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THE SOURCES OF THE SPOON:
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SPoon RIVER ANTHOLOGY

James Hurt

I

THE SPOON RIVER ANTHOLOGY CONTINUES TO MAINTAIN its place as one of the best known and most widely read volumes of poetry ever published in the United States.¹ But perhaps because of its very popularity and apparent simplicity, it has not attracted much serious criticism.² Early critics tended to debate whether Masters’ free verse was poetry or not and to register either approval or disapproval of Masters’ frank treatment of sex. These issues are no longer burning ones, and more recent critics tend to “place” the book with Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, and Lewis’ Main Street as an anti-sentimental expose of small town life and to regard it as otherwise self-explanatory. The “simplicity” of the Spoon River Anthology is deceptive, however. To regard Spoon River merely as a sociological microcosm, the small town as world, is to leave out a great deal of the book—the highly personal mysticism of many of the epitaphs of the last section, for example, the systematic imagery that runs throughout the collection, and the almost obsessive recurrence through the epitaphs of certain subjective motifs.

To do justice to the complexity of the Anthology, the reader must recognize the highly personal nature of the epitaphs, the extent to which they present not just the small town as world but also the poet himself as small town. Masters’ constant presence in the book behind the formally “objective,” dramatic epitaphs is inescapable, but it is usually dismissed or deplored as distortion, a skewing of “the truth” about Spoon River in the direction of Masters’ various prejudices and

¹All quotations from the Spoon River Anthology are from the Collier edition (New York, 1962).
²For a survey of the criticism, see John T. Flanagan, Edgar Lee Masters: The Spoon River Poet and his Critics (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1974).

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preconceptions. The book's subjectivity might instead be regarded as its strength, its very reason for being, not as an objective critique of village life but as a sustained piece of self-revelation, a portrait of the artist as a small town.

Masters himself took this view of the book, at least on occasion, and there are ample materials for developing such an interpretation, in Masters' direct statements, in the backgrounds of the composition of the Anthology, and in Masters' other self-portrait in his autobiography, Across Spoon River.3

Masters wrote himself into the Spoon River Anthology not only as “Webster Ford,” his pseudonym for the magazine publication of the Anthology, but in a number of other epitaphs as well. But in 1933, he declared that his “cosmology” was best represented not by any epitaph in the original Anthology of 1915 but by the epitaph of “Clifford Ridell” in the New Spoon River of 1924.4 This epitaph is significant enough in the interpretation of the Spoon River Anthology to merit quotation in full:

Nothing outside of it,
Boundless and filling all space.
At one with itself, being all,
And bent to no will but its own.
Changing forever, but never diminishing.
Every part of it true to the whole of it,
However a part of it wars with a part of it.
Disharmony comes from two, not one.
Friendly with itself, for otherwise
It would perish.
Is it good or evil? But how evil,
Since there is nothing with which to compare it,
And make it a blunder, a mistake?
Without disaster, having no fate, being fate itself.
Unutterable unity,
Eternal creation,
Changing, but never destroying, not even me.5

The Ridell epitaph is an extreme example of the cloudy abstraction and pseudo-philosophy which mar much of the New Spoon River as well as some of the last-written epitaphs in

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the original Anthology. What is the subject of the speaker's discourse, the referent of "it" in the first line? Is it Life? Reality? The Universe? Creation? There is no way of knowing, and the poem does not make us care very much; it seems as if almost any capitalized abstraction will serve to make the poem an equally meaningful or meaningless piece of vaguely mystical wisdom.

Read philosophically, the poem is insignificant; read psychologically, it is considerably more revealing. The last three words of the poem are a startling plunge from the heights of abstract impersonality into the personal and the dramatic: "not even me." With these words, we are forced to rethink the entire poem, not as a philosophical generalization, but as a dramatic utterance, an expression by a specific person of his perceptions of the world and of himself. The tone of those last three words is a complex combination of self-loathing and defiance. If "it" ever turned to destruction, the first to be destroyed would be "me," a self which is perhaps especially guilty or especially vulnerable. Mingled with this attitude is a suggestion of defiance, as well, a sense of daring "it" to do its worst and determining not to be destroyed.

If we read back from these final words, the entire poem expresses not so much a philosophy or a "cosmology" as a psychological position. The speaker is tormented by conflicts and divisions in which "a part of it wars with a part of it." But he attempts to transcend these divisions by looking beyond them to a vision of seamless unity, "every part of it true to the whole of it," beyond the categories of will, of good and evil, and of fate, endlessly changing but never destroying.

Such a vision seems to have more in it of a wish than of a firm belief. The self-hatred of the last three words gives a retrospective reality to the disharmony, evil, and disaster of the preceding lines, compared to which the perhaps over-vehement assertion of an "unutterable unity," an "eternal creation," seems an expression of yearning rather than of
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faith. The epitaph has in it none of the pithy, anecdotal detail that makes many of the poems in the earlier Anthology so memorable. Nevertheless, it conveys a strong sense of the personality of "Clifford Ridell" as a man tormented to the point of obsession with disharmonies, perhaps both internal and external, and yearning, almost beyond hope, for integration and unity.

This psychological position is the one that underlies the Spoon River Anthology; this is the "cosmology" that governs the "microcosm" of Spoon River, however it may be rationalized into political views, theories of society, and various other doctrines.

II

Masters himself repeatedly made clear that the composition of the Spoon River Anthology coincided with the most important psychological crisis in his life and that the epitaphs were both an expression of that crisis and a means of working through it. He began to write the epitaphs without previous planning and in a style unlike his voluminous earlier work, and as the composition proceeded over a period of about eight months, it became the means and expression of a gradual loss of self, the collapse of strained psychological defenses, a rapid psychological regression, and ultimately a kind of symbolic death. The characters in the Anthology were not the products of ordinary memory or nostalgia, but Masters' own ghosts, internalized images of primal conflicts dredged up and confronted through the medium of his art.

