

**MASTERS VS. LEE MASTERS:  
THE LEGACY OF THE *SPOON RIVER* AUTHOR BETWEEN ILLINOIS AND ITALY**  
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Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* was the best-selling book of poetry to date in the United States when it was first published in 1915 (Russell 83). It is a compilation of 244 free-verse poems, all of which, except the introductory "The Hill", are epitaphs told from the point of view of citizens of the imaginary village of Spoon River, Illinois, who lie dead and buried in the town cemetery. The book's success made Masters a sensation nationwide, but since then his name and works, including *Spoon River*, have largely faded into oblivion in the U.S. In fact, when his face was printed on the U.S. 6-cent stamp in 1970, most Americans could not identify him (Flanagan *Edgar Lee Masters* iii). Yet, in Italy at that time, his name and work were still well-known and the singer-songwriter Fabrizio De André was about to reignite Masters's popularity with his 1971 album inspired by nine of the epitaphs. As of 2009, *Antologia di Spoon River* had gone through 72 editions there, with more than 500,000 copies sold (Bonino Kind. Loc. 181-182), and in recognition of its centennial, in 2016 and 2018, two brand-new editions, including introductions, notes, and translations, were released by Mondadori and Feltrinelli.

By contrast, as Jerome Loving points out in his 2008 Introduction to the Penguin Books edition, in the U.S. the work is no longer canonical and it “today exists in the national memory as piecemeal poems” (Kind. Loc. 430-432). The difference in the poet’s two divergent legacies in the U.S. and Italy is largely a result of the very different mythology the figure of Masters and his *Spoon River* has accrued. This is due, in great part, to Italian literary isolationism during Fascism and, later, to U.S. disinterest in Masters, which allowed Italian reception to grow as its own sapling, rather than as a branch of the U.S. tree. The disconnectedness between literary conversations at home and abroad is evidenced by the very treatment of his name, as the title of this article suggests; until the 2000s, Masters was referred to in Italy as ‘Lee Masters’, as his middle name (he was named after the Confederate Army general, Robert E. Lee) was misinterpreted as his last name, and until the aughts the error went unnoticed. Today, most scholars have corrected the mistake, but the tradition of referring to him as Lee Masters is so strong that the 2018 Feltrinelli still lists him as ‘Lee Masters, Edgar’ on both the cover and in its bibliographic information.

Two additional elements to have furthered the poet’s distinct legacies are the absence of translations and U.S. criticisms of his later works, which are partially responsible for his loss of credibility in the States, and the particularities of the *Spoon River* publication history and its adaptations in Italy, which tie *Spoon River* firmly to the antifascist and student-revolutionary traditions of the 1940s and 1970s. With John Hallwas’s seminal 1992 critical edition of *Spoon River* and Herbert K. Russell’s 2001 *Edgar Lee Masters: A Biography*, however, new Italian scholarship has necessarily included these, as well as other crucial texts from the aughts, which highlight the various reasons for which Masters has come to be seen as an unviable voice in American poetry. New Italian editions have sought to render more accurate translations and root themselves in U.S. critical reception, yet, these editions perform a dual task; the translations themselves are indeed more accurate, but at the same time, their

authors take great care in their introductions and notes to include American criticism and new details, while maintaining Masters's unspoiled status.

This dual act is in line with what translation theorist, Lawrence Venuti, has argued: more than the accuracy of translations themselves, it is “the practices of circulation and reception by which the translation continues to accrue meanings and values that differ from those invested in the source text” (5). Italian scholars perform a nuanced curation—specifically in regards to Masters's later works, his Southern sympathy after the Civil War, his xenophobia, and the central message of *Spoon River* itself—in a way that renders new editions both more and less faithful to the source text. From an American perspective, the careful curation is dangerous, while from the perspective of an Italianist, it seems to miss the most valuable point. That is, I argue that Masters's legacy in Italy need not be jeopardized by the poet's American reception, which is influenced by subtle political and historical realities so foreign to the Italian audience that they are missed by readers. Rather, the contemporary deepening of research and thought around his work would do better to focus on *Spoon River* in the Italian context, as the Italian love affair with Masters, in my view, speaks volumes about the amputated self-conception and estranged cultural memory in post-Fascist Italy.

This article will go over the specifics of, and reasons behind, Edgar Lee Masters's very different legacies in the U.S. and Italy. It will consider polysemy, decontextualization, and neutralization of criticism in recent editions. Finally, it will argue that a more faithful account in Italian scholarship of the central message of *Spoon River*, as put forth by John Hallwas and others, would really get to the heart of its impact on generations of readers who continue to deal with the lasting trauma of the Fascist regime, and particularly, Mussolini's rural policies and rhetoric. This article takes into consideration all available Italian editions that have introduced either a new translation, scholar's introduction, or notes/comments. It is most interested, however, in Fernanda Pivano's canonic translation and writing

that is associated with it (including Pivano's commentary and Cesare Pavese's articles on Masters), and with scholarly work that has come out after, and explicitly leaned on, the works of recent U.S. scholars like John Hallwas, Jerome Loving, Herbert K. Russell, and James Hurt. For that reason, the 2016 and 2018 Mondadori and Feltrinelli editions, with translations and notes by Luigi Ballerini and Enrico Terrinoni, are particularly relevant.

### **Edgar Lee Masters's Legacies between Illinois and Italy**

Gianfranca Balestra, professor of American Literature at University of Siena, in her 2007 article on Masters and De André, calls Fascist Italy a suffocating atmosphere in which the exploration of American literature gave one an alternative cultural experience (109), while Cesare Pavese says that Sinclair Lewis and his contemporaries, such as Masters, "made the first little hole in the wall to freedom, the first suspicion that not everything in the world's culture ended with the fasces" (197). It is, in fact, this inherent sense of glimpsed freedom through literature, together with the story of *Spoon River's* arrival in Italy during those repressive years, that is most important to the mythology that has formed up around it.

