

AMERICAN POETRY, 1900-1950:

NOTES TOWARD A RE-ASSESSMENT

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Is it nonsense to talk of a typical American poem? If not, what, in your opinion, are the qualities which tend to distinguish a poem as American?
2. Do you consider that the language of American poetry (vocabulary, use of vocabulary, metric, cadences, syntax, punctuation, differs notably from that of English poetry? Is this difference (if any) fortuitous, or does it correspond to some underlying difference of sensibility?'¹

'Plato the purple swine advocated the expulsion of "poets" (he may have meant Eddie Marsh's gang or the blokes who write in the *Observer*) from his projected republic but he failed to *specify* that he meant sloppy poets. He was, as I have already said, a "prose poet", that is a rhapsodist who shirked verse technique (musical technique)'²

It would have been interesting to have Pound's reply to Rajan's questionnaire. The poets asked — Marianne Moore, Robert Penn Warren, Wallace Stevens, Horace Gregory, Allen Tate, James Laughlin, William Carlos Williams — produced some oddly unilluminating responses, mainly because

1. B. RAJAN, ed., *Modern American Poetry*, p. 182 (Dobson, 1950).
2. EZRA POUND, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 128 (New Directions pb, 1968).

they refused to get down to details. There *are* differences and they arise, as Wallace Stevens pointed out, from the fact that 'we live in two different physical worlds and it is not nonsense to think that that matters'. But it is from closely observed differences in the areas which Rajan specifies — from induction rather than deduction — that the truth might emerge.

Pound's personal aside, typical of the acrimonious and sporadic aperçus of the *Guide to Kulchur*, subsumes a whole line of criticism vis-à-vis American poetry. We have all heard it so often that we take it for truth, perhaps without as much examination as we might have given these axioms. Nota: American poetry in the twentieth century is better than English poetry. Nota: it all began in the years before the First World War, when Harriet Monroe perceived what was best in the new American poetry and, in the pages of *Poetry*, published a catholic collection of American poets whose work was as far from the thin romanticism of Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman as it was from the Georgian pipings of 'Eddie Marsh's gang'.

But what do we actually find when we compare the first volume of *Georgian Poetry, 1911-1912*³ with *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (Volume I, October-March, 1912-13)? We find, for one thing, that the latter volume begins with a contribution by one Arthur Davison Ficke ('a graduate of Harvard, who studied law and entered his father's office in Davenport, Iowa'). It is called 'Poetry' and the first verse runs:

It is a little isle amid bleak seas —
 An isolate realm of garden, circled round
 By importunity of stress and sound,
 Devoid of empery to master these.
 At most, the memory of its streams and bees,

3. The Poetry Bookshop, Theobalds Road, December 1912.

Borne to the toiling mariner outward-bound,
 Recalls his soul to that delightful ground;
 But serves no beacon toward his destinies.

Miss Monroe's chatty notes further inform us that another contributor, Mrs. Roscoe P. Conkling, is a resident of the state of New York; her poem is 'Symphony of a Mexican Garden'. The Contents list contains many non-American names — from W.B. Yeats (five Celtic Twilight poems), Rabindranath Tagore, Alfred Noyes, Ernest Rhys and Alice Meynell to Richard Aldington. Of the vaunted new guard there is precious little — Pound's 'To Whistler, American' and 'Middle Aged' (both unpreserved in his *Collected Shorter Poems*) and Vachel Lindsay's 'General William Booth Enters into Heaven'. For the rest, it is a sad *mélange* of such as Witter Bynner, Madison Cawein, Fannie Stearns Davis, Lily A. Long, Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer (!) and Ridgley Torrence.

The Georgian anthology, on the other hand, contains five superb poems by Rupert Brooke, including 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester', De La Mare's 'Arabia', 'The Sleeper' and 'The Listeners' (among others), poems by Flecker, W.W. Gibson Maschfield and James Stephens, and D.H. Lawrence's 'The Snapdragon'. What price *Poetry* (Chicago)? All in all, it seems an amateurish affair, with, apart from a few Poundian nuggets, a peculiar kind of American poetasting, which might be found as distasteful as the mandarin style of the English. 'Sloppy poets' some of 'Eddie Marsh's gang' may have been — but not all.

But this, of course, is not the whole truth. Let us call a roll of some of the more usually cited American books of verse in the early years of the twentieth century⁴. Vachel Lindsay's volume containing 'General William Booth Enters into Heaven' appeared in 1913, and *The Congo and Other Poems* in 1914. Forst's *North of Boston* came out in the

4. See L. UNTERMEYER, *Modern American Poetry*, Preface, p. 13, 1950.

same year (albeit published in England), Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915, Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* and Robinson's *The Man Against the Sky* in 1916. It is a fair enough contribution. However, Lindsay, Sandburg and Masters achieved as much fame by being heralders of a so-called 'Middle Western Renaissance' as by being poets of intrinsic literary importance. Robinson is revealed on close examination to have a peculiarly 'for them' (Americans that is) validity. And Frost — even Frost at his best — can hardly approach the glorious felicities of Yeats. Whitman was another matter but, certainly, the transatlantic fireworks of the early years of the twentieth century seem a little damp when viewed from the vantage point of the nineteen seventies.

We must look elsewhere for the greatest poetic contribution by Americans in the early days of the 19th-Century. They are two-fold. The first is the extraordinary impetus given to modern poetry as a whole by the pioneering achievement of Pound and Eliot. By 1920 Pound had published eleven books, the last of them *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. Three more were to appear before *A Draft of XVI Cantos* in 1925. Eliot brought out *Prufrock* in 1917, *Ara Vos Prec* in 1919, *Poems* and *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, and *The Waste Land* in 1922. The second is the Imagist movement (although it was not *wholly* American in origin).

It is in the six principles of Imagism, rather than in the less-than-first-class talent displayed in the anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914) and the three volumes of *Some Imagist Poets* (1915, 1916 and 1917), that there may be found the core of that new hardness and clearness which was to inform the best work of Pound, Eliot and, later, Williams:

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the *exact* word, not the merely decorative word.
2. To create new rhythms - as the expression of new moods.
We do not insist on « free verse » as the only method of writing poetry ... we do believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms.

3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject.
4. To present an image (hence the name "Imagist"). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous.
5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite.
6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is the very essence of poetry.

However, I do not believe that Imagism as such — that is, the simple, if skilful setting down of images in a style which might be compared with the *haiku* — ever produced great poetry. Two examples from Pound might be adduced in evidence:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

and

Green arsenic smeared on an egg-white cloth,
Crushed strawberries! Come, let us feast our eyes.