Masters left two full and moving accounts of the psychological crisis that produced the Anthology. The earliest published account appeared in the American Mercury in 1933 in an article called "The Genesis of Spoon River." This account was the basis of the fuller account which appeared in Masters' autobiography Across Spoon River (1936).

The book and the crisis began on the weekend of May 20, 1914, when Masters' mother, Emma Masters, visited him in
Chicago, and they spent the weekend reminiscing about people and events in Petersburg and Lewistown. Masters describes this as a "truly wonderful" experience, and uses the language of regression to describe his feelings: "Along the way I was reinvested with myself in those incarnations that had long since surrendered their sheaths to the changes of the years." On Sunday, he walked her to the train station and then walked back home, "full of a strange pensiveness." He particularly recalls the sound of a church bell and a feeling of spring in the air. He immediately went to his room and wrote "The Hill," the opening piece in the Anthology, and wrote "two or three" of the epitaphs.⁶ (What these three were is not known, but they were probably among the "First Garland" of epitaphs which appeared on May 26 in the St. Louis Mirror: "Hod Putt," "Ollie McGee," "The Unknown," "Cassius Hueffer," "Serepta Mason," "Amanda Barker," and "Chase Henry."⁷) The memories of the sound of the bell and the feeling of spring both suggest the initiation of an "uncanny" experience, in which the repressed returns in the service of regeneration and life.

Once he had begun, Masters produced the epitaphs very rapidly, despite heavy court commitments which his law practice required. The only block seems to have been Masters' initial uncertainty about the merit of the new work. Actually, one epitaph had been written earlier as an experiment in using the Greek Anthology poems as models, that of "Theodore the Poet," a whimsical tribute to Theodore Dreiser. The first submission to William Marion Reedy, the Mirror's editor, was "The Hill," "Fletcher McGee," and "Hod Putt," and Masters reported that he had scrawled across the top of the manuscript the title Spoon River Anthology, regarding it as "the most preposterous title known to the realm of books," apparently

⁶Across Spoon River, p. 339.
⁷The files of the St. Louis Mirror are not readily accessible, but a list of the epitaphs with dates of their publication appears in Marjorie Eileen Fox, "William Marion Reedy and the St. Louis Mirror" (M.A. thesis, University of Illinois, 1947).
as a friendly jibe at Reedy's tastes. When Reedy immediately accepted the poems, Masters wanted to change the title to the conventionally pretty *Pleasant Plains Anthology*, but Reedy insisted that it remain the *Spoon River Anthology*. Once this initial doubt had been overcome, Masters apparently surrendered to what seemed to him an almost miraculous flooding out of material. He wrote the epitaphs, he said, on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, “on the street car, or in court, or at luncheon, or at night after I had gone to bed.” He wrote on the backs of envelopes, the margins of newspapers, and other such scraps of paper, and had them typed by his law secretary, Jake Prassel, on Monday mornings. Some apparently arrived at the *Mirror* offices still handwritten on scrap paper. Masters expressed what he felt to be the almost automatic nature of the writing when he wrote, “I was pouring out the Spoon River pieces from a reservoir that seemed exhaustless.”

As the writing proceeded over an eight-month period, Masters began to experience feelings of possession and depersonalization:

The flame had become so intense that it could not be seen, and I wrote with such ease that I did not realize the sapping of my life forces that was going on. I had no auditory or visual experiences which were not the effect of actuality; but I did feel somehow by these months of exploring the souls of the dead, by this half-sacrilegious revelation of their secrets, that I had convoked about my head swarms of powers and beings who were watching me and protesting, and yet inspiring me to go on. I do not mean by this that I believed I was haunted. I only mean I had that sensation, as one in a lonely eyrie room might suddenly feel that someone was in the next room spying upon him.

He also describes himself as being in a “hypersensitive” state of “clairvoyance and clairaudience,” and describes a recurring feeling of “lightness of body,” in which he felt he could “float to the ceiling” or “drift out the window without falling.”

Masters himself points out that the progress of his state of mind during this period can be retraced by examining the

*Across Spoon River*, p. 352.
order of composition of the poems and their publication in Reedy's magazine. (The order in which they appear in the final book is unrelated to the order of composition). This progress seems to have been from comparatively recent memories, treated more or less whimsically or ironically, to earlier, more personal, and more deeply repressed ones. The first poem written, "The Hill," reads like a poetic treatment of the crucial conversation with his mother. There are two voices, one asking what has become of various figures out of Spoon River, the other replying that they are all "sleeping on the hill." The first group of five epitaphs are all earthy, realistic, and sardonic. "Hod Putt," for example, possibly the very first composed, since it begins both the magazine series and the book sequence, is lightly ironic; Hod Putt, who was hanged for murder while committing highway robbery, compares himself to Old Bill Piersol, who made a fortune trading with the Indians, took the bankrupt law and emerged from it richer than ever, and concludes that they both took the bankrupt law "in our respective ways." But by December, he was writing such epitaphs as "Joseph Dixson," "Harlan Sewall," and "Alfred Moir," all of which appeared in the Christmas issue, and "Russell Kincaid," "Aaron Hatfield," and "Isaiah Beethoven," which appeared on January 1. These epitaphs are completely devoid of the earthy folk humor of the earlier epitaphs and deal rather abstractly with general problems of the human condition. "Joseph Dixson" presents a piano tuner who speculates that there is "an Ear that tuned me, able to tune me over/And use me again if I am worthy to use," while "Harlan Sewall" deals painfully and elliptically with a man whose "diseased soul" was healed and who repaid the healer with "silence" and "separation."

