

# «THE RHYTHMICAL CREATION OF BEAUTY»: A METRICAL ANALYSIS OF THREE SONNETS BY POE

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## RESUMEN

Edgar A. Poe escribió principalmente crítica literaria, narrativa breve y poesía. De los tres géneros, probablemente ha sido su poesía, con alguna excepción, la que ha recibido las críticas más adversas. En las páginas que siguen voy a intentar analizar las posibles razones de la falta de apreciación que ha despertado la producción poética de Poe. En primer lugar, se seleccionan tres sonetos, uno de la época inicial, «A la ciencia», otro de la intermedia, «A Zante», y otro de su madurez, «A mi madre», para a continuación analizarlos métricamente, considerando número de sílabas y número de ictus por verso, casos de promoción y democión y, en general, el modo en que se puede decir que Poe innova las formas de prosodia tradicional en los tres poemas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Poe; Análisis métrico; «A la ciencia»; «A Zante»; «A mi madre».

## ABSTRACT

Edgar A. Poe devoted his writings mostly to criticism, short fiction and poetry. Of these three genres, his poetry, with a few exceptions, has been probably considered to be the weakest. In the following pages I intend to look at some of the possible reasons for this general lack of appreciation surrounding Poe's poetic production. I will start by selecting three sonnets, one from early youth, «To Science», one from his intermediate period, «To Zante», and one from maturity, «To My Mother», and then I will analyse them metrically by considering number of syllables and number of beats per line, instances of promotion and demotion and general possibilities for innovation in Poe's use of traditional prosody in these three poems.

KEY WORDS: Poe; Metrical Analysis; «To Science»; «To Zante»; «To My Mother».

## 1. INTRODUCTION «THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION» AND A POET'S JOB

Poe's position within the canon of literature written in English has been highly controversial for a number of years. We can find highly contradictory assertions in the critical literature around him, ranging from those who consider him as one of the most prominent figures of American literature written in English to this

day to those who reflect on the low esteem that he may have received by the critical world in general. Among the first, Buranelli (1977: 136), «the American writer of greatest significance in world literature»; and Sinclair (1977: 14), «[...] his inclusion among the immortals». And among the second, Rans (1965: 2), «[only] rarely has he been taken seriously as an artist<sup>1</sup>». This is a partial reflection of the way he was regarded in life, and also of his later evolution in the critical world, especially when we can, as a whole, agree with Ackroyd when he says that «Poe's true genius was not recognised until after his death» (2009: 93).

His role as a writer is particularly complex if we reflect on the three main kinds of activities that he practised: as critic, as fiction writer and as poet. As a critic, his worth has been recognised by many researchers. See, for instance, Buranelli (1977: 111), «he is by nature as much a critic as a writer»; Symons (1978: 181), «the best of his early criticism is relentlessly analytical»; Bloomfield (2007: 88), «[Poe] was really the first American literary critic and theorist»; and especially Parks (1998 [1964]) and Ljungquist (2002), who deal with this role in some detail; finally, Stern (1977: 549) offers in just a few words what is to me one of the most balanced reflections on Poe as a critic: «Poe might have become a first-rate critic if time and circumstance had worked in his favor instead of against him». Secondly, as a fiction writer, we can say he practically invented or improved drastically the short story, with great, classical examples of science fiction, horror and detection. This double function, as critic and as short fiction writer, in my view, more than justifies his presence within the canon of literature written in English to the present. Additionally, although late in his short life, he attained fame and public recognition as a literary figure practically through just one poem, «The Raven»<sup>2</sup>, it is also true that nowadays he is mainly studied and recognized as a writer of short fiction<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, his public figure as a poet is even more controversial. On the one hand, «Poe [...] desired, first and foremost, to be a poet because the poet was esteemed as the greatest kind of creative writer» (Fisher 2008: 105), and we know that he wrote his poetry in a highly conscious, almost painful, way, revising his compositions again and again until he was fully satisfied with them —see, on this, the

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<sup>1</sup> Special attention deserves the way readers have seen him as a writer between his first published texts and the present. HAYES (2002: 1-3) offers an excellent summary of this evolution, suggesting three basic attitudes: «popular acclaim, measured skepticism, and ardent enthusiasm» (HAYES, 2002: 2). From a more technical point of view, MAY (1991: 13) suggests that «his true stature as an artist was not recognized until the introduction into American criticism of structuralist, poststructuralist, and reader-response theories in the 1960s».

<sup>2</sup> Cf. LINDSAY (1953: 163), «*The Raven* did make Poe famous»; and SINCLAIR (1977: 214), «Edgar became a celebrity».