These are offered as poems, but poems they are not. They are, if you like, brilliant gestures, bold experiments, attempts to clear away the rubble of Victorian over-describing. In prose, they might be compared with the contribution which Hemingway made when he too 'used the language of common speech' and employed 'always the exact word, never the merely decorative word', when he substituted the dryness of 'he said', 'she said' for the pseudo-eloquence of, say, 'he expostulated violently'. 'Don't talk about, present', said Henry James, and although his work is not an ideal example of using the language of common speech, one may applaud his sentiments. Even William's notorious experiments in the Imagist manner leave something to be desired — for example:

So much depends
 upon
 a red wheel
 barrow
 glazed with rain
 water
 beside the white
 chickens

Those who were most possessed by Imagism, like HD, never became more than good minor poets. That the movement was for Pound, Eliot and Williams a stepping-stone towards their own personal goals, indicates their stature. What I find it interesting to enquire is exactly what that stature was. All the great American poets, it has been said, have been either preachers or experimenters, or both. Not for them the modes of men 'content with the connotations of their masters'. This statement applies no doubt to Pound, Eliot and Williams — as it did to Whitman — but how far down the scale does it go? To examine the proposition carefully may not only provide a certain perspective but also, perhaps, enable tentative answers to be given to the first part of Rajan's questionnaire.

For the sake of clarity (and perhaps of a certain enlightenment) a list of twentieth century American and British poets placed roughly in the decades in which they were most important might be attempted:

American

1900 Edwin Markham
 William Vaughn Moody
 E.A. Robinson
 Trumbull Stickney

British

Rudyard Kipling
 G.K. Chesterton
 Laurence Binyon
 Thomas Sturge Moore
 A.E. Housman
 G.M. Hopkins (posthumous,
pace Bridges)

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1910 Robert Frost | Robert Bridges |
| Carl Sandburg | Rupert Brooke |
| Vachel Lindsay | Wilfred Owen |
| Edgar Lee Masters | Siegfried Sassoon |
| Amy Lowell | John Masefield |
| | W.B. Yeats |
| | Edward Thomas |
| | W.H. Davies |
| | Walter de la Mare |
| | |
| 1920 Emily Dickinson | D.H. Lawrence |
| (posthumous) | Edith Sitwell |
| Conrad Aiken | Robert Graves |
| Ezra Pound | James Stephens |
| T.S. Eliot | W.J. Turner |
| E.E. Cummings | |
| Wallace Stevens | |
| William Carlos Williams | |
| HD Stephen Vincent Benét | |
| | |
| 1930 Hart Crane | W.H. Auden |
| Marianne Moore | Stephen Spender |
| John Crowe Ransom | Louis MacNeice |
| Allen Tate | Cecil Day Lewis |
| Robert Penn Warren | William Empson |
| Robinson Jeffers | David Gascoyne |
| Archibald MacLeish | |
| Richard Eberhart | |
| Kenneth Fearing | |

1940 Delmore Schwartz	Dylan Thomas
Karl Shapiro	Roy Fuller
Muriel Rukeyser	Lawrence Durrell
Elizabeth Bishop	Vernon Watkins
Randall Jarrell	W.S. Graham
John Ciardi	W.R. Rodgers
Theodore Roethke	George Barker
Robert Lowell	Henry Reed
Richard Wilbur	Sidney Keyes
John Berryman	Alun Lewis
Kenneth Patchen	John Heath-Stubbs
Winfield Townley Scott	David Wright
Peter Viereck	John Betjeman

I choose Housman to compare with Robinson in the first decade since although, like Yeats, he spans a greater period, it was in the early years of the twentieth century that his poems had most impact. Like Robinson, too, he published his first book in the nineties. Both were classicists; both were pessimists.

A comparison of Robinson with Housman produces a conclusion which may be extended — through later comparisons — from the particular to the general. The English poet is conventional in form and (at least publicly expressed) morality, but the professionalism is superb and the music is all. Yet it is not music in the sense of Swinburnian lilt or the thundering metres of Newbolt — and certainly not of Moody, Richard Hovey or Bliss Carman.

Housman's sense of touch — seeming so bland — has a cutting edge and an element in it of that effectiveness, pertinence and happiness of phrase which Helen Gardner found in Chaucer compared with Langland:

But Chaucer's "divine fluidity" . . . his unerring sense of *verbal melody*, his *skill in the verse paragraph*, the range of his vocabulary and his discretion in the use of it . . . the union in his poetry of grace and strength - these all make him a poet who has in a high degree what Langland lacks: what Mr. Eliot has called "auditory imagination"⁵.

Eliot's definition of « auditory imagination » was:

the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality⁶.

Does Housman possess « auditory imagination »? In 'Reveille' the extended image of the first stanza:

Wake: the silver dusk returning
 Up the beach of darkness brims,
 And the ship of sunrise burning
 Strands upon the eastern rims...

is far from being that of a conventional poetaster, although at first glance it might seem to be such. Rhythm and sense go hand in hand with an urgency that is sustained by the change of pace in the third stanza:

Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
 Hear the drums of morning play...

5. HELEN GARDNER, *The Art of T.S. Eliot*, p. 4 (E.P. Dutton pb, 1959).

6. T.S. ELIOT, *The Use of Poetry*, 1933 (quoted by Gardner, p. 6, *op. cit.*).

Finally, the last verse rings the heart (in spite of ourselves?) with the felicity of its word-choice:

Clay lies still but blood's a rover;
 Breath's a ware that will not keep.
 Up, lad: when the journey's over
 There'll be time enough to sleep'

Kiplingesque echoes? ('If you can keep your head when all about you...'). But what is wrong with these virtues, if expressed acceptably? Nor is it merely the young soldier's duty that Housman is underlining. The moral applies to us all.

A similar felicity attends 'With rue my heart is laden'. 'Golden friends' and 'rose-lipt maidens' may not be the contemporary poet's idea of original imagery. But backward-looking though Housman may be in vocabulary and technique, there is no *pastiche* here (as there is, very obviously for example, in the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay).

There is a memorable quality about the typical Housman phrase:

'When I was one-and-twenty
 I heard a wise man say...'

memorable, that is, in a mnemonic sense. This kind of verse is for repeating, as in:

In summertime on Bredon
 The bells they sound so clear...

or

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
 Is hung with bloom along the bough

The final stanza of 'Loveliest of Trees' is trite enough in its sense: but although the *carpe diem* note is sad, it is not banal. Housman has used a traditional instrument and traditional imagery to express his own individual voice.

Let us take, for comparison, one of Robinson's best-known poems:

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
 Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
 He wept that he was ever born,
 And he had reasons...

What is most noticeable is the difference of tone. Not only is Housman a singer; he can be sung. It would be difficult to sing Robinson. His metres, like his thought, are tough. The abrupt change of the four-stress line to a three-stress one is disconcerting — and is meant to be so. Robinson is an ironist; none of the well-controlled glamour of Housman for him. A 'down-East' dourness pervades even the most 'musical' of his lyrics:

No more with overflowing light
 Shall fill the eyes that now are faded
 Nor shall another's fringe with night
 Their woman-hidden world as they did...

or

She fears him, and will always ask
 What fated her to choose him;
 She meets in his engaging mask
 All reasons to refuse him;
 But what she meets and what she fears
 Are less than are the downward years,
 Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
 Of age, were she to lose him.

