

WILLIAM ROSE BENET

THESIS

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WILLIAM ROSE BENET

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

William Rose Benet, on the opening page of his prize-winning semi-autobiographical verse-narrative The Dust Which Is God, describes himself as a small boy with his mother in church singing:

Holy Holy Holy

Lord God All
Mi-ighty
Allthy
workshall
Praise Thy Name in
earthand
Sky
andsea. . .
Only
Thouart
Ho-oh-ly . . . that was when it went deeper that was when
it tugged at the throat when you wanted to shout
when there was nothing but praise so lovely as praise
so brave as praise so going forth to war
with banner on a high white horse as praise and
cas ting
downtheir
Gol den Crowns
beside the
Glassysea. . .
Chair
ubim and
Sair
uphim it was thunder and lightning in the blood
falling befor-ohr Thee
Which wert
and art and . . . splendor and thunder and tears behind the eyes. .

On the last page, after taking his reader breathlessly through not only his own exciting life but also through the exciting times in which he lived, he concludes:

Could this
be solely earth? O surely not of earth
these I have seen have known touched with my hands . . .
and not of dust . . . but holy holy holy
in the enveloping dark....

that spirit rises
clothed on with light that never bolt nor bar
nor prison-camp nor bomb nor bullet quelled
nor the beast-in-man all vile device
to crush . . . stamp out the fire . . . blot the light
fearful of spirit . . . whispering . . . of the spirit
afraid . . . afraid . . .

but when that spirit wakes . . . !

. . . And so the small boy standing
in the dim church with colored light through tall windows
a small boy with his mother restless trying to sing
hating to pray . . .

but Holy Holy Holy Lord God Almighty
All Thy works shall praise Thy name . . .

and so there is no Time
Walk through the walls! for all the walls give way
and in a moment . . . the twinkling of an eye . . .

even this dust . . .

Particularly significant are these lines when one reads of his sudden death in such terse press notices as the following:

William Rose Benet, poet, contributing editor and one of the founders of the Saturday Review of Literature, dies of a heart attack on May 4, while walking on Broadway near 155th Street, New York, after attending a meeting of the Council of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, of which he was secretary. He was 64 years old.¹

¹Publishers' Weekly, CLVII (May 13, 1950), 2069.

This mere cessation of the act of breathing while in the midst of the activities he loved would have been, perhaps, the very manner of death most desired by the man who lived with "splendor and thunder and tears behind the eyes," "trying to sing" but "hating to pray," who early in his life wrote his often-quoted "The Falconer of God," beginning

I flung my soul to the air like a falcon flying.
I said, "Wait, wait on, while I ride below!"

and ending

My soul still flies about me for the quarry it shall find.

Kenneth Rockwell, in his memorial column to William Rose Benet, writes:

One man has died, and one death more can be of little consequences to a world made too familiar with the inevitable. Yet the fact that William Rose Benet has left taxis and subways for the ultimate flight of Pegasus cannot but make many of us sad.²

And so Benet's death has made many sad, especially his famous co-workers and friends of The Saturday Review of Literature, like Henry Seidel Canby, Amy Loveman, Christopher Morley, and Louis Untermeyer. Benet, at the time of his unexpected death, had just finished his Annual Poetry Number for this magazine of which he was a founder and the poetry editor, and for which he wrote for many years his popular column "The Phoenix Nest." With appropriate and poetic fitness his fellow-writers dedicated this May 20, 1950, issue of The Saturday Review of Literature "In Memoriam: William Rose Benet."

²"And So to Books," The Daily Times Herald, Dallas (May 14, 1950), p. 4.

In this issue Henry Seidel Canby, Chairman of the Editorial Board of The Saturday Review of Literature, titled his tribute simply "William Rose Benet: February 2, 1886—May 4, 1950." This was also printed in the Book-of-the-Month Club News for July, 1950. Dr. Canby says of him:

He was tolerant, humorous; it was an unforgettable experience to see him grasp in talk a flashing idea or explode at a suggestion of meanness, injustice, or spite. He knew Mark Twain was right when he said that laughter was the most successful weapon against the depravity of the human race, but when Bill could not laugh he raged.

Yet I like best to think of Bill Benet as one who was formed and featured as a poet ought to be. When he came into our office he would remind me of Shakespeare's lines

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
Kissing the golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy:-

This sounds rather magniloquent, for Benet was not a sun, nor were we mountain-tops, yet he gilded our air, which was too often dusty with facts and figures and pettier concerns, merely by his presence, which was of a man whose thought was always ready to take wing, was winging already while we talked. Not that he was impractical, but the practical for him required some corner of the mind free from the trivial or the gross.³

Any Loveman, associate editor with Benet on the Review for many years, in her tribute to him, "The Gallant Spirit," says:

But it is not as the poet, the editor, the co-worker in the field of letters that we who so long sat at the side of Bill Benet will best remember him. We will remember him for the gallant spirit which never in the midst of personal sorrow was too withdrawn to render sympathy to others, for the compassion that flamed out so readily at injustice, for endearing modesty and generosity, for the quizical humor that exploded so often into delighted laughter, and for the riches of mind and heart that made him the most rewarding of companions.

³The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 9.

His was a selfless and crusading soul, questing and brave,
the memory of which will rest as a grace with those who knew him.⁴

Christopher Morley, one of the founders of The Saturday Review of Literature, when he heard of Benet's death wrote to Miss Loveman, enclosing a poem he had written to Benet in 1947 "Ballads of William Rose Benet." Although this letter was not meant for publication, Morley agreed to its inclusion in the memorial issue to his friend. It was published under the caption "Heaven Had No Wall," and in it he says:

But, however agonizing for his lovers, for himself,
O felix! To go unwarned, and unsuspecting, honored and
believed, at the top of his lovely power. As the ballad
says, "the lightning comes the zigzag way." You told me
he had just finished his annual Poetry Number, and that was in
character. He was encumbered with many jobs, and he gave
the most deliciously subtle rendition of irresponsibility—
he, the most conscientious of journeymen. I was always
careful not to tell him too often how sudden conflagrant
lines of his moved me. But there was one, about last Xmas,
that pierced like an icicle:—

I was ingathered, Heaven had no wall. (SRL Dec. 17, 1949)⁵

His life-long friend, Louis Untermeyer, writes in this same
issue:

It is impossible for me to write with critical detachment about William Rose Benet's poetry. The man and his work were so intricately interwoven that the human being can be scarcely considered apart from his prime function. Moreover Bill Benet and I grew up with, around, and on poetry—even on the same poems....

It was a genuine passion for poetry that we shared for most of a lifetime....

His poetry was the man: generous, sometimes too lavish, overflowing with forthrightness and brotherly good will. With Bill's death there is a little less generosity, a little less

⁴Ibid., p. 10.

⁵The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 10-11.

faith and good will in the world. Our literature will be thinner and our lives poorer for the lack of these.⁶

Mr. Untermeyer classifies "The Horse Thief" as perhaps "Bill's most typical poem," and summarizes it as follows:

The hero's stolen horse breaks a leg, and the outlaw sees a mustang "up on the purple canyon's lip." He lassoes the wild creature, mounts him, and is taken, literally, out of this world. It is a work of creative fancy and, at the same time, an unconscious piece of self-criticism. As poet, Bill delighted to ride his fantasies bareback. The easy lopes, leaps, and centers continued.....The high spirits were uncurbed and, frequently, out of control.⁷

All who knew Benet personally or through his writings will agree that he is one of America's outstanding poets; but there is no consensus among his critics as to the other classifications to which he belongs, for in seeking to evolve a philosophy for his life he used many media. For instance, in his own The Reader's Encyclopedia he classifies himself simply as "American poet and critic;"⁸ Who's Who in America lists him merely as "author;"⁹ Kunitz and Haycroft call him an "American poet and novelist;"¹⁰ in the Holiday Magazine he is referred to as "American poet, critic, and encyclopedist;"¹¹ Scholastic Magazine identifies him as "poet, critic, novelist and Phoenician;"¹² Publisher's Weekly lists him as "poet, contributing editor and one of the founders

⁶Ibid., p. 13.

⁷Ibid., pp. 13-14.

⁸The Reader's Encyclopedia, p. 95.

⁹Who's Who in America, 1950-1951, XXVI, p. 196.

¹⁰Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycroft, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 116.

¹¹Holiday Magazine, VII (June, 1950), 49.

¹²Publisher's Weekly, XXVII (December 7, 1935), 5.

of The Saturday Review of Literature; ¹³ Time Magazine describes him as "Pulitzer-Prize poet (The Dust Which Is God), brother of the late Stephen Vincent (John Brown's Body) Benet, husband of the late Elinor Wylie;" ¹⁴ while News Week similarly cites him as "Pulitzer Prize-winning Poet (The Dust Which Is God, 1942), critic and editor (The Saturday Review of Literature), and brother of Stephen Vincent Benet."¹⁵ In addition to these classifications he has been columnist, short-story writer, dramatist, translator, writer of children's stories, and anthologist. Mr. Untermeyer summarizes Benet's work in this manner:

At sixty-four he had written, edited, and compiled some thirty-six books, including a novel, several anthologies, and an invaluable "Reader's Encyclopedia." Varied though they were in technique and intention, they were united by an intensity of spirit. To which he added integrity—and a pervasive kindness.¹⁶

How his writings will stand the test of time remains, of course, to be seen. Mr. Rockwell says:

Benet was not a great poet, but he was a good one, a writer who will undoubtedly be remembered by one or two or three poems in the anthologies, and most men can ask no more.

No, Benet was not a great poet. His greatness lay in other fields. He was a great lover of beautiful and talented women, but the quality will number him among the noblemen of the world we know was that greatest of all his characteristics—his love for mankind. He knew there were fools among us, but even that he could forgive. He had time to read the most puerile of verses, time to write letters of

¹³CLVII (May 13, 1950), 2069.

¹⁴LV (May 15, 1950), 94.

¹⁵XXXV (May 15, 1950), 67.

¹⁶The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 14.

criticism and advice. The number of young writers he helped and encouraged must be astronomical.¹⁷

Watt and Cargill,¹⁸ however, call him "a more subtle poet than the bright genius who was his younger brother," even though he never attained that brother's popularity.

In his eulogy of Benet Dr. Canby writes:

I do not know how the future will rank his poetry. It may be said that he wrote too freely. The reply might be that he could not do otherwise. Even as a youth he "lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came." Some of his poems will certainly last with the best of his time. But to the man himself as one of the most lovable and most heartening of his day, many will bear witness. By no means unacquainted with the hard realism of loss and suffering and hardship, he held fast to the instinctive happiness which seems to have been his birth-right and it bloomed in his word and his very look at the end. He will be more deeply missed than many a more congested thinker or bitter prophet of the approaching doom of man.¹⁹

Christopher Morley writes more optimistically about Benet's place in American literature:

It'll take years, fifty maybe, before he is relished as one of our greater and more difficult poets. But he won't and doesn't care. We had together, for many years, what Wells called *The Foods of the Gods*, and nothing else matters.²⁰

Today the perspective is too close to know whether William Rose Benet will go down in the annals of literature as an outstanding American poet and very versatile writer, or whether he will be

¹⁷The Times Herald, Dallas (May 14, 1950), p. 4.

¹⁸Homer A. Watt and Oscar Cargill, College Reader, p. 920.

¹⁹The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 9.

²⁰Ibid., p. 11.

rated as merely a good poet and efficient journeyman. To say the least, he has been one of our most interesting and most original writers, who loved life intensely, and lived it still more intensely. To paraphrase Browning, with whom Untermeyer compared him, Benet loved whate'er he looked upon, and his looks went everywhere.

The following chapters will review the life of the man, as portrayed by himself and by his contemporaries; his works—poetry, compilations, and miscellaneous types of writing; and current estimates of his contributions to American culture.

CHAPTER II

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM ROSE BENET

William Rose Benet, prolific and versatile man of American letters, has had very little written of him biographically to date, although a number of critics have written of his works as they appeared from time to time. It is soon after his sudden death on May 4, 1950, to expect much in this respect. While a man is living, growing, and producing, it is impossible to measure the full value of his life and his writings, for often they are almost synonymous.

Christopher Morley, in his letter to Amy Loveman about the death of his friend, writes: "The time will come when I can say more about him."¹ So it is to be hoped that in the not too distant future Mr. Morley, Benet's friend for over thirty-five years, or some of the other famous writers whom Benet knew for so long and so well will give to the world a complete account of his life and his work. Perhaps some member of his famous family will do this—his writer wife, Marjorie Flack; his novelist sons, James Walker; his poet and author sister, Laura, or his sister-in-law, Rosemary Carr Benet. Any or all of these writers could give many interesting and cherished facts and experiences of Benet's eventful and romantic life—facts and experiences such as only they could give. Until that time, however, there are many things to be known of his life, which was full to overflowing—more than most

¹The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 10.

people's—with the drama of living, comedy, melodrama, and tragedy. The following biographical sketch is based on facts gleaned from the writings of his contemporaries and from his own works, particularly his semi-autobiographical verse-narrative The Dust Which Is God.

The initial sentence of the vital statistics of his life might be phrased: William Rose Benet, American writer, was born at Fort Hamilton, New York Harbor, February 2, 1886, son of James Walker and Frances Neill Rose Benet, and grandson of Brigadier-General Stephen Vincent Benet, one-time Chief of Ordnance.

Benet, however, begins his self-portrait for Twentieth Century Authors much more vivaciously and originally:

The subject of this sketch at one time had his birth celebrated in rhyme by his friend Christopher Morley:

Old Bill Benet, Old Bill Benet,
Born in a Fort on Ground-hog Day!

(the fort being Fort Hamilton in New York Harbor.) This gives a clue to the pronunciation of the celebrite's name. W. R. B.'s grandfather was Stephen Vincent Benet (the elder), who entered West Point in 1845, and was given the French pronunciation of the name. The family, whose name was originally pronounced Ba-na-te, came from Catalonia.² His great-great-grandfather, Esteban Benet, was master mariner in the Spanish Merchant Marines and settled in St. Augustine 1785. He married Catalina Hernandez and in 1812 he was lost at sea in his ship. His brother was a Post-Captain in the Spanish Navy and was assassinated in Havana. This fact pleases the more brutal instincts of his descendant.³

Pedro, the son of Esteban, saw Florida a possession of the Spanish, the English, and the French before it was acquired by the United States

² Catalonia was formerly a province of Spain and a principality of Aragon. Today it is represented by the provinces of Gerona, Barcelona, Lerida, and Tarragona.

³ Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 116.

in 1819. Pedro immediately became an enthusiastic American, took an interest in local politics, and sent his son, William Rose's grandfather, to West Point, all of which is in the family tradition.

Mr. Benet was very proud of his Spanish ancestry and often referred to it. In The Dust Which Is God he calls his family by the Spanish name "Fernandez," himself "Raymond," his brother "Peter," his sister Laura "Louisa," and his son James Walker "Gavin." Two interesting references to his Spanish ancestry are made in this book. The first is in the form of a letter from "Gavin," who "spent two and a half years in Spain driving an ambulance truck for the Loyalist cause, which Mr. Benet and his brother supported in this country:"⁴

Your letter was
fine on the genealogy We talk
about such things I read it to the guys. . .
On the Valencia waterfront a shop
(where our particular Fernandez branch
began) still bears the name upon its door. . .
Also I've always wondered was that fellow
back somewhere in the sixteenth century
the navigator and discoverer
any forebear of ours—who sailed you know
from Callao to Chile and went so fast
they thought he was a sorcerer? It seems right
I should put in some licks to serve the country
the family left some two centuries ago.⁵

The second reference to their Spanish origin is near the close of the book when, after a severe illness, Benet goes with friends to St. Augustine:

at last to visit in the Oldest City
whence came his forebears. . .

⁴Ibid., p. 117.

⁵The Dust Which Is God, pp. 507-508.

and Raymond said
 "Really my name's Ramon Peter is Pedro
 The family was a Minorcan breed
 but first from Barcelona Yet I can't write
 or speak the language My grandfather could!
 Also I'm English and a bit Scotch-Irish—
 and sometimes they're on top."⁶

With characteristic appreciation for the "American scene" and with characteristic humor, irrepressible even in illness, and showing his interest in things of the past, evident even in his first poems, he continued:

"Sixteenth Century wasn't it—hunh Marcia?—
 Ponce de Leon at the end of March
 beached near the Indian village of Seloy?
 And now there's that hotel they call the 'Ponce'
 where you can go to hear the arteries
 harden of all the wealthy northern tourists—
 but this is where our country made a start—
 one of the places They say there is a saint
 or virgin or madonna of the family
 down here in someone's keeping."⁷

His father James Walker Benet was a Pointer, as was his grandfather, and was an officer in the Ordnance Division. William Rose is a son of New York simply because his military father happened to be stationed there at the time of William Rose's birth, but he could as easily have been a native of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, California, or Georgia, or any of the other army posts where the Benets found themselves stationed during the years when their three children, William Rose, Laura, and Stephen Vincent, were growing up. During the first years of Benet's life they lived in Springfield, Massachusetts; Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; and Buffalo, New York.

⁶ Ibid., p. 531

⁷ Ibid., pp. 531-532.

of the truth, than all the church services that ever were held. Both men possessed the mental integrity nothing could move.¹⁰

His father's and his mother's faiths, as well as their characters, he sums up thus:

in the agnostic father
burned reverence for the word lit with clear humor
and in the mother a spiritual flame
shaken with passion both these passionate people
strict in conventional conduct of the time
delightfully at times were wild and wayward
let nothing stem their gaiety and nonsense
in the inner circle were children with their children
and then again aloof and alien air
of strictness breathed and walked each with a sorrow
and difficult breath. . .¹¹

The following lines written in appreciation of his parents are echoed in the words that many of his friends wrote about him:

Such human people
both walking in their own inviolacy
aware of their own follies and mistakes
but warm in hearts of friends and of their
foes he seemed not to have heard. . .¹²

His mother he especially honors in a beautiful chapter titled "Image of Ghostly Elf," written about her death.

Of his sister Laura, famous today in her own right as a poet and author, and their childhood he writes:

He loved his sister
even through the age when growing boy and girl are
two recriminating antagonisms
forgetting never the quick companionship

¹⁰"A Page for Poets," Forum, XCIII (June, 1935), 381.

¹¹The Dust Which Is God, p. 15. Henceforth, quotations from The Dust Which Is God will be referred to by page number only.

¹²p. 17.

when he was small "picked on" by other boys
 bewildered by a sudden cruel absence
 of all good will. . .¹³

He says of his beloved brother Stephen Vincent, twelve years his junior:

The Infant too he loved
 who shook beligerant curls who took to life
 at first like a young emperor whose round face
 was lit with wonder and curiosity
 and amid violent poundings of his spoon
 would beam benevolence. . .¹⁴

Of the family group he says:

Such were the five:
 the different two who never for all their strivings
 could change by one iota essential nature
 in either and the three begotten of love
 as their live essence knew. . .

these were in bond
 each to the other for a certain time
 nourished and foiled each other's natural best
 beat hardily against each other's wills
 increased experience suffered endured
 and held to love whether they found or failed—¹⁵

In such a healthy, normal, wholesome atmosphere he grew to young
 manhood. He expresses his appreciation for this background in these lines:

But the wondering Raymond in his early years
 Knew little of Earth's misery his heart
 not yet the marvelous governance of the world
 the great directing greed the spirit thrawn
 with poverty the scramble around the trough
 the fury of privilege the mental garbage
 that passed for thought in stuffed hotels and clubs
 and mansions of the rich ere Hollywood
 exalted these. . .

He was a fortunate child
 like many fortunate children of his time

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

who on small means received an education
 as good as any whose parents taught him kindness
 and the search for truth and honor and fair dealing
 and that there walked a beauty in the world
 everywhere found if one might apprehend it. . .¹⁶

He describes himself as this growing boy searching for the beauty every-
 where around him in these words:

The boy on the front stoop the boy at the desk with ink
 and chalk besmeared turning the greasy leaves
 his pockets bulged with buckeyes could hear the clink
 of the sword of great Achilles or Hector's greaves

* * * * *

The boy on the railroad tracks in the Pennsylvania town
 or by the New York canal where used to plod
 satiric mules would yearn for a Sussex down
 nightingales hawthorn hedges ivy tod

* * * * *

who remembers county fairs ancient hotel spittoons
 blue jays circus posters loud covered bridges
 till brighter in retrospect than many Athenian moons
 sputters a street-corner lamp beset by midges. . .¹⁷

Thus Benet grew like any average American boy, but perhaps with a
 mind more full of curiosity and a heart more full of singing. The earli-
 est printed evidence of the songs teeming in his mind is in The St.
Nicholas Magazine for June, 1902. Contributions to the third annual
 poetry and essay contest on "June-Time," held by the St. Nicholas League,
 contains this poem:

JUNE-TIME
 by William Rose Benet
 (Age 16)

Hark, hark, to the meadow lark
 As he swells his throat in a burst of song!
 By the rippling brook sway the lilies. Look!

¹⁶ Pp. 22-23.

¹⁷ P. 32.

They lift their heads in a surpliced throng.
 The sun's bright gleam shakes the silver stream
 With ripples of light that dance and play
 The fields are white with the daisies bright;
 The earth rejoices, and all is gay.
 It's June-time, it's June-time.¹⁸

In the Editor's Note are these lines: "The League has become one of the greatest educational institutions in the world. . .the editor is sorry to see them go. It is like losing old friends and he hopes that in the greater school. . .he will one day meet and greet and congratulate many of those who have made their beginning here."¹⁹ The editor may have been able to congratulate Benet, for the first job held by Benet was with The Century Magazine, which also published St. Nicholas, and to the latter magazine he sold a number of children's stories.

Benet's first poem was published while he was a student at the Albany, New York, Academy, a preparatory school from which he was graduated in 1904. Although both his father and his grandfather had been Pointers, Benet says, "on the other hand, both the Benet brothers went to Yale University."²⁰ As William Rose's proclivities were not particularly militaristic, he entered the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale, "probably as a compromise between a military and an arts education."²¹ It was at Yale that he made several friendships that greatly influenced the course of his life. At "Sheff" at the same time was Henry Seidel Canby, an instructor in English and Benet's proctor.

¹⁸ The St. Nicholas Magazine, XXIX (June, 1902), 761.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 752.

²⁰ Kunitz and Haycraft, op. cit., p. 117.

²¹ Dilly Tante, Living Authors, p. 32.

Canby writes this of Benet at Yale:

I have known and admired and loved William Rose Benet for almost half a century, ever since as a lank and rather frightened freshman he came to live in a Yale dormitory where I was proctor. His smile won me. But it was sixteen years later, after he joined me in the founding of the old Literary Review, which became The Saturday Review of Literature, that I learned to understand the rare quality of his mind.²²

Because Benet was a Scientific School undergraduate, he was barred from the editorial board of the Yale Literary Magazine; he was, however, chairman of the Yale Courant and an editor of the Yale Record. It was in this latter capacity that he made another lasting friendship, that of Henry Martyn Hoyt, Jr., artist and poet, whom he calls "Gavin Heseltine" in his autobiography. Benet dedicated Great White Wall in 1916 and Moons of Grandeur in 1920 to him. When Elinor Hot Wylie visited her brother at Yale Benet was introduced to her. Later she became the second Mrs. Benet. In The Dust Which Is God Benet calls her "Sylvia." He writes:

"This is my sister Mrs. Ryder."

"I've heard of you." Her voice was cool and clear
Suddenly she laughed and elfin sort of laughter.....

"And you write verse."

"O sort of—I—"

"No He's a real one Sylvia," said Gavin

Said Raymond "Gavin has told me a lot about you
He read me something of yours rather miraculous
I'm awfully glad to meet—"

"He's pleased to have meet you!"
said Gavin nonsensically "Well old man

²² The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), p. 9.

I guess I'm going to England with the family
I'll write and you get writing knock 'em dead!"

"Thank you for that 'miraculous'" said Sylvia
"I wish it were true!"

They were gone up College Street
and she leaned against Gavin and laughed and they
turned and waved

All rose and dovelike gray and as though a mist
of silver were around her. . .

Who is Sylvia
what is she that all the gods and delicate deer
in a chequer of sun and leaves and a ripple of bells.²³

After his graduation from Yale in 1907 Benet lived with his family in California, where his father was stationed at the Benicia Arsenal. From then until 1911 he tried his hand at free lance poetry. While establishing himself as a writer, he "lived off the family," as he put it. The Bookman for October, 1923, threw its "Literary Spotlight" on William Rose Benet in a rollicking unsigned article, in which it was stated that he was "known to his more or less familiars as Bill." From the general tone of the article it can be safely assumed that the author was one of Bill's "more familiars," particularly when he writes:

There was no reason for William Rose Benet in the first place. His family was a military family and it will take more than Dr. Freud to figure out why an entire generation should suddenly turn poets. But they did and the result is that Scarsdale, their present home nest, should be likened to that famous pie wherein the four and twenty blackbirds caroled so sweetly. It's regrettable that Bill did not go into the regular army, even for a short while, because there is in existence a portrait of Our Hero in uniform that is joyous to behold. He looks like the Duke of Wellington the morning after Waterloo. Such pride and poise betoken anything but a

²³Pp. 64-65.

poet. Instead of going into the regular army Bill went to Yale. Now the influence of Yale on poets—but then this is a matter for the consideration of Harvard men.

