George Sterling’s “A Wine of Wizardry”: Romanticism, Decadence, and the Fantastic

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1. GEORGE STERLING AND “A WINE OF WIZARDRY”

In September 1907 a strange poem appeared in Cosmopolitan magazine. Now a glossy women’s magazine known for fashion and sex, at the time Cosmopolitan regularly published fiction and poetry for a general audience. Its publication of a poem was not, then, in itself particularly noteworthy. What was noteworthy was the bizarre nature of the poem in question. “A Wine of Wizardry” is a poem so deeply immersed in the realm of the bizarre, the baroque, and the fantastical that just a decade after publication it would strike most informed readers as hopelessly out-of-step with the more restrained tendencies of literary modernism.

The poem was by the San Francisco poet George Sterling (1869–1926). 212 lines long, it was lavishly illustrated by the pen-and-ink drawings of F. I. Bennet, house artist to the magazine. Decorating the borders of each of the poem’s six pages are crenelated castle towers, galleons on high seas, and tangled forests. Other illustrations depict somber demons, gnomes, female vampires, pensive angels, and mysterious robed easterners (551–56). All of these images are drawn directly from the poem. Ambrose Bierce, the notorious cynic, poet, and satirist of The Devil’s Dictionary fame, was a friend and mentor of Sterling whose influence had been instrumental in the piece’s publication. In a short introduction, Bierce praised the poem as a work of pure poetry, “virgin gold” free from narrative or didacticism (576). In their

1) These page numbers refer to the original Cosmopolitan printing. When citing the poem elsewhere in this essay, I reference Sterling’s more accessible A Wine of Wizardry and Other Poems.
stead, the poem presents a phantasmagoria of fantastical imagery, apparently linked together by nothing more than the whims of the poet’s imagination.

The poem begins with an anonymous speaker—frequently assumed to be Sterling, although no such direct identification is ever made within the poem itself—pouring a measure of wine into a “crystal cup” (9). The speaker looks into the wine, which awakens their imagination. This imagination, personified as a winged muse-like figure named “Fancy” (9), then embarks on a prolonged mental journey through a variety of gaudy landscapes and scenes inhabited by fantastical characters: gnomes, demons, and vampires. The form of the poem is iambic pentameter strung into an irregular rhyme scheme (for the most part quatrains and couplets, which give the lines musicality without a sense of constraining form). The language is mannered and at times archaic (“Ere Faith return, and azure censers fume” [15]), and the imagery veers between the beautiful, the grandiose, and the horrific. Little distinction is made between these different tones. There seems, as Bierce claimed, no meaning or moral to the whole thing; it is simply an exhalation and exploration of the free-play of the creative imagination.

The first two lines of the poem, before the wine is even poured, evoke a sense of openness and liberation through a description of the sky and sea:

Without, the battlements of sunset shine,
’Mid domes the sea-winds rear and overwhelm.
(9)

To anyone with a cursory knowledge of Sterling’s biography, these lines evoke the coast of Carmel on the Monterey Peninsula in Northern California, an area famous for its natural beauty: magnificent and rugged hills and cliffs descending sharply to surf-washed beaches. By 1907, Sterling had already made a name for himself as a West Coast bohemian, living a life of decadence and free-love in the artist communities of the region. The speaker of the poem seems to be situated upon those cliffs or beaches, gazing eastward over the ocean towards the setting sun. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the poem is going to continue with naturalistic descriptions of Carmel. The next line makes the first of many sudden shifts in focus:

Into a crystal cup the dusky wine
I pour, and, musing at so rich a shrine,
I watch the star that haunts its ruddy gloom.

(9)

After his brief survey of the external world, the speaker turns suddenly to something closer at hand. This “crystal cup” marks a shift away from observable reality—the world of sunsets and seascapes—into imagination and fantasy.

The wine itself has obvious potency of meaning in poetic tradition. This is the wine of Edward FitzGerald’s *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, emblematic of poetic exuberance: “Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring / Your Winter-garment of Repentance fling” (2). This is also the wine of Charles Baudelaire’s “Enivrez-vous” (“Be Drunk”): “Be always drunken. . . . If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually” (58). It also resonates, of course, with the phrase “wine, women, and song” (Bartlett 1058), a generic call to hedonism.

