

JOHN MASEFIELD: POET-LAUREATE

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A FRIEND of mine who, at the beginning of his career as a critic, wrote usefully about Synge and the Irish dramatic movement, soon decided to abandon the contemporary field and to take up eighteenth century writers, on the ground that he felt safer in the more familiar territory. I dare not accuse him of undue caution; indeed, the imaginative sympathy he shows with these earlier folk would seem to justify his choice. Certainly, it is much more difficult really to see a living, moving scene (in which we ourselves are nervous actors, or stammering prompters, or commandeered scene-shifters) than it is to sit down in comfortable arm-chairs and watch the unfolding of the pageant of the Past with whatever we can summon of imagination's aid.

Most writers, I suppose, regard contemporary criticism as relatively unimportant and, like Browning's *Strafford*, look to Time to do them justice. Sidney Lanier expressed a mild surprise at what he called "the timid solitudes" with which his immediate critics would "rarefy in one line any enthusiasm they may have condensed in another." He thought that many of his critics seemed "to be for ever conciliating the yet-unrisen ghosts of possible mistakes." And the subject of this paper, when asked his opinion of a critical study of John Masefield which, I believe, had stood upon his shelves for some months, replied simply that he had not read it. Still, pathfinding is a process in criticism, as in all the other fields of human activity. And I am not sure that the familiar Elizabethan Age, or Restoration, or Romantic period, may not easily become too departmentalized, may not lose at least some aspects of the familiar which only the contemporary spirit could hope to feel as natural and necessary. To be sure, we may be led, by personal attraction and agreement, or the reverse, to overpraise or underpraise the statesmen, the social reformers, the poets of our own time; but at any rate it is something to identify them, to relate them, and to examine their intentions. Besides, there are two other considerations. The critical approach to Literature can afford to ignore no manifestation—past or present—of the creative spirit, even though in the latter case an adequate focus is confessedly

hard to achieve. And again, critical pathfinding is somebody's task and is in itself good fun, even though it may seem to require a somewhat foolhardy kind of courage.

The appointment of John Masefield as Poet-Laureate of England did not come as a surprise. The personal history of the man himself and the deeply human quality of his work made such an appointment by a Labour Government almost inevitable. Indeed, had any other Government been in office, Mr. Masefield's fitness for the post could not have been overlooked. Another Government might have considered Sir William Watson, then seventy-two years of age; or Laurence Binyon, some ten years younger, both of them close to the great tradition; or Walter de la Mare, or Sir Henry Newbolt, or Sturge Moore, or Alfred Noyes, or even the aged Kipling, who has sung so strenuously on Imperial themes. Yet, as against them all, the choice at the last might well have fallen on Masefield, the most essentially English of the group, the man whose work is so companionably near and kind, who wrote what is likely to be the most enduring of the poems inspired by the Great War—*August, 1914*—and who was the close friend and neighbour of the late Laureate, Robert Bridges. Nor is Mr. Masefield a partisan Socialist, despite the sentiments expressed in the verses he calls *A Consecration*. He is not a partisan at all. He is a poet, and, as a poet, must sympathise with Shelley's requirement that a poet shall have no party but mankind. The poet, like Nature herself, knows how to reconcile the principle of aristocracy with that of democracy, giving each a truer justification, and an access of power through that reconciliation. The Masefield who has written the democratic ballads and narrative-poems has written also that lovely Shakespearean sonnet-sequence in praise of Beauty that any cavalier or academic poet might have longed to write; and he knows that each type is implicit in each, and that each helps to induce and interpret the other.

"Shakespeare", says Emerson, "is the only biographer of Shakespeare; and even he can tell us nothing, except to the Shakespeare in us, that is, to our most apprehensive and sympathetic hour." The justice of this reminder may reconcile any biographer of any poet to the difficulties of his task, and may convert those difficulties into delights. What does the poet hint here, imply there, of his early struggles and adventures, of the shaping of his spirit; of his changing, ripening thoughts on our human predicament? What of the lonely mysteries of death; what of the gospel of beauty; what of the meaning of tiny earth amid the Vast; what of the powers and passions of men, their loves, their dreads, their futilities,

their incurable follies, their astounding martyrdoms? And what soul of him himself, as thinker, singer, friend, from among these questionings and answerings, at length emerges? We cannot answer all these enquiries here. As Mr. Masefield has said in talking about Chaucer, "An hour isn't very long to give to the life's work of a great man." And a short paper is a short paper. In the poem *On Growing Old*, however, and in the following item of the sonnet-sequence referred to above, we have much of the core of Masefield's artistic faith:

It may be so with us, that in the dark,
 When we have done with Time and wander Space,
 Some meeting of the blind may strike a spark,
 And to Death's empty mansion give a grace.
 It may be, that the loosened soul may find
 Some new delight of living without limbs,
 Bodiless joy of flesh-untrammelled mind,
 Peace like a sky where starlike spirit swims.
 It may be, that the million cells of sense,
 Loosened from their seventy years' adhesion, pass
 Each to some joy of changed experience,
 Weight in the earth or glory in the grass;
 It may be that we cease; we cannot tell.
 Even if we cease, life is a miracle.

