

THE POETRY OF READ.*

BY CHARLES J. PETERSON.

THE publication of an elegantly illustrated volume suggests to us to consider Mr. Read as a poet. It is for grace, melody, keen sympathies, knowledge of nature, and delicate appreciation of the beautiful, that he generally receives credit. We think he might aim at a higher walk, with fair prospects of success, if he would but "gird up his loins for the battle;" and that this is his own opinion, we judge from an entirely new work, "The House by the Sea," in which he makes the attempt. Before we have finished, it will be seen how far, in our opinion, he has succeeded. Having made the venture, it is incumbent on him to go on, for to fail, if the latent capacity lies within him to triumph, would now be dishonor.

"The House by the Sea," is a wild, wierd story, full of forcible descriptive passages, and characterized by unusual license both as to incidents and to style. The poet has plainly given free scope in it to his genius, determined to test his capacity to the utmost, as well in regard to positive strength as to originality and self-reliance. The chief actors are a solitary exile, inhabiting a lonely house that beetles over the sea; and a fisherman's daughter, Agatha, one of those incarnations of innocence and piety, whom poets love to delineate. The exile, in earlier life, has been the victim of a great sorrow. Fate has separated him from his mistress; she has perished by suicide; and he has fled, in gloomy despair, to this secret haunt. One night, in the midst of a terrible storm, a ship is cast away near his dwelling. Two persons only are rescued, Ida, his lost mistress, and her confessor. That is, they wear the likeness of these, but are really evil spirits: and their mission is to tear Roland from the young girl, by reviving his old affection. For awhile their scheme promises to succeed. They induce the exile to embark, on the ensuing day, on board their vessel, itself a dragon-fiend. But Agatha, at this crisis of Roland's fate, and when the plot against his soul appears about to triumph, becomes the instrument of his rescue.

The poem concludes with the flight of the baffled deamons; the union of the two lovers: and the restoration of Roland to happiness and usefulness, under the sweet guidance of Agatha.

To arrive at a just estimate of "The House by the Sea," its element of *diablerie* must be continually borne in mind, otherwise some of the finest passages will lose much of their force and significance. For example, when the shipwrecked lady is carried to Roland's hearth, accompanied by the monk, the knowledge that she and her confessor are not what they seem, gives additional meaning to the verse; for that, which else would be only a graphic delineation of a tempest, rises to a revelation that demoniac attendants are abroad, that they crowd about the house, that they rush in as the door opens.

"Was it the sound of a human cry,
Or wail of a night-bird driven by?
The lady started and halfway rose,
With that look the walking sleeper shows—
With large eyes staring vacantly,
That seem to listen and not to see."

"Even while she spoke, as if at her will,
The door swung wide and over the sill
The gust and the roar and the spray swept in."

"And the old monk murmured—'My blessing is thine.'

While he laid his hand on her shining hair;
But it seemed like a fiery gauntlet there!

Then tracing his girdle and fumbling his dress,
He cried with a visage of deep distress,
'Oh, wo is me! They are lost in the sea—
That miracle cross and rosary!
Torn from my side in these desperate shocks
When the billows were lifting me over the rocks.

Oh, wo is me! They were made from a tree
In the garden of holy Geth—'

*Here the sea,
Through the open door, hurled into the place
Such a cloud of spray that the old man's face
Was smothered with brine. The white torch hissed,
And all the room was blind with the mist."*

The skill with which, throughout the poem, the demoniac element is brought out, through this principle of association, proves Mr. Read a natural artist in poetry. In the description of the dragon-barque, we feel that it is a sentient thing we are reading of, a fiend-ship and not mere timbers. The sneering monk is as ably delineated. His first appearance is a picture, complete, and needing no accessories.

* Poems by Thomas Buchanan Read. Illustrated edition. 1 vol. Philada: Parry & McMillan. 1855.

The House by the Sea. A Poem. By Thomas Buchanan Read. 1 vol. Philada: Parry & McMillan. 1856.

"There came the monk in his robe of brown,
Over his breast his white beard blown
And sparkling like a gust of foam;
*As if old Neptune should leave his home,
To travel the dry land up and down
Disguised in a friar's hood and gown."*

But it is when he describes modern Rome, and especially when he falls on his knees to pray, that we detect his counterfeit.

"The monk fell in the pathway prone,
And lay, like a statue overthrown;
Muttering harshly to the air
Something that passed for a hurried prayer.

