AMERICAN POETRY

FROM 1910-1935

AMERICAN POETRY FROM 1910 TO 1935

by

ROBERT ALEXANDER HAMILTON

Prefatory Note

The following pages comprise a

THESIS

presented to the

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research,

McGill University,

as a requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

April 29, 1936.

PORTIONS

CONSTITUTING THE THESIS

CHAPTER I

A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

It is a strange anomaly, and yet it is a fact of great importance, that at a time when poetry is being least read, (or if read, least understood and appreciated), America has come into its most poetic period. It seems to be adequate refutation of Whitman's dictum that "to have great poets, we must have great audiences." The fact that there has been a tremendous amount of poetry written in the past twenty-five years, and that poets ply their art in every state in the Union, does not of course prove that America has come into its most poetic era. One of the purposes of this thesis is to show to what extent that poetic output is of genuine worth.

Moreover, there has always been a vast amount of verse published, (verse which very few people read), particularly in seventeenth century England. Who knows how much more got no further than the manuscript stage? But it is surely of some significance that in the last quarter century in the United States, some 18,267 books of poetry and drama have been published, [1] and that in 1916 the output in this class was surpassed by novels only to the extent of seventy-two volumes. [2] Considering, then, the great number of poems

---

1 Acknowledgement, with thanks, is herewith made to the Librarian of Congress who has furnished these figures. Complete statistics follow the bibliography of this thesis.

2 I do not find corroboration of a statement of Conrad Aiken to the effect that in 1916 alone, more volumes of poetry and drama were printed than of any other class. See Aiken, Scepticisms, p. 55.

and of poets, it is obvious that in this thesis I can deal only with the outstanding figures, the spokesmen of the new era.

The date of the beginning of modern American poetry must be considered as somewhat arbitrary. I have chosen for the purpose of this essay, the year 1910; and in this choice I find accord with Professor Tinker, who, writing in 1925, says: "For the past fifteen years there has been in this country a definite attempt to produce a body of literature distinguished by its freedom from any European influence and its reliance upon a purely native impulse." [1] Alfred Kreymborg likes "to set the dawn of the renascence around 1912", [2] while the Columbia Encyclopedia is more liberal in extending the date further back to the time of the private publication of Robinson's The Torrent and The Night Before in 1896. [3]

But the insistence upon a prescribed date is dangerous; dates in literature, as in the broader field of history should serve rather as reference landmarks for an expansive consideration, than as precise exactitudes for the astute scholar. A literary movement does not begin or end at any definite time. The fetus develops for some time before parturition, and long before ultimate fructescence the seed partakes of a slow process

---

1 Chauncey Brewster Tinker, The Good Estate of Poetry, p. 100.

2 Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength -- A History of American Poetry, p. 294.

3 The Columbia Encyclopedia, article on American Literature, p. 58. (The article adds: "though he [Robinson] was not known until after 1910", in which year The Town Down the River was published.)

of germination. So, too, we must look for the beginnings of the new era in a time comparatively far removed from the year 1910.

American poetry, vital and moving as it was at the time of the birth of the Republic, with only rare exceptions persisted until modern times in being Continental or British poetry which, by accident of the poet's birth, happened to have been written in the United States. At the time of the Civil War, American poets looked largely to Byron and Shelley and Keats as models for their own effusions. As Miss Lowell accurately states, "our poets were largely phonographs to greater English poets dead and gone." [1] But the desire for an indigenous literature was even then apparent. It found expression in an obscure and tedious novel of one generally regarded as a conservative, subservient, and little courageous imitator:

> "We want a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers — commensurate with Niagara and the Alleghanies, and the Great Lakes..... We want a national epic that shall correspond to the size of the country. ... We want a national drama in which scope enough shall be given to our gigantic ideas and to the unparalleled activity and progress of our people. ... In a word we want a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn that shall shake the earth."[2]

Emerson, too, was as insistent in the desire to sever the obstructive umbilical cord: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." [3]

---

1 Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, p. 6.

2 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Kavanagh (1849).

3 Emerson, The American Scholar (1837).

There was, however, more than mere sentiment, more than a subconscious reliance on a motherland, even more than a resultant molding of the forces of education, that prevented the appearance of this long awaited ideal. It was something which transcended these factors, which even embodied them all. The "strongest factor that prevented ... these Americans from expressing themselves fully was a peculiar hypocrisy that was rooted in its old puritanism." [1] I believe, however, that the great majority of critics of puritanism are much too biased, too peremptory in their views. In modern literature, particularly in fiction, the bogey of puritanism seems to have filled the essential need of creating a new devil. Professor Luccock remarks in this regard, "the fact that most devotees of this New Orthodoxy ... had but the slightest understanding of what Puritanism really was and is historically, and that from this abundant ignorance they confused Puritanism with their version of the conventions and restraints of present-day life in a small town, did not in the least abate their zeal or spoil the gaiety of the party." [2] Puritanism was itself not hypocritical. The deceipt lay not in the religion but in an interpretation of that religion which demanded an austerity too exorbitant to perfect a lofty ideal. [3]

---

1 Louis Untermeyer, The New Era in American Poetry, p. 6.

2 Halford E. Luccock, Contemporary American Literature and Religion, pp. 54, 55.

3 One of the fairest treatments of this religion is in The Puritan Mind, by Herbert Wallace Schneider, See in particular, Chapter VII.

But to whatever cause be ascribed the inhibitions of the time, denial stifled an inherent will to sing; to sing not only a new song, but to sing it in a new way, for the adequate technic of expression must constantly vary with the particular condition of mind and the particular factors which require that expression. Here was a new world, a new republic; vast regions of untenanted land, forests to be felled, earth to be tilled, dreams to be lived and visions to be realized. Yet "at no time in America was literature so inhuman, so little related to life." [1] For literature was an art, and art was unnecessary. At best it could only serve religion. "Literature was conceived not as a thing in itself, but merely as a handmaiden to politics and religion." [2]

A certain strength in puritanism, then, no longer sustained its devotees who would be artists. Bryant and Longfellow seemed to be of that plastic stuff which could alter within the matrix of puritanism, perceiving no dissonance except where it occurred in lines of poetry, aware of little incongruity either in their times or in relation to their fellowman. But just because such a disposition was possible in these men, a new literature was correspondingly impossible.

One man at least, Ralph Waldo Emerson, suggested the need of a severance with such a tradition; he insisted on the wisdom of the past being verified in one's own experience. More than this, Emerson reacted against the excessive reliance of the academic culture of the day upon the authority of the past.

---

1 Untermeyer, quoted work, p. 7.

2 H. L. Mencken, A Book of Prefaces, p. 215.

"Be lord of a day through wisdom and justice", he said, "and you can put up your history books." He welcomed "the new realism of the time in poetry and art, their new tendencies to deal with the 'philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life ... the meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan ... Give me insight into today and you may have the antique and the future worlds.'" [1] So Emerson, almost sole eulogist, announced the prophet of a new era, the founder of modern American poetry.

Others had indicated what was needed, had made known the desire for a distinctive American verse; but they lacked the essentials for bringing it about. It remained for Walt Whitman to produce that literature shaggy and unshorn. Here was one who eighty years ago could say with our contemporary, D. H. Lawrence, "we'll never get anywhere until we stand up and face things out and break the old forms." [2] Here was one who could stand up and face life, accept life, see it bare of human trappings, see man as a part of nature sharing all of nature's attributes. Nature uttered not a word of any inherent dualism, any conflict of body and soul, of good and evil. He would have done with eclectism.

---

1 James Cappon, Bliss Carman and the Literary Currents and Influences of his Time; Part II, "The Tradition of Emerson and Whitman in American Literature", p. 263.

2 D. H. Lawrence, Aaron's Rod.

"Not to exclude or demarcate or pick out evils from
their formidable masses (even to expose them)
But add, fuse, complete, extend — and celebrate
the immortal and the good." [1]

Small wonder he found little sympathetic response from the self-sufficient and satisfied persons of his day.

Modern poetry begins with the first poem of Leaves of Grass:

"One's-Self I sing — a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse."

"Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws
divine,
The Modern Man I sing."

With this, Walt Whitman gave the world the record of an individual, the personality of a vibrant being.

"Who touches this book touches a man."

This was to be the key for future poets: to voice a personality, and not only of one man but of a nation ("the word En-Masse"). It was not that he should ever reach a solution of the mystery of life, its cause or its ideal goal, or even that he should express himself entirely succinctly.

"My final merit I refuse you, I refuse putting from
me what I really am,
Encompass worlds, but never try to encompass me."

It was to see man in relation to his fellows, in relation to the universe he inhabited. An all-absorbing love brought him to feel his essential humility:

"What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest is Me."

---

1 This, and the following quotations from Whitman, are from Leaves of Grass (Aventine Press edition, 1931).

It was a love that included the gabbler, the listener, the wounded, the stricken, the successful, the failure, the idler, prostitute, the worker. Man was akin to bird and beast and tree, and in no haughty sense superior to the animals.

"They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth."

The creations of nature, then, were one, and the attributes of nature, one and all, were things to be accepted stoically in a mood that befitted man. Heaven was on earth if man chose to see it so, and the immortality in nature was sufficient. Time was no master to exact our persistent servitude.

"Whether I come to my own today, or in ten thousand or ten million years,
I can cheerfully take it now or with equal cheerfulness I can wait."

Life was joyous and to be desired, but death was not without its beauty. So he sings in the Lincoln burial hymn,

"Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death."

Another poet in Assisi years ago sang a similar refrain; but he accepted less of life, denying, in his asceticism the very nourishment by which the spiritual journey may be sustained. And years before this Aristotle expressed

exaltation in purely intellectual happiness. Whitman found joy in the life of the passions, the senses.

But Whitman was man; and man's duty, if only to assure his individual well-being, is to find affinity with his fellowman. One's self he sang, but more: "the word Democratic, the word En-masse." In the union of men by the bond of goodwill, he saw the stability of the state. I do not know what the poet read of Spinoza, but he did give expression to Spinoza's words: "Men who are good by reason ... desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind." [1] With confidence greater than is found in our day (and only very recently finding sentiment in verse), he envisaged the greatest democracy, greater even than his own United States, a united world. Nature, man, democracy, comradeship: these were his foremost thoughts. All was one splendid, dynamic, undivided whole. He had but to look beneath, or around, to be aware of an undying unity.

> "This is the grass that grows wherever the land is
> or the water is;
> This is the common air that bathes the globe."

Whitman, then, is a modern poet; what he expressed is reiterated time and again in the poetry of today. He is "the most contemporary poet because of the fact that his influence has only lately become astonishingly important and because Leaves of Grass expresses more of the spirit and body of things

---

1 Benedictus Spinoza, Ethics, IV, 18. So, too, Spinoza's determinism enabled him to see all things as parts of an eternal order and development, to accept the inevitable cheerfully and abide his time, as Whitman would.

American than any other one book." [1]

But, as I have intimated, Walt Whitman found little responsiveness from his own contemporaries. He was "clearly before his time. His countrymen could see him only as immoralist; save for a pitiful few of them, they were dead to any understanding of his stature as artist, and even unaware that such a category of men existed." [2] It remained for our day to see Whitman come into his own.

He was ignored, above all, by the very people of, and for, whom he wrote, and received whatever praise was afforded him from the coterie and the isolated individual. His case was, of course, not unusual, for the prophet has ever been neglected by the mass. The "divine average" was ready for the popular ballads of a few relatively uninspired and uninspiring minor poets, and a fewer number above this class.

The poems of Bret Harte and James Whitcomb Riley were recited by firesides and at country entertainments; and the better known poems of Eugene Field found ready response with children. Failing as it did to become poetry of real worth, the material of these poems was later to become the magic song of Vachel Lindsay. Out of the south, too, came the lyric notes of Sidney Lanier, (whose profound dislike of Whitman is well-known). Emily Dickenson wrote pungent verses in her Amherst sanctum.

Then at the turn of the century was heard the voice of

---

1 Bruce Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry p. 34.

2 H. L. Mencken, quoted work, p. 216.

two men, the immediate forerunners of a renascence. Each, deeply moved by social and economic problems, saw the new America borne on the backs of an oppressed working class. William Vaughan Moody inveighed against a growing acquisitive imperialism. Edwin Markham in "The Man With the Hoe" "crystallized the expression of outrage, the heated ferment of the period. His was a vision of a new order, deriving its life-blood from the millions ~~of~~ struggling in the depths." [1] Walt Whitman was beginning to be appreciated. Mindful of each one "bowed by the weight of centuries", Markham asked in no tone of sentimentality,

> "O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
> How will the Future reckon with this man?"

The answer was to be part of the task of modern poetry.

About it and throughout this poetry of preparation one may detect certain movements abroad at the time. Out of a provincialism had grown a nationalism fully cognizant of broader international implications. A cultural and artistic homogeneity had come to be felt. Lyrics of earth expressed a human solidarity, a need and a desire for a humanitarian bond, a social consciousness and conscience. Poets, it is true, would retire as they do today to the precincts of the library, but it was only to reaffirm a deathless kinship with the past; and this is particularly necessary for the poet, for as T. S. Eliot has said, "Between the true artists of any time there is, I believe, an unconscious community." [2]

---

1 Louis Untermeyer, Ed., Modern American Poetry: A Critical Anthology, p. 13.

2 T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 13.

With our eyes then upon the poetry of the new era, it might be well to consider some of the difficulties we are to encounter. If, as Newton Arvin would remind us, [1] fiction mirrors America, a similar reflection might be expected in poetry. And at a time of unrest, conflict, war, depression, unemployment, we should find a corresponding perplexity in poetry. This confusion will be seen not only in the variety of subject matter but in its presentation. We shall perceive realism and romanticism in a species of adnate birth, traditional form and free birth side by side, idealism and pessimism gaining ground in their turn, atavism welling up and finding expression despite the censorship of a vigilant ego, and always aspiration with its thoughts stitched to the stars.

With the question of difficulty and the charge of obscurity found in relation to modern poetry there is readily associated the matter of neglect to which I referred at the opening of this chapter. As a result of the romantic tradition readers became accustomed to treat poetry as a means of release, an escape from the problems besetting their daily life, instead of a challenge to solve these problems. It is predominately this latter function that poetry is now fulfilling.

In the face of a disorganized social structure the poet feels he is not a sound individual in a sound society, and of necessity must give expression to this very instability. The artificial stimulants that are part of modern life are, to use

---

1 See Newton Arvin, "Fiction Mirrors America", Current History, Sept., 1935, pp. 610 - 616.

Wordsworth's phrase, acting upon the mind "to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor." The same science that is responsible for them has both changed a mental attitude which formerly courted magic and the supernatural, and contrived a coetaneous loss of individual contact in an expanded town civilization. Education, which has as its far-reaching ideal the indoctrination of all, must lose, at least in its present state, depth for expanse, so that it falls short of giving the minority enough to understand poetry, while it fails to raise the culture of the majority. With a levelling of culture poetry ceased to be a "gentlemanly art" to read, and "with the decay of the aristocratic tradition . . . came the decline of poetry as one of the more desirable luxuries." [1]

We should expect then to find, and we do find, some poets involved in an almost psychotic self-analysis. But this is merely one trend. Others, believe, like Herbert Read, that the modern poet should be "the insidious inspirer of a fresh communal poetry;" [2] and they see signs of it today. The difficulty of this I have already shown. It is the poet's difficulty of finding, out of chaos, "a point from which he may begin to work outward again," [3] and secure that lost contact between man and man.

A treatment of mode of expression must be deferred until individual occasion is afforded, but this matter demands

---

1 Cecil Day Lewis, A Hope for Poetry, p. 31.

2 Herbert Read, Phases of English Poetry, p. 155.

3 Lewis, same, p. 37.

a reference here. Apart from the exigencies demanded of poetry by modern complex social conditions, a further cause of obscurity has been in the search for methods of restoring freshness to words. This is a reaction against former "poetic" words which now appear trite: poetic contractions and redundancies, clichés and flowery language. The vocabulary has lost its haughtiness, and the forms their stilted precision. But to compensate for spaciousness there has come intensity, and this requires a minimum of words. The poet then, "far from seeking freedom and irresponsibility, seeks a stricter discipline which is the discipline of the exact concord to thought and feeling, the discipline of sincerity." [1] The reader must be willing to exchange attention and discrimination for such a poet's bequest.

Of the dangers, the pitfalls of criticism, particularly of contemporary authors, I need no reminder. Without presuming too greatly I believe that all critics share that tendency to read what they wish to find into the works they attempt to discuss. A critic's "praise is liable to attend those most like himself, his impatience or carelessness those most unlike."[2] Despite the most rigid set of standards, one's estimate can scarcely be wholly impartial, and a criticism remains, at the last, a personal one. But one might do well to use a practicing poet's guide, and consider above all "whether the given poem has beauty, subtlety, intensity and depth, or whether it has not,

---

1 Herbert Read, quoted work, pp. 153, 154.

2 Kreymborg, quoted work, p. 293.

and in what degree.[1]

Perhaps a censure of failure might then find alleviation in recalling Whitman's subterfuge:

> "Do I contradict myself?
> Very well, I contradict myself;
> (I am large — I contain multitudes.)"

---

1 Conrad Aiken, Scepticisms, p. 295.

CHAPTER II

TILBURY TOWN AND THE BITTERSWEET

The opening of The Town Down the River tells of Lincoln, "The Master" whose greatness was at first not recognized. In a sense the poem is symbolic of the author himself. At the time of this book's publication (1910), Edwin Arlington Robinson had already written three volumes of verse which had passed practically unnoticed. But the poet had written enough to convince himself of what was to be his life's work; and in six years a growing appreciable audience served to strengthen that conviction. Within a decade, more than one critic voiced Ben Ray Redman's encomium: "Edward Arlington Robinson is admittedly our greatest living poet, and some would call him the greatest poet that this country has produced". [1]

In many respects Robinson has little connection with the poetic renascence of 1910-1920. He has not belonged to any "movement", but he undoubtedly profited by that awakened interest in poetry in the second decade of this century. He is distinctly modern, not in the forms he uses but in the application of those forms to his subject matter. He uses rime and meter, the ballad, the sonnet, the villanelle, the iambic pentameter of blank verse; but every form is definitely his own. He is an unconventional poet writing in conventional ways.

---

1 Ben Ray Redman, Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 8. (Since the publication of this book, Robinson has died, April 5, 1935)

Robinson's first book, The Torrent and the Night Before (1896), was published privately at a time when the state of poetry in the United States was neither satisfactory, exciting nor promising. He himself realized this, and expressed in a poem the wish

"for a beacon bright
To rift this changeless glimmer of dead gray:"

for a poet

"To put these little sonnet-men to flight
Who fashion, in a shrewed mechanic way,
Songs without souls, ..."

and the number of these sonnet-men was legion at the time.

To the gratification of Robinson, his book was recognized favorably by a review in The Bookman, February, 1897. To one appellation in this review, however, the poet objected, and replied (in the same journal for the following month): "The world is not a 'prison-house', but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks". [1] Here, as Redman has remarked, "in one brief sentence we find the tragedy, the humor, the pity, and the doubt that are the vitalizing elements of Robinson's poetic utterance." [2]

The Children of the Night (1897) introduced at once the themes and the technic that were to be Robinson's very own. He is not concerned with the clamorous accidents of our civilization. "His preoccupation is the spirit of man, not assailed

---

1 Robinson has since somewhat apologetically commented on this remark by saying, "I was young then and it seemed a smart thing to say." See The Bookman, Nov. 1932, p. 680.

2 Redman, quoted work, pp. 33, 34.

and tortured by that movement of life which we call civilization, but seen, as it were, detached from this influence and laboring in all the ironies and aspirations of its own nature. ... Whereas most of his fellow-countrymen who are poets see man beset by society, which is circumstance, he sees man beset by his own character, which is fate." [1] The conflict of the poet's protagonists is really the conflict of the poet himself. Whence arises this conflict? Well, that is ultimately and definitively a problem for the psycho-analyst, but Miss Amy Lowell gives us a valuable clue. [2] Puritanism, she says, though it strengthened the fiber of the early settlers, at length produced anemia and atrophy, sapped the vitality and brought on despair. Where in other places, it had gradually died out, Puritanism persisted in small towns, such as Gardiner, Maine, where Robinson spent his early years. It is difficult for one brought up in such a tradition to change quickly, consequently prejudice and training warred with newer ideas and produced a melancholy tinged with cynicism. The ballad technic of the old world found its counterpart in "Isaac and Archibald" but the plaintive questioning of one whose old faith had been swept away, leaving no new confidence to restore the balance, could not fail to appear.

Robinson's weakness, then, is his Puritan inheritance. His existence is one long battle between individual bravery and

---

1 John Drinkwater, The Muse in Council, p. 254. (It may be remarked that other poets, however, show how definitely this circumstance of society may be changed by man. See in particular the last chapter of this thesis.)

2 See Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, pp.3-25, throughout.

paralyzing atavism. His own mind is a battle-ground; and one is apt to recall a parallel in Victor Hugo's "Mahomet", who says:

"Je suis le champ vil des sublimes combats:
Tantôt l'homme d'en haut, et tantôt l'homme d'en bas."

But Robinson is clearly aware of the combat, and he turns it to good use in his poems. He has, too, a stoical faith in life, and accepts his condition with courage, though, because he is a poet, he cannot be quite content. "The clash arises from the measureless discrepancy between life experienced and life desired; the forces involved are chilling reason and warming faith, each impotent to conquer wholly, each incapable of complete surrender." [1]

The Children of the Night contains practically the only subjective poems Robinson has written. Its true vigor is in the objective etchings of the men of Tilbury Town. In these astringent character delineations we have the forerunner of the Spoon River epitaphs. Later Robinson reverted to kings and knights and princesses, but it is such Tilbury men shaped of the stuff of humanity, that are nearest his heart. These are not the flawless, the impeccable, for such would be gods. They are the flawed, the somewhat cursed, the social pariahs, the failures. But are they failures? Here is John Evereldown, who, though he prayed "to be done with it all", was doomed to be a reprobate; Luke Havergal who would keep his blind tryst at the western gate; the suicide Richard Cory, admired or envied, of all Tilbury; Cliff Klingenhagen, finding an anodyne in wormwood.

---

1 Redman, quoted work, p. 17.

Yet who would call them failures? Certainly not Robinson. With pity, sympathy, even humor, he can be no judge, but merely ask

"Who of us that is worth his while
Will, if he listen, more than smile?"

And that smile is far removed from bitter laughter. It is the kind recognition of fellow-feeling. Cynicism has already given way to a pitying tenderness.

Robinson's attitude in these studies is one of impartiality towards his characters. They are independent people realistically portrayed. Many of these poems are in sonnet form, and show Robinson's unique use of this medium for dramatic effect. Each has a surprise ending that "bites", to use Robinson's term, a trick that O. Henry used to good effect.

An example of Robinson's distinctive use of the villanelle is "The House on the Hill". Poignant and beautiful, it merits inclusion here in its entirety.

"They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around the sunken sill?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill.
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say."

Not all of the poems in this volume have such a sustained quality of perfectly controlled emotion. "Calvary" is a little weak and trite; "Her Eyes", with such a banal line as, "God never forgets", is disappointing. The title poem itself is perhaps the poorest in the book. It is all too reminiscent of the present homely verse of a certain Detroit journalist; and though the poem may be, as Miss Lowell suggests, "invaluable as a psychological note", [1] I cannot share her praise of it as poetry. It was a discerning judgment that excluded this poem from subsequent collections. On the whole, however, the volume is an important one in the history of American poetry, and it gave promise of the poet's later achievements.