The story goes that 26-year-old Fernanda Pivano, with the help of Cesare Pavese, subverted Fascist censors by requesting to publish *Antologia di S. River*, knowing that 'S. River' would be interpreted as an abbreviation of 'San River'. Pavese's supposed ruse worked and Einaudi managed to get the book past the censors on March 9th, 1943.<sup>1</sup> Pavese and Pivano thus became literary partisans. During the years of the most intense resistance to the Fascist regime, they were subverting the Fascist State and Fascist culture, with pens rather than swords. This story, though widely considered apocryphal, is retold in nearly every new edition, as *Spoon River* and Italian partisanship become strictly correlated in the mythology surrounding the book. To name just one example, in the Chronology of Masters's life and works in the 2015 Giunti Edition, the year 1943 is remembered for two things:

“Marzo: esce da Einaudi, grazie a Cesare Pavese, l'*Antologia*, tradotta da Fernanda Pivano” and “Marzo: al quarto anno della Seconda guerra, inizio della Resistenza con gli scioperi a Milano e Torino” (251). Fernanda Pivano is remembered, furthermore, as a ‘pioniera’ (Balestra 111), both as a woman and as a translator of American literature. This rhetoric, too, is important to the larger myth, as Masters’s heroes are the American pioneers and homesteaders, and it allows the young writer to translate the very heroism of *Spoon River* to the contemporary Italian context.

Then in 1971, singer-songwriter, Fabrizio De André, added another link to the Italian myth with his adaption of *Spoon River* in his concept album *Non al denaro, non all'amore, né al cielo*. On the inside cover he associates his work with Pivano by including a full-spread interview with her, and in so doing, he links Pivano’s and Pavese’s original partisanship with his own countercultural stance during the 1970s. He ends the interview thus: “Fernanda Pivano per tutti è una scrittrice. Per me è una ragazza di venti anni che inizia la sua professione traducendo il libro di un libertario mentre la società italiana ha tutt’altra tendenza. È successo tra il ’37 e il ’41: quando questo ha significato coraggio” (qtd. in Sassi 125-6), in a clear reminder of the historical and political stakes.

Because of its unique history in Italy, *Spoon River*’s appearance on the scene is linked to the promise of a fresh start, a renewed vision for the future after Fascism and during the tumultuous cultural shift of the 1960-70s, but as early as 1933, American critics saw *Spoon River*’s message in its original context as idealizing an old order (Jeffersonian agrarian democracy) without offering a clear path for the future. Critic Herbert Ellsworth Childs was one of the first to note that Masters’s epitaphs were “tarred with the brush of agrarianism, a defunct philosophy now” and one that was “no longer the answer for the problems that Masters raised, and he offered no other” (qtd. in Flanagan *Edgar Lee Masters* 41). According to Hallwas’s groundbreaking scholarship, this stunted vision, of a poet who feels “dispossessed” by change (4), is key to *Spoon River*. It is key, in turn, to American intellectuals’

aversion towards Masters, as his sense of dispossession revolves around changes incurred by the Civil War.

Masters's nostalgia for a better and more truly 'American' past, is framed in *Spoon River* as (a) reverence for pioneer generations, such as "Aaron Hatfield" who calls out: "O pioneers, / With bowed heads breathing forth your sorrow / For the sons killed in battle and the daughters" (Masters ed. Hallwas, 329); and as (b) a reproach of Americans who came after, such as "Lucinda Matlock" and her condemnation: "What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness, / Anger, discontent and drooping hopes? / Degenerate sons and daughters, / Life is too strong for you" (295). In successive works, however, it becomes an assault on any person who does not fit into Masters's limited definition of Americanness. To name a single example from his sequel, *The New Spoon River*, as biographer Herbert Russell points out, Masters's prejudices are in full view as he attacks all non-descendants of pioneers directly:

I saw that the village names were changed;  
And instead of Churchill, Spears and Rutledge,  
It was Schoenwald and Stefanik,  
And Berkowitz and Garnadello ...,  
And then I said with a sinking heart, Good-by Republic, old dear! (qtd. in Russell 221-2).

Far from having simply lost a taste for Masters's poetic voice, which Viola Papetti offers, in the 1986 Rizzoli Libri edition, as the reason for lack of American interest in Masters<sup>2</sup>—*Spoon River*, particularly in light of Masters's later works, reads to Americans as a call to restore a version of the country that offered absolute liberty to a highly restricted group of Northern-European land-owning men whose ancestors had forged the frontier. Indeed, his rhetoric echoes that which one hears today in U.S. politics and media in regards to immigration from Latin America and new Americans as a threat to 'true Americans' and their traditions and values.

Rather than problematizing it, Italian scholarship tends to bolster Masters's song-of-America styling by likening it to Walt Whitman's. Luigi Ballerini, for example, in the opening lines to his Notes

in the 2016 Mondadori edition makes this somewhat confusing claim: “Uniche rivali, in fatto di notorietà, le *Foglie d'erba* di Walt Whitman, a cui Masters è stato a volte, impropriamente, avvicinato, e forse, *The Waste Land* di T.S. Eliot o i *Cantos* di Ezra Pound” (561). While Enrico Terrinoni, in his 2018 Introduction to the Feltrinelli edition, says Masters is “legato a un filone chiave della letteratura e della storia americane [...] tramite il whitmaniano identificarsi del sé prima col villaggio e poi con la nazione.” (Kind. Loc. 107-110). Though Ballerini and Terrinoni both claim Hallwas as their cornerstone source, they crucially choose not to make the key distinction between Whitman’s message and Masters’s, which Hallwas argues is essential to their different legacies:

The poem’s closest forerunner is Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” and like that great poet, Masters saw himself as a representative American, one who embodied the basic goodness of the new ‘breed and clan.’ Unfortunately, he did not view everyone else in America as spiritually equal and sharing in the same potential, as Whitman had. (42)

This distinction is essential to Masters’s American legacy, and it also begins to convey a sense of the careful elisions that seek to keep Masters untarnished in Italy.