<sup>3</sup> BURANELLI (1977: 88) offers a reasonable explanation as to why he produced such a large amount of short fiction but relatively little poetry instead, speaking about «[his] profession and his hope of financial success». For his part, ACKROYD (2009: 67-68) speaks of Poe as «the greatest exponent of fantasy fiction in the English language», whereas SZUMSKI (1998: 13) refers to him as «the founder of [...] the short story, the detective story, even literary criticism as it is practiced today». It is unsurprising, then, that FISHER (2008: 122) describes him as «a writer of many parts».

commentaries by Lindsay (1953: 130-131, 159), Rans (1965: 3, 87), Buranelli (1977: 61, 88), Felman (1985 [1980]: 120), Ljungquist (2002: 18), Kopley & Hayes (2002: 194), and Fisher (2008: 3, 30-31), among others—. We can say that Poe described himself as a poet in just a few words when he asserted, in «The Philosophy of Composition», that «no one point in [the composition of «The Raven»] 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» (in Stern 1977: 551-552)<sup>4</sup>. In spite of his highly praised technical skills, however, most of his poetic compositions have been said to be «heroically bad verse» (Buranelli 1977: 105)<sup>5</sup>, «awful diction [...], his poems scarcely bear reading» (Bloom 1985: 4, 9), or «loose writing» (Cohen 1994: 114). Additionally, many years ago Aldous Huxley (1998 [1930]: 37) declared that «[the] substance of Poe is refined; it is his form that is vulgar (...), unhappily cursed with incorrigible bad taste», partially coinciding with William Carlos Williams' judgement that only between three and five of his poems are really worth reading and judging (quoted by Kopley & Hayes 2002: 191). For his part, Stern (1977: 587) wrote that «[Poe's] poetry could be very good or very bad», and Hoffman (1985: 259) spoke about «his fifty failures in verse» —in a poet who published no more than eighty poems in all—. Additionally, in considering reception of Poe's poetry, Fisher (2008: 33) says that «negative opinion argues that his rhyme and rhythmical patterns are so blatant because they mask deficient intellectual content»<sup>6</sup>. And, to complete the seemingly negative view we get from these differing opinions on Poe, it has even been considered that readers' and critics' approach to his poetry tend to differ according to their «native» or «foreign» origin. This probably comes from Baudelaire's definite praise of Poe's writings, not just concerning the short fiction, as is sometimes believed, but also his poetry (Baudelaire 1988 [1857]: 101-110). This high esteem by French critics probably led Aldous Huxley (1998 [1930]: 36-41) to speak about Baudelaire's «happy ignorance of English versification», and Symons (1978: 240) to criticise Mallarmé's view on him and, by extension, «French assessment of his work». The whole issue is summarised by Buranelli (1977: 128), when he says that «Americans marvel that

<sup>4</sup> See, however, Morisi's commentaries on this issue. Contradicting Poe's judgement, she suggests that «the «mathematical» nature that he ascribes to his work may at first seem essentially metaphorical» (MORISI 2008: 108). We will return to the connection between «The Philosophy of Composition» and «The Raven» later on within this section.

<sup>5</sup> Buranelli's judgement is actually not as negative as it seems. He also says, in a commentary on one of Poe's several nicknames, that «he is sometimes a bad poet, but the implication of the phrase «Jingle Man» is the reverse of the truth» (1977: 106).

<sup>6</sup> Part of the problem may have originated in Poe himself. In a letter written to James Russell Lowell in 1844, he says that his «best poems «The Sleeper», «The Conqueror Worm», «The Haunted Palace», «Lenore», «Dreamland», and the «Coliseum», [...] all have been hurried and unconsidered» (in STERN 1977: 23). This practically limits his best production to some poems written during the last five years of his life, eliminating from his personal canon all his early poetry, which from other critics' perception contains some interesting compositions, and also his poems written in the 1830's.



Poe is highly esteemed in France, while Frenchmen marvel that Americans do not seem able to understand or appreciate the magisterial literary personality they have given to the world».

Definitely, Poe is a poet who has a theory to apply in his dealing with composition and who does it so consciously that, in «The Philosophy of Composition», he reflects on the creative process followed to write his most famous poem. In this short piece of critical theory, he starts by considering that the first element to consider in addressing a creative text is unity of effect, followed by length, choice of impression, topic and tone. In his self-conscious analysis of the creative process for «The Raven», then, he considers such details as the «line of argument» to be followed and, very importantly for the present article, the choice of metrical form. This suggests that, apart from all the important elements mentioned as initial considerations, he was also, as was very common at the time, familiar with the conventions followed in a given composition in terms of versification, choice of measure and meter.

In his evolution as a poet, on the other hand, we must also consider how his last compositions, with the only possible exception of «To Helen», which was originally written in 1831 and then revised in 1845, were in general considered to be better poems, or more neatly written, or having a more personal style, than his early poetry, which as a rule is not currently regarded as worth of great merit within his personal canon<sup>7</sup>. Even if it is generally assumed that a poet tends to mature as years and practice go by, to my knowledge there are not many empirical studies where critics and scholars have intentionally addressed the issue by concentrating on a number of compositions from different stages in his career as a poet and contrasting different literary strategies followed by the author in dealing with composition, which as we know was so important for Poe.

