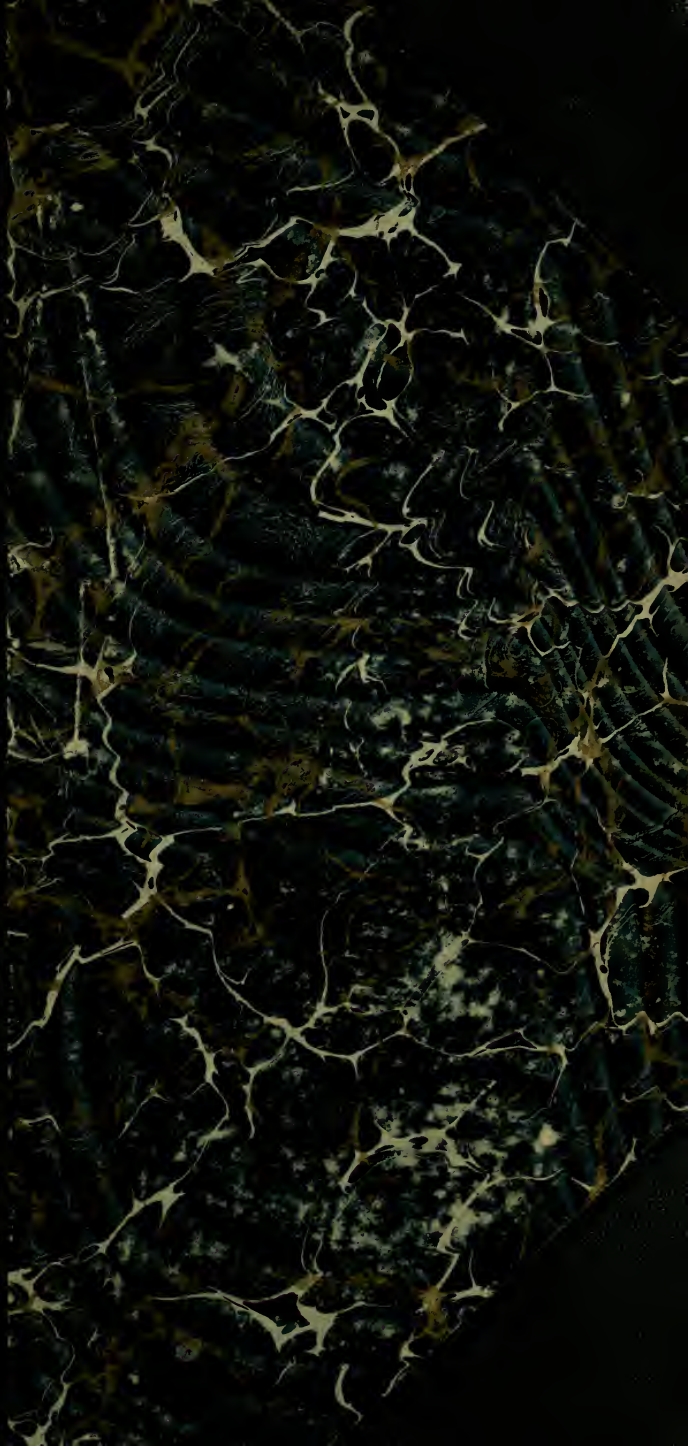
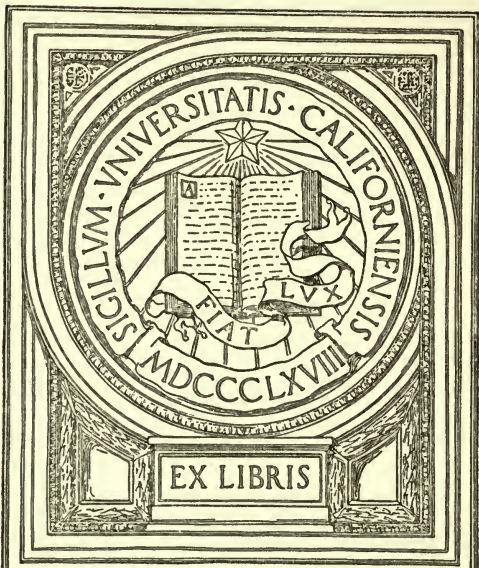


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# **THE YOUNG IDEA**



**AUTHORS' EDITION**

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# THE YOUNG IDEA

An Anthology of Opinion Concerning the  
Spirit and Aims of Contemporary  
American Literature

BY  
LLOYD R. MORRIS



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1917

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	- - - - -	i
I THE EMPIRICISTS: The Renaissance of Com-		
	mon Experience - - - - -	3
	Conrad Aikeh - - - - -	7
	Witter Bynner - - - - -	10
	Will Levington Comfort - - - - -	11
	Max Eastman - - - - -	15
	Donald Evans - - - - -	18
	John Erskine - - - - -	20
	Arthur Davison Ficke - - - - -	22
	Vachel Lindsay - - - - -	47
	Harriet Munroe - - - - -	56
	James Oppenheim - - - - -	66
	Louis Untermeyer - - - - -	72
	Margaret Widdemer - - - - -	90
II THE ROMANTICISTS	- - - - -	97
(1) Imagism	- - - - -	100
	John Gould Fletcher - - - - -	100
	Amy Lowell - - - - -	110
(2) Spectrism	- - - - -	114
	Anne Knish - - - - -	114
	Emanuel Morgan - - - - -	116

III	THE IDEALISTS: The Renascence of Spirit-	
	uality - - - - -	121
	William Rose Benét - - - - -	123
	Joyce Kilmer - - - - -	128
	Josephine Preston Peabody - - - - -	134
	Ridgely Torrence - - - - -	140
IV	THE PESSIMISTS - - - - -	145
	Benjamin De Casseres - - - - -	145
	Floyd Dell - - - - -	147
	Donald Marquis - - - - -	149
	John Curtis Underwood - - - - -	150
V	THE TRADITIONALISTS - - - - -	173
	Fannie Stearns Gifford - - - - -	174
	Louis V. Ledoux - - - - -	177
	John G. Neihardt - - - - -	188
	Edward Arlington Robinson - - - - -	193
	Blanche Shoemaker Wagstaff - - - - -	196
	Thomas Walsh - - - - -	198
	CONCLUSION - - - - -	205

# **THE YOUNG IDEA**





## INTRODUCTION

THE YOUNG IDEA is an outgrowth of the widespread revival of interest in literature, and more especially in poetry, which, during the past few years, has afforded one of the most arresting phenomena in the entire course of our literary history. This literary revival has brought with it a fresh content and many innovations in form, and of these much has been written in interpretation by critics of literature, and, frequently, by the authors and poets who have been concerned with establishing the ideals of what has been called the "new literature." But in some degree these various critical discussions and explanations have lacked co-ordination, and, while Mr. Braithwaite's annual anthology has provided the basis for a survey of the

yearly accomplishment of the poets, there has been no attempt made thus far to provide its complement in criticism, a collective statement of the ideals and the ideas upon which rests the work of contemporary American writers. Moreover, the confusion with which the public has received the work of the more radical of these innovators has been paralleled, in some instances, by the dismay of the critics confronted with a literature with whose fundamental contentions they were unacquainted.

It is to fill this void that **THE YOUNG IDEA** has been compiled. (Any ambitious critic who would interpret the ideals which are finding expression in contemporary American writing, would, in doing so, hold himself open to the charges of misconception and of lack of receptivity. How, then, solve the dilemma otherwise than by requesting from each individual author a statement of his or her ideals, a definition of the essential intention of his or her art?)

This was a solution which apparently had

not heretofore recommended itself to the critics. And so the following letter was sent out:

My dear Mr. ———

I am compiling a statement of opinion by the younger groups of American writers concerning the contemporary and future temper of our literature. I believe that such a statement would possess sound value as creative criticism and would center public attention upon the ideals of the generation in between. A well-known publisher has offered to take the book, believing as firmly as myself in the value of such a symposium in clarifying the ideals and determining the essential direction both of the literature that is being written to-day and that which lies in the dreams and aspirations of our writers.

Will you not, then, aid me in my investigation by contributing a reply to the following questions?

Do you believe that there is manifest to-day a new movement in our literature? If

so, what are its ideals? What relation does it bear to the immediate past? Which of its many currents seem to you to be the most important? What relation does your own work bear to this new movement? What is your criticism of contemporary American literature?

I shall hold myself deeply indebted to you for your valued opinion concerning these questions, which appear to me to be both important and interesting. Please feel free to reply to them, either directly as I have stated them, or to view the subject in a different light. In a word, where does our literature stand to-day, and whither is it going?

Whatever you say will be published in exactly your own words, over your own signature, and there will be an introductory and concluding essay dealing with the question as a whole. I am endeavoring to make this inquiry as serious as possible, and as representative of the ideals of our writers of to-day and tomorrow.

I am enclosing herewith a stamped and addressed envelope, hoping that you will find it convenient to favor me with your opinion. May I not call your attention to the importance of your individual opinion to the investigation as a whole, and respectfully urge you to favor me with it?

It was sent, not to those writers of whom, because of our long acquaintance with their art, it may without presumption be predicted that their philosophies are accomplished facts and that their work is likely to suffer little change in the future, but to those writers who, since they are shaping our contemporary literature by expressing the spirit of today, are also in a measure illuminating our literary ideals of tomorrow. It is in this sense that this little book justifies its claim to be an expression of the young idea. For it is only in the degree that we are aware of what our quest is today, that we may hope for enlightenment of the spirit of the immediate future,



The response to this inquiry has been most gratifying, and the authors whose contributions to the investigation appear in the body of this book have co-operated generously by stating frankly what they are about. The fact that absolute freedom of statement was a condition of the inquiry accounts for the disparity in length between the various contributions.

A word must necessarily be said in explanation of the grouping of the contributions. As I read the replies, I discovered certain outstanding ideas so strongly emphasized that, when they appeared common to the points of view of several of the writers, they suggested the divisions because of an essential unity of direction.

Thus, for example, the writers who have been grouped as The Empiricists have individually emphasized as the most important content of their art a concern with the common experience of contemporary American life. The Idealists share the belief that the most significant tendency in our contemp-



ary poetry is its return to primitive faith and its expression of spiritual experience.

The chapter called the Romanticists includes expressions of the philosophy of two movements whose existence is definitely admitted; the oldest and the youngest of those groups of contemporary poets who, holding certain ideals in common, have formed schools and promulgated consistent programs. And since both of these schools have been, in their art, concerned chiefly with the extension of poetic form, always a romantic revolt, I have grouped them as Romanticists. The Pessimists are those who find nothing of any essential importance in contemporary American letters; and one of them grounds his pessimism upon a flagellating denunciation of our contemporary national life. The Traditionalists, I think, require no explanation.

I hope that the readers of this little book will derive from it a fuller understanding of the aims and of the ideals of our own contemporary writers. For if we believe that lit-

erature is a record of and a reaction to experience, we shall learn from our writers what it is, in thought and in feeling, that we stand for as a nation. Our literature has, quite obviously, been undergoing certain changes; and we should discover whether these changes are the expression of a parallel process taking place in our national consciousness and in our national experience. If we find that they are, we must believe that we are in a period of transition between old ideals and new ones. And, should we find this to be the case, it is to our writers that we must look for the light wherewith we may see the ideals of tomorrow.

LLOYD R. MORRIS.

**THE EMPIRICISTS:  
THE RENASCENCE OF COMMON  
EXPERIENCE**



## THE EMPIRICISTS

EMPIRICISM as a philosophical doctrine implies actual contact with experience; in its strictest form it claims that all knowledge is derived from experience through the senses. It would be unfair, however, to adopt this term of philosophical usage and employ it as a generic description of a group of writers who share in common certain ideals, without explaining the significance which, in so doing, we attach to the word itself.

The writers in question unite in expressing a lively interest in the world about them, in how people in their time and country are living, and what they are thinking and feeling. They are concerned with the problems, social, moral, intellectual, æsthetic, which

#### 4 THE YOUNG IDEA

arise from an attempt to adjust American life to American ideals. As poets they are refusing to be bound by rules or traditions inherited from the past which would limit the subject-matter of their art. They are claiming the freedom of selection of the novelist, the right to deal with life as they find it, and in its own terms. And in so doing, they are bringing about a change in our conception of what actually is meant by the word poetic.

In this discovery of the romance of the commonplace there is evident a riotous intoxication. In the true sense of the word it has been a discovery, and the poets, having broken the bonds, whether fancied or real, which shackled them to a conventionally accepted relation to experience, have become drunk with life. They are experiencing a magic wonder at familiar things with something of the same penetrating vision and instinctive truthful reaction we find in children who are called upon to adjust themselves for the first time to a new situation of which they have previously been told nothing.



Wonder comes with difficulty to the sophisticated soul. And the person whom convention has taught what he should and what he should not see is likely to be ashamed of and to suppress the immediate and natural reaction to experience which either disconcerts or charms us when it is expressed by a childlike mind. These poets are the childlike minds of our day. They are discovering to us what we might discover for ourselves had we their vision and their courage. They are enthralled by the strange spell of their own time, by its science, its mechanical inventions, its laboring masses, its tremendous industrial activity, its new ways of living and thinking. The most thoughtful among them are asking its meaning in terms of intelligence or spirituality, seeking to extend their discovery beyond the mere surface of common experience into the realm of the mind and the spirit, reading the contemporary in the light of the eternal. The others are content to record their immediate and instructive reaction to common experience

## 6 THE YOUNG IDEA

itself. But they share the instant and present quest of the pattern of daily life and its problems.

Some writers in every age, perhaps, have made this discovery of their own times. But rarely before has the search and the discovery been so general, and the writers, as many of them here point out, been so busy in making the discovery of their own mind. The combination of conscious introspection and a naïve reaction to everyday experience is one of rare novelty, and it has bestowed a peculiar flavor upon our literature. Finally, each age, in making its own world, is making a new world; and its discovery is each time a fresh discovery.

So that this new spirit in our literature may be called the spirit of empiricism, and the writers who are expressing it are empiricists, in that they are testing out their art in the light of common experience, and demanding of it that it shall express an honest and sincere reaction to our life, our thought and our feelings to-day.

Mr. Conrad Aiken, the author of "Earth Triumphant," "Turns and Movies," and "The Jig of Forslin," in the following letter clearly defines the fundamental intention of his art. But his letter is something more than a personal definition; it is an exceptionally penetrating diagnosis of the contemporary state of American poetry.

In one respect the literary situation in America today is an anomalous one. In so far as there is a definite revival of letters here, and I think there is, it is limited almost entirely to the domain of poetry. It is as if the poets had got tired of waiting for the novelists to take hold of modern ideas and modern conditions, to bring literature up to date, and had resolved to do it themselves. While the greater part of our fiction is still amiably superficial and romantically idealistic, with here and there such encouraging exceptions as the work of Theodore Dreiser, our poets have all of a sudden, and with an extraordinary simultaneity which reminds

us almost of the Elizabethan age, extended the claims of poetry in many new directions and with considerable success. Poetry has now appeared among the best sellers, and it would not be at all surprising, and, to my mind, a good thing, if poetry should to some extent usurp the field of the novel or of the epic—in fact, be restored to its original estate, with all life for its province, and all knowledge, too.

Several distinct tendencies are manifest in this poetic renaissance. At bottom, two ordinarily antithetical currents are now flowing side by side: the romantic and the realistic. Each of these two main currents can be divided into subsidiary currents; there are conservative romanticists and radical, just as there are conservative and radical realists. Of the realists, Masters—to choose one example—is the most radical, both as regards form and ideas, and Frost, perhaps, the most conservative. Of the romanticists, I think it might be said that Fletcher is the most consistently radical—and the Imagists in

general—and there are many conservatives, with none outstanding. In general, I believe it can safely be said that it is the radicals of the two groups who are doing the most interesting work, the work most likely to have cumulative influence.

These classifications are, of course, vague and perhaps unjust. Frost, for example, is conservative as regards form but radical as regards matter; he imports into poetry much that would have seemed unpoetic ten years ago.

Whether the romantic or the realistic will dominate, it is almost impossible to say. Do we want poetry to deal exclusively with a world of the imagination, a world of illusion and beauty? Or do we want to have it deal with man as he really is, illusions, disillusion and all? . . . Do we want work such as the Imagists give us, sensory phenomena presented discretely, unrelated to any cognitive functions, vividly descriptive, primarily static,—or work which aims primarily at an understanding of man?



## 10 THE YOUNG IDEA

Personally, I should like to see a fusion of the two: to see the romantic method—colorful, sensuous, illusion-making—employed for a realistic end. I should like to see poetry become scientific in its search for truth, penetrating, destructive, comprehensive; not so much desiring to *find* beauty as to *be* beauty, no matter what be the subject treated. Two cardinal principles should govern it: it must tell the truth, and it must be a work of art.

Of Mr. Witter Bynner, Mr. Untermeyer has written that “he can get magic and metaphysics out of a Pullman smoker.” It is interesting to note that he finds our present renaissance of poetry a reaction against the influence of the nineties.

There is a new vigor in poetry, he writes. As I see it, the people are responding to a renewal of humanness among the poets; human subjects, natural language and vital impulses. We have been slowly emerging from the æsthetic vanity of the

nineties toward poetic health again; and the public is quick now to perceive it. The patter of the so-called "schools" of poetry will do no harm, I think; for they will freshen and diversify technique. But they are a side-show. And the three rings in the main tent are beauty, vigor and common-sense.

Mr. Will Levington Comfort's letter is of peculiar interest in establishing the propinquity of the viewpoint of the younger generation of American novelists to that of the younger group of American poets. His comment upon the effect of the moving picture on the form and content of our fiction is worthy of serious consideration.

A fresh and different vitality is manifest to-day in North American literature. At various points around us, dealing with words, colors, and the subtler tools, are active young workmen who, for the first time, in the fullest sense, may be termed "North American."

The first characteristic of this new element,

## 12 THE YOUNG IDEA

these young, flexible and very vigorous minds, is that they are workmen—not laborers, not professionals, not primarily artists in anything, unless it be life—but workers first, and after that, novelists, poets, musicians, painters or politicians.

They are not competitors. They have not forgotten the warm side of justice, but they knew well the stern face of compassion—they know that it takes Christ and anti-Christ to make a world. They are neither modest nor egotistical, being for the most part busy and intensely alive, which implies joy. They are not responsible for their parents.

The great love-story has not been written. The few great love-stories of the world have to be pieced out by the imagination. We find that we have been told that they are great love-stories, but they do not stand examination. The classic form will not do for the New Age. There is to be a new language—for literary handling. It may be called American, to distinguish it from Eng-



lish in the accepted form. It is to be brisk, brief, brave and ebullient—to meet the modern modification all must reckon with—the screen-trained mind.

American-mindedness, of itself now, would never accept a great love-story. It would be called “sentimental,” if not lascivious. The average American is an impossible lover, making it incident to business. The real and the sham are equally above him. He would not know when to be exalted or when to be ashamed. He thinks his own passion is evil, and thus makes it so. The great love-story can only be written with creative dynamics, and can only be accepted by the few of corresponding receptivity. There is nothing soft about true romance. Some passionate singer of the New Age will likely appear right soon, his story to have the full redolence and lustre of the heart, his emotions thoroughbred, his literary quality at the same time crystalline with Reality.

