

THE

N A S S A U

Literary

M A G A Z I N E .

APRIL, 1871.

*ἔνθα βουλαὶ μὲν γερόντων καὶ νέων ἀνδρῶν ἄμλλαι
καὶ χοροὶ καὶ Μοῖσα καὶ ἀγλαΐα.*

CONDUCTED

BY THE SENIOR CLASS,

PRINCETON COLLEGE.

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY.

POETIC GENIUS OF POE.

“ Here comes Poe with his Raven, like Barnaby Rudge,
Two-fifths of him genius and three-fifths sheer fudge,”

the often repeated but only half-true lines of Mr. Lowell, have done as much harm, by their keen satire and the quaintness of their expression, to the memory of Poe, as nearly the whole of the adverse criticisms of other writers put together; they are eminently what are called “taking” lines, lines that fix themselves at a glance in the memory and obstinately refuse to be forgotten, lines that recur at the most untoward seasons and provoke a smile at the most unfortunate times. But are they true? This is a question each one must settle for himself, nor can he obtain help from the critics; Mr. Lowell was writing for effect, and professedly in a satirical vein, when he made use of the expression, and hence we must be on our guard in taking it as his honest opinion; and as for others, some have claimed for him the brilliancy not of a star only, but of the sun itself, while others are ready to prove he was no more in literature than he was in private life, a wild and reckless scribbler of incoherent and maudlin jargon. Now, while we should take care not to exalt him too highly, nor too closely to follow the extravagant opinions of the former class, we can but acknowledge no one can hold the views of the latter, who has ever read him with the understanding as well as the eyes. And we think even a very cursory examination will conclusively prove this.

Having, then, this end in view, we invite your attention to a very rapid glance at his style, assuring any one, who may not then be convinced, that he only needs to carefully study the works for himself, line by line and verse by verse, to be forced to acknowledge they are immortal.

Of meter he was a master, and the variety he evinced is as wonderful as the gracefulness he always secured. Few of his pieces, however, can be regularly scanned, for he used a system of versification of his own, which, however it may be proved unscientific, has yet proved amazingly musical. And such was his power of bending the meter to correspond to the sentiment, that he makes it almost tell the story without the help of words, and the regularly repeated feet grow sweetly tender, or cry out in the most piercing anguish, to suit only his will or mood; but they are always musical,—the cadences swell up into organ peals, or sink into the soft notes of that sweetest of all instruments, the flute, but, however they may change, they are always musical; never do the sounds grate upon the ear,—all is concord, all is harmony. It is never so sublime, it is true, as Milton's, nor is it ever so flowing as many of the great masters of poesy have made it, but Milton's sublimity would ill assort with "Annabel Lee," and a too smoothly flowing stream must be without the jutting rocks of passion which break the waters, it is true, but only to make them the more beautiful. His own meters perfectly accord with the weird fancies and shadowy forms that walk

" By the dismal tarns and pools
Where dwell the ghouls,"—

with his melancholy thoughts, "and sheeted memories of the past;" and a single change can hardly be imagined which would not be for the worse.

Words, too, owned his sway and bent in homage at his feet, obeying his every behest. Well did he know, as has been truly said, their power, and well did he also know how to turn that power to his profit. It is wonderful what a command over them he had, how he could express every emotion and passion so truthfully by the sound, as well as in so masterly a manner reproduce even the tinkle

of the bells. We hazard nothing in asserting there is in no language so magnificent a tribute to the power of words as mere sounds, so beautiful an example of true knowledge of the phonetic elements, as this "rhyming and chiming of the bells."

"From the molten golden throats,
And all in tune,
What a liquid ditty floats "

to our ears as we list to the varied combinations and admire the subtle skill expended in their construction! What a play of feeling they produce with the merry tinkle of the silver, the mellow chiming of the golden, the loud alarm of the brazen, and the solemn tolling of the iron bells! What a train of imaginations they bring up! What delicious melody they produce! The whole vocabulary was at his bidding and offered its choicest music to his will, and this music he used, but unfortunately sometimes even at the expense of sense. It was seldom, however, that he allowed himself to commit this fault, and we can forgive the few cases in which he did fall into the snare, for the beautiful harmony which pervades his more successful, which are fortunately by far the more frequent, attempts at giving the words themselves their parts to act, making them correspond to the sentiment in sound, as well as in sense.

