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AN ENQUIRY INTO THE MORAL AND RELIGIOUS FACTORS OF CARL SANDBURG'S POETRY

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of

Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Divinity

by

Ralph Lee Underwood

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND THE PROCEDURES USED

There has been little enough examination of the moral and religious significance of modern poets in general, and there has been serious neglect, in this regard, of the major poets in particular. The approach to the moral and religious aspects, moreover, has often been inadequate in its consideration of the religious factors. This study has selected one poet, Carl Sandburg, whose poetry has not thus far been particularly examined with reference to its moral and religious contribution to the modern age.

I. THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was (1) to discern the influence of moral and religious factors on Carl Sandburg's poetry, and (2) to ascertain the moral and religious contributions of his poetry to the modern age. Since the religious factors have been more neglected than the moral factors, this study has emphasized the former.

The few published evaluations of Sandburg's poetry from the moral and religious perspectives have been incomplete in themselves because individually they have dealt with only one or two factors and have not attempted an analysis of the whole. Furthermore, these evaluations have been concerned with the early poetry and have not considered the "New Section" of Sandburg's _Complete Poems_ or the poems published since 1950. Within its limits this study has attempted to identify and correlate the moral and religious factors that have been

prominent in all of Carl Sandburg's poetry published to date.

The subjective factor was a major limitation of this study. Carl Sandburg himself conceded that there is no single interpretation of any particular poem. Different readers will arrive at different levels of meaning. The poet himself said he had forgotten the meaning of a number of his poems.[1] For these reasons the writer of this thesis had to take care not to formulate unwarranted conclusions. Some familiarity with the poet's life and with the total scope of his poetry has helped the writer formulate what he considers to be some valid observations.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Although the study of the technical aspects of free verse has been helpful in the interpretation of Carl Sandburg's poetry, the terms involved in the literary approach have not been used in the presentation of this project. A few terms from the moral and religious approach probably need clarification.

Sympathy. This term has been used in a broad sense to refer to the capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings and interests of another, whatever those feelings and interests may be.

Religious influence. This term has been used to designate those

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[1]Sandburg, Carl, "Notes for a Preface," Complete Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. xxi-xxix.

influences that derive from belief in a being, beings, or an order of existence that is higher than man and that commands man's devotion.

Christian influence. This term has been used to designate the religious influence that derives from belief in God as Creator and Father, in Jesus Christ as the only Son of God, and in the Holy Spirit as the divine Comforter. It involves faith in the Trinitarian God.

III. ORGANIZATION OF THESIS

The procedure of presentation sets forth first the life of Carl Sandburg. The purpose of the biographical chapter is introductory in that it provides an outline of Sandburg's life and an estimate of his personality. It is an integral portion of the thesis in that it supplies data that help to establish observations and conclusions in the poetry. The early influences and events have been given the most detailed consideration on the assumption that these years had the most important bearing on Sandburg's poetry.

The third chapter deals with the quality of sympathy in Carl Sandburg's poetry. The relationships between the dominant moods and themes are discussed as they pertain to this quality. This chapter is an effort to understand the spirit of Sandburg's poetry.

The fourth chapter seeks to discern the religious influences in general, and the Christian influences in particular, which help to account for the sympathy observed in the third chapter. This fourth chapter is an effort to explain the sources of the poet's sympathy.

The fifth chapter analyzes the moral and religious contributions of Sandburg's poetry. The evaluation is defined from the standpoint of American society and of American Christendom. A concluding statement summarizes the findings of the research.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The two writers who make the most significant comments on the moral and religious significance of Sandburg's poetry are Amy Lowell and Halford Luccock. Amy Lowell divides the modern poets into three stages of development, and classifies Carl Sandburg in the second stage. The first group consists of those poets who express a breaking down, but not the total collapse of cultural and social tradition (Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost). In the second group traditional beliefs have no power to mold character. The third stage completes the change to new beliefs. Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg are the most revolutionary poets America has yet produced. Sandburg's powerful imagination carries him toward the third stage, but he never reaches it. This is Lowell's analysis.[2]

Amy Lowell points out Carl Sandburg's weakness at the point of faith. Her thesis appears to be a little overdrawn. The reason for this seems to lie in the fact that the critic deals with the early Sandburg poetry and does not secure the perspective that his later

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[2]Lowell, Amy, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), pp. 141, 142, 202.

poetry affords

Luccock's keenest observations of Sandburg's verse concern the quality of indignation. The Yale professor points out the uniqueness of this indignation in modern literature, and concludes that such indignation can be explained only by religious influence.[3]

Luccock does not deal specifically with other dominant moods in Sandburg's poetry. He traces the indignation back to the poet's conviction of the sacredness of personality. He does not concern himself with the question of Sandburg's belief in God.

V. PROCEDURE OF RESEARCH

The procedure followed in research has been to read first Sandburg's Complete Poems, then the poems published since 1950; to review biographical materials; to examine the critical writings on Sandburg's poetry; and finally to reread all the poetry. This method has allowed the author to make his own observations before being unduly influenced by others' comments, and to check and confirm his own observations in the light of these comments.

VI. THE TEXT

In the format of the thesis, the author has taken the liberty of showing references in Complete Poems in parenthesis in the text itself,

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[3]Luccock, Halford E., Contemporary American Literature and Religion (New York: Willett, Clark and Company, 1934), pp. 175, 176.

after the first reference in each chapter of the study has been listed in the footnotes. Whenever other references are combined with a reference in Complete Poems, the combined references are inserted as a footnote. This procedure enables a more careful documentation of observations, examples, and interpretations, without making the footnotes appear bulky.

It is the writer's opinion that the consistent use of the past tense makes for awkwardness in reading. He has therefore taken the liberty to employ the present tense in those chapters describing the content of the poetry.

CHAPTER II

THE LIFE OF CARL SANDBURG

The purpose of this chapter is to orientate the reader to the general facts of Carl Sandburg's life, to supply biographical data that partially account for the moral and religious characteristics of his poetry, and to summarize his personality. No attempt is made in this chapter to correlate the biographical data with the moral and religious characteristics of his poetry, since the latter have not been discussed.

I. A GOODLY HERITAGE

"It is a boy!" This announcement came in Swedish, on January 6, 1878, shortly after midnight. August and Clara Sandburg had their second child christened Carl August Sandburg. He it was who was to bring fame to the family name.

What did Carl have with which to begin life? What was he given to develop?

A Swedish heritage. The Sandburgs were humble Swedes. Carl's grandparents were peasants who lived and died in Sweden. After their death Carl's father first worked as a chore boy, and then as a teamster in a distillery. When opportunity opened for him to emigrate from Sweden to America, he sailed for New York. Here he worked for a few months in a cheese factory. On his cousin's invitation young August went to Illinois, where he found employment with a construction crew

of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincey Railroad. It was during these days that he met a Swedish hotel maid, Clara Mathilda Anderson, who later became his wife. They had seven children. Mary was the first child, Carl the second (three years later); then came Mart, Emil, Fred, Esther, and Martha.

A laboring class heritage. Carl was born on a cornhusk mattress, and it was on cornhusk mattresses that he was destined to sleep every night for the first ten years of his life. He recalls, "We all slept well on cornhusks . . . we were in favor of what we had."[1] Clara made diapers from Pillsbury Best Flour sacks. August was a conscientious provider. Promoted to blacksmith for the railroad, he worked sixty hours a week for $35.00 per month. He was continually concerned about trying to save a little against the day of trouble.

The first home Carl lived in was a three-room frame house in Galesburg, Illinois. Eventually the family moved to a ten-room home, in the same city, renting the extra rooms. By the time Carl was of high school age, the family economy had shown little improvement. There were few items around the house that were not absolutely necessary — a Photograph Album and a homemade bookcase, which housed Carl's books. But the Sandburgs did not feel that they were suffering any great

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[1]Sandburg, Carl, _Always the Young Strangers_ (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 15.

hardship. Carl wrote, "We're not rich — but we're not poor."[2]

A Christian heritage. The Sandburgs were a sincerely religious family. They attended the First Swedish Lutheran Church. Both parents would read the Bible to the children. No foul language escaped their lips. The children were taught that it was unchristian to call the Negro a "nigger." They were reared not to be proud. Father August was a Puritan type man, very temperate, never seen in the town saloons. He had a reputation for hard work and honesty. Clara was a warmhearted mother, with a ready smile for the children, and an uncomplaining hard worker. Carl grew up ever conscious of his mother's prayers. A few days before her death in 1926, Mrs. Sandburg wrote these lines to her son:

> Life is short if early days are lost . . . . With thought and love in the home so much can be overcome . . . . I find so much comfort in the thought of wise men; the Bible is full of it . . . . The larger wisdom behind the veil is yet strong and able to uplift the crushed . . . . Crushed I am many times, but not to death. The apron of silence is with me. Silence is a gift. Be silent.[3]

Carl Sandburg recalls a Lutheran minister of his childhood days, the Reverend Carl A. Beckman, whom he awesomely regarded. The talented and sincere pastor died of pneumonia when still young. Incidentally, he was the first author whom Carl knew.

