

1844-49

MARGINALIA

Edgar Allan Poe

Poe, Edgar Allan (1809-49) - American poet, short-story writer, and critic who is best known for his tales of ratiocination, his fantastical horror stories, and his genre-founding detective stories. Poe, whose cloudy personal life is a virtual legend, considered himself primarily a poet. Marginalia (1844-49) - A collection of Poe's critical writings on literature and the literary life.

MARGINALIA

DEMOCRATIC REVIEW, November, 1844

In getting my books, I have been always solicitous of an ample margin; this not so much through any love of the thing in itself, however agreeable, as for the facility it affords me of pencilling suggested thoughts, agreements, and differences of opinion, or brief critical comments in general. Where what I have to note is too much to be included within the narrow limits of a margin, I commit it to a slip of paper, and deposit it between the leaves; taking care to secure it by an imperceptible portion of gum tragacanth paste.

All this may be whim; it may be not only a very hackneyed, but a very idle practice;- yet I persist in it still; and it affords me pleasure; which is profit, in despite of Mr. Bentham, with Mr. Mill on his back.

This making of notes, however, is by no means the making of mere memorandum- a custom which has its disadvantages, beyond doubt "Ce que je mets sur papier," says Bernadine de St. Pierre, "je remets de ma memoire et par consequence je l'oublie;"- and, in fact, if you wish to forget anything upon the spot, make a note that this thing is to be remembered.

But the purely marginal jottings, done with no eye to the Memorandum Book, have a distinct complexion, and not only a distinct purpose, but none at all; this it is which imparts to them a value. They have a rank somewhat above the chance and desultory comments of literary chit-chat- for these latter are not unfrequently "talk for talk's sake," hurried out of the mouth; while the marginalia are deliberately pencilled, because the mind of the reader wishes to unburthen itself of a thought;- however flippant- however silly- however trivial- still a thought indeed, not merely a thing that might have been a thought in time, and under more favorable circumstances. In the marginalia, too, we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly- boldly- originally- with abandonnement- without conceit- much after the fashion of Jeremy Taylor, and Sir Thomas Browne, and Sir William Temple, and the anatomical Burton, and that most logical analogist, Butler, and some other people of the old day, who were too full of their matter to have any room for their manner, which, being thus left out of question, was a capital manner, indeed,- a model of manners, with a richly marginalic air.

The circumscription of space, too, in these pencillings, has in it something more of advantage than of inconvenience. It compels us (whatever diffuseness of idea we may clandestinely entertain), into Montesquieu-ism, into Tacitus-ism (here I leave out of view the concluding portion of the "Annals")- or even into Carlyle-ism- a thing which, I have been told, is not to be confounded with your ordinary affectation and bad grammar. I say "bad grammar," through sheer obstinacy, because the grammarians (who should know better) insist upon it that I should

not. But then grammar is not what these grammarians will have it; and, being merely the analysis of language, with the result of this analysis, must be good or bad just as the analyst is sage or silly- just as he is Horne Tooke or a Cobbett.

But to our sheep. During a rainy afternoon, not long ago, being in a mood too listless for continuous study, I sought relief from ennui in dipping here and there, at random, among the volumes of my library- no very large one, certainly, but sufficiently miscellaneous; and, I flatter myself, not a little recherche.

Perhaps it was what the Germans call the "brain-scattering" humor of the moment; but, while the picturesqueness of the numerous pencil-scratches arrested my attention, their helter-skelter-iness of commentary amused me. I found myself at length forming a wish that it had been some other hand than my own which had so bedevilled the books, and fancying that, in such case, I might have derived no inconsiderable pleasure from turning them over. From this the transitionthought (as Mr. Lyell, or Mr. Murchison, or Mr. Featherstonhaugh would have it) was natural enough:- there might be something even in my scribblings which, for the mere sake of scribblings would have interest for others.

