What It Means to Be a Poet in America

[Nicholas Vachel Lindsay published this essay in *The Saturday Evening Post* 199 (November 13, 1926): 12-13, 45-46, 48, with illustrations by Wyncie King.]

My residence at Fifth and Edwards streets, Springfield, Illinois, is an old before-the-war mansion. There I wrote most of the prose and verse known to the readers of this article. I have lived in one room upstairs, writing poems and drawing pictures, very often in an empty house, while the rest of the family wandered to China or Colorado or Europe. Sometimes I get silly and pugnacious about it, and say it is still more emphatically my home than that of any other living member of my family. This article is written in the Northwest, in the woods around Spokane, Washington, in Glacier Park, on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, and elsewhere. My dream home is still Springfield, Illinois; my address is Spokane. Springfield is packed with people I love with all my heart, people of all sorts and kinds, intensely loyal to the memory of my father and mother. As a family physician, my father brought into the world about one-third of the people of that community born in the mauve decade. As an elder in the First Christian Church, he was very busy and very zealous.

Surrounded with History

Whenever I begin to write a poem or draw a picture I am, in imagination, if not in reality, back in my room where I began to draw pen-and-ink pictures and write verses in my seventeenth year. Both windows of the room look down on the great Governor’s Yard of Illinois. This yard is a square block, a beautiful park. Our house is on so high a hill I can always look down upon the governor. Among my very earliest memories are those of seeing old Governor Oglesby leaning on his cane, marching about, calling his children about him. Another is a series of recollections of the Blaine and Logan campaign, when I was about four years old. After much scrutiny of the colored cartoons in Puck, I attended, with my mother, a staunch Republican at the time, the speeches of James G. Blaine and Black Jack Logan, delivered from a platform erected temporarily in the Governor’s Yard. Through the great driveway of the yard I have seen the dazzling and earnest pageants of the Democratic and Republican parties pass. Being a Democrat, in spite of maternal thunders, I watched with more passionate interest the parades for Governor Altgeld and Governor Dunne. The graybeards may remember that *Puck* was a Democratic paper.

Across the street from the old house is a tiny Congregational church. There attended the greatest English teacher I have ever known—Susan E. Wilcox. Though a Campbellite of the Campbellites, nothing interfered with my sneaking in alone as a small boy to go to free stereopticon lectures at that church. Colored slides were shown of the bombardment of Fort Sumter, while the Battle Hymn of the Republic was sung. The speakers were sure New England had established Plato’s Republic or the like.

My father was a raving Breckenridge Democrat from Gallatin County, Kentucky. My political infancy was one of mixed emotions. I might say I have emerged an Abraham Lincoln Democrat, with some Virginia prejudices. I am not a Kentucky mountain white,
as one firm British biographer has said. My friend Percy Mackaye’s recent successful and delightful book, *Tall Tales of the Kentucky Mountains*, is as novel to me as to any other man. When my father and mother talked about Kentucky it was The Blue Grass and Lexington, and then again Lexington. Yea, the old house at Fifth and Edwards streets, Springfield, in the beginning had nothing to do with us Lindsays. We went into it without its consent. The old house at Fifth and Edwards streets belonged during Civil War times, when we were far away, to others. It belonged to the C.M. Smiths, the sister and brother-in-law of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. I can very well remember Mrs. Smith’s calls upon my mother when I was a child in long curls, and her telling my mother of the parties given to Abraham Lincoln in our parlor before he started for the White House.

These calls of Mrs. C.M. Smith were made upon the Lindsays around 1886. She was making them welcome as newcomers of ten years’ standing in the city of Springfield. I was six years old at the time, but I did not miss that point. As a matter of fact, I am still living in the 1886 Springfield, though the town has way outlived it.

To take the visitor to the tomb of Abraham Lincoln at Oak Ridge Cemetery, and to the house of Abraham Lincoln about four blocks from our house at Fifth and Edwards streets, was always pure fun. The house was an old playground. In the cottage next door lived my infant cousin, Miss Ruby Vachel Lindsay. We played in and out of the Lincoln house, whatever our Southern traditions. [Osborn H. I.] Oldroyd, the famous Lincoln collector, made us quite welcome. The Lincoln house was not, as it now is, a fair parallel to Mount Vernon, a meditative temple of well-selected old furniture. Every inch of wall space was covered with the bitterest cartoons for or against Lincoln that were issued during his campaigns. The idea of controversy in connection with him was my initial impression. The bronze-statue and steel-engraving William the Conqueror Lincoln had not yet emerged.

