A Late 19th-century Belgian Parody of *The Raven*

J.P. Vander Motten

Department of Literature, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

Sien Uytterschout

Department of Educational Policy, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

J.P. Vander Motten, Marsstraat 14, 9030 Mariakerke, Belgium [vander.motten.jp@telenet.be](mailto:vander.motten.jp@telenet.be)

Sien Uytterschout, Sint-Pieternieuwstraat 33, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

[Sien.Uytterschout@UGent.be](mailto:Sien.Uytterschout@UGent.be)

J.P. Vander Motten is emeritus professor of English Literature at Ghent University, where he was Head of the English Department from 1985 to 1991, and served as Dean of the Faculty of Letters from 1997 to 1999. His publications include a book on the life and works of the Restoration playwright Sir William Killigrew (1980) and articles on John Dryden and Sir John Denham, among others. Both singly and in collaboration, he has contributed articles on Sir Richard Flecknoe, Sir Tobie Matthew, Margaret Cavendish, and Aphra Behn, tosuch journals as *Lias, Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen, American Notes and Queries*, and *The* *Review of English Studies*. He has contributed essays to several edited collections and written extensively on the dramatist and theatrical manager Thomas Killigrew (1612-1683).

Sien Uytterschout holds a PhD in American Literature from Ghent University (2013), which she obtained with a dissertation on post-9/11 fiction, entitled “Desperate Domesticity? Diagnosing Five 9/11 Novels.” She has published on the subject of 9/11 in various journals including *Amerikastudien* and *English Studies*. She has worked as a policy advisor for higher education at the Flemish Interuniversity Council (Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad/VLIR). In 2015 she returned to her alma mater, now working for the Ghent University Educational Quality Office.

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This contribution calls attention to what was probably the first Belgian authored adaptation/translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous poem. Published in *L’Escholier*, a students’ journal, in 1894, *La Buse* was the work of the aspiring poet Francis Bohan (pseud. of Thomas Braun, 1876-1961). He turned Poe’s poem into a spoof reflecting his own preoccupations as a first-year student and as the representative of a distinguished family.

Keywords: E.A. Poe, *The Raven*, Belgian literature, Francis Bohan

In a letter addressed to art critic André de Ridder (1888-1961) on 2 August 1928, the painter James Ensor (1860-1949) famously acknowledged a long-standing “Anglo-Belgian imaginative sympathy” with Edgar Allan Poe. Reaching back to his earliest memories of the Belgian sea-side town of Ostend, Ensor recalled his paternal house with its spacious gardens, gloomy attic and wrinkled old housemaid, whose mysterious stories of fairies, ogres and malicious giants never ceased to impress him. One event—evidently dating back to the early 1860s—stood out in particular:

Une nuit, alors que couché dans mon berceau dans ma chambre éclairée, toutes fenêtres ouvertes et donnant sur la mer, un grand oiseau de mer attiré par la lumière, vint s’abattre devant moi en bousculant mon berceau. Impression inoubliable, folle terreur et je vois encore l’horrible apparition et ressens encore le grand choc de l’oiseau noir et fantastique, avide de lumière.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The illumined bedroom, the open windows, the big black bird alighting on the cradle, the terror it caused, and its continuing hold on the adult painter’s mind: is it too far-fetched to suggest that Ensor’s distant childhood memory, however authentic, was at least in part a “re-collection” of elements of Poe’s *The Raven* (1845)? Had Ensor, with hindsight, come to look upon the sea-bird as a messenger from the “fantastic” world he was to explore in his art—much like Poe’s prophet bird “wandering from the Nightly shore” (l. 46)?[[2]](#footnote-2) If he had, he was one of the few Belgian graphic artists, writers, or critics who in the half century after Poe’s death took any notice of *The Raven*.

