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THE LEGION of readers who dislike fictionized biographies will find this novelistic study of Vachel Lindsay[1] far less annoying than most. Perhaps the turbulent, bizarre, and pathetic career of this social rebel and clamorous apostle of beauty demands the imagination and empathy of a novelist rather than the objective scrutiny of a biographer devoted to fact and documentation. Who can say whether the real Vachel Lindsay is revealed in this "novel," whether Mark Harris has succeeded more than Masters in making credible this anachronistic troubadour, this would-be reformer, this seeker of beauty singing his thumping songs in the crass Harding-Babbitt era? The question is legitimate, for the Springfield poet was in many ways a puzzle even to those who knew him well. Perhaps he was no more a mass of contradictions than many other people, but his mighty articulateness and his indifference to accepted patterns of life exposed more freely his contrarieties and erraticism. More than two decades after his pitiable suicide, we perhaps are beginning to see him in relation to his age, as we now can clearly see that Poe was not out of time, out of place, but, with his personality and crasis, a plausible journalist and artist in the New York and Philadelphia of the 1830's and '40's.

The title of the novel refers to Springfield, where the Lindsays lived in the pleasant house once occupied by Lincoln's sister-in-law. Springfield is a not very attractive industrial, political, and agricultural center, which the poet longed to beautify and transform into a prairie Florence or Athens. How much was the attraction of Springfield due to Lincoln and family association? His letters reveal the overpowering influence of his executive-like

1 *City of Discontent*, by Mark Harris. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1952. 403 pp. $4.50.

mother, and one suspects that if she had removed to Peoria his vague civic utopianism would have transferred itself with her. The narrative of *City of Discontent* traces his familiar career—his lonely bookishness as a boy, his almost ludicrous attempts to study medicine at Hiram, his indifferent success as an artist, his abortive and primarily poetic love affairs, and finally sudden and wide reputation with the syncopations and booms and swings of "General Booth" and "The Congo." His decline as an artist, though not as an entertainer, followed pathetically soon after his first triumphs. He was always somewhat neurotic, and advancing years brought no corresponding maturity—he simply could not cope with the demands of every day life. Parenthetically one wonders whether Vachel's speech before the Springfield Noonday Luncheon Club as reported by the novelist is an actual transcript. If so (the novel very properly is undocumented), the poet reveals unexpected powers of humor and brilliant common sense. Marriage late in life and happy parenthood could not check the disintegration, and he committed suicide at the age of fifty-two.

City of Discontent is for the most part well-written, although some readers may fidget at the occasional streams of consciousness, others at the Dos Passos-like newsreels, and still others at four hundred pages of historical present tense. But the author is perceptive and sensitive and there are passages of power and beauty. We welcome the proper minor significance given to Lindsay's Campbellitism and Anti-Saloon League antics, but we are aware of whitewash—too little is said of his quarter-baked ideas, his occasional arrogance, his fantastic juvenility, his singular notions of business integrity.

This reviewer has two poignant Lindsay memories. Once, during a high-school "steak fry," a classmate pulled from his pocket a sheaf of manuscript poems he had that day received from his cousin in Illinois, and by the leaping flames read to us "The Congo." Why waste precious space trying to describe the overwhelm-

ing effect on the circle of excited high-school youngsters? One midnight, years later, in the reviewer's almost completely darkened living room Vachel chanted "The Chinese Nightingale," which glowed and rang with a temple-bell-like beauty it never possesses on the page, or from the prosaic platform of a lighted hall. With these two vivid memories it was not easy to read *City of Discontent* with complete objectivity.

THIS FIFTH and final volume of "Makers and Finders: A History of the Writer in America"[2] brings to a teasing stop Van Wyck Brooks's mammoth examination of American life and writing during the past century and a half. One says "stop" rather than "conclusion," for Brooks is well aware that the stream of American writing flows on as vigorously as ever, though much of it through new-cut channels which he does not feel inclined to try to chart and identify. The title of the book suggests that the American idealism of Jefferson, Emerson, and Whitman, the strong faith in humanity and progress, though often challenged, was not seriously threatened as a major force in American thought and writing until the years of the First World War. Since then, the negative attitude of "The Waste Land" has produced whole schools of poets and critics of highest brow who seemingly have reversed what to Brooks is the glorious American tradition.

Like the previous volumes, *The Confident Years* is an extraordinary synthesis and chronicle of American thought and culture, viewed with a perspective almost superhuman: what an achievement to come so near seeing America whole, to be at once sociologist, historian, psychologist, biographer, geographer, critic, anthropologist, nationalist and internationalist in the best sense! The pattern is largely geographical—from New York in the '80's to the South, Philadelphia, Chicago, the West, and back to the East, with substantial stops en route in England and France, and

[2] *The Confident Years, 1885-1915*, by Van Wyck Brooks. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1952, 627 pp. $6.00.