### **Polysemy and Decontextualization**

One of the key elements to Masters’s mis-interpretation abroad has been the persistent polysemy of political and historical terms, which translation theorist André Lefevere calls the “universe of discourse features” in a text. Translations that do not resuscitate the original intent—through a loan translation, calque, footnote, or some combination therein—are unfaithful, Lefevere claims, as those features are “particular to a given culture and they are, almost by definition, untranslatable or at least very hard to translate” (438). Such crucial features in Masters include *Democratic/Democracy*, *Republican/Republicanism*, *Liberal/Liberalism*, and *individual freedom*. In no Italian edition of *Spoon River*, have I ever seen a glossary of these problematic terms, nor footnotes, endnotes, or introductory comments that do the work needed to clarify them.<sup>3</sup>

Without any gloss from the translator, Masters’s Democratic stance was interpreted in 1940s

Italy as FDR's New Deal brand of Democracy, while in the 1970s his fierce hatred of 'Republicanism' was seen in opposition to Nixon's Republican presidency. In 2012's *Invito a Spoon River*, Giovanni Romano, in his analysis of the epitaphs "John Hancock Otis" (democratic hero to Masters) and "Anthony Findlay" (republican villain) falls into this trap of dehistoricizing. Romano explains the epitaphs by stating that they "rappresentano molto bene uno dei più classici dibattiti della cultura politica americana: da una parte l'ala progressista e liberale, dall'altra l'ala repubblicana rigidamente conservatrice e protezionista sul piano interno, isolazionista e abbarbicata alla dottrina di Monroe" (64). Yet, the relationship between the two parties, in 1915 when *Spoon River* was published, and even more so in the 1880s when *Spoon River* is staged, cannot be stated as the 'classic' American Democratic Liberal vs. Republican Conservative.

Masters is vehemently opposed to Lincoln and to his Republicanism, which was, in fact, the progressive party of its day, formed by Conscience Whigs and Free-Soil Democrats opposed to the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which sought to bring new territories into the Republic as 'free territories' where men could choose to hold slaves or not. Indeed, after the Civil War, the term 'Conservative' referred to those, often Southern Democrats, who fought against 'Radical Republicans' who wanted full citizenship for freed slaves. Richard Nixon's 'Southern Strategy', which sought to increase political support among white voters in the South by appealing to racism against African Americans, was the political maneuver that finally transitioned Southern Democrats to modern Republicanism.

The modern judgment amongst intellectuals, which sees liberal Democrats as positive and conservative Republicans as negative, does not apply neatly to the shifting political sands of the early 20th century in the U.S. Still, it is this dichotomy that in Italy is often applied back to define Masters's political ideology. When Gianfranca Balestra sums up Masters in 2007 simply as "politicamente legato al partito democratico e con inclinazioni populiste, è disgustato dalla ricchezza ottenuta attraverso



attività immorali” (107), it supports the mythical image of Masters in Italy but is ultimately misleading. Masters was, as John Hallwas points out, a Southern Democrat (also called a Jeffersonian Agrarian Democrat) who believed in the myth of idyllic agrarian democracy, based on slavery, which had been destroyed by the Civil War (40). In this sense, Masters’s liberalism and his democratic party affiliation, which are both based in his vehement belief in ‘individual rights’, must be understood in their historical context. This is perhaps best appreciated through the oppositional relationship between Petersburg and Lewiston, which combine to become the inspiration for the fictional village of Spoon Rive. They are the Illinois towns where Masters grew up, and the representatives of good and bad, respectively, in Masters’s view of American life.

Nearly every Italian critic speaks of this dichotomy and it is generally around these towns that editors do the work, if they do it at all, of historicizing the book’s socio-political context. It is clear that, for Masters, Petersburg represents Virginian Democrats and Lewiston represents New England Republicans. It is also clear that Masters personalizes this dichotomy in his mother (a New Englander) and in his hero-father (a Virginian). In sum, it is clear that for Masters Petersburg/southern/democrat/father is good and Lewiston/yankee/republican/mother is bad. Luigi Ballerini says as much in his Introduction to the 2016 Mondadori edition:

A Petersburg abita gente venuta dal Kentucky e dalla Virginia, pionieri divenuti agricoltori e allevatori, persone di buon senso, tolleranti, se non curiosi del diverso, e tanto poco inclini alle dispute teologiche quanto sereni nel privilegiare l’aspetto sociale ed etico del messaggio religioso. Così almeno ce la presenta Masters. [...] Si aggiunga che, al contrario della omogenea Petersburg, Lewistown è dilaniata da conflitti politici: repubblicani (quasi tutti provenienti dalla Nuova Inghilterra) e democratici (quasi tutti provenienti dalla Virginia e dal Kentucky) (30-1).

He goes on in his notes section:

Sommamente conta la dichiarazione del [Masters] disprezzo per ‘repubblicani, calvinisti, mercanti e banchieri’ che segnala lo spacco radicale che divide a Spoon River, e realmente divide a Lewistown, il partito dei liberali, gente venuta nell’Illinois dagli Stati del Sud e della Virginia in particolare, da quello dei conservatori provenienti dalla Nuova Inghilterra, culla del puritanesimo (611-2).

Petersburgians have “good sense”, are “tolerant”, they are “little inclined to theological disputes” but privilege religion’s “social and ethical message.” Meanwhile, Lewiston has warring factions, Republicans, carefully described simply as New Englanders, conservatives who moralize drink, Calvinists, and capitalists, and Virginians who are of the liberal party. This description is not an objective one, and Ballerini seems to know it, as he hedges in his description of Petersburgian democrats by stating that they are as described or “così almeno ce la presenta Masters.” Yet, he does not offer any further clarification.

Meanwhile, Enrico Terrinoni says in the 2018 Feltrinelli edition:

Il padre vantava un peculiare scetticismo religioso condito da un indomito amore per il whiskey, un forte senso di appartenenza e una morale a dir poco rilassata, ma anche la passione per gli ideali democratici pre-rivoluzionari, e per un’idea di America che guardasse alla “purezza” dei primi pionieri. Di conseguenza, nutriva disillusione per lo status quo e per il trend modernizzatore che aveva investito il suo paese negli anni dopo la Guerra civile. La madre, al contrario, era molto religiosa e devota, sosteneva strenuamente il movimento per l’astinenza dall’alcol, e osservava una rigida morale che non poteva non farla entrare in conflitto con i comportamenti molto più libertari del padre. [...] è indubbio che su di [Masters] il fascino del padre, con i suoi modi liberi e gli ideali democratici, si dimostrò superiore all’amore per la madre (Kind. Loc. 152-156, 160-161).