The main difficulty respected the mode of transferring the notes from the volumes- the context from the text- without detriment to that exceedingly frail fabric of intelligibility in which the context was imbedded. With all appliances to boot, with the printed pages at their back, the commentaries were too often like Dodona's oracles- or those of Lycophron Tenebrosus- or the essays of the pedant's pupils, in Quintilian, which were "necessarily excellent, since even he (the pedant) found it impossible to comprehend them":- what, then, would become of it this context- if transferred?- if translated? Would it not rather be traduit (traduced) which is the French synonym, or overzezet (turned topsy-turvy) which is the Dutch one? I concluded, at length, to put extensive faith in the acumen and imagination of the reader:- this as a general rule. But, in some instances, where even faith would not remove mountains, there seemed no safer plan than so to re-model the note as to convey at least the ghost of a conception as to what it was all about.

Where, for such conception, the text itself was absolutely necessary, I could quote it, where the title of the book commented upon was indispensable, I could name it. In short, like a novel-hero dilemma'd, I made up my mind "to be guided by circumstances," in default of more satisfactory rules of conduct.

As for the multitudinous opinion expressed in the subjoined farrago- as for my present assent to all, or dissent from any portion of it- as to the possibility of my having, in some instances, altered my mind- or as to the impossibility of my not having altered it often- these are points upon which I say nothing, because upon these there can be nothing cleverly said. It may be as well to observe, however, that just as the goodness of your true pun is in the direct ratio of its intolerability, so is nonsense the essential sense of the Marginal Note. I have seen

many computations respecting the greatest amount of erudition attainable by an individual in his life-time, but these computations are falsely based, and fall infinitely beneath the truth. It is true that, in general we retain, we remember to available purpose, scarcely one-hundredth part of what we read; yet there are minds which not only retain all receipts, but keep them at compound interest forever. Again:- were every man supposed to read out, he could read, of course, very little, even in half a century; for, in such case, each individual word must be dwelt upon in some degree. But, in reading to ourselves, at the ordinary rate of what is called "light reading," we scarcely touch one word in ten. And, even physically considered, knowledge breeds knowledge, as gold gold; for he who reads really much, finds his capacity to read increase in geometrical ratio.

The helluo librorum will but glance at the page which detains the ordinary reader some minutes; and the difference in the absolute reading (its uses considered), will be in favor of the helluo, who will have winnowed the matter of which the tyro mumbled both the seeds and the chaff. A deep-rooted and strictly continuous habit of reading will, with certain classes of intellect, result in an instinctive and seemingly magnetic appreciation of a thing written; and now the student reads by pages just as other men by words. Long years to come, with a careful analysis of the mental process, may even render this species of appreciation a common thing.

It may be taught in the schools of our descendants of the tenth or twentieth generation. It may become the method of the mob of the eleventh or twenty-first.

And should these matters come to pass- as they will- there will be in them no more legitimate cause for wonder than there is, to-day, in the marvel that, syllable by syllable, men comprehend what, letter by letter, I now trace upon this page.

Is it not a law that need has a tendency to engender the thing needed?

Moore has been noted for the number of appositeness, as well as novelty of his similes; and the renown thus acquired is indicial of his deficiency in that noble merit- the noblest of all. No poet thus distinguished was ever richly ideal.

Pope and Cowper are instances. Direct similes are of too palpably artificial a character to be artistical. An artist will always contrive to weave his illustrations into the metaphorical form.

Moore has a peculiar facility in prosaically telling a poetical story. By this I mean that he preserves the tone and method of arrangement of a prose relation, and thus obtains great advantage, in important points, over his more stilted compeers. His is no poetical style (such as the French have- a distinct style for a distinct purpose) but an easy and ordinary prose manner, which rejects the licenses because it does not require them, and is merely ornamented into poetry. By means of this manner he is enabled to encounter, effectually, details which

would baffle any other versifier of the day; and at which Lamartine would stand aghast.

In "Alciphron" we see this exemplified. Here the minute and perplexed incidents of the descent into the pyramid, are detailed, in verse, with quite as much precision and intelligibility as could be attained even by the coolest prose of Mr. Jeremy Bentham.

Moore has vivacity; verbal and constructive dexterity; a musical ear not sufficiently cultivated; a vivid fancy; an epigrammatic spirit; and a fine taste- as far as it goes.