And when the bell was done, he rose
Red in the face as a furnace glows—
And cried, 'Now, hang that sacristan!
What pious crank has got into the man,
Thus to be ringing a vesper tune
In the very middle of afternoon?
It takes one down so unawares
That one can scarcely remember his prayers!
And besides, we have an old tradition,
Which may be merely superstition,
*That when one kneels and forgets his prayer,
The Devil is also kneeling there!"*

The accumulation of similes, metaphors, and other analogies, all associated with demoniacal ideas, in the scene after the embarkation, is another evidence of his skill. So adroitly has the poet managed it, that the very air seems to glow, a terrible light gleams around, and the songs that are sung have an undertone of horrible mockery. Unquestionably this is one of the finest parts of the poem. We quote the description of the lady's musical instruments and of her music, as proof of this.

"And it looked as it had only been
Waked to *mysterious melodies,*
On *phantom lakes and enchanted seas,*
Flashing to fingers *weird and wan,*
In the minstrel ages lost and gone."

Round and round the cadence flew,
Sailing aloft and dropping low,
Now soaring with the wild sea-mew,
Flushing its breast in the sunset glow,
Then slowly dropping down the air,
Wailing with a wild despair,
Down and down,
Till it seemed to drown,
With wide pinions on the brine,
Weltering with no living sign,
Till the listener's pitying eye
Wept that so fair a thing should die.
Then with malicious laughter loud
Jeering the sighing hearer's grief,
In a moment wild and brief,
Filling the air with mockery,
It leapt to the sky and pierced the cloud."

Rowland listened, confused, amazed,
While an *unknown frenzy* thrilled his heart;
And Agatha on the lady gazed
With steadfast eyes and lips apart;
And there sat the friar *smoothing his beard,*
As into the maiden's eyes he peered
With a *sidelong sinister glance;*
While she, as one in a charmed trance

Bending forward, could only see
Roland leaning on the lady's knee,
With pale, bewildered countenance,
Gazing up in her face, *which beamed*
As if a torchlight on it gleamed;
And flushed as with an orient wine.
Where passion's swift and fitful flame
On the breath of music went and came
Like a gusty blaze on a heathen shrine."

The description of the flight of the baffled fiends, after their prey has escaped, is in a similar strain. In all these passages, the poet towers and towers, till he reaches a height whence he swoops downward with resistless force.

"The lady standing beyond the door,
Like one whose despair can bear no more,
Shrieked a fiendish shriek of wrath;
And, *with a hollow sepulchral sound,*
Her body fell upon the ground
And lay a corpse along the path!

And then a shadow, *like a cloud*
On a *hissing whirlwind fierce and loud,*
Swept seaward, pierced with curses and shrieks,
Which like the lightning's fiery streaks
Flashed madly through the twilight shades,
Cleaving the air with sulphurous blades!

Then the people ran to the headland height
With the fascination of wonder and fright—
And saw the little dragon-bark,
Speeding out to the eastern dark—
Away and away, as swift and bright
As a red flamingo's sudden flight.

And climbing the black rocks higher and higher
They gazed and gazed with aching sight—
Till into the distant realm of night
They saw it pass—a ship on fire!"

Those who have thought Mr. Read capable only of graceful and tender lyrics will be struck, we think, with the force here displayed. In an earlier portion of the poem, however, occurs a passage of even greater power than any of these: it is a description of the suicide's hell.

"Then I saw that by the horrible deed
The chain was Sundered, yet I was not freed;
I had burst away from a windowed cell
Into a dungeon unfathomable—
Into utter night—where I could only hear
The sighing of cold phantoms near!
I shrank with dread; but soon I knew
They also shrank with dread from me;
And presently I began to see
Thin shapes of such a ghastly hue
That sudden agues thrilled me through!

'Some bore in their hands, as signs of guilt,
Keen poinards crimson to the hilt,
Which, ever and anon, in wild despair
They struck into their breasts of air:
Some pressed to their pale lips empty vials
Till frenzied with their fruitless trials:
Some with their faces to the sky,
Walked ever searching for a beam:
Some leaped from shadowy turrets high,
And fell, as in a nightmare dream,
Halfway, and stopped, as some mad rill,
That leaps from the top of an alpine hill;
Ere it reaches the rocks it hoped to win,
Is borne away in a vapor thin;

Some plunged them into counterfeit pools—
 Into water that neither drowns nor cools
 The horrible fever that burns the brain,
 Then climbed despairing to plunge again:
 And there were lovers together clasped,
 O'er fumeless brazures, who sighed and gasped,
 Staring wonder in each other's eye,
 And tantalized that they did not die.