I venture to suggest that in the future, Robinson will be best known and admired for his supreme technical merit: brevity. In his best work he depicts a tragic world with exquisite clarity attained by a shrewed and exact use of the mot precis. That quality which so distinguishes modern American poetry, the firm, clear, close-clipped line, he has to an unsurpassed degree.

It is then with a feeling of disappointment that we read the poem which gave the title to Captain Craig of 1902 (reprinted in 1915). It presents that tendency to long-windedness,

---

1. Amy Lowell, quoted work, p. 29.

all too prevalent in Robinson's later work. Packed as it is with lines of profound thought, it demands a too tireless attention to await the lines of poetry. As in passages of "The Book of Annandale" and the whole of "Aunt Imogen", the compact lines of "Captain Craig" approach too near to the rhythm of prose.

Written in the same style and meter, "Isaac and Archibald", however, is poetry throughout. It ranks among the best short narrative poems that Robinson has written. This, with some of the shorter poems in the book, is excellent. There is the dramatic ballad "The Return of Morgan and Fingal", there are the two sonnets, "The Growth of Lorraine", and the delightful and even humorous "Variations of Greed Themes". The volume, too, widened Robinson's scope, and in "The Woman and the Wife", the poet turned to a characteristic theme, the drama between man and woman. This widened range shows a definite departure from the early Robinsonian subjectivity. Introversion, we learn from psychotherapy, can be directed toward catharsis, and this, it seems, was the case with Robinson. His abreaction found expression in Captain Craig and all his future works.

The Town Down the River appeared at the beginning of the poetic renascence, in 1910. It presented an even surer and more versatile turn of speech. Again we hear Robinson's clearly modulated music in the title poem, in "Pasa Thalassa Thalassa", and in the touching "Leonara". Again we have those short character vignettes revealing the emotional paralysis of Tilbury's successful failures. We see in three terse sonnets the pageant of Leffingwell's "failure-laden years"; we see Lingard, "the

Moon-calf", and Clavering, "who died because he couldn't laugh". "Calverly's" reëchoes a mood of sorrow for departed things.

These sharp character studies are continued in The Man Against the Sky of 1916. We are introduced at the outset to

> "The man Flammonde, from God knows where,
> With firm address and foreign air,
> With news of nations in his talk
> And something royal in his walk,
> With glint of iron in his eyes."

He is a man, and a symbol.

> "He pictured all tradition hears
> Of what we owe to fifty years,"

a man who "borrowed graciously" to play "the Prince of Castaways". Yet many a man, and woman "of a long-faded scarlet fringe" found him a sincere friend. And his best friend is Robinson, who loved, almost glorified, the man kept "from the destinies that came so near to being his".

Truly, in this volume, "we have all of Robinson in one hundred and fifty pages; ... we have him unfalteringly at his best." [1] We have the simple traditional verse forms inspired with new life; compactness of sound, in phrases with swift and adequate final accents. His characteristic rhythm motivated by a cool, dry, severe movement is nowhere better seen than in this sestet of "Another Dark Lady":

> "I cannot hate you, for I loved you then.
> The woods were golden then. There was a road
> Through beeches; and I said their smooth feet showed
> Like yours. Truth must have heard me from afar,
> For I shall never have to learn again
> That yours are cloven as no beeches are."

---

1 Louis Untermeyer, The New Era in American Poetry, p. 124.

This shows too, the deeply moving channel of Robinson's emotion.

"Ben Johnson Entertains a Man from Stratford", is a poem very highly, and justly, praised. It draws one of the finest portraits of Shakespeare in all literature. It is far from an optimistic Shakespeare that is seen here:

> "Not long ago, late in an afternoon,
> I came on him unseen down Lambeth way,
> And on my life I was afear'd of him:
> He gloomed and mumbled like a soul from Tophet,
> His hands behind him and his head bent solemn.
> 'What is it now', said I, — 'another woman?'
> That made him sorry for me, and he smiled.
> 'No, Ben,' he mused; 'It's Nothing. It's all Nothing.
> We come, we go; and when we're done, we're done.'"

He is the immortal, the supreme failure.

> "Tell me, now,
> If ever there was anything let loose
> On earth by gods or devils heretofore
> Like this mad, careful, proud, indifferent Shakespeare!"

Redman is right in calling this "as flawless a poem as Robinson has given us, and one of the most stimulating." Truly "it is the man's humanity that sets off his divinity." [1]

In "The Man Against the Sky" [2] we see the picture of one who

> "may have proved a world a sorry thing
> in his imagining,
> And life a lighted highway to the tomb",

or one at whose heart

> "there may have gnawed
> Sick memories of a dead faith foiled and flawed,"

a man, that is, like Robinson himself. To him there comes the

---

1 Redman, quoted work, pp. 66, 67.

2 Quotation marks denote poems; titles of books are underlined.

old question of the meaning of life.

> "If after all that we have lived and thought,
> All comes to Nought, —
> If there be nothing after Now,
> And we be nothing anyhow,
> And we know that, — why live?"

To me it has always seemed that one who asks such a question admits defeat, for he demands too much of life. He is not content to accept it for what the day brings. But Robinson merely poses the question, he does not answer it; and any who see in this poem the justification of a religious faith but read their own wishes into the poet's words.[1] Nowhere in this poem does Robinson assume ultimate knowledge. He believes somewhat intuitively that there must be a "Word" which surpasses the ephemeral, but he fails to see that man has found it, or that he is able to find it.

Beyond these poems from this volume, there is hardly any single one more worthy of treatment than another. All certainly do justice to Robinson's name. The colloquial "John Gorham" with a contrast, "The Clinging Vine"; "Bewick Finzer" with its well-turned similes:

> "Familiar as an old mistake
> And futile as regret;"

and "Llewellyn and the Tree" with its concluding touch of irony, "as far off as a moral": all of these poems have the intellectual

---

1 This predilection is seen in at least two instances. Joyce Kilmer writes: "Impressionistic critics call E. A. Robinson a pessimist, but the careful student of his poetry knows that it consists merely of a series of intensely interesting and beautifully phrased questions, all having the same answer, that answer being God." (See Lloyd R. Morris, The Young Idea, p. 132). Likewise Theodore Maynard in an article on Robinson says, "'The Man Against the Sky' ends in an affirmation of his belief in immortality." (The Catholic World, June 1935, pp. 268, 269.)

beauty and exquisite sense of form that characterize Robinson.

With Merlin we come to the first of Robinson's legendary poems, which, with Lancelot and Tristram comprise the Arthurian cycle. Here, with the exception of The Three Taverns (1920) and Sonnets (1928), we bid good-by to the intensive Robinson of the shorter poems, and we are introduced to the poet's lesser works. It is a reluctant admission to make, yet here we have the beginning of Robinson's decline. I find complete accord with a critic in Poetry magazine, "To the present writer, Mr. Robinson's Arthurian poems and the non-legendary narratives of his later period mark a distinct lapse in power: a lessening of grasp, not only on technical, but on psychological essentials." [1]

It is doubtful as to what prompted Robinson to embark on this theme. "His life and manner have just that incisive reticence that is so characteristic of his poetry," [2] so we must rest on supposition, or suggestion. Mental hygienists tell us that an individual, while normally gaining increased satisfaction from outward things, is at a time of crisis, thrown back upon himself. May it not be, then, that at such a crisis, the mind of the poet returned to that Gardiner mansion (the "House on the Hill") which had been in his boyhood days a visible and tangible embodiment of romance? May he not have found, then, that there was something more to say?

---

1 Louise Bogan, "Tillbury Town and Beyond", Poetry, Jan. 1931.

2 Drinkwater, quoted work, p. 251.

At any rate, the poems were written, and the poet, whether he believed it or not, returned to "ruin and decay". The phantom figures that haunted the house never really lived again, at least, not for me. Yet there are commendable passages in these poems. The conclusion of Merlin is powerful and decisive. Many parts of Lancelot exemplify the author's rare ability of depicting light and shade in blank verse. Tristram, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1927, is superior to both of these in firmness and clarity of treatment. It is, in the words of Lloyd Morris, "the finest of Mr. Robinson's narrative poems". [1] Many passages, such as the following, convey a heightened emotional beauty:

> "Again her tears, unwilling still to flow,
> Made of her eyes two shining lakes of pain
> With moonlight living in them."

But such emotion is more often drawn-out, and Robinson has difficulty in sustaining a former intensity.

By way of contrast, "The Mill" in The Three Taverns of 1920, presents in three stanzas a more powerful drama than all three Arthurian poems together. Its slight obscurity, felt upon first reading, is due to Robinson's singularly oblique approach, his sure and poignant under statement that suffices, for

> "What else there was would only seem
> To say again what he had meant."

It is regrettable that Robinson did not have these lines more

---

1 Lloyd Morris, in The Nation, May 25, 1927, p. 586. (I believe, however, that this applies to the longer narratives. "Isaac and Archibald" excels any of these.)

often in mind in his succeeding writings. Time and again he but reëchoed what he had said before.

His characters in Roman Bartholow (1923) and The Man Who Died Twice (1924) are but shadows of former Robinsonian successes. They are gray amorphous creations in a misty world.

A friend of Robinson has informed me that there were two things the poet hated, free verse and prohibition. Robinson gave vent to his feeling about the latter in Dionysus in Doubt (1925). There are, however, few poems to merit our consideration in this book, although "The Sheaves" is a beautiful exception. His knack in conveying the ghostly is, too, well exhibited in "Haunted House".

The book of Sonnets published in 1928 covers the period of the author's writing between 1889 and 1927. They are a refreshing interlude indeed. Every phrase is sharply filled, and the whole is hard, bright, round and self-sufficient.

Of the seven comparatively small volumes that remain, little need be said. "Cavender's House" is thin and confused despite its terse felicity of phrase. In regard to The Glory of the Nightingales (1930) I can but quote Horace Gregory: "In relation to the main body of his work, The Glory of the Nightingales merely proves again that Robinson has already said very nearly everything he has to say". [1] Matthias at the Door of the following year is notable only for its sympathetic treatment, and

---

1 Horace Gregory in The New Republic, October 29, 1930. p. 303.

Nicodemus (1932) contains poems neither better nor worse than Robinson's average. In Talifer (1933) the standard Robinsonian character has grown weary of his tragic role. Amaranth is interminably dull, although Merrill Root is a little harsh when he says it is "just another evidence of hardening poetic arteries". [1]

In King Jasper (1935) I cannot get beyond blank lines of prose or find a fire that once was Robinson's. This volume was published in October 1935, after the poet's death; another posthumous volume is promised for this year (1936).

We may well ask what prevented these later narratives from becoming great poetry. Undoubtedly Robinson's distinctive attribute is a laconic speech. In the shorter verse forms it serves his dramatic purpose in a masterly fashion. But the narrative poem will not admit of its continued use. Then, too, drama needs a well understood code of behavior. Mr. Robinson, however, "has no epos, myth or code to tell him what the terminal points of human conduct are, in this age, so he goes over the same ground again and again, writing a poem that will not be written." [2] So when we look back at his later narratives we have difficulty in telling them apart. From Avon's Harvest on, they present a successive thinning resolution through hazy revenants, phantoms, convinced that "there is no cure for self", each with his "darkening hill to climb." Robinson's "later

---

1 Merrill Root, "The Decline of E. A. Robinson", The Christian Century, Dec. 5, 1934, p. 1554.

2 Allen Tate, "Again, O Ye Laurels", The New Republic October 25, 1933, p. 313.

poems suffer from a lack both of sensual richness and of intellectual horizons: They are dramas of scruple, not purpose; they are tragedies played in the twilight of a closed room." [1]

With Robinson an early neurasthenic verse solidified into an indigenous cryptic and compact mold. With a rare genius of intuitive insight he expressed through imagery and swift allusiveness the rhythms of ordinary speech within the traditional forms. Curiously alienated from the spirit of contemporary life he owes much to Browning, Crabbe and Hardy. This latter poet has a more probing understanding than Robinson but seldom a greater subtlety or finish. Robinson's verse also frequently brings A. E. Housman to mind. With the possible inclusion of Zola, these authors seem to be Robinson's chief heritage from his wide and sympathetic acquaintance with books.

In his best poems we find Robinson an acute depictor of human types, a shrewd psyches iatros, a sharp psychologist. His analytic incision cuts like a scalpel, leaving bare the essential dissimilarities of men. And yet his portraits become universal. His accurate precision invests these men with an air of magic, mystery and illusion. Poet of the success of failure, "he is above all a biographer of souls, who is bound to humanity by the dual bond of sympathy and humor." [2]

It is, however, a humor that emerges from sadness. There is no effervescent joy in Robinson. "No one will ever go

---

1 Editorial, The New Republic, April 17, 1935, p. 269.

2 Redman, quoted work p. 95.

to Mr. Robinson's books ... to fill himself with the zest and sparkle of life. These things Robinson has not to give." [1] "His are the passions of reminiscence, of observation, repression, and leisure, in short the passions of the studious observer," [2] not of the partaker. There is little in life to be exuberant about, little evidence of a benevolently ordered power in the universe. The metaphysical problems posed at the outset of his poetic career remain for him set problems. Life makes no affirmation, offers no moral, good or ill. So in his poetry, "neither force in the struggle between experience and faith can ever, for long, claim any show of victory." [3] The question remains, and Robinson's innate puritan fortitude keeps him ever seeking the answer.

Yet there is no utter pessimism in his work. "Robinson was a prince of heartachers amid countless achers of another part. The sincerity he wrought in was all sad. He asserted the sacred right of poetry to lean its breast to a thorn and sing its dolefullest." [4] But his poems "mellow and subdue"; they are "tonic and uplifting". [5]

"To direct a tranquillity of contemplation upon the whirlpools of life is in a rare degree the function of his art". [6] In doing this he has made a consummate contribution,

---

1 Lowell, quoted work p. 74.
2 Bruce Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, p. 188.
3 Redman, quoted work, p. 35.
4 Robert Frost, Introduction to King Jasper, p. viii
5 Lowell, quoted work, p. 74.
6 Drinkwater, quoted work, p. 251.

not only to poetry but to a knowledge of mankind. We believe with Mrs. Colum that "when anyone in the future wants to know what the descendants of the early American colonists were like, how they felt, their characters, their fears, their profound loneliness, ...he will find revelation in the poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson". [1] More than this he will find humanity.

---

1 Mary M. Colum, "Poets and Their Problems" Forum, June 1935, p. 343.

CHAPTER III

THE IMPARTIAL EARTH

E. A. Robinson, by virtue of his strict adherence to realistic portrayal, became the first spokesman of the new poetic order in America. His uncompromising use of words produced a crisp, concise phraseology that became a model for younger poets. In poetic form, however, he was to the end a traditionalist.

It is also primarily as traditionalist that we approach the work of his fellow New Englander, Robert Frost. Perhaps it is not strictly accurate to include either of these men in this category. Robinson lived most of his life in New York City, while Frost was born in San Francisco. Frost, however, is quite the indigenous New Englander, the New Hampshire poet laureate.

In comparing the two poets, their fundamental difference is apparent at once. Robinson is the naturalist: his personality studies are faithfully etched, but the print is in a definite tone of gray. Frost is the true realist: he gives us woodcuts as vivid and yet as subdued as the illustrations of Julius Lankes in the volume West-Running Brook. He loves and sings the intrinsically beautiful simple things, and enjoys them solely for themselves. With these words he concludes "Hyla Brook": "We love the things we love for what they are." That is enough. He loves the realities of life because "the fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." He loves life not simply for its joys but for its hardships and difficulties. These

indeed can be joys if they are considered philosophically. More than Robinson, he derives inspiration from direct contact with the world, and more too, than Robinson, his is a mood of acceptance.

> "Let the night be too dark for me to see
> Into the future. Let what will be be."

Alfred Kreymborg has accurately estimated the two poets when he says, "Robinson is more intellectual, Frost more intuitive".[1]

Walt Whitman manifested an attitude of independence. Beyond this, Robinson bears no similarity to that poet. But Whitman's inheritance of."the breadth, the prodigal energy, the immense jubilant acceptance, a roughshod faith in life and death," [2] Robert Frost gladly accepted. "This poetic feeling for ordinary life is the bond that unites most of the younger poets of our day — in none is it expressed so simply and yet so richly as in the work of Robert Frost." [3] But Frost is less spontaneous and exuberant than the Long Island poet. He is more of the Whitman who could say, "I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait." Frost was content to wait until his thirty-eighth year for the publication of his first volume.

In A Boy's Will (1913) [4] Frost has not yet found himself. He has difficulty in presenting a clear expression. As

---

1 Alfred Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength, p. 318.

2 Louis Untermeyer, The New Era in American Poetry, p. 15.

3 same, p. 16.

4 This is the date of the English publication. An American edition appeared in 1915.

the rubric to the third poem says, "he is in love with being misunderstood," even in his verse. The work, however, is a good subjective study of his own period of transition, and is so arranged as to adumbrate the author's development. "The opening poems render the youth's preoccupation with the flux of his own longings and with nature's shifting phenomena." [1] In "Stars" he sees a universe "with neither love nor hate", a world in which "there is no oversight of human affairs." This fills him with a feeling of isolation so that his

> "heart owns a doubt
> Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
> And save ourselves unaided."

So after the turn of the year, he accepts the labors that the day brings, going for water, mowing, living with the person who is nearest him. And in "The Tuft of Flowers" he feels "a spirit kindred to my own". He comes to a realization that changes his life:

> "'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
> 'Whether they work together or apart.'"

He discovers that in true labor is a firm personal joy and a constant social sympathy. Henceforth he is the poet of neighborliness.

In the first poem of North of Boston (1914), however, he sees that social conventions may obstruct the spirit of human brotherhood. "Mending Wall", as a note to this volume says, "taken up the theme where 'The Tuft of Flowers' laid it down." "Something there is that doesn't love a wall", and it

---

1 G. R. Elliot, "The Neighborliness of Robert Frost," The Nation, Dec. 6, 1919, p. 713.

is more than a winter's frost that "spills the upper boulders in the sun." But his neighbor is of the old order. "He will not go behind his father's saying", and only replies, "'Good fences make good neighbors.'" So the poet learns that conservativism wars with liberalism, that there is a distinction between neighborliness and intimacy.

This poem is completely characteristic of Frost. We have a realistic literal presentation of a common farm task. Beneath it is a universal application. I think that Bruce Weirick misinterprets the poem when he emphasizes its meaninglessness, claiming that in the chaos of today "there is nothing left for the wall to keep out or let in." [1] There is certainly complexity, degeneracy in the life of New England. Frost shows this in other poems of North of Boston. But such an implication is not here connoted. I believe that "Mending Wall" presents, beyond the vivid and concrete particulars, two spirits, the one of a dogmatizing generation, the other of a new order which would break down the barriers between men.

Frost sees, then, that in order to be a good neighbor he must know how his fellow men want to be treated; he must study these New Englanders more closely. North of Boston, then, becomes a book of people. The people he finds, and introduces to us, are far from happy. They live in diseased communities, stricken with monotony, grief, insanity. Incidents occur, momentarily to shake a growing inertia, but only to leave a more profound estrangement. Now, a hired man, worthless, unwanted,

---

1 Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, p. 180.

returns, but death has a way of settling things. Then, a servant, fraught with the decay of a narrow burdened life, unpacks her heart to her fellow domestics. Again, a woman rails at her mate who cannot understand a consuming grief over the child he has just buried.

With bare simplicity and economy, Frost is able to project a dramatic narrative by means of dialog. He recognizes that the grand style is not for him, and is content to speak rather than to sing. This is not to say that we do not find lyric lines in his poetry. In one of the poems to which I have just made mention, "The Death of the Hired Man", there are these beautiful lines:

> "Part of a moon was falling down the west,
> Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
> Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
> And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
> Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
> Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves.
> As if she played unheard some tenderness
> That wrought on him beside her in the night."

But his great achievement is in the faithful, forceful presentation of characters in narratives that are fresh, mordant, and unsentimental. As in the narratives of the greatest writers, the stories tell themselves. The theatricalities, like the narrator himself, are entirely absent. His manner is quiet, his words accurate, precise, and sparing. Yet through the simplicity there is a deeper meaning than the words of a line convey. Because of his subtle realistic method, it is sometimes difficult to grasp all the implications and bearings of his situations. He lets the thought emerge unspoken from the simple account of what happened. Often, too, this account

gives us insight into the entire life of the character. "His record of the present passing scene suggests how much has gone before, how much these people have lived through, what a lengthy chain of feelings and motives and circumstances has shaped their actions and mental attitudes." [1]

Frost's power and sympathy is at once displayed in all these poems of North of Boston. His adeptness at genre painting is well seen in "The Death of the Hired Man". The whole power of "The Fear" lies in the fact that nothing could happen physically that would be so tragic as the mental uncertainty produced when nothing happens. "Home Burial" accentuates the profound difference between man and woman — a chasm that only love can bridge. "A Servant to Servants" lays bare the painful memories and gloomy forbodings of an overdriven woman. Some subtle humor invests "A Hundred Collars".

In these North of Boston poems, Frost has caught the sure tone of New England speech. Through a blank verse as massive as the people and as hard as New England granite he has allowed the natives to tell their own story. Like the people themselves, the lines are stripped of all apologies and adornments, and flow slowly and simply in an elusive, characteristic rhythm, "His 'native touch' is declared by the subtle blend of outspokenness and reticence of brooding conscience and grave humor." [2] It is a touch that gives a keen feeling for

---

1 Edward Garnett, "A New American Poet," The Atlantic Monthly, August 1915, p.219.

2 Same, p. 200.

situation by the use of clear images in a firm outline.

So in this book, Frost learned that though there may be essential differences in men, there are as equally essential similarities. The same earth, too, is impartial to all. In Mountain Interval (1916) he turned to consider more fully this impartial earth, this nature and man's place in it. What makes one man differ from the rest? This he answered, for all no less than for himself, in "The Road Not Taken:"

> "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
> I took the one less traveled by,
> And that has made all the difference."

A profound thought this, for it reaches into the depths of all men. It makes all the difference.

We follow him, then, along the road he has chosen. We share with him the loneliness of "An Old Man's Winter Night":

> "One aged man—one man—can't fill a house."

We watch him build a screen to protect "The Exposed Nest." We feel his sheer tiredness in the poem "A Patch of Old Snow." We realize his neighborliness in "A Time to Talk".

The poems in this book are almost all short. They treat of what for some would be trivial incidents; but for Frost these incidents have a significance that makes for permanency. "Snow" is the longest poem. It is not as poignant as Frost's better narratives, but conveys successfully through the in-doors talk of the delicately contrasted characters, the bitterness of a winter tempest. The volume marks a change in Frost's attitude. He is no longer the clinical analyst, but a

friendly man observing men and nature, quietly yet discerningly. He is a man enjoying an interval in that part of his state north of Boston. He is ready to travel the length and breadth of his New Hampshire.

It is regrettable that in the title poem of New Hampshire (1923) we have more of Frost "the sensibilitist" and less of Frost the poet. What he has to say is worth listening to, but we should prefer him to speak in poetry. The other poems however make amends for this one.