Housman would never have been guilty of the lack of ear which led to the third rhyme on the same sound in line seven. It is an error which Poe more often fell into; one would not have expected it of a poet of Robinson's desperate honesty.

But it is not only to the lyric Robinson or the Robinson of those pre-Spoon River pen-portraits that we must look if we are to judge his quality as a whole. Most of the commentators dwell on the much-anthologised poems ('Eros Turannos', 'Mr. Flood's Party', 'For a Dead Lady', 'Flammonde'). However, the bulk of his work consists of long narrative poems. After his first twentieth century book, *Captain Craig* (1902), he published five such poems of book length, using Merlin or Lancelot or Tristram or 'King Jasper' as subjects.

Perhaps it was the fact of living in the United States, its context, its demands which made him approach the large subject and since — as a realist as well as a profound pessimist — he could not bring himself to write a new *Columbiad*, the impetus of his not inconsiderable talent frittered itself away. It was not even buried, like Melville's, in the holy ground of a *Clarel*, but maundered on into a world he never knew and with which he had little sympathy. When, occasionally, he succeeds in the long poem it is where he can identify himself passionately with the subject. An example (although it is by no means as long as the poems I have mentioned) is 'Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford'. This poem conveys that fascination with the 'otherness' of the English world — that mysterious world of hallowed literary names — which enabled John Livingston Lowes to write so penetratingly about Chaucer, or Thomas Wolfe to make a meal of such large chunks of Burton and the Elizabethans. The almost-conversational blank verse line carries a wealth of knowledge and, above all, feeling for the greatest figure of that European literary heritage which Americans of Robinson's stamp hold so dear:

You are a friend then, as I make it out,
Of our man Shakespeare, who alone of us
Will put an ass's head in Fairyland...

It is clear, then, that we must not look in the work of Edwin Arlington Robinson for the delight in words and

memorable phrases that we find in the English poet. It is like looking in the world of Hawthorne or Melville for the domesticated character-studies and warm-blooded sentiments of a Dickens or a George Eliot. And if Robinson has indeed a 'for them' significance, it is because Americans are accustomed to looking in their own literature for another kind of thing and not simply because, by being there, by being all there is, he *has* to be made much of. Indeed, if one spends as much time with Robinson as one is forced, by English education and chauvinism, to spend on English poets, he grows on one. The fact that there is a slightly amateurish quality about much of his verse tends to obscure its dry wit and homely honesty. Here is a clapboard carpenter, not an artist in Sheraton. But he thinks, he feels. He may not possess the quality of 'auditory imagination', but his eye is one of the highest; he is at the farthest removed from the kind of poet who uses words for words' sake.

How true this is also of Frost, the most outstanding American poet of the next decade. He builds on the same background as Robinson but accomplishes a great deal more, partly because of the advantage of publishing at a later period and partly because of his exposure to that 'other place' which Robinson knew only through books. Although there were only five years between their birthdates, Robinson began publishing in 1897, whereas Frost's *North of Boston* did not come out in England until 1914. In *Poetry and the Age*, Randall Jarrell tells of teaching Frost in Germany. German audiences, he says, found it difficult to accept Frost because he had none of the mannerisms they expected of a *dichter*. One would assume, therefore, that it should have been easier for the English, who have Wordsworth in their inheritance. And so it has been. Edward Thomas admired Frost, and Cecil Day Lewis wrote an introduction to the Penguin selection of his work. Yet there have still been reservations. No English critic has been quite as enthusiastic as Jarrell. We are indebted to Jarrell for pointing out the bareness and hardness of Frost's sentiments (later to be expressed publicly

by Lionel Trilling on an unfortunate occasion). But we must also insist on that element of whimsicality which occasionally mars Frost's work and which Jarrell conveniently ignores. It is true that Frost is much more than a good High School poet, a laureate of the *Saturday Evening Post*, but the cracker-barrel philosopher with the elfish grin breaks through a little too often for us to suspend all reservations. Let us take two examples, one from 'Mending Wall':

We keep the wall between us as we go.
 To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
 We have to use a spell to make them balance:
 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned'...
 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That wants it down. I could say 'Elves' to him,
 But it's not elves exactly...

the other from 'Birches':

... Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
 You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen...
 You may see their trunks arching in the woods
 Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
 Like girls on hands and knees...

But it is not only Frost's whimsicality and preciousness which get in the way. There is a sort of knowingness even in the narrative poems which no doubt led Kenneth Koch to write his not entirely unsuccessful parody 'Mending Sump':

Hiram, I think the sump is backing up.
 The bathroom floorboards for above two weeks
 Have seemed soaked through. A little bird, I think
 Has wandered in the pipes, and all's gone wrong.
 Something there is that doesn't hump a sump,
 He said ...

When Jarrell made his arbitrary and dramatic choice of Frost's best poems most critics were too dumbstruck by Jarrell's acuity to raise questions. Frost, misled by Jarrell's choice of 'The Witch of Coös' [among others] was moved to read it on the Library of Congress recording. The result is bathetic, for 'The Witch of Coös' brings out in fact those qualities of the village poet and sententious moralizer which occasionally mar even the successful 'Death of the Hired Man' and 'Home Burial'. It is difficult to understand how any reader could keep a straight face at the recital of how the bones marched up and down the stairs. Enter Ralle the Sioux control; mother and son talk to each other in the third person; even the name of the protagonist — Toffile Lajway — adds to the unreality of the poem. 'The Witch of Coös' bears the same relation to the best of Frost as *Across the River and Into the Trees* bears to *The Sun Also Rises*.

What *is* best in Frost may be seen the more clearly by comparing him with his friend and mentor, Edward Thomas. There is a bookish, a 'literary' quality about Thomas, a clinging not merely to accepted metrics, but to the conventions and imagery which go with a 'poetic vocabulary' (nineteenth century, of course). This is Thomas:

Out in the dark over the snow,
The fallow fawns invisible go
With the fallow deer
And the winds blow
Fast as the stars are slow...

or

The new moon hangs like an ivory bugle
In the naked frosty blue
The ghylls of the forest, already blackened
By Winter, are blackened anew...

It is competent enough stuff; it has a ring and a lilt, but it lacks that edge of hardness and truth which enables us to

forgive an obvious clinging to the conventions in the case of Housman. Let us consider one of Frost's many rhyming poems — for we must not be misled by frequency with which the dramatic poems are quoted. The tone is more personal, the vocabulary is simpler than Thomas's — for example, in 'To Earthward':

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.

This is very different from Thomas's world of 'Jenny Pink's copse', of 'Cockham, Cockriden and Childerditch/Roses, Pyrgo and Lapwater'.

Frost's countryside is full of death, dangers, disasters, sudden accidents:

The leaves got up in a coil and hissed
Blindly struck at my knee and missed...

Even when he is at his simplest and seemingly most pastoral there is a threat, a sadness, a hint of life's burden:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep!