His subsequent career has been a series of mild jumps from position to position. Sometimes they weren't positions, they were just jobs.....He once published a little magazine of his own, The Chimera, which beat most little magazines by one month. It ran two months.²⁴

For a time he lived with another young Yale graduate who had not yet found his literary wings, Sinclair Lewis, the "Larry Harris" of his autobiography. Their days at Carmel were full of fun and frolic and hard work. During this period Benet's poems were published in most of the leading magazines in this country and some in England.

His correspondence during these years with the editor of The Century Magazine led to the offer of a position with that publication. He accepted this job in 1911. His first two weeks in New York after entering the Century offices were spent as office boy, addressing envelopes. He was soon promoted to the job of reader, which position he held until 1914, when he was made associate editor of The Century. He writes of these days in this way:

The offices
Of The Epoch were hushed with a literary past
eminently embalmed
daily rejection-letters
"Outside the periphery of our present needs"
were pressed in tissue letter-books that made
the ink turn green
the manuscripts were entered
in a large ledger.....
Raymond toiled
as a reader reading himself to somnolence

²⁴"William Rose Benet," The Bookman, LVIII (October, 1923), 135.

seeking some hidden pearl

He wondered then
even as he wondered long what the fire of writing
had to do with frock coats and high silk hats
and social aspirations, with brownstone fronts
and clever chattering women?.....

Once when he joined
an author's club and found there eminent men
entrenched in dignity he thought of yaks
and gravely dancing bears The air was stale
and rancid even with obvious prejudice
bumbling like authority quite polite
and utterly empty

What did it have to do
with bloody sweat and passion
and agony of creation?²⁵

During his days as reader his first volume of poetry, Marchants
from Cathay, was published in 1913. This book was quickly followed by
others, about which Louis Untermeyer writes:

The publishers could scarcely keep up with his headlong
energy: "The Falconer of God," "The Great White Wall,"
and "The Burglar of the Zodiac" all appeared in less
than four years. He was also crusading against preten-
tiousness, bigotry, and the braggart (sic) of "solemn
asses in political office." At the same time he began
a quiet campaign for his younger brother, Stephen
Vincent, whose first volume was to appear a year later.
"I enclose some of his poems, which mother copied. He
is just sixteen. You will see how violently Gallic
they are—his hero is Napoleon. But I think you'll
also see that he has an unusual command of rhythm and
rhetoric." And a few months later: "You'll find
young Stephen heading a herd of poets in the New
Republic for August 7. I'm prejudiced, of course, but
I think 'Winged Man' has more guts than all the rest
together."²⁶

If William Rose had had someone to help him become established
in the field of letters, as he helped Stephen, one wonders what his

²⁵The Dust Which Is God, p. 100.

²⁶The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), p. 13.

writing might have been, thus freed from so much necessary "pot-boiling" journalism.

Although cynicism and pessimism filled his mind most of his life, he writes of his early life as an author in this manner:

But in the time
of his first books loving gaiety splendor
ribald whimsical life and sounding phrase
deft craft of writing and the magical dream
he wandered through a city where every color
and noise experience and newfound friend
were exhilaration.²⁷

On September 3, 1912, he had married Teresa Frances Thompson, sister of Kathleen Thompson, who later became famous as the novelist Kathleen Norris. Benet tells in the chapter "Dark Rosaleen" of meeting Teresa when he and Sinclair Lewis were still in California. Dressed in old clothes, they had gone to hear Steve Manton, the labor leader. After the meeting they fell into conversation with Teresa, or "Nora Raftery," who had also gone to hear Manton because she believed in what he was doing for the dock strikers in San Francisco. Benet describes seeing her in the light of the street lamp:

There was laughter in her eyes
dark-lashed and blue there was laughter on the lips
with an Irish curve but the broad and candid brows
under the wide-brimmed hat were grave and still.²⁸

He vividly describes meeting Teresa's family, particularly "Molly," or Kathleen Norris:

²⁷p. 102.

²⁸p. 79.

Big Molly Raftery
 with her noble Roman nose and humorous mouth
 and keen blue eyes was the most amusing person
 Raymond thought the quickest at banter and nonsense
 and mimicry he yet had known.²⁹

Teresa was a devout Catholic, whereas Benet was not too firm in his convictions of Episcopalianism. After he left California for New York, Teresa went to England to join the Carmelite order of nuns. His mother received a letter from "Molly," which he quotes in part:

".....I feel that I have lost her
 forever She's entering the Carmelites
 You never see them again."³⁰

When Kathleen Thompson married Charles G. Norris, the novelist, they, too, came east. One night they invited their old friend Benet to dinner. He learned then that Teresa was returning to the United States as the Carmelites "asked too much of her belief." Her decision to renounce the order brought desperate grief to herself, but joy to her family and to Benet. Upon Teresa's return she and Benet renewed their friendship and were married. To them were born three children James Walker, Frances Rosemary, and Kathleen Anne. In The Dust Which Is God he refers to them as "Gavin," "Frances," and "Janet."

They bought a house in "Port Adams" and Benet commuted to New York. From these daily rides he received inspiration for "Grand Central Types," which appeared in Century in May, 1916. These six humorous verses were written in conjunction with W. R. Burlingame and were illustrated with comic line drawings by Charles Huard. This

²⁹p. 84.

³⁰p. 84.

is the only observed instance that the author's name was printed as "W. R. Benet." The stanza on "The Commuter" is typical of these verses written in the lighter vein:

Observe the daily hot pursuit
Of him who ventures to commute.
Isn't it fun? It keeps him well,
This five-sixteen to New Rochelle.
He would not practice otherwise
Such ante-prandial exercise.
Some scorn it. I, for one am green
With envy of his five-sixteen.³¹

During the first two years of their marriage Benet assisted his wife in the translation from the French of Paul Galudal's The Book I Know. This translation was published in 1914.

Although Teresa was bitterly opposed to war, when Benet decided to enlist in the first World War, she consented to his wishes and took the children to live with his family, who at that time were stationed in Georgia.

His anonymous friend of The Bookman said: "He helped win the war. He doesn't talk about it."³² Benet himself in Twentieth Century Authors merely says: "He was once a shavetail in the Air Service and a Ki-Wi (which means non-flying). That was in the last war."³³ He received his training at Kelly Field, Texas, and at Columbus, Ohio. He was commissioned as Second Lieutenant in the Air Corps February 29, 1918, and served as ground officer in Fort Worth, Texas, and later in Washington,

³¹The Century Magazine, XCII (May, 1916), 157.

³²The Bookman, LVIII (October, 1923), 136.

³³Kunitz and Haycroft, op. cit., p. 117.

labored with this advertising agency striving mightily to inoculate its callous ad men with a more aesthetic feeling for their calling. Alas, it was no go. He cast his eyes elsewhere. Strangely enough they landed pop upon The Nation's Business.³⁵

But the name of this advertising agency has not been "kept secret forevermore," for it was the Corman Advertising Service of New York City. From January until July of 1919 Benet was connected with this firm. Several of the slogans originated by him during this time are said to be still in use.³⁶ Benet writes of these experiences in his chapter called "Sloganeering:"

The atmosphere of the agency was brisk
Raymond in his cubicle set to work
to evolve slogans first for a talcum powder
in its tin container on the desk before him
What will the people buy? He found a new
domain of words.....

Enthusiasm
was what you needed—for a talcum powder
for a varnish for a tire with special tread.....
in any case
ponder on the importance of the product
pump up enthusiasm till the glow
of imagination kindles till invention
suggests a picture or a line of talk
that snares attention in few but artful words
enveigles housewife hypnotizes hubby
or by some method makes the general public
yearn for but this particular type and style
among the many.³⁷

Before he could save enough money to bring his wife and children back to New York, Teresa died at his parent's home on January 26, 1919. Benet states briefly in Twentieth Century Authors: "The first Mrs. Benet

³⁵ The Bookman, LVIII (October, 1923), 136.

³⁶ Daily Tante, op. cit., p. 32.

³⁷ The Dust Which Is God, p. 182.

died in the post-war influenza epidemic, which so shadowed the East."³⁸
 But in The Dust Which Is God he writes fully of his grief at her death,
 and how in the middle of the night a few days before he received the telegram telling of her serious illness he composed a poem which seemed to him to be a premonition of some foreboding ill, for he thought:

he had been away
 on a dark hill in a desperate search for God
 groping through darkness holding a colloquy
 with death.³⁹

Shortly after Teresa's death, in March of the same year, he published a memorial volume to her which he called Perpetual Light.

In the summer of 1919 Benet became assistant editor of The Nation's Business. His aforementioned anonymous biographer writes:

The Nation's Business is conducted by the Chamber of Commerce of Washington, D. C., and its purpose is—well, the nation's business. I suppose that the editor mistook Bill for a merchant, and so he is; but not that kind of merchant that The Nation's Business would be especially interested in. Bill is a merchant from Cathay. He swaps unicorns and sells patches from the sunset to anybody that requires them. This being so (and the place being the United States of America), Bill went to work on The Nation's Business and wrote lengthily about the coal situation. It was from that dark and forbidding labor that Christopher Morley (looking for kinsprits, possibly) rescued Our Hero, brushed the coal dust out of his hair, took his mind off the nation's business and incontinently ran him back into the literary game.⁴⁰

Benet was with this publication until 1920, in which year his Moons of Grandeur was published. This book was dedicated to his friend from

³⁸Kunitz and Haycroft, op. cit., p. 117.

³⁹p. 214.

⁴⁰The Bookman, LVIII (October, 1923), 138.

Yale, Henry Martyn Hoyt, Jr., who had committed suicide. His friend's tragedy and death were keenly felt by Benet, who not only dedicated this volume of poetry to his "Gavin" but helped edit Hoyt's poems and exhibit his paintings.

Christopher Morley, who "rescued" Benet from the conservative magazine of the United States Chamber of Commerce, had met Benet when he was connected with The Century Magazine. Benet describes the beginning of their rare and life-long friendship in these words:

He loved the bookstores
on Vesey Street and Ann along Fourth Avenue
and some uptown He haunted old Brentano's
near Madison Square
and there one day he found
a stout young man with a large quizzical face
who thrust out a strong and flexible-fingered hand
saying "Excuse me but God bless my soul!
Aren't you Fernandez who wrote about the pigeons
and the old fellows who feeds them in Madison Square--
'but it was rude and crude when the swift present burst
on his beatitude'?"

My name's Darlington Tracy"

He had a brief case
scuffed and bulging, he had a battered hat
cocked over one ear he had an irresistible
air of could it be impecunious affluence?
The affluence was of the mind

He fingered books
as though he loved the feel of them the smell of them
the type and binding even the very stitching
and could eat them alive

and Raymond was to find
in future years the fount of glorious nonsense
that welled in Tracy a perennial spring
against disaster and defeat the gusto
with which he slipped his arm about the Muse
and clutched her to him for a spontaneous buss
and whirled her into a jig the bubbling laughter
the cheery guffaw the sudden seizure of arm
to point some curious street sign or even
the halloo of "Good Old Raymond!" these to be

the paprika of existence terrible puns
ingenious poems and jugglery with words...⁴¹

Morley's securing for Benet the position of associate editor of the Literary Review of the New York Evening Post in 1920 might be considered the turning point of Benet's life, for out of the Literary Review grew The Saturday Review of Literature, which Benet helped to found and with which he was associated until his death. Benet refers to the Literary Review as "a sort of book supplement on the Despatch," with which they hoped to give it "literary value."⁴²

At the time Benet joined the "Despatch" he writes of Morley, who was then a columnist on that paper:

sprawled beneath a rolltop rapidly writing
legerdebrain in shirtsleeves with a pipe
hooked in his mouth like some benevolent carp
played the supramundane on a line
of threadlike smoke.⁴³

Christopher Morley writes of these days in his "Ballade of William Rose Benet." In his letter to Miss Loveman referred to above, Mr. Morley observes:

In three days of very sorrowful thinking I have come to the conclusion that what Bill would like (better than anything formalized or black-edged under the pressure of sadness) would be (enclosed) "The Ballade of WRB," which was written in 1947 with no purpose but to amuse him, which it did. I think, even in this shock of grief, I remember best that through some 35 years we always amused each other, in affectionate fundamental respect but neither on yielding ever.

⁴¹Pp. 103-104.

⁴²P. 225.

⁴³P. 235.

an inch of our opinions. Maybe the test of a really great poet is that he never is comfortable when treated on grand poete. At any rate in our long game of tennis-singles—a game Bill hugely loved in the older days—we never put the grave accent on poetry, or even the circumflex; always the acute.⁴⁴

This ballad, quoted below, was published in the memorial issue to William Rose Benet of The Saturday Review of Literature and seems to express clearly Benet's philosophy of writing poetry. Morley prefaced the poem with this note:

This was written for W. R. B. in 1947. In some thirty-five years of mutual ricochet this was a small but loving pallet. He thought (and quite right) it was too personal to include in a pamphlet of verses (Poetry Package) we published jointly a few months ago. But I think, today, he would prefer this to any emotional reaction of pain and shock. No really fine poet was ever more modest.—C.M.⁴⁵

BALLADE OF WILLIAM ROSE BENET

By Christopher Morley

Sometimes, enthusiastic fool,
 I spent an elegaic day
 In winding on a rhyming spool
 An intimate auto-da-fe.
 Then showed it to Old Bill Benet
 And moaned, How few will mark my wit—
 So what, old merrythought, would say:
You Had the Fun of Writing It.

Old comrade of a stricter school
 The hour is late, and hell to pay
 Since in the Woolworth swimming pool*
 We sloshed and frolicked and made spray.
 New endocrines the boys obey,
 But ours was also Holy Writ—
 Mehitabels and toujours gai
We Had the Fun of Writing It.

⁴⁴The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 10.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 11.

So each man finds his molecule
 And learns to model his own clay;
 There is no law, there is no rule,
 The lightning comes the zigzag way.
 But You, as critic Yea-or-Nay
 Could always leave my weasand slit:
 You said, old Friar of Orders Gray,
You Had the Fun of Writing It.

Envoy

Okay! In Charon's vestibule
 Exchange our double-breasted twit:
 For even when we slipped the tool
We Had the Fun of Writing It.

*The swimming pool, natatorium in the basement of the Woolworth Building, favorite relaxing place of W. R. B. and friends when they worked 1920-24, in the office of the old Evening Post. In hot weather they always went there at noon, instead of lunch. In cold weather they went to Mendoza's Bookstore, on Ann Street, and sold enough review copies to buy a meal. They were quite young in those days, and no street in the world, not even Fleet Street, ever roared with such innocent laughter. That is what I best remember. Bill, how different from most young eecodasmon poets, really loved people and persons. Love to him, forever and always.—C.H.

A fellow-writer on the Literary Review was his former proctor at Yale University, Dr. Henry Seidel Canby. In his autobiography Benet pays the following tribute to Dr. Canby, whom he calls "Danby Slidell:"

He joked Danby Slidell
 editor of the Book Review a small
 slight man with domelike forehead and lower lip
 inclined to pout a professorial habit
 that still persisted in his codifying
 remarks under (a) and (b) a candid nature
 a mind alive and liberal his desk
 a noble rat's nest and the hand he wrote
 a secretarial headache he possessed
 the ability to wring from noted writers
 criticisms of books at honoraria
 modest perforce he was an honest man
 highly intelligent a sturdy friend
 in adversity.⁴⁶

⁴⁶P. 235.

Dr. Canby writes of their early days on the Literary Review, sixteen years after he first knew Benet at Yale:

.....after he joined me in the founding of the old Literary Review, which became The Saturday Review of Literature, I learned to understand the rare quality of his mind. Those were merry days of hard work and enthusiasm, and an optimism that is now only historical. Bill could do anything—write poetry, write editorials, write criticism, and put his heart and his already mellow style into everything he wrote. He had come to New York as a youth with only courage and a love of literature to back him, and walking into the office of The Century, then our leading literary magazine, had told Richard Watson Gilder, that kindly patron of all young poets, that he had come for a job and would stay until he got one, any job. We were lucky to inherit him. And like a young and vigorous birch transplanted from the fields into new earth, he leafed into abundance. Humor salted the sap of his native romance and for a while he conducted what I still think was the wisest and wittiest and most graceful column in New York. Then he took all poetry in his care and not only wrote but nourished the gift in others. In this respect he was one of that group of radiant minds who have sweetened the atmosphere of literature.⁴⁷

The other member of the staff of the Literary Review was Amy Loveman, referred to in The Dust Which Is God:

Acquiline Mary Wellman
as his assistant one woman in a thousand
was the mainstay of the Book Review all conscience
and devotion to duty and in spite of this
a spirited human being wholly generous
wholly unselfish loyal to the bone
but with the feminine prerogative
of an occasional unexpected fixity
of opposition then it was Slidell
rambled the floor with hands thrust deep in pockets
amicably arguing, provoked to laughter
while the sphinx sat firm on her original premise
or principle and unoffendingly challenged
wild horses to budge her.⁴⁸

⁴⁷The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 9.

⁴⁸The Dust Which Is God, p. 235.

Miss Loveman, in turn, has written sympathetically of Benet in the eulogy "Gallant Spirit,"⁴⁹ and in the biographical piece about Benet for The Grolier Encyclopedia. She describes his poetry as being "notable for its union of technical skill with freshness of epithet and rich imaginative range."⁵⁰

These early exciting days on the Literary Review, the beginning of what was to be a long and successful career of voluminous and diversified writing, he describes in these lines:

Unto these there came
reviewers essayists poets journalists
and writers of the Town and every day
Tracy discovered some more fantastic place
to lunch or some new bookstore roved the streets
with wild paronomastic enthusiasm
nothing could quell filched all the city's secrets
and sang like Saadi when the sun and moon
fell like the sower's seeds into his brain
"there quickened to be born again" in itmas
guzzling his column.⁵¹

Benet's unknown biographer, after recounting how Morley "ran" Benet "back into the literary game," continues: "To show how callous he was Bill immediately wrote a novel. People thereupon decided that he was a very good poet indeed."⁵² Perhaps Benet did, too, for this novel, The First Person Singular, published in 1922, was his only venture into the field of novel writing. Most of this book was written

⁴⁹Cf. supra, p. 4.

⁵⁰The Grolier Encyclopedia, II, 146.

⁵¹Pp. 235-236.

⁵²The Bookman, LVIII (October, 1923), 136.

in the garage of the family house in Scarsdale, New York, where Benet and his three children were living with his parents. He owed his father four hundred dollars and agreed to have the house repapered in payment of this loan. This redecorating came to four hundred dollars and he secured the needed amount in advance royalties; then he proceeded to write The First Person Singular.

Benet was thirty-five years old when he began his association with the Literary Review and entered into that phase of his life which was to place him at the forefront of American poets and men of letters. Louis Untermeyer describes him as "tall, lean, with a curiously hesitant step, a low and almost deprecating voice, his face continually wrinkling with warmth and pleasure."⁵³ Accompanying the Bookman article is a "Caricature by William Gropper," a charcoal sketch which portrays Benet as extremely lanky, of almost skeletal proportions, with a serious face over which strayed wisps of hair. He is standing behind a speaker's table with the ever-present cigarette in his hand. Tante describes Benet in these words: "His voice is soft and his manner is gracious, but he gives the impression of having definite opinions and an independent point of view."⁵⁴ His anonymous biographer writes of Benet's voice:

And he will read his own work. For instance, when he starts his falcon on its well-known "flying" one gathers from Bill's voice that it is taking off as an old-fashioned aeroplane or a glider does. It must have a long run first. When Bill reads a poem it sounds like a Druid incantation.⁵⁵

⁵³As quoted in Kunitz and Haycroft, op. cit., p. 117.

⁵⁴Dilly Tante, op. cit., p. 33.

⁵⁵The Bookman, LVIII (October, 1923), 135.

In the same account the following graphic description of Benet at this period of his life is given:

At this point.....it may be apropos to inject a few personalia. Bill is long and lean and lissom with spidery legs.....He never loses his temper except when a stranger puts his hat on. He likes spaghetti. He is anti-Prohibitionist. He is assiduous in doing things for people.....He is brown and smooth-faced and guileless. One has to look twice before discovering his eyebrows. His eyes are small. His nose looks as though it had been gently pushed by somebody and had not sprung back into shape. He takes his coat off when he works.....He is good company because, unlike most modern poets, he is always willing to listen. He has his faults, too. He is aggravatingly patient. He is altogether too equanimous. In a brown suit he looks like a Venezuelan blood, a rakish South American, who still goes to Sunday School.⁵⁶

Benet's love of drawing is referred to as resembling Vachel Lindsay's and as artistic creations sometimes marvelous to behold. He would draw a picture for anybody who would ask him. Millet says Benet possessed "a love not only of poetry but of painting as well." Of this love for drawing Benet himself writes:

This writer has also amused himself with a slight gift for eccentric draughtmanship and once produced a series of fantastic animals painted upon the cardboards which accompanied men's shirts from the laundry.⁵⁷

This was the Benet of the early nineteen-twenties, that era of jazz and sophistication and speakeasies and gangsters. It was at this time that another of "the beautiful and talented women" who played such tremendous parts in his life came to the fore—the "Sylvia" of The Dust Which Is God, Klinor Hoyt Wylie, who is one of the outstanding poetesses of this century. In the foreword to this book Benet says: "The char-

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 136.

⁵⁷Kenditz and Haycroft, op. cit., p. 117.

acter of Sylvia is obviously modelled upon the late Elinor Wylie, but the circumstances of Sylvia's life are her own and the invention of the author; at times a faint approximation to the life of the original." Whether based on actual fact or not, the story of Elinor Wylie is feelingly and generously presented in his autobiography. After her divorce from her second husband she and Benet were married on October 5, 1923.

Benet's children, who had been living with his parents and his sister, came to live with them in their New York apartment. The children had been spending their vacations at the Norris ranch in the Santa Clara Valley in California. Both Kathleen and Charles G. Norris had been producing one best-selling novel after another. Benet gives the following vivid picture of their success:

The affluence of the Grosvenors was something Raymond remembered as having its foundation in a faroff Autumn ere his marriage when pyramids of books behind plate-glass were fame and holiday Christmascounter sales and advertising and best-seller lists featured the happy new American classic "The Home" by Molly Grosvenor

Now for the coming summer in Aunt and Uncle's notable retinue Raymond's children were bound for California to the estancia up among the foothills of the Santa Clara Valley At Grand Central Molly standing within a sort of island of luggage swirled about by friends and porters—smartly tailored and major-generalish and looking a little like a beleaguered eagle cried "Raymond dear Goodbye! I'll take good care of the Three!" who most meticulously dressed delighted and bewildered with round faces hugged him and kissed and cried goodbyes to "Granny" and "dear Aungt Lou!" and were herded through the gate in the crowding throng of literary friends and fashionable people with messages and queries answers scraps of conversation

still like drifting confetti whirled in air
 to the echoes of last calls and frantic shouts
 and a persistent image upon his eyes
 of his brother-in-law's sartorial display
 who saw parch'd Abyssinia rouse and sing
 to silver cymbals meaning every red-cap
 and Porter Great god of breathless cups. . .
 on spleenful unicorn!⁵⁸

From such a life of luxury with the Morrises the children came to live with the newly-married couple who were trying to "keep off the Morris Plan." Elinor Wylie Benet bought a house in the suburbs for them, but with her arduous writing and her failing health she found "the care and feeding of children harder than the care and feeding of characters in fiction." Her hands were "no good at all as human household hands." It was decided, therefore, that the children should go to the Palo Alto home of the Morris's, who had always wanted Teresa's children. Here the children lived until they finished their respective college courses and embarked upon careers of their own.

Elinor Wylie went abroad and took up residence in England. Benet felt he could not afford to live abroad, although he made occasional trips to see her. She returned to America when her genius and popularity were at their peak. Soon after her return she died suddenly in their apartment in New York in 1928. At the time of her death she was generally regarded as the finest contemporary woman poet in America. In 1932 Benet wrote the introduction for Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie; in 1934 he published the Prose and Poetry of Elinor Wylie which book was the basis for his Annie Talbot Cole lectures at Wheaton College; and in 1943 he

⁵⁸p. 288.

wrote the foreword for Last Poems of Elinor Wylie.

During the years between 1924 and 1929 Benet was associate editor of The Saturday Review of Literature, which made its first appearance with the issue of August 2, 1924. During these years he also published The Flying King of Kurio, a story for children, in 1926; Wild Goss-lings, a Collection of Fugitive Pieces, in 1927; and Man Possessed, also in 1927.

From 1929 until 1930 he was also editor of a publishing firm, Brewer and Warren, Inc.

During these years he began work on the first of his several anthologies. In 1930 Twentieth Century Poetry, compiled jointly with John Drinkwater and Henry Seidel Canby, was published. In 1932 Rip Tide, a Novel in Verse, appeared; in 1933 came Starry Harness; in 1933 Fifty Poets, an Auto-Anthology was also published; in 1936 letters from Robert and Elizabeth Browning hitherto unpublished were printed under the title From Wimpole Street; in 1938 the Oxford Anthology of English and American Verse, the work of Benet and Norman Holmes Pearson, was published, also Poems for Modern Youth, edited with Adolph Gillis, appeared; and in 1939 his play Day's End was presented in Charleston, South Carolina.

Benet continued his work as contributing editor on The Saturday Review of Literature. During 1936 and 1937 he also went on lecture and reading tours, of which he writes:

"I have recently taken up lecturing or talking rather on American poetry throughout the country and reading some of my own work aloud."⁵⁹

⁵⁹As quoted in Fred B. Millett's Contemporary American Authors, p. 249.