The big adventure-story has not been done so far. The day of guns, horses and redskins

is over. Photoplays have developed such fiction resources to the limit, proving to those writers who were born to be modern that their full tales can never be shown on a flat surface. There will be undercurrents, overtones, invisible movements, tensions upon the reader, not only from between the lines, but between words. The story-teller of the New Age may handle his theme in words of one syllable, but his tale will have an intensity scarcely to be explained—only responded to by minds which cannot be satisfied by two-plane production—minds which demand more of life than the camera sees.

The real war-story of today, even for tomorrow, ought to arrive soon. This is an age for an epic. Some keen and comprehensive mind will arise—a literary genius who will include the patriot, the anarchist, the poet, dramatist, humanitarian, theosophist, dreamer, judge and statesman—and tell the Story of War, a tale of trenches, kings and arms; blood, heroism and monstrous greed; vast, far-reaching causes and the slow, inev-

itable hell of effects—told from a viewpoint so inclusive that thrones are merely pawns in a Planetary Game.

Inclusion is the first business of the writer who is truly allied with the modern element. Propagandists do not fill the picture. Yesterday the knockers and agnostics—today the specialists and one-sided enthusiasts—tomorrow the embodyers, the includers. Whitman is the arch-type for builders to come; Nietzsche the master-wrecker; these are the guidons of the New Generation—the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night.

Mr. Max Eastman, editor of "The Masses," poet and critic, wrote some years ago an illuminating and beautiful book called "The Enjoyment of Poetry." His contribution analyzes the new movement in our life which he believes our art will record. It may be added that in his latest book, "Journalism vs. Art," he has voiced his disagreement with the champions of the free verse forms. And, therefore, with respect to his

theory of poetic form, he ranks among the conservatives. But his criticism of the content of contemporary art proclaims him a revolutionist.

I think that the first three paragraphs of my review of a book by Rebecca West are an answer to the question you ask in your letter. I do not suppose there has ever been an age when there was not a "new movement in literature." And, as to literary movements as such, I am not so much interested in them. But there is certainly a movement in our life today which will be reflected in literature as contemporary life always is, and I think these paragraphs indicate my feeling as to what it is and what relation my work bears to it.

"Every full-blooded young person has in his arteries a certain amount of scorn. Literary young persons have usually directed this scorn against philistinism, the middle class monotonies, and any provincial obtuseness to those finer values discriminated by

the cultured and by those who possess Art. But in our day the full-blooded young persons have got their scorn directed against a more important evil—against the ground-plan of money-competition built on industrial slavery which orders our civilization and makes all our judgments of value, even the most cultured, impure. Indeed, we suspect everything that is called culture—we suspect it of the taint of pecuniary elegance. We have armed our critical judgment with Thorstein Veblen's "Theory of the Leisure Class"—perhaps the greatest book of our day, for it combines a new flavor in literature with a new and great truth in science. This theory has taught us how to see through "culture." We know something about knowledge. We have been "put wise" to sophistication.

Moreover, we have tasted an affirmative and universal sympathy with all realities of life that lies far out and beyond culture in the mind's adventure. We have drunk of the universe in Walt Whitman's poetry.

And of "Art," too, we have our intolerant



suspicion—a suspicion grounded in the fact that the whole standard of judgment by which art is judged was evolved in the parlor play of a petty minority of the race left idle by the tragic and real bitterness of life's experiences accorded to the majority who never spoke. We have read Tolstoy's great mad indictment of European art. We have made ready to knife the whole canvas, if necessary, in favor of a coarser and more universal reality. That is the direction in which our blood is coursing. We are filled with scorn, as every young builder is filled with scorn. But our scorn makes of us rank and democratic revolutionists instead of over-exquisite and rather priggish æsthetics."

Mr. Donald Evans disagrees with Mr. Bynner as to the ancestry of our contemporary literature. He finds it to be the direct heir of the movement of the nineties. His own work has usually been considered as being one of the most radical contribu-

tions to modern poetry; he, however, places it midway between the radical and conservative currents.

There is undoubtedly a new spirit in American literature, but I should dislike calling it a "movement," because a "movement" is perforce self-conscious and artificial, and I believe this new spirit is spontaneous and unconscious. It is best summed up, I think, as the "voice of youth." Literature today has burst the shackles of middle and old age which controlled it absolutely during the last half of the last century. Today the writer wins a hearing in his twenties while his mind is still growing, expanding, and thus his work has all the charm of freshness, illusion, contradiction, error, doubt, faith, intolerance, impatience—in short, all the charm of youth itself with always the promise of finer, larger things to come.

The new spirit's most conspicuous ideal, I should say, is a healthy realism, a striving to express all sides of life, the "good and the bad and the best and the worst."

It is the true child of the brave and battlesome "Yellow 90s" of England.

Naturally, to me, poetry seems the most important current. Never has poetry had a greater role in letters. In the last two years almost as many volumes of verse as novels have been published.

My own work is in thorough sympathy with the new spirit, steering, I fancy, a rather middle course between the radicals and the conservatives.

John Erskine, Professor of English at Columbia University, is widely known as a poet and critic. He draws an interesting comparison between the attitude toward life of our contemporary poets and the novelists of the last fifty years. And his criticism of our literature is incisive. His essay, "The New Poetry," in "The Yale Review" for January, 1917, is a comprehensive study of the spirit of recent American poetry.

Here are my answers to your questions:



I believe a new movement is showing itself in poetry today. I find it not only in the remarkable output of free verse and other kinds of verse, but in the growing attention to American life as a subject for poetry. It seems to me that the poets are taking some such interest in the world about them as the novelists have been taking in the last half century, and this new movement must be very largely an advantage to our literature. The attention to free verse I think fairly negligible—that is, I don't much care whether a man writes in free verse or in some other form, provided he writes poetry. It is perhaps unfortunate that so much attention has been attracted to the form in which verse is written today, when the question of the subject matter is so important. My own verse, I hope, shows an interest in what people are thinking and feeling today. It is meant, at least, to express the best thoughts and feelings that I have. My adverse criticism of American literature today would be that though there is this improvement in the

attention to life about us, there is still a feeling among the writers that literature need not be particularly thoughtful nor scholarly. Too much of our writing might be dismissed, I think, with the hard verdict of "empty-headed and shallow-hearted." The poets who ever amounted to anything in the world shared deeply in the ideas and in the feelings of their time.

Mr. Arthur Davison Ficke is a poet, dramatist and critic, whose "Sonnets of a Portrait Painter" received wide recognition. In this letter, and in the essay which follows it, is recorded the faith of one who, although writing in the traditional forms, has shared deeply in the process of liberation which he describes, and is thoroughly informed of the new spirit in poetry.

The only branch of American literature about which I feel competent to speak is poetry. In that field there has been of late so striking an awakening of interest that im-

portant new work may be expected. The manifest eccentricities and absurdities of the "new schools" are certainly no worse than the banalities and sentimentalities of the old ones; in fact, the vigorous shock which some of these aberrations have administered to the moribund body of poetry is distinctly galvanizing. Goethe's words, used to describe the ultra-romantic excesses of French literature in his own day, apply accurately to our present situation: "The extremes and excrescences will gradually disappear; but at last this great advantage will remain—besides a freer form, richer and more diversified subjects will have been attained, and no object of the broadest world and the most manifold life will be any longer excluded as unpoetical." We are today experiencing, in poetry almost as markedly as in painting, one of those periodic outbursts of unbridled life by which alone can an art be kept from hardening into a fossil.

English poetry of today is notoriously the

scene of an opposition which to some observers seems the rebellion of new life against sterile and petrified forms, while to others it appears as the menace of anarchy against order and beauty. Almost as clearly marked as in the economic world, the conservative and the radical forces are at work. The making of poetry is the aim of both, but they march under two irreconcilable banners. One of these is the very modern attempt to find some new and more flexible form in which can be expressed accurately the honest and unsentimental poetry of the modern mind; the other is the effort to invest the raw vigor of our modernity with that glamor of formal beauty which marks the classic tradition of the older poets. Between these two camps a merry war is waging; and it is an open question whether the impatience of the Revolutionists toward the Traditionalists, or the distaste of the Traditionalists for the Revolutionists, is the greater.

[In any examination of the Revolutionary poetry, it is best to put aside this little quar-

rel and to approach the new poems as one would a theatre—willing to be entertained, but not determined to be. Some readers will take up the modern work with minds haunted by the ghosts of poets who died before the new poets were born; and these will find it difficult to regard the birth of poetry as coincident with the origin of any modern cult. In fact, many lovers of the old tradition appear to have great trouble in keeping good-tempered in the face of some of the claims made by the advanced poets. It would be well if these apoplectic critics would remind themselves that an open mind is acceptable to God and profitable to man. As they confront the novel and sometimes startling attempts of radical enthusiasts, they might advantageously recall history and be a little humble. The revolts of each rising generation have always seemed to each passing generation like perverse breaches of immutable laws; yet time has often made it clear that it was only against the very mutable and sometimes stupid misinterpretation of laws



that the rebellion of the younger wills was directed. Thus the pathetic comedy goes on from generation to generation; and the old past fights bitterly against the rising tide of the young future. May heaven spare us the humiliation of acting so dull a part in so grotesque a drama. May we be ready to welcome all in the new poetry that is beautiful even though it come dressed in an unfamiliar beauty!

On the other hand it would be a pity to abandon completely the attitude of the skeptic mind—of the mind from Missouri. It is not wholly a sign of senility to demand evidence that the new is good before we discard the old. Change is, indeed, the condition of growth, in art as in life. But not all motion in the arts is progress, nor are all movements to be regarded as Crusades toward the Holy Sepulchre. In the arts, as in life, there are many blind alleys, many meaningless expeditions; and no one wants to be tricked into adherence to one of these. Faith in the necessity of progress need not drive the enthu-

siast to such a pitch of desperation that he joins every Coxey's 'Army that marches shouting through the streets.

Whatever we may think of the new poetry, we must perceive in it four sharply marked elements. These are the demand for complete metrical freedom; the insistence on hard actuality of images; the adoption of an attitude of humor, irony, or grotesqueness in even the most serious poems; and an absolute frankness and shamelessness as to the content of the poet's work.

Of these elements it is the metrical freedom that stands out most obviously. The extremists of the new school look with distrust on the established verse-forms. They feel that the constraint of any regular metrical system is an intolerable prison to the spirit of the poet. Following the example of recent French poets, they demand that the integrity of the poet's meaning be poured into song whose cadences are born solely of the moment's emotion and are not responsible for conformity to any recurrent order

of rhyme or rhythm. Such a theory produces verse whose lines are of irregular length, whose dominant movement may change at any moment, and from which rhyme is usually absent. At its worst this verse is an abomination; at its best it is a very subtle medium for the expression of certain kinds of feeling.

As all educated Revolutionists admit, though the name *vers libre* is new, the thing itself is not. In fact, it is a very ancient thing, which has been used admirably by the most classic of all the English poets, Milton. In the Choruses of *Samson Agonistes* he employs such free verse as no modern Revolutionary poet is likely to surpass. Hence if we protest against free verse, we set ourselves counter not only to the modernists of today but also to the classicists of yesterday. As Milton saw, regular rhythms do not fill every need. Not all themes fit themselves into conventionalized sound-patterns. Sometimes, as in *Samson Agonistes*, an effect of peculiar dryness and hardness is



wanted which regular verse would be unable to supply. Also there are cases in which life strikes the emotion of the poet in broken flashes—in swift chaotic fragmentary perceptions; and to record these, free verse is an unsurpassed medium. For all these reasons there is no sense whatever in the popular objections that have been raised to the free verse of the modern poet.

It is only with those who proclaim free verse to be the sole possible poetic medium that one has a right to quarrel. There are such poets; and in their attempt to create a cult of free verse they make themselves very ridiculous. Because the carpenter finds the hatchet useful for certain kinds of work is hardly a reason for throwing the saw out of the window. Milton knew very much better. Though he used free verse when he chose, he employed the regular metres and the sonnet in a manner that has not been surpassed. Great artist that he was, he adapted his medium to his purpose. He knew what all poets will be wise to recognize today; that

certain effects in poetry are wholly impossible without the use of regular rhythms and rhyme.

The reason for this fact is derived from the very nature of the art. It is based on the absolute necessity of carrying the lulled spirit of the reader on waves of recurrent sound into a state of suspended consciousness—a kind of visionary trance in which the mind, deaf for a moment to the distractions of the world around it, will see singly and solely the dream which the poet puts before it. The emotion-heightening, hypnotic power of regular rhythms and recurrent rhymes is in many instances the whole basis of that peculiar somnambulistic effect which is the special magic of poetry. Emotion is the secret of it all; and some emotions answer to the call of rhyme and rhythm as to almost nothing else. Rhythm seizes the thread of one's thought as might a current, and intertwines with it, and draws it down into remote subterranean caverns of the spirit unvisited by the everyday consciousness.

The sole debatable question that arises is: How regular must the rhythm be to produce the desired trance-like effect? When the degree of trance desired is not very intense, as in poems that keep close to the surface-details of observed reality, the beat of the verse may safely be reduced to a minimum. But when one wishes to lift the reader into regions of passionate ecstasy and to arouse the profoundest and most primal emotions, one will have to resort to a more powerful stimulus and carry the reader farther away from every-day reality on the flow of these hypnotic waves of sound. For ironic comments on the human comedy around us, for pictures of the common stage on which we do our little struttings, free verse is admirable; but it will seldom serve to transport us to the heights of religious experience, or to the depths of the black night of the soul, or to the sun-swept levels of beauty-drunken happiness.

It is, in fact, difficult to escape the feeling that free verse, valuable though it is, is still

in some obscure way incomplete verse—a rudimentary and not a final art-form. Many poets will agree that one resorts to free verse chiefly when what one has to say is not completely crystallized, or when one's emotion is not at its most intense pitch, or when one wishes to note down a series of impressions that have not yet fully combined into one concentrated pattern. For one case in which free verse has been used as Milton used it,—out of deliberate and conscious choice,—there are a thousand cases in which it has been employed solely because the writer had not carried the inner processes of composition far enough to poetize his material completely. When the mind is a blaze of sudden revelation, and the poet's theme glows into thorough transparency of white heat, he will usually find that what he has to say flows rapidly and perfectly into the smooth mould of regular verse-forms; but when the intensity of his impulse is a little lower, and all kinds of comments, reflections, minor observations, and clever plays of word and

thought are mixed with his truly poetical material, then he can give much more complete and appropriate expression to his idea in the less intense rhythms of free verse.

The new poets have made no mistake in using free verse. Their only error has been in committing themselves to it with too blind an exclusiveness.

Beyond the matter of rhythm lies another feature of the new poetry—that very interesting theory of writing called Imagism. The Imagists attempt to present to the reader a clear, exact, sharp picture of objects and episodes; after this, they allow the reader himself to evoke from this presentation those comments, reflections, emotions, and overtones which form so large a part of ordinary poetry. The Imagist would not say “mournful waves” or “bleak coast”; he would refuse to comment thus: he would prefer “lead-gray waves” and “splintered coast.” He would attempt to find the precise word “which brings the effect of the object to the reader as the writer saw it,”



and would present his scene with that impersonal interest in the scene itself which is the peculiar characteristic of modern painting. He would avoid all flamboyant words, all set phrases, and keep his speech hard, spare, clean-cut, economical. He would express even the most general ideas, even the most abstract conceptions, by means of the concrete manner and the definite embodiment of beauty.

This theory has great fascination. The practice of the theory by the professed Imagists has, however, been disappointing up to the present time. The poems which follow are from among those which the Imagists themselves praise. Here is one of the most admired of Imagist productions, *Oread*, by Mrs. Richard Aldington:

Whirl up sea—  
Whirl your pointed pines,  
Splash your great pines  
On our rocks,  
Hurl your green over us,  
Cover us with your pools of fir.

There is, indeed, a certain vividness of tumult expressed in this likening of the wind-tossed sea to a wind-tossed pine-forest. But it seems attenuated, over-stressed; and such a minutely treated theme for a poem, after all! Surely a morbid fear of elaboration has impelled the writer to resort to such a mere adumbration of her thought. It suggests an unwholesome veneration for even the most fragmentary of her perceptions. Compare it with any of the short poems of that supreme lyricist, William Blake, and observe how thin it seems.

Here is another Imagist poem by Mr. Ezra Pound, called April; it is almost meaningless because of this same parsimony:

Three spirits came to me  
 And drew me apart  
 To where the olive boughs  
 Lay stripped upon the ground:  
 Pale carnage beneath bright mist.

The principle of hard conciseness has here

been carried too far. It is the method of Japanese poetry reduced to madness. But here is an incomparably better and perhaps a more characteristic specimen of Imagism, by Miss Amy Lowell; it is called *White and Green*.

Hey! My daffodil-crowned,  
Slim and without sandals!  
As the sudden spurt of flame upon darkness  
So my eyeballs are startled with you,  
Supple-limbed youth among the fruit-trees,  
Light runner through tasseled orchards.  
You are an almond flower unsheathed  
Leaping and flickering between the budded  
branches.

Thus the Imagist attempts to give you a clear, sharp word-picture of the thing seen, without making any attempt to tell you what emotions this thing evokes in him or should evoke in you. He hopes, by presenting just the right details, to make you do your own feeling, and to convey to you the implica-



tions of the scene described with a sharpness all the greater because of his withholding of his own comments. Of course, the Imagist is not unique in this aim. There is a perfect example of Imagism in Burns' line:

The white moon is setting behind the white  
     wave,

and in Keats':

The sedge is withered by the lake  
 And no birds sing.

In the words of these poets, however, the Imagistic passages stand in intelligible relation to greater wholes; they are merely the bits out of which the artist composes his wide mosaic. The real Imagists, on the other hand, too often forget the whole for the part; they too often are content to put down vivid little trifles as if they were completed pictures. Many Imagist poems are merely such fragmentary bits of color, such momentary sketches, as a great artist puts

down in his note-book for later use in a larger composition.

There is a third element very strikingly present in the new poetry: this is its revolt against sweetness and prettiness. It appears sometimes as brutality, sometimes as irony, sometimes as grotesqueness. As one might stamp, swearing furiously, out of some overscented boudoir,—so many of the Revolutionary poets give expression to their contempt for the softness and sugariness of the older poetry. This is not an altogether new phenomenon; it has occurred before in all the arts as a sign of vigor and fresh life. It offends the godly, but it wakes them up. It is one of the healthiest signs in our modern work. Sometimes it takes a less violent form, as it did in the work of a poet who was in other respects a Revolutionist,—Rupert Brooke,—and becomes an insistence on the ugly, the humiliating, the repulsive aspects of life. Tired of high-flown idealizations and hothouse bouquets, Brooke shows us Helen of Troy in old age.

. . . . . a scold

Haggard with virtue.

Oft she weeps gummy-eyed and impotent;  
Her dry shanks twitch at Paris' mumbled  
name.

This kind of thing has its tonic value; it is the other half of the story, the dark of the moon. And though it would be a pity if the vigor of the new movement spent itself wholly in grotesques of this variety, they show a healthy skepticism, a healthy contempt for the humiliating position of the human animal; and their place is just as legitimate as is that of the gargoyles grinning down from cathedral buttresses.

