

# POETRY TO-DAY

BY CORNELIA A. P. COMER

## I

THOSE poets whose fate it is to be young along with the youth of the twentieth century face a problem unique in its difficulty. Alone among the singing-men of our race, it is theirs to extract the poetry from a man-made and essentially unpoetic world — the world of mechanistic science, of great industrial centres, of the uncrystallized human mass. Theirs, too, to write of man as though he were the creature of an environment without mystery and without God.

In performing this task, as difficult as it is novel, there must inevitably be much discarding of old forms and fashions, much testing of new methods. So many young writers have found in *vers libre* the appropriate vehicle for their inspiration that the increasing body of cadenced, more or less rhythmic writing, which escapes the status of prose without arriving at that of formal verse, is often called the New Poetry. This restriction of the 'newness' to certain forms, is, of course, a perfunctory and inadequate classification. If there is a new poetry, — and one must acknowledge that it is coming on rapidly even if not yet quite arrived, — its real basis is a new spirit. Taken by and large, poetry grows out of and implies an attitude toward life. It is a metaphysic of the relation of man to his environment.

You may not like the way the new poet is solving his problems as compared with the way that Tennyson and

Browning solved theirs, but, after all, poetry is poetry. And even when it is not poetry to those who read, if it has been poetry to those who wrote, it is not worthless, for it has fulfilled toward at least one human creature its true function of freeing the spirit. The genuine thing in poetry, under any guise, is forever justified, forever triumphant. Open-mindedness toward the new poetry, then, befits us. We cannot afford to patronize or ignore any possible source of poetry, because poetry, like art, has become too much an exotic in modern life. It is to-day completely detached from our affairs. The new poets specifically recognize this condition and offer, rather pitifully, different remedies, so much less deep-seated than the disease that one can hardly expect their success.

However superficial and forgotten our knowledge of the beginnings of English letters, we are aware that our case was not always thus. Poetry was basal in the life of our remote forefathers. For them it was, literally, the language of the soul. When the spirit spoke, it spoke in numbers for the numbers came. Poetry was the wild, hardy, deathless thing, growing in the depths of the Dark Ages as gorse grows on the moor. It fed on war and war's alarms. Prose was the fragile plant, the garden flower. Not until King Alfred made peace of a kind in England and strengthened the land against invasion, did the story of English prose begin.

The repetition of these familiar facts

may be pardoned because of their bearing upon our attitude toward current verse. Since poetry was once an integral part of men's lives, and since free verse derives from the stressful Saxon poetry, with its assonance, its alliteration, its lines of varying length to fit the singer's feeling, its general emotional plasticity, one takes up these little experimental volumes with a stir of hope. Will one find, this time, something of the essential spirit of an elder day as well as its unfettered rhythm? Will the latter show itself again a vital thing, flexible to the writer's thought, a power in his hand — or will it be merely a toy with which he makes a conventional protest against convention? In all the earthly choir there are no singers so feeble and futile as those who ape the forms of revolt because it is the fashion in their set!

## II

There is a new life, and it demands a new poetry. Man has become a city-dwelling animal. From the fields he has emigrated to the factories. To a great extent he has left behind his sanity, his soul, his God.

It was of the very nature of the old poetry that it was concerned with meanings, with relations, with the soul. We hardly called it poetry unless, for us, it threw light on the path. It is of the very nature of the new poetry that it evades these issues in the shape we knew them once. The new philosophy has not yet taken shape. Here and there we see it forming, but more often the new poets are satisfied to depict, without comment or deduction, whatever they choose for subject, be it a garden rose, a July day, or a human life. The greater part of the new poetry deifies observation and deprecates thought.

Well — what else can it do? We

know what we were. We know not what we shall be. It remains to be seen whether the Creator has use for the factory-made world of man's devising. If he has, doubtless we shall learn how to make it both tolerable and poetic. One thing is certain: in the transvaluation of values that industrialism is bringing about, industrialism itself will not endure unless it somehow provides for the man of good will his chance for poetry. Beside this issue the minimum wage becomes a minor matter.

