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Edgar Allan Poe: Reflections on Poetry

“In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse of the poetical.”

Edgar A. Poe

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POE'S LITERARY expression is recognizable in American and world literature, and the legacy he left to us, the new generations, has been huge—ever since his first critical views on creativity were observed in terms of their effect and affective power (Cassuto 1999, vii). This is particularly evident in “The Philosophy of Composition” which rejects the established Romantic notion of the process of creation as an act arising solely under the influence of imagination and inspiration. Poe's theory of imagination was based on Coleridge's *Literary Biography* and later underwent certain changes. For Poe, poetry represents “the rhythmical creation of beauty,” and as such should comply exclusively with the logic of its own principles. Beauty is the only real area of a poem, and the most wonderful and the most sublime pleasure comes from watching the beautiful. Our research shows that we can only talk about a poem in a Poesque sense if it excites us, by elevating the soul; that is to say, its true value is proportionate to the sublime excitement. This view is elaborated on in detail in “The Poetic Principle.” Pointing to the fact that up until halfway through the nineteenth

century, in his native Appalachia, nothing significant was published about poetry and versification, Poe decided to respond to this in “The Rationale of Verse.” Although many critics pointed out a number of shortcomings in Poe’s understanding of versification and prosody, it can be concluded that this essay is the first valid American attempt to lay the foundations of a modern study on English-language poetry. In this most explicitly elaborated essay, Poe presents his mathematical principle, that is, the notion of creation as a particular type of scientific, algebraic process that necessarily involves the use of reason and imagination in order to achieve a harmonious unity.

*How vast a dissimilarity always exists between the germ and the fruit—between the work and its original conception! Sometimes the original conception is abandoned, or left out of sight altogether. Most authors sit down to write with no fixed design, trusting to the inspiration of the moment; it is not, therefore, to be wondered at, that most are valueless. Pen should never touch paper until at least a well-digested general purpose be established. In fiction, the *dénouement*—in all other compositions the intended effect, should be definitively considered and arranged, before writing the first word, and no word should be then written which does not tend, or form a part of a sentence which tends, to the development of the *dénouement*, or to the strengthening of the effect. . . . Plot is very imperfectly understood, and has never been rightly defined. Many persons regard it as mere complexity of incident. . . . It is that from which no component atom can be removed, and in which none of the component atoms can be displaced, without ruin to the whole; and although a sufficiently good plot may be constructed, without attention to the whole rigor of this definition, still it is the definition which the true artist should always keep in view, and always endeavor to consummate in his work. (Poe 1984, 1293–1294)*

“The Philosophy of Composition” is a “reaction” to the traditional Romantic notion of the poetic process. In this essay, we also recognize the echo of Poe’s “transcendental” attitude about the nature of inspiration, which is particularly evident in the part of the text where Poe says that, in addition to thought-processes and calculated effects, he was searching around himself but also inside himself for what he needed in order to create the desired impression (Levine and Levine 2009, 57). As Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine have pointed out, “The Philosophy of Composition” is an essay in which the importance of skills, planning and energy primarily come to the fore. It should be noted that, in his recognizable manner, while directing abuse at transcendentalists, he is actually somewhat “agreeing” with them even though to him they were and remained rhymsters of the lowest order. In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe is not only saying that a good poem comes into being solely and exclusively due to pre-

cise, detailed, mechanistic planning. Poe definitely pays most attention to this aspect and it is of essential importance to his vision of poetic creation. However, he does not completely neglect the “touch” of inspiration either (Levine and Levine 2009, 57):

*Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock’s feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion*.*

I am aware, on the other hand, that the case is by no means common, in which an author is at all in condition to retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained. In general, suggestions, having arisen pell-mell, are pursued and forgotten in a similar manner.

For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor, at any time, the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions . . . I select ‘The Raven,’ as the most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem. (Poe 1984, 14–15)

What he insisted on in “The Philosophy of Composition” he repeated in other places, for example in the “Marginalia” written for the *Southern Literary Messenger* in July 1849, when he said that sometimes romance writers might be able to benefit by remembering the Chinese, who have sense enough to begin the process of writing a book from the end. Of course, such a project takes a lot of effort and skill, otherwise it usually ends up as pulp fiction. Noting that most writers, especially poets, want to create a picture of creation as a process akin to a noble madness, Poe used the term “fine frenzy” (Levine and Levine 2009, 71), alluding to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*¹ and Theseus’ famous speech about the power of imagination in which he says that a man, when he uses that power, can “change” the appearance of reality, beautify it and enrich it, but the manner in which he “changes” it depends solely on him. Poe also used this term in “The Rationale of Verse.” Speaking about his intention to show that the flow of creation of “The Raven” was worked out in advance in detail and

planned, and that not a single part of the poem can be considered the product of the subconscious or games of chance, Poe explained that the poem actually developed gradually towards its completion with the inevitability and the strict consistency of mathematical problems.