In the next pages I would like to address Poe's evolution as a poet between 1829 and 1849. We know that versification principles were so important to him that in «The Philosophy of Composition» he admitted that «I may as well say a few words of the versification. My first object (as usual) was originality» (559). After this apparently irrelevant commentary, he goes on to consider the meter used in «The Raven», saying that trochee octameters, heptameters and tetrameters are employed in combination, considering then stanzaic form and how these different meters are used in it, to the point of suggesting that a caesura, or medial pause within a line, is extensively employed in the heptameters, and finishing his commentaries on versification with a reflection on «the application of the principles of rhyme and alliteration» (560). All this relatively lengthy reflection on the theory and practice of poetic composition points to some lines of thought that may be

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<sup>7</sup> This view, however, is far from being homogeneous. In general, critics on Poe tend to agree that his early poetry is derivative —see, for instance, SINCLAIR (1953: 60-61), SYMONS (1978: 193) and HOFFMAN (1985: 36)—. The only clear exception to this is the famous French poet Charles BAUDELAIRE (1988 [1857]: 54), who sees Poe's early poetry as a foreteller of what was later to be great poetry.

useful for the following analysis. Initially, we may simply assert that Poe was obviously more than familiar with traditional meters in poetry written in English, and with all the technical lore behind them. Secondly, that, given his deep knowledge of meters, tradition and writing practices, he looked for that degree of originality that was allowed by «the language of the tribe» at the time. And thirdly —and most importantly—, as we have seen, that he was extremely careful about the way he faced a poetic composition, to the extent that many of his former commentaries in «The Philosophy of Composition» practically remind us of a music composer addressing the writing of a melody<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. METHOD EMPLOYED: TEXT SELECTION AND GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

To study the way in which Poe evolved as a versifier over twenty years, I will concentrate on three samples of the same poetic form and meter, namely three sonnets, considering that this tends to be a very stable poetic form, that it is relatively difficult to innovate in its meter, traditionally the iambic pentameter form, and that the degree of «originality» may be little, especially when we know that this was probably not one of Poe's favorite poetic forms —cf. Symons (1978: 24), «[the] four-stress line was a favorite of Poe's»—. In any case, the efforts taken by the author in looking for a personal voice may be reflected in some important elements in the texts. The point of departure for this kind of analysis is outlined in Nieto García (2002), where I suggest a possible method of analysis of poetic meter.

The sonnets «To Science» (1829), «To Zante» (1837) and «To My Mother» (1849) were selected for metrical analysis, by determining the verse design, which is the iambic pentameter. Following Mabbott's (2000) very detailed information concerning original dates of writing and publication, and also different versions of the poems, I decided to use the first editions of all three, so that Poe's evolution as a poet could be seen more clearly. These, together with the actual metrical analysis, can be found in the appendix. Next I considered possible deviations from the «metrical norm» in the three poems, either because an extra syllable is used somewhere —«And driv'n the Hamadryad from the wood», line 10 of «To Science»—, because

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<sup>8</sup> Poe reflected on the connection between poetry and music in «The Poetic Principle»: «there can be little doubt in the union of Poetry with Music in its popular sense» (in STERN 1977: 574). It is no surprise that other commentators have built upon his words. Aldous HUXLEY (1998 [1930]), for instance, is very critical on this issue, speaking about Poe's «much too musical metre». In a more positive vein, FAGIN (1998 [1949]) says that «Poe was a highly gifted writer [...] his poems are musical»; RANS (1965: 30) writes that «Poe's insistence upon the claims of music in poetry is not merely an expressed preference for sweet sounds»; BLOOMFIELD (2007: 217) says that «he used all the rhythms and rhymes he could muster, but always in original ways—and never with the feel-good content of jingles»; finally, FISHER (2008: 103) reflects on the fact that «[the] musical sounds in a poem contribute to readers' or hearers' pleasure by stimulating their sense of beauty».



the rhythm has been adapted through promotion —the word «in» in «To seek for treasure in the jewell'd skies», line 7 of the same sonnet— or demotion —the word «meet» in «Science! meet daughter of Old Time thou art!», line 1—, to make lines fit metrical canonicity. Finally, I also considered «irregular» feet in a traditional, «fixed», learned kind of poetic form, the sonnet —«-ter of», «Old Time» in line 1, again, the first taking the form of a pyrrhic foot, that is, two weak syllables within the same foot, and the second the form of a spondaic foot, or two strong syllables in a sequence of two—. A few reflections are probably necessary at this stage. Firstly, we must consider the difference between the sense of competence and the sense of performance —as I stress in Nieto García (2002: 283)— that different readers can bring to the poem; it is obviously the first concept and not the second that I am bearing in mind for the analysis here, as it is the nature of the poetic text and not the reader's ability in reading it aloud that is at stake. Secondly, concerning the analysis offered in the appendix, this cannot be the only possibility, as Chatman (1965: 158-183) proved through the experiment he carried out in the detailed metrical analysis of Shakespeare's «Sonnet XVIII» by a number of different equally well informed analysts, who presented highly diverging conclusions, even if they used the same method for the analysis of meter. On the other hand, it is not less true that such common uses at the time as trochaic initial inversion —«Science!», line 1 of the first sonnet under analysis— and extra metrical syllables at the end of lines —«O purple Zante!», line 13 of the second sonnet— for rhyming purposes are considered to be frequent, as was the case in the metrical tradition of poetry written in English in the first half of the nineteenth century, leaving all other «deviations from the norm» to be considered in some detail in the following section.