In this volume, as in the preceding one, Frost has left behind him the pathological elements of North of Boston. Yet in it we have all that is characteristic of the poet. The rural background is ever present. In the scenes of farms and animals, there is what Frost says he likes in landscapes, a straight-edge on a curve. There is ever the human reaction to nature's processes, and in a few poems there are more intimate moods of personal reflection. Of this last type, "Fire and Ice", and "For Once, Then, Something", are as confessional as Frost is ever apt to write. The poet is as reserved about his inmost thoughts as he is in the treatment of his poetic personalities. The thought in "Fire and Ice" is perhaps borrowed from A. E. Housman, [1] but this short poem of nine lines is a distinctly Frostian creation. I will make no further comment than to say that it expresses the entire gamut of human relations. "The poem is neither hopeful nor pessimistic; it

---

1 Compare Housman, A Shropshire Lad, XXX

faces facts and states them for what they are, in Frost's unique speech". [1]

This volume has more humor than previous books. It is a quality which G. R. Elliot believes critics have been wont to overlook in Frost. [2] It is seen rather pathetically in "Paul's Wife", and takes on a shivering, eerie, yet genial tone in "The Witch of Coos". There is an atmosphere of natural mystery in Frost's humor, the mystery of human personality. In "The Grindstone" there is more of bitterness, more of the sense of inertia in nature, the wear on the human spirit by time, the aching strain of making nature malleable. But nature is unconcerned about man's disaster. One feels throughout the book that being "versed in country things" only impresses more deeply the demarcation between man and nature. It is a dualistic world. The line between nature and man is always present. It is not a wild nature, but rather a tamed wilderness, and the men that Frost treats are disciplined by it. "Their bodies have been contracted and hardened by sweating toil, their emotions have the solidity of rocks, and their minds achieve a good dogged common sense." [3]

In West-Running Brook (1928) Frost's usual astute eclecticism does not seem to have served him so well, for he has admitted several poems of merely fair degree. It is not that one looks for progress or improvement over earlier verse.

---

1 Kreymborg, quoted work, p. 329.

2 See G. R. Elliot, "An Undiscovered America in Frost's Poetry", The Virginia Quarterly Review, July, 1925, pp. 205-215.

3 Gorham B. Munson, "Robert Frost", The Saturday Review of Literature, March 28, 1925, p. 626.

"They would not find me changed from him they knew", he wrote in the first poem of A Boy's Will, so we do not expect a different poet in this book. It is only that there are poems here not up to his former standard.

At least a half-dozen poems, however, have all of their author's excellence. This short verse, for instances, must find a place in the heart of every man:

"Lodged"

"The rain to the wind said
'You push and I'll pelt.'
They so smote the garden bed
That the flowers actually knelt,
And lay lodged — though not dead.
I know how the flowers felt."

Yet not for long is this sense of loneliness, of defeat. Though it is felt again in "Bereft" and "On Going Unnoticed", the mood gives way to resignation in "Acceptance" and "Acquainted With the Night". Back of the resignation is a respect for the inscrutable in the cosmos, (see "Once By The Pacific") a respect that marks the dignity of man, that gives him poise, that distinguishes him from the rest of nature's creations. This "poise" is best seen in "The Armful", which is "an assertion, in the symbolic terms verse loves, that man as man is engaged in the difficult feat of preserving a balance, of trying ever new arrangements for coping with the unmanageable burdens of circumstance." [1] In the title poem, too, man is seen endeavoring to preserve his integrity against the impulse to drift with the stream of life. One last poem from this volume remains for me

---

1 Gorham B. Munson, "Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper," The Bookman, July 193-, p. 420.

among the finest Frost has written. It is entitled "The Peaceful Shepherd".

"If heaven were to do again,
And on the pasture bars,
I leaned to line the figures in
Between the dotted stars.

I should be tempted to forget,
I fear, the Crown of Rule,
The Scales of Trade, the Cross of Faith,
As hardly worth renewal.

For these have governed in our lives,
And see how men have warred,
The Cross, the Crown, the Scales may all
As well have been the Sword."

In one respect it is significant that West-Running Brook should be Frost's last book of poems within our consideration. [1] The volume seems to sum up Frost, the man, as well as any calculation might be possible. Critics are all too fond of placing him in one or another category. One emphasizes the humorist, another the humanist. Gorham Munson calls him "the purest classical poet of America", [2] and Professor Blankenship stresses his realism. [3] Sidney Cox is perhaps nearest to my own view in his appellative, "original 'ordinary man'". [4] But Frost, as life itself, eludes definition. His poetic contri-

---

1 Collected Poems, appeared in 1930 and an illustrated edition of: A Boy's Will in 1934. Two chapbooks have also been printed, A Lone Striker (1933) and Gold Hesperidee (1935)

2 Gorham B. Munson, quoted article, The Saturday Review of Literature. See also a treatment of classical allusions in Frost's poetry by George O. Aykroyd, "The Classical in Robert Frost," Poet Lore, Dec. 1929, pp. 610-614.

3 See Russel Blankenship, American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind, pp. 588-594.

4 See Sidney Cox, Robert Frost, Original 'Ordinary Man'

bution has been a conscientious and sympathetic one. Miss Deutsch has written more than a just estimate of Frost's worth, as seen in West-Running Brook, in her Herald Tribune review of this book: "The courage that is bred by a dark sense of Fate, the tenderness that broods over mankind in all its blindness and absurdity, the vision that comes to rest as fully on kitchen smoke and lapsing snows as on mountains and stars — these are his, and in his seemingly casual poetry, he quietly makes them ours." [1]

Frost has never hurried about his work. He has always been faithful to the dictates of his artistic conscience. His quiet, unassuming manner, characterizes the lines of his poetry. Quite casually, for instance, he makes reference to that most spacious of northern constellations:

"You know Orion always comes up sideways,
Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains".

He does not rebel, or rail against the impartial earth. "No poet of our time is so little sensuous, none clamours so little, none sings or whistles so naturally, none makes, of piercing sorrow, and of tragedy deeply realized, a music more tranquil." [2] His "spring time passion for the earth" moves deeply. It finds original expression in weaving rich cadences over a bare basic meter. Always the true Yankee, he is yet bigger than his environment. He stands and looks at something in such a way that it becomes a world. This creation of univer-

---

1 Babette Deutsch, "Books" N. Y. Herald Tribune, Nov. 18, 1928.

2 John Freeman, "Robert Frost", The London Mercury, December, 1925, p. 186.

sal significance is still made without a taint of didacticism, but rather through a logical deduction of the reader. "He has transformed blank verse into a fluid instrument of his own idiomatic speech, pungent and taciturn, a speech sharpened and mellowed with a humor that strikes always through its mark of literal fact." [1] He has achieved that difficult simplicity which he believes necessary for a complete poem, "emotion that has found its thought and the thought that has found the words."

---

1 Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "A Good Greek Out of New England", The New Republic, Sept. 30, 1925. p. 146.

CHAPTER IV

ILLINOIS AND POINTS WEST

Shortly after 1910 it became increasingly evident that America was no longer to find her poets coming for the most part from the comparatively small New England States. The republic was to express itself more and more by natives of the West. So we find, in the best work of the years 1910 to 1935, many poets from the Mississippi valley. Sandburg, Lindsay and MacLeish were born in Illinois, Masters in a small Kansas town near the Missouri state line. Sara Teasdale and T. S. Eliot both came from St. Louis, Missouri, John Gould Fletcher from Arkansas. Two other poets take us on across the plains, even to the coast; for Ezra Pound is a native of Idaho, and Robinson Jeffers, though born in Pittsburg, has permanently resided in California since 1914 and is generally spoken of as "the Californian poet".

The fact that six of these poets come from the Middle West, however, means very little, as far as similarity of verse is concerned. Sandburg and Lindsay, for example, have little in common except a negative quality of unevenness. Yet this remark is to be taken as not wholly disparaging. A lack of uniformity is seen in the bulk of even our greatest writers. When the critic is faced with an appreciable disparity in literary contribution, however, his logical plan must be to treat this literature selectively. In my consideration of Sandburg and Lindsay, then, I shall not follow their work chronologically, as I have done with Robinson and Frost, but

rather select from the poems such material as illustrates their weakness, and their strength.

Of strength, Carl Sandburg has certainly an abundant supply. It is at once brutal and tender, rough and refined. If this power were not so obvious on every page he has written, Sandburg might be as great a poet as Whitman; but he lacks just this Whitmanian ability to direct strength into a concise and artistic mold, an organized and esthetic form. And yet to Whitman, Sandburg owes more, and is most similar, than to any other single poet.

What Whitman desired in his American Primer was not the polite or obscure, but the simple and direct, the use of strong "words that would be welcomed by the nation, being of the national blood." These national words Sandburg brought to the so-called Poetic Revival — a fresh, audacious novelty of words and imagery. He has taken the Whitman forms and even cadences, though he has not expressed the complete Whitman vision. He has moments when a vivid power of fresh imagery gives great beauty to his pictures. Such a moment is seen in "Lost":

> "Desolate and lone
> All night long on the lake
> Where fog trails and mist creeps,
> The whistle of a boat
> Calls and cries unendingly,
> Like some lost child
> In tears and trouble
> Hunting the harbor's breast
> And the harbor's eyes."

At other times ("Death Snips Proud Men" is only one of two many examples) he is sustained for three or four lines, then collapses ignominiously, leaving a loose and sprawling end.

It is in respect to vocabulary that Sandburg moves American poetry away from its Anglo-Saxon inheritance. "Woven into the substance of passionate expression, one begins to hear, sometimes raucous, sometimes still, the racy inflections of vulgar speech." [1] He gives us such words as galoots, hoodlums, crapshooters, muckers, scabs, hunky, has-been, slut; such adjectives as crooked, husky, dago, brawling; such verbs as croak, cram, snozzle, titter, snort. Quite often these words give a sharp, surprising rightness to his descriptions; at other times the colloquialisms are used inadvertently in the wrong place. Yet when appropriately employed, Sandburg's vocabulary has an amazingly graphic, as well as a fine artistic quality. He claims his ideal models are the expressive picture-words found in Chinese characters: "The Chinese catch the clean-cut picture. That's what I try to do with words." [2] So we find in his Chicago Poems a certain uplifted coarseness running through bold and visionary pictures of a man and a city. The book is a good illustration of Sandburg's "ability to make language live, to make the words on the printed page sing, dance, bleed, rage and suffer with the aroused reader." [3]

---

1 Paul Rosenfeld, "Carl Sandburg", The Bookman, July 1921, p. 392. This is quite the best impartial account of Sandburg's poetry.

2 Quoted by Walter Yust, "Carl Sandburg, Human Being," The Bookman, Jan., 1921, p. 387 (numbered 287 due to an error in pagination.)

3 Louis Untermeyer, The New Era in America Poetry, pp. 97, 98.

There are three main subjects that comprise Sandburg's work. He is "the poet of Chicago, the prairies, and the proletariat." [1] Not in Chicago Poems alone, but in his four succeeding volumes, does Sandburg rise in defence of the Middle West metropolis. It is not a vainglorious idealization that he puts forward. He is well aware of the city's ugliness, filth, immorality, but he sees its spots of beauty as well. What he objects to is the superficial calumny of those who have not seen enough of Chicago. It is against such passages as these, presumably, that he raises his protest:

> "Ruines de Chicago! Je vous évoque avec horreur, avec ennui, prodigieux monceau de ferrailles, de béton et de plâtras, dont la seule beauté serait d'herbes folles et de mousses." [2]

> "Ah! vous, poètes du vieux monde, vous pouvez toute imaginer: le fond des mers, le désert, la lune ... Vous n'imaginerez pas Chicago, cette termitière, Chicago qui n'est pas même laide, mais inhumaine, mais hagarde comme un rêve après l'ivresse." [3]

He answers the indictment in no uncertain terms:

> "It is easy to come here a stranger and show the whole works, write a book, fix it all up -- it is easy to come and go away a muddle - headed pig, a bum and a bag of wind.
>
> Go to it and remember this city fished from its depths a text: 'Independent as a hog on ice'".

He continues in "Chicago",

> "And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at his my city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them:

---

1 Marguerite Wilkinson, The Poetry of Our Own Time, p. 22.

2 George Duhamel, Scènes de la Vie future, p. 110.

3 same, p. 146.

> Come and show me another city with lifted head
> singing so proud to be alive and coarse and
> strong and cunning."

He has lived here long enough to know that stone and steel do not alone make up his city, for

> "By night the skyscraper looms in the smoke and the
> stars and has a soul."

These tall spires express an ideal; they point to pools of clean pale blue that open beyond a heavy steel-gray sky. He remembers the men that made them; he knows that "smoke and blood is the mix of steel." He would be one of these men, he would speak their language, respond to the timbre and idiomatic phrases that are the blood and bones of their speech. So he links his arm in theirs, and goes down the street singing. Skyscrapers and canal boats and locomotive yards become fused with him: When he speaks, the stuff of these scenes is softened, is mellowed, plied into flesh and sinews, brought into the here, the now, the immediate present. "The sheer noise, the banging of jazz, the colored and emphatic and cruel phrases, the raging and gorgeous slang of the American streets, saturate him, waken in him grim, rough, sardonic joy, touch life in him." [1]

But at times, as in "Aprons of Silence", he feels the shattering, senseless noise of the thoroughfares. He was "born on the prairie." He would be back again "between the

---

1 Paul Rosenfeld, quoted article, p. 391.

sheds of the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians." The Mississippi valley is for him the space on top of the globe — and the earth is beneath him.

"The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know
in the night I rest easy in the prairie arms,
on the prairie heart."

He would dream awhile of "River Roads", the "Early Moon" and "Laughing Corn." He would remember "The Smoke of Autumn."

"Better the blue silence and the gray west,
The autumn mist on the river,
And not any hate and not any love,
And not anything at all of the keen and the deep:
Only the peace of a dog head on a barn floor,
And the new corn shovelled in bushels
And the pumpkins brought from the corn rows,
Umber lights of the dark,
Umber lanterns of the loam dark.

Here a dog head dreams.
Not any hate, not any love.
Not anything but dreams.
Brother of dusk and umber."

In Cornhuskers Sandburg expresses a deep feeling for beauty in the towns of the Middle border, where beauty never before was felt. He apprehends the western scene not merely intellectually but physically, with the entire man. His scenes are never of loneliness, of solitude. Always there are men and women, and children playing. Nature only has a meaning when there are human beings to perceive it. But strong as is his love of life, Sandburg's Swedish inheritance of a knowledge of the imminence of corruption and decay has kept the thought of death always before him.

"I shall be eaten by gray creepers in a bunkhouse
Where no runners of the sun come and no dogs live."

He is well aware of life's caducity:

"Those who saw the buffaloes by thousands and how
they pawed the prairie sod into dust with their
hoofs, their great heads down pawing on in a
great pageant of dusk,
Those who saw the buffaloes are gone.
And the buffaloes are gone."

He thinks of the great names lying in the "Cool Tombs":

"Pocahontas' body, lovely as a poplar, sweet as
a red haw in November or a pawpaw in May, did
she wonder? does she remember? ... in the dust,
in the cool tombs?"

And he wonders "if any get more than the lovers ... in the dust ... in the cool tombs." Civilizations "go to the dumps one by one." It might be well to live quietly, not too intent on advancing our own desires,

" ...since at the gates of tombs silence is a gift,
be silent about it, yes, be silent -- forget it."

Sandburg, however, simply cannot be silent. He blatantly cries out his passionate dislike of the rich, his violent love of the common man, of the dirty and oppressed. He clamors in a vague sort of way for social reform. I say this despite the fact that Miss Lowell seems to find an open presentation of his theories in the strange and pathetic "Savoir Faire". [1] Occasionally, too, as in "The Masses", he is restrained in his mood of social protest. But the chief fault of Sandburg's propanda is that it gives statements, not representations. He is too outspoken, not subtly inductive. "We overhear him telling himself what it is he ought to be singing." [2] Not one of his propaganda poems is as moving or

---

1 Amy Lowell, Poetry and Poets, p. 159.

2 Rosenfeld, quoted article, p. 394.

as powerful as Arturo Giovannitti's "The Walker."

The fault lies, of course, not with propaganda, in itself. There is propaganda of some sort in every one of Shakespere's plays. Conrad Aiken, too, goes quite beside the point when he warns that "doctrine is interesting only when new", [1] or that "ethics and art cannot be married." [2] If this were true we should have long since abandoned the greater part of our best literature. The fact is that propaganda, like didacticism, is only effective when it persuades by indirect presentation.

Often, at the hands of Carl Sandburg, a violent dislike is expressed merely by cacophonous lines of prose wherein enjambment alone aids in an approximation of poetry. Such a bad poem is "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter", which opens with the lines,

> "You come along ... tearing your shirt ... yelling
> about Jesus,
> Where do you get that stuff
> What do you know about Jesus?"

It is powerful, perhaps even shows restraint, but it lacks dignity. Shakespere was powerful; he used a sufficient number of expletives; but even the speech of the demented Lear is dignified in its crudeness beside this of Sandburg. Dreiser has shown how the commonplace personality can take on a classic

---

1 Conard Aiken, Scepticisms, p. 144.

2 Same, p. 147.

dignity, in speech as well as in character. [1] Sandburg merely hurls back the cheap reformer's own stentorian epithets. My criticism is merely a poetic one. Beauty without strength is poor poetry. So is strength without dignity.

The demerits of Sandburg, however, are far removed from those of his fellow Illinois writer, Edgar Lee Masters. One searches, through boredom and tiredness, the interminable pages of nearly twenty volumes of this Spoon River poet, in an effort to find twenty lines of genuine poetry. It was an indiscriminating critic that mistook Masters for "the natural child of Walt Whitman". Certainly, in style and content, the two are poles apart. An English writer clearly recognized this when he wrote: "Whitman is an optimist, full of aspiration and indulgence. ... The author of Spoon River and Domesday Book is a pessimist of the darkest dye, for whom there is, in that provincial American scene which Leaves of Grass so radiantly described, nothing but dullness and concealed wretchedness." [2]

The Spoon River Anthology, which made its author famous, served to provide one more example of how gullible a nation's readers can be, and perhaps gave another inkling as to why real poetry is so little read. Strength, shrewd analysis, precision, clarity, mordant excoriations, pungent and ruthless exposés — these the book has, everything but poetry. Masters is a novelist who lacks the coördination to

---

1 See in particular, Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy.

2 Edmund Gosse, More Books on the Table, p. 354.

write poetry. It is indeed easy to see why his "poetry" has had a greater influence on novelists than on poets. So Spoon River is neither one thing nor the other. We might ask of this book, as of all Master's work, "It is a miracle of veracious characterization, fiction of an unexampled kind, ... but why drag in poetry?" [1]

The best work of Carl Sandburg, on the contrary, is definite poetry. We feel it despite the incomplete verses, the many watery, tattered things that clutter the pages of Smoke and Steel. We feel a very genuine kindness, a sense of unity of mankind, a strong tenderness, that is entirely absent in Masters. We feel that Sandburg's outlook is not so confined, so narrow. The sun, the grass, steel and brawn, can be as real as psychopathia sexualis. But Sandburg lacks the power of particularizing that is so evident in Masters. Just as his socialistic program is diffused by too much talk, his workingmen are left obscure by too little detail. He seldom individualizes, but rather leaves a vague sense of surging masses. "He is the voice of the abstract city rather than of the citizen." [2] It is the same too, with his treatment of objects of nature. We feel something pale, something ragged, about his "slabs of the sunburnt west". He never seems to see a particular star, never Vega, or Arcturus, or Altair. They are all nebulous, simply "One gold star. A shower of blue stars.

---

1 Lawrence Gilman, "Moving Picture Poetry," The North American Revue, August 1915, p. 276.

2 Stuart P. Sherman, Americans, p. 242.

Blurs of white and gray stars."

No poet in America today has had Sandburg's apprenticeship of almost every variety of job and experience to equip him for writing about life. But this poet has not looked at experience with a sufficiently discerning eye. He accepts too much without examination, and hence is inclined to sentimentalize. He seizes the immensities with a rough grasp and the minutiae with tender fingers. Whatever comes to hand is grist to the poetic mill; but his mill more often throws out poetic matter in its raw state.

Original as his material is, Sandburg's work bears a likeness to some other poets. For example, this of the Slave Zupautchitch, might have been written by Sandburg:

"Hammer me, Oh Life! Hammer me!
If I be steel, I shall sing,
If a fire-stone, sparks will fly,
If glass, let me be broken."

And the Chicago poet's shortest poem,

Fog.
"The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on."

as well as showing Imagist influence, presents a striking resemblance to similar lines of T. S. Eliot.[1] Another poem,

---

1 Compare the stanza in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", beginning "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes." (T. S. Eliot, Poems, pp. 37, 38.)

while being in no way unique, will, I believe, long be remembered as one of Sandburg's best. It is, "The Road and the End", which opens with these lines:

> "I shall foot it
> Down the roadway in the dusk,
> Where shapes of hunger wander
> And the fugitives of pain go by."

This brings us back to Sandburg the lover of humanity. His poems are "powerful, brutal, gentle and human — and so is he." [1] He feels and suffers with the men who toil with blood and sweat. But he does not feel quite deeply enough. He lives too quickly his journalistic life to be very deep, or penetrate his subject matter profoundly. "He does not 'tie up' his subject. He does not make an analysis or arrive at a conclusion. In a word, he not only does not know what his material means, but he does not tell us what it means to him, further than his selection of the matter for treatment gives an inkling." [2] We sense, too, that he lacks the courage of his convictions. He thinks that he is sympathetic with the working class, but "he writes for the literary smart set." [3] Not that he is conscious of this, however; it is simply a result of the society in which he lives and writes. There are some compulsives that keep him from complete success. "He appears afraid of himself; fearful of seeing himself naked. The hand of the herd rests, for all his radicalism, dangerously heavy on his neck." [4]

---

1 Walter Yust, quoted article, p. 390.

2 Edgar Lee Masters, "The Poetry Revival of 1914", The American Mercury, July 1932, p. 278.

3 Sherman, quoted work, p. 242.

4 Rosenfeld, quoted article, p. 394.

Even having his material close at hand, however, (or maybe because of it), he fails to squeeze his poems firm and solid. He lacks a critical, selective sense, though not nearly so completely as Masters. Despite the fact that he is said to revise and "polish" his lines many times, a certain sluggishness is all too apparent in many poorly organized, unesthetic poems. At moments the basic rhythm is felt — then lost again — and the poem wanders blindly. There is never a profound underflow. Perhaps the moral is that poetry needs a more sturdy structure than "free verse" gives it, that it needs chains in order to be free.

Yet without critical aid, this clay-footed Titan has achieved robustly, and America would certainly be a vastly different place in literature if Masters were its sole laureate. In Carl Sandburg there is no trace of the delicate languors associated with the library. His are the emotions of the living, vibrant man, the undulations of green corn waving, the piercing of a spire of steel. "He has begun doing in his Chicago of the new century what Whitman was doing in the Manhattan of Civil War times: burning the mists off the befogged land, striving to create out of the inanimate steel and the loveless dirt, the living thing America". [1]

In the year 1913, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, with the publication of General William Booth Enters Heaven and

---

1 Rosenfeld, quoted article, p. 389.

Other Poems, became, and was destined to continue for the next ten years, the most unique figure in American poetry. There hardly needed the appearance of this volume to give him the popularity he enjoyed. Seven years before, he had left Springfield, Illinois, and "started out on an apostolic mission through Southern states, tramping from place to place, carrying little money and less baggage, and trading rhymes and reproductions of pictures for a meal or an overnight bed." [1]

Lindsay had caught the vision of a new heaven and a new earth. With the child-like heart of the dreamer this troubador of joy went from town to village, proclaiming his message with slogans of good advice: "To Begin, We Must Have a Sense of Humor and Learn to Smile"; "Fair Streets are Better Than Silver: Green Parks are Better Than Gold"; "Ugliness is a Kind of Misgovernment"; "Let the Best Moods of the People Rule". Blind to temporal things, ever his vision before him, he set about building the new Jerusalem. In no figure in modern literature was the poet and the man so combined. He lived in every poem he wrote. Strangely original, beloved and admired, he became at last the most pathetic and tragic poet in possibly all the history of American literature.