In The Dust Which Is God he writes of his first lecture tour:

Raymond in Chicago at the Palmer House
 the end of March saw by the morning papers
 Darlington Tracy in town and tracked him to
 a bookstore and that evening with a friend
 from a large publishing house they dined and danced
 with ladies of the evening Raymond made
 his Evanston lecture on the fateful morrow
 with a blurred memory of the famous man
 reciting Whitman during the light fantasia. . .
 and comradely and gay white-collar girls. . .
 spoke at two-thirty left at eleven-thirty
 by sleeper for Des Moines. . . lectured Des Moines
 next afternoon. . . left at four fifty-four
 and via Kansas City fled to Tulsa
 on the Frisco lines. . . At Oklahoma City
 and Tulsa all among the startling derricks
 poured oil of poetry and so in April
 catching a famous play's road-company
 and hotel-dancing with an understudy
 ended his lecture trip in that Emporia
 of a great Western editor He cleared
 some seven hundred dollars—for a month
 of time-table acrobatics sleight of words
 and memories of women's clubs and forums
 and colleges and arrivals and departures
 and introductions, and hotels assorted
 and down in Texas a cat that walked the stage. . . .
 So he returned to Town exhausted.⁶⁰

Kenneth Rockwell recalls Benet's lecture at the University of
 Kansas, where he had been asked to entertain the lecturer because the
 professor who should have made arrangements had forgotten to do so.
 Since he was a constant reader of Benet's popular "The Phoenix Nest,"
 Rockwell was delighted with this assignment, of which he writes:

I cut classes, met William Rose and took him to the house.
 Imagine the alarm both of us experienced when he discovered that
 he was losing his voice on the day when he had to lecture. I
 promptly put the man to bed and started plying him with hot toddies,

⁶⁰ P. 489.

for even in dry Kansas the son of a Presbyterian family kept a wee drop for medicinal purposes.

The recipient of those wee drops soon exhausted the medicine—that was long before I knew of the poet's ability to annihilate any liquid with alcohol in it. But the voice did begin to return.

Margaret Lynn, author of A Stepdaughter of the Prairie, a book that should be republished, was giving a lunch for Benet. They had known each other at MacDowell Colony. The poet attended, but he said little—he was too groggy. Miss Lynn talked to me later; she couldn't understand why her guest of honor was so quiet. I knew, but I didn't tell her.

Anyway, William Rose Benet was able to lecture that afternoon, and lecture well to a group of enraptured listeners made up of faculty and students.⁶¹

Mr. Rockwell writes further of his pleasure in talking with Mr. Benet when they were back in his apartment and Benet discovered Nancy Hoyt's biography of her sister, Elinor Wylie. Rockwell asked Benet why he had never written about Mrs. Wylie, since he knew her better than anyone, and loved her more. Benet replied, "I tried once. But I was too close to her. The attempt was a failure. I shall never try again."

In writing of himself Benet said: "Above all, he thinks trying to write poetry the best kind of life in the world—not trying to tell people about it, which he has also tried (as instructor at Mills College, Oakland, California, 1936)"⁶² In the chapter "Fist-full of Laurel," in the Dust Which Is God, he writes of his teaching:

The summer saw Raymond teaching in California crossing the Oakland Bridge to San Francisco to catch the local south to Sunnyvale for a ranch weekend⁶³ through the week conducting a course in writing.

⁶¹Kenneth Rockwell, op. cit., p. 7.

⁶²Kunitz and Haycroft, op. cit., p. 117.

⁶³P. 498.

He also taught a verse-writing course in the Extension Division of Columbia University.⁶⁴

It was during this decade of the thirties that his third marriage took place, to Lora Baxter, the beautiful and popular actress who was currently starring in a Broadway production, Philip Barry's The Animal Kingdom. Benet had first met Miss Baxter, according to his chapter "Curtains Rise" in his autobiography, when she was the child star, "Leila Bancroft," in Sinclair Lewis's first play before World War I. At a party after the premiere he remembers the child as saying to him:

an actress isn't any age at all
unless she wants to be.⁶⁵

After the death of his second wife in 1928 and the financial crash in 1929, Benet became more than ever an habitue of his "ornate bars," and writes of himself during this time:

and Raymond greeted another year come new
with steady drinking and daylight work to do

It seemed too strange! One evening as his sixth
Tom Collins stood before him on the bar
the thought—like the familiar full-blown rose—
had bloomed inside his brain The funny thing
was that next morning it was just as bright
and the day-after-that seemed quite as good
and pinned him down to write it and a week-end
was spent in his apartment all alone
telephone off the hook and buzzer scorned
scrawled crumpled paper everywhere and stubs
of countless cigarettes in every dish
that lay about the room.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Loomis and Clark, Modern English Readings, p. xxxvi.

⁶⁵The Dust Which Is God, p. 148.

⁶⁶P. 413.

The play thus created was soon in production, according to his recounting, and when the cast was selected, the star was none other than the actress he had known when she was a child of twelve. Lora Baxter was twenty-six at the time of their marriage and had already starred in a number of Broadway plays, such as The Great Gatsby, The Love Child, and The Haunted House. In 1931 she was on tour as Nina in Strange Interlude. He writes of her as an actress:

This later Leila seemed
still in a way that child though now an actress
smart and alert with quite a string of leads
She had played Lady Travers in "Thought Transference"
a season's hit.⁶⁷

She was also co-author with Ralph Murphy of a mystery play, Black Tower, which ended its Broadway run the Saturday night before her marriage.

The New York Times of March 14, 1932,⁶⁸ carried an announcement of the engagement of Miss Baxter and Mr. Benet, with the wedding to take place the next day at three o'clock in the afternoon at the Church of the Transfiguration, with the Reverend D. Randolph Ray, rector, officiating. But two days later the same paper reported that the famous poet and the famous actress were married in a simple ceremony at Benet's apartment at 302 West Twelfth Street, by the Reverend Dr. J. Valdemar Moldenhawer, of the First Presbyterian Church, in the presence of a few relatives and intimate friends of the couple. The bride's sister Dorothy and the poet's brother Stephen were the sole attendants. After the cere-

⁶⁷P. 414.

⁶⁸New York Times, (March 14, 1932), p. 13.

D. C. He was honorably discharged in December, 1918.

After the war Benet returned to New York. The old organization of The Century Magazine had been changed, and he had to start over again at the bottom. After a time he secured a job with an advertising agency. He writes of these difficult days in this manner:

He took a room
in a small boarding house and set to work
firmly and yet rejoicingly to write
for himself and Nora.

Life holds ironies
that never end The memory of that room
for many years!.....

here were so many stories
Raymond thought for the born teller of tales
Somehow he could not seize them he was shy
at talking to these people.....

He cursed himself
for a failure walked the streets and for the first time
found
what it is to walk the streets with fear in your heart
for the future Then an advertising friend
gave him some letters to agencies. . . .³⁴

In the biographical sketch in The Bookman Benet's experiences with the advertising agency are described in this manner:

First, there was an advertising agency. Its name shall be kept secret forevermore, but certain feats perpetrated by Bill while attached to that mercenary undertaking must be set down. It is quite possible that the majority of virile young men who read these lines will have no occasion especially to note the advertisements of Mennen's Talcum Powder. But for those people who have, a gentle prodding of the mind may recall to them a catch line reading "the petal texture of baby's skin." THAT was created by William Rose Benet. THAT is one of his most famous lines. And then there was that charming assertion which accompanies the advertisements of Murphy's Varnish, "Your house under glass." For six months Bill

mony Stephen gave a reception for them at his home, 220 East Sixty-ninth Street. Perhaps the change in wedding plans was due to the fact that a former marriage of Miss Baxter's had been annulled in 1923, an action which could not be sanctioned by the church of their first choice.

Benet described their wedding thus:

They were married on a blustery day in mid-March with many friends attending in his apartment his Mother and Louisa his brother and Judith and that very night sitting far back in the orchestra he watched Leila in his melodrama "Come Seven!" "Oh you Seven!" breathed Raymond for somehow the show was holding on. "It isn't nearly what Leila rates It isn't one-two-three with what I'd wish for her I'll write another By Golly—that'll be something!" But meanwhile it fed their dream and better still their bodies while life spun like a bubble and a bauble. . . .⁶⁹

Under the pressure of his writing and her absorption in her acting, however, to say nothing of the twenty years difference in their ages, their bubble eventually burst. They were divorced in 1937. His inherent kindness is reflected in his remarks about this third marriage in his self-portraits: "A third time in 1932 he married Lora Baxter, well known in the theatre. They were amicably divorced and Miss Baxter has married again."⁷⁰

Mr. Ben Ray Redman, author and critic, writes:

To his third wife he came almost as a walking dead man. Yet she, lively realist and desirable woman, could give him what he needed at the time.⁷¹

Just before their divorce Lora Baxter went on tour, and Benet went to the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire to write. It was here that he

⁶⁹ P. 437.

⁷⁰ Kunitz and Haycroft, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁷¹ The Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (November 15, 1941), p. 6.

met "Marcia," Marjorie Flack, who was to become in 1941 the fourth Mrs. Benet. At the time of their meeting she was writing and illustrating children's stories. During this summer Benet dined with her several times and met her friends "The Barkers," in whose Florida home he recuperated from his serious illness a few days later.

In 1938 Benet was a judge in The Witter Bynner Poetry Contest. The other judges were Witter Bynner, poet and founder, and chairman of the committee; Genevieve Taggard, poet and biographer, and faculty member of the Sarah Lawrence College; Alfred Kreymborg, poet, playwright, and author; and Ben Belitt, poet, and member of the faculty of Bennington College. A picture of Benet at this time shows a man in his fifties, baldish, with a slight double chin, and tie askew.⁷²

Benet's children, having grown up in California, had taken a trip around the world with the Norrises. Each of the three had gone to college. His son, James Walker II, after his graduation from Leland Stanford, took a position in New York "with an independent journal of opinion." He left that job to join the Loyalist forces in the war in Spain. Frances Rosemary married Richard S. Dawson, and of their wedding Benet writes:

France was married in California
to her young painter Raymond flew in August
to the wedding in Santa Clara Brilliant sun
The little dusty Roman Catholic Church
of the Holy Name the bridesmaids all in white
The big reception of relatives and friends
on the Ranch lawn and Frances as a bride
a vision to her father Oh so strangely
recalling another! But nowhere in the throng
the wiry strength of Gavin
By great luck
a letter came! Before he journeyed East

⁷²Scholastic, XXXII (May 7, 1938), 53.

visiting once again the House of Zeus
 above Los Gatos in the patio
 he read its contents to his elder friend
 and like their wine drank in their understanding
 and kindred pride.⁷³

The "Zeus" mentioned above Benet identified in his foreword:

"The death of the noble poet, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, in January 1944, removed from this world the 'Zeus' of pp. 406-409." This patron of poetry, as well as "noble poet," and his wife, who was also a poet, had been of great help and inspiration to Benet. Benet included both of them in his Fifty Poets.

When James Walker was discharged from the Spanish army, he returned to America and resumed his writing career. Benet mentions his marriage in these words:

Gavin and the gray-eyed girl, whose name
 was Anne were married a fine and loyal girl
 from California with work upon the stage—
 courage and wit.⁷⁴

His younger daughter Kathleen Anne married George B. Fry, and of her wedding Benet writes:

And in July another California
 wedding Janet's this time Fran was already
 at the estancia with her. . . Raymond drove
 from Chicago with his son-in-law. . . and Gavin
 (back at his job upon the magazine)
 with Anne flew to the Coast (tickets supplied
 by a fond uncle)

Fran's baby would be born
 sometime in August or perhaps September
 everyone thought a family jest of course:
 suppose the baby came before the wedding
 and "stole the show" away from Janet's marriage?

⁷³Pp. 505-506.

⁷⁴P. 516.

In the small peaceful church the simple wedding
 went perfectly His blonde and youngest child
 miraculous—Raymond thought Festivities
 whirled through the evening and the married couple
 escaped in showers of rice. . .

and Raymond soon
 back in New York again was hard at work
 upon a textbook.⁷⁵

In 1942 Benet wrote that "his older daughter recently made him a
 grandfather."⁷⁶ Today both his daughters and their families are living
 in California. His son lives in San Francisco where he is connected with
 the San Francisco Chronicle, and is also pursuing the career of novelist.

The textbook referred to in the preceeding quotation was The
 Oxford Anthology of American Literature published in 1938 which Benet com-
 piled with Norman Holmes Pearson.

The following winter a serious illness "made an abstimient of an
 inveterate cigarette smoker and cramped his style of drinking and spend-
 ing evenings at ornate bars."⁷⁷ In his The Dust Which Is God he writes:

One evening in the cold
 Raymond was walking home alone from Broadway
 against the wind when in his arms a pain
 grew real and gnawing "I guess I must be
 getting neuritis."⁷⁸

But it was more serious than that for at the insistence of his brother
 he entered a hospital, where he was confined for months. He writes
 thus of his hospitalization:

drawn and wan
 next morning—he rang up Peter His brother urged
 a certain doctor at the uptown Centre
 whom Raymond went to see—the upshot being
 that he was quickly lying very flat
 on a high hospital bed in a private room

⁷⁵Pp. 521-522.

⁷⁶Kunitz and Haycroft, op. cit., p. 117.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸The Dust Which Is God, p. 529.

and for a month so lay during another
 achieved a gradual elevation—during
 part of a third allowed to write again
 and learn to walk again. . .⁷⁹

Marjorie Flack, who had returned from New Orleans, on learning of his illness, came to see him, asking "Why didn't you let us know" to which he responded:

I was just going to—it came so quickly
 It's nothing terrible—it's heart—but merely
 the kind that lots of men my age acquire—
 coronary occulsion They've got me flat
 and they assure me that if I am good
 and never smoke another cigarette
 I'll make the grade.⁸⁰

Make the grade he did, for he lived for eleven years during which he produced some of his greatest works. When Benet was able to leave the hospital, he went to St. Augustine with Marjorie Flack and "The Barkers." From Florida he returned to his beloved New Hampshire for the summer. Here he received word of his mother's death. As soon as he was able to write again he continued his autobiography so often quoted in this account. In his sketch for Twentieth-Century Authors he says: "He is at work at present upon a long semi-autobiographical poem, having recently completed a rhymed narrative for children and a book in rhyme celebrating the chief flights of international aviation."⁸¹ The two books referred to are Adolphus; or The Adopted Dolphin, published in 1941 and written in conjunction with Marjorie Flack, who also did the illustrations, and With Wings as Eagles, which appeared in 1940.

⁷⁹Pp. 529-530.

⁸⁰P. 530.

⁸¹Kunitz and Haycroft, op. cit., p. 117.

In addition to these two books there were published during the last decade of Benet's life The Dust Which Is God, 1941; a collection of Mother Goose rhymes, 1943; the contribution of a collection of war poems to McClure's new edition of Stag's Hornbook, 1944; Day of Deliverance, also in 1944; Poems for American Youth, 1945; Anthology of Familiar English and American Poetry, in collaboration with Conrad Potter Aiken, 1945; Great Poems of the English Language, jointly with Wallace Alvin Briggs, 1945; Poetry of Freedom, in conjunction with Norman Cousins, also in 1945; The Stairway of Surprise, 1947; Timothy's Angels, a book for children, illustrated by his wife, 1947; the invaluable The Reader's Encyclopedia, 1948; and in April of 1950, his last book, Poetry Package, a joint work with Christopher Morley.

Benet's verse narrative ends the history of himself and his family with the death of his mother in the summer of 1940; consequently, we do not have his own account of his marriage with Marjorie Flack, in June, 1941, and of their years together, for she survived him; nor of his activities in the second World War; nor of his brother Stephen's death in 1943.

Not too many details of his contributions to the war effort are available, but he wrote convincingly about his attitude toward war:

In the present (war), which may either remake or end the world, he does not anticipate any very important part. His general thesis is that the acquisition of power ruins any fine altruistic dream. Nevertheless, he believes that the world will get better and that eventually it will even outlaw war.

He does not believe in writers becoming propagandists for any political system but in their writing the truth that is in them as they see it. He does not believe in people being told what to think. In fact, all his life he has been fighting that idea. He believes that half the time people take themselves much too seriously—present-day radicals being a vital instance—and would rather enjoy the most delightful absurdities of life

with the generous and kindly than carry a torch with the zealots. This will get him nowhere in the end, except before a firing-squad. He hates and abhors all secret police and that whole manner of running a country. He thinks the United States has more virtues than the present hot-heads admit, and way and above any other country gives people a chance to be more hot-headed, which they probably accept with screams of joy. He says, of course, democracy is an imperfect system, but he vastly prefers it to any other.⁸²

His greatest contribution to the war effort was perhaps his Day of Deliverance, portions of which were used by the Writer's War Board, distributed by the Office of War Information and by the British Library of Information, and were broadcast by the Third Service Command. Coleman Rosenberg, in his review of this book of war poems, writes that Benet "earlier than many was alert to the menace of fascism" and that he "says clearly many things which are in need of saying."⁸³

Titles of his editorials and articles and essays in The Saturday Review of Literature during the war years reveal Benet's interest in and concern for America and her part in the world struggle against dictatorship. Some of these are "America Has the Courage," "For Pacifists Today," "Poets and the War," "This Freedom," "Thoughts in Wartimes" "War Morale and the Writer," "We Are at War," "Writers and the Fighting Spirit," "Writer's War Chance," "Age of Responsibility," "Mortality in Writers," and "USO-USA."

In 1943 his brother, Stephen Vincent Benet, died at the age of forty-four. William Rose had always loved his younger brother and had

⁸²Kunitz and Haycroft, op. cit., pp. 117-118.

⁸³Poetry, LXV (November, 1944) pp. 101-104.

done much to foster Stephen's literary career. As Untermeyer has pointed out, even before Stephen's graduation from Yale, where he had shown exceptional ability as a poet, William Rose was calling attention to his brother's poetry. Stephen was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1926 and went to Paris to study. Here he met and married Rosemary Carr, who was also a writer. In The Dust Which Is God William Rose writes of their return to America:

Peter on graduation
had crossed to Paris and was living there
attending the Sorbonne At Raymond's marriage
to Sylvia he had cabled a gay absurd
burst of congratulations and had sent
later his first novel with a flourish
inscribed to both And now another cable
detonated in Ninth Street

"JUDITH AND I
MARRIED SAILING ROCHEMBEAU ARRIVING
AUGUST SECOND"

The name of Judith Somers
an American girl doing a Paris letter
for a Manhattan magazine ere this
had frequently appeared in various missives
Peter sent to his family Raymond knew
from others of her cleverness and charm
and clear shining

but when he met the boat
with his mother and his sister and his father
and saw the two on the gangplank laughing together
then Peter hugging the family and shouting
"Here she is!" and Judith's smile amused
affectionate and shy her clear blue eyes
and roseleaf skin straight slimness little quirk
of laughter at the corner of mouth and eyes
he was entirely captured.⁸⁴

Stephen and Rosemary returned to Paris after this visit for him
"to dig into his epic," which proved to be the long narrative poem of the
Civil War, John Brown's Body, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for

⁸⁴p. 344.

Poetry in 1929, and which placed him in the forefront of the American literary pantheon. Upon their return to America, they lived in New York; and the contacts between the two brothers then were perhaps stronger than ever. In 1941 William Rose Benet wrote "My Brother Steve," which appeared in The Saturday Review of Literature. After Stephen's death he wrote "S. V. B. - 1898-1943," of which Gregory and Zaturenska write:

Of those who wrote in tribute to Stephen Benet's memory, none spoke with deeper understanding than his brother, William Rose Benet, who was 12 years his senior. In his elegy, S.V.B.-1898-1943, (from The Day of Deliverance, reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Copyright, 1944, by William Rose Benet), William Rose Benet included the following lines:

The fleece that was filled with dew;
The god in the oak.
And legend for his own folk,
Of their toil and their mirth;
Tang of the tongue they spoke,
The savour of their earth;
Till when foul darkness stirred
To blast all singing,
Men heard his quiet word
Steady and ringing.⁸⁵

In the biographical sketch for Stephen Vincent Benet in

Twentieth Century Authors appears this comment:

It was a writing family. The father loved and knew poetry, and Stephen is the brother of William Rose Benet, and Laura Benet, the uncle of James Walker Benet, and brother-in-law of Elinor Wylie, and his wife, who was Rosemary Carr, is also a writer. The Benets and the Van Dorens are New York's first writing families.⁸⁶

Any Loveman also points out the writing ability of the Benets, for in a short biographical sketch of Stephen, she says "he was one of three

⁸⁵Horace Gregory and Marye Zaturenska, A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940, p. 440.

⁸⁶Kunitz and Haycraft, op. cit., p. 115.

children who came to be known as 'the writing Benets.'⁸⁷ In writing of William Rose she says:

He had a mind richly stored with knowledge, a memory that ranged widely and surely through the fields of literature, and an inherited enthusiasm and family gift for verse, which in himself and his brother flowered into some of the most signal poetry of our era.⁸⁸

Thus, the names of the Benet brothers have come to be linked.

Gregory and Zaturenska says of them:

The area represented by "romantic traditionalists" has been a large one in American poetry; and it could be stretched to include the poetry of William Rose Benet, but in his case it seems more fitting that it be considered in the same chapter that treats of his brother's work, the poetry of Stephen Vincent Benet; both brothers shared an historical imagination and both were consciously "American."⁸⁹

During the latter part of the 1940's Benet was connected with the publishing firm of Payson and Clarke as editor. He also continued his many other literary activities.

In his letters to the editor of the New York Times are evidences of Benet as "a fairly good average example of human being." In these letters he expresses his opinions on issues of the day as a private citizen and not as a prominent writer. One of these letters appeared in the Times of January 22, 1947, captioned "Not the People's Choice," in which he writes relative to an editorial urging the resignation of Governor Arnall of Georgia:

⁸⁷The Grolier Encyclopedia, II, 146.

⁸⁸The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 10.

⁸⁹Gregory and Zaturenska, op. cit., p. 300.

The Times editorial page of January 16 presents the unedifying spectacle of America's greatest newspaper advising the Governor of Georgia to give up the fight he has fought so long against the forces of evil in that State and surrender his office to the well-known "white supremacy" advocate of the most undemocratic type who is not by the wildest stretch of the imagination the choice of the people of Georgia.

I heard Governor Arnall on the radio, sane and fearless, and I now read your advice to him to exercise "political wisdom." I recommend to you a quotation from Paradise Lost:

But all was false and hollow; though his tongue
Dropp'd manna, and could make the worse appear
The better reason.⁹⁰

Another letter appeared in the February 3, 1947, issue of the Times, and was titled "Decent Housing for Negroes," which reads in part:

As an American equally of Northern and Southern origins, I was glad to see your editorial upon the Segregation Number of The Survey. That which I find of immediate personal concern, however, is not the Negro problem in the South, bad as it is. It is the case of the Negro in our own city. Humane as we may be, such matters are fairly academic until brought home to us by personal experience.⁹¹

Then Benet recounts in detail the plight of their Negro maid who had been with them for years and whose apartment had had no heat during the winter. He demanded to know just how long it was going to be before self-respecting colored people could get decent housing at a moderate rental. Thus, again, William Rose Benet expressed his innate kindness and took his stand against injustice, intolerance, and discrimination.

On April 12, 1947, another of his letters was published under the heading "Grave Injustice Believed Inevitable as Outgrowth of Pronouncement." In this letter he voices his fears regarding Mr. Truman's Loyalty

⁹⁰New York Times, (January 22, 1947), p. 7.

⁹¹Ibid., (February 3, 1947), p. 10.

Order, and says in the opening paragraph:

It is true that the great "ideological" struggle today is between the tenets of communism and those of what we call American Democracy. But I will always believe, because the facts bear me out, that if the democracies had stood against Franco from the beginning the chances are that the Second World War would have been averted.

He then discusses some of the effects of the President's Loyalty Order and the discrimination against American boys who fought with the Loyalists in Spain, and who were considered to be Communist sympathizers. He spoke from knowledge of his son's own experiences. He concludes the letter with a convincing statement of his ideals about our government:

To an American like myself, who is a member of no political party and does not believe that the present state of Soviet Russia represents the millenium, the implications of the ukase are paralyzing.

If this is the way we have chosen to combat an "ideology" alien to us--we are no longer the country of Lincoln, of Woodrow Wilson, of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Thanks for allowing one small person to express his opinion in regard to this. I wished to do so as an individual, for I believe in the individual not existing for the state but in the state existing for the individual.⁹²

Benet's last letter recorded in the New York Times demonstrates his alert and keen interest in the affairs of the day and his courage in speaking out for whatever he believed right. It was written from Cape Ann, Massachusetts, and was printed in the Times on July 22, 1948, with the heading "President's Speech Praised. It Demonstrates, Writer Declares, a Concern for the Common People." In listening to the President's acceptance speech of the Democratic nomination at 2 a. m., Benet wrote that he felt it contained "hard-hitting words of honesty and sense spoken at last." And he concluded: "Let us not slide backward again. And let us

⁹²New York Times, (April 12, 1947), p. 16.

give recognition to a President honest and courageous, with the best interests of the wage-earners of American at heart."⁹³

And so, to the end he maintained his love for and interest in America, that country he depicted so graphically throughout The Dust Which Is God, especially in the next to the last chapter, "U. S.," which contained such lines as the following:

—land of the ore-boats at Duluth with its airy bridge
 swung high. . .
 and under Iowa's limestone bluffs (their forest climbing
 the height)
 the Father of Waters Tom Sawyer knew swirling and
 slipping by. . .
 and Arizona's mile-deep canyon terraced with fire
 and light!

