

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 28

Volume 28

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Excerpts from Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1960,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**

**Dennis Poupard
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**Paula Kepos
Marie Lazzari
Thomas Ligotti
Associate Editors**



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Preface

It is impossible to overvalue the importance of literature in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual evolution of humanity. Literature is that which both lifts us out of everyday life and helps us to better understand it. Through the fictive lives of such characters as Anna Karenina, Jay Gatsby, or Leopold Bloom, our perceptions of the human condition are enlarged, and we are enriched.

Literary criticism can also give us insight into the human condition, as well as into the specific moral and intellectual atmosphere of an era, for the criteria by which a work of art is judged reflect contemporary philosophical and social attitudes. Literary criticism takes many forms: the traditional essay, the book or play review, even the parodic poem. Criticism can also be of several types: normative, descriptive, interpretive, textual, appreciative, generic. Collectively, the range of critical response helps us to understand a work of art, an author, an era.

Scope of the Series

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC) is designed to serve as an introduction for the student of twentieth-century literature to the authors of the period 1900 to 1960 and to the most significant commentators on these authors. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are by far the most popular writers for study in high school and college literature courses. Since a vast amount of relevant critical material confronts the student, *TCLC* presents significant passages from the most important published criticism to aid students in the location and selection of commentaries on authors who died between 1900 and 1960.

The need for *TCLC* was suggested by the usefulness of the Gale series *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, which excerpts criticism on current writing. Because of the difference in time span under consideration (*CLC* considers authors who were still living after 1959), there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*. For further information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism series, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to include authors who represent a variety of genres and nationalities and who are currently regarded as the most important writers of this era. In addition to major authors, *TCLC* also presents criticism on lesser-known writers whose significant contributions to literary history are important to the study of twentieth-century literature.

Each author entry in *TCLC* is intended to provide an overview of major criticism on an author. Therefore, the editors include fifteen to twenty authors in each 600-page volume (compared with approximately forty authors in a *CLC* volume of similar size) so that more attention may be given to an author. Each author entry represents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work: some early criticism is presented to indicate initial reactions, later criticism is selected to represent any rise or decline in the author's reputation, and current retrospective analyses provide students with a modern view. The length of an author entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English, and from foreign criticism in translation. Critical articles and books that have not been translated into English are excluded. Every attempt has been made to identify and include excerpts from the seminal essays on each author's work.

An author may appear more than once in the series because of the great quantity of critical material available, or because of a resurgence of criticism generated by events such as an author's centennial or anniversary celebration, the republication or posthumous publication of an author's works, or the publication of a newly translated work. Generally, a few author entries in each volume of *TCLC* feature criticism on single works by major authors who have appeared previously in the series. Only those individual works that have been the subjects of vast amounts of criticism and are widely studied in literature classes are selected for this in-depth treatment. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* and Leo Tolstoy's *Voina i mir (War and Peace)* are examples of such entries in *TCLC*, Volume 28.

Organization of the Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, list of principal works, excerpts of criticism (each preceded by explanatory notes and followed by a bibliographical citation), and an additional bibliography for further reading.

- The *author heading* consists of the author's full name, followed by birth and death dates. The unbracketed portion of the name denotes the form under which the author most commonly wrote. If an author wrote

consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- The *biographical and critical introduction* contains background information designed to introduce the reader to an author and to the critical debate surrounding his or her work. Parenthetical material following many of the introductions provides references to biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, and past volumes of *TCLC*.
- Most *TCLC* entries include *portraits* of the author. Many entries also contain illustrations of materials pertinent to an author's career, including manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, or representations of important people, places, and events in an author's life.
- The *list of principal works* is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors where there are both foreign language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- *Criticism* is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles by the author featured in the critical entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to ascertain without difficulty the works being discussed. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. When an anonymous essay is later attributed to a critic, the critic's name appears in brackets at the beginning of the excerpt and in the bibliographical citation. Many critical entries in *TCLC* also contain translated material to aid users. Unless otherwise noted, translations within brackets are by the editors; translations within parentheses or continuous with the text are by the author of the excerpt. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editors' discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- Critical essays are prefaced by *explanatory notes* as an additional aid to students using *TCLC*. The explanatory notes provide several types of useful information, including the reputation of a critic, the importance of a work of criticism, the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, structuralist, etc.), a synopsis of the criticism, and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author's work. In some cases, these notes cross-reference the work of critics who agree or disagree with each other. Dates in parentheses within the explanatory notes refer to a book publication date when they follow a book title and to an essay date when they follow a critic's name.
- A complete *bibliographical citation* designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book by the interested reader follows each piece of criticism.
- The *additional bibliography* appearing at the end of each author entry suggests further reading on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

An appendix lists the sources from which material in each volume has been reprinted. It does not, however, list every book or periodical consulted in the preparation of the volume.

Cumulative Indexes

Each volume of *TCLC* includes a cumulative index listing all the authors who have appeared in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, and *Short Story Criticism*, along with cross-references to the Gale series *Children's Literature Review*, *Authors in the News*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, and *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children*. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC*.

Each volume of *TCLC* also includes a cumulative nationality index. Author names are arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities and followed by the volume numbers in which they appear.

New Index

An important feature now appearing in *TCLC* is a cumulative index to titles, an alphabetical listing of the literary works discussed in the series since its inception. Each title listing includes the corresponding volume and page numbers where criticism may be located. Foreign language titles that have been translated are followed by the titles of the translations—for example, *Voina i mir* (*War and Peace*). Page numbers following these translated titles refer to all pages on which any form of the titles, either foreign language or translated, appear. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks. In cases where the same title is used by different authors, the author's surname is given in parentheses after the title, e.g., *Collected Poems* (Housman) and *Collected Poems* (Yeats).