* * * * *

The available facts about John Masefield's early life are soon set down. He was born in 1878, in Ledbury, Herefordshire—a small, rather circular inland county lying on the Welsh border in the basin of the Severn. Ledbury has a present population of some three thousand, and is a picturesque market-town not far to the southwest of the Malvern Hills. Small though Herefordshire may be, it is one of the chief agricultural counties of England. The beautiful countryside of this shire and of Shropshire provide the nature-backgrounds for the play, *The Tragedy of Nan*; for the narrative poems, *The Everlasting Mercy*, *The Widow in the Bye Street*, *Reynard the Fox*, *Right Royal*, *King Cole*, *Young John of Chance's Stretch*; and for the novel called *The Hawbucks*.¹

The boy Masefield made many verses, but did not write them down. "Early verses", as he says, "are nearly always reflections from early reading." He read during his childhood plenty of

¹ When, in October, 1930, Mr. Masefield was made an Honorary Freeman of the city of Hereford, he said in his speech of thanks and acceptance:

"I am linked to this county by ties deeper than I can explain. There are ties of beauty. Whenever I think of Paradise, I think of parts of this county; whenever I think of any perfect human state, I think of things which I have seen in this county; and whenever I think of the beauty and the bounty of God, I think of parts of this shire. For I know no land more full of the beauty and the bounty of God than these red ploughlands and deep woodlands so full of yew trees, these apple orchards and lovely rivers and running brooks. There is no more lovely county in this lovely land."

with whom he knew a true communion; of the dim room in the city which nightly became a college to him and others as they met and matched their "brooding minds". "London", he writes—

London has been my prison; but my books
Hills and great waters, labouring men and brooks,
Ships and deep friendships and remembered days,—

days when ancient Roman ruins became alive for him (perhaps the genesis of his tragedy, *Pompey the Great*), days on Ercall, days of hard sea-labour or rare sea-beauty, days of flood and storm, of heart-breaking effort and proud success in boat-racing, or of swimming, pawling, ranching,—

Best trust the happy moments. What they gave
Makes man less fearful of the certain grave,
And gives his work compassion and new eyes.
The days that make us happy make us wise.

But the sea is second with Masefield, as with Conrad, and ships are first. "The ship", says Joseph Conrad, seaman, "this ship, our ship, the ship we serve, is the moral symbol of our life:"

Of all the creations of man she is the closest partner of his toil and courage. From every point of view it is imperative that you should do well by her . . . Mute and compelling, she claims not only your fidelity, but your respect. And the supreme "Well done" which you may earn is made over to her.²

So Masefield praises in *Ships* the barques and schooners, the steamers and liners he has known and has been made by, among them the *Wanderer* of Liverpool, in whose memory he has written a long poem in heroic quatrains and, many years later, a definitive account in prose and verse. "She was", he writes, "the perfect ship of that day." "I have seen much beauty, but she was the most beautiful thing."

I touch my country's mind, I come to grips
With half her purpose, thinking of these ships,
That art untouched by softness, all that line
Drawn ringing hard to stand the test of brine,
That nobleness and grandeur, all that beauty
Born of a manly life and bitter duty,
* * * * *

The life demanded by that art, the keen
Eye-puckered, hard-case seamen, silent, lean,—
They are grander things than all the art of towns,
Their tests are tempests and the sea that drowns,
They are my country's line, her great art done
By strong brains labouring on the thought unwon;
They mark our passage as a race of men,
Earth will not see such ships as those again.

2. *Notes on Life and Letters*, pp. 188-189.

After several voyages Masefield found himself still undecided as to his future. Although as a boy he had dreamed and scribbled, yet at seventeen he had thought of becoming a physician, and did actually read medicine for several months. He varied his sea-experiences by land-changes, tramping it now and again, and learning much of human nature. At sixteen he wrote some verses about sea life, but he read little and wrote little between the ages of fourteen and eighteen.

Between 1895 and 1897 we find Masefield in America. Stranded at first in New York, he made his way "up-state", and during the spring of 1895 became a farm-hand. Upon returning to the city in the summer, he and a chum found some difficulty in securing work until Luke O'Connor, the genial County Wexford proprietor of the Columbian Hotel, on the corner of Greenwich Avenue and Christopher Street, near Jefferson Market Court, engaged the lads as bar assistants. He tells me that "John" and his friend put in their heads at his door, with the not too hopeful enquiry: "Can you give us a job?" "I can that", replied Luke. "Come in, byes!" And to work they were put.

I asked Mr. O'Connor (who now conducts a café in Greenwich Village) to tell me which of the two solicited the job. "It was John, then; John was a bashful lad, but he said them words."

Mr. Masefield has told me that O'Connor did not consider him a sufficiently expert "artist" to handle the mixed drinks, and O'Connor corroborates this. Indeed, there was no question of his even attempting that task. Some of the more skilful bartenders of a day that is dead, or at least considered legally dead, had a knowledge of composing drinks comparable to a chef's knowledge of preparing dishes. "I could not aspire to such a distinction," says Masefield. He served the simpler beverages (it may be remarked that he himself, like Dauber, was and is "temperance") and wiped down the bar. Some have expressed surprise that a bartender—a third assistant bartender—should have become a famous poet. The truth is that a potential poet undertook for a time to be a bartender.

O'Connor assures me that "John" had no trouble with rough customers. "He never had no trouble with nobody. He was a bashful, ruddy-faced lad,—a nice lad, he was. Everybody liked 'John'."

Mr. Masefield values his experiences in the Columbian saloon, and has told in the earlier editions of *A Tarpaulin Muster* of what happened there one Sunday when the police raided the place under the Raines Law. He enjoyed his long days of work, but found it

rather trying to have so little time to himself. He hungered for reading, but usually found himself tired out at night. He lived with his employer, and after supper would retreat to his small room and do what reading might prove possible. He received some fifteen or twenty dollars monthly, with room and board—no small advance over the wage mentioned in the merchantman's articles.

Hanging in Luke O'Connor's front room is a large photograph, bearing the inscription:

To my kind old friend and master,
 Luke O'Connor,
 With many grateful remembrances,
 from John Masefield,
 20 June, 1918.