While Lindsay's verse depicts a man of many moods, he is most frequently referred to as evangelist, "the minstrel turned missionary, a cornfed Apollo singing to convert the heathen." [2] Prof. Luccock believes that it is the man's

---

1 Alfred Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength, p. 368.

2 Untermeyer, The New Era In American Poetry, p. 65.

spirituality that is his important trait. He writes: "The deepest thing in Vachel Lindsay is not new forms of verse, not jazz singing on Olympus; it is his esthetic outlook, his moral idealism, his sensitiveness to the possibilities of life which are being thwarted." [1]

Lindsay realizes that, to create the world of his ideal, he must gain the heart of the common-people; he must inflame them with an emotional appeal that they can appreciate. So he deliberately addresses himself to an unlettered audience, chanting them rimes and jingles, becoming a kind of Salvation Army captain of poetry. He is captured by the love of Christ as completely, as joyously, as the Poverello of Assisi who is his patron saint. It is not, however, the lady Clare that is the embodiment of his mystical love's desire. It is to the Blessed Virgin herself that he bends his entreaty:

"Look you, I'll go pray —
'Sweet Mary, make me clean.
Thou rainstorm of the soul,
Thou wine from worlds unseen'."

Few poets outside of a Catholic faith have expressed so complete and touching a devotion to this Lady whom Heine calls "the fairest flower of poesy". He would awaken the "St. Francis in you all", he would gather the converts one by one, and in a body shout the world ideal:

---

1 Halford E. Luccock, Contemporary American Literature and Religion, p. 221.

"This is our faith tremendous, —
Our wild hope, who shall scorn, —
That in the name of Jesus
The world shall be reborn."

And such a broad vision must include others not of the Christian faith, until there rises

"one shining, universal church
Where all Faiths kneel, as brothers, in one place."

Not any of these verses has the appeal of "General William Booth Enters Heaven", the first of those characteristic chants which Lindsay lifted to so individual a plane. Here is certainly the revivalistic spirit, embodied not so much in a tribute to the Salvation Army as in the glorification of a spirit greater and far beyond it. It is expressed in a syncopated rhythm, easily associated with the chorybantic religion of the street corner.

Another example of Lindsay's ragtime verse is "The Congo". It is longer, more rhapsodical than "General Booth". It passes from staccato to andante, and on to allegro. The repetition of words is singularly reminiscent of Poe, although the total effect is something quite unlike Poe's music. In a different way, that is, as a study of the negro, "The Congo" is to verse what O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" is to the drama. In this poem, Lindsay's verse "elaborately imitates the exotic rhythms and figures which are the most original features of the religious folk-song of the American negro." [1]

---

1 Edward Davison, Some Modern Poets, p. 227.

This type of higher vaudeville, however, is not confined to merely religious themes. It is seen in a poor example, "The Fireman's Ball", and in the very successful "Santa-Fe Trail" with its humoresque of a variety of auto horns. "The Kallyope Yell" serves also to insist that such poems of Lindsay must be uttered aloud, not read. From various strains of manner and matter, we see how individually Lindsay "has evolved a personal idiom ... which recalls its antecedents at every turn, in the coarse picturesqueness of its similes and images, its blazing colour, its haste and gusto, frequently gaudy sentiment, and swollen simplicity." [1] The tendency, too marked in many cases, is for a reader to hear the mere noise and bombast above the basic rhythm. It is important, at such a time, to remember that these jazz poems constitute only a small proportion of Lindsay's work.

The music has slowed and softened in the song of "The Chinese Nightingale". It has become a wistful chant to the haunting accompaniment of the p'i-pa. The poem is colored and redolent throughout of the rich tapestry and lotus incense of the Orient. And it ends on as optimistic a note as Lindsay ever sounded:

> "They spoke, I think, of perils past.
> They spoke, I think, of peace at last.
> One thing I remember:
> Spring came on forever,
> Spring came on forever,
> Said the Chinese nightingale."

Stating nothing directly, disguising all in imagery, Lindsay makes of this poem a beautiful expression, having a more than

---

1 Davison, quoted work, pp. 233, 234.

usual depth of thought in its concern with the soul of man, its meaning and its destiny.

Lindsay's various moods are quickly perceived throughout his Collected Poems. We feel his genial forthright humor in the nonsensical "Dirge for a Righteous Kitten." Such pieces as "To Gloriana", "Alone in the Wind", "On the Road to Nowhere", take us away from the boom and seeming arrogance of his syncopated poems. We are impressed with his deep social feeling in "Tolstoy is Plowing Yet" and "The Leaden-Eyed", his pacificism in "The Unpardonable Sin", his sense of tragic beauty in "Lincoln Walks at Midnight", and "The Eagle That is Forgotten". "Bryan", in its political scene pictures the Middle Western farmers caught in a gigantic spider web spun in the East.

His picturesque childish exaggeration, his naive ability of investing a poem with magic, make the bald facts become glamorous before our eyes. He makes us believe that "Booth strides, full-haloed into a Salvation Army heaven; fat black bucks of South State Street dance along a mystical glorified Congo; motor-cars on a Kansas road are chariots from now to forever; Bryan 'sketches a silver Zion', Johnny Appleseed is a wandering god of the soil, as mythical as Ceres." [1] In the measure that Lindsay succeeds he is a true disciple of Mencius, "the great man who does not lose his child-like heart". [2]

---

1 Harriet Monroe, Poets and Their Art, p. 24.

2 The Works of Mencius, Book IV, Part 2, xii.

Life for Vachel Lindsay was an inner battle, much more arduous than Robinson's. He was equipped with a certain fortitude, and made even of his poems "a weapon, a whole armoury of weapons, with which he has steadfastly fought on the side of the angels against the Powers of Darkness." [1] But shortly after this 'armoury of weapons' had been gathered in 1923, [2] Lindsay began to see himself as a mere figurante of the times, whose vogue was passing, and had even passed. His own Springfield turned from him. He had no longer an impetus to create. He felt his material come less easily, less plastically to his hands. Despite a renewed ability which came in 1925, and persisted, decreasingly until 1929, Lindsay never regained a former zest or joy or optimism. One of the few modern poets of a definite religious conviction, Lindsay has been "an unofficial poet laureate of the Christian faith and outlook of our time. ... His faith was not an apologetic one, with its back against the wall, but a lyrical faith, a marching conviction, striving to keep religion from sinking into moral and spiritual mediocrity." [3] Not this faith, however, could give him a strength to prevail against himself. Approaching senility was evident as early as 1929. In the fall of 1931 the blackness of despair settled, to leave him no more. He

---

1 Herbert S. Gorman, "Vachel Lindsay: Evangelist of Poetry", The North American Revue, January 1924, p. 125.

2 The date of the first publication of his Collected Poems, Going-To-The-Stars, and The Candle in the Cabin, appeared in 1926. Neither adds greatly to his poetic reputation.

3 Luccock quoted work, p. 280.

died of self-administered poisoning, December 5, 1931. [1]

The work that he left is a gallimaufry with which time, more correctly than I, can deal discerningly. It is a heart-felt desire to create a new political environment, a new America a-rejoicing. It contains a rare fund of phantasy and extravagance, rimes, ragtime, religion, primitive joy in syncopated sound, high seriousness in dignified and sonorous lines, whimsical and colorful beauty in an individual view of the American scene.

Equipped with a powerful social conscience, Lindsay, yet, like Carl Sandburg, has no comprehensive program of social reform. There is about his "Gospel of Beauty" a shallow, artificial idealism which saps its strength, and leaves it sadly doctrinaire. There is, further, about every one of his best poems, some imperfection, however slight, that keeps them from being complete successes. It may be, as in the almost perfect "Chinese Nightingale", that a taint of sentimentality diminishes its powerfulness. It may be that in a needless repetition of phrases the thought outruns the content and leaves a ragged poem.

Again, he uses too much material — and too little. He lacks selectivity. His heart is always exposed to even a trivial incident; his passions are directly unveiled. He fails to achieve that ennobled forcefulness that results from a carefully leashed power. Far from the erudite scholar, the

---

1 A sympathetic biography appeared last year: Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay -- A Poet in America.

dweller among books, at least as far as his verse informs us; we would wish for a more profound treatment of a deeper thought. While we are told that he was fed on Egypt and India and China when young, it is only a superficial knowledge that appears in his poems. He seems to know of no other Chinese than K'ung Fu-tzŭ, and no other East Indian but Siddhatha Gotama.

Whatever his place will be in the future, there are at least two things that can be said for him now. However much his original impulse goes back to "Springfield Magical", he is completely American to the core. He saw America as persons, and he so expressed it in his poems. "Lindsay comes to poetry from the forty-eight States, from the great cities, the little prairie towns, the wheat belts, from the Rockies and the Pacific, the villages of New Mexico and New England." [1] And finally, while he has the Whitman vocalism and brotherly expansiveness, as well as the echolalia of Poe, he is in poetry a completely unique figure. Nothing like him ever was. He stands alone without paternity, and, at least to this date — without heirs.

---

1 Davison, quoted work, p. 252.

CHAPTER V

CARVERS IN JADE: EXPERIMENTALISTS

English prosody, declares O. W. Firkins, "records the story of three notable revolts -- the revolt against parity of line lengths which reverts to the Middle Ages, the revolt against rhyme which slightly antedates Elizabeth, and the revolt against parity of feet which is scarcely older than the last century. The culmination and combination of these three revolts has declared itself in the unequal line-lengths and the variable feet of the rhymeless prosody of the Imagistes." [1] The group to which the last word of this quotation refers has been of considerable moment, not so much for its direct contributions, as for its salutary, vitalizing effect on the general tenor of modern American poetry. It stressed the use of common speech, which does not, of course, exclude imaginative language or metaphor, the use of the exact word to describe the effect or the writer's impression, the avoidance of hackneyed expressions, inversions and diffuseness, and hence the presentation of a definite, clear-cut "image" of whatever the author wishes to convey.

This movement, contrary to the belief of a great many writers, was not originated by Ezra Pound, although he was one of the early adherents, and, it might be remarked,

---

1 O. W. Firkins, "The New Movement in Poetry". The Nation, October 14, 1915. p. 458.

one of the first seceders. "The originator of the movement was Thomas Ernest Hulme," [1] an obscure poet and esthete, who, in 1908 published a short poem "Autumn", often quoted by the Imagists as the first of their school. In his theories of poetry are all the essentials of Imagism.

Early in 1909, in the city of London, England, Hulme met Frank Stewart Flint, who, in turn, introduced Ezra Pound. In the following year Hilda Doolittle arrived from Philadelphia, and about the same time appeared Richard Aldington. Being influenced greatly by contemporary French poets, the group was already formulating a theory of poetry. Their ideas were further consolidated with the advent of John Gould Fletcher, an American then living in London, Miss Amy Lowell, and D. H. Lawrence.

While several experiments of members of this group had been receiving magazine publication, it was not until Pound edited his Des Imagistes (1914), that the poetry appeared as the production of a coterie. It remained, further, for the three volumes, Some Imagist Poets (1915, 1916, 1917), produced largely through the energy of Miss Lowell, to make known clearly the fundamental tenets of the association. The preface to the 1915 collection sets forth the principles of Imagism, and for the exact wording of its six points, this volume is the most accessible text. It is sufficient, however, to consider the

---

1 S. Foster Damon, Amy Lowell -- A Chronicle, p. 197. A large fund of material on the Imagists is found in Chapters X, XII, XV.

manifesto under three main heads: (1) treatment — to allow absolute choice in the subject, but to handle the 'thing' directly, whether it be subjective or objective; (2) phraseology — to use the minimum amount of words, and to use them exactly so as to produce poetry that is hard and clear; (3) tempo — as regarded rhythm, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. The resultant poetry would present what is embodied in the fourth Imagist tenet — an image.

There was, of course nothing new about these principles, and the Imagists were from the first anxious to dissociate themselves from any claim to the novelty of revolution. Nor, on the other hand, was there any single rule which could not be justly refuted. In their insistence on cadence rather than meter "they can hardly claim to be violent innovators; the choruses of Aeschylus are based upon no other principle, nor for the matter of that, are the anapaestic splendours of Swinburne." [1] The unit of such verse then, is "not the foot, the number of the syllables, the quantity, or the line. The unit is the strophe, which may be the whole poem, or may be only a part. Each strophe is a complete circle, ... and ... of course the circle need not always be the same size". [2] The sphere of balance, then, extends beyond the mere line to include the whole poem. This poem has, thus, a compact unity in itself.

---

1 Arthur Waugh, Tradition and Change, p. 125.

2 Some Imagist Poets, 1916, Preface, p. x.

It is,however, hardly necessary for the Imagist to advise poets to acquire new cadences in order to express a new idea, for if a new idea is attempted in a sincere expression, it is hard to see how it shall miss being clothed in a new rhythm. The poetic process builds from the inside outward.

The use of exact words was a healthy reaction to Victorian indefiniteness, and the loose suggestion of the Georgians. But while it aided the presentation of a clear and shining images, it helped little in giving these images any great interpretive significance. Indeed, the tendency was rather more and more toward the use of blind phrases, toward a too aloof abstraction, toward a content divested of human interest. "Wishing to load every rift with ore, to make every phrase a concrete image, they [the Imagists] neglected ideas." [1] They discouraged any attempt to write philosophical or descriptive poetry. It could never, of course, be done directly. As in all this type of poetry the matter must be hinted, suggested, never stated. There was indeed, so much negation, that the self-enforced limitations became obvious. Their one excellence, as finished art, lay in static presentment, the fixing of an object or mood at a given time.

Their gospel was Art for Art's sake. "Reacting against bad technique, they made technique an end in itself; reacting against undue reliance on substance, they virtually

---

1 Geoffrey Bullough, The Trend of Modern Poetry. p. 67.

eliminated substance." [1] Their whole strength, too, Conrad Aiken believes, has been rather needlessly dissipated. "The Imagists, straying too far in search of flowers of vividness and colour, have ended by losing themselves in a Plutonian darkness of unrelated sensory phenomena: they predicate a world of sharply separate entities without connective tissue of relationship, and, in addition, have sacrificed a large part of their power to convey this vision by their unwillingness or inability to heighten their readers' receptiveness through playing upon it rhythmically." [2]

The main contributions of Imagism, then, appear to be these: sensory phenomena presented discretely, vivid description, subject matter primarily static, suggestion, concentration, externality. Its greatest importance has been as a discipline of language, a quality which at first seemed to challenge the reader in a comfortable manner, but later assumed a rather abrasive function. It is as an influence rather than an end that Imagist verse is considered noteworthy. "For the simple and direct lyric cry, for the philosophical suggestions that show the soul of the folk, for the plain earth-wisdom of simple men and women, for that proud and prescient sense of the meaning of life which has been the glory of English poetry in the work of many masters, the Imagists seem to care very little." [3] The value of their verse is as

---

1 S. Foster Damon, quoted work, p. 253.

2 Conrad Aiken, Scepticisms, pp. 61, 62.

3 Marguerite Wilkinson, New Voices, p. 88.

an antithetical remedy for the ills of Victorian diffuseness, vagueness and sentimentality.

Historically, there are only three points to consider. The Imagists fulfilled Whitman's desire to be freed from moldering diction. They were for all their preciosity and occasional extravagances, prophets of freedom. Secondly, they show the influence of the neglected Poe who returned to America as free verse, by the round-about way of Beaudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé, through the younger poets in England. Finally we see that the Imagists, far from being new, merely wished to emphasize previous poetic truths then fallen into desuetude. "Their restatement of old truths was one of the things which helped the new poetry out of a bog of rhetorical rubbish." [1] One last quotation from Foster Damon will close this portion of criticism. "Afraid of moral tags, 'human interest', platitudes, the Imagists eliminated ethics, narrative, ideas. Even emotions were not presented directly; they were suggested through the contrast of images and the rhythm of cadence. The result was highly wrought music, excellent in technique but limited in its effect and consequently narrow in its appeal. Consider Aldington's 'Choricos', H. D's 'Oread', Pound's 'Return'; they are lyrics, harmonic rather than melodic, rich, restrained, brief, and perfect; but they are only one effect in the whole gamut of the possibilities of poetry." [2]

After the third anthology of Some Imagist Poets, 1917,

---

1 Louis Untermeyer, Preface to Modern American Poetry, p. 19.

2 S. Foster Damon, quoted work, p. 254.

these writers ceased to function as a group. One collection, however, gleaned from various Imagist writings, came from the New York press of Covici, Friede in 1930.[1] A note says, reassuringly, that its appearance is "not intended as an attempt to revive Imagism", so we can scarcely accuse it justly of failure in this respect. A review of the book by Miss Harriet Monroe, however, (a woman who first championed the Imagists) seems to admit more than this previously mentioned "failure". She says, "Reading these 1930 poems by those 1913 imagists, I cannot but feel that the War, or something else, has come between them and the muse."[2] Imagist poetry, as this volume shows is still being written, but it may, for our purposes, be considered a thing of the past. Just when it died is a matter of some conjecture, but 1925 the year of Amy Lowell's death, seems as safe a date as any.

Those comprising the Imagist coterie, were, as we have seen, of both British and American nationalities. However, it is only the latter, four in number, that fall within the scope of this thesis. Their contribution, too, has been, justly praised by Geoffry Bullough: "But for them the school would never have reached public attention for ... it was the Americans who ... crystallised tentative ideas into a programme."[3] These poets, like practically all the early

---

1 Imagist Anthology — 1930.

2 Harriet Monroe, "New Poetry by the Imagists", Poetry, July, 1930, p. 217.

3 Bullough, quoted work, pp. 64, 65.

Imagists soon struck out on paths of their own, having tried Imagism, sensed its usefulness, but wearied of its exigencies. We shall consider them in the order that they appear to adhere most faithfully to Imagist principles: Miss Doolittle, Fletcher, Pound, and finally, Miss. Lowell.

Hilda Doolittle, better known to her readers as H.D.. is, even more than her husband, Richard Aldington, the one perfect Imagist. While achieving her delicate effects in interwoven rime, she has also become the surest (and purest) artist in unrimed cadence. She has expressed a remarkable intensity in the fixation of light, color, emotion; through her art, the arrested moment glows with a quivering tension.

Some of H.D's surest successes are with Greek material. She is at home in the atmosphere of freedom, simple love of the open fields, the woods, dryads and naiades, jagged rocks or somnolent brooks. Like the Greeks she feels nature, expresses it, but does not talk about it. Her treatment, however, merely shows Greek influence; it is at no time copied.

I am, unfortunately, not in a position to attest to the literal accuracy of H.D.'s Greek translations, but it is generally admitted that she is in good command of her materials. This is, moreover, not the place for a discussion of the principles of translation; but I believe that such work should be done rather in the spirit than in the strict letter of the original. H. P. Collins, who has made a study of this branch of H. D.'s work, [1] believes that in her translations of Euripides,

---

1 See H. P. Collins, Modern Poetry, Chapters XIII, XIV.

while she has not the Greek poet's romantic, questing preoccupation, her slight discipline is salutary, and she vitally re-creates the atmosphere. Her language is more 'complete', more self-contained emotionally, but has less 'potential' force. Again referring to the "Agamemnon" he says, "H.D.'s intensely physical conception of beauty is clearly in evidence in these choruses." [1]

Not only in direct translations is H. D. specifically Greek. "Almost all her work is a re-creation of the Greek spirit — of its sensuousness and mythopoeic faculty, its ardent emotion and formal restraint." [2] In her first volume, Sea Garden (1916), there is a technical freshness, a surprising shortness of lines, a delicate and brittle imagery. In the flower-pieces that suggest the title of the book, there is a crispness, an accuracy of vision voiced in clear, sharp, consonant sounds. "Sea Poppies" will suffice as an example.

"Amber husk
fluted with gold,
fruit on the sand
marked with a rich grain,

treasure
spilled near the shrub pines
to bleach on the boulders:

Your stalk has caught root
among wet pebbles
and drift flung by the sea
and grated shells
and split conch-shells.

Beautiful, wide-spread,
fire upon leaf,
what meadow yields
so fragrant a leaf
as your bright leaf?"

---

1 Collins, quoted work, p. 169.

2 Bullough, quoted work, p. 76.

In these pieces, the original imaginative insight is kept unsentimentally strong and incisive by a satisfying but astringent cadence. In the poems "Heat" and "Mid-Day", beyond the description of heat is the effect of it. One feels the very weight and solidity of a midsummer afternoon. In "Sea Gods" the effect depends on our ability to see and smell and feel and share intellectually what is told. It is in this first volume that "the redoubtable penetration of the haze that divides us from Greek beauty began to emerge as the characteristic of a definite poet." [1]

Hymen, which appeared in 1921, presents H.D.'s purest and most characteristic medium. The long title poem is musical and exquisitely worded. In this, and in the other poems, her perceptions are highly emotional, yet detached and impersonal. She uses repetition, for precisely the opposite effect of Swinburne — for intensification. And in this respect she is most consistently successful.

H.D.'s more mature work, seen in Heliodora (1924) and Red Roses for Bronze (1931), shows a freer range, "a natural inclination to a stronger continuity and blending of phrase and phrase, image and image; the progression becomes easier." [2] Her technical processes are definitely conscious. The short and sharp line division conveys a

---

1 Collins, quoted work, p. 166.

2 Same, p. 182.

peculiar and unexpected impression which would be lost by a different line division. It is a distribution used successfully to crystallize the meaning, to externalize the emotional quality.

This poet is definitely not one of breadth of mood, nor of many moods. Her effects are delicate, essentially lyric. Hers is thus a narrow art, thin, but of a hard luster. However, a wide scope is not demanded of her kind of poetry. She has written imagist verse faithfully, and we cannot declaim against her work because it is not something else. Her art is one of balance, of repose, of mellowness and charm. She is best in her reflections of clear-cut loveliness in a quietly pagan world, a world of her longings to which she has flown from life. Less of a contemporary than an inspired anachronism, she presents, as Miss Lowell has put it, a strange paradox: "To be prophet of a renewing art, and to spend one's life longing for a vanished loveliness." [1] On the whole her work warrants the epitaph she herself wrote:

"Greek flower, Greek ecstasy
reclaims for ever

One who died
following
intricate song's lost measure."

John Gould Fletcher's work is much less significant than that of H. D. It attracts an even smaller audience, and is decidedly uneven in quality. Professor Weirick seems

---

1 Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, p. 275.

to believe Fletcher has only an unrivalled gift of dullness: "The reader tires of a poet whose eyes seem to have little traffic with his intelligence." [1] Such a criticism, though justified, is directed at the poorest aspect of Imagism, and of Fletcher's work, the complete divorce from human interest.

After his experimental work of 1913 and 1914, Fletcher published, in the following year, his Irradiations—Sand and Spray. It contains an extraordinary fancy, imaginative shifting subtleties, a brilliant if haphazard series of improvisations. Goblins and Pagodas of 1916 includes his rather unique color symphonies, more unique in purport than achievement. The chief emphasis in this group seems to lie rather with visual images than the emotional associations which should transcend them. The following are illustrations:

"The volcano of the sun,
Has burst and split its crater
Black slag is hurled to the zenith
Above the red lava-sea."
(Red Symphony)

"Of my long nights afar in alien cities
I have remembered only this:
They were black scarves all dusted over with silver,
In which I wrapped my dreams;
They were black screens on which I made those pictures
That faded out next day."
(Grey Symphony)

He achieves a contrapuntal effect when in "Midsummer Dreams" ("Symphony in White and Blue") he suddenly breaks into a rapid rhythm:

"The midsummer clouds were piling up upon the south horizon,
Mountains of drifting translucence in the larkspur-fields of the sky:

---

1 Bruce Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, p. 157.

Ascending and toppling in crumbled ravines, dribbling down chasms of silence,
Reassembling in crowded multitudes, massive forms one above another."

Elsewhere in the book is this rather ominous verse:

"The Yardstick"

"Yardstick that measured out so many miles of cloth,
Yardstick that covered me,
I wonder do you hop of nights
Out to the still hill-cemetery,
And up and down go measuring
A clayey grave for me?"

