

# Poet Always Next But One

By David McCord

## I

THE world is in an ugly mood;  
The world has bred an ugly brood.  
A wind is blowing off the sea:  
Uprooted lies the Judas Tree.

A man is pounding on the door:  
The world has heard that sound before.  
Bolts rattle, and the door is thin:  
A voice says he shall not come in.

Who takes the water from the spring  
May spy the bird and hear him sing:  
Who feeds the frost with candle light  
Betrays the bastion in the night.

## II

Given his heritage, what other gift?  
Sure of his anchorage, what other ties?  
Granted his boundaries, how else and  
where?  
Proven his genius, will the ladder rise?  
Asking these questions in a world  
adrift,  
Question the answers for we are not  
there.

## III

Given his heritage, he is not born;  
The paper for his books perhaps not  
even  
The seed unripened under Hudson Bay.  
His birth star rises nightly over East-  
port,  
Rindge, Cape Charles, St. Augustine,  
Key West,  
To set beyond the seven perpetual  
rollers  
West of Puget Sound, northwest south-  
west  
Of salmon-spawned Columbia, the  
Rogue,  
The Red Woods, of each sunken bulk-  
head holding  
The far Pacific peaceful at the edge  
Of California's fog-wreathed Monterey.  
Time has a healthy appetite. The cycle  
And universal meshing of the gears  
Of life and death, delight, disaster,  
dream  
And anguish, sealed in the animal oil  
Of here and now, are in  
His favor. Time consumes, consuming  
with a mouth  
Of fire along the quadrants of continual  
Dawn, a mouth of smoke along the  
quadrants  
Of continual dusk. Time is unanxious.  
Only we  
Are anxious that our day be long and  
late.  
His day will come, is coming: The  
American

Poet always next but one. His heritage  
Just what? His anchorage just where?

His  
Vision wide—how wide? O time  
attends  
To all and sundry but time is not  
attendant or  
Attentive. Time will tell, but not to us:  
Time is a kind of fever in our eyes;  
We are a flash of fever in our time.

## IV

How large the country looms for any  
poet!  
How big and strange—too strange for  
all its bigness,  
And strangest at the points of common  
fault.  
Life? Anywhere from Coast to Coast  
we live  
Revised, revisioned, socialized, secured,  
taxed,  
Surtaxed—harmonized and hormon-  
ized:  
One people with one look, one frown,  
one smile,  
One laugh, one voice, one vote, one  
fear, one  
Dividend, one vitamin, one atom, and  
one style.  
If only we could simply say: one faith!  
If only we could faithfully say: one  
God!  
If only One were all we had in  
common!  
From coast to coast,  
From cost to cost,  
From ghost to ghost  
From lost to lost

Horizons, waiting for the lights to  
change; still waiting, flying,  
Speeding, waiting, bolting, dashing,  
waiting, racing . . .  
Waiting for the need to speed no  
longer; finding  
Images that only images ourselves  
could recognize,  
Seeing no shallowness beneath the thin  
veneer; not seeing  
A school of human ale-wives in the  
night-nets of  
The national networks; pinned black  
beetles  
On a ground glass screen; dead fingers  
Turning inside out atomic comics,  
Robots warming up the stale commer-  
cials, script  
That waits upon the nondescript; our  
national wit  
A blood-bank for thin gags; tradition  
Questionable; culture a commodity;  
Noblesse oblige a rhinestone phrase, a  
keepsake;

Chromium façade ok, fine craftsman-  
ship

Lost somewhere on the beltlines, and  
Great books in losing battle with the  
Photo-finished, camera in camera. O  
candida!

O pixilated, commentated, simple-  
simonized! And who  
Is always driving, using, boasting, beg-  
ging next year's  
Models, paying last week's payments,  
pawning  
Last year's dreams?

## V

American poet next but one,  
This is what we have done:  
To this your fathers won.

This is the nightmare — what the  
physicists  
Call surface tension. Or perhaps excess  
invention.  
In the corrected phrase, the plastic age  
In plastics, the electric age of spastics,  
Age of the international nervous break-  
down,  
Age of premature remorse and post-  
poned joy.

American poet next but one,  
The sands in the glasses run;  
Brighter will shine your sun.

## VI

This is the illusion we elude,  
This is the night of which we make  
the day,  
This is the day from which we fashion  
night,  
This is the truth we wish to call untrue,  
This is the road we shall not ever take,  
This is the road we took by some mis-  
take,  
This is the complication of the crude,  
This is the nightfall cutting off the  
view,  
This is the word we thought we should  
not say,  
This is the vision we did not invite.

## VII

America, have we no choice?  
All emptiness, all hollow voice?  
All platitude, all cryptic joke?  
No fire, no ceremonial smoke?

Have we no roots? no seed? no corn?  
No blossom on the cactus thorn?  
No spawning in the shattered light  
On shelving waters? Rain in sight?

Great land, between the greater seas,  
The pioneer who felled his trees,  
The settler who consumed his soil  
Are one with everything we spoil.

## VIII

Given his heritage, it is not given  
To countersign the articles of faith.