O'Connor's pride in that possession and in "John's" friendship is a frank and simple pride. The influence of that bashful boy—whom his former master regards as "a big man" now—over his ageing friend illustrates Lanier's conception of the true poet as one whose

. song was only living aloud,
 His work, a singing with his hand.

The friendship is real and beautiful. Whenever he visits America, John pays Luke an early visit; and Luke has read with zest John's *Everlasting Mercy*, *The Widow in the Bye-Street*, *The Tragedy of Nan* and *Gallipoli*. Of these four he prefers, on the whole, *The Widow*, and expresses the considered opinion that John has "called a spade a spade in that book, now."

During the autumn of 1895 young Masefield was offered employment in the carpet factory of Alexander Smith and Son, at Yonkers, where he worked for two years. In the winter of that year he read in a periodical called *Truth* Duncan Campbell Scott's *Piper of Arll*, which, he wrote, "impressed me deeply, and set me on fire."³ And in 1896, as he states in the Preface to his *Collected Poems*, he first began "to read poetry with passion and system:"

Chaucer was the poet, and the *Parliament of Fowls* the poem, of my conversion. I read the *Parliament* all through one Sunday afternoon, with the feeling that I had been kept out of my inheritance and had then suddenly entered upon it, and had found it a new world of wonder and delight. I had never realized, until then, what poetry could be. After that Sunday afternoon I read many poets (Chaucer, Keats, Shelley, Milton and Shakespeare, more than others) and wrote many imitations of them.

3. Mr. Masefield asked and received Dr. Scott's permission to publish this poem in his anthology—*A Sailor's Garland*.

How Masfield's delight in Chaucer has affected some of his own narrative poems—particularly the first part of *Reynard the Fox*—is well known. Thirty-five years after his first contact with Chaucer he spoke of that master, in the Leslie Stephen Lecture at Cambridge, as uniting grace, colour and liveliness for the first time in English poetry.

At Yonkers, Masfield's income climbed to eight-and-a-half dollars a week, when he became a sort of inspector whose duty it was to compare the newly manufactured carpet with the original pattern. Much of his weekly wage he spent on books at the shop of William Palmer East. Here he bought his first copy of Chaucer, followed next week by Shelley and Keats. Shakespeare was staple food; Swinburne and Rossetti, Spenser and Sidney and Milton were added. In prose he read Dickens and Stevenson and Kipling, Hazlitt and De Quincey; and he kept at his French. When not at work, or not in the mood for reading, he tramped alone about the country. But he had his friends, especially one "Billy" Booth, himself a Shropshire man, who remembers Masfield's taste for good reading, the clever sketches he drew of sailing ships,⁴ and his somewhat melancholy disposition.

In 1897 Masfield returned to England, and, after several years of struggle, began his career as a writer. He was much helped by William Butler Yeats, whom he met in 1900 in London. Yeats rescued him from his own doubts, and gave him incentive, direction and self-confidence. "I owe everything to Yeats", he says. At Yeats's rooms—a gathering-place for young writers—he met Synge, who also became his friend. Galsworthy, too, and Granville Barker helped him. He slowly became more facile in writing both verse and prose, and in 1902 joined the reviewing staff of the *Manchester Guardian*. Soon afterwards he was made a temporary member of the editorial staff. In 1903 he married Constance, daughter of Nicholas de la Cherois-Crommelin, of Cushendun, County Antrim, Ireland. At this time he published his *Salt-Water Ballads*. In 1905 a group of short stories appeared under the title *A Mainsail Haul*, and in 1907 a similar collection called *A Tarpaulin Muster*. Next year came *Captain Margaret*, in which the beauty of ships and seas and sunsets is finely revealed. There is adequate humour, but relatively weak organisation. A second story, *Multitude and Solitude*, followed in 1909. This is, I think, Masfield's best novel, although it may deserve the stricture of Professor Beers, who thinks that "the tsetse fly is a worse burden than the grasshopper." The

4. In Mrs. Hardy's *Later Years of Thomas Hardy* she tells of a gift that Masfield made her husband on October 14, 1921,—a full-rigged ship named *The Triumph*, "much valued by Hardy, who showed it with pride to callers at Max Gate."

same year he published *The Tragedy of Nan*, which exhibits the influence of Hardy (particularly the Hardy of *The Return of the Native* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*), and remains Masefield's most moving play, although its tragic realism and its rather sentimental symbolism show some incompatibility of temper. (Masefield is not seldom sentimental. Despite his deep personal sincerity, yet as an artist he pulls that stop out too far and too frequently. But it is not his sole stop, nor his most controlling one.) Like Hardy's Egdon Heath, the Severn Bore here becomes at once a symbol and a character. Then came in 1910 *The Tragedy of Pompey the Great*, not I think, very successful. There is a wrenching at times of the mode and the key; the English idioms strike strangely; and the absence of Caesar hurts the play as the absence of Christ hurts *Good Friday*. In the same year the *Ballads* were reprinted and *Martin Hyde* appeared.

