

IN THE CAMPS OF THE POETS

BY HERMAN JACOBSON

A STRANGE form of poetry has arisen. For the past dozen years our newspapers, magazines, and book publishers have been swamped by a form of verse that makes the older generation of poets rub their eyes in amazement.

Nor are the poets the only ones concerned. The public is bewildered, uncertain whether the poetry it reads is the genuine article or a fraud.

This condition has prevailed in European countries for quite a number of years. In America it made its formal appearance with the publication of Edgar Lee Masters', *Spoon River Anthology*; Robert Frost's, *North of Boston*, and above all other things, with the entrance into the arena of Amy Lowell.

This verse form has created among us a three-cornered struggle. At one point are the new poets. At the other the old poets. At the third the compromisers.

The old poets have drawn up a long list of grievances. They have made their cry heard in scores of volumes and hundreds of magazine articles. All that can be given here is the refrain of their plaint. They contend that it has taken the poets of the past thousands of years to perfect measures for all the human emotions, from the bridal song to the funeral dirge. They have worked out meters for every phase of human emotion or thought. The new poets, they contend, have flung all that heritage to the wind and put forth such things as this as poetry:

I am sitting in my room,
I am looking out of the window
At the leaves,
The brown leaves,
They fall,
They flutter,
They drop.
Do you see the leaves fall?
It is night.

The wind is blowing,
 Oh, how it blows!
 Do you hear it blow?

It must be admitted that this sort of thing will hardly make fit material for a primer for steerage immigrants; yet is this sample far from the worst, we are told by the old poets. They show that it cannot be called verse, since it violates every canon of the art. It cannot be called prose, since it hardly says anything. At its best it is neither flesh, fish, nor good red herring. At its worst it is a crime—a crime against human labor; which might be used to far better advantage in other fields. Its greatest masters occasionally manage to convey an emotion of some sort. But nothing like that conveyed by the old form. Take this as an illustration from Amy Lowell:

Cat,
 I am afraid of your poisonous beauty;
 I have seen you torturing a mouse,
 Yet when you lie purring in my lap
 I forget everything but how soft you are
 And it is only when I feel your claws open upon my hand
 That I remember.

Shall I choke you, Cat,
 Or kiss you?
 Really I do not know.

This is pretty good writing. But what is it? we are asked. No teacher of rhetoric would find it easy to explain to his classes to what form it belongs.

In short, the young poets are accused of shirking the hard work incident to the dressing up of an idea. We are told that they are trying to find a sort of philosopher's stone to do away with toil. They have ambition to do great things—to write poetry. But they have not the patience that goes with the realization of great ambitions—the patience for steady, long, and superhuman exertion. Their works are mere jottings on paper. The old poets are in the habit of making such jottings to be worked up into real poetry; never for publication. The young ones fling them at us to be consumed raw. But they no more make up a poem than an armful of alfalfa makes up a beefsteak. They are "might-be's."

But the accusation against them for lack of form is really not as significant as the accusation of lack of subject matter. A poor pattern is only a sin against the eye. But poor material, poor and undig-

nified subject matter, is a sin against reason, against the Holy Ghost. It is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. The poet of old sang of things beautiful and true, of God, of love, of war, of immortality; of mighty struggles and fearful combats. He took himself seriously, very seriously. He sang with O'Shaughnessy the famous ode—made it his creed:

We are the music-makers
 And we are the dreamers of dreams,
 Wandering by lone sea-breakers
 And sitting by desolate streams;
 World-losers and world-foresakers,
 On whom the pale moon gleams,—
 And yet are we the movers and shakers
 Of the world forever, it seems.

With wonderful deathless ditties
 We build the world's great cities,
 And out of a fabulous story
 We fashion an empire's glory:
 One man with a dream at pleasure
 Shall go forth and conquer a crown
 And another with a new song's measure
 Can trample an empire down.

On the other hand, the new poets, we are told, go down into the gutter for their subject matter. They sing of things that were best left unsung. They tell us of

. . . the Bowery
 . . . throbbing like a fistula
 Back of her ice-scabbed fronts,
 Where lived faces
 Glimmer in furtive doorways
 Or spill out of the black pockets of alleys.

The majority of the older poets plead their cause patiently. They have not the heart to quarrel with the young folks. Besides, they know that quarreling will do little good. Poets, especially young ones, are a stubborn lot. They are men who follow their own sweet will, no matter whither it leads. More, they cannot be starved into doing what is right. For the poet of today is still treated very much like the ancient bard of whom it has been said, "Seven cities claimed great Homer dead, where the living Homer begged his bread." Society denies them a livelihood, except in such rare instances as that of a Francois Villon who, in addition to his art as a poet, managed to acquire the art of climbing porches. And they cannot be made to

write "what the public wants," since they get no pay from the public.

But there is a class of poets of the old school, especially critics, who are more aggressive. They plainly accuse the young ones of indolence, insolence, lack of brains, and of downright lunacy. We are told that the reason they write the way they do is because they have no sense of human dignity. That they have no disciplined brains. That they have no brains to discipline. That they make a virtue of their faults.

