

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

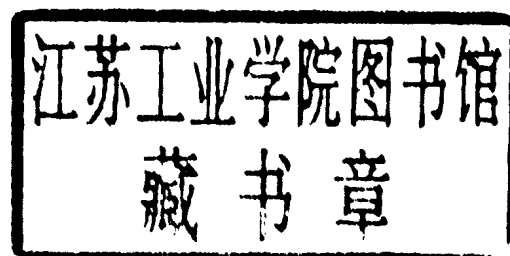
64

# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

**Volume 64**

*Michelle Lee*  
Project Editor



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## Poetry Criticism, Vol. 64

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## Preface

*Poetry Criticism (PC)* presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Thomson Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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*PC* is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Thomson Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

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Each *PC* entry consists of the following elements:

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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# Stephen Vincent Benét

## 1898-1943

American poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, and short story writer.

### INTRODUCTION

Benét is recognized as a noteworthy twentieth-century American poet. His best-known works adapt American myths, imagery, and themes to epic poetic form and exhibit a strong interest in history and legend. His poetic masterpiece, *John Brown's Body*, is a nationalistic epic poem that recounts the history of the Civil War. Although his verse has declined in popularity through the years, critics acknowledge his important contribution to American letters.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Benét was born on July 22, 1898, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He was born into a military family: his father was a career military officer, and his grandfather was a general in the U.S. Army. Benét's older brother was the poet William Rose Benét. The boys were raised in California and Georgia, where his father was stationed in the military. Benét became interested in literature as a boy, and his early writings received awards from *St. Nicholas* magazine. In 1915 he entered Yale University and published his first book, *Five Men and Pompey*. He quickly became involved in the literary life at Yale, developing friendships with such figures as Thornton Wilder and Archibald MacLeish. While at Yale he published another book of verse, *The Drug Shop, or Endymion in Edmonstoun* (1917). In his senior year at Yale, he served as chairman for the *Yale Literary Magazine*. After his graduation in 1919, he worked briefly in advertising but returned to Yale for graduate studies. In 1920 he accepted a fellowship to study at the Sorbonne in Paris. While in Paris he published his first novel, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, and met his wife, Rosemary Carr. They returned to the United States and married in 1921. That same year he was awarded the Poetry Society of America Prize and a few years later won the *Nation* poetry prize.

After he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1926, he moved with his family to Paris, where he remained for the next few years. It was there that he wrote his best-known poetic work, *John Brown's Body* (1928), which earned him a Pulitzer Prize. He then



returned to the United States and began to write short stories in addition to his poetry, essays, and novels. He also wrote plays, radio plays, and adaptations of myth and folklore. In 1929 he moved to Los Angeles to try his hand at writing scripts for Hollywood films. However, he did not enjoy scriptwriting and returned to New York. In 1933 he accepted the editorship of the Yale Younger Poet Series and engaged in literary journalism. In 1939 he suffered from a nervous breakdown, which was complicated by the onset of severe arthritis. Politically, Benét became a strong and active voice for liberal causes; he wrote several propaganda essays warning readers of the growing fascist threat in Europe. He died from a heart attack on March 13, 1943. A year later, he won a Pulitzer Prize for his incomplete posthumous poem *Western Star*.

### MAJOR WORKS

Benét wrote dramatic monologues, ballads, lyrics, and epic poems that focus on popular historical characters

