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Back from Nature

THE intense love of wild nature which used to be a characteristic trait of the American books that were most American seems to be disappearing. It has made its mark on American literature, gathered indeed a nature literature for itself, on which at least one book* and many essays have been written, and it may be said that the honey which Thoreau sucked from the varied slopes of New England is the richest and most pungent of its kind. There is a passion in his rapt studies which makes the love passions of his contemporary New Englanders seem thin and cold. And not merely the enthusiast Muir and the pastoral Burroughs, but forgotten practitioners, like Abbott of New Jersey and Olive Thorne Miller, stir the imagination with the intensity of their obsession by wild life. A warbler, a hepatica, a hermit thrush, an islanded pine left from the great woods, have acquired for these foresters a quality which is less philosophic but more immediately human than the immanence of Wordsworth's daffodils. Such refinements upon wild nature as theirs represent perhaps the last mood of the rough romantic passion which had inspired the pioneers.

From Thoreau to Burroughs the course of this literature is plain. Afterward the decadence begins. Birds and animals in Thompson-Seton and his many successors must live in story plots and dramatic adventures. The call of the wild is dramatized and becomes a spotlight upon weasel or goshawk, which turn to figures of heroic romance. It is no longer the wilderness as a means of expanding the soul, but sensation that interests. A swamp or a wild apple tree becomes universal in Thoreau; in the decadent books we look for a chase, a murder, an escape, a combat. At the end of the process is the bed-time story of an unnatural bunny and his friends.

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Nature in literature has thus declined into sentimentalism, or gone into scientific description which lacks the imagination of "Walden" or of Muir on the high Sierras. So all good things rust, rot, or change, not necessarily for the ultimate worse. But the inevitable decay of moods and minds is not the only reason for our new distances with Mother Nature of the Wild. In this quick half century we have shifted from introspection to extraspection. Men like Thoreau were subjective to a degree only possible in a generation whose belief in the illimitable unity of the soul was still untouched by psychological doubt as to the nature of consciousness and the conditions of thought. It is himself that Thoreau would capture in the echoes of the thrush's song in a hemlock dusk, or the flame of a cardinal flower in the marsh. High pines, wild geese flying southward, the depths of clear lake water, upland pastures, the moose, the Indian, all summon the spirit from its reticences, and the experience is more real, because more vivid, than the routine of ordinary experience. He is studying his own soul which, like the eremite's, steals out in solitude. It was true, for a while, of the American spirit, that it was most original in the woods.

Nature literature, then, was in a peculiar sense self-study. In England, the book of Jefferies, more rhapsodical and less revealing than the American writings, were also self questings, and no work of Rudyard Kipling's is so personal as "The Jungle

*Nature in American Literature. By NORMAN FOERSTER. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1926. \$1.75.

Golden Falcon

By ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

HE sees the circle of the world
Alive with wings that he
Was born to rend; his eyes are stars
Of amber cruelty.

God lit the fire in his eyes
And bound swords on his feet,
God fanned the furnace of his heart
To everlasting heat.

His two eyes take in all the sky,
East, West, North, and South,
Opposite as poles they burn;
And death is in his mouth.

Death because his Maker knew
That death is last and best,
Because He gives to those He loves
The benison of rest.

Golden, cruel word of God
Written on the sky!
Living things are lovely things,
And lovely things must die.

This Week



"Prohibition at Its Worst." Reviewed by *Fabian Franklin*.

"The Story of the Catholic Church." Reviewed by *T. Lawrason Riggs*.

"Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson." Reviewed by *C. B. Tinker*.

"A History of Cornwall, Connecticut." Reviewed by *H. S. Canby*.

"Little Pitchers." Reviewed by *Robert B. Macdougall*.

"The Kays." Reviewed by *L. W. Dodd*.

"Before the Bombardment." Reviewed by *Leonard Bacon*.

"Ignatius Loyola." Reviewed by *Ernest Sutherland Bates*.

Next Week, or Later

A Note on the Modern Novel Pattern. By *Mary Austin*.

Books." But in America wild nature meant more than beauty released or strangeness brought home to symbolize the ethics of a race. A literary interpretation was a liaison with a new continent, new skies, new birds, new airs, new earth. It was a reminder in chosen words of that freedom to do and suffer and enjoy on the soil which generations of immigrants had found intoxicating. This was all that remained of the hope for a new man inspired by an untrammelled continent. The aspiration passed into Cooper and gave his romance a compelling quality which his literary crudities could not destroy; it passed into Emerson and Whitman. It is the subtle heart of nature literature.