After the publication of Baudelaire’s translations of Poe’s tales in the mid-1850s and early 1860s, various newspaper reviews were instrumental in introducing Poe’s name into Belgian (mainly French-language) literary circles.[[3]](#footnote-3) Judging from the paucity of sustained critical engagements with his work in the late 1860s and 1870s, however, Poe’s reputation appears to have been rather short-lived. If mentioned at all, his name was now only brought up in connection with other artists or writers with whom he was thought to share affinities, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) or Richard Wagner (1813-1883).[[4]](#footnote-4) Given the fact that among educated classes the knowledge of the English language had appreciably increased by 1850 and that many Belgian journals in the period 1850 to 1880 displayed a lively interest in the culture of the United States, the reasons for the waning of Poe’s critical fortune in Belgium in the third quarter of the century are hard to gauge.[[5]](#footnote-5) Then again, in the newly independent state the general preoccupation with the forging of a didactically-oriented literature “aimed at legitimizing the ideas of unity and nationalistic pride” was hardly the proper breeding-ground for the Poe-esque ideals of Beauty and Truth.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Not until the 1880s did the brief accounts of Poe’s life and the scattered reviews of his work begin to evince any interest in his poetry in general and in *The Raven,* in particular. References to the poem nevertheless remained few and far between. In a review of Baudelaire’s *Histoires Grotesques et Sérieuses* (1865), the theatre critic Gustave Frédérix (1834-1894), while extensively borrowing the French translator’s own words and expressing his admiration for a poem “si énergique et si saisissant” [“so powerful and so striking”], had failed to quote one single line from *Le Corbeau,* except for the reiterated “Jamais plus”.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1881, Max Waller [pseud. of Maurice Warlomont, 1860-1889], the future co-founder of the avant-garde journal *La Jeune Belgique*, devoted some space to *The Raven*, noting that itwas the repository of all of Poe’s pain and despair. In support of this notion he only provided his readers with a partial paraphrase of the poem, derived from the French critic Léo Quesnel.[[8]](#footnote-8) No doubt for the benefit of bilingual readers, Ernest Verlant (1862-1924) was the first to include in his 1888 critical survey of the major poetical works both the (complete or partial) French translations as well as the original English texts of *Ulalume, For Annie, The Haunted Palace*, *The City in the Sea*—and *The Raven*, eight stanzas of which Verlant quoted, praising the poem for its “miraculeuse maîtrise d’exécution” [“miraculous mastery of execution”].[[9]](#footnote-9) Published the next year, Paul Maury’s *Le Corbeau* was a poetical lamentation casting Poe’s bird as the ill-fated symbol of the persona’s blackest thoughts about the void called Life.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the Flemish-speaking part of the country, the harvest was—if anything—even thinner. Although the earliest reference to *The Raven* occurred in an 1877 overview of Poe’s life and works, it was not until 1893 that Flemish readers were given a less than enlightening ten-line summary of what the writer blandly described as one of Poe’s “most remarkable and characteristic” poems.[[11]](#footnote-11)

While the critics and poets mentioned all betrayed a (first- or second-hand?) familiarity with *The Raven*, or presupposed such familiarity in their readers,a proper *translation* of the poem, either in French or Flemish, was—as far as we have been able to ascertain—never attempted by a Belgian author in the 19th century.[[12]](#footnote-12) This is remarkable given that by the 1890s, as a result of a new reversal in his critical fortune, Poe’s name had become a household word in Belgian art-for-art’s sake circles, and his “stature as an arbiter in current disputes over the nature of true poetry had become nearly sacrosanct.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It is perhaps symptomatic of the relative disregard for *The Raven* that the first Belgian-authored “translation” was a largely derivative adaptation in the form of a spoof perpetrated not by an established man of letters but by an aspiring university student.