But, while admiring his command of meter and words, we must not lose sight of the fact that the true attraction of his poetry is, as always must be the case in every literary production, in the sentiment. Always one, sometimes all of the three elements he himself named as desirable in poetry, are present—mystery, melancholy and love. Mystery, indeed, is a ruling principle, she is the ghostly mime who acts the chief rôle on that stage where nearly all the subordinate parts are filled by other forms of herself, and where her twin sister, Horror, stalks back and forth among the

scenes. Her black wings hang over even his fairest pictures, casting a gloom and shadow over every piece of brilliant imagery. Grief also occupies a prominent position, and some of his best pieces sound this as their key-note, and in some of these, their key-note is their only strain. With unsparing hand he painted scenes teeming with terrific grandeur, or even scenes whose almost only claim for notice is their possession of just these two qualities,—the horrible and the melancholy. And, faithful to his expressed opinion, he also frequently introduces love, and where he does, he in no wise does himself dishonor. “Annabel Lee,” the calm beauty and sweet low music of which are, without qualification, unsurpassed, gives evidence of his power even in this sphere, a sphere so different from his ordinary wild ravings. For loveliness and pathos it is unequalled in the English language, and the artful artlessness of its construction aids in casting an irresistible charm over the whole. “Lenore,” too, derives all of its immense influence over the feelings from the ravings of a heart-broken lover, and the “Raven” has its power greatly enhanced by a passing allusion to that rare and radiant maiden. All three of these pieces, too, breathe with sadness; in fact, love is subordinate to a sorrowful longing for the object of its affection, now lost to it forever. And so it is in everything he wrote,—he never introduces love as a governing idea, and only in the sweetest of all his pieces, “Annabel Lee,” is it not studiously kept well in the background.

Always striving after the portrayal of such feelings, the strange, weird character of his verse is not to be wondered at,—the improbability which too often weakens the effect, the overstraining which defeats the very object to gain which it is employed. It is but a step from the sublime to the ridiculous is an old saying, but a saying which has lost none of its truth with its youth, and never does any other poet

so recklessly tread on the very boundary which separates the two. So that it is not so surprising that he sometimes oversteps it, as that he so seldom does,—as that his soaring is as successful as it is bold, the wonder of which is, as Dr. Johnson said of the dancing dog, not that he does it so well, but that he does it all. And one of the strangest things about it is that this improbability and straining for effect is not found here and there only, but in nearly every one of his pieces;—even his best are tainted with it.

“ For we cannot help agreeing
That no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing
 Bird above his chamber door—
Bird or beast upon the sculptured
 Bust above the chamber door,
 With such a name as ‘ Nevermore.’ ”

But with all his defects, his poetry possesses a charm which is as indescribable as it is real and great, a charm which does not, like that of the fabulous Ossian, take captive the young and uncultivated alone with its pompous declamation and high sounding epithets, but which grows in its influence as we grow in years, and increases in its power over us as we increase in breadth of mind and scope of understanding. The chief elements which enter into his verse are those we have named; they are elements which hardly seem to account for its beauty and vigor; and yet, when used as he alone knew how to use them, and when overspread with the wealth of his vivid and peculiar imagination, they have power to wondrously act on that which, if it needs less strength, yet requires infinitely more skill and delicacy of touch to move than even the world itself—the heart of man. And any examination which deals with the skeleton only, and not the rounded and complete form, can but result in bringing home to us, with new force, the trite truth that the real source of the influence of poetry, and of Poe’s poetry

especially, can not thus be understood, but that we can only obtain an idea of it by allowing the light from the finished production to enter and illuminate our minds.

And now we repeat the question with which we started out: is the slur, which forms the very life of Mr. Lowell's couplet, founded on fact? And we have no hesitancy in answering, it is not. The day is past when abuses are to be heaped on Poe's name, and the day now is when his genius is seen and admired,—a genius which gave promise of almost wonderful greatness, but which was prematurely choked down by dissoluteness and profligacy. Though tied down, however, to such a life, it *would* soar at times, and the poems we have been discussing are part of its fruit. We need not enter into any further defense of them, they speak for themselves and thunder forth now, and will forever,

“ Not all our power is gone—not all our fame—
 Not all the magic of our high renown—
 Not all the wonder that encircles us—
 Not all the mysteries that in us lie—
 Not all the memories that hang upon
 And cling around about us as a garment,
 Clothing us in a robe of more than glory.”

N. E. D.

Despise not the wrinkles of age
 That disfigure and furrow the face,
 They mark not the fool, but the sage
 That has run, with his might, the good race.

Not ruts, that old Time's wheel has brought,
 Are these lines that the wisest must wear,
 But furrows with great seeds of thought
 Thickly sown,—seeds of thought, and of care.