*FOUR AMERICAN POETS.**

Recognition of two principles underlies the present poetic movement: the first, that there exists no poetic subject as such — no one matter, that is, more susceptible than another of poetic treatment; the second, that rhythm is organic — that the musical form of verse must be intimately moulded by its emotional content. On them has been based almost entirely its broader appeal. As a result there is observed a certain tendency to misunderstand them and pervert their significance. Because it is admitted that a poet may find ample inspiration in modern life, it is often contended that the theme of vital poetry must necessarily be contemporary; and because it is evident that every poet worthy of the name invents his own versification, however "regular" it may appear — when did such a poet ever consciously write "iambs"? —it is urged that only through deliberate divergence from traditional practice is genuine originality possible.

Mr. Edgar Lee Masters, at least, is the victim of no such vain illusions. In his latest book, "The Great Valley," the author of the "Spoon River Anthology"—"the only poet with Americanism in his bones," according to Mr. John Cowper Powys, his "discoverer"—writes of Apollo, the Furies, Marsyas, and St. Mark, as freely as of the men and women who made Chicago, while this leading exponent of a new medium, midway between prose and poetry, shows himself quite impartial in his employment of traditional metres and of those free rhythms more peculiar to himself — blank verse, the rhymed pentameter couplet, and *vers libre*. It would be hard to say in which he displays the greater artistic ineptitude; and if one were casting about for a convenient confutation of Mr. Max Eastman's theory of "lazy verse," he need look no farther than a book in which the worst of Whitman ("Come Republic") is found side by side with the worst of Shakespeare ("Man of Our Street" and "The Typical American"). Not that there do not occur flashes of the power and penetration, coupled with the harsh felicities of word and phrase, that made of the "Spoon River Anthology," with all its obvious crudities, a really notable performance. But they are relatively few, and largely lost in the welter of words.

The truth is, of course, that Mr. Masters, who seemed at one time to give a certain artistic promise, is not primarily an artist at all, but a moralist and social philosopher of vague ideological tendencies. For the moment, in the "Spoon River Anthology," his discursive instincts were held in check by the sheer mechanical requirements of the restricted form he imposed upon himself, in the brief space and inscriptional succinctness of the epigram. This artificial restraint once removed, however, the poet appears in his proper guise as a popular preacher of semi-literary, pseudo-scientific pretensions, who has read "Bob" Ingersoll, Darwin, Gobineau, Grote,— a whole shelf-full of the "World's Best Literature,"— and is eager to bring the conglomerate wisdom thus acquired to bear upon the solution of social problems, the mystical interpretation of our national destinies. In this merely edifying end, all sense of artistic proportion is lost. A story like that of "Cato Braden," which would have been compressed into fourteen lines in the "Spoon River Anthology," is here developed interminably through as many pages. Even then the poet, fearing lest he may not have exhausted all its implications, returns to the attack in a supplementary poem, "Will Boyden Lectures," a sort of funeral sermon for the country editor, dead at the age of fifty-one, of wasted opportunities and Bright's Disease. The significance of the whole is summed up in the admonition addressed to city-dwellers, at the end of the first poem, to

> Think sometimes of the American village and
> What may be done for conservation of
> The souls of men and women in the village.

— a fairly representative example of his habitual homiletic style.

The poems in which Mr. Masters is least unsuccessful are those in which he only too seldom seems stirred by some note of personal feeling, such as "Malachy Degan," the lightly touched portrait of a prize-fight referee; and "Slip Shoe Lovey," a genuine enough bit of greasy kitchen genre. Those in which, on the other hand, he is seen at his absolute worst, are the Chicago series, where the "bigness" of his theme, as he conceives it, betrays him into almost incredible turgidity and bombast. "Bigness" has an equally baleful effect upon Mr. Carl Sandburg, inciting him, in his "Chicago Poems," to a brutality and violence of expression about which there seems a good deal that is alien and artificial. But there are apparently two Mr. Sandburgs: one the rather gross, simple-minded, sen-

* THE GREAT VALLEY. By Edgar Lee Masters. New York: Macmillan Co. $1.50.
CHICAGO POEMS. By Carl Sandburg. New York: Henry Holt & Co. $1.25.
MEN, WOMEN AND GHOSTS. By Amy Lowell. New York: Macmillan Co. $1.25.
MOUNTAIN INTERVAL. By Robert Frost. New York: Henry Holt & Co. $1.25.

timental, sensual man among men, going with scarcely qualified gusto through the grimy business of modern life, which, mystical mobocrat, he at once assails and glorifies; the other, the highly sensitized impressionist who finds in the subtle accords between his own ideal moods and the loveliest, most elusive aspects of the external world, material for delicate and dreamlike expression. The first Mr. Sandburg is merely a clever reporter, with a bias for social criticism. The second, within his limits, is a true artist, whose method of concentration, of intense, objective realization, ranges him with those who call themselves "Imagists."