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[2] Ibid., p. 57.

[3] Cited by Ralph McGill, "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met," The Reader's Digest (May, 1954), p. 112.

Carl was confirmed in the Lutheran Church at age thirteen. As a part of his Christian heritage, he remembers the community Mission, where a Miss Stowell taught the boys many things about the Bible; where his sister Mary won a declamation contest; and where for the first time he sang for an audience, acted in a play, and gave a speech. He was very fond of the Mission Superintendent, Reuben K. Stetson, a Congregational minister. He liked to visit the Y. M. C. A. because Godfrey Haas was the secretary there. Godfrey always saw to it that the boys had clean fun, and he invited them to prayer meetings. Carl must have had much respect for him, for at one time he thus addressed him, "God bless you, Mr. Haas."[4] On several occasions Carl and his friend Vic Lundgren attended the Salvation Army.

__A political heritage.__ The Sandburgs were Republicans. August's interests were confined to his work, the church, the home, and politics. He cared little for sports. He belonged to no organizations other than the Lutheran Church and the Republican Party. About once a month the Sandburgs would visit the Krans family, who also were Lutherans and Republicans. When he was six years old, Carl went with his father to a Republican rally. At seven years of age, he witnessed the funeral parade for U. S. Grant. That night in bed he told himself that he must learn more about the Civil War, the black people made free, and the man Grant, general and president.[5]

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[4]Sandburg, Carl, __op. cit.__, p. 308. [5]__Ibid.__, pp. 34-38.

Carl Sandburg inherited health and strength. During the formative years of his life, he developed strong religious and moral conviction. In these years too he acquired some sympathetic understanding of the lot of the lowly poor, as well as an interest in political activities.

II. BOYHOOD MEMORIES

Father's helper. The oldest boy in the family, Carl was his father's helper. August worked at the railroad shop until 6 p. m., came home for supper, then began to make repairs around the house. Carl held the kerosene lamp and assisted his father in what ways he could. Because he did not want Carl to become proud, August offered little praise to the boy who patiently waited on him with the lamp.

The first books. Carl's father was not much of a reader. He believed in working with his hands. But books held a fascination for young Carl. He liked J. T. Headley's Napoleon and His Marshalls and his Washington and His Generals, which he borrowed from the Seventh Ward school library. Carl's mother bought him the Cyclopaedia of Important Facts of the World and A History of the World and Its Great Events. At school he used extra time to read articles in Champlin's Young Folk's Cyclopaedia of Persons and Places and Young Folk's Cyclopaedia of Common Things. He dreamed his way through a row of history books by Jacob Abbott and John S. C. Abbott, and through Hezekiah Butterworth's Zigzag Journeys. He treasured Charles Carleton Coffin's The Boys of '76.

Of Course he read James Otis' _Toby Tyler_ and Mark Twain's _Huckleberry Finn_ and _Tom Sawyer_, and also numerous poems. Before he was fourteen he had read five books on Jesse James. In the eighth grade he enjoyed best a book published by A. S. Barnes and Company, _A Brief History of the United States_. He never tired of the Grimm brothers' _Fairy Tales_ or of Hans Christian Andersen's _Fairy Tales_. Young Carl was attracted mostly to history books and to literature that stirred his imagination.[6]

Joe Elser. One of the roomers at the Berrien Street home was tall, strong Joe Elser, a carpenter and Civil War veteran. A man separated from his wife, who reportedly was a constant complainer, he preferred the single life. His mind was a vault filled with treasured memories. He welcomed the Sandburg children at all times, and entertained them with his stories of the Civil War days and his own experiences. He was one of Carl's links with the living past. Carl remembered him as a man who loved the simple life and who took pride in his work.[7]

Misfortune. There were misfortunes in Carl's boyhood days. His brothers Emil and Fred died of diphtheria. Another indelible memory of the early years was the financial setback that came to the Sandburg family. With his savings through the years, father Sandburg purchased some property in Congers subdivision on South Street, Galesburg. This

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[6] _Ibid._, pp. 38, 89-91, 113-118, 130, 138. [7] _Ibid._, pp. 44-48.

was in 1883. The price was $100.00. In 1889, August Sandburg had to go to court. Nineteen years before, a mortgage on the property had been given to one William C. Grant, a mortgage which was neglected and forgotten until Mr. Grant died and his will was legally executed. Mr. Sandburg did not know of the mortgage; and it appears that the man who sold him the property did not know about it either. One-half year more and the mortgage would have been invalid. But the law was on the side of Jennie A. Grant, who was either William Grant's widow or his daughter. She collected $807.24 from August Sandburg. It seemed an awful shame to Carl that this should happen to a poor, honest man. On the one hand, the misfortune did not embitter Carl's father; on the other hand, it had a sobering effect.[8]

The Dirty Dozen. Carl, a normal boy, was a member of a local gang of boys in Galesburg, which styled itself The Dirty Dozen. These boys, full of fun and mischief, were not bad boys. Perhaps the most serious trouble they got into was the Sunday afternoon they were arrested for swimming in a pond on the Booth farm. Sandburg now remembers wistfully the games they used to play on a vacant lot in town. He recalls with a touch of nostalgia the widow of a Civil War veteran, who scolded the boys for running through her yard and garden to retrieve their ball. He writes, "I would say now that she was a woman of rare inner grace who had gathered wisdom from potatoes and

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[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 102-108.

hollyhocks."[9]

III. RESTLESS YOUTH

Many jobs. While still in grade school Carl delivered newspapers and worked at odd jobs. He quit school after the eighth grade to work seven days a week for a Mr. Burton as a milk-wagon helper. He was in turn an office boy, drug store clerk, mail-order businessman, barber shop porter, bottle-washer, boathouse helper, icehouse worker, potter's helper, tinsmith's assistant, racetrack boy, stage manager for the local theatre, harvest hand, short-order cook, and railroad section hand.[10]

Many miles. Growing into manhood Carl, vexed by the rebuffs of life, had his bitter and lonely thoughts. At one time he contemplated suicide. But overcoming his morbidity he decided to travel west. He had really traveled little in his brief life — not more than a few miles from home. He was nineteen at the time, and weighed more than a hundred and forty pounds. His goal was the farm lands of Kansas, to work at the harvest. Reaching his destination by traveling in boxcars, he worked at odd jobs for brief periods. Eating in hobo jungles he met professional tramps, panhandlers and petty thieves, picking up some of their slang and their songs. Before long he was on his way again —

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[9] Ibid., p. 183; Sandburg, Carl, "Alley Rats," Complete Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 159.

[10] Sandburg, Carl, Always the Young Strangers, pp. 209-257.

still farther west — Rocky Ford, Canyon City, and Denver. But by then he had had enough. He started back to Galesburg, Illinois.

In all his travels he seemed to feel that the divine protection was over him. Once when he fell asleep on the train car bumpers but did not fall off, he thanked God for sparing his life. He spoke often of the Angel of Death brushing past him with soft wing tips and saying, "Not yet for this boy. Let him live."[11]

Soldier. At twenty years of age Carl signed up for the Spanish-American War and was sent to Puerto Rico, but he engaged in no military action. While a soldier his journalistic instinct expressed itself in a series of letters he wrote to the Galesburg Evening Mail, telling what he saw and heard during the war.[12]

College student. Back in Galesburg at the end of the summer of 1898, he took a job as a "call man" for the fire department, and also at that time enrolled in Lombard College. Carl studied at this Universalist institution for almost four years, but was not graduated. He was captain of the basketball team, editor-in-chief of the college paper, a member of the Poor Writers Club, and the college debating club. As editor of the college journal, he once put the picture of the janitor with his broom opposite the group photograph of the college board. "He's kind of a member of the faculty, ain't he?" wrote

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[11] Ibid., p. 397. [12] Ibid., pp. 403-424.

Sandburg. "And besides, he's been here twenty-six years!"[13]

He read Boccaccio, Walt Whitman, Emerson, Tolstoi, and some Universalist literature. Encouraged by Professor Philip Green Wright, Sandburg applied himself to the writing of poetry. His first printed verse, In Reckless Ecstacy, appeared in 1904, two years after he had left campus.

It should be remarked that during his college days he read all he could find about Abraham Lincoln and his times. Sandburg's comment on this is interesting:

> I do remember . . . that when I was in college at Galesburg I resolved that some day I would go farther [sic] in the study of Lincoln, in the hope of getting a better understanding of this man the Republican party and the GAR and the preachers magnified until he was too big to see.[14]

IV. PROFESSIONAL WRITING

Journalism. After leaving college the still restless Sandburg traveled for two years. Following his travels he worked at a variety of jobs. He spent six weeks as police reporter for the old New York Daily News; made contributions to Tomorrow and Unity, an organ of the Unitarian Church; sold stereoscope views of the country between jobs; became associate editor of The Lyceumite; wrote biographies of platform

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[13] Cited by Golden, Harry, "Sandburg, The Poet of Prairie and City," Lexington Herald-Leader, January 8, 1961.