Wild nature has not lost its powerful charm.
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Amy Lowell as a Poet

By HERVEY ALLEN

IT is characteristic of the ambition and overpowering nervous energy of Amy Lowell that she planned to prolong the sound of her voice even after the date of nature's verdict when "the rest is silence," and that she has seemingly succeeded. In reality, however, this is not so. The posthumous poems, which are now appearing in three separate packages*, for the most part belong to the period when she was hardest at work upon her biography of John Keats, and if they represent anything at all, they are so many tokens of a reservoir of creative and commenting energy so cribbed and cabined in by the circumstances and accidents of her life and environment that even the immense draft upon its potential which the labor on Keats implied was not sufficient to relieve the pressure, much less exhaust the supply.

The circumstances, which in a large measure served to frustrate her personality of the normal experiences of a complete cycle of life, were a serious accident many years ago while driving followed by a threatened invalidism, and a series of major surgical operations, none of which was completely successful, and all of which finally culminated in a condition that ended in a fatal stroke. She was looking in her mirror when, as it were, she saw death appear in her own countenance, and it is also characteristic of this great woman that her complete control of herself and of all those about her ceased only with consciousness itself. These are pertinent biographical facts which must be considered in relation to her work, for all of the energies of a gigantically virile personality were perforce concentrated in her intellect, and the trace of this condition is both fortunately and unfortunately present in her works. Indeed, it is the very vigor and masterful memory of her personality, which, at so early a date as this after her death, renders it difficult to approach her work from a detached and critical standpoint.

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Nevertheless, the fact remains that Miss Lowell has been withdrawn from the scene of her labors. The great bulk of her work is now before us, and it may be approached and appraised not as the unfinished record of an able controversial contemporary, but for what it actually is, a given example of literary art. It is frankly the purpose to attempt here the outlines of such an appraisal, or at least to suggest a pertinent method of approach in such an attempt.

The implications of space in an article such as this will, it is felt, need only to be mentioned to be fully apparent. Of Amy Lowell as a critic, or as a dynamic personality of wide and important literary influence, it will not be possible to treat here at all. The discussion must perforce be somewhat rigidly narrowed to her poetry alone, and to the tests of it proposed, i. e., were her themes important, and were they adequately phrased; what was her governing attitude toward her art, and what human values emerged from it? And finally, as a result of the discussion—what is the apparent place of her work in the poetry of English? It should also be borne in mind that for the great majority of poets the last question is never asked. Above and beyond all this, there will be a frank attempt here to examine the poetry of Amy Lowell from an

*East Wind. By AMY LOWELL. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1926. \$2.25.

assumed distance—say a decade or twenty-five years hence. If some of the objects in the vista thus obtained by looking backward seem to be belittled, it should be remembered that just as the artist sometimes obtains perspective by devices, so it is frequently the function of the critic to anticipate the shrinkage of the bulk of the present in the domain of time.

The earliest known work from Amy Lowell's pen appeared in a little volume published for or by her or her mother, entitled "Dream Drops," in which is recorded the fact that, at an extremely childish date, Amy Lowell was writing verse. The poems are in no way remarkable and both they and the volume in which they appeared have nothing but a collector's interest. At the age of thirty she had decided to be a poet and spent eight years in careful preparation. The first fruits of this resolve became visible in 1912 in "A Dome of Many Colored Glass," in which the themes treated were the most avowedly autobiographical of any of her work. Significantly enough the book begins with a moon poem, "Before the Altar"—a poet stands there—"With empty hands. . . . Empty and silent, I . . . myself the sacrifice." In "A Fairy Tale" occur some especially significant lines that from their context are obviously personal and enormously tragic:

. . . Along the parching highroad of the world
No other soul shall bear mine company.
Always shall I be teased by semblances,
With cruel impostures, which I trust awhile
Then dash to pieces, as a careless boy
Flings a kaleidoscope, which shattering
Strews all the ground about with colored sherds.
So I behold my visions on the ground
No longer radiant, an ignoble heap
Of broken, dusty glass, and so, unlit
Even by hope or faith, my dragging steps
Force me forever through the passing days.

The second poem in the book was about Keats. In another "I hear the flowers talking in the dawn," characteristically enough "Behind a wall." She was already decorating the house of her art with "A Japanese Wood Carving," addressing John Keats as "Great Master," talking about New England in "Monadnock in Early Spring," turning to history for material, after reading Trevelyan's "Garibaldi and the Making of Italy," and wondering about the nature of poetry. In other words, by 1912, in her first book, Miss Lowell had already indicated not only the type of themes which interested her but had already treated many of them. Her peculiarly feminine philosophy of art and her attitude toward life in general were also clear.