In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe raised as the first issue the length of a poem and concluded that if a work is too long to read in one breath, then the impression that it achieves through the unity of its performance is inevitably compromised. A long poem, therefore, is only a series of short poetic impressions. Poe touched on the problem of “long poems” in other essays and critical reviews. Thus, for example, in “The Poetic Principle” he wrote that he believed that the long poem does not exist, and in his critique of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* (1842) he concluded that, given the fact that all great excitements are transient, a long poem represents a paradox. That same year, 1842, he published a critique of Longfellow’s *Ballads* where, among other things, he commented that in exceptionally long poems, the mind of the reader is unable to engage in a consideration of the proportions and an adjustment of the whole, and that it is inevitably satisfied only in certain parts.

In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe’s position, whereby he implied that creativity, in terms of poetry, is measured in terms of the impression (effect) and affective power, is dominant or, as Leonard Cassuto implies, this aesthetic of originality, based on emotion, was Poe’s replacement for that which is labelled “the heresy of didactics” and actually served as a guiding principle for his entire creative and critical work (Cassuto 1999, vii). So the very approach to originality depends precisely on the creative process, and this process is always explained in detail, precise, carefully planned and minutely worked out. It is in “The Philosophy of Composition” that we recognize Poe’s vision of the process of creating a poem, although the mentioned essay, according to some critics, is at the same time a unique kind of parody of this ideal. However, this view implies that one of the main qualities of a good writer must necessarily be uniqueness, possessing its own, distinctive creative stamp.

Therefore, “The Philosophy of Composition,” published in *Graham’s Magazine* in April 1846, is definitely Poe’s most famous critical essay. In it Poe attempted to “kill off” the Romantic presumption that the poet creates exclusively in the ecstasy of pure inspiration, and showed that a successful poet can be a successful critic, but he also emphasized the view that the process of criticism can be creative. Here poetry is seen as a mechanical means to produce a certain impression. This impression is actually the starting point of the aforementioned essay. The novelty of the impression is inevitably associated with the originality of poetry, that is, everything that the poet creates is in order to make a certain impression. Even when talking about beauty he says that it is referred to as the

realm of poetry just because it is an obvious law of Art that impressions should follow from direct causes (Poe 1984, 16). There are also opinions according to which “The Philosophy of Composition” may be regarded as Poe’s response to Emerson or his “The Poet” of 1844, in which Emerson attacks and ridicules those poets who rely on the rhymes and meters of music boxes (Cassuto 1999, 100). In this essay Poe points out that it is quite clear that each plot must be thoroughly and properly worked out: “Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention” (Poe 1984, 13).

It is in “The Philosophy of Composition” that he insists that in “The Raven” there is not a single place that could be attributed to chance or the subconscious, that is, the entire work progressed gradually from beginning to end, with the inevitability and precise consistency of mathematical problems.² Addressing the problem of the long poem, Poe says that if the work is too long to read in one breath, then in that case we have to give up the substantial impression that is achieved by the unity of the performance, that is to say, a greater length actually cannot get around the inevitable breaking up of the whole and the loss of unity. Poe considered the long poem to be nothing more than a series of short poems, that is, a series of short poetic impressions. For all literary works there is a certain limit when it comes to the length of the work, and that is precisely the limit that requires that the work can be read in one sitting. When it comes to prose works, they do not require any unity and therefore this limit can be exceeded which, of course, should not happen with poems.