Texas gushers Cotton is King Sharecroppers of the
 soil
 chained to a "doodlum book" of debts in a grasping
 landlord's store—
 deserts mountains hills and valleys the cowboys
 rolling river
 wandering streams and falls for power peaks that tower
 in pride
 abiding place of a mighty race—if greed nor sloth
 deliver
 the keys of these united states to those who wait
 outside.⁹⁴

This he says in the years before Pearl Harbor; and before the days of the atom bomb, he meditates:

Suppose a mere speck of uranium
 released the energy of a ton of coal
 would you be equal to it?⁹⁵

⁹³Ibid., (July 22, 1948), p. 22.

⁹⁴pp. 551-552.

⁹⁵p. 538.

Truly, he makes one wonder whether or not we are equal to it, even as he himself seemed to wonder about it—and his life and his death. He begins his final chapter, "As It Was in the Beginning," as if he were in anticipation after his death of just such studies as this thesis:

They will want to know they say they will want to know
They want to know so many things about you. . .

Who did he vote for? Did he marry the girl?
Does he wear long underwear? Does he like the movies?
Is it on Sun Street he lives or number fifty
on Gloom Street. What does he think that God looks like
if any? How about National Defense?
Is there hope for America—Democracy—
a cure for baldness? Did it take him long
to give up cigarettes? Was he a drunkard?
Ever committed as violently insane?
What does he weight? Does he diet?
Does he think
Capitalism is doomed? Is he a red?
a white? a pink? a green? a purple cow
or ever see one? Why did he write this book—
why did he call it———?

They want to know
one doesn't know. . .

Open your door and find
twisted into a wad as the boy threw it
from his bicycle.....

the news—the news—the news
the cataract the avalanche of the news—
as the world ends as the world begins again
as the world goes on.....

Open the Monday papers.%

On May 5, 1950, when one opened the morning edition of the New York Times on the first page, one saw "William Benet, 64, Noted Poet, Is Dead—Brother of Stephen Vincent—He Won Pulitzer Prize in '42—Was Well-Known Anthologist and Literary Columnist—An Editor for 31 Years." The details were given as follows:

%p. 554.

William Rose Benet, poet and Pulitzer Prize winner, died at 6:26 o'clock last night, presumably of a heart attack while walking on Broadway near 155th Street. He was sixty-four years old and lived at 130 West 12th Street.

He collapsed on the sidewalk and a passer-by Richard Hawkshaw went to his assistance. The poet was taken in an ambulance to Mother Zabrin Memorial Hospital, 611 Edgecombe Avenue, where a physician officially pronounced him dead.

This unusually long obituary notice in the Times states that "he revealed himself in his works as a man of many moods and much learning, and with a strong belief in the potential goodness of mankind and a purpose in the universe."

In addition to the recognition Benet received for his writings his alma mater bestowed upon him an honorary Master of Arts degree in 1921, and Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, awarded him an honorary Doctor of Literature degree in 1933. He had been for a number of years secretary of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and a member of the Yale Club.

Now that Benet's "moving finger" has moved on, let us see what it is that this man of many moods and much learning has written.

CHAPTER III

THE POETRY OF WILLIAM ROSE BENET

William Rose Benet once defined a poet as simply "a man who takes his craft seriously."¹ If that be the case, Benet was truly a poet, for he devoted his life to his craft. It was once said of him that he was one of the few American writers who, having passed the dangerous age of thirty-five, still continued to "respect the substance more than the form of poetry." Benet loved poetry and that is all there is to it. A critic said of him that "he is a much better poet than he is generally given credit for, but he has several disastrous handicaps, for in putting this fact over, he is not inclined to stop where he should stop."² Benet does overload his material with color, and he recognizes this fact himself. In The Dust Which Is God Benet quotes this criticism from "Gavin" concerning The Merchants from Cathay:

Raymond (now don't get mad) But look you ought to prune
some of the Bulfinch mythology undergrowth or
overgrowth otherwise swell!³

When Benet's poetry is considered chronologically as published, The Merchants from Cathay appears first, being published in 1913. This volume contains eighty-four poems, most of which had already appeared in

¹As quoted in Time, LV (May 15, 1950), 94.

²The Bookman Magazine, LVIII (October, 1923), 136.

³The Dust Which Is God, p. 248.

leading magazines throughout the country. In the foreword Benet thanks the following periodicals for permission to reprint poems of his which had appeared in their pages: The Century Magazine, The American Magazine, The Churchman, The Independent, The Smart Set, The Sunset and Pacific Monthly Magazines, McClure's Magazine, Harper's Weekly, The Forum, The International, The Lyric Years, The Yale Review, and The Poetry Journal. The earliest of these copyrights was 1909. The Merchants from Cathay was published when Benet was twenty-seven years old and had been married only a year. The dedication to Teresa is typical of the exuberance of this period of his life. It is also perhaps the most exquisite of the included love poems and reads:

MY WIFE

Braver than sea-going ships with the dawn
 in their sails,
 Than the wind before dawn more healing and fragrant
 and free,
 Fairer than sight of a city all white, from the mountain-
 top viewed in the vales,
 Or the silver-bright flakes of the moonlight in lakes,
 when the moon rides the clouds and the
 forest awakes,
 You are to me!

For you are to me what the bowstring is to the
 shaft,
 Speeding my purpose aloft and aflame and afar.
 Through the thick of the flight, in your eyes steady
 light of my soul hath seen splendor, and
 laughed.
 Now, however I tend betwixt foeman and friend through
 the riddle of Life to Death's light
 at the end,
 I ride for your star!

Louis Untermeyer says of The Merchants from Cathay:

Bill's first volume was something of a tour de force. It was a breathless, helter-skelter volume; style and subject refused to come to terms; the author's verve was surpassed only by his versatility. Here was something of the lush orientalism of Flecker, the crowded rhymes of Chesterton,

and the banging-clanging chants of Vachel Lindsay. Lindsay returned the compliment, for he often recited the title-poem of "Merchants from Cathay" and called it "the greatest of modern ballads."⁴

The title-poem tells of two "mad, antic Merchants" who came riding into town upon their paunchy striped beasts with hooves of beaten gold. They brought sacks of magic merchandise; and they sang in praise of the Grand Chan, "the king of all kings across the sea." There are few "nature poems;" but Benet exhibits throughout the book a keen, sympathetic observation of trees, flowers, and clouds. The format for the title-poem is strictly individual, for in the wide left-hand margin is printed in italics a summary of each stanza, for example: How They Came; Of Their Beasts; And Their Boasts; With its Burthen; and Chorus; A First Stave, Fearsome; and a second Right hard to Stomach; And a third, which is a Laughable Thing; Of the Chan's Hunting; We rage to Hear them End; And are in Terror; And Dread It Is Devil's Work!

Benet's work in this book is reviewed by Mr. W. M. Payne in this manner:

Gifted with an opulent imagination and bearing a staggering load of the stuff of poetry on his shoulders, he makes us a little too conscious of the burden, and does not quite succeed in so ordering his expression as to escape turgidity. Now and then he achieves restraint and clean-cut form.⁵

Mr. Joyce Kilmer, who did much critical work before he became famous as a poet, says of The Merchants from Cathay:

For the whole book we may be grateful; it is a book of poetry, musical imagination, vigorous. Mr. Benet's second book will be

⁴The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 13.

⁵Dial, LVI (January 16, 1914), 67.

better but "Merchants from Cathay" is good enough to make all friends of American poetry glad.⁶

In Review of Reviews appears this analysis of Benet's first volume of poetry:

If his jewels are not all in proper settings, if they are bundles of precious stuff littered about carelessly, it is well to remember that Mr. Benet is still writing in the lavishness of his first youth. He possesses versatility, power and an astonishing sense of rhythmic values.⁷

Soon after the appearance of his first book came The Falconer of God in 1914, another collection of poems most of which had been published in current periodicals. There are some sixty poems in this volume, which is dedicated "To My Mother and My Father with Deep Appreciation of the Debts I Can Never Pay." Included here are such poems as "Brother," "Land of the Giants," "The Schoolroom of Poets," "People," "Wings," and "The Vivandiere." The poem from which the volume takes its title is perhaps one of his best-known and most often quoted poems.

In 1916 appeared The Great White Wall, dedicated to his friend of Yale and brother of his second wife, Henry Martyn Hoyt, Jr. The book was illustrated with effective marginal drawings by Douglas Duer. In this poem Benet displays his inimitable rhythmic flare, and happily blends elements of fantasy with the epic story of Timur, the Tartar, who has long been a favorite subject for literary topics. Benet takes this ancient and cruel autocrat for the central figure of his story of Timur's attack on the great wall of China. In the series of pageants that make

⁶New York Times, (November 28, 1913), p. 683.

⁷Review of Reviews, XLVIII (December, 1913), 639.

up the story is a wealth of descriptive verse throughout which is scattered insight into moral truths.

A criticism in the Yale Review reads:

The poet's metrical gifts have the fullest play here but the verses must be heard to be appreciated. Mr. Benet's powers of description were never better used than in this tale of far-off things and battles of long ago. The book is original in its workmanship, full of vivid descriptions and interest in the life and animation that pervades it. It is Mr. Benet at his best.⁸

In quick succession appeared The Burglar of The Zodiac and Other Poems, in 1918. The seventeen poems in this volume include some of Benet's best-known verses, such as "The Burglar of the Zodiac," "The Horse Thief," "How to Catch Unicorns," and the lengthy "The Seventh Pawn, 1809." The dedication is "To Laura and Stephen," his sister and brother. In the four stanzas of this dedication Benet, in fancy, drops in upon them on a rainy evening. In answer to their question as to where he has been, he answers, "Oh, lashed behind the plough in the world's pasture." The dedication ends:

Let's draw up chairs, serve supper, talk between
Of fairies and chimaeras, ogres, elves,
Life's whirligig, the tourneys you yourselves
Have splintered lance in. . .
Ah, the enchanted scene,
The healing of the old speech and laughter, blending
To tunes, to dreams, to love of you unending!

The poems in The Burglar of the Zodiac, like those in Benet's three preceding volumes, are rich in imagery and fantasy, with brilliant dashes of poetry, and full of the joy of life. Benet is intensely modern, however, in the variety of his choice of subjects for these poems, and inde-

⁸Yale Review, VI (July, 1917), 862.

pendent in his use of metre and rhyme.

Hilda Conckling, poet and critic, says of Benet: "We find him marvelously observant, always adventurous, in love with the color and the music of his art."⁹

Of the poems of this first period of Benet's writing Mr. Untermeyer writes:

Bill's praise of Stephen's "rhythm and rhetoric" was not a mere brotherly gesture. Rhythm and rhetoric were two of Bill Benet's greatest assets—and his greatest handicap. He was often so bemused by the beat and flow of lines that he drenched, and sometimes drowned, the meaning of the music. Caught in the rush of his own vigor he often did not know when and where to stop. Nevertheless, some of his best pieces, which are also his best-known poems—such as "The Horse Thief" and "Jesse James," to name two—are bravura pieces in the best tradition. Somehow he managed to combine high seriousness and highflying fantasy with a sure hand. Another characteristic which was both a strength and a weakness was his penchant for the past. This was particularly true of his early work, but the nostalgic note persisted. I rallied him that he was writing not so much for posterity as for antiquity, that he was determined to outdo Browning in a resuscitation of odd types and forgotten figures of historic unimportance. Bill's rejoinder was swift but, as always, kindly: "Perhaps what you say is true about the older poems. But if you say that my new ones hold a trace of Browning, why, I'll—by gravy—I'll hit you with the inside of a doughnut.....At any rate, you consarned modernist, it may amuse you to know that two of my last three poems bear the titles 'The Push-Cart' and 'The Quick-Lunch Counter,' though I'll admit they try to put the splendors of ancients into the grim of modernity. The third is 'The Horse Thief.'"¹⁰

After the death of his first wife, Teresa Thompson Benet, in January of 1919, he published in the same year Perpetual Light: A Memorial, the foreword of which was dated March 25, 1919, showing that in two months after his wife's death the volume was ready for the press. On

⁹Yale Review, VIII (January, 1919), 436.

¹⁰The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 13.

the title page of this book is the following quotation from which Benet takes the name for this collection of poems:

. . . That we may be able to arrive with pure minds
at the festival of perpetual light. Through the
same Christ or Lord, Amen.

Oremus

Included in the front of the book is a paragraph from The Tidings Brought to Mary by one of Teresa's favorite authors, Paul Claudel. In this is reflected the grief Benet must have felt:

"Ah, do not turn to me that face which is no longer of this world! . . . There are enough angels to serve the mass in Heaven! Have pity on me, who am only a man without wings, who rejoiced in this companion God had given me, and that I should hear her sigh with her head resting on my shoulder! . . . the bitterness like the bitterness of myrrh. . . And for you age is already come. But how hard it is to renounce when the heart is young!"

The four-stanza dedication is "To Kathleen and Margaret," Teresa's devoted sisters. The last stanza reads:

By her clear eyes, by her pure brows
We take the Sign,
And kneel within her Father's house—
And yours and mine.

Perpetual Light is divided into two parts: "Before," which contains thirty-seven poems, and "After," which contains fifteen poems. The first part has eleven poems that had appeared in The Merchants from Cathay and three from The Falconer of God and Other Poems, while the remainder of the poems were from current publications. The poem "Premonition" is the last in the section of the book called "Before" and bears in parenthesis under the title this notation: "Written in absence and unaware of her desperate condition, a few days before her death." In the foreword he writes: "This verse is published to her memory, because I wish to keep together the poetry she occasioned and enable those who

loved her—and they were many—to know definitely what she was to me." He then gives a brief summary of his and Teresa's life together, and of her character and many good works.

Here is a book that is a tribute full of beauty, tenderness, deep and delicate feeling, expressed in rich language and rhythms. The New York Times says of Perpetual Light: "Mr. Benet has written no better lyrics than some of those included in the volume. They are both brave and simple."¹¹ Of this book Mr. E. B. Reed, critic for The Yale Review, writes: "The dignity, the courage, the faith, the aspiration of the verses are like a beacon in this time of unrest and uncertainty."¹²

The next book to come from Benet's pen was Moons of Grandeur, published in 1920. The dedication was to his friend who had committed suicide that year, and it reads: "This book is Dedicated to Henry Martyn Hoyt, Remembering 1906-1920." As were the other volumes, Moons of Grandeur was a reprint of poems that had first appeared in current periodicals and newspapers. Many of the forty-three poems in this book are written to members of his family and of his intimate circle of friends; for instance, "The Triumphant Tuscan" is to Frances Rose Benet, his mother; "Thorstan's Friend" is of his sister Laura; "The Ballad of Taillefer," to Elinor Wylie; "Eugenie's Solitaire," to Kathleen Norris; "When the Caterer Sang of His Wedding," and "Metamorphosis—Not in Ovid," to Sinclair Lewis; "Friends," to Anna McMichael Hoyt, mother of Henry Martyn Hoyt and Elinor Hoyt Wylie; one is titled "To My Father; "Tricksters" is

¹¹New York Times, XXV (April 11, 1920), 173.

¹²The Yale Review, X (October, 1920), 205.

to Vachel Lindsay; "Being Cárrious," to Stephen; "Menagerie," to Don Marquis; "Charles Darwin," to Henry Seidel Canby; and the last poem "Night" is to Christopher Morley.

In his book John Mistletoe, Christopher Morley, in writing of the works of Thomas Bird Mosher, has this reference to the poem "Night" which Benet had written to him:

He (Mosher) knew lapidary work when he saw it. Once he spotted a poem written by a contributor to the old Bowling Green. At once he wrote for permission to reprint it in his catalogue. "It is one of the few things," he said, "that to me seems almost absolutely perfect." May I tell you, without breach of manners, what it was? Life is very short anyhow for paying one's respects to the things that need admiration. The poem was "Night" by William Rose Benet.¹³

This "almost perfect poem" reads:

NIGHT

Let the night keep
What the night takes,
Sighs buried deep,
Ancient heart-aches,
Groans of the lover,
Tears of the lost;
Let day discover not
All the night cost!

Let the night keep
Love's burning bliss,
Drowned in deep sleep
Whisper and kiss
Thoughts like white flowers
In hedges of May;
Let such deep hours not
Fade with the day!

Monarch is night
Of all eldest things,
Pain and affright,
Rapturous wings;
Night the crown, night the sword
Lifted to smite.
Kneel to your overlord,
Children of night!

¹³Christopher Morley, John Mistletoe, p. 320.

Inspiration for the poetry included in Moons of Grandeur the poet takes, with few exceptions, from history—the Renaissance, ancient Egypt, mediaeval England. His vocabulary and allusions make serious demands upon the reader's knowledge of history. The rich color and vigor of Benet's first poetry is still present, but he seems to have caught more of the brilliance and romance of his own times. A review of this book in The Nation says:

A poet so fertile and diversified is bound to be interesting and one cannot but recognize Mr. Benet's gifts of streaming phrase and bannered fancy; at the same time one often misses the clear strong note of nature, often feels the absence from this work of actual blood and bone.¹⁴

The New York Times's critic, H. S. Gorman, writes in this manner:

In Moons of Grandeur he includes ten such poems as may be ranked among quite the best things he had done. It is apparent in this book that he has grown greatly in stature as a poet. An extravagance that was once fatal to him as an artist at times has been finely curbed and turned into channels where it becomes a virtue.¹⁵

Miss Marguerite Wilkinson reviews Moons of Grandeur in a lively and interesting manner in The Bookman, under the title of "Mirrors of the Renaissance," part of which is quoted herewith:

Architecture, as we have been told, is "frozen music." If it be permissible to describe one art in terms of another in this way, poetry is sometimes architectre made fluid again. Such is the poetry of William Rose Benet. He is a builder. He goes to history as to a quarry for his materials and having secured them, sets block on block with pains until the walls of his thoughts stand firm before him, until the strongest rhythms have the certitude of an arch. He is one of the most keenly intellectual poets now writing in America. Sometime ago

¹⁴The Nation, CXIII (January, 1921), 86.

¹⁵New York Times, (January 9, 1921), p. 11.

ago he said:

"A poet should swallow the encyclopedia and after that the dictionary. A poet should know history inside and out and should take as much interest in the days of Nebuchadnezzar as in the days of Pierpont Morgan."

Mr. Benet has swallowed more than the encyclopedia and dictionary. He has devoured many books and obviously, he still hungers. His avidity prompts the salutation in the words of Kipling: "Full forge and a deep sleep to thee, O Ram, thou noblest of kites!"

He was interested chiefly in the Renaissance when he wrote Moons of Grandeur. The longest and most important poems in this last book are interpretations of powerful personalities of the Italian Renaissance, studies of moods and moments in the lives of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Garipara Stampa, Caterina Sforza, Caesar Borgia. . . .and others. Mr. Benet has seen these men and women and their lives in relations to their times. He has set them against the background of wanton bloodshed and daring beauty, of old lusts and the new learning, of deadly poisons and passionate exaltations, that belonged to the period in which they lived.....

How has the work of building been done? For the most part, well. His designs are good and suited to the materials with which he works. He has a sense of color—"green with the juicy greenness of a leek," "grape-colored water," "cherry embers!"....

Perhaps no single ballad is so thrilling as "The Horse Thief;".. ..and no single lyric equals Mr. Benet's masterpiece, "The Falconer of God," a radiant and invincible poem unequalled among religious lyrics of modern America. There is a brightness and soundness about it that makes one certain that he has not stopped growing and that he is not ready to stop. For him there is "something unbuilt to be built still."¹⁶

Christopher Morley writes of this book in a letter to Miss Loveman in these words:

There was an old beloved friend specially dear to us both, Don Marquis. Nothing would please Bill more than if you could include an excerpt from Don's Sun Dial when "Moons of Grandeur" was published in 1920. I enclose the clipping, yellow with 30 years cherish. Please may I have it back?

Miss Loveman did find room for Don Marquis' column and prefaced it with this editor's note: "Following is the Don Marquis review of WRB's 'Moons of Grandeur' as it appeared in The Sun in an issue of 1920."

¹⁶The Bookman, LIII (April, 1921), 168-170.

Parts of this review read as follows:

Someday, just to please ourself, we intend to make a compilation of poems that we love best, one that we turn to again and again. There will be in the volume the six odes of Keats, Shelley's "Adonais," Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," Sidney Lanier's "Hymns of the Marshes," "The Hounds of Heaven," William Rose Benet's "Man Possessed," and very little else.

We don't "defend" these poems.....we merely yield ourselves to them and they transport us; we are careless of reason in the matter for they cast a spell upon us.....

William Rose Benet has published another book of poems, "Moons of Grandeur" (George H. Doran Co.). Here is a stanza which shows the lyric quality of the verse:

Like flame, like wine, across the still lagoon
The colors of the sunset stream.
Spectral in heaven as climbs the frail veiled moon,
So climbs my dream.
Out of the heart's eternal torture fire
No Eastern phoenix risen--
Only the naked soul, spent with desire,
Burst its prison.

....."Moons of Grandeur" is a ringing bell and a glimmering tapestry and a draught of sparkling wine.....There are very few people writing verse today who have the power to charm us and carry us away with them as Benet can.

He has found the horse with wings.

—Don Marquis.¹⁷

After this successful volume Benet did not publish another book of verse until 1927. This new book was called Man Possessed, the title from a poem first included in Perpetual Light. Of this poem Benet wrote that it was one of the few that had been written within the sound of his wife's voice. Some of the poems included in Man Possessed were selected from earlier books; others were new ones which had not yet appeared in book form.

A criticism of the volume in the Springfield Republican does not rank Benet among the great poets, as did his friend Don Marquis. Part of

¹⁷The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 18.

this review reads:

It is pleasant to have so full a selection from William Rose Benet's half dozen volumes. Mr. Benet is by no means a poet of the first importance. He has neither the depth and range of thought nor the freshness and (in the strict sense) peculiarity of style that such a poet must manifest. But that he is a poet with a clear authoritative voice, and easy power over language and metrical device, and a faculty for investing a thousand subjects with the same glittering nimbus of strangeness and romance.¹⁸

In 1932 appeared Rip Tide: A Novel in Verse. Perhaps "novelette" would have been a better word, for a first-edition copy¹⁹ contains only eighty pages. The poem is divided into three parts—"Sheila," "Gordon," and "Barry." The story is that of a young man and a young girl who are intensely in love with each other. Unknowingly, they have the same father. The climax of the story is reached when the youth is killed while saving the life of the girl he loves.

Benet said that he turned to verse in this poem in order to gain for the story a condensation and intensification not possible in prose. In this purpose he succeeded. Rip Tide is considered one of the outstanding poetic achievements for the year 1932, although most critics do not consider it comparable to his brother's prize-winning John Brown's Body. Yet Benet's version of the brother-sister love tragedy in a modern setting has qualities that make it worthy of comparison with many a classic, for it suggests not so much modern fiction as it does Greek tragedy. In many instances the modern treatment lends power to the story.

¹⁸Springfield Republican, (November 27, 1927), p. 7.

¹⁹In the Rare Books Room, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

A New York Times' reviewer has this to say of Rip Tide:

There is no gainsaying the fact that William Rose Benet has at once a flair for fluid narrative and the ability to write poetry of exceptional beauty, power and depth. There is always the danger, in telling a story such as Rip Tide, of becoming too involuted—thereby weakening the force of the theme in hand. Mr. Benet tells an effective story effectively and in the first part with rare and brooding loveliness.²⁰

On the other hand, Harriet Monroe, noted poet, critic, and publisher, is not too favorably inclined in the following excerpt from her review:

On the whole, Mr. Benet moves securely on his poetic plateau—not the lofty epic heights, but a mountain meadow where there are grasses and flowers and views of the sea and icy, steep declivities. The climax of the poem—the discovery to each other of father and son—is skilfully stripped bare of any unnecessary trope or word. It is done with complete competence, with appreciation of dramatic values, with every excellence except the last magic of great poetry—but somehow Gordon becomes commonplace when he so bluntly blurts out the terrible truth to the son he had never known, and one does not quite believe in nature's benevolent intercession—the storm and the violent death of the young lover seem manufactured, and thereby the story is lowered from the level of tragedy to that of melodrama.²¹

"Journeyman of Letters," the title of Rolfe Humphries's review of Rip Tide, Starry Harness and Fifty Poets, is an apt description of Benet. In this review, Mr. Humphries says of Rip Tide:

The qualities of the verse in which it is presented insufficiently demonstrate the theorem that the poem achieves a condensation and intensity impossible to prose; a feeble variation of rhythm is insufficient warrant for abandoning the medium more conventionally associated with novel writing. The influence of Jeffers is apparent, but the rather daring rhythms are handled with a delicacy of which Mr. Jeffers is incapable. There is nothing shocking about Mr. Benet's treatment of adultery and incest. The characters, more upper-class than anything in Jeffers, are limned with the

²⁰New York Times, (September 25, 1932), p. 2.

²¹The Saturday Review of Literature, IX (October 29, 1932), 203.

compulsive obsession that gives them value as symbols of private religion; the figures in Rip Tide confute the author's estimate of their vital emergence.²²

Starry Harness was the next book of poetry to be published, in 1933, and was dedicated to "Stephen Vincent Benet." The title of this volume is inspired by the following stanza by one of Benet's favorite authors, William Blake:

When Luvah's bulls each morning drag the sulphur sun
out of the Deep
Harness'd with starry harness, black and shining,
kept by black slaves
That work all night on the starry harness, strong
and vigorous
They drag the unwilling Orb-----

This book of one hundred eleven pages contains fifty-five new poems, mostly lyrics. Some of these poems possess a mystical quality; and some are on themes of love and beauty. Included in Starry Harness are "Dead Letter Office," which Benet selected to represent him in his Fifty Poets; "Overture to Man;" "Sagacity," which had been published in pamphlet form; six sonnets to Lora; and "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday." The final poem in the book is "To Modern Poets." The advice contained in it seems to have been Benet's motto throughout his life:

Now in a lowering hour
For all on earth who cower
Asking if love be long
Or life or death be best,
With lightning at your heart,
Pour song.

