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Fifty Years of American Poetry

In 1910 American poetry was a bare sight. We were not, like Canada or New Zealand, a province without a national poetry of its own. There had been good American poets—but how few, and already how far in the past! Whitman and Dickinson, the two greatest and most decidedly American, seemed to owe both their greatness and their Americanness to their own entire originality and eccentricity. Three other genuinely American poets, Melville, Emerson, and Thoreau, had written good poems, most of them less notably un-English than Whitman's and Dickinson's. But the American poets who were admired most during the nineteenth century, who seemed most plainly the center of American poetry, and who fitted into the regular tradition of English poetry as plainly as Whitman and Dickinson did not, were Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, and Bryant. There had been a gap of thirty or forty years, from the '70's until 1910, during which almost no good American poetry had been written. If in 1912 someone had predicted that during the next fifty years American poetry would be the best and most influential in the English language, and that the next generation of poets would be American classics, men who would establish once and for all the style and tone of American poetry, his prediction would have seemed fantastic. Yet all this is literally true of the generation of American poets that included Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, Williams, Marianne Moore, Ransom. When we read the poems of these poets and of the Irishman Yeats, we realize that the whole center of gravity of poetry in English had shifted west of England.

It is worth our while, then, to look hard at the American poetry of the last fifty years. I'll try not to theorize about movements and tendencies, but to stick to the poets and their poems; as Goethe says, "theories are as a rule impulsive reactions of an over-hasty understanding which would like to have done with phenomena and therefore substitutes for them images, concepts, or often even just words." I have written out for you the opinions of a devoted reader of this poetry; often I have summarized or quoted from what I have already written about a poet.

When you read Edwin Arlington Robinson's poems, you are conscious of a mind looking seriously at a world with people in it, and expressing itself primarily in terms of these human beings it has observed and created. Robinson's steady human sympathy is accompanied by a steady hatred of the inhuman world that people have made for themselves, the world of business and greed and hypocritical morality; he felt for the America of the end of the century the same gloomy despair that Henry Adams and Mark Twain felt, asking it: "Are you to pay for what you have/ With all you are?" You see his qualities at their rare best in "Mr. Flood's Party," at their ordinary best in "Eros Turannos," "George Crabbe," "The Clerks." He is far better when he is reserved and prosaic than when he is poetic; his poetic rhetoric is embarrassingly threadbare and commonplace, as when he writes about his own last belief: "I can hear it only as a bar/ Of lost, imperial music, played when fair/ And angel fingers wove, and unaware,/ Dead leaves to garlands where no roses are." Such rhetoric is accompanied, characteristically, by an emptily antithetical, quibbling, riddling paradoxicalness. Robinson wrote a great deal of poetry and only a few good poems; and yet there is a somber distinction and honesty about him—he is a poet you respect.

If Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River Anthology" seems to us, today, more a part of literary history than of living poetry, still it is a surprisingly live part, a "Main Street" through whose mud the old buggies and the new horseless carriages are still pushing. It tells the historical truth of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century towns of the Middle West—the struggle of greed and puritanicalness and provinciality with innocent radicalism and idealism and culture—directly in terms of the people who embodied them; it is a kind of "Ironies of Circumstance" told by an honest muckraker. Its whole is more effective than any of its parts; and the poems' prosaic effects are always better than their poetic effects, since Masters' rhetoric, his whole idea of what a poetic effect is, is commonplace—he is either sincerely prosaic or ingenuously poetic. His work has less distinction than Robinson's; and yet his style and tone are his own, the poems plainly do come out of the life they describe. He writes: "The earth keeps some vibration going/ There in your heart, and that is you"; such a vibration is still going in some of the poems.

Carl Sandburg's poems, generally, are improvisations whose wording is approximate; they do not have the exactness, the guaranteeing sharpness and strangeness, of a real style. Sandburg is a colorful, appealing, and very American writer, so that you long for his little vignettes or big folk-editorials, with their easy sentimentality and easy idealism, to be made into finished works of art; but he sings songs more stylishly than he writes them, says his poems better than they are written—it is marvellous to hear him say "The People, Yes," but it is not marvellous to read it as a poem. Probably he is at his best in slight pieces like "Grass" or "Losers," or in such folkish inventions as: "Tell me why a hearse horse snickers/ hauling a lawyer's bones."

The oddest and most imaginative of these poets is Vachel Lindsay. He has the innocent desperate eccentricity of the artist in a world with no room for, no patience with, artists; you could die for what you believed, Lindsay said, and no one would notice or care, but if you had the nerve to go broke time after time, they would notice. Nowadays when a poet with one privately printed book can have his next three years taken care of by a Guggenheim Fellowship, a *Kenyon Review* Fellowship, and the Prix de Rome, it is hard to remember what chances the poet took in that small-town world, how precariously hand-to-mouth his existence was. And yet in one way the old days were better: Lindsay after a while, by luck and skill, got far more readers than any poet could get today. His rhetoric with its wild queer charm (half vaudeville and half grammar-school-pageant dreamed by a provincial Blake), his almost child-like imagination produced a good many poems that we make allowances for and complacently enjoy; but at his best—in "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan," in "A Negro Sermon: Simon Legree," and in "Daniel"—the poems are truly imagined and written, have a rightness all their own. In "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan," for instance, you find a real aesthetic distance, an unexpected objectivity and historical truth, that go along with the consciously exaggerated and audacious phrases; what other writer, in the smiling expectation of his reader's smile, has ever called his sweetheart and himself "fairy Democrats"? The rest of literature, the rest of the world were for Lindsay a kind of second-hand shop from which he could get, cheap, the properties of his poems; but he had more sheer imagination, sheer objective command, than most of his contemporaries, so that several of his poems are perfected as almost none of theirs are.

