

THE SPOON RIVER ANTHOLOGY—THE STORM-CENTER OF THE LATEST LITERARY CONTROVERSY

THE author of "The Spoon River Anthology," Edgar Lee Masters, was recently characterized by John Cowper Powys, the Oxford critic, as "the aboriginal American poet." Mr. Powys declared that the author of the most amazing history of an American community ever written is the third great poet he has been able to discover in America, the other two being Edwin Arlington Robinson and Arthur D. Ficke. But Mr. Powys is by no means the "discoverer" of the talent of the Chicago lawyer-poet. Almost coincident with the publication in Reedy's *Mirror* of his 200 portraits—suggested by the tombstones in towns on the Spoon River, letters began to pour in upon the surprized author, and requests from publishers for the book rights. The "Spoon River Anthology," even before its publication in book form by the Macmillan Company, had become the storm-center of a heated controversy among the lovers of poetry and literature. Is it poetry? Is it prose? Is it literature? These are the questions that the remarkable "epic" of a little Illinois community (really a composite of three communities) has aroused. Some of those who have been willing to admit that the anthology is literature will not concede that it is poetry.

Mr. Masters himself, claiming that poetry is essentially a matter of spirit rather than body, claims that at least a part of his work is poetry. In a recent interview published in the *New York Times*, he recounted the origin of this unique work:

"I always had it in mind that I would write a novel about a small community, including every interest and every piece of machinery you find in the big world or metropolis, because you do not find human nature in the small community alone—you find it everywhere. Because, however, of the pressure of professional duties I never had time to write the novel. It came to me. I don't know how, last Spring to write a few sketches, and I thus began the Anthology, the first sketches being printed in Reedy's *Mirror*. I had contributed other poems, and Mr. Reedy complained that they were not interpreting American life adequately—that they lacked the American punch. So it came about that I wrote the first installment of the Anthology, and was much gratified when Mr. Reedy wrote back, 'This is the stuff.' So, instead of writing a novel I began to weave my story into these sketches. The Anthology, as now finished, is the interwoven history of a whole community, a village, a city, or whatever you like to call it.

"Some of the sketches are very lyrical and others are not lyrical at all—almost prose. The Anthology includes 220 sketches, but it is supplemented by an

epic fragment, which is supposed to be written by one of the characters—Jonathan Swift Somers, who became a misanthrope through much study and penance and who died young and left this epic fragment. This fragment fills in a story which the sketches, being dramatic or lyrical, cannot complete."

In reply to those critics who claim that the "Spoon River Anthology" is not poetry, Mr. Masters calls attention



Courtesy N. Y. Times.

AN ABORIGINAL AMERICAN POET

Edgar Lee Masters is the author of the greatly discussed "Spoon River Anthology," first published by William Marion Reedy in his *Mirror*, and about to appear in book form. Mr. Masters is a lawyer and a radical.

—in a letter we take the liberty of quoting—to the words of Carlyle: "What we want to get at is the thought the man had, if he had any; why should he twist it into a jingle if he could speak it out plainly? It is only when the heart of him is rapt into true passion of melody, and the very tones of him, according to Coleridge's remark, become musical by the greatness, depth and music of his thoughts, that we can give him the right to rhyme and sing." The author interprets his own work in this light:

"I desire to say that while many of the portraits in the Anthology are prose unless they are rescued by the virtue which Carlyle makes important; or unless rescued because the language is vivid, imaginative, passionate and inspiring; or unless rescued because they constitute invention, or do with words what colors do on a canvas . . . yet on the other hand, dozens of them are rhythmical, and many of them are metrical as well as rhythmical. And I invite your attention to this opinion of mine not to say that they are poetry,

even if both rhythmical and metrical, but to say that they are not prose in virtue of having neither rhythm nor meter. . . .

"But I had a variety of things in mind in writing the Anthology. I meant to analyze character, to satirize society, to tell a story, to expose the machinery of life, to present to view a working model of the big world and put it in a window where the passerby could stop and see it run. And I had in mind, too, the creation of beauty, and the depiction of our sorrows and hopes, our religious failures, successes and visions, our poor little lives, rounded by a sleep, in language and figures emotionally tuned to bring all of us closer together in understanding and affection.

"I am not asking any one to call the Anthology poetry. Indeed, the first twenty sketches or so which I wrote plainly show no attempt to conform to the rules of poetical production. But I believe that a careful consideration of the Anthology as a whole will show that a large part of it is poetry, provided I have ever written any poetry at all. And that I do not decide, and could not if I would, however strong my opinion might be. The world decides that."

Edgar Lee Master's first poems were published in Chicago in 1898, under the title of "A Book of Verses." In 1900 he wrote a drama in blank verse entitled "Maximilian," which was published by Richard C. Badger. In 1904 he published a volume of essays "The New Star Chamber." Other published works are "Blood of the Prophets" (1905) over the pseudonym "Doctor Wallace"; and two plays, "Althea" (1907) and "The Trifler" (1908). He has also contributed poems and essays on political and legal subjects to various periodicals.

Mr. Masters admitted to the interviewer for the *Times* that some of his greatest inspiration in writing the anthology, which has sifted him out of comparative obscurity as a writer to national fame, was derived largely from his work as counsel for the defense of the girl members of the waitresses' union who were arrested for disorderly conduct for picketing various Chicago restaurants during last year's strike. He is a good deal of a radical, tho he does not wear either the Socialist or Anarchist label, and was at one time a law partner of Clarence A. Darrow. According to an appreciation written by William Marion Reedy in the *St. Louis Mirror*, Mr. Masters, who was born in Garnett, Kansas, in 1868, spent his childhood in the heart of the "Lincoln country." No one can read the "Spoon River Anthology" without the conviction that its author knew the people he describes. Ezra Pound notes in the *London Egoist* a strange power in the very names of the folk portrayed.