A review in the Boston Transcript says of Starry Harness:

Mr. Benet has rather transformed his inner technique.

²²Poetry, XLIV (May, 1934), 111.

He is no longer quite the man who wrote that splendid fantasy "The Horse Thief." His colors are more blended by a new philosophic abstraction. In many poems his lyricism has completely left the earth and in the sky has found almost blinding beauties. This is progress, this is a thousand times better than revisiting the senses and sensibilities of a youth that is, unfortunately, no longer present.²³

The New York Times' review of this book is also optimistic concerning Benet's progress as a poet:

The poems of Starry Harness, the grave and the less grave alike, have one unusual and highly fascinating characteristic: namely, a certain contradictoriness, a negligence which at the same time is never neglect—on the contrary, a fastidious negligence.....If Starry Harness proves one thing, it is this—Mr. Benet is forging rapidly forward to the point where he may become one of the foremost poetic interpreters of the American scene.....If you wish to see America, with its high ideals and its lapses, interpreted by a poet who understands his America, read Starry Harness.²⁴

Mr. Rolfe Humphries, in his review referred to above, sees nothing commendable in this volume:

Starry Harness is as good a title as one might ask for a book of lyric poems that are, on a whole, a little high-flown. Pretentiousness is a bad quality in art, and Mr. Benet's verse pretends badly. It is for the critic to penetrate pretense, to discover and define the peculiar quality of the pleasure, if any, given us by the writer, to shuck him down to its central reality. But the process of husking is here so continual, the search for the integrity of this poet so tedious and so complicated by his extravagances that we abandon the pursuit with little remorse.²⁵

The next book of Benet's poetry was Golden Fleece: A Collection of Poems and Ballads Old and New, which appeared in 1935. This book contains ninety poems selected by the poet from two of his former books,

²³Boston Transcript, (December 23, 1933), p. 2.

²⁴New York Times, (November 19, 1933), p. 5.

²⁵Poetry, XLIV (May, 1934), 110.

Man Possessed and Starry Harness, to which were added other poems that had been printed in magazines. This volume is richly representative of the first quarter century of his writing of poetry. As Benet planned the book, it displayed the best of his work; and by it he considered his standing as a poet should be judged. These poems showed his extreme sensitiveness and insight, his fine underlying simplicity of emotion, and his mastery of many meters.

The critics differed in their estimates of the poetry in Golden Fleece, as they had in regard to his other writings. Percy Hutchinson, critic for the New York Times, says:

No one can read the poems which fill Golden Fleece and not experience both keen and continuous delight.....Reading one poem one is certain to read all. If any one characteristic stands out above others, it is Mr. Benet's marked sense of rhythm. He pipes as naturally as a William Blake. The sinuosity of his lines ensnares.²⁶

Mr. W. T. Scott, critic and author, is both favorably and unfavorably inclined toward this collection, as appears in the following paragraph of his criticism of Golden Fleece:

The most salient quality of his poetry is its variety. This is true not only of its forms but as well of its intentions. Mr. Benet besides being a story-teller, is by turns didactic, lyrical, thoughtful, impressionistic, and humorous. And somehow, while he is almost invariably assured and practiced in his shifting technics, he is just as invariably something less than distinguished in his completed work. At his worst he writes with immense and uninspired wordiness, and at his best he misses that intensity which is the indefinable yet always recognizable life of genuine poetry.²⁷

²⁶New York Times, (August 4, 1935), p. 10.

²⁷Poetry, XLII (January, 1936), 223.

The following excerpt from a criticism in The Nation has very little constructive to say of Golden Fleece:

The best poems are the less pretentious lyrics and occasional verse written to and about people that he knows. The ballads lack salt; and the more ambitious efforts are inflated and turgid. After thirty prolific years this writer is still doing apprentice work, lacking focus, the direct vision, and organic unity of form and content.²⁸

The next book of poems that Benet published was one of his most interesting and most original, With Wings as Eagles: Poems and Ballads of the Air, which came from the press in 1940. This little volume contains twenty-four ballads and long poems celebrating flyers and flying from the first days of the Wright Brothers at Kittyhawk to the sky-writers of 1940. Many stories are contained in With Wings as Eagles, which, if taken in its entirety, might be called a real saga of the air.

Again, estimates of the worth of these new poems are at variance. John Holmes,²⁹ critic for the Boston Transcript says that the poems are pitched low, in what must have been the poet's conception of folk-poetry, for nothing else could have accounted for some of the lines and stanzas. Dudley Fitts³⁰ feels that the diction was appropriately colloquial but that the versification was rough; of the various stanza forms used, the most successful was the rhymed ballad-quaternion. Mr. Fitts also feels that the manner of writing is artlessly impressive—alive, tough, driving at its best, and something close to doggerel at its worst; but even at its

²⁸The Nation, CXL (June 5, 1935), 665.

²⁹Boston Transcript, (September 23, 1940), p. 11.

³⁰The Saturday Review of Literature, XXIII (October 26, 1940), 16.

best it is a kind of treason against its author.

In "Happy Landing," a lengthy review of With Wings as Eagles, Miss Marion Stobel has this to say in defense of the book:

William Rose Benet's new book of ballads has the unfortunately poetic title With Wings as Eagles. Had it been called something simple and forthright as Flying Is Fun the reader would have known more accurately what to expect, for the book has the zest of its subject. Reading it is as much fun as flying is to those who are air-minded. And it will certainly make land-lubbers understand the fascination that led the Wrights to risk their lives in 1903 and has been leading so many other intrepid souls ever since. Together the ballads form a vivid and comprehensive history of aviation; separately, they have that popular and much maligned virtue, known as human interest.....

Never before has Mr. Benet had a larger field in which to display his technical virtuosity, and never has he done so with more apparent ease and pleasure. His rhythms are as various as fireworks: couplets, blank verse, jingles. Obviously, he has brought to his task the "careful work and the cheerful will" with which he credits the Dayton fliers.....Perhaps the most memorable of all the ballads is the one to Amelia Earhart. Before the poem is over we experience not only the last flight of the flier, but the author's own faith in the power of love:

.....over the leagues of air
hums the loved voice, strengthening, understanding,
We live forever when the voice is there. . .

Momentarily, at least, we, too, believe that the crack-up, wherever it happened, was therefore a "happy landing."

The most charming ballad in the book—and no one is more charming than Mr. Benet when he puts his mind to it—is the one called "Ten Miles High," addressed to Professor Piccard.³¹

Miss Ruth Lechlitner, critic for Books, agrees with Miss Stobel about the charm of these poems, especially the piece called "Ten Miles High." She says: "Mr. Benet is amazingly expert in making good rhymes of difficult aeronautical terms.....Once in a while humor gets the upper hand—but no one minds when it produces such a masterpiece as 'Ten Miles High.'"³²

³¹Poetry, LVII (December, 1940), 220-221.

³²Books, (October 13, 1940), p. 23.

Besides paying tribute to the Wright brothers, Miss Earhart and Professor Piccard, Benet celebrates the feats of many other famous aviators, such as Eleriot, Glenn Curtis, Lindbergh, Clarence Chamberlin, and "the man named Smith." Wiley Post flies again around the world; Byrd soars over "the polar peak where the icefields interlock;" and Soviet planes go "over the top of the world." The poems contain records that are thrilling in the field of aviation and that appeal to readers of any age. Miss Stobel closes her review with this comment: "Benet sticks to the record, though the judgment fall as it may," which appraisal seems applicable to Benet not only in these poems but throughout all his works.

Of the next published work by Benet Louis Untermeyer writes:

Then, without prologue or preparation, came the semi-autobiographical portrait-narrative The Dust Which Is God, published in Bill's fifty-sixth year, a volume which won the Pulitzer Prize. Apart from its technical competence, it showed that no one had written as fully, or as frankly, about William Rose Benet as Bill himself. Here is the boy and the man, the lover and the husband, the poet and private person. And here was the public citizen, the hater of cant and the fighter for justice, the champion of the freely uttered and freely circulated word, the ardent liberal devoted to the truth.³³

Mr. Ben Ray Redman, in his "Momentum in Verse," a review of The Dust Which Is God, says that any brief review of this book must be unhappily inadequate, for the book, which flows into one of the most ambitious literary exertions of our day, is a poem over five hundred fifty pages long with each full page carrying over forty lines of verse. Mr. Redman feels that the publishers' announcements of the book as "semi-autobiographical" are misleading, for, except in one or two minor

³³The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 14.

incidents, the experiences and happenings recounted in the book are based on fact.

Mr. John Gould Fletcher, eminent poet and critic, thinks that The Dust Which Is God will rank with the great literature of our time, for he says:

First, let me say, and emphatically, Mr. Benet's fictionized autobiography in verse is one of the great documents of our time. Like other such documents—Mr. Sandburg's The People, Yes, Mr. Stephen Vincent Benet's John Brown's Body, and Mr. Auden's The Double Man—it belongs with the most extensive and most courageous attempts made to achieve great poetry in our day. But that it remains, when all is said and done, not great poetry except incidentally, and apart from its main purpose, is manifest to anyone who has read through all its more than six hundred pages. And the reason is chiefly due, not to any lack of skill on Mr. Benet's part, but to insuperable difficulties implicit in the theme which attempts to cover the age itself.³⁴

This book was composed, according to a notation at the end, at Peterborough, New Hampshire; St. Augustine, Florida; Nassau Point, Long Island; and New York City during the years 1938 through 1941. It is dedicated simply to his three children, whom he calls by their nicknames: "For Kitten, Rose and Jim." The title of the book is taken from a poem called "Hertha"³⁵ by Swinburne, one stanza of which Benet quotes at the beginning of the book:

I the grain and the furrow,
The plough-cloven clod
The ploughshare drawn through,

³⁴Poetry, LIX (January, 1942), 213.

³⁵"Nerthus" or "Hertha" was a name given by Tacitus to a German or Scandinavian goddess of fertility, or "Mother Earth," who was worshipped on an island. She roughly corresponds to the classical Cybele, and is probably confused with the Scandinavian god Njorthr or Niord, the protector of sailors and fishermen. Nerthus and Njorthr alike mean "benefactor."

The germ and the sod,
The deed and the doer, the seed and the sower,
The Dust which is god.

There are four main parts to The Dust Which Is God, each part beginning with a quotation which sets the tempo and mood for that phase of the poet's life and the age in which it was lived. Book I is called "There Sat Glory," the title being taken from the following "Children's Street Song:"

Down in the meadow where the green grass grows,
There sat Glory along the road,
She sang and she sang and she sang so sweet
Along came a fellow and kissed her on the cheek,
Oh Glory, oh Glory, you ought to be ashamed
To marry a fellow without a name! . . .

Book II takes its heading "Breaths of Dawn and Thunder" from the following passage of Chesterton's "A Song of Defeat:"

"—The lords and the lackeys ride the plain.
I draw deep breaths of the dawn and thunder
And the whole of my heart grows young again—" .

"A Heaven Taken by Storm," the name for Book III, is inspired by these lines from Blunt's "The Desolate City:"

"Therefore the earth is dark to me, the sunlight blackness
Therefore I go in tears and alone, by night and day;
Therefore I find no love in heaven, no light, no beauty,
A heaven taken by storm, where none are left but
the slain."

The title for Book IV, "The Triple Veil," is from the following stanza of a poem by Matthew Arnold:

"The Guide of our dark steps a triple veil
Betwixt our senses and our sorrow keeps;
Hath sown with cloudless passages the tale
Of grief, and eased us with a thousand sleeps."

The main narrative of The Dust Which Is God is written in an impressionistic, staccato style which is often most effective. It is fashioned on that style made popular by Benet's friend Don Marquis in the famous Archie and Mahitabel series in his column in the New York Sun, wherein no

punctuation and capitalization are used. Mr. Benet modifies this style in that he does use the capital letters and some sparse punctuation. Interspersed throughout the book are lyrics that are moving and lovely, and graphic Whitmanesque pictures of the American scene about 1900 through 1940. Lack of intensity, dramatic pressure, and explosive force seem to be the main weaknesses of this poem.

Criticisms about this book, of course, vary; yet on the whole The Dust Which Is God was enthusiastically received. Mr. E. H. Crowell,³⁶ writer and critic, says that Mr. Benet produced his most notable work in this absorbing novel in verse, which was written with heroic candor and in poetry that often rises to great beauty. Crowell rates it as an important book for the adult library. Mr. Maurice Swan, reviewer for the New York Times, is even more enthusiastic in his summation of the book. He says that there is no reason to doubt that if the American audience would suspend their distaste for poetry for just one book and begin to read this one, The Dust Which Is God would go through the country like prairie fire. He writes, "I have read it in one gulp, finding it difficult to tear myself away from it."³⁷

Miss Lechlitrer sums up her reaction to the non-personal portions of the book in this manner:

Mr. Benet sets forth objectively the folly and blindness of democratic leadership that led, perhaps inevitably, to Hitlerism. But partly because of his uncritical loyalty and affection for

³⁶Library Journal, LXVI (September 1, 1941), 729.

³⁷New York Times, (December 14, 1941), p. 4.

his friends and fellow writers, he is totally unable to evaluate the similar inadequacies of the literary set-up of the same years. And that is the weak spot of this novel in verse that otherwise fulfills its intention to be a "detailed picture of a period."³⁸

Mr. Redman, in his review mentioned above, says: "The reader of today or tomorrow will pare and strip The Dust Which Is God to his own liking, but, however it is stripped, poetry will be found in all its veins and at the heart."³⁹

Mr. Fletcher, after calling The Dust Which Is God "one of the great documents of our time," has "pared and stripped" the book to his own individual liking in a manner that warrants quoting in some detail from his review called "Dust Swirl Over Manhattan:"

Mr. Benet's attempt to tell the story of the past thirty years is in its incidence upon the world as upon his chief protagonist. The story itself is simple. A young man, with a natural facility for writing, but with no particular philosophy, whom Mr. Benet calls Fernandez, graduates from a University identifiable as Yale, and then—thanks to his lack of economic status—enters the commercial world of our time via free lance journalism. He falls in love with, and eventually marries a girl called Nora, and there are three children. (It is only about the hundredth page that Mr. Benet's story really hits its stride and begins to engage the reader's full interest with a scene on an apartment roof in Manhattan.) The first World War finds them ensconced in a country cottage and Fernandez has the impulse to join up. He follows the impulse, with the result that he is chained to a desk in Washington for the rest of the war—while wife and children stay with his parents in Carolina. After the armistice he drifts back to New York and has to start again from the bottom, writing advertising copy. Suddenly he is summoned to the bedside of his wife, who has caught the post-war influenza and is dying. Her death concludes the first half of the story.

³⁸Books, (December 7, 1941), 6.

³⁹The Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (November 15, 1941), 6.

After this tragedy, unmitigated as it is in Fernandez's own mind by any faith, either rational or mystical, that it may be all part of some tremendous and overpowering plan on the part of that force they call God—the protagonist is again caught up in the swirl of the sophisticated, speakeasy, cocktail, jazz and gangster era of the twenties. He is helped into it—despite honest and abiding doubts of its validity—by the interposition of another woman who has already wrecked two other men's lives. After a married life of ups and downs and following a long separation overseas, the woman suddenly dies; a brilliant poet but the self-confessed betrayer at last of her own husband's love and loyalty. And Fernandez apparently now inured to the position of being perpetually used and kicked out, accepts this situation also.

In the last section the protagonist is led—via various casual affairs—to the final acceptance of the God of his childhood, whom he has all along half admired, half mistrusted; and in the meantime, the world, in its blundering and confusion, is led into another World War. Thus the whole book concludes as a modern novel, with the exit of its leading character, and with the underlying moral dilemmas completely unsolved.

.....Mr. Benet's attempt to envisage the war from the standpoint of a modern agnostic who has merely endured and shared the dust swirl over Manhattan for the past thirty years, must be frankly admitted a failure. The dust-swirl in itself had no point of reference, no objective and no goal—nor can Mr. Benet make it relevant to the problems we have to face today.

That is not to say that Mr. Benet is a bad poet. When he ceases discussing the affairs of his main character and concentrates on affairs and things all around him, he can be extremely convincing. His chief technical device of blank verse, written in swift stabbing phrases somewhat like a telegram, in them does better duty than in the more personal passages of narrative. One could signal out much for attention here.....

And yet when all is said and done with Mr. Benet's book—and I hope I have made it clear that no one could do better with such a subject—what abides in the mind are a few excellent lyrics.⁴⁰

Not until the second World War was well under way did another book of verse by Benet appear in print. In 1944 was published Day of Deliverance. The lines of the poems in this book sincerely expressed the national feeling in the third year of the war. This book contains fifty-five

⁴⁰"Dust Swirl Over Manhattan," Poetry, LVII (June, 1942), 213-217.

poems—poems for a world at war, for Lidice, for the Greek, for the French sailors who sank their own ships, for besieged Moscow, and for traitorous Vichy. A few of the poems, however, are in a more serene mood.

Mr. Robert Hillyer,⁴¹ critic, poet, and Pulitzer Prize winner, thinks "the book needs to be winnowed," but that the careful reader will not begrudge that task since Benet is a poet to be depended upon for honest craftsmanship, and often for the authentic flash of genius. But Mr. Leo Kennedy, reviewer for Book Week, takes just the opposite view of Benet's craftsmanship:

Never a Stephen Vincent, elder brother William Rose Benet is emblazoned on his sleeve as large as life. Hardly a precise craftsman, his choice of swinging metrical arrangements reminds one of Kipling, as his fighting fervor smacks of Chesterton.⁴²

The title for this book, Day of Deliverance, is that of the long poem with which the book opens, a poem filled with the dream of hope familiar to us all. Under the title are the two following lines setting forth this dream and Benet's purpose:

Written today, that it need never be
Written in blood again for you and me.

The sound of war is in the book—war for the fighter and war for the men and women searching for the broken bones of their children in the rubble. Benet was striving to achieve just this sound, for his poetic interpretations of the world conflict were his contributions to the ware effort. In his acknowledgments appended to Day of Deliverance

⁴¹Atlantic Monthly, CLXXIV (October, 1944), 129.

⁴²Book Week, (August 27, 1944), p. 7.

he enumerates some of the uses to which his war poems were put. The following are examples:

Many of these poems, thanks to the generous hospitality to them of Norman Cousins, first appeared in The Saturday Review of Literature. Franklin P. Adams in the New York Post sponsored "The Burning Orphanage," "Prayer for England" (which last had an astonishing response in England itself, being reprinted on October 12, 1940, in the London Daily Express, and distributed by the British Library of Information), and "Dunkerque," all of which were first used in his column, "The Conning Tower."..... "Day of Deliverance" was written for the Philadelphia Inquirer at the request of Arch C. Luther, and has been used in broadcasts by the Third Service Command, adapted for radio by Sgt. H. Donald Spatz, and distributed by the Writers' War Board. "Dance of Heroes" and the poem now titled "Lidice" appeared.... in the "War Poems of the United Nations," edited by Joy Davidman. The official magazine of the U. S. Marines The Leatherneck has used, in part, "The Myriad Ghost." "Archipelago" has been included by Lieutenant Commander Griffith Baily Coale in his "Victory at Midway." "For the Red Army" was a contribution to the Anniversary Number of Soviet Russia Today. "For Hellas" has been distributed by the Office of War Information.

Since this was the first book of poetry Benet had published since his marriage to Marjorie Flack, this volume is fittingly dedicated to her, as follows:

FOR MARJORIE

You who give always, but so seldom take;
Who are brave, brown-eyed, grave, laughing, purely true;
In a dark time, but for a deep love's sake,
Mergie, these are for you.

There are only infrequent lyrics in the one hundred fifty pages of the book. Some of the poems are political in character, most of them are on the war theme, none of them are of love and romance. "Lines to a British Playwright" are written to Noel Coward. "In Thanksgiving" celebrates the allied victory in North Africa. His reactions to a documentary film are presented in "After Seeing Desert Victory." He tells in "The Strong Swimmer" of a Negro's heroism in the Pacific. Throughout

all the poems he employs his usual variety of styles.

Mr. Coleman Rosenberger gives a detailed review of Day of Deliverance in "Poet as Public Speaker," in which he writes:

This (writing of the present war) has been a perilous ground for a poet. Karl Shapiro, for example, writes in the introduction to his recent V-Hour: "Since the war began I have tried to be on guard against becoming a 'war poet'.....We know very well that the most resounding slogans ring dead after a few years, and that it is not poetry to keep pace with public speakers and the strategy of events."

What Shapiro has been on guard against, Benet has actively sought. Where Shapiro shunned the "strategy of events," Benet takes for his subjects "Tarawa," "Lidice," "The War Dead,".... Where Shapiro did not compete with the public speakers, Benet has vigorously entered the competition.....

As a public speaker Benet is better than most, as an old and practiced and effective user of words. His first book of poems was published in 1913—the year incidentally that Karl Shapiro was born. In the years since then Benet has led a full and active life as a professional man of letters: as poet, novelist, editor, anthologist and critic.....

It is not, however, merely as a skilled literary practitioner that Benet invites attention here. It is as a man who possesses considerable awareness of the world in which we live, who earlier than many was alert to the menace of fascism and who says clearly many things which are in need of saying.....

Like the rhetoric of most public speakers the verse in Day of Deliverance is more impressive in its total effect than any single line. In "bitter cup" and "bloody boot," for example, Benet has not sought to avoid the cliché. But the whole speech is still effective. Whatever the volume's weakness, it is good to have a poet moving in an area of public responsibility. There are already enough poet's painting paper-weights and fondling their personal psychological peculiarities.⁴³

The last volume of Benet's poems was Stairway of Surprise, published in 1947. This book contains two hundred sixty-five pages, and is the largest of Benet's collected poetical works. It is divided into nine parts, and so much variety is displayed throughout that it is more like several books in one. The title is from a stanza from Emerson's

⁴³Poetry, LXV (November, 1944), 101-3.

Merlin:

"Pass in, pass in," the angels say,
 "In to the upper doors,
 Nor count compartments of the floors,
 But mount to paradise
 By the stairway of surprise."

The dedication is to his friend and fellow-writer of long-standing,

Amy Loveman:

We've seen a rampant quarter-century through
 In work with hope. But what I've done to earn
 The steady friendship of one so fine and true
 Is murgatory as this small return.

The first section of the book is called "Center Is Everywhere,"

a title taken from Empedocles' A Lost Treatise:

The nature of God is a circle of which the center
 is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere.

"The Noblest Frailty" is the subject for the second portion, and is taken from this quotation in Dryden's The Indian Emperor: "Love's the noblest frailty of the mind." The succeeding parts of the book are under the names of "Gallery;" "The Fire Is Crystal;" "North Shore," which contains the "Ballad of Cape Ann," where he spent so many delightful days; "Speak What You Think Today;" "High Fantastical;" "Sonnets;" and "Pendant."

The last portion of the book contains one of his rare terse and trenchant quatrains, "Whose?"

Scientific and empirical,
 Whose intellection do you call
 The fundamental miracle
 That anything should exist at all?

Acknowledgments for these poems show that many of them appeared in The Saturday Review of Literature, Atlantic, University of Kansas City Review, The Holy Cross Purple, New York Times, New York Times Sun Magazine,

New Yorker, Encore, and The Gloucester Times. Many of the poems had not appeared in print previous to the publication of the book.

The typography and binding for the book were based on original designs by W. A. Diggins, Benet's friend and collaborator in A Baker's Dozen of Emblems.

Many of these poems were written to people Benet had known and loved throughout the years. There is one poem called "Fee Simple" which is "In Memoriam of C. E. S. W.," the "Zeus" of The Dust Which Is God. Another called "Token - For M. F. B." was, of course, for Benet's fourth wife. "Deep Rhythm" showed his sympathy for and understanding of the American Negro. Of Lola Ridge, written of the poetess Benet so often befriended and encouraged, contained these lines:

She was all fire and spirit. The throat chokes. O she
was insatiable candor in a vase too frail
of alabaster, that held an occult grail.
She evolved her prophecies as a seeress does.

On the dust jacket of Stairway of Surprise the publishers identified the poet as the man who "conducts The Saturday Review of Literature's renowned department 'The Phoenix Nest'" and summed up this book in these words:

His last previous volume Day of Deliverance found a wide, eager public. In Stairway of Surprise are to be found the variety, the impassioned voice and supple poetic art, the music that made his earlier volumes happy events to countless readers. It is idle to speak of "Maturing" in the case of so accomplished a craftsman; here is the ripe fruit of a fine and moving talent.

Indeed, throughout his last volume of poetry Benet reveals himself, as he had revealed throughout his entire life and writings, as "a man of many moods and much learning." And throughout the book Benet's faith in the potential goodness of man and his purpose in the universe is more

apparent than in any of his other works. Mr. Hillyer says of this book:

In wisdom and intensity, The Stairway of Surprise, I feel, surpasses anything Mr. Benet has done before. With this book he takes an incontestable place among our important living poets.⁴⁴

Mr. Untermeyer appraises his friend's last book of poetry thus:

His gamut was widening. A deeper voice was matched by a more impassioned music. The lover of liberty found new expression in his celebration of civil rights, in hymns to those beaten, betrayed, and crucified because they allied themselves with unpopular causes, in rhapsodies to the true democracy.