In this issue of January 15, Masters epitaphed himself as "Webster Ford," the pseudonym under which the poems had appeared. "That was the last. And I was about ready to be laid away and given a stone with these verses." When Reedy revealed the identity of "Webster Ford," against Masters'
better judgment, in the issue of November 20, 1915, Masters reported that he read the article announcing him as the author "with a kind of terror, a kind of sickness, such as one might feel who has died and for a moment is permitted to look down upon the body that he has abandoned." Almost immediately after the publication of the "Webster Ford" epitaph Masters developed a severe cold which confined him to his home, and ten days later, he contracted pneumonia. The illness was severe, the doctor warned Mrs. Masters that he might not recover, and his father came for a deathbed visit. He reached the crisis of the illness precisely one week after it had begun; he described the hours just before the fever broke in this way:

I had a form of schizophrenia, for there seemed to be two of me: one who was sick and in danger, one who was not sick and whom nothing could hurt. The words ran through my mind quite definitely, "That fellow there is in a bad way, and will probably die; but as for me I am safe." Later toward the last I heard at times the sound of a bugle blowing "thin and clear" from a height far off, as if from Elfland. Then I heard symphonic music, more beautiful than I had ever heard any orchestra play, and of a richer, more sublime sort. Then the bugle would blow. Finally I saw a black disk like a victrola record. Above it was suspended, as if it had touched and ascended from the disk, a phosphorescent tongue of light. That was the last I knew until I felt myself swinging up and down on a vast warm tide of ocean water. Nothing could have been more delightful than that rhythmical movement of those giant swells and falls.9

Such sensations are of course not uncommon in cases of high fever, but in association with the recurring feelings of loss of self over the preceding several months, they take on a particular significance. It appears likely that the composition of the Spoon River Anthology was intimately linked with a severe ego-crisis on the part of Masters, which began with his mother's visit in May, which stretched through eight months of regressive activity accompanied by increasingly powerful feelings of loss of self and which culminated in this powerful experience, during a high fever and physical collapse, of ultimate regression and symbolic death.

The aftermath of this shattering experience was fairly prolonged. He remained in bed for another three weeks and was

9Across Spoon River, p. 357.
confined to the house for most of the rest of the spring. By May he was spending some time at his law office and managed to argue and win a lucrative law case, which eased his financial situation somewhat. During the summer and fall, he wrote the epilogue and a number of additional epitaphs for a new "definitive" edition of *Spoon River*, which appeared in 1916. But psychological reintegration was slow in returning. On a trip to New York, he reported, "my psyche seemed to be dwelling in infinity, I was far off, and it was with an effort that I was bringing myself back to earth. I had wandered to some galactic sphere so distant and alien to human life and to creative passion that I was returning only by slow degrees."10

By the middle of 1916, he seems to have recovered his strength.

III

The materials for understanding the background of Masters' collapse, its meaning, and the part the composition of the *Spoon River Anthology* had in it are to be found in *Across Spoon River* itself. The autobiography is a working out of the themes of the Ridell epitaph in terms of a life history. Masters' personal world he sees as locked in a web of desperate conflict, each part of it warring with another part. Every thesis—father, Petersburg, the South, the law—has its antithesis—mother, Lewistown, the North, poetry—and the two stand frozen in perpetual opposition. Nothing is ever forgotten or softened by the passing of time; childhood sibling rivalries are wounds as fresh at the age of sixty-seven as at the age of six. The rare images of fusion or unity, for example his grandparents' home, are presented as almost impossibly remote, more objects of helpless yearning than attainable goals. All these labyrinthine conflicts are, however, externalized, projected onto the outside world. Masters presents himself as assaulted by division, but seldom as divided himself. For the most part,

10*Across Spoon River*, p. 368.
his favorite image of himself suggests a powerful bull, set about by bulldogs (or more often, stinging insects), but doggedly pushing his way forward. "As always in my life," he writes in a characteristic passage, "my head was down, and I was thrusting my way forward." (p. 120)

The most fundamental division is between Masters and his mother. The portrait he sketches of her is of an attractive and vivacious but weak, perpetually discontented, and basically unloving woman. "There were times," Masters writes, "when my heart flooded with love for her, moved by her beauty, the speaking tenderness of her eyes. There were other times when her cutting words, her flaming temper froze my heart and filled me with fierce resistance and resentment and, I regret to say, with unloving feelings." (p. 36) The parents' marriage was apparently not a happy one, and Masters describes their conflicts in much the same terms he uses in summarizing his relationship with his mother, perhaps displacing some of the resentment he feels in his mother's alternation between a "soft" tenderness and a "hard" rejectiveness onto his parents' relationship. He feels much the same ambivalence toward his father that he does toward his mother; he resents his father's stern demands on him and his impatience with the arts, but admires his vitality and love of life. His parents' differences, he thinks, were temperamental and irreconcilable. His mother's will "was unconquerable," he writes, "and as my father had the same indomitable disposition, their marriage was the union of conflicts and irresistible forces. . . . She set out to break my father's will, and failed utterly all her life." (p. 10) (One of the unsettling aspects of Across Spoon River is the vertiginous feeling that all women are one woman; Masters later feels that his sister, his wife, and his principal mistress are all out to "break his will.")

Masters quickly comes to see the contrast between the tense unhappiness of his parents' household and the orderliness, harmony, and gaiety of his grandparents' home in similar terms. Masters opens the book with a family anecdote he
returns to several times, apparently finding it particularly significant. When his parents brought him to Illinois after his first year in Kansas and handed him to his grandmother Masters, his face broke into a smile for the first time in his life. All through the early chapters of the book, Masters returns again and again to the contrast between his parents’ disorderly and unhappy household and the idyllic home of his grandparents at the foot of the Menard County hills. “My own home,” he writes, “very early, really from the first, seemed a poor and barren place compared with the house of my grandparents. . . . The meals were always on time—and the table was filled with delicious things. My grandmother was always laughing; my grandfather always singing, or saying quaint things; and both of them were so full of affection for me, and so indulgent toward me. Soon this old house became a very heaven to my imagination.” (p. 14-15) Masters’ preference for his grandparents’ home seems to have become very early a source of tension between mother and grandmother; he reports his mother’s “jealousy and heart hurts,” her attempts to keep him away from his grandmother, and the competitiveness for the affections of Masters’ younger sister Madeline, in which the mother triumphed.