Acknowledgments

No work of this scope can be accomplished without the cooperation of many people. The editors especially wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted criticism included in this volume, the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reprint rights, and Anthony Bogucki for assistance with copyright research. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, the Library of Congress, the University of Detroit Library, the University of Michigan Library, and the Wayne State University Library for making their resources available to us.

Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to various suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including explanatory notes to excerpted criticism that provide important information regarding critics and their work, a cumulative author index listing authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, more extensive illustrations, and a title index listing all literary works discussed in the series since its inception.

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.

Authors to Be Featured in Forthcoming Volumes

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Volume 30, will be an Archive volume devoted to various topics in twentieth-century literature, including the Surrealist and Russian Symbolist movements, the journal *Partisan Review*, and the literature of German émigrés fleeing Naziism during the 1930s and 1940s.

Mikhail Artsybashev (Russian novelist)—Artsybashev was notorious for works promoting the principles of anarchic individualism and unrestrained sensuality. His erotic novel *Sanin* produced an international sensation and inspired cults dedicated to the destruction of social convention.

Henri Bergson (French philosopher)—One of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, Bergson is renowned for his opposition to the dominant materialist thought of his time and for his creation of theories that emphasize the supremacy and independence of supra-rational consciousness.

Edgar Rice Burroughs (American novelist)—Burroughs was a science fiction writer who is best known as the creator of Tarzan. His *Tarzan of the Apes* and its numerous sequels have sold over thirty-five million copies in fifty-six languages, making Burroughs one of the most popular authors in the world.

Samuel Butler (English novelist and essayist)—Butler is best known for *The Way of All Flesh*, an autobiographical novel that is both a classic account of the conflict between father and son and an indictment of Victorian society.

Joyce Cary (Anglo-Irish novelist)—Regarded as an important contributor to the trilogy as a literary form, Cary wrote trilogies noted for their humor, vitality, sympathetic characterizations, and technical virtuosity.

Willa Cather (American novelist and short story writer) Cather combined knowledge of Nebraska with an artistic expertise reminiscent of the nineteenth-century literary masters to create one of the most distinguished achievements of twentieth-century American literature. She has been compared to Gustave Flaubert and Henry James for her sensibility, emphasis on technique, and high regard for the artist and European culture, and to the "lost generation" of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald for her alienation from modern American society.

Anton Chekhov (Russian dramatist and short story writer) Praised for his stylistic innovations in both fiction and drama as well as for his depth of insight into the human condition, Chekhov is the most significant Russian author of the generation to succeed Leo Tolstoy and Fedor Dostoevsky. *TCLC* will devote an entry to Chekhov's plays, focusing on his dramatic masterpieces *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*.

Stephen Crane (American novelist and short story writer) Crane was one of the foremost realistic writers in American literature. *TCLC* will devote an entry to his masterpiece, *The Red Badge of Courage*, in which he depicted the psychological complexities of fear and courage in battle.

Bernard DeVoto (American historian, critic, and novelist)—A prolific writer in several genres, DeVoto is primarily remembered as a historian of the American frontier, an important scholar of Mark Twain, and a pugnacious literary critic.

Theodore Dreiser (American novelist)—A prominent American exponent of literary Naturalism and one of America's foremost novelists, Dreiser was the author of works commended for their powerful characterizations and strong ideological convictions.

Vicente Huidobro (Chilean poet)—Huidobro was among the most influential South American poets of the twentieth century for his formulation of *creacionismo*, a poetic theory that regarded poetry not as an imitation of nature but as an original creation.

William James (American philosopher and psychologist)—One of the most influential figures in modern Western philosophy, James was the founder of Pragmatism, a philosophy that rejected abstract models of reality in an attempt to explain life as it is actually experienced.

Franz Kafka (Austrian novelist and short story writer) Kafka's novel *The Trial* is often considered the definitive expression of his alienated vision as well as one of the seminal works of modern literature. *TCLC* will devote an entire entry to critical discussion of this novel, which has been described by Alvin J. Seltzer as "one of the most unrelenting works of chaos created in the first half of this century."

Nikos Kazantzakis (Greek novelist)—Kazantzakis was a controversial Greek writer whose works embodied Nietzschean and Bergsonian philosophical ideas in vividly portrayed characters, the most famous of which was the protagonist of *Zorba the Greek*.

Dmitri Merezhkovsky (Russian novelist, philosopher, poet, and critic)—Although his poetry and criticism are credited with initiating the Symbolist movement in Russian literature, Merezhkovsky is best known as a religious philosopher who sought in numerous essays and historical novels to reconcile the values of pagan religions with the teachings of Christ.

George Orwell (English novelist and essayist)—Designated the "conscience of his generation" by V. S. Pritchett, Orwell is the author of influential novels and essays embodying his commitment to personal freedom and social justice. *TCLC* will devote an entry to Orwell's first major popular and critical success, *Animal Farm*, a satirical fable in which Orwell attacked the consequences of the Russian Revolu-

tion while suggesting reasons for the failure of most revolutionary ideals.

Luigi Pirandello (Italian dramatist)—Considered one of the most important innovators of twentieth-century drama, Pirandello developed experimental techniques including improvisation, the play-within-the-play, and the play-outside-the-play in order to explore such themes as the fluidity of reality, the relativity of truth, and the tenuous line between sanity and madness.

Marcel Proust (French novelist)—Proust's multivolume *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) is among literature's works of highest genius. Combining a social historian's chronicle of turn-of-the-century Paris society, a philosopher's reflections on the nature of time and consciousness, and a psychologist's insight into a tangled network of personalities, the novel is acclaimed for conveying a profound view of all human existence.