But even in the inconclusive darkness  
of  
This darkening hour all the Delphic  
Meaning of our consequent lives can  
Suddenly resolve, and we become  
The one beyond the oneness I decry.

American poet next but one:  
Here is the argument begun—  
In Genesis. No other. None.

Sure of his anchorage, his other sure-  
ness  
Is half himself: the rock within the  
Mountain, the river on its way, the  
Far savannahs and the buffalo bones.  
The delta at the Gulf, old Spanish moss  
Suspending the deep South, rock  
maples  
In the roundness of Vermont, red Man-  
zanita  
Veins of Oregon milk quartz, the smoky  
blue  
Integument of true Virginia, profitable  
Aroostook, the alluvial sandwash  
By the young St. Lawrence—all are his.  
And his forever—as we count forever  
—lavas  
And culebras of the West, the flowery  
Desert under the Joshua Tree,  
Those long-horned adjectives of Texas,  
pure  
Mosaic carpets at the foot of the pueblo,  
Cross-cut ranges sawing through the  
sky: all  
Color, cloud, and contour of this proud  
Memorial hunting ground, green forest,  
Broken lakes, moraine and drumlin,  
running  
Water and lost tombs.

## IX

Three things are basic in the long  
advance:  
Time, place, and being. But the  
forward glance  
Assumes the act of history, which was  
chance.

The simple cambric for the whole  
design  
Is place and being, and where they  
align  
A thread draws them together. Time is  
twine

In that sense, only time can never  
break.  
The living and the dead are both awake  
And one with everything we do or  
make.

An Adams and a Jefferson today  
Have rather much than little still to  
say.  
We challenge them. Who cries the  
stronger Nay?

Franklin, his knuckles bare and show-  
ing scar,  
Is more the statesman than the Leyden  
jar.

Yet cry Poor Richard! Who brings near  
from far?

Our freedom dearer than endemic light  
Is turning men to wakefulness tonight.  
Whence came it? It was never won  
through flight.

Our tolerance: a quality or force?  
Out of the heart, or something to en-  
dorse?  
A tendency, or flowing from the  
source?

The dawn of letters was an older dawn,  
But still the ancient light is coming on.  
Our silhouette is not agreed upon,

And yet through Melville hangs a flag  
unfurled.  
A "bold and nervous lofty language"  
hurled  
His thunderbolts: "The pulpit leads  
the world."  
A "man of globular brain and a pon-  
derous heart,"  
His strength in "Moby Dick" can still  
impart

The meaning and the fire suffused in  
art.

And art itself, indigenous as rain,  
We stack like wheat across the central  
plain,  
But grind to flour with mixed unpre-  
cious bane.

American genius—if the word elect  
Shares anything of daring and effect—  
Is genius of the skyborne architect,

For he alone has climbed the pure  
serene  
And given plane and line the right to  
mean  
Not building, terminal, but the god-  
head seen.

Music! If ever thrush was heard to sing,  
America has grace-notes on her wing:  
The wind through needles of the pine  
in spring.

## X

It is not down on any map,  
True places never are:  
The little path turned through the gap,  
The blue gate to the star;

The lake whose water draws the cloud,  
The flyways running south;  
The valley where wild bees are loud,  
The secret river mouth,

Or anywhere that he might come  
Or go to strike his song.  
The hyla stopped, the cricket dumb,  
With him so sudden-strong.

## XI

Cities and science serve each other  
well;  
Osmotic processes aloft and under-  
ground  
Make cities scientific and a shrine  
For labor on the enzyme in the lab.  
Some cities science built, some not.  
Boston is made of bricks and four per  
cent,  
The law, good teaching, and the best  
museums;  
Richmond of pride and culture and  
good living.  
New York is science to the soaring  
height  
Of towers and plumes reflecting down  
the world:  
Compact of steel and tube and cable,  
rich  
In all devices for unloading loads, but  
poor  
In basement bargains on the hundredth  
floor.  
The science-city can be ravishing, as  
instance  
That lace of bridges round the hand-  
me-up  
Of lovable San Francisco. Cities  
Are broad and wide and braced  
By science in prairie country—Fargo,  
Topeka; Chicago on the lake, Mil-  
waukee  
On the bluff.

Perhaps all cities  
are meanest just where science  
Leaves them out: The filthy sprawl  
That fronts the controlling river  
And trails due west (the usual  
Stride of growth) to the clean sheer  
sheen  
Of hospital wall for soluble alcoholics.

American poet next but one,  
Here the great web is spun  
For terror, toil—and fun.

Granted his boundaries, he will have  
to solve  
The city-country complex not of our  
Loose day but his: The lines of force  
That draw men in, repelling as they  
draw.  
Proven his genius, he will have to walk  
The long and antiseptic corridor of  
Doors marked chlorophyll and nuclear,  
Psychosomatics, cybernetics,  
Antibiotics, semantics, and horse sense.  
Proven his genius, he will have to  
speak  
The thousand-jargoned languages of  
Specialists who specialize the special.

