

American Romanticism, Poe and “The Rationale of Verse”

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ABSTRACT

Although “*The Philosophy of Composition*” is usually referred to as Edgar Allan Poe’s best-known critical essay, “*The Rationale of Verse*” can certainly be seen as his most elaborate. “*Rationale*” presents a consideration of the poem as a unit with elements that function together as a unique achievement of a single effect. In this essay Poe developed his “mathematical approach” to a poem in minute detail, emphasizing his proposition that verse is based on time as it is in music, not on accent. This paper will highlight Poe’s most significant ideas on versification and poetry as expressed in “*The Rationale of Verse*” as well as reveal the basic shortcomings of the essay, a text which can be said to represent the first significant American attempt at laying out the foundations for a modern science of English language verse.

KEYWORDS

“Philosophy of Composition,” “Rationale of Verse”, Edgar Allan Poe, line, poem, syllable, versification

In the “*The Rationale of Verse*,” his longest and most thoroughly elaborated critical discussion, Edgar Allan Poe elaborated his “mathematical approach” to composing poetic work. In this essay, published in October and November of 1848 in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe makes the claim until that time that there had been no useful and relevant discussion about English verse at all. Through his meticulous interest in prosody, Poe’s vision of poetic creativity gains expression as “the intertwined application of reason and imagination to create harmonious unity.”¹

Poe dealt with the problem of versification earlier in his career as well. In his review of *The Poetical Writings of Elizabeth Oakes Smith* (December 1845, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*), Poe claimed that the poetess, like many other American and European poets, proved to be unacquainted with the correct rules of versification or true rationales behind solid composition. Poe claims that many puerile technical conventions are “explained” in common popular prosodies, from which numerous “blunders” have been passed down to poets. For Poe, these prevailing prosodies are completely useless and inadequate.² In *Marginalia*, published in *Graham’s Magazine* (November 1846), in his comment on poetry Poe tackles the question of versification, stating as well that although one-third of the practice could be regarded as metaphysical, two-thirds belong incontestably to the field of mathematics. This argument should not be surprising, since it comes from a man who insisted upon the relevance of the search for Supernal Beauty, which is identified as the divine aim of poetry, and a man who claimed that poetry represents “the rhythmical creation of Beauty” but at the same time discarded the traditional romantic vision of artistic creation as primarily a spontaneous process ultimately influenced by imagination and inspiration, defining it as an activity of careful mechanistic planning and calculation. The process is always worked out in detail, highly controlled by a skilled artist. The perfect example of Poe’s process of creation can

1 Leonard Cassuto, ed., *Literary Theory and Criticism: Edgar Allan Poe* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, INC., 1990), 125.

2 Edgar Allan Poe, “Elizabeth Oakes Smith” in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (NY: The Library of America, 1984), 916.

be found in his masterpiece “The Raven,” the creation of which, according to the author himself, involved the consistency of solving a mathematical problem. Therefore, the reader should not be startled at the system of accentuation Poe presents in “The Rationale of Verse,” with its numbers and fractions which obviously represent another numerical calculation. In a footnote to the text published in *Marginalia* (*Graham’s Magazine*, January 1848), Poe claimed that there is no prosody under the sun which is not “a mere jumble of the grossest error.”³ Poe saw verse as constantly being discussed by lesser writers with many inaccuracies and much confusion. Poe was never satisfied with the sections on versification in prosody and in grammar books, thus the sharp, distinctive attacks on popular verse scholarship to be found by the “tomahawk man” from Appalachia, “The Rationale of Verse” as well as in earlier texts.

Commenting on a passage from *The Institutes of English Grammar* by Goold Brown in “The Rationale of Verse” in which Brown claims that “[v]ersification is the art of arranging words into lines of correspondent length, so as to produce harmony by the regular alternation of syllables differing in quantity,”⁴ Poe points out that the very beginning of this definition can be applied to the “art” of versification, but not to versification itself, which Poe sees not as some art of deploying and the sequencing words, but the actual sequence and deployment themselves; the act of inducing similarity or “matching” of verse length cannot be of essential significance. Here Poe gives as an example the Pindaric ode, which is characterized by great diversity in the length of the verse. The aforementioned “harmony” is neither the only nor the main purpose, since as the verse is being created the “melody” should not be forgotten. The aforementioned regular alternation is not a component of any principle of versification. Poe says that the arrangement of spondees and dactyls in Greek hexameter is an arrangement that can be considered random and concludes that there is no regular alternation of syllables that differ in quantity. He further points out, “[b]ut not only do I deny the necessity of any *regularity* in the succession of feet, and, by consequence, of syllables, but dispute the essentiality of any alternation, regular or irregular, of syllables long and short.”⁵ Quoting a quatrain by Arthur C. Coxe, Poe suggests that in the first line the author has successfully used caesuras, a perfect foot crucial in any type of verse but a form which is, however, discarded by English prosodies and misconstrued in the classics. On the other hand, he says:

