

# Rationales of Verse: Poe and Other Critics

*Fernando Barragão*

ULICES - University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies



## Rationales of Verse: Poe and Other Critics

### I

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Rationale of Verse" is comparatively more obscure than "The Philosophy of Composition" or "The Poetic Principle". Nevertheless, this particular essay has many interesting and relevant points to make about verse: how to define, scan or even compose it – and above all, how not to describe or comment on it.

Our main purpose is to analyze the key ideas advanced by Poe throughout this text. We intend to draw attention to those we think are absolutely right, as well as the few unfair criticisms he makes. In doing so, we will compare Poe's views with those by other authors and critics, and see how they relate to each other.

### II

Poe begins by stating that "[t]he word "Verse" is here used not in its strict or primitive sense, but as the term most convenient for expressing generally and without pedantry all that is involved in the consideration of rhythm, rhyme, metre, and versification" ("Rationale" 908). That is, 'Verse' stands for a broad definition of the verbal material involved in the creation of what was deemed "Poetry" at the time – and, up to a point, even today. We find this "strict or primitive sense" in a footnote on verse lines:

Verse, from the Latin *vertere*, to turn, is so called on account of the turning or recommencement of the series of feet. Thus a verse, strictly speaking, is a line. In this sense, however, I have preferred using the latter word alone; employing the former in the general acceptation given it in the heading of this paper. ("Rationale" 916)

This distinction between the two senses matters, not only because of the didactic intentions in Poe's paper, but also because it exemplifies the possibilities of the English language, which is of course related to Poe's main interest in this text – English verse. (By way of comparison, our own Romance language – Portuguese – has “*verso*” for both the line and verbal material of poetry.)

After having defined what he means by “Verse”, Poe proceeds to denounce some of the main failures of verse scholarship. He attacks with particular delight – and, in fact, with pronounced harshness – what he dubs “the scansion of *the schools*”. (“Rationale” 935; Poe's italics) According to Poe, such people interpret incorrectly the prosody of the Ancients and are wholly insensitive to the musicality of verse. Such a critique is considerably strengthened by Poe's acute ear. This is superbly displayed by his scansion of Lord Byron's “Bride of Abydos”, where he shows the rhythm to be flowing continually throughout its lines, caesuras included. It is worth remembering that the caesura is considered by Poe to be “a perfect foot – the most important in all verse” (“Rationale” 912).

When speaking of metrical feet, Poe assumes a rather defiant tone: “employing from among the numerous “*ancient*” feet the spondee, the trochee, the iambus, the anapaest, the dactyl, and the caesura alone, I will engage to scan *correctly* any of the Horatian rhythms, or any true rhythm that human ingenuity can conceive” (“Rationale” 913; Poe's emphasis). This is an ambitious statement, but we find some pages later the really innovative side to his argument. By scanning a few complex lines based on a principle of equality, which he claims is akin to a sense of proportion and therefore lies at the centre of verse, he manages to describe altered versions of the feet he relies on. Hence Poe's mention of a “bastard anapaest”, a “bastard dactyl”, a “bastard trochee” and a “bastard iambus” (“Rationale” 921-2, 924, 931-2) and even a “quick trochee” (“Rationale” 926, 932). His reason for doing so? Time – as in music. It is interesting to see that Hopkins, some years later, would base his special notation for “Sprung Rhythm” on musical notation. (Sprung Rhythm, by the way, consists in unequal feet, from one up to four syllables, and only the stressed syllables are scanned. Thus, the result is similar to Old English and Old Norse accentual lyric.)

Pound, in the following century, would argue – quite rightly, bearing Poe's observations in mind – that the main rhythm of a poem should

allow the poet some freedom to play with metre within the structure of the text.

No one is so foolish as to suppose that a musician using “four-four” time is compelled to use always four quarter notes in each bar, or in “seven eighths” time to use seven eighth notes uniformly in each bar. He may use one  $\frac{1}{2}$ , one  $\frac{1}{4}$  and one  $\frac{1}{8}$  rest, or any such combination as he may happen to choose or find fitting (92).

