setting of odd twisting. The narrator translates the turret of the building with "manifold armorial trophies" to the arabesque frame of the portrait.

> We established ourselves in one of the smallest and least sumptuously furnished apartments. It lay in a remote turret of the building. Its decorations were rich, yet tattered and antique. Its walls were hung with tapestry and bedecked with manifold and multiform armorial trophies, together with an unusually great number of very spirited modern paintings in frames of rich golden arabesque. (Poe 1966 568)

In fact, the fictive space of "The Oval Portrait" is geometrically shaped in that it suggests a series of circular or oval frames of representation. According to Scheick (1978), the narrative frame occurs within the turret, "a circular

setting objectifying the narrative manner of the tale, which in turn encircles the vague tale on the portrait found by the narrator's bedside" (6). Obviously this tale relates to the "rich golden arabesque" frame encircling the portrait. The whole story is indeed shrouded in the mysterious, complex scheme of the successive oval frames, which, at the same time, comes to thematise the narrator's experience of a defusion or illusion between life and art. The series of circular arabesque frames are so imperceptibly intertwined, failing clearly to mark the absence of life and the presence of artifice, thus resulting in the dangerous consequences of the rivalry between natural and artistic creation. Such an experience of the two uncanny moments, which conflate the frame of the portrait and the frame of the narration, erases the difference between the model and the portrait image, thus making the copy(the image) as real as the original(the real) or the real as artificial as the image.

3. Feminine Ideal & Gender Translation

It becomes now clear that the artist purposely forces the live model into the arabesque frame, transforming or translating her into the bride he already has, whose other name is art. As the model is translated into painting, she is idealized into a prototype of the impossible pure and beautiful maiden. The artist casts her living bride in the stereotypical feminine ideal who is submissive and dedicated to her lover while she herself becoming week, pale, and dispirited. As we can see, the young wife is depicted as "a maiden of rarest beauty," who is "humble and obedient, and [sits] meekly for many weeks in the dark high turret-chamber for her husband's art" (Poe 1966 570). Although one comes to speculate about which woman inspired Poe's tale, the woman modeled for his husband's art lacks any particular physical embodiment. "Poe never truly wrote about women at all," Karen Weeks (2002) argues, "[he wrote] instead about a female object and ignoring dimensions of character that

add depth or believability to these repeated stereotypes of the beautiful damsel" (150). Indeed Poe's female characters are remarkably similar in demeanor, and his narrators peculiarly resemble each other as well. Poe's another feminine ideal, Berenice, is also unparalleled in her beauty and has loved the narrator long. In "Berenice," when she falls ill, the narrator takes an acute interest in her decline, not as physiological process but as a theoretical instance of beauty in death: "I had seen her--not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream--not as a being of the earth, but as the abstraction of such being" (Poe 1966 174). Just like Berenice, the beautiful painter's wife grows increasingly pale after all and approaches the Romantic ideal until her death, at which point her beauty leaves her and is immortalized in her husband's painting.

The association of beautiful women with death is prevalent in Poe's works, and is especially prominent in "The Oval Portrait." A woman who is dying or dead while still lovely is again the culturally constructed Romantic image of an ethereal woman. In Poe's tales, the narrative and visual representations of the death of beautiful women draw their material from common cultural image repertories in the nineteenth century. Kennedy quotes Philippe Aries to argue that Poe's epoch can be considered as "the Age of the Beautiful Death," a certain period of time in which dying is considered "a fetishized spectacle, an elaborately prepared departure" (qtd. in Kennedy 1987 64). Particularly, the death of young women, especially of unmarried women, seems to epitomize the death of innocent beauty. Moreover, a consumptive woman ironically becomes increasingly beautiful as her skin pales to translucence and her cheeks and lips redden from fever. In "The Oval Portrait," which deals with the process of dying, Poe implies that "through this insidious transformation, temporal loveliness approaches the perfection of eternal beauty, and theoretically at least the corpse of the dead woman briefly incarnates an ideality" (Kennedy 1987 68). The conjunction of a beautiful feminine body with death depicts aesthetically the beauty of the body against its natural

decay. If the process of decomposition can ever be prevented, death is the perfect moment that captures the beauty of the feminine body in full bloom in the eternal work of art.

