

A book review by Aleister Crowley from the July 1916 edition of The International.

Songs of Armageddon and Other Poems

It is impossible for contemporary minds to distinguish between the good poet and the great because nobody can tell what the Zeitgeist is really thinking; we are all too apt to suppose that it is thinking as we think. Now the great poets are all direct expressions of the Zeitgeist, and for this reason it always appears, as soon as time enables us to identify them, that they are not only poets, but prophets. I am consequently not going to tell anyone that Mr. Viereck is a great poet. That will be the obvious comment — though a quite unnecessary one — upon that admirably edited library edition of his works which is to be published in A.D. 2216.

But it is very easy to distinguish the good poet from bad poets. The greatness depends on what he has to say — the goodness can always be detected by the way he says it. If a man is obviously not master of the language in which he writes he is certainly not a good poet. If his grammar is confused, if his epithets are feeble, if his style is redundant, stilted, and artificial, you know that he is not even good. If he is not master of his metres, if he is compelled to twist his sentences about for the sake of rhyme, you know that he is a bad poet.

Now, America has more bad poets to the cubic inch than any other country since the beginning of the world; and taking them all in all they are worse than time has ever born. Most of them have frankly abandoned the question of technique, as utterly beyond them, preferring to cut up exceedingly bad prose into lengths and to print it as poetry. There is hardly one who understands the first principle of rhythm, or who could tell you when a spondee may replace an iambus and when not. Most of them are totally incapable of grammar,

and are either commonplace beneath the level of the lowest hack journalist, or so afraid of being commonplace that they use strange words and phrases without feeling them or even meaning them. They adopt eccentricities merely in order to be eccentric. Incapable of expressing themselves in a recognized medium, they invent new forms of punctuation, which mean nothing, if only because they are totally unaware of what punctuation really is. But the good poets of America can be counted on one hand by a hero just returned from the front, who has had nine fingers shot away.

This poet is Mr. Viereck. You can read his latest book from cover to cover and hardly find a stanza which would not read just as simply if it were printed as prose. It is extraordinarily free from Miltonic inversions and other forms of so-called poetic license. Poetic license is the pitfall of poets. They are told in youth that they may say "the cat black" when they mean "the black cat" — so whenever they want a rhyme for "stack" they do it. Mr. Viereck's verse flows quite easily, naturally, and simply. But, it may be said, this is merely preliminary. And so it is. Anyone who does not achieve this is merely unworthy of our consideration. True, this might be coexistent with a perfectly commonplace style. But Mr. Viereck is one of the great masters of phrase. He has for anything not merely the good, or the musical, or the beautiful, but the necessary expression. That he should get expressions at all is a miracle. That he should cause them to fall naturally into their places, that he should use the sweep of the verse to hammer them home, is a miracle of miracles.

Let us quote:

The Czar whose septre is the knout.

Here is a complete arraignment of the Czar down in a single phrase, a perfect symbol, a perfect image. It would not be possible to add a single word to that phrase

or to subtract one from it — and that is the supreme test.

The sidling submarine.

Can anyone find a better epithet? It is complete. It indicates the whole method of the submarine in a single word.

To Italy:

Tear from thy brow the olive wreath!
Thy laughter sickens to a leer.

Here is a perfect picture, simple and symbolic, of the fall from paganism to prostitution. Again in the same poem:

These are not Caesar's Seven Hills,
Nor this the land that Dante trod.

Always in Mr. Viereck's verse we get the picture, we get the allusion; he has the trick of invoking the great name and the great memory. "Caesar's Seven Hills" is the sort of thing that magicians call a Pantacle; it contains everything in microscopic form. At the phrase the whole history of Ancient Rome springs to the mind. So, too, "Dante" is like a word of invocation. Say it, and the whole of the Renaissance leaps into the mind, with the suddenness and spontaneity of sunrise.

Again:

We are the Paladins of God.

Here the word "Paladin" calls up the entire romance of Charlemagne, the supreme fight against the heathen.

"Quite true," you say, "quite true, very natural — but why make a fuss about it? Why would not 'heroes' of 'Berserks' do equally well?" Because this is a poem

against Japan. It is the great new crusade that the poet is celebrating. Therefore, to him, because he is a good poet, there comes the word which is inevitably right. No other would serve.

Now, while this word is necessary in that particular poem, the question arises as to whether that particular poem is necessary to the universe. That is the distinction between goodness and greatness. We know that Prometheus Unbound is a great poem, because it expressed the emancipation of man, which was being worked out in other fields by Danton and his kind. History has set her seal upon Shelley. The question is whether she will do the same to Viereck. Now, by all obvious methods it appears that she must do so. We can hardly keep thinking that the European war and the Yellow Peril are the important issues of our time — but we have no guarantee that we are right. Shelley himself was totally mistaken on many points, for instance, the situation in Greece. But the poet in Shelley made no error. His Prometheus Unbound was couched in cosmic terms. His poem about Greece, on the contrary, was entitled "Hellas," thereby localizing and limiting its application. So now, today, there may be a movement incomparably vaster than anything political or social, of which we are all ignorant or careless. We cannot "look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow and which will not."

There is, however, another test of poetry, this time of merely lyric poetry. Almost every human being perpetrates a few lyrics under the influence of the first sex-awakening, and when the victim has a reasonably decent education such lyrics are quite passable, and no canons of criticism, as ordinarily understood, avail to distinguish the twitterings of the sparrow from the scream of the eagle. History again, however, serves us as some sort of a guide. It is to be observed that those who have written really great lyrics, have always done much more. They have attempted epics, or dramas, or

something of the kind; something so big that, if their work were equal they would all be Shakespeares. In them the lyric appears merely as a trapping. Very often the "big" work is quite worthless, as in the case of Coleridge, but the point is that the size of their ambition is a measure of the size of their soul.

Now, I should feel very much happier in prophesying immortal fame for Mr. Viereck if he had produced an epic of a million lines, not one of which was readable, and maintained that the said epic was the only decent poetry ever written. It is very largely a question of probabilities; where a man devotes his whole life to a subject it is highly probable that now and again he will exhibit perfect mastery of it, at least in patches. But there are too many people going about today who "do not know whether they can play the fiddle, because they never tried."

Now it does seem to me that Mr. Viereck's lyrics are noble and powerful. They are at least incomparably better than anything else which America has to show. They compare only too favorably with those of many poets whose names are in the mouths of men more frequently than his. On the technical question there can be no doubt whatever. The severe pain in the neck from which I am now suffering is to be attributed entirely to the fact that the names of Stephen Phillips and John Masefield crossed my mind at the moment. Such American animalcules as Edgar Lee Master, John Frost, Horace Holley, and the "monstrous regiment" of sob-sisters do not cross my mind. These facts, however, although demonstrably true, are not sufficient. One cannot prove an unknown animal to be a dinotherium by simply disproving it to be a streptococcus. It is, therefore, small consolation for Mr. Viereck that he stands apart from the average poet. He must match himself with the Sam Langfords of Parnassus and knock out the Gunboat Smiths of Helicon. In order to do this it is not sufficient for him to say: "Behold this lyric — is it

not equal to the 'Ode to a Nightingale?' Is not this a nasty blow to Herrick?" He must rather say: "Behold this epic; I will now go down and buy myself copies of the Iliad and of the Mahabharata and of the works of Shakespeare and of Virgil and of Goethe, for after all, there was some merit in those fellows. Now they will never be reprinted! It will be only kind of me to save them from oblivion —."