It is at this early point in the poem that several critics have made a significant misreading. S. T. Joshi, summarizing the poem, claims that “the poet drinks a wine that awakens his ‘Fancy,’ who ventures on a variety of fantastic voyages, alternately lovely and horrific” (11). Likewise, Thomas E. Benediktsson writes that “as the poem begins, the speaker is drinking from a crystal goblet of red wine and musing into its depths” (88). It seems reasonable to conclude from these observations that the poem is about inebriation. Indeed, this fits with the decadence associated with poets such as Baudelaire, and fits even more closely with Sterling’s own biography of alcoholism and drug use (as Upton Sinclair mentions, one reviewer suggested a more accurate title for the poem would have been “The Wizardry of Wine” [44]). However, “A Wine of Wizardry” is not a poem about drunkenness. We can make this judgement because of one detail apparently overlooked by Joshi, Benediktsson, and the others: the speaker does not actually drink from the cup until the last sentence of the poem. At the beginning of the poem the speaker looks into the crystal goblet, but only after the long sequence of fantastical images has run its course do they drink the wine.
2. ESCAPISM AND THE VISUAL IMAGINATION

“A Wine of Wizardry” is not, then, concerned with intoxication—or at least not intoxication through drinking. It is about, rather, an intoxication of the imagination. The trigger for this imagination is not alcohol, but rather the refractive spectacle of the play of light on, and in, the red wine and its crystal container. Sinclair, a close friend of Sterling, claimed that once during a ferry trip from San Francisco to Oakland Sterling pointed out “the wavering, rainbow-colored circles of light riding on the water, caused by thin slicks of oil,” explaining that they “had been the source of his inspiration” for the poem (73). There is no clear reason why light on oil-slicks should trigger visions of gnomes and vampires, but this focus on vision is crucial to understanding the poem as part of a tradition of similarly visual explorations of imaginative freedom.

The poem presents a long sequence of tableau-like scenes overflowing with visual imagery. There are few references to sound, touch, or odour. Occasionally the tableaux feature movement, but for the most part they are static. Through the eyes of Sterling’s winged Fancy, we encounter “an iceberg oriflamed” with rays of sunlight, glowing coals upon the plains of Tartarus, the “Red pyres of muffled light” of a painted bracelet (10, 11), and, in the poem’s most visually lush sequence, a coral-strewn seafloor:

As far below the deep-hued ocean molds,  
With waters’ toil and polished pebbles’ fret,  
The tiny twilight in the jacinth set,  
With wintry orb the moonstone-crystal holds,  
Snapt coral twigs and winy agates wet,  
Translucencies of jasper, and the folds  
Of banded onyx, and vermilion breast  
Of cinnabar. . . 
(14)

Such images blur away from representation into the impressionistic. It is difficult to determine just what is being described: rock formations, coral, sea-sponges? For the most part, though, the poem presents more concrete and clearly delineated visions. In the next line, Fancy rises from the sea-bed and proceeds to survey the beach: 

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. . . . A near on orange sands,
With prows of bronze the sea-stained galleys rest,
And swarthy mariners from alien strands
Stare at the red horizon, for their eyes
Behold a beacon burn on evening skies,

This image again evokes Sterling’s home on the coast of Northern California. Yet this identification is weakened by the references to “galleys” and “swarthy mariners.” While sailors may well have been present in nearby San Francisco, they would not have been crewing galleys. Again, the details of the description veer the images away from reality and into more imaginary spaces.

Such exotic and alienating lines are emblematic of Sterling’s rejection of the near and familiar in favour of the distant and strange. While his Fancy explores scenes evoking Ancient Greece, India, and otherworldly fairylands and caverns, there are no concrete images of continental American landscapes or culture. This is not due to lack of potential subject matter. Aztec, Mayan, or Incan temples—the Pueblos and Cliff-cities of the Southwest USA—the indigenous horse-cultures of the plains—even the Spanish Conquistadors or the horsemen of the American West—all these subjects seem ripe for transformation by Sterling’s fantastical imagination. A possible explanation for why he does not include them is because they are too closely connected to his own immediate cultural and geographic realities. For Sterling, that which is near-at-hand must be rejected, for to acknowledge it acknowledges everything else near-at-hand: the mundane realities of everyday life.