George Saintsbury (English critic)—Saintsbury has been called the most influential English literary historian and critic of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Ernest Thompson Seton (American naturalist and author)
Best known as the founder of the Boy Scouts of America, Seton was the author of twenty-five volumes of animal stories for children as well as books on woodcraft and natural history.

Italo Svevo (Italian novelist)—Svevo's ironic portrayals of the moral life of the bourgeoisie, which characteristically demonstrate the influence of the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, earned him a reputation as the father of the modern Italian novel.

Thorstein Veblen (American economist and social critic)
Veblen's seminal analyses of the nature, development, and consequences of business and industry—as well as his attack on bourgeois materialism in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*—distinguished him as one of the foremost American economists and social scientists of the twentieth century.

Thomas Wolfe (American novelist)—Wolfe is considered one of the foremost American novelists of the twentieth century. His most important works present intense and lyrical portraits of life in both rural and urban America while portraying the struggle of the lonely, sensitive, and artistic individual to find spiritual fulfillment.

William Butler Yeats (Irish poet, dramatist, and essayist)
Yeats is considered one of the greatest poets in the English language. Although his interest in Irish politics and his visionary approach to poetry often confounded his contemporaries and set him at odds with the intellectual trends of his time, Yeats's poetic achievement stands at the center of modern literature.

Additional Authors to Appear in Future Volumes

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William Rose Benét

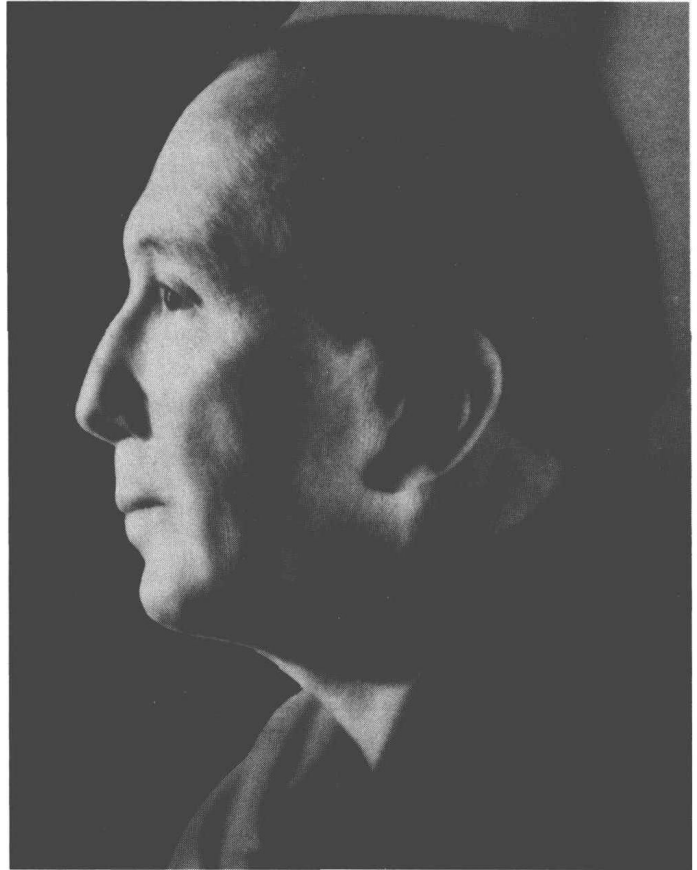
1886-1950

American poet, essayist, critic, short story writer, and editor.

Remembered today primarily as the brother of Stephen Vincent Benét and husband of Elinor Wylie, Benét wrote poetry that illuminated his belief in human dignity and celebrated the national spirit he saw illustrated in the lives of common people. Set in traditional metrical lines praised for their technical precision, Benét's poems present ideals and sentiments more common to the nineteenth century than the twentieth. In addition to fervid patriotism, Benét's work typically reveals his deeply humanistic values as well as his profound religious faith.

Benét was born in New York, the son of a career army officer whose appreciation of poetry inspired each of his three children to become poets. During his youth, Benét planned to follow his father into the military and attended Albany Academy. While there, he began to write, discovering, as he later noted, that he had "inherited from his father a love of French verse-forms, and so began—with the aid of *Tom Hood's Rhymester*—fashioning rondeaus, triolets, and ballads, and printing a little of this very bad verse in the school paper." In lieu of further military schooling, Benét attended Yale University, where he studied science, wrote poetry, and became editor of the *Yale Record*. Benét graduated in 1907 and worked for a variety of periodicals, including the *Century*, the *Literary Review*, and the *New York Evening Post*. His first volume of poetry, *Merchants from Cathay*, appeared in 1911. This collection is noted for an abundance of fanciful details, including references to jeweled temples, glittering swords, gallant heroes, and maidens in distress, and the evocative atmosphere of the title poem has been compared to that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." The poet Vachel Lindsay declared that "Merchants from Cathay" was his favorite American ballad, and he often recited it before large audiences during the early decades of the twentieth century. Like Lindsay, Benét wrote for a popular audience, believing that the poet "should produce all his poems on single broadsheets and go through the city every week tossing them in doors, like circus or furniture-sale announcements."

During the First World War, Benét volunteered for service and was enrolled in flight school; however, he was honorably discharged in 1918 because of poor eyesight. In that same year *The Burglar of the Zodiac, and Other Tales* appeared, a poetry collection in which Benét confronted more modern subjects than in his earlier poems. While his poems now treated such topics as films, quick-lunch counters, and skyscrapers, he retained his traditional verse forms, explaining that his intention was "to put the splendors of ancientry into the grim of modernity." He also employed classical allusions in poems based on characters in American folklore; for instance, in his most often reprinted poem, "The Horse Thief," a figure from Greek mythology appears in what is essentially a wild-west cowboy yarn. During the 1920s, Benét took on the role of mentor to several poets, including his brother, Stephen Vincent Benét, and a friend's sister, Elinor Wylie. He married Wylie in 1923, the year during which her success in New York's literary and social circles reached its height. Edmund Wilson noted at the time: "When I expressed my doubts about their union, she



The Granger Collection, New York

[Wylie] said with her harsh and callous laugh: 'Yes, it would be a pity that a first-rate poet should be turned into a second-rate poet by marrying a third-rate poet.' Benét and Wylie lived apart for most of their married life.

