TRANSLATING POE IN NEW YORK IN THE 1880s
Or, Poe’s other transnationalism

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Introduction
No other US writer has maintained a relationship with Spanish American letters as broad and as permanent as that of Edgar Allan Poe. For the Spanish American modernistas at the turn of the twentieth century, the so-called Boom writers of the middle of that century, the “Post-boom” authors who followed, and many contemporary Spanish American writers, Poe has served and continues to serve as an inspiration. Both his poetry and his prose have influenced some of the region’s most important authors—including Rubén Darío, Leopoldo Lugones, Horacio Quiroga, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and Carlos Fuentes. The modernistas revered Poe as their melancholy muse or dark poet-prophet while later writers in the region focused their attention and their praise on his horror tales, his fantastic fiction, or his detective stories. The combined influence of Poe’s poem “The Raven” and his invention of the detective genre through the Dupin tales, apart from the influence of the rest of Poe’s literary corpus, writes Poe into Spanish American literary history to the point where he is often read as part of the tradition itself rather than as a translated author whose works have been transplanted into Spanish American letters through a complex history of translation, adaptation, and interpretation.

Poe’s transnational reach, in Spanish America and across the globe, depends on the portability of his texts rather than the mobility of his person. Although some of his early biographies and a few of his obituaries suggested that Poe had travelled as far as Saint Petersburg, Russia, while in his teens in an attempt to join the Greek Revolution, Poe’s only international travel occurred in his childhood when he accompanied his foster parents, John and Frances Allan, to Britain for five years.¹ Poe’s lack of travel outside the United States after his childhood stay in the British Isles, however, did not limit the international bent of his works or the transnational scope of his literary presence. As an example of the former, Poe’s renowned trio of tales about the inaugural analytic detective—C. Auguste Dupin—takes place in a detailed, although imperfect, contemporary Paris that Poe never knew. As examples of the latter, Poe’s work (both in official, acknowledged publications and also in pirated and plagiarized versions) was available in both England and France during Poe’s lifetime, and the first translations or rewritings of his prose in Spanish America appeared as early as 1847, two years before Poe’s death, in the Peruvian biweekly El instructor peruano.² This early
transnational footprint expanded exponentially after Poe’s death, and Poe’s current reputation or literary afterlife both draws sustenance from and continually renews his transnational presence.

Most Poe scholarship that explores his relationship with Spanish America emphasizes the triangular relationship between Poe, the region, and Poe’s famous French advocate, Charles Baudelaire, whose Poe translations and biographical essays on Poe endeared Poe to the *modernistas* who then imported Poe into the Spanish American literary polysystem. Baudelaire, like Poe, has become a transnational figure whose texts resonate far beyond his home and his brief travels as a young man. Although Baudelaire never set foot in Spanish America, his work on Poe helped to disseminate Poe throughout the region in a way that Poe’s source texts did not initially accomplish on their own.3 Poe’s source texts themselves did not begin to have a serious effect on Spanish American literature until Jorge Luis Borges and several of his younger peers—the writers of the Boom—began to read Poe primarily in English. Poe’s initial entrance into Spanish American literary history, like the entry of most foreign writers into a national or regional literary polysystem outside their own, relied heavily on translation.