Nevertheless, some critics have abused Mr. Edgar Lee Masters for the gloom and savagery of his Spoon River portraits; and the other day a certain reviewer took a book to task because it was not "heartening," and because the dramatis personæ of the lyrics were all "wise and bitter and weary and generally disillusioned and disillusionizing." As

if it were necessary for a poet to write with a pie-smile on his face! One writes of life as one sees it; and the new writers, impatient with the shallow optimism of

God's in his heaven,  
All's right with the world,

are trying to set down their sense of the confusions and degradations and bafflements of life, as well as of its peaks in Darien. Mr. Masters or Mr. Carl Sandburg or Mr. Edwin Arlington Robinson would produce a fine absurdity, indeed, if they attempted to write with that confident optimism which is perfectly natural to Mr. Vachel Lindsay, and which is the true and proper way for Mr. Lindsay to write. But Mr. Lindsay's work would have little value if its cheerfulness were its only or its finest quality.

This leads one to the last characteristic of the new poetry: its intellectual frankness. Until one stops to think about it, one does not realize how extensive the change in this

matter has been. Fifty years ago the tradition of English poetry was simply overgrown with a thicket of Victorian pruderies and reticences. The hypocritical sentimentality of Tennyson's Arthurian ideal lay upon Mid-Victorian English like a blight; and few writers except Swinburne, who cared not a fig for devil, man, or Queen Victoria, dared make beauty out of the soul's or the body's nakedness. Now all this is past. To-day it is possible for the sincere artist in verse to write of absolutely anything. He is no longer limited to that small segment of life which might have been considered proper for the sight of the Mid-Victorian young lady. He has once more the virile freedom of the Elizabethans, and may without fear or shame depict whatsoever aspect of life seems to his eyes significant or curious or beautiful.

In future years it will doubtless not be possible for the dispassionate critic to take the new poetry quite as seriously as, today, it takes itself. Such an observer may grow



a little bewildered and even amused as he surveys our Schools and Movements—the Imagists and Vorticists and Spectricists and Patagonians and a Choric School, and Heaven only knows how many others. He will perhaps wonder wherein the revolutionary element of all these Revolutions lay, for he will see clearly that all the elements of our new poetry are in fact very old elements. But if he stops there, he will be a very bad critic indeed.

Something has really happened to us. The effort toward freedom from dead conventions, displayed in the new poetry, has a significance greater than any actual accomplishment that the movement has so far produced. There is a genuine spiritual liberation behind even the most fantastic of the new poems, and an honest effort to explore, to invent, to widen the boundaries of the art. Though the technical results have been so far negligible, the moral results have been large. Today men are writing more honestly, more spontaneously, more vigorously,

than at any time during the last quarter-century; they are writing joyfully and shamelessly; they recognize no authority that cannot justify itself, no dogmas that are not lighted by living faith. They are trying to express real feelings and to devise patterns of verse appropriate to this expression.

A few years ago, men with no deep power over either thought or form were busily filling the magazines with sweet characterless rubbish. Since the death of the great Victorian poets, they had used the whole Tennysonian machinery in a facile, spiritless, over-ornamented way, without any of that underlying greatness of spirit which made this rather absurd machinery forgivable in the hands of Tennyson. People had come to think that regular rhythms, rhymes, and a good deal of talk about "azure argosies" and "hillside vernal" and "argent panoplies" and "light supernal" constituted the badge of the modern poet; and that fine poetry had really died with Queen Victoria.

Then came the Revolution. It came as a



part of that general revolution which has been working upheaval in all the arts. Our day has seen every artist, be he musician, painter, sculptor, or poet, forced to take stock of his soul's goods and to look around him with fresh eyes. We have seen in music the growth of a new order of composition—an order in which the formal patterns of Mozart and Beethoven seem shattered into strange discontinuous tones, imperfect satisfactions of the waiting ear, discords as haunting as they are unexpected. In the field of painting, men whom we can no longer dismiss with a nod as charlatans,—men like Cézanne and Matisse,—have been abandoning the hard-won classic perfection of Titian and Raphael, and have been insisting that the painter must return to the freshness and integrity of his own emotional perception of nature, in all its starkness and crudity.

Even so in poetry, this revolution has worked in salutary ways. It shattered the illusion that all the poets were dead, and that the pseudo-Tennysonian poetry of the

magazines remained as their sole relique on earth. The Revolutionists demanded true feeling and appropriate expression instead of empty rhetoric. They assaulted the great. They tried preposterous experiments. They made the world feel that there was, after all, dynamite and a volcano at the heart of poetry. For this, let us give them profound thanks.

But after we have given them this, their intensity of effort need not make us feel that the stars of our youth have gone out. These insurgencies have not touched the glory of Milton or Shelley or Shakespeare. The old beauty remains beautiful, though it does not flatter us with the sense that we have discovered its secret for the first time today; and the principles of æsthetic creation endure precisely as they were in the days of King David the Psalmist. In the arts, liberty is not all, nor all-important. There is no virtue in just the free and untrammelled expression of our personalities, in free verse or any other verse; the root of the matter is

to discover and use that medium, that pattern and rhythm, into which our personal emotion can be poured and there take on the lineaments of an impersonal and intelligible beauty. It is of very little consequence if you or I cry out our hearts; it is of great consequence if we can turn our hearts' cry into the measures of a perfect song. In any art, nothing ultimately matters but the æsthetic element; and the æsthetic element is not necessarily inherent in even the most sincere and spontaneous outpouring of feeling. Liberty from formal restraint is therefore worthless unless it leads to some further and finer discovery of formal law. The chief danger of the new poetry is that it often seems in its practice to forget this positively platitudinous axiom. Form!—it is everything. Not in the stupid academic sense of precedented models, but in the sense of that fine harmony between the artist's meaning and his manner which is the parallel of those rare human moments when there is achieved a real concordance of body and soul.

Mr. Vachel Lindsay was among the vanguard of the prophets of revolt in our poetry. His "Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty," a record of his vagabond journey through the Middle West, records his faith in the influence of poetry upon the common man, a faith which he has put to the test of proof.

He says: There is a wave of interest in verse going across the country. America is beginning to professionalize, institutionalize and nationalize a new group of laureates.

The Century Magazine for March, 1916, said: "There are one hundred poets in America today, excellent craftsmen, vivid adventurers, known and unknown."

Some of these people have been writing for a generation. The public, however, refused until today to read any of their books. Only one excuse was offered. The verse of these poets was not "great."

It was a particularly cruel and unreasonable standard, when applied to the village

poet. His rhyme was sometimes printed by the most fastidious magazines. That should have been enough for a standing in the hometown. Certainly it was not required of the young fellow with a law school education that he have ten years of eminence as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court before he be trusted with the local legal business. Yet many of the hundred who are now emerging were these village poets, hung, drawn and quartered by the Christian Endeavor Society, the Y. M. C. A., the Labor Union and the Country Club alike, because, as it was implied, they could not prove themselves Homer, Shakespeare, Milton and Whitman combined.

But the real reason of the taboo was that the tyrannous majorities disliked all poetry. There were two causes for this. First: American fidgets. Second: the way verse was taught in the public schools of the last generation. The teachers did not many of them love the art. It was the custom to use it as a grindstone, as a sharpener of the wits.



This gift of the gods, whose name for little children should have been as springtime and wildflowers, became in the eyes of the American babies a mysterious rack on which the mind was tortured. Every poem was transformed into a prose exercise in reasoning or an experiment in scanning. The child was always taught to read past the rhyme and ignore it. He was shown the alleged wonderful trick of stopping for breath at the middle of the line, and reading past the rhyme as fast as possible. Yet, generally speaking, in every well-read poem there should be as long a pause as is given for a comma, wherever there is a rhyme. The child who singsonged the poem was the martyr of poetry. He was absolutely right and he was reproved for it.

The only poems allowed to penetrate the baby souls of that generation were the classics of the playground, "London Bridge Is Falling Down," "King William Was King James' Son," and "As We Go Round the Mulberry Bush," sung in concert and acted



by sturdy volunteers at recess. And no one in America appeared to know that was poetry. Poetry was something to pull a long face over, and give the name of the meter.

The village poet should see that the entire teaching of verse in the nearest public school be related as closely as possible to "London Bridge," "King William," and the "Mulberry Bush," and the child encouraged to sing-song his favorite poems with growing elaboration through the years. The village poet will find this generation of teachers quite willing to co-operate. Let the children go deeply into the cadences of "Hiawatha," Poe's "Bells," and "Horatius at the Bridge" and "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix," and, if possible, make them into their own folk dances. I have found this very easy to do with children from six to eighteen, and, of course, with older students.

The college student should go deeply into the mystery of unrhymed melodies, and

evolve any procedure that will make the printed rhythms real. The new free verse requires an ear that is first elaborately trained in conventional rhythms. The people that like it best are apt to be those who love the old poets.

Young physicians and lawyers have empty offices the first few years, sometimes many years, and the versifier need not expect an easier time. Whatever the village poet's ostensible profession, school teacher, editor, ditch-digger, let him fight for local recognition as a minstrel, in any dignified way, and not wait for a hearing to come to him.

And, like the preacher, let the versifier learn to vocalize his message. Young divines, delivering their first sermons, act as poets generally do all their lives when reading their works. Every one gives a sigh of relief when the exercises are over. But here is a difference. The preacher tries again, because society expects it of him, and he expects it of himself. The most brilliant poets go on whispering forever, claiming special

privileges, while there is scarcely a cross-roads pastor or small town lawyer of middle age but can make a fairly acceptable presentation of such a message as he has, and hold three hundred with reasonable command.

“Getting into the magazines” is a diploma for which the bard should be thankful. It is worth striving for. But though the poets have been in the magazines all these years, no one for a generation has, as it were, read the diploma. Or, to put it another way, the accepted verses became end-page ornaments, by no means taken with the same human interest as the prose before or after. And as to remembering the name or style of a poet from one month to the next, that was incredible. Even yet the typical newsstand magazines list their contributing prose writers on the back of flaming colors, and are discretely omitting their rhymers.

But Harriet Munroe, Edward J. Wheeler, William Stanley Braithwaite, Jessie B. Rittenhouse, Alice Corbin Henderson, Louis

Untermeyer, Alfred Kreymborg, Margaret Anderson, Max Eastman, Lewellyn Jones, Joyce Kilmer, William Marion Reedy, Francis Hackett, with their special publications, reviews, magazines, anthologies, social groups or organized societies have served in their various ways to lift the American poets out of the class of mere diploma-getters, stop-gaps, end-page decorators. Differing in a legion of amazing ways, of all schools of political and religious thought, these critics agree in a passion for verse. They have distributed living laurels of late, as well as some limp laurels. Let those who have hopes for the American soul, do them honor for this crusade.

Now the lately-laurelled are in a sea of endless technical discussion as to what the pattern of a poem should be. It is as dreary as the ancient scanning of the ward-school pedagogues. But no one is attempting to work out what is more important; the pattern of daily life for the American singer. This is the thing the village poets must do.

Certainly they may need Bohemia for a season. They may find Art allies worth while in Greenwich Village, that new East Aurora, with its many new would-be Elbert Hubbards.

But it does not behoove the true Jeffersonian American to break his home-ties for ever and stew away to nothing in the far country simply because in his early youth some one in authority praised one of his songs.

Let the lately-crowned member of our poetical one hundred accept his dead diplomas and his living laurels as well. Let his henchmen insist to his neighbors that he is a verse-designer duly certified by both the official and the inspired authorities, and then let him set out to make over the spirit of his town.

Our most outstanding examples of the local poet in the present decade are the late James Whitcomb Riley, who has given Indiana a soul, Edgar Lee Masters, laureate of all down-state Illinois, Carl Sandburg,



laureate of Chicago, Robert Frost, laureate of all north of Boston.

There are too many poets in Greenwich Village. But there is room indeed for one hundred poets, properly distributed. That is but one for each million of inhabitants. A potential audience of a million should be spur enough for any man. It seems to me some of our young fellows are rather babyish, the way they huddle together. Why cannot they stand out alone and take the real winds of America, instead of snuggling in an imitation Latin quarter? There is nothing in the cornfields to frighten real men. It is not all important that America have "Immortal Bards." Poetic immortality is an utterly false aspiration for the critic to awaken or for the unfortunate rhymer to hug to his breast. It is as bad as newspaper notoriety, as a motive.

And it is still more absurd, when the poet does return to the village, for utterly unknown labor leaders, politicians, merchants or bankers to insist that their local singer



prove that he has won the admiration of the unborn of the whole wide world for all the ages to come, before he is privileged to sing the local songs. The village poet, the hometown poet, should rather aspire to an old-age veteranship, a standing that will count with his friends and provoke his enemies, we will say, at his seventieth birthday. He should be equal parts William Allen White, Eugene V. Debs and the nightingale. If he desires immortality, let it be among the children of his personal friends in his hometown. I hope any reader of the *Mirror* who knows a poet that needs this message will not hesitate to clip it out and send it to him.

Miss Harriet Munroe is the editor of "Poetry, a Magazine of Verse." A poet of distinction herself, she has made the magazine a center for the new movement in the art whose influence in bringing the work of the new poets to the attention of the public can hardly be overestimated. As her contribution to the discussion, she has chosen these editorials from the magazine.

I am moved sometimes to wonder at the narrowness of the field accorded to the poet of conservative public taste, as compared with the freer range granted today, as a matter of course, to other artists.

The architect must pass with ease from cottage to cathedral, from the village shop to the skyscraper, and in doing so he may take his choice of classic, renaissance, gothic, secession, or catch-as-catch-can. The painter may paint figures, landscapes, marines, histories, mysteries, in any style that pleases him, from Rembrandt to Cézanne, from Cimabue to Kandinsky. Even the sculptor, despite the bulk and hardness of his medium, has the freedom of marble, bronze, terracotta, wax, wood, and many other substances, and of all styles from the Chou dynasty to the futuristic dream in his own soul. And the musician—but his range is the widest of all: he may compose song or symphony, fugue or rhapsody, opera, fantasia or extravaganza; and to express all the fine harmonies or riotous discords of his dream

he may call on hundreds of cunning instruments, singly or in miraculous unison, and on the human voice as well, and compel them to reveal him, whether he be Bach or Debussy, Wagner or Schoenberg.

And all these various extremes in these various arts the public admits to its streets and gardens, its theatres and concert halls, its museums and exhibitions. Indeed, the more violent the extreme, the more eagerly do we flock to see or hear, the more firmly do we believe that we must see or hear in order to bring our culture, or *kultur*, up to date and meet the cannonading future with a quiet mind.

But the poet, the English-writing poet of today—what does his potentially vast public expect of him? His language circles the globe; his era is cosmopolitan, enormous, full of newly released forces, of newly emerging ideas. He lives in a world which is wound in a net of rails and wires, of sea-ways and air-ways, a world of far kinships and inhuman wars, of intolerable poverty and

luxury, incredible fellowships and isolations.

To express the unprecedented magnificence of this modern era, the unprecedented emotion of this changing world—to tell the “tale of the tribe” to the future, and thereby make the future as Homer and Dante and Shakespeare have made us, the poet has but one instrument—words. To use this instrument adequately, to make it resound far and wide to the heights and depths of the human spirit, the poet has need of the utmost freedom and the utmost sympathy. He needs as large and as eager an audience as any confrère in the other arts, an audience giving him the widest liberty of experience in his effort to enrich his instrument, broaden its range, and break down the technical barriers between his art and the far-flung modern tribes whom it must address.

Yet, instead of such a co-operating public, what does he find? He finds an indifferent public, loath to listen at all, but demanding, if it does listen, close observance of the well-worn formulæ of rhymes and iambs which

Chaucer imported from France in his scorn of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. If a poet ventures out of this classic park he is at once suspect; the public gives him up as mentally afflicted and leaves the paragraphers to diagnose his malady. And even the more conservative of his fellow-poets question his right to batter down sacred walls.

Now, Poetry has frankly tried to widen the poet's range, to question conventional barriers, whether technical or spiritual, inherited from the past, and help to bring the modern poet face to face with the modern world. We have printed not only odes and sonnets, blank verse dramas and rhymed pentameter narratives, but imagistic songs, futuristic fugues, fantasies in *vers libre*, rhapsodies in polyphonic prose—any dash for freedom which seemed to have life and hope in it—a fervor for movement and the beauty of open spaces—even if the goal was vague and remote, or quite unattainable in the distance.

And probably we shall go on in this reck-



less course, whether the public gathers in great numbers or not. A certain public—small, perhaps, but choice—is gathering; of that we receive indisputable evidence every day. Even that satirical newspaper editor who turns one of our fugues upside down, or that other who gaily parodies imagism, or that graver one who points at us the finger of scorn—all these are more or less consciously our friends, for they are helping the public to WAKE UP, to observe that something, through whatever illusions and extravagances, is going on, that poetry is not a dead art, but a living one, and that the poet of today, like the liberator of long ago, WILL BE HEARD.

The Book and Play Club had an “editors’ night” last month, when spokesmen for various Chicago weeklies and monthlies uttered their pleas and complaints. It was mostly the same story—the difficulty of finding and winning over a public for art, for ideas, while the great, headlong, tolerant, American crowd huddles like sheep in the droves of the



commercial exploiters of this or that feature or fashion, this or that impulse or interest of the hour.

Also it was a confession of motives and feelings. Mr. Alexander Kahn loved the *Little Review* like a sweetheart, the editor of *The Dial* admitted his aversion from its conventionality, and one and all longed for that free and enlightened weekly which shall outrank all other papers of whatever time or clime, and make Chicago the centre of the earth. Incidentally, there were more personal confessions. Mr. Edgar Lee Masters, for example, told how the *Spoon River Anthology* was conceived nearly a year ago, when his mind, already shaken out of certain literary prejudices by the reading in Poetry of much free verse, especially that of Mr. Carl Sandburg, was spurred to more active radicalism through a friendship with that iconoclastic champion of free speech, free form, free art—freedom of the soul. At this acknowledgment that Poetry had furnished the spark which kindled a poet's soul to

living flame, and burned out of it the dry refuse of formalism, this editor, in her corner, felt a thrill of pride, and a sudden warmth of unalterable conviction that, whatever may happen to the magazine now or later, its work can never be counted vain.

After Poetry, *The Little Review*, *The Dial*, *Drama*, etc., had confessed bitter struggles to keep above water, we were patted on the head and condescendingly put in our place as "uplift magazines" by one of the numerous popular monthlies which, though no one ever hears of them, go out from Chicago to eager millions. "We don't turn over our hands to get subscribers," said the charmingly complacent editor, "yet nothing can stop them; after two brief years of life we have two hundred thousand—thirty thousand new ones since October. I fear these well-meaning neighbors of mine don't give you what you want."

As the audience laughed the mind of at least one editor transformed it, and multiplied it by millions, until it included the vast

constituency of all those incredibly popular magazines. I saw as in a *Piers Ploughman* vision the myriads of "new readers" stretching from sea to sea—the huge, easy-going American public following trampled roads, gulping down pre-digested foods, suspicious always of ideas, of torches, of climbing feet, of singing voices—a public which does not stone its prophets, finding it more effective to ignore them.