Precisely because the musical sway of the poem is to remain constant, these men have each found a principle that prevents a text from becoming, in Hopkinsian terms, “same and tame” with respect to rhythm. Thus we have Poe praising, in this “Rationale of Verse”, “variation” (916) so as to avoid monotony, with Hopkins lending a new form to old accentual verse, and Pound remarking that “all good poets” have composed “to the feel of the music, to the cadence” (92).

This brings us to Poe’s very own notation. Based on the real value of syllables within a metrical foot, inherited from the Greek and Latin poetry, he scans the syllables as musical notes, all the while insisting on that sense of proportion he had identified beforehand. However, when the scansion comes to fruition and its definite form appears in paper, we realize there is more than just music behind the process.

On the definition of verse, he had stated that “the subject is exceedingly simple; one tenth of it, possibly, may be called ethical; nine tenths, however, appertain to mathematics; and the whole is included within the limits of the commonest common-sense” (Poe, “Rationale” 908). This thesis is rather unsurprising coming from a man who claimed, in his “The Philosophy of Composition”, to have composed “The Raven” “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (163). In fact, this very sentence may help to clarify his method for scanning lines of verse. That method is both blessed and doomed, for its strength is inseparable from its weakness. The “precision” is easy to identify: it is in the very notation he uses, one inspired by musical notation. Unfortunately, therein lies also its “rigid consequence”. Such figures resemble fractions. That feature gives the notation the look of “a mathematical problem”, rather than the score for a musical composition. Of course there is an arithmetical element in musical time, but the pressing need for equilibrium in the result

reminds us of a chemical equation. Since we are dealing with words, the combination is somewhat awkward, regardless of (we stress it once more) its precision and even brilliancy. Besides, the method itself reveals a lack of confidence in the reader's ability to read "with [his] ears", as Father Hopkins suggested it should be done with his own poems. Therefore, Pound states with some justice in his essay "The Tradition": "As to quantity, it is foolish to suppose that we are incapable of distinguishing a long vowel from a short one, or that we are mentally debarred from ascertaining how many consonants intervene between one vowel and the next" (91).

A distinctive feature of "The Rationale of Verse" is the tentative approach he makes to a possible origin of verse. As a mental exercise, it does possess a fair amount of coherence. His theory of the spondee as the first foot makes one think of accentual verse such as was practiced by the Germanic peoples of Northern Europe. All the while he theorizes on the possible origins of lines of verse and even rhymes, never letting go of the reality of oral poetry prior to the appearance of written verse. It is very hard to say with certainty whether Poe is right or wrong on this account, but this approach seems coherent.

### III

As recently as 1996, Mikhail Gasparov's *A History of European Versification* has helped to shed some light on the roots of the diverse sorts of verse identifiable in European literature. His search for the main features of an Indo-European primeval verse or "Urvers", which none of us had any contact with, draws from elements of comparative linguistics in order to argue that this Urvers was syllabical in its nature. Poe's Urvers, as you may remember, was accentual, namely spondaic. In Gasparov's own classification, the available sorts of verse are syllabic, quantitative and tonic – his word for accentual. Then he proceeds to qualify modern English verse as syllabo-tonic, Romance verse as syllabic and the Classical Greek and Latin verse as quantitative. The definition is clear enough – and, so we believe, consensual enough – for us to identify the last serious flaw in "The Rationale of Verse".

It is true that quantitative verse is very hard to reproduce in a language without the necessary qualities to do so, which is why Poe attacks,

quite sarcastically, Longfellow for his insistence on recovering the age-old dactylic hexameter for nineteenth-century American English. He then tries to compose his own Greek-like hexameter, in order to prove the possibility of such a text in English. It *is* possible, but the result comes out as heavy.

Do tell! / when may we / hope to make / men of sense / out  
of the Pundits  
Born and brought / up with their / snouts deep / down in the  
/ mud of the / Frog-pond?  
Why ask? / who ever / yet saw / money made / out of a / fat old  
Jew, or / downright / upright / nutmegs / out of a / pine-knot?  
("Rationale" 941)

Surprisingly enough, Poe did not realize that he was involved in the attempt to conciliate two different strands of verse from two different linguistic backgrounds. English, as we said before, now has a great syllabo-tonic, or accentual-syllabic, tradition, after it developed an accentual one. Greek, on the other hand, was quantitative. So the length of syllables was of less importance in English than in Greek – hence the heavy cadence of Poe's hexameter due to its quick succession of accents.