Literary critics who analyse Poe’s relationship with Spanish America acknowledge the importance of several Spanish American translations of Poe’s texts, but they typically mention these translations as historical facts without offering much analysis of the translations themselves. The field of translation studies, however, offers several competing models that allow literary scholars to engage translations directly, and in this essay I follow a descriptive translation studies (DTS) model to briefly examine the Poe translations offered by a pair of Spanish American exiles—Venezuelan poet Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde and Cuban poet and freedom fighter José Martí—who lived in one of Poe’s home cities, New York, during the 1880s.4 Pérez Bonalde’s 1887 translation of Poe’s “The Raven” as “El cuervo” remains the most widely recognized translation of the poem into Spanish to date while Martí’s translations of Poe’s “Annabel Lee” and of a fragment of “The Raven,” in contrast, were never printed during Martí’s lifetime and are known today only as minor works in Martí’s otherwise well-known corpus. The descriptive approach I adopt in this piece does not judge these translations as “good” or “poor,” “better” or “worse,” “successful” or “unsuccessful” according to the now debunked concept of “fidelity.” Instead, it examines Poe’s source texts and Pérez Bonalde’s translation as significant cultural productions that wield real power within the literary traditions of both source and target cultures. It also points to Martí’s unpublished Poe translations as indications of Martí’s and Pérez Bonalde’s close friendship, as evidence of Poe’s early influence in Spanish America (even before the *modernistas*), and as signs of a tantalizing but untapped project from Martí’s literary life. My descriptive analysis both reiterates Poe’s influence on Spanish American letters and emphasizes the importance of translation for Poe’s growing reputation throughout the region. It also unveils a different type of transnationalism that Poe scholars have, up to this point, ignored—the role of the translator as a literal transnational figure who, in this case, physically crosses borders to enter the home space of the author of the source text, engages a community of other translators who are also transplants in the home of that writer, translates the source text in this cosmopolitan but foreign space, and then, either withholds his translations or disseminates them into the target culture from which he is currently exiled.

Both Pérez Bonalde and Martí passed significant parts of their lives as political exiles outside of their respective homelands, and both poets spent multiple years living, writing, and translating in New York City. New York served as Pérez Bonalde’s primary residence for several years during the 1870s and 1880s, and Martí lived in New York on and off through the 1880s and early 1890s. During their decade of overlap in New York, Martí and Pérez
Bonalde became close friends. They read and commented on one another’s work, attended the same social functions, and spent time with each other’s families. Neither author’s collected works contain letters between them, but Martí’s correspondence with other friends, as recorded in his multivolume Obras completas, sheds light upon this friendship between exiles. In a late 1881 letter to Diego Jugo Ramírez, Martí claimed that in New York his “limited hours of relaxation are Venezuelan hours” that he “shares with Bonalde and Gutiérrez Coll” (Martí 1991, Vol. 7, 269); in several letters from that same winter, Martí praised Pérez Bonalde’s poetry and asked different friends in Havana to treat the Venezuelan well as he visited them in Cuba (Martí 1991, Vol. 20, 289–292, 297–298); and in a much later letter to Manuel Mercado, Martí lamented Pérez Bonalde’s deteriorating health—calling him an “unhappy victim of morphine” (Martí 1991, Vol. 20, 123). Martí also wrote a lengthy and laudatory prologue for Pérez Bonalde’s best known poem, “El poema del Niágara” (Martí 1991, Vol. 7, 221–238).

Living in this cosmopolitan center, Martí and Pérez Bonalde found other exiles who shared their political ideas, intellectuals and artists who shared their literary tastes, and both literary and fiscal markets for their work as translators. Martí translated both for money and for pleasure while Pérez Bonalde focused on translating works by two of his favorite poets—Heinrich Heine and Poe. Martí’s 1880s translations include Hugh Conway’s novel Called Back and several books of a “didactic nature,” all of which Martí translated for D. Appleton and Company in order to “put bread on the table,” and his rendition of Helen Hunt Jackson’s Ramona, which Martí published himself in 1888 (Martí 1991, Vol. 24, 9). Pérez Bonalde’s two primary translations in the 1880s were Heine’s collection Das Buch der Lieder in 1885 and Poe’s “The Raven” in 1887 (J.A. 2: 11–150, 151–157).

Apart from a lost translation of Thomas Moore’s Lalla Rookh that Martí and Pérez Bonalde purportedly co-translated around 1888, Poe is one of the few authors whom both Pérez Bonalde and Martí attempted to translate. No evidence suggests that Martí and Pérez Bonalde worked together when translating Poe, but Martí’s writings do point out his awareness of Pérez Bonalde’s translation of “The Raven.” In an 1887 letter that Martí wrote for El Partido Liberal just a month after the release of Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo,” Martí names his friend’s translation of the poem and then suggests that “on this same day” there are still older people in Fordham who recall Poe roaming the streets for work while his mother-in-law foraged for herbs to make dinner for his struggling family (Martí 1991, Vol. 11, 206).

