

# An Insurrection of the Peasantry

By Ambrose Bierce



WHEN a man of genius who is not famous writes a notable poem he must expect one or two of three things: indifference, indignation, ridicule. In commending Mr. George Sterling's "A Wine of Wizardry," published in the September number of this magazine, I had this reception of his work in confident expectation and should have mistrusted my judgment if it had not followed. The promptitude of the chorus of denunciation and scorn attested the superb character of the poet's work and was most gratifying.

The reason for the inevitable note of dissent is not far to seek; it inheres in the constitution of the human mind, which is instinctively hostile to what is "out of the common"—and a work of genius is pretty sure to be that. It is by utterance of uncommon thoughts, opinions, sentiments, and fancies that genius is known. All distinction is difference, unconformity. He who is as others are—whose mental processes and manner of expression follow the familiar order—is readily acceptable because easily intelligible to those whose narrow intelligence, barren imagination, and meager vocabulary he shares. "Why, that is great!" says that complacent dullard, "the average man," smiling approval. "I have thought that a hundred times myself!"—thereby supplying abundant evidence that it is not great, nor of any value whatever. To "the average man" what is new is inconceivable, and what he does not understand affronts him. And he is the first arbiter in letters and art. In this "fierce democracie" he dominates literature with a fat and heavy hand—a hand that is not always unfamiliar with the critic's pen.

In returning here to the subject of Mr. Sterling's poem I have no intention of expounding and explaining it to persons

who know nothing of poetry and are inaccessible to instruction. Those who, in the amusing controversy which I unwittingly set raging round Mr. Sterling's name, have spoken for them are in equal mental darkness and somewhat thicker moral, as it is my humble hope to prove.

When the cause to be served is ignorance, the means of service is invariably misrepresentation. The champion of offended Dulness falsifies in statement and cheats in argument, for he serves a client without a conscience. A knowledge of right and wrong is not acquired to-day, as in the time of Adam and Eve, by eating an apple; it is attained by only the highest intelligences.

But before undertaking the congenial task of pointing out the moral unworth of my honorable opponents, it seems worth while to explain that the distinguished proponent of the controversy has had the deep misfortune to misunderstand the question at issue. He has repeatedly fallen into the error of affirming, with all the emphasis of shouting capitals, that "Ambrose Bierce says it ["A Wine of Wizardry"] is the greatest poem ever written in America," and at least once has declared that I pronounced it "the only great poem ever written in America." If the dispute had been prolonged I shudder to think that his disobedient understanding might have misled him to say that I swore it was the only great poem ever written in the world.

To those who know me it is hardly needful, I hope, to explain that I said none of the words so generously put into my mouth, for it is obvious that I have not seen, and could not have seen, all the poems that have been written in America. To have pronounced such a judgment without all the evidence would have been to resemble my opponents—which God forbid! In point of fact I do not consider the poem the greatest ever written in America; Mr. Sterling himself, for example, has written a greater.

Naturally, not all protagonists of the commonplace who have uttered their minds about this matter are entitled to notice. The *Baseball Reporter* who, says Mr. Brisbane, "like Mr. Sterling, is a poet," the *Sweet Singer of Slang*, the *Simian Lexicographer of Misinformation*, and the *Queen of Platitude* who has renounced the sin-and-sugar of youth for the milk-and-morality of age must try to forgive me if I leave them grinning through their respective horse-collars to a not unkind inattention.

But Deacon Harvey is a person of note and consequence. On a question of poetry, I am told, he controls nearly the entire Methodist vote. Moreover, he has a notable knack at mastery of the English language, which he handles with no small part of the ease and grace that may have distinguished the impenitent thief carrying his cross up the slope of Calvary. Let the following noble sentences attest the quality of his performance when he is at his best:

"A natural hesitation to undertake analysis of the unanalyzable, criticism of the uncriticizable, or, if we may go so far, mention of the unmentionable, yields to your own shrewd forging of the links of circumstance into a chain of duty. That the greatest poem ever written on this hemisphere, having forced its way out of a comfortable lodgment in the brain of an unknown author, should be discovered and heralded by a connoisseur whose pre-eminence is yet to be established, is perhaps in itself not surprising, and yet we must admit that the mere rarity of such a happening would ordinarily preclude the necessity, which otherwise might exist, of searching inquiry as to the attributed transcendentalism of merit."