Likewise, Poe is ruthless about French poetry, which "*is without accentuation, and consequently without verse*" ("Rationale" 939). Given that what we have here is a Romance language, it becomes obvious why it is "dwelling on no one (*sic*) of the syllables with any noticeable particularity" (*ibid.*). In fact, he is missing the point. Pound, who studied Romance poetry closely, urged his readers not to mistake Dante's hendecasyllables for English iambic pentameters. The very names of the meters tell the story: number of syllables versus regular accents. This also helps to explain why Poe is unfair on elisions as a poetic licence. He claims all words in a text should be written in full, which suits his notation very well. But he does not seem to realize that, for his demand of an immediately recognizable scansion to be fulfilled sometimes poetic licences are needed, precisely so as to eliminate any possible ambiguities from the text.

In short, one could say that Poe ended up contradicting himself by answering his complaint about a lack of a decent English prosody with a brilliant – and brilliantly sweeping – generalization on verse, which then prevented him from acknowledging the vibrant diversity of prosody in different languages.

## IV

Should we then infer that his essay has failed? Far from it. After all, there is a reason why we summoned other lucid readers to help us in our task. If those authors we mentioned in this paper have indeed contributed to our knowledge, it is because people such as Edgar Allan Poe have, due to his efforts, helped pave the way for them.

"The Rationale of Verse" is still more obscure than "The Philosophy of Composition" or "The Poetic Principle". But it bears witness, more than any of those essays, to the greatness of its author, both in success and in failure. And it is fitting we have come together to praise one who left us too soon.

**Works Cited**

- Gasparov, M. L. *A History of European Versification*. Trans. G. S. Smith and Marina Tarlinskaja. Ed. G. S. Smith with Leofranc Holford-Strevens. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Selected Prose*. Edited by Gerald Roberts. Oxford, New York, Toronto and Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- MacKenzie, Norman H., ed. *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition." *Graham's Magazine*, vol. XXVIII, no. 4, April 1846, 28:163-167. *Eapoe.org*. Web. 5 Mar 2008.
- . "The Rationale of Verse." *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. Intr. Hervey Allen. New York: The Modern Library, 1938.
- Pound, Ezra. "The Tradition." *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Edited with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot. London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1954.
- Roth, Martin. "Poe's Divine Spondee." *Poe Studies*, vol. XII, no. 1, June 1979, pp. 14-18. *Eapoe.org*. Web. 3 Mar 2009.



#### ABSTRACT

“The Rationale of Verse” is probably among the less widely known theoretic / critical essays by Edgar Allan Poe. Nevertheless, it is a text whose rediscovery matters due to the pertinence of most of Poe’s conceptions regarding topics such as prosody and the correct scansion of a poem (if there is such a thing). Poe’s essay is also surprising because of the author’s proposal of a new method for scanning verse based on a musical notation. In this context, other authors such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Ezra Pound are mentioned as theorists and critics with ideas converging with Poe’s. On a negative note, Poe’s fail to recognize distinctive features of non-English prosodies is exposed with the help of Mikhail Gasparov’s investigations.

#### KEYWORDS

Poe, Prosody, Theory, Scansion, Poets

#### RESUMO

“The Rationale of Verse” é provavelmente um dos ensaios teóricos / críticos de Edgar Allan Poe menos conhecidos do grande público. É, no entanto, um texto que importa redescobrir devido à pertinência da maioria das concepções que Poe revela face a tópicos como a prosódia e a correcta escansão de um poema (se tal existe). O ensaio de Poe surpreende ainda pela proposta que o autor faz de um novo método para escandir versos baseado em notação musical. Neste contexto, outros autores, como Gerard Manley Hopkins e Ezra Pound, são mencionados enquanto teorizadores e críticos com ideias convergentes com as de Poe. Numa nota negativa, a falha de Poe em reconhecer características distintivas das prosódias não-inglesas é exposta com recurso às investigações de Mikhail Gasparov.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Poe, Prosódia, Teoria, Escansão, Poetas

---