Even here, in this early book, can be seen Fletcher's severance from pure Imagism. And in the book which preceded this, the same factor is noticeable. In Irradiations, his native Mississippi threads its way through languorous southern landscapes. We feel that "this Southern poet owes more to Whitman than he does to the French or the Oriental. He is not as democratic as Walt: he is a lover of jungles, of an almost inhuman god, of asperities and solitudes."[1] Yet we feel that it is a self-enforced solitude which the good earth is endeavoring to dispel. There is a certain inseсable attachment that binds him to his country and his race.

After the moving mysticism which he expresses in Tree of Life (1921), then, we find him more obviously native in Breakers and Granite of the same year. In this book he gives us a noble tribute to Lincoln, surpassed, Miss Amy Lowell, believes, by no other poem on the subject she has ever read.[2] While I would place Whitman's threnody above

---

1 Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength, p. 363.

2 See Amy Lowell, Poetry and Poets, p. 145.

it,[1] Fletcher's "Lincoln" remains a truly majestic poem. In this book, love of country is the poet's distinguishing theme. He sees it with grandeur, love, sorrow, and rejoicing. His movement is sweeping, rather than Imagistically detailed.

Fletcher's poems are moods, expressed in terms of nature, with a highly fanciful point of view. He has unique perceptions and impressions, love of color and form, with significant understanding to interpret the actions of men. There is no doubt that he is an absolute master of rhythms, a virtuoso of sound effects. He has no instinct for telling a story, no wit or satire, and is dramatic only in the large. His later and richer work is in almost flat opposition to the early Imagist pronouncements. There is a greater depth in his recent poems, a calm music, a grave and subdued lyricism. His trend away from Imagism has been towards the expression of man in a changed relation to a changing world, and as he is still writing, it is very probably that he will continue in this direction.

Ezra Pound is the most brilliant failure in contemporary poetry. His personality, with the sole exception of Miss Lowell, has been the most dynamic of modern poets. The strength and impassioned beauty of his early verse bade fair to surpass anything written in this century. A keen athletic vigor and a freshness of feeling that characterized his early

---

1 Compare Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd".

work, are qualities which proved to be specious. He has, today, become caught in as vicious a circle of academic erudition as this age hopes to see.

Two volumes serve us in our consideration of Ezra Pound. The first, taking its title from an earlier book, Personae, contains, according to a prefatory note, all of his poems to date (1926), "except the unfinished Cantos." The second, including this latter omission, comprises the complete Draft of XXX Cantos (1933). To name the titles in Personae is, in itself, almost sufficient citation of the influences that have shaped this protean [1] poet. They are titles that call to mind the literature of Greece, Old France, Italy, Germany, Egypt, Rome, the Norse countries, England, China, and incidentally, the United States.

While America comes in for little approval, Pound acknowledges a certain indebtedness to Walt Whitman, "a pig-headed father", and asks for "A Pact";

"Let there be commerce between us". He remembers his "N.Y.", and wishes to pay it tribute, although he is hardly successful in attempting to personify this massive metropolis as a maid "slender as a silver reed." In another poem he offers some consolatory advice to "The Rest" of his countrymen. I have thus far in this thesis avoided any deliberate dissection of a poem, but "The Rest" affords a very fine example of Pound's careful structure. It begins with an

---

1 Conrad Aiken, in Scepticisms (p. 138) says "Mr. Pound's middle name should have been not Loomis but Proteus."

invocatory couplet:

"O helpless few in my country,
O remnant enslaved!"

There follow two parallel triplets:

"Artists broken against her,
A-stray, lost in the villages,
Mistrusted, spoken-against,

Lovers of beauty, starved,
Thwarted with systems,
Helpless against the control;"

then two quatrains, each composed of two parallel two-line strains:

"You who cannot wear yourselves out
By persisting to successes,
You who can only speak,
Who cannot steel yourselves into reiteration;

You of the finer sense,
Broken against false knowledge,
You who can know at first hand,
Hated, shut in, mistrusted:"

and lastly, a coda with a balanced couplet:

"Take thought:
I have weathered the storm,
I have beaten out my exile."

With this challenge, Pound left his country, poetically and otherwise, for a fleeting exile in all the lands from Provence to Cathay. Buried in books, this peripatetic monastic set out on a vicarious journey that has never found a destination. Equipped with the tools of the archeologist he dug back to Anglo-Saxon days to give us a splendid rendition of the onomatopoeic "Seafarer", a poem which I believe only surpassed in our Old English heritage by "The Wanderer". He fled to Egypt, presumably, for a meaningless three-line poem,

"Papyrus"

"Spring ... .
Too long ...
Gongula ... ."

then flew back "with the swallows", and "De Aegypto".

His sojourn in France, Greece, and Rome, has been considerably longer. He has had time for "La Fraisne", "with its quiet and perfect measures carrying the wistful wisdom of old age"; [1] "A Villonaud: Ballad of the Gibbet," which captures the spirit of the wild French poet writing his "Frères humains qui apres nous vivez;" "Night Litany", singing a pure chant of the votary through "the beauty of this thy Venice". In "Doria" [2] he has written a perfect Imagist poem:

"Be in me as the eternal moods
of the bleak wind, and not
As transient things are —
gaiety of flowers.
Have me in the strong loneliness
of sunless cliffs
And of grey waters.
Let the gods speak softly of us
In days hereafter,
The shadowy flowers of Orcus
Remember thee."

Another in this mood is "The Spring". Pound has even written in Latin a whimsical poem of the same meter as the "Stabat Mater", marred unfortunately by the lack of a final rime. It is number IV of "Amities", beginning "Iste fuit vir incultus". The mood is a healthy one, not uncharacteristic of the poet, who would remind us of a too

---

1 Harriet Monroe, Poets and Their Art, p. 13.

2 Pound, in his fancy, frequently writes the titles in Greek as Δωρία, Τοκαλόν, Ιμέρρω.

easily forgotten major premis, "laughter is the end of all things," (from "Post Mortem Conspectu").

It will be obvious from the foregoing that Pound has attempted to grasp too wide a range of material with the result that his opera present a confused jumble of sounds and sights and the mere smattering of erudition. Thomas McGreevy thinks he "is not so much a poet manqué as a professor manqué." [1] But even this is not quite the case, for a professor has at least the background of sound and careful training. Most of Pound's work shows only a superficial knowledge of the original material of his translations. Professor Hale has challenged his competence, and has "made out an extremely good case in a certain memorable controversy about the Propertius series." [2] Louis Untermeyer claims that Pound's presentations of the Heine poems are "awkward and malformed versions that read like so many witless parodies." [3] Criticism can also be levied against the Chinese pieces, beautiful as they are. I make no pretense to scholarship, nor apology for pedantry, nor have I read all of these in the original. For the English versions, Pound has accepted the notes of Ernest Fenollosa, without going straight to the original text. One result is that in the transliteration of Chinese names he has not followed the recognized English system of Sir Thomas Wade. [4] Miss Amy Lowell's method, moreover,

---

1 Thomas McGreevy, Thomas Stearns Eliot — A Study, p. 15.

2 Harriet Monroe, quoted work, p. 18.

3 Untermeyer, The New Era in American Poetry, p. 207.

4 Ronald Bottral, in an essay, "XXX Cantos of Ezra Pound", makes a similar criticism in remarking on "the enthusiasms, the wilful misspellings, the misprints, ... the Japanese spelling of Chinese names", and says "these are not pedantry but dilattantism". See Determinations—Critical Essays, p. 184.

was far more satisfactory in that she worked directly with an acknowledged English sinologist, Mrs. Florence Ayscough. [1]

Aside from the mere academic criticism (which is justified as long as Pound is the academician), this expatriate never really resurrects a long-dead past. Occasionally, when he comes near to it as in "The Ballad of the Goodly Fere", he weakens the force of his historical argument through an inadequate medium. "By using the ballad setting Mr. Pound has made the fishermen of Galilee into North-country sailors of the Patrick Spens tradition and given them sentiments more proper to the left wing of the Y.M.C.A." [2] This, and a great many other poems of the past, show to what extent Pound has scattered his talents. Confused as to what the message of the ages should mean to him, he has laid the chief stress on technic, shades of color, verbal nuances. The result has meant a lassitude of the creative faculties, an impoverishment of the emotion. With a loquacity as wandering as his library mind, he has not known when to stop.

Ezra Pound's growing detachment from life came to its deepest recess in Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (1920). It is a volume that has been imitated by a score of younger poets, the one book in which Pound synthesized a sequence of interrelated parts into a definite harmonious unit. But even as art, it has its

---

1 See Florence Ayscough and Amy Lowell, Fir-Flower Tablets. For the manner of their translating, see "Amy Lowell and the Far East," The Bookman, May, 1926.

2 Laura Riding and Robert Graves, A Survey of Modernist Poetry, p. 141.

defects. In this poem "he used a dry elliptical expression to emphasize his ironic detachment from his personal history, and in banishing lyricism and emotional surplusage, banished grace and simplicity." [1] The unity he achieved here was lost in the discrete sequences of the Cantos. Pound the poet has reverted to Pound the disintegrated man. This is what I meant in calling him a brilliant failure.

To record his successes we go back to his early work. It contains a freedom of feeling well confined by an exacting expression. But even here in much that is sharp and living, lurk the germs of dessication and decay. What seemed a revolt is actually an inverted scholasticism. Pound is really no intrepid explorer but a man hunting out a place of retreat. Occasionally, he tries a new road, only to shrink back again into the haven of literature. He finds, even before Mauberley, that the past holds more for him than the future. But, engrossed as he is, he fails to communicate the emotions of recondite learning. His is the decadence of imaginative sterility, a decadence which appraises the values in life chiefly as esthetic values. His life is drawn from books.

It is not well, however, to end on a note of derogation. Ezra Pound, through all his vagaries, has consistently fought against the mawkish, the stereotyped, the smug. He has given some poems of sheer beauty, language direct and clear, symbolical overtones. "Threnos" is for me one of the few perfect

---

1 Bullough, quoted work, p. 125.

elegiac poems of our day. Too specific to achieve permanence, too intellectual to be popular, he has yet been staunch pioneer in new forms. Modern American poetry owes him a debt of gratitude.

If Ezra Pound had not done so well at first, had not received fame practically at the outset, his whole story would have been different. Miss Amy Lowell's fame came not so easily, and much later in life. Her first poem saw magazine publication in 1910, when she was thirty-six, and her first book in 1912.

There is scarcely anything in this soft and sentimental collection, A Dome of Many-Colored Glass, to prognosticate a poet of promise. Only eighty copies of these conventional and often lyrical poems sold the first year. The book records Miss Lowell's first bit of experimentation, however, a poem in free verse entitled "Before the Altar".

Sword Blades and Poppy Seed, (1914) presents a totally new individuality, a passionate experimenter, not only with the then new Imagism but with a form which she called "polyphonic prose". This is so named she explained, because it makes use of the 'voices' of poetry, namely: meter, vers libre, assonance, alliteration, rhyme and return. It employs every form of rhythm, even prose rhythm at times.[1] Because of such experimentation, Miss Lowell first attracted attention and continued to be best known.

---

1 See the Preface to Can Grande's Castle.

The title poem of this book is a symbolical narrative, which form she used many times. It depicts a poetry of two classes: stimulants and sedatives.

"All books are either dreams, or swords,
You can cut, or you can drug, with words."

But, in all fairness to Miss Lowell, she has omitted her own books from this classification. I find practically all of her poems neither soporific nor violently disturbing, though at times a trifle irritating. It is not that they are mediocre. Certainly some of her visual effects are as "hard and clear" as the most uncompromising Imagist could desire. She even has the ability to make still life live — something that few painters are able to convey to me. But it is simply that, to be brief, Miss Lowell lacks genius. Even "A Lady", which comes in for most praise in this volume, fails to convey a clear portrait. She declaims quite openly,

"Your half-tones delight me,
And I grow mad with gazing
At your blent colors."

I only wish I could feel so intoxicated with the poem.

For Amy Lowell, Imagism was literature, not life. She used its technic in her own way, but rejected the restrictions which the Imagist imposed on themselves. In Men, Women and Ghosts (1916) there is an extraordinary range of subjects, treatment and forms. The Imagist monotone has become varied and alive. The book is best in its portrayal of colors and sounds, of physical perceptions rather than reactions of emotion experience. One of the best poems, however, is quite in contradiction to this last statement. "Patterns", which also appeared in the Imagist Anthology of

this year, can scarcely be called an Imagist poem. It occupies a greater space, tells a more poignant story, has a far deeper intention than most Imagist verses. Here is its powerful close:

"For the man who should loose me is dead,
Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,
In a pattern called war.
Christ! What are patterns for?"

After another two-year lapse, Can Grande's Castle appeared. A broader line is seen in the four polyphonic prose-poems. Varied and sweeping in their sense of amplitude and time, their distinguishing point yet remains as experiments. They are too long for their subject matter, and over-descriptive. The narrative element is too slight and too disjointed. Of polyphonic prose, Conrad Aiken says "its sole raison d'etre is its vividness, ... a perpetual furor of disturbance, both of thought and of style." [1]

Miss Lowell's later work is, for the most part in a quieter key. Pictures of the Floating World (1919) is in many senses her most personal revelation. The eleven Legends (1921) show how successfully she can make even the most casual scene an adventure. What's O'Clock? (1925) contains two of her best less experimental poems. "Meeting-House Hill", while definitely local, ends with a nostalgic yearning for China:

"I might be sighting a tea-clipper,
Tacking into a blue bay,
Just back from Canton
With her hold full of green and blue porcelain
And a Chinese coolie leaning over the rail
Gazing at the white spire
With dull, sea-spent eyes."

---

1 Aiken, quoted work, p. 123.

In "Lilacs", a completely native poem, Miss Lowell symbolizes her self as the roots, leaves, flowers of this New England shrub. It is the most personal note the poet ever revealed.

Amy Lowell's work is never great poetry. She records neither brilliant successes nor complete failures. It is because of this that her work is difficult to place. As H. S. Canby admits, "there have been a score of essays on Amy Lowell's verse, and not one definitive." [1] Certainly, Professor Erskine failed to make an adequate estimate of her powers when he wrote, among other things, in 1917, "she seems to have no special aptitude for the lyric or the narrative." [2] Miss Lowell proved that she knew how to tell a story in verse on many occasions. "Cremona Violin" is full of drama, incident, realism, and is, beyond this, pure lyric singing. While she goes far afield for the material of her poems, she selects them with great care. Her work has born out her earlier determination not to be confined to any school. [3] Believing poetry a spoken art she was wise in not adhering strictly to Imagism, and building her poems of genuine human material. Her influence however, has been greatest outside the realms of the printed poem. She was a brave commander, a great organizer. It is because of this that the publishers and critics proclaimed her, upon her death, one of the most daring and picturesque figures in contemporary literature.

---

1 H. S. Canby, American Estimates, p. 57.

2 John Erskine, "The New Poetry, The Yale Review, Jan. 1917. p.391.

3 See the Preface to Sword Blades and Poppy Seed.

CHAPTER VI

THE WASTE LAND OF AN EXPATRIATE

The Imagists formulated a theory, then wrote poems to illustrate it. Thomas Stearns Eliot, however, has effected a reverse process. He wrote poetry, and followed with a number of essays to justify it. In consequence a student of his poetry needs the corollary of his essays. My intention in saying that he wrote poetry is not meant to infer that he no longer does so, although it is fairly evident that the bulk of his work to come will be in prose. [1] The use of the past tense simply means that for the purpose of this dissertation, T. S. Eliot finished his poetry about 1922.

The exclusion of his later poems is necessitated because of the fact that Mr. Eliot is no longer an American poet. A recent anthological index [2] will serve to make this quite clear, for on a page near the beginning appear the words -- "Name: Eliot, T. S.,; Nationality: British". Eliot, to refer to statistical records, became a British subject in 1927, although he had resided in London since 1914. Apart from certain essays, his early work will concern us then, Poems of 1920, and The Waste Land, (1922).

The American volume, Poems, includes an earlier book, Prufrock and other Observations published in England in 1917.

---

1 Alfred Kreymborg substantiates this statement in saying, "The poet is dead and long live the critic." (Our Singing Strength, p. 526)

2 I refer to The Modern Muse (1934)

A cursory perusal of this book may well have confused, perplexed and dismayed the reader accustomed to Victorian or Georgian poetry. I venture to say that it may still be vague to one who has not read Eliot's Sacred Wood or Selected Essays. And this is still more true when we consider that remarkable rhapsody, The Waste Land. The logical place to begin then, is not with Eliot's poems but with his theory of poetry.

While it is a difficult matter to determine precisely what poetry is, we may be helped by considering what it is not. For Eliot, at least, "it is not the inculation of morals, or the direction of politics; and no more is it religion." [1] It has something to do with all these, though we cannot say exactly what. It goes beyond "a collection of psychological data about the minds of poets, or about the history of an epoch." [2] Nor are we greatly assisted by a study of excellent words and their arrangement, or of meter and rhythm, for these have to do with the technic of verse. We cannot then say definitely what poetry is. "The great poet, in writing himself, writes his time." [3] Times change, and our estimate of them likewise changes. The best we can do is to consider the attributes of poetry through time.

Quoting Ben Jonson, Eliot says that our requisite of a poet is, "to be able to convert the substances, or

---

1 Eliot, The Sacred Wood, Preface, p. viii, (All references are to the 1928 Edition)

2 Same, Preface, p. viii.

3 Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 117.

riches of another poet, to his own use";[1] and this requisite Eliot has continually in mind when writing his own poetry. While "the poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it, and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility,"[2] it is only when the poet is inwardly aware of the entire past that he is capable of possessing this consciousness, power and sensibility. "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it something better, or at least something different. ... A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest."[3] Elsewhere Eliot asserts, "we shall often find that not only the best [in a poet] but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."[4]

All of the foregoing is, of course, best illustrated in The Waste Land; but we have first to consider some of the 1920 Poems. Opening the book at random, here is "Portrait of a Lady", a keen analytical study of the feminine dilettante, the faded votary of dimly lit studios. The very title suggests

---

1 Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, p. 55.

2 Same, p. 15.

3 Sacred Wood, p. 125.

4 Same, p. 48.

an association -- and an influence. It brings to mind Ezra Pound's "Portrait d'Une Femme"; it reminds us of Pound's early books which Glenn Hughes says are the beginning of "the Modern vogue of erudite poetry". [1] Much of Pound's technic was mastered and improved upon by T. S. Eliot. Then continuing with "Portrait of a Lady", we find an italicized quotation from "The Jew of Malta". Three lines after the opening of the poem we read:

> "And four wax candles in the darkened room,
> Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
> An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
> Prepared for all the things to be said, or left
> unsaid."

This brings to mind not only Shakespere's superbly motivated and well constructed play, but countless versions of the story from the early Greek romance to the many poems, notably Arthur Brooke's, current in Elizabethan times. The insertion of the reference to Juliet does not mean that we are to expect a tragedy of the caliber of Shakespere. It serves to invoke the emotions generally felt for this unfortunate scion of the Capulets, to assure us that Eliot's "Lady" once had the capabilities of Juliet; but it is introduced more to contrast the nobility of a lady of old with this jaded, shallow heroine of our day. There are other literary references in this poem ("You are invulnerable, you have no Achilles' heel", for example), but Eliot's point must be, by now, evitable, and we may return to his poetic theory.

A paramount necessity, then, is the possession of a

---

1 Glenn Hughes, Imagism and the Imagists, p. 12, Since the writing of the book, 1931, the "vogue" has decidedly waned.

historical sense, a sense which involves a perception of the presence of the past. "The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer, and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order".[1] There is thus an "unconscious community", an apostolic succession of artists, and the only significance of individual works of art and the works of individual artists is in relation to the "organic wholes" of all literature. The second-rate artist, however, wishing to be original, will not aline himself with this community; "only the man who has so much to give that he can forget himself in his work can afford to collaborate, to exchange, to contribute."[2]

It is to be expected that a writer with such a knowledge of the literature of the past will insert it directly into his own work; and this we find in Eliot's poems. The Waste Land includes quotations from, allusions to, or imitations of, at least thirty-five different writers, and introduces passages in six foreign languages, including Sanskrit! Eliot, in an effort to break from the romantic style, reverted in such a manner to tradition, and placed a definite accent on the Elizabethan phase of that tradition. A danger of the extensive use of another poet's lines lies

---

1 Sacred Wood, p. 49

2 Selected Essays, p. 13.

not so much in plagiarism as in pedantry, even though Mr. Eliot does not think so. Pedantry is usually not pedantry to the person who utters it. In the hands of Ezra Pound such a literary trick even appears decadent. There is, too, the danger of obscurity, although we are reminded by Hugh Ross Williamson, in this regard, that "we are apt to disparage Eliot's knowledge, instead of our own lack of it." [1] But a poet like Pound abuses our ignorance for the sake of display, and this is a weakness in both artistry and good taste.

It appears, then, that the difficulty of T. S. Eliot's poetry does not indict Mr. Eliot, only in so far as he has used passages that are less well-known to the average well-read reader. The danger is, however, a very present one, and we would do well to heed the warning of Edmund Wilson: "It seems plain that the anti-Romantic reaction is leading finally into pedantry and into a futile aestheticism. ... We should have to read the whole of literature in order to appreciate a single book, and Eliot fails to supply us with a reason why we should go to the trouble of doing so." [2]

The superior artist, to return to Eliot's theory, in proportion as he alines himself to tradition, the more completely submerges his own personality in his work. This "depersonalization" theory is Eliot's main thesis. "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." [3] He means here the

---

1 H. R. Williamson, The Poetry of T. S. Eliot, p. 42.

2 Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle, pp. 122, 124.

3 Sacred Wood, p. 53.

extinction of one's merely personal prejudices, with the sacrefice of which the real self will take on a greater significance, and an attitude of disinterestedness will command a clear and vital consciousness. He sees the mind of a poet as a catalytic agent which remains inert, neutral and unchanged, while it brings about a reaction between the elements resulting in a new substance or compound. The poet's mind is the receptacle that stores up the feelings, phrases, images. Gradually the catalyst (which is also the chemical retort), subject to a pressure which is the intensity not of the emotions but of the artistic process, brings about a great poem. This mind "may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material." [1]

Poetry "is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality." [2] How then is emotion to be expressed? Certainly emotion is invoked in The Waste Land, and in Dante, whose poetry Eliot believes "is the one universal school of style for the writing of poetry in any language." [3] Wherein, then, lies the secret of its expression?

---

1 Sacred Wood, p. 56.

2 Same, p. 58

3 Selected Essays, p. 228

Let us look at the obverse of the "Portrait of a Lady", "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", a poem without peer in modern English literature, powerful in its communication of so great a sense of ambiguous hurt and general frustration. Here is the battered hero, timid, self-conscious, thin and bald with the wearing years, (he is sure

"They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!'")

about to make a momentous decision that a man would settle in two minutes. Not he:

"Do I dare
Disturb the universe?"

Experience has taught him that he must be cautious.

"For I have known them all already, known them
all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons."

There, in this last line, there is the man, there is his entire life, there is all the emotion in a single epigram. The expression of a detached situation serves to draw out the long series of events that have made Prufrock come to entertain such emotion. We know precisely the way this man felt, yet Eliot has not manifestly expressed it. But we cannot, now that we know the trick, leave this brilliant poem so desultorily.

How will he ask this lady so important a question?

"And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow
streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt sleeves, leaning out of
windows? ..."

But the thought of it is too much, makes too great demands on his flighty brain. He

> "... should have been a pair of ragged claws
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."

So he regresses into memories, ponders the matter further, and settles into futility.