Surely a man who habitually writes such prose as that must be a good judge of poetry or he would not be a good judge of anything in literature. And what does this Prince Paramount of grace and clarity find to condemn in poor Mr. Sterling's poem? Listen with at least one ear:

"We are willing to admit at the outset that in the whole range of American, or, for that matter, English, poetry there is no example of a poem crowded with such startling imagery, ambitiously marshaled in lines of such lurid impressiveness, all of which at once arrest attention and would bewilder the esthetic sensibility of a Titan. The poem is made up of an unbroken series of

sententious and striking passages, any one of which would have distinguished a whole canto of Dante or Keats, neither of whom would have ventured within that limit to use more than one—such was their niggardly economy."

Here is something "rich and strange" in criticism. Heretofore it has been thought that "wealth of imagery" was about the highest quality that poetry could have, but it seems not; that somewhat tiresome phrase is to be used henceforth to signify condemnation. Of the poem that we wish to commend we must say that it has an admirable poverty of imagery. Deacon Harvey's notion that great poets like Dante and Keats deliberately refrained from using more than one "sententious and striking passage" to the canto "goes neare to be fony." They used as many as occurred to them; no poet uses fewer than he can. If he has only one to a canto, that is not economy; it is indigence.

I observe that even so good a poet and so appreciative a reader of Mr. Sterling as Miss Ina Coolbrith has fallen into the same error as Deacon Harvey. Of "the many pictures presented in that wondrous 'Wine of Wizardry,'" this accomplished woman says, "I think it is a 'poem'—a great poem—but one which, in my humble estimate, might have been made even greater could its creator have permitted himself to drop a little of what some may deem a weakening superfluity of imagery and word-painting."

If one is to make "pictures" in poetry one must do so by word-painting. (I admit the hatefulness of the term "word-painting," through overuse of the name in praise of the prose that the thing defaces, but it seems that we must use it here.) Only in narrative and didactic poetry, and these are the lowest forms, can there be too much of imagery and word-painting; in a poem essentially graphic, like the one under consideration, they are the strength and soul of the work. "A Wine of Wizardry" is, and was intended to be, a series, a succession, of unrelated pictures, colored—mostly red, naturally—by what gave them birth and being—the reflection of a sunset in a cup of ruddy wine. To talk of too much imagery in a work of that kind is to be like Deacon Harvey.

Imagery, that is to say, imagination, is not only the life and soul of poetry; it is the poetry. That is what Poe had in

mind when he contended that there could be no such thing as a long poem. He had observed that what are called long poems consist of brief poetical passages connected by long passages of metrical prose—*recitativo*—oases of green in deserts of gray. The highest flights of imagination have always been observed to be the briefest. George Sterling has created a new standard, another criterion. In "A Wine of Wizardry," as in his longer and greater work, "The Testimony of the Suns," there is no *recitativo*. His imagination flies with a tireless wing. It never comes to earth for a new spring into the sky, but, like the eagle and the albatross, sustains itself as long as he chooses that it shall. His passages of poetry are connected by—passages of poetry. In all his work you will find no line of prose. Poets of the present and the future may well "view with alarm"—as Statesman Harvey would say—the work that Sterling has cut out for them, the pace that he has set. Poetry must henceforth be not only qualitative but quantitative: it must be *all* poetry. If wise, the critic will note the new criterion that this bold challenge to the centuries has made mandatory. The "long poem" has been shown to be possible; let us see if it become customary.

In affirming Mr. Sterling's primacy among living American poets I have no apology to offer to the many unfortunates who have written to me in the spirit of the man who once said of another: "What! that fellow a great man? Why, he was born right in my town!" It is humbly submitted, however, that unless the supply of great men is exhausted they must be born somewhere, and the fact that they are seen "close to" by their neighbors does not supply a reasonable presumption against their greatness. Shakespeare himself was once a local and contemporary poet, and even Homer is known to have been born in "seven Grecian cities" through which he "begged his bread." Is Deacon Harvey altogether sure that he is immune to the popular inability to understand that the time and place of a poet's nativity are not decisive as to his rating? He may find a difficulty in believing that a singer of supreme excellence was born right in *his* country and period, but in the words that I have quoted from him he has himself testified to the fact. To be able to write an unbroken series of sententious and striking passages; to crowd a poem, as no other in

the whole range of our literature has done, with startling imagery in lines of impressiveness, lurid or not; to arrest attention; to bewilder the Titans, Deacon Harvey at their head—that is about as much as the most ambitious poet could wish to accomplish at one sitting. The ordinary harpist harping on his *Harpers'* would be a long time in doing so much. How any commentator, having in those words conceded my entire claim, could afterward have the hardihood to say, "The poem has no merit," transcends the limits of human comprehension and passes into the dark domain of literary criticism.