[14] Detzer, op. cit., p. 22.

personalities; gave lectures on Walt Whitman; wrote feature articles for the _Milwaukee Journal_ (1908), for the _Milwaukee Daily News_, for the _Milwaukee Sentinel_, and again for the _Journal_ as City Hall reporter (1909); served as Milwaukee Mayor Emil Seidel's private secretary (1910); and wrote for the _Milwaukee_ Leader (1912). Moving to Chicago, he wrote for the _Chicago World_, the _Day Book_, and _System: The Magazine of Business_ (1913). Returning to the _Day Book_, he was a contributor until 1917, when he became a staff member of the _Chicago Daily News_, writing on race conditions in the city.

Liberal politics. During these early journalistic years, Carl Sandburg developed liberal political views. He worked for the Social Democrat Party in Wisconsin. It was in this state that he met his wife-to-be, Lillian Steichen, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Chicago. They were married on June 15, 1908. Subsequently Sandburg became a war correspondent for the Newspaper Enterprise Association, a work that took him to Scandinavia. There he became acquainted with Michael Borodin, a man close to the Bolshevik leaders; and with Per Albin Hanson, who had been prime minister of Sweden and at the time was managing editor of the Swedish Social-Democratic party newspaper.[15]

Poetry and miscellaneous writings. Throughout his early

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[15] _Ibid._, pp. 77-80, 110-113.

journalistic days, Carl Sandburg kept on writing poetry for practice, jotting down ideas in pencil and working them out at his leisure. He occasionally traveled here and there, reading poetry before audiences. He attributes much of his poetic inspiration to Harriet Monroe, the editor of _Poetry: A Magazine of Verse._ To him Miss Monroe was a human poem.

While living in his Hermitage Avenue home in Chicago, Sandburg finished his _Chicago Poems_ and began _Cornhuskers._ During those days his poem "Chicago" won the 1914 Levinson prize. When he lived in suburban Maywood, two daughters were born, Janet and Margaret. In 1919, he started to write again for the _Chicago Daily News_, remaining in this work for thirteen years. In these days he worked also on the Lincoln biography as well as on his poetry. His third volume of poetry, _Smoke and Steel_, was published in 1920; and the fourth, _Slabs of the Sunburnt West_, in 1922. In the 1920's, besides his lecture tours, he published _The American Songbag_, _Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years_, a biography of Ed Steichen, a volume of poetry entitled _Good Morning, America_, and two books for children. In the next decade he published another children's book, a biography of Mary Lincoln, the poems entitled _The People, Yes_, and _Abraham Lincoln: The War Years._ In 1932, he left the _Chicago Daily News_, and eventually moved to the Harbert farm in Michigan.

Biography. Many of the paragraphs in the early chapters of _The Prairie Years_ run like children's stories. Why is this so? Sandburg

originally planned that the book would be for children and young people. Then he found that it was impossible, even when keeping the subject narrowed to Lincoln the lawyer and prairie politician, to do the writing justice and keep the style at that age level — the content was too complicated for children. From Hermitage Avenue to Maywood in 1914, and then to Elmhurst five years later, he moved the Lincoln materials in boxes and cases, still collecting, an archeologist digging materials in caves that stored newspapers, a platform entertainer checking map locations with his file data. In 1919, after he shifted from labor to movie and various other editorials, he began the biographical work in earnest.

Believing that Lincoln's background was the important factor in shaping the Lincoln of the war years, Sandburg concentrated on the prairie years in the life of his hero. *The War Years*, therefore, at first was to be either an epilogue or a prologue to *The Prairie Years*. Again, his materials grew on him until it could be neither. A sixteen-year project, *The War Years* was written in Harbert, Michigan, sixty miles east of Chicago, in an attic with stove, cot, book shelves, typewriter, and cracker box. The shelves were stocked with hundreds of books and materials on Lincoln, secured from libraries and from people he met during his lecture tours. Two copyists worked on the downstairs porch of the house. Governor Henry Horner of Illinois, William Allen White, J. W. Beach, Daniel R. Fitzpatrick, and Oliver R. Barrett — these were a few of the friends that helped make *The War Years* possible. In the actual writing Lillian Sandburg's

assistance proved invaluable. Her husband wrote, "She occasionally curbs my rhetoric to good advantage."[16]

One can better appreciate Sandburg's devotion to his work when one knows about the many volumes of source materials the writer studied in this connection. He collected more than four thousand books from about one hundred libraries scattered in different regions of the country. These books provided 90 per cent of the Lincoln materials he used. Not only did he read biographies of Lincoln, but also he searched biographies of other men that might contain worthwhile notes and comments on Lincoln and his times. Along with these there were autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, and volumes of letters. To help get at the temper of the times, Sandburg read _Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War_, _Desertion during the Civil War_, _Swedish Immigrants in Lincoln's Time_, and many similar volumes. In "The Preface" to _The War Years_, he has this to say concerning two of his sources, the _Congressional Globe_ and the one hundred and thirty-three volumes of the _Official Record of the Rebellion_, "In these two wildernesses of words I have picked my way carefully . . . ."[17] He covered the critical notes of professional historians on Lincoln myth and fact, books such as Roy P. Basler's _The Lincoln Legend_, Lloyd Lewis' _Myths after Lincoln_,

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[16] _Ibid._, p. 174.

[17] Sandburg, Carl, _Abraham Lincoln: The War Years_ (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1939), p. xi.

and numerous bibliographies. Besides books Sandburg searched through magazines, newspapers, and miscellaneous sources of Lincoln's utterances — letters, notes, communications signed, addresses — Lincoln's printed speeches and writings alone making 1,078,365 words. The biographer studied photographs and collected and studied materials like those found in the Barrett Collection. He visited places of special interest. Franklin Delano Roosevelt conducted him through the White House. There can be no doubt that Sandburg went about his task with the utmost thoroughness. He commented, "If I had not faithfully plodded through every last piece of material I could lay my hands on that concerns the essential record I would feel guilty."[18]

V. THE LATER YEARS

In 1940, The War Years won the Pulitzer Prize. That year Carl Sandburg campaigned for Roosevelt. In 1941, the famed biographer signed a contract for a weekly column in the Chicago Daily Times.

Four years later the Sandburg family moved from Harbert, Michigan, to the Connemara House, just outside Flat Rock, North Carolina. It once had belonged to Christopher Gustavus Memminger, secretary of the Southern Confederacy treasury. Sandburg put a guitar with a few mail-order catalogues as a footstool in almost every room of the house for those times when the guitar-picking mood would strike him. On the

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[18] Detzer, op. cit., p. 202.

two hundred and forty acres in the Smokies, Mrs. Sandburg bred championship goats. Their third daughter, Helga, spent her time writing, painting, and helping her father.

All through these later years, Carl Sandburg has been in demand for public appearances. A few events are highlights. In 1951, Complete Poems won the Pulitzer Prize; in 1953, at Chicago's Blackstone Hotel, he celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday. In 1955, he won a poetry prize at the Boston Arts Festival. Presenting the award Archibald MacLeish read this citation:

> To Carl Sandburg, poet of the American affirmation, whose reply to doubt, to depression, to the failure of heart of those who dared no longer trust the people, was "The People, Yes." Biographer of one war President, friend of another, Mr. Sandburg has been a participant in the history of his own troubled generation as well as the recorder of the history of the generation of the great American trial. He has been the singer of the city where no one before him thought song could be found, and the voice of a prairie country which had been silent until he came, and all this continent is in his debt — a debt which Boston and New England, by this award, acknowledge.[19]

At the Galesburg Lincoln-Douglas debate centennial in 1958, Avara Fairbanks presented a sculptured head of Sandburg. During his 1959 visit to Sweden, the poet discovered new relatives, was guest at a formal dinner with Prime Minister Tage Erlander, received a gold medal from King Gustav Adolf, and was awarded his twenty-eighth honorary

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[19]Cited by Alan B. Green, "Trade Winds," Saturday Review, XXXVIII (July 30, 1955), p. 5.

degree[20] Since then he has traveled in Russia, and has served as creative consultant for a motion picture production on the life of Jesus. Eighty-three years old, he is at present working on the second volume of his autobiography and preparing a new volume of poetry.

VI. THE SANDBURG PERSONALITY

The preceding sections of this chapter have sketched the events of Sandburg's life. The task of this section is to summarize his personality.