On the surface, Martí’s commentary appears to highlight time since Fordham’s elderly population recalls Poe on the very day that Pérez Bonalde’s translation brings Poe’s most famous poem into Spanish. However, this anecdote actually emphasizes place—the New York locale of the publication of “El cuervo”—since Martí would have no reason to mention what the old people of Fordham currently say about Poe had Pérez Bonalde published his translation in Caracas, Havana, Mexico City, or Buenos Aires.

**Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo”**

Pérez Bonalde published his translation of Poe’s “The Raven” as “El cuervo” on April 1, 1887 with numerous illustrations and no paratext other than a prologue written by his Colombian friend Santiago Pérez Triana. Pérez Bonalde’s translation of Poe’s famous poem was not the first into Spanish. That distinction belongs to Mexican man of letters Ignacio Mariscal who signed his 1869 version of “The Raven” in 1867 while conducting diplomatic business in Washington, D.C. Pérez Bonalde’s rendition of the poem is also not the most metrically rigorous version of “The Raven” in Spanish since the 1932 translation by
Argentine poet, scholar, and translator Carlos Obligado more closely approaches Poe’s trochaic octameter than does Pérez Bonalde’s translation. Yet, Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo” becomes the version of the poem in Spanish. Regardless of the numerous times that translators have retranslated “The Raven” into Spanish after Pérez Bonalde’s 1887 version, his text remains the most well-known and influential Spanish-language rendition of “The Raven” into the twenty-first century.

The unique and rigid form of Poe’s “The Raven” allows any individual stanza to stand in as a microcosm for the poem’s form as a whole. To understand how Pérez Bonalde does and does not bring the form and content of Poe’s “The Raven” into Spanish, I briefly analyse the first stanza of Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo” alongside Poe’s source text and the two previously mentioned translations—Mariscal’s and Obligado’s. Then, I explain the immediate and long-term influence of Pérez Bonalde’s translation on Spanish American literary history. To visualize both the form and the content of Poe’s source text and the target texts that I reference, I offer the full first stanzas of each version below.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore —
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

“ ’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door —
Only this and nothing more.”

Poe (1845)

Reina la media noche: calma fúnebre
Se tiende en pos del recio temporal:
Cansado al fin de recorrer volúmenes
De mi estancia en la triste soledad,
Al sueño me rendía, cuando súbito
Un sonido me viene á despertar.

“Alguien está llamando en el vestíbulo:
¡Importuna visita!” exclamo, “¡bah!
Será un necio que venga con farándulas,
Un necio y nada mas!”

Mariscal (1869, signed 1867)

Una fosca media noche, cuando en tristes reflexiones,
sobre más de un raro infolio de olvidados crónicos
inclinaba soñoliento la cabeza, de repente
a mi puerta oí llamar;
como si alguien, suavemente, se pusiese con incierta
mano tímida a tocar:

“¡Es — me dije — una visita que llamando está a mi puerta:
eso es todo, y nada más!”

Pérez Bonalde (1964[1887])

Cierta vez que promediaba triste noche, yo evocaba,
Fatigado, en viejos libros, las leyendas de otra edad.
Ya cejaba, dormitando; cuando allá, con toque blando,
Con un roce incierto, débil, a mi puerta oí llamar.
Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo” delivers the content of Poe’s poem much more than Mariscal’s version and somewhat less than Obligado’s, but what seemed to most fascinate his nineteenth-century Spanish American readers was his translation’s sound. In the aforementioned prologue, Pérez Triana claims that Pérez Bonalde had performed a “miracle” by taking Poe’s “monosyllabic language” into Spanish—a “polysyllabic” tongue—while re-creating the poem’s “idea” and “cadence and rhythm, in such a way that, without understanding it, an Englishman could recognize the piece if he heard it read well in Spanish” (Pérez Triana 1887). John Eugene Englekirk, the primary authority on Poe’s relationship with Spanish American letters up through the early 1930s, repeats this type of praise. He argues that Pérez Bonalde’s rendition of the poem fits “so well within the metrical confines of the original that a fine reading of the version will betray its identity immediately” (Englekirk 1934, 36–37).