Shoulder to shoulder now they stand:
Our valiant dead and all our valiant living
To vivify with giving and forgiving
This Country of the Free, the impartial land
That it might be: with heart and mind and nerve
In many-in-one to strengthen and preserve.

I will not see it open for bleating sheep
Watched by sly wolves; or, in new dark ages,
Industrial feudal lords dispensing wages
Each from his fief and his baronial keep.....
Now, in this age, when, whatsoe'er the weather,
We must fairly together live or die together.⁴⁵

Watt and Cargill, in their recently published anthology College Reader, include "Men on Strike" from Stairway of Surprise as representative of Benet. They have this explanatory remark:

Scattered throughout his volumes of verse....are many poems whose message is explicit enough. The just wrath of "Men on Strike" is not elsewhere matched but suggests a vein the author might well develop.⁴⁶

Although Stairway of Surprise was the last volume of Benet's poetry to be published before his death, it is not too much to expect that perhaps some day another book of Benet's unpublished poetry will

⁴⁴New York Times, (August 24, 1947), p. 7.

⁴⁵The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 14.

⁴⁶Watt and Cargill, College Reader, p. 920.

appear, together with poems that have appeared in current publications since the date of publication of Stairway of Surprise.

The last poem to date to appear in print was in the July, 1950, issue of The Atlantic Monthly, titled "The Fancy," with a typically Benet parenthetical explanation under the title, "With a Bow to George Borrow's Lavengro." This poem is also typical of Benet in its display of erudition and love for the past. Without a modicum of like knowledge of and love for antiquity, the reader is apt to find much of Benet's writing unintelligible. "The Fancy" is practically meaningless unless one knows that George Borrow, British author and traveler living between 1803 and 1881, was a combination of Gil Bass and Bunyan, and that Borrow wrote Lavengro, which perhaps is his masterpiece. This novel has come to be more fully appreciated in this century than when it was published in 1851. To appreciate "The Fancy" one also needs to know that "Lavengro" means in the gypsy language "word master," a title given to Borrow in admiration by the gypsies with whom he lived and roamed for so many years. Lavengro, largely autobiographical, narrates Borrow's early life and travels, his first meeting with the gypsies, his studies in philology, and the life of the times. Benet ends this poem with these words:

....the professor that Borrow extolled
As though he were Homer invoking the heroes of old—
Their life in his language; his memory never to pass
Though faded their glory as fadeth the flower of the grass!⁴⁷

⁴⁷The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXVI (July, 1950), 67.

And now that "finis" has been appended to Benet's poetry, one feels that his memory will never pass as long as people love unusually exquisite language, deeply inspiring thoughts, and the ideals of freedom and liberty for which this country stands, because Benet's poetry contained all this—and much more. Perhaps much of Benet's poetry will fade "as fadeth the flower of the grass"—and some of it already has faded. Benet, like Borrow's professor, extolled many of the heroes of old; but he also extolled the era in which he lived and the people of this era. These, through Benet's poetry, will be preserved for future generations, "their life in his language."

CHAPTER IV

THE ANTHOLOGIES AND ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WILLIAM ROSE BENET

It has been said of William Rose Benet that the "very conditions of his life, his many activities in editing magazines and anthologies of verse, seemed to contribute toward a neglect of his own gifts in favor of his ability to encourage and to appreciate the works of others."¹ The fourteen volumes of poetry discussed in the preceding chapter represent an achievement attained by few poets devoting their entire time to the art of writing poetry. Yet the writing of poetry was only one of Benet's many fields of literary endeavor. As Henry Seidel Canby said of Benet as a young man when he joined the staff of the Literary Review, Benet "could do anything—write poetry, write editorials, write criticism." But Dr. Canby could not then foresee his future greatness as an anthologist.

Louis Untermeyer² says that he and Benet "grew up with, around and on poetry," and that they shared a youthful enthusiasm not only for pulse-pounding ballads but for unspeakably bad verse. It was a genuine passion for poetry that they shared for most of a lifetime. Benet's avid, omnivorous and continuous reading of poetry of all types and from all countries gave him a vast and extraordinary background of the poetry of

¹Gregory and Zaturenska, op. cit., p. 440.

²The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 13.

all ages. This wide knowledge Benet put to use in a field of literature not embraced by the writing of poetry or in the editorship of literary magazines—that of compiling the works of other poets. One of Benet's outstanding contributions to the field of American letters is the number of splendid, interesting, and unusual anthologies he collected and edited, some by himself and some in collaboration with others. In his New Poets from Old: A Study in Literary Genetics, Dr. Henry W. Wells, professor of English at Columbia University, includes Benet among the outstanding anthologists of our time, as shown in the following paragraph:

Specific evidence of the lively interest taken by well-read poets in their forerunners is discernible in the large number of anthologies gleaned from considerable periods of literature by prominent modern poets. Comprehensive collections of verse have been made, for example, by Conrad Aiken, W. H. Auden, William Rose Benet, Lawrence Binyon, Robert Bridges, Robert Graves, John Masefield, Walter de la Mare, Herbert Read, Carl Sandburg, Edith Sitwell, Genevieve Taggard, Mark Van Doren, Robert Penn Warren, and William Butler Yeats. The list might be easily enlarged. This activity implies a lively interest on the part of the editor in the work of his antecedents; indeed, it presumes a certain connoisseurship. Such labor and enthusiasm can hardly be without significance for the compiler himself.³

Benet's connoisseurship in whatever he was interested was highly developed. One of his earliest interests was in children's literature and throughout his life he maintained this interest. The first of his anthologies was for this audience that he loved. It was Poems for Youth, An American Anthology, published by E. P. Dutton and Company in

³Henry W. Wells, New Poets from Old: A Study in Literary Genetics, p. 9.

1923. Benet's purpose in collecting these poems is best expressed in his own words from the Preface to Poems for Youth:

The primary purpose of this book is to furnish to the American youth.... not an entirely comprehensible series of selections from the works of all the American poets of any distinction who have ever written, but, on the other hand, a compendious selection of a certain portion of the best work that has been done in the field of American poetry.....The endeavor has been to include only poems of comparatively simple and direct appeal.....

In general, and finally, the compiler has tried to preserve with all the strictness possible under the circumstances, the canon of his own private artistic taste, and he has constantly endeavored to keep before his mind's eye the particular audience for whom his compilation was intended.⁴

After a lengthy introduction, Benet addresses himself to his youthful audience in the following letter:

To the Young Reader:

The thing to do is to read poetry for pleasure, not as a task.....Your own temperamental bliss will indicate the particular kind of poetry that is the best food for your spirit—good hunting!

William Rose Benet⁵

Included in this unusually discriminating selection are poems of one hundred twenty-four American poets, with a few brief biographical sketch and critical comment about each poet. The poems are arranged chronologically according to the dates of birth of the poets, with Fitz-Green Halleck (1790-1867) heading the list and Hilda Conkling (1910-)

⁴William Rose Benet, Poems for Youth, p. vii.

⁵Ibid., p. xxiv.

concluding it. Benet's comments about each poet give concisely the consensus of the critics about that author's works, together with his most distinguishing characteristics. Benet does not include any of his own poetry in Poems for Youth.

Benet realized that, generally speaking, boys and girls like anthologies, and the larger the collection the better; that young people like to browse over extensive fields, nibbling at this, rejecting that, and gobbling up whole portions; and that very few anthologies had been compiled specifically for youthful readers. In Poems for Youth Benet presented an enticing field for their first independent literary or poetic explorations. Although the title of this book indicates that the selections were made for young readers, the five hundred twelve pages of the anthology contain an ample collection for anybody, regardless of age.

A review of Poems for Youth in The Bookman's Magazine recommends the anthology in these words:

William Rose Benet has accomplished a commendable bit of anthologizing and has produced a collection which, on the whole, should fulfill its purpose of appealing to young men and women in the late teens and early thirties.⁶

The Nation acclaims Poems for Youth as a book that "gives an excellent survey of the more spirited and lucid examples of American verse,"⁷ whereas Babette Deutsch, critic on the New York Times, has nothing but derogatory remarks about this first compilation of Benet's. Her adverse criticism is exemplified in the following:

⁶The Bookman's Magazine, LXL (June, 1925), 492.

⁷The Nation, CXXI (July, 1925), 100.

The book bristles with facile narrative pieces on incidents of the Civil War, sentimental twitterings, melodramatic vacuities. The compilers personal bias is obvious enough. It is unfortunate that he decided to exclude his own productions, which are richer in fantasy, more sonorously rhymed and far less bombastic than most of the ballads of "comparatively simple and direct appeal" which he has seen fit to offer to the unsophisticated high school seniors and college freshmen for whom his book is intended.⁸

Six years later, in 1929, Benet edited jointly with John Drinkwater and Henry Seidel Canby Twentieth Century Poets. Canby writes the preface to this compilation of more than six hundred pages, which is an anthology of English and American verse written since 1900. The poetry of each nation appears separately, with groupings arranged by the editor. A short biographical summary precedes the work of each poet represented. Drinkwater writes the introduction to the first section, which is on British poetry, and consists of two hundred seventy pages. Benet introduces the second section, on American poetry, which covers three hundred sixty-six pages. Benet divides the American poets into seven groupings, but gives no basis for these groupings.

In the two-page foreword to the American section Benet states the ever-present problem of the anthologist of "how to exemplify a wide range of work by judicious selection."⁹ He begins the American grouping with the poetry of William Vaughn Moody. In the second group he includes two of the works of his brother Stephen, "King David," and "The Golden Corpse." His own works are represented by "The Falconer of God" and

⁸New York Times, (May 17, 1925), p. 13.

⁹John Drinkwater, Henry Seidel Canby, and William Rose Benet, Twentieth Century Poetry, p. 273.

"There Lived a Lady in Milan." Both the Benet brothers are included in Part III. Lola Ridge is represented by six poems in Part II, among which is an excerpt from her famous "The Ghetto."

No one after even a cursory reading of Twentieth Century Poets, which, incidentally, was worthily printed by Houghton Mifflin Company, could pessimistically complain that poetry is dead, for much fine and significant verse of more than a quarter of this century is collected in this volume. The New York Times gives high approval to the volume in the following comments:

Messrs. Drinkwater, Canby and Benet have come closer to triumph in their difficult task than any other anthologists since Conrad Aiken issued his rigorously selected "Modern Poetry." They have covered a huge field and selected from it with tact and understanding, the result being a good sized book that actually does give a comprehensive picture of what has been accomplished in English and American poetry during the last three decades.¹⁰

Margaret Wallace, however, does not regard the anthology so highly, for in her review in the New York Evening Post she declares:

They have garnered a large and rather academic representation of the lyric verse of England and America, but they have harvested in an indecisive fashion which leaves the purpose and usefulness of the anthology somewhat in doubt.....The editors have taken a position more critical than appreciative and they have been interested not so much in good poetry for its own sake as in the illustration of movements, tendencies and innovations—in short, in a sort of poetic fashion show.¹¹

The next work of compiling that Benet engaged in was of a totally different nature. In 1932 he published the poetry of his second wife, Elinor Wylie, who had died in 1928. In the foreword, dated December 1,

¹⁰ New York Times, (January 19, 1930), p. 25.

¹¹ New York Evening Post, (December 21, 1929), p. 13.

1931, from New York City, to Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie Benet explains the contents of the book thus:

The contents of this book embody the contents of Elinor Wylie's four books of poems, Nets to Catch the Wind (1921), Black Armour (1923), Trivial Breath (1928), and Angels and Earthly Creatures (1929), in the exact sequence and order in which they were originally published. Added to these is a section of poems hitherto uncollected in book form, some of which have previously been published in periodicals. A few, on the other hand, have never before been printed. The editor has felt deeply the responsibility of including in a volume by this poet no work of whose inclusion she might not have approved. Owing to many considerations, however, it seemed judicious to gather within the same covers the best of her work in verse that any exact bibliography will show reposing in magazine files. And, in a sifting and re-sifting of the poetry she left behind in manuscript, certain other writings also seemed to merit inclusion.....

Such mention (of "A Tear for Cressid," a song for which she devised the tune) leads me to say a word concerning the lighter verse that, in intervals of writing poetry, Elinor could shape so deftly and wittily, principally for the entertainment of her intimate friends, though she occasionally gave it to the "columns" of Christopher Morley and of "F. P. A."¹²

The introductory remarks, although they present personal knowledge and information about the poetess, are noticeably impersonal, which is in direct contrast to the words of love and grief in his introduction to Perpetual Light, which was written in memory of his first wife. Only in the following instance in the five-page foreword does Benet express his own private and personal feelings for Elinor Wylie:

In bearing witness to this more frivolous—and yet hardly so frivolous, after all—side of one I deeply love and whom I have always esteemed a genius, I will not be misunderstood by anyone who really knew Elinor. It is the casual, the fragmentary, the apparently inconsequential that touch the heart to the quick when a great and noble spirit, also so beautifully human, is gone. And all her friends knew Elinor's lively, witty side, her child-

¹²Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie, pp. v-vi.

likeness, her headlong sympathies, the impulsive traits that endeared. Erudite and the paragon of artistic integrity, she could flash into a mood of clever nonsense at any moment, or exclaim with an apparent abandon of admiration over some bijouterie or some apt phrase coined by another. Her bronze hair seemed to have wings, and her head on its beautiful throat to bear the face of one flying. Often tense with actual physical pain, her lineaments in laughter had both the surprised innocence and the mischief of a child. She loved old Scotch and Irish ballads and songs, and sang them in a high-pitched wistful way that I shall never forget. But I have been led far afield.....¹³

The volume of three hundred eighteen pages contains one hundred sixty-six poems. These are divided into five parts—the first four parts represent Mrs. Wylie's four published books of poetry, and the fifth part contains her hitherto uncollected poems. Two pictures of the poetess and a facsimile of her almost undecipherable handwriting are included.

Gregory and Zaturenska mention this book in their A History of American Poetry in this manner:

Her posthumously published Collected Poems containing her four books of poems between the covers of a single volume appeared in 1932. The book was edited by her husband, William Rose Benet, and his preface, unlike most pieces written on such occasions (one has only to remember the ghoulish figure of J. Middleton Murry over the remains of Katherine Mansfield) is an excellent tribute to Mrs. Wylie's memory, informal, light in texture, and yet sustained by dignity.¹⁴

The next of Benet's compilations was one of his most original -- Fifty Poets: An American Auto-Anthology, published in 1933 by Dodd, Mead and Company. Bookman's Manual, A Guide to Literature, catalogues Fifty Poets thus:

Fifty contemporary American poets have each selected from their own work their favorite poem and have described the cir-

¹³ Ibid., pp. viii-ix.

¹⁴ Gregory and Zaturenska, op. cit., p. 285.

circumstances which inspired it.¹⁵

Benet, in the introduction, tells of his inspiration for this collection, and the time and efforts involved in editing it. His accounts of the reactions of some of the outstanding American poets of this day are highly entertaining and illuminating, for the responses he received ranged from ignoring his request completely to spontaneous enthusiasm. The following excerpts from the opening remarks are indicative of Benet's manner of thinking and working:

Having engaged in the compilation of three anthologies and having perused, in my time, several hundred, it occurred to me one evening that the experiment should be made of letting the poets choose their own poems for inclusion. I know how often they marvel that the anthologist selects some particular composition by which to represent them. I know how anthologies continue to duplicate the same selection..... I know, as a poet, what an irritation this can be.

.....I thought it would be especially interesting to write to those I conceived to be the best fifty poets in America and to see whether it were not possible for them to select from all their published work one of their shorter poems by which they would like to be remembered.¹⁶

Benet expresses regret at the omission of several women poets whose work he would have liked to include, particularly that of his sister, Laura Benet; but, as he said, "limited choice must exclude some admirable work."

Some of the poets Benet considers worthy of inclusion in his fifty best American poets and their personal selections of the poem by which they would like to be known to posterity include the following: Charles Erskine Scott Wood, who did not begin to write poetry until he

¹⁵Bessie Graham, Bookman's Manual, A Guide to Literature, p. 169.

¹⁶Fifty Poets: An American Auto-Anthology, p. vii.

was sixty years old, chose his "From the Poet in the Desert;" Edward Arlington Robinson selected a passage from "Tristram and Isolt of Ireland;" Witter Bynner preferred his "A Tent Song;" Lola Ridge picked out "Light Song;" Louis Untermeyer designated his "Transfigured Swan;" John Gould Fletcher indicated "The Swan;" Christopher Morley specified his "The Dogwood Tree," and Stephen Vincent Benet decided upon "The Hider's Song." That Conrad Aiken and Edna St. Vincent Millay would make no choice was a disappointment to Benet.

Of the inclusion of his own favorite poem among the works of the fifty best American poets, Benet modestly writes:

When his publisher insisted that the editor include one of his own poems in this anthology, and prevailed upon him, perhaps affected by the idiosyncrasy of choice exhibited by some, perhaps because poems of one's own that one has long known have a way of becoming stereotyped in one's memory, he decided upon the sonnet that accompanies this note. His best shorter poems—such as they are—are to found in the volume of his selected poems published in 1927 Man Possessed. The sonnet here used has as yet appeared in no book of his. For permission to use it he has to thank The New Yorker. His easily-mistaken feeling is that it accomplishes a certain fluidity within the sonnet form and touches upon a universal experience. Peculiarly enough—for the precise opposite is usually the case with this poet—the title, in this instance, came first and the poem was written fairly rapidly without a great deal of correction afterward. Certain lines seemed to fall into place of themselves. As to the question as to whether prayers are or are not answered, the poet here feels slightly guilty, as in his own case it seems to him that he has been particularly fortunate in eventually getting the best things that he ever wanted in this world. That is as near as he can come to his precise attitude toward the poem.¹⁷

The poem he selected was "Dead Letter Office," which was later included in Starry Harness. The poem reads as follows:

¹⁷Ibid., p. 83.

From the mind of mankind, like rapid invisible fires,
 Where do the agonized prayer and the wild wish go,
 Crying on heaven—of the unbearable throes
 Born—and those desperate, unappeased desires
 That also assume no outward verbal attires?
 Constant, incessant, up through thin air they flow,
 Sparing the lip to learn or the ear to know,
 Emissaries secret, sealed with the blood of our sires.

Protests, adjurings, hopes like missives of cloud,
 Where do they fade, or where do they whirl as leaves? . . .
 Lost in their urgency, all too long unclaimed,
 I have seen them hide in the silence of the proud,
 In the dark ironic eye, in the smile that grieves,
 In the wound unshown and the name that is never named.¹⁸

The only criticism of Fifty Poets to be found appears in Poetry Magazine and is adversely inclined toward the whole idea, as is seen in these remarks:

Fifty Poets is an anthology conceived in the belief that there are at least fifty living American poets worth listening to about themselves and a certain one of their poems. It is offered to the public with the unreluctant lines of many poets conspiring toward that charitable hope. The items that compose this egregious book are not without interest to the mathematician who would discover how eccentric in our time is the pursuit of poetry, nor to the philosopher who yearns to peruse lines upon the vanity of human wishes. For the researcher they may some day possess genuine antiquarian significance; it is a pity that by then the luster of the more gorgeous comic passages will be overlaid by the patina of time.¹⁹

The following year Benet published the Prose and Poetry of Elinor Wylie. Benet wrote the introduction for this book, which contained excerpts from Mrs. Wylie's four volumes of poetry and from her four novels, Jennifer Lorn, The Venetian Glass Nephew, The Orphan Angel, and Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁹Poetry, XLIV (May, 1934), p. 108.

The next anthology Benet compiled was Poems for Modern Youth. Benet's first anthology, Poems for Youth (1923), had proved such a successful venture and had filled such a need that another collection for young readers was edited and published in 1938, in conjunction with Adolph Gillis. Modesty, unobtrusiveness, and demureness are adjectives that many different writers have used in summing up the personality of Benet; and nowhere is this characteristic personal quietness more evident than in the signatures of the collaborating editors of Poems for Modern Youth. Adolph Gillis bears the titles of "Principal, Public School Number Three, Brooklyn, New York, Former Head of the English Department, James Madison High School, Brooklyn, New York," whereas Benet simply uses his full name. Perhaps he knew he needed no further identification.

The introduction to Poems for Modern Youth is rather lengthy, and is followed by "Why Read Poetry?" and "To the Teacher." Each of these sections is written in a stimulating and charming manner that enhances the value of reading poetry. The inclusion of Christopher Morley's "At the Mermaid Cafeteria" in the front of the book immediately catches the eye and interest of the reader. The various groupings of the poems are under captions that are appealing to teen-agers: "Stories Brave and Strong," "Modern Marvels," "The Workaday World and Its People," "The Funny Side," "The Well of Wisdom," "Under the Open Sky," "All Manner of Creatures," "Challenge to Courage," "Man and Warfare," "Remarkable Sonnets," "Love and Memory," "Footloose for Far Places," and "Men and Women in Literature and Fable."

Following the poetry selections are some excellently prepared aids for both the teacher of literature and the student, such as "Study

Helps;" "General Questions;" "Special Assignments;" "Supplementary Readings;" "A Poetry Library," which includes Benet's *Man Possessed*; "Biographical Notes," and indices of authors, titles, and first lines.

Only three of Benet's own poems are included in this textbook for high school poetry study—"Jesse James," "The Falconer of God," and "The Last Ally."

Also published in 1938 was The Oxford Anthology of American Literature, edited by William Rose Benet and Norman Holmes Pearson. A second edition of this anthology was published in 1947. Many critics and professors of American literature feel this is one of the best anthologies of American literature ever published. This volume of some seventeen hundred pages is an historical selection from the literary expression of the American people. It contains prose as well as poetry, selected from the output of the best writers from the days of John Smith to the date of publication. Brief notes on each writer are included, together with a short bibliography for each. The arrangement is chronological, and the indices are full and valuable.

Mr. E. L. Tinker, reviewing The Oxford Anthology for The New York Times, states:

The worth of such a volume is entirely dependent upon the conscience and literary taste of its editors, so "The Oxford Anthology of American Literature" is most fortunate, for William Rose Benet and Norman Holmes Pearson planned and executed it with care and intelligence. The sum total of the passable literature of colonial days and even in the first half century of our existence as a nation presented a pitifully small choice, but the editors have succeeded in bringing a fresh interest to oft-trodden ground by selected unhackneyed excerpts from eighteenth and nineteenth century authors. Their judgment was admirable, and the most es-

sentia! examples of creative writing have been fitted into the general pattern of our intellectual development.²⁰

Mr. Charles Angoff, writing in Living Age, reviews the anthology favorably, saying:

Arguing with a pair of anthologists who admit everything beforehand makes little sense. Fortunately, their volume represents so catholic a taste that probably few specialists will find much to carp at, and most general readers will find much to delight them.²¹

A critic for the Yale Review, Mr. W. M. Sale, Jr., expresses his reactions to The Oxford Anthology of American Literature in these words:

The book provides ample evidence of the usefulness of intelligence and sound scholarship in making an anthology. Principles guided the construction of this book, though the statement of these principles in the preface is much fuzzier than that made by the selections themselves and in the commentaries.²²

Another compilation of Benet's is The Oxford Companion to American Literature. The book is an excellent aid to teachers and students. This volume is made up of short explanatory notes about American authors and literary characters. Biographical data, titles, and critical comments are included in these brief sketches.

It seems no feat at all for Benet to jump from editing anthologies for high school students to contributing war songs to a book of convivial verse for men. In 1918 John McClure had edited The Stag's Hornbook, which he dedicated to H. L. Mencken. McClure said in the preface: "A complete

²⁰New York Times, (December 25, 1938), p. 13.

²¹Living Age, CCCLVI (March, 1939), 95.

²²Yale Review, XXVIII (Spring, 1939), 639.

collection of the convivial and merry verse in the English language would doubtless be of interest to scholars, but for the most of us it would be insufferably dull.....The Stag's Hornbook is designed as a companion, not an encyclopedia." McClure sets the tempo for his unusual anthology with this quotation from King Henry IV: "Give me a cup of sack; I am a rogue, if I drunk today." The thirteen parts of The Stag's Hornbook bear such titles as "The Jug," "The Merry Men," "The Joys We Miss," "Our Lady Nicotine," and "A Mad World, My Masters." When the second revised edition of McClure's The Stag's Hornbook was published in 1943, Benet added the final section—timely selections of war poetry.

Leo Kennedy writes in Book Week of this collection of poems on wine, women, and merriment: "For those who have never read 'The Stag's Hornbook' there is a tremendous treat ahead; joy in store and fun to come."²³ Louis Untermeyer says: "It always was a jolly book. It still is. And it is more insinuating and far more serviceable in this grim embattled day than it was when it served the gay and garish 1920's."²⁴

The year 1945 saw three more anthologies published in which Benet collaborated. The first of these was Great Poems of the English Language, which he edited with Wallace Alvin Briggs. This work elicited no response from critics and reviewers, and has not been included in local library poetry selections.

The second anthology of this year was compiled in conjunction with

²³Book Week, (November 28, 1943), p. 4.