But, strangely enough, the vision brought, instead of bitterness, a deep warming of the heart. Is it not the same old crowd that Langland saw—the struggling, suffering toilers who starve in body and mind, who clutch at any straw of comfort and follow any casual cry, who dream deep dreams which they dare not admit and cannot express, who grope for beauty and truth through tinsel trickeries and smug falsities? Are not the prophets one with them because the prophets are doing the same thing—plunging with such lights as they have into the darkness? Indeed, only the prophets are

aware of what all are doing, aware of the uncharted immensities against which our little human torches flicker and flame; so they alone feel the urgent impulse to lift their torches high, to cry aloud, to reveal, to lead.

The crowd rebels against the universal theme of art—the littleness of man—or, rather against the abysmal contrast between his littleness and his greatness. In old Chinese paintings there is always some little weazened philosopher squinting at the cataract; and so in all great art stands the absurd, earth-bound, gnome-like figure of humanity facing the infinite with inadequate and unattainable dreams. Deep-buried in the heart of every man is some effigy of this figure, but most men are afraid of it, like to bury it deeper under conventional occupations, sentimentalities, moralities, instead of permitting artists and prophets to unearth it and expose it to the pitiless light. But every man's heart, however perverse with ignorance, however cluttered with knowl-

edge, makes a secret confession of the truth. Poets and prophets, therefore—the beauty of art, the sublimity of truth—appeal to him not quite in vain; and the appeal must go on as long as the race endures. To the last trench and the last despair certain spirits, in whom the common human spark of love becomes a flaming passion, must keep up the eternal impossible fight for souls, for a “kingdom of heaven on earth.”

Mr. James Oppenheim, novelist and poet, is editor of “The Seven Arts,” a magazine of “American artists, American authors, American critics for America—possibly for a new America, an America waking to that self-consciousness which is the first step toward national greatness.” Mr. Oppenheim’s verse is an experiment in polyrhythmic forms. He submitted very courteously to an interview, the report of which, he was gracious enough to say, transcribed the outlines of his thought with accuracy.

“There are,” said Mr. James Oppenheim,



“two important currents in our contemporary poetry which seem to be the result and the expression of two different conceptions of poetry. In the first place there is a strong English influence which has built up our New England tradition. The chief characteristic of that tradition is that it has conceived poetry as intellectual rather than emotional expression. We Americans, like the English, seem to fear emotion and the expression of emotion; we do not trust our feelings, and prefer to restrain them. As a result, the content of the poetry created under the influence of the New England tradition is almost wholly intellectual in its character. The poet whose influence is today most strongly expressed in this poetry is Robert Browning. His dramatic lyrics have contributed, both in form and in content, to the work of such men as Edward Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, and Edgar Lee Masters, who, despite the fact that he writes of the middle west, may be considered a transplanted New Englander.



In opposition to the ideals of the New England tradition there are a few poets writing to-day, of whom I am one, who conceive poetry as being primarily an expression of emotion. They do not fear their emotions and they are not afraid of expressing them honestly and naturally; and one of the results of this tendency has been a loosening up of poetic form. Poetic form is not in itself, however, a very important matter. It becomes important only after the poem has been written. Today we say that the Elizabethan dramatists wrote blank verse that for sheer beauty is unequalled in English literature. But they were not, when they wrote, trying to write great blank verse. They were expressing themselves in the medium most natural to them. So today poets are writing, for example, in free verse because that is the way in which they feel their poems. The strongest influence felt by those of us who are in revolt against the New England tradition is that of Walt Whitman. But what influences us in his poetry is its content,

and we are influenced by his poetic form only as a result of having first been influenced by his poetic content. There are, on the other hand, certain contemporary followers of the New England tradition who have derived their expression, but not the content of their art, from the same source.

One of the greatest dangers that threatens our contemporary poetry is the tendency toward localization. I feel that many of the poets who are writing today are deliberately representative of some small locality. Human life and human emotions are largely the same everywhere; their identity is essential, their diversity only superficial. Therefore, the poet who wishes to express the life of any particular locality must first express the life of our country as a whole. The fundamentally national, and only incidentally local vision, is the vision of which American poetry stands in greatest need today.

The imagists have fulfilled an important function in demonstrating the importance of disciplining our language and in directing

our attention to exactness of expression and to the distinction of values in the use of words. They are, in this respect, our contemporary purists. But as a theory of art imagism is foredoomed to failure, for it is tending toward a separation between art and life, and since art is a form of human expression, there can be no divorce between life and art. The chief difference between the poetry of yesterday and the poetry of today lies in the fact that while the poetry of yesterday was an exercise, the poetry of today is an expression.

If our poetry is to progress beyond its present level, I feel such progress will be the result of a more general revolt against what I have called the English, or the New England, tradition. Before our poetry can truly express our life we must rid ourselves of foreign influences, and become really self-conscious as Americans. The culture of other nations is both important and interesting, but it is far more important for our art to express our own culture and our own

life than the life and the culture of other peoples. Today poetry is undergoing one of its periodical returns to the soil; the poetry of our immediate past, the work, for example, of Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Richard Watson Gilder, was refined away from life as far as possible. The poets of yesterday tried to create an art remote from life. Today we are trying to create an art which shall express our own experience of our own life. And the most hopeful sign in our contemporary renaissance of poetry is that it is, fundamentally, a renaissance of common experience. I feel that contemporary American poetry has achieved in this respect a higher level than any other literary activity of today in the United States. I do not think that a parallel advance has been manifested in either the novel or the drama. But the poetry that is being written today holds out the promise of a literature which, if we concentrate upon our own experience, express our life and our emotions in the form most natural to each of us in-

dividually, and write what we feel without fear and without reticence, will truly be a significant expression of American life.”

Mr. Louis Untermeyer is a prophet of the democratic spirit, and the social content of his art finds expression in a vesture of lyric beauty. He is, primarily, a singer, and his ever-increasing interest in social problems has in no wise diminished the beauty of his songs. In the following essay he enunciates that faith in the romance of the commonplace which is the essential discovery of his poetry.

The conservative of every age has been his own iconoclast. And often, in building on the time-eaten and treacherous timber of the past, he has brought down not only his idols, but the temple that contained them. Our thinking is improving architecturally. We blast deeper before building; we have become far more critical of the foundations. And, in getting down to bedrock, a hundred undermined and rotting formulas have been



exposed and demolished. Many are the preserved and rooted aristocracies that have been threatened; and now, with the rush of unsuspected energies, comes the end of the aristocracy of the arts. And poetry, being the most patrician of all the crafts, is the last to become democratized. But the change is inevitable; its advent has come upon us with the strange and sudden power of all things new. New, first of all, in spirit. Not since the classic New England group has American poetry had so great an impetus and so full-throated an utterance. And never has that utterance been so rich, so free and so varied.

Much of this is due to the fact that our poets are coming back to the oldest and most stirring tongue; they are using a language that is the language of the people. Nor is this a mere revolt from the stilted and æstheticized vision of life. They have rediscovered the beauty and dignity, I might almost say the divine core, of the casual and commonplace; and they are bringing back to



ordinary speech that same beauty and dignity, calling forth its inherent warmth and wonder. Whitman, as much the prophet as the poet, foretold this in his little-known and highly characteristic "An American Primer," a thin sketch of a book which throws a series of illuminating sidelights on himself and his aims. In furtherance of his belief that the whole "Leaves of Grass" was a gigantic language experiment, an effort toward a democratic poetry, he said: "It is an attempt to give the spirit, the body and the man, new words, new potentialities of speech—an American, a cosmopolitan (for the best of America is the best cosmopolitanism) range of self-expression." He wrote also "The Americans are going to be the most fluent and melodious-voiced people in the world—and the most perfect users of words. \* \* \*

The new times, the new people, the new vista need a tongue according—yes, and what is more, they will have such a tongue."

And it was Whitman's use of the rich verbal material that flowered in the street

rather than in libraries that made him so remarkable. That large spirit was set free and made common to all men, not so much because of his form or his philosophy, but because of his words. And it was this love and sublimation of the colloquial and racy that made him so great an artistic influence—an influence that was not only liberal but liberating. It was Whitman, more than any single element, unless one includes the indirect force of a wider social feeling, that broke the fetters of the poet and opened the doors of America to him.

From what, it may be asked, has the poet been set free? Let us say, in a sweeping generality, from a preoccupation with a poetic past, from the repeating of echoes and glib superficials, in the first place. He has been transferred from a fantastic literary limbo—a panorama of mythological figures and moralistic scraps seen through a mist. And what has he been set free for? Well, for one thing, to look at the world he lives in; to study and synthesize the startling fusion

of races and ideas; the limitless miracles of science and its limitless curiosity; the groping and stumbling toward a genuine social democracy—the whole welter and struggle and beauty of the modern world. He has been set free to face these. For even though he tries to recreate the tunes of an antique lyricist, listening only to the echoes of a thousand years, he will find it hard to escape his times.

And that escape has become increasingly difficult. The wireless, the rural free delivery, the ubiquitous and omniscient newspapers follow him everywhere. No matter how distant his hiding place, he cannot get away from the world's loud and restless activities; the tiniest hamlet reproduces and buzzes with the stress of the whole world. The retreat to the poet's ivory tower is blocked on every side.

Not that the escape is impossible; it is the artists' power and prerogative, and many of them have availed themselves of the privilege. Like Keats, the poet may fly to a

strange and soothing antiquity; or, like Poe, he may build and populate a misty No Man's Land. But unless he can make his world as actual and convincing as our own, he will have failed—even in his escape, and certainly in his poetry.

And it is this difference that is shown in the temper of the most of the living poets; they are not anxious to escape. They are not frightened or disgusted with their times; they are fascinated by them. They are in love with their world; passionately, even painfully. It may be urged that this might be said of the first poets of any time; that the artist has always been intensely interested in his age and has, consciously or unconsciously, reflected it. And, to a great extent, this is true. But, above all, what distinguishes this age from the preceding ones is its sharp, probing quality, its insatiable curiosity, its determined self-analysis. And it is not, as in the past, the spasmodic effort of a group or the rare interpretative power of one great mind that stands out. It is

the steady drive of the mind of man now turned in like a great searchlight upon itself. In every field; from the artistic to the political—one sees this restless searching, this effort toward new values, toward ascertaining its own larger possibilities. I said before that the artist had been set free for a clear look at his own age. It would have been truer to say that he is being set free for a clear look at himself. \* \* \* Let us see by a few instances how far-reaching this eagerness, this introspection, really is.

James Oppenheim is an excellent example. Even in the early "Doctor Rast" stories, with their sentimental solutions, and the tentative "Monday Morning and Other Poems," there was always apparent, beneath the stammering and the awkward lines, a straining vision. And in his recent "Songs for the New Age" that vision achieves its fullest expression. Rhapsody is still there, but it is rhapsody without rant. The old passion for landscapes and men and music and justice



are here also; but it is lifted and clarified in a greater singing. And there is a new element—a slow searching that goes on beneath the musical and literary surface of all the poems. Beneath it, and, at the same time, beyond it. Psalms and prophecies these poems are, in form as well as feeling—the old Isaiah note, revived and lifted out of the crowded streets—but they are something more; they are an attempt to diagnose the twisted soul of man and the twisted times that he lives in. In this work Oppenheim reveals the world conflict reproduced within one's self; it is an attempt to assemble the elements of gigantic struggle and to synthesize them.

Almost at the other extreme in manner and method is Edwin Arlington Robinson. His sharp, even rhythms and chiselled rhymes are the antithesis of Oppenheim's polyrhythmic lines; but a similar impulse is in them both. Witness the close-packed sense of mental struggle in the shorter poems in "The Town Down the River," and the psy-



chological interplay of character and environment in "Captain Craig." Witness, also, the color and simplicity, sometimes the almost baffling simplicity of his speech, as shown in his latest volume, "The Man Against the Sky."

Or turn to a poet who has apparently nothing in common with either. In "North of Boston" Robert Frost sets down a series of scenes and incidents of New England life, and sets it down in a loose, blank verse that is so natural in speech that many missing the familiar, ready-made glamor, have taken it for prose. And it is in this very naturalness of language, in the constant use of the spoken rather than the "literary" word, that he achieves both poetry and revelation. In Frost we find the poet who extends our literary borders not only with fresh sight but with fresh sounds. These sounds, let in from the vernacular, are full of a robust and creative energy; they are red corpuscles to the thinning blood of our speech. Possibly in his "The Death of the Hired Man" and

“Birches,” to take two dissimilar examples, this vigor of words is most evident; but it leaps out of all his work with a restless, somewhat roundabout but always keen and plunging psychology. In his most recent work (“Mountain Interval”) we find these same direct and distinguished qualities. But a new element is here—a warmer, even a more whimsical reflection of a life that seemed gray, and, even in its humors, grim. This geniality does not mean that Frost’s penetration is any less deep than it was; it means merely that he has brought emotions nearer the surface. So with the unexpected lyrics in this volume; they emphasize the happier undercurrent by emphasizing the singer no less than the seeker. It is its differences even more than its similarities that make “Mountain Interval” a worthy successor to “North of Boston.”

Scarcely less unusual is Edgar Lee Masters’ “Spoon River Anthology”—an interesting and remarkable work, although as a book of poems a greatly overrated one. For,

though he shares that same clarity and directness of eye and speech with the others, "Spoon River Anthology," although it is notable as character drawing and drama, is often negligible in poetic power. At least, poetry is its frailest quality. For when Mr. Masters writes, as he sometimes tries to do, poetry *per se*, his fresh strength is mixed with a stale and mystical flabbiness. Most of the rhymed portions of his new "Songs and Satires" are cases in point. It may be that his sharp irony dulls the edge of his poetic impulse. Or it may be that Mr. Masters is a sharp-eyed novelist and not, first of all, a poet. Compare his treatment of people, for instance, with Frost's. Masters, with great sophistication and almost constant disillusion, enjoys most of all the surface gossip of his folk; sometimes he throws a high light on one submerged motive or incident (or a series of them) in his characters' lives. But Frost goes deeper; his light, less brilliant and less superficial, does not merely set off his figures. It penetrates them. It

reaches down through his people to their roots; it strikes the soil from which they grew. It even transforms the whole countryside and makes it something more than an effective background; it gives his setting the quality of an immense and moving actor in the lives of the folk it overshadows.

Amy Lowell's recent New England dialect poems, done with her usual economy of line, have some of these qualities. Her volume "Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds" displays other but no less striking sides of her ability. Of all the women singers in America (and there are at least a dozen excellent ones) she is the most vigorous and individual. Her work blends very curiously a delicate, feminine whimsy, a love of *diablerie* and the grotesque with an almost stark, square-shouldered virility. With all these, and an incisive satire, she cuts through tawdry and the commonplace surfaces to hidden and beautiful depths. Swinging away on one hand from the soft sighings of her past and on the other from the rigidity of the Imagists' credo,

she has achieved a poise and a power rare among American poets of either sex.

No clear perspective has as yet been allowed the Imagists themselves. They have suffered chiefly from two things; too much advertising and the larger group's hatred for the smaller one. But the infuriated critics of Imagism have suffered still more. They have for the most part fallen heatedly from their calm eminences by making the mistake of denouncing not the Imagist poets nor the Imagist propaganda, but the Imagist pronunciamento. Most of them failed to see that when they were attacking the Imagists' credo of "using the exact word"; of allowing "freedom in choice of subject"; of "producing poetry that is hard and clear," and of the "importance of concentration," they were attacking the essentials of all great literature. The Imagists, realizing the need for the constant re-statement and re-shaping of old truths, have repeated consciously certain fundamental principles observed by every poet more or less uncon-



sciously. And even their over-emphasis will have a salutary rather than a harmful effect. Discounting the inverted classicism that still attaches itself to certain poets of the group, in spite of the frantic convulsions of its more spectacular adherents and recent self-elected exponents, for all its occasional fridigity and frequent exaggerations that spring from an unholy fear of the *cliché*, Imagism is a strong influence for good. It is excellent fertilizer in the fields of poetry; it will help nurture the new and stronger crop. It will do this since its very "hardness," its sharp edges and images, and its constant insistence on packing and cutting down are a vigorous and healthy reaction from the verbose, the carelessly facile and the pale, pretty reiterations of a rubber-stamp loveliness.

The list of the "new" poets could be prolonged for another page. Though only a few are mentioned, one must notice Vachel Lindsay, with his infectious combination of rhymes, rag-time and religion; his remarkable attempts to interpret the soul of a nation



through its sounds, and his efforts to bring art, prohibition and Socialism (and his faith in this strange blend is not the least of his qualities) to the villages. Mr. Lindsay sees (and hears) poetry not only in Springfield and the moving pictures, but in negro camp-meetings and automobile horns and fire-engines and the United States Senate and a Chinese laundry. Nor are his eyes and ears any the less keen when Mr. Lindsay is in a quieter and more meditative mood.

But to proceed: John Hall Wheelock, in his "The Human Fantasy" and "The Beloved Adventure," two volumes vibrant with "the warm recklessness of lavish life," is another of the poets who see "the universe made of dust, but holy to the core"; his work glows with the realization of a "lovable, sordid humanity." In the first of these volumes is the splendid lyric "Sunday Evening in the Common," one of the loveliest of pure American lyrics, with the exception of Poe's "To Helen" and Whitman's Lincoln elegies.

Then there is Witter Bynner, who can get

magic and metaphysics out of a Pullman smoker; William Ellery Leonard with "The Vaunt of Man" to his great credit and a group of poignant sonnets; Arthur Davison Ficke, another eminent sonneteer who stings his archaisms into life with the whiplash of a personality; Carl Sandburg, whose first volume, "Chicago Poems," shows him at times the most tender and at times the most brutal of our poets; who proves Synge's contention that it is the timber of poetry that wears most surely, and there "is no timber that has not strong roots among the clay and worms." Plain speaking and outspoken, he uses words as weapons; but he can also use them as delicately as an engraver his tool. He has the etcher's power, with its firm, clean-cut and always suggestive line—but he is never merely the artist. His hate, a strengthening and challenging force, might overbalance the power of his work were it not exceeded by the fiercer virility of his love. Arturo Giovanitti, with his hot and raucous hymns of democracy, is another radical, min-

gling these two dangerous combustibles, love and dynamite. Also there is Clement Wood, another fiery poet of protest, whose first volume is still to appear; William Rose Benét, with his affections divided between stark modernities and rollicking chanties or weird ballads of a fantastic world; John G. Neihardt, Maxwell Bodenheim, Eunice Tietjens, Margaret Widdemer, Harriet Monroe, Helen Hoyt, Max Eastman—and a dozen other strangely contrasted artists could be added.

And though all these poets differ in choice of theme, in method and in temper, still they are united by a definite though a loose bond. Each of these poets respond to and reflect the two strangely creative powers of our day—its restlessness and analysis. Each poet is an active part of a new impetus and fervor; in his love for his times he is revealing both himself and his age. He is determined to know his world and to realize it completely. He does something more than accept a shop-worn glamor and formulas of beauty that

have been handed down to him; he questions them. He is going to look for beauty for himself everywhere, in strange places possibly; but he is going to find it. And he is going to wrest it from the neglected and trivial—even out of the dark cavern of the ugly and the subconscious. For it is this intense love for the whole world, not a part of it, that impels and uplifts him. He sees the amazing vitality beneath what seems merely vociferous; he knows the health that is in the heart of vulgarity. And it is this burning intensity, this analysis, that sharpens and vivifies all incidents and emotions; that reveals the ordinary in fresh and shining colors. There are poets, no doubt, who still can be unstirred by these things within his world. But the poet to-day who definitely desires to escape them is rare, a creature to be wondered at rather than to be scorned. He is not exactly a coward. He is much too bewildered and half-hearted to be that. He is an anachronism. For poetry is something more than a graceful, literary escape from

life. It is a spirited encounter with it.