Enthusiasm. The first noteworthy characteristic is enthusiasm. Apparently the later years have not sapped the Sandburg enthusiasm. Always an aviation enthusiast, as a young Bible student he wanted to go up in a chariot like Elijah. A friend of Orville Wright, he wrote poetry about the Wright brothers ("The People, Yes," p. 582). He traveled on the first jet plane that carried passengers from New York to California. He read poetry in praise of aeronautics on the "Music 'Till Dawn" program over Cincinnati's WLW radio.

He was enthusiastic about the American people. On his travels from New York to North Carolina, Sandburg used to talk with librarian of Congress Luther Evans. On one occasion while discussing men who were the living embodiment of American tradition, Dr. Evans asked Carl whom he would place at the top of the list. The poet answered,

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[20] "Sandburg Visits Swedish Kinfolk," Life, XLVII (September 21, 1959), pp. 169-171.

"Eisenhower." This was just before "Ike" became President of Columbia University.[21]

<u>Concern</u>. The second characteristic is concern. Sandburg has always been devoted to improving the lot of the poor, to "heroizing" the nameless masses, befriending the lonely, and accepting the rejected. This is the dominant characteristic, manifest even in his youth. His brother Martin recalls the early years:

> Mother and Dad had so much trouble, so much worry, that they always had sympathy for any guy that was up against it and always tried to take his part. Naturally we kids couldn't help feeling this, but it seemed to strike Carl even harder than the rest of us.[22]

Sandburg's reporting career illustrates his concern. As the author of <u>The Chicago Race Riots</u> (1919), he was not considered an objective reporter; that is, he had to put himself into the situation — yet he never was guilty knowingly of being careless with source materials and facts. His poetry certainly highlights this characteristic with the spirit of compassion.

His writings show strong moral concern. The poet decries the evil influences in mass media entertainment. In reply to someone's defense of television as a baby that has to grow up, Sandburg said,

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[21]Cited by Duncan Emrich, "The Poet and the General," <u>The Saturday Review of Literature</u>, XXXI (March 20, 1948), p. 9.

[22]Detzer, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 38.

"We will pray for it."[23] Once he told an interviewer:

> There is so much that is glorious and uplifting in our sacred music literature. I do wish that our fine singers would include more of it in their broadcasts. And our composers should be writing it, too. We need it these days.[24]

Estimating the life of Carl Sandburg, Adlai E. Stevenson speaks as follows:

> Carl Sandburg is the one living man whose work and whose life epitomize the American dream. He has the earthiness of the prairies, the majesty of mountains, the anger of deep inland seas. In him is the restlessness of the seeker, the questioner, the explorer of far horizons, the hunger that is never satisfied. In him also is the tough strength that never has been fully measured, never unleashed, the resiliancy of youthfulness which wells from within, and which no aging can destroy.[25]

This brief sketch of Sandburg's life recalls the earliest influences; his restless struggle to manhood; his writing career as reporter and journalist, author of children's books and poetry, collector of folk songs, and biographer; and his later years. A general summary of the characteristics of his personality concludes the sketch.

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[23]Cited by James F. Finley, "Carl Sandburg or Sandbag?" The Catholic World, CLXXXV (August, 1957), p. 386.

[24]Evelyn Brock Waldrop, "Carl Sandburg, the Musician," Etude, LXXIII (September, 1955), p. 43.

[25]Cited by Earnest E. Calkins, "Education of an American Poet," Saturday Review, XXXVI (January 17, 1953), p. 10.

CHAPTER III

SANDBURG'S SYMPATHY WITH THE PEOPLE

Emerson once wrote that the life, activities, and thoughts of the people were "yet unsung."[1] Walt Whitman began this task, but Carl Sandburg has done it more intimately. He sings to the previously unsung heroes, to ten thousand who die anonymously, who "touch the sunlit silver finalities of undistinguished human glory."[2] Waldrop observes, " . . . only Sandburg could have produced the dozens of brief, virile poems which translate as does no other poetry the spirit of America-in-shirt-sleeves."[3]

How is it that Sandburg excels in making poetry out of the life of the American people? It is the purpose of the present chapter to discuss the poet's sympathy with the common people, for this Sandburg trait, in large measure, helps answer this query.

I. THE SOUL OF THE PEOPLE

Carl Sandburg has achieved this sympathy because from the days of his youth he has searched for the soul of the people. He has lived with the poor, the unemployed, the criminal, the factory worker, the farmer.

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[1]Cited by Deutsch, Babette, This Modern Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1935), p. 53.

[2]Sandburg, Carl, "Legends," Complete Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 115.

[3]Evelyn Brock Waldrop, "Carl Sandburg, the Musician," Etude, LXXIII (September, 1955), p. 11.

He has sought to understand their toils and trajedies, joys and sorrows, dreams and hopes, and their sins. He has collected their idioms, their slang, and their songs. His quest has stretched beyond the confines of partial vision; it has led him to contacts with all kinds of people. Indeed, it may be said of him that he knows the common man as few do in our time. He is, moreover, proud of the people he envisions.

Sandburg sings psalms to those who go to work before daylight, to a farmer's wife who opens the barn door every morning, to an old woman carrying scrub buckets, to a trapeze artist, to a Gypsy mother, to young working girls come from the country to the big city, to a harlot in the streets, to a fish crier, to a pawnshop owner. He fashions images out of a working man's legs, out of his hands and his arms. He makes poetry out of a killing, escorts the reader to a summer shirt sale, to a Yiddish eating place, to a Cleveland, Ohio, honky tonk. Nothing seems out of place, improper, crude — everything is a part of this interesting world of people.

To the poet Chicago has a soul. It is wicked, crooked, brutal, proud; it is a slugger, a savage, an ignorant fighter:

> Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and
> under his ribs the heart of the people,
> Laughing!
> Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth,
> half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker,
> Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler
> to the Nation.
> ("Chicago," p. 4)

Omaha, too, brings to mind another image of the people:

> Omaha, the roughneck, feeds armies,
> Eats and swears from a dirty face.
> Omaha works to get the world a breakfast.
> ("Omaha," p. 162)

The poet sees the soul of the people in a pocket jack-knife. People make dynamite and deliver it to miners who blast. Mule drivers, engineers and firemen, pumpmen, rope riders, sinkers and sorters, carpenters, electricians and repairmen, foremen and straw bosses — these get the ore out of the ground and to the steel mill — and it takes many people to run a steel mill — and after that the molders, cutters, buffers, finishers, forgers, grinders, and temperers:

> This for the sake of a jack-knife to your pocket or a shears
> on your table.
> These are the people, with flaws and failings, with patience,
> sacrifice, devotion, the people.
> ("The People, Yes," p. 595)

Sandburg sees the present generation, rising from the buried one and flowing into the unborn one. Man is both an earthworm and a rider to the moon:

> The people, yes —
> Born with bones and heart fused in deep and violent secrets
> Mixed from a bowl of sky blue dreams and sea slime facts.[4]

So it is that the poet learns the details of the life of the people and writes of the ordinary, everyday things as quite significant. Out of this and beyond this he sees a vision — the ghost of the people, their phantom image. And he is proud of the detail and of the vision.

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[4]Sandburg, "The People, Yes," *op. cit.*, pp. 470, 471, 575; "Man the Moon Shooter," *Holiday*, XIV (September, 1953), pp. 42, 43.

The people are his hero. Lincoln is his hero because Lincoln is representative of the people, a man of the people who came to greatness from the people. The people are the center of life: "What is history but a few Big Names plus People?" ("The People, Yes," p. 553)

The poems that sing of the common elements of the life of the people, that create images of their soul, are scattered, recorded testimonies that Sandburg is a man of the people. He is one of them, a part of the whole, and he loves all parts and is proud of the whole. They belong to each other. Even his nature poems reflect his interest in them — "To whom does the grass belong if not to the people?" ("The People, Yes," p. 514) The nature poems are not descriptions of nature scenes themselves, for he sees nature through the eyes of the people. His images of nature suggest their thoughts — their wonder at the mystery of life, their sense of the whimsicality of nature and the gamble element in life, and their belief that nature is telling them some of the secret of life. In some poems the elements of nature seem like people; in others, they clutch clues to the understanding of life.

The sympathy with the people that Sandburg knows appears in dominant moods: compassion, indignation, joy, and hope.

II. COMPASSION

Carl Sandburg senses the predicament of the people. He sees their plight; he hears their cry; he feels their pain and hunger; he speaks their complaint; and he tastes their gall. He asks, "Who can

make a poem of the depths of weariness bringing meaning to those never in the depths?" ("The People, Yes," p. 570) He himself comes as close as any to achieving this aim. His sensuous poetry makes the reader feel the plight of the people.

