

**THE POSSIBILITIES
OF AN
AMERICAN POETRY**

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The possibilities of an American poetry by David Chalmers Nimmo

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of an
American Poetry



BY
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"NATURE SONGS," "HOME SONGS," "SOUL SONGS," "SOLDIER
SONGS," "SONGS AND TALES," Etc., Etc.

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WHAT IS POETRY

Poetry is Spirit great
On her highest station,
Viewing life with wisdom kind,
Lifted with elation,
Casting man and life and time
In a new creation.

Poetry is singing life
Soul has bought from sorrow;
That the virtuous, wise and strong
Evermore must borrow;
Bound at eve upon the heart
Life is young tomorrow.

Poetry is man and life
After sin and sadness;
Noblest utt'rance of the wise
Rescued from the madness;
Time's full orb'd and perfect soul
Singing out its gladness.

Poetry is Spirit fair
In her palace courtal,
Beautiful and singing free,
Op'ning wide her portal,
Bidding into selfish earth
Dreams and songs immortal.

Poetry is Oversoul
Singing to the under,
Singing such a strain of life
Sense is rent asunder
And a spirit hears the song
Full of joy and wonder.

Poetry is all that sing
To the strife so hoary,
Singing out inspiring strains,
Life's diviner story;
Building up the cosmic worlds,
Building souls of glory.

Author
list
11-22-20

The Possibilities of an American Poetry

NEGATIVELY CONSIDERED

By "American Poetry" we do not mean a poetry that is the embodiment of the national life and differing from other national poetries by the possession of elemental American characteristics. We do not even mean a poetry that is commensurate with American life and expresses it as our mechanics and engineers express our dynamic life, as our scientists and scholars express our research and investigation and as finance and business express our barter and exchange. We simply mean a poetry that has its origin in America and is a real contribution to the best in the English language. We mean a native production that can challenge comparisons and survive the "deadly parallel" with unscathed immortality and virtue. We mean a new creation produced in this land that really fits the times, that can feed and form the new spirit, that expresses something of the new dynamic soul, that is a qualitative conception and expression of life, that turns from the past and foreign and in which we can find American pride, inspiration and power.

The inference from the caption of this article and the above paragraph is that no such American poetry exists. Such is the plain unvarnished truth. In the sphere of poetry America has not yet given a product that is a real contribution of the first order. Her poets have been essentially of the second class and some not even that. Not one of them had a mind of supreme measure, and thinking capacity in various forms of action is always the fundamental endowment of a great poet. None of them had minds of penetration, comprehension, conception and expression in the philosophic wisdom and esthetic forms that satisfy both the artist and the thinker. With this fundamental lack, which really means lack of soul,

I am seeking a publisher for both poetry and prose who will even look at the product and accept or reject according as it is or is not a real contribution to American song and life.

D. C. N.

others of a lesser nature result. None of them had great character conceiving and creating power, and poetry without character is always of an inferior order; none of them had that quality of the imagination that is the prime requisite for embodying noble physical and spiritual conceptions; none of them had dynamic passion that sweeps the human scale and can alone give vitality to either prose or poetry; none of them had that elemental, scientific, cosmic experience and outlook which seems the mark of the spirits ascending to rule the future; and none of them had the esthetic and musical gifts that can clothe in befitting garments great life in character, action and utterance.

These are not very gratifying statements for our national pride but national pride ought to have no place in cosmopolitan truth. Is it true? That is the question. No person who is acquainted with the subject would venture to dispute it. No person who has real appreciation of Shakespeare and Milton could possibly claim that America has produced a poetry that could seriously come in comparison. In fact, we never feel the "deadly comparison" is so deadly as when we compare the English and American poets. The English names stand for a decidedly higher order of work. There are many reasons for this but we are now discussing products not causes. Even with her second class we can hardly stand comparison. Put Tennyson, Swinburne, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Burns and Gray over against Bryant, Poe, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell and Whitman. While there may be single gifts and poems comparable the whole poetry of the former towers over the latter. "The Idylls of the King," the "Cenci," "Cain" and "The Intimations of Immortality" have no equals from America. It is true we have "Thanatopsis," "The Raven," "Evangaline," "Sir Launfal" and a few others, but if we were to take all the best we have we could hardly make a book that could command a great mind for half a dozen consecutive hours.