Democratic Review, December, 1844

I am not sure that Tennyson is not the greatest of poets. The uncertainty attending the public conception of the term "poet" alone prevents me from demonstrating that he is. Other bards produce effects which are, now and then, otherwise produced than by what we call poems; but Tennyson an effect which only a poem does. His alone are idiosyncratic poems. By the enjoyment or nonenjoyment of the "Morte D'Arthur" or of the "Oenone," I would test any one's ideal sense.

There are passages in his works which rivet a conviction I had long entertained, that the indefinite is an element in the true poesis. Why do some persons fatigue themselves in attempts to unravel such fantasy-pieces as the "Lady of Shalott"? As well unweave the "ventum textilem." If the author did not deliberately propose to himself a suggestive indefinitiveness of meaning with the view of bringing about a definitiveness of vague and therefore of spiritual effect- this, at least, arose from the silent analytical promptings of that poetic genius which, in its supreme development, embodies all orders of intellectual capacity.

I know that indefinitiveness is an element of the true music- I mean of the true musical expression. Give to it any undue decision- imbue 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. You exhaust it of its breath of fiery. It now becomes a tangible and easily appreciable idea- a thing of the earth, earthy.

It has not, indeed, lost its power to please, but all which I consider the distinctiveness of that power. And to the uncultivated talent, or to the unimaginative apprehension, this deprivation of its most delicate air will be, not unfrequently, a recommendation. A determinateness of expression is sought- and often by composers who should know better- is sought as a beauty rather than rejected as a blemish. Thus we have, even from high authorities, attempts at absolute imitation in music. Who can forget the silliness of the "Battle of Prague"? What man of taste but must laugh at the interminable drums, trumpets, blunderbusses, and thunder? "Vocal music," says L'Abbate Gravina,

who would have said the same thing of instrumental, “ought to imitate the natural language of the human feelings and passions, rather than the warblings of canary birds, which our singers, now-a-days, affect so vastly to mimic with their quaverings and boasted cadences.” This is true only so far as the “rather” is concerned. If any music must imitate anything, it were assuredly better to limit the imitation as Gravina suggests.

Tennyson’s shorter pieces abound in minute rhythmical lapses sufficient to assure me that- in common with all poets living or dead- he has neglected to make precise investigation of the principles of metre; but, on the other hand, so perfect is his rhythmical instinct in general that, like the present Viscount Canterbury, he seems to see with his ear.

Godey’s Lady’s Book, September, 1845

The increase, within a few years, of the magazine literature, is by no means to be regarded as indicating what some critics would suppose it to indicate- a downward tendency in American taste or in American letters. It is but a sign of the times, an indication of an era in which men are forced upon the curt, the condensed, the well-digested in place of the voluminous- in a word, upon journalism in lieu of dissertation. We need now the light artillery rather than the peace-makers of the intellect. I will not be sure that men at present think more profoundly than half a century ago, but beyond question they think with more rapidity, with more skill, with more tact, with more of method and less of excrescence in the thought. Besides all this, they have a vast increase in the thinking material; they have more facts, more to think about. For this reason, they are disposed to put the greatest amount of thought in the smallest compass and disperse it with the utmost attainable rapidity. Hence the journalism of the age; hence, in especial, magazines. Too many we cannot have, as a general proposition; but we demand that they have sufficient merit to render them noticeable in the beginning, and that they continue in existence sufficiently long to permit us a fair estimation of their value.

Broadway Journal, Oct. 4, 1845

Much has been said, of late, about the necessity of maintaining a proper nationality in American Letters; but what this nationality is, or what is to be gained by it, has never been distinctly understood. That an American should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea- and at best is a questionable point. We would do well to bear in mind that “distance lends enchantment to the view.” *Ceteris paribus*, a foreign theme is, in a strictly literary sense, to be preferred. After all, the world at large is the only legitimate stage for the autorial histrio.

