

Eccentric Trends in Modern Poetry

By D. J. Sullivan

For the last three hundred years men have been rebelling without cease against something or other. "Freedom!" "Freedom!" has been the great war-cry and nearly everyone has taken it more or less for granted that men have been becoming freer in almost all respects. In accordance with that great law of inevitable progress we have had preached to us for so long, it has been regarded as incontrovertible that man has been plodding steadily upwards towards "the dawn of a new day," or some such silly thing. With the unfolding of time, however, this great dream of a fuller and freer life is rapidly taking on the aspect of a nightmare. With a stupidity almost Teutonic in its intensity, men have managed to thoroughly blind themselves to what has really been going on under their eyes. As a matter of fact the only revolt we have had in the last three hundred years is a revolt against law and order; the only freedom we have had is the freedom to do anything or believe anything as long as it isn't rational. Logic and metaphysics have gone by the board and the man who suggests the possibility of the human mind reaching definite, stable, and ultimate principles of truth is looked upon with that air of horror and suspicion that is usually reserved for wife-beaters and orphan-cheaters.

Until recently the intellectual crack-pots have ignored the field of the arts, especially the field of literature. How, in all the contemporary Donneybrook Fair of irrational speculation, literature managed to escape for so long, is only one more of the inscrutable mysteries of a long-suffering Providence. When the suggestion that fixed rules and principles are necessary for the rational guidance of man in his relations with his fellow men is scoffed at as an intolerable survival from a barbarous and unenlightened age, it is surprising that the reliance on definite rule and principle should have been insisted upon for so long in the infinitely less important field of writing. Possibly the solution lies in the fact that the cultivation of the fine art of writing has been largely under the control of the pundits of the great universities—a class that has always been notoriously slow-minded and stupidly conventional. This solution seems possible when we consider that the

revolt against law and order in literature has been waged most vigorously in America, where revolt against law and order of any kind has always been the favourite national sport.

Among the filibusters of poetry there stands out especially a certain group known as the Imagists. The Imagists receive that name because they believe that the function of poetry is to present a sharp and clear image, "should render particulars exactly, and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous." They further insist that poetry be in the language of everyday life, using "always the *exact* word, not the nearly exact, nor the merely decorative word." They neglect, of course, to define what they mean by the word 'exact,' for such things as definitions smack of logic, and ipso facto are suspect. They deplore too, the use of the traditional metres, saying that these are only echoes of old moods, and that the poet should create new rhythms for the expression of new moods. And here we are faced with that 'enfant terrible,' the child of the age. And this particular child of the age—a very unamiable child it is, too—is the insane insistence on having everything new. (Usually the thing can be traced back to a fond desire for originality—even though it be at the expense of verity). The Imagists further demand that the poet should have absolute freedom in the choice of his subject. This of course is a perfectly legitimate demand, except that here again the craze for novelty results very often in offense against good taste or in works of wondrous and amazing banality.

None of these principles are in themselves new, nor do the Imagists claim them for new. The newness seems to lie in their insistence on the application to an extreme degree of many or all of these principles. Almost any principle pushed to an extreme becomes ridiculous, and when you illustrate the extremities of *all* of these in a single work, the result is rare and wonderful of its kind.

The Imagists have flourished both on this continent and in England, though they have their source originally in France. The leader of the Imagist school in America is Amy Lowell. Amy Lowell is a striking example of that strange phenomenon which has appeared on the American scene—the phenomenon of a regiment of intensely energetic but outrageously brainless women who exert an immense influence on contemporary affairs; an in-

fluence that has been in the main pernicious, since it has invariably resulted in the exaltation of feeling and sentiment at the expense of reason. Our friend Amy became the Angel of the Imagists. They had been a much-maligned and derided group until Amy took hold. She became interested in their tenets, wrote her own poetry according to the approved canons, and toured the women's clubs of America in defence of Imagism. Her forceful and energetic character assured the thing a hearing, and eventually it became established as a recognized school of poetry. Amy herself has published a large quantity of verse, none of which is worth reading. Here is a sample from one of longer poems, by name, 'Lilacs':

"Lilacs,
False blue,
White,
Purple,
Color of lilacs,
Heart leaves of lilac all over New England,
Roots of lilac under the soil of New England,
Lilac in me because I am New England,
Because my roots are in it,
Because my leaves are of it,
Because my flowers are for it,
Because it is my country
And I speak to it of itself
And sing of it with my own voice
Since certainly it is mine."

Bearing in mind her principles of writing, and the aim of her verse, a sympathetic reading of her poetry will indicate definite beauties and harmonies which otherwise do not appear. But then, too, if you bear in mind the fact that there is beauty and order in everything, even a scrap-heap will disclose unsuspected beauties to the seeing eye. But why look at a scrap-heap when you can look at a sunset, or why read Amy Lowell when you can read John Keats?