After the war, Benét helped to establish the *Saturday Review of Literature*, where he worked as an associate editor for the rest of his life. The poetry he produced during the 1930s earned him a reputation as a poet of mixed talent; as Louis Untermeyer has written: "His poetry was the man: generous, sometimes too lavish, overflowing with forthrightness and brotherly good will." Benét's poetry has frequently been criticized for its sentimentality and melodrama, most notably in Harriet Monroe's 1932 review of the verse novel *Rip Tide*, which derided Benét's portrayal of the deaths of two star-crossed lovers. Nonetheless, his work continued to earn respect, and in 1942 he received the Pulitzer Prize for *The Dust Which Is God*, a collection of autobiographical poems with an optimistic and patriotic emphasis. In "Men on Strike," for instance, he praises America in such exclamatory lines as: "The Country of the Free! Yes, a great land." Benét later wrote patriotic poems attacking Hitler which were distributed by the Office of War Information. He died in 1950 at the age of sixty-four.

Throughout his poetry, Benét often synthesized opposites such as the elevated and the ordinary, the sacred and the sensual,

and the lyrical and the prosaic. Joining classical allusions and folk types, he attached legendary significance to daily experience. In "Jesse James," for instance, Benét presents a Missouri outlaw in a mythical aspect, writing: "Jesse James was a Hercules / When he went through the woods he tore up the trees." Although Benét's poems are usually considered didactic, uneven, and derivative, critics have commended his poetry for its technical precision and versatility as well as its lyrical qualities.

(See also *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 118; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 45: *American Poets, 1880-1945*.)

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Merchants from Cathay (poetry) 1913
The Falconer of God, and Other Poems (poetry) 1914
The Great White Wall (poetry) 1916
The Burglar of the Zodiac, and Other Poems (poetry) 1918
Perpetual Light (poetry) 1919
Moons of Grandeur (poetry) 1920
The First Person Singular (novel) 1922
Man Possessed (poetry) 1927
Wild Goslings (essays, short stories, and poetry) 1927
Rip Tide (poetry) 1932
Starry Harness (poetry) 1933
Golden Fleece (poetry) 1935
The Dust Which Is God (poetry) 1941
Day of Deliverance (poetry) 1944
The Stairway of Surprise (poetry) 1947

JOYCE KILMER (essay date 1913)

[An American poet and critic, Kilmer is best known for his popular sentimental poem "Trees." In the following review of *Merchants from Cathay*, he praises Benét's adherence to traditional poetic forms.]

Mr. Benét's book of poems [*Merchants from Cathay*] takes its title from a gay ballad that gave pleasure to many when it appeared several months ago in a leading magazine; a tale of two strange merchants who rode into town on paunchy beasts with golden hooves. They bought sacks of magic merchandise, and they sang a carol in praise of the Grand Chan, "the King of all the Kings across the sea."

Nevertheless, this reviewer will resist the temptation to call Mr. Benét himself a merchant from Cathay. It is true that he brings some strange exotic wares, songs and stories from other lands and other times. But he is not (as many young poets are) wilfully a foreigner. He does not rebel against the noble old traditions of English poetry.

Of late years there has been noticeable among the younger poets a tendency to break deliberately the established rules of rhyme and rhythm and to write the sort of verse which is called "free." Partly this comes from a morbid craving after novelty, partly from laziness. It is good to find that Mr. Benét takes seriously the techniques of his art. There are in the volume now under consideration a number of poems—particularly "The Halcyon Birds" and "The Violin's Enchantress"—that are remarkable when looked at merely as examples of virtuosity. Not only does Mr. Benét show an enviable sense of verbal

music, he also has an accurate perception of the connection between rhythm and thought, he uses the form conscientiously, but he selects the form with due regard to the idea to be expressed.

So much for his mastery over his tools. He has, it has been stated, that knowledge of the use of words which the public legitimately demands of every maker of verses. Now must be examined that even more important thing, the idea, which is the poem's essential justification. And (contrary to the platitude of the amateur) sincerity is not the quality by virtue of which a poem stands or falls. The idea must first of all be interesting. It may also be sincere, elevating, original. But it must interest the reader before it can display to him its other virtues. Sincerity undecorated and obtrusive makes the work and conversation of many young poets things diligently to be avoided. Well, he must be blasé indeed whom all of these poems fail to interest. For the romanticist here are such strange tales as "The Bird Fancier" and "The Halcyon Birds," and ringing tributes to such illustrious vagabonds as Baron Munchausen and Sir John Mandeville. Those (not all of them are gone) who know the difference between Helle and Hades will enjoy such beautiful echoes of the classics as "The Centaur's Farewell," "The Winning of Pomona," and—best of all—"The Argo's Chanty."

Orpheus hath harped her,
 Her prow hath drunk the sea.
 Fifty haughty heroes at her golden rowlocks be!
 His fingers sweep the singing strings,
 Her forefoot white before she flings,
 Out from the shore she strains—she swings—
 And lifts, oh, gallantly!

Mr. Benét has written few "nature poems," but a keen and sympathetic observation of trees, flowers and clouds is manifest throughout his work. There are, of course, many love poems (the beautiful dedication is perhaps the best) and they are poems of real love, not sordid, not feverish, but strongly, whitely passionate. Mr. Benét is not interested in sphinxes, "love" does not invariably suggest "pain" to him, nor does he even once use the dear old rhyme of "lust" and "dust."