**Pouring the Country into Springfield**

I am still making my living reciting my verses for crowds who refuse to buy my books. I must do this, as all American rhymers must, however sick I may be of the sound of my own voice. The death of my people ruined touring for me forever. All my books are packed with allusions to the Springfield I still dearly love, with all its odd corners. One book is an apocalypse of Springfield as the Pilgrim City; a prophecy of its history. Not a character in it is a Springfield person, but some fixed American type from elsewhere. I tried to pour the United States into Springfield for one hundred years, since all the world seemed coming on pilgrimage in increasing numbers.

In every university group of one thousand people for whom I speak, there is at least one who has galloped through the books the morning of my arrival. Of late they are saying to me, “You are not in Springfield as much as you used to be.” The answer is very simple: I expect to return there, if I have to send back my ghost. But the only things left there that are kin to me are the old house at Fifth and Edwards streets and my English teacher in high school—Susan E. Wilcox.

The attachment to a House of Seven Gables and childhood memories and school memories may seem fantastic to those who have never had them, but it seems to me that the peculiar situation of the place, with the growing weight of the Lincoln legend and my
desperate boyish effort to vindicate the legend there through the years, makes it reasonable. This legend has grown imperceptibly. It has been an enormous and deepening education to me. Susan E. Wilcox helped to make Lincoln one of the glories of high school. It was one of the glories of my life to be John Drinkwater’s particular host after his play had made such an international hit in London, and just before it was to be put on on Broadway and taken across America.

Standard Verse

John Drinkwater, a deep-hearted and true pilgrim, came to put his wreath on Lincoln’s tomb before he ventured to address the American people through his play [Abraham Lincoln, 1918]. That strange and unexpected pilgrimage was the beginning of a new mystical life for my mother, who, as a young girl, in her early teens, had seen her sweethearts march off from a Southern Indiana village, all to die on Southern battlefields, for the most part fighting their own kin and hers. In this whole story so far I am a Springfield boy in a town gone, ages gone; a youth always six years old, almost completely surrounded by a father as fiery as a Southern battle flag, and voting for Grover Cleveland amid fury and flame, and defying the whole town. Some people say he had red Indian in him.

So far as I know, this is as much of the narrative as is personal. Now I will return to my subject: What it Means to be a Poet in America. Poets and poetry readers know all too well. We will not trouble them with this discussion.

I promise not to make a single quotation of poetry to the end of the discourse, because most real he men, when they strike a poetical quotation nowadays, indicate their true Americanism by throwing the magazine away before they finish. If you examine the discourse with a microscope you will not find even a scrap of a poetical quotation in it—no, not from Milton! If I am a bit defiant it might be excused from the standpoint of heredity. And let me tell you the story of a young educated Swede from Minnesota my wife and I met at Glacier Park entrance, Western Montana. He was solemnly mourning that the Blackfeet Indians there on display had gone back to the blanket in spite of a university education, and that all highly educated red Indians did. He said he just couldn’t understand them. I told him I could. I said, “I act just like I did before I was educated.” He wouldn’t laugh; but my wife did.

What do I mean by a poet? By a poet I mean anything so classed by the educated public, and I am not going to use up a bit of energy ruling out anyone who writes good verse.

There is no word in America more hated than the word “poet.” This is because poems have been used to punish students in grammar and high school; and as they grow up, in college and university. Standard poems are rubbed in like salt from the day the poor youngsters can read at all. This will continue indefinitely unless all poetry is thrown out of the grammar schools, high schools, colleges and universities, and poetry becomes a volunteer game, as baseball and football are—something to be discovered out of study hours. The first curse then of the poet is the freight-car load full of perfectly meritorious literature textbooks pouring into the smallest town every year; the second is the schoolmarm rubbing these textbooks in.
Then there is a third curse—the art-store panel of the portraits of dead poets. It is hung up all over the land, from the first-reader rooms to the little seminar rooms for the postgraduates at the great universities. This art-store panel is a picture of seven senile, spiteful, educated, overbearing old gentlemen with long whiskers and long hair, and the atmosphere of executioners. They all look like the kind of quick workers that would steal pennies from a dead child’s eyes. I have seen the pictures of most of these men in their youth. They were handsome boys, regular sheiks; they really looked like the young miniatures of Shelley and Keats and Byron.

But think of the atrocity of making a small boy memorize “Thanatopsis, A Meditation on Death,” then of telling him it was written by William Cullen Bryant at eighteen! Even if the youth had poetry in his soul, he would swear a secret and eternal vendetta against the name of poet forever. And is he, by way of apology, shown a picture of William Cullen Bryant at eighteen, before he was educated, charming, debonair, sheiklike, the Apollo Belvedere of his day? No; he is shown a picture of William Cullen Bryant that is ferocity itself, with gray hair all down his back and whiskers that go on forever. So poor little Willy Smith is only waiting to meet one of those poets down an alley, and hopes to have a gun handy. Moreover, if Willy does not know “Thanatopsis” to the last word, memorized like the multiplication table, Willy has to stay after school and miss the baseball game, and he is captain of his team. Could any angel from heaven then persuade that small boy that “Thanatopsis” is poetry? Death is no poem to rub into babies, nor should they be bothered with puffy, self-important, overeducated, toothless, malevolent old bullies.

