

Edgar Lee Masters and the Dramatic Monologue: Innovations and New Dimensions

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Abstract: One of the most artistic contributions of American poets at the beginning of the twentieth century is the development of the dramatic monologue which they took up from the Victorian poet, Robert Browning, “the most modern, to modern people the most important of poets.” The dramatic monologue was particularly suited to the needs of the modern American poets and their experiments with this form are highly innovative. It is significant that these poets were able to entertain possibilities that had not been foreseen by the earlier users of the form even as they did not completely break away from the past. As an example, although Edwin Arlington Robinson could never quite see the relation between himself and Browning, his earliest critics addressed him with the epithet, “American Browning” and, over the decades, critics have noted the striking similarity between the poets: both had a tendency to focus on the drama between men and women in a form which could at once present the immediate contact with a subject in action, and also maintain a detachment necessary to convey their meaning of the situation.

This paper examines Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* to expound the thesis that amongst the American poets of the early twentieth century, the dramatic monologue was a “live” form continually developing, expanding its borders, moving in different directions, yet linked firmly to the tradition of the Browningsque monologue.

Edgar Lee Masters is an important figure in this group of poets. His *Spoon River Anthology* has been described as the best of books and also as the worst of books. Whether readers praised it enthusiastically or vociferously attacked it, the fact remains that it compelled immediate and vigorous attention. By incorporating the form of the dramatic monologue, Masters was able, instantly, to give a greater meaning to his poems which are brief biographies, singularly frank, realistic and dramatic. The form was entirely in keeping with the epitaphs as it is a mode of self-revelation which lends objectivity and enables judgment of human actions even as it uses the speaking voice and conversational idiom with all its rich inflections. Masters took up the form of the dramatic monologue and gave it a new dimension by using it within the framework of an anthology. Even as the poems were being published, Masters began to interlace the biographies until, eventually; the book appears to be a novel about a group of characters in a small American town. Whereas in Browning’s monologues we hear (rather overhear) the views of the speaker and only inadvertently do we get to know the views of the person being addressed; with Masters the picture is complete. In a separate poem – or in a few separate poems if necessary – he draws for us, indirectly and suggestively, the whole picture. While retaining the essential features of the dramatic monologue, the early twentieth century American poets greatly widened its scope and effectively gave it a refreshing vitality.

Keywords: American poets, Masters, Dramatic Monologue, Innovations

Introduction

One of the most artistic contributions of American poets at the beginning of the twentieth century is the development of the dramatic monologue which they took up from the Victorian poet, Robert Browning, “the most modern, to modern people the most important of poets.”¹ The dramatic monologue was particularly suited to the needs of the modern American poets. Their experiments with this form are highly innovative and represent one of the more creative achievements of twentieth century literature. It is significant that these American poets were able to entertain possibilities that had not been foreseen by the earlier users of the form even as they did not completely break away from the past. Ezra Pound regarded Browning as a poetic model and on several occasions he spoke of the vitality of the form. He developed the dramatic monologue as a “persona” where the poet speaks through a mask, presenting the nucleus of a drama in the form of a monologue. That T.S. Eliot was aware of the importance of the form of the dramatic monologue is clear from his essay “The Three Voices of Poetry.” In his monologues Eliot attempted to present an age and to reveal its nature through living speech and he widened the scope of the dramatic monologue by bringing in “interiorization.” As for Edwin Arlington Robinson, although he could never quite see the relation between himself and Browning, his earliest critics addressed him with the epithet, “American Browning” and, over the decades, critics have noted the striking similarity between the poets: both had a tendency to focus on the drama between men and women in a form which could at once present the immediate contact with a subject in action, and also maintain a detachment necessary to convey their meaning of the situation.

Edgar Lee Masters took up the dramatic monologue and gave it a new dimension and his *Spoon River Anthology*² is a significant example of the creative use of this form, continually developing, expanding its borders, moving in different directions, yet linked firmly to the tradition of the Browningsque monologue. Indeed, the vitality and flexibility of the form is evident from the fact that several adaptations were made within it. While retaining the essential features, its scope was greatly widened. To examine Masters’ experiments with the dramatic monologue, it is necessary to refer to his life, for he himself tells us: “my blood and stock had something to do with the book;” and “the story of my ancestors is here and there woven into its fabric.”³ Born of New Zealand and Virginian ancestry in Garnett, Kansas in 1896,⁴ he remarks that his anthology was “a thoroughly Anglo-Saxon production.” Masters spent his boyhood in the Sangamon Valley; and it is the communities of this neighbourhood which eventually yielded to him a rich store of characters and stories for weaving into his many books. For Masters, this country was ideal. “All my memories of meadow larks, and long summer afternoons, and drowsy hills in the distance (these being in fact the Mason country hill on the border of the Sangamon River, five miles north of the Masters homestead) – all my memories nearly, of kind hearts and simple faiths were taken from Menard country.”⁵

About 1904, Masters began to see copies of the St. Louis *Mirror*; and soon met its editor, William Marion Reedy, and they became fast friends. In the words of Masters: “No man was so close to him as I was; nor any so close to me as he was.”⁶ In spite of their friendship, Reedy took no interest in Masters as a poet in those early years. Reedy valued Masters’ learning and admired his legal and political articles, but as to poetry he is reported to have told Masters. “For God’s sake lay off.”⁷ Masters felt that “there was implicit in Reedy’s criticisms the idea, that I should do something distinctively American, that my experience and background should not go unexposed, and should not be smothered under verses of mere skill, which did not free what was really within me.”⁸ When Masters sent Reedy the first pieces of the *Anthology*, back came a letter asking for more. Overnight, Masters became one among the parade of “discoveries” made in 1914. Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* also played a part in the introduction of *Spoon River Anthology*. Reedy’s *Mirror* ran the poem, initially under the pseudonym Webster Ford, from May 29, 1914 to January 5, 1915. The October 1914 issue of *Poetry* reprinted some of its parts and these were much appreciated. Pound promptly instructed Harriet Monroe to “Get some of Webster Ford’s stuff for *Poetry*.”⁹ Masters’ poem was considered to have sufficient individuality to help give definite shape to the modern poetic renaissance. When Macmillan published the anthology in April 1915, it went into several printings in rapid succession, and has continued to be frequently reprinted ever since. It was described as the best of books and the worst of books. W.S. Braithwaite, in the preface to his *Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1915*, recognizes the existence of the new poetry and refers to Frost and Masters as the two great successes of the year. On the other hand, Raymond M. Alden, a sharp critic of “the new movement”, called *Spoon River Anthology* “the *reductio ad absurdum* of certain of the new methods such as the abandonment of conventional form and the fearless scrutiny of disagreeable realities. There is nothing here, to be sure, of the vapourings of some of our imagists, but a stern virility to which one might warm were it not so deliberately unlovely.”¹⁰ Alice Corbin Henderson wrote an enthusiastic review in the June 1815 issue of *Poetry*, placing Masters with Frost and Robinsons as a developer of an indigenous American poetic tradition; while Amy Lowell lamented the fact that “*Spoon River* is one long chronicle of rapes, seductions, liaisons, and perversions.”¹¹ Critical discussion of the *Anthology* has continued unabated over the decades. One such instance is about the book’s notoriety due to its alleged preoccupation with sex and is quoted by John T. Flanagan in *Edgar Lee Masters: The Spoon River Poet and his Critics* (1974, Netuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press). In 1972 an English teacher in the Hillard Junior High School of the Socioto-Darby City School District in Ohio ordered copies of the book for his ninth grade students. When the copies arrived, the students discovered that, on orders of the school principal and superintendent, three of the portraits (Georgine Sand Miner, Elijah Browning, and Daniel M’Cumber) had been removed from the book, presumably because they contained objectionably explicit sexual material. A number of students signed a petition requesting unmutilated copies. Whether readers praised it or attacked it, the fact remains that *Spoon River Anthology* clearly compelled immediate and vigorous attention.

