

EDGAR ALLAN POE

ESSAYS AND REVIEWS

Theory of Poetry

Reviews of British and Continental Authors

Reviews of American Authors and American Literature

Magazines and Criticism

The Literary and Social Scene

Articles and Marginalia

G. R. Thompson, ed.


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IT HAS BEEN SAID that a good critique on a poem may be written by one who is no poet himself. This, according to *your* idea and *mine* of poetry, I feel to be false—the less poetical the critic, the less just the critique, and the converse. On this account, and because there are but few B——’s in the world, I would be as much ashamed of the world’s good opinion as proud of your own. Another than yourself might here observe, “Shakspeare is in possession of the world’s good opinion, and yet Shakspeare is the greatest of poets: It appears then that the world judge correctly, why should you be ashamed of their favorable judgment?” The difficulty lies in the interpretation of the word “judgment” or “opinion.” The opinion is the world’s, truly, but it may be called theirs as a man would call a book his, having bought it; he did not write the book, but it is his; they did not originate the opinion, but it is theirs. A fool, for example, thinks Shakspeare a great poet—yet the fool has never read Shakspeare. But the fool’s neighbor, who is a step higher on the Andes of the mind, whose head (that is to say his more exalted thought) is too far above the fool to be seen or understood, but whose feet (by which I mean his every-day actions) are sufficiently near to be discerned, and by means of which that superiority is ascertained, which *but* for them would never have been discovered—this neighbor asserts that Shakspeare is a great poet—the fool believes him, and it is henceforward his *opinion*. This neighbor’s own opinion has, in like manner, been adopted from one above *him*, and so, ascendingly, to a few gifted individuals, who kneel around the summit, beholding, face to face, the master spirit who stands upon the pinnacle. * * * * *

You are aware of the great barrier in the path of an American writer. He is read, if at all, in preference to the combined and established wit of the world. I say established; for it is

*These detached passages form part of the preface to a small volume printed some years ago for private circulation. They have vigor and much originality—but of course we shall not be called upon to endorse all the writer’s opinions.—*Ed.*

with literature as with law or empire—an established name is an estate in tenure, or a throne in possession. Besides, one might suppose that books, like their authors, improve by travel—their having crossed the sea is, with us, so great a distinction. Our antiquaries abandon time for distance; our very fops glance from the binding to the bottom of the title-page, where the mystic characters which spell London, Paris, or Genoa, are precisely so many letters of recommendation.

* * *

I mentioned just now a vulgar error as regards criticism. I think the notion that no poet can form a correct estimate of his own writings is another. I remarked before, that in proportion to the poetical talent, would be the justice of a critique upon poetry. Therefore, a bad poet would, I grant, make a false critique, and his self-love would infallibly bias his little judgment in his favor; but a poet, who is indeed a poet, could not, I think, fail of making a just critique. Whatever should be deducted on the score of self-love, might be replaced on account of his intimate acquaintance with the subject; in short, we have more instances of false criticism than of just, where one's own writings are the test, simply because we have more bad poets than good. There are of course many objections to what I say: Milton is a great example of the contrary; but his opinion with respect to the *Paradise Regained*, is by no means fairly ascertained. By what trivial circumstances men are often led to assert what they do not really believe! Perhaps an inadvertent word has descended to posterity. But, in fact, the *Paradise Regained* is little, if at all, inferior to the *Paradise Lost*, and is only supposed so to be, because men do not like epics, whatever they may say to the contrary, and reading those of Milton in their natural order, are too much wearied with the first to derive any pleasure from the second.

I dare say Milton preferred *Comus* to either—if so—justly. * * * * *

As I am speaking of poetry, it will not be amiss to touch slightly upon the most singular heresy in its modern history—the heresy of what is called very foolishly, the Lake

School. Some years ago I might have been induced, by an occasion like the present, to attempt a formal refutation of their doctrine; at present it would be a work of supererogation. The wise must bow to the wisdom of such men as Coleridge and Southey, but being wise, have laughed at poetical theories so prosaically exemplified.

