

# OUR WRITERS AND THE DEMOCRATIC MYTH

*by Horace Gregory*

IN 1930 literary criticism in America took on a self-consciously serious tone. The time had come to rebury the dead, and the first funeral was that of the nineteen-twenties. Chief among those to be cremated and deposited within a vault was H. L. Mencken, whose influence had been dwindling for the previous five years and whose hearty, beer-garden laughter now had a curiously empty sound. Within the Mencken school there were many others marked for burial; Sinclair Lewis and Dreiser were permitted to survive only because of their innate vitality and the scope of their social criticism, but the lesser realists were slaughtered. Joseph Hergesheimer, James Branch Cabell, Carl Van Vechten, the "sophisticated romantics" mentioned by Vernon Louis Parrington, were shoved into the funeral pyre without further ceremony. What, then, was to happen to the three poets of the period whose philosophy so closely approximated certain phases of Mencken's articulated dogma? What was to be done with Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg? For the most part they were ostentatiously ignored, and if not ignored, merely forgotten. It was indeed almost embarrassing to remember them at all, for they had been leaders in the 1912 poetic renaissance that had swept the country; and their popularity had run so high that it was now indecent to expose their remains, to call attention to the unread editions of their latest books and to their rapidly emptying lecture halls. Only

their chief and critic, H. L. Mencken, still stood above the ruins.

In 1926 Mr. Mencken published his *Notes on Democracy*. Here was a subject dear to his heart; a gorgeous opportunity for his wit and for the mordant satire with which he was accustomed to flay his people. The book should have been his masterpiece, should have been his final declaration to the mob. It was instead a huge and significant failure, as significant as the long-heralded autobiography of Mark Twain—that hardy, acrobatic mouse, advertised for his lion-like ferocity, who crept out of a mountain. For the first time it became evident that Mr. Mencken was not and never had been the glorious Zarathustra of his youth. Siegfried and Nietzsche turned out to be merely disguises that he had worn to hide the "plain cloth" garments of Thomas Jefferson. In a word, H. L. Mencken was far more a part of an American tradition than his critics (or himself) cared to admit—and that tradition is the Jeffersonian ideal of aristocratic libertarianism. He is chief mourner at its grave, and he is not content to be merely the most important figure in the company of mutes, but is eager to raise his voice in the first dirge.

Throughout the book a subtle distinction—not always clear to Mr. Mencken's followers—is made between the democrat (or the individual lost in the mob) and the libertarian. "It takes quite as long to breed a libertarian as it does to breed a race-horse," says

Mr. Mencken, and it is the libertarian whom he admires and with whom he identifies himself. The libertarian, of course, is one aspect of the Jeffersonian myth, the ghost of the bland aristocrat who could afford to dismiss the hard-headed policies of Hamilton and Wall Street, the shade of the tall and handsome gentleman who rode alone to the White House on his inauguration day, who would have none of your fine inaugural balls, no titles; plain Mr. Jefferson in plain cloth was quite enough for him. It is easy to see why this aspect of the legend appealed to Mr. Mencken, to recognize how Jefferson combined the qualities of the perfect plantation owner, master of Monticello, with all the likable qualities of Rousseau's natural man. He could well afford that rarest of all human luxuries, the daily habit of viewing wealth and the details of its acquisition with an Olympian air of detachment.

From this symbol and this aspect of the legend springs Mr. Mencken's scorn for Mr. Lewis's Babbitt and his belief that "government under democracy is thus government by orgy" and that the mob has no conception of liberty. But before he concludes even the shortest paragraph in his castigation of American society, we see the contradiction in his symbol and in his thinking—the contradiction between Jefferson the aristocratic libertarian and Jefferson the democratic idealist; and this contradiction is important because it appears repeatedly with individual variations in the work of his three contemporaries: Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg.

## II

When Vachel Lindsay paid his visit to English lecture halls, London critics accepted him as a genuine homespun American product; to Europeans he was a curiosity from

the distant and remarkable Middle West. They were not wrong, for he was a living example of what the American small town had to offer in the way of crude and seemingly inexhaustible vitality. He was born in Springfield, Illinois, where he died some months ago. Behind him lay the full expanse of a Puritan culture thinly spread over the broad plains of Illinois.

