

COLLECTED POEMS

VINCENT STARRETT
(1886-1974)

Edited & Introduced by
Peter Ruber

With a Poetic Foreword by
Christopher Morley

The Vincent Starrett Memorial Library
Volume 1



THE BATTERED SILICON DISPATCH BOX
2000

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IT WAS THE 6TH OF MAY, 1962, a typically hot and steamy day in Chicago. I was sitting in Vincent Starrett's book-infested study at 3749 North Fremont Street. The room was a jumble of books and papers, with patches of dust and an occasional spider web. I never felt more at home. Although we were separated by more than a half-century of time, the conversation flowed effortlessly. It always did when you engaged Vincent in the subject of books and authors. As fellow journalist Harry J. Owens wrote in his introduction to Vincent's 1958 *Book Column*, he had an "encyclopedic" knowledge of books and authors, and he spoke of these subjects with such erudition and enthusiasm, that you would be filled with the desire to run to the nearest second-hand bookshop and spend every dime in your pocket.

Many years have passed, but I remember all of my visits as vividly today as I did when they took place. These memories are reinforced every time I thumb through my collection of special books which I hunted down in antiquarian bookshops because of his pervasive influence. Vincent Starrett was, as Carl Sandburg remembered him, a "timeless human being." He is still a timeless human being twenty-one years after his death.

Many of my early literary enthusiasms have faded over time, but I can still reread Vincent Starrett's books with enjoyment, even though they have become very familiar to me. My favorites are his collections of essays about books and writers – *Buried Caesars*, *Penny Wise & Book Foolish*, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, *Persons from Porlock*, *Books Alive*, *Bookman's Holiday*, *Books & Bipeds*, *Best Loved Books of the 20th Century*, and *Book Column*. Various library publishers have kept some of these in print over the years. *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, in particular, keeps surfacing in new editions every decade or so.

Books & Bipeds, *Best Loved Books of the 20th Century*, and *Book Column* were culled from the weekly "Books Alive" column he wrote for the *Chicago Tribune's* Sunday literary supplement between 1942 and 1968, a job he relished greatly. *Best Loved Books* was suggested by paperback publisher, Bantam Books, Inc. The publisher asked the *Chicago Tribune* if Vincent would devote his entire 1954 column to writing about the best loved books to coincide with the publisher's reprinting them in paperback. Vincent agreed and this book of columns appeared in 1955.

When the *Chicago Tribune* closed down its Sunday literary supplement in 1968, it also marked the end of Vincent Starrett's 63 years as a journalist. Age and his declining health had taken its toll on him. In 1969, when Rachel Latimer Starrett, his second wife of nearly 30 years died, he put aside his typewriter forever. Vincent died on January 5, 1974 at the age of 87.

He was buried in an unmarked grave, save for a number on a stone. When news of this unmarked grave reached The Mystery Writers of

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America, they took up a collection for a fitting tombstone. Vincent had been a past president of the Mystery Writers and the first recipient of its “Grand Masters of Mystery” award.

Vincent began his newspaper career at the age of 18 as a cub reporter, in 1905, on the old Chicago *Inter-Ocean*. He moved on to the Chicago *Daily News* the following year, and eventually became that paper’s leading crime reporter. During the early 1910’s, the Chicago *Daily News* became the nucleus for the famous Chicago literary renaissance, about which much has been written.

Within a few short years many brash young writers cut their literary teeth at the *News*, including Carl Sandburg, Ben Hecht, Charlie MacArthur, Burton Rascoe, Charles Layng, Harry Hansen, Harry J. Owens, and others. All contributed voluminously to local and regional literary magazines and many had their first books published by Chicago bookseller/publishers like Walter M. Hill and Covici-McGee.

Vincent’s first published book was a collection of poems entitled *Estrays*. Actually, it was a collaborative effort between Vincent, George Steele Seymour, Thomas Kennedy and Basil Thompson, who each contributed \$25 to have the collection privately printed. This event so outraged Hill and Pascal Covici, because there were so few local publishers willing to give young writers a chance, that they went into the publishing business on shoestring budgets. Later, legendary bookseller Ben Abramson joined the pack and helped to make Chicago a major publishing center during the 1920s.