In 1911, however, Masefield really became Masefield with the publication in *The English Review* of his narrative poem, *The Everlasting Mercy*. This work troubled critics of the neatly docketing type, but took a large section of the reading public by storm. Here was a quiet, youngish man who had written sea-shanties with something of the verve and swing of Kipling, who had spun some rather good yarns, and who had written a play of real power. And now he turns out a tale in verse that shows, to be sure, much of the narrative vigour of Crabbe, but remains a tale of violence violently told, of "deliberate brutality in choice of story and of language", of "hotfoot energy", of sensational innovation. These charges did not worry the poet or his public. Some of them might even have been urged against Chaucer. As Mr. Masefield said years later in America: "The English poet likes to go into the market-place and see what is being done there. The English poets are perhaps less masters of men's minds than companions of men's spirits." He cited Chaucer, Shakespeare, and, in fiction, Dickens. He might have named Fielding also, and Burns, and Browning. Various as these men are, they are at one in their intense aliveness and humanity. There is a frankness of phrase at times in all of them that may seem to certain minds less than refined; but whenever poetry refuses to be coterminous with life itself, it restricts its power. "Poetry," said Sidney, "must depict all sides of life, base as well as virtuous." Beauty is not to be discovered only in grove and garden, only looking out from magic casements or dwelling within ancient towers. Beauty is of her very nature and function universal. If we find her in pine or peony, we can see her shining sometimes in poachers, too. Just as there is a good

in evil, a hope in ill-success, so is there a beauty latent in very ugliness. Who has better understood this than Shelley in *The Sensitive Plant*, or Browning in *Childe Roland*, or Poe in some of his finer tales of terror and horror? It is, of course, possible to transcend limits, to allow preoccupation with the ugly for its own sake to degenerate into the loathsome as against the artistic, but that charge cannot be maintained against Masefield. Art has full use for vigour and virility. Nor is there any necessary quarrel between Realist and Romanticist. Both see life as symbolic, and both select for artistic patterning such symbols as their imaginations find useful. The Realist suspects the presence of Beauty in the bare and commonplace fact, the existence there of an intense meaning that may be carelessly passed by; the Romanticist hovers more hopefully over the exceptional, even the exotic flower in life's garden. As I have tried to suggest elsewhere,—

The art that is broad enough to include the whispered assonances of Poe, the cryptic chants of Emerson, the flooding harmonies of Shelley, the dreamy magic of Coleridge and of Keats, the subtle appraisals of Browning, and the marrowy tales of Masefield, can reject neither the bare, hard fact of the Realist nor the "sleep and forgetting" of the Romanticist, provided only that the offering be beautiful in spirit and in truth The difference is one of varying preference and emphasis in the choice and treatment of material. The same poet may write (as Masefield does) with equal success and sincerity now in one mode, now in another; only he must make sure that fact-symbol and fancy-symbol are in each case prescribed by his imagination, and that the focus of his vision does not suffer distortion.⁵

Masefield had now found his *métier*. The *Widow in the Bye-Street*—a complement to *The Everlasting Mercy*—came out in 1912, and so did *Dauber*. In both of these yarns and elsewhere, the poet uses Rime Royal, a stanza peculiarly in tune with human nature—at any rate, with the English nature. Our poet considers it "one of the most useful and beautiful of our verse-forms, far better suited to Narrative than the more complex and more difficult Spenserian stanza." For myself, I should rather agree with Saintsbury, that it is "a stanza-of-all-work" . . . "The expression of clangorous cry it can do supremely. . . Its compass is not quite so wide as its appeal is poignant." To one of these poems—*Dauber*—we shall return.

Masefield's novels—or rather yarns in prose—include also *Lost Endeavour*, a very uneven work; *The Street of To-day*—a good story well told; *Sard Harker*, a glorified melodrama, redeemed

5. Introduction to *A Treasury of War Poetry*, Second Series (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).

only by the beauty of the style and the sheer narrative power of Part III; *Odtaa*, a similar pot-boiler; and *The Hawbucks*, a rural English tale giving the people of *Reynard the Fox* a chance to achieve full-bodied identities and striking adventures.

Among Masefield's remaining plays, *Philip the King* was not written at his best moment. *The Faithful* is based on an old Japanese household story. It contains some noble wisdoms and some lovely songs, but seems rather episodic, and incurs the judgment of a Japanese critic that Mr. Masefield "did not understand well the feudal system of Japan in the eighteenth century" . . . "the anachronism of the play is beyond expression." *Good Friday* is also too panoramic, yet shows a poet's sympathy for Jesus and a good man's understanding of him. *The Trial of Jesus* (1925)⁶ completes *Good Friday* and compensates for its omissions. The grave serenity of Masefield's religious faith, with its native yet rather Yeatsian mysticism, shines through a long range of works like these and *The Coming of Christ*, as far back as the conclusion to *The Everlasting Mercy*, through *Esther*, *A King's Daughter*, *King Cole* and the sonnets. *Esther* is an adaptation, and *Berenice* a translation of the corresponding works of Racine. In *A King's Daughter* (in which, as *Punch* has remarked, the author says a few kind words for Jezebel) the intensely dramatic element in the Old Testament story has called to him across the deeps of time, and his warm human sympathy has enabled him to reconstruct the essential scene and problem. The play has atmosphere, unity, historic core, and causal inevitableness of crisis and conclusion. *Melloney Holtspur* has a bit of Barrie's favourite ingredient—romantic supernormalism. It is not well knit, nor does it promote an effective catharsis. It involves the difficult question of the interrelation of art and morality, a question, I think, that Mr. Masefield has not yet fully faced, so that, although his art is hardly ever moralistic, it sometimes seems over-indulgent to moral conventions as such. His latest full-length play, *Tristan and Isolt*, feels Hardy's influence again. Its great passage is that in which Isolt addresses herself to death.