In any list of important poets in the twentieth century, regardless of nationality, Frost commands a place; the same cannot be said of the poets of the so-called 'Middle Western Renaissance'. It is true that the fact that Sandburg, Lindsay and Masters wrote about the people and places which they knew well places them several notches above the 'birds and flowers' school of lady poets who had flourished in a region given over until then exclusively to pioneering, industry and commerce. But the poetic instrument with which they were endowed was of a lesser order than Frost's.

Sandburg is, for the most part, watered-down Whitman. Consciously or unconsciously, he modelled his style on Whitman's long line, his lists, his enumeration of American scenes and objects. But in the process something was lost. Even in his 'catalogues' Whitman sings to the reader. Whitman's lines are liturgical:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
 The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his
 foreplane whistles its wild, ascending lisp,
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their
 Thanksgiving dinner,
 The pilot seizes his king-pin, he heaves down with a
 strong arm,
 The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and
 harpoon ready...

Even in this extract, taken at random from 'Song of Myself' the word-choice apparently so simple, is on closer scrutiny arresting: 'pure', 'dresses', 'tongue', 'wild, ascending lisp', 'stands braced'. The lines are taut with movement. By comparison, Sandburg is prosy:

I know an ice handler who wears a flannel shirt
 with pearl buttons the size of a dollar,
 And he lugs a hundred-pound hunk into a saloon
 ice-box, helps himself to cold ham and rye bread,
 Tells the bartender it's hotter than yesterday and will
 be hotter yet tomorrow, by Jesus,
 And is on his way with his head in the air and a hard
 pair of fists...

Every word is usual, unremarkable. To say that it echoes the voice of the people is to fall into the fallacy of imitative form. In his most often-quoted poem, 'Chicago', the tone is expostulatory, blustering:

Hog Butcher for the World!
 Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
 Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler
 Stormy, husky, brawling,
 City of the Big Shoulders,...

This is 'talking about', enunciating; the sensibility is not, to put it conservatively, of the highest order. Where Sandburg is at his best, in *The People, Yes*, the most interesting writing is to be found in the 'stories':

Six feet six was Davy Tipton
 and he had the proportions
 as kingpin Mississippi River pilot
 nearly filling the pilothouse
 as he took the wheel with a laugh:
 'Big rivers ought to have big men'

and not in the flat statements which make up so much of his verse:

Yes

The people will live on.
 The learning and blundering people will live on.
 They will be tricked and sold and again sold...

Masters is better because he is dramatic and laconic at the same time; he does not try to put ideas into the reader's head:

... And down I came with both legs broken
 And my eyes burned crisp as a couple of eggs...

The Circuit Judge said whoever did it
 Was a fellow-servant of mine, and so
 Old Rhodes's son didn't have to pay me.
 And I say on the witness stand as blind
 As Jack the Fiddler, saying over and over,
 I didn't know him at all.

Lindsay, who once seemed like a joke, is probably the best of the three. He did not try to catch the 'voice of the people'

with a prose line [when did 'the people' ever read Sandburg and Masters?] He went to the people with a ballad metre that roused them and succeeded thereby in rousing us. In the 'Negro Sermon' entitled 'Simon Legree' he hits just that note of hyperbole which communicates the comedy-in-terror of the subject. In 'Bryan, Bryan, Bryan' and, especially, in 'General William Booth Enters Into Heaven' the style fits the subject. Last of all, is the note Lindsay struck in:

But the flower-fed buffaloes of the spring
 Left us, long ago.
 They gore no more, they bellow no more,
 With the Blackfeet lying low
 With the Pawnes, lying low
 Lying low.

The achievement is in the tone, communicated with simplicity and without bravado. How quietly effective its feeling for America is may be seen by comparing it not only with the bluster of Sandburg but also with the over-competent journalism of Stephen Vincent Benét:

I have fallen in love with American names,
 Left us, long ago.
 The snakeskin-title of minig-claims,
 The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat...

But all this is but a prelude to the great age of American poetry — the twenties and the thirties. Four great names dominate the period between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second. Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams.

I should like, first of all, to consider the contribution of Pound, Stevens and Williams. Eliot is another matter. I have mentioned their indebtedness to Imagism, but we must go beyond Imagism to Imagism's principle, the 'ding an sich' of which Stevens spoke, but which Williams, more than any of them, practiced. This is the touchstone of the

American psyche, that urge towards facts, things, objects, the mapping of a continent, a world, which is responsible for such diverse phenomena as Whitman's verse, the pragmatism of William James, and the dry notations of a Kinsey. It is in the air of the country, the intellectual atmosphere which made Stevens speak of English and American poets 'living in two different physical worlds'. It is no accident, also, that all of them wrote long poems. A further quality links them and this is the degree to which they used verse in order to advance ideas, attitudes of mind. The effect of this is to make their verse difficult reading and often to deprive *l'homme moyen sensuel* of that quality of charm and memorability of diction which makes English poetry so readable. When William's poetry began to be well-known in England a younger English poet complained that it 'tasted like sawdust in the mouth'. Pound's verse is similarly fragmented. What mellifluousness it has, in some of the early *Cantos*, is sweepingly rhetorical, but not musically memorable in the way in which 'Sir, no man's enemy...' or 'Lay your sleeping head, my love' is memorable. G.S. Fraser, in considering Stevens's contribution compared with Yeats's, said:

What is it that one misses? Partly, or perhaps mainly, the whole area of life that lies between detached aesthetic perception and philosophical reflection on it; and as chief corollary to that, the urgency of ordinary human passion, the sense of commitment and the moment of final concentration.

Fraser is near the mark. The American poets offer us few sweets. Like the novelists of nineteenth century they live in a harder world, their eye is on the object. Only the bad ones try to lull us — and they say nothing because they rarely achieve the quality of 'auditory imagination'. The good ones are either telling us something as directly as possible, or describing succinctly. They live in a much more visual world; their words do not so often chime in the

mind's ear. In this they are in the vanguard of contemporary verse. One has only to read an anthology such as Donald M. Allen's *New American Poetry* or Berg and Mezcy's *Naked Poetry* to see how far the American insistence on direct communication has been taken. In the process much has been lost — although younger readers do not feel the loss, perhaps because they have never really been committed to, or because they have no ear for memorability of diction. The contemporary reader is impatient to 'know what the poem means' and there are more of him than in the days when Archibald MacLeish could write 'a poem must not mean but be' or Stevens say that a poem must 'defeat the intelligence almost successfully'. Even Stevens himself who, at first sight, seems the odd man out in the trio I have selected uses words in a way that no English poet has ever used them. His titles are surrealist, his world as unlocated as Poe's, his ontology of his own making. Only now, with the perspective given to us by the seventies can we look back and say that we can see the real significance of Pound, Williams and Stevens. Paradoxically, difficult as they are, they point the way to a world unrealized because unimagined by 'Eddie Marsh's gang'. It is not a comfortable world, but it is a challenging one.