and subjects and concern moral and social values. His first major work, *The Ballad of William Sycamore* (1923), draws from American legends such as Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and Kit Carson to celebrate the rugged individualism and adventurous spirit of the pioneer scout William Sycamore. He also included other numerous stereotypical images of the American West in the poem and cited Sycamore's death as a metaphor for the passing of an entire era. In 1923 *King David* was also published. This two-hundred line poem adapts the story of David and Bathsheba from the Bible. The poem did attract some controversy for telling such an iconic story in a modern way, and reviewers criticized Benét's handling of David's adultery and his casual repentance. Considered Benét's poetic masterpiece, *John Brown's Body* is a history of the Civil War. Starting right before Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, each section of the long poem is told from a different character's perspective and relates their experiences in various military campaigns. Benét utilized not only historical information to tell the story of the Civil War, but also used soldiers' letters and biographical material. Reviewers note the evenhandedness of his approach and argue that he treated his characters with respect and tolerance. In this way, critics view *John Brown's Body* as a nationalistic epic poem that stands out from Benét's other work. His final poem, *Western Star*, was published posthumously in 1944. Initially projected as a nine-volume epic poem on the American pioneer spirit and the settlement of the West, Benét only completed five thousand lines before his death in 1943. The finished portion of the poem chronicles the first English settlement in the New World.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Benét's reputation has declined throughout the years. His penchant for archetypal American characters and themes, as well as his optimism and patriotism, is denigrated by reviewers who value more experimental and esoteric forms of verse. Such critics dismiss his poems as too conventional and hackneyed. However, others commentators assert that his poetry utilizes familiar characters and stories in appealing ways that are in concert with mainstream American culture. *John Brown's Body* remains his best-known and most highly regarded poetic work. Critics commend the importance of the subject matter and the epic scope of the poem, as well as Benét's careful craftsmanship. In theme and style he is often compared to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Carl Sandburg, and Edgar Lee Masters. Despite his decline in popularity, critics recognize Benét as an important figure in the American poetic tradition and praise his ability to create compelling and entertaining verse from American history and folklore.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Poetry

- Five Men and Pompey: A Series of Dramatic Portraits* 1915
- The Drug Shop, or Endymion in Edmonstoun* 1917
- Young Adventure: A Book of Poems* 1918
- Heavens and Earth: A Book of Poems* 1920
- The Ballad of William Sycamore, 1790-1880* 1923
- King David* 1923
- Tiger Joy: A Book of Poems* 1925
- John Brown's Body* 1928
- Ballads and Poems, 1915-1930* 1931
- A Book of Americans* [with Rosemary Carr Benét] 1933
- Burning City: New Poems* 1936
- The Ballad of the Duke's Mercy* 1939
- Nightmare at Noon* 1940
- Listen to the People* 1941
- Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*. 2 vols. (novels, short stories, poems, essays, and radio plays) 1942
- Western Star* 1943
- The Last Circle: Stories and Poems* (poems and short stories) 1946
- Selected Poetry and Prose* (poems and essays) 1960

### Other Major Works

- The Beginning of Wisdom* (novel) 1921
- Young People's Pride: A Novel* (novel) 1922
- Jean Huguenot* (novel) 1923
- Nerves* [with John Chipman] (play) 1924
- That Awful Mrs. Eaton* [with John Chipman] (play) 1924
- Spanish Bayonet* (novel) 1926
- The Barefoot Saint* (short stories) 1929
- The Litter of the Rose Leaves* (short stories) 1930
- James Shore's Daughter* (novel) 1934
- The Magic of Poetry and the Poet's Art* (essays) 1936
- The Devil and Daniel Webster* (short stories) 1937
- The Headless Horseman: An Operetta in One Act* [with Douglas Moore] (play) 1937
- The Devil and Daniel Webster: A Play in One Act* (play) 1939
- We Stand United: A Declaration* (nonfiction) 1940
- A Child is Born: A Modern Drama of the Nativity* (play) 1942
- They Burned the Books* (play) 1942
- O'Halloran's Luck, and Other Short Stories* (short stories) 1944
- We Stand United, and Other Radio Scripts* (radio plays) 1945
- Selected Letters* (letters) 1960

## CRITICISM

Harriet Monroe (review date October-March 1928-1929)

SOURCE: Monroe, Harriet. "A Cinema Epic." *Poetry* 33, no. 2 (October-March 1928-1929): 91-6.

[In the following review, Monroe praises John Brown's *Body* as a singular achievement and calls the poem "a kind of cinema epic."]

Here is a real book, a man-size book, a rousing American verse-tale, a kind of familiar super-journalistic epic, done by a young poet away from home, an impecunious young poet lingering for two years in France on a Guggenheim "Travelling Fellowship." Hats off to Stephen Vincent Benét! I have read his earlier poems—stories of King David, William Sycamore, and other adventurers, mere practice work in narrative—and I herewith joyously confess I should never have dreamed that *John Brown's Body* was in him. Mr. Benét was the first poet honored by the Guggenheim committee, and for their first two or three years the only one. A book like this, probably the most distinguished piece of work which any Guggenheim "fellow" has turned out, should encourage them to appoint more poets.