Conceptual Framework: An Anthology of Epitaphs

Spoon River Anthology was originally conceived as a novel: Masters wrote in his autobiography, *Across Spoon River*, that he had at times thought of writing an extended work in prose. He felt that his life in Chicago had shown him that “the country lawyer and the city lawyer were essentially the same; that the country banker and the city banker had the same nature; and so on down through the list of tradespeople, preachers, sensualists, and all kinds of human beings. That,” he added, “was the germ of *Spoon River Anthology* written eight years after this time.”¹² A conversation with his mother brought about the immediate impulse to write the book. In their talks, they went over the whole past of Lewistown and Petersburg, bringing up long-forgotten characters and events. “We traced these persons to their final fates, to the positions in life that they were then in. We had many sessions at this recalling of old days, and along the way I was reinvested with myself in those incarnations that had long since surrendered their sheaths to the changes of the years.” Masters then proceeded to write two or three of the portraits of *Spoon River Anthology*, and almost at once the idea came to him “... why not make this book the book I had thought about in 1906, in which I should draw the macrocosm by portraying the microcosm? Why not put side by side the stories of two characters interlocked in fate, thus giving both misunderstood souls a chance to be justly weighed? I proceeded to do this, drawing upon a fund of stories which had been accumulating for twenty years in the country and in the practice of law in Chicago.”¹³

The impetus for writing the book may have been personal, but the fact remains that the mode and the form of *Spoon River Anthology* are, by and large, derived from the *Greek Anthology*. In 1913, William Reedy gave Masters a copy of J.W. Mackail’s *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* (1906), praising its “ironic, sardonic, epigraphic” qualities.¹⁴ Shortly afterwards Masters sent in his new attempts – monologues based on the epigrams from the *Greek Anthology*.

Masters’ indebtedness to the *Greek Anthology* is clear in various ways. For one thing he has derived the very concept of the anthology in that he used the device of a series of short, related poems in his book. The vehicle of expression was eminently suitable for the form of the epitaph. As in the *Greek Anthology*, Masters’ poems are brief biographies, singularly frank, realistic and dramatic. By incorporating the form of the dramatic monologue, Masters was able, instantly, to give a greater meaning to his poems. The dramatic monologue, of itself, is a mode of self-revelation; it lends objectivity and judges human actions. It was a form entirely in keeping with the epitaphs.

The conceptual frame itself of *Spoon River Anthology* was startlingly dramatic -- dead men speaking their own epitaphs from the grave. The book is a chronicle of the lives of the inhabitants of Spoon River, all of whom “are sleeping on the hill” of a Midwestern cemetery. From the vantage point of their graves, they speak their own epitaphs, revealing their secret inner lives, pouring out their sins, their wasted dreams, their joys, their sorrows, incidentally revealing those details which were unknown during their lifetime.

Spoon River represents a small town in the Middle West. In fact its prototype, as Herbert Ellsworth Childs calls it, is “rural Illinois in the closing years of the last century.”¹⁵ Spoon River was actually a composite place and was derived from communities which the poet had personally known. Josephine Craven Chandler describes the geographical areas connected with Masters’ early life and notes that the poet conceived Spoon River as both a town and a stream.¹⁶ Actually he combines two small rivers flowing on either side of the Illinois River¹⁷ as well as a variety of communities in six or seven counties. As a boy, Masters visited these counties in his travels around the area. Masters displays great inventive faculty in depicting the characters of Spoon River. The range and variety of faces in his portrait gallery is breathtaking. We have Thomas Rhodes, the banker and the capitalist, and, in the bargain, a notorious villain, Daisy Frazer, the town’s good-hearted bad woman; Whedon, the unscrupulous editor of the town’s newspaper, who is hand-in-glove with Rhodes in victimizing several citizens; Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Pantier, the incompatible couple; Doc Hill, the unhappy yet compassionate man; Thomas Trevelian, the village poet, writing in a trite, ornamental language; Lucinda Matlock, a sturdy, enlightened old woman; Mrs. Kessler, the imaginative laundress; the village atheist, the judge, the gardener, the priest, the artist, the soldier, the druggist, the fisherman – we have them all. Each one of them relates his story, revealing all. Masters creates characters who reflect his personal interest in the proceedings. He allows these characters to speak for themselves directly or to express their feelings and reactions through a neutral mediating voice. These are dead men who are telling tales which are not only true but so varied and so bristling with life that often it becomes hard to remember that “these lusty combatants and challengers were really dead, at worst it seemed a case of burial alive, and one could almost fancy that the hard, pounding lines were the rappings on the coffin of the wrongfully imprisoned life, insisting on its restoration to the day.”¹⁸

Interlocking Histories

There are two hundred forty four monologues; several combine to present various views of single incidents: nineteen stories are developed by the inter-related participants. Masters widens the scope of the dramatic monologue by making it effective not only as an individual poem, but in the entirety of the anthology. Even as the poems were being published, Masters began to interlace the biographies until, eventually, the book appears to be a novel about a group of characters in a small American town. The speaker and the spoken to – the latter invisible but distinct – are an important feature of the dramatic monologue, and in Masters’ poems we are provided this essential connection between the voices. But he does not stop here. The inter-related voices in a poem, even as they are relevant within the context of the poem, produce a series of plots which are sustained throughout the book.

Masters’ dramatic mode takes him a step further because of the interlocking histories that he creates. Whereas in Browning’s monologues we hear (or rather overhear) the views of the speaker, and only inadvertently do we get to know the views of the person being addressed, with Masters the picture is complete. In a separate poem – or in a few separate

poems if necessary, -- he draws for us, indirectly and suggestively, the whole picture without concealment or evasion. The detachment of death has led to a terrible truthfulness. "Stripped of the necessity for deceit, these characters bare their souls without shame or embarrassment. Their behaviour is simply a human phenomenon, and the truth need not be coloured."¹⁹ Because there is no need for what Hertz calls "the euphemisms, moral clichés, hesitations, pretences, and self-delusions," because the characters speak freely about their lives, they reveal 'the essence' of what they are and come alive "with a certain familiar immediacy as people."²⁰ As the characters multiply the whole town builds up before us. In scope, Masters' use of the dramatic monologue was daring, even extravagant, in that he writes the chronicles of a whole community where characters act and interact with each other. As Max Putzel says: "The community they (the poems of *Spoon River Anthology*) portrayed was like a closely woven fabric. Its men and women moved like shuttles in a loom of cause and effect, tossed by forces incomprehensible to all."²¹

There are speakers and there are moods and there are tones; and there is constant interaction and movement between these; but not in the way that there is a development in Browning's monologues. The dramatic development of Masters' monologues is on a different note from that of Browning's monologues. In Browning, we find the character engaged on a specific course of action within a well-defined set of circumstances. There is a single situation, the one moment, which Browning seizes and carries to the point of culmination, and to its fullest dramatic possibilities. Browning's speakers are full-fledged dramatic characters with identifiable traits. The Duke of Ferrara, Fra Lippo Lippi, Mr. Sludge and Bishop Blougram are all memorable character conceptions. Masters' monologues, on the other hand, do not move towards one situation, one moment of confrontation. His characters do not have distinct identifiable traits, and most of them do not have distinct speaking voices either. All of them, however, do speak distinctly, conversationally, all of them are part of a large, exciting, dramatic situation and that is what makes them memorable.