He is particularly apt in creating a sense of the helplessness of the people. He helps his reader grasp something of the significance of human frustration at the level of the lower strata of society. He tells of the haggard and desperate harlot, her claims gone, no more takers ("Traffiker," p. 62). He lists case studies of people who toil long hours and years, and then have nothing to show for it. He shows a crippled child in the slums and concludes, "I would rather be a sunflower." ("Cripple," p. 15) He chants to the homeless, the unemployed, the lonely and sorrowful. He writes of a man who saw

> the slumborn illborn wearyborn
> from fathers and mothers the same
> out of rooms dank with rot
> and scabs, rags, festerings, tubercles, chancres,
> the very doorways quavering,
> "What's the use?"
> ("The People, Yes," pp. 481, 482)

<u>Poverty</u>. Carl Sandburg lingers on two themes of the people's plight: poverty and war. He describes his pleasures in seeing the grandeurs of nature and the thrill of knowing great men, but then he goes on to say:

> And then one day I got a true look at the Poor, millions of the Poor, patient and toiling; more patient than crags, tides, and stars; innumerable, patient as the darkness of night — and all broken, humble ruins of nations.
> ("Masses," p. 4)

He sees the physical effects of poverty, especially the hunger, but he sees more than this. He knows the moral and spiritual effects of poverty. He writes of the people's anxiety. He puts the morally lax, careless attitude that is the result of poverty into the speech of a man without a job, "a job is a job and I want to live." ("Blacklisted," p. 11) He grieves for the poor family that is glad their three-year-old daughter is dead because now they will have more to eat and wear ("The Right to Grief," pp. 12, 13). He knows pity for the man whose poverty makes him wish he never had a wife and kids ("Mag," p. 13). He writes plain words:

> Hunger says to hell with the law.
> The empty belly instructs the tongue.
> Want changes men into wild animals.
> ("The People, Yes," p. 585)

War. To bring out the horror of war, Sandburg contrasts war with peace ("Flanders," pp. 136, 137). He visions the millions of the dead, he stares at the flowing streams of blood, and surveys the buildings and beauty destroyed in the storm of war. His jerking pen jots down the thought flashes of soldiers blinking at death, their home memories full of stabbing pain. The fighting soldiers are killers "fixed in the drag of the world's heartbreak." ("Killers," p. 36) War stirs an unnatural passion in a soldier, making him cry for war, causing him to like to kill and see the blood flow, like an animal killer ("Fight," p. 39).

In Sandburg's poetry the tragic designs of poverty and war are woven with the threads of change and ignorance and sin. These have

cause and effect relationships with the story of the people's plight. These are elements of the stormy night.

<u>Change</u>. Change is a basic ingredient of life. It is the theme of time. Life has the nature of changing movements. Sandburg describes the radical changes that take place from one generation to another, those from the country to the city, those within the country and within the city, and those in nature. Skyscrapers replace trees; machines take the place of men; elaborate farm equipment displaces the horse and plow; running waters change the face of the earth. Change is natural, both in the world and in people. People are dissatisfied, ever seeking, dreaming, wishing. Their desires drive them to new ventures and quests. They cannot live in the past, but must live in the swift present. They want to tear down the past and build the new:

> Lay me on an anvil, O God.
> Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.
> Let me pry loose old walls.
> Let me lift and loosen old foundations.
> ("Prayers of Steel," p. 109)

<u>Ignorance</u>. Part of the problem lies in the fact that, although the changes of life are swift, man is a slow learner. Sandburg sees

> The pity of men learning by shocks,
> By pain and practice,
> By plunges and struggles in a bitter pool.
> ("The People, Yes," p. 468)

People are shifting, moving, yearning, searching, but they are not sure where they are going. They cannot anticipate all the future results of their present actions. Making decisions, they are but poor

gamblers. Some are winners, most are losers. "The people move eternally in the elements of surprise." ("The People, Yes," p. 577) The result is often poverty and its anxiety and the horror of war ("The People, Yes," pp. 459, 460). The poet supplies an image:

> Tomorrow we move in the gaps and heights
> On changing floors of unlevel seas . . . ours is the quest of an unknown shore.
>
> ("Waiting," p. 67)

Thus Sandburg scans the poverty and the war that afflicts the people. He feels that to some extent these are the result of life process and so unavoidable, and no one is to blame.

<u>Sin</u>. If Sandburg believes that poverty and war entangle people in sin, he also believes that sin is the cause of the plight of the people, and of poverty and war in particular.

He deals sternly with proud prejudice that divides races and classes. To him it is the first of the seven rotting sins. It is pride that makes men want to be superior to other men and groups, to rule and lord it over others, to attain position and status. This expression of pride causes the few to separate themselves from the masses, whom in the end they make their target. This is a dominant theme in many of the early poems and in the last sections of "The People, Yes." (pp. 510, 598-617)

The poet describes hate as an aspect of the sin of materialism:

> Said the scorpion of hate: "The poor hate the rich. The rich hate the poor. The south hates the north. The west hates the east. The workers hate their bosses. The bosses hate their workers. The country hates the towns. The towns hate the

> country. We are a house divided against itself. We are millions of hands raised against each other. We are united in but one aim — getting the dollar. And when we get the dollar we employ it to get more dollars."
>
> ("The People, Yes," pp. 480, 481)

The intense expression of this materialistic attitude is greed. It causes war. In their greed, men reject the voice of God:

> Seven nations stood with their hands on the jaws of death.
> It was the first week in August, Nineteen Hundred Fourteen.
> I was listening, you were listening, the whole world was
>   listening,
> And all of us heard a Voice murmuring:
>   "I am the way and the light,
>   He that believeth on me
>   Shall not perish
>   But shall have everlasting life."
> Seven nations listening heard the Voice and answered:
>   "O Hell!"
> The jaws of death began clicking and they go on clicking:
>   "O Hell!"
>
> ("Jaws," p. 41)

Death makes materialism a senseless sin. All possessions someday will be only shadows ("Lossers," p. 35). Life is like the shower of sparks from a scissor grinder's wheel ("Jabberers," p. 111). Death is the great equalizer of men, putting all to sleep under a grass blanket, while flowers and the wind forget the differences among men ("Graves," pp. 43, 44).

In his early poems, from "Chicago Poems" to "The People, Yes," Sandburg attacks materialism in his exposition of the sharp contrast between the rich and the poor. In his later poetry there is a shift in emphasis. In foreseeing the rise of the majority middle class, he predicts their involvement too in the evils of a materialistic philosophy of life.

Though the plight of the people must be accepted at least for the present as a part of life, the poet points to sin as ultimately responsible for much of the injustice that aggravates the sufferings of the people.

Sandburg cannot escape this vision. He has a deep-rooted compassion for the common man. He loves the people. Their suffering and sorrow are his. He believes he has a right to choose for whom he will grieve, and he sides with the masses of the poor ("The Right to Grief," p. 12). Van Doren, discussing the poet Sandburg, adds, "Among all the recent American poets Mr. Sandburg speaks most naturally with the accents of pity."[5]

III. INDIGNATION

Along with his compassion for the poor, Sandburg is indignant toward the placid, comfortable rich. And it is not just anger, nor a display of ire, that possesses the poet. It is deep, intense, righteous indignation.

He cannot tolerate the injustice that aggravates the plight of the people. To Sandburg justice is of priceless value. His poems speak of preposterous, unjust circumstances, of hush money, of violence and propaganda used to keep the underprivileged in his place. Always the storm of propaganda blows ("The Liars," p. 192; "The People, Yes,"

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[5]Van Doren, Carl Clinton, Many Minds (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), p. 142.

pp. 599-613). He asks why the bribe-taker is convicted so often and the bribe-giver so seldom. With irony he tells of the death of a worker who died in a fire at the factory, "It is the Hand of God and the lack of fire escapes." ("The People, Yes," p. 557; "Anna Imroth," p. 16)

Sandburg's indignation is most intense in those early poems that contrast the rich and the poor. "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter" (p. 29) is a blast at Billy Sunday. This poem does not indicate that the poet discounts religion, for he believes that there are both clear-eyed prophets and muddleheads in religion ("Thee Fragments for Fishers of Destiny," p. 422). But the poet felt that the evangelist was supported by the rich and judged that he had no genuine compassion for the poor. In Sandburg's thinking Billy Sunday did not address himself to the physical needs of the people, and being sensational in manner, he was harassing nerves already worn with agony.

The poet's compassion is provoked by the plight of the people; his indignation, by the unjust situation aggravating their plight, the unjust situation created by sin.