Epic is too heroic a word, no doubt, to stand alone as descriptive of this poem; a word associated too loftily with Homer and Virgil, with Dante and Milton; suggestive of masterpieces of the past, whose royal rhythms carry mythical gods and heroes through magical exploits. Mr. Benét's poem is a kind of cinema epic, brilliantly flashing an hundred different aspects of American character and history on the silver screen of an unobtrusively fluent and responsive style. The scene-shiftings are sometimes jerky, not always adroit; occasionally the scenario is faulty or the camera-work slipshod, conceding a too "happy ending," for example, in at least one detail of the enormous scheme; and one is forced to admit that the poem, like most epics, falls off somewhat toward the end—*Books VII* and *VIII* do not quite keep up the gallant stride with which the poem began.

But these are minor blemishes, to be admitted but not dwelt upon when there is so much to praise. Mr. Benét has held his reins well in hand, and kept to the straight road of his subject, riding lightly and gracefully a Pegasus which has more paces than a gaited horse. Most of the narrative passages run in a loosely-syllabled variously rhymed three-time pentameter; but one never has a chance to tire of this measure, for suddenly, with a change of mood or subject in the story, the lines will

trot into tetrameters, or scuffle into free verse, or, as at the opening of *Book VII*, march solemnly into four-time hexameters. And the lyrics, which happily interrupt the narrative at intervals, are beautifully set to different song-measures, from the hymn-tune of *John Brown's Prayer* to the sapphics of Sally Dupré's lament for her wounded lover. In short, the technique shows admirable variety, with fewer lapses into dullness or prosiness than one would expect in so long a poem; it is carried without strain, is usually adequate, and often brilliantly skilful.

I have said there is much to praise, and perhaps one should praise first and longest the poet's whole-hearted abandonment to his

American muse, whose strong and diverse heart  
So many men have tried to understand,  
But only made it smaller with their art  
Because you are as various as your land.

. . . . .

You are the buffalo-ghost, the broncho-ghost  
With dollar-silver in your saddle-horn,  
The cowboys riding in from Painted Post,  
The Indian arrow in the Indian corn.

. . . . .

The prairie-schooners crawling toward the ore,  
And the cheap car parked by the station door.

Where the skyscrapers lift their shaggy plumes  
Of stranded smoke out of a stony mouth,  
You are that high stone and its arrogant fumes,  
And you are ruined gardens in the South,

And bleak New England farms—

And so forth. Only a few lines may be quoted from that haughty and high-spirited *Invocation*, much as one would like to quote the whole; for there is nothing finer in the book than this key-note.

Then, after the *Prelude* in the slave-ship, and a few pages with minor characters—youth north and south—we have the bronze clangor of John Brown's magnificent prayer:

I hear the rolling of the wheels,  
The chariots of war.  
I hear the breaking of the seals  
And the opening of the door.

. . . . .

Get, up, get up, my hardy sons;  
From this time forth we are  
No longer men, but pikes and guns  
In God's advancing war.

And if we live, we free the slave,  
And if we die, we die;  
But God has digged His saints a grave  
Beyond the western sky.



Oh, fairer than the bugle-call  
 Its walls of jasper shine!  
 And Joshua's sword is on the wall,  
 With space beside for mine.

And should the Philistine defend  
 His strength against our blows,  
 The God who doth not spare His friend  
 Will not forget His foes.

It is strange how the tough, rough figure of this pioneer crusader has taken on the glamorous proportions of a heroic myth. Executed as a traitor, his tomb is now a state-guarded shrine, and there all the poets are heaping up their tributes. Lindsay, Masters, Sandburg have laid their imperishable wreaths, and now this younger poet dedicates a whole book to his memory, making his name the pivot on which his nation swung its mighty war.

We cannot follow here the various episodes, historic and fictional, which carry the poem on to the death of Lincoln and the end of the conflict. There is nothing finer than the John Brown chapter, but some of the battle-thunders, rolling at Shiloh or Antietam or Gettysburg, strike out as heroic a tune. Throughout, the poet stands as a twentieth-century observer of all the impassioned goings to and fro; seeing the astonishing events as parts of a patterned whole, the characters as heroes or supes of a vast drama which few of them understand. He sees the whimsical, the grotesque as well as the heroic—there is icy satire, for example, in his description of the congressmen who “came out to see Bull Run”—

The congressmen who like free shows and spectacles,  
 They brought their wives and carriages along;  
 They brought their speeches and their picnic-lunch. . . .  
 Some even brought a little whiskey, too—  
 (A little whiskey is a comforting thing  
 For congressmen in the sun, in the heat of the sun.)