Robert Frost, along with Stevens and Eliot, seems to me the greatest of the American poets of this century. Frost's virtues are extraordinary. No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men: his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of a knowledge of people that few poets have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech. It is hard to overestimate the effect of this exact, spaced-out, prosaic movement, whose objects have the tremendous strength—you find it in Hardy's best poems—of things merely put down and left to speak for themselves. (Though Frost has little of Hardy's self-effacement, his matter-of-fact humility; Frost's tenderness, sadness, and humor are adulterated with vanity and a hard complacency.) Frost's seriousness and honesty; the bare sorrow with which, sometimes, things are accepted as they are, neither exaggerated nor explained away; the many, many poems in which there are real people with their real speech and real thought and real emotions—all this, in conjunction with so much subtlety and exactness, such classical understatement and restraint, makes the reader feel that he is not in a book but a world, and a world that has in common with his own some of the things that are most important in both. I don't need to praise anything so justly famous as Frost's observation of and empathy with everything in Nature from a hornet to a hillside; and he has observed his own nature, one person's random or consequential chains of thoughts and feelings and perceptions, quite as well. The least crevice of the good poems is saturated with imagination, an imagination that expresses itself in the continual wit and humor and particularity of what is said, in the hand-hewn or hand-polished texture of its saying. And when you remember that Frost has written "The Witch of Coös," "Home Burial," "A Servant to Servants," "Directive," "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," "Provide, Provide," "Acquainted with the Night," "After Apple-Picking," "Mending Wall," "The Most of It," "An Old Man's Winter Night," "To Earthward," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Spring Pools," "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," "Design," "Desert Places"—these and "The Fear," "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," "The Gift Outright," "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," and a dozen or two dozen more as good: when you remember this you are astonished, almost as you are with Yeats and Rilke, that one man could have written so many good poems.

How little Frost's poems seem performances, no matter how brilliant or magical, how little things made primarily of words, and how much things made out of lives and the world that the lives inhabit! For how much this poetry is like the world, "the world wherein we find our happiness or not at all," "the world which was ere I was born, the world which lasts when I am dead," the world with its animals and plants and, most of all, its people: people working, thinking about things, falling in love, taking naps; in Frost's poems men are not only the glory and jest and riddle of the world but also the habit of the world, its strange ordinariness, its ordinary strangeness, and they too trudge down the ruts along which the planets move in their courses. Frost is that rare thing, a complete or representative poet, and not one of the brilliant partial poets who do justice, far more than justice, to a portion of reality, and leave the rest of things forlorn. When you know Frost's poems you know surprisingly well what the world seemed to one man. The grimness and awfulness and untouchable sadness of things, both in the world and in the self, have justice done to them in the poems—the limits which existence approaches and falls back from have seldom been stated with such bare composure—but no more justice than is done to the tenderness and love and delight; and everything in between is represented somewhere too, some things willingly and often and other things only as much—in Marianne Moore's delicate phrase—"as one's natural reticence will allow." To have the distance from the most awful and most nearly unbearable parts of the poems, to the most tender, subtle, and loving parts, a distance so great; to have this whole range of being treated with so much humor and sadness and composure, with such plain truth; to see that a man can still include, connect, and make humanly understandable or understandable so *much*—this is one of the freshest and oldest of joys, a joy strong enough to make us say, with the Greek poet, that many things in this world are wonderful, but of all these the most wonderful is man.

Athens was called the education of Hellas; from 1912 till 1922 Ezra Pound could have been called the education of poetry. (I once read all the issues of *Poetry* printed during those years, and what stood out most was one poet, Yeats, and one critic, Pound.) His advice to poets could be summed up in a sentence: Write like speech—and *read French poetry*! He had needed his own advice: his earliest work was a sort of anthology of romantic sources—Browning, early Yeats, the *fin de siècle* poets, Villon and the troubadours (in translations or adaptations that remind one of Swinburne's and Rossetti's), Heine. His own variety of modernist poetry, though influenced by Laforgue and Corbière, was partly a return to the fresh beginnings of romantic practices, from their diluted and perfunctory ends; partly an extension to their limits of some of the most characteristic obsessions of romanticism—for instance, its passion for "pure" poetry, for putting everything in terms of sensation and emotion, with logic and generalizations excluded; and partly an adaptation of the exotic procedures of Chinese poetry, those silks that swathe a homely heart. Much of Pound's earlier poetry was a sort of bohemian *vers de societé*; Pound's best work before the "Cantos," with the exception of some parts of "Mauberly," consists of adaptations of Chinese and Latin poetry. The best poems in "Cathay" are marvellous in their crystalline clearness, in the way their words stand out in delicate lucid pure being; Pound's style at its best is always a part of—in Pound's words —"the radiant world where one thought cuts through another with clean edge, a world of moving energies . . . the glass under water, the form that seems a form seen in a mirror." This style comes to us, mostly, in beautiful fragments or adaptations: it is surprising that a poet of Pound's extraordinary talents should have written so few good poems all his own.

Most of Pound's life has been spent on the "Cantos." Many writers have felt, like Pound: Why not invent an art-form that will permit me to put all my life, all my thoughts and feelings about the universe, directly into a work of art? But the trouble is, when they've invented it it isn't an art-form. The "Cantos" are a "form" that permits Pound, much of the time, not even to try to write poetry; but since he is a poet, a wonderful one, he sometimes still writes it. The "Cantos" are less a "poem containing history" than a heap containing poetry, history, recollections, free associations, obsessions. Form, as Kenneth Burke says, is a satisfied expectation; in much of the "Cantos" it is only our expectation of disorder, of an idiosyncratic hodgepodge, that is satisfied. Some of the lines have an easy elegance, a matter-of-fact reality; the bare look and motion of the words, sometimes, is a delight. A great deal of the "Cantos" is interesting in the way an original soul's indiscriminate notes on books and people, countries and centuries, are interesting; all these fragmentary citations and allusions remind you that if you had read exactly the books Pound has read, known exactly the people Pound has known, and felt about it exactly as Pound has felt, you could understand the "Cantos" pretty well.

Gertrude Stein was most unjust to Pound when she called that ecumenical alluder a village explainer: he can hardly even tell you anything (unless you know it already), much less explain it. He makes notes on the margin of the universe; to tell how just or unjust a note is, you must know that portion of the text yourself. Some of the poetry is clearly beautiful, some of the history live: Pound can pick out, make up, a sentence or action that resurrects a man or a time. Many of Pound's recollections are as engaging as he is; his warmth, delight, disinterestedness, honest indignation help to make up for his extraordinary misuse of extraordinary powers, for everything that makes the "Cantos" a *reductio ad absurdum* of genius. His obsessions, at their worst, are a moral and intellectual disaster, and make us ashamed for him:

> Democracies electing their sewage
> till there is no clear thought about holiness
> a dung flow from 1913
> and, in this, their kikery functioned, Marx, Freud
>   and the American beaneries
> Filth under filth . .