Some—but not all—of the poems that are ethical or philosophical in theme, deserve high praise. To take an exception first, "Remarks to the Back of a Pew," is a composition which Mr. Benét probably wrote when he was undergoing some punishment for "cutting" chapel in his freshman days. All of us know that on a hot Sunday morning it is pleasanter to sit under a tree and smoke a pipe than to listen to a long sermon in a poorly ventilated church. Some 8,000 people have put this idea into verse—calling the results "The Cathedral of the Trees" "Nature's Church" or something of the sort, and most of them have done it better than Mr. Benét. Undoubtedly, the back of his pew was very much bored. "Ritual" is less trite, but it is evidently the work of one who, for the moment, tries to fix his own limitations on all mankind, who decries what—as yet—he fails to understand. But he will understand.

Having thus patronizingly insulted Mr. Benét, the reviewer desires to call particular attention to three poems, to which, in the course of years, there will come, he thinks, no little fame. These are "The Anvil of Souls," "Sincerities," and "Umbræ Puellularum." The poem first named is the splendid expression of a tremendous thought; critics courageous enough to use the term will call this poem "great." The second (refreshing after "Ritual") is full of that abasement before God's works which marks the true poet. The third is an exquisite memorial to the

little maids of history and romance, a poem that for its sheer loveliness deserves immortality.

These three poems are things for which to be grateful. For the whole book we may well be grateful; it is a book of real poetry, musical, imaginative, vigorous. There are echoes of other poets—Francis Thompson, Alfred Nowes, Robert Browning, and (possibly) E. A. Robinson; but there is no slavish imitation; there is sure evidence of originality. Mr. Benét's second book will be better, but *Merchants from Cathay* is good enough to make all friends of American poetry glad.

Joyce Kilmer, "'From Cathay': Mr. Benét's Songs and Stories from Other Lands," in *The New York Times Book Review*, November 30, 1913, p. 683.

WILLIAM MORTON PAYNE (essay date 1914)

[The longtime literary editor for several Chicago publications, Payne reviewed books for twenty-three years at the Dial, one of America's most influential journals of literature and opinion in the early twentieth century. In the following excerpt, he offers an unfavorable review of *Merchants from Cathay*, finding a lack of restraint in Benét's poetry.]

I would not be a dogmatist,
Banging a heavy, hairy fist
To crack the pint-pots on the table.
But I would dream as I am able
And noose God's wonders in a twist
Of quaintest thoughts and rippled rhyme;
By happy turns of fortunate phrase
Would capture Faith, and teach stern Time
To mend his ways.

Thus discourses Mr. William Rose Benét, in "*Merchants from Cathay*." He is certainly a master of "quaintest thought and rippled rhyme," although the "happy turns of fortunate phrase" seem to elude him. Gifted with an opulent imagination, and bearing a staggering load of the stuff of poetry on his shoulders, he makes us a little too conscious of the burden, and does not quite succeed in so ordering his expression as to escape turgidity. Now and then he achieves restraint and clean-cut form, as in the sonnet on "*The Guests of Phineus*":

Man hungers long. Into his cup is poured
Wine of pearly brilliance or of flaming dyes
From gold and silver ewers of the skies—
The sun and moon. And on his banquet-board
Rich lands of romance, glamorous seas, afford
His vision viands. Yet with upturned eyes
Like to poor Phineus, he still descries
The shadows overhead, the birds abhorred.

Ye dark enigmas of this universe,
Cloud not my feast! God, give me thoughts to face
And rend despair, as did the wingèd twain
Who soared above the baffled guests of Thrace
And hurled the harpies of Jove's ancient curse
To whirlwind ruin o'er the Ionian main!

Mr. Benét is fond of classical themes, but he usually handles them in the wildest romantic manner. The realms of phantasy are his province, and he delights in the imaginings of Baron Munchausen and Sir John Mandeville. It is not every poet who would be daring enough to write a chanty in Kiplingese for the Argonauts to sing as they plied the oar:

Lemnos lies behind us
And ladies of good grace,
Home, bring home the oars again and lift the coasts of Thrace!

Nor yet the Clashing Islands find,
Nor stark Promethean highlands find,
But here, of far or nigh lands, find
Adventure's very place—
Adventure's splendid, terrible, and dear and dafting face!

Then, Orpheus, strike harp for us!
Oh, Talking Head, speak true for us!
Lynceus, look you sharp for us!
And, Tiphys, steer her through for us!
May Colchis curse the dawn o'day when first she thundered
free
And our golden captain, Jason, in glory put to sea.

Ragged and swinging measures are Mr. Benét's favorites, and they force his volume into a special format for their accommodation. But even the widened page is not wide enough, and a small type has to be used which is a serious obstacle to pleasurable reading. . . . Many of Mr. Benét's poems are marred by infelicitous words and halting rhythms, but sometimes he achieves something approaching perfection of form. There is probably no finer poem in the volume than "*The Rival Celestial*":

God, wilt Thou never leave my love alone?
Thou comest when she first draws breath in sleep,
Thy cloak blue night, glittering with stars of gold.
Thou standest in her doorway to intone
The promise of Thy troth that she must keep,
The wonders of Thy heaven she shall behold.

Her little room is filled with blinding light,
And past the darkness of her window-pane
The faces of glad angels closely press,
Gesturing for her to join their host this night,
Mount with their cavalcade for Thy domain!
Then darkness. . . . But Thy work is done no less.

(pp. 67-8)

William Morton Payne, in a review of "*Merchants from Cathay*," in *The Dial*, Vol. LVI, No. 662, January 16, 1914, pp. 67-8.