'Then as I passed, with marvelling stare
 They gazed, forgetting their own despair.
 Oh, horrible! their eyes did gleat
 Upon me, till at my ashen throat
 I felt the fiery viper thirst
 Which ever in that dry air is nurst.
 And ere I was aware
 I had raised the cup it was mine to bear:
 My pale lips cleaved to the goblet dim,
 And found but dust on the heated rim.'

As a necessary relief to these terrible verses, where horror is accumulated on horror till the blood runs chill, we give the climax of joy and rejoicing with which the poem may be said to conclude. Escaped from the dragon-barque, with Agatha fainting in his arms, Roland gains a church near the sea, the lady and the monk following in pursuit, until checked by the sacred threshold. While the disguised fiends stand gnashing their teeth without, the hero bears the insensible form to the foot of the altar, and kissing her, adjures the sweet girl to awake. The caress revives her. We leave the poet to tell the rest.

"A moment surveying the sacred place,
 Her blue eyes turned, then with modest grace
 Gazing up into Roland's face,
 Her sweet tongue said, in its first release,
 With words which seemed breathed from the lips of
 peace—

'The spell is past! Oh, hour divine!
 Thou, thou art mine! and I am thine!'

And the listening shadows cool and grey,
 In the gallery, like a responding choir,
 Where the organ glowed like an altar-fire,
 Seemed to the echoing vault to say,
 Softly as at a nuptial shrine—
 'Thou art mine! and I am thine!'
 And still through the breathless moments after,
 Like doves beneath the sheltering rafter,
 Along the roof in faint decline,
 The echoes whispered with voices fine—
 'Mine and thine! mine and thine!'

And now, like a golden trumpet, blown
 To make a glorious victory known,
 The organ with its roll divine,
 Poured abroad from its thrilling tongue
 Words the sweetest ever sung—
 'Mine and thine! mine and thine!'

And up in the tower the iron bell
 Suddenly felt the joyous spell,
 And flung its accents clear and gay,
 As if it were rung on a wedding-day;
 And like a singer swaying his head
 To mark the time
 Of some happy rhyme,
 Breathing his heart in every line,
 Thus swayed the bell, and swaying said—
 'Mine and thine! mine and thine!'

Many passages of almost equal beauty, though less sustained, are scattered through the poem. A few random selections are all we can give.

"Out of the East the moon arose
 Red as Mont Blanc at morning glows;
 Over the sea, like a ship on fire,
 She sailed with her one star sailing by her."

"Far and wide through the valley round
 Sailed the silver wings of sound—
 Like a flock of doves rung out,
 Wheeling joyfully about,
 Flashing from their pinions white
 A sense of quiet and delight."

"The sea, to one of its slumberous calms,
 Now sunk as it never would waken more:
 Its breakers were only as flocks of lambs
 Bleating and gambolling along the shore.
 Where of late the storm-lion insane
 Had shaken abroad his tumultuous mane,
 Frightening the land with his rage and his roar."

The defect of the poem is an occasional carelessness, sometimes in thought, and sometimes in the execution. In the following otherwise fine passage, not only is the pathway of the stars compared to the track of a snail, a sad descent, but the grandeur of the whole is still further weakened, at what ought to be the culminating point, by the figure in the two closing lines.

"This very moment we hold a place
 Never filled before in space—
 Where never again the world shall reel—
 The same wave never revisits the wheel.

Year by year our course is run
 In a voyage around the sun;
 In million circlings forth and back
 We never retrace a once gone track.
 Did the countless earths abroad, like snails,
 Leave behind them shining trails,
 What a web of strange design
 Through the eternal space would shine!
 And such a web of marvellous lines
 Left by each satellite and sun,
 Though by us unseen, still clearly shines
 To the observant eye of One.