But of the need of that nationality which defends our own literature, sustains our own men of letters, upholds our own dignity, and depends upon our own

resources, there can not be the shadow of a doubt. Yet here is the very point at which we are most supine. We complain of our want of International Copyright on the ground that this want justifies our publishers in inundating us with British opinion in British books; and yet when these very publishers, at their own obvious risk, and even obvious loss, do publish an American book, we turn up our noses at it with supreme contempt (this is a general thing) until it (the American book) has been dubbed "readable" by some literate Cockney critic. Is it too much to say that, with us, the opinion of Washington Irving- of Prescott- of Bryant- is a mere nullity in comparison with that of any anonymous sub-sub-editor of the Spectator, the Athenaeum, or the London Punch? It is not saying too much to say this. It is a solemn- an absolutely awful fact. Every publisher in the country will admit it to be a fact. There is not a more disgusting spectacle under the sun than our subserviency to British criticism. It is disgusting, first because it is truckling, servile, pusilanimous- secondly, because of its gross irrationality. We know the British to bear us little but ill will- we know that, in no case, do they utter unbiased opinions of American books- we know that in the few instances in which our writers have been treated with common decency in England, these writers have either openly paid homage to English institutions, or have had lurking at the bottom of their hearts a secret principle at war with Democracy:- we know all this, and yet, day after day, submit our necks to the degrading yoke of the crudest opinion that emanates from the fatherland. Now if we must have nationality, let it be a nationality that will throw off this yoke.

The chief of the rhapsodists who have ridden us to death like the Old Man of the Mountain, is the ignorant and egotistical Wilson. We use the term rhapsodists with perfect deliberation; for, Macaulay, and Dilke, and one or two others, excepted, there is not in Great Britain a critic who can be fairly considered worthy the name. The Germans and even the French, are infinitely superior. As regards Wilson, no man ever penned worse criticism or better rhodomontade. That he is "egotistical" his works show to all men, running as they read. That he is "ignorant" let his absurd and continuous school-boy blunders about Homer bear witness. Not long ago we ourselves pointed out a series of similar inanities in his review of Miss Barret's [sic] poems- a series, we say, of gross blunders, arising from sheer ignorance- and we defy him or any one to answer a single syllable of what we then advanced.

And yet this is the man whose simple dictum (to our shame be it spoken) has the power to make or to mar any American reputation! In the last number of Blackwood, he has a continuation of the dull "Specimens of the British Critics," and makes occasion wantonly to insult one of the noblest of our poets, Mr. Lowell. The point of the whole attack consists in the use of slang epithets and phrases of the most ineffably vulgar description. "Squabashes" is a pet term. "Faugh!" is another. "We are Scotsmen to the spiner" says Sawney- as if the thing were not more than self-evident. Mr. Lowell is called a "magpie," an "ape," a "Yankee cockney," and his name is intentionally mis-written John

Russell Lowell. Now were these indecencies perpetrated by an American critic, that critic would be sent to Coventry by the whole press of the country, but since it is Wilson who insults, we, as in duty bound, not only submit to the insult, but echo it, as an excellent jest, throughout the length and breadth of the land. "Quamdiu Catilina?" We do indeed demand the nationality of self-respect. In Letters as in Government we require a Declaration of Independence. A better thing still would be a Declaration of War- and that war should be carried forthwith "into Africa."

Graham's Magazine, March, 1846

Some Frenchman- possibly Montaigne- says: "People talk about thinking, but for my part I never think except when I sit down to write." It is this never thinking, unless when we sit down to write, which is the cause of so much indifferent composition. But perhaps there is something more involved in the Frenchman's observation than meets the eye. It is certain that the mere act of inditing tends, in a great degree, to the logicalisation of thought. Whenever, on account of its vagueness, I am dissatisfied with a conception of the brain, I resort forthwith to the pen, for the purpose of obtaining, through its aid, the necessary form, consequence, and precision.

How very commonly we hear it remarked that such and such thoughts are beyond the compass of words! I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language. I fancy, rather, that where difficulty in expression is experienced, there is, in the intellect which experiences it, a want either of deliberateness or of method. For my own part, I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words, with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it:- as I have before observed, the thought is logicalised by the effort at (written) expression.