Nine in ten of the poem's critics complain of the fantastic, grotesque, or ghastly nature of its fancies. What would these good persons have on the subject of wizardry?—sweet and sunny pictures of rural life?—love scenes in urban drawing-rooms?—beautiful sentiments appropriate to young ladies' albums?—high moral philosophy with an "appeal" to what is "likest God within the soul"? Deacon Harvey (Oh, I cannot get away from Deacon Harvey: he fascinates me!) would have "an interpretation of vital truth." I do not know what that is, but we have his word for it that nothing else is poetry. And no less a personage than Mrs. Gertrude Atherton demands, instead of wizardry, an epic of prehistoric California, or an account of the great fire, preferably in prose, for, "this is not an age of poetry, anyway." Alas, poor Sterling!—damned alike for what he wrote and what he didn't write. Truly, there are persons whom one may not hope to please.

It should in fairness be said that Mrs. Atherton confesses herself no critic of poetry—the only person, apparently, who is not—but pronounces Mr. Sterling a "recluse" who "needs to see more and read less." From a pretty long acquaintance with him I should say that this middle-aged man o' the world is as little "reclusive" as any one that I know and has seen rather more of life than is good for him. And I doubt if he would greatly gain in mental stature by unreading Mrs. Atherton's excellent novels.

Sterling's critics are not the only persons who seem a bit blinded by the light of his genius: Mr. Joaquin Miller, a born poet and as great-hearted a man as ever lived, is not quite able to "place" him. He says that this "titanic, magnificent" poem is

"classic" "in the Homeric, the Miltonic sense." "A Wine of Wizardry" is not "classic" in the sense in which scholars use that word. It is all color and fire and movement, with nothing of the cold simplicity and repose of the Grecian ideal. Nor is it Homeric, nor in the Miltonic vein. It is in no vein but the author's own; in the entire work is only one line suggesting the manner of another poet—the last in this passage,

Who leads from hell his whitest queens, arrayed  
In chains so heated at their master's fire  
That one new-damned had thought their bright  
attire  
Indeed were coral, till the dazzling dance  
So terribly that brilliance shall enhance.

That line, the least admirable in the poem, is purely Byronic. Possibly Mr. Miller meant that Sterling's work is like Homer's and Milton's, not in manner but in excellence; and it is.

Mr. Sterling's critics may at least claim credit for candor. For cause of action, as the lawyers say, they aver his use of strange, unfamiliar words. Now this is a charge that any man should be ashamed to make; first, because it is untrue; second, because it is a confession of ignorance. There are not a half-dozen words in the poem that are not in common use by good authors, and not one that any man should not blush to say that he does not understand. The objection amounts to this: that the poet did not write down to the objector's educational level—did not adapt his work to the meanest capacity. Under what obligation was he to do so? There are men whose vocabulary does not exceed a few hundreds of words; they know not the meaning of the others because they have not the thoughts that the others express. Shall these Toms, Dicks, and Harrys of the slums and cornfields set up their meager acquirements as metes and bounds beyond which a writer shall not go? Let them stay upon their reservations. There are poets enough, great poets, too, whom they can partly understand; that is, they can understand the simple language, the rimes, the meter—everything but the meaning. There are orders of poetry, as there are orders of architecture. Because a Grecian temple is beautiful shall there be no Gothic cathedrals? By the way, it is not without significance that Gothic architecture was first so called in derision, the Goths having no architecture.

The passage that has provoked this class of critics to the most shameless feats of self-exposure is this,

Infernal rubrics, sung to Satan's might,  
Or chanted to the Dragon in his gyre.

Upon this they have expended all the powers of ridicule belonging to those who respect nothing because they know nothing. A person of light and leading in their bright band says of it:

"We confess that we had never before heard of a 'gyre.' Looking it up in the dictionary, we find that it means a gyration, or a whirling round. Rubrics chanted to a dragon while he was whirling ought to be worth hearing."

Now, whose fault is it that this distinguished journalist had never heard of a gyre? Certainly not the poet's. And whose that in very sensibly looking it up he suffered himself to be so misled by the lexicographer as to think it a gyration, a whirling round? Gyre means, not a gyration, but the path of a gyration, an orbit. And has the poor man no knowledge of a dragon in the heavens—the constellation Draco, to which, as to other stars, the magicians of old chanted incantations? A peasant is not to be censured for his ignorance, but when he glories in it and draws its limit as a dead-line for his betters he is the least pleasing of all the beasts of the field.