Terrinoni focuses on the same aspects of the dichotomy; Petersburgians represent liberalism and the democratic party as we are left to understand them in the modern sense, while a key ideology of that liberalism, *individual liberties*, is questionably unparsed.

Indeed, Liberalism came to its modern definition in the U.S. only with Franklin Roosevelt and ‘modern liberals.’ Masters’s brand of liberalism is more closely associated with modern libertarianism. Furthermore, and crucially, in Masters’s day, Southern Democratic liberals saw the right of individual freedoms as applicable to a select few.<sup>4</sup> This precision can be seen in Hallwas’s description of the two towns, which he describes quite differently. Petersburgians do not come across as the neat heroes, nor are Lewistonians vilified. He says in regards to Petersburg:

In the bottom half of the long state, settlers from Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia predominated. They were Indian-fighting, game-hunting, story-telling, and whiskey-drinking frontier people who celebrated courage, stressed kinship, prized hospitality, opposed abolitionism, advocated individual rights, idolized Andrew Jackson, and supported the Democratic party [...] They were 'agrarian traditionalist' [...] They feared change and maintained intense loyalty to a narrow circle of people: family, kinsfolk, and others like themselves.

Then in regards to Lewiston:

In the top half of Illinois, settlers from the East predominated. Always called 'Yankees' on the frontier, they were more apt to be community organizers, business founders, churchgoers, schoolteachers, and social reformers. They were modernizers [...] ambitious, self-confident, upwardly mobile people who advocated and enacted change. Opposed to drinking and slavery, they were not afraid to place limits on individual freedom in order to promote social improvement (3).

Though it is not cited as coming from Hallwas, Terrinoni clearly lifts Hallwas's assessment, while subtly removing problematic terms:

A Petersburg [...] la parte predominante della popolazione era composta da coloni degli stati del Sud, Tennessee, Virginia e Kentucky principalmente. Di indole liberale, tradizionalisti legati al mondo agrario, non disdegnavano il colorito mondo dei saloon, e credevano fortemente nei valori dell'ospitalità e nei diritti individuali. A Lewistown, più a nord [...] il predominio era delle genti provenienti dall'Est modernizzato, gli Yankee, riformatori sociali e uomini d'affari, devoti e ambiziosi, legati più all'idea di cambiamento che al mantenimento delle tradizioni (Kind. Loc. 140-145).

Gone from the Southern heroes is the Indian-fighting, anti-abolitionism, fear of change, and narrow loyalty while added is the term 'liberal'. From Hallwas's "prized hospitality, opposed abolitionism, advocated individual rights," Terrinoni carves out his own "credevano fortemente nei valori dell'ospitalità e nei diritti individuali." The anti-abolitionism has simply been pulled from the middle. Conversely, when describing Masters's New England villains, gone is the abolitionism and limiting of individual freedoms *in order to* secure larger social improvement for all.

With these long citations I hope to have demonstrated the subtle muddying of terms and historical contexts that allows such relationships as Republican/Democratic, Conservative/Liberal, Yankee/Virginian, and Petersburg/Lewiston to maintain, in Italian criticism, a clear tendency to favor

Masters's political and socio-cultural worldview. These terms will continue to be important here, as will the idea of editors carefully recasting U.S. secondary literature to support claims that differ, only slightly, but significantly from the original claims.

### **Neutralizing Masters: Confederate Sympathies, *Lincoln the Man*, and Racism**

Masters's troublesome view of Americanness, as previously discussed in terms of his dissimilarity to Whitman, along with his Confederate sympathies (present in *Spoon River* and increasing across the years), his xenophobia, and the quality and content of Masters's later works, particularly, his 1931 biography of Lincoln, are the five key elements to tarnish his reputation in the U.S. In tendencies similar to those seen above, which engage polysemy to neutralize universe of discourse features, recent Italian scholars interact with the overarching issues that disturb Masters's legacy in the U.S. while carefully framing the poet to survive any partial blows he may receive.

#### *Confederate Sympathies*

Take, for example, Enrico Terrinoni's assertion above that Edgar Lee Masters's father and hero, Hardin Masters, had "la passione per gli ideali democratici pre-rivoluzionari." This vague declaration of "pre-revolutionary ideals" seems chosen precisely to de-signify and neutralize. The categorization of Hardin Masters as such encourages readers to interpret the revolution in question as the American Revolution, yet, Hardin Masters's ideals concern the Civil War, not the Revolutionary War. In fact, it would be accurate to state his ideals as 'pre-Civil War'. For, indeed, he was an Jeffersonian Democratic who did not fully oppose an economic model based on slave-aided farming.

Ballerini obfuscates in the same sort of way when he cites Jerome Loving's 2008 Introduction to the Penguin Books *Spoon River* in his notes to the epitaph "Sexsmith the Dentist." In reference to the verses in the poem "Do you think that the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' / Would have been heard if the chattel slave / Had crowned the dominant dollar, / In spite of Whitney's cotton gin," Jerome Loving

clarifies Masters's intention:

The Northern song of victory in the Civil War would not have been heard and the war would not have been waged if slavery had been economically viable outside the South. Here Masters expresses his neo-Confederate belief that Lincoln ruined the Jeffersonian spirit of the country, selling out its individuality to corporate and trust interests (Kind. Loc. 2585-2587).

Ballerini cites Loving in this translation:

Non ci sarebbe stato nessun canto della vittoria nordista, e nessuna guerra si sarebbe combattuta, se la schiavitù non avesse avuto un peso economico anche fuori dagli Stati del Sud. Qui, Masters dichiara il suo credo politico neofederale, sostenendo implicitamente che Lincoln avrebbe distrutto lo spirito jeffersoniano della nazione, facendosi complice dei banchieri e degli interessi privati (599).

There are a couple of differences between the translation and the original, but the most glaring is the choice to translate 'neo-Confederate' as 'neofederale.' This small change allows Italian reader to understand Masters's stance as simply one that believed in States' freedom, rather than as specifically one associated with the Confederates' fight for the freedom to own slaves.