Miss Margaret Widdemer, a writer of both verse and prose, writes illuminatingly of the relation of the contemporary poet to the world about him.

There unquestionably is a new movement in our literature today; a distinct effort to formulate and realize ourselves and our relation to life in the present, as differing from the old feeling which, more or less differently phrased, the writers of other times have felt, of "writing for eternity." The older idea, I think, was to write, if the work was serious at all, of the eternal verities, the things which were and would be changeless, and were of no time. What reflection of the moment's thought was in their work was more or less an involuntary thing, though to this unintentional reflection of the psychology of the moment many of the older writers owe what place remains to them in the present. We have come to the place where our civiliza-



tion is becoming self-conscious, and record its own attitude of mind, knowing this to be a thing as worthy of record as any attitude of mind we may glean from writers of other periods. We are realizing that romance, and the battle between good and evil, is here with us, not locked on shelves with book-people in costume, and are self-consciously evoking it.

This is the most important feeling—indeed, the main feeling—of today's literature. It has its good and evil side, as any self-consciousness has. We are in danger of coming to feel that our view is the only view, our age the only age, and, in our anxiety to lose false glamor and false relations, lose the True Romance, and drop into a fashion of making our books laborious patchworks made out of little pieces of meaningless, aimless realities, as futile as a Futurist color-scheme. If we can show that the little scraps and pieces of our lives today will eventually make a thing which is as real and worthwhile and great as any of the old great romances we are creating something which is



epic and lasting. In these alternatives lie our danger and our capability of success.

As to my own work, I think that any work which bears a deliberate and self-conscious relation to "movements" is in just so far a mistaken and artificial mechanism, not creative or alive at all. My poetry has never been written with the deliberate idea of expressing this or that; it has been written because it was there in my mind to write, without any idea of being "among those present." But looking at it as a body of work, now that it is something done and printed, it seems to me that I have unknowingly taken for my share of the day's self-expression the things women are thinking and feeling—the things that many of them are not yet able to say. I am not the only one who is doing this. I only mean that this is what I seem to myself to be doing. As to my prose, I don't think I can say what relation that has to present day literary movements, because as yet I have tried to do little more than be a story-teller in the bazaar—to relate ro-

mances which should be sane and light-hearted, and which would make people gayer, perhaps, and perhaps a little comforted about the gray spots in the world, for reading them.

I don't believe I am capable of a criticism of "contemporary literature as a whole" any more than I have done. It's going to be a big thing, I believe, but, like America itself, it is as yet chaotic, a grand, but unwelded thing. It isn't a whole so far. But I know it will be.



**THE ROMANTICISTS**





## II

### THE ROMANTICISTS

THE essence of romanticism is a revolt against convention; in art every romantic movement has manifested itself in a determination to extend the domain of experience and likewise to transcend the traditional forms of expression. The romantic quality of any professedly romantic work of art, therefore, lies either in a content which is strangely new or in an unwonted medium of expression, or both; any or all of which is intended to produce the superb shock of the unexpected, and evoke an emotional reaction whose quality has either been completely forgotten, or else previously undiscovered. By pushing the definition to its logical conclusion we should learn that the quality of romance lies, not in the work of art at all, but

in the emotion it arouses. In so far as it does not produce this distinctive quality of emotion it fails in being romantic.

I shall be reproached, I fear, for terming the representatives of Imagism and of Spectrism Romanticists. On the one hand, Miss Knish assures us that the doctrines of the Spectric school, of which her collaborator, Mr. Morgan, is the founder, are a fresh interpretation of classic gospels. On the other hand, we have been assured that the reforms which the Imagists are trying to work in our poetry have as their object principles which "are the essentials of all great poetry." But to be essentially romantic, a work of art need discover to us no new methods and no new idiom. If through old methods long forgotten and an old idiom it tricks our emotions into responding to a new experience, it has accomplished an essentially romantic result. [So that, whether the principles of Imagism and of Spectrism are new or not, we are privileged to call the poetry in which they have found expression romantic art, if

for no other reason than that it has, judging by its reception, produced an emotional reaction of romantic quality in its readers. But there is a further reason that we can urge in justification, and that is that these two schools are preoccupied chiefly with promulgating a new technique. [Imagism and Spectrism are admittedly programmes of revolt in the field of expression.]

The singular fact in the existence of these two schools is that their fundamental objects are directly antithetical. Imagists proclaim their faith in a rendering of an exact picture in an idiom which combines the characteristics of suggestion, vividness, concentration, and externality, in either of two forms, free verse or polyphonic prose. The Spectrists have as their objects the diffraction of emotion, and the conveying of after-images and overtones; moreover, they employ both the traditional poetic forms and free verse. The Spectrists thus seem, in a measure, to be chiefly interested in blurring and encircling with a haze of symbols the image which the

Imagists, in their poems, are anxious to convey with photographic precision.

This is not the place to further elucidate the theories of these two schools of writers. Readers who wish for more light are referred to the preface to "Some Imagist Poets," and to Miss Amy Lowell's article, "A Consideration of Modern Poetry" in *The North American Review* for January, 1917, and to the preface to "Spectra" by Miss Knish and Mr. Morgan. It is interesting to note, however, that the poetry of both these schools emphasizes, each in its own way, a point touched upon in the contribution of Miss Harriet Munroe, the contrast between man's littleness and the greatness of the universe and the fantastic and ironic self-importance of man in his relation to the universe.

Mr. John Gould Fletcher belongs, with Miss Amy Lowell, to the Imagists, whose program was first enunciated in 1913. His two volumes of verse, "Irradiations. Sand

and Spray," and "Goblins and Pagodas," have given to the public his theory of the art of poetry and the product of its practice. He has been concerned chiefly with experiments in new forms. But what he has to say, in the following essay, of the content and form of contemporary poetry, brings additional light to bear upon the changes which he, in common with the other Imagists, are striving to bring about in our writing.

There can be no doubt that at present there is a striving and a stirring in American Literature, on a scale never before witnessed. Hitherto the progress of American Literature has been a question of individuals rather than of groups. The effect of the Civil War was to unify the country politically, but to decentralize it intellectually. When the Civil War came, a small group of men in New England controlled America's literary destiny. The sixty years that have passed since then have been years of break-



up and transition, and the figures that have dominated those years—Henry James, Mark Twain, Bret Harte—have been isolated examples of genius rather than products of any intense feeling for literature on the part of large bodies of their fellow-countrymen. It is noteworthy that all three of these men spent large portions of their lives in Europe, as if driven by inner necessity to seek a more favorable atmosphere for production and discussion of literature than America offered. Only Whitman remained, and Whitman waited his life long for the appreciation that never came from his country.

At present all this is changed. America is demanding a national literature, and although this aspiration is not likely to be satisfied for some years yet, nevertheless steps are being taken to meet it. The War has had the effect of making Americans realize that they are something essentially different, in spite of the accident of a similar language, from the English; and in spite of the accident of immigration, from the European stocks.



America is now engaged in the process of discovering itself. The process is not yet completed, nor has it gone on long enough to enable us with any confidence to predict what the future America may produce. We can only say that the battle for a new America is being fought out most fiercely, in the field of poetry. Poetry, which may be defined as the art of the rhythmical expression of the emotions, has, from its very essence, attracted so far the most fanatical of those who wish to renew American Literature. At the same time, it is more difficult to predict what the future course of American poetry may be than that of any other form of literary activity, for two reasons: First, because there is not yet a large body of persons who constantly read new poetry; second, because the great majority of American editors and critics who deal with poetry have no other standards to guide them than the remote traditions of their school days, when they were trained to assimilate that which, whatever its place of origin, was strictly in

line with English standards of writing.

Now there is only one thing which may be definitely predicted of American poetry, and that is, whatever it may become in the future, it can no longer follow English standards. Long ago Poe realized this fact, and strove to break loose from the ideals of the English Reviews, and to combat the influence of the small New England group, who, thanks to their long settlement in the country, and university training and sea-going traditions, remained true to English guidance. Later on Whitman devoted his life to the same cause of an autochthonous literature. Meanwhile, England and Europe in general steadfastly refused to recognize any American literature which was not impregnated with this native taint and aim. This process has been accentuated since the outbreak of the War. The outstanding results of the European cataclysm have been, politically and intellectually, to set apart from the influence of the seaboard, the Central United States, from the Alleghanies to the Rockies, and from the

Canadian border to the Gulf, and to proclaim their predominance. This block of central and valley States now controls America; it is setting its face southward and westward; and all other American forces, such as the small New England group, are being drawn into its current.

Athwart and throughout this central tendency there runs yet a mixture of emotional and intellectual factors confusing the issue. There is first of all the factor of racial heredity, and of its assimilation to American conditions. This is incalculable. Secondly and more calculable as to outcome, are the factors of the struggle between *vers libre* and rhymed metre, of realism versus personal fantasy, of poetry based upon external phenomena or internal symbolism. Let us examine each one in turn.

[The battle for *vers libre* stands as good as won, in my opinion.] America has something new and different to express, and a new expression cannot be clothed in a guise of an old form, any more than new wine can be

put into new bottles. We must create our poetics for ourselves. The mere fact that we choose for the purposes of our writing a language very nearly similar to the English tongue, means nothing, any more than the New Testament, by being written in Greek, holds parentage with Homer and Euripides. We must content ourselves with not trying to imitate English models, which were created for a different atmosphere and public than our own, and set ourselves resolutely to the task of creating new ones. Nevertheless, it is important to note that *vers libres* are as easy to write as rhymed doggerel, and that there is no hope for any form which will not develop. In its primitive shape, as in the works of Whitman, *vers libre* is simply natural rhythm—the rhythm of the sea, the river, the wind blowing over a lake or the boughs rocking in the wind. We must go further than this. We must build up these rhythms into stanzas or blocks of rhythm. We must admit rhyme, alliteration, assonance, as occasional but valuable

adjuncts. We must take up the problem of the development of our themes, and of our style.

The struggle between realism and personal fantasy has not yet been settled. The realists such as Frost or Masters, have given us broadly shaped works, but no intensely vividly memorable lines. The followers of individual fantasy, such as the Imagists, to which I belong, the New York "Others" group, the recently-appearing Spectrists, have given vividly memorable lines and short poems, but nothing of the depth and human breadth which the Realists display. It is noteworthy that these Fantaisists (if such I may call them), have shown a distinct tendency to group themselves into schools about certain centres, whereas the Realists are mostly separate phenomena.

It is also noteworthy that diverse poets as, for example, Vachel Lindsay and Conrad Aiken, seem to be unable to fit into either group, but are striving for a blend of Realism and Fantasy—a poetry which demands



at once the most precise observation and the most complete use and control of such observation to imaginative ends.

As regards the third great question, that of external application versus internal symbolism, I must admit that the former is at present triumphant, although my own sympathies go mostly with the latter. It seems to me that as the imagination of the poet exercises itself more and more freely, there must come a time when he realizes that the aim of all this can be nothing more or less than the attempt to reconcile material phenomena with internal ideas and feelings—whether these be his own or those of other people. And this attempt can only express itself by employing the external world as more or less definite symbolical material. In this respect I must disagree with the “externalism” of so brilliant a poet as Miss Amy Lowell, whose work seems to me, nevertheless, the culmination of her own theory.

Having thus briefly examined the state of poetry today in America, let me conclude



with a word of hope for the future.

America will only attain to her fullest literary development if she can be made to realize that achievement and theory must go hand in hand. We must be prepared to build up anew, on a new basis, and therefore we must not seek to compare ourselves to foreign models, nor to imitate these in any way, but only to use them, in whatever language written, as objects of study. We must free ourselves of any dogmatic adherence to foreign literatures, whether these be English, French, German or Russian—but be prepared to make use of any foreign idea that achieves our ends, in exactly the self-same spirit as the men who build the skyscrapers of New York employ the elements of foreign architectural styles, for a different purpose.

Above all, we must create intelligible theories of Art to match our practice, and the discussion and revision of these theories must proceed constantly. It is ridiculous for any one to suppose that poetry or any other Art

can progress without criticism, or that in the Elizabethan, or any other age, literature sprang spontaneously from the soil. We know that this was not the case. The theory and practice of English Poetry have ever gone hand in hand since the generation immediately preceding the great Elizabethans—a generation whose ardent discussion of the merits of rhymed as against classical and rhymeless metres closely resembles the battle being waged about *vers libre* to-day. And any opportunity to enlarge the bounds of discussion by defending whatever is novel in one's own practice, should therefore be welcomed by every serious American poet.

Miss Amy Lowell is so well-known as the apologist of the Imagist movement in this country that her paper requires no preface. Her most recent books of verse are "A Dome of Many-Colored Glass," "Sword Blades and Poppy Seed," and "Men, Women and Ghosts," in addition to which she has published a volume of criticism, "Six French Poets,"

(1) I think there is distinctly a new movement today, but I regard that movement as especially evident in poetry at the present moment. Prose is still too much under the domination of magazine editors to have broken away and started anything very new. Our prose writers are still inferior to those of England. Our poets, on the other hand, are, I think, inferior to none living today, either in England or in the European countries.

(2) It is a little difficult to say what are the ideals of a movement. (And in speaking of the new movement I shall confine myself strictly to poetry.) I should say that the ideal evidenced in all the better poetry today is toward a great naturalness and simplicity; a trend away from the sentimental and pretty-pretty, which for so long reigned in American verse. The poets today are seeking reality—the greater reality, which includes ideality; they are seeking it through the simplicity and beauty of current speech; and, with a greater faith in the universe, they

find poetry in many quarters where the older poets did not admit it to exist. The current discussion of forms shows a very superficial conception of the new poetry, forms being merely a means to an end. The new movement can be found, not only among the *vers libristes*, but among those writers who habitually employ the older forms.

(3) It is impossible to say which of the new currents of poetry seem to be important. These currents are like the contributory streams of a great river. They are all important to the development of the main flow. So long as they be authentic and sincere each has its place.

(4) You ask me what relation my own work bears to this movement, which is a question very difficult for anyone to answer about oneself. My aim is for greater depth, beauty, sincerity, and vividness. To that end, I am interested in many methods of attaining it; but I insist that poetry must always be poetical, and I prefer that it should be dramatic as well. Poetry, to my

mind, is man's endeavor to express, not only his emotions, but the highest beauty he apprehends; and any method is permissible which conveys that emotion and that beauty to the reader.

This does not, of course, mean that readers may not have to be taught a new idiom. A poet should always be ahead of his time, otherwise he is no true seer—in the old sense of the word, "to perceive." It is those poets who have been more misapprehended during the time of their writing who have meant most to succeeding generations.

(5) As to my criticism of contemporary American literature—that is almost too large a subject to deal with in a letter. The great danger hitherto has been the large prices which popular magazines pay for the sort of thing that attracts their clients. As writers must live, there has come about a sort of facile writing, built very much upon one pattern, and which is sure of its audience. This has done an immense amount to injure American literature. But it is a natural and



healthy sign that the poets, possibly because they have no temptation, have been able to free themselves from this commercial influence. As poetry is the most highly emotionalized of all the forms of writing, it is also natural and proper that they should be the first to break away from a baneful influence. Doubtless the prose writers will follow their lead before long. The true poetical movement today must not be confused with the desire to shock and surprise in some modern verse. Where a few people are sincere and original, there will always be a crowd of imitators to follow them. Time alone can sift the chaff from the wheat. But that such imitators do exist is no proof that the more serious of the modern poets are not sincere.

The latest of the movements for a wider technical freedom in poetry is that brought forward by the Spectrists, a school for which Miss Anne Knish and Mr. Emanuel Morgan stand as sponsors. Miss Knish defines its aim as a fresh interpretation of classic



gospels. She believes our present poetic renaissance to be a derivation from a stale current.

I do not know if I have a right to speak on this subject, for American poets will resent, perhaps, the criticism of one whose native tongue is the Russian, and who has written only one English book. Yet since you ask me, I will answer, with humility, as to poetry only.

Your new movement in poetry seems to me too closely derived from a French movement that is already ancient history to Continental Europe. Young people without genius slip into this stale current and have much fun; but many of their tragic poems are of humorous effect, I think, and when they would be funny I sometimes weep. [It is like a piece of cheese left over at breakfast. *hch*] So little is basically grounded on a theory of æsthetic that is of new import; and these young people fear the classic æsthetic as they would poison. They need not;

though we seek new drinks to become drunken with, the doctrine of Aristoteles remains the staff of life, the bread.

We who are of the Spectric School of poets have tried, contradicting no ancient truth, to give fresh interpretation to classic gospels. If our æsthetic dogma be sound, the other poets will before long become aware. But these are in American poetry days only of beginning; and I think these people know nothing of European literary history who speak so much of "new, new, new!"

Mr. Emanuel Morgan, collaborator with Miss Knish upon "Spectra," tells us that the essential quality of Spectric poetry is humor, and defines its basis in vision.

Yes, there is a new, or, rather, renewed movement in poetry. Its ideals are life. It is born of the death of the immediate past. Its most important current, for the moment, seems to me to be the current of mirth, and

in that current much of our work belongs. We call ourselves a "School." But all we are doing, as I see it, is to combine and realize qualities which are appearing, now here, now there, among much modern poetry not professedly spectrist, viz.: catholicity of subject and metre, a quick registering of mental reflections by a sort of leapfrog metaphor, an exchange of intuitions; in short, by imagination or humor, a breaking through the mere pretty or ugly surface of things.

In our own convenient terms, spectrism belongs to its time in that it intends the poem or spectrum, by means of laughter or other illumination, to send an enchanted X-ray through the skin to the lungs and liver and heart of life.



**THE IDEALISTS:**  
**THE RENASCENCE OF SPIRIT-**  
**UALITY**





### III

## THE IDEALISTS

THE four poets here grouped as Idealists could be more accurately described as spiritualists, did not the word spiritualism convey a special connotation which does not in the least apply to the theories of these poets. The idea which each of them has expressed is that today we are experiencing a renaissance of faith, that after an era in which spiritual experience was doubted and during which the soul was denied, the writers, as interpreters of the thought and the feeling of their time, have discovered, as the most important thing in life, the soul of man and its relation to the absolute.

They would claim that literature which does not take into account man's religious experience is superficial and false to life.

Their point of view may briefly be described thus: Science, in its quest for a wholly truthful explanation of the world in which we live, has achieved only a partial explanation, since it is dependent upon rational proof in establishing the validity of its doctrines. But beyond the truth which science has established, there lies another body of truth revealed to man intuitively in the experience of faith. This body of truth may or may not in the future be susceptible of rational proof; at present we apprehend it only subjectively and intuitively in faith. And it is this experience of faith and its discovery of the ideal within the real which these four writers believe to be the most significant contribution of our life to-day, in its expression in literature.