This method of Imagism, with its insistence upon the clear, concrete, sharply defined rendering of the poet's idea or "image," whatever this may be,— Miss Lowell protests against the current notion of the Imagist as exclusively a picture-maker,— naturally tends to restrict his range, to throw him back upon the briefer lyric or dramatic forms for expression. There are Imagists, however, who refuse to accept as inevitable the narrow limitations seemingly imposed by their artistic ideal. They are ambitious to achieve longer, more considerable *œuvres* than the epigram. Doubtless one of these days we shall have an Imagist epic, and perhaps Miss Lowell will be the author of it. At present, however, she is content to appear in the more modest rôle of story-teller.

Not that the tales contained in her latest collection, "Men, Women and Ghosts," are by any means her first, whether in the more usual verse forms to which she, no less than Mr. Masters, turns from time to time; or in her more characteristic *vers libre;* or in her still more personally flavored "polyphonic prose." Those who have read her earlier volume, "Sword Blades and Poppy Seed," will recall, particularly, two pieces in the last-mentioned manner, "In a Castle," and "The Basket," as among the best things it contained. Indeed it is doubtful if the new book, with the possible exception of "Patterns"— a perfect thing in its way — has anything to show quite so successful. One cannot help feeling, as one reads, that Miss Lowell, exhilarated by former successes, has come to write too much and too rapidly. Often her instinct for what is really significant fails her in those poems in which, as she says, "the dramatis personæ are air, clouds, trees, houses, streets, and such like things"; her impressionism — or rather "expressivism"— degenerates into a mere passion for the picturesque; and she seems content to achieve upon occasion a scattering effect with a charge of buckshot, where we should have expected a succession of bull's-eyes. And if this is true even of so richly and warmly colored a composition as "Malmaison"—which suffers also from a certain sluggishness of movement in spite of its brisk phrases — it is felt very much more in many of the other poems — particularly in those where Miss Lowell employs that "unrelated" method, or method of the "catalogue," which, however fascinating for the artist, constitutes a very distinct menace for her art.

Nor do we always feel the same variety and elasticity in her rhythms as before, owing no doubt to the constantly increasing strain put upon them. Formerly Miss Lowell was satisfied to make them merely the appropriate musical embodiment of her thought and feeling — organic, in short. Now she seeks often to render them directly imitative of the "pronounced movements of natural objects," such as the hoops and shuttlecocks of the little girls in "A Roxbury Garden," or of the "flowing, changing rhythm" of musical instruments in "The Cremona Violin," and "Stravinsky's Three Pieces 'Grotesques,' for String Quartette." Each reader must decide independently as to the success of these novel and daring experiments. But in the opinion of the present reviewer, at least, Miss Lowell has very largely sacrificed that beauty which comes from the handling of the line of verse as an instrument in itself, in order to achieve what is at best but a faint, far-off suggestion of the alien effect aimed at.

The same straining effort after imitation as an end, not as a means merely, leads Miss Lowell to invent words, or rather vocables, to represent sounds in nature directly, instead of simply suggesting them imaginatively. This is always a questionable device, to be used sparingly. With Miss Lowell it has become a habit, almost a vice, threatening to spread like a blight over all her work. Scarcely a poem of any length in the present collection but presents one or more example, like the

> Whee-e-e!
> Bump! Bump! Tong-ti-bump!

with which she attempts to rival the dissonances of modern music.

Such a practice, carried to such bizarre excess, simply bears witness to the poverty of the poet's verbal resources. In general it may be said of Miss Lowell that her feeling for the color values of words is much superior to her sense of their sonorous quality. And yet without the latter — language being what it is, a purely musical medium—there can be no real distinction of style in poetry. Very

few American poets to-day show such distinction. Mr. Robert Frost has a touch of it in more than one poem in his latest collection, "Mountain Interval,"—in "The Oven Bird," for example:

> There is a singer everyone has heard
> Loud, a midsummer and a midwood bird,
> Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.

It is for this purely sensuous quality, as well as for his genuine passion for nature, expressed through such wealth and delicacy of observed detail, that one most legitimately reads and admires Mr. Frost. There are, too, elements of deep divination in his art, where it touches complex human relations and reactions. But as a dramatic and narrative poet, his method is often unnecessarily cryptic and involved. Thus in "Snow" there is nothing sufficiently remarkable either in the incident itself, or in the resultant revelation and clash of character, to justify its long and elaborate treatment. But in "In the Home Stretch" the poet is singularly successful in suggesting ghostly presences, in creating a veritable haunted atmosphere for the old New England farmhouse, akin to that produced by the English poet, Mr. Walter de la Mare, in "The Listeners." Mr. Frost is the one continuator at present of the "tradition of magic" in American poetry.

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