Omitting mention of Masefield's editorial and critical work, (his little book on Shakespeare is well worth while), of his tales for or about children, and of his studies of the Great War, we may touch briefly the remaining narrative poems and then deal more directly with *Dauber*. *The Daffodil Fields* uses much the same motive as does *Enoch Arden*. It excels Tennyson's poem in its characterizations, its narrative power, and its human pity. *Rey-*

6. cf. Yeats's *Calvary*, in *Four Plays for Dancers*.

nard the Fox is a vividly realistic account of an English fox-hunt, in which the poet transfers his prime interest from a human to an animal hero, as Kipling and Kenneth Grahame and some of our Canadian writers had done before him. Our sympathy is quickly enlisted for the fox, not as a fox, but as a hunted canny creature whose endurance in the face of heart-breaking difficulties deserves escape, and a good-night view of the grey beech wood and the "moonlight fallen in pools of light" with a lyrical picture of which this memorably English poem closes. *Right Royal* is the story of a steeplechase, of a noble horse's great day. *King Cole* has much emotional eloquence, especially in the ending, and brings us very close to that quality in its writer that we may call his inborn loving-kindness. The later narrative poems appear in the two volumes called *A Midsummer Night* (Arthurian folk-lore) and *Minnie Maylow's Story*, (ancient, mediaeval and modern tales).

The poem *Dauber* seems to me to mark the height of its author's achievement in this kind. It is a poem for youth and age, but particularly, perhaps, for youth. One fine-grained boy, Charles Hamilton Sorley, himself a poet, who was killed in the Great War, wrote at his school in Marlborough a glowing appreciation of it, *The Widow*, and *The Everlasting Mercy*.⁷ It is greater, I think, than *The Everlasting Mercy* and *The Widow* because it is less episodic. No doubt, the episodes of those poems tie in with the psychological unity of their themes and with the unity of their dramatic intentions. In *Reynard the Fox*—second only to *Dauber* among the narrative poems—the chase itself makes for unity, but prelude descriptions of hunter and hunted have filled out half the poem. These descriptions are of Chaucerian quality, and we do not wish them cancelled or curtailed, yet they seem disproportionate to the movement as a whole. Indeed, this fact betrays Mr. J. C. Squire into calling *Reynard* "first and foremost a descriptive poem," although he afterwards acknowledges that "the story more than holds one," and that, while still twenty pages from the end, he turned excitedly to the last page to see whether there was a happy ending. But *Dauber* has not only the subjective coherence and completeness belonging to its hero's inner history, but also the objective group-unity provided by his roundhouse environment and contact, with the unbroken accompaniment of the ship in her changing motions and of the sea in her changing moods. *Enslaved*, an exciting, tonic tale of land and sea, has something of the same tonal and personal unity, but is turned, after *The Arabian Nights* and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, toward far romance. There are three great move-

7. See *The Letters of Charles Sorley*, pp. 24-38.

ments in *Dauber*: (1) the exposition, *Storm Anticipated*; (2) the development, *Storm Realized*; (3) the conclusion, *Aftermath of Storm*.

The exposition, perhaps a spiritual autobiography, consists of the first three parts. It introduces, aboard a clipper bound for Valparaiso, the slight hero Dauber, only son of a widowed Gloucestershire farmer, who has sought to brighten his old age by securing his boy's assurance that he, too, will cultivate these storied fields. But Dauber, an instinctive artist, has resisted his father's and sister's appeals. He knows that death would not greatly trouble his father if he could die

Knowing our work was going on here still.

But Dauber loathes the farm, looks upon it as a prison, and dreams secretly of some day becoming a painter. He had once found in a disused attic his dead mother's sketch-book:

There were her drawings, dated, pencilled faint.
 March was the last one, eighteen eighty-three,
 Unfinished that, for tears had smeared the paint.
 The rest was landscape, not yet brought to be.
 That was a holy afternoon to me;
 That book a sacred book; the flat a place
 Where I could meet my mother face to face.

In the earlier version of the poem the author likens the union of Dauber's parents to that between a rose and an oak. It is perhaps a pity that the simile does not reappear in the revised version, for the whole work unfolds Dauber's character as partaking of both the qualities thus symbolized. His sister Jane, the better farmer of the two, resents his attitude, and attributes it to his likeness to their mother. Dauber knows that the country sights he loves most are those of brooks and banks, millponds and moorhens' nests. His delight is "to be near water flowing." In this respect, as in some other ways, he resembles Mr. Masefield himself, who has written in *Sard Harker* that "all water interests a sailor," and whose own stories and poems on ships and seas and storms seem saturated with salt water.⁸ A rainy day brings him no regrets. He told me once, after he had visited the city of Memphis, Tennessee, that he hoped to return some day to see again the great Mississippi River. "I never quite understood *Huckleberry Finn* until I saw that," he said.

8. Cf. *Sea-Fever*, *The "Wanderer"* (first poem of this name), stanzas 50-52; *The River*; "the brook," "the rain," "the mist" and "Severn stream" in *The Everlasting Mercy*; the "glimmering pool" and "the night lonely with the water's tone" in *The Widow in the Bye-Street*; the fourth paragraph of the fourth chapter in *The Hawbucks*; the eleventh and twenty-third stanzas of *Tristan's Singing*; the sixth speech of Richard in *Richard Whittington*; etc.

At length Dauber was forced to make a final choice. He left his father's farm for good and went to his mother's brother, who understood him in a measure and helped him to learn house-painting. The beauty of a gallant clipper as she came up the Severn to her dock confirmed his still vague intention—

to see the sea and ships, and what they meant.

He resolved to sign on as a vessel's painter or "Dauber" that he might study at first-hand the sight and style of great ships at sea, the ways of sailors at their work, the colours and movements of the sea itself:

It's not been done, the sea, not yet been done,
From the inside, by one who really knows;
I'd give up all if I could be the one,
But art comes dear the way the money goes.
So I have come to sea, and I suppose
Three years will teach me all I want to learn,
And make enough to keep me till I earn.