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Her art was "a dome of many colored glass,"—not the dome Shelley was speaking of. "Life," says Shelley, "life is a dome of many coloured glass," and it "stains" the white radiance of eternity. With him life and the expression of it in art were one. But Miss Lowell asks herself in her "Dome of Many Colored Glass" about her art, a thing apart from life.

What is poetry? Is it a mosaic
Of colored stones which curiously are wrought
Into a pattern? Rather glass that's taught
By patient labor any hue to take
And glowing with a sumptuous splendor. . . .

With all the terrifying energy of a childless and unmated woman she now set out to put the colored stones into curiously wrought patterns and by "patient labor" to teach the glass how to become "glowing with a sumptuous splendor." By "glass" she did not mean the one which it has been recommended that poets should hold up to nature. Cut off from the prime biological experiences of life by her tragic physical predicament and from many other vital experiences by the estate to which it had pleased God to call her, she continued, with a few major additions, to elaborate upon the same themes under various titles, to decorate and to arrange. And as always happens when the sources of inspiration are literary and secondary rather than primarily the expression of emotional experience, she became more interested in the way that she said things than in what she had to say. "A Dome of Many Colored Glass" was phrased in traditional forms upon which she conferred no peculiar distinction; the poems which followed wore another disguise. Of the nature of that disguise it will be necessary to speak elsewhere, and to confine ourselves here to the themes, with the end in view of appraising their literary value.

"Sword Blades and Poppy Seed," which appeared in 1914, was described without any intent of irony by a licensed biographer as "one of the literary events of the year." This book was notable for its preoccupation with the mode of its phrasing rather than for its content. It was well set forth by the publisher's brochure, issued in 1916, as follows: "We find free verse and sonnets; pictorial pieces and lyrics; long narratives in rhymed couplets or stanzas, with a flavor of romance and mystery, imagistic cameos; and, perhaps, most important of all, the first examples of 'polyphonic prose' which have ever appeared in the language." We do not learn anything even here about what was said, only how it was said. The "flavor" was there. Taking up the book one is forced to agree it is flavor and method alone. "Many people enjoyed 'Sword Blades and Poppy Seed' who had never cared much for poetry." Miss Lowell was already engaged by the Imagists, and in the "free verse" controversy. It was 1914 and another equally important controversy was also taking place which engaged her attention almost not at all. She was now busy inventing by a process of rationalization, or borrowing from John Gould Fletcher and others, a series of terms to disguise from herself and the world the fact that her poetry was largely written in prose. The forms in the dust storm so ably raised are now, as it settles, once more taking on their old familiar outlines.

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"Men, Women and Ghosts," her next volume of poetry, continued the experiments in writing poems in the twilight border land between verse and prose. There were also some poems in the dialect of New England, obviously stunts in the Lowell tradition. But the book was chiefly notable for a poem called "Patterns" in which the theme of frustration emerged triumphantly, as it has in so many other poets, in a genuine utterance. It was a cry of suffering out of her own life experience and therefore one of the most successful poems that she ever wrote. She was tired of patterns—"Christ, what are patterns for!" In the next book there was consequently a notable strengthening of themes.

With "Can Grande's Castle" three new themes appeared. "Sea-Blue and Blood-Red" treated of the conflict between desire and duty in the story of Lord Nelson's affair with Lady Hamilton. "The Bronze Horses" were a symbol of Time treading down all things ruthlessly; certainly not a startling contribution, and in "Guns as Keys and the Gate Swings," the narrative was concerned with the impinging of the Occident upon the Orient.

Oriental themes and forms now began to pre-occupy Miss Lowell considerably. She was probably drawn to them unconsciously by the fact that they offered her at once an esoteric and an abstract field in which to experiment beyond the realm of the traditional in English verse. Oriental art to the Occident is largely decorative; and alike in its landscape, its sculpture, and its poetry remote from us, existing so far as we are concerned in a kind of artistic limbo. It was from this highly conventional and congealed Nowhere that Miss Lowell attempted to translate her borrowed products into the Here. A typhoon in the literary teapot was created over the "Hokku," a confined Japanese form for which great epigrammatic and disciplinary virtues were claimed. It turned out to be a precise arrangement whose arbitrary construction had little value in itself except as an exercise. There are a great many pages of that kind of thing in Miss Lowell's works. They are broken lines of prose with a faint twinge of conversational charm. Whether they be poems by Japanese definition, the Japanese can say. There is no doubt whatever into what category they fall in English.