For this reason, Poe uses art to dream of a beautiful yet declining woman to preserve and entertain the ideal form of beauty. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe (1984) designates the death of a beautiful woman as "the most poetical topic in the world" (19). And in an quasi-autobiographical poem, he writes, "I could not love except where Death / Was mingling his with Beauty's breath" (Poe 1980 26). Poe's poetic treatment of dying women indicates that, to a certain extent, he shares the pervasive sentimental view of his culture that death intensifies female beauty. Such a romantic melancholy involves a denial of loss, a desire for eternity. Both beauty and death allow us to escape from the material world into the realm of spirituality, from the ephemeral world into an illusion of timelessness. The work of art therefore finds its supreme manifestation in the death of a beautiful woman. By dying, a beautiful woman serves as the motive for the creation of an art work and as its object of representation. Poe's seemingly antithetical coupling of death and beauty finds its aesthetic solution: love and death are indissolubly and miraculously intertwined in his art. The simultaneous death and preservation of the beauty comes to stabilize the relation between the subject and the object of desire in the work of art.

Furthermore, the death of a beautiful woman serves to express the rivalry between a material presence of the body and its immaterial representation in art, between original and translation, which is frequently sexualized. The original is considered the strong generative male while the translation the weaker and derivative female. Like women, translation should be always submissive and faithful to the original. The hierarchical authority of the original over the translation, which is linked with imagery of masculine and feminine, is a symptom of larger issues of Western culture. It is observable that translation was the means through which women were able to gain access

to the world of letters. According to Sherry Simon (1996), "beginning in the European Middle Ages, women who were excluded from the privileges of authorship turned to translation as a permissible from of public expression" (2). Translation continued to serve "as a kind of writer's apprenticeship for women into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Simon 1996 2). This cultural and social background of translation has contributed to the long-dominant theory of translation as equivalence and transparency which describes the translator as an invisible, secondary, feminine hand mechanically turning the words of one language into another. This paradigm depicts, Lori Chamberlain (2000) argues, "originality or creativity in terms of paternity and authority, relegating the figure of the female to a variety of secondary roles" (314). This opposition between productive and reproductive work is certainly a cultural product used to mark the distinction between writing as original and masculine, and translating as derivative and feminine.

However, "The Oval Portrait" shows a sharp contrast to the literary and economic hierarchy: while the translator is figured as a male, the text is figured as a female model. The painter's wife is essentially a passive figure within the story. Docile and loving, she is akin to the canvas of the portrait in that both can be easily manipulated by the male painter. The modest, self-effacing wife disturbingly wishes into death in order for her husband to fulfil his art. She is the one who merely holds a place as an object to be observed, analyzed, and thus translated into painting. Poe translates the creative role of the author into the passive role of the female text, rendering the author completely powerless and submissive to the male translator. This kind of reversed gender role of translation however was not uncommon during the sixteenth century. According to Chamberlain (2000), at the time, translation was seen as a "public duty" that justified any form of violence on the original and its culture (318). She offers a stunning example of an English translation of Horace done by Thomas Drant who, in the preface to his translation of the Roman author, boldly announces:

> First I have now done as the people of God were commanded to do with their captive women that were handsome and beautiful: I have shaved off his hair and pared off his nails, that is, I have wiped away all his vanity and superfluity of matter [...] I have Englished things not according to the vein of the Latin propriety, but of his own vulgar tongue [...] I have pieced his reason, eked and mended his similitudes, mollified his hardness, prolonged his cortall kind of speeches, changed and much altered his words, but not his sentence, or at least (I dare say) not his purpose. (qtd. in Chamberlain 318)