These words are spoken by Dauber to Si, a young reefer or apprentice whose friendly interest in Dauber is checked and forbidden by the Mate. Dauber is telling Si the story of his life, while the latter half-listens, half-dozes. Through this skilful use of economy Mr. Masefield supplies the necessary antecedent action. The chief note of the exposition as a whole is Dauber's anticipation of the sea's violence as the vessel approaches Cape Horn, his fearfulness as a physically weak man, and his fascination as a spiritually eager artist. His fellows on board the great clipper jeer at his awkwardnesses and his timidities, and play heartless practical jokes at his expense; the officers can make nothing of him; and his objective life becomes a hell of misery and scorn. But something within him, in spite of all, keeps Dauber going. This something is his feeling that he is, however humbly, a servant of the principle of Beauty, whose thousand aspects by day and by night reduce him to a state of worshipful despair; yet tighten his allegiance into stubborn determination to do what he can—to try to express, however ineffectively, his sights and insights. He feels "the joy of trying for Beauty." In that at least he need not fail. And to his scoffing mates, who tell him that he cannot paint and bid him drop his nonsense, the "oak" in Dauber replies:

You've said enough . . . now let it end.
Who cares how bad my painting may be? I
Mean to go on, and, if I fail, to try.
However much I miss of my intent,
If I have done my best I'll be content.

* * * * *

My sketch may be a daub, for aught I care.
 You may be right. But even if you were,
 Your mocking should not stop this work of mine;
 Rot though it be, its prompting is divine.

Here indeed we find the explanation of that vague death-word of Dauber,—his faith in the lasting power of Beauty to reveal her meanings to men:

“It will go on,” he murmured, watching Si.
 Colours and sounds seemed mixing in the air.
 The pain was stunning him, and the wind went by.
 “More water,” said the Mate. “Here, Bosun, try.
 Ask if he’s got a message. Hell, he’s gone!
 Here, Dauber, paints.” He said, “It will go on,”

Not knowing his meaning rightly, but he spoke
 With the intensesness of a fading soul
 Whose share of Nature’s fire turns to smoke,
 Whose hand on Nature’s wheel loses control.
 The eager faces glowered red like coal.
 They glowed, the great storm glowed, the sails, the mast.
 “It will go on,” he cried aloud, and passed.

Over and over again, during the first movement of the poem, does Dauber wonder about the days to come. If he is despised of all men now,

What harvest would he reap of hate and grief
 When the loud Horn made every life a hell?
 When the sick ship lay over, clanging her bell,
 And no time came for painting or for drawing,
 But all hands fought, and icy death came clawing?

At any rate the painter in him will see the

. . . faces ducked down from the slanting drive
 Of half-thawed hail mixed with half-frozen spray,
 The roaring canvas like a thing alive,
 Shaking the mast, knocking their hands away,
 The foot-ropes jerking to the tug and sway,
 The savage eyes salt-reddened at the rims,
 And icicles on the southwester brims.

Yet he fears these unknown dangers, for when the June gales of Cape Horn come upon them, he will be no longer “idler” and “Dauber”, but will be rated seaman like the rest, and must with them man the terrifying yards in intense cold and endless wind and snow. How shall he bring his honour round the Horn unstained?

With Part IV of the old version and Part V of the new the posing of the problem is concluded. The development, the process of its actual solving, begins in Part V, old version, and Part VI

new version. It is here in this second movement that the narrative reaches the height of its power in dramatic excitement and purely poetic utterance. In the first forty-three stanzas of this Part the style becomes an indispensable part of the content, as the poet essays the description of a great storm at sea. Memory and imagination unite to produce these vibrating chords. We are made to feel the cold menace in the voice of the gale:

Denser it grew, until the ship was lost.
The elemental hid her; she was merged
In mufflings of dark death, like a man's ghost,
New to the change of death, yet thither urged.
Then from the hidden waters something surged—
Mournful, despairing, great, greater than speech,
A noise like one slow wave on a still beach.

Mournful, and then again mournful, and still
Out of the night that mighty voice arose;
The Dauber at his foghorn felt the thrill.
Who rode that desolate sea? What forms were those?
Mournful, from things defeated, in the throes
Of memory of some conquered hunting-ground,
Out of the night of death arose the sound.

And we are made to feel, too, the presence of something diabolical in the fury now let loose to smite and smite again the staggering ship. Scores of fleeting scenes are drawn in stern, spare strokes and quick ellipses, in a fashion that only the imagination of a seaman could conceive, or that of a poet realize in words. For Mr. Masefield knows the sea as Conrad knows it, and as neither Swinburne nor Noyes, not even Kipling has known it, from long and constant intimacy. In an almost forgotten paper, *Sea Songs*,⁹ he writes such sentences as these:

Day after day, in the Cape Horn cold, with the decks awash, and the seas heaving up into a dingy sky, the worn-out men gather at the halliards, to make sail after a storm. The icy ropes are stretched along; the canvas slats up aloft, and the monotonous crying out begins, with the yards jolting, and the sheets clacking on the masts.

It had been blowing hard for a week, but the wind had at last died down, and we were making sail. A heavy sea was running. It was so cold that the water which came aboard was slushy with ice. The day was a typical Cape Horn day, grim and lowering. It was under these conditions that I first heard the song. I have always thought that it expressed perfectly, in its melancholy, wavering music, the grey sea, with its mournful birds, and the wind in the rigging, and the disconsolate seamen on the rope.