THE MOST suitable length for a poem, claimed Poe, is about a hundred lines. With that in mind, his “Raven” has one hundred and eight lines. Dealing with the impression that should be produced, Poe dealt with beauty because it is beauty that is the only acknowledged realm of poetry, or that satisfaction, which is at the same time most powerful, loftiest and purest, found in the observation of the beautiful. Poe believed that Truth (gratification of the mind) and Passion (the excitement of the heart), although they can to some extent be achieved in poetry, are much easier to achieve in a work of prose. The most appropriate expression, Poe went on to explain, through which that beauty will be exhibited in the best possible way, is sadness, that is, he was stating that melancholy is the most legitimate of all poetic expressions. Then he went on to explain the necessity of finding the main motif before creating a poem, something that would serve as its backbone. He decided on a refrain, which he said

is still at an early stage of development—usually limited to lyrical verse, but the impression that it would produce also depends on the strength of the uniformity of the sound and thought. Poe decided that it would be short, so in the end he opted for a single word. As the refrain should be at the end of each stanza, in this case, Poe thought, it must be both powerful and sonorous. All these reasons directed him to use certain words in which a long *o* would be used as the most important vowel, as well as *r* as the richest consonant. The first word that came up that would completely fit the above assumptions was *nevermore*. Then, it would be much more effective if that word were said by a creature that can speak, but which has no ability to reason, and the best choice seemed to be that of a *raven*.³ Thinking about what was the saddest possible subject of all, he came up with the answer—*death*; however, the most poetic subject is actually the *death of a beautiful woman*, and this can be best and most appropriately talked about by the overwhelmed lover in his pain. Analyzing the poetic process realized in “The Raven” with mathematical precision and detail, especially when it came to linking the idea of a despondent lover and an ominous bird that repeated the word *nevermore*, Poe commented that it was precisely in this situation that he found an excellent opportunity to achieve the impression of *diversity in application*.

If “The Philosophy of Composition” can be considered Poe’s most famous critical essay, “The Rationale of Verse” certainly represents his most complex essay, and is essentially an understanding of the poem as a whole. This whole consists of parts that function together and in this way contribute to a unique and efficient achievement of a single, ideal impression. Arthur Ransome, and many after him, observed that “throughout all Poe’s writings on poetry blows a refreshing wind of sense” (Ransome 1910, 128–129). In his conception of poetry all aspects are essential. It is evident from this essay that he never falls back on generalization but illustrates every one of his points. It is even more obvious that Poe’s vision had significant shortcomings. At the beginning of “The Rationale of Verse” Poe expressed his regret that nothing useful had been published on poetry and versification. In December 1845, in his criticism of the poems of Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Poe also said that the poet seemed to be not at all familiar with the principles of versification.

In “The Rationale of Verse,” the longest and most thoroughly elaborated critical discussion published in the months of October and November 1848 in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe elaborated on his “mathematical approach” to poetic work in which he gave primacy to the problem of prosody. It was through this meticulous interest in prosody that Poe’s vision of creation as “intertwined application of reason and imagination to create harmonious unity” (125) came to the forefront. At the very beginning of this essay Poe defined the term “verse” as the one that seems most appropriate to cover, without split-

ting hairs, all that is implied by rhythm, rhyme, meter and versification. This problem was constantly being debated with so many inaccuracies, confusion and misunderstanding and even ignorance, said Poe, that it can hardly be said to exist at all. In fact, this subject of discussion is very simple, “one tenth of it, possibly, may be called ethical; nine-tenths, however, appertain to the mathematics; and the whole is included within the limits of the commonest common sense” (Poe 1984, 26). Although much has been written about rhythm in ancient, and even Hebrew poetry, the same cannot be said of poetry written in English. Poe argued that there is actually no valid discussion about English verse, because although in some grammar books and works devoted to rhetoric or prosody there are chapters entitled “Versification” the truly curious reader will not find there any analysis, nor will he find anything that would function as a unified system because everything depends on “authority.” Poe emphasized that it all boils down to a mere citation of examples of alleged different types of English meter and verse.

Although many attacked this essay of Poe’s and pointed their finger at some genuine shortcomings, “The Rationale of Verse” essentially represents the first significant attempt to develop a “science of English verse” (Cody 1924, 325). Poe insisted that verse is based on time, as it is in music, not on accent. In his view, it is on accented syllables that the voice actually rests for a long time when the verse requires it. The natural rhythmic expression of verse should correspond to scansion (327). On the other hand, Poe ignored certain important thrusts in his theory. What prosodists most resent is the fact that he did not sufficiently take into account pauses in calculating the time of scansion, that is to say, he neglected to mark the culmination of a rhythmic “wave” movement in each foot (ibid.).

When he comments on the length of a poem in “The Poetic Principle,” that is, when he claims that the long poem does not exist, Poe restates a position that he had presented in his earlier essays and critical reviews. This primarily refers to the famous critique of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* where he said that the unity of impression cannot be fully preserved in works that cannot be read in one breath, that is, all great excitements are transient and therefore a long poem is a paradox.