After establishing the controlled conditions of his world, Masters adopts the pose of a detached reporter whose duty it is to describe the reactions which occur arising out of the conflicts and distortions, in much the same way as the qualities of a chemical element are revealed in the controlled conditions of a laboratory. But this is an experiment with a difference for the results are not only known, they cannot and will not, be altered. The dramatic monologues and the witness voices serve as an insight into psychological forces. Masters perforce has to adopt the pose of a detached reporter describing the conditions of his world, therefore cannot be "keen, direct and unsparing" like Crabbe, as T.S. Eliot laments. Eliot feels that "*Spoon River Anthology* is not material of the first intensity, it is reflective, not immediate."²² However, one must remember that a post-mortem of society has to be different from actual life, just as a corpse is only guts and blood, not the person one knows.

Chief among the interlocking histories is that of Deacon Thomas Rhodes, who, ably assisted by Editor Whedon, unscrupulously victimizes many of the citizens. Through the dead mouths of these victims emerges the portrait of a self-centered rich man, an abuser

of power, who deliberately sets out to oppress others. Thomas Rhodes ran the church as well as the store and the bank. He ruthlessly prosecuted Clarence Fawcett and held him up as a thief “to make an example of him,” because he took some blankets from the store in order to eke out his salary and pay a doctor’s bill for his little girl. When the bank was wrecked, Thomas Rhodes and his vain unscrupulous son were acquitted and Editor Whedon helped to send to prison as scapegoat George Reece who was innocent. “Butch” Weldy was crippled and blinded in an accident at the works, but the Circuit Judge ruled in favour of the Rhodes family, so that they were not liable to pay damages in compensation. Eugene Carman is indirectly the victim of Rhodes: in an angry fit he curses and abuses Rhodes and immediately crumples to the ground and dies of a broken vein in his head. But Rhodes is unaffected. His self-sufficiency is cold: he is shown to be “self-contained, compact, harmonized, / even to the end.” Editor Whedon, however, is shown lying:

... close by the river over the place
Where the sewage flows from the village,
And the empty cans and garbage are dumped,
And abortions are hidden.

The iniquities of Thomas Rhodes, his son, and Editor Whedon form a large part of the drama of this small town.

Another interlocking history is that of the Pantiers. After reading the monologues of Mr. and Mrs. Pantier, of their son Reuben Pantier, and of Emily Sparks, the affectionate school-teacher of Reuben, one cannot be sure as to who is responsible for the broken marriage. However, Trainor, the Druggist, thinks he can understand the incompatibility of the Pantiers being a “mixer of chemicals”.

There were Benjamin Pantier and his wife,
Good in themselves, but evil toward each other:
He oxygen, she hydrogen,
Their son, a devastating fire.

Benjamin Pantier, an unhappy lawyer testifies that he was driven out of his home by a dictatorial wife who “snared his soul.” Mrs. Pantier replies that it was unbearable for a lady of “delicate taste” to live with a man with no aesthetic sensibilities, and one moreover, who smelt of “whiskey and onions”. Whatever the case may be, the Pantiers’ quarrel left its mark on Spoon River. Max Putzel succinctly sums up the effect of the Pantier quarrel: “Whatever impulse led Mrs. Pantier to drive her husband from her bed, it had ramifications throughout the community. For her reforming zeal made her president of the Social Purity Club, and the club joined forces with the revivalist church headed by a hypocritical banker. In the end there was a political battle between these forces of Prohibition and a new liberal party. The bank failed; the courthouse was burned down: and the town marshal, among others, was killed.”²³

Reuben Pantier went out in the world, where he passed through every peril known “of wine and women and joy of life” until the thought of his teacher, Emily Sparks, and her

love for him, gives him “a new vision.” Emily Sparks’ monologue is one of the few tender, loving voices in a community which errs on the side of a preoccupation with crime and oppression, Emily Sparks loves Reuben Pantier and prays that he may rise above the clay and dross in him which is a result of the friction between his parents:

Oh boy, boy, for whom I prayed and prayed
In many a watchful hour at night,
Do you remember the letter I wrote you
Of the beautiful love of Christ?
And whether you ever took it or not,
My boy, wherever you are,
Work for your soul’s sake,
That all the clay of you, all of the dross of you,
May yield to the fire of you,
Till the fire is nothing but light! . . .
Nothing but light!

Through the use of the dramatic monologue, Masters has ingeniously presented various points of view, so that the entire story of an incompatible couple, and the effect their relationship has on their family and neighbourhood is revealed to us. This wider scope was a new development within the form itself.

Dramatic Situations and Contemporary issues

The dramatic situations in the monologues are not unreal: Masters regularly made reference to contemporary issues. As a practicing lawyer, Masters drew upon his own experiences of the legal profession to create his tales. “Masters chose poetry to explore the nature of law and legal systems”, and given “the panoply of lawyers, judges, citizens and litigants”, his anthology can be read as “a work of legal realism.”²⁴ May Swenson tells us how Masters’ ghosts “freely gossip about each other and themselves as well as about the private lives of neighbours still alive in their village. Few of the ingredients of human corruption and vulnerability are missing from the depositions of these underground witnesses, and the *Anthology* remains fascinating if for nothing else than to untangle the lurid web of small-town scandal provocatively placed before us.”²⁵ Masters’ monologues effectively create a sense of the dramatic by an exciting quality of the themes and situations portrayed. In the epilogue, “The Hills”, Masters gives a succinct catalogue of the kinds of themes he has taken up in *Spoon River Anthology*:

WHERE are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozier, the fighter?
All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

One passed in a fever,
One was buried in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in a jail,

One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife --
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

Where are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie and Edith,
The tender heart, the simple soul, the loud, the proud, the happy one? --
All, all, are sleeping on the hill.
One died in shameful child-birth,
One of a thwarted love,
One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,
One of a broken pride, in the search for heart's desire,
One after life in far-away London and Paris
Was brought to her little space by Ella and Kate and Mag --
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

In *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters dared to bring sex into the open – “dared” in fact, as Childs puts it, “to hint that in one corner of the world, at least, there were individuals and families for whom the Biblical system of monogamy was an insufficient solution of a very vexing question.”²⁶ Masters’ treatment of sex should not be regarded as unique; in fact it typifies the modern malaise. A large number of the inhabitants of Spoon River were victims of incompatibility, of sex starvation, of violence. But no solution is offered. In fact, Masters believed that various forces – sexual, social, religious, economic and political – combined to bring about a sterile and defeated society where people have limited capabilities, small minds, restricted lives and narrow horizons. *Spoon River Anthology* has “something of the old Greek tradition which saw man beset by his own character, but there is quite as much of the modern point of view which sees man beset by society.”²⁷ The tide of events has a clear impact on the inhabitants of Spoon River. They are deeply affected by memories of the Civil War, of Lincoln and Altgeld, Bryan and Roosevelt. There is a society where Puritanism, materialism, church and bank scandals leave a lasting impression. In fact Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* can be read as a sociological treatise in that it provides an insight into the effects of industrialization in early twentieth century America and also deals with democracy. Jim Brown of Spoon River says that one is

For men, or for money;
For the people or against them.