Masters was of the belief, still popular amongst Confederate sympathizers today, that the Civil War was waged with slavery merely as an excuse; this belief is clear enough in *Spoon River*, as seen above in "Sexsmith the Dentist" as well as "Jacob Goodpasture" and others. While American writers are careful to call into question his stance (as we will see when discussing *Lincoln, The Man*), Luigi Ballerini backs it up as, not only a commonly held belief, but a historical fact. In his accompanying note to the opening lines of "Jacob Goodpasture" ("When Fort Sumter fell and the war came I cried out in bitterness of soul: / "O glorious republic now no more!" When they buried my soldier son / [...] I cried: / "Oh, son who died in a cause unjust! In the strife of Freedom slain!"), Ballerini explains that Fort Sumter was the first battle of the Civil War and that "La 'causa ingiusta' di cui si parla al v. 7 è il mantenimento a tutti i costi (milioni di morti) dell'Unione degli Stati americani. Solo nel 1863 la causa dell'emancipazione degli schiavi viene ufficialmente elencata tra i motivi del conflitto" (590). Ballerini's claim jumps out to the American eye, not only as it flattens the issue, but as it relies on rhetoric used

in the U.S. only by Confederate-apologists.

The ‘slavery question’ had, indeed, been a hot debate and central in American politics for some fifteen years before the Civil War, as new territories were added to the Union and northern politicians sought to secure their status as non-slaving holding lands, while southern politicians wanted to guarantee ‘individual freedoms’ (N.B. the use of this key term) to future Americans in those territories to buy, sell, and own slaves. The Compromise of 1850 was a set of legislation meant to diffuse four years of heated altercations between free and slave States regarding, specifically, slave ownership in territories acquired during the Mexican-American War. Furthermore, the Republican Party emerged as a direct response to the slavery question; in 1854 it was formed to combat an act that allowed slave or free status to be decided in the territories by popular sovereignty. The party, unsurprisingly, had almost no presence in the Southern United States.

Claims that the Civil War was waged for purely economic reasons and that slavery was merely an excuse fall apart when scrutinized in light of historical particulars; those who support the theory have been seen across the 20th-century as Confederate and slave-holding apologists, often called ‘Revisionists.’ It was and still is a rhetorical and ideological technique used by revisionist groups, as historian Matthew Norman points out, to “downplay slavery as a cause of the war and place blame on fanatical abolitions and a ‘blundering generation’ of politicians” (54). And it was precisely these Revisionists that Masters was associated with 15 years after *Spoon River*, when he wrote his biography, *Lincoln, the Man*, which Carl Sandburg called “a long sustained Copperhead<sup>5</sup> hymn of hate,” and which Claude Feuss thought sounded like it was written by “an unrecognized and still bitter veteran of Lee’s army” (qtd. in Norman 43). American critics saw the biography as the peak of an anti-Lincoln revival, spurred on by the economic difficulties of the Great Depression, which was led by unreconstructed Confederate Revisionists like Mildred Lewis Rutherford (43-44), a southern educator

who was pro-slavery and against women's suffrage.

*Lincoln, the Man*

Much Italian scholarship of the past did not deal with *Lincoln, the Man*; for some of that time it was lost in relative obscurity in the U.S. and unknown abroad, or at least its views were unknown. Today, however, American critiques are plentiful, in *Spoon River* editions as well as in scholarly articles about the biography itself. Italian commentary, however, elides honest treatment of the book. In Einaudi's new edition of Pivano's translation, Guido Davico Bonino, in his Introduction, does not mention the biography, only citing it without comment in the critical bibliography; similarly, the 2015 Giunti edition of Alessandro Quattrone's translation, states only "1931-1938 [Masters] scrive alcune biografie su Lincoln, Whitman e Twain" (251). In the Rizzoli edition, Viola Papetti mentions the biography in the Chronology of Masters's life, noting only that it is a "biografia antilincoliniana, accolta sfavorevolmente dalla critica" (Kind. Loc. 71-72), while in her Introduction, she chooses to talk about Carl Sandburg's favorable presidential biography rather than Masters's own, and in the Essential Bibliography Masters's is mistitled as *Lincoln, the Man of the People*, lending it a positive tone. In the notes to the edition, Papetti arrives closer to the truth, stating: "L'amoreodio di M. per Lincoln si esprime oltre che nella biografia (*Lincoln, the Man*) anche nei frequenti riferimenti occasionali" (Kind. Loc. 8947-8949). Yet, it does not go far enough, as the biography is not an ambiguous 'amoreodio.' Rather, *Lincoln, the Man* was called by one historian "an incoherent diatribe" made up of "a series of immoderate, absurd, and extreme statements which are neither founded on fact nor in harmony with reason" (Norman 53).

Walter Mauros's commentary in the 2018 Newton Compton edition tows the same line, skipping it in the Introduction, and saying in the Nota biobibliografica only that Masters wrote a few "polemici studi biografici come il *Lincoln, the Man* del 1931 che voleva essere una critica serrata alla

mitica figura dello statista e il *Mark Twain, a Portrait* nel 1938 che presentava quello scrittore come un genio vittima dell'incomprensione pubblica" (13). While I cannot get into the Twain polemic here, since it was brought up by Mauro I will point out that Masters's biography makes claims that ring with a violent racial rhetoric. He argued, for example, that the Mississippi-born Twain did not represent his southern origins in post-Civil War America well-enough. U.S. critics remember that he "hurled against Twain the charge of being desouthernized" (Flanagan *The Spoon River Poet* 233), he "berated Twain for not continuing his service in the Confederate army [...] instead abandoning his post" (Loving, Kind. Loc. 419-420), and he called it inexplicable that "Twain in the dark days of Reconstruction voted for Grant and the Republican party when he ought to have spoken out vehemently for the common decency and the forces of light" (qtd. in Flanagan *The Spoon River Poet* 233).