In “The Poetic Principle” Poe said that the value of a poem is reflected in the extent to which it arouses excitement. This excitement cannot be sustained through a poetic composition of great length because after only half an hour it weakens. This was a shorter breath now than in 1842. In the aforementioned critical review of the *Twice-Told Tales* he expressed the opinion that a poem, as a work which should be dealt with by a genius, should not exceed the length of what can be read in an hour. It is not difficult to notice that Poe had mentioned or explained many of the views that he expressed in “The Poetic Principle” in ear-

lier writings, especially in his critique of Longfellow's *Ballads*. For instance, the heresy of didactics from "The Poetic Principle" is one of Poe's most frequently repeated views. In calling poetry a rhythmic creation of the beautiful, Poe actually repeated what he had already stated in his theory, especially in his critique of Longfellow's *Ballads*.⁴ Poe also repeatedly stated what he had emphasized in "The Poetic Principle," that the poem can "deal with" truth, duty and passion, of course, only and exclusively if excitation of poetic feeling is achieved and if it is achieved as a contribution subordinate to the expression of beauty, which is the real essence of the poem. This idea of Poe's has its origin in his critique of the works of Joseph R. Drake and Fitz-Greene Halleck from 1836, but also in his critique of Longfellow's *Ballads*. Poe started "The Poetic Principle" by commenting on the term "minor poems" which includes only poems that are not long, arguing that: "a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, 'a long poem' is simply a flat contradiction in terms" (Poe 1984, 71). A poem in the true sense of the word can only be told if it excites us by elevating the soul. Its value lies in the very extent of this elevated excitement. "But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in fact, no longer such" (ibid.).

Therefore, his attitude that *Paradise Lost* can be considered a poetic work only when it is understood as a series of shorter poems should not be surprising. If this work were to be read in one sitting, said Poe, then it would inevitably replace excitement with despair, and in the end he concluded that the full effect and everything that even the best epic represents is actually futility, that is to say, if long poems had once been popular, it is now more than obvious that no long poem ever will be so again. On the other hand, argued Poe, it is clear that a poem may be inappropriately short and its excessive shortness very easily degenerates into mere epigrammatism. Moreover, "[a] *very* short poem, while now and then producing a brilliant or vivid, never produces a profound or enduring effect" (Poe 1984, 73). He emphasized the view that there is no work that is loftier or more noble than a poem, a poem *per se*, that is, one which is a poem and nothing more than that, written just for its own sake.

The demands of Truth are severe. She has no sympathy with the myrtles. All that which is so indispensable in Song, is precisely all that with which she has nothing whatever to do. It is but making her a flaunting paradox, to wreath her in gems and flowers. In enforcing a truth, we need severity rather than efflorescence of language. We must be simple, precise, terse. We must be cool, calm, unimpassioned. In a word, we must be in that mood which, as nearly as possible, is the exact converse

of the poetical. He must be blind, indeed, who does not perceive the radical and chasmal differences between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation. He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth. (Poe 1984, 76)

The poetic sense can develop in different ways in painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, and especially in music. Music, with all its forms of meter, rhythm and rhyme, is a very important segment in poetry. By combining poetry and music we will find the widest field of poetic development, said Poe. “The Poetic Principle,” although published posthumously in 1850, was actually presented as a lecture in 1848. Here Poe emphasized that what is aesthetic can be determined not in terms of a “truth” which includes simplicity, linguistic precision and sharpness, but rather through the development and “blossoming” of language. In this essay he continued to make use of mathematical principles and hence said that the true value of a poem is reflected in the “quantity” of excitement that it arouses.

If we want to emphasize some of Poe’s most relevant ideas concerning poetic creation, “scattered” across his numerous essays and reviews, as well as the development of his critical thought, we come to the following terms which represent his distinctive “theory of poetry”.