At the turn of the century, Middle Western communities hailed the second coming of a Henry Ward Beecher. In this case the hero was William Jennings Bryan, a silver-tongued Lochinvar from the West. He was all this and more—a young David, the boy-defender of the "common people" hot foot after Goliath, a mysterious giant called "big business". In Bryan Lindsay found his vague dreams of a social philosophy taking form. Here was the hero; there was no need for further investigation of a troublesome problem. He became converted to Bryan's doctrine of free silver with all the religious fervour that has since marked the writing of Upton Sinclair. Like Bryan he was to make himself a spokesman of the small town, the population of a "real" America, classless and free. He became a hobo going from door to door, from farm house to village, singing his songs and reciting his childlike, fanciful stories. In those days, for they were the days of twenty years ago, the profession of tramping was not without romantic glamour. You were a useless, idle fellow but you were (supposedly) a tramp by choice; there was nothing ominous in your strange behaviour. Lindsay's *Handy Guide for Beggars* tells the story of how he set out to revive the tradition of the ballad singer and the minstrel in a land whose conception of mediaeval Europe was derived from school-book editions of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. And he was singing songs not to rich men and

fine ladies, the privileged and the educated, but to the respectable poor of the American Bible Belt, to farmers and their wives, who would gladly give him a hand-out at the back door.

It is significant that when Lindsay realized the potential power of the motion picture (sweet Mary Pickford, innocent and poor, a translation of the Cinderella story into the vulgate of that glorious Wild West where "flower-fed Buffaloes" thundered no more) he deified that power. To Lindsay the movie was the voice of inarticulate America and he could do no less than write a book about his great discovery. His book (now quite unreadable) quickly congealed into a formless mass of soggy mysticism. But behind its platitudes, behind the naïve effort to say something profound, smouldered a genuine if unreasoned belief in the righteousness of popular taste.

As if to prove his intuitive convictions, the audience for his poems grew. Soon he was no longer tramping from door to door but speaking grandly from a lecture platform. Now confident of success, he exhibited a new talent for showmanship and used it with the same zeal that inspired his master, the boy orator from the prairies whose speech about the "Cross of Gold" still echoed over the wheat fields of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. To many of his hearers, Lindsay became the personification of the Middle Western farm boy, quaint and amusing, an eloquent barbarian who refreshed the stale appetites of the rich women who frequented poetry recitals in large cities. His evangelism took fire and his championship of the Anti-Saloon League was not the least of the extravagant gestures that contributed to his growing reputation.

There is an element of pathos in Lindsay's subsequent sharp decline from popularity.

The tom-tom rhythms of his poetry soon filled his most friendly critics with a sense of monotony; one knew exactly what Lindsay was going to say next. The very technique that he had made his own (a combination of the music of the calliope with a variation of cake-walk jazz) could not carry a theme large enough to catch the attention of the generation which followed his. His decline in critical and popular favour was accompanied by a shift in the character of his idealism. His vision of "the common people" paled. His adulation of Andrew Jackson, Lincoln, and Bryan changed to a little-red-schoolhouse worship of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. He had become bewildered and a little despairing: surely there is no more pathetic document than his outcry against Babbitt which appeared in the *American Mercury* under the title of *The Virginians Are Coming Again*. As his audience dwindled he became prematurely old, a shadow of the poet who wrote *The Congo*, *The Chinese Nightingale*, and *The Eagle Forgotten*. What had happened to his sunny, corn-fed America, where every barefooted Middle Western boy had a chance to split rails, study law and the Bible, and then finally walk triumphant up the steps of the White House into the President's chair? It had been conquered by Babbitts:

Babbitt sold Judas. Babbitt sold Christ.  
Babbitt sold everything under the sun.

Lindsay had turned to the symbols of Washington and Jefferson as a refuge from his own "common people" now grown into industrialists, automobile salesmen, bankers. It was a disastrous retreat for him, a strong indication that his confidence in democracy, if not blasted, was in one of the later stages of decay.

It is but one short step from the later Lindsay to the early Edgar Lee Masters. Long before Lindsay had entered his decline Masters had begun where Lindsay was to make his final stand. Again we have the background of the small Middle Western town with Masters playing the rôle of a Main Street atheist, an inverted patriot. He resented bitterly the narrow world so artfully hidden behind broad streets and seductively wide lawns where family skeletons danced in the midnight shade of tall elms and maples. Unlike Mencken, he had no stomach for whatever humour came to the surface of the scene around him.