Only Eliot, of the great ones in the between-wars period, stands out as being different, and that because he is the most traditional of all — not merely because he emigrated to England, became 'classical, royalist, and reactionary', and joined the Anglican Church; but perhaps because he achieved at times that quality of 'auditory imagination' which he himself defined and which few other American poets have. There is a little of it in Poe ('meretricious' according to Eliot), more in Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

It is possible to pick out the 'American' references in Eliot's verse, but these are superficial compared with the deep currents of his writing. One can point to the use of American turns of phrase in the early verse — 'one night cheap hotels', 'sawdust restaurants with oyster shells', 'butt-ends', 'a toast and tea'. In 'Portrait of a Lady' the

protagonist 'reads the comics and the sporting page'. In 'Preludes' there are 'dingy shades' (not 'blinds') a 'city block' and 'vacant lots'. The river in 'The Dry Salvages' is the Mississippi and the sea is the Atlantic off Cape Ann. We can show how, in the American tradition, Eliot preferred the long poem, the 'epic'; how like a good Harvard scholar he went for his references to Hinduism as well as Christian mysticism; how much of a teacher and preacher he was (also in a great American tradition); how much — like Pound and Williams — he uses visual imagery. All these things are demonstrable. Nevertheless, in addition to these qualities, Eliot also has that power of verbal memorability without which there can be no sense of « auditory imagination ». Perhaps it is partly because by including so much of the writing of others he strikes a chord in the memory.

A cold coming we had of it
 Just the worst time of the year for a journey
 And such a long journey...

or

What are the roots that clutch what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish?

But it is not merely that. What he did not invent for himself he made over into his own voice:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire...

or

Because I do not hope to turn again
 Because I do not hope
 Because I do not hope to turn
 Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope...

Compare this with the opening of one of the most poignant of Williams's poems:

It is myself
 not the poor beast lying there
 yelping with pain
 that brings me to myself with a start

or Pound's:

Lynx-purr, and heathery smell of beasts
 where tar smell had been,
 Sniff and pad-foot of beasts,
 fur brushing my knee-skin,
 Rustle of airy sheaths...

or even Stevens's:

It was something to see that their white was different
 Sharp as white paint in the January sun;
 Soothing to feel that they needed another yellow,
 Less Aix than Stockholm, hardly a yellow at all...

Williams is communicating directly, without benefit of any ornament. It is not merely rhyme that he has discarded; there is no rhythm other than the sound of his spoken voice. Even when it is read aloud, his verse has the flat sound of prose. In Pound there is rhythm, but is the rhythm of chanting, of *The Seafarer* or *Piers Plowman*. In Stevens the communication is again direct, but cultivated, refined, measured, ordered. None of these poets has the sheer memorability of Eliot, because Eliot immersed himself in another tradition, a tradition as alien to Stevens and Pound as it was to Williams ('I had to watch him carry my world off with him, the fool to the enemy').

It is perhaps not easy to accept that the tone, the poetic world of Pound and Williams may be the voice of the future. But just as it has become clear — as Charles Feidelson, Jr. told us in *Symbolism and American Literature* — that the writers of the "American Renaissance", because of a conjunction of historical and intellectual circumstances, anticipated

certain developments in European literature in the twentieth century, so it has become increasingly apparent that the fragmented, directly spoken yet elliptical, communication of Pound and Williams speak to the young contemporary reader more clearly and more nearly than the gorgeous web of Shakespearean blank verse, the "marvellous concert of Donne", or the conspiracies of Keats or Dylan Thomas. In a world in which every man will be his own poet any kind of obvious artifice, however controlled or manifest, will be the undoing of the artificer. It was for this reason that Lowell, the greatest of contemporary poets, and sensitive as no other to the currents of his time turned from the involuted word-weaving of his early verse to the no less cunning but barer and more intimately direct verse of recent years.

Herbert Read put his finger on the pulse of our time when he wrote *The True Voice of Feeling*, and traced a "line of sincerity". Increasingly, as time goes on, and the number of readers and writers of verse grows greater, the proportion who have that very special sensibility which enables the trained reader to enjoy words for what they connote as well as what they denote will grow less. In an age in which art is for everyman, everyman will dictate its canons; and everyman has no ear. He looks above, below, beyond, through the verse; resonance of phrase gets in his way. He wants to feel but he cannot feel through the texture of words. He demands his emotions straight, flung on to the page as an action-painter commit paint to canvas.

Williams is the easiest model, Stevens the most difficult. There can be no "school of Stevens", for Stevens is the most subtle, the most complicated poet of modern times. The "essential bravura" may be there, but not for Stevens the heady delights of word-play for its own sake. A sober, serious thinker, the most accurate of poets in his use of words, he is also the most bewildering because the world of his imagination is at once so logical and so advanced. Two themes occupied him throughout his life: the nature of appearance and reality and the question of belief. Feeling that orga-

nised religion was a matter — as Rupert Brooke said — of “This life cannot be all they swear/ For how unpleasant if it were” he moved from the stated doubts of “Sunday Morning” to the philosophical musings of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”. Different as he was, in tone and intention, from Williams, however, his eye was on the same object — the celebration of the things of this world. In fact, there is a common theme which links Pound, Williams and Stevens, and that is the praise of Man, — what man can do in this world, not as a vale of tears but as the repository of all our hopes and fears, our be-all and end-all, in which:

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her
Alone, shall come fulfilment to her dreams...

for

The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.
We live in an old chaos of the sun...

or, as he put it in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”:

It feels good as it is without the giant,
A thinker of the first idea. Perhaps
The truth depends on a walk around a lake...

and, most beautifully of all, in “Credences of Summer”:

Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
And spring's infuriations over and along way
To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.

“The fidgets of remembrance”, says Stevens, “come to this/
It comes to this and the imagination's life”.

Stevens's contribution — immense as it is — brings up a matter which must be mentioned because of its importance in any assessment of the *nature* of American poetry compared with British. As G.S. Fraser put it, when comparing Stevens's work with Yeats's, poetry was for Yeats a matter of "the sense of commitment and the moment of final concentration". What I would suggest is that the "different physical world" in which Yeats lived — or Lawrence, or Dylan Thomas, or Shakespeare for that matter — was a world whose peculiar literary heritage arose out of a *gestalt* of circumstances which made it possible for him to write with more evidence of "ordinary human passion" than did the cultural world out of which Stevens came. However felicitous their images, however skilful their metrics or the dedication of their souls, there is a peculiar "thinness" about American poets, and intellectuality which sometimes moves the mind more than the heart. From Edward Taylor through Poe, Emerson, Whittier, Longfellow to Stevens and Ransom a line of worthy high-minded American poets contribute their concerns to the world, yet fail to move. Even Pound, that most cosmopolitan of men, suffers from the same disease. It is in vain for Dr. Leavis to tell us what a great poem "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" is; we do not feel it. We come to honour, our heads bowed with awe, and we go away disappointed, feeling that the experience is just round the corner. We can follow the *oeuvre* all right (with a crib), but it is the sentiments and the bravura which we remain to endorse. We are not completely engaged by the verse in the act of reading.