### 3. DEALING WITH POE'S VERSIFICATION: INTRODUCTION

As is reflected in the appendix, even if we just centre on such a relatively «fixed» kind of composition as the sonnet, and we see how Poe adapted concepts, themes and ideas to adopt a metrical form, there may be significant details suggesting that his style evolved in the twenty years between 1829 and 1849. Other critics have dealt with Poe's rhythms and his knowledge of meter, both generally and by studying their evolution, although most treatments are very general in nature. See, for instance, Lindsay (1953: 187), «[where] Poe failed as a poet was in his rhythms»; Buranelli (1977: 95), «he had no conception of the difference between English verse (based on accent) and Greek and Latin verse (based on syllabic length)»; and Hoffman (1985: 86), «Poe combines the charms of repetition with those of variation». Additionally, both Symons (1978: 193) —«there is hardly a poem of [the early] period which might not easily be attributed to another poet in terms of diction and rhyhtm»— and Hoffman (1995) —«the taste of his time was more tolerant than ours of the incessant rhyming and unvaried meters he uses»— consider evolutionary topics in dealing with Poe's rhythms. In this section I want to deal with his management of the number of syllables, examples of promotion, of demo-



tion, and his use of pauses, both internally within the line —caesura— and at the end —end-stopped lines, to be contrasted with cases of enjambment—. Finally, I will centre a part of my analysis on lines where he departs from the norm in his use of feet that do not strictly coincide with the iambic pentameter line.

### 3.1. SYLLABLES PER LINE

In a quick analysis of the tabulated information in the appendix, we can see how the number of syllables, after adapting some expressions through syllable reduction (Chatman 1965: 110-111) and considering off-beat syllables at the end of lines as extra-metrical syllables —see Nieto García (2002: 302-303) on this notion—, their number seems to be quite regular, ten per line, with just a few exceptions. I would like to offer some additional information concerning these cases. Syllable reduction applies in «memories» (line 3, «To Zante»), presented as 'x; in other versions of this poem (Mabbott 2000: 311), this word was written «mem'ries», in order to adapt the line metrically without great distortions of the line as an iambic pentameter. The example of extra-metrical syllables in the use of feminine rhyme, where the last beat coincides with the last but one syllable, can be observed in ll. 13-14 of «To Zante» («purple Zante» as 'x'(x) and «Levante» as x'(x)), and in ll. 2 («another»), 4 («of «Mother»»), 5 («have called you»), 7 («installed you»), 9 («died early») and 11 («so dearly») of «To My Mother»<sup>9</sup>. In all of these uses of the extra metrical syllable at the end of the line, this is marked in the scansion above each line by means of the symbol (x), and in the tabulated analysis by suggesting that this syllable is additional (10+1, for instance). Likewise, the presence of «driv'n» (l. 10, «To Science»), «maiden» (l. 7, «To Zante»), «Heavens» (l. 1, «To My Mother») and even possibly «mother I» (l. 12, «To My Mother») can be also considered to be «regular» admissions of slight standard deviations from the norm, in the poems, although admittedly none of these spellings brought with them any actual change in performance; this was simply a way of making explicit the feeling many poets had concerning the highly weak and unstable nature of the vocalic sound in all these syllables. Even, for l. 12 of «To My Mother», —«And thus are dearer than the mother I knew»— we can find another form in a later version of the poem: «Are thus more precious than the one I knew», this final version being more «regular», as it presents just ten syllables. So, after all of these considerations, there only remains a line that is definitely odd in its number of syllables, l. 14 of «To Zante»: «Isola d'oro! Fior di Levante!». We can obviously see that the fact that this line is written in Italian is not irrelevant in a possible discussion considering its metricality; it could be the case that he meant the word «Fior» (') to be a pure iamb (x').

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<sup>9</sup> W.H. AUDEN (1998 [1950]: 61) warns the reader against «the meter Poe chose, with its frequent feminine rhymes, so rare in English, [which] works against [the narration of the story] and at times defeats him».



As a general rule, then, I am suggesting that there is hardly any sense of evolution in Poe's poetic technique regarding number of syllables per line.