To more fully understand this rejection of immediate reality, we must ourselves look outside Sterling’s North American context. Lionel Stevenson has pointed out that “there is so little in [Sterling’s] poems that may be recognized as essentially American” (para. 4). Instead, he goes on, to understand Sterling it is necessary to view him in the context of British literary tradition, specifically that of early 19th century Romanticism in which the “impulse of escape-escape from the commonplace and familiar and rational” led poets such as John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Samuel Taylor
Coleridge, and George Lord Byron “into the picturesque and strange and emotional” (para. 5). Essential to these poets was an imaginative shift of focus onto places and subjects distant from the contemporary moment: to “the historic past, or remote countries, or to the lonely fastnesses of nature, or to visionary Utopias of social justice, or to the unbounded faery lands of fantasy” (para. 5). There is a clear link here with the escapist impulse that drives Sterling into his fantastical vistas. It should be noted, though, that Sterling’s focus is narrower than his Romantic forebears. His Fancy is not interested in utopias or nature, but indulges itself instead in fantasies of the bizarre, the baroque, and the impossible.

3. THE FANCIFUL IMAGINATION

In early Romanticism, an orientation towards the distant and unreal was intertwined with a preoccupation with the free-flow of thought. The idea was that, just as the individual consciousness should not be tied down to the here-and-now, it should also not be locked in slow-moving linear patterns of thinking. Andrew J. Welburn has explained that this is what Coleridge meant by the phase “middle state of mind”: a mode of thinking positioned “on the edge of representational consciousness” which operates by “hovering between images” (15). As Coleridge explained, “As soon as it is fixed on one image it [thought] becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination” (quoted in Welburn 15). This “middle state of mind” is, of course, just what is personified by the figure of “Fancy” in Sterling’s poem. This figure appears in line 6, immediately after the speaker gazes into the glass of wine:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Now Fancy, empress of a purpled realm,} \\
\text{Awakes with brow caressed by poppy-bloom,} \\
\text{And wings in sudden dalliance her flight} \\
\text{To strands where opals of the shattered light} \\
\text{Gleam in the wind-strewn foam, and maidens flee} \\
\text{A little past the striving billows’ reach . . . (9–10)}
\end{align*}
\]

It is through Fancy’s eyes that the speaker of the poem, and ourselves as readers, witness the imaginary scenes and landscapes. Such personification of
the poetic imagination is common in both Romantic and, later, Decadent literature. An American precedent can be found in the work of New York City poet Francis Saltus Saltus, whom in 1873 published a remarkably lurid poem titled “Landscape of Flesh.” The poem presents a bizarre vision of an alien planet made of human flesh and bone, lingering over descriptions of seas of blood, mountains of muscle, and “dwarfed trees with solid trunks of bone” (229). The poem is framed as a dream, yet early in it Saltus uses the same technique of personification that Sterling uses. It is not the speaker of the poem who experiences its events, but rather his “soul”:

Within an ignored world my soul was led
Above all darkness, high in floods or space:
Above the sun’s great ball, fleck-dabbled, red,
Above the stars domain, the comets’ trace . . .

There is, however, a significant difference between the dream-voyage of Saltus’s soul and the visionary journey of Sterling’s Fancy. Whereas in “Landscape of Flesh” one region is explored in detail, in “A Wine of Wizardry” the perspective shifts rapidly from place to place and scene to scene. This key difference can be connected with Sterling’s choice of the word *fancy*. By using this term, Sterling is placing his poem within a specific subset of imaginative literature: one that deals with just such a “hovering between images” that Coleridge described.

The 17th century poem “Hallo My Fancy”² contains a very similar personification of the creative imagination. Like Sterling, the speaker of the poem personifies their imagination as a spirit-like being, free from the ordinary restrictions of time and space. The poem begins:

In melancholic fancy,
Out of myself,
In the vulcan dancy,
All the world surveying,
Nowhere staying,

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² The poem is commonly attributed to William Cleland, a Scottish soldier; he seems, however, to have merely added stanzas to an earlier anonymous ballad.
Just like a fairy elf;
Out o’er the tops of highest mountains skipping,
Out o’er the hill, the trees and valleys tripping,
Out o’er the ocean seas, without an oar or shipping-

Hallo my fancy, whither wilt thou go?