> "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
> And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat,
> and snicker,
> And in short, I was afraid."

Here is his story. He is simply the super-sophisticated worldling whose searching mind has been imprisoned by walls and roofs and indoor philosophies. His tragi-comic questioning of the meaning of life ends in an inane question mark that is himself. So,

> "... would it have been worth while, after all?"

She would only have answered,

> "That is not it at all,
> That is not what I meant, at all."

It is best to play out his old idle game, loaf, and dream.

> "I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon
> the beach.
> I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
>
> I do not think that they will sing to me."

The tragedy of inadequacy is emphasized to poignancy, not only by the poet's sharp and wounding edge of humor, but also by the blinding flame of beauty perceived or imagined. Here are the final lines:

> "I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black.
>
> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown."

This pseudo-self-portrait presents Eliot's poetry at its best. A poise less subtle than in the "Portrait" is compensated by a deeper intensity and a humor satiric yet piteous.

We have seen demonstrated in this poem the author's method of depicting emotion. Eliot believes the artist must find "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion, such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." [1]

T. S. Eliot's two chief points in his poetic treatises are conformance to tradition and depersonalization. If erudition is involved in the former, it is useless, Eliot claims, "unless it enables us to see literature all round to detach it from ourselves, to reach a state of pure contemplation." [2] And if we believe that depersonalization involves a danger of abstraction, divorce from life itself, Eliot assures us that this is not the case. He is no advocate of Art for Art's sake. This theory is valid only "in so far as it can be taken as an exhortation to the artist to stick to his job; it never was and never can be valid for the spectator, reader or auditor." [3] Finally, though it appears to be a paradox, the creative mind must be free from environment yet bound to tradition. "On the one hand actual life is always the material, and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life is a necessary condition to the creation of a work of art." [4]

---

1 Sacred Wood, p. 100.
2 Same, p. 49.
3 Selected Essays, p. 356.
4 Same, p. 98.

We may return now to Eliot's poetry.

Four pieces in the 1920 collection are "love poems", the two which I have introduced previously, and "La Figlia Che Piange" and "Conversation Galante." These last two poems, in particular, show a definite influence of Laforgue and Webster. "Laforgue determined many of the images and the general manner of treatment, while the Elizabethans enriched the word texture."[1] Eliot has also acknowledged a debt, for his early poetry, to Corbière, Beaudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé. "The flippant irony which is a refuge for the imaginative idealist in an uncomprehending world shows itself in 'Conversation Galante'."[2] In La Figlia Che Piange", Laforgue's line, "simple et sans foi comme un bonjour" becomes "simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand." The complete poem, however, seems to lack an intensity sufficient to justify its title of the child who weeps.

The other poems in the volume, exclusive of those in French, may be divided into four groups. "Preludes","Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and "Morning at the Window", convey the reactions of a disillusioned sensitive man confronted with a drab and dingy reality. There is nothing but

> "... withered leaves about your feet,"
>
> "... faint stale smells of beer
> From the sawdust-trampled street."

---

1 Williamson, quoted work, p. 68. The best treatment of French influences on T. S. Eliot is in René Taupin's, L'Influence du symbolisme français sur la poèsie Americaine de 1910 à 1920.

2 Bullough, The Trend of Modern Poetry, p.134.

"The memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things."

Civilization has become a crowd of

"Twisted faces from the bottom of the street."

Ugliness reigns over a kingdom of chaos.

Four short poems, "The Boston Evening Transcript", "Aunt Helen," "Cousin Nancy", and "Mr. Apollinax", are a subtle thrust at a society "refined beyond the point of civilization." These acrid comments are Eliot's first and little successful attempts to contrast a highly colored past with the anti-climax of a barren urban culture.

A third group are the satirical "Hippopotamus", "Whispers of Immortality", "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," "A Cooking Egg", "Burbank", and the "Sweeney" poems. In all of them Eliot uses his favorite device, the past called in to redress the balance of the present.

All of Eliot's various method's are combined in the poem "Gerontion". It opens with a recurrent theme: the mixing of "memory and desire" in present barrenness. An emotional sequence pervades the poem. The mind of Gerontion, "an old man in a dry month", flashes from remorse to remembered exalted emotions, from the recollection of vitality to the mysteries of religion. "Mr. Eliot does in concentration what he does by his notorious transitions from theme to theme: widely different emotions and feelings are contrasted and fused." [1] But we may leave "Gerontion" to consider a poem greater only in its length and expansiveness, "The Waste Land."

---

1 F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, p. 85.

The main thing to remember in reading "The Waste Land", for many an enigma and for me a challenge, is that it is a poem. The precise meaning of every line is only a secondary concern, for as Eliot says, it is a positive test "that genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood." [1] There have been many critiques, essays, synopses and notes on this most significant poem of the twentieth century, [2] but writers often find disagreement with the author himself. Seeming to have hit upon its meaning they are rebuked with words as callous as "that is not what I meant at all." When one sees reflected in it the disillusion and confusion of the mind and consciousness of most men of our day, Eliot merely makes answer: "When I wrote a poem called 'The Waste Land' some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'dissillusionment of a generation', which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention." [3] What this intention was he still withholds, so I can only hope that my guess is as good as another's when I subtitle the poem: The Predicament of our Time.

I cannot pretend to have plumbed the entire depth of "The Waste Land" in some five or six readings, each of which was accompanied by the addition of notes written in the margins.

---

1 "Dante", Selected Essays, p. 200.

2 A brief account, unsatisfactory for our immediate purposes, is in John Strachey's Coming Struggle for Power, pp. 224-228, (Modern Library Edition) For a discerning treatment, See F. R. Leavis, quoted work, pp. 90-114, and the excellent analysis in H. R. Williamson's quoted work, Chapter VI. Edith Sitwell presents a technical point of view in Aspects of Modern Poetry, pp. 125-137.

3 Eliot, Thoughts After Lambeth - p. 10.

But whatever analysis I am capable of, helped largely by these same notes, is herewith offered. It is not meant to be a final word, then, but to serve as an elucidative introduction.

The title of the poem, Eliot informs us in the notes that follow the main text, is suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's From Ritual to Romance. In this book the significance of the Waste Land is to be found in the Fertility Ritual. [1] The modern Waste Land is depicted by Eliot's seeming disjointedness, his wealth of contrasted literary borrowings and allusions, characteristics that reflect the present state of civilization. "The traditions and cultures have mingled, and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary; no one tradition can digest so great a variety of materials, and the result is a break-down of forms and the irrevocable loss of that sense of absoluteness which seems necessary to a robust culture." [2]

The poem opens with lines as haunting as the last fingers of shadows over an evening sky in spring:

> "April is the cruelest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain."

But in the modern Waste Land, April brings no quickening to the human spirit. Agony comes, when at the resurrection of the year, there is only sterility. Men and women, as we see

---

1 Eliot claims he also owes much to the Atthis, Adonis, Osiris sections of Frazer's Golden Bough. I find a brief but adequate account of the origin of vegetation goods in Macleod Yearsley, The Story of the Bible, Chapter III.

2 Leavis, quoted work, p. 91.

in the lines following this opening, spend their time in holidays and witless conversation. What could such people know of a new birth?

> "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket
> no relief."

We must pass quickly over such intimations as the "broken images" to the weakened churches of today, the "dead tree" to a lost faith, and the "cricket" (with its reference to Ecclesiastes XII, v.) denoting the inadequacy of mere natural companionship and natural science. Soon there is blown a refreshing breeze indeed:

> "Frisch weht der Wind
> Der Heimat zu,"

with Wagner's recurring motif of earthly love.

Then comes a memory of hyacinths,

> "'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago,'"

a flower symbolical of the slain god and at the same time introducing an association with the sea whence all life sprang. But what has happened to the sea?

> "Od' und leer das Meer."

The very waters from which love first rose [1] are now desolate, an empty space. Then we are thrust back on modern life; and meet a popular charlatan,

> "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,"

who uses the Tarot pack of cards, not for divination as of old,

---

1 The birth place of Venus is evident in the etymology of Aphrodite.

but for fortune-telling. But in her prognostication she does not find "the Hanged Man". Christ, the vegetation God, has not arisen. In the "Unreal City" that is London today, one can scarcely hope, but merely wonder:

> "That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?"

And with this interrogation "The Burial of the Dead" is over.

Part II, "A Game of Chess", consists mainly of two distinctive conversations in which is shown the triviality and selfishness of human relationships. I shall not point out the obvious contrasts between the technic of modern poets and the pre-war attempts at realism. There is the more important contrast between the luxurious woman in the palace, with her jewels and satin cases and "vials of ivory", and the woman in the tavern who has only a trivial wealth of memories. Spring used to awaken the procreative urge. Now sex is sterile, breeding not life and fulfilment, but disgust and ennui.

> "What shall we do to-morrow?"

The man knows the answer, though he doesn't speak it.

> "The hot water at ten.
> And if it rains, a closed car at four,
> And we shall play a game of chess,
> Pressing Lidless eyes and waiting for a knock
> upon the door."

So the idle rich have only death to await. And the idle poor have to think of a way to avoid having children, and leave the tavern singing

> "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good
> night, good night."

But the time is coming when the call to repentance must be heard. "The Fire Sermon" gives fair warning. Spring is advancing.

> "The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf
> Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
> Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are
> departed."

But death lurks over the waters of the Thames, for

> "... at my back in a cold blast I hear
> The rattle of the bones, and chuckles spread from
> ear to ear."

Then the main theme is developed. The sound of horns will "bring Sweeney to Mrs. Porter". With a brilliant coup the whole irony of the scene is manifested:

> "They wash their feet in soda water
> Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!"

In the hubbub of men whose god is commerce, Tiresias appears. This one personage, in whom both sexes combine, is the protagonist of "The Waste Land." More than this Tiresias is all men and women, the cultivated modern intimately aware of the experience of the opposite sex. What Tiresias sees is the substance of the whole poem.

Set against the vulgar noise of a stenographer's chatter is a line from "The Tempest":

> 'This music crept by me upon the waters',

music that floats on to

> " ... where the walls
> Of Magnus Martyr hold
> Inexplicable splendours of Ionian white and gold."

Even where

> "The river sweats
> Oil and tar",

we might see the royal barge of Elizabeth and Leicester. But now it has all become a waste land.

> 'On Margate Sands.
> I can connect
> Nothing with nothing.
> The Broken finger-nails of dirty hands.
> My people humble people who expect
> Nothing.'

Through it all is the Fire Sermon,

> "Burning burning burning burning
> O Lord Thou pluckest me out."

It is the Buddha speaking, calling the wanderers to repentance. All things are burning, all that the five senses perceive. They are burning with hatred and grief and despair. He would have them embrace the Four Noble Truths, pluck out their suffering, and find Nirvana.[1]

There is a path, then, that leads from the waste land. It is not seen in the short fourth section, however. Phlebas the Phoenician symbolizes the brevity of sensual life. He accentuates the need for a spiritual rebirth.

The final division suggests a "collapse, for the poet, of the whole physical universe."[2] There was once a rock which gave strength and in its shadow was a respite from the heat of day. No spring spurts from its split crevice:

> "Here is no water but only rock,
> Rock and no water and the sandy road."

Would there were only spring rain to stir dull roots in this dry month. Fever strikes at the brain; phantasy ensues.

---

1 I am indebted to that exhaustive treatise of Dr. James B. Pratt, The Pilgrimage of Buddhism.

2 McGreevy, quoted work, p. 53.

"Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you."

At last through the haze of the waste land there is coming, not the Buddha, but he who accompanied the disciples on their journey to Emmaus. Hordes come swarming; there are falling towers in the capitals of the western world; there are murmers and lamentations. If only the crowds can reach the sanctuary of the Chapel Perilous, they may still be saved. But what if the chapel is itself a delusion?

"There is the empty chapel, only the mind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one."

But, as we doubt, and the cock crows twice, God hurls a blast of thunder.

"Then a damp gust
Bringing rain,"

ends this drought of desolation. The clouds have gathered from across the Himalayas and the thunder speaks their Indian legend: "Datta—Give, Dayadhvam—Sympathsize,""Damyata—Control." Obedience to these injunctions leads out of the waste land to salvation. The poem closes with a recapitulation of the whole, almost overloaded with associations and symbolism, and a final note of hope—and peace;

"Shantih shantih shantih."

One cannot of course, do justice to "The Waste Land" in such a sketchy account. I have avoided almost completely the literary associations in order to present a sparse survey of the poem's main intention. While the work is meant to depict a disorganized world, the structure of "The Waste Land" is built on a solid foundation. By the repetition of images

Eliot carries on the symbolism from section to section. Frequent allusions to bells, thunder, rain, spring, bones, rats, throughout the whole poem, serve to weave the material into a compact unity, the unity Dr. Leavis calls "that of an inclusive consciousness." [1] The chief criticism of the poem is one to which I have alluded earlier. "Its structural basis lies in a specialised branch of learning, and it involves continual reference to other branches of knowledge with which few readers can be acquainted." [2] Without such knowledge I do not believe the poem can be truly appreciated; but granted we are willing to spend some time on it, the poem repays abundantly, more than any other single poem produced in the last twenty-five years.

There may be a large degree of justification in Edmund Wilson's identification of the emotional starvation in "The Waste Land" with the sterility of the Puritan temperament. [3] For Eliot, since the writing of this poem, has found it necessary to retreat to the roundtower of a Catholic faith. He has left the world's waste land of esthetic and spiritual drouth, desolation, anarchy and doubt. But this is not a criticism nor a commendation; it is merely a statement.

Eliot has left an impact on modern poetry, greater in poetic achievement alone, than any poet alive today. His first work represents a complete break with the old forms and ideas; it points in a definitely new direction. An early "cleaverness" soon gave way to a serious, conscious, determined

---

1 Leavis, quoted work, p. 103
2 Bullough, quoted work, p. 146
3 See Wilson, quoted work, pp. 104, 105.

style, a terse, cryptic expression, a firm yet resilient and at times magnitudinous structure. Eliot's is poetry "that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age." [1] Mordant and caustic as a restless contemporary, he can still, at times, blend his acridity with a peculiar, unique pity, a detached yet probing inquiry, all clothed in a masterly technic.

While his vogue is now finding few imitators, there can be no doubt as to his enormous influence in the decade between 1917 and 1927. This influence "is responsible for the emphasis upon musical nuances; the interest in a subtler and more involved consciousness; the use of a more flexible, more various vocabulary, juxtaposing the lyrical and the anti-poetic, to convey these shades; the ready resort to synesthesia: expression of an experience in terms of a sense other than that which first apprehends it." [2] Such tribute of Miss Deutsch needs no further word of mine.

---

1 Leavis, quoted work, p. 76.

2 Babette Deutsch, This Modern Poetry, p. 131.

CHAPTER VII

DECADENCE, REACTION, AND THE SIGNS OF A NEW SOCIETY

The year 1925, or thereabouts, saw a new decline in American poetry. The post-War scene pictured a group of hollow men, crippled, demented, paralytic, attempting to dance around a prickly-pear, watching the world's too slow demise "not with a bang but a whimper." [1] The four horsemen still stalked across bare pages of prose and verse. Satire mocked the Whitman dream. When some lyrists attempted to recapture a lost melody, their music found discordant accompaniment from a split-reed saxophone. The times were definitely out of joint. There were two ways to turn. One could bewail it all or start building a new order. One could be reactionary and decadent, or revolutionary. Robinson Jeffers and Archibald MacLeish represent the former; there are only a few poets who have appeared in the last five years to speak for the proletariat.

Robinson Jeffers' fame began with the publication of Tamar in 1924, an opportune time when the talk of the "New Poetry" was dying down. In this book he abandoned the rimes and old forms of Flagons and Apples (1912) and Californians (1916) in favor of a long rhythmical line more suited to the Californian locale of his poems. A poet of unmistakable strength, imagination and subtlety, he represents the ultimate

---

1 T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men" Poems, 1909-1925.

degree to which an introverted mind may stretch itself. He disdains humanity, he scorns our new art. Man is an unfortunate accident and the best thing he can do is to yearn for annihilation.

Man is a strange anomaly. Endowed with a queer desire to seek truth, his very humanity prevents him from attaining it. Jeffers is in a quandary. But other men found some satisfaction. Blake, wanting to understand life as a whole, found peace in a newly constructed world of his imagination. Whitman identified himself with the humanity of the future. Jeffers can but rack his brains "struggling in an agony to smelt down time, space, and God himself inside one fiery skull; though failing tragically to extract a single ray of the pure perception that he craves." [1] Perhaps darkness holds its secret in the shadow of "Night";

> "Over the dark mountain, over the dark pinewood,
> Down the long dark valley along the shrunken river,
> Returns the splendor without rays, the shining
> of shadow,
> Peace-bringer, the matrix of all shining and
> quieter than shining."

Jeffers yearns for the sleep without aspiration, the sleep of deep rocks, folds of mountain, bed of sea. He wants to be away from a human world.

The fact that Jeffers may be all wrong, and the world pretty much right never seems to enter the poet's head. Just what it is he thinks wrong is repeated over and over again in the long drawn out narratives of human animals

---

1 Lawrence S. Morris, "Robinson Jeffers - The Tragedy of a Modern Mystic", The New Republic, May 16, 1928, p. 387.

all wrapped up in themselves. Tamar's father gives us the first pronouncement--and warning:

> ' ... better dance your pony
> down the cliffs again than close
> Young life into a little box; you've been too wild; now
> I'm worn out, but I remember
> Hell's in the box. '

But Lee Cauldwell is already too much in the box of the world, and his incest is Jeffers' symbol of a species whose attachment has rested too wholly on their own kind. This idea is more apparent in "The Torch-Bearers' Race":

> "You have walked in a dream, consumed with
> your fathers and your mothers, you have loved
> Inside the four walls of humanity, passions turned
> inward, incestuous desires and a fighting
> against ghosts."

And the same interpretation is given by Orestes near the end of "The Tower Beyond Tragedy": "It is all turned inward, all your desires incestuous."

Jeffers' characters, then, destroy themselves, and are destroyed by each other because the orbit of their love has not extended beyond the human family. The characters are symbols of our civilization which Jeffers believes is growing progressively involved in the satisfaction of its wants. It is all obsessed with a psychological incest. But with what, we well ask, is civilization to concern itself, if it drop the idea of creating a system by which men and women may live together harmoniously? There is surely little help in contemplating the fact that, in a detached, cosmic view from a planet beyond the forever hourless spheres of Uranus and Neptune,

> "... death's nothing, and life,
> From a high death-mark on a headland
> Of this dim island of burials, is nothing either."

There may be something salutary in the thought that Betelgeuse is twenty-seven trillion times larger than the earth, and that perhaps our petty foibles need not give us much concern. But this is a different matter to saying that in the face of infinity life and death are nothing. The fact is that, as long as man is a thinking animal, no matter how puny his powers of thought may be, life and death are very much something.

What would Jeffers have us do? "Fall in love outward", says Orestes. But fall in love with what? Would Jeffers have us all zoöphilists like the girl in "Roan Stallion"? Or should we embrace yoga or a cult of the Buddhists? To be sure the early Buddhist writers expressed the thought of "falling in love outward", but their peace was a bliss of the Unconditioned. They pictured falling in love outward not as a step from existence to non-existence, but from existence to life. And in this step humanity was not to be denied but employed. The prophet, Jeffers, offers not enlightenment but annihilation.

If man is compelled to suffer consciousness in a universe that has no meaning or value for him, we should expect to find Jeffers indulging in a narrative which uproots and overthrows all the false standards heretofore imposed by humanity upon itself. "The Women at Point Sur" is such a satanic transvaluation of all earthly values. Barclay imagines himself a god, but a god turned anti-Christ. "Mephistopheles, Iago and Vautrin are Boy Scouts compared to this tremendous being." [1] He gathers about him a motley

---

1 Benjamin de Casseres, "Robinson Jeffers: Tragic Terror" The Bookman, November, 1927, p. 265.

crowd of disciples and gives them a new decalog:

> "... I tell you that every letter of the laws
> is struck backward, the stone tables turned
> over."

All is permitted, nothing denied. God is action, energy, power. His apostles may express it in any way they wish. But the strength that was Barclay's could not stay his madness. In vain he built up a gigantic illusion to excuse his incest. Man's greatest balm would be to find a way to escape being born. This denied, annihilation is best. Yet even this is denied.

> "... annihilation's impossible, the dead have none,...
> ... the unborn have none."

So the yearning for peace serves only to throw into relief the deep craving to grasp all life, to

> "... be all things in all time, in their returns
> and passages, in the motionless and timeless
> center."

But when we arrive there I am afraid we are lost, not found. Barclay is lost, Orestes is lost, so is Jeffers, and so are we.

The philosophy of Jeffers is best seen in the much-quoted lines of "Roan Stallion" beginning

> "Humanity is the
> start of the race; I say
> Humanity is the mold to break away from, the crust to
> break through, the coal to break into fire,
> The atom to be split."

For him, humanity in the cosmos is the last

> "Least taint of a trace in the dregs of the solution."

Here is the cynical flaunt he hurls at his United States, "heavily thickening to empire":

"... shine, perishing republic.

But for my children, I would have them keep their
distance from the thickening center; corruption
Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the
monster's feet there are left the mountains.

And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of
man, a clever servant, insufferable master.
There is the trap that catches noblest spirits, that caught—
they say — God, when he walked on earth."

A lone bird is dearer to him than many people. His supreme joy is in the fact that

"... at length quietness
will cover those wistful eyes,"

and his only solace in the thought that

"no matter
What happens to men...the world's well made though."

He is never sorry to think

"...that here's a planet
Will go on like this glen, perfectly whole and content,
after mankind is scummed from the kettle."

And his final "Credo" ends with a cold composure:

"The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient
to itself; the heart-breaking beauty
Will remain when there is no heart to break for it."

Could there be any thought more fatuous than this last? How can there be beauty, or anything else, as far as man is concerned, without a mind to perceive it? Such is the extent to which a mind turned in upon itself can give vent to bombastic rhetoric. In these specious intellectual attempts, Jeffers' mind seems to approach very near to a state of schizophrenia. My argument that an abstraction of beauty is merely a vague conceit may be in itself some show of solipsism, but I do not think it carries with it such a loose implication as Jeffers presents. His detachment has all of the decadence of

the symbolists but none of their strength which served Eliot's creative purpose. He is logically reduced to exploit more and more a host of varying neurotic persons or else write pompous and inflated absurdity; and frequently the two courses are combined.

Our great disappointment in this poet is when we find lines of compelling beauty only serving such an absurd purpose. In Part VI of "Tamar", we come upon this passage:

> "The year went up to its annual mountain of death,
> gilded with hateful sunlight, waiting rain,
> Stagnant waters decayed, the trickling springs that
> all the misty-hooded summer had fed
> Pendulous green under the granite ocean-cliffs dried
> and turned foul, the rock flowers faded,
> And Tamar felt in her blood the filth and fever of
> the season."

These long-rolling lines have all the essence of tragic beauty, the lyrical grandeur of epochs of time, of tides of circumstance. As equally well modulated are these from the first choros of "The Coast-Range Christ":

> "God was a hawk in the glow of morning, a bee in the rose
> that has stars for her petals,
> The far lights felt him, the first-born lamps
> Spun from the brush of his wings when he bathed in the
> splendor of a firmament men's eyes never imaged."

Here is the sense of life's indifferent play of forces concentrated in "cold, incandescent suns that revolve about the tragedy of the boy slacker." [1] But the whole content of Jeffers' poetry leaves us as cold as the flickering red flame of Antares. The "Choroses" are singularly reminiscent of Euripides, but they have not the slightest quality of

---

1 de Casseres, quoted article, p. 263.