9. See *Temple Bar* (London), January, 1906.

The Rime Royal in *Dauber* is much better handled and is in any case a more inevitable form than in *The Widow in the Bye-Street*. The devices—and they are many—seem as natural here as the relentless diction itself. Here are short vivid phrases crowding one another in nervous haste; grim Dantean metaphors; despairful repetitions, as of *mournful* and *multitudinous*; onomatopoeia, as in

The thundering rattle of slatting shook the sheaves,
Startles of water made the swing-ports gush;

poised parallelisms in verbs and adjectives; symbols of marginal horror; suggestions of physical reaction to fear and pain; the endless refrain of the wind's cold wail, and the failing cry of swift-blown birds.

And behind all this are the motives that make for the impressive unity of *Dauber*—the quality of the oak in this unfriended lad now that he must share the hard fact-fare that makes manhood; and the changing relations of ship and sea, now in collaboration, now in collision. Of the varying gait of the clipper (the restless scene of the whole story, as the sea is its immediate background) the poet never fails to keep us aware. The poem pauses, or gathers speed, or drives dead onward with her:

They stood there by the rail while the swift ship
Tore on out of the tropics, straining her sheets.

Again, she strode like a queen, or "rushed with fire-bright bows", or "stumbled through the smother", or "trampled the seas to yeast," or—

Drowsed as a snail the clipper loitered south
Slowly, with no white bone across her mouth.

Or still again—

Southward she thundered while the westers held,
Proud, with taut bridles, pawing, but compelled.

Then—

All through the windless night the clipper rolled
In a great swell with oily gradual heaves
Which rolled her down until her time-bells tolled.

In the heart of the storm—

Darkness came down—half darkness—in a whirl;
The sky went out, the waters disappeared.
He felt a shocking pressure of blowing hurl
The ship upon her side. The darkness spared
At her with wind; she staggered, she careered,
Then down she lay. The Dauber felt her go;
He saw his yard tilt downwards. Then the snow

Whirled all about—dense, multitudinous, cold—
 Mixed with the wind's one devilish thrust and shriek,
 Which whiffled out men's tears, deafened, took hold,
 Flattening the flying drift against the cheek.
 The yards buckled and bent, man could not speak.
 The ship lay on her broadside; the wind's sound
 Had devilish malice at having got her downed.

After the first furling of sail—

He heard the wind go past
 Making the great ship wallow as if drunk.

And for a time, between storm and aftermath,—

The ship limped in the water as if lame.

Aftermath begins with Part VII of the New version. A slant comes from the south, more sail is made, the ship stands north, the Horn is rounded:

She made a thundering as she weltered through.
 The mighty greybacks glittered as she bounded.
 More sail was piled upon her; she was hounded
 North, while the wind came; like a stag she ran
 Over grey hills and hollows of seas wan.

But before haven is reached, Cape Horn tries conclusions once more:

The Captain eyed her aft, sucking his lip,
 Feeling the sail too much, but yet refraining
 From putting hobbles on the leaping ship,
 The glad sea-shattering stallion, halter-straining,
 Wing-musical, uproarious, and complaining.

The end comes at last for the humble hero; the last lashing of the last storm ceases; the body of defeated Dauber is committed to the deep, one of his mates insisting that he had been a Jonah, and

once again
 The clipper held her course, showing red lead,
 Shattering the sea-tops into golden rain.
 The waves bowed down before her like blown grain;
 Onwards she thundered, on; her voyage was short
 Before the tier's bells rang her into port.

Cheerly they rang her in, those beating bells,
 The new-come beauty stately from the sea,
 Whitening the blue heave of the drowsy swells,
 Treading the bubbles down. With three times three
 They cheered her moving beauty in, and she
 Came to her berth so noble, so superb;
 Swayed like a queen, and answered to the curb.

Dauber's end is in some sort both actual history and imagined tragedy. Of the genesis of the poem Mr. Masefield has said: "I once knew of a boy with that desire—to see and to paint the sea. He died of a fall from aloft."¹⁰ The accident is made realistically sudden and startling. During the final gale Dauber, now first aloft, is trying with his mate to stow an outer jib-stay when a vicious gust wrests his part of the sail from his hands, and he falls some 150 feet to the deck. He soon passes away in great physical pain, yet with strange peace of spirit. The tale is tensely told, Dauber's own point of view being used during the progress of the accident. The death scene is drawn with a comrade-like compassion, and the awkward reserve of the men (whose respect Dauber had won, though not their understanding) is quietly recorded. There is no questionable sentimentalism here. Dauber has been caught in the tragic rebound. "He was off duty," and his fellows stared at him with rough regret:

At dawn they sewed him up, and at eight bells
 They bore him to the gangway, wading deep
 Through the green-clutching, white-toothed water-hells
 That flung his carriers over in their sweep.
 They laid an old red ensign on the heap,
 And all hands stood bare-headed, stooping, swaying,
 Washed by the sea while the old man was praying,

Out of a borrowed prayer-book. At a sign
 They switched the ensign back and tipped the grating:
 A creamier bubbling broke the bubbling brine.
 The muffled figure tilted to the weighting;
 It dwindled slowly down, slowly gyrating.
 Some craned to see; it dimmed, it disappeared;
 The last green milky bubble blinked and cleared.

At sunset the ship makes her harbour. With two stanzas remotely reminiscent of medial and final passages in Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*, the poem concludes. The last stanza in *Dauber* is the most symbolic utterance in the whole work, symbolic of the relations of life and death; and of art and Dauber, the servant of art:

Silent the figure of the summit stood,
 Icy in pure, thin air, glittering with snows.
 Then the sun's coming turned the peak to blood,
 And in the rest-house the muleteers arose.
 And all day long, where only the eagle goes,
 Stones, loosened by the sun, fall; the stones falling
 Fill empty gorge on gorge with echoes calling.