I should like — to complete my perspective — to mention the work of three poets who, although less important than Eliot, Pound, Williams and Stevens, are important enough — and uniquely American: that is, E.E. Cummings, Hart Crane and Marianne Moore.

Bad things have been said about Cummings. R.P. Blackmur, one of the most penetrating and intelligent of American critics, counted "flower" forty-eight times in *Tulips and*

Chimneys and twenty-one time in *Etcera*, each time in a different context, and concluded that the words must "contain for him an almost unlimited variety and extend of meaning... The question is whether or not the reader can possibly have shared the experience which Mr. Cummings has had of the word". There is also a great use of vague emotive adjectives ("thrilling", "delicious", "bright"). Nevertheless, despite these undoubted facts, Cummings at his best has a capacity to communicate, more nearly than most modern American poets, a sense of delight in the present, a lyric celebration of life. It is true that Cummings is nearly always at his best in his first lines, ("I thank you God for most this amazing", "my father moved through dooms of love", "anyone lived in a pretty how town", "all ignorance toboggans into know", "what if a much of a which of a wind", "as freedom is a breakfastfood") but here and there there stands out a single achieved poem. For example, although "I sing of Olaf" and "take it from me kiddo" are faulty in their sense and syntax, "my sweet old etcetera" and "plato told" are not. "She being Brand" is an undergraduate exercise, but poems like "buncha hardboil guys from duh A.C. Fulla" are successful because they exactly catch the accents of the lower East Side and do not pretend to be more than they are. In "Chanson Innocente" and "this little bride and groom" Cummings gives us insight into a peculiarly American world.

But perhaps most significant of all, in the light of contemporary developments in poetry, are the typographical experiments. A poem for Cummings consists of poem-plus-typography and not in any extractable "meaning" which can be separated from the total construct of the poem. The way the words *look* is as important as the way they sound. In fact, in a poem like the one on the Grasshopper, the sense is subservient to what the eye perceives:

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r

who

a)s w(e loo)k

upnowgath

PPEGORIIRASS

eringint(o-

aThe): l

cA

!p:

S

a

(r

rIvInG

.gRrEaPsPhOs)

to

rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly

,grasshopper;

In the *Collected Poems* of 1938, one finds ample evidence of Cummings's unconscious drift towards the implications of concrete poetry. Numbers 48, 52, 74, 99, 205, 221, 222, 262, 263, 265, 270, 275, 276, 277, 279, 290, 294, 295, 299, 302, and 303 — among others — would make equally good illustrations. It is possible that, before the end of the century, these logo-visual experiments will prove a satisfaction in themselves, where now they seem to be only steps in a certain direction.

I should like, at this point, to distinguish two aspects of the non-irrational, intimately connected and both to be found in Cummings. One is the typographical experiments which are the antecedents of concrete poetry, and the other *a manner of writing* (compare Cummings's "my father moved through dooms of love" with W.S. Graham's "O gentle queen of the afternoon", Dylan Thomas's "If I were tickled by the rub of love" or Hart Crane's "Where icy and bright dungeons life"). If one were reaching for the antecedents of concrete poetry one would, presumably, at least refer to the "hour-glass" or "wings" experiments of the seventeenth century, but, more recently to Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, Mallarmé's "house of words", the look-upon-the page effects of Pound, and Dylan Thomas's experiments with shapes. Even Williams's plain-patterns, as in (for example) "so much depends", or his triadic line, would be part of the movement in which Cummings's experiments might be placed. At the end — so far as we know it — are the plain or complicated *schemas* of "concrete" and "sound" poetry, and the kinetic world of modern art.

The "manner of writing" to which I have referred is connected with, but does not necessarily appear in conjunction with, those typographical and other experiments which produce a penumbra of significance beyond the world of linear communication. The typographical experiments might be expected to have more immediate impact in a post-Gutenberg age in which High School students play "three dimensional tick-tack-toe" against computers⁷. The "manner of writing" has

been going on for a much longer time and is a linguistic extension of that exploration of the boundaries of communication which is at the heart of Romanticism. The antecedents of the language experiment (of which, it might be remembered, Whitman said he was a part) are to be found in Blake, some of Shelley, Coleridge of "Kubla Khan", less *Symbolistes*, Jarry, Dada and Surrealism. Dylan Thomas is part of the movement and so, in their own way, are Cummings and Hart Crane.

Crane is a true American phenomenon. Poor Crane — if only he had not had so much explaining to do. All those letters to Harriet Montoe and Otto Kahn spelling out painfully what he meant by "adagios of islands". It had all been done before; the battle had been fought and won somewhere between 1880 and 1920 but Crane, the maverick Middle Westerner, the little-boy-lost of Garrettsville, Ohio, secretly dressing up in his mother's clothes, had to fight the good fight against Comstockery, the League of Decency and the Daughters of the American Revolution. "Absolute poetry" was an un-American activity. And so Crane turned from the "verbal music" (so much more substantial than the thin impressionism of a John Gould Fletcher) of *White Buildings* to an ambitious attempt to deal with the "Myth of America". It was a worthy ideal and no one but an American would have undertaken it. After all, Whitman had done it in *Leaves of Grass*, and Barlow in *The Columbiad*. Pound had begun to take the whole of civilisation as his subject and Eliot had written a diatribe against Western moral values. The time was ripe for a new Whitman, « Christopher Newman » Crane, who would present "an organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present". The structure would be based on America: the Conquistadors, Captain John Smith, Pocahontas, Rip Van Winkle, From the myths of America in "Van Winkle",

Crane turned to "The River" — a figurative, psychological « vehicle » for transporting the reader to the Middle West... The rhythm is jazz. Thenceforward the rhythm settles down to a steady pedestrian gait, like that of wanderers plodding along". "The Tunnel" was to be "a kind of purgatory in relation to the open sky", "Cape Hatteras" a "kind of ode to Whitman".

With all his heart Crane tried to do the right thing by his banker angel, by his country, by his art, by his ambition, by his poet's sense of that "absolute music" which he felt in his soul. It was a good idea; the only trouble was that it *was* an idea. Crane laboured manfully, but the result is fragments, moments of felicity. The curious thing is that one does not feel the need to apply the same strictures to Pound. Pound's work is also fragmentary, but there is a power behind it which is positive. However cranky Pound's world-view, however personal and eccentric the currents of his preoccupations, it all makes sense somewhere in his brain. He was not impelled by an outside idea, a worthy motive. It is the same with Whitman. America, "these States" the all-embracing more-than-egotistical "I" are for him part and parcel of the voyaging spirit. What he felt comes through the verse with a kind of defiance which is characteristic also of Pound. With Crane the honourable motive almost subverts the talent. Positive, however, despite the curiously disjointed idiom and slightly old-fashioned high style is a heady power over words, and a passion which few other American poets have. It is there in "The Bridge":

O caught like pennies beneath soot and stem,
Kiss of our agony thou gatherest...
And this thy harbour, O my city I have driven under,
Tossed from the coil of ticking towers... Tomorrow,
And to be... Here by the River that is East.
Here at the water's edge the hands drop memory...