Euripides' humanity and tenderness.

His "Gentle Shepherdess" approaches as near as anything Jeffers has written to the depiction of a loveable character. He has called it "a story of one who has committed self-sacrifice ... a saint, I suppose, going up to a natural martyrdom, aureoled with such embellishments as the mind of the time permits." [1] This saint's halo is of a different luster to that of Mrs. Meynell's "Shepherdess", but neither of the people ~~are~~ is real. We feel for Jeffer's suffering creature only the aloof pity that the poet himself would entertain. Jesus in "Dear Judas", merely another mouthpiece for Jeffers, says that the secret reason for the doctrine of forgiveness is that all men are driven by the mechanism-God to act as they do. They are helpless; yet one would not wish to divulge this secret, for men would run amuck and begin to act differently. The central character in this poem thus becomes an absurd grotesque, a romantic superman.

There are points of definite excellence in Robinson Jeffers' work. His sonnet sequences in "Fauna" and "The Truce and the Peace" show a subtle mastery of phrase and time, seeming to be the flower of his discipline and muscular mental excercise seen in the longer narratives. In these long poems, too, there is all of the crash and howling and rage of the long breakers hurling against California cliffs. But I am led to believe that even in California storms abate, and the natives

---

1 Quoted in The Bookman, October, 1929, p. 190.

find that all the sound and the fury has signified practically nothing. In Jeffers' verse we have difficulty in hearing the sense through the terrific noise. Even in more lucid moments the words convey very little. Here is the close of "Resurrection" in the volume Give Your Heart to the Hawks (1933):

> "But love or hatred
> Or good or evil are hardly
> A hair's weight here in the balance.
> One being risen from the dead,
> The irrational mind revives,
> All things are possible again."

It is perhaps unfair to pick this out of its context; but even the rest of the poem is an inadequate footnote. Jeffers has the same trouble avoiding rhetoric as he has in preventing melodrama. All of these so-called tragedies are far too obvious at the outset to lead one to expect anything else than debauchery, disease and interminable surfeit.

Occasionally Jeffers forgets the narrative (which is the least poetic part of his work) to express his own mind. It is then, in the long, nervous lines, restive as the roan stallion, and in the hymns to the unconscious, that the poet's purest poetry is evidenced.

However, Jeffers fails us, ultimately. The factor he most skilfully produces is a feeling of vastness. But this is not enough. It takes more than one dimension to make a world, even that despicable world of "the animals Christ was rumored to have died for." Jeffers is sorry he is a human being. He is posed with the ultimate questions of life and can't find an answer. Thought affords no help; the mind is a breeder of delusions. He would embrace the inertness of Cambrian strata, or strive with Orestes to break the net of pain-pleasure and

soar "like a freed falcon" to "the motionless and timeless center," from which human relationships and human tragedy are imperceptible. Why he bothers to live, let alone write poetry for the men he so utterly despises, is a question no less difficult than the ones he poses. He simply can't be passive, inert. The heart of an ancient mystic wars with the mind of a contemporary psychoanalytical rationalist. He must lead his long circus of frenzied motiles and tactiles across the sawdust of a decaying world. And the tent that shrouds them all is a fatality tall as the stars and as serenely impervious in its trajectories and orbits. A wild, dishevelled, remote beauty haunts the scene. It is made more eerie by the music of an infernal but contained madness.

Apart from the obvious symbolism of his pivotal theme, Jeffers remains consistent to psychiatrical principles. Sigmund Freud goes so far as to declare "that the relation of the parents instigated by incestuous longings is the central complex of the neurosis."[1] Our criticism is not with Jeffers' development of the theme but with the postulate itself. His outlook is too narrow, his imagination woefully unablanced. Even with the half-caste material he uses, one might find much more favorable circumstances of human loyalty. Yet he presents no evidence of admirable deeds. Like Swift, he exaggerates in order to blackwash humanity.

My contention, however, does not overlook the fact that a sentimental optimism needs to be guarded and that there

---

1 Freud, Totem and Taboo, p. 28.

is something positively helpful in a deflation of the ego. One cannot quite naively look at the present state of affairs and say all's right with the world. One does require, to quote Thomas Hardy, "a full look at the worst." Jeffers does not present Barclay as a model but as a warning. It is a warning against an acquisitive civilization, against the ruthless wielding of power for selfish ends. But the solution lies not in retreat from base, conceited humanity; it lies not in embracing "the sublime aloofness of a being who has dismissed life as an ethical problem entirely from his consciousness — if it was ever there." [1] It is found in a concerted attempt of man to see himself in relation to all other men, to make his ideals amenable to those of his fellow men, to use the stuff of humanity to remold the world nearer to his heart's desire. So long as Jeffers thinks the sufferings of humans no more to be pitied than the impersonal revolutions of the nine planets, he remains, for the rest of his kind, a renegado.

There can be no doubt of Robinson Jeffers' poetic genius. He provides us time and again with a rich, memorable esthetic experience. He has, in his best work, a mastery of vast sweeping form, different from, but equal to, Blake or Whitman. Were it possible to divorce the form from the content, Jeffers' position in letters would be assured. As it is, the issue need not concern us. Jeffers has chosen his single motive,

---

1 de Casseres, quoted article, p. 263.

and though he is still writing, there is no doubt as to his future direction. His decision has spelled his destiny. If life is valued, explored, subdivided, and defined, poetic themes are infinite in number; if it is denied, the only theme is the rather sterile and monotonous one of the denial.

Jeffers wrote in the Prelude to "The Women of Point Sur",

> "But why should I make fables again? There
> are many
> Tellers of tales to delight women and the people.
> I have no vocation."

And I am inclined to believe him.

Archibald MacLeish is the chief spokesman for the negatively minded inheritors of post-War disillusion. He is one of the "Too-Late Born", men who

> "... turned back and climbed once more
> The steep road southward, and heard faint the sound
> Of swords, of horses, the disastrous war,
> And crossed the dark defile at last, and found
> At Roncevaux upon the darkening plain
> The dead against the dead and on the silent ground
> The silent slain —"

He is tired. He has reached "L'An Trantiesme de Mon Age",

> "And here above the chimney stack
> The unknown constellations sway —
> And by what way shall I go back?"

A ripe old age indeed, to be thinking of turning back! But this is characteristic of his futile school. Gone is the old romantic outlook. He is troubled because he cannot escape the perpetual mood of despair. He knows for certain that onward leads to dark and sullen death.

MacLeish's own selection of Poems, 1924-1933 is quite an adequate volume for our consideration. It opens with his most completely successful poem, "The Hamlet of A. MacLeish", "highly ingenious in construction, nearly impeccable in versification, and deeply moving in emotional intensity." [1] In a confessional indictment against the poet's self, MacLeish voices all the nostalgia of a decadent age longing to return to the innocent world. He would regain that simple communication between man and the natural world, return to the earth as it was before the

> "Irremediable woe, the ill
> Long done, lost in the times before memory."

It would be a world without shame, without superstition, no longer hostile and no longer alien.

> "Always the earth has been turned away from me hiding
> The veiled eyes and the wind in the leaves has not
> not spoken."

And yet he sees with more myopic eyes a vision that is always persistent on the retina. The earth beckons:

> "Come down into the crumbling loam,
> Come home into the curving wave,
> The dark, dear heart, will fondle thee,
> The earth will kiss, thee in the grave."

It ends with the bitter pang of enforced resignation:

> "Thou wouldst not think
> How ill all's here about my heart!"

MacLeish's "Hamlet" achieves power through the sharp presentation of significant detail. Variations of mood are communicated intimately in an intricate union of sound and sense. Each phrase, charged with a halted, audante cadence,

---

1 Lewis Galantière, "Hamlet For Our Time", The Nation, April 17, 1929, p. 472.

partakes of the deep emotion of the protagonist. The poem expresses Mac Leish's sense of the burden laid upon man by life, and expresses it through a form that marks the poet as one of the finest craftsmen now writing in English.

The same themes, the loss of contact with earth and the persistent obsession with death, appear in a great many other poems of MacLeish. "The Pot of Earth", based on a passage in Frazer's Golden Bough, furnishes an analogy between the plants which wither through loss of roots and the present civilization decaying for want of a like depth to sustain it. In technic, the poem records MacLeish's debt to Eliot as evinced particularly in "The Waste Land". "His introduction of moments from contemporary life recall similar passages from Eliot's poem, and the tragic sense of waste which dominates it." [1] "Einstein" is a further example, though, marred by a too purposeful obscurity, it is not so successful as some other poems. It depicts "the lack of communication between man and the earth's denial of itself to man; it is a perpetually unsatisfied desire to understand, to put into words, to rediscover the earth, the air and the light." [2]

A more important writing, yet one which does not attain the significance it should is "Conquistador." In this, the desideratum, action, combines with a further loss, that of

---

1 Babette Dentsch, This Modern Poetry, p. 216.

2 George Dangerfield, "Archibald MacLeish: An Appreciation", The Bookman, January, 1931, p. 495.

a central theme, to leave a work of considerably less power than "The Hamlet". Its merit is a technical one, a very fine example of the terza rima in English. MacLeish has a wealth of imagery at his command, an uncanny ability to create atmosphere, and a skilful use of assonance which saves the poem from monotony. While the poem is itself a living thing, MacLeish fails, in the measure that T. S. Eliot succeeds, to extract from the past a meaning for the present, to resurrect a past age for the benefit of our present time. One perceives that MacLeish feels the lack of a central unifying power in the life of his own day, and yet is without the determination to create that power. He recognizes sadly that his country, his people, is "neither a land nor a race."

Yet, far from attempting a consolidation of the dissipated powers in his postwar world, MacLeish chooses to remain one of "the outcasts, the intelligent." He is content to sit back and laugh at the world's cock-eyed circus. In "The End of the World," he realizes that the top has blown off the tent, and he finds

> "There in the sudden blackness the black pall
> Of nothing, nothing, nothing — nothing at all."

Nothing but death, and his consort, shadow, in league with the thieving time that pierced "You, Andrew Marvell:"

> "And here downward in the sun
> To feel how swift how secretly
> The shadow of the night comes on..."

From such open banality we may return to the limp humility of an "American Letter" and that country which is neither a land nor a people, where

> "It is a strange thing — to be an American."

With this we come to see MacLeish's logical position. Too aloof to throw in his lot with that gross beast, the vulgus, he makes way to join a grosser company of bureaucrats. Tired, even, of his nostalgia, he throws out invectives at the very people who are trying to make America a fit country. With the characteristic derision of the reactionary he ridicules the comrades of a new brotherhood:

> "Aindt you read in d' books you are all brudders?
> D' glassic historic objective broves you are brudders!
> You and d' Wops and d' Chinks you are all brudders!
> Havend't you got it d' same ideology? Havend't you?"

> "For Marx has said to us Workers what do you need?
> And Stalin has said to us Starvers what do you need?
> You need the Dialectical Materialism!"

But MacLeish, in his "Frescoes", can't be bothered.

> "There is too much sun on the lids of my eyes to be
> listening."

Archibald MacLeish is a vivid and arresting poet. He is a fine lyrist, an excellent technician, a powerful elegiast of an autumnal tone. His imagery and syntax mark him definitely of the "Waste Land" school, but he does not condense or harden so much as balance clause and clause. He has Eliot's nervous lucidity, Aiken's tinkling languor, and Robinson's clipped aphorisms. His heritage is not limited to fellow contemporaries but goes back even to the dawn of English verse. This is seen in "Immortal Autumn", with such lines as

> "No more the foreign sun does meddle at our earth
> Enforce the green and bring the fallow land to birth
> Nor winter yet weigh all with silence the pine bough."

He has a rare feeling for the weight and distribution of words

and always approaches the full being of the word. While this assures avoidance of redundancy, the continued persistence with death, nostalgia and despair, limits his scope and makes him prone to mere repetition. He seems like somebody speaking to himself in a mirror, listening affectionately to his own voice, watching his own expression playing a part. In this respect we are apt to wonder with Conrad Aiken why he must "go on giving us his so extraordinarily skillful pastiche of evasions." [1] But we are at times content to accept these evasions when he gives us such rare and melancholy beauty as the "Epistle to be Left in the Earth."

In his intellectual surrender he has exploited the use of a romantic device incorporating mystery, emotion and terror. Here, Obed Brooks believes, "MacLeish has allied himself, despite the purity of his poetic intentions, with a tendential philosophy. It is the philosophy of occultism, of the myth, the night, the clithonic denial of reason. ... It is the philosophy of Fascists." [2] It may be, however, that this is a half-way stop for MacLeish. That he has changed his attitude towards capitalism is assured in his recent play, Panic (1935). We should expect good things from MacLeish, and we shall doubtless receive them.

In the most interesting verse of the last six years there is seen an attempt to get beyond or at least away from the skepticism and self-pity of the years immediately preceding

1 Conrad Aiken, "The Development of a Poet", The New Republic January 17, 1934, p. 287.

2 Obed Brooks, in Proletarian Literature in the United States, p. 327.

1929. If I may borrow form the concluding chapter of this thesis, the trend appears to be towards writers less concerned with their petty personal problems, a group with a sense of responsibility to the culture of which they are a part. There have not arisen, as yet, poets of the caliber of the English Auden, Spender, and Lewis, but the signs are definitely promising. It is natural, however, that social-minded poets in the United States should not immediately gain the stature of English writers. There is a class distinction in England which makes it a more difficult matter to emerge from the third rank and the corresponding accomplishment in literature assumes a greater perspective.

While definitely socialist writers have come to the fore only recently, their trend actually goes back to Walt Whitman and his gospel of comradeship. While Santayana in 1913 thought that American literature had not kept pace with industrial advancement, [1] the attempt to overcome this disparity had already been begun. Early in the century Markham foretold a social upheaval. In "War is Kind", Stephen Crane prodded a bitter thrust,

> "Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
> Make plain to them the excellence of killing,"

fifteen years before "these men were born to drill and die" in the worst carnage of what has been called Western civilization. Edna St. Vincent Millay was stirred to comment on the iniquity of injustice when faced with the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Arturo Giovannitti wrote his masterpiece, "The Walker", when, as a strike leader, he was arrested and jailed

---

1 See George Santayana, Winds of Doctrine, p. 188.

in solitary confinement. Lola Ridge lent her Imagist influence to the depiction of green-walled tenements, the pressure of stricken indomitable life in the ghetto, as she had come intimately to know it. The list of these writers leading up to the present proletarian poets is a long one, and their work might form a complete and fascinating essay in itself.

A defence of propaganda cannot find a place here. I have spoken of it before, [1] and will do so again in the next chapter, but the contribution of present-day American poets is sufficient justification of social content. Like the major triad of "New Signatures" [2] in England, these poets are working within the actual traditions of their environment and they are relating these traditions to the social background of our time.

The distinction of the rival factions of our day, so clearly presented in Palme Dutt's book, Fascism and Social Revolution, is also felt in modern American poetry. There is a group in the South, whose main figures are Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Donald Davidson, who are devoted to a program of restoring southern life. Of them, Prof. Arvin remarks: "The germs of a Fascist philosophy may be detected in this position, and from somewhere among these groups we may doubtless expect to see a Fascist laureate emerge." [3]

---

1 See pp. 52, 53 of this thesis.

2 See New Signatures, (1932), edited by Michael Roberts.

3 Newton Arvin, "Our Haughty Poets", Current History, June, 1934, p. 313.

Against such a position is the work of the proletarian poets. Far from desiring to overthrow the best that is the heritage from the past, they are bent upon removing the vices which threaten civilization. "It is important", claims John Strachey, "that supporters of dialectical meterialism should assert their undeniable claim to be the heirs apparent to all that is best in traditional culture." [1] This philosophy stresses the view of civilization as a continual flux, an ever-changing growth and development, far removed from the static outlook of the fascist position.

Stanley Burnshaw writes of unemployment "in these days of marking time." [2] Alfred Hayes voices the younger group of unwanted graduates. The agencies, he warns, are "filing cards of hate", while he —

> "I brood upon myself, I rot
> Night after night in this cheap coffee pot."

Kenneth Patchen is dramatic and colorful in a typical example, "Joe Hill Listens to the Praying." Joseph Kalar gives us a vivid impression of the "Worker Uprooted":

> "Now alien, I move forlorn, an uprooted tree,
> feel the pain of hostile eyes
> lighting up no more for me;
> the forced silence, the awkward laugh,
> comrade no more in laughter and pain."

It is to be expected that much of the work of these poets should be in the nature of a justified protest. A great deal of their strength does lie in such expression, and any survey of poetry will reveal a detached hatred in the best

---

1 Strachey, Literature and Dialectical Materialism, p. 15.

2 Examples of the work of this poet, and of several others mentioned here, maybe found in the authology, Proletarian Literature in the United States.

literature of reformists. The opponents of the class-minded poets, however, take objection to this, as if one were not allowed to hate injustice or degradation or decay. MacLeish makes such a protest, remarking that "for the most part the emotion which excites and inspires American revolutionary writers is the emotion of hate." [1] Like so many other critics, he decries only those who hate his particular interests. When John Dos Passos or Keene Wallis or Paul Engle point their scalpels at the malignant growths of contemporary civilization these apologetic critics rise up in alarm.

There is in scathing criticism of a dying social order something of definite constructive value. Kenneth Fearing [2] has presented such criticism, although he is not limited to such mere utterance. His "Lullaby" ranks with the finest poems of the present day:

"Wide as this night, old as this night is old and young
as it is young, still as this, strange as this,
filled as this night is filled with the light of
a moon as grey,
dark as these trees, heavy as this scented air
from the fields, warm as this land,
as warm, as strong,

Is the night that wraps all the huts of the south and
folds the empty barns of the west;
is the wind that fans the roadside fire;
are the trees that line the country estates, tall
as the lynch trees, as straight, as black;
is the moon that lights the mining towns, dim as
the light upon tenement roofs, grey upon the
hands at the bars of Moabit, cold as the
bars of the Tombs."

Fearing is a definite, powerful voice of the proletariat, one of the most promising poets writing today.

---

1 Archibald MacLeish, "Preface to an American Manifesto," The Forum, April 1934, p. 195.

2 See Kenneth Fearing, Angel Arms, and Poems.

When we now take our departure from modern American poetry, we do so feeling that poetry in the hands of these socialist writers is safely entrusted. The old dichotomy between poetry and politics has vanished; art and life are fused; art is seen in its logical position as art for life's sake. The narrow outlook has given way to the broad and wholesome view of the extrovert.

These poets realize that a great deal of spade work must be done before the humane society appears. Ten years ago it might have been said that American poetry was without a foothold, but today these poets know the direction in which they are going. When they arrive, "we shall get an art that is truly epic, for it will deal with the tremendous experiences of a class whose world-wide struggle transforms the whole of human society." [1] Towards this end they will direct their energies, voicing the words that Whitman sang seventy years ago:

> "Have the elder races halted?
> Do they droop and end their lesson? ...
> We take up the task eternal, and the burden and
> the lesson,
> Pioneers! O pioneers!"

---

1 Joseph Freeman, in Proletarian Literature in the United States, p. 19.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SCENE IN RETROSPECT

> "Moreover in every systematic treatise there are two requisites: the author must first define his subject, and secondly, though this is really more important, he must show us how and by what means of study we may reach the goal ourselves."
> — Treatise on the Sublime

On first thought it may seem that in delaying too long in a definition of my subject: "American Poetry from 1910 to 1935," I have already transgressed the first requisite of "Longinus." Certainly there can be no difficulty with the term, "American", or with the dates inscribed. But a consideration of the word, "Poetry", is a more difficult matter, for poetry, like light and life, evades definition. It can be only defined by its attributes and by its effect upon us; and I hope I have thus far made clear the attributes of modern American poetry.

The second requirement suggested by "Longinus" seems to involve the question of interpretation; and I hope that this too has been evident in the foregoing chapters. My main intention has been to present an essay in interpretation. This also involves a criticism, for it is impossible to "explain" a poem. A poem is not a mathematical formula, nor a theorem, nor a philosophical premise, even though it may involve some aspect of any of these. However, the subject, "poetry", admits of a countless number of shades and angles and directions in interpretation, and this is precisely the reason for the existence of this thesis. What are American

poets trying to do? What is so new about the "New Poetry"? To what degree is it new in technic, in language? To what extent is it bound to tradition? What is its emotional, intellectual, social content? And where is it going? These are questions which I have attempted to answer, and which may need some further consideration.

There is something more than fortuitousness in the fact that this chapter began with a quotation from "Longinus"; for this critic emphasized a cardinal tenet in the poetic doctrine of today: the use of words so as to give the entire depth of their meaning, and the avoidance of their empty or frivolous use. He also made clear a point that now no longer needs stressing, the fact that literature is a function of life.

There is bound up with the question of the exact use of words the whole consideration of poetic diction and verse form. As far as form is concerned, modern poets are seen to be free to use any medium they wish. The range extends from traditional meters and rimes of Robinson and Frost to the experimental grotesques, the Spectra hoax, and Miss Stein's "Tender Buttons." Just as "there is not one literary tradition but many traditions," [1] there is in modern poetry not one trend but several trends. This means that in the entire body of modern poetry there is an increased freedom and range of style and subject matter. "The effect of the New Poetry movement upon poetic form has been simply to enlarge greatly the range of the poet's choice when he begins to

---

1 Herbert Read, Form in Modern Poetry, p. 80.

select his mode of expression." [1]

The age has been called one of experimentation, but what age is not? Revolt in literature is not new; and it merely serves to prove that poetry lives by defiance more than by acquiescence. For any revolt, Professor Lowes assures us, "is merely one of the countless waves of action and reaction between which the arts, like life, perpetually swing to and fro, and, through an occasional ground swell, sometimes farther on." [2]

Change in form has been a constant characteristic of poetry. In the English language it is first seen in the domination of the rimed patterns of the Continent over the alliterative patterns of Old English. Free verse reverts to the accentual Saxon poetry, with its alliteration, its lines of varying length to fit the singer's feeling, and its general emotional plasticity. Then, just as the Continental patterns supplanted the somewhat limited technic of older days, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries there was an attempt to overthrow accentual meters and substitute the quantitative stresses of Latin. This was found to be unsuccessful — long before the Imagists discovered their limitations. The revolt of the Romantic Revival was essentially one of content rather than form, although the two are intricately related. In all reactionary movements there are seen absorbed the best features of the predecessors,

---

1 Russel Blankenship, American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind, p. 572.

2 J. L. Lowes, Convention and Revolt in Poetry, p. 143.

and this is no less in evidence today than it has been in the past.

The immediate influences upon the diction of modern poetry appear to be Poe and Whitman, through the French symbolists, and, though felt to a greater extent in England, the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manly Hopkins. This Roman Catholic poet curiously felt Whitman's mind nearer to his own than that of any other Victorian contemporary, although he expressed his work in a "running rhythm" based on the common English form, a "sprung rhythm" going back to "Piers Plowman", and a vocabulary of unique combinations of words and phrases. What the modern unrimed cadences abandon is the recurrent beat of the line. The group of lines constitutes the unit, and the whole presents, as the Imagists put it, "the organic rhythm of the speaking voice."