There is no reason to doubt that there were rivalries between parents and grandparents, mother and grandmother, and mother and father, but Masters’ recurring insistence upon them suggests that he is responding to a deep sense of being deprived of a fundamental security by seeing division and conflict all around him. The same is true of the bitterness of sibling rivalry which he reports, especially with his sister Madeline. “She was never a help to me,” Masters writes, “but in several crises of life she was in my way or else she brought me misfortune. My sister’s relation to me can be etched into full understanding by contrasting her with Wordsworth’s sister. With a different nature she might have been a wonderful influence in my life. As it was, she imitated me and used me, but she also departed upon a way wholly foreign to my
way; and in so far as she got me into her way she was a disaster.” (p. 20) The bitter contrast with Dorothy Wordsworth recurs a number of times in the book, and it is fairly obvious that Masters is displacing his resentment of his mother’s coldness onto Madeline by contrasting her with a motherly, nurturing sister such as Masters thinks Dorothy Wordsworth was.

He feels equally ill-used in contrast to his surviving brother Tom and deeply resents that his parents spent more money on Tom’s education than on his own. “Tom had a high temper and a dreadful tongue,” Masters writes, and he reports with some satisfaction that he did poorly in his father’s law office. He reports in great detail a conversation in which his father apologizes for the favoritism shown his brother: “I have spent on that boy’s schooling in one year more than I ever spent on you in your whole life for everything that you had, schooling and all, and it isn’t right. I don’t like it, and damned if I know how it came to be, except that your mother thinks that he is a genius and more wonderful than any of the rest of you, and of course I was not very prosperous when you were home.” (p. 208)

Masters tells an anecdote about his sister which might well stand to epitomize the attitude he adopts toward all his immediate family:

Once at the Atterbury farm I was working with a hoe, and she persisted in getting in front of me so that I could not cut the ground with it. When she wouldn’t move out of the way, I let the hoe come down on her head, for which I was severely punished by my mother. I tell this here because it contains a symbol which will more and more unfold. (p. 20)

As Masters later makes even more explicit, he sees his sister as blocking his way at crucial times in his life, as he doggedly pushes his way forward against general opposition.

The conflict between Masters and his sister mirrors that between his father and mother, turning around strong wills masked by “hard” masculine achievement and “soft” feminine self-indulgence. This conflict also surfaces in an opposition which is as close as Masters ever comes to ac-
knowledging an inner division, though even here it is projected outside himself, the rival claims of law and poetry. In describing the family tension that precipitated his leaving his father’s law office and moving to Chicago, he describes his mother and sister “in secret sympathy with each other” studying French and writing stories which they read to each other. There would be arguments, and the elder Masters “sat by wondering how he ever got into such a mess.” Then he “seized his hat and rushed uptown to the office to get away from us.” Masters himself, as his father’s law partner but also a would-be writer, is torn between father and mother, both resenting and seeking to win the approval of each. In a sad little episode after Masters has moved to Chicago, he takes his father to a prize fight and is disappointed that his father did not enjoy it: “As I felt myself growing more and more like him, and as I wanted to cultivate all the strength and manliness that were in me, I was disappointed that this interest of mine did not signify to his mind that I was making progress in these directions, and outliving the fragility of feeling and the Shelleyan tendencies which he had lamented in me when I was with him in the country.” (p. 186) And in another passage, he cites experiments in which frogs can be bombarded with x-rays until they develop a single “cyclopean” eye. The law has been such an x-ray to him, he says, and he has developed a single, “realistic,” “satiric” cyclopean eye while also retaining his two “romantic,” “mystical” eyes. “All through my poems there run the two strains of realism and mysticism. I wrote with my cyclopean eye many of the portraits of Spoon River, and with my dreaming eyes I wrote ‘The Star’ and ‘The Loom.’” (p. 318) Again, the unusual suggestion of self-division this passage contains is countered by the notion of being bombarded by outside forces, of being manipulated by conflicting forces outside himself.

Violent oppositions, denied in himself but projected onto others, also dominate Masters’ view of women. His love affairs loom so large in Across Spoon River that the book
constantly threatens to become a sexual memoir. Sixteen love affairs are listed in the index, but this barely scratches the surface; in one characteristic line, he writes, “Was it wonderful all in all that in these days I solaced myself with Grace, Adele, Marie and Virginia?” (p. 315) Masters alternates between the loftiest idealization of women and the most scathing and vitriolic misogyny, but for him this is not evidence of his own ambivalence but of the nature of women. He characteristically begins an affair with idealizations in which women are “embodiments of mysterious beauty” and ends it with savage denunciations in which references to demons and serpents figure heavily. The most shattering episode of this sort in the book is the painful account of an eighteen-month affair with a woman whom he identifies as “Deirdre,” actually Tennessee Mitchell, later the second wife of Sherwood Anderson. Masters’ account of this affair is so agonized it is difficult to sort out the exact sequence of events, but its conflicts were so painful that he writes that he had “endured the agony of fears and desires that gave me nausea in the seat of the solar plexus, and had caused the great nerves of that center to writhe and constrict like entangled snakes.” (p. 307)

It would seem obvious that such sexual conflict could be related directly back to a mother who sometimes made his heart “flood with love for her” and at other times “froze my heart,” but if there is a connection, it escapes Masters. He instead rather loftily attributes the divided nature of his sexual experiences to the inevitable conflict between “earth love” and its “diviner being,” flesh and spirit, the “Aphrodite Pandemos” and the “Aphrodite Urania.” He also, oddly but characteristically, attributes his capacity for misogyny to having been rejected at the age of eleven by a little girl named Zueline. Her mother told her she could not play with him anymore, and when he heard the news,
something like cold poison went through me, something like sudden and violent hate. A great agony stormed my breast, and twisted through the great nerves of my solar plexus. Then it was that spiritual antibodies built themselves in my emotional blood and circulation. It was like having measles which could not again be contracted. It was more than that: it was an acid which had entered my spiritual veins with which I could subdue subsequent affections of the heart. (pp. 88-89)

All this at the age of eleven! Masters repeatedly calls upon the acid and the antibodies built up in the affair with little Zueline in later passages to explain his hard-hearted behavior.