To return now to Lincoln's biography, Luigi Ballerini deals much more than others with Masters's opinion of Lincoln, both in *Spoon River* and after. He clarifies that Masters disliked the president by stating it numerous times, yet he still makes sure to neutralize, in statements like this from his Introduction: "quando emerge il disappunto per quello che non solo Masters riteneva un vero e proprio tradimento (da parte di Lincoln) dell'eredità politica di Thomas Jefferson" (xvi), in which he underlines that Masters is not alone in his criticism of the president. In regards to *Lincoln, the Man*, specifically, Ballerini oddly focuses on the word 'amore' to talk about Masters's hatred. "Masters," he says, "non amava [Lincoln]. Tale disamore è testimoniato dal suo *Lincoln: The Man*" (563). He points out that the biography "suscitò un vespaio," then chooses to cite only the "rara voce a favore," significantly a non-American voice, "quella dello scrittore inglese John Cowper Powy che affermò: 'Masters è uno storico di vasta e precisa erudizione'" (xxxvi). This claim that Masters is acting as a historian in *Lincoln, the Man* is particularly frustrating, as American scholars have pointed out time and again that it was completed in 47 days (Russell 274) and "contains little original research, while



Masters's thesis is both presentist and simplistic to the point of being *reductio and absurdum*" (Norman 54). Masters based the majority of his claims on personal family lore, but did not make that clear to his readers, in a desire, as his biographer claims, "that his text appear to be an objectively written biography, not just a series of family biases made public" (274-5). Terrinoni's 2018 edition does not make any mention of the ruinous biography, but chooses to include various Masters's poems as an appendix to *Spoon River*, the first three of which have Lincoln as a central, if neutral, figure.

Besides Russell, whom I have already cited, other U.S. critics central to new Italian editions, such as Jerome Loving and James Hurt, have much to say about the biography as well. Loving cites Russell's point that the book is largely based on local oral tradition and says that Masters "blames Lincoln for starting the Civil War, suggesting he was a closet abolitionist all along" (Kind. Loc. 389-393). Hurt argues that Masters's biography was largely an ode to Lincoln's opponent, Stephen Douglas, and that his opinion of Lincoln may not be "new and not necessarily irrational, but the vehemence and extremism with which Masters advances it makes us suspect motivations rooted in personal associations" (418). He summarizes the work by stating:

Lincoln ultimately stood with the North, the city, and the future, while for Masters, Douglas stood with the South, the country, and the past. And once he has classified them, the categories harden for Masters, and he can pour into them the displaced energies of his own personal position. This also seems to be the strategy behind Masters' other political and social attitudes, his xenophobia and racism, for example. (418)

I could go on citing American opinions of *Lincoln, the Man*, but it should be clear by now that these critiques are plain and plentiful, and that their exclusion in Italian editions shows a careful curation process. This last citation, furthermore, brings up a final key issue.

### *Racism*

In *Spoon River*, Masters's opposition to the Civil War is framed in terms of the centralization of the government and introduction of big-business interests to the frontier in the postwar years. The war

itself is seen as incurring those changes. While that belief may be truly felt by the poet, it obscures a latent defense of slavery—and, in turn, racism—that exposes itself across the years. In *Spoon River*, we see strains of this in Masters's defense of Southern Democracy, his critique of abolitionists, like Robert G. Ingersoll in "W. Lloyd Garrison Standard," and his denouncement of the Civil War as a "cause unjust" in "George Trimble" and again in "Jefferson Howard." In his 1922 *Children of the Marketplace*, Masters's protagonist believes that "trusts are much worse than any ante-bellum slave owner" (Norman 46). In his 1931 article in *American Mercury*, titled "Stephen A. Douglas," meanwhile, Masters says that Republicanism ultimately led to "Prohibition, bureaucracy, the trusts, imperialism, and the loftiness of a Christian Republic free of slavery, polygamy and drink!" (qtd. in Norman 48). Lincoln and his Party, Masters claims, "were getting ready to do worse things against slavery than slavery had ever done" (51). Since American critics have almost always chosen to address these opinions, Italians who choose to rely heavily on U.S. scholarship have had to cherry-pick citations, as we will see.

Ballerini, in his version of the epitaph "George Trimble," makes a much more accurate and clear translation of the English "free silver" as "l'idea di mettere in circolazione monete d'argento" (99) which all of his predecessors had left as the ambiguous "libero argento." In the notes to the epitaph, he cites Masters's speech about 'Bimetallism', as mentioned in a letter from Burgess to Hallwas, which he most likely took from Hallwas's own mention of it in his notes to the epitaph. Ballerini also points out, like Hallwas, that the 'Peerless Leader' in the epitaph was the historical William Jennings Bryan. Hallwas, significantly, reveals Bryan as the Peerless Leader on page 41 of his Introduction.

Ballerini's historical summation of Bryan and free-silver follow Hallwas's, yet Ballerini does not choose to include Hallwas's larger point, from pages 41-43:

Between the Civil War and the turn of the century America had been transformed from an agrarian republic with a fairly homogenous northern European ethnic background to an industrialized, urbanized nation, filled with business entrepreneurs devoted to capitalistic growth and immigrants clinging to Old World traditions. [...] No American writer was more deeply

troubled by the change than the author of *Spoon River Anthology*, who fused his awareness of it with his memories [...] and his idealized recollections of the Petersburg area to create his mythic view of conflicting social groups and cultural decline (41-42).

Hallwas goes on on the page to say that Masters's "Philosophical determinism prompted him to regard human character as substantially fixed by heredity and environment." To Masters, only the descendants of the pioneers were "real Americans," while newcomers were "not apt to share the American vision—and they were on the increase" (41). Hallwas finishes his assessment of Masters's fear of immigration and subsequent cultural decline by citing the 1920 "The Great Race Passes":

Crackers and negroes in the South,  
Methodists and prohibitionists,  
Mongrels and pigmies  
Possess the land" (42).

This historical contextualization is not optional for American scholars, as readers can parse the tension themselves when they read the entire *Spoon River*, but to Italian readers there exists no inherent tensions in the text, thus scholars can indulge in a generous avoidance.