Masters is for the people. He deeply distrusted the decadent influence of the city, and lamented the fact that Spoon River had been corrupted and befouled by the vices of a materialist society. He riles indignantly against glaring injustice, political swindling and economic oppression. In Masters’ epitaphs, Reedy saw constant paradox: fools displaying wisdom, property rights destroying human rights, and justice made the instrument of injustice.²⁸ The book was not so much an indictment of the small town as a lament for its corruption. Masters, according to Michael Yatron, remained constant to the primary theme of literary populism, namely that America’s glory lay in its agricultural past: a past whose return he alternately despaired of and hoped for.²⁹ Masters denounces the ways of Spoon River because it did not have the innocent, semi-idyllic environment he believed

possible. In Spoon River, most of the inhabitants who had power, position and wealth, are depicted as uniformly evil. We have Thomas Rhodes the leading citizen of the town, a perpetrator of social injustice; his son Ralph Rhodes who wrecked his father's bank by borrowing money to dabble in wheat; John.M.Church, the corporation lawyer, who "pulled the wires with judge and jury, and the upper courts, to beat the claims of the crippled, the widows and orphans, and made a fortune thereat;" the Circuit Judge, who sold justice to the moneyed powers, Henry Phipps, the Sunday School superintendent who, as the dummy president of the wagon works and the canning factory, acted for Thomas Rhodes and the banking clique. The list is endless.

Masters uses his monologues to discuss several controversial issues of his day like prohibition, free love, women's rights. He emulated liberalism: when Jefferson Howard says,

Foe of the church with its charnel dankness,
Friend of the human touch of the tavern;

it is as if Masters was speaking of himself. We have the unfortunate Adam Weirauch who, "lost many friends, much time and money" caught between the forces of Altgeld and Armour, and then said "to hell with principle," and sold his vote on Charles T. Yerkes' street-car franchise and in the process got ruined.

For all his liberal, sociological tendencies, Masters does not glorify the working man. This is apparent from the twin monologues of John Hancock Otis and Anthony Findlay. Otis is a man of wealth and position, a bonafide democrat, who proclaims that he is

second to none in Spoon River
In my devotion to the cause of Liberty [?]

On the other hand we have Anthony Findlay, a labourer born in a shanty, "a veritable slave-driver" who affirms:

That a nation can never be good,
Or achieve the good,
Where the strong and the wise have not the rod
To use on the dull and weak.

Throughout *Spoon River Anthology*, we notice Masters' preoccupation with democracy and the problem of public morality. It was the selfish destruction of justice and liberty that Masters was concerned with. His own comment was: "I may say that if I had any conscious purpose in writing it [*Spoon River Anthology* and *The New Spoon River Anthology*], it was to awaken the American vision, that love of liberty which the best men of the Republic strove to win for us, to bequeath to time."³⁰

Part of the reason why Masters' faith and idealism are not immediately apparent is the arrangement of the *Anthology*. In the first section of the book, epitaphs of sinners and

rascals dominate, and it is only towards the end that we come across the genuinely enlightened spirits. As Masters himself puts it: "... when the book was put together in its definitive order, which was not the order of publication in the *Mirror*, the fools, the drunkards, and the failures came first, the people of one-birth minds got second place, and the heroes and the enlightened spirits came last, a sort of *Divine Comedy*."³¹ It is significant that there are so many reprehensible characters in *Spoon River*. The form of the dramatic monologue is particularly suited to that kind of representation.

Detached Sympathy

In a dramatic monologue, we necessarily identify ourselves with the speaker and adopt his angle of vision, however unconventional it might be. In fact, the most effective dramatic monologues are those with the most amazing points of view. This particular perspective is the method by which the disequilibrium between sympathy and judgment is established. Robert Langbaum has noted that the peculiar structure of the dramatic monologue depends entirely upon this tension between sympathy and judgment.³² The poem can be understood only through a combination of sympathy and judgment, because it can acquire meaning only through an interchange and fusion between the subjective and the objective experience. In a dramatic monologue we have the persona, the experiencing self; who leads us through his experience; and as we know the experience from within, we can empathetically undergo his experience. Even as the reader is given facts from within and establishes a sympathetic relation to the subject of the poem, he remains sufficiently detached from his subject to be able to pass judgment. "The monologue", says Wright, "offers the poet the opportunity to withdraw from the persona, to present as speaker a limited character with whom neither poet nor reader can be ultimately identified. The reader is allowed to feel morally or intellectually superior to the persona, or at least to feel that he has access to more information – in short, he sees the persona in a context of which the latter is unaware, and he recognizes that the implied context is also a part of the poem."³³ Also, the moral judgment does not decide the amount of sympathy given. The dramatic monologue derives its special effects from the fact that both sympathy and judgment are fully operative. The more reprehensible the speaker, the greater is the awareness of moral condemnation, and consequently the deeper the sympathetic identification. Thus the most effective dramatic monologues are those which deal with the most outrageous "impossible characters" and specialize in the reprehensible speaker because his moral perspective is extraordinary.

Masters' choice of form is therefore particularly appropriate, as the dramatic monologue is "an excellent vehicle for the impossible case."³⁴ In taking up themes of perversion and violence Masters has taken up an extraordinary perspective. His use of the dramatic monologue enables the reader to see what it feels like to believe that way, without losing one's awareness. M.W MacCullum tells us that the object (of the dramatic monologue) is to give facts from within. A certain dramatic understanding of the person speaking, which implies a certain dramatic sympathy with him, is not only the essential condition but the final cause of the whole species.³⁵ The speaker of a dramatic monologue is capable of dramatizing a situation in which a reader is willing to participate and sympathize, without

having finally to agree. We are required to suspend our moral judgment to understand the speaker of the dramatic monologue; and even as we sympathize with him, we are aware of the critical reservation. This split between judgment and sympathy is at work in all effective dramatic monologues, and more so in those where the speaker is in some way or the other reprehensible.

Several critics have been disturbed by Masters' tendency to dwell on the ugly and the revolting: many of his tales are tales of violence, crime and of the sordid. An anonymous reviewer of the *New York Times Book Review* questioned at the outset whether "any community ever existed which was so much in need of moral prophylaxis as Spoon River with its complement of drunkards, thieves, suicides, murders, and adulteries."³⁶ In fact, *Spoon River Anthology* has been called "one long chronicle of rapes, seductions, liaisons, and perversions. It is a great blot upon Masters' work. It is an obliquity of vision, a morbidness of mind, which distorts an otherwise remarkable picture. With all his vitality and courage, with all his wealth of experience and vividness of presentation, his point of view is often tortured and needlessly sensual and cruel."³⁷ One must perceive, however, that Spoon River is a small village, and must therefore give greater publicity to moral lapses than would a city, where vices can be hidden. The village must comment upon everything faithfully without idealizing or fantasizing.

