Americanization and Poetry

To bring into correlation such diverse terms as Americanization and Poetry, it is necessary, and important, that we know the definition of each and the aura of connotation surrounding both. Then, with the definitions in mind, we shall be able to see the function of each and the relationship between the two.

Americanization, properly speaking, involves the ideals of Americanism, which are but aspects of the all-inclusive topic. Americanism is well defined in Glenn Frank’s statement: "Any Americanism worth having must come as a result of our having personally discovered in American life specific ideas, institutions and personalities which we can enthusiastically believe in and loyally promote." 1

Americanization can be reduced, a more personal level of the American as an individual who maintains "all the things that seem to him admirable, that stimulate in him a genuine enthusiasm, that by their inherent virtue and vitality win his instinctive loyalty." 2 These are the very things that move him to think, consider, and judge, to talk, and to use as motives for creative expression.

In some ways more powerful than prose, Poetry is the direct appeal to the imagination and the emotions. Out of his common experiences and the pressure of everyday living, the individual creates something that is part of his inner dreams, something that is at once "a transfiguration of life", according to Gayley, Young, and Kurtz in their book. 3

Most people read Poetry for the pleasure gained from the rhythm of the lines, the melody of words, the skillful picturization of their feelings that they themselves might not be able to translate into imaginative poetic language. Poetry is the embodiment of human experience, "man’s emotions and his moral character, his conceptions and intentions, his aspirations, his ideals, and his deeds, in short, his career and the world in which he moves." 4 Thus, Poetry reflects the man, or the people.

True Americanization is not a matter of division by race, with each set of nationals sealed within, and protected by, invisible, inaccessible walls. It is rather a way of living together for citizens of various racial ancestries. It is not merely a process of Americanizing, but likewise the "prideful sense of satisfaction that comes to a creative

1. "Americanism": Challenging Essays in Modern Thought edited by Bachelor and Henry, 1928
2. Opus cited
4. Opus cited
people when they are working successfully for the increase, the enrichment, and the spiritual unity of their national life, a sense of satisfaction that merges imperceptibly into a determination further to develop and faithfully to defend the common life they are creating. 5.

With racial prejudices and barriers torn down and carted away, the best, worthy national traits of the minority groups of Oriental and European extract can be woven firmly into the stuff that is America. Each of them has some quality to contribute to strengthen the fabric of living, as they become assimilated into organized society.

To effect this harmony, Poetry can be simultaneously the means and end in the huge workings of Americanization. Because of its immediate invitation to the mind to exercise its emotions, its power of reminiscence, interplay between fact and ideal, and sheer enjoyment, it is a means of arousing people to a consciousness of Americanism.

Poetry can make people aware of certain experiences common to all, that the native-born and foreign-born may find similarities in and share. Such a bond strengthens understanding so that a sunset or sunrise, daily events, reactions to personalities, or usage of particular idioms have almost identical connotations.

What has already been written and published in America can serve as stimulus to the yet inarticulate groups of people, the minorities, who are trying to overcome language difficulties. During the course of their reading, they may gradually absorb the thoughts that underly the printed words. They can then perceive from what sources spring the beauty and vigor of expression, the variety of experiences, and the love of nature, people, places, and familiar things. They can see for themselves what facets in American living are the brightest in the light of their own appreciation.

Poetry dealing with aspects of American life is not a blatant display of patriotism, but it does record the best that is American. It may treat of so simple a thing as a sunrise in an eastern city, as in Lizette Woodworth Reese’s poem:

"The east is yellow as a daffodil.  
Three steeple - three stark swarthy arms are threest  
Up from the town. The gnarled poplars thrill  
Down the long street in some keen salty gust."

or of a harvest sunset in Carl Sandburg’s description:

"Red gold of pools,  
Sunset furrows six o’clock  
And the farmer done in the fields  
And the cows in the barns with bulging udders."

5. "Americanism: Challenging Essays in Modern Thought  
   edited by Bachelor and Henry, 1928"
Such pictures evoke recollections of many sunsets and sunrises in many cities and on many farms, where people dwell. That they are common enough to most people is significant, giving ground to the assumption of related experiences that are sounded in Walt Whitman's verse:

The Commonplace

"The commonplace I sing,  
How cheap is health; how cheap nobility!  
The open air I sing, freedom, toleration,  
(Take here the mainest lesson--less from books--less from the schools,)  
The common day and night--the common earth and waters,  
Your farm -- your work, trade, occupation,  
The democratic wisdom underneath, like solid ground for all."


The cycle of the seasons inspires many types of poems, and thus again is shared the common response to the beauty and changes of the year, evident in Richard le Gallienne's description of spring:

May Is Building Her House

"May is building her house. With apple blooms  
She is roofing over the glimmering rooms;  
* * * * * * *

"May is building her house. From the dust of things  
She is making the songs and the flowers and the wings;"

in Madison Cawein's definition of summer:

Abandoned

"Here Summer seems a placid face asleep,  
And the near world a figment of her dreams."

in Bliss Carman's exultant song of autumn:
A Vagabond Song

"There is something in the autumn that is native to my blood —

Touch of manner, hint of mood;

And my heart is like a rhyme,

With the yellow and the purple and the crimson keeping time."

and Sara Teasdale's quiet lyric:

A December Day

"Dawn turned on her purple pillow,

And late, late, came the winter day:

Snow was curved to the boughs of the willow,

The sunless world was white and grey."