Aristotle, with singular assurance, has declared poetry the most philosophical of all writing*—but it required a Wordsworth to pronounce it the most metaphysical. He seems to think that the end of poetry is, or should be, instruction—yet it is a truism that the end of our existence is happiness; if so, the end of every separate part of our existence—every thing connected with our existence should be still happiness. Therefore the end of instruction should be happiness; and happiness is another name for pleasure;—therefore the end of instruction should be pleasure: yet we see the above mentioned opinion implies precisely the reverse.

To proceed: *ceteris paribus*, he who pleases, is of more importance to his fellow men than he who instructs, since utility is happiness, and pleasure is the end already obtained which instruction is merely the means of obtaining.

I see no reason, then, why our metaphysical poets should plume themselves so much on the utility of their works, unless indeed they refer to instruction with eternity in view; in which case, sincere respect for their piety would not allow me to express my contempt for their judgment; contempt which it would be difficult to conceal, since their writings are professedly to be understood by the few, and it is the many who stand in need of salvation. In such case I should no doubt be tempted to think of the devil in Melmoth, who labors indefatigably through three octavo volumes, to accomplish the destruction of one or two souls, while any common devil would have demolished one or two thousand.

* * *

Against the subtleties which would make poetry a study—not a passion—it becomes the metaphysician to reason—

**Spoudiotaton kai philosophikotaton genos.*

but the poet to protest. Yet Wordsworth and Coleridge are men in years; the one imbued in contemplation from his childhood, the other a giant in intellect and learning. The diffidence, then, with which I venture to dispute their authority, would be over-whelming, did I not feel, from the bottom of my heart, that learning has little to do with the imagination—intellect with the passions—or age with poetry. * * * * *

“Trifles, like straws, upon the surface flow,
He who would search for pearls must dive below,”

are lines which have done much mischief. As regards the greater truths, men oftener err by seeking them at the bottom than at the top; the depth lies in the huge abysses where wisdom is sought—not in the palpable palaces where she is found. The ancients were not always right in hiding the goddess in a well: witness the light which Bacon has thrown upon philosophy; witness the principles of our divine faith—that moral mechanism by which the simplicity of a child may overbalance the wisdom of a man.

We see an instance of Coleridge's liability to err, in his *Biographia Literaria*—professedly his literary life and opinions, but, in fact, a treatise *de omni scibili et quibusdam aliis*. He goes wrong by reason of his very profundity, and of his error we have a natural type in the contemplation of a star. He who regards it directly and intensely sees, it is true, the star, but it is the star without a ray—while he who surveys it less inquisitively is conscious of all for which the star is useful to us below—its brilliancy and its beauty.

* * *

As to Wordsworth, I have no faith in him. That he had, in youth, the feelings of a poet I believe—for there are glimpses of extreme delicacy in his writings—(and delicacy is the poet's own kingdom—his *El Dorado*)—but they have the appearance of a better day recollected; and glimpses, at best, are little evidence of present poetic fire—we know that a few straggling flowers spring up daily in the crevices of the glacier.

He was to blame in wearing away his youth in contemplation with the end of poetizing in his manhood. With the in-

crease of his judgment the light which should make it apparent has faded away. His judgment consequently is too correct. This may not be understood,—but the old Goths of Germany would have understood it, who used to debate matters of importance to their State twice, once when drunk, and once when sober—sober that they might not be deficient in formality—drunk lest they should be destitute of vigor.

The long wordy discussions by which he tries to reason us into admiration of his poetry, speak very little in his favor: they are full of such assertions as this—(I have opened one of his volumes at random) “Of genius the only proof is the act of doing well what is worthy to be done, and what was never done before”—indeed! then it follows that in doing what is *un*worthy to be done, or what *has* been done before, no genius can be evinced: yet the picking of pockets is an unworthy act, pockets have been picked time immemorial, and Barrington, the pick-pocket, in point of genius, would have thought hard of a comparison with William Wordsworth, the poet.