### 3.2. USING PROMOTION AND DEMOTION

The use of promotion and demotion is, generally, a highly complex matter for reading poetry: on the one hand, using no promotion and no demotion results in producing a rhythm that is far too regular to be considered original or even «proper» of really creative poetry; on the other hand, using too much promotion or demotion may end up in producing lines which some critics consider to be «unmetrical», as the need to adapt the lines is so great that the composition may run the risk of not sounding poetic at all. Attridge (1982: 167) proposes the following promotion rule: «An unstressed syllable may realise a beat when it occurs between two unstressed syllables, or with a line-boundary on one side and an unstressed syllable on the other». By contrast, demotion consists of the following: «A stressed syllable may realise an offbeat when it occurs between two stressed syllables, or after a line-boundary<sup>10</sup> and before a stressed syllable» (Attridge, 1982: 169). In very general terms, the promotion of a syllable does not necessarily mean that, as suggested above, performance—or reading aloud—of these syllables is louder, and the same happens with demotion. In other words, if you consider line 13 of «To My Mother», this should not be really «by THAT inFINiTY with WHICH my WIFE»—this is actually closer to a «naïve» reading—, but «by that inFINity with which my WIFE», in such a way that the beats marked by promotion naturally sound slightly more prominent than the preceding and following off-beat, in any case, because of the sense of rhythm in the poem as a whole. The use of demotion, which is not very common in these three poems—just three cases in all—, again, does not imply making the demoted syllables neatly weaker, just transferring part of their prominence to the following beat; see, for instance, «fair ISLE», «meet DAUGHTer», or «why PREYEST».

A simple study of numbers affecting promotion and demotion suggests that promotion is relatively frequent in these three poems—sixteen cases in «To Science», seven in «To Zante», and sixteen again in «To My Mother»—, whereas demotion hardly ever occurs—two, one and no cases, respectively—. A possible explanation might be that Poe simply used versification principles through his career not forcing a declamatory style that might sound, in the end, too «elevated» to sound completely natural, at least in what affects his managing of beats and offbeats in a given sequence in this way. What is probably not so common in poetry written in English at the time, as I intend to study in the next section, is his use of pauses, to which he gives great importance, to the extent that «mèet daughter» actually follows a medial pause, after the initial beat. The actual result is the inclusion of a pause paramount to the effect attained by an end-stopped line, and this leads to a

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<sup>10</sup> Or, we might add, after a pause. See discussion of an example below.



possible interpretation where demotion is possible in this context, completing Attridge's demotion rule like this. Any other possible interpretations of the line would render it unmetrical.

A second question regarding the use of promotion and demotion in these poems may be also relevant. Can we appreciate a meaningful evolution in these three poems, in the use of, at least, promotion? Although the answer does not seem to be a linear one—sixteen, seven and sixteen cases—, we may somehow have the impression that the Poe of early youth was aware of poetic processes and simultaneously tried to innovate by departing from an established norm—that is, using demotion and, especially, promotion freely in order not to make his poetry sound monotonous—, whereas the Poe of 1837, eight years later, may be more keen on respecting these rules and not treading the forbidden path more than necessary. Finally, the Poe of 1849, a few months before he died, seemed to have found a voice that did not care so much for «perfection» in versification and instead looked for a fresher, freer approach to composition, or «originality», as he said in «The Philosophy of Composition». This is reflected in the fairly large amount of lines that had to be adapted through demotion, promotion, or a combination of both, in «To Science»—twelve— and «To My Mother»—eleven lines—, and in the relatively low number of lines equally adapted in «To Zante»—only six—. And it may also help to explain why, as we saw above, many critics think that Poe's best poetry belongs either to his early or late period, with hardly any positive commentaries on the middle period.

### 3.3. USING PAUSES: END-STOPPED LINES AND CAESURAE

Although the use of pauses in poetic discourse is open to as many variations as a literary style, a poet, or even the idea behind a text may determine, it is not less true that if we decide to have a traditional stance in this, as readers of Augustan poetry are aware of, we are very likely to expect a major pause at the end of a line, or at least a medial pause instead. It seems to be the case, then, that, in facing a poem, be that for silent reading or for public performance, we expect to find a single pause at the end of every line or, if there is no such pause, to find a medial pause instead. In Turner's words, we find «a double system of potential pauses, one controlled by grammar and the other by the ends of lines» (1973: 38). What is probably not to be expected is what we very frequently find in Poe's compositions: either no pauses at all for several lines in a sequence or, more commonly, several pauses within a line. This is practically like listening to a symphony with a slow pace and sudden silences that suddenly acquires a faster rhythm, to slow it down again. This may be one of the reasons why Poe's poetry has sometimes not been taken too seriously, as we saw above. This, in itself, is not a lack of merit in Poe's compositions, but it tends to make his style, in this respect, too emphatic, marked, or even repetitive. If we take a closer look at the three sonnets under analysis, we will observe a relatively large number of lines, in all three, having more than one pause per line—three in «To Science», six in «To Zante», and five in «To My Mother»—, lines that may be said to be «outside the norm», especially if we read through the poems as compositions and