POETRY (essay date 1917)

[In the following review of *The Great White Wall*, the critic praises Benét's poems for their metrical variety.]

The heroic narrative in verse, in which anthropomorphic gods and brawny heroes stride through countless cantos of hexameter, is necessarily out of vogue in these days of staccato short-stories in *vers libre* and pithy etchings that reduce a life to an epigram. Yet there is something in us that goes behind the vogue, that escapes now and again from the stern censorship of our intellect and revels with a childlike glee in fierce bearded heroes with glittering swords, in lovely maidens in distress, in the color and gleam and swing of a crisp narrative in decorative verse. And as for the *Arabian Nights*, in whatever form we find them, it will be a mercifully long day before we lose our delight in them.

All these elements William Rose Benét has gathered together into a really enchanting tale in his latest book, *The Great White Wall*. He has called for his enchantment on all the ancient sources, on Kublai Khan, on ancient Cathay, on Persia and India and Arabia; but the enchantment remains authentic, and Mr. Benét is at his happiest in evoking it. The lines are everywhere a gleam with color, as in these, from the description of the army of Timur the Terrible on the march:

Pheasant feather and peacock plume from many a marching
 headdress glitters.
 Bows on backs, a crowd of archers bronzely swings along as
 one.
 Herds of antelope, goat, and nihlgao straggle along the armies'
 fringes.
 Mimics, sorcerers, and buffoons in parti-colored costumes
 pass.
 Dancing girls with golden anklets trip in the desert dust that
 sings.
 High upheld above their bearers, banners stream from poles of
 brass.
 Over all the embroidered arms of Samarcand, the City
 Splendid:
 Lion and Sun and Three Great Circles, threefold realms that
 signify,
 Blaze on a banner of gold brocade. And, densely by his troops
 attended,
 Odmar, leading the Avant-guard, to a blare of terrible horns
 goes by.

Mr. Benét has avoided with real craftsmanship that pitfall of the narrative poem, a too regular rhythm. The framework of heroic measure is here, but so well does he halt and vary it that nowhere, even to the ear of the sophisticated, is the sense rocked to sleep in the cradle of the metre; and the ambitions and the love of Timur stand out almost as starkly as from prose. In the end too, while not losing the elaborate brightness of the key, he lends a note of human truth to the tale by having Timur's spiritual defeat come at the moment of his greatest physical triumph.

There is a distinct place in American poetry for Mr. Benét's jewelled stories, and it is to be hoped that he will give us more of them. (pp. 322-24)

E. T., "Cathay Again," in *Poetry*, Vol. IX, No. 6, March, 1917, pp. 322-24.

HARRIET MONROE (essay date 1922)

[As the founder and editor of *Poetry*, Monroe was a key figure in the American "poetry renaissance" that took place in the early twentieth century. Poetry was the first periodical devoted primarily to the work of new poets and to poetry criticism, and from 1912 until her death, Monroe maintained an editorial policy of printing "the best English verse which is being written today, regardless of where, by whom, or under what theory of art it is written." In the following review of Benét's verse novel *Rip Tide*, Monroe criticizes Benét for reducing a tragic story to melodrama.]

In spite of certain lapses, Mr. Benét has made a poem of his novel [*Rip Tide*]. It is true, as the jacket says the author believes, that "a story may be told in verse with a condensation and intensification not possible to prose . . . and that it can be just as natural." But it is also true that the telling in verse makes a more severe demand upon the writer, not only in the obvious details of fitting a story to verse technique, but in lifting and holding the story to the higher levels of the poetic imagination. Nothing is so prosy as a verse-tale which does not reach and keep these levels; no one is so mistaken as the poet who thinks that mere rhyme and metrics will carry him to these upper ranges and sustain him there.

On the whole Mr. Benét moves securely on his poetic plateau—not the lofty epic heights, but a mountain meadow where there are grasses and flowers and views of the sea and icy, steep declivities. His progress is interrupted now and then by lines, or even passages, of prose, usually in the dialogue sections; the most flagrant example being two or three pages of talk



Stephen Vincent and William Rose Benét on the Yale campus in 1915.

between the young Barry and his chum, where the loosely woven pentameter rhymes make a clever pattern but sadly stiffen the friendly jargon of youth. Or we may find stylistic offences like this:

She wondered now as she had wondered then,
 Grasped by a will to which her will was water,
 Why all young love had meant had not prevailed
 Despite one careless boy who ceased to write.

The poet is happier in descriptive passages, whether of nature or human character. Here, from the first section of the poem, is a stanza showing forth the heroine's tragically ineffectual husband, him of the "burning eyes," the "hawklike face," the "ever-restless hands"—an eight-line stanza, rhyming 1-5, 2-6, etc.:

So he, who lived by fire, famished by fire,
 Changelessly unconsumed and burning ever,
 His passion always razing what he reared,
 His heart a hound hunting to kill his peace
 Though ever tracking beauty with desire,
 Gazed at the wasting prey of one endeavor
 And felt her tugging heart that leapt and veered
 Beneath his hand and quivered for release.

The poet changes his measures and stanza-forms adroitly, slipping in grace notes of extra short syllables to quicken the pace of the pentameter lines—

Something fortuitous willed it should find her alone—

Or cutting down to three's and two's:

Heart lead-encased—
 O difficult breath!—
 Taste as of death
 In the writhing mouth—

and returning to the slower iambs for the final tragedy, ending finally to the sound of the ocean, with which the poem began, when the actors in it

Heard in their ears, all night, like the drums of fate,
The far-off surf, the wind that would not abate,
The roar of the sea, the heavy roll of the tide,
And thought their ears would hold that sound forever.

The climax of the poem—the discovery to each other of father and son—is skilfully stripped bare of any unnecessary trope or word. It is done with complete competence, with appreciation of dramatic values, with every excellence except the last magic of great poetry.