Bryant and all the others have been hated by the typical young American ever since they went into the textbooks, and will continue to be hated unless they are thrown out of the textbooks, and until that art-store panel of the long-haired frights is destroyed forever. Let’s all go back to the blanket is my song.

I have never chanted my verses for women’s clubs or Chautauquas except in the direst financial necessity; I have sung them almost altogether for the English departments of colleges and universities, under the auspices of some local versifier and troubadour who is disguised as an English instructor. He is generally a minor instructor, not yet sour enough to be an adequate head of an English department. But he is allowed one field day in the year. On that day he sends for a poet who has had a wreath dropped on him by a dashing publisher or magazine, or by some prize-giving poetry society. The instructor has a pathetic notion that the weary gentleman he sends for is his superior because he has seen him in standardized print.

A Motto for American Poets

The instructor is apt to be a poet who has issued a little sheaf privately, without his home town’s consent, and who thinks there is something more to the story. Of course there is where he is wrong. The line of demarcation between good and bad poetry is right there. Most good poetry is all written before a man gets so-called recognition, when his town is still hounding him, and before he gets a publisher or gets into a magazine. The first and last motto for any American poet is: Be a pamphleteer all your life if you would
keep your singing power and save your soul. Or to put it another way: Go back to the blanket and stay there, and act just like you did before you were educated.

This minor instructor is allowed his one day in the year. He is allowed enough money to pay the visiting poet’s bill—that is, his car fare to the next town and his hotel bill. The instructor is also allowed to pack the house for the visitor with the entire student body—either a chapel or some such assembly. The student is marked off a day’s work if he does not attend. The visitor often finds this out years afterward. The real assembly, however, comes when this local poet, still disguised as an English instructor, his shy little wife, who generally does her own work, their two most promising pupils and their sweethearts, assemble with the visitor in a conclave of seven and talk and read till midnight; all this after the big shout is over. Such riots justify all the trouble, and are often very, very gay indeed; jolly as Willy Smith’s baseball game. I and all other living rhymers still hold these small riots, especially all over the South and West, though they remain utterly unadvertised. This is as it should be.

Yea, this conclave of seven is the thing for which the poet has really made the trip, and for which the university, without knowing it, has paid the bill. It continues not only in the South and West but in a measure all over America, and has been going on since October, 1912, when Poetry, A Magazine of Verse, was launched in Chicago by the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair set, and the University of Chicago set, rallied by Harriet Monroe, Alice Corbin Henderson and Mrs. William Vaughn Moody.

Messrs. Flip and Utopia

I desire to step back to a peculiar moment in the large university assembly, after the visitor has recited his best for two hours, and just as he is starting for the semi-secret conclave of seven. The visitor is so tired he can hardly stand up. A pimply-faced boy now appears. I will call him Mr. Flip. He has been sent by the local newspaper. He says he has not heard the recital; he has not had time. But he practically demands that the visitor, who has done his very best and is, as I say, tired as a dog, and sweating like a football player, give the entire recital over again for Mr. Flip’s personal benefit, there, in five seconds on the auditorium steps in the pneumonia wind. He demands that thirty years’ work be delivered in those five seconds by an utterly exhausted human being. Though every newspaper of any standing has a man on the staff who has done considerable reading and probably writes fairly good verse, this expert is not sent to listen to the recital, and he is seldom commissioned to read the visitor’s books through before he arrives in town. Though it may be one of the oldest universities in the land, in the biggest of towns, the pimply-faced little wretch, Mr. Flip, is sent to insult the poet; and it is perfectly obvious that when the wretch, Mr. Flip, was in school he was kept after hours to memorize “Thanatopsis” and to gaze on the long-haired travesty of a picture of William Cullen Bryant. He had no such English teacher as mine. He and the editor in chief are men together in hating poets with all their souls; and he is sent to insult, and not to interview. This testimony can be corroborated by any member of the Poetry Society of America. I hope they offer the public two hundred variations of the same.

But I have ventured for the purposes of this article to imagine an ideal reporter—Mr. Utopia. I have ventured to imagine one who, though he has not had time to attend the
recital or to race through the poet’s books in the library in seven minutes, still is willing to ask him clear questions there in the pneumonia wind, and to put down clear answers. I have thought of a few questions which my worst enemy could ask me and I could answer without aggravating further hostilities.