*Verse originates in the human enjoyment of equality, fitness. To this enjoyment, also, all the moods of verse – rhythm, metre, stanza, rhyme, alliteration, the refrain, and other analogous effects – are to be referred. As there are some readers who habitually confound rhythm and metre, it may be as well here to say that the former concerns the character of feet (that is, the arrangements of syllables) while the latter has to do with the number of these feet.*⁶

Commenting on equality, Poe claims that it involves similarity, proportion, identity, repetition as well as adaptation or fitness; one obtains pleasure in his own perception of equality.

3 Edgar Allan Poe, *Marginalia* – January 1848 in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (NY: The Library of America, 1984), 1421.

4 As quoted in Edgar Allan Poe, “The Rationale of Verse” in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (NY: The Library of America, 1984), 28.

5 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Rationale of Verse”, in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (NY: The Library of America, 1984), 29.

6 Poe, “The Rationale of Verse,” 33.

For Poe, the perception of enjoyment of the equality of sound is in fact the principle of music. Only then does the idea of equality in the sound between the final syllables arise in what is called rhyme. According to Poe, the main power of the rhyme lies in the accented syllable, and regarding trochaic and dactylic rhythms, double and triple rhymes are inevitable. Poe also points out an extremely effective old and classic type of rhyming that has never been used in modern times, one in which the final and penultimate syllables rhyme with each other, as in the example from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*: *Parturiunt montes et nascitur ridiculus mus*.⁷

The idea of stanza implies a separation of verses into equal or proportional units. The removal of any of the lines would undermine its perfection. The modern stanza is strikingly loose and therefore not functional. Edgar Allan Poe was also of the opinion that it is rare for a particular verse to continue a uniform sequence of absolutely identical feet since even in the most musical line the sequence must be interrupted, as is the case in the section that he quotes from Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad* (1728) in which the iambic pentameter frequently varies, with trochees in the middle or anapaests in the body of the line.

Ōh thōu | whātē | vēr tī | tlē pleāse | thīne eār
Dēan Drā | piēr Bīck | ērstāff | ör Gūl | ivēr |⁸

Commenting on blending (*synaeresis*) Poe states that there should be no blending, since all feet vary in time. “The principle of equality, in verse, admits, it is true, of variation at certain points, for relief of monotone [...] but the point of *time* is that point which, being the rudimental one, must never be tampered with at all.”⁹ Following this reasoning, Poe was adamant that there was no need to shorten the individual words of the verse and summarize words such as *am’rous* or *silv’ry* to obtain the “perfect foot.”

Poe was certainly not propagating any imprecision or ambiguity regarding the measurement of feet. He just felt that a certain justified freedom represented a constructive support in the creation of the Beautiful. The abuse of this freedom, however, or its immoderate usage, was exploited only by the dull and common lyricist.

In “The Rationale of Verse,” Poe also touches upon poets themselves, mostly considering the task they face, emphasizing that the poet has to construct his verse so that its intentions are immediately obvious, since even when readers generally understand a certain sentence in the same way, they pronounce it differently. After mentioning this idea, Poe uses the poem “Christabel” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and points out that out of a hundred people who read this poem, fifty will not understand its rhythm at all,

while forty-nine of the remaining fifty will, with some ado, fancy they comprehend it, after the fourth or fifth perusal. The one out of the whole hundred who shall both comprehend and admire it

7 Poe here is probably citing a misprint. In Horace’s *Ars Poetica* it is not “Parturiunt” but rather “Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus”, i.e. the future tense is used – “The mountain will labor; a silly little mouse will be born.” Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine, eds., *Edgar Allan Poe—Critical Theory: Major Documents* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 132.

8 Poe used these verses in his criticism of Bryant’s *Poems* of January 1837. Here in his own manner Poe concludes that deviations from the rules of prosodic art are only improvements upon the rigidity of these rules, and not a mistake or defect. *Ibid.*, 133.