An amusing instance of the commonplace mind's inability to understand anything having a touch of imagination is found in a criticism of the now famous lines,

The blue-eyed vampire, sated at her feast,  
Smiles bloodily against the leprous moon.

"Somehow," says the critic, who, naturally, is a book-reviewer, "one does not associate blue eyes with a vampire." Of course it did not occur to him that this was doubtless the very reason why the author chose the epithet—if he thought of anybody's conception but his own. "Blue-eyed" connotes beauty and gentleness; the picture is that of a lovely, fair-haired woman with the telltale blood about her lips. Nothing could be less horrible; nothing more terrible. As vampires do not really exist, everyone is at liberty, I take it, to conceive them under what outward and visible aspect he will; but this gentleman, having standardized the vampire, naturally resents any departure from the type—his type. I fancy he requires goggle-eyes, emitting flame

and perhaps smoke, a mouth well garnished with tusks, long claws, and all the other appurtenances that make the conventional Chinese dragon so awful that one naturally wishes to meet and kick it.

Between my mind and the minds of those whom Mr. Sterling's daring incursions into the realm of the unreal do not affect with a keen artistic delight there is nothing in common—except a part of my vocabulary. I cannot hope to convince or persuade them. Nevertheless, it is no trouble to point out that their loud pretense of being "shocked" by some of his fancies is a singularly foolish one. We are not shocked by the tragic, the terrible, even the ghastly in literature and art. We do not flee from the theater when a tragedy is enacting—the murder of Duncan and the sleeping grooms, the stabbing and poisoning in Hamlet. We listen without discomposure to the beating to death of Nancy Sykes behind the scenes. The Ancient Mariner's dead comrades rise and pull at the ropes without disturbing the reader; even the "slimy things" "crawl with legs upon a slimy sea" and we do not pitch the book into the fire. Dante's underworld, with all its ingenious horrors, page after page of them, are accounted pretty good reading—at least Dante is accounted a pretty good poet. No one stands forth to affirm his distress when Homer's hero declares that

Swarms of specters rose from deepest hell  
With bloodless visage and with hideous yell.  
They scream, they shriek; sad groans and dismal sounds  
Stun my scared ears and pierce hell's utmost bounds.

Literature is full of pictures of the terrible, the awful, the ghastly, if you please; hardly a great author but has given them to us in prose or verse. They shock nobody, for they produce no illusion, not even on the stage, or the canvases of Vereshchagin. If they did they would be without artistic value.

But it is the fashion to pretend to be horrified—when the terrible thing is new and by an unfamiliar hand. The Philistine who accepts without question the horrors of Dante's hell professes himself greatly agitated when Sterling's

Satan, yawning on his brazen seat,  
Fondles a screaming thing his fiends have  
flayed.

In point of fact the poor Philistine himself yawns as he reads about it; he is not shocked at all. It is comprehensible how there may be such a thing as a mollycoddle, but how one can pretend to be a mollycoddle when one is not—that must be accepted as the most surprising hypocrisy that we have the happiness to know about.

Having affirmed the greatness of Mr. Sterling, I am austerely reminded by a half-hundred commentators, some of whom profess admiration for "A Wine of Wizardry," that a single poem, of whatever excellence, does not establish the claim. Like nearly all the others, these gentlemen write without accuracy from a general impression. They overlook the circumstance that I pointed out a book by Sterling, published several years ago, entitled "The Testimony of the Suns and Other Poems." What, then, becomes of the "single poem" sneer? To its performers nothing that they have not seen exists.

The book is dedicated to me—a fact that has been eagerly seized upon by still another class of critics to "explain" my good opinion of its author; for nothing is so welcome to our literary hill-tribes as a chance to cheat by ascription of a foul motive. But it happens, unhappily for the prosperity of their hope, that the dedication was made in gratitude for my having already set the crown of praise upon its author's head. I will quote the first lines, not only in proof of this, but to show the noble seriousness and sincerity with which a great poet regards his ministry at the altar of his art:

Ah! glad to thy decree I bow,  
From whose unquestioned hand did fall,  
Beyond a lesser to recall,  
The solemn laurels on my brow.

I tremble with the splendid weight.  
To my unworth 'tis given to know  
How dread the charge I undergo  
Who claim the holy Muse as mate.

It is to be hoped that Mr. Sterling's reverent attitude toward his art has suffered no abatement from his having been thrown to the swine for allegiance to an alien faith hateful to his countrymen.