TERM	POE’S INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TERM
Versification	<p>Versification is not the art of arranging [words into lines of correspondent length], but the actual arranging—a distinction too obvious to need comment. (Poe 1984, 28)</p> <p>The principle of <i>equality</i>, in verse, admits, it is true, of variation at certain points, for the relief of monotone, . . . but the point of <i>time</i> is that point which, being the rudimental one, must never be tampered with at all. (43)</p> <p>. . . all words, at all events, should be written and pronounced in full, and as nearly as possible as nature intended them. (44)</p> <p>Good versifiers who happen to be, also, good poets, contrive to relieve the monotone of a series of feet, by the use of equivalent feet only at rare intervals, and at such points of their subject as seem in accordance with the <i>startling</i> character of the variation. (45)</p> <p>If by the written scansion of a line we are not enabled to perceive any rhythm or music in the line, then either the line is unrhythmical or the scansion false. (61)</p> <p>Admitting . . . that the spondee was the first approach to verse, we should expect to find, first, natural spondees, . . . most abundant in</p>

- the most ancient languages, and, secondly, we should expect to find spondees forming the basis of the most ancient rhythms. These expectations are in both cases confirmed. (67)
- The poem A poem, in my opinion is opposed to a work of science by having, for its *immediate* object, pleasure, not truth; to romance, by having for its object an *indefinite* instead of a *definite* pleasure. (11)
- Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes. (16)
- But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. (71)
- Excellence, in a poem especially, may be considered in the light of an axiom, which need only be properly *put*, to become self-evident. (84)
- A passionate poem is a contradiction in terms. (1354)
- In speaking of song-writing, I mean, of course, the composition of brief poems with an eye to their adaptation for music in the vulgar sense. In this ultimate destination of the song proper, lies its essence—its genius. It is the strict reference to music . . . which gives to this branch of letters a character altogether *unique*, and separates it, in great measure and in a manner not sufficiently considered, from ordinary literature. (1434)
- The length of poems But in pieces of less extent—like the poems of Mrs. Sigourney—the pleasure is *unique*, in the proper acceptation of that term—the understanding is employed, without difficulty, in the contemplation of the picture *as a whole*—and thus its effects will depend, in a very great degree, upon the perfection of its finish, upon the nice adaptation of its constituent parts, and especially upon what is rightly termed by Schlegel, the unity or totality of interest. (877)
- All high excitements are necessarily transient. Thus a long poem is a paradox. (571)
- Extreme brevity will degenerate into epigrammatism; but the sin of extreme length is even more unpardonable. (572; compare with 73)
- If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed. (15)
- What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects. (15)
- Within this limit, the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit—in other words, to the excitement or elevation—. . . to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect:—this, with one proviso—that a

	<p>certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all. (15)</p> <p>I hold that long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, 'a long poem,' is simply a flat contradiction in terms. (71)</p> <p><i>Eureka, a Prose Poem</i></p>
Poetry	<p>Poesy is the sentiment of Intellectual Happiness here, and the Hope of a higher Intellectual Happiness hereafter. (510)</p> <p>And now it appears evident, that since Poetry, in this new sense, is the practical result, expressed in language, of this Poetic Sentiment in certain individuals, the only proper method of testing the merits of a poem is by measuring its capabilities of exciting the Poetic Sentiment in others. (511)</p> <p>Of merely humorous pieces we have little to say. Such things are not <i>poetry</i>. (410)</p> <p>Its first element is the thirst for supernal BEAUTY . . . Its second element is the attempt to satisfy this thirst by <i>novel</i> combinations among those forms of beauty which already exist—or by novel combinations of those combinations which our predecessors, toiling in chase of the same phantom, have already set in order. We thus clearly deduce the <i>novelty</i>, the <i>originality</i>, the <i>invention</i>, the <i>imagination</i>, or lastly the <i>creation</i> of BEAUTY . . . as the essence of all Poesy. (687)</p> <p>And these . . . will decide that the origin of Poetry lies in a thirst for a wilder Beauty than Earth supplies. (293)</p> <p>I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth. (78)</p> <p>And Poesy is the handmaiden but of Taste. This handmaiden is not forbidden to moralise—in her own fashion. She is not forbidden to depict—but to reason and preach, of virtue. (685)</p> <p>. . . the poetic sentiment . . . implies a peculiarly, perhaps an abnormally keen appreciation of the beautiful, with a longing for its assimilation, or absorption, into the poetic identity. (758)</p>
Ideal	<p>. . . the Faculty of Ideality—which is the sentiment of Poesy. (510)</p>
Truth	<p>The demands of truth are severe. She has no sympathy with the myrtles. All that is indispensable in song is all with which she has nothing to do. To deck her in gay robes is to render her a harlot. It is but making her a flaunting paradox to wreath her in gems and flowers. . . . He must be blind indeed who cannot perceive the radical and chasmal difference between the truthful and the poetical modes of inculcation. He must be grossly wedded to conventionalism who, in spite of this difference, shall still attempt to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth. (684–685; compare with 76)</p>