In his treatment of the theme it would seem that Mr. Benét fumbled his chance at some kind of a really modern development. He surrendered to a romantic temptation to let the tempestuous surf kill off his young hero and thereby save everybody trouble. But this was begging the question, for the situation invited trouble. The poet leads up simply and dramatically to his climax: the house party of young people, with the head of the house, Gordon Powell, away at first, and his daughter falling in love with a tall young guest and getting engaged; Gordon's return and gradual realization that his daughter's suitor is his own son by a secret, brief liaison with a young matron who had died soon after; the young man asking the older one for his daughter's hand, and Gordon answering that the marriage can never take place and bluntly telling the shocked young suitor why.

One is tempted to follow in imagination a number of leads to possible endings. Suppose the poet had made Gordon hold his peace, and suffer horribly as the lovers rushed ignorantly into an incestuous marriage—that might have been an almost Freudian study of a strong man writhing into suicide or insanity, or of a weak one slithering into abysses of despairing secrecy or ultimate revelation; all this involving a presentation of human agony worthy of Jeffers himself. Or the young lover, under the shock of Gordon's terrible revelation, might have killed himself; or he might have told the girl, and made it, sooner or later, a double suicide; or he might have run away and left the girl to shoulder the agony. By any one of a number of endings the poet would have faced the issue raised by his plot, and followed it consistently to a credible modern finale. But an incurable romanticism got in his way; he must needs call in a tempest to kill off his hero, and not only that, but the hero must die a hero's death, must be dashed on the rocks in saving his sweetheart from the undertow.

The result of this concession to romance is a softening of fibre and a relaxing of the reader's interest. Somehow Gordon becomes commonplace when he so bluntly blurts out the terrible truth to the son he had never known, and one does not quite believe in nature's benevolent intercession—the storm and the violent death of the young lover seem manufactured, and thereby the story is lowered from the level of tragedy to that of melodrama.

It is the same poet who wrote "*Merchants from Cathay*," "*The Horse Thief*," and other fabulous ballads, only in these poems his romantic imagination moved more freely in its own element, was more at home than in this recent effort to invoke the fates and furies of tragedy.

Harriet Monroe, "Mr. Benét's Verse Tale," in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. IX, No. 15, October 29, 1922, p. 203.

LOUIS UNTERMAYER (essay date 1923)

[A poet during his early career, Untermeyer is better known as an anthologist of poetry and short fiction, an editor, and a master parodist. Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska have noted that Untermeyer was "the first to recognize the importance of the anthology in voicing a critical survey of his chosen field." Notable among his anthologies are *Modern American Poetry* (1919), *The Book of Living Verse* (1931), *New Modern American and British Poetry* (1950), and *A Treasury of Laughter* (1946). In the following excerpt from *American Poetry Since 1900*, Untermeyer surveys Benét's poetry collections, emphasizing the lyrical quality of his work.]

The outstanding feature of William Rose Benét's poetry is the fact that his lyrics have an unusually narrative quality and his ballads are intensely lyrical. Less apparent but equally characteristic is his mingling of realism and symbolism; he delights in interpreting the elemental through the incidental. A mystic with his feet firmly fixed in to-day. This is established even in his first volume, *Merchants from Cathay* where Benét has already found his own manner. But his is no thin and sugary mysticism, no Maeterlinckéd sweetness long drawn out; it has a hearty and almost muscular power. The best examples of this mood are "*The Anvil of Souls*," with its robust swing, "*Invulnerable*" and "*The Wrestlers*." But it reaches its highest pitch in the thumping rhythms of the ballads where Benét is at his best. The title-poem is the epitome of this rollicking gayety. It opens in a crisp tempo:

Their heels slapped their bumping mules; their fat chaps
glowed.

Glory unto Mary, each seemed to wear a crown!
Like sunset their robes were on the wide, white road:
So we saw those mad merchants come dusting into town.

Two paunchy beasts they rode on and two they drove before,
May the Saints all help us, the tiger stripes they had!
And the panniers upon them swelled full of stuffs and ore!
The square buzzed and jostled at a sight so mad.

They bawled in their beards, and their turbans they wried.
They stopped by the stalls with curvetting and clatter.
As bronze as the bracken their necks and faces dyed—
And a stave they sat singing, to tell us of the matter.

"For your silks to Sugarmago! For your dyes to Isfahan!
Weird fruits from the Isle o' Lamaree!

But for magic merchandise,
For treasure trove and spice,

Here's a catch and a carol to the great, grand Chan,
The King of all the Kings across the sea!"

Snatches like these shout from Benét's pages; they have the tone of Lewis Carroll's buoyant nonsense reset by Vachel Lindsay. Turn to a still earlier poem. Nine poets out of ten would have made "*The Argo's Chanty*" a wearisome list of forgotten incidents and half-remembered names. Given such a theme, they would have filled the lines with outworn classic phrases, routine images, Bulfinch's Mythology and dullness *ad lib*. Benét does nothing of the sort. He does not hesitate to use Greek names with the rest of them, but in his sharp measures they do not remain names; they take on ruddy flesh, they glow once more with the thrill of their shining adventure.

This vigor of utterance permeates most of Benét's work; it spurs his pen even when he is not engaged in the making of ballads. It surges beneath such quieter poems as "*Paternity*," the ironical and intricately rhymed "*Remarks to the Back of a Pew*"; the freshness of "*His Ally*," the tender strength of "*Charms*" and the fantastic "*Morgiana Dances*," in which swift movement is cleverly achieved. It makes us condone the

instances where his borrowing is unabashed. His love for Keats and Browning is so intense that occasionally he cannot refrain from imitating them—even when he is conscious of it.