Mr. Utopia asks, “What degree of recognition have you secured?”

My books have been published steadily since 1912, when I quit trying hard to be a beggar from back door to back door. Through the efforts of the English department of Baylor University, Waco, Texas, beginning in the Far South, I have sung my songs to my own tunes for most of the English departments of the state universities of the forty-eight states of the nation, and the English departments of other universities and colleges; and I have been recalled to many of these seven and eight times, which matters are a source of great pride to me. And I have brought out three books where the songs were based on my own pen-and-ink pictures.

Mr. Utopia asks, “What has been the financial return in your case?”

None. Most years I owe no money and I have no money. Every university pays my way to the next town. That’s about all. No poet has ever made any money out of having his poetry published, and no poet ever will. If the fee is two hundred dollars, it is one hundred dollars for coming to town and one hundred for leaving inside of twenty-four hours. There has been no poetry in the history of the world that has made money for the poet. The New Poetry Movement began when Abel made a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain; but the sacrifice of Abel was not intended as a money-making idea. On the last great day, when Gabriel blows his trumpet, even if he blows it in sonnets, he will not do it for the money that is in it. If he does do it for the cash he will not be Gabriel and it will not be the last great day. It will be a second-rate Hollywood movie of the last great day, and business will continue as usual.

But I allow the reporter, Mr. Utopia, to ask the question again: “What has been the financial return in your case?”

I must admit that I have in certain very energetic years made money speaking from platforms of universities, though for the most part I now hate platforms of all kinds with all my heart and soul, and will so continue till I have years of rest. I have used up the money recuperating from many a devastating heartbreaking hour. The wear and tear of Pullman cars and hotel life, even at best, is terrific, and increases insidiously, and has nothing whatever to do with poetry or an income. The railroads and the hotels have taken my money and they are welcome. I do not owe anybody much and am not likely to do so.

A Great Discovery

I have been a little severe on the young reporter, Mr. Flip, for nagging the poet in the pneumonia wind after he has done his best for a thousand people, and for insulting him by saying he has not been to the recital. But I am not quite through with that brigand, Mr. Flip. Next morning he comes out with a column, with headlines which have nothing to do with the case. They generally say of me “Jazz Poet Performs,” though I have put it on record in a dozen places in my books that I hate jazz with all my soul. I come of rural,
dry, crossroads-church, blue-grass Southern stock and believe in the slow rural pace. The first sentence of the column goes on to say: “Mr. Lindsay looks like the typical businessman and does not have the long hair and flowing tie of the conventional poet.” It is always brought forward about every poet as a great discovery. The young reporter is still thinking of that ferocious picture that misrepresents William Cullen Bryant, is still hating “Thanatopsis, a Meditation on Death.”

I have met practically all the versifiers who get into print in England or America. Not one of them wears long hair or a flowing tie. Not since 1880 has any poet worn long hair or a flowing tie. Every man of letters knows this, every human being on every newspaper who does even a moderate amount of book reading knows it; but it seems still to be news that the two hundred living versifiers of America and the two hundred living versifiers of England do not wear long hair and flowing ties, and are dressed in what the newspapers call conventional business-man garb. No poet is a business man, or he would not be a poet. People who write verses dress and act in a general way like their neighbors back in the home town. In short, they still wear the blanket and do not act educated.

But back of the pest reporter, Mr. Flip’s attitude is the frame of mind of the university which would send for a poet three times in three different years to cross a thousand miles of desert merely to gaze on him, without once buying one of his books. The university attitude, aside from the group of the sacred seven of whom I have spoken, is fundamentally the same as Mr. Flip’s. They want the singer to stay modest as a violet, but they eternally want to look at him and poke him up. They want once more to reassure themselves that he does not remind them of that art panel that used to hang in the third grade. For this they will pay handsome car fare and a handsome fee. But buying and reading one small book is an utterly different matter.

Costly Vanity

Thus we anticipate—for the third question of the ideal nonexistent reporter, Mr. Utopia, is rather hard-boiled and, as he thinks, business like: “What sale have you had on your books?”

ANSWER: Just about enough to pay for the corrections and designing of the various editions, for which, of course, the poet is charged by the publisher. The poet is fined by the business department of the publishing house for the presumption of attempting to improve his works.