- Now the object, Truth, or the satisfaction of the intellect, and the object Passion, or the excitement of the heart, are, although attainable, to a certain extent, in poetry, far more readily attainable in prose. Truth . . . demands a precision, and Passion, a *homeliness* . . . which are absolutely antagonistic to that Beauty which . . . is the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul. (16)
- Now symmetry and consistency are convertible terms:—thus Poetry and Truth are one.
- (Poe in Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore. <<http://eapoe.org/works/editions/eureka.htm/>>
- Equality 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* [...] are to be referred. (Poe 1984, 33)
- [The] man derives enjoyment from his perception of equality. (33)
- Heresy . . . the most singular heresy in its modern history—the heresy of what is called very foolishly, the Lake School. (6–7)
- The heresy of *The Didactic* (75)
- Beautiful An important condition of man’s immortal nature is thus, plainly, the sense of the Beautiful. (685)
- The range of imagination is thus unlimited. Its materials extend throughout the universe. Even out of deformities it fabricates that *beauty* which is at once its sole object and its inevitable test. (1126–1127)
- Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes. (16)
- An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly, a sense of the beautiful. (Poe 1984, 76)
- In lauding Beauty, Genius merely evinces a filial affection. To Genius Beauty gives life—reaping often a reward in Immortality. (1306)
- . . . a species of melancholy is inseparably connected with the higher manifestations of the beautiful. (521)
- Mystic The term *mystic* . . . is applied . . . to that class of composition in which there lies beneath the transparent upper current of meaning, an under or *suggestive* one. (337)
- Music Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music without the idea is simply music; the idea without the music is prose from its very definitiveness. (11)
- It is in Music, perhaps, that the soul most nearly attains the great end for which, when inspired with the Poetic Sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supernal Beauty. (78; compare with the review of Longfellow’s *Ballads*)

Effect	<p>I <i>know</i> that indefinitiveness is an element of the true music—I mean of the true musical expression. Give to it any undue decision—im-bue it with any very determinate tone—and you deprive it, at once of its ethereal, its ideal, its intrinsic and essential character. You dispel its luxury of dream. You dissolve the atmosphere of the mystic upon which it floats. (1331; compare with 1435–1436)</p> <p>By the initial motto—often a very long one—we are either put in possession of the subject of the poem; or some hint, historic fact, or suggestion is thereby afforded, not included in the body of the article, which, without the suggestion, would be utterly incomprehensible. . . . In either instance the <i>totality</i> of effect is annihilated. (877)</p> <p>. . . in almost all classes of composition, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance. It is clear, moreover, that this unity cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting. (771)</p> <p>The ultimate, aggregate, or absolute effect of even the best epic under the sun, is a nullity;—and this is precisely the fact. (72)</p>
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The extent to which Poe’s theoretical views have found fertile ground in practice and the extent to which there were conflicting attitudes in criticism about the validity of Poe’s principle are best understood from the following facts. Poe’s name is inevitably associated with the aestheticism that would blossom a few decades after his death, especially the idea of “art for art’s sake.” However, the term *aesthetic* is not mentioned at all in any of Poe’s works (Polonsky 2002, 43). Unlike the classical postulates and ancient rhetoric, works such as Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars Poetica* which above all emphasized the task of teaching but also offered to the audience “pleasure,” at the beginning of the nineteenth century English Romanticism simply reversed the mimetic model of production and put the focus of attention on the poetic creative process instead of on the work of art (ibid.). It is obvious that in “The Poetic Principle” Poe also used the rhetoric of aestheticism as his vocabulary, that is to say, in this particular essay, written towards the end of his life, he collected and expressed the most obvious “aesthetic” postulates. In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe rejected the widespread romanticized vision of artistic creation as a completely spontaneous process and highlighted the experience of a work as a product controlled by the artist, for whom it is a “mathematical problem.” It is this moment that distances Poe from the generally accepted and established Romantic attitude that a work is first and foremost a product of the poet’s imagination and inspiration. Some critics believe that Poe, in “The Poetic Principle,” by emphasizing phrases such as “the heresy of didactics” and “a poem for itself [...] written for its own sake,” actually placed himself among those who fit into the Kantian conception of a

