

audacity we make obeisance. We pronounce it plainly that, but for Amy Lowell and Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg and the first furious cohorts, we should even now be diluting sugar with water, prescribing opiates of sweetness and light; we should be rehearsing the hocus-pocus of a creed outworn and mumbling stereotyped consolations out of some dusty kabbalah. "Now it appears to me that almost any man may, like the spider, spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel—the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few, and she fills her air with a beautiful circuiting."

We could continue this Magnificat, praising the dark singing strength of Edwin Arlington Robinson, the brown earth quality of Robert Frost, the exquisite craftsmanship, the sub-acidity, the needle-point statement of line we find in the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie, Louise Bogan, and the pythonesses. Our giving of garlands is discriminate, unprejudiced. What Conrad Aiken has termed the "lusty corybantic cacophony" receives its laurel with the others. Poetry, for us, is greater than the individual poet, the coterie of poets. And poetry has profited by all these. There is less anarchy perhaps, less range, less tumultuous productivity, less of the bizarre and the barbaric; but, as the number of lamps is diminished, the

height of the flame is increased.

If poetry, at its best, "redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man," dare we not hope for the best? A little space ago I quoted from Arnold to the effect that it is to poetry we must turn for that sustaining, that informing spirit which religion as such has forgotten how to give. Let me forthwith disclaim every imputation of odorous sanctity. I am obviously not presenting a brief for the evangelical virtues of verse. That would be as flagrant a distortion of my purpose as the pietistic is of any valid exaltation! I had rather be a dog and bay the moon!

No, I cleave to the thought solely that when our poets have come into their full inheritance they may once again restore the grandeur of pale-mouthed prophecy to the glory of their trumpets; that they may become, as by their very birthright and being they are charged to become, "the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true, that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion." They alone can go up to make augury for us before the jealous gods; they—"the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present;" they—"the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

JOSEPH AUSLANDER.

## The Springs of Poetry

WHEN he sets out to resolve, as rationally as he may, the tight irrational knot of his emotion, the poet hesitates for a moment. Unless the compulsion be absolute, as is rarely the case, the excitement of the resolution sets in only after this pause, filled with doubt and terror. He would choose anything, anything, rather than the desperate task before him: a book, music, or talk and laughter. Almost immediately the interruption is found, and the emotion diverted, or the poem is begun, and the desperation has its use.

The author of the *Poetica* recognized this necessary intensity when he wrote that distress and anger are most faithfully portrayed by one who is feeling them at the moment, that poetry demands a man with a special gift for it, or else one with a touch of madness in him. Few poems are written in that special authentic rage because even a poet has a great many uses for grief and anger, beyond putting them into a poem. The poem is always a last resort. In it the poet makes a world in little, and finds peace, even though, under complete focused emotion, the evocation be far more bitter than reality, or far more lovely.

Sometimes the poet does not entirely succeed in diverting his energies. He expresses himself, determined to take a holiday from any emotion at all, being certain that to hear, see, smell and touch, merely, is enough. His hand has become chilled, from being held too long against the ground to feel how it is cold; his mind flinches at cutting down once again into the dark with the knife of irony or analysis.

So he writes a poem at third, fourth, or fifth hand, bred out of some delicate fantastic ruse of the brain. Even though at its best a poem cannot come straight out of the heart, but must break away in some oblique fashion from the body of sorrow or joy,—be the mask, not the incredible face,—yet the synthetic poem can never be more than a

veil dropped before a void. It may sound, to change the images, in ears uninitiate to the festival, but never to those, who, having once heard, can recognize again the maenad cry.

It would seem best, in order that his temptation to second-rate work be kept negligible, that for long periods the poet himself be his only audience. He has no business with the shifting criteria with which each little year would charge him. He should have no thought of a descending scale of editors to whom his best and his worst may be fed.

One would wish for the poet a stern countryside that could claim him completely, identify him rigidly as its own under the color of every season. He should be blessed by the power to write behind clenched teeth, to subsidize his emotion by every trick and pretense so that it trickle out through other channels, if it be not essential to speech,—blessed too, by a spirit as loud as a houseful of alien voices, ever tortured and divided with itself. And most completely blessed by that reticence celebrated by the old prophetic voice: "I kept silent, even from good words . . . the fire kindled, and at the last I spoke with my tongue." Under the power of such reticence, in which passion is made to achieve its own form, definite and singular, those poems were written that keep an obscure name still alive, or live when the name of their author is forgotten. Speaking thus, as though the very mind had a tongue, Yeats achieves his later work: poems terribly beautiful, in which the hazy adverbial quality has no place, built of sentences reduced to the bones of noun, verb, and preposition.

This is the further, the test simplicity, in the phrase of Alice Meynell, sprung from the passion of which every poet will always be afraid, but to which he should vow himself forever.

LOUISE BOGAN.