The main general criticism of American poets is, that they were not truly great souls. They were not of the elemental kind nor was the mould heroic. Most of them were better endowed spiritually than mentally but in neither direction very capacious. They had not the being to think the great thoughts that are the best sign of a great soul. Few of them without the poetic gift would ever have established themselves in the national intellectual life. Some of them would never have found mention beyond their own social circle and day. They were certainly not of common every day quality but they were certainly not of that nature that swells from the multitude and towers over their own and succeeding generations.

A glance at our older poets will show their strength and weakness. Bryant had no very special greatness of any kind, though a combination of many gifts that makes him one of our great national

figures. His "Thanatopsis" is his best work. It is a specimen that any poet might wish to have in his book but it is not an alabaster peak soaring up into the literary heaven. Poe had a pictorial imagination, esthetic and musical quality but it was paid out of another side of his being that left him decidedly defective in philosophic capacity and knowledge of real humanity. This gave him an intense but very narrow and abnormal sphere for his gifts. Whittier had the reality, simplicity and truth of the spiritual kingdom but he had no imagination, variety of passion, esthetic or special musical quality. His spiritual nature was far richer than either his mental or poetic. Longfellow had probably the richest endowment of the American poets. It is not so much in his poetic being that he lacks as in his mental and spiritual. A good undergraduate must feel that the fine treasure is not in a very great measure. Lowell in his youth promised the best but never fulfilled the prophecies. He had no fine sense of beauty but he did have a good thinking capacity, a largeness of soul, a healthy view of life, a fair measure of imagination and expression. On the whole he promised a real poetry. From the quality of thought in "A Glance Behind the Curtain" it might be argued he never found his real poetic soul. His old age singing is not as good as the lisplings of his youth. Whitman had a rich poetic endowment in some directions but unfortunately there was a characteristic in his mind that put him out of relation with the normal method of thinking. His mind to a very large extent both in his preface to "Leaves of Grass" and in many of his poems moved in rhapsodic exclamations and not in the regular progressions of logical, emotional or associational continuity. Furthermore he dispensed with music and a poetry without music is just another quality of prose.

A general review of the older American poets and poetry while bringing to attention some fairly good men and work does not bring very much that is of real greatness, supreme excellence and inspirational power on the present generation. Though some considerable measure of this is due to the simpler condition of time and life they lived in, much of it is due to the fact that they were not great original creations and so not really great creative souls. They were superior to their time and place but not of the quality that transcends condition and creates an elemental content of eternal virtue and appeal. A lack is felt in more or less degree of all the great gifts that are fundamental in a really great poetry. Quality of character, life and thought must be the distinguishing mark of such a production and it must penetrate a body of considerable dimensions. There must be height and depth and length and breadth in which leading spirits can round out their circles. There must be an elemental perception approaching to Shakespearean reality, truthfulness and wis-

dom. There must be real universality and greatness of soul and the ten and a hundred talented elements that create, color and vitalize all outgo. There must be the variety of nature and man, mood and action, all sweeping the gamut of life from smiling infancy to philosophical age and from convulsive comedy to the crucifying tragedies of fate. These must be a supreme overruling, cosmic-constructive power drawing out of this chaos the multitudinous heterogeneous elements and moulding them into systematic social forms of humanity. There must be a high sense of ideal perfection to clothe all in the garments of beauty and an absolute spontaneity of song to cast life into metrical measures. Above all there must be the thoughts with the highest and purest sign of genius, thoughts that have the stamp of eternity, the majesty of heaven and the power of destiny in them. These qualities, which must be the distinguishing qualities of all great poetry, are not present in any very serious measure in our older recognized poets and productions. They were pioneers and have given the highest service of poets, sung into us a desire for something better.