In *The Falconer of God* the athletic mysticism grows. And with it grows a more fantastic sense of color and image. Benét has the gift of evoking a strange and spicy music from a combination of seemingly casual words. Interesting as was his earlier work, there was, beneath the bluster and airiness, something overstudious; hovering above the fresh aroma of his poems one caught, not infrequently, a whiff of midnight oil, slightly rancid. Here, even the more scholastic attempts show a sharpened participation, a livelier increase of life. Take, for example, the title-poem of the new book. This has all of Benét's early glamour lifted to a plane of symbolism where it is sustained without ever being forced. These are the first two verses:

I flung my soul to the air like a falcon flying,
I said, "Wait on, wait on, while I ride below!
I shall start a heron soon
In the marsh beneath the moon—
A strange white heron rising with silver on its wings,
Rising and crying
Wordless, wondrous things;
The secret of the stars, of the world's heart-strings
The answer to their woe.
Then stoop thou upon him, and grip and hold him so!"

My wild soul waited on as falcons hover.
I beat the reedy fens as I tramped past.
I heard the mournful loon
In the marsh beneath the moon.
And then, with feathery thunder, the bird of my desire
Broke from the cover
Flashing silver fire.
High up among the stars I saw his pinions spire;
The pale clouds gazed aghast
As my falcon stooped upon him, and gript and held him fast.

As more pointed instances of this broadening of perceptions there are the whimsical anger of "People," the macabre music of "The Cats of Cobblestone Street," and the revealing freshness that animates the rather ponderous learning in "The Schoolroom of Poets," where we see the great singers, not as laurel-crowned bards, but as boys in class—pinched little Chatterton oblivious of the rest, Francis Thompson mumbling scraps of Latin, Keats deep in the charms of Marmontel's *Peru*.

Some of the poems in this volume, some of the best poems, in fact, show an unfortunate tendency of Benét's—a tendency to be discursive and run on past the limitations of his themes. "The Land of the Giants" is a case in point. It is the sort of ballad that this poet writes so well, a blend of light whimsy and loud protest. G. K. Chesterton, in one of his "tremendous trifles," suggested that, since there are chanties for sailors, we ought to have a set of songs for shopmen, printers and bankers' clerks. In "The Land of the Giants," Benét has done an even more fascinating thing—he has written a marching song for reformers. But this ballad of Jack, the modern iconoclast, defying the ogres of tradition, would have been twice as appealing had it been half as long. Benét excels in the shorter poems where he can curb the prancing imagination that so often runs away with him; it is in the sonnet, where he is compelled to keep his restless steed curvetting inside the palings of fourteen lines, that he is most effective. Here his figures gain in definition and sharpness. In "The Pearl Diver" he speaks of

... the bright, bare Day
Like a tall diver poised above the surge
Of ebony night,

that plunged through a spray of stars to pluck a filmy pearl

And held it high for earth and heaven to mark:—
The cold globe of the winter-shrunk sun.

Benét's next volume is composed of one long poem interspersed with lyric interludes. *The Great White Wall* differs somewhat in kind but not in color from his previous volumes. Here is the same extraordinary sense of whimsy, a wayward fancy and a deft juggling with the grotesque. None of his compatriots, with the exception of Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay and his own younger brother, has his *flair* for the decorative that verges on the diabolic. In the present work, he has lightly turned back a few centuries and lets us revel in the savage glitter of ancient China. True, there are times when, like Swinburne, Benét pulls his reader under as he sinks in a welter of flowing words and inundating figures; but he is a good swimmer, even in the roughest verbal seas. One pictures him, having just plunged through an especially threatening passage; his feet firm but swaying a trifle on the shore; his head thrown back victoriously, still dripping phrases like:

He razed the ramparts of Systan and smote the lords of
Badukshan,
Whose chepaval and shekaval, wild squadrons, he outrode.
Polonians, barbarians, Udecelains, Hungarians
He gripped and threw, and on to new and vaster triumphs
strode.

The poet is seldom as rumbling as this. Often he achieves, in the midst of such merely mouth-filling rhymes, a piercing lyrical note. His vivacity and his invention rarely flag; the end where terrible Timur sees his great defeat in the hour of his greatest triumph is a skilful, dramatic climax.

In *The Burglar of the Zodiac* the poet begins to let his fantastic Pegasus run away and frequently unseat him. He seems either afraid or incapable of using the bit. The result is that often what started out as a canter among the stars ends in a scraping of shins on the pebbly earth. One watches this in such poems as the over-long allegory, "The Seventh Pawn," "The Quick-Lunch Counter" and "The Blackamoor's Pantomime." There are many times when the rhythms are badly cramped and the rhymes seem twisted out of joint.

But all the poet's earlier gifts are combined with new energy in the madcap title-poem, in "Films" (particularly the first and third reels), in the amusing "How to Catch Unicorns" and "The Horse Thief." This last is a prodigal and lively extravaganza. A desperate cowboy, crouching with coiled lariat in the mesquite, sees a snow-white horse, whose mane is mixed with moonlight and silver. He lassos the bright mustang: the rope breaks; he manages to swing up and hold to its glittering mane. Then, as the horse springs from the earth, he hears "a monstrous booming like a thunder of flapping sails," the mustang spreads wings—and he realizes he has caught Pegasus! . . . But the first poem is also the best example of what Benét can rise to. Here is possibly less of the impudent, soaring vivacity, but more of a homelier vision. "The Singing Skyscrapers" has the rich combination of daring and nobility toward which Benét's work seems to aim. In the voices of the titanic buildings calling each other across the night, we hear a new sort of mysticism—one that, with its mixture of splendor and stridency, is wholly American. It is impossible to imagine such a conception coming from a graduate of Oxford. The fancy itself is inconceivable except from one to whom skyscrapers are as native as quick-lunch counters, crap-games, double-