It is noteworthy that Masters' attitude towards his characters is one of 'compassionate objectivity.'³⁸ He has infinite sympathy for the unhappy lives of the sordid little place called Spoon River. Masters called his epitaphs "Imagists ventures into rural delineations of fate and sorrow," and went on to confess that in writing them, a feeling like sorrow had come over him "something of the terror and loneliness of life, the consciousness of the flying years."³⁹ The tales that Masters tells are brutal and grim, but running through them is a feeling of keen pity. The opening lines of the epilogue are an example of Masters' attitude of detached sympathy:

WHERE are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozier, the fighter?
All, all, are sleeping on the hill.

Masters has a specially tender place for Doc Hill, who faces his tragic circumstances nobly. Ezra Pound said that Masters knew how to recognize the "eternal poetic situations when they appeal," and that when he wrote forthrightly, each poem had a cause," a sort of "core of reality,"⁴⁰ and he quotes "Doc Hill" to elaborate his point:

I WENT up and down the streets
Here and there by day and night,
Through all hours of the night caring for the poor who were sick.
Do you know why?
My wife hated me, my son went to the dogs.
And I turned to the people and poured out my love to them.

If our heart wrenches for Doc Hill, we have a sympathetic smile for Roscoe Purkapile who tries desperately to escape from his wife and fails:

SHE loved me. Oh! how she loved me!
I never had a chance to escape
From the day she first saw me.
But then after we were married I thought
She might prove her mortality and let me out,
Or she might divorce me.
But few die, none resign.
Then I ran away and was gone a year on a lark.
But she never complained. She said all would be well,
That I would return. And I did return.
I told her that while taking a row in a boat
I had been captured near Van Buren Street
By pirates on Lake Michigan,
And kept in chains, so I could not write her.
She cried and kissed me, and said it was cruel,
Outrageous, inhuman!
I then concluded our marriage
Was a divine dispensation
And could not be dissolved,
Except by death.
I was right.

Even as we are sorry for Roscoe Purkapile we cannot help chuckling when we read how Mrs. Purkapile dismisses her husband's "silly story" adding stoutly:

But a promise is a promise
And marriage is marriage,
And out of respect for my own character
I refused to be drawn into a divorce
By the scheme of a husband who had merely grown tired
Of his marital vow and duty.

We have deep sympathy for Petit the Poet, who plays around with "little iambics," with "Triolets, villanelles, rondels, rondeaus,"

While Homer and Whitman roared in the pines?

and for the Walter Simmons, who everyone believed was a genius and would be

As great as Edison or greater:

because as a boy he made little toys and little engines; but the fact was, as he admits:

I didn't have the brains.

Another failure whom we can't help feeling sorry for, is the frustrated Archibald Higbie who says bitterly:

I LOATHED you, Spoon River. I tried to rise above you,
I was ashamed of you. I despised you
As the place of my nativity.
And there in Rome, among the artists,
Speaking Italian, speaking French,
I seemed to myself at times to be free
Of every trace of my origin.

But failing to reach the heights of art, he exclaims bitterly:

There was no culture, you know, in Spoon River,
And I burned with shame and held my peace.
And what could I do, all covered over
And weighted down with western soil,
Except aspire, and pray for another
Birth in the world, with all of Spoon River
Rooted out of my soul?

Another poignant monologue is that of Anne Rutledge, the first love of Abraham Lincoln, "Wedded to him, not through union, But through separation." So moving is the picture of this noble, unselfish soul, that soon after this epitaph appeared, some historians searched out her grave, and buried her in Petersburg, placing the poem on her tombstone.

The drama consists in the gradual unfolding of the situation and various personalities. We remember Daisy Fraser not just as a good-hearted bad woman but as a good-hearted bad woman in a town rampant with hypocrisy, injustice and exploitation, all of which she talks about:

DID you ever hear of Editor Whedon
Giving to the public treasury any of the money he received
For supporting candidates for office?
Or for writing up the canning factory
To get people to invest?
Or for suppressing the facts about the bank,
When it was rotten and ready to break?
Did you ever hear of the Circuit Judge
Helping anyone except the "Q" railroad,
Or the bankers? Or did Rev. Peet or Rev. Sibley
Give any part of their salary, earned by keeping still,
Or speaking out as the leaders wished them to do,
To the building of the water works?
But I – Daisy Fraser who always passed

Along the streets through rows of nods and smiles,
And coughs and words such as “there she goes,”
Never was taken before Justice Arnett
Without contributing ten dollars and costs
To the school fund of Spoon River!

Among the few upright, enlightened spirits in this dead community is Lucinda Matlock, who is drawn from Masters’ recollection of his beloved grandmother Lucinda Masters. Lucinda Matlock worked contentedly, raised twelve children, and at the age of ninety-six, having lived enough, “passed to a sweet repose”. She cannot understand “the sorrow and weariness, anger, discontent and drooping hopes” of the poet’s generation. Lucinda Matlock stands out as a contented, courageous, happy woman in a town where the majority of the inhabitants have opposite traits. In *Spoon River Anthology*, individual lives do stand out, but against the backdrop and the pattern which Spoon River imposed upon them. Overall Masters has, in the words of Percival Sharp, “stirred certain vibrations in Spoon River,” and the vibrations are spontaneous and sympathetic.

The Speaking Voice

The dramatic monologue obviously cannot be expected to deal with the larger contents of a drama. It has to imply a great deal more than can be said within the given space and time. As Hobsbaum says, “It has this need to put a weight of past action upon a speech delivered in the present, and this subjects the verse to some strain, if only in handling an amount of experience disproportionate to the quantity of line employed.”⁴¹ For this reason we have a great deal of ellipsis, abrupt diction and colloquialism instead of stretches of narrative. This feature of language, which was only marginal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is central to the modern tradition. In fact, part of the reason for the popularity of the dramatic monologue in the twentieth century American poetic scene, is its simplicity of diction, its elliptical method and its direct technique. As Stange points out, the famous manifesto of the Imagists did not go much beyond Browning’s innovations in diction and dramatic concentration.

It is perhaps in his use of language to create effective drama that Masters came closest to Browning. Both poets use the speaking voice with all its rich inflections. The very simplicity of the language draws our instant attention towards the monologue. The conversational idiom is strikingly used by Masters in several monologues; as for instance, Judge Somers:

How does it happen, tell me,
That I who was most erudite of lawyers,
Who knew Blackstone and Coke
Almost by heart, who made the greatest speech
The court-house ever heard, and wrote
A brief that won the praise of Justice Breese –
How does it happen, tell me,
That I lie here unmarked, forgotten,

While Chase Henry, the town drunkard,
Has a marble block, topped by an urn,
Wherein Nature, in a mood ironical,
Has sown a flowering weed?

Or again, Amanda Barker's colloquial utterance:

HENRY got me with child,
Knowing that I could not bring forth life
Without losing my own.
In my youth therefore I entered the portals of dust.