What is worst in Pound and what is worst in the age have conspired to ruin the "Cantos," and have not succeeded. I cannot imagine any future that will think the whole of it a good poem, a finished work of art; but, then as now, scholars will process it, anthologies present a few of its beauties, readers dig through all that blue clay for more than a few diamonds.

At the bottom of Wallace Stevens' poetry there is wonder and delight, the child's or animal's or savage's—man's—joy in his own existence, and thankfulness for it. He is the poet of well-being: "One might have thought of sight, but who could think/ Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?" This sigh of awe, of wondering pleasure, is underneath all these poems that show us the "celestial possible," everything that has not yet been transformed into the infernal impossibilities of our everyday earth. Stevens is full of the natural or Aristotelian virtues; he is, in the terms of Hopkins' poem, all windhover and no Jesuit. There is about him, under the translucent glazes, a Dutch solidity and weight; he sits surrounded by all the good things of this earth, with rosy cheeks and fresh clear blue eyes, eyes not going out to you but shining in their place, like fixed stars. If he were an animal he would be, without a doubt, that rational, magnanimous, voluminous animal, the elephant.

His best poems are the poetry of a man fully human—of someone sympathetic, disinterested, both brightly and deeply intelligent; the poems see, feel, and think with equal success; they treat with mastery that part of existence which allows of mastery, and experience the rest of it with awe or sadness or delight. Minds of this quality of genius, of this breadth and delicacy of understanding, are a link between us and the past, since they are, for us, the past made living; and they are our surest link with the future, since they are the part of us which the future will know. Many of the poems look greyly out at "the immense detritus of a world/ That is completely waste, that moves from waste/ To waste, out of the hopeless waste of the past/ Into a hopeful waste to come"; but more of the poems see the unspoilable delights, the inexhaustible interests of existence.

Stevens did what no other American poet has ever done, what few poets have ever done: wrote some of his best and newest and strangest poems during the last year or two of a very long life. These are poems from the other side of existence, the poems of someone who sees things in steady accustomedness, as we do not, and who sees their accustomedness, and them, as about to perish. Many of the poems' qualities come naturally from age, so that they are appropriately and legitimately different from other people's poems, from Stevens' own younger poems. The poems are calmly exact, grandly plain, as though they themselves had suggested to Stevens his "Be orator but with an accurate tongue/ And without eloquence"; and they seem strangely general and representative, so that we could say of them, of Stevens, what Stevens himself says "To an Old Philosopher in Rome":

> Each of us
> Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
> In yours, master and commiserable man.

How much of our existence is in that "master and commiserable man"! Poems like these, in their plainness and human rightness, remind me most of a work of art superficially very different, Verdi's "Falstaff." Both are the products of men at once very old and beyond the dominion of age; such men seem to have entered into (or are able to create for us) a new existence, a world in which everything is enlarged and yet no more than itself, transfigured and yet beyond the need of transfiguration.

Stevens has an extraordinarily original imagination, one that has created for us—so to speak—many new tastes and colors and sounds, many real, half-real, and non-existent beings. He has spoken, always, with the authority of someone who thinks of himself as a source of interest, of many interests. He has never felt it necessary to appeal to us, make a hit with us, nor does he try to sweep us away, to overawe us; he has written as if poems were certain to find, or make, their true readers. Throughout half this century of the common man, this age in which each is like his sibling, Stevens has celebrated the hero, the capacious, magnanimous, excelling man; has believed, with obstinancy and good humor, in all the heights which draw us toward them, make us like them, simply by existing. In an age when almost everybody sold man and the world short, he never did, but acted as if joy *were* "a word of our own," as if nothing excellent were alien to us.

William Carlos Williams is as magically observant and mimetic as a good novelist. He reproduces the details of what he sees with surprising freshness, clarity, and economy; and he sees as extraordinarily, sometimes, the forms of this earth, the spirit moving behind the letters. His quick transparent lines have a nervous and contracted strength, move as jerkily and intently as a bird. Sometimes they have a marvellous delicacy and gentleness, a tact of pure showing; how well he calls into existence our precarious, confused, partial looking out at the world—our being-here-looking, just looking! And if he is often pure presentation, he is often pure exclamation, and delights in yanking something into life with a galvanic imperative or interjection. All this proceeds from the whole bent of his nature: he prefers a clear, active, intense confusion to any "wise passiveness," to any calm and clouded two-sidedness.

He has a boyish delight and trust in Things: there is always on his lips the familiar, pragmatic, American "These are the facts" —for he is the most pragmatic of writers, and so American that the adjective itself seems inadequate . . . one exclaims in despair and delight: He is the America of poets. His imagist-objectivist background and bias have helped his poems by their emphasis on truthfulness, exactness, concrete presentation; but they have harmed the poems by their underemphasis on organization, logic, narrative, generalization. The materials of Williams' unsuccessful poems have as much reality as the brick one stumbles over on the sidewalk; but how little has been done to them!—the poem is pieces or, worse still, a piece. But sometimes just enough, exactly as little as is necessary, has been done; and in these poems the Nature of the edge of the American city—the weeds, clouds, and children of vacant lots—and its reflection in the minds of its inhabitants, exist for good.

Anyone would apply to Williams such adjectives as outspoken, warm-hearted, generous, fresh, sympathetic, enthusiastic, spontaneous, impulsive, emotional, observant, curious, rash, courageous, undignified, unaffected, humanitarian, experimental, empirical, liberal, secular, democratic. One is rather embarrassed at the necessity of calling him original; it is like saying that a Cheshire cat smiles. He is even less logical than the average poet—he is an intellectual in neither the good nor the bad sense of the word—but loves abstractions for their own sake, and makes accomplished, characteristic, inveterate use of them, exactly as if they were sensations or emotions. Both generalizations and particulars are handled with freshness and humor and imagination, with a delicacy and fantasy that are especially charming in so vigorous, realistic, and colloquial a writer. He is full of homely shrewdness and common sense, of sharply intelligent comments dancing cheek-to-cheek with prejudices and random eccentricity; he is someone who, sometimes, does see what things are like, and he is able to say what he sees more often that most poets, since his methods permit (indeed encourage) him to say anything at all without worrying: *Can* one say such things in poetry? in this particuar poem?