## Why We Don't Read Poetry

**T**HAT poetry is not read must be admitted even by those who think it is.

Of course the existence of an enthusiasm for verse on the part of a few readers and almost as many writers cannot be denied. But speaking in a comparative world, I speak comparatively. Periodicals of fiction circulate by the million; the most popular poetry magazine has by report only a few thousand subscribers. Six million people go daily to the movies; dozens of theatres are jammed nightly in the greatest cities, and crowds flock to hear the opinions of European literati. At most a few dozen gather together here and there at the same time to listen to poetry or to talk about it. Novels run into sales of hundreds of thousands; a sale of twelve hundred copies is a failure. But notable books of poetry sell by the hundred, and a thousand is the token of success. We are not reading poetry.

In our failure to do so—when it is honestly admitted, there is assumed to be something of a mystery. It is said that poets were never such competent craftsmen as they are now, that the amount of good poetry being produced is astonishingly large. Those who say this cannot see why the interest in poetry should lag. They know there was once a tremendous response to poetic creation. Romeo and Hamlet, they remember, were a London rage, Chevy Chase was daily in men's mouths, Pope's Iliad outsold Defoe, and Scott's lays were as eagerly bought and wept over as his novels. They cannot understand the feebleness of poetry today. They regard each flicker of public demand as likely to leap into an explosion. They make hopeful talk over each new poetic name. They cannot understand why hopes of poetry come still-born or die in infancy, why, in a world where Main Streets rush into the hundred thousands, volumes of Lowell, Sandburg, and Aiken strain to make a thousand. Masfield sells like a novel only to leave them the more bewildered that he alone among poets should do so.

Yet it is doubtful if there is much mystery about the modern indifference to poetry. Poetry itself supplies a sufficient explanation for its own neglect. Men and women read, after all, something that is useful, to them. They wish to get in a novel a vivid substitute for life which, perhaps, is better than the real thing, or at least embellishes it. They wish to get in the drama interesting characters to live with and ideas to think and talk about. In poetry they doubtless look for a similar usefulness. And it must be confessed that modern poetry disappoints them.

To be sure, a great deal of it is rhythmically beautiful. Some of it—like Sandburg's chants and Frost's narratives—attempts with a measure of success to make pictures or stories of the life we know. Some of it promises a vivid dream world—like Conrad Aiken's faintly colored rhythms. But, with some moderate successes conceded, poetry in general today does not even attempt the creation of a compelling and therefore useful illusion. It evokes moods inexplicable in ordinary speech and often outside common experience. It chases its own tail in the artistic vicious circle of pure description. Its best philosophy sinks under rhythmic embroidery and the tedious excitement of its own hortative tone. In narrative and drama the poet seems studiously to avoid anything tangible enough to serve in

different form for a short story, a novel, or a Broadway play. The exceptional creator who dares the natural and vivid moves under a sense of rebuke. Masfield and Frost have actually received critical sentence because their tales "might have been done in prose." Nobody told Broadway officially that Clemence Dane's Will Shakespeare was verse. When Maxwell Anderson's White Desert was being rehearsed, the actors received their parts typed in prose so that they might not be embarrassed by the responsibility of "putting over" poetry.

Of course this is handicapping poetry as no other art is handicapped. Fiction is forbidden no aspect of life. It makes its illusions useful to millions. The drama, with as great a freedom of subject and a more vivid form of expression, creates pictures and problems that become daily talk. The writing of opinion achieves a directness provoking assent or disagreement, and stirs its pondering, its indignation, its applause. Poetry alone among the forms of literature seems to have been edged out of life, limited by other forms of art to subjects too vague and sapless for their use.

Poetry was once the mother of proverbs. Today a poet must not be didactic.

Poetry was the source of fiction and for centuries its chiefest fount. Now if a story is really good as a story it must be told in prose.

Poetry once included all forms of drama. Today the poet must not poach in the preserves of the serious play, and much less in those of farce or comedy.

In other words, the present conventions of his craft forbid the poet to do anything vital. He obeys them in the main, and wonders why his writing goes unread.

Of course it would be unjust to blame the poet too severely for what is his misfortune. He has had to accept or oppose almost universal conceptions, and it must be said for him that he has not always accepted. But his battle—evident in the challenge of old forms, the battering at the walls of poetic diction, the incursions into modern realism—has not won much for him. And it is not kindness to persuade the poet he has had a victory when all the tokens are of a repulse.

The poet may never be able to make poetry useful again. It was useful a thousand, even a hundred years ago, but the usefulness has in a great measure gone out of it, and it is not easy to put back into an art something that has departed. Yet plainly, if the magic is to be restored it must be by the simple process of taking back from those who took from poetry. The poet must compete successfully with the now vital forms of literature. He must seize his readers with the imperious force of a great novelist or a great playwright. Of course this does not mean that his poetry will be any the less poetry. It rather means that in becoming more life it will become more poetry. It means that if the verse form is to survive importantly, it must satisfy the poetic craving in humanity with the fundamental in story, dialogue, and idea. In all these poetry is now weak. The Everlasting Mercy is probably the greatest poetic narrative of the century. It illustrates the poetic failing of the century in decorating a second-rate story with first-rate verse. In whatever field he writes, the new poet at his best must aim higher than that.