Published in the very first issue of the bimonthly journal *L’Escholier* on 22 October 1894, *La Buse* was the work of Brussels-born student Francis Bohan [pseudonym of Thomas Braun, 1876-1961], the journal’s founder and a precocious literary talent.[[14]](#footnote-14) Emanuela Cristofari first called attention to this parody but she failed to point out that *La Buse*, professedly composed “d’après [i.e. adapted from] Edgard Poe”, is in reality very heavily indebted to *Le Corbeau*, Mallarmé’s famous prose translation first published in 1875.[[15]](#footnote-15) Of the eighteen stanzas into which Mallarmé’s rendering is subdivided, stanzas five (the speaker’s “peering” into the darkness, l.25), seven (the “stately Raven” entering the room, l. 38) and fourteen have been ignored by Bohan. The first two of these obviously did not fit the design of his adaptation, in which the bird is no unbidden guest soliciting entry into the speaker’s room but a lifeless creature of his own making. And without a counterpart to Poe’s Lenore, Bohan had no need for a persona craving after the “nepenthe” (l. 83) offering forgetfulness. He also pared down to two lines stanza four, replacing the speaker’s first address to the visitor in Mallarmé (and Poe) with his own persona’s terse statement that he shot the bird. Bohan similarly contracted into one stanzas twelve and thirteen (the speaker’s attempts to “divine” the bird’s message, l. 75). All in all, while drastically curtailing his source text, the Belgian writer has unashamedly copied most of Mallarmé’s poem, and only in the first seven sections of his translation has he effected such changes as would bring home to the reader the nature and aim of his parody. These opening sections deserve to be quoted in full:

Une fois, par un midi implacable, tandis que je marchais écrasé de soleil, faible et fatigué, par les champs d’or jaune, soudain se fit un tapage, comme d’une bête se levant des herbes, cela seul et rien de plus. [Once on a dreary midday, as I was walking, sun-beaten, weak and weary, along golden fields, there came a sudden noise, as of an animal rearing itself from the undergrowth, only that and nothing more (our trsl.)].

Ah! distinctement que je me souviens que c’était en le brûlant septembre et pas une ombre sur la terre. Ardemment je souhaitais le gibier –le rare et rayonnant gibier auquel les chasseurs aspirent –de nom! pour lui, ici, non jamais plus. [Oh! I distinctly recall that it was in the blazing month of September, with not a trace of shade on the ground. Ardently I wished for it to be a piece of game—that rare and splendid game pursued by hunters—its name destined never to be here again.]

Et des herbes l’incertain et douteux bruissement en chaque frisson me traversait –m’emplissait de fantastiques terreurs pas senties encore: si bien que, pour calmer le battement de mon coeur, je demeurais maintenant à répéter: “C’est quelque bête qui tâche de partir, quelque bête qui tâche de s’en aller, c’est cela seul et rien de plus.” [And with each uncertain and dubious rustling from the undergrowth I shuddered; I was overcome with ghastly terrors I had never sensed before, so much so that, in order to calm the beating of my heart, I kept repeating to myself: “It is some animal trying to leave, to get away, only that and nothing more”.]

L’oiseau s’éleva tout à coup dans le soleil, en planant, et mon âme devenant plus forte, j’ajustai mon fusil et abattis l’oiseau –cela seul et rien de plus. [Suddenly, the bird rose hoveringly into the sunlight, and my spirits rallying, I took aim with my rifle and shot it—only that, and nothing more.]

L’âme en feu, j’entendis le corps tomber sur une gerbe: “Sûrement, dis-je, sûrement, c’est quelque oiseau lourd, quelque oiseau des altitudes. Voyons donc ce qu’il y a et explorons ce mystère: c’est un grand oiseau et rien de plus.” [My soul burning, I heard the body fall onto a sheaf of hay: “Surely, I said, surely, it must be a heavy, high-flying bird. Let me see what it is and explore this mystery: it is a large bird and nothing more”.]

Je me précipitai, et je vis qui [sic] c’était une buse, un oiseau de proie dévastateur, et rien de plus.[I hastened over and saw that it was a buzzard, a ferocious bird of prey, and nothing more.]

Chez un naturaliste de la ville je la fis empailler et elle est perchée, avec une mine de lord ou de lady, elle est perchée au-dessus de la bibliothèque de ma chambre, au-dessus de mes livres de travail, elle est perchée, et siège, et rien de plus. [At a taxidermist’s in town I had it mounted and now it sits on the bookcase in my room, with the bearing of a lord or lady, perching on my study books, and nothing more.]