Despite his mistrust of the heroes who must have captured his imagination during his boyhood, Masters could not move forward without erecting new heroes to take the places of the old. From this point onward he conceived a melodrama in which the good are murdered or tricked into obscurity by those who join their forces with the powers of evil. He had a boyish admiration for Roosevelt and an equally boyish hatred for Mark Hanna and William McKinley. In general the black Republicans were villains and the tradition of Southern Democracy was a lily-fingered Ophelia—a bit insane, but always innocent. And Masters himself was Hamlet, wrapped in a frock coat.

The eloquence that produced *Spoon River* and *The Domesday Book* soon dropped below the standard of honest, clear-headed social criticism. It was later to degenerate into a facile and childish cynicism of the sort that often inspires the average newspaper man talking full blast in a New York speakeasy. Within a few years Masters became a Tom Paine Cassandra shouting a prophecy of destruction to the four corners of the American continent—and there was no bottom to the

well of bitterness in which he cooled his hatred of capitalist society, prohibition, and the ghost of the American Puritan. The spirit of self-destruction had entered his bones, and this could not effect a catharsis until he had destroyed one of his chief idols, Abraham Lincoln, the subject he had chosen for an exhaustive biography.

This last gesture of the iconoclast placed Masters beyond the reach of serious criticism. He was fast becoming a literary curiosity; his periodic lapses into barnstorming verse became a fixed habit. He had always been notoriously lax in the practice of self-criticism, so lax indeed that from the very start of his career he published much that should never have appeared in print at all. It was also obvious that he could learn nothing from the critics, who soon discovered that it was better to ignore him entirely, for the problem he presented (beyond the fact that he often wrote badly) was too complex and too closely associated with a movement that was already diverted from the main stream of American literature.

Superficially the most consistent of the three poets who developed under Mencken's patronage was Carl Sandburg. His was a Christian democracy that soon turned the corner and emerged as humanitarian socialism. Naïve as Sandburg may have seemed to his early public, his championship of an inarticulate people was of a harder texture than Lindsay's. His background was of both the Middle Western farm lands and of the large city (Chicago). When the Socialist Party came into being it made a place for Sandburg, and through its eyes he found a means of interpreting the brutality, the force, the impact of the metropolis that stood on the shores of Lake Michigan. He came directly out of a tradition left by Walt Whit-

man, whose first function was to become the mouthpiece of a voiceless people.

As long as the Socialist Party retained its position as the fighting left wing of political reform in America, Sandburg's poetry carried something of its zeal and emotional vitality. But when the Party began to show signs of inner corruption and to move in the general (and vague) direction of American liberalism, Sandburg's poetry followed in its wake. It was then that the rugged and sometimes sharp outlines of Sandburg's writing became blurred. Like Lindsay he began to turn his attention to making books for children, began to fall back upon his ability to use his facile charm.

Sandburg's real defect was of early origin. It may be traced back to his famous attack upon Billy Sunday in the poem, *A Contemporary Bunkshooter*. Despite the obvious merits of the poem—a zeal that equalled if it did not surpass Sunday's own evangelism, a vigorous critical attitude, and an evident honesty—today it is curiously outmoded, as distant let us say as Masefield's *Everlasting Mercy* and *The Widow in the Bye-Street*. The poem's effectiveness is seriously diminished by the fact that we no longer believe in the Christ of the Socialist Party and his particular function as a saviour of the American working classes. At best this was an inadequate religious symbol, and Sandburg's inability to recognize its weakness leaves his "vigorous" poem today empty of meaning, its liveliness strangely spurious.

With the collapse of idealism in the Socialist Party it was only natural that Sandburg's individual idealism should run a course backward to the figure of Abraham Lincoln, and it is in Lincoln that he has created a new idol in his own image. In Sandburg's hands Lincoln becomes what Sandburg would like to be—the naïve, sun-

bronzed protector of American democracy, smelling of the earth from which he sprang, his feet firmly planted in that Middle Western soil whose vitality seems inexhaustible.

In other words the fighting quality in Sandburg's verse has measurably declined and the very language that he once used so effectively—the vivid slang of the street—has lost much of its surprise, a dramatic element that gave Sandburg's early work a valid structure. Now that the element of surprise is gone the original framework of the poems drops into formlessness, and the dramatic climax misses fire. Of course Sandburg was always doomed to suffer something of the defeat of an artist working in a perishable medium. We may admire his courage, and others who follow him may learn much from his early experiments in moulding a new language for literary usage, but his fate was inevitable: nine-tenths of what he has to say is wasted upon topical subject matter transitory as the noon edition of an evening newspaper.