And did the countless souls of men
 Leave life-trails visible to the ken,
 Each hued with color to betray
 The character which passed that way,
 How intricate and variously hued
 Would seem the woof of pathways rude
 Across the world's great surface laid!
 And so invowen with lines of shade,
 Of vice and cruelty, anger and hate,
 That darkness would preponderate!
 And such a woof of tangled trails
 Lies o'er the world and never pales—
 Never varies. On earth's great page
 Each soul records its pilgrimage,
 And under the eye of God each shines
 As visible in eternal lines,
 As on the cliff I see from here
 The various strata lines appear."

Is not the solution to this error to be found in the essentially synthetical character of Read's mind? If we have correctly studied his intellect, as revealed in his poems, it is deficient in analysis. Poe, for example, wrote poetry as a

mason builds a house. He raised up the fabric of a poem, thought by thought, metaphor by metaphor, line by line, fitting, rejecting, trimming and squaring, exactly like a brick-layer erecting a wall. Why? Because his genius was altogether analytical, so that it was impossible for him to construct a poem, except by first dissecting the works of the great masters, discovering the secrets they employed, and then laboriously selecting and arranging his materials. In saying this we do not speak speculatively, for circumstances threw us, for years, into daily literary companionship with Poe, so that the processes of his mind became perfectly familiar to us. Synthetical intellects work in a different way. They possess a power of assimilating to themselves, instinctively, the ideas that are in harmony with what they wish to write about. Or rather they become *en rapport*, unconsciously, with analogies and associations bearing on their subject. They usually write their best things with freedom and even rapidity; and unused to analyze, call this inspiration. It was, in such a mood, that Burns wrote his "Highland Mary." He went out, at twilight, Mrs. Burns said: she heard him walking up and down, watching the evening star and crooning; and directly he came in and wrote down the song. Doubtless the burden of that exquisite lyric had been on his mind for years. The rough ore had gradually been forming, deep in the recesses of his heart, till at last, fused by some accidental lightning stroke, it rushed forth, at white heat, and was moulded forever.

The difference between the analytical and synthetical mind, therefore, is this, that the one has to gather up laboriously what it needs, while the other is all the while unconsciously assimilating. But the latter often is so deficient in analysis, that it cannot tell, after what it calls its period of inspiration is over, how to amend an error, or even sometimes that there is an error. And yet the synthetical mind, whose mission is to construct, is superior to the analytical, whose impulse is to destroy. All the great masters, whether in poetry, philosophy, or statesmanship, have been synthetical. In the very greatest, indeed, the two faculties have been equally developed, as in Bacon, Newton, Shakspeare, and others. But when an intellect, essentially analytical, attempts to be synthetical, it only succeeds by a procession of inversion. Poe had one of the subtlest analytical intellects. He was of his kind as great as Milton. Yet his best works are immeasurably beneath those of the latter. They have all that is requisite except the divine element. They are not flesh and

blood. What the Frankenstein was to other men they are to other poetry.

On the contrary, whatever a synthetical mind produces is at least homogeneous. It does not weld, but fuses together. It does not fabricate, it creates. Its work is not mere mechanism, but a living organic body. The popular intellect recognizes this, though employing a vague term to express its meaning, when it says that Poe and other merely analytical poets have no heart; that one sees in their verse only the polish and glitter of cold steel; that though they may awaken admiration, they never touch the soul. But the poetry of synthetical minds is always vital. It may be redundant, like that of Keats, and need pruning; it may spring from a comparatively barren soil, as with third-rate writers, and be deficient in strength; but it is real, living poetry, and the people recognize it as such. And this brings us back to the prevailing error of synthetical minds, their proclivity to write without correction, and its cause, a deficiency in the faculty of analysis. But, fortunately for them, this faculty may be developed, if not absolutely created, by intellectual discipline. Its growth may be clearly traced in Shakspeare. It is but slightly visible in his earlier poems; it exhibits its traces more plainly in those written in mid-career; and it culminates so grandly in his later ones, that the subtlety of the metaphysician makes us almost forget the imagination of the poet. So also with Milton. How different are *Comus* and *Paradise Lost*! Yet the creative force exhibited in the first is not inferior to that displayed in the last. The epic is greater than the masque, just to that degree to which Milton had developed his powers of analysis, by study, by controversy, by psychological inquiries, by close thought of every kind. Had he never been Cromwell's secretary, had he never crushed Salmatius, he would never have written this masterpiece, which no subsequent poet has been able to rival, no critic able to point out how it might be improved.