To suggest that a person sometimes engages in paranoid thinking is not to deny that he may sometimes be persecuted, and Masters seems to have occasionally been the victim of the repressive sexual codes of his time, the system his father summarizes in the following terms: “A man has got to have one of ‘em, and to have her he has to work and support her. That’s the game that Nature has laid out for us to play. No escape!” (p. 244) In the same way, he was apparently sometimes treated unlovingly or unjustly by his parents and siblings. But the pervasiveness with which he sees himself as assailed by forces polarized in unremitting conflict seems to go beyond objective fact into a habitual way of thinking.

Instances could be multiplied of Masters’ tendency to project personal conflict into clashing external forces while painfully yearning for a recovery of a presumed original unity. But one area, politics, should be added to those of family and sexual relationships. Here, too, Masters idealizes an original unity, the early Republic, now perceived as fallen into warring factions, Republican and Democratic, Northern and Southern, commercial and agrarian. Many of these conflicts harden around the character of Lincoln and the sharp contrast Masters draws between Lincoln and Douglas. The development of Masters’ antipathy toward Lincoln is an illuminating example of the way all materials are subsumed in Masters’ personal system. Davis Masters had been a “peace man” and had voted against Lincoln in both 1858 and 1860. Nevertheless, the young Masters associated Lincoln with his grandfather and Petersburg and thus with an idyllic harmony. In the early nineties, he wrote,
I had an admiration for Lincoln, even believing the falsehood that the War Between the States was inevitable and the result of an irrepressible conflict, though my grandfather, who knew Lincoln there in the Petersburg-New Salem country, had given me the materials for a very different judgment of Lincoln. But at this time I followed on after the mythmaking that was being carried on in histories, biographies and poems. The Gettysburg Address was a miracle worker not to be stayed. (p. 172)

As late as 1915, Masters' view of Lincoln was the conventionally favorable one, as evidenced by such epitaphs as "William H. Herndon," "Hannah Armstrong," and "Anne Rutledge" in the Spoon River Anthology. But by 1931, when his notorious Lincoln: The Man was published, Masters had become an enthusiastic Lincoln-hater. Lincoln as a man was "lazy," "mannerless," and "unkempt"; as a politician he was "cold," "slick," and "crafty." But his chief offense was that he was a Whig "Hamiltonian" who allied himself with the rich and powerful to force the country into a civil war that eclipsed the "Jeffersonian" ideal by delivering the United States into the hands of bankers and industrialists. This interpretation of Lincoln is not new and not necessarily irrational, but the vehemence and extremism with which Masters advances it make us suspect motivations rooted in personal associations. The antithesis between "hard" father and "soft" mother, which keeps surfacing in veiled ways in other antitheses between father and grandfather, city and country, law and poetry, here appears in the antithesis between Lincoln and Douglas. Lincoln, for all his Petersburg associations, ultimately stood with the North, the city, and the future, while for Masters, Douglas stood with the South, the country, and the past. And once he has classified them, the categories harden for Masters, and he can pour into them the displaced energies of his own personal position. This also seems to be the strategy behind Masters' other political and social attitudes, his xenophobia and racism, for example.

Masters' personality is remarkably consistent and corresponds closely with the psychological position epitomized

in the Ridell epitaph. He yearns hopelessly for an “unutterable unity” which we may suspect is identified with fusion with the mother but which is projected into such avatars as his grandparents’ farm, sexual ecstasy, and the early Republic. But such unity is denied him, and instead he stands, “head down” and defiant, under the bombardment of clashing opposites: mother-father, country-city, poetry-law, Douglas-Lincoln. Such a view of the world may have figured as heavily in Masters’ choice of the law as a profession as paternal pressure did, since the law operates through the adversary system to reconcile conflict and restore harmony. And it may equally have figured in Masters’ ultimate rejection of the law, when it failed to fulfill the psychic promise implicit in it.

The testimony of 1936 cannot be invoked too literally to understand the man of 1914; as the view of Lincoln suggests, Masters seems to have grown steadily more rigid and embittered between the composition of the Anthology and that of Across Spoon River. But there is ample evidence to suggest that the change was a matter of degree and that Masters’ psychological makeup was essentially the same at the age of forty-five as at the age of sixty-seven.

Viewed against this background, the writing of the Spoon River Anthology seems to have been a cathartic act for Masters, involving both the desperate reenactment of his complex defensive system and its ultimate collapse. The choice of the epitaph form has a significance beyond rhetorical considerations. One by one Masters summons up the figures into which he had projected his own conflicts, exhibits them, and then kills them off. The Anthology contains two hundred and forty-three murders and a suicide, safe, “poetic” ones to be sure, but significant ones nevertheless. By the end of the book, everyone—good and bad, weak and strong, sympathetic or unsympathetic—“all, all are sleeping on the hill.” And at the end of the book, the poet “Webster Ford” kills himself in one of the most moving epitaphs of the series, full of regret and self-understanding.
As *Across Spoon River* recasts the vision of "Clifford Ridell" as an autobiographical narrative, so the *Spoon River Anthology* projects the same vision as an imaginary town. Or rather two towns, for the most fundamental conflict in the *Anthology* is between the worlds of Petersburg and Lewistown. It is part of the plan of the sequence that the towns be melded in a single composite, but the melding is not quite complete, and the careful reader of the *Anthology* can still see the joints. It is not quite accurate to write, as some have done, of Masters' "ambivalence" or his "love-hate relationship" with the small town. The ambivalence is, typically for Masters, translated into radical conflict, with all the love going to Petersburg and all the hate going to Lewistown. He makes the contrast explicit in his article on "The Genesis of Spoon River." Petersburg was a "genial neighborhood of fiddlers, dancers and feasters," and it "furnished the purest springs for the *Anthology*, and colored the noblest portraits of the book." Petersburg was heavily Southern in population and spirit; it had "no New England influences of any moment," including Calvinism and such Puritan constraints as Prohibitionism or taboos on dancing. While Petersburg was rural and Southern, Lewistown was urban and Northern; it was "inhabited by a people of tough and muscular minds, where political lines were bitterly drawn by the G.A.R., and competition at the bar was intense, and where New England and Calvinism waged a death struggle on the matter of Prohibition and the church with the Virginians and free livers." "It was this atmosphere of Northern light and cold winds," Masters wrote, "that clarified my mind at last to the beauty of the Petersburg material, and pointed with steel the pen with which I drew the microcosm of the Spoon river country."12