Durant is free to take the liberties to make Horace suitable as a member of the family. Horace's text is identified with a female, and Durant's job as a translator is to make the captive woman a wife: he has "shaved off [her] hair and pared off [her] nail" and "wiped away all [her] vanity and superfluity of matter." In Durant's translation of Horace, therefore, the original loses its spirits as he consciously invades and interferes with the text in order to make it acceptable to his own cultural interests and perspectives. As Chamberlain (2000) aptly comments, in Drant's translation, "fidelity" defines "a (male) author-translator's relation to his (female) mother tongue, the language into which something is being translated" (319). Likewise, in "The Oval Portrait," the young wife is transformed into the pervasive Romantic ideal of a beautiful woman dying or dead. The painter is rather faithful to his mother tongue and culture in reproducing the wife in the form of art. The "humble and obedient wife," like Durant's captive woman, agrees to be imprisoned for her husband's art, sitting "meekly for many weeks in the dark high turret-chamber" (Poe 1966 570). So the imprisoned text must be naturalized, must become part of the translator's language and culture. Much like Durant, the painter reshapes and appropriates the wife to make her suitable to the prevailing cultural image.

3. Poe's Philosophy of Composition & Translation

The sexualization of translation appears perhaps most infamously in the long relished term "Les belles infideles." Like women, translations must either beautiful or faithful. This tag “Belles infidèles denotes a type of translation that is beautiful but unfaithful as it sounds more natural and appealing to the target reader while deviating from the source text. The old translation adage of beauty and fidelity, positioned here as the opposites of one another, can be equated with Poe's poetic principle of 'beauty' and 'truth.' According to Poe (1984), 'truth,' like fidelity in translation, demands "a precision" and scientific accuracy "which [is] absolutely antagonistic to that Beauty" which [...] is the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the [reader's] soul" (16). When Poe claims that the death of a beautiful woman is the most "poetical topic in the world," he intends to emphasize "not quality" but pleasurable "effect" of poetry: "A poem [...] is opposed to a work of science by having, as is immediate object, pleasure, not truth" (1984 16). The end of the work therefore is not to instruct or copy with "precision," but to give pleasure, which Poe characterizes as the apprehension of beauty. The aim of poetry is beauty, not truth as correspondence to reality. Truth has only a minor role in poetry because it demands a “cool, calm, unimpassioned mood that is alien to any poem, which should be passionate and intense (1984 17). In place of truth, poetry deals with the beautiful and the sublime, with emotional categories rather than with rational or ethical ones. Truth may have a role in a poem, but “the true artist will always contrive to tone them down in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem (1984 16)[3)]

3) Poe often associates 'beauty' with poetry, 'truth' with prose fiction. He treats prose fiction as different in nature from that of poetry. However, Poe's work, in effect, makes no aesthetic discrimination between fiction and poetry. Dan Shen (2008) argues that "if some of Poe's tales convey a moral, then that moral tends to be

Poe believes that any poetic text exists in the realm of pleasure, not truth, and that the nature of translation, like that of poetry, is radically indifferent to truth or morality(fidelity) but is more concerned with aesthetic pleasure(beauty) offered for the reader of the target language. Poe himself might have been deeply affected by English translations of Eugene Sue's "urban mysteries" novel in terms that Poe's Dupin stories and the urban mysteries novel are actually very close in narrative strategy and thematic concerns(Heckenberg 2007). Sara Hackenberg (2007) suggests that "Poe's Dupin stories [...] can be read as both a translation and a distillation of the urban mysteries serial" (121). Hakenberg quotes some points from Poe's review on the Sue's *Les Myst res de Paris*, to disclose Poe's own distinct philosophy of translation:

> Declaring in this review that "there is one point (never yet, I believe, noticed) which, obviously, should be considered in translation, Poe asserts that the translator of a given text "should so render the original that the version should impress the people for whom it is intended, just as the original impresses the people for whom it (the original) is intended. Poe suggests that by "pride[ing] themselves less upon literality and more upon dexterity at paraphrase, translators can produce texts that "may be made to convey to a foreigner a juster [sic] conception of an original than could the original itself. (qtd. in Hakenberg 2007 121-122)