American literary centers; but always Brooks sees these parts in a great pattern and stresses likenesses more than divergences. He permits us to see for the first time in proper perspective Crane, Ade, Brownell, Bourne, More, Roosevelt, Huneker, Veblen, Norris, Hearn, London. Many almost forgotten writers—and Brooks's concern is with writers, not merely literary giants (he wastes no time, however, on mere best sellers and popular banalities)—such as Page, Frederic, Davis, Bunner, Allen, Field, Hapgood, Sedgwick, come to brief life again to help illuminate the age, as do figures not primarily literary such as Isadora Duncan, Darrow, Emma Goldman, Frederic Remington, Saint Gaudens, and Stieglitz. Moreover he does not neglect the powerful influence of Shaw, Wells, Tolstoi, Zola, and Nietzsche on our writers of the era.

Naturally there will be disagreement at many points. His near ignoring of Amy Lowell, H. D., Susan Glaspell, Nathan, Edward Bellamy, and W. E. Leonard will pique whatever followers they now have. Does not Witter Bynner deserve more than mention in one footnote? The author's forthright attack on the Eliot-Pound school of nay-sayers will wound the New Faithful, and some will quibble at his thrusting past his terminal date to write of Anderson, Lewis, Wolfe, and Faulkner. But no axe fell on 1915 cutting it off from the past, ushering in a brand new era—as no axe fell in 1642, 1800, 1832, and other dates beloved of literary historians. In the final chapter, "A Forward Glance," for the first time in twenty-five hundred pages Brooks has his dander up and takes up the sword against those intellectuals partly or largely responsible for our ebbing faith. Does this Punic faith on its lowest level generate the current hysteria which threatens to cripple thought and devitalize the arts?

Although Brooks is reluctant to pass literary judgment and is never pontifical, his excellent pages on Edith Wharton, Dreiser, Vachel Lindsay, Gertrude Stein, Mencken, Pound, and Masters will help us to clarify our own judgments.

ALTHOUGH Edwin Arlington Robinson has not been the subject of a flood of books, as have Hawthorne, Melville, and James in recent years, there has been an impressive accumulation of criticism during the past three decades. To the fairly long list of studies of Robinson, including those of such strange critical bedfellows as Rollo Brown, Amy Lowell, Lucius Beebe, Lloyd Morris, Charles Cestre, Hermann Hagedorn, Laura Richards, Yvor Winters and Emory Neff, is now added this analysis by Dr. Barnard.[3] If not an inspired study, it is painstaking and should contribute to a better understanding of Robinson's verse among readers of poetry concerned enough to consult a critique. Moreover it will probably serve as a useful Teacher's-Little-Helper, with time-saving hints about "Luke Havergal," "For a Dead Lady," "Eros Turannos," and other classroom puzzlers.

The author announces that the aim of his book is to extend understanding and appreciation of the poetry, not to recount the dull facts of Robinson's life or dissect his personality. He discusses the poet's views on the nature and function of poetry, the mysterious drive and procedure of creation, the causes of obscurity, his poetic style and organic form, his treatment of character, and finally the only surprising section of the book—an examination of his religious and philosophical views.

Perhaps the dullest sections are those concerned with details of prosody; here the smell of doctors' theses and textbooks is unmistakable. The most rewarding are those tackling the problems of obscurity—there is no doubt that Robinson overworks the business of veiled implication—and the poet's great achievement, the creation of memorable characters ("These too smoothly turned etchings," Conrad Aiken said of them in 1919) : Nightingale, Captain Craig, Matthias, Norcross, Cheevy, Mr. Flood, Annandale and the rest—no women among them. To the objection that nearly all are strange and twisted failures or psychological

3 *Edwin Arlington Robinson,* by Ellsworth Barnard. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952. 318 pp. $4.75.

strays, Robinson would no doubt reply that they are only unique persons.

This reviewer, who is only a reader of Robinson and not a student, found the discussion of the poet's philosophical optimism and religion unconvincing. For all the apt quotations pointing to the inadequacy of science, the meaningfulness of existence, the sterility of materialism and determinism, it is difficult to overlook a general Hardy-like gloom and the frequent note of very-dry ironic humor, not to mention such specific remarks as "The whole western world is going to be blown to pieces, asphyxiated, and starved," "The world is a hell of a place," etc. As for Robinson's religion, one is reminded of Lowell's couplet about Emerson:

> For though he builds glorious temples, 'tis odd
> He leaves never a doorway to get in a god.

Dr. Barnard's study is for the most part sanely this side of idolatry. For example, he is aware that the frenzy of *Tristram* is sometimes far too fine, sometimes not nearly fine enough. There is room for this somewhat workaday book on the Robinson shelf, which still awaits a really comprehensive study of one of the great American poets.