Masters himself hints that the distinction between Petersburg and Lewistown survives in the final version of the *Antholo-

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ogy when he writes that there were “fifty-three poems with names drawn from the Petersburg-New Salem-Concord-Sandridge country; and sixty-five from the Spoon river country.” But one does not need to know the origins of the names; the distinction is clear on internal evidence alone. Characters in the Anthology tend to fall into two groups, the members of which refer to each other but not to members of the other group. Thus references to the Hatfields, the Sievers, Fiddler Jones, etc. identify epitaphs as “Petersburg” epitaphs, while references to Thomas Rhodes, Editor Whedon, Doctor Meyers, the Reverend Abner Peet, etc. mark the “Lewistown” epitaphs. Internal evidence of this kind allows us to place twenty-eight of Masters’ fifty-three epitaphs in Petersburg, and sixty-five of Masters’ sixty-six in Lewistown. In half a dozen or so, characters from both towns are mentioned. The coffin maker Jeduthan Hawley, for example, mentions eighteen names, eight demonstrably from Lewistown, three demonstrably from Petersburg, and seven not clearly localized. Of the twenty-five epitaphs which Masters identified with Petersburg but which cannot be so identified on internal evidence, most are probably in the last section of the collection, where the “heroes and enlightened spirits” are placed in Masters’ “Divine Comedy.” Many of these epitaphs are highly personal and lack any reference to other characters, but they include the “noblest portraits” which Masters associated with Petersburg.

These figures are not significant in themselves—certainly the effect the Anthology leaves on a casual reader is that there is only one town—but they do demonstrate the way Masters built into his composite “Spoon River” not a vague ambivalence but a precise and well articulated polarity, the one he associated with Petersburg and Lewistown.

Fortunately, Masters did not extend this polarity to the individuals in the Anthology. Not all the villains come from Lewistown and not all the heroes come from Petersburg.

Most of the people in the collection are of "mixed character," complex mixtures of good and bad, strength and weakness. One of the most striking sustained groups of epitaphs is the "Pantier" group, which includes seven epitaphs grouped together—"Benjamin Pantier," "Mrs. Benjamin Pantier," "Reuben Pantier," "Emily Sparks," and "Trainor the Druggist"—and two later in the collection: "Dora Williams" and "Mrs. Williams." The models for the Pantier family are complex and instructive. The chief model would appear to be Masters' own family. The conflict between the earthy, "common" country lawyer Benjamin Pantier and his "delicate," "artistic" wife seems to duplicate fairly exactly the relationship between his parents described in *Across Spoon River*. This would make "Reuben Pantier," their son, Masters himself, and again the identification seems accurate. Reuben, scarred by the conflict between his mother and father and the object of gossip about his sex life in Spoon River, goes out into the world and passes through "every peril known/Of wine and women and the joy of life." The model for his idealistic teacher, "Emily Sparks," is also implicitly identified in *Across Spoon River* as Mary Fisher, who encouraged Masters' early literary ambitions and later became a writer herself.  

Looked at from a slightly different angle, however, the Pantiers seem to be Masters himself and his wife. Some of the tensions in Masters' first marriage replicated, perhaps not coincidentally, those in his parents' marriage, and certainly we can hear behind Mrs. Pantier's distaste for whiskey, onions, and sex the voice of Helen Jenkins, who made Masters serve a year of church-going and abstinence from whiskey and cigars before she would marry him.  

A third model for the Pantier marriage, and an amusingly unexpected one, is that of Abraham Lincoln. The gossips in Petersburg and Springfield could not have missed the allusion to a homespun country lawyer driven to spend his nights in his law office by a wife with pretensions to gentility, espe-

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14 *Across Spoon River*, pp. 59ff.
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cially when his favorite poem is Lincoln's own favorite, "Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?" (Masters' identification of both himself and his father with Lincoln in these epitaphs, comic though it is, may throw some light on his later tortured attitude toward Lincoln.)

Whatever its models, the Pantier misalliance, and all the other relationships it sets in motion, is a complex tissue of opposing forces which are never reconciled though the multiple points of view temper the bitterness of individual voices. Trainor, the Druggist, has an important part of the truth when he says that Pantier and his wife were "good in themselves, but evil toward each other:/He oxygen, she hydrogen,/ Their son, a devastating fire." Pantier himself is full of bitterness and self-pity: "she, who survives me, snared my soul/ With a snare which bled me to death." But his wife, when she speaks for herself, is by no means an unsympathetic character, absurd perhaps in her pride at being a "lady" and having "delicate tastes," but as tragic a victim as Pantier in that "law and morality" have trapped her in a marriage with a man with whom having the "marital relation" "fills you with disgust/ Everytime you think of it—while you think of it/Everytime you see him."

Dora Williams is the indirect victim of the Panders' conflicts. Seduced by Reuben Pantier, their troubled son, and rejected by him, she has, however, managed to turn the tables on men. A series of rich husbands who died quickly left her "versed in the world and rich" until her last husband, an Italian count, poisoned her. She finds in death release from the Panders' conflicts as they were transmitted to her: on her tomb in Rome is carved, "Contessa Navigato/Implora eterna quiete." No wonder that her fast-living milliner mother, Mrs. Williams, concludes that if marriage were abolished in Spoon River and all the children were reared by the county, the town would not be any the worse.

The chief victim of the combination of oxygen and hydrogen that was the Pantiers' marriage, however, is their son.
Reuben, who has become a “devastating fire” of dissipation and self-destructiveness. It takes Emily Sparks, his former teacher with “the virgin heart,” to see that Reuben is torn between “the clay” and “the fire” and that Reuben’s fire could be not the fire of self-destruction but the purifying fire of the spirit. “My boy,” she calls, “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!”