(358, italics in original)

These opening lines describe a sundering of the creative imagination from the poet himself; the language is evocative of the act of giving birth, fancy emerging “out of” the poet’s being. Once separated from the poet, this division is exemplified by associating the fancy with the non-human: the fancy is revealed as a sylph, an otherworldly “fairy elf.” This works to further separate and distance the identity of the poet from the digressive course of their imagination. It is as if the imagination, before it can be let loose upon the worlds of unrestricted possibility, must be transformed into something that transcends limited human consciousness. It must itself become a creature of the imagination, one that, like Shakespeare’s fairy Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, can “put a girdle round about the earth / In forty minutes” (1090), or which, like the spirit Ariel in *The Tempest*, can “tread the ooze of the salt deep” and “run upon the sharp wind of the north” (3082).

The term *fancy* itself has a long legacy in English literature. The word derives, via the French “fantasie,” from the Greek “phantasia”: “imagination, appearance” (Oxford Dictionaries online). It emerges in English in the mid-15th century, to mean both “inclination” and “imagination.” The linkage between the two meanings is clear: fancy is a state of mind that dwells on that which it inclines towards (that is, is attracted to). Shakespeare uses it extensively, in both senses. In *The Merchant of Venice*, written around the end of the 16th century, he has the young heroine Portia sing that fancy originates not “in the heart, or in the head,” but “is engender’d in the eyes.” Furthermore, it “dies / In the cradle where it lies”; in other words, it is inconstant and falters when settled upon a single object (1243). Portia seems to be using the word to mean *inclination*, specifically in the sense of sexual or romantic attraction. Her statement, however, applies equally well to *fancy* as imagination. In literature, the word is frequently used to mean a restless
mode of thinking in which deep thought is replaced by idle, meandering daydreams. As W. R. Irwin puts it, it is “wit, invention, free play of mind, the ‘mimic’ of reason that frolics while reason sleeps” (36). In this sense, imaginative fancy dies “in the cradle” in that it survives only when the mind is actively in motion, darting from thought to thought, image to image.

This is the sense of the word in which the young romantic Keats uses in his 1820 poem “Fancy,” which begins “Ever let the Fancy roam, / Pleasure never is at home” (307). Like Sterling, Keats focuses on the light-footed, digressive nature of the idle imagination. It is important to note, however, that in this poem Keats explores highly naturalistic subject matter: his Fancy wanders over rural landscapes of summer, autumn, winter, and spring, pondering birds, flowers, and other assorted wildlife. Similarly, Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp” (written in 1795) describes the fanciful meanderings of a mind that is, nonetheless, anchored to its immediate physical location on a sunny English hillside:

. . . . as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst through my half-closed eyelids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquility:
Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
 Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

(100)

Both these poems share with “A Wine of Wizardry” a sense of the imagination as something in rapid motion, a motion which is to some degree beyond the conscious control of the thinker. Like an eolian wind harp strummed by the breeze, the mind of the daydreamer is under the command of forces that transcend individual consciousness. Yet while the English Romantics experimented extensively with the interrelation between the creative imagination and the natural world (William Wordsworth, the romantic poet with the longest career, famously developed a poetics of the
imagination centred on just this relationship), for Sterling, the fantastical imagination is key.

4. DECADENCE AND EXHAUSTION
Stevenson’s claims that there is nothing “essentially American” in Sterling aside, this aspect of the poem is grounded in a distinctively American evolution of British Romanticism. Camille Paglia has described how “American Romanticism is really Decadent Late Romanticism, a style of sexual perversity, closure, and fragmentation or decay” (572), while Brigid Brophy has termed such tendencies “black romanticism”: a poetics of “eroticism and . . . destructiveness” that draws upon the more violent and nihilist energies of the mind (325-26). Rejecting the naturalistic tendencies of the early English Romantics, this American Romanticism blends a focus upon the creative imagination with the European Decadence of Baudelaire and Joris-Karl Huysmans. The seminal figure in this American movement is the poet and short story writer Edgar Allan Poe. “Poe,” as Paglia puts it, “shows Wordsworthian nature as a dead end,” instead taking a path towards the unreal and the unnatural (572). It is this path that results in what Floyd Stovall describes as Poe’s fundamental commitment to “imagination, or originality, which displays itself in novelty of tone as well as of [subject] matter” (261).