A poet who is reviewed with approval by the three hundred most reliable critics in America will sell three hundred copies of his book. The critical approval serves to introduce him to the universities. If his book is sold at four dollars, he gets forty cents a book; if his book is sold at one dollar he gets ten cents a book. Figure it out for yourself. The book represents from ten to forty years of work and winnowing. A poet writes about seven possible poems in a lifetime. It takes a lifetime to find which the seven are. Magazines pay about fifteen dollars for respectable verse, insisting that it be short. They class it as wall paper to fill an empty space. The writer or his point of view is not advertised. For instance, no Northeastern critic of my work has taken seriously
Springfield, the Pilgrim City, of whose future I have always dreamed; the city I dearly love and delight in. Springfield will yet be Mecca.

The poet may have been reckless enough to have sent a set of his books to the principal English department of the state universities, and so on, that entertained him, charging it to his royalty account. His motive in this may have been simply vanity. He has the vague hope that his work may be read some day, that his general aims, such as this about Springfield, the Pilgrim City of Democracy, may be understood. But the publisher is stern, and it is quite often found at the end of the tour that the poet owes the publisher money for this distribution. I think at the present moment that most of the poets who are known, well or incidentally, in England and America, owe their publishers money. This comes about by the recklessly revising or illustrating their books, or by presenting them to a few sisters, cousins, aunts, libraries or English departments.

“Why does the publisher fool with this cranky poet?” asks Mr. Utopia.

The publisher makes money off the poet by persuading him ultimately, through a carefully selected middleman, to write novels or textbooks—textbooks preferred. Textbooks can be made compulsory reading by all the boards of education in the land, and another generation of young Americans can be made to hate poetry if they are textbooks of verse. This slow kidding of the poet into becoming a textbook factory or atlas factory or novel factory is a theme worthy of Patrick Henry.

The publisher expects to make a profit from about one book in seven. By the time the seventh year comes and the seventh book is produced, he earnestly hopes that the gentleman will be no longer a poet, for however the publisher may advertise and spread, he has not the remotest notion of selling the verses, or of employing a staff that reads poetry or sells it. His real high-pressure salesmen interview boards of education.

Big novels make a little money, but soon run out. The publisher has learned through long experience that most novelists begin by being real poets, by writing a book of verse, so he is willing to keep as many young poets before the universities as the universities are willing to send for and feed and pass on. The publisher does this with the expectation that about one in twenty of these fellows, he cares not which, will become a novel writer or a textbook producer by the time he is about forty years of age. The rest who stand by their songs are dropped or insulted or flattered or kidded along or patronized according to the disposition of the individual publishing house. Since I have held pretty closely to the idea of producing pen-and-ink pictures and verses only—the verses written to fit the pictures—and have refused to produce textbooks, novels, histories, biographies, or essays, I have had no sale on my work, though I am now forty-six. I am continuing with private pamphlets with the greatest enthusiasm, as I did when I was a beggar. My bedroom is stacked to the ceiling with these pamphlets. My motto is: Free Speech and a Free Press. The theme of these pamphlets is still Springfield, the Pilgrim City. To distribute these free, spending my last cent on them, is the joy of my life, incredible as that may seem. They are full of my own drawings, as well printed as I can afford, with verses written to fit the same.

Mr. Utopia asks, “Do you think it is enough for a poet to gain the recognition of other poets, or should he feel it his ambition to reach as wide a public as possible?”
I have spoken of my tramp days. They are recorded in two books that never sell—*A Handy Guide for Beggars* and *Adventures While Preaching the Gospel of Beauty*. They represent a total of almost a year, three quite separate expeditions in my life in which I kept away from all railroads and tramps, walked alone from door to door with Jeffersonian democracy in my heart, and with the determination to sing my Springfield poems to some few American farm families, one family at a time. The very fact that I attempted this three quite separate times indicates that I respect and love the American people, beginning with the most illiterate farm hand. One of the pamphlets of my songs about Springfield which I carried with me was entitled *Rhymes to be Traded for Bread*. To trade rimes directly for bread is a desperate undertaking for many reasons, but no more desperate than life itself; and I recommend it to any young poet who has not a wife, a family or debts. As heretofore implied, I am a deal of a Jeffersonian, for which I apologize humbly to all Hamiltonians. I cannot help it. It is hereditary. But being a Jeffersonian has not interfered with equally successful and unsuccessful attempts to trade rimes for bread with people who owned skyscrapers bigger than any publisher ever owned. Also there is red Indian and Spanish in me. Possibly this may account for the fact that I exasperate fearfully any publisher who really knows me. He finds to his astonishment that I am neither humble nor broken, though forty-six and poor. It is a state which the claque of the publisher will undertake to punish, if possible. Some of this article is written within sound of the Blackfeet tom-toms, and the music drowns the claque.

People who have read this article so far are beginning to suspect that there is little humility in my bones. If I am shot at sunrise it will not be for meekness, but for going back to the blanket and acting like I did before I was educated. But, men and brethren, let us all view this incredible situation with a proper sense of humor, and proceed.