In "Pictures of the Floating World" occurs the following prose paragraph on William Blake:

He said he saw the spangled wings of angels in a tree at Peckham Rye, and Elijah walking in the haying-fields; so they beat him for his lies, and prenticed him to an engraver. Now his books sell for broad, round, golden guineas. That's a bouncing turn of fortune! But we have the guineas, since our fathers were thrifty men and knew the value of gold.

It is submitted that this is a hopelessly banal recital of facts about William Blake. In Miss Lowell's book the paragraph is broken into ten lines, the exact arrangement of which we defy anyone to reproduce except by good luck, without looking at the "poem." It occupies all of page 181. If irony about "our fathers" is meant it is enormously far-fetched.

In "Pictures of the Floating World" there is a section entitled "As Toward War." The present writer does not hesitate to say that, all in all, the material gathered under this head constitutes the most trivial and remote comment on the World War made by any writer of note in English on either side of the Atlantic. A myopic architect is discharged for insanely designing a landscape garden like a fortress, and commits suicide; Miss Lowell visits another fort and wonders, "Is it possible that, at night, the little flutter bats hang under the lever-wheels of the disappearing guns?"—to escape the searchlights, of course. But she describes the *camouflage* pattern on a troop ship, perfectly. In September, 1918, there was a nice day, the afternoon was peculiarly successful, and she promises herself to remember it after the war! "In the Stadium" is the only "war poem" that has anything to say about the war with first hand emotion and comment.

"Many Swans," a sun myth of the North American Indians, was a long and for the most part a prose-poem, the theme of which was the occasion for a *tour de force* on Indian folk-lore. The Indian in it climbs up into the sky and gets into considerable trouble by returning with a disc of power "hung on him." He is very sad because everything is burnt up. At last a kind lady, The-One-Who-Walks-All-Over-The-Sky, takes the "round thing" back again and leaves him. "He wept." Fifty-seven pages are solemnly devoted to this cosmic allegory which is said to be peculiarly North American and once received the official applause of the Phi Beta Kappas at Columbia University. In the same volume, "Legends," there is also a long legend about porcelain in which the legend is entirely lost amid the porcelain and there is also a "Memorandum confided by a Yucca to a Passion Vine." In the latter Miss Lowell was dealing with Peru and the Incas, probably the most glorious and little tapped source for romance, epic themes, and imagination-firing material in all the Americas.

All of this story, replete with ten thousand majestic feats of arms, human tragedies, love, lust, murder, treachery, friendship, courage, avarice, umph, defeat, and Gargantuan suffering was dear to Amy Lowell. Her comment upon it is a pretty legend whispered by one flower to another. It is purely conversational; "The Turkey-buzzard was chatting with the Condor high up in the White Cordillera,"—later on a fox trots by and we follow him as the hero of the story until he commits the sacrilege of trying to rape the moon. That is how the moon got its marks!

It will not be possible to continue a chronicle of the themes that engaged Miss Lowell to any greater length. We have here discussed some of the major ones. Whether they are of primary significance or of great value in the literature of English, must be left to the reader, for it is by their relative value in that literature and by the readers who will approach them hereinafter that their importance must ultimately be judged.

There are a number of other books of poetry in addition to those already touched upon. Following in the footsteps of James Russell Lowell, a cousin of Miss Lowell's grandfather, she issued anonymously "A Critical Fable." In the late 1840's a very famous critic and poet described James Russell Lowell's essay in the realm of satire in part as follows:

"The Fable for the Critics" . . . has not the name of its author on the title page; and but for some slight foreknowledge of the literary opinions, likes, dislikes, whims, prejudices, and crotchets of Mr. James Russell Lowell, we should have had much difficulty in attributing so loose a brochure to him. "The Fable" is essentially "loose." . . . Some good hints and some sparkling witticisms do not serve to compensate us for its rambling plot (if plot it can be called) and for the want of artistic finish so particularly noticeable throughout the work. . . . This to be sure is not the very loftiest order of verse; for it is far inferior to either that of the imagination or that of the passions, but it is the loftiest region in which Mr. Lowell can get his breath without difficulty.

Only a few lines of Mr. Lowell's "Fable" are now occasionally remembered. They apply to Edgar Allan Poe who wrote the passage just quoted. The rest of his "Fable" was mostly about persons whom time forgot. Miss Lowell's "Fable" was also in the best family tradition, and in it she mentions among others Robert Frost.

In the roll of Miss Lowell's work in verse it would be unthinkable to omit her translations. Aside from occasional passages from what Mary Austin

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