These accolades certainly make sense when juxtaposing Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo” with Mariscal’s earlier and much looser translation, a version that Englekirk calls “wholly unrecognizable” (Mariscal 1869, 42), but they lose their force when we compare Pérez Bonalde’s text with Obligado’s translation. Obligado’s 1932 version of “The Raven” not only looks more like Poe’s text than Pérez Bonalde’s translation does—on the most basic visual level, Obligado maintains Poe’s sestets and indents the shorter sixth line of every stanza just as Poe does, while Pérez Bonalde uses octets with shorter fourth, sixth, and eighth lines—but it also sounds much more like Poe’s poem because Obligado masterfully re-creates Poe’s trochaic meter and creates an intricate rhyme scheme (using both rhyme and assonance) that differs from but recalls Poe’s. Obligado himself provides the most succinct analysis of the formal elements of his “El cuervo” in a lecture he offered just before his collection of Poe translations went into print. He notes the valor of Pérez Bonalde’s version and then argues that his newer translation is “the only one” that reproduces Poe’s exact metrical structure, “the internal rhyme in the first and third lines,” and the anaphora at the end of the fourth and fifth lines; he also claims that “there was no way to avoid the assonance in the famous refrain” due to the “limited number of useful consonants” in the Spanish phrase “Nunca más” (Obligado 1932b, 82).

Although Pérez Bonalde’s metrical pattern does not match the rigor of Obligado’s, his particular rhyme scheme (again, a combination of rhyme and assonance) also recalls Poe’s and maintains certain elements from Poe’s source text that Obligado’s meticulous translation lacks. Pérez Bonalde’s octets follow an AABCDCDCc pattern with the fourth and sixth lines ending in rhyme and connecting to the eighth lines via assonance—“llamar,” “tocar,” and “nada más” in his opening stanza. Pérez Bonalde does not re-create the internal rhyme in the first and third lines that Poe offers in his source text and that Obligado follows in his version, but Pérez Bonalde consistently rhymes the last word in each stanza’s third line (the lone “B” in the rhyming pattern above) with the word before the caesura in the middle of each fifth line—in his first stanza, “repente” and “suavemente.” This move provides the reader or listener with a strong visual and/or audible reminder of the similar move in Poe’s “The Raven” in which he rhymes the last word of each third line (which already rhymes internally with the word in the middle of that same line) with the word in the middle of each fourth line (whether the fourth line contains a visible caesura or not). This pattern creates a familiarity with the general sound of Poe’s poem while also maintaining some of “The Raven’s” most unique rhymes. For example, in the sixth stanza, Poe rhymes “window lattice” at the
end of line three with “what thereat is” in the middle of line four. Pérez Bonalde’s translation keeps this rhyme, offering “persiana” at the end of line three and “llana” in the middle of line five, while Obligado’s rhyme scheme loses this particular and very recognizable quirk.

In short, Obligado’s translation is more painstaking at the formal level, but Pérez Bonalde’s rendition of “El cuervo” strikes a chord with its readership that no other Spanish-language translation of “The Raven” has since. Obligado’s “El cuervo” is known for its rigor, but Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo” was reprinted time and again and is still discussed as the Spanish-language version of “The Raven.” This distinction probably relies on context as much as content since Pérez Bonalde released his translation just one year before the Nicaraguan poet and the foremost voice of the Spanish American modernistas, Rubén Darío, published his famous book Azul, giving rise to a new literary aesthetic that many scholars consider Spanish America’s most important contribution to world letters. Darío and the other modernistas read, praised, translated, and made an icon of Poe. The Poe that they loved was Poe the poet—the creator of “The Raven”—and “The Raven” that they read spoke to them in Pérez Bonalde’s rhyme and meter. Pérez Bonalde translated “The Raven” on Poe’s home turf—in the very city where Poe lived when he first published the poem—and like Poe, he sent his bird to fly from New York to the world.