Plato believed that our joy in the discovery of beauty and truth in the world was founded upon an unconscious memory of the perfect truth and beauty seen by the soul in its heavenly chariot ride before birth. The fable of the heavenly chariot ride was his

poetic interpretation of the experience of faith. And these poets, in saying that the highest art is an expression of spiritual experience, and that as such it moves us through our souls, are restating in a modern form the idealism of Plato.

Mr. William Rose Benét's gospel is one of greater individualism, as against the tendency toward a democratization of poetry. But his central thought is of the essential concern of poetry with the things of the spirit.

Yes, I think a new movement in American literature is making itself felt. It was first manifested in the field of poetry. The recent revival of free verse and the introduction of some new cults, such as Imagism, have had, on the whole, an invigorating influence. The point is not that the things now being done in verse are new, but that they have shaken awake the faculties of poets and critics (widely apart as are some of these in

their opinions). How much of the flood of contemporary experimentation will remain when the inevitable alternating ebb sets in is beyond anybody to say very comprehensively. So much for poetry. American fiction is now working toward greater sincerity than in past years, I think, having already attained a very high average of technical merit. The "manner" has been mastered—the "matter" will be more vital in most novels and short stories from now on. At least, such is my particular faith. The romantic school both in prose and poetry is out of fashion at present. I suppose my own work falls more into the romantic category than into the realistic, though, as far as my reading goes, I enjoy Dostoievsky and Edgar Lee Masters immensely. Poetry, in my opinion, cannot escape a certain touch of mysticism. Prose, if desired, can dispense with this element entirely. But the most realistic poets—and take Masters again, for an example (as he is, just at present, the cynosure of all eyes)—the most realistic of

poets, as Masters, cannot wholly escape his particular mysticism, cannot surrender himself entirely to a materialistic or even a rationalistic conception of the universe. This has nothing to do with his opinions upon organized society or anything else—it is most often involuntary, but nevertheless creeps into and most beautifully permeates his graver poems. Prose discussion can often win through a climax of glib denial, that convinces temporarily. I feel that real poetry cannot—for our deepest thoughts cannot (by the nature of the animal!) *deny*, though they may be saturated with doubt. Those most truly poets are necessarily mystics to a certain extent—whether they like it or not. They do not arrive at their conclusions by the straight streets of logic, but by the wandering roads of emotion, in spite of themselves often. For one of the necessities to their being artists is, after all, to be able to *feel* why a thing is right or wrong. One could reason it out all day and, without this *feeling*, which engenders the creative emo-



tion, could have no nucleus in one's decisions for any work of art. Dealing with a medium, such as poetry, which depends mainly upon its emotion for its greatness, the rationalist must be comparatively sterile unless his "reason" seethes itself into "passion," in which case the mystical quality enters again and "rationalism" becomes a misnomer.

Therefore, I do not feel that our glib divisions of poets into romantic and realistic groups or clans is any very great matter.

I dislike cliques, schools, sects, and "movements" in poetry. There is usually one leader to each, who produces something. The rest strive to make themselves like the leader and come off as badly as Atherton in "Atherton's Gambit," in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem. There is always the "brains" of the "movement." In poetry the "movement" itself has never mattered, it has been the individual. It always will be. You cannot any more democratize poetry than you can democratize a humming-bird—ex-



cept in this sense, that more people educate their finer faculties, or get them educated, as time goes on, and so come to look into the books that were always under their noses. Say to a poet that he *must* write about the laboring-man, the brothel, the tenement, the slaughter-house,—and you would have him immediately writing of all the fairy people and places and all the mythological rigamaroles in the world—and serve you right! But say to a poet that he *must* play safely inside the garden palings and you'll have him running down Queer Street in his night-shirt, waving a petroleum torch. Such are poets—in other words, they are strong individualists, and when they try to herd together the sight is just too pitiful for anything!

In closing I wish to say that I am not a Whitmanite. Whitman was a great writer, but from the present babble of all the young in America one would think that Whitman was the only man who had ever written poetry in America. Some of the adulation

is simply sickening. I wish some of our modern poets would stop quoting what Whitman thought about art and life and begin to produce art and life as *they* see it. This idea of "handing on the torch" is all very fine—but I have a lot more respect for a man who goes out to the pinewood and yanks off and lights his own. I should say to the modern American poet in general,—break away, break away,—get out and exercise your own soul, refuse to be smothered to death in a clique, a group, a theory. Keep the law of the outlier! It is well that you should have to make yourself more or less useful to the community, but keep your work your own. Play it lone-handed, possibly wrong-headed,—but keep your work free, individual, more than a thing of barter,—quite outside and unafraid of styles or fashions or popular applause or the lack of it. The poet has usually saved his soul in that way alone.

Mr. Joyce Kilmer is known as a poet,

critic and essayist. And one of the distinctive qualities of his writings is its discovery of the beauty and the spirituality of common life. And he finds a spiritual awakening to be the most important current in contemporary poetry.

I am not an enthusiastic student of literary movements, believing that literature exists independent of schools and cults and coteries, and for the most part uninfluenced by them. But I believe that a certain change is coming over the philosophies and attitudes toward life of those who make our poems and stories, and perhaps an attempt to describe this change will be considered an answer to your question.

The literature of America, like the literature of all the rest of the world, is progressing away from materialism toward idealism. Our writers are becoming aware of the fact that the subject of the greatest literature must be the soul of man, which is the most interesting thing in the world. The day of

pessimism and atheism and pseudopaganism in literature is past. A poet who today devoted his energies to attacking Christianity, as Swinburne did, would be unable to find a publisher. Paganism is as dead as ping-pong or as a bit of the slang of nineteen hundred and six.

Of course, there are a few writers who are archaic and reactionary. Mr. Theodore Dreiser is a reactionary clinging, as he does, to methods that were considered startling in Zola's day. But Mr. Dreiser's books are read only by people who are paid for the task by the Society for the Suppression of Vice. Miss Amy Lowell is a reactionary, because she is still writing and talking about Imagism—a fad popular among a few of the younger London poets back in nineteen thirteen. But no one reads Miss Lowell's writings—I have too much respect for her good taste to believe that she herself reads them. And these two writers are living anachronisms, not actually related to the literature of our day.

In the United States, we have so far escaped the stern discipline of the War, but our writers seem, nevertheless, to have learned their lesson from it. They have seen the handwriting on the wall of the world. When Rupert Brooke thanked God for the cleansing red flood of battle, when he rejoiced in the re-birth of honor and courage and faith and for the passing of "half-men and their dirty songs and dreary, and all the little emptiness of love," I think that he spoke for all the writers of the world—for those of the United States as well as for those of Europe. The late Emile Verhaeren exemplified the same renaissance of idealism when he wrote his noble poem on the shelling of Rheims Cathedral. He lamented the desecration of the cathedral not because it was a magnificent piece of architecture but because it was a holy place. This feeling in the heart of a man who for years had been counted among the enemies of religion was greatly significant. It was not until the churches were actually under fire that the



“intellectuals” of Europe knew their value. And the writers of America are getting this lesson at second hand.

Of course our greatest living writers have always been idealists—the Germans did not need to cross Belgian soil to discover to them their own souls. In the work of Anna Hempstead Branch, Edith Thomas, Louise Imogen Guiney and our other poets of authentic calling, there has always been a radiant idealism, a joyous recognition of life transcending life. 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. Those of our prose writers who have achieved most success—who have been most widely read and are most likely to continue to be read, are idealists. Imagine what worse-than-Zola O. Henry would have written, could he, like Zola, have seen only flesh and blood and brains! But he was a student



of the souls of men and women, and, therefore, he will be read by generations who never will hear the names of Artzibasheff's American imitators.

And since nineteen fourteen there has been noticeable in the literature produced in this country, especially in the poetry, a sort of spiritual frankness that is an encouraging sign. I think that the publication of Marjorie Pickthall's "Mary Shepherdess," in Scribner's for Christmas nineteen fifteen, of Margaret Widdemer's "The Old Road to Paradise," in one of Mr. Hearst's most widely circulated magazines, and perhaps of the long poem by Ridgeley Torrence in Scribner's for December, nineteen sixteen, are startling signs of the times. Much water—much blood-stained water has flowed under the bridge since Professor Henry Augustin Beers wrote that nine days' wonder, "The Dying Pantheist," or whatever it was called. No magazine of reputation would print that poem today.

I do not think that writers lead the

thought of their time, I think that they reflect and interpret it. The world today is forgetting all its fads and isms and picturesque heresies and returning to its primitive faith. Francis Thompson predicted this, years ago in his strange and beautiful poem "Lilium Regis." Our writers—except those who willfully separate themselves from the life around them—are recording and explaining and celebrating this return which is a most glorious advance.

Miss Josephine Preston Peabody is catholic in allowing the poet all freedoms. She finds the most significant tendency of modern poetry in its rediscovery of the spirit through suffering.

1. *Is there a new movement in poetry today in this country?*

No. I should say there is an eddy. It is related to movement, or progress, as a side-eddy is related to the main current of a river. That is to say: To my mind all real progress

in art or life means a wider and intenser consciousness. For that, two things are indispensable: analysis and synthesis. There is a new style (not movement) in poetry which represents the analytic element, with its joy in the discovery or re-discovery of certain tools of poetic expression, not apparently ready to its mind or hand, before. The synthetic impulse which would relate this new impulse to the past (and which will, in time) seems to be lacking at present to most of the prophets of the New Style.

I call this an eddy, because it is incident to the natural growth and onwardness of poetry; also because I think its chief use is Disturbance; Disturbance as a stimulus. In other words, the animated contention over all the terms of poetry which of late has filled so much space in the magazines, has also served to set many persons (disinterested and uninterested) questioning poetry, what the thing may be; even as, while the world endures, any indication of a street-fight will draw a crowd.

2. *What are its ideals?*

Its ideals, I should say, as far as ideals are shareable among any company of human beings, are precisely the ideals that have moved men to expression since time began: viz., the sense of Life; the passion to express Life, as it is or as it feels; the deep disinclination to take Life at hearsay; and an abounding enthusiasm for the newest tools that suits the hand of the craftsman.

The differences from this generality must be set forth by the exponents of "New Style." My own and only source of disagreement with prophets of this particular freedom, is my conviction that they are not free enough; and that they will allow no man freedoms of his own.

3. *What relation does it bear to the immediate past?*

The belief that it is a revolution. As a matter of fact, it would seem to be a very

natural activity, having its freshest roots in the rousing challenge of Walt Whitman, enriched and stimulated of late, by the craftsmanship, and the joy in their secret, of several striking French artists and their able fellows, here and in England.

4. *Which of many currents seem to you the most important?*

I think there are not many currents. There are many individuals; there are even more individualists. Setting aside all minor confusions of method and manner, the general movement of poetry still divides, as art has always done (*where there is division*)—and Man has always done, when he has felt as a house divided against itself,—into body and soul. Normally or synthesized, the Man is one. But these eddies of consciousness make twain of him very naturally; and in our own country at present, the two currents of artistic ideal express this temporary parting. One takes account of Man chiefly through his soul,—as we still find it useful to call



the Live-Thing-Within, that makes him walk and see. The other deals with the externals, the passing chances, the things walked by, the things seen; taking no account or rather, *trying not to take account* of that Live-Thing-Within, the seer.

Naturally, the Live-Thing-Within seems to me the thing which gives significance as well as sight to the man; to his limner, and to the tools chosen by that fellow-workman to carry out his design.

Even the most contentious artists are apt to agree that Art interprets Life. They disagree perpetually as to what Life may be; and as to the variety and fitness of one another's tools.

But, inasmuch as present-day life is discovering to Europe, through suffering, the soul it had come to doubt, I think the most significant Art of today is the art that bears witness to this suffering, this discovery, this painful birth of a triumphing Spirit.

5. *What relation does your own work bear to this new movement?*



'A merely human relation: inasmuch as all sincere and unified work is a spontaneous growth of one's own spirit, regardless of what others are doing or are like to do. Artistic beliefs are as different in color as religions; and there are as many religions as there are individuals.

I am for all freedoms; even other people's. I am also for all manner of symmetries, rhythms, and musics (overflowing with delight for me) that might strike other minds as bonds for them. A new method seems to me preposterous only (but always) when it proposes to "displace" some heritage of beauty, that has survived by virtue of beauty, from the indifferent past. The past, be it noted, is not with us to serve as curator of that heritage, so often referred to by contemporary writers as an archæological display. As if a water-lily must needs displace the rose.

My working faith is this: To the workman, his choice of tools. To the reader, his own delights.

6. *What is your criticism of present literature?*

That is,—when it is voice without spirit?

Too little heart for Real Life, in spite of the flourish of trumpets. Too little courage to face the mysteries of the dark, with so few earnings in its pocket.—No real fortitude; or little. Struggle it can bear, and welcome; but not silence or solitude. It can attack: it cannot face a siege. It is rich in bragging body. It is feeble of vision.

I might sum up all, with a flouting word of little-sister brevity:—"Talk less.—Sing more."

Mr. Ridgely Torrence likewise finds us to be in a period of spiritual regeneration. And he points out that unless vision controls the poet, his work is worthless.

Surely there can be but one ideal and that must be held by each individual writer, namely: to express the truth that is in him or her.

A time of visions and renewed faith is beginning faintly to dawn and this is not unrumoured among Americans.

If there are many "currents" in this "movement," I am not concerned with which is the most important, I am only interested in what a writer has to say. If he has, in the highest sense, something to say, he will not reveal it until it has been wholly fused in the fires of his heart and imagination and then it will be expressed in its inevitable and perfect form. One might pursue this, but a single example will serve: Emerson knew but one or two tunes, and those doggerel ones, but by virtue of his burning secret his penny pipes gave forth a glorious poetry, the distilled essence of song.



**THE PESSIMISTS**





## IV

### THE PESSIMISTS

PESSIMISM, we are told by the Standard Dictionary, is a disposition to take a gloomy view of affairs. No other word so closely approximates the attitude taken by these four writers toward our contemporary literature. One tells us that today we are upon the eve of birth, and implies that the contemporary movement in literature is the first evidence of a future parturition, but that, of itself, it has accomplished nothing. Another tells us that there is nothing to distinguish American literature from English literature. And both of the remaining two see no evidence of any significant movement in the writing that is being done today.

Mr. Benjamin DeCasseres explains his

own work. And he tells us what is wrong with our literature.

There is undoubtedly a new movement in our literature today. We are on the eve of *Birth*. There are no ideals that I can perceive. It is wildly spontaneous, individualistic and anarchic. Its relation to the immediate past will, I think, be a complete demolition of the stupidities and puritanism that have ossified us and petrified us. Its watchword will be Liberty. My own work is destructive and bears no relation to the past American literature. As I am an imaginative ironist and a mystical pessimist, my roots are in the Latin civilization of Europe, though I count among my forebears Poe and Walt Whitman.

Imagination, irony and the superb amoralism of Greece—that is what my work stands for, and it is that that I hope to see dominate the Coming Age in this country. The nine vital books (poetry, essay, satire, short stories, epigrams, philosophical paragraphs and

confessions) which I have written, and which no publisher as yet will publish, are, because of their rejection, an indictment against the enormous stupidity of the *status quo* here in America. My own work is epochal in American literature; but I cannot compete with the hopeless sissification of our college-ridden publishing houses and magazines.

Today the symbol of American literature should be a teething ring; tomorrow I hope it will be two eagles ridden by Lucifer and Aphrodite.

Mr. Floyd Dell, one of the editors of *The Masses*, claims that we have no truly national literature.

(1) "Our literature"—if you mean by that American literature, there isn't any such thing as distinguished from English literature. In the United States, the magazine has a more powerful and more disastrous influence than in England, where fiction is still written for readers of

*books.* But there are signs that American fiction is bursting its magazine bounds. The most significant influence upon American writing seems to be the example of H. G. Wells and the half dozen other Englishmen who are trying to draw true pictures of life. (2) The ideal of the newer kind of writers in this country is to depict America as they see it—a sufficiently good ideal, and one that, fortunately, the magazines are pretty much in sympathy with. (3) “The immediate past,” I take it, is the historical novel. It was, I suppose, Frank Norris who ushered in the new era. Our relation to the historical novel past consists in our having grown up. But why try to create “periods”? There have nearly always been people in the United States who tried to tell the truth about what they saw. (4) If there must be “currents,” let us say there is a current setting toward “style” and another current setting toward “journalism.” I am in sympathy with the latter. (6) American fiction seems to me in the main too morally provincial.

Mr. Donald Marquis is a poet who is also a novelist and satirist. His own modest appraisal of his work does not do it justice. His "Cruise of the Jasper B.," and especially his "Hermione," a collection of satiric essays upon the contemporary mind, are delightful contributions to our recent writing. His column, "The Sun Dial," in the *New York Evening Sun*, offers an asylum to many young poets, and is an excellent example of the new literary current in American journalism.

(1) There are many experiments, fads, imitations of European authors, minor innovations, but I see nothing of sufficient bulk or significance to deserve being called the new movement; or in the sense that the Impressionist painters inaugurated a new movement, or in the sense that Wagner's music was new movement.

This also disposes of questions 2, 3 and 4.

(5) My own work doesn't amount to a tinker's dam in relation to anything import-



ant. I'm only getting started, and have a disinclination towards kidding myself.

(6) Contemporary American *literature* is all right . . . what there is of it. If I had a sure recipe for making more of it, I wouldn't tell anybody; I'd use the recipe in my business. But there are no recipes, and can be none. There are only men who have power, and men who lack power. The men who lack power cluster around the men who have power . . . and that is all a movement is.

Mr. John Curtis Underwood is a poet and critic. He bases his adverse criticism of our contemporary literature upon certain conditioning factors in our national life which he believes to be responsible for making our psychology what it is.

In "The Research Magnificent," H. G. Wells has said something about an imaginary effort to organize the best thought of the world through the mediums of special-



ized effort and printing house propaganda. In an earlier novel he has laid stress on an insistent need for "resonators," people of normal intelligence and culture capable in one way or another of receiving and transmitting human progress in terms of art and science and socialized and efficient good will. During the last three or four years, progress in these directions in North America, taken as a whole, seems to me backward rather than forward.

Any trend of thought and feeling as vast in its superficial extent, as barren in its positive results, so far, cannot be judged, condemned or inspired independently of the environment that produces it and which it reflects, however trivially and commercially. It cannot be judged constructively without some taking of contributing testimony from its sister arts of the drama, the moving picture and American book and magazine illustration, popularly patronized and exploited from Broadway to Los Angeles. It cannot continue to be written and printed (not even

by its rarest and strongest; its finest and most efficient producers and distributors) free from the inevitable reaction upon it of the manners and customs, the commercial and civic immorality, the mean average intelligence and the culture rudimentary or otherwise of the millions who read, as well as the hundreds or the thousands who write or who edit. It cannot continue to represent and misrepresent the incompatible national, pacificistic and socialistic ideals variously indulged in by 100,000,000 people loosely grouped together by conventional legal and police protection without abandoning, sooner or later, one very traditional and American attitude of academic neutrality toward the problems of the masses and the classes in America (which very definitely includes Mexico today) and the rest of the world on the other side of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

For the vast majority of the American public who indirectly produce and modify American journalism and literature today as

no publisher's following or look to local *coterie* ever has done or will do, the literary center of America continues to be the hotel, railroad station and street corner newsstand, quite as definitely and extravagantly as it did more than three years ago when the following paragraphs of the preface to my *Literature and Insurgency* were written.