think of the kind of effect this may have over a reader. Firstly, «To Science» opens with a double pause, one internal, one final in the first line. Then, two «regular» lines follow, other two with two pauses each, one more bearing no pauses, three regular, one pauseless and four regular—in fact, the last two lines are not so regular, as the pause in line 13 takes place in the middle of the fourth foot, «grass, and from me/...»—. The general poetic effect, then, is one of lack of balance and of continuously playing with rhythm, by making it faster or slowing it down at irregular intervals. Something similar happens in «To Zante», where we find the following: a double pause again in the opening line, then a single pause at the end of the line, followed by a pauseless line, three regular ones, no pauses in line 7, three double pauses, two single pauses in lines 11 and 12—one medial, one final—and two double pauses again. Here the rhythm becomes especially heavy in the second half of the sonnet, using a refrain that, in a slightly altered form, Poe was going to use in «The Raven» again: «no more!». Finally, «To My Mother» seems to be even more irregular in this facet of rhythmical analysis: four double pauses in the first quatrain, four single, end-of-line pauses in the second, and then three pauses, two of them medial, within line 9, a pause between feet four and five in line 10, a final pause in line 11, two pauseless lines (12 and 13) and another single pause to close the poem. Apart from the obvious general feeling of irregularity that we get, it looks as if the first quatrain is thought to be solemn in nature, the line devoted to his own mother—not to his wife's mother, object of the sonnet—then is given prominence, and pathos reigns at the end through the use of a very fluid pace in the last three lines.

As for the sense of evolution in the twenty years between the first versions of «To Science» and «To My Mother», apparently nothing much can be said. It is true that slightly over one pause per line—fifteen in «To Science»—versus nearly one and a fourth in «To Zante» and «To My Mother»—eighteen pauses in each—are not identical numbers, but it is probably much more interesting to reflect on another factor that I mentioned above: Poe's poetic compositions are such self-conscious artifacts that they are practically like symphonies in the use of pauses, their pace will be «presto» or «staccato» depending on the kind of effect he wants to attain in a reader at a given point—cf. Hoffman (1985: 55): «the sinewy movement of caesura-filled pentameters»—.

#### 3.4. USING AND ADAPTING TRADITIONAL FEET

It is mainly in Poe's dealing with and adaptation of traditional feet that we are going to find major differences in the twenty years between «To Science» and «To My Mother». We have determined so far that, through demotion, and particularly through promotion, an initially irregular pattern easily becomes a pattern that undoubtedly is recognized as an iambic pentameter, with just one possible exception—line 14 of «To Zante», possibly a tetrameter instead, as we saw above—. We have also seen that such minor adaptations, as far as versification is concerned, as syllable reduction, initial trochaic inversion and extra-metrical syllables were canonical practices at the time.



There are some other combinations that must be explained and that I would like to address in this section. Namely, it is very common to find a pyrrhic foot (xx) followed by a spondaic foot (''), as in the following examples from «To Science»:

- (1) «-ter of Old Time» (feet 3-4, line 1)
- (2) «thee? or how deem» (feet 3-4, line 5)

Also the following examples from «To Zante»:

- (3) «-rest of all flowers» (feet 4-5, line 1)
- (4) «-est of all gent-» (feet 2-3, line 2)
- (5) «-ries of what rad-» (feet 2-3, line 3)
- (6) «-ical sad sound» (feet 4-5, line 9)

Finally, from «To My Mother»:

- (7) «by that dear name» (feet 2-3, line 5)
- (8) «-er—my own moth-» (feet 2-3, line 9)
- (9) «er, who died early» (feet 4-5, line 9)
- (10) «than its soul-life» (feet 4-5, line 14)

Additionally, it is not uncommon to find the odd trochaic foot internally within a line, in «To Science»:

- (11) «things with» (foot 3, line 2)
- (12) «grass, and» (foot 4, line 13)

Finally, we can still find a line that, we saw, is difficult to determine, as it is written in Italian –line 14 of «To Zante»–, and where we can find an anapaest (xx'(x)) where two iambs were expected:

- (13) «di Levante» (foot 4, line 14)

How can we look for a reasonable explanation to these «oddities» that somehow mark the way in which Poe adapts traditional metrics to suit his forms in these three poems? Can we say that we find significant differences in the way he uses the language in all these instances? It is my contention both that these examples are different ways to add variation to the language of poetry, and also that we find some sense of evolution.

The sense of variation, to begin with, can be seen in the presence of just six «irregular» feet, out of seventy, in «To Science», nine out of sixty-nine in «To Zante» and eight—but half of them within the same line, more on this later— out of seventy in «To My Mother». As we know, variation and change, to avoid monotony, are two basic principles in all forms of creative discourse, so that a simple accumulation of two off-beats, or two beats, in a sequence, may be, in itself, and provided other basic principles