Although Vincent was known primarily as an essayist and a writer of mystery stories, he published three major poetry collections between 1922 and 1924 – *Ebony Flame*, *Banners in the Dawn* and *Flame and Dust*. With the addition of two slim paperbound items – *Rhymes for Collectors* (1921) and *Fifteen More Poems* (1927) – Vincent had to wait nearly two decades for the 1943 publication of his magnum opus, *Autolycus in Limbo*. *Brillig*, his last poetry collection, came out in 1949.

Only *Autolycus* had a decent printing of 1500 copies. The rest were limited editions of several hundred copies each, and the total number of copies of all editions was a mere 3610 copies. It is little wonder that Vincent Starrett only achieved a clandestine reputation as a poet. *Autolycus* and *Brillig* reprinted the best of his early poems, plus new ones that he had written.

While Vincent’s reputation as a poet was always obscured by his mystery stories, he had a fervent hope that one day his best poetry would be collected into a book. Shortly after the publication of my Starrett biographical-memoir, *The Last Bookman* (1968), I discussed such a book with him. We had planned to call it *Death-Watch*, after the title of a poem

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about a newspaper's press room. Unfortunately, the publisher was caught up in a recession and went out of business before we could complete the project.

But I did not give up hope for putting such a collection together. Early in 1994, on the 20th anniversary of his death, I decided to take care of this "unfinished business" by publishing it myself. After building a database of titles, I began to key Vincent's poetry into my computer. I also hunted through my extensive collection of his leaflets, privately-printed Christmas cards, newspaper and magazine clippings for other uncollected gems. Several unpublished poems were found in letters to friends, and a few, like "Sea Story," were given to me by Vincent in manuscript form during one of our meetings.

I hesitate to claim that this edition is "complete." No doubt the Starrett manuscript collection at the University of Minnesota's Wilson Library has other unpublished poems, but as they are still not catalogued after 10 years, this poetry collection is as complete as it is likely to get in my lifetime. However, the 300 plus poems in this collection are still a considerable literary achievement, and when you read them you'll understand why.

In his introduction to *Autolycus in Limbo*, critic William Rose Benét wrote: "Mr. Starrett supplies something alien to modern verse, and something we are glad to have persisting, namely: humor. Humor is more mellow than mere wit ... Humor is richer, rich with the juices of human existence. When you have humor joined to the instinctive feeling for the expressive word or phrase, which is part of the equipment of the poet, you have something unusual. Mr. Starrett is not afraid of the line that may startle or waylay. I have had some rare moments with this manuscript, when suddenly something so very good sprang from the page that one gave it the recognition of a delightful gasp ... His [poetry] as a whole can safely be left to the literary connoisseur."

Vincent was a master story teller in the truest sense of the phrase. He had a lean, direct style honed by years of writing for the newspapers, and you'll rarely find a superfluous word or phrase in anything he wrote. This style is also evident in his poetry. Most of his poems tell a story of an event or describe a scene or a mood, laced with occasional cynicism or a macabre sense of humor.

Many examples spring to mind because Vincent wrote many great poems, rich with phrases that roll deliciously over one's tongue. Vincent's poetry is largely traditional in form and style, even though experimental poetry was the rage during his heyday. By far his favorite and most effective poetic form was the sonnet, rigid in its rhyming patterns, in which he reveals his artistry and his gift for story-telling. An excellent example is his classic sonnet about Francois Villon, the 15th Century French poet-part-time-thief-

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and-drunkard, called appropriately enough, “Villon Strolls at Midnight.”

There are some wonderful lines in this poem, in which Villon talks to his companion Tabary about the corpse they see dangling from a tree – “Look! Where the moonlight and the shadows kiss.” The last six-line stanza of the sonnet is as eerie as any horror story I’ve ever read:

“See where the gibbet rises, gaunt and slim –
Curse me, the wind has thrust my entrails through!
It dangles fruit to-night – not me nor you –
Hark to the clatter of the bones of him.
They rattle like – Ho, do you catch your breath? –
Like castanets snapped in the hands of Death!”

William Rose Benét also commented that “notably, there is an occasional flicker of malice in this man, which is excellent.” But sometimes it is more than just malice. Vincent can inject irony about human vanity that will often make you smile or bite your tongue. It might even be called poetry with a twist ending, for it startles the unwary reader with each turn of the page. At other times his poetry is robust and frolicsome, especially when he is writing about bookish subjects and historical characters.

Sometimes it is sad, like the two poems about his father, “Galley Slave” and “November 24, 1918.” In the former he writes about man who spent his life as an accountant, “Christ, what a beaten way to end one’s innings / Totaling up another fellow’s winnings;” in the latter he remembers his father’s death as “...in that dreadful moment by his side / It was my father’s son that gasped and died.”