### III

At the present moment it seems as though both aspects of the Jeffersonian ideal as revealed by H. L. Mencken and his disciples—both democratic idealism and aristocratic libertarianism—are spiritually bankrupt. The very writers who once fed upon the rich grasses of Monticello are dying of starvation. Even Mr. Mencken's aimless preoccupation with Prohibition and the Congressional circus at Washington seems ominously neurotic, for there was a time when his laughter implied a definite course of action. Most certainly his early campaigns against the genteel sterility of our "Mauve Decade" was not a gesture of futility. What is more, his criticism bore instantaneous fruit and was

not unlike the little orange or peach tree mysteriously brought to being out of an empty flower pot by Chinese miracle men. We must not forget that Mencken was the first American critic to foresee the fertility of Southern literary soil; our Thomas Wolfes and William Faulkners may be offered as proof of Mr. Mencken's ability to see light in a langorous, semi-tropical midnight that twenty years ago was peopled only by the ghosts of Opie Reid, Lafcadio Hearn (exiled to New Orleans), and George Cable. This period in Mr. Mencken's career is now definitely closed; and if he offers any criticism at all it is given in the spirit of hopeless amusement—a kind of shadow bear-baiting of Herbert Hoover and the dignitaries of the Protestant churches.

The original Mencken disciples are now passing beyond middle age, and the new re-

cruits have already earned the brilliant title recently bestowed upon them by James Branch Cabell—they are no more than "Menckenoids". The younger liberals have deserted the Mencken camp; they not only mistrust the validity of democratic idealism in a country where collective action has become a necessity, but they no longer enjoy the endless vista of the decay of the aristocratic libertarianism of Jefferson. It is enough that three once popular poets have sacrificed their talents upon an empty shrine. The time has come for a reassertion of faith, not for a further contemplation of America's failures in the immediate past. Already the younger men are swinging to the extremes of left and right. Their way is still uncertain but we may be sure that they will have little patience with the heritage of the sage of Monticello as thus far interpreted by our writers.



# HERBERT SPENCER AND OSCAR WILDE

EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF "MICHAEL FIELD"

*Edited by T. Sturge Moore*

*(Previous extracts from the letters and journals of Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley, the women who achieved fame as "Michael Field", appeared in the March and April issues of THE BOOKMAN.)*

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*(Entry by Edith Cooper.)*

*March 3rd, 1890.*

WE WENT to meet Herbert Spencer at lunch, invited by our sweet Miss Bakers. He is a character—with a sharp, kindly, positive face. Hazel eyes of extreme intelligence, tarnished hair just over the ears and under-growing whiskers. But of all faces I find it most difficult to present his in words, even to myself. I cannot fix the characteristics of mouth and nose and look—yet they are not subtle. The brow wholly without artistic or imaginative qualities; but he wore a black silk skull-cap which hid what in his portrait is magnificent—his domed, philosophic head. He speaks like a man whose every sentence is connected with a general principle—yet there is humour and interest in his talk. It is delicious to hear him making disarmed fun at May's perfect frankness of most sweet folly in conversation. He laughs till the tears flow. I am certain our friends are reforming him, for there is the possibility of disagreeable things in his features. He is very faddy about the smallnesses of eating and drinking and comfort. It was

sad to find the great Altruist so self-concerned. For all his giant powers of thought, Robert Browning far surpassed him in moral dignity. At the end of lunch, he said childishly, "My feet are cold. I must warm them". "We will all turn to the fire and warm our feet," suggested gracious Miss Rosa; but no!—off he went to his own room and, unless reminded, would have left us without salute, in the oblivion his creature need occasioned.

I was shy, for he put on his spectacles to examine a creature so strangely and hopelessly poetic. Sim was mighty audacious. We were talking of picturesque old houses and how beauty endeared a home for us. He said he was devoted to the useful and what tended to life. "We live by admiration, hope and love," rang out Sim's voice. "But if you get a fever and die?" "Then I shall go on admiring, hoping and loving more and more," was the intrepid answer. "You comfort yourself like that," he said, but his glance appreciated the independence of the stranger. He conversed on slang, under which he includes no misuses of words, only invented expressions which are an end in themselves, with no relation to the history of language and no place in logic. He said the general principle underlying landscape gardening is the emphasis of natural diversities. He was full of the death of the late Japanese Ambassador. It seems he helped that worthy to draw up the new Constitution. On the day when it came in force, the Ambassador was assassinated in