²⁴The Saturday Review of Literature, XXVI (December 11, 1943), 26.

his friend of many years, Conrad Potter Aiken, and bore the title An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry. This is one of The Modern Library books published by Random House and contains nine hundred fifty-one pages. In the compilation of Twentieth Century Poets in 1929 Benet had edited the section on American poets; but in this anthology he collected the section on English poets, leaving Aiken to select those for the American group. One hundred fifteen English poets were included, beginning with Chaucer and ending with C. Day Lewis. The American grouping embraces eighty-eight poets, starting with Anne Bradstreet and concluding with Jose Garcia Villa. Aiken includes none of his own poetry nor that of his collaborator. There are indices of authors and of first lines, but no biographical sketches.

In his introduction to the section on British Poetry Benet defends his choices in these words:

This anthology, like any other, involves personal predilection, though it endeavors to be catholic in taste. My only criterion has been what I consider excellent. Some of my choices will certainly display an idiosyncrasy not shared by readers of different temperament. One is also limited as to scope by a book's planned size. Which only means that there is really more good English verse accumulated from the past than an ordinary volume will hold—what Saintsbury has called "the grace and the glory of the written word that conquers Time." That is what I have striven to present here. Perhaps on a good deal of it we may agree.²⁵

The concluding paragraph of his introduction echoes the troubled last days of the second World War and Benet's far-seeing vision and hope for the future:

²⁵William Rose Benet and Conrad Aiken, An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry, p. 5.

But in the last analysis, it is the poets who chiefly point the way, as they have always done. It is the poets who sense the weather of the world, and feel in which direction the wind of human history is blowing.....If we owe some of our highest standards of living to the revelations, exhortations, admonitions in English verse, we may be sure that they will continually be secured and enlarged by new rhythmic voices. And perhaps we may be allowed to hope that thus the walls of a new spiritual city will rise to music, as did those Babled of old time.²⁶

Reviewer Sterling North writes of this anthology in these words:

And where in this curious pot-pourri (the American section) are such real destiny poets as George Dillon and Elizabeth Madox Roberts? Obviously the editor is either ignorant or prejudiced in this respect. Generally speaking, this anthology is worth the money if only for the first half of the English section, where the selections are unquestionably excellent.²⁷

Miss Pearl Strachan, critic for the Christian Science Monitor, is also conscious of the monetary value of this compilation, for she writes:

From Chaucer to Tennyson and Whitman, you get more than your money's worth. It is not so comprehensive as, for example, the Viking Book of Poetry, edited by Richard Aldington, which has never been surpassed since its appearance in 1941. For the price, however, this is a good and representative selection....Among the works of American contemporaries we could well spare such offerings as Oscar Williams to make room for some of the really good poetry excluded from the collection. If no more print could be spared we should like to have seen a few of the selections give place to works of poets both recognized and worthy of recognition who are notably absent.²⁸

Poetry of Freedom is Benet's third anthology to be published in 1945. This was compiled with Norman Cousins, editor of The Saturday Review of Literature. This anthology is inspired by the chaotic conditions of a world at war, and throughout the eight hundred twenty pages of this anthol-

²⁶Ibid., p. 8.

²⁷Book Week, (December 30, 1945), p. 2.

²⁸Christian Science Monitor, (January 19, 1946), p. 4.

ogy are poetic expressions representing the urge to freedom of all peoples from the early Greeks and Britons to the young men of the second World War.

This inspiring and enjoyable collection of poems expressing the instinct for freedom excites a very positive reaction in a reviewer in the New York Times in this comment:

All in all, the book should make the most valuable addition to the private library, the public library, the schoolroom. One cannot help thinking that such a book carefully studied by the children of Germany over a generation would be an excellent agent provocateur for the cause of freedom.²⁹

Mr. R. M. Lovett, author and critic, also strongly advocates the worth of Poetry of Freedom in his review of the book in Poetry, in which he says:

It is an immensely more difficult task to survey the vast scene of world poetry in following a single theme than to proceed along the beaten highway of literary history. Palgrave and Quiller-Couch demonstrated the value of the anthology in increasing the reading of poetry, but Mr. Benet and Mr. Cousins have bettered their instruction. Their collection gives to poetry an immediate impact upon human minds, an impact which is more than ever valuable in the present day when the fate of the world is bound up with the idea that men have of liberty, and the means they are prepared to take to achieve it.³⁰

In the author's own periodical Mr. Untermeyer declares:

Here is the best that men have said about the last best hope of earth; here, cumulatively gathered, music and meaning are combined in "a message that can be conveyed in no other way."³¹

The last of Benet's compilations is Poetry Package, which was pub-

²⁹New York Times, (August 5, 1945), p. 25.

³⁰Poetry, LXVII (October, 1945), 46.

³¹The Saturday Review of Literature, XXVIII (June 23, 1945), 34.

lished jointly with Christopher Morley in 1950, shortly before Benet's death. Mr. Morley refers to this in his note to his "Ballade of William Rose Benet" as "a pamphlet of verses." No reviews of the booklet are yet available, nor have copies of it reached the local bookstores.

Perhaps one of the most lasting and far-reaching contributions that Benet has made to American culture is his The Reader's Encyclopedia, published by Thomas Y. Crowell Company in 1948. This is a one-volume encyclopedia containing miscellaneous information on world literature, art, music, history, mythology, and current affairs. Benet used some of the material in the twenty-year-old Crowell's Handbook for Readers and Writers. While the book is convenient and almost indispensable as desk equipment for quick and ready reference, in idle moments one may browse through it solely for the pleasure afforded by reading. This encyclopedia serves to identify or define rather than to discuss or analyze. It is an excellent starting point for seeking information about the subjects covered in it.

Despite minor flaws and carelessness the book has been acclaimed by critics, students, and the public. Shortly before Benet's death The Reader's Encyclopedia, in a four-volume edition, was distributed by the Book-of-the-Month Club as a "book dividend," whereby the owners of this reference work were increased by thousands.

Mr. C. J. Rolo, writing in The Atlantic Monthly, says of The Reader's Encyclopedia:

There are some omissions (for instance, Koestler and a number of noted painters, including Bommard and Derain) striking in view of the many trivial contemporaries included. Still, the book is a superb achievement—immensely informative, a delight to browse through and an amazing value for the price.³²

³²The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXXIII (January, 1949), 88.

Library Journal rates it in this manner:

Any library (or individual, for that matter) not possessing this reference work lacks the best one-volume encyclopedia of literature and the arts on the market.³³

Mr. Horace Reynolds, in the New York Times, writes of it thus:

Those readers who remember with affection Dr. Brewer's little red "Reader's Handbook" will relish Mr. Benet's new reference book for readers.....The book is eccentric enough to leave out Augustus John, unconventional enough not to list the composer of "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginy." It is also casual enough to be critical of some contemporary writers and not of others. As such, it is a reference book with a personality. It invites, not repels, reading.³⁴

Mr. Clifton Fadiman's summation of The Reader's Encyclopedia is not only complimentary but penetrating, as shown by this comment:

What transforms "The Reader's Encyclopedia" into a kind of masterpiece among miscellanies is simply the mind of Mr. Benet. Mr. Benet is not merely a compiler, but a scholar; he is not merely learned, he is educated. The evidences of his mental temper are not traceable in any single entry. They permeate the entire book..... One can, of course, pick microscopic flaws even in the editor's almost perfect flair for the up-to-date.³⁵

In looking over the thirteen anthologies which bear the name of William Rose Benet—four of which he edited solely and nine of which he edited jointly with prominent poets, authors, and editors—and his Reader's Encyclopedia, one is forcibly reminded that here is truly "a man of many moods and much learning." To have written as many books of poetry as Benet did is a sign of genius; to possess the analytical ability and retentive memory displayed in compiling his anthologies and encyclopedia is

³³Library Journal, LXXIII (December 1, 1948), 1744.

³⁴New York Times, (November 7, 1948), p. 16.

³⁵The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXI (October 23, 1948), 20.

evidence of another kind of genius. These two facets of his life's work, however, are only a part of his contributions to American literature. Benet earned his livelihood as an editor, and in the next chapter his editorships, as well as his miscellaneous forms of writing, will be discussed.

CHAPTER V

THE MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS OF WILLIAM ROSE BENET

A panoramic view of Benet's writings published during four decades convinces one that Benet could write almost anything. In analyzing the various forms of writing that he used from time to time, one feels that perhaps he tried his skill with words in different media for sheer joy of seeing whether he could master a particular form—he usually did. That Benet could write poetry is proved by his fourteen published volumes of poetry; that he could compile and edit the poetry of others is evidenced by his thirteen anthologies; and that he could amass information about world literature and art is seen in his encyclopedia. Benet's many other forms of writing will now be considered—translation, novel, children's literature, short stories, drama, introductions, and his work in connection with The Saturday Review of Literature. While he was editor of this magazine he wrote numerous essays, editorials, reviews, criticisms, and his popular columns.

Soon after Benet's marriage to Teresa Frances Thompson in 1912, he assisted his devout Catholic wife in her translation from the French of one of her favorite books, The East I Know, by Paul Claudel. Benet identifies Claudel in The Reader's Encyclopedia as:

French poet, playwright, and diplomat, born 1868. Was once French Ambassador to Japan and wrote The East I Know. He is a mystical Catholic poet. His plays owe a debt to Aeschylus. The Tidings Brought to Mary (1916) is among his most notable works.¹

Although Benet did not share his young wife's religious enthusiasm, he did appreciate the literary ability of Claudel, who was practically unknown in this country, and gladly assisted in this means of presenting the ardent Catholic poet to the American public. Their completed work was published in 1914 by the Yale University Press, with a note of appreciation from Claudel and an introduction on Paul Claudel written by Pierre Chevannes, reprinted from The New Statesman, London. Chevannes' full explanatory comments on Claudel's life and works, a few of which are quoted below, help the reader to understand and appreciate The East I Know:

Claudel worked for more than twenty years in silence in an almost complete obscurity. Nobody even mentioned him save a few very independent artists.....Moreover, Claudel was usually far from France, Consul in various towns of the Far East; he published his earlier works anonymously lest their Catholic character should damage his career.....These latter days Claudel's glory, which had so long been obscured, has suddenly blazed forth, if not to the great public, at least to the public which reads and is interested in literature.²

Since any poetry, almost without exception, is reduced in power and beauty when translated into the verse forms of another language, the Benets cast their transcription of Claudel's poetry in prose form. The beauty, delicacy, charm, and picturesqueness of Claudel's keen imagery

¹The Reader's Encyclopedia, p. 217.

²Paul Claudel, The East I Know, p. vii.

have been preserved in the Benet's rhythmic and sympathetic translation, as may be seen in the following description of an opium den in a city in Japan:

An opium den, a market of prostitutes, these last fill the framework of my memory. The smoking den is a vast nave, empty all the height of two stories which superimposes the balconies inside. The building is full of blue smoke, one breathes an odor of burning chestnuts. It is a heavy perfume, powerful, stagnant, strong as the beat of a gong. Sepulchral smoke, it established between our air and dreams a middle atmosphere which the seeker of these mysteries inhales. One sees across the haze of the room the fire of little opium lamps like the souls of the smokers. Later they will arrive in greater numbers. Now it is too early.³

Although Benet was quite conversant with great poetry and literature from all over the world, The East I Know is his only published effort along these lines.

After the publication of the translation there followed in quick succession three volumes of poetry. At the same time Benet was also busy with his job as assistant editor of The Century. Then, after the first World War, for six months he successfully, if somewhat disinterestedly, wrote advertising copy and slogans. In 1920 he joined the editorial staff of the Literary Review, which grew into The Saturday Review of Literature, where, despite his many other literary activities, he served either as assistant editor or contributing editor until his death. This phase of his career will be discussed later.

In his first year with the Literary Review appeared the first of Benet's works written for children. His interest in young people has been seen in the three anthologies for youth, the first of which appeared

³Ibid., p. 15.

in 1923. His Flying King of Kurio, however, was designed for an even younger audience, and was published in 1920. The illustrated book of almost three hundred pages tells of the activities of two children, Michael and Amanda, who in reality live in New York City and in fancy in their secret country of Kafirista. The children are fortunate enough to discover what children are always longing to find—a house apart from the house in which their family live. In their case it is an apartment very near their own, to which they can go through their own cupboard when no one is looking. The people in this other apartment are very odd and at the same time very sympathetic. Mr. Tractable, the man they visit, makes plans and invents things. He shows the children his designs for "A Recreation Home for Superannuated Cats." The children's visits to the Tractable's apartment always lead to exciting and interesting happenings.

Benet also wrote a number of short stories for children, some of which stories were published in the famous old St. Nicholas, a magazine for readers under eighteen years of age. "Wooden Boy and Wooden Bird," a fairy story worthy of Grimm or Anderson, appeared in the issue for January, 1925. The Wooden Boy turns out to be Prince Rupert, and the Wooden Bird Sir Lionel Agravaine de Wyvern. The delightfully written story is appreciated as much by grown-up readers as by children. The following sentence, one of many such, illustrates Benet's humor, as well as his love of words: "The reason why he might have been in-fin-it-es-i-mally per-tur-ba-tious—which is two words, meaning small fry—

was because there was a tiger sitting on the top step."⁴

"Bartholomew Pendred," appearing in the issue of April, 1925, of the same magazine, is about a little boy and a Liege Lynx and a Unicorn. Benet's play with words is also seen in this story, of which the following paragraph is typical:

There was silence—broken only by the hoarse "Eep! eep!" of the Iz bird, flapping afar. Bartholomew Pendred stood astonished at the entrance to the Kohl Range. The Kohl Range must not be confused with the kitchen range. There are, you will find, all sorts of ranges; there is the mountain range and the kitchen range and rifle range and cattle range. The Kohl Range was a mountain range and it was in the northeastern part of Kallyopia.⁵

Another story for children appeared in book form in 1941. This was Adolphus: or, The Adopted Dolphin and The Pirate's Daughter, a nonsense tale told in pictures and in rhymes. The verse was written by Benet and his fourth wife, Marjorie Flack, did the delightfully amusing illustrations. Adolphus is about a helpful young dolphin who rescued a maiden, a pirate's daughter, from the sea and returned her to her lover. The New Yorker rates it as "a handsome amusing book,"⁶ and The Saturday Review of Literature says "Whale of a book. Must."⁷ Mr. A. T. Eaton, reviewing it for the New York Times, writes:

Adolphus as he meets a shark, or gambols in the waves for pure joy, or, as very gratified after the success

⁴St. Nicholas Magazine, LII (January, 1925), 261.

⁵Ibid., LII (April, 1925), 640.

⁶The New Yorker, XVII (December 6, 1941), 141.

⁷The Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (November 8, 1941), 10.

of his efforts, he leaps and curves from the foam, is irresistible. Unfortunately, the text is less successful. Unless set forth with the verve and metrical facility of a Bab Ballad by W. S. Gilbert, a tale of thwarted lovers finally united has little interest for boys and girls. However, though McHenry and Angelina may leave young readers cold, they follow the antics of Adolphus with unmixed delight. For readers from eight on.⁸

Another interesting facet of Benet's many contributions to our literature and one that is almost completely overlooked in considering his greatness as a poet and critic is his several editions of Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes. He made several comprehensive collections of what he considered the most loved and the best of these children's rhymes. The first of these Mother Goose books appeared in 1932, with illustrations by Fern and Frank Peat. A 1934 edition was illustrated by only Fern Peat. In 1938 an exquisite and appealing edition was printed by the Heritage Club, with drawings by Roger Duvoisin. The latest edition appeared in 1943.

The last of Benet's children's stories was Timothy's Angels, published in 1947. The famous children's illustrator Alajalov did the fascinating pictures. This slight picture book of only twenty-three pages is designed throughout to give pleasure to children between the ages of three and six. Even the hand-written text is interesting to them. The poem and the gay pictures describe a small boy's reaction to a thunder storm. Jane Cobb, in The Atlantic Monthly, writes: "A warm, funny, simple little poem, completely unpretentious, and the pictures have just the touch of sophistication that no well-run nursery should be

⁸ New York Times, (November 30, 1941), p. 42.

without."⁹ Mr. M. B. Snow,¹⁰ reviewer for Library Journal, rates it as a picture book which will appeal to both children and their elders because of its combined simplicity and sophistication. Benet's sister-in-law, Rosemary Carr Benet, writes of Timothy's Angels in this manner:

It is a reassuring fantasy and may help a child who becomes frightened when the clouds pile up. Alajalov's angels—halfway between choirboys and street urchins—are wonderful against cerulean backgrounds.¹¹

Still another type of writing at which Benet tried his hand was the novel. The First Person Singular, Benet's first and only attempt at novel writing, was published in 1922. If Benet had taken his task more seriously and had written more carefully, the book might have been better. This was the novel he composed in his father's garage to earn money to repay a loan. The First Person Singular is a mystery romance. The real heroine hovers like a ghost throughout the story, not coming bodily into the picture until near the end. Twenty years before the story opens Gertrude Gedney, at the age of sixteen, had run away from her home in a small Pennsylvania town and had become almost a myth. When the story opens, a Mrs. Ventress, of New York, and about the same age as Gertrude, takes a furnished house for the summer in this town. She excites much curiosity among the staid inhabitants, who think she is Gertrude. Involved with the personality mystery is also a literary mystery, both of which are solved when the real Gertrude Gedney turns up.

⁹The Atlantic Monthly, CLXXX (December, 1947), 144.

¹⁰Library Journal, LXXII (December 15, 1947), 1783.

¹¹The New Yorker, XXIII (December 6, 1947), 142.

The Boston Transcript reviews Benet's novel in this manner:

Its positive qualities run in the following order: excellent dialogue, good power of characterization, and an interest in the plot. The author is not ashamed to have a story to tell. So long as a writer can, in his first novel, describe attractive men and women and also others who are mean and petty, and do it as well as Mr. Benet has done here, it is no business of his reviewer to try to dictate to him. He may be permitted to say that, although the author's interest was probably more centered in the puzzling plot, his success was greater in his people themselves.¹²

Comment in the American Library Association Booklist includes this remark about The First Person Singular:

Mr. Benet again and again shows a sign of possessing the knowledge, insight, power of a novelist in an uncommonly high degree. He has obscured all these qualities by telling a yarn and cultivating a manner not his own.¹³

Miss Hildagarde Hawthorne¹⁴ feels that there is a good deal of clever writing interspersed throughout the very long book, but that the story is not well constructed, and that it drags badly. Some of this clever writing is seen in such phrases as "in her Bessieish way," "in one of his spare moments unconfidential," "after persistent unsucccess, she had also forged tools to blunt and dull it," and "'Mefdis Pisk—dat's my damnation.'"

In 1927 Benet published yet another type of book when he gathered together fifty-five short pieces from various periodicals and columns to make up Wild Goslings: A Selection of Fugitive Pieces. These selections, for the most part, are essays in which his fancy has run gently

¹²Boston Transcript, (May 13, 1922), p. 7.

¹³American Library Association Booklist, XVIII (July, 1922), 364.

¹⁴Literary Review, (June 3, 1922), p. 699.

mad, and which typified his writings in that era of jazz and sophistication. This book is dedicated simply "To Elinor." The quotation from which the title is taken is found in Chatterton's "Resignation:"

He laid his books aside, forgot to read,
To hunt wild goslings down the Tweed—

Benet, with tongue in cheek, defines goslings immediately after this quotation as "the offspring of a Goose.—Dictionary." His acknowledgments are made in the same spirit:

The unfortunate periodicals which must share with me the responsibility for originally printing the masterpieces here included are, in various degrees of culpability: The Century Magazine (for short stories originally appearing under the pseudonym of "Cabot Hearn"), Harper's Monthly Magazine, Life, The New Yorker, The Commonweal, but chiefly the original Literary Review of the New York Evening Post and The Saturday Review of Literature.

Benet's humor is again displayed in the "Author's Note" which follows the acknowledgments:

Some of the brilliant papers in this profound volume are written in the first person, some affect the editorial "we." Well, we knew that all along and, personally, I don't care.

Mr. Grant Overton, in The Bookman, writes of this book in the following words:

The nearest comparison is with certain of Christopher Morley's books, but Mr. Benet has his own flavor in essay-writing. Wild Goslings is like Shandygall and other Morley morsels in type, nowhere in manner. There is perhaps less verse than so good a poet as Bill Benet ought to give us in a book of his. Show me a book of more delightful fooling if you can.¹⁵

Mr. H. S. Gorman, in reviewing Wild Goslings for Books of the New York Herald-Tribune, says:

¹⁵ The Bookman, LXV (March, 1927), xxvii.

Most of these pieces have been flung off with some rapidity for the exigencies of the hurried journalism, and yet there is always a certain roundness and a gay esprit to them. Whether Mr. Benet is writing about "Bathroom Reciters" (he appears to be one himself), "Taxicabaret," or "On Having Indigestion," he never loses a sort of mellifluous (there is no other word for it) good humor and an almost naive zest in snapping one's fancy (in this case his own) about as hard as he can.¹⁶

The New York Times' critic, Mr. L. Kronenberger, is not so favorably inclined to this book as are the preceding critics, for he writes:

He has more gusto and sense of fun in him than actual wit and cleverness. He is more appreciative than inventive, a better detector of absurdity in others than a creator of absurdity himself. One thing which works against him, of course, is the fact that much of what he laughed at in his column when it was new has become hackneyed in the meantime. Its timeliness is past and it dates.¹⁷

The Boston Transcript is entirely adverse in its reactions to Wild Goslings, as shown in this criticism of it:

One is reminded upon reading this collection of essays, which ought not to have been reprinted, of a young man flitting about at an afternoon tea, touching upon this subject with one group, upon that with another, smiling at everybody, being far too clever. But not sophisticatedly clever, either. It is very well for such essays and trivia as it contains to be printed bit by bit in the backs of magazines where vapor is not amiss, but to place it between covers is futile.¹⁸

Although Benet also wrote a number of short stories during this period of his career, it appears that these were written early in his life "for the exigencies of hurried journalism." His short stories will do little or nothing to perpetuate his fame. As mentioned in his acknowledgments for the selections in Wild Goslings, he wrote a number

¹⁶Books of the New York Herald-Tribune, (April 2, 1927), p. 3.

¹⁷New York Times, (February 27, 1927), p. 2.

¹⁸Boston Transcript, (April 2, 1927), p. 3.

of his first short stories under the nom-de-plume of "Cabot Hearn." His short stories for children have been mentioned above. Perhaps his most famous short story is "Seesaw," which appeared first in The Atlantic Monthly for February, 1934, and was reprinted in Scholastic December 7, 1935. This is a story in the O. Henry manner, wherein a man who has come upon unfortunate days is trying unsuccessfully to sell his collection of rare books written by Prosser. He is befriended by a man who turns out to be Prosser himself. The Scholastic Magazine contained a biographical sketch of Benet along with the short story; in this brief outline of his life and works was this comment: "From 'Seesaw' you can see that Mr. Benet can tell a story in prose as sure as any."¹⁹

One of the most unusual of all Benet's books is to be found filed in libraries in the section devoted to technical publications on printing and typography. This is A Baker's Dozen of Emblems, a small but exquisitely printed book published in 1935, by the Mergenthaler Linotype Company. The drawings were by W. A. Dwiggins and the verses were by Benet. These drawings and verses were collected, according to the title-page, "from various numbers of the Saturday Review of Literature issued in 1927 and 1928, and Electra, A New Linotype Face, from the hand of the said W. A. D." Mr. Dwiggins is an artist of note, and has designed many de luxe editions of famous books, especially for the publisher Alfred A. Knopf. Mr. Dwiggins has this explanation of these emblems:

¹⁹The Scholastic Magazine, XXVII (December 7, 1935), 5.

These drawings were mailed to Mr. Benet from month to month. No word was passed to him about the draughtman's note except the lettered title under the design. His part of the game was to riposte with a quatrain that should interpret the theme. His success as a mind-reader was astounding.

Thirteen linear drawings are included, one to a page, with the verse under the emblem. The various colors of ink used in the printing, usually one color to a drawing, are outstanding and brilliant. The titles for these emblems are "Scheme for a Mountain," "Fete in Xanadu," "Type Ornament with Landscape Attached," "NOX MII," "Prester John Contemplates the Setting Sun," "The Icons," "Panic, Inc., Dusk Division," "Shrine for an unusual god," "The Persian Tale," "Sinbad's Trophies," "The Knight's Lady, Death, and the Devil," "Ominous House," and "The Story of the House that Crossed the Canon." One of these, "Type Ornament, with Landscape Attached," was used as the afterpiece in Designed for Reading, the anthology published in 1934 by the authors of The Saturday Review of Literature.

The most humorous of these drawings and verses was "The Story of the House that Crossed the Canon," the verse of which reads:

"This avvyation," the puncher said, "it's raw;
Things is too certain. Now take a proper test;
Like when Hank sailed the bunkhouse 'crost the draw;
That was the kind o' flyin' we done out West!"

The bitterest of them is "The Icons," the drawing for which is a background of skyscrapers against which is seen three illuminated gasoline pumps of a filling station, and in the foreground the silhouettes of a number of people with bowed heads. Benet's quatrain explains the drawing thus:

Far fade the gods, like cloud by cloud pursued;
 Obstructive towers decree our nether night.
 O Service Stations, lo, the multitude
 Bowed worshipful beneath your moons of light!

The most thought-provoking of all is "Shrine for an unusual god." This illustration is a series of curved lines suggesting a blank church window, with elements of Catholic, Gothic, Byzantine, Jewish, and Moslem religious architecture intertwined. The verse for this drawing reads:

At last, the Tabernacle Satisfying!
 Vain human kind, discard all doubt and fear,
 Your dreams its void with various forms supplying,
 Unless, indeed, you place a mirror here!

Following these thirteen drawings and verses are explanations and comments by W. A. Dwiggins on a new linotype face designed by him.