IV. JOY

Happiness. Sandburg shares in the laughter of the people. He likes those who learn happiness and contentment in the simple life. The happiness that the poet pictures does not come from flight into fantasy or from dreams of the past or future. Neither does it come from a concentrated effort to be happy ("Snatch of Sliphorn Jazz," p. 420). It is

found in the present moment, in the fellowship of friends and loved ones, in the delight of nature, and in work. The image of happiness is a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with their women, children, a keg of beer, and an accordian ("Happiness," p. 10). It is like the happiness of the wrens that forget their troubles ("People of the Eaves, I Wish You Good Morning," p. 418). Sandburg admires those who are hungry but who, notwithstanding, go on singing; those who have little but who still find some measure of happiness ("Onion Days," p. 14). He finds happiness in just looking up at the moon, "Money is nothing now, even if I had it." ("Half Moon in a High Wind," p. 213) The maker of accordians and guitars, who was sorry to have to charge anything for his instruments, has it all over the millionaire and the mayor when it comes to happiness ("Fellow Citizens," pp. 22, 23). Lowell remarks that Sandburg's belief in "joy in the midst of a joyless world" makes the paradox of his writings.[6] Yet the happiness that the poet writes about is by no means an exalted, continuous joy. How well did he know that "our sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught."

Fortitude. Another value of the simple life that gives Sandburg much joy is fortitude. He shouts cheers for the people who are ready to take the bitter and the sweet, who never give up, who toss a reckless

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[6]Lowell, Amy, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 212.

laugh to the wind and keep in step through the march of life. He wants a violin "crushed in the heartsblood of pain readier than ever for one more song." ("Kreisler," p. 125) He likes the old flagman, old enough to have great-grandchildren, who was twenty years a Chicago policeman, now with a wound in his side, now just a railroad flagman, but "ruddy as a hard nut, hair in his eyes, clear sea lights in his eyes." ("The Old Flagman," pp. 381, 382)

There are qualities of carelessness and pride in the Sandburg fortitude. These qualities differentiate it from the seasoned courage possessed by the few only. People recklessly, willingly, take the risks of life, face its struggles. Win or lose they have pluck to laugh and make the best of it. And they feel pride and look proud, too. They are proud of their hands, their work, and what they have been able to accomplish. They are not ashamed of what they are, but accept themselves and one another. This is not the same as the sinful pride already discussed. It is a healthy type of pride because it is not carried to the extreme measure that divides men, because it gives people the backbone to stand against opposition. Sandburg is glad the people have grit, the capacity to take it.

Love. Love is the third value of the simple life. Though Sandburg does write of eternal love and of love for Christ ("Loin Cloth," p. 126), his emphasis is upon earthly, temporal love that must end with death ("Have Me," p. 130). He beckons people to love now, this moment, this hour ("Garden Wireless," p. 133; "Let Love Go On," p. 196).

He writes of a child's love, of a parent's love, of love between man and woman. He praises the liberal lover, the one whose love is as free as sunlight and morning air ("Repetitions," p. 102). He wants to know if in the next life any are rewarded more than lovers ("Cool Tombs," p. 134). He teaches that comfort is not the indispensable value of life — give pain, hunger, and want, but leave a little love ("At a Window," p. 49). Love is a shut-in river seeking the sea ("Sandhill People," p. 219).

Service. The poet cheers the working people who busy themselves rendering some service to others, no matter how lowly the task may appear. He wants the people to know how important their individual labors are, and to take pride in their work. He disdains both those rich and those poor who do not work:

> The flowing of the stream clears it of pollution.
> The refuse of humanity, the offscourings, the encumberings,
> They are who?
> They are those who have forgotten work and the price
> At which life goes on.
> They live in shambles overly foul and in mansions overly
> Swept and garnished.
> The flowing of the stream clears it of pollution.
> ("The People, Yes," p. 562)

Discovering the value of service is a quality of the simple life that counteracts the temptation to greed. Sandburg does write of a more exalted level of service when he praises the soldiers who die for freedom, but since the spirit of the poetry treating such sacrifice is not only one of joy but also of hope, it is treated separately in the thesis.

His poems exult with a lively joy, achieving a certain sensuousness that enables the reader to grasp quickly the people's feeling. It is worthy of note that the poet in finding much joy in the common, ordinary values of life, casts reflection on some religious leaders who take these things for granted. Sandburg is excited at discovering that many of the common people know this quality or level of happiness. This does not mean that he does not know about or believe in a more abiding joy, a stronger moral courage, an eternal love. Rather he takes joy and pride in dwelling on the earthly happiness, pluck, and love with which the people are familiar. Here, again, is seen the poet's sympathy with the people.

V. HOPE

Sandburg believes that man's deathless dream of equity will win, that man will rise above poverty and the hog-trough level, that

> Man is a long time coming.
> Man will yet win.
> Brother may yet line up with brother.
> ("The People, Yes," pp. 561, 608, 617)

The Bethlehem star is the image of hope ("Special Starlight," pp. 666, 667).

<u>Social theory</u>. The early Sandburg poetry set hope in the idealism of a social theory. Amy Lowell referred to the theory in terms of the "brambles of economic reform." She found Sandburg to be

concerned with reconstruction, both economic and aesthetic.[7] The poet did not feel an economic-social theory to be out of place in poetry. One of his definitions of poetry is that it is "the achievement of the synthesis of hyacinths and buscuits." (p. 319) He believed that every man has the right to work and that the economic system that guarantees this right can only be good for man. Something of the reformer's zeal is already apparent in the younger Sandburg, reporter, secretary to Milwaukee Mayor Emil Seidel, and poet. Even then he was the reformer casting his lot with socialism ("Choose," p. 34; "Kin," pp. 34, 35).

Sacrifice. But the more mature Sandburg of recent years places his hopes in the twin virtues of sacrifice and composure. He believes that man is able to achieve these goals and come to a better, brighter life through them.

People must have something worth dying for. Sacrifice must have an object. Freedom! It is freedom that brings people to their highest and best. It provides the environment in which people may learn enough to conquer poverty and war. Without freedom, the soul of the people dwindles and dies; without sacrifice, freedom dwindles and dies.[8] Sandburg sees the truly free man as a rarity, but he believes that the

[7] Ibid., p. 211.

[8] Sandburg, Carl, "Freedom Is a Habit," "Is There an Easy Road to Freedom?" Complete Poems, pp. 627, 624; "Fathom This Murder, Sir," Playboy, VII (October, 1960), p. 89.

future of America will produce more free persons ("The People, Yes," p. 578). He eulogizes the people of history who gave their all for some great cause ("John Ericsson Day Memorial," p. 139; "The Four Brothers," pp. 143-147; "Washington Monument by Night," p. 282; "The Man with the Broken Fingers," pp. 626, 627). Sacrifice and service reveal the unity of mankind.[9] The Christ of Golgotha is the supreme example of sacrifice ("The Four Brothers," p. 145; "Crimson Changes People," p. 168).

<u>Composure</u>. Though the poet is almost overwhelmed by the massive, swift-running currents of change, he does see evidence of stability in life, and herein lies hope. He thinks of Pike's Peak as something fastened down, something one can count on ("Caboose Thoughts," p. 93). The old anvil laughs at many broken hammers ("The People, Yes," p. 617). When farms came to the valley, and the cities came, great changes were introduced, but the mountains stood the same in blue and in smoke ("Smoke Blue," p. 367).

Sandburg refers to the element of stability in people as "composure." To be calm in strife, composed in battle and blood, to be deliberate in sacrifice — this is a virtue. It is necessary to make right decisions and correct calculations ("The Unknown War," pp. 646-648), which in turn will make sacrifice profitable and life meaningful. One

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[9]Sandburg, Carl, "Psalm of the Bloodbank," <u>Colliers</u>, CXXXVI (September 2, 1955), pp. 24, 25.

of the sayings of the Swedes is, "The fireborn are at home in fire." Sandburg uses this saying as the title of a poem teaching composure (p. 632).

But the question arises, how can people learn composure? Sandburg's answer to this question is not obvious, but there are hints to a solution in a number of his poems. In the preceding paragraph, for instance, one notes that composure is related to skill in making decisions. Solitude is also viewed elsewhere as necessary for making important decisions ("The People, Yes," p. 449); and silence is seen as a virtue ("Aprons of Silence," pp. 176, 177; "Sandhill People," p. 219). These facts suggest a close relationship between solitude and composure; that silence, being alone with time to meditate, is an aid to composure.

The poet attests to the fact that faith helps make composure possible — faith, for instance, in immortality ("Testament," p. 122; "The Unknown War," p. 646).[10] He wonders what is the difference between credulity and calculating belief. He sees the scientists performing experiments as reasoning believers ("The People, Yes," p. 461). He advises believing in myths and miracles of one's own making. This suggestion appears to be founded upon a pragmatic viewpoint ("The Unknown War," p. 467).

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[10] Though Sandburg often describes death as sleep, this does not reveal his theology, for sleep is only the image of death ("The People, Yes," p. 592).

The Sandburg hope, which focuses on sacrifice for freedom and on composure, is born of strong desire. The better life for which the people struggle must be possible. If people fall short of sacrifice and composure, there can be no real progress; for these are significant means in the struggle toward the ideal future.