But even more, tenderly and much more successfully, the note of triumph is in "Voyages":

Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe,
O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
Is answered in the vortex of our grave
The scal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.

And so we have sailed the seas and come — to the holy city of Marianne Moore. Not for her the headiness of Crane's rhetoric. It was not for nothing that she won the accolade from Eliot; the tone is clear, learned, witty, wise, full of common sense. She was an experimenter of the first order — an experimenter in her strange collocation of facts and abstruse references, and an experimenter in her syllabic-counting. Eliot, in his introduction to the *Selected Poems* (1935), described her as a "descriptive" poet, a label which might be more acceptable if he had not made a comparison with « Cooper's Hill » « Windsor Forest » and « Gray's Elegy ». A comparison in these terms, is a little far-fetched. Miss Moore's voice is direct; the concentration is on the "ding an sich" and the meditation is part of that concentration. A friend of Williams and an editor of *The Dial*, she subscribes to the doctrine of "no ideas but in things".

The "syllabic-counting" is a rather confused issue. Everyone knows that it is supposed to exist and most critics refer to it. But few explore the fact behind the phrase. The two most recent histories of American poetry: R.H. Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), and H.H. Waggoner's *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (1968), seem to avoid the main issue. Waggoner, who comes nearest to some kind of helpful comment, merely says "Attempts have been made to reduce this « syllabic » but « non-accentual » verse to a system; but the fact of the matter seems to be that the nature of language is such that nothing distinguishes, or can distinguish, the sound of verse in English from the sound of prose but some kind of pattern

of recurrent *stress*". Perhaps so, but this begs the question. If Miss Moore does depend on syllabic-counting, let us find out how it works and leave it to the reader to decide whether or not the method succeeds.

"The fact of the matter" seems to be that Miss Moore gets as near as possible to equating the number of syllables in the first line of a verse with the number of syllables in the first line of the next verse, and soon through the verse — except that she will occasionally vary the system. In her best known poem "Poetry" for example:

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important
beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because

I make the number of syllables 19, 19, 11, 5, 8 and 13, and this is followed with slight variations in the second verse, which begins

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but
because they are.

and proceeds with a count of 21 (because of the awkward "intelligible" — Miss Moore is disinclined to break up words), 12, 5, 8 and 13. A similar exact or approximate system of syllabic-patterning is followed in "To a Steam Roller", "The Fish", "The Monkeys", "Critics and Connoisseurs", "Peter", "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play", "No Swan so Fine" or "In Distrust of Merits". However, in poems like "When I buy Pictures" or "The Labours of Hercules", where there is no stanza construction, the syllabic-counting has to be abandoned. Waggoner is hard on such an artificial ordering of a poem, insisting that there is nothing to distinguish such "poems" from

prose. But even Sidney recognised that poetry need not necessarily have metre or rhyme and Miss Moore's method, like the non-sonnets of her namesake Merrill, has a validity of its own. Miss Moore's patterning has in fact a hoary lineage in Welsh verse. True, in the various varieties of *englynion*, relying mainly on syllabic counting, there are also internal rhymes, but we are in another country, and another century. If a Melville or Joyce can break up the structure of the conventional novel, a Marianne Moore is entitled to respect for any device she chooses.

Before making a summary of the general points to emerge from this attempted "re-assessment" of twentieth century American verse we might look briefly at the kind of poetry which emerged in the forties. With truth, it can be said that only five poets have lasted: Lowell, Wilbur, Roethke, Berryman and Jarrell. Of the others, Shapiro is perhaps the best. His smoothly-ordered carefully-wrought poems were models for that generation of fine writers which emerged in the fifties, to be enshrined by Donald Hall, Robert Pack and Louise Simpson in their first selection of *New Poets of England and America*. Most of the Americans in that volume — Hall himself, Meredith, Merrill, Merwin, Moss, Pack, Simpson and Wright — wrote so well, and so blandly, that they were indistinguishable from one another. However, Shapiro must not be damned by his imitators; they had other models, too — Wallace Stevens, for example, who was as much the hero of the early fifties as Williams was to become of the sixties. Shapiro, who wrote an ambitious *Essay on Rime*, was at his best as a war poet, of which there precious few in the United States. Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell — with his grim "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" ("When I died/ They washed me out of the turret with a hose") — are also worth mentioning.

How different this is from the English poetic scene during the Second World War, when every other combatant

seemed to be a potential contributor to *Poems from the Forces*. Sidney Keyes, Alun Lewis, Henry Reed, Gavin Ewart, and many others, wrote remarkably good poems about the personal impact of war. One's conclusion must be that, for a time, American poetry had gone into the doldrums. Schwartz, who was included by Matthiessen in the *Oxford Book of American Verse*, comes nearest to that combination of the personal and lyric which marks the best of the verse of the late forties and fifties. He had a gift of phrase which strikes a sad echo in the mind ("All of us always turning away for solace", "All clowns are masked", "The heavy bear who goes with me"). One other poet with a similar gift is Kenneth Patchen, who wrote that remarkable poem "The Character of Love seen as a Search for the Lost":

You, the woman; I, the man; this, the world,
And each is the work of all.

There is the muffled step in the snow; the strangers;
The crippled wren; the nun; the dancer; the Jesus-Wing...

But of the rest who were so often in the public eye in the forties — Muriel Rukeyser, John Ciardi, Winfield Townley Scott, Elizabeth Bishop — their work seems like a rather unimportant moment in history. In the fifties and sixties American poetry was to experience a new "renaissance" but in the forties — with the exception of the few I have mentioned — it was the older Americans who were most significant.

Pound for example published *Cantos LII-LXXI* in 1940 and *The Pisan Cantos* in 1948, Jeffers *Medea* in 1946, *Be angry at the Sun* in 1941, and *The Double Axe* in 1948, Marianne Moore *What are Years?* in 1941 and *Nevertheless* in 1944, Eliot *Four Quartets* in 1943 and Cummings *50 Poems* in 1940 and *I x I* in 1944. Crane had died in 1932, and there seemed no more recent American counterpart to Dylan Thomas. American romanticism seemed to have become buried

under the fat of opulent and highly competent writing which struck no fire and raised no hopes.

Ranging over the whole of the period covered by this paper, it would seem that, in the first twenty years of the century — despite Harriet Monroe's and Amy Lowell's well-meaning encouragement of a "poetic spirit" — there were inadequate grounds for asserting that American poetry had achieved major stature. The quality of English poets up to the end of the First World War is such that one cannot label them all as merely members of "Eddie Marsh's gang". Housman, Brooke, Owen, Sassoon, Yeats — even Maschfield — wrote extraordinarily well, with a power of tradition behind them which triumphed over the fact that, generally speaking, they look back to the nineteenth century in their style and mannerisms. Compared with them Robinson, Frost, Sandburg and Masters look like amateurs. That, at least, is one way of putting it.