In 1936 Benet engaged in another diverse form of literary endeavor—that of editing twenty-two heretofore unpublished letters of Elizabeth and Robert Browning. These letters were presented in serial form in issues of The Woman's Home Companion, from September through December of that year, under the title of "Addressed to Wimpole Street." Subsequently, they were published in book form under the title From Robert and Elizabeth Browning: A Further Selection of the Barrett-Browning Family Correspondence. The binding of this book is interesting in that the only thing on the front of the dark green cover is the autograph in gold of each of the Brownings. These letters brought forty thousand dollars at an auction at the American Art Association Anderson Galleries. The consignment was offered to the public as "the property of a gentleman residing in London," and the letters were said to have been discovered in 1934 by a member of Mrs. Browning's family. Benet obtained access to these

letters, which were undeniably authentic, and wrote the introduction and notes between the letters, most of which were addressed to Elizabeth's sisters, Henrietta and Arabella. These letters include the first ones sent home after Elizabeth's marriage, and cover a period of about eleven years. Most of the messages were written from Italy.

The consensus of critics is that very little emerges from these letters that was not already known, but that it is delightful to renew acquaintance with this interesting and famous couple.

In the year 1939 Benet ventured into still another field of writing—that of the drama. Day's End was his solitary—but very successful—attempt in this medium. This play, which had for its sub-title Fantasia, was published for the first time in The Best One-Act Plays of 1939, edited by Margaret Mayorga. This collection is criticized in The Saturday Review of Literature as follows:

Miss Mayorga's material is, on the whole, not so rewarding as Mr. Mantle's and since there is little check by counter-opinion or audience reaction, her selection is more subject to whim. In the present volume her taste ranges widely and so does the quality of the short plays.²⁰

In her preface Miss Mayorga states: "The introductory remarks to several plays included here—especially to Air Raid, Haunted Water, The Hungerers, and Day's End—demonstrate the revision of accepted dramatic techniques for new purposes."²¹ In the introduction to Day's End the beginning of a new dramatic movement is outlined briefly, and it is in this new spirit that Benet wrote Day's End. Just before World War I, a group of young people in Vienna organized a "spontaneity theater."

²⁰ The Saturday Review of Literature, XXI (March 9, 1940), 20.

²¹ Margaret Mayorga, The Best One-Act Plays of 1939, p. viii.

They became more interested in the therapeutic aspects of the work than in the benefits that might accrue to the theater. This group developed and brought to America the dramatic form now known as "Living Newspaper." From Germany in 1930 the first of these "agitprop" (agitation-and-propaganda) plays were introduced into this country by a German-speaking labor group, Prolet-Bulme. In these plays mass recitations, little scenery, and symbolical costumes were used. Since that day mass and choral chants have been used by workers' groups and in progressive colleges and schools.

Miss Mayorga says, in introducing Day's End:

Similar to the plays used in these untraditional theater groups, Day's End is a fluid form. The play was produced with stylized setting with parts memorized by individual actors. It might be given as a mass chant against a background of draperies. Even more significant would be a spontaneous reading in which unrehearsed players give to lines the feelings that smoulder in every creature of subways.

Readers do not need to be told of his nine books, of poems, his two novels, a children's story, several edited volumes and translations, and his nationwide tours as reader and lecturer. It is a pleasure to introduce him here in the role of a dramatist.²²

Day's End was originally produced by the Footlight Players and Carolina Art Association on the Annual Playwriting Program at the Dock Street Theatre in Charleston, South Carolina. In May, 1939, this play won the national award given by the Dock Street Theater. The setting for the play is in a New York subway train and the time is 5:30 p. m. The characters include A Shop Girl, Slick Specimen, Young Married Man, Solid Citizen, Broker, Woman with Bundles, Girl with Book, Radical, Politician, Cop, Schoolboy, Merchant, Artist, Anonymous, Motorman,

²²Ibid., p. 310.

and Dummies. From merely reading the cast of characters one can sense the drama—not only in personal lives but in the urban and national life of our times—that can occur in a brief ride on the subway. Such drama Benet has captured in his unconventional and penetrating lines of this play. One wishes that he had written other dramas, so gripping and thought-provoking is Day's End.

Several of Benet's articles that appeared in the pages of The Saturday Review of Literature have been reprinted in pamphlet form. One of these was "Noah's Ark," which dealt with the origin and making of Webster's International Dictionary, Second Edition. This article was reprinted and distributed in 1939 by the G. & C. Merriam Company, publishers of the Dictionary. Benet begins his account of this huge undertaking in the following interesting manner:

The Ark went forth on the waters of the Deluge to preserve every variety of living thing.....But the Ark that the second Noah launched at the beginning of the nineteenth century in America was a book to preserve a living language, bearing in it his implicit testimony to the "wonderful structure of language, and its progress from a few simple terms, expressive of natural objects which supplied the wants or affected the senses of unlettered man, thro a series of ingenious combinations to express new ideas, growing from the growth of the human mind, to its highest state of refinement." Note that "thro," by the way! Webster was one of our earliest simplified spellers.

For anyone who loves words and their history, this brief recounting of the growth of our dictionary and the technicalities involved in publishing this new edition will prove not only instructive but entertaining reading as well.

After the death of his brother in 1943, a booklet called Stephen Vincent Benet was published, and it included Benet's article "My Brother

Steve," which had been published in The Saturday Review of Literature for November 15, 1941, and John Farrar's "For the Record," together with a complete bibliography of the writings of Stephen Vincent Benet. In reading Benet's intimate and human account of the childhood and young manhood of the brother who meant so much to him, one wishes that Stephen in his turn had left to the world a similar story about William Rose.

Also to appear in pamphlet form were "Sagacity," a poem first printed in 1929, and "Reviewing Ten Years," a personal record of ten years on the staff of The Saturday Review of Literature. This latter pamphlet was compiled by Benet and published in 1933.

Benet has also written a number of introductions to books by other authors. He wrote introductions to Last Poems of Elinor Wylie, for which Miss Jane D. Wise had transcribed the holographs, and to Love Poems of Six Centuries, edited by Helen Huston. This latter book was published just before Benet's death. Of this book reviewer Gustav Davidson writes in The Saturday Review of Literature:

The authors on the whole are excellent and representative. William Rose Benet's brief but vastly entertaining introduction on octogenarian poets who sing of love, wisely and well, is alone worth the price.²³

Over and above Benet's poetry, his anthologies, and his frequent sallies into various fields of literature, such as the novel, drama, translation, and short stories, his contributions as an editor of the Literary Review and The Saturday Review of Literature stand pre-eminent

²³The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (June 10, 1950), p. 23.

and are worthy of more detailed treatment than is here possible. There was, of course, the continuous flow of Benet's poetry into the pages of these magazines and the routine behind-the-scenes business of editorship which he maintained from the inception of the Literary Review in 1920 until his death in 1950. These activities in themselves were time-consuming enough to occupy the full energies of a less prodigious writer. Yet Benet continued for thirty years his literary contributions to the leading weekly periodical devoted wholly to literature. His writings for The Saturday Review of Literature fall into the main classifications of essays and editorials, criticisms and reviews, and his columns.

Many of Benet's earliest essays were included in Wild Goslings, which was published in 1927. Even before that date six of his essays had been included in the twenty-one essays that made up Saturday Papers, edited by Henry Seidel Canby, William Rose Benet, and Amy Loveman in 1922. This was the first volume of selections from essays on literature that had appeared in the Literary Review in 1920 and 1921. The six essays written by Benet to be included in Saturday Papers were "Novel Nowadays," "Prospero and the 'Pictures,'" "Shamefaced Art," "'Is It What our Readers Want?'" "Literary Revivalism," and "On Literary Structure."

In 1934 the editors of The Saturday Review of Literature published another collection of essays, Designed for Reading, An Anthology Drawn from The Saturday Review of Literature, 1924-1934. This book was dedicated to their mutual friend, Thomas W. Lamont. In the foreword

it was stated that the selections reprinted in Designed for Reading had been chosen for their intrinsic interest as representative of the literature of the decade between 1924 and 1934. This marked the tenth anniversary of the founding of the periodical.

In the chapters on "Writing," Benet's "Poetry and Periodicals" was included; in the section on "Reviews," two of Benet's reviews appeared — one on Thurso's Landing by Robinson Jeffers and another on A Story-Teller's Story by Sherwood Anderson; in the "Poetry" section, "Overture to Man" represented Benet; and in the part on "Imaginative Writing," Benet's "Liberty and Hot Dogs" was included.

Charles A. Cockayne, editor of Modern Essays of Various Types, published in 1927, includes Benet's essay "Lend Your Mind."²⁴ This essay is as mentally stimulating today as when it was written. In it Benet says in essence that sometimes it seems as though most minds atrophied from lack of lending; that it is an easy matter to lend the mind to something, but it is much more difficult to lend of the mind; that many people have catch-words and are stuffed with quotation marks, but they themselves have little to lend. True lending of the mind is a difficult art in itself; but, nevertheless, he commends its cultivation.

One of Benet's timely essays written during the second World War was designed for the youthful readers of the magazine in which it appeared, Scholastic, the American High School Weekly, and was titled "America Means." This excellent and needed lesson on toleration was summarized by the editor in the following manner: "It means a lot of things,

²⁴"Lend Your Mind," in Charles A. Cockayne's Modern Essays of Various Types, pp. 183-186.

says this distinguished poet and critic—from good neighbors and freedom of speech to clam chowder and 'I can do it' and fair play." In this essay Benet says in part:

Yes, we've had our Ku-Kluxers and Fiery Double-Crossers, our white-nightshirts and fraidy-cat masks, our poisonous intolerants, and human sharks and fomenters of race-hatred—we have some of them yet, some of the most flannel-mouthed—but they're just the scum of the boiling; and our melting pot has been boiling with all races and all colors and all creeds for a long time now. What is extraordinary about it is how long and well, in general, all of the different races and colors and creeds have gotten along together.

When Benet tells what America means to him, his words fairly sing. He concludes this essay with these challenging words:

.....and some of us came here for petty reasons, but most of us came here for freedom and to escape from some form of intolerant tyranny, and because in the living words of our own William Penn, "Great God hath written his law in our hearts, by which we are told and commanded to love and help and do good to one another and not to do harm and mischief one unto another. Let us live together with mutual fair play!"

And if there doesn't come a lift to your heart and a catch in your breath when you read those words and you think of all that they can mean, why then I'm very much afraid that you're not an American!²⁵

Of the many editorials signed "W. R. B." that graced the pages of The Saturday Review of Literature for so many years, his last one, "The Why and The How," seems to sum up most fittingly a lifetime devoted to poetry and to criticism of it. This editorial, which is presumably the last thing he wrote for publication, appeared in the annual poetry number of the Saturday Review, which number turned out to be a memorial issue to him. He begins this editorial by saying that he has recently completed a thorough delving into all the verse—good, bad, and indifferent

²⁵Scholastic, XXXII (February 7-12, 1944), 36.

—that he had written in the course of some thirty-five years, an activity which, he remarks, "cannot be recommended as an entirely pleasant task!" Then he mentions the mail he receives from young poets, and muses why people continue to try to write poetry, unremunerative as it is. The editorial concludes in the following words, as if this were his final statement of position in regard to the matter:

What lasts—I do not mean heart-throbs—is great skill plus that indefinable element that visits any of us so rarely. The poet, like the Scholar-Gipsy, may find himself at the end of a long life still "Waiting for the spark from Heaven to fall," yet also "Still nursing the unconquerable hope. Still clutching the inviolable shade," and, through the implicit pledge of that sad, immortal cadence, know how well worth all pangs of the spirit his pilgrimage has been.²⁶

Another important phase of Benet's works was his criticisms. One of the most recurring terms applied to his list of literary activities is "critic." His "Reviewing Ten Years" summarizes the first decade of his work as critic for The Saturday Review of Literature; and "Remembering the Poets, A Reviewer's Vista," in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of the same periodical (August 6, 1949), records Benet's impressions during thirty years of reviewing. In this resume he advises that the danger in reviewing today is not from propaganda but from desiccation.²⁷

Not only has Benet reviewed countless books for his own publication, but his reviews of current prose and poetry have appeared in many of the nation's leading periodicals. His numerous

²⁶The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 25.

²⁷Ibid., 25th Anniversary Number (August 6, 1949), 60.

reviews and critical writings are worthy of more complete study and treatment than can be accorded them in a general summary of his life and works. Suffice it to say that each of Benet's reviews sparkles with his brilliant phraseology and captivates through kindly humor and generous manner of presentation of the book under his consideration.

Benet is noted also for his encouragement to young poets; and this characteristic is reflected in many of his critical writings, as, for example, in "The Editor Looks at Poetry," which is included in Norman Cousins's Writing for Love or Money. This book, published in 1949 by the editor of The Saturday Review of Literature, is concerned with writing as a craft; it is not a "how-to" book, but one that discusses the problems facing the writer today. The chapters of this book were originally articles and editorials that appeared in The Saturday Review as part of that magazine's concern with the pleasures and pains of writing. In "The Editor Looks at Poetry," Benet expresses his belief that beginning poets need to see their poetry in print—and also to be paid for it. He concludes with the following remark about a poet who was appreciative enough to express his thanks for the criticisms that Benet had taken the trouble to give: "He had the pride in his art, and the humility before it, of the true poet."²⁸

Perhaps the endeavor that has endeared Benet to more readers than any other is his column "The Phoenix Nest." So well known is he for this column that he is often called "The Phoenician." Dr. Canby thinks

²⁸Norman Cousins, Writing for Love or Money, p. 141.

that Benet conducted "the wisest and wittiest and most graceful column in New York."²⁹ In the obituary notice in Wilson's Library Journal it is said that "for many years in his column 'The Phoenix Nest' Benet discussed subjects ranging all the way from poetry to world affairs."³⁰

"The Phoenix Nest" is described in The Reader's Encyclopedia as the title of a poetic miscellany of 1593 edited by 'R. S. of the Inner Temple, gentleman,' and containing, among other poems, some by Lodge and Breton;" and also as "a literary column given to poetry and talk about writers of the past, conducted by William Rose Benet, in The Saturday Review of Literature."³¹

The first column, in the opening number of The Saturday Review, began with the following bits of verse, wherein Benet explained the origin of the name for his new column:

"Let the bird of loudest lay
On the sole Arabian tree
Herald sad and trumpet be,
To whose sounds chaste wings obey."

Thus writ Shakespeare in a poem
I but vaguely understand,
Yet, because it's come to hand,
Let it serve me for a proem.

* * * * *

I met a Phoenix in the sand
(To turn to Keats, with tongue in cheek)

* * * * *

I said, "Sweet Phoenix, on the loose,
Let us put our wits to use,
Ever let the Fancy roam,
"Pleasure never is at home."

²⁹The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIII (May 20, 1950), 9.

³⁰Wilson's Library Journal, XXIV (June, 1950), 714.

³¹The Reader's Encyclopedia, p. 850.

With the which unblushing crib
 I this colymn dedicate
 And my pen I consecrate
 From the handle to the nib

In the service of my betters
 And the books that they compose.
 Aid thou my initial throe,
 Phoenix, patron fowl of letters!

Then Benet continues:

The "bird of loudest lay" looked down and asked us what our own particular lay was. We soon explained. We have the vast silence of this fantastical desert in which to meditate; and the Phoenix, with all the wisdom of the gorgeous East, to consult on literary matters.....

And now to get to work, An occasional Chimaera may stroll our way, attracted by the rattle of our Underwood. We expect the Roc and the Gryphon in, a few evenings a month. The Roc is awfully conservative. The Phoenix may interrupt us occasionally, but she sleeps mostly in the top of her tree.

Some mention of topics of current interest followed, including that of Douglas Fairbank's new picture "The Thief of Bagdad." Benet concluded his first "Phoenix Nest" thus:

We have been confounded recently by certain figures that say that \$2,000,000 worth of white paper flows annually from the presses and binderies of Manhattan. Nevertheless, we shall continue to spoil our quota. And so, the Arabian sun has set on our first perfect week.

William Rose Benet.

P. S. Phoenix sends love to all!³²

In this whimsical manner Benet continued for many years to "spoil his quota of white paper," to the delight of ever-widening circles of readers. So personal was the loss felt by many readers when Benet died that they wrote letters of condolence to The Saturday Review of Literature.

³²The Saturday Review of Literature, I (August 2, 1924), 22.

One of these letters began: "Sir: It is perhaps unconventional to write a letter of condolence to the editor of a magazine, but for so many years I have been pouring over SRL that I feel the editors are my friends." In order to give recognition to these letters a two-page spread of "Letters to the Editor" was published in the Saturday Review for June 10, 1950—the issue in which the name of William Rose Benet was dropped from the list of editors. These pages were captioned "For W. R. B." The Editor's Note reads:

Since the death of William Rose Benet on May 4, 1950, so many friends of "The Phoenix Nest" have sent tributes and sympathy. Below are printed a very few of the letters received. The editors wish to thank everyone who expressed the esteem and affection which William Rose Benet inspired.

Thus, throughout his life, in whatever medium Benet wrote, he inspired esteem and affection—poetry for which he won the nation's highest prize; textbooks and anthologies which are ranked with the finest; an encyclopedia which is rated as invaluable; drama that was accorded a national award; and a type of journalism that a wide and intelligent group of readers will miss for many years to come. Truly, the death of this prolific and versatile and learned American writer has left a place that will be hard to fill.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

For almost forty years the name of William Rose Benet has appeared in the forefront of American men of letters. His contributions to the culture of his times have been numerous, varied and interesting. A few of his critics feel that his name will go down in the annals of literature as one of the greatest and most difficult poets that America has produced. On the other hand, some critics, although they recognize his originality, fluidity and profundity, feel that his writings have been too hurried, too mechanical, and too verbose to stand the test of time.

Benet was born with extraordinary literary talents that made possible his unusual literary contributions. These talents seemed to be the family heritage of his generation, for they were shared by his sister, Laura, and his brother, Stephen Vincent. For three poetic geniuses to be born into a military family was indeed a phenomenon. Their parents, however, seemed equal to the occasion, and provided a wholesome, normal home life for their exceptional children. The mother and father early recognized the unusual literary interests and abilities of their three children, and through sympathetic understanding and careful nurture of these qualities gave the children free rein to develop their gifts in their own special ways. Since the father was stationed in many parts

of the country during his career in the army, the Benet children had the opportunity of growing up against a wide and diverse background of these United States. The love and appreciation of their native land and its people of all races, colors, and creeds thus acquired early in their lives later found expression in the writings of each of the Benets. And the love and appreciation that each member of the family held for the others were also engendered early in their lives and endured throughout the years, to the mutual comfort and inspiration of all.

The experiences of William Rose Benet during his college days at Yale also bore much fruit in his later life. His work on the Yale Courant and the Yale Record gave him confidence and knowledge useful in the editorial work to which he devoted the major portion of his time and efforts. It was at Yale that his long and profitable association with Henry Seidel Canby was begun.

The first editorial position Benet held was with The Century Magazine. He began as office boy in 1911, and when he entered the Air Corps in 1918 he was associate editor. In 1920, after a period of readjustment following World War I, Benet joined Henry Seidel Canby, Christopher Morley, and Amy Loveman in founding the Literary Review of the New York Evening Post. From this grew The Saturday Review of Literature, America's leading weekly publication devoted exclusively to literature. The felicity of collaboration that existed for thirty years between the four founders of the Literary Review is unparalleled in the history of American journalism. When Benet's sudden death terminated these years of mutual friendship and literary endeavors, the esteem, admiration, and respect in which he was held by his fellow-writers was sincerely

expressed in their tributes to Benet in the Annual Poetry Number of The Saturday Review of Literature. With poetic appropriateness, this Annual Poetry Number which Benet, as poetry editor, had just completed at the time of his death was published as a memorial to him.

During his long career as editor Benet did much to raise the quality of American journalism through the high calibre of his editorials, his keenly discriminating criticisms, and his authoritative and scholarly articles and essays. The underlying warmth, generosity, and humor of the American people found reflection in his "wisest and wittiest and most graceful of columns." "The Phoenix Nest" not only endeared Benet to countless readers but exerted much influence for good in publicizing and supporting worthy charitable and literary causes. Many of Benet's essays, editorials, articles, and reviews have already been included in anthologies of such types of writing. It is not too much to expect that more and more recognition will be given to these phases of Benet's works.

In his position as poetry editor Benet not only winnowed for publication the best from the poetry that heaped his desk, but he also gave unstintingly of his time, counsel, and encouragement to young aspirants of poetry. If, in his honesty, he felt discouragement was necessary, he mingled his criticisms with such kindness that the sting went out of it.

As demanding as were his duties as editor, Benet always found time to promote and popularize the cause of poetry. His anthologies, several of which were compiled in collaboration with other men prominent in the field of letters, are used in high schools and colleges throughout the

country. His Oxford Companion to American Literature and The Reader's Encyclopedia are almost essential to teachers and students of American literature. The Oxford Anthology of American Literature, edited with Norman Holmes Pearson, is considered one of the finest such collections ever made.

Not content with his duties as editor and as anthologist, Benet expressed his exceptional creative vigor and versatility in many other types of composition. Children's stories, editions of Mother Goose, short stories, translations, the novel, the drama, encyclopedia—in all these media Benet worked. But that medium through which he expressed himself most fully and freely was through poetry. From early childhood Benet loved poetry, in any and every size, shape, form, or fashion. In his turn, he created volume after volume of colorful, sonorous, and brilliant verse. From the time his first poem to be published appeared in 1902 until after his death, Benet's poetry graced the pages of America's leading periodicals. It is as a poet, perhaps, that Benet will be longest remembered.

The first period of his poetry is marked by The Merchants from Cathay (1913), The Falconer of God (1914), The Great White Wall (1916), and The Burglar of the Zodiac (1918). The exuberant, romantic verse of these volumes is displayed in a variety of forms, and through subjects ranging from Oriental fantasy to cowboy balladry.

Man Possessed, published in 1927, and Golden Fleece, in 1935, are collections of what Benet considered the best that he had published up to those dates. In these two representative volumes of poetry one

clearly sees the fecundity of his volatile, gracefully mannered and erratic talent. This poetry of his middle years is less expansive but more exquisite than his first poetry.

The poetry of the last decade of Benet's life still displayed his metrical variety and skill, his vast knowledge, and his zest for living, but is more condensed and refined in word and thought. The last volume consisting of only his poetry was Stairway of Surprise (1947). This was the largest of all his volumes of poetry and covered a vast field of widely divergent interests. Here his creative ability is shown to be unabated with the years.

His masterpiece and Pulitzer-Prize winner, The Dust Which Is God, will long stand not only as a lengthy and revealing autobiography in verse, but as an epic of America. In this monumental work Benet expresses his belief and faith in the ideals of American democracy, despite all the faults it may contain; and his belief and faith in the goodness of man and his purpose in the universe, despite all of man's littleness and meanness. In this book Benet also writes feelingly and graciously of each of the four beautiful and famous women who so influenced his life—and who each, in turn, became "Mrs. Benet," Teresa Frances Thompson, Elinor Wylie, Lora Baxter, and Marjorie Flack. To each of these women he pays grateful tribute for the help and inspiration which they, in their own individual manner, gave him.

The last book to bear Benet's name was fittingly a book of poetry—Poetry Package—published in the spring of 1950, in conjunction with

his old friend, Christopher Morley. When death dramatically interrupted Benet's many and varied services to the literary profession, Morley wrote to Amy Loveman: "For your own private comfort, look, when you have a chance at pp 57-58 of 'John Mistletoe' where is mentioned his special habit of slipping away." Mr. Morley, at the age of forty, had written John Mistletoe (1931) as a reminiscence of his life along the American Grub Street. A portion of his reference to his friend in that book reads:

I saw a poet yesterday; my old Endymion.....He was looking well, handsome, even prosperous; perhaps because he has not been writing much poetry.....He sat, demure as usual, during miscellaneous lunch-table palaver; how charmingly, when he was fain to leave, he slid off from the group, leaving in a quiet ripple, no unnecessary splash. I God-blessed him in my heart, for I am happy to be one of those conspirators who know how great a poet he is.....

My mature Endymion slipped away; we are all always slipping away. He had work to do; we all always have work to do; sometimes the work does US. If Wordsworth thought the world was too much with him in the Lakes, what would he have felt on W. 45th St.? The drink the poet must learn to mix for himself needs the ingredient none knows how to name. Shall we call it Wholeness, or Oneness, or Simplicity? Call it what you please, it brings for an instant the drowsy numbness Keats mentioned; and then words neither numb or drowsy. It brings clean certainty; not the negatives of philosophy, but the positives of intuition, the continuous integrality of life. Then he catches up with Time by standing still, and standing so, in an air of dreadful clearness, he knows how simple all is. The philtre scalds in the throat but it goes to the Right Spot. Consciousness is made whole, seeing is believing. A wormhole drilled smooth in dead wood, the fuzz of frost on a mouldered twig, the taste of cold water, an axe-blade going through the billet at one stroke, were one morning's suggestion of that feeling. Everything becomes analogy, of which is the Kingdom of Heaven. Then--again quoth my old Endymion--he drinks honey from the poisoned lips of Life.

He slipped away, he went about his affairs. I wonder if he knew how much of my love went with him. And he had given me just the drink I needed.¹

In this busy work-a-day world if more people would only stop and visit a few moments with Benet through his writings, they, too, might receive just the drink they need.

¹Christopher Morley, John Mistletoe, pp. 54, 57-58.

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