I find the raw appetite for poetry about the same in all normal human creatures. I have found gentlemanly farm hands who tolerated a song or two, and gentlemanly potentates. But all these people have to be hand picked, and the poet is in the end a family physician, a general practitioner, not a standardized, foolproof hospital or clinic expert. He must forever go to man, the separate human being, and become one of the little conclave of seven of which I have spoken, assembled by the assistant instructor of English. This is as large a unit as a poet should sing for in one day. I have always thought this, and woe to those flip critics who have assumed I thought anything else.

From about 1870 till 1918 my father was an old-fashioned family doctor in Springfield, Illinois, and Sangamon County. He comes very readily to mind, indeed, as an illustration. A poet may contribute throughout his life to about as many families as an old-fashioned family doctor can take care of. The rest is fake, advertising, forced growth. Big and little poets would be left absolutely alone to this perfectly natural conception of their lives if all publishers did not have the trade tradition of sweating textbooks, novels, anthologies, or the like, out of them by a long and slow process of carefully systematized flattery. The fact that you can write verse is in itself a certificate that you can write prose.
The Poetry of Statesmen

In 1912 when *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*, was launched by the set that had built The Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, and by the University of Chicago set, poets suddenly began to correspond with one another. For four or five years there was marvelous unity among them. The basis of this correspondence was their mutual contribution to *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*. Slowly there emerged the twenty poets most easily advertised, then the scouts of the Manhattan publishers took notice, used them for figureheads at their ships’ prows for a while, tried to make them all into novelists, textbook writers, and so on, but failed for the most part, and told their obedient claques that the New Poetry Movement was over. These poets are still writing for *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*, still in correspondence, and youngsters of their discovering are coming on like waves of the sea. The movement began as a Southern and Western movement, and so continues. Read the magnificent Travel Tale, in *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse* for June, 1926, with its roll call of new names. It is the chronicle of Harriet Monroe’s journey through the South and West under the wing of Baylor University, English Department, Waco, Texas, and contains such names as that of Robinson Jeffers, the newest and most thundering poet for many a long day, a sort of Paul Manship of verse, living in California. “That Chicago magazine” still gives out laurels, and Manhattan cannot wave it aside.

I have spoken of the hardships of travel. It has also its great glories. If people like Harriet Monroe did not make these journeys, rallying the youngest of the singing birds in little after-meeting conclaves of “about seven,” the poets would indeed be in a lonely land.

Mr. Utopia asks: “Isn’t it a mistake to underestimate and scoff at public opinion?”

Certainly. The most towering recent work from that group which burst upon America in 1912 is Carl Sandburg’s book, *Abraham Lincoln—The Prairie Years*—issued in 1926. Much of it is prose poetry, the best free verse Carl Sandburg has ever written. This book has won the unstinted praise of Sandburg’s friends and enemies, and is sweeping across England. It is such a book as any of the two hundred living poets of America or the two hundred living poets of England would glory in having written if they could.

This brings me to a theory that may be personal. Up to the Civil War and through the Civil War our best poets were our statesmen. I class The Declaration of Independence, the best of the letters of Jefferson to Adams, of Adams to Jefferson, the pamphlets of Alexander Hamilton when they were most fiery, Washington’s Farewell Address, and most anything that was in the old McGuffey’s Fifth Reader as American poetry. Fortunately that McGuffey no longer circulates as a textbook, so I suggest that you get it at a secondhand store at any price. Read aloud the Address of the Indian Chief to the White Settler, the Supposed Speech of Black Hawk, and read them with no schoolmarms present, and no pictures of long-haired, spiteful old men on the wall to spoil the joy. You will have the time of your life.
Poetry Unsuspected

All this leads us to the best of the papers of Lincoln, especially the Gettysburg Address. These represent American poetry, and people read them with a gigantic poetic thrill because no schoolmarm has rubbed it into them that state papers are poetry. They are left free to like them or let them alone. They have no association in childhood memory with senile and mysterious creatures.

Another great poetic act of those who were brought before the public in 1912 was the publication in 1925 of the two-volume life of John Keats, by the valiant Amy Lowell. This she produced as she was dying, and so it was that nothing in her life became her like the leaving of it. If ever mortal warrior died with the flag upon the battlements, it was Amy Lowell, laboring at her John Keats in the face of physical agony and desperate trouble. Neither Carl Sandburg’s Lincoln book nor Amy Lowell’s Keats are classed as poetry, but certainly both are sufficient certificates of the fact that there are things in the heart of the new poet which he wishes to say to the whole world, that he has what Jefferson called “a decent respect for the opinions of mankind.”