9 Poe, “The Rationale of Verse,” 43.

at first sight – must be an unaccountably clever person – and I am by far too modest to assume, for a moment, that that very clever person is myself.¹⁰

Poe also elaborates on his view that a poem can begin with an iambus in the first line and be continued with an anapaest or dactyl in the second. He points to the example of Byron's "Bride of Abydos," in which the first line of the poem beginning "Know ye the land where the cypress and myrtle" can be divided up in several ways, for example:

Know ye the | land where the. |
 or thus:
 Know ye the | land where the | cypress and. |
 or thus:
 Know ye the | land where the | cypress and | myrtle are. |
 or thus:
 Know ye the | land where the | cypress and | myrtle are |
 emblems of. |¹¹

Poe essentially wants to emphasize his view that, in spite of the prosodies, measuring the *length* of a line is an arbitrary undertaking. According to him, the length of lines in the quoted verse from Byron can be measured in many ways, provided that at least two feet are contained in the line.

As far as a line of one foot is concerned, Poe claims that we cannot have a correct appreciation of the rhythm, because "it depends on the equality between two or more pulsations," while "false lines," those which sometimes consisting of a single caesura, are "rhythmical" only in connection with some other line.¹² On the other hand, in practice it is often preposterous to quote only one line from a poem in order to describe the (im)perfection of the line's rhythm. Poe also points out that a long syllable is actually the element from which everything starts and there is no need to accent it. Therefore, an unaccented syllable should be considered a long syllable, as this extended passage from the essay indicates:

Thus a spondee would be without accent. In an iambus, the first syllable being 'short', or the *half* of long, should be accented with small 2, placed *beneath* the syllable; the last syllable, being long, should be unaccented; – the whole would be thus (control.) In a trochee, these accents

2

would be merely conversed, thus (manly.) In a dactyl, each of the two final syllables, being the

2

half of long, should, also be accented with a small 2 beneath the syllable; and the first syllable left unaccented, the whole would be thus (happiness.) In an anapaest we should converse the dactyl thus, (in the land.) [...] 2 2

2 2

10 Poe, "The Rationale of Verse," 48.

11 Poe, "The Rationale of Verse," 55.

12 Poe, "The Rationale of Verse," 56.

In this system of accentuation Mr. Cranch's lines, quoted above, would thus be written:

Many are the | thoughts that | come to | me
 $\frac{6}{6} \frac{6}{6} \frac{6}{6} \quad \frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2}$

In my | lonely musing, |
 $\frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2}$

And they | drift so | strange and | swift
 $\frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2}$

There's no | time for | choosing |
 $\frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2}$

Which to | follow, | for to | leave
 $\frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2}$

Any, | seems a | losing. |
 $\frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2} \quad \frac{2}{2}$

In the ordinary system the accentuation would be thus:

Māny arē thē | thōughts thāt | cōme tō | mē |

In my | lōnely | mūsing, |

ānd thēy | drift sō | strānge ānd | swīft |

Therē's nō | timē fōr | choōsing |

Whīch tō | fōllōw, | fōr tō | lēave

āny, | seēms ā | lōsing. |¹³

Of course, Poe highlights the great advantage of this method compared to the standard practice, emphasizing the simplicity or the "time, labor, and ink saved." On the other hand, the sign of the short accent essentially means a lot (which in a particular case the reader cannot know precisely), while the long syllable in fact remains insufficiently defined. The horizontal accent should indicate long syllables, but in Poe's opinion this does not work, at least not in an efficient way, because it is placed over a caesura as well as over an ordinary long syllable, implying possibly contradictory aspects. Poe claimed that he marked everything that requires accentuation with his own system of accentuation.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the reader can rightfully wonder about how confusing his system is, with all those figures and fractions, especially bearing in mind the fact

13 Poe, "The Rationale of Verse," 58–59.

14 Commenting on the system of rhythmical notation Poe discusses in this essay, Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine point out the following: "Poe imagines the words of a poem as the horizontal lines in fractions. When he writes numbers only beneath syllables, he visualizes a 1 above each syllable. [...] So the first syllable of the word *control* is half as long as the second. [...] When Poe writes numbers *above* syllables, he means common numbers – 2 means 'twice as long as 1'. And when he writes 3/2, he means 1½. In all cases, as he says, 1 is equal to the length of a long syllable." Levine and Levine, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 79.

that Poe raised his voice against pedants many times in his career. Wasn't he himself being very "pedantic" in this essay?