The characterization is often marvellously vivid. Three leading actors in the drama, especially, stand out in full stature and color—Grant, Lee and Davis are like to be remembered as this poet paints them: thus they were, and are till the crack of doom. Lincoln's portrait is pretty well done, but less authoritative—for who can put into print or paint that strange and sombre figure, piteous, humorous and confoundingly wise! Some of the minor generals—Hooker, Meade, Beauregard—are vividly sketched in, and McClellan gets his dusty tag. And a few women are very much alive, mostly southern women: Mary Lou Wingate, who hated the North, and held the plantation and the South together through those tragic years—

as slightly made

And as hard to break as a rapier blade.

And her mammy and servant:

Fat Aunt Bess is older than Time . . .  
 The family despot, and the slave.

We have a whole panorama moving hardily before us on the luminous screen—soldiers, officers, civilians; aristocrats, slaves, sweethearts, lovers, killers; great and small, heroes and nobodies, they are all in the picture that moves along to the rumble of drums.

And as the picture moves, as the cinema epic swings along, the ghostly figure of John Brown reappears like a refrain:

That is my song.  
 It is made of water and wind. It marches on.

A big book. A book which reaches out over this broad America, and looks not only backward but forward.

### Alfred Kreymborg (essay date 1929)

SOURCE: Kreymborg, Alfred. “Youth Moves on Toward Maturity.” In *Our Singing Strength: An Outline of American Poetry (1620-1930)*, pp. 607-11. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1929.

[In the following excerpt, Kreymborg views Benét as a minor poet “attempting a major theme” in John Brown's *Body* and asserts that the poem is too ambitious in scope.]

If Hart Crane has not yet found a theme large enough for his powers, it may be said that Stephen Benét, in *John Brown's Body*, attempted too large a canvas. But any failure on a grand scale is always admirable. It has been observed that recent American poets, in an effort to produce perfection, have become obsessed with polishing some microscopic image, or, haunted by cosmologies, have reduced the universe to polysyllabic abstractions in which human beings are beheld as atoms. If one now wearies of Imagism, one has also begun to weary of a poetic world in which the race is reduced to microbes underneath a lens fastened in the knowing eye of some poet who has read quite a few books on science and psychology, and holds an omniscient altitude by virtue of other men's discoveries. Benét and other young poets are returning to an older view of man—man, the heroic puppet—a view by no means romantic. The renewed interest in epic forms is based on this view, and the poet passionate enough to attempt nothing less than a major theme is the poet of to-morrow. America is old enough and rich enough in racial experience to offer major material. The modern movement in history and biography is an earnest of a larger, more

expert examination of our past with reference to our present and future. A man need no longer import his writing material from abroad. Longfellow's day is long since past. So is Ezra Pound's. Obviously, but never obviously enough for certain esthetes, any race is a member of the human race. One need not be a chauvinist to detect the major tendencies of the American experiment. The theme as a whole is tremendous; and its myriad ramifications have minor details of a major character. It is time for the native poet to be writing poems on a universal scale; to show how large the little is, no matter how little. He no longer has to invent his themes; the less he invents the better. He may find them in the American tradition. The tradition may not be completely grounded, broadened, mellowed. Most things, in a continental experiment, may still lie ahead. The old experiment may be a failure, and the new fail even more tragically. But human beings were concerned in the tragedy. Their effort and failure, and their relation to one another along the way, reveal an endless succession of heroic themes. Major poets are the rarest of human beings. We have not had an epic poet since Whitman. But we have had many minor poets attempting a major theme. Benét is the most recent of these.