Again—in estimating the merit of certain poets, whether they be Ossian's or M'Pherson's, can surely be of little consequence, yet, in order to prove their worthlessness, Mr. W. has expended many pages in the controversy. *Tantene animis?* Can great minds descend to such absurdity? But worse still: that he may bear down every argument in favor of these poems, he triumphantly drags forward a passage, in his abomination of which he expects the reader to sympathize. It is the beginning of the epic poem “*Temora*.” “The blue waves of Ullin roll in light; the green hills are covered with day; trees shake their dusky heads in the breeze.” And this—this gorgeous, yet simple imagery—where all is alive and panting with immortality—this—William Wordsworth, the author of *Peter Bell*, has *selected* for his contempt. We shall see what better he, in his own person, has to offer. *Imprimis*:

“And now she's at the pony's head,
And now she's at the pony's tail,
On that side now, and now on this,
And almost stifled her with bliss—
A few sad tears does Betty shed,

She pats the pony where or when
 She knows not: happy Betty Foy!
 O Johnny! never mind the Doctor!"

Secondly:

"The dew was falling fast, the—stars began to blink,
 I heard a voice, it said—drink, pretty creature, drink;
 And looking o'er the hedge, be—fore me I espied
 A snow-white mountain lamb with a—maiden at its side,
 No other sheep were near, the lamb was all alone,
 And by a slender cord was—tether'd to a stone."

Now we have no doubt this is all true; we *will* believe it, indeed we will, Mr. W. Is it sympathy for the sheep you wish to excite? I love a sheep from the bottom of my heart.

* * *

But there *are* occasions, dear B——, there are occasions when even Wordsworth is reasonable. Even Stamboul, it is said, shall have an end, and the most unlucky blunders must come to a conclusion. Here is an extract from his preface—

"Those who have been accustomed to the phraseology of modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to a conclusion (*impossible!*) will, no doubt, have to struggle with feelings of awkwardness; (ha! ha! ha!) they will look round for poetry (ha! ha! ha! ha!) and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts have been permitted to assume that title." Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha!

Yet let not Mr. W. despair; he has given immortality to a wagon, and the bee Sophocles has transmitted to eternity a sore toe, and dignified a tragedy with a chorus of turkeys.

* * *

Of Coleridge I cannot speak but with reverence. His towering intellect! his gigantic power! He is one more evidence of the fact "que la plupart des sectes ont raison dans une bonne partie de ce qu'elles avancent, mais non pas en ce qu'elles nient." He has imprisoned his own conceptions by the barrier he has erected against those of others. It is lam-

table to think that such a mind should be buried in metaphysics, and, like the Nyctanthes, waste its perfume upon the night alone. In reading his poetry I tremble—like one who stands upon a volcano, conscious, from the very darkness bursting from the crater, of the fire and the light that are weltering below.

* * *

What is Poetry?—Poetry! that Proteus-like idea, with as many appellations as the nine-titled Corcyra! Give me, I demanded of a scholar some time ago, give me a definition of poetry? "Tres-volontiers,"—and he proceeded to his library, brought me a Dr. Johnson, and overwhelmed me with a definition. Shade of the immortal Shakspeare! I imagined to myself the scowl of your spiritual eye upon the profanity of that scurrilous Ursa Major. Think of poetry, dear B——, think of poetry, and then think of—Dr. Samuel Johnson! Think of all that is airy and fairy-like, and then of all that is hideous and unwieldy; think of his huge bulk, the Elephant! and then—and then think of the Tempest—the Midsummer Night's Dream—Prospero—Oberon—and Titania!

* * *

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, being a poem only so far as this object is attained; romance presenting perceptible images with definite, poetry with *indefinite* sensations, to which end music is an *essential*, since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception. 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.

What was meant by the invective against him who had no music in his soul?

* * *

To sum up this long rigmarole, I have, dear B——, what you no doubt perceive, for the metaphysical poets, *as* poets,

the most sovereign contempt. That they have followers
proves nothing—

No Indian prince has to his palace
More followers than a thief to the gallows.