There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are not thoughts, and to which, as yet, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use the word fancies at random, and merely because I must use some word; but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquillity- when the bodily and mental health are in perfection- and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams. I am aware of these "fancies" only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable point of time- yet it is crowded with these "shadows of shadows"; and for absolute thought there is demanded time's endurance.

These "fancies" have in them a pleasurable ecstasy, as far beyond the most pleasurable of the world of wakefulness, or of dreams, as the Heaven of the

Northman theology is beyond its Hell. I regard the visions, even as they arise, with an awe which, in some measure moderates or tranquillises the ecstasy- I so regard them, through a conviction (which seems a portion of the ecstasy itself) that this ecstasy, in itself, is of a character supernal to the Human Nature- is a glimpse of the spirit's outer world; and I arrive at this conclusion- if this term is at all applicable to instantaneous intuition- by a perception that the delight experienced has, as its element, but the absoluteness of novelty. I say the absoluteness for in the fancies- let me now term them psychal impressions- there is really nothing even approximate in character to impressions ordinarily received. It is as if the five senses were supplanted by five myriad others alien to mortality.

Now, so entire is my faith in the power of words, that at times I have believed it possible to embody even the evanescence of fancies such as I have attempted to describe. In experiments with this end in view, I have proceeded so far as, first, to control (when the bodily and mental health are good), the existence of the condition:- that is to say, I can now (unless when ill), be sure that the condition will supervene, if I so wish it, at the point of time already described: of its supervention until lately I could never be certain even under the most favorable circumstances.

I mean to say, merely, that now I can be sure, when all circumstances are favorable, of the supervention of the condition, and feel even the capacity of inducing or compelling it:- the favorable circumstances, however, are not the less rare else had I compelled already the Heaven into the Earth.

I have proceeded so far, secondly, as to prevent the lapse from the Point of which I speak- the point of blending between wakefulness and sleep- as to prevent at will, I say, the lapse from this border- ground into the dominion of sleep.

Not that I can continue the condition- not that I can render the point more than a point- but that I can startle myself from the point into wakefulness; and thus transfer the point itself into the realm of Memory- convey its impressions, or more properly their recollections, to a situation where (although still for a very brief period) I can survey them with the eye of analysis.

For these reasons- that is to say, because I have been enabled to accomplish thus much- I do not altogether despair of embodying in words at least enough of the fancies in question to convey to certain classes of intellect, a shadowy conception of their character.

In saying this I am not to be understood as supposing that the fancies or psychal impressions to which I allude are confined to my individual self- are not, in a word, common to all mankind- for on this point it is quite impossible that I should form an opinion- but nothing can be more certain than that even a partial record of the impressions would startle the universal intellect of mankind, by the

supremeness of the novelty of the material employed, and of its consequent suggestions. In a word- should I ever write a paper on this topic, the world will be compelled to acknowledge that, at last, I have done an original thing.

Democratic Review, April, 1846

In general, our first impressions are true ones- the chief difficulty is in making sure which are the first. In early youth we read a poem, for instance, and are enraptured with it. At manhood we are assured by our reason that we had no reason to be enraptured. But some years elapse, and we return to our primitive admiration, just as a matured judgment enables us precisely to see what and why we admired.

Thus, as individuals, we think in cycles, and may, from the frequency, or infrequency of our revolutions about the various thought-centres, form an accurate estimate of the advance of our thought toward maturity. It is really wonderful to observe how closely, in all the essentials of truth, the child- opinion coincides with that of the man proper- of the man at his best.

And as with individuals so, perhaps, with mankind. When the world begins to return, frequently, to its first impressions, we shall then be warranted in looking for the millennium- or whatever it is:- we may safely take it for granted that we are attaining our maximum of wit, and of the happiness which is thence to ensue.