In the passage quoted above, we can see that Poe subverts the traditional hierarchy of "original" text and its translated "copy," implying that the point of the translation of a text such as Sue's urban mystery lies not in the faithful

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implicit and inseparable from the structural 'unity of effect' (p.321). In the same fashion, by 'truth,' what Poe means is, as John Whitley says, "the working of every part of the story--rhythm, plot, character, language references [...] logically, consistently and satisfactorily" within the text(qtd. in Shen 2008 326). 'Truth' as morality or "precision" means nothing but the unity of effect or impression which Poe thinks is as important for poetry as for prose fiction.

relation to the original but rather in the reproduction of the aesthetic pleasure for the target reader. This philosophy of translation is also betrayed in Poe's detective tales, in which the detective Dupin's method is to identify with the criminal (original) and put himself in his mind. The detective Dupin becomes an author who, knowing everything that the criminal knows, figuratively writes the hidden story of the crime for the reader with his own powers of logic and imagination. In this regard, the particular role of the detective can be compared to that of the translator whose role, for Poe, is to affect the reader of the target culture. Poe suggests, as he praises the translation of Sue's novel, that the translator must take a pride not on "literality" but on the ability to disseminate, as Hakenberg (2007) aptly puts, "compelling master-narratives with which many diverse groups of readers might be able to locally identify" (122).

It is therefore questionable whether Poe, as Arrojo argues, believes that the author has "total control over a reader, whose role is reduced to that of a passive receptor of the author's conscious intentions" (2003 175). In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe (1984) suggests that the work should proceed, "step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (14). The theme or plot, for Poe, is always subordinate to the author's calculated construction of a single, intense mood in the reader's mind. For this reason, Arrojo (2003) claims that Poe's theory of composition is to "make sure that what readers get from the text is exactly that which the author intends them to get" (p.175). In addition, Poe is often considered establishing the rules and methods common to New Criticism whose familiar tenet is that the text must be interpreted as a self-contained unit apart from the critic's opinions of its author or cultural context. For New Critics, the text is autonomous, objective, and organic whole, which cannot be rendered in different language and by different authors. Perhaps, in this context, Arrojo (2003) concludes that Poe shares "the typically essentialist belief in the possibility of forever stable meanings and texts," and that, for this reason, the painter-translator's violence on the wife (the original) is viewed as "a somewhat

scandalous or illegitimate activity" for which he is after all severly punished by his wife's death (167). Unarguable true her claims may be to a certain extent, Poe does not believe that if the reader is totally passive and submissive to the text, the text alone will disclose or offer all pleasurable information and meaning. As we've observed, Poe's philosophy of translation advises the translator to take an authorial role in producing texts that "may be made to convey to a foreigner a juster [sic] conception of an original than could the original itself." So the ideal role of the translator, Poe argues, is to "impress the people for whom it is intended, just as the original impresses the people for whom it (the original) is intended. Poe is more concerned with the aesthetic communication between the text and the translator (the reader) than the absolute integrity of the text in which, as New Critics believe, no individual part could be altered without damaging the organic structure.

It is not surprising therefore that Poe's work has enjoyed a wide range of aesthetic communication as well as an extraordinary scale of popularity: the works of Poe have been appreciated more in translation than in their original language, and his life and tales have been continuously reproduced by popular culture like comic books, movies, and TV programs. Most of all, Poe had the great fortune to be felt, admired, thus translated by the most celebrated and influential writers in the French language: Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Valery. These writers regarded Poe more French than American. They all saw in Poe some values that English-speaking readers have missed. According to Patrick Quinn (1957), not only psychological contents of Poe's stories with horrible and astonishing details but Poe's ability to choose and govern his effects with a strong Modern spirit of reasoned inquiry were what the French writers believed essentially of French (18-35). Baudelaire, for example, recognized a kindred spirit in Poe and ideas in Poe that were authentically French in origin. Poe was more readable and receptive to France, and more fully understood and appreciated in France. However, Poe was nothing but a mythical construction of the French imagination. Much like Durant's "captive women," Poe has been

appropriated and somewhat improved in translation. As Quinn points out, when Baudelaire turned the stories of Poe into French,