This free verse of theirs frees them from the task of getting an education; from paying the price of knowledge; from going through the long apprenticeship every art imposes upon its creators; and from the toils incident to the whipping of an idea into shape.

So much for their work itself. Its effect upon the other arts is most pernicious, we are told. It has influenced every phase of human activity in the form of a diminution of discipline. It has made itself felt in music, dancing, painting, sculpture, drama. Above all else, in simple prose. Up till a dozen years ago prose demanded a style from an author; an individuality which took a score of years to attain by dint of superhuman toil, concentrated thought, and unusual experience. These things had to be acquired in addition to the God-given gift of articulation. The result was that after you had read a dozen pages by a particular author he need not sign his name any more to his writings, so far as you were concerned. You knew him by his style.

But as a result of the influence of free verse, a prose author must leave his finger prints on his pages if he is to be identified.

A great number of the compromisers do not quarrel with the young poets over their subject matter as over the form. Form is everything in art, they tell us. No matter what you say, so long as you say it well. With them is not so much a question of What as of How. They demand the wave-like swing and the bell-like ring of the good old English poem. A poem need not be sublime. Need not be grand. Need not sing of things in cloudland. The emotion of a simple soldier is enough. The ballad may be of a barrack room or a bar. So long as it is in the tested and tried form.

In conformity with the times, they go to psychology to prove their contention. The form of the old poetry, they tell us, is part of our tradition. Of the civilized white man's culture. A Chinaman's music may sound to us like the antics of a circus caliope. But it is part of his tradition, and he therefore likes it. The same holds good with respect to poetry. We have perfected in the course of the centuries

a particular rhyme and rhythm, which has become part of our inherited tradition. Anything set to that form pleases us. Anything outside that form displeases us. Is not poetry. This, for example, though not treating of things sublime is good poetry:

At last we knew that she was gone, as best and worst may go,
The good ship and the bad likewise, the fast and the slow.
From course to skysail up she soared like a midsummer cloud;
In all the earth I have not seen a thing more brave and proud:
And she is gone, as dreams do, as a song sung long before,
Or of the golden years of a man's youth when they are his no more.

By Casey's Occidental Rooms a little thing I heard,
With heavy heart I turned away and long I spoke no word;
I bared my head there where I stood, "God rest her soul," I said,
As if some woman I had loved in a far land was dead.

They allow the poet even to dabble with things few poets have ever dabbled before. Till now very little of poetry had anything to do with the life of the common man, with particular forms of legislature, with social problems in general. Like chamber music, it was the cultured man's preoccupation. It never had much to do with new inventions, new theories in science, novel conceptions of the relation between man and man. The compromising school finds no fault with such poems as this:

We act in a crisis not as one who dons
A judge's robe and sits to praise or blame
With walnut gavel, before high window frame
Beside a Justice-and-her-scales in bronze:

We act in crises not by pros and cons
Of volumes in brown and calfskin, still the same;
But like the birds and the beasts from which we came."

This is obviously new subject matter in the realm of poetry. But, the compromisers assure us, every age and generation have sung their peculiar song—the song characteristic of their life. But so long as the established form is not violated they have no quarrel with the poet. In fact, they show that the generation of, say Robert Burns, brought up on Milton and Shakespeare, must have been shocked out of their frames when they heard the Scot singing:

A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast,
Churches for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest.

Or were told of a batch of jolly beggars who

Wi' quaffing and laughing
 They ranted and they sang,
 Wi' jumpin' and thumpin'
 The vera girdle rang.

In a word, all that is wanted of the free verse writer is that he learn rules of rhyme and rhythm. He may then follow his sweet will.

The young poets contend that both are wrong. That both belong to yesterday. In fact, some of them mirthfully tell us that their antagonists are still voting for Lincoln for President. They are not living in the twentieth century. The first is a medievalist. The second is a Victorian. Both hopeless. This earth of ours, we are told by the free verse spokesmen, has been so shaken in the past ten years that the very foundation of our life is rocking. And free verse is not a cause but an effect.

They insist that the old formulas and artificialities which have captivated past generations and held them in servitude must go. To copy past generations is to try to live their lives. This is impossible. No one's life may be duplicated. And even if it were possible to do so, it would render the duplicator a lifeless thing. The great calamities that have befallen mankind is largely due to the fact that it has tried to follow in the footsteps of this great man or that great man; this great theory or that great theory of life, conduct, and art. Now it was a Tolstoi, a Zola, a Voltaire, a Saint Paul, a Christ, a Moses. With the conclusion of every man's life the form of his life ends. It cannot be put into action again without causing the death, physically, mentally, or spiritually of the man who tries to make use of it. Neither life nor its forms ever repeat themselves.

Take an illustration from a field more at hand. Poe has perfected, or rather helped to perfect, the form of the short story. In his hands it became a form fraught with extraordinary possibilities. It has brought into being a literature which had never existed before.