This flexibility to avoid dealing with racially charged poetic moments is apparent again in Terrinoni's choice to include Masters's 1941 poem "The Old Salem Mill: Petersburg" in the selected poetry appendix. He does so without controversy and without gloss, even though the poem refers to Shack Dye, the one black speaker in *Spoon River*, as "Nigger Dick" (Kind. Loc. 8536-8537). The word 'nigger' is widely considered the most inflammatory and racist term in American history, since at least the 1800s and still today. Coming from the mouth of an apparent racist in 1941, it loses even the ambiguity some give it in Mark Twain's work. Yet, Terrinoni, without problematizing it, simply translates it as the English equivalent of 'negro': "Dick il Negro" (Kind. Loc. 8501). 'Negro' is a politically incorrect term in Italy and the U.S., but it not carry the same cultural baggage, nor does Terrinoni elucidate the immense weight of the original racist slur, either in Masters's day or today.

The flexibility to be generous with Masters is clear, once again, in Ballerini's note to the opening

lines of the Union-soldier epitaph, “Knowlt Holheimer”: “I was the first fruits of the battle of Missionary Ridge. / When I felt the bullet enter my heart” (54). Ballerini says it calls to mind the same sacrifice as Billie Holiday’s lynching ballad “Strange Fruit”:

All’idea di sacrificio (first fruits) si sovrappone inoltre, diacronicamente, quella delle impiccagioni (strange fruits) come si evince da una canzone resa famosa da Billie Holiday: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit, / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, / Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze, / Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees...” (579).

To compare the death of Knowlt Holheimer’s (who enlisted in the army only to avoid prosecution for theft, as we learn in “Lydia Puckett”) to a sacrifice equal to the long history of African American lynching in the south after the Civil War is ill-conceived. But then, to imply that the slavery-apologist Masters’s intentions, diachronically, share something with Holiday’s accusations against people like Masters himself, reads as a highly non-native, perhaps even uncritical, reading. Masters’s problematic worldview, and the careful Italian treatment of it, underpin my claim that the poet’s legacy in Italy can, in an academically honest sense, only continue if scholars stop attempting to authenticate their own analysis through connection with the U.S. context and U.S. scholarship.

### **Rereading *Spoon River* through the lens of Mussolini’s Traumatic Agrarian Rhetoric**

As stated previously, the legacy of *Spoon River* in Italy is largely tied to its revolutionary roots there. The risky publication of the first edition and Cesare Pavese’s involvement have been important to the book’s antifascist ties, as Pavese was one of Italy’s foremost antifascist writers in the immediate postwar period. During the 1970s’ *strategia di tensione* or *anni di piombo*, it once again came to represent resistance, for example, as Luigi Ballerini points out, Pivano’s translation of the epitaph “Carl Hamblin” was carved on the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli’s tombstone (628). It seems likely due to the work’s antifascist legacy that its agrarian sympathies have been continually under-emphasized by critics, though American and Italian scholars alike have pointed out how central agrarianism and ruralism are to the work and to Masters’s worldview.

John Hallwas allows that *Spoon River* was first seen as a revolt against the village, but he argues that in reality it is a mythic, nationalistic “champion of agrarian American” (40), which taken as a complete work reflects a central tenant: that the Adamic early Americans had been pure and true, while the Civil War ruined idyllic agrarian democracy (39). Hallwas is not alone in this sort of claim, nearly all American critics stress similar messages, and even Cesare Pavese ultimately agrees. While in 1931 he wrote in an article for *La Cultura*, that “the great merit of Lee Masters is to have begun, in his country, the merciless description of provincial people, villagers, Puritans” (42-43). By 1943, his opinion had changed and rather than calling the book a revolt against traditional, rural culture, he says that it can be defined as *a ballade du temps jadis*, a ballad to times past (171). When he writes a eulogy for Masters in 1950, his assessment, in part, sounds remarkably like Hallwas’s. *Spoon River*, he states, is a “humiliated celebration of the energy and the youth of great past. [...] A heroic dream of ‘the republic’, of ‘giant hands [who] from the womb of the world tore the republic,’ the real ‘pioneers’ who loved and fought with courage. To this dream Lee Masters gave a name, ‘Jeffersonian democracy’” (201). Jeffersonian democracy is agrarian democracy, an ideological model in which the farmer best exemplifies civic virtue and independence from corrupting city influences.

Masters’s stance *vis-a-vis* agrarianism is clear in American scholarship today, yet Ballerini cites an antiquated U.S. secondary source (from 1922) in his Introduction and maintains the old claim that Masters was part of the revolt of the village writers:

“Masters [è] il capostipite di una nuova razza di narratori americani [...] La rubrica nella quale li iscrive, ‘La rivolta del villaggio’, titolo con cui intendeva significare che questi scrittori mettevano a nudo le ipocrisie che permeavano la vita di provincia – quella stessa vita che generazioni precedenti di scrittori avevano dipinto come ideale, pura, idillica, genuina, ecc., contrapponendola alla vita inevitabilmente corrotta degli abitanti delle grandi città” (ix).

He does point out that some disagree with this claim, but his prevailing point is still that Masters is to be considered anti-provincial. I see this desire to adhere to an earlier assessment of Masters as having

much to do with rural and provincial associations with Fascist political rhetoric. Mussolini's construction of a myth of the rural was partially founded on disdain for the city, and like Masters's brand of ruralism, Mussolini's was retrograde, palingenistic, and nationalistic. One may point out that Mussolini was pro-rural and anti-agrarian, while Masters was pro-agrarian, but the distinction falls apart in context. To Mussolini, *gli agrari* are rich land owners, while *i rurali* are *mezzadri* and small-plot owners (Alvaro Lopez 130). This contrast does not exist for Masters for whom the ideal agrarian dream allowed all men (slaves significantly excluded) to own swaths of frontier land.