Belgium has produced a poet who grips the question of the future explicitly, fervently, firmly. The octopus-cities of these latter days obsessed Verhaeren's imagination and he has faith that they are a development, not a retrogression, and that our path lies through them to some great future yet to be attained by the mass rather than by the individual. No poet in England or America has yet worked out so definite, even if so unconvincing, a philosophy as this. Most of them are in a more tentative stage of thought, hesitating to make assertions of any kind, perhaps denying that assertions are part of a poet's function. You may take or leave what they have to give. They offer, as life offers, a cup whose flavor for you depends largely upon your own sense of taste.

Where the work of the 'younger set' diverges from the old traditions and adopts free verse, it exhibits two distinct strains. One shows the French influence, while the other derives, through Whitman, from the close-to-life singing of our Saxon fathers. On French soil it is free verse that is the exotic, in spite of the brilliant modern mastery of the method that the French have shown. The native French forms, imported into England with the Normans and receiving their final naturalization at Chaucer's hands, were exact and measured, depending upon rhyme

and fixed length of line. If we had not these remote but still potent facts of ancestry to help us explain current phenomena, we might well wonder why some of the new poetry is so bold and unconstrained, so palpably close to the breathing world, while some of it is so remote and delicate that its very freedom seems a kind of graceful artifice.

Chief producers of the latter type, we note the interesting group of imagists, who frankly acknowledge the influence of the post-symbolist French poets. Their not very exhaustive account of themselves (in the preface to *Some Imagist Poets*) is that they mean to present an image definite in its particulars, adhering to terms of common speech so far as choice of the 'exact word' permits; to create new rhythms and to produce 'clear, concentrated' poetry. Mr. John Gould Fletcher adds to these articles of faith a belief that poetry should be as free as to cadence and the groupings of cadences as music is in regard to time, these gradations of *tempo* being used for emotional ends and welded into a unity, taking the poem as an artistic whole. Miss Lowell's summing-up is that poetry should exist because it is a created beauty.

Success is always legitimate. The imagist poets have assailed their especial problem valiantly, and often with as prosperous an issue as the limitations they have set permit. They are almost always adroit and often exquisite, though some of them at times, failing to achieve the clear image that their ideal demands, become vague and futile. Miss Lowell is the most prolific and impressive member of the group, and her work is adorably full of color. She is especially fortunate in conveying by the weight and shine and shape and lilt of words themselves, the inner essence of the image she would offer.

Words could hardly give a more coruscating picture of the electric contact between two whose antagonism is founded on essential attraction than does 'Fireworks' in a recent *Atlantic*. *The Precinct, Rochester*, is so perfect a presentation that it carries almost as many implications and connotations as any cathedral close could do to the seeing eye — which is saying much.

Here is a little verse by 'H.D.' from *An Imagist Anthology*, which is typical of the minor imagist somewhere near his best. It would be hard to recall more vividly an August afternoon.

O wind  
rend open the heat,  
cut apart the heat,  
rend it sideways.

Fruit cannot drop  
through this thick air;  
that presses up and blunts  
the points of pears  
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat,  
plough through it,  
turning it on either side  
of your path.

To be a good imagist obviously demands mastery of the *nuance*. You do not really represent an object unless you depict, or so imply that you seem to depict, the connotations of that object as it seems to our deepest perceptions. In other words, things *do* have a meaning. There is a sense of tears in them, or a sense of laughter, and no image can be perfect that takes no account of an object's soul. One is not clamoring for morals plastered over the universe precisely, especially as we all like to make our own morals; but surely if the things that we see have no meaning, then also they have no beauty. The demand of the mind for meaning is as insistent as the demand of the eye for beauty, and the two attributes are practically inseparable for man.