Williams' poetry is more remarkable for its empathy, its muscular and emotional identification with its subjects, than any modern poetry except Rilke's. His knowledge of plants and animals, our brothers and sisters in the world, is surprising for its range and intensity; and he sets them down in the midst of the real weather of the world, so that the reader is full of an innocent lyric pleasure just in being out in the open, in feeling the wind tickling his skin. At first people were introduced into the poems mainly as overheard or overlooked landscape; they spread. Williams has the knowledge of people one expects, and often does not get, from doctors; a knowledge one does not expect, and very seldom gets, from contemporary poets. Williams' attitude toward his people is particularly admirable; he has neither that condescending, impatient, pharisaical dismissal of the illiterate mass of mankind, nor that manufactured, mooing awe for an equally manufactured Little or Common Man, that disfigures so much contemporary writing.

Williams' ability to rest (or at least to thrash happily about) in contradictions, doubts, and general guesswork, without ever climbing aboard any of the monumental certainties that go perpetually by, perpetually on time—this ability may seem the opposite of Whitman's gift for boarding every certainty and riding off into every infinite, but the spirit behind them is the same. Williams' range (it is roughly Paterson, that microcosm which he has half-discovered, half-invented) is narrower than Whitman's, and yet there too one is reminded of Whitman: Williams has much of the freeness of an earlier America, though it is a freedom haunted about by desperation and sorrow. The little motto one could invent for him—"In the suburbs, there one feels free"—is particularly ambiguous when one considers that those suburbs of his are overshadowed by, are a part of, the terrible industrial landscape of northeastern New Jersey. But the ambiguity is one that Williams himself not only understands but insists upon: if his poems are full of what is clear, delicate, and beautiful, they are also full of what is coarse, ugly, and horrible. There is no optimistic blindness in Williams, though there is a fresh gaiety, a stubborn or invincible joyousness: in his best poems, and in the first and best parts of "Paterson," the humor and sadness and raw absurdity of things, and the things themselves, exist in startling reality.

In John Crowe Ransom's best poems every part is subordinated to the whole, and the whole is accomplished with astonishing exactness and thoroughness. Their economy, precision, and restraint give the poems, sometimes, an original yet impersonal perfection; and Ransom's feel for the exact convention of a particular poem, the exact demands of a particular situation, has resulted in poems different from each other and everything else, as unified, individualized, and unchangeable as nursery rhymes. In Ransom the contradictions of existence are clear, exactly contradictory, not fused in arbitrary over-all emotion; one admires the clear, sharp, Mozartian lightness of texture of the best poems. And sometimes their phrasing is magical—light as air, soft as dew, the real old-fashioned enchantment. The poems satisfy our nostalgia for the past, yet themselves have none. They are the reports (written by one of the most elegant and individual war correspondents who ever existed) of our world's old war between power and love, between those who efficiently and practically know and those who are "content to feel/ What others understand." And these reports of battles are, somehow, bewitching: disenchantment and enchantment are so beautifully and inextricably mingled in them that we accept everything with sad pleasure, and smile at the poems' foreknowing, foredefeated, half-acceptant pain. For in the country of the poems wisdom is a poor butterfly dreaming that it is Chuang-tze, and not an optimistic bird of prey; and the greatest single subject of the romantics, pure potentiality, is treated with a classical grace and composure.

Most writers become over-rhetorical when they are insisting on more emotion than they actually feel; Ransom is perpetually insisting, by his detached, mock-pedantic, wittily complicated tone, that he is not feeling much at all, not half so much as he really should be feeling—and this rhetoric becomes over-mannered, too-protective, only when there is not much emotion for him to pretend not to be feeling, and he keeps on out of habit. Ransom has the personal seriousness that treats the world as it seems to him, not the solemnity that treats the really important things, the world as everybody knows it is. His poems are full of an affection that cannot help itself, for an innocence that cannot help itself—for the stupid travelers lost in the maze of the world, for the clever travelers lost in the maze of the world. The poems are not a public argument but personal knowledge, personal feeling; and their virtues are the "merely" private virtues—their characters rarely vote, rarely even kill one another, but often fall in love.

Ransom's poems profess their limitations so candidly, almost as a principle of style, that it is hardly necessary to say they are not poems of the largest scope or the greatest intensity. But they are some of the most original poems ever written, just as Ransom is one of the best, most original, and most sympathetic poets alive; it is easy to see that his poetry will always be cared for, since he has written poems that are perfectly realized and occasionally almost perfect—poems that the hypothetical generations of the future will be reading page by page with Wyatt, Campion, Marvell, and Mother Goose.

And then there is Eliot. During the last thirty or forty years Eliot has been so much the most famous and influential of American poets that it seems almost absurd to write about him, especially when everybody else already has: when all of you can read me your own articles about Eliot, would it have really been worth while to write you mine? Yet actually the attitude of an age toward its Lord Byron—in this case, a sort of combination of Lord Byron and Dr. Johnson—is always surprisingly different from the attitude of the future. Won't the future say to us in helpless astonishment: "But did you actually believe that all those things about objective correlatives, classicism, the tradition, applied to *his* poetry? Surely you must have seen that he was one of the most subjective and daemonic poets who ever lived, the victim and helpless beneficiary of his own inexorable compulsions, obsessions? From a psychoanalytic point of view he was far and away the most interesting poet of your century. But for you, of course, after the first few years, his poetry existed undersea, thousands of feet below that deluge of exegesis, explication, source-listing, scholarship, and criticism that overwhelmed it. And yet how bravely and personally it survived, its eyes neither coral nor mother-of-pearl but plainly human, full of human anguish! Think of the magical rightness of "Prufrock," one of the most engaging and haunting and completely accomplished poems that ever existed. Or take the continuation of it, that mesmeric subjective correlative "The Waste Land," which Eliot would have written about the Garden of Eden but which your age thought its own realistic photograph. And if none of the poets of your age—except perhaps for your greatest, Yeats—could write a really good play, still, how genuinely personal, what a subjective therapeutic success "Murder in the Cathedral" and "The Family Reunion" are! And if none of the poets of your age could write a long poem that compares with the best of their short poems, still, how wonderful the "Four Quartets" is: a long poem by a good poet that (as neither the "Cantos" nor "The Bridge" nor "Paterson" does) brings an intelligent man's own world-view into an organized and thoughtful whole. If the reasons you gave were, often, the wrong reasons, the poet and the poems you loved were the right poet and the right poems: so far as Eliot is concerned, your age can be satisfied with itself."