Southern Literary Messenger, July 1836

nBritish; 1080.8, C.; 1081.10, W.; 1083.23, re-publication; 1090.35, pirnting; 1095.32, That; 1106.30, gazettes!!; 1109.24, COLLIER; 1115.22, uanaged; 1115.28, consonants; 1116.20 court ofs; 1116.31, podularity; 1120.31, at a; 1136.35, first; 1145.17, told"—; 1166.2, Mr. F.; 1166.35, manner; 1207.7, Old; 1219.12, alt; 1219.13, thal; 1285.20, frd; 1285.20—21-22, fuacsfshffheo; 1285.21, hetmsaffhie; 1285.25, ihufheo; 1285.25, aeohdæff; 1285.26, ief; 1285.28, raecu; 1285.30, rdffheafhil; 1285.32, desiaefiun; 1285.38, softriedi; 1286.2, ff; 1288.24, n; 1299.39, — Review, "; 1304.40—1305.1, somethat; 1305.3, vesification; 1306.28, "is; 1342.14, apared; 1345.30, *codices*; 1361.26, *leshimmanah*; 1386.37, *not*—; 1389.15, them?"; 1399.34, Ayretos; 1400.22 skaken; 1400.27, like; 1403.14, trival; 1420.34, "Thirdly; 1441.11, book, "; 1446.21, Shellyan; 1450.24, do.; 1457.2, Villiany; 1458.2, so so; 1461.21, coutemplating; 1464.10, *confreffe*; 1467.17, Constellation. Error corrected third printing: 936.20, εἰσπορευδμενος (LOA).

Notes

In the notes below, numbers refer to page and line of this volume (the line count includes chapter headings). No note is made for material included in a standard desk-reference book. Some queries concerning full names, authorship, and further mention of titles may be answered by checking the Index for cross-references. Notes at the foot of the page in the text are Poe's own.

THEORY OF POETRY

- 5.1 *Letter to B*—*] First published as the preface to *Poems* (1831) under the title "Letter to Mr. — ——" The identity of "B" is uncertain, though the publisher of the volume, Elam Bliss, is a strong likelihood. The text here is that reprinted in the *SLM* in 1836. It is unclear whether the footnote to the title is by T. W. White, owner and at that time editor of the *Messenger*, or by Poe himself.
- 7.7 Aristotle] *Poetics*, IX, 3. The phrase is taken out of context. Aristotle writes that poetry is more philosophical than history, for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. Poe seems to follow the lead of Wordsworth in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800): "Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writings."
- 7.18 *ceteris paribus*] "Other things being equal."
- 7.30—31 the devil in Melmoth] Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).
- 8.9—10 "Trifles . . . below,"] Slight misquotation from the Prologue (II, 25—26) of John Dryden's *All for Love* (1677). For "trifles" read "errors."
- 8.15—16 The ancients . . . well:] Democritus was alleged to have said that Truth lies at the bottom of a well; see Diogenes Laertius, *Pyrrho*, IX, 72.
- 8.22 *de omni . . . aliis*.] "Concerning all that can be known and certain other things."
- 9.11 volumes at random] The work referred to is Wordsworth's "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" in his *Collected Poems* (1815).
- 9.23 *Tantene animis?*] Short for "Why such anger?" From Virgil, *Aeneid*, I, II.
- 9.28 "*Temora*"] One of the "Ossian" poems of James MacPherson that Wordsworth alludes to in "Essay Supplementary to the Preface."
- 9.35—10.3 "And now . . . Doctor!"] From Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" (1798); the first two lines are reversed and two lines are omitted.