## III

The imagists are the only group of the oncoming poets who have the advantage of a body of doctrine and an official designation. They need these benefits to compensate for their lack of fundamental conceptions, of philosophy in short, for the poetry-lover refuses to be wholly satisfied without this. His interest in objects and in lovely words is great, but, frankly, they satisfy only a small part of his appetite for poetry.

Two poets of very unusual ability who adhere strictly to the presentation of their subject without comment and without philosophy are Robert Frost and Edgar Lee Masters. They are the best examples of the new spirit in so far as that spirit dictates 'Hands off the Soul of Man!' Both have seen that, if the poet is to present his subject with such complete detachment, then the only possible subject for him to present, in order to be read much or long, is that one in which we are always vitally interested — namely, the life of our individual fellow man. Mr. Frost adds to his interest in New England lives an equally compelling interest in New England landscapes. He presents both with a clarity, an austerity, a detachment almost terrible. Reading *North of Boston* one suddenly asks one's self if Mrs. Wharton knows that she too is a poet? For if these are poems — and one willingly admits that they are poems of a high order — then *Ethan Frome* is also a poem of identically the same school, but an even greater poem than these rather wonderful productions of Mr. Frost. For it has precisely the same clarity, austerity, detachment, the same exalted and just phraseology. It, too, is a hopeless tragedy presented absolutely without comment, yet one hears in the background the whirring of Clotho's wheel. Destiny, cruel and sardonic if you will, but con-

scious and volitional, presides, while Mr. Frost's tragic characters, actual as they are, yet seem as little to attain human dignity as do the lichens on his birch trees. They are insignificant, patient growths, unconsidered excrescences on that Great Futility, the universe. Considering them, one has a flash of insight, perceiving that man is not man unless God is God — and no poetic art can make this otherwise.

The author of *A Spoon River Anthology* in presenting his marvelous human exhibit uses a device which permits the reader to escape the agony of witnessing helpless suffering which is experienced so often in *North of Boston*. Spoon River folk, a whole community of Southern Illinois, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, speak to us from the peace of their graves. The fever is forever past, the agony a by-gone matter. There remains dry wisdom, a deep perception of the crucial thing in each life's little day. This is recounted with an almost miraculous concision and definiteness. A whole personality goes into half a page. The vulgarities, the grossness, the pettiness of average lives are unblushingly recorded, but so are the great moments, the high decisions, and the things upon which they hinge. It is just in this perception of the creative part played in personality by the apparently negligible incident that Mr. Masters is strongest. The book displays immense insight into the hearts of men. Certain of the poems add to this imagination, tenderness, and beauty of an unusual order. Consider this account of *Anne Rutledge*. It will be remembered, she was the young girl who was betrothed to Lincoln in early life. The biographies attribute his fundamental melancholy to the shock of her death, which unbalanced him temporarily, and it is certain that he entered political life as an anodyne for her loss.

Out of me unworthy and unknown  
 The vibrations of deathless music;  
 'With malice toward none, with charity for  
 all.'

Out of me the forgiveness of millions toward  
 millions,

And the beneficent face of a nation  
 Shining with justice and truth.

I am Anne Rutledge who sleep beneath these  
 weeds,

Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln;  
 Wedded to him, not through union  
 But through separation.

Bloom forever, O Republic,  
 From the dust of my bosom!

Surely this is a great poem of its kind. It indicates the high-water mark of achievement in strictly reportorial poetry and points out with some sureness the direction such poetry must take for its best growth. Here is human life in its simplicity and here are tenderness and that glorifying touch of imaginative vision which alone can make any picture of human life imperishable.