Though he is still a young man, he has been writing ballads and narratives for a number of years. His first book, *Five Men And Pompey*, was issued by The Yale University Press in 1915, when the poet was seventeen. Three other volumes of verse and four or five rather popular novels, not to mention a play or two, have followed rapidly. One does not object to the popular appeal behind Benét's work. In choosing the Civil War as the theme for *John Brown's Body*, he obeyed the tradition of epic writers from Homer down: they used material common to their own race and known to the average household for years and centuries. Possibly, we are still too close to the Civil War. We are only beginning to see it en masse, and to understand its motives, motives for the most part dark to its protagonists, darker still to its people, and darkest of all to the gray and blue men in the field. But certain facts are now apparent: we perceive their approximate order and realize that the greatest issue of the war was not the Negro question, not the saving of the Union or the defense of States' rights, but the economic issue. From John Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry to Lincoln's assassination, this issue is the undercurrent of Benét's saga. Benét, though still a young man, was so thoroughly saturated with the war, from infancy on, thanks to his father's memories, and has made so persistent a study of histories, biographies, newspapers, facts, hearsay, legends and lies, as to be the poet best fitted at present to compose a Civil War epic. His poem is a fascinating document, deriving part of its fascination from the familiarity of the theme and of the characters and issues involved. But it is a document rather than a major poem: a book

composed of glorious fragments of poetry, thrilling battlescenes, portraits of the leaders and portraits of minor characters.

No history has given us a more intimate feeling of the war: one feels everything and everybody: the Southern soil, the Northern soil, the border states, the European vultures, England and France—John Brown, Davis, Lincoln, Lee, Jackson, Beauregard, Longstreet, Pickett, MacClellan, Meade, Hooker, Grant—and the fictitious characters: the Wingates of Georgia, the Wingate home, the Southern aristocracy, Southern ladies, the gypsy-like Sally Dupré, the ladylike Lucy Weatherby, the marvelous Negroes, Cudjo, faithful to his masters, and Spade, the runaway slave who finds less freedom in the North—and the Northern protagonist, Jack Ellyat of Connecticut, and the dryad he falls in love with, Melora Vilas, and deserts after their first night—a beautiful lyric episode. And the soldiers themselves—the most vivid characters in the book—their vernacular—the Southern, the Yankee, the Mid-Western, each an accurate transcription. And the hell of it all, the inordinate suffering, the blind obstinacy, hatred of the war, love of commanders; and the laughter, the spoofing, vaingloriousness, heroism, cowardice, chicanery, humanity. The poem has a cinematographic scheme. It is the right scheme for so vast and swift a canvas. But the poet has failed in important particulars. Many of the shots are entirely unnecessary. Others come in at the wrong time. Often, a battlescene is interrupted for the sake of imposing a sardonic moral, a moral in the manner of Sandburg. Often, the poet stops a scene to tell you that historians have fabricated sentimental lies at this point. Then again, lyrics are introduced by way of underscoring the mood of a character or situation. These are written out of the poet's nature. Too often, he writes out of his own person. Such passages are fine in themselves, but obscure the *dramatis personæ* or retard the dramatic progression.

The order of the material follows the historic order—from Harpers Ferry, Fort Sumter, Bull Run, through Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Appomattox, the surrender, the death of Lincoln, the dirge of the South, and the birth of Northern industrialism out of John Brown's remains.

Out of John Brown's strong sinews the tall skyscrapers grow,  
Out of his heart the chanting buildings rise,  
Rivet and girder, motor and dynamo,  
Pillar of smoke by day and fire by night,  
The steel-faced cities reaching at the skies,  
The whole enormous and rotating cage  
Hung with hard jewels of electric light,  
Smoky with sorrow, black with splendor, dyed  
Whiter than damask for a crystal bride  
With metal suns, the engine-handed Age,

The genie we have raised to rule the earth,  
 Obsequious to our will  
 But servant-master still,  
 The tireless serf already half a god . . .

Finally, the poet urges the reader not to join shuddering  
 or adoring prophets:

Say neither, in their way,  
 "It is a deadly magic and accursed,"  
 Nor "It is blest," but only "It is here."