Portraits of people seem clearer and more colorful in verse than

in-prose, perhaps, because of the almost epigrammatic force and precision

required to draw character or physical lineaments. These portraits have

the virtue of condensation, yet at the same time they allow the reader to

fill in the light and shadow by employing his imagination. One of the

most notable collection of poem-portraits is the "Spoon River Anthology"

by Edgar Lee Masters. From this original volume has come lives that are

applicable to various personalities that we observe in our daily life.

Alongside of these, we can mention "Lincoln, the Man of the People" and

"The Man with the Hoe" by Edwin Markham. These poems describe a man

whom history has exalted and a man that Art has made known, thus giving

to all people understandable, cultural portraits. Anyone can appreciate

Anna Hemplead Branch's "Songs for My Mother," the delicate, warm tribute

that most of us have wanted to say to our own mothers. We should also

include here the poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson, as "Richard Corey",

"Miniver Cheevey", and others.

From poem-portraits, we can go on to dialect Poetry that is the

speech of certain groups of people, alien or indigenous. It has caught

the flavor and the brightness of different nationalities. A trick of

pronunciation, a turn of phrasing and inflection, have been reproduced,

and these poems, because of their originality, contribute a stimulating

freshness to American letters. We can hear the German-English dialect

in the "Hans Breitman's Ballads" by Charles Godfrey Leland, the country

twang of the mid-Western farmer in the "Complete Works" of James Whit-

comb Riley, the mellow negro drawl in the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar,

and the half-humorous, half-pathetic Italian-Americans speech and Irish

tongue in the work of T. A. Daly. No attempt has yet been made to re-

produce Chinese-English or Japanese-English or other Oriental-English,

in Poetry.

In spite of the fact that no Oriental dialect verse has made its

appearance, nevertheless, Oriental influences have been felt in American

Poetry, though indirectly. Witness the musical, rich language of the

Chinese in the imagery of Amy Lowell, the crisp, suggestive style of the
Japanese in the cinquains of Adelaide Crapsey, and the sometimes ornate address, patterned on Indian, Persian, or Arabian poetry, in the work of Ezra Pound. It may well be that no American poet has written typical Oriental poetry, as influences are invariably tempered by experience, receptiveness and use. All that was derived from the other languages of the world became a part of America, so that American literature, like the nation itself, may be considered a melting pot.

America is a large country, stretching from one ocean to another, but geographical knowledge has been made possible through regional poetry, so that a stay-at-home can visualize the distant corners of his country by looking over the shoulders of the poets. As Untermeyer has explained: "Every section of America has had its own singer. The 'laureate of New England' is Robert Frost, as is proved by his 'North of Boston' and 'New Hampshire'; the Far West has been celebrated by Bret Harte and Joaquin Miller; Dubose Heyward and Hervey Allen has told many tales of the South in their 'Carolina Chansons'; Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg give us many pictures of Illinois and the mid-western states; even far Alaska has found a voice in Robert W. Service's 'The Spell of the Yukon.'" Listen, and you will, like Walt Whitman, 'hear America singing.'"

There are other regional poets whose names would easily lengthen the list of the few mentioned.

Not only geography lessons, but small, vivid details of city and rural life can be noted in poetic descriptions. Observe the difference between the opening lines of Grace Hazard Conkling's "After Sunset":

"I have an understanding with the hills
At evening when the slanted radiance fills
Their hollows, and the great winds let them be,
And they are quiet and look down at me."

and those of Helen Hoyt's "Ellis Park":

"Little park that I pass through
I carry off a part of you
Every morning hurrying down
To my work-day in the town."

Such vast subjects as life and death and the tomorrows are encompassed by Poetry. A rational philosophy is manifest in such examples as William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis", Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Psalm of Life", A liver Wendell Holmes "The Chambered Nautilus", and Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Renaissance," besides shorter poems by Aline Kilmer, Elinor Wylie, Leonie Adams, Leonora Speyer, George Santayana, and a host of others. The poets have interpreted for the people their

6. This Singing World edited by Louis Untermeyer
hopes, dreams, regrets, and griefs, so that the mass can be comforted by what has been said so fitly for them or be moved to write of joys and sorrows themselves. The intensity of emotional reaction and the depth of sense-impressions are tuned to the poet's skill, and the hearts of the people beat together in Poetry. Untermeyer's equation may be judged the basis for what has been attempted in this discussion of Americanization and Poetry, with "all these sentences boiled down to a four-word problem in arithmetic:

Poetry + People = Education + Enjoyment" 7.

The Richardson and Owen's volume on the literature of the world has a chapter on American literature that has a meaningful paragraph that may serve as summary: "The United States is a very young nation. Those nations (of the world) have certain more or less clearly defined national traits, which color their literature and give it something of an individual tone. Perhaps it is too much to expect any such things as a distinctive national quality to be developed in so short a period of national existence. A national spirit is the gradual result of ages upon ages of history and settled habitation. In the first place, we were a transplanted people; in the second place, we have become an amazingy composite people as viewed from the standpoints of nationality and race; and in the third place, we have undergone rapid and profound changes, geographically, industrially, and socially ... A few more generations may perhaps see evolved in the United States a typically American literature." 8.

Americanization and Poetry are the unknown quantities, or even qualities, like the X and Y in an algebraic equation. Americanization may mold and outline the poetry of different nationalities living in this country, inspire it with a tangible warmth, cause it to reflect Americanism for all the minority groups and thus hasten their assimilation into the great majority. Inversely, Poetry may be instrumental in awakening the latent desire, and enthusiasm, for American ideals, for all the good and beautiful to be gained from the American way of living. So, the two divisions of Americanization and Poetry can be thought of as an interrelated unity.

7. This Singing World edited by Louis Untermeyer
8. Chapter XV; American Literature: American Spirit from The Literature of the World edited by Richardson and Owen
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