Much of Vincent’s poetry has a knack for painting images. Buried in the back pages of *Autolytus* is his poem “Pictures,” so stripped of verbal ornaments that it remains with the reader long after he has read it for the first time –

Brown for the autumn leaves,
Green for the tree,
White for the flying sail,
Blue for the sea;
Gray for the solemn priest,
Red for the lass,
Black for the silent boy
Dead in the grass.

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As scathing and amusing as his portraits of women sometimes were, he did not exempt himself from criticism, especially in three autobiographical poems – “La Vie Litteraire,” “Carpe Diem,” and “Self Portrait.” He displays a puckish sense of humor, particularly in his sonnet “Self Portrait”:

A faintly Jewish, somewhat Spanish visage:
Nose nearly Roman, hairless lip and jowl,
And shaggy thatch; eyes that incline to prowl
Behind horn spectacles, in gentle quizzage.
Tall, but of proudly curving appetite,
Garments, that hang like some grotesque conceit;
Abstracted manner, save when inward heat
Gives off in stream of talk, late in the night.

Kindly, indeed, except when roused to rages,
Soothed by tobacco and by skillful cooks;
Fond of the gallant company of books,
And villains of all languages and ages.
Withal, a decent chap who likes the ladies
And daily paves a goodish stretch of hades.

A critic once remarked that Vincent Starrett’s poems “echo golden phrases of literature; they play with parody and well loved writing, and to ‘men and deeds already trite’ they give new contemporaneousness. More urban than Herrick, less fanciful than Lewis Carroll or Lear, Mr. Starrett in his poetic phrase belongs in the great tradition of Horace and Praed, which is good enough company for any reader’s money.”

Burton Rascoe, one of Vincent’s journalistic pals, who later moved on to become editor of McCall’s magazine, frequently asked Vincent for a contribution. To one of these requests Vincent once replied: “A couple of poems, preferably ones which will appeal to women.’ ‘Tis a tall order! I have many poems, of course, and in most of them there is an undercurrent of cynicism – at the mildest, polite irony.” He frequently referred to his own poetry as “bibliofrolic verse.”

The great bulk of Vincent’s poetry was written by the early 1920s, as he commuted to work to the Chicago *Daily News* and then to his job as editor of the *Austinite*, a group of suburban Chicago weekly newspapers “stuffed

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with dreadful local gossip.” He would scribble them on scraps of paper torn from his reporter’s notebook. “Villon Strolls at Midnight” was originally composed in 1917, and between appearances in magazines and in several of his poetry collections, Vincent played with the words. He was a craftsman, rarely satisfied with any poem he had written, and revising them became an obsession with him.

“I confess I do not greatly like it myself after I see it in print,” he once wrote to Esther Longfellow, one of his most ardent fans and collectors, and he spent his odd hours revising his favorite poems and stories and reselling them to other magazines. Early poems appearing in his later collections were frequently changed. In all cases I selected the latest published version.

I thought it would be appropriate to include Christopher Morley’s delightful and amusing “Gentlemen’s Relish” as a poetic foreword to this collection. Morley and Starrett were literary men cut from the same cloth and were close friends and colleagues for more than a quarter century. “Gentlemen’s Relish” was a review of Vincent’s *Autolycus in Limbo*, which appeared originally in 1943 in the pages of the Saturday Review of Literature. In 1955 he used it as a title to one of his own volumes of verse.

I hope you will enjoy this collection of Vincent Starrett’s poetry, and that it will give you the kind of pleasure it has given me over the years. Its appearance is long overdue, and I am grateful that Dr. George Vanderburgh and The Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library have offered to publish it. It is also fitting that this book should be published in Toronto, because Vincent was born in that city on October 26, 1886, and spent most of his first decade of life hanging around inside his grandfather’s bookshop, before his family moved to Chicago.

Dr. Vanderburgh has laid out an ambitious program to publish a number of new Vincent Starrett books of essays and short stories over the next couple of years, which I am in the process of editing for him, with the assistance and co-operation of the University of Minnesota Libraries.

Dr. Vanderburgh will also republish several Vincent Starrett books in electronic form (hypertext versions scanned onto floppy disks) which users can load into their computers and read. These computer files can also be printed out. This is a nice way of keeping books around forever. He has done this with nearly 40 of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s books, at prices far