This brings us back to the heavily visual nature of “A Wine of Wizardry,” for central to this anti-naturalistic exploration of the imagination is its emphasis on intensely visual writing. In Paglia’s words, Poe has a “cinematic” approach to writing, his “gilded style” presenting to the reader “a muddle of priceless but incongruous objects” (578). Following in this tradition, Sterling piles image upon image. Through Fancy’s eyes, we see:

. . . a grotto rosy-sparred,
Where wattled monsters redly gape, that guard
A cowled magician peering on the damned
Thro’ vials wherein a splendid poison burns,
(10)

We see a sky where
... sunset, like a crimson throat to hell,
Is cavernous, [and Fancy] marks the seaward flight
Of homing dragons dark upon the West;
(12)
We see
... halls
In which dead Merlin’s prowling ape hath spilt
A vial squat whose scarlet venom crawls
To ciphers bright and terrible
(18–19)

Note that Sterling’s phantasmagoric images are linked together not so
much by theme as by colour. The red-tinted hue of the glass of wine seeps
through every one of the landscapes his Fancy finds herself in. “A Wine of
Wizardry” is, as Bierce put it, “full of light and color and fire,” (576) and
the predominant colour is red. If the poem was truly a poem of drunkenness,
this detail would seem arbitrary. Given that the visions of the poems are
triggered by gazing into a glass of wine, however, this red hue links directly to
the visual sense. The crystal goblet becomes a kind of scrying stone, like a
crystal ball used by a fortune teller, as much a medium of vision as is the
figure of Fancy herself.

There is also a resonance here with one of Poe’s most seminal works, “The
Masque of the Red Death” (1842). In this short prose story, a nobleman in
an unspecified country ravaged by a deadly plague takes shelter, along with
his aristocratic friends, in a palace dedicated to pleasure and aesthetics. The
interior of the sealed-off palace, in which the aristocrats revel continuously,
contains a play-area described as a sequence of seven rooms, laid out so that
they do not together “form a long and straight vista,” but rather are “so
irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a
time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn
a novel effect” (para. 4). Vision is broken up in this way in order to
accentuate the strange decorations and tableaux each room contains. To
further heighten the visual intensity, each room has a different colour theme:
blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet, and finally black with red-tinted
windows through which light is projected inwards. “There was,” Poe goes on,
“much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. . .” (para. 7). These lines could well be used to describe “A Wine of Wizardry.”

The red hues of Poe’s story are, ultimately, the red of blood, and the blood is emblematic of unnatural death. The plague victims hemorrhage dramatically, and at the climax of the story the aristocrat and his friends are confronted, in the final red-and-black room, by a bleeding spectre of Death itself. Many of the scenes in “A Wine of Wizardry” feature similarly violent or horrific content. In the course of the poem, Sterling’s Fancy witnesses “A cowled magician peering on the damned / Thro’ vials wherein a splendid poison burns,” “crimson bubbles [rising] from battle-wrecks,” (10, 14) and Satan himself, torturing a nameless flayed soul and accompanied by Lilith,

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.
(17)

There is a violently erotic element to this scene. The red-hot chains seem to be the queens’ only clothing, the implied softness of flesh contrasting with the hard, searing metal. Later in the poem, there is another such erotically horrific image. In a dark landscape of tombs,

The blue-eyed vampire, sated at her feast,
Smiles bloodily against the leprous moon.
(19)

This image, in its relative simplicity one of the most effective visuals in the poem, comes near the end of the text. The redness that has coloured Fancy’s entire journey here seems to solidify into thick, warm blood. The symbolic resonance of this female vampire works on several levels. Blood is pain and death, but it is also life, the beating heart of romantic and sexual passion, the blood of menstruation and childbirth. For the vampire, it is pure lifeforce, taken through lethal force from her victim. The wine that began the poem
has thus, in the course of its hallucinatory journey, transformed into something both more vital and more dangerous.