- 10.5-10 "The dew . . . stone." Wordsworth's "The Pet Lamb" (1800), with dashes added by Poe.
- 10.19-25 "Those who . . . title." From the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.
- 10.25-27 Yet let . . . turkeys.] A series of playful allusions: Wordsworth wrote a work called "The Waggoner" (1819); the "sore toe" is a reference to *Oedipus* ("swollen foot"); Sophocles was called "the Attic Bee" (see A. W. Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* [1808], Lecture VII) and was said by Pliny (*Natural History*, XXXVII, 40) to have used a chorus of guinea fowls to lament the death of Meleager in one of his plays.
- 10.30-32 "que . . . nient." "For the most part, most sects are right in what they advance, but not in what they deny." Quoted by Coleridge in Chapter II of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) as from Leibnitz, *Trois Lettres à M. Remond de Mont-Mort* (1741).
- 11.2 Nyctanthes] Night-blooming jasmine.
- 11.8 Corcyra] Corfu, frequently renamed throughout history.
- 11.10 "Tres-volontiers." Very willingly.
- 12.3-4 No . . . gallows.] From Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, Part II (1664), I, 272ff.
- 13.3-5 examination . . . backwards?] In 1841, while Dickens' novel *Barnaby Rudge* was still appearing serially, Poe predicted who the murderer would be (see his reviews, pp. 218-44 of the present volume). Godwin's statement about writing *Caleb Williams* (1794) backwards occurs in the preface.
- 20.12 Aidenn] Muslim term for paradise, *Adn* (Eden).
- 26.1 *The Rationale of Verse*] This essay incorporates most of the shorter treatment, titled "Notes upon English Verse," published in *The Pioneer*, March 1843.
- 27.31-34 "When a . . . hypermeter." Goold Brown, *The Institutes of English Grammar* (1833).
- 28.21-28 Bacon . . . Leonicensus.] This Bacon seems to have made an abridgment of Lindley Murray's influential *English Grammar: Comprehending the Principles and Rules of the English Language*; Alexander Miller, *A Concise Grammar of the Language* (1795); Allen Fisk, *Murray's English Grammar Simplified* (1822); Jeremiah Greenleaf, *Grammar Simplified; or, An Ocular Analysis of the English Language*, 10th ed. (1824); Charles M. Ingersoll, *Conversations on English Grammar*, 4th ed. (1824); Samuel Kirkham (for Kirkland), *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures*, 53rd ed. (1841); Joab Goldsmith Cooper, *An Abridgement of Murray's English Grammar* (1828); Abel Flint, *Murray's English Grammar Abridged* (1810); Hugh A. Pue, *A Grammar of the English Language* (1841); John Comly, *English Grammar*, 15th ed. (1826); William Lily, *Brevissima institutio, seu ratio grammatices cognoscendae, ad omnium puerorum utili-*

- taten prescripta; quam solam regia majestas in omnibus scholis docendam precipit* ["in all schools by royal injunction"] (1776); Omnibonus Leonicensus, *De octo partibus orationis* (1473).
- 30.5-9 Fallis . . . umbram.] From *Punica*, II, 342-46. "You are wrong if you believe he sits at table unarmed; / This lord is armed with the eternal greatness gained / From so many wars, so many slaughtered victims. / If you come close to him you will be astonished: / Cannae and Trebia will be before your eyes, the Trasimene graves / And Paulus' monstrous shade." (Translation by Anthony Kemp.)
- 31.20 a little ballad] By Henry B. Hirst; see Poe's review of his *The Coming of the Mammoth*, pp. 594-605.
- 32.5-6 *les moutons de Panurge*] The sheep of Panurge, a character in François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-52); this is a recurrent reference in Poe's criticism.
- 32.31-32 *Ex uno disce omnia.*] "From one thing learn all."
- 37.36 Parturiunt . . . mus.] "The laboring mountain gives birth to a ridiculous mouse." Horace, *Ars Poetica*, V, 139.
- 37.38 Litoreis . . . sus.] "You will find an immense sow under the oaks of the shore." Virgil, *Aeneid*, III, 390.
- 42.30-33 ὄη θῶου . . . χαῖρ.] Alexander Pope, 1st *Dunciad* (1728), II.19-22.
- 47.5 Christopher Pease Cranch] Poe consistently misspelled the name of Christopher Pease Cranch (1830-92).
- 47.7-12 Many are . . . losing.] "My Thoughts," printed in Rufus Wilmot Griswold, *Poets and Poetry of America* (1842) and Cranch's *Poems* (1844).
- 47.23-24 Coleridge . . . system] In his preface to "Christabel" (1816), Coleridge explains that the meter of the poem is "founded on a new principle; namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables"; four accents per line and any number of syllables from seven to twelve.
- 49.24 ἀστρολογος] An apparent error on Poe's part, derived from his misreading of Charles Anthon, *A System of Greek Prosody and Metre* (1842), where ἀστρολογος (astrologer) is used as an example of a word that scans as the foot called *paon primus*; ἀστρολογος, or *astrologos*, is not a term of Greek prosody.
- 61.28-33 Mæcenas . . . Deos.] Horace, *Odes*, I, 1. "Mæcenas, sprung from royal progenitors, / Oh, my protector and my dear glory, / There are those who delight in gathering / Olympic dust upon the racing-car, / Who cleared the turning-post with burning wheel. / Lords of earth, they carry to the gods / The celebrated palm." (Translation by Anthony Kemp.)