It seems to me that the poet should not have attempted to recreate the war in its entirety. Born not far from Gettysburg (Book Seven is a superb reproduction of the battle), Benét might have produced a greater poem by confining himself to the one high incident, reflecting the whole war, and the heights and depths of the Southern cause to which, by temperament, he throws his larger sympathies. He could have employed the same cast of characters, actual and fictitious, and given us a more closely integrated drama. *John Brown's Body* does not fail as history: as a revelation of America or of the human race anywhere. Nor does it fail as poetry in disparate fragments. But it does fail as drama. Raving critics who called the book the greatest since the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were most unjust to Benét. One need only go back to Goethe's *Faust* or to Whitman's *Leaves* to see how unsparing such praise is. Goethe and Whitman each spent a lifetime on works unfinished at their death. Possibly, Benét has not yet finished *John Brown's Body*. Perhaps he will revise and enlarge it down to his final breath. What he has done with the theme has enough grandeur for the grandeur to be carried on. I am heartily glad the book is popular. But I trust, even more heartily, the poet will not let his public give him the impression that his work is done. The economic issues of any war are also issues in the lives of poets. The success of his book has freed Benét from the terrible bugaboo. He may now invite his soul to loaf, and make his book a companion of the *Leaves*. Walt, at the heart of hospital camps, was certain no poet could encompass the Civil War. It is time for some stripling to show the old prophet where he was wrong. Stephen Benét has made a fine start in that direction.

#### Morton Dauwen Zabel (review date August 1936)

SOURCE: Zabel, Morton Dauwen. "The American Grain." *Poetry* 48, no. 5 (August 1936): 276-82.

[In the following mixed review, Zabel delineates the range of styles and themes in Benét's *Burning City*.]

For twenty years Mr. Benét has been praised as a prodigy, a patriot, an entertainer, and a prize-winner; it has not been so easy to take him seriously as a poet.

But one becomes conscious of a wish to resist this difficulty and summon up a reasonable interest in a writer so devoted to the American tradition that he has won, at whatever sacrifice of critical respect or comparison with the more formidable talents of his period, one of the largest popular followings of the past two decades. His verse is a survival of an abundant native line; it has become a virtual guide-book of native myth and folklore, their place-names, heroes, humors, and reverences. He followed the mid-western poets of the pre-War revival in this affection; one poem in *Burning City*, a tribute to Vachel Lindsay which precedes another to Walt Whitman, reminds us of this continuity. At a moment when even special students of poetry are expressing exasperation with the more rarefied purities of esthetic belief, when political contempt is directed against intellectual verse and symbolist influences, when a new order of lyric realism is being demanded of Americans and the author of *John Brown's Body* is held up at the Writers' Congress as a model of popular eloquence to revolutionaries, Mr. Benét's day for sober honors seems at last to have arrived. *Burning City* claims attention on these grounds and one hopes to see a practiced hand demonstrate to floundering proletarian talents the right ways of using popular language and subjects, of translating common human tastes and necessities into a verse that will surmount the futility of convincing only those believers who require no conversion to the ways of light. The fact that Mr. Benét has sensed this situation and turned to social and political subject compels such curiosity. His new book opens with a set of poems on political themes ("Litany for Dictatorships," "Ode to the Austrian Socialists," etc.), and closes with a group of "Nightmares" of the coming years—a *Blick ins Chaos* where angels in cellophane, synthetic rubber, and chromium sow the seeds of a final confusion, and the termites of Manhattan develop a taste for steel.

These are formidable subjects, but we find them approached with no fear or trembling. Mr. Benét follows in a poetic line that is never so relaxed or self-confident as in the presence of prophetic enormities that might paralyze another order of poets to the point of speechlessness. This confidence is important; it indicates his type—the romantic fabulist. It explains both the ease with which he has spun past legends out of any stuff that fell to hand—Biblical, historical, or fantastic—and the temerity that produced in *John Brown's Body* a whole text-book of dramatic and metrical varieties. Ease of this kind is as enviable as it is convenient in a poet who wants to work in the large dimensions of popular myth. There can be no undue worry about refining allegory or imagery to the point of exact meaning, no severe economy in a poem's structure, and no privacy in its references. Such verse strives to be as indulgent to the reader's attention as possible, and no generosity is greater than that exhibited by Mr. Benét's

facile yarn-spinning imagination. His poem on Lindsay amounts to much more than a reproachful tribute to an ignored and neglected singer of the tribe: it shows how Mr. Benét derived, through Lindsay, from the bardic romantics who held sway in American poetry for over a century. Kipling, Masfield, Morris, and Rossetti might be studied as English revivalists of ballad and epic heroics, but not necessarily, for in America this tradition, in its homeliest form, was the living authority of text-books and family anthologies all the way from Neihardt, Riley, and Markham, back through Hay, Harte, and Miller, to the bearded dynasties of Longfellow and Bryant—a succession hostile to eccentric talent or refined taste, scornful of modernity or exotic influence, once the pride of the burgeoning Republic, and now chiefly a source of cheerful embarrassment to teachers and blushing incredulity to their students. Mr. Benét has aspired from his school-days to a place in this old American line. He has preferred, to the tests and risks of a loftier poetic hardihood, the homespun satisfactions recently expressed by Robert Frost:

At least don't use your mind too hard,  
But trust my instinct—I'm a bard.