10. Cf. *The Haubucks*, p. 183.

So far as I know, no other poem of Mr. Masefield's has been subjected to such close and patient revision. And this fact seems the more important when we come reluctantly to believe that Mr. Masefield does not habitually revise enough. At any rate, he has given us in no other instance two strikingly differentiated versions of the same work.

The poem first appeared in the *English Review* for October, 1912, and was published in book form during November of the same year. The original version contains 303 stanzas, and the later revised form 261. The consequent shortening of the poem by 42 stanzas was achieved by omitting 59 of the old stanzas and by adding 17 new ones. In several cases two or more stanzas have been telescoped into one, and in these and other instances there has been considerable phrasal revision.

Similar meticulous revision of both organization and style would, I think, prove a great advantage in much of Mr. Masefield's work. He writes earnestly, and with the savour of his own fine sympathy. He has a deep compassion for the under-dog; he has a mystic's yearning for a more universally compelling Beauty than sensuous forms—mere symbols of Shelley's "awful Loveliness"—can provide; he has an almost painful awareness of the narrow limitations of life and of love. He is filled with human pity, but do we find in him enough of the right pride of the artist? After all, he often is and should always seek to be an artist first—a tolerant and comprehending artist; and, only a long way after, a particular prescriber for the social ills of mankind. Even at its best, his prescription is simply more Beauty, more Hellenism. But does he steadily seek thus to heal himself? He worships at the shrine of Beauty, but he often grows impatient of her ritual. "Art will not have the half, but whole." And, as we have seen, Mr. Masefield is too often content with a fractional approximation to good writing. Witness his frequently loose, makeshift rhymes; his use in otherwise blank verse of sudden, solitary couplets; his casual diction; his lapses in tone-colour and even at times in syntax; his echoings and repetitions from work to work. In the revised *Dauber*, and in the Shakespearean sonnet-sequence to which I have referred, he shows himself so careful and conscientious a writer that we can only regret his failure in some of his other works to consider his style as loyally as his content. In work of the first order these two must become fused and inseparable. But Mr. Masefield seems characteristically much more concerned with the fine intention of his work than with its finished execution. He desires the intention, apparently, to do most of the actual writing on its own

account. Only so can one explain the relatively careless phrasing and unconsidered padding of most of his prose stories, from *Captain Margaret* to *Odtaa*, and from *Martin Hyde* to *The Midnight Folk*. In this never too attractive department of his work he seems to show steady decline. Power has slowly gone out of him. It is a pity, perhaps, not that he should have tried prose fiction, but that he should have published so much practice-work. He is so interesting and appealing at his best, that we may become too quickly dissatisfied with his worst. But his very determination to try his hand at so many forms—the lyric, the ballad, the narrative poem, the reflective sonnet, the essay, the drama, (realistic, historical, legendary and fantastic), and prose fiction—suggests, on the one hand, a certain striving tentativeness in his own mode and means as an artist, a discontent, perhaps, with *any* mode and means—a desire to break through language and escape; and, on the other hand, a wish to become a good general practitioner in the field of literature.

But to return to *Dauber*. Its revision has immensely improved it as regards both structure and style. Mr. Masefield has wisely compressed the too bulky original, has practised specific condensation in the merging of two or more stanzas in one, has bettered his diction and his arrangement in many instances, and has more quickly given the story its impetus. To be sure, we have lost occasionally some good lines through the omission of certain stanzas mediocre in themselves; yet in nearly all of these sacrificed passages we must respect the poet's decision. He shows equal skill as a reviser in his handling of the six consecutive stanzas cancelled after the original Part II. These stanzas are atmospherically valuable, yet by their omission that part of the poem as such gains greatly in reserve and imaginative suggestion. Mr. Masefield does not completely discard them, however, but uses four of them as the second, third, fourth and fifth of a newly and wisely created Part IV. Most of the 59 cancelled stanzas are really redundant extensions of description or dialogue that add much to the length of the poem, but little to its worth. We may notice, too, the phrasal gains in such instances as the following:

ORIGINAL VERSION

REVISED VERSION

"He stayed a moment"

"And stand there silent"

"That was my aim: I worked at
that, I toiled"

"Drawing became my lite. I
drew, I toiled"

ORIGINAL VERSION	REVISED VERSION
"And go aloft high on the yellow yard"	"And go aloft with them to man the yard"
"The yard shook to men's feet, a brace was loose"	"The yard was shaking, for a brace was loose"
"He had endured the worst, he had passed through;	"Fronted the worst and looked it in the face;
He thought of all the pictures he would do."	He had got manhood at the testing-place."

Both versions of *Dauber* tell, with a difference, the same invigorating tale of the sea, and reveal the virtues of courage and loyalty in the pursuit of a great ideal, and in the face of danger and defeat. But only the second version has a really adequate organization, and an unflinching dignity—however the tone-levels may vary—as a work of art. The poem discovers the relativity of success and failure (a favourite theme of Browning's) with clear insight. It discovers, too, the conspicuous merits of its author's character—simplicity, tolerance, folk-sympathy and moral earnestness. Mr. Masefield may not be a first-rate thinker, yet he has a compelling magic quite his own as a story-teller. Like his own King Cole, he is a companion of the heart, who has transmuted a rich and adventurous experience into many sensitively imagined meanings. Although, as he insists, he is not a learned man, yet we feel that he has read widely and wisely. *Dauber* is, then, the intense word of a quiet man who feels intensely, who has compassion on the frail and the unhappy, who knows much of human nature and hopes much for human betterment, and who feels a passion truly mystical for Beauty in its thousand visible forms as cloudy symbols, flowing and fleeting, of the "primal sympathy" of Wordsworth, the "daedal harmony" of Shelley, and the "spiritual witness new and new" of Browning.