Taking its place in the long line of imitations and parodies stretching back to Poe’s own lifetime[[16]](#footnote-16), Bohan’s text turns the Raven into a “buse”, a buzzard, with its secondary meanings of dunce and, crucially, a failed exam in Belgian student slang. The initial setting has been altered from a room on a cold December midnight to a golden field on a blazing September day—a setting more nearly corresponding with Bohan’s evident love for the natural scenery of the Ardennes. Unlike Poe’s speaker who longs for relief from the books in which he has sought solace for the loss of “rare and radiant” Lenore, the persona in *La Buse* hopes to come upon the game so longed for by hunters, feverishly anticipating the encounter with the prey as a unique, epiphanic moment never again to be repeated (“de nom…ici, non jamais plus”, st. 2).[[17]](#footnote-17) When the game manifests itself in the shape of a buzzard, the frightened amateur-hunter unthinkingly shoots this “oiseau lourd” (st. 5) —a circumstance reminiscent of Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, whose killing of the albatross, a bird of good omen, had the direst consequences. Having had the bird mounted Bohan’s speaker, who is only midway through the poem revealed to be a student, goes on to project onto the animal, now perched atop his book case, all of his freshman’s worries about the outcome of his university studies.[[18]](#footnote-18) Can the buzzard, whether a demon or indeed only a bird, allay his fears about the stern professors he must face in next year’s exams (st.13)? Can this “prophet” (l. 85) reassure his troubled soul that it will one day embrace not, as in Poe, “a sainted maiden” (l. 94) but this “jury sanctifié que les anges nomment legal” [a sanctified examination board termed legal by the angels, st. 14]. Waiting in vain for an answer, Bohan’s persona orders the bird to take its flight back, not to the “rivage plutonien de Nuit” (“Night’s Plutonian shore”, l. 98) but to the “rochers du Rhin” [the rocks of the river Rhine, st. 15]. Ostensibly no more than a minor change, this allusion to his father’s ancestral region may betray on the poet’s part a certain degree of anxiety as to whether he too, the descendant of a long line of lawyers and magistrates, would be able to come up to the high expectations the family had no doubt placed in him.[[19]](#footnote-19) But the buzzard answers all of the student’s mundane questions no less than the command to leave his study with a relentless “Jusqu’en juillet” [Until July]—a phrase bathetically turning Mallarmé’s “Jamais plus!” and Poe’s haunting “Nevermore!” into a chilling inescapability.

Even those discerning readers of *L’Escholier* and fellow-students of Bohan’s who felt that *La Buse* was more nearly Mallarmé plagiarized than Poe parodied would have been delighted by this clever spoof, which no doubt spoke to their own concerns while playfully taking to task the sombre seriousness of the original. Others may have been amused by the implicit tension between the persona’s modesty and his fear of failure, on the one hand, and youthful Bohan’s self-confidence in publishing this irreverent piece, on the other. One may even imagine that those privy to the poet’s family background would have been titillated by *La Buse*’s subtle autobiographical touches. But few may have realized that, for many years to come, this was to be the first, admittedly half-hearted, attempt by a Belgian author at a rewriting of *The Raven.*