Subsequent generations in America have grasped its wonders and began to follow it. The result is that within half a century after the death of Poe our magazines are filled with a lifeless form of fiction the majority of which, though they fetch checks in three figures, are constantly keeping our intelligent men and women in an apologetic mood with respect to American literature. It is a dead form. It belongs to the museum. Attempts to keep it alive kill those who attempt it. It smells of the grave; and no elixir will ever be

found to bring it back to life. It is Nature's stern law that all things which live must die. Forms of literature are no exception.

There is only one safe touchstone in life and art: The inner voice of Self, unmarred by this theory or that theory. It is true, it often leads to tragedy. But there is a tragic element in Nature, in life, which none may escape. It is the one thing before which we must bend our heads in resignation. The idea that another's inner voice, whether of an age or an individual, is more important than our own reduces itself to an absurdity under the analysis of common sense. In fact, no man really follows. Neither men nor theories. Take even such movements as religion, where the individual who founds it becomes deified and his teachings become definite, concrete. Even there the observer will notice that there are as many forms of the particular religion as there are followers. For no man is capable, no matter how hard he tries, to annihilate himself.

Of the whole vast welter of our day, one definite thing emerges: All values are being re-evaluated. Poetry is only one of them and cannot escape re-evaluation. The young poets assure us that they are as profoundly impressed with the work of the masters as the college professors. But they cannot shut their eyes to the fact that these works speak of a time and of men long since dead. Their forms and their manner of expression are marvelously beautiful, but they do not give utterance to the throbbing life within us; to our needs, our problems, our longings. Imitated by us, these beauties become the beauties of the defunct body in the coffin.

Their primary concern is not this rhythm or that rhythm, but

. . . the steeled sight,
The obstinacy of vision that melts the hard edge of things like compressed fire.

And affords them a peep at reality. The vast majority of us live in a world of illusion, which, through the instrumentality of metaphysics, religion, politics, and art has been rendered far more powerful than the real world. The young poets, together with many other artists and thinkers, are laboring to brush away all the cobwebs of illusion. The theory of the metaphysician that this world is too stern and life too stony at the core to be endured without illusion, is challenged by them. Anyway, they want a look at it. If they find life too stony, they will spin illusions. But not before they have tried to see it as it is.

And so we find Edgar Lee Masters not afraid to exclaim:

There is a joke of cosmic size!
The urge of nature that made a man
Evolve from his brain a spiritual life—

The very same brain with which the ape and the wolf
Get food and shelter and procreate themselves.
Nature has man do this
In a world where she gives him nothing to do
After all
But get food and shelter and procreate himself.

The young poets insist upon taking in all life. They declare that the renters of the front pew are not the only ones worthy of finding their emotions in song. The great, the all-embracing fact is for one to be alive. Whether he is socially this or that is of little consequence. And so we find Daisy Fraser, the sinning sister of Spoon River, ascending to heaven on the thought that she was

Never taken before Justice Arnett
Without contributing ten dollars and cost
To the school fund of Spoon River.

They insist on singing the song of the new day, no matter what its activities. You find them in the front ranks of the army fighting for social justice; and you find them jibing at some local celebrity.

I belong to the church
And to the party of prohibition;
And the villagers thought I died of eating watermelon.
The truth is I had cirrhosis of the liver.
For every noon for thirty years
I slipped behind the prescription partition
In Trainor's drug store
And poured out a generous drink
From the bottle marked
"Spiritus frumenti."

They are indifferent to the fact that they are taken for a wicked lot by the professors. They do not mind the stout stick of the critic, nor the condescending smile of the school ma'am. They point to the fact that every new movement is met with threats, derision, and even violence. At the time Shakespeare wrote Hamlet and Lear, the old guards were inveighing against the drama; which is perhaps the most respected form of composition of our day. The Carnegies of Elizabethan England were bequeathing money on libraries on the stipulation that "play-books" be excluded from them.

To the charge of a lack of technique, they reply that their accusers are wrong. The fact that their poetry has none of the tum-ti-tum-tums of the old poetry does not mean it has no form. It has as definite a technique as the rhymed verse has. Only we have not yet gotten used to its rhythm. The laws of the new form have been definitely established upon laboratory experimentation. Amy Lowell, perhaps the greatest of its exponents, tells us: "It is non-syllabic, . . . the stress is one of chief accent only, with many or few syllables between, and the time unit is from one chief accent to another, a group of such time units making up the curve of the cadences."

At first blush it would seem that this is only a quarrel among the poets and need not concern the layman. The truth is that the quarrel reaches much further. All of us are concerned in it. For one thing, the reason the vast majority of mankind do not read poetry is partly due to the fact that it does not concern them. Homer's song does not touch *their* lives. Milton was read more than praised by his age, because his *Paradise Lost* is the struggle of the Puritan age. Today he is praised more than read because we have to admit that he is a great poet. But Puritanism is no longer the ruling force of life of the majority of us. For those for whom it still is *Paradise Lost* is still *the* book, much read and talked about.

The young poets believe that they can bring poetry back to its ancient prestige by making it utter the joys and woes of the day.