Marianne Moore has as careful and acute an eye as anybody alive, and almost as good a tongue. The reader relishes in her poems a fineness and strangeness and firmness of discrimination that he is not accustomed to. Her poems are notable for their wit and particularity and observation; a knowledge of "prosaic" words that reminds one of "Comus"; a texture that will withstand any amount of rereading; a restraint and delicacy that make many more powerful poems seem obvious. Their forms have the lacy, mathematical extravagance of snowflakes, seem as arbitrary as the prohibitions in fairy tales; difficulty is the chief technical principle of her poetry, almost. What intelligence vibrates in the sounds, the rhythms, the pauses, in all the minute particulars that make up the body of the poem! The tone of her poems, often, is enough to give the reader great pleasure, since it is a tone of imagination and precision and intelligence, of irony and forbearance, of unusual moral penetration—is plainly the voice of a person of good taste and good sense and good will, of a genuinely human being. It is the voice, too, of a natural, excessive, and magnificent eccentric. In some of her poems she has discovered both a new sort of subject (a queer many-headed one) and a new sort of connection and structure for it, so that she has widened the scope of poetry; if poetry, like other organisms, wants to convert into itself everything that is, she has helped it to. She has shown us that the world is more poetic than we thought.

She has great limitations—her work is one long triumph of them. How often she has written about Things (hers are aesthetic-moral, not commercial-utilitarian—they persist and reassure); or Plants (how can anything bad happen to a plant?); or Animals with holes, a heavy defensive armament, or a massive and herbivorous placidity superior to either the dangers or temptations of aggression! Because so much of our own world is evil, she has transformed the Animal Kingdom, that amoral realm, into a realm of good; her consolatory, fabulous bestiary is more accurate than, but is almost as arranged as, any medieval one. The poems say sometimes, to the beasts: "You reassure me and people don't, except when they are like you—but really they are always like you"; and it is wonderful to have it said so, and for a moment to forget, behind the animals of a darkening landscape, their dark companions.

Some of her poems have the manners or manner of ladies who learned a little before birth not to mention money, who neither point nor touch, and who scrupulously abstain from the mixed, live vulgarity of life. "You sit still if, whenever you move, something jingles," Pound quotes an officer of the old school as saying. There is the same aristocratic abstention behind the restraint, the sitting still as long as it can, of this poetry. "The passion for setting people right is in itself an afflictive disease./ Distaste that takes no credit to itself is best," she says in an early poem; and says, broadly and fretfully for her, "We are sick of the earth,/ sick of the pig-sty, wild geese and wild men." One feels like quoting against her her own, "As if a death-mask could replace/ Life's faulty excellence," and blurting that life-masks have their disadvantages too. We are uncomfortable—or else too comfortable—in a world in which feeling, affection, charity are so entirely divorced from sexuality and power, the bonds of the flesh. In the world of her poems there are many thoughts, things, animals, sentiments, moral insights; but money and passion and power, the brute fact that *works*, whether or not correctly, whether or not precisely—the whole Medusa-face of the world: these are gone.

A good deal of Marianne Moore's poetry is specifically (and changingly) about armor, weapons, protection, places to hide; and she is not only conscious that this is so, but after a while writes poems about the fact that it is so. As she says, "armor seems extra," but it isn't; and when she writes about "another armored animal," about another "thing made graceful by adversities, conversities," she does so with the sigh of someone who has come home. Sometimes she writes about armor and wears it, the most delicately chased, live-seeming scale-armor anybody ever put together: armor hammered out of fern seed, woven from the silk of invisible cloaks —for it is almost, though not quite, as invisible as it pretends to be, and is when most nearly invisible most nearly protecting. And yet in the long run she has learned to put no trust in armor, says, "Pig-fur won't do, I'll wrap/ myself in salamander-skin like Prester John," the "inextinguishable salamander" who "revealed/ a formula safer than/ an armorer's: the power of relinquishing/ what one would keep," and whose "shield was his humility." And "What Are Years" begins: "All are naked, none are safe," and speaks of overcoming our circumstances by accepting them; just as "Nevertheless" talks not about armor, not about weapons, but about what is behind or above them both: "The weak overcomes its/ menace, the strong over-/ comes itself. What is there/ like fortitude? What sap/ went through that little thread/ to make the cherry red!" Just so the poet overcomes herself, when she says at last: "What is more precise than precision? Illusion." There is so much of life concentrated into, objectified on, the poet's hard, tender, serious pages, there is such wit and truth and moral imagination inhabiting this small space, that we are surprised at possibility, and marvel all over again at the conditions of human making and being. What Marianne Moore's best poetry does, I can say best in her own words: it comes into and steadies the soul," so that the reader feels himself "a life prisoner, but reconciled."

E. E. Cummings persisted so boldly and stubbornly, for a whole career, in his own extraordinary individuality, that it is hard for his readers to believe that he is gone. No one else has ever made avant-garde, experimental poems so attractive both to the general and the special reader; since the early '20's, Cummings has been more widely imitated and more easily appreciated than any other modernist poet. His fairy godmother, after giving him several armfuls of sensibility, individuality, and rhetorical skill, finished by saying: "And best of all, everyone will forgive you everything, my son." Just as he persisted in the interests with which he began—his disposition was unchanging—so he persisted in the development of the style with which he began, and worked out the most extraordinary variations, inversions, extrapolations of the romantic rhetoric of his earliest poems. His rhetoric was as skillful, approached as nearly to the limit of every last possibility, as did the acts of the circus performers or burlesque comedians he felt an admiring kinship for. Many a writer has spent his life putting his favorite words in all the places they belong; but how many, like Cummings, have spent their lives putting their favorite words in all the places they don't belong, thus discovering many effects that no one had even realized were possible? As Cummings said, "Every man is wonderful/ and a formula"; often this is true of Cummings himself, so that you get tired of the hundredth application of the formula—but often it is from that very formula, worked out into a fantastic new one, that Cummings has derived an effect of wonderful originality.