Out of the golden west, just about at the spot where Chicago sprawls itself like an uneasy monster along the shores of Lake Michigan, there arises a bedlam of sound, out of which, as the ear grows accustomed to the racket, can be isolated such phrases as "the bondage of rhythm," and 'the poetry of individualism.' These are the war-

cries of the school of free verse, whose very name is illustrative of that horrible inversion of terms which is the curse on modern language. The very terms 'freedom' and 'free' demand relation to some law or other, and the one thing the proponents of 'free verse' will not allow is the restraint of law of any kind. They refuse to tie themselves down to metre or rhyme. This is the only rule they allow themselves, but they are as intolerant in their unorthodoxy as the most rigid of poetic dogmatists. The absence of rhyme, of course, is no novelty. The exclusion of metre, however, bars their work from the title 'poetry,' unless by an unbearable wrenching of terms. Instead of writing lines of regular length with the same procession of accented and unaccented syllables in each, they write lines of varying length and in a rhythm so irregular that it is sometimes impossible to find two lines in a whole poem of the same beat of rhythm.

The foremost exponent of free verse is probably Carl Sandburg. He is the son of a Swedish immigrant and was raised near Chicago in an environment defaced by the blight of industrialism. Much of his stuff is written around the sublime theme of Chicago, and one of his best known poems has that same inspiring name as its title. The following is an extract from 'Chicago':

"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:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have
seen your painted women under the gas lamps luring
the farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is
true I have seen the gun-man kill and go free again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the
faces of women and children I have seen the marks
of wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those who
sneer at this my city, and I give them back the sneer
and say to them:

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing
so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning."

This lovely sample of vulgarity and uncouthness is saluted by breathless admirers as evidence of Sandburg's great power and originality. In another of his poems, "Prayers of Steel," he grows a little maudlin, and sentimentalizes over the touching aspirations of a bit of steel which prays to be laid on an anvil, beaten into a crowbar, hammered into a spike.

"Drive me into the girders that hold a skyscraper together.
Take red-hot rivets and fasten me into the central girders.
Let me be the great nail holding a sky-scraper through
blue nights into white stars."

Back to Chicago again, while we cull another gem from his poem "The Windy City."

"Go to it and remember this city fished from its depths
a text: 'independent as a hog on ice.'

Venice is a dream of soft waters, Vienna and Bagdad recollections of dark spears and wild turbans; Paris is a thought in Monet gray on scabbards, fabrics, facades; London is a fact in a fog filled with the moaning of transatlantic whistles; Berlin sits amid scrubb-ed quadrangles and torn arithmetics and testaments; Moscow brandishes a flag and repeats a dance figure of a man who walks like a bear.

Chicago fished from its depths a text: "independent as a hog on ice."

So much for Sandburg. He and Amy Lowell are the two leading figures of these two major movements, if such they can be called, in modern poetry. They have many satellites, naturally, but it is not within our present range to treat of them. I must warn you that it is a mark of ignorance and provincialism to sneer or jeer at these poets, as always it has been to sneer at the latest fad. I call these trends fads because I believe them to be aberrations from principles which hold eternally true; for this reason 'Imagism' and 'Free Verse' can be nothing but temporary and transitory fashions. I have suggested all along here that back of the theory of poetry is a body of definite rational principles which must be adhered to by the poet if he is to realize his true being as a poet. I will also add that a certain definite body of moral principles must be adhered to if good art is to result. Both of these brazen assertions would be roundly denounced today—

on the one hand by those who deny the possibility of the attainment of any truth, and on the other by those who can see only 'didactive' art as the alternative to art without principle. I cheerfully accept the denunciation, and will merely suggest the solution in the words of Eric Gill: "Beauty is a union of the true and the good. Look after goodness and truth, and beauty will take care of herself."



Ma Chambre

Regardant vers le sud, par sa grande fenêtre;
Ma chambre, chers amis, je vous la fais connaître.
A droite est le bureau, toujours chargé de livres
Et de portraits d'amis avec qui j'aime à vivre.

On peut voir sur les murs de charmants paysages,
Qui reposent mes yeux lorsqu'ils sont las de lire.
L'automne, le printemps; j'entends bien des ramages;
Tout ça vient d'un bocage, et ça me fait sourire.

L'hiver n'est pas si dur pour qui demeure ici;
Le soleil vient me voir et pas rien qu'au midi.
C'est un lieu reposant pour qui veut le silence;
Le soir, on y dort bien; on rêve aussi: je pense.

Je devrai la quitter, bientôt, hélas ! partir.
Ce n'est pas sans regret, car j'y suis si souvent.
Mais dans ma mémoire, j'en garde souvenir;
Et vous, vous viendrez voir, le coin que j'aimais tant.

—Napoléon Beaudet, '35.