

# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## MOVING-PICTURE POETRY<sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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SINCE the famous discovery of Paris by Mr. Richard Harding Davis some years ago, there have been few more edifying happenings of a similar kind than the recent disclosure, by our always alert "general public" and our no less alert newspaper paragraphers, of a strange and hitherto unheard of poetic phenomenon: "*vers libre*." Letters to the papers from sarcastic and jocose readers, parodies by the paragraphers, solemn discussions by reviewers, have marked this momentous emergence into public view of a novel and arresting verse-form. There have even been anxious editorials on the subject; and the inexhaustible "F. P. A." has charmed the discussion with the breath of inspiration by turning the weather report into "free verse," and by confessing, in a deathless phrase, that, since he could not like "free verse," he must be suffering from hardening of the fine-arteries. A generation hence, inquisitive and patient students of the history of poetic art will learn with astonishment that *vers libre* was discovered by America in the second decade of the twentieth century.

But whether "free verse" is something new or something old is not so important as the fact that its present condition has yielded at least one remarkable creative product—we mean, of course, the extraordinary *Spoon River Anthology* of Mr. Edgar Lee Masters.

It is apparently not yet agreed what Mr. Masters' book is,—except that it is "free verse." Convinced that it is certainly not poetry, and horrified by its content and structure, the æsthetic Calvinists have exhorted Mr. Masters to

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<sup>1</sup>*Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Masters. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1915.

be still, in the spirit of the command of the immortal ship-captain to his mate: "What I wants of you, Mr. Coffin, is SILENCE, and damn little of that." But Mr. Masters is unlikely to oblige. It is extremely doubtful if silence is his long suit. Certainly it is not a conspicuous characteristic of his *Spoon River Anthology*, which is nothing if not articulate and alive and what we have a fancy to call psychically reverberatory. In this village *comédie humaine* are assembled the life histories of the inhabitants of Spoon River, and the overtones of the jangling music of these spent lives reverberate from page to page, clash and re-echo, attaining at times a poignancy which we do not quite know how to regard or appraise.

They speak to us from their graves, these Spoon River people:

Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,  
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the  
boozier, the fighter?

All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

And when, through Mr. Masters, they have spoken, we know them beyond the power of forgetting; their actuality is amazing: Isaiah Beethoven, Flossie Cabanis, Aner Clute; Willard Fluke and Fiddler Jones; Serepta Mason, Hamlet Micure, Peleg Poague and Mrs. Purkapile; Tennessee Claflin Shope, Margaret Fuller Slack, Jonathan Swift Somers, W. Lloyd Garrison Standard, and Hod Putt. We know not if Mr. Masters be an authentic genius; but there is genius of a kind in these superb names. What an inspired nomenclature is here: Flossie Cabanis, Isaiah Beethoven, Georgine Sand Miner, Pelig Poag, Lydia Puckett, Hod Putt. What portraits they evoke!

Throughout two hundred and fifty pages this unique human comedy unfolds itself—the life of Spoon River and its men and women, its girls and boys. The *Anthology* has a microcosmic completeness. We hear, told by themselves, the life-histories of village belles and grocer's clerks, farmers and farmer's wives, travelling salesmen, lawyers, blacksmiths, school-girls, politicians, tramps, doctors, bank-presidents, druggists, the village poetess, the village dandy, deacons, school-teachers, saloon-keepers, preachers, adulteresses and Sunday-school superintendents, hired girls and circuit-judges, newspaper editors, whores, bullies, grafters, crooks, murderers, gamblers, wantons, drunkards, ne'er-do-

You see that tragically ill-assorted pair, Benjamin Pantier and Mrs. Pantier—lonely and hostile souls: he, driven from home, living with his dog Nig in a room back of a dingy office:

But now hear Mrs. Pantier:

There was Benjamin Fraser, who was tortured by life, oppressed by sex:

There was Minerva Jones, the village poetess, whom "Butch" Weldy captured and whom he left to her fate with Doctor Meyers,—“good-hearted, easy,”—who tried to help her out; but she died. And we hear from Mrs. Meyers that, though her husband protested all his life long that the newspapers lied about him villainously, and he was not at fault for Minerva's fall, but only tried to help her, she held him to be nought but a poor soul sunk in sin. We turn a few pages, and out of his earthly cell speaks Frank Drummer, the village fool, who tried to memorize the *Encyclopedia Britannica*; and we observe with admiration that Mr. Masters is the first poet who has dared to put, not only the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but Henry George, Free Silver, the Peerless One, and Prohibition, into serious verse, as you will see by turning to the life history of poor George Trimble.

politician, who was hectored by his wife, and died a disappointed and futile being:

For the radicals grew suspicious of me,  
And the conservatives were never sure of me.

—the eternal tragedy of the trimmer!

There was Harold Arnett—wretched, sick-souled failure, who, weak from the noon-day heat, heard the cry of a baby,

Then the violent voice of my wife:

“ Watch out, the potatoes are burning! ”

I smelled them . . . then there was irresistible  
disgust.

I pulled the trigger . . .  
. . . thus I came here.

And for a companion piece, consider Margaret Fuller Slade, who “ would have been as great as George Eliot but for an untoward fate.” She married John Slade, the rich druggist, thinking thus to secure leisure for her novel; but she bore eight children, and had no time to write, and ran a needle in her hand while washing the baby’s things, and died from lock-jaw—“ an ironical death.”