The indications of such a return are, at present, like the visits of angels- but we have them now and then- in the case, for example, of credulity. The philosophic, of late days, are distinguished by that very facility in belief which was the characteristic of the illiterate half a century ago. Skepticism in regard to apparent miracles, is not, as formerly, an evidence either of superior wisdom or knowledge. In a word, the wise now believe- yesterday they would not believe- and day before yesterday (in the time of Strabo, for example) they believed, exclusively, anything and everything:- here, then, is one of the indicative cycles of discretion. I mention Strabo merely as an exception to the rule of his epoch- (just as one in a hurry for an illustration, might describe Mr. So and So to be as witty or as amiable as Mr. This and That is not- for so rarely did men reject in Strabo's time, and so much more rarely did they err by rejection, that the skepticism of this philosopher must be regarded as one of the most remarkable anomalies on record. I have not the slightest faith in Carlyle. In ten years- possibly in five- he will be remembered only as a butt for sarcasm. His linguistic Euphuisms might very well have been taken as prima facie evidence of his philosophic ones; they were the froth which indicated, first, the shallowness, and secondly, the confusion of the waters. I would blame no man of sense for leaving the works of Carlyle unread merely on account of these Euphuisms; for it might be shown a priori that no man capable of producing a definite impression upon his age or race, could or would commit himself to such inanities and insanities.

The book about 'HeroWorship'- is it possible that it ever excited a feeling beyond contempt? No heroworshipper can possess anything within himself. That man is no man who stands in awe of his fellow-man. Genius regards genius with respect- with even enthusiastic admiration- but there is nothing of worship in the admiration, for it springs from a thorough cognizance of the one admired- from a perfect sympathy, the result of the cognizance; and it is needless to say, that sympathy and worship are antagonistic. Your hero-worshippers, for example- what do they know about Shakespeare? They worship him- rant about him- lecture about him- about him, him and nothing else- for no other reason than that he is utterly beyond their comprehension. They have arrived at an idea of his greatness from the pertinacity with which men have called him great. As for their own opinion about him- they really have none at all. In general the very smallest of mankind are the class of menworshippers. Not one out of this class have ever accomplished anything beyond a very contemptible mediocrity.

Carlyle, however, has rendered an important service (to posterity, at least) in pushing rant and cant to that degree of excess which inevitably induces reaction.

Had he not appeared we might have gone on for yet another century, Emerson-izing in prose, Wordsworth-izing in poetry, and Fourier-izing in philosophy, Wilson-izing in criticism- Hudson-izing and Tom O'Bedlam-izing in everything. The author of the 'Sartor Resartus,' however, has overthrown the various arguments of his own order, by a personal reductio ad absurdum. Yet an Olympiad, perhaps, and the whole horde will be swept bodily from the memory of man- or be remembered only when we have occasion to talk of such fantastic tricks as, erewhile, were performed by the Abderites.

Graham's Magazine, January, 1848

If any ambitious man have a fancy a revolutionize, at one effort, the universal world of human thought, human opinion, and human sentiment, the opportunity is his own- the road to immortal renown lies straight, open, and unencumbered before him. All that he has to do is to write and publish a very little book. Its title should be simple- a few plain words- "My Heart Laid Bare." But- this little book must be true to its title.

Now, is it not very singular that, with the rabid thirst for notoriety which distinguishes so many of mankind- so many, too, who care not a fig what is thought of them after death, there should not be found one man having sufficient hardihood to write this little book? To write, I say. There are ten thousand men who, if the book were once written, would laugh at the notion of being disturbed by its publication during their life, and who could not even conceive why they should object to its being published after their death. But to write it- there is the rub. No man dare write it. No man ever will dare write it. No man could write it, even if he dared. The paper would shrivel and blaze at every touch of the fiery pen.

Southern Literary Messenger, April, 1849

I blush to see, in the—, an invidious notice of Bayard Taylor's "Rhimes of Travel." What makes the matter worse, the critique is from the pen of one who, although undeservedly, holds, himself, some position as a poet:- and what makes the matter worst, the attack is anonymous, and (while ostensibly commending) most zealously endeavors to damn the young writer "with faint praise." In his whole life, the author of the criticism never published a poem, long or short, which could compare, either in the higher merits, or in the minor morals of the Muse, with the worst of Mr. Taylor's compositions.

Observe the generalizing, disingenuous, patronizing tone: "It is the empty charlatan, to whom all things are alike impossible, who attempts everything. He can do one thing as well as another, for he can really do nothing.... Mr. Taylor's volume, as we have intimated, is an advance upon his previous publication. We could have wished, indeed, something more of restraint in the rhetoric, but," &c., &c., &c.