But an understanding of the technic of verse affords only a partial aid to the appreciation of modern poetry. What is most essential is to feel the spirit of the times. The persons who dislike poetry, the majority of people today, are those out of tune with the age. The poets of the new thought see man as a part of the universe, not lord and master of it. This thought originates in the middle of the nineteenth century when the theory of evolution reduced man from the heroic stature to which the Romantics had tried to exalt him, to the semblance of a small and helpless animal. But the naturalism of novelists like Zola was not altogether due to the appearance of the Origin of Species in 1859. An independent reaction had set in earlier, against the sentimentality and loose-

~~ness~~ness of the Romantics, reaching its highest development in prose, and characterized by a scientific observation corresponding to that of biological science. Coupled with this knowledge, modern psychology has emphasized the fact that "the human machine is driven by ducts and glands, deeply hidden impulses, and complex physio-chemical reactions far beyond the individual's control or even present understanding." [1]

The naturalism of nineteenth century novels, then, finds its way into the verse of the twentieth century. Men are seen in their logical position in the universe. Tragedy is not limited to a person in high estate, for any character is looked upon as a fit protagonist for a deeply moving tragedy. The mood of tragedy, too, is endured philosophically. Triumphant forces are sometimes evil; there is no moral law or purposive power to punish transgressors, and, whether we like it or not, tragedy comes in the end. Build the illusion as we must, it one day goes to the earth that supports it.

Man, no less than the world he inhabits is not the center of the universe, so modern poets aim at externality, objectivity, or immediacy. They aim, through the use of the exact word, at clearness and firmness of presentation. For this, as we have seen in portions of Sandburg, the reportorial poetry of Masters, and others, unrimed cadence imposes no restriction upon choice of words. There is no need to fit a word into a metrical scheme or to invert the word order. But

---

1 Blankenship, quoted work, p. 520.

the naturalism of Robinson or the candor and objectivity of Frost's realism, given the advantage of a rich vocabulary, is in no wise impeded by a metrical form.

The impact of the World War found little immediate expression in American poetry. Marguerite Wilkinson's New Voices (1921) does not contain a single line by an American in its section on the War. The revulsion from war came naturally earlier and stronger in England, and it is in such poets as Sassoon and Wilfred Owen that we find the most powerful, savage and bitter cynicism. [1] While American poetry in this respect does not present the tone of novels like Three Soldiers, Plumes, The Big Parade, Soldier's Pay, or A Farewell to Arms, we must not overlook Sandburg's "And So Today" and "Killers", Lindsay's poem mentioned previously, "The Unpardonable Sin", Martin Feinstein's "In Memoriam", or Charles A. Wagner's "The Unknown Soldier."

The effects of the War, however, are as noticeable in American poetry as in the literature of any other country. It meant on the one hand a turning of the mind in upon itself, and on the other, a social protest shaking the already leaning towers of capitalism. The former aspect is associated with the scientific and psychological outlook bequeathed by the natural sciences and several branches of philosophy. It gave rise to a new war of the world within. Failing to understand the new thought completely, the poets gave way to irony and

---

1 An excellent collection is An Anthology of War Poems, compiled by Frederick Brereton.

despair. "Wisdom." said Koheleth, "is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good." Now, it seemed, the world was filled with a host of sinners who had destroyed every vestige of sanity, coherence, beauty, meaning. The econ omic framework was toppling, religious sanctions had fallen away, and science had failed to supply anything to take their place.

Yet there is in this introverted writing of Eliot and MacLeish and Jeffers a thread connecting the monuments and aspirations and failures of the past. It is the strong thread which supports tradition, which reaches back to the racial myths lying in the subconscious mind. For a man belongs only by accident to this scientific age and there are all ages and generations in his blood. It is precisely this sense that makes a major poem. "One might say that all great poetry, of whatever age, has the power of moving on through the years, keeping pace with mankind through his ever-changing landscape. It is the second rate, that which is devoted to the small compass of a single period or decade, which is soon out of fashion." [1]

Poets may find their subject matter in the exciting present, but they are not blind to a very real contemporaneous past. Professor Fairclough has assured us of the debt of poets like Robinson, H. D., and Jeffers to the classics of Greece and Rome. [2] There is abundant evidence of a similar

---

1 Robert Hillyer, Some Roots of English Poetry, pp. 13, 14.

2 See Henry Rashton Fairclough, The Classics and Our Twentieth Century Poets.

obligation to the later writers of Europe and of the British Isles. Today the world is swinging to what, to America, is the Near East: to China, Japan, and the neighboring Russia, "and, happily, American poets are using those riches to further the ideals of international sympathy." [1] So, too, out of the spinnerets of the psyche, the modern Arachne is weaving a web to express the world that has become his. Some day the anthropological epic will be written.

The second influence of the World War was the emphasis upon the need of creating a society which should make war unnecessary. It is this movement which is now gaining ground in American literature. Poets are endeavoring to move humanity, to arouse a social consciousness. They are discovering "as the foundation upon which rests our national life the articulate masses who are striving for self-expression, and they are expressing the thoughts, the feelings, the hopes and the tragedies of those masses." [2]

It is hardly necessary to reiterate the fact that propaganda is no novelty in literature. We have but to recall "Piers Plowman's" passion of discontent, Milton's defence of propaganda in the "Areopagitica", or Shelley's views on political liberty in "Prometheus Unbound." We know that Virgil wrote the "Georgics" to advance Augustus's agricultural policy, and that in the "Aeneid" he glorified Roman imperialism. Yet we do not fail to admire these works on

---

1 P. K., "China in Poetry", The Trans-Pacific, July 21, 1928, p. 5.

2 Lloyd R. Morris, The Young Idea, p. 206.

any of these accounts. The whole point of opposition in modern derogatory criticism centers around the socialist's attack on the vested interests of capitalist society.

What is new, however, in the propaganda of today is the expression of a class basis for the fundamental differences in the life of our time. Men are conditioned by their environment, and a poet's work is seen to be influenced by his social position. "There is no such thing", says Edmund Wilson, "as a work of literature or art which does not embody a point of view, and ... every point of view has been molded by the circumstances of the person who holds it." [1] Accordingly, the various divisions of literature are seen to express the view of "a period of civilisation, of an epoch, of history characterised by a particular economic organisation, a particular variety of institutions, a particular type of law, of religion, of morality." [2]

The task, then, of the proletarian poets and their comrades among the professionals, is to produce a society which will break down the warring factions that make for disintegration and become in reality a classless society. The more developed the economic struggle, the more obstrusive is its expression in literature. And before there can be a classless society "in which man will move from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom, before there

---

1 Wilson, "Art, the Proletariat and Marx", The New Republic, August 23, 1933, p. 44.

2 R. D. Charques, Contemporary Literature and Social Revolution, p. 10.

can be a classless art, the proletariat, through the artists who come from its ranks or who go over to it from the other social classes, must produce a class art which is revolutionary because it illumines the whole of the contemporary world from the only viewpoint from which it is possible to see it steadily and see it whole." [1]

The impulse to remake society has grown steadily since the War. With the resultant dislocation of the prevailing economic system has come an intensification of political passions and an emotional unrest. At least ten years after the War ended, men saw that they were not yet done with waste and devastation. Defeat and victory alike were blotted out in the bitterness of frustration and vain sacrifice. But out of the disillusion has arisen a vision of the New Age when the life of the mass will be a brotherhood of love, labor and service, only to be achieved after long eras, perhaps more selfish and more material than any we have ever known.

The poetry of the future will doubtless be found to have started, as Stephen Spender foretells, [2] from the position of Eliot and his poem, "The Waste Land:"

> "Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
> These fragments I have shored against my ruins."

This poetry will be traditional in the sense that Eliot's poetry is traditional. It will glean from the best of the

---

1 Joseph Freeman, Introduction to Proletarian Literature in the United States, p. 18.

2 See Stephen Spender, "The Artistic Future of Poetry," The New Republic, April 18, 1934, pp. 268-270.

past in form and content, and continue to perform that unique function of poetry: a synthesis of our experiences. When proletarian verse becomes popular the more obscure idioms will give way to plainer statement, and socialist writers will be found to belong to the poets of all ages, the true revolutionaries, who, speaking out of the deepest instincts of man, build once more a new world.

"What causes a change, then, in the official inspiration of poetry is usually not a revolt on the part of poetry itself against the tyranny of social sentiment, but the absorption of poetry by a new social sentiment, which uses it as an aggressive weapon against the old." [1] The reaction of Robinson to sentimentality and puritan inhibition found adequate expression in the old forms. His simplicity consists in resolving things to their original elements, and of disdaining mawkishness and preconceived ideas. Too remote from the exterior conflicts that beset this generation, he yet was able to ferret out the soul of humanity with analytical interest, and look truth in the face.

Shortly after Robinson's best early work appeared, it became certain that the poetic revival would not be dominated by any single group or tendency. Classicists, romanticists and realists rapidly contributed to the renascence, all presenting "a spectacle to which perhaps no era was ever

---

1 Laura Riding, Contemporaries and Snobs, p. 89.

Review, welcomed their contributions.

In 1914 Miss Lowell published Sword Blades and Poppy Seed, a volume important not only for its experimental work but for the preface. Miss Lowell has helped more than any other figure to dispel the idea that there is anything mysterious or supernatural about poetry. It is an organic product with discoverable functions, the result of a poet's genuine hard work. In the same year Lindsay, poet of the spiritual life, of humor, nonsense and rhetoric, appeared with Congo to appeal to the unselfconscious and unprejudiced.

1915 saw the appearance of four important volumes. Frost's American edition of North of Boston presented a poet keenly aware of man's place in the pastoral scene, a far cry indeed from the simplicity of Riley. In Masters' Spoon River Anthology the village controversy was precipitated by a naturalistic study of the small town. Two other volumes were in free verse: Fletcher's Irradiations, and the Imagist Anthology. Here the immediately previous concern with matter gave way to a preoccupation with manner. Gaudiness and inanity defeated the Imagist's purpose no less than it defeated the purpose of all these modern poets; and the Imagists were right in veering away from any tinge of archaism in diction, because they aimed at an effect with which such diction is inconsistent. Their reaction to the vague and the nebulous found a salutary, fresh and vivid expression. But the Imagists, in polishing the surface overlooked the texture and the depth; and in overconcentrating on exquisite craftsmanship, their achievement, like that of all such movements,

was doomed to ultimate and rather hasty death.

However, the same reaction against the use of any word solely for its adventitious value was seen in at least a dozen volumes of 1916. The most important of these were Frost's Mountain Interval, Robinson's Man Against the Sky, and Sandburg's Chicago Poems. While a poet like Fletcher began with the poetic and attempted to make life spring from poetic forms, Sandburg invested living material with the poetic spirit. In his use of neologisms he further aided the breaking down of the distinction between poetic and nonpoetic words, although he, like Masters and Lindsay with their news from the west, did not quite achieve a mature style.

By 1917 the New Poetry (with unprecedented sales) ranked as America's first national art. While poetry then, as today was not popular with the mass, there is no doubt that it found an exceedingly larger audience than it had previously known. The reading public wants the obvious clearness of novels, newspapers and magazines, the more appealing moving pictures or one or two legitimate plays. However, the poet insists that clearness demands thought and language of a far greater complexity and sensitiveness than the enlarged reading public will permit him to use. This does not mean that all writers need go to the extent of the "private poetry" of Eliot or the modernistic poets, in their desire for freshness or vividness. But that era, including much of the work of MacLeish and Jeffers appears to be on the wane as the socialist poets are in the ascendant.

Where poetry enjoys popularity is in individual groups who are educating an increasingly numerous body of readers and listeners. Young people are encouraged to write poetry, to form societies and publish their work in small magazines. Colleges are finding a place for such activity, and Hughes Mearns in Lincoln School, New York, has shown that even a school environment can set free the creative spirit. [1]

The difficulty in dealing with modern poetry, as the reader may well realize, is that there are many poets of undoubted accomplishments, and the problem of selection needs nothing short of the aid of a magical divining rod. I am aware of my omission of much prominent minor work: of the meandering Conrad Aiken who presents the somewhat romantic languor of a tired hedonist; Arthur Davison Ficke and his musical somnolence of the school of Walter de la Mare; the swaying, colored balladry of William Rose Benet, filled with exotic wording and quaint imagery.

I have overlooked at least three important women: Edna Millay and her passionate and polished, naive and sophisticated poems, wrought of a peculiar magic of phrase; the late Sara Teasdale, an intelligent technician with a mind of vision and a sense of beauty in the simple things; and another perfect craftsman, also deceased, Elinor Wylie, a poet of hard penetrating language and imaginative realism. I must pass with only a mention of some modernistic poets, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, E. E. Cummings, whose work

---

1 See an inspiring book by Hughes Mearns, Creative Youth.

appears more ephemeral, as if designed to limit the poet's audience to a handful of highly selected and specialized readers. But the list of minor poets is a far too lengthy one. It has been almost exhaustively treated by Alfred Kreymborg in the last two hundred pages of his history, Our Singing Strength.

One final reference, however, must be made to a group who present an obviously different strand and unique part of American poetry. Several Americans of African descent have in recent years made great strides in self-expression. A recent anthology, Caroling Dusk, while it contains work of older poets like Joseph S. Cotter and Dunbar, can hold its own with the modern collections. The best work of our day is seen in Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and a few poets associated with the proletariat writers. The most wholesome aspect of their work is that they are freeing themselves, not only from a sentimentality designed to please the majority-race but from a previous deterrent of self-consciousness. They are making way to take their proper stand in the new brotherhood, and in the literature that knows no race.

It is, of course, too early to place contemporary poets in historical perspective. We are in too close proximity to the picture for a definitive appraisal. We have seen, however, that poetry today is fulfilling its traditional function. It reflects the conflicts and changes of the modern mind, the complexity of problems and interests, the "emotional experiences of a new age in which the irresistible flow of scientific knowledge has transformed all the older conceptions

of man's nature and place in the universe — conceptions that are still rooted in the subconscious mind and still live in the words that transmit intellectual and emotional experience." [1]

Poetry in America does not concentrate as it has done in some countries; it does not travel towards a unified expression. A group of poets embodying dissimilar modes of conception has yet made "the poetry of our time the richest, the most varied, the most exciting in American literary history." [2] While there is no homogeneous body of beliefs and feelings into which the poet may be educated, these modern poets have proved that the pages of poetry do not need to be watermarked with forty-eight stars and thirteen stripes in order to produce a literature that may be described as national.

"Behold, I make all things new," sang the poet of the Revelation. It is the function of poetry ever to re-create. Its symbol should be not Pegasus but the Phenix. Out of the jarring seeds of diverse life there grows through the air of poetry a sustenance that feeds and becomes one with the people of the world.

> "For literature endures like the universal spirit,
> And its breath becomes part of the vitals of all men." [3]

---

1 Helen E. Haines, Living With Books, p. 383.

2 John Macy, "The New Age of American Poetry," Current History, January, 1932, p. 553.

3 Li Shang-yin, in T'ang Shih San Pai Shou, Three Hundred Poems of the T'ang Dynasty, 618-907, A. D.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

POETRY

Anthologies

Aiken, Conrad, Ed.: Modern American Poets. N.Y., 1927.

Aison, Gerta, Ed.: Modern American Poetry, N.Y., 1933.

Cullen, Countee, Ed.: Caroling Duck. N.Y., and London, 1927.

Hicks, Granville, and others, Eds.: Proletarian Literature in the United States. N. Y., 1935. (Also contains drama and critical essays.)

Johnson, James W., Ed.: The Book of American Negro Poetry N. Y., 1922.

Kreymborg, Alfred, Ed.: Lyric America. N. Y., 1930.

Markham, Edwin, Ed.: The Book of American Poetry. N.Y.,1934.

Monroe, Harriet, and Henderson, A.C., Eds.: The New Poetry. N.Y., 1920.

Untermeyer, Louis, Ed.: Modern American Poetry, A Critical Anthology, N. Y., 1925.

Wagner, Charles A., Ed.: Prize Poems, 1913-1929. N.Y., 1930.

The English Association, Ed.: The Modern Muse. London, 1934.

_____: Some Imagist Poets, 1916. Boston and N. Y., 1916.

_____: Imagist Authology 1930. N. Y., 1930.

Individual Works

H. D. [Doolittle, Hilda]: Collected Poems. N. Y., 1925.

Eliot, T. S.: Poems. N. Y., 1920
The Waste Land. N. Y., 1922.

Fletcher, John Gould: Irradiatons -- Sand and Spray. Boston, 1915.
Goblins and Pagodas. Boston and N. Y., 1916.
The Tree of Life. London, 1918
Breakers and Granite. N.Y., 1921.

Frost, Robert: Collected Poems. N. Y., 1930.
A Lone Striker. N. Y., 1933.

Jeffers, Robinson: Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems. N. Y., 1925.

Jeffers, Robinson (Con.): The Women at Point Sur. N.Y.,1927.
Dear Judas. N.Y., 1929.
Give Your Heart to the Hawks. N. Y., 1933.

Lindsay, Vachel: Collected Poems. N.Y., 1923.
Going-to-the-Sun. N.Y., and London 1926.

Lowell, Amy: Selected Poems. Boston and N.Y.,1928.

MacLeish, Archibald: Poems 1924-1933. Boston and N.Y.,1933.

Masters, Edgar Lee: The Spoon River Anthology. N.Y.,1915.
Songs and Satires. N.Y., 1916.
Domesday Book. N.Y., 1920.

Pound, Ezra: Personae. N.Y., 1926.
A Draft of XXX Cantos. N.Y., 1933.

Robinson, E. A.: Collected Poems (5 Vols.). N.Y., 1927.
Sonnets. N.Y., 1928.
Cavender's House. N.Y., 1929.
The Glory of the Nightingales. N.Y., 1930.
Matthias at the Door. N.Y., 1931.
Nicodemus. N.Y., 1932.
Talifer. N.Y., 1933.
Amaranth. N.Y., 1934.
King Jasper. N.Y., 1935.

Sandburg, Carl: Selected Poems. N.Y., 1926.

Whitman, Walt: Leaves of Grass. N.Y., 1931.

BIOGRAPHY AND CRITICISM

Only those volumes which legitimately fall under this classification have been included here. Reference in footnotes has been made to other classes of books used for this thesis, such as philosophy, religion. For critical anthologies, see under Poetry.

Aiken, Conrad: Scepticisms. N.Y., 1919.

Ansley, C.F., Ed. in Chief: The Columbia Encyclopedia. N.Y.,1935.

Belknap, George N.: A guide to Reading in Aesthetics and Theory of Poetry. (Studies in College Teaching, Bulletin 5). Eugene, Oregon, 1934.

Blankenship, Russell: American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind. N.Y., 1931.

Bullough, Geoffrey: The Trend of Modern Poetry. Edin.,1934.

Canby, Henry Seidel: American Estimates. N.Y. 1929.

Cappon, James: Bliss Carman and the Literary Currents and Influences of his Time. N.Y. and Montreal, 1930.

Charques, R. D.: Contemporary Literature and Social Revolution. London, no date.

Collins, H. P.: Modern Poetry. N.Y., no date.

Collins, Joseph: Taking the Literary Pulse. N.Y.,1924.

Cook, Howard W.: Our Poets of Today. N.Y., 1919.

Cox, Sidney: Robert Frost, Original 'Ordinary Man'. N.Y., 1929.

Damon, S. Foster: Amy Lowell -- A Chronicle. Boston and N. Y., 1935.

Davison, Edward: Some Modern Poets. N.Y., 1928.

Deutsch, Babette: This Modern Poetry. N.Y., 1935.

Drinkwater, John: The Muse in Council. Boston and N. Y., 1925.

Eliot, T. S.: The Sacred Wood, London, 1920, 1928.

Thoughts After Lambeth. London, 1931.
Selected Essays, 1917-1932. N.Y.,1932.
The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism. London, 1933.

Fairclough, H. R.: The Classics and Our Twentieth Century Poets. (Stanford University Publications, Language and Literature, Vol II, No. 2) Stanford University, Calif. 1927.

Gosse, Edmund: More Books on the Table. London, 1923.

Haines, Helen E.: Living With Books. N. Y., 1935.

Hind, C. Lewis: More Authors and I. N. Y., 1922.

Hillyer, Robert: Some Roots of English Poetry. Norton, Mass., 1933.

Housman, A. E.: The Name and Nature of Poetry. Camb., 1933.

Hughes, Glenn: Imagism and the Imagists. Stanford University, Calif., and London, 1931.

Hubbell, Jay B., and Beaty, John O.: An Introduction to Poetry. N.Y., 1932.

Kreymborg, Alfred: Our Singing Strength. N.Y., 1929,1934.

Krutch, Joseph Wood: The Modern Temper. N.Y. 1929
Was Europe a Success? N.Y., 1934.

Leavis, F. R.: New Bearings in English Poetry. London, 1932.
(Introd.) Determinations — Critical Essays. London, 1934.

Lewis, C. Day: A Hope for Poetry. Oxford, 1934.

London. City Literary Institute—Addresses: Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature. London, 1929.

Lowell, Amy: Tendencies in Modern American Poetry N. Y., 1917.
Poetry and Poets. Boston and N.Y., 1930.

Lowes, John Livingstone: Convention and Revolt in Poetry. Boston and N.Y., 1919.

Luccock, Halford E.: Contemporary American Literature and Religion. Chicago and N.Y., 1934.

Manly, John M., and Rickert, Edith: Contemporary American Literature. N. Y., 1929.

Masters, Edgar Lee: Vachel Lindsay — A Poet In America, N. Y. and London, 1935.

McGreevy, Thomas: Thomas Stearns Eliot — A Study. London, 1931.

Mearns, Hughes: Creative Youth. Garden City, N.Y., 1930.

Mencken, H. L.: A Book of Prefaces. N.Y., 1918.

Monroe, Harriet: Poets and Their Art. N.Y., 1926.

Morris, L.P.: The Young Idea. N.Y., 1917.

Periodicals: Some 200 articles listed in the Wilson Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature have been read. Reference to the more important articles has been made in footnotes.

Phelps, William Lyon: The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century. N.Y.,1919.

Read, Herbert: Phases of English Poetry. London,1928.
Form in Modern Poetry. London, 1932.

Redman, Ben Ray: Edwin Arlington Robinson. N.Y.,1926.

Richards, I. A.: Science and Poetry. N.Y., 1926.

Riding, Laura: Contemporaries and Snobs. London, 1928.

Riding, Laura, and Graves, Robert: A Survey of Modernist Poetry. London,1929

Sherman, Stuart P.: Americans. N.Y., 1922.

Sitwell, Edith: Aspects of Modern Poetry. London, 1934.

Strachey, John: Literature and Dialectical Materialism. N.Y., 1934.
The Coming Struggle for Power. N.Y.,1935.

Tinker, Chauncey B.: The Good Estate of Poetry. Boston, 1929.

Untermeyer, Louis: The New Era in American Poetry. N.Y.,1919

Ward, A. C.: American Literature, 1880-1930.London,1932

Waugh, A.: Tradition and Change. London, 1919.

Weirick, Bruce: From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry. N.Y., 1924.

Whitman, Walt: Complete Prose Works. Boston, 1907

Wilkinson, Marguerite: New Voices. N.Y., 1920.
The Poetry of Our Own Times. Chicago, 1926.

Williams, Charles: Poetry at Present. Oxford, 1930.

Williamson, H. R.: The Poetry of T. S. Eliot. N.Y., 1933.

Wilson, Edmund: Axel's Castle. N.Y. and London, 1931.

COMPARATIVE STATISTICS*

Volumes of Fiction and Poetry-Drama published in the United States, 1910-1935.

	Fiction	Poetry-Drama
1910	1,539	752
1911	1,024	685
1912	1,010	656
1913	1,156	679
1914	1,053	902
1915	919	741
1916	932	860
1917	922	695
1918	788	639
1919	904	500
1920	1,154	558
1921	972	512
1922	1,098	680
1923	1,080	677
1924	1,226	731
1925	1,451	800
1926	1,531	886
1927	1,763	991
1928	1,809	980
1929	2,142	727
1930	2,103	696
1931	1,942	711
1932	1,988	573
1933	1,806	501
1934	1,899	561
1935	2,039	594
	36,230	18,267

*Compiled from the Publisher's Weekly by the Acting Chief Bibliographer, Library of Congress.