**Martí’s Poe fragments**

Like Pérez Bonalde, Martí also attempted to translate Poe while residing in New York, but unlike his colleague, Martí never published his Poe translations. Instead, he left behind a draft of “Annabel Lee” (Martí 1991, Vol.17, 338–339) and a fragment containing the first five stanzas of “The Raven” (Martí 1991, Vol. 17, 336–337). The stanzas in this fragmented version of “The Raven” do not form a consistent pattern, but the first stanza demonstrates the potential of Martí’s translation had he decided to complete this work:

 Una medianoche fría, mientras yo triste leía
 Sobre mucho tomo viejo, tomo ańejo años ha,
 Cabeceando, dormitando, oí de pronto alguien llamando
 Suavemente, alguien llamando a la puerta de mi hogar;
 Es sin duda algún amigo, que me viene a visitar:
 ¡Eso es y nada más!

Like both Pérez Bonalde’s and Obligado’s translations, Martí’s first stanza creates its own pattern to recall the sound of Poe’s poem while capturing a fair amount of its content. Martí’s stanza resembles Poe’s meter more than Pérez Bonalde’s version, but less than Obligado’s, by offering five lines of octameter and a truncated sixth line. Like the later Argentine translator, Martí also keeps Poe’s sestet, but he offers a stanza with an AbCBBb rhyme and assonance pattern. Martí produces two lines—the first and the third—that do not rhyme with the endings of other lines in the poem, as opposed to Poe’s first line that does not. He also offers more internal rhyme than either Pérez Bonalde or Obligado, nearly mirroring Poe’s usage of internal rhyme in his first, third, and fourth lines by offering “fría” and “leía” in line one and “cabeceando,” “dormitando,” and “llamando” in line three while repeating “llamando” in the middle of line four. Martí rhymes the end of line four with the last word in line five, and he connects the stanza’s second line and final line to that rhyme via assonance with a refrain that resembles those created by Pérez Bonalde and Obligado. This pattern, especially with its usage of internal rhyme, sounds even more like Poe’s “The Raven” than
the *cuervos* of Pérez Bonalde and Obligado, but the rest of Martí’s draft (along with the fact that the fragment contains only five stanzas) suggests that this sonic resonance would have been difficult to maintain in a translation of the entire poem.

The promise offered by Martí’s fragment of “The Raven” begs questions about why he did not finish and publish his translations of Poe and why he tinkered with translating Poe at all. Unlike Pérez Bonalde, whose translations contain no preface or translator’s note to create a context for his readers, Martí wrote introductions or prologues for several of his published translations. The introductions to his first published translation—a Spanish rendition of Victor Hugo’s “Mes fils” (Martí 1991, Vol. 24, 15–18)—to his translation of Conway’s *Called Back* (Martí 1991, 39–40), and to his translation of Jackson’s *Ramona* (Martí 1991, 203–205) suggest that Martí translated for one of two reasons: for personal joy and pleasure (Hugo and Jackson) or to make money (Conway). Perhaps he could not fit his translations of Poe into either side of this binary. On the financial side, a translation of “The Raven” would have had to compete with what Martí called the “luxurious prints” (Martí 1991, Vol. 11, 206) of Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo,” and the publication of a single short poem like “Annabel Lee” would not have earned him much money. On the joyous side, Poe does not appear to be one of Martí’s preferred writers. He does mention Poe at various times in his collected works, but not nearly as often, as in-depth, or with as much reverence as when he refers to Emerson and Whitman. Martí’s most complex note on Poe in his notebooks reads “Poe. —Personifier of everything abstract. —Great power to personify. —‘Sense swooning into nonsense.’ —‘Fundamental basis, basis in real life, for every poem.’ —‘A realm of his own imagining’” (Martí 1991, Vol. 21, 263). This note, however, demonstrates how one of Martí’s contemporaries, not Martí, read Poe since the three quotations appear in an anonymous 1882 review in *The Academy* of Andrew Lang’s *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* in which the reviewer critiques Lang for missing out on “Poe’s art of personification” (Lang 1882, 335).

Martí’s distanced reading of contemporary Poe scholarship and the reality that he did not publish his translation of “Annabel Lee,” even though no Spanish-language translation of the poem was published before his death in 1895, suggest that Poe caught Martí’s attention, but not enough to cause the Cuban to set aside other projects in order to complete and publish translations of “The Raven” or “Annabel Lee” for his own personal satisfaction. Yet, the very fact that Martí did dabble with Poe translation reveals Poe’s nascent influence on Spanish American writers before Darío and the modernistas consecrated Poe, and it hints at the conversations Martí must have been sharing with Pérez Bonalde and his other colleagues about Poe during their years of exile in New York in the 1880s.

