

ART IN AMERICA

Even of those whom we may claim as at least candidates for election to the Elysian fields, we must remark that their output is infinitesimal. In prose, it is true, Poe managed to sustain himself in æther well enough, and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (too little known here) is a greater achievement than any of the shorter stories. But you can pack away his poetry into a hat-box. "The Raven" is, to my mind, a much over-rated piece; "The Bells" is as bad as Southey's "How the water comes down at Lodore." What remains? "Ulalume," "Annabel Lee," "For Annie," "Al Aaraaf" (more or less), "Israfel," and three or four pieces which are barely more than stanzas.

All very exquisite, all lacking body, and all monotonous in a single key.

I say this, although I consider Poe to have been one of the greatest men of his century. The thought in "Eureka," "Monos and Una," and one or two other essays, is profound and lofty. But there is little breadth in the depths. His philosophy is based not on a study of all human thought, but on odd books which drifted his way. He tried to make bricks without straw, and it was bad for his pyramid.

His book-learning, too, slight as it was, was too much valued. He is always hinting at his own scholarship. He was "cultured," though with enough real genius to laugh at the "frog-pond" of cultured Boston.

Of American culture, I have one perfect sample. Travelling from Nagasaki to Hong Kong, two mature maidens from Massachusetts discovered that I sometimes wrote, and "took me up." "And who," I asked, "is your favourite poet?"

A warm flush overspread each sallow cheek as the two thin mouths exclaimed "Rossetti!" "And which" (I tactlessly pursued) "which of his poems do you like the best?"

This remark closed the conversation. They had put the name Rossetti down in a note-book; and right there "culture" ended.

This I found characteristic of many American women. I have seen American girls in Italy laboriously writing down the names of more painters than I shall ever know, without any further comment than the dates at which they painted.