Or Daniel M'Cumber's monologue as he tries to explain his desertion to Mary McNeely who became a recluse at home for love of him:

WHEN I went to the city, Mary McNeely,
I meant to return for you, yes I did.
But Laura, my landlady's daughter,
Stole into my life somehow, and won me away.
Then after some years whom should I meet
But Georgine Miner from Niles – a sprout
Of the free love...

These examples are strongly reminiscent of Browning's Andrea Del Sarto:⁴²

But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia, bear with me for once:
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish

And of Fra Lippo Lippi

I was a baby when my mother died
And father died and left me in the street.
I starved there, God knows how, a year or two
On fig-skins, melon parings, rinds and shucks,
Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,
My stomach being empty as your hat,
The wind doubled me up and down I went.

Pound considered Masters a poet so rugged he might endure the withering anti-aesthetic weather of the west, one capable of dealing with actual life direct and plain, not in "murmurous" idioms of derivative poesy. Masters, he declared, used, "the speech of a man in the process of getting something said."⁴³ The speaking voice is a device essentially suited to the form of the dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue is an address to an audience either present or imagined, and the speaking tone and

conversational metrics are the basic elements of social intercourse. Masters' dramatic monologues make effective use of these.

Although both Browning and Masters have worked in the medium of conversational language, there are certain differences in their style. Browning's poetry is replete with the characteristics of the spoken tongue: pauses, breaks, sudden ejaculations, unfinished utterance, repetitions. Browning's speakers are either too impatient or too excited to round off sentences; they tend to abruptly interrupt themselves to talk about something else, and they tend to plunge suddenly into the depths of action. We have, for instance "Bishop Blougram's Apology":

No more wine? Then we'll push back chairs and talk.
A final glass for me, though: Cool, i'faith! ...
So, you despise me, Mr. Gigadibs
No depreciation, -- nay, I beg you, sir!
Beside 'tis our engagement: don't your know,
I promised, if you'd watch a dinner out,
We'd see truth dawn together?

While Browning constantly employs these stylistic tricks in his poetry to produce a realistic effect, Masters' dramatic monologues give the impression of being neat in their tonal effects. There are no sudden shifts, no parenthetical breaks in *Spoon River Anthology*, and if there are side comments, they are very deliberately, very neatly added on. This difference in style may be attributed to Masters' use of the epitaph. Browning's speakers are alive, their thought processes are constantly changing, there are fluctuations in their moods and gestures, hence the conversational devices. Masters' speakers are dead. They speak distinctly and with great clarity of tone. John Horace Burleson begins:

I WON the prize essay at school
Here in the village,
And published a novel before I was twenty-five.

Dora Williams relates thus:

WHEN Reuben Pantier ran away and threw me
I went to Springfield. There I met a lush,
Whose father just deceased left him a fortune.
He married me when drunk. My life was wretched.
A year passed and one day they found him dead.
That made me rich. I moved on to Chicago.

This is not the spontaneous utterance of a living being, not an unwitting revelation, but a purposeful self-disclosure. In fact "the most forceful of the 'confessions' are often merely verbalizations of obvious facts which were always known by the speaker or by others in the town, but which, for reasons of exigency, convenience, or lack of the perspective of time, remained unspoken."⁴⁴

Robert Frost, commenting on his *Snow*, remarked: "I have three characters speaking in one poem, and I was not satisfied with what they said until I got them to speak so true to their own characters that no mistakes could be made as to who was speaking. I would never put the names of the speakers in front of what they said."⁴⁵ Edgar Lee Masters could never say the same of his *Spoon River Anthology*. As Babette Deutsch says of its figures, "However, they differ in their attitudes and the circumstances of their lives the characters are not identifiable by their speech. The cadences are monotonous and closer to prose than to song."⁴⁶ It is, of course, unreasonable to expect that Masters should, like Frost, need never to "put the names of the speakers in front of what they said," for Masters' graveyard is populated, rather over-populated, by a great number of citizens both distinguished and undistinguished. Men and women of all professions belonging to various communities are buried here. In this plethora of life-in-death, where lovers, bankers, judges, doctors, editors, artists, and churchmen mingle with a hat-maker, a poet, a prostitute, a fiddler, a laundress, a gambler, a Negro, a wanderer from Poland, another from China, and still another from Germany, it would not be fair to expect a sharp, distinct individuality of tone. Masters, however, does try to instill some measure of ingenuity in each portrait by his use of names. The names, says Masters, "I drew from both the Spoon River and the Sangamon River neighbourhoods, combining first names here with surnames there, and taking some also from the constitutions and State papers of Illinois."⁴⁷ Some of the names were products of Masters' inventive genius, and in these he gives suggestive clues to the personalities of the portraits and his attitude towards them. We have all manners of names: down-to-earth, unglamorous names like Jim Brown and Hannah Armstrong, we have a Tom, a Charley, an Ella, a Kate, a Mag, a Hod, a Bert. Then there are names like Yee Bow, the China man; Russian Sonia; Ippolit Konovaloff; Shack Dye, the Negro; which are distinctly regional. Some names have the professions of the person tagged on to them -- Trainor the Druggist, Andy the Night Watch, Schroeder the Fisherman, Fiddler Jones, Dippold the Optician. And finally there are names which obliquely, indirectly, tell us about the personalities: Zilpha Marsh is a medium, Silas Dement is the demented arsonist who sets fire to the court-house; Ida Chicken is a silly woman who

Thought I'd take a trip to Paris
To give my culture a final polish.

We have Voltaire Johnson who

Stood and laughed
Amid ironical lightning!

and Hamlet Micure who wants to know what is "divine despair;" and Minerva Jones, the village poetess with her "heavy body, cock-eye, and rolling walk" who "thirsted so for love" and hungered so for life." We have a crook attorney, ironically called John M. Church, and a good-for-nothing who spent his time hunting quail and snipe, named Percy Bysse Shelley.

In some cases, Masters varies the tone and posture of a monologue to fit that of a speaker, or presents a speaker's response to a situation in an unmistakable tone of voice. An example of the first kind which comes straight to mind is the monologue of the poet, Thomas Trevelyan:

READING in Ovid the sorrowful story of Itys,
Son of the love of Tereus and Procne, slain
For the guilty passion of Tereus for Philomela,
The flesh of him served to Tereus by Procne,
And the wrath of Tereus, the murderess pursuing
Till the gods made Philomela a nightingale,
Lute of the rising moon, and Procne a swallow!
Oh livers and artists of Hellas centuries gone,
Sealing in little thuribles, dreams and wisdom,
Incense beyond all price, forever fragrant,
A breath whereof makes clear the eyes of the soul!

No other epitaph in *Spoon River Anthology* is written in this kind of conspicuously lyrical, rhetorical language.

Similarly in Zilpha Marsh's epitaph not only is the same name a clue to the personality of the medium, but the language is also suggestive:

... I sat alone in the country school-house
Back from the road 'mid stricken fields,
And an eddy of wind blew leaves on the pane,
And crooned in the flue of the cannon-stove,
With its open door blurring the shadows
With the spectral glow of a dying fire.

Some of the professionals use metaphors drawn from their trade. We have Trainor, the Druggist, who thinks he can understand the incompatibility of the Pantiers, being "a mixer of chemicals". Then there is Sexsmith the Dentist who ends his monologue with a tart finality thus:

Why, a moral truth is a hollow tooth
Which must be propped with gold.