We have dwelt the longer upon this distinction between the analytical and synthetical faculties, because it solves the question, so often asked, yet so rarely answered, "how shall we tell who is, or who is not, a true poet?" For an essentially analytical mind is never creative, but only adaptive, and cannot, under any circumstances, become a real poet. It may become a subtle critic, a keen metaphysician, or an accurate investigator of the laws of Nature, but never a poet, or creator, in any correct sense of that term. It may even write verses, and verses, which may temporarily acquire fame, in consequence of

embodying the taste of their generation, but they will never survive through the ages, revered and worshipped by the great popular heart, as are the grand old bards of Palestine and Greece. The analytical mind may also write novels, and wonderful ones too, after the school of Godwin, in which the workings of the human heart will be anatomized so thoroughly that we can see the quiver of every fibre. But it will never produce such works as *Ivanhoe*, or even *Master Humphrey's Clock*. It is the stuff out of which to make men of science, not the golden ore from which true poetry is minted. And yet, in this age, more perhaps than in most others, the ranks of poetry, so-called, swarm with analytical intellects. The press teems with pretty bits of mosaic, arranged with rare skill, polished to the highest degree of perfection, and modelled according to rules of art as infallible as those in *Blair's Rhetoric*; and the analytical minds who read these counterfeits—for ninety-nine hundredths of our educated minds are simply analytical, and not at all creative—cry out "what a master-piece." Alas! analysis may prune, but cannot give life.

But to return to Read. Our young countryman, with his essentially synthetical mind, has the true foundation on which to build. For

short lyrics he has already grasp enough. His "Bards," his "City of the Heart," "The Closing Scene," and other poems we might quote, are nearly, if not quite, perfect of their kind. Passages of great beauty may be selected also from his longer poems, as we have shown. But Read trusts too much to inspiration, too little to revision. He needs discipline of intellect, so as to bring out the analytical faculty, and enable him to criticize, and correct, and condense. He dreams too much, lives too entirely in vague fancies, is not a sufficiently exact and laborious investigator of his own mind and the laws of poetry. In a primitive era, such "sweet singers" may succeed. But no poet of this description has ever risen, or can rise, to the highest eminence in a cultivated age. We have several young poets, in America, who have done what holds forth an almost sure promise of immortality, if to their natural synthetical genius they would only add severe training. Of these Read is one. In "The House by the Sea," he has exhibited great inventive powers, has given high promise for the future, has shown a sustained capacity for which even his best friends were scarcely prepared. We look to him, however, for yet greater things. And earnestly we bid him "God speed."

THE FIRST RED ROSE.

BY ELIZABETH BOUTON.

As a dream of Heaven, the garden was fair,
No breath of sin had yet poisoned its air—
When Eve with Adam was walking one day,
Admiring the beauties that thronged round their
way:

Like a being of light she joyously moved,
Finding fresh pleasures wherever she roved,
Enchanted with all that she hears or she sees,
The flowers and the sunshine, the birds and the
breeze.

One moment she's bending in childish delight
Where a bed of sweet violets bursts on her sight,
The next round a lily she lovingly lingers,
Caressing its petals with fairy-like fingers,
Now pausing awhile with innocent grace
O'er a fountain that mirrors her beautiful face,
Now stooping upraises a flowering vine,
And teaches its tendrils a bough to entwine.

Tufts of primrose from a green bank that start,
Bid a musical laugh ripple up from her heart,
A bird in gay plumage that sings from its nest,
Is hailed with a rapture she scarce can express;

A tree whose rich freight weighed its boughs to the
ground,

A new source of wonder and pleasure is found,
But forgot are bud, violet, primrose and tree,
When a newly blown rose in its beauty they see,

All glittering with dew-drops and peerlessly fair,
It sheds its soft fragrance abroad on the air;
Its velvet-like petals no ruddy tint flush,
For the queen of the flowers had not yet learned to
blush:

So graceful its stalk, and its verdure so green,
While no jealous thorns hid the leaflets between,
Its form was so lovely, its petals so white,
It seemed just transplanted from regions of light

Enraptured, Eve entered the odorous bower,
And stooping imprinted a kiss on the flower:
The rose felt the pressure and blushed with delight,
Till the petals grew crimson that late were so white;
She breathed its aroma, its honeyed dew sipped,
And the rose caught and held the warm hue of her lip,
And still in remembrance of that happy hour,
Its roseate color is worn by the flower.