Pérez Bonalde and Martí both remain transnational figures in the literary sense, just as Poe does, since their writings find a readership across national borders. Pérez Bonalde’s “El poema al Niágara,” for example, was a well-known poem in Spanish America through the early twentieth century, and his version of “The Raven” is still republished today and still praised as the principal text that brought Poe into the Spanish American literary tradition. The popularity of Martí’s poems endures, and many of his political writings—especially his famous essay “Nuestra América” (Martí 1991, Vol. 6, 15–23)—continue to resonate across the western hemisphere and the globe as both early and passionate calls for Pan-American identity and Latin American solidarity in the face of U.S. aggression. Unlike Poe, however, these poets were also literal transnational figures who left their homelands as exiles. Yet, all three writers cast their lots (literary in the case of Poe, and literary plus political in the cases of Pérez Bonalde and Martí) in the same cosmopolitan space of New York. This city of so many languages spawned Poe’s anaphoric raven, who only repeats “Nevermore,” but it also produced two *cuervos*—Martí’s who cawed “nada más” in private and Pérez Bonalde’s who...
cried “nunca más” to a vast reading public. Poe’s current reputation in Spanish America, a standing as wide and as long-lasting as the shadow that his raven casts in his poem’s final stanza, began with the nineteenth-century translations of that very shadow as hinted at in Martí’s fragment and brought into full realization with Pérez Bonalde’s “El cuervo.”

Notes

1 Poe appears to have started this Greek and Russian rumor himself in an 1841 “Memorandum” that he sent to Rufus Griswold who republished the claim in his entry on Poe in The Poets and Poetry of America in 1842. Other people who wrote about Poe followed suit, both during and after Poe’s life. I would like to thank Jeffrey Savoye of the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore for helping me pin down the earliest source containing this romantic but erroneous claim.

2 This Peruvian newspaper published three anonymous rewritings of Poe’s works in April 1847. The first two publications carried the titles “Cuentos de Edgar A. Poe” and offered Spanish-language summaries of Poe’s tales “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” and “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion,” respectively. The third piece was titled “Cuentos de Edgar A. Poe: El gato negro,” and it provided a summarized version of Poe’s “The Black Cat” in Spanish. This rendition shifts Poe’s famous first-person confessional narration into the third person.

3 The seriousness with which Baudelaire and the French Symbolists who followed him treated Poe also caused U.S. thinkers to re-evaluate Valéry. For example, in his essay “From Poe to Valéry,” T.S. Eliot wonders what the French see in Poe and “become[s] more thoroughly convinced of his importance, of the importance of his work as a whole” after “trying to look at Poe through the eyes of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and most of all Valéry” (Eliot 1966, 219).

4 My approach to translation is most influenced by the early work of James S. Holmes (2000[1972]) and Itamar Even-Zohar (2012[1978]) and the later work of Gideon Toury (2012) and André Lefevere (1992, 2012[1982]). My emphasis on both target and source cultures and texts also resembles the “Göttingen approach” developed in Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Mueller-Vollmer and Irmscher 1998).

5 Due to length constraints, apart from the cited translations of “The Raven,” I offer all other Spanish-language texts in translation without reproducing them in Spanish. All of the translations from Spanish into English are my own.

6 Martí refers to his translation of Moore’s poem various times, and he specifically calls it a collaborative work with Pérez Bonalde in an 1888 letter to Enrique Estrázulas (Martí 1991, Vol. 20, 189), but this co-translation was never printed and has never been found.

7 The reproduction of Martí’s draft of “The Raven” as published in Obras completas combines the first two lines of the poem’s second stanza with the first stanza. Leonel-Antonio de la Cuesta notes in Martí, traductor that this “typographic disposition” seems off (1996, 155), and he reproduces those two lines on their own rather than pressing them into the first stanza (1996, 159).

Bibliography

“Cuentos de Edgar A. Poe.” El instructor peruano. 21 Apr. 1847.