There is a link here with the oceanic sky-scape at the very beginning of the poem, and the images of liquids (wine, poison, seawater, magic potions) that recur throughout it. The sea is continuously in motion, its waters—and all those who traverse them—moved by mysterious, unseen currents and tides. It is just such tides which drive Sterling’s imagination. Like Coleridge’s harp-like thoughts played by the wind, his Fancy is swept along by forces larger than the poet’s own consciousness. The mind dips into them like a swimmer and, like a swimmer diving into deep water, there is a danger to such activity.

Poe, as Brophy has pointed out, “added to Sade’s consciousness of the destructive [that is, sadistic] wish the full romantic recognition that it is the self which is to be destroyed” (326). Poe’s narratives are seldom divided clearly into tormentor and victim: his protagonists are driven to the point of death, madness, or mental exhaustion by forces that remain largely faceless (the Inquisition, whirlpools, ravens, their own guilty conscience). Similarly, as “A Wine of Wizardry” unfolds, we see an imaginative trajectory into what Paglia describes, again in the context of Poe, as a “Dionysian realm of formlessness and dissolution” (579): vials break, ships sink through the sea, blood vessels bleed their red life force; thoughts and images shift and shuffle, rise and fall, and the mind of the poet dissolves in the flux of images.

Fittingly, the image of the sated vampire marks the end of Fancy’s flight. Immediately after these lines the flow of inspiration, like the blood of the vampire’s victim, drains away. Fancy “folds/ Her splendid plumes” and roosts on “a star above the sunset lees” (19). Poe’s “Masque” ends with the annihilation of all life: “Darkness and Decay and the Red Death [holding] illimitable dominion over all” (para. 14). In contrast, “A Wine of Wizardry,” after its rush of strange and violent images, ends with a sense of peaceful closure:

But evening now is come, and Fancy folds
Her splendid plumes, nor any longer holds
Adventurous quest o’er stainéd lands and seas

(19)
This conclusion fits in with the visually-driven themes of the poem as a whole. Fancy’s wanderings have been driven by light and colour, so the darkness of the fall of night naturally brings those wanderings to a conclusion. The next few lines do still contain strong visual elements, but the redness has drained away. Fancy vanishes into the distance over “... onyx waters stilled by gorgeous oils / That toward the twilight reach emblazoned coils” (19). In is only at this point, at the very end of the poem, that the speaker drinks from the glass of wine:

And I, albeit Merlin-sage hath said,
"A vyper lurketh in ye wine-cuppe redde,"
Gaze pensively upon the way she went,
Drink at her font, and smile as one content.
(19–20)

For so much strangeness and colour and light and violence—horror and demons and dragons and suchlike—to end in this way is somewhat anticlimactic. The rich red of blood has been replaced by the more mundane taste of wine. The speaker of the poem has lost contact with their Fancy and the parade of images has, just as they reached their most potent in the image of the gorey vampire, faltered into nothing. The splendour and violence of the imagery seems, in retrospect, oddly unmoving, and the poem as a whole takes on a sense of superficiality.

5. CRITICAL RESPONSES AND LEGACY
This sense of hollowness did not go unnoticed by readers in 1907. At this time, Sterling had only published one collection, 1903’s The Testimony of the Suns and Other Poems. Bierce had long championed the title poem of this earlier work—here, he refers back to it as equal to “anything of the generation of Tennyson, and a good deal higher than anything of the generation of Kipling.” He poured even greater praise on A Wine of Wizardry, comparing the poem favorable to the work of John Milton and Edward Spenser (576).

Other readers, however, were less enthusiastic. The publication of the poem provoked a number of harshly negative critiques. Geoffrey Dunn, in a 2007 article, has summarized some of this backlash:
an editorial in the San Francisco Examiner declared that “five lines from [the poem] would drive a man to beat a cripple, and ten lines would send him to the bottom of the river.” Critic Porter Garnett likened it to “the hammering of a tattoo on a sweet-toned bell.” (para. 9, square brackets in original.)

Dunn also points out that Ella Wheeler Wilcox, then a popular poet, wrote a scathing parody of the poem which was widely quoted in the San Francisco press (ibid).