## IV

If the evolution of twentieth-century poetry were to proceed strictly according to *a priori* considerations, we might expect its present phase to end here with this admirable objective work. For such work, once done as well as possible, has no conceivable future, since it can have no further development. But apparently logic has as little to do with poetry as with life. Mechanistic science and industrialism to the contrary, it is still fluid and still free. So we have other developments. There are a dozen other poets singing bravely and gracefully, each according to his own belief. Of these Louis Untermeyer is probably the most widely known and Margaret Widdemer the latest comer. These and others are still writing with much charm and sensitiveness the 'old' poetry, although touched by the 'new' spirit. Then there are still others, like Mr. Vachel Lindsay

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who believes that in order to restore poetry to a world bereft of it, there must be a closer personal relation between the poet and his hearers. He should be again the wandering minstrel — a belief which Mr. Lindsay put to the happy test of experience. There are other young poets, like Mr. Fletcher of the Imagists, who say that Mr. Lindsay's rousing, rattling verse 'intended to be read aloud' is literary rag-time. So they go, to each man his sufficing belief and to each the joy of working it out with an adequate talent — for they are all clever and competent, these new poets.

Fluid and free, again, is the work of James Oppenheim and Lincoln Colcord. Both follow Whitman very closely, almost slavishly, in the matter of form — or formlessness — and both feel themselves unconstrained and sure in the possession of a philosophy fitted for the on-coming age. One may respect these convictions and believe conviction basal to any poetry destined to further development, without wholly accepting the immediate creed of either poet. Oppenheim finds all perfections, glories, laws, and sanctions in the individual will; Colcord, whose *Vision of War* is the most serious and worthy piece of work the great European conflict has yet brought to print, presents the final goal of the New Age as the life of the mass in a perfect brotherhood of love, labor, and service, only to be achieved after long eras more selfish and more material than any we have yet known. All great convulsions discipline us for this end. Hunger and war are our schoolmasters. But 'the world has yet to pass through the Dark Ages of Democracy while practice is catching up with theory.' However, the Great Dream once dreamed, is deathless. Mr. Colcord explicitly defies mechanistic science and industrialism — those modern foes of the spirit —

defeat it. The one thing of which his breadth of vision seems unconscious is that men once called this same dream of a blissful world-state 'the New Jerusalem descended from God,' and defied the world, the flesh, and the devil to compass its defeat.

It is worth noting — though no man can say what is the exact significance of the fact — that poetic activity with a concurrent tendency to freedom in verse-form is likely to be synchronous with the gestation of war. Whitman's work lies well within the field of force that played about our Civil War; so also does the Transcendentalist movement in New England, which surely was a vehement attempt at putting poetry into practice. 'Free verse,' this, indeed, the freest of all and the finest!

Obviously the poetic activity of our passing hour is unusually large and varied. It is, obviously also, a little hard here, a little cold there, now too 'cosmic' and now too rigidly objective, sometimes too contentedly complacent and self-willed. Even where it is noblest and finest, as perhaps in the *Vision of War*, it nevertheless fails to answer the deepest cry of the soul of man. By these signs it is not yet great poetry. But, and this is the innermost joy of it, it is the plasma of which great poetry is made. Without committing ourselves too freely to any of the new poets we may delight in their achievement and look forward with certainty to the coming of others whom they mutely prophesy. 'There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.'

## THE FAILURE

BY CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

### I

At an unearthly hour in the morning John Scidmore sat up suddenly in his bed and remembered Julia Norris's telephone message. He rose at once, switched on the shaded light on the bureau, and looked at his watch: the minute hand had just swung past three o'clock.

Undisturbed by her husband's nocturnal prowling, Kitty Scidmore slept with almost childish naturalness. He plunged the room into darkness again and felt his way out into the hall and down the short flight of stairs to the dining-room.

The night was unusually warm. As he opened the garden window, pungent odors of dry stubble wet with a late October dew floated toward him. He leaned out and drew in a deep breath, but his attempts at calmness failed utterly.

He knew that it was absurd to fret; he might just as well go back to bed and sleep peacefully. One could not place a line of insurance at three o'clock in the morning. Upon what day had Julia Norris telephoned? Was it last Friday? Yes, he remembered now, perfectly. He had been busy with a peevish customer who haggled about a twenty-five-cent overcharge. In the midst of