Toward such bardship he has mastered a profuse stock of native lore and made himself, next to Lindsay, the most proficient balladist on native themes in the century. If the sentiment of local traditions survives for future poets, it may be largely due to his efforts. One admits a strong pull on even the most guarded of patriotic feelings, as well as on human impulses over which vigilance may now be more safely relaxed.

Why then, with all these seductions, does one find the sympathy as rigid and skeptical as ever in reading *Burning City*? It is chiefly because the book illustrates so flatly the distinction between bard and poet. To the fluent mill of such a talent, all is grist, not merely in subject-matter, but in language as well. Mr. Benét talks about social and moral degeneration, but there is little in imagery or phrasing to suggest that its meaning has penetrated his sensibilities or intelligence. He has roughly seized upon the moment's issues and causes, run them through the familiar meters and phrases of his instincts, and produced a passable verse journalism. It would be hoping too much to expect from this journeyman attitude anything very decisive in moral judgment or memorable as poetic meaning.

The most ambitious poem in the volume is the "**Ode to Walt Whitman.**" Here is a full opportunity for displaying a love of American memories against a heroic theme, and the opening section is in fact a passage in Mr. Benét's most charming manner—pictures of provincial innocence moving loosely through a free verse that catches the spirit of Whitman very successfully, particularly in the image of footsteps and the ap-

proach of "Magnificent Death." The second part begins to dissipate this impressive effect by repetition and direct exposition; it betrays the absence of a central conception of Whitman as the dialogue between the poet and his interrogator descends to the most obvious contrasts between Whitman's dream of democracy and its present frustration ending with a suspended cliché:

"Now they say we must have one tyranny or another  
And a dark bell rings in our hearts."

"Was the blood spilt for nothing, then?"

There follows a hymn-like interlude which suggests an answer to this question by hinting that heroic visions are not successful in terms of small profits and quick returns: "He grows through the earth and is part of it like the roots of new grass." The form of this passage—brief unrhymed lines of two beats—is appealing, and some of the images are delicate, but they multiply and entangle themselves to disadvantage, and as a lyric interruption it hardly strengthens the formal unity of the poem as a whole. In Part 4 the ode's resolution is completely stultified by characteristic faults: it begins with some slovenly sarcasm on the cheap way the world has with its poets, and advances into a catalogue of "the glory of America" as glimpsed by Whitman, a broad flood of visions and splendors advancing toward "the restless-hearted always, forever, Mississippi, the god." This exhibits Mr. Benét's customary deftness in producing the tones and colors of native life, but never gets beyond suggesting a check-list of his familiar references, and ends with the desultory effect of having all been heard, too many times, before. In fact, it repeats—shorn of originality or concentration—the idea of Crane's *The River*, and invites a perilous contrast with what the theme becomes in the hand of a genuine poet.

It is this willingness to work in the loose run-of-mill material of the commonplace that besets all the more serious projects here. When one poem is entitled "**Litany for Dictatorships,**" it reveals its technique only too obviously: it turns out to be a long indiscriminate itemization of newspaper reports, atrocities, and horrors that finally arrives at a perfectly true and quite insignificant conclusion: "We thought we were done with these things, but we were wrong," upon which any daily editorial writer might improve. The same effect is produced in the poem on the Austrian socialists, and as for the *Nightmares*, whatever sense they convey of the impending catastrophe is cheapened as much by the juvenility of their spectres as by the reckless vulgarity of their style. These chromium-plated angels and swampy miasmas belong to thrillers by Wells or Conan Doyle, and their language should be reserved to *The New Yorker* or Paul Engle. Mr. Benét's success in echoing this last-named disciple is not the least of the discouragements his new book offers. In fact, since