The story of the Pantiers’ marriage and its multiple reverberations may be taken as a paradigm of life in Spoon River. There is always the potentiality—perhaps a memory, perhaps a hope—of a seamless unity, but actual life is a clash of opposites; everywhere “a part of it wars with a part of it.” The rift that runs through the Pantier marriage reappears in every aspect of life in Spoon River: religion, politics, art, work. The life-hating Puritanism of the Rev. Abner Peet wars against the tolerant compassion of a Doctor Meyers; Elliott Hawkins’ political conservatism wars with John Cabanis’ liberal idealism; Petit the Poet’s fashionable but trivial verses triumph over the ridiculed but passionate poetry of Minerva Jones, and the self-destructive work ethic of a Cooney Potter clashes with the joyful playfulness of a Fiddler Jones.

This desperate vision of life as ceaseless, radical conflict is not unrelieved by rays of hope, however. Masters’ Dantesque division of the book into an Inferno of “fools, drunkards, and failures,” a Purgatory of “people of one-birth minds,” and a Paradise of “heroes and enlightened spirits” has perhaps obscured a more fundamental historical division among past, present, and future. A small group of epitaphs, most notably those of Lucinda and Davis Matlock, are voices out of a past culture that was unified and coherent. In their lives, work, play, marriage, religion, and social relationships were harmonious and fulfilling, welded together by a passionate joy in living.

The photographer Rutherford McDowell senses this lost unity in the photographs of the old pioneers and studies their faces to try to understand their secret:

What was it in their eyes? —
For I could never fathom
That mystical pathos of drooped eyelids,
And the serene sorrow of their eyes.
It was like a pool of water,
Amid oak trees at the edge of a forest,
Where the leaves fall,
As you hear the crow of a cock
From a far-off farm house, seen near the hills
Where the third generation lives, and the strong men
And the strong women are gone and forgotten.

It is not so much that the "third generation," that of the present, are "fools, drunkards, and failures" as that they live in a society at war with itself. There are many heroes even in the first, "Inferno" section of the Anthology: Kinsey Keene, Emily Sparks, Doctor Meyers, Doc Hill, Dorcas Gustine. If such people are failures, it is not through any deficiency of their own but because they are caught up and sometimes crushed in the forces clashing around them. Doctor Meyers, in an act of compassion against the harsh morality of Spoon River, performs an abortion for Minerva Jones. When she dies on the operating table, he is indicted, attacked by Editor Whedon's newspaper, and disowned by his unforgiving wife, whose judgment is that "he had broken the law human and divine." "Butch" Weldy, on the other hand, who fathered Minerva's child in a brutal rape, goes free and even gets religion. Many transformations of Masters' father and of one aspect of Masters himself move through this section in figures forced by their society into a perpetual stance of defiance, figures such as Dorcas Gustine, Jefferson Howard, and Kinsey Keene, who says, with Cambronne at Waterloo, "merde" to the whole Spoon River establishment. Such men are admirable but tragically reduced from the models of the past such as Davis Matlock or Aaron Hatfield. To be involved in such a society is to be involved in eternal warfare.

Many of the "heroes and enlightened spirits" of the last
section of the *Anthology*, those who have risen above the conflicts of Spoon River to a vision of integration and unity, are therefore outside the mainstream of Spoon River life, eccentrics, recluses, and dropouts who have rejected the establishment or have been rejected by it and who live in the private world of the imagination where they find the hope of some future redemption of the fallen world of Spoon River. This final section opens with the "Anne Rutledge" epitaph and contains most of the idealized pioneer epitaphs as well as those of the visionaries of the future. This juxtaposition of the harmony of the past and the hope of the future enriches the implications of each. The epitaph of Davis Matlock, for example, is immediately followed by that of the contemporary hero Herman Altman, whose very name suggests that in his idealism he is an "old man" like Matlock. And the epitaph of the pioneer Aaron Hatfield is immediately preceded by that of Russell Kincaid, who finds the same unity in the identification with nature that Hatfield found in the communion at Concord Church.

Images of a unity to counter the fragmentation of Spoon River life appear throughout the *Anthology*, though they are concentrated in this last third. The most pervasive and important of these is announced by Emily Sparks (a significant name in itself) when she tells Reuben Pantier to work that his clay may yield to his fire, "Till the fire is nothing but light! . . . Nothing but light!" The patron god of the *Spooner River Anthology*, as Masters makes clear in the Webster Ford epitaph, is Apollo, and imagery of fire, light, and the sun appear throughout in connection with the ecstatic achievement of unity. The image is treated comically in the epitaph of Jonathan Swift Somers, the voice along with Webster Ford of Masters as poet, perhaps his satirical, "cyclopean" eye as opposed to the "dreaming," "mystical" eyes of Webster Ford. Somers hopes that when, after he has risen to a total vision of
the world, his soul takes fire, life will not “fiddle” as Nero did. For Edmund Pollard, one need not write poetry but merely live vividly and intensely to thrust one’s hands into “the mirror-like core of fire/Of the light of life, the sun of delight.” And for the mystic Arlo Will, progress of the soul is from the dullness of earth “through unnumbered heavens/To the final flame!”

But the earth and the clay are not always images of blindness and the flesh. As in much mystical thought, Masters’ images of ecstatic integration tend to be double. Reuben Pantier’s fire may be either a “devastating fire” of self-destruction or a purifying fire of self-transcendence. In the same way, the earth may be not the prison of the spirit but the gateway to it. The symbol of Siever’s apple orchard moves through the Anthology as a means of mystic integration with natural process. Siever himself lies under the roots of a northern-spy apple tree, to “move in the chemic change and circle of life,/Into the soil and into the flesh of the tree,/And into the living epitaphs/Of redder apples!” And the village idiot Willie Metcalf attains to a kind of wisdom denied wiser heads when he has the feeling that he was not “a separate thing from the earth.” “I never knew,” he says, “whether I was a part of the earth/With flowers growing in me, or whether I walked—/Now I know.”