The epitaph of Thomas Rhodes, the arch-villain of the drama, exposes his defiant egotism in death, One can almost imagine Thomas Rhodes, arms akimbo, chin in the air, saying:

VERY well, you liberals,
And navigators into realms intellectual,
You sailors through heights imaginative,
Blown about by erratic currents, tumbling into air pockets,
You Margaret Fuller Slacks, Petits,

And Tennessee Claflin Shopes –
You found with all your boasted wisdom
How hard at the last it is
To keep the soul from splitting into cellular atoms.
While we, seekers of earth's treasures,
Getters and hoarders of gold,
Are self-contained, compact, harmonized,
Even to the end.

This aggressive tone and posture is very different from, say, the tone of contentment in “Fiddler Jones”:

THE earth keeps some vibration going
There in your heart, and that is you.
And if the people find you can fiddle,
Why, fiddle you must, for all your life...
I ended up with forty acres;
I ended up with a broken fiddle –
And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,
And not a single regret.

Or the low meditative, resigned tone of Mary McNeely who became a recluse for the love of a man:

PASSER BY,
To love is to find your own soul
Through the soul of the beloved one.
When the beloved one withdraws itself from your soul
Then you have lost your soul.
It is written: “I have a friend,
But my sorrow has no friend.”
Hence my long years of solitude at the home of my father,
Trying to get myself back,
And to turn my sorrow into a supreamer self.

Or again, the indignant tone of “Indignation” Jones:

You would not believe, would you,
That I came from good Welsh stock?
That I was purer blooded than the white trash here?
And of more direct lineage than the New Englanders
And Virginians of Spoon River?

This diversity of tone, however, can be found only to a limited extent in *Spoon River Anthology*. As a rule, we find a statement-like recitative tone running through most of the monologues. An important point which stands out at this stage, is the fact that Masters refrains from describing his figures physically. His portraits are purely psychological portraits – we have neurotics, rebels, martyrs and idealists; but no physical

embodiment is given. The features and the physical characteristics are left to the reader's imagination. This, according to Flanagan, is an important factor in the success of the *Anthology*.⁴⁸ The emphasis is on individual narratives and the characters. With the cold realism of the lawyer that he was, Masters presented the facts as he saw them. It is with a remarkable impersonality and objectivity that he allows his faceless characters to reveal themselves. As Reedy puts it, "Mr. Masters makes great literature of his comprehensively various epitaphs by virtue of the impersonality of the work in which he makes so many other personalities live."⁴⁹

Because Master's speakers are speaking from the immunity of the grave, there is no necessity for deceit or evasion, and the action and confession are reduced to the simplest terms. Masters' satire stands out precisely because of this simplicity of statement. The soldier, Knowlt Hoheimer, goes docilely to the war and dies for his country without ever knowing what the carved tombstone words *pro patria* meant. Hod Putt, the robber-murderer and his victim "Sleep peacefully side by side." Jack Mcguire learned to read and write in jail. The humor of juxtaposition is skillfully handled in "A.D. Blood":

IF you in the village think that my work was a good one,
Who closed the saloons and stopped all playing at cards,
And haled old Daisy Fraser before Justice Arnett,
In many a crusade to purge the people of sin;
Why do you let the milliner's daughter Dora,
And the worthless son of Benjamin Pantier
Nightly make my grave their unholy pillow?

At other times the irony runs across two studies as in "Elsa Wertman" and "Hamilton Greene". Hamilton Greene is proud of his "valiant and honorable blood," and of his mother from whom he has inherited "vivacity, fancy, language". He is grateful to his parents for helping him to become an honoured leader in the State. This is a perfectly happy, contented monologue, until we read Elsa Wertman's statement. Suddenly, we discover the terrible truth which Hamilton Greene never knew. His mother is not Francis Harris of Virginia, of valiant and honourable blood, but Elsa Wertman, a peasant girl from Germany. The veil of respectability has been torn in this tale of human weakness.

A similar kind of juxtaposition of irony spreads out over two other poems, "Albert Schirding" and "Jonas Keene". The monologues speak for themselves:

JONAS KEENE thought his lot a hard one
Because his children were all failures.
But I know of a fate more trying than that:
It is to be a failure while your children are successes.
For I raised a brood of eagles
Who flew away at last, leaving me
A crow on the abandoned bough.
Then, with the ambition to prefix Honorable to my name,
And thus to win my children's admiration,

I ran for County Superintendent of Schools,
Spending my accumulations to win – and lost.
That fall my daughter received first prize in Paris
For her picture, entitled, “The Old Mill” –
(It was of the water mill before Henry Wilkin put in steam.)
The feeling that I was not worthy of her finished me.

And Jonas Keene’s monologue:

WHY did Albert Schirding kill himself
Trying to be County Superintendent of Schools,
Blest as he was with the means of life
And wonderful children, bringing him honor
Ere he was sixty?
If even one of my boys could have run a news-stand,
Or one of my girls could have married a decent man,
I should not have walked in the rain
And jumped into bed with clothes all wet,
Refusing medical aid.

This juxtaposition of irony is very skillfully handled by Masters.

In *Spoon River Anthology* at least, Masters has adopted brevity and compression, and the result is a happy one. His monologues are brief and compact, we find no wealth of detail, no explicit analysis. Firkins refer to the *Spoon River* method as “the method of completeness in trenchant brevity”, and goes on to say that “the enforced terseness demanded by the treatment of three hundred and forty four persons in three hundred and forty-four pages is as sanative for Mr. Masters as a straight-backed, hard-backed chair is for a spine with capacities for erectness and inclinations for lounging.”⁵⁰ Marjorie A. Seiffert refers to *Spoon River Anthology* as “a sort of notebook into which Mr. Masters condensed his observations of people – a case filled with human specimens,”⁵¹ while Conrad Aiken feels that it is this compression of his material to the point where it becomes “singly powerful” that gives Masters’ work a “quality of realistic magic.”⁵²

Technically, the monologues in *Spoon River Anthology* show Masters at his best. He employs artistic selection, compression and conciseness. In fact it is the succinct brevity of the form which gives his work a kind of vitality. In his later books, Masters resigns this artistic compression in favor of an explicit detailed analysis. One could well argue that Masters failed in the prodigious volumes of narrative poetry that followed *Spoon River Anthology* because he abandoned the medium of the dramatic monologue.

Little is said and much implied in Masters’ monologues. Nellie Clark’s monologue, with the devastating simplicity of its last lines, is a superb example of Masters’ suggestive methods:

I WAS only eight years old;

And before I grew up and knew what it meant
I had no words for it, except
That I was frightened and told my Mother;
And that my Father got a pistol
And would have killed Charlie, who was a big boy,
Fifteen years old, except for his Mother.
Nevertheless the story clung to me.
But the man who married me, a widower of thirty-five,
Was a newcomer and never heard it
Till two years after we were married.
Then he considered himself cheated,
And the village agreed that I was not really a virgin.
Well, he deserted me, and I died
The following winter.

This is strongly reminiscent of Browning's "My Last Duchess":

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed here; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together.