of versification are followed, enough to bring with it a given sense of originality to a poetic text. Similarly, it is not simply initial trochaic inversion that we find, we also find two other instances of medial inversion. What was probably not so clear at the time was the general metrical sensation conveyed by the poem after its first two, or even three, lines. In other words, medial trochaic inversion was not considered to be fully canonical at the time—and this may be one of the reasons why Poe is not considered to be one of the great poets in this cultural tradition, with just a handful of poems as exceptions—and, additionally, after reading the first quatrain of «To My Mother», we undoubtedly know we are facing an iambic pentameter composition. By contrast, both «To Science» and «To Zante» are less «canonical» in this. In «To Science», three out of the first ten feet are irregular—a pyrrhic, a spondee and a trochaic—, apart from the initial trochaic inversion in the first foot, which we saw was canonical. In «To Zante», no less than six out of the first fifteen feet are also irregular—three pyrrhic, three spondees—, with one possible initial trochaic inversion additionally in line 3. Although metrical expectations concerning these two poetic compositions are later confirmed, these irregularities might be considered as blunders and doubts from a young, immature pen, rather than actual forms of innovating traditional poetic forms. If we look at «To My Mother», by contrast, we see we have to wait until the second quatrain, in line 5, when the general tone has already been established, to find the first of these «irregular» combinations.

In addition, there is a second way in which «To My Mother» is different from «To Science» and «To Zante». We saw above that line 9 is definitely odd, in the sense that a double sequence of pyrrhic plus spondaic feet makes the line practically unmetrical within the iambic pentameter tradition. The following is a reproduction of the scansion offered in the appendix:

x ' x / x ' ' x / x ' '(x)/

My mother—my own mother, who died early,

If we establish a cline along which we place a number of elements in the study of poetic meter, like number of beats, number of syllables, lack of promotion and demotion and coincidence between the general verse design and verse instance, we will see this line clearly agrees with the first, second and third «restrictive» elements, but also that it is clearly at odds with the fourth. Or, to make things clearer, where we expected [x' x' x' x' x'], we find [x' xx '' xx ''(x)]. There is, however, a good reason to suggest why this happens precisely at this point within the poem: the composition is a praise to Maria Clemm, Virginia's mother and Poe's aunt, and he establishes, from the title, a very special connection with her, so that he explains that he has always considered Maria as his «other» mother, since Elizabeth, his real mother, died when he was not even three years old<sup>11</sup>. This is the only line in the

<sup>11</sup> The special relationship established between Poe and Maria Clemm can be seen, for instance, in a letter he addressed her in August 1835, where he wondered what Mrs. Clemm would

poem where he explicitly refers to this relationship, and it is not amiss to suggest that he is using technical knowledge to make the line deviate from a given pattern and therefore make it prominent, salient, or, in technical terms, foregrounded. It is as if Poe had wanted to establish an unseen connection between the oddity of the line and the oddity resulting from devoting a poem entitled «To My Mother» to somebody who in fact was not his mother, and a large part of this oddity centres on this admission of a possibly odd kind of personal relationship, offered after the second quatrain, once the overall rhythm of the poem has been settled.

As a final brief reflection within this section, we have seen how Poe combines traditional elements of poetry written in English in a composition, and also how he sometimes departs from the norm —cf. Hoffman (1985: 55): «the more lively displacement of stresses, by which we distinguish a flexible rhythm from a mechanistic meter»—. Although some of these departures from the norm may look odd at times, we can see a certain sense of evolution which allows us to say that «mature» Poe was a much more professional writer, and also one who would have possibly gone on producing better and better poetic compositions, had he lived longer. The effects he achieved through certain apparent «oddities» may not have been to everybody's liking, and some of them may not have been totally successful, as we have seen. In any case, we cannot deny that he was a conscientious and highly original poet, although this has not always been admitted by some of his critics.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Edgar A. Poe has been referred to in the critical literature as two people in one, what J. Symons (1978: 177) calls «Visionary Poe and Logical Poe». We have seen, in this analysis of metrical form and variation in three of his sonnets from different creative periods, that Poe very frequently combined these two roles, by applying strict metrical patterns —the «logical» in him—, but also by avoiding these same patterns in a highly conscious form, to create beauty out of language —the «visionary»—. We have also seen how there exist three different stages in Poe's poetry, an initial one, where he is still looking for a proper creative voice and tends to comply with most of the rules affecting canonical metrics at the time —though not all—, a second one, when he is probably still not very clear in the way he can establish a proper creative style and where, probably because of a relative lack of practice as a poet, we seem to miss the certain sense of audacity we perceive in earlier compositions, and a final period, when he seems to have found a proper creative voice, distinguished by the combination of technical knowledge and the need to use English in a truly distinctive way. Metrical virtuosity and partial devia-

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do if Virginia, whom he would marry later, went to live with Neilson Poe, as if he was afraid to lose them both at once (in STERN 1977: 13). Much later, in another letter dated July 7<sup>th</sup> 1849, he wrote his famous sentence «we must die together» (in STERN 1977: 48).



tions from the norm are sometimes difficult to trace. By applying an analytical method, I have tried to explain why we sometimes find such contradictory judgments concerning his compositions. I hope that the analysis presented in the pages preceding has contributed to throw light on what is still a highly controversial issue two hundred years after Poe's birth.