> he removed most of their flaws. He brought to his task more than a sympathetic understanding of what Poe had attempted. He brought also a much surer hand and a more delicate taste, and so, in effect, he as much rewrote the stories as translated them. The French, therefore, in appreciating Poe, are appreciating something that Poe himself did not have and the Baudelaire gave him. (Quinn 1957 39)

Not only has Poe been shaved and naturalized into a French character of American origin but he has been recreated and reproduced by American mass culture as a Romantic myth. Poe has been successfully transformed into products of mass culture with willful lack of accuracy. Because of Poe's frequent use of first-person narrators, suggesting that Poe and his characters are identical, his horror stories are often combined with his abrupt, tragic, and somewhat peculiar death. His life stories, such as the exaggerated alcohol problem, always sneak into his fictional stories. As Mark Neimeyer (2002) claims, many movie directors, fascinated by the myth, have adapted Poe's works with greater or lesser faithfulness, exploiting the man in movies "with only the most tangential relationship with either the real Poe or the real works of Poe" (216). Nonetheless, Poe's life and work have fascinated American people for generations, and Poe himself has managed to remain a significant figure in the American literary imagination and pop culture. If Poe left America to travel the nineteenth century France as a Modern genius of French mind, he has successfully come back to the twentieth century America as "[a] mad genius of the tortured Romantic artists" (Neimeyer 2002 216)).

5. Conclusion

Because of his aesthetic theories concerning the unity of effect and the structural design, Poe has been regarded as a forefather of New Critics who emphasize textual unity and whose readings demonstrate how various elements in a poem or short story work together to produce a subtle but ultimately coherent meaning. However, Poe's philosophy of translation, as demonstrated in "The Oval Portrait" and his review on Sue's *Les Myst res de Paris*, suggests that the text is not a self-contained unit existing in a sphere of its own creation, apart from the author's biography or the reader's imaginative participation, but an object of aesthetic communication--between the author and the reader(the translator)--whose value resides in its power of reproducing desirable effects on the reader. At every moment in a narrative, Poe's aim is to provoke the sensibilities of his reader to their utmost. As Rachel Polonsky (2002) rightly puts it, "Poe's aesthetic theory is perhaps more remarkable for its effect than for its substance; more intriguing by virtue of its reception than for its content" (44). It is not the message contained in the text but the pleasure generated by the text that the translater is ordained to resuscitate for the reader of his mother tongue. For this reason, the painter in "The Oval Portrait" is not so much, if not as much, concerned with his young model as with the reader behind him, the reader who is stealing a glance at his painting in process. Poe portrays the painter as a translator who comes to identify both with the text and with his mother tongue in order to reproduce the maximum effect on the target reader. After all, translation is a product neither of one mind nor the other, but a miraculous consequence of both.

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[Abstract]

The Oval Frame of Translation: Poe's "The Oval Portrait"

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Poe's "The Oval Portrait" presents an interesting allegory of transformation from life to death, from death to another form of life, as the painter transforms the life of his wife into a lifeless model for his painting. This complex relationship between the model and the painter is comparable to the one established between the original text and the translated copy. In the tale, the supposedly invisible painter-translator takes on an explicitly visible authorial role, sacrificing the life of his wife for the benefit of his art, thus subverting the traditional hierarchy of the original and translation. The painter is rather faithful to his mother tongue and culture in reproducing the wife in the form of art. The wife, therefore, is successfully transformed or reproduced into the cultural image of an ethereal woman.

We can observe in Poe's philosophy of composition and translation that the role of the writer or the translator, for Poe, is to affect the reader, not by scientific observation or accurate rendering but by creating or recreating aesthetic pleasure for the reader. Poe is more concerned with the aesthetic communication between the text and the translator(the reader) than the absolute integrity of the text which cannot be altered without damaging the organic structure, without entailing necessarily 'the scandal of translation.'

▸ Key Words: Edgar Allen Poe, "The Oval Portrait, the scandal of translation, life and death, aesthetic pleasure

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