Mr. Utopia asks: “Do you find that the public reacts to good verse?”

The answer is: Yes; so long as they do not know that it is poetry. There is not a human being in America outside of the special students of English who would believe you, should you say that the King James Version of the Bible is poetry. People hate poetry and they love the Bible, and they are not going to let you spoil the Bible for them. Some of them would even stare if you told them that their favorite play of Shakspere is poetry, because they hate poetry and love that play. Most of the senators in Washington would be horrified if you told them that the writings of the fathers of the Republic are poetry, because they hate poetry and love the writings of the fathers of the Republic, and without knowing it, they prefer to quote the most poetic lines. I might go even further and say that the most applauded lines in the high-class plays on Broadway this season are poetry. They are rhythmic, some of them as beautifully constructed as a line of Milton. But if you want to kill a play by a standard playwright put up the sign: A Poetical Play. I could go even further and say that some of the business slogans and billboards which the hard-jawed business men like best are effective to the extent to which they are poetry, and no further. “Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon” [cf. 2 Samuel 1:20].

One of the best things Al Smith does for his friends once in a while is to sing The Sidewalks of New York. All that is good in that little old song hit is poetry. But do not tell New York. They think that song is hard-boiled, too, and we must not ruin it for them.

I have ventured to speak of the way in which Abel made a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, and how that was the first poem; but I am a little hasty in my chronology. The Gospel according to Saint John says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not any thing made that was made. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. . . .”

I am no theologian, but I would draw the attention of those who would mock at words to this strange and authoritative Scripture. There is not the least doubt in my mind
that the American people are living a magnificent, a beautiful, and in many ways, a great religious life. They are living on, with tremendous power and with new tides of singing, dancing, spontaneous children pouring in. Most of this article has been devoted to the ironical misunderstanding of the words “poetry” and “poet” in the face of a perfect whirlwind of poetry and song that happens to be labeled something else. But in Poetry, A Magazine of Verse, in a special way, in certain limited circles, this great religious life is openly acknowledged by our very youngest writers. This magazine was the first, and still continues as the most resolute and effective warrior in the business of restoring the word “poetry” to its original meaning in the dictionary of America.

This necessary restoration movement under Harriet Monroe, a statesman of increasing power in the literary world, came about through one of the American situations which would have been humorous if it had not been pathetic.

Poetry and Youth

That row of pictures showing the American poets of 1880, senile, long-haired and malevolent, is again our subject matter. No man knoweth why the publishers who took their poems away from their widows thought that it was necessary to publish the oldest instead of the youngest pictures of these gentlemen. Poetry will be young until Gabriel blows his trumpet, and afterward. But these poets, in this patented, scowling aspect, had become established properties of now forgotten publishing houses. As usual in such cases, their most aged aunts or their silliest disciples survived them. Anyway, we were treated from 1880 until 1912 with deadly reminiscences of the dead—required reading, if possible—Longfellow’s correspondence with some sniffing Sunday-school teacher who should have been shot at sunrise for invading his privacy! Every old gentleman east of the Hudson had a book to sell, which was forced on the public at Christmas—all about Oliver Wendell Holmes’ last case of rheumatism. We were treated to the pious remarks Whittier was alleged to have made in a mistaken moment, and told by the toothless that Emerson drank nothing stronger than tea. Not till 1912 was the market for reminiscences of 1880 and patent anthologies of the old steel-engraving type completely glutted. Not till 1912 had the old publishing houses gone under the sod or retired to their proper place. We—poor helpless children—were plastered and plastered and plastered with anthologies and textbooks containing alleged selections from gentlemen who all deserved a better fate.

Put it down as almost an axiom that any anthology, good or bad, is a robbery of the poets or of their widows. The anthology contains the ear of one poet, and the toe of another, and the eye of still another. It can be sold by the freight-car load, but no poet’s widow receives compensation for toe or ear or eye. I—who am still living in spite of my rashness—have seldom received a cent of compensation for anything of mine appearing in any anthology, and I suppose there are two hundred in active circulation, with what are alleged to be representative sets of my verses in them, making money for somebody.

With due apologies to dear friends who have prepared them, and who have not the remotest notion they are victims of a system, I say the anthology gives the general impression that poetry is cold soup. It is indeed cannibal soup—one man’s eye and another man’s liver. If you are not willing to read all of a man and then pick his seven
best for yourself with your own taste, you had better let him alone forevermore. Do not
think you are getting acquainted with the poets of America when you are taking a
teaspoonful of that corporation cannibal soup. Shall the arts which are supposed to
represent the power of choice be arbitrarily forced upon the people by the textbook trust?