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«SONNET — TO SCIENCE»

	syll.	p.s.	d.s.	b.	p.
'x / (') ' x x ' ' x ' /					
Science! meet daughter of Old Time thou art!	10	0	1	5	2
x ' x ' ' x x ' x ' /					
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.	10	0	0	5	1
(') ' x ' x ` x 'x ' /					
Why prey'st thou thus upon the poet's heart,	10	1	1	5	1
' x / x ' ' x ' x' x ' /					
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?	10	1	0	5	2
' x x ' x / x ' ' x ' /					
How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,	10	0	0	5	2
x ` x ' x ` x ' x ` →					
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering	10	2	0	5	0
x ' x ' x ` x ' x ' /					
To seek for treasure in the jewell'd skies,	10	1	0	5	1
x ' x ' x ` x ' x ' /					
Albeit he soar with an undaunted wing!	10	1	0	5	1
` x x ' x ' x ` x ' /					
Hast thou not dragg'd Diana from her car?	10	2	0	5	1
x '(x) x ` x 'x ` x ' →					
And driv'n the Hamadryad from the wood	11	2	0	5	0
x ' x ' x ` x ' x ' /					
To seek a shelter in some happier star?	10	1	0	5	1
x ' x ' x ` x ' x ' /					
The gentle Naiad from her fountain-flood,	10	1	0	5	1
x ' x ` x ' ' / x x ' →					
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me	10	1	0	5	1
x ' x ' x ` x ' x ' /					
The summer dream beneath the shrubbery?	10	2	0	5	1

(1829)

Note: syll. = syllables per line; p.s. = promoted syllables; d.s. = demoted syllables; b. = beats per line; p. = pauses per line

«TO ZANTE»

	syll.	p.s.	d.s.	b.	p.
(') ' / x ` x ' x x ' ' /					
Fair isle, that from the fairest of all flowers,	10	1	1	5	2
x ' x x ' ' x ' x ' /					
Thy gentlest of all gentle names dost take!	10	0	0	5	1
' x x ' x x ' ' x ' →					
How many memories of what radiant hours	10	0	0	5	0
x ' x ` x ' x ' x ' /					
At sight of thee and thine at once awake!	10	1	0	5	1
' x x ' x ' x ' x ' /					
How many scenes of what departed bliss!	10	0	0	5	1
' x x ' x ' x ' x ' /					
How many thoughts of what entombed hopes!	10	0	0	5	1
' x x ' x ` x ' (x) x ` →					
How many visions of a maiden that is	11	2	0	5	0
x ' / x ' x ` x ' x ' x ' /					
No more—no more upon thy verdant slopes!	10	1	0	5	2
x ' /x ' / x ' x x ' ' →					
<i>No more!</i> alas, that magical sad sound	10	0	0	5	2
x ' x ' / x ' x ' x ' /					
Transforming all! Thy charms shall please <i>no more</i> —	10	0	0	5	2
x ' x ` x ' /x ' x ' /					
Thy memory <i>no more!</i> Accursed ground	10	1	0	5	1
x ' x ' x ' x ' x ' x ' /					
Henceforth I hold thy flower-enamelled shore,	10	0	0	5	1
x `x' x ' / x ' x ' (x) /					
O hyacinthine isle! O purple Zante!	10+1	1	0	5	2
' x x ' x / ' x x ' (x) /					
«Isola d'oro! Fior di Levante!»	9+1	0	0	4	2
(1837)					



«TO MY MOTHER»

	syll.	p.s.	d.s.	b.	p.
x ` x' x/' x' (x)x' /					
Because I feel that, in the Heavens above,	11	2	0	5	2
x' x/ ' x` x' x' (x) /					
The angels, whispering to one another,	10+1	1	0	5	2
x' / x ` x' x' x' /					
Can find, among their burning terms of love,	10	1	0	5	2
' x x 'x ` x' x' (x) /					
None so devotional as that of «Mother,»	10+1	1	0	5	2
' x x x' ' x' x' (x) /					
Therefore by that dear name I long have called you—	10+1	0	0	5	1
` x x' x' x' x' /					
You who are more than mother unto me,	10	2	0	5	1
x' x' x' / x' x' (x)					
And fill my heart of hearts, where Death installed you	10+1	0	0	5	1
x' x ` x' x' x' /					
In setting my Virginia's spirit free.	10	1	0	5	1
x' x / x' ' x / x' ' (x) /					
My mother—my own mother, who died early,	10+1	0	0	5	3
x ` x' x' x' / x' →					
Was but the mother of myself; but you	10	2	0	5	1
x' x ` x' x' x' (x) /					
Are mother to the one I loved so dearly,	10+1	1	0	5	1
x' x' x ` x' (x)x' →					
And thus are dearer than the mother I knew	11	1	0	5	0
x ` x' x' x ` x' →					
By that infinity with which my wife	10	3	0	5	0
x' x ` x' x x' ' /					
Was dearer to my soul than its soul-life.	10	1	0	5	1

(1849)