A decade later Harriet Monroe, poet and editor of the seminal literary magazine *Poetry*, wrote a particularly perceptive critique of Sterling’s work in general. Monroe saw Sterling as hopelessly out-of-date, “tempted by the worst excesses of the Tennysonian tradition,” utilizing archaic diction (“he never thinks—he deems; he does not ask, but craves”) which she describes as “the frippery of a by-gone fashion” (309). She is especially dismissive of “A Wine of Wizardry,” claiming that the poem’s bizarre imagery left her “cold.” While allowing Sterling a talent for “lovely lines, couplets, [and] quatrains,” Monroe concludes that his grandiose rhetoric, as well as being outdated, fails to compensate for an emptiness of meaning. In contrast to what she saw as Sterling’s failed poetry, Monroe offers the new model of the imagist poets (Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle among them). Thanks to the imagists, she claims, “English poetry will be henceforth more compact and stern—‘as simple as prose’” (311).

As far as American poetry in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s is concerned, Monroe is essentially correct. As Joshi has also pointed out, even when “A Wine of Wizardry” was published, “Sterling’s poetic star was inevitably falling: his work simply was not in conformity with the imagistic, free-verse poetry of the Modernists” (15). Yet by focusing on style and form, Monroe misses another shift in English poetry, one which is ultimately more relevant in the context of Sterling’s poem. This is a shift not in diction or in metre, but in subject matter. For it is the content of the poem, even more than its style, that makes it fit so awkwardly into the course of subsequent American poetry.

When Sterling wrote *A Wine of Wizardry*, he must have felt his work, for
all its imaginative originality, fit smoothly into a mainstream literary tradition going back, beyond even Romanticism, into the earliest English poetry. This is the tradition of the Old English *Beowulf*, with its bloodthirsty monsters and gold-hoarding dragon; of Spenser’s questing faerie knights in *The Faerie Queene*; of Shakespeare’s sorcery and witchcraft in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*. Yet since the second decade of the 20th century, English-language poetry has moved steadily away from such subjects as gnomes, wizards, and dragons. Such subjects are, of course, still encountered in literature: the key point is that they have jumped genres, away from the categories of the literary and into the less-respected zone of popular fantasy fiction. In many ways, 20th century fantasy is the philosophical inheritor of the anti-naturalistic orientation of Romanticism. Gary K. Wolfe describes this as an orientation of the “reality-oriented function” (S. C. Fredericks’s term) which is “deliberate and purposeful in the ways it diverges from cognitive reality” (3). Central to such fantastic writing is the idea of detachment from and, ultimately, transcendence of the mundane world. As C. N. Manlove has put it “the very ‘supernatural or impossible’ character of fantasy is a way of freeing it from possession as an extension of our reality” (33), an overt rejection of the supposedly limiting nature of realism. Like the Romantics, the fantasy writers of the 20th century thus sought to extend their viewpoints to regions outside of immediate physical circumstance.

Sterling’s poem occupies a moment in time just prior to this shift from literary Romanticism to genre fantasy. In this light, it is revealing to contrast Sterling with his younger friend and fellow poet Clark Ashton Smith. Ashton Smith was directly influenced by Sterling—the two were close friends in the Carmel literary community—and his poetry shares many of Sterling’s preoccupations: exotic and alien scenes, horror, the bizarre and grotesque (Joshi 14–15). Yet the two poets have left very different legacies. Sterling was an established poet during the decline of Romanticism and Decadence in American poetry. His poems may have been judged harshly, yet he was still seen as part of a literary tradition; an anachronistic poet, perhaps, but a poet nonetheless. Ashton Smith, on the other hand, came into poetry just a little later, by which time Romanticism had more thoroughly been subsumed into
Modernism. He is thus exiled from literature and placed in the category of the outsider and the eccentric. His legacy as a poet is confined to the sphere of what has come to be known as “weird poetry,” the sphere of writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, authors more well known for their prose fiction.

“A Wine of Wizardry,” then, stands as a monument marking the end of an era in American literature: an era when poets could revel in fantastical whimsy whilst still remaining within the bounds of literary genres. It is a strange and somewhat hollow poem, a burst of wild, unstable imagination, a brief but heady intoxication of the mind. Its final image of Fancy at rest—folding her “splendid plumes” amidst the gathering darkness of evening (19)—is the image of a poetry which has run its course. Yet throughout the wanderings of Sterling’s lines we can discern the Romantic and Decadent energies which in the following decades would form their own new, albeit less respectable, spaces in both the critical and popular imaginations.

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