

# Why Baudelaire lied about Poe and drugs

by Gil Rivière-Wekstein

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## Contes, Essais, Poèmes

by Edgar Allan Poe, with an introduction by Claude Richard  
Paris, Collection Bouquins, édition Robert Laffont, 1989  
1,620 pages, 140 French francs.

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How many times have we heard naive persons state that the inexhaustible font of creativity of great artists resides in drugs? And they cite, pell-mell, Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd etc. . . . Poor Edgar Allan Poe turns up in very sad company!

This is not the place to demonstrate the artistic mediocrity of such Lords of Feeling as Mick Jagger or David Lake, specialists in the most pessimistic expression of humanity—witness such songs as “I Don’t Need Any Education”; nor is it the place to raise questions on the moral quality of a man who does not hesitate to say that “to love an intelligent woman is a rather pederastic pleasure,” as Baudelaire wrote in his *Flowers of Evil* more than a century ago.

“You’re just conformists,” their admirers reply, “you are making value judgments: You are mixing up Genius with Morality.”

Yes, because I am a real disciple of Edgar Allan Poe. That’s why I dare to quote him: “Not only do I think it paradoxical to speak of a man of *genius* as personally is ignoble, but I confidently maintain that the highest genius is the loftiest moral nobility” (*Marginalia*, p. 1106).

So while I, like Edgar Allan Poe, plead guilty to mixing up Genius and Morality, I don’t mix up Art and Drugs, nor Drugs and Poe.

“But, it’s a universally recognized fact, everyone says it: Poe took drugs!” retort our young hashish smokers.

If you tell a lie often enough, you end up believing it, unless you are intellectually honest. And this is the great merit of Claude Richard. Rather than tread the beaten path of slander, he offers us, with the first complete edition of Poe’s stories and poems in French, the possibility of judging a man

from the totality of his writings. Better yet, he dares to touch a tabu: He corrects the *willful* translation errors of Baudelaire! Baudelaire, who introduced much of Poe’s work in France, translates “The Imp of the Perverse” as “Le Démon de la perversité” (“The Demon of Perversity”); but “imp” is actually *diablotin*, *luin* or *gobelin* in French, and “the perverse,” an adjective, does not necessarily mean “perversity,” but also “stubborn, contrary.” Baudelaire turns “the most impure of hearts” into “the most insulted of hearts.” The “certainty of the injustice or of the error included in an act,” becomes with Baudelaire, “the certainty of the sin or the error included in an act.”

Following this, several things are explained in the introduction by Claude Richard. Listen up, you heirs of malicious slanders:

“Here is the first mention of opium à propos of Poe; it is the personal contribution of Baudelaire to the myth. Because no investigator has ever discovered the slightest trace of drugs in the life of Poe, except for one single dose of laudanum taken—to commit suicide or to relieve a horrible toothache, no one knows—I am saying laudanum, an inoffensive ingredient of many medications in the 19th century. Edgar Allan Poe’s alleged addiction to opium, backed up by reckless theses in medicine, was born of a dream of Baudelaire. Fashion did the rest. . . . The responsibility of Baudelaire in the myth of the drugged or drunken [Poe] is important.”

So why so many slanders? Why falsify a man’s work by wrong translations?

Claude Richard replies: “In the myth forged by Baudelaire, it is the man who principally interests the French poet. The figure whom Griswold, Thompson, and Daniel linked to Baudelaire is useful to him to justify his own life and his own character. His interest for the work is second. He approaches it with a preconceived image of the author; and this image, which he needs for himself, he will prefer to preserve even when he has the proof of its inaccuracy.”

Claude Richard touches here on the nub of the problem: There are all too many mediocre artists, incapable of the slightest creativity, who dare to justify their own product by denigrating the genius of true poets. Art is not some throwaway, as Edgar Poe knew, he who defined Art as “the reproduction of what the senses perceive in nature through the veil of the soul. . . . The mere imitation, however accurate, of what is in nature entitles no man to the sacred name of ‘artist.’ Denner<sup>1</sup> was no artist. The grapes of Zeuxis were inartistic—unless in a bird’s-eye view; and not even the curtains of Parrhasios<sup>2</sup> could conceal his deficiency in point of genius. I have mentioned ‘the veil of the soul.’ Something of the kind appears indispensable in Art” (*Marginalia*, p. 1107).

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1. Balthasar Denner (1685-1747), a German realist painter.

2. Zeuxis and Parrhasios were two Greek realist painters who were ardent rivals around 400 B.C. Legend reports that the birds, fooled by the startling verisimilitude of the fruits painted by Zeuxis, came to peck the grapes in one of his pictures.