Yet another example where the force of suggestion is beautifully handled by Masters is in the monologue of Sam Hookey:

I RAN away from home with the circus,
Having fallen in love with Mademoiselle Estralada,
The lion tamer.
One time, having starved the lions
For more than a day,
I entered the cage and began to beat Brutus
And Leo and Gypsy.
.....
On entering these regions
I met a shadow who cursed me,
And said it served me right....
It was Robespierre!

The suggestive method is a device that can be very effectively handled especially in those forms of poetry adopting the speaking voices, like the dramatic monologue. Masters' monologues have the flavor of common speech and a deliberately imposed brevity.

New Spoon River Anthology

Masters is essentially a one-book man, though he did publish several more volumes of poetry, novels and biographies. However no discussion of Masters' dramatic monologues

can be complete without a reference to *The New Spoon River* which was published in 1924.⁵³ *The New Spoon River* is valuable as an extension of the thought of *Spoon River Anthology*. In the 1920s, Spoon River had become a suburb of Chicago, “a ganglion / For the monster brain Chicago” (“Marx, the Sign Painter”). Harry Hausen wrote of the new anthology: “Masters endeavours to interpret the lives of those who have died since Spoon River became a standardized community; in other words, suffering from the ailments which beset the republic itself: foreign influences, materialism, the madness for money, the lack of high ideas, Spoon River has been ‘metropolized’.”⁵⁴ Because the character of Spoon River has changed, new occupational types like the garage mechanic make their appearance. Barnstone notes that in *The New Spoon River*, the intrusion of city life is more pronounced.⁵⁵ We have electricity, the automat, the billboard, the radio and to top it all, we have foreigners. When Marx, the sign painter, practised his profession, he found himself dealing with funeral parlours, life insurance agencies, and the automat. Inhabitants are no longer so obviously Anglo-Saxon in origin, as is clear from the abundance of foreign names. And yet, in spite of these changes, things are very much the same. In both anthologies, industrialization and urbanization lead to a bloody struggle between capital and labour; freedom is atrophied; there is judicial corruption, immoral thinking and journalistic greed; and life is generally sad, drab, confusing and perplexing. Bruno Bean, the auto mechanic, speaks very much to the point:

I saw no change in the game of men,
And nothing gained by the swifter wheels,

In speaking of his motive for writing the later book, Masters refers to the “encroachment of the city” and “the standardized community.”⁵⁶ This disturbing invasion by urban and industrial values is responsible for lives and deaths which are overall more violent, more tragic, more desperate. We have Robert Carpenter:

You were good soil, mother of me
Mary Woolridge,
But why did you allow the poor seed of my father
To be wasted in such soil?

Or Michael Gallagher;

Forgive me, Jesus of Nazareth, for the comparison
But you and I stood silent for like reasons,
You as a lamb disdaining to wrangle;
I as a goat tied in the garbage dump of Spoon River,
Eyeing the festering stuff which the scribes of the Press
Piled for flies and infection to all the town.

Dick Sapper “being known as a Socialist” was put in prison for twenty years,

Where my body broke, and my spirit broke,
And where in vain I tried to be pardoned

And I coughed and cursed to that awful moment
When the blood of my body shot from my mouth like a gushing hose, and
I was dead.

Sophie Wassner realizes the meaninglessness of her life: although “dowered with personal beauty,/ with grace and brilliancy of mind,” she married the wrong man, chose the wrong friend, bought the wrong house and made her home in Spoon River, “To my undoing.” Evalena Fayner who eventually commits suicide, suffered sleeplessness:

Fear of walls! Fear of crowds, of building.
Fear of poverty! Fear of sudden death!
Sapped, terrified by the smallest demands of the day.

Claude Antle is as “a deer compelled to live with the hounds.” Fate and Nature were in league against him. He is teased by schoolmates, bitten by dogs, nearly drowned, sick to death from eating toadstools; always a broken arm, kick of horse, frozen ear; betrayed, robbed in business. Cowley Rider slaves all his life for a thankless family and can only say,

The wages of goodness in Death!

Heine La Salle suffers

persecution, because society fears
Always the genius soul.

Sarah Dewitt, the self-righteous, respectable woman, towards whom Masters has a satirical attitude, finds one whom she believed “gifted of God” to be “full of treasons and perjuries,” and says “The wreck of him was the wreck of God.” Emmett Burns talk about this blundering world and advises;

Be young, be wise,
Be indifferent to good and evil,
And the laws they make
Seek only the truth
And die!

Foreigners invade Spoon River, and through McDowell Young, Masters voices his sentiments concerning them. Olaf Lindbloom, the corrupt editor of a Spoon River newspaper, is representative of the first generation of descendants of the immigrations to Spoon River. He publishes “Girondist doctrines of the largest acceptance thereby increasing my circulation,” on the basis of which he sells advertising space. Overall, in *The New Spoon River* the moments of optimism are few, but the fact remains that Masters “still praised honesty, courage, magnanimity and vitality.”⁵⁷

The diction used in *The New Spoon River* is “at once city colloquial and visceral.”⁵⁸ As in the earlier volume, Masters writes with brevity and compression. Sharp, incisive,

revealing phrases are very often to be found. The world is a “topsy-turvy woman-world,” there is the “lollipop republic” of boy scouts and rotarians, war has a “mouth like a Grand Canyon.” The new anthology, though more inclusive, is not as organized as the previous one. But, as Harriet Monroe says, we do have “more of those brief biographies of human souls, and possibly some of these new ones dig deeper into the hidden sources of action and emotion than those in the earlier book,” and after all, “who can object to a second series.”⁵⁹

Conclusion

With the publication of *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters acquired great fame. As early as 1915, Masters had avowed that all that counted was the poet’s freedom to choose the form which he felt was most appropriate to achieve the desired effect.⁶⁰ In an America emerging from a complacent acceptance of old standards and genteel tradition, Masters with his flouting of tradition and his effort at revitalizing the language of poetry, caused a widespread sensation. And ninety five years later Masters retains an audience and *Spoon River Anthology* also serves as an inspiration to various poets.

Although Masters turned out books at the rate of nearly one a year until his death in 1950, he never quite equalled the vitality of *Spoon River Anthology*. In fact his fame rests solely on it. Reedy published far too much of Masters and in his voluminous output. Masters appears to have lost the selective skill, the compression and the psychological insight forced upon him by the use of the dramatic monologue. When he moved away from this form towards narrative, his work faded into insignificance. He did not recognize that his “true voice in his poetry is, oddly, the voice of a persona... in the best of the *Spoon River* poems the mask was not transparent. The force and conviction of an epitaph derived from the authenticity of the persona. Whenever the face of the poet began to show through the mask, the voice lost its liberating simplicity and artlessness and became stuffy and didactic.”⁶¹ In his later works Masters gave up the homely bantering casual voice imposed upon him by the use of the persona and adopted a “literary,” serious, elevated voice. Had he retained his true voice, arguably he might have sustained the promise which Reedy, Pound and others saw in the *Spoon River* portraits.

Spoon River Anthology represented a new departure, raising moral, aesthetic, psychological, stylistic and formalistic challenges. By his use of the dramatic monologue, Masters established himself as one of the “new” poets who sought to work toward a freedom of subject matter and technique to express their views and their vision.

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At sixty 1, Dionysios, lie in my grave
I was from Tarsos
I never married and wish my father had not.

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