



The Great Valley

Edgar Lee Masters

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It is appropriate, no doubt, that Masters should be less selective than Frost – the West is less reserved than New England. Against Frost's one hundred pages we have nearly three hundred from Masters, and *The Great Valley* is his second book of this year. The watchful critic must regret much of it; especially he must wonder, to the extreme of amazement, why the poet should have reverted to *Marsyas* and *Apollo at Phrae*, which are in the mood of those early books whose academic unexpressiveness will always be one of the curiosities of literature. But one must take a poet as he is, and this poet has to pour out whatever is in his heart, and leave his readers, or Father Time, to do the sifting. He has to do this, moreover in a spirit of careless abundance which throws off magic lines in a mass of coarser texture – flowers, grasses and weeds together under a brilliant and generous procreative sun.

But this is the prairie's exuberant way – one must look at this poet, not in close detail, but in the mass. Thus one may get from him, as from the prairies themselves, a sense of space and richness. One feels in him too the idealistic vision of a man accustomed to far horizons – that impatience with things near, things more or less faithless to the imminent beauty, and that relief in the contemplation of things remote, beauty's survivals or prophecies. This chaotic half-baked civilization, growing up out of these broad and fruitful plains into dull little towns and mad great cities, all fitfully, inadequately spiritualized – this one feels in Mr. Masters' books. One feels also a deep and tragic love of it, a thwarted but rooted faith in it, which cannot be destroyed by all the messy materialism, the soul-wasting – efficiency, which he sees around him. His – great valley is dominated by the gigantic sombre figure of Lincoln, the Autochthon of his dream – Lincoln, who ever renews his power in the imagination of the people, growing greater, like the elder Titans, through the mists of time. How much of all this Mr. Masters presents with adequate poetic magic no critic can define as yet. We, his neighbors and contemporaries, find – most of us – the very essence of it in *Spoon River*, which will surely tell something of the tale of our tribe to those who come after us. We find something of its atmosphere also, its light and shade and space, in the longer monologues of the later books, though here the theme is more consciously and as a rule less creatively presented. But in all one is carried along by a wave of power – the cumulative effect, like a geometrical progression, seems out of proportion to the separate steps that make it. This is the reader's tribute, no doubt, to the poet's rich and generous personality – that of a deeply informed man of the modern world, something between Chaucer and Rabelais, but burning darkly in his heart a little secret candle to some mediaeval saint.

–*Poetry*, Volume 9 [1917]

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