The stars and music similarly stand as images of mystic unity. Alfonso Churchill has an astronomer’s vision of the stars, while Elijah Browning has a mystic’s apprehension of them. In his strange dream-vision which immediately precedes the final epitaph of Webster Ford, he ascends through levels of life and experience—childhood, commerce, love—to a mountain peak with a solitary star above it. “I touched that star/With my outstretched hand./I vanished utterly./For the mountain delivers to Infinite Truth/Whosoever touches the star!” Music can also deliver one to “Infinite Truth” occasionally in the Anthology. Masters reports in his autobiography that he was always “profoundly affected” by music,
and that he wrote “Isaiah Beethoven” to suggest in words the integrative power of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, which he was playing on the victrola as he wrote. Fiddler Jones’ dance music catches the vibrations of the earth and brings joy and peace.

These various images of harmony and unity are all highly private and mystical; there is not much sense in the concluding sections of the Anthology of a political solution to the conflicts in Spoon River, little more than Anne Rutledge’s hope that the Republic may “bloom forever” from the dust of her bosom. A strong death wish moves behind these images of transcendent unity. To achieve peace and integration one must move beyond consciousness itself into the “final flame” or the cycles of nature or the high, cold star beyond life.

The movement toward the peace of death culminates in “Webster Ford,” the last epitaph in the book and Masters’ own literary epitaph. In this extraordinary poem, addressed to the “Delphic Apollo,” Masters associates himself with Mickey M’Grew, a minor figure from earlier in the Anthology. Mickey M’Grew is one of Masters’ many doubles in the Anthology; he expresses the familiar Masters attitude that “It was just like everything else in life; Something outside myself drew me down, My own strength never failed me.” Forced to give up the money to his father that he had saved for an education, he has become a man-of-all-work in Spoon River. Atop the town water-tower, which he is cleaning, he unhooks his safety rope and laughs as he flings his arms over the lip of the tower. But they slip on the “treacherous slime” and he plunges to his death, “down, down, down. . .Through bellowing darkness!”

Masters seems to feel a deep kinship with Mickey M’Grew and his one heroic, defiant gesture followed by a plunge into a “bellowing darkness.” This affinity is further explored in “Webster Ford.” Ford, M’Grew, and the banker’s son have seen a vision of Apollo on the river bank at sunset. The
banker's son has denied the vision: "It's light/By the flags at the water's edge, you half-witted fools." Ford and M'Grew, as spiritual brothers, acknowledge the vision; M'Grew, though he recognizes the vision only as "a ghost," carries the vision of Apollo with him to his death. Ford's own stewardship of the vision is a sad summary of Masters' own spiritual life. He has hidden the vision, "for fear/Of the son of the banker," and Apollo has avenged himself by turning Ford into a tree, "growing indurant, turning to stone." But as the metamorphosis progresses, from the gradually hardening trunk and branches there burst forth laurel leaves, the pages of the Spoon River Anthology. "'Tis vain, O youth," he cries, "to fly the call of Apollo."

Fling yourself in the fire, die with a song of spring,
If die you must in the spring. For none shall look
On the face of Apollo and live, and choose you must
'Twixt death in the flame and death after years of sorrow,
Rooted fast in the earth, feeling the grisly hand,
Not so much in the trunk as in the terrible numbness
Creeping up to the laurel leaves that never cease
To flourish until you fall.

The laurel leaves of the Anthology epitaphs are too sere for coronal wreaths, he writes, but they may be fit for urns of memory and as themes for greater poets, "hearts, heroic, fearless singers and livers."

The shadows are gathering fast in the last pages of the Spoon River Anthology, and "Webster Ford's" last words are a race against the spreading numbness of death, that goal toward which the entire collection has been increasingly directed, a death which is the only real release from the painful conflicts of life.

Within days after writing this epitaph, Masters actually felt the numbness moving into his limbs and approached the threshold of death. And after a prolonged recovery and the appearance of the Anthology in book form, he felt that the book was alien to him, as if it had been written by another person. It seemed, he wrote, to be a "creation which had come from me and now seemed to have no relation to me." And in a
sense it had been written by another person. The man who, under the influence of his mother's reminiscences, had begun the Anthology in the spring of 1914 had been engaged for years in an exhausting psychological struggle, preserving his own self-image as an invulnerable stoic, head down and pushing his way forward, by denying his own inner conflicts and projecting them into competing figures in the external world. The writing of the Anthology functioned both as an attempt to preserve this strategy by dramatizing it and as the signal of its ultimate collapse. The “swarms of powers and beings” Masters sensed hovering over his head as he wrote, both protesting and inspiring him to go on, were the projections of his own conflicts, now assuming an independent existence and taking their leave. The act of writing was an act of undoing, of moving backward through his life, symbolically killing the images of his conflicts, returning to his origins, and attempting to begin again. This act culminated in the symbolic suicide of the Webster Ford epitaph and the final fantasy of his illness, the music, the flame, the “black disk” of annihilation, and the “vast warm tide” of oceanic peace. Perhaps unfortunately, “rebirth” in fantasy is seldom a permanent transformation in real life. After a period of recovery, Masters appears to have gradually reconstructed a similar defense system, and the Masters of 1916 was not markedly different from the Masters of 1914.

The origins of a work of art are not necessarily relevant to its meaning. But in the case of the Spoon River Anthology, consideration of the poet in the poems suggests levels of depth and complexity in the poems that have generally been ignored. The collection is on its most fundamental level a spiritual autobiography, an account of “the poet’s mind.” Only upon this substructure are the microcosm of small-town life and the macrocosm of social criticism of American life constructed. It is largely beside the point to try to determine whether Spoon River presents a true “cross-section” of a real village, whether marriage was really as dreadful in 1900 as it...
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seems to be in the *Anthology*, or whether such war really existed in small-town political life. Spoon River is a highly personal, highly subjective vision of small-town life and the national life, not an objective or scientific account. To ignore the personal dimension in the *Anthology* is to ignore its underlying structure, the significance of its symbolism, the nature of its emotional power and much else that makes it continue to command our interest.