Language is a world of signs, and of prescribed relations between the signs, that stand for the things in the natural world and *their* relations. But there are all sorts of impossible, unprescribed relations between words that also seem to stand for something, have quasi-denotations, vague or contradictory but exciting meanings. And since we feel that words and their prescribed relations don't fully or satisfactorily describe the world, that there is a disorder or meta-order in the world to which ordered words are inadequate, we sympathize with the contradictory or impossible order of words, and try to feel what it must stand for. The round-square may be impossible, but we believe in it because it is impossible. Cummings is a very great expert in all these, so to speak, illegal syntactical devices: his misuse of parts of speech, his use of negative prefixes, his word-coining, his systematic relation of words that grammar and syntax don't permit us to relate—all this makes him a magical bootlegger or moonshiner of language, one who intoxicates us on a clear liquor no government has legalized with its stamp.

The accomplished body of Conrad Aiken's work—which has been at once respected and neglected—is something you read with consistent pleasure, but without the astonished joy that you feel for the finest poetry, which is always extraordinary. It is peculiarly hard to say what is lacking in Aiken's work, since he has written poems that come as close to being good poems, without ever quite being so, as any I know. Isaac Babel said about style: "A phrase is born into the world good and bad at the same time. The secret lies in a slight, almost invisible twist. The lever should rest in your hand, getting warm, and you can turn it once, not twice." Aiken has kept his hand on the lever all his life, and he has turned it over and over and over. He is a kind of Midas: everything that he touches turns to verse; so that reading his poems is like listening to Delius—one is experiencing an unending undifferentiating wash of lovely sounds—or like watching an only moderately interesting, because almost entirely predictable, kaleidescope. Aiken's diluted world is a world where everything blurs into everything else, where the accomplished, elegiac, nostalgic verse turns everything into itself, as the diffused Salon photography of the first years of this century turned everything into Salon photographs.

Another respected but somewhat neglected poet is Allen Tate. But the best of his harshly formed, powerful poems are far more individual, unusual, than even the best of Aiken's. Perhaps they are read less than they are admired because of their lack of charm, of human appeal and human sympathy, and because of their tone of somewhat forbidding authority; but the neglect of poems as good as "Mother and Son," "The Cross," and "The Mediterranean" will surely be temporary.

Robinson Jeffers has taken an interesting and unusual part of the world and has described it, narrated some overpowering events that have occurred in it, with great—but crude and approximate—power. He celebrates the survival of the fittest, the war of all against all, but his heart goes out to animals rather than to human beings, to minerals rather than to animals, since he despises the bonds and qualifications of existence. Because of all this his poems do not have the exactness and concision of the best poetry; his style and temperament, his whole world-view, are to a surprising extent a matter of simple exaggeration. The motto of his work is "More! more!"—but as Tolstoy says, "A wee bit omitted, over-emphasized, or exaggerated in poetry, and there is no contagion"; and Frost, bearing him out, says magnificently: "A very little of anything goes a long way in a work of art."

Archibald MacLeish first employed his delicate lyric gift upon more easily and immediately attractive versions of poems like Eliot's, Pound's, and Apollinaire's; the smoothly individual style that he developed makes such a poem as "You, Andrew Marvell" beautiful in just the way that a Georgia O'Keefe painting is beautiful. In his later work he began to make overpowering general demands upon this limited and specific talent. The directly impressive rhetoric of a play like "J. B." is akin to the rhetoric of the more cultivated and effective television programs: the play, like so much of MacLeish's later work, is the "public speech" of an authoritative public figure who is controlling the responses of a mass audience. MacLeish's work suffers, characteristically, from something akin to metaphysical pathos: it is almost more conscious of the impressiveness of what it says than of what it says.

Hart Crane's "The Bridge" does not succeed as a unified work of art partly because some of its poems are bad or mediocre, and partly because Crane took for his subject an ambiguous failure and tried to treat it as a mystical triumph: it is as if Fitzgerald had tried to make an ecstatic patriotic success out of Gatsby's world by showing, with real rhetorical magnificence, how the Brooklyn Bridge joins West Egg to the American continent. Actually Crane had some of Fitzgerald's understanding of, feeling for, the worst changes in the United States, but instead of making these into a controlling image—as Fitzgerald did in his valley of ashes, his deserted mansion with its scrawled obscenity on the front steps—Crane tried to transcend them by means of the contradictory "positive" image of the bridge. And yet how wonderful parts of "The Bridge" are! "Van Winkle" is one of the clearest and freshest and most truly American poems ever written; "The Dance," "Harbor Dawn," "The Tunnel," and "To Brooklyn Bridge," if they are in part rhetorical failures, are in part magical successes. Crane's poetry is hurt most by rhetoric and sentimentality—his automatic ecstatic mysticism, often of a Whitmanesque kind, is a form of sentimentality—and yet it is helped sometimes by the rhetorical risks Crane takes: if sometimes we are bogged down in lines full of "corymbus," "hypogeum," "plangent," "irrefragibly," "glozening," "tellurian," "conclamant," sometimes we are caught up in the soaring rapture of something unprecedented, absolutely individual. Remember the beautifully imaginative, haunting sympathy of "Black Tambourine"; the composed magic of "Repose of Rivers"; the serious exact interest, the organized concision of "National Winter Garden"; the mesmeric rhetoric of "Voyages II," one of the most beautiful of those poems in which love, death, and sleep "are fused for an instant in one floating flower." All these poems have the clear freshness (both young in itself and, somehow, in the America from which it came) of Crane at his inspired, astonishing, and attractive best.