Criticism of literature *per se* is a lost art in America today. Tomorrow or the day after it will come back as an exact science and part of a constructive insurgent revolt against machine-made and slipshod conditions in literature and in the life that literature interprets.

Any American criticism that is fit to survive or worthy of the name, must recognize that authors, editors, publishers, malefactors of great and lesser circulation and all their works, are to be classed essentially as products of environment and forces that react on the same, and so dealt with.

The fact that muck-raking has been made profitable and that our muck-raking maga-

zines have proved their fitness to survive and to adapt themselves to American needs and ideals of today, represents the most important economic advance of the last fifty years.

Sooner or later in the present campaign of education, in the new reorganization and realignment of our mental and moral assets and liabilities, our present system of literary and journalistic production and distribution is due to come in for its full share of muck-raking and constructive criticism.

The series of articles on *The American Newspaper*, by Will Irwin, published in *Collier's Weekly* during the summer of 1911, sufficiently foreshadows this tendency. A similar series of articles on *The American Magazines* by an author of equal reputation, inspired by an equal passion for speaking the truth without fear or favor to anyone, might prove quite as much to the point.

If our journalism, like the machine politics that it represents, is our most crying national disgrace today; if numbers of our yellowest journals and the smuggest and most

conventionally respectable of the American press "higher up" are the mouthpieces of Big Business, and directly or indirectly its paid prostitutes and liars, the very cynicism of their open immorality has served to divert public attention from other vital factors in the formative processes of American thought and literary and social morality, that in the long run cannot and will not be disregarded.

Any office boy that reads and reflects, that has any adequate sense of literary values in the up-to-date output of the American public library and magazine world, that has any real appreciation of the editorials and the best fiction in both *The Popular Magazine* and *The Saturday Evening Post*; can, if so inclined, frankly characterize and criticise the woman-produced-read-and-catered-to-literature of the day and hour in America, in terms that might well make Washington Irving, Lowell, Lanier, Emerson and Hawthorne turn over in their graves and gasp.

At the same time it takes a social and lit-



erary vivisector of the first order like David Graham Phillips to reveal the pretenses and the posturings of the "good" woman of America—the conscious and unconscious literary and artistic snobbery of the socially eligible and refined partners, wives, mothers, daughters and sisters of our most prominent malefactors of great wealth, and their subordinates and trade rivals—for exactly what they are worth.

Poetry that is real, that is fit to survive through the centuries, needs no defence. Like truth, the very vital color of whose voice it is, it rises triumphant from each defeat to summon men and women to greater heights of aspiration, to greater intensities and charities of common humanity shared and exalted. Such poetry is ready for the making in America today. Great poetry like all great literature is born of storm and stress in the individual or the community.

There never was a time in the history of the world when the material of such poetry, so rich and complex in its color scheme, so



potent and vital in its content and inspiration, lay so close at hand beneath the eyes too blind to see it, as in America, the melting pot of the nations, today.

And there never was a century in the history of man's long struggle upward from the brute, when the heart and soul of a great nation were so restlessly expectant of some spiritual message, something of lasting and significant value in prose or verse, to give charm, color and power to the dreariness and debauchery of everyday, workaday existence, as the beginning of this Twentieth Century and the present month, week, day and hour of this year of grace in conventionally Christian America.

Poetry and prose of this order of distinction the System that dominates literary America has denied us; and it is not too much to say that if fifty per cent of our most misrepresentative American magazines for the high brow and the man in the street alike and some ninety per cent of their parasites and prostitutes, their numerous head-line

contributors, could be blotted out of existence tomorrow, the American people as a whole would be better rather than worse off.

This is said in all charity to literary producers, publishers, middlemen, agents, editors, and sub-editors who, like their readers, have not the brains, the courage and the capacity to free themselves from false positions, and who remain equally the victims of the machine rule that today dominates every department of American life and literature.

Outside the slum and the university, the misdirected and ineffectual energies of our conventional churches, the defective working of our free public educational system, and the tentative efforts of a few public libraries, mental and moral conservatism of the individual and the race is an undiscovered country to the mass of the American people today.

Men like Norris and Phillips have begun to unmask its vistas. The muck-rake magazines have revealed the exceeding grimness of its frontier.

But in general we remain as we have been since the American pioneer learned to dominate the forest, the prairie, the desert, the mountains and the rivers by machinery, and in turn suffered the machinery that he had evolved to dominate him; and we exist today a machine-made people, conventionalized, standardized, commercialized as to our food, clothes, houses, homes, offices, factories, theaters; amusements, social wants, pleasures and obligations; working plans; civic and social responsibilities, local and national pride, and its absence or perversion.

If a large fraction of the American people are systematically sweated and underfed, underpaid and overcharged, crowded into cars like cattle, and housed in dwellings where noise, dirt, infection and the extremes of heat and cold are variable quantities, always to be met and fought with, not in the slums alone; obviously the physical stamina and morals of the race must in the long run suffer, while the mean mental and moral level

must at the same time be brutalized and debased.

Today we have our pure food law and its evasions, demonstrations of one sort or another against the meat trust and the coal trust, and the present perplexities of our public utilities commission.

Similarly, corporate aggressions against the public domains and organized looting of water, forest, and mineral rights have finally resulted in a national programme of conservation in things material.

We have not yet reached the point of demanding a pure thought law, a legal restriction of the yellowest phases of our yellow journalism, or a national movement for the conservation of literary opportunity and reward, and of the comparatively small proportion of his or her time that the average American can or will devote to any printed matter that is not mere journalism or the news of the day.

Such a movement is bound to come some time. It will depend when it does come far

more on the canons of sound and scientific criticism of literature and life in the largest sense, than on any possible or impossible arbitrary legal enactment.

At the same time, if any protective tariff is at all desirable or legitimate at any period of American growth, the details of an amendment to our national copyright law exacting a national tax in the form of a cumulative royalty on every copyrighted foreign book and serial publication of recent date, and the requirement of copyright registration and similar cumulative royalties in the case of foreign plays produced on the American stage, might be arranged easily enough, once the mass of the American people made up its mind that such a state of things was desirable, and determined to have it.

Such a remedy might be far from ideal; at any rate, it could hardly leave American literature and the American stage in a worse state than that in which we find them both today.

It would at least relieve us of the commer-



cialized immoralities and hysterics of imported Elinor Glyns and the Marie Corellis, and leave us the power to deal adequately with our own Chambereses and McCutcheons.

It might reduce local consumption of Materlinck, Shaw and Chesterton. It might at the same time stimulate the production of essentially American playwrights, poets, novelists, essayists and critics.

It would at least help to stimulate our racial sense of ultimate destiny in the world of thought and of literature, and our national acceptance of the fact that literature, like all other human phenomena, is distinctly a product of environment in the material, as well as the spiritual sense.

During the last forty months my persuasion of America's immediate emergence toward ultimate destiny and her general recognition of any vital need of the inspiration that poetry and literature in general achieves has been more or less modified. Superficially, we have gone from bad to worse, by machinery, in world's record time. This may



be merely the recurrent and material sag in the wave of human progress, whose crest, even today, demands generations and centuries of striving toward. This small item on the credit side of the account remains; in the history of the literature of every lost nation once worthy to have a history and a literature, the period immediately preceding final national decadence and fall was that of the finest flowering of the art and literature in question. This may be true today of Belgium, also unprepared to a certain extent. (In Belgium's case we, like the rest of the world, are still entitled to have our doubts. In our own case, it is hard to believe that Robert W. Chambers, Henry James, Harold Bell Wright, George Sylvester Viereck, Gertrude Atherton and Marjorie Benton Cooke any more fully, firmly and finally represent or misrepresent us than William Jennings Bryan, Henry Ford, Woodrow Wilson, Josephus Daniels and Newton D. Baker do.)

In the meantime, we are assured by publi-

cists of one brand or another that there is a new movement toward a new and larger freedom in art and literature as well as life. Probably there was some such movement in Babel just before the confusion of tongues was achieved, and the work of the first skyscraper on record was brought to an abrupt conclusion. If our literary and artistic interpretations have so far failed to measure up to our skyscrapers and their builders, and the builders of the foundations on which those skyscrapers were reared; it may be the world's loss no less than ours. Again, it may not be. Literary publishers and producers seem to take temporary ebulliences of interest and inversions of technic in American poetry, like American painting today, entirely too seriously. One is led to suspect a certain commercialism, not to say cynicism, in certain publishers and art dealers—to go no further—in this respect. And for the mass of intelligent American readers and appreciators, the new poetry, like the new art in America, which has begun by claim-

ing everything (and so assumed a very considerable burden of proof), has yet, save in the case of sporadic and technical instances, to prove its case.

More recently, Mr. Louis Untermeyer, for many of whose poems and for much of whose critical information in detail I have a very real respect and regard, makes himself the spokesman of a get-together movement in American literature Common, Poetry Preferred, which, on the surface at least, has to do with the spirit no less than the letter of the law. He tells us that our thinking is improving architecturally . . . a hundred undermined and rotting formulas have been explored and . . . And poetry, being the most patrician of all the crafts, has at least become democratized. All this and a good deal that follows this in some three thousand words of "a compilation of three *causeries* which were published in the *Review of Reviews*, the *New York Evening Post* and the *Chicago Evening Post*," which was mailed me late in November this year,

appears to me to be more in the nature of a rather too optimistic resumé than an absolutely constructive and impartial criticism. At the same time, as Percy Mackaye says, "poetry needs to be advertised."

I believe that Mr. Untermeyer is sincere and close to the truth when he says: "For poetry is something more than a graceful, literary escape from life. It is a spirited encounter with it." But in his compilation of our poetic assets and personalities in America up to date, and in the general trend of the times, I do not find conclusive evidence that poetry in America today is proportionately any nearer to perfection technically or any more of a counsel of perfection in the lives of rich and poor, the masses and the *illuminati*, than it was three years, or a little more than three years, ago. With all due respect for Mr. Brownell and one or two of the younger men connected with *The New Republic* and the *Seven Arts Magazine* and Mr. Untermeyer himself, I do not believe there is a single critic in America today qualified

by position and native capacity to interpret American literary tendencies authoritatively any more than there is a single American poet today capable of inspiring and representing his generation as Whitman and Pope did theirs.

Rather than the blurbs and the business of blurbing, the American people, its poets and other authors today need a little sound sense and salutary humility in esteeming accurately and impartially their approximate importance in the cosmic scheme of things.

Talma said to Rachel once: "A little sorrow is what you need, my child, to make of you a great actress." But the American nation today needs more.

More than a hundred years ago Alexander Pope wrote: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," and failed to realize just how little the little learning easily come by of the machine, of the public school, of the public library, of the typical American daily morning and evening paper and monthly magazine would have for us today.



If American literature in the last fifty years of easy money since our Civil War has not made good as Russian literature has in the lives of Turgenev, Tolstoi, Dostoievsky, Gogol, Gorki, Andreyev and their contemporaries, in the permanent products of organized human thought and emotion, it is true that Russian literature, like Russian life, fights and bleeds today for freedom and racial expression, and in the fighting and bleeding is finding herself.

Russia out of her Nihilists and her ikons and the blind urge toward light of her masses has achieved a national literature that voices a national soul. In the meanwhile, we have manufactured and exploited the literature of the advertising page and porter, the market report, the society column, the yellow journal, the yellower magazine, the telephone book, the motor blue book, the Christian Science reading room, the feminist and pacifist propaganda, the Congressional Record and the moving picture scenario. We have also produced an Anthony Comstock and his



successor, the lady novelist, the newer school of feminism in fiction, the sporting page and Sunday supplement cartoon serial, the motor art catalogue, the prospectus of the hotel and the train *de luxe*, and the publisher's blurb.

Under all these more or less superficial passions in print and signs of the times it may be that the soul of America is still dumbly and passionately awake, still urgently striving through the richest material for prose and verse that any nation has ever known toward something like adequate and inspiring national expression. It may be that among our young men already beginning to be known there is another Frank Norris, another David Graham Phillips, another Stephen Crane, another William Vaughn Moody in the making. It may be, but the signs of the times say otherwise.

If the American Democracy today is fundamentally more than a counterfeit democracy of pretence, on a paper basis expressed in notes to Germany and the voice of the

press-agent everywhere, if it is anything more than the scum of the world's melting pot, all these matters will arrange themselves racially in time.

Otherwise not.

# THE TRADITIONALISTS



## V

### THE TRADITIONALISTS

THE point of view of the six authors who have been grouped here as traditionalists receives its fullest explanation in the essay contributed by Mr. Ledoux. They unite in believing that contemporary poetry has discovered no new beauty to us, that its chief emphasis has been put upon matters of technique which, when all is said and done, are neither new nor of compelling importance. They feel that our life is unorganized and chaotic, and that the lack of form in which it has found expression interprets nothing essentially enduring. In contrast to the poets who seek to react to those phases of experience which are peculiarly of our own time, and which give life here and now in

America those qualities which distinguish it from the past, the traditionalists assert that the fundamental truths of life are changeless, and that it is the poet's business to deal with eternal truths, and that a work of art which is concerned chiefly with what is contemporary must be truly vital to survive the passing away of its temporary allusion.

Mrs. Fannie Stearns Gifford is well known as a writer of charming lyrics.

It seems to me that in Poetry, as in the other arts, there cannot be any real novelty. Poetry is like a great fact of Nature. The Force of Gravity remains the same forever. There is nothing new about it except the new discoveries that may be made as to its powers; the new application of its powers to the uses of life.

So Poetry is never old, and never new. Its struggle is the ancient one to breathe the wind of spiritual beauty and undying truth



into material transiencies. The only real question about Poetry is not whether it uses regular rhythms and rhymes, or odd free forms; not whether it interprets its subjects directly or by remote suggestions, but whether it *is* Poetry or not, by any of the final tests. These tests are most difficult to define or describe, but they include the qualities of beauty, power and truth in all their familiar and unfamiliar phases.

The "New Poetry" of which one hears so constantly today seems to me an attempt, sometimes sincere, sometimes meritricious, to express the restless and troubled spirit of the age in restless and unrestrained forms. Its novelty consists in only one element: its emphasis on the freedom of the poet to use matter and manner hitherto dogmatically banned as "unpoetical."

But the task (or joy) of the Poet is unchanged. A painter whose palette has held only dim neutral tints may discover wild blues and greens and reds free for his use, but his problems will not be new nor his

powers heightened. A poet in a paradise of bizarre imaginings and untrammelled verse must still see and speak according to his own vision, or he is not poet at all.

It is difficult for me to classify Poetry; and when I find it classified, a curious revulsion sweeps over me, and I am inclined to echo Gamaliel's words:

"If this counsel be of men, it will come to naught; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it."

All new movements in Poetry or in life must finally be left to the same impartial judgment.

My own verse has, I think, no relationship to any movement. It is made up of echoes of other people's poetry, and of my own chance imaginings. In form it belongs clearly to the "old" type, for I like the music of almost song-like rhythms and cadences. It is, for me, a highly personal possession, somewhat like the clothes I make for myself or the flowers I try to grow, both in interest and in negligibility.

But, fortunately, other American poets have a higher idealism and a broader calling. The work of Josephine Preston Peabody is to me representative of the best type of Poetry that America is writing now. Her alert, human sympathy, her vision of high, unfading truth, and her powers of beautiful song, satisfy more honest and deep demands than any of the so-called "New" schools of verse. There are other poets with the same ideals, if not the same ways of expressing them.

A man must have Air, and Water, and Sleep, and Work, and Love, over and over and over. Like all those great simplicities, Poetry is Poetry, over and over and over.

Mr. Louis V. Ledoux has found his inspiration chiefly in Greek legend. His most recent volume, "The Story of Eleusis," is a poetic drama of great beauty and deep spiritual vision. His essay is important as a criticism of the new spirit in our poetry from the viewpoint of a conservative,

The history of art, like the history of anything else, is the record of cycles of bloom and decay. The course of literature is a series of movements which are like the slow swinging of some great pendulum, or would be like it were there not present in art, as in life, a gradual evolution which makes any cycle, any one swing of the pendulum, a little different from its predecessor and renders the image inexact. What happens in art is like, in a smaller way, what happens in nature: earth moves through a perpetual recurrence of Spring and Autumn from some beginning of which we know little to some end of which we know nothing at all; but in this apparent repetition there is a comparatively unapparent growth, a principle of change that can only be observed in a series of centuries. The pendulum swing of literature is easier to follow than is its evolution.

There are only a limited number of great ideas, or distinctive mental and emotional attitudes toward life, and these are period-

ically discovered by new generations of artists just as each new generation of children discovers for itself certain facts of life which come to them with the force of a previously withheld revelation. Some one probably had announced the return to nature idea before Longus wrote "Daphnis and Chloe," and when time was ripe Rousseau, Bernardin de St. Pierre, Chateaubriand and the others of that age discovered it again; soon, when the force that was in Walt Whitman has been spent, some one will reannounce the return to nature, and the announcement will be of as much value and novelty to the new generation as that made by Longus was to the one in which he lived. Just now in America there is a tendency to consider the life of the laboring classes—the comparatively uneducated and unprosperous—the best material for poetry; the pendulum is where it was when Crabbe wrote his *Tales of village life* and Wordsworth gave English literature a "new" subject, and precisely where it was when the poets and



sculptors of third century Greece were producing statuettes of fagot-gatherers bowed beneath their burdens and writing idylls and comedies about the problems of the proletariat.

Much has been said lately about what is called "the new poetry," the claim of novelty being based apparently on three things: First, the predilection for subjects taken from the life of what used to be the lower classes and the interest in social problems seen from the point of view of the oppressed or unfortunate; second, the fondness for distinctively contemporary and probably ephemeral adjuncts such as the sky-scraper and the Ford car; and third, the development of a new form of expression necessitated by the newness of the thing to be expressed. The validity of the first claim has been somewhat inadequately discussed already, and of the second it may be said that the use of contemporary adjuncts does more to militate against the endurance of a work of art than anything else could; only a poem



of extraordinary vitality can live under such a burden. A lesser poet than Dante could not have survived the amount of contemporary scientific achievement and political dissension that makes the *Divine Comedy* a happy pasture for the Scholiast; but a more simple instance may be drawn from Aristophanes. No author is more filled than he with contemporary and local allusions; to understand half of what his original audience got from him it is necessary to master a volume of footnotes greater than that of the text, but no one except an antiquarian would read Aristophanes for the things in his work that were primarily of contemporary importance. One of his plays opens somewhat as follows—I am quoting from memory and away from my books:

Which of the old jokes shall I crack, Master?  
 Almost any of them; the audience is sure to laugh, but for God's sake don't tell the story about So-and-So; that's too old.

The story about So-and-So is as much of a

mystery to me as what happened to old Grouse in the gun-room; but that element in the bit of dialogue which is not dependent upon the contemporary point makes the lines for all time a perfect opening for comedy. The admission of a Ford car or a sky-scraper into a poem will tend to diminish rather than to increase its chance of enduring, and consequently, its value as a work of art.