Poe did not agree with Coleridge and his "absurd" system based on the scansion of accents because such usage of scansion is nothing but a "phrase." In his Preface to "Christabel" Coleridge comments that

the metre of "Christabel" is not, properly speaking, irregular, though it may seem so from being founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables. Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accent will be found to be only four.¹⁵

Considering that Coleridge believed that accent was an element of meter of crucial importance, a stance in stark contrast to Poe's attitude, the reader is not surprised to learn that, in his distinctive manner, Poe calls Coleridge's system "absurd." Dealing with the problem of scansion, Poe claims that it is the clear and unambiguous creation of a rhythmic sequence. Scansion with proper rhythm, i.e. "without accents or perpendicular lines between the feet," is scansion to the ear only, while "written scansion addresses the ear through the eye," so that in the both cases, we create "a rhythmical, musical, or reading flow"¹⁶.

Although many modern poets such as Sir Philip Sidney and Longfellow tried to produce English hexameter after the Greek model, they actually did not succeed in making their verse sound like the model they based them on. To illustrate this idea, Poe cites the example of Longfellow's hexameter:

Also the | church with | in was a | dorned for | this was the |
season | [...] ¹⁷

Poe comments on these verses rather unfavorably, sometimes even ridiculing them, and therefore recommends that all these dactyls and spondees should be used in a much more natural and more appropriate manner in prose form. In Poe's opinion, the spondee is the main "theme" of the Greek line, "the initial approach to a verse," the germ of thought that seeks satisfaction in the equality of sound. He claims that proper Greek hexameter cannot be created in English, although Poe immodestly claims that he in fact could succeed in doing so. It is interesting to note Poe's self-satisfaction referring to these lines at the end of the essay: "The proper spondee prevalence is here preserved. Some of the dactyls are not as good as I could wish – but, upon the whole, the rhythm is very decent – to say nothing of its excellent sense."¹⁸

A significant parallel can be drawn between "The Rationale of Verse" and *Eureka*.¹⁹ In the former essay, Poe insists on the view that in poetry everything starts from the spondee, and over time the poets themselves complicated individual segments. In *Eureka* he concludes that the

15 George Watson, *Coleridge the Poet* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1966), 108–109.

16 Poe, "The Rationale of Verse," 60–61.

17 Poe, "The Rationale of Verse," 69.

18 Poe, "The Rationale of Verse," 70.

19 Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine, eds, *Edgar Allan Poe—Critical Theory: Major Documents* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 78–79.

universe of today is a complicated phase of creation that began in simplicity and unity, to which it will inevitably return.

In those cases in which vehemence should be emphasized, Poe recommends two consecutive equivalent feet, citing as his only example a stanza from "Al Aaraaf," a poem composed in his early youth:

Dim was its little disk, and angel eyes
 Alone could see the phantom in the skies,
 Whén first thè phantom's cōurse wás found tō bē
 Heādlōng hithērward o'er the starry sea

Research has confirmed, however, that Poe here undoubtedly changes the last two lines, as the poem does not appear anywhere else in this form. In the revised versions of the poem these two lines sound like this:

When first Al Aaraaf knew her course to be
 Headlong thitherward o'er the starry sea – ²⁰

Commenting on Cranch's poem which begins with "Many are the | thoughts that | come to | me," in the first part of the line Poe recognizes what according to Greek prosody would be marked as an *αστρολογος* (*astrologos*), which was equal to five short syllables. However, modern criticism has highlighted the fact that Poe was wrong. Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine argue that an *astrologos* does not mark a rhythmical unit in poetry but rather is used as a kind of illustration, given that it has the appropriate number of syllables and structure of accents to be used to show such a rhythmical unit.²¹ The relevant section of "The Rationale of Verse" related to this context actually represents an expanded version of what Poe had already said about Cranch in "Marginalia," item 175.

In the part of the essay where Poe comments on poetry in French, he points out that it is a language for which stress is not characteristic. Poe is right in this statement, because the unstressed syllables that occur in English verse are virtually unknown in French poetry²² and the use of spondees is not characteristic of French versification. Where Poe goes wrong is in his attempt to impose English metrics on the French language, making the same mistake as those against whom he raised his voice in their attempts to transfer Latin versification into English.