By 1912 the anthologizers and recollectors had done the worst that could be done
for the poets who had died in 1880 or thereabouts. For thirty-two years we had been
doused with textbooks and emasculated reminiscences by order of the boards of
education, East and West. Then it was suddenly discovered that the last of the
perpetrators of these textbook compilations, these board-of-education snaps, was dead;
and the so-called New Poets were heard from. I mean to say, poets from forty to seventy
years of age who were still living were heard from, through Poetry, A Magazine of Verse.

It is one of the illusions of the public, especially of the university world, that the
so-called New Poets are hostile to the old New England group. They are not. They are
hostile to the senility and pious gabble that were served up in the name of the New
England group. I once saw a lithograph from Godey’s Lady’s Book of young Professor
Longfellow. He looked as grand as Byron, and as young and dashing. I suggest to those
who would restore the prestige of Longfellow that they begin with his baby pictures and
work up.

You think I have no sense of humor. But now let me tell you a humorous
anecdote. Recently a New York newspaper did me the honor to send for my picture. In
my shy but adventurous way, I sent two—one as I am now at forty-six, looking
somewhat like a relief map of the Cordilleras, a snow-capped, forbidding, hostile,
inaccessible monument, a solitary granite spectacle; and the other, which I much
preferred, a picture of me taken in high school at seventeen, when I wrote my first two
poems. Those two poems are not so exhilarating as “Thanatopsis,” but they are in my
alleged collected works, and I have been asked to recite them by young and old at many
universities.

A Pen-and-Ink Artist

The picture of me when I wrote those, my first two poems, was sent back to me
by the otherwise kindly New York paper with blistering indignation, almost with the
suggestion that I had been presumptuous; that I was no longer young and beautiful and
that I had no business to pretend to be. But since I am to be kicked upstairs whether I like
it or not, I think I have a right to ask to be known by a picture taken when I was very
young and gay, and far more of a poet than I am now, if I ever was a poet. I have never
asked for the title. I have fought like a wildcat all my life to be known as a pen-and-ink
artist, and may yet win that privilege. Let all who would thwart me beware.

One publisher considers it lese majesty for me even to suggest that I think myself
a pen-and-ink artist, since he decreed that I was not. For the presumption I am still
punished by him in many ways. And he ordered me to write a book of poems for children
in the first-year high school—precisely, no older, no younger—a book that would serve
as a text. But the fact holds true that there is no such thing as a professional poet, and no
man can be ordered about that way. What I draw and write is for people from five to one
hundred years old, especially people in Springfield, Illinois. I am not manufacturing for
the trade, and I cannot imagine the cast-iron nerve of ordering a man about when you do not even pay him wages. I hear the Blackfeet tom-toms beating, beating, beating.

Most of the good poetry, as I have said, has appeared in pamphlet form before the poet was known to the public. It is utterly impossible to make an income from verse, and one must win his worldly standing, and earn his living some other way. One of the most distinguished of the Middle Western poets supports himself by writing a movie column once a day. I do not know a poet in the Anglo-Saxon world who makes his living by poetry. Every single one of them makes his living in some other way. I could call off the list of their professions. None of them are a disgrace; all are hard work. All poets of forty-six do two men’s work and cheerfully expect to. Most of the wives do their own washing and the poet cheerfully hangs it out to dry.

"Which of your own efforts finds the most favor?" This is Mr. Utopia’s last question.

My answer is, as usual, roundabout. I begin by saying the Manhattan critics who have been so oracular about my affairs know nothing about them because they have not met my kin or been in my home. Their presumption is amazing.

Poets of Virginia

This article began with the old home in Springfield, Illinois. It is still loaded with heirlooms that lead back toward Kentucky, and from there back toward Virginia. It is astonishing to me, when I think through my life and history, how much of it turns on the fact that none of my kin came from north of Mason and Dixon’s Line; but this is the reason, perhaps, why my best-received song of late is a Southern poem. I have just finished two university and college tours of the entire United States, and there is no doubt that in the little conclaves of seven after the recitals, especially in the South and West, the most liked thing that I have done is the little song about Virginia. Of course it means nothing, except to those who belong to my particular clan. It means nothing, nothing, nothing except to my own people. To all others it is diffuse and repetitious, and surely they are right. The claque who first brought my work before the Northeastern public will go on calling the roll of two or three of my pieces, separating them from all the Springfield and ancestral life that made them. As literary critics they are right; as persons they are entirely wrong. Ere I forget thee, O Virginia, may my right hand forget her cunning! [Cf. Psalm 137:5]

There were three great Virginia poets in the very beginning—George Washington, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson. “What!” you say. “We do not even know the names of their publishers. They were not poets!”

Well, how do you know? Did you ever really read them? What do you know about it? Their very names will breathe poetry forever.