The third point upon which the exponents of the "new poetry" base their claim to newness and, what is of considerably more importance, to artistic worth, is the form in which they express what they have to say. This is merely a question of technique, and is of little interest to anyone except artisans of the poetic craft. The layman is like a person surrounded by a high board fence on the other side of which are stretches of beautiful landscape; the business of the poet is to make a hole for him through which he can see the beauty that is beyond, and to the man inside it matters little how the hole is made, the vision is what he needs to have

given him. A question of technique would not be mentioned here had not some writers of verse obtruded it on public attention, insisting that holes must be bored with a gimlet rather than with an auger, and this must be answered. The view on the other side of the fence is in no way different from what it always has been, and the poet is free to choose whatever tool suits him best; he must remember, however, that the sole reason for making the hole is to give the man inside a vision that he could not have gotten without the poetic intermediary. Augers and gimlets are equally useless when the hole is made in a board beyond which there is nothing, for what the poet says is of infinitely more importance than is the choice of the form in which he chooses to say it.

The exponents of free-verse have claimed that it was a new development in art, and the validity of this claim must also be discussed. There is nothing new about the free-verse of the present except the exaggeration of its use; all competent writers from the

Greek dramatists downward have introduced metrical variations to avoid monotony, and particularly to produce certain special effects, usually of emphasis. This tendency to exaggerate a minor point of technique is characteristic of contemporary art just as other forms of exaggeration are characteristic of contemporary life; there was a sculptor not long ago who realized poignantly what everyone had always known, that the human head is shaped more like an egg than it is like an orange and the busts he produced emphasized the ovoid form to the exclusion of all traces of physiognomy. Perfection of form certainly cannot hurt a work of art, and the demand that artistic expression should be a primitive rhythmic is based on instinct.

The other so-called modern schools can all be related to something in the past; Imagism, for example, in its practice, if not in its theory, is like an unconscious revival of the Elizabethan conceit. The slopes of Parnassus have always been covered with mush-

rooms, but in the restless eagerness and hurry of our life we are prone to rush out into the wilderness after new things, and when the artist out there calls loudly enough about the novelty of his wares, we run to see, forgetting the gist of the whole matter, which is this: a new thing, like an old one, may be either worthless or of value; the quality of newness or the reverse that is in it having little or nothing to do with its worth as poetry or as an interpretation of life. A Ford car might be mentioned in a poor poem or a good one, the fact of its mention neither raises nor diminishes the value of the piece, for the things that the poet's vision ought to make him see are things that endure, and these are without necessary localization in time or place—as true to San Francisco as to Athens, to New York as to Peking. The setting of a poem makes little difference.

America is uncrystallized in its democracy, in its life and, by consequence, in its art; a chaos cannot be expressed or interpreted by crystallized forms and uncrystallized form-



lessness, while it may express, without art, cannot interpret. The crystal that may ultimately appear has not yet been defined, and while many contrary tendencies are discernible, there is no definite indication of the future. The pendulum swings, and after one period follows another; but in each succession there is variation, and the swinging has always been accompanied by a number of eccentric attempts to get away from the track.

The question as to the relation of my own work to the present state and future prospects of American poetry is a difficult one to answer. A wave does not go in an opposite direction to the rest of the sea, and all I can say is that to my mind the essential, enduring things of life being infinitely varied, it is the business of the poet simply to make his hole in that part of the fence where he believes what he can show to be at its finest, to bring as much of his vision as he can, as much interpretation as he can to the man inside, and to leave ten-



dencies on the knees of the gods. I cannot, however, see the advantage of putting the hole in the back of the fence, where only a brick wall will be disclosed, or the neighbors' wash which hung out today will tomorrow be gone, when there is the great sweep of hill and valley in front. There are certain things that every one in all time must face,—death, for example,—and if the poet illumines them he has a better chance of reaching more people for a longer period than if he treats of things in their aspects that have merely temporary significance for a few. Men die at one place as at another, and in its essentials the problem was the same to the caveman that it is to the factory-worker. What a poet has to say—the power and quality of his vision—is what counts, and this comes to him from without, or from within, and usually is independent of volition; all he can do, and each for himself alone must strive faithfully to do it, is to express what he finds in him in the best manner that is possible for him to attain. Poetry is not a parlor accom-

plishment, nor a means of notoriety, and the genuine poet, especially in the America of to-day, is under obligations to others as well as to himself.

This is not a formal essay; it is merely an attempt to answer the given questions as directly and as concisely as possible; and I have limited what has been said to the subject of poetry. Much of what I have tried to bring out, however, can be applied with equal justice to other branches of literature and to other arts, particularly to painting.

Mr. John G. Neihardt is well known as the author of "The Song of Hugh Glass," "The Quest," several other volumes of verse, two novels, "The Dawn Builder" and "Life's Lure," a volume of short stories entitled, "The Lonesome Trail," and a book of travel, "The River and I."

During the past six years something over two thousand new books, representing every phase of modern literature, have passed through my hands. About half of these I

have read, and the rest I have scanned. I am now reading at the least three representative current books every week and scanning as many more volumes. As a result of this rather strenuous experience I am convinced that a new movement is indeed manifest in our literature. As to its ideals, they are, as everybody knows, supposed to be concerned with democracy. Its relation to the Past is, in general, the relation of a brilliant upstart youth to his dogmatic elders.

The storm-center of the literary revolt we are now witnessing is undoubtedly in poetry, and for the sake of brevity I prefer to limit my remarks thereto. As I have noted, the "new" poetry is said to be democratic. It is democratic in the sense that nearly everyone seems to be engaged in writing it; for now that the difficulties of the art have been removed, a long and faithful apprenticeship seems no longer to be necessary. Anyone possessing pen, paper and an assortment of vague emotions may easily qualify. Thus the realm of poetry has been fitted with

strictly modern improvements. One no longer scales Parnassus; one takes the elevator. The "new" poetry is democratic also in the sense that the majority of our poets profess to be greatly in love with the People. Posterity will decide as to how much of this is pose, inspired by that overwrought humanitarianism now so much in vogue. As a reaction against a barren formalism, the "new" poetry will no doubt serve a good purpose in the end. Experimentation is always necessary in a universe where rigidity is death.

But I do not forget, as many of my contemporaries seem to do, that the world did not begin with the present decade; that world literature is a living thing; that its body is tradition, and that a poet can no more dispense at will with that tradition than he can dispense with that complex of psychic tendencies which he inherits from his ancestors and with which, plus his individual experiences, he must build his own unique personality.

Further, I know, as any student of great poetry must know, that by ignoring the Past the poet deliberately sacrifices the chief source of poetic power. For it is mainly by appealing to memory that poetry works its magic: and the individual memory is too brief, too fragmentary. The racial memory, rich with the distilled experience of countless men and women, is necessary; and racial memory is literary tradition.

So much for substance. As to method, I am disposed to question those who talk so glibly of "free form" and who apparently do not understand that freedom cannot be realized except by obedience to unyielding law. I suspect that these "*vers libristes*" confuse the meaning of "freedom" and "license"—a confusion characteristic of all so-called "democratic" revolts. I find, also, that as sense of form decreases, vagueness of thought generally increases.

The key to the situation, it has seemed to me, is generally overlooked. We err in fancying that democracy is anything more than



a dream. So far, all that has ever resulted from a so-called "democratic" revolt has been a state of anarchy. We speak of "democratic" America; and America is not democratic, but individualistic—the exact opposite. Likewise, we speak of a democratic movement in poetry. What we have is an individualistic movement; and individualism is anarchy.

From our economic system on up (or down!) to our moral code, we are either individualistic or are rapidly drifting in that direction. And that is why we are experiencing an orgy of unsupported individual opinion in nearly every field of human endeavor—religion conspicuously included! We have already repudiated or are tending to repudiate all standards of judgment (which are the result of the accumulated experience of the race), and we have set up individual caprice as a guide. For this reason we have few authoritative critics.

But I am no pessimist. On the contrary, I have the greatest confidence in the future



of American poetry. Already we have some very remarkable poets and others are in the making. The change which will reveal the good and destroy the bad in the new movement will, it seems to me, be primarily economic and governmental. On the economic side, individualism must be crushed. On the governmental side, there must be a strong centralization of power, bringing back to the people the fine old sense of obedience which we have temporarily lost. Some great national danger will probably hasten that inevitable change. Powder smoke might cleanse us.

Mr. Edward Arlington Robinson, author of "The Town Down the River," "Captain Craig," "The Man Against the Sky," and of a comedy, "Van Zorn," has, perhaps more than any other of our contemporary poets, sought to express an intellectual content in his verse.

You ask me if I think there is a new movement in poetry, and my reply is that there

is always a new movement in poetry. There is always a new movement in everything, including each new inch of each new revolution of the earth around the sun. But if you mean to ask me if this new movement implies necessarily any radical change in the structure or in the general nature of what the world has agreed thus far to call poetry, I shall have to tell you that I do not think so—knowing very well that my answer is worth no more than that of any other relatively intelligent individual.

In referring to a new movement I assume that you refer primarily to *vers libre*—a form, or lack of form, that may or may not produce pleasant results. I do not know that there is any final reason why this mode of expression should not give pleasure as often as any other, although I do know, so far as I am concerned, that in the majority of cases it does not. I have read furlongs of it, but the amount that has given me any solid satisfaction could easily be measured in a few yards at the most. I say this with

reluctance, for I know that some of my friends will disagree with me entirely, and be tempted in all probability to call me names. Some of them may call me a conservative, others a reactionary; and all this in spite of the fact that I have been accused in the past of being, if anything, too modern. But these accusations were made long ago; and I fancy that my limited public has come by this time to see that I was never so perilously modern, after all.

If there be a new movement in poetry that can be definitely labeled, such a movement will probably be found to have more to do with vocabulary and verbal arrangement than with metrical or non-metrical form. The poetry of the next few hundred years will in all probability have an incisiveness and a clarity that have not generally prevailed heretofore, and some of the best of it may be written in *vers libre*; although my own opinion is that most of the best of it will be written in some form or other that shall have a definite metrical pattern. I may be

grievously in the wrong, yet it seems to me that up to this time *vers libre* has been its own worst indictment, in that perhaps less than one per cent of it may be said to possess the quality that gives pleasure. In spite of the fact that it has produced several interesting and stimulating results, I am inclined to the belief that the *vers libre* movement has seen its best days, and that the few writers who have succeeded in making it interesting are still to do their best work along more traditional lines, in which there is room for any amount of innovation and variety. But, as I said before, my opinion is merely that of an individual, possibly prejudiced, and is, therefore, to be taken as such and as nothing more.

In reply to your request for a criticism of contemporary American literature, perhaps I had better keep to the subject of poetry and express my belief in the genuineness of its "revival" and in the significance of much that has been published during the past few years.

Mrs. Blanche Shoemaker Wagstaff's most recent volume is "Eris."

It is my belief that the new movement in modern literature and art is an expression of social democracy, a note of internationalism that indicates the attitude of the world today. The European war has brought all nations face to face with the sternest facts of existence, and as a result poetry has become inoculated with a vigorous realism—it is stripped of symbol and romantic suggestion; flowering artifice having been discarded for sturdier forms of feeling. Huysmans, Zola, Verhaeren and Gide in France, and Masefield in England, have been the progenitors of the present realistic movement in poetry. It satisfies modern cosmopolitan needs; but, in my opinion, it is only an ephemeral current that will be replaced by a reactionary aristocracy in life and letters. Just as from archaic art emerged the efflorescence of Hellenic sculpture, so from Cubism, Imagism and all the various pres-



ent-day schools there will occur a reversion to intellectual austerity. Art has a temperamental flux that varies with the impulse of the age—so ultimately in all countries there must re-arise, as a reflex of modern realism, a more austere technique, a truer emotionalism and a finer spirituality in poetry. The idealism of antiquity will re-awaken to temper our boisterous modernism, and to tranquilize the realistic democracy of American art.

My own work is naturally influenced to a certain degree by the modern impetus—but essentially I prefer the artistic ideal of Marlowe, of Shelley, of Swinburne, of Sophocles, of Milton. But I feel that the student of the classical cannot exempt himself without loss from the modern trend of art which, despite its many unfortunate aspects, is a vigorous infusion of new energies.

Mr. Thomas Walsh is known for his beautiful poems dealing with the history and the



art of Spain, "The Pilgrim Kings: Greco and Goya, and Other Poems of Spain."

There is nothing new under the sun, not even today: and it does not seem to me that we have any new elements in our literary production that give any warrant for doubt of the belief that the future will be as the past. The Papal Delegate, Archbishop Bonzano—a man of unusual culture—summed up our American literature as "plentiful," and his irony reveals the attitude of the matured scholar in the presence of the clamors of the very young and the very wild.

There has been a great deal of very disjointed reasoning regarding the rules of æsthetics that were settled, it seemed, some thousand years ago; and we have beheld in these discussions the results of that modern philosophy which abandons and flouts at any connected relation between the different branches of human knowledge and morals. The young radical of today's letters is the

natural son of Matthew Arnold and his school, although I think Arnold himself would be rather surprised at the progeny he has produced. The abandonment of law and order in philosophy has merely preceded the abandonment of law and order in the arts. Our young writers are honestly expressing themselves; they are possessed of a lawless sympathy with everything, whether it should have sympathy or not. Mercy has been declared the most modern virtue in literature, but it seems we have reached a point where it has become stupidity.

To me the real performances in literature today are very much akin to those of the past generations. There is an added quality of simplicity and sincerity, but the same materials and the same general ambitions and spirit. Today our audiences are more mixed and, from an Anglo-Celtic point of view, more alien to the standards that have ruled us in America in the past. Art still remains the expression and the enjoyment of the few—who seem fewer today only because of the

greatness of the variety of outsiders who are untutored and unprepared for an opinion, not to mention taking a hand in its current production.



## CONCLUSION





## CONCLUSION

The results of this investigation require little interpretation. Certain conclusions are immediately apparent. There is a singular unanimity of opinion with respect to the predominating tendency in our contemporary writing; a return upon life, and, more specifically, upon contemporary American life, as the subject matter of our writing. The younger writers are urging as their claim to attention that they are dealing with the life which they see about them, and of which they are a part, and that they are dealing with this life in its own terms; they are quick to perceive the poetic core of common experience, and it is this that they would reveal in their art. They have, in Mr. Untermeyer's eloquent phrase, discovered the

beauty and dignity, and, one might add, the romance of the commonplace. This discovery is not without its peculiar significance. For, in dealing with the everyday life of our democracy, they are forced to take into account the disproportion between its basis in ideality and its functioning in actuality. Thus it is that contemporary literature, and particularly contemporary poetry, is expressing a social content. In their primary task of actually living, the poets 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 these masses in their verse. They are appealing to us less as lovers of art than as lovers of life, they are striving to move our humanity, to arouse a social consciousness. They conceive art as a means of expressing life, and since they are taking as their province the whole of life, they would be bound by no traditional conceptions of beauty. If we urge against them

a preoccupation with the sordid, the violent and the hideous, they will answer us that all these are phases of the life which they are experiencing. And they will show us wherein they have been revealing the new beauty which is being evolved in the democracy of labor. They are confident idealists, seeking to reconstruct our life by widening and deepening our conceptions of experience. In æsthetics, therefore, they are distinctly revolutionists, revolting against the view that art is a refuge from life and vigorously refusing allegiance to a tradition which they feel would limit not only the content of their art, but the form in which that content is to achieve expression.

There is, however, in these expressions of opinion less discussion of poetic form than one would naturally expect in a time when our notions of poetic form seem superficially to be undergoing a process of far-reaching and deliberate modification. The emphasis of the poets seems rather to be in the direction of content; it is as though they believed

that content shapes its own form and that the business of the reader lies with the content of art, and with its form only indirectly, in determining whether the medium of expression is the best possible medium for conveying the particular emotional experience of which it is the vehicle. No one who reads, to choose a striking example, the essay of Mr. Arthur Davison Ficke can doubt that the various metrical experiments of the new schools are less a deliberate program of reform in poetic diction than the logical result of a fresh way of looking at life.

There is, likewise, a vigorous recognition of an increasing seriousness in outlook among our writers, a disposition to penetrate beneath the merely superficial externalities of life, and to seek for fundamental spiritual values. I have grouped together four poets who have emphasized this spirit most strongly under a single heading, but the barriers of classification break down upon this question. Mr. Joyce Kilmer, for example, whose work in both poetry and prose reveals

as sure a discovery of the romance of the commonplace as does any of the writers grouped under that general heading, believes that the most important tendency in our contemporary literature is its expression of spiritual experience. It would not be just to deny the existence of this tendency in the work of other poets who are not grouped with Mr. Kilmer. It is, perhaps, more honest to say that the poets are reacting to spiritual experience in the terms of a more homely reality than heretofore.

The differences existing between the conservatives and the radicals are admirably illustrated by a comparison between the contributions of Miss Margaret Widdemer and Mr. Louis Ledoux. Miss Widdemer tells us that today the poets are reflecting the attitude toward life of their own time, and of an experience produced by the special circumstances of life here and now in America. Mr. Ledoux reminds us that the fundamental realities of life are changeless, and that their contemporary attributes are largely tempo-



rary and ephemeral in their nature. Both, perhaps, would agree upon the eternal nature of life's great experiences, but Mr. Ledoux has not remarked that the reaction to these experiences is a product of the special conditions of life in the age in which they achieve expression, and thus varies from age to age, while Miss Widdemer's implication is that we live in a peculiarly self-conscious time, and that we are therefore anxious to analyze our individual reactions to life. Mr. Ledoux reproaches contemporary writers for expressing too great an interest in the contemporary aspects of life; Miss Widdemer tells us that the poet of today is interested in just those things which make today different from yesterday, and has no thought of eternity.

There is, moreover, a further difference of opinion between the Conservatives and the Radicals, centering upon the question of technical innovations. In general, the Conservatives agree that a greater freedom of poetic form will undoubtedly result in an in-



fluence for the good upon poetic diction; what they object to is the anarchy of the present. Both Conservatives and Radicals seem to be united in a suspicion of "schools"; and among all the contributions, only four could with absolute certainty be referred to definite movements. Those of Miss Lowell and Mr. Fletcher belong by right to the Imagist movement, although neither of the poets have discussed the specific tenets of that school in their contributions. Miss Anne Knish, who, with Mr. Emmanuel Morgan, represents the Spectrist group, is slightly contemptuous of our latter-day search for novelty, and explains Spectrism as a fresh interpretation of Classic gospels. Mr. Donald Evans, whose "Sonnets from the Patagonian" resulted in his being credited with the foundation of another school, does not mention its existence, and places his own work as being midway between the Radicals and the Conservatives in temper.

But although the existence of all sorts of movements is denied, there is, in a wider

sense, a distinct movement in contemporary American letters, having as its basis the common ideal of a determination to express a reaction to experience in terms of the thoughts and feelings of our own time and country. The methods by which this is being accomplished are largely individual, and are told in the statements of the writers who have responded to this investigation of their ideals; any repetition here would be both redundant and impertinent. Any investigation of this nature must necessarily be incomplete in its results. One cannot mobilize all contemporary writers for an expression of opinion; there are several whose absence, for one reason or another, from this volume is heartily to be deplored. But investigations such as this have the virtue of bringing together a number of varied and representative points of view with reference to certain specific questions which are of fundamental importance in appraising the value of our literary activity. And therefore I believe this little book will have its place in criticism as a rec-

ord of the spirit and the ideals and the ideas underlying the work of American writers who are coming into their own in the present day.

LLOYD R. MORRIS.





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