This chapter attempts to survey the Sandburg vision of the soul of the people. It seeks to describe the people's plight, their simple life, and their potential. Sandburg seeks the reasons for human ills, and the redeeming virtues in the life of man. Imagination and emotion produce in turn strong states of compassion, indignation, joy, and hope. The spirit of Sandburg's verse breathes everywhere the poet's s sympathy with the people. It is here that Sandburg makes rich contribution to realism in modern American literature.

CHAPTER IV

RELIGIOUS SOURCES OF SANDBURG'S SYMPATHY

The preceding chapter has emphasized Sandburg's sympathy with the people. How is this sympathy to be accounted for? Luccock is especially impressed with the quality of indignation in the poet's writing. Remarking that few modern writers feel noble indignation, he insists a mood such as this must have a religious source, a deep-rooted conviction of the sacredness of personality.[1]

It has already been shown that there is genuine indignation in Carl Sandburg's poetry. Does this indignation derive from religious roots? Do the other qualities of compassion, joy, and hope also have their source in religious influences?

An examination of Sandburg's personal history and his poetry sheds light on the matter. It has been noted in the second chapter of the thesis that the poet's early years were characterized by a strong Christian family influence, regular church attendance, Bible reading, instruction in Lutheran doctrine, and participation in other Christian activities. Has the Sandburg spirit developed from this early influence, or from resentment toward religion?

Carl Sandburg's autobiography shows respect rather than contempt for his parents' religion. One Lutheran minister young Carl did not like; another, who had his respect, left him with a morbid fear of

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[1]Luccock, Halford E., Contemporary American Literature and Religion (New York: Willett, Clark and Company, 1934), pp. 175, 176.

judgment. Other clergymen Sandburg remembers with appreciation. It appears that Carl left off regular church attendance in his teens, a situation to be accounted for by the fact that he was obligated to work seven days a week on the milk wagon. In college he was influenced by Universalist teachings; but, according to Detzer, he did not wholly accept them.[2] Later he wrote for a Unitarian paper. In summary it would seem that Sandburg, the young man, while respectful of the religion of his parents, was somewhat influenced by both Universalist and Unitarian teachings.

I. THE SACREDNESS OF LIFE

A pronounced religious tone pervades Sandburg's poetry. All of life is felt to be sacred. This accounts for his writing without embarrassment on subjects not generally considered fit for poetry. Many of his poems are prayers. He sees the element of the sacred in everything. The daily duties of the people constitute ritual, their work is silent litany.[3] The scientific laboratory is a sublime sanctuary ("The People, Yes," p. 461). He writes of the washerwoman over the tub of suds, and imagines her singing of the Last Great Washday ("Washerwoman,"

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[2] Detzer, Karl, Carl Sandburg (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941), p. 49.

[3] Sandburg, Carl, "The People, Yes," "Good Morning, America," Complete Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. 467, 332.

p. 105). He blesses God for the wonders of creation ("Glass House Canticle," p. 669). He calls Johann Sebastian Bach's work "a prayer of Numbers." ("Number Man," p. 675)

The religious tone suggests something more than mere poetic rhapsodizing. Indeed, the sacred element is so prominent that it sets Sandburg's verse apart in modern poetry. It indicates that the poet himself interprets life as sacred.

II. THE SACREDNESS OF PERSONALITY

There is more than a vague religiosity to Sandburg's poetry. He sees man as essentially a spiritual being. Man has two hungers, physical and spiritual.[4] The people are like the sea and the wind, always moving. They want and want with endless yearnings, and will not rest ("The People, Yes," pp. 479, 616). Brancusi, the Rumanian sculptor, and the Wright brothers of Dayton, Ohio, are portraits of Man the Seeker, Man on a Quest ("Brancusi," p. 301; "The People, Yes," p. 582). Man is not a mere animal that can be satisfied with bread; neither can he be satisfied with money or the things money can buy. Man is ever searching the above and the beyond, wondering where he came from and where he is going.

Deutsch asserts that Sandburg does not search the mind of the people deeply, that the people in the poetry are not given to much

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[4]Sandburg, Carl, "The People, Yes," Complete Poems, p. 580; "Buns and Gardenias," Ladies Home Journal, LXXVII (June, 1960), p. 115.

questioning or explaining.[5] But even a cursory acquaintance with the poems should intimate the fact that here is a searching, questing, wishing, dreaming, imagining people. And where they do not verbalize their questions, the questions and the spirit of quest are implicit in the poet's images. At times Sandburg himself directly asks life's questions ("Oomba," p. 411). There is some justification of the point of view that the people in the poems do not explain much, but the matter will be dealt with in the next chapter.

The people of the poems are in search of spiritual knowledge and spiritual values. The poet makes it eminently clear that it is natural for people to believe in God. The boy Alexander believes there must be a God ("Boy and Father," p. 166). Sandburg records the people's different ideas about God; he shows the swarming of the different peoples toward their varying concepts of God ("Good Morning, America," p. 322). To gamblers God is Luck, the High Thrower ("Crapshooters," pp. 164, 165). To tailors He is the Master Tailor ("Three Ghosts," p. 198). To many God is lonely ("They Ask: Is God, Too, Lonely?" p. 393). A dying poet takes it for granted that God will forgive him because "it's his line of business." ("The People, Yes," p. 464) On the Lang Syne Plantation the people prayed to the God who is the answer to all their need ("The People, Yes," p. 517). The people have a saying:

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[5]Deutsch, Babette, This Modern Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1935), p. 54.

Something began me
and it had no beginning:
something will end me
and it has no end.
("The People, Yes," p. 589)

These are some of the ideas the people have about God. For Sandburg there is a sacredness of life and of personality because the people are on a great spiritual treasure hunt, striving to know God and to find the meaning of life. There are religious roots to Sandburg's indignation, as Luccock believes; there is a firm conviction of the sacredness of personality.

III. GOD

What is the source of this sacredness of life and of personality? Does it come out of a belief in the personal God in whom Sandburg's parents believed? Or is it the kind of sacredness that the humanist knows? In what kind of a God does Sandburg believe? It is not possible to give a full answer to these questions, but it is possible to arrive at a general understanding of the poet's faith at this point.

In "Good Morning, America," Sandburg deals with the inscription "In God we trust." In this statement he sees one fact: "God is the great One who made us all." Whether or not the people of America really trust in Him is questionable. But for Sandburg God is the great Creator (p. 332).

God is great and mysterious, beyond human comprehension. It will be a long time before man will be able to understand God ("Good Morning, America," p. 322). Sandburg feels that not only is the peoples' concept

of God too small but also that comprehending Him is difficult ("Slabs of the Sunburnt West," pp. 309, 310). He teaches that in God are hid all the answers to the great questions of life, to the problems of sin and evil, tragedy and injustice. God is the great Knower.[6] He holds the secrets of life; He is sovereign; and man is to praise and thank Him even if He is impersonal and does not care, even if it turn out that He is not a God of love ("Our Prayer of Thanks," p. 48).

Even though he does not understand the why of all that happens in life, even though he cannot comprehend God, Sandburg nevertheless does believe that God is love, that He is the God of the people who has a good purpose even in tragedy such as war ("The Four Brothers," p. 147). He is the "God of all broken hearts, empty hands, sleeping soldiers." ("Fire Dreams," p. 131) God knows, He understands, and He cares. God is the God of compassion.

Sandburg does not write of Jesus as God, but he does write of him as a man full of compassion. Jesus was a man of the people. He loved the poor and rejected. "He never came near clean people or dirty people but they felt cleaner because he came along." ("To a Contemporary Bunkshooter," pp. 29-31) To the poet Jesus is the greatest example of suffering and loving sacrifice ("The Four Brothers," p. 145; "Crimson Changes People," p. 168). The poet hesitates to say much more than this about Jesus.

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[6]Sandburg, Carl, "The Four Brothers," Complete Poems, pp. 146, 147; "Runaway Colors," Life, XLIII (November 4, 1957), p. 108.

Sandburg has no poem that directly shows his own belief in a God who expresses indignation. He does say that Jesus was at times indignant, intolerant of the injustices of his day ("To a Contemporary Bunkshooter," p. 29). There is teaching that God is just; it is He who brings rich and poor, ruler and ruled, evil doers and the wronged, to the same level by death ("The Four Brothers," p. 145).

It can surely be asserted that the spirit of Carl Sandburg's poetry does have religious sources. These sources, however, involve more than the sacredness of personality to which Luccock refers. They involve belief in God the Creator, God who loves His creation and who demands justice.

The fact that Sandburg was reared among the lower classes of society does not fully explain the spirit of his poetry. His compassion comes in large measure from his concept of God as the Lover of the people. His indignation derives from his belief in God as the Lover of the people, as the just God, and from his conviction of the sacredness of personality. His joy derives from his view of the sacredness of life. His hope lies in his belief in the sacredness of personality and in the potential of the people. Sandburg has retained a general respect and appreciation for the Christian teachings he learned in his youth; and these with other kinds of religious teachings have greatly influenced the spirit of his poetry.