Elizabeth Bishop's "Poems" seems to me one of the best books an American poet has written, one that the future will read almost as it will read Stevens and Moore and Ransom. Her poems are quiet, truthful, sad, funny, most marvellously individual poems; they have a sound, a feel, a whole moral and physical atmosphere, different from anything else I know. They are honest, modest, minutely observant, masterly; even their most complicated or troubled or imaginative effects seem, always, personal and natural, and as unmistakable as the first few notes of a Mahler song, the first few patches of a Vuillard interior. Her best poems—poems like "The Man-Moth," "The Fish," "The Weed," "Roosters," "The Prodigal Son," "The Armadillo"—remind one of Vuillard or even, sometimes, of Vermeer. The poet and the poems have their limitations; all exist on a small scale, and some of the later poems, especially, are too detailedly and objectively descriptive. But the more you read her poems, the better and fresher, the more nearly perfect they seem; at least half of them are completely realized works of art.

Robert Penn Warren's narrative and dramatic gifts seem to me greater than his lyric gifts, though he has written lyrics as memorable as "Original Sin" and "Pursuit"; he is at his best in one of the only good long poems of our century, "Brother to Dragons." It is a terrible but sometimes very touching poem, one of extraordinary immediacy, strength, and scope. The poem's traumatic subject is Original Sin, but there is no Savior left to save anybody in the poem; the consoling veil of religion and art and philosophy is gone, leaving us raw nature, raw morality, and the saving grace, the shaky grace, of custom. Cruel sometimes, crude sometimes, obsessed sometimes, "Brother to Dragons" has its touches of tender inconsequence, of forbearance and magnanimity. Some of Warren's wrenching historical understanding, his rhetoric, and his moralizing are hard for us to accept; but there is a wonderful amount of life in the poem—of human beings who, in the end, are free both of Warren's rhetoric and moralizing and of our own.

Theodore Roethke's poems began under glass (his greenhouse poems give you the live feel of a special world) and moved underground, underwater, out into the growing universe of roots and slugs, of all the "lewd, tiny, careless lives/ that scuttled under stones." One is struck by what the world of his poems is full of or entirely lacking in; plants and animals, soil and weather, sex, ontogeny, and the Unconscious swarm over the reader, but he looks in vain for hydrogen bombs, world wars, Christianity, money, ordinary social observations, his everyday moral doubts. Many poets are sometimes childish; Roethke, uniquely, is sometimes babyish, though he is a powerful Donatello baby who has love affairs, and whose marsh-like Unconscious is continually celebrating its marriage with the whole wet dark underside of things. He is a thoroughly individual but surprisingly varied poet: if we were to read aloud four or five of his best poems ("Dolor," "My Papa's Waltz," "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt, and Frau Schwartze," "I Knew a Woman," and "Meditations of an Old Woman" or one of the poems from "Praise to the End") we should see to our astonishment that each is in a decidedly different style; instead of conquering and living in one country Roethke has led expeditions into several, and has won notable victories in each. His best large poems are not, perhaps, as thoroughly satisfying as the best small ones. Certainly the long poems in "Praise to the End" are partially or superficially successful, but do they mean enough? are not the parts (except where these are derived from a formula, so that they can be duplicated or replaced too easily) better than the whole? don't such poems tend to have impressive "positive" endings of a certain rhetorical insincerity? "Meditations of an Old Woman" is a more directly meaningful adaptation of this "Praise to the End" type of long poem; it is interestingly influenced by the "Four Quartets," just as some of Roethke's later poems are overpoweringly influenced by Yeats. Roethke is a forceful, delicate, and original poet whose poetry is still changing.

As these accounts must have reminded you, good American poets are surprisingly individual and independent; they have little of the member-of-the-Academy, official-man-of-letters feel that English or continental poets often have. When American poets join literary political parties, doctrinaire groups with immutable principles, whose poems themselves are manifestoes, the poets are ruined by it. We see this in the beatniks, with their official theory that you write a poem by putting down anything that happens to come into your head; this iron spontaneity of theirs makes it impossible for even a talented beatnik to write a good poem except by accident, since it eliminates the selection, exclusion, and concentration that are an essential part of writing a poem. Besides, their poems are as direct as true works of art are indirect: ironically, these conscious social manifestoes of theirs, these bohemian public speeches, make it impossible for the artist's Unconscious to operate as it normally does in the process of producing a work of art.

This doctrinaire directness is as noticeable in the beatniks' opposites, the followers of Yvor Winters. These poets have—if I may invent a parable—met an enchanter who has said to them: "You have all met an enchanter who has transformed you into obscure romantic animals, but you can become clear and classical and human again if you will only swallow these rules." The poets swallow them, and from that moment they are all Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a wax one; from that moment they wander, grave weighing shades, through a landscape each leaf of which rhymes, and scans, and says softly: "And the moral of *that* is . . . ."

Does the muse come to men with a ruler, a pair of compasses, and a metronome? Is it all right to say anything, no matter how commonplace and pompous and cliché, as long as you're sober, and say what the point is, and see that it scans? The worst thing about such planned poems as these is that they are so unnaturally silly: this is a learned imbecility, a foolishness of the schools, and ordinary common sense, ordinary human nature, will dismiss it with Johnson's "Clear your mind of cant," or with his "Sir, a man might write such stuff forever, if he would *abandon* his mind to it."

There is another larger group of poets who, so to speak, come out of Richard Wilbur's overcoat. The work of these academic, tea-party, creative-writing-class poets rather tamely satisfies the rules or standards of technique implicit in what they consider the "best modern practice," so that they are very close to one another, very craftsman-like, never take chances, and produce (extraordinarily) a pretty or correctly beautiful poem and (ordinarily) magazine verse. Their poems are without personal force—come out of poems, not out of life; are, at bottom, social behavior calculated to satisfy a small social group of academic readers, editors, and foundation executives.

