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 world's greatest 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 town—of the Spoon River, letters began to pour in upon the surprised 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 the literati. 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 it 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 may like to call it.

"Some of the sketches are very lyrical and others are not lyrical at all—at most 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 even if both rhetorical 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 mean 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 see it as it is. And I had in my mind, too, the creation of beauty, and the depiction of our sorrows and hopes, our religious failures, successes and visions, our poor little lives, roused 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 Triffer" (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 Journal, Edgar Lee 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.