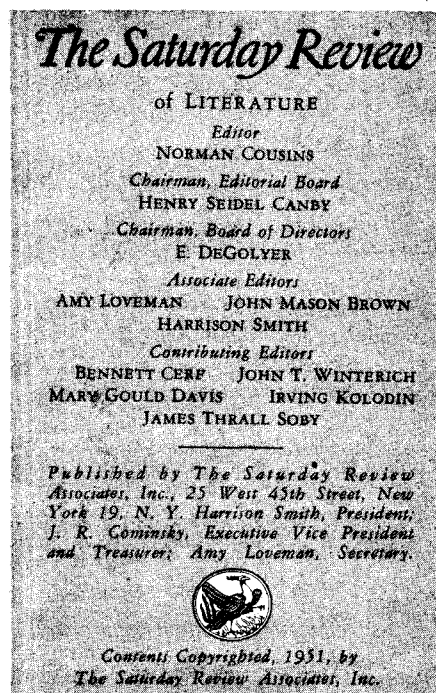
American poet next but one:  
Complexity to stun  
Brave father, braver son!

## XII

Over the grass his wind will soon be  
blowing,

(Continued on page 34)





## The Expansion of Literacy

IT IS ONE of the interesting phenomena of the democratic process that as literacy contracts on the one front it expands on the other. In the days when education was the privilege of the few, there was a substratum of knowledge that could be taken for granted on the part of the cultured, and a sort of short-hand of allusion prevailed that was common currency among those who had any learning. Reference to ancient history, to the Bible, to the classics needed no annotation; a name, a quotation were sufficient to set a mood, or call up an image, or evoke a situation. The "gentleman" knew his Scripture and his classics, was read in history and poetry, had foreign phrases at his tongue's end, and had a fair idea of distant countries and civilizations. The writer, or speaker, addressing him stood in a relation to him almost like that of the specialist expounding a theory to his profession today who knows that he can skip preliminaries and proceed to the nub of his subject without introductory explanation. For he, too, was a man of information speaking to other men of information; all alike had drunk of the Pierian spring and had quaffed from it a common basis of culture. But as the democratic impulse spread, and education levelled down to the masses, it thinned out as it became more widely disseminated and culture, instead of becoming the perquisite of the many, remained the acquisition of the few who by it were sharply differentiated from the wide

new public which was gaining literacy even though as yet it lacked background. Culture, indeed, is a flower of slow and gentle growth.

Despite shocking facts brought out by Army tests and college examinations literacy, by and large, is widespread in America, and education is making constantly increasing strides. Yet, inevitably, there are enormous unevennesses inherent in the educational status of a society which is continuously in flux and which is ever and anon casting up new elements from the bottom. And since the literate masses now vastly outnumber the cultured few, the latter have had to meet the situation by laying aside some of the adornments of their knowledge lest they speak to the closet instead of to the public.

That is one side of the shield. The obverse tells another story. For what has taken place concurrently with the democratization of literature is the amazing spread of factual and scientific knowledge among the people. The technological developments of recent years, the advances in pure and applied science, the phenomena of daily living—and dying—have become the stuff of universal consciousness. The book, journalism, the periodical press, the radio, and the movie, have brought within the ken of the multitude subjects which once were comprehensible only to the specialist. Though far from every schoolboy knows of Macaulay, every schoolboy knows something of the principles of physics, knows the mechanics of the radio and the auto, can follow a scientific description with

understanding, and dwells familiarly with theories of space and time, even though they may still come to him only in fiction form. Well-nigh every child today lisps in numbers. Never was there an age—probably never was there a people—more awake to the wonders and implications of science than is the America of the present. Nor, of course, was there ever a period as now when all the ends of the earth are drawn together in the awareness of men everywhere. There is an enormous mass of information, political, social, military, economic that has become the commonplace of general knowledge where once mere vagueness or complete ignorance reigned.

WHAT is a culture, not as a philosophy but as a practical manifestation of democratic living? Not learning alone, or the love of knowledge, or "the study of perfection," as Matthew Arnold put it, but surely a compound of all these—of tradition and reverence for tradition, of curiosity and zeal, of awareness of the problems of the hour and consciousness of the obligation of the individual and the race to the world.

Something of all these America has, something more than mere glibness even if too little of old-world scholarship, something of eagerness, something of excitement. It is a mixture which by its very nature is constantly expanding, sending out steadily sturdy new shoots. It is busy in levelling education up today as once education was busy in levelling culture down.

—A. L.

## A Mulberry Tree

By Alfred Noyes

*Many years ago, in our Isle of Wight garden, we planted a mulberry tree in remembrance of that other in Keats' garden in Hampstead. But these trees grow too slowly for one man's lifetime.*

OUTLIVE me then, old tree.  
You'll keep our secret well when I am gone.  
How should you know what distant memory  
Planted you here and, in your life, lives on.

Whatever fruit you bear,  
Ripening to darkness while this age goes by,  
Your roots are in a garden far from here,  
A small sad plot, beneath a smoke-dimmed sky.

There stands the immortal tree,  
Which, though men cut you down, shall never fail,  
Remembering one young listener's ecstasy,  
His darkness, and the undying nightingale.