The concluding sentence, here, is an excellent example of one of the most ingeniously malignant of critical ruses- that of condemning an author, in especial, for what the world, in general, feel to be his principal merit. In fact, the "rhetoric" of Mr. Taylor, in the sense intended by the critic, is Mr. Taylor's distinguishing excellence. He is, unquestionably, the most terse, glowing, and vigorous of all our poets, young or old- in point, I mean, of expression. His sonorous, wellbalanced rhythm puts me often in mind of Campbell (in spite of our anonymous friend's implied sneer at "mere jingling of rhymes, brilliant and successful for the moment,") and his rhetoric in general is of the highest order:- By "rhetoric, I intend the mode generally in which thought is presented. When shall we find more magnificent passages than these?

First queenly Asia, from the fallen thrones
Of twice three thousand years
Came with the woe a grieving Goddess owns
Who longs for mortal tears.

The dust of ruin to her mantle clung
And dimmed her crown of gold,
While the majestic sorrow of her tongue
From Tyre to Indus rolled.

Mourn with me, sisters, in my realm of woe
Whose only glory streams
From its lost childhood like the Arctic glow
Which sunless winter dreams.

In the red desert moulders Babylon
And the wild serpent's hiss
Echoes in Petra's palaces of stone
And waste Persepolis.

Then from her seat, amid the palms embowered
That shade the Lion-land, Swart
Africa in dusky aspect towered,
The fetters on her hand.

Backward she saw, from out the drear eclipse,
The mighty Theban years,
And the deep anguish of her mournful lips
Interpreted, her tears.

I copy these passages first, because the critic in question has copied them, without the slightest appreciation of their grandeur- for they are grand; and

secondly, to put the question of "rhetoric" at rest. No artist who reads them will deny that they are the perfection of skill in their way. But thirdly, I wish to call attention to the glowing imagination evinced in the lines. My very soul revolts at such efforts, (as the one I refer to,) to depreciate such poems as Mr. Taylor's. Is there no honor- no chivalry left in the land? Are our most deserving writers to be forever sneered down, or hooted down, or damned down with faint praise, by a set of men who possess little other ability than that which assures temporary success to them, in common with Swaim's Panaces or Morrison's Pills? The fact is, some person should write, at once, a Magazine paper exposing- ruthlessly exposing, the dross of our literary affairs. He should show how and why it is that ubiquitous quack in letters can always "succeed," while genius, (which implies self-respect with a scorn of creeping and crawling,) must inevitably succumb. He should point out the "easy arts" by which any one, base enough to do it, can get himself placed at the very head of American Letters by an article in that magnanimous Journal, "The Review." He should explain, too, how readily the same work can be induced (in the case of Simms,) to vilify personally, any one not a Northerner, for a trifling "consideration." In fact, our criticism needs a thorough regeneration, and must have it.

Southern Literary Messenger, June, 1849

I have sometimes amused myself by endeavoring to fancy what would be the fate of any individual gifted, or rather accursed, with an intellect very far superior to that of his race. Of course, he would be conscious of his superiority; nor could he (if otherwise constituted as man is) help manifesting his consciousness. Thus he would make himself enemies at all points. And since his opinions and speculations would widely differ from those of all mankind- that he would be considered a madman, is evident. How horribly painful such a condition! Hell could invent no greater torture than that of being charged with abnormal weakness on account of being abnormally strong.

In like manner, nothing can be clearer than that a very generous spirit- truly feeling what all merely profess- must inevitably find itself misconceived in every direction- its motives misinterpreted. Just as extremeness of intelligence would be thought fatuity, so excess of chivalry could not fail of being looked upon as meanness in its last degree- and so on with other virtues. This subject is a painful one indeed. That individuals have so soared above the plane of their race, is scarcely to be questioned; but, in looking back through history for traces of their existence, we should pass over all biographies of "the good and the great," while we search carefully the slight records of wretches who died in prison, in Bedlam, or upon the gallows.

THE END