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1. Ensor*,* 55-59. [One night, when I lay in my cradle in my lit-up room, all windows wide open and overlooking the sea, a large sea-bird, attracted by the light, came and perched in front of me, upsetting my cradle. An unforgettable impression and wild fear it was—and I can still see the horrible apparition and sense the shock caused by the fantastic black bird, avid for light., our trsl.] Ensor’s “imaginative sympathy” with Poe most obviously manifested itself in the engravings *Le Roi Peste* [*King Pest*, 1895] and *La Vengeance de Hop-Frog* [*Hop-Frog’s Revenge*, 1898]. Available from <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/poe-inspired-prints-by-ensor-join-research-institutes-collection>. Accessed 27 June 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Poe, 366. All further in-text references will be to the relevant line number in this edition*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Emile Deschanel’s reviews of *Histoires extraordinaires* and *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires* in, respectively, *L’Indépendance belge,* 12 February 1857, no. 43 and 20 August 1857, no. 232. For a brief survey of Poe’s reception, see Vander Motten, “Poe in Belgium”, 43-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for instance, K. Stur’s review of Leclercq’s novel *Maison Tranquille*, containing lines from Poe’s *Politian*; G. Frédérix’s “A Propos de Richard Wagner”; H. Céard’s review of Jean Richepin’s volume of poems *Les Caresses*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gilsoul, 36, 134, 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Vander Motten, “Poe and the Belgian Aesthetic Movement”, 54. The earliest trace we have found of the availability of Poe’s works in Belgium is in the *Catalogue des Livres composant la Bibliothèque de la Société Littéraire de Gand*, published two years before the earliest Baudelaire/Poe reviews listed in note 3. The catalogue’s substantial section entitled “Littérature anglaise” includes an entry of Poe’s “Tales and sketches,1 v. in 12”, possibly a copy of the 1852 London edition. But a literary society’s reading-public is of course hardly representative of the national readership at large. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. G[ustave] F[rédérix], “Chronique dramatique”, *L’Indépendance belge*, 20 avril 1865, no. 110. On his own copy of a clipping of this review, put up for auction in 2013, Baudelaire noted: “L’auteur de cet article ne s’est pas donné grand mal. Il l’a fait avec des citations de mes phrases.” [The author of this article has not gone to much trouble. It consists of quotations of my own sentences, our trsl.]. Available from <http://www.sothebys.com/fr/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/collection-raoul-simonson-monique-albert-kies-pf1331/lot.85.html>. Accessed 28 June 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Waller, no. 8 ,107-08. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Verlant, 776. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Maury, n.p. This Liège-based periodical was only published from 24 March 1888 until 18 August 1889. Dating his version from “Salies de Béarn [South-West France], le 4 septembre 1888”, Paul Maury may have been a French contributor writing under a pseudonym. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Segers, 217; Van den Weghe, 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In Holland, the poet and novelist Jacob van Lennep (1802-1868) had published what was probably the first Dutch translation, entitled *De raaf*, in his *Holland. Almanak voor 1861*, 187-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Vander Motten, “Poe and the Belgian Aesthetic Movement”, 60. According to Françoise Delsemme, in the 3,300 articles, notes, reviews, and references included in eighty Belgian, French-language, periodicals published between 1885 and 1899, some forty American authors were mentioned, quoted, or discussed (passim). Among these Poe has more references to his name (53) than any other author, including R. W. Emerson (38) and Walt Whitman (18). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bohan, “La Buse.” The author’s pseudonym was probably inspired by the village Bohan on the river Semois in the Belgian Ardennes, a wooded region whose beauty Braun had celebrated in 1893, at age 17, in *Le* *Magasin littéraire* (“En Ardennes: quelques notes de vacances”). The scion of a distinguished family of pedagogues and politicians, Braun as a lawyer, senator, and president of the Bar Council in the next half century went on to publish several collections of poems and essays. Biographical sketch available from <http://www.arllfb.be/composition/membres/braun.html>. Accessed 21 May 2015. The last issue of *L’Escholier* appeared on 24 April 1899.  [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cristofari, 60-65.Bohan’s idea for his imitation may have been inspired by the publication of Mallarmé’s *Poèmes d’Edgar Poe* (1888), which had been very favourably received by Belgian critics: see Vander Motten, “Poe and the Belgian Aesthetic Movement”, 59. *Le Corbeau d’Edgar Poë* (“Traduction de Stéphane Mallarmé”) had also appeared in *Le Libre Journal. Revue artistique et littéraire*, I (1 novembre 1893), 5-6. Attributed to Paul Verlaine in the table of contents, this version was even closer to Mallarmé’s translation than Bohan’s. See Vines, 171-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ingram, 94-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. All further references to Bohan’s poem will be by stanza number. Bohan’s fascination with the hunt emerges from “Impressions”, a brief poetical account of an early morning hunting scene on Saint-Hubert’s day (3 November), which he also contributed to *L’Escholier*. It is a weird coincidence that the previous year the Belgian Ministry of Agriculture had issued a regulation regarding the hunt for insectivorous birds, stipulating that “ravens can be destroyed at all times, even by means of fire-arms” [our trsl.]: see *Journal de Bruxelles*, 17 décembre 1893, p. 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In addition to the meaning “schoolboy”, the French word “écolier” also has the connotation “novice” or “freshman”. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Available from [<http://www.arllfb.be/composition/membres/braun.html>]. Accessed 28 June 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)