When we look from the past to the more immediate present we are face to face with a most chaotic condition of affairs. From a great number of causes the world from its very heart to its farthest circumference is one elemental, seething, heterogeneous, convulsive, dynamic mass. This vital energy is working in poets and poetry as well as in every other direction of life. New personalities with new powers are arising. They are elemental "here" and "now" spirits. They know no law but that that leaps up out of their own resistless impetuosity. They are divorced from the past, unwed to the future and lost in a chaotic struggle to find their own best selves. New poets are bursting from obscurity with surprising frequency. There are promises and prophecies, contradictions, affirmations and denials never seen or heard before. Iconoclasts are running up and down the nation blaspheming our old idolatries. The temple of fame is fairly stormed by those who would tear down the images unless restrained. New schools are arising with new ideals, large influence and numerous following. Old and new often seem in a pitched battle fighting for their very existence. Today before a new criticism or magazine the old goes down and out as if to oblivion. Tomorrow there is a resurrection of the old singers and the experimentors slink away as if ashamed. Now there seems such a recreating spirit in poets and poetry that a new race of long desired singers can be seen coming through the gates of morning. After listening and feeding for a week or a month upon the song we hear a groan: "Great Heavenly Muse, let us hear the old singers again! Let us hear the old songs of nature, beauty and truth! Give us the thoughts and music that charm us out of the eternal strife into the infinite admir-

ation of wisdom and virtue! Above all, Great Spirit, deliver us from these new poetic battering rams that are blazing their way to a new age!" This seems the condition of affairs today. It is a true poetic chaos.

The Free Verse school seems to be the more influential and growing. Almost all the magazines are partially open to them and the leading poetry magazines are about three quarters or exclusively devoted to their interests. Great defenses and products are made by geniuses who are using this method. Their books find publication and an increasing number of defenders and readers. The movement has hardly reached full tide yet. A far better and nobler free verse is possible and will no doubt come. The free versers certainly have some of the future. This is not surprising for the method of this school is the perfect manifestation of the dynamic American spirit. There are some things to be said and must be said against the old poetry and there are some things that can be said, must be said and will be said for the new. Whatever may be the final contribution and last judgment on free verse it is doing in some respects a good work for poetry and ought to be thoroughly grasped and appreciated in its real spirit.

In the present state of free verse, however, there is no sign that it can match the best in English literature or ever approach the poetry we wish to bring before the mind in this article. The best criticism of the product comes from one of themselves. In a late issue of "Poetry" one of the compilers of "The New Poetry" and a joint editor of the magazine criticized it almost as fiercely as Macaulay did Montgomery. It was criticized on what all good readers feel to be the true grounds, on its brevity, movement and fragmentary nature. It is so brief that it has no soul. It is so short that it does not say anything. Its size, often four, six, eight or ten lines, is a solar diameter from the size of great souls. It is the American ideal of thirty two lines gone to seed. It is a mere point of life instead of a surface with a length, breadth and depth. It moves like a "Jumping Jack." It lacks an inner regular progression of thought, emotion or spiritual association. In dispensing with music it tries to make up the loss by graphic images, swift actions and sheer condensations. These are properly in place at times but no "Jumping Jack" movements of any kind can be general in poems. Passion in poems is not convulsive or torn to tatters. Generally it flows smoothly as a deepening river, not very often as a rapids and only very rarely as an awful plunge. The worst criticism described its fragmentary nature as "cracked china", a rare Chinese platter let fall to a thousand pieces. It is not made of unitary wholes. It has no spirit of life binding all into one vital being. It is an epigrammatic phrase, a plunge of passion, a point or short line of life, a gleam of