Earlier in this century there was a tradition of feminine verse —roughly, an Elizabeth Barrett Browning tradition—which produced many frankly romantic and Poetic poems, most of them about love or nature. Elinor Wylie was the most crystalline and superficially metaphysical of these writers, and Edna St. Vincent Millay the most powerful and most popular. (One thinks with awe and longing of this real and extraordinary popularity of hers: if only there were *some* poet—Frost, Stevens, Eliot—whom people still read in canoes!) Millay seems to me at her best in a comparatively quiet and unpretentious poem like "The Return"; two later poets in this tradition, Leonie Adams and Louise Bogan, have produced (in poems like "The Figure Head" and "Henceforth from the Mind") poems more delicately beautiful than any of Millay's or Wylie's. I have already written about two poets in a very different tradition, Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, who seem to me the best woman poets since Emily Dickinson; an extraordinarily live, powerful, and original poet, Eleanor Taylor, is a fitting companion of theirs; and I am sorry to have no space in which to write about such individual poets as Adrienne Rich and Katharine Hoskins.

I should like, if I had room, to write about such interesting and intelligent poets as John Berryman, Howard Nemerov, and Delmore Schwartz; such charming, individual, or forceful poets as W. D. Snodgrass, James Wright, Theodore Weiss, James Dickey, and Louis Simpson; and such respected poets as Mark van Doren, Horace Gregory, Yvor Winters, Stanley Kunitz, Richard Eberhart, Muriel Rukeyser, Louis Untermeyer, and John Peale Bishop. Instead let me finish by writing about Karl Shapiro, Richard Wilbur, and Robert Lowell.

Karl Shapiro's poems are fresh and young and rash and live; their hard clear outlines, their flat bold colors create a world like that of a knowing and skillful neo-primitive painting, without any of the confusion or profundity of atmosphere, of aerial perspective, but with notable visual and satiric force. The poet early perfected a style, derived from Auden but decidedly individual, which he has not developed in later life, but has temporarily replaced with the clear Rilke-like rhetoric of his Adam and Eve poems, the frankly Whitmanesque convolutions of his latest work. His best poems—poems like "The Leg," "Waitress," "Scyros," "Going to School," "Cadillac"—have a real precision, a memorable exactness of realization, yet they plainly come out of life's raw hubbub, out of the disgraceful foundations, the exciting and disgraceful surfaces of existence. Both in verse and in prose Shapiro loves, partly out of indignation and partly out of sheer mischievousness, to tell the naked truths or half-truths or quarter-truths that will make anybody's hair stand on end; he is always crying: "But he hasn't any clothes on!" about an emperor who is half the time surprisingly well dressed.

Petronius spoke of the "studied felicity" of Horace's poetry, and I can never read one of Richard Wilbur's books without thinking of this phrase. His impersonal, exactly accomplished, faintly sententious skill produces poems that, ordinarily, compose themselves into a little too regular a beauty—there is no eminent beauty without a certain strangeness in the proportion; and yet "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra" is one of the most marvellously beautiful, one of the most nearly perfect, poems any American has written, and poems like "A Black November Turkey" and "A Hole in the Floor" are the little differentiated, complete-in-themselves universes that true works of art are. Wilbur's lyric calling-to-life of the things of this world—the things, rather than the processes or the people—specializes in both true and false happy endings, not by choice but by necessity; he obsessively sees, and shows, the bright underside of every dark thing. What he says about his childhood is true of his maturity: "In my kind world the dead were out of range/ And I could not forgive the sad or strange/ In beast or man." This compulsion limits his poems; and yet it is this compulsion, and not merely his greater talent and skill, that differentiates him so favorably from the controlled, accomplished, correct poets who are common nowadays.

More than any other poet Robert Lowell is the poet of shock: his effects vary from crudity to magnificence, but they are always surprising and always his own—his style manages to make even quotations and historical facts a personal possession. His variant of Tolstoy's motto, "Make it strange," is "Make it grotesque"—largely grotesque, grandly incongruous. The vivid incongruity he gives the things or facts he uses is so decided that it amounts to a kind of wit: in his poetry fact is a live stumbling-block that we fall over and feel to the bone. But it is life that he makes into poems instead of, as in Wilbur, the things of life. In Wilbur the man who produces the poems is somehow impersonal and anonymous, the composed conventional figure of The Poet; we know well, almost too well, the man who produces Lowell's poems. The awful depths, the plain absurdities of his own actual existence in the prosperous, developed, disastrous world he and we inhabit are there in the poems. Most poets, most good poets even, no longer have the heart to write about what is most terrible in the world of the present: the bombs waiting beside the rockets, the hundreds of millions staring into the temporary shelter of their television sets, the decline of the West that seems less a decline than the fall preceding an explosion. Perhaps because his own existence seems to him in some sense as terrible as the public world—his private world hangs over him as the public world hangs over others—he does not forsake the headlined world for the refuge of one's private joys and decencies, the shaky garden of the heart; instead, as in his wonderful poem about the Boston Common, he sees all these as the lost paradise of the childish past, the past that knew so much but still didn't *know*. In "Life Studies" the pathos of the local color of the past—of the lives and deaths of his father and mother and grandfather and uncle, crammed full of their own varied and placid absurdity—is the background that sets off the desperate knife-edged absurdity of the jailed conscientious objector among gangsters and Jehovah's Witnesses, the private citizen returning to his baby, older now, from the mental hospital. He sees things as being part of history: if you say about his poor detailedly eccentric, trust-fund Lowells: "But they *weren't*," he can answer: "They are now."

Lowell has always had an astonishing ambition, a willingness to learn what past poetry was and to compete with it on its own terms. In many of his early poems his subjects have been rather monotonously wrenched into shape, organized under a terrific unvarying pressure—in the later poems they have been allowed, in comparison, to go on leading their own lives. (He bullied his early work, but his own vulnerable humanity has been forced in on him.) The particulars of all the poems keep to an extraordinary degree their stubborn toughness, their senseless originality and contingency; but the subject-matter and peculiar circumstances of Lowell's best work—for instance, "Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid," "For the Union Dead," "Mother Marie Therese," "Ford Madox Ford," "Skunk Hour"—justify the harshness and violence, the barbarous immediacy, that seem arbitrary in many of the others. He is a poet of great originality and power who has, extraordinarily, developed instead of repeating himself. His poems have a wonderful largeness and grandeur, exist on a scale that is unique today. You feel before reading any new poem of his the uneasy expectation of perhaps encountering a masterpiece.