What Mr. Masters has accomplished is the cinematographing of narrative-verse. He has reversed the practice of the moving-picture people,—who give us stories in picture-form,—and offers us a kind of moving-picture in the form of fictional verse. The *Spoon River Anthology* is a series of vivid, concentrated, rapidly shifting visualizations, related and interwoven, and employing that favorite device of the screen-play: a single event exhibited from different dramatic angles. You get, for example, Aner Clute’s story of how she happened to “ lead the life ”: well, it was a silk dress, and a promise of marriage from a rich man (Lucius Atherton); and because they gave her the name for it, why, that made her what she was. You get, then, Lucius Atherton’s picture flashed on the screen: the former town dandy,—“ an excellent knave of hearts who took many a trick,”—now old and shabby, living at the village restaurant; “ a gray, untidy, toothless, discarded, rural Don Juan.” But this is not all: Homer Clapp is put before you, begging of Aner Clute a parting kiss at the gate—a kiss that she refused, “ saying we should be engaged before that ”; but no sooner had he gone (so he learned afterward) than Lucius Atherton stole in at her window. So he died cursing himself for one of

Life's fools, "whom only death would treat as the equal of other men."

Just what relation Mr. Masters' cinematographic verse bears to poetry it is not easy to declare with confidence. We have said somewhat of the substance of his book, nothing of its form. Here is a fair sample of it at its most characteristic—it is Deacon Taylor speaking:

I belonged to the church,  
And to the party of prohibition;  
And the villagers thought I had died of eating water-melon.

In truth I had cirrhosis of the liver,  
For every noon for thirty years,  
I slipped behind the prescription partition  
In Trainor's drug store  
And poured a generous drink  
From the bottle marked  
" *Spiritus frumenti*."

Clearly this is as remote from poetry—the poetry of Whitman no less than the poetry of Swinburne—as the music of young Mr. Leo Ornstein is remote from the music of Chopin. It is perfectly easy to conclude that it is not poetry at all. To call it "free verse" is as idle as it would be to call it blank verse, or a sonnet. Nine-tenths of the *Spoon River Anthology* is, as verse, equally bald, flat, and uncouth. Occasionally it attains a measure of grave eloquence, an exaltation of speech that is seen at its best in the picture of Isaiah Beethoven, with but three months to live, brooding in the darkness by the mill-stream, where

The flame of the moon ran under my eyes  
Amid a forest stillness broken  
By a flute in a hut on the hill.

But there is little in the book that is of this fibre. Most of it is of a piece with the "Deacon Taylor" passage. So, reading about the trial of Dr. Duval for the murder of Zora Clemens, we come back to the question that disturbs us throughout most of the *Anthology*: If this is poetry:

Alas, that love, so gentle in his view,  
Should be so tyrannous and rough in proof!

what, then, is this?—

It was clear he had got her in a family way;  
And to let the child be born  
Would not do.

When, in Whitman, we weary of reading that

The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded  
by the great Secretaries,

we can turn a few pages and find this:

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night.

. . . . .  
Smile, O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!

Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!

There are no such compensations in Mr. Masters' verse. You will seek there in vain for what Stevenson called the "unexcelled imaginative justness of language" that is in Whitman. The *Spoon River Anthology* prevails—seizes you, engrosses you, haunts you—not because of its verse, but in spite of it. It is often as rank and as candid as the records of a police-court; but it is ineluctably detaining, at times extraordinarily moving. It is a miracle of veracious characterization; fiction of an unexampled kind; a new thing under the sun. But why drag in poetry?

LAWRENCE GILMAN.

## NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

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THE CHURCH. By John Huss. Translated, with notes and an introduction, by David S. Schaff. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915.

Through his scholarly translation of the Treatise upon the Church written in 1413 by John Huss, the Bohemian reformer and martyr, Dr. Schaff has placed a work of the first importance in the history of religious belief—and hence in the history of thought and of civilization—within the reach of readers who have hitherto known it chiefly by its renown. Huss's treatise is, as Dr. Schaff remarks, "the best known work upon the subject issued from Augustine to the Reformation period." Huss himself was a true precursor of Luther, though a determining influence over the latter cannot be claimed for him. Historically speaking, his trial, upon charges drawn from this *magnum opus* and *apologia pro vita sua* of his, is "the most famous formal trial of a single individual in the history of the Christian Church," not forgetting those of Abelard and Savonarola. So far, at least, as the written word is concerned, the influence of Huss has been greater than that of his predecessor and acknowledged master, Wyclif; for Wyclif's Treatise upon the Church was hidden away in manuscript until a generation ago, and the power over men's minds which his views continued to exercise long after his death was due rather to tradition and to his version of the Bible than to any original writing of his; while the effect upon the development of the idea of the Church produced by the treatise of Huss has been permanent and plainly marked. In a sense, Huss suffered martyrdom in Wyclif's stead, and through his death and his treatise, he kept open a subject of the utmost consequence to mankind.

Born in 1373, Huss was a student at the University of Prague during the period of its greatest influence and celebrity. In 1403 he was made rector of the University, holding the position for six months, and he was again rector in 1409 for the term of a year. Appointed, in 1403, preacher of Bethlehem Chapel, which had been founded ten years earlier to afford preaching in the native Czech tongue, Huss at once commanded attention by the fervency of his eloquence and the fearlessness of his attacks upon the abuses of the clergy. He made the Chapel the center of a new religious force and of a national movement