Mussolini used the figure of the *contadino* as a national and heroic figure, a virile, fertile/productive and frugal figure, whose values represented the new fascist man (130). At the same time, he discouraged Italians from moving to the unhealthy and corrupt metropolis, creating a polemic between the two worlds that he tied into the long history of the peninsula. As the fascist economist, Arrigo Serpieri, wrote in 1929: "Spesso la storia umana è stato null altro che contrasto fra società rurali e società industriali o commerciali. Roma—la rustica e povera Roma—vince la ricca, la commerciale, la plutocratica Cartagine" (132). So, perhaps, to a modern Italian audience—for whom *ruralism* still rings of the Fascist rhetoric that spawned the *strapaese* intellectual movement—to classify Masters's *Spoon River* as an ode to ruralism, would mean to risk its revolutionary stance. Or perhaps it would seem to be admitting, in the reader, latent sympathies with Fascism, even though ruralism and fascism have never been not strictly correlated, except by Mussolini himself. Indeed, Mussolini chose to rally Italians around the figure of the *contadino/a* precisely because of its extant and inherent potency. The provincial hero is not a Fascist myth, it is rather a myth that was usurped and manipulated by Fascism in a way that stripped it from the hearts and minds of Italians and returned it to them stained with ideology that is not inherent to it.

*Spoon River* was read in Italy in 1943 as a satire and exposé of the village, of Fascist *ruralism*; as

such, it was subversive of Mussolini's regime, and of Mussolini himself, who proclaimed in 1927 "Vi spiegherete quindi che io aiuti l'agricoltura, che mi proclami rurale; vi spiegherete quindi che io non voglia industrie intorno a Roma; vi spiegherete quindi come io non ammetta in Italia che le industrie sane, le quali industrie sane sono quelle che trovano da lavorare nell'agricoltura e nel mare" (131).<sup>6</sup> To reread it, critically, as an ode to the pastoral appears to be judged too risky by scholars today; yet, the pastoral promise in the text is not rendered invisible by this editorial choice. Rather, rural heroism exists in *Spoon River* at a sentimental instead of intellectual level, just below the critical surface. The original socio-political issues are so foreign as to dissolve away, neutralizing the objective and historical to render the text personal and emotional; it is an idyllic dream set in a far-off place, safe from associations with the *ventennio fascista*. *Spoon River's* very foreignness is perhaps, too, part of its favor, as Italy since the postwar has often preferred nonnatives as its popular heroes (consider Tex Willer, Corto Maltese, and Dylan Dog), whose stories carry readers away from their own local history, and toward much-safer foreign 'memories'.

In 1943, Cesare Pavese wrote provocatively of *Spoon River*: "Some of these poems seem little by little to have become Italian, before the act of translation, in the insistent recurrences of the memory" (168) and he claims that Pivano's translation "put us once again face to face with this lost image of ourselves" (169). In other words, it transports Italians back to 1915, before the U.S. or Italy had joined WWI, before Mussolini had marched on Rome, during a moment when western individuals and nations were struggling to come to terms with modernity and its effects. Italian modernity/modernism began as part of the European avant-garde in art and literature, but it was interrupted by Fascism. Fascism, at first, allowed for experiments in modernisms, and presented itself as a third-way for dealing with modernity. Yet, as Mussolini's regime settled into an economic depression and coalition with Germany in the 1930s, Fascism sought less and less a means towards reconciling Italy with modernity,

focusing evermore on a solution for the future that returned Italy to a mythic past, and in so doing, it confounded local mythic traditions with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century regime. Masters's vision, while ultimately similar to Mussolini's, exists in a realm that is safe from Fascism.

Luigi Ballerini says of "Jacob Goodpasture," one of the central hero-epitaphs of *Spoon River*, that "nel cognome Buonpascolo si riflettono anche le simpatie di questo personaggio (e dell'autore di *Spoon River*) per la civiltà agricola degli Stati del Sud, mortalmente ferita dalla vittoria nordista nella Guerra civile" (xxx). For an American reader, Ballerini's simple claim is highly problematic and demands heavy unpacking. Yet, for the Italian reader, "Jacob Goodpasture" might represent an opportunity to indulge in an unproblematic nostalgia for *la civiltà agricola*, which if written in the Italian context in 1915, would need its own unpacking and problematizing in light of Fascist rhetoric to come. The Illinois of 1915, decontextualized from the local historical setting, is a guilt-free space where Italian readers can breathe in the idyllic pre-modern world, representative of a vast and ambiguous 'before'. It is both the personal 'before' of childhood and the universal 'before' of the pre-modern, but it is not, crucially, the specific national 'before' of the early 20th-century Italy that was heading straight for the *ventennio fascista*.

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<sup>1</sup> "Per ottenere l'autorizzazione dalle censure del tempo venne richiesto il permesso di pubblicazione per un *Antologia di S. River*, e all'antologia di questo nuovo santo il permesso venne accordato (o almeno così mi raccontò Pavese [...]) e il libro uscì in pieno guerra, poco prima che la casa editrice venisse confiscata [...] pochi giorni dopo le autorità lo [the book] avrebbero sequestrato" (Pivano Kind. Loc. 208-217).

<sup>2</sup> "la voce del Masters, più personale degli altri, serba ancora un accento che seppure i connazionali hanno smesso di gustare, riesce indicativo, per noi europei, d'un particolare e singolare



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atteggiamento naturalista di timbro così americano che non può fare a meno di invitarci e commuoverci” (Kind. Loc. 281-283).

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Porta, in his 1986 translation, is aware of previous translators’ inability to ‘*sdoganare*’ the difficult language of the source text; he chooses to keep some terms in English, such as ‘leader’, ‘Sunday-school,’ ‘bulldog’; yet, he does not gloss these terms, nor does he work to *sdoganare* the more important political terms and context. (Montorfani 620-21).

<sup>4</sup> Gianfranca Balestra in 2007, speaking of Masters’s influence in the 1970s when Fabrizio De André released his album inspired by *Spoon River*, said that his libertarianism was “contro il proibizionismo e contro tutte le ipocrisie, a favore dei diritti delle donne, della libertà di opinione, per l’amore libero. Tutti temi controversi del suo tempo e che continuano a essere di attualità nel dibattito politico americani” (106).

<sup>5</sup> In the 1860s, Copperheads were a faction of Democrats in the Union-North who opposed the Civil War and wanted to compromise with the Confederates.

<sup>6</sup> Mussolini, B.: “Il discorso dell'ascensione alla Camera dei deputati”, 26 May 1927 (qtd. in Alvaro Lopez 131).

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