CHAPTER V

V. CONTRIBUTIONS OF SANDBURG'S POETRY TO THE MODERN AGE

From a consideration of the nature of those religious influences in general that contribute to the moods of Sandburg's poetry, the writer now attempts to show that the poet's sympathy expresses itself in two ways; he also seeks to appraise these two ways in the light of their moral and religious significance. These are 1) a reverent realism without materialism; and 2) sacrificial sympathy.

I. REVERENT REALISM

The poet's conviction of the sacredness of life has been noted. This conviction manifests itself in a spirit of reverence for all things. At the same time there is a strong element of realism. Luccock ranks Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg as departing most radically from the romantic tradition in poetry.[1] Hansen writes that Carl Sandburg "had a sense of the world in flux, the hobo aversion to all things fixed and fastened down, a habit of thinking and dreaming about to-morrow more than yesterday."[2] The poet does dream more of tomorrow than of yesterday, but what really concerns him is what is present, more than what is past or what is future. People may learn valuable lessons from history, but

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[1]Luccock, Halford E., Contemporary American Literature and Religion (New York: Willett, Clark and Company, 1934), p. 118.

[2]Hansen, Harry, Midwest Poets (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), p. 62.

Sandburg has no use for servitude to tradition. He sees the present progress of things. The new must replace the old.

The marks of Sandburg's realism are his themes of the lower classes in society, and his diction. He dwells on tangibles that are very much a part of these classes in particular and of the majority of the people in general. Though his images are realistically concrete, they suggest moral and spiritual values.

Concerning his vocabulary, Deutsch writes:

> Sandburg's delight in colloquial language, his feeling for slang as poetic diction of a fresh sort, his sense of the values in the cadences of common speech, were a distinct contribution to American poetry.[3]

It is significant that Sandburg achieves reverence in his realism without an unfamiliarly pious vocabulary. On the other hand, as a number of critics observe, slang often has a cryptic element of its own, familiar only to a particular group or class, and also very short-lived as a rule. Some of Sandburg's poetry is unintelligible already to most readers because of its slang. Nevertheless, a substantial number of poems have an undeniable lasting quality, unhampered by any general unfamiliarity with terminology, and possessing a reverent realism. In fact, Sandburg bequeathes a legacy of reverent realism which younger poets may well seek to acquire. In an age when many are given to displaying realism in its most sordid colors, Sandburg's influence is much needed.

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[3]Deutsch, Babette, <u>This Modern Poetry</u> (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1935), pp. 55, 56.

The absence of a materialistic spirit in Sandburg's poems is noteworthy. While a number of highly-acclaimed poets depict the human tragedy as an inevitable and inescapable fate, Sandburg strongly opposes the idea that man is a mere animal and that the tangible values are the most important in life. He weeps and protests at the people's struggle for physical subsistence, but he sees the ultimate struggle in terms of the spiritual. Man is a spiritual being, searching for higher values, for answers, and for meaning. Physical well-being is important, but it is only a means to an end. The poet therefore extols the simple life; he records in print the groanings of the soul of the people. His realism is more than a negative criticism of an oppressive materialism. It is a positive witness which may assist many in beginning to find the rich values of the spiritual life. His realism inspires the individual to exercise his spirit in search of truth.

Even though realism without materialism is a positive contribution, its limits must be recognized. The weakness in Sandburg's poetry at this point is his inadequate understanding of revelation and faith. He sees revelation of truth in both history and nature, especially in the latter. He does not give evidence of a firm belief in special revelation; that is, in Jesus Christ and the Bible, except that Jesus is the supreme example of the virtues of sympathy and compassion. He honors a quality of faith as necessary to human quest and sacrifice. He also allows a little faith in what is not actually true on account of the positive effect it produces. But here he appears to reach what he

would call the borderline of credulity. Beyond this he can wish and hope, but he cannot have honest faith. The contribution of his reverent and anti-materialistic realism, so naturally and appealingly expressed in his poems, will not guide the reader to the reality of Christian revelation and experience; however, it can instigate the struggle for truth, which could in turn lead to the discovery of Christian faith.

II. SACRIFICIAL SYMPATHY

The second contribution of Sandburg's poetry is sacrificial sympathy; that is, a sympathetic attitude of such quality that it expresses itself in sacrifice.

Sympathy. Landis is so impressed with Sandburg's compassion that he writes, "The hopelessness and the depression seemed to be transferred from the people to the poet." Sandburg reminds him of words from Kipling: "I will be the word of the people, mine will be the bleeding mouth from which the gag is snatched. I will say everything."[4] Yet there is more than oneness with the sufferings of the people. There is a congeniality with their whole life. Sandburg enters into and shares their feelings and interests. He is susceptible to the same influences and emotions. Whatever affects the people similarly affects

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[4] Cited by Landis, Benson Y., Poetry and Rural Life (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A., 1956), pp. 18, 19.

the poet. He is one with the people, he is one of the people. He writes of their tears and laughter, hopes and fears, labors and dreams.

A comparison of Carl Sandburg and E. E. Cummings helps clarify the character of the former's sympathy with the people. Both writers celebrate the grotesque and fall into wistful moods. Both understand the speech of the people. But Cummings mixes slang and literary diction, and mocks the man of the street. Sandburg's poems sound like a plain man expressing his companions' feelings.[5]

But is this wholly admirable? The question is raised as to whether or not Sandburg's intense sympathy with the poor distorts his vision to the point where he is unjustly indignant toward the wealthy. Amy Lowell for one feels that in exalting the life of those who work with their hands, Sandburg neglects the worthy people of other occupations and professions.[6] It is true that the early poems betray a radical class distinction in favor of the poor, and intolerant of the rich. But the later poems, while still full of feeling for the lower classes, show a more healthy attitude toward the upper classes.

There is significance for the religious world in Sandburg's sympathy. Just as the Christian religion has had a marked influence on the quality of his poetry, he too has made significant contribution to

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[5]Deutsch, op. cit., pp. 212-214.

[6]Lowell, Amy, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), pp. 209-212.

the life and thought of American Christendom.

Sandburg greatly admired Jesus as a man of the people. Jesus had a certain oneness with the needy people of his day; nor can there be any question of Sandburg's identifying himself with the needy of his generation. Indeed, the Sandburg sympathy may well call the attention of American Christianity to the need of keeping the sufferings of the needy at the center of consciousness.

If today's church lavishes most of its attention on a comfortable middle class to the neglect of the poor, who are still everywhere with us, then she is in danger of losing her sense of mission. Called of God to proclaim the gospel of Christ to the whole world, the church, if she is to fulfill her purpose, must come to know the feelings and needs of all peoples. In his concern for the laboring classes, particularly in mid-West America, Carl Sandburg demonstrates how genuine and intense such sympathy can be.

Sacrifice. As essential and demanding as sympathy may be, it is not sufficient. Carl Sandburg has learned this. He sees beyond sympathy, the attitude of "I understand. I'm with you." He calls the society to sacrifice.

In one of the earliest Sandburg poems, sacrifice is viewed as an evidence of genuine sympathy.[7] In other poems sacrifice is considered in relation to some great cause, most often, to freedom. He sees sacrifice

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[7] Sandburg, Carl, "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter," Complete Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. 29-31.

as the answer to the problems arising in aimless, yet idealistic, youth:

> Whatever the wild kids want to do they'll do
> And whoever gives them ideas, faiths, slogans,
> Whoever touches the bottom flares of them,
> Connects with something prouder than all deaths.
> For they can live on hard corn and like it . . . .
> Give them a cause and they are a living dynamite.
> They are the game fighters who will die fighting.
> ("The People, Yes," p. 598)

The church can be of service to this generation only as she sacrifices and calls the people to sacrifice in the name of Christ. What shall the church be profited if she gain the popularity of the whole world and lose the spirit of sacrifice? Or what shall she give in exchange for the spirit of sacrifice?

The fact that Sandburg does not write as a churchman should perhaps the more convict the complacent of the value and necessity of sacrifice. He is the one modern poet who combines the spirit of sympathy with the spirit of sacrifice in an appealing and meaningful way.

Sandburg's worshipful realism, which counteracts the spirit of materialism, and his example of sympathy with its call to sacrifice, are surely worthy contributions to American society in general and to American Christianity in particular.

CONCLUSION

There are specific religious factors in the life of Carl Sandburg which help explain the quality of his sympathy with the people. For the most part these are Christian influences, which involve not only a

conviction of the sacredness of life and of personality, but also a conviction of the reality of the God of love and justice.

Among the poet's contributions to poetry and to his generation, two stand out in bold relief: the spirit of reverence in the presence of realism, and the spirit of sympathy to the point of sacrifice. If Carl Sandburg's temperament, so forcefully and vividly manifest in his poetry, is in significant measure the result of Christian and other religious influences, his poetry contributes markedly to the thought and life of America and American Christianity.

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