As Sherwin Cody²³ states, the system of English verse involves counting the accented syllables in a line, and determining whether they match the number required of that particular meter. Poe used a specific system to extraordinary effect.

Although many attacked this essay of Poe's and pointed their finger at genuine shortcomings, "The Rationale of Verse" essentially represents the first significant attempt to develop a "science of English verse." Sherwin Cody concluded the following points:

²⁰ Levine and Levine, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 135.

²¹ Levine and Levine, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 136.

²² Levine and Levine, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 142.

²³ Sherwin Cody, *Poe – Man, Poet and Creative Thinker* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924)

1. The general characteristic of classical verse was quantitative, which means that this verse operated on the principle of a succession of long and short syllables, with the long syllable equal to two short syllables. English verse is based on accent.
2. For Poe, both of these systems were equally inadequate and “powerless” to explain good verse. According to Poe, given that versification is based on the universal principle of rhythm, a poem whether it is classic or modern should be tested on the basis of the time required to pronounce the successive syllables. Such a system is called a system of natural quantity.
3. Poe’s idea of scansion of verse involved the reading of verse in a perfect, natural way, and then finding an adequate interpretation of the rhythm that the voice instinctively produces. The verse is presented in the most perfect form when the “natural” time or quantity of syllables generally corresponds to the rhythmical requirements, which is to say that with a well-trained ear one can appraise a poem’s meter and keep time, just as in music.²⁴

Thus verse is based on time just as in music, and not on accent – the accented syllables are actually those on which, when the verse demands, the voice rests for a long time. On the other hand, Poe ignored certain important rhythmical moments in his theory. Many critics point out that he did not take into account pauses taken in calculating time in scansion, and that he neglected to mark the culmination of rhythmic “wavelike” movements within every foot.²⁵ Furthermore, if “one wanted a system that would prescribe such strict mathematical proportions in rhythm, a widely understood one already existed: musical notation. It can effortlessly handle all the ratios Poe discussed and more besides.”²⁶

It is not difficult to conclude that “The Rationale of Verse,” Edgar Allan Poe’s most complex critical essay, is essentially an understanding of a poem as a unit. This unit is made up of parts that function together “towards the production of a single, ideal effect,”²⁷ and in that way contribute to a particular and effective creation of a unique impression. Arthur Ransome, like many after him, observed that through the works of Poe, a refreshing wind of reason blows, while Arthur Hobson Quinn was of the opinion that Poe had “strayed” into the laws of English verse.²⁸

In Poe’s understanding of poetry all aspects are essential. His vision of poetic creation as a kind of “scientific,” “mathematical” process, begun in earlier essays, is particularly reflected in the “The Rationale of Verse.” Poe scattered his reflections on prosody around many critical reviews, then elaborated on them systematically in the aforementioned essay.²⁹ Here it becomes

24 Cody, *Poe*, 324–330.

25 Cody, *Poe*, 326–327.

26 Levine and Levine, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 79.

27 John Tresch, “Poe Invents Science Fiction” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 122.

28 Arthur Hobson Quinn and Edward H O’Neill, eds, *The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe with Selections from His Critical Writings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 1087.

29 Benjamin J. Fisher, *The Cambridge Introduction to Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 15.

clear that Poe considered that the development of verse was moving from its original simplicity to an extreme complexity, according to the very nature of things.

In his statement that verse is based on the time as it is in music rather than accent, Poe claims that versification does not present the art of arranging words in lines but the actual process of arranging. According to Poe, the verse originates in our enjoyment of "equality, fitness" and towards this enjoyment "all the moods of verse – rhythm, metre, stanza, rhyme, alliteration, the refrain and other analogous effects – are to be referred."³⁰ Poe claims that our perception of pleasure in the equality of sounds presents a unique principle of music. According to Poe's vision of syllabication, the natural long syllables are those encumbered with consonants, while the natural short ones are unencumbered. He also argues that it is on stressed syllables that the voice rests when the verse demands it.

"The Rationale of Verse" presents the first comprehensive American attempt to lay out the foundations for a modern science of English verse. It is obvious that Poe illustrates his every idea with precise examples and gives a detailed explanation of his vision of the given problem. It is even more obvious that Poe's vision had significant shortcomings.

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³⁰ Poe, "The Rationale of Verse", 33.

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