In the twenties, however, the American talent which had shown promise before the First World War came to fruition. Frost published *New Hampshire*, and *West Running Brook*; Pound, having given birth to *Hugh Sewyn Mauberley*, began the *Cantos*; Eliot rocked the world of literature with *The Waste Land*; Williams showed in his fourth book of verse, *Spring and All*, that if one could not exactly make speech out of the language of "Polish mothers" one could at least fashion a new kind of verse based on one's own speech rhythms; Stevens, in *Harmonium*, produced yet another kind of American language, showing to later generations that, far from being — as Louis Untermeyer asserted — "unrelated to any human struggle", it held perhaps the greatest significance of all.

By the thirties, the work of Marianne Moore, Jeffers, the "Fugitives", Cummings and Hart Crane showed clearly the distinctive characteristics of the American voice.

In attempting a brief summary of those characteristics, those underlying correspondences and similarities, which mark

American poetry in the twentieth century off from the English we cannot help being dependent upon that perspective which the achievement of the twentieth century gives to the whole of American Poetry. In his introduction to *The Faber Book of Modern American Verse*, Auden made the statement that "there is scarcely one American poet, from Bryant on, who can be mistaken for an Englishman". The tradition goes back even further than that.

From the seventeenth century on, there has been apparent in American poetry a quality which it is only possible to define by a conjunction of descriptions. It is partly a "homeliness" of reference, a not unattractive amateurishness — like the art of the art of the "limners" — and partly a high seriousness which borders on the portentous. Bradstreet, Taylor and Wigglesworth are all of a piece, despite the disparity of their styles. They produced for a purpose. Set beside the wealth of English poetry from Donne, Vaughan, Herbert, Herrick, Marvell and Milton to Dryden, Traherne and Rochester, the comparison — if it were set up for chauvinistic purposes — would be as laughable as it is unfair. Small pioneering colonies cannot compete with great nations. But therein lies the seed of the difference. "We live", to repeat Stevens, "in two different physical worlds, and it is not nonsense to think that that matters". And with the different physical worlds there go historical, intellectual, religious and economic worlds. The note of "do it yourself" set in the seventeenth century is traceable through to the twentieth. Not until the Second World War do we see in American poetry that easy competence with words and modes that characterises English poetry — and even then the tone, the level of communication is blander.

This note of blandness is connected with the "intellectuality" which is noticeable in that great line of sober, serious, dedicated Americans which runs from Taylor through Emerson and Longfellow to Wallace Stevens and is present in differing styles in many other American poets. It has also something to do with the predominantly visual quality of

American imagery compared with the English. Where the words of the English poet will chime in the mind's ear, those of the American — from the rhetoric and the catalogues of Whitman to the courteous meditation of Stevens — will appeal to the eye, to the sense. There is a point to be made and the American has his mind on it. One's thoughts go back to Cotton Mather, who, in the *Manuductio ad Ministerium*, gave it as his opinion that:

There is a *Way of Writing*, wherein the Author endeavours, that the Reader may have *something to the Purpose* in every Paragraph. There is not only a *Vigour* sensible in every *Sentence*, but the Paragraph is cmbellished with *Profitable References*, even to something beyond what is *directly spoken*. Formal and Painful *Quotations* are not studied; yet all that could be learnt from them is insinuated. The Writer pretends not unto *Reading*, yet he could not have writ as he does if he had not Read very much in his Time; and his Composures are not only a *Cloth of Gold*, but also stuck with as many Jewels, as the Gown of a Russian Ambassador... (sic).

All of which is hardly to say that the American poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries carefully perused Mather's manual, but rather that qualities in the cultural air, the "données" of the American scene conduced the poet — as indeed they did the novelist too — through a process of intellectual osmosis, to turn toward high seriousness and unhumourous dedication. In Stevens's very playfulness there is something artificial; the incredible dexterity — like the unbearable convolution of James — is part of the *persona*. The American literary artist is indeed a masked man.

From these preoccupations it is but a short step to the "no ideas but in things" theory of Williams, which is itself related to the "hardness and concreteness" of Imagism. Whether the American poet chooses to write in a form of the colloquial like Frost or Williams, or in the more elaborate style of Stevens or Wilbur (the Twain-James dichotomy of American literature) there is something worthy in his attitude. If

he cannot get his message across in any other way he will communicate — as Lawrence pointed out — in a high scream. A comparison of Lowell and Larkin — if I may go briefly beyond the period I have chosen — reveals the difference in tone, not only between two individuals but between representatives of two different cultures. For all his superbly-chosen dramatic details, the craftsmanship which is so apparent behind the seemingly unformed verse, there is a note of hysteria in Lowell which is part of a sensitive man's response to the electric atmosphere of his country and culture. Lowell confesses; Larkin professes. In Larkin, all is downgraded; the occasional shock-tactic metaphor given with the one hand is taken away with the other. "Come off it" says Larkin: "I am serious" says Lowell.

The English poet rarely preaches. He will moralise, but shamefacedly. The Americans have always been preachers, as they have been teachers; and in their teaching they are often teaching themselves. The mantle of *vates* suits a Whitman, a Pound, a Stevens. Not even Wordsworth was as ambitious as this. His messages were comparatively parochial and particular; he did not self-consciously direct his voice across a continent, a culture. Not man under the aspect of eternity, but man as a social creature, is the burden of the English poet — as it is of the English novelist.

Nor has the English poet been so much of an experimenter as the American; he has not needed to be. The extravagance and wildness of the American is part of his scene. It is part of the process of mapping the country, identifying the nation. "What is it an American?" asked Crèvecoeur. Let us find out by writing an epic, say Freneau and Whitman, Pound, Williams or Crane. And behind it all is the relentless search to find out more about Man himself. Americans are accused by Europeans of being chauvinistic because they write about American things. But few artists, in any culture, could be more resolutely high-minded than the American.

From an artificial and embattled nation like the United States, founded on high-minded theories and ideals, there

might be expected that self-questioning, that interminable restless casting about for self-identification, ways and solutions which has in fact characterised its literature. But here we move from induction to deduction, and that is an approach which — even if it leads to similar conclusions — must play no part in this attempt at comparison and revaluation. It would be as well to end with a quotation from Stevens. His theme runs deeply but strongly below the surface of those considerations of style, tone, vocabulary, metric and cadences which, following Rajan's line of enquiry, have occupied the major part of this attempt to suggest a few of the differences between American and English poetry in the first half of the twentieth century. "The major abstraction" says Stevens:

... is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular ,
More fecund as principle than particle,
Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,
In being more than an exception, part,
Though an heroic part, of the communal...

GEOFFREY MOORE