work of art which is characterized by a purpose without a purpose (45). Thanks to Poe a special experience of lyrical poetry was created, or at least reinforced, while on the other hand, he anathematized other literary forms of verse. His vision of poetic creation as a kind of scientific, algebraic process is particularly reflected in “The Rationale of Verse.” Here it becomes clear that Poe considered that the development of verse was moving away from its original simplicity to extreme complexity according to the very nature of things. However, this essay attracted a lot of criticism. Hence Arthur Hobson Quinn pointed out that Poe had simply “wandered off” into the natures and patterns of English verse, claiming that he had failed to recognize its accentual basis (Quinn and O’Neill 1946, 1087). Floyd Stovall pointed out the weakness of Poe’s theories, especially those which look into introducing poetry into the framework of Procrustean time constraints borrowed from music, while he referred to Poe’s treatment of the caesura as a monosyllabic element as the only important contribution that he made in that essay (Stovall 1969, 194). According to Sherwin Cody, the good side of Poe’s theory is that verse is based on time, not on accents, and that according to the nature of things, the reading of verse should comply with scansion. However, Cody resents Poe’s inadequate treatment of the pause, as well as the fact that he did not take into account the importance of stress in marking the climax of rhythmic waves (Cody 1924, 324–327).

Alongside all the shortcomings of Poe’s views expressed in his essays, we can still claim that “The Rationale of Verse” is the first effective attempt to develop “a science of verse” in English. Poe did not only write poetry, he discussed the very process of creation in minute detail. His other writings on literary theory and his attempt to devise his theory of poetry should also be considered from this angle. The readers should always bear in mind that besides being a great poet, a short story writer and a literary critic Poe was also a “magazinish” always “concerned with effect” (Levine and Levine 2009, x), and that in order to achieve appropriate effects he was sometimes inconsistent (e. g. truth, passion). However, one thing is clear: his influence on the generations to come has always been undisputable, no matter whether we discuss his poetry, prose or literary theory. □

Notes

1. “The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And, as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name..." (Shakespeare 1996, 297)

2. Some critics, such as Joseph Chiari, for example, see in the arguments of "The Philosophy of Composition" a kind of mathematical inevitability which is hard to take seriously. In addition, Chiari criticized the vagueness and mannerism of allegorical concepts such as Beauty and Passion or even the precise, surgical separation of the Intellect from the Heart. Chiari is also of the opinion that this method of composition put forward in the aforementioned essay should first be known as the "mathematical principle" and only then should Poe write poems in accordance with his formulated principle, which would of course be applicable to all poems of that kind. Although in "The Raven" he primarily sees a short story successfully told in verse, he does not find much in it that is poetic because the poem is dominated by its theme. Chiari (1956, 105–111) claims that it lacks organic structure and movement.
3. Charles Dickens decided to "introduce" in the novel *Barnaby Rudge* a raven which Poe, among other things, commented on in his critical review of this work in 1841 and 1842, and maybe even used it as inspiration for his poetic masterpiece.
4. It is in his Longfellow review that he states that the first element of poetry is the thirst for the Supernal Beauty, while as a second element he names the very attempt to satisfy that thirst with novel combinations of those forms of beauty that already exist or were made by our ancestors, claiming that poetry represents a rhythmical creation of Beauty. This statement was obviously repeated in "The Poetic Principle," the essay in which he expressed the most relevant "aesthetic" postulates of his theory.

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe: Reflections on Poetry

In his theory of poetry Edgar Allan Poe dealt with several crucial literary and theoretical issues. In his review of Longfellow's *Ballads and Other Poems* (1842) Poe reconfirms the significance of the search for beauty that overcomes the limits of the terrestrial, Supernal Beauty, in which he recognizes the grand aim of poetry as well as the perennial essence of human nature. It is in his Longfellow review that he states that the first element of poetry is the thirst for Supernal Beauty, while as a second element he names the very attempt to satisfy that thirst with novel combinations of those forms of beauty that already exist or were made by our ancestors, claiming that poetry represents a rhythmical creation of Beauty. This statement was repeated in "The Poetic Principle," the essay in which he expressed the most relevant "aesthetic" postulates of his theory. In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe rejected the conventional Romantic vision of artistic creation as a primarily spontaneous process and pointed out that this is a process of planning and calculation, highly controlled by the artist, while in "The Rationale of Verse" he detailed his "mathematical approach" to poetic work.

Keywords

Edgar Allan Poe, theory of poetry, Supernal Beauty