

THE CITY

Benét, William Rose, 1886-1950

To Robert H. Davis

I went forth to sing the city, today's city—
The blank stone sphinx, the monster search-light-eyed,
The roaring mill where gods grind without pity,
The falling torrent, the many-colored tide.

Granite and steel upflung became my fountains,
Cunningly reared and held as by a spell.
Lost in colossal stone, my newer mountains,
I wandered witlessly through miracle.

And snared in tiny toils both frail and idle
I lost my wonder as I had lost my stars,
Though here a mammoth heaved no man might bridle,
A terrible symphony rolled through crashing bars.

But small and obvious life fogged every wonder
And itching needs and each small thirst and lust.
Over me and about me roared the thunder
Of the city's heart; I trafficked with its dust.

Yet beyond Babylon its ways were regal;
Even Jerusalem its dreams outsoared.
Loins of the lion and splendor of the eagle,
Where swarming vermin hailed it god and lord;

Where hardly one could touch, save to defile it,
The dream phantasm it spread aloft at night;
Where men snared men, and made all men revile it,
Save in its moments of bewildering light.

Yet men had thought and raised and poised its splendor,
And fed the torrents of its living veins,
And had fallen prone before it in surrender,
Seeing its awful being repay their pains.

A living being, but blind, where all misprision
Flourished and fattened, and, lashed as by a scourge,
Flowed fear-struck crowds—yet dupes of some strange vision
As on the instant ready to emerge,

But ever foiled—and still forever trembling
Just past the reach of mind, the urge of will;
Sum of all jaded aims and drab dissembling,
Something unbuilted, to be builded still!

So once again, almost against desire,
The appalling city unsealed the eyes she sealed,
Until her darkest streets ran weltering fire
For thought of love at point to be revealed.

So all their eyes are fixed on mine forever,
Eyes of dark pain